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CRAWFORD | Strong's Louisville legacy: A solid foundation

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (WDRB) -- A year ago, after he had opened up the athletic department coffers to keep Charlie Strong from bolting to Tennessee, University of Louisville athletic director Tom Jurich talked about why.

He knew there were flashier coaches out there, and lots of good ones he could go after. But Strong brought something he did not believe U of L had experienced in his tenure as athletic director.

"Charlie is the whole package," Jurich said. "He gets it from the ground up. The way he's building this thing, it's the real deal."

Now, Jurich will have to find someone to build on that foundation. Charlie Strong has agreed to become the next coach of the Texas Longhorns in a 5-year deal reportedly worth $5 million annually. He reportedly gave Jurich the news in a face-to-face meeting tonight at Strong's home in Louisville, just a few doors away from Jurich's own home.

Strong will not be the long-term leader U of L fans and administrators hoped for. But Strong's legacy here is clear from a simple look at the won-lost column. In the three season before Strong's arrival, the program won 15 games and lost 21. In Strong's final two seasons alone, his teams went 23-3 with victories over Florida in the Sugar Bowl and Miami in the Russell Athletic Bowl.

There was Teddy Bridgewater, who will depart after his junior season with a chance to be among the top players taken in the NFL Draft, and Marcus Smith, a defensive end who became an All-American this season. Strong, with the help of his staff, re-opened Louisville's pipeline into South Florida, and endeavored to change the culture, occasionally clashing with U of L fans about getting into their seats on time and in large enough numbers.

But Strong's more lasting legacy -- and the one that will be far more difficult to replace -- came in ways that were not seen by the public or even most media.

I don't know Charlie Strong. He has coached here four years, and yet I must still make that statement. I spent no time with him one-on-one. Most media members did not. He was guarded. He confided in few people, and even fewer reporters in his time in Louisville.

And yet you don't have to know a man personally to tell that he's a good man. You can see the results of his presence.

The esteem with which Strong and his staff were held by U of L players is something I've seen with no coach that I've ever covered. It bordered on reverence.

When U of L wanted to raise money for an academic center by putting Strong's picture on a Maker's Mark bottle, the coach didn't want any part of it. He doesn't drink, and didn't want to encourage drinking. There were players who, from the day they arrived on campus, adopted the same approach. That's rare.

Strong's dislike for the public side of the job has been well-documented. It's one reason many viewed him as a longshot for the Texas position. Strong doesn't like talking about things. He likes doing them.

That's one thing that Jurich liked about him, and one of the reasons he didn't want to interview Strong in the traditional sense. When the time came to hire Strong, Jurich flew to him, stood in his living room, told him that there was going to be no interview, that the job was his if he wanted it. Strong broke into tears.

That scene is one that many thought might keep Strong in Louisville for a long time. He waited more than a

decade to become a head coach. Jurich was the man who made that dream happen. And that news would break all over the Internet with Strong not having spoken to Jurich about it leaves a blot on Strong's time here. The end wasn't handled well, even if Strong did delay officially accepting the job until after meeting with U of L officials well after midnight.

But that doesn't overshadow all that Strong did. And should not.

When Strong arrived, the program was facing NCAA sanctions for academic underperformance. Last month, 19 players graduated at mid-semester, the highest number the program has ever had.

Darius Ashley was a promising cornerback who, within a short period, racked up two DUI arrests. Strong removed him from the team. He did not remove him from the program. He kept him on scholarship. He sent him to treatment. He stayed involved with him. Darius Ashley earned his degree. He enrolled in Louisville's MBA program. He speaks to U of L players about the dangers of alcohol. Darius Ashley never played another down of football for Louisville after his second arrest. But he left school a winner.

Strong talked about changing the culture within his program. He didn't talk a lot about bigger things he was working to change. Some laughed when one of the "core principles" of his program was "no guns." He meant it to apply to his players, but the message was aimed at a larger audience. In Louisville, where gun violence is a problem, his message was designed to speak to a larger culture change, where it could.

Strong wouldn't talk about such things. In the first longer story I was assigned to write about him for The Courier-Journal, I was to write about the state of Kentucky having three African-American football coaches, and its significance. I talked to Willie Taggart at Western Kentucky. I talked to Joker Phillips at Kentucky.

Charlie Strong didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to carry anybody's banner.

But that doesn't mean he didn't do anything. Without telling anyone, and without taking public relations staff of any kind, he showed up at the West End picnic and signed autographs and took pictures with people and talked to them.

One of the better things Charlie Strong did was his kindness to Owsley Brown Frazier. Probably the most important fund-raiser and benefactor in U of L history, Frazier fell ill in late 2012. When Strong was told Frazier was ailing, he went to the hospital immediately. He didn't have to do that. There was no direct benefit to him. He went. He told Frazier he needed to get well, so he could get out and see the team at practice. Frazier did. It was one of the last things he did before a final illness led to his death.

Strong would head to Kosair Children's Hospital unannounced, just to visit.

He will leave U of L with the goodwill of faculty, staff and administration not just in athletics, but outside of it.

He had his problems. Once when the university wanted him to tape a promotional spot, he didn't show up. He could be hard to get motivated when it came to public affairs tasks.

But when it came to football, when it came to his players, when it came to the people he interacted with the most, he was rock solid.

And the legacy he leaves at U of L is a program built on a solid foundation. His loss is going to be a blow, to the players he's leaving, and to the program as a whole.

The measure of a coach, in the end, is not about what he says to reporters or in front of the cameras. You don't have to know a guy to know what he means to people. For Charlie Strong, the evidence abounds at U of L. And it will for some time.

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