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Georgia head football coach Kirby Smart in action during the Georgia vs. Auburn football game and homecoming celebration on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2024, in Athens, Georgia at Sanford Stadium. Georgia won 31-13. PHOTO/LANEY MARTIN



Georgia head coach Kirby Smart coaches during the football game between Georgia and Florida at EverBank Stadium in Jacksonville, Florida, on Saturday, Nov. 2, 2024. Georgia won 34-20. PHOTO/LANEY MARTIN

‘Not where they need to be’

Kirby Smart on next season

Andy Mathis

Georgia head coach Kirby Smart has made it clear: the Bulldogs are not meeting the expected standard – particularly the incoming freshmen.

Amid the team looking to claim its third national championship in five seasons, Smart expressed frustration with the team’s early spring performance, singling out players struggling to keep up with Georgia’s notoriously demanding practices.

“We really can’t practice to our standard because they’re all tired ... so we got to do a better job of getting them in shape,” Smart said following a March practice. “They are not where they need to be ... they have to be willing to receive coaching.”

Georgia once again faces the challenge of integrating new talent into an established, championship-caliber program. The team has seen massive turnover; Smart noted that only 26 players will have completed at least three seasons with the Bulldogs by the start of this season.

“We have the least number of players who have gone through three spring practices since I’ve been here,” Smart said. “So that should tell you something ... We have a very young, inexperienced group.”

Despite being highly touted recruits, many of the freshmen have struggled with the physical demands of Georgia’s practices. The Bulldogs’ lack of veterans has left many positions, including key spots in the secondary and on the offensive line, open for competition, but Smart acknowledged the adjustments newcomers must make.

“I’m calling out all the freshmen,” Smart said. “We’re not in shape. There’s not a guy out

there, a freshman, that is sustaining his reps and just flourishing. They’re not used to the tempo of practice, nor should they be. There’s not a high school program in the country that can practice like we do.”

While Smart has expressed concern about the team’s overall fitness, he also emphasized the importance of leadership from the few experienced players who remain, such as safety KJ Bolden.

“I prayed for moments like this, to be a leader in one of the rooms at Georgia,” Bolden said. “So just being able to take over that leader role and pushing the guys every day because I know what the standard is here, and I know what the standard [has] got to be. We’re supposed to go all the way.”

The Bulldogs, who signed the No. 2 recruiting class in the country for 2025, are not lacking in talent. However, transitioning from high school to one of the nation’s premier programs requires more than potential. Smart made it clear that players will need to earn their spots, regardless of recruiting status.

“We’ve got to probably simplify some to get guys just to go play and not be thinking out there,” Smart said. “I need the older players – I mean old to me is year two, year three, that’s old – to lead year one guys.”

The early struggles have not diminished Smart’s belief in his team’s eventual success. Despite the challenges of integrating new faces, he remains confident the Bulldogs will meet his lofty expectations — though not without some growing pains along the way.

“I think they’ll get there,” Smart said. “I mean, if they won’t, then somebody else will be in their spot.”

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Georgia defensive back KJ Bolden in action during the University of Georgia vs. Auburn University football game and homecoming celebration on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2024, in Athens, Georgia, at Sanford Stadium. PHOTO/LANEY MARTIN



Georgia defensive back KJ Bolden celebrates after a play during the University of Georgia vs. Tennessee Tech game at Sanford Stadium in Athens, Georgia, on Saturday, Sept. 7, 2024. No. 1 Georgia defeated Tennessee Tech 48-3. PHOTO/LANEY MARTIN

Growing up fast

KJ Bolden poised for headlining role in Georgia’s safety room

Bo Underwood

Things have been moving pretty quickly for KJ Bolden. When he arrived at Georgia in spring 2024, he joined a safety group made up of two experienced players: Dan Jackson and Malaki Starks. Now, with both off to the NFL, Bolden is going from the rookie of the bunch to, arguably, Georgia’s most experienced player at the position.

“I would say it felt a little weird, but it really doesn’t,” Bolden said in March. “I pray for moments like this, to be a leader in one of the rooms at Georgia. So being able to take over that leader role, just pushing the guys every day, because I know what the standard is here.”

That’s the kind of growth expected from a former five-star recruit and top-15 player in the country — not to mention someone with one of the most dramatic recruiting sagas in recent memory. He made the stunning decision to flip to Georgia on the first day of 2023’s early signing period, after having previously been committed to Florida State for months.

Bolden and his family said the decision was based on a desire to give him the best chance possible to play in the NFL, and he sure put some great things on tape in year one. His raw athleticism, football instincts and fiery personality got him on the field for all 14 games, and he proved he belonged right away.

As a freshman, Bolden recorded 59 total tackles, one sack, a forced fumble and an interception. Following the season, he was named a freshman All-American by the Football Writers Association of America.

But, Georgia is going to need even more out of Bolden in the 2025 season. Starks and Jackson’s departures leave two massive voids to fill. Senior JaCorey Thomas, who appeared in all 14 games as a reserve, will be back alongside Bolden, but aside from that, it’s essentially all newcomers. The Bulldogs added UAB transfer Adrian Maddox, USC

transfer Zion Branch and University of Miami transfer Jaden Harris from the portal this offseason.

“It’s a lot of people, but the solid foundation that Malaki and Dan provided is not there,” head coach Kirby Smart said. “So it’s a ‘by committee’ group. I’m thinking it’s too early to have anybody out in the lead. They’re all swimming a little bit. They’re trying to survive practice instead of thrive, and we want to thrive, not survive.”

Smart, a former Georgia safety himself, has a reputation for coaching his old position particularly hard. He said that Georgia has been “behind” at safety this spring.

“Here, you really just gotta hear how they’re saying it to you,” Bolden said to new players adjusting to Georgia. “They may be yelling at you ... but you just really gotta hear what he’s saying. They really want you to be the best player you can be. So I tell the young guys, don’t take it offensive[ly]... So just be coachable, that’s how you get on the field.”

Bolden is entering uncharted territory, but it’s not like Georgia hasn’t asked a lot of him before. This is someone who led all Bulldogs’ defenders in snaps in his very first college game, after all. He has always maintained that he chose Georgia because of its potential to develop him as a player. Now, the opportunity is in front of him. He’s in a position to take command of the safety room as a sophomore.

“He’s very natural at understanding our defense,” Smart said. “I’m proud of where he is. He has to be careful that he doesn’t become complacent or think that because he might know it the best that he’s where he needs to be. There’s a difference, right? So, intrinsically, he has to be motivated by trying to be great, and he’s got to do that every day. He can’t measure himself against what we have right now.”

Smart has emphasized the importance of self-motivation, calling those who have it the “greatest kind of player to coach” in March. For a young player like Bolden, who has already made several plays beyond his years, it’s about

recognizing there’s even more out there — if he really wants it.

Bolden appears to be embracing that responsibility head-on.

“I went up to the top with the coaches, just went over the playbook – things I didn’t know last year about the play-book, things I could just work on,” Bolden said. “Asking for tips and stuff like that, asking some of my older guys like Malaki and Dan. ‘How I should approach it, how do I come about it?’ And I feel like they gave me great ideas on how I should do it.”

The fact that Bolden was able to get on the field as much as he did during his freshman year is a testament to his willingness to learn — as well as his incredible talent. But going from an unproven freshman to the most experienced safety on the team in one offseason is going to take its toll. In his first availability of the spring, Bolden talked about the biggest lesson he learned as a freshman from Starks.

“Every day is not going to be a good day for you, so you know you will have on and off days,” Bolden said. “Just going to practice every day, trying to give 110% and trying to be the best you can be. That’s the most I’ve learned from him.”

There will almost certainly be growing pains in the back end of Georgia’s secondary currently. An almost all-new safety corps is going to take time to gel together and master its on-field communication, even if Smart wishes the group were much further along than it is this season. But if Bolden’s freshman season is any indication, he should be the latest in a series of star Georgia safeties. Just take it from Starks himself:

“He’s like a sponge, in meetings, he really wants to learn,” Starks said. “He really wants to grow, and he’s super athletic. So to watch him grow in his process from the spring when he got here, and just kind of how he played throughout the season, I’m excited to see what he has for next year.”

‘We tailgate harder than your team plays’

Highlights from Saturdays in Athens



Scenes from the homecoming tailgate event on Myers Quad on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2024, in Athens, Georgia. PHOTO/HOSANNA WORKU



Football fans tailgate at the University of Georgia before the South Carolina game on September 16, 2023, in Athens, Georgia. PHOTO/SIDNEY CHANSAMONE



Football fans tailgate at the University of Georgia before the South Carolina game on September 16, 2023, in Athens, Georgia. PHOTO/SIDNEY CHANSAMONE



Scenes from the homecoming tailgate event hosted by University of Georgia Black Alumni members on Myers Quad on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2024, in Athens, Georgia. PHOTO/HOSANNA WORKU



Georgia quarterback Gunner Stockton at the 2025 Allstate Sugar Bowl between Georgia and Notre Dame in New Orleans on Thursday, Jan. 2, 2025. PHOTO/LANEY MARTIN

Leading the pack

Stockton embraces new role with Georgia football

Kameron Farmer

Gunner Stockton’s career start of 234 passing yards and a touchdown at the SEC Championship in Atlanta, Georgia, on Dec. 7, 2024, was nothing short of magical, but is it enough to earn him the position of QB1 next season?

As newly-crowned SEC champions, and in its first CFP appearance since the illustrious 2022 championship run, Georgia might have found its successor to outgoing quarterback Carson Beck.

Although Stockton is the presumed QB going forward, since Beck transferred to University of Miami, Georgia head coach Kirby Smart has not decided who will be starting as QB1 in August, despite praising both Stockton and freshman QB Ryan Puglisi for their performances thus far.

“Both of those guys are doing a great job,” Smart said. “I’m really pleased with where both of them are at. Ryan’s taking some reps with the ones. Gunner continues to grow and get better.”

Though the two quarterbacks are competing for the position of QB1, Stockton said he “wouldn’t want it any other way.”

“Ryan’s a great guy,” Stockton said. “He’s a good friend. That’s the thing about Georgia. I mean, there’s going to be good competition everywhere.”

Stockton is aware of the competition in the locker room, but as the season quickly approaches, he’s using the spring to focus on something else: getting reps.

“A bunch of reps help,” Stockton said. “Like coach Smart [said], you’ll get the most reps here at the University of Georgia. So, I think everybody, freshmen to fifth years, you’re getting a bunch of reps.”

The Rabun County-native has been busy since Georgia’s

season ended at the hands of the Fighting Irish in January.

“I’ve been working on my footwork and watching some film,” Stockton said. “And that’s the thing about spring ball, we have a bunch of time to watch film and looking at all the little things, honing in on them.”

Stockton knows his play on the field needs to elevate for Georgia to contend for a championship, but he feels leadership and communication are essential, especially in becoming comfortable with his receivers.

“You just gotta communicate,” Stockton said. “It takes time, so in the offseason ... you’re building chemistry and just knowing how certain routes work and how you want it and how each person runs it a little different, so that’s when you work on it.”

Stockton is surrounded by a loaded receiving corps to start the new season.

Transfers Zachariah Branch and Noah Thomas are expected to make huge impacts in progressing the ball downfield, while returners Colbie Young, Dillon Bell, London Humphreys and Sacovie White are also expected to garner attention.

Stockton will have quite a few expectations placed on him, should he officially become Georgia’s QB1. He believes he is prepared for what is to come after seeing Beck navigate both the praise and criticism.

“I think there’s a lot of good things from Carson,” Stockton said. “He has really good footwork and stuff like that and the way he really processed information really well.”

Stockton knows the high-profile spotlight that his position entails. From throwing touchdowns to dealing with the media, he is aware of what comes with the territory. He’s embracing it every day and is ready for the challenge.

FRESHMEN TO WATCH:G-DAY

Defensive lineman Elijah Griffin

#90

The hype is real for the 6-foot-4, 310-pound defensive lineman from Savannah, Georgia, who entered college as the nation’s No.1 defensive prospect in his class, according to teammate Warren Brinson. “[Griffin is] the next Jalen Carter,” Brinson said. “I saw him at practice ... He’s legit.” Griffin is explosive and powerful in the trenches, and his arrival comes at the perfect time as Georgia looks to replace four key contributors along the defensive line. The opportunity is there for him to crack the rotation. Given his talent and early buzz, don’t be surprised if Griffin makes an immediate impact — much like Carter did.

Wide receiver Talyn Taylor

Talyn Taylor, a polished 5-star receiver from Illinois, showed impressive growth throughout his recruitment and entered Athens facing high expectations. Scouts rave about his refined route running, smooth acceleration and reliable hands. The 6-foot, 190-pound playmaker racked up over 1,600 receiving yards and 26 touchdowns as a high school senior. With Georgia’s wide receiver room still searching for consistency — especially after last season’s struggles and early uncertainty this spring — Taylor could work his way into the rotation, particularly if injuries arise or depth becomes a concern.

#11

Offensive lineman Juan Gaston

#73

At 6-foot-7 and 360 pounds, Juan Gaston will be hard to miss; he’s the heaviest player on the team. The Atlanta native was the highest-rated O-lineman in Georgia’s 2025 signing class, coming in at No. 62 nationally. His new teammates were wowed as soon as he arrived. “First impression [of Gaston]: that’s a big guy, that’s a big man,” returning offensive lineman Monroe Freeling said. “Probably one of the biggest I’ve seen coming to Georgia. But he’s a hard worker, always got a smile on his face, and he’s coachable.” Georgia’s offensive line is undergoing a youth movement after losing four starters from last season, so Gaston has a real chance to push for early playing time. You can’t teach size, and if he continues trimming down and refining his technique, the massive freshman could find himself in the mix at tackle sooner rather than later.

Running back Bo Walker

Bo Walker isn’t the biggest prospect, coming in at about 5-foot-9 and 210 pounds, but, according to staff and teammates, he might be the most college-ready. “Bo’s very bright,” head coach Kirby Smart said. “He’s had some really good runs. He’s had some mistakes. And what I like about Bo is he’s very teachable. He’s very coachable. And he’s got natural rush instincts.” Before transferring to Rabun-Gap Nacoochee for eligibility reasons his senior year, Walker put up 2,001 all-purpose yards and 30 touchdowns as a high school junior. This spring, he’s capitalizing on an injury-thinned backfield, with veterans Branson Robinson and Roderick Robinson both sidelined. Walker has gotten extended carries, and all reports suggest he’s made the most of it in a backfield battle behind expected star Nate Frazier. If he keeps up this momentum, Walker could be a key rotational back in 2025.

#24

— Braden Brownell

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Georgia running back Andrew Paul (3) runs with the ball during the annual G-Day spring football game at Sanford Stadium in Athens, Georgia, on Saturday, April 13, 2024. The Red and Black teams tied 20-20. PHOTO/LANDEN TODD

84 years of homegrown rivalry

The history of Georgia’s spring game

Jesse Wood

Georgia’s G-Day game has long been a spectacle for Georgia fans to get familiar with the upcoming season’s team. Players like Stetson Bennett, Jacob Eason and even head coach Kirby Smart have used the game as an opportunity for a tune-up before the fall season gets underway. The game’s history, though, goes much further back than some supporters might realize.

On March 8, 1941, 2,500 spectators, who paid 50 cents each, filed into the stands of Sanford Stadium for Georgia’s first G-Day, kicking off an iconic annual tradition. Now, the 80th G-Day approaches, marking the start of a pivotal season with new players, new goals and new challenges.

“We’re very deficient at a couple positions and if we lose one or two or three, it would convert into some kind of controlled practice, some kind of other format,” Smart said in a press conference on March 18. “But right now, we haven’t been through scrimmages. We’ll see where we go.”

G-Day was introduced as a way for Bulldog fans to get a glimpse at the up and coming talent and see returning players back in action — as well as a chance to solidify positions within the team before the fall season. Additionally, many fans take the opportunity to partake in classic gameday traditions, such as tailgating or the Dawg Walk.

Unlike previous years, this G-Day will not be televised, but it will be covered by the Georgia Bulldog Radio Network.

“We like to have prospects come in. It’s a big event,” Smart said. “We have official visits, so we want to control the timing of it more and we want to be able to play at our pace and not have to worry about the constraints of being inside a window.”

The spring game is held approximately 100 days after the conclusion of the previous season and around 140 days before the start of the coming season, which kicks off this year

on Aug. 30 against Marshall.

G-Day has transformed over the years in many ways, including a shift in team names. In 1964, first-year head coach Vince Dooley changed the White team to the Black team, which has stuck to this day.

Additionally, the division of the opposing teams has varied over the years. In the past, the entire team has been divided evenly, whereas now, the first-team offense and second-team defense face off against the second-team offense and first-team defense.

Few outside forces have halted G-Day — not even the 1996 Olympics. Because of the events held in Sanford Stadium, the 1996 G-Day was held at Clarke Central High School in front of 10,196 fans.

G-Day has been cancelled only four times in its history: due to the World War II draft shrinking the team in 1943, numerous player injuries in 1945, a sewage leak at Sanford Stadium in 2000 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The 2016 G-Day was one of the most iconic, with the debut of Smart and freshman quarterback Jacob Eason in front of 93,000 fans.

The spring scrimmage has also served as a convenient time to not only induct new players, but also four-legged mascots, including the current Uga, Boom. The 2024 G-Day pregame ceremonies included the collaring of the eleventh Uga, officially welcoming him to the team.

The 80th G-Day will allow Georgia’s inexperienced roster to get acclimated to the gameday environment.

“I feel like half the roster is in their first season at Georgia,” Smart said. “Not necessarily first season in college, but their first season at Georgia and that’s been tough. So we’ve got a long way to go but I am optimistic. We do have good kids and they do work hard.”



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- ACROSS
1. Pharaoh’s nickname

4. Luau handouts

8. Press

12. Antipollution grp.

13. Inauguration recital

14. “I’m ____ you!”

15. Petition

16. Busboy’s load

17. Teen ____

18. Oil supporter

20. Like a winter scene

21. When doubled, on the double

23. Finger or toe

25. Any port in a storm

27. Lowlife

28. Stretch, with “out”

31. Joan’s “Dynasty” role

33. Faultfinder

35. Part of a price

36. Coral islet

38. Smoldering remnant

39. “Against the Wind” rocker

41. Swabs

42. Selfish sort

45. Symbols of industry

47. Bane of youth

48. Photo mishap

49. It runs in the forest

52. Propel, as into action

53. Eastern discipline

54. Poetic palindrome

55. Attaches, as patches

56. Flock members

57. Hangout

20. Crab-like move

21. Crack, in a way

22. Robust

24. Chitchat

26. Comparatively consid-
erate

28. Raised in relief

29. Castle’s stronghold

30. Blunders

32. Problem of the middle
ages?

34. BBs, e.g.

37. Chicken

39. Top competitors, often

40. Roulette bet

42. Memorial Day solo

43. Plot unit

44. Comprehend

46. Mardi ____

48. “Later”

50. Art, nowadays?

51. Ink holder
- DOWN
1. Brewer’s product

2. Kind of truck

3. Assume control

4. Realtor’s offering

5. Lop-____ rabbit

6. Right-leaning type?

7. Like wallflowers

8. Show the way

9. Loosen

10. Put on board

11. Sacred

19. Height



Georgia inside linebackers Justin Williams (19) and Chris Cole (18) celebrate with fans at the game between Georgia and Florida at EverBank Stadium in Jacksonville, Florida, on Saturday, Nov. 2, 2024. Georgia won 34-20. PHOTO/LANEY MARTIN

‘That’s my best friend’

Linebackers Chris Cole and Justin Williams preparing for 2025 breakout

Bo Underwood

Georgia loves to keep the cupboard full of linebackers.

Though longtime starters Smael Mondon Jr. and Jalon Walker are off to the NFL draft, the Bulldogs have CJ Allen and Raylen Wilson ready to man the top linebacker spots, and behind them, Georgia may have its future at the position already set.

Chris Cole and Justin Williams were two of Georgia’s biggest pickups from the 2024 recruiting class, with Williams ranking as the No. 1 linebacker in the country and Cole following closely behind at No. 3. After promising freshman seasons in 2024, they’re ready to make an even greater impact in 2025.

The pair are best friends off the field, quickly forming a bond as blue-chip freshmen who played the same position and moved to a new state at the same time. Williams is from Conroe, Texas, and Cole is a Salem, Virginia, native.

“He’s my best friend,” Cole said of Williams. “He’s a great guy. He helps this team a lot. He’s vocal, and he also encourages everyone on the team.”

Williams made an impression on the coaching staff as a freshman for his high motor, work ethic and attitude — not always qualities a five-star freshman shows when forced into a reserve role.

“He’s probably one of the most positive people I’ve ever been around,” head coach Kirby Smart said of Williams. “He inspires hustle, effort. I just love the kid’s energy. He’s never down in the dumps. He competes. I think that he is the kind of alpha you need at the inside linebacker position.”

Cole saw action as a freshman following some injuries in Georgia’s linebacker group and turned heads immediately. He recorded 16 tackles and recovered two fumbles, drawing praise for his versatility as both a pass rusher and in coverage.

“He makes me a better player every day,” Williams said of Cole. “Seeing him go chase the quarterback, it makes me like, ‘Dang, I’ve got to pick it up,’ because that’s my best friend ... I want to be like him and just work as hard as him.”

Cole’s ascent is even more striking, considering he’s been playing the position for only a couple years. He played safety his “whole life” before moving to linebacker in his senior year of high school. That background, coupled with his athleticism, gives him a unique skill set that Williams compared to that of Walker.

“I play everything,” Cole said. “If I’m on the field, coach can put me anywhere, I’ll play that. Pass rushing is a big thing for me, so I just want to keep working on

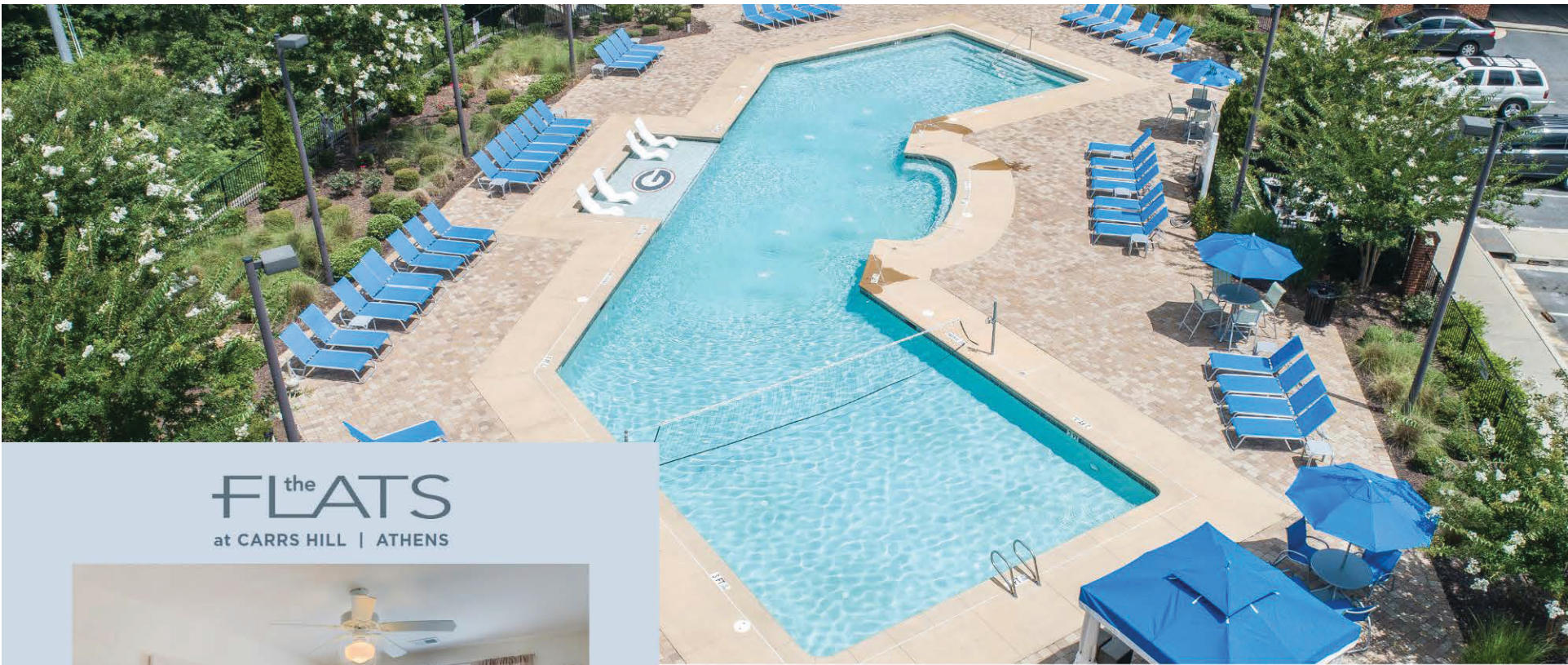
it this offseason.”

While both linebackers have a reputation as hard-working, coachable players on the field, they’ve taken to social media as a way to show off a more light-hearted side. Both are active on TikTok, with Williams’ account approaching 35,000 followers and Cole’s around 12,500. They post anything from dance videos together to cinematic slide-shows documenting their football journey. It’s become a way for them to bond and express themselves off the field.

“I don’t get paid for my TikTok, I just do it because I love it,” Williams said. “I love the TikToks. It makes me have fun with Chris. It’s just something me and Chris picked up this season, and it’s just a tradition for us.”

TikTok may be a new chapter in the lore of Georgia linebacking, but if Cole and Williams continue to improve the way their coaches seem to believe they can, it’ll surely be a welcome one nonetheless.

“I’ve started a new ritual of asking a guy at the end of practice who he thinks the hardest worker is,” Smart said. “Who do you say has that passion and fire that’s sometimes lacking all over college football now? It’s a different climate in college football. So, it’s funny because Chris Cole and Justin Williams have both been mentioned multiple times by people as extremely hard working guys. They work hard, and I appreciate that about them.”



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Fresh faces, new routes

Revamped Georgia wide receiver room poised to rebound

Owen McDaniel

After a tumultuous season riddled with disappointment both on and off the field, Georgia's wide receiver room underwent a major reinvention, bringing in a new core that is a fusion of experience and raw talent.

It is no secret that the Bulldogs' wideouts were one of the most underperforming position groups on the team last season. In seemingly every game in the back half of the year, the same graphic would be presented during TV broadcasts: the amount of drops Georgia had, followed by "most in FBS."

In the Allstate Sugar Bowl against Notre Dame, Gunner Stockton stepped up in the pocket and heaved the ball 40 yards down the field to a wide open Dillon Bell, which caromed right off Bell's hands — a play that encapsulated the entire season for an offense that finished the year with 36 drops. The issue was so profound during the season that, after the Texas game in October, head coach Kirby Smart described the team's inability to catch as "almost comical."

With Arian Smith and Dominic Lovett, who had a combined 18 drops last season, off to the NFL, Smart had the opportunity to transform the makeup of the wideout room in the offseason.

Smart acknowledged the need to focus on Georgia's recruiting trail and the transfer portal, bringing in top transfer targets Zachariah Branch and Noah Thomas, as well as five receivers in the 2025 recruiting class, including five-star Talyn Taylor and four-star CJ Wiley.

Thomas and Wiley, listed at 6-foot-6 and 6-foot-4, respectively, provide big one-on-one or deep ball targets, while Branch and Taylor are known for their swift route running and shiftiness with the ball in their hands. Last season, Thomas caught 39 passes for 578 yards and eight touchdowns with Texas A&M. Branch hauled in 47 receptions for 503 yards and a touchdown at USC.

"Them guys are monsters, man," sophomore safety KJ Bolden said of Thomas and Branch. "Zach is definitely a great player. He goes 110[%] every day. He's gonna try to give you his best. Same with Noah — Noah is just a big guy, big tall receiver, you love those types of guys. He kinda reminds me of Colbie [Young]."

Taylor, Georgia's highest-rated wide receiver recruit since George Pickens, tallied 1,617 yards and 24 touchdowns on 84 receptions and two kick return touchdowns in his senior season at Geneva Community High School in Illinois. He was able to join the team for its Sugar Bowl practices, and he quickly made an impression on wide receiver coach James Coley.

"Quick as a cat," Coley said. "Fast. Good catch radius and just very conscientious. When he does something wrong, there's a high effort with the next rep trying to do it right."



Georgia wide receiver Zachariah Branch (1) during Georgia's practice session in Athens, Georgia, on Tuesday, March 11, 2025.
PHOTO COURTESY/TONY WALSH/UGA ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION

The wide receivers' on-field performance wasn't the only way the group fell short of expectations last season. Georgia's two best "X-receivers," the wide receiver who lines up directly on the line of scrimmage, Young and Rara Thomas, were both arrested during the season. This forced the Bulldogs to play the rest of the year without a true X, exacerbating existing struggles.

The off-field issues have bled into the spring, with the most recent debacle being sophomore wide receiver Nitro Tuggle's arrest for speeding and reckless driving on March 20. Tuggle, who would have likely seen an increase in reps

next season, was subsequently suspended from the team indefinitely.

Though Smart added depth to the wideout room over the offseason, Georgia cannot afford to lose any more receivers to avoidable situations. It will be up to returners like Bell and London Humphreys to set the tone and lead by example.

If the receivers are able to shore up last season's execution issues and stay out of trouble off the field, this group has tremendous upside potential and can elevate the offense back to its championship years.

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Chanda Santana, founder of DIVAS Who Win, speaks on sex trafficking and addiction during TEDxUGA at the Morton Theatre in Athens, Georgia, on Friday, March 28, 2025. The 12th annual TEDxUGA events theme was "Destination." PHOTO/ JAKE WESTING



Mokah Jasmine Johnson speaks on the resolution to address Black minority inequities during the public comment section of the Athens-Clarke County Mayor and Commission meeting at City Hall in Athens, Georgia, on Tuesday, April 1, 2025. PHOTO/FOREST X. DYNES

AADM’s resolution to address Black minority inequities

What is it and why the controversy?

Sophia Eppley

During their February regular session meeting, the Athens-Clarke County Mayor and Commission voted to table the resolution to address Black minority inequities for 60 days to move for an ordinance instead.

The resolution, brought by the Athens Anti-Discrimination Movement, aims to address continuous gaps in equitable resources and reaffirm the commission’s commitment to promote housing security, economic empowerment and youth safety to communities of color in Athens.

The struggle between producing an ordinance or passing the resolution has been ongoing since the item was introduced, creating divides both within and between the commission and the community.

During the March agenda setting session, District 5 Commissioner Dexter Fisher requested an extension to produce an ordinance, while District 8 Commissioner Carol Myers and District 2 Commissioner Melissa Link suggested passing the resolution then, as is.

The public and commission are split on the issue. Many believe the resolution is a necessary first step to an ordinance that will address inequities and disparities in the Athens community. Others criticized the resolution, citing its vague language and noting past resolutions have been ineffective.

According to Mokah Jasmine Johnson, AADM’s co-founder and executive director, the resolution is meant to lay the groundwork for approaching multiple issues regarding minority inequalities.

The resolution would allocate funding to housing security by increasing affordable housing options for communities experiencing the highest poverty rates, displacement and gentrification, obtaining federal funding for rental assistance programs and supporting minority-led nonprofits.

The resolution places a priority on minority-owned businesses and community programs that provide mentorship and development training opportunities. The resolution calls on the Athens-Clarke County Government to seek partnerships with the University of Georgia to expand access to educational resources for entrepreneurs from underrepresented groups.

The resolution also encourages collaboration between

ACCGov and the Clarke County School District to invest in youth-focused initiatives for high-poverty neighborhoods, such as after-school programs, summer employment opportunities, skill-building workshops and restorative justice practices and violence prevention programs.

The resolution also asks for increased focus on oversight, collaboration and outreach for minority communities in Athens by diversifying representation on existing boards, authorities and commissions, and regularly evaluating all government programs and policies, based on data, to maximize their impact.

Johnson was surprised the resolution was tabled in February, believing she had support from the community and the majority of the commission. However, several people changed their stance last minute, according to Johnson. Although he was one of the original signatories, Fisher voted to table the resolution.

“It was very disheartening because the people that spoke against it never took the time to even have a conversation with us,” Johnson said.

The resolution was drafted so that multiple ordinances could come out of it, according to Johnson.

“It was never either-or,” Johnson said. “We never went into it saying: ‘All we want is a resolution.’”

Several commissioners have argued resolutions are nothing more than words on paper. District 9 Commissioner Ovita Thornton pledged that she will no longer be supporting resolutions for this reason, according to Johnson. Johnson believes that because of these instances, many Athenians, including commissioners, have grown tired of the process.

The irony, Johnson said, is commissioners hold the power to make resolutions actionable.

“As the document exists right now, it cannot be an ordinance,” Myers said. “[Resolutions] signal an intent and a direction and afterwards, if there’s no follow through in that direction, that is an issue.”

Although she understands concerns, Myers noted several actionable resolutions, such as 2019’s 100% Clean and Renewable Energy Resolution, 2021’s Linnentown resolution and 2023’s resolutions to display the progress pride flag and Juneteenth flag.

Nearly 20 Athenians spoke at the commission’s reg-

ular session meeting on April 1, and most speakers, including Johnson, agreed the most important thing to do now is pass ordinances – with or without the resolution. Many Black community members expressed anger over the commission not responding to requests for change and community support.

Tamika Money, an Athens activist, spoke about the first times she experienced racism, such as being chased home by two white teenagers yelling racial slurs and sexually explicit things at her when she was nine years old.

“ [Resolutions] signal an intent and a direction and afterwards, if there’s no follow through in that direction, that is an issue.

CAROL MYERS | DISTRICT 8 COMMISSIONER

“While many of you refuse this truth and the lived reality of Black people, or even worse, while you admit it and still choose your bike trails over helping the most impoverished groups, Black people are continuing to suffer in ways that significantly outpace other groups,” Money said.

District 1 Commissioner Patrick Davenport motioned to approve the resolution, while District 6 Commissioner Stephanie Johnson introduced a substitute motion to deny the resolution, which several public commenters had requested, and to instead focus on working with the community to draft and pass ordinances, and the resolution was approved.

Stephanie Johnson’s substitute failed in a tied vote that Mayor Kelly Girtz broke. Davenport’s original motion was passed by the commission 8-2, with Stephanie Johnson and Thornton voting against the motion.

EN ESPAÑOL

New East Athens Kroger Marketplace location to open in May

Lindsay Mutzman

A new Kroger Marketplace location will open in May, according to Kroger officials, which is earlier than previous estimations. The Kroger will be located at 2301 College Station Road.

The existing Kroger store next door to the new location will close down to allow for the new 116,274-square-foot grocery store to be built. All 300 of the employees working at the old Kroger store will move into the new one and the opening of the new location will add 100 to 200 new jobs, according to Kroger officials.

The old Kroger building will be torn down to make space for a fuel center. Retail space will also be added as part of the next phase of development for the shopping center.

Nueva ubicación de Kroger Marketplace en el este de Athens abrirá en mayo

Lindsay Mutzman

Un nuevo Kroger Marketplace abrirá en mayo, según funcionarios de Kroger, antes de lo previsto. El Kroger estará ubicado en 2301 College Station Road.

El supermercado Kroger existente, junto al nuevo, cerrará para permitir la construcción del nuevo supermercado de 116,274 pies cuadrados. Los 300 empleados que trabajaban en el antiguo Kroger se mudarán al nuevo, y la apertura de la nueva ubicación generará entre 100 y 200 nuevos empleos, según funcionarios de Kroger.

El antiguo edificio de Kroger será demolido para construir una gasolinera. También se añadirán locales comerciales como parte de la siguiente fase de desarrollo del centro comercial.



The newly constructed Kroger Marketplace building located at 2301 College Station Road in Athens, Georgia, on March 30, 2025. The new Kroger Marketplace is set to open in May 2025. PHOTO/KALEB TATUM

El nuevo edificio de Kroger Marketplace, ubicado en 2301 College Station Road, Athens, Georgia el 30 de marzo de 2025. La apertura del nuevo Kroger Marketplace está prevista para mayo de 2025. FOTO/KALEB TATUM



Chanda Santana poses for a portrait on March 31, 2025, in Athens, Georgia. Santana founded DIVAS Who Win, a nonprofit organization that provides substance abuse and sex trafficking recovery care for women. PHOTO/ZACH LEGGIO

A DIVA who won

How Chanda Santana rebuilt her life, now lives to support others

Zach Leggio

Growing up in Asheville, North Carolina, Chanda Santana saw it took a village for her mom to raise her. Now, she works to create that same network of support in Athens for women who have faced substance abuse or trafficking.

Santana created her nonprofit, DIVAS Who Win, in 2018 to serve that mission. The name of the organization stands for “Develop Intentional Victory And Success” and came to Santana as a way to give the word “diva” a positive connotation for women in recovery.

Santana knows what it’s like to feel safe and have a supportive community. After she and her mother moved to Atlanta when she was 12, she lost her close-knit support system from Asheville and faced “unaddressed complex childhood trauma” that led her to the sex work industry for 10 years.

“That was probably just a rocky time from age 13 to 26,” Santana said. “I started having children at 20, so life was just really out of control.”

Even during this turbulent time, she was an advocate for others.

“I started doing grassroots activism at the age of 16, I wanted to change the rape laws here in Georgia,” Santana said. “I went neighborhood to neighborhood, trying to get petitions signed and collecting donations.”

Once she was able to quit sex work, she began having substance abuse issues while trying to raise her six children. Santana moved to Athens through Project Safe, eventually checking herself into a rehab facility.

While creating DIVAS, Santana originally intended it to be an organization to help women in substance-abuse recovery.

“I had no plans to talk about sexual exploit,” Santana said. “I was comfortable talking about an opioid use disorder because ... that message had already picked up steam and it was in the mainstream.”

However, during the planning process, Santana’s 17-year-old daughter was sex trafficked. Her daughter was eventually found with the help of the FBI in July 2017, and Santana was able to find temporary help for her daughter at the same rehab facility she herself had attended.

“We got her back safely, sent her away for a while,” Santana said. “During the time that I was trying to regroup and think about, ‘Am I even still going to launch this agency, and then what parts of the story am I now going to tell?’”

However, she felt that she now had to talk about the issue of sex trafficking and make it a core part of her new nonprofit.

“I just woke up one day and said, ‘I’m going to tell the whole story. I’m going to talk about being a sex worker. I’m going to talk about sex trafficking,’” Santana said.

Seven months after her daughter was rescued, Santana got DIVAS Who Win approved as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in February 2018, and it became the first and only female-centric organization that addresses both exploitation and addiction, according to Santana.

In June 2019, the nonprofit moved from a 300-square-foot warehouse to its current location on Hawthorne Avenue.

The new recovery center contains many different ways to help women feel safe as possible, complete with a closet where they can choose free outfits, a kitchen with a fully-stocked fridge, a laundry machine and a bathroom where women can safely shower and are provided with all of the toiletries they may need.

“We try to infuse dignity in any way [we can],” Santana said. “It doesn’t even feel good to have to ask someone for a washcloth or the fact that you’re in that position, so we try to empower in as many small ways as we can.”

The space also has an art room where women, or the children of women in recovery, can express themselves through artistic means.

“I’m a talker ... but for a lot of people it’s not like that,” Ashley Willis, a graduate of the Way of a DIVA program and now a full-time employee of the nonprofit, said. “They speak their recovery out through art.”

The main goal of the center is for women to have a safe place to go during the day, while spending nights at recovery residences. The center even has times designated for women to be able to take naps in peace.

“Sometimes there’ll be three women in here at once, just taking a nap,” Santana said. “They don’t have to worry about being attacked or someone offering them substances.”

After hours, the center also hosts community organizations, such as a Latina family group and an enrichment

group for women.

The program Santana created, called Way of a DIVA, is typically a year-long process, although this varies for different women depending on what stage of recovery they are in. Santana says nearly all of the women who come to DIVAS Who Win are in some kind of substance-abuse recovery process.

After a woman’s second visit to DIVAS, they receive a personal folder to help track their recovery process and divides the Way of a DIVA program into 90-day chunks.

“We call it a bingo card,” Santana said. “It has 16 squares, with maybe five of them are meetings, and she gets to X that off. Maybe two are art, that means she came upstairs. Maybe two are clothing, meaning she shopped. So we’re really just trying to get her interested in all these sections of DIVAS.”

“I just woke up one day and said, ‘I’m going to tell the whole story. I’m going to talk about being a sex worker. I’m going to talk about sex trafficking.’”

CHANDA SANTANA | FOUNDER OF DIVAS WHO WIN

After finishing each of these “bingo cards,” the women receive a keychain to mark milestones in their DIVAS progress. The levels and corresponding keychains are red, yellow, green and finally blue, marking program alumnae. Keychains and tokens are often important symbols in recovery programs to track progress with recovery and sobriety.

Even when women exit the program before completing it, they are always welcomed back, according to Santana. Part of DIVAS’ mission is staying visible to women in recovery and giving them a place to come back to whenever they wish.

“We only go as far over as the woman wants us to go,” Santana said. “Sometimes that can be heartbreaking because sometimes when she gets back in her disease, she tells us no, tells us to stay out and stay away, and we have to honor that.”

Alumnae of the program also receive a green and pink letterman jacket at the annual “Joyfest” celebration in December, where women can be recognized for their progress through the DIVAS program.

After completing the program, women can apply for the DIVAS Foundations internship program, where they receive mentoring and are paid \$15/hour for 250 hours, building soft skills and preparing for the workplace.

“Throughout my life, I’ve never really completed anything,” Willis said about her life before DIVAS. “So when it comes to the Way of a DIVA program, that’s where my passion really lies because I went through it and, for me, it represents just what recovery really means.”

Willis came back to DIVAS to complete the internship program and now works for the nonprofit full time.

“I knew I wanted to do something positive in life, I just didn’t know what it was,” Willis said. “My skills are helping me financially, to be able to maintain, to be able to survive, and it’s something I love doing, whereas the jobs I had before, you couldn’t even get me to come to work.”

Now, DIVAS Who Win is expanding to not only help women in need of recovery, but to also prevent those needs arising in the future.

Through summer camps and after school programs, Santana has begun outreach programs for girls ages 11-16 to teach them about restorative justice, agriculture, STEM, fashion, therapeutic drumming and anger management.

She has also worked to educate the community on these issues through her talk at TEDxUGA in March, where she was the first Athens community member to ever speak at a TEDxUGA event.

“When I checked into rehab on that Friday morning, I was not convinced that freedom was possible,” Santana said. “But the thing that I saw on the very first day of being there was that I was not alone.”



Chanda Santana, founder of DIVAS Who Win, speaks on sex trafficking and addiction during TEDxUGA at the Morton Theatre in Athens, Georgia, on Friday, March 28, 2025. The 12th annual TEDxUGA event’s theme was “Destination.” PHOTO/JAKE WESTING

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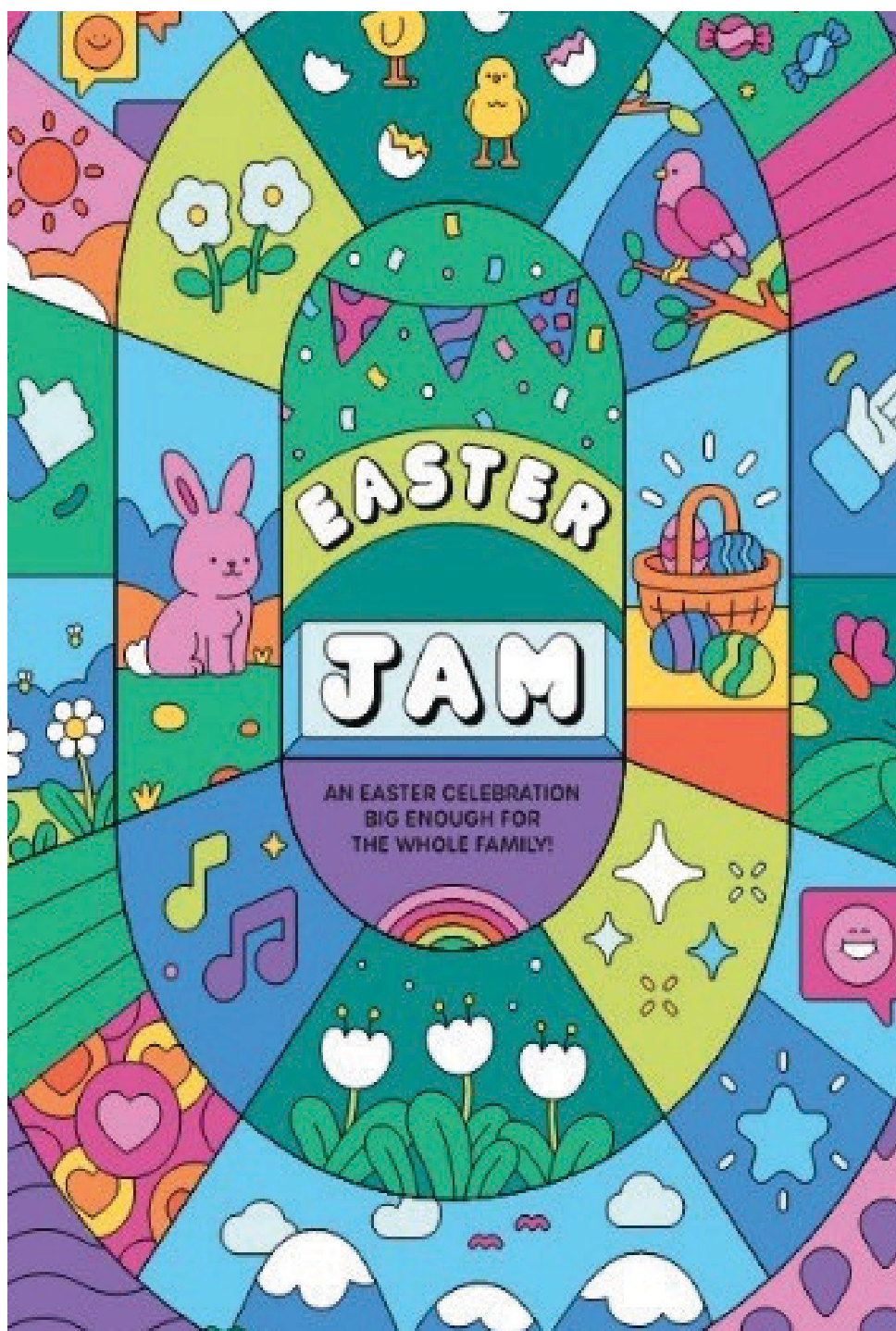
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Travis Glenn, environmental health science professor at the University of Georgia, speaks about his research on alligators at an Athens Science Cafe event on March 20, 2025, in Athens, Georgia. PHOTO/CALLIE CLARK



Elisabeth Drake, an Athens Science Cafe executive, and John O'Brien, the social media director, hold alligator skulls during an event on March 20, 2025, in Athens, Georgia. Athens Science Cafe hosts events to give people from the community a chance to learn about various topics from professional scientists. PHOTO/CALLIE CLARK

Cheers to science

Athens Science Cafe is catalyzing conversations

KD Muhammad

It's not every day you happen upon a scientist sharing his research on alligators at Little Kings Shuffle Club, but through the Athens Science Cafe, something like this is a monthly occurrence.

According to an October 2024 report by the Pew Research Center, approximately 76% of American adults express a fair amount of confidence in scientists and their investment in the good of the public. However, per the survey's results, only 45% of American adults feel that scientific research is communicated to the public in an accessible way.

The Athens Science Cafe is an organization dedicated to bridging that gap, hosting numerous events for more than a decade to make science more accessible to the Classic City.

Science cafes are informal discussions on scientific topics presented in casual, public settings. Though the first cafe was started by Duncan Dallas in 1998 in the United Kingdom, there are now more than 100 science cafes registered across the globe.

Usually occurring once a month during the academic year and held in bars and breweries across Athens to reach as wide an audience as possible, the Athens Science Cafe is intended to bring together the academic and broader Athens communities, according to Katie Dillon, a graduate research assistant at the University of Georgia and director of the Athens Science Cafe.

"I think that there has always been a divide, and there is a very prevalent divide between scientists and nonscientists, and I think it's important to sort of recommunicate what science means to people," Dillon said.

OPINION

Morning sheds, ab workouts and more

The toxicity of online wellness culture

Caroline Feagin

I can't remember the last time I've opened TikTok, or other social media platforms, without being bombarded with photos, videos and text posts promoting the latest health trend. Whether it's taking olive oil shots on an empty stomach or embracing a full-carnivore diet, wellness culture is inescapable.

The concept of "wellness" has permeated the online sphere for quite some time. According to the Global Wellness Institute, the wellness economy boomed in the wake of the pandemic. Based on data collected between 2019-2023, the wellness industry reached a peak of \$6.3 trillion in 2024, and it's expected to continue growing rapidly.

The wellness industry boom has been paralleled by growth in the influencer economy, which is worth approximately \$250 billion and expected to grow to around \$500 billion by 2027, according to Goldman Sachs.

While there are countless types of influencers online, some of the most prominent are those who promote a wellness lifestyle. These YouTubers, podcasters and TikTok creators share fitness, health and skincare advice online with large audiences, promoting products and practices they claim are the "key" to becoming the healthiest version of yourself.

But beneath all the ab workouts and retinol recommendations, there is an underlying toxicity in how wellness culture operates on social media. An obsession with perfection has led many young people, especially young girls, to believe they need to spend thousands of dollars on products recommended by online personalities. In fact, according to Pew Research Center, 50% of women aged 18-29 said they had purchased an item after seeing an influencer post about it online.

Perhaps the biggest problem with wellness culture is how it perpetuates unrealistic standards of wellness. Some of the most popular wellness trends in 2024 were more extreme - red light therapy, drinking raw milk and bovine colostrum were all trends that exploded in popularity last year.

While some of these fads are harmless in moderation, social media algorithms bombard users with these trends, making them feel compelled to follow each one to embrace wellness. Ironically, the obsession with "being well" can lead to prolonged anxiety and body image issues, according to Psychology Today.

Another concerning trend in wellness culture is the skincare craze among preteens. Driven primarily by young influencers online with multi-step skincare routines, the demographics of skincare product shoppers has gotten progressively younger. Sephora stores have now been overrun by "Sephora kids," as young as elementary school students, shopping for skincare and makeup products.

Dermatologists warn that many products tweens buy are not suited for their skin. These products often contain ingredients to treat oily skin, which works for older teens and young adults, and can be dangerous for younger people, whose skin is much softer.

Elaborate skincare routines are not just prominent among young teens. A viral trend on TikTok called the "morning shed" combines skincare with other products



GRAPHIC/FILE STAFF

meant for hair, eyes and mouth care. Participants will apply an assortment of different skin, self care and hair products at night, sleep in it and wake up the next morning to "shed" it off.

Some wellness influencers adopt popular dieting trends, often parroting misleading or false information about food. According to a survey conducted by MyFitnessPal and Dublin City University, only around 2% of TikTok dieting trends fall in line with public health and nutrition guidelines. What's even more concerning is that, of those surveyed, 87% of Millennial and Gen Z TikTok users said that they use the platform for advice concerning their health.

This highlights troubling aspects of wellness culture and the industry. As "expertise" shifts away from those trained in nutrition, dermatology and kinesiology, young people are increasingly falling victim to an industry that profits off their insecurities. Prioritizing health is important, but chasing perfection can be detrimental. True wellness lies in balance, not obsession.

Face masks, pimple patches and heatless curls are not inherently harmful. But, the excessive use of these regimens in the pursuit of beauty is physically and mentally taxing. Worrying about every perceived physical imperfection only triggers further insecurities, driving us deeper into the consumerist cycle that pervades the wellness community. It begs the question, when does the pursuit of wellness become an illness?

Caroline Feagin is a sophomore journalism major at the University of Georgia.



Colby Cannizzaro, a sophomore management information systems major and president of Bike UGA, poses for a portrait at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, on Friday, March 4, 2025. PHOTO/LANEY MARTIN

Taking the scenic route

Efforts to improve and popularize biking in Athens

Rachel Roberts

Biking is becoming an increasingly popular method of transportation for Athenians. This trend, however, has highlighted the ways in which Athens is largely inaccessible for biking. Clubs on the University of Georgia's campus and other local organizations are striving to improve bike safety and accessibility within Athens to make it a place where more people want to bike and feel comfortable doing so.

Frustrated with the morning traffic and narrow road on Williams Street prohibiting him from riding his bike to class, Colby Cannizzaro, a sophomore management information systems major at UGA, was inspired to start Bike UGA, a club that focused on improving biking and sustainable transportation on campus, in October 2024.

Bike UGA is not a club solely focused on racing or group rides; rather, it recognizes the importance of improving biking accessibility and making campus, along with Athens, feel like a more bikeable place.

"A lot of times when you're riding your bike, you somehow feel less important than a car, even though you're more vulnerable," Cannizzaro said. "It's all about trying to put UGA in a place where people can choose to bike instead of driving to campus every day."

Maddison Davis, a junior management information systems major at UGA, is the secretary of Bike UGA. At first, Davis was hesitant to bike around Athens, but, with some encouragement from Cannizzaro, she realized it is "a lot easier" than she thought it would be.

"As somebody who has always been a little more environmentally and sustainably conscious, I was ready to put my car keys aside and start biking a little bit more for my own health, and then for the environment," Davis said.

Environmental sustainability is critical to the club's overall mission and goals. Both Cannizzaro and Davis view biking as more than just a sport or a workout; they also see it as an environmentally-conscious alternative method of transportation. Fueled by the hope to see UGA's campus filled with people travelling by bike, scooter and on-foot, Cannizzaro wants the enthusiasm of Bike UGA to "inspire a culture of alternative transportation."

"I think the big goal of Bike UGA is eventually just to have [Athens] be a place where you really don't see that many cars," Cannizzaro said.

In addition to focusing on improving biking accessibility around Athens, Bike UGA also hosts group rides that are open to anyone and offers bike repairs on Wednesday afternoons outside Tate Student Center.

Cannizzaro said there are about 30 active participants in the club and four officers who help to plan projects and events and organize the weekly group rides. All group rides begin at Tate; bikers then travel to East Campus on River Road to the Oconee Rivers Greenway, where they are able to bike without worrying about the traffic congestion of downtown Athens.

Bike UGA is also making a mark on UGA's student body through tabling at Tate and student outreach. As part of its efforts to address bike safety in Athens, the club recent-

ly met with the UGA Student Government Association to voice its concerns about ineffective bike lanes and the safety of bikers as they try to navigate local roads.

Initiatives to make biking more accessible in the Classic City are not limited to campus: BikeAthens, a nonprofit organization focused on improving equity and transportation through advocacy, education and service, is also working with local leadership to make Athens a more bike accessible city, through safer streets and improved infrastructure.

Additionally, the organization offers free safe-cycling classes to people of all ages, donates and repairs bikes for people who need transportation and holds joyrides on the last Friday of every month.

Scott Long, the executive director for BikeAthens, explained some of the goals regarding better biking infrastructure in Athens as being long-term goals, while citing the addition of bike lanes on Prince Avenue as an example of changes that are easier to implement.

"Every once in a while, things will pop up, like the bike lanes on Prince Avenue where they reconfigured the roadway to take away one driving lane and then add in the bike lanes ... those kinds of things are easy wins," Long said.

Through the efforts of organizations like BikeAthens and Bike UGA, there is passion to make Athens a more bike-friendly place.

"UGA's campus is too big to walk, too small to drive, but it's the perfect distance for biking," Cannizzaro said.

'It's not just food, it's an experience'

Bologna-born chef brings Italy to Athens

Pride Haggerty

With complete focus, Chef Filippo Trapella tosses freshly boiled pasta in a pan full of his homemade sauce, the rich aroma filling the air, and he completes the dish with finely grated Parmesan cheese. For Trapella, cooking is less about serving the food and more about sharing his Italian culture and letting others experience it firsthand.

As an Italian-born chef from Bologna, Trapella brings authentic Italian cuisine to the Athens community through private events, catering, cooking classes and weekly pop-up dinners.

Trapella moved to the United States in 2013, settling in Ohio for three years before relocating to Athens in 2016. In Italy, he worked as a freelance architect, but after moving, he pivoted his career path to pursue his passion of cooking while still "maintaining this independence."

Trapella began as a food blogger, posting his dishes on social media, but after the pandemic, he launched Athens Pasta Lovers to cook for clients directly.

Athens Pasta Lovers is an Italian private dinner company offering three options to clients: a private dinner experience for four to 12 guests, pasta bar catering for a minimum of 20 people and weekly pop-up dinners at Hendershot's, where guests can either dine in or take out their pasta dish.

Customers can choose between different pastas for the catered pasta bar option. Recently, Trapella catered a sorority's movie night event, offering amatriciana and arrabbiata style pastas.

Trapella's family was another reason he took on cooking, with his grandparents on one side of his family owning a restaurant, and his grandfather on the other side of his family owning a pasta factory.

"We have our family recipe that changes a little every generation, so now it's my turn," Trapella said. "I'm more happy now that I cook for the people."

Every Wednesday, Trapella hosts a pop-up pasta night at Hendershot's, featuring two pasta options, one of which is always meatless or vegan. Trapella said his menus replicate regional menus inspired by cuisines like Milanese, Tuscan and Bolognese.

During private events, Trapella ensures that clients are included in the entire cooking process, from picking out the menu together to learning about what ingredients go in the dish to having it served at their dining room table.

"It's something very personal, the idea is to replicate a family gathering," Trapella said. "You can see the whole process, from the ingredients to the final dish, and you can also ask me what you want."

One of Trapella's clients, Mary Mattson, hired him for her husband's 70th birthday dinner in mid-January, and said she was impressed by Trapella's authenticity. He arrived with his own cookware and, according to Mattson, worked with her to pair the perfect wine with each course.

"He prepared the most unbelievable meal and made pasta from scratch right there in my kitchen," Mattson said. "He hand-cut everything. There were no machines involved." Trapella spent more than four hours preparing the meal before it was served.

"He arrived at 2 p.m., and we didn't actually start serving the meal until 6:30, and he was totally in the preparation for those four and a half hours before the guests even arrived," Mattson said. "The way he prepares it is the authentic way, you can see his grandmother in there showing him what to do."

According to Mattson, Trapella engages with clients through clear communication and an educational approach to cooking, taking the time to explain each dish, share which



Filippo Trapella poses for a portrait in his home kitchen in Athens, Georgia, on Friday, April 4, 2025. Trapella is an Italian chef, born and raised in Bologna, Italy. PHOTO/KATHERINE DAVIS

region of Italy it is from and walk his audience through the process of preparing it.

In the kitchen, Trapella's focus is on making the dining experience personal and engaging to ensure that guests feel like they are at an authentic Italian dinner.

"It's not just food, it's an experience," Trapella said. "What I'm offering, it's a real Italian experience from Italy."

Beyond the kitchen, Trapella and his family have built strong ties within the Athens community. Trapella's wife, Caterina Villari, works as an assistant professor at the University of Georgia. Trapella's weekly pop-ups have also helped him form close friendships with local musicians.

"It's easy because living here, everyone knows everyone," Trapella said. "It's the right size for us. It's one of the best places around to grow."

Trapella said he wants to bring something different than what is offered in Athens' existing Italian restaurants. After spending 35 years of his life in Italy, he wants to create an experience that reflects what a strictly Italian meal would feel and taste like.

"There are a lot of restaurants, even Italian restaurants, that are offering exquisite Italian-American food, and what I want to offer is something that is distinguished from them," Trapella said.

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