# Adam Himmelsbach: Under Charlie Strong, Louisville players make grade in classroom, too

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A few other reporters and I huddled around University of Louisville quarterback Teddy Bridgewater last week and asked him about his future. He looked like he'd rather be drinking bad milk than talking about the NFL.

But when someone asked about school, Bridgewater suddenly beamed. He talked about earning a 92 on his last final exam of the semester. He talked about walking the stage at U of L's graduation in front of his mother last Thursday, becoming the first member of his family to receive a college



degree. He talked about how wonderful it had been to graduate alongside 14 teammates.

"It was very special," he said. "That's what you want to see out of the program. … We're all just thankful."

Bridgewater, who earned his diploma in just three years (he enrolled at U of L in January 2011), is a college football anomaly. But in a football program that faced academic struggles in the past, he is a glowing example of the culture shift that has taken place under coach Charlie Strong.

It's easy to be skeptical of NCAA academic success stories, but U of L's is, by all accounts, quite real. Three years after the Cardinals were stripped of three scholarships because their four-year average academic progress rate had dipped below the NCAA minimum before Strong's arrival, the classroom



has been the foundation of the coach's rebuilding job.

Ninety-three of Strong's 98 players have graduated, and the Cardinals' single-year APR score mushroomed from 896 in the 2009-10 academic year to 948 in Strong's first year to 971 in 2011-12. A U of L spokesman said the team's 2012-13 score, which will be released this spring, is expected to be among the best in the nation.

"When you talk about a player's future, it all starts in the classroom," Strong said. "And what players have to understand is if we're going to talk about it, we have to be about it."

After Strong was hired in December 2009, he contacted several U of L players who had left the program without earning their degrees — players he'd never even met — and asked them to return to school so future Cardinals would not be punished for their missteps. Only a few did, Strong said, but the no-nonsense message was being sent.