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In Virginia's Hills, a Football Crusade

By **BILL PENNINGTON**

LYNCHBURG, Va. — Football is not just a sport at Liberty University, the Christian institution founded by **Jerry Falwell**, it is a mission.

At Liberty, once a tiny Bible college but now a budding giant, the plan is for college football — big-time, always-on-television college football — to do for evangelical Christians in the 21st century what Notre Dame football did for Roman Catholics in the 20th.

Liberty is already packing the house for its campus games, but Jerry Falwell Jr., the businesslike son of the founder and the current university chancellor, gazes from his office in the western hills of Virginia and sees a worldwide congregation united in faith and in football.

Other football teams run a spread offense. Liberty's team will spread the word.

"We think there would be a vast, committed fan base of conservative, evangelical Christians around the country and maybe even folks who are conservative politically who would rally behind Liberty football," Falwell Jr. said, smiling at the thought. "They would identify with our philosophy."

The university has a motto for the cause: "Champions for Christ."

"And yes, there are parallels to Notre Dame," Falwell continued. "There might even be a little rivalry there — the Catholics against the Protestants."

In the middle of the last century, Notre Dame, then a small Midwestern institution, filled its football roster with the sons of Catholic immigrants. As the team became a celebrated national power, Catholics across the country with no connection to Notre Dame nonetheless adopted the football team as a symbol of their evolving assimilation. To various degrees, athletic teams at other faith-based universities like Brigham Young and Oral Roberts have played comparable roles. At Liberty, officials hope for a similar cultural effect.

There is one problem. Liberty, which has played at lower levels of college football since its founding in the 1970s, is unquestionably a David trying to barge into a world of football Goliaths, institutional monoliths that frequently play by rules not found in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament. Liberty's ascent would be arduous — Sisyphean, to mix in a little Greek mythology.

For starters, Liberty needs an invitation from a top-level conference to begin a full schedule in the

N.C.A.A.'s highest football level, the Football Bowl Subdivision, formerly known as Division I-A. Most conferences are assemblies of like-minded universities that find comfort in the familiarity. Liberty stands out in any collection, perhaps a selling point or a deal breaker.

There is one other catch, and it weighs heavily on the pivotal task of recruiting the nation's brawniest and fastest high school football players, an oft-pampered group wooed with all manner of enticements.

All Liberty students are expected to live a Christian lifestyle defined by specific behavioral rules, including a prohibition of alcohol consumption on and off campus. There is also a detailed and enforced code of conduct that includes mandatory attendance at a universitywide convocation service three times a week.

Jeff Barber, the Liberty athletic director, concedes that the university's rules turn away some athletic recruits.

"But if we were playing at the highest level of football when Tim Tebow came out of high school, he might have been really attracted to the Christian environment of our campus," Barber said. "There are a lot of talented football players in Christian high schools or elsewhere who want that lifestyle in college. And so do their parents."

In the meantime, Liberty has one unquestioned, major advantage on its side, and it is the ultimate game-changer in college athletics: Liberty is flush with cash.

With a devoted following of 82,000 students enrolled in its prosperous online university, Liberty's net assets have ballooned by more than \$900 million in the last five years. The once sleepy Liberty campus, which used to be no more than a few nondescript structures and a parking lot, has been transformed with a multitude of technologically advanced brick buildings in the Jeffersonian architectural style. Huddled against the foothills outside Lynchburg's historic downtown, Liberty has a 500,000-square-foot learning center with a new 170,000-square-foot library under construction. An observatory will open in the spring next to the equestrian center. New dormitories will house the extra 8,000 students expected to join the 12,000 existing residential students. There is an expanding law school, and a medical school is scheduled to open in 2014.

But no sector of Liberty has visibly benefited from the university's largess like the athletic department. At a time when many large public universities are increasingly crimped by shrinking state budgets or a lack of space to expand — if not both — Liberty has ample money and room to grow.

The renovated double-decker, 20,000-seat football stadium — filled for home games — will expand to 30,000 seats and was designed to accommodate expansion to 60,000 or more. The stadium already has luxury suites, entertainment rooms and a state-of-the-art press box wired to handle

nationally televised broadcasts. Liberty's locker rooms and training facilities resemble those of a top college program, if not one in the N.F.L. More practice fields are coming next year. And last year, Liberty hired Turner Gill, a onetime Nebraska all-American and a former coach at the University of Kansas, to lead the team on the field. Behind the scenes, an influential consulting firm has been hired to help procure an invitation from an F.B.S. conference.

Liberty's 19 other sports are fully staffed and award the maximum number of scholarships allowed at the Division I level — a rarity outside the N.C.A.A.'s elite. A 2,500-seat baseball stadium is halfway complete, and the basketball practice site is being expanded. There is an indoor soccer complex and a full-size hockey rink even though Liberty does not have a varsity hockey team. Rural western Virginia also does not receive much snow, so Liberty instead built a synthetic ski slope on a mountain overlooking campus — with a ski lodge at the bottom.

A Father's Vision

The amenities and improvements at Liberty were not all added specifically to entice a big-time football conference to come calling, but football is at the cynosure of Liberty's biggest goal: recognition as a nationally prominent university.

"Football's role in making Liberty a national institution was my father's vision from the very beginning," Falwell said one day last month from his office perch, waving his hand across a Liberty panorama that now routinely features construction cranes and cement-mixing trucks. "It might have seemed far-fetched then, but not now. We're as ready as anyone can be."

The capital projects have gussied up little, rural Liberty, or as Falwell said with a thin grin: "If you're looking for a spouse, you make yourself as attractive as possible. Then you wait for suitors."

And make no mistake, Liberty is very serious about receiving suitors.

Asked how long it would take the Liberty administration to respond to an invitation from a major football conference because a vote of acceptance could mean a football investment of \$100 million over 10 years, Falwell abruptly answered: "Forty-eight hours. The university trustees leave that sort of thing to me."

Falwell, 50, is tall, angular and serious, in contrast to his famous father, the more round-faced, stout and easy-smiling leader of the Moral Majority who died in 2007, stricken in his Liberty office at 73.

The younger Falwell was educated at the local Christian academy his father founded and earned a degree in religious studies at Liberty. He received his law degree from the University of Virginia and had a private practice until he was [drawn into the inner circle](#) of leadership at Liberty. He assumed the title of chancellor after his father's death.

Befitting his background, Falwell has the manner of a lawyer, circumspect when answering questions and careful not to say more than he wants to say.

He is not prone to proselytization but has the conviction of a zealot. Chasing big-time football is a matter of exposure and the good it can bring to the crusade.

He need not say the rest because it is obvious. Liberty sees an opportunity, a place on the vast stage that is college football, which is something akin to a religious experience in America. There is no pulpit as well lighted as the end zone of a national championship game.

"It's where we should be," Falwell said in a voice that was unyielding and unemotional. "We would be reneging on Liberty's mission if we didn't try."

And what about the escalating, often prodigious costs to upgrade?

"If our constituency gets behind the program, the revenue will be there," he said.

The likelihood that the football team will lose for multiple seasons before it succeeds, if it ever succeeds?

"We're prepared to be patient," Falwell said. "It is a virtue."

And what of the chance for embarrassing scandal? Big-time football has led many institutions astray lately, from Ohio State to North Carolina to Penn State.

"We're not going to back off because of bad things that might happen — not after 40 years of struggling to get here," Falwell said, relaxing enough to recline slightly in his seat. "For every school that has had that kind of problem, there are 25 that haven't."

Falwell laughed as if contemplating the notion that Liberty, with its sedate, no-partying campus atmosphere, could be overrun by wanton, uninhibited football players.

"I'm pretty sure we'll be one of the 25 without those problems," he said.

Gill, the coach entrusted with finding the talented players suitable for the Liberty football program, likewise did not seem worried about what was to come.

This season's team, playing in the Big South Conference of the Football Championship Subdivision (formerly Division I-AA), took a 4-5 record into Saturday's home game against Stony Brook.

In addition to coaching at Kansas, Gill coached at the University of Buffalo, which 13 years ago made the transition to I-A football. Gill led Buffalo to its only winning season so far in the top tier, in 2008.

“Moving up is a step-by-step process, but there are many examples of schools that have pulled it off,” said Gill, sitting beneath a cross on his office wall.

A Coach's Plan

Gill, who spices his conversation with Bible quotations, says that when he is recruiting, he quickly explains the rules, campus environment and Liberty code of conduct.

“I don't want surprises from anyone we recruit, but I also tell them that everyone is welcome,” Gill said. “We have students representing every religion on earth at Liberty. And truthfully, every school has rules. Brigham Young has its ways and its regulations on student life, but they've built a top-notch football program.”

Nonetheless, Gill said Liberty gravitated toward private Christian high schools and relied on word of mouth from high school coaches who understand Liberty's policies.

“A coach might contact us and say, ‘This kid would be a good fit for you,’ ” Gill said. “They know the families.”

Gill considers Liberty's major football aspirations important for two reasons. One, because Liberty is one of the nation's largest online universities, he says he believes the football team can be a newfound connection to college life for those who cannot afford to attend a residential college.

“I think it would be wonderful for Liberty's online students to be able to point at the TV and say, ‘Hey, that's my university,’ ” Gill said. “Why shouldn't they feel part of something, too?”

Gill's second motivation is evangelical.

“God has called us to be examples and to change the world,” he said. “We can touch millions.”

Within the student body at Liberty, a question about the football team brings a smile to nearly every face. Students have been tutored in the grand scheme for the football team, sometimes during the thrice weekly convocations. At Liberty, where it is not uncommon for students to wear neckties or dresses to class, there is near complete agreement that Liberty's football team should try to charge to the mountaintop of college football.

“If nothing else, when I go back home, people won't say: ‘Liberty? What's that?’ ” said Jeremiah Hartman, a senior from Perry Hall, Md. “To see us on ESPN would be awesome.”

Sean Beam, a sophomore who grew up watching Penn State football at home in Mechanicsburg, Pa., said he hoped Liberty football could accomplish something even more profound.

“Maybe we usher in a new era of athletes who set a good example for other college athletes and students,” Beam said. “How good would it be if there was a college football program that practiced

what it preached?"

After football practice on a weekday last month, quarterback Josh Woodrum and wide receiver Pat Kelly acknowledged that playing at Liberty was different from the experience at other Division I programs.

"When a fellow student stops to tell you she's going to pray for you Saturday, it's not because she's worried for your safety," Kelly, a senior, said with a chuckle. "It's a good thing."

Woodrum, a freshman, does not harbor dreams of playing Alabama or Southern California before he leaves Liberty, but he says he expects to see the day when his successors will.

"We have too much to offer college football — a spiritual college environment and a following that could stretch into living rooms everywhere," he said. "We'll get there. And, you know, we'll give them a good game."

Since 1990, Bill Carr, the principal of Carr Sports Consulting of Gainesville, Fla., has advised and counseled more than a dozen major universities on the transition from lower-level football to the top tier. Of Liberty, one of his latest clients, Carr said: "They are a quantum leap ahead of any other school we've worked with. Liberty is the best prepared and has, by far, the most resources. It's simply a matter of time until they get there."

Liberty at Notre Dame? Liberty at Louisiana State?

"Hey, I never thought I'd see Boise State in the Big East Conference," Carr said. "Virginia Tech was on the outside looking in for a very long time. Now they are a bona fide member of the Atlantic Coast Conference. It's a volatile time. Anything is possible. People make their own place now."

Jerry Falwell Jr. recalls attending a game with his father during Liberty's first full season of football, in 1974. The opponent was another Virginia college, Ferrum, enrollment 1,500.

"Even then, he was sitting in the bleachers talking about how one day we would play Notre Dame," Falwell said. "This was when all we had was a local church and rented public school buildings. Everybody thought he was crazy."

The game went back and forth. Ferrum scored late and Liberty lost, 14-7.

"The score didn't matter," Falwell said. "He had his inspiration — Notre Dame and Liberty, national faith-based institutions, Catholics against the Protestants."

