

Grant Williams has seen everything with the Charlotte Hornets, ready to 'commit to winning'

BY SHANE CONNUCK
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Grant Williams feels he has seen Spectrum Center tail.

The 25-year-old forward entering his second season on the Charlotte Hornets remembers attending games during the franchise's 7-59 season in 2011-12. It felt as though fans just wouldn't even be inside the building, or casual basketball spectators would fill seats while donning different teams' jerseys.

Williams, who grew up in west Charlotte and won a state championship at Providence Day, initially sat courtside for the first time in his life during a Hornets game against the Golden State Warriors. With J. Cole sitting behind Williams, Stephen Curry dropped more than 40 points on Charlotte, and the crowd had its cheers for the local talent.

Williams has seen it all. He attended a Hornets-Warriors game during the following season, and

members watching Kemba Walker — who's now on Charlotte's staff as a player enhancement coach — "whooping that tail."

It wasn't just that the NBA team that represents the city in which he grew up was starting to play well. The Hornets were gaining support, and that was something he wanted to help sustain.

"I know that happens quickly," Williams said Monday at the Hornets' preseason media day. "We just have to do our job as players to really commit to winning."

HORNETS DONATE \$1 MILLION TO HURRICANE HELENE RELIEF EFFORTS

The Charlotte Hornets Foundation announced that it has committed \$1 million to aid the American Red Cross and Second Harvest Food Bank of Metrolina in their ongoing Hurricane Helene relief efforts.

Most of the Hornets began their remarks at media day with a message for those affected by the

hurricane.

Williams, the former Tennessee star who became one of four local high school basketball players named All-Observer player of the year twice, noted that he has grandparents who are turning 89 and 90, respectively. Still being able to regularly play in front of them is a blessing.

"Whether it's your time, whether it's your efforts, volunteering your finances to the victims: They're right there in our backyard," Williams said. "People I know in Charlotte, Asheville, family members of mine across the way have been affected."

"Just the community here, I know the importance of basketball in the state of North Carolina. I know the importance of the Charlotte Hornets and Carolina Panthers, because we've been here, and when we're at our best, the city's at its best."

Seth Curry, the Charlotte Christian graduate whom the Hornets quickly re-signed in the offseason, offered a

similar sentiment. "I'm worried about everybody affected by Hurricane Helene in the western part of the state," Curry said. "It's been a rough past week, so I just want to say our thoughts and prayers are with everybody trying to get everything they need to recover from this awful, awful tragedy."

HORNETS WILL 'DO EVERYTHING WE CAN AS AN ORGANIZATION'

New head coach Charles Lee said he's already been noticing how the city of Charlotte rallies and bands together.

For example, Spectrum Center has been going through renovations, and spaces inside the arena are moving amid the construction. He's noticed how they've had to "figure it out," even if it's as simple as knowing where to walk down a different hallway.

"Living in Charlotte and hearing about all the devastation that took place in all the Carolinas, just want them to understand

that they are in our thoughts and prayers," Lee said. "I know there's already been a message from the Hornets' organization sent out to everybody, and our ownership group is trying to help financially in the relief efforts."

"The videos are pretty devastating, and it's a tragic situation. Having a family myself and knowing what you have to go through to lose your home, power and all those things, it's really tough."

Jeff Peterson, the Hornets' executive vice president of basketball operations, kicked off all the news conferences on Monday morning by acknowledging the devastating impact that Hurricane Helene has had on the Carolinas.

"Our hearts and thoughts and prayers are going out to them," Peterson said. "We're going to do everything we can as an organization to make it a little bit better. We know it's not perfect, and we just want to continue to let them know that we're

thinking about them."

'WE WANT TO BE A CONSISTENT, RELEVANT CONTENDER'

Peterson, who begins his first season in his new role, joked about how he even had his clothes laid out ahead of his first media day.

He's been excited about the ways in which new owners Rick Schnall and Gabe Plotkin have built this roster — taking immense pride in character and bringing in the most competitive group it can.

"We wanted to take a holistic approach in terms of just having sustainable success," Peterson said. "It's not one of these things where we want to make the playoffs one year, and then we're out for another four years; Or make the play-in game one year, and then we're out for five. We want to be a consistent, relevant contender."

"You don't do that overnight, right? It takes time. You have to build it the right way. You can't skip steps. We're very strategic in every move to see if that's possibly going to impact that goal, knowing it's the north star."

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"(It's) not too bad," Ball said. "Found some good ones, so I think it's straight."

Previously, Ball was never too keen on the idea of wearing ankle braces, suggesting they weren't comfortable and hindered his ability to be and feel like himself. He ditched the braces around this time a year ago after initially trying them, but seems to be on board now with the new custom pair. "I obviously knew I needed something, but it was pretty much just like feel," he said. "I would be wearing some and they still would be hurting or something would be rubbing on a part. So, just found some that work."

That should be music to

the Hornets' ears. Since Charlotte grabbed him in the 2020 NBA Draft after Minnesota selected Anthony Edwards and Golden State took James Wiseman, Ball has mixed in flashes of brilliance with a seemingly inordinate amount of injuries.

In Ball's four seasons, he's logged more than 36 games just once — during his All-Star year in 2021-22. This past season, after starting things off slowly as he recovered from March 1 surgery on his right ankle, he couldn't stay off the injured list — playing in a career-low 22 games due to lingering soreness — and was sidelined for the final three months.

It was a continuation of

an alarming pattern. Ball has played in only 58 out of 164 potential games in the last two seasons, and the Hornets just aren't the same team when he's on the bench in street clothes.

"He's a special talent," Grant Williams said. "He's somebody that with his playmaking ability, with his pace, with his way of impacting the game, both on the offensive and defensive side of the ball and really controlling (things) ... (People talk about) Chris Paul controlling the pace of the game. LaMelo does the same, because when you get to running with him, you know the ball is either going to find you or he's getting a wide open layup."

"So, it's super fun to be able to play with (him) now, because this is my first experience this summer. Because prior to that

he had been injured when I first got here. I'm excited because now he's doing everything every single day."

Which, in turn, provides Williams with a different perspective.

"That's something I feel like people looked back on in the past and was like, 'Is he really committed?'" Williams said. "He's committed. He's a guy that I can say really cares and is really focused on the right things. And he's taking every single approach, whether it's the weight room, whether it's coming to practice, showing up early, leaving late. I'm motivated and excited to be around him and compete with him this season."

The next trick — and challenge — is to get Ball to crank up things a notch on one of the weaker aspects of his game: de-

fense. The organization as a whole has sought to instill the importance of improving defensively while also ensuring there's no drop off offensively.

It's a delicate balancing act, but a necessary step for everyone.

"LaMelo plays with such great joy," coach Charles Lee said. "And now what we want to see from him is that he has competitive joy and understanding what are the competitive attributes that he needs to bring on night-in, night-out basis, a day-in, day-out basis in building those proper habits. Because he has this infectious personality (where) when he comes into a building, he bands everybody together."

"Even the way he plays basketball, he brings everybody together with his playmaking. And so now we just have to make sure those efforts competitively

are happening defensively and offensively on a night-in, night-out basis."

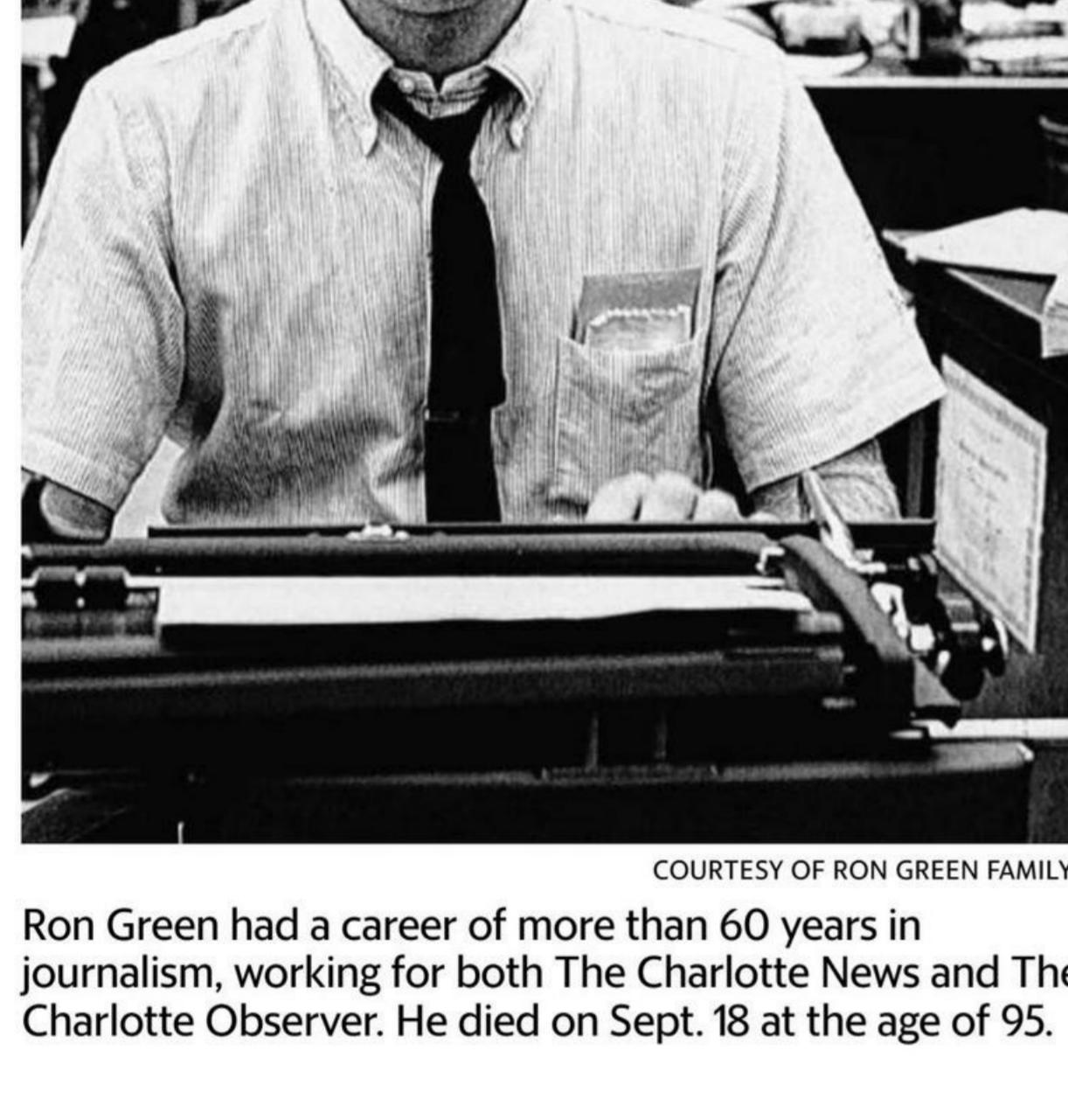
The seeds are being sewn and some have no-

thing. "During these workouts, when he's just shooting around and stuff, his coach has him doing defensive drills and everybody else just shoots around," Bridges said. "So, it's just him wanting to get better at defense, learning the terminology, being able to talk more on defense. Yeah, just seeing a different Melo on defense this year."

Yet, in some ways, very little has changed.

"I'm here, still alive, really can't complain," Ball said. "Still blessed and I'm able to do what I love, so I'm in a good spot."

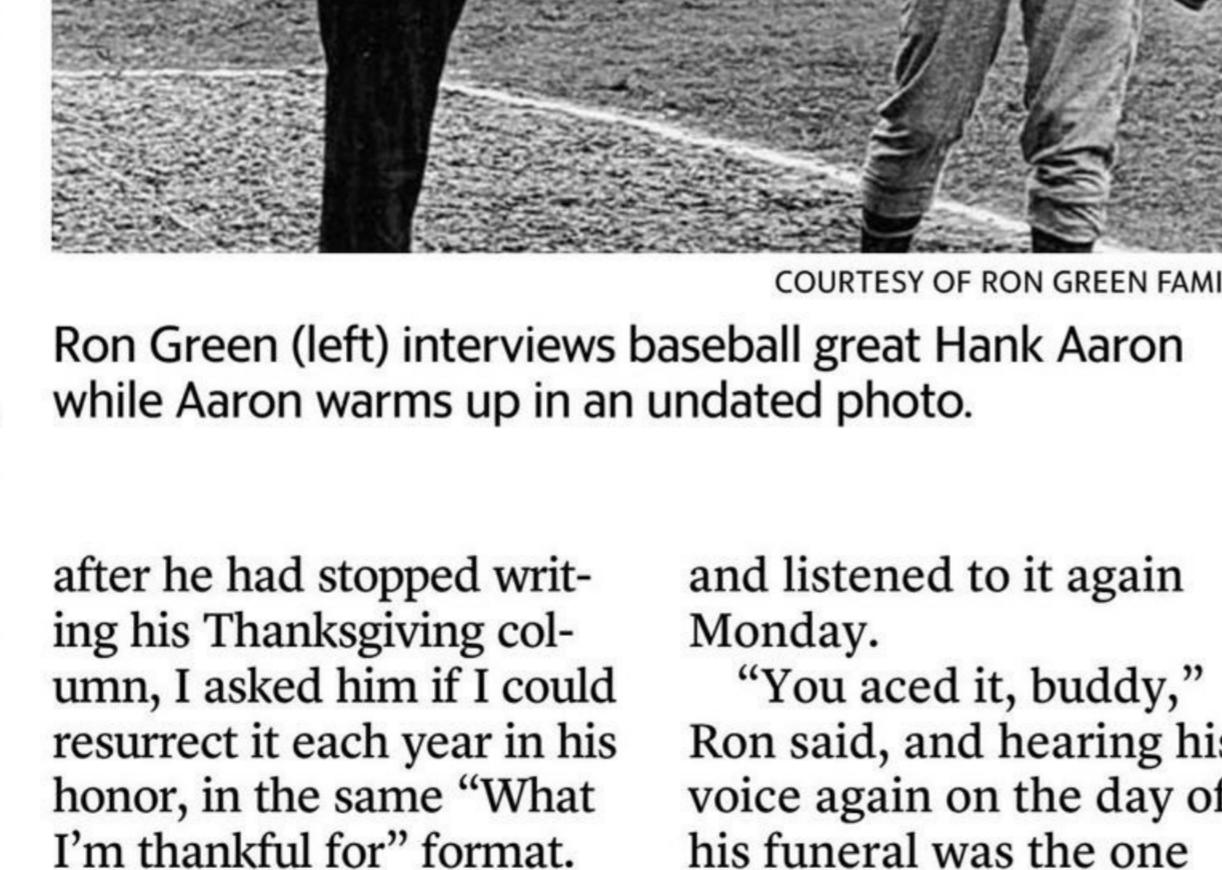
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COURTESY OF RON GREEN FAMILY
Ron Green had a career of more than 60 years in journalism, working for both The Charlotte News and The Charlotte Observer. He died on Sept. 18 at the age of 95.



COLUMBIA STATE
For 60 years, Ron Green walked the Augusta fairways. His writing took Charlotte News and Charlotte Observer readers along with him.



COURTESY OF RON GREEN FAMILY
Ron Green (left) interviews baseball great Hank Aaron while Aaron warms up in an undated photo.

good when I saw my by-line in that paper."

He also knew how lucky he was. Of his life, he said then: "I wouldn't change much of anything. If somebody said, 'I'll give you your life all over again,' I'd say, 'Oh, I'll take it.' It's about as good as it can get, if you ask me."

Let's leave the final word here about his father to Ron Green Jr., an extremely accomplished sportswriter himself. "Junior," as we called him around the office when he worked for The Observer to differentiate him from "Senior," finished his eulogy Monday with this. The words came from Ron Green Sr. himself, when he was interviewed by his other son, Dave, a few years back and provided one of the best eulogy endings I've ever heard.

Said Green Sr. in that interview: "In my life, I'm most proud of our kids and grandkids.... Like everyone else, I've made mistakes. I can be difficult at times. I snore, I curse my putter, I chase squirrels away from bird feeders."

"But I have said it before and I'll say it again — I may not show up at church every Sunday. I may not volunteer at the homeless center. I may not look kindly on everyone — especially politicians, people trying to sell stuff on the phone and whoever the bad guys are in the Middle East. But if I don't make it through the pearly gates, it's their loss."

Amen.

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could. I loved reading it, and I also despised while reading it.

Eden with flagsticks?! If that was the standard around here, I was in big trouble.

Green, though, created his own standard. He was unique in the field — a guy who never went to college but wrote like an angel. A nice guy, too, as anyone would tell you. Dean Smith would take his calls, and so would most everyone else, because Green worked hard, didn't take cheap shots and just plain showed

up everywhere. He covered 60 Masters (all in a row!), as well as 26 Final Fours, 25 Super Bowls and just about everything else you could think of that had a sports component to it.

Green's humility was one of his most endearing qualities. He was quick to compliment colleagues and fretted about everything he wrote, worrying it wasn't good enough. After he retired in 1999, I ended up replacing him as an Observer sports columnist. He still wrote for us occasionally. But a couple of years

after he had stopped writing his Thanksgiving column, I asked him if I could resurrect it each year in his honor, in the same "What I'm thankful for" format.

He called me after that column ran to say thanks. I still have his voicemail

and listened to it again Monday.

"You aced it, buddy," Ron said, and hearing his voice again on the day of his funeral was the one time I choked up.

In 2021, I interviewed Ron for a long feature and

asked him a lot of questions. He was 92 at the time, his mind still sharp.

About Augusta, he said: "I liked going out in the morning on tournament days. Just the way it felt. And looking at all the beauty and letting it all sort of wash over me, kind of gathering you up and sending you out to work. I was in love with it. I look back now, and I was silly in love with it, like a guy in love with a girl. But I'm glad I was. I think it showed through in what I wrote."

As for his lifelong love of his profession, he said: "I loved newspapers. I still remember the first day I walked into a newspaper office — how it smelled. The ink and the paper. Still remember it. Never got over it. I loved being a newspaperman. I loved the rush, and the crush, of a deadline. And I just never got over feeling

it's their loss."

Amen.

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