

NINERTIMES

Student-driven news since 1947

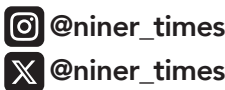
Aug. 28, 2024



STRUCK GOLD?

What fans can
expect in year
two of the Biff
Poggi era

MORE ON PAGE 10



EDITOR-IN-CHIEF Davis Cuffe editor@ninertimes.com	
MANAGERIAL BOARD Brendan Mullen WRITING MANAGING Jordyn Phillips MULTIMEDIA MANAGING Clare Grealey COPY Bryson Foster OUTREACH	
EDITORIAL Sofia DiStefano NEWS Ruhshona Soledjonova OPINION Guadalupe Aguilar Sosa ARTS & CULTURE Dan Rice PHOTO Everett Pohl VIDEO Sunny Hadavi LAYOUT	ASSISTANT EDITORS Emsley Jackson ASST. OPINION Kendall Maye ASST. SPORTS Kelli Blackburn ASST. SPORTS Steven Xiong ASST. COPY Clare Pollick ASST. PHOTO Ava Weaver ASST. LAYOUT
CONTRIBUTING STAFF Eve Goldman Blaise Uy Chris Crews Noah Hughey Megan Khor	
LAYOUTS Cover photo: Norm at a Charlotte football home game. Aravind Pasupathi/Niner Times File Cover layout by Sunny Hadavi Interior layouts by Sunny Hadavi, Ava Weaver and Megan Khor	
MARKETING STAFF Ava Gilmore MARKETING DIRECTOR Reggie Matherson SALES REPRESENTATIVES Damion Davis SALES REPRESENTATIVES Madison Lewis SALES REPRESENTATIVES Rachael Nguyen GRAPHIC DESIGNER	
NINER MEDIA DEPARTMENTS Niner Times NOVA Literary-Arts Magazine Media Marketing Midas Magazine Charlotte Current	NINER MEDIA STAFF Kelly Merges MEDIA ADVISER Justin Paprocki MEDIA ADVISER Laurie Cuddy BUSINESS MANAGER Bianca Fruscello MARKETING COORDINATOR

Student-driven news since 1947

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

The Niner Times aims to provide accurate and fair news to the UNC Charlotte community. We cover campus happenings, news and events in the city of Charlotte and North Carolina and topics that are important to students. We publish written, photo and video content online (ninertimes.com), on social media and through our weekly email newsletter (sent every Wednesday at 9:30 am). We also produce a supplemental bi-weekly (every other week) in-print newspaper that hits stands on Wednesdays.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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

CONTENTS

A LOOK AHEAD AT UNC CHARLOTTE’S ESPORTS LOUNGE	3
N.C. GOVERNOR ROY COOPER INTRODUCES KAMALA HARRIS AS FINAL DNC SPEAKER	4
3 TAKEAWAYS FROM THE 2024 DNC	4
OPINION: DOWNVOTING IS NOT JUST FOR REDDIT	5
OPINION: OFF-CAMPUS HOUSING OPTIONS PRIORITIZE STUDENTS WITH CARS	5
THE BULLETIN: UPCOMING EVENTS, POILCE LOG AND SCOREBOARD	6
HOW THE FILIPINO-AMERICAN STUDENT UNION IS ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO EMBRACE THEIR HERITAGE	7
A ‘BACKYARD’ DEBUT: CHARLOTTE EMO HOUSE BAND BIG BACKYARD TO DROP NEW ALBUM AUG. 31	8
STRUCK GOLD? WHAT FANS CAN EXPECT IN YEAR TWO OF THE BIFF POGGI ERA	10
THE MAKING OF A LEADER: MAX BROWN’S TRANSITION TO CHARLOTTE FOOTBALL	11
REMEMBERING AND HONORING THE LIFE OF ISAIAH HAZEL	12
PREVIEWING CHARLOTTE FOOTBALL’S 2024 SEASON	13
TIM BREWSTER BRINGS SWAGGER AND SUCCESS TO CHARLOTTE FOOTBALL	14
CHARLOTTE FOOTBALL’S DONTAE BALFOUR STEPS INTO 2024 SEASON IN NEW LEADERSHIP ROLE	15
NPHC FRATERNITIES AND SORORITIES STROLL AT THE 2024 NPHC YARD SHOW	16

A look ahead at UNC Charlotte's esports lounge

Eve Goldman | Staff Writer

Construction for UNC Charlotte's new \$1.5 million esports lounge will begin this fall with the expectation that it will be completed in spring 2025.

The University recently unveiled a future addition to the campus, a state-of-the-art esports lounge in the Popp Martin Student Union. This new space was created to be more than just a gaming area; it offers a fusion of technology, design and community engagement. The space's primary purpose is to foster an esports culture on campus as the technology expands.

In addition to the space, a new director will be appointed to oversee the facility's upkeep and managing events.

The lounge will be located in Norm's loft on the Mezzanine level of the Student Union. In the fall of 2023, the North Carolina General Assembly first approved the allocation of \$1.5 million in funding for the lounge. Jason Saine, a former North Carolina representative and a Charlotte 1995 alumnus, was influential in gaining approval for the allocation.

Upon the fall 2023 approval, Charlotte administration expressed excitement about what the space may offer.

"As the esports industry grows, there are additional opportunities at Charlotte for academic connections in areas such as computer science, gaming design and development, video and streaming technology, art and storytelling and business and marketing operations," said UNC Charlotte Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs Kevin Bailey. "When you look at Niner Esports' national recognition and listen to the students' experiences, it's clear there are exciting things in store for the future."

Charlotte's Niner Esports club, which will be a primary beneficiary of the lounge, has been among the top in the nation. In 2023, the club won Club of the Year at EsportsU's 2023 Collegiate Awards and is home to over 2,400 members, including Charlotte alumni.

Alexis Diamond, a Charlotte graduate student and officer of the Esports Club, spoke highly of how the space may benefit the club.

"There's gonna be a good amount of PCs, as well as an area with a smart board where people can either watch TV or hook up their gaming console and just hang out," said Diamond.

These amenities may be what sets the lounge apart from other gaming spaces.

The lounge will house high-end gaming PCs, consoles and virtual reality stations with the latest technology to provide a comprehensive gaming experience.

The lounge's creation was sparked by the rapidly growing popularity of esports globally and

the recognition of its potential as a valuable extracurricular activity. Esports' value as an extracurricular activity has rung true for Diamond.

"Because of the esports team, I was able to speak to other companies about sponsoring us, which has provided me with interview skills. I was also able to gain an internship, as well as network and meet other people within the collegiate scene. I was just able to chat with them and learn more about what they do and their esports," said Diamond.

The lounge also boasts a thoughtfully designed layout that promotes social interaction and focused gameplay. Its primary purpose extends beyond just being a gaming space and is envisioned as a central hub for the esports community on campus, where students can connect, compete and grow together.

Upon its completion, the lounge plans to host various events, including tournaments, workshops, and guest speaker sessions to attract local and regional esports enthusiasts.

"We have two big get-togethers a semester. Each game community holds an event at least once a month," said Diamond.

The lounge is also exploring partnerships with local gaming communities and industry professionals to offer students more opportunities. Plans are being considered to expand the lounge's offerings in the future, potentially including a dedicated space for streaming and content creation and more advanced training programs for competitive players.

"Our main goal is outreach. There are a lot of people who still don't know about us on campus. There also aren't many women gamers, so I would love to see an increase there," said Diamond.

Success for the Esports Lounge may be measured not just in terms of foot traffic but its impact on the campus community.

"There are people that just don't have a setup for various reasons. So now that they'll have a space with the equipment needed, they can see if they find a hobby they enjoy. Spreading our community and having more people discover a passion they might have," said Diamond.

Once construction is complete, the esports team plans to add a team meant only for women gamers.

"There are some tournament leagues out there that have women-only teams," said Diamond. "So I've spoken with some of the team managers, and we want to start some women's teams to make them feel comfortable."

The lounge is designed to be more than just a hub for competitive gamers. It is also a space for spectators to engage with the esports communi-

ty. While the lounge will typically be open to all, offering an environment where gaming enthusiasts can watch live matches, discuss strategies and immerse themselves in the culture. However, there will be special times when it serves a more focused purpose.

At some points, the lounge will become an exclusive practice space when teams prepare for tournaments. During these periods, access will be limited solely to team members, allowing them to concentrate fully on their skills and

strategies without distractions. This ensures the teams have the best environment to prepare for high-stakes competitions while maintaining the lounge's broader role as a communal space for gaming fans.

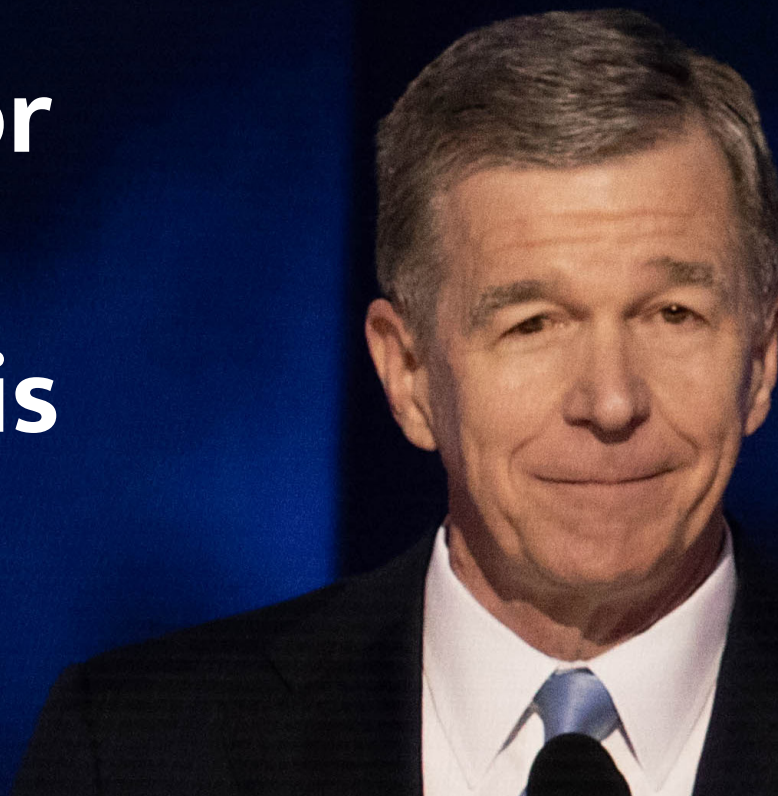
"Even if you've never played before, or if you just have heard the stigma around it, just give it a try; you might end up actually really enjoying it. Or even if you don't game, just come into the space and meet new people," said Diamond.



Renderings of new esports gaming area in the Popp Martin Student Union Mezzanine level. | Courtesy of UNC Charlotte

N.C. Governor Roy Cooper introduces Kamala Harris as final DNC speaker

Sunnya Hadavi | Layout Editor



Sunnya Hadavi/Niner Times

Governor Roy Cooper of North Carolina took the stage at the 2024 Democratic National Convention (DNC) on the evening of Aug. 22, delivering the final remarks before Vice President Kamala Harris accepted the presidential nomination.

On stage, Cooper recalled a story about Harris from 2011, when they were both attorneys general dealing with the weakened housing market and illegal foreclosures. Cooper said that the attorneys general were close to a settlement for big banks that would have meant \$4 billion for California families, but Harris did not think it was enough.

"I know that [\$4 billion] sounds like a lot, but Kamala said, 'Hang on a minute. I've met these families. I know what they've been through, and they deserve more.' She went toe to toe with some of the world's most powerful executives, and she refused to give in," said Cooper. "Let me tell you, this was a huge risk, but she knew it was a risk worth taking. That's Kamala."

Cooper said this was the first time he saw Harris in action, and her risk led to \$20 billion for California families.

"The banks caved. That \$4 billion for California families became \$20 billion. That was the first time I witnessed Kamala in action, and what I saw was a leader who does exactly what she says she's going to do," said Cooper.

Cooper was thought to be one of the top choices as Harris' running mate in the weeks leading up to the convention but confirmed in

a statement that he chose not to be a candidate.

In his statement posted on X (formerly Twitter), Cooper said that it "wasn't the right time" for him or North Carolina. This presumably refers to how controversial Republican Lieutenant General Mark Robinson assumes control of North Carolina as acting governor each time Cooper leaves the state.

The statement concludes with Cooper saying how he and others supporting Harris will "all work to make sure she wins."

"America, we've got a lot of big fights ahead of us, and we've got one hell of a fighter ready to take them on. I know that because I know her. And tonight, I want the American people to know," said Cooper. "Even if you don't agree with her on everything, Kamala Harris will fight for you to the very end."

Before Harris took the stage, Cooper spoke highly of Harris' fight for all Americans.

"Even if you don't agree with her on everything, Kamala Harris will fight for you to the very end," said Cooper. "For families who need better healthcare or a safer place to live, Kamala will fight for you. For parents who want better schools for their kids, for workers worried about a secure retirement for themselves, Kamala will fight for you. For any one of our allies, anywhere in the world, wondering if America still has your back, remember this. Kamala will fight for you. And when she fights, we win."

Cooper was one of two political leaders from North Carolina who spoke at the DNC in Chi-

cago. The other speaker was Leonardo Williams, the mayor of Durham. Alongside Cooper, two other Democrat governors spoke on the last day of the DNC: Maura Healey (Mass.) and Gretchen Whitmer (Mich.).

Cooper ends his second term as North Carolina's 75th governor this November with a high-stakes gubernatorial election. Current Democrat Attorney General Josh Stein and Republican Lieutenant General Mark Robinson are also running for governor.

The North Carolina governor concluded his speech by rallying battleground states like his own and calling all Americans to take on the fight with Harris.

"If you're ready, my home state of North Carolina, stand up. Stand up, Pennsylvania. Stand up, Michigan. Stand up, Wisconsin. Stand up, Georgia. Stand up, Nevada. Stand up, Arizona. Stand up, America," said Cooper. "Are we going to stand up? Are we going to fight? Are we gonna vote? Are we gonna win? You bet we are. Let's go get them."

Editor's Note: *The Niner Times applied for media passes for both Democratic and Republican National Conventions but were only able to receive a pass to the Democratic convention. The Niner Times still covered the RNC remotely. Our presence at the DNC does not reflect our values as a publication.*

3 takeaways from the 2024 DNC

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

The DNC was held in Chicago from Aug. 19-22. The convention featured speakers, tributes, musical performances and support for the Harris-Walz ticket.

Endorsements

Various prominent Democratic figures, including former Presidents Biden, Obama and Clinton spoke. U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders spoke at the convention endorsing Harris.

Some Republican figures and former staff of Trump spoke in support of Harris.

2024 party platform

The official Democratic party platform, a 90-page document with nine chapters, was voted on and approved on Aug. 19, day one of the convention.

Protests

During all four days of the convention, pro-Palestinian groups held various protests in surrounding areas of the United Center, such as Union Park.

Opinion: Downvoting is not just for Reddit

Ruhshona Soledjonova | Opinion Editor

With election season in full swing, many instantly know which presidential candidate to vote for but ignore state and local candidates down the ballot. Filling out the full ballot is important because local governments affect everyday lives, especially for college students.

Down-ballot voting (downvoting) voting, or the lack thereof, is a timely issue that contributes to not knowing our local government and its influence in school boards, law enforcement and judicial courts.

Roughly one-third of eligible voters do not bother to vote for local candidates. This is a major problem because local elections hold the power to take or give away civil rights to American citizens. Completing the entirety of the ballot matters now more than ever as we see the political sphere become further polarized.

Just because local votes are lower on the ballot does not mean that they are less important. For example, state legislatures pass laws that affect voting, economic, reproductive and educational rights.

Importance for college students

Voters, especially first-time voters, should pay careful attention to who they vote for down the ballot as these are the people in control of their surrounding communities. For college students, downvoting could play an important role in education, whether it is funding, curriculum, graduation requirements and more.

According to the Washington Post, “In the 2020 election, 66% of college students who were registered to vote cast their ballots—an increase of 14 percentage points over the 2016 presidential election.”

Undoubtedly, college students are encouraged to vote, but practicing civic duty means completing the full ballot. It is much more likely that students face interactions with local laws than the federal government. College students can make lasting impacts on their communities by voting on issues that directly affect them.

A shift in mindset

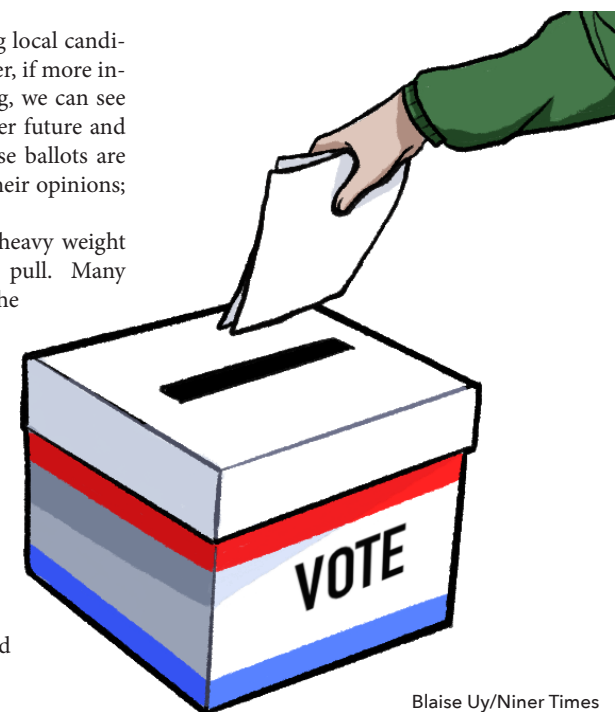
Exercising your right to vote is a civic duty.

Shifting this mindset of prioritizing local candidates takes time and effort. However, if more individuals participate in downvoting, we can see impactful changes toward a brighter future and more effective representation. These ballots are intended for individuals to voice their opinions; it is time to take advantage of that.

Reinstating a level of trust is a heavy weight that government officials must pull. Many Americans are dissatisfied with the outcomes of elections but often neglect to research local candidates.

One way to take accountability in this divide is to be open to conversations with people of different backgrounds.

Especially in an environment where students can flourish in critical thinking, college students can exercise supporting local candidates and spreading the word through their peers.



Blaise Uy/Niner Times

Opinion: Off-campus housing options prioritize students with cars

Noah Hughey | Staff Writer

Students need off-campus housing now more than ever. Those who do not meet the new freshmen housing requirements are disadvantaged by the Charlotte area's car-centered sprawl and run the risk of homelessness.

UNC Charlotte's upperclassmen may wonder, “Where will I live?”

Charlotte's new policy requiring freshmen to live on campus will start in 2025 and make campus housing even more elusive. The reality for everybody else may soon be a race to find available off-campus housing before it fills up.

The University's housing crisis reflects several problems we are facing as students. With a persistent 80% acceptance rate and the lack of available space, upperclassmen have been made to feel disregarded as the University prioritizes the living arrangements of freshmen.

How we got here

Urban sprawl is America's unique curse, which

took the destruction of once easily accessible communities and sold it as a symbol of American freedom.

Designed by U.S. car manufacturers in the 1930s and 40s, this urban planning project targeted less affluent and Black neighborhoods, pummeling them over with miles-wide highways that connect the suburbs to cities.

Today, only 1.2% of American cities are walkable. Yet alternative transit options and walkable redevelopments are constantly shot down and labeled as everything from inefficient to an evil plot to curtail individual freedoms.

What this means for Charlotte

Urbanist YouTuber CityNerd called Charlotte “the sprawl capital of planet Earth.” Charlotte ranked No. 124 on WalkScore's 2023 list, with older neighborhoods constructed before the birth of American highways being ranked higher.

This sets the stage for the race for housing and

what it means for students. Many housing developments near campus are built in such a way that it is vital to have a vehicle. These areas are isolated from reliable transit and poorly connected to existing sidewalks if connected to any at all.

If students want to avoid the extra cost of buying a car on top of paying rent and the cost of tuition, they might try to look at units located near stops on the Lynx Light Rail's blue line to campus or off of one of the CATS bus routes.

But this brings up questions of safety, efficiency and reliability in public transport, which can also be undermined by car-centered urban planning and infrastructure. This is especially the case considering that in January of this year, top elected officials such as North Carolina House Speaker Tim Moore openly criticized Charlotte's transit plan as being not focused enough on road infrastructure.

For Charlotte students, car-centered urban planning will lead to increasingly limited off-campus housing options. Those without cars

will either be forced to buy one on top of what they will pay for rent and tuition or will have to find housing connected to Charlotte's existing transportation infrastructure and hope its reliability is not undercut by roads-first policy proposals.

This could have detrimental effects on the housing security of students who already have enough responsibilities as it is. If Charlotte wants to accommodate these students, serious action must be taken to end urban sprawl and support an accessible city for all of its residents.

Among many possible actions, introducing more mixed-use development in the University City area is a strong place to start, combining residential and commercial land use that would otherwise be sprawled across miles. This will give non-driving students much richer off-campus housing options and a more accessible city to call home. If Charlotte wants to be more welcoming to its students, infrastructure must take precedence.

UPCOMING EVENTS

First-Gen Meet & Greet

First generation Niners can come collect free merch and meet other first generation students.

AUG. 29
2-4 P.M.
POPP MARTIN STUDENT UNION 340

CAB on Broadway: 'The Lion King'

Come watch CAB's live adaptation of Disney's "The Lion King."

AUG. 29
7:30 - 10:30 P.M.
BELK THEATER AT BLUMENTHAL ARTS CENTER

Niner Diners Dash

Learn about different dining resources and win awards on campus through a series of challenges.

AUG. 29
11 A.M. - 1:30 P.M.
STAR QUAD

Football Home Opener

UNC Charlotte football team will face off against James Madison University in the first home game of the season.

AUG. 31
8 P.M.
JERRY RICHARDSON STADIUM

Fall Career and Internship Fair

Learn about various career opportunities and internships and get free merchandise.

SEP. 13
10 A.M.
BARNHARDT STUDENT ACTIVITY CENTER

From the UNC Charlotte Police Logs (Aug. 11-25)

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

The following are descriptions of some incidents in the UNC Charlotte campus police logs from Aug. 11-25, 2024.

Aug. 16

Suspicious Person - Student Union

While on patrol an Academy Bus employee approached an Officer and informed him that there was a suspicious male on a bus near the Student Union. Officers responded to the Union and were told the individual was near the light rail. Officers responded to the light rail and did not observe an individual fitting that description. The individual was seen on camera entering the light rail and leaving campus. No further action taken.

Aug. 17

Larceny - Student Union

An officer responded to the Student Union in reference to their items being stolen. The reporting person stated she had accidentally left her laptop, phone and other items unattended, and when she returned, they were gone. Detectives were able to locate a suspect and are working to identify him.

Aug. 17

Robbery - CHHS

An unaffiliated person to UNC Charlotte called dispatch to report that someone had stolen his backpack with a computer and phone in it. Investigation revealed that an unaffiliated person was robbed by a male who

fled the scene and was last observed heading off campus. Officers circulated the area attempting to capture the suspect but the suspect eluded arrest. The victim came to the Police Department where he positively identified the suspect through a captured video. Dispatch relayed the information to CMPD to make them aware of the last known direction of the suspect. A NinerAlert was sent in reference to this incident.

Aug. 22

Vehicle Accident - Cone Deck

An officer responded to Cone Deck in regard to a hit-and-run vehicle accident. Vehicle two sustained minor damage to the rear driver's side bumper.

CLT 49ERS SCOREBOARD

RECENT GAMES AUGUST 15-25

WOMEN'S SOCCER

August 15: UNC Wilmington 2, Charlotte 1
August 18: Texas Christian 3, Charlotte 0
August 22: Mississippi State 2, Charlotte 0

MEN'S SOCCER

August 23: Charlotte 3, Davidson 0

OVERALL STANDINGS

Men's soccer: 1-0
Women's soccer: 0-3
Volleyball: 0-0
Football: 0-0

6 AUG. 28, 2024 | NINERTIMES



Members of the Filipino-American Student Union pose with an art piece. | Courtesy of FASU

How the Filipino-American Student Union is encouraging students to embrace their heritage

Kendall Maye | Asst. Arts & Culture Editor

Established at UNC Charlotte in 2016, the Filipino-American Student Union (FASU) is a cultural organization that has grown exponentially over the years. The organization shows no signs of slowing down as they received the largest turnout for events last year that they have ever had.

"FASU is committed to creating a space that allows others to learn and celebrate Filipino culture," said club President Jonah Sanderson, a fourth-year student at Charlotte.

Sanderson finds the organization valuable because it provides a safe place for students of similar backgrounds to share their experiences, feel a sense of belonging and spread awareness about Filipino culture. Any interested students can get involved by following FASU's Instagram page and attending events.

This organization strives to educate others, strengthen the community and make their voices heard.

"I would like students to learn about the diversity within Filipino culture," said Sanderson. "There are 4,000 islands in the Philippines, each with unique customs, cultures and languages. Here, in the U.S., being Fil-Am can mean so many different things, whether you're from the Philippines, first-generation, mixed race, all are valid and celebrated."

To promote the club, they arrange various

events and activities biweekly. These events cater to everyone, ranging from fundraisers to cultural performances.

"All of our events serve to be a good time for our members and guests while we all learn about our culture," said Sanderson.

This year, the group plans to host several events that anyone can enjoy, no matter what they are interested in.

"FASU plans to continue our traditions such as the annual potluck called FASUGiving, our second annual Cultural Gala, bake sales, workshops, general body meetings and socials," said Sanderson.

Besides being involved with on-campus activities, like the annual International Festival, the organization also engages in events within the state. These events include the N.C. Asian-American Chamber of Commerce (NCAACC), the Filipino-American Chamber of Commerce North Carolina (FIL-AM CNCC) and the Filipino-American Community of the Carolinas (FACC).

FASU has an environment that cultivates a strong sense of belonging and empowerment for the Filipino community at UNC Charlotte. The idea of being community-centered is not just one of this organization but also an idea rooted in Filipino culture.

"We wish to empower the Filipino-American

community by providing opportunities to lead and serve," said Sanderson.

The organization also provides members with opportunities to improve their professional skills.

"We offer many different opportunities such as community engagement with our partnerships to FACC, FIL-AM CNCC and NCAACC," said Sanderson. "On campus, we offer an internship program where students shadow executive board members and learn leadership skills to build their resume."

In addition, FASU emphasizes the importance of making an effort to understand others and uplift the community. In the spirit of collaboration, they work with other Asian organizations such as SEASA (South East Asian Student Association), VSA (Vietnamese Student Association), ASA (Asian Student Association) and more.

"FASU is committed to fostering bayanihan, the strength in working together to uplift and encourage the community," said Sanderson.

Sanderson reflects fondly on his Filipino-American experience at UNC Charlotte. He is grateful to have an organization on campus that makes him feel at home and is optimistic about the possibility of the University making positive changes in the future to benefit students.

"I am so glad to have a community within FASU, but there are some areas within campus I hope can see improvement," said Sanderson.

"I feel safe and included here on Charlotte's diverse campus, but there are ways that I hope I can bring awareness to be celebrated rather than just included."

Sanderson would like more academic opportunities available on campus for students to engage in their culture. At the moment, the University does not offer an Asian-American Studies program, and Chinese and Japanese are the only Asian languages that are taught. FASU and its president want to expand the options for students to learn about different cultures in different disciplines.

"I hope that FASU can bring attention to the lack of university programming, funding and attention to celebrate the Asian/Filipino community on campus and be the start of a more aware future," said Sanderson.

Not only does Sanderson enjoy the chance to teach others about Filipino culture, but he also appreciates the friendships that he has fostered during his time in the organization. His favorite part of being involved is the people he has met along the way.

"My executive board and I have grown close over the years, and I love to connect with all of the members and community that show up to support our events," said Sanderson. "It always feels like we're making an impact on our campus and city."

A 'Backyard' debut

CHARLOTTE EMO HOUSE BAND BIG BACKYARD TO DROP NEW ALBUM AUG. 31

Brendan Mullen | Writing Managing Editor

On Saturday, Aug. 31, the southern emo house band Big Backyard will drop their self-titled debut album, "Big Backyard." This bite-sized album will feature a blend of re-recorded songs from the band's first EP, "Music for Your Porch," and three new tracks that amount to a concise 24-minute runtime.

Big Backyard's journey to the release of its debut album began pre-COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019, with Charlotte alumnus and lead singer/guitarist Jackson Martin writing songs in his dorm on UNC Charlotte's campus.

"Big Backyard was founded in Scott Hall at UNC Charlotte at the end of 2019," said Martin. "I started writing music right there before the pandemic."

In the midst of the pandemic, Big Backyard's backup singer/guitarist Will Washburn joined Martin in writing and making music, and the band began to take shape.

"Will was a student at [UNC] Chapel Hill at the time," said Martin. "It was after COVID hit, when we were all back home, that Will joined the fold."

I said, 'Hey, during the school year in the dorm, I started writing these songs. What do you think?' Then we really had the opportunity in quarantine to flesh those songs out."

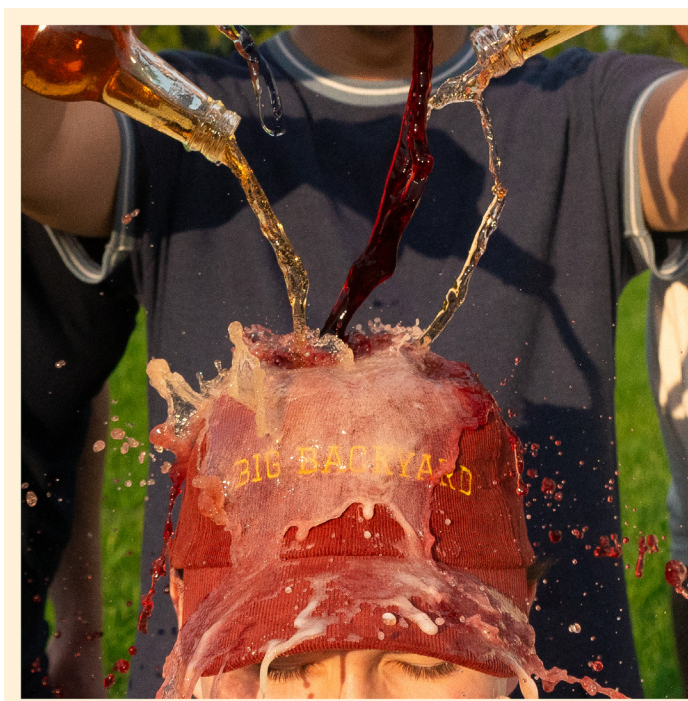
Unlike most bands, Big Backyard could take advantage of the ample time provided in quarantine to find its identity. However, the group faces challenges balancing other aspects of their lives and the band.

"I wish, sometimes, that none of us had anything going on in our lives," said Martin. "Then we could just do the band and go for broke because we've got nothing to lose anyway. As it stands, all four members have a lot to lose. None of us can commit to always touring, always working, always doing something new. So we really have to pick when we're gonna write, when we're gonna play shows, when we have time to rehearse, which sucks."

Despite the difficulties of balancing their lifestyles and musical careers, the band has found some upsides to their situation that are prevalent in the newer songs on this album.

"It also felt like we were who we wanted to be. It feels like we really succeeded in the vision that we wanted us to be back then. Now we are a real band."

- Jackson Martin





Courtesy of Big Backyard

“If you are a college student who wants to write music, and you think that maybe your life isn’t interesting enough, or you don’t have anything to write about, go to the DIY [music] venues in Charlotte, where this stuff is happening, and smack yourself in the head and realize you can write music about your life.”

- Jackson Martin

“Will and I are both in English master’s programs,” said Martin. “We learned how to write a little bit more. Will, as a poetry student, and me, as a rhetoric and composition student, I think we were trying to find ways to be a little bit smarter with our lyrics and the new stuff.”

“Being in poetry has made me just a way better writer,” said Washburn. “Finding more interesting ways to say things is so much easier when you are embedded in this practice all the time. So while being a student definitely kind of drags the band down a little bit, just because we have more going on, it has been helpful as far as just knowing how to write.”

The band’s musical and personal progress is also noticeable in the freshly reworked tracks on this record.

“Working on those old songs again four years later was a love letter to us in our undergrad. In a way, we sort of felt like a cover band doing those again,” said Martin. “It also felt like we were who we wanted to be. It feels like we really succeeded in the vision that we wanted us to be back then. Now we are a real band.”

“I think each one of those songs is notably better than the original,” said Washburn. “In a way that makes it substantially different. I hope that comes through in the songs.”

Despite the album’s quick pace, Washburn believes there is a narrative that can be found throughout the record.

“Even though the songs were written over the span of four years, they tell a pretty cohesive story. Every song, including Bellingham, takes place in North Carolina, and half of them take place in Charlotte. It’s nonfiction, and it’s a narrative of the city,” said Martin.

“It’s literally just songs about our lives, having fun with our friends, getting the band back together and growing up,” added Washburn. “Each song is very narrative and about something material that happened in our lives.”

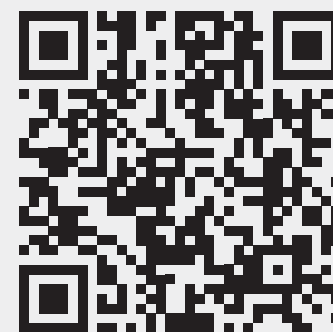
Ultimately, while listening to this album, Martin wants people to know that they can make music for people to enjoy under any circumstances.

“If you are a college student who wants to write music, and you think that maybe your life isn’t interesting enough, or you don’t have anything to write about, go to [The Milestone Club] go to the DIY [music] venues in Charlotte, where this stuff is happening, and smack yourself in the head and realize you can write music about your life,” said Martin.

Listen to “Big Backyard” on iTunes, Spotify or SoundCloud on Aug. 31.

For more information about Big Backyard, check out their Instagram page @bigbackyardband.

Listen to Big Backyard
on Spotify



Struck gold? What fans can expect in year two of the Biff Poggi era

Bryson Foster | Outreach Coordinator

The Charlotte football program enters its second year of the Biff Poggi era, and fan expectations are high that the 49ers will turn a corner. In the current college football climate, many programs find themselves in a rebuild, and for Charlotte, the rise to prominence will take time.

When a program hires a new head coach, getting the team back on track usually takes three to five years. This has been true for a long time, but with the introduction of the transfer portal and Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) deals, coaches face an uphill battle.

Ten years ago, having athletes come to your college for four years was normal, but now players spend one year at a university before jumping ship for more money, as over \$1 billion has been spent in NIL deals since its inception three years ago. Building a winner is now twice as hard for a smaller school like Charlotte.

As the new season approaches, Poggi has a change in focus as he preaches patience to fans

and players alike.

"I learned a lot last year and made plenty of errors. The key thing is learning from those mistakes. I was overly optimistic last year and set the bar too high," said Poggi at Charlotte football media day on Aug. 13. "How good are we going to be? I don't know. I don't know how many games we will win. It is a process to build a program; it takes time."

This may be an alarming proclamation for some, but it is a truth that fans must accept. What can Niner Nation expect this season? The answer is growth.

Season in review

Charlotte's 3-9 record in 2023 might be little to the eye, but the program took steps in the right direction on defense. In the season prior, the last in Will Healy's tenure, the 49ers were abysmal on defense, ranking No. 129. In the first year under Poggi, Charlotte's defensive prowess improved by 70 spots.



Charlotte football head coach Biff Poggi sought out to run the ball in the 2023 and may do the same in 2024. | Courtesy of Charlotte Athletics

The same could not be said about the offense, ranking No. 123 in points per game with a meager 17.5. The offense is the main focus going into the 2024 season as the 49ers bring on former University of Florida quarterback Max Brown to be its new leader.

"He [Brown] gained a lot of respect in the beginning from the players and the coaches because he didn't come in here like some person who was different, higher or more special than anybody else," said Poggi.

The running back room returns players such as Terron Kellman, Hausaun Wilson and Henry Rutledge while adding Cartevious Norton from Iowa State University. Wide receivers Duane Thomas Jr. and Jairus Mack return, while Justin Olson moves over from Middle Tennessee State University.

The biggest problem a year ago was that no one could get the ball to the playmakers, and Poggi hopes to fix that this season.

What fans should expect

As great as the team looks on paper, the 49ers' slate will be rather tricky. Charlotte starts with James Madison University on Aug. 31 before non-conference trips to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Indiana University, which will be uphill battles.

The American Athletic Conference (AAC) games are toss-ups. The team will host East Carolina University, the University of South Florida and the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). On the road, the 49ers have Florida Atlantic University, Rice University and the United States Naval Academy.

With excitement running high for the new season, expectations get blown out of proportion. The ceiling for this 49ers could be six wins and bowl eligibility, but the more likely answer is between three and four wins. As much as Niner Nation wants to see a winner now, that is unrealistic.

Charlotte is within the norm for struggling at the start of a new coach's tenure, as even the greats of the game, like Nick Saban, struggled in the beginning at the University of Alabama and Louisiana State University (LSU).

LSU suffered an upset loss to UAB in Saban's first season there, and in the next, they won a national championship in 2001. He had a similar fate at Alabama in 2007, when the Crimson Tide fell to the University of Louisiana Monroe 21-14.

After that first season, Saban led the Tide to powerhouse status, winning six national championships in 17 years.

It has taken time for prestigious programs like the University of Texas at Austin. Texas played in the national championship game in 2009, losing to Saban's Alabama squad, but then suffered a slide into mediocrity for 10 years before having a triumphant return in the College Football Playoff last season.

These may be lofty examples, as Charlotte is in a Group of Five conference, but even the small guys can have prolonged success. Boise State University is the best example, winning the Fiesta Bowl three times and, most notably, over Oklahoma University in 2007. The Broncos are in the 39th largest state in the country and have found a way to out-recruit power five schools.

Another example is in our state with the Appalachian State University Mountaineers, whose upset over the then-ranked No. 5 University of Michigan Wolverines in 2007 jump-started the program's upward trajectory. In the AAC, Tulane University stunned the No. 10 University of Southern California Trojans in the Cotton Bowl in 2023 and is now the flagship school in the conference.

Playing the waiting game can be challenging, but these programs showed patience can get you far.

Looking ahead

What is ahead for Charlotte? We have yet to get the answers. The 49ers are not alone in their rebuilding journey, as Navy and Colorado University are in the same spot. Poggi is looking at the foundation.

"We are in a great conference and living in a good neighborhood. There are a lot of beautiful houses in the neighborhood, and this one, when I got here last year, was not such a beautiful one," said Poggi. "All I know is that the structure here has fully been excavated, and the foundation is beginning to be laid. Good things take time, and I can tell you this: when I leave Charlotte, there will be a great foundation and a house that can withstand all the elements."

The 49ers kick off their season on Aug. 31 against James Madison University, and the building of Poggi's structure will continue. As Charlotte battles the Dukes at 8 p.m. on ESPNU, fans should stand behind their team as something special looks to be built inside Jerry Richardson.

The making of a leader: Max Brown's transition to Charlotte football

Kelli Blackburn | Asst. Sports Editor

Charlotte redshirt sophomore quarterback Max Brown has become a well-known name in college football circles throughout the 2024 offseason. After two seasons with the University of Florida Gators, he announced his commitment to Charlotte on Dec. 11, 2023.

The 6'3", 220-pound native of Tulsa, Okla. brings a dynamic element to Charlotte's offense that the 49ers have lacked in previous quarterback rooms. His leadership and composure through the transition have been a strong driving force in shaping Charlotte's plan to succeed for this upcoming season.

The beginning of versatility

Brown was active growing up, involved in many different sports such as soccer, baseball and football. He attended Lincoln Christian High School, where he put up 4,416 passing yards with 68 touchdowns over two seasons, earning the Oklahoma District 3, 3A MVP and a top-15 player ranking in the state his senior year.

At Florida, Brown redshirted his freshman year in 2022 and earned one start over six games in 2023, completing 19 of 28 passes with one interception for 192 yards and rushing for 37 yards.

Brown's athleticism extended beyond football. He excelled on the baseball field, ranking at No. 3 amongst shortstops and No. 10 overall in Oklahoma in 2022. He continued to pursue baseball at Florida where he was listed as a right-handed batter and outfielder for the Gators' men's baseball team in 2023. In 2021, Perfect Game clocked a fastball pitch from Brown at 85 mph.

"I think playing a lot of different sports has helped me become a better quarterback," said Brown. "Even if it's soccer, footwork, or playing shortstop with arm angles and footwork as well, I think the biggest thing with all of the sports coming together is just being a competitor and understanding what it takes to be able to win and achieve the goals and challenges that are presented."

Handling the change

Transitioning from Florida to Charlotte went smoothly for Brown, who stayed true to himself in this new beginning.

Connecting with the Charlotte coaches and understanding their plans for the future was crucial for Brown. His parents, siblings and grandparents played a large role in making him comfortable in an unfamiliar place. He also emphasized his faith in navigating new environments.

"Trust in Christ, trust in God, be able to pray on it and understand that it's His plan. It's all gonna work out how it's supposed to," said Brown.

Brown has built chemistry with his teammates—whom he calls his 'brothers'—through spring and summer workouts and fall camp. He stresses that success relies on the results of grinding and suffering for the team during their training.

Moving from the Southeastern Conference (SEC) to the American Athletic Conference (AAC) offers new challenges, but Brown's goals remain the same.

"Whether it's Florida or Charlotte, just being able to understand that we're representing the University and being able to give it your all and understand that it's a blessing to be able to go in and represent," said Brown.

Stepping up

Brown has not only brought versatility to the field but emerged as a voice in the locker room.

Charlotte Head Coach Biff Poggi said that Brown has come in as a 'servant leader' who has earned respect throughout the program with his work ethic and humility.

"He gained a lot of respect in the beginning from the players and the coaches because he didn't come in here like some person who was different, higher or more special than anybody else," said Poggi.

Brown is not looking at the people who are setting expectations for him, but he is setting expectations for himself. As part of his continuous development, he is gaining a new understanding of maturity that he plans to build on through his athletic career.

There are many leaders in the locker room at Charlotte, but as the facilitator of the offense, Brown is building himself up to direct his fellow teammates.

"I want to be a leader that can lead by example and also be a vocal leader when I'm needed," said Brown. "More importantly, just be a leader that brings his teammates around the map and brings the level of their play up and their confidence."

Taking the stage

Now fully focused on football, Brown is ready to lead for Charlotte. He has connected with teammates to instill a winning mentality that emphasizes effort from the 49ers as a whole.

"I am going to give my all. I am going to give 110% of myself each time, so every time, I'm out there playing like it's my last [game]," said Brown.

"I'm extremely grateful to be able to play with my friends and the guys that I am around every day."

Brown will kick off the 2024 season with Charlotte at home in Jerry Richardson Stadium

on Aug. 31 at 8 p.m. against the James Madison University Dukes. The game will be nationally televised on ESPNU.



(Top) Charlotte football's redshirt sophomore quarterback Max Brown steps back for a pass in the Green & White spring game on April 20, 2024. | Chris Crews/Niner Times

(Bottom) Charlotte redshirt sophomore quarterback Max Brown has been a star in Charlotte's training camp, earning praise from players and coaches alike. | Courtesy of Charlotte Athletics

Remembering and honoring the life of Isaiah Hazel

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

Charlotte football lost a light in the program with the death of former cornerback Isaiah Hazel, and will strive to honor and remember his name in the coming seasons.

23-year-old Hazel was killed on July 6 in a car crash in Maryland. Also killed in the crash were 24-year-old Minnesota Vikings rookie cornerback Khyree Jackson and 24-year-old Anthony Lytton Jr., a former Penn State and Florida State University cornerback.

Hazel's death sent ripples through the Charlotte community and 49er football program, as seen by a statement released by Charlotte football Head Coach Biff Poggi shortly following the announcement of Hazel's death.

"We are heartbroken today at the news of Isaiah Hazel's untimely passing," said Poggi in the statement. "Our program mourns his loss, and our thoughts and prayers are with Isaiah's family

during this tragic time. All of Isaiah's hopes and dreams were still before him, and I pray that his family is granted strength now more than ever."

Hazel, Lytton Jr. and Jackson were high school teammates at Dr. Henry A. Wise Jr. High School in Maryland and won a state championship together in 2016. The three have been named "DMV legends" by the local Maryland community where the three grew up together.

According to Maryland State Police, the three's vehicle was hit by a speeding driver at around 3 a.m., knocking their vehicle off the roadway. Hazel and Jackson were pronounced dead at the site of the accident, and Lytton Jr. was pronounced dead at a nearby hospital.

"I love them, and I wish I could say it to them one more time," said Steve Rapp to WUSA9 following their passing. "The legacy of those guys is going to live on forever. I don't think you can say

you're happy about something like this, except, for me, at least they were together."

Rapp coached the three in high school as an assistant coach and now serves as Wise's head coach.

Since their days at Wise, the three were close friends, and all were on the way to promising careers. Lytton was set to spend his final year of college eligibility at Bowie State University. Hazel had his eyes set on the Canadian Football League or an NFL opportunity where he could compete alongside Jackson.

"All three were best friends," said Brianna Thompson, Hazel's sister, in an interview with FOX Baltimore. "Grew up together, went to high school together. All of them were on the right track."

Hazel went on to play four seasons at the University of Maryland before transferring to

Charlotte in 2023. In his senior season, Hazel was a standout on the 49er defense, starting eight games and playing all 12. Hazel was No. 6 on the team for total tackles for Charlotte, with 45.

Hazel is remembered with love by his 49er teammates and coaches for someone who was always kind, compassionate and caring.

"Haze [Hazel], he was that guy, just to bring a smile on your face," said redshirt senior linebacker Prince Wallace-Bemah. "When you [were] feeling down, he'd bring you up. With Haze, it's like you never have a dull moment."

"He'd [Hazel] do whatever he could to help him from any standpoint, from literally giving you the shirt off his back if he had to," said Charlotte safeties coach Justin Sanders. "He was a man that had a heart for people, and again, he was genuine about it."

Coaching Hazel in 2023, Sanders recounted a



Isaiah Hazel (13) runs out against Georgia State University alongside his 49er teammates in a 2023 matchup. | Aravind Pasupathi/Niner Times File

fond memory of how Hazel took in his teachings.

“One of the things that I always try to push on the safeties of being obnoxious communicators,” said Sanders. “And he [Hazel] loved to communicate. He loved to talk. Even when it wasn’t football, he always had something to say.”

“I remember one time I was in a meeting with my players, and I always asked him to talk, but I

actually wanted him to be quiet because I knew he knew what he was doing, and I wanted some of the young guys to talk,” said Sanders. “I ended up having to kick him out of my meeting. But I told the rest of the group, once he left, I said, ‘That’s what I mean when I say obnoxious communicating, is that you cannot ignore the things that are being said.’ The type of kid Hazel is, I was

blessed to be able to coach him, blessed to be able to be around him, to see the type of energy he gave off. It was just devastating to see him going so soon.”

After considering multiple options, the team will wear a helmet sticker for all their games this season. The sticker will bear the number 13, the number Hazel donned in his 2023 season with Charlotte.

Maryland football will also honor Hazel this year in its opening game against the University of Connecticut, according to their Head Coach, Mike Locksley.

While it may be unintentional, the 49ers have also honored Hazel by adjusting the way they communicate with each other.

Wallace-Bemah said he had noticed a shift in extra communication between players since Hazel’s passing.

“I feel like we’re more connected, more caring about one another,” said Wallace-Bemah. “Now we always want to know what everybody is doing outside of football and check up on each other.”

Although the team is now connected as they

head into the regular season, Hazel’s passing was a devastating moment that could have fractured this Charlotte team.

“Oh, there were a lot of tears falling,” said Wallace-Bemah, recounting the moment. “Lots of heartfelt speeches and just trying to bond and come together as a family instead of letting our past problems tear us apart.”

With Hazel’s passing, Sanders believes his time at Charlotte can be a valuable lesson for the team and a lesson that the 49ers have held onto.

“Just take advantage of opportunity,” said Sanders. “When he [Hazel] chose to come to Charlotte for his last year, he really wanted to maximize his opportunity. I believe that he did. And that’s one of the things that kind of reverberated through the team.”

Though Hazel is no longer with us, the Charlotte community can cherish his memory and honor his life by remembering him as the compassionate, good-hearted and talented young man that all who were familiar with Hazel knew him to be.

“He’d [Hazel] do whatever he could to help him from any standpoint, from literally giving you the shirt off his back if he had to.”

- Justin Sanders, Charlotte safeties coach

Previewing Charlotte football’s 2024 season

Kelli Blackburn | Asst. Sports Editor

As the 2024 college football season approaches, the Charlotte 49ers aim to bounce back and make significant strides under Head Coach Biff Poggi, who enters his second year at the helm.

Last season

The 49ers experienced a challenging 3-9 season, finishing No. 11 overall with a 2-6 record in the American Athletic Conference (AAC). They closed out tough conference competition in the 2023 season and were placed in AAC standings over the University of Tulsa, Temple University and East Carolina University (ECU).

Charlotte opened their 2023 season with a 24-7 win over South Carolina State University. They also secured wins against in-state rival ECU 10-7 in Greenville, N.C. and Tulsa University 33-26 in overtime in Tulsa, Okla.

Redshirt junior wide receiver Jairus Mack led the 49ers in receiving yards, recording 453 yards over 11 games.

Players to watch for

Charlotte welcomes some new faces while also seeing key players return in 2024.

Junior defensive back Dontae Balfour enters his second season with the 49ers. He has earned spots on five preseason awards watch lists, such as the Preseason Paycom Jim Thorpe Award Watch List and Preseason All-Conference Third Team for the AAC. In 2023, Balfour ranked No. 4 on the team with 54 tackles (34 solo) with one tackle-for-loss.

Junior running back Cartevious Norton, a transfer from Iowa State University (ISU), looks to elevate Charlotte’s running game. At ISU, he rushed for over 300 yards with five touchdowns in two seasons.

Redshirt sophomore quarterback Max Brown takes the reins for Charlotte after transferring from the University of Florida during the offseason. At Florida, Brown completed 19 of 28 passes for 192 yards, rushed for 37 yards and threw only one interception over two seasons.

Junior linebacker Nikhai Hill-Green, who transferred from the University of Michigan in 2023, will be a key piece for the defense. Last season, he was the second-leading tackler for the 49ers with 73 tackles and earned Third-Team All-AAC honors.

Upcoming season

The 49ers will adapt their offense following the departures of redshirt sophomore wide receiver Jack Hestera, now with Utah State University and senior quarterback Jalon Jones.

Charlotte faces ECU at home on Oct. 5, 2024. They also take on tougher competition in college football, including an in-state matchup against the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Tar Heels on Sept. 7 and a game against Indiana University on Sept. 21 in Bloomington, Ind.

In their second season in the AAC, the 49ers kick off conference play against Rice University in Houston on Sept. 28.

Expectations

Coach Poggi and Charlotte football are looking for positive changes in the program for the 2024 season. Facing a tough schedule, the 49ers hope these changes will build the team toward a winning record.

The 49ers will take on the James Madison University Dukes under the lights on Aug. 31 at 8 p.m. in Jerry Richardson Stadium. The game will be nationally televised on ESPN.



Courtesy of Charlotte Athletics

Tim Brewster brings swagger and success to Charlotte football

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

Following over 40 years of football experience on and off the field, Tim Brewster has landed in Charlotte and immediately has made an impact.

The 49ers' new tight ends and associate head coach was described as the "x-factor" following his hiring and has been just that for Charlotte as a top-notch recruiter and coach.

Before his time at Charlotte, Brewster coached with the Denver Broncos and the then-San Diego Chargers in the NFL. He has also coached at seven Power Five institutions, most recently at the University of Colorado under Deion Sanders in 2023.

During his time as a coach, Brewster has coached the likes of Kyle Pitts at the University of Florida, who was the highest-drafted tight end in NFL history and Antonio Gates at the Chargers, who now holds the NFL record for most touchdown receptions by a tight end.

As a recruiter, Brewster is among the top in the country. While at the University of North Carolina, he was named the Atlantic Coastal Conference's top recruiter by ESPN, a top 25 recruiter in the nation by Rivals and a top 10 recruiter

by 247Sports. While at Florida State University, Brewster helped them hoist a trophy in four top-five recruiting classes in his five years there.

While he is a new addition to the Charlotte staff, Brewster is absolutely a needed one. The Charlotte staff is an inexperienced group, making Brewster the perfect antidote.

"I'm a veteran, experienced coach; I like to say no flinch," said Brewster. "There's no situation in the game or in practice or anything that I haven't already seen, and I want to be a guy that the other guys can lean on."

Like many coaches, Brewster started as a player and totaled over 1100 yards as a tight end at the University of Illinois from 1982-1983. Coming onto the team as a walk-on and then redshirt, Brewster had a slow start, but his 59 reception season in 1983 ranks among the top in Illinois history for tight end receptions in a season.

Now nearly 40 years removed from his playing career and entrenched in the college coaching landscape; Brewster still holds the same love for the game he held as a player.

"I just love ball. I love ball. I loved playing the game," said Brewster. "I was the first one there,

the last one to leave. If you can't play the game, the next best thing is to coach the game. I just feel so blessed that I'm doing something that I truly love to do. How many people in life wake up, and they're just thrilled and love what they're getting ready to do?"

The first-one-in, last-one-out mentality is something that Brewster still brings to his everyday life. While his playing days may be over, his physical condition is still something that he values.

According to Brewster, every day, he wakes up at 4:30 a.m. and starts his day with a four-mile run. This early and energetic start is something that he hopes to transfer to his players.

"I want the players to feel my energy," said Brewster. "That's why, at the beginning of practice, when we stretch, I reach out and touch every player. I go down the line and touch every player because I want him to feel that I'm all in with him."

A large number of the players he connects with were hand-picked by Brewster. With his help, Charlotte brought in another top class in school history, with over 30 new additions.

With college recruitment experiencing an overhaul due to changes to the transfer portal and NIL rules, Brewster was among the first to adapt. In 2023, at Colorado, Brewster helped rope in the nation's No. 1 ranked transfer class.

"I understand how the [transfer] portal works and how you have to be extremely aggressive in your relentless pursuit of getting the players that you want and feel like can help improve your team," said Brewster.

Brewster said relationship building has been his key to recruiting success.

"Players, when they're in communication with coaches, want [the] truth," said Brewster. "Me, as a coach, I want trust. I have to be able to trust the player, and that's something that's built over time. I don't ask a player to trust me. I tell the player, let me earn your trust. That's how you build something that will last."

Read more at
nintertimes.com



Associate and tight ends coach, Tim Brewster speaks to players during a session of Charlotte football's training camp. | Courtesy of Charlotte Athletics

Charlotte football's Dontae Balfour steps into 2024 season in new leadership role

Bryson Foster | Outreach Coordinator



Charlotte football's junior defensive back Dontae Balfour steps back for coverage against the United States Naval Academy in their Homecoming matchup on Oct. 14, 2023. | Jordyn Phillips/Niner Times File

Chaos has become an everyday word in modern college football, and for Charlotte, this rings true as multiple holes need to be filled defensively. Amid the uncertainty, the 49ers have one player who has become a constant in the secondary.

Junior defensive back Dontae Balfour enters the 2024 season with high expectations after a 54-tackle campaign in 2023. He finds his name on five preseason awards watch lists, such as the Preseason All-American Athletic Conference First Team and the Jim Thorpe Watch List. Balfour looks to step into a leadership role, holding down the defensive side of the ball for the 49ers.

"Stepping into the new role just comes naturally. I don't really look at it as pressure," said Balfour. "I look at it as something that I do and was built for. I'm going to be me at the end of the day."

Head Coach Biff Poggi said that he expects Balfour to be a top contributor on defense.

"As a player, he [Dontae] is a guy who leads by example and has all the tools," said Poggi. "He

is long, fast and has great feet. We are blessed to have a corner like that because they are hard to come by."

The love for the game

A small-town kid from Starke, Fla., Balfour's fondness for sports was evident at a young age. He started playing basketball in elementary school while competing in track and field, following in the footsteps of his uncle, a three-time Florida high jump state champion.

Balfour's interest in football peaked after watching the 2013 Florida State University national title team, which was littered with future NFL talents such as Jameis Winston, Jalen Ramsey and Derwin James Jr. Inspired by their success, he put on football pads for the first time in middle school.

"They [Florida State] made me gain a deep love for the game because it was like I was playing out there with them. I used to feel everything, and I feel like that's what comes out of me when I

play on the field," said Balfour.

Balfour continued to be a three-sport athlete into high school, qualifying for states in the 300-meter and triple jump for track while averaging 20 points per game in basketball as a senior. However, football became the main focus, earning him recognition as a four-star prospect at Bradford High School and ranking as the No. 17 cornerback in the country by 247Sports.

Journey to Charlotte

After his high school success, Balfour started his collegiate journey at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), choosing the Tar Heels over Auburn University and Louisiana State University. Balfour said one person impacted his decision.

"Coach Dré Bly was a big part of why I went to UNC over Auburn and LSU. I feel like being there made me lock in on myself," said Balfour. "It pushed me academically, mentally and physically to be better. Those two years molded me

into who I am today."

In his two seasons at UNC, Balfour played in just six games before entering the transfer portal and heading to Charlotte.

"I didn't really want to go somewhere too far away from where I was from. I wanted to stay in North Carolina," said Balfour. "I was hearing good things about Charlotte, and I felt like it was somewhere I could come and dominate."

A breakout season and reunion

Balfour was a defensive standout in 2023, breaking the school record for pass breakups in a season with 11. He was No. 4 on the team in tackles with 54, adding two forced fumbles and an interception. After a stellar first year as a 49er, Balfour reunites with the coach who started it all, Bly, a defensive analyst for Charlotte.

"He's [Bly] had a big impact on my life. That's my guy; I have learned so much from him," said Balfour. "He doesn't want anything but the best for you, and I feel like having him on my side just puts more confidence in me."

Bly is not the only coach encouraging Balfour, as Poggi is helping him grow on and off the field.

"He [Poggi] is here for us, not for a paycheck. He's a great, genuine person. He cares about his players more than anything," said Balfour. "He emphasizes life advice on what to do and what not to do. He is trying to keep us on the right path."

Poggi has an evident admiration for Balfour's character and leadership for the 49ers.

"Dontae [Balfour] is a great kid; I love him. He always has a smile on his face and always hugs me. He is an outstanding kid, bright-eyed and just a wonderful human being," said Poggi. "We think we have a really good one in Dontae."

Looking ahead

With the 2024 season quickly approaching, Balfour wants to be a leader his teammates can rely on.

"Most importantly, I want to be the best teammate anybody can ask for. You can call on me anytime," said Balfour. "Being a great teammate is the most important thing because when a guy knows you have their back, they're going to play just as hard for you."

Balfour and the 49ers will kick off the 2024 season by hosting the James Madison University Dukes on Aug. 31 inside Jerry Richardson Stadium. Kickoff is set for 8 p.m., and the game will be nationally televised on ESPNU.

NPHC fraternities and sororities stroll at the 2024 NPHC Yard Show

Jordyn Phillips/Niner Times

