

Liberty University Makes Play for Football Bowl Subdivision

In December 2011, Turner Gill sat in the plush presidential suite atop Liberty University's football stadium, on the verge of accepting the school's head coaching job.

But as he peered out from a brand-new five-story tower onto the program's practice complex just beyond the north end zone, Gill, the former Buffalo and Kansas coach, had another question for school president and chancellor Jerry Falwell Jr.

"Would it be possible to add one more practice field?" Gill asked.

"Sure," Falwell replied. "We can make that happen."

In the current climate of NCAA uncertainty, where smaller Division I athletic departments are more concerned about their future viability than getting into the facilities arms race, granting such a request with a snap of the fingers is practically unheard of.

But at Liberty, a private evangelical school suddenly flush with cash and immense athletic ambitions, there is almost no amount of dirt officials won't move or concrete they won't pour these days to help break into the big time.

In the middle of a \$500 million makeover of this campus, which sprouted up from the Blue Ridge Mountain foothills in 1971 under the name Lynchburg Baptist College and endured nearly 40 years of financial hardships and political controversies attached to its late founder, Jerry Falwell Sr., is a sparkling set of new athletic facilities that touch nearly all of Liberty's 20 varsity sports.

Its baseball stadium, which opened last year, has player and

fan amenities that would put most of the neighboring SEC and ACC schools to shame. Its half-finished softball complex promises to be just as spectacular. In the past five years, new practice or playing facilities have gone up for soccer, field hockey, lacrosse, golf, track, basketball, volleyball and tennis.

And its football stadium, which reached capacity of 19,200 after a renovation in 2010, has a set of blueprints at the ready to add 6,000 seats in the near term and more than 40,000 over time.

"Everything here," athletics director Jeff Barber said, "is built to expand."

But Liberty's very public desire to move up from the 63-scholarship Football Championship Subdivision to the Football Bowl Subdivision has yet to generate mutual interest.

Buoyed by rumblings earlier this year that the Sun Belt Conference would consider adding a 12th football member, Barber and Falwell Jr. made lobbying trips to seven schools and explained why they were ready to make the transition.

But at the league's spring meetings, the Sun Belt voted against adding another school until at least 2015. According to a person with direct knowledge of the Sun Belt's expansion plans, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the dialogue was supposed to be private, there wasn't much support for inviting Liberty this time around.

"They have a lot of resources, but does anybody even know they're Division I?" the person said. "If we're going to add a 12th, we want someone people are going to recognize and raise the profile of the conference. I just don't think Liberty adds anything to our profile."

That decision has, at least for the moment, left Liberty in a difficult position. In an era when administrators in FBS

leagues like the Sun Belt, Mid-American Conference and Conference USA are worried about how they'll afford a wave of new player benefits brought on by autonomy for the NCAA's power conferences, here's a school saying it can commit whatever resources necessary to play at the highest level.

But with no immediate prospects of getting into one of the 10 FBS conferences, Liberty must wait, continue to build and hope its investment into college athletics will eventually pay off.

"We can be patient," Barber said. "I think there's still going to be more settling, more landscape change if you will. We just hope any of these conferences, when they decide they want to expand, that they'll give us a look."

The elder Falwell, who was both famous and polarizing as a conservative political figure and televangelist, long envisioned the university he founded as a potential religious/athletic power in the same vein as Notre Dame and Brigham Young.

But until his death, Liberty had neither the resources nor the academic reputation to even be a candidate for a major athletic conference.

What changed? In 2007, the school collected on Falwell's \$29 million life insurance policy, clearing its entire debt. Then, thanks to an external degree program developed and accredited in the 1980s—"course work mailed in boxes with videotapes of lectures," Falwell Jr. said—the school was well positioned to take advantage of the explosion in online education.

Liberty now has roughly 12,000 students on its physical campus and 95,000 online, putting the school in a good enough financial position to rebuild almost everything, including a new high-tech library, music school, health sciences building, a school for osteopathic medicine, student recreation space and 252-foot tower attached to a student center. It even has a

year-round, artificial "Snowflex" ski slope atop a nearby hill, the only one of its kind in the United States.

But Falwell Jr. acknowledges the university is still battling an image problem attached to its early days and some of the political backlash that surrounded his father, particularly within the academic community given that school presidents ultimately decide who gets invited to their conferences.

"The perception is that we're primarily a small Bible school, and the reality is we're a liberal arts university with engineering, medicine and nursing," he said. "A lot of people think religion is our No. 1 major, and in reality it's ninth.

"One of the (Sun Belt) presidents made the comment, he said, 'Yeah, Jerry, all you have to do is show people Liberty's not Oral Roberts; it's Baylor.' We've moved toward that goal much faster than anybody thought."

Not that Liberty is running away from its religious roots. Students are still required to go to convocation three times a week, curfew is enforced at midnight, alcohol isn't allowed on campus and there are no coed dorms.

It's also true that Gill, who kept a Bible on his desk when he was coaching at Kansas and Buffalo, was hired in part because his religious beliefs align with what the school espouses.

According to the person with direct knowledge of the Sun Belt's thinking, the school's religious mission "never came up" in discussions among athletic directors and presidents, nor did controversies surrounding the elder Falwell.

Especially in these times, where some FBS schools may be weeded out on finances alone, Liberty's future is likely to be evaluated strictly on its athletic merits.

"I tell people Liberty is better than what they think it is and different than what they think it is," said Barber, who

spent 10 years as an associate athletics director at South Carolina. "We have a lot to offer a conference."

Bill Carr, a prominent college sports consultant who did Liberty's FBS feasibility study, said it is already more prepared than the other schools who recently made the jump.

And Liberty isn't going to stop spending until it does happen. Because for all the work Falwell Jr. has done remaking the campus and the school's academic image, he knows nothing would be a game-changer quite like the opportunity to play a Baylor or BYU on ESPN.

"My father used to say there were two universal languages all young people understood—music and athletics—and to build a world-class university those two components have to be a major part of it," Falwell Jr. said. "Athletics isn't our mission, but it has the potential to shine a light on our mission like nothing else ever can."

Dan Wolken writes for USA Today.

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