

# NINERTIMES

Student-driven news since 1947

Jan. 15, 2025



## A CHAMPION'S JOURNEY

How a former Olympic bobsledder has won  
Charlotte 44 conference championships

MORE ON PAGE 8

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

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

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Miguel Sanchez-Nuñez/Niner Times File

## Events to watch for on and off campus

**2025 Faculty Dance Concert**  
Jan. 24, 7:30 P.M., Robinson Hall

**49ers Club Ice Hockey vs Duke**  
Jan. 24, 10 P.M., Extreme Ice Center

**Polar Plunge at UREC**  
Jan. 16, 7 P.M., UREC

**Winter Student Org Showcase**  
Jan. 16, 5:30-7 P.M., Student Activity Center

**49ers Women's Basketball vs East Carolina University**  
Jan. 15, 6:30 P.M., Halton Arena

**Retro Rollback**  
Jan. 16, 7-10 P.M., Belk Gym

## NOTES FROM THE NEWSROOM:

# 2025 may be 'your year,' but it's everyone else's, too

Emsley Jackson | Opinion Editor



If not you, people you know are posting that 2025 will definitely be their year. This is the year they are gonna make an academic comeback, find love, be on that grind, create world peace, get in shape, whatever. Finally, investing in Spotify Premium? Or perhaps investing in yourself with a gym membership?

Franchisees everywhere are rubbing their hands together, diving into their piles of doubloons Scrooge McDuck style because the clock striking midnight on New Year's releases a

stampede of dreamers right into the arms of Planet Fitness. It is a guarantee that UREC and Atkins Library will be buzzing with some of these recharged student dreamers fresh off winter break and ready to be academics again.

I just hope that being conscious of behavior in public spaces is one of the things all of these people are trying to improve upon. Why are you just now stepping foot in the library? Why have you waited until now to grace UREC with your presence? If you have dreams

or aspirations, why wait until the new year and semester to get at it? Start next Monday.

As a matter of fact, start whenever you want. I am a big supporter of mid-year resolutions because there is too much pressure to have ideas in January. In July, I resolved to be a nicer person. By August, I had realized life was too short to spend it criticizing yourself and figured that energy is much better spent on others.



## Staff Highlight: Bryson Foster

Our very own Bryson Foster was recently highlighted in UNC Charlotte's publication, Inside UNC Charlotte. A true pillar of the Niner Times and inspiration to us all, we hope you take a moment to check out the piece and get to know Foster.

At the Niner Times, Foster has acted as a staff writer, sports editor, editor-in-chief and outreach coordinator, but above all else, has been a shining example of what every journalist strives to be.



Learn more about Bryson's journey in Inside UNC Charlotte

# Upper Prospector closes for renovations and welcomes new dining options

Praghna Hemadri | Staff Writer

As the spring 2025 semester kicks off, the UNC Charlotte campus welcomes some new changes to the Upper Prospector dining locations, with the closure of the area for renovations beginning Dec. 6 and lasting until the summer 2025 semester.

The current restaurants closing due to renovations are Jamal's Chicken, Mamma Leone's, Salsarita's, Wild Blue Sushi and 49er Fresh Grab-and-Go.

While the renovations bring new seating and a lounge-type environment to campus, the University hopes that these changes will also bring faster and more efficient services for the student body.

Within these changes are also additions of new dining options for campus.

The first restaurant in the newly renovated space will be the popular Mexican fast-casual restaurant Qdoba. The new option will have the same function as Salsarita's, offering customiz-

able burritos and tacos to burrito bowls, with the flexibility to design meals with favorite ingredients.

Members of Charlotte's campus who have dietary restrictions and need quick and easy options will soon find them in Upper Prospector.

The second restaurant that the renovation will bring is The Halal Shack. Similar to Cava, The Halal Shack will offer a range of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean foods.

With various types of customizable bowls and pita wraps, this restaurant will have many options for vegans, vegetarians and those who follow the halal diet.

The third restaurant to be welcomed at UNC Charlotte is The Oasis. This restaurant is unique to the campus, created by Charlotte's Dining Services team.

It will feature a variety of cuisines, including coffee, ice cream, sushi and sandwiches.

Panda Express, currently located in the Cone

University Center, will also move to Upper Prospector once the renovations are completed.

While the final hours are still being finalized, Auxillary Services has also promised that these new restaurants will have longer hours to give students more flexibility.

According to the University's Auxillary Services, the restaurants in Lower Prospector, Chick-fil-A, 49er Fresh and Burger 704, will remain open during construction.

There will also be a food truck village with rotating restaurants outside of Prospector. These food trucks will have campus favorites such as Mister Greek, Chaconia, HotBoys Chicken and Marlie Q's and accept various forms of payment such as declining balance, 49er Account and Optional Dining Account funds, credit and debit cards.

During these renovations, the Mail & Package Services will relocate to Union Station in the Popp-Martin Student Union and the upper level

of South Village Dining Hall. Here, students will be able to purchase postage stamps, ship packages, send money orders and use notary services.

Passport services will be moved to the Popp-Martin Student Union, in room 140A, next to Shake Smart.

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## DO YOU HAVE AN ARTICLE IDEA?

WHETHER IT IS NEWS, OPINION, SPORTS OR ARTS & CULTURE, THE NINER TIMES IS ALWAYS ACCEPTING ARTICLE IDEAS AND TOPICS!

DM US YOUR IDEA ON SOCIAL MEDIA OR EMAIL [EDITOR@NINERTIMES.COM](mailto:EDITOR@NINERTIMES.COM). THE NINER TIMES RESERVES THE RIGHT TO REJECT SUBMISSIONS.

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Courtesy of UNC Charlotte Auxillary Services

# All that glitters isn't gold: S.L. Ivey's inspiring journey to becoming Golden Niner

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

In November of 2024, UNC Charlotte honored S.L. Ivey with the prestigious title of Golden Niner; however, behind Ivey's impressive accolade lies a story of unwavering commitment and overcoming life's darkest moments that inspired the path the 46-year-old aims to pave for struggling students today.

Ivey's college experience has been far from standard. As a first-generation student, Ivey attended Morehouse College in Atlanta but later dropped out due to a lack of support and self-discipline.

After struggling to find his footing and the courage to return, Ivey decided he wanted to return to school to pursue his initial goals.

In his late 20s, he attended Central Piedmont Community College and later transferred to UNC Charlotte in 2011. After three semesters at Charlotte, Ivey shared how he fell into what felt like the beginning of the end of his time in college.

"When I was able to abuse alcohol consistently," said Ivey. "I was a bartender and had access to alcohol every day.

about 32, I be-  
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Things snow-  
balled, and I  
found myself

dropping out of school again. I went through a period of life where my substance abuse habit got exponentially worse, and I did not even have the idea of going back to finish [college]."

After his second departure from college, Ivey moved to Chicago to try and find a new environment and start over; however, Ivey explained that this was where some of his darkest days occurred.

"Things got dark for me [in Chicago]. I was essentially homeless, and I would intentionally eat out of garbage cans," said Ivey. "I would not want to spend the money that I would have for food on food, but instead on drugs and alcohol."

Ivey said that he reached a point where he realized he needed to make a significant lifestyle change. In 2022, he entered a rehabilitation pro-

gram to get clean and turn a new page.

"If you ask anyone who's achieved any long-term sobriety, they all say the same thing is that you get to this point where you just get sick of it," said Ivey. "You get sick of your life. You get sick of being dirty. You get sick of being broke all the time. You get sick of eating out [of] trash cans, and you get sick of not having [to] work towards your goals."

During his six months of sober living in a Chicago rehabilitation facility, Ivey found inspiration in the words of a previous Golden Niner.

"I read in the Niner Times and another student source about Ra'Quan Leary. The second Golden Niner was selected and elected in 2022, and I remember reading his advice for people or for students in general," said Ivey. "He said that



Sofia DiStefano/Niner Times

obstacles are not stop signs. They're not something that has to stop you, but they are speed bumps that slow you down."

These words ignited a fire within Ivey, motivating him to face his fears and doubts and pursue what he truly wanted.

Ivey returned to school in January 2023 and graduated in December 2023 after earning the 20 credit hours he needed for his bachelor's degree.

Going back to school for a third time was no easy feat. Ivey owed UNC Charlotte a significant amount of money and had to pay it all off before receiving financial aid again. It was only then that he was able to register for classes.

Alongside the financial difficulties were the social aspects of the process. At 44 years old, in a classroom of 18-22-year-old students, Ivey felt an undeniable disconnect with the rest of his peers.

While most would let the various social and background aspects deter them, Ivey found comfort in his professors and classes. He explained that becoming a teaching assistant (TA) to 90 students and getting to guide them through their academics while also receiving encouragement from his professors and colleagues played a significant role in helping him complete his undergraduate studies.

"After I made the Niner 9, a lot of the professors in the history department allowed me to go and promote the Niner 9 to their classes. So I would speak to 80 students here, 50 students there. And so, after winning, I still see them, they see me, and they're like, 'Hey, congratulations.' That's something that didn't exist before, but now that it has, all I can do is cultivate that and build upon that," said Ivey.

Despite the age difference, Ivey held his head high and got involved. He expressed that there was no time like the present, and he knew he could not push things aside anymore.

Alongside being a TA in Charlotte's history department for an American History Survey class, Ivey is the current president of the Graduate History Association. In that role, he is working on incorporating the graduate and undergraduate history majors to present a forum in April 2025.

Ivey's goal is to become a lawyer, and he thought that dream had passed due to the course of his life so far. After completing his undergraduate studies with a 3.1 GPA, he did not stop there. Ivey wanted to continue his studies now that he was in a good place.

"I knew I could do better because

now, this time, in graduate school, I wouldn't have drugs and alcohol as a deterrent, and I knew that if I removed that blockage, I could excel, which is exactly what I've done," said Ivey.

In December 2024, Ivey celebrated two years of sobriety while achieving a 4.0 GPA and holding the golden pickaxe of the 2024 Golden Niner.

Connecting with the campus community, Ivey says, made him feel golden at UNC Charlotte even before earning the award.

"I won't say that before my name was announced during halftime of the game, I knew I was going to win. However, I did know that I felt like I was the Golden Niner already," said Ivey. "I felt like the connections I had made on campus and the impact that I had, and I'm still going to have, made me feel successful, made me feel like I was a representative of the University."

Throughout this journey, Ivey says his two keys to success have been time management and creating transformational relationships with other Charlotte community members.

"I think that creating transformational relationships is a big component of how I've been able to succeed because no one can do anything alone," said Ivey.

The Charlotte native found a sense of home and pride again by attending UNC Charlotte to complete his degree. Ivey noted many challenges, but Charlotte pushed him to become the best version of himself he had always longed to be.

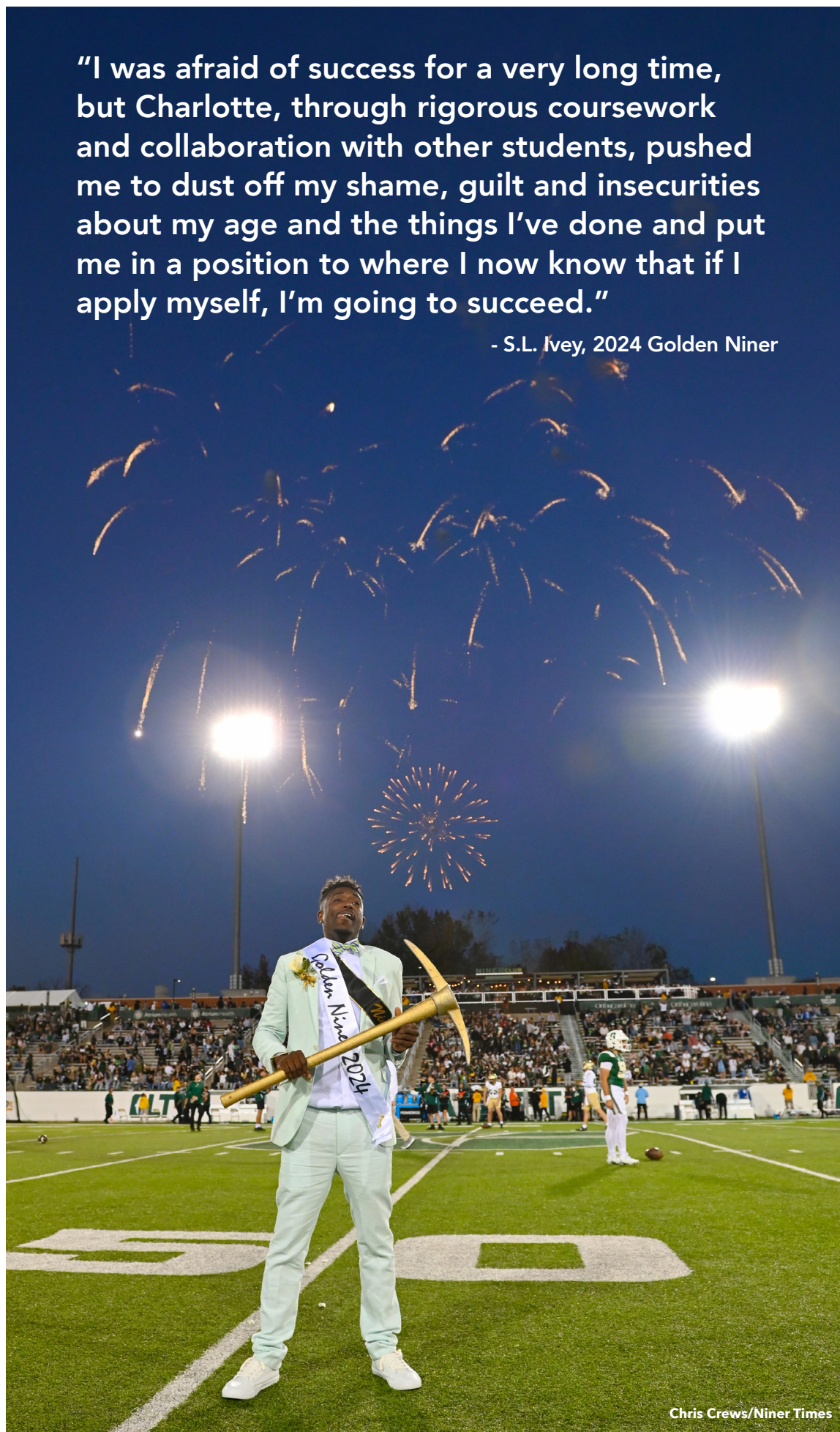
"Charlotte has challenged me to uncover a side of myself that I was afraid of," said Ivey. "I was afraid of success for a very long time, but Charlotte, through rigorous coursework and collaboration with other students, pushed me to dust off my shame and guilt and insecurities about my age and the things I've done and put me in a position to where I now know that if I apply myself, I'm going to succeed."

Above all, Ivey stressed the importance of students learning how to seek help.

"You just have to be honest with yourself about whether you may have a problem. You may have an area where you need help, whether academically, socially, economically or with food insecurity," said Ivey. "Whatever it is, ask for help because it is available to you. Don't be so prideful because [of] the reward on the other side. Once you fill that gap, once you learn the math, or once you conquer your drug addiction or once you get an A on your paper, then you get the real confidence, then you get the real reward."

**"I was afraid of success for a very long time, but Charlotte, through rigorous coursework and collaboration with other students, pushed me to dust off my shame, guilt and insecurities about my age and the things I've done and put me in a position to where I now know that if I apply myself, I'm going to succeed."**

**- S.L. Ivey, 2024 Golden Niner**



Chris Crews/Niner Times

# UNC Charlotte reaches new heights in US News Report as the University approaches R1 status

Wes Packham | Asst. Arts & Culture Editor

The 2025 U.S. News university rankings have been released, highlighting the University's improvement as a UNC system institution, climbing 26 spots since 2024's ranking and 76 since 2020.

UNC Charlotte was ranked No. 152 out of 436 national universities in the 2025 U.S. News Ranking, the highest spot the University has ever received. UNC Charlotte has been rapidly growing in recent years, with record enrollment, retention rates, graduation rates and research expenditures in the past year.

Charlotte is one of the nation's fastest-growing cities, and as its most prominent university, UNC Charlotte's promising growth provides an excellent space for both education and research.

The U.S. News College Rankings is a yearly list of the best universities nationwide. Since its first release in 1983, it has grown to become a credible gauge for an institution's academic standing.

UNC Charlotte also received other notable rankings from U.S. News, apart from its overall national ranking:

- Top Public Schools: No. 81
- Best Value Schools: No. 157
- Top Online Bachelor's Programs: No. 7

U.S. News ranks colleges based on various criteria, each of which is given a different weight in the final ranking. Highly weighted criteria include graduation rates, retention rates, peer assessment and financial indicators such as borrower debt and financial resources per student.

Graduation rates held one of the highest weights at 16%, with Pell Grant graduation rates

also contributing with a 5.5% weight.

UNC Charlotte's graduation rates have steadily increased over the years. Four-year graduation rates have reached over 50%, an improvement from 28% 10 years prior. Six-year graduation rates have grown from 54% to 69%.

Retention rates for first-year students have reached 85%, helping to improve the ranking. University resources such as theUCAE, University Career Center and the University Scholarship Office help improve graduation rates and career performance and reduce borrower debt. These all improve UNC Charlotte's ranking and foster a positive student experience.

UNC Charlotte's administrative leadership has been paramount in accelerating the University's growth. Since becoming chancellor in 2020, Sharon L. Gaber has implemented a 10-year strategic plan for improving multiple aspects of the University, titled "Shaping What's Next."

This initiative has helped mold the University to what it is today and craft a successful future.

"At UNC Charlotte, we are setting records as we move toward becoming the nation's next pre-eminent public research university," said Gaber.

Research activity also contributes to a university's rankings. Citations, their impact and scientific journal publications help a university rank higher.

UNC Charlotte's research expenditures have grown 272% in the past decade. With continued plans to expand and

“With record enrollment this fall, record graduation and retention rates and record research expenditures, there's an unstoppable momentum at Charlotte. Our rise in the rankings reflects the dedication of our faculty and staff, who are deeply committed to transforming the lives of our students.”

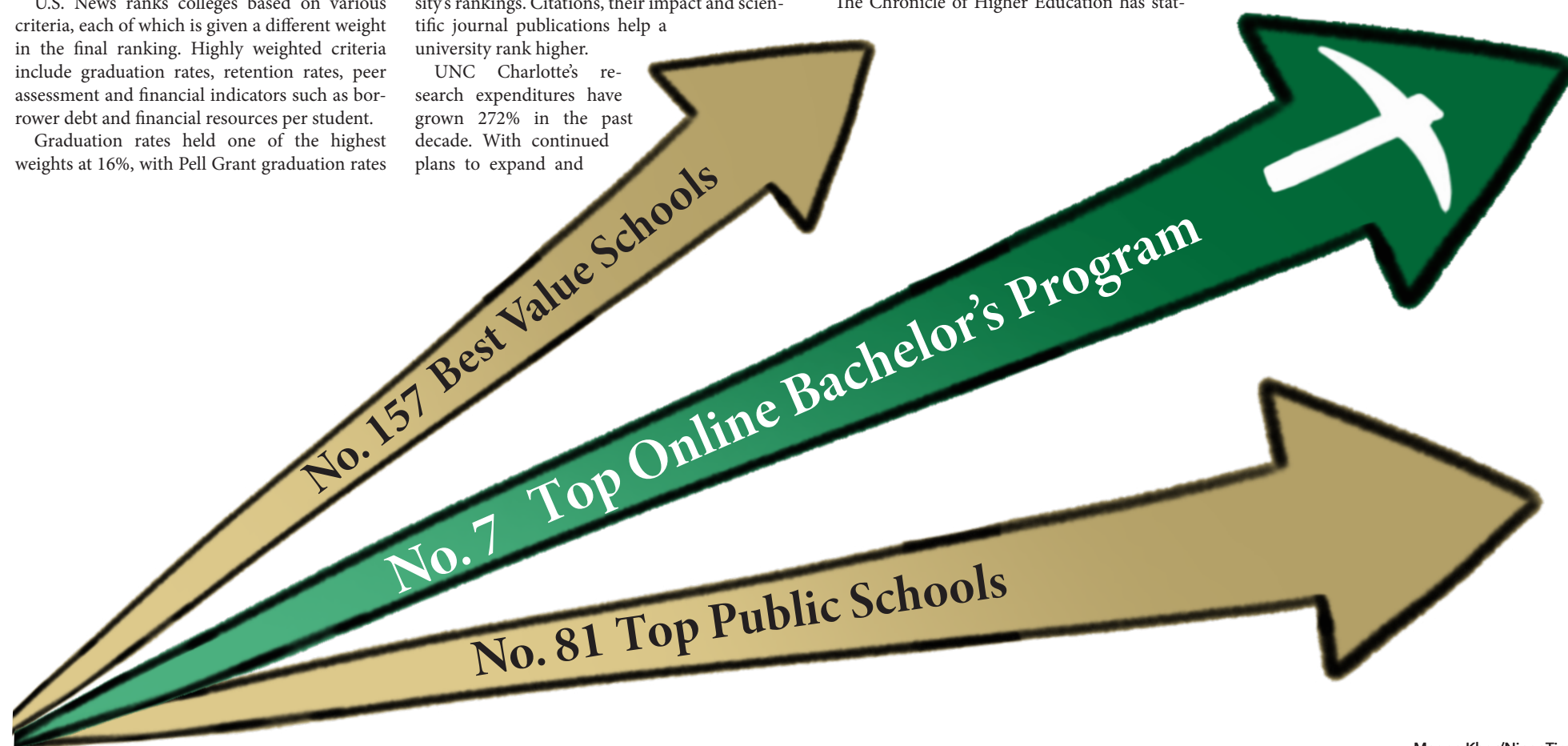
- Chancellor Sharon L. Gaber

improve as a university, UNC Charlotte strives to reach Carnegie R1 research status.

Carnegie R1 is the highest research level a university can attain. To qualify for R1 status, an institution must spend at least \$50 million on research and development and award at least 70 research doctorate degrees.

The Chronicle of Higher Education has stat-

ed that UNC Charlotte qualifies for R1 status in the coming months. If the school reaches R1 status, UNC Charlotte will be the fourth university in North Carolina to reach that status. Other R1 universities include Duke University, UNC Chapel Hill and NC State University.



Megan Khor/Niner Times

# How Trump's presidency could affect college students

Davis Cuffe & Brendan Mullen | Editor-in-Chief & Writing Managing Editor

With Donald Trump's Jan. 20 presidential inauguration on the horizon, widespread changes could take effect, altering the lives of every American, including college students.

While these changes are no guarantee, the Republican majority in the House of Representatives and Senate gives Trump leverage to enforce his policy.

## Loan forgiveness

Trump will inherit soon-to-be former President Joe Biden's legal battle over student loan forgiveness. Biden's Saving on a Valuable Education (SAVE) plan that lowered loan payments for roughly eight million Americans, currently stands in legal limbo. The estimated \$455 billion price tag on the plan has caused the Supreme Court to reject it and Republican Attorneys Gen-

eral to challenge the legality as Biden circumvented Congress to open SAVE.

Biden's second and smaller loan forgiveness plan, dubbed "Plan B," also faces legal push-back from Republican states and was paused by courts, leaving Trump to receive not one but two legal loan battles.

Although Trump has not directly made any comment as to how he may address the plans, he has been clear about his disdain for loan forgiveness.

In his first term, Trump pushed for the elimination of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program but never gained traction on the proposal.

While Trump never directly tied himself to it, the conservative 'Project 2025' agenda bashed previous loan forgiveness policies. "The new Administration must end abuses in the loan forgive-

ness programs. Borrowers should be expected to repay their loans," reads page 322 of the document.

## Imposing Tariffs

As he enters his second term, Trump will continue to reflect his "America First" policy, as he plans to impose several tariffs on U.S. trade partners. Trump cites various reasons, such as increasing national security and trade deal leverage, along with increasing American production, among others, to support his plan.

A widespread increase in tariffs would result in various changes across sectors of the economy and country. These changes are difficult to predict, but, according to several economists, the tariffs, along with promised mass deportations and immigration curbs, will be harmful to U.S. industry in the long run.

Trump's planned tariffs, economists speculate, will lead to increases in costs of resources producers use to make products. These increases may lead to higher prices for consumers in America.

Outside of the nation's borders, widespread tariffs on China and targeted ones on certain sectors of several allied trade partners will cause a decrease in production on account of a reduction in trade.

On the contrary, a decrease in supplies from certain, more advanced countries, such as China, necessitates a growth in the electronic industries on American soil. Additionally, it is important to consider that industries may be deterred from utilizing foreign countries for production, thus potentially bolstering national security and strengthening supply chains within the U.S.

## Education

During his 2024 campaign, Trump promised to make a number of changes within the Department of Education (DoE). The changes include the elimination of what Trump describes as 'woke' indoctrination in the classroom and a significant downsizing or dismantling of the DoE as a whole.

Trump faults the DoE for focusing too much on promoting 'woke' in the classroom, ultimately leading to a decline in overall academic standards. The effects of a downsizing or outright elimination of the department are hard to say, as the DoE handles a wide variety of areas regarding education; however, it is vital to note that Trump would first have to gain congressional approval to make any changes, but the changes could lead to several significant changes in federal education oversight.

Additionally, as part of his efforts to remove 'woke' from classrooms, Trump would continue to make federal funding cuts to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and reallocate those funds elsewhere. Many critics have expressed that these

cuts may harm marginalized groups by hindering their student populations.

Trump also aims to shift who holds power in the classroom by reducing the federal government's role in schools and moving to local and state governments. This decentralization could result in varied curriculum across different schools in the nation.

Trump advocates for universal choices for parents when deciding where to send their child to school, whether private, public or charter. This could result in policy redirecting funding to private schools, affecting public schools and possibly student demographics.

## Mass deportations

Although it is unclear how and if Trump's campaign promise of mass deportations will happen, his steadfast dedication to the act and support from the House and Senate means the deportations are more than likely.

An analysis of the 2021 American Community Survey done by the American Immigration Council estimated that over 408,000 undocumented students attended U.S. universities. Trump's deportation plan would mean the removal of these students, who comprise an estimated 1.9% of all U.S. college students.

For students with undocumented parents, this could mean reconsidering sending in their FAFSA applications.

The application asks for the applicant's parents' social security numbers and gives a separate section for those whose parents do not have proper documentation. This leaves families in fear of the form's data being used to identify individuals for deportation.

The National College Attainment Network validated those fears, writing that it "cannot assure mixed-status students and families that data submitted to the US Department of Education, as part of the FAFSA process, will continue to be protected" in a November 2024 post on their website.

Along with the immediate effects, an estimate by the Center for Migration Studies of New York projected that undocumented immigrants make up 5.2% of the U.S. workforce. The deportation of this large portion of the workforce and the expense to do so would negatively impact the economy but could also open work opportunities for American citizens.

## Looking forward

Although plans and promises have been made, as Trump has yet to take office and begin enacting change, the impact of his second term is subject to speculation.

Trump will officially take office and the role of America's president at noon on Jan. 20, following the presidential inauguration ceremony in Washington, D.C.





# How a former Olympic bobsledder has won Charlotte 44 conference championships

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

In 1998, Charlotte track and field and cross country Head Coach Bob Olesen was hired as an assistant coach just months after competing in the 1998 Olympics for bobsledding.

Twenty-six years later and far removed from his bobsledding glory days, Olesen has built a dynasty under the lights of Charlotte's Irwin Belk Track and Field Center.

Olesen, the 44-time conference champion and 35-time conference coach of the year, stands as Charlotte's most accomplished head coach on campus, and his office tells the tale.

Since his arrival to the program, Olesen has been racking up accomplishments, leaving the walls and shelves with little room for anything but a gold-plated plaque.

Despite the overwhelming quantity of awards in his office, his desk is almost bare outside of framed pictures of his family. Not alone in his track stardom, his daughter Elizabeth holds Charlotte's No. 3 all-time mark in the high jump, and his son Thomas ranks No. 4 all-time in the heptathlon.

Thomas and Elizabeth are not the only athletes who have had success under Olesen. In his 23 years as head coach, he has helped 75 different athletes to conference championships and 300 to all-conference honors.

With many of the typical coaching accomplishments already marked off, Olesen now takes special pride in seeing the growth of his athletes.

"I mean, you never get tired of winning cham-

ampionships, but there's always that next athlete to build that individual relationship with and see that improvement," said Olesen. "Whether that's someone that makes the last spot on the travel squad, that's almost as exciting to see the development in an athlete like that over a few years as to see someone on the top of the podium."

A testament to Olesen's expertise in athlete development is Riley Felts, a 2024 Charlotte graduate who spent five years under Olesen, who coaches athletes in jumps and combined events while acting as head coach.

Felts, one of nine finalists for NCAA Woman of the Year, tacked on an entire meter to her personal best in her time at Charlotte and is currently the school record holder for pole vault.

While Olesen credits Felts' work ethic for her success, he says providing the environment for them to succeed is the fuel for individual success with athletes like Felts.

"You know, I don't count myself as a super 'rah-rah' motivator, but I'm darn sure to make sure that they have the right spikes and they get to the right track meets and we have everything right," said Olesen.

Although he now guides athletes to the podium from afar, 35 years ago, Olesen found himself atop the podium as the Big Ten triple jump champion for the University of Illinois.

With the Fighting Illini, Olesen earned lifetime bests of 7.83m in the long jump and 16.38m in the triple jump. The team MVP in 1990, he first joined the program as a walk-on. Olesen's triple jump mark bests the school record at Charlotte and earned him a trip to the Olympic trials in 1992.

Unfortunately, Olesen did not reach the Olympics in 1992 but would make the trip in 1998, six years later, on a different kind of track.

Following the 1994 Olympics, Olesen was training for the decathlon at Texas State University when a colleague offhandedly recommended he try out for the Olympic bobsledding team. With the 1994 Olympics just wrapped up, the U.S. Olympic Federation was out of athletes and recruiting hard in search of someone like Olesen.

In preparation for the tryout, he rented a copy of the 1993 film "Cool Runnings," a movie about Jamaican bobsledders, to learn the basics of the sport. As Olesen did not have a spare bobsled to practice with, his first attempt at the event was at the tryout, which he won.

"Come to find out later, I actually broke their record for their testing that day," said Olesen. "They didn't tell me at the moment, but he was like, 'If you stay healthy and stick with us, I think there's a really good chance that you could be a member of our Olympic team in Japan in 1998.'"

“I mean, you never get tired of winning championships, but there’s always that next athlete to build that individual relationship with and see that improvement.”

- Bob Olesen, track and field head coach

After calling his wife to talk over the opportunity, Olesen's bobsledding career began.

Putting his coaching career on hold, Olesen went all in on bobsledding for four years, traveling the world for world cups and competitions.

"It was surreal to just have some vague notion of what bobsledding is in June, and then pushing one of them down the hill in November, in Calgary, Canada, at my first race," said Olesen.

While his entry to the sport was later than that of other athletes, Olesen excelled.

He earned the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee bobsled athlete of the year award in 1995 and 1996 and won bronze medals in both two-man and four-man events in the 1997 Bobsledding World Championships.

His combination of strength, size and speed from track made the transition to the sport easy. After years of trying to stay slim for track, his coach's first request was for Olesen to put on extra muscle for the event, an easy task for Olesen.

Just four years after his first race, Olesen qualified for the Olympics and found himself in Nagano, Japan, for the 1998 Winter Olympics.

"We had been to Japan the year before for a preview event, so we kind of knew what to expect, from just an experience standpoint of being in Japan, but it's just different when you're there for the Olympics; it's almost so big, it's hard to really take in and wrap your mind around the experience, it was just a fantastic time," said Olesen.

After placing No. 7 in the Olympics and considering his options, Olesen stepped away from the sport.

His daughter had just been born in April before the Olympics, and he wanted to return to coaching and spend more time with his growing family.

"The [Olympic] Federation really wanted me to continue. They wanted me to transition into being a bobsled driver," said Olesen. "But it just didn't fit where I was heading for the rest of my

life. For the next two years, when I was here in Charlotte, I would get a call in the summer, and they'd say, 'Hey, are you interested in coming back?' And I was like, 'No.' After the second year, they gave up on me."

Even with his days as a competitor behind him, Olesen says his experience competing as a walk-on and as an Olympian helped him level with his team.

As a former walk-on, he tries to take time to take care of all 125 athletes on the track and field team.

While the inflated roster can be a lot to handle at times, it was Olesen's vision to expand the team as an assistant coach in his early days at Charlotte.

Olesen's assistant coaching days under David Hall were during some of the program's founding years after Charlotte's track team started in 1991. At the time of his 1998 entrance, the team was comprised of just 20 men and 20 women, and the Irwin Belk track facility was just two years old.

Looking at all the changes the program has undergone in his tenure, Olesen takes extra pride in the team's roster expansion.

"Some teams might focus on the distance and cross country side and kind of leave the other areas unattended. I've always wanted to be true to all those different events," said Olesen. "When you do that, it allows many opportunities for athletes. So that's important to allow as many student-athletes as we can handle the opportunity to participate. As a result, it helps us to win championships."

Unfortunately for Olesen, this roster-building philosophy may need to change.

As a result of a recent settlement agreement with the NCAA, new regulations would cap track and field rosters at 45 per birth sex. This would cut down Charlotte's roster by 35 athletes.

The ink has yet to dry on these changes,

but Olesen knows this would pose a challenge to his program.

"I'm hoping that we'll still be able to keep forging forward and then be as successful as we've been," said Olesen. "It is going to be challenging because we've got to figure out how to fit what we've been doing into these new restrictions."

Still, with new challenges on the way and a never-ending supply of athletes to coach, Olesen will continue to rely on his tried-and-true philosophy of consistently giving his athletes exactly what they need.

"When somebody gets into the program, and they just see that pretty well-oiled machine as far as supporting them, they can't say, 'Well, I don't have a good coach, or I don't have the right spikes, or we don't have the right pole vaulting poles,'" said Olesen. "It's all gonna be on you to develop as an athlete and be able to contribute to the program."



Courtesy of Bob Olesen & Bridgeman Images

# In with the new: Charlotte football begins rebuilding process under Tim Albin

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

Following the dismissal of Charlotte football Head Coach Biff Poggi and the 49ers' season concluding, the forecasted mass exodus of players and staff came to fruition, leaving newly hired Charlotte football Head Coach Tim Albin to rebuild the program.

While the roster and staff are still in the works, the 49ers are on their way to fielding an all-new roster with many key contributors already signed.

## On-field additions

Arguably, the most notable of the 14 commits in the young class is quarterback Conner Harrell, who will enter his junior season at Charlotte after transferring from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). With freshman quarterback Deshawn Pur-

die's entrance into the transfer portal, Harrell will be in contention for the starting spot in 2025.

At UNC, Harrell started one game in 2024, notably against Charlotte, and threw for 219 yards and two scores, adding 39 yards and a score on the ground. In his career, Harrell has seen snaps in 11 games with the Tar Heels and totaled 552 yards, four touchdowns and three interceptions through the air, adding 130 yards and two scores on the ground.

If Harrell earns the starting spot, he will face off against his former team when the now Bill Belichick-led Tar Heels come to Charlotte on Sept. 6.

Harrell will compete for that spot with fellow transfer quarterback Grayson Loftis, who played just 10 miles down the road from Harrell at Duke University last season.

While Loftis did not see a start in 2024, he led the Blue Devils in four games last season and threw for 1,006 yards and

eight touchdowns to four interceptions.

Both Loftis and Harrell stood in for their teams during bowl games in 2023, and both were victorious; they will aim to bring that success to a Charlotte program that has not seen a bowl game since 2019.

Supplementing Charlotte's air attack will be running back Donald Chaney Jr., who ranked as the No. 5 high school running back in the country in 2019. Now in his sixth year in college after stints with the universities of Miami and, most recently, Louisville.

In his



Charlotte Football Head Coach Tim Albin (left) and newly signed players Jayden McGowan, Conner Harrell, Parker Startz, Don Chaney Jr., Grayson Loftis and Stellan Bowman. | Courtesy of University of Ohio Athletics & Charlotte Athletics

2024 season with the Cardinals, Chaney totaled 50 carries for 178 yards and three touchdowns. As four of Charlotte's five top rushers have transferred, Chaney will likely lead the Charlotte rushing attack in 2025.

Amplifying the transfer class on the offensive side of the ball is wide receiver Jayden McGowan from Boston College, who will enter his fourth year with the 49ers.

McGowan started in 11 games last season for the Commodores but was primarily used as a punt returner and did not see much action, totaling two receptions for zero yards.

However, two years before, McGowan was a solid contributor for Vanderbilt University. In the two-year stint, he hauled in 80 receptions for 836 yards and two touchdowns and was involved in the run game, turning in 32 carries for 160 yards.

Defensively, Albin has brought in a pair of playmakers from his former school to uplift his unit.

The first to sign was linebacker Stellan Bowman from Ohio University. In 2024, Bowman totaled 24 tackles and one forced fumble.

Following Bowman comes Parker Startz, who did not play in his freshman season in 2024 with

the Bobcats but was a four-star recruit out of high school before signing to Ohio.

### Staff signings

Named Charlotte football's head coach on Dec. 7, Albin arrives to Charlotte after four seasons as Ohio's head coach. After a 3-9 year in his first year as head coach, Albin led the Bobcats to a 30-10 record over the next three years, winning 10 games in each of the following seasons.

The 2024 season marked Albin's 20th year with the Bobcats after joining in 2005 as offensive coordinator. Albin's high-volume passing offense ranked No. 1-8 on the program's all-time top-10 single-season scoring list through the past 10 seasons.

Before coming to Ohio, Albin spent four seasons coaching with the University of Nebraska as an offensive graduate assistant and later running back coach and pass game coordinator from 2000-2003.

Albin's 58-27 overall record as a head coach includes a perfect season at Northwestern Oklahoma State and an NAIA championship in 1999.

His contract details include a \$500,000 yearly salary through 2029 and supplemental payments from Charlotte's athletic foundation of \$400,000

in 2025, 2026 and 2027 and \$500,000 in 2028 and 2029.

Also hailing from Ohio is Clay Finney, who will lead player recruitment and development at Charlotte as Director of Player Personnel. Prior to his arrival at Charlotte, Finney spent five years at Ohio as director of recruiting.

Todd Fitch will serve as the associate head, quarterbacks coach and offensive coordinator for Charlotte.

Fitch has coached at 13 different schools, but he most recently was an offensive analyst for Louisiana State University in 2024 and Ohio State University from 2021-2023. He has been coaching since 1986 when he was an assistant at Ohio Wesleyan University.

Leading the charge defensively will be Nate Faanes, who acted as co-defensive coordinator for Ohio in 2024 and will now be Charlotte's defensive coordinator and linebackers coach.

A 2015 graduate of Winona State University, Faanes started as a graduate assistant with Ohio and rose to be special teams coordinator in 2019 and co-defensive coordinator before the 2024 season.

In that 2024 season, Ohio's defense ranked No. 3 nationally in rushing yards allowed (90.57) and

No. 10 nationally in total defense (303.1 yards per game).

Rounding out the trio of coordinators is Brian Haines, who served as special teams coordinator and running backs coach at Appalachian State University from 2020 to 2024 and will do the same at Charlotte.

Before coaching at Appalachian State, Haines spent 12 years as an assistant coach in Ohio, working as a tight ends coach and later as a recruiting and special teams coordinator.

### Work to be done

Although the picture is starting to become clearer about what Charlotte's team might look like in 2025, the roster is far from complete.

The 49ers lost over 35 players to the transfer portal and have only brought in 14 players to make up those losses.

With their annual spring game expected to take place in late April, Albin and his staff will have to scramble to assemble a roster that will compete with UNC and the University of Georgia in 2025.





Chris Crews/Niner Times

# Charlotte men's basketball gains perspective through international experiences

Zane Hincke | Contributor

When looking at the history and progress of basketball, there is no doubt that the game has grown.

While the NBA plays its games in majority within U.S. borders, the league's reach has grown far beyond the 'national' in the National Basketball Association.

NBA players Victor Wembanyama, Nikola Jokić and Luka Dončić are all household names and some of the league's biggest stars.

Since James Harden's MVP in 2018, there has not been an American-born MVP since, with the likes of Giannis Antetokounmpo and Jokić standing in as perennial MVP candidates. And the world has taken notice; according to a 2024 Forbes report, 75% of the NBA's social media following comes from outside the United States.

In every facet, basketball has grown to international influence, and Charlotte is no exception. Men's basketball Head Coach Aaron Fearne hails from the land down under, bringing the Australian mentality to the Charlotte men's basketball team from the top down.

Before coming to Charlotte, Fearne played and coached for the Cairns Marlins of Australia's men's basketball organization, the National Basketball League (NBL). After two years playing with the Marlins, Fearne acted as head coach of the team from 2008 to 2017 and led them to two finals appearances, earning NBL Coach of the Year in 2017.

"The Australian style is a very physical, aggressive kind of league. I coach that way, and I want our guys to play that way," said Coach Fearne during the 49ers' season-opening press conference in 2024.

## Finding their way to Charlotte

Two other foreign-born contributors to the 49ers this season are graduate student forward Nika Metskhvarishvili and redshirt sophomore

forward Aleks Szymczyk. Both are European players who have found their way across the pond and to the city of Charlotte.

For both players, the journey to Charlotte and through the sport has been long and winding, making the transition to America and a new style of basketball particularly challenging.

"For 19 years, I'd been in the same country, and really quickly, I had to move all the way to the USA away from family. It was really challenging," said Metskhvarishvili.

A Georgian national, Metskhvarishvili started his collegiate career in Kansas at Seward County Community College (SCCC). At SCCC, he scored 67 points and started three games. After stops at Ranger College and the University of Louisiana Monroe, Metskhvarishvili found his way to Charlotte.

"[The] culture and everything was really different. It took me some time to get used to [Charlotte]," said Metskhvarishvili. "I couldn't really get along with people at first, but since then, everything has been really good."

The latter of the duo, Szymczyk, has had a fairly different experience in his American basketball journey. Szymczyk is from Frankfurt, Germany, and signed with the 49ers on May 20, 2024.

"For me, I always wanted to play in the U.S. It's always been a dream of mine," said Szymczyk. "At first, I did a high school exchange here [in the U.S.] my sophomore year."

The COVID-19 pandemic cut Szymczyk's high school experience short and sent him back to Germany, where he completed high school. Making his way to the States, Szymczyk was recruited to the University of Florida, but injury set him back.

Later, he transferred to Charlotte partly due to Fearne's international experience.

"We have Coach Fearne, who is also inter-

national, so it makes things easier for us," said Szymczyk.

Metskhvarishvili agrees, "Since the beginning, it's made us connect better because he understands where we come from."

## A look at the differences

Not only was there a major cultural transition for these two, but the game of basketball is different in America.

According to Metskhvarishvili, European basketball is characterized by a slower, more deliberate pace. Szymczyk highlighted that the European approach is more disciplined, focusing on structured play-by-play, in stark contrast to what he called the 'run-and-gun' style typical in the United States.

The differences between basketball in Europe and America extend even beyond game-day experiences. For Charlotte, athletes' game days follow a highly structured routine, which repeats over and over until the final buzzer sounds. However, for amateur basketball players in Europe, the experience is much different.

"In Georgia, they would give us a time to get to the gym. You have to take care of food and warm up yourself," said Metskhvarishvili. The European side of basketball fosters a 'show up and play' mentality with a less strict atmosphere. In Charlotte, however, one big effect of the college experience of basketball is fan engagement, as Szymczyk particularly noted the 'Pride of Niner Nation' Marching Band and the energy of the Gold Mine.

## Making their mark

The international experiences of Metskhvarishvili and Szymczyk have given them unique experiences that extend beyond the court. Szymczyk and Metskhvarishvili have met a di-

verse range of people throughout their careers, fostering personal growth along the way.

"I would say this makes it easier to communicate with different people with different backgrounds," said Szymczyk, expressing gratitude for the opportunity to learn from diverse cultures.

Metskhvarishvili credited his time with the Georgian national team for helping him immerse himself in various cultures. "I would have to travel a lot with the national team to 15 different countries," said Metskhvarishvili. "I've always been pretty open to exploring new traditions [and] new cultures."

This open-mindedness has not only eased their transitions to the college experience but also enriched their contributions to the team. Their gratitude and joy for the game are refreshing in today's competitive college basketball landscape.

Metskhvarishvili and Szymczyk's stories reflect a broader trend in basketball, as organizations like the NBA actively nurture international talent through initiatives like the NBA Academy.

The NBA Academy, launched in 2016, operates year-round in regions like Europe, Australia and Mexico, offering high school-age prospects opportunities to maximize their potential through exhibition games, international tournaments and academic support.

A report by Ogletree Deakins highlighted that in 2022, up to 15% of first-year men's basketball athletes were from overseas. Considering that the percentage was only first-year players and a report from three years ago, the numbers only continue to progress.

Ultimately, the diverse backgrounds of Metskhvarishvili and Szymczyk enrich Charlotte men's basketball, fostering a culture of resilience, growth and international influence.

# Charlotte's Gold Dusters: The spirit behind Niner Nation

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

The 2024-2025 academic year concludes as a bittersweet one for the Charlotte Gold Dusters, as it marks the last season for co-captains Halle White and Madigan Lambert and a significant period of growth for the team.

Head Coach Tess Ripepi is no new face to the Charlotte dance team. The Charlotte alumna danced on the team and has seen firsthand the generational improvement the program has gone through.

After graduating, Ripepi returned as an assistant coach and moved into the head coach role three years ago.

Although many aspects of the team, such as the choreography, uniforms and opportunities for the program, have varied, Ripepi highlighted how the family-like environment has always remained a constant.

"I tried out going into my freshman year, and I was on the team, and I still keep in touch with the girls that I was on the team with," said Ripepi. "They were bridesmaids in my wedding [and are] aunts to my children now. The relationships that you build on a team are so genuine and long-lasting, and that's one of the amazing things about being on the team."

Ripepi explained that although every game day is fun, the team is responsible for bringing positive energy, rain or shine, to the rest of Niner Nation.

"Our job is to go out and get that crowd hyped up, as well as the team that's playing. It's our job to keep them engaged," said Ripepi. "The team that's on the field or on the court feeds off of the energy from the crowd, and so that's one of the biggest things; we're a liaison between the crowd and the players, and the energy that is brought into the stadium or onto the court."

Ripepi highlighted how there would be no team without her two captains this season. White and Lambert, both fourth-years, have been with the program since their first year at UNC Charlotte. For Ripepi, the choice behind selecting the captains was easy.

"I think, as a coach, especially on a collegiate level, a lot of what we teach and educate the girls on is life skills, more so than dance skills," said Ripepi. "[White and Lambert] led through action in years past, and I've gotten to know them over the last few years. They're great girls, and they're great examples to our underclassmen. So it is a smooth process and transition on my end."

Throughout the past few years, the program has been able to increase its intensity with training and preparation for every performance. With practices three times a week during football season and weekend games, the group remains busy.

During the basketball season, the group has to perform at numerous games a week, which requires more practice and time devoted to per-

fecting the choreography.

Preparation for their game day performances begins during the summer; Ripepi and the rest of the coaching staff finalize the choreography before semester practices so that the team can spend time perfecting the craft of the various numbers.

The group rotates between jazz and hip-hop numbers to avoid too much repetition during their performances.

On top of perfecting the choreography, the visual and sound aspects of the numbers play a significant role. Ripepi explained how the formations always need to be neat and perfected since the group is performing for a crowd that is far away rather than on a typical stage. Additionally, song selections can change the crowd's mood even during a losing game.

Another one of the many focuses of the group is to bring the Charlotte alumni and students into a tight-knit community during the game.

"Even if one of the teams we're cheering for is down by 20 points, we still know how to have a good time with each other. I think we kind of joke about it here and there, but win or lose, we always say that the Gold Dusters are winning because we have fun together," said Lambert.

Co-captains White and Lambert have dedicated their lives to dance and explained how joining the Gold Dusters made their college experience

even more special.

"I definitely wouldn't have the same college experience that I've had if I didn't have this team; it would have been a big regret if I decided not to try out my freshman year," said White.

The two captains said that although this year was a learning curve, strong role models in years before prepared them for the task as they stepped into their positions as captains.

"Having good captains when we were underclassmen helped prepare us for the school, and being so close with the girls on the team, it's not hard to be there for them and they feel comfortable with us, which is also a bonus," said White.

Looking forward, the group wants to see more recognition for their hard work and dedication to the team. Ripepi also expressed her desire to introduce scholarship opportunities to the students involved in the program.

"I would love for dance teams to be recognized as a sport and to be able to provide scholarship opportunities to our dancers because they work tremendously for so many other student-athletes," said Ripepi. "For them to have that recognition would be great. To have that support, we'd be able to recruit and have incredible dancers every single year, as well as the resources to continue that training."



Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

# Ranking the top movies of 2024

Nathan De Souza | Staff Writer

Courtesy of IMDb

This year was a time of recovery. The 2023 writers' and actors' strikes caused delays in production schedules and film releases, influencing studio strategies, which made it challenging for studios to release movies according to their planned schedule. Despite facing huge hurdles with the labor strikes, 2024 has been a fantastic year for movies.

It is that time of the year again. With award season buzzing with talent and box office records still being broken by movies like "Inside Out 2" and "Deadpool & Wolverine," it is 2025, so here is the list of the best movies recognized for 2024.

## 5. "The Wild Robot," directed by Chris Sanders

An intelligent robot called Roz (Lupita Nyong'o) ends up stranded on an island. To survive the harsh environment, Roz uses built-in abilities to adapt to the harsh conditions only to find island animals to bond with.

While connecting with the animals, a baby goose named Brightbill (Kit Connor) finds Roz, who makes it her objective to care for the orphaned animal.

"The Wild Robot" is one of the best movies of the year and was also a great theater experience. The film tackles themes of motherhood, social alienation, togetherness and grief.

Its beautiful animation style enhances the voice performances of the star-studded cast, who deliver emotional lines that will bring tears to anyone watching. Visually stunning and charmingly made for one of the best, not just animated, films of the year.

## 4. "Conclave," directed by Edward Berger

Following the unexpected death of the Pope, Cardinal Lawrence (Ralph Fiennes) is assigned

to manage the ancient ritual of electing a new one. Through the voting process for the new Pope, Lawrence finds himself in the middle of a conspiracy that could have drastic consequences for the Catholic Church.

"Conclave" has been making rounds early in the awards season and deserves all of it, as it is a masterfully directed film by Berger with an amazing high-caliber performance from none other than Ralph Fiennes. This film is a political, slow-burn thriller with amazing cinematography and a string-heavy score that enhances the intensity of certain scenes where the Cardinals get together and begin their voting process.

The interesting part of this film would be the structure. The story is structured as a murder mystery where we gradually learn more information about the Cardinals as it progresses. As we begin to discover secrets and whispers, they end up playing out differently than expected. "Conclave" is a must-watch for a captivating and absorbing encounter that balances themes like power, faith and doubt.

## 3. "Anora," directed by Sean Baker

Anora (Mikey Madison), a young sex worker, finds herself an opportunity for love when she meets and boldly marries a young man (Mark Eidelstein) she meets at work. As she discovers that the young man is the son of an oligarch, the public finds out that he is married and her twisted "Pretty Woman" story comes crashing down.

In life, there are ups and downs. Baker emphasizes the comedy through trauma, and "Anora" is a prime example. This film is a realistic take on the "Pretty Woman" story where Baker asks what happens when a heavily coded love story unveils itself to the harsh reality of the world.

Performances are the key takeaways here. Madison is fantastic, and this is her career-de-

fining role. She brings such rawness and authenticity to her performances that it felt natural to watch her navigate this path of lust and love while dealing with unfortunate living conditions.

The performances are supplemented by the astonishing visuals that add layers to the story. There are static parallel camera shots that tell a story with no dialogue that impacts the story in a deeply nuanced fashion. "Anora" is one of the most intimate movies that disguises itself as a dark humor tale of love and trust. It is a front-runner for Best Picture in the upcoming award season.

## 2. "The Substance," directed by Coralie Fargeat

Fading celebrity Elisabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore) decides it is time for a change when she orders a drug from the black market that essentially is a cell-replicating substance that temporarily creates a younger, better version of herself by the name of Sue (Margaret Qualley).

If you are a fan of horror/sci-fi, "The Substance" should be next on your list. This film expresses high-level writing combined with beautiful visuals that make it one of the darkest yet most beautiful films of 2024.

This film has Moore explore emotions that give such relatability to the character and makes the audience feel her pain as she sees a better version of herself steal the limelight from her. Qualley plays off Moore brilliantly to create a haunting dynamic between the two.

This is one of the more gorgeous-looking films of the year. The vibrant colors pop, and at some times, the colors are darker and grey, giving off the two different mental states of the characters to show the masterful visual storytelling from director Fargeat. "The Substance" is a body horror that is grounded in reality and is a human sto-

ry about the dangers of body comparison and learning to love yourself.

## 1. "Dune: Part Two," directed by Denis Villeneuve

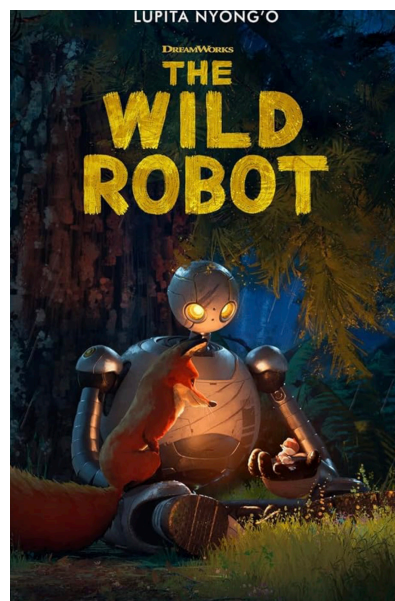
Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet) unites with Chani (Zendaya) and the Fremen while on a path of vengeance against the houses that destroyed his family legacy. Atreides is challenged to either stay with the love of his life or fight for the fate of the universe while being troubled with visions of the foreseeable future.

"Dune: Part Two" is the best movie of 2024. The scale of this film is amazing and a daunting task for a director, but Villeneuve is no stranger to creating immersive sci-fi worlds. This is the type of movie you ask yourself every five minutes, 'How in the world did they film that?' The cinematography is perfect, and it is important to credit the director of photography and cinematographer, Greig Fraser, for having the capabilities to compile such an impressive, awe-inducing film.

Performance-wise, the cast is in another stratosphere. Chalamet demands his presence as Atreides when dealing with the fate between the universe and his love; he balances those two heavy emotional decisions with so much depth that it is impressive to see on screen.

Austin Butler, as Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen, was a stand-out as the psychotic nephew to the Harkonnen house. The immaculate sound design, stellar music, multi-dimensional story and characters and spectacular action, all work together to create one of the best movies of 2024.

Read more at  
[ninertimes.com](https://www.ninertimes.com)



# Opinion: The ‘Wicked’ marketing is the only thing about it worth loathing

Ava Harris | Asst. Opinion Editor

“Starbucks, Mattel, LEGO, you name it, there’s a ‘Wicked’ collaboration involved,” said ABC news reporter Will Ganss in ABC’s “The Year.” With 450 promotional partners raking in \$350 million in media value and \$150 million spent by its studio in prints and advertising, this niche, underground film has certainly been able to get its name out there.

That is, of course, sarcasm. “Wicked,” first a book and then a renowned Broadway musical, has been around since 1995. The story of the city of Oz has been in the ether for decades longer. As a film that was already highly anticipated, why is there a need for this obscene, unprecedented and often irksome display of marketing? It seemed as though there was nowhere to go to escape the “Wicked” logo for the last four months, and pink and green got old quickly.

Not only is the “Wicked” marketing unnecessary and exasperating, but it takes away from the essence of the film. The story of Glinda and Elphaba, the movie’s main characters, can be interpreted in many ways. Whether the ostracization of Elphaba is a metaphor for racism or Glinda’s eventual rise to power is a metaphor for the ascent of a fascist regime, at the surface level, “Wicked” is still a beautifully told story of acceptance, growth and a complex relationship between unlikely friends.

The production of the film itself has the same care and detail implemented as the story. Countless pieces of Munchkinland, Shiz University, the train to Oz and Emerald City were primarily crafted by human hands with very minimal CGI in use. As many of us know, stars of the film Ariana Grande and Cynthia Erivo were immensely dedicated to their roles, even singing live on set rather than using a musical track, which ultimately did both of their characters great justice.

This is not to mention the costume design, the choreography, the makeup work, all of the other cast members who made the film great and the director with the vision to make it all happen. All of this time, effort, heart and soul put into this film just to have the quintessential “Wicked” riff at the end of a Target commercial. It almost feels disrespectful. What would otherwise be a stunning piece of artwork is now tainted with a putrid air of hyper-consumerism.

While Glinda and Elphaba dolls and costumes seem a normal byproduct of such a whimsical film, many “Wicked” collaborations just did not make sense. Does seeing dramatized clips of the movie really make you want to buy a Lexus? Did the pink and green of Glinda and Elphaba make you want to paint your nails? Did you leave the theater thinking how badly you need a “Wicked”-themed hair dryer?

It can be said that the more you see something,

the more you begin to like it. However, that phenomenon typically happens over time, for example, months of seeing those Birkenstock clogs on occasion for them to finally grow on you. In this case, all of a sudden, having everywhere you turn to be pink and green, or to the tune of that Elphaba riff, is only a bombardment akin to the presidential ads of 2024. Now, perhaps some no longer want to see the movie; they have seen enough of Oz to last a lifetime. The sanctity of the art is ruined, as is its overall likeability.

Of course, “Wicked” still made a ton of money, grossing \$634 million at the box office worldwide because, as stated before, people were excited to see it. Musical theater fans do not mess around. This does not change the fact that the colossal marketing scheme surrounding it left a bitter taste in the mouths of too many viewers.

Much of the world today is about trying to sell things. Some people get out of bed every morn-

ing wondering how best to get others to buy stuff they do not need. Marvel movies, Barbie variations and Disney films have always taken this sort of angle, but “Wicked” took it to a new, perhaps dangerous, level. If this is the precedent set for blockbuster films to come, the art will no

longer be allowed to speak for itself. Instead, screaming over top of it will be a new hair product, a themed drink or another commercial.

One can only hope for the day that people can look at art and stop seeing dollar signs.

“If this is the precedent set for blockbuster films to come, the art will no longer be allowed to speak for itself. Instead, screaming over top of it will be a new hair product, a themed drink or another commercial.”

- Ava Harris, Asst. Opinion Editor





# Opinion: Spotify is putting you into a music echo chamber

Noah Hughey | Staff Writer

By now, hearing discussions about social media putting users into ‘echo chambers’ rarely turns heads. Experts and activists have long warned us that algorithmically tailoring content towards our preferences has led to us drowning in information that overwhelmingly affirms our biases.

But would you believe that Spotify is doing it, too? By basing the app’s algorithm and other vital features on AI, Spotify has created a stilted listening experience that makes it harder for new artists to grow organically.

Spotify has embraced the AI revolution with open arms, replacing human-curated playlists in increasing amounts. They now use AI to read the preferences of each user, feeding them an algorithm of related music, podcasts and audiobooks they might be interested in listening to.

While kept secret, it is known that the model Spotify relies on is called reinforcement learning. It is a kind of machine learning that uses signals such as listening time and increased saves to push more of that content onto users more frequently. This brings users back for that particular niche they are interacting with on the platform.

Functionally, this model feels a lot like a social media algorithm. And much like those algorithms, Spotify’s music experience can become repetitive because of the need to regurgitate the information users are interacting with the most. For listeners, this creates an echo chamber of the same genres and musicians being spoon-fed to them. Spotify’s AI assumes that shoving Sabrina Carpenter’s “Espresso” or episodes of “The Joe Rogan Experience” will keep listeners around, creating a frustrating listening experience.

For musicians, this limits the room for creative freedom. It is one thing to make songs that stretch genre conventions, putting your music in multiple kinds of playlists for Spotify to push on various listeners.

But suppose your music does not neatly fulfill particular genre expectations. In that case, you run the risk of either not being marketed to listeners organically at all or having to buy your way through. Artists would have to use Spotify’s Discovery Mode, a feature that adds additional flags to promote a song on their algorithm, in exchange for lower royalty rates to the artist when that song is played on Spotify’s curated playlists.

The other half of Spotify’s limiting music experience comes from the social aspect of the platform as a consequence of its AI algorithm. “Spotify today is not just about listening to music,” wrote The Dartmouth opinion writer Alexandra Surprenant in early 2024. “It has become a social ecosystem where users curate playlists with a distinct awareness of collective tastes and cultural currents.”

Beyond the app’s algorithm itself mimicking the exclusive nature of social media, we users tend to do the same in our use of Spotify as a social platform. Our ability to cultivate public music and podcast tastes for an audience of followers causes a social self-awareness in our listening habits. We self-enforce ideas of what kinds of music we ought to be listening to and interact with it more so that spectators are made aware of how ‘in’ we are with the cultural movement.

Much the same as the AI powering Spotify’s algorithm, this active use of the app causes us to become trapped in music echo chambers, reinforcing the algorithm’s repetitive recommendations based on our faux interests. Furthermore, we limit any organic exploration of new musi-

cians, genres or styles of music, hurting both us as less well-rounded listeners and musicians who stay undiscovered indefinitely.

Spotify ought to take responsibility for its callous disregard for the sanctity of music. This does not have to mean a regressive undoing of AI’s broad uses for music listeners. What it does mean, however, is that developers should reconsider the barrage of automated content slammed in users’ faces and opt out for more intentional and artist-approved curations.

Listeners, too, bear the responsibility of meaningfully engaging with music. It is easy to pretend music ought to be categorized and stratified due to its exclusive relationship with us as individuals. But music holds a more powerful value beyond this purely aesthetic consumptive model. Music is the sound of human emotion, a raw, untapped source of emotional value unmatched by any other expression. A less normative, more intentional exploration of music will not only lead to more complete listening experiences but a more emotionally rich life.

