

Open Letter To Charlie Strong

Dear Charlie,

Do you mind if I call you Charlie? Although you don't know me, I feel like you are one of my best friends. Since you arrived in Louisville you have become a special person to me and all the other devoted Cardinals fans in our community. You are doing a wonderful job as coach of our beloved football team. The marked improvement in attitude and effort has been striking and has everyone excited about this year's football team and especially about the future. Your hard work and tough love toward your players seems like a winning combination for the Louisville football program. I don't know if the Cards will receive a bowl bid this season, but even the thought of a potential bid is amazing because most of us wrote this year off as a "rebuilding" one.

I hope you feel welcome here in Louisville. I know it is hard on a coach's family because during the season and while recruiting you are gone from home most of the time and don't get to see your precious family. Are your children doing well and is your wife making friends? That is very important, and my experience with other newcomers is that Louisvillians are a warm and welcoming bunch and will embrace you and your family. Louisville is just a small town with big city amenities, and don't be surprised if people ask you what high school you went to. It's a local idiosyncrasy that sets our community apart ...

I hear you and your family are attending St. Stephen Baptist Church. That's a good place, and Kevin is a good preacher. He's also a Louisville fan and a former star basketball player. He comes from a family of good athletes, and it's a good place to meet a lot of fine folks.

Charlie, I've really been impressed with the performance of the UofL football team. It may be a far cry from where you want it to be, but I see improvement every week in some phase of the game. Hopefully, as the season progresses the offense, defense and special teams will put it all together and win out. That would be miraculous. I know you have been disappointed with the casualness of the fans toward their attendance and tardiness to the games, but maybe I can help you understand some of that:

When you get right down to it, Cardinals fans are still neophytes to big-time college football. We are tops in college basketball, and according to such people as Dick Vitale and Billy Packer we are some of the most sophisticated basketball fans in the country. But football's a different matter. It wasn't until 1999 that the school went to its first back-to-back bowl games, and those were the Motor City Bowl and the Humanitarian Bowl. Have you ever been to Detroit or Boise in the dead of winter, Charlie? It was so cold at those two games I vowed to never go North of the Ohio River after Dec. 1 for an outdoor event the rest of my life. That was 11 years ago and the first two years in PJCS. We've seen a lot of success since then, but as you know after the 2007 Orange Bowl things kind of fell apart.

If you're wondering why every seat isn't filled for this year's games, you have to understand that Louisville is an active city. Thousands of kids play sports in the many youth programs around town. On some Saturdays there are 3,000 people, including parents, fans and players, involved in youth activities at my church alone. In the fall there are numerous festivals and walks to benefit needy projects and organizations, and some 40 percent of the college football fans in our city cheer for Kentucky and head to Lexington when the Wildcats are playing.

I am amazed that every seat was sold for the Connecticut game. For the game against Cincinnati there were 14,000 more people in the stands than in any previous home game in Louisville not against Kentucky in the history of our program. UofL didn't play a home game in a college football stadium until 1998, when PJCS was completed. For the entire history of the football team UofL played on high school fields or baseball stadiums. Since 1990 average attendance has increased by 30,000 fans, although the price has gone up significantly. Before Howard Schnellenberger came to Louisville, donations to the football program were around \$10,000 annually.

UofL fans are devoted to the school, but they like to party. So bear with them as they learn the joy of the opening kickoff and the team's running onto the field. We're still learning and growing as fans. There are a lot of youngsters at the games like my grandkids. I became a Cardinals football fan 40 years ago, and now all three of my grown kids and their spouses come to the games, along with my grandkids. In a few years my great-grandkids will be coming to the games, and before you know it PJCS will have to be expanded again.

We're not up to the SEC yet in attendance, but Vanderbilt averages 40,000 and Ole Miss and Mississippi State average barely more than UofL. Last year against ACC foe Duke Miami had 38,200 at a home game and averaged well below the Cards for the season in spite of being former national champions.

We're not there yet Charlie, but I have faith that someday soon UofL will be one of the best fan bases in college football. We need you to lead us and build a great program. Maybe someday you can fulfill Howard Schnellenberger's national-championship prediction while working at the best metropolitan university in the country.

Jack Coffee, Managing Editor
Louisville Sports Report