The obvious successes of the Big East—not the least of which was Syracuse's 2003 national basketball title—left many SU alumni and fans baffled by the conference's susceptibility to the "raid" perpetrated on it last year by the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). According to Crouthamel, it's a tale of football, television, and greed.

To make its move into football in the early '90s, the Big East expanded from its Northeastern base across the Mason-Dixon line to recruit the University of Miami, one of the last nationally powerful independents, and Virginia Tech, a program on the rise. At one point, Miami and the Southeastern Conference had eyed each other, but never struck a deal. "You might say we got Miami on the rebound," Crouthamel says. "In a sense, its membership was on the table from the day it was admitted."

The ACC courted Miami through much of the '90s, Crouthamel says, but the Hurricanes stayed put until a string of developments changed the situation. In 1998, the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) was instituted to replace the traditional agreements and scattershot invitations that had previously determined bowl opponents. The BCS created an alignment among the Orange, Sugar, Rose, and Fiesta bowls and the nation's top conferences, including the Big East and the ACC. Along with automatic bowl invitations for each conference's championship team, the agreement created a revenue-sharing plan worth millions of dollars. In addition, the NCAA created an opportunity for schools

20 intercollegiate sports, speaks of vitality. During a 25-year history, Big East men's and women's sports teams have won nearly two dozen national championships in six different sports and more than 100 of its student-athletes have won individual national titles. Moreover, some 300 Big East student-athletes have earned Academic All-America honors.

The 25-year-old conference looks to rebound after a stunning shuffle in its membership

By David Marc

ack in 1979, SU's new athletic director, Jake Crouthamel, got together with his counterparts from Georgetown, St. John's, Seton Hall, Connecticut, Providence, and Boston College and put pen to ink to form the Big East Conference. It would prove to be a smart move for Syracuse, which had one of the few nationally competitive, full-scale sports programs in the Northeast, but was at the mercy of the Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference (ECAC). "At that time, the ECAC controlled television rights and post-season opportunities for independents, and we were not getting our fair share," Crouthamel says. "There were about 150 colleges in the ECAC and a tiny school with a limited program was getting the same representation as Syracuse or St. John's."

With the formation of the Big East, Crouthamel saw an opportunity to build on SU's storied tradition and keep the University a force to be reckoned with in intercollegiate athletics. "We were already playing most of the schools with whom we formed the Big East," he says. "But we did more than just make it official. With our own basketball conference, we controlled our own television package, staged our own post-season tournament, and were assured of our own qualifier for the NCAA basketball tournament. This was clearly the best way to bring the most benefit to our athletes, our schools, and our fans, and the whole thing came together quite nicely."

As Crouthamel predicted, Big East competition ushered in a renaissance of Northeastern college basketball. The conference's innovative TV contracts with established broadcast networks as well as emerging cable channels played a major part in this. ESPN, the nation's first "all-sports" satellite cable service, came online in September 1979, and grew up with the Big East. During the '80s, a 7 p.m. tip-off at the Carrier Dome or Madison Square Garden soon became a familiar after-school TV attraction for high school athletes and for sports fans across the continent. "We were the originators of 'Monday night basketball' on ESPN," Crouthamel says. "The Big East Conference really helped to highlight the potential of cable TV for college sports, especially basketball."

In 1991, the Big East took on an even more difficult job—a revival of Eastern college football. Since most of the founding schools did not compete in the sport, the conference expanded in stages to create an eight-team football league. Here too, the Big East met with success, regularly sending as many as half of its teams to post-season bowl games.

Today, the conference's overall record, including its participation in more than

Big East Comings and Goings

1979-80: Conference play begins in basketball and other sports with seven teams: SU, Boston College, Connecticut, Georgetown, Providence College, St. John's, and Seton Hall.

1980-81: Villanova is added.

1982-83: Pittsburgh is added.

1991-92: Football becomes a conference sport. Miami is added. Rutgers, Temple, Virginia Tech, and West Virginia are added for football only.

1995-96: West Virginia and Rutgers upgrade affiliation to all sports. Notre Dame is added in all sports except football.
to gain even more revenue by allowing 12- team conferences to hold post-season championship games before the bowls. Big East football was in no position to expand to 12 teams for several reasons, especially opposition from the conference’s non-football schools. However, if the ACC could go to 12, it would be prepared to make Miami a lucrative offer.

Crouthamel says the presidents of the ACC schools initially balked at such a huge expansion. “Here was a conservative-minded conference that had gone from eight to nine members in 1991 and had been discussing going to 10, mainly with Miami, ever since,” he says. “Then, all of a sudden, they’re looking at 12. Economic reality, which of course means television money, wasn’t just a factor in the ACC’s sudden change of heart—it drove the decision, pure and simple.”

To satisfy Miami, the ACC needed two additional members. As a Southern school, Virginia Tech was a logical choice, and the Hokies followed Miami’s lead. Many predicted that Syracuse would round out the ACC’s new dozen. But SU held fast to its Big East roots and obligations, and so, it seemed, did other conference members. However, last October, Boston College, an original member of the Big East, announced it too would bolt to the ACC.

This unexpected development left the Big East with just five football-playing members, creating a major quandary. A rule scheduled to take effect in 2005 requires Division 1-A conferences to have at least eight members to be eligible for the BCS. This gave the Big East no choice but to expand.

In November, the presidents of the Big East schools announced the admission of five new members. The universities of Cincinnati, Louisville, and South Florida are set to join in the 2005-06 academic year in all sports, giving the conference a viable eight-team football league. DePaul and Marquette universities, which don’t field football teams, will compete in all other conference sports.

Crouthamel is realistic about the effects of the ACC raid on Big East football. “We no longer have the instant credibility in football that Miami and Virginia Tech gave us,” he says. “But Louisville, Cincinnati, and South Florida all have successful programs, and we have to get more television exposure to make that better known. New media opportunities, such as the College Sports Television [CSTV] cable network, may help us that way. Keeping the Big East in the BCS [the current arrangement expires at the end of the 2005 season] is extremely important to us, but I don’t see us expanding the football conference to 12 members. There simply aren’t four appropriate schools available.”

On the subject of basketball, the normally reserved athletic director is downright effusive. “I think it’s fair to say that the Big East will be the strongest basketball conference in the country,” says Crouthamel. “Of course, that can be a mixed blessing. After all, we’re going to have to play these teams, and the new Big East will be tougher than ever to win. We’ll be up against six or seven of the best teams in the country, not just three or four. Our hope is that this will raise the national profile for Big East football as well.”