

# TAR HEELS REBUILT



Previewing head coach Bill Belichick's first season with UNC football

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”



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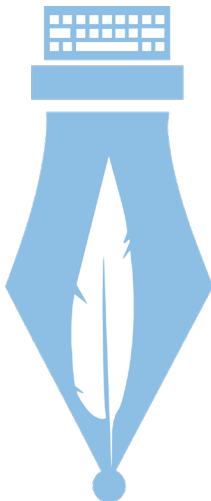
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## NEW ERA IN CHAPEL HILL | REFLECTIONS

## Bill Belichick reconstructs roster, implements NFL systems

## Eight-time Super Bowl winner works to transform UNC's program

By Matthew Maynard  
Sports Editor

The Bill Belichick era is here. At the tail end of a rocky 2024 campaign, then-head coach Mack Brown was fired just before North Carolina's loss to N.C. State in the regular season finale.

Immediately rumors began to swirl about UNC's next head coach. Names like Jon Sumrall from Tulane and Arthur Smith from the Pittsburgh Steelers circulated. Oh, and then Belichick.

An unlikely hire that became a reality. On Dec. 11, 2024, North Carolina officially announced the hiring of eight-time Super Bowl winner Bill Belichick as the program's next head coach. Throughout the offseason, Belichick has rebuilt North Carolina's roster and has worked to install his methods into the program. And on Labor Day at Kenan Stadium, Belichick will coach in his first-ever college game against TCU.

## Family Connections

Belichick's ties to North Carolina go back to his childhood. His father, Steve Belichick, served as UNC's backfield coach from 1953-1955.

There's a picture of Belichick sitting on the wall in front of the bleachers at Kenan Stadium when he was a kid. "As a kid all I knew was college football," Belichick said at his introductory press conference in December. "So it's great to come back home to Carolina and back in an environment that I really grew up in."

Following his hiring, Belichick started to build his coaching staff, with two of the most notable hires being his sons, Steve and Brian.

The trio worked together for the New England Patriots during Bill's 24-year

tenure as the head coach. Steve joined the Patriots in 2012, and Brian joined in 2016.

After Bill left the Patriots in 2024, Steve took the defensive coordinator job at Washington while Brian stayed in New England. Now reunited, Steve is grateful to be working with his father again.

"He's definitely my mentor, my idol," defensive coordinator Steve Belichick said. "I look up to him in more ways than just football."

## Offseason Transition

Belichick hit the ground running in the offseason, utilizing the transfer portal to bring in 41 transfers.

He's never navigated the transfer portal. Sure, it's similar to NFL free agency, but it's a wider scope.

"It's up to us to make the right evaluation for us and how a player fits for us," Belichick said.

As Belichick constructed his roster, he also started implementing NFL-like practices within the program. Changes in training, nutritional focuses, schemes and terminology to help players succeed at the highest level both on.

Throughout the offseason, Belichick also brought in former players to talk with UNC.

"We're all going to end football at some point," senior defensive back Will Hardy said. "So how can you pour all that investment into something else, whether you're a dad, whether you have a spouse,

whatever it is, how can you pour everything into a relationship, so we've learned that."

And ahead of a season that will have constant attention, UNC will have to lean on Belichick's experience and methods.

## Fall Camp

The Tar Heels opened their fall camp on Aug. 2 with a Saturday morning practice.

From day one, Belichick was focused on getting players acclimated to each other and the training program

"Every practice is going to be a hard practice, make the game easier and just the competition level is high," redshirt first-year defensive lineman Leroy Jackson said.

One noticeable change that Belichick has utilized in his practices is physicality.

And while Belichick has magnified the coverage of UNC football, he's focusing on controlling what the team can control and ensuring everyone is doing their job.

He isn't worried about the outside noise. The preseason rankings. Predictions of how the season will go.

As fall camp comes to an end, Belichick will have a better idea of how his roster fits together. And he's ready to see how the season plays out.

"These guys are bought in," Belichick said. "They're working hard. It's exciting to see what they're going to be able to do on the field."

X: @mdmaynard74

## Q&amp;A: Players and coaches from other ACC teams react to head coach hiring

## Entrance into the conference shocked the college football world

By Brian D'Aguanno  
Assistant Sports Editor

*At ACC Kickoff, Assistant Sports Editor Brian D'Aguanno asked players and coaches from around the ACC their thoughts on the hiring of new UNC head coach and eight-time Super Bowl Champion Bill Belichick. The interviews have been edited for brevity and clarity.*

**The Daily Tar Heel:** With the week six matchup against UNC, what was your reaction to the Belichick hiring and what do you expect from that game?

**Cade Klubnik, Clemson quarterback:**

"Obviously a huge hire for them, big time hire. I love Coach [Mack] Brown and I'd known him for a long time. But I actually got to meet Coach Belichick at the Manning Passing Academy and sit down and chat with him for a little bit, so definitely a huge hire for them. Excited to go up there, I've always wanted to go up there and play, so it'll be really cool."

**DTH:** You talked about being excited for the big four rivalry games, what was your reaction when you saw that Bill Belichick was going to coach at UNC and what is your excitement levels for the Wake Forest vs. North Carolina game?

**Demond Claiborne, Wake Forest running back:** "Absolutely, Bill Belichick is a great coach, great rap sheet of history and things that he's completed and done. But, yeah I'm excited to play that game and be involved with Bill Belichick and his staff. I know he's known for eliminating the best player, so just to have that opportunity for him to try and eliminate me, it'll be fun and it's a cool experience to go against a guy who's won some Super Bowls."

**DTH:** What was your reaction to hearing the news about Bill Belichick and how do you think

that will impact the rivalry between Duke and UNC?

**Wesley Williams, Duke defensive end:** "It's kind of crazy, because sometimes you separate college and NFL so much, I've been watching Bill Belichick since I was a kid win championships, he's got six rings. So it's like a collision of worlds in that aspect, it's like oh my god, I'm going to play him this year. But he's obviously a great coach and brings a lot to Chapel Hill and I think that you know that rivalry is already intense, so I think that's just adding to it."

**DTH:** You've talked about the ACC conference, what was your reaction to Bill Belichick taking the head coaching job at North Carolina and what does it mean for the ACC?

**Pat Narduzzi, Pittsburgh head coach:** "Bill Belichick, one of the greatest coaches ever to coach the game. Won six super bowls with the New England Patriots. I've enjoyed conversations with him, whether it be Amelia Island or in Zoom calls with ACC coaches. He's a tremendous football coach, really smart. Again, he adds a lot of flavor and excitement to the ACC. When you look at Bill Belichick coming to the Atlantic Coast Conference, it just tells you how attractive our conference is."

**DTH:** With the week six matchup against North Carolina being talked about a lot, what was your reaction to the Bill Belichick hiring and what are you excited about for that game?

**TJ Parker, Clemson defensive end:** "I'm happy for him, I'm always excited about competition. And especially for this year, I got to talk to Bill Belichick earlier, shake hands with him, just because you know he's such a legend in the game in general, having that run with the Patriots. Just kind of pick his brain and understand what's the difference between college and the League for him and things like that. Having a mutual understanding and respect that goes both ways, I'm super excited."

X: @dthsports

DTH/CONNOR RUESCH

UNC football head coach Bill Belichick makes a surprise halftime appearance during the men's basketball game against La Salle on Dec. 14, 2024 at the Dean E. Smith Center. UNC won 93-67.



## AROUND TOWN

## Businesses prepare for Bill Belichick's first season

Some are implementing new procedures to account for increased crowds

By Sarah Smiley  
Senior Writer

Businesses on Franklin Street are preparing for busier game days this football season, with Bill Belichick now serving as the head coach of the team.

"We definitely are expecting it to be crazier than ever this year," Lindsay Watson, an assistant manager at The Shrunken Head Boutique, said.

She said game days are always more crowded than usual, but that customers are especially excited for football season this year.

The University announced last December that Belichick would be leading the team, following the announcement in November that Mack Brown would not be returning as head coach.

Tickets for all games at Kenan Stadium sold out in July, over a month before Belichick's first season as head coach was set to begin. It was the earliest sellout in the football program's history.

Watson said short-sleeved hoodies, which Belichick is known to sport during games, have been very popular items.

"We've really leaned into the 'Chapel Bill' slogan that people have been using recently — we have it on T-shirts, hoodies and crewnecks," Watson said.

Jake Erater, an assistant manager at Johnny T-Shirt, said his store has also noticed interest in the 'Chapel Bill' merchandise.

Watson said The Shrunken Head Boutique is embracing the attention UNC football is receiving from fans. She said the store hopes to welcome newcomers to Franklin Street.

"I think with the increased media presence, and people traveling to Chapel Hill more often just to see Belichick or following UNC football in general, we really are leaning into that small town, local business vibe that we've been doing," Watson said.

To accommodate larger crowds, The Shrunken Head Boutique opened an expansion store, Tailgate, located just a few doors down at 161 E. Franklin St.

"We opened that in February, so this will be our first football season at Tailgate, which is definitely going to be an adjustment, but we're doing all hands on deck," Watson said.

Both Erater and Watson said they are increasing staffing on game days in anticipation of higher traffic in their stores.

"Everyone loves to work game days the most because it's just nonstop — people are so happy to be here in Chapel Hill," Watson said.

Erater also said his store will be clearing out space to accommodate more customers inside.

"It's always just chaos whenever game days come around, so nothing new under the sun there," he said.

Don Pinney, owner of Sutton's Drug Store, said he is operating his business as usual. He said he's not worried about accommodating larger crowds, and that he is unsure how much Franklin Street will actually be affected by the higher volume of attendees.

"I can only fit so many, and only so many people can park in town," Pinney said.

Both Pinney and Watson said they are worried about how customers will navigate parking near Franklin Street on busy game days.

"I think that [parking] is a big barrier to people actually coming into businesses on Franklin, but with the Rosemary [Street] Parking Deck opening a few months ago, we're hopeful that will kind of help keep traffic under control," Watson said.

Pinney said he has heard customers complain about parking availability and rates, but the Town's parking and transit initiatives may divert visitors from Franklin Street on game days.

"They encourage everybody to Park and Ride and go straight to the Bell Tower and go to the game, so it'll be interesting to see if traffic actually picks up," Pinney said.

Watson said she is hopeful to see Belichick on Franklin Street someday, and that she is excited for the season to begin.

"I think Franklin Street is just an awesome place to be on game days," she said.

The Tar Heels begin their 2025 season on Sept. 1 against Texas Christian University at Kenan Stadium.

"I just hope [the team] is spectacular," Pinney said. "The better they do, the better we do."

X: @ssmiley2027

## COLUMN

# Sports editors predict UNC football's 2025 season record

By Matthew Maynard  
Sports Editor

Expectations are high for UNC football this season, given the major transition that took place over the offseason. North Carolina took a gamble hiring head coach Bill Belichick — an eight-time Super Bowl champion with zero collegiate coaching experience.

And while I think the Tar Heels will win a few games by solely out-coaching other teams, I'm still left unsure about how good the team will actually be on the field. With 70 new players, the first game against TCU will be vital to see just how good — or bad — UNC will be this year.

Another factor that very much favors Belichick's squad is the schedule. North Carolina's strength of schedule sits at 62nd (out of 136 teams) in the country according to Team Rankings. The Tar Heels open with four winnable games and could enter a matchup with preseason No. 4 Clemson ranked.

The rest of the schedule features bottom-feeder ACC teams such as Stanford and Wake Forest that UNC should beat. However, without having seen the team play yet, it's hard for me to be confident that North Carolina will be significantly better than the past few years.

My record prediction is 8-4 in Belichick's first season.



DTH/CONNOR RUESCH

By Beckett Brantley  
Assistant Sports Editor

As the excitement surrounding the UNC football program and Bill Belichick shows no signs of dying down, my mind wavers between buying into the flashy optimism that surrounds the team or accepting the reality that comes with tearing a team apart and putting it back together in just a few months.

But, for the time being, optimism is winning.

The Tar Heels are returning talented players on the offensive line and at wide receiver, as well as bringing in the ninth best transfer class in college football.

With North Carolina's past struggles with defense, especially in the secondary, the revamped defense under new defensive coordinator Steve Belichick should at least give UNC a chance against the talented returning quarterbacks at TCU and preseason No. 4 Clemson.

The Tigers and the Horned Frogs will be two of North Carolina's toughest opponents in an otherwise manageable schedule.

Still, other than UNC's rival in Duke and its bully-of-late, N.C. State, there are a few stumbling blocks in the schedule where the rebuilt roster will be tested.

So, allowing for a pair of good losses and perhaps a bad loss somewhere along the way, my cautiously optimistic record prediction for the 2025 UNC football team is 9-3.



DTH/CONNOR RUESCH

By Brian D'Aguanno  
Assistant Sports Editor

This season will be unlike any other for UNC football with the hiring of Bill Belichick. The media frenzy is in full force, and all eyes are on the program in Chapel Hill. That kind of attention brings about high expectations.

For me, the question isn't whether the Tar Heels will lose in similar late-game fashion as they have in years past — because with Belichick at the helm, those losses won't happen. But rather, the main question for me is this: does North Carolina have the talent to compete with the top of the ACC?

A completely revamped and overhauled roster consisting largely of transfers will have to come together quickly. Coming in with the ninth-ranked transfer portal group according to 247Sports, I believe the talent is sufficient though, with the main area of improvement coming on defense.

Though, the most critical factor to look at when evaluating how well UNC will do this season is the schedule. The Tar Heels play only two preseason top-eight teams in the ACC and face five of the bottom six.

With an easy schedule and what I believe to be a talented enough roster, the Tar Heels will see drastic improvement this season.

My record prediction is 10-2 with losses coming at the hands of TCU and Clemson.



DTH/CONNOR RUESCH



TEAM

# Bill Belichick overhauls UNC roster with over 70 new recruits

Transfers, first-years look to make an impact this fall

By Tess Alongi  
Staff Writer

With no prior college coaching experience and name, image and likeness reshaping the sport, it was unclear how new UNC head coach Bill Belichick would do on the recruiting trail.

Now eight months after his hiring and the season opener less than a week away, Bill Belichick has overhauled North Carolina's roster. He's brought in more than 40 transfers and 30 first-years, giving the Tar Heels a wide variety of new pieces.

Bill Belichick's large rebuild has propelled UNC to the ninth-ranked transfer portal class and 36th-ranked recruiting class for 2025 per 247Sports.

Headlining UNC's transfer class is redshirt senior defensive back Thaddeus Dixon and sophomore

linebacker Khmori House. Dixon and House are two of four former University of Washington players who followed former Huskies defensive coordinator Steve Belichick to North Carolina this offseason.

The chance to play under Bill Belichick and learn from a coach with great NFL experience factored heavily into Dixon's decision to come to UNC.

portal following his season with Washington, where he had two interceptions, 69 tackles and earned an All-Big Ten honorable mention. House brings his own expertise to the Tar Heels, as during his first season with the Huskies, he recorded 35 tackles, one interception and one forced fumble.

The Tar Heels also added redshirt senior offensive tackle Daniel

was redshirt sophomore quarterback Gio Lopez from South Alabama.

With the Jaguars, Lopez threw for 18 touchdowns, completed more than 65 percent of his passes and finished with 2,559 yards.

Along with Lopez, UNC added key first-year quarterback Bryce Baker, who entered North Carolina as one of the top recruits in the 2025 class. Baker finished high school as

entered UNC as a three-star edge from Burlington, Ky. Alexander finished his high school career with 245 tackles, 42.5 sacks and 26 tackles for loss.

With dozens of newcomers on both sides of the ball, Bill Belichick faces the challenge of integrating the team into one cohesive unit.

"We have a lot of new players," Bill Belichick said. "A little over 40 from the spring and 70 guys that weren't on last year's team. So it's a lot of new people to get up to speed in terms of communication, and just kind of the way we practice, techniques, things like that."

Altogether, UNC's variety of transfers and first-years has reshaped the Tar Heels roster. With many new players competing for starting roles, North Carolina's success this fall will be greatly dependent on how fast the newcomers build chemistry.

X: @dthsports

## BY THE NUMBERS

No. 9

RANKED TRANSFER PORTAL CLASS IN THE COUNTRY ACCORDING TO 247SPORTS.

41

TOTAL TRANSFERS THAT BILL BELICHICK AND MICHAEL LOMBARDI BROUGHT IN TO NORTH CAROLINA.

7

4-STAR RECRUITS IN UNC'S TRANSFER CLASS, TIED FOR SIXTH MOST IN THE COUNTRY.

30

3-STARS LANDED IN THE PORTAL, TIED FOR THE SIXTH-MOST IN NCAA DIVISION I.

"He's had such an impact on the defensive side of the ball, going back all the way to when he was on the Giants and the Jets," Dixon said. "I just think it's crazy, man. It's truly a blessing to just be around that much football knowledge."

On3 ranked Dixon as the third-best cornerback in the

King, the 54th-ranked player in the transfer portal according to 247Sports. King played 40 games in three seasons with Troy and bolsters North Carolina's offensive line.

And while Bill Belichick added many top-ranked players, one of the most notable additions to North Carolina's roster during the offseason

the eighth-best quarterback per the 247Sports composite rankings.

"We have good depth at quarterback, and so we'll see how it all plays out," Bill Belichick said.

In addition to Baker, one of the most-talked-about first-year additions to the UNC roster is linebacker Austin Alexander, who

CALENDAR

# A look at North Carolina's 2025 football schedule

The Tar Heels only leave the state three times all season

By Sofia Szostczuk  
Staff Writer

After ending the 2024 season with a three game losing streak and finishing with a 6-7 overall record, UNC football needed a shakeup. In the off-season, the Tar Heels made themselves the talk of the college football sphere after firing Mack Brown and landing eight-time Super Bowl champion head coach Bill Belichick.

Now, despite the buzz of anticipation for UNC football, the Tar Heels ranked eighth in the ACC preseason media poll. But the Tar Heels have the advantage of staying close to home, only leaving the state three times during the season when they travel to play UCF, California and Syracuse.

To kick off the year, UNC will host TCU on Labor Day. The Tar Heels landed in the prime time spot on Monday evening to face the talented Horned Frogs. TCU, likely North Carolina's toughest non-conference opponent, received votes in the AP top 25 preseason poll and is led by junior quarterback Josh Hoover, who set TCU's single-season passing record last year with 3,949 yards.

Only five days later, the team will take a drive down to Charlotte to continue its non-conference slate. Following that, the Tar Heels will host the Richmond Spiders before heading down to Orlando to take on UCF.

The Tar Heels have only faced the 49ers once before. Last year, UNC defeated Charlotte 38-20 at home. Charlotte finished 5-7 last year, but the game will bring a matchup with

former North Carolina quarterback Conner Harrell. Richmond is also a team UNC should keep on its radar. The Spiders found success last season, finishing with a 10-3 record. In their first year in the Patriot League, the Spiders will come to Chapel Hill looking for an upset.

UNC will look to wrap up its non-conference games with a win against UCF, who finished last season 4-8.

The week of Sept. 27 is North Carolina's first bye week of the season.

On Oct. 4, the Tar Heels return to Kenan Stadium to host the preseason No. 4 Clemson Tigers to kick off ACC play. UNC is 11-16-1 at home against Clemson and hasn't beaten the Tigers since 2010. The last time the two teams played in

"The Tar Heels landed in the prime time spot on Monday evening to face the talented Horned Frogs."

Sofia Szostczuk  
Staff Writer

Kenan Memorial, in 2019, the Tar Heels lost by only one point.

North Carolina will have to look out for several returning players for Clemson, including quarterback Cade Klubnik

and defensive lineman Peter Woods. Both were on the Associated Press' preseason All-America first team and are expected to have a big impact for the Tigers this season.

UNC has its second bye the week of Oct. 11.

The Tar Heels will then travel to face California for the first time since it joined the ACC. The Golden Bears were projected to finish 15th in the conference pre-

season poll, and North Carolina is seeking its first win over Cal.

Up next, UNC will face Virginia in a late-October matchup. North Carolina will look to build on its dominant 41-14 win from last season in the South's Oldest Rivalry.

For their Halloween game, the Tar Heels will travel up north to face Syracuse in a chilly road environment.

Saving them a trip to California, the Tar Heels will return home to face Stanford for UNC's homecoming game. This is another new conference member whom UNC has not yet faced in conference play, but the preseason last-in-the-ACC Cardinal should not present a significant challenge at home.

The final three games are in-state rivalry games: Wake Forest, Duke and N.C. State on Nov. 15, Nov. 22 and Nov. 29, respectively.

Last season, the Tar Heels defeated the Demon Deacons, 31-24, and will look to do so again, this time in Winston-Salem. Wake Forest should be the easiest of the three games down the stretch after they finished 4-8 in 2024 and brought in only the 48th best transfer class.

Next, the Tobacco Road rivalry commences for the 2025 season as UNC hosts the Blue Devils for Senior Day. In their last

matchup, Duke secured a 21-20 win after the Tar Heels surrendered a 20-point lead.

Finally, to round out the regular season in rivalry week, UNC will travel down the road to face N.C. State. Ending the season away and looking to break the four-game losing streak against the Wolfpack, the Tar Heels will need to flex their revamped roster to regain control of the series and cap off the regular season on a high note.

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## TRANSFER FEATURE

# ‘The opportunity was enough’: Gio Lopez’s journey to UNC

Hard work and drive make him a formidable signal caller

By Brian D’Aguanno  
Assistant Sports Editor

The plan wasn’t always clear for redshirt sophomore quarterback Gio Lopez.

Growing up, the transfer from South Alabama’s first love was baseball. And although that changed to a passion for the gridiron, he didn’t immediately gravitate to the signal caller position.

Starting out, Lopez didn’t even want to play offense. Before high school, he transitioned to play both sides of the ball, competing as a cornerback, safety, wide receiver and running back.

His father, Barney Lopez, had to convince him to give quarterback a shot.

“I had to force him to play quarterback, he didn’t want to play quarterback,”

Barney said. “And I said, ‘Listen. You need to give it a try, see what you can do, help your team out.’”

That switch paid off. But it wasn’t out of luck or by accident. Lopez put in the work to get to the next level at one of the hardest positions in sports, and now as UNC’s season opener against TCU quickly approaches, the transfer from South Alabama has settled in at North Carolina as he competes for the starting job.

The work to get to this spot began in the backyard of the Lopez’s family home in Madison, Alabama. No professional trainers or fancy machines, just nets and tires paired with Lopez’s desire to be the best quarterback he could be.

Barney would roll tires across the yard,

and Gio would have to throw the football through them. The two recreated drills they found online. One specific drill included a big net, located in the backyard, divided into numbered sections. Barney would yell out a number for Gio to hit.

It was those moments, the nights spent in the backyard working until one or two in the morning, that built Lopez into the player he is today.

After his junior year of high school, Lopez faced a major setback: an injury to his shoulder required surgery. Much of the recruiting momentum slowed, and some schools that were interested before went silent.

But not South Alabama.

On the day of his surgery, South Alabama head coach Major Applewhite visited the hospital and officially offered Lopez a full-ride scholarship to play quarterback for the Jaguars.

“South Alabama gave me that opportunity and I’m forever thankful for that,” Lopez said.

In his first year with the Jaguars, Lopez redshirted, playing in five games and throwing for 475 yards and four touchdowns. But during his first full season as the South Alabama starting quarterback, the 6-foot, left-handed gunslinger broke out, throwing for 2,559 yards to pair with 18 touchdowns and five interceptions. On the ground, he added 465 yards and seven touchdowns.

Last season showed what Lopez could do, with his game on full display. His ability to make something out of nothing stood out.

“You watch some of his plays, Gio is running around in the backfield and he is watching downfield and he’s actually pointing, telling his receivers where he wants them,” Barney said. “He’s conducting them to be where he needs them to be if the play gets broken.”

After his 2024 season with the Jaguars, Lopez decided to enter the transfer portal during the spring window.

That’s when newly hired UNC head coach Bill Belichick called.

The recruiting pitch was short and simple — come compete and

play at the Power Four level.

When Lopez committed to UNC in the spring, he knew the starting position wasn’t a given. That was fine with him, all he wanted was a chance to compete.

“Of course nothing was given to me, because I didn’t earn anything,” Lopez said. “I’m twenty years old, [I’ve] got a lot of life to still earn a lot of things, so for me the opportunity was enough for me to take that.”

Due to the timing of his transfer, Lopez missed the spring practice window and was unable to get on the field with his new teammates.

But that didn’t stop him from getting to know everyone.

During the offseason, Lopez and North Carolina’s receiving core built chemistry before the start of fall camp.

“All of us, we just get together and have throwing sessions,” sophomore wide receiver Jordan Shipp said. “Me and him, we talk every day, we hang out outside of practice and we go get food together and stuff like that.”

Heading into the season, there’s one thing on Lopez’s mind — winning games. He doesn’t solely care about stats or individual performance. For a young quarterback moving up the ranks of college football, the primary focus on winning seems untraditional.

But that’s who Lopez is — hardworking and ready to compete. “Goal wise is just to win games,” Lopez said. “I could go out there and throw for 10 yards a game, if we win 12 games, I don’t care.”

After originally not wanting to play football and even being forced to play quarterback, Lopez now has the chance to compete at one of the highest levels of college football.

For Barney, it seems surreal, but the work ethic and competitive mindset, forged from the backyard workouts to his time at South Alabama, has made Lopez’s situation a reality.

“Absolutely words can’t describe it,” Barney said. “Sometimes I’ll lay in bed at night watching his videos and I tear up and it’s just knowing that

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## COMEBACK

## Max Johnson competes for starting quarterback job after injury

Broken leg in last year’s season opener resulted in long recovery

By Matthew Maynard  
Sports Editor

and Beckett Brantley  
Assistant Sports Editor

and Brian D’Aguanno  
Assistant Sports Editor

Almost a year ago, graduate quarterback Max Johnson thought he was going to lose his leg.

In the third quarter, with three minutes remaining during North Carolina’s season opener against Minnesota last season, Johnson dropped back for a pass.

But at the same time that Johnson went to release the football, Minnesota defensive back Justin Walley made contact with his leg. Another defender came crashing down on Johnson’s leg simultaneously.

His leg snapped. “I remember getting up and put my shoulders around the trainers who were carrying me off the field,” Johnson said. “As soon as I got picked up, my leg kind of like slipped out, kind of felt it dangling and right then and there I knew it was my femur.”

At the tail end of a lengthy recovery process, Johnson is once again competing for UNC’s starting quarterback role. Despite significant roster turnover and a new coaching staff, Johnson opted to stay and play for new head coach Bill Belichick. While he wasn’t ready for spring ball, Johnson has continued to take it day by day to finally be back where he belongs.

Following the injury, Johnson was carted off the field, staring ahead with his chin tucked into his shoulder pads.

He spent the night of the game at the hospital in Minnesota. In the morning, Johnson had his first surgery. A complication put pressure on his leg, and they thought they might have to amputate, but Johnson’s team of doctors saved his leg — and his career.

“I remember being in the hospital and went through a couple of

parents, who helped him change his clothes and do everything else he suddenly couldn’t.

When spring practice rolled around, Johnson thought he was going to be ready.

But he wasn’t.

“I was frustrated that I couldn’t play,” Johnson said. “All the long hours of rehab, the seven days a week, three hours in the training room just grinding away. Not being seen and just kind of watching everybody do their thing.”

A couple weeks after UNC wrapped up spring camp, at the beginning of summer, Johnson was able to start running again. He was getting better.

“I think the progression is very gradual,” Belichick said. “It’s one percent at a time, but at some point he’s crossed that threshold and so he’ll be ready to participate out there.”

On Aug. 2, the first day of fall camp, Johnson joined his teammates in a red No. 14 pinnie.

He was thrilled to be back on the field. He finally felt like himself again.

“It’s actually quite inspiring,” redshirt senior offensive lineman Austin Blaske said. “Watching him work and coming to work every single day and busting his butt.”

Now, Johnson is back to where he was last fall — competing for a starting quarterback role.

“I set my mind on, ‘I’m going to be ready for this season.’ That’s where I am.”

Max Johnson

UNC football graduate quarterback

surgeries,” Johnson said. “It was tough, man, laying there on the bed, not knowing what was going to happen.”

Johnson was eventually cleared to return to Chapel Hill in September. He didn’t take his first steps until early-to-mid-October following five total surgeries.

In his fifth year of college, Johnson was back in the care of his

He focused on being consistent. Not making the bad plays worse. Focusing on doing what the coaches are telling him, taking the checkdown when it’s there.

“Seeing him on the field in Minnesota last year and then seeing where he’s at right now is remarkable, from the standpoint of what he did in the training room,” offensive coordinator Freddie Kitchens said. “I know from experience that injuries like that, it puts a toll on you from a mental standpoint also. For him to recover mentally and physically, the way he’s done, has been remarkable.”

For Johnson, the journey has been long, but he’s still playing.

He’s back where he belongs.

“I set my mind on, ‘I’m going to be ready for this season,’” Johnson said. “That’s where I am.”

X: @mdmaynard74  
@beckettbrant



DTH FILE/HEATHER DIEHL  
UNC quarterback Max Johnson.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SOUTH ALABAMA ATHLETICS  
UNC quarterback Gio Lopez.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SOUTH ALABAMA ATHLETICS  
UNC quarterback Gio



LEADERSHIP STYLE

# Three themes to watch for in Bill Belichick’s first game

UNC will play TCU Monday at 8 p.m. to kick off a new era

By Jack Morris  
Senior Writer

The wait is over. On Monday night, first-year collegiate head coach Bill Belichick and North Carolina football will begin their 2025 campaign against TCU at Kenan Stadium with kickoff set for 8 p.m. While the Tar Heels only went 6-7 last season compared to TCU’s 9-4, the matchup and its major headlines have nothing to do with the past and everything to do with the present. Since mid-December, when Belichick was announced as the newest head coach for UNC, all the attention has been on opening night. Here are three things to watch for heading into the season-opener:

## Welcome Bill Belichick

After a long offseason of anticipation, the new leadership is approaching its first test. North Carolina will get a stand-alone primetime game to ring in the next era of Tar Heel football, with all eyes centered on Kenan Stadium. While the result and final statistics are key in learning about how this season might go, it will be important to pay attention to how Belichick runs the show at the collegiate level. There are still a lot of question marks that won’t be answered until UNC takes the field, including how the Tar Heels will look in terms of play calling, game management

and substitutions under a staff with extensive NFL experience. In the locker room, though, it’s all about silencing the outside noise and finding a way to start 1-0. “The pressure is to win,” sophomore wide receiver Jordan Shipp said. “It doesn’t matter who’s coaching, who’s playing, [we] just want to win. That’s the biggest thing.”

## Identifying the playmakers

The Tar Heels lost their leading passer, rusher and receiver from 2024,

“The pressure is to win. It doesn’t matter who’s coaching, who’s playing, [we] just want to win. That’s the biggest thing.”

Jordan Shipp  
Sophomore wide receiver

making way for new players to take over this season. Belichick brought in 41 transfers in the portal, but major question marks remain in identifying who will emerge and become a key contributor against TCU and throughout the year. Under center, redshirt sophomore Gio Lopez — a transfer from South Alabama — and graduate quarterback Max Johnson are two names to watch, as both are still battling for the starting quarterback position. Sophomore running back Davion Gause, who backed up First-Team All-ACC superstar Omarion Hampton last season, is back in Chapel Hill and could potentially inherit an increased workload. Gause ran for 326 yards on 67 carries last season, while adding four touchdowns. In terms of pass catchers, Shipp and redshirt senior Kobe Paysour are two returning wide receivers to note.

Shipp was a former four-star recruit in the class of 2024 and recorded nine catches for 114 yards with one touchdown last season. Out of the portal, redshirt sophomore running back Benjamin Hall — a Michigan transfer — may also compete for carries, while redshirt sophomore Aziah Johnson enters the picture from Michigan State as the potential starting slot wide receiver. “[We have] 70 guys that weren’t on last year’s team,” Belichick said. “It’s a lot of new people to get up to speed in terms of communication, the way we practice [and] techniques. The coaches have done a good job of closing that gap.” All eyes will be on who rises to the occasion when the Horned Frogs come to town on Monday night.

## Defensive improvement

Over the past four seasons, North Carolina has only ranked in the top 10 for points per game allowed in the ACC one time. Last year, UNC ranked 72nd nationally in team defense. That side of the ball has been a head-scratching factor in consecutive years for the Tar Heels, and it is crucial that new defensive coordinator Steve Belichick improves the unit in his first year. Newcomers such as sophomore linebacker Khmori House, redshirt senior defensive lineman Pryce Yates and redshirt senior defensive back Thaddeus Dixon are highly-rated transfers who are primed to turn the defense around. “[Coach Steve Belichick] is really good at knowing his players, knowing

what we’re good at, using us, and being able to let us play free,” House said. “And he’s a great playcaller.” That said, UNC will have its hands full with quarterback Josh Hoover and the TCU offense. The Horned Frogs ranked eighth in total passing offense in 2024. Last season as a sophomore, Hoover threw for 3,949 yards, 27 touchdowns and 11 interceptions. The new personnel and scheme will show the measure of improvement from the get-go for the Tar Heels and provide a view of how the defense will perform this season.

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Head coach Bill Belichick of the Tar Heels. Photo by Peyton Williams/Getty Images

A large crowd of fans at a football game, many wearing blue and white gear, cheering and holding up foam fingers. The scene is captured in black and white, emphasizing the energy and scale of the event.

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# VICTORY FORMATION

## Quarterback battle is back on

Three key players bring versatility, experience and potential

By Caleb Schalliol  
Staff Writer

READ ON PAGE 11

## The receiving room is wide open

New faces fight for J.J. Jones' empty slot

By Katie Reeves  
Staff Writer

READ ON PAGE 11

## Familiar face set to lead backfield

Davion Gause is the likely starting back this season

By Lauren Mallett  
Staff Writer

READ ON PAGE 11

## Tar Heels establish identity in the trenches

Coaches emphasize competition on offensive line

By Lauren Weider  
Staff Writer

READ ON PAGE 12

## Transfers overhaul defensive line

Khmore House and Andrew Simpson highlight front seven

By Josh Markotich  
Staff Writer

READ ON PAGE 12

## Veterans headline secondary

Cornerbacks, safeties sharpen technique and discipline

By Sophia Gray  
Staff Writer

READ ON PAGE 12

DTH DESIGN/AUBREY WORD

PHOTOS FROM @WILLHARD\_31, @GIOLOPEZ7, @KHMORI, @1K.SHIPPP, DTH/AVA SHARON, @AUSTIN\_BLASKES8, @BOSSMANBOOMIN, AND @UNCFOOTBALL

Back row, left to right: UNC defensive back Will Hardy, UNC quarterback Gio Lopez, UNC linebacker Khmore House, UNC wide receiver Jordan Shipp.

Front Row, left to right: UNC linebacker Khmore House, UNC running back Davion Gause, UNC center Austin Blaske, UNC defensive back Thaddeus Dixon.



KICKERS

Breaking down North Carolina’s 2025 special teams unit

Veteran players bring consistency for the Tar Heels

By Brian D’Aguanno  
Assistant Sports Editor  
and Colette Boyden  
Staff Writer

Kicking, returning and punting play a major role in field position and momentum. With the 2025 season approaching, here’s a breakdown of what to watch and the players who could make a difference on special teams for North Carolina this year.

Last year in the season opener against Minnesota, kicker Noah Burnette went 4-for-4 on field goal attempts in North Carolina’s 19-17 victory, showcasing the important role that kicking plays in the outcome of games. This offseason, Burnette transferred to Notre Dame, creating an opening at the position heading into the season.

This fall, senior Rece Verhoff will be one of the most important names to watch with the starting kicker spot open. Verhoff has built a reputation as a steady kicker, playing the previous three seasons with Marshall, where he converted on 105 of 107 point-after-attempts. Last season, the 5-foot-11 kicker made 73.7 percent of his field goal attempts, with a 51-yard career-long against Georgia Southern on Oct. 12 in a one point loss. On 42 kickoffs,

Verhoff pinned 29 for touchbacks, a rate of a little over 69 percent. Establishing a consistent kicking game will help in close games, and the Tar Heels will look to Verhoff to provide that.

Punt and kickoff returns can change the pace of a game in seconds. A long return creates energy for the sideline and sets up easier scoring opportunities.

In 2024, North Carolina’s primary kick returners were defensive back Alijah Huzzie and wide receiver Chris Culliver. With Huzzie leaving for the NFL, Culliver will assume a bigger role this year. Last season, Culliver boasted an impressive return stat line of 242 yards and two touchdowns on five attempts.

Alongside Culliver, look for redshirt first-year wide receiver Javarius Green to be the second returner. Green had five returns last year for 100 yards, showcasing his potential to become an impact player in the area.

This is where senior punter Tom Maginness comes into the picture. Last season, Maginness had 51 punts with an average of 41.1 yards per punt, including a long of 65 yards.

The Tar Heels must improve in the punting department this season though. In 2024, North Carolina ranked 16th in the ACC in net yards per punt with 35.9. With Maginness entering his third season and the introduction of a new coaching staff, look for UNC to build on last year’s production.

A reliable kicker or a standout coverage player can be the margin between winning and losing.

“A reliable kicker or a standout coverage player can be the margin between winning and losing.”

Colette Boyden  
Staff Writer

For 2025, Verhoff provides the scoring piece. He gives the team a dependable option in the kicking game, one that could decide late-season conference matchups. Meanwhile, Maginness adds versatility to a North Carolina punting attack that must take the next step this year.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRIS CULLIVER  
UNC wide receiver Chris Culliver.

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# Evaluating North Carolina's options at quarterback

Continued from Page 8

After an underwhelming performance at quarterback last year, North Carolina is headed into the 2025 season with three promising options.

After graduate Max Johnson went down with a broken leg in the third quarter of UNC's week one matchup against Minnesota, then-sophomore Connor Harrell started the next two games, eventually losing the starting job to backup then-senior Jacoby Criswell before gaining it back to finish out the 6-7 season. The three combined for 22 touchdowns and 8 interceptions.

With Harrell and Criswell both having entered the transfer portal in the offseason, UNC's quarterback battle has reignited.

## Gio Lopez

Redshirt sophomore Gio Lopez, a transfer from the University of South Alabama, has made a great case for the starting job at UNC.

While not as experienced as Johnson, Lopez made waves in his first two years at South Alabama, starting in 12 games. He earned the starting job in his second year, throwing for 2,559 yards and 18 touchdowns, as well as rushing for 465 yards and seven touchdowns in the 11 games he played.

The quarterback transfer for the Tar Heels boasts high mobility in and out of the pocket with his ability to easily shed defenders while keeping his eyes downfield.

A dual-threat with a strong arm, Lopez has the ability to bomb throws downfield while also keeping defenders on their toes with a complete ability to rush. Throughout his two years at South Alabama, he tallied 619 rushing yards.

But as the season approaches, will Lopez's game be able to translate to facing Power Four competition? With the recent hiring of head coach Bill Belichick and the No. 9 ranked transfer class according to 247Sports, Lopez likely has the necessary coaching and talent at his disposal to contend with stronger teams. If he can make the transition, Lopez has both the resume and the skills necessary to be UNC's starting signal caller.

## Max Johnson

Graduate Max Johnson has made a tremendous amount of progress since his injury against Minnesota last year.

A sixth-year senior this upcoming season, Johnson has ample experience starting for big-time programs. After starting two games his first year at LSU, Johnson started all 12 games for the Tigers his second

year, racking up an impressive 2,814 yards and 27 touchdowns.

After recovering from an injury, Johnson transferred to North Carolina, hoping to play for one year before declaring for the NFL draft. But that plan changed three quarters into his tenure at UNC when Johnson dropped back to pass and had his leg pinned under two defenders, breaking his femur and ending his season. While the recovery was long, Johnson is back again for the three-way quarterback battle.

Johnson's greatest strength lies in his ball placement, particularly over the middle of the field. His high-accuracy throws are what allowed him to rack up the touchdowns at LSU, throwing well-layered balls and leaving very little margin of error for defenses, throwing only six picks in his 12 starts in 2021 for the Tigers. His experience as a sixth-year player that has routinely thrown against highly ranked teams sets him apart from the rest of the quarterbacks on North Carolina's depth chart.

Assuming he has fully recovered and can remain healthy, Johnson remains a capable veteran option at quarterback for the 2025 season.

## Bryce Baker

Of the three quarterbacks vying for

the starting position, first-year Bryce Baker is the biggest unknown.

While he doesn't have a resume of college football to fall back on, he does have an abundance of talent and high-level potential. Coming out of high school, Baker was ranked the nation's 74th best player, as well as the 11th quarterback overall by On3.

Throughout his time at East Forsyth High School, Baker led the Eagles to a 23-3 record and two conference championships, throwing for 3,082 yards and 39 touchdowns his junior year and 3,523 yards and 40 touchdowns his senior year.

A well-rounded player, Baker is a talented rusher who has an arm that should allow him to translate well to the college level.

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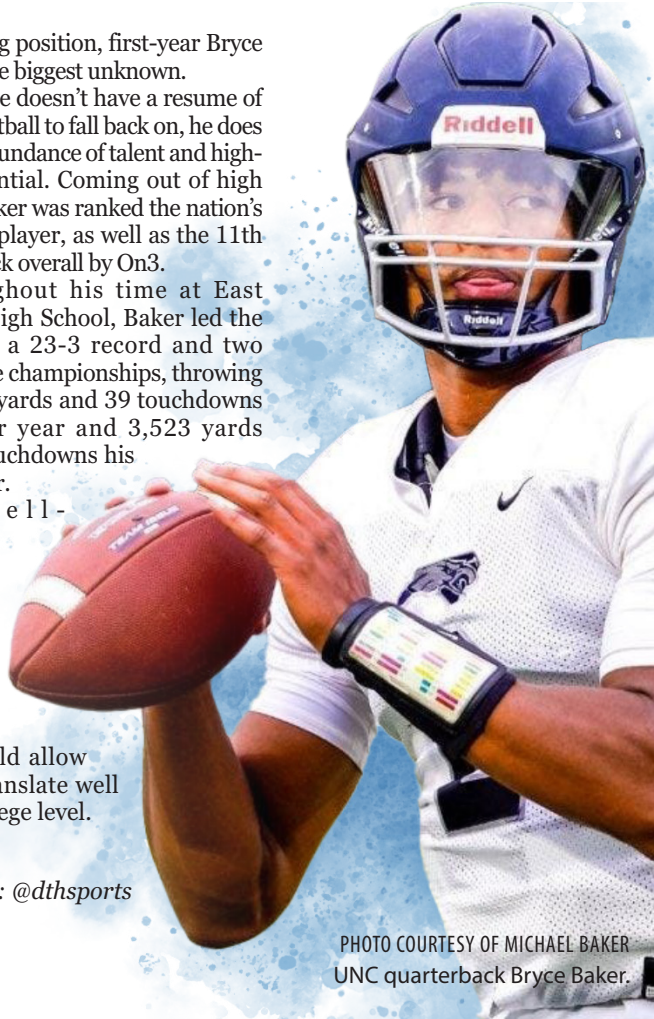


PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL BAKER  
UNC quarterback Bryce Baker.

# Experienced receiving core will bolster offense

Continued from Page 8

Finishing with the seventh-best offense in the ACC in 2024, UNC football will look to improve this year with the help of some experienced receivers and promising new additions. While the starting quarterback job is still up for grabs, North Carolina's receiving core will look to bring experience and talent to the offense.

With North Carolina's top three receiving threats gone from last year, the receiving room is wide open entering the 2025 season.

North Carolina is looking for someone to replace J.J. Jones, who was the team's leading receiver during the 2024 season. The most likely fit is sophomore Jordan Shipp, who looks to build off his first-year campaign. Last year, Shipp played in nearly every game for the Tar Heels and ended the season with nine catches for 114 yards and a touchdown. Entering 2025, the former four-star recruit will look to step up as UNC's top wide receiver, fulfilling his potential to be a key part of the Tar Heel offense.

Next up at the position is redshirt senior wide receiver Kobe Paysour, who is entering his fifth season at UNC. Paysour returns to the team as the only receiver remaining who played in all 13 games for the Tar Heels in 2024. Having a reception in 11 out of 13 games and a total of 365 receiving yards, Paysour brings consistency to the room which will be important for the new look offense as they search for a new lead receiver.

The Tar Heels also added some depth with redshirt sophomore wide receiver Aziah Johnson, who transferred to UNC after two seasons at Michigan State. Johnson saw action in 12 games for the Spartans in 2024, posting 16 receptions for 276 yards and two touchdowns. His ability provides a potential starting option for the Tar Heels and Johnson could carve out a meaningful pass catching role this year.

Adding to the experience is junior wide receiver Chris Culliver,

who looks to improve following his breakout performance the season finale against N.C. State — two receptions for 96 yards and a touchdown. Culliver didn't see the field much last season with only six catches, but following his breakout performance, he will look to become a valuable contributor.

At the tight end position, UNC has large shoes to fill after losing both John Copenhaver and Bryson Nesbit to the NFL, who accounted for nearly all of the production in 2024.

Redshirt junior Jake Johnson is returning for the 2025 season. Johnson transferred to UNC in 2023 and was ranked as the fourth overall tight end in the portal according to 247Sports. Although he finished last season with only two receptions, Johnson had a stellar 2023 season with the Aggies, where he recorded 24 receptions for 235 yards and four touchdowns. Johnson looks to repeat that kind of season as he leads a new group of tight ends. With both Copenhaver and Nesbit gone, look for Johnson to step up as North Carolina's top tight end target.

The Tar Heels also added numerous new players through the transfer portal to add some depth to the position. Redshirt sophomore Connor Cox transferred to North Carolina and has three years of eligibility remaining. While at South Carolina, Cox appeared in nine games, recording one reception and a touchdown.

Redshirt sophomore Shamar Easter joined the Tar Heels from Arkansas, where he only appeared in one game. Easter was a four-star prospect and the second ranked tight end recruit in Arkansas in 2023 per 247Sports.

Despite losing production from last year, the new Tar Heel receiving core will look to bolster an offense that averaged just over 224 passing yards per game last season in the ACC.

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# Running backs seek to fill void left by Omarion Hampton

Continued from Page 8

With the departure of last year's star running-back Omarion Hampton, who was selected 22nd overall in the 2025 NFL draft by the Los Angeles Chargers, incoming Tar Heels and returning players have big shoes to fill in the backfield this upcoming season. Fortunately, the team has great potential with a strong set of new recruits and a formidable group of returning backs.

Under new leadership with head coach Bill Belichick starting his first season at North Carolina, the team also has the challenge of adapting to changes in its coaching staff. New offensive coordinator Freddie Kitchens has been working on the team's coaching staff since 2023, when he joined as their run game coordinator and tight ends coach. Kitchens brings an impressive 16 years of NFL coaching experience to the table having previously served as the Cleveland Browns head coach, and attended the Super Bowl during his time with the Arizona Cardinals as the tight ends coach. He will also be North Carolina's tight ends coach this season.

Natrone Means, the new running backs coach, brings two decades of coaching expertise to his new role. Having formerly worked as an offensive assistant for North Carolina, Means begins his fifth year working with the Tar Heels this season.

Notable returning backs for the upcoming season include sophomore Davion Gause and redshirt senior Caleb Hood. Gause, likely the starting running back this season, looks to continue his success after an impressive first year. During his first season with the Tar Heels, Gause recorded 326 rushing yards on 67 carries and scored four touchdowns. He averaged 4.9 yards per rushing attempt, slightly ahead of star Hampton's 4.6 in his first year.

Last season, Gause showcased his potential in UNC's home opener against UNC Charlotte, where he rushed for 105 yards and one touchdown on 16 carries.

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Hood, on the other hand, has racked up a total of 471 rushing yards, 165 receiving yards and three touchdowns during his four year career with the Tar Heels. Despite his struggles with a season-ending upper-body injury during his sophomore season at UNC, Hood has still managed to make a few plays. Last season, he rushed for 81 yards on just 18 attempts. Averaging 4.8 yards per carry on 98 rushing attempts overall, he stands not far behind Gause.

The new recruits hoping to bring a spark to North Carolina's backfield include first-year Demon June and redshirt sophomore transfer Benjamin Hall from the University of Michigan.

During his two seasons with the Michigan Wolverines, Hall totaled 141 rushing yards and 12 receiving yards.

In his first season, he averaged 4.6 yards per carry. Hall also brings a degree of physicality to this set of running backs; at 235 pounds, he could likely be a power back and feature in goal line situations. Hall is a likely second option behind Gause for the starting role.

June is a three-star prospect from Jacksonville, N.C. Over the course of his high school career, he averaged nine rushing yards per carry and 12.5 receiving yards per reception, and scored a total of 93 touchdowns.

This year's set of running backs is a lively mix of both returning players and fresh faces all hoping to revitalize UNC's offense. While the team has a lot of change to reckon with following Hampton's exit and coaching changes, this group of new and returning backs will get a chance to make an impact under strong leadership.



DTH/AMANDA KIRKPATRICK  
UNC running back Davion Gause.



# Daniel King, Aidan Banfield spearhead offensive line

Continued from Page 9

When Bill Belichick and Michael Lombardi arrived at UNC, they made it clear where North Carolina's turnaround must begin: from the lines out. It's



PHOTO FROM @D14Y  
UNC offensive lineman Daniel King.

been a common theme the two have shared throughout the offseason to help the Tar Heels establish their identity in the trenches.

UNC enters the season with 70 players joining the program. They have fostered competition on the line in preseason practices as the Tar Heels inch closer to their Sept. 1 season opener.

"We kind of welcome competition," offensive coordinator Freddie Kitchens said. "Because we think you got two guys competing at guard, three guys competing at guard, whatever it may be, it's going to make all three of those guys better. Or it shows itself, and you show who ends up being the starter or second team."

Key among these newcomers is redshirt senior Daniel King, a 4-star transfer who entered the portal with one year of eligibility left and quickly committed to UNC. King is rated as the No. 8 offensive tackle and the No. 54 overall transfer in the country.

Another standout transfer is redshirt senior lineman Christo Kelly, who became the first commit to UNC under Belichick in December. At Holy Cross, Kelly started all 12 games in 2024 and captained an offensive line that surrendered only 14 sacks last season. With an average of 1.08 sacks per game — 11th best nationally and the lowest in the Patriot League — Kelly received a First Team All-Patriot League selection.

First-year Trey Blue, a three-star offensive lineman from Cary, also joins the UNC offensive line this year. Rated 54th for his position

in the nation and 24th in North Carolina, Blue committed to UNC early, turning down offers from Charlotte and Maryland.

While new transfers are making their presence felt on the offensive line, veterans are stepping up as well, bringing energy and leadership to the group.

Among these is redshirt senior lineman Austin Blaske, who is returning to Chapel Hill for his final year following a 2024 season where he started in 12 games and posted an 84.6 pass blocking rate. Although he injured his foot in fall camp, Blaske should join the line during the season. Alongside Blaske on the interior is sophomore lineman Aidan Banfield, who emerged last season as a reliable piece up front. Starting in 11 games during his debut season, he earned the Football Writer Association of America Freshman All American Honors — making him the first lineman in UNC program history to claim the award.

First-year Peter Pesansky, who, according to Tar Heel 247 recently switched from the defensive to the offensive line, was the nation's 24th-best defensive lineman coming out of high school.

Redshirt sophomore lineman Miles McVay, redshirt junior lineman William Boone and redshirt senior lineman Jakai Moore are also in the mix, each vying for a spot in the rotation as the line takes shape.

As decisions are made, every practice has become a chance to prove oneself. Belichick has been adamant that spots will not be awarded by default.

"Nobody's entitled to it," Belichick said. "Nobody's been given anything. The player who plays the best and earns that playing time, will get it."

X: @dthsports

# Defensive front renewed by transfers

Continued from Page 9

Along with the various changes to the UNC locker room this offseason, the North Carolina defense will be bringing an overhauled defensive line and linebacker group onto the field led by three fresh faces: senior defensive lineman Pryce Yates, redshirt senior linebacker Andrew Simpson and sophomore linebacker Khmori House.

The linebacker position, headlined by Power Echols and Amare Campbell in the 2024 campaign, was one of the more consistent pieces to a Tar Heel defense that struggled last season. Echols and Campbell, who recorded a combined 152 total tackles, seven sacks and one interception, are passing the torch to the three transfers who will be key for success in the fall.

Simpson, a 6-foot veteran, will bring leadership and intensity to the UNC defense. The transfer from Boise State, who appeared in 40 total games for the Broncos, is listed on the Dick Butkus Award preseason watch list, which is given to the most impactful linebackers in all levels of football. His most notable season was his sophomore year, when he earned All-Mountain West second team honors and was named a third team All-American by College Football Network. That season, Simpson recorded 66 total tackles, 6.5 sacks, two forced fumbles and two interceptions.

Joining Simpson is House, who is already acquainted with new defensive coordinator Steve Belichick. The sophomore, who transferred from the University of Washington, played under Belichick for one season. With the Huskies, House registered 33 tackles, one forced fumble and one interception all in his first year of college football. When he entered the transfer portal, 247Sports listed House as the third-best linebacker transfer in the country.

Along with new faces at the linebacker position, the defensive line also faces a plethora of change.

This year's defensive line will only include one returning player — redshirt first-year Leroy Jackson — and includes seven true first-year players on the roster, as well as a projected starting core made up almost entirely of transfers.

One key piece of the defensive line will be Yates, who had 108 total tackles, 12.5 sacks and three forced fumbles during his three years at the UConn. Sophomore transfer D'Antre Robinson will be another key addition to UNC's defensive line. In his lone season with the Florida Gators, he had 16 total tackles and one sack. The most notable losses for this year's defense are Beau Atkinson, Kaimon Rucker and Jahvaree Ritzie, who led the 2024 Tar Heels in sacks with a combined 20.

**"North Carolina defense will be bringing an overhauled defensive line and linebacker group not on the field."**

Josh Markotich  
Staff writer

The looming question, however, is how the two positions will perform under defensive coordinator Belichick. During his time at the University of Washington,

Belichick transformed the Huskies into a defensive side that allowed an average of 328 yards per game in 2024. In comparison, UNC's defense gave up an average of 376 yards per game last year. For a North Carolina defense that underperformed last season, Belichick aims to bring his expertise to the Tar Heel squad in hopes of turning the unit into a top-tier defense despite their new roster.

One of the keys to Belichick's defensive success has been his use of a versatile defense. During his time with the Huskies, he would often put his linebackers at the defensive end to attack offensive weakness. For the Tar Heels, this could mean a greater number of reps for players who are performing at a higher level.

While the North Carolina defensive line and linebacker rooms both have a significantly different look than last year, they will hope to make an immediate impact for the Tar Heels.

X: @dthsports

# Steve Belichick, new coaching staff revamp UNC defense

Continued from Page 9

With a new coaching staff leading the way, the arrival of key transfers and several seasoned players returning, North Carolina football is set to redefine its defensive identity.

The secondary will take on a fresh approach under first-year defensive coordinator Steve Belichick, who followed his father to Chapel Hill and joined the Tar Heels in December after a season as the defensive coordinator for the University of Washington. He will work with the new secondaries coach Brian Belichick, who was previously the safeties coach for the New England Patriots.

The blend of experience and new faces sets the stage for a refreshed and competitive secondary for North Carolina.

North Carolina picked up key additions to their roster in the transfer portal. One of those players to watch out for is Washington transfer Thaddeus Dixon — the third best cornerback transfer in the nation according to 247Sports — who followed his former defensive coordinator to North Carolina.

Before transferring to UNC, Dixon spent two seasons with the Huskies, earning honorable mention All-Big Ten honors in 2024. During those two seasons, he recorded two interceptions, 16 pass breakups and 69 tackles. Dixon posted a career-high eight tackles and forced a fumble against Oregon at the end of the 2024 season.

Along with the new additions, leaders are emerging among the returning players to continue to help the Tar Heels limit the passing game. Senior cornerback Marcus Allen, junior cornerback Kaleb Cost and senior safety Will Hardy,

**"North Carolina football is set to redefine its defensive identity."**

Sophia Gray  
Staff writer

three crucial contributors from last year's squad, will likely get the opportunity to grow their impact under the new coaching staff.

Allen has developed into a reliable defensive option. He started all 13 games his sophomore season, posting 49 tackles, eight pass breakups and an interception.

In 2024, Allen continued to make pivotal plays and lead the team with seven tackles in the home-opener win against Charlotte, showing strong coverage skills. He played in 12 games, tallying two interceptions and 26 solo tackles. As one of the few players who has spent four years at UNC, Allen brings a veteran presence to the secondary.

Cost has also quickly emerged and joined Allen as a playmaker in just his first two seasons. After contributing on special teams the majority of his freshman year, he made the transition to the secondary in North Carolina's 2023 bowl game against West Virginia.

The cornerback stepped up in 2024, racking up seven or more tackles in five games, including a pick-six against Pittsburgh and disrupting the opposing offense with pass breakups.

Hardy, another fourth year Tar Heel, played in all 13 games last season and started in two. A versatile free safety, Hardy recorded six tackles in a start at Virginia and stepped up in UNC's bowl game, recording seven tackles.

With a hefty influx of transfers joining the defensive backfield, building chemistry and cohesion will be just as important as improving fundamentals. As the group continues to settle in, the team's focus remains on sharpening technique and creating a more disciplined, unified unit.

Head coach Bill Belichick and the defensive backs are aiming to revamp North Carolina's defense this season with a stronger presence in the secondary. If they can avoid injuries, UNC's secondary could become a key difference-maker in this upcoming season.



PHOTO FROM @BOSSMANBOOMIN  
UNC defensive back.

X: @dthsports



STAR PLAYER

# Thaddeus Dixon brings competitive edge to North Carolina’s defense

Senior cornerback’s journey to being one of college football’s best

By Alexandra Jones  
Senior Writer

From junior college to the national championship game, redshirt senior cornerback Thaddeus Dixon had to fight for an opportunity at every level. No matter the league, Dixon kept the same hard working mindset through it all. “Football is gonna be football,” Dixon said. “No matter how big the stage is, I mean, you still gotta go out there and play.” With College Football Playoff experience at the University of Washington in 2023, Dixon brings a hard-nosed mentality to the field for North Carolina. The Los Angeles native’s physical and versatile play style shown throughout his career will be pivotal for UNC this season. In two seasons at Washington, Dixon recorded 69 tackles, 16 pass deflections and two interceptions, earning him an All-Big Ten honorable mention as a true senior. “He’s a relentless player,” sophomore linebacker Khmori House said. “I think he’s a very smart, intelligent player. He’s able to understand formations, understand great instincts. He’s an all-around good football player.” But Dixon had to fight his way to this spot. After graduating from La Mirada High School in 2020, Dixon didn’t have many options at the Division I level due to academic and maturity issues. As a result, he ended up committing

to Long Beach City College (LBCC), with former head coach Brett Peabody taking a chance on the budding star. “He was not getting out on scholarship,” Peabody said. “So we obviously started recruiting. He was one of the better athletes in the area. He really excelled on both sides of the football, offensively and defensively.” Peabody saw the cornerback’s potential from day one. Even though issues off the field slowed his recruitment, Peabody said it was not an issue at LBCC. Dixon’s talent was seemingly always there – he just needed to fine tune the little things to get to the next level. Dixon put up impressive numbers at LBCC, according to Peabody. With a competitive nature and athletic frame, he was a star for the Vikings. This competitive nature was on display during his first year at LBCC, when they were playing top-ranked Riverside City College. Down by two touchdowns, Dixon was still in the game. He rushed on a swing pass and leveled the running back. “When you can play as hard as you can, knowing that the outcome is probably already decided, that’s going to be a great player,” Dixon’s former position coach and LBCC head coach Marques Cooper said. Dixon recorded 42 tackles and three interceptions over 11 games as a sophomore at LBCC. He found himself ranked as a top ten junior college cornerback and top 50 junior college prospect by both ESPN and 247Sports. He proceeded to enter the transfer portal and committed to the University of Washington in December 2022. He played two seasons with the Huskies, including the 2023 national

championship loss against Michigan where he recorded two tackles. The standout cornerback then made his way to Chapel Hill in January 2025. And he wasn’t alone. Defensive coordinator Steve Belichick and House worked alongside Dixon at Washington, and now all three look to revamp North Carolina’s defensive unit. “Being able to learn from a guy like that who has so much football knowledge, so much knowledge of the game and scheme and stuff like that, I feel like I’m going to make it to the next level as far as understanding the game, other offensive coordinators and the ins and outs of these things,” Dixon said. Still, in Chapel Hill, it’s the little things for Dixon. Raised in a bustling city, he describes North Carolina as smooth, quiet and nice, enjoying the state’s nature, including going fishing with his teammates. Even in a new environment, Dixon works on the building blocks with a consistent coaching staff day by day. By honing his press coverage ability and hands in the offseason, Dixon looks to win each matchup. Because, for Dixon, one second of movement, one extra rep and one play in practice can all change the course of a season. “You can’t make plays on Saturdays until you make plays in the offseason, working hard,” Dixon said. “I just tell guys [to] keep the main thing the main thing. Everybody strives every day trying to get better, and on Saturdays, everything’s going to take care of itself.”

X: @alexjdjones



PHOTO FROM @BOSSMANBOOMIN  
UNC defensive back Thaddeus Dixon.



PHOTO FROM @KHMORI  
UNC linebacker Khmori House.

STANDOUT

# Khmori House makes immediate impact on UNC football

Sophomore transfer makes new waves at linebacker

By Marvin Lee  
Staff Writer

Last year, UNC’s defense was ranked 72nd in FBS football; Khmori House is on a mission to change that. The sophomore linebacker was considered the future of the defense at Washington. But, five days after Bill Belichick was hired as the head coach at North Carolina, House entered the transfer portal. Then, just one day before his defensive coordinator at Washington — Steve Belichick — was confirmed as the defensive coordinator at North Carolina, House committed to UNC. Now he’s the anchor in Chapel Hill. “I felt like this was the best decision for me, you know what I’m saying?” House said. “I think I was one of the first guys here, and once I saw some of my other teammates hop in that portal, that’s when I was trying to get them.” Khmori, rated as a three-star recruit in 2024 out of St. John Bosco High School in California and a four-star transfer according to 247Sports, had an unusually prolific first year as a three-star playing in the Power Four. House played in all 12 regular-season games for UW, finishing with 33 total tackles, 19 solo tackles, a forced fumble and an interception. He also earned an honorable mention on College Football Network’s Freshman All-American list.

House entered the portal prior to Washington’s bowl game but was still named the team’s Travis Spring Most Outstanding Freshman Award. Despite a losing record, House was part of a defense that was ranked 28th in the nation — up from 56th the year before. After recording three tackles and an interception in a 24-5 win over Northwestern University in Washington’s Big Ten opener, House was named the conference freshman of the week. UW teammates praised his “big voice” and how he “just bring[s] an energy to the room,” according to Huskies Wire. It’s a feeling and impact that has been quickly felt by his UNC teammates. “He was already familiar with a lot of stuff that Steve brought in and that Carolina brought in the first few months,” redshirt senior linebacker Andrew Simpson, who played with him at St. John Bosco, said. “He’s been guiding me the way I would expect a vet to do.” House was the first Husky to commit to North Carolina, but a pack quickly followed. Joining him are redshirt first-year wide receiver Jason Robinson, sophomore defensive back Peyton Waters and redshirt senior defensive back Thaddeus Dixon. Those players in some way all credit Steve Belichick for leading them to the Tar Heels, but House put a good word in for UNC to his former teammates. House now lives with two of his fellow UW transfers. House, who has three years of eligibility remaining, figures to lead

UNC’s defense this year right alongside former Huskies teammate Dixon. The Belichick connection should only enhance the defensive chemistry. “Thad and Khmori, too, we developed great relationships with all those guys,” Steve Belichick said. “I try to do that with all my players, so we’re blessed to have them here with us on this team.” Although an official depth chart has yet to be released, House is expected to start at weakside linebacker alongside redshirt senior Andrew Simpson at middle linebacker in Belichick’s 4-2-5 defense. The scheme will seek to take advantage of House’s speed at 6 feet and a slender — for a linebacker — 215 pounds. House will look to improve UNC’s pocket pressure, a department the team faltered in last year. His skills were evident in Washington’s win over USC last November, where on a fourth-and-goal he tackled the USC running back for a 3-yard loss at the goal line to seal the victory for the Huskies. The linebacker is sure to impress UNC fans both on and off the field this season, but for now, he’s the one impressed with Chapel Hill. The California transplant has nothing but good things to say about his new home down south. “I think it’s a different area,” House said. “I’m from a city area, but it’s been a great adjustment. Everybody here, the people in the South is nice, fans are great, so man, it’s a great adjustment, it’s been smooth.”

X: @marvinlee



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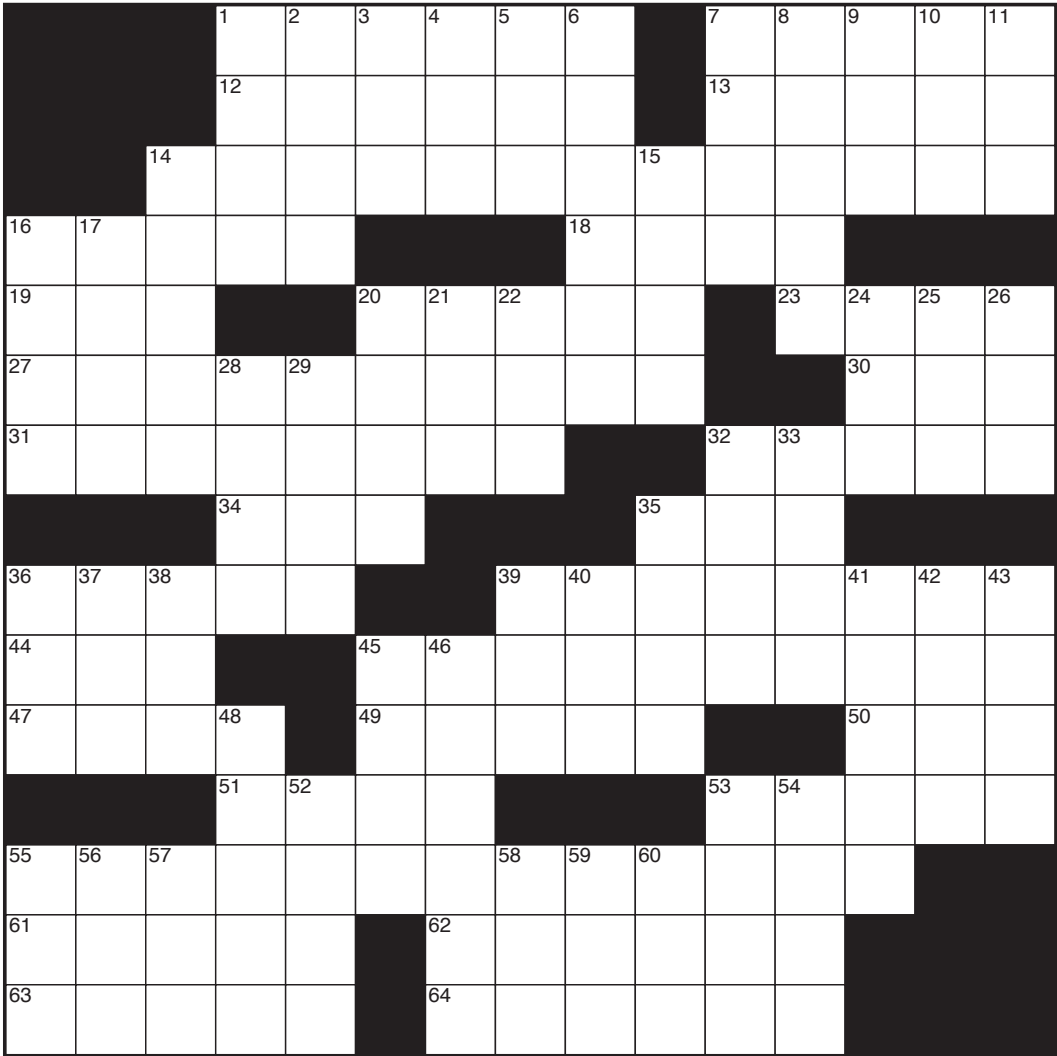
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Resume to [luasesmario@gmail.com](mailto:luasesmario@gmail.com). Earn \$1500 weekly



“Tar Heel Touchdowns”

This week’s puzzle was created by Rachel Clark, a senior studying Philosophy and Russian.

ACROSS

- 1 Mid-life \_\_\_\_
- 7 Color with a matching flower
- 12 Joey, Dee Dee or Johnny in a 70s punk band
- 13 Make a speech
- 14 Point-based program that awards UNC vs Duke basketball tickets
- 16 Join together
- 18 Biblical book containing the Pentecost
- 19 Org
- 20 Trash
- 23 What one does to a garden or a bar?
- 27 UNC’s Tyler Thompson or Khmori House
- 30 Golf metric
- 31 Government system of Vietnam and Cuba
- 32 Luminously dazzling
- 34 Ideology suffix
- 35 With “date,” characteristic of a bill or baby
- 36 Geologic time unit
- 39 European country divorced from its current neighbor in 1993
- 44 Type of strip lights banned

- in UNC dorms
- 45 Pre-game gathering around Kenan Stadium
- 47 Maple View ice cream spot
- 49 Tears or breaks something violently
- 50 “Kia \_\_\_\_,” New Zealand greeting
- 51 Black and white cookie That collaborated with Post Malone
- 53 Heat and Snow in “The Year Without a Santa Claus”
- 55 Newest UNC Football coach
- 61 Camera company that filed for bankruptcy in 2012
- 62 Deranged
- 63 Aaron or Raymond, for example
- 64 Awry

DOWN

- 1 Celtic cliff
- 2 \_\_\_\_ Beauty, Gomez’s makeup line
- 3 “It seems to me...,” online
- 4 Sun, in Barcelona
- 5 Pasta suffix
- 6 Upper House of Congress
- 7 Ann Taylor’s offshoot

- company
- 8 “\_\_\_\_ my case”: closing argument words
- 9 British restroom, for short
- 10 Consumed
- 11 \_\_\_\_-aVe, skincare
- 14 Classic origami animal
- 15 Computer company headquartered in Taiwan
- 16 Thatch in <i>Atlantis: The Lost Empire</i>
- 17 Category 5 hurricane off the coast during FWOC
- 20 How 33-down causes one to feel
- 21 Pre-university exam
- 22 Zeus’ domain
- 24 \_\_\_\_-pen
- 25 A Brit’s grandmother
- 26 Like the Sahara
- 28 Iliad, Aeneid or Ramayana
- 29 Large lively party
- 32 Fiji capital
- 33 Fire’s emission
- 35 Man’s best friends
- 36 Santa’s helper
- 37 Princess’s pocket-sized problem?
- 38 An NHL Winter Classic setting, for short
- 39 Sloth or pride, for example
- 40 Doctor of Laws degree
- 41 Self-service stand
- 42 Regarding, for legal matters
- 43 Algae gelatin
- 45 Oak or redwood, e.g.
- 46 Ancient Greek name for western Asia Minor
- 48 Back tooth
- 52 Club C 85 brand, for short
- 53 Not yours!
- 54 Preferred version of coffee in the summer
- 55 Glove-less fighting style, abbr.
- 56 A debt, colloq.
- 57 COTCC and NFR! singer
- 58 Tattoos, informally
- 59 Area of study UNC ranks at 20th in the US
- 60 Hem’s counterpart

Answers to  
“When in Rome”



Horoscopes



Today’s Birthday:  
**August 27, 2025**

If you wanted a full birthday message instead of a bunch of football lingo, you should have picked a different week to be born. Quarterback field goal end zone tackle tight end blitz running back interception tackle huddle possession turnover. But really though, you will intercept a message today that will change your perspective on someone you love. Trust it.

To get the advantage, check the day’s rating: 10 is the easiest day, 0 the most challenging.

ARIES

Today is a 2 — The likelihood that Bill Belichick will draft you for the football team is low, but never zero. Always be prepared; Bill might need you.

TAURUS

Today is a 4 — Take a moment to appreciate the natural beauty of one of the most idyllic places in Chapel Hill: Kenan Stadium. UNC spent a lot of money on that grass, so be sure to make the most of it.

GEMINI

Today is a 5 — Life is a team sport. Don’t take your team for granted. They have your back; make sure you have theirs.

CANCER

Today is an 8 — It’s always a great day to beat dook. You will do something this week that will make a dookie mad — keep up the good work!

LEO

Today is a 3 — You, personally, are responsible for how this season goes. Make it a good one, or you will get absolutely torn apart on Yik Yak.

VIRGO

Today is a 1 — You’re going to fumble this week hard. Whatever you’re imagining, it will be worse. But there’s always next week!

LIBRA

Today is a 7 — You can’t always get a touchdown, but it’s always worth trying. You miss every shot you don’t take and all that.

SCORPIO

Today is a 6 — If you have problems, punt them as far away as possible. You’ll still have to deal with them, but that’s a problem for your future self.

SAGITTARIUS

Today is a 9 — Don’t fumble on first and goal. Your dreams are within reach.

CAPRICORN

Today is an 8 — Make your fantasy a reality. Bet your house. When you win, you will have two houses.

AQUARIUS

Today is a 5 — Football is overrated. Try out for field hockey! #womenssportsschool

PISCES

Today is a 6 — Turn over a new leaf. Spend \$10 million annually on a former NFL coach to solve all your problems.



LEADER

# A model of faith: Jordan Shipp rises to the occasion for his sophomore season

Wide receiver put his trust in program after uncertainties following end of 2024 season

By Beckett Brantley  
Assistant Sports Editor

Jordan Shipp had faith.

When an injury impacted his mental health during the 2024 fall camp, the sophomore wide receiver started working with UNC football's chaplain, Mitch Mason, to strengthen his religion.

But when former North Carolina football head coach Mack Brown was fired at the end of the 2024 season and the team was thrust into limbo, Shipp put his faith into UNC football.

Close to his family and friends in Charlotte and at a university he loves for more than just football, the gamble seemed worth it.

"UNC, we're always going to have a great coach," Shipp said. "So I just trusted in the AD and everything like that because there's too many good things to leave."

Now, although Shipp recorded only 114 receiving yards last season and made his only start in the bowl game loss to UConn, new head coach Bill Belichick and his staff are putting faith in Shipp to lead both the receiving core and his teammates.

In high school at Providence Day, waiting and working for football scholarship offers, Shipp was already beginning to believe in UNC.

He wasn't lacking for options — his shortlist included Michigan and N.C. State. But when the offer from North Carolina came in the summer before his junior year, one of the last to arrive, it was the one he had been waiting for.

"I knew right then that's where he wanted to go," Providence Day head coach Chad Grier said. "That's where he's always wanted to be. He's been a great promoter of the program at the school for other recruits."

When Shipp returns to Charlotte, he always swings by Providence Day to visit and train with his former coaches, teammates and teachers.

He credits Grier's college-level program with preparing him for the elevated expectations at UNC, but Grier puts all of Shipp's success on his willingness to buy into Providence Day's program and be a leader for his teammates, even as a young player himself.

"We talk about the standard at Providence Day and what that is, who upheld it and held us accountable to it, and he's at the top of the list of guys who've been the standard," Grier said.

It was a display of Shipp's maturity, Grier believes, that allowed him to bide his time last season. It's his on-field talent and leadership that are going to get him on this field this year.

Shipp's talent lies largely in his versatility. He is especially tough to cover in the slot, but he doesn't have a problem with contested catches, either. Providence Day won North Carolina independent school championships in his last three years. His senior year, he tallied 1,195 yards and 15 touchdowns and was a four-star recruit.

"He can play inside, play outside," Belichick said. "Good hands, smart route runner, very dependable. Quarterbacks love throwing to him because they know where he's going to be and he can come through in some tough situations."

Both of the quarterbacks that Shipp took throws from last year are gone.

But he immediately started building chemistry with his teammates in the offseason, especially the trio of quarterbacks — graduate Max Johnson, first-year Bryce Baker and redshirt sophomore transfer Gio Lopez, who joined in the spring.

They worked out, bonded outside of practice and threw together.

"At the end of the day it comes down to relationships with the guys," Shipp said. "I have to be able to trust them and they have to be able to trust me."

While Shipp is only a sophomore, he is in the minority of UNC players who played in Chapel Hill last year and the even fewer who saw playing time.

Just like in high school, he's taken on a de facto veteran role — an ambassador and receptionist not just for UNC football, but for Chapel Hill in general.

"Jordan is a leader first and foremost," offensive coordinator Freddie Kitchens said. "Jordan always knows what to do, which is very special from that standpoint, especially at that position, if you play so many positions. And he helped the younger guys, you know he's not that old of a guy either."

Since coming to North Carolina, Shipp's faith — in God, the university, everything — has grown stronger. It oozes out of him in a way that inspires confidence from everyone around him.

Which is perhaps why Belichick and Kitchens are putting their faith in Shipp.

He knows that he hasn't done anything yet. He also knows that everyone is looking to him to be a top receiver this season.

But with everything to prove, Shipp isn't feeling any pressure.

He has faith.

X: @beckettbrant



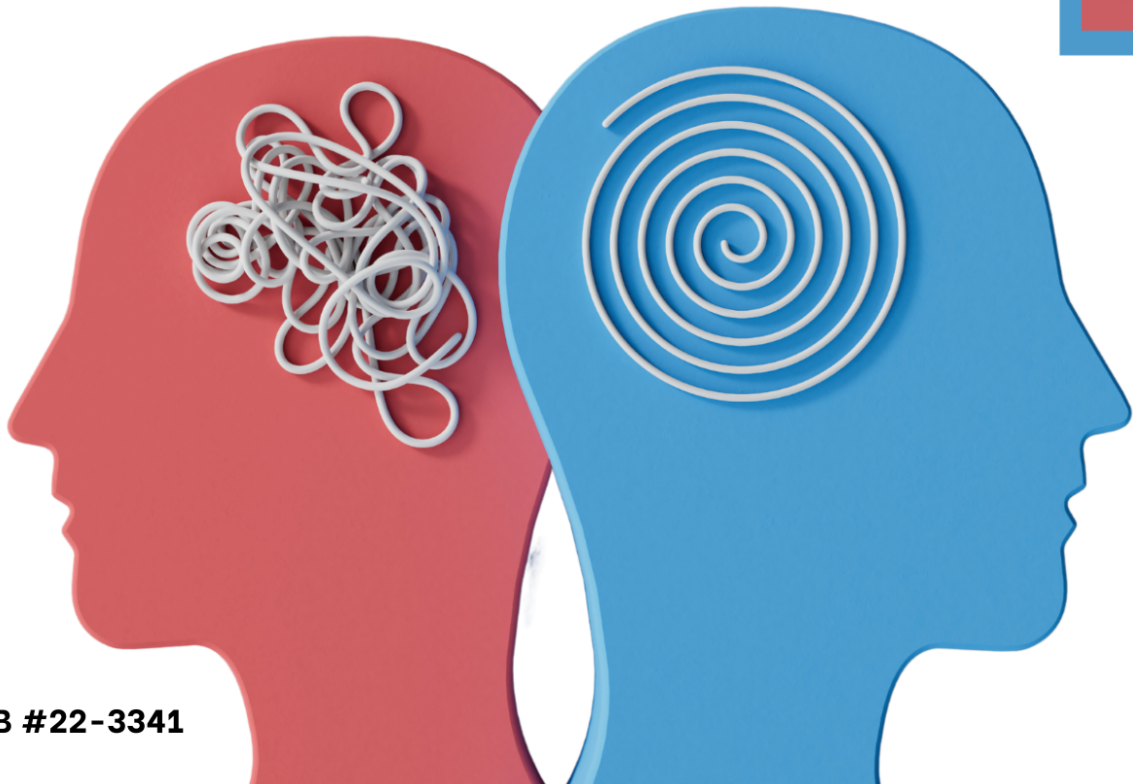
PHOTO FROM @1K.SHIPPP  
UNC wide receiver Jordan Shipp.

# FEELING ANXIOUS?

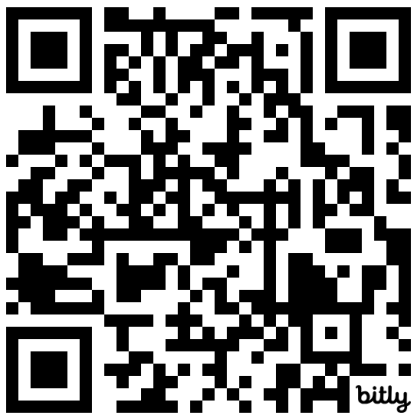
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## REWARDS ON MOVING DAY LATTES

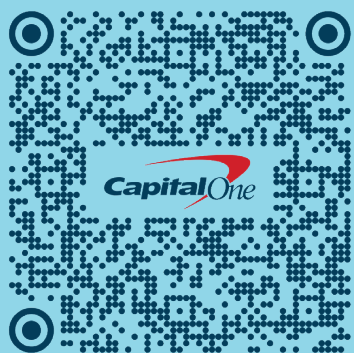
Thought lifting boxes was hard...  
unpacking might be worse.

Send help!

OTW with coffee...and a plan.



You're my hero.



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on dining with the  
Savor Student card.

Scan to learn more.