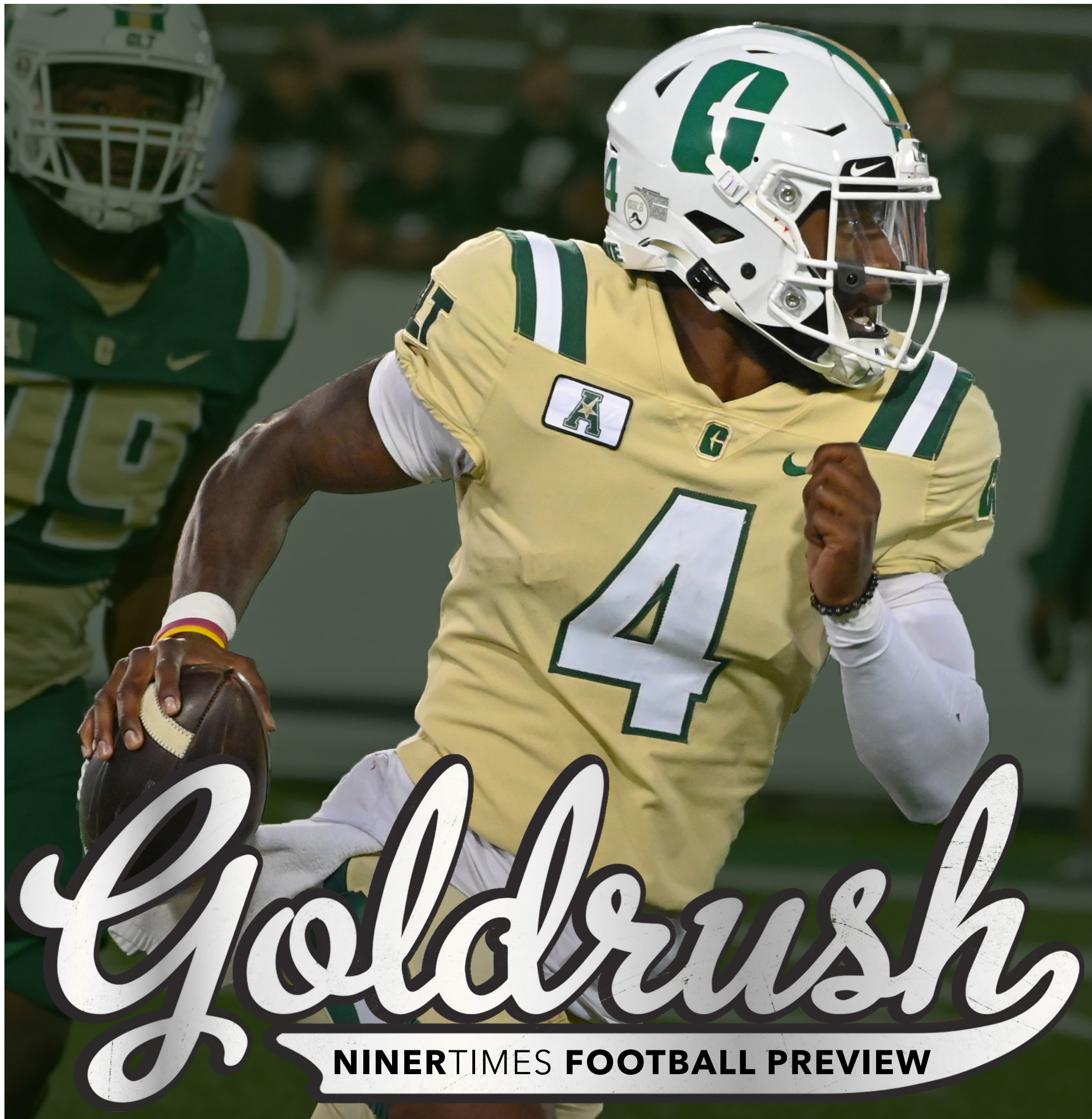




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NINERTIMES FOOTBALL PREVIEW

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COVER
Charlotte's quarterback Jalon Jones (4) scrambles to throw a pass in the annual Spring Game on April 22, 2023, at Jerry Richardson Stadium.
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The Niner Times aims to provide accurate and fair news to the UNC Charlotte community. We cover campus happenings, news and events in the city of Charlotte and North Carolina and topics that are important to students. We publish written, photo and video content online (ninertimes.com), on social media and through our weekly email newsletter (sent every Tuesday at 9:30 am). We also produce a supplemental bi-weekly (every other week) in-print newspaper that hits stands on Tuesdays.

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CHARLOTTE FOOTBALL ROSTER

##:	Name:	Position:	Class:	##:	Name:	Position:	Class:	##:	Name:	Position:	Class:
0	Terron Kellman	RB	R-Fr.	20	Doug Newsome	CB	Jr.	54	Adam Booker	LS	R-Fr.
0	Eyabi Okie-Anoma	DL	Gr.	21	Breon Noel	DB	So.	54	Micah Sumpter	OL	Fr.
1	Dontae Balfour	DB	So.	21	Henry Rutledge	RB	R-So.	55	Johnathan Bass	OL	Sr.
1	Durell Robinson	RB	Fr.	22	Jack Reynolds	WR	R-So.	55	Colin Coates	DL	Fr.
2	Derek Boykins	LB	R-Jr.	22	Marcus Robitaille	DB	R-So.	56	Andrew Adair	OL	R-So.
2	Randy Fields Jr.	WR	Gr.	23	Keoni Denny	LB	Fr.	58	T.J. Butler	LB	So.
3	Jaden Bradley	WR	Jr.	23	Izaiah Taylor	DB	Sr.	58	Austin Fontaine	OL	5th
3	Demon Clowney	DL	R-So.	24	Tequan Latimore	DB	Jr.	61	Marshall Futrell	OL	R-So.
4	C.J. Burton	DB	Jr.	25	Prince Bemah	LB	R-Jr.	65	Boston Brinkley	OL	R-Fr.
4	Jalon Jones	QB	Sr.	28	Joachim Bangda	RB	Sr.	66	Kendall Stanley	OL	R-Fr.
5	Katron Evans	DL	R-So.	28	Demetrius Knight II	LB	R-Jr.	71	PJ Wilkins	OL	Fr.
5	Ike White	WR	R-Fr.	29	Maguire Neal	DB	So.	72	Dominick Kelley	OL	Fr.
6	Al-Ma'hi Ali	DB	R-So.	30	Ephraim Deese	DL	Fr.	73	Isaiah Bullerdick	OL	R-Fr.
6	Dom Shoffner	QB	Gr.	30	Jaylen Donaldson	RB	R-Fr.	74	Jordan Daniels	OL	R-Jr.
7	Damani Dent	DB	R-Fr.	32	John Anderson	DB	R-So.	75	Lucas Gramlick	OL	R-Sr.
7	Steven Johnson	QB	R-Fr.	33	Brian Bates Jr.	LB	Fr.	76	Kevin Williams	OL	R-Sr.
8	Micah Bowens	QB	R-So.	33	Watson Cusick	RB	R-Fr.	77	Rene Miller	OL	So.
8	Cam Burden	LB	R-So.	35	Joey Bearns III	TE	R-So.	78	Jai'Lun Hampton	OL	So.
9	Lacota Dippre	TE	Fr.	35	Elijah Culp	DB	Jr.	79	Jasper Parks	OL	Sr.
9	Wayne Jones	DB	R-Sr.	36	Uriah West	DB	R-So.	80	Tyreese Schieffer	R-So.	
10	Ositadinma Ekwonu	LB	R-Jr.	38	Jamari Broady	DB	R-Fr.	81	Jake Clemons	TE	Jr.
10	Duane Thomas Jr.	WR	Fr.	38	Hahsaun Wilson	RB	R-So.	82	Elisha Edwards	WR	R-Fr.
11	Stone Handy	LB	R-Jr.	40	Reid Williford	LB	So.	83	Sean Brown	WR	R-Sr.
11	Trexler Ivey	QB	R-So.	41	Nikhai Hill-Green	LB	Jr.	84	Malik Baker II	WR	R-Fr.
12	Dontez Fagan	DB	Jr.	42	Jake Larson	K	Sr.	85	Jason Jeffares	TE	Fr.
12	Jairus Mack	WR	R-So.	42	Emmanuel Balogun	DL	Jr.	86	Bryce Kennon	TE	Jr.
13	Shadrick Byrd	RB	R-Jr.	43	Randy Franklin	DB	R-So.	87	Charlie C.C. Fish	WR	R-So.
13	Isaiah Hazel	DB	Sr.	43	Isaiah Turnage	RB	R-So.	88	Andrew Jacobs	WR	R-Fr.
14	Manning Lasso	WR	Fr.	44	Grant Gonya	P	Sr.	89	Quinton Patten	WR	R-Jr.
14	Steven Parker	S	R-So.	45	Nico Crawford	LS	R-Fr.	90	Dez Morgan	DL	Jr.
15	DeAndre Hollins	DB	R-Sr.	46	Omari Orgertice	LB	R-Fr.	93	Malik Daniels	DL	Jr.
15	Roger "Fresh" Walters	WR	R-Fr.	47	Tymere Burton	LB	Fr.	94	Jonathan Wallace	So.	
16	Carson Black	QB	Fr.	48	Malik Puryear	DL	Jr.	95	Miguel Jackson	DE	Jr.
16	Kameron Howard	DB	Fr.	50	Ja'Khi Green	OL	R-So.	95	Bronson Long	K	R-Fr.
17	Gus McGee	TE	R-So.	51	B.J. Ragland	DL	R-So.	96	Julius Welschof	Gr.	
18	Zion Shockley	DL	So.	51	Tyler Thomas	OL	Jr.	97	Jalar Holley	DL	R-Jr.
18	Colin Weber	TE	R-So.	52	Jonny King	OL	R-So.	98	Kyle Cunanan	Fr.	
19	Jack Hestera	WR	R-So.	53	Panda Askew	OL	Jr.	99	Isaac Washington	DL	R-So.
20	Xander Lamb	WR	R-Fr.	53	Mike Kelly	DL	R-Jr.				

'US AGAINST THE WORLD': CHARLOTTE FOOTBALL FACE THE ODDS WITH THE WORLD IN DOUBT

Joey Ellsworth | Sports Editor

As the dawn of Charlotte's 2023 football regular season approaches, the 49ers find themselves the underdogs in nearly all 12 of their upcoming games. After a poor outing in 2022 under former Head Coach Will Healy, the new head coach, Biff Poggi, and the Charlotte players are now faced with the challenge of proving their mettle and silencing the many skeptics.

With doubt of success from both fans and critics still resonating in the air, Poggi has rallied his squad around a singular mantra – "It's us against the world."

A disappointing 2022 season

In their previous season, while under Healy, Charlotte football had an outcome that left much to be desired. The 49ers pulled out three victories throughout the season, one of

which came under Interim Head Coach Pete Rossomando, who temporarily took the helm after Healy's midseason firing.

The 49ers were underdogs in 10 of their games and lost the two games they were favored in. This season put them in the bullseye of critics, even being ranked dead last of all 131 college football teams by sites such as The Athletic.

Low expectations

Despite the new look of the 49ers and Poggi now at the helm, many foresee little success coming from Charlotte. This can be especially seen in the betting odds for the 49ers.

Adding last year's win totals of their opponents this season (57) makes the 49ers' schedule the 12th-easiest in college football and

easiest in the conference.

Charlotte is projected to lose nine or 10 games this season despite only five of their opponents having a winning record last season, zero squads winning nine or more games and facing the University of South Florida, who won one of their 12 games last season.

According to the moneylines, Charlotte has +500000 odds to win the national championship, a 0% chance, and +20000 odds to win the conference, a 0.5% chance. They have an over/under of 2.5 wins, with moneylines giving them a 63.6% chance of finishing with just three or more wins.

Ready to face the odds

While some of the 49er players have chosen to ignore the critics, such as Ositadinma Ekwonu, who has decided to "focus on the team and us getting better and performing at the highest level we can," players such as freshman running back Durell Robinson have let the doubt fuel the fire heading into the season.

"Nobody really respected us. I've seen that, and it just made me mad. I hate losing, I hate being disrespected, and I know all the other guys on the team do as well," said Robinson. "We have been working since January, and we all say the same thing: Winning changes everything. As soon as September hits, all we see is red, and we use that as motivation. We were ranked last in the conference; people on campus are saying that we ain't no good even though we just got here. It's okay, though; they don't understand what we really have yet. I can't wait until we showcase all of it."

A few members of the squad had similar messages.

"It puts a chip on our shoulder because we have a very new roster; it's not the same team at all," said senior offensive lineman Kevin Williams. "We love it. People look at us and laugh at the schedule. I know after this year, that will be a different case when they see Charlotte; they'll respect us a little more. We anticipate that people would overlook us and not game plan us, and we'll take advantage of that on Saturdays."

Offensive Coordinator Mike Miller went into more depth about the "chip" he felt the team has.

"We're aware of it, and to be honest, it's just

put even a bigger chip on our shoulder," said Miller. "Everybody here feels like we have something to prove. The players, the staff and at the same time, we want to block out the noise. I don't really care what other people are saying about us. We're focused on our progress and not only how we play, playing to our standard. That's been a big theme on offense for us."

Season opener

The 49ers kick off their season on Sept. 2 as they host South Carolina State at Jerry Richardson Stadium. The game will be broadcast on ESPN+ as these two teams face off for the first time. SC State currently sits favored by 22 points over the 49ers.

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Sept. 16:
Vs. Georgia State University



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Oct. 27:
Vs. Florida Atlantic University



Nov. 11:
Vs. Memphis University



Nov. 18:
Vs. Rice University

JONES TAKES CHARGE: CHARLOTTE'S NEW SENIOR QUARTERBACK REKINDLES WITH HEAD COACH BIFF POGGI

Itza Ochoa | Asst. Sports Editor



Charlotte's Jalon Jones (4) in the annual Spring Game at the Jerry Richardson Stadium on April 22. | Photo by Chris Crews

With an open position for the team's biggest decision-maker, Head Coach Biff Poggi brought back a familiar face. Senior Jalon Jones joins his former high school coach to commence the new era for the 49ers in the American Athletic Conference (AAC).

Jones began playing at Jackson State University before transferring to Bethune-Cookman University. He completed 188 of 321 passes for 2275 yards, 14 touchdowns and rushed an extra 574 yards before committing to the Green and White.

"The opportunity to jump up in the conference and to be a part of the first Charlotte team in the American, that opportunity is big," said Jones. "Being able to say I was on this team, being a leader and being somebody that contributed is amazing."

Rekindling

It was no coincidence that the chance arose to play under Poggi five years later. Jones met Poggi at the age of 16 at Saint Frances Academy and graduated as a four-star prospect.

"Me and Coach Poggi stayed in contact since I played for him in high school," said Jones. "He's always been a great man, somebody that I've always been able to call whenever I had an issue. He's a great coach and somebody that's going to critique you hard, but he's also going to love you even harder."

Quarterback searching

With six quarterbacks listed on the roster, Poggi is not afraid to utilize multiple players in Charlotte's favor. Jones said he has no pressure on whoever coach decides to take the spotlight.

"I always go out there with the mindset of me just competing against myself," said Jones. "It's the coach's job to put whoever they feel like is best on the field, but it's my job to go out there and be the best me every day. I know my play will speak for itself."

During the 49ers' spring game on April 22, Jones finished the game going 6-of-7 for

67 yards, not allowing an interception.

"I thought [Jones] was outstanding; he's dynamic," said Poggi. "He was a showstopper today. He's going to give people trouble."

On Aug. 4, the 49ers held their first day of training camp. Poggi had been looking for a versatile playmaker, and Jones was hoping to show the work to satisfy his needs.

"He's throwing the ball a lot better. When you add that to his athletic ability with his feet, he's dangerous," said Poggi. "We have a lot of leaders, and he's certainly one of them. People respect you when you play, and he plays well."

Team and personal growth

After playing for multiple universities throughout his career, Jones said he is still working to revamp his command and leadership.

"I can throw, I can pass, I can run, but being able to have a command of the offense and lead the guys, that's something that I've continued to work on, and I'm proud of the work that I've put in it," said Jones.

In terms of how the 2023 season will go, Jones, along with the rest of the 49ers, hopes to reestablish the image of a broken program. In the 2022 season, the 49ers were 3-9 overall, which sat them in last place in the Conference USA standings.

"My personal goals are team goals. We just want to win, that's the main thing," said Jones.

Striving to be a part of a new winning team, Jones said he hopes to seek this achievement with the coach he admires. Throughout the years, Poggi's words have stuck with Jones.

"When I was playing for him in high school, he told me to control the controllable, control what you can control," said Jones. "I can only control what's going on with myself and how I perceive my environment. It's allowed me to have a better attitude and mindset on whatever is going on around me."

BEYOND THE FIELD: CHARLOTTE DEFENSIVE LINEMAN MIKE KELLY GIVES BACK THROUGH COMMUNITY SERVICE ENDEAVORS

Bryson Foster | Editor At-Large

Charlotte redshirt junior defensive lineman Mike Kelly was named to the Wuerffel Trophy Watch List on Aug. 4, 2023. The trophy is College Football's Premier Award for Community Service.

Kelly said giving back is an integral part of his life.

"Life is not just about what we receive, but also about what we give back," said Kelly. "Embracing the importance of giving back creates a ripple effect of positive change."

Head Coach Biff Poggi said that Kelly is a standup individual.

"I love Mike Kelly as a human being," said Poggi. "For those with daughters, one of the scariest things is who they will bring home once they begin dating. If your daughter brought Mike Kelly home as a dad, you hit the lottery."

Kelly is entering his fifth year with the program and has recorded 42 tackles in 23 games. As the 49ers enter a new era and conference under Poggi, Kelly said he is poised to give it his all in his final year.

"Going into my fifth year and a new era is super exciting," said Kelly. "We want to come together as a team and reach our full potential. We need to take small steps and continue to build."

Early life

Kelly hails from Graham, N.C., where he grew up surrounded by his mother, Angela Lawson, grandmother, Ruthie Bynum and his two brothers. Kelly said he knew from a young age that giving back to others was important.

"My mother and grandmother always gave back even when they didn't have much," said Kelly. "It taught me early that you always need to be willing to give more than you have, as it will come back in the end."

Kelly's love for sports was evident early on as he was active in multiple, but football was not his first choice.

"I originally wanted to play basketball and baseball," said Kelly. "Football didn't click for me until 10th-grade. I broke my leg in my freshman year of high school and gained about 30 pounds. I built off that and started to gain some buzz."

Kelly played at Graham High School, and as

his love for football grew, he was named a two-star recruit and a Top 100 prospect in the state. After his time at Graham, Kelly committed to Charlotte, the only school to offer him.

Community service endeavors

At Charlotte, Kelly is leaving an impact off the field as the Charlotte 49ers SAAC director of engagement.

He is involved in community service projects such as Feeding Charlotte, the Second Harvest Food Bank and the Epilepsy Alliance of North Carolina. Kelly is also helping children faced with serious illness and disability with Team Impact and Friends of Jaclyn.

"When I get up in the morning, I always think about how blessed I am and try to take advantage of it," said Kelly. "It is a fantastic time to see a smile on someone's face who may not have the same ability as me, and with it, I want those who have different abilities to be welcomed in the same places that I am and be loved."

Kelly said that he has gained a new perspective through his work.

"You never know who you may have impacted and how," said Kelly. "Working with these organizations adds to my life and brings a smile to my face. Not just me but the whole team is focused on giving back to the community, and it is so much bigger than football."

Final season

On the field, redshirt junior linebacker Prince Bemah said Kelly is a veteran presence.

"Mike gives me good knowledge and has an old-head mindset," said Bemah. "It is cool to have him around, and he comes in working hard daily. You like to be around people who give their all for the team and others."

Going into his final season as a 49er, Kelly has many goals for himself as a player and person.

"For the season, it is putting my all into it every day and not having any regrets once I put the helmet down for good," said Kelly. "I want to increase my engagement with events and the campus. I am graduating with another degree, so I also want to finish that strong."

Looking ahead

After football, Kelly said he is excited for his next chapter.

"The biggest thing right now is to leave football healthy and in one piece," said Kelly. "I am still figuring out where I want to fall into. I enjoy the corporate world and working there as I interned with Lowes' corporate. I would love to help guys transition out of football, but I want to live a peaceful life and be happy with myself."

After five years with the program, Kelly said that being a 49er has meant the world to him.

"The definition of being a 49er is leaving things better than when you found it," said Kelly. "I would not take a thing back, and in 20 years, I

can say I had a footprint in being a small part of it. Being a 49er has been a cool experience and something I will never forget."

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TALENTED RUNNING BACK ROOM LOOKS TO LEAD THE WAY OFFENSIVELY FOR 49ERS

Sam Perry | Staff Writer

Since stepping foot on campus in November of 2022, Head Coach Biff Poggi has made it clear that the offensive focus will be on the running game, and the 2023 roster may bolster the staff suited for the task.

“Offensively, we are going to run the football, very simple,” said Poggi in his introductory press conference in 2022. “When we do that, you are going to put the seventh and probably eighth man in the box; then we are going to throw it over your head many times.”

The running back room has put together a group of backs to make a Swiss Army knife approach to the run game, putting together pieces that each bring their specialty to the table and can meet the high running demands of coach Poggi.

“Everybody has their way of hitting a home run. It will look different,” said junior running back Shadrick Byrd. “Everybody has been working, and we all look pretty good regardless of who’s getting the ball, so I’m looking forward to it.”

All-around back: Shadrick Byrd

Byrd is the veteran returning piece to Charlotte, having been a vital piece of the team’s identity the last couple of years; he returns to the Queen City as a leader and all-around team player.

His play on the field as an all-around running back earned him a spot on the Paul Hornung Award Watch List, awarded to the best all-around player in college football each year.

Byrd’s versatility has new Offensive Coordinator Mike Miller excited this season to be the guy he can rely on to do anything he needs.

“Shad has been great; he’s so reliable and just does everything you are supposed to do. Just very consistent,” said Miller.

Byrd shined in Charlotte’s spring game, putting up over 125 yards on the ground and a touchdown despite limited touches.

Bulldozer: Joachim Bangda

Joachim Bangda is a transfer from Townson University who also spent some time at Kent State University before that. He comes in reuniting with his high school coach in Poggi,

and he brings a solid powerback mentality, willing to fight for every yard while being a senior mentor for the younger players.

Miller loves Bangda’s skill in being the bulldozer and getting the tough short yardage in critical situations.

“You know Jo Bangda, who just got here, runs like a maniac; he tries to hunt for contact instead of making people miss; he finds guys he’s like a heat-seeking missile,” said Miller.

Young home run: Durrell Robinson

Freshman Durrell Robinson gained Charlotte national media attention when he announced he was committing to the 49ers on ESPN during the High School All-American game. He is the highest-rated recruit in Charlotte football history and is likely the guy to break out for big runs.

Knowing he is the young guy and the talent around him in the room, Robinson wants to focus on his part in his freshman season to help the team win and grow.

“Do my part, mess up the least as possible, do my job the best I can. If I do my job the best I can, we can win,” said Robinson.

Miller loves the development Robinson has shown a commitment to and is getting to teach him that not every play will be the long home run play. Miller loves seeing Robinson’s growth under his veteran running back teammates.

“Durrell is a home run hitter, and that’s something we’ve been working on; not every play is going to be a home run; they will happen organically throughout the game. Just stick to your reads, and he’s just such a young pup. It’s been so good for him to be under Shad and Jo,” said Miller.

Gadget duo: Henry Rutledge & Terron Kellman

Another returning player from last year’s team is Henry Rutledge, who had strong breakout performances last season. He was a significant receiving threat out of the backfield, so he adds another dynamic to the running game for Charlotte in his redshirt sophomore season.

Terron Kellman brings a similar dynamic to the team; if you can get him or Rutledge the

ball with room to work with, they can break out for big chunk plays, adding another tool to the team’s running attack.

The abilities that Rutledge and Kellman bring to the table gives Miller more to look forward to this season when designing his offensive plays,

giving him plenty of running options for his first season as a 49er.

“Henry Rutledge, who is a Charlotte guy, and Terron Kellman both have a lot of twitch and are those gadget guys,” said Miller.



Charlotte’s football team running the ball at a game versus William & Mary in their home opener on Sept. 2, 2022 | Photo by Chris Crews

CHARLOTTE FOOTBALL GAME-BY-GAME PREVIEW

Bradley Tepper | Staff Writer

As the Charlotte 49ers men's football team gears up for a new season, expectations are high with the move to the American Athletic Conference and the hiring of Head Coach Biff Poggi.

This season, the schedule for Charlotte features formidable out-of-conference clashes with Power Five foes Florida and Maryland, along with a new in-state rival, East Carolina University. Charlotte will also face some familiar old Conference USA teams in FAU and Rice as both universities joined Charlotte in moving to the American Conference.

Vs. SC State

Charlotte will open their season at home in Jerry Richardson Stadium against South Carolina State University. SC State boasted a humbling 3-8 record this past year with a notable win against North Carolina Central, who had a 10-2 record last season.

SC State gave up 35 points per game and 219 rushing yards on average last year, so Charlotte will look to stick by Poggi's rushing philosophy in this matchup.

@ Maryland

Charlotte then travels to College Park to take on the Maryland University Terps. Maryland concluded last season with an 8-4 record, finishing the season with a win in the Duke's Mayo Bowl. Maryland faced off against the

49ers last season, in which the Terps won 56-21.

Charlotte will have to be ready for an air attack as star quarterback Taulia Tagovailoa returns. Tagovailoa had over 3,000 yards passing yards last season.

Vs. Georgia State

Charlotte travels back home to take on the Georgia State Panthers. The Panthers finished off last season 4-8. The two teams faced off in a 2022 classic where Charlotte narrowly came up on top 42-41. This game may be a tight affair as both teams have won twice in the matchup history.

@ Florida

Charlotte will then travel down to Gainesville, Florida, for its toughest road test of the season against the University of Florida Gators. Florida finished off last season 6-7 with a notable win against the No. 7 ranked University of Utah but ultimately finished the season in a loss against Oregon State in the SRS Distribution Las Vegas Bowl.

Charlotte will have a tall task playing in one of the loudest environments in college football.

@ SMU

Charlotte will enter American Conference play against the Southern Methodist University Mustangs (SMU). SMU wrapped up last season

7-6 with notable wins against Memphis and a wild 77-63 win against Houston.

Charlotte's defense must be firing on all cylinders against an offense that scored 37 points per game.

Vs. Navy

Charlotte returns home for one of its most anticipated home games of the season against The United States Naval Academy. The Navy finished last season 4-8 and ended the season losing against the Army. This matchup will be a hard-fought battle, as the Navy defense only gave up 24 points a game last year.

@ East Carolina

Charlotte then stays in North Carolina to take on the East Carolina University Pirates. It will be the first matchup between the two schools. East Carolina finished last season 8-5 with a win in the TicketSmarter Birmingham Bowl against Coastal Carolina University.

Charlotte will most likely be in a shootout, as ECU averaged 461 yards of total offense per game while limiting opponents to 404 per game.

Vs. FAU

Charlotte comes back home to take on familiar foe Florida Atlantic University (FAU). FAU finished last season 5-7 and beat the 49ers in the first game of the season 43-13. FAU leads

matchup history against the 49ers 6-2. Charlotte will look to get their third win against their old Conference USA rivals.

@ Tulsa

The 49ers then travel to Oklahoma to take on Tulsa University. Tulsa finished last season 5-7 and 3-5 in conference. The 49ers will look to try and take an away conference win.

Vs. Memphis

Charlotte will then take on the University of Memphis at home. Memphis finished last season 7-6 with a Servpro First Responder Bowl win.

Memphis will likely be Charlotte's most challenging test at home as the 49ers will look to get an upset win at home.

Vs. Rice

Charlotte's last home game will be against Rice University. Rice finished the previous season 5-8. Charlotte defeated Rice 56-23 in their matchup last year.

@ USF

Charlotte will wrap up the season on the road against the University of South Florida (USF). South Florida finished last season 1-11, with their only win against Howard University. USF allowed 50 points per game last season, which Charlotte must capitalize on.



Charlotte football team running out at the start of the annual Spring Game at Jerry Richardson Stadium on April 22 | Photo courtesy of Charlotte Athletics

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN YEAR ONE UNDER BIFF POGGI

Mathis Gaglione | Staff Writer

The Charlotte 49ers have completely revamped their football program since they stepped into the Jerry Richardson Stadium in November 2022 against Louisiana Tech University.

Under an entirely new coaching staff led by Head Coach Biff Poggi, the 49ers also welcome over 50 new players from all over the country, most via the transfer portal.

With so much unfamiliarity, what should fans expect from Charlotte in their first season in the American Athletic Conference (AAC)?

Who is Biff Poggi?

The career journey of the new lead man for the 49ers is one for the books. Poggi's first documented football experience began when he played offensive lineman for the University of Pittsburgh from 1978-79. Although his playing career did not stick around long, Poggi's love for

the game found him still wanting to be involved with the sport.

Poggi started his first job at The Citadel as an assistant before landing his next opportunity with Gilman School in Maryland. After 19 years, Poggi built one of the top high school programs, reaching 13 conference championships.

Looking for another challenge, Poggi went up the road to another high school in Maryland called Saint Frances Academy, where he turned yet another program around rather quickly.

He has spent the last two years working as the associate head coach of the University of Michigan under one of the best coaches in college football, Jim Harbaugh. With his evident experience in rebuilding programs, Poggi is now at Charlotte, hoping to repeat history.

Brand new team

After going 3-9 overall in the 2022 season,

it was important for the 49ers to bring in new talent to start this new era.

Following the departure of record-setting quarterback Chris Reynolds and top-notch receiver Grant DuBose, the 49ers regrouped to gather a new group of players to fill the missing pieces.

In the offensive line, Charlotte welcomed eight Division 1 transfers with the height and weight that the 49ers needed.

New conference

Charlotte has spent the last eight years in Conference USA (C-USA) but will make their first appearance in the AAC for the 2023 season. They will also be celebrating the football program's 10th anniversary.

The 49ers took a huge step up the ladder, as not only does the revenue and recognition increase for the program, but so does the

competition.

Making the move with Charlotte from C-USA are five other members of the conference: Florida Atlantic University, University of North Texas, Rice University, University of Alabama at Birmingham and the University of Texas at San Antonio.

Charlotte will now face East Carolina University, University of Memphis, Naval Academy, Southern Methodist University, University of South Florida, Temple University, Tulane University and the University of Tulsa.

According to CBS Sports and Athlon Sports, the 49ers are expected to finish in last place.

Ready to destroy expectations

According to ESPN analytics, the 49ers are only supposed to win three games this year, their same win total from a season ago.

It is clear that the public perception of Charlotte this year is to not be a competitive team, but that is not stopping both Poggi and his team from backing down from the challenge to prove the naysayers wrong.

Poggi has been very adamant about the blatant disrespect of his program, and he has let the media know he is not happy about it.

"That's it? Three questions? Maybe that's because you have us ranked last, that's all what you think of us," said Poggi at the AAC Media Day as he slapped the podium. "We get that message, thank you."

Loaded backfield

If there is one part of the 49ers roster that is making noise, it is their running backs.

One of the few returning Niners is Shadrick Byrd, the redshirt junior who thrives on his versatility. Byrd has over 1,600 yards in his career, along with 10 touchdowns and will be relied on heavily this year to be a key contributor.

To pair with the veteran, Charlotte has also snagged their highest-rated recruit in program history earlier this year with Durell Robinson. Robinson is a true freshman but is expected to have a large role in this offense by complimenting Byrd's skillset well.

According to Poggi, he wants to be confident with running the ball.

"Offensively, we are going to run the football, very simple," said Poggi.



Head Coach Biff Poggi during the Charlotte football spring game on Saturday, April 22. | Photo by Chris Crews