Athletic wins, fundraising prowess

UL's sports programs get big boost from RCAF

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Six years ago, a fledgling effort to boost University of Louisiana at Lafayette athletics took root. It involved volunteers, UL enthusiasts who wanted to help raise funds necessary to support a top-tier university sports program.

It worked.

That early Ragin' Cajun Athletic Foundation effort has blossomed into a well-structured, productive organization that has increased its board size, eyes ambitious targets and is now seeking full-time help to keep its focus on this end result: Giving UL athletes the coaches, facilities and support they deserve and need to succeed and giving UL enthusiasts the competitive, successful teams for which they thirst.

UL athletics is in the midst of See RCAF. Page 8A

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The RCAF, its fund-raising arm, which has scrapped to put donated dollars into supporting the program over the past six years, is playing an increasingly larger role in delivering that dream.

The RCAF raised some $2.1 million in unrestricted funds last year, about $6.5 million overall. That was a record year. In the first quarter of this year, RCAF raised $1.5 million.

"It's become a big business," Wayne Elmore, outgoing RCAF chairman, said. "That's why the RCAF is seeking a director. The fund raising won't go away. It's gotten too big for just volunteers."

Money that the organization raises helps to fund scholarships for athletes and supplement salaries for top-flight coaches. But the foundation also served to promote ticket sales and packages, finance construction and generate enthusiasm for the program. It raised $21 million in bonds for the first phase of capital improvements.

"The only way we can move faster is to have more money," said Charlie Moncla, RCAF secretary/treasurer. "We've done a very good job, considering where the university was and where it has come to."

Other board members share Moncla's assessment. The athletic program has met success across the board, and counted five conference championships in five different sports — football, men's basketball, softball, baseball and tennis — this year. RCAF has played a role in that success, board members and UL Athletic Director Scott Farmer said.

Coaches, players, wins, donors

Seated in Farmer's campus office, Elmore waved toward a wall where UL coaches' images hang.

"When you bring in the right coaches and you win — I hate to say winning is everything — you see the success translated into more money and better facilities," he said. "I have never dreamed we would be doing the things we are doing today."

This mantra is repeated by other board members: Good coaches recruit top athletes and prepare them well; good, well-prepared athletes win; wins excite supporters who donate; donations help keep good coaches in the fold and lead to better facilities. Repeat.

Included among capital projects that Elmore cites is construction of the Ragin' Cajuns' new athletics performance center, which will include a football locker room, offices and meeting rooms, football coaches' meeting rooms, a 12,000-square-foot weight room, an athletic training room and 150-seat auditorium.

That facility and end zone seating at Cajun Field are part of Tier I, the $21 million first phase of facility improvements, which also includes improvements to soccer and track facilities. But there's more.

Task large, but RCAF undaunted

Next up: Tier II, $50 million in improvements that include a seven-story "tower" facility at Cajun Field that will feature athletic administration space; high-end seating; press box; bookstore; public space and more. Farmer said those improvements will transform Cajun Field into a 365-day facility, with students and the public sharing in the use of the facilities. It will also include improvements to the baseball facilities.

A quiet but determined campaign is underway to raise funding for that second phase of improvements, and RCAF and athletic department officials will know by year's end if fund raising will be on schedule.

Robert Daigle, RCAF chairman-elect, said $50 million is a large task, but not an intimidating one. It may have been daunting, he said, but based on early responses to the quiet portion of the campaign, he believes it is a doable one.

"It's not easy," he said. "The local economy is affected by the success of the oil and gas industry, which has suffered some downturns over the past year, but Daigle said "there is no panic" among the oil and gas people who have been approached. In fact, approaching large donors now is easier than it was six years ago, when the RCAF was formed. That wasn't always so.

What UL needed: a fund-raising arm

John Bordelon, past RCAF chairman, said the organization was born through a committee appointed perhaps a decade ago by former UL President Ray Authement to review the use of athletic dollars. Bordelon, a banker and former football player, said he approached Authement to say he appreciated the committee's work, but thought it could do more. What UL athletics needed, he said, was a "fund-raising arm."

Bordelon said Authement, who was nearing retirement, gave the idea the go-ahead. Bordelon said members talked with other universities, LSU and Texas A&M among them, about how to establish such an organization. They wrote bylaws and started the process of organizing. The Tiger Athletic Foundation was very helpful in providing the RCAF guidance, he said.

But Authement was nearing retirement and Bordelon said the RCAF needed to await the arrival of and approval from the next president. They got that when President E. Joseph Savoie returned to UL. With the arrival of Athletic Director Scott Farmer, the RCAF got down to business.

"The greatness of the RCAF is that our supporters realized the need to have a higher athletic budget to be competitive as a mid-major," he said. "Most of the money has been spent on hiring and retaining great coaches. Isn't it amazing what they have produced?"
Amazing indeed. Four straight football bowl game wins. NCAA Super Regional appearances in baseball. Softball NCAA tournament success. Post-season appearances in basketball. And more. The “heavy lifting” was done from 2009-2011, Farmer said. When the big sports — football, basketball, baseball — began to win, the department budget began to grow. Donors bought in. “What it took to motivate people was you had to believe good times were ahead,” Elmore said. Good times were ahead. “There are a lot of good things going on; fans recognize that,” Farmer said. “RCAF is one of the ways they can support us.” Those good things that are going on include the 75 percent graduation rate for athletes, highest in the state and in the Sun Belt Conference. But this recent success was not assured, not at the start. “People were skeptical,” said RCAF Executive Board member Ed Domingues. “Anytime people donate to athletics, they want to know the money will be used well. It takes a while to get on board and to gain trust.” But Domingues said the additions of football coach Mark Hudspeth and basketball coach Bob Marlin made a huge difference in establishing community buy-in. Success breeds success. “I’m not surprised by the success,” Domingues said of UL’s on-field triumphs. “Lafayette is a diamond in the rough. UL may be enjoying its greatest athletic era, which has been complemented by record-breaking support from fans, donors and the RCAF. The potential is untapped as enthusiasm swells. The key to that widespread enthusiasm, though, is winning. The formula is the same: raise money, hire coaches, win, then raise more money. “First you win,” Farmer said. “Then you build it, and then they will come.”