



Liberty Track & Field Chronology

1971

Lynchburg Baptist College was founded by Dr. Jerry Falwell, pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church, and Dr. A. Pierre Guillermin.

1972

Lynchburg Baptist gained affiliation with the National Christian Collegiate Athletic Association (NCCAA).

1976

The men's track and cross country teams were born under the direction of Jake Matthes.

1977

The women's track and cross country teams were inaugurated by Jake Matthes, and shortly thereafter placed under the direction of Ron Hopkins, who became the first women's head coach.

1981

The Flames men's and women's track teams won the NCCAA national championships. Jake Matthes was also named National Christian College Coach of the Year.

1982

Liberty joined the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) for two years, earning several All-America honors at this level.

1983

Liberty joined the Mason-Dixon Conference.

1984

The Flames jumped to the ranks of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II.

1986

Brant Tolsma was hired as the new men's head track coach, as Hopkins continued to direct the women's squad. Jake Matthes continued as the distance coach.

1987

In its final year at the NCAA Division II level, the women's cross country team concluded an impressive season by finishing fourth in the nation.

1988

Both the Flames and the Lady Flames placed in the top 10 nationally, with the men's team placing sixth, and the women's team placing seventh at the national championship meet. This season also began a streak in which Liberty won 15 of 18 Mason-Dixon conference championships in cross country, indoor and outdoor track through 1990.

1989

Upon its first year of competition at the Division I level, the university completed the construction of a beautiful track facility, ending the days of driving or jogging to practice at local high schools. Decathlete Henry Elliott became the first Liberty track athlete to achieve NCAA Division I All-American honors.

1990

Ron Hopkins, the founder of the women's cross country and track programs, died while out on a routine run.

1991

After 14 years of beginning and building the Flames track program, Coach Jake Matthes retired from coaching. In due fashion, Liberty's new track facility was named the Matthes-Hopkins Track Complex in tribute to the founders of Liberty track and field. In addition, Liberty joined the eight-team Big South Conference, and the highly competitive ECAC/IC4A, which is the oldest and largest - over 80 Division I teams - conference in the country.

1993

Decathlete Todd Pettyjohn finished ninth at the NCAA national championship meet in New Orleans, becoming Liberty's second NCAA Division I All-American.

1994

After just three years in the IC4A, the men's track team climbed all the way to a second-place finish, which was the beginning of a run of seven successive years among the Top 3 in the IC4A. Sprinter Jacob Swinton and decathlete Ryan Werner were named NCAA Division I All-Americans.

1995

After several unfortunate injuries, the Flames track & field team fielded only seven athletes at the IC4A championships. Despite a lack of personnel, Liberty edged Seton Hall by one point to capture second place in the conference. For the second consecutive year, Ryan Werner was named an NCAA Division I All-American for his fourth-place finish in the decathlon at nationals.

1996

For the third time in as many years, Ryan Werner earned NCAA Division I All-American honors as a decathlete. In an upset of major proportions, the Flames defeated heavily favored George Mason - the 1996 indoor national champion - in winning the IC4A championships. The next day, sports writer Alex Rosen wrote: "A funny thing happened on the way to George Mason's eighth consecutive IC4A title ... Liberty University, a team backed by the power of God, had the sun shining on them. Liberty had what could only be described as a performance of Biblical proportions."

1997

The Flames returned to the IC4A championship as the defending champion, and again defeated Track & Field News' favorite to win, Georgetown. The meet was a combination of amazing blessings and major disappointments.

Nevertheless, the meet yielded two individual championships, and the team placed second, making it the fourth consecutive year in which Liberty finished in the top two at the IC4A championship.

1998

Liberty christened the Big South's first season of indoor track by capturing both the men and women's indoor titles. The Flames and Lady Flames proved to be equally successful outdoors, as both teams won their fifth straight Big South conference outdoor track & field titles. The men's team also tied Manhattan for third at the IC4A championships, making the Flames arguably the most consistent team in that conference over the past five years.

1999

Liberty again won both the indoor and outdoor men's and women's Big South Track Championships.

The men's team finished second in the IC4A Championships for the fifth time in six years. Greg Benhase, Mike Decker, Ken Howell and James Johnson represented Liberty at the National Championship. Benhase and Howell became Liberty's 5th and 6th Division I All-Americans, both in the decathlon.

2000

2000 was a year of individual firsts for the Liberty Track & Field team. Mike Decker became Liberty's first NCAA Division I indoor All-American by finishing 10th overall in the 400 meters, and Andrea Wildrick pole vaulted 13-1.5 to become Liberty's first women's All-American since the program moved to the Division I level in 1989. Decker repeated his All-America performance on the outdoor track, becoming the first Liberty track & field athlete to win All-American honors in both indoor and outdoor track. Josh Jones won All-America honors in the decathlon, becoming Liberty's eighth division I decathlete to win the honor.

The Flames won both the men's and women's Big South Conference Outdoor Championships for the seventh consecutive year and won the indoor meet again for the third year in a row. At the IC4A Championships, the men's track & field team finished second overall, marking the seventh consecutive year that the Flames had finished in the top three in the prestigious event. The women's team finished 18th at the ECAC Championships, their highest-ever finish in the event.

2001

Both Liberty's men and women extended their outdoor Big South string of victories to eight. Both also repeated as indoor champions. The Liberty ladies continued their progress, as indicated by their 12th-place finish at the indoor ECAC, their highest finish ever. The men's seven-year string of IC4A top three finishes came to an end. Mike Decker again led the team with a strong effort, winning the 400 and finishing second in the 200, as well as running on a placing 4 x 100 relay. He scored an amazing 113 points at the IC4A championship meets in three years. Decker earned his third All-America honor, placing fifth at the indoor national championship, running the 400 in an outstanding 46.33.

2002

The 2002 season was clearly the greatest season in the history of the Lady Flames Track and Field program. Heather Sagan became the first athlete in Liberty history to win a national championship, as she won the 2002 NCAA Indoor National Championship in the mile, while placing second in the 2002 NCAA Outdoor National Championships in the 1,500 meters. Andrea Wildrick became the first Liberty NCAA runner-up, when she placed second in the pole vault at the outdoor national championship after tying for fourth indoors. Wildrick and Sagan also became the Liberty's first-ever ECAC champions; Wildrick winning in the pole vault both indoors and out and Sagan winning in the mile indoors and 1,500 meters outdoors. With the efforts of Sagan and Wildrick, Liberty's Women's Track and Field team placed 15th in the nation in both the indoor and outdoor seasons. Danielle McNaney became Liberty's first freshman to qualify for nationals, accomplishing the feat with her 5,274-point second-place finish in the ECAC heptathlon. McNaney went on to place fourth at the USA Junior Nationals. Sagan was named the U.S. Track Coaches Association Scholar-Athlete of the Year and NCAA Virginia Woman of the Year. She was also named Eastern Track's 2002 Athlete of the Year with Wildrick as runner-up.

2003

The big news of 2003 was that the men's 10th consecutive Big South outdoor title was taken away from Liberty by the conference office. At issue was the honest effort rule. Quoting Track and Field News, "Belated DQ Reverses Big South Standings. Overzealous Application of the Rules?" You be the judge. Several days after the Big South Conference Championships, the conference office announced a change in the men's team standings. What happened? Liberty's Jon Debogory was entered in the high jump and shot put simultaneously at a facility where the throwing area was about a half mile from the track. Coach Tolsma explains what happened next. "The high jump started later than scheduled and while participating, Debogory received a call from a teammate saying that he needed to be at the shot put as quickly as possible. He took his last jump and hopped in a car to head to the shot put. When he arrived, the official would not let him throw even though the finals had not yet started." Since the conference had told Coach Tolsma prior to the meet that walkie-talkies were available and would be used for communication in such a situation, Tolsma wrongly assumed that this situation could not be considered a violation of the honest effort rule, and Debogory ran on the 4 x 400 relay team. Three days later, the 4 x 400 team was disqualified and Liberty lost by one point.

The Lady Flames turned in great performances at the Big South Indoor and Outdoor Championships, as they won by 11 points during indoors and nine points during the outdoor championships over a favored Coastal Carolina squad, extending their Big South outdoor string to a record 10 straight championships.

2004

The Liberty men's team answered the Big South controversy of the previous year by taking the indoor championship by over 60 points and the outdoor by nearly 50. The Lady Flames' 10-year streak was ended by a strong Coastal Carolina team that bettered Liberty by 50 points indoors but then battled to a close 240-223 victory outdoors. Dani McNaney led the ladies, claiming her first ECAC title in the pentathlon while Chad Wilson led the men winning the IC4A long jump with an outstanding 25-6.75. Both represented Liberty at nationals.

2005

Senior, Dani McNaney, and junior, Kena Butts, gave the Lady Flames national exposure while freshmen, Josh McDougal and Brandon Hoskins did the same for the men. McDougal (3,000 meters) and Hoskins (heptathlon) became the first Liberty athletes to earn All America honors as freshmen, while McNaney earned her second Academic All-America honor and Butts qualified for nationals in the high jump, both indoors and outdoors. McNaney won all her multi-event competitions up to nationals. This included the ECAC pentathlon and heptathlon and the Penn Relays in a conference record of 5,504 points. She placed 11th at both NCAA and USA nationals.

The Lady Flames stole the indoor Big South Conference championship from Coastal, taking victory by only 3.5 points. The men continued their string of indoor and outdoor Big South Conference championships and got IC4A champions in freshmen McDougal (3,000 meters indoors) and Hoskins (decathlon).

2006

Sophomore Josh McDougal enjoyed a banner year, becoming the first athlete in either Liberty or Big South Conference history to record a “triple crown” of All-America honors in the same academic year. McDougal placed fourth in the NCAA National Cross Country Championship. He then took fourth at 5,000 meters and fifth at 3,000 meters at the national indoor meet before earning his fourth All-America distinction of the year with a ninth-place finish in the 5,000 meters at the outdoor championships. Also the IC4A 3,000-meter champion indoors and the 10,000-meter champion outdoors, McDougal became the first Liberty male track and field athlete to win the Big South’s Howard Bagwell Male Student-Athlete of the Year award. McDougal helped the men’s indoor track and field team capture its ninth-consecutive Big South title. Brandon Hoskins also qualified for the NCAA National Outdoor Track and Field Championships in the decathlon.

The Lady Flames finished second at both the indoor and outdoor conference meets. Leading the way was junior Arlene Zelinkas, who was named the Big South Indoor Track and Field Women’s Outstanding Track Performer of the Year, after winning the 60-meter hurdles and pentathlon and setting conference meet records in both disciplines.

2007

2007 was a year of conference championships for the Liberty men’s team, as the Flames completed their first Big South “Triple Crown” since the 1999-2000 academic year, sweeping the cross country, indoor track and outdoor track team titles. The Big South indoor track crown was the 50th conference championship captured by the Liberty men’s and women’s cross country and track teams, since joining the Big South in 1991. The Flames also won their second IC4A outdoor title and first since 1996, led by an unprecedented 1,500, 5K, 10K sweep by junior Josh McDougal. It was one of many noteworthy feats by McDougal during the year, as he added five more All-America certificates to his total (cross country, indoor 3K and 5K, outdoor 5K and 10k). McDougal also ran a 3:57.46 mile and became the fifth-fastest collegiate 5K runner of all-time, running a 13:20.43 at the Mt. SAC Relays. Brandon Hoskins garnered his second career All-America mention, taking seventh in the decathlon at the NCAA national meet. Juniors Jon Hart (hammer) and Clendon Henderson (discus) became the first two Liberty throwers ever to reach the national meet.

On the women’s side, the Lady Flames won the Big South cross country and outdoor track titles, both of which snapped Coastal Carolina’s streaks of conference championships. The squad was led by senior multi-event athlete Arlene Zelinkas, who received numerous honors. The co-Big South Women’s Track Performer of the Year indoors, she was tabbed Big South Woman of the Year and was an Academic All-American. Junior Carol Jefferson made her first national appearance, running the 10,000 meters at the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships.

2008

The Liberty men's squad continued its dominance of the Big South Conference in 2008, capturing another "Triple Crown" of conference titles in cross country, indoor track and outdoor track. The Flames also enjoyed another year of success in the IC4A, successfully defending their team championship outdoors and posting the highest indoor IC4A finish in program history (second place). At the NCAA Division I East Regional Championships, the Flames finished seventh, representing Liberty's highest-ever regional placing. The Flames' team success was spearheaded by a powerful senior class, led by Jon Hart, Clendon Henderson, Brandon Hoskins and Josh McDougal. McDougal posted the crowning achievement of his stellar four-year career on Nov. 19, 2007, when he won the NCAA Division I National Cross Country Championship in Terre Haute, Ind. He later added a pair of All-America honors at the NCAA indoor meet, bringing his final total of All-America certificates to an incredible 14. Henderson placed third in the discus at the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships, becoming the first Liberty thrower ever to garner All-American recognition. He also became the second Liberty track & field athlete ever to complement his All-America status with a place on the Academic All-America roster.

The Lady Flames held off Coastal Carolina to win their second consecutive Big South cross country title, paced by conference runner-up Piper Newby and Big South Freshman of the Year Dacia Bushman. On the track, Jaime Watson broke Heather Sagan's Liberty and Big South indoor 800-meter record with a 2:08.34. That effort helped Watson take the 800-meter title at the ECAC Division I Indoor Track & Field Championships, making her only the second Lady Flame ever to win an ECAC running event.

2009

Despite graduating a sizable and successful senior class from the previous year's team, the Liberty men's cross country, indoor track and outdoor track teams posted their third straight Big South Conference "Triple Crown" in 2009. The Flames also posted a runner-up finish at the IC4A outdoor meet and sent four athletes to the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships. Liberty's national qualifiers included Sam Chelanga (10K), Daniel Newell (decathlon), Matt Parker (high jump) and John Talbert (discus). Newell gave Liberty a representative on the Academic All-America team for the third consecutive year.

Meanwhile, Chelanga took the mantle from Josh McDougal as Liberty's national-caliber distance runner during his first year in a Flames uniform. The redshirt sophomore earned All-America honors in cross country (second place), indoor track (second in the 5K) and outdoor track (third in the 10K). Chelanga also set an all-time NCAA record in the 10K, clocking a 27:28.48 at the Brutus Hamilton Invitational in Berkeley, Calif., on April 24.

The Lady Flames finished as the Big South runners-up in cross country, indoor track and outdoor track. Individual honorees included Ashley Osborne and Marie Williams. Osborne was tabbed Big South Women's Track Performer of the Year at the Big South indoor meet, after sweeping the 3K and 5K titles. Meanwhile, Williams completed 13 events and scored 33 team points at the Big South Outdoor Track & Field Championship, punctuating a stellar senior campaign. As a result, she was voted Big South Women's Field Performer of the Year.

2010

For the first time in program history, Liberty completed a Big South Conference “Double Triple” in 2009-10. The Flames and Lady Flames swept the year’s Big South men’s and women’s cross country, indoor track & field and outdoor track & field titles, becoming only the ninth NCAA Division I program ever to record a Double Triple.

The men’s squad was also successful at the IC4A and national levels. The Flames tied for third at the IC4A indoor meet and posted a runner-up finish outdoors. It was Liberty’s fourth straight top two finish at the IC4A Outdoor Track & Field Championships.

On the strength of Sam Chelanga’s national championship in the 10K and second-place finish in the 5K, Liberty tied Kentucky for 13th place at the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships. At the time, it was the highest finish ever by a Big South team at either the NCAA Division I Indoor or Outdoor Track & Field Championships.

Chelanga’s 10K title was Liberty’s first national crown at the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships and capped off a spectacular season. The redshirt junior also won the NCAA cross country title in dominating fashion and improved his own NCAA 10K record to 27:08.39 at Stanford on May 1.

Liberty’s other NCAA national qualifiers included Jaime Watson (indoor women’s 800), Elliot Galeone (outdoor men’s javelin), Evans Kigen (outdoor men’s steeplechase) and Clarence Powell (outdoor men’s triple jump). Watson became the first Lady Flame to compete at the national meet since Carol Jefferson ran the 10K at the 2007 NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships.

2011

Liberty nearly notched its second consecutive Big South Conference “Double Triple” in 2010-11, winning five Big South titles in cross country and track & field. Only the women’s outdoor track & field championship eluded the Lady Flames.

Liberty captured its fifth consecutive Big South Triple Crown on the men’s side, sweeping conference crowns in cross country, indoor track & field and outdoor track & field. The indoor team title was the Flames’ unprecedented 14th straight Big South championship.

At the IC4A/ECAC level, the Flames were most successful at the IC4A Indoor Track & Field Championships, tying for second place. Highlighted by Taylor Courtney’s first-place finish in the 500-meter final, Liberty equaled its best-ever placement at the meet.

Sam Chelanga closed out his exceptional career with a bang, winning national titles in both cross country and the outdoor 5K. The 14-time All-American helped the Liberty men’s squad tie Illinois, Texas and USC for 12th place at the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships. That was the highest national finish ever by a Big South team at either the NCAA indoor or outdoor track & field national meet.

Chelanga was joined by two teammates at the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships, as Elliot Galeone threw the javelin and Kolby Shepherd competed in the pole vault.

2012

Liberty continued its dominance of Big South men’s cross country, indoor track & field and outdoor track & field, sweeping all three conference titles for its sixth straight Big South Triple Crown. The Flames became the first team in conference history ever to win seven consecutive Big South men’s cross country crowns.

The Lady Flames found their greatest success at the ECAC level, placing 11th at the ECAC Division I Indoor Track & Field Championships and coming in seventh at the ECAC Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships. It was Liberty’s best-ever ECAC indoor finish and equaled the Lady Flames’ highest ECAC outdoor placement. Liberty’s ECAC performances were highlighted by Jocelyn Williams’ indoor weight throw title and Melinda Bendik’s outdoor hammer throw crown.

The Liberty men’s squad scored points at the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships for the sixth consecutive year, tying for 54th place with 3.5 points. Redshirt senior Kolby Shepherd was responsible for the points, as he tied for fifth place in the men’s pole vault final. Like Shepherd, redshirt senior Melinda Bendik became an All-American for the first time, placing 16th in the women’s hammer at the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships.

2013

For the seventh year in a row, Liberty won the Big South men's Triple Crown, claiming the conference cross country, indoor track & field and outdoor track & field championships. The cross country (eighth consecutive title) and indoor track (16th consecutive title) squads both extended their conference-record championship winning streaks.

Meanwhile, the Lady Flames captured their fifth Big South cross country title in seven years and their first outdoor track & field championship since 2010. The latter crown came at the newly refurbished Matthes-Hopkins Track Complex, keeping Liberty unbeaten during the seven times it has hosted the Big South Outdoor Track & Field Championships.

Liberty won three events at the IC4A and ECAC Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships, with Mychelle Cumings (women's discus), Josh MacDonald (men's steeplechase) and Isaac Wendland (men's 1,500) doing the honors. As a result, both teams posted top 10 finishes, with the Flames placing fifth and the Lady Flames tying for ninth.

The Flames sent athletes to the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships for the 10th consecutive year, as Cumings (women's discus), Ryan Smith (men's shot put) and Wendland (men's 1,500) all made the trip to Hayward Field in Eugene, Ore.

2014

Liberty captured the Big South men's Triple Crown for the eighth year running, tying Kansas (Big 8, 1951-59) for the second longest streak of conference Triple Crowns in men's NCAA Division I history. It marked the Flames' ninth straight cross country title, 17th consecutive indoor track & field championship and eighth outdoor track & field crown in a row.

The Lady Flames finished second at the Big South championships for women's cross country, indoor track & field and outdoor track & field. Their top performance came at the ECAC Division I Indoor Track & Field Championships, where the Lady Flames placed third for the highest-ever ECAC finish in program history at the time. Meghan Burggraf (800) and Mychelle Cumings (shot put) led the way with ECAC individual event victories.

The year also included tragedy, as freshman sprinter Darius Dixon was killed in a car accident on Dec. 7, 2013, just two days after opening his collegiate career at the Liberty Kickoff.

2015

Liberty's streak of Big South men's Triple Crowns came to an end, as High Point defeated the Flames in cross country. However, Liberty bounced back for dominating victories at the Big South indoor and outdoor track & field championships, winning the two meets by a combined 195 points. For the Flames, it marked their 18th straight indoor conference title and their ninth consecutive outdoor crown. The Liberty men's squad also picked up head-to-head victories over ACC squads Clemson, Duke, North Carolina, NC State and Virginia during the outdoor campaign.

The Lady Flames captured the Big South outdoor track & field team title for the second time in three years and the 14th time overall. Liberty also recorded its second straight top-five finish at the ECAC Division I Indoor Track & Field Championships, coming in fifth overall.

Redshirt senior Jocelyn Williams placed 16th in the women's hammer at the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships in Eugene, Ore., becoming the Lady Flames' fourth NCAA Division I All-American in program history (second team).

2016

Liberty swept the men's and women's team titles at the both the Big South Indoor and Outdoor Track & Field Championships for the first time since 2010. The latter meet was contested at the Matthes-Hopkins Track Complex, keeping the Flames and Lady Flames unbeaten during the eight times Liberty has hosted the championship. Liberty was dominant in the Big South, winning the indoor team championships by a combined 179.5 points and claiming the outdoor team crowns by a combined 203.5 tallies.

Individually, Ednah Kurgat became the first Lady Flame ever to earn NCAA Division I All-America honors in women's cross country, indoor track & field and outdoor track & field during the same athletic year. She placed 12th in cross country, ninth in the indoor 5K and fourth in the outdoor 5K.

2017

Liberty claimed its first Big South Conference women's Triple Crown since 2009-10, sweeping the conference titles in cross country, indoor track & field and outdoor track & field. The Lady Flames' cross country crown marked Brant Tolsma's 100th conference championship in his 31 years at Liberty.

The Flames nearly captured their second Big South "Double Triple," but fell just six points shy of winning the men's cross country title. Liberty's Big South men's indoor track & field championship made the Flames a perfect 20 for 20 all-time at the meet.

Liberty enjoyed success at the IC4A/ECAC Division I Indoor Track & Field Championships, placing a program-best second in the women's ECAC standings and fourth in the men's IC4A race. Azaria Kirwa won the IC4A 5K title, springboarding him toward qualification for the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships 5K three months later.

The Flames hosted their first three meets at the state-of-the-art Liberty Indoor Track Complex, which features a 200-meter hydraulically banked track. Liberty's home debut at its new facility took place at the Liberty Kickoff (Jan. 20-21), while the Darius Dixon Memorial Invitational featured a grand opening ceremony on Jan. 28.

2018

The 2017-18 athletic year marked the end of an era, as Liberty wrapped up its 27-year stay in the Big South Conference. The Flames captured titles in men's and women's indoor track & field at the Liberty Indoor Track Complex and swept the men's and women's outdoor track & field team crowns as well. Liberty finished with 98 total Big South team championships in cross country and track & field.

The Lady Flames won their first-ever team title at the ECAC Division I Indoor Track & Field Championships. Meanwhile, the Flames matched their best-ever finish (second) at the concurrent IC4A indoor meet.

Liberty boasted NCAA Division I All-Americans during all three seasons of competition, including Azaria Kirwa (25th place in men's cross country), Jovaine Atkinson (fourth place in indoor men's 60 hurdles) and Markus Ballengee (seventh place in outdoor men's decathlon).

The Flames and Lady Flames sent a program-record 27 athletes to the NCAA Division I East Preliminary Round meet and equaled a program best with five NCAA Division I Outdoor Track & Field Championships qualifiers (Ballengee – decathlon, Darrel Jones – men's triple jump, Dasiana Larson – women's hammer, Alejandro Perlaza Zapata – men's 400 and Denzel Pratt – men's javelin).