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Flames induct Hall of Fame members

October 01, 2009 | Todd Wetmore

Liberty Athletics is in the midst of one of its most dominant stretches in department history. Last year, the Flames captured the Big South's Sasser Cup for the second-straight season and seventh time in program history. The award is given annually to the top athletics department among the league's membership.

Jump-starting what Liberty hopes to be a Big South Sasser Cup "Three-Peat" will be the Flames fall athletics programs. Last year, the football team soared to new heights, posting the program's first 10-win season, second-straight Big South title and finishing the year ranked No. 14 nationally among the nation's best NCAA FCS programs.

The Flames kicked off their 2009 campaign on Sept. 5 against Big East and BCS powerhouse West Virginia University. Playing in front of its largest crowd in program history, Liberty refused to back down, as it tallied 20 points on the visitor side of the scoreboard. The Flames' valiant on-field effort also garnered attention from West Virginia governor Joe Manchin, III and university president Dr. James Clements, who were both impressed with the team's performance.

On Sept. 12, the Williams Stadium crowd welcomed the Flames home as they defeated the North Carolina Central Eagles, 35-10. The crowd of 16,112 was the largest in school history, besting the previous record set in 2006 by nearly 500 spectators.

Following up the action on the gridiron is Liberty's volleyball team, which posted another 20-win season and the second straight (fifth overall) Big South title in its storied history last year.

The volleyball team followed the action on the gridiron, posting another 20-win season and the second straight (fifth overall) Big South title in its storied history.

Both programs are favored to repeat their performance, as predicted in the Big South annual pre-season polls.

The Flames' final competitors might provide Liberty with its best chance for national notoriety. The cross-country programs are coming off of a season where rising junior Sam Chelanga was the men's NCAA national cross-country runner-up.

While the future continues to look bright for Liberty's current student-athletes, another level of excitement is a buzz within the Athletics Department regarding its former stars. Last April, Liberty Athletics announced that it would be starting a Hall of Fame, giving the department a platform to honor its best.

On Sept. 26, 2009, Liberty's football program welcomed in-state foe James Madison, who was ranked No. 1 nationally for 10 straight weeks in 2008, to Williams Stadium for Hall of Fame

Weekend. During the festive weekend, Liberty Athletics officially inducted seven members into its inaugural Hall of Fame class.

Below is a brief glimpse into the heralded seven-member class, and how they helped make Liberty Athletics what it is today.

Dr. Jerry Falwell will long be remembered as Liberty's No. 1 fan, as the sports fanatic had a vision of Liberty Athletics competing alongside the nation's best from the day he opened the doors at then-Lynchburg Baptist College.



Falwell's presence at athletics events often spurred Liberty student-athletes to victory over the years, as the founder rarely missed a home event. He also traveled the country cheering Liberty's best until he passed away on May 15, 2007. At his home-going celebration, 10 Liberty student-athletes served as honorary pallbearers, exhibiting Falwell's passion for athletics.

Arthur L. Williams, the founder of Primerica Financial Services, has long been one of Liberty Athletics' strongest supporters since he was first introduced to the program by Dr. Jerry Falwell during the mid-1980s.

Williams' financial generosity over the years helped a small NCCAA program quickly transition to the NCAA Division I level. Several athletics facilities around the campus still bear his name, including Williams Stadium and the Williams Football Operations Center, home to Liberty's two-time defending Big South championship football program.



Sid Bream was one of Liberty's first true athletic stars, earning NAIA and NABC All-America honors during his time at first base for the baseball program. He still holds seven different baseball program records, including the career mark for both batting average (.435) and slugging percentage (.830).

Bream was drafted by the Los Angeles Dodgers in the second round of the 1981 MLB Draft. As a 12-year major leaguer and the 1990 Hutch Award winner, Bream helped the Pittsburgh Pirates to the National League Championship Series in 1990 and the Atlanta Braves to win back-to-back World Series appearances in 1991 and 1992.



Kelvin Edwards helped the athletics department's flagship program make the move to the NCAA ranks, as the wide receiver shined for the football program during a spectacular four-year career. A 1985 Associated Press Little All-America first-team honoree and Blue-Gray Football Game participant, Edwards still holds the program records for career-receiving yards (2,546) and career-receiving touchdowns (24).

Upon graduating from Liberty, Edwards became Liberty's second-highest NFL draft pick, when he was selected in the fourth round of the 1984 draft by the New Orleans Saints. His three-year

professional football career was spotlighted when he was a starting wide-out for the Dallas Cowboys.



Along with Sid Bream, **Karl Hess** helped put Liberty Athletics on the national scene. He became the men's basketball program's all-time leading scorer with 2,373 points and dazzled fans on the hardwood. Hess capped off his four-year career at Liberty by leading the Flames to a 28-11 season and an NCCAA national championship in 1980, earning tournament MVP honors during the event.

The CoSIDA Academic All-America first-team honoree still holds 12 program records, including six career standards. Still active in the game, Hess is now considered to be one of the nation's top referees, primarily officiating ACC, BIG EAST and SEC men's basketball games. In 2007, he served as the crew chief for the national championship game between Florida and Ohio State.



Elena (Kisseleva) Bengds helped turn a fledgling women's basketball program into one of the Big South Conference's longest-running dynasties. During her magnificent four-year career, the

Moscow, Russia, native led the Lady Flames to four straight league titles and the first four of 10-straight NCAA Tournament berths.

The two-time Big South Player of the Year still lays claim to 12 program records, including the career mark for points scored (2,154) and minutes played (3,860). During the 1997-98 season, Bengds helped the Lady Flames enter the 1998 NCAA Tournament with an unblemished 28-0 record, where they faced eventual national champion Tennessee in the only NCAA Tournament matchup of two unbeaten programs in women's basketball history.



Bob Bonheim orchestrated the first true national powerhouse at Liberty, guiding the Flames' wrestling program to five straight NCCAA national championships (1977-1981). The two-time NCCAA National Coach of the Year (1976 and 1981) finished his days roaming the mats with a 118-31 dual meet record, winning at an impressive 79.2-percent clip.

A 2003 inductee into the Central Virginia Sports Hall of Fame, Bonheim coached 35 All-Americans, including eight at the NCAA level. Twenty-one of his grapplers went on to win NCCAA national titles. Bonheim, who also served four years as a defensive line coach for the football program, helped wrestling move from NCCAA to NCAA Division II, finishing fifth nationally during his final season as head coach in the Flames' third year at the new level.