

# Pride Restored

The Story of Loyola Marymount's Greatest Season Since The Days of Westhead

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## What Does It Take to be Great?

What is the standard of greatness for a college basketball team? Given the wide disparity among the 350 plus Division I programs, the answer depends on the echelon within which a particular team is contained. For some, the bar is to win championships and not just one. This standard applies to blue blood schools like Duke and Villanova. For other schools, the bar is sustained success and excellence for many years, regardless of whether they win a championship or not; examples include Michigan State and Gonzaga.

For mid-major universities, the standard is different. The way to achieve greatness as a mid-major university can assume a couple of different forms:

- **Making a run in the tournament**
  - 2011 #11 VCU → Final Four
  - 2018 #11 Loyola Chicago → Final Four
  - 2022 #15 Saint Peter's → Elite Eight
  - 2023 #9 Florida Atlantic → Final Four
- **Winning a game**
  - 2018 UMBC
  - 2021 Oral Roberts
  - 2023 Fairleigh Dickinson
  - 2025 McNeese State

Even simply reaching the tournament can be enough to cement a team in their respective history. Some recent examples include SIU-Edwardsville reaching the dance for the first time in school history, UC-San Diego reaching the tournament in their first year of eligibility and posting 30 wins, and Saint Francis reaching the tournament for the first time in over thirty years, despite posting a losing record.

Similar to European football, the nature of competition in college basketball is not equal. Using a crude comparison of the Champions League to the NCAA Tournament, the list of winners is dominated by elite programs and "Blue Bloods." Possible exceptions include teams like Baylor, Louisville, Syracuse, etc. Yet, those are all power five teams, and teams that linger around the top of those conferences too. Mid-major teams are not going to win the tournament, so they can't be judged as such. Mid-major

programs will struggle to sustain excellence, but they can have a great season, a great group of players, or just one great player. Greatness for a mid-major team is accomplishing something that engenders pride among its supporters, pride that lasts the test of time. With that being said, I will now turn my attention to my personal mid-major of interest, Loyola Marymount. They had a three-year stretch in the days of Westhead, Kimble, and Gathers where they were the most exciting team in the country. Since then, as with most mid majors, without that magical composition of players and coach, they have simply existed. I argue that the Lions' 2023 campaign was their greatest since the glory days of Westhead, due to a fantastic player, a miraculous upset, and a trio of wins.

## The Lights Are Never Too Bright

As mentioned above, a mid-major program can put together a great season when it possesses a special group of players. I would not call LMU's 2023 roster special. Their rotation went ten deep: three bigs (Leaubepe, Issanza, Graham), two spark plugs off the bench (Anderson and Merkviladze), shooters (Ahrens and Stephens) and defense-first players (Lamaj, Marble). This is a fair cast of role players who were all capable of making a big shot or making good decisions when called upon, but they struggled with consistency. These nine players filled their roles around the star of the show: Cam Shelton.

It's a rare sight within these pieces that a topic or player is beyond being adequately captured in a statistical realm. I wager that the impact that Cam Shelton had in the 2022-23 season is not reflected strongly enough through the statistics, but here goes. He led the WCC in points per game and placed in the top five in many other advanced stats (2nd in PER, OWS; 3rd in WS, WS/40, BPM, OBPM, AST% GmSc; 4th in STL%). Shelton was likely the third-best player in the WCC behind overlord Drew Timme and future NBA draft pick Brandin Podziemski. The 2022-23 WCC First Team<sup>1</sup> includes multiple players from Gonzaga, Saint Mary's, Santa Clara, San Francisco...and then Cam Shelton. No other LMU player received Second Team honors this season.

Shelton's 21.4 points per game are impressive, but he had a run within conference play that took him to another level.

Stretch	PPG	FGA/g	3PA/g	FTA/g	FG%	3P%	FT%	TS%	GmSc
First 19 games	18.0	14.3	4.0	4.9	.472	.342	.645	.543	14.4
Last 12 games	<b>26.8</b>	18.7	5.8	6.8	.513	.420	.768	.612	19.1

Table 1: Shelton's elevated performance in the heart of conference play

Shelton decided to shoot more often and more efficiently in the middle of conference play against the most challenging competition LMU faced all season<sup>2</sup>. He decided "I got this," and willed LMU to feats they would not have achieved otherwise. The Lions secured wins against Saint Mary's and Gonzaga, with the latter being one of the most remarkable things in the program's history. His herculean efforts to carry his team are what I will always remember.

<sup>1</sup>Yeah, the All-WCC First Team is a selection of TEN players, not five as one might expect. I don't get it either.

<sup>2</sup>Average SRS of LMU's opponents through the first 19 games: 2.77; the next 12: 6.63

The sad reality of that 12-game stretch is that LMU finished 7-5 in those games; he could only do so much considering who they were facing and his teammates' performances. The most emblematic loss of those five was LMU's two-point defeat on the road at the hands of the Broncos. Shelton and Podziemski were dueling, and Brandin had one fundamental edge that Cam lacked: Help. Shelton scored 36 of the Lions' 69 points. He shot 14-of-25 and 4-of-10 from deep, and the rest of the team shot 9-of-37 and 3-of-19, respectively. Podziemski, who scored 30 himself, was able to trust that Chris Tilly and Cam Tongue would make some shots, while Shelton was left praying that his teammates would come to life. That is the crux of my point: Shelton dragged an LMU team much farther than they could have imagined. This team possessed solid, albeit inconsistent players, but without Shelton at the helm, this team would have been bumping elbows with Portland and Pepperdine in the basement of the WCC.

Another feature that made Shelton a joy to watch was how he scored. His stats indicate that he was a willing three-point shooter, which he was, but Cam preferred not to settle for jumpshots. Shelton was a bruising slasher who used his strength to get to the rim and finish adeptly in the post. He was always in control with his drives and very few guards in the WCC had the strength or discipline to slow his drives down. If the drives were contained, then he would let that funky-looking left-hand release go and hit his threes.

Another fascinating element of Shelton's magical season was how unexpected it was. This was Shelton's second year at Loyola Marymount after having transferred from NAU. He joined the Lions fresh off leading the Big Sky in points per game, but in an inefficient fashion (19.2 PPG on 42/35/72 splits). That NAU team was abysmal, so I don't necessarily blame him for putting on the backpack.

Shelton's first year at LMU was a mess. Cam struggled to fit alongside the vacuum Eli Scott, as his usage percentage was cut in half. In 2020-21, he led the Big Sky with a 33.8 USG% and it fell to 16.5% at LMU in 2021-22. Shelton was relegated to a catch-and-shoot guy, with his field goal attempts per game cratering from 15.6 to 6.9. He was also taking threes at a higher rate than before in his career and it did not go well (27.8 3P%). LMU went 11-18, Eli Scott, Joe Quintana, and Dameane Douglas all departed, leaving the role of lead ball handler available for Shelton to seize. He needed that freedom to take the reigns as he did in 2022-23.

LMU went 5-2 when Shelton took 20+ shots; as shown in Table 1, Shelton was not a shot chucker; he was very efficient. Four of those wins occurred in conference play. Here is a recap of all four ordered by their gravity:

- 2/25 Pepperdine: 32 points, 4 assists, 3 steals, 3 threes, 10-21 FG, 9-12 FT in an eight-point win.
- 2/18 vs. Pacific: Career-high 40 points, 5 rebounds, 6 threes, 13-21 FG, 8-11 FT in a two-point win, including the go-ahead layup and scoring 17 points in the last 9:32 of the second half.
- 2/9 vs. #15 Saint Mary's: 31 points, 5 rebounds, 4 assists, 12-26 FG in an overtime win against one of the top defenses in the country; all 31 points came in the second half plus OT, including 11 in the extra period.
- 1/19 @ #6 Gonzaga: Cam's magnum opus. 27 points, 9 rebounds, 3 threes, 11-23 FG, and the go-ahead layup to put LMU in front for good in front of a raucous Spokane crowd.

Those two victories against the joint rulers of the conference were particularly special. Shelton's second-half barrage against Saint Mary's was part of a miraculous comeback at the end of regulation. Shelton had a huge and-one and the game-tying layup to force the extra period, although we can't forget Justin Ahrens's huge three that sent Gersten into a frenzy. Shelton had another huge and-one in overtime, as the Gaels' guards were unable to keep Cam in front of them, including WCC Defensive Player of the Year Logan Johnson. The Gonzaga game was a different story. LMU had a 66-59 lead before Gonzaga went on an 8-0 run to seemingly end little brother's fun. That's when Shelton put on a series of moves to get to the rim and finish a sweet layup of the glass, while being guarded by Drew Timme no less. Shelton was playing for David, but he played like Goliath, bullying every opponent in front of him, regardless of what team they were on.

## Raising the Standard

The modern day WCC has a well-established hierarchy. Gonzaga and Saint Mary's are at the top<sup>3</sup>, San Francisco, Santa Clara, and former member BYU are typically in the second tier, and LMU, Pepperdine, Portland, San Diego, and Pacific compose the mediocre medley of remaining teams that jockey for positioning. That lower level of teams occasionally competes for fourth in the conference, but it is dependent on one of the top four being abnormally subpar. That is to say, when LMU faces an opponent from the top four, I hope more for a competitive affair, rather than a win. The 2022-23 season strayed far from the norm.

LMU was not only competitive in games against the top of the WCC, they were able to win. The Lions went 9-7 in WCC play—their most conference wins since 2011-12. As you can imagine, the 2022-23 season had many landmark moments:

First Time...	Since
Beating BYU	2018
Beating Saint Mary's	2012
Beating Gonzaga	2010
Beating Gonzaga & Saint Mary's in a single season	1996
Beating Gonzaga at Spokane	1991
Beating BYU, Saint Mary's & Gonzaga in a single season	Ever

Table 2

For this section and the following one, there's an additional piece of nomenclature needed for putting these all these different teams and seasons into a comparable context: Sports Reference's Simple Rating Statistic (SRS) statistic. It's designed for ranking Division I programs based on their strength of schedule and their performance, where 0 is average. For example, teams at the top of Power 5 conferences would have a higher SRS, average mid-major programs would hover around zero, and bad mid-majors would have a negative SRS. SRS is comparable to Kenpom's net rankings, but unfortunately it costs money to see the Kenpom rankings of previous seasons, making SRS a more accessible option.

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<sup>3</sup>While Gonzaga is still in the conference

When LMU defeated Gonzaga on the road in 1991, both programs were on the same level. This was the first year following Westhead's departure. Their records were one game apart, but Gonzaga was a slightly better team. The gap between LMU and Gonzaga was not a vast chasm until the 21st century.

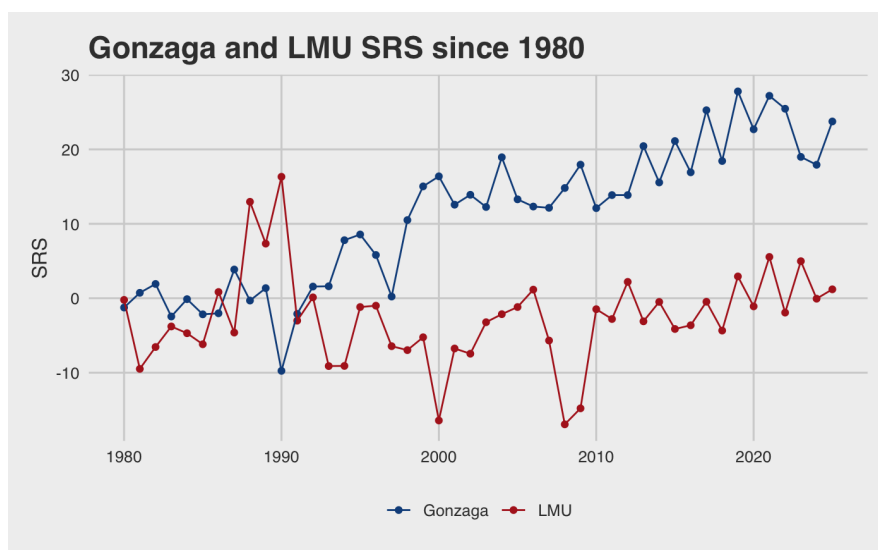


Figure 1: We can not compete.

1997 was the point where the relationship between the Bulldogs and the Lions became what it is today. As a result, the Lions have a 4-62 record against them since the 1996-97 season. That's a 6% winning percentage, and that is why I merely hope for a competitive game every time these two face off; if your team had won 6% of time and just four times in nearly thirty years, why would you seriously believe you could win?

In the last 15 ears, LMU has beaten Gonzaga once. It's difficult to visualize domination to that degree, but here is my best attempt:

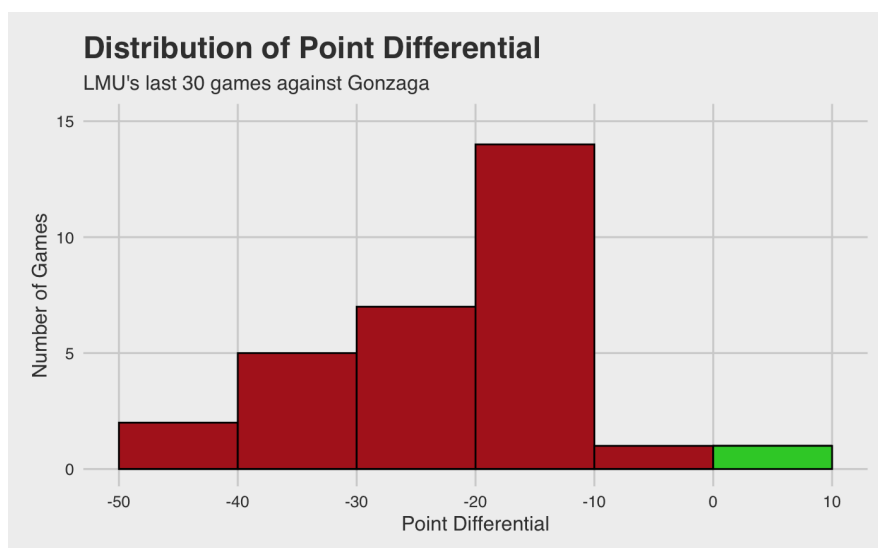


Figure 2: Close game

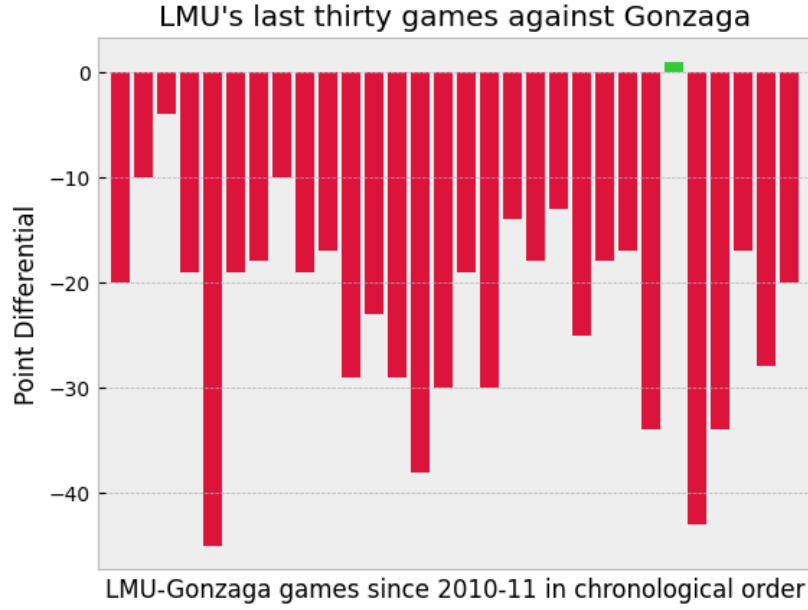


Figure 3: 1-29 record vs. Gonzaga since 2010-11

Figure 2 highlights the cold realization that LMU has more games losing by 30 or more points (7) than games where the final score is within 10 points (2). Gonzaga owns the Lions, and that is what makes the 2023 victory that much sweeter. It was LMU's Super Bowl, arguably the greatest win in LMU's regular season history.

The win against Gonzaga was a peak combination of rivalry implications and unlikelihood. It was incredibly unlikely, but statistically speaking, it was not the most extreme case of an upset win. To classify the upsets, I used a statistic based on SRS.

$$SRS_{diff} = SRS_{opp} - SRS_{LMU} \quad (1)$$

The greater  $SRS_{diff}$  is, the more "unlikely" a win is. This statistic is a form of an upset index. Here are the fifteen wins with the highest  $SRS_{diff}$ :

Season	LMUSRS	Opponent	Venue	Opp SRS	SRS_diff
2007-08	-16.94	Boise State	Road	1.60	<b>18.54</b>
1993-94	-9.09	Pepperdine	Road	9.16	<b>18.25</b>
2006-07	-5.68	Gonzaga	Home	12.15	<b>17.83</b>
1993-94	-9.09	Gonzaga	Home	7.80	<b>16.89</b>
2002-03	-3.22	Gonzaga	Home	12.26	<b>15.48</b>
2009-10	-1.47	Notre Dame	Road	13.14	<b>14.61</b>
2008-09	-14.79	San Diego	Home	-0.37	<b>14.42</b>
2022-23	4.98	Gonzaga	Road	18.99	<b>14.01</b>
2009-10	-1.47	Gonzaga	Home	12.11	<b>13.58</b>
2021-22	-1.93	SMU	Neutral	11.14	<b>13.07</b>
2001-02	-7.45	UCSB	Home	5.55	<b>13.00</b>
2011-12	2.20	Saint Louis	Home	15.15	<b>12.95</b>
2022-23	4.98	SMC	Home	17.41	<b>12.43</b>
2017-18	-4.34	BYU	Home	8.05	<b>12.39</b>
2013-14	-0.49	BYU	Home	11.63	<b>12.12</b>

Figure 4: LMU's fifteen biggest upsets

By this metric, the 2023 win against Gonzaga only ranks eighth in  $SRS_{diff}$ . However, it's the win with the greatest  $SRS_{opp}$  among these fifteen games. Most of these wins can be summed up as a bad to awful LMU team beating a much better, but not great, team. Most of these wins were against tournament teams, but only one was against the healthy number six team in the country. In fact, this was LMU's toughest win ranked by  $SRS_{opp}$ .

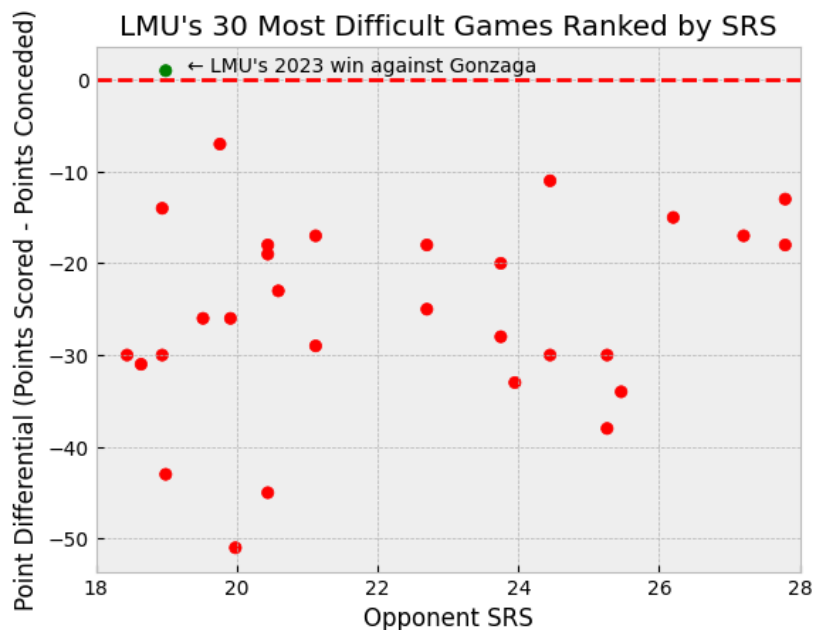


Figure 5: Scatterplot of LMU's thirty most difficult games and by how much they won or lost

Here is a note on this plot: This was not curtailed after the Westhead era. There are five games within this plot that took place while LMU was an offensive juggernaut (1987-90); they were all losses by an average of 23 points. There are not enough superlatives in the world to describe how unlikely it was for LMU to win against Gonzaga in 2023.

There is another wrinkle about the Gonzaga win that makes it more remarkable: it was on the road. As referenced in Table 2, this was LMU's first win at Spokane since 1991 and Figure 1 reveals '91 Gonzaga was nowhere near the monolith they are today.

Season	LMUSRS	Venue	Gonzaga SRS	SRS_diff
1993-94	-9.09	Home	7.80	16.89
2002-03	-3.22	Home	12.26	15.48
2006-07	-5.68	Home	12.15	17.83
2009-10	-1.47	Home	12.11	13.58
<b>2022-23</b>	<b>4.98</b>	<b>Road</b>	<b>18.99</b>	<b>14.01</b>

Figure 6: LMU's most unlikely wins against Gonzaga in chronological order

It is more challenging to win on the road in any sport, but attempting to win on the road in college basketball conference play is incredibly difficult. It's the reason why many ranked teams lose on the road in conference play—that environment is as hostile as it gets. The thought of LMU even keeping pace with #6 Gonzaga on the road is

almost unfathomable. These plots serve to highlight how extraordinary this feat is, and it is very likely that these heights will not be reached again.

## The Rule of Ten

Since 1990, the bar for a successful season has not been a high hurdle to clear. LMU has struggled to be a consistently winning program. In 35 seasons since Westhead's final, LMU has posted a 417-631 record including a 175-350 record in conference play, both winning percentages below 40%.

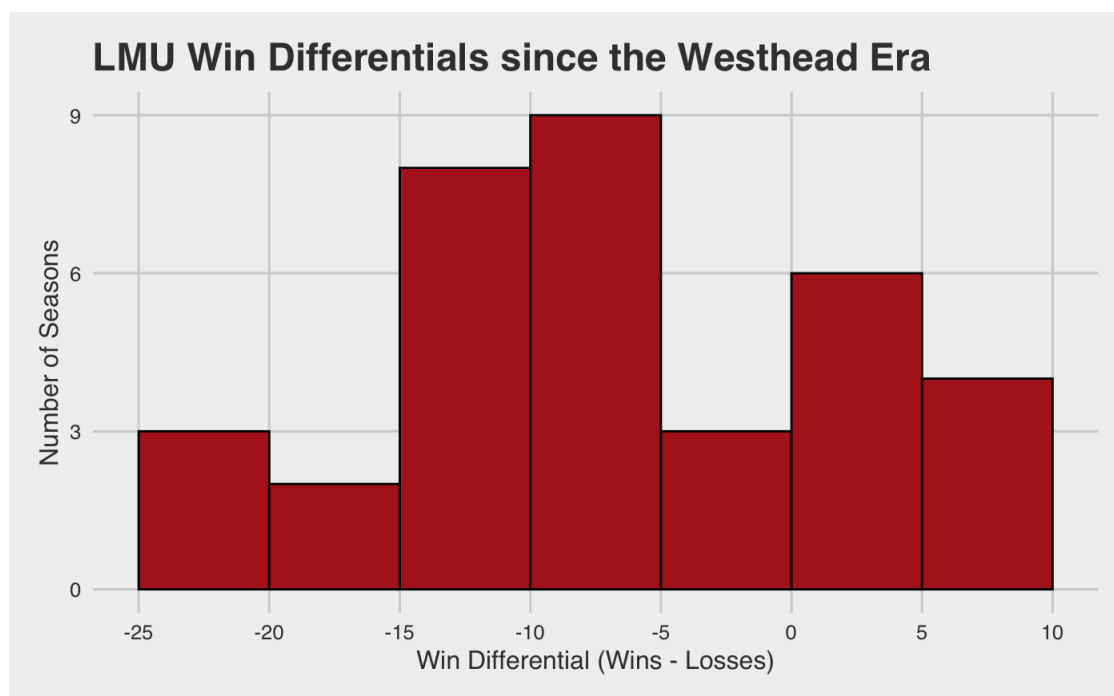


Figure 7: Histogram of LMU's Win Differential Distribution from 1990-2025

The Lions have posted a record above .500 in just ten of those 35 seasons, and they have more seasons with a win differential of -15 or less than of 5 or more.

There is a counterargument to the 2023 Lions being the best iteration since the Days of Westhead. There are two Lions teams since 1990 that won 20 games, the 2011-12 Lions and the 2018-19 Lions. I still argue that 2023 is more impressive for a few different reasons.

The 2018-19 Lions won 22 games, making this their winningest season since the 1990 season. However, a look at their schedule takes away from the initial luster of that number. This Lions squad had the best net rating of any Lions group in the last 15 years, largely in part due to their defense. They had a fantastic defense this season, ranking 46th in the country. LMU had two quality wins (Georgetown and San Francisco) and went 1-9 against Pepperdine, Gonzaga, Saint Mary's, BYU, and San Diego (the one win came against the Waves). They lost in Round 1 of the WCC Tournament, also against the 16-18 Waves. They made it to Round 3 of the CBI and fell to the only decent team they played.<sup>4</sup> Again, they had 22 wins, but it was accumulated against inferior teams.

<sup>4</sup>LMU's second-round opponent Brown University featured future ASU Sun Devil Dez Cambridge,



The 2011-12 Lions won 21 games, which was their winningest season since 1990 until the 2019 season. This campaign was electric. It possesses a much stronger résumé than 2018-19, making it the most viable counterargument against 2022-23 for being LMU's best season since 1990. The numbers were impressive, but the highlights of some of their games were enthralling. These games took place nearly 15 years ago, I never watched any of these players take the court while I was on campus, and yet here I was unable to contain myself while watching [LMU's fantastic comeback against the Dons](#). They had several other games that were taxing to the blood pressure: another classic against USF, a home stand against ranked Saint Louis, and a pair of wins on the road against BYU and ranked Saint Mary's. I could feel my argument for 2023's case slipping through my grasp, but the numbers provided some additional clarity.

The 2012 Lions had a more balanced attack than the 2019 group. The 2012 Lions are the only iteration to have an above-average offensive and defensive rating in the last 15 years. The 2019 Lions defense carried them a better net rating, but the 2012 group was a more balanced team. The 2012 Lions were led by Anthony Ireland and Drew Viney. Ireland was a fearless scorer and volume shooter and Viney was a fantastic complementary boost. Viney actually missed a chunk of the season; the Lions were 15-9 in games in which he took the court. They didn't have a win against Gonzaga, but they still put together some impressive wins.

	2011-12		2018-19		2022-23	
	Wins	Losses	Wins	Losses	Wins	Losses
$SRS_{Opp} \geq 0$	8	9	5	11	8	10
$SRS_{Opp} < 0$	13	4	17	1	11	2

Table 3: The distribution of win quality among these three LMU squads

Season	Best Win by SRS	Opponent	Worst Loss by SRS	Opponent
2011-12	15.15	#23 Saint Louis	-8.41	Morgan State
2018-19	8.56	San Francisco	-11.12	UC Riverside
2022-23	<b>18.99</b>	<b>#6 Gonzaga</b>	-2.06	San Diego

Table 4: The most extreme wins and losses of the three teams

The 2019 Lions stacked up wins against inferior competition; they did not have a signature win unlike the 2012 and 2023 Lions squads. Figure 4 actually includes the 2012 Lions' upset win over #23 Saint Louis. Additionally, LMU's win against Saint Mary's on the road was wildly impressive. The Lions do have a similar stretch of misery at the hands of their WCC contemporary Saint Mary's.

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who sank a half-court shot to beat U of A. The feeling I experienced when that happened was very similar to what I felt when Shelton made that go-ahead shot against Gonzaga: pure unadulterated joy. Small world. Random intersections like these are what make these deep dives so much fun.

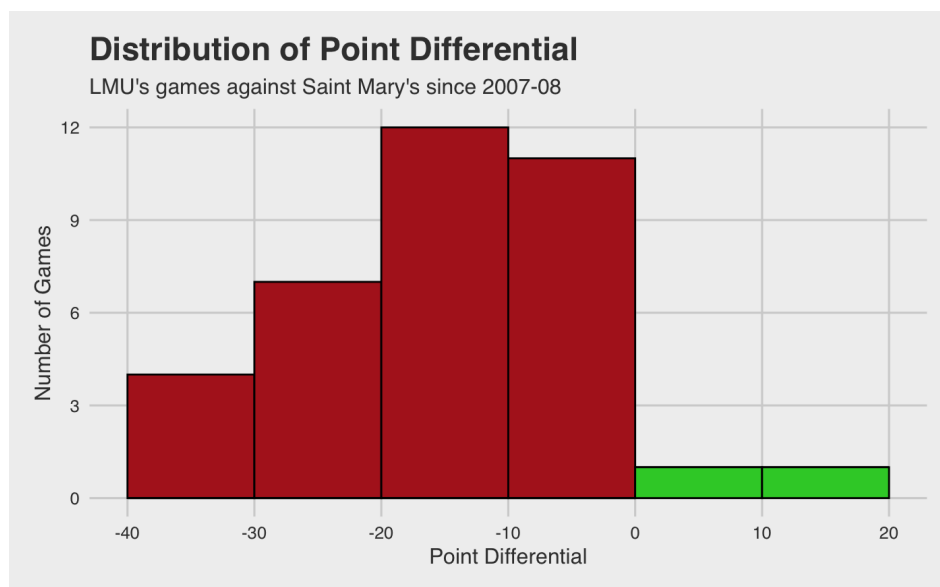


Figure 8: Joint Custody

The 2012 Gaels were not on the level of the 2023 Bulldogs, but they were still ranked #15 in the country. Additionally, the Lions won convincingly; they beat Saint Mary's by 15 in Moraga! It does not possess as much mystique as the Gonzaga win, but it is still very impressive. As Table 4 indicates, Saint Louis did have a higher SRS. Both Saint Mary's and Saint Louis went to the NCAA Tournament, and the latter actually advanced to the Round of 32 before losing narrowly to #1 Michigan State with Draymond Green and three other NBA players. They also played in a better conference, hence why Saint Louis ended up with the higher SRS. However, while defeating those two teams was special, it does not reach the heights that the 2023 Lions achieved.

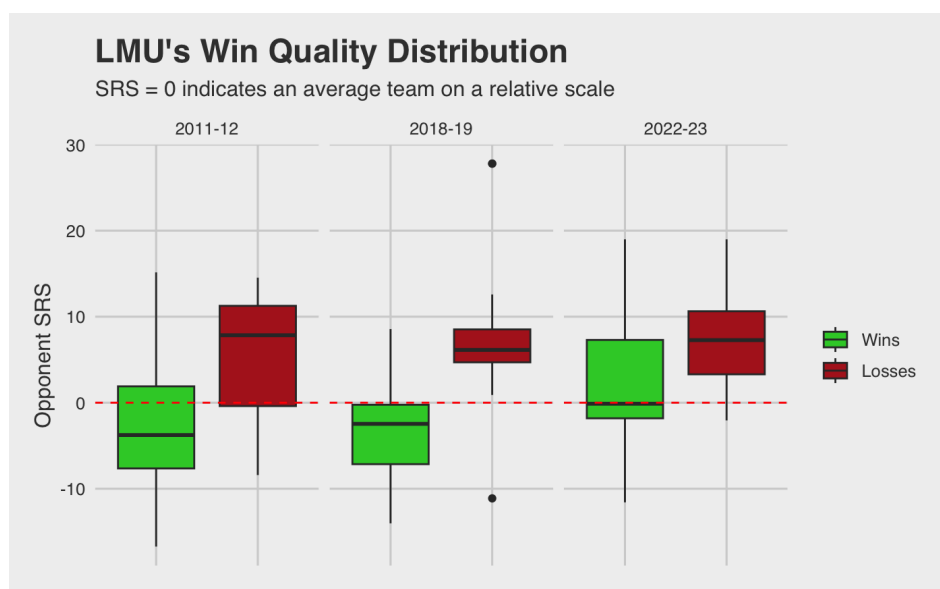


Figure 9: The three seasons' win quality distribution

## Glossary

- **PER** (Player Efficiency Rating) - An attempt to take a player's statistical profile and represent it with one number.
- **WS** (Win Shares) - "An estimate of the number of wins contributed by a player due to their offense and defense," also **OWS** and **DWS** which only reflect offensive and defensive contributions, respectively.
- **WS/40** (Win Shares per 40 minutes) - Win Shares are an accumulative statistic, so this is adjusted to put players on an equal plane in terms of playing time.
- **BPM** (Box Score Plus Minus) - "A box score estimate of the points per 100 possessions that a player contributed above a league-average player, translated to an average team," also **OBPM** and **DBPM** which reflect offensive and defensive contributions, respectively.
- **AST%** (Assist Percentage) - "An estimate of the percentage of teammate field goals a player assisted while he was on the floor."

$$100 * AST_{player} / (((MP_{player} / (MP_{team} / 5)) * FG_{Team}) - FG_{player})$$

- **STL%** (Steal Percentage) - "An estimate of the percentage of opponent possessions that end with a steal by the player while he was on the floor."

$$100 * (STL_{Player} * (MP_{Team} / 5)) / (MP_{Player} * Poss_{Opp})$$

- **GmSc** (Game Score) - "A rough measure of a player's productivity for a single game."

$$PTS + STL - TOV + 0.3 * DRB + 0.4 * (FG - (FTA - FT) - PF) + 0.7 * (-FGA + ORB + AST + BLK)$$

- **SRS** (Simple Rating System) - "A rating that takes into account average point differential and strength of schedule. The rating is denominated in points above or below average, where zero is average."

## References

- [1] "Glossary," *Sports-Reference*, [link](#).
- [2] Specific play-by-play information and moments were taken from ESPN.
- [3] All data is taken from Sports-Reference. Data was aggregated using BeautifulSoup scraping into a Pandas DataFrame and exported as a CSV.
- [4] Data manipulation is done with Excel, Python, SQL and R.
- [5] Visualizations were done in Python, R and Excel.