

Batt

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share, one of the areas in which there is an opportunity to create competitive advantage is in both the construction of and the evaluation of those dollars. And so construction of how are those contracts put together, how are we managing those both at the program level, but also at the — from the entire department, right? Creating a 30,000-foot management of the entire student-athlete rev-share, NIL, etc. opportunities. There is real advantage of how those things are put together, so having somebody with expertise in that, negotiating those contracts is important. But also developing a robust evaluation of how those dollars are spent and how those dollars perform as they translate onto on-field, court, etc., success.”

UK Athletics social engagement increases with new AD, football coach

Since the end of July, daily engagement across UK Athletics social platforms has more than doubled, Batt said in his report Thursday. Last weekend’s announced sellout at Kroger Field for Kentucky vs. Alabama was the football team’s first since Vanderbilt in 2024. And the 7.3 million average viewers on ABC made it the most-watched game in program history.

Paul Archey, president of UK’s multimedia rights partner JMI Sports, said the “newness” in the market brought by Batt and first-year football head coach Will Stein has created excitement and momentum JMI can use to beef up the Wildcats’ business portfolio. Since its launch in 2025, Archey said UK’s NIL program BBNIL (managed by JMI) has facilitated more than 300 deals with 50-plus partners.

How can UK maintain this kind of engagement once the new wears off?



University of Kentucky athletics director and Champions Blue CEO J Batt speaks at the Champions Blue LLC Board of Governors meeting in the University of Louisville Student Activity Center ballroom. ELLIOTT HESS/PROVIDED BY UK ATHLETICS

“Through delivering on substance,” Batt said after the meeting. “We talk about projects such as the entertainment district. We talk about some of the ROI created by our investment in facilities. The goal is to create not only one-time revenue, but recurring revenue that helps sustain for a long time.”

Facility investments, entertainment district update

In June 2025, UK committed an internal loan of \$141 million to athletics to help with increased operational costs brought about by revenue sharing and multiyear capital projects. Among those projects are enhancements to Kroger Field (which are 65% complete), corner suite and elevator renovations (88%),

improvements to the softball and soccer facility (100%), improvements to the Joe Craft Football Training Facility (98%) and a West End Zone Club space/Wi-Fi (to be completed in 2027).

“We’re continuing to evaluate continued stadium enhancement, exploring additional hospitality opportunities. Our demand for increased premium seating inside of Kroger Field is tremendous. All of our current premium seating areas are sold out with a significant waiting list. The challenge is to continue to develop revenue, but also to meet our fans where their expectations are.”

The highly anticipated sports adjacent entertainment district around Kroger Field and Historic Memorial Coliseum is currently in “the end of Phase

3,” according to Kevin Locke, UK’s assistant vice president of planning, design and construction. This phase includes “plan documentation, final work session and requests for proposal, RFP, development still ahead,” he said.

The entertainment district aims to integrate athletics, academics, living and community life, according to materials shown at the meeting Thursday. UK has had interviews with more than 12 interested developers, according to those same materials, and developed phasing plans as well as initial cost estimates for review.

Key programs with the entertainment district include the following near Kroger Field:

- Multiuse basketball training facility
- Hotel and conference center
- Mixed-use, market-rate residential and retail
- Food hall
- Innovation Center
- Student housing
- Amphitheater and outdoor event space

Key programs near Historic Memorial Coliseum include:

- New welcome center, including alumni engagement offices, career center and more
- Mixed-use, market-rate residential and retail
- Parking garage
- New academic buildings

The final work session with the steering committee is scheduled for Oct. 5, followed by an internal work session on RFP development in October or November, and a draft and final executive summary and RFP slated for December or January.

Reach college sports enterprise reporter Payton Titus at ptitus@gannett.com, and follow her on X @petitus25. Subscribe to her “Full-court Press” newsletter here for a behind-the-scenes look at how college sports’ biggest stories are impacting Louisville and Kentucky athletics.

Volleyball

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lightly.”

George is from Louisville, played for the nationally renowned club KIVA (Kentucky Indiana Volleyball Academy), led Assumption High School to two state championships and crafted one of the most decorated careers in UofL volleyball history (2012-15). She has had an intimate view of the volleyball boom in her home state.

Participation has reached new levels in the past decade or so, with the number of girls playing high school volleyball surpassing basketball. (KHSAA reported girls volleyball participation exceeded 7,000 students for the first time during the 2023-24 school year.) Kentucky has long been home to club powerhouses including KIVA, Union and MAVA (MidAmerica Volleyball), which have sent athletes to Nebraska, Texas, Wisconsin, UofL and UK, among others, to compete for national championships. That strong volleyball lineage led to Louisville hosting the NCAA championship just two years ago.

More girls are interested in the sport than ever, which helps elevate play from the youth level up to the state’s top universities.

“They’re programs that are becoming national contenders every year,” ESPN commentator Courtney Lyle told The Courier Journal. “You now expect that Louisville is going to be really good, and they’re going to be a tough team to face. Just like you now expect Kentucky to do the same thing. And I think the fact that they’ve both been to that national championship final multiple times shows you that, hey, it wasn’t just a fluke.”

George added: “At that point, I think you’re a perennial power. If we’re talking about you as a team that you should be (among) the last four standing, that’s when you know you’ve arrived.”

With a great product and a big enough platform comes millions of eyeballs.

Last season, Kentucky played in three of the four most-watched matches on ESPN platforms:

- The national championship against Texas A&M averaged 1.4 million viewers, up 10% year over year, making it the second most-watched postseason match ever.
 - The national semifinal against Wisconsin drew 1.1 million viewers and is the second most-watched NCAA semifinal match on record.
 - The Broadway Block Party match against Nebraska averaged 1.2 million viewers and is the most-watched regular-season match on ESPN networks.
- Louisville played in three of the five most-watched matches on ESPN platforms in 2024:



Louisville’s Elena Scott celebrates the Cards scoring against Tennessee on Sept. 1, 2024 at the KFC Yum Center. PHOTOS BY SCOTT UTTERBACK/COURIER JOURNAL



Kentucky’s Azhani Tealer celebrates after scoring against Illinois on Dec. 4, 2021.

- The national championship between UofL and Penn State averaged 1.3 million viewers.
- The national semifinal between UofL and Pitt averaged 1 million.
- Louisville-Nebraska was the top regular-season match of the year with about 683,000 viewers.

Consider those numbers along with each program’s on-court resume. Louisville and Kentucky, ranked Nos. 3 and 4, respectively, have appeared in a combined four national championship and five national semifinal matches since 2020, the year Kentucky won the national title. Add in the century-long beef between both fanbases, and putting this year’s match on ABC “made all the sense in the world” to Mallory Kenny, ESPN’s director of programming and acquisitions.

Kenny started at ESPN in 2015. She has since worked her way up from associate manager in programming and acquisitions to director of college sports programming, a role she landed in 2024. Her team is responsible for acquiring the rights to Olympic sports and non-NCAA football and basketball championships. They maintain relationships with those partners and select game times on ESPN networks.

Because of how vast ESPN’s programming portfolio is, there’s a lot of internal collaboration required in assembling the TV schedule. Women’s volleyball is up against football and basketball season for time slots. And whenever the company launches a new initiative — like the increase from 31 matches in 2025 to 36 in 2026 on ABC/ESPN/ESPN2 — Kenny’s programming team works closely with ESPN’s communications, marketing and production departments to promote it.

“Think of it as like the spoke in the center of a bicycle wheel,” Kenny told

The Courier Journal. “We kind of help maintain the relationship from all aspects of the company.”

When evaluating where to put regular-season games, Kenny said the first question — beyond when different matches fall on the calendar — is what might resonate with the largest audience? Louisville and Kentucky have certainly proven themselves in that regard. And continue to. UofL’s win over Texas in Nashville drew about 809,000 average viewers, making it the second most-watched regular-season match on ESPN networks.

After UK coach Craig Skinner and former UofL head coach Dani Busboom Kelly ushered in the most successful era of collegiate volleyball in the state, both athletics departments selected their programs for revenue sharing distribution as part of the House settlement, which allows school to pay players directly for the use of their names, images and likenesses.

In 2025-26, schools could spend up to \$20.5 million across their departments. In 2026-27, that number rose to \$21.3 million.

That kind of investment, along with Louisville’s new L&N Federal Credit Union jersey patch deal, allows both volleyball programs to compete at a high level. More resources help recruit better players. Better players create rosters that embolden Skinner and current UofL coach Dan Meske to schedule tougher opponents. And tougher opponents create matchups that not only move the NCAA selection committee, but also television programmers like Kenny.

“Every step of the way with that it’s always been, ‘What do you need to get the next step? What do you need to get to the next match?’” Meske told The Courier Journal. “So, yeah, I think the support that we’ve had has been right on par with all those teams that we want to beat in December. And I know Kentucky’s in the same boat.”

While every match has the potential to influence the NCAA tournament bracket, Meske says the primary motivation behind Louisville’s “beat UK” mentality is bragging rights. The stakes are higher when UofL spars with elite conference foes like Pitt or SMU. But there’s a unique sense of urgency in besting the Wildcats. It’s unlike anything Meske’s been a part of, and he played volleyball at Ohio State, where Michigan (or Xichigan, as the Buckeyes prefer) is public enemy No. 1.

“We want to beat them just as bad as we want to beat anybody else,” he said.

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