

2025-2026

YEAR-IN-REVIEW



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From the UNC Charlotte police logs April (4/20 - 4/24)

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

The following are some incidents in the UNC Charlotte campus police logs from April 20 to 24, 2026.

April 21 Hit and Run

Dispatch received a call in regard to a vehicle hit and run in Cri Lot 2. Once on scene, all pertinent information was collected, and a report was completed.

April 22 Harassment

An officer was dispatched to Holshouser regarding individuals knocking on doors. Upon arrival, an officer met with a resident student, stating that four males were walking around, knocking on doors and filming Tik Tok videos.

UNC Charlotte events calendar

Day of Remembrance Wreath-Laying Ceremony
April 30, 8:30 p.m.,
Constellation Garden
Memorial

Spring 2026: Engineering Senior Design Expo
May 1, 11 a.m. - 3 p.m.
Halton Arena

Softball vs. Tulsa
May 1, 6 p.m.
Sue M. Daughtridge Stadium

Reading Day
April 30

Baseball vs. Tulane
May 1, 6 p.m.,
Robert & Mariam Hayes
Stadium

Odyssey/Odissi concert
May 2, 2 p.m.
Robinson Hall

The Niner Times is UNC Charlotte's student-run news publication founded in 1947 and has received both state and national recognition.

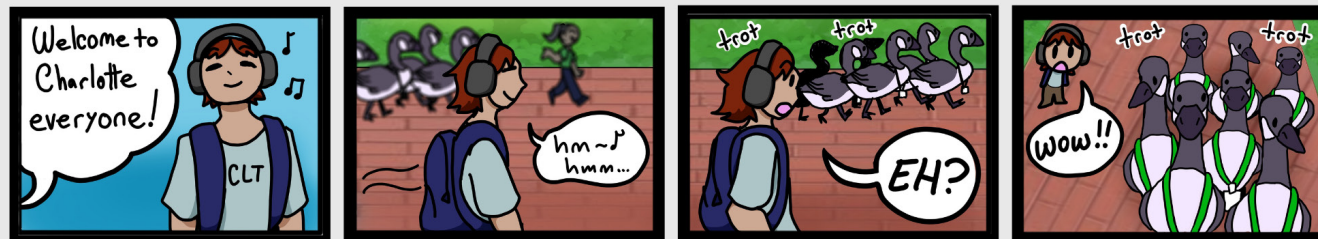
We cover campus happenings, news and events in the city of Charlotte and North Carolina and topics that are important to students.

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Niner's Comics: Undergraduate gaggle

Catherine Kerns | Staff Illustrator



Farewell column: What I learned walking around in the dark

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

Last summer, I interned in the wonderful city of Philadelphia. I spent my days cooped up at my internship, hammering away at my keyboard working on one article or another and my nights roaming the streets of the city.

My nightly meandering up and down Broad Street and taking trolley trips to the charming streets of West Philly created a habit. When I returned to Charlotte in August, I began to feel an itch in the late hours of the night to get up and walk. So of course, I did.

Two or so times a week this last year I've emerged from my apartment like some nocturnal creature and walked around campus. Maybe you've seen me.

These walks weren't the first time I'd wandered campus. When I was a first-year running track at Catawba College, I had a track meet at UNC Charlotte. At the time, I was pretty miserable at Catawba; my running days were clearly behind me, and the journalism program there wasn't quite meeting my needs. So during my warmup before my race, I took a jog through campus as an impromptu tour. I ran up Craver Road, past J. Murrey Atkins Library and down by Fretwell — I even popped by the Popp-Martin Student Union, where I picked up a copy of this scrappy, up-and-coming student newspaper.

Those spots that seemed so foreign during that warmup are now greeted as old friends, even in the dark of night. Fretwell, where I sat silently in the back of so many classes taught by some of my favorite professors. The student union, where I spent my days and nights working tirelessly on the publication I poured every ounce of my life into, and where I got to know some of my best friends. And Craver, where I walked home from the union five days a week, sometimes with my head hung low, contemplating if one of my articles on the student government was the right move or if I hadn't done enough to help other staffers.

But often, I walked home proud; proud of the team I had the privilege to lead and proud of what we'd accomplished.

I thought about all this on my late-night walks, too. The Niner Times is just about all I've thought about for the past three years; I dream of being on Grammarly and InDesign, and rarely do I have a meal where I'm not typing.

There were times, wandering under the moon, when I questioned whether it was all worth it. I gave up countless hours of sleep, many of my weekends, most of my social life for the Niner Times. But what more would I be with those

small pleasures? I want to write for The Atlantic, I want to win a Pulitzer, I wanted campus to have the best newspaper it could.

In the dark, I often looked for a way forward. My writing wasn't always the best, and the Niner Times didn't always do as well as I knew it could, that fell on me.

But almost always, the way forward wasn't one I really found myself. I've been incredibly lucky to work alongside some of the best people I know, Clare Grealey, Sofia DiStefano and Sunnya Hadavi, who've hung around at the Niner Times for all three years of my tenure and been with me through my best and worst moments. Without them and our late-night consultations, I'm not the person, or reporter, I am today, and the campus has been lucky to have them.

When the sun was up, and it was appropriate to call them, I turned to my parents, who tolerated my endless chatter about a newspaper that maybe isn't as important as I think it is, and always gave me well-placed advice.

My parents have, of course, been great, but I've been lucky enough to have almost a second set of parents in the student union: my two advisors, Kelly Merges and Justin Paprocki. I will always remember crying on the phone to Kelly in my first week as editor after my first real print edition had the wrong date on the cover. Kelly and Justin supported me then, and that support never wavered. I will forever be thankful for them.

I couldn't always see where I was going on my walks in the dark. Often I stumbled, sometimes I tripped. But I could always phone a friend if I got lost.

As my walks come to an end and I move on to some new spot where I'll no doubt continue to stumble through the dark, I'll continue to think about Charlotte. Those thoughts won't be about coverage anymore; that'll be someone else's job soon, but likely they'll be about how lucky I was to have spent time at Charlotte, where I met people and told stories that'll always stick with me.



Blaise Uy/Niner Times File
Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times



Blaise Uy/Niner Times File
Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

Farewell column: There are many like it, but this desk is mine

Clare Grealey | Copy Editor

Nearly every weekday (and some weekends) for three years, I have driven my car, ridden the bus or walked to the Popp-Martin Student Union, faced the opposite direction in the elevator and strolled into the windowless office space that is the Niner Times office.

Nearly every weekday (and some weekends) for three years, I have dropped my backpack to the floor, pulled out my laptop and placed it on my desk to begin working.

Nearly every weekday (and some weekends) for three years, I have sat at this desk. There are many like it, but this one is mine.

This desk wasn't always where I sat.

My first time in the office, I sat across from Sunnya Hadavi, the then-editor-in-chief, avoiding eye contact and wiping sweat from my hands. I was there for a job interview, hoping to become the next assistant copy editor for the Niner Times.

My second time in the office, I huddled close to AJ Siegel, the head copy editor at the time, at the big table in the center of the room. My third time in the office, I sat to the left of my future desk, slouching down at the assistant copy editor's desk.

Months later, I sat to the left of my future desk, awkwardly avoiding eye contact with the new assistant sports editor, Davis Cuffe. Next to me sat the other assistant copy editor, Brendan Mullen. We sat on the left,

AJ on the right, Davis behind us, and Sofia DiStefano, a news staffer, typed loudly at the big table in the center of the room. Sunnya sat in her office, shuffling through papers and planning for our print editions.

One year after my first time in the office, my stomach hurt, and my eyes were filled with tears from laughter as I sat at my desk, chair swiveled around to talk to my dearest friends, AJ, Sunnya, Davis, Brendan and Sofia, sleep-deprived after weeks covering encampments and protests.

Brendan once referred to the copy desk as a "toy chest." He's not wrong.

Littering the surface are little figurines, a mini skateboard and plastic ducks lining the top of my desktop computer.

There are napkins with combating messages written on them from Davis and Sofia, a framed "family photo" drawing that Brendan once made on a scrap of paper, a note on the back of a gum wrapper that declares "Sunnya was here."

There are letters from AJ, an encouraging memo from Davis and even a little note from Mareska Chettiar, who sits to my left.

Three years on, I sit on the right, and an assistant copy editor sits to my left. Soon enough, Mareska will become the head copy editor and assume the desk on the right. The desk is special to me. It's carried me through editing hundreds of stories, writing my thesis, late nights and early mornings at the office. My desk has been there for me for years on end.

There are many like it, but this one is mine.

In the coming days, I will have to pack up my desk. Decide which trinkets stay and which come with me. Neatly arrange the desk for Mareska, and say goodbye. There will likely be many desks in my future, but none quite like this one.

My desk has served me well and brought people to me that I am eternally grateful for.

To my desk: thank you for keeping me grounded, for being a shoulder to rest on, for being a strong foundation. Thank you for all the people you've brought me and for those I leave with you. For all the times I've faltered, you've always been there. I love you, my desk. Maybe one day we'll meet again.

Love,
Clare Grealey, Copy Editor

Farewell column: Learning to lean on others

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

All my life, I have been a big sister. The sibling you go to when you broke something and you don't want mom to know, the one who yelled at others on the playground when they didn't let you play with them, the one who would always try to pick you up and force you to play dress up, the advice giver, the listener.

Coming to UNC Charlotte was a classic "Little Miss Independent" older sister move. Ten hours away from anyone blood-related, no dad half asleep on the couch for me to wake up and look over and say, "I wanna be like Tracy Wolfson," the sports journalist for the NFL, no little brothers to drive around or boss.

It was the weirdest feeling in the world. To be completely honest, I was scared. I didn't feel so tough and independent at first. Actually, not for the first full year at school, but I think it was because I hadn't found my people yet.

When I first took the elevator in the Popp-Martin Student Union to the lower level and shuffled through the hallway, peering into the Niner Times office, it was love at first sight.

The walls lined with past prints, the stack of papers on the table, everyone at their desks typing away. My brain had something that probably would resemble a cosmic explosion as the "biggest journalism nerd you may ever meet" — as professor Craig Paddock might put it — had just found where she was going to spend as much time as possible for the next three years.

I started out as an eager staff writer. Probably almost annoyingly eager, and to my previous editors, I apologize, as I've met staffers now who have made me feel like I'm staring into a mirror at my past self.

I used to sit at the big table in the middle of the office during the news sections, paying attention but also staring. I used to stare off and people-watch all the other editors who were already on the board. I remember watching the previous editor-in-chief, Sunnya Hadavi, move from desk to desk, talking to people. At the time, I had never spoken to her before, but I really wanted to be just like her; she was flawless.

As just a staffer, I didn't really talk to any editors, but one, AJ Siegel, the head copy editor at the time, would always extend a smile and we would make a few jokes from time to time. They soon began calling me their term of endearment, "bubba," and I have never felt such immediate kindness from anyone else on that level.

Brendan Mullen, who I honestly thought had just spent every night reading the dictionary, used to always joke and say, "Sofia, spell astronaut." I still have to double-check myself on that one because I always just relied on Brendan to help me. Because that's what you could do with Brendan, rely on him to be there, for anything.

Then there was Clare Grealey, this awkward goofball who would make these jokes that I would catch her laughing harder at than others were. I used to barely know Clare, but I've spent every day since March 2024

walking into the newsroom looking for her first, always making sure her head was peeking out the side of the copy desk wall. Although she is the biggest know-it-all, she is the reason I always want to push myself: one day I will know the answer instead, but that day has not come yet.

And then there was this guy who would always enter the newsroom during the news meetings. He always had his headphones on and wore a Batman children's backpack, it always made me giggle to myself every time I saw it, and I remember the old assistant news editor used to always say, "Hi Davis." Little did I know this guy named Davis would be my boss just four months later. Or that I would've spent almost every waking moment with him sitting against the buildings of campus, capturing a part of political history.

When I moved up to an editor, I was honestly scared shitless. I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. It did not help that there were some of the biggest things in history going on across the nation; pro-Palestine encampments, DEI rollbacks and election season all within my first nine months as an editor, I basically put my foot on the gas and never let up.

Sunnya, AJ, Brendan, Clare and Davis all have felt like older siblings to me. I looked up to each of them in different ways. I never had that older sibling to look up to, so for me, Niner Times gave me more than just 90% of my resume, but that feeling of guidance through "older siblings" that I never knew I needed.

As an older sister, I have gained extra little brothers and sisters through my news section. Kyle, Emily, Deonna, Hayden, Emma-Katherine, Cassandra, Miguel, David, Montse, Gabby, Tanisha and all the others who have come and gone, I see you all as part of a little family.

To the others who brightened my day, Maddy, Mare-ska, Wes, Annie, Emmanuel, Kaitlyn, Megan, Ava(s), Emsley, Ahmed, Tre and Shane, I am so excited for where life will take you guys.

So for the first time, as I say goodbye, this farewell column isn't just about leaving, it's about finally knowing what it feels like to be the little sister, while still leading like the oldest and being endlessly grateful for everyone who let me.



Blaise Uy/Niner Times File
Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

Farewell column: Keep telling stories



Madeline Andrews | Arts & Culture Editor

College was never a guarantee for me.

My father was incarcerated for much of my childhood, and my mother couldn't cope, sending her into active addiction. My life was punctu-

ated by cut-off utilities, overdoses in the yard, calls from the county jail, disappearing TVs and rarely enough food.

Asheville is a painfully small town, and even people who have never met me have heard the tales of my dad before he got sober, or have seen my mom, who is still homeless, panhandling on Patton Avenue.

Throughout high school, my parents' legacy followed me into every room and in the corners of every conversation, and any attempt to separate myself from them failed.

When I miraculously made it to college, it felt like an awning during a thunderstorm. I could meet people, and they would only know what I told them about myself; I could hide in omission.

In my junior year, I decided to apply to the newspaper. To my surprise, I got praised for my writing on its own, not the story behind it.

I suddenly sat in a room of peers who respected me, with no reservations or angled questions, just good people who are writing towards something, with no context for what I am running away from.

Journalism allows me to focus on other people's stories, and I was honored to write ones that I think will stick with me for the rest of my life.

G, the daughter of undocumented Mexican immigrants, who hid AirTags in her parents' shoes during the Customs and Border Protection raids, was brave enough to share her story in the face of such immense uncertainty.

Students shared that their finances got so tight that they began donating plasma bi-weekly, or Savannah, who would have died without a plasma transfusion when she lost half of the blood in her body during a postpartum hemorrhage.

These stories remind me that suffering is neither unique nor far from survival.

G's parents were not deported, and I was invited to her birthday party last week, where she was more excited about my acceptance to graduate school than blowing out her birthday candles, because she really is just that selfless.

Savannah, who survived a postpartum hemorrhage, is home with no complications, spending each day

with her newborn son, Levi, who is small but mighty and won't have to grow up speaking of his mother in the past tense.

These experiences could have remained in G's studio or Savannah's hospital room, leaving them to remember their small tragedies and move forward without any community, but they were all revealed due to the grace and autonomy that this publication affords.

To my fellow editors, thank you for treating me like an equal.

Davis swore my mediocre pieces were good, highlighting the few salvageable sentences and directing me out of crippling writer's block.

Clare taught me that I really don't know English grammar, but still edited everything from late-night coverage to my graduate school application with grace and patience.

Sofia showed me what it means to dedicate yourself in your entirety to journalism with a determination that can only be compared to that of an Olympic athlete.

To those who shared their stories with me, thank you for entrusting me with both your suffering and survival.

Telling your story is weird and painful, and blindly trusting in a way the world rarely allows. You can never know how you'll be treated, spoken about or remembered. The people going without, the ones making art or music, and the ones banding together to celebrate each other are all worth knowing.

The most important thing I have learned from my time here is the value of talking to people. Talk to the girl who sits next to you in your class. To the man who hands you your chicken sandwich at Chick-fil-A, the custodian cleaning the bathroom, the bus driver and the girl who lost her keys in UREC.

It's the people around you, standing under the awning, that make everything else worth it.

I am leaving with the memory of hundreds of people who are worth knowing, and want to be remembered as a story of irresponsible, blind hope.

Keep telling stories.
- Madeline Andrews,
Arts & Culture Editor



Blaise Uy/Niner Times File
Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

Charlotte students to compete in upcoming 2026 Dance World Cup

Anna Waskey | Asst. Arts and Culture Editor

Gia Soto/Niner Times

Ahmed Ahmed/Niner Times

Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

For three UNC Charlotte students, their endless dance rehearsals and countless hours in studios have been rewarded. This July, their skills will be put to the test at the 2026 Dance World Cup (DWC).

A spontaneous audition call has become an opportunity to share the talent of Team USA. Since January, these students have been training tirelessly with the rest of the team, all while working toward their degrees.

Showcasing international talent

The DWC is the second-largest international competition after the Olympics, and with invitations sent to over 50 countries, hosts tens of thousands of dancers during the competition week each year.

This year, the contestants will travel to Dublin, spending July 8 to 18 in the Irish capital.

Panels of judges rank routines within each category and division, crowning the top performers. Special recognition is granted to the highest-scoring entries in both age groups.

In the U.S., dance is overlooked as a sport, so Team USA has an inconsistent record of attendance at the Cup; this year marks its second reappearance after a several-year-long stretch without an invitation.

"None of us who auditioned had heard of it before," fourth-year student Keegan Martin said. "It's just not very well known in the States."

How the opportunity surfaced

The competition will draw dancers and teams from all over the world — 73 total countries. Three dancers on Team USA are

Charlotte students: fourth-year Keegan Martin, third-year Camryn Shoener and second-year Constanza Martell-Cote. They all hope to pursue commercial dance after graduation.

The dancers are part of Legacy Dance Company (LDC), which was founded in 2014 and serves the greater Concord, North Carolina area. Alisha Dixon is a choreographer and dance instructor at LDC and has mentored Martell-Cote, Martin and Shoener over the last year since they each joined the company.

"She's been insanely helpful to all the people on the team. We train at least one night a week, sometimes two, for two-hour training sessions," Martin said. "It's industry-level training, preparing us for the stage, for music videos, for concerts. She's just guided us into that."

Dixon provides work opportunities to her dancers, offering both instruction and pathways to further their dance careers.

The Team USA coaches are Hannah and Alex Isenberg, who are the owners of Isenberg Entertainment. When they gave Dixon a casting call for the DWC, she invited everyone on her crew to audition. Then, a few days before Christmas, they received the final decision and began learning the competition choreography in January.

In addition to the three UNC Charlotte students, there is one other member of LDC on Team USA; the other dancers belong to various companies along the East Coast. The 27 total members have been rehearsing with their local companies, but in June, they will rehearse for the first time as one team.

From rehearsal to relationship

"It's been cool to see how everyone perceives dance differently, but it still comes back to the same thing: we're just dancing and having fun and loving what we're doing," Shoener said.

Shoener has taken classes from international instructors before, learning different dance styles and personalities from across the world. Now, she will put the glimpses of these perspectives into practice.

The team has been growing relationships as they learn the choreography. While not everyone on the team has met, some companies have met up and rehearsed together.

"Just having those rehearsal times and those breaks, we were able to make conversation, and we all got super close and clicked immediately," Martell-Cote recalled from a weekend spent rehearsing at a studio in Winston-Salem.

Team USA has been preparing to represent the country for months, and while they do not get the luxury of rehearsing together all the time, they cherish the times they do.

"I think we're all hard workers on our own, but when we come together, everything comes together. We're really proud of the work that we're putting out," Martin said.

Recognizing the athleticism of dance, not just the artistry

Only competitive dance is recognized as a sport in the United States; it is seen as more of an art form despite its physical demands. Because of this, Team USA has historically struggled to bring a full adult team to the Dance World Cup.

"I'm honestly really honored to be able to go," Shoener said. "I always looked up to the Olympic athletes who got to wear the Team USA vests, so I feel really proud that I get to go out there and show what I've been training for for so long and represent the country with such a beautiful art form."

Raised in the dance field, these students often heard their passion invalidated in the athletic scope.

"Growing up, I've always heard that dance isn't really a sport. But we're training like athletes, we're dancing five to seven days a week, for multiple hours," Martin said.

They want to showcase the athleticism involved in the craft. While dance is an art form, it requires the same physical demands and dedication as many widely-recognized sports.

"Dance is both artistic and athletic," Martell-Cote said. "I want people to understand both sides of it."

The team will experience the many other cultures of dance and see firsthand how the United States compares. While Team USA's goal is to win the Cup, they're also looking forward to simply being involved in such a prestigious competition.

"Dance is really big on connection, so meeting new people and getting to know everyone really helps with having the courage to step on such a big stage, and I'm looking forward to getting to experience different cultures," Shoener said.

As the competition date comes closer, Team USA will continue to rehearse, putting in their best effort to represent the country to the international dance scene.

Remembering Ellis Reed Parlier

Niner Times File



Content Warning: This article mentions a past shooting on campus on April 30, 2019.

On April 30, 2019, an avoidable tragedy claimed the lives of two, including Ellis Reed Parlier. Reed was 19 years old but left an unforgettable impact on others.

“Reed didn’t have to boast about what he did because he just did it,” his father, Brian Parlier, said. “Just like he was naturally born with his hair, he was also naturally kind.”

Reed was born in Charlotte on Oct. 2, 1999, to Julie and Brian Parlier. He attended high school at the Central Academy for Technology and Arts (CATA) in Monroe, North Carolina. In 2019, Reed was a second-year at Charlotte studying computer science.

“He had a dry sense of humor, and he would make us laugh out of nowhere,” Julie said. “He never caused us issues, and he made being a parent easy.”

Reed has been described as a giver who made others feel wanted.

“He helped special needs kids, tutored his fellow students and helped his grandmother who had Alzheimer’s,” Julie said. “Reed would save money when he went out with his friends, and if they needed something, he would pay for it without asking for it back.”

As a high school student, Reed gave back to his classmates.

“He was tutoring a student at his high school that had cancer, and Reed offered to help them catch up so they wouldn’t be left behind,” Julie said.

In the days after the tragedy, Julie, Brian and Mallory saw butterflies that reminded them of Reed. Julie said the family always sees Reed in those butterflies.

“We had a lot of people around our house right after the tragedy. Mallory went around the garage to get away from all the people, and a monarch butterfly landed near her,” Julie said. “Then, one of my friends took me to a park to escape everything, and we stood over a water bridge, and two butterflies kept flying around my face.”

Impact on other students

At Charlotte, Reed’s impact has been felt by students and professors.

Nathan Weisskopf was the first recipient of the Reed Parlier Memorial Scholarship. He received \$72,000 from the University in honor of Reed. Weisskopf is a graduate of Reed’s high school.

Weisskopf was selected from 1,500 candidates for the scholarship and said being chosen was wonderful.

“It is an indescribable feeling having the scholarship. I was trying to quantify it when I received it, but I always wonder, ‘Why me?’” Weisskopf said. “I hope I have been able to do right by it through my school and extra-curriculars.”

“I never knew Reed, but I had friends that knew him. I remember an acquaintance from high school breaking down and crying after the shooting because they knew him,” Weisskopf said.

Relationship with professors

Dr. Nadia Najjar taught Reed in his final semester. In Najjar’s class, she built relationships with students as they had to check in with her during projects.

Najjar first heard the news of the tragedy after she had left campus. She was teaching a class in the Kennedy Building just an hour before.

“I immediately contacted all my students, asking them to let me know if they were okay,” Najjar said. “The next morning, the names came out, and Reed’s name is Ellis Parlier. I got to know him as Reed, and as soon as I heard his name, I told my husband that he was my student. I checked my class roll, and it was him, which was really hard.”

Najjar said Reed was beloved by his fellow students because he made everyone feel important.

“We did paired programming in that class, and since he had that extra experience, he would take the time to help other students learn by answering their questions. I could see that the other students appreciated his patience, and he created a bond with all of them.”

Reed was an avid video game player who had become friends with fellow gamers nationwide. Najjar said Reed taught her a final lesson after meeting his friends.

“I was honored to be invited to be a part of the celebration of

life, and when I went there, I got to know more about him,” Najjar said. “I have a son, and at that point, he was nine or 10 and was starting to get into gaming, and seeing Reed’s friends from gaming changed my perspective, as it allowed me to see how they connected. He taught me something even after he wasn’t with us anymore.”

Carrying on the legacy

Reed’s parents are carrying on his legacy by hosting the 2026 Reed Parlier Golf Tournament on Monday, April 27, at the Emerald Lake Golf Club. Since the event’s inception in 2019, more than \$1 million has been raised in honor of Reed.

Reed’s father said the event was created due to the abundance of people hoping to help.

“People want to give in those situations, and we didn’t want to benefit from Reed’s death. So we set up a scholarship for students and the golf tournament,” Brian said.

According to Reed’s mother, the event continues to add more people each year.

Reed was a giver, and his impact continues to live on. The pain of losing a son is something that the Parliers will never forget. Brian said people should continue to live their lives even when tragedy strikes.

“The world is a great place, but sadly, there are bad spots along the way,” Brian Parlier said. “You can’t stop these tragedies, but we can’t shelter our students because we want them to achieve great things.”

Julie shared one thing people should take away from this event: “Live your life like it is the last day.”



Courtesy of the Parliers & WAFE

Remembering Riley Howell

Niner Times File

Content Warning: This article mentions a past shooting on campus on April 30, 2019.

In the fall of 2018, Riley Howell of Waynesville, North Carolina, enrolled at UNC Charlotte after transferring from Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College. Throughout his time at Charlotte, Riley was described as optimistic, joyful and selfless. Eventually, he was hailed a hero.

On April 30, 2019, a gunman opened fire in the Kennedy Building. To prevent any more harm, Riley tackled the gunman and urged students to “go, go, go” for their safety. In the process, Howell died from his injuries along with his fellow student, Ellis “Reed” Parlier. Howell was 21 years old, and Parlier was 19.

Riley was not only a student at Charlotte and a hero, but he was also a friend, son and loving brother. Riley’s younger brother, Teddy Howell, gives an in-depth glimpse of who his older brother was before he lost his life.

Riley was a big fan of Star Wars, liked spending time outdoors, especially time spent with his family and friends, worked out and listened to music such as The Rolling Stones. Their song “Jumping Jack Flash” was one of his favorites.

Teddy’s memories of Riley

For Teddy Howell, Riley was a role model to his siblings and everyone he interacted with.

“If you were ever in real trouble, he was right there,” Teddy said. “If you ever got hurt or anything, he’ll dive right in head first to help you out.”

Despite their seven-year age difference, it did not stop Riley from spending time with his younger brother.

“He and his friends, whenever they’d be over, I’d want to be right there,” Teddy said. “They probably didn’t wanna hang out with [his] nine-year-old little brother when he was 16. But he always did. At the time, I didn’t think anything of it because he would always hang out with me.”

Teddy recalled more memories of his older brother before his death, ones that he will always remember.

“It wasn’t until that first year he went to Charlotte that we became closer as not just brothers but as friends. He could be his true self, and I was growing into more of my true self,” said Teddy.

Around the summer before Riley’s death, another memory that stuck with Teddy was when Riley taught Teddy how to drive a boat.

“In the summer of 2018, we had this houseboat on a lake called Fontana. It was pretty old and rundown, but it’s fun. We always go there in the summer,” Teddy said. “It was him, his girlfriend Lauren and I, and he taught me how to drive a boat.”

“He taught me how to do a lot of things, but that was one of the biggest because I know for him, me and probably all of our family, that houseboat is like our favorite place in the world,” Teddy said.

“I always knew I was gonna learn how to drive a boat, but to learn from him was such a special time,” Teddy said.

Riley’s legacy

In the aftermath of the shooting, Riley is remembered for his sacrifice and legacy. He was posthumously awarded a Purple Heart and the Bronze Star for his actions.

His memory was not only awarded but was immortalized as a Star Wars character. Lucasfilm sent a letter to the Howell family, where they expressed their deepest condolences and informed the family of the tribute to their son’s memory. The first mention of Riley’s character, Ri-Lee Howell, was in the book “Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker: The Visual Dictionary.”

“They used the last name Howell. Ev-

erything just sort of went off the rails right there. I remember Mark Hamill retweeted it. It was just crazy,” Teddy said.

“I know Riley would feel humbled, like, ‘I probably didn’t deserve that’ because that’s the kind of guy he was. On the inside, he probably would’ve been ecstatic because he is an official character. Our initial reaction was just shock and wonderment,” Teddy said.

In May 2019, the Riley Howell Foundation Fund was founded. The organization was formed to help and provide counseling and funeral expenses to the families of victims who were lost to gun violence. The foundation fund is run and is made up of Howell family and friends.

Remembering Riley

To Teddy, Riley was not only his older brother but one of his best friends. He remembers his brother as someone who was always willing to go out of his way to help others.

“He was not a judgmental person at all. I think that’s what made him such a wonderful person,” Teddy said. “He would help you if you needed it, and he’d probably go out of his way to help you if you needed it, no matter the situation.”

“Riley, as a person at his core, was willing to help. That especially showed on that day,” Teddy said.

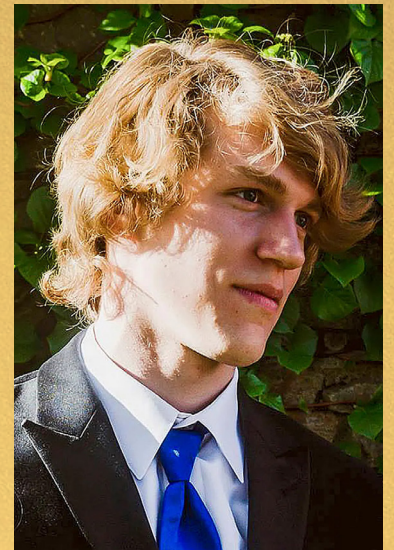
Teddy admired Riley for his selflessness and how he has inspired others to improve one’s self and be a better version of themselves.

“It’s an amazing thing what he did. He definitely shouldn’t have had to, but it’s great that he did,” Teddy said. “I’m glad that people can take his story and find inspiration within themselves and appreciate nature in the way that he did, find a new hobby or do something to try and make themselves a better person.”

Teddy continues to live every day in Riley’s memory, as Riley remains a role model to others and himself.

“There are always ways people can improve; there are a billion ways I can improve. Riley is helping me every day because, now, moving forward, anything I do, I do it for him,” Teddy said.

“Because of him, even if it’s getting out of bed, which is sometimes the hardest thing to do in the entire day, I’d do it because he would want me to,” Teddy said.



Courtesy of the Riley Howell Foundation Fund



Richard and Carol Leeman say farewell to UNC Charlotte after 37 years of instruction

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

Thirty-seven years ago, Richard and Carol Leeman went out to lunch as part of the interview process Richard was in for a role at UNC Charlotte.

Little did they know that the lunch would spark a relationship and that the two would work together at the University, leaving a legacy like no other.

In the spring of 1989, Richard arrived on campus in hopes of getting a faculty position. Carol, who had just joined the University in 1988, was tasked with talking to Richard.

“He was way too quiet,” Carol recalled about the interview, laughing. “It was hard to get him to talk.”

Richard did not dispute that first impression, and despite the slow start, something clicked as they began dating that following fall semester.

“We were engaged by spring break,” Carol said.

Just months later, in August 1990, they were married.

For nearly four decades, the two have been together and have watched the University and themselves change. As they walk along the bricks of campus every day, the Leemans saw students and colleagues alike grow and succeed at the University.

But like many other things in life, there have been several learning curves for the Leemans.

Building their lives and careers together

For the entirety of their time at Charlotte, the Leemans worked side by side in the Communications Studies department, balancing professional and research lives with family life in a way that few couples do.

The two shared the sentiment that working in the same field, department and University had its advantages.

“Academia is a particular kind of work environment,” Richard said. “We understood what each other was going through.”

That shared understanding proved especially valuable when raising their children. With the help of a supportive department chair at the time, Bill Hill, the couple coordinated an alternating teaching schedule, one teaching in the morning, the other in the afternoon, so one parent was always available at home or to pick up the kids.

Managing to coordinate times and drop-off locations prior to the smartphone era was something that made the two laugh when looking back.

Their coordination even had its own unofficial ritual: the “baby pass.” At the time, there used to be a parking lot where the Fretwell sits today. The two would meet there during the day to complete the “baby pass,” then go off to teach class.

But as time went on, the two watched their department and campus transform together.

Growing a department, shaping students

Carol’s time at Charlotte did not begin when she started teaching.

She earned her bachelor’s degree from UNC Charlotte in 1985. As an English major, she also shared an interest in communication studies and was the first student to sign up for a communications course before it was formally offered as a program at Charlotte in 1995.

Richard said that the interpersonal communication and small group communication

courses were classes she “fell in love” with and knew she wanted to teach in some capacity, which luckily, was made possible.

Carol recalls that there were roughly a dozen students at the time, and after 37 years have passed, Carol has not only taught in the department but also served as the undergraduate coordinator, helping generations of students beyond the classroom.

“I’ve loved helping students get through the program,” Carol said. “Helping them get to graduation — it’s been really rewarding.”

Richard’s path into the Communications Studies department came through speech and debate, where he developed an interest in the field of rhetoric and persuasion that would define much of his teaching and research.

But before he moved up to upper-level courses, he started out teaching what he considered “the bread and butter” class of public speaking.

“I am a big believer in getting people so that they are comfortable giving speeches. That certainly was what motivated me to get into the profession, thinking that this is something that every student should have — the ability to stand up and speak and explain their ideas,” Richard said.

Throughout his time at Charlotte, Richard has gone far beyond just upper-level courses.

He previously served as the department chair for Communications Studies, has authored or co-authored and edited eight books, served as president of UNC Charlotte’s Faculty Council from 2017-2019 and has won several research and writing awards.

The Leemans have seen quite the change in the department as recent undergraduate graduating classes have been upwards of 300

students, a large increase from the first 12 students.

Carol and Richard began teaching with overhead projectors and handwritten grade books. Over time, they transitioned through a document camera, PowerPoint and multiple course management systems.

“The job constantly changes,” Richard said. “You’re always updating your teaching, your research, your approach. This is a great job if you like this kind of work, and UNC Charlotte has been a great place to do it.”

As retirement approaches, it’s not the milestones that stand out the most to the Leemans, it’s the everyday rhythm of campus.

A bittersweet goodbye

Walking between buildings, seeing students gathered in conversation and passing colleagues in the hallway, is both what they first noted when they thought of something they would miss most.

“I usually prep things before I leave the house, because I go straight to class, but I love walking in with the changing foliage during the year, and always seeing all of the students and all the people. I have enjoyed the familiarity of the buildings over the years,” Carol said. “Just being in Denny, or I’ve had a lot of classes in Fretwell, and I just really enjoy that familiarity. I’ll miss seeing the people and the campus a lot.”

As the school year nears an end and the two prepare to start their retirement journey, the everyday moments and lasting connection with students are how they hope to be remembered.

“I hope people remember that I cared,” Richard said. “That I wanted students and colleagues to be the best they could be.”



Looking back at the 2025-2026 UNC Charlotte academic year

Kyle Boucher | Asst. News Editor

From new degrees to changes in financial aid, UNC Charlotte had several major developments in academic programs and policies throughout the 2025-2026 school year.

This year also brought a record-breaking snowstorm and political concerns regarding President Donald Trump's administration and Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) operations in Charlotte.

New academic programs and mergers

The College of Computing and Informatics announced a new Bachelor of Science (B.S.) and Master of Science (M.S.) in Artificial Intelligence.

These new degrees were developed through AI research conducted in the College of Computing and Informatics and the University-wide Charlotte AI Institute.

The University also created two new online bachelor's degrees in economics and computer science with a concentration in AI-Assisted Software Engineering.

The William States Lee College of Engineering launched the Albert School of Construction, which will offer a B.S. in construction engineering, construction management and civil engineering technology.

There was also a new concentration in aerospace engineering added to the B.S. in Mechanical Engineering. This concentration focuses on aerodynamics, flight mechanics and aircraft structures.

All these new degree programs will begin accepting students in fall 2026.

The College of Humanities & Earth and Social Sciences announced that the Department of Writing, Rhetoric & Digital Studies (WRDS) will merge with the Department of Communication Studies on July 1.

WRDS will become an academic program within Communication Studies, and the WRDS major and minor will continue to operate in fall 2026 using the same course curriculum.

Advocacy in Charlotte

Two No King's Protests took place in this academic year on Oct. 18, 2025 and March 28, 2026. Both protests saw hundreds gather in First Ward Park to march through the city, protesting policies passed by the Trump ad-

ministration, such as the 2025 tariffs and the 2026 Iran war.

In August, the Student Government Association announced that the Alumni Way Tunnel would be renamed the Freedom of Expression Tunnel, where students can write or draw anything they wish on its walls.

Customs and Border Protection in Charlotte

From Nov. 15-20, 2025, Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) held Operation Charlotte's Web with a mass deployment of immigration enforcement agents throughout Charlotte.

This operation was set to detain any undocumented immigrants found in the city. Over 425 people were arrested during this operation, and the Trump administration stated that these CBP arrest operations were targeting "the worst of the worst."

Of the first 130 arrested, 44 had criminal records.

Several businesses also closed during the CBP operation in Charlotte, and local schools saw sweeping absences. On campus, students held two demonstrations protesting the operation and some professors altered attendance policy to accommodate for students.

Record snowstorm

In January, Charlotte saw two of the biggest snowstorms since 2004, the second of which brought 8-11 inches of snow. After the storm ended, cold temperatures kept the snow from melting for several days.

During the storms, UNC Charlotte moved all classes online.

Students who stayed on campus during the storms spent their time snowboarding down Craver Road by the Popp-Martin Student Union. From cardboard boxes to dorm-room mattresses, students used whatever they could find to go sledding.

The Charlotte Doug-

las International Airport had over 1,000 flights delayed or canceled, and the airport was forced to ground all flights on Jan. 31, 2026, due to heavy ice on the runways.

The snow also caused massive back-ups on major roads such as I-85. Many cars were stuck in the storm with limited visibility.

New highs at Charlotte

The 2025-26 academic year has brought many new achievements for Charlotte, including another record-breaking enrollment count of 32,207 in fall 2025. This marked the second consecutive year that Char-

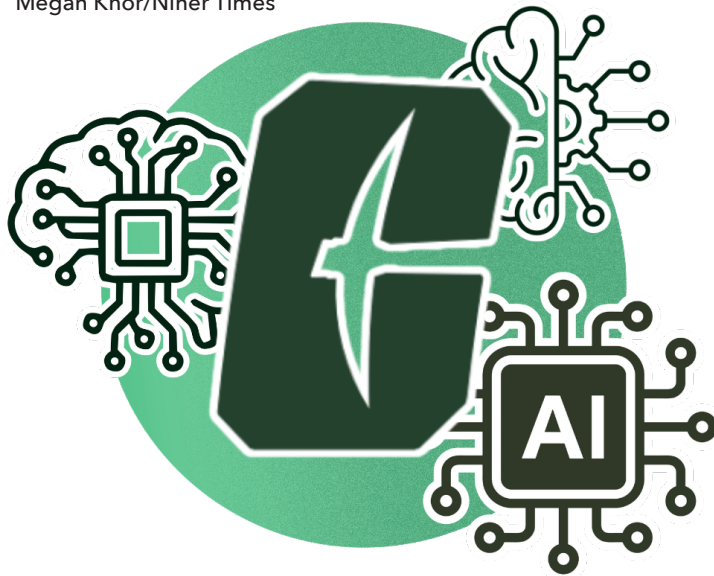
lotte has broken its previous enrollment record.

According to U.S. News' Best Colleges, UNC Charlotte placed at No. 74 among the top public universities in the country. This is an improvement from last year's ranking of No. 81.

Charlotte also placed No. 38 on U.S. News' Most Innovative Schools, a seven-place increase from last year.

UNC Charlotte's fundraising event, Niner Nation Gives, raised a record-breaking \$5.2 million in 2026. Throughout this 49-hour fundraiser, Charlotte Athletics doubled its previous Niner Nation Gives record of \$2.2 million in donations.





Research, education, phased adoption, define the past year of AI at UNC Charlotte

Wes Packham | Writing Managing Editor

Artificial intelligence has quickly reshaped industries across the nation, and UNC Charlotte has emerged as an early adopter in higher education. Focusing primarily on research, education and innovation, the University has stood out on both a state and national level for its contributions to the world of AI.

During the 2025 University Convocation, UNC Charlotte Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Jennifer Troyer identified AI as one of the three key initiatives for the Office of Academic Affairs for the 2025-26 academic year.

“The work ahead this year really includes an expanded focus on integrating AI into course and program options for our students and expanding the training opportunities, learning opportunities for faculty and continued work on the infrastructure and governance,” Troyer said.

The AI in Teaching and Learning Task Force created a finalized 132-page report to the provost in August 2025, serving as a guiding philosophy and recommendations for building an “AI-enabled learning ecosystem” at UNC Charlotte. The immediate next steps outlined in the report include establishing an AI roadmap and an implementation plan for teaching and learning.

Additional steps include establishing multiple new teams to address task force recommendations, including teams focused on ethics, policy and governance; AI integration in teaching and curriculum; and technology, training and support.

Research and investment

Since its launch in February 2025, the Charlotte AI Institute has become a central

driver for AI innovation at UNC Charlotte. The institute coordinates research efforts and expands partnerships across a variety of disciplines.

As a key player in research, the institute has supported interdisciplinary work in fields such as health, environmental science and data analytics.

One notable initiative includes a project led by Stephanie Schuckers, co-director of the AI Institute, where her expertise in biometrics has helped to develop algorithms to measure biometric “liveness.” This technology distinguishes a living person from digital deepfakes and can be used to combat AI-powered identity theft.

Another project includes work led by bioinformatics master’s students Andra Buchan and Stephanie Wiedman under the mentorship of Assistant Professor Richard Allen White. The team used artificial intelligence analysis and advanced computational techniques to assist in the mapping of Phage G, the largest cultivated bacteria-killing virus, pushing forward the knowledge base for bacterial-based disease fighting.

The AI Institute has partnered with AI//Forward to host the ThinkAI Research & Innovation Symposium in May, an AI conference that will provide a space for innovators, researchers, students and industry leaders to collaborate and share ideas at the forefront of technological innovation. The symposium will include Meta, Nvidia, Honeywell and Siemens as presenting organizations.

The National Defense and Intelligence Innovation Institute was announced in January 2026, serving a similar purpose to the AI Institute, but with a specific focus on military, national security and defense-related ventures.

More than \$41 million from the North Carolina General Assembly has been invested in STEM-related initiatives at UNC Charlotte, with a significant portion directed to support the College of Computing and Informatics and the School of Data Science.

In September 2025, UNC Charlotte announced that Honeywell would be investing \$10 million to create the Honeywell Innovation Hub on campus. The investment will also bolster research funding and create new scholarships for students in STEM fields.

Expansion in education

UNC Charlotte announced bachelor’s and master’s degree programs in artificial intelligence in September 2025, marking it as one of the first universities to do so; about 20 universities in the country currently offer undergraduate degrees in AI, and approximately 35 have a master’s option. Enrollment for each of these programs begins in fall 2026. UNC Charlotte is the first UNC System university to offer a standalone master’s degree in AI.

The AI Accelerator in Teaching and Learning was announced in February 2026. An academic leadership body, it is focused on “leading the University’s growth in AI in teaching and learning.” Their work primarily hinges on creating actionable strategies based on the recommendations of the AI Task Force.

Its work has involved the creation of workshops and training for faculty members to advise on how to use and implement AI and technology into their courses, and fostering a better understanding of how AI has changed academic integrity policies for students.

In a report published by Validated Insights Inc., titled “AI as a Competitive Edge,” UNC

Charlotte is identified as a strong regional institution that has plans to incorporate AI into the curriculum for all undergraduates. According to Validated Insights Inc., UNC Charlotte is one of only about 1% of universities in the United States that have created such plans.

Navigating impact

Throughout campus-wide adoption and implementation of AI, specialized groups have been created to advise on the ethical and responsible adoption of AI.

The AI Research Council has been working since its founding in 2024 to guide how artificial intelligence is to be used in research settings. With the combined perspectives of faculty from a variety of disciplines, they work to address concerns regarding research integrity as AI becomes more widely used. Key suggestions include the use of AI solely as a tool for analyzing large datasets, identifying sources and avoiding AI for generating original research.

These efforts reflect how the University strives to implement AI fairly and ethically, reaching a balance between caution and hasty adoption.

In a Niner Times survey of 85 students conducted in February 2026, the majority of students expressed an unfavorable opinion of AI, but still believed it can be used positively and be a helpful tool.

As outlined in the AI Task Force report, roadmaps and plans for changes will continue throughout 2026, with several initiatives planned for the years ahead as UNC Charlotte continues its implementation of AI.

Column: A positive year of change for Charlotte Athletics

Kelli Blackburn | Staff Writer

The 2025-2026 year brought a mix of challenges and excitement for Charlotte Athletics. While some new faces arrived in the Queen City, others said goodbye, marking a period of both change and growth across the department. Through every shift, there was one constant: Charlotte's mission to redefine itself and shape a future rooted in resilience and long-term vision.

Changes in leadership

The most visible changes came at the top, when former Director of Athletics Mike Hill was dismissed from Charlotte on Oct. 16, 2025. His exit marked the end of an era of leadership that helped guide the program through its transition into the American Conference and an evolving collegiate athletics landscape.

During his transition out, a change in administrative structure placed greater emphasis on behind-the-scenes development, ultimately leading to the hiring of Kevin White as the program's next leader.

White, who had been serving at Clemson University since 2022, was named the 49ers' director of athletics on Feb. 23, 2026, six months after Hill's firing. As Clemson's deputy director of athletics since 2022, White played a key role in expanding Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) initiatives while also strengthening community engagement efforts.

His arrival signals a promising step for-

ward for Charlotte, bringing experience from the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) to a program still establishing itself within the American. With a background in strategic growth and modern college athletics operations, White's leadership offers a glimpse into the next phase of the 49ers' development.

While leadership changes shifted the direction of Charlotte Athletics, the football program provided a sense of continuity. Head coach Tim Albin entered his first season with the 49ers, finishing 1-11 overall, but the spring brought a clearer vision for year two as a foundation for growth and adjustment.

After a transitional first season, Albin and his staff focused on building an identity centered on player development, discipline and consistency. Key additions to the coaching staff, including Tariq Drake and Victor Cabral, reflected a commitment to strengthening both culture and scheme as the 49ers continue to evolve.

That culture extends beyond the sidelines and into the stands, as the expansion of Jerry Richardson Stadium officially began, aiming to

elevate the game-day experience for the University. The development not only enhances facilities but also signals growing confidence in the program's long-term trajectory.

As football shifted into its next phase, men's basketball continued its own process of refinement under head coach Aaron Fearn. The program ended its 2025-2026 season with a 17-17 record and a semifinal exit in the American Conference Championship Tournament.

It ultimately led to the firing of Fearn, with the 49ers hiring University of Cincinnati's Wes Miller on March 23.

As the roster and team begin a new cycle, Miller's focus on developing players within his system has brought plenty of new faces. Charlotte's goal has remained steady: turning potential into reliable production on a game-by-game basis.

Successful seasons

Beyond the marquee programs, Charlotte's other sports, such as women's tennis and golf, reinforced the department's depth.

Women's tennis was one of the program's most consistent

performers, highlighted by a 17-match winning streak that set a program record. No. 30 Charlotte was led by sophomore Prisca Abbas, who sealed a win on April 17 as part of an undefeated home record. The program's reliability has been a quieter but important pillar of Charlotte Athletics' success.

Women's golf entered a new chapter under head coach C.C. McMahan, bringing renewed energy and a focus on foundational strength, led by sophomore Pinky Chaisilprungruang.

Chaisilprungruang won her fourth individual title at the French Broad Collegiate Invitational on Oct. 28, 2025, to conclude the fall season, and later claimed the American Conference Women's Golf Individual Championship on April 22. Despite the coaching change, the 49ers and Chaisilprungruang continue to move in a positive direction with stability.

Across these programs, a common theme remained: change was not disruption, but direction. From administrative turnover to coaching changes and facility growth, Charlotte continued to push the evolution of its program and University.

As the 2025-2026 year comes to an end, Charlotte Athletics is defined by transition and guided by intention. The 49ers are not just reacting to change but shaping it, and in doing so, Charlotte is laying the groundwork for a future of sustained growth.



Gia Soto, Caiden Herstein,
Emmanuel Perkins &
Megan Bentley/Niner Times

Column: Hornets' past year was a resounding success

Evan Campos | Sports Editor

Despite the Charlotte Hornets' longest active postseason drought in the NBA reaching a decade, this season — and ultimately this past year — was undeniably a success for the organization.

While it may be the conventional wisdom now that Charlotte is going in the right direction as a franchise, early in the 2025-26 season, it felt far from that. I think back to late November, sitting in the media row watching Charlotte get overwhelmed by the New York Knicks in its first home NBA Cup matchup.

At that time, the Hornets' two best players and pillars, star guard LaMelo Ball and forward Brandon Miller, were already in and out of the lineup with injuries barely a month into the season. Even with both on the floor that night, they were clearly rusty, and the team lacked the cohesion needed to operate at a high level on either side of the court.

The Spectrum Center felt like Madison Square Garden, with Knicks fans taking over and chanting "MVP" for New York superstar guard Jalen Brunson every time he stepped to the free-throw line.

Walking out of the building that night, I was completely perplexed, as it felt like the same story could play out for a fourth straight season for Charlotte, with the year slip-

ping away before December ended and fans already looking at Tankathon and trade simulators.

But over the next month or so after that Knicks game, Charlotte found something that drastically shifted the trajectory of the franchise.

Charlotte's crescendo

With better injury luck and head coach Charles Lee finding a scheme that worked, along with key rotation adjustments, Charlotte found its footing.

Simply having the team's best players on the floor consistently made a difference. Rookie guard Kon Knueppel being so far ahead of schedule gave Charlotte a huge boost during this stretch, and it all led to Charlotte playing really solid basketball to close out 2025.

During that run, it became clear that Lee and his staff had started to figure out the offensive end. At the time, that was how Charlotte was going to win games, and they leaned into it.

Charlotte fully bought into an egalitarian style of offense, where creating the advantage and maintaining it with quick reads and passes consistently led to open three-point shots or layups. Lee also dialed up a consistent set of actions that teams struggled to guard, even when they knew what was coming.

The double drag actions with Ball or Miller initiating, the guard-guard spread pick and roll, or "wipe" action as it is universally known, along with zoom actions featuring Knueppel getting downhill, became staples of this newly unlocked offense.

That stretch of December in Charlotte's season laid the foundation for how effective its offense could be and how it could drive winning.

Once the calendar flipped to 2026, Charlotte entered a complete flow state.

Lee began to maximize Charlotte's personnel on the defensive end. Getting guard Josh Green and forward Grant Williams back from injury added more

two-way presence to the rotation.

From there, the focus became keeping ball handlers in front, limiting fouls and keeping opponents off the free-throw line while taking away corner threes. The game plan was centered on being fundamentally sound and consistently being in the right positions defensively.

Charlotte operated within this conservative gap scheme, not giving away cheap points, cleaning up its transition defense and controlling the glass on both ends, winning the possession battle and, in turn, the math battle night to night.

That approach was driven by center Mousa Diabaté, whose speed, range, fluidity and switchability unlocked the versatility of the defense.

From Jan. 10 through the end of the regular season, it was pure magic in Charlotte. The Hornets went 31-13, with the starting five producing at a historically high level and posting a plus-27.4 point differential.

Charlotte was also the best team in the league by net rating over that span, finishing with a top-five offense and a quietly top-12 defense on the season, turning that surge into a 44-win season and the No. 9 seed in the Eastern Conference before it ultimately came to an end in Orlando, Florida.

Eyes on the offseason

Which brings it to the present, where one of the most important outcomes of this season for President of Basketball Operations Jeff Peterson was getting a clear evaluation of a fully healthy Charlotte team over an extended stretch.

The question now is what the next move is to break the playoff drought.

If the play-in loss to the Orlando Magic had one benefit, it made it very clear what the Hornets lack, even while winning. Charlotte simply does not have the requisite physicality to deal with top teams in the Eastern Conference like Orlando or the Detroit Pistons.

Lee called it a "global issue" across the roster during his exit-day media availability, and that assessment is accurate.

While Charlotte has an incredibly talented and skilled group, the rotation from top

to bottom is slight and lacks true enforcing players on either end of the court. With Ball, Miller and Knueppel as the offensive core, Charlotte will naturally be at a physicality disadvantage in backcourt matchups moving forward.

Those three are finesse players, and that is simply not their game. While the organization hopes Miller can add weight this offseason, there is a limit to how much that changes, given his frame.

The added size, logically, has to come in Charlotte's frontcourt. Even with forward Miles Bridges and Diabaté having strong seasons, both are undersized for their positions, and that need has to be addressed externally.

If Peterson decides to push his chips in and enter the trade market for a major move, there are several names to monitor. Miami Heat center Bam Adebayo, Toronto Raptors forward Scottie Barnes, Cleveland Cavaliers forward Evan Mobley and Utah Jazz forward Lauri Markkanen all represent the type of star wings to bigs Charlotte could covet.

Oklahoma City Thunder center Isaiah Hartenstein is another name to watch, given how well he aligns with how Charlotte plays. Whether those moves are realistic or if this is the offseason to make that kind of swing, that is the tier of player the Hornets should be targeting if they want to become a serious threat in the Eastern Conference next season.

There are also areas around the margins that cannot be ignored heading into the offseason.

Charlotte would benefit from adding a third point guard on the roster, assuming they bring back guard Coby White. When White was out of the lineup late in the season, the second unit struggled to consistently create good looks without a true table-setter, so adding a reliable, low-cost, playmaking guard would provide needed insurance.

The Hornets also need a quality point-of-attack defender, someone capable of taking on the assignment of guarding elite opposing guards without relying so heavily on rookie guard Sion James as the primary defensive stopper most nights.

Even with those needs, Charlotte is in an excellent position. The Hornets hold picks



Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

No. 14 and No. 18 in the upcoming draft, have financial flexibility with Miller and Knueppel combining to make around \$25 million next season and still possess a valuable collection of draft capital in future years.

A year ago, this was a 19-win team searching for answers. Now, the conversation has shifted toward how Charlotte can elevate itself into a legitimate playoff team and which move gets them there.

Improved top brass in Buzz City

Another clear takeaway from this past year is how much better run Charlotte is as an organization since Michael Jordan sold his majority stake in the franchise.

Since co-chairmen and principal owners Gabe Plotkin and Rick Schnall took over, the level of investment and resources has noticeably increased across key areas. From a new practice facility to an improved Player Health and Performance staff, a greater willingness to invest in assistant coaches and a deeper commitment to analytics, the changes have been significant and positive.

That added backing also extends to the Greensboro Swarm, the NBA G League affiliate for Charlotte. The Swarm's win in their first NBA G League Championship on April 10 reflects how aligned development has become across every level of the organization.

Peterson has been especially effective in asset management during his tenure, from the draft to maximizing returns in trades, and there has been little to criticize about the work either has done.

Lee often remarks in his availabilities that "everything matters," and that philosophy has carried throughout the team-building process for Charlotte. The Hornets have prioritized bringing in players who are winners and who have selfless personalities, as seen in a rookie class that included James and Knueppel, along with center Ryan Kalkbrenner and guard Liam Mc-Neeley.

That group helped lead Charlotte to its first NBA Summer League Championship on July 20 last year, making the Hornets the first franchise to win both a Summer League and G League title in the same year.

Charlotte truly is one of the ascending franchises in the NBA right now, with clear star players who complement each other and a coaching staff implementing schemes and principles on both ends that translate to winning. At this point, it becomes about adding the right ancillary pieces.

Sometimes, all it takes for a franchise turnaround is having the right people in place making the right decisions, and Charlotte clearly has that.

Kelli Blackburn & Kaitlyn Fankboner/Niner Times



Halton Arena comes alive for Greek Life's 2026 Airband dance competition

Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

