

SPORTS

May 2, 2023

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Power in a pair of shoes

Men's soccer Captain Luke Eberle leads community outreach for 110 children



NOAH SEIDLEZ | @NOAHSEIDLE | LIBERTY CHAMPION COMMUNITY — More than 50 other Flames student athletes served during this event.

As children shyly walked through the cafeteria doors of their humble elementary school, a raucous crowd welcomed them with a seemingly ordinary gift: shoes. The plain faces grew into large smiles as hope became something one could slip onto their feet.

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At Robert S. Payne Elementary school in the heart of Lynchburg, a typical Thursday evening on April 28 turned into a memorable night for over 100 kids. Samaritan's Feet — a nonprofit organization out of Charlotte, North Carolina — in partnership with senior midfielder Luke Eberle of the Liberty men's soccer team, and dozens of Liberty student-athlete volunteers, converted a cafeteria into a fully-functioning and completely free shoe distribution center.

For 110 pre-kindergarten to fifth grade students, a new pair of shoes awaited them. In August 2022, Eberle signed a name, image and likeness (NIL) deal with Samaritan's Feet pledging to raise \$100,000 for shoes to give away. Now, after raising nearly \$50 thousand, Eberle begins to see the fruit of his labor.

"It was awesome," Eberle said. "It was great to see so many Liberty athletes out here serving at R.S. Payne. ... the shoes were a small part of the whole night, but I'm happy that the shoes were the avenue through which we could impact the kids. It was amazing to see the smiles, not only on the athletes' faces, but on the parents, the kids, and everyone else who was serving here."

From 4-6 p.m., students filtered into the cafeteria. There, more than 50 student-athletes from nearly every NCAA sport at Liberty welcomed them with loud cheers and open arms. Individually, each child paired with a Flame to find the perfect fit. New pairs of shoes arranged by size and color awaited the students who made their choice.

"We are so glad that this is happening. Our parents are excited, and our children are excited because they are receiving some wonderful shoes that they can play in during the summer," Dianne Stratton, the family engagement liaison at Robert S. Payne Elementary School, said.

On a large poster in the back, a once-blank canvas with the words "My dream is..." began to crowd with various kinds of handwriting and unique ambitions. One student wrote "to be a hairdresser," another wanted to become a "football player," and another described their dream as simply to "provide for my family."

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— Luke Eberle

Some kids joined Flames student-athletes in coloring, and others went into the gym to put their new kicks to use by jumping rope and playing sports.

"I was so excited to serve next to athletes that I see all the time, but to see them in this context is really sweet," Liberty volleyball rebirth junior Julia Mangum said. "Seeing the kids' faces was so fulfilling and rewarding. Knowing the impact shoes — something that we get all the time as athletes — can do for a kid is so encouraging."

"It's a great day to have an impact and inspire the kids to dream," Samaritan's Feet Regional Program Manager, Jeremiah Williams, said. "Maybe they want to be athletes, maybe they want to be doctors, maybe they want to own their own business, you never know. Today we're present ... and we're giving effort."

Samaritan's Feet's mission is to "serve and inspire hope by providing shoes to those in need around the world." On a Thursday in Lynchburg, this mission was achieved. While meeting a need in the community, a privilege was simultaneously realized. Liberty's student-athletes saw the power of their platform, but also the blessing of something so simple as shoes that many take for granted.

"I want to thank everyone who is volunteering. I want to thank Samaritan's Feet for doing a lot of work behind the scenes to get the shoes here and I want to thank everyone at Liberty for helping me get this started," Eberle said.

Eberle and everyone involved saw shoes as the avenue to show others the tangible love of Christ. However, the Maryland native is not done. With only half of his \$100,000 raised, Eberle hopes to organize more shoe drives like this one and impact more lives through his platform as a collegiate athlete.

RIVAS is a sports reporter.

Masters of the ASUN

Men's golf secures NCAA Tournament berth with ASUN Championship

With the Liberty Flames' golf team having returned to Lynchburg after the ASUN Championship in Mobile, Alabama from April 25-26, the team bus had some extra hardware in the form of an ASUN Championship trophy.

By Noah Willard
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The Flames came to play in the conference tournament, notching multiple record-setting performances on the trail to a championship victory. The Flames finished day one of the tournament in the lead after posting a record-setting round, carding 27-under par 261. That marks the lowest 18-hole total in Liberty program

history, marking the new standard in the ASUN championship.

As weather concerns loomed, the Flames ended up playing 36 total holes during day one, finishing with an overall of 40-under par 536.

Jacksonville State set a conference record on day one, scoring 19-under par 269 in their first 18-holes. It wasn't theirs long, however, as the number was quickly shattered by the Flames, who beat it by eight strokes.

The first day of conference competition ended with Flames senior Jonathan Yau and redshirt junior Isaac Simmons tying for second individually for the championship.

As day two got underway and the Flames looked to build off its lead from day one, the team didn't disappoint. On day two, Liberty set a new program 54-hole team scoring

record as they finished the championship with a score of 53-under par 811.

Now, all that stood between the Flames and ASUN glory was the North Florida Ospreys, the team who took it last season. As the battle came to an end, Flames came away victorious, notching its second ASUN title and seventh conference title in program history.

The Flames' ASUN title fun doesn't end there, however, as Liberty had multiple players perform incredibly as individuals as well. Yau, the face of this Flames team, won the individual ASUN championship as he finished 18-under par 198, the lowest individual 54-hole total in program history, and even finished with a stroke to spare. This marks the 35th NCAA Division I individual medalist honors in program history and the third of Yau's Liberty career. The Flames

also saw Simmons and senior Connor Polcender place in the top five, as Yau, Simmons and Polcender all earn the title of the ASUN All-Championship team.

While this was an electrifying couple of days for the Flames and they will certainly take their time to celebrate, they also look ahead to competing in the National Championship. Even before the Flames headed off to the ASUN Championship, it was clear from talking with the players and head coach where they had their expectations set.

The NCAA Regionals will be from May 15-17 and the pool will be announced May 3. The Flames certainly look to build off the ASUN Championship as they look to compete for the program's first National Championship.

WILLARD is a sports reporter.



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY LIBERTY ATHLETICS ACES — The Flames golfers broke numerous conference records in their ASUN Tournament win.



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY LIBERTY ATHLETICS SPLASH — The golf team relished in its win before setting all sights on the NCAA Tournament.