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Advancing the vision

June 01, 2008 | Todd Wetmore

Every entity at Liberty University entered the 2007-08 academic year with a singular focus — to carry on the vision of its beloved founder and former chancellor, Dr. Jerry Falwell.

The larger-than-life figure was famous for challenging 20-something college students to become "Champions for Christ" in whatever field to which the Lord had called them.

For Liberty's 400-plus student-athletes, the directive is simple — to be the best by not only competing against the nation's elite, but by finishing with a victorious outcome.

Nearly two decades ago, Liberty's student-athletes were given that exact opportunity when the Athletics Department was granted full-time NCAA Division I status.

Three years later, the Flames gained conference affiliation with the Big South Conference, quickly setting their sights on dominating the league. And that's what the department has done, winning 84 conference championships over the past 20 years to set a new standard of excellence in the Big South.

Annually, the league presents the coveted Sasser Cup to a member institution based on regular season performances and championship finishes.

Liberty and Coastal Carolina University have had a strangle-hold on the honor for the past decade, earning five Sasser Cups apiece. However, Coastal has taken home the trophy the past four years and five out of the last seven.

In keeping with Dr. Falwell's vision, Liberty's student-athletes banded together this past school year to regain possession of the Cup, returning the award to its rrightful home on Liberty Mountain.

The year began with the most successful run in Big South history. Liberty claimed five out of six conference titles in the fall and the cross country programs kicked off the "Season of Champions" by sweeping the men's and women's team titles for the fourth time in program history.

Liberty's volleyball program dominated Big South play to claim its fourth league title. The Lady Flames ended Winthrop's reign in the sport, including their regular-season victory which halted the Eagles' 63-match conference winning streak.

The men's football and soccer teams earned conference championship rings following their firstever titles, capping off the most victorious season in league history. Individually, a student-athlete achieved a benchmark only one other had previously accomplished. Senior cross country runner Josh McDougal capped an already star-studded career with his crowning achievement, when he won the NCAA Men's Cross Country National Championship in Terre Haute, Ind.

The cold winds of the winter didn't cool the Flames' fervor for victories, as the winter clubs continued Liberty's run of success.

After having its 10-year run of conference titles snapped last year by arch rival Radford, the women's basketball program returned to the top, dashing the hopes of the Highlanders with a last-second victory to claim the program's 11th Big South title.

The men's indoor track program continued its unprecedented run in the league, winning its 11th-straight conference title — hoisting the trophy each year the Big South has sponsored the sport at the championship level.

The second-year wrestling program proved that its victory at last year's NCAA East Regional was not a fluke, dominating this year's championship in the first-ever NCAA Championship event hosted by LU. The Flames also sent a program-best six grapplers to the NCAA National Championships, where two advanced to the "Sweet 16" level.

The men's track program completed the league "Triple Crown" by claiming victory at the Big South Outdoor Championship.

An up-and-coming women's tennis program finished the regular season in second place and advanced to the league championship's semifinal round.

Closing out the Big South seasons were the softball and baseball programs. A young and upstart softball program was upset-minded and made its fourth Big South championship game appearance.

The baseball program quickly followed suit, pushing No. 13 and eventual NCAA Regional top seed Coastal Carolina to the brink of elimination with its third-straight title game showing.

All in all, Liberty claimed eight Big South titles and had a trio of programs post runner-up finishes to claim the department's sixth Big South "Sasser Cup" championship. The Flames also swept the Men's and Women's All-Sport trophies for the second time in league history; the best way to honor a visionary like Dr. Falwell, who was and will always be Liberty's No. 1 fan.

Todd Wetmore is Liberty University's Assistant AD for Athletic Media Relations.