



LSU coaches and Jindal attract talent

By Rolfe McCollister (Contact)

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There has been a lot of recent media coverage about two apparent “problems”: the loss of some top talent from LSU’s football and baseball teams and turnover in the governor’s cabinet. And there’s something that national championship coaches Paul Mainieri and Les Miles have in common with Gov. Bobby Jindal. In addition to having a winning track record and a national reputation, each of them can attract, recruit and sign extremely talented people who want to join their teams.

Unfortunately, when you get the best in Louisiana and coast-to-coast, other folks want them, too. They will work long and hard to get them, and they can offer some very attractive incentives—whether it’s Los Angeles Dodgers owner Frank McCourt throwing \$5.25 million at 18-year-old LSU freshman quarterback Zach Lee, or a national company persistently calling to make long-term offers in the private sector to former Jindal cabinet members like Tim Barfield, Alan Levine and Angèle Davis.

So here’s the dilemma faced by both Jindal and the coaches: You want to attract the best players, and your reputation and record make that possible. But you also realize you might only have them for a short time, because there is the risk that someone is going to come and lure them away with an incredible offer. [Did I mention \$5.25 million guaranteed, for an 18-year-old? What would you do?] So what do the coaches and Jindal do? Well, let’s look at the alternatives.

Would you rather have so little reputation that no one wants to be on your team and you can’t recruit that level of talent? You wouldn’t have to worry about losing anyone or being disappointed in the future.

Or would you rather tell them that if they can’t commit to a full four years, despite their incredible talent, you prefer they not play or serve at all so you won’t have to deal with the transition?

These are ridiculous questions, but that’s exactly why I draw the comparison between Jindal and the coaches. While it seems most political journalists fail to consider the “alternatives,” sportswriters seem to better understand the predicament coaches are in. You’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t. The fans and media expect you to compete for the best recruits; they even rank your success in doing so. But if you win the battle, you may also lose the war when those recruits leave as practice is beginning in August.

Mainieri, LSU’s baseball coach, told *The Times-Picayune*, “It all comes down to dollars. If someone threw \$1,000,000 at you at the last minute, wouldn’t you take it?”

But the media reports on turnover in the Jindal administration often underplay this dynamic. Some of our journalists have failed to realize the level of talent the governor attracts and the value of the talent in the private sector. They don't realize how much many cabinet members were making prior to taking substantial pay cuts to come and work for Jindal in 2008. I don't think they understand the 24/7 job these public servants have and the sacrifice made by their families.

The governor himself could be making a seven-figure salary in the private sector—and there are few governors in our past about whom we could have said that. But the market pays for top talent—and Louisiana currently has it.

Here's how Michelle Millhollon reported it in *The Advocate*:

"Jindal said he assembled a cabinet of the best and brightest, recognizing that he was lucky to have them. He said it is natural for people to move on to other opportunities. 'You hire the best people you can even if they don't work for you forever,' the governor said.

"By contrast, former Gov. Kathleen Blanco's cabinet stuck with her, for the most part, through the end of her four-year term."

Oh, really? Millhollon is "objectively" reporting that Blanco's cabinet "stuck with her." Does she really believe if a private firm had come with a check like those offered Barfield, Levine or Davis—that any of Blanco's appointees would have stayed?

I know that Millhollon ended her piece by mentioning former DEQ secretary Harold Leggett, who cited the talent conundrum as the reason for the turnover, but the tone of her article was clearly intended to paint the Jindal administration and the "state of the state" in the worst possible light. She went out and found Pearson Cross, head of the political science department at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, so she could write in her story, "Cross also compares the turnover to the old cliché of rats leaving a sinking ship." And what does he know about the cabinet?

No sportswriters compared LSU baseball or football to a "sinking ship" when Lee announced last week that he was leaving.

Consider the contrasting perception of those interviewed by freelance political writer Jeremy Alford for a *Business Report* story on cabinet changes ["In and out," July 27]. Alford spoke to Jim Brandt, head of the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, and Joshua Stockley, a political science professor at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. Brandt told Alford, "There really has been a lot of change at the top. But I don't sense that there's been any major problems. They always seem to have a plan and have adapted well. It's obviously been all thought out."

And Stockley told Alford he wonders why administration changes don't happen more often. "We all forget how extremely stressful and demanding these cabinet jobs can be," he says. "It's not really amenable to a long and healthy career."

Neither the LSU coaches nor Jindal would trade places with anyone. They like working with the best talent, whether the time is brief, moderate or long-term. They know that when talent leaves for a better offer, they will have a lot of talented players left—and more coming on board. You create a team where everyone contributes.

For the cabinet, some talented people may tire after years of intense public service, and others get a lucrative offer. Some leave to pursue a dream—maybe run for office—and some may not fit. Fact is, change is inevitable. You hand off the ball and keep playing to win.

***New York Times* bias**

It would be no surprise to most conservatives to hear that *The New York Times* has a liberal bias. [The same is true for CNN.] But I am not sure how anyone can read a recent article and not admit these guys just can't help themselves—even when the facts don't back them up.

In a *Times* article last week, the writer blasted Republicans—including former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin—for complaining about federal stimulus spending when Alaska is No. 1 in per capita aid at \$3,145. Fair issue and debate.

But then the article slips in, “[Curiously, that pattern plays out in Louisiana, Wyoming and the Dakotas, states relatively low in unemployment but high in per capita stimulus aid and growling antigovernment animus.]” What?

OK, there is a chart with the story that does accurately show South Dakota at No. 2 [\$1,781 per capita]; North Dakota at No. 5 [\$1,626]; and Wyoming at No. 7 [\$1,517]. The national average is \$1,170. But Louisiana is No. 32 at \$1,121, below the national average. Now why did *The Times* take a cheap shot at Louisiana when we are nowhere near the “top 7” the others fall into?

A seasoned journalist I know, who can be critical of our governor and state, suggested after reading this article, “It seems like *The Times* is reaching to take a subtle slam at Jindal and Louisiana.” He added, “This is clearly a biased and unsupported comment by the *N.Y. Times*.” And *The Times* criticizes Fox News for bias? Ha!