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HERBERT L. WHITE | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Estella Patterson, Charlotte-Mecklenburg's new police chief, is the first woman to lead the department.

Charlotte's trailblazing cop

Estella Patterson returns to Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police as first woman chief

By Herbert L. White
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Estella Patterson's law enforcement career is breaking barriers.

Patterson, Charlotte-Mecklenburg's new police chief, is the first woman to lead the agency, but she's no stranger to the department. She joined CMPD in 1996 as president of her recruiting class and spent 25 years in several roles, starting as a patrol officer before moving to the academy as an instructor and recruiter. She moved to Internal Affairs and advanced to deputy chief for administrative services and patrol services deputy chief.

Patterson spent three years as Ra-

leigh's chief, where she oversaw a reduction in violent crime, including a 100% clearance of homicides in 2024 and the launch of a recruitment and hiring plan that cut the department's vacancy rate from 150 openings to 40. Other accomplishments include creation of the Raleigh Police Foundation, which raised \$4 million in two years to fund initiatives to lift employee morale.

In an interview with The Post, Patterson discusses her goals, including building relationships within CMPD as well as the larger community, breaking the gender barrier and what it'll take to reduce crime. Responses are edited for brevity and clarity.

On returning to CMPD:

That's a question I've gotten a lot, and I say it just feels great. It feels good. It feels normal for me to be back in this uniform, back in this city, a city that I know, that I love, a police department that has been good to me, that has taught me everything, really, that I know about policing. It's just an all-around good feeling to be back.

Lessons learned from leading Raleigh police and what can be applied with CMPD:

I was in Raleigh as chief for three and a half years. It was a wonderful ride. I loved it. I went into Raleigh not knowing

Please see **PATTERSON** | 2A

Color of county's unhoused community

By Cameron Williams

cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

Homelessness still discriminates in Mecklenburg County.

Racial disparities remain a reality in the county's unhoused community. According to the Crisis Assistance Ministry, 73% of Charlotte's homeless population is Black, 3% lower than in 2022, when county data counted more than 2,800 homeless people.

Karen Pellitier, division director of Community Support Services as well as Housing Innovation & Stabilization Services, said that based on the latest data, the number of homeless people in the county is around 2,000. While the number of individuals in the homeless system has fallen, there is still a need to be met.

"The county does continue to invest in street outreach," she said. "We know that we're finding more people that are living unsheltered in our community, and we know that we've got people from Davidson to Pineville to Mint Hill to Still Creek who are experiencing homelessness throughout Charlotte. So, we know that investing in street outreach is helpful and helps to get people connected."

Getting homeless people connected to resources that can help them transition to stable housing is a focal point. Jessica Leffkowitz, executive director of Hearts for the Invisible Charlotte Coalition, has

Please see **LONG-TERM** | 2A

Drayton's in for District 2 campaign

By Herbert L. White

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Monifa Drayton is campaigning for the Mecklenburg County commissioners seat held by incumbent Vilma Leake.

Drayton, a former executive director of the Mecklenburg Democratic party and community advocate, officially filed Dec. 17 to run in the District 2 Democratic primary against Leake, who has held the position for 17 years.

Drayton, who chairs Mecklenburg Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, contends the district faces challenges from rising housing costs and displacement as well as public health disparities, workforce instability, and economic mobility. Her platform is focusing on more robust representation and service in an area made up predominantly of west Charlotte neighborhoods.

"This race is not about running 'against', but instead 'for,' she said in a statement. "It is about continuing to carry the legacy forward while running for the people of District 2 which deserves leadership that meets this moment. I am running because our communities need representation that is present, responsive, and relentlessly focused on results. Longevity alone is not a strategy. After nearly two decades, it is time to ask not just how long someone has served—but how well are all people are being served."

Drayton, CEO of a strategic planning firm has managed campaign for several elected Mecklenburg of-

Please see **MONIFA** | 2A

NC lawmaker launches congressional campaign in gerrymandered district

By Herbert L. White
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U.S. Rep. Don Davis isn't running away from a gerrymander.

Davis, a North Carolina Democrat whose First Congressional District has been redrawn to favor Republicans for the third time in as many election cycles, has officially filed to run for a third term. The mid-decade redistricting replaced Democratic-leaning Greene, Lenoir, Wayne, and Wilson counties for GOP-favoring Beaufort, Carteret, Craven, Dare, Hyde, Onslow, and Pamlico.

"From the northeast to the coast, costs are too high, making it harder for families living day-to-day. I'm running to keep fighting for eastern North Carolina — lowering costs, bringing jobs home, strengthening our communities, and standing up for our families," Davis said in a statement. "Our hard-working families deserve nothing less. If you grew up in eastern North Carolina, you know about agriculture, hunting, fishing, and good barbecue. I will not stray away from our proud heritage and will always put the people of eastern North Carolina first."

A federal court on Nov. 26 upheld North Carolina's new map, which gives Republicans a chance at holding 11 of 14 seats. The panel voted to allow the redrawn lines, which changes congressional districts 1 and 3 and improves the chances of bouncing Davis by adding more Republican voters. A lawsuit filed in October sought to block the changes by arguing the remap disproportionately impacts Black voters. Davis, who is Black, introduced the Restoring Electoral Stability to Enhance Trust, or RESET, Act of 2025,

Please see **LAWMAKER** | 2A



THE CHARLOTTE POST FOUNDATION

Members of The Charlotte Post Foundation with Walter G. Byers School Principal Ericka Loft (middle).

Charlotte Post Foundation provides holiday meals to student families

By RYANNE PERSINGER

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Charlotte Post Foundation provided 40 families Thanksgiving turkeys and trimmings.

Families of participants in the foundation's afterschool reading and math tutoring program at Ashley Park and Walter G. Byers K-8 schools were chosen by school counselors/teachers who are familiar with the students' needs. The food

was delivered to the schools the Tuesday before Thanksgiving.

In addition to turkey, families received rolls, canned cranberry sauce, corn, green beans, Hawaiian rolls, sweet potatoes, stuffing, macaroni/mashed potatoes, gravy and dessert.

"We wanted to make sure that the youth we serve in our after-school program receive food for the Thanks-

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Patterson blazes new path as CMPD chief

Continued from page 1A

anyone. I did not know a single person in that police department, and over the course of that time, I got to learn everybody to work with them. Being in Raleigh really taught me the importance of looking inwardly in a department, because I didn't know anybody. So, I had to learn them, I had to spend time with them and to really understand the issues that employees feel, the workload that they have to experience. I constantly was talking to them about that.

I had to learn the community as well, so I was out, and I had one occasion where one of my officers in Raleigh said to me 'Chief, we see you in the community all the time. We know you're engaged in the community, but also too, we want to spend time with you.' That really, [was] like a light bulb went off in my head for that officer to tell me that, and I then began to really see the importance of spending time making sure that we're listening to our employees.

Coming in, back to Charlotte, that's a top priority. In fact, that is my number one priority - that we build morale, that we are concentrating on the wellness of our employees, that I'm spending time listening to them, that I see the work that they're doing.

What the delegation of authority will look like to make CMPD better.

As a CEO, you can't be in all places at all times. You can't do the work you want to do on the ground, right? You have to run the organization, so delegation is a priority. You have to trust the people who work for you, and I have a great team around me. I'm really happy about that, so I do have to delegate, and they take care of the day-to-day functions, if you will, so that I can concentrate on getting us the resources we need to be successful.

Also ... reaching out to the community and making those connections. That is really important to me, gaining that support from the community, but for me, I'm going to make sure that I focus on three areas, the top one being internally with the police department, looking at the needs, looking at the morale, but also too that we work as a community to mitigate the crime that is around us.

What it means to be in a position previously exclusive to men:

I am honored to be able to be a female in this position. It is a male dominated field. We understand that, and I know for many little girls who think that you can't be a police officer, or you can't be a police chief, or other women who are struggling to figure out in their workspace that's male dominated. Can they advance? Can they do it? I'm here to tell you yes, you can, and that it is commendable

and it's an honor to be able to do it.

But really, at the end of the day, gender, race, nationality, none of that matters when it comes to doing this kind of work. It is about making sure that our communities are safe. And whatever we have to do to have that happen is what we have to do. So, I come into this position proud to be the first but that is not the most important thing to me at all.

Whether law enforcement was always a career goal:

I never thought I'd be a police officer. It was the farthest thing from my mind. When I was in my senior year at UNC [Charlotte], I needed some credits to graduate. Just needed to take some classes. People suggested [criminal justice], those are easy. I was like, 'Oh, OK. And so that's what I did. And to my surprise, I just loved it. I was like, 'Wow, this is like, you really get to serve, help people, be outdoors, do all these various things when you're a police officer. I said, 'I love that. That really aligns with who I am.'

So I took one class, and then I took another class, and I'm like, 'This is pretty cool.' And then I met a I went to a job fair. There was a CMPD recruiter there. She recruited me. I took the job. I really loved it. Came to CMPD, and then some years later, I went back and got my master's degree, and I got it in criminal justice. It is really an honorable profession. I'm so glad that I did it, but it didn't start out this way for me. I thought I was going to maybe a teacher, a professor, something like that, maybe even a lawyer, is what I thought about. But once I got in the profession, 29 years later of doing this work, I'm still loving it.

On how CMPD will approach Charlotte's growth given the political climate for dealing with crime versus the relationship between law enforcement and communities of color.

Growing cities, metropolitan areas, you have good growth coming, but you're always going to have a criminal element that comes with it. We cannot avoid that with a city this size and the pace in which we are growing. We know we're going to have a criminal element. Our job is to try to mitigate as much as possible, to reduce it as much as possible.

And for Charlotte, when I've come back to this city and just seen the growth, all the housing going up, every time I look, I say, 'Oh, that's more cars to be broken into. That's more apartments to be broken into and burglarized.' That's a reality. We just have to face it, but we tackle it, not in a silo, not by ourselves, but we rely on our community to be eyes and ears and report information to us, but also to our other law enforcement and community partners."

Lawmaker launches re-election bid in gerrymandered district

Continued from page 1A

a bill that would prohibit statewide mid-decade redistricting legislation unless mandated by a state independent redistricting commission created through a state constitution, a court order on constitutional grounds, or state referenda.

The previous 1st District was 40% Black, 47% white and skewed slightly Republican.

Individual voters and pro-democracy advocacy groups challenged the redraw, arguing lawmakers intended to nullify Black voting power, especially in the northeast, where District 1 has elected Black Democrats to Congress since 1992. The federal court cited the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in Alexander v. South Carolina NAACP, which raised the standard to show racial bias in voting rights.

The Post Foundation provides holiday meals to student families

Continued from page 1A

giving holiday," Post Foundation President Gerald Johnson said. "When we brought the food to the schools, the staff were so thankful to receive our donations. It really warmed my heart knowing that we were able to give back."

Teachers and transportation for the afterschool program are paid by the foundation at the public schools, where small groups of students receive instruction on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

"Walter G. Byers would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the Charlotte Post Foundation for their

generous donation of 20 turkeys and Thanksgiving fixings to support families in our Charlotte Post Foundation afterschool program," Byers social worker Crystal Oliver said. "This meaningful gift provided our students-who have shown consistency, dedication, and a commitment to improving their academics-with the opportunity to enjoy a warm Thanksgiving meal at home. Our families were truly appreciative, and their joy was felt throughout our community."

"The Charlotte Post Foundation continues to pour love, support, and

compassion into Walter G. Byers, not only through academics, but also by remembering our families during the holidays."

The afterschool program started at Byers in 2019 and expanded to Ashley Park in 2025. The nonprofit hopes to expand the program to a third school in 2026.

"We wish we could have done more, and we hope that next year we will be able to double our efforts," Post Foundation Chair Ellison Clary said.

For more information on the CPF, visit thepostfoundation.org.

Monifa Drayton in for District 2 race

Continued from page 1A

ficials as well as experience in public policy, community engagement, workforce development, and nonprofits. As the district evolves, Drayton is focusing on building neighborhood relationships for its future.

"This campaign is about honoring the past while refusing to accept stagnation," she said. "We can respect history and still demand progress. District 2 deserves leadership that shows up, listens deeply, and delivers results boldly."

Long-term disparities drive Mecklenburg homelessness

Continued from page 1A

made it a mission to do just that.

"Our agency's primary focus is homelessness street outreach," she said. "Our staff goes into the community and works with people and families that sleep in places not meant for human habitation. That could mean an abandoned building or under bridges or encampments, even benches downtown. We try to begin formulating that engagement process and get people comfortable with us."

Lefkowitz adds the agency tries to help clients navigate substance abuse and connect them with proper healthcare to get them get back on their feet and off the streets, since homelessness is often caused by a life catastrophe. It could be the loss of a loved one, a job or anything that affects income levels and mental health. Pelletier adds that homelessness is often the result of societal failures.

"When the school systems fail, when the criminal justice system fails, mental health systems, all the systems fail, the result is homelessness," she said. "And so, when we know that people of color are already disproportionately represented in other systems that have failed, this is what happens. We know that we need to be responsive to that, and we know that we need to make sure that particularly people of color are gaining access to our homeless system, that they're gaining access to the resources that are needed to help them resolve their homelessness."

Another underlying issue is the cost of housing rising at a rate that exceeds the increase of average salaries. According to statistics from the North Carolina General Assembly, the median cost of a single-family home in 2000 was just over \$110,000 and the average salary was around \$35,000. In 2025, the average annual salary is just under \$53,000, while the average home price is approximately \$320,000. The average cost of a single-family home has nearly tripled while the average salary has not even doubled in the last 25 years.

"They're raising rents far faster than what people that may either be on a fixed income or maybe already not making a

livable wage," Pelletier said, "but when wages aren't increasing at the same rate, we are going to have more people that are living what we would call housing cost burden, meaning that they're contributing more than 30% of their income to their housing and we know that when your car breaks down, or if someone gets sick, or you miss a day of work for something that you are literally become that one paycheck away from entering our homeless system."

Pelletier said Mecklenburg has taken steps to help mitigate the most glaring issues.

"What I'm most proud of is the funding that the county has invested in youth that have aged out of foster care," she said, "because we knew that we had youth that would have emancipated from Mecklenburg County, meaning they were 18 in our foster care system, and oftentimes they would then leave the child welfare system only to enter the homeless system."

Pelletier said those young adults, who have already dealt with trauma, access programs that help them make the transition from foster care into adulthood, so they don't become homelessness when they age out.

"I'm also proud about the other investments that the county has made in providing either subsidies or those support services for people," she said. "The fact that we're able to really focus on individuals and families that are the most vulnerable and help them with housing resources and then in that case, management support that wraps around them in order to help them really create stability."

Homelessness is not easily resolved, Pelletier said. Many organizations are doing what they can, but it takes collaboration.

"We need our General Assembly, and we need our federal government to also support these sorts of policies to help people earn a living wage," she said, "because people want to work and are working. It is also very expensive to live. This is beyond Charlotte-Mecklenburg's control in a lot of ways."

Trump credit rule change that could reverse access across US

By Stacy M. Brown

BLACK PRESS USA

Alphonso David spoke without ornament, naming a danger that has followed Americans for generations.

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, David told the Black Press of America, is proposing a rule that would strip away key fair lending protections and make it far more difficult to prove discrimination in the credit market. The proposal would eliminate disparate impact as a tool for enforcement, narrow how discrimination and discouragement are defined, and restrict special-purpose credit programs that have helped expand access to homeownership and small business lending for people long excluded from financial markets.

"This is a public service announcement for anyone that cares about economic opportunity in the United States," David said. "The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which is being run by the architect of Project 2025, Russell Vought, is trying to dismantle systems that ensure that people can get access to credit."

David, one of the nation's leading civil rights advocates, rejected any attempt to treat the proposal as technical or benign. What is being advanced, he said, is modern redlining, updated for an era of data models and algorithms rather than paper maps and red ink.

Redlining, David said, was never about individual failure or financial risk. It was a deliberate system built to deny mortgages, insurance, and credit to Black and other minority families based on where they lived, cutting them off from home equity, the most common pathway to generational wealth.

"This new rule would implement modern-day redlining," David said. "It would eliminate disparate impact, which is a tool that reveals discrimination when it shows up in outcomes, not intent."

Disparate impact has long allowed borrowers and regulators to prove

discrimination through patterns rather than admissions. David explained that discrimination rarely announces itself. Under the proposed rule, a borrower could no longer rely on evidence showing that entire neighborhoods or communities were being excluded.

"If a bank is denying all the Black people in a neighborhood loans, and you happen to be one of them, you're not able to show that everyone else is being denied in order to prove your case," David said.

The stakes, he said, are especially alarming given existing disparities. Black borrowers are already being denied mortgages at nearly twice the rate of White borrowers, even when income and credit profiles are comparable.

"This rule would lock those disparities in place," David said.

David laid out examples that would become harder to challenge if the rule takes effect. A bank could stop approving loans in a predominantly Black neighborhood by labeling it high risk through an algorithm. A Black entrepreneur with strong revenues could be denied small business credit because of zip code-based scoring. Borrowers could be charged higher interest rates without the ability to show that others in their community faced the same treatment.

"The policy looks neutral on paper," David said. "But the outcome is exclusion, and this rule would make it nearly impossible to challenge that."

David traced the legal protections now under threat back to the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974. The law was originally enacted to allow women access to credit, at a time when many could not open accounts without a man's approval. Two years later, Congress expanded the law to prohibit discrimination based on race and ethnicity.

"Congress wanted to ensure that financial institutions could not discriminate when issuing credit," David said. "This new rule will make it that

much more difficult for people of color, and in some cases women, to get credit from these institutions."

What further unsettles David is that the CFPB itself admits it lacks data to measure the costs or benefits of the proposal.

"The agency does not have any evidence to justify this rule," David said. "Quite the contrary."

He pointed to data showing Black borrowers are denied mortgages at nearly twice the rate of White borrowers with comparable financial profiles, warning that the proposal would harden those inequities into policy.

With the public comment period nearing its close, David urged immediate action. He said there were fewer than five days remaining for the public to submit comments before the deadline. He encouraged viewers to contact elected officials and share the information widely, warning that policy changes often move fastest when communities are unaware.

States may provide some protection, David said, particularly those with strong fair lending laws. But federal enforcement sets the baseline, and when federal agencies retreat, enforcement becomes fragmented and weaker.

The consequences, he warned, would extend beyond individual borrowers. Black banks, already constrained in lending power, would face increased pressure as communities turn to them to fill gaps left by larger institutions.

"The burden on Black banks will increase," David said. "They'll be asked to close a gap that the largest institutions are allowed to widen."

As the conversation closed, David turned from policy to memory, invoking generations who fought similar battles when the law itself was hostile.

"They're counting on us giving up," David said. "They're counting on us looking the other way. And once we actually wake up, we'll realize that we've reverted back to the 1950s."

Election boards reject early voting on some campuses

By Sarah Michels
CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS
Disagreements have always existed over early voting sites in North Carolina, no matter who is in power.

County election board members regularly debate over whether to allow Sunday early voting, how many sites to use, where they should be located and how long they should be open.

But in Jackson and Guilford counties, Democratic board members are raising concerns over the exclusion of early voting sites that serve college students from 2026 primary election plans.

In Jackson County, Republican board members voted against Democratic board members to remove an early voting site from Western Carolina University's campus. In Guilford County, Republicans denied Democrats' request to add early voting sites at North Carolina A&T State University and UNC Greensboro.

In Cumberland County, Democratic and Republican board members agree about the inclusion of a site across the street from Fayetteville State University, but one Democratic member wants to remove another site next to a community college in a wealthy part of town to make room for a site in the northernmost part of the county.

So far, at least 65 counties have submitted their 2026 primary early voting plans to the State Board of Elections, according to spokesperson Jason Tyson. Sixty had unanimous approval, meaning that they're essentially good to go. Five were not, which gives the State Board the final say. County boards have until Dec. 19 to send their plans to the state board.

Tyson said he expects the board to take up the non-unanimous plans during one of the first meetings of 2026.

Placing early voting sites on college campuses is popular; according to a recent survey commissioned by Common Cause, 79% of voters support locating early voting sites at locations accessible to student voters, including on campus. Younger voters and Democrats support campus early voting sites at higher levels.

Among some Republicans, there's a perception that helping student voters is synonymous with helping Democrats.

As county boards now have Republican majorities, the question for election watchers is whether the exclusion of primary early voting sites located on or close to campus is part of business as usual or an emerging pattern driven by politics.

Jackson County and WCU
Zach Powell left Jackson County's Dec. 9 election board meeting disappointed.

Powell, president of the Western Carolina University College Democrats, heard that the board might remove the WCU early voting site a few weeks ago.

Republicans claimed that the site wasn't accessible, lacked ample parking and was intimidating to the broader community, Powell said. Board Chair Bill Thompson also implied that the university wasn't politically neutral, he added.

"I'm not really sure where the chair is coming from," he said.

The university hosts many community events for both students and the broader community, for one. While there may not be a ton of parking as it stands, the university was willing to reserve additional spots to make the site work, Powell explained.

"I definitely think that some of them, probably they have preconceived notions about college students and the way that they vote that aren't necessarily reflective of the reality in Jackson County, on WCU's campus, because Republicans and Democrat students use the polling site at roughly the same rate," he said.

WCU is unique in another aspect: it's taken the top spot for early voting sites with the highest proportion of same-day registrations in eight of the nine past elections, according to an analysis by Chris Cooper, WCU political science professor.

Undeniably, the site has increased youth early voting turnout since it began being used in 2016 for primary and general elections, he found.

Board members also brought up finances. They said they would save money by removing the WCU site. But Powell isn't buying it. If they're able to transport students to the nearest site, the Cullowhee Recreation Center, then that site will inherit the large volume of same-day registrants and student voters.

"The chair, Bill Thompson, claims that they'll save \$20,000 by closing the WCU site," Powell said. "I'm not really sure where that number comes from. When you account for the labor and the infrastructure that will be needed, I think they'll actually save a lot less than that."

There's a lot of hand-wringing about students helping Democrats win elections, but that's not the full story. Sure, college students tend to lean more liberal, but there are plenty of Republican students too, and actually, many are registered unaffiliated now, Cooper said.

Students have a stake in the local and state government, even if they are temporary residents, Powell said.

"They live there, they learn there, they work there," he said. "In a lot of cases, they contribute to the local economy. They're there for more than half of the year, and there are decisions made at the state, local and federal level that affect college students."

Cumberland and Fayetteville State
In Cumberland County, one Democratic board member wants to switch things up.

Election board members decided not to use the county board of elections office as an early voting site for next year's primary election. So, they had to designate a replacement site fairly close to the office.

Republicans wanted to use Kiwanis Recreation Center, which is located close to a community college and has historically been used.

Irene Grimes, a Democratic board member, wanted to use the Smith Recreation Center, located across the street from Fayetteville State University, a historically Black university.

The board did not agree on a plan, but several proposals are out there. Both the majority and minority plan include the site across from Fayetteville State University. A plan brought up by the director, but quickly dismissed by board members, would have eliminated that site, Republican board chair Linda DeVore said.

Grimes and the other Democratic member want to exclude Kiwanis Recreation Center to make room for a Spring Lake site in the northernmost part of the county, since the county only uses seven sites normally. That would mean the Smith Recreation Center would replace the Kiwanis Recreation Center as the county board office replacement site. That's never been the case before.

Since the early voting plan was not unanimous, the state board will have the final say on the various proposals. They could also go with their own proposal.

While both the Smith Recreation Center and Kiwanis Recreation Center are close to colleges, Grimes said there's more nuance than that. The Kiwanis Recreation Center is in the second-wealthiest neighborhood in Fayetteville, while the Smith Recreation Center is in the poorest neighborhood.

The two sites are 2.6 miles apart; Grimes previously argued that there was no need for two early voting sites so close together when there are only so many sites they can open. While the community college is a commuter school, which means students are able to drive to another site, not all FSU students can say the same, Grimes said.

Despite the director's plan not gaining traction, Grimes felt the board tried to "horse trade Smith away" during the discussion. She's not confident in its future.

"Maybe I'm a little late to the party, but I have sensed this desire, move, whatever to strategically place early voting sites where it is politically convenient," she said. "And that's not how we should be doing elections."

Guilford County rejects some sites
Guilford County Board of Elections Chairman Eugene Lester III started the Nov. 18 meeting with a statement. In the United States, he said, citizens have rights and privileges.

The right to be presumed innocent at trial, for example, is automatic, he said. But that's not the case with privileges.

"Voting is a privilege," Lester said. "Voting requires the citizens to actually take some action, to do some things, to discharge a duty, and it may require some work on the citizens' parts."

That's when Democratic board member Carolyn Bunker decided to go through with her plan: to suggest adding A&T and UNCG early voting sites to the 2026 primary plan, she told Carolina Public Press.

While the county has used these sites for early voting during presidential years, the election board has never approved their use for midterm primary elections.

Specifically, Guilford County has used an A&T early voting site for presidential general elections since 2004, and a UNC Greensboro site since 2012, according to data from elections director Charlie Collicut. Both campus sites have been used for presidential primary elections since 2020. But they have never been selected for midterm elections.

So, while the sites were excluded from the 2026 early voting plan, it's not quite accurate to say they were removed, Collicut said.

Nonetheless, Bunker feels like the board ignored east Greensboro and south High Point with their site selection.

She also suggested the addition of Barber Park and Washington Terrace sites, which are located in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods. The majority rejected the idea.

"The bottom line is, I think that they are trying to disenfranchise a certain part of the population — two parts of the population, the poor and the students," she said.

In the 2024 general election, the A&T and UNCG sites had the lowest early turnout of all sites, with about 750 voters each. It's a big expense, Bunker said, but she thinks is worth it.

While some early voting sites particularly accessible to students will likely not be available in the 2026 primary — pending the state board's decisions — some turned out quite alright in county board discussions.

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A reality check on white men in college

The headlines this month about white men, college admissions, and the fallout from ending affirmative action startled a lot of people. Stories of declining enrollment and shrinking opportunity for young White men were treated as if they had materialized out of nowhere.



BEN
JEALOUS

Many found it surprising. I didn't. It reminded me of a conversation I had a little over a decade ago on a Delta Airlines flight from Atlanta to Memphis — one of those brief moments in transit that stays with you because it tells the truth long before the data catches up.

A White man in a bright red shirt with a Confederate flag over his heart sat down next to me. He stuck out his hand and said, "Hi, I'm Bill." As he introduced himself, I looked more closely at his shirt and realized that under the flag it said, "Ole Miss Football." It was a booster shirt. We chatted. He asked what I did. I told him I led the NAACP. He blinked, then leaned in with a sincerity I recognized.

"Ben," he asked, "what's the purpose of affirmative action?"

I told him the truth: its purpose is to help dismantle nepotism as the operating system of this country.

He slapped his knee. "Sign me up for that. But tell me this — what good does that do for the boys in my family?"

Then he told me what he meant. The men in his family had been, as he put it, "in and out of prison since we came here on the wrong side of the Georgia penal colony." He was the lone exception — a gifted high school football player who earned a scholarship to Ole Miss.

A coach introduced him to business leaders in Memphis. That was his way out. The booster shirt wasn't a provocation. It was a keepsake from the only open door his family ever had.

Bill's story is not the one America tells about white men. But it is the story millions are living. And it mirrors something larger happening across this country.

For years now, researchers have documented serious headwinds facing working-class American men: wages that stagnate or fall, especially for men without college degrees; fewer men in college even as women's enrollment rises; more men detached from the labor force; rising suicide and overdose deaths in many hard-hit communities; and marriage becoming less common and less stable for men with the weakest economic prospects.

White working-class men feel this acutely. But they are not alone.

White men may have made the headlines, but similar trends are affecting Black, Latino, Native, and Asian men — especially those from poor and working-class backgrounds. In today's economy, class and education now do as much work as race in deciding whether a man will be seen as "marriageable," employable, and likely to climb beyond the station of his birth.

So, if you're wondering why a Black civil rights leader cares about the struggles of White men, the answer is simple: In a democracy, you cannot fix poverty for anyone unless you fix it for everyone. Every major leap forward in opportunity in this country has depended on multiracial coalitions. Progress comes when we face the full truth — not when we ignore parts of it.

Which brings us to the conversation we are actually having. Or rather, not having.

It's time to adjust our thinking about white men, college admissions, and DEI. The left and the right have both turned this into a culture war when what we really need is a reality check.

On the right, the headlines became a grievance weapon — proof, some claim, that diversity efforts were out to "replace" white men. On the left, the reaction was defensive, as if acknowledging hardship among white families would somehow undermine the fight for racial justice.

Neither response had much to do with the truth. And if we're wondering why we can't seem to have a real conversation about opportunity, we should start where political scientist Martin Gilens warned us decades ago. By portraying poverty disproportionately with Black faces, American media helped make the white poor — and much of the working class — invisible. That distortion robbed us of the ability to see the full picture of suffering and the full map of shared struggle.

When entire communities are invisible, their pain doesn't get counted. Their boys don't get counted. Their decline doesn't make the front page until it shows up as a political shock.

That invisibility hurts everyone. It hurts white families like Bill's. It hurts Black and brown families navigating the same broken ladders. It hurts the communities trying to build stable futures for their children.

Before we talk solutions, we need full visibility — a willingness to see all who are struggling, not just the ones who fit our old narratives.

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

Can't afford going without nurses

There is nothing beautiful about how Donald Trump's One Big Beautiful



ALMA
ADAMS

Bill worsens the national nursing and teacher shortage.

The Trump administration is attempting to redefine what a "professional degree" is, and graduate

programs such as education and nursing are left off the list. This is not only insulting to these noble professions, but it also reduces the amount of federal loans graduate students can take out to pay for their education.

Under new provisions in the One Big Beautiful Bill, degrees designated as "professional" can receive up to \$50,000 a year in federal student loans while all other graduate degrees are capped at \$20,500 annually. Meanwhile, the average master's degree costs \$62,820 over two years, far exceeding the maximum loan for "non-professional" degrees.

If students can't pay for their education, how can we expect them to enter the professional workforce? Especially as we face

a nationwide nursing and teacher shortage.

Nationally, 1 in 8 teaching positions remain unfilled or filled by teachers not fully certified for their teaching assignments. At the same time, interest in teaching among high school and college students is at its lowest point in decades and less than one fifth of teachers leaving the profession are doing so to retire.

As a former educator of 40 years, I've seen firsthand how low wages, poor working conditions, and lack of institutional support impact teachers. Adding an impossible financial hurdle will only turn more people away from the profession.

North Carolina currently projects a 13% nursing shortage by 2035, and as high as 26% in other states, even before this reckless proposal. If enacted, it will be disastrous for our healthcare system.

Already, patients, hospitals, and healthcare providers are suffering from Republicans' \$1 trillion in Medicaid cuts, \$500 billion in Medicare cuts, and the failure to renew the Affordable Care Act enhanced premium tax credits—all of which will result in 15 million Americans losing their

healthcare.

We have hospitals and clinics cutting services and closing their doors because they can't afford to stay open, especially in underserved and rural communities.

We have 5 million Americans set to lose their healthcare entirely next year because they can no longer afford their premiums.

Now, we have a nursing shortage that will only worsen if the Trump administration's proposal goes into effect, forcing even more people out of the healthcare field.

Hospitals will always have patients and schools will always have students, but what happens when we don't have nurses and teachers to take care of them? We can't afford to find out.

The Department of Education claims these provisions will lower college tuition costs but there's no proof that's true. If the Trump administration really wants to make college more affordable, they should start by undoing the reckless education policies they enacted this year.

They should reinstate the SAVE Plan, the most affordable federal student loan

repayment option that helps 7.7 million Americans repay their student loans, which has been paused by the Department of Education and will be eliminated by 2028.

They should stop treating the Public Student Loan Forgiveness program as a weapon to punish anyone whose values don't align with the administration's agenda—including teachers and nurses.

They should end their unlawful attempt to dismantle the Department of Education and work with Congress to build a stronger, more affordable educational future.

I believe that higher education is too expensive. I also know targeting nurses and teachers won't make it any more affordable. It's time the Trump administration realizes that too.

The proposal still needs to undergo a public comment period before a final rule is issued and when it opens, I encourage every American to make their voice heard because there is nothing beautiful about this.

Alma Adams represents Charlotte in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Remove punitive credit card swipe fees

In the coming weeks, North Carolinians will be browsing for books to match the holiday spirit. Whether they're picking



DOMINIQUE
BURLESON

out a gift for a loved one or curling up with a Christmas classic, bookstores like mine are expecting a healthy bump in store visits.

But behind the counter, we're facing a growing problem that has nothing to do with paper or ink: credit card "swipe fees" imposed by a modern-day credit card cartel. As North Carolina's elected leaders explore ways to invest in Main Street, addressing the stranglehold major credit card networks have over the payments arena would be a meaningful step.

When a customer makes a purchase at my store and uses a credit card at the checkout, I'm on the hook to pay a small tax called a "swipe fee" — generally be-

tween two and four percent of the ring-up price—to the credit card network and issuing bank.

What does this amount to? In 2024, credit card networks collected nearly \$150 billion in "swipe fees" nationwide. Here in North Carolina, merchants lose more than \$283 million from these fees on sales tax alone. This makes "swipe fees" the second-highest operating cost after labor.

For business owners like me, I could be using that money to expand my shop's selection, host more events, or simply give back to my community. And the situation is unlikely to improve thanks to extreme consolidation in the credit card market.

Visa and Mastercard control more than 80% of the credit cards in circulation, allowing them to raise "swipe fees" with minimal pushback. Unlike other retailers, bookstores can't simply adjust prices to absorb these costs. The prices are printed right on

the covers, set by publishers, leaving us little flexibility.

Fortunately, the Credit Card Competition Act is the right prescription for this headache. By requiring the biggest banks to include at least two processing networks other than Visa and Mastercard on their credit cards, the measure would break the current stranglehold in the payments market and open the door to competitors like NYCE, Star, or Shamam.

With this healthy injection of competition, "swipe fees" would come down across the board, saving businesses and their customers an estimated \$16 billion annually. And despite recent headlines about Right versus Left—whether it be the government shutdown or simple budget battles—the Credit Card Competition Act has no shortage of bipartisan support.

Elected leaders like Vice President J.D. Vance and Sens. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.)

and Roger Marshall (R-Kansas) have all backed the measure. Small business support for the act is strong too, with more than 80 percent of Main Street operations throwing their weight behind it, according to recent polling from the Job Creators Network Foundation.

Small businesses and independent bookstores like mine are the cornerstone of the North Carolina economy, comprising over 99 percent of all businesses across the state. Not only would the Credit Card Competition Act help us keep the lights on, but it would allow us to grow and give more to our communities. North Carolina's elected leaders in Washington would be wise to seize this rare moment of bipartisan consensus and pass free market credit card reform.

Dominique Burleson is the owner of Paperbacks & Frybread Co. in Lilesville, N.C., and a member of the Lumbee Tribe.

This season, Steph Curry can be our guide

Does basketball have anything to do with Advent, and can the great Steph Curry be our guide during this season?



MAY
MARTIN
BRITT

The answer is a resounding yes.

In his new book "Shot Ready," Curry offers far more than a behind-the-scenes look at how he became one of the greatest players the game has ever seen.

It's his story — the sweat, the grind, the shots — but beneath all that, the book is an ode to mindfulness, community, and finding joy where you are.

Curry has lessons for those of us who find ourselves solidly in December, in the melee of red and green and relentlessly chipper holiday tunes. This season, for many, is a time of darkness and waiting on the sidelines, preparing for what is next.

So, if you are hunting for a present for a basketball lover, this is the gift. But if you — or someone you love — would like an inspiring book for any season of life, this is also the gift. It's about how to show up prepared and centered for whatever your vocation might be.

Here are a few highlights from our unlikely Advent guide, Steph Curry:

Slow down. When Steph was working on getting his

shot right, caught up in a slump, he did a lot of extra practice between games. "There I had the quiet and time to analyze the movement of my body as I shot. In that environment, shooting the ball is almost a form of meditation-- I took that time to let everything else fall away and just inhabited my body as fully as I could, making myself aware of every subtle movement."

Not many of us are working on something as technical as a Steph Curryesque shot, but we are all wrestling with something. If we can slow down and carve out a quiet moment, we can do what Curry does so well - we can be in our bodies fully. On a walk, by a fire, in a moment with friends, we can step back, slow our pace, and inhabit the moment.

Learn to wait, but do not mistake waiting for passivity. Waiting is hard, its own discipline. Curry recounts giving advice to a teammate who was frustrated by what he thought was too much time on the bench. He says, "The times that feel like you're standing still are times to get shot ready."

Like time sitting on the bench and yearning to go in for a game, these dark days of winter and Advent are times for patience.

Waiting is a skill, whether we are waiting to celebrate or waiting to grieve.

Curry's advice resonates. You can wait, but while you are waiting, you can still do things to find hope. You practice your "shot ready" position - feet firmly grounded, eyes open. When the ball comes your way - or when life throws something else at you-- it won't knock you off your feet.

Find joy. Like waiting, joy is not passive. Curry makes it clear that it is a choice and a mindset. He writes: "I keep talking about joy in the work for a reason."

He notes that all the players in the NBA are after the same thing: a championship. They are trying to outwork one another and have their eyes trained on that shiny trophy. Joy, Curry says, sets apart some players.

"The ups and downs of any job can steal joy from you — whether it's a day-to-day pilfering or one big disappointment that leaves you wiped out. Protect your passion. It is joy that will sustain your commitment to greatness and the work it requires. But joy is more than a great motivator. It is both the means — the thing that drives your effort — and the end, the glorious payoff of all

that work. If you look for it, you will see it as the thread that runs through and supercharges everything."

Breathe. Curry confides that he still gets a "great wave of nerves" before every game. And he shares his way to deal with those butterflies. He says, "Take a couple deep breaths. Do it with intention, really slowing yourself down. Let your mind set the tone for your body, don't let your body set the tone for your mind."

He encourages us, no matter what our own "big game" might be, to intentionally settle and deepen our breathing. Even in the biggest moments, he urges, "you should remind your body that it is just another day. So breathe."

No matter your practice this season, no matter your faith tradition, we can all learn something from Curry. He has given Davidson and Golden State such great basketball, but he's giving us all some helpful wisdom as we await the "great wave" of this holiday season.

Chapel Hill attorney May Martin Bryan is a lifelong resident of North Carolina. She holds degrees from Davidson College and the UNC schools of law and social work.

Sports

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2025



DONALD WATKINS | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Carolina Panthers defenders Nic Scourton (from left), D.J. Wonnum and Thomas Incoom celebrate after Wonnum's fumble recovery against the Los Angeles Rams on Nov. 31. Carolina, which is tied with Tampa Bay atop the NFC South, square off against the Buccaneers Dec. 21 at Bank of America Stadium.

Slow starts plague Panthers

Carolina aims to shore up early inconsistency ahead of NFC South showdown vs. Tampa Bay

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Bryce Young could do nothing but watch.

For 11 minutes, 22 seconds Sunday at Caesars Superdome, Young waited on the sideline as the Panthers' problems started mounting.

The mishaps culminated in the New Orleans Saints earning a 20-17, come-from-behind win. The Panthers committed a season-high 11 penalties for 103 yards. Six led to automatic first downs, matching an all-time franchise record.

"The more that we can minimize the things that are given because we have poor technique or the things that are

given because we missed an assignment, we have to get that out of our game," coach Dave Canales said Monday. "Certainly, the penalty game needs to be cleaned up as well."

The loss dropped the Panthers (7-7) into a first-place tie with Tampa Bay, with three regular-season games remaining. They meet Sunday at Bank of America Stadium and Jan. 3 in Tampa, Fla.

There's another area that Canales wants improvement: second-quarter effort. At minus-94 points, the Pan-

thers are last in scoring differential during that span. They've surrendered a league-high 146 points and scored 52, better than only two teams.

"It's execution," rookie running back Trevor Etienne said. "That's what it comes down to at the end of the day. We take the same approach with every drive. It's just execution. We have to execute each and every play."

Second-quarter stumbles

Young directed the offense to an early touchdown Sunday, marking the ninth time Carolina produced points on their opening possession this season. But, like a majority of outings, the Panthers' offense suffered a lull.

During the first half of their seven

losses, they have been outscored 114-35.

The Panthers pushed their way into playoff contention by closing games, highlighted by Young's 11 game-winning drives, the most since 2023. At 24 years old, Young was the youngest quarterback to reach that milestone.

The Panthers can close, but can they open?

"Just looking for consistency and I would love to see that from snap one until the end of the game," Canales said last week. "That fact that we do finish well, we take a lot of pride in that. The way we prepare, do right longer and maintain that focus."

Please see **SLOW** | 6A

Hough's dominant season ends with state title

By Cameron Williams
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The Hough Huskies are state champions at last.

After years of preseason favorites, Hough (14-0) finally got over the hump with a 21-0 win against Raleigh Millbrook (13-1) to claim the school's first state football title in its 15-year history.

"I thought our guys played exceptional," Hough coach DeShawn Baker said. "All year long, we've been through ups and downs. We battled. The ups and downs that nobody ever sees in practice and things we go through. I told y'all back on August 26 that we had the best defense in the state, and they showed that tonight."

Millbrook, which came into the game averaging more than 39 points per game, managed just 148 yards of total offense and no points. A chunk of those yards came late when the outcome was not in question. Millbrook faced tough defenses during the sea-

Please see **TALK** | 6A



MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

After opening the season with a win against Rock Hill South Pointe in the Keep Pounding Classic, Hough High capped it with a 21-0 win against Raleigh Millbrook in the North Carolina 8A title game, the Huskies' first.

The crown fits: Huskies No. 1 in Magnificent 7

By Herbert L. White
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Hough High, Mecklenburg County's best team in 2025, left no doubt atop the Magnificent Seven rankings.

The Huskies, who won the North Carolina 8A title with a dominant 21-0 win against Raleigh Millbrook, was No. 1 in The Post's weekly ranking of public school programs for 14 weeks. West Charlotte, which led the preseason poll, finished second after losing to Hough in the 8A West final.

Independence, which lost to Weddington in the third round of the 7A tournament, took third.

Here's the final Magnificent Seven, with overall record in parentheses:

1. Hough (14-0). Best team from beginning to end. The 8A state champion Huskies lived up to potential by storming through the post-season behind a defense that allowed a single touchdown.

2. West Charlotte (10-3). The Lions, were plenty good until running into the Hough postseason buzzsaw. They face an uncertain future after moving on from coach Sam Greiner, a move that still has folks talking mostly because of a lack of information.

3. Independence (10-3, third). The Patriots routed Greensboro Page 45-6 and Richmond

Senior 52-18 in the first two rounds of the 7A playoffs before losing to Weddington 21-6.

4. Myers Park (9-3). The Mustangs lost to West Charlotte 32-21 in the 8A third round. Myers Park were a feel-good story all season.

5. Olympic (9-3). The Trojans crashed out with a 42-6 loss to Sun Valley in the 6A second round.

6. Providence (8-4). The Panthers didn't have much of a chance against West Charlotte, taking a 41-0 loss to close their season.

7. Palisades (8-4). The Pumas were eliminated in the 8A draw via 63-7 loss to Hough, but overall a good season for a young program.

statement. "We are looking forward to an amazing crowd in Charlotte."

Senegal went unbeaten in CAF World Cup Qualifying, amassing seven wins while allowing just three goals during 10 matches. Led by 2019 African Footballer of the Year Sadio Mané, Senegal won its first international trophy in 2021 by beating Egypt to win the African Cup of Nations.

Senegal, which is making its third straight

Please see **US-SENEGAL** | 6A

Ascent moves in the right direction

By Steve Goldberg
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

After an inconsistent start to their second season, the Carolina Ascent are 4-1-1 in their last six games and beginning to look more like the team that captured the inaugural Gainbridge Super League Players' Shield trophy.

Two straight clean sheet wins feels a lot more like the team that came out of the gate strong in the league's inaugural campaign, going undefeated in their first 11 matches. That record now belongs to league leaders Lexington SC.

With a game remaining before winter break, the Ascent, third in the standings (5-4-4, 19 points), is four points behind Lexington. Can they pull closer before Christmas? It's possible.

Carolina is tied on points with Dallas Trinity after losing to them 1-0 last week, while the teams above them – Lexington (5-0-8, 23 points) and Sporting JAX (6-3-4, 22 points) both at home.

Dallas 65-5-1, 16 points) have won three straight and had the better of the Ascent last year at 2-2-1 in four games. Last week's game was their first meeting this season.

The truth is that league standings are just vanity at this point. Momentum and positive consistency are far more important over the next two matches. After going undefeated in their first 11 matches last season, the Ascent dropped three consecutive before the break. After a slow start afterward, they won six straight to regain their spot at the top of the table. Consistency now can help build the foundation for the last 14 games in the spring.

The Ascent close the first half at home against DC Power on

Please see **CAROLINA** | 6A

US takes on Senegal in Charlotte for a World Cup warmup

By Herbert L. White
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The FIFA World Cup warmup tour for the U.S. national team includes an African powerhouse.

Senegal will take on the U.S. May 31 at Bank of America Stadium in the third of four pre-tournament friendlies. Tickets are on sale at Ticketmaster.

The first two exhibitions are in Atlanta against Belgium on March 28, followed by

Portugal three days later at Mercedes Benz Stadium. After the match against Senegal, the U.S. will take on Germany in a June 6 tuneup at Chicago's Soldier Field.

Each match is against a team that qualified for the World Cup.

"In the year leading up to the World Cup, we will have played at least one team from five different confederations which is incredibly valuable for our preparations," USMNT head coach Mauricio Pochettino said in a

Slow starts remain a concern for Panthers

Continued from page 5A

On the first drive against New Orleans, Young engineered a 13-play, 74-yard drive, capped by Rico Dowdle's 4-yard touchdown run. After Carolina forced the Saints to punt on their initial two series, Young led the Panthers to a first down, but the drive stalled after tackle Ikem Ekwonu was flagged for a 15-yard unnecessary roughness penalty.

The Saints then embarked on a drive that consumed the majority of the second quarter. Devin Neal scored on a 4-yard run, tying the game at 7-all. The Panthers responded with a field goal with 21 seconds left in the second quarter for the lead at intermission for just the fourth time this season.

"Would I love to see more success early on, especially in the middle part of the game? Absolutely," Canales said. "That goes back to the place we were talking about of finding our best football, finding consistent football that shows up drive in and drive out."

Struggles against adversity

On the 76 offensive series following the Panthers' game-opening possession through the third quarter, the Panthers scored on just 32.8% of those drives.

That's significantly lower than the

40.6% of possessions that teams collected points on that did not end on a kneel-down in 2024, according to Sharp Football Analysis.

Young, who failed to create any key fourth-quarter plays against the Saints, has developed a reputation as a clutch performer. Despite being outscored 10-0 Sunday, the fourth quarter has been the Panthers' strongest stage, outscoring opponents, 85-66.

On fourth-down plays, Young has helped extend drives on 23 of 33 attempts. He entered Week 15 with a 156.3 passer rating on fourth down, tops among all quarterbacks with at least 10 attempts.

"It comes from a lot of adjustments throughout the game," Canales said. "The different ways we are trying to run the ball and how they are impacting that. How we are trying to throw to pass the ball and how they are impacting that. There are a lot of conversations of how we settle into a type of game plan as the game goes on."

Many of last week's conversations centered on the mental lapses and mid-game struggles that led to New Orleans' (4-10) sweep of the season series.

"We're not able to overcome that adversity," Canales said. "It continues to be a factor."

« QCFC »

Carolina Ascent aims to finish the first half strong

Continued from page 5A

Dec. 20 in Charlotte.

Carolina's 1-0 victory against Brooklyn FC on Dec. 6 was significant on both sides of the ball. Defensively, it was only the second shutout of the season for the Ascent, who led the league in clean sheets last season. Through 12 games last year, they had already blanked the opposition six times.

It's also the second straight, which is how trends begin. Meagan McClelland and the defense in front of her, which includes all 10 field players when they are out of possession, were very effective in limiting the Brooklyn attack. BFC hit the posts last week in Charlotte but put only one of 11 shots on target.

Offensively, Mia Corbin's curling cross along the turf from the right to Audrey Harding on the run at the top of the 6-yard box at the back post was a work of art in dissecting the Brooklyn defense, taking out five defenders and the keeper on a single stroke.

On the pass, Harding said, "Oh, that was very nice. She told me it was my birthday present." For clarity's sake, Harding's birthday was July 14.

The 44th-minute goal was just reward for a superior first half by the Ascent.

At 42:20, Rylee Baisden's pass back was intercepted at midfield. She and Jill Aguilera, with Taylor Porter in support, immediately converged to win it back, with Emily Morris taking possession. Over the next 42 seconds, from the time Morris col-

lected the ball, seven other players and Morris again would handle it 13 times before it hit the back of the net.

That kind of connection, spacing, and timing is what best defines Carolina when they are clicking, and it was very evident in the first half, but it got a little messy to begin the second 45.

"I feel like the first half, we really came out firing, really connecting as a team, from top to bottom, bottom to top, and I just feel like we had a lot more chances," Harding said. "The second half, I wish we could have a redo because I don't think it was good enough. But we did show that we can still hold ourselves. I did think it was a bit chaotic to start, but we had some people come in, like B (Hylton), and Lou (Grabias) and Riley (Parker); some really good subs to help kind of calm the game down."

The Ascent put 5-of-13 shots on frame, eliciting four saves from Breanna Norris.

"With the first half, we leave some goals on the table, which makes the second half harder," defender Sydney Studer said, "because 1-0 is a harder lead than three or four. The first half, you're doing so good, you're like, 'I've just got to keep going.' So, you come in with that 15-minute break, and then they step up their game. We all have to wake up and be ready for it."



Hylton

'Talk soon:' Hough's Huskies prove best in North Carolina 8A

Continued from page 5A

son like Rolesville and Hoggard, but nothing like Hough's.

"It starts with their players," Wildcats coach Laymarr Marshall said. "They've got 11 really good players on defense. They are really good schematically as well. They give you a lot of different looks and pressure to get off blocks. It is probably the best tackling team that we've faced. So, shout out to those guys, they did a great job, and we have to give them credit."

Hough set the tone early by forcing an opening three-and-out by Millbrook. A methodical 66-yard drive later and Huskies' quarterback Ethan Royal kept the ball on a read option for the opening score of the game. Royal, who was named most valuable player, had a hand in all three touchdowns.

Royal's catchphrase all season was "Talk Soon." Even after winning a state title in an undefeated season, the junior remained humble.

"This feels amazing," he said, "just to get it done for the senior class. It is a really, really good feeling."

A defensive stalemate ensued for the second and third quarters until Royal found Jahmere Anderson on third-and-goal from 7 yards out to put the Huskies up 14-0. Royal put the nail in the coffin late in the fourth quarter with a 73-yard touchdown run.

"These past couple weeks, even though we had a bye week we were working on some of the stuff we run," Royal said. "On that one particular play I just saw that everyone [on defense] was shifting right and I just got outside."

Baker said after the season opening win against Rock Hill South Pointe in the Keep Pounding Classic that it was like getting a monkey off his back finally beating a South Carolina foe. This win was much bigger.

"I got the cinderblock off my back," he said. "It is amazing. I'm excited for myself but it's more about [the players]. They do all the work. They just come in and listen to us yell and scream, punish them, run them and all this stuff. For them to just

take the coaching and do what we ask them to do, it's a thrill. I'm excited, but more excited for the program."

The Huskies finished the season with six shutouts, including two in the state semifinal and final. Defensive coordinator Chachi Sullivan — who has been at Hough since it opened in 2010 — said while it feels great to win the championship, he is more interested in the players and their futures.

"The championship is icing on the cake," Sullivan said. "I care more about what these young men are going to do in the future and long term in life. Winning championships doesn't change what I am going to do in the community, what I do for other kids and what I do for the kids here as well as what they do for me. So, yes, the championship feels great, but the reality is there are some juniors and even seniors on the team that are deserving of [college] offers I think they should have, and we are working to make that happen."

Hough has a lot of talent coming back. While four-star Texas commit Samari Matthews won't be on the roster next season, he was glad to go out on top.

"This definitely feels great," Matthews said. "I've been here four years, and the first three years were all tough losses. This was my last time playing with a lot of great seniors. So, I just promised them, when the time is right, I promise [we'd win]."

With young talent like Royal, running back Jamarion Morrison, linebacker Ryan Peterson among others returning, Baker is excited for the future.

"We hope to get back here again and get another state championship," he said. "Now, we've got young guys that know how it feels and know the hard work that it takes to get here. I think the senior leadership will be even better. ... All these guys have seen a great senior group lead this team and so they are just going to build on the momentum. I think it will take us a long way. ... I really want to be back here next year, so we are going to work and figure it out."

US-Senegal tuneup in Charlotte

Continued from page 5A

World Cup, and the U.S. have never played each other in international competition. Ranked 19th in the world, Senegal was drawn into Group I along with France, Norway and the winner of FIFA Playoff 2. In the opening match of the 2002 World Cup, the Teranga Lions beat previous World Cup winner France to become the second African team to reach the quarterfinals.

Senegal forward Sadio Mané, who plays for Al-Nassr, is the most capped player and top scorer in the country's history with 117 appearances and 50 goals.

The Senegal match is the second for the U.S. national team in Charlotte. In 2023, a first-half hat trick from Jesús Ferreira powered a 6-0 win against Trinidad and Tobago in the final match of Concacaf Gold Cup group play in front of 40,243 fans.

Overall, the USMNT is 5-1-2 in North Carolina.

Charlotte FC defender Tim Ream has

earned 79 caps for the U.S. since 2011 and has captained the team 25 times, good for eighth all-time.

The U.S. was drawn into Group D along with Paraguay, Australia and the winner of UEFA Playoff C between Kosovo, Romania, Slovakia and Türkiye — at the World Cup Final Draw. The U.S. has wins in 2025 against qualifiers Australia and Paraguay.

Appearing in its 12th World Cup and second time as a host nation, the USMNT opens group play against Paraguay on June 12 in Los Angeles. The second group stage match will take place on June 19 in Seattle against Australia and will close in Los Angeles on June 25 against the UEFA Playoff C winner.

The USA, one of three host countries for the tournament, qualified for its ninth World Cup since 1990 and unbeaten in its last five matches, with four wins against teams that were already qualified for the 2026 tournament.



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