



From collaborations with Anthony Hamilton and Prince to solo projects, saxophonist Adrian Crutchfield carves a versatile musical path

THE VOICE OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY SINCE 1906

The Charlotte Post

WEEK OF AUGUST 14, 2025

VOLUME 51 NUMBER 49

WWW.THECHARLOTTEPOST.COM

\$1.50



MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Ryanne Persinger (left) and Audrey Long of Charlotte train in University City for the Aug. 31 Sydney, Australia, Marathon. The 26.2-mile race is their second marathon abroad following the 2024 Berlin Marathon in Germany.

On the road: A marathon challenge takes global turn

Unexpected pull of distance racing takes Charlotte competitors around the world

By Herbert L. White
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There was a time Audrey Long and Ryanne Persinger couldn't comprehend running 26.2 miles. No longer.

Persinger and Long are not only distance runners, they're spanning the globe in the process. The Charlotteans are heading to Sydney, Australia, for a marathon on Aug. 31, their second International race together. Persinger, a media relations professional and former Post reporter, started running to escape the boredom of treadmills.

In the process, she discovered a sup-

portive community.

"I ran by myself, and then I when I joined [a] group, I said I can't believe I used to run by myself, because it's so much enjoyable when you have people to run with," she said. "People have different things that they're trying to attain, and they have different paces, so they want to get faster and get their times down. That's just something from me personally that I'm not interested in doing."

Persinger's first exposure to distance running was 5-kilometer (3.1 miles) races in Charlotte. She joined Run For Your Life in University City to train for

the 2022 Yosemite half-marathon in California, then sought another challenge. Long, the more experienced runner, had an idea.

"When I joined the group, they decided to do the Marine Corps Marathon in 2023, so that was my first marathon," Persinger said. "And then last year, Audrey tricked me into going to Berlin, so that was my second marathon. And now she's pulled me back again, and we're going to Sydney."

"It's all her fault." As of 2015, approximately 509,000 people run marathons in the United

Please see **MARATHONS** | 2A

New city advocate for transit system

Donny Hamilton Jr. to lead CATS transition

By Herbert L. White
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The city of Charlotte has a new deputy city manager to oversee public transit's transformation to regional authority.

Donny Hamilton Jr. will manage Charlotte Area Transit System's transition pending Mecklenburg County voters' approval in November of a referendum that would boost sales taxes by 1% sales to support mass transit. Part of his job is to sell voters on the benefits of transportation investments.



Hamilton

"I'm honored to join the City of Charlotte and contribute to a community that is clearly committed to innovative, sustainable growth," Hamilton said in a statement. "Charlotte has an incredible opportunity to shape the future of mobility and urban living, and I look forward to working with a talented team to help lead the effort."

The referendum, approved Aug. 6 by Mecklenburg commissioners, would commit the county to a 1-cent sales tax for investment in roadways and public transportation. If voters OK the initiative, the levy would raise Mecklenburg's tax

Please see **LEADERSHIP** | 3A

NC elections board settles lawsuit over digital ID

By Lynn Bonner
NC NEWSLINE

Digital IDs cannot be used to vote in North Carolina until the legislature explicitly allows it, under a settlement between the state Board of Elections and the Republican National Committee.

The RNC and the state GOP sued the state Board last year after it voted along party lines to allow UNC-Chapel Hill students to use their mobile UNC One cards as photo ID.

University student and facility IDs, if the state Board approves them, are among the acceptable forms of photo identification voters can use at the polls. Many campuses have replaced physical cards with multipurpose digital IDs. UNC's was the first digital university ID the state Board approved.

A trial court last year sided with the state Board, but the state Appeals Court blocked use of the mobile IDs. Students weren't allowed to use them for the 2024 election.

Please see **NORTH CAROLINA** | 2A

State education board launches strategic plan

NC NEWSLINE

The North Carolina State Board of Education has approved a five-year strategic plan to make the state's public schools the best in the nation by 2030.

The ambitious plan sets targets across eight key areas for the state's 1.5 million public school students.

The "Achieving Educational Excellence" initiative establishes what officials are calling "best in nation" benchmarks. These include matching the highest-performing state's four-year high school graduation rate and composite ACT scores.

Specifically, the plan seeks a 92% graduation rate and an average ACT composite score of 20 by 2030. As of 2023-24 school year, North Carolina's adjusted four-year graduation rate is 86.9%, and the average ACT composite score is 18.5, placing the state 10th among 17 states and Washington, D.C. where 75% or more of high school students take the ACT.

Please see **STATE** | 2A

BET gutted, DEI killed and media bought. Trump's playbook in action

By Stacy M. Brown
BLACK PRESS USA

Donald Trump's first eight months back in the White House have erased any illusion of restraint.

He is not just following the Project 2025 playbook — the authoritarian blueprint he once claimed to know nothing about — he's executing it with surgical precision. From purging diversity programs to steamrolling media independence, Trump has unleashed a blitzkrieg of white nationalist policymaking under the guise of federal power.

And now, with the blessing of federal regulators, he has the media — including Black-owned and Black-centered platforms — under his heel. The Federal Communications Commission recently approved the \$8 bil-

lion acquisition of Paramount Global — parent company of CBS and BET — by Skydance Media. The merger was greenlit just days after Paramount paid a \$16 million settlement to Trump, resolving a lawsuit over a "60 Minutes" interview with then-candidate Kamala Harris. Critics say the timing was no coincidence.

During a PBS interview, journalist Dylan Byers said: "It certainly seems that way. All available evidence suggests that this was a payoff dressed up as a settlement."

The fear, said Byers, is that this is the new cost of doing business in Trump's America.

"If you need any deal to get done, any merger, any acquisition, you might be forced to cough up — the

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Marathons cemented a friendship, global travel

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States annually, according to Running USA. That number represents finishers in roughly 1,100 marathons held across the country annually.

Long wanted to try a marathon but wasn't sure she could complete a distance race. It was a pipe dream, a distance only the truly dedicated could pull off.

"It was a bucket list item, and not because I had run before," she said. "I didn't run in high school or college or any other time before then. I can remember in 2010 my boss coming to work one day and he said, 'oh, I got up and ran 5 miles,' and I looked at him like that is the craziest thing in the world. Who runs 5 miles? I just thought it was crazy."

A friend convinced Long to give it a try, then suggested tackling one of the most best-known marathons in the United States. Unaware of the training necessary to finish a race, she applied for the 2013 Marine Corps Marathon.

"I had a friend one day just talking about running," Long said. "She was like, 'Audrey, you should run the Marine Corps Marathon.' ... I said, 'What's that?' And she said, 'Oprah did. And then I was like, 'OK, if Oprah ran the Marine Corps Marathon, I'm gonna run the Marine Corps Marathon.'"

Long, who has also run in Toronto, took a four-year break from marathoning before connecting with Persinger in 2022.

"We just started running together," said Long, who has competed in the Novant Health Charlotte Marathon. "Ryanne said I'm dragging her in, but I think other runners will influence you."

Long can attest to that. She's tried - and failed - 12 times to land a spot in the New York City Marathon, but a fel-

low runner suggested London - one of the world's toughest courses - as a challenge.

"I said, 'London? I'll try again,'" Long said. "It's a lottery, it's a world major, so I applied, thinking it's just going to be like New York. And then I got in."

Next up was convincing Persinger to go abroad. The first step was Germany last year; this year it's Australia.

"I did London, and then I [dragged] Ryanne in for Berlin," Long said. "I said, 'it's the 50th anniversary - we have to do the Berlin marathon.' And then with Sydney, I told her, 'Hey, it's the first year. It's a world major. That's how the running community does. They will pull you in.'"

Competition, Persinger and Long agree, is secondary to finishing. That's their first and only goal - in addition to exploring Sydney's sights and culture.

"I graduated college with no cum laude, just thank you Lordy, so I'm the same way with running," the 2003 Johnson C. Smith University graduate said. "As long as I finish ... I am happy because I'm a back-of-the-pack type runner. I do intervals, the run-walk method, so I'll run for a minute, walk for 30 seconds."

Said Long: "Running, to me, is recreation only. ... A lot of people always want to ask, what's your time, not celebrate that you completed a marathon. I think they are trying to analyze, 'are you as fast as those Kenyans' or something, not to congratulate you."

"... My point is 26 miles is 26 miles. I don't care if it takes three hours or seven hours, you're still a marathoner and you're still part of the 1% of the world population that completed it."



PARAS GRIFFIN | BET.

Rapper Two Chainz performs at the BET Hip Hop Awards in 2023. The awards show, along with the Soul Train Awards, have been suspended indefinitely by BET, whose parent company Paramount was absorbed in an \$8 billion merger with Skydance Media.

Black-oriented media caught in Trump program

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number seems to be — \$16 million to the Trump Presidential Library."

Even more chilling is what the deal required: the gutting of DEI initiatives, the installation of a political ombudsman to monitor "bias," and an additional \$20 million in PSAs dedicated to causes "near and dear to the president's heart."

One lone FCC commissioner voted against the deal, citing "overreach by the FCC and capitulation by Paramount." FCC Chairman Brendan Carr was blunt in his public remarks: "President Trump is fundamentally reshaping the media landscape." He applauded Trump's direct attacks on legacy media giants like ABC, NBC, and CBS, now effectively under his influence.

That influence extends to content and culture. BET — a pillar of Black music, film, and storytelling — has abruptly suspended both the BET Hip Hop Awards and the Soul Train Awards indefinitely. It's a blow many in the Black community see as part of a larger strategy: silencing Black voices while making media whiter, safer, and Trump-approved. A viral video by TikTok user @TalkUrShxxtNene has ignited online conversations by connecting the dots that mainstream outlets have tiptoed around.

"So, BET has suspended BET Hip Hop and the Soul Train Awards indefinitely," the video begins. "Now I want everyone to pay attention to this s**t." The post breaks down the timeline and details of the Paramount-Skydance merger, pointing out the suspicious coincidence of Stephen Colbert's show being canceled, CBS executives changing their messaging,

and the networks now reportedly having a "CC monitor for Trump." "This is about Trump making the guillotine whiter," she says in the video. "Only white people should be seen. And they're going to dismantle BET whether we realize it or not." "Little by little, they're going to take BET away from us."

Her video points to a larger agenda: the erasure of Black visibility in media, the collapse of Black cultural programming, and the sanitization of entertainment to reflect Trump's white nationalist vision.

"They're eroding everyone else and leaving the white people there to sit," she said. "Blue eyes and blonde hair are not the architects of beauty. That's racism. That's eugenics. And they're going to keep throwing that in the entertainment space because everything is there. The media controls everything. And right now, Trump has it under his boot."

Under Skydance's takeover — and with Trump's hand guiding every major federal agency — CBS, BET, and other Paramount properties are being forced to undergo "comprehensive reviews" to ensure "viewpoint diversity." Translated: no more liberal, inclusive, or racially conscious content that could offend MAGA sensibilities. During the same PBS segment, anchor Geoff Bennett asked Byers, "Is this sort of the new template for future media deals — this sort of new era of political appeasement?" "Yes," Byers answered. "As long as everyone plays ball — pay the settlement, dismantle DEI, install a political censor — then your deal goes through. This is the way deals get done, at least so long as Trump is in office."



GALEN BACHARIER | NC NEWSLINE

Students work in a classroom at a Wake County public school.

State education board launches strategic plan for public schools

Continued from page 1A

The plan also seeks to increase participation in Advanced Placement courses, dual enrollment, and career and technical education. It aims for a 30% AP participation rate in the advanced courses and a 75% AP exam pass rate with a score of 3 or higher by 2030.

In 2024, 21.5% of North Carolina's students in grades 10-12 took at least one AP exam, and 65.4% earned a qualifying score of 3 or higher, according to the report.

Last school year, students in the state earned a record-high 358,069 Career and Technical Education credentials; the plan calls for increasing the number earned yearly to 500,000 by 2030.

"This plan is bold, ambitious and deeply intentional," said Geoff Coltrane, senior director of government affairs and strategy at the Department of Public Instruction. "It sets out a commitment to our students, our educators and the entire state of how we're going to make sure that our public school system is the best in the nation."

The plan was developed after a statewide listening tour by state Superintendent "Mo" Green that included eight regional meetings, 16 school visits and input from more than 5,000 residents, including 1,000 educators. The plan was further refined with feedback from universities, community colleges, local school boards and education associations over a two-month revision period.

The goals of the plan are organized around eight pillars, including preparing students for life after graduation, supporting educators, and ensuring safe learning environments. A key focus is on recruiting, retaining and compensating educators. It sets a target to raise beginning and average teacher salaries to the highest in the Southeast.

The plan also proposes establishing a State Board of Education task force to create a more transparent educator licen-

sing system with multiple pathways into the profession, including apprenticeship models and mentoring opportunities.

For students, the plan focuses on character development alongside academic achievement. It notes that character education is currently not measured uniformly across the nation and that a new student-centered metric will be developed. The plan also calls for expanding school-based health services and implementing "community school" models that connect families with local resources.

Several board members praised plan, including the outreach process that shaped it.

Board member Dr. Olivia Oxedine also praised the plan but raised several concerns, including costs.

"How much is this plan going to cost?" she asked? "We may not have the exact figures today... but if we could get somewhere in the ballpark, I think that would be important." Oxedine suggested financial details be included either in a stand-alone document or within each of the plan's eight pillars.

She also noted the lack of a "policy section" outlining how the plan would be revised over time. She also questioned many of the plan's measures, saying they "continue to feel like actions, not measures." A true measure, she said, should serve as a "benchmark point" for comparison and estimated that "at least 50%" of the listed measures were actually actions. Green assured her that her feedback would be taken into account.

The plan will be officially launched on Aug. 20, with promotional events scheduled across the state this fall.

"This plan is your plan. It is our plan," Green said. "I look forward to North Carolinians making this plan successful."



LYNN BONNER | NC NEWSLINE

Sydney Meeks, NextGen regional organizing director, and Logan Parke, Chapel Hill field organizer, talk to a UNC-CH student during a National Voter Registration Day campus visit.

North Carolina elections board settles lawsuit over digital ID

Continued from page 1A

As part of the agreement dismissing the lawsuit, the state Board agreed to not approve any more digital IDs unless the legislature passes a law allowing them.

Democrats held a 3-2 majority on the elections board last year. Republicans now have a majority.

Two Democrats who voted with the majority last year to allow the mo-

bile IDs are still on the elections board.

On Friday, they defended their 2024 votes.

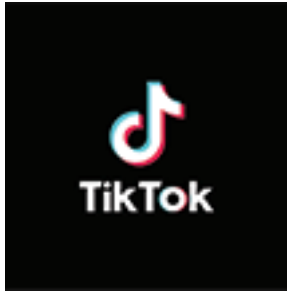
"I think that the previous Board made the correct decision to allow that ID, but the Court of Appeals order disagrees and we are bound to obey that," said Board member Siobhan Millen. "I think with the way technology is changing with digital IDs that this will not be the last

word on this subject."

Democrat Jeff Carmon agreed with Millen. "I know this is something we will see again as we move toward digital driver's licenses and things of that nature," he said.

The legislature last year passed a law telling the DMV to study and implement a plan for digital driver's licenses.

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Leadership for transit

Continued from page 1A
from 7.25% to 8.25% and would generate a projected \$19.4 billion over 30 years.

Referendum supporters contend the transit tax is necessary to keep pace with growth for a county expected to add an estimated 600,000 people in the next 20 years. Opponents counter the levy doesn't provide significant detail on what is included in the tax or whether it is permanent.

Another concern is the tax is regressive, which means lower income people pay a greater share of the investment.

Hamilton, a specialist in transportation finance, has more than two decades of experience managing infrastructure projects and transportation strategy. At the Federal Railroad

Administration, his job was advancing transit initiatives across the country.

As chief strategy officer for Pittsburgh Regional Transit, Hamilton oversaw development of its first strategic plan and spent 17 years with the Federal Highway Administration, where he was involved in planning and transportation projects.

"We are thrilled to welcome Donny Hamilton Jr. to our executive leadership team," City Manager Marcus Jones said. "His expertise in transit and transportation, combined with his passion for building resilient, people-centered cities, makes him an ideal fit as we navigate a transformational period for Charlotte. I'm confident his leadership will help shape a more connected organization and city."

Donation to state court candidate likely breaks law

By Ahmed Jallow

NC NEWSLINE

A \$6,800 donation from a longtime lobbyist to Rep. Sarah Stevens' campaign for North Carolina Supreme Court appears to violate a state law that bars lobbyists from contributing to sitting legislators

— regardless of the office they are running for.

The contribution came from Harold Brubaker, a registered lobbyist and a former speaker of the North Carolina House, who served more than 30 years in the legislature before becoming one of Raleigh's most influential lobbyists.

Brubaker donated to "Stevens for Justice," the judicial campaign committee for Stevens, a Republican from Surry County who currently serves in the North Carolina House and is seeking a seat on the state's highest court in 2026. The donation was made on June 23.

While judicial candidates may legally accept contributions from lobbyists, North Carolina law prohibits lobbyists from donating to any legislator while that individual is serving in that office.

That prohibition extends to all campaign committees associated with the officeholder, including committees for different elections. The intent is to

prevent lobbyists from influencing sitting lawmakers through campaign cash — regardless of what future political plans those legislators may have.

Brubaker's donation, made in the first half of 2025 and disclosed in the "Stevens for Justice" mid-year campaign finance report, appears to run afoul of that restriction.

Brubaker told NC Newsline that the donation is "legal" before hanging up on a reporter.

Stevens said Brubaker "knows lobbyists can't give to members during session," but said his contribution was for her judicial campaign, not her legislative one. She added, "He did not give to me as a member. He gave to me as a judicial candidate."

North Carolina State Board of Elections didn't respond to a request for comment.

While one state law bars lobbyists from donating to legislators during the legislative session, a separate provision prohibits lobbyists from contributing to sitting legislators at any time, regardless of whether lawmakers are in session. The law contains narrow exceptions, such as a lobbyist contributing to their own campaign, but none apply to this situation.

"Unless Brubaker resigned as a lobbyist before June 23, it looks very much like an illegal contribution," said Bob Hall, longtime campaign finance watchdog and former executive director of Democracy North Carolina. "It's a \$6,800 contribution, regulated by state law, to a

North Carolina candidate's committee from a registered lobbyist to a sitting state legislator."

Brubaker was still a registered lobbyist as of June 23.

"It would be different if this was a contribution to a federal candidate's committee that is not regulated by state law — which happened last year when several lobbyists got away with donating to Tim Moore's congressional campaign while they were lobbying him as Speaker of the House," Hall added.

Stevens, who has served in the House since 2009, was elected Speaker Pro Tempore in 2017. She announced her bid for the state Supreme Court in May. The \$6,800 Brubaker contribution matches the maximum allowed from an individual donor under current state limits.

Stevens has reported raising about \$141,000 since announcing her run in May, according to campaign finance reports. Among her donors are Macon Newby, wife of Republican Chief Justice Paul Newby, and Brent Barringer, husband of Republican Justice Tamara Barringer. Newby gave \$3,800, while Barringer gave the maximum \$6,800.

Stevens' challenger, North Carolina Supreme Court Justice Anita Earls, has raised four times as much with a four-month fundraising head start. Earls, a Democrat and the court's senior associate justice, reported raising more than \$580,000 for the first six months of the year.

Deputy county managers hired

By Herbert L. White

herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

Mecklenburg County has a pair of new deputy managers.

County Manager Mike Bryant appointed Michelle Attreed as deputy county manager for financial services and Dr. Kimm Campbell to oversee the combined Health and Human Services agency.

The first day on the job for both Attreed and Campbell will be Aug. 25. Additionally, longtime Deputy County Manager Dr. Leslie Johnson and Deputy County Manager/Chief of Staff Derrick Ramos will remain in their current roles on the executive team.

"These additions reflect my commitment to building a strong executive team and aligning the organization to support our vision for Mecklenburg County's future," Bryant said in a statement. "These changes are part of a broader effort to advance the mission of the organization, support the Board of County Commissioners' priorities, and improve the customer service experience for all residents."

Attreed joins Mecklenburg from Prince William County, Virginia, where she worked for 30 years, including acting deputy county executive for government operations, performance, and innovation. She also served as their chief financial of-

ficer for 11 years.

Attreed will have oversight of Mecklenburg's Finance Department, Tax Collector's Office, Information Technology Services, Human Resources, and Assessor's Office. During her time at Prince William County, Virginia, she was acting deputy county executive for government operations, performance and innovation.

Campbell, who has more than 30 years in state and local government as well as nonprofits, was most recently deputy county administrator of Broward County, Florida. Campbell, who previously Mecklenburg's director of the Children's Mental Health System of Care, was assistant county administrator and human services department director for Broward County.

Campbell will oversee of Mecklenburg's combined Health and Human Services agency, which includes the departments of Child, Family, and Adult Services, Public Health, Community Resources, and Community Support Services as well as the new Housing and Community Development Office.

"Ms. Attreed and Dr. Campbell are both known across the country as strong and committed leaders in their respective fields of finance and human services," Bryant said.

Bryant also announced the establishment of a new assistant county manager position dedicated to designing and executing the Mecklenburg's upward mobility strategy with an emphasis on economic development and workforce development.



Campbell



Attreed



Stevens



Earls

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Published weekly by The Charlotte Post Publishing Company Inc., 5118 Princess Street, Charlotte, NC 28269 (USPS #965500). Subscription is \$65 per year. Periodicals postage paid at Charlotte, NC. Postmaster: Send address changes to The Charlotte Post, PO Box 30144, Charlotte, NC 28230

How Dems can use August recess to save their brand

Kevin Harris and Richard McDaniel

SPECIAL TO THE POST

There's an old saying in the hip-hop community: "Men lie, women lie, numbers don't." In this political climate of lies, corruption, and misinformation, working families deserve numbers that work in their favor, especially when it comes to the economy and their wallets.

But the latest numbers tell a hard truth that Democrats can't ignore. A recent Wall Street Journal poll shows that out of every 10 Americans, more than six view the Democratic Party unfavorably. That's the worst showing in over 30 years. Put simply: for every person who likes what Democrats are doing, two others don't.

This should keep every Democrat awake at night: even when voters don't like how Trump handles the economy, they still trust Republicans more than Democrats to fix it. It's like saying you don't trust the mechanic who broke your car, but you'd still rather have him work on it than the other guy.

As Democratic pollster John Anzalone bluntly admitted: "The Democratic brand is so bad that they don't have the credibility to be a critic of Trump or the Republican Party."

No wonder Democrats lost ground in the 2024 election with every demographic except Black women. Trump made historic inroads with Black and brown voters, which says more about declining trust in the Democratic Party than any real enthusiasm for Trump.

Despite dismal favorability numbers, there's hope. The Wall Street Journal poll also found voters are willing to give Democrats another chance if the party can prove it deserves one.

Congress is now in August recess, when members return home to reconnect with constituents. For Democrats, this month isn't vacation time; it's a lifeline. While Republicans flee tough questions, Democrats can prove they're listening through town halls, door-knocking, and direct engagement with working families who've lost faith in the party.

To prove our value, Democrats must remember that being anti-Trump isn't enough. We've run on that message for three presidential elections, losing twice while Republicans secured governing majorities.

Instead, Democrats need to say what we're for and what we'll do once we have power again. In 2006, Nancy Pelosi led Democrats back to power with her brilliant "Six for '06" campaign, focusing on wages, retirement security, affordable health-care, and college.

Democrats must meet voters where they are. This means maintaining a consistent drumbeat message on affordability instead of responding to daily Trump controversies. Working-class voters, including Black and brown Americans who form the backbone of our coalition, are stressed about rising costs. We can't only oppose tariffs because Trump supports them, we must oppose them because they make everything from groceries to cars more expensive. We can't just oppose ICE raids because they're cruel, we must oppose them because they disrupt supply chains and raise prices for working families.

Democrats need to model courage over fear. Pete Buttigieg recently noted Democrats have been "too attached to a status quo that has been failing us." He's right. Democrats should stop letting fear police our messaging and start taking bold positions that serve working families and communities of color. It's time to be unapologetic about who we're fighting for.

While Democrats debate messaging, Republicans are executing a comprehensive strategy to lock in power for decades. Trump's team is putting "maximum pressure" on red states to redraw congressional maps before 2026, with Vice President J.D. Vance personally visiting Indiana to push redistricting efforts. Beyond Texas, Republicans are targeting Ohio, Missouri, Florida, and other states, potentially netting 10 or more House seats through gerrymandering alone.

Even more concerning, Trump has announced plans for a new census designed to exclude undocumented immigrants from congressional apportionment, a move that would fundamentally reshape representation and strip seats from diverse, Democratic-leaning areas.

This is the Republican playbook. Change the rules when you can't win the game fairly. While they're playing chess, too many Democrats are still playing checkers.

This August recess isn't just an opportunity; it's time to make a stand. Democrats must use this month to build the coalition and trust needed to counter an unprecedented assault on democratic representation. The question isn't whether Democrats can recover. The question is: when will we start capitalizing on Trump's overreach by speaking plainly about what we're for, who we're for, and what we'll do if we have power again?

Kevin Harris and Richard McDaniel are veteran Democratic strategists with over 100 political campaigns between them, including the past five presidential elections. They co-host "Maroon Bison Presents: The Southern Comfort Podcast."

Tenacious open-mindedness

This week marks the 80th anniversary of our country dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

A few days after the bombings, on Aug. 15, 1945, Japan surrendered, effectively ending World War II.

Where were you when you got news of these events? Likely, most of you were not born. But I was a five-year-old beginning my life as a news junkie. My family did not have a TV, and we got all our news through the radio. Even at age five, I loved to listen to the radio.

So when the news about Japan's surrender came across the radio broadcast, my five-year-old ears and brain scrambled to understand what this meant. For me, it was simple: The Japanese had surrendered and the war was ending. This was, all in all, good

news. It was cause to celebrate our resourceful and powerful country.

What the older, seemingly wiser adults were doing was not unlike what I was doing. We were all trying to make sense of this with the limited information we had.

In 2025, 80 years later, we are still learning what these events meant for Japanese citizens.

When I was five, listening to the reports of the bomb on the radio, Kunihiro Iida was three years old in Japan. He was about 900 yards from the site of impact of the Hiroshima bomb. Iida did not hear the news on the radio. He woke up under a pile of glass. There was no radio for him to listen to. He heard screams and chaos around him. His mother and sister died a few days after the bomb was dropped. There was no good news, no celebration.

Isn't all news this way? It appears one way to us at the moment. We are all, like five-year-old me, only

capable of digesting the news given to us, with the flawed information, ears, eyes, and brains we have to interpret it. The full story just cannot be presented at the moment. Perspective and years reveal that there are many sides to the story.

But even five-year-olds know right from wrong. While their moral reasoning is not fully formed, they do empathize and understand concepts like fairness. Did my five-year-old self wonder what was happening to children or grown-ups in Japan? Probably not. But my eighty-five-year old self thinks a lot about what is happening to people in war-torn countries today.

What about the current events that define us today? In 80 years, what will we know about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that might change the way we think about it? Will we have a different, more nuanced understanding about the complexities in Ukraine and Russia? Will

we understand different facets of climate change?

When it comes down to it, we are all essentially five-year-olds, doing our very best to make sense of what we are hearing. Part of being a human of any age is that we always have a limited view. Our own experience can never give us all the information. We rarely know the full meaning of the moment while we're still in it.

So we need to lean into both curiosity and humility. We need to ask questions, talk about the hard things, push for answers, and stay curious about what is happening to our counterparts in other parts of the world who are experiencing a very different reality from our own.

Maybe this type of tenacious open-mindedness is the most grown-up thing we can do at any age.

D.G. Martin is a retired University of North Carolina system vice president and host of PBS NC's "North Carolina Bookwatch."

Trump's leading us to Black unemployment

President Trump likes to say he is delivering for working people. He promised on the campaign trail that he would protect "Black jobs."

But like so many of his promises, it is an empty one. In fact, we have been living with the effects of Trump's policies since he took office in January and the only thing he has delivered for us is employment uncertainty and financial insecurity.

The July jobs report that came out last week is starting to reflect that. Black unemployment has now surged to more than 7%, nearly double the country's overall unemployment rate. For both Black Americans as a whole and Black women in particular, unemployment has reached its highest level since 2021 and will likely

continue to grow.

These are not just numbers on a page. They mean our entire communities are suffering. Black workers, who make up a significant part of the federal workforce, have been among those Trump has been firing by the tens of thousands since taking office. Black women are more likely to work in health care and caregiving jobs—and Trump just signed into law what will become the largest health care cut in American history.

Too many of us are familiar with the experience of being "last hired, first fired." But the data shows it's actually fact: In good economic times, Black workers are the last brought on board, and when the economy is in a slide, we are the first to be shown the door.

We are the canaries in the coal mine for the economy as a whole. So when unemployment in our com-

munity has been steadily increasing, it's a signal that the entire country is heading toward a recession.

Though the recent jobs report shows Black Americans were hit hardest, we aren't the only ones feeling the pain. Unemployment increased in every demographic group and nearly 1 million people became jobless in July alone. Key industries are bleeding jobs, including manufacturing, government, retail and mining.

So how does Trump respond to this bleak data? He fired the head of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. He'd rather shoot the messenger than face the reality of a bad report—and change his policies to build an economy that works for all of us.

It's clear that in the labor movement, we've got our work cut out for us. We're going to keep organizing, so that every worker has a voice on the job and a chance to bargain with

their co-workers for the pay and job security they deserve.

We're going to keep fighting for fair contracts to make sure Black workers can show up to their jobs every day without facing discrimination and aren't exploited by greedy bosses. And we'll keep fighting to hold the Trump administration accountable when it pushes anti-worker, anti-Black policies.

Trump's economy may be working for his billionaire buddies, but for the rest of us, it's a disaster. It's time to take our country back to ensure Black workers—and all workers—finally get the fair shot at getting ahead that we deserve.

Fred Redmond, the highest-ranking African American labor official in history, is the Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL-CIO, the nation's largest labor federation representing 63 unions and nearly 15 million workers.

NC Senate race could set expense record

By Colin Campbell

WUNC

Political experts say North Carolina's Senate race next year could see around \$500 million in campaign spending, and the contest between former Gov. Roy Cooper and Republican National

Committee Chairman Michael Whatley could set a new record for the most expensive Senate race in the country.

Past U.S. Senate races in North Carolina have cost more than \$200 million. Democratic political

strategist Kimberly Reynolds told the WUNC Politics Podcast that voters can expect an onslaught of ads that goes far beyond previous elections.

"With these two candidates, and their connections and their ability and infrastructure to go raise money, and the outside interests that see North Carolina as a must-win for 2027 for the Democrats to take back the Senate, I think it will way surpass that," said Reynolds, a former N.C. Democratic Party executive director who leads the firm Maven Strategies.

Jim Blaine, a Republican political strategist with the firm The Differentiators, previously worked for Senate leader Phil Berger. He's predicting \$400 million to \$500 million will be spent as North Carolina gets a national focus.

"There just aren't a lot of places at the national level where money can go this year," Blaine said. "There's a limited playing field. If the Democrats have any chance of taking back the Senate ... they have to win North Carolina to have any chance. There just aren't a lot of other competitive races."

Reynolds says voters will be sick of the ads by the time Election Day arrives. "You're gonna smash your television," she joked. "Come about September of next year, you're just gonna see a lot of TVs in the streets and phones."

Whatley launched his campaign with a strong endorsement from President Donald Trump, who said on his Truth Social site that Whatley is "one of the most capable executives in our country."

But he enters the race with far less name recognition than Cooper. While Whatley led the North Carolina GOP for several years before moving to the national level, a new poll from Emerson College found that more than two-thirds of North Carolina voters have no

opinion about him.

"Whatley is very undefined, and that is both an opportunity for Whatley to position himself, but also because he's more of a blank slate, Cooper and the Democratic Party will have a chance to define him in the way he wants to," Blaine said.

Reynolds says Democrats will tie Whatley to Trump and the president's actions so far, including the impacts of the so-called "Big, Beautiful Bill."

The same poll found that about 51% have a favorable opinion of Cooper, while only 16% of those surveyed had no opinion about him. The poll ultimately gave Cooper a slight lead over Whatley. Reynolds says he has an advantage as the race gets started. "Roy Cooper doesn't have to spend his money introducing himself to a lot of

people, because they already know him and feel one way or another," he said.

But Cooper's decades in office including time as governor, attorney general and as a state legislator will give opposition researchers plenty to work with. Blaine says Republicans will likely highlight Cooper's missteps on things like a rape-kit processing backlog and sluggish hurricane recovery programs run by his administration.

"In this day and age, a candidate with a long record is almost always hurt by that record more than they are helped, especially someone that's been in office as long as Cooper," he said, adding that the GOP will also tie Cooper to more polarizing Democratic Party figures at the national level.

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TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Carolina Panthers linebacker D.J. Wonnum chases Cleveland Browns quarterback Shedeur Sanders in the Browns' 30-10 win Aug. 8, 2025 at Bank of America Stadium. The Panthers, who allowed an NFL record 534 points in 2024, are in the process of remaking the unit.

Panthers work on best defensive fit

Competition is fierce – and necessary – to remake unit that allowed NFL-worst 534 points in 2024

By Jeff Hawkins

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Jaden Crumedy jogged back to the Carolina Panthers' sideline and slapped his helmet with both hands. The third-string defensive tackle missed his chance to make an NFL exhibition season-opening impression.

One he needed to make. Crumedy bull-rushed his way into the pocket on the second-quarter pass rush attempt, forcing Shedeur Sanders to roll out to his left. Crumedy lunged to corral the Cleveland Browns' rookie quarterback but missed his target. Sanders, reversing direction, eluded at

least two other defenders before being pushed out of bounds by rookie outside linebacker Nic Scourton.

With 5:51 in the second quarter, the Panthers could have used a big play as the Browns recorded a 30-10 victory at Bank of America Stadium.

Questions persist concerning the defense.

"We have to go back and look at the film," Crumedy said. "I don't really know everything that went on."

Starting over

Missing several injured starters and top reserves in 2024, the Panthers yielded an all-time-worst 534 points.

They struggled to stop the run, ranking last in the NFL by allowing 3,057 yards. They also failed to generate a consistent pass rush, posting just 29 sacks, the third fewest in the league.

General manager Dan Morgan invested heavily along the defensive front during the offseason, adding potential starters Turk Wharton and Bobby Brown III through free agency and drafting Cam Jackson in the fifth round.

In his second season, Crumedy, who appeared in only five games last season, felt relieved he made it through the preseason opener. At this point in

2024, he was carted off the field with a high ankle sprain that landed him on injured reserve and cost an opportunity to develop.

"When I went down, I just had a lot of emotions," Crumedy recalled. "It set me back for a little bit."

Coach Dave Canales said on Tuesday Crumedy is attempting to make up for lost time. Through two weeks of training camp, "he's had some good days and some bad days," Canales said, "but he keeps getting better, keeps improving."

Among the fundamentals the former Please see **PANTHERS** | 6A

'Brothers' Sanders and Horn reunite for pro debut

By Jeff Hawkins

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

'Brothers' Jimmy Horn Jr., Shedeur Sanders reunite for preseason opener

When the Colorado Buffaloes needed a spark against North Dakota State in the 2024 season opener, Shedeur Sanders stood in the pocket under a heavy rush and delivered.

Sanders hit receiver Jimmy Horn Jr. on a well-executed slant route for a 69-yard touchdown highlighted by the future Carolina Panthers draft pick outrunning Bisons defensive backs. Before that play late in the first quarter, the Buffaloes failed to match the inten-

sity of the underdog Bison, who stampered to an early 117-65 passing yards advantage.

Considered a top NFL prospect in 2024, Sanders and Horn helped rally the Buffaloes to a win, with Sanders compiling 445 passing yards and four touchdowns while Horn posted 198 yards receiving.

After transferring to Colorado together in 2023, Horn (South Florida) and Sanders (Jackson State) started developing a brother-like relationship. Colorado coach Deion Sanders grew into a significant figure to Horn, whose birth father is incarcerated.

After going to Carolina in the sixth round of April's draft, Horn joked about being the elder Sanders' "favorite son."

"It feels good," Horn said. "Having that bragging right. I love Coach Prime to death."

'Good to see him again'

Horn and the younger Sanders reunited briefly during last week's joint practice at the Panthers' practice fields behind Bank of America Stadium. They embraced and Sanders could be heard saying at the end of their exchange: "It's business."

Horn replied: "You know it is."

The "brothers" got to see each other on different sidelines when the Panthers and Browns squared off at Bank of America Stadium. Cleveland won 30-10.

"It's gonna be exciting to see (Sanders) again," Horn said last week. "Can't wait to see how he's doing out there, like see him in person and stuff. I talk to him here and there, but it's just gonna be good to see him again."

With Horn's father incarcerated in Colorado on drug-related charges since 2021, the elder Sanders did more than coach Horn Jr.; he tackled the role of a Please see **BROTHERS** | 6A

Playoff intensity weekly for Meck Power Six 7A/8A

By Cameron Williams

cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

The Meck Power Six conference is loaded with talented teams and championship winners.

The new conference consists of Independence, West Charlotte, Mallard Creek, Julius Chambers, Butler and North Mecklenburg. It is arguably the toughest conference in North Carolina with 17 combined state championships and rivalries that date back before the turn of the century, it promises to deliver.

Independence (10-2 in 2024)

The Patriots have found a steady rhythm under coach D.J. McFadden, a former Independence quarterback himself who knows the program's standard for success. Now that the Patriots are again winning with regularity, the playoffs are the next step.



CAMERON WILLIAMS | THE CHARLOTTE POST

West Charlotte High, the 2024 North Carolina 3A title winner, is aiming for the first 8A state title as a member of the new Meck Power Six 7A/8A.

McFadden was vocal on social media the last few weeks about media preseason rankings that overlook Independence.

"There's a tier of teams that we don't get mentioned with," he said, "and we'd like

Please see **COMPETITIVE** | 6A

Decisions, decisions: Charlotte 49ers quarterbacks weigh in

By Cameron Williams

cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

Charlotte has yet to announce who the 49ers' starting quarterback is.

Coach Tim Albin said at American Conference media day that he and the staff are still working diligently to come to a decision on who the field general was going to be. North Carolina transfer Connor Harrell, Duke transfer Grayson Loftis and junior college transfer Zach Wilcke are all options.

While Albin is mulling it over, The Post caught up with all three potential starters for a Q&A session. Answers are edited for brevity and clarity.

CP: What has the competition been like within the quarterback room and how have you each learned from one another?

ZW: It's been great. I feel like we all have different strengths. We all have different things that we need to work on and just support each other, know each other's roles and compete with one another every day to get better.

GL: I think like Zach said, being able to push each other has been good for all of us. We all have various strengths and weaknesses, and I think our games can kind of marry up a little bit. We can all learn from each other, and I think we are all three developing a special

bond and friendship through all of this.

CH: We all go through some of the same things. We're all getting coached up and nobody else in the building is experiencing it quite the same way. So, we've got to be close and use other people's successes or failures to learn. We are all just learning from each other and trying to be the best we can be.

CP: All three of you are transfers, so what has Albin and his staff instilled in you to drive home what they want the culture of Charlotte football to look like?

ZW: I think the biggest thing they have talked about is consistency on both sides of

Please see **DECISIONS** | 6A

SWAC football on feel-good carpet ride

Charles McClelland is full of it.

The SWAC commissioner was beaming on all cylinders at last month's SWAC Football Media Day.

McClelland no longer has to cringe before reporters while waiting for THE question: Why can't the SWAC beat the MEAC in the MEAC-SWAC Challenge or the Celebration Bowl?

Answer: it can. The conference has won the last three Challenges and two consecutive CBs.

Then, on Aug. 1, a historic first: the SWAC became the first HBCU conference to have its own streaming service. SWAC TV is available on Roku, Apple TV, Google Play and more. The free streaming service will showcase all 18 conference sports in some capacity throughout the season.

I downloaded on launch day and watched part of the media day on the SWAC Digital Network hosted by Santoria Black Please see **SWAC** | 6A



BONITA
BEST

Panthers urgently seek proper fit for defense

Continued from page 5A
Mississippi State standout is working to refine is keeping his pad level low when attacking offensive linemen, forming better habits on his hand placement and “learning how to play doubles,” Canales said.
It’s a work in progress.

Derrick Brown: Carolina ‘is going to be different’
On his Sanders sack attempt, Crumedy said “I was real close, but I (didn’t tackle) him. I should have taken a better angle.”

Is Crumedy’s job safe?
That likely will be determined in the final two preseason games, but, he said, “I feel like I’m fitting in pretty good. Everyone is showing a lot of effort.”

Despite giving up 30 unanswered points, All-Pro defensive lineman Derrick Brown, who missed all but one game last season with a knee injury, remains optimistic.

‘Brothers’ Sanders and Horn shared field for NFL debut

Continued from page 5A
father figure. “Coach Prime” walked beside Horn to celebrate Senior Day in November.

After watching Horn collect two touchdowns and make a touchdown-saving tackle on a fake punt attempt, Deion Sanders appeared on “What Needs to Be Said” podcast and declared: “Jimmy don’t play.”

“Jimmy has got his pops on his mind. So, Jimmy has got a purpose.”

Since arriving in Carolina, Horn continues in to utilize his speed and precise route-running ability to stand out in training camp.

On the Panthers’ initial preseason depth chart, Horn was listed with the third unit and returning kicks on special teams. Horn is generating preseason buzz but he’s tuning out outside voices – at least until after cutdown day on Aug. 26.

“I appreciate all the hype and stuff, but I feel still like I haven’t done anything yet,” he said. “I haven’t played in no real NFL game yet. I still haven’t accomplished any goals or anything. I try not to feed into it. I just want to continue to prove myself every day and become a consistent player.”

Shedeur Sanders tries to stand out
With five quarterbacks in Charlotte, Browns coach Kevin Stefanski, a long-

time friend of Panthers coach Dave Canales, named Sanders the starter. Tagged as a first-round talent, Sanders dropped to the fifth in April as NFL executives and scouts questioned his attitude and whether he could take coaching from anyone but his father.
Horn supports his “brother.”

“I know everything happens for a reason in life,” Horn said. “I feel like God’s got a plan for everything, so I just leave it up to God. That’s how I look at that situation.”

Deion Sanders sounded pumped on the podcast over his son starting opposite Carolina’s Bryce Young.

“You’re gonna have to let him play in the preseason,” the elder Sanders said. “And I know my son, he’s gonna get that ball down the field.”
Horn’s situation with Carolina appears to be different, but no less cramped. In the new-look receivers’ room, the Panthers have 12 in camp. Six, maybe seven, will make the team.

Horn appears to be on track to make the 53-man roster. If the 5-foot-8, 174-pounder is cut, he likely will find a new home in short order. Word spreads fast in NFL circles.

“I just love the way that he plays football,” Canales said. “It’s full speed all the time. He’s one of those guys. Everything he does is fast. He’s just all gas.”

“It’s going to be different,” he told NFL Network. “I can guarantee you that. We don’t want to harp on the past. Last year was what last year was, and then it’s time for us to move on from that, so I mean we’ve completely turned the chapter from that, and you can look for a more exciting defense, for sure, coming this fall.”
How different?

The Browns are expected to contend for the top overall draft pick next April, but they converted on 40% of their third-down chances and didn’t commit a turnover.

Rookie Princely Umanmielen didn’t sound concerned.

“We didn’t have our whole playbook open,” he said. “We were playing the same plays over and over again. As far as physicality, I think we did a pretty good job. We didn’t gameplan for this game at all. I think that’s what made the result.”

Decisions, decisions: 49ers QB trio weighs in

Continued from page 5A
the ball. You can’t win a lot of football games with a lot of turnovers. You have to have good field position to score points. You don’t necessarily have to but stats prove that teams that start in better field position score more points on average. So, TFC has been a big motto. That is turnovers, possession and Charlotte doesn’t beat Charlotte. That is something they have preached a lot.

GL: I think all the coaches are pushing us really hard to bring our best stuff every day. It creates a fun and competitive environment, and I think as a football player you want that type of environment.

CH: I think overall, just taking care of the little things. You know, coach [Albin] shows us little details. ‘Hey, this block is made. This puts us in a better position. This receiver does this differently and results in an explosive play.’ So, I think that is echoed all around the team, on defense and special teams that the little things make a big difference.

CP: Who are some of your favorite playmakers, whether that be receivers, running backs or tight ends?

ZW: I would say our tight end room. We have a bunch of good tight ends, but we have three older guys that are gonna play, and they all have different skill sets. They all do a good job in the run game, in the pass game, and I feel like with the receivers and running backs, we have so many weapons.

GL: I think one thing that’s been neat to see through spring ball and the start of fall camp is the group grow as a whole. I think if we were sitting here and talk about everybody who’s made a play we would be here for a really long time, but to see the group grow on the perimeter and see the group up front really grow together as well, and everybody just kind of get comfortable in this system and really start trying to commit to the details, becoming consistent as a group, has been fun to watch.

CH: Let me give a shout out to Derrick Eley [freshman wide receiver from Hopewell high school in Huntersville]. I just feel like every time he runs a route he wins. He is a great receiver, great dude overall and I am just really excited to see him grow.

CP: There is an old saying that the run game opens up the pass game; how have the running backs been so far and what have you three seen from that group that you liked?

CH: I’ve been really impressed by how all those guys can run and get yards but knowing where to be in pass protection. That is something that’s not just a given

with a running back. And I think all of them have done a really good job in fall camp. ‘Hey, I know I got this guy. I know I got this guy,’ like we’re not having to talk to them a bunch. So, I really appreciate every running back in the room.

ZW: We have definitely added some running back depth this summer. I feel like the biggest thing, at least for me, is that none of us like getting hit. So, we’d like to know what they are doing in pass protection for sure, and like Connor said, they have been doing a pretty solid job with that.

GL: It’s a good group. They’ve been working hard all summer. You know, C.J. Stokes and Henry Rutledge have done a good job of trying to lead verbally and by example. Some of the guys we added are really bringing a lot of value to that room, and that’s a group that I think people are sleeping on a bit.

CP: Obviously, you three are all competing to be the starting quarterback, so how do you all keep it in perspective, understanding that you want to be the starter but also the other two guys are your teammates and you’re still friends at the end of the day?

CH: For me, the way I think about it is there’s stuff that you can control but there’s stuff you can’t control. I try to go in every day and do the things that I can control and do it to the best of my ability. And outside of that, just be a good person. Yes, there’s only so much you can do, within the confines of practice and meetings. Outside of that, it’s like, ‘Hey, I did what I can do now, let’s just go be a normal person.’

GL: Like Connor said, the only journey you can control is yours. A lot of it’s just focusing on making sure you can do, and as long as you’ve done anything and everything you can do, you can hang your hat on the wall at the end of the day and say, ‘I did all I can do,’ and you can be OK with the outcome of whatever happens.

I think it’s unique and it’s an interesting situation to be in, but in today’s day and age of college football a chance to compete all you can ask for.

ZW: I would say if we’re doing well as a room, as a quarterback room we are going the right direction. I think it’s been said, it always starts with us. And if we’re doing well as a room, then the offense is going to go as we go.

So, just supporting these guys if they have a negative rep, or something they can learn from on the next play, or if they have a good play, saying ‘good rep.’ Just supporting the guy next to you and competing every day with a positive attitude.

SWAC football on a magic ride

Continued from page 5A
and Tolly Carr. It was as good a production as anything on ESPN, Fox Sports or any other sports network.

McClelland said several years ago that the conference didn’t want to depend on just ESPN and HBCU GO to showcase its athletic programs. What he didn’t come right out and say was when companies, or individuals, think they are your only option, you get taken for granted. SWAC TV changes that thinking. Pepsi and General Motors already are prominent advertisers.

“We think it’s a game-changer with the relationship we have with ESPN and HBCU GO,” McClelland said. “This is going to allow us to take all the remaining content and give it directly to our consumers. This year, we’ll have 45 football games free, live and in high definition on SWAC TV.”

NIL
If it’s sports-related, it all goes back to Name, Image

and Likeness. Once the NCAA settlement was approved, the conference immediately eliminated caps for all sports.

“We want the market to naturally govern itself,” McClelland said. “The market will determine what a quarterback is worth. SWAC TV is an additional revenue source that we can put back into NIL for institutions to use.”

Put up or get out
ESPN co-host Jay Walker referenced a 2022 SWAC t-shirt he had with all the football coaches’ names on it. Today, only two coaches remain from that list.

Some left for more lucrative opportunities like Florida A&M coach Willie Simmons to Duke as an assistant and now at Florida International as head coach. Others were escorted out the door.

McClelland was blunt: “You have to win. ... The biggest difference today is there is a significant

amount of resources on the line for winning and losing.”

Indeed. The team that hosts the SWAC Championship Game keeps all the revenue, while the conference pays the visiting team’s expenses. Then the winner goes on to the Celebration Bowl and gets another fat paycheck. All total? About \$3 million, McClelland said.

Women’s and men’s basketball tournament championships receive equal pay. Their automatic appearance in the NCAA Tournament can earn them even more if they win a game – not to mention the free publicity by just being in the Big Dance.

Texas Southern football coach Cris Dishman was asked what advice he would give the new coaches in the league. His reply? “Nothing! Nobody gave me any advice.”

It’s a whole new ballgame. *Bonitta Best is sports editor at The Triangle Tribune in Durham.*

Competitive Meck Power Six

Continued from page 5A
to think that consistency means a lot to us. Over the last three years, we’ve been pretty consistent. We are about 32-8. There’s only really one other team in Charlotte that has more wins, and that’s Hough. I like to think a lot of the rankings are what should be, what could be, rather than what is and what has been. And that’s kind of where I am on that.”

West Charlotte (13-2 in 2024)

The 2024 3A state champions now play in 8A, the largest classification. After the state association restructured classifications and student enrollment that fall in each one, the Lions found themselves at the top.

“Coming off the championship, what we’re saying this year is basically when you’re chasing No. 1 is different than owning No. 1,” coach Sam Greiner said. “You’ve got to own being a champion. Now it’s a different process chasing No. 1 rather than when you’re being chased. You’re not the one that’s hunting anymore, but you got to stay on top. So, it’s a different mindset.”

The Lions open with 2024 4A champion Greensboro Grimsley in the Keep Pounding Classic.

Mallard Creek (10-3 in 2024)

The Mavericks have one of, if not the toughest, non-conference schedules in the state.

Mallard Creek opens with last year’s 4A state runner-up Rolesville. Then, the Mavericks head out of state back-to-back weeks against Warwick, which finished 10-3 last season in the 4A classification in Virginia. Then, in what is arguably the toughest game of the year on Sept. 5, the Mavericks face Grayson (Georgia), which MaxPreps has ranked in the top five in the country. Mallard Creek rounds out its non-conference with Myers Park and Cardinal Gibbons, two North Carolina title contenders.

Mavericks coach Kennedy Tinsley is not new to brutal schedules. But in the new conference where it is going to be tough each week, he feels more than ever it is essential to challenge his team early.

“I’m really excited about this new opportunity about the new conference and new opportunity,” Tinsley said. “We’ve always believed in playing the best in tough competition, and our goal is to give kids the best chance to compete against the best, so we’re excited about that with the new conference. ... I feel like we can handle what we schedule. I think the kids are motivated based on what we put out there in front of them, so we put the best schedule out there, and I tell them that I’ve done everything that I possibly can to give you

the best opportunity.”

Butler (4-7 in 2024)

The Bulldogs had a rough 2024 season.

Several games were not competitive in their first season since 2011 without longtime coach Brian Hales. His successor, Glenwood Ferebee, stepped aside, and Hales returns after a year away.

“It’s good to be back,” Hales said. “I was actually going to be here today, either way. Just three months ago I thought I’d be over on that side [with media]. ... I think with our guys this year, we have a chip on our shoulder. A lot of people will say, ‘Oh, Butler had a good run, but that’s over now.’

The Bulldogs have an opportunity to prove doubters wrong with a tough non-conference schedule with South Carolina power Irmo and North Carolina private school power Providence Day scheduled.

Chambers (5-5 in 2024)

It has been a long five years since Chambers last won a state championship.

When coach Brandon Wiggins left after the 2024 season, it left a vacancy at what was once one of the more sought-after jobs in the city. Who better to get Chambers back to winning football games than someone who won at the highest level? Captain Munnerlyn, a former Carolina Panthers defensive back, took over the program to get things going in the right direction.

“I know a lot of people aren’t going to believe in this group, but I believe in this group,” he said. “We go to work each and every day. This group of kids has bought in since day one. Ever since I took the job, I have told them that I am going to set the standard if you’ll just follow me, and they have been trusting me with that.”

North Mecklenburg (4-6 in 2024)

The Vikings have been labeled as a basketball school for a long time, but coach Daryl Vereen believes his team can end that narrative. In a conference where teams will likely beat each other up on a weekly basis, Vereen wants no sympathy.

“Don’t feel sorry for us,” he said. “Every dog is going to have its day.”

Vereen said the offseason has been good for rebuilding as opposed the year before when graduation and transfers posed challenges. With a handful of players returning, this is where North can start to build.

“This offseason has been huge for us,” Vereen said. “I think we’re returning maybe 14 to 15 starters, so having that game experience is always big, but last year we were very freshman- and sophomore heavy. We were really young, but this year, in the weight room, in the classroom, during chalk talks, I believe we are a much more mature team.”

