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Gridiron Glory: Rocco ready for upcoming season

September 01, 2008 | Eric Brown

Coming off a tough loss to North Carolina during the 2005 football season, the University of Virginia's Associate Head Coach Danny Rocco found himself in a compromising position. Due to a recruiting trip, UVa head coach Al Groh could not appear on his weekly call-in radio show, leaving his right-hand man with the task of taking calls from disgruntled fans.

As expected, fans called in, challenging the decisions made by the Cavaliers' coaching staff. Throughout the show, Rocco kept his cool, refusing to shy away from any inquiries. As the segment unfolded, one particular listener in Lynchburg, Va., paid special attention to the way the coach handled the situation.

"The next day I got a call at my office and it was from Dr. [Jerry] Falwell," recalled Rocco. "(Falwell) said, 'Last night I was listening to the Al Groh radio show. I just wanted to let you know how impressed I was with the interview you conducted.'"

Falwell complimented Rocco on his ability to remain loyal to his longtime mentor and asked him if he had an interest in becoming LU's head football coach. By year's end, the Rocco era at Liberty University was under way.

Since Rocco's arrival, support for Flames football has grown tremendously, creating an atmosphere that seemed unimaginable in years past. These days, a sea of red saturates the student section of Williams Stadium, where crowd attendance has been at an all-time high.

Rocco realized early on that in order to take the program to the next level, he had to instill confidence in his players.

“(Rocco) has a vision for where he wants to take it,” stated Associate Head Coach Pete Sundheim. “I think the key thing is that he has really captured the kids’ hearts here and has gotten these guys to really play hard and play well.”

As a former defensive line and linebacker coach, Rocco brought a unique scheme to the program with the installment of the 3-4 defense. The formation consists of three defensive linemen and four linebackers and is predicated on physical endurance. While such variations in the Flames playbook have helped transform the program into a conference powerhouse, the players are using more than just X’s and O’s to prepare for the 2008 campaign.

“One of the things we’ve talked about since I’ve been here is being a physically dominant football team,” Rocco said. “The more you preach that message and the more that our strength coach Bill Gillespie gets the kids in the weight room buying into that message, then that’s what we become.”

Last season, the physically dominant Flames captured the program’s first-ever Big South title, earning numerous awards and honors along the way. Despite its success, Liberty did not receive an automatic bid to the 2007 NCAA Division I-AA playoffs.

This year, Rocco and his team are looking to take care of “unfinished business” and make a run in the post season.

“We have recruited well enough for the last couple of years to have enough talent and depth, so that our players are starting to replenish themselves as our seniors move on and graduate from the program,” Rocco said.

Liberty’s explosive offense features several key returners, including quarterback Brock Smith, running back Zach Terrell and 2007 Big South Offensive Player of the Year Rashad Jennings.

While Rocco hopes to improve on last year’s performance, he also wants his players to achieve success off the field.

“There is a much bigger picture here than just wins and losses,” he said. “I want to help young people understand what’s really important in life. Winning in life goes well beyond just the football field.”

Liberty’s football program has undergone numerous changes, from facility upgrades to the overall team philosophy. However, Rocco and his staff understand that while the program has achieved success at a rapid rate, there is still much more to accomplish.

GET TO KNOW COACH ROCCO

Sharing the spotlight: Before becoming Liberty's head coach, Rocco served as an assistant at UVa, the New York Jets, the University of Maryland, Texas, Boston College, Tulsa, Colorado and Wake Forest. Rocco has served under prominent head coaches Al Groh, Bill McCartney, John Mackovic and defending Super Bowl champ Tom Coughlin.

In the game: During his collegiate career, he played two seasons at Penn State under Joe Paterno before transferring to Wake Forest, where he played for his mentor Al Groh.

Family affair: Rocco comes from a family of football coaches. His father, Frank Rocco Sr., served on Penn State's coaching staff for 17 years before coming to Liberty as Director of Football Operations in 2000-2001. Rocco's offensive-minded older brother, Frank Jr., was also a member of the LU coaching staff from 2000-2003 and is now the head coach and athletic director at Liberty Christian Academy. Rocco's younger brother Dave also coaches high school football, serving as defensive coordinator at Jefferson Forest High School in Forest, Va.