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Playing at a whole new level

December 01, 2008 | Todd Wetmore

Travel down a suburban road any weekend of the year and you are more than likely to see children playing in their backyards, mimicking the actions of the sports figures they regularly watch on television.

If you were to visit those youngsters and inquire about their life's goals, there is a good chance they might mention playing their sport of choice professionally.

Those starry-eyed dreamers who excel in the early stages of life are the same ones who now don a Liberty Flames jersey, which one day might just give them a shot at their heart's desire.

In just four short decades, Liberty's athletics program has gone from a fledgling NCCAA department to one of the consistently mentioned up-and-coming leaders in NCAA Division I athletics.

For example, the Flames football program gained a place of national prominence during its 2007-08 season of "Unfinished Business," finishing with a record-setting run in the nation's Top 25 rankings.

The season, which will long be remembered as one of the best in program history, was made possible by some of the elite athletes at the FCS level.

Once barren sidelines at Williams Stadium are now routinely packed with professional scouts, assessing Liberty's athletes and their potential to play at the next level.

Star running back Rashad Jennings was a season-long candidate for the Walter Payton Award, an honor given annually to the best FCS football player in the nation. The bruising back who has become synonymous with one of the nation's best rushing attacks year-in and year-out, is widely talked about as being Liberty's first NFL Draft pick since Eric Green was taken by the Pittsburgh Steelers in the first round of the 1990 draft.

Football might be the flagship athletics opportunity Liberty University grants its student body, but that doesn't mean that the plausibility of national success stops on the gridiron.

Last year, Josh McDougal punctuated the most storied career of any athlete in Liberty's history, when he outlasted a 250-man field of the nation's best runners to capture the 2007 NCAA Men's Cross Country National Championship, Liberty's second individual national title.

Following in the runner's proverbial footsteps this year is sophomore long distance runner Sam Chelanga, who has already started to break records that took McDougal years to assemble, quickly capturing the attention of the national running world.

On the hardwood, Katie Feenstra, who championed the Lady Flames run to the "Sweet 16" of the 2005 NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament, was the No. 8 overall selection in the 2005 WNBA Draft. All in all, the men's and women's basketball programs have produced nearly 30 players who have played professionally in the United States or abroad.

Over the last four years, four former men's soccer players who used to roam the pitch over at the Liberty Soccer Field have garnered selection in the MLS Supplement Draft. Former softball standout Jessica Moore, who shattered program home run records during her days on the diamond, recently helped the Washington Glory capture the National Pro Fastpitch title.

Last spring, hurlers Ryan Page and David Stokes each were selected in the MLB Draft, giving the Flames baseball program 38 players who have been tabbed to play America's pastime at the highest level.

Once a place known for honing the skills of pastoral majors ready to charge the pulpits of the world, Liberty University is quickly becoming known as a place where every kid's dream can come true ... even if it is a desire to play sports at the highest levels.

Todd Wetmore is Liberty University's Assistant AD for Communications.

For Liberty University athletics news and schedules visit www.libertyflames.com.