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Liberty University

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## Flames Club, LUnatics pump up school spirit

December 01, 2008 | Eric Brown

Steadily emerging as a Big South Conference powerhouse, Liberty University Athletics is receiving abundant support from two groups that inject enthusiasm into the rest of the student body

Founded in 2006, LU's Student Flames Club serves as the athletics department's undergraduate ambassador, connecting peers with the university's 18 NCAA Division I programs. While this group does much of its work behind the scenes, another oncampus club is the animated role model in the stands.

The start of the 2008-09 Flames basketball season marks the one-year anniversary a pack of high-octane undergrads assembled to form a deafening force in the Vines Center. This season, Liberty's LUnatics are larger in size and louder than ever.

"It started as just a bunch of friends goofing off," LUnatics founder Jonathan Carone said. "We wanted to make it official and get more people involved."

Ironically, Carone, who is undoubtedly one of Liberty Athletics' most spirited fans, began his college career at Coastal Carolina, LU's No. 1 rival in the Big South Conference. Having mixed feelings about remaining at CCU, Carone made the trek to Lynchburg, Va., in 2005 to watch the No. 14-ranked Chanticleers battle the Flames. During the triple overtime thriller, Carone met a group of Liberty students and became interested in the university's athletics programs. The following semester, he made the switch to LU, instantly transforming into a die-hard Flames fan.

Shortly after transferring, Carone attended various Liberty sporting events where he encountered other students who shared his passion for collegiate sports. As their love for Liberty sports strengthened, he and his newfound friends received recognition from LU's Student Government Association as an official university club — the LUnatics.

At every Flames home basketball game last season, the LUnatics took their place behind the scorer's table. For two 20-minute halves, they energized the Vines Center with their creative chants, turning the facility into a challenging venue for opposing teams. Refusing to remain grounded, the passionate pack took its show on the road, often out-shouting the home team's student section.

"When we went to UNC Asheville for the conference tournament basketball game, we were twice as loud as their student section and twice as organized," Carone recalled. "That Saturday, I'm watching [Asheville] play Winthrop, and they are using our cheers."

In the past, the majority of the LUnatics' members primarily attended LU football and basketball contests. However, with the group's numbers doubling since last season, Carone hopes the club can extend its influence to other sports.

"We want to get to the point where if there is a big game or big match coming up, a coach can say to us, 'Hey, we'd really like you guys there.' It hasn't happened yet, but that's one of the places we want to go."

Much like the LUnatics, the Student Flames Club [SFC] also has passion for LU sports flowing through its veins. During this school year, the group has accumulated nearly 900 members.

"What we are trying to do is to reach out to the student body and get them more incorporated with Athletics and what our mission is," said Jeff Barber, Liberty's director of athletics.

For just \$25, new members receive an official club T-shirt, discounts at local restaurants, priority on away-game tickets and numerous other benefits. Upon joining the group, members can upgrade to a higher Flames Club level for half price.

Last year, the SFC teamed up with LU's athletics department for one of its most successful marketing campaigns — Beat Coastal. In an effort to educate others on the university's sports rivalry, the athletics department and the SFC posted advertisements with the straightforward phrase all around campus, promoting upcoming contests with Coastal Carolina. Whenever the Chanticleers came to the Hill City, Flames fans filled the stands, donning bright-red "Beat Coastal" T-shirts.

"I think the students understand now that we have a big rival," Student Flames Club President Allen Sparks said.

In addition to the Beat Coastal campaign, Sparks and his crew were instrumental in numerous giveaways last year, awarding students with Nintendo Wiis, TVs, and iPods. During the 2008 spring football game, the SFC assisted LU Dining in presenting a brand new Ford Mustang to one lucky student.

Before game time, the SFC's 25-member leadership team posts signs and banners around campus promoting upcoming sporting events. The group also hosts pregame concerts and helps with promotions such as Mabry Automotive Group's Wild Wheels Kickoff. The field goal

kicking competition gives students the opportunity to place a ball between the uprights in hopes of walking away with a new car.

Although the two groups are not affiliated with one another, the LUnatics and the SFC occasionally join forces in an effort to rouse school spirit. At the Chancellor's Cookout in August, Sparks served as the event's emcee, while the LUnatics sat on the front row at Williams Stadium, leading new freshmen in the singing of the Flames fight song and traditional Liberty cheers.

As LU's athletics programs continue to excel, both groups remain steadfast in establishing Liberty University as an institution known for passionate sports fans.

"It's exciting to see where we're going," Sparks said. "We have turned a corner and I don't think we're looking back."

**TO JOIN THE STUDENT FLAMES CLUB, CALL (434) 582-2582, OR EMAIL SFC@LIBERTY.EDU.**