

Colleges

At Liberty University, Jerry Falwell Jr. bets on big-time football, with a disgraced coach

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By [Kent Babb](#)

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LYNCHBURG, Va. — On occasion Liberty University will invite members of out-of-state churches to speak at its convocation, and in January 2018, a man from Mississippi stood and stepped forward.

“I’m humbled,” he said early in remarks to a packed arena that held more than 8,000 students, staffers and administrators, “and certainly unworthy.”

The new semester’s first convocation, a twice-a-week mandatory gathering at the Vines Center, had a theme: perseverance, though it might as well have been about pride. Hugh Freeze had, maybe without realizing it, just let it envelop and overtake him.

Freeze was as damaged as he was accomplished, perfect for a place expanding as rapidly as Liberty, where resources outpace need. The Flames didn’t need a football coach at the time, but the controversial university president increasingly saw opportunity in flawed but dynamic personalities — especially when they helped advance his expansive vision for the school.

Freeze had spent five seasons as head football coach at the University of Mississippi, and using his Christian faith and the spread offense as the program’s bedrocks, his Rebels had gone to four bowl games, upset Alabama twice, entered the national rankings’ top five in consecutive seasons. This went on for years, along with a few other things, and he said that it was pride that eventually destroyed him: numerous NCAA violations, paying no mind to boosters who broke rules, Freeze using his university-issued cellphone to call an escort service.

“My world crumbled,” he said in [a presentation featured on the school’s YouTube site](#), one he had given many times but never to a crowd so large, and on the stage behind him was Jerry Falwell Jr., the school’s president and the son of its founder. “I had to say to the people that I love, ‘I am sorry. Please forgive me.’”

By then, Falwell was looking into the audience, noting the crowd’s response to one of the nation’s great recruiters making the pitch of his life.

“And today is really the first day that I can tell the faith family that I am sorry,” Freeze said, and now Falwell was nodding as Freeze paused to fight back tears. “*Please forgive me.*”

Unshakable vision

It's a sunny Tuesday in Lynchburg, a day after students flooded the campus to begin the fall 2019 term, and Liberty Athletic Director Ian McCaw raises his voice to talk over the hum of a backhoe.

"A constant state of progress and construction," he says, and he could mean this both literally and symbolically, pointing out the breakneck way Liberty is growing its athletic facilities in general and its football program in particular.

When McCaw and Falwell hired Freeze last December, less than a year after his testimonial at convocation, the Flames made their latest bold, and controversial, move. Yes, Freeze was an offensive mastermind who never has really lost on any level. He is an effective, engaging recruiter and a man of intense faith.

But, yes, he also is a man whose pattern of personal and professional indiscretions landed Ole Miss with a two-year bowl ban and led to his immediate ouster, the forfeiture of more than \$12 million in salary, and nearly two years of employment radioactivity. Then Liberty called with an offer to coach football at the largest evangelical Christian university in the United States — a perfect marriage, perhaps, or at least one of mutual convenience.

"A mission fit, a man of faith, the best person available," McCaw said.

In November 2016, the same things — and maybe a few others — could have been said about him. Then, Falwell was feeling pretty good about himself. He had, months earlier, ignored the advice of evangelical leaders and one of Liberty's most prominent donors by endorsing Donald Trump for president. Twenty days after Trump was elected, Falwell introduced McCaw, who earlier that year had been forced out at Baylor — itself a private Baptist university — following a wide-ranging sexual and domestic assault scandal involving football players.

Like Falwell's backing of Trump, it was a highly controversial decision that led some supporters and alumni to distance themselves from the school.

"That's not the Liberty I know and that I appreciate," said Eric Green, a former Liberty football player, a member of the school's athletics hall of fame, the father of a teenage son who, Green has decided, will never attend Liberty. "... The message is not something that I believe in."

But Green, like most everyone who visits campus, is astonished by the changes. Eight years ago, Liberty — financially engorged because of a mighty online program that pushes its current enrollment beyond 100,000 students — committed \$1 billion to upgrades: a new student union, a 17-story tower that overlooks the divinity school, a 78,000-square-foot business school. Just since McCaw came to Lynchburg, \$150 million in athletics facilities have been completed, and in the past three years, the AD and his boss have watched their enclave grow.

Over there, McCaw says as he walks, is the \$16 million expansion of the Flames' football stadium, a \$29 million indoor football facility, another \$25 million football operations center that will open in 2020 (this does not

include the \$19 million natatorium, the year-round snow skiing facility atop Liberty Mountain, or the sprawling home of the Flames' club ice hockey team).

"We're building Power Five facilities," McCaw says, and last year Liberty completed its reclassification to the Football Bowl Subdivision and will play three major-conference football opponents this season.

But McCaw knows that's not enough for his boss. If Jerry Falwell Sr., the evangelist who founded the school, once said he wanted to *play* Notre Dame, his industrialist and provocateur son wants Liberty to *be* Notre Dame. Not Central Florida or Boise State, outposts that punch above their weights in college football, but a bona fide heavyweight on the level of Alabama and Southern Cal.

"The pieces are being put in place," McCaw says, and when former coach Turner Gill told McCaw last December that he was retiring, McCaw knew who he would call first.

Taking chances

Falwell played blackjack in the Bahamas once, but he doesn't consider himself a gambler. Not in the traditional sense, anyway.

But like him or not, the man is on a hell of a heater — Trump, McCaw, now Freeze — and is acting and talking like he can't lose.

"It's like painting a portrait," Falwell says, sitting at a conference table and motioning toward a window that overlooks his school. "Just doing on campus what I always wanted to do."

Decades ago, when Falwell's daddy ran the place, he was a lawyer and commercial builder. He hated himself. His advice and deals always had to be so careful, his personality so emptily risk-averse, so when Jerry Falwell Sr. died and the young man moved into the big office, he wanted to do things differently.

"The lawyer side of me had to go away," he says.

He stalled construction of student housing on campus and went all-in on Liberty's online program, thinking of ways to attract more customers, or what other universities might call "students." He invested in music and athletics in part because those are good marketing tools, and when the time came to bet big, that's what Falwell did.

"We're not electing a pastor; we're not electing a Sunday school teacher. We're electing the president," he says of Trump, and a moment later, he'll launch into one of several meandering anecdotes that always end in a similar place: with a previously skeptical group conceding that, once again, Falwell was right. "He's got rough edges, okay, but we need somebody who's a fighter."

This can go on for a while.

“See, that’s the reason a lot of people supported Mitt Romney: ‘He’s such a good family guy,’” Falwell says.

“What the heck difference does that make when you’re running a country? I mean, who cares?”

On this day, Falwell unfurls his stories and takes his victory laps, and McCaw and several other aides sit at the table and listen. McCaw, Falwell gets around to saying, was fully vetted by Liberty and found to be “clean” of the rampant misdeeds at Baylor. Freeze, Falwell eventually says, made mistakes but came to Liberty’s convocation, and did you hear his words? Did you see his emotion? That wasn’t a master salesman who needed a job; before them was a man who’d been humbled and had learned to combat his own pride.

This, like Trump, was an imperfect man whose scars made him more qualified as a fighter; who needed someone like Falwell — who has been increasingly scrutinized for his own private dealings, the latest of which was a report this week that suggested he steered millions of dollars’ worth of university-owned property to his personal trainer — to see the bigger picture, to act when others hesitate.

“I can’t take credit,” Falwell says, his voice softer now. “It’s just: God has his hand on this university. It’s bigger than me. There’s a purpose for this university. That’s what I believe.”

The men surrounding the table are nodding. A moment passes.

“But,” Falwell says, “I have been accused of having balls the size of cannonballs.”

They all laugh, and eventually the conversation resumes. McCaw, as deliberate and soft-spoken as his boss is filled with bluster, is asked: Why, considering the way things ended at Baylor, was he willing to stick his neck out for a coach with this much baggage? Given what McCaw experienced and claims to have learned, why not learn from Freeze’s own words and resist the juicy temptations of pride?

McCaw takes a breath, but before he can answer, his boss cuts him off.

“Because then you lose,” Falwell says.

Finding redemption

After time and reflection, Freeze can finally admit it: All the sneaking around, the hiding — it wore on him.

At Ole Miss, a taxpayer-supported public university, Freeze could invite players and coaches to join a pregame prayer or attend a devotional service in the team’s meeting room on Sunday mornings. But attendance, he was supposed to remind everyone, was optional.

“I won’t say that here,” he says, and because Liberty is a private school, Freeze no longer has to conceal or even tone down his Christianity or his expectations: Chapel is on Friday nights, and he says every player, coach and staffer should be there. “Certainly it is much easier here.”

Freeze says his coaching style, an unyielding and multi-angled accumulation of yards and points, will be identical to the way it was in Oxford. He says he’ll recruit the same way, so that on signing day, the same kinds

But most everything else, he says, has changed in these past two years. He's more compassionate, he says. A better listener. A man who now has a zero-tolerance policy, he says, on assistant coaches and boosters who subvert NCAA rules.

There are skeptics among the Liberty faithful, but this is a community of believers.

"I would share Jerry's belief in redemption and second chances and forgiveness, and all that is part of the Christian story," says Mark DeMoss, a Liberty alumnus who was removed from the school's executive board after publicly criticizing Falwell's support of Trump. "... I'm pulling for Hugh Freeze and for Liberty."

For his part, Freeze says it took the fall to understand the traps of his rise. Freeze had been successful on every sideline he ever paced, from a Tennessee high school to the mighty Southeastern Conference, and he suggests that when those are the conditions — success leads to power and a contract worth nearly \$20 million — it becomes easy to feel bulletproof.

"That was just euphoric," he says now, pausing to apologize if he sounds "prideful." "And before you know it, you're bigger than life, and you're stepping into an area where you never once dreamed."

Then came the NCAA investigation; the lawsuit from Houston Nutt that alleged Ole Miss and Freeze had attempted to "smear" the ex-Rebels coach; the phone number with the 313 area code, associated with a female escort service, that Freeze — given one last chance to conceal something — failed to redact; and the Ole Miss investigation into its coach's behavior that revealed a pattern of similar calls.

Just like that, it was over. In Oxford, that is, and no matter the infraction it's hard within college football and its culture of redemption to be truly done in. Freeze says he participated in a consulting capacity on the staffs of Alabama's Nick Saban and Auburn's Gus Malzahn, adding that he later had opportunities to join major-conference programs as a coordinator.

But there was enough residual pride that, when Falwell invited Freeze to speak at convocation last year, the coach's mind wandered. With his career on hold, his reputation tarnished, his standing as a Christian in question, Freeze's speech wasn't just a passionate plea for forgiveness; it was, with a receptive audience before him and Falwell and McCaw nearby, a recruiting pitch.

"Obviously that crosses your mind," Freeze says, going on to say that he and his wife, Jill, fell in love with the campus and the way everything feels new. Their eldest daughter said later that Liberty was the type of school she'd like to attend. Freeze was a head coach, not a coordinator, and this would be the perfect place, he said later, for him — for all of them — to hit the restart button.

"You kind of think in the back of your mind," he says now, " 'Man, one day, who knows?' "

A welcome home

On that day in January 2018, Freeze finished his presentation and retook his seat next to Jill. They kept talking, answering questions, telling the crowd who they are and what they'd learned.

"I know this man. I know his heart," Jill would tell the audience. "I know he loves God, and I know he's going to do what it takes to get right with God. And so for that, it was easy in that moment: 'I forgive you,' like immediately, and that was the beginning of my healing."

Falwell, who welcomes Liberty students to convocation but often says no more, was so moved by the Freezes' remarks that he took a microphone. He alternated Bible verses with a brief reading of a tweet Falwell wrote but never sent about the "notorious adulterers" and users of profanity among Democrats before finally arriving at his point: Trump, he'd say, was flawed, too — but look who prevailed.

"All I'm saying is: Jesus was on the side of the sinner, the repentant sinner," Liberty's president said that day. "And all he said was: 'Go and sin no more.'"

Eleven months later, after Gill told McCaw his wife's health was deteriorating and that he would be stepping down immediately, McCaw called Freeze, who said he needed a few days of contemplation and prayer to consider taking a five-year contract in the low seven figures from Liberty over the SEC coordinator jobs.

"Maybe that was the pride," Freeze would say later. "This decision needed to be made out of wisdom."

That decision landed a flawed man at a place that seems to be collecting them, a university that — as Freeze himself once did — seems to be succeeding so much, moving so fast, staring so hard at the road ahead that there's almost no thought of possible hazards around the bend.

"An incredible blessing," McCaw said on the day Liberty introduced Freeze.

"It's just part of Liberty's DNA to give people second, third, fourth chances," Falwell said.

Eventually Freeze, who's usually the one doing the recruiting, stood and stepped forward, and as Jill and their three daughters stood to join another Liberty audience in applauding Freeze, the Flames' new coach pulled on a hat that seemed to be a perfect fit.

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