

FROM PAGE 1B

JACKSON

new team, whether that's this week or down the road.

His 21-day window is currently in its second week. If he remains on injured reserve beyond Week 7, he'd be shut down for the season.

But, for now, he's just focusing on one day at a time. On Thursday, he was listed as a limited participant in practice, along with tight end Ian Thomas (calf) who is also designated to return from IR.

"Whenever my name is called, whenever it's my time to go out there and ball, I'm just going to be ready," Jackson said.

While the Panthers are staying mum on Jackson's status, head coach Dave Canales has been pleased with his progress in practice. On Wednesday, Canales said Jackson could "absolutely" be in line for a return against Atlanta.

The Panthers could benefit from using Jackson this weekend against the Falcons, especially with wide receivers like Drake London and Darnell Mooney coming to town.

"I think with Dane coming back, it's just going to add another element of even more physicality — his energy is upbeat," said Jonathan Cooley, the team's defensive pass game coordinator. "And so I just think it's just going to make us better. And we're excited about whenever it is his time to play again."

PANTHERS INJURY UPDATES: DIONTAE JOHNSON STILL LIMITED IN PRACTICE

The Panthers are still monitoring wide receiver Diontae Johnson's ankle injury. The top receiving threat on the roster was limited in practice again on Thursday.



Carolina Panthers cornerback Dane Jackson, right, runs through a drill during the team's voluntary minicamp practice on April 23.

Johnson, who leads the team in receiving yards, has taken part in the first two practices of the week. The same can't be said for pass rusher Jadeveon Clowney (shoulder), tight end Tommy Tremble (concussion protocol), linebacker Josey Jewell (hamstring/groin) and rookie lineman Andrew Raym (concussion protocol). All four were listed as non-participants on Thurs-

day.

Right tackle Taylor Moton (triceps), who was already ruled out for this weekend, was also sidelined. Center Austin Corbett has yet to be placed on injured reserve, so he was singled out as a non-participant as well.

In more positive news, wide receiver Xavier Legette (shoulder) was a full go for a second day in a row.

Here is the entire injury participation report for Thursday:

Did not participate: OLB Jadeveon Clowney (shoulder), TE Tommy Tremble (concussion protocol), C Andrew Raym (concussion protocol), C Austin Corbett (triceps), LB Josey Jewell (hamstring/groin), DE A'Shawn Robinson (ankle), OT Taylor Moton (triceps)

Limited: WR Diontae Johnson (ankle), TE Ian Thomas (calf), CB Dane Jackson (hamstring), OT Ikem Ekwonu (elbow)

Full: WR Xavier Legette (shoulder)

QUICK HITS

• The Panthers re-signed running back Mike Boone, defensive end Jayden Peevy and defensive back Russ Yeast to the practice squad Thursday.

All three players were released from the 53-man roster earlier in the week. The team came into the day with two open spots on the practice roster, so tight end Stephen Sullivan was released in a corre-

sponding move.

• Week 6 will feature a pair of NFC South head-to-head matchups. Along with the Panthers (1-4) hosting the Falcons (3-2) on Sunday, the New Orleans Saints (2-3) will host the Tampa Bay Buccaneers (3-2) this weekend as well.

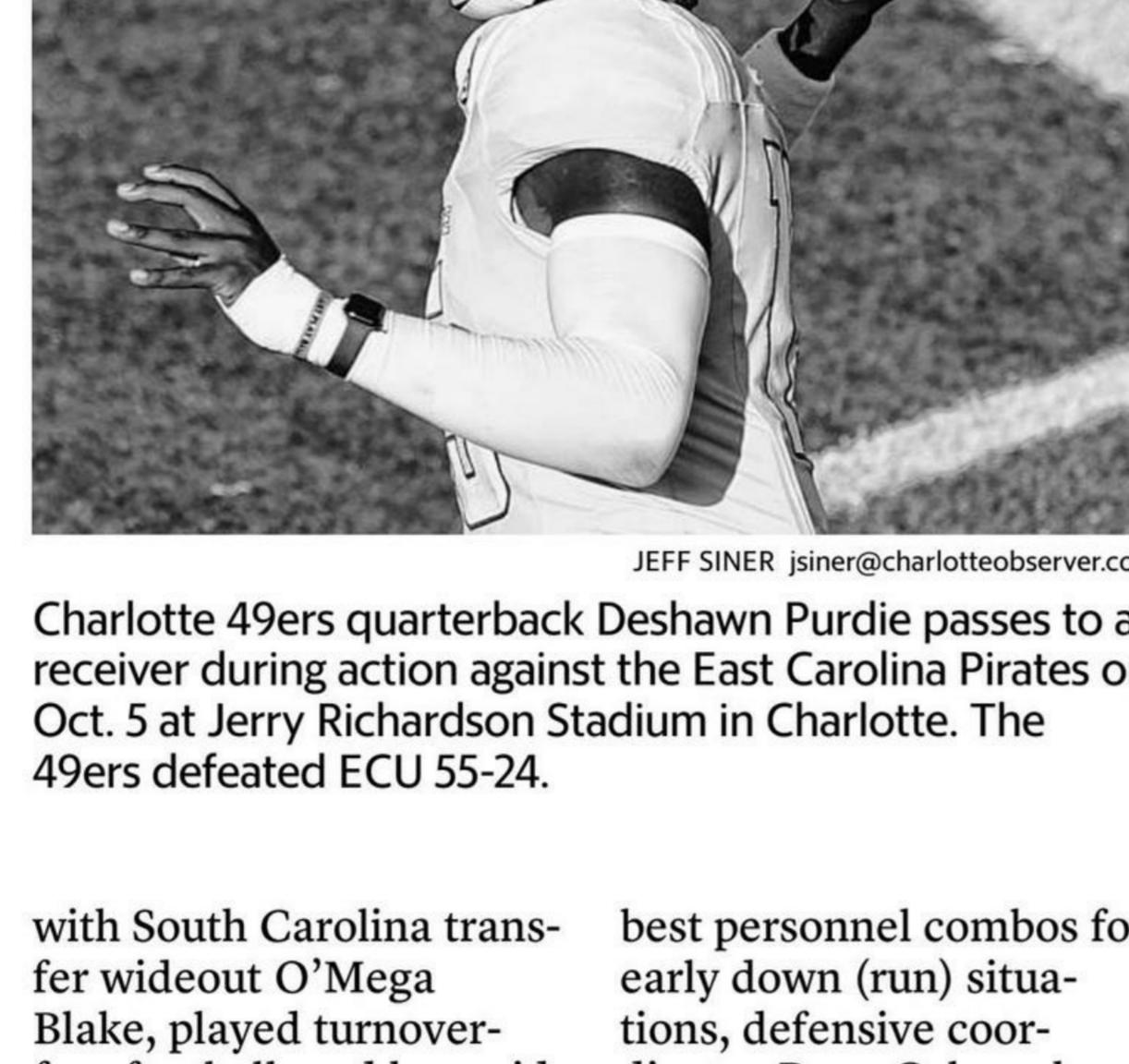
• The Panthers have designed a "Keep Poundin' for the Carolinas" shirt that will be available in their team store at Bank of America Stadium this week. The net proceeds for the shirts — priced at \$35 — will be donated to the Carolinas Hurricane Helene Relief Fund to help those impacted by the storm in North Carolina and South Carolina.

• Follow Observer reporters Mike Kaye (@mike_e_kaye) and Alex Zietlow (@alexzietlow05), and columnist Scott Fowler (@scott_fowler), on X, formerly known as Twitter, for the Panthers' latest news and highlights.

Mike Kaye: @mike_e_kaye



Charlotte 49ers running back Hahsaun Wilson glances up at the Jumbotron as he races toward the end zone for a touchdown during fourth-quarter action against the East Carolina Pirates on Oct. 5 at Jerry Richardson Stadium in Charlotte. The 49ers defeated ECU 55-24.



Charlotte 49ers quarterback Deshawn Purdie passes to a receiver during action against the East Carolina Pirates on Oct. 5 at Jerry Richardson Stadium in Charlotte. The 49ers defeated ECU 55-24.

games as expected under a Poggi-led team, entering last Saturday's contest with the lowest rushing average in the conference at less than 80 yards per game.

And comparable to the quarterback position, Charlotte's seen a revolving door at tailback with season-starter Terron Kellman missing time, Michigan transfer CJ Stokes flashing and immediately suffering a season-ending injury, and Cartevious Norton missing much of the second half at Rice. But it's allowed others to flex their muscles, with returnees Henry Rutledge and Hahsaun Wilson seeing extended action in the backfield, and the latter leading the team with 307 yards and five touchdowns at 6.5 yards per carry.

Norton has led the group with 157 snaps, followed by Wilson at 101, Kellman at 77 and Rutledge at 42. Stokes and true freshman Rod Gainey Jr. are both sub-20, playing in just three games.

The offensive line, anchored by Kendall Stanley and Jonny King, knocked on the door against Indiana, rushing for 137 yards, and kicked it down on Saturday imposing their will on the Pirates. But the Niners also have had performances of 13 total rushing yards against Gardner-Webb, 49 at North Carolina, and 67 against Rice, resulting in the second-lowest total in the American at 118 yards per game at the season's midpoint.

Charlotte broke the Pirates' spirit last week-end, according to Norton,

and the 49ers must utilize that momentum down the stretch to take pressure off whoever is calling signals at quarterback.

Grade: C

49ERS' PASSING OFFENSE

While Saturday's performance demonstrated Mike Miller's rushing offensive ceiling, we're yet to see the full passing attack's peak.

Playing three quarterbacks in six games, be-fuddled by half-by-half performances from season-opening backups DeShawn Purdie and Trexler Ivey, it's unclear who is best fit to lead Charlotte's offense.

Max Brown opened the season struggling against James Madison and followed with an efficient first half against the Tar Heels before exiting with a thumb injury to his throwing hand. Following a successful surgery, Brown is nearing return, and Poggi stated that Brown would return to the starting lineup if healthy just three weeks ago.

But that was before Purdie found his rhythm. Reinserted into the starting lineup to kick off the second half against Rice, Purdie has been efficient — and not just for a true freshman's standards.

Over the past six quarters, Purdie has completed 62.9% of his passes for 389 yards and three scores, and the most important stat — no turnovers.

The 6-foot-5 signal-caller led a game-winning drive against the Owls, formed a clear connection

with South Carolina transfer wideout O'Mega Blake, played turnover-free football, and has said all the right things to the media, including shouting over the offensive line following Saturday's win over ECU.

Now, with a quarterback controversy on their hands, Miller and Poggi must decide between Brown and Purdie moving forward — if not both.

But unlike a season ago, the 49ers have real weapons on the perimeter. Led by Jarius Mack, four different receivers have made game-changing plays, with Mack, Blake, Sean Brown, and Zay Myers flashing on separate occasions. And that's not including Colin Weber and Bryce Kennon in the tight end room, who have been sure-handed all season with 0 drops on 44 targets.

And despite a slow start to the season, Charlotte's offensive line has held its own against multiple formidable defensive fronts. UMass transfer Jonny Hassard and returnee King lead the group with 80.3 and 79.4 pass-blocking grades, respectively. Despite early season success, Clemson transfer Mitchell Mayes has struggled, surrendering the most sacks (2) and pressures on the team (8) with the lowest grade of any starter at 61.9, per Pro Football Focus.

With hopes of good health moving forward, the passing game has shown promise. Playing from behind in all but one game this season, Charlotte still has work to do with making an early impact on offense, more than quadrupling their first-quarter season total (3) against ECU (14) last Saturday.

Grade: C-

49ERS' RUSHING DEFENSE

Despite marginal improvement in the past two weeks, Charlotte is still surrendering more than 182 yards per game on the ground, ranking 108th out of 133 FBS teams.

Still searching for the

best personnel combos for early down (run) situations, defensive coordinator Ryan Osborn has used Dre Butler, Charlie Jackson, and Dre Martin as the primary trio of interior defensive tackles, with Butler flashing as the best of the group.

Linebacker play has been a struggle against the running game, with starters Prince Wallace-Bemah (61.9) and Reid Williford (59.4) posting low grades in that department. Williford is second on the team with 31 total tackles and is tied with Stephen Sings V and Donovan Spellman with two sacks a piece — the most on the team through six games.

Charlotte has surrendered 200-plus yards on the ground in half of its games, winning just one — on the road against Rice. Osborn has spoken extensively about bending but not breaking, but opponents are carrying at over 5 yards per clip which must dwindle as the season wanes.

Three of the 49ers' next six opponents rank among the top five in the American in rushing attacks, headlined by Navy's 295-yard per game average. The rushing defense has made timely stops in the past two weeks, and Charlotte needs steady improvement on the defensive side to achieve its postseason goals.

Grade: C-

49ERS' PASSING DEFENSE

When a team can run on you, it can do anything. And Charlotte's dealt with that struggle early and often this season, being forced to bring an eighth player into the box routinely — leaving the corners on islands frequently.

Even with one of the best cornerbacks in the AAC in Dontae Balfour, Charlotte's surrendered the big play at eye-popping rates this season.

Opponents are averaging over 14 yards per completion against the defense, ranking as the sixth worst in the FBS.

Charlotte has surrendered 77 chunk plays for

1,825 total yards through six games — with an average of 304 yards per game on chunk plays alone. For reference, Charlotte is giving up 434 yards per game (118th in the nation), meaning that more than 70% of the yards the 49ers are surrendering are coming on the big play.

Despite struggling early in the season, Balfour has played his best two games in the past two contests, with opposite corner Elijah Culp having his best showing against ECU, recording his first interception of the season. Safety Al-Ma'hi Ali has been a constant for the secondary at 391 and leading the team in tackles with 33, 25 solo.

Charlotte is still awaiting an NCAA ruling on the availability of safety Ja'Quirius Conley, who transferred in following three seasons at North Carolina. Conley is expected to be a huge addition to the secondary, aiding in both the passing and rushing defense.

While the secondary has dealt with problems of their own, the lack of a pass rush is the real culprit on the defense. After being a huge strength a season ago, Charlotte hasn't had the same levels of production from returnees Demon Clowney and Stone Handy, with the edge duo recording just two combined sacks on the season. Edges Lacota Dippre and Miami transfer Chantz Williams have flashed in spurts, with Williams posting the season's highest-pressure grade of 78.

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For reference, in the six quarters prior, Charlotte was outscored 62-14.

Finding an identity on the ground gives Poggi's team the best chance of victory, and the defense must continue its recent streak of standing tall in the red zone, limiting chunk plays and taking the ball away at opportune times if remaining a contender for the conference championship is attainable. And the next four games are a gauntlet in the American.

With road trips to Navy (5-0, 3-0 AAC) and Memphis (4-1, 0-1 AAC), followed by home bouts against Tulane (4-2, 2-0 AAC) and South Florida (2-3, 0-1 AAC), Charlotte's slated to match up with three bowl teams from a season ago in the next month, as well as the rejuvenated Midshipmen — who have taken the nation by surprise with their aerial attack.

With add-drop in the rear-view mirror and midterms upcoming, the 49ers have done enough to pass.

Grade: C

49ERS' SPECIAL TEAMS

For the second consecutive year under Poggi,

Jeff Froelich's special teams have kept the 49ers afloat in games and occasionally made game-changing plays to put Charlotte in position to win.

Henry Rutledge has been the catalyst, tied for 12th in the nation with a kick return average of 25.5 yards, setting Charlotte up with favorable field position at least once per game.

The kicking game has been efficient as well, switching from Kyle Cunnan to Stephen Rusnak, with the kicker duo com-

ing for a perfect 6-6 on the season.

Rusnak has been relied on as of late, connecting on a career-long 54-yard field goal to start the comeback against Gardner-Webb and splitting the uprights on all 13 of his extra points. But with 14 fourth-down attempts on the season (converting 50%), which ranks in the top third of the FBS, Charlotte hasn't given its kickers many opportunities, and that's a philosophy of Poggi's.

After rostering one of the best punters in the nation a season ago with Grant Gonya, replacement Michael O'Shaughnessy has recovered from his rough start (3-yard punt) to an average of 38.9 yards per punt, including a 73-yard punt — tied for fifth-longest in the nation this season. O'Shaughnessy received AAC special teams player of the week honors following his career day against Gardner-Webb.

No blocked punts or kicks, one return touchdown (up 38 against ECU), and the ability to flip the field in the punting game grades out as Charlotte's most efficient facet.

GRADE: A-

OVERALL

Winners of two straight, with Brown returning to the fold in the coming weeks, there's real optimism around the 49ers. But from one week to the next — even one half of football to the next — this team has shown little to no consistency. The past six quarters have seen Charlotte outscore its opponents 76-34, returning from what could've been another failed season back to .500 in emphatic fashion.

For reference, in the six quarters prior, Charlotte was outscored 62-14.

Generating turnovers is priority number one for Osborn's defense, with eight takeaways through six games — tied with Alabama for 45th best in the nation.

Grade: D

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