The season of spring is often viewed as a time of new beginning and new life – a time when God’s creation begins to grow, change and develop. This past spring proved to be no different for the Liberty men’s basketball team, as a familiar face returned to the campus to usher in a new era.

On April 8, 2009, Liberty’s Director of Athletics Jeff Barber reintroduced Dale Layer to the university and to the men’s basketball program, this time as the new head coach.

An assistant coach during the 2007-08 season under Ritchie McKay, Layer spent one season as an assistant at Marquette in the Big East Conference before making the journey back to Lynchburg, Va. Now at the helm of Liberty’s program, Layer is bringing with him a fresh look to this season’s roster.

The Flames’ 2009-10 lineup includes 11 underclassmen, five of which will experience collegiate play for the first time. Making up Liberty’s latest recruiting class are five individuals who add a range of skills to the preexisting collection of competitors. The quintet consists of guards Evan Gordon and Chris Perez, forwards Antwan Barber and Patrick Konan and center Joel Vander Pol. As proven players in the high school ranks, these newcomers may be called upon early to face squads from highly reputable leagues such as the Atlantic Coast Conference, the Big East and the Colonial Athletic Association. Although youthfulness could be a factor early in the year, Layer is optimistic about what his team’s makeup presents when facing these challenges.

“We’ve got several guys that can play multiple positions,” Layer noted. “We can go small, we can go big. We can stretch the defense with our shooting and score off the dribble. As we grow and develop, I think this team has a chance to be very good.”

Stepping up as veteran leaders for the youthful Flames are seniors Kyle Ohman and Tyler Baker. Throughout their collegiate careers each has had to overcome a degree of adversity. Baker dealt with injuries resulting in two medical redshirts during his first four seasons, before becoming a solid contributor in the last 26 contests for the Flames last season. Meanwhile, Ohman has experienced an uphill battle of his own, transforming from a walk-on into one of the top competitors in the Big South. Together, this duo can provide the Flames’ young roster with leadership throughout the season.

Layer is no stranger in working with young players himself, having gained experience from his previous coaching destinations. Kyle Ohman, Jesse Sanders, Jeremy Anderson, David Minhaya, Tyler Baker and Johnny Stephene are all guys who can develop that. They all have worked hard and are definitely confident in their abilities.”

Heading into the 2009-10 season, several questions surround Liberty’s young roster. How will the Flames respond to the challenge of facing this season’s gamut of tough non-conference competitors? Which players will step up for the Flames and become clutch performers? Will the tests in the first half of the season serve as training ground heading into conference play?

As the season progresses, these questions will certainly be answered. In the meantime, Layer is pleased the group of guys he has inherited and recruited.

“We’ve got great character,” Layer said. “The spirit of our team is excellent. I like the makeup of the team in that it’s a team that is committed to improving daily. It’s a team that continues to bow its neck and move forward.”

The poet Anne Bradstreet once said, “If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant: if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome.”

When young teams first take the court, they naturally encounter the storms that are associated with youthfulness. Though the winds may blow, the Flames, like other teams before them, will forge ahead and face these challenges head on.

With a new head coach and an assortment of talented players, a new era has begun for Liberty men’s basketball and like the season of spring, the potential the Flames possess could bring about many bright days.

**THE GUARDS**

Once again, Liberty takes the floor this season loaded with a mixture of guards, including two returning starters and a few fresh faces. Headlining the group is Flames workhorse, Ohman. Beginning his career as walk-on, the Mechanicsburg, Pa., native broke loose last season, posting career highs in every major statistical category. An emotional on-court leader, Ohman was the Flames’ third leading scorer during the 2008-09 campaign, averaging 13.9 points per game and chipping in 5.6 boards.

“Kyle is such a competitor,” Layer said. “No matter what assignment he is given, he attacks it with desire and intensity. He’s gone from walk-on, part-time player to starter and one of the best players in the Big South. That in itself is a statement of who he is.”
2009-10 OUTLOOK

Last season, the 6-4 guard found his niche behind the three-point arc, hitting 41.5 percent of his shots from downtown. Ohman’s long-range accuracy ranked him No. 26 in the nation in three-point efficiency. During Liberty’s road-win over the Virginia on Nov. 25, the senior lit it up from long-distance, knocking down five treys in the opening 20 minutes. Ohman’s hot hand that night allowed him to rack up 17 first-half points, tying the record for most first-half points at John Paul Jones Arena, a mark he shares with recently graduated UNC Tar Heel Tyler Hansbrough.

“Kyle’s ability to shoot is something that was evident last year,” added Layer. “But, what is probably underappreciated is his toughness, his ability to score in other ways and his ability to defend the best player on the other team at the three or the four spot. Despite giving up inches to most opponents on most nights, he tries to outwork them and that’s what makes Kyle a special player and very valuable to our team.”

The other starter in the backcourt next to Ohman is the Flames assist leader from last season, Jesse Sanders. A member of the Big South All-Freshman team in 2008-09, the 6-3 point guard averaged 6.9 points and 5.2 rebounds per game to go along with his 137 dimes. Armed with a high basketball IQ, the former home-schooler committed zero turnovers in nine of the 32 contests in which he appeared. Sanders’ low turnover count resulted in an assist-to-turnover ratio of 2.4, ranking him No. 22 in the nation. Heading into the 2009-10 campaign, Sanders is expected to lead the Flames as the team’s floor general.

“Jesse is the heart of our team,” said Layer. “He is a unique person in that he thinks about the team way more than himself. He was one of the best point guards in the league last year. Hopefully, he’ll continue to improve and lead us on and off the floor, and be our heart-beat.”

Three redshirt sophomores hoping to make a big impact on the scoring charts this season are Johnny Stephene, Jeremy Anderson and David Minaya. Appearing in all 35 contests last season, Stephene proved he could contribute, posting 15 points on Dec. 19 against Saint Louis.

“Johnny has worked extremely hard in the off-season,” Layer noted. “He had an up and down year as a redshirt freshman last year, but that is kind of normal. We’re expecting Johnny to build upon that and give us great scoring, leadership and toughness, and to capitalize on all the hard work he has put into his game.”

After sitting out for a season due to the NCAA transfer rule, Minaya is also expected to provide a scoring presence for the Flames. In his lone year at Tennessee Tech, he posted double figures in games against Rutgers, Oregon State and Morehead State.

The bar is set high for Minaya, as Layer hopes the 6-6 freshman with a strong work ethic. Viewed as an energy boost to the Flames roster, the guard is known as a wing player who has the ability to defend, sink long-range jumpers and drive to the basket.

“Chris is an incredible competitor,” Layer said when speaking of the Florida native. “There won’t be a player this year who will outwork him. That’s what has gotten him to this point. The way he plays, he will find a way to help this team.”

THE FORWARDS

This season’s class of forwards is headlined by redshirt senior, Baker. After missing almost the entire 2007-08 campaign with an injured left foot, the 6-9 Baker made his long-awaited return to the court this past season on Dec. 17. The versatile veteran is a scorer and defender, who stretches defenses with his long range shooting ability.

“When Tyler is healthy, he is a guy who can help our team in a lot of ways,” said Layer. “He can do a lot of things, including score, rebound and defend, but it is all predicated on whether he can be healthy for the next six months.”

Along with his versatility, Baker brings an abundance of leadership to a group of forwards which also includes newcomers Burrus, Konan and Taylor Jensen. Averaging 22.2 points and 9.6 rebounds as a senior at South Central High School, the 6-6 Burrus is dangerous from both the perimeter and the post. Joining Burrus is fellow freshman and Ivory Coast native Konan. The first official Layer signed, Konan, who stands at 6-6, adds even more of a post/periimeter threat to the Flames roster and is hailed by Layer as a defensive stopper.

“I like Patrick’s versatility. He can play both inside and out,” Layer stated. “He’s got a very good future here at Liberty. Antwan has a great body, combined with good athleticism. He has a chance to help us, as well.”

Rounding out the quartet is Jensen, a walk-on from Ashburn, Va. Standing at 6-9, Jensen played two seasons at Clearwater Christian College before transferring to Liberty and is regarded as a skilled big man, who continues to show signs of improvement.

THE CENTERS

After appearing in only five contests during the 2008-09 campaign, Carter McMasters returns to the Flames lineup this season after receiving a medical redshirt for a stress fracture in his right leg. Before going down, the 6-11 McMasters was highly touted out of Grace Baptist Academy, ranking No. 34 on ESPN.com’s power forward recruiting list in 2008. Now back at 100 percent health, the Chattanooga, Tenn., native looks to make up for lost time and build upon the success that made him a 2008 McDonald’s All-America nominee.
Layer says with added experience, strength and repetition, McMasters possesses the skills to be a real factor in the Big South. “I think that he has potential. Carter has worked really hard in the offseason to fulfill some of that potential, and now is the time for him to step up and give us great minutes at his position and be a force in our league."

Back up McMasters as a big man is the 6-10 freshman Vander Pol. Hailing from Fort Meyers, Fla., Vander Pol brings a shot blocking, rebounding and scoring presence to the Flames’ arsenal.

In his senior season at Evangelical Christian High School, he averaged 23 points and 14 rebounds per game, ranking No. 1 in boards and blocks in the Southwest Florida region. “Joel has been a pleasant surprise,” Layer said. “He’s one of the most improved guys on our team. He has quickly established a high work ethic, high energy level and degree of toughness that has really helped us. He is continuing to develop into someone who has a chance to be a really good player at Liberty.”

THE SCHEDULE

Clemson, Notre Dame and the Chicago Invitational headline the 2009-10 Liberty men’s basketball schedule. “I am looking forward to this year’s schedule,” said Layer. “It will be fun and exciting early as we bring some big-time programs to the Vines Center.”

The Flames are coming off one of the program’s best Division I seasons in its history and a berth in the inaugural CollegeInsider.com Post Season Tournament (CIT). Liberty finished the year 23-12, securing the very first victory in the history of the CIT over Rider in the opening round.

Liberty starts its season at perennial CAA powerhouse George Mason on Nov. 13. The next day, the Flames host Southern Virginia in their home opener.

A big-time week starts for Liberty as Clemson invades the Vines Center on Nov. 17, the first ACC opponent the Flames have ever hosted in Lynchburg. The game with the Tigers also marks the third straight season and seventh time in the past eight years, Liberty has faced off with a member of the ACC. Last year, the Flames topped intra-state rival Virginia at John Paul Jones Arena, 86-82.

“Hosting Clemson, a team that is coming off an NCAA Tournament appearance last year, is an awesome and unique opportunity for basketball fans in Lynchburg to see ACC basketball without leaving the city,” commented Layer.

The Flames conclude the three-game home stand on Nov. 19 against CAA foe and 2009 CIT champion Old Dominion. The game serves as the return contest from last year’s ESPN Bracket-Buster game televised on ESPNU.

“Having Clemson and Old Dominion, which are both projected to be NCAA Tournament teams, come to town in the same week will be a challenge that our players and coaches are looking forward to,” said Layer.

Next on the slate will be two games in the Chicago Invitational, a tournament similar to last year’s Findlay Toyota Las Vegas Classic. Liberty will play games at two home sites, starting at Notre Dame on Nov. 22, followed by a contest at Northwestern on Nov. 24.

The Notre Dame game will mark the fourth different Big East foe Liberty has faced all-time. The Flames squared off previously against DePaul (2008), Providence (1990) and Seton Hall (2003, ‘04, ‘06). The contest at Northwestern marks the third game at Northwestern the Flames have ever hosted in Lynchburg on Dec. 12. Shawnee State comes to town on Dec. 15 and Houghton concludes the five-game home stand on Dec. 19.

The Flames finish the non-conference portion of the schedule at the UCF Classic in Orlando, Fla. The tournament runs Dec. 29-30, and the Flames will play two games against a field that features Buffalo, UCF and Jacksonville.

Big South action continues on Jan. 2 at VMI. Liberty then makes its first South Carolina road trip of the season, as the Flames play at Presbyterian on Jan. 7 and Winthrop on Jan. 9. Liberty returns home on Jan. 14 to host Gardner-Webb and UNC Asheville on Jan. 16. Layer and company will head to High Point on Jan. 21 and, preseason conference favorite Radford on Jan. 23.

A three-game conference home stand commences on Jan. 28, when VMI comes into the Vines Center to start the second round of league play. Winthrop travels to Lynchburg on Feb. 4, followed by Presbyterian on Feb. 6.

UNC Asheville will host Liberty on Feb. 11, followed by a road game at Gardner-Webb on Feb. 13.

The regular-season home portion of the schedule concludes with games against Radford on Feb. 16 and Senior Night against High Point on Feb. 20.

The annual “Beach Trip” concludes the regular season for the Flames, starting at Coastal Carolina on Feb. 25 and Charleston Southern on Feb. 27.

The Big South Men’s Basketball Championship begins with the quarterfinals on March 2 at the home of the higher seed. The semifinals, which will be broadcast on ESPNU, will be played at the site of the regular-season champion on March 4. One of the ESPN Family of Networks will broadcast the championship game on March 6 at the home of the highest remaining seed. The NCAA Tournament starts March 18-21, with the first two rounds being played at various locations across the country.

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