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Blue out to make Louisville 'a more worldly place'

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Jonathan Blue says his sports dreams were born while he was watching a dream come true at court level: "Ball boy, University of Louisville basketball team, 1980."

Outside of the Kentucky Derby, it was the first time many in Louisville had seen the city take center stage of the sports world. And in some ways Blue has spent much of the rest of his life trying to keep getting it back there.

He took a step in that direction yesterday. He made national headlines, at least for folks who read Sports Business Journal as closely as they do ESPN.com, when his Blue Equity bought the sports agency of Joel Segal, recognized as one of the most powerful player agents in football.

What's that mean? It means guys such as Reggie Bush and Michael Vick now are represented by a sports agency whose international headquarters are in Louisville. And Segal will stay on to become president of the football division of Blue Equity, which in the past year has been running a financial fast break, acquiring events, television properties and agents.

Star-studded lineup

An example of the firm's rapidly growing influence: When I caught up with Blue yesterday, he was a bit down. Andy Roddick, another of Blue Equity's clients, had just lost in the first round of the French Open, for which Blue Equity owns international television rights. Then he laughed. The winner of that match, Igor Andrejev, also is a Blue Equity client.

The firm has recently signed agency deals with Florida Gators Corey Brewer and Joakim Noah. It represents top women's tennis player Justine Henin and NBA All-Star Rasheed Wallace. Among its media and event properties are the U.S. Tennis Open, the Boston Marathon, numerous ATP tournaments and the AVP Beach Volleyball tour.

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Blue doesn't work with the athletes. He is assembling agencies, events and television properties. And although that may not be quite as exciting as a big-league event coming to town, it does give the city a big-league sports presence.

"We're in Louisville and people say it can't be done here, and I think we continue to prove as a company and a firm that you can do things that bring things here and make this a more worldly place," he said.

Blue, 39, is a Louisville guy. Grew up here. Still remembers reading Dick Fenlon's columns in The Louisville Times at his kitchen table. Graduated from St. Francis High School. Runs in the miniMarathon every year and trains for triathlons. To complete a contractual obligation, he moved to Atlanta for a short stretch after the family business was sold.

'I was never leaving again'

"When I came back, I said I was never leaving again," he said. "I don't have a residence anywhere but here. I don't have a place in Florida or a place in New York. I love getting off the plane at Standiford Field and driving home. It's a relief to come home, not a downer. I just like to be able to do things that make this a better place."

He said he's already putting together an ice show slated for Louisville this winter that will be televised by CBS.

"Last year we had it in Chicago because it was set up before we owned the business," he said. "Now we have the ability to wave the magic wand."

Blue's work stretches far beyond sports. But after helping to lead the effort to get an NBA team to Louisville and landing the Mike Tyson-Danny Williams boxing match here, Blue said he began to look for more sports opportunities.

"It's funny, because people saw the news today and have come up to me and said, 'I didn't even know you were in sports,' " he said.

Oh, he's in. And while he's trying to build an international giant, Louisville could benefit from his love of going to home games.

Reach Eric Crawford at (502) 582-4372 or ecrawford@courier-journal.com. Comment on this column, and read his blog and previous columns, at www.courier-journal.com/crawford.

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- Dining
- Television
- Movies
- Arts
- Music
- Events
- Goof Off
- Blogs & Columns

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- Horse Racing
- Recruiting
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- UK Wildcats
- IU Hoosiers
- Motor Sports
- Kentucky Highs
- Indiana Highs

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- Cartoons
- Reader Letters
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- Op-Ed
- C-J Blogs
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- Business People
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