

NINERTIMES

Student-driven news since 1947

Nov. 13, 2024



HOME COMING

2024



EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Davis Cuffe
editor@ninertimes.com

MANAGERIAL BOARD

Brendan Mullen WRITING MANAGING
Jordyn Phillips MULTIMEDIA MANAGING
Clare Grealey COPY
Bryson Foster OUTREACH

EDITORIAL

Sofia DiStefano NEWS
Emsley Jackson OPINION
Guadalupe Aguilar Sosa ARTS & CULTURE
Kelli Blackburn SPORTS
Dan Rice PHOTO
Everett Pohl VIDEO
Sunny Hadavi LAYOUT

ASSISTANT EDITORS

Ruhshona Soledjonova ASST. OPINION
Clare Pollick ASST. PHOTO
Ava Weaver ASST. LAYOUT

CONTRIBUTING STAFF

Allena Harris, Wes Packham,
Praghna Hemadri, Ava Harris,
Kate Russell, Bianca Bagley,
Megan Khor, Evan Campos

LAYOUTS

Cover photo: Collage of old Niner Times pages |
Sunny Hadavi/Niner Times
Cover layout by Sunny Hadavi
Interior layouts by Sunny Hadavi & Megan Khor

MARKETING DIRECTOR

Ava Gilmore
mktdirector@charlotte.edu

NINER MEDIA STAFF

Kelly Merges MEDIA ADVISER
Justin Paprocki MEDIA ADVISER
Laurie Cuddy BUSINESS MANAGER
Bianca Fruscello MARKETING COORDINATOR

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.

CONTACT INFORMATION

9201 University City Blvd. SU 042
Charlotte, NC 28223
Phone: 704-687-7148
Email: inquiry@ninertimes.com



Courtesy of UNC Charlotte

Events to watch for on and off campus

Niner Nation Week Scavenger Hunt
Nov. 11-15
Completed on the Scavify app

NPHC Homecoming Stroll Off
Nov. 15, 7-10 p.m.
Popp-Martin Student Union,
room 340

Game Day Spirit Tents
Nov. 16, before 3:30 football
kick-off
49th Acre

Barnes & Noble Homecoming Pre-Pre Game
Nov. 15, 3-5 p.m.
Popp-Martin Student Union

Homecoming Carnival
Nov. 15, 5-8 p.m.
CHHS/CoEd Plaza

Homecoming football game vs South Florida
Nov. 16, 3:30 p.m.

NOTES FROM THE NEWSROOM:

Don't stay home for Homecoming

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief



While it may be the easier option to stay home for Homecoming, I encourage you to get out and get involved.

As a transfer student, I can confidently say Charlotte's week of Homecoming celebration is top-notch compared to other colleges. With a week ahead of you full of fun and festivity, take advantage of the warm November temperatures gifted by our melting planet and get out and celebrate your school.

If fun is not big enough of a draw, Homecoming offers an opportunity to network or connect with the school's alumni throughout the week. Whether you seek an internship or intel, these graduates can be a valuable connection.

Students want to complain about the lack of culture or tradition at UNC Charlotte, but participation is how you build that culture. Without engagement, Charlotte cannot move forward as the culturally rich and

energetic school we all want it to be.

It has been said time and time again, but college is just four years; make the most of it. There is no better opportunity to maximize your time at college than during Homecoming. Do not let this be a regret after you graduate; get out, get excited and go for gold during this year's Homecoming.

From the Charlotte police logs (Oct. 30 - Nov. 8)

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

The following are some incidents in the UNC Charlotte campus police logs from Oct. 30 to Nov. 8, 2024.

Oct. 30 - An officer observed a vehicle that matched the description of a registered stolen vehicle. An attempt to initiate a traffic stop on the vehicle was unsuccessful as the vehicle fled at a high rate of speed. Four subjects were detained by CMPD and determined to be the occupants (unaffiliated) of the vehicle.

Oct. 31 - Officers were flagged down for an intoxicated subject lying in the wood line between EPIC and Grigg Hall. The student was then transported to Atrium University for further care.

Nov. 3 - Dispatch received a call from a non-resident student reporting his bicycle as stolen. An Officer met with the student at Atkins, and he stated he secured his red bicycle to the bike rack near the front door, and it was not there when he returned.



The noise of Niner Pride

UNC CHARLOTTE
MARCHING BAND
MARKS 10 YEARS OF
SUCCESS IN 2024

Allena Harris | Staff Writer

Niner Times File

UNC Charlotte celebrates the 10th year of the Pride of Niner Nation Marching Band (PNNMB) program, which continues to expand and perform in areas other than football and basketball celebrating Niner Pride.

The PNNMB was formed in 2013 after the first Charlotte football game, when two alumni, Vickie and Gene Johnson, decided it would not be a college football program without the accompaniment of a marching band.

Twenty-five students were a part of the inaugural band program, and since then, the program has increased to 187 students.

Athletic Band Director Dr. Brian Taylor joined the program a little over a year ago after moving to Charlotte after completing his Doctor of Musical Arts degree at Michigan State University.

"Well, I knew the director of bands quite well before I applied here," said Taylor. "He was really excited about the opportunities that we have in terms of being at a growing school that is also increasing the academic standard and recruiting opportunities of being in a major metro area."

The PNNMB has grown by over 20 members each semester. During Taylor's time with the program, the bands have expanded their performances to gigs outside of the athletic programs of football and basketball.

One endeavor of the band program has been performing at various events and celebrations around campus, most recently at a conference held by the Division of Student Affairs.

"We are trying to make sure that we can be part of any different type of celebration, to bring school spirit to those and to make it feel like, yeah, we're at a college, we're at a university," said Taylor. "It's a major university that people are excited to be at."

According to Taylor, the PNNMB has two purposes: to entertain and promote Niner Pride among listeners. Music like the UNC Charlotte fight song and the alma mater focus more on fostering the school spirit, while performances entertain students and attendees of these events.

"Like, 'What is it about Charlotte that we remember?' Oh, well, we know the fight song; we know the alma mater. We know these cheers that have words to them and all of that kind of stuff," said Taylor. "On the other side of that is more of like a show band thing, where we're performing to entertain."

One of the main processes of the PNNMB is recruitment, which starts at both the high school and college level. Band members attend high school concerts and speak with incoming first-year students about the program, hoping to en-

courage them to attend Charlotte and join the PNNMB.

"We have to do our job recruiting so that people are not overwhelmed by the amount of commitments that they have," said Taylor regarding the expansion of the program.

Within the band, there are sections of eight members, with one section leader who reports to Taylor with any suggestions or conflicts. Taylor explained how this allows students to have a direct influence on the future of the band.

"I can't interact with every member on a daily basis, and so it is very student-led," said Taylor. "We want them to have a voice in what they're doing. So we definitely consult with the students about the direction of the program, but even more so, we give them the power to make decisions about that direction on a day-to-day basis."

Taylor described the desired atmosphere of the program as welcoming, similar to the dynamic of a family. He wants students to feel comfortable sharing thoughts, opinions and ideas they feel are important and hopes to foster a feeling of belonging among band members.

"Even if they have different views on 'what we should do,' we all have a similar 'why we should do that,' and it's to create a strong family atmosphere where people feel cared about," said Tay-

lor. "They feel like they can express themselves, and then also that that culture instills a standard for performance for all of those people."

According to Taylor, the future of the band program is to continue expanding its performances to athletic and non-athletic celebrations across campus communities and organizations. To achieve this level, the band aims to have at least 300 members to supply musicians at events outside of the current scope.

Taylor plans to remain with the PNNMB as it continues to grow in size and diversity and increase the roles and responsibilities of students as more join.

Creating an environment that promotes individual creativity can be challenging with so many students. However, Taylor describes the band's culture as uplifting and caring.

"That's the coolest thing to me, that we can create a space where people really do care about helping each other and that they're taking an active role in that," said Taylor. "Those rewarding moments are not because I said, 'Hey, this person is going through a hard time. Can you go check on them?' It's organic, watching the other students circle around them and build them up."



The evolution of Niner Nation Week and the Niner 9

Wes Packham | Staff Writer

Niner Nation Week and the Niner 9 have evolved over the years to become annual events for students and alumni alike to celebrate Niner Pride.

UNC Charlotte's long-standing tradition of Niner Nation Week is a week full of events to foster Niner Pride among the student body. The week also includes naming the Niner 9 and the Golden Niner.

"Niner Nation Week expands Homecoming into a week-long celebration, spotlighting not just UNC Charlotte but the entire Charlotte community. It's about creating a greater Charlotte by involving students, staff, faculty, alumni and community members," said Associate Director of Student Involvement Tavaris Baxter.

The idea for Niner Nation Week came from current Chancellor Sharon L. Gaber. She took inspiration from the previous institution she presided over, the University of Toledo, and implemented the tradition at UNC Charlotte to expand its yearly Homecoming tradition.

Niner Nation Week has changed and evolved over the years into what it is today. Homecoming week has been part of the University ever since it became part of the UNC System in the 1960s.

"We've always had Homecoming week, which

has been a little bit more focused on school spirit and the campus. The Niner Nation part is a little bit more focused on alumni, the community [and] the city of Charlotte, so we've blended those two together," said Adam Burden, director of Student Involvement. "So we've certainly added more events than we've ever had and kind of really focused celebrating UNC Charlotte both internally and externally now during the same week."

An important part of Niner Nation Week is the Niner 9 and the naming of the Golden Niner at the Homecoming football game. The Niner 9 is how the University highlights exemplary students at UNC Charlotte.

Faculty and staff across campus review Niner 9 applicants, scoring them on key qualities. Each year, they interview approximately 25 key applicants and decide on the nine to represent the University.

However, the Niner 9 has not always been part of Niner Nation Week. One major reason for the change to Niner 9 as opposed to the traditional Homecoming King and Queen is the ability to use more inclusive language.

"Back in 2001, a student coordinator saw that the 'King and Queen' titles were a bit outdated.

She wanted to align our program with the values of inclusivity that UNC Charlotte stands for. So, we shifted to the Niner 9 format, choosing the best nine people regardless of gender," said Burden.

The Board for Student Involvement still wanted to recognize one exemplary student out of the Niner 9 instead of the traditional Homecoming King and Queen.

"We wanted a single recognition within the group to honor a standout, similar to a king or queen. After considering names, 'Golden Niner' resonated the most. It's an honor selected by the student vote, marking one individual's impact," said Burden.

Last year's Golden Niner Kenan Moore was the third student to be named in the new annual tradition. Currently a fourth-year student, Moore was able to involve himself heavily on campus and founded the Black Organization Alliance Board (BOAB). Moore joined the Black Student Union on campus during his second year.

"It's one of our longest-standing traditions, even though it's under a new name, we've had Homecoming and Homecoming court almost as long as we've had a UNC Charlotte," said Burden. "It's good to see it continue and evolve."

Despite changes over the years, Niner Nation Week still stands as an event for students to express and celebrate Niner Pride, now with a larger scope encompassing the city of Charlotte as a whole.

"This tradition has adapted over the years, but its core—celebrating our students and their contributions—remains strong. It's about honoring our past while moving forward," said Burden.

"We have plans to make Niner Nation Week a larger, more impactful student experience in the coming years. We're aiming to build on its success and enhance student involvement," said Baxter.

Niner Nation Week spans from Nov. 10 to Nov. 17 and features events throughout the week, including a Campus Scavenger Hunt, Paint the Campus Green and an Alumni Tailgate.

This year's Homecoming football game will be against South Florida at Jerry Richardson Stadium on Nov. 16.

UNC Charlotte's past Homecoming Kings, Queens and Golden Niners

As the years have passed, the Niner Nation community has grown, and Niner Nation Week has become widely celebrated. Included in the Niner Nation Week festivities are the Homecoming football

game, the presentation of the Niner 9 and the announcement of the Golden Niner. Previously known as the Homecoming Court, the group was rebranded into the Niner 9 in 2021.



Chris Crews/Niner Times File & courtesy of UNC Charlotte



Ellie McCutchen

Ellie McCutchen is a fourth-year political science, economics and sociology student. McCutchen found inspiration in the past Niner 9 groups and aims to follow in their footsteps.

As a member of the Niner Guides, Chinese Undergraduate Student Association, Charlotte Mock Trial, the Costume Shop and Levine Scholars Program, she keeps a busy schedule. However, it is through these groups that she has felt the most inspiration,

“My time at Charlotte has been largely shaped by the people and organizations who have invested in me. Over the past three years, their presence in my corner has shaped my motivations and goals as a UNC Charlotte student and pushed me to become someone worthy of the Niner 9,” said McCutchen.

McCutchen explained how she embraces Niner Pride through the diversity and sense of community on campus.

“I embrace Niner Pride by being excited to be a part of all aspects of Niner Nation. Niner Pride is different for everyone, but for me, it ultimately means being proud of the diversity and passionate community we are all fortunate to be embraced by.”



Allie Whitestone

Allie Whitestone is a fourth-year elementary education student who applied to Niner 9 to show her love for UNC Charlotte.

“This University has been my second home for my entire life. I want to continue to help others see how much potential and heart this place holds. To me, Niner Nation is all about family, resilience and creating a space where we can all thrive,” said Whitestone.

Whitestone is heavily involved on campus and aims to bring positivity to each area. Whitestone is a tour guide, an honors student and a social media ambassador for Charlotte admissions.

“For me, Niner Pride isn’t just about wearing the colors—it’s about showing up every day, excited to be part of something that’s bigger than yourself,” said Whitestone. “I want people to feel that same buzz of excitement and that undeniable sense of belonging every time they step on campus, just like I do.”

Whitestone encourages her peers to take chances and trust the process during their time at the University.

“Whether you’re a freshman just finding your way or a senior wrapping up your time here, remember that we’re all part of something special. Charlotte isn’t just a university—it’s a family that supports you, challenges you and helps you grow in ways you never expected,” said Whitestone. “Don’t be afraid to step outside of your comfort zone and take chances because that’s where the real growth happens. And always remember, no matter where life takes you after graduation, you’ll always have a place here, and Niner Nation will always be behind you.”



Amya Richardson

Amya Richardson is a fourth-year political science, international studies and Spanish student.

Richardson is a Resident Advisor (RA), a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Native American Student Association, Student Government Association and in the Executive Leadership Cohort.

“I wanted to represent and give back to a place that has shaped me and helped me grow as a leader,” said Richardson. “It’s an honor to be recognized as part of the Niner 9. This recognition validates my hard work and dedication, not just academically but also through my roles in student government, housing and cultural organizations. Being part of the Niner 9 is also a reminder of the support I’ve received from my peers and mentors, and I’m incredibly grateful for this opportunity to celebrate with them.”

Richardson highlighted how her time at Charlotte has been a learning and growing experience, and she has made strong connections with the Charlotte community.

“These experiences have helped me grow not only in my abilities but also in my understanding of what it means to care for and support others. Each step along the way has shaped me into the person I am today, ready to proudly represent the Niner spirit,” said Richardson.

Get to know the 2024 Niner 9

Sofia DiStefano, Wes Packham & Praghna Hemadri | News Editor & Staff Writers

The 2024 Niner 9 are Allie Whitestone, Amya Richardson, Ellie McCutchen, Josie Sheeler, Maddox Morrow, Sania Peterson, S.L. Ivey, Sylvia Srinivass and Simone Tezzo.

Voting for the Golden Niner ends on Nov. 13, and the winner will be announced at the Nov. 16 Homecoming Charlotte football game.



Sania Peterson

Sania Peterson is a fourth-year psychology and health systems management student. She applied to be a part of the Niner 9 because of her involvement with the National Society of Black Women in Medicine (BWM) and as a student ambassador, connecting students to UNC Charlotte’s alumni network.

“I realized that sharing my own story could inspire others and highlight the amazing opportunities UNC Charlotte has offered. Being a part of Niner 9 would allow me to represent not only my journey but also the legacy I hope to leave behind,” said Peterson.

To Peterson, Niner Pride is about embodying the values of resilience,

inclusivity and unity. She embraces it by actively engaging with students, connecting herself and others and making an effort to make a positive impact on everything she does.

“Embrace every opportunity you have to build connections, support one another and give back to this community that has given so much to us. I believe that if we all work together, supporting each other’s journeys and sharing in each other’s successes, we can make an unstoppable impact. Niner Nation is a family, and I’m honored to be a part of it—let’s keep pushing forward and make every moment count,” said Peterson.



Josie Sheeler

Josie Sheeler is a fourth-year Biology student who applied to Niner 9 to honor the pride and connection that have defined her time at UNC Charlotte. She was inspired to apply because she knew several students who had been a part of Niner 9.

"Seeing how deserving [the former Niner 9] were and the joy they felt in representing their student experience was inspiring. They showcased not only their own stories but also the enthusiasm and diversity of our own campus community," said Sheeler.

With involvement in Niner Guides, Delta

Zeta and the Panhellenic Association, Sheeler said her time at Charlotte have been filled with opportunities that challenged her, connected her with others and helped her grow as a leader.

As a Niner Guide, Sheeler feels proud to share her love for the uniqueness of the Charlotte community with prospective students; this has only heightened with involvement in Niner 9.

"I feel incredibly proud to represent UNC Charlotte as a part of the Niner 9. My experience here has been more than I could have ever imagined when I was applying to colleges," said Sheeler.

Sheeler embraces Niner Pride by sharing the story of our campus.

"The most impactful parts of my journey were the ones I didn't expect, from friendships formed in random places to moments that challenged me and helped me grow," said Sheeler. "This community has so much to offer, so soak it in, lean on each other and be proud of the family you've found here. Let's continue to make memories and build a legacy for those who come after us."



Maddox Marrow

Maddox Marrow is a fourth-year communications, interdisciplinary studies and sociology student. Marrow never thought he would be part of the Niner 9 but holds his head high with pride after all his work to become a part of the 2024 Niner 9.

"I remember being a freshman and seeing the Niner 9 for that year and thinking that was something I'd never be able to achieve. Their level of involvement and commitment to the Charlotte community was immense, and it seemed like it'd be impossible for me to ever reach heights like that," said Marrow. "However, with every passing year, I became more and more involved with the Charlotte community. By the time I reached my senior year, it felt possible, and I chose to take the leap and go for it. I wanted to represent all of the organizations that have supported me and make those who have helped me get to this point proud."

Marrow said he felt justified during his time at Charlotte and could not be happier that his college experience and dreams had come true.

"Being involved with something at this level is something I thought I could have only ever dreamed of before coming here, so actually being selected was so exciting and justifying of the work I've put into the Charlotte community," said Marrow. "I'm so happy to be a part of it and so glad I get to engage with the community along with the rest of the beautiful people in the Niner 9 with me."

As a member of the UNC Charlotte chapter of Lambda Phi Epsilon and an RA, Marrow said that he has connected with the campus community in many ways.



S. L. Ivey

S. L. Ivey is a graduate student double majoring in history and public administration. He applied primarily due to his involvement as a teaching assistant and his connections with the students.

Ivey is a first-generation college student. Despite the hardships, Ivey persevered and graduated with his bachelor's from UNC Charlotte in 2023 and is now pursuing his graduate degree at 46 years old.

"For me, this role is about lighting the way for others, proving that determination and resilience have no expiration date," said Ivey. "I'm here to stand as a testament to the

strength it takes to overcome, to keep going and to start again—because it's never too late to be part of something bigger."

Ivey attributes his Niner Pride to being a teaching assistant for Dr. Benny Andrés' American History class.

"This semester has been transformative—I've memorized each of their full names because together, we've built our own tight-knit community. My office hours are alive with conversation and laughter, and I've even managed to inspire a bit of healthy competition in our Friday history debates," said Ivey.



Sylvia Srinivass

Sylvia Srinivass is a fourth-year student majoring in Italian. Being surrounded by many friends and role models at UNC Charlotte inspired her to apply to join the Niner 9. She is involved in many orgs around campus, like the Levine Scholars program, Niner Times and Niner Guides.

"I feel incredibly excited and honored to represent the student body as a member of this year's Niner 9. I hope to inspire younger students to get involved on campus, form meaningful connections and make the most

of their time," said Srinivass.

She strives to serve as an example to her fellow Niners by being a driven scholar, a civically engaged citizen and a fair leader.

"Being a Niner means being grateful for what you have while striving for excellence for yourself and your community. It means reflecting the University's ever-evolving nature by embracing the notion that your time here will be transformative," said Srinivass.



Simone Tezzo

Simone Tezzo is a fourth-year computer science student at UNC Charlotte. She was inspired to apply for the Niner 9 to express her gratitude towards Charlotte.

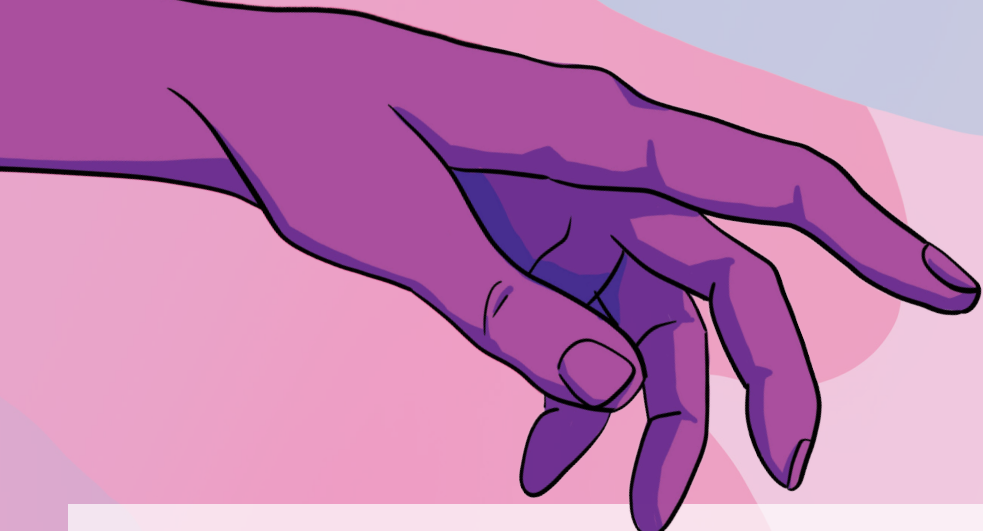
"To me, the Niner 9 represents the best of UNC Charlotte, and it's an absolute honor to be recognized among those who embody the spirit and values of our university. It's humbling to be part of this group, and it makes me even more motivated to continue making a positive impact," said Tezzo.

Tezzo is a transfer student, and although

she has only been here since 2022, her time here is where she has grown most.

"The past two years have been a truly transformative experience. I've grown immensely, stepping into leadership roles I never thought possible and built connections that feel like family."

As a peer advisor for the College of Computing and Informatics, Tezzo has aided prospective students and families and shared her positive experiences at the University with them.



Opinion: Bring back yearning

Ava Harris | Staff Writer

“Fellas, is it gay to love your woman?” This has become the subject of countless tweets, TikTok and Instagram posts solely because it has become the norm to poke fun at those who dare show care toward their romantic partner.

This year, ‘nonchalant’ is a new word for many as the internet decided we needed another way to say we do not care. When did it become cool or so direly important to seem not to care? Most of us have not thrown our cares out the window; we are too afraid to allow others to see them.

Is romance dead?

Purposefully waiting hours to open a message, view a story, like someone’s post or simply for the other person to text first has all become customary, if not mandatory, in the modern dating scene. No one wants to seem too eager to someone they want to see; it would be too embarrassing. From the introduction of ‘simp’ in 2019 to the nonchalant epidemic of 2024, people have been forcing themselves and others to keep their feelings hidden for years out of fear of ridicule.

In Franz Kafka’s yearlong correspondence with his love Milena Jesenská in 1920, he wrote over 100 letters professing how much he cared for her.

“With you in my heart I can bear everything, and even if I did write that the days without letters were horrifying, it’s not true; they were just horribly difficult- the boat was heavy and its draught was horribly deep, but on your tide it floated nonetheless,” wrote Kafka.

Correspondence in prospective romances of today typically includes text messages like ‘I want u’ and ‘ur so bad.’

The culture surrounding romance has greatly influenced how we speak to each other. Now, is it fair to compare the stylings of an everyday modern person to that of one of history’s greatest writers? Of course not. However, the greatest difference between Kafka’s letter and these text messages is not necessarily their content but their intent. To demonstrate care, one does not have to create fanciful metaphors comparing thee to a summer’s day. The effort behind writing a letter, poem or even a text makes it considerate. We all just need to be a little less afraid of being willing to show that effort and care.

To be cringe is to be free

‘Extra,’ ‘over the top,’ ‘try hard’ and ‘doing the most’ are just a few phrases we have come up with to call things and people ‘too much’ and, by proxy, weird. The negative connotation around going above and beyond or being passionate has made

many believe it is somehow cooler to do and be the opposite. Ironically, we seem to care so much about looking like we do not care.

What do we stand to gain from not caring? No one lies on their deathbed thinking how glad they are to have suppressed their passions because at least they were cool. We have created this stigma around outwardly and loudly expressing ourselves. As much of a cliché as it may be, the things we care about make us who we are. This does not simply mean hobbies and careers but also one’s morals, values and standards.

Feeling as though we are not allowed to laugh too loud, to cry or try too hard only makes us robotic. It is human to feel things deeply, to find something or someone we love and burst with emotion.

It is not embarrassing for partners to be affectionate, for parents to care about their children, for children to love their families, for friends to unconditionally embrace one another or for people to give their all to reach their goals.

Untethering oneself from the idea that it is embarrassing to be human is when one can finally embrace the yearning we all have to be, feel and love. Cry with fervor, ugly laugh until your stomach cramps, skip and jump up and down in excitement, love, grieve and welcome the fact that you are alive.



Commentary: Behind the curtain of Charlotte's student theater and why it's time to pay attention

Bianca Bagley | Contributor

Student-led theater is important in UNC Charlotte's vast performing arts landscape. Organizations like Charlotte's Student Theatre at Robinson (STAR) draw students by giving them an opportunity to participate in theater without judgment or unnecessary pressure.

"When we do a musical or a show through the department, we have amazing directors and staff that help us," said Braden Kneeshaw, a third-year student and president of STAR. "But when we do complete student work, it's people our age who have similar experiences to us, and they know what we as actors need, but also just as people, so they understand what we're going through."

After being dormant for a year, STAR is back up and running again. It aims to emphasize the importance of student-led theater and engage all kinds of people. Students can bond over their shared experiences of failure and success and use them to improve their acting and problem-solving skills.

"It's really about getting people involved in theater on campus, especially majors, but also non-theater majors," said Kneeshaw. "Just opening those opportunities to everyone."

In productions like these, students dictate every part of the process, even lesser-known aspects like costumes, directing and tech. This results in differences between the behind-the-scenes processes of professional and student productions.

"The difference is the level of expertise," said Astrid Reed-Kennedy, a fourth-year student and costume designer. "Students are still learning. The entire point is that we are still learning and building our resume, whereas professionals have already made it. They don't need to continuously prove themselves."

Despite still perfecting their craft, students in tech make a point to view their work professionally. The department provides students with mentors and allows them to develop a more personal relationship with other actors and tech

crew members.

"For designing, we take a pretty strict professional standpoint from it just because we are a school and it really varies depending on the department you're in," said Reed-Kennedy. "So if you're doing student design, you'll get a mentor and then they'll assist you along the way. Usually, if we're doing a student-led production, then we have to pitch it, and it has to be approved."

With this in mind, the quality of student-made productions does not vary much from that of professional productions. Both Kneeshaw and Reed-Kennedy agree that Charlotte students should be interested in seeing student productions.

"We know what students want or need," said Kneeshaw. "You can focus on the issues that affect you or us in our community and specifically affect students at Charlotte. It also expands roles even more than just acting in a show. You now have students who can direct or design or help

out in so many different areas that faculty usually hold, and students just get to learn even more, like learning by failure and also as a group."

Despite all the work that goes into every production, these shows are still overshadowed by other on-campus events. This means that these talented students and their performances often go undeservingly unnoticed.

STAR is planning a spring production of the musical "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," a show following a group of middle schoolers competing to win their county's illustrious spelling bee title. Naturally, the production will be entirely student-produced and directed. The group also looks forward to hosting events such as guest lectures to get more students interested in theater.

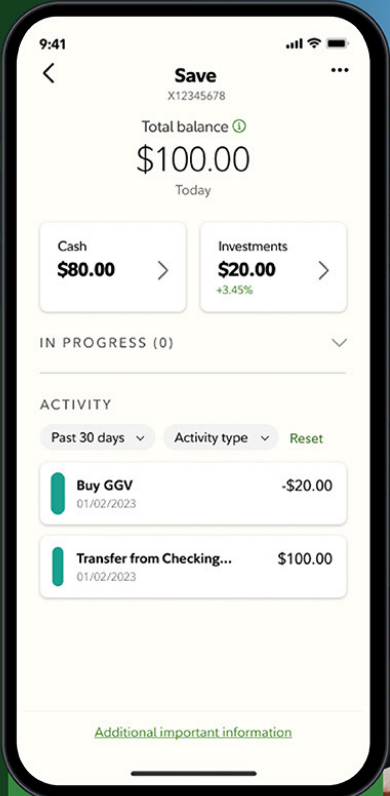
"I think it's important to be able to show up and support people in your community," said Reed-Kennedy. "Even if you're not a theater person, it's still fun to go and see it."



Money like you mean it.



Investing involves risk, including risk of loss. Screenshot is for illustrative purposes only. Fidelity Bloom® app is free to download. Fees associated with your account positions or transacting in your account apply. Fidelity Brokerage Services LLC, Member NYSE, SIPC, 900 Salem Street, Smithfield, RI 02917 1147899.1.4



Download the free app



A legacy of art and community

THE SUE LEMMOND HELMS COMMUNITY ART HOUSE CREATES A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

Megan Khor | Contributor

Unifying artists under one roof to encourage the creation of art is the vision of the Helms family and the College of Arts + Architecture (CoA+A). With the September dedication of the Sue Lemmond Helms Community Art House, CoA+A celebrated not only the legacy of a cherished artist but also a future of community and collaboration for its students.

Dr. Angela Rajagopalan, chair of the Department of Art and Art History, was among the many faculty members who participated in creating this ceremony. In September of 2024, the Sue Lemmond Helms Community Art House was donated to CoA+A as a gift from the Helms family to honor the legacy of Sue Lemmond Helms, who passed away in 2012.

Sue Lemmond Helms was a native of Charlotte who majored in art education at UNC Greensboro. She was a well-known pianist, singer, visual artist and arts educator.

“She shared her love of international arts and culture through regular hands-on experiential workshops with school children and her decade-long role as Director of Education at International House,” said Rajagopalan.

Together with her husband, Jerry Helms, a philanthropist and local businessman, the two played a pivotal role in Charlotte’s international relations by increasing understanding across barriers that once separated people. One of their greatest accomplishments was their significant role in the early makings of Charlotte’s Sister Cities program.

Today, many of the objects and artworks that Sue Lemmond Helms collected during her lifetime are now being used in classrooms. Moreover, it is through the Helms family that historical work that the departments related to the arts at Charlotte now have active student-driven partnerships with universities in two of Charlotte’s sister cities: Limoges, France, and Wrocław, Poland.

Through Helms and his children, Brian and Robin’s, donation of the house to the University, the Helms family hopes to carry Lemmond Helms’ legacy to future generations.

“This gift marks an exciting time in the 60-year history of the Department of Art and Art History, a unit of CoA+A, and will impact artists, students and art lovers for generations to come,” said Rajagopalan.

Not only does the property serve to honor the legacy of Sue Lemmond Helms, but

it also marks the beginning of a new chapter for collaborative creativity.

As of the opening ceremony in September, the house is now part of an artist-in-residence program that seeks to provide a place of stay for artists aiding the University.

Clay Harper, a part-time faculty member and lecturer for digital media studies, is living as the first artist in residence of the property.

In late December 2023, the department chair approached Harper with the possibility of being the first resident. Since then, the house has been constructed and renovated to ensure its livability for future residents. Harper and his partner have been living in the house since June 2024.

“It’s an honor and a great opportunity,” said Harper.

Having been at a previous artist-in-residence property as a graduate student at the University of Texas at Dallas, Harper comes from a different perspective on the future of the property than others might. Along with his prior experiences, he comes with the motivation to make something sustainable and purposeful out of the Sue Lemmond Helms Community Art House.

During his time in Dallas, he found that a lot of interesting cross-pollination of artistic techniques and mediums had occurred.

“I think it’s great when people work across different mediums. Just being exposed to different ideas and different kinds of work, I find that it’s very productive as an artist because it creates a sense of community,” said Harper.

One of his roommates at the time was a soft sculpture artist. Seeing their artistic process not only encouraged him to get into soft sculpture but also made him reflect on his creative process within his works. Outside of soft sculpture, Harper’s main medium is video art.

“In some ways, it’s hard to gather a group of artists and not have a lot of diversity even if they’re practicing the same medium because everyone has different ways of approaching their medium,” said Harper.

Currently, the Sue Lemmond Helms Art House is labeled as a residency property, meaning only one artist can live there at a time. The property itself contains multiple bedrooms, offices and a large garage space that he and the department hope could be used as a future artist’s studio.

In the future, Harper wants to get the

necessary renovations to rezone the house so that more artists can live on the property together.

“I envision that this property could both be a place of residency for two to three artists at a time while being a community space that has workshops, demos, meals and film screenings like the residency that I lived in at Dallas,” said Harper.

Currently, he is uncertain whether future residents will only be limited to artists in their mid-careers or potentially be open to graduate students with seniority status.

Regardless, Harper believes that it is important for the property to not only act as a space for local artists to live and work but also encourage involvement from artists in Charlotte by allowing them to embrace the space for their works.

“The arts in some way get trapped in the idea of individual genius,” said Harper. “Sure, some people work like that, but even figures that we attribute that mystical concept to have often been very engaged in their artistic communities and their art scene. Art thrives when there is a community, not just people living in their cubicles.”

While Harper is not the only one involved with the future of the property and its usage at the school, his vision is synonymous with that of the University and the Helms family.

“The Sue Lemmond Helms Community Art House will enable us to host workshops, exhibitions and community events, fostering an environment where ideas can flourish and voices can be heard. We envision this space buzzing with energy, passion and the diverse talents of our students, all thanks to the vision and support of the Helms family,” said Rajagopalan.

Although the art house is not yet ready to serve as a multipurpose space for artists, its legacy promotes creativity, community and individual exchange of thoughts and ideas.

With the Helms family’s vision, the University’s commitment and Harper’s aspirations for a collaborative residency, the house is on track to become a dynamic property where artists can converge and inspire one another.

As individuals bring their talents, the property will continue to honor Helms’ legacy by fostering an environment for artists.



Charlotte football's history of Homecoming

Evan Campos | Staff Writer

Niner Times File

Charlotte 49ers fans, students and alumni gather each year for the excitement of the Homecoming football game. Since the football program's inception in 2013, this annual game has become a platform for the team to showcase their talent and celebrate Niner Pride.

With this year's game against the University of South Florida set for Nov. 16, we revisit the memorable Homecoming matchups that have brought thrill and heartache to Jerry Richardson Stadium.

2013: A humbling start against UNC Pembroke

In their debut season, the 49ers' first-ever Homecoming game was against the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Charlotte took an early lead, 8-7, in the first quarter. However, the Braves, who finished their season with a 9-2 record, took control and never looked back, ultimately defeating Charlotte 45-22.

2014: A close call with James Madison

The following year, Charlotte faced James Madison University in a high-scoring duel. Although the 49ers fell behind early, a stunning 98-yard touchdown pass kept the game close. Charlotte fought to the finish but lost 48-40 in a nail-biting performance that foreshadowed future Homecoming battles.

2015: A tough entry into Conference-USA

In 2015, Charlotte joined Conference USA (C-USA) and faced a formidable opponent in the University of Southern Mississippi. The Golden Eagles' dominance was evident as they handed the 49ers a 44-10 defeat. This game underscored the challenges of competing in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) and solidified Southern Miss as a conference power.

2016: Heartbreak in the final minutes against FIU

The 49ers faced Florida International University (FIU) in their closest Homecoming game yet. Despite leading in rushing yards and time of possession, Charlotte saw victory slip away in the game's last five minutes. FIU scored two late touchdowns, securing a narrow 27-26 win. It was a crushing loss for the Green and Gold, who had shown immense potential throughout the game.

2017: Victory against UAB with a remarkable finish

The tide turned for Charlotte in 2017 when they hosted the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). Down by 14 points in the first half, Charlotte rallied back, ultimately forcing overtime. In a thrilling decision, the 49ers opted for a two-point conversion, securing a 25-24 victory. This win was the lone bright spot in a

challenging season and marked Charlotte's first Homecoming win.

2018: A decisive win over Western Kentucky

Building on their previous year's victory, Charlotte hosted Western Kentucky University and dominated with a 40-14 win. This marked the highest-scoring Homecoming game for the 49ers in C-USA play. The team's strong performance boosted their morale and added one of five wins to their season.

2019: A setback against Florida Atlantic University

Charlotte's 2019 season was memorable as the 49ers achieved their first winning record. However, their Homecoming matchup against Florida Atlantic University (FAU) resulted in a 45-27 loss. The Owls led from start to finish, overshadowing Charlotte's otherwise historic season.

2021: Overtime triumph against Rice

With no Homecoming game in 2020, Charlotte fans eagerly awaited the 2021 Homecoming clash against Rice University. A 10-point fourth quarter helped Charlotte level the score, forcing the game into overtime. The 49ers secured a thrilling 31-24 victory, clinching their third Homecoming win in program history and delivering a highlight to their season.

2022: A defeat with lasting consequences against FIU

In 2022, Charlotte squared off once again against FIU. This game proved to be a turning point as FIU handed the 49ers a 34-15 defeat, ending Charlotte's bowl eligibility for the season. The loss led to the dismissal of Head Coach Will Healy, bringing a close to an era as the team looked to move forward.

2023: A defensive standoff with Navy

The United States Naval Academy dampened Charlotte's Homecoming spirit in 2023, securing a 14-0 win in a game marked by defensive prowess on both sides. Despite a scoreless first half and strong defensive showings from the 49ers, Navy capitalized with two long touchdowns. It was a game of small margins, underscoring Charlotte's continued evolution as they adapted to higher levels of competition.

Looking to Homecoming 2024

Facing off against the South Florida Bulls in a crucial conference matchup, Charlotte aims to add another victory to its Homecoming history and keep bowl eligibility hopes alive. The 49ers must win their last three remaining games of the 2024 regular season for a shot at a bowl game.

Kickoff is scheduled for 3:30 p.m. at Jerry Richardson Stadium, with the game broadcast on ESPN3.



Niner Pride on the gridiron

CHARLOTTE FOOTBALL ALUMNI SHINE IN THE NFL

Kelli Blackburn | Sports Editor

As the National Football League (NFL) reaches midway through the 2024-2025 season, a few Charlotte alumni emerge as familiar faces across the country. From representing the green and gold to sporting their team colors today, these players continue their pursuit of the Lombardi Trophy.

Five 49er alumni are currently on active NFL rosters, as Niner Times examines their journeys from Charlotte to the league.

Larry Ogunjobi

Defensive tackle Larry Ogunjobi is a Charlotte trailblazer who paved the way for the football program. Playing from 2013-2016, Ogunjobi became a member of Charlotte's first recruiting class, wore the honorary No. 49 jersey and surpassed 200 career tackles. A Greensboro, N.C. native, he started in all 11 games of Charlotte's inaugural season and had 42 tackles with 29 solo stops.

His game rose to new levels over four years, progressing from Second Team All-Conference-USA in 2015 to first team in 2016. He finished his Charlotte career with 49 tackles for loss, 217 total tackles and 12 sacks. He became the first 49er to attend the NFL Combine and the NFL Draft.

Drafted as the No. 65 pick in the third round of the 2017 NFL Draft, Ogunjobi joined the Cleveland Browns, where he played until 2020. Larry started only one game in his rookie year in 2017, but still managed a sack and 17 solo tackles. His stats grew yearly, combining 13.5 sacks and 91 tackles from 2018-2020.

Larry signed with the Cincinnati Bengals in 2021, marking him the first and only Charlotte 49er thus far to make it to a Super Bowl. Though sidelined by injury for the game, he saw the Bengals battle the Los Angeles Rams in a close 23-20 loss. He recorded 29 tackles and seven sacks that season.

In 2022, Ogunjobi signed with the Pittsburgh Steelers, his third AFC North team. So far in the 2024 season, he has 10 solo tackles with 1.5 sacks. Now in his eighth NFL season, Larry frequently returns to support Charlotte football and works with the youth to give back to each community that he has been a part of.



Alex Highsmith

Linebacker Alex Highsmith joined Ogunjobi, evolving into a defensive asset for the Steelers. The Wilmington, N.C. native turned heads in college with his fast physicality, producing immensely for the 49ers. Highsmith was a walk-on in 2015, earning a scholarship by 2017. That season, he totaled 33 tackles, five tackles for loss and two sacks.

The sky became the limit for Alex, who hit collegiate career highs in 2018 with 17.5 tackles for loss, breaking the 49ers' single-season school record. Highsmith was named First Team All-Conference-USA that season and, in 2019, was named to the Chuck Bednarik Award (Defensive Player of the Year) Watch List, along with a semifinalist for the Bursworth Trophy.

Highsmith became the first player at Charlotte to earn All-America honors and First Team All-C-USA twice. He took part in the 2020 East-West Shrine Bowl and the NFL all-Combine Team as an edge rusher that same year. Overall, he left an impressive record at Charlotte that translated over to the NFL well.

Alex made himself a home in the Steel City, selected No. 102 overall in the third round to the Pittsburgh Steelers. He has played in 71 games for the black and yellow, having over 230 tackles with 134 being solo hits. Highsmith has racked up 32.5 sacks, three interceptions and one touchdown over five seasons. In the 2024 season, he currently has eight tackles with three sacks.

Nate Davis

Offensive lineman Nate Davis, now in his sixth NFL season, played for Charlotte from 2015-2018, starting in 37 of his 40 games. Davis earned Second Team all-Conference-USA honors in 2018 and was invited to the Reese's Senior Bowl in 2019. Drafted in the third round by the Tennessee Titans, he was picked No. 82 overall.

Inactive until week four of his rookie season, Davis debuted as a starter against the Buffalo Bills in week five. He blocked for running back Derrick Henry, who led the league in rushing yards in 2019. The Titans made it to the AFC Championship later in the postseason, with Davis starting at right guard.

After three seasons as a starter for the Titans, Davis signed with the Chicago Bears on a three-year contract in 2023. He is now blocking for Heisman Trophy winner and 2024 No. 1 overall pick Caleb Williams. The Bears sit 4-5 as of Nov. 10, 2024, at the bottom of the NFC North standings.

Markees Watts

Outside linebacker Markees Watts is a newer edition to the NFL, only in his second season. Watts played for the 49ers from 2018 until 2022 and joins Highsmith and Ogunjobi as the only 49ers to finish their collegiate careers with double-digit career sacks. His

breakout season in 2019 left him with 13 tackles for loss and 9.5 sacks. Watts was able to play in the 49ers' first ever bowl game, the 2019 Bahama Bowl along with Highsmith.

In 2022, Markees played and started in all 12 games for Charlotte, recording 41 tackles and a team-high nine tackles for loss with four sacks. Watts also got his first career interception, a forced fumble, two fumble recoveries and a blocked kick in the same season. He finished his career at Charlotte as the all-time sack leader with 21.5 sacks and led program history with 54 games played.

Watts signed with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 2023 and played seven games last season. He totaled four tackles with one sack for his first season in the NFL and has played in all five games on special teams so far in the 2024 season. On Oct. 7, 2024, it was announced that Markees was placed on injured reserve due to a quad tear that will leave him out for four games or more.

Grant DuBose

Wide receiver Grant DuBose played as a transfer from Miles College for Charlotte from 2021-2022. Over two seasons, DuBose's impact on the offense was immediate. On his first-ever target as a 49er, he caught a 56-yard touchdown in a season-opening win versus Duke University in 2021. That same season, he had three games with 100+ receiving yards and was an honorable mention

for All-Conference-USA.

In 2022, DuBose made 11 starts in 12 games for the 49ers, sharing the team lead with nine touchdown catches. That season, he reigned as the team leader with 64 catches for 792 yards. Grant was a Second Team All-Conference-USA selection and participated in the 2022-2023 Reese's Senior Bowl. DuBose attended the 2023 NFL Combine shortly after, posting a 4.57 40-yard dash time.

The Birmingham Stallions originally drafted Grant in the seventh round as part of the United States Football League (USFL), but that all soon changed as his time in the NFL ended during the 2023 NFL Draft. He was selected in round seven at pick No. 256 and went to the Green Bay Packers but was shortly cut from the active roster and signed to the practice squad in August. On Jan. 6, 2024, DuBose was elevated to the active roster in Week 18 for a 17-9 win against the Chicago Bears.

DuBose was released once again from Green Bay on Aug. 27, 2024. The Miami Dolphins swooped in and retrieved him from waivers a day after, moving him from Titledown, USA, to the Magic City. Grant has only caught one pass for 13 yards in the 2024 season and was placed on injured reserve on Sept. 21 due to a shoulder injury that has left him off the field since. Miami is currently 2-6 on the season leaving DuBose and the Dolphins searching for a 'bounce back' moment.



Courtesy of Pittsburgh Steelers, Chicago Bears, Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Green Bay Packers



Dan Rice/Niner Times



Chris Crews/Niner Times

Charlotte's ground game takes flight as Norton and Wilson put the team on track for bowl bid

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

From the jump, Charlotte football Head Coach Biff Poggi set out to run the ball.

"Very simple, we're going to run the football," said Poggi in his introductory press conference in 2022, setting the blueprint for the 49ers' offense.

In 2024, Poggi's vision is coming to fruition with Charlotte's rushing attack.

Through nine games, all three of Charlotte's wins have come on the back of a strong rushing performance, with an average of 164.6 rushing yards in their wins.

A duo of junior running backs, Cartevious Norton and Hahsaun Wilson, lead this successful rushing attack.

Nine games into the season, both backs are over 400 yards and have combined for 75% of Charlotte's rushing yards.

While they have established themselves as stars in Charlotte's offense, the two are new to the Saturday limelight in Jerry Richardson Stadium.

Wilson first broke out as a 49er in a 2023 matchup against the University of Memphis, where he had three touchdowns and 198 yards on 24 carries. Before this performance, Wilson had one carry for four yards in his entire career as a 49er.

The showing against Memphis earned him a scholarship and etched Wilson into Charlotte's record books with the No. 2-most rushing yards in a single game in program history. Wilson has maintained that momentum and averaged 6.7 yards per carry this season, good for No. 5 in the conference among running backs.

"I knew I could always do it," said Wilson. "I just needed the opportunity to showcase my talents."

After claiming his first record against Mem-

phis, Wilson is eyeing his second record in becoming the program's first 1,000-yard rusher in a season. To do that, he will compete with Norton, who trails Wilson by just 19 yards as Charlotte's No. 2 rusher.

A transfer from Iowa State University, Norton left the Cyclones in search of more opportunities. In 2023 with the Cyclones, Norton totaled 87 carries for 343 yards in 11 games. Through nine games at Charlotte, he has 90 carries for 412 yards.

The increase in productivity and usage has made Charlotte what Norton calls "a perfect fit."

Now a 49er, Norton has made his mark on the Charlotte offense and on opposing defenders. Listed at 5'11" and 225 pounds, Norton has made some defenders miss, and others regret making contact.

"Some guys make a business decision; probably not the smartest decision to go up with a 5'11", 225 guy head-on," said Norton. "The things I display on tape, they watch it so they know to come correct."

While some defenders have kept their distance, Norton, Wilson and the rest of the running back room have created a close bond as teammates.

"We [are] family at the end of the day, just to keep it simple, we're brothers," said Wilson. "We got each other's back on and off the field."

Charlotte brought in nearly a whole new roster from the transfer portal last offseason, meaning Norton was not alone in charting new territory at Charlotte.

Despite the initial unfamiliarity, Norton says the team has come together as the season continued.

"Everybody's new; we all came from different

spots. So, at the beginning, it was a little different for everybody," said Norton. "I don't know how many transfers we had, but it was a lot. But now we're all jelled up."

This brotherhood makes big games out of the backfield all the more rewarding for Norton and Wilson. Already, the two have had star performances together, such as against East Carolina University, where the two combined for 252 yards and five touchdowns.

"It just feels electrifying when you get going finally, and the whole room is eating," said Wilson. "Everybody's getting good carries, good runs, scoring. It's just a good feeling all around. We feed off that."

To get going, Wilson said the running backs often communicate during the game to help each other out and share what they may be seeing on their carries.

During the game, the running backs share intel; before the games, they share energy.

"We're always gonna get lit before the game starts," said Norton. "When we wake up, we just gotta go ahead and be on that type of timing. You step on the field, and that fire is burning; don't let nobody put it out."

To get that fire burning, Norton shared that the team has begun a ritual to blast music in the locker room pregame through a teammate's boom box.

Both backs shared that this bond between teammates formed through long practices and energetic pregames lightens the load as running backs.

"It's a lot easier because you feel like the weight is not on you," said Norton. "When you're going out there with your brothers, you feel like they got your back, and when you know someone got

your back, you just go out there and play."

Even when things are clicking on the field, and the team is together off it, running back is a grueling position to play. Outside of being physically demanding through conditioning, running backs take big hits almost every time they touch the ball.

This may ring especially true for Wilson and Norton, who often see double-digit touches.

Even with the strenuous nature of the position, Wilson said the only thing driving him to play is himself.

"Ain't even no drive, I love it," said Wilson. "You do something you love; you're not going to look at it as a job or something you gotta do. I love it. I chose to play running back. I chose to play football, and I'm taking it head-on."

While both backs are frequently seen breaking off long runs or celebrating in the end-zone, life lessons are what have made the position rewarding for Norton.

"I love the position I play because it teaches you patience, and that's on and off the field," said Norton. "In some games, you run for three or four yards a carry, but you just gotta wait for that one pop."

Sitting at 3-6 with three games to go, Charlotte football may be waiting for a pop of their own. The 49ers are within reach of their first bowl game appearance since 2019 but will have to 'run' the table to do so.

In the face of the uphill battle, Wilson said he believes the 49ers running back room is one of the best in the nation and has the potential to bring Charlotte to a bowl game. With Charlotte again experiencing quarterback troubles, it may be up to Wilson and Norton to play to that potential and return Charlotte to the postseason.

Charlotte football puts its trust in O'Mega Blake

Kelli Blackburn | Sports Editor

Amid Charlotte football's challenges, the offense has maintained consistency despite the rotation of quarterbacks. Someone those quarterbacks have leaned on is their 'Mr. Reliable,' redshirt junior wide receiver O'Mega Blake. A transfer from the University of South Carolina(USC), Blake has stepped up to electrify Charlotte's offense, helping to keep games close and stakes high.

For Blake, his one-of-a-kind perspective of the field makes this reliability come naturally.

A jack-of-all-trades

Growing up down the road from Charlotte in Rock Hill, S.C., Blake's athletic journey began early, playing football alongside basketball and track at South Pointe High School. His role as quarterback shifted during his sophomore year at South Pointe, where he transitioned into a defensive position. From there, Blake led the team with four interceptions that year. As a junior, he played primarily as a wide receiver, bringing in 38 receptions for 800 yards. He stayed versatile, rushing for 353 yards on 39 carries. By his senior year, he helped his team to the second round of the Class 4A playoffs. His offensive play continued to flourish, with 12 touchdowns and 1,272 total yards that same year.

"It has always been natural to step on the field and play any position, so [I] thank God for blessing me with that ability," said Blake.

Off the football field, Blake dominated on the court and the track. At South Pointe, the Stallions won the 2021 4A State Championship in basketball. In track, Blake won the 4A Region 3 High Jump Championship.

Journey to Charlotte

O'Mega received his first offer to play at the next level from the University of Tennessee Volunteers on Jan. 18, 2020, after a junior day visit in Knoxville, Tenn. From there, one opportunity came after the other, earning offers from 24 other schools.

Some of his choices were from other top programs, such as Michigan State University, Virginia Tech University, East Carolina University (ECU) and the University of Louisville. The South Carolina native made his decision to sign a letter of intent to the USC Gamecocks on Dec. 16, 2020, transitioning into the next step of his football career. At USC, Blake made his collegiate debut in 2021 at the Duke's Mayo Bowl against the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In 2022, Blake was a redshirt freshman who was targeted twice and caught one pass for one yard in the span of three games played. The next year, he made four starts in 12

games played. In 2023, he had 19 receptions for 250 yards and two touchdowns. Blake was also recognized as the Spring Co-Offensive Most Improved Award winner, a testament to his progress at USC.

In 2023, it was time for Blake to bet on himself and continue to get better, so he announced his entrance to the transfer portal after the 2023 season on Dec. 4. Only 15 days later, Blake turned his head to the ECU Pirates, committing to them before changing his mind once more on April 17, 2024. It was finalized on April 22 that he would fully commit to the Charlotte 49ers to begin the next stage of his college career.

Reflecting on his time in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), Blake acknowledges how the difference in cultures between there and the American Athletic Conference (AAC) prepared him for high-pressure situations.

"It's SEC football—[the] closest thing to the NFL. It's a big difference once you're playing in the SEC in front of 100,000 fans. I would say that Carolina [USC] got me ready for all moments," said Blake.

Despite all of the changes, Blake looks at each part of his journey as a way to fight through adversity and progress not only as an athlete but as a person.

"I feel like football [and] playing sports, period, is setting me up on how to deal with adversity all through life and [how to] be a real future father and a future husband and stuff like that. A lot of guys lack those things, but thank God we get an opportunity to get a hold of those things early on in life because there's gonna be ups and downs playing sports," said Blake.

Stepping up on the field

Since his beginning in Charlotte, Blake has become the playmaker for the 49ers. Over nine games played so far in the 2024 season, he has five touchdowns and 471 yards on 21 receptions.

"I think [Blake is] a really good player, he's a talented player," said Head Coach Biff Poggi. "We saw his South Carolina tape against Georgia when he went for 180 yards, and we were like, 'We got to get this guy.' We're really glad to have him. He's got more years to play, and he's a really good player."

Blake brought fuel to the fire in Charlotte's thrilling 21-20 win over Rice University on Sept. 28, totaling five receptions for two touchdowns and 153 yards. Blake also had a standout performance in a close 33-28 loss against the University of Memphis on Oct. 26, with three receptions for 128 yards. One of those receptions was a crucial 57-yard

touchdown that put the 49ers ahead of the Tigers before the final seconds of the game. Despite the loss, this performance strengthened the connection between Blake and freshman quarterback Deshawn Purdie, solidifying him as a secure receiver ready to make a play.

Blake's athleticism has made him a dependable figure for the team, earning the nickname 'Mr. Reliable.' His work ethic and drive to win extend beyond practice, influencing Purdie as they continue to develop new offensive plays together.

"I invite Purdie over, [and] me being an older guy, I have seen a lot. I have been playing with some elite quarterbacks throughout my years of college. I know how it looks, and I know how it's supposed to be done. [So] I give him pointers, [and] the extra work with me and him meeting up at the house and getting on the same page on what we're going to do here and coming up with all types of stuff and instituting it on a field, we have that good relationship. [But, of course] I had to earn his trust by going up and making the plays," said Blake.

On Oct. 31, against Tulane University, Purdie handled the aggression of the Green Wave's defense with back-to-back passes to Blake. The passes combined for 36 yards during Charlotte's second drive of the game, as their bond kept them pushing through the difficult 34-3 defeat.

Blake sees the close games and progression of a program at Charlotte as something that sets the sky to be the limit. He wants to be the guy who can continue to improve the team and set a tempo to their offense that will only leave them moving in the right direction.

"Everything you do off the field, it correlates on the field. So, as long as I got my stuff together off the field, it'll be together on the field. I'm a big believer in that, and if I continue doing that, everything will be good," said Blake.

Blake's efforts on and off the field are helping set a strong foundation for Charlotte football's future, making him the trusted cornerstone of a team on the rise.



Chris Crews/Niner Times



You've never lived like this.

Walk or bike to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte campus

Private bedrooms and bathrooms available

Leather-style furniture

24-hour, state-of-the-art fitness center

Academic Success Center with iMacs and free printing

Swimming pool with sun deck

Internet included in every apartment

 PROUD PARTNER OF THE
CHARLOTTE FORTY-NINERS®

Learn more at
AmericanCampus.com/Charlotte

 AMERICAN CAMPUS
COMMUNITIES

Where students love living.®

Rates/installments, caps, dates/deadlines, promotions and fees are subject to change. Limited time only. See office for details.

