



MELISSA MELVIN-RODRIGUEZ mrodriguez@charlotteobserver.com

UNC Asheville women's basketball head coach Tynesha Lewis speaks during the Big South media day in Charlotte on Tuesday.

‘We’re not victims’: UNC Asheville basketball teams relocate to Charlotte after Helene

BY SHANE CONNUCK
sconnuck@charlotteobserver.com

Josh Banks’ mother led a convoy down Interstate 26 toward Charlotte.

Three UNC Asheville men’s basketball players were in the back seat as Banks’ mother drove alongside his stepfather on a recent Saturday night. Fellow Charlotte natives Jordan Marsh and Kameron Taylor were driving cars behind Banks, among eight players who were heading to the Queen City.

Head coach Mike Morrell left the following day, taking four more Bulldogs players with him. He’d happened to be watching his mother’s dog — named Kobe — who came to Charlotte with the players as well. Basketball was the least of his worries.

The Bulldogs’ men’s and women’s basketball teams have been in Charlotte for roughly three weeks amid devastating flooding in Asheville from Hurricane Helene. They’ve been living in hotels in University City and practicing all over,



MELISSA MELVIN-RODRIGUEZ mrodriguez@charlotteobserver.com

UNC Asheville men's basketball head coach Mike Morrell speaks during the Big South media day in Charlotte on Tuesday.

from the Charlotte Hornets’ facilities in uptown to Johnson C. Smith to West Charlotte High School.

“All that we’ve been going through, we’re just very thankful and appreciative,” Banks, a fifth-year guard who rose to prominence during a standout career at Olympic High School, said Tuesday at Big South preseason media day in Charlotte. “We’re not victims. It’s just the situation that we’ve been in the past couple weeks, we’re just blessed and thankful that we still have

a season coming up, and now we’re just locked in and focused.

“The past two weeks have been tough. It has been tough to see the place that we live and the place where we are most of the time in the condition that it’s in now.”

‘WE STILL GET UP EVERY DAY SMILING’

This season, UNC Asheville women’s basketball is pushing to understand the applications of basketball into life.

New head coach Tynesha Lewis, who won



MELISSA MELVIN-RODRIGUEZ mrodriguez@charlotteobserver.com

UNC Asheville forward Nycerra Minnis speaks during the Big South media day in Charlotte on Tuesday.



MELISSA MELVIN-RODRIGUEZ mrodriguez@charlotteobserver.com

UNC Asheville women's basketball head coach Tynesha Lewis, left, and forward Nycerra Minnis speak during the Big South media day in Charlotte on Tuesday.



MELISSA MELVIN-RODRIGUEZ mrodriguez@charlotteobserver.com

UNC Asheville guard Josh Banks, right, smiles as head coach Mike Morrell speaks during the Big South media day in Charlotte on Tuesday.

North Carolina’s “Ms. Basketball” honors in 1996-97 at Southwest Edgecombe, enters her first season. She previously led Elizabeth City State University, the Division II school in eastern North Carolina, to three straight Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association championship games after playing at N.C. State and in the WNBA.

Just like her first season as a head coach — she started at Elizabeth City State in 2020 — she’s had to navigate uncharted waters. She’s made an effort to hold regular

check-ins with her players, and mental health specialist Dr. Laura Jones has been meeting with them, as well.

The Bulldogs have been practicing at Johnson C. Smith in the morning, and then they use the Hornets’ facility in the evening to work on shooting. Queens University and the Charlotte 49ers have also hosted them when they can’t get inside J.C. Smith or Spectrum Center.

“The hurricane has shown us: If we show up every day, no matter how I’m feeling — I’m aching, I’m sore — and I look to

the right and my left, everybody else is still pushing,” said Nycerra Minnis, a fifth-year forward from the Washington, D.C., area who started at University of Virginia. “We are really strong. It’s not even just the hurricane, the emotional aspect has come with it. Everything we’ve had to overcome thus far, and our season is less than 30 days away.

“And we still get up every day smiling. I feel like, ‘Wow.’ We are strong, and we can do anything we put our mind to. Because we’re doing it right now.”

UNC ASHEVILLE TEAMS UNDERSTAND THE BIGGER PICTURE

Morrell, who enters his seventh season as men’s basketball head coach at UNC Asheville, has a diary.

There are “a lot more words in that thing” over the past few weeks, he said. He said if he ever ends up writing a book, these experiences will take up an entire chapter.

Janet Cone, the athletic director at UNC Asheville, has been integral, making a passionate effort to understand how the student-athletes are doing and ensure that the Bulldogs have places to play.

It might be “delayed gratification,” as Morrell put it, in terms of how the totality of this experience will really end up helping them in the long run. But he knows it’ll mean even more once they get a chance to return to practice inside Kimmel Arena.

“We ain’t victims here,” Morrell said. “I think too many times in these situations, it’s like what we’re going through. We’re inconvenienced. And we’ll be home, hopefully soon. When that time comes, hopefully, we’ll learn a lot from it.

“But you go back to Asheville. Walk around, go down the front — I live a half-mile from the River Arts District — you find out really quickly when you get to walk into your own door, that you ain’t no victim. There are people there going through a lot, lot more than we are.”

Shane Connuck:
@shane_connuck

Simmons eases back in for new-look Brooklyn Nets

BY LAW MURRAY
NYT News Service/Syndicate Stories

The Brooklyn Nets are rebuilding. They are the only team in the NBA that does not have a player who was an All-Star in one of the past three seasons or a lottery pick from one of the past three drafts.

Brooklyn missed the playoffs last season for the first time in six years. Jordi Fernández, an assistant coach with the Sacramento Kings the past two seasons and the coach of the Canadian men’s national team, is the franchise’s fifth head coach since 2020.

Also rebuilding? Ben Simmons, the first pick of the 2016 NBA draft, who was acquired by Brooklyn in the 2021-22 season after an accolade-filled start to his career with the Philadelphia 76ers.

Simmons was a star in Philadelphia for a perennial playoff team. He was the rookie of the year in 2018 after missing the 2016-17 season while recovering from foot surgery; he made the 2020 All-NBA team; and he was named to multiple all-defensive teams, the last coming in 2021. He signed a five-year, \$170 million contract exten-



GREGORY FISHER Imagin Images

Nets point guard Ben Simmons, seen Oct. 14, has not played much since the 2020-21 season, having had two back surgeries.

sion in 2019, a deal that expires in the 2025 offseason.

But since the 2020-21 season, Simmons has not played much. He was on the floor for the top-seeded Sixers when the Atlanta Hawks pulled a second-round upset in Game 7 in 2021. Since then, he has had two back surgeries and played only 57 games.

Simmons made his latest return recently in Brooklyn’s preseason opener in Oceanside, California. He had 2 points, 2 rebounds, 3 assists and a steal in a

115-106 loss to the Los Angeles Clippers. It was his first game action since Feb. 26.

“Obviously, we don’t have a team that’s been together too long, so it’s a new experience for me,” Simmons said. “A lot of younger guys. But I’m looking forward to building with this team.”

How Simmons has been used has been fascinating. Despite his 6-foot-10 frame, he was a starting point guard in Philadelphia, and at his best, he could get to the free-throw line at a high rate, finish efficiently and rack

up assists. Defensively, he guarded a variety of positions and rebounded like a capable big; he also led the NBA in steals in 2020. The best version of Simmons is one who controls pace. The greatest criticism of his game is his poor shooting from 3 (five made career 3s, none in Brooklyn) and the free-throw line (59.7% in Philadelphia, 43.1% in Brooklyn).

Simmons has been a shell of himself in his time with the Nets, averaging 6.7 points and 0.8 steals. In 12 of the 57 games he has played, he has come off the bench, and his outlook as a starter seems questionable this season. Not only do the Nets have point guard Dennis Schröder, but center Nic Claxton, 25, recently signed a four-year, \$97 million deal. Claxton and Simmons were incompatible together last season. In 99 minutes with Claxton and Simmons sharing the floor, the Nets were outscored by 51 points and scored only 95.8 points per 100 possessions.

Claxton’s recent hamstring injury allowed Fernández to include Simmons with the other four expected starters: Schröder, Thomas, Cameron Johnson and Dorian Finney-Smith.

“A healthy Ben Simmons is a very, very, very good basketball player, a three-time All-Star,” Fernández said recently. “And that’s what we got right now,

we have a healthy Ben that has been working really hard the whole summer. He’s done a great job getting his body ready to play. And I’m very excited now to see a point guard on the court.”

Fernández said Simmons is “built like a truck,” and he wants Simmons to be an asset by guarding multiple positions, creating stops with steals and rebounds, and playing in the open floor as much as possible.

“He’s multipositional, right?” Fernández said. “I want to see that purpose. Communication, physicality and once again finish possessions and then run the other way.”

Rim protection is the one part of Simmons’ defensive game that is not a strength; he has a relatively short wingspan and has never averaged more than 0.9 blocks per game in a season. He allowed only 57.5% on shots at the rim in 2022-23, at 3.0 contests per game. But opponents shot 82.9% on shots at the rim defended by Simmons last season. Simmons believes his experience can help him be a better defender at center going forward.

“I’m an older guy now,” Simmons, 28, said. “I’m pretty strong down there. I’m always up for that challenge.”

What Simmons can do to stay on the floor and contribute is only a part of the Simmons experience, though. He’s a former All-Star and the

Nets’ highest-paid player, making just over \$40 million this season. His skill set and availability will always come under scrutiny from outside.

When Simmons came to Brooklyn, he was teammates with All-Stars such as Kevin Durant, Kyrie Irving, Blake Griffin, Andre Drummond and LaMarcus Aldridge and coached by Steve Nash.

“I think that, you know, winning’s not easy,” Simmons said. “I think there are certain players that add to winning. I think that I’m one of those guys that can contribute to a winning team. I think there’s multiple things I can do on the court, throughout the game, that have winning impacts. And that’s what I’m about, is making an impact on the floor to win games, no matter what it is.”

Fernández is pleased with where Simmons is physically and that he is showing up every day. The coach wants to focus on that, not the outside noise that seems to be louder than Simmons’ actual play.

“I want him to be a leader by example, and I want him to do the right things,” Fernández said. “I want him to show how good of a basketball player he is. To me, the main concern has been his health. And like I said before, a healthy Ben Simmons is a very, very good player. That’s what I focus on.”