



Panthers fight end Ja'Tavon Sanders is healthy and raring to earn a prominent role in the Carolina offense

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INLIVIAN

A land deal between Atrium Health and Inlivan (Charlotte's housing authority) will allow Inlivan to develop a 27-acre site off North Tryon Street with more than 1,200 homes, including affordable housing. It is between 28th and 32nd streets in a formerly industrial area that is attracting plenty of apartments and townhomes.

## Atrium Health land deal clears way for 1,200 homes

### Transfers 14 acres to Charlotte's housing authority for a 27-acre community

By Michelle Crouch  
CHARLOTTE LEDGER

After months of scrutiny, Atrium Health announced this week that it has finalized a deal to fulfill one of the affordable housing promises it made in 2021 while seeking public support for The Pearl, its medical innovation district.

The agreement calls for the hospital to transfer nearly 14 acres at North Tryon, West 32nd and Poplar streets to Inlivan, Charlotte's housing authority, for future affordable housing.

Conceptual plans for the site shared by Inlivan envision transforming the parcel and a nearby Inlivan-owned site into a 27-acre community with 1,200 apartments, 44 for-sale townhomes, retail space and robust community amenities including walking trails, a dog park and

an outdoor amphitheater.

If built as envisioned, the project would be one of the largest mixed-income housing developments in Charlotte in recent years and could reshape an area that serves as the northern gateway to uptown Charlotte. The Atrium site is across 32nd Street from NoDa Brewing, in a former industrial area that's seeing plenty of apartment and townhouse redevelopment, likely spurred by its proximity to NoDa and the Lynx Blue Line.

"Together, we are not simply developing real estate, we are creating communities where people can put down roots, build brighter futures, and experience the stability every family deserves," said A. Fulton Meachem, president and CEO of Inlivan, in a statement to The Ledger/NC Health News.

ident and CEO of Inlivan, in a statement to The Ledger/NC Health News.

Land transfer part of a three-way swap

Atrium Health CEO Gene Woods first pledged to donate the North Tryon Street land to Inlivan in 2021 while seeking \$75 million in public money for The Pearl. Woods also said 5% of apartments within the innovation district itself would be set aside for affordable housing.

When it opened a year ago, The Pearl delivered much of what Atrium had promised: the city's first four-year medical school, a cutting-edge research building and millions of dollars in new investment.

The promised affordable housing, however, lagged. As The Ledger/NC Health News reported last month, the project has been delayed and underfunded. Please see **ATRIUM** | 2A



Meachem

## Data center moratorium fever grows among NC local governments

By Lucas Thomaie  
CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

Charlotte just became the latest, and largest, North Carolina community to instate a temporary pause on the development of new data centers. Its city council unanimously approved a 150-day moratorium in front of a packed house Monday night, in a scene similar to ones which have played out in town halls and county commissioners chambers across the state.

"As a city, we have a responsibility to welcome innovation and economic opportunity," City Council member Dimple Ajmera said. "But we also have a responsibility to understand the long-term consequences of our decisions before they become difficult—or impossible—to reverse."

Dozens of local governments have passed data center moratoriums in the last six months. Officials in some of these communities told Carolina Public Press that the policies were necessary to update planning ordinances that aren't equipped to deal with modern data centers.

These facilities house the IT infrastructure necessary for modern computing tasks, but they also consume immense amounts of electricity and water to cool down hot machinery.

Data centers themselves are nothing new — they've been around for as long as electronic computers have existed, going back to the 1940s. However, the rapid growth of artificial intelligence has driven demand for more data centers with enhanced computing power and data storage capacity.

Please see **DATA** | 3A



FREEDOM FIGHTING MISSIONARIES

Freedom Fighting Missionaries founder Kenny Robinson.

## Juneteenth event celebrates local heroes and the spirit of advocacy

By Max Poku-Kankam  
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

A Juneteenth celebration is recognizing local advocacy.

Freedom Fighting Missionaries will host "Freedom Reimagined: A Juneteenth Experience of Culture, Community, and Impact" on June 19 at Knight Theater to celebrate artists, educators and social workers. Tickets are available at blumentarts.org. The highlight is the premier of "Freedom

Reimagined," a documentary produced by Crux Films that explores housing instability in Charlotte, affected people and perspectives from community leaders.

According to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing and Homelessness Dashboard, as of April 30, there are 2,386 homeless people from 1,987 households in Mecklenburg County. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools reimagined. Please see **JUNETEENTH** | 2A

## Child welfare changes sought

### State lawmakers target change after Charlotte girl's 2025 death

By Jennifer Fernandez and Ashley Fredde  
NORTH CAROLINA HEALTH NEWS

Outrage over the death of Moore County toddler Rylan Ott in 2016 compelled North Carolina on a path to improve its child welfare system.

Nearly a decade later, the state has rolled out several of those reforms — a statewide office focused on preventing child fatalities, regional supervisory offices to provide more support to county departments of social services, and a modernized intake and assessment system for all 100 counties that will eventually include case management.

All these changes were intended to strengthen the state's state-supervised but county-operated child welfare system, one of only a handful in the country that operate under this model.

After Rylan's death, legislators also gave the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services the authority to take over some of the most troubled county DSS offices.

Since 2018, the state has taken over six of them — four after child fatalities. Three counties — Bertie, Davidson and Vance — are still under state control. In addition, NC DHHS is working on corrective action plans for six other counties, including Mecklenburg County, where 6-year-old Dominique Moody was found unresponsive in her east Charlotte home in December.

She later died. Police alleged that she was starved, beaten and locked in a dog crate.

The high-profile death has legislators asking why red flags were missed in dozens of visits by social workers and law enforcement over the years.

Please see **NC CHILD** | 3A

## Student loan revisions are on the way

By Kate Denning  
CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

The student loan repayment plan introduced by former President Joe Biden will officially cease in light of passage of President Donald Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act last summer.

An estimated 269,000 North Carolina borrowers who are enrolled in Saving on a Valuable Education, or SAVE, will need to select a new repayment option within 90 days after July 1.

Just two repayment plan options — the Tiered Standard Plan and Repayment Assistance Plan — will be available once SAVE dissolves and the Income-Contingent Repayment Plan and the Pay As You Earn Plan are sunset in 2028.

Under the Tiered Standard Plan, the monthly payment will be a fixed amount in a certain amount of time depending on the outstanding principal balance, the amount of money borrowed not including interest. Payments must be at least \$50 a month but can be more if it's needed to repay within the allotted time.

For example, those that owe less than \$10,000 will have a fixed monthly payment of \$50. Please see **STUDENT** | 3A

### STAY IN TOUCH

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## Atrium land deal clears way for 1,200 homes

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News reported last fall, community advocates questioned when - and if - it would materialize. At the time, Atrium said it was fully complying with the terms of its agreement with the city and that The Pearl innovation district was still in its early stages.

Since then, hospital officials have announced a plan for an apartment building at the Pearl that would include the promised affordable units, and Atrium donated \$5 million to the city's Housing Impact Fund, bringing the system's total contribution to \$15 million.

Hospital leaders also explained that the delay on the North Tryon Street donation was slowed by many factors, including "multiple iterations of the deal" and "multiple leadership changes at Inlivan."

In a news release announcing the finalized deal, Atrium said including the land donation, it has contributed more than \$51 million toward affordable housing and homelessness solutions in the Charlotte region.

"This agreement reflects our commitment to strengthening the communities we serve by investing in ways to expand access to safe, affordable housing," said Steve Smoot, president of the North Carolina and Georgia division at Advocate Health, Atrium's parent company, in the release.

The transfer of the North Tryon Street land is part of a broader land deal that also calls for Inlivan to receive a 3-acre Atrium-owned property on East Morehead Street for affordable housing, while Atrium acquires a similarly sized Inlivan-owned parcel near The Pearl for expansion of the district.

### What's envisioned for North Tryon Street?

The 14-acre tract between North Tryon and Poplar streets was previously owned by Mecklenburg County and donated to Atrium in 1990. It has an estimated value of nearly \$30 million, and houses a hospital distribution center.

Rather than demolishing the distribution center, Inlivan's conceptual plans call for preserving part of the building for redevelopment. The preserved section would house 16 apartments on an upper floor and 24,000 square feet of retail or commercial use on the ground floor.

As part of a land swap, Atrium is donating land for the right portion of the proposed development, which is a 14-acre tract between North Tryon and Poplar streets and across 32nd Street from NoDa Brewing. It was previously owned by Mecklenburg County and donated to Atrium in 1990.

Inlivan also proposes building four mixed-income apartment buildings on the Atrium land. Then, across the street on the site of its former Dillehay

Courts public housing complex, it would build six more apartment buildings, 44 three-bedroom townhomes and another 28,000 square feet of commercial or retail space.

A project rendering shows a variety of community amenities including walking trails, a soccer field, a dog park, community gardens, tennis/pickleball courts, a community amphitheater and a mural recognizing the area's history.

An Inlivan spokeswoman said the project would be built in phases and emphasized that the plans are preliminary and subject to change.

Like other affordable housing projects, it would aim to use a mix of financing, including low-income housing tax credits, the city's Housing Trust Fund, loans and other public funding.

### Details in the fine print

Under the latest agreement between Atrium and Inlivan, at least 25% of the apartments in the community must remain affordable for at least 20 years, with half reserved for those earning 50% or less of the area median income. The contract says the units must be distributed throughout the community.

A review of the agreement, including four amendments since it was first signed in spring 2025, revealed additional details about the project:

- Housing for public healthcare workers: Up to 50 units - or 25% of all affordable units, whichever is greater - could be set aside for qualified Mecklenburg County public healthcare workers, pending a separate agreement between Atrium and Inlivan. In exchange, Atrium would contribute \$5 million toward construction.

The provision originally applied just to Atrium employees and affiliates but was expanded in a February 2026 amendment to all public healthcare workers in Mecklenburg.

- Atrium will help pay for site cleanup: Atrium agreed to contribute \$1 million toward environmental remediation, asbestos abatement, the removal of underground storage tanks and other costs related to redeveloping the distribution center site.

- Rental assistance for apartments: Inlivan agreed to provide housing vouchers to support the affordable apartments being built at The Pearl.

- Atrium can stay until 2028: Even after the distribution center property is transferred to Inlivan, Atrium can lease it back and continue operating its distribution center until Dec. 31, 2028, meaning some housing construction could be years away.

An Inlivan spokesperson said there is no timeline for the project to start. *The Charlotte Ledger's Ashley Fahey contributed to this article.*

## Juneteenth event celebrates local heroes and the spirit of advocacy

Continued from page 1A

ported more than 5,700 homeless students during the 2024-25 academic year.

"This documentary will feature not only Freedom Fighting Missionaries staff and clients, but also have perspectives from District Attorney Spencer Mayweather, Sheriff Gary McFadden, vice president of Wells Fargo Rodrick Banks, and Carol Hardison, CEO of Crisis Assistance Ministry," Freedom Fighting Missionaries founder Kenny Robinson said. "This documentary will show how these collaborations work together to truly give those that we serve an opportunity for a second chance to rebuild their lives."

The showcase also highlights community arts groups with performances by Vision Elite Royalty, a youth dance company, and Brighter Day Community Gospel Choir.

"There's always a focus of any Freedom Fighting Missionaries event to highlight the creative arts in the community, specifically the Black creative arts who don't have an opportunity to perform on such a large stage in front of such amount of

people regularly," Robinson said.

People who have made an impact in the community will also be acknowledged. Two people will receive lifetime achievement awards; another will get the entrepreneur of the year award. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools board chair Stephanie Sneed will deliver the keynote address.

"She's going to do a keynote address at the event, highlighting the importance of education and how homelessness impacts testing with students," Robinson said.

The event takes place on Juneteenth to celebrate the freedoms African Americans enjoy as well as the strength of working together.

"We do want to highlight not only the freedom from slavery, but from the freedom from all forms of bondage, including incarceration and poverty and show that the community has come together in a way to celebrate the theme of Juneteenth by showing the collaborative work that's done in the community that often goes unseen," Robinson said.



## NC child welfare changes sought by state lawmakers

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several years, and what can be done to prevent it from happening again.

"Time and time again, children are harmed or killed when law enforcement or social services ignores or downplays reports," Rep. Allen Chesser (R-Middlesex) said June 11 during a N.C. House Oversight Committee hearing on Dominique's death. "Children suffer when those authorities disregard abusive histories, and this must stop."

While legislators focused on Mecklenburg County's role in Dominique's death, other opportunities to flag what was happening were missed, said Karen McLeod, who runs Benchmarks, an umbrella non-profit organization that advocates for groups that provide care for children and families.

The case exposed cracks across the system that - even after a decade of reform - still need to be addressed, she said.

### 'Broad, systemic failures'

Every year, children in North Carolina die at the hands of a parent or caregiver. Twenty children died between July 2021 and June 2022, according to the latest state data available.

In recent years, there have been other high-profile deaths of children involved with DSS in the state. In 2023, 8-year-old Christal Lane was beaten to death in Nash County. Her grandmother was sentenced to life in prison for the killing. Severe blunt force trauma killed 2-year-old Jamie Drain in Bertie County in 2024. Her mother has been charged in the toddler's death.

Dominique's death became a flashpoint for legislators, in part because they felt that county officials weren't cooperating with requests for information, Chesser told NC Health News in a phone interview on Sunday.

In those previous deaths, county officials wanted to help as much as they could and make sure they got back on track, Chesser said.

The frustration with Mecklenburg officials was evident during last week's more than seven-hour hearing in Raleigh as legislators grilled officials with state DHHS, Mecklenburg DSS, the sheriff's office and Charlotte-Mecklenburg police.

Over the course of several years, county DSS workers, police officers and sheriff's deputies were called to Dominique's home dozens of times to investigate reports of child abuse or neglect, to serve domestic violence protective orders and to search for a murder suspect.

Sheriff Gary McFadden said deputies only served domestic violence protective orders at the residence. He did not know if the deputies went inside, but typically in such cases, they hand the legal documents to the subject when they answer the door.

"We first have to have knowledge of something before we can take ownership of it," McFadden told the oversight committee. "I wish we had the opportunity to help this young lady, but we did not have any knowledge."

CMPD Chief Estella Patterson said officers never reported signs of abuse or neglect at the home. A 2022 encounter at a separate location involving Dominique and one of the suspects in her death raised concerns that were shared with DSS, she said.

When pressed further by lawmakers on what responsibility, if any, the sheriff's office and police department bear, Patterson acknowledged, "Collectively, there could have been more communication."

In prepared testimony ahead of the hearing, DHHS said its review of Dominique's death "revealed broad, systemic failures, including a lack of appropriate safety planning, insufficient family contacts, and inadequate [Mecklenburg DSS] supervisory oversight."

Lisa Tucker Cauley, director of human services for NC DHHS, told lawmakers that a deeper review of 122 other Mecklenburg cases found several deficiencies.

In more than half of intake cases reviewed, workers did not ask enough questions to explore alleged maltreatment, she said.

In more than one third of cases with allegations that may have met the criminal definition of child abuse, case files did not include the required verbal and written notification to the district attorney and law enforcement.

In Dominique's case, NC DHHS noted several reports of neglect or abuse that were deemed by Mecklenburg DSS to not warrant further investigation but upon review by the state were found to meet the definition of abuse or neglect.

Over the years, 13 allegations of neglect or child abuse of Dominique had been reported, according to officials. One of those cases allegedly included photographs of the child's wounds, with the caseworker recommending removal from the household.

That recommendation was overturned by a supervisor who dismissed what was noted by the caseworker as "ligature marks" as marks from a nail in a crib, according to Chesser.

In the daylong hearing, Mecklenburg County Manager Mike Bryant and Deputy County Manager Kimm Campbell spoke to lawmakers last and incurred most of their growing frustration and anger.

Mecklenburg DSS said 12 people involved in Dominique's case were disciplined, including a senior social service manager who was fired and a social

worker supervisor who resigned.

Bryant and Campbell pointed to additional steps the county had taken to improve the process, including the county budget that had been approved by commissioners just days prior. The budget outlined \$2.1 million to enhance capacity and resources for Child, Family and Adult Services, including 21 new positions.

But some committee members were not convinced this would help.

"Everybody comes to this moment in this committee. Where do your loyalties lie? How many lost kids do we have in Mecklenburg County being ignored just like this?" Rep. Brian Echevarria (R-Harrisburg) asked.

"This should have gotten the attention necessary, and no, staffing will not fix it, because staff looked at it," he said. "It wasn't that someone didn't get to it, they got to it and they dismissed it. It wasn't at the bottom of a pile, not seen. It was looked at and dismissed under your authority."

When pressed further about the county's responsibility, Campbell acknowledged, "I do think that we all share responsibility and things that should have been done or could have been done."

She added that the county's last involvement with Dominique was February 2024, so it had been well over a year since they had seen her or her living conditions when she was found unresponsive in December 2025.

"Feel like y'all did a pretty good job?" Rep. Brenden Jones (R-Tabor City) quipped grimly during the hearing.

"I think for the time that we were involved, I think the workers did the job by following the policy," answered Campbell.

"Well, you didn't!" he snapped. "You got a dead child on your hands, so you didn't do the job."

McLeod agreed that there's no excuse that so many red flags were missed in Dominique's case. But there were also clear signs - from large caseloads to policy failures - that the current system is overstressed, she added.

### More work to be done

"Any of us who are in child welfare ... these are our children," McLeod said. "We all have a responsibility. We should all be holding ourselves accountable for their well-being, and we should all be raising our voices to moving our system to a better place."

She said many counties struggle to find enough staff to meet the bare minimum requirements. Even when they have money, some can't pay enough to get anyone to take the job or stay very long.

In a system with 100 counties, there are a lot of inequities. Larger and wealthier counties can pay more, so often, case workers in smaller, less-well-paid counties, gain a year or two of experience and then go looking for better pay elsewhere.

"There's so many barriers that the county DSSs are trying to overcome to try to meet those standards," McLeod said.

State and local lawmakers should be putting money into aggressive training and recruiting, and ensuring all counties can provide appropriate salaries, McLeod said.

While North Carolina has been investing in infrastructure, it is at the beginning of reforming its child welfare system, said Vicky Kelly, a board member of the Child Welfare League of America, a national coalition of hundreds of private and public agencies that advocate for improved child welfare policy.

State lawmakers started appropriating funding in 2017 to fulfill the promises made in Rylan's law, allocating about \$10.5 million annually which provided funds for DHHS to hire 24 positions to support child welfare agencies.

During the 2023-24 budget, when the state was flush with leftover federal pandemic funding, lawmakers bumped up spending to support families with children with complex needs.

What will happen as federal funding begins to dwindle is yet undetermined, as the legislature failed to approve a budget last year and has not yet presented this year's budget.

Kelly said North Carolina should be looking at reducing caseloads and improving training for supervisors, who she described as "the linchpin" in child welfare. A seasoned supervisor who has the time to help process what the caseworker is seeing and can properly apply reports from other sources is crucial to good outcomes, she said.

It's difficult to have that level of supervision when in today's strained child welfare systems, supervisors often also carry caseloads because of staffing shortages, Kelly said. And many supervisors don't have deep experience anymore because of the continual turnover.

Kelly recalled meeting a group of social workers at a conference. Many of them were in their first year of working in child welfare. Their supervisor had just over two years of experience.

In addition, these social workers should have no more than eight to 10 cases at any time, according to best practices, Kelly said.

Letecia Loadholt, interim director of Mecklenburg County's Child, Family and Adult Services Department, said the county's average is 17 cases per social worker. That doesn't account for complexity of cases, such as the number of children involved, she said.



Cooling modules operate outside the Google data center in Lenoir, in Caldwell County. The facility was built in 2007 but announced a \$1 billion expansion in 2026.

## Data center moratorium fever grows across NC

Continued from page 1A

At least 93 data centers are operating in North Carolina, some of them more than a decade old. But a recent surge in demand driven largely by the AI industry has led to the announcement of more than 20 new data center projects since the start of 2025.

Although some places have welcomed data centers as drivers of economic growth, others say they need more time to consider the potential downsides. Some projects that were already underway have encountered intense opposition from residents, prompting local leaders to rethink their current policies.

### Charlotte puts a pause on data centers

Such was the case in Charlotte, where two planned data center projects in the eastern part of the city spurred a grassroots effort to pressure the City Council to act.

"Data centers are unlike traditional office buildings or commercial developments," Ajmera said. "They can have substantial impacts on energy demand, water consumption, infrastructure capacity, and surrounding land uses. Across the country, local governments are wrestling with these challenges after projects have already been approved."

Charlotte has the opportunity to learn from those experiences instead of repeating them.

The Charlotte branch of the left-wing Party for Socialism and Liberation, or PSL Charlotte, organized a door-knocking campaign in the neighborhood where one of the data centers, owned by Boston-based American Tower Corporation, is being built.

PSL Charlotte member Dana Alhasan said many residents she spoke with weren't aware of the project at all.

"Either people didn't know about it, or they found out about it earlier from one of their neighbors, or they found out about it from the petition that we had launched," Alhasan said.

"When we would talk to people about it and the potential impacts, the residents were overwhelmingly extremely concerned about the data center."

PSL Charlotte worked with other community groups to conduct press conferences and demonstrations opposing the data centers. Eventually, the City Council passed a five-month moratorium intended to give the city time to assess infrastructure capacity, noise impacts and "other environmental concerns," according to the city's website.

"The question before us is not whether data centers are good or bad," Ajmera said. "The question is whether Charlotte has the right policy framework in place to manage them responsibly."

Alhasan said the moratorium's unanimous passage was a testament to the community organizing efforts.

"It really was the people that put enough pressure to bring forward the vote to consider a data center moratorium in the first place," she said.

One thing the moratorium won't do, however, is pause any projects that are currently in the development pipeline, including the two data centers in East Charlotte. That's because state law prohibits localities from enacting moratoriums on active developments.

### Locals question officials over Rowan projects

A similar community debate is taking place in nearby Rowan County, where residents launched a petition and website and filled local meetings to express their displeasure with two proposed data centers.

One project is a planned 400-acre facility, owned by Edged Energy, which falls under the county's jurisdiction. Edged Energy purchased the land for the data center from a private seller in November and has since begun work on the site.

Mark Ortiz, a community activist who helped organize opposition to the data center, told CPP that locals had a wide array of concerns about the data centers.

"The people that are right near where one is being built are most concerned about the environmental effects: the noise, heat island effect, water usage," Ortiz said.

"There are a lot of other concerns just with AI and (cryptocurrency) also," he added, "apart from the physical footprint of the hardware that it takes to make them happen."

After hearing the residents' complaints, Rowan County commissioners passed a one-year moratorium on new data centers, although like in Charlotte it does not apply to the project already under development.

Meanwhile, the city of Salisbury, which is the county seat of Rowan, is moving ahead with a separate data center project. That proposed facility will be smaller than the Edged facility and operated by Colorado-based company Flexential, which currently owns two data centers in Charlotte and one in Morrisville.

On June 2, the Salisbury Town Council passed a text amendment to its land development ordinance at the behest of the developer that will be building the Flexential data center. The text amendment allows developers to apply for data centers within city limits with restrictions related to maximum size, noise and water consumption.

Although the text amendment was requested by the developer, Salisbury community engagement director Anne Little told CPP that it wasn't an "open door" policy.

"It's a framework to establish what would or would not be appropriate for a data center project," she said.

Little directed community members with concerns about the project to a city-maintained webpage which contains all public documents, frequently asked questions and informational videos about the proposed data center.

### Towns get moratorium fever

Even places with seemingly no interest from data center developers have begun passing moratoriums.

Hillsborough Mayor Mark Bell called data centers one of the "hottest topics" in local government right now.

The town of just under 10,000 people in Orange County passed a two-month moratorium to allow for consideration of new planning ordinances that specifically define data centers. That's despite Hillsborough not receiving any requests for new data centers or much community engagement around the issue. Nobody spoke at the public hearing for the moratorium, Bell said.

Hillsborough is, however, situated in a hotbed of data center activity because of its proximity to the tech-centric Research Triangle. Orange County's government, which is based in Hillsborough, passed a similar moratorium earlier this year; so have other nearby jurisdictions including the city of Durham, Chatham County and the town of Apex in Wake County.

Bell said the resource consumption of data centers could pose a problem for small towns with limited infrastructure, which is partly why Hillsborough decided it was time to adjust their planning ordinances, which in their current state don't cleanly address or put guardrails around such facilities.

"We have very constrained water and sewer capacity and could not support a hyperscale data center," Bell said.

Unsurprisingly, the data center industry isn't a fan of the wave of moratoriums.

Dan Diorio, who leads state policy initiatives for the Data Center Coalition, told CPP that data centers contribute to the state economy and delivered more than \$1.3 billion in state and local taxes in 2024.

"Unfortunately, local moratoriums on data centers would send a signal that the area is closed for business, both for data centers and for other significant economic development projects," Diorio said.

That sentiment hasn't seemed to rub off on city leaders yet. Asheville and Fayetteville are among the municipalities considering a vote on data center regulations later this summer.

It remains to be seen whether those pauses will actually squash data center development statewide — or whether they're merely delaying the inevitable.

Additional reporting by Herbert L. White of The Charlotte Post.

## Student loan repayment revisions are on the way

Continued from page 1A

than \$25,000 must complete repayment in 10 years. Borrowers who owe greater than \$25,000 but less than \$50,000 — the average federal student loan debt is \$39,075 per borrower — have 15 years to complete repayment. Those with \$100,000 or more in debt have up to 25 years.

Alternatively, required monthly payments on the Repayment Assistance Plan are dependent on the borrower's income and number of dependents. The U.S. Department of Education uses tax information to calculate the monthly payment amount, and it could change if income or number of dependents change.

"Your required monthly payment amount under the Repayment Assistance Plan is a percentage of your annual income, most commonly your adjusted gross income, divided by 12 to determine the monthly payment amount," the Department's website states.

"Your monthly payment amount is then reduced by \$50 for each dependent you claim on your federal tax return; however, your monthly payment may not be less than \$10 a month. The percentage of your annual income varies depending on your AGI ..."

Monthly payments will be reduced if a borrower's spouse also has federal student loans and tax returns are filed together. If borrowers are married but file separately, only income and dependents will be considered.

### Choosing a new plan

Some might have not kept track of their loans in recent years given how many pauses and relief attempts have been provided by the government since the pandemic. In that case, Tia Anderson, program services representative for North Carolina's nonprofit lender NC Assist, said it's important to start to familiarize yourself with the status of your loan, especially as SAVE goes away.

"Now you're going to have a lot of families asking the question of 'What's going to work best for my student or work best for me?'" she said.

"This is the time now to look into those loans. If you're an existing borrower, maybe it's been years since you've graduated, maybe you've gone through forbearance, maybe you have not been as active in paying on those student loans. Now is the crucial time to seek out your loan provider, make sure that they have the correct information to reach you, as well as keep a track of the emails that you are receiving from the Department of Education."

Federal and private loans will still be treated differently in terms of repayment, as the changes going into effect from Trump's OBBBA only apply to federal loans, like those distributed via the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. It's important to be knowledgeable about where your loans came from and act accordingly if they are federal, private or a mix of both, Anderson said.

Several factors could go into how borrowers should choose which plan to switch to, whether it's a growing family or thinking about obtaining another degree soon.

The Repayment Assistance Plan, which considers current gross income, could be a good option for those who are still early in their career or are low earners.

Ultimately, it's important to make the decision within the 90-day window after July 1 rather than having the decision made for you, Anderson said.

### Alternative programs after SAVE

Aside from impacting existing borrowers, the rollback of SAVE, student loan forgiveness and certain repayment plans might be a deterrent for students who want to attend college but are concerned about what they might owe later. But it's important to not let fluctuations in loan and repayment options influence those big life decisions, Anderson said.

"If you are a student that is considering college, and there's a lot of conversation happening around student loan repayment, I would definitely still encourage students to seek out what their dreams are, their educational dreams," Anderson said.

"There's going to be a number of support systems specifically here in the state of North Carolina to help students get there."

Nonprofit lender NC Assist helps North Carolina residents afford college through its private loan program for parents or students with fixed rates and no fees.

"Being a nonprofit lender here in the state allows families to know that there is a lender that's being mindful of affordability and accessibility for students," Anderson said.

"So before shopping around, if you are needing to rely on private loans this upcoming semester here in the state of North Carolina, I would definitely encourage you to consider NC Assist as an option prior to moving forward, just because in comparison to other lenders here in the state of North Carolina, we do have the mission of making sure that it is affordable and accessible for families."



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## The Charlotte Post

The Voice of the Black Community

Gerald O. Johnson | CEO/PUBLISHER

gerald.johnson@thecharlottepost.com

André P. Johnson | CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

andre.johnson@thecharlottepost.com

Herbert L. White | EDITOR IN CHIEF

herb.white@thecharlottepost.com

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## Shackles nation's founders warned Americans about

My grandmother was born in 1916 on the same red Virginia ground where her grandfather was born enslaved.

She lived to one hundred and five. She carried the weight of what her family had been to my family, and what her family had been to itself, the way you carry a stone you cannot put down. When she died, the stone passed to me.

I went looking.

What I found was a paradox written in blood.

The man Thomas Jefferson called "the most learned and logical" of the founding generation was my fifth great-grandfather. In 1766 he wrote that Parliament's fleets and armies might give it power, but not right. He wrote that shackles, however nicely polished, would never sit easy on free men. He was Jefferson's cousin and political mentor. He helped invent the American argument.



BEN  
JEALOUS

He owned thirty human beings. In 1769, in Jefferson's first session in the House of Burgesses, the young man asked his old mentor to do one brave thing: introduce a bill making it easier for masters to free the people they enslaved. Bland did as Jefferson asked. He was denounced as an enemy to his country. In Jefferson's words, he was "treated with the grossest indecorum."

He kept his 30 slaves. He died still holding them. That is the strange courage of the founding. A man who understood that government without consent is tyranny could not break the shackles in his own house. He indicted himself with his own argument. So did Jefferson. So did every Virginia patriot who signed his name to natural rights while holding the title to another human being.

They wrote the creed anyway. They knew it would destabilize them. And the argument they could not finish was picked up by the people they would not free.

A hundred years later, the great-great-grandson of the man they would not free left the place of his enslavement as a teenager and never looked back. He cobbled shoes. He preached. He kept a light-house on the same point of land where the patriot's plantation once stood. In 1879 the people of Prince George and Surry Counties elected him to the Virginia House of Delegates as part of the most successful biracial coalition in the 19th century South.

They abolished the poll tax. They tore down the public whipping post. They founded what is now Virginia State University. They rebuilt the colleges the war had broken. They funded free public schools for every Virginia child, Black and White. They built, for one bright moment, the Virginia the patriot could have written into law and would not.

The Danville Massacre of 1883 ended that coalition with bullets. The argument went unfinished again.

It is unfinished still.

Read the grievances in the Declaration of Independence one more time. Standing armies in our streets without the consent of our legislatures. The military rendered superior to the civil power.

Quartering armed troops among us. The protection of armed men, by mock trial, from punishment for murders committed against us.

Last June the president federalized California National Guardsmen and active-duty Marines and sent them into Los Angeles over the governor's objection. A federal judge ruled it violated the Posse Comitatus Act. Patrick Henry warned of exactly this in 1788. He used almost the same words.

The Fourth Amendment was written because British officers used general warrants — blank checks to search any home, any paper, any person. In 2024 the Fifth Circuit ruled that geofence warrants, which sweep up the data of everyone near a crime scene, are "modern-day general warrants" forbidden by the Constitution. The court named the colonial writs of assistance.

Section 702 of FISA lets the government query Americans' communications — swept up in surveillance of foreign targets — without a warrant. The 1033 Program has poured seven billion dollars of military gear into ten thousand local police departments. Breonna Taylor was killed in her bed. Amir Locke was killed in his sleep. Both by officers serving no-knock warrants. Both, in the language of 1776, victims of armed troops quartered among us, protected from punishment by a mock trial.

This is not a left issue. It is not a right issue. Ron Wyden and Rand Paul wrote the Fourth Amendment Is Not For Sale Act together. The ACLU and Cato agree. The grievances are not partisan because the grievances are not new. They are the same grievances written in the same hand against the same kind of power.

The patriot understood the principle and could not live by it. His descendant lived it and was outvoted by force. My grandmother carried the weight of that unfinished business her whole life. It is unfinished now.

Ben Jealous is a professor of practice at the University of Pennsylvania and former president and CEO of the NAACP.

## Court's attack on black voting rights

By Lakeisha Hood Moise and Kamillah A. Pickett

SPECIAL TO THE POST

Voting while Black has always been a battle.

Poll taxes. Literacy tests. Grandfather clauses. All white primaries. Violence. Intimidation.

One hundred and sixty years ago, these were the devices deployed by a system designed to deliberately disenfranchise Black voters in the South. Today, those devices have been modernized,

but the intent to systematically suppress Black political power has not changed. In 1965, eight days after Bloody Sunday, when peaceful marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma were beaten back by state troopers, Lyndon B. Johnson stood before a joint session of Congress and declared, "Every American citizen must have an equal right to vote." Nearly five months later, Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. It was the belated fulfillment of a Reconstruction-era promise that has now been hollowed out.

Section 2 of the VRA guaranteed that members of every racial group have an equal opportunity to elect representatives of their choice. As Justice Kagan wrote, in dissent of the Louisiana v. Callais ruling, that guarantee "arose from a far-too-prominent part of this Nation's history," one in which states deployed every mechanism available, including gerrymandered district lines, to ensure Black votes counted for next to nothing, if counted at all.

The court's ruling blatantly guts that protection and sets forth a new set of procedural requirements engineered to ensure that even the most obvious discriminatory maps survive legal challenge.

VRA claims must now demonstrate discriminatory intent rather than effects, and plaintiffs in these cases must now avoid political partisanship when challenging district maps. States can now methodically dilute minority voting power without legal consequence, so long as they maintain the dual farces of nonpartisan preference and race-neutrality. It is political gaslighting.

This ruling is not an opening salvo; it is a sequel. Justice Kagan called the Callais ruling "part of a set." In 2013, the Court struck down Section 5's preclearance requirements in Shelby County v. Holder, clearing the way for voter ID laws, early voting restrictions, and aggressive voter roll purges across the South.

The pattern is clear: what Selma birthed, the court is putting to death.

And the consequences are real. The overwhelming majority of Section 2 voter dilution lawsuits originate in Southern states, where more than half of Black Americans live. District lines have already been redrawn in Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, Texas, and North Carolina, with South Carolina and Mississippi vying to be next.

And in Virginia, where

maps were voter-approved, the state's high court nullified the results of a fair and open election. This manipulation is not conscious disservice of Southern Black voters. Let the lived impact get lost in the legalese: voter suppression and vote dilution are not hypothetical harms. They are the apparatuses that sustain the South's wealth and opportunity inequities, a historical throughline that persists across generations. When Black communities are denied a fair chance to elect leaders who represent their interests, their access to quality healthcare, housing, education, public support, nutritional assistance and safe community spaces are diminished.

The path forward will require sustained, coordinated action, and a sharper understanding of power beyond elections. It might also be time to redefine what Black power is and where it resides.

Black communities hold \$1.7 trillion in annual spending power. Black athletes account for much of NBA and NFL rosters, Black entertainers dominate the global music and media industries. Indisputably, Black culture shapes American life in ways that extend far beyond any courtroom. And that is leverageable influence that has been proven through recent collective actions that made corporations take notice.

But that leverage is weakened when entrusted to a few instead of unified into a disciplined, shared strategy that can move boardrooms and statehouses alike.

So, what do we do next?

Here's one illustrative example that will have a major impact on N.C.'s future.

Duke admits solar is cheaper — then builds less anyway

In Duke Energy's model to determine the plan that will minimize costs, they include an artificial limit on how much solar they are capable of building. This consequential constraint is buried deep in one of the plan's 13 appendices and is thus not well understood by the public.

Specifically, Duke Energy claims it can build only a base of 1,200 megawatts of solar per year — every single year from now through the year 2050, according to Duke's analysis. No ramp-up. No learning curve. No improvement in build capacity over the next 25 years.

That's insane. In most years, Duke's model recommends building the full amount allowed by this constraint. This means that this artificial constraint, not market forces, determines how much solar gets built.

Is 1,200 MW per year a reasonable limit? Absolutely not. For comparison, just last year, Texas added about 12,000 MW of solar. Florida added about 5,000 MW.

Even if you adjust for population or land area, Texas and Florida are building solar at many times the annual rate today that Duke claims they will be able to build in North Carolina for the next 25 years.

In Duke's own public filings, they re-ran its model using a slightly higher solar cap — 1,800 MW per year instead of 1,200. This plan chose more solar and less gas and nuclear, which is much more expensive. According to these same filings, this would save the

region will eventually crush its smaller competitors and monopolize the market.

So, without government involvement, you'd end up with private monopolies that could charge whatever price they want for this mission-critical service. That's a problem.

It's why starting in the early 1900s, governments granted them the legal right to be a monopoly with no competition. In return, the government — through public utilities commissions — would regulate their electricity rates and long-term energy plans. In North Carolina, that responsibility falls to the N.C. Utilities Commission, whose members are appointed by the governor, state treasurer and state legislature.

Financial incentive to stretch truth

In Duke Energy's case, their electricity rates are set by a formula that allows them to earn a fixed percentage profit on their total capital investment. This means if they build more expensive energy facilities, they make more profit dollars which boosts their stock price.

That's what makes the Utilities Commission's role so critical. If they fail to properly scrutinize Duke Energy's plan, then Duke can game the system by building unnecessarily expensive projects to inflate their profit, at the public's expense.

And that's exactly what's happening. In fact, Duke Energy's CEO effectively admitted this to investors, saying the company's profit growth is secure because it has "been building the capital plan and regulatory mechanisms for several years to accomplish it," according to the February transcript a quarterly earnings call.

## Duke's rate hike exposes broken system

Here's one illustrative example that will have a major impact on N.C.'s future.

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average household about \$84 per year by 2035.

By imposing an arbitrary constraint on solar capacity, Duke Energy convinces regulators to approve more expensive gas and nuclear projects, to increase their profits and stock price at the public's expense.

What we can do right now

Importantly, North Carolina does not need new legislation to lower our power bills. Existing law already requires Duke to prove its plan is the most reasonable way to minimize power bills.

We just need the Utilities Commission to uphold the law instead of rubber-stamping Duke's unreasonable plans. Their current plan is under regulatory review, and the Commission won't make a final decision until late 2026. Here is what you can do now to influence the outcome.

1. Directly pressure the Utilities Commission by submitting a public comment. Instructions are at <https://tinyurl.com/duke-complaint> or can be found under the "Consumer Statements" portion of the commission's website.

2. Demand your legislators have a plan to pressure the Utilities Commission to hold Duke accountable;

3. Demand the attorney general sue the commission if they rubber-stamp this plan.

Every North Carolinian pays the price when the Utilities Commission refuses to do its job. We have both the right and the responsibility to demand that Duke Energy follows the law.

Sam Grote is CEO of the NC Business Impact Forum, a nonprofit that uses data-driven research to advance sustainable economic growth in North Carolina.

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# Sports

THURSDAY, JUNE 18, 2026



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Tight end Ja'Tavion Sanders, who missed the Carolina Panthers' playoff push with a broken ankle, is healthy and determined to become a valuable asset as a receiver.

## 'Minor setback, major comeback'

*Panthers tight end Ja'Tavion Sanders is healthy and poised for a breakthrough after breaking ankle*

By Jeff Hawkins  
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Carolina Panthers tight end Ja'Tavion Sanders felt blessed.

Coach Dave Canales last week ordered the players to take an early summer vacation, calling off the final mandatory minicamp practice. After wrapping up a few team-oriented details, Sanders said he would travel home to Texas for a few weeks to "get around my people."

When asked about Canales' surprise locker-room announcement, Sanders

was ecstatic.

"Hell, yeah, I'm blessed," he said. "Most definitely," adding he plans to spend part of the break at a football camp and Tight End University in Nashville, Tennessee, on June 22-25.

Then?

"Back to Charlotte," Sanders said.

The Panthers will officially report for training camp July 22 for nine practices before participating in the Hall of Fame Game in Canton, Ohio, on Aug. 6.

A 2024 fourth-round draft pick, Sanders, who suffered a Week 3 high

ankle sprain and a Week 12 broken ankle last season, finished with 29 catches for 190 yards and a touchdown. After collecting six catches of at least 20 yards as a rookie, he had none last season.

Sanders said his time on the sideline "changed me in a lot of ways. Changed me for the better. Minor setback, major comeback. "I was completely healthy before

OTAs," he said. "The trainers definitely got me right. I feel better than I ever have. My confidence level has never been higher."

It needs to be.

**Panthers pass on adding TE depth**

The Panthers continue searching for their next Greg Olson, who seven seasons ago surpassed 500 receiving yards. No Carolina tight end has reached the milestone since.

The Panthers did not make any significant offseason moves to upgrade

Please see **SANDERS** | 6A



Sanders

I was completely healthy before OTAs. The trainers definitely got me right. I feel better than I ever have. My confidence level has never been higher.

Carolina Panthers tight end **JA'TAVION SANDERS**

## Duke's Tolbert ends run with All-America finish



DUKE ATHLETICS

Lauren Tolbert (second from right) and Duke teammates (from left) Julia Jackson, Maya Collins and Braelyn Baker finished fourth in the women's 4x400 meter relay with a clocking of 3 minutes, 24.59 seconds June 13 at the NCAA Track and Field Championships in Eugene, Oregon. Tolbert finished third in the 800 with a personal best 1:58.22.

By Keith T. Barber  
THE CARBORO DEFENDER

Competing in four consecutive NCAA national championships in track and field is incredibly rare, but Lauren Tolbert is among them.

A four-time All-America at Duke, the Belmont resident delivered two more scintillating performances June 11 at the NCAA Division I outdoor championships in Eugene, Oregon.

Tolbert posted a fourth-best time of 1 minute, 59.69 in the 800-meter semifinal to advance to the final and in the 4x400 relay, Tolbert — along with teammates Julia Jackson, Braelyn Baker and Maya Collins — shattered the school record with a clocking of 3:25.14 to finish first in their heat. They did better in the finals, with Tolbert finishing third in the 800 with a personal best and school record 1:58.22 while the foursome took fourth in the 4x400 in 3:24.59 for a new school and ACC standard.

Tolbert said the highly-charged, electric atmosphere of Hayward Field felt overwhelming as a freshman in 2023, but she never felt more prepared or more confident for a meet in her life.

"There's always a lot of nerves and excitement just hearing the crowd at nationals — everyone in the field is either a conference

Please see **DUKE'S** | 6A

## HBCU offseason is just a dream

"Just when I thought I was out...they pull me back in."

— Al Pacino, aka Michael Corleone, "The Godfather, Part III."

I'm not in the mob and certainly haven't killed anybody (that you can find), but I feel some of what Corleone meant on a different level.

It's June. Summer doesn't officially start until June 21, Father's Day. The 2025-26 HBCU sports season officially ended last month.

It's ME time. Yes, there's still a newspaper to publish because the news doesn't stop, but HBCU sports used to. There was such a thing as an offseason. We could get away from it all and get our life back, if only for a little while.

I figured I had at least until the July 4 weekend before things heated up.

Then an email came from the MEAC announcing details of its Football Media Day next month. The CIAA, SIAC and SWAC sent their releases weeks ago, too early to get serious about sports.

But the MEAC is the dinner bell.

The conference even changed its menu with a new meal called "The Pivot." This national sports podcast is hosted by former NFL stars Ryan Clark, Channing Crowder and Fred Taylor, so expect a whole new listening audience.

The MEAC media day returns to M&T Bank Stadium, home of the Baltimore Ravens, for the second straight year. The event

Please see **WHEN** | 6A



BONITTA BEST

## FIFA World Cup is primetime for Charlotte FC's Tim Ream

By Steve Goldberg  
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

It's primetime for Charlotte FC's Tim Ream. While he's been on America's soccer radar for some time, it's spotlight primetime for Tim Ream.

Ream, who spent 13 years in England with five seasons in the Premier League and four starts in the 2002 FIFA World Cup, he and his United States teammates will open the 2026 World Cup against Paraguay on Friday.

Named captain by coach Mauricio Pochettino, the Charlotte FC center back is not only supporting teammates from the back; he's also fronting for them as a designated spokesman for the team when media come calling. He's not just representing his country but also the club and the city in which he now lives and works.

If you've been watching, listening to, or reading the news, especially this past week, there was Ream, answering questions in the same measured tone and relaxed demeanor

See **FIFA** | 6A



U.S. SOCCER

Tim Ream, whose soccer experience includes multiple stops in the Premier League and Major League Soccer, positioned him to wear the captain's armband for the U.S. World Cup team.



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Carolina Panthers tight end Ja'Tavon Sanders is carted off the field after breaking his ankle against the Seattle Seahawks on Dec. 28, 2025. Sanders, who caught 29 passes for 190 yards and a touchdown in 2025, is healthy and making a bid to become more prominent in the Panthers' passing attack.

## Sanders determined to refine skills after injury

Continued from page 5A

the position, outside of bringing back special teams ace Feleipe Franke. The top four depth chart remained the same as most of 2025: Tommy Tremble, Sanders, Mitchell Evans and veteran James Mitchell.

Entering April's NFL Draft, national media insiders linked the Panthers to Oregon tight end Kenyon Sadiq. The situation became moot when the New York Jets selected him at No. 16 overall, leaving general manager Dan Morgan an opportunity to solidify the offensive line long term with first-round pick Monroe Freeling.

"There was chatter about drafting Sadiq, but it was a confidence builder that (Morgan) believes in us," Sanders said. "He sees all the work we put in. We honestly have one of the closest rooms, friendship-wise. We talk to each other every day. Honestly, anyone can have a breakout year. Anytime anyone steps out on the field, there is no drop off."

### Retooled skillset

Canales has seen a difference in Sanders during the three stages of off-season workouts: "He looks faster ... he looks stronger," Canales said, and more

confident after suffering his "first ever serious football injury."

While recovering from the ankle injury and rehabilitation, Sanders focused on refining his skill set.

"I think I worked on everything," he said. "Started with my footwork and hand placement, the way I was getting in and out of my (route) breaks. The way I use leverage. I feel stronger, faster. My hips are looser. I put in the work to get back. It was exactly what I needed."

Sanders admitted to being humbled by his first two NFL seasons and missing time because of injury.

"Getting through that, mentally," Sanders said, "it showed that football can be taken away. I don't take it for granted any more."

Sanders is already eager to suit up for the preseason, starting with the Hall of Fame Game against the Arizona Cardinals in Canton, Ohio. Carolina opens the regular season against the Chicago Bears on Sept. 13.

"The Hall of Fame Game is going to be an amazing experience," he said. "It'll give us all kinds of advantages and make us game-ready before other teams."

## When it comes to HBCU sports, forget the offseason

Continued from page 5A

was moved from its normal hotel venue in downtown Norfolk, Virginia, to accommodate the frenzy surrounding the hirings of ex-NFL superstars Michael Vick and DeSean Jackson.

It's Year 2, but the euphoria hasn't diminished, at least on Jackson's side after Delaware State came within one win of going to the Cricket Celebration Bowl.

"MEAC Football Media Day provides an opportunity to celebrate the student-athletes, coaches, and institutions that continue to shape the game of football while preparing young people for success in life," said Troy Vincent Sr., executive vice president of NFL Football Operations. "As we look ahead to another season, we celebrate the power of football to bring people together, create opportunity and inspire the next generation."

Yeah, T-H-A-T Troy Vincent, the NFL All-Pro cornerback that I watched every Sunday.

MEAC football should be on "Cloud Nine," as The Temptations sang back in the day. The conference opened the season with a win against its rival SWAC (and it is a rivalry) in the MEAC-SWAC Challenge and

ended the season on the same high note after South Carolina State defeated Prairie View A&M in overtime in the Celebration Bowl.

Add that to this season's storylines. Can anybody stop the Chennis Berry machine?

Was Delaware State's success a fluke under Jackson?

How quickly will fans turn on Vick if Norfolk State goes 1-11 again?

Will Howard alumnus Ted White's inaugural season go the route of Jackson, Vick or somewhere in between?

Will Morgan State coach Damon Wilson finally get that breakthrough and turn the Bears into winners like he did at Bowie State?

And what will North Carolina Central's offense look like without 2025 MEAC Offensive Player of the Year Walker Harris, who followed in the footsteps of 2022 and 2023 MEAC Offensive Player of the Year Davius Richard?

Yep, for a short while I was out on a mental vacation, but they got me. I've been pulled back in. Giddy up!

*Bonitta Best is sports editor at The Triangle Tribune in Durham.*

## FIFA World Cup is primetime for the steady hand of USA captain Tim Ream

Continued from page 5A

he does around Charlotte FC matches. CBS Mornings, NPR, New York Times, The (London) Times, TNT, NBC News. Even an Atlanta United podcast. He's everywhere.

Ream was 6 years old when the World Cup was last played in the United States in 1994, the event that led to the creation of Major League Soccer, where the St. Louis native played his first two seasons (65 appearances) for New York Red Bulls before heading to England.

After four seasons (126 appearances) with the Bolton Wanderers in the Premier League and Championship Division, he joined Fulham FC ahead of the 2015-16 campaign and made 312 appearances over nine seasons before making the move to Charlotte in 2024.

What you see is what you get

"He has a future. I probably shouldn't say too much, but Ream has a chance to be a national team player," said Hans Backe, then coach of New York Red Bulls, to the New York Times in 2010. "He's a center back who is comfortable and calm in possession of the ball."

Since making his national team debut in 2010, Ream has played 82 times for the national team. Never spectacular, he was steady and dependable, his left foot an asset to national team coaches as it is now for Dean Smith and the Crown.

But it wasn't a continuous path. Coach Jurgen Klinsmann selected Omar Gonzalez, Matt Besler, John Brooks, and Geoff Cameron as the backs on the 2014 World Cup team. Though he played three times for the

U.S. in 2017, Ream wasn't in the mix when the U.S. failed to qualify for the tournament in Russia. He didn't play for the national team in 2018. Brooks was still on the team along with Matt Miazga, Cameron Carter-Vickers, Walker Zimmerman, Aaron Long, and Tim Parker.

Ahead of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, the then-34-year-old Ream was not regarded by many observers and fans as being too old and slow for world-class competition. But after playing every minute of every match, he was widely considered to have been one of the team's best in the tournament.

Ream has been a fixture since, though pundits and fans have continued to point out why he shouldn't. He may not start every match for the Americans, but he will play, and he is

## Duke's Tolbert ends run with All-America finish

Continued from page 5A

champion or a national champion," Tolbert, who recently graduated with a degree in biology. "You're riding with the best of the best in the NCAA — so it's a lot of fun to compete with the very best and show who you are."

Tolbert, who was first team All-America the previous three seasons, finished fifth in the 800 at last year's national championships, but she's confident she'll have the individual gold medal draped around her neck after Saturday's final.

"This year, I have the most confidence going into nationals," she said. "I'm ready to go have fun. It's going to be a big victory lap to cap off my whole collegiate career, and to come out on top."

At the NCAA East Regional 4x400 relay event last month, Tolbert ran the anchor leg in dramatic fashion. The Blue Devils were in fourth place when she took the baton from Collins with everything at stake. If Tolbert had been unable to overtake her competitors, they would have to wait to see if their time was good enough to qualify for the national championships. Tolbert recalled her thought process waiting for the baton exchange and then finding herself trailing the leader by 10 meters.

"I said to myself, 'I'm here to take it all, not just play it safe. I don't want to just qualify — I want to win this whole thing for my team,'" she said.

Tolbert exploded past the competition to give the Lady Blue Devils the third seed at the national championships. In the process, Duke set a new Atlantic Coast Conference record, posting a time of 3:26.40.

### A safe space

Running became a big part of Tolbert's life at the tender age of 8. She joined Girls on the Run, a national nonprofit that empowers girls in grades 3-8 by combining the physical activity of running with lessons on mental and emotional health, according to the nonprofit's website.

Raychelle Robinson, executive director of the Greater Charlotte chapter of Girls on the Run, said Lauren's success on the track is a shining example of how the nonprofit helps young girls build confidence and develop valuable life skills.

"It is wonderful to see Lauren utilizing her gifts and pursuing her full potential at such a high level," Robinson said.

Robinson said Tolbert's mother, Delisa, recently shared an anecdote about her time participating in Girls on the Run, which speaks to Tolbert's unselfishness.

"There was a period of time [she] was not running her fastest—not because she could not, but because she would stop along the route to encourage and support her teammates. That story speaks volumes about Lauren's heart, leadership, and character from a very young age," she said.

For Tolbert, the joy of running transcends winning races.

"Running is my safe space," she said. "When I was younger, I would always run to clear my head — running is just like a part of me. Running makes me feel free."

Tolbert credits track and field with helping her personal growth with respect to discipline, confidence, and time management. Tolbert said she hopes her legacy will be making a lasting impact on young women who look up to her as a role model. She participates in Athlete to Athlete — a mentoring program that connects athletes ages 6-18 with Division I collegiate athletes.

"I mentor high school [students] and I love seeing their progression — giving advice, talking about anything they need to discuss — having that lasting impact on people," she said.

### The next chapter

For Tolbert, the national championships represent the end of one journey and the beginning of another. Her ultimate goal is to compete in the 2028 Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

Last fall, Tolbert inked an NIL deal with Brooks Running, and she plans on turning pro after her final collegiate competition. Tolbert said she hopes to retain Duke associate head coach Mark Mueller as her professional coach and continue training in Durham.

Tolbert attributes a great deal of her success to Mueller's mentorship, and the unconditional support of family and friends.

"Coach Mueller cares more about you as a person than an athlete, so he always puts your mental wellbeing above athletics," she said. "Coach Mueller always tells us, 'If you have a bad race, people will still love you.'"

Tolbert said she feels the weight of pressure — the high bar she sets for herself — but Mueller has helped her gain perspective on the emotional ups and downs that are inevitable in athletic competition.

"The higher you get, the more expectations you put on yourself," she said. "The more expectations coaches and everyone else puts on you to perform at the highest level every time you step on the track."

During her sophomore season, Tolbert admits the high expectations took a mental toll. Tolbert said she struggled with her confidence and belief in herself, but her support system at Duke University was unparalleled, which made all the difference.

"I was just in a slump," Tolbert recalled. "I had to meet with coach Mueller over and over again, and he was telling me, 'It's okay if you don't hit this time. It's OK if you don't execute this race perfectly. Everything is a learning process, and you're going on a journey.'"

Tolbert said to the casual observer, it could appear that gifted athletes just step on the track and turn in amazing performances, but it's far more complicated and to be a champion, you must be willing to work hard, endure pain and sacrifice.

"People just don't know how much work you put in at the track," she said. "The 800 and the 400 are two of the hardest events, so you're in pain every single day at practice. It's about being mentally present and coming back day after day, putting yourself through that to reach your biggest goals."

From the time she began her running journey, Tolbert has leaned on her support system, which has contributed to her mental toughness.

During her downtime at track meets, Tolbert's approach to lowering her stress level isn't listening to music or sitting alone with her thoughts, but rather socializing, laughing and joking with teammates.

"It helps calm me and takes the stress off of me — just knowing I have people supporting me there, and I'm not really thinking about track," she said. "I'm just having fun with my friends and just doing the things we love. Having that family of women around you — it makes the journey even better."

### Formula for success

Tolbert said she understands that she's on a journey, and races will not always go according to plan. Last month, Duke 4x400-meter relay team finished second behind Clemson in the 4x400 at the ACC Championships and she was disappointed in her finish in the 800.

"We were disappointed because it was only three points, which hurt the most — we tried our best and tried our hardest, and we came up short," Tolbert said.

But Tolbert knew the Blue Devils would get a shot at redemption in the East Regional in Lexington, Kentucky, on May 30.

"I just went back to the drawing board with Coach Mueller and talked about how we're going to approach regionals and nationals," she said.

One point of emphasis for Tolbert has been to utilize visualization techniques before, during and after competitions to help improve her performance on the track.

"Going into any big competition, my teammates and I just visualize what we see, feel and hear — what we want to accomplish at the meet — and then we just step into the picture and reenact the whole race," she said. "And if there's a conflict in the race, we try to reenact it as well so we know what to do in those situations if it comes into reality for those races."

Thus, when Tolbert grabbed the baton in the 4x400 relay event in Lexington, she was mentally prepared to win.

"I just tell myself, 'Trust in your training, trust in yourself, trust in everyone that believes in you,'" she said. "Those are always words I tell myself. Then I take a few deep breaths and I'm ready to go."

their captain.

As Backe described in 2010: "He plays a good passing game; he's an excellent passer. A European-type center back who, I think, reminds me of Rio Ferdinand in the Premier League. Ream is strong tactically and never stressed, and of course, he's good in the air. He has a top-class attitude and spirit."

Those attributes are still there, and his leadership has only grown. Ream has already worn the armband 28 times for the U.S., and if he plays in all three opening round matches, that would raise him to sixth all-time in USMNT history, one ahead of John Harkes, who was captain in 30 matches.

Carlos Bocanegra leads the list at 64, followed by Tony Meola (54), Michael Bradley (48), Claudio Reyna (47), Mike Windischmann (36), and Christian Pulisic

(29).

On CBS Mornings earlier this week, Ashley Westwood, the CLIFC captain, noted: "He's different to me. I'm more of a shouter. Tim is very calm and collected."

To which Ream responded, "I like to say that's just my nature, but when people see crazy, I just see normal speed. And it is a game, and I get to play that game. So, what's the point of stressing out about it?"

Well-seasoned from time in England and experienced in the largesse of a World Cup, Ream doesn't get overwhelmed on the pitch. In a video series produced by New York Life, a USMNT sponsor, his wife, Kristen, recalls when they met as both were playing soccer at Saint Louis University. She was a bit more fire, he was far quieter.

"Tim was definitely a

nerd," Kristen said.

Ream said her outgoing nature was intimidating. "I was boring, and I can admit that."

"He still is a rule follower, quiet calm, and I am the opposite, and it works for us," Kristen said. "I think that is why we are so balanced."

That home life, with Kristen and their three children, is the foundation on which Ream's inherent calm and demeanor stand strong. It's what gives him perspective.

"It gives you this feeling of, OK, well, my value is not there, it's here," he said. "I'm important here. No matter what happens on the field, what you mean to your wife, your three young children is what matters. It gives you a freedom, and you can go on and just play like you're a kid again."