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« NEWSMAKER OF THE YEAR | TCHERNAVIA MONTGOMERY »



MICHELLE MURCHISON

Tchernavia Montgomery celebrates the March opening of Care Ring's new headquarters in north Charlotte. Montgomery, The Post's 2025 Newsmaker of the Year, led a \$3 million fundraising campaign for the state-of-the-art facility, the nonprofit health center's first dedicated building.

'A torchbearer of hope'

Care Ring CEO led facilities upgrade campaign to make Mecklenburg healthier

By Herbert L. White

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Tchernavia Montgomery is reinterpreting community health.

As CEO of Care Ring, Montgomery, The Post's Newsmaker of the Year, that means shepherding a \$3 million campaign to move the nonprofit health center into a new state-of-the-art facility. It entails expanding programs for babies and new moms. And opening a pantry to help clients at risk of food insecurity.

The goal: help under- and uninsured people thrive in a community where growing economic gaps impacts health care access.

"We're a business just like anyone else," said Montgomery, who has led the clinic since 2021. "I've got the same fea-

tures of a for-profit business. We have a finance office and operations and [human resources], and all those businesses continue to innovate, right? You want to keep your customer base that you have and then bring in new business. It's the same here. We're just working with people, and I get to spend all of my money at the end of the year. That part's fun, but we have to innovate."

The health center, which opened in 1955, moved into its first dedicated space in March - a 13,000 square foot facility on North Graham Street. The two-year campaign, in which \$2.3 million was raised within six months, resulted in a campus that delivers services from prenatal and maternal health to mental health and food pantry.

"It's been a vision that quickly became a reality for us," Montgomery said. "We would not be in this space had it not been for the support of the community, and they're embracing that vision that we had. We have grown tremendously over the last five years, doubling in our organization size, and we needed those new digs to make sure that we were accommodating our staff and providing our patients with a dignified place to experience care."

Montgomery is the first Black person to lead Care Ring, and after five years as its leader, her place in the organization's history still resonates. The nonprofit was launched in 1955 by community health nurse Maribel Conner to provide health

Please see NONPROFIT | 2A

National campaign aims to end the death penalty

By Eric Tegethoff

NORTH CAROLINA NEWS SERVICE

A new effort is underway to bring an end to the death penalty. A coalition of groups from around the country, including North Carolina, has formed the U.S. Campaign to End the Death Penalty.

The alliance hopes to build on the decades-long momentum to abolish capital punishment. The coalition includes groups from across the political spectrum, as well as faith groups, civil rights organizations, and people exonerated from death row.

Campaign director Laura Porter said pub-

lic support for the death penalty has decreased steadily in the past three decades and less than half of people ages 18 to 54 support it. She also noted that new death sentences remain at historic lows.

"In a country of 348 million people, there were still less than 30 new death sentences in 2025," Porter said. "There's no greater indicator of how Americans feel about the death penalty than in the jury room, and juries are sending very few people to death row."

This year has seen an uptick in the number of death sentences carried out.

This is largely due to Florida, which accounts for more than a third of executions this year.

North Carolina has not carried out an execution since 2006.

However, lawmakers in the General Assembly have attempted to restart the death penalty with Iryna's Law, which went into effect this month. The sweeping legislation was passed in response to the highly politicized killing of a Ukrainian immigrant in Charlotte earlier this year.

Porter said she believes the law will likely

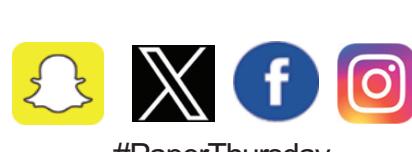
Please see NATIONAL | 2A



Archive CLT owner Cheryse Terry shakes hands with U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock (D-Ga.). As Senate candidate Roy Cooper (center) looks on. Cooper, a two-term North Carolina governor, was in Charlotte to talk economics and the impact of tariffs on consumers.

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Nonprofit CEO values innovation in community health

Continued from page 1A

care resources in Black neighborhoods. The goal then, as now, is to close disparities, but Montgomery's leadership style is from a different experience.

"I'm a double minority. I'm a woman and I'm Black," she said. "I'd add a third in that I'm short. I do have to lead differently. Nationally, only 3% to 5% of nonprofits are run by Black women, so while we have made some great strides in our country in putting Black women in positions to lead organizations where sometimes we are proximate to the problems that we're trying to serve. I am trying to do my best here in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg community to lead, to lead confidently, to lead in partnership with our government, with our private foundations, with our public entities and corporate to make sure that we are providing individuals who want to call Charlotte home a place where they can thrive."

Carlenia Ivory, a long-time Charlotte community, education and health advocate, calls Montgomery "a torchbearer of hope" for her ability to create collaborations to help the most vulnerable live healthier.

"She has an unwavering commitment to empower young people, the people who are the parents to these babies," Ivory said. "She wants to find a way to assist them in all aspects of their life ... financial assistance, higher education, she wants to help them with housing. She wants to make sure that the future generations have an opportunity to meet their dreams. She's a person who just feels like we can get it done, but we have to get it done together."

Mecklenburg County Commissioner Arthur Griffin appreciates Montgomery's leadership and impact beyond Care Ring. Her ability to articulate the clinic's purpose and necessity for community support resonates beyond the nonprofit sector.

"She's a go-getter, principally because of her knowledge," said Griffin, who chairs the county's Health and Human Services Committee. "She certainly has a phenomenal personality, but she also is intelligent. When she walks up to you, her ability to capture the moment, her executive presence is one that really grabs your attention and makes it such that you pay attention to what she's saying. You not only hear what she's saying, but you listen to what she's saying."

Montgomery's career goal wasn't to lead a health center. As teen parent, her interactions with a social worker motivated Montgomery to become one. After earning an associate's degree at Central Piedmont Community College and undergraduate and graduate degrees in social work at UNC Charlotte, she transitioned to health care while balancing motherhood. Those struggles sharpened her empathy and drive to serve.

"My career journey was inspired by a social worker named Amy who was providing me with home visitation services when I was young," Montgomery said. "The care that she provided me allowed me to feel safe and allowed me to feel empowered and I decided early on, I want to help people feel that way. I wanted to serve, so that's what led me to the career that I'm in."

"I started out at Central Piedmont, had a 10-year education journey being a teen mom having to navigate the world of being in poverty and learning the system. Some of that pays off today, and I'm here because of that degree in social work, bachelor's and a master's that prepared me for the career that I'm now in. I had an opportunity to work for public health and the private mental health field. I worked for Atrium Health as a leader there for nearly a decade and then

decided to come back out and put those skills to use in the nonprofit community."

Part of Montgomery's job is understanding clients' needs that "have nothing to do with your genetic code." Care Ring emphasizes feedback and interaction to address not only physical issues, but holistic change by addressing geographical, social or economic determinants like transportation access, housing or food insecurity.

"Sometimes issues that people may be facing are invisible - mental health issues, for example, or hunger," she said. "You don't see those things, but they're felt, so our job here is not only to provide services to those who are uninsured, also those who are underinsured, or to individuals that are underserved. There's a lack somewhere and community-based organizations like ours are able to help fill in those gaps with community partners, with different resources, and I will share that the work that we do is not for the weak."

"We have to be agile. We have to be ready to serve. We have to be dedicated to the people that we're committed to who have trusted us with their literal lives, so for us, it's making sure that holistically, they are cared for whatever their need is. It's not for me to define, it's for them to define what they need. That's what I learned as a social worker."

Even with the momentum of a new building and program expansion to serve more people, cuts to federal programs like Medicaid and SNAP increases challenges to local organizations. As health care access becomes more of a challenge to working people struggling to keep pace with expected price spikes, Care Ring, like other nonprofits, will need to be nimble going forward.

"I've been here for 25 years now, and I've seen our community shift," Montgomery said. "I've been in the human services field for 20 years, and I've been the leader of this organization for nearly five and what I've learned through those life experiences and professional experiences are that crises present opportunities. So, I believe now is the time for us to unite together in a shared purpose. I often use our board of directors as an example of that happening. I call it a purple board. We've got people across both sides of the aisle that somehow find a way to work together and to row in the same direction for the people that we're serving. It's beautiful to watch. I am confident that as a community, with organizations like Care Ring and those that we partner with in Charlotte and the Mecklenburg County community, we're going to withstand and we're going to recover. I want to make sure that we are rebounding and moving forward with thoughts and programs and ideas and services that are progressive and that are going to help us heal."

The perception of clinics is usually facilities that cater to poor people, but as Mecklenburg County's affordability gap widens, so does the demographic of Care Ring clients. The center turns no one away regardless of economic status or ability to pay.

"We're open to anyone anywhere that needs services, and we have professionals that come to Care Ring to get services," she said. "We are a donations-based service. Some donations may be small, right? Someone may have \$5 to offer towards their care. Others may have \$200. We don't judge. We believe that being able to pay for your services is an aspect of dignity, but we want someone to not have a barrier to getting care, but we're open to anyone and everyone that needs it. The recent snap cuts were evidence of people needing

help unexpectedly with a benefit that's necessary to supplement their nourishment each month, all of a sudden being cut off. So we see anyone and everyone here, and yes, you'd be surprised, the overwhelming majority of SNAP recipients work, and we wanted to make sure that we were taking responsibility as an organization that advocates to put out some of those facts associated with the myths and reduce them so that people could see the issue for what it is."

In a community dominated by hospital companies like Advocate Health and Novant Health, community health centers are easily overlooked but fill a vital niche. Getting the word out about Care Ring's services and the need for public support is a full-time job, which Montgomery has become more proficient in.

"I'll always take a check," she said. "Our organization, we have grown to serve nearly 8,000 individuals a year, but community wide in Mecklenburg County, there are around 140,000 to 160,000 people who are uninsured, so we're just scratching the surface. We not only want to expand, but we also believe in deepening services like the food pantry. That's another way for us to serve and solve issues of hunger that are related to health. We also have tried to stay close to our county government in understanding what their pillars of service are based on the data they've collected."

Said Griffin: "She has navigated to be able to get certified for her patients to use Medicaid and other health insurance, so she knows how to run a corporation. It just happens to be a nonprofit corporation, but she would do well in even for profit. She really knows how to run a business and to serve the public."

Care Ring's results have been stellar with Montgomery as CEO. She cites the nonprofit's physician outreach program, which launched in 2004, has eclipsed \$500 million in donated care from the medical provider community. A data point Montgomery is passionate about - infant and maternal health - has shown good results, too. Ninety-one percent of Care Ring's clients gave birth to healthy, full-term birth weight babies last year. Black women are at least twice as likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than their white counterparts and their babies are three times more at risk of dying in the first year of life.

"She's committed, she's dedicated, and she's focused on trying to provide the best health care for women, in particular women who are experiencing childbirth," Griffin said. "Ever since I've known her, she's been absolutely focused on Black child health, Black infant child health. Every April, she has this big conference on Black well childcare, and it's standing room only. People come from all over even surrounding counties, to participate in seminars in here, presentations about women's health. One of the things that we experience here is an unacceptable percent of Black infant mortality, and she's one of the primary agencies, along with others, that are working to try to reduce that statistic."

Said Montgomery: "We knew years ago that maternal child health was an issue in Mecklenburg County. We historically, per the March of Dimes infant mortality study and report card, have had a D. I don't know about you, but my family wasn't accepting a D, right? I needed to be an A student today, and we like to believe it's because of the expansion of our services and thanks to the county, we're a C. While that's a passing grade, we know that we can do better. We don't



MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Tchernavia Montgomery, who has led Care Ring since 2021, is the first Black person to lead the Charlotte nonprofit health center in its 70-year history.

want infants and mothers to continue to suffer here in Mecklenburg County.

"We know that a Black baby is three times more likely to die in their first year of life. We know that black women are more exposed to prenatal complications and postpartum issues and maternal mortality, we want to help solve those problems. So,

for us, it's word of mouth, it's staying close to our community partners, our local hospital systems,

making sure that we are in the spaces that people are living, working, playing and worshiping so that we can share the good word of Care Ring and making sure that we're also sharing our impact."

Ivory believes Montgomery's future is bright, whether it's with Care Ring or another platform. Wherever she goes, results will follow.

"I just think the sky's the limit for her, because she's very ambitious, but at the

same time, she's very humble," Ivory said. "We know that she is not done yet, and she's going to leave behind a legacy because through her compassion for others. ... I'm not sure what her aspirations are. I know she's happy where she is, but I see her leading one of the top nonprofit agencies in this city, and I'm not sure if exactly what that is, but I know that she's focused, and she knows what her next steps are."

Cunningham files for reelection

Continued from page 1A

legislature, especially on maternal mortality and mental health.

Among House Democrats, Cunningham votes most often with the Republican majority, and has been rewarded with co-chair of the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services, and vice-chair of the Health Committee. In an email announcing her re-election campaign, she noted supporting bills that invested millions of dollars in funding for nonprofits and community organizations as well as programs that support children, seniors, mental-health services and Medicaid expansion.

"Expanding Medicaid was a decade-long fight, it is what brought me to Raleigh," Cunningham said in the email. "More mental health providers are serving people covered by Medicaid since expansion and our overdoses are down. My work is not done though; vulnerable populations still need access to quality

healthcare so families and communities can thrive."

However, Cunningham's vote to override Gov. Josh Stein's veto of a bill that adds requirements for local law enforcement to help federal deportation efforts, infuriated Democrats and immigrant advocates. In a speech explaining her vote, Cunningham criticized immigrants who don't assimilate.

"All cultures are not equal," she said.

However, in her campaign email, Cunningham said her vote was about addressing serious criminal offenders.

"My focus, and my vote, is regarding serious offenders and the importance of taking custody of those criminals in our jails, rather than out in our communities where others can be harmed," she said. "I do not support any practices that intimidate law-abiding immigrant families. Community safety and community trust must coexist, and I will always stand up for both."

National campaign to end death penalty

Continued from page 1A

be challenged in the courts. She said political rhetoric makes conversations about capital punishment difficult, but conversations about how executions fail to serve victims and guarantee a fair

and get ready to get rid of it," said Porter, "but it does take time, and these moments in response to crime and when there is politicization of the crime, it is a tough one."

The lack of drugs needed for lethal injections is one hurdle for supporters of capital punishment in North Carolina. Sister Helen Prejean is an activist and author of "Dead Man

Walking," who is part of the U.S. Campaign to End the Death Penalty. She said supposedly humane methods of execution like lethal injection are illusions.

"We have been trying and trying to show that we can do the killing of a conscious, imaginative human being in a humane way," said Prejean, "and it is impossible."

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HERBERT L. WHITE | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Archive CLT owner Cheryse Terry says the impact of tariffs on her business and the cost of health insurance has focused her attention on the U.S. Senate campaign.

Affordability is top of mind in campaign

Continued from page 1A

Republican Thom Tillis is vacating in 2026. As the Republican-controlled Congress has ceded its constitutional authority to levy tariffs to President Donald Trump, consumers are paying more for goods produced outside the United States like coffee.

"You start off with these chaotic, indiscriminate tariffs that are being placed all across the world by this administration," Cooper told supporters at Archive during a Dec. 5 campaign stop. "You know who's paying for it? This small business, small business across North Carolina and this country, and their employees and the consumers. We were just talking across the street over here about the price of wedding dresses having to go up because of the tariffs. Your coffee is having to go up because of the tariffs."

Cooper, who served two four-year terms as attorney general in addition to eight years as governor, said the Senate race represents an opportunity for North Carolina voters to reset the federal government's priorities. Affordability, which Trump successfully campaigned on in 2024, hasn't improved in 2025 and federal taxes on consumer goods isn't helping.

"There are too many people who are having too much month at the end of the money right now," he said. "They're telling me that rent's too high. The utility bills are too high. Health care costs are too high. Childcare is too high, and this administration promised them to fix these problems on day one. Not only have they not done it, but they made it worse. This big ugly bill, Big, Beautiful Bill, whatever you want to call it, ended up taking health care away from people. Ended up costing these very people more."

U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock (D-Ga.), who accompanied Cooper, criticized Trump for the added tariff burden consumers bear as well as congressional Republicans for allowing him to concentrate power in the executive branch happen without legislative oversight.

"As we approach the holidays, Donald Trump and those who are enabling him in the Congress are literally the Grinch that stole Christmas," he said. "We are seeing prices go up and not down. Here we are in this business selling coffee. We don't grow coffee in the United States, and you don't have the conditions for growing coffee. Businesses require a lot of different things. You've got to get cups, a whole range of things to make this work and these tariffs are a real strain and a burden on these businesses. And we ought to call tariffs what they are — they are a tax. They are a tax on everyday working people and so Donald Trump has made a choice. He's decided that it's Elon Musk who needs a tax cut. That is the billionaires in this country who need a tax cut, and he has literally raised taxes on everybody else, so you know who he's looking out for."

Terry is also concerned about Trump's emphasis on cultural issues and coarsening rhetoric that has devolved into political and social polarization. Government, she said, should focus more on doing business on behalf of constituents.

"The level of pride, the level of security and safety and unity that we had grown to for the community, I see that being sabotaged," she said. "Just the hate rhetoric that is in the air, and it's been a nightmare, to be honest."

In addition to greeting Cooper at her shop, Terry found "it was actually cool" meeting Warnock, Georgia's first Black senator and pastor at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, a position once held by civil rights leader Martin Luther King.

"My passion is archivist work, so knowing that he's the first Black senator in Georgia, and he's also the preacher at historic Ebenezer, it was like him tying into politics and being able to have a voice for us," she said. "That was icing on the cake."

Tax cuts likely to reduce support for NC safety net

Continued from page 1A

"Due to tax cuts since 2013, North Carolina is missing out on \$1.8 billion in annual lost revenue," Hodges-Copple said. "So, just imagine what we could have done with that 1.8 billion."

Without action from the General Assembly, the tax cuts are set to go into effect on Jan. 1.

Hodges-Copple added that the highest income bracket is set to receive an even greater cut to their taxes than the One Big Beautiful Bill Act passed in Congress, which will reduce taxes by more than \$60,000 for North Carolina's top 1%.

Up close, politics isn't intimidating

Ten minutes is all it took. I covered my first political campaign stop last week and was pleasantly surprised. United States Senate candidate and former North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper visited Archive CLT, a coffee shop on Beatties Ford Road. The space was intimate and filled with media and campaign supporters, so I was expecting mayhem right off the bat.

I went strictly to learn how political reporting operates, or at least what that environment feels like. I was once someone who said I would never want to cover politics due to what I suspected was an overwhelming chaos that came with it.

Cooper and Georgia Sen. Raphael Warnock greeted Archive owner Cheryse Terry. It was personable and casual, which surprised me at first. Their conversation went in the direction of how tariffs have affected her life but family and business. Cooper and Warnock used clear examples of how tariffs imposed by President Donald Trump on products that originate outside the country from coffee cups to wedding dresses are taxes paid by American consumers.

"They're telling me that rent's too high, the utility bills are too high, health care costs are too high, childcare is too high, and this administration promised them to fix these problems on day one. Not only have they not done it, but they've made it worse."

Cooper and Warnock

talked about Trump administration policy and why it's important for Americans to stay informed and engaged.

"There's some crazy new announcement, some chaos coming out from this industry," Warnock said. "They're trying to flood the zone and by flooding the zone what they're really trying to do is weaponize despair. To convince us that they've already won and therefore there's no need for us to fight."

I also appreciate the event's brevity. I spent 30 minutes at Archive, and the politicians spoke for around 10. Nothing long-winded, no unnecessary fluff. The message was clear and to the point.

Going in, I fully expected my "spoken like a true politician" suspicions to play out, but it was actually refreshing to hear Cooper

and Warnock use simple language about issues and what North Carolinians can do about them. Another takeaway was the night-and-day difference between consuming politics online versus in person. Through social media or certain news outlets, politics can become muddled and overwhelming, especially to people who actively avoid it for those very reasons.

It was time well spent. No complicated language, no clickbait, no drama. Hearing directly from the source offers a clearer view. What I expected to be over the top or chaotic turned out to be the opposite.

I still don't understand the depths of politics — or political reporting, for that matter. But this was a good introduction.

Nikya Hightower, 24, is a Post correspondent.



MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Hough High junior quarterback Ethan Royal has led the Huskies to a 13-0 record and a berth in the North Carolina 8A final in his first season as a starter. Hough plays Millbrook in the state title game Thursday.

Soaking up state title game vibes

Hough High, No. 1 in the Magnificent Seven, plays for school's first NC football championship

By Cameron Williams
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The Hough High Huskies are ready to play for the school's first football state championship.

Two weeks removed from beating West Charlotte in the 8A Western Regional final, it is finally game week. Coach DeShawn Baker said the time off was productive, and the Huskies (13-0) are hungry and ready to compete Thursday at 8 p.m. in Chapel Hill.

"The week has been good," Baker said. "It's crazy having a week off in between because it's tough trying to find ways to keep the kids enthused. Not lack of enthusiasm for playing in a state championship but because it's

cold outside, so we found ways to make sure they had fun at practice while still doing the things we needed to do to get better."

Hough defensive coordinator Chachi Sullivan said it is gratifying to finally get to a spot coveted by every team in the state when the season starts. To be one of 16 teams competing for a title is special.

"For me, it's awesome," Sullivan said. "To see all the other coaches that have put in the same type of caliber of work, and to see them kind of enjoying the moment too. Also, seeing how their behavior is. You can kind of tell the guys that haven't been here versus the guys who are here all the time, so it's great."

To Sullivan's point, teams like Tarboro, Murphy, Shelby and Crest are familiar with title games. They are historic programs that have won multiple championships. Baker wants Hough to get to that level.

"Now our kids know what it takes," he said. "We've handled ourselves well all year and the way the seniors have led this team, I think it will be second nature come next year. We know the process, we know how it feels to get here now. There are teams that have been here 19 times here today. Their culture is different. We have been expected to get here a few times and didn't. Now, we are over that hump."

It is one thing to make a state cham-

pionship game; it is another to win.

The Millbrook Wildcats are also in their first championship appearance and 13-0 like the Huskies. Their offense is explosive, scoring 37.8 points per game.

"Firs off, they do have a lot of explosive players," Sullivan said. "They have a good quarterback and a lot of good guys up front. Obviously, they're 13-0, so the first thing we have to make sure we are prepared to do is to be fundamentally sound and locked in on what we do. We can't change what we do now. We can kind of anticipate what they are going to try to do based on what they've done, but our main thing

Please see HOUGH | 6A

Jalen Coker in right place, right time for Panthers

By Jeff Hawkins
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Dave Canales saw everything fall into place. The Carolina Panthers coach discovered the matchup he wanted for a fourth-and-3 play from the Panthers' 33: Second-year wide receiver Jalen Coker lined up against Los Angeles Rams cornerback Emmanuel Forbes Jr. in press-man coverage.

One of the NFL's top fourth-down aficionados, Canales saw an opportunity and called for quarterback Bryce Young to hit Coker for a momentum-stealing touchdown pass, fueling the Panthers' 31-28, come-from-behind win.

Off a two-step drop, Young delivered a crisp deep pass. In stride, Coker caught the ball at the 14 and dragged Forbes into the end zone.

Canales was asked during his post-game press conference what he saw leading to Coker's first touchdown of the season. "Just matchups ... and Jalen Coker."

Please see JALEN | 6A



Panthers receiver Jalen Coker (left) and tight end Ja'Tavion Sanders celebrate during Carolina's 31-28 win against the Los Angeles Rams Nov. 30 at Bank of America Stadium. Coker caught a team-best four passes for 74 yards and a touchdown.

2 coaches named Jackson; 1 snubbed

Two first-year HBCU Division I FCS coaches boasted at their football media day how they fully expected to be in the conference championship game at season's end.

One came from a winning program, leading his Division II team to back-to-back playoff appearances, an undefeated season and a trip to the NCAA national championship.

His preseason prognostication rubbed some the wrong way. Who was he, a former DII coach almost guaranteeing a conference championship with a program that hadn't won a title since 2009. Didn't he know where he was?

Oh, he knew all right. Prairie View A&M coach Tremaine Jackson and the Panthers beat 2024 HBCU champion Jackson State in the SWAC Championship Game for the right to meet South Carolina State in the Cricket Celebration Bowl. Jackson was named the SWAC football coach of the year, as voted by the coaches and sports information directors.

The second coach had no prior head coaching experience - only name recognition from his playing days in the NFL. He was taking over a program that hadn't finished above .500 since 2012. His preseason prognostication rubbed some the wrong way. Who was he, a no-experience wannabe thinking he could outcoach anybody?

Delaware State coach DeSean Jackson led the Hornets to their best record (8-4) since the 2007



BONITA

BEST

Sackless DJ Wonnum has Carolina's confidence

By Jeff Hawkins
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When Derrick Brown sacked Los Angeles Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford with 2:34 remaining in Carolina's 31-28 win on Nov. 30, Panthers outside linebacker D.J. Wonnum scooped up Stafford's fumble to clinch a potentially season-defining moment.

Teammate Thomas Inoom described it: "It was big, seeing how hard D.J. works and to have a play fall in his lap."

Not many have this season.

Through 12 appearances, Wonnum, a six-year veteran facing free agency in the offseason, has yet to record a sack. Despite 11

starts, he posted just one quarterback hit.

During Monday's practice session, Wonnum led the position group during drills. He remains entrenched in the starting lineup. He retains the confidence of coach Dave Canales.

"He's a guy I just love," Canales said. "I love that he's here. I love that he shows up every day with professionalism."

A few sacks down the stretch could enhance the player-coach relationship.

Panthers, Wonnum seek sacks

With four games remaining, the Panthers' playoff chances received a boost Sunday when New Orleans (3-10) upset Tampa Bay (7-6), who dropped into a tie with the Pan-

thers atop the NFC South. Entering Monday night, the Panthers ranked 31st with 18 sacks. Cleveland Browns defensive end Myles Garrett, the league leader, has 20 on his own.

To qualify for the playoffs for the first time since 2017, the Panthers' best shot could be claiming the division title. They play Tampa Bay twice down the stretch - at home Dec. 21 and on the road for a Week 18 finale.

The division crown remains "right there in front of them," Canales said.

Wonnum has everything in front of him, beginning with breaking his sackless slump. He will be looking for job this summer. He could

Please see SACKLESS | 6A

Charlotte 49ers football snag 27 commitments for 2026 class

By Herbert L. White
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The Charlotte 49ers' football first batch of 2026 signees leans toward a regional approach.

Of 27 players signed, more than half are from the Carolinas and Georgia, including four from the Charlotte area: defensive back Josh Hines from Myers Park, receiver Donte Nicholson (West Charlotte), defensive line-man D'Nas White (Catawba) and linebacker

Gray Patterson (Fort Mill). In addition to the local signees, the 49ers added athlete Kaden Catoe from Greensboro Grimsley.

Charlotte, which went 1-11 in 2025, added eight players from Georgia, the largest contingent from any state, followed by North Carolina with four.

"The goal for this class was to go out and fill some needs, and that's what we did," 49ers coach Tim Albin said in a statement. "This is a great group of young men who will

help us lay the foundation of what we are building here at Charlotte. We were very intentional in the areas we targeted with this class. We have four players from the Greater Charlotte area, four from the state of North Carolina, and a total of 15 from within a tank of gas. This class is ready to come to campus and get to work, evidenced by 24 total players enrolling early in January."

The 49ers went for defenders with 16

Please see 49ERS | 6A

Please see JACKSON | 6A

Sackless Wonnum has support of the Panthers

Continued from page 5A

use a strong finish.

"I know he would love to be up here telling you how he could come away with some sacks," Canales said. "He's doing an excellent job in terms of being part of the leadership group."

After enduring a series of medical setbacks to get back on the field for the final eight weeks last season, Wonnum sparked a struggling defense with four sacks. His late-season performance ignited high expectations of improving a decade-long franchise concern: generating a consistent pass rush.

The Panthers compiled 32 sacks last season. Only the Atlanta Falcons (31 sacks) and New England Patriots (28) registered fewer. In 2023, the Panthers placed last with 27 takedowns.

At his locker after Monday's practice, Wonnum declined a chance to talk about his up-and-down season. Walking away from his locker, he said he was scheduled to lift weights.

"The way he's working, his time is going to come," Incom said. "(The stats) don't show any sack production, but his impact on the field has been major."

Like it did against the Arizona Cardinals on Sept. 14. With the Panthers trailing by 18 in the fourth quarter, Wonnum helped spark a near comeback with a momentum-turning interception.

The ultimate professional

Wonnum may not be producing much QB pressure, but "he does have a pick and a fumble recovery," inside linebacker Christian Rozeboom said.

Jalen Coker in the right place at the right time for Carolina

Continued from page 5A

The Panthers expected a lot from Coker entering the season. A 2024 undrafted free agent, Coker's role grew steadily throughout his rookie campaign, ending with 32 catches for 478 yards and two touchdowns. He continued to solidify his role as a top 3 receiver during the offseason program and training camp.

Among Coker's preseason highlights, there was the 34-yard, one-handed catch against Cleveland. With Coker emerging as a versatile receiver, general manager Dan Morgan traded veteran Adam Thielen to Minnesota with the intention of using Coker in the slot while also being able to line up outside.

The plan stalled, however, when Coker pulled a quad muscle leading up to the opener. He remained on injured reserve until Week 7, slowly working his way back into the flow of the offense. Before Sunday, he had just one outing with more than 36 receiving yards.

"That's pretty impressive. Maybe that sack number isn't necessarily there, but now that we're talking about him, he might have three sacks on Sunday."

"Hopefully, that's the case." One of the Panthers' priority free agents in 2024, Wonnum signed a two-year, \$12.5 million deal. But after contracting MRSA and battling blood clots around his lungs stemming from a torn quadriceps sustained as a member of the Minnesota Vikings the previous December, his Carolina debut was delayed into the second half of the regular season.

"He's still kind of working through some things" was a common Canales comment in 2024. This year, Wonnum, 27, remains in the starting lineup because of his leadership and potential to apply pressure on opposing quarterbacks. He compiled 27 sacks in his first 70 NFL outings. With the Vikings, he collected eight-sack campaigns in 2021 and '23.

Scourton spoke of Wonnum's ability to focus on the team over his sackless streak, which dates back to Week 16 last season.

"Not one time has he complained about not having any sacks and that's what our job is," Scourton said. "I know some guys would get frustrated and want to be in a different situation or something like that. He makes plays that guys don't see on the stat sheet."

In the win against the Rams, Wonnum, who added two quarterback pressures, earned a 62.8 defensive grade by Pro Football Focus, fourth best on the team.

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Wonnum

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« QCFC »

Charlotte to host US national team for World Cup warmup

By Herbert L. White

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The United States' men soccer team is coming back to Charlotte.

The U.S. Soccer Federation Tuesday announced the national squad will play May 31 at Bank of America Stadium in a friendly match ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup. The opponent will be named after the World Cup draw. The game is the second time the USMNT has played in Charlotte, with the first appearance a 6-0 win against Trinidad and Tobago in 2023 at the CONCACAF Gold Cup.

The match is one of two showcase exhibitions scheduled for Charlotte next year, with the other MLS's All-Star game.

"We are thrilled to welcome the U.S. Men's National Team to Charlotte for one of their World Cup send-off matches at Bank of America Stadium," Charlotte Sports Foundation CEO Will Pitts said in a statement. "Our city has a deep passion for soccer, and we look forward to showcasing

Canales and offensive coordinator Brad Idrizik have repeatedly expressed their desire to get Coker going over the past two months. But his production remained limited - until Sunday.

Along with his fourth-down scoring reception, Coker caught a clinching 10-yard, first-down pass with 2:17 remaining in the fourth quarter. He finished with a team-high four catches for 74 yards.

"That's him," said rookie wide receiver Tetairoa McMillan, who caught the game-winning, 43-yard touchdown pass with 6:34 remaining on a fourth-and-2 call. "He's proven day-in and day-out that he's capable of making plays. There's no surprise there at all."

The Panthers entered Monday leading the NFL with 30 fourth-down attempts and remained tied with the Kansas City Chiefs with 21 conversions. Of the 247 points the Panthers produced this season, 112 have come on drives that included a fourth-down conversion, according to CBS Sports.

the hospitality, energy, and incredible experiences that make Charlotte such a memorable destination for fans from across the country."

Charlotte isn't finished positioning itself for international soccer. The city is included in the 2031 FIFA Women's World Cup bid book from the U.S. Soccer Federation, Mexican Football Association, Costa Rican Football Association, and Jamaica Football Federation.

North Carolina has hosted multiple U.S. national team matches over the years. The women beat South Korea in Charlotte after their 2019 World Cup win in Charlotte, which set a record for the largest USWNT crowd in North Carolina. The men have played eight times in the state with three matches in High Point and Cary hosting a pair since the MLS launched in 1996.

Charlotte FC defender Tim Ream has earned 79 caps for the USMNT since 2011, having served as captain on 25 occasions. Ticket are now on sale.

With an opportunity to step up, KJ Simpson shows benefits of development

By Cameron Williams

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K. J. Simpson is benefitting from time in the G-League.

The Charlotte Hornets second-year guard scored a season-high 16 points and grabbed five rebounds in their most recent game, a 115-106 loss to Denver. Simpson has been back-and-forth to the G-League this season, but with LaMelo Ball and Collin Sexton out, Simpson got a chance to step up.

"Obviously, we're down with a couple guys," Simpson said, "and I knew today

that I had to step up or be one of the people to step up when my name was called, and especially starting to kind of set the tone. I wanted to go in there and do that, whether that was defensively or being aggressive offensively, which I felt like I was able to go out there and do."

Lee commended Simpson's performance.

"He's decisive, aggressive, confident and a little bit more sure of where he wanted to get and what he wanted to get accomplished," Lee said. "His intentionality and purpose was felt. Zero turnovers I believe

« HIGH SCHOOLS »

Hough Huskies ready for first title game appearance

Continued from page 5A

use a strong finish.

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