

NINERTIMES

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW



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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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Events to watch for on and off campus

Gallery Reception: Mei Mei: Duff Woon Yong
Aug. 28, 6-8 P.M.
Rowe, Rowe Galleries

College Colors Day
Aug. 29, 11-1 P.M.
Barnes & Noble, Popp-Martin Student Union

Charlotte vs UNC Football
Sept. 6, 7 P.M.
Jerry Richardson Stadium

Charlotte vs App State Football
Aug. 2, 7 P.M.
Bank of America Stadium

Climbing Wall Kickoff Opening Night
Sept. 4, 6-8:30 P.M.
SAC

Yiasou Greek Festival
Sept. 5-7, Times Vary
600 East Blvd, Charlotte, NC

NOTES FROM THE NEWSROOM:

This season, don't be that guy

Kelli Blackburn | Sports Editor



Every season, there's that one guy—the one who picks fights with other fans in the stands, screams nasty remarks at a player or floods social media with nothing but negativity.

Maybe that's you, or maybe it's someone you know. Either way, here's a quick reminder for this season: don't be that guy.

What most fans don't realize is that athletes are always playing for something bigger than themselves.

They carry a weight that takes a real mental toll.

For some, it's the chance to make it big, and to support the families who sacrificed to get them here.

For others, it's about honoring the little kid inside of them—the one who fell in love with the game and refused to let go.

Also, for many, it's survival—fighting to keep the scholarship money that allows them to stay in school and chase the future they've

worked for.

Every practice, every rep and every game comes with that weight. It's more than a box score or final record—it's a story of sacrifice.

So this season, remember what's at stake. In the stands, online or walking around campus, don't be the guy who forgets the humanity behind the jersey. Be the fan who respects the grind it takes to write the story behind the scoreboard.





UNC Charlotte Board of Trustees report record enrollment, budget stability in August meeting

Davis Cuffe | Editor-In-Chief

UNC Charlotte's Board of Trustees reported a stable budget and rising enrollment at their first meeting of the academic year last Friday.

The budget's security follows UNC-Chapel Hill's July announcement that it would cut \$70 million from its operating budget due to federal funding decreases and state funding uncertainty.

Charlotte avoided similar cuts because it receives less federal funding than Chapel Hill, leaving it less affected by the reductions. Still, Rich Amon, Charlotte's vice chancellor for business affairs and chief financial and administrative officer, said a campus-wide initiative to constrain spending helped avoid cuts.

Charlotte's operating budget of over \$476 million will now go towards supporting the largest ever student class in 2025, as University Chancellor Sharon L. Gaber reported an unofficial enrollment number of 32,038 students in 2025.

Official enrollment census data will be released on Aug. 29.

Last fall, UNC Charlotte had 31,091 enrolled students. A record number of first-year students contribute to this class's growth.

"We also set a record for first-year enrollment with 4,949 first-year [students], and I didn't even make that number up," Gaber said during her presentation.

Strategic plan shows strong progress, but some goals lag

UNC Charlotte is trending up in most areas, as evidenced by Gaber's presentation during the Committee of the Whole meeting that capped off the day. Gaber mainly focused on the University's progress on her "Shaping What's Next" 10-year strategic plan, which she installed upon her arrival in 2020 to advance the University.

Over the course of four years, the University has surpassed its original 10-year goals in four key areas: average indebtedness of the graduating class, service hours on engagement activities, national university ranking and public national university ranking.

The only goals the University appeared unlikely to meet within 10 years were reaching 32 top-50 graduate programs, where Charlotte was still 20 short, and hiring 1,019 tenure-track faculty and non-faculty researchers, where it remains 280 behind.

That said, Charlotte has six more years to accomplish these goals, and its recent Research 1 (R1) certification will likely aid in its progress.

Risk report highlights federal funding, inflation challenges

Charlotte's chief risk officer, Steven Dunham, provided an update on the top risks that the University currently faces. On his list of top 10 was the following:

- Federal funding impact on research activity
- Regulatory and policy change management
- Inflation
- Athletic financials and funding
- Protests and demonstrations
- Charlotte student market share
- Safety and security
- Enrollment
- Perceived value of four-year degree
- AI-efficiency and productivity

Dunham reported that Charlotte was underperforming in three areas: federal funding impact on research activity, regulatory and policy

change management and inflation.

Dunham explained that while the school was marked as underperforming in these areas, it essentially meant that "the University is facing higher than desired levels of uncertainty for those risks during the reporting period."

All risks outside of safety and security, protests and demonstrations and enrollment were trending up according to Dunham's presentation. No risks were noted to be trending down.

Trustees approve millions for campus renovations

Following the unveiling of the new and improved upper area of the Prospector building during the meeting week, campus construction may not slow down, as the Trustees approved a \$14 million increase for the Witherspoon residence hall renovation and discussed future renovations.

The \$14 million increase accounts for new windows, doors, kitchens, plumbing and fire suppression systems. Witherspoon's renovations are projected to start in the 2027 academic year.

The Trustees also approved funding requests for a \$1.5 million replacement of Lynch Hall's roof, \$1.8 million for new elevators in the Fretwell building, \$1 million for Friday classroom renovations and an \$8.5 million Prospector mid-level refresh.

All funding is contingent on approval from the UNC System Board of Governors, which the Trustees must now request.

With those projects still yet to start, the Trustees also discussed ongoing projects of the \$55.9 million Burson remodeling and expansion and \$60 million Jerry Richardson Stadium expansion projects. Both projects are set to be completed in 2027.

From the UNC Charlotte police logs (8/16 - 8/23)

Davis Cuffe | Editor-In-Chief

The following are descriptions of some incidents in the UNC Charlotte campus police logs from Aug. 16-23.

Aug. 16 Welfare check

Dispatch received a call from a student's parent, unable to reach her son for a day. Officers located him at the 49th Acre; he was fine, cited phone issues and planned to contact his mother.

Aug. 17 Trespass

While at Mecklenburg County Intake, an officer learned CMPD arrested a combative homeless male near Atrium University at W.T. Harris Blvd and Johnson Alumni Way. He attempted to enter campus, but was stopped and issued a trespass order.

Aug. 18 Loitering/trespassing

Dispatch received a call from a soccer coach about five unauthorized males on the field. Officers responded, identified them as students, educated them on field procedures.

Aug. 19 Investigate

Officers responded to Lot #15 for a kitten trapped under a truck hood. The kitten was safely freed and given to a student who volunteered for custody.

Aug. 20 Trespassing

While conducting a Student Union walkthrough, officers saw a previously trespassed individual who fled. She was caught and arrested for breaking and entering and 2nd degree trespassing.

Aug. 20 Animal control

An officer responded to a call describing an injured deer by Belk Hall. The deer fled from the officer once they arrived and animal control was called off.

Aug. 21 Injured subject

An officer on patrol near the NERF Complex observed an individual with missing teeth and a bloody face getting into a vehicle. The officer followed the vehicle to the hospital, where the student was taken to the Emergency Department.

‘All about memory making’: Charlotte Dream Team helps children live out sports dreams



Emily Schenkel | Staff Writer

With the goal of making sports dreams come to life for children with life-altering disabilities and illnesses, UNC Charlotte's Dream Team does just that.

The Dream Team was brought to Charlotte's campus in 2023 and has continued to grow over the last two years, creating a long-lasting impact on those involved.

After interning with the organization "Dream On 3" during the summer after her first year of school, fourth-year student and Dream Team Captain Grace Marlowe found out the nonprofit had launched a collegiate program.

It was then that Marlowe brought the program straight to the Charlotte campus, with the goal of making a difference for the children.

"It's just really special to be a part of this [Dream Team] from the very start," Marlowe said.

The big dream weekend

Each year, the Dream Team gets to make one special kid's dream come true through what they call a "big dream weekend."

A large aspect of Dream Team is the Dream Weekend, where they surprise the Dream Kid for the entire weekend. Two years ago, Eric was the first

Dream Kid at Charlotte, and the Dream Team created his perfect weekend through many surprises.

The team surprised Eric at his house in the morning with a limousine that took him all around Charlotte throughout the weekend, where he was able to practice with the football team, go out to lunch and dinner and get the "ultimate UNC Charlotte experience."

"His dream was to be a part of the basketball team, so later that day we got him out on the court to warm up and practice with the team. He also got to meet the Charlotte Gold Mine and lead his own student section chant," Marlowe said.

The 2024 Dream Kid was a young girl named Janelle, whose dream was to be on the cheer team. Throughout her dream weekend, she was able to stay at Great Wolf Lodge, go to Topgolf and get immersed in Charlotte campus culture.

"Her special day continued with a cheer practice where she learned a couple of our cheers, the fight song and was able to sit court side with me during one of our basketball games and perform during a timeout," Marlowe said.

To make all of this happen, the 20-person Dream Team works to fundraise to put together the perfect Dream Weekend. One of their largest 2025 fundraising events is the 5K they are host-

ing at Gaston Christian High School on Oct. 11. In addition to the 5K, they also plan to host tabling events and partner with local restaurants for percentage nights.

The Dream Team will also be partnering with Charlotte's Club Hockey team, where they are able to attend their games, table at their games and host a "Dream On 3" night at one of the games during their fall season.

"We are especially excited to partner with Club Hockey because our Dream Girl this year will be able to drop the puck at the beginning of a game," Marlowe said.

Charlotte's Dream Team is super excited to meet their upcoming 2025 Dream Girl for this year and give her the perfect weekend. Marlowe said that the girl's mother shared with The Dream Team board that they had just stopped her cancer treatments to be able to spend more time with her.

"It's really important to us that we put our all into this year and that we raise as much money as possible for our new Dream Girl because she really deserves the world and to make all these meaningful experiences with her mom—it's all about memory making, having fun and making her cheerleading dreams come true," Marlowe said.

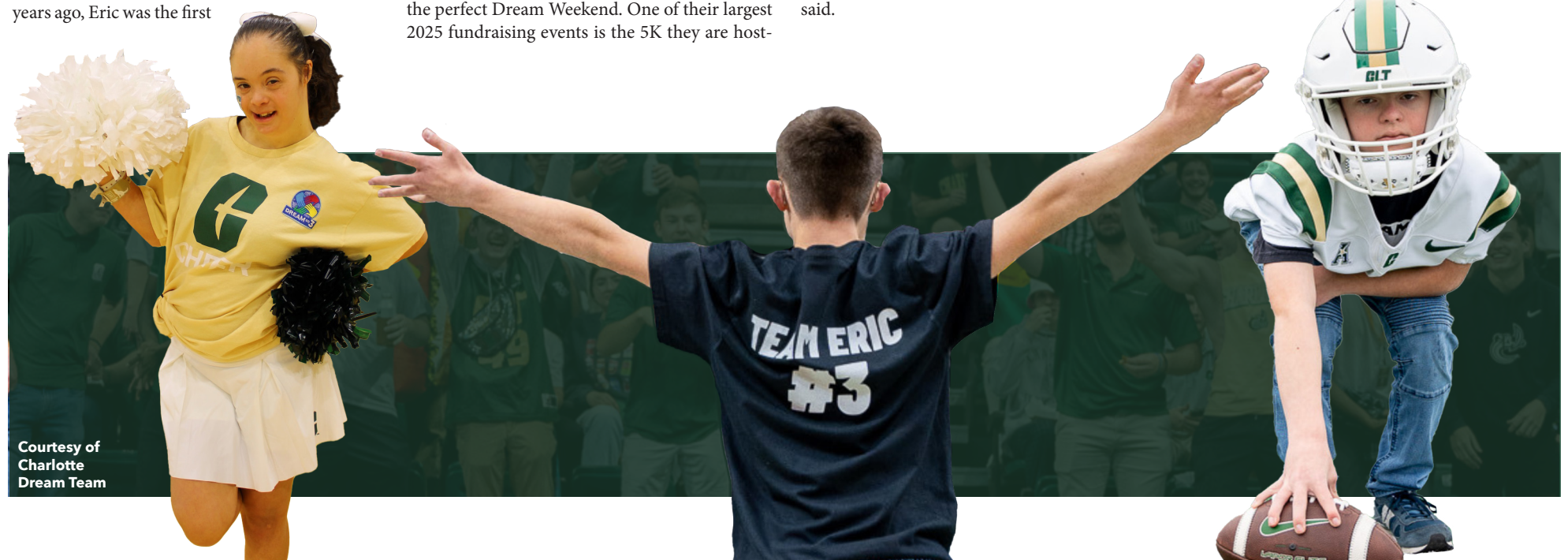
More than just an organization

Fourth-year student and Dream Team Captain, Allie Grice, has been a member of Dream Team throughout her entire college career and has loved getting to know the Dream Kids and watching them truly live through their sports dreams.

"Just getting to spend time with Janelle was incredible. It was like, whenever you would just be around her, she would just light up the room and get so excited when we would do something new," Grice said. "Watching her on the court with Grace was incredible; she was just so excited."

Marlowe emphasized the importance of each minute spent with the Dream Kids, as whether they were making friendship bracelets, going to dinner or cheering during a basketball game, seeing the Dream Kids' smiles during each part is what the entire Dream Team initiative is all about.

"Having those really meaningful connections with the Dream Kids has been really important to me," Marlowe said. "[It's] impactful to see so many college students really rally behind a campus community and a Dream Kid."



Courtesy of
Charlotte
Dream Team

Charlotte voters have until Sept. 9 to choose from 5 Democratic mayoral hopefuls

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

Niner Times File
Richard Nuzzo/Niner Times

With voting for the Democratic primary opening on Aug. 21, five candidates are on the ballot, all of whom are vying for a spot in the Nov. 4 general election.

There will be no Republican primary for Charlotte mayor in 2025 because only one Republican candidate, Terrie Donovan, filed to run.

Ahead of Sept. 9, the final day to cast a vote, here's what voters should know about mayoral hopefuls and their stances on prevalent issues.

Who is on the ballot?

The 2025 candidates for mayor are:

- Vi Lyles (Democratic Party)
- Jaraun 'Gemini' Boyd (Democratic Party)
- Delter Kenny Guinn III (Democratic Party)
- Brendan Maginnis (Democratic Party)
- Tigress Sydney Acute McDaniel (Democratic Party)

The Charlotte primary election date is Sept. 9; however, early voting is already underway, as the election for the next mayor and council members is now open.

Voters will also weigh in on the makeup of the Charlotte City Council, which sets policy on development, transit and city services. Four at-large seats are vacant, alongside single-member seats across the city's seven districts.

Campaign focuses for candidates

Before casting one's vote for a candidate, it's important to know what plans they have and where they stand on the issues of the day.

The following is a brief overview of what each candidate wants to focus on if elected as the 2025 mayor of Charlotte.

Vi Lyles

For Vi Lyles, her fifth campaign in her run for mayor includes her pushing for a one-cent sales tax referendum to fund a transformative mobility plan focused on transportation in Charlotte and specifically funding road, bus and rail proj-

ects. Lyles also plans to focus on the affordable housing crisis, including finding housing solutions for those who are homeless.

Vi Lyles has served the city of Charlotte for eight years, and she is still actively pursuing a fifth term as mayor. If she were to win, it would give her the title of second-longest serving mayor in Charlotte history.

Jaraun 'Gemini' Boyd

Despite being incarcerated at one point in his life, Jaraun 'Gemini' Boyd turned his life around and decided to start Project BOLT. The mission of Project BOLT is to improve the quality of life for marginalized groups in the Charlotte community. The nonprofit aims to help people establish relationships with partners to help them express community concerns and also be the catalyst for the change they need.

This is just one of the many visions Boyd has, as his campaign website shares that he plans to improve not just the quality of life for marginalized groups but also the healthcare, transportation, safety, housing and opportunities for all Charlotteans. Boyd plans to expand mental health resources, invest in workforce development and support the growth of small businesses.

Delter Kenny Guin III

Delter Kenny Guin III has plans for Charlotte. His campaign highlights two major issues that need resolving: homelessness and affordable housing in Charlotte. With a career in banking, Guin III aims to tackle the rising wealth disparity in the Queen City. He highlights the stark contrast between the city's gleaming skyline and the visible rise in homelessness, crime and urban neglect, calling it "unacceptable" on his campaign website. His platform emphasizes passing rent control or rent-capping legislation, expanding affordable housing and ending homelessness by repurposing vacant buildings.

Brendan K. Maginnis

Brendan K. Maginnis is running for Charlotte



mayor on the slogan "Together for a Transparent, Thriving Charlotte," positioning himself as a candidate focused on restoring trust and equity in city government. Prior to running for mayor, Maginnis served in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1993 to 1997. Maginnis pledges to restore trust that community citizens have in the government through public meeting disclosures, spending transparency and stronger accountability.

His platform centers on building 25,900 affordable housing units, creating 8,000 jobs in five years and investing in underserved neighborhoods. He also emphasizes childcare support, community-focused public safety and civic engagement tools.

Tigress Sydney Acute McDaniel

Tigress Sydney Acute McDaniel has previously run in several races. McDaniel ran for a spot on the Mecklenburg County Soil and Water Conservation District, Mayor of Charlotte in 2019 and 2022, and Board of Education at-large; however, she has not yet held elected office.

In her 2025 campaign for mayor of Charlotte, she continues with the slogan, "It's Common Sense," as she advocates for a cultural reset in city leadership. McDaniel has pledged to address a sweeping array of issues, including reducing crime, improving race relations, ensuring sustainable and affordable housing, cleaning the air and water and more.

What to know

While early voting opened Aug. 21, it runs

through Sept. 6. During that stretch, voters can stop by any early voting site in Mecklenburg County, including locations that are not their assigned precinct.

Early voting locations in Charlotte include:

- Allegra Westbrooks Regional Library
- Hal Marshall Annex
- Independence Regional Library
- Marion Diehl Recreation Center
- South County Regional Library
- SouthPark Regional Library
- Steele Creek Masonic Lodge
- University City Regional Library
- West Boulevard Library

For those who missed the Aug. 15 registration deadline, early voting serves as a valuable resource, with same-day registration available. For first-time voters who haven't gone through the registration process before, all you need to bring is a valid photo ID and proof of residence. This could be a pay stub, a bill or a piece of mail.

If interested in sending in an absentee ballot, requests must be in by Aug. 26 and completed ballots must be in by Sept. 9. All absentee ballots must include a photocopy of an approved ID or a completed exemption form.

The super dogs helping UNC Charlotte students smile



Lauren Simendinger | Staff Writer

It's the first week of class. The campus is crowded, you keep getting lost, you're drowning in work, and you are terribly homesick. Then you see a dog.

The J. Murrey Atkins Library regularly hosts therapy dogs for students. A small group of volunteers from the organization Therapy Dogs International (TDI) brings in their dogs, and students are free to hold, pet, lie with or just sit in the presence of them. Whether this is their first time meeting a dog or they have one at home, the dogs never fail to bring a smile to people's faces.

Carol Runion, then the interim dean of Atkins, started the partnership between Atkins and TDI in 2006. She brought in her own dog, a German Shepard named Jasmine. Runion also enlisted the help of fellow handlers Ken and Rosemary Finch, who had a Sheltie named Joy, and Carlene Gogolin and her daughter, who brought their Shih Tzus named Toby, Tessie and Gracie.

TDI does not just serve colleges; volunteers also go to hospitals, libraries and nursing homes. Handlers and dogs must go through rigorous training and pass the course before they can work. The dogs must have a calm temperament, be able to obey commands, walk on a loose leash,

ignore large dogs and crowds, and, of course, be friendly with strangers.

Gogolin started volunteering with therapy dogs because of her daughter. She was interested in working with therapy dogs and found TDI. They took the classes, and the dogs were approved. Both Gogolin and her daughter still volunteer with TDI today, and Gogolin visits UNC Charlotte constantly.

"The best part of having a therapy dog is seeing the love that the dogs give to people and the smile it puts on people's faces," Julie Bosley, a fellow handler, said.

Bosley brought a Border Collie named Lilly. Other handlers on campus for the first week of class included Robert Ruelan, who brought two Golden Doodles called Bindi and Bodie, and Diana Davenport with Wicket the Havanese. Gogolin brought her Miniature Schnauzer named Jeeter and a Shih Tzu named Hartley.

Ruelan started volunteering after he retired, as did Bosley. Davenport was inspired after her coworker had a stroke.

"I wanted to give something back to the community," Ruelan said. "Little did I know how rewarding it would be. I've seen some amazing

things. I've had families hugging on the dogs when their loved one was passing away, and little kids who haven't smiled in days after surgery, all of a sudden start smiling when they see the dogs. I feel like it's a ministry."

It might seem like the importance of this impact carries a heavy weight, but this is not the case at all. Every volunteer smiled and watched as the dogs worked their magic on the students. Davenport even handed out stickers with Wicket's face on them.

"It's amazing just how fulfilling it is to be able to give back to other people through your pet," Davenport said.

The dogs are just happy to be here, too. The joy they feel being with people is as obvious in them as it is in humans. Donning their red TDI bandanas, they come up to say hi, lie down next to you and bask in the love. Jeeter didn't mind being hoisted into the air at all, and Lilly smiles when petted and enjoys belly rubs.

Students were smiling too while giving the belly rubs. Throughout the visit, people would stop as they spotted the dogs, their eyes lighting up and grinning. They dropped what they were doing to be with the dogs.

"When I saw the dogs, I got super happy because I have a dog at home," first-year Chloe Rich said. "I really miss her because she was always around and she always gave me a sense of comfort. Seeing the dogs here definitely made my day."

Looking into those loving, innocent eyes and running your hands through their soft fur, all your stress and worries melt away. It is an experience you will never forget.

It is also an opportunity for students to try to learn something new. Many students have never been around dogs before, and this gives them a chance to learn how to interact with them in a safe, calm environment.

"It's interesting to watch," Gogolin said. "You have them hold their hand up because dogs learn from scent. They rub their ears and necks. Then you place the dog in their lap. Their shoulders rise, and they relax. The dog shares the calmness."

College can often feel like a lot, but the most important thing to remember is that you are not alone in your struggles or your feelings. There is always someone or something around that can help you feel better, especially when that 'someone' is a dog.

Student artist Dru Swan blends culture and heritage as part of Career Center Gallery

Leo Ma | Staff Writer

As UNC Charlotte's fall semester begins, the Career Center welcomes back an annual tradition: an art gallery showcasing the talent of students from the Department of Art & Art History. Each work reflects not only the effort behind its creation but also the personal themes and identities of its artists.

"It's actually the busiest gallery on campus because we have classes here, employer visits, and we just are constantly in this room," Suzanne Voigt, UNC Charlotte's program manager for faculty and staff engagement, said. "We're very, very fortunate to have so much art, and to also partner with the College of Arts + Architecture on this project."

Voigt began this art gallery tradition about five years ago. Each fall and spring, a reception is held where completed student works are reviewed, and a select number are chosen for display.

"We do try to create a cohesive exhibit, of course. So Suzanne and I look through all of the submissions, and it's a really fun process of selecting the pieces," Sydney Gallup, UNC Charlotte's assistant director for marketing, said. "It's a process of choosing between different mediums. We try to keep it pretty balanced so that there's representation from all concentrations."

One of the standout pieces on display at the gallery comes from a student named Dru Swan. She is a fine arts major with a concentration in painting and will graduate at the end of this semester.

"It feels bittersweet because this is my last 'first day of school,'" Swan said. "But also, I don't know—it feels good—I feel happy to be here and grateful to see my art in the Career Center."

Swan also had an art piece of hers included in last year's Career Center Art Gallery Exhibition. Her artistic skills are shown in the work she has consistently been putting out. She has won a number of awards over the years from art events hosted in the city of Charlotte, including the 2024 Talking Walls Speed Paint Showdown, where local artists compete to create a painting in under 30 minutes.

"I'll be really, really sad to leave all my friends, but I'm also excited for all the connections I've

made and how I will use them after graduation," Swan said.

Swan offered a deeper look into the creative choices and meaning embedded in the piece. Her art weaves together themes that resonate with her experiences and identity.

"My piece was really inspired by Rome and Venice in the study abroad trip I went on for the art department, two summers ago," Swan said. "It's called 'Ciao,' or 'Chokma.' Ciao is a greeting in Italy, and Chokma is a greeting in Chickasaw, which is a Native American nation that I'm a part of."

Swan spoke about the challenges and beauty of solo traveling, noting how the experience has shaped her perspective. She emphasized that traveling alone taught her resilience and a deeper sense of independence. Her art piece reflects that.

"This piece was about my struggles studying abroad—taking a piece of me with me and reminding myself of who I am along the way... going on an adventure by yourself and just holding on to where you came [from] and just holding on to where you came [from] is basically what this piece is about," Swan said.

Swan wanted to include parts of her Native American heritage in her art. She also drew inspiration from a self-portrait she had created in the past for this piece.

"It definitely reflects my heritage of being Chickasaw, Native American. I put some bead work in there, and the colors I used reflect a lot of colors that were used by my ancestors in their artwork," Swan said.

The piece on display used techniques Swan learned from one of her professors when she was studying in Italy.

"They had us do rubbings, so we took pieces of paper and then went on textured surfaces like walls or lettering, and then we'd rub and create a print of that surface," Swan said. "I used that technique in this with the raw canvas—which was basically in the trash and really crumpled up—and I rubbed paint on top of it to create this rustic old feeling that a lot of the buildings in Rome had. I was really inspired by the architecture and the organic forms there."

She spoke about the difficulties involved in applying these techniques to her work. This was her first time using textiles in painting with the beadwork and working on an unprimed canvas with an uneven surface. The development of this project took a lot of patience as well as acceptance for her.

"It was just very textured. It was absorbing the paint in a way that I've never experienced. There were a lot of things that I learned throughout the process," Swan said. "And I discovered that I really enjoyed it. I think I'm going to continue that in some of my other work."

Swan will have additional bodies of work at the BFA ceremony in December for her final thesis project as a graduating senior from UNC Charlotte's Fine Arts Department.

"This project fits into my larger goals because I'm going to be creating some larger-scale canvas works for my thesis," Swan said. "I'll be exploring more themes of identity and heritage, as well as the colors—the sort of terracottas and the blues and the browns. And a little bit of that textile work as well."

While the reception was held on the first day of classes, the gallery continues to thrive. Visitors are encouraged to drop in and explore the students' artwork at any time.

"What I really like about the gallery is that it creates a welcoming space, and I think having students invited in could be an introduction to the Career Center for them," Gallup said. "When they come to see the gallery, they might feel a little bit more comfortable coming to see us."



Megan Bentley/Niner Times
(Center piece by Swan)



Quarterback trio bring unique talents but familiar uncertainties

Kelli Blackburn | Sports Editor

NFL Hall of Fame Head Coach John Madden once said, “If you have two quarterbacks, you have none.” For Charlotte football, the dilemma has only grown. In 2025, the 49ers find themselves with three quarterbacks—each with distinct strengths, yet none with the complete package to seize the starting role outright.

That makes Charlotte’s decision tougher than at most Division I programs. Rebuilding an offense and program from the ground up hasn’t been easy for a team still chasing its first bowl appearance since 2019. But with a new identity forming under Head Coach Tim Albin, the 49ers hope this year’s quarterback group can be the foundation for lasting change.

A familiar storyline

Quarterback battles aren’t new in Charlotte. In 2023, starter Jalon Jones often shared snaps with Trexler Ivey. The following year, a revolving trio—Ivey, Deshawn Purdie and Max Brown—each split time under center for different reasons.

Now, a completely rebuilt quarterback room takes shape in 2025. Transfers Zach Wilcke, Grayson Loftis and Conner Harrell have all arrived, eager to lead. Despite the fresh faces, the 49ers once again face the same recurring question: Who will lead the offense?

Meeting the new room

Redshirt juniors Harrell and Wilcke, along with redshirt sophomore quarterback Loftis, arrived in Charlotte this offseason through the transfer portal.

Loftis and Harrell bring Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) ties from opposite sides of the timeless Tobacco Road rivalry—Harrell from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Loftis from Duke University. Wilcke, a Hernando, Miss. native, took a different path, transferring after two seasons at Northwest Mississippi Community College and two at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Harrell started one game in 2024, notably against Charlotte. He threw for 219 yards and two touchdowns, adding 39 yards and a score on the ground. Across 11 games with the Tar Heels, Harrell totaled 522 passing yards, four touchdowns and three interceptions.

Loftis led Duke in four games last season, throwing for 1,006 yards and eight touchdowns with four interceptions. Wilcke, meanwhile, passed for 1,654 yards and 12 touchdowns at Northwest Mississippi in 2024, adding a rushing touchdown but also six interceptions.

The commitments came in quick succession: Loftis on Dec. 20, 2024, Wilcke on Dec. 22 and

Zach Wilcke

Grayson Loftis



on Loftis

Conner Harrell



Courtesy of Charlotte Athletics

Harrell on Jan. 5, 2025.

All three were looking for a fresh start, and Albin offered just that.

“When you meet a guy like Coach Albin, who tells you the truth and tells you straight, you kind of latch on and take advantage of that opportunity,” Loftis said. “That’s kind of how, for me, [it] felt like he was a genuine, honest guy, and I wanted to commit and to play for Coach Albin.”

Albin’s toughest call

Following Albin’s arrival last winter, the program has faced a whole new set of challenges: revamping everything from the staff to the culture to the offense. While most spots have been solidified through workouts and camp, the quarterback room has remained the biggest question.

While having options at quarterback is usually a luxury, it can also be dangerous without clarity. The clock is ticking for Albin and his staff to make the final call.

“All three guys are highly intelligent,” Albin said earlier this spring. “They’re unbelievable students of the game.”

“I think the biggest coaching point I would give those three guys is, ‘Hey, don’t try to do too much. Let the game come to you and let the guys around you make some plays as well. I think if those guys can do that, that’s gonna give them the best chance to be successful.’”

Strengths and weaknesses

Each quarterback brings a different part of the game to the table, which makes the decision both exciting and complicated.

Harrell brings versatility. He’s the most dynamic athlete of the group. His mobility allows him to extend plays, and his start against Charlotte last year proved he can shine under pressure. But at Chapel Hill, Harrell struggled with consistency and turnovers, leaving questions about whether he can handle a full-time role.

“I feel that my biggest strength is knowing [how] to do everything,” Harrell said. “It’s hard for a defense to focus on one area, because you can attack them somewhere else.”

Loftis’ greatest skill, on the other hand, is his timing—keeping the offense on schedule—whether it be making sure the offense is in the right run or getting the ball in the right spot in the passing game. His pocket-passing presence during his time at Duke showed poise in high-pressure ACC games, but with four interceptions across four starts, there is still a part of his decision-making that needs refinement.

Wilcke is a proven JUCO playmaker—bringing grit and confidence—with the ability to be accurate with airing it out downfield. But his FBS track record is limited, and Charlotte’s coaching staff will need to evaluate how his game translates against American opponents.

Individually, each has strengths that could increasingly lift Charlotte’s offense. The uncertainty collectively makes it difficult for Albin to anoint a clear leader.

Bigger picture: what’s at stake

The battle under center carries weight beyond one position. Charlotte hasn’t reached a bowl since 2019, and the move to the American Conference has only raised the stakes. Against tougher competition, instability at quarterback can quickly sink a season.

Nonetheless, these quarterbacks are a family. They are here to lift each other up despite the competition and make each other stronger by challenging each other in each practice and game.

“The team has one goal, so you have to separate your individual goals from the team goals, but you also have to make sure that you’re in alignment with what the best thing for the team is,” Loftis said.

“I think you develop a special relationship when you all play quarterback and you go through the same things, and you kind of make the same mistakes. I think outside of that, it’s just about sharing with each other, you know, we spend time together off the field. We’re all buddies.”

The camaraderie is real, but so is the pressure. Albin knows that Charlotte cannot afford to rotate endlessly like past seasons. This year’s theme is “brick-by-brick”—this team is building something special with each piece of its positions, including the trio of quarterbacks who aim for success.

Still, Madden’s old adage still looms: if you have two quarterbacks, you have none. If you have three, the margin for error is even smaller.

What’s next

Harrell was named a captain for the team on Aug. 20, a sign that his leadership has caught the eyes of teammates and coaches. If he earns the starting nod, he’ll face his former Tar Heels—now led by eight-time Super Bowl Champion Bill Belichick—when they face off at Jerry Richardson Stadium on Sept. 6.

But no matter who takes the first snap, the quarterback decision will define Charlotte’s 2025 season. For a program chasing relevance, a steady hand under center could mean the difference between another rebuilding year and a long-awaited return to the postseason.

“My main personal goal this year is to stay consistent with everything, with eating, sleeping, preparation, film and not worrying,” Wilcke said. “Just worrying about what I can control and not worrying about what I can’t control.”

Three quarterbacks with one job. The competition is slowly closing in, but it still feels far from over—for Charlotte, the final answer can’t come soon enough.

FALL '25 FOOTBALL SCHEDULE



APPALACHIAN STATE
AUGUST 29
@ 7:00 P.M.
CHARLOTTE, N.C. (BANK
OF AMERICA STADIUM)



CHAPEL HILL
SEPTEMBER 6
@ 7:00 P.M.
CHARLOTTE, N.C.



MONMOUTH
SEPTEMBER 13
@ 6:00 P.M.
CHARLOTTE, N.C.



RICE
SEPTEMBER 18
@ 7:30 P.M.
CHARLOTTE, N.C.



SOUTH FLORIDA
OCTOBER 3
@ 7:00 P.M.
TAMPA, FLA.



ARMY
OCTOBER 11
@ 12:00 P.M.
WEST POINT, N.Y.



TEMPLE
OCTOBER 18
@ TBA
CHARLOTTE, N.C.



NORTH TEXAS
OCTOBER 24
@ 7:00 P.M.
CHARLOTTE, N.C.



EAST CAROLINA
NOVEMBER 8
@ TBA
GREENVILLE, N.C.



UTSA
NOVEMBER 15
@ TBA
CHARLOTTE, N.C.



GEORGIA
NOVEMBER 22
@ 12:45 P.M.
ATHENS, GA.



TULANE
NOVEMBER 29
@ TBA
NEW ORLEANS

New faces, fresh uniforms, expanded stadiums: Catching you up on Charlotte football

Davis Cuffe | Editor-In-Chief

Courtesy of Charlotte Athletics

When Charlotte kicks off against Appalachian State University on Aug. 29, it will have been 272 days since the 49ers last took to the field.

Beyond transfer portal roster shuffles that have become routine in college sports, the 49ers have fundamentally altered the program with coaching changes, uniform alterations and more.

The following will get you caught up on everything that has changed and what's to come in the coming year of Charlotte football.

Return of the Charlotte Bobcats

When Charlotte's NBA team shed the Bobcats name for the Hornets, it seemed the Queen City had seen the last of its wild feline representation. But new Charlotte football Head Coach Tim Albin has revived the species, bringing players, staff and coaches from his former Ohio University Bobcats with him to create the latest incarnation of the Charlotte Bobcats.

The 49ers will, of course, remain the 49ers, but upwards of nine members of the coaching and support staff and seven players who helped the Bobcats win their conference in 2024 will be joining the 49ers this season.

Some former Bobcats to watch for this season are defensive coordinator Nate Faanes and senior linebacker Shay Taylor, who was recently named captain. The two bring experience from an Ohio defense that ranked last in their conference in points allowed in 2024.

New uniforms tied to new traditions

While not explicitly naming it a rebuild, Charlotte football hasn't been shy about the fact that they're building.

During spring practice, the program introduced its new 'Brick Winners' tradition, where players earn bricks featuring the Charlotte football logo and "Gold Standard" etched on the side for good performance.

Since then, two new batches of players have earned bricks.

Building on the brick motif, the program unveiled two new uniforms with a brick-patterned stripe on the helmets.

Less tangible than the tradition and uniform changes, Charlotte football's social media teams seem to have gotten the message; you can't find a post from the team without a "BrickXBrick" hashtag.

Stadium renovations

Off the field but in the arena, more literal building will take place as Jerry Richardson Stadium will see the start of its expansion over the season.

Phase one of Charlotte's expansion project will be completed in 2027 and push the stadium's maximum capacity from 15,314 to over 18,000.

Phase one includes seven luxury suites with a chancellor's box, club and lodge seating, ledge seats, expanded general seating and a club with a patio, bar and concessions, along with team dining and year-round conference space.

Phase two of the expansion project is contingent on securing funding and will increase the stadium's capacity to 21,000.

A mix of public and private donors funded the \$60 million pricetag on phase one of the project. The mix includes \$25 million from the NC General Assembly, which matched a donation from Charlotte real estate developer Howard "Smoky" Bissell and his wife, Margaret.

Renamed conference

The athletic conference that hosts all 19 Division I athletic programs at UNC Charlotte underwent a rebrand this summer.

Formerly known as the American Athletic Conference, the conference will now be known as the American Conference.

The conference will be referred to as the "American" for short, replacing the previously used AAC acronym.

The conference's rebrand was made to stop confusion with other similarly named organizations like the Atlantic Coast Conference, which goes by ACC.

The short on Albin

After the firing of Biff Poggi, Tim Albin has stepped in for Charlotte as head coach.

Previously at Ohio University, Albin led the Bobcats to a 33-19 record and three straight 10-win seasons from 2022-24.

Albin was recognized as his former conference's coach of the year during the 2022 and 2024 seasons.

Before coming to Charlotte, Albin had been at Ohio since 2005, serving as running backs coach, offensive coordinator and eventually head coach.

Off the field, Albin likes fishing and rock artist Sammy Hagar, whom Albin says he has seen in concert over 20 times.



Tracing Charlotte's ongoing bowl game drought

Evan Campos | Lead Writer

When Charlotte took the field at the 2019 Bahamas Bowl, it looked like a program on the rise. Under Will Healy, the 49ers had just posted their first winning season since the program's beginning in 2013 and earned the school's first bowl trip.

Now it's 2025, and that momentum is long gone. Since their lone bowl appearance, the 49ers have cycled through staff and quarterbacks, stumbled in recruiting and struggled to keep pace in a deeper, tougher American Conference.

The drought has Charlotte fans starved for a winner and still waiting for the promise of 2019 to be realized.

Decline of the Healy era

Healy was supposed to be Charlotte's boy wonder. At 33 years old, he was one of the youngest head coaches in the FBS and quickly made a splash.

His energy was undeniable, his message resonated, and in 2019, Charlotte beat Marshall University to secure the program's first bowl eligibility. For a program still trying to establish itself, Healy gave the 49ers direction and the belief that bigger things were on the horizon.

But the climb stalled almost as quickly as it started. Charlotte's defense was disastrous in Healy's closing years, undoing any offensive progress.

Recruiting classes never developed into difference-makers, leaving the roster short on both depth and top-end talent. By Healy's fourth year, the cracks were too wide to ignore.

There were brief highs, like the 31-28 win over Duke University in 2021 that marked the program's first victory over a Power-Five opponent.

But, after a 1-7 start the next season, Charlotte fired Healy on Oct. 23, 2022. He left with a 15-24 re-

cord, and Pete Rossomando was elevated to interim head coach for the final four games.

The Biff experience

When the 49ers turned to Biff Poggi in late 2022, the move felt like a swing for the fences. Poggi wasn't the typical college head coach—he came from the high school ranks, had been Jim Harbaugh's right-hand man at the University of Michigan and carried a reputation as a visionary and motivator rather than a proven program-builder.

His background was unconventional, but Charlotte hoped that unconventional might also mean transformative.

For a while, it was interesting. Poggi's blunt press conferences, cutoff t-shirts and transfer-heavy rosters gave Charlotte a unique personality.

He leaned on his deep connections in recruiting circles, landing several highly touted transfers and promising a roster capable of competing right away. His ties to Michigan and the powerhouse program he helped shape gave the 49ers some credibility, and he spoke openly about making Charlotte a factor in the American Conference.

But the product didn't match the national buzz. The roster churn made it difficult to build continuity, and Charlotte struggled to keep pace in its new league.

Poggi's unfiltered approach, while compelling at first, wore thin when the wins didn't follow. Instead of closing the gap, the 49ers found themselves outmatched against conference peers

with more dynamic offenses, established systems and steadier leadership.

By November 2024, the experiment had run its course. Poggi went 6-16 in less than two seasons, and he, too, was gone.

Spinning the QB wheel

No position has highlighted Charlotte's struggles more than quarterback. Chris Reynolds was the face of the program for years, a gritty competitor who maximized every snap and gave the 49ers stability under center.

He finished his career as the school's all-time leader in passing yards (10,266) and touchdown passes (84) across 49 starts. Since his departure in 2022, his successors have been, to put it kindly, not good.

In Poggi's first season, quarterbacks Jalon Jones and Trexler Ivey ping-ponged back and forth for the starting job, but neither provided the consistency Charlotte needed. The offense never found its rhythm, and the instability under center became a weekly storyline.

In 2024, Poggi's second year, Charlotte turned to transfer quarterback Max Brown as the next attempt to stabilize the position. Instead, he flamed out after five games, and the 49ers

were once again left scrambling.

Quarterback Deshawn Purdie brought some juice to a passing game that had been stagnant during the Poggi era, but his run was short-lived—he entered the transfer portal and left for Wake Forest University in January.

In the now

Enter Tim Albin. Hired in December 2024, Albin represents a stark shift from Poggi's high-risk hire. At 59 years old, he is a steady hand, fresh off three straight seasons of 10 or more wins at Ohio University.

He has built programs with fewer resources and has experience navigating roster turnover in the NIL and transfer portal era.

If Albin can bring winning football back—even modestly—it could give Charlotte exactly what it needs. The 49ers don't need flash right now; they need stability, competency and the chance to slowly climb out of the hole they've been in since their lone bowl appearance.



What fans can expect as the Albin era begins

Evan Campos | Lead Writer

After more than a decade of uneven steps, coaching changes and constant roster churn, Charlotte football enters 2025 with a long-overdue message: stability.

The 49ers are starting fresh again, but this time it feels different, with Tim Albin—the former Ohio University head coach arrives with a winning pedigree and a plan to transform the program into a tougher, steadier outfit.

For fans, one thing to watch this season is Charlotte's chance to establish an identity as a program, finally—one rooted in trench play, a balanced offense, discipline and a blueprint that produces champions.

A staff with a plan

The 49ers have never been short on ambition, but too often the results have lagged behind the vision. One winning season in 10 years at the FBS level is a reminder of how far Charlotte still has to go.

To change that trajectory, the 49ers turned to Albin, who led Ohio to three straight double-digit win campaigns capped by a Mid-American Conference (MAC) title in 2024.

Charlotte's new staff is built on experience and familiarity. Offensive coordinator Todd Fitch has past stops at Louisiana State University and Ohio State University, while Nate Faanes—now serving as both defensive coordinator and linebackers coach—followed Albin from Ohio.

Kurt Mattix, another addition from Ohio, came aboard in January as co-defensive coordinator and defensive line coach. Mattix spent last season overseeing the defensive ends and coordinating the pass rush, helping develop one of the most disruptive fronts in the MAC.

Charlotte is unlikely to put up big point totals in most games this season. The 49ers plan to run the ball, control the clock and wear opponents

down physically. Wins will likely come in tight, low-scoring contests where time of possession and efficiency will matter most.

For that approach to work, Charlotte must start fast, build early leads and avoid chasing the game.

Quarterback clarity

The biggest storyline entering fall camp was the quarterback. On Aug. 20, redshirt junior Conner Harrell was named a team captain—a strong signal that he will start Week 1 against Appalachian State University on Aug. 29.

Harrell arrived at Charlotte in January after transferring from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he spent three seasons and appeared in 11 games. The 6'2", 210-lb Alabama native earned starts for the Tar Heels in both 2023 and 2024, including the Duke's Mayo Bowl against West Virginia University after quarterback Drake Maye declared early for the NFL Draft.

His time in Chapel Hill was uneven, marked by starts and setbacks, but he still threw for

more than 550 yards with six total touchdowns and showed mobility that fits the mold of Albin's past quarterbacks.

Behind him are redshirt sophomore Grayson Loftis, who closed Duke University's 2023 season with a Birmingham Bowl win, and redshirt junior Zach Wilcke, a junior college starter. All three pushed each other through camp.

Players to watch for

Albin has stressed the offensive and defensive lines as the foundation of this team. Senior center Jonny King, a captain and the lone returning starter up front, will anchor a rebuilt offensive line by making checks at the line and revitalizing a run game that finished No. 13 out of 14 teams in the American Conference last season.

Senior receiver Sean Brown led Charlotte with 35 catches for 470 yards and a touchdown last season. He is expected to see a heavy share of targets again this year.

Senior transfer receiver Jayden McGowan from Boston College Univer-

sity brings proven production and juice in the slot. At the same time, JUCO addition E. Jai Mason from Samford University adds versatility to the receiver room.

Defensively, linebacker is Charlotte's most proven group. Senior Reid Williford, who led the team in tackles last season, is joined by redshirt senior Shay Taylor and junior Kadin Schmitz, giving the unit both leadership and range.

Key dates

The opener against Appalachian State University at Bank of America Stadium will serve as the first impression of the Albin era, under the lights in uptown Charlotte.

One week later, the 49ers host UNC-Chapel Hill in a headline-grabbing matchup against Bill Belichick's Tar Heels on Sept. 6.

The regular-season finale at Tulane University on Nov. 29 looms as a potential measuring stick against one of the American Conference's standard-bearers.

Expectations

Albin's first season at the University of Ohio produced just three wins. In each year that followed, the Bobcats reached double figures in victories and grew into a championship program.

Charlotte isn't there yet, but there are some easy bars to clear if it wants to be taken more seriously.

That means not following a victory with a 30-point loss, not shuffling quarterbacks every Saturday, establishing an identity on offense and improving on the 35.1 points per game the defense allowed last season.

With 56 new players, 16 new staffers and a step up in competition, growing pains are inevitable for Albin and his staff. But if Charlotte can show consistency and stability, the foundation will be in place for Albin to build something lasting.



Courtesy of Charlotte Athletics

Niner's Comics: Too old for love

Ava Weaver | Staff Illustrator



Limbo, leadership and legacy: Sean Brown's return to Charlotte football

Kelli Blackburn | Sports Editor

Home is where the heart is—and for graduate wide receiver Sean Brown, that place is Charlotte.

A Waxhaw, N.C., native, Brown began his college career at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke in 2019 and 2020. But when he returned to suit up for Charlotte football, he realized Jerry Richardson Stadium was not just where he played—it was where he belonged. The 49ers, from the locker room to the community, had become his family.

"I never really wanted to leave here. I always loved Charlotte, and that's why I've stayed the past two years," Brown said. "The year before, I was about to join the workforce and be a regular guy. Just driving around in Charlotte, I would see a Charlotte logo and have that bad feeling towards it. Now, even though we haven't been winning as much, I still love Charlotte. I see the Charlotte logo and these seats, and I can say with pride, 'I went there.'"

Uncertain future

Following the 2024 season, Brown sat with a lot of uncertainty. After closing out with an overall 5-7 record and a 4-4 American Conference mark, he didn't know what the future held. Although he wanted to stay at Charlotte, the possibility of transferring out lingered based on eligibility and academics.

Trying to stay on the team for a seventh year felt almost out of reach, but one thought never wavered—he wanted one more season in green and gold.

After two years at UNC Pembroke and a brief step away from football in 2021, Brown returned to Charlotte in 2022, appearing in two games. In 2023, he saw action in nine games, recording three catches for 31 yards.

By 2024, he had become a go-to target—leading the team with 35 receptions and finishing second in receiving yards with 470. His steady play helped spark pivotal wins over Gardner-Webb University and the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

That determination and athleticism have made Brown one of Charlotte football's most reliable names and a true embodiment of a 49er.

"[Brown is] a really good receiver," said Zach Wilcke, a redshirt junior quarterback. "He's a really talented deep threat—he can go get the long ball, and that's very much needed in offense. So, he definitely brings an older presence in the receiver room."

Eligibility limbo

In spring 2025, Brown found himself battling for his college future. Normally, NCAA athletes

have a five-year window to play four seasons, but medical redshirts and waivers can extend that. Having already been granted six seasons, pushing for a seventh felt like just another waiting game.

While Brown was on standby to hear back on the NCAA's decision, new Head Coach Tim Albin made sure to keep him involved in team workouts during the spring. He was able to condition, getting acclimated to the new offense. The ability to still be a part of the team in the midst of some major decision-making brought some familiarity in what felt like being on pins and needles for Brown.

Even then, more chaos came. On March 27, Brown also showcased his skills at Charlotte's Pro Day for NFL scouts—just in case a professional opportunity came calling.

"I had some miscommunication with Charlotte, so I got notice of it 24 hours before," Brown said. "The best example of it is—if you don't study for an exam and you come in—that was the best feeling for it. I definitely had that kind of humbling feeling."

The event provided a glimpse of a possible future, but the call he wanted finally came: the NCAA approved him for one more year.

"I didn't get the news till about May or maybe June—I don't remember the exact day, but it was toward my birthday, which is in late May," said Brown. "It was definitely pins and needles waiting on that because I'm a very anxious person, [and] kind of want to know, 'What am I doing today?'"

Ready to lead

Jumping into fall camp, Brown has used every opportunity to prepare for one last run with Charlotte football. Although quiet in the huddle, Brown's leadership is something he utilizes to make sure games and practices remain fun for everyone. His veteran presence has been invaluable for a young receiving corps, especially freshman wide receiver Jeremiah Hoffman.

"Any receiver, I want to take them under my wing, and it reminds me of me when I first came into it a bit," Brown said. "I want to kind of give them some tips on what I've learned. I'm going to give them some good tips, because I don't want them to go through what I've gone through—so, I want to teach Hoff as much as I can."

Brown's influence has stretched far beyond receptions and touchdowns, and his leadership has become just as vital as his playmaking.

Looking ahead

Now, with his eligibility secured, the 2025 season has become more than just another fall—it's

Brown's chance to define his final chapter with Charlotte football.

"Just winning a bowl game will make us the greatest team of all time at Charlotte—seven wins will make us the greatest ever," Brown said. "We want to make it a standard [that] bowl games are normal. So, when I come back when I'm 40, when I'm watching these games, it's going to be a disappointment when we go 8-5 one year and set a standard of winning. That's also why I came back, too. I wanted to get a taste of the Albin era. I wanted to kind of set, not a standard, but a good base for what he's building, [and] be a little part of it. I had a fear of missing out for sure."

For Brown, the season ahead represents both unfinished business on the field and a lasting personal milestone off of it. After this school year, he will walk off the field with his memories of a 49er and out of the classroom with two degrees in health systems management and sociology.

Stepping onto the stage

For a player who grew up attending Carolina Panthers games at Bank of America Stadium, Brown now has the chance to suit up inside that venue in a 49ers jersey for the Duke's Mayo Classic against Appalachian State University. On Aug. 29, Brown hopes to see some familiar legends' faces inside the stadium and kick off the season on a good note.

From uncertainty to opportunity, from a young fan in the stands to a leader in the locker room, his journey has embodied limbo, leadership and legacy. And when Brown walks away from the field for the final time, his imprint on Charlotte football will be impossible to miss.



Courtesy of Charlotte Athletics

Charlotte's man without fear:

Henry Rutledge dares to return for Charlotte

Davis Cuffe | Editor-In-Chief



Courtesy of Charlotte Athletics

The crowd swells and the stadium shakes as the kick sends the ball soaring across the field. Henry Rutledge waits beneath the descending ball, still and alone at the goal line as all eyes point to him. Across the field, 11 men sprint towards him, united in their mission to bring him down.

Despite the chaos of kickoff, Rutledge is right to be calm as he receives the kick and begins to dip, dodge and dash away from defenders.

Rutledge owns Charlotte's single-season record for return average and was one of 16 nominated ahead of this season for the Jet Award, given to the most outstanding return specialist in college football.

Unfazed by the noise and 11 men seeking to do him harm several times every Saturday, Rutledge has made one of the more dangerous plays in all of sports his bread and butter.

Between chaos and courage

In some ways, a relic of older, more primitive competitions, the kickoff is likely the closest thing to a gladiator event left in American sports. It's like a chaotic game of 'sharks and minnows,' with one runner left and every shark crashing in to take them down.

Last season, the NFL implemented new kickoff rules that made kicking and receiving teams start closer to reduce high-speed collisions that caused frequent injuries. Historically, the injury rates on kickoffs have been 2-4 times that of all other plays in the NFL. According to ESPN, 2025's new rules reduced the kickoff concussion rate by 43%.

The NCAA has yet to implement new kickoff rules in college football, which may be to the benefit of Rutledge.

Rutledge ranks No. 1 in program history in total punt returns and punt return yards, and is 50 yards and two returns away from No. 2 in program history for kick returns and return yards.

Rutledge clocked a 4.42s 40-yard dash time in high school and has likely gotten faster at Charlotte, but his fearlessness may be his true superpower.

At Charlotte Christian High School, Rutledge was the fastest on his track team and even shone with the Charlotte Soccer Academy, outrunning goalkeepers to the ball and getting easy goals on slow passes.

Playing football, his athleticism remained on full display in high school. Rutledge spent some time at kicker and could boot the ball out of the back of the endzone for touchbacks on kickoffs, and spent time at running back and wide receiver.

"We had a punt returner that was always dropping the ball; nothing is more terrifying than when it's a close game and you're getting a punt," said Henry's adopted father, Dan Rutledge. "Henry, he has that calm presence of being back there and somehow not feeling the weight of the moment and doing his thing."

While not with the 49ers yet,

Charlotte Christian struck gold putting Rutledge at returner; he averaged 56 yards per kick return in his high school career. In his senior year, an article from The Charlotte Observer dubbed him Charlotte Christian's "home run hitter" in the same year he averaged 58 yards per kick return and helped his team to a NCISAA championship.

In the tense moments on their championship run, Rutledge never let the stakes rattle him.

"They'd be in a really intense game, you know, fourth quarter, things are going crazy. They're on the sidelines, stressed and tense, and Henry would be sitting on the bench, and you'd turn to him and he'd be like, 'Hey, where are we going to eat after this?' recounted Henry's father. "He has always had that kind of calm presence."

Moments that echo

Kick and punt returns often decide momentum. A dropped ball can crush a drive before it starts, but a breakaway return can change the game and ignite the stadium.

History's greatest returns carry nicknames etched in football lore. Auburn University's "Kick Six," a 109-yard return of a missed Alabama field goal, and the Tennessee Titans' "Music City Miracle," a last-second playoff winner, live on in football infamy.

None of Rutledge's returns have earned a nickname as of yet, but he's made history regardless.

In Charlotte's 2023 matchup against Georgia State University, he returned a punt for a touchdown, the first punt-return touchdown in program history.

It was an impressive return from Rutledge and one that doesn't happen without his unflinching nature.

A second after he fields the punt, wrapping it up with two arms and turning his head towards what's in front of him, he's hit by a Georgia State defender with 46 yards of momentum.

You can still hear the crowd pop on the highlight video as all 5'8", 180lbs of Rutledge is hit low and hard immediately after catching the ball.

Unshaken, Rutledge spins through the hit and towards more defenders. After dodging a few tackles and putting some trust in his blockers, Rutledge breaks free and bursts into the end zone, throwing up a peace sign with an outstretched hand before his cleats meet painted grass.

"That was my first punt return," Rutledge said, recounting the 46-yard score. "Everyone was patting my head. It was a good time, man."

The play is no game-winner or miracle, and while it swung momentum, Charlotte trailed by 16 at the time of his return and did not come back or score again against Georgia State, falling 41-25 in the game. Still, the circumstances of the play are somewhat encapsulating of Rutledge's Charlotte career.

Staying in the fight

In 2025, Rutledge enters his fifth year with the 49ers. Charlotte is 16-32 since he arrived in 2020 and will see their third head coach, Tim Albin, in four years this season.

Despite scarce team success, Rutledge's stats

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“Henry, he has that calm presence of being back there and somehow not feeling the weight of the moment and doing his thing.”

- Dan Rutledge

have seen a steady increase since he first earned play time in 2021. Similar to his record return against Georgia State, Rutledge's returns often are bright spots in dark moments for the program. Last season, Rutledge returned a kick 79 yards against Navy for the fourth-longest return in program history.

The return put them in field goal range and earned Charlotte three of their 17 points in a 34-point loss. In that game, Rutledge totaled 168 all-purpose yards, the most of any Charlotte player that day.

After a 2024 season where he led his conference in total kick return yards, Rutledge considered a change and entered the transfer portal heading into his fifth year of eligibility.

After 48 days in limbo, Rutledge withdrew from the portal and says he did so to stay close to home, a move that likely pleased his parents, who attend every home game and most away games.

“It's just special to be there,” Henry's father said. “Henry's brother Zane also went to Charlotte and just graduated, so to have both the boys there, experience the game, see Henry afterwards and go out to dinner to celebrate... It's a really fun thing to be in Charlotte.”

Coming back as a Charlotte veteran, Rutledge is a leader on the 49ers, particularly to other running backs and returners like redshirt freshman running back Rod Gainey Jr.

Gainey was also in the transfer portal after last season, but returned to Charlotte with Rutledge.

“He's just a great guy,” said Gainey. “He doesn't really talk much, but he's a good leader.”

“He helped us [Gainey and others] get used to the environment, and has been giving us more tips on how he learned how to run the ball and learn patience.”

The veteran in the running back room and yards-per-carry leader in 2024, Rutledge is expected to see an increased workload between the tackles in his last year at Charlotte. Head Coach Albin called Rutledge “electric” at Charlotte's 2025 media day, but says he expects a committee approach to the ground game this season as the backs will compete for work.

Naturally, Rutledge says he doesn't fear an increased workload or the pressure that comes with it, but wants to establish himself as a star back this season, not just a return specialist.

“I'm a running back,” said Rutledge. “I like returns, but I want to get inside the zone and be able to run in between the tackles, and be just an all-around athlete.”

Fervently fearless

In adolescence, some are scared of the dark. Others are scared of spiders. As we age, those fears can evolve and take on new existential faces: failure, inadequacy, and for athletes, the spotlight.

Like Marvel Comics' ‘Man Without Fear,’ Daredevil, Rutledge's true ability is not superhuman senses or physical attributes like speed and acceleration, but real bravery. By all accounts, Rutledge seems unable to feel humanity's most primitive emotion.

“I can't say that he had any fears as a kid,” said Rutledge's father. “Vampires, clowns... We tried to, of course, create a safe environment for him, but I don't remember anything specifically that could shake him.”

Even now, with an away game at the University of Georgia on schedule, where the Charlotte 49ers will face off against one of the five best college football programs in the last decade, in a stadium that reached 130 decibels in 2022 (the equivalent of a jet taking off), Rutledge remains unblinking.

“If they let me return it and don't kick it out of the end zone. I'm definitely taking it back, yeah, the very first kick,” Rutledge said, smiling.

This season, as he steps into a new role at in his final year at a program he's passed up opportunity for, Rutledge shrugs off the pressure, the expectations and the looming possibility of disappointment ahead.

“I'm ready,” Rutledge said. “I'm just ready to play. I've been waiting for four years to really get the opportunity, and it's here now, so I'm ready to go.”

For four years, Rutledge has faced noise, contact and the inevitability of being hit, yet he has never flinched.

That same steadiness may be what Charlotte's program needs most.

With change in the air, a new coach on the sidelines and an expanded stadium soon to fill, the 49ers face the same threats of letdowns and unmet expectations that have defined past seasons.

Rutledge has shown what it looks like to stare down those odds and run straight through. The program now has its chance to do the same.



Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

NPHC fraternities and sororities come together for Star Quad Yard Show

Ivory Galloway | Network Manager

