

2025 DUKE FOOTBALL
CLIPS

Meet Harland Bower, the coach with a formula for Duke's defensive line prowess

Caleb Dudley: The Chronicle (October 22, 2025)

E+R=O.

That's not an equation you'll encounter in any math class. In fact, you won't find it in any traditional school – only the school of Duke's defensive ends coach, Harland Bower.

The equation? Events + response = outcome. Expanded further, the events in your life plus your response equals the outcome. For Bower, this is paramount to the success of the Blue Devil defensive ends.

"We don't control the events in our life, and we don't control the outcome. All we do is control all the response, and that's kind of a key cog in the defensive end room," Bower said.

Amidst a 4-3 start to the season, the Duke defensive ends have been some of the strongest contributors to a Blue Devil group gaining momentum. At the midpoint of the season, senior pass rusher Vincent Anthony Jr. was tied for sixth in the nation with 6.5 sacks and was recently named the No. 6 best defensive player at midseason according to ESPN. Outside of Anthony, Duke also ranked 10th in time to pressure, at 3.19 seconds, after its first six games according to Pro Football Focus.

While Anthony and fellow pass rusher Wesley Williams get a lot of the attention, it's their tutor Bower who enables them to play freely on Saturdays. As one of the longest-tenured coaches on staff – Bower and receivers coach Zohn Burden are the only holdovers from the days of Mike Elko – his contribution to the Duke program has kept the defensive line humming weekly.

It was a winding journey for Bower to reach Duke, one he called typical of coaches nationwide. After a solid high school career in New Jersey, the defensive lineman became a team captain by his final year at Georgia Southern. After being encouraged by one of his coaches in Statesboro, Ga., Bower joined the coaching staff at a laundry list of schools: Texas A&M, South Alabama, Notre Dame, Central Arkansas, Troy, Rutgers, Murray State and Georgia Military College. That journey finally came to an end when he followed then-Texas A&M defensive coordinator Mike Elko to Durham.

Like every member of the program, Bower had the chance to dart once Elko elected to take the head coaching job at Texas A&M. Considering the assistant's last stop before Durham was College Station, it would have been easy to go back to donning maroon and white. But for Bower, the chance to see things through outweighed the comfort of an old home.

"Obviously, you know, that transition time was tough. It was a time of the unknown," Bower said. "I had the opportunity to go with Coach Elko. But then my family – my second daughter – was born here in Durham. We love it here, and a lot of us that were on that last staff really wanted to stay."

A strong recommendation to new head coach Manny Diaz – courtesy of Jess Simpson, the Blue Devils' former defensive tackles coach – didn't hurt either.

"I think he told Coach Diaz like, 'Hey, this is a great coach blah, blah, blah, give him a shot,'" Bower said. "That was my connection, and just ever since we've gotten to know each other from that first conversation, it's just been an awesome, awesome relationship."

A result of this decision to stay put was the ability to see recruits he welcomed in graduate four years later – a surprisingly rare occurrence for coaches due to the volatility of the profession and the emergence of the transfer portal. That inaugural class of four-year Bower disciples contains Anthony and Wesley Williams. As one might imagine, four years in the same room knitted the players tightly together.

"Both guys came in as young, bright-eyed bushy-tailed freshmen, not really knowing a whole lot … I would say this about both guys, they both have matured so beautifully, just mentally, physically, emotionally, and it's been cool to see their bodies develop as well," Bower said.

While the time spent in meeting rooms, at practice and on game days is mandated, it's the little things outside of the regimented schedule that Bower's players latch onto – whether that's extra film study at the Yoh Center, additional drills after already-rigorous practices or group dinners at his house that includes an honored guest, Bower's mother.

"We're always happy to be there," Williams said. "It really does feel like family. We have his mom come into town, like twice a year, and cook us meals. And it's amazing all the things that you can do to create that family environment. He's done great."

"It's probably the most tight-knit room I've really been in throughout my whole career playing football, just a close room. We always hang out together," Anthony added.

This consistent mention of family and connectivity is not by accident. Bower prides himself on balancing love and intensity as he coaches the defensive ends. To him, family – especially in the way he defines it – is what makes the Duke group so successful.

"To me, F.A.M.I.L.Y. stands for forget about me, I love you. And that is a selfless love. It's something that we talk about a lot, and I think that means the guys work for each other and they love to see each other succeed," Bower said. "It's just truly, truly selfless. And I think that's what our special sauce is."

The innate chemistry between Bower and his players is certainly an added bonus, but there is still plenty of work to be done daily between the white lines. Unsurprisingly, the coach has a defined philosophy for the traits he wants his defensive ends to have: Violence, athleticism and refined pass rush skills.

Growth is a team effort, and Bower would be remiss if he didn't put in the same level of effort to help his defensive ends develop these desired traits. The coach described his style on the field as one that contains juice, passion and energy. His star players make that description feel apt and then some.

"Coach Bower is probably the hypest coach on the staff … At practice, he's really out there, playing the position with us … which really means a lot to me as a player, because he's right there in the thick of it with us," Anthony said. "Just because he doesn't have shoulder pads and the helmet on doesn't mean that he can't coach us. He coaches us like he's playing the game too."

The energy put in by Bower is infectious – and consistent. In fact, the continuity from Bower is so noticeable that both Williams and Anthony had almost the exact same response when asked to highlight some of their coach's most frequent activities. That answer boiled down to one word: strain.

"Strain is one of his favorite words of all time. He's been saying 'strain' since the beginning of time," Anthony said.

"I'm on the field, I just think of him, like this image of him just yelling and spitting and just saying 'strain,'" Williams said.

The straining has resulted in Bower having one of the best positional groups in the ACC under his tutelage. With a stretch of games against the league's top quarterbacks coming up, the play of the defensive ends will be paramount if the Blue Devils want to find themselves in Charlotte in a month and a half.

But for Bower, the situation doesn't change anything. All his group can control is the response to the events the rest of the way.

"I think we've had a good year so far, but I would say that we're not finished yet, and that's what our mindset is on. Our mindset is on just continually getting better," Bower said.

We'll see if the O is a good one for Duke come December.

'A long road': Inside Nate Sheppard's sprint to college stardom

Abby DiSalvo: The Chronicle (October 17, 2025)

Nate Sheppard has never stopped running.

Ask the Syracuse defenders, who watched him amass triple-digit yards in his first collegiate start. Ask the fans in Mandeville, La., who watched him hop off the high school field with a broken leg. Ask Sheppard's father, who watched him chase an NFL-bound older brother around the backyard as a preschooler.

"His determination, his grit, it would always be something that stood out to me," Willie Sheppard, Nate's father, said. "It's so much about who he's always been."

Sheppard's race to success began 840 miles away from Duke, on the football fields of a New Orleans suburb. With a former Louisiana Tech defensive back for a father and a promising young wideout for an older brother, the littlest Sheppard seemed predestined to chase end zones.

He loved the Saints and Alvin Kamara. He craved competition. As soon as he could wear a helmet and pads, he was on the gridiron.

By the time Sheppard was five, his 10-year-old brother had to stop giving him head starts in backyard competitions. The future running back never slowed down. As a high school junior, he totaled 1,816 rushing yards and 32 rushing touchdowns. He also played basketball and raced hurdles, juggling track meets and spring football practices without sacrificing a single commitment.

"He was going to be out there every day at practice. You knew he was going to be busting his tail," said Anthony Pequeno, Sheppard's track coach at Mandeville High School. "Watching him compete was also fun because you just knew that it was going to be a show."

In the first seven games of his senior high school season, Sheppard did nothing but entertain. He found the end zone 31 times, scoring touchdowns on offense, defense, kickoffs and punt returns. Mandeville's matchup against Ponchatoula High School promised similar theatrics — until Sheppard snapped his fibula on the first offensive play.

His ceaseless sprint came to a violent halt.

"Devastation would not be an understatement," Sheppard's father said.

When the running back hit the ground, he paused to process the injury that would end his high school career. Then, rather than stay down and wait for medical staff to help him, Sheppard stood up and single-leg hopped 40 yards to the sideline.

"If nothing else, that showed me that this kid was different when it came to his heart," Sheppard's father said.

Within two weeks, Sheppard found ways to move forward. He attended every remaining team practice and meeting. He mentored his running back teammate Isaiah Baham and cheered Mandeville to the playoffs from the sidelines. He graduated early to join spring camp in Durham, having already committed to Duke by the time of his injury.

All the while, he watched his brother sprint towards success of his own. Will Sheppard, with a perennial five-year head start over Nate, finished four years at Vanderbilt as the eighth Commodore receiver to eclipse 2,000 receiving yards. He tied for third in school history with 21 career receiving touchdowns before transferring to Colorado for his graduate year. While Nate trained at Duke's spring camp, Will signed with the Green Bay Packers.

The finish line for Sheppard's success kept moving downfield.

"I don't want to just follow in his footsteps, you know?" Sheppard said. "I feel like I'm better than him. That's just our friendly, brotherly rivalry."

Instead of pushing them apart, the brothers' five-year age gap and relentless battle on the field pulled them closer. They still talk almost every day, whether exchanging casual banter or serious advice.

"Nate was Will's shadow for a good part of his youth," their father explained. "They have a very loving, supportive nature towards each other, but they give each other a hard time and they're competitive in every sense of the word."

Whether because of his brother or despite him, Sheppard doubled down on the search for his own success. After Blue Devil medical staff helped him finish his recovery, strength coach David Feeley took the 5-foot-10 standout and prepared him for the college game. Sheppard added 20 pounds in the weight room and slotted into the fourth spot on Duke's depth chart.

A starting nod became the next goal to chase.

The freshman had tough competition in a crowded running back room. New teammates Jaquez Moore, Peyton Jones and Anderson Castle had all been playing NCAA football since before Sheppard was a sophomore in high school.

"Everybody's bigger, faster, stronger, at the next level," Sheppard said. "Getting used to that was a challenge, a little bit, at the beginning."

The Blue Devils' youngest back learned from the upperclassmen in his position group, especially Moore. He drilled pass protection with coaches and worked on identifying blitzes pre-snap. In the first four games of his collegiate freshman season, Sheppard totaled 29 touches and 188 yards, rarely allowing himself to falter mid-rush.

"He's a powerful runner. He's a violent runner," Duke offensive coordinator Jonathan Brewer said in September. "He hardly ever gets hit and taken to the ground when he's close to the sideline. He finishes runs, finishes through people."

Sheppard's efforts earned him the starting role against Syracuse. He took the opportunity and ran with it — to the tune of 168 yards, 15 carries and two touchdowns. The freshman scored his first of those less than a quarter into the game, racing three Orange defenders 47 yards down the turf of the JMA Wireless Dome.

Then, because Nate Sheppard never stops running, he bounced through the end zone in celebration.

"You could see the utter joy in his face when he crossed the goal line," his father said. "You could feel the feeling of 'I'm back, I'm here, it's been a long road.'"

It had taken just five weeks for Sheppard to cement a place for himself within Duke's team. On the sidelines in Syracuse, a smile radiated through his face mask. Teammates four years older clapped his helmet. Running backs coach Chris Foster went in for a bear hug.

The curly-haired freshman paused to soak in the glory before readying himself for the next run. He would be the Blue Devils' leading rusher by the end of the game.

"He plays beyond his years, and he has obviously transformed our offense in terms of our ability to be really dynamic in the running game," head coach Manny Diaz said in a September availability.

The young running back, still chasing success, wouldn't smooth out a single yard of his journey.

"I don't think I would change it. It's hard to say that, but I don't think I would," he said. "This game doesn't last forever."

So Sheppard will keep running as long as he can.

'Very pointed with what we do': How Duke football's selective transfer portal approach bolstered its roster

Ranjan Jindal: The Chronicle (October 15, 2025)

After three straight conference wins, Duke football has flipped the script on its 2025 campaign. As has been the case in this new era of Blue Devil football, the innovative approach to roster construction combined with an ardent focus on culture and development has produced an enticing product for Wade Wackos.

Even after a 9-4 season, Diaz knew the talent level had to be boosted on this year's roster due to graduation and inconsistencies on the offensive side of the ball. Duke didn't overhaul the roster; the transfer class only had nine players. But each of those nine have seen significant snaps thus far, a testament to the quality over quantity approach to the portal.

"[The transfers have] got the right DNA in that they immediately become one of us, and they fit in the locker room really, really well ... As you do see in college now, you bring in transfers that could disrupt the apple cart, right? And morale is so important," Diaz said Monday at a media availability. "I felt like we've hit on everyone we took this past year, and all those guys are really contributing."

Duke's trio of Diaz, Chief Football Strategy Officer Binuk Kodituwakku and General Manager John Garrett have carefully navigated the new world of college football hurled at them. With Diaz's attention to detail, Garrett's coaching development background and Kodituwakku's sports analytics experience, they have developed a novel approach to winning in this era, while still not losing the identity of Duke's program.

Their robust analytics system provides the Blue Devil coaching staff with an overall rating for each prospective player, including their strengths and weaknesses and positionality relative to other players in the ACC and the Power Four conferences. Coaches and scouts like Garrett can then use that assessment as a support function in decision-making.

Even though Duke rarely spends an excessive amount on transfers, the Blue Devils showed this offseason they are willing to pay the big bucks to players they believe in. Duke went all in for its premier transfer, Darian Mensah, who reportedly earned a hefty NIL deal worth $8 million over the next two years. While the exact number and contract structure is disputed by some around the program, Duke's NIL collective, the Durham Devil's Club, reportedly gathered large investors once the analytics showed his value.

So far, that investment seems to have paid its dividend. Mensah boasts the second-highest passing yards in the country with 1,838, while throwing only two interceptions — both coming before ACC play. His ability to layer the ball and accuracy on all three levels has drastically upgraded the team's offensive capabilities.

Offensive coordinator Jonathan Brewer mentioned that the analytics team noticed Mensah's "dirty pocket" ability at Tulane, meaning his accuracy throwing the ball against heavy pressure and collapsed pockets, particularly against Oklahoma and Kansas State.

"He knows how to layer the ball. He has touch, and when both those things match, that's when you start realizing you've got something. We saw that early on," Brewer said Monday. "What I've seen from him that you wouldn't know is that he's an extreme competitor. He's extremely smart. He picks up on nuances in the defense that maybe necessarily normal players don't pick up on."

Perhaps more shocking than Mensah's performance is that of the receiver room, one of the biggest positional question marks on the team due to the production loss. Duke's dominance in that area is emblematic of its combination of quality development and elite portal hauls.

Cooper Barkate, Harvard's 1000-yard receiver, was not highly sought-after by any means. Only ranked the 124th transfer wide receiver according to 247Sports — yes, 124th among just receivers — the Ivy League product is second in the ACC and 15th in the country with 475 receiving yards. He has found the end zone four times in the last three games, and the California connection with Mensah makes for one of the country's best quarterback-receiver duos.

Despite the surprise, Duke's analytics team knew he was a diamond in the rough from the beginning. Kodituwakku told The Chronicle in an August interview that Barkate's potential jumped off the charts in their analytics system. The system adjusts for the level of competition, so Barkate's numbers for an Ivy League product caught the staff's eyes.

"He was really, really highly rated on the analytics ... The expected scores that he would provide his team was greater than the average wide receiver. It was crazy," Kodituwakku said Aug. 21.

"All that objective and quantitative information that you receive from those reports and analysis is very helpful to either endorse what you see or challenge what you see," Garrett told The Chronicle Aug. 11. "It's really good synergy when the analytics and the subjective personal evaluation come together to decide on a player, and our experience early on here is that when that happens, it typically makes good decisions."

The rest of the portal class was carefully selected, and because of their rankings, came in relatively cheaper than the upper echelon of the league and Power Four. Nonetheless, their impact looms large up and down the roster. Speedster Andrel Anthony, short-down bruiser Anderson Castle and the physically imposing Landen King at tight end have all found their roles. On the defensive end, safety Caleb Weaver is second on the team in tackles.

"You can't get kind of drawn into the market and what the market is doing. We have to be really firm in our process," Kodituwakku said. "We won't go out and just pay crazy amounts for everyone. We can't afford to do that. So we just have to be very pointed with what we do."

At the same time, Duke's ventures into the portal are limited because of the team's goal to develop and grow what it already has to build a sustainable product.

"The most important thing for us is retention, because we're going to be a developmental program," Kodituwakku said. "We're never going to be like a team that goes heavy portal. It's always just going to be kind of supplementing what we have on our team already."

Another bright spot in the receiver room has been Que'Sean Brown. The team's leading receiver has demonstrated steady progression since his arrival at Duke's campus two years ago and has nearly eclipsed his yardage total from last year.

With guys like Brown, running back Jaquez Moore or All-American cornerback Chandler Rivers — potentially ripe portal targets for other schools — Duke's staff can't lose focus on keeping its current roster intact. It must understand how the multiple pieces of the player acquisition puzzle fit to form the best group.

"I think our personnel staff, led by John Garrett, and our coaching staff are really aligned in terms of what we're looking for," Diaz said Monday.

Now that teams can pay roughly $20.5 million from their athletic department budgets directly to players on their teams, Kodituwakku's job is to decide how to allocate the funds for football. Through his professional experiences managing salary caps and running analytics in Australia's Adelaide Football Club, he's learned how to invest in key positions and understand when players are expected to peak in their performance.

And it's fundamental in this world of college sports to learn to walk away from players who may ask for more than the team feels they are worth. In this era, Kodituwakku emphasized that the Blue Devils won't bring in a starter replacement that makes more money than the current starter, to promote an "equitable distribution of funds."

"You hear horror stories of schools that go out and bring all these guys that are earning more than their current guys, and then that just leads to problems, cultural issues, and we just won't do that," Kodituwakku said.

Duke doesn't utilize a budget that rival schools may have. Duke doesn't need the budget other schools have. In this day and age of college football, "you can have a championship football program anywhere," as Diaz said Monday.

The appeal of the culture and degree opportunities often woo the type of player Diaz wants. And an additional recruiting bump will come with the evidence that the Blue Devils can compete for championships. The next six weeks of the season against a tough conference slate will go a long way in determining both that success and the trajectory of this program.

Chandler Rivers Interview: Athleticism and Instincts

Justin Melo: The Draft Network (October 14, 2025)

Duke cornerback Chandler Rivers is an intriguing prospect. The Blue Devils standout broke out throughout the 2024 campaign to record three interceptions and 11 pass breakups. Rivers, a sticky man-coverage corner, has built on that momentum in 2025.

Rivers, the No. 68 overall prospect in our Draft Network 100 rankings, recently spoke exclusively with The Draft Network. Rivers discussed his approach in man coverage, the best wide receivers he's squared off with, his physical mentality as a tackler, and so much more.

JM: I thought you took a step forward in 2024. You recorded career highs in interceptions (three) and pass breakups (11) last season. What changes led to that improvement?

Chandler Rivers: I honed in on my craft more than ever before. I became one of the older, more experienced guys on the team last year. I took that seriously. I just stepped up my preparation. I grew into that leadership role.

If I go out there and perform, everybody around me is going to be motivated to do the same. That was my biggest thing last year. I felt like my play reflected that.

JM: You accepted that responsibility. You also had 7.5 tackles for loss. You like coming downhill and impacting the run game. That's not the case with every cornerback. Where does that mentality come from?

Chandler Rivers: I embrace every way I can impact the game. Whether that's interceptions, pass breakups, or making a tackle behind the line of scrimmage. I took a lot of pride in that. Our entire defense, my teammates, we all pride ourselves on getting tackles for loss.

If the offense is playing behind the sticks, we have better opportunities to make plays, create turnovers in the passing game. That's our motto on defense: to come downhill and tackle. I love changing the game any way I can.

JM: It shows on tape. In an era of college football where NIL and entering the transfer portal are running rampant, you're in your fourth season at Duke. I love that. What's kept you at the program?

Chandler Rivers: Players make the program. Players create the culture. Duke is just different. I obviously haven't been to any other place, but I know I love it here at Duke. This feels like home, even though I'm from Texas.

Being in North Carolina for four years, it's been different. I love the people. I love this program. I wouldn't trade it for the world, honestly. That's what kept me here. NIL, whatever opportunities I had, I never considered leaving Duke.

JM: Going from Texas to North Carolina, what are some of the biggest lifestyle adjustments you had to make?

Chandler Rivers: For one, the weather (laughs). We get all four seasons here in North Carolina. In Texas, it's pretty much summer all the time. That was the biggest adjustment. I had to get used to the weather, playing in cold games.

JM: That's funny. I love watching you play man and zone coverage on tape. What's your preference? What coverage does Duke predominantly ask you to play?

Chandler Rivers: We're a man coverage defense at Duke. I love playing man. I get to go up against another great receiver, a good receiver in general. I embrace the opportunity to showcase my man-coverage skills.

I feel like anybody can sit back in coverage and play zone. Not everybody can play man coverage. I love it. If we get the offense behind the sticks, then we can play zone coverage, keep eyes on the quarterback, and break on the ball.

JM: When I turn the tape on, I see an explosive cornerback who pairs athleticism with instincts and outstanding ball skills. Talk to me about marrying the two and making sure you stay consistent with your technique, as opposed to relying on just athleticism.

Chandler Rivers: A lot of that goes back to watching film. I understand how teams are trying to beat us. I go in understanding what our weaknesses are, and what our opponents' strengths are. I usually have a pretty good feel for what to expect.

It allows me to play faster. If they line up in this formation, they're doing this. It helps me play fast. That's when my athleticism and instincts come to play. Situational awareness is the biggest thing.

JM: There's no doubt about that. Do you approach bigger receivers in man coverage differently than you do smaller, shiftier ones?

Chandler Rivers: Yeah, I feel like you have to approach them differently. You can't guard any receiver the same way. Those bigger ones, they're probably not as quick as me. Those smaller guys, they're usually quicker and twitchier. I might get hands on those small guys earlier.

It just depends on the opponent. I feel like every receiver brings something different to the table.

JM: Who are some of the best receivers you've had to cover?

Chandler Rivers: I had to cover Josh Downs and Zay Flowers during my freshman year. Going into my sophomore year, I had to cover Keon Coleman at Florida State. Those are the most challenging receivers I've had to cover.

JM: All of them are playing at a high level in the NFL. This has been outstanding, Chandler. What are your goals for the remainder of this 2025 season?

Chandler Rivers: Our goal is to win the ACC this year. We're trying to win every game on our schedule. That's the goal. I'm doing everything I can to help get us to that point. Whatever it is, I want to help get us to the ACC Championship Game.

I'm doing my part and playing my role. Everything else will fall into place.

Why Penn State firing its football coach resonated with Duke's Manny Diaz

Chip Alexander: Raleigh News & Observer (October 13, 2025)

The firing of Penn State coach James Franklin is endemic to college football in its current state, Duke's Manny Diaz said Monday, stressing the relentless pressure to win amid the constant demands of roster management and the millions of dollars needed to build the rosters.

Franklin was fired after Penn State's loss at home Saturday against Northwestern, ending his almost 12-year tenure with the Nittany Lions. Diaz spent two seasons as Franklin's defensive coordinator before becoming head coach at Duke ahead of the 2024 season.

Franklin was 104-45 at Penn State, won a Big Ten championship and reached the College Football Playoff. But an overtime loss to Oregon, a shocking upset loss to previously winless UCLA, and then the loss to Northwestern prompted the school to make a midseason change. Northwestern was a 22.5-point underdog.

"I know how hard James worked and I know nobody cared more about getting Penn State to the top," Diaz said Monday. "It does say a lot about where we are in college football right now, that three weeks ago they could be No. 2 in the country (and) 16 days ago they were leading the No. 2 team in the country (Oregon).

"And this is going to happen more. I don't know that we're fully aware of how our sport is changing and how rapidly it is changing. We're in a strange place in this sport."

The coming of rapid transfers and the awarding of lucrative NIL packages has allowed some previous football "have-nots" – Vanderbilt comes to mind – to become more competitive, while others with stronger, traditional brands built through the decades have or will slip back a bit, Diaz said.

"If you have a university that is aligned top to bottom and wants to play championship football, you can have a championship football program anywhere," Diaz said. "You can compete for championships anywhere now. The landscape has changed.

"There are legacy brands who believe you have to go to a legacy brand, because that's the only place that can happen. For a long time, that was true. I don't believe that's true anymore, and I think there's a lot of evidence."

The Blue Devils (4-2, 3-0) will face undefeated Georgia Tech (6-0, 3-0) on Saturday at Wallace Stadium. The No. 12 Yellow Jackets, Diaz said, might have one of the longest win streaks in the country had a two-point play been successful against Georgia last season – the Jackets lost 44-42 in eight overtimes last November.

With his connection to Penn State, Diaz cannot be surprised that his name has cropped up among potential candidates to replace Franklin. In his two seasons as defensive coordinator, the Nittany Lions ranked among the FBS leaders in many defensive categories in compiling a 21-4 record that included a Rose Bowl win over Utah.

Diaz was a semifinalist for the 2022 Broyles Award as the nation's top assistant coach.

Before going to Penn State, Diaz was head coach of the Miami Hurricanes, coaching in his hometown. He was 21-15 overall in three seasons, and the Canes played in three bowls, but Diaz was fired in December 2021.

Diaz did not address any of the coaching speculation but said, "There's three things you go through as a coach. You're in the honeymoon phase, you're in the please-don't-go phase or the please-leave-now phase. And it can change in three weeks."

Diaz referred to Duke's 1-2 start this year, with losses to Illinois and Tulane, saying, "Once you start getting into what happened then and what happens next and all that, you are going to get beat any week you play.

"College football is about preparation and mindset. That's the whole key. You've got to be in the present in where you are and the second you start thinking about what's next, you're about to get it."

Of note: Freeman, Johnson could return
Diaz said Monday that injured linebackers Tre Freeman and Kendall Johnson are expected to be ready for Saturday's game. Freeman was injured on the second play of Duke's 45-21 win at California, and Johnson has missed the past few games.

The Blue Devils have lost middle linebacker Nick Morris Jr. for the season. The injuries to Freeman and Johnson allowed younger linebackers such as Luke Mergott, Bradley Gompers and Elliott Schaper to get more snaps in the wins over Syracuse and Cal.

Elliott Schaper fits right in with Duke's defense

Conor O'Neill: DevilsIllustrated (October 7, 2025)

The foreshadowing of Elliott Schaper's big night in California is the most impressive part of it.

Duke's freshman linebacker burst onto the scene with 12 tackles, two sacks and an interception against the Golden Bears. He played more snaps – 50, according to Pro Football Focus – in that game than he did in Duke's first five games combined (34).

There's no way around it being the most surprising individual performance of Duke's season.

And yet, Schaper's performance is less surprising when considering what coach Manny Diaz and defensive coordinator Jonathan Patke – also the linebackers coach – said of him after he played in the rotation at Syracuse.

"I thought Elliott Schaper just looked very natural, very at home," Diaz said in between the Syracuse and Cal games.

"He tackled well, got lined up," Patke said of his game at Syracuse. "I mean, one play – if you remember, they shift three or four times. They move the fullback. I've got two freshmen linebackers out there and they kinda settled in and they understand where we're at, where we're supposed to be."

The Blue Devils went west without two of their top four linebackers, Nick Morris Jr. (out for the season) and Kendall Johnson (out for the last two games).

Two more linebackers – Tre Freeman injured on the second play, Bradley Gompers on a targeting call – were lost in the first quarter. Duke was drawing up new defenses on the sideline, Diaz told ESPN sideline reporter Stormy Buanantony.

"It sucks to see such great leaders and linebackers go down," Schaper said on the post-game radio interview. "But you know, just extra preparation and being able to play with my friends. … Nick Morris, our middle linebacker who went down. He helps me."

Duke is off this week; its next game is an Oct. 18 matchup against No. 13 Georgia Tech. The break in the schedule affords Freeman and Johnson time to heal. Gompers, because the targeting call was in the first quarter, will be back for Georgia Tech.

In the meantime, Duke knows it has a burgeoning star in the middle.

There was one more part of Saturday night's game worth savoring for Schaper.

"I used to live in the Bay Area, from 5 years old to 8th grade," Schaper said. "All of my friends and family are here and I'm so blessed they made it."

And Duke was blessed he was so well prepared in the moment it needed him to step up.

Who are Duke football's 'Hard Hat Guys'? Meet the Blue Devils' trio of super fans

Anna Snyder: Fayetteville Observer (October 7, 2025)

When former Duke football coach David Cutcliffe came out in a construction style hard hat ahead of the Blue Devils' 2014 season finale vs. Wake Forest, it sparked an idea in longtime Duke fans Alex and Matthew Tedder and Mike Hardison.

Bulldozers sat in the end zones of Wallace Wade Stadium, with everyone knowing the track surrounding the field would soon be torn up. The track had been part of the stadium for decades, but its removal marked the start of a new era for Duke football.

"It was a big deal," Matthew said. "We decided, it's like a new beginning for Duke, we'll wear hard hats next year,"

From that point on, the trio – Alex, "Hard Hat Guy 1," Matthew "Hard Hat Guy 2" and Mike "Hard Hat Guy 3" – did just that, putting their own spin on it. Their hard hats feature devil horns and the Duke emblem, hand-cut by Matthew with his Cricut Maker, paired with striped overalls embroidered with "Hard Hat Guys."

"And it turned into the horns and the lights and the overalls and the decals," Matthew said.

The "Hard Hat Guys"

While now a staple at Duke games, the trio first crossed paths at the 2013 Duke spring game. Father-and-son duo Alex and Matthew, season-ticket holders since 2008, kept noticing the same white-haired fan – Hardison – showing up in the background of all of their photos.

"We come to a spring game every year, we're out on the field, and we're snapping pictures," Alex said. "And every picture we snap, there's this guy with white hair."

By the start of that football season, Hardison had officially joined the group, completing the trio.

"It's just grown from there," Hardison said.

But the "Hard Hat Guys" are known for more than their signature appearances. Their tailgates, which started with Matthew and Alex and a simple setup of just one tent, a single table and a Coleman grill back in 2008, have grown into a full-scale tradition. Regardless of kickoff time, the trio is on site by 6 a.m., equipped with endless amounts of food, two Blackstone grills, eight tents and anything else they might need.

Over time, multiple tailgates merged together to create one massive gathering, bringing together friends, fans and families to a single game day hub. Even for away games, the tailgate tradition continues, as the group hosts the parents' tailgate.

"It's got a life of its own," Alex said.

Matthew doesn't even have to cook for everyone anymore, either, as the tailgate attendees – and the chefs – have grown alongside the gathering.

"There were a bunch of Saturdays it was just (my dad) and I," Matthew said. "Now I didn't have breakfast ready at 8:30 and I had people waiting."

The trio added a bus to the collection in 2016, which they take to relatively close games that don't require a flight. When purchased, the bus was green but they have since had it repainted white and blue. Just like the "Hard Hat Guys" themselves, their bus is noticeable too, decorated with Duke's schedule, different mascots through the years, a map of all the places they've traveled, and a tally of seasons – all hand-cut by Matthew with his Cricut Maker.

This season, they added a 7x12 trailer to store extra supplies. They tow the trailer with the bus, driven by Alex from his home in Badin Lake.

"(The bus) seems to be more balanced," Alex said.

And while over the years, the "Hard Hat Guys" have drawn more attention for their signature looks and tailgates, one thing has remained the same: their loyalty to Duke. Win or lose, rain or shine, home or away, they're always there to cheer on the Blue Devils – even traveling more than 2,800 miles to watch Duke play at Cal in Week 6.

"If we win by 60, lose by 60, we will be there," Matthew said.

Anderson Castle left App State to join Duke. Why his big game is bittersweet

Chip Alexander: Raleigh News & Observer (September 24, 2025)

From all accounts, Duke's Anderson Castle would have been happy playing his entire college football career at Appalachian State. Castle is a Boone native. He starred at Watauga High. Shawn Clark recruited the running back to ASU and was Castle's coach, his guy.

But Clark was fired as head coach after last season. Castle, a graduate, decided to look around for another place to play.

"I kind of wanted to see what was out there," he said.

Duke assistant coach Justin Watts, who had been on Clark's staff at ASU, reached out. Castle soon was on his way to Durham. It all fell into place.

No one knew how it might work out. Duke coach Manny Diaz said the initial thought was Castle could help on special teams and be a short-yardage and goal-line specialist at 6-feet and 215 pounds. The guy is a load.

And now? Castle has just experienced an emotional, bittersweet week, one mixed with football satisfaction but also deep personal sadness.

Castle rushed for 92 yards and scored three times Saturday against N.C. State, his last touchdown on a startling 66-yard dash off tackle that clinched the Blue Devils' 45-33 victory. That earned him ACC running back of the week honors.

But Castle learned Sunday night that Clark, who was an assistant coach at UCF, had passed away. Clark, 50, suffered a medical emergency on Sept. 9 and did not recover.

"Anderson took it very hard," Todd Castle, Anderson's father, said Tuesday in an interview. "He was really at a loss for words. He and Clark had remained in contact with each other, and Clark congratulated him and communicated with him. They remained close."

What Shawn Clark meant to Anderson Castle

It was Clark who offered Castle a scholarship on his 18th birthday, his father said. He did it after showing up at a Watauga High basketball game, with Castle playing.

"He missed two free throws when Clark walked in the door," Todd Castle said, chuckling. "Clark asked Anderson if he had had a good birthday and Anderson said yes. He said, 'I think I can make it a little better.'"

Todd Castle said Anderson was very close to committing to The Citadel, saying the offer was for him to play quarterback in the Bulldogs' triple option. A three-star recruit, he led Watauga to a 36-6 record in three years at QB and scored 101 touchdowns, 70 rushing.

"App was a late offer, late to the party," Todd Castle said. "But it changed everything. And I attribute Anderson being at Duke today because Shawn Clark saw something in Anderson he wanted to pursue.

"Anderson gave him five good seasons and started all the games except eight games he missed with a broken foot (in 2023). Against Clemson last year, we got nailed, but Anderson had 80 yards and a touchdown in the game. That got him attention."

Castle, a team co-captain in 2024, had seven carries against the Tigers and five went for 10 or more yards. That got the attention of the Duke staff. And the guy who wide receiver Sahmir Hagans calls "Beast" and wideout Cooper Barkate calls "The Fridge" now has gotten the attention of those in the ACC.

Making his mark at Duke

In Duke's opener, Castle broke off a 63-yard run but was chased down at the Elon 8. That got him a text from his Watauga coach, Ryan Habich.

"He texted to say, 'In high school you were running a 4.45 and one of the fastest guys on the field. What in the world happened?'" Todd Castle said.

"Anderson's response was, 'The best I can tell, coach, that guy was running a 4.3.'"

No one caught Castle on Saturday. On third-and-1 at the Duke 34, he broke off left tackle and was gone. The closest player to him on the 66-yard TD run was Hagans.

"The goal was to get two yards," Castle said after the ACC game. "I wasn't expecting to break free like that. But the O-line opened up a huge hole and all I had to do was hit it fast. I was thinking 'Just hold on to the ball and run.'"

After beating N.C. State in their ACC opener, the Blue Devils (2-2, 1-0 ACC) go to Syracuse this Saturday. Castle, Duke's top rusher with 193 yards, could be a key part of the game plan and certainly has to be viewed by the Orange as a threat.

"Anderson's role has really developed into a normal-down back," Diaz said. "He's done a great job of catching the ball out of the backfield and done nothing but warrant more and more playing time. And the guys love him."

Defensive end Wesley Williams said he has not had to try and tackle Castle in any preseason practices or scrimmages and jokingly said he doesn't want to. "It doesn't look like fun," Williams said. "When he gets those knees going ..."

Castle, who was married in January, was strongly pursued in the portal by Washington and Arkansas, his father said. As for Castle, he said college football has been a "crazy journey" that now has him happy at Duke.

"I loved my time at App. I love Boone," he said. "And coming here has been amazing, as well. It's been a great change for me. It's kind of like a fresh start.

"From the day I stepped foot here, it's felt like home. Everything here has been unbelievable."

Duke football coach Manny Diaz on why standards are the North Star for his organization

Mark Mensheha: The Business Journals (September 24, 2025)

Fall has only officially just begun, but for college football programs, the 2025 season is already at least one-quarter complete.

It happens quickly, just like the end of the first quarter can sneak up on a business owner after the start of a new calendar year.
Running a business and coaching a football team have more in common than you might think.

I spoke with Duke University head coach Manny Diaz about how he runs his program, how he approaches leadership, and how some familiar concepts from the C-suite translate to his office and the sideline. Here's what he shared about those topics.

Setting goals, benchmarking and adjusting

Diaz said he and his team lay out their goals at the start of the year, but they go a step further and address the standards that are necessary to reach those goals. There are two reasons for that. One, he said, is that every team has generally the same goal. "Nobody says 'We don't want to win the championship,'" Diaz said. But second, having a focus on the underlying standards puts emphasis on things that are more controllable.

Those standards, he said, will vary by person. For one player, it might relate to being a great communicator. For another, it might be more of an on-field skill, like a first step.

"After we lay out the goals, our mindset is we don't ever speak of them again, because things can change and they can be outside of your control," Diaz said. "You might lose a game, and so can we win the championship? I don't know if we can or can't, but I know that we can continue to work at the same standards and try to attain the same standards. And if you just do that, generally speaking, even if you don't meet your goal, you'll probably be closer to it than if you say, 'It's championship or bust,' and then you lose a game or two early in the season, and you no longer have a North Star. So we try to let our standards be on our North Star."

Managing your managers

Just as a CEO has department heads, Diaz has a staff of coordinators and position coaches who are tasked with running their respective units.

"I look at my coaching staff as my position group," Diaz said. "The linebackers coach coaches the linebackers, the tight ends coach coaches the group of tight ends – and the head coach, I coach the group of coaches."

Each of those coordinators and coaches has a specific responsibility. As head coach, Diaz is responsible for the ultimate product – meaning he's charged with putting those individuals in positions where they can succeed with their responsibilities. That process starts with hiring good people, Diaz said – "not just competent people, but also just good people" – and then empowering them to do their jobs.

"What I try to do is observe them doing their jobs," he said. "I try to look around corners because I'm not in the weeds like they are. I try to see things from a 30,000-foot view. And I listen. I listen to what they say, I listen to what they're teaching, I listen to how they're directing their sides of the ball, and then I respond based off of what they're saying to potentially uncover issues that maybe they're missing, or to reinforce what they're saying."

Diaz said his approach has evolved through his career. It's been shaped by his experiences both as a defensive coordinator and as a head coach.

"The more you do it, the more you find the rhythm, the more you find your voice and the more you find your style – all the while still trying to be authentic to who you are," he said. "That's the most important thing. But you learn; your tactics get better."

Open access, and personal assessments

In many respects, Diaz and other major-college coaches are running good-sized companies. In addition to the players and coaches, there's support staff, alumni, sponsors, the media and others who require time and attention. Planning is critical. So too are clear lines of communication.

Diaz said that's particularly important when he spends time with his coaching staff, because that's where and when he gets a measure of success.

"While I have the ability to coach and critique everyone in the program, usually the head coach doesn't have anyone to coach or critique him," he said. "The person who hires you is not an expert in the thing that you do. They may be an expert in the thing that they do, but they're not necessarily an expert in the thing that you do. And so where do you get your honest and open feedback? I implore my staff. You have got to give them the safety to speak up, because the people on the front lines normally know the issues, and if they don't have the ability to convey those issues up the chain, you're getting led to a place you don't want to go to."

Making sure people feel free to speak is imperative, no matter how new to the staff or early in their career they might be.

"People throw around words like 'psychological safety,' but you have to honor it and you have to live it," Diaz said.

Meeting people where they are

Diaz also needs to make himself available to the players – the ones who make up the core of the team. Players can bring issues to the attention of their position coaches, and a leadership council also exists among the players for purposes of discussion and support, but Diaz said players should feel they can approach him as needed, as well.

"One of my favorite sayings is 'I want to be intimate with our reality,'" he said. "I don't need to be told every day is sunny, and then you walk outside and get all wet. I'd rather know it's raining and I'd rather know what we can do to fix it."

Communicating with players can provide its own challenges. Today's teenagers and 20-year-olds learn and communicate differently than how they did when Diaz, 51, was that age. That makes it his job to find a way in.

"I have to hear them where they are to be able to understand what it is that they need to hear," he said. "I think that's so overlooked at times. How can you know what to message your team if you don't know where your team is at any given moment? So that's a big part of the job that I take very seriously."

He added that the environment at Duke adds a wrinkle to those expectations.

"The young men this school attracts are generally inquisitive by nature," he said. "They don't want to memorize; they want to understand. And so that really puts the onus on you as the teacher to be a great communicator. I tell my staff all the time, 'We've got to get the storytelling right.' We all remember things better with stories than just a collection of facts. If we're putting in a certain pass play or a certain coverage, before you start talking about the details of the play, explain why. Tell them the story of how it came to this and why it's going to work. People are going to remember that, respond to it, and they'll take better ownership if they truly understand the story behind it."

Continuous learning

The smartest person in the room is often said to be the one who doesn't want to be that person, because that person wants to learn from and get pushed by others.

Diaz said there's no choice but to learn and improve if there's a desire to find both immediate and big-picture success.

"That's one of the unique things about sports," he said. "In our games, there can only be one winner, and while there may be one company that turns the biggest profit, that doesn't mean there can't be many companies that are profitable. But for us, it's the idea that somebody wins and somebody loses."

That reality shapes how he approaches each season and his career.

"If you go to Manhattan, there are a lot of tall, shiny buildings, and there are a lot of really outstanding companies there," Diaz said. "National champion: There's only one a year, so you have got to stay curious, you've got to stay competitive and you've got to evolve in every aspect of the sport, whether that's game strategy, how you recruit, or how you connect to players. Because if you stay the same, you will get flown by by people, because we're all chasing the same thing."

Why two long runs and staying in the fight mattered to Duke football

Chip Alexander: Raleigh News & Observer (September 21, 2025)

Years from now, when much is forgotten about Duke's 45-33 win Saturday over N.C. State, there will always be the two long runs to rekindle the memories.

One was Tre Freeman's 67-yard interception in the first half, the Duke linebacker sprinting down the left sideline with the ball in his hand. It was sudden, it was dramatic, it was arguably the biggest single play in the game.

The second came much later. It was running back Anderson Castle, the transfer, the big man from Boone, barreling down the left side for a 66-yard touchdown run with 2:19 left that sealed the victory in Duke's ACC opener.

Freeman did not have a pick-six, did not get to the end zone, much to his chagrin, as State's Hollywood Smothers hustled back to make the tackle. But his theft of a C.J. Bailey pass and the runback came with the Wolfpack leading 20-14 and on the move, looking to put a potential stranglehold on the Blue Devils in the final minute before halftime.

On fourth-and-2 at the Duke 24, the Pack tried to draw the Blue Devils offsides. It backfired as Bailey was surprised by the center snap, then unloaded a pass down field under pressure.

"It was a bad throw right to me and I was just running, trying to score, thinking we need this for momentum right now," Freeman said. "I think that really got us going, showed that we were in the fight for sure."

That's what Duke coach Manny Diaz wanted – after back-to-back losses, after falling behind by 13 points to the Pack, to stay in the fight.

It was hard, emotionally, seeing middle linebacker Nick Morris Jr., being carted off the field with a leg injury. Morris, called the "heart and soul" of the Duke defense by end Wesley Williams had worked so diligently to return from an ACL injury in the 2024 season opener, only to be injured again Saturday late in the first quarter .

"That hurt my heart, for sure," Freeman said. "To see his struggles and him overcoming them, then to see him go down like that, it hurt.

"I know how much work Nick puts in, and I don't think he deserves that. Sometimes stuff just happens and you've got to deal with it."

The Blue Devils dealt with Morris' injury by giving more snaps to linebacker Luke Mergott, a redshirt sophomore. And it would be Mergott whose hard rush on Bailey rushed the throw that found the hands of Freeman.

Turnovers finally come Duke's way

Duke, which thrived on opponents' turnovers last season, entered the game minus-6 in turnovers through the first three games of 2025. Tulane quarterback Jake Retzlaff lost a fumble last week, Duke's first forced turnover of the season.

But the Blue Devils came up with four Saturday as Bailey had three interceptions and lost a fumble. Duke, in turn, did not turn the ball over and it's tough for a team to lose a game when it's is plus-4 for the night.

"We knew the turnovers were going to come, even though they weren't coming the first few games," Freeman said. "We knew our chaos and our havoc was going to cause turnovers. We got back to being the underdog, putting our heads down and just working and playing as hard as we can."

Offensively, the Blue Devils got a clean game from quarterback Darian Mensah, who passed for 269 yards and three touchdowns. Sahmir Hagans, Cooper Barkate and Landen King all had touchdown grabs, with Barkate's 37-yarder pushing Duke ahead 35-26.

On special teams, Williams crashed through to block a field-goal attempt by the Pack late in the third quarter.

"We were on the right side of those plays today," Williams said.

If Williams could have located the ball, he might have had a scoop and score. "But I had no clue," he said, laughing. The block would do.

Duke's "beast"

Then there was Castle, the guy the Devils call "A.C," although Hagans also used another word: "Beast."

With running back Jaquez Moore slowed by a minor injury, Castle had 92 of Duke's 149 yards rushing. The Appalachian State transfer had five carries for five yards in the first half, then seven for 87 yards in the second half.

"A.C. was the one who carried the load tonight," Hagans said.

With road trips coming up to Syracuse and California, the Blue Devils still have much work to do and more to prove. The load won't lighten. But for a night, they could gather together in the locker room and let loose a victory yell or two.

"A lot of words flowing, a lot of music blasting, a lot of good energy and good vibes," Hagans said. "We finally got the big win we've been waiting for."

'They kept battling': Duke football's refocused identity made the difference against NC State

Dom Fenoglio: The Chronicle (September 21, 2025)

Tre Freeman's second-quarter interception was the hinge that swung Saturday's game in Duke's favor, turning what would have been a two-possession deficit into a two-possession lead. Across the proverbial "middle eight" minutes – the end of the first half and the beginning of the second – the Blue Devils finally looked like the team they expected to be.

But as noticeable the difference was in the team's on-the-field play, the biggest change for Duke Saturday afternoon was one of identity.

"We talked today about our identity, and how Duke football wins," head coach Manny Diaz said. "We thought we'd gotten a little bit away from that. We are defined by our mental toughness, our resiliency and our togetherness."

"We had a lot of evidence early on in the game that there would be reason to not to believe and to drop our gloves. And to our guys' credit, they stayed in the fight. They kept battling."

Minutes before Freeman's pick, the Blue Devils' resolve was tested when the defense's emotional and literal anchor, Nick Morris Jr., went down with a serious injury. Freeman spoke after the game about his bond with the veteran middle linebacker, who has personified the battle with adversity Diaz preached.

Before the season began, Diaz brought in a former military general who shared a message of making adversity matter, and all of the players echoed the sentiment of winning Saturday's contest for Morris. While the Wolfpack scored a touchdown soon after the injury, there was a noticeable difference in the intensity and attention to detail in tackling after that moment.

"I think part of [the change is] lowering the expectation of not trying to play perfect," Diaz said. "That's a super talented offense, right? They're going to make plays. I mean, we can't help them with some of the missed tackles we had, but get up and just play the next play."

Once the dominoes began to fall for Duke, big plays began to come in bunches. Darian Mensah linked up with tight end Landen King for a spectacular touchdown, Wesley Williams stormed through the line for a blocked field goal and Nate Sheppard continued to breakout as a true freshman with countless broken tackles.

"Our offense feels like a threat to go down the field every time they have the ball. And I thought it was, for the first time this season, some complimentary football as the game went on," Diaz said. "[The] defense got some stops, [the] offense went down [and] scored and just got that momentum."

For a team that had tripped over its own feet through the first three weeks, that level of synergy was a breath of fresh air. While the scoreboard remained close enough to keep the outcome in question until Anderson Castle broke off a 66-yard touchdown run in the fourth quarter, there was little doubt that the home team was in the driver's seat for the first time all season.

The offense's first drive of the second half was a perfect snapshot of this confidence. Mensah began by rolling out of the pocket and hitting Sahmir Hagans in stride on a crosser. Sheppard snapped off a nine-yard gain on the following play, and the Blue Devils went no huddle to give Que'Sean Brown an advantage on a screen pass. Mensah linked up with Hagans once again to cap off a 75-yard drive that took just 1:30.

Each play was perfectly executed, and N.C. State appeared helpless in stopping the boulder rolling towards it down the hill. It was exactly what Diaz envisioned when he brought Mensah to Durham, and what Duke will need moving forward.

The final piece of the puzzle that the Blue Devils finally connected was winning the turnover battle. Before Freeman's pick, Chandler Rivers and DaShawn Stone teamed up to snag one from Wolfpack quarterback CJ Bailey. After a game-opening drive that saw the defense yet again fall victim to a third-and-long blunder, that play gave the secondary a much-needed break.

"Turnovers are a funny deal," Diaz said. "We haven't been able to get turnovers, but when they come, they tend to come in bunches."

Still, Duke's defense is far from what coordinator Jonathan Patke wants it to be. Bailey sliced and diced the Blue Devils for 364 yards through the air and had just three incompletions in the first half.

For all of the progress made on the field and in the locker room Saturday, Duke cannot continue to ride highs and lows to such extremes as the season goes on. It cannot count on a +4 turnover margin every week, and defensive discipline remains a major issue.

Time will tell if the Blue Devils take another step forwards on the round against Syracuse. For now, they are relieved to rediscover what it feels like to win.

"I feel at peace a little bit. It feels good. Feels right," Williams said after the game.

Down and out, Duke rediscovers what makes it Duke, and leaves NC State behind

Luke DeCock: Raleigh News & Observer (September 20, 2025)

The clock was ticking, the scoreboard was unfavorable, the home crowd leaned toward the visitors and Duke was well into its fourth game of the season still looking for the team it hoped and thought it would be. The season, to date, had been disappointing to say the least. Saturday was turning out no different.

Five turnovers against Illinois, to turn a winnable game against a ranked team into an embarrassing loss. A dismal first half in Darian Mensah's return to Tulane that left the Blue Devils with too much work to do.

There was such promise going into Manny Diaz's second season, and Duke had yet to locate it. Maybe it just took a visit from a rival, the games fans and players still care about and the ACC no longer does, to shake something loose. Maybe it took a mental reboot – "we kind of hit ctrl-alt-delete," Diaz said – to get Duke back to where it needed to be.

"We talked at the hotel today about our identity and how Duke football wins," Diaz said. "We thought we had gotten a little away from that."

In less than four minutes on either side of halftime, Duke emerged as the team it was supposed to be, leaving N.C. State shattered and stunned. Down 13 and being outgained on a two-to-one basis, the Blue Devils scored three touchdowns in as many minutes and never looked back on their way to a 45-33 win, even busting a long touchdown run when they were just trying to run out the clock after a late Wolfpack score applied some belated game pressure.

Duke's defense forced four turnovers, blocked a field goal and thumped C.J. Bailey every chance it got, rediscovering its confidence after N.C. State's early push.

"A lot of little things that had not been going our way that went our way tonight," Diaz said. "The thing we just kept saying was, 'We just have to do us better.' It wasn't a schematic thing."

Or, as Wes Williams, who blocked a field goal, said: "I feel at peace, a little bit. It feels good. It feels right."

And as the Blue Devils emerged from whatever funk they'd gotten lost in, the Wolfpack found itself in an unfamiliar situation. N.C. State had been, to date this season, in three games it would likely have contrived to lose – one or more if not all – in recent years, but found ways in all three to make game-winning plays at critical moments.

It didn't look, through most of the first half, like this was going to be a fourth. The Wolfpack was doubling up the Blue Devils in yardage, had a decided edge on defense and appeared comfortably ahead by two scores. There was every reason for the Wolfpack to believe it was about to be 4-0 en route to 6-0, even if the schedule got tougher from there.

Then the Blue Devils scored three touchdowns in less than four minutes on either side of halftime, benefitting from a bizarre play where N.C. State appeared to snap the ball unexpectedly while receivers were looking to the sideline and Bailey wasn't expecting it. Bailey, under immediate pressure, threw up a jump ball over the middle that Tre Freeman ran nearly all the way back to set up the second of the three Duke touchdowns.

And after Duke scored on the first possession of the third quarter to go up 28-20, now N.C. State was in another one of those games, yet again.

There was a moment, late, when it looked like another big play would turn the tide. After cutting it to a one-score game with four minutes to go, the Wolfpack had Duke in 3rd-and-1. One stop there and it would have been N.C. State's game to lose.

Anderson Castle, nominally a short-yardage back, broke through the line and never stopped, running 66 yards right into rivalry history for his third touchdown. And Duke had recaptured, along the way, what it always thought it would be.

"We just wanted to get back to doing what we do best," Duke receiver Samir Hagans said. "I feel like this game was a good testament to the work we put in this week, showing everybody we are still who we are."

N.C. State lost a game it could have won. Duke won a game it could have lost. After being on the other side, they swapped places Saturday night. The Wolfpack still has a cushion. The Blue Devils figured it out just in time.

Duke is a basketball school. So why is it paying a transfer QB top-tier money?

Stewart Mandel: The Athletic (September 11, 2025)

Reports last December of Duke awarding a two-year, $8 million NIL deal to a transfer quarterback elicited two obvious reactions: 1) Duke has that kind of money? And 2) It's giving it to … a football player?!

"We have aspirations to play at the highest level possible, and that's counter, maybe, to what people have always thought of with Duke football," said Greg Pritchard, a former Duke defensive lineman and co-founder of the football program's NIL collective. "So it was very purposeful for us to go after the best quarterback that we could possibly get."

Once Tulane's Darian Mensah entered the transfer portal, Duke's staff evaluated him and rated Mensah as "significantly higher than any other quarterback that was available," said its chief football strategy officer, Binuk Kodituwakku.

So Pritchard quickly mobilized donors and got a deal done within days.

But landing the prized quarterback is one thing. As Kodituwakku said last week, "A big thing about Duke donors is they want to see a return on investment."

Those donors likely had mixed reactions last weekend when Mensah, a third-year sophomore, faced his first big test, against No. 11 Illinois. He was an impressive 23-of-34 for 334 yards and two touchdowns, but he also had three turnovers. His team had five on the day. The Blue Devils hung in for three quarters before losing 45-19 at home.

"Darian played very well, but he's a developing player that's going to learn some lessons on ball security today," head coach Manny Diaz said afterward. "He showed with our offense today, against a really, really good defense, that we've got some really dangerous weapons."

Next up for Duke: A trip Saturday to Mensah's former school, Tulane.

In the still-nascent name, image and likeness era, the players who receive the most highly publicized deals inevitably garner a higher level of scrutiny. See former Tennessee quarterback Nico Iamaleava, now at UCLA, who signed a four-year, $8 million contract in high school and garnered considerable backlash for leaving the Vols last spring after his representatives reportedly asked for more money. Or former Georgia quarterback Carson Beck, now at Miami, whose stolen Mercedes and Lamborghini became a national headline.

In this case, though, most college football fans had never heard of Mensah prior to him landing at Duke. And many still haven't.

Just 13 months ago, the two-star recruit out of San Luis Obispo, Calif., was still a third-string backup for an AAC school. He ultimately won Tulane's starting job in preseason camp and went on to lead the Green Wave to a conference championship game. He finished as the nation's sixth-rated passer while averaging 9.5 yards per attempt, tied with No. 1 draft pick Cam Ward and Ohio State's Will Howard for third nationally.

Two weeks into the 2024 season, he signed with an agent who set out to make him the highest-paid player in the country. Now, the 20-year-old has his own house, bought a Mercedes for himself and a Dodge Charger for his mom and started a foundation to help young athletes in his hometown.

"It all happened so fast," he said, "I didn't really get to sit back and realize how life-changing NIL could be."

All he's expected to do is elevate the profile of a traditionally mid-level Power 4 program long overshadowed by its basketball counterparts.

About that $8 million deal, first reported by CBS. Two people involved in the negotiations said that figure is accurate. Others involved in the negotiations said it is not. Kodituwakku, who manages Duke's contract negotiations, did not offer specifics but said, "The number's not as high as what's been said, and it's very incentive-laden."

But even if Mensah earns closer to $3 million, it would put him in an exclusive club with Miami's Beck, Michigan's Bryce Underwood, Oklahoma's John Mateer and Penn State's Drew Allar. (Texas' Arch Manning may be making more from endorsements.)

But unlike Mensah, those other quarterbacks all play for college football blue bloods.

Duke has at least been respectable for some time. Beginning in 2012, Duke reached six bowl games in seven seasons under longtime coach David Cutcliffe before a three-year down period led to his ouster. His replacement, Mike Elko, led Duke to a nine-win season in 2022 and 8-5 the next, before leaving for Texas A&M. In December 2023, athletic director Nina King hired Diaz, once head coach at Miami, who led the Blue Devils to their second nine-win season in three years and a trip to the Gator Bowl, its first January bowl game in 30 years.

Diaz's first big catch in the transfer portal was Texas quarterback Maalik Murphy, for whom the collective paid around $1 million. It was more than 10 times what his predecessor, Riley Leonard, was making before leaving for a seven-figure deal at Notre Dame.

Murphy, now at Oregon State, had a respectable 2024 season, throwing for nearly 3,000 yards. But the staff felt his lack of mobility limited the offense. It quietly began scouting for an upgrade.

Kodituwakku, a native of Australia who previously managed the salary cap for an Australian Football League club, and John Garrett, general manager of player personnel, oversee Duke's roster acquisition. Garrett handles scouting. Kodituwakku handles the numbers. He utilizes a database with advanced stats on thousands of college players to identify potential fits and assess their dollar value.

"We're trying to put in systems and processes that will help us A) stretch our resources and B) minimize the chance of making poor decisions," said Kodituwakku. "We're always going to be a developmental program, so we've got to hit on our portal acquisitions at a higher rate than other schools."

Mensah first began catching attention in the Green Wave's second game of the season, when they nearly upset No. 17 Kansas State. He threw for 342 yards (and had two turnovers) and appeared to throw a touchdown that tied the score with 17 seconds left, which got wiped out by an offensive pass interference penalty on his receiver.

Noah Reisenfeld, an agent at Young Money APAA Sports, got an early tip on Mensah through a connection at Tulane and swooped in after the K-State game to sign him. Reisenfeld, 25, garnered backlash last January for claiming "pretty much every NIL agency charges (college athletes) 20 percent," compared with 3-to-5 percent for pro contracts, due to the smaller value of most college deals.

He speaks with similar candor about his pursuit last year of a lucrative Power 4 deal for Mensah, who became the top-ranked player in the portal in The Athletic upon his Dec. 8 announcement. (His position would, like others', move as more players entered the portal.)

Mensah committed to Duke three days later, suggesting the Blue Devils were his only suitor. Reisenfeld disputes that.

"As quiet as it was publicly, it was louder than a lot of people probably think," he said. "The only schools that I did not speak to were Texas, Washington and Clemson," all of whom had established quarterbacks returning. "I had conversations with everyone else under the sun."

Two sources involved with Mensah's recruitment said that Auburn had interest, before landing Oklahoma's Jackson Arnold. One of those sources and another source with knowledge of Mensah's recruitment said UCLA pursued him as well. But the options thinned once Reisenfeld made it known the ambitious price tag he was seeking for his client.

Duke was undeterred.

Diaz and Kodituwakku were told they'd be receiving the first of three visits by Mensah, and prepared a presentation highlighting both how he'd fit into their offense and their plan to surround him with new weapons. At Tulane, Mensah had led a run-oriented offense with a lot of play-action passing, whereas Diaz and Brewer's scheme is heavier on run-pass options, progressions and vertical passing.

"The fact that they pushed the ball vertically down the field was a big one for me," said Mensah. "And in this offense, the quarterback has all the control. That's something that I really wanted."

He promptly committed to Duke without taking other visits. (No other visits had yet been scheduled.)

Mensah picking Duke continued an NIL-era trend of high-profile recruits and transfers choosing less "obvious" programs. Diaz cites as an example last year's top-two Heisman finishers. Travis Hunter, the No. 1 player in the Class of 2022, became the No. 2 NFL draft pick after playing for Jackson State and Colorado. Ashton Jeanty turned down lucrative offers from major programs to remain at Boise State for his last season and became the No. 6 pick.

Or college basketball, where Rutgers last year landed Dylan Harper and Ace Bailey, who both became top-five NBA draft picks, and where the top-ranked 2025 player, AJ Dybantsa, signed with BYU for a deal reported to be as much as $7 million.
"In the past, you had to go to a small handful of schools as a player to have a brand, and that's not the case anymore," said Diaz. "Kids don't believe that they have to go to the blue blood schools to achieve what they want to achieve."

The news on Dec. 11 that Duke had landed the touted quarterback came as a surprise to many. A couple of weeks later came reports of the two-year, $8 million figure that shocked the sport. Landing Mensah served notice that Duke is no longer content to be known as a basketball school.

And the program made good on its promise to upgrade his supporting cast. Receivers Cooper Barkate (Harvard) and Andrel Anthony (Oklahoma) already have a combined 17 catches for 314 yards through two games. Now, the Blue Devils have to go out and prove all that money was well spent.

"Obviously, (Duke football) is not as big as basketball," Mensah said last week, "but I think I'm here to change it."

From Mardi Gras to Research Triangle: Darian Mensah's reported $8M journey from Tulane to Duke

Anna Snyder: USA Today (September 11, 2025)

The last time Duke football quarterback Darian Mensah was in New Orleans was for Mardi Gras this past March.

Six months later, the former Tulane quarterback is back in New Orleans, not for beads or parades, but to face his former team for the first time since transferring to Duke in December 2024.

Mensah spent the 2023 and 2024 seasons in New Orleans after committing to the Green Wave – the first program to offer him and the lone Bowl Subdivision school to do so – out of St. Joseph High School in Santa Maria, California. He redshirted his freshman season before throwing for 2,732 yards and 22 touchdowns in 2024 to lead the Green Wave to the American Athletic championship game, where they fell to Army.

Days later, he entered the transfer portal, where he was ESPN's No. 3-rated player.

The return Saturday to Yulman Stadium is described as a "weird" one by Mensah, who will be going up against former teammates, some of whom he spent Mardi Gras with alongside his family, playing in a stadium where he spent time the first two years of his college career.

"Those are my guys still to this day," Mensah said.

At the same time, playing against his former teammates in a stadium he knows so well brings a sense of familiarity – not just for Mensah but for the Green Wave, too.

"We know Darian well," Tulane head coach Jon Sumrall said, "he knows us pretty well, too."

Durham, North Carolina: The "perfect place" for Darian Mensah

Two days after entering the transfer portal, Mensah got his first taste of Duke on an official visit where he was welcomed by the Cameron Crazies in attendance for Duke basketball's game against Incarnate Ward. Not long after, the 6-foot-3, 205-pound quarterback announced his transfer, inking a reported $8 million NIL deal.

Academically, Mensah said Duke isn't much more rigorous than Tulane, with both universities ranking among the top 100 in "U.S. News & World Report's" 2025 Best Colleges rankings: Duke at No. 6 and Tulane No. 63. City-wise, though, New Orleans' lively vibe differs from that of Durham's more chill, relaxed setting, which reminds Mensah of his hometown of San Luis Obispo, California, despite being more than 2,500 miles apart.

Mensah noted that he has his own house for the first time in Durham, adding to the homey feeling of his new city.

"Durham is the perfect place for me," Mensah said.

That comfort off the field has carried over onto the gridiron. Mensah quickly earned the trust of his teammates and became a leader in the Blue Devils locker room, being named one of Duke's four team captains for 2025. Through the Blue Devils' first two games, Mensah has thrown for 723 yards and five touchdowns while being intercepted once.

"He's magical," Duke wide receiver Cooper Barkate said following Duke's season-opening win over Elon. "Probably everyone has told you that, but he really is."

Darian Mensah's return to New Orleans

While Mensah's last trip to New Orleans was in March, his last time seeing Sumrall was this past summer at the wedding of Green Wave quarterbacks coach Collin D'Angelo. It was nothing but love between Mensah and his former coach.

"I probably spent more time with him at the wedding than did I anybody, other than maybe my wife," Sumrall said.

"If you play one snap for me or 100 or 1000, I love you for as long as I live."

Facing a former team isn't new to Duke personnel either. Duke football coach Manny Diaz knows all too well what it's like, as the former Miami coach found himself on the sidelines of Hard Rock Stadium when Duke made the trip to face the Hurricanes in November 2024.

"I always say it's awkward, especially before the game," Diaz said. "But that first play, it just becomes ball and everyone's trying to do their job. I suspect that'll probably be the way it'll go Saturday."

Same goes for Duke offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Jonathan Brewer, who formerly coached at SMU and led Duke against the Mustangs last year.

Brewer said him and Mensah have discussed his return to New Orleans since Mensah's arrival on campus.

"You'd be lying to say you weren't more emotional in that game, that's just what it is, it's human nature," Brewer said. "You just need to know how to control your emotions, how to control adversity when bad things happen and not overreact."

And while Mensah has settled in Durham, there's one thing he still misses from New Orleans. He hopes to fit in a stop while he's back in town.

"That gumbo in Louisiana is always A-1," he said.

Darian Mensah returns to Tulane: Journey for $4M QB comes full circle as Duke heads to New Orleans in Week 3

John Talty: CBS Sports (September 11, 2025)

When the deal was done and the reality of the moment finally hit him, Darian Mensah couldn't help but well up with tears of joy.

In seemingly an instant, a player who had one FBS scholarship offer coming out of high school and started fall camp as Tulane's third-string quarterback was now a multi-millionaire and headed to one of the top academic schools in the country. You could call it a dream come true for Mensah, but he couldn't have even dreamed that big.

A player that even the most hardcore of fans didn't know existed mere months earlier was now believed to be the highest-paid player in college football with a deal that could pay him $8 million over two years, as CBS Sports first reported last December. His agent, Noah Reisenfeld, told him even if he never played a down in the NFL, he was now set for life financially.

Mensah's mind quickly went to his mom, Naomi, who had raised him and his three siblings as a single mother. He thought about all the challenging moments along the way. How his mom seemed to work 24/7 and yet still had to file for bankruptcy at one point. On all the sacrifices she made to keep their family afloat when the situation got dire. How he dreamed that one day he could provide financial help and ease his mom's challenges.

"I've watched her struggle many times -- physically, emotionally -- and seeing that as a kid, it does something to you," Mensah told CBS Sports. "To have this opportunity is a huge blessing."

Mensah's life forever changed when he agreed to go to Duke, but his journey is still just getting started. It hits another important milestone Saturday when he returns to New Orleans to take on Tulane.

Coming out of St. Joseph High School in Santa Maria, California, the recruiting attention never made its way to Mensah.

He had a total of two scholarship offers: Tulane and FCS-level Idaho State. He was the No. 135-ranked quarterback in the 247Sports composite rankings. There was talent there, but the Mensah family was fighting to survive, and it wasn't like there was a ton of leftover money for expensive private quarterback training or flying all around the country to get in front of different coaches.

The California kid picked New Orleans out of the two and redshirted his freshman season.

And then the lone staff that thought he was FBS-worthy left. Willie Fritz and his son, Wes, were the early believers of Mensah but had decided to leave for Houston. It could have been easy for Mensah to get lost in the shuffle of a coaching transition as new coach Jon Sumrall and his staff came in.

He started fall camp as the third-string quarterback, but as Sumrall and his staff watched more and more practices, they liked what they saw out of the redshirt freshman. He had a coolness about him, an ability to not get rattled or too high off what happened. In a surprise, Sumrall named Mensah the starter ahead of its season opener, a top 25 game against Kansas State. Mensah immediately paid off Sumrall's faith, throwing for 342 passing yards, two touchdowns and one interception in a game the Green Wave should have won.

It wasn't as easy the following week against Oklahoma and Brent Venables, who eats up young quarterbacks, but Mensah kept getting better and better as the season progressed. Toward the end of a standout season for Tulane, Reisenfeld knew there would be a strong market for his client should he enter the transfer portal. He had the ambitious goal of making the Tulane quarterback few knew the highest-paid player in college football.

As Reisenfeld assessed what the options could look like, Duke was doing its own due diligence. The Blue Devils' brain trust liked that Mensah was a smart kid who was little-recruited and yet had still won the job.

"That means something to do that," Duke offensive coordinator Jonathan Brewer told CBS Sports. "To prove to everybody you've got something and you aren't just a highly rated guy who had things handed to you."

As the season progressed, Duke general manager John Garrett and his team met once a week with Big League Advantage, an analytics firm it worked with, to determine who might be a good fit. They needed someone who had strong academic credentials, which Mensah had, but they also wanted someone who could help elevate the offense. They watched Mensah's games against Power Four competition and came away impressed with how his game would translate to the ACC.

On paper, Duke didn't need a quarterback. It landed Maalik Murphy, a Texas transfer, the following cycle and the quarterback threw for 2,993 yards, 26 touchdowns and 12 interceptions in Duke's nine-win season in 2024. But as Duke coach Manny Diaz and his team thought about how the program could level up, to find those small edges to go beyond nine wins, they saw an opportunity at the quarterback position. It wasn't that they disliked Murphy, who later left for Oregon State, but they felt like they needed someone who had more scrambling ability and could make something out of seemingly nothing.

"If you're not able to extend plays, you have to be so elite with the ball and your mind to get there," Duke coach Manny Diaz told CBS Sports. "To me now, it's not a luxury, it's a necessity. There's not many people that are having a lot of success right now without the ability to be able to buy time and sort of make those off-schedule plays."

When Mensah entered the portal after the American Championship Game, Duke told Reisenfeld he was their No. 1-rated target. And when the agent for Young Money APAA established the compensation range it would take to land Mensah, Duke didn't flinch.

The agent said there was another school, which he wouldn't name, that was willing to pay the same as Duke. But it was clear early on that once Mensah, his family and his agents all convened together in Tampa that Duke was the preferred school. It had the strong academics that were critically important to Mensah, it was investing big money in improving its football program and wanted to feature the young quarterback in a much more pass-friendly offense than what he had at Tulane.

"We assessed it all and we thought Duke was the best fit," Mensah said. "It wasn't between a bunch of schools. I kind of wanted to get recruited, but Duke had everything I wanted and checked every box."

With Mensah now guiding the offense, Duke is 2-1 with a tricky road game against Tulane this weekend. The Blue Devils had a big opportunity last weekend against No. 11 Illinois, but sloppy plays and turnovers took what looked like a game Duke had a real chance to win into a 45-19 loss.

Returning to the school where you got your start is never easy. Sumrall has said all the right things this week about it, but there were understandably some hurt feelings within the program when Mensah left. There's plenty of extra motivation, too, to prove the Green Wave are just fine without the highest-paid quarterback in the country. People within the Tulane program believe they'll be able to rattle their former quarterback.

"I think there's familiarity on both sides," Sumrall said. "We know Darian well; he knows us pretty well, too. He's gone against this defense plenty in practice... It's a unique matchup, I think what makes it unique is this type of thing happens all the time in pro football. College, it's probably a little bit newer with the era we're in."

A year ago, Mensah was a little-known Tulane quarterback just trying to prove he belonged in college football. Now, he carries the extra weight of proving he's worth one of the most expensive contracts in college football, to date. While there may be outside questions about how that much money can change a person, those inside Duke say he's been the same kid from the moment he arrived on campus.

"He's a genuine person," Brewer said. "He cares about people. He loves football. He's a competitor."

There's no major ego, no throwing his weight around as a player who makes more than some Power Four head coaches. He's just a 20-year old kid who has capitalized more than perhaps anyone in college football history on the convergence of NIL and revenue share money.

No matter what happens Saturday, college football has forever changed the trajectory of the Mensah family.

"It's been everything I've wanted and a huge blessing," Mensah said. "When it comes to taking care of family, it's something that I hold dear to my heart."

Darian Mensah stays focused on what matters

Conor O'Neill: DevilsIllustrated (September 5, 2025)

The main thing stays the main thing for Darian Mensah.

People are itching to talk about Duke's quarterback. Most of the time, his skillset is a tertiary topic.

Is he really making $4 million this year? How could Duke afford him? And how did they lock him up so quickly through the transfer portal?

Oh, and why did they need a QB with Maalik Murphy throwing 26 touchdowns last year?

It's 2025 and college students are online. The 20-year-old Mensah isn't going to feign ignorance. He has the same online awareness as he has pocket awareness.

So, how does Mensah maintain his focus?

"Just keep the main thing the main thing," he says, "which means, just focus on football."

"In this day and age it can get easy to get distracted with all the outside noise," Mensah continued. "I think if you keep the main focus football, then everything else will fall into line."

Duke brought in Mensah so that its offense could fall into line.

The Blue Devils won nine games a season ago with an inconsistent offense – mostly because of who was playing quarterback. Bringing in the Tulane transfer was a shrewd and calculated move. One meant to take the Blue Devils from the 8-9-win plateau of the last three years to the second double-digit-win season in program history.

Saturday's game against Illinois is the first test of whether Duke can reach such heights.

With that, we need to know more about the Blue Devils' new quarterback.

Why was Darian Mensah underrecruited?

Of power-conference starting quarterbacks, Mensah's recruiting tale is a unique one.

He had three offers. Tulane was the only FBS team; Idaho State and Lindenwood were the others, both on the FCS level.

Mensah was a self-described diamond in the rough. He attributes that to a few things, one of them a transfer to Saint Joseph High School halfway through his career.

Another reason is simple: Geography.

His hometown, San Luis Obispo, is on the California coast but not particularly close to the football hotbeds of the state. It's four-plus hours north to San Francisco and the Bay Area; four-plus hours south to Los Angeles.

"I feel like everyone wants to recruit NorCal ... or SoCal, or (St. John) Bosco or Mater Dei," Mensah said. "There's not a lot of powerhouses in the Central Coast. ... I don't think anybody knows that area."

Overlooked, underrated and those weren't the only things working against Mensah.

For more on his family's background and how it shaped him, check out Ross Dellenger's story.

Mensah didn't play in his first season at Tulane, 2023. The Green Wave won 11 games and went unbeaten in the AAC with Michael Pratt at QB. Out went Willie Fritz, the coach who recruited Mensah; in stepped Jon Sumrall.

He was a surprise winner – to the uninformed, at least – of a three-man QB battle going into last season. Mensah beat out Ty Thompson, an Oregon transfer who was a top-10 QB in the Class of 2021, and Kai Horton, who was entering his fourth season at Tulane.

It's been a rocket ship trajectory for Mensah ever since. He completed 65.9% of his passes with 22 touchdowns and six interceptions last season.
Through one offseason and a game, he's made a strong impression on the Blue Devils.

"He's magical," wide receiver Cooper Barkate said. "Any play that's called, no matter left or right, run or pass. I mean, one of Sahmir's (Hagans) touchdowns (against Elon) came from a little flip out. That's the type of player he is, he's magical any time the ball is in his hands."

Standing out in Game One

You can caveat this as much as possible, given Duke played an FCS-level team in its season opener.

In his first game at Duke, Mensah threw for 389 yards – the 22nd most in Duke history. His passer efficiency of 204.6 is the ninth best in Duke history.

Not bad for a debut – or, as he put it:

"Not a bad day in the office."

It's a simple remark. Maybe there's not much meaning behind it.

But it offers a peak into the psyche of the most important player on Duke's roster. Putting up big numbers with laser-like passes and efficiency is just another day for Mensah.

His office is just different from most.

"He even came to me in the second quarter, he's like, 'OK, I'm relaxed now,'" coach Manny Diaz said.

Everything wasn't copasetic in Duke's opener.

Mensah missed Barkate on a deep throw in the first half. On the same drive, Peyton Jones dropped a likely touchdown pass. Jaquez Moore fumbled when Duke was driving to end the half, sending the game to halftime tied at 10-10.

Though it all, the main thing stayed the main thing for Duke's QB.

"I think you saw a guy play really calm, collective," offensive coordinator Jonathan Brewer said. "He didn't show any sign of panic when things maybe weren't going good in the first quarter.

"Halftime, probably was one of the most poised I've seen. We're making adjustments and saying, 'Hey, we're going to go to this, we're going to get to this,' and he was locked in, dialed in."

It wasn't a surprise to Brewer or Duke's staff. That's the Mensah they've seen throughout spring practices and fall camp.

Not a player who's enamored with his NIL deal that pays him up to $4 million in each of the next two seasons at Duke.

Staying level throughout the season

Mensah goes into the weight room to stretch before taking the field for warm-ups.

His playlist outside of football contains "a bit of everything," he says, naming rapper Gunna and country singer Morgan Wallen.

When Mensah is stretching before games, he isn't listening to rap or R&B or country.

"I listen to frequencies before games. Like, vibrational frequencies," he said. "It's just like a constant ringing noise ... it's like calming music."

That's as close as Mensah comes to having a pre-game superstition. He said there's nothing specific about the frequencies – "just anything to be high vibrational."

"I'm just a huge believer in manifestation," Mensah continues. "Things that you say, you can manifest into your life. My mom is super big on this, the higher your vibration is, the more you can attract things that you want into your life."

It keeps him centered – the crux of who he is.

"It can get easy to get distracted or look ahead," Mensah said. "But that comes with anxiety and all types of stuff. I think just focusing on what you have to do in the moment that you're in, helps with that."

The main thing stays the main thing.

Darian Mensah's journey to Duke: A modern-day American success story

Ross Dellenger: Yahoo Sports (September 4, 2025)

As a longtime acupuncture and massage therapist, Naomi Brebes-Mensah considers herself "a healer." She's calm, steady and always optimistic. With her, the glass is half-full.

Life has challenged that attitude.

In 2008, she lost her biggest support system when her mother died. Not long afterward, her husband left her to raise their three children and a fourth belonging to him whom she informally adopted. She had to file for bankruptcy, her car was repossessed and she lived – the family of five – in a three-bedroom apartment within a low-income housing development.

"I was on food stamps and going to the Christian church for bags of food," Naomi said. "That was the hardest."

Now, years later, when discussing her family's current situation, Naomi grows emotional, her voice cracking as she apologetically pauses during the conversation. The past eight months have been overwhelming. Her son signed a multi-million-dollar contract to play college football, changing the family's financial fortunes.

It's the ultimate rags-to-riches tale, one of many such stories across the college sports industry, made possible in this new athlete-compensation era where schools, for the first time, are legally permitted to pay players directly.

Darian Mensah, so under-recruited out of high school that he yielded one FBS scholarship offer, is a player who just 13 months ago had started zero college games yet became one of the most sought-after figures in the transfer portal this past December, igniting a bidding war among schools that resulted in, perhaps, the most lucrative contract in the early history of this new era of college sports.

Darian went from a little-known, unpaid California kid to a multi-millionaire almost overnight.

"You have to believe in miracles when this stuff happens," Naomi said. "Obviously, it was his hard work and dedication, but I believe that nothing is by accident or chance."

On the way up

Mensah doesn't look like a millionaire.

First off, he's 20 years old.

Within the suite level of the football stadium at Duke, his new school, Mensah arrives for an interview in exercise shorts, open-toed shoes and a T-shirt. He has just completed football practice and will soon head to class. He's majoring in sociology – yes, well-paid college players still have academic requirements, especially here.

Money has not changed Mensah as a player or, even, as a person. But it has changed his and his family's life. He bought himself a black Mercedes with Duke blue interior and his mom a gray Dodge Ram. He took his new teammates on a yacht in South Florida this offseason and, perhaps most importantly, he began a non-profit foundation to sponsor underprivileged athletes back home in San Luis Obispo, a city of about 50,000 along the central California coast, overshadowed by the more populous hubs to its north, San Francisco, and south, Los Angeles.

Darian Mensah completed 27 of 34 passes for 389 yards and three touchdowns in his Duke debut against Elon.

The foundation, just a few weeks old, is currently funding the football training of his three brothers, ranging from ages 14-16. They are working with Mensah's old trainer, Joe Protheroe, a former California Polytechnic State running back who opened JPro Athletic Development not long after he met Darian in 2020, when he spotted the quarterback, his mom Naomi and twin sister Grace throwing passes at a neighborhood park.

"Hey, man," Prothroe remembers saying to a 15-year-old Mensah, "you wanna get some work in?"

Five years later, after being ignored at so many high school recruiting camps and even doubted at his first college stop in New Orleans, Mensah steps onto the biggest stage yet since his meteoric rise from a little-known backup in the lower rung of FBS to one of the sport's highest-paid players as an ACC starting quarterback.

At noon Saturday in a nationally televised game on ESPN, Mensah and the Duke Blue Devils host 11th-ranked Illinois – an ACC-versus-Big Ten duel at a time when power conference bragging rights lord over the sport. It's a chance, also, for the nation to see Mensah – if people didn't see him last season, when he threw for more than 2,700 yards, 22 touchdowns (against just six interceptions) and led Tulane to the American Conference championship game during a breakout sophomore season.

"It was a weird feeling to go super under-recruited and then one of those people highly talked about," Mensah said in an interview last month. "I think it's something I've always been worthy of. I just didn't have the right eyes on me. I feel like I've always been that player, that hot commodity. I always felt that way about myself."

Such a statement may read as smug. But Mensah doesn't come across as cocky. In fact, he's "California cool," those around him say – mellow, laidback, carrying with him a happy-go-lucky vibe likely acquired from mom.

There is another side, though.

"He's got some guts to him," said Duke offensive coordinator Jonathan Brewer. "He's got an edge, a prove-them-wrong."

Mensah's story is possibly the most extreme example of college sports' new system of athlete compensation – an overlooked high school player who blossoms while competing at a non-power league school and then leaves for a rich payday at a bigger brand.

Of the top 100 football players in On3 Sports' transfer portal rankings this past year, nearly one-quarter of them (23) moved from a non-power conference program to one of the four power leagues. Eighteen of those players were all-conference selections – a few of them even all-Americans – at their previous school.

While this migration isn't altogether new within the sport, the onset of athlete revenue-sharing has made permissive what has existed for decades as a transgression within the NCAA's old rule structure: offering financial incentives for a player to move schools.

And, for the most part, no one – even coaches – blames them for leaving nowadays.

"In my career, I've left jobs for more money," said Tulane head coach Jon Sumrall, the man who gave Mensah a starting spot and helped develop him last season in New Orleans. "The financials become so great, how does a guy say no?"

In figures released earlier this summer by the NIL platform Opendorse, football players in the Big Ten, ACC, SEC and Big 12 – the richest leagues in the sport – will earn three to six times more in compensation than those in the Sun Belt, American, Mountain West, Pac-12, Conference-USA, MAC and the FCS division.

At Tulane last year, Mensah earned only enough money from the school's collective to pay for his family to attend games, his mother says. And while the compensation is likely to increase in this new era as cash shifts from collective to school, significant financial gaps still exist.

For instance, cash-strapped non-power league schools will each spend an average of $4.3 million on their athletes this year, with roughly 65% going to football ($2.7 million), according to estimates from Opendorse. Meanwhile, most power programs will spend the max allowed under House settlement terms of $20.5 million ($13-$16 million on football).

While details of Mensah's two-year contract were not shared with Yahoo Sports, those at Duke and those close to the quarterback emphasized that the reported $4 million annual salary is close to reality.

Duke head coach Manny Diaz addressed the situation with the team earlier this year.

"You first tell everyone that what you see on the internet is not always true," he told Yahoo Sports. "But you have to explain to people that what is actually accurate is … we are in an era now that, similar to the NFL, no one is going to bat an eye if a quarterback makes blankety-blank of the total team allocation. Whatever the number is, that's just sort of the new normal."

According to Opendorse, power conference schools plan to spend an average of around 15-25% of their revenue-share pool on quarterbacks ($2-$5 million), with the starter – especially a highly prized transfer – receiving a majority of that compensation.

"Everyone knows the salary cap in the NFL and they understand what the quarterbacks get paid," Diaz said. "To me, it stands to reason, on a smaller scale, it's the same in college."

How Darian Mensah landed at Duke

Naomi never thought she'd be in the role of interviewing college player agents. But last fall, during her son's sophomore season at Tulane, that's exactly what happened.

Ultimately, she and Darian chose Young Money APAA Sports, a Tampa-based firm founded by American rap star Lil Wayne and CEO Adie von Gontard, the grandson of August Busch Jr. of Anheuser-Busch. Naomi knows that some have been critical of the agency, but during the vetting process, the firm agreed to represent Darian's twin sister Grace, a member of the Oregon women's soccer team.

Family is a way to Darian's heart.

He's eight minutes older than Grace, six years younger than older sister Anela and four years behind half-brother Elvis, who came to the United States when he was 13. Darian's father and Elvis are both originally from Ghana. Darian doesn't speak much about or to his father. He left the family before Darian entered junior high.

Naomi raised the three kids with help from Darian's auntie, uncle and grandpa, as well as neighborhood parents. While mom worked, they'd all chip in, bringing Darian and siblings to games, buying them cleats, feeding them.

Naomi owns a spa and has been in what she calls the "healing realm" since a serious car accident more than two decades ago left her with a deep spiritual connection to God. She taught her children the healthy way to eat, live and think, she says, despite their financial situation. When the twins were 3, the family moved into low-income housing.

"You think about San Luis Obispo and you think that's where all the rich kids come from, but Darian wasn't one of those," said Protheroe, Mensah's former trainer. "He grew up different from all of his friends."

Naomi put herself through college on student loans, something that later negatively impacted her credit and further exasperated the family's financial issues. She acknowledges that, at one point, she slipped into a depressive state.

"My kids watched me crawl out of that hole," she says. "When you are stuck in poverty, all I wanted to do was get out of that poverty."

"Seeing her work hard," Darian Mensah said. "She's one of the reasons I go so hard."

Naomi has no real financial worries now, currently living in a studio apartment in Morro Bay, a coastal city 15 miles northwest of San Luis Obispo. But this is a whole new world.

For instance, she and Darian now have a banker, financial accountant, agents and other "money people" to help them invest the proceeds from Darian's contract with Duke – much of which was frontloaded in payments this past spring.

Mensah and other players who transferred this past year were beneficiaries of an especially lucrative time in the portal. The price for talent skyrocketed as school collectives spent regulation-free, scrambling to build rosters before the implementation of a new enforcement system this summer.

Mensah signed with his agency in early October, about a month into his sophomore season at Tulane. He's one of about 35 college football clients of Noah Reisenfeld, who identified the quarterback even before he won the starting job at Tulane.

By November of last year, given his play and the timing of college sports' revenue-share changeover, there was enough interest in Mensah that Reisenfeld felt like there was a "clear path to make him the highest-paid player in college football."

A host of schools needed a quarterback, including Auburn, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, Syracuse, UCLA, Kentucky and, to the surprise of many, Duke, whose starter, Maalik Murphy, had two years of eligibility remaining after throwing for nearly 3,000 yards and 26 touchdowns in a nine-win season in Durham in 2024. However, a school upgrading at a position – even one with an established starter – is growing more acceptable.

Duke's staff grew interested in Mensah last year when the data analytics system the Blue Devils use, Big League Advantage, identified him as having characteristics the staff thought they needed: an accurate passer who can throw receivers open, operate under pressure and escape from a collapsing pocket. His "dirty pocket" numbers were off the chart, says Brewer, the Duke coordinator.

As Tulane marched toward the American Conference championship game, Sumrall, the Green Wave's coach, realized that he'd likely lose his QB. It's not easy. Sumrall, in his first season as head coach last year, chose Mensah as his starter after he stunned the staff in camp last August by outperforming two higher-rated and more established quarterbacks.

No one saw it coming, even Sumrall himself, who acknowledges that Mensah spent much of the spring and summer as the third man in the three-man battle, mostly participating with the third- and second-string offensive units.

"About seven practices into training camp, I went to my offensive staff and said, 'I want to see this guy with the 1s for a full week. I want to see what we got here,'" Sumrall recalls. "I think our local media here thought I'd lost my mind."

A similar ordeal transpired in his high school recruitment too.

Mensah didn't hold any offers as his senior season began. Late that year, Tulane became the first, followed then by FCS programs Lindenwood and Idaho State.

"We were scouring the country," said Wes Fritz, the man who, while working in recruiting at Tulane, found Mensah's tape and liked it enough to tell his dad, Willie, then the head coach. Looking for a dynamic quarterback who met the school's high academic standard, the staff made Mensah an offer.

"Other schools were probably like, 'Is this Tulane offer even real?'" said Wes Fritz with a laugh, he and dad Willie now at Houston. "They were probably like, 'What the hell is going on here?'"

'Freedom to go rip the ball'

It's tough to explain exactly why Mensah is so successful at quarterback.

He doesn't have the strongest arm. He's not the biggest or fastest guy. But he is smart, accurate, shifty, reads coverages well and, above everything, is instinctive, coaches say.

Wes Fritz describes him as a "point guard" on the football field – calm and collective, that California vibe materializing on the field. In attempting to pinpoint his best skills, Sumrall mentions Mensah's "rhythm" and the precise location of his passes, even comparing the QB to Drew Brees.

"Drew didn't have the biggest arm," Sumrall said, "but he had great instincts."

But maybe there's something else, says Brewer.

"He's got a freedom to go rip the ball," the coach said. "When you're a big-time recruit out of high school, there's a little bit of ... 'Oh! If I mess up, I got this ego and I'm this big-time dude and I suck?' Guys crash fast. I've seen it."

Mensah's recruitment out of the portal last December was different than anything he's ever experienced. He was the guy, at one point the top-ranked transfer quarterback available.

But this was no lengthy recruiting battle. Schools interested in Mensah were told by his agency that the starting figure to speak with the QB was $4 million a year – an obvious sign that he'd been offered a lucrative enough contract with Duke.

"They were talking life-changing money or you weren't talking to him," one coach told Yahoo Sports.

He visited only one school, Duke, and canceled potential visits to others like UCLA and Auburn.

But why, of all places, Duke?

"The guys here, they yearned to be led by someone like me," Mensah said. "I wasn't a five-star recruit. I'm a three-star, just like everybody else in the building. I'm one of them."

Reisenfeld credits Diaz's recruiting approach and the work of Binuk Kodituwakku, the school's chief strategy officer and someone Reisenfeld describes as the team's "deal closer."

"They felt like Darian was the guy to take them to the next step – from 9-3 to 12-0," Reisenfeld said. "Duke made it very clear with the pay that they were all in. We felt the amount of money they offered would set up his family for the rest of his life."

Aside from any financial incentive, he just fits here.

"As a guy coming in, whatever the money situation is, to get guys to see you're not an a-hole, he did that," Brewer recalled.

"Duke guys tend to have a chip on their shoulder," Diaz said. "Because of, you know, for a lot of reasons. And he's wired that way."

So many non-power league players are the same way, overlooked as high schoolers only to develop at the lower levels of Division I before moving up to join those same programs that ignored them years before.

The trend shows no signs of slowing, even with athlete revenue-share contracts. While some of those contracts feature a buyout clause, many believe an "acquisition fee" or a luxury tax should be imposed on power programs that continue to pillage the best of the Group of 6 and FCS conferences.

Jamey Chadwell, the head coach at Liberty, says that lower-resource schools are simply a "farming system" for those at the power level. Should they celebrate identifying a player, signing them and then developing them enough that they get a big payday?

"We are taking the approach that if a freshman plays and he does well, we are only going to have him for one more year," Chadwell said in a 2024 interview.

Sumrall isn't ready to make such a leap, he says.

"The risk-reward is go make more money now and hope there's a good playing situation or stay where I'm at and be the guy," he says. "You don't know until you get to the other side."

For Mensah, both have worked out.

In Duke's first game last week against Elon, he completed 27 of 34 attempts and passed for 389 yards and three touchdowns. A dark horse to challenge for the Big Ten championship this year, Illinois presents a much stiffer challenge.

But what awaits Mensah next week is an even bigger made-for-TV spectacle: The Blue Devils play at Tulane.

"It'll be electric," Mensah said. "Fans riled up. It's going to be a great one."

But first up, it's Illinois – the big stage for one of college football's most unlikely highest-paid players and a shimmering example of how the new era of the sport can change a family's fortunes forever.

"We signed the contract at our agent's home in Florida," Naomi recalled. "It was overlooking the ocean. The sun was setting. Dolphins were jumping. It was crazy.

"My son wanted to change his family life, wanted to change his mom's life. The whole NIL thing is a trip. This door helps change lives."

Why Duke went all in on football: Blue Devils invest heavily for program to compete at highest level

John Talty: CBS Sports (September 4, 2025)

On a beautiful North Carolina campus, an ACC school is heavily investing in trying to elevate its football program.

No, we aren't talking about UNC's grand Bill Belichick experiment. Go 10 miles down Tobacco Road and you'll find a Duke football program coming off a surprising 9-4 record a year ago and dreaming of something more in the future.

A program that didn't even have a 100-yard practice field when David Cutcliffe took over in 2008, Duke is now all-in on football in a way it never has before.

The flashpoint this offseason was landing Tulane quarterback Darian Mensah on a record-setting deal believed to be worth $8 million over two years. A big swing for basketball wouldn't have raised an eyebrow, but Duke football paying top-of-the-market value shocked the college football world. To put it in context: That number would put a college QB above or equal to the compensation nine Power Four head coaches made in 2024. That Duke nudged out starting quarterback Maalik Murphy -- who ended up at Oregon State -- to bring in Mensah only added to the intrigue.

Coming off a strong 2024 season, this offseason was the Blue Devils showing the world they were "going for it," says Duke athletic director Nina King.

"We've got this men's basketball program that is absolutely elite, top of the top in the brand," King told CBS Sports. "But why can't football be right there with men's basketball? We're here, we want to compete."

King says Duke wants to be a College Football Playoff-caliber team and believes it can be. "It's not title-or-bust, but can we play at that level?" King asks. "Absolutely, I think we can get there."

Duke can go a long way in proving it belongs with a win Saturday over No. 11 Illinois inside Wallace Wade Stadium. With a lighter ACC schedule that sees Duke avoid Miami, SMU and Louisville, Illinois represents one of its biggest -- and only -- chances to prove it belongs on the national stage.

Sitting across from Manny Diaz inside his office, it is easy to see why he's a dynamic recruiter and leader. There's the natural charisma, of course, but also an optimism that many of his peers seem to be missing in this current transformational period of college athletics. On this day there's no complaining about NIL, transfer portal or any other litany of things that frustrate college coaches.

Perhaps it is because Diaz believes Duke can be a big winner when all is said and done.

Diaz has been everywhere in college football, from previous stops in the ACC (Miami, Florida State and NC State) to the Big Ten (Penn State) to the then-Big 12 (Texas) to the SEC (Mississippi State) and even the Group of Six level (Middle Tennessee). He knows what worked in the pre-NIL world and sees how the game is moving with revenue sharing beginning this summer.

There's a shift afoot, Diaz believes, and Duke will benefit.

It already has.

Duke signed four four-stars in its most recent recruiting class, led by the school's highest-ranked signee ever, Bryce Davis. The 6-foot-3, 260-pound edge rusher probably wouldn't have gone to Duke in the past -- he was even committed to Clemson at one point -- but Duke thinks it is selling something very few, if any other program, can offer with a top-ranked academic university that also (now) cares about football. U.S. News ranked Duke as the No. 6 university in the country in its 2025 rankings.

"We're in a different era now, and kids are making choices that they just didn't make 10 years ago," Diaz told CBS Sports. "And that's going to disrupt this game, and I think in a good way, by the way. I think it's going to be super exciting. I think it already is and way less predictable than it's been."

There are inherent challenges that come with recruiting to a school that cares as much about academics as Duke does. The pool of players to recruit from is significantly smaller than what some of its competitors have access to. "It begins and ends with the transcript," said Duke general manager John Garrett.

The silver lining is it brings clarity. There shouldn't be analysis paralysis with a limited pool of options. When Stanford had things humming under Jim Harbaugh and David Shaw, it capitalized on a similar challenge. Stanford's run was in the pre-playoff era, but the Cardinal would have made multiple trips in the 2010-16 run that included five top 10 finishes. It's a blueprint, of sorts, on what's capable when everything is aligned and the program starts attracting a specific type of player capable of flourishing in that environment.

Duke partnered with Big League Advantage (BLA), an analytics firm, to help identify players that fit its preferred player makeup. Garrett and his team met once a week with BLA in the fall to compare how Duke's scouting ratings compared with the analytics on the players. Collaboratively, they came up with a list of targets.

"There's an exact type of kid that we're looking for," said Duke offensive coordinator Jonathan Brewer. "We don't have to recruit everybody. We're looking for people that are achieving excellence in academics and want excellence in football. We don't have to sacrifice for anything -- our guys want to do both."

Rick Lyster had finally hit the big time.

After playing football at Lafayette, Lyster slowly worked his way up the ranks, from FCS Monmouth as a volunteer defensive assistant to stops at graduate assistant and quality control gigs at Army and Georgia Tech to his first on-field coaching job at Fordham during the pandemic-impacted 2020 season.

Manny Diaz wanted him to come down to Miami, and Lyster was on his way from the Bronx to Coral Gables as the Hurricanes' defensive quality control analyst. He fell in love with Diaz's preferred aggressive defensive style, believing this is what football was supposed to be. The jump from school to school had been worth it; he had found the defensive mind from which he was meant to learn.

And then it all went off the rails as Miami administrators and boosters worked behind the scenes to bring Mario Cristobal back to Miami despite Diaz still holding the job. It was awkward and messy as Miami left Diaz, a native son, twisting in the wind before finally firing him when Cristobal agreed to take the job.

It would be easy for Diaz to be bitter about the experience. Perhaps he hadn't succeeded in the way he or others hoped, but he still had a winning record and would have benefited from Miami's aggressive NIL spending spree.

He landed at Penn State as defensive coordinator and brought Lyster with him as a defensive analyst. The pair spent a lot of time together in meeting rooms going over defensive game planning, and one day Diaz told him, "You can learn a lot from being fired if you just listen."

"That firing changed him," said Lyster, now Duke's safeties coach. "It changed who he was as a man, as a coach. He realized don't be upset about the situation, learn from it."

Diaz has taken those lessons to Durham where he is trying to build a sustainable program that can compete in the ACC. Duke had a fork-in-the-road moment, he says, when Mike Elko left for Texas A&M. Elko went 16-9 over two seasons and made two bowl appearances, Duke's first since 2018. Duke had been here before with the height of the Cutcliffe era delivering three consecutive eight or more win seasons -- the Blue Devils even won 10 games in 2013 -- but didn't add enough coal to keep the train moving at full speed.

King, who took over as AD in 2021, didn't want to let this moment pass Duke by again.

"I think we got a little comfortable," King said. "I think we saw success, but we didn't continue investing in success. I want to give credit where credit is due -- what David did here was absolutely incredible."

Duke has to be creative in how it does so. It doesn't have a 100,000-seat football stadium delivering tens of millions in ticket sales revenue. Wallace Wade Stadium can fit 40,004 with the largest crowd last season coming against North Carolina (35,018). Duke football made about as much in total in 2023 -- $39.7 million according to its EADA report -- as Alabama did off football ticket revenue ($37.9 million).

Duke has great brand and marketing partnerships which help, but it has also pushed a donor base that has traditionally focused more on basketball spending to recognize the moment football has in front of it. King said that message has resonated with Duke boosters and that the support has been "incredible" from an investment and even fan attendance standpoint. Duke fans, King says, realize what football can do not only for the athletic department, but the university as a whole.

Diaz agrees.

"Everyone understands that it's a good time to be good at football with what's going on with all the uncertainty in college sports," the Duke head coach said.

That is a key point to where college athletics stands right now. It's a similar situation at schools like Indiana, Kansas and, yes, in-state rival UNC -- traditional basketball blue bloods who have realized they have to spend bigger in football. With an estimated 75 to 80 % of TV rights deals coming from college football, if you want to secure a spot in the big leagues of college football, especially if there is a long-discussed consolidation into a breakaway league, one must be competent in football.

Duke has long had its doubters.

In a previous interview with SMU AD Damon Evans, then with Maryland, for "The Price: What It Takes to Win in College Football's Era of Chaos," the AD explained why the Terrapins, another basketball-first school, needed to make football the priority.

"What drives conference realignment? TV partners, football and marketplace," Evans said. "You might not like it. No disrespect to Duke, ain't nobody talking about adding Duke. It's about football."

Diaz and his staff are working to change that. Last season's 9-4 record announced that there wouldn't be a drop off after Elko left and that Duke was trending upward. The hardest part is what Duke is trying to do next. Diaz told his team that going from nine to 10 wins is more challenging than it would be to go from two to 10. Every win number Duke tries to go up, he told them, "the climb gets steeper and steeper."

It's ultimately the reason why Duke made such a big bet on Mensah, who threw for 2,723 yards and 22 touchdowns last season for Tulane. A Duke brain trust of Diaz, Brewer and Garrett realized that the Devils had to improve on those fine margins, and getting a quarterback like Mensah could be the difference.

"When we evaluated ourselves and some of the things that were missing in our offense, (Darian was) pretty cool character for a (redshirt) freshman in terms of his pocket awareness, his ability to manufacture time with his feet, scramble to throw, scramble to run when necessary," Diaz said. "Those types of plays on third-and-6 when nobody's open; it's what made Cam Ward amazing last year. You don't have to be perfect as a play caller because there's the play that you call and there's the play that the quarterback can make.

"We just felt like that was an element to our offense that Darian could do."

Mensah threw for 389 yards and three touchdowns in Duke's season-opening win over Elon that started shaky before ending easy. Next up is Illinois, which is also trying to take the leap to the next level after a 10-3 record in 2024. From there is a spicy return trip for Mensah to New Orleans to play his former school.

It's a critical stretch for a program ready and eager to take that next step. Duke has invested like never before in its football program, and it'll find out Saturday afternoon whether it is on the right path.

2025 Duke Future Initiative Connects 40 Student-Athletes with Alumni and Industry Leaders

Duke Athletics (September 3, 2025)

Forty Duke student-athletes gained valuable career development this summer through internships and immersion experiences with 15 organizations as part of the Duke Future Initiative, which pairs Blue Devils with alumni and industry leaders across the country.

Rising senior **Alaina McVeigh** of the field hockey team shadowed professionals at Artisan Partners, with stops in both Atlanta and Milwaukee.

"Being able to meet with so many professionals across the company and hear their advice was invaluable," McVeigh said. "They encouraged me to always be the hardest worker in the room and stay open to new opportunities. I came away more confident about exploring career paths after Duke."

Graduate student **Anish Rajamanickam** of men's track and field and junior women's soccer defender **Mia Oliaro** participated in a three-day program with Circumference Group, a private investment firm founded by Duke alumnus **Jeff Fox** '84.

"The case studies pushed us to think like real investors," Rajamanickam said. "It was the perfect way to connect what I've learned in class with real-world decision-making."

Oliaro added: "Hearing directly from the firm's executives gave me exposure to the language of business and taught me how critical analytical thinking is in investment decisions."

Circumference Group Chief Strategy Officer Luca Sechi said, "The student-athletes leaned in, asked great questions, and tackled real investment decisions with professionalism."

Women's soccer goalkeeper **Bianca Dominguez** and track and field's **Maddie Davies** each completed a week-long internship at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP in New York City.

"This experience opened my eyes to what 'Big Law' really looks like and gave me a chance to connect with attorneys across so many different practice groups," Dominguez said.

Davies emphasized the networking value: "The biggest takeaway for me was how essential building relationships is in the legal profession. That's something I'll carry with me as I consider law school."

Volleyball senior **Christina Barrow** interned with Intrepid Marketing, contributing to research and case studies on professional sports branding and Atlanta media outlets.

"Working on projects that will actually help the company gave me the chance to apply my skills," Barrow said. "It also helped me realize how important it is to find a career path that feels truly fulfilling."

Football freshman **Cole Denson** joined Northeast Financial Network in New Jersey, gaining firsthand experience in financial planning and wealth management.

"Meeting with professionals across different roles gave me a clear picture of how financial advising works in practice," Denson said. "It confirmed my interest in pursuing a career in the industry."

Redshirt sophomore **Semaj Turner** returned for a second summer with Wake County Government, where he focused on leadership and public service.

"I was able to help develop a leadership curriculum that draws from my athletic background and applies it to government decision-making," Turner said. "It showed me how leadership, service, and purpose can intersect."

Several football and wrestling student-athletes spent a week in Atlanta with Student Quarters, a company specializing in off-campus student housing.

"My time at Student Quarters was great," said redshirt sophomore defensive tackle **Terry Simmons Jr**. "Being able to shadow **Andrew Layton** and learn directly from him was a privilege."

Layton, a 1990 Duke graduate and Chief Acquisition & Experience Officer at Student Quarters, praised the program's impact.

"This week gave these student-athletes a chance to build the foundation of their careers by meeting C-Suite executives and younger professionals in real estate," Layton said. "The Future Initiative is a true differentiator for Duke."

Blue Devils also gained exposure at some of the world's most recognizable companies.

Graduate defensive back **Mem Factor** interned at Google, where he and teammates met Duke alumni in Atlanta.

"My experience at Google was incredible," Factor said. "In such a short time, we really got to understand what it's like to work at one of the world's biggest companies."

Matthew Pritchard '01, Head of Industry at Google, was equally impressed.

"Any company would be lucky to hire these kids one day," Pritchard said. "The Future Initiative is Duke at its best."

From law firms to investment groups to technology companies, the 2025 Duke Future Initiative cohort embraced opportunities to explore new fields, build networks, and prepare for life after athletics.

2025 Duke Future Initiative Roster

Alumni Media Network (Craig Richardson '87 '92) – Raymond Adams (wrestling), Sam Bodensteiner (women's soccer)

Google (Matthew Pritchard '01) – Gemyel Allen (football), Julius Columbs (football), Mem Factor (football), Bariate Kara (football), Kaleb Lanier (football), Bradley Smith (football)

Student Quarters (Andrew Layton '90) – David Anderson (football), Marquise Collins (football), Terry Simmons Jr. (football), Aidan Wallace (wrestling)

Intrepid Marketing Group (Torrey Winchester '09) – Christina Barrow (volleyball), Jake Taylor (football)

Circumference Group (Jeff Fox ' 84) – Axel Blom (men's lacrosse), Adrian Byasima (men's soccer), Caroline Dysart (women's soccer), Phoebe Goldthwaite (women's soccer), Lauren Ingram (volleyball), Julia Magliaro (track & field), Mia Oliaro (women's soccer), Phillips Moore (track & field), Anish Rajamanickam (track & field), Cameron Roller (women's soccer), Bradley Smith (football)

Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP (Demetrius Warrick '05) – Maddie Davies (track & field), Bianca Dominguez (women's soccer)

Northeast Financial Network (Chris Dapolito '05) – Cole Denson (football), David Hussey (wrestling)

Wake County Government (Tommy Moorman '88) – Kyren Condell (football), Vontae Floyd (football), Semaj Turner (football)

Fanatics (Glenn Schiffman '91) – Tre Freeman (football), Terry Moore (football)

Duke Department of Orthopaedic Surgery – Ethan Grimminger (wrestling)

Align Technology (Joshua Snead '13 '16) – Aaron Hall (football), Chandler Rivers (football)

MetaMetrics – Jeremiah Hasley (football)

STARZ – Emma Koabel (women's basketball)

Artisan Partners (Eamonn Callahan '05) – Alaina McVeigh (field hockey)

TrackX – Chelsea Proutt (rowing)

Healthy returns pay off for Blue Devils

Conor O'Neill: DevilsIllustrated (September 3, 2025)

One-third of the nine Blue Devils who caught a pass against Elon missed either all or most of last season because of knee injuries.

Season-opening football games always seem to feature a few players returning from significant injuries. Duke's 45-17 win against Elon last week is no exception.

Jayden Moore missed all of last season, his first at Duke, because of a torn ACL in the spring. Jeremiah Hasley was Duke's starting tight end for the first two games but had a season-ending injury at Northwestern.

"You practice in the offseason and you're preparing for a game but you don't really know what a game-like setting is until you play it," Hasley said this week. "I was really excited to be out there, being away from football for a year."

The third player in this group basically missed the past season and a half.

For Oklahoma, Andrel Anthony played eight snaps last season before an injury ended his season. He had three catches for 51 yards and a touchdown against the Phoenix — his first touchdown since Oklahoma's second game of the 2023 season.

Anthony suffered a season-ending knee injury in Oklahoma's win against Texas halfway through the 2023 campaign.

"Man, you talk about excited after a game," offensive coordinator Jonathan Brewer said. "Him kind of breaking through like, 'OK, I'm here to play.' ... It was good to come off the field as a coach and be in arm's lock with a guy and you could feel his emotion."

Brewer added that early success is important for Anthony. In the recruiting process, Duke made it clear to Anthony he could thrive in its offense.

Moore, the brother of former Blue Devil Jordan Moore, suffered a torn ACL in Duke's 2024 spring game.

He had catches on back-to-back plays on Duke's third drive against Elon. First for 8 yards, and then a 15-yarder with a physical finish that earned him some recognition in the team's weekly awards.

"Jayden Moore, I mean, how cool is that?" coach Manny Diaz said. "He won our Duke tough for running a guy over on a catch, got the whole sideline fired up."

On defense, Nick Morris Jr. returned to health after he only played against Elon last season. The linebacker had four tackles, one of them a TFL.

In his last full season, 2023, Morris had 61 tackles, two TFLs and a fumble recovery. He ended that season as a starter in the final five games.

Bruce Feldman's "Freaks List" for The Athletic listed Morris at No. 69.

Sahmir Hagans emerges as leader of Duke receivers

Conor O'Neill: DevilsIllustrated (September 2, 2025)

Sahmir Hagans said it's more fun to return a kick for a touchdown than have a game with two receiving touchdowns.

Of course, Hagans isn't complaining about starting his senior season with two scores against Elon last week.

"Obviously, you know, scoring two touchdowns is a dream for any receiver and it's nice to have that on the stat sheet," Duke's fifth-year receiver said Tuesday morning. "But in terms of the crowd atmosphere, I think running a kick back is the best part."

One of the best parts of Duke's season-opening win was Hagans looking the part of a veteran leader.

Duke benefited last season from having two experienced wide receivers, Eli Pancol and Jordan Moore. Their departures meant the Blue Devils needed to fill a leadership void at receiver.

The Blue Devils brought in experienced transfers, Andrel Anthony (Oklahoma) and Cooper Barkate (Harvard). But Hagans is a fifth-year player who has spent all of his time in Durham.

"What happens when those guys walk out the door, there's just a vacuum," coach Manny Diaz said during fall camp. "You want your rising seniors to step into that vacuum.

"Sahmir, from when we came back in January, recognized that. ... He's a guy that's deeply invested in Duke football."

His dedication to the program was acknowledged by strength and conditioning coach David Feeley. Hagans was named Duke's Iron Duke Lifter of the Year at the end of summer workouts.

Hagans credited his growth as a leader to watching the receivers who came before him. That isn't limited to Pancol and Moore, with shoutouts to Jake Bobo and Jalon Calhoun.

"Seeing how everybody in their way of leadership, just taking bits and pieces of what they did that I liked and things that may have happened ... I implemented that in myself," Hagans said. "And then just making a connection with all of the guys in the room, whether it's the transfers like Andrel and Cooper or the young guys and the freshmen."

Hagans caught five passes for 54 yards and two touchdowns last week. Going back to last season, he has scored five touchdowns in Duke's last six games. Hagans returned a kickoff for a touchdown against Mississippi in the Gator Bowl.

'Working to the same common goal': Duke's reloaded receiver room looks to power the Blue Devil offense

Dom Fenoglio: The Chronicle (August 27, 2025)

For all of the turnover Duke football sustained in recent history – the Blue Devils have been led by three head coaches in five years and are set to start a new quarterback Week 1 for the third consecutive season – the wide receiver room remained relatively constant. From 2022-24, Jalon Calhoun, Eli Pancol and Jordan Moore combined for over 5,000 receiving yards, good for nearly 60% of Duke's total.

But Calhoun graduated in 2023, and Pancol and Moore finished their careers in Durham last season. That left this year's batch of Blue Devils with a pair of holes on the perimeter and head coach Manny Diaz without an easy solution.

Graduate Sahmir Hagans and redshirt sophomore Que'Sean Brown are both proven options, but they have smaller frames and fit more easily in the slot. To add some length to the room, Diaz hit the portal and picked up projected starters Andrel Anthony from Oklahoma and Cooper Barkate from Harvard. A promising crop of young talent like Chase Tyler, Jamien Little and Jayden Moore (younger brother of the aforementioned Jordan Moore) round out Duke's new-look wideout corps.

The clear leader has been Hagans, who is entering his fifth year as a Blue Devil. Still, meshing returners, freshmen, transfers and – most importantly – a brand-new quarterback does not happen overnight. Even though Tulane transfer Darian Mensah arrived on campus in January, Anthony and Barkate did not join the team until this summer.

As has become the standard with Duke football, though, every member of the Blue Devils' passing attack has attacked the challenge in lock-step stride.

"I think the biggest thing I learned in my five years here is [that Duke has] really a player-led culture, a player-led program," Hagans told The Chronicle. "Despite all the different head coaches, guys stayed the course. Guys had each other's back, kept working to the same common goal. That's just a testament to the type of guys that we recruit and bring in, whether it's a freshman, transfers and the guys we have in leadership positions. Seniors down to the freshmen [are] bought into the Duke culture."

Returning leaders

Early in the second quarter against then-No. 5 Miami last season, the Blue Devils were staring down yet another third down. Hagans, after shaking his primary defender with some fancy footwork, caught a short pass and streaked past the rest of the Hurricane defense into the end zone, the highlight of his career-best 139-yard performance.

The Miami game showcased exactly what Hagans can provide for Duke this season: A shifty receiver who isn't afraid to put his nose down for an extra yard. That second part is probably what matters most to Diaz and the rest of the Blue Devils.

Hagans was recently named the Iron Duke Lifter of the Year by strength coach David Feeley, and he emphasized the weight room when asked about his leadership style.

"[My leadership] all started in the offseason program, just pushing guys to do their best in the weight room with the weight lifting," Hagans said. "Whether it's extra work [or] the actual drills, just pushing guys to grow outside their comfort zone."

"He's definitely the most vocal, and he's the most experienced within our room," Anthony said of Hagans. "I've taken a lot of stuff from him, his game, his release work and how he goes about himself. Every day, he's always doing extra. That's a very good trait to have."

Few players embody growth inside the program better than Brown, who Duke honored as its most-improved offensive player after the 2024 season. The 5-foot-8 Winston-Salem, N.C., native played twice his size last season, as he was featured heavily in the screen passing game and on vertical routes.

For example, Brown, who ran a 10.76-second 100-meter dash in high school, beat his man with straight-line speed to get open for a pair of touchdowns against SMU and UConn.

"Coach Diaz talked about it a lot this offseason, [this is] our fastest team we've had at Duke," Hagans said. "In the receiver room, we have a lot of speedsters. There's a lot of guys who can get up there and run by defenders, who can just stretch the field vertically with their speed."

Hagans and Brown also bring to the table their knowledge of second-year offensive coordinator Jonathan Brewer's aggressive tempo offense. The duo each caught a touchdown as primary options in the Spring Game before Barkate and Anthony arrived, knifing through a usually kevlar Blue Devil defense.

"What you saw today with Que'Sean Brown and Sahmir Hagans, again, that's been a common theme throughout spring ball," Diaz said after the Spring Game. "Both those guys have really elevated their game, and we'll need them to. They need to play their best ball for us to have a chance to be great."

New faces

During his past two offseasons at the helm, Diaz has dipped into the transfer portal carefully, and with a surprisingly high hit rate. Barkate continues a long line of Ivy League standouts who jump to the FBS level by coming to Duke; linebacker Ozzie Nicholas came from Princeton last season, and defensive tackle Josiah Green joined the Blue Devils this season after a successful run at Dartmouth.

Barkate was named an FCS All-American and averaged over 75 receiving yards per game in his career with the Crimson. As the primary option, he often ran short routes to find space and made plays in the open field. He complimented this with plenty of vertical shots, using his athleticism to consistently beat out defenders.

Ranked as the No. 10 receiver in California coming out of powerhouse Mater Dei High School, Barkate chose Harvard over offers from bigger names like Oregon, UCLA and Notre Dame. The 6-foot-1 Swiss Army knife has already received praise from teammates and coaches alike, including defensive stalwart Chandler Rivers.

"One thing I can say, Coop is a dog. I feel like he brings something different to his team that we haven't [seen] in a long time," Rivers said of Barkate. "Going against him every day, going against Sahmir Hagans every day, Andrel Anthony every day. Just going against [those] guys is getting us better day in and day out."

Anthony, on the other hand, came to Duke after four seasons at a pair of blue-chip programs in Michigan and Oklahoma – including playing in two College Football Playoff games with Michigan. As a freshman against Michigan State, Anthony hauled in a catch over the middle of the field and used his gamebreaking speed to outrun four defenders for a 93-yard score.

But after being named the offensive Rookie of the Year for the Wolverines in 2021, injuries repeatedly derailed his career and caused him to once again change schools.

"I believe Duke is a very good program," Anthony said. "[Duke is] up and coming and I feel like this year we got a chance to make that next jump … To be able to be a part of making history is huge."

In a post-practice availability, Anthony said that his time on the sidelines injured gave him a new perspective – a similar story to the one told by Pancol coming off an injury last season. Four years of development have also helped him grow into a more versatile option for his quarterback.

"In my younger college days, I would definitely say I was more of a deep threat, but now, since I've gotten older, I've definitely been able to become more balanced and run more routes," Anthony said. "So pretty much, I'd say I'm a very well-rounded receiver."

Barkate and Anthony have shown big play potential and the ability to run crisp routes on the perimeter. In the red zone, both players should see plenty of targets with their larger frames and experienced hands.

The final pieces of the receiving puzzle for the Blue Devils are younger players with potential to make an immediate impact. Before Anthony and Barkate got to campus, Tyler was getting first-team reps and looked the part.

The three-star recruit chose the Blue Devils over programs including Tennessee and Georgia Tech. Little, who was an all-conference basketball player in high school, is another lanky freshman who may find his way in the rotation as a rookie.

"That's their specialty, guys like Chase Tyler, go get the ball anywhere. [He has a] very long catch radius," Hagans said.

The obstacle for freshmen and transfers alike is learning the Duke system. All the talent in the world can't win football games if the gears don't turn at the same time. But while it remains to be seen in live action, there is not a Blue Devil receiver lacking belief.

Putting it all together

For all of the big passing plays Duke had last season, it was hardly an area of strength. To the credit of Diaz and his coaching staff, they worked hard to rebuild the offense with plenty of new weapons and a quarterback to help showcase them.

But how can fans have confidence that these changes will have an effect?

Hagans would say that the receivers have leaned into the same process that has built one of the best defensive units in the nation. And his teammates would reply with something similar.

One remarkable, if not frustrating at times, note about the Blue Devils is their tendency to echo each other in answers. The team has clearly bought into the vision Diaz has for the program: the standard for on-field excellence starts in their preparation and belief in the offseason.

"I think we're gonna surprise a lot of people," Hagans said. "We know the work we put in, but it's time for us to just show it, and I think that's what we'll do. I think we have a lot of young guys that are going to step up this season, [and] I think we have a lot of older guys who are going to solidify their marks on Duke."

It is fair to say that the Blue Devils' passing game is still the biggest unknown entering 2025, so its performance will set the ceiling for where the team can go. If Hagans is correct in his outlook, any goal Duke may have is in reach.

With unbridled confidence and an infectious smile, Chandler Rivers climbed to Duke football stardom

Ranjan Jindal: The Chronicle (August 27, 2025)

For the past three years, aspiring football players have been treated to an annual three-hour camp in Beaumont, Texas. There are skill position drills with Beaumont United High School alums, a seminar accompanied by Buffalo Wild Wings and TikTok dances with the host.

It's always for free, courtesy of Duke cornerback and hometown hero Chandler Rivers.

In his annual "More than an Athlete" camp, Rivers goes back home on Mother's Day weekend to create an unforgettable experience in the stadium where he blossomed into a star. Rivers stands alongside the campers to encourage them on drills and 40-yard dashes. The community flocks for Rivers; he carries a magnetic pull in the 409.

Even his Duke position coach, V'Angelo Bentley, took a flight to Houston and drove 90 minutes east to attend this year.

It's a family affair — by blood and by choice. Chandler's parents, Derrick and Cheryl Rivers, and their friends pack "swag bags" the night before, and his high school teammates help coach the youth.

"I did most of the work," Derrick joked. But because the local businesses in the city "gravitate towards" Chandler, as Derrick says, they were eager to sponsor the nascent initiative and align their namesake with a figure as outgoing and popular as Rivers.

"I had never seen anybody do a camp while they were still in college, better yet a freshman. So [my dad] was like, 'Why not try it?'" Chandler said.

That camp epitomizes Rivers. As he enters his senior season with All-American accolades and the eyes of NFL scouts upon him, the lockdown cornerback maintains his happy-go-lucky personality and confident humility. Grounded in his preparation and strengthened by those who doubt his small frame, Rivers is on track to be one of the winningest players in Duke football history.

From Texas to Duke

Athletics are in Chandler's DNA; Derrick played baseball and Cheryl ran track in college. Chandler's high school success extended beyond football as he was second in the state in long jump and participated on a state championship basketball team.

His early passion was basketball. But because of his 5-foot-10 stature and the amount of players on a football field compared to a basketball court, Derrick advised Chandler to focus on the gridiron. Perhaps he was meant to stay on the field. Cheryl recalls a kindergarten Chandler enamored with football action figures he got for Christmas. He played for hours on end.

On Beaumont United High School's team, Rivers' versatility created an omnipresent effect. A rusher and receiver, he compiled 31 touchdowns in his three-year career and, on the defensive end, racked up 300-plus tackles and 25 interceptions. He even punted for the Timberwolves. Rivers catalyzed a turnaround from a 1-9 season prior to his arrival.

"I knew whatever he pursued, no matter if it is his professional career, athletically or education wise, he's gonna be alright, because he's a hard worker. He doesn't mind putting in extra time to do things," Derrick said.

Rivers' size masked his success on the gridiron. Despite the accolades and impressive camp performances, his ranking failed to match the achievements. But his size taught him at an early age to block out the external noise and maintain a positive attitude. He kept his head down, and the three-star recruit earned a number of strong Power Five offers and interest from within his home state.

"I feel like playing football in Texas, it prepares you better for college football than any other state," Rivers said. "I felt like I was in the best situation to succeed because playing in front of big crowds a lot of high school students aren't really used to at that age."

The Duke connection originated with Chandler's high school position coach, who played defensive back at Baylor with Trooper Taylor, the former Blue Devil associate head coach. Taylor gave his elevator pitch to Derrick over the phone, who immediately noticed their aligned values and saw Chandler as a good match.

Prior to the efforts of Taylor and the Duke staff, Chandler was undecided and didn't really know where Duke was. But he then had a conversation with his parents on the significance of a Duke degree. Rivers also cherished the opportunity to immediately fight for a starting opportunity.

"I mean, who doesn't want to go to a top 10 academic school that also can be top 10 in football? It's awesome. Why wouldn't you want to go to a school like that? So I feel like it's got the best of both worlds," Chandler said.

On a Zoom call with then-head coach David Cutcliffe and the entire staff at the beginning of his junior year, Rivers decided on a whim to commit. He became the first Class of 2022 commit, many of whom now lead this Blue Devil team. Rivers committed at the nadir of the Blue Devil football program but, just like in high school, he was not fazed by the 3-9 season for the 2021 Duke team.

"I ain't ever been a loser," Rivers said of his thought process on the Devil Up Podcast. "I don't feel like that's going to change when I get to college."

Loyalty, faith and developing a brand

Everything Chandler envisioned quickly manifested into reality. He made his presence felt in all 13 games as a freshman — Rivers has not missed a game in his collegiate career — and earned Duke's Rookie of the Year award. The Blue Devils also started winning; a 9-4 season was capped off by a Military Bowl win against UCF, the site of Rivers' first career interception.

Chandler's next two years exemplified the same consistent production. He earned Birmingham Bowl MVP honors with three pass breakups in Taylor's lone game as interim coach. He logged pick-sixes in back-to-back years against Florida State. He was the second-highest rated cornerback in 2024 by Pro Football Focus. Four publications named Rivers as an All-American at the end of his junior campaign, and he received first-team All-ACC recognition.

Rivers' speed is an asset as a blitzer, and he frequently blows up screens resulting in tackles for loss. A sure-fire tackler, he can punch above his weight as a corner in guarding receivers of all statures. With three years under his belt, Rivers faced highly touted NFL quarterbacks and his name now populates 2025 Draft big boards.

"Preparation breeds confidence, and I feel like I prepare just about as good as anybody in the nation," Rivers said. "Because at the end of that day, you gotta be confident to play [defensive back]. If you [aren't], they won't let you ever play."

But the Duke program did not have the same trajectory as Rivers' career. When former head coach Mike Elko left for Texas A&M in 2023, rumors swirled about Chandler moving closer to home. But Derrick stifled them whenever he got the chance.

"We never once could consider leaving," Derrick said. "I told him 'You've got a chance to make history, son. You've got a chance to be the winningest player in Duke's history for four consecutive years.'"

Both parents instilled in Rivers the values of purpose and passion and that has shone through in his Duke career. Moving 18 hours from home was a "short-term sacrifice for a long-term goal," as Derrick says, that Chandler never wavered from. His plan has always been to earn a Duke degree and transform the football program.

"Honestly, it was the people in the locker room," Rivers said on his reason to stay. "Just the culture ... It's created by the players, and that's just how it is here at Duke. I couldn't leave that for anything."

A devout Catholic, Chandler's faith has rooted him in his plan and veered him from distractions. Damon West, a former college football quarterback incarcerated for drug-related organized crime, spoke to Chandler's Christian middle school about his faith-led journey to rehabilitation. A young, red-eyed Chandler came home and declared to his parents that he became Christian that day. Since then, faith has played an instrumental role in his life and his bond with family.

Derrick is most proud of the focus Chandler maintains and the fact that he never succumbed to temptation, despite the NIL offerings across the country and the oft-utilized transfer portal. No matter what bowl Duke has played in or may enter this season, Derrick knows Chandler is committed to playing.

Meanwhile, Chandler has forged his own path in the NIL world, utilizing his natural social media charisma to maximize his marketing appeal.

"I just like having fun, honestly. I'm always smiling. I'm always just energetic around people," Rivers said on defining his brand. "I like bringing good vibes to people. I tell my teammates 'I'm just here for the vibes.'"

An exploration into Chandler's TikTok account confirms his assessment. It's filled with dances and edits on popular TikTok sounds, always with Chandler flashing a grin. Zhanique Williams, marketing director at ProStar Sports Agency and Chandler's agent, noted that Chandler isn't afraid to inquire about or take initiative on his NIL partnerships. Together, they ensure the brands align with his personality and don't take priority over his on-the-field endeavors.

Whether he sports colorful crocs or indulges in Insomnia cookies, Chandler balances the dichotomy between his football and personal self. Still, his passion radiates in everything he does.

"He has those two sides, and that's what I tell brands," Williams said. "You get his football, his lifestyle, his seriousness, his professionalism on Instagram. But when you go with him to TikTok, then you get funny humor, not-so-serious Chandler, which some brands have loved ... I feel that it gets him to open up more to his audience."

Summer of separation

The preseason accolades piled on from the end of the 2024 campaign. Rivers was named an AP Second-Team All-American. Heading into his last dance with the Blue Devils, Rivers' teammates and coaches are helping him stay grounded.

"He has to be a better player this year ... I've seen in my career where guys have had great junior years, and then if all of a sudden you think you've arrived, the margin for error is so little," head coach Manny Diaz said in an Aug. 11 availability. "What I've been most pleased with Chandler through the first week is ... He's been highly urgent, highly disruptive, making everything difficult on whoever he's covering, which isn't just getting him better, it's also making us better on offense."

As the oldest player in his position group for the first time, he has also grown as a leader. Rivers and Terry Moore – film partners and roommates since freshman year – form a dangerous tandem in the back end. Rivers also has Lone Star ties with fellow Texan and Sam Houston State safety transfer Caleb Weaver.

Chandler's goal for the unit this year is to play complimentary football. And for himself: Pursuing his standard of excellence and being the same person he was a year ago.

His parents emphasize mental health, preparing him to handle inevitable adversity but also limit inconsistencies.

"I've always been a mental guy with him," Derrick said. "I'm about the five p's to life: proper preparation prevents poor performance. That's in the classroom, the field, in life. That's the way we operate."

Rivers has already embraced a novel challenge this season. With fellow upperclassmen, linebacker Tre Freeman and running back Jaquez Moore, Chandler hosts the player-led Devil Up podcast to illuminate the lives of Duke football players under the helmet. It was Moore's idea to embark on the podcast journey and bring Rivers and Freeman along.

Rivers was nervous to co-host at first but thought of it as a PlayStation party to diminish the formality. They discuss football: Fall camp, hometown pride and position idols. However, they also venture off into conversations about cereal and milk and NBA hot takes.

This May in Beaumont, nearly 200 kids suited up in Chandler's camp, a four-fold increase from 2023. Chandler honors Mother's Day weekend with an assortment of flowers for the mom's. He wants to be a brotherly figure for the kids, modeling the potential of success from the area.

"He takes every picture and signs every autograph when the camp ends," Williams said. "He does not rush out of there. He speaks to everyone – the janitor at the stadium who's driving around giving us rides. He is so humble."

It's not just the camp; Chandler centers his NIL ventures around community. He bought Gatorade for his high school athletes over the summer, gave to nonprofits and partnered with local restaurants.

"Although he's taking these strides, he hasn't forgotten where he came from, and he's always giving back and going back to support others," Williams said.

This may be the biggest year of his football career, and he's self-motivated to end his collegiate career on a high note while focused on his team's common goal. And wherever Chandler's football journey takes him, he will always bring his joy.

"If I'm going to be the difference with somebody having a great day right now or not, I want to be that difference. I want to be the big, energetic smile you see before you have to go do something," Rivers said.

That's the Chandler Beaumont and Duke have come to love. He's the same down-to-Earth self with his accolades and Blue Devil stardom. As Trooper Taylor says and Derrick reminds Chandler, with all of life's twists and turns, the only thing that you should change about yourself is your address.

Building the future: How Duke football prepares players for life after college

Alex Min: The Chronicle (August 26, 2025)

With the advent and evolution of NIL, it's easy to think of collegiate football players as professionals – as if school has simply become an accessory to already-lucrative careers. Eligibility only lasts so long, no matter how many redshirt years or seasons lost to injury. More often than not, student-athletes are forced to plan for a life without the gridiron.

Balancing that preparation is far from simple. The reality of being a college football player is a schedule consumed by early lifts, film sessions, practice blocks and cross-country travel – with the cherry on top being a full academic courseload. Little space is left for internships, networking or even imagining an identity outside the jersey. For these lifelong athletes, the thought of pivoting toward an unfamiliar career path can overwhelm – akin to admitting defeat before the clock runs out. In a world dominated by scheme and structure, more is still needed.

Enter the Future Initiative.

"The Future Initiative is a program that connects our current student-athletes and our former student-athletes through different events to help prepare them for what's next after graduation," explained Dorian Jackson, the program's director. "Of course, Duke has its own resources, but we wanted our alumni to get involved – to be that connecting piece in the transition and help the next man or woman. It's all about preparing our athletes for life after graduation."

That pitch encapsulates the Future Initiative's mission: a pipeline of support built on generosity, shared experience and above all, a love for Duke. Launched in 2022, the program first tackled football – a development destined to attract recruits.

"Back when it started, they looked at it more as a recruiting tool to show why Duke stands out," Jackson said. "One, you can get a great education. Two, you can play a high-level sport. And then three, they knew that our alumni base is second to none."

For every student-athlete, the Future Initiative begins with a simple yet key prompt: build your resume.

"Put everything on your resume now," Jackson said. "A lot of us forget what we've already done or achieved."

Accomplishments listed in hand, student-athletes are given the opportunity to connect with professionals of all fields at the program's annual networking fair. As they figure out where their career ambitions may lie, the Future Initiative does everything in its power to help its student-athletes realize those aspirations.

"If [a student-athlete] likes real estate, I want to connect you with somebody who is in real estate, who may be from your area, a Duke grad, but somebody that connects with you," Jackson shared. "My deal is trying to be that middleman. From there, that's when we say, 'Can they shadow you for a week?' We take care of all the assets, as far as traveling, food, per diem, all of that."

A former college football player himself, Jackson more than understands the importance of thinking ahead; he's lived it. At Old Dominion University, the former Monarch was a three-year letterwinner, also earning a bachelor's degree in sports manageme and a master's degree. Planning ahead and pursuing his passion in sports has led him to a decade-long career in collegiate athletics.

"One thing we get caught up in – especially in sports and the way it is now – is the moment. I just don't want our student athletes to miss their moment," Jackson said. "I've been in their shoes before. I know that transition can be tough. I know it may be different for someone who is used to their own locker room – I try to help them out, make them feel confident and give them that push to say, 'Hey, let me go ahead and start doing this now before it's too late.'"

But for some, the pros are more than a pipe dream. From Daniel Jones, the sixth overall pick in the 2019 NFL Draft, to Graham Barton, a first-round pick in 2024, former Blue Devils are littered across the landscape of professional football. On this year's roster alone, several players hold legitimate hopes to hear their names called as early as the first two rounds of the NFL Draft.

For them, The Future Initiative's Pro-Ready program, led by director of player development John Battle, is a step-by-step guide for life as an athlete.

"It's a program that allows for our players to feel prepared and confident to transition to the NFL," Battle says. "From selecting an agent or financial advisor, to figuring out whether you rent or buy when you move to a new city, we pick out the small things a student-athlete might not think about."

Battle and his team have deliberately crafted the program's structure. Underclassmen receive a group session led by an NFL Players Association representative – a primer on agent selection and draft realities. Juniors and seniors, however, dive deeper: vetting agents by confirming NFLPA certification, contacting current clients, researching training camps and even tracking lease timelines. While these student-athletes have spent their lives preparing to play against NFL competition, the behind-the-scenes work and technical details are often left unlearned.

"How do you spend a million dollars?" is Battle's exercise of choice in teaching NIL and fiscal responsibility. The amount appears gaudy, and almost anything – a house, a car, other luxury items – seems in reach. But the practice intends to expose how fast the money goes.

"We go through buying a car, buying a house," Battle said. "We don't even tell them about the taxes part. They just spend the money and do whatever. Then we say, 'You've got taxes and NFL fees; you have your NFLPA fee; you have your agent fee.'"

A real-world example is up next.

"We break down a current NFL player's salary," Battle described. "This past leadership, we went down and broke down [Buffalo Bills defensive lineman] DeWayne Carter's contract to say, 'DeWayne is making this much. How much of the signing bonus was this? How much are taxes in New York? How much for the NFL dues?' I don't know his percentage with his agent, but let's hypothetically say it's two percent.We bring it home to somebody that they know and one of our own that's playing professionally."

Oftentimes, alumni will visit the school to offer advice and share about the realities of their lifestyle. It's next to impossible to discuss Duke sports without hearing "The Brotherhood" – and while the term is often reserved for men's basketball and its pantheon of college stars and NBA legends, the phrase is apt here as well.

"We have different opportunities for guys to come back and speak," Battle noted. "Vincent Ray, a former player, is currently the team chaplain for the Cincinnati Bengals. [He] played in the NFL for about seven seasons. We try to get guys to come back."

Even away from Durham, the program constantly reaches out to its former members. Regional events are hosted; check-in Zoom calls are made quarterly; swag boxes with "all the cool stuff" are sent.

"There's a multitude of opportunities for the former players to stay engaged and most importantly, to make sure that they're seen, that they still have a connection to the university."

Only three years old, The Future Initiative still has plenty of room to grow. Football, given its popularity and immense spotlight, was a natural starting point, but now Jackson hopes to take the program even further.

"The next step is to continue to expand to all sports. Get connected with more alums to see if this is something that they will be interested in," Jackson said. "We have an advisory group that I meet with at least once a month. I want to continue to grow that group because they give me feedback. They help push the word. They are the ones that have connections. They are the ones in the C-suite levels. Continuing to meet individuals like that and helping our student-athletes."

"Because I don't want to do this for me," he added.

'Evolve and adjust': Inside the growing role of college football general manager

Elle Chavis: The Chronicle (August 26, 2025)

Ten years ago, John Garrett's job did not exist at the college football level.

Named Duke football's General Manager of Player Personnel in January 2024, Garrett joined a growing number of general managers in the college football landscape. In the new era where NIL money and the transfer portal dominate the conversation around recruitment, having a general manager has slowly become the norm for many teams at the FBS level.

Since arriving in Durham, Garrett has taken the lead on scouting and recruiting oversight as well as the evaluation of players both in the transfer portal and high school, an increasingly important role in any college football department.

Colleges did not need general managers in the days when transferring schools was a difficult task and roster turnover was rare. Managing roster construction was merely a formality when there were few transfers and the extent of recruitment usually involved signing 10-15 high school seniors. Schools did not need the massive pro personnel departments led by general managers that many NFL teams boasted. What used to be a job easily managed by a head coach and his coaching staff has turned into a leviathan necessitating a whole department, which in turn birthed the need for roles like Garrett's.

"Probably seven, eight years ago is when they started to emerge as a position, coincidentally, with the onset of the transfer portal and obviously, NIL and all that," Garrett said. "Over the years, everything has accelerated."

Some say that Arizona's Matt Dudek was college football's first general manager, while LSU's athletic department claims that Austin Thomas became the first person to hold the title. Both obtained their roles in 2016. Even for those two early title-holders, it still may have seemed unnecessary for a college football team to have a general manager. College football had no free agency period or draft to coordinate and prepare for. But, even in 2016, the rise of NIL and the transfer portal already lingered on the horizon, signaling a marked shift in the sport and making it so vastly different from when Garrett first got his start.

'The most important thing in any organization'

Professional and college football used to occupy definitively separate worlds, but experiences in both run through Garrett's blood. His father enjoyed a 30-year career in both college and professional football, with Garrett and two of his three brothers following in their father's footsteps. They were all inspired by what Garrett called Jim's "love and enthusiasm for the game." After their collegiate careers ended, Garrett called it the "natural transition" for him and his brothers to all try their hand at playing professionally and eventually move into the coaching sphere as their father had.

When Garrett played college football at Columbia and Princeton, the idea of a college football team having a general manager was foreign. But, in the years since his playing days, the similarities between college football and professional football have increased, resulting in general managers becoming commonplace at both levels.

As Garrett first began his coaching career, the world of personnel evaluation, already sprinkled into his duties as a coach, called to him. He grew up watching his father evaluate players and give them opportunities to play and wanted to do the same. Garrett believed he could make a more significant impact on the game by putting a team together and deciding which players to add, rather than coaching.

"What you find out, even as a coach, is that the most important thing in any organization or any business outside of football, is talent acquisition," Garrett said. "I've always seen and been able to feel the importance of putting the team together and adding players to the team, whether it was the draft in pro football or college recruiting."

That double calling eventually led him to Duke and the role as General Manager of Player Personnel. When head coach Manny Diaz called Garrett and offered him the role, Garrett immediately responded with interest for the opportunity to be a key part of the football team at a school he thought had a "unique combination of excellence, both on and off the field."

'The conventional way'

Garrett stresses that for him, one of the most important aspects of his role comes in his collaboration with Diaz and Binuk Kodituwakku, who serves as Duke's Chief Football Strategy Officer. He believes Duke's set-up allows each of them to focus on what is most important: Garrett on scouting and recruiting, Kodituwakku on the financial aspect and Diaz on actually coaching. While Diaz gets the final say on the final shape of the roster, the three work in close collaboration to ensure the best outcome for Duke and to achieve the same goal: win as many games as possible.

Despite having decades of experience with the sport as a player and a coach, including 19 years with various NFL teams, Garrett could not help but note that the game of college football, especially in terms of recruiting, has sped up at a dizzying pace.

"You really have to be able to evolve and adjust with your recruiting practices," Garrett explained.

Evolving is perhaps the best word to describe the changes that college football has made in the past 10 years.

"The conventional way of adding to a team in college football was just through high school, and it was one class at one specific signing date, and that was it," Garrett said. "A head coach and a regular coaching staff could handle that because there wasn't roster movement."

Updated rules about when and how often a student-athlete can transfer have turned roster movement from a rarity in college football to the norm. Colleges no longer focus on simply signing a class of high school seniors and pouring all of their efforts into developing them. While many schools, including Duke, still value and emphasize their development approach to recruiting high schoolers, coaches now have far more options to add onto their teams than they did two decades ago.

Those options and the accelerated recruiting timelines initially made it overwhelming for a head coach to attempt to manage on their own. Having a general manager on staff allows them to utilize those options while still keeping coaching as their primary focus.

For any college football team looking to play in the last weeks of December into January, having a general manager has all but become a necessity. Indeed, of the 12 teams that made the 2024-25 College Football Playoff all but three — Georgia, Arizona and Tennessee — boast general managers as a part of their staff.

One of the first hires new North Carolina coach Bill Belichick, himself a former NFL head coach, made down the road in Chapel Hill was to tap Michael Lombardi as the Tar Heels' new general manager. Lombardi brings with him three Super Bowl championships and over 30 years of NFL front office experience. Both men are another example of the growing trend of personnel with NFL experience, including Garrett himself, flooding college football.

At Stanford, former NFL and current interim head coach Frank Reich will report to general manager and former NFL quarterback Andrew Luck — not the other way around, highlighting the different hierarchies at every school.

'Always another player to evaluate'

For Garrett, there really is no offseason. While NCAA rules may govern when and how Garrett and his staff can reach out to prospective players, the constant evaluation and analytics that factor into every decision made in college football never stop.

"Recruiting season is really every day," Garrett said. "There's always another player to evaluate."

Diaz likened recruiting in the portal world to "speed dating," an analogy Garrett agrees with.

"I've never done it, by the way, but I can imagine what it's like," Garrett joked. "In the transfer portal, things happen fast ... It's the best convincing, it's the best opportunity, it's the best financial package, it's the best playing opportunities. There's so many factors and information that you have to get to the recruit very quickly and succinctly."

Garrett believes that the consistency of Duke's message since he arrived on campus has made that part of his job as general manager easy. Though the transfer portal has surely affected it, the Blue Devils have steadily built up a culture of excellence even in the short 18 months since Garrett joined the staff. For him, especially in the rapid-fire, chaotic recruiting landscape that he navigates, achieving unity goes beyond the wins and the losses.

The world of college football may look completely different than it did in 2016. General managers like Garrett have changed the way teams operate, and those changes will continue to come.

Meet Darian Mensah, the Duke QB with an $8M NIL deal and a chip on his shoulder

Chip Alexander: Raleigh News & Observer (August 22, 2025)

Darian Mensah will make his debut as Duke's starting quarterback Thursday against Elon, and his pregame routine is a little different.

He doesn't like to eat before a game, so that's out.

And while many athletes have their favorite playlist of music, some tunes to set the right vibe in pregame, Mensah just goes with the vibe.

Mensah says he listens to ... frequencies? "Vibrational frequencies," he said in a recent interview. "It's like a noise you listen to, like a constant ringing noise. It's like calming music, I guess."

Some call it sound therapy or bioacoustics. The goal is to use binaural beats and the vibration to reduce stress, create relaxation, enhance mental focus and even help pain management.

And why that instead of using the headphones to listen to, say, some R&B?

"I'm just a huge believer in manifestation," Mensah said. "My mom is super big on this, but the higher your vibration is, the more you can attract things you want in your life."

Mensah is a redshirt sophomore and a California kid, raised by his mother, a longtime acupuncturist. He's also the type who knows what he wants and where he wants to go, and plans on carrying a chip on his shoulder – his words – until he achieves it.

"I've always wanted to be in the spotlight," Mensah said. "So it's no surprise why I'm here and doing the things I'm doing."

Recruited off social media

Mensah picked up that "chip" years ago when college recruiters all but ignored the quarterback at Saint Joseph High near San Luis Obispo. He was putting up good numbers and winning games but the recruiting interest was scant and the offers scarce.

The way Mensah describes it, he was basically recruited to Tulane off social media, after the Wave's recruiting coordinator saw a video clip of Mensah and made contact. "I think they stumbled into a diamond in the rough," Mensah said.

Mensah was soon on his way to New Orleans, was redshirted as a freshman and then more or less manifested himself into the Wave's starting quarterback.

"Being from the central coast, and seeing guys I thought I was a little better than being the ones in the spotlight, I've always wanted to be there," Mensah said. "Now that I have that, it's go time."

Mensah earned much attention last season at Tulane, leading the Green Wave to a 9-5 record and the American Athletic Conference championship game. He earned even more by then deciding he would transfer and being given a two-year NIL package worth $4 million a year, it was reported by ESPN, CBS Sports and other outlets.

Four million dollars. Let that sink in for a sec.

That's what Duke coach Manny Diaz reportedly is paid. It's also the price of business in college football, where a player's skill and production, along with the value of their name, image and likeness can make someone, and his family, financially secure.

From a Dodge Charger to a Mercedes

What has changed for Mensah?

"Have my own house, own car," he said. And a Rolex watch. Mensah has that, too, showing it off on his YouTube channel.

Mensah said he now has a Mercedes. After tag-teaming with his sister, Grace, to drive a borrowed 2013 Dodge Charger in high school, the new ride is quite an upgrade for the 20-year-old.

It's interesting that "upgrade" is the word used by one of Mensah's Duke teammates to describe the quarterback brought in to replace Maalik Murphy, last year's starter and another Californian.

Murphy transferred to Duke from Texas to run the offense for Diaz, helped the Blue Devils win a lot of close games and closed out the Blue Devils' 9-4 season with 26 touchdown passes. He then left for Oregon State when it was apparent Duke wanted Mensah, considered one of the top players – and one of the costliest – available in the transfer portal.

Mensah has the rare distinction of being a football player serenaded by Duke students at a basketball game at Cameron Indoor Stadium. "It was cool," he said, "to feel wanted."

Earning praise from coaches and teammates at Duke

On the football field, Mensah has earned little but praise from his coaches and teammates since coming to Durham, which he says is a little like his hometown.

"Darian, since the day he's come in, he's truly been a good guy, so the team backs him," offensive tackle Brian Parker II said. "I've heard at other schools, transfers come in and think maybe they're above the program or just using it or whatever, but I don't get that sense with Darian at all.

"He's a great teammate and everybody believes in him and his ability on the field. He's a huge upgrade from last season and it really gets guys excited about the offense, because you know that you might bust a play and that guy can make you right."

Asked to clarify his "huge upgrade" description, Parker said: "No shade to Maalik. He was just a more stationary quarterback. With our offense and especially RPO game, and the backside reads and runs, Darian's ability gives us an extra tool up front in both the run game and the pass."

Diaz likes to say Duke football has a "chip on the shoulder" edge to it, saying Mensah fit right in.

"With a guy like Darian, when you add him in I think that's a part of the connection with the locker room," Diaz said. "Because the guys see the similarity of the underdog story, under-recruited, under-valued and kind of being able to punch above your weight based off what is said about you."

Summer with Cam Ward, Manning Passing Academy

During a busy summer, Mensah went to Nashville, Tennessee, to work out with Cam Ward, who starred at Miami last season and was the No. 1 pick of the 2025 NFL draft by the Titans.

Mensah also spent time at the Manning Passing Academy in Louisiana, where he roomed with Oklahoma's John Mateer and was impressed by the voracity and tenacity of the coaching by the Peyton and Eli Manning.

Mensah used some of his NIL income to finance a Florida trip for his new wide receivers. He also has partnered with the Single Moms Planet organization after the Southern California wildfires, supporting a non-profit based in Santa Monica that assists single mothers who need financial aid.

On Thursday, Mensah will go out on Brooks Field at Wallace Wade Stadium for the first time as the starting quarterback for the Blue Devils. It's a new season, a new challenge.. He's just hoping all the vibes will be good ones.

Inside the unique front office setup of Duke's football program

Conor O'Neill: DevilsIllustrated (August 19, 2025)

A football lifer who spent 19 seasons on NFL staffs and was a college head coach five years ago and a former front office member for an Australian Football League team walk into Manny Diaz's office.

The start of a bad joke? No.

The triumvirate for personnel decisions with Duke's football team? That ringing comes from the Victory Bell.

John Garrett and Binuk Kodituwakku form, with Diaz, a unique front office for Duke's football program. It's a driving force behind Duke's most-anticipated football season in a decade.

The reason for such anticipation stems from several factors. Duke's transfer crop isn't robust. But it's headlined by quarterback Darian Mensah, one of the top transfers in the country. Fall camp notes and highlights make it seem like each transfer will meet or exceed expectations.

Duke's incoming freshman class ranked 34th in the Rivals industry ranking. If that doesn't jump off the page, consider: Duke's previous seven classes had an average rank of 57.6, with none higher than 49th.

It meshes perfectly with keeping intact a roster that won nine games last season. It wouldn't have been difficult, given the state of college football, to name the top 8-12 players with remaining eligibility from last year's roster and predict each of them would get a raise if they entered the transfer portal.

Duke returns four starters on the offensive line, three on its defensive line and two defensive backs who received All-America nods last year. Starters also return at running back, tight end, linebacker and both kicking positions.

"The best teams in the pros that we spoke to are the ones that do the greatest job in terms of retention," Diaz said. "That's where we wanted to make sure we did a great job, as well.

"Our best guys, despite multiple offers and usually higher offers, chose to stay at Duke."

It was full-staff effort to keep such a strong nucleus in a program fighting for its place in the upper echelon of the ACC.

You know the players and some of the staff; now it's time to learn about two masterminds behind the scenes.

How they came to Duke

Kodituwakku was pursuing his MBA in the Duke's Fuqua School of Business in the summer of 2023 when former coach Mike Elko reached out to him.

Elko had heard of Kodituwakku's experience with the Adelaide Football Club in the Australian Football League. There, the 35-year-old was the head of analytics and football innovation. He led the digital transformation strategy of the football department and formulated roster strategy using analytical models. He also managed a salary cap of $15 million each year.

For a college football coach in 2023, that's a heck of a résumé walking around campus while you're trying to clear NIL hurdles.

"I still had six months of my MBA to go when he left for A&M," Kodituwakku said. "Coach Diaz came in and I didn't really think that I was going to stick around."

Last words and such.

In the chaos of the transition, Kodituwakku had to run point on getting Diaz up to speed on Duke's NIL machinations. That laid the groundwork for what Kodituwakku calls a "really strong" relationship – along with both he and Diaz being fans of English Premier League teams.

Assembling his staff meant Diaz hiring Garrett to be his general manager of player personnel.

The 60-year-old Garrett was most recently at Florida State as its director of scouting for offense. That was for the 2022 and '23 seasons, when the Seminoles were a combined 23-4 and ascended to the top of the ACC. From 2017-21, Garrett was the head coach and offensive coordinator at Lafayette College. His other stints on college staffs included time at Richmond, Florida, Oregon State and Virginia, never spending more than two seasons in the same role.

But 19 of Garrett's seasons in coaching were in the NFL, with the Buccaneers, Cowboys, Bengals and Cardinals. He was on the Cowboys staff when his brother, Jason, was elevated to head coach in 2010.

While John Garrett had never crossed paths directly with Diaz, they had mutual connections.

"Who you bring into the organization is really the most important thing," Garrett said. "I coached a long time and I had done a lot of scouting and personnel over the years in the NFL. And then when you're a college head coach, you do everything.

"I've always enjoyed the personnel and evaluation part because –"

This is where Garrett leaned in and dropped his voice to a loud whisper …

"You're a much better coach when you have better players."

How Duke lands those 'better players'

Duke hasn't reinvented the wheel when it comes to recruiting.

Coaches still develop trust and relationships through the recruiting process. They're involved in the evaluation and recruiting processes.

Duke has adapted to what college football has become. The evolution has come with Garrett and Kodituwakku being constantly curious.
That's the thread between the two men who collaborate with Diaz on Duke's roster movement.

"You have to be able to adjust with the times," Garrett said. "If you're not asking questions and you're looking at it through a straw, just from one point of view, I just don't think that you will be as effective."

With the straw part of that, Garrett put both hands to one eye as if he were seeing through a spyglass.

Duke's financial situation is never going to be public knowledge. What percentage of the $20.5 million in the house settlement goes to the football program, we can just make educated guesses.

Both Garrett and Kodituwakku say they're pleased with the number they have. It goes along with the understanding that men's basketball at Duke will command a larger piece of the pie than at most athletic departments.

Kodituwakku's official role is chief strategy officer for the football program. It is defined on his staff bio page as: "… he oversees the program's Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) strategy, analytics and strategic roster construction and recruiting efforts. Kodituwakku optimizes Duke Football's revenue sharing arrangements through data-driven decision making and value-based assessments."

"One of our goals is to be one of the smartest teams in college football," Kodituwakku said. "With our resources compared to some other schools, we really need to make our resources stretch."

"So, what's the best way to do that? Ask questions, turn over every rock."

And that's where relationships matter beyond knowing a player's family and coaches.

Kodituwakku is well-versed in the agent realm. Garrett, as noted, spent 19 seasons on NFL staffs. There is immense value in connections and open communication to that new frontier of college sports. It helps in negotiations and in being aware of which players could be entering the transfer portal.

"That's one way we can build a sustainable team for a lot less than our competitors," Kodituwakku said.

Recruiting out of the transfer portal has become speed dating. There's a feeling that every second matters when you're vying for a player in December.

The cohesion and efficiency with which Diaz, Garrett and Kodituwakku operate is how Duke brings in high-impact transfers.

"I think being aligned in that allows us to make quick decisions and I think that's one thing we've done a good job of over our two years," coach Manny Diaz said. "I think our hit rate tells that story."

Duke's leading passer (Maalik Murphy) and rusher (Star Thomas) were both transfers last season. Its top two tacklers, Ozzie Nicholas and Alex Howard, were also transfers. A transfer offensive lineman (Caleb Krings) was a second-team All-ACC pick.

This season will further tell the story of the staff's hit rate with transfers. But indications from the preseason are the Blue Devils have several transfers ready to play starring roles.

The front office blueprint doesn't exist

This doesn't quite fit the Drew Carey meme.

The points very much matter. They show up in the win-loss record of every team.

But that first part, about "everything is made up"; that strikes the chord of how college programs are creating front office structures.

There is no precedent for how programs should operate in the current climate. There are no regulations from the NCAA about these departments. Every program is on its own to delegate the responsibilities.

"We believe that collaborative effort is the best," Garrett said. "We're fortunate that (the) two of us have pro sports experience with these things. I've been in a lot of draft meetings and a lot of meetings about contracts in pro football."

When Elko was introduced as Duke's new coach in December of 2021, athletics director Nina King spoke to media members offstage about Duke's commitment to football.

She was talking about upgrades to facilities and a higher salary pool – not just for Elko, but for his coaching staff.

That was roughly 3✢ years ago. College athletics haven't stopped changing.

"It's a testament to our AD," Kodituwakku said. "Nina has worked with both programs but also the other programs to understand what the real needs were and where our strengths and weaknesses lied."

Duke's football program hasn't always been a strength. There's no beating around that bush.

But in today's world, there has to be dedication to football. Duke's administration understood that with each of its recent coaching hires. It will have to continue to support a program that has won 26 games over the last three years and wants to take the next step toward establishing itself in the upper echelon of the ACC.

It's important for the next inevitable changes.

Line Drive: Veteran defensive front motivated to keep the pressure on

Michael White: GoDuke the Magazine (August 19, 2025)

This interview originally appeared in the 2025 Duke Football Yearbook issue of GoDuke The Magazine

When asking the starting four players along Duke's defensive line about hobbies they enjoy away from the field, it is fascinating to learn that one likes kayaking, another enjoys painting and cooking Southern-style food, one spends his down time practicing saxophone, and another has loved building LEGOs his entire life.

However, for offenses that will face the Blue Devils this fall, knowledge of those wholesome, gentle pastimes will offer no relief from the pressure and threat they are about to face on the field.

This quartet – which includes graduate defensive tackle Aaron Hall, senior defensive end Vincent Anthony Jr., redshirt junior defensive end Wesley Williams and graduate transfer tackle Josiah Green – enters the 2025 season as arguably the most experienced defensive line in the country, with a total of 5,037 career snaps between them over the last four-plus years. In fact, Hall, Williams and Anthony have patrolled the front together for Duke for much of the last three seasons, while Green is a transfer portal pickup from Dartmouth College, where he was a unanimous All-Ivy League selection in 2024.

In other words, this group has been good. They have been consistent. They have proven themselves. And heading into the 2025 season, the group has a mission.

"I think dominance is the word," said Williams, a product of Gainesville, Virginia, who is majoring in public policy. "We have the ability and the will to suffocate a lot of teams, and hopefully we can go out and accomplish that. We pride ourselves on defense – grittiness and toughness – and I think it just translates to how we play football. There's not really a secret to it or anything. I think we just go hard and that translates to great defense."

Indeed, that approach has served Duke well over the last three years, as the defensive unit has been a foundational ingredient in the Blue Devils' winning recipe. It is an approach that has resulted in 26 wins, three bowl appearances and two bowl victories over that time frame.

For Hall, a 6-foot-4, 290-pound Durham native who spent his childhood hanging out in the family kitchen and learning to prepare his mother's favorite meals, being part of a winning recipe has meant a great deal – especially considering the Blue Devils had struggled in the years preceding his arrival on campus in 2021.

"A lot of pride," said Hall, who played at Southern High School and is currently a graduate student studying management in the Fuqua School of Business. "We came here knowing what Duke football was, especially my class. We were struggling a lot in terms of football at that time. We were last in the ACC, and just our goal – especially the class of 2025 – was to build something here. Leave the place better than you found it. Leave a program that is wanted by the institution, but more importantly, wanted by the fans and the players and the coaches that reside here. I think that's something that drives us a lot."

One person who took notice of Duke's recent success was Green. Having finished his time at Dartmouth – where he helped the Big Green to back-to-back Ivy League titles in 2023 and 2024 – the 6-1, 285-pound native of Indianapolis, Indiana, was looking for a place where he could fit in seamlessly and have an opportunity to compete for championships.

Duke not only offered that chance, but also provided a stage in a Power 4 conference like the ACC. However, there was even more to Green's decision than football. "The decision to come to Duke was really a mix of a bunch of things," said Green, who is joining Hall in the management graduate program at Fuqua. "The first was what kind of education are you going to get? What Duke offered made a lot of sense for me. Then it was the culture here. People actually care about each other. I got a bunch of people's (phone) numbers on my official visit, and it wasn't like that anywhere else. I wanted to go somewhere where people really cared about each other, wanted to win games, and I'm going to get a great education."

That cultural element was a consistent theme for the entire quartet. A winning culture has taken root both within the position group and throughout the team. And while it comes with demands for characteristics such as excellence, togetherness, and hard work – both on and off the field – there are also moments to smile, to play with joy, to laugh at each other (or at one's self).

Enter Anthony, the self-described jokester of the group.

Like Hall, Anthony is a fellow Durham native who played his prep football across town at Jordan High School. The 6-6, 260-pound end takes great pride in playing for his hometown and having built a winning tradition at Duke. He has not only provided a relentless edge-rush element to the group, but has also served to relieve the anxiety and pressure of stressful in-game moments with a free-spirited, joyful approach to the game.

"That's just my personality," said Anthony, a double major in African American studies and cultural anthropology. "It makes my day when I see other people laughing. We all crack jokes – Aaron, Wes, we all do it. But I'd say out of all of us, I'm doing it the most. It's a way to lighten the mood and get people to relax. I just like to have fun. That's just me. For every sack or TFL (tackle for loss), I'm going to do a different dance every time and bring that excitement to the field that everybody loves to see, even my teammates."

That free-spirited, aggressive approach to defense has served Duke well in recent years. Described as being "vertical" by all four players, the defensive scheme aims to bring pressure whenever possible, relying on all 11 players on the field to do their jobs, and trusting in the preparation provided by the coaching staff.

In fact, head coach Manny Diaz, who is entering his second year on the Blue Devils' sideline, points to the fact that Duke's success up front is also derived from its depth. As good as Hall, Williams, Anthony and Green may be, they are only part of an overall position group that thrives on competition and togetherness.

"We're proud of what we have up front, but defensively you're only as good – when I talk about sustaining a level of play for 48 straight quarters – as your two-deep," Diaz said. "That's something we've got more of this fall than we did a year ago. We've got proper competition."

It's hard to argue with Diaz's approach and the results of that crew up front.
Williams began his career with two blocked field goal attempts in the Blue Devils' season-opening win over Clemson in 2023 and posted a career best eight tackles against Virginia Tech a year ago. Hall was an honorable mention All-ACC performer last season and will serve as a team captain this year. Anthony has recorded 19 quarterback pressures and 7.5 sacks in 28 careers starts while being on the field for 1,237 snaps. Those three accounted for 31 tackles for loss to buoy a Blue Devil unit that finished second in the country in TFL at 8.9 per game.

Meanwhile, as he joins the group, Green brings the experience of being on the field for 1,567 snaps at Dartmouth, including a 10-tackle performance against Harvard in 2023.

However, beyond the on-field performances, it's who these men are away from the field that is even more intriguing.

While Green picked up a kayaking habit during his time at Dartmouth, he also has the goal to live abroad following his time at Duke. And if he were a superhero? His superpower?

"To be able to understand every language," said Green, who has an identical twin brother who is also currently playing college football. "It would be nice to know what other people are saying all the time … and it would really be great to know what other teams are saying on the field."

Meanwhile, Anthony may see himself as a bit of a comedian, but he is also an amateur musician.

"'I've been playing the saxophone since I was in the sixth grade," he said. "I was in band in middle school, but even though I started playing football in high school and stopped band, I just kept playing. I like doing it to take a break, to relax."
And while Hall likes to cook and take time to paint, Williams has carried on a childhood hobby into his time at Duke.

"I'm big into LEGOs," said Williams. "I lean into building airplanes, cars and stuff like that. I even do time-lapses sometimes when I'm building them."

To a man, the group talked about family and closeness. In fact, Hall and Anthony had only one degree of separation while growing up in Durham. "VJ's mom was my dentist for 18 years and we didn't even know each other until we got here to Duke," Hall said with a laugh.

And where does this family expect to go this year?

"An ACC championship and a shot in the playoffs," Anthony said. "We have the talent on the field. Having that type of team to end my last year at Duke? That's what I would want.

"That's what we would want."

Fine Fina Fits: Brothers Bruno and Roman Fina bring strong pedigree to O-line

Johnny Moore: GoDuke the Magazine (August 19, 2025)

This interview originally appeared in the 2025 Duke Football Yearbook issue of GoDuke The Magazine

It is refreshing, in this age of NIL, collectives and transfer portals, to find examples of true student-athletes in major college sports. Duke left tackle Bruno Fina is one of many Blue Devils who fits that description perfectly.

On the academic side, Fina graduated from UCLA in June 2024 with a degree in business economics. Last year he added a master's in management studies from Duke's Fuqua School of Business, and now he is pursuing a master's in business administration from Fuqua. He was one of only five players from the ACC to be named as an Academic All-America last year and is a National Football Foundation (NFF) Hampshire Honor Society member. At UCLA he was named All-District Academic and was a two-time member of the Pac-12 Academic Honor Roll.

Last season on the football field, the 6-foot-5, 300-pounder from Tucson, Arizona was a key member of the Duke offensive line. He was part of a unit that ranked second in the ACC and tied for eighth nationally in fewest sacks allowed per game (0.92) while providing pass protection for Maalik Murphy to throw for a Duke single-season record 26 touchdowns. He was part of a line that did not yield a sack in the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl to an Ole Miss team that led the nation in sacks.

Prior to Duke, in his four years at UCLA (2020-21-22-23) he was a two-year letterwinner. He helped the Bruins lead the Pac-12 in rushing yardage, 197.9 yards per game in 2023, while playing in three bowl games.

Fina is also in the last group of covid year players, as this will be his sixth year of competition at the collegiate level. His extensive experience features 31 games played with 25 starts, including 12 of the Blue Devils' 13 games last year. He logged 835 snaps during his first Duke campaign.

"The last of the Mohicans, that's me," he laughed. "It was a weird situation my freshman year (at UCLA). It was the only time when coaches were encouraging you not to spend time with your teammates. To not hang out with people. That was difficult as a first-year student. Obviously, you don't get your normal first-year experience. You're not going to any parties or meeting new people. You know that stuff has come in time. It just didn't start out like that."

Fina played high school ball at Salpointe Catholic in Tucson and had several collegiate offers, ultimately picking UCLA for its great mix of academics and athletics. He came into UCLA as a skinny 230-pound kid and left as a starting tackle tipping the scales at 300 pounds.

Following graduation he wanted to continue to play and continue his academic career as well. Duke looked like the perfect spot for him.

"Great fit," he explained. "The MMS degrees are fantastic and help to set me up with so many connections down the road. Coach Diaz has a special approach with players. Coaches talk about the mental game, but it just feels like he understands it on another level. Every team meeting, every one-on-one meeting, he is speaking very, very, closely to what's like in your heart. He just has a talent for that."

Now, heading into his final season at the collegiate level, Bruno is being joined on the team by his younger brother Roman, a true freshman offensive lineman.

"It's great," said Bruno, who also has two sisters Mimi and Stella . "The last five years I've only seen him for like a week or two at a time. It's great now to get to watch him develop as a player and be around him every day."

Roman is also glad to have the opportunity to be around his older brother, on and off the field.

"One of the reasons I came to Duke was the fact that I'd be able to play with my brother, which is just an experience that I've never had," he explained. "He knows his game very well; he's had a great deal more experience in football and life than I've had. He's been on the college football stage for six years now, so he knows a thing or two, which is a great resource for me. I love him too, which is great. It's great to be able to spend time with him going to restaurants, just hanging out."

And of course, the older Fina is going to give his younger brother tips and insights into playing on the offensive line for the Blue Devils.

"I try to coach him as much as I can without being overbearing," Bruno explained. "It's easy to fall into a lot of pitfalls when you're a freshman. I just have an eye for when he's out on the field. Just naturally care more and I think it has helped me spread that to other freshmen who deserve attention from all the older players."

The Fina brothers grew up around football. Their father John played for 11 years in the NFL as an offensive lineman.

He played his collegiate career at the University of Arizona, 1989-90-91, playing both sides of the line while earning second team All-Pac-10 honors and team captain recognition in 1991. Not surprisingly, he also was a three-time Pac-10 All-Academic Team honoree. He was a first-round selection of the Buffalo Bills with the 27th pick overall in the 1992 NFL Draft and spent his first 10 seasons with the Bills before returning home to play for the Arizona Cardinals his final year of 2002. Overall Fina started in 131 of his 155 games in the NFL and participated in two Super Bowls before induction into the University of Arizona Athletic Hall of Fame in 2002.

Like most parents, John and Melissa Fina are very proud of the achievements of their sons on and off the field. John has tried to pass along some insider knowledge from his long career playing in the trenches.

"Your job as a lineman is to be smart at the right time," he explained. "You don't have to pancake the guy every time to win the play. You must create leverage, understand the philosophy of the play. I wasn't the biggest guy on the field when I played, so I had to play with my brain and my athleticism. You can always have those things, but at some point, there's always going to be somebody bigger. There's always going to be somebody that you can beat with technique, but you can't beat with strength, so you might as well get your technique right. So we've taught technique from the first moment they ever stepped on the field."

"Obviously he had a great wealth of knowledge," said Bruno. "I could come home every day and ask him questions when things didn't make sense and I knew I could always trust him. When days were hard and I felt like I was falling behind, I could always go to him. He would say, 'I had these exact same days. I had these exact same doubts.' And we would figure it out."

"Growing up he never really pushed me to play football," explained Roman. "I played baseball and basketball, and I always knew I'd try football in my freshman year. And of course I did, and I came in not knowing much, or at least not having many skills because I'd never played before. But having my dad on the field with me – he was one of the assistant offensive line coaches on my high school team – was just incredibly helpful. I could ask him questions at home about plays that I didn't understand quite yet. And you know, on the field, of course he was there. A familiar face to look to. An extra sense of trust for me as a coach and a father."

For Bruno, he now has a great combination of academics, football and family for his final collegiate season. Last year's nine-win season showed him and others just how good this Duke football program is and can continue to be. He is extremely optimistic heading into the 2025 season.

"I think we all expect great things from this team," he said. "We should definitely grow this year as a team. We have the talent, we just have to go out and perform well. It's time to take all that talent and experience and put it out on the field."

Showcase QB: Confident Darian Mensah assumes command of Duke's offense

Meredith Rieder: GoDuke the Magazine (August 19, 2025)

This interview originally appeared in the 2025 Duke Football Yearbook issue of GoDuke The Magazine

Nobody under center has swagger like Mensah. Cali swagger. That basketball walk. Whatever you want to call it, Duke quarterback Darian Mensah has it.

"It" certainly isn't self-proclaimed by Mensah, rather it has been recognized by coaches, including his freshman year head coach Willie Fritz at Tulane, where he spent two seasons and starred in 2024 as the QB1 for the Green Wave.

While Mensah may not automatically describe himself as having that swagger, he understands that confidence and a certain – for lack of a better term – arrogance is an important part of being successful at quarterback.

"My freshman year at Tulane, Coach Fritz would always say I got that basketball walk," said Mensah. "It's just kind of having that basketball swagger. You'd hear everyone say it last year when I was playing, that I had that 'Cali swagger.' I feel like those are important parts of playing quarterback – confidence and swagger. That's something I feel basketball helped with."

Mensah, a native of San Luis Obispo, California, played all sports as a young kid with tee-ball, soccer and whatever else his mom Naomi signed him up for eventually falling by the wayside while basketball and football remained a large part of his life into high school.

He said tee-ball just wasn't for him and his twin sister, Grace. Soccer turned out to be Grace's sport as she heads into her junior season as a midfielder at Oregon. If Darian's story holds true, the siblings couldn't get past tee-ball for a reason that might have been a glimpse into their future athletic successes.

"Me and and my sister would hit home runs, and they'd make us go back to first base," Mensah said about why his tee-ball career didn't evolve into a baseball career. "So we stopped playing after that."

Possessing dreams of playing in the NBA one day, Mensah played basketball in the Under Armour circuit as well as in West Coast Elite, one of 18 members of the Jr. NBA Flagship Network. However, by the time he was 15 years old he had enough self-knowledge and maturity to realize there were a lot of kids who simply were better than him, leaving football as his focus.

"My ceiling was lower (in basketball), and I realized that when I played on the Under Armour circuit and in West Coast Elite," Mensah said. "I realized a lot of these kids are better than me. In football, at that time, I was better than a lot of people I was playing against. So, I thought maybe I should focus all my attention on football rather than basketball."

Mensah took the footwork and that swagger he learned on the basketball court and transferred them fulltime to the football field, and did so with much success.
Following in the footsteps of his uncle who played quarterback, Mensah loves everything about playing the position. He embraces the responsibility and the leadership demands that come with being a starting quarterback. Mensah did have a few stints at wide receiver in flag football and when he transferred high schools while he learned the full playbook, but he knew he was meant to touch the ball on every snap.

"I like everything that comes with it," Mensah said about playing quarterback. "Being the face of your program and taking command of the offense. Whether it's leading in the weight room or on the field to off the field, I just feel like I'm a leader at heart."

His ability to move in and around the pocket as well as his arm strength, combined with his comfort guiding a team on and off the field, landed Mensah at Tulane. After going through a redshirt season in 2023, he earned the starting job in 2024. Mensah quickly made a name for himself, throwing for over 2,700 yards and 22 touchdowns while leading the Green Wave to a 9-5 record, including a 7-1 mark in the American Athletic Conference.

He averaged 209 yards passing per game, threw multiple touchdowns in eight games and eclipsed 300 yards through the air three times to climb to the top of ESPN's 2025 transfer portal rankings.

Blue Devil head coach Manny Diaz knew Duke would be a perfect match for Mensah, both on and off the field. Duke stands out with what it offers off the gridiron, plus Diaz and the Blue Devils were coming off a nine-win season with an established identity. The attraction was mutual for Duke and Mensah.

"It was the opportunity to showcase my talent on a broader scale," Mensah said about his decision to transfer to Duke. "I've always wanted to play Power 4 football, especially in the ACC, a super competitive conference. I feel like all the pieces aligned with Duke. I could have gone all over the country, but I feel like at Duke we have an elite head coach. We won nine games last year. In this offense, we throw it vertically. Who wouldn't want to play quarterback here?"

Diaz believes the athleticism, mobility and skills Mensah possesses will allow Duke to continue to win a bunch of games.

"It is hard now to not have that mobile element (at quarterback)," said Diaz. "It's not just having that dual threat, it's being able to extend a play. And Darian, for a first-year starter for Tulane – his ability to manipulate a pass rush with his feet, keep his eyes down field, scramble to throw, scramble to run, even just checking it down to make it second-and-6 instead of second-and-10 in terms of game logistics is so different."

Mensah's ability to extend a play was on display at Tulane as he only got sacked 17 times while leading a Green Wave offense that ranked 10th nationally in third down conversion percentage.

"I feel like I'm reactionary enough to thinking it's cover two and then you see them roll to one and then having the reaction to be like, 'This is where I have to go with the ball,'" Mensah said. "My coaches at Tulane told me I have enough arm talent to be able to flip from one read to another one. I feel like it's something not a lot of quarterbacks have, so it's my superpower along with my accuracy. Those are two things that help my game."

There are a trio of quarterbacks Mensah says he watched as individuals who influenced him as a player – all three who excelled with incredible arms and the ability to move well around the pocket.

"I always say CJ Stroud," Mensah said when asked who he models his game after. "But when I was younger, I used to watch a lot of Geno Smith back in his days at West Virginia. I just thought he spun it well and that team was super fun to watch with Tavon Austin and Stedman Bailey. And my mom always used to tell me I looked like Russell Wilson when I was younger. I liked the Seahawks and him. Those three dudes for sure."

The football numbers speak for themselves, but it might be Mensah's leadership, and the joy he brings to the field and locker room that might have the largest impact.

"I'm not the dude who is going go out and yell at everybody," Mensah said. "I feel like I lead by example, but I will hold the people around me accountable. It's not like a Tim Tebow, but more of a quieter version of Jameis Winston."

Mensah, with a laidback smile, reflected when asked about how he builds bonds with his teammates, which is paramount to being a successful quarterback.

For him, it's about treating it like family and spending quality time together. That might sometimes mean running extra routes, but ultimately, it's about developing relationships and trust.

"Really it's about just investing all my time – aside from football – in just being with the guys," Mensah said. "Going out to dinner, throwing extra routes, just being with them whenever and wherever I can because I feel like the more time I put in with these guys, the more I will get out of them come game time. I took the receivers to Tampa a couple of weekends ago, so just being with them is the biggest thing. It comes with playing the quarterback position."

Arriving in January, Mensah went right to work in the weight room, the film room and into building his Blue Devil community. Because for him, what he enjoys most is just going out and playing a game he loves with his best friends.

After three months of grinding behind the scenes, Mensah cherished the opportunity to put his game on display in the annual Blue & White Game – a glimpse of what he has on tap for fans this fall. He threw a pair of touchdown passes, leading the offense to a 38-26 win.

"It did feel real," Mensah said about the spring game. "It was awesome to go out in front of the fans and throw some touchdown passes to my guys. It was a surreal feeling for sure, but I just can't wait until August to do it for real. I'm super excited."

Mensah, eschewing the common approach of setting distinct goals prior to a season, enters his second year as a starting quarterback relying on his love of football and his community, which encompasses Duke, his mom, sister and extended family and his hometown in central California.

"I really just want to go out and enjoy my time here at Duke," Mensah said. "I don't want to put any expectations or standards on the season. I want to go out and have fun with my guys next to me and hope that we make this season a special one."

Diaz believes the Blue Devils, through the returners and the new roster additions, have the potential to do just that. He looks forward to seeing the impact transfers Andrel Anthony of Oklahoma and Cooper Barkate from Harvard at wide receiver will have and is excited about the returning personnel in the front seven on defense.

"If we can play great defense and have a great quarterback – a team that does those two things normally wins a bunch of games," Diaz said.

Get ready Duke fans. If Mensah has anything to say about it, it will be an exciting season on Brooks Field at Wallace Wade Stadium. That excitement is written all over his 20-year-old face. He is eager to add all Duke fans to his community and he plans to do so with flair.

"I'm a kid from a small town in California and I like to put on a show when I play," Mensah said. "I'm just excited to get into Wallace Wade and interact with the fans and play in front of my mom again and all of my family and put the central coast on the map."

There's a feeling around this team that sooner rather than later, all Duke fans will know where to find San Luis Obispo on a map.

David Shumate Sits Down With Nick Morris Jr.

David Shumate: GoDuke the Magazine (August 19, 2025)

This interview originally appeared in the 2025 Duke Football Yearbook issue of GoDuke The Magazine

DS: Let's start with your earliest memories of football – what are some of your memories growing up of being around football? Or maybe it wasn't football, maybe it was another sport?

NM: No, it was definitely football. It was football and baseball that I that I grew up playing, primarily. I remember when I was, I think, eight or nine years old, first time playing tackle football, I was a quarterback and middle linebacker. I was not a good passer, and I made bad decisions as a quarterback and I was kind of overwhelmed in the pocket. But I ran a lot, and I would use my physicality, and I think a lot of people noticed that. One of my dad's friends made a highlight tape of me. It was a really nice thing for him to do for my family, and I remember just after that season watching that highlight tape in my family room and being like, man, I really love this sport.

DS: You mentioned baseball briefly. When did you know football was ultimately going to be your focus? I know everyone has to make that choice at some point.

NM: Funny enough, actually, my dad went to Penn as a quarterback and then he broke his hand playing volleyball and struggled to throw the ball moving forward. So, they moved him to strong safety, and he had a great career, having switched positions like I did. But to get back to your question, I loved baseball growing up.

It was really nice having that juxtaposition of football and baseball, where football is such an aggressive sport, very physically taxing. You have to have a mentality of being aggressive, full exertion. And then in the spring season, baseball is more like a mental game. It helps your hand-eye coordination and stuff like that. So, it was really nice having the balance of those two sports growing up.

I think I liked both of them equally up until high school and then, you know, my body developed. I noticed I was getting stronger than my peers, lifting more than a lot of other people in my high school. I think having that mentality is maybe more advantageous for football and, in particular, linebacker. So, I realized that I was probably on track to be a much better football player than I would have been a baseball player.

DS: Fast forward to your time at Duke, I think people forget because there has been a lot of change over the last few years, but you were recruited by Coach Cutcliffe. What has the journey to Duke been like for you – choosing to come here, but also when you take a step back now that you're a little bit older, in these last five years, what has this been like with all of the change?

NM: So I guess the story would have to begin in August 2020. I was living in Connecticut at the time, and it was obviously during covid. There were very stringent covid rules in Connecticut and long story short, the governor of Connecticut cancelled the football season there. My family kind of had this inkling that this was going to happen back in April and May and I had worked so hard that offseason. I was so excited for my senior year in Connecticut, and it was just devastating that the season got cancelled at that point. Thankfully, my dad had a college roommate that lives in a town called Westlake, in the suburbs of Austin, and my dad and I had actually visited that town a few times within the past few years prior to this.

I remember saying when we visited their stadium how cool it would be if I had grown up there and played in that stadium. Westlake's stadium has around 15,000 seats and football in Connecticut pales in comparison to what you experience as a high school football player in Texas. So when the season was cancelled, we made a spontaneous decision to move down to Texas as a family, and it was an incredible experience. My defensive coordinator, coach Tony Salazar, who's now the head coach at Westlake, I learned so much from him – not only about the schematics of football, but also what it means to work hard and a lot about preparation.

That season I was playing pretty well in Austin and started attracting more attention from colleges. I got an offer from Oklahoma State who was No. 5 in the country at that point but it's important to note that my family also really values academics. My dad went to the Wharton School of Business, and he was given that opportunity by football. He always told me how valuable that was, that decision to use football to secure a spot at a prestigious institution that has helped him throughout his life. So, I got an offer from Oklahoma State, but it just didn't really align with my values. Then I remember Coach Cutcliffe following me on Twitter and it was so exciting. He arranged a call, offered me a scholarship and I just knew immediately that I needed to come here. It was, again, during covid, so there weren't any official visits but my dad, brother and I took an impromptu visit to Durham. We were just there exploring the campus as I wasn't even allowed to meet anyone in person. But when we got here, I immediately realized how it was the most unique school I'd ever seen, and I imagined myself prospering here immediately. My cousin actually went here at the time; she was a senior and she gave us a tour around and I immediately fell in love.

I have to say Coach Cutcliffe has a very special place in my heart. He's a phenomenal person. I am so indebted to him for the rest of my life because I'm incredibly happy to be a Duke football player.

Now fast forward to these last few years and it has just been an incredible opportunity to play for Coach Diaz. He instills in the program a tremendous culture. Being ambitious about goals, being confident in ourselves, and in doing that he makes it 100 percent clear that you are genuinely valued as an individual on this team. He's an incredible person. He leads meetings and sometimes runs us through a mindfulness exercise, like a breathing exercise, which is something that I never experienced being a college football player and something that I accept with open arms because the mental game is such an important part of football. He's an incredible person to play for.

DS: Let's talk football and about last year. Heading into the season you were coming off a 2023 season where you were starting to play a little bit more. You had that monster game against Pitt at the end of the regular season, you had a fumble recovery up at Connecticut in your home state. The coaching change obviously happens and I would think for a linebacker, it's kind of cool. You're going to play in a 4-3 defense – you can fly around, you can make plays and I would imagine you were eager to get started. Then in game one you get hurt and just like that, your season's over. What was the emotional roller coaster like last year?

NM: I was definitely so excited for the season last year. It's a phenomenal defense to be a mike linebacker in particular. In general, the defense is super fun, but to be a mike – it's hard to explain how fun it is. It's an aggressive defense, and I was so excited to get started. I had a great summer getting ready, hit a bunch of PRs in the weight room and I was excited to see that work come to fruition.

Then, obviously, the season ended very very fast for me. I was just looking forward to the whole season at one moment, and then the next, my view of the future changed drastically. It was tough to digest. But I think that having gone through that experience, I'm coming out of it in the end a much more resilient, focused, and motivated person because I've experienced what it's like to not have football and to not be a contributing member of the team. I'm just so excited to get back to a place where I was and hopefully go beyond that. I have a new perspective on football in general because the experience has just drastically increased my gratefulness that I'm able to play football healthy and that I'm a part of this incredibly great program that supported me a lot through the difficulties I endured.

DS: You mentioned that you're fully healthy, that's obviously a piece of it, but for Duke fans that obviously know what you're capable of, how would you say you've changed physically as a player, in terms of stuff you've worked on that people are going to get to see this year?

NM: I'm really happy to say that I had by far the best offseason I've ever had since I've been at Duke. I challenged myself at the beginning of the offseason that I wanted to look back in July and tell myself confidently that I did everything in my power to put myself in put in a position where I can perform at my absolute best this coming season, and I'm really proud to say that I feel like I accomplished that.

I was incredibly focused, made great improvements in terms of nutrition, sleep and intensity during workouts. I was really cognizant about the encouragement of others during workouts as well, and more broadly increasing my ability to be a good leader. I'm incredibly excited about this season. Physically, I feel the best I've ever felt by far. I feel faster, stronger, more agile and more focused mentally than I ever have. As you can probably tell, to say that I'm excited for this season is an understatement.

DS: When you go through an injury, obviously, you can't be on the field so strength training, all that stuff, becomes very important. Everyone talks about their relationship with Coach Feeley and I'm curious about yours because I saw you broke the power clean record. When you guys do those days where you PR and everyone gets dressed up, I normally can see Coach Feeley in there to help spot you guys and as you finish the lift he's running away so you guys can celebrate. But I noticed when you hit yours, you wouldn't let him get away. He was the first person you ran to – and I feel like that said something. Can you talk about your relationship?

NM: Yes, it's hard to communicate how lucky I feel to have Coach Feeley in my life. He is, besides my mom and dad, the most important person that I've had in my life. I've been with him for four years now. He's completely changed the way I view hard work.

I'm proud to say I'm now a person that completely accepts a challenge in front of me. Whether it be a hard workout, a hard practice, or even a difficult game, I approach that challenge with open arms and enthusiasm because of what he's instilled in me. Even this summer, at the beginning of the summer, I remember I had my pre-summer meeting with him to outline goals in terms of strength, speed, agility and everything like that. I mentioned to him that I wanted to break the power clean record again, and he said, "Alright, well, it's going be hard – I don't know if you can do it." But Coach Feeley and I have this thing where he knows that I'm motivated by that challenge, being told that I might not be able to do something.

He told me that he wanted me to adopt the mentality of every single time I have a rep in the weight room, it is the most important thing in the world. Every single rep of power clean I should adopt the mentality of what I would be thinking about if I was going to PR. I remember the whole summer, I was so amped up when I was power cleaning and trying to focus as hard as I could on every single rep of my form and the amount of power I was generating and everything. I was honestly super nervous for that day when I power clean maxed because I challenged myself to do it, and I was worried that I was going to fail. I just remember when I finished the lift everything that Coach Feeley and I had discussed, and it all kind of came rushing back into my head.

I knew how proud he was of me, and it was a really fun moment. I was obviously doing it for myself and for the team, but almost for him as well because he does get really excited when guys PR and are putting up impressive numbers. So it was just a really great moment.

DS: That's awesome. There is one other topic I wanted to hit on. Coach Diaz has talked about, given the ongoing conversations around college sports and transfer portal and NIL and the state of everything, he always talks about the fact that it's an advantage to be at Duke because there are things here beyond football that draw people. I don't want to overstate it, and feel free to tell me if I'm wrong, but to me, you're kind of the embodiment of that. You already have your degree, you're studying at Fuqua, and I was hoping you could share what Duke has meant to you beyond football.

NM: Again, it's hard to state how much Duke means to me. If I were to be a high school student and foresee my college experience, what I've experienced at Duke so far and what I have in front of me would completely exceed any of my wildest ambitions for what college would be.

It's just such a unique school. Because of my injury last year I have one more year and I know we've we talked about this, but there's no doubt in my mind that I'm coming back to Duke. There's no amount of money or opportunity that could be presented at any other place that would even come close to what Duke offers me. That obviously is a result of the incredible prestige that Duke offers as an academic institution, but it's also a result of the incredible people that this this program is filled with, like Coach Feeley, Coach Patke and Coach Diaz.

I couldn't ask for a better group of people to play for on a day-to-day basis and I'm excited every day I wake up in the morning to come in here and work really hard and that's the most valuable thing in life, in my opinion. No amount of resources, money or otherwise, can compete with being happy on a day-to-day basis, you know? Like I said at the beginning, I'm indebted to Coach Cutcliffe forever for giving me the opportunity to be here in the first place, but I absolutely love the school and this football program and I'm really hoping that I can establish a positive legacy over the next two years and be remembered for years to come in this program.

Portal Power: Duke didn't shop heavily for transfers this year, but found several impact gems

Jim Sumner: GoDuke the Magazine (August 19, 2025)

This interview originally appeared in the 2025 Duke Football Yearbook issue of GoDuke The Magazine

Some of Duke's ACC football rivals have more than 40 incoming transfers.

Duke has nine who figure to be rotation players. They didn't have room for more. Head coach Manny Diaz told the media at the ACC Kickoff that the school's culture tends to keep players around.

"You get a lot of people that were really raised the same way," he explained. "Guess what happens when you put them in a locker room? They really enjoy playing with and for one another. So, when that portal opens, they don't want to leave their best friends. I'd like to take credit for it. It ain't me. They want to play for the guys down there and that's because they're about the same stuff."

That means Duke can be surgical in its approach to the portal, selectively filling specific needs.

"You have to look at not just the impact of what the player does on the field but what they do in the locker room, and you've got to make sure you bring the right people into your program," Diaz added.

Therefore, what Duke's 2025 transfer class lacks in quantity, it makes up for in quality – nine players who project to see the field this season.

Caleb Weaver might be the best of three on the defensive side of the ball.

The safety from Houston played three seasons at Jersey Village High School in that city before finishing his prep career at Charlotte's Myers Park High School. Weaver then walked on to Sam Houston State, in Huntsville, Texas. The Bearkats had just moved up to FBS after winning the 2020 FCS national title. Weaver redshirted as a freshman, gradually earned playing time and a scholarship as Sam Houston State moved from the Western Athletic Conference into Conference USA.

Weaver arguably was CUSA's best defensive back last season, leading the league (tied) with four interceptions, while placing fifth in tackles (97) and fifth in passes defended (10).

"Change is just life," Weaver says of his journey. "I'm used to the changes. Just got to adapt, make new friends, embrace new circumstances."

After his head coach K.C. Keel left to go to Temple, Weaver hit the portal.

"When I got into the portal, a bunch of schools reached out. Duke was one of my top schools. When I took a visit it just felt like they needed to fill a position at safety (having graduated Jaylen Stinson). The defense is good across the board. I just felt like it was the right school for me."

How does Weaver describe his game?

"Playing safety, tackling is very important. But I also can cover as well. I try to perfect my craft and just dial in on that."

Defensive coordinator Jonathan Patke sees big things for Weaver.

"We needed a safety. We felt like we needed some age in that room, with Jaylen gone. So we searched in the portal to find that experience. We don't want to just acquire talent. We want guys who fit our system. He has all the accolades and then you hear his story. He's from the same area of Houston that I'm from. What it shows is that he's very hard-working, very resilient. He's very versatile. He can tackle, he can cover, he's got a nose for the ball. He's not very big but he has elite attributes that we were looking for. Once you get him on campus and you figure out his family and who he trains with, everybody loved him. He checked a lot of boxes for us and we're glad we got him."

Patke's defense has two other impact transfers.

Jaiden Francois comes from Utah State, after starting at UCF. He projects to take graduated Cam Bergeron's hybrid safety/linebacker position. Like Weaver, Francois can tackle and cover and has a 75-yard pick six against Idaho State to his credit. He's a South Florida native and Patke says he and Diaz recruited him hard when they were at Miami.

"We came to know him as a person and a man," Patke noted. "We knew his journey. He played that star position (at Utah State). We thought it was a perfect fit. We brought him in on a visit and it just felt very comfortable. He has a wealth of knowledge playing the position."

Josiah Green dominated the Ivy League last season at Dartmouth and was a unanimous All-Ivy selection. At 6-1, 285, he's small for a power conference defensive tackle. But graduated Duke star Kendy Charles was about the same size and he was second-team All-ACC last season.

"In the system we play, we don't mind the 6-foot D-tackle, as long as he's athletic and can move and get vertical," Patke says. "We felt like we needed to add age to our D-tackle room and experience, so we find Josiah from Dartmouth, a guy that terrorized that league and you start doing the background on him and his coaches say nothing but great things about him. He's just a special young man.

"Pound for pound he's one of the strongest guys on our roster. He can squat a house, he can bench press a house. He's as powerful as anybody I've seen in the weight room numbers-wise. When it clicks he's going to be a special, special player for us."

Duke has six offensive transfers who figure to make an impact, led by quarterback Darian Mensah (featured elsewhere in this publication). Four of the other five are skill-position players.

The exception is Jordan Larsen, a 310-pound guard who played 24 games at South Dakota and helped the Coyotes to last season's 2024 FCS semifinals.

Larsen has the early inside shot at replacing Caleb Krings, the only offensive lineman to graduate from the starting lineup.

"Larsen is a great guy, a great (weight) room guy, works hard," veteran Duke lineman Justin Pickett says. "He had an incredible summer, working hard, putting in extra work in the weight room, on the field. He's learning a lot and I think he'll jump right in and help this team."

Tight end Landen King is a late addition. After beginning his career at Auburn, King caught 17 passes in two seasons at Utah.

Third-team All-ACC wide receivers Jordan Moore and Eli Pancol used up their eligibility last season after combining for 115 receptions. Duke brought in a pair of grad transfers to help replace them.

Andrel Anthony has 47 career receptions playing at Michigan and Oklahoma.

Cooper Barkate was a D-2 All-American at Harvard last season, after grabbing 83 passes for 1,084 yards and 11 touchdowns

Barkate says he loved his time at Harvard but wanted an opportunity to play a higher level of football while maintaining academic rigor. He took extra classes, graduated from Harvard a year early and recognized that Duke "had a lot of open room in the receiver room."

Barkate did not play spring ball but has spent the summer bonding with his new teammates and learning the playbook, the latter perhaps not a big ask for someone who graduated from Harvard a year early.

Barkate, with good size at 6-1, 195, says he runs a 4.4 40 and has gotten stronger than ever under director of football sports performance David Feeley.

"I told my parents the other day I feel very put together, like a machine." The California native gives a self-scout.

"My number one strength is my speed. I have that in my back pocket. My other biggest strength is my route running. I've done it for awhile and I was fortunate to grow up with a lot of great receiver coaches, so I learned the art of route running pretty young."

He adds that he can win 50-50 balls.

Anderson Castle is a running back. He grew up in Boone, North Carolina and spent five years at Appalachian State.

What compelled him to come down the mountain?

"We didn't have the best year last year at App. Made some coaching changes. I figured I might as well see what was out there. The opportunity to come to Duke arose and it seemed like it was too good to turn down for me."

Castle is 6-0, 220 and pretty tough to stop between the tackles. He had eight rushing TDs at App State. He embraces that role.

"My running style is downhill. I don't do a lot of dancing. I'm confident in my decision making. When I make one cut behind the line, it's go. I'm a guy that's going to fall forward. Getting those extra two or three yards is something I take pride in." But he adds that he's not just a between-the-tackles runner.

"I've been working a lot in the open field, getting quicker feet. I've got speed to break away."

There's proof. Castle had a 49-yard TD run against Troy in 2020.

Castle is the only transfer running back but he's not the only experienced addition to the running back room.

Chris Foster joined Duke in the spring after running backs coach Willie Simmons took the head job at Florida International.

Foster joined Duke from Northwestern, after early coaching stints at his alma mater Gardner-Webb, then Appalachian State, Maryville, Georgia Southern, East Carolina and Northwestern.

In other words, he knows something about being the new kid in school.

"You can see where Coach Diaz is taking this program, where it's heading to," he says. "It's definitely trending upwards. Also the opportunity to coach and learn under coach (Jonathan) Brewer has been really good for me. I grew up in Spartanburg, South Carolina. The opportunity to get closer to home and work at a great institution, to me that's a no-brainer."

Foster says he admires Castle's willingness "to get out of his comfort zone" and come to Duke. "I think he's a great all-around back," Foster adds. "I don't think he's limited to short-yardage and goal line. He can be an every-down back."

Grad student transfers are in a curious position. On one hand they are among the team's oldest and most experienced players. On the other hand they're newcomers to a school, with a big learning curve.

Barkate threads the needle.

"It's definitely a little strange. You're an older dude but also a rookie at the same time. I'm not that vocal a guy and definitely had the humility to know when to be a leader and when to sit back, watch and learn. As an older guy you want to lead by example but you also need to know when to do it their way."

The transfers have hung around all summer, bonding as transfers, while bonding with their position groups and the team as a whole.

Not a big group in terms of numbers. But a big group in terms of potential impact for a Duke program trending upwards.

Why Duke football believes transfer WR Cooper Barkate will boost its offense

Chip Alexander: Raleigh News & Observer (August 13, 2025)

Duke, like many ACC schools, holds closed football practices but uses social media to give a few glimpses of what's in store for this season.

In one post, with the tag "Dime Dropping," there's a video clip of wide receiver Cooper Barkate hauling in a long pass from quarterback Darian Mensah.

On another, tagged "Fire away," there's Barkate again getting open deep on another Mensah bomb.

Both were well-thrown balls by Mensah, the transfer from Tulane who will be the Duke starter this season. But what grabs the eye was Barkate getting behind cornerback Chandler Rivers in one clip and Kimari Robinson in the second.

Barkate, like Mensah, is new to Manny Diaz's program at Duke. He, too, was a portal pickup and a big one from Harvard, where Barkate both earned a degree and had 113 grabs for 1,742 yards and 14 touchdowns in his three-year football career with the Crimson.

Barkate impressed at Harvard

Last season, Barkate was second in the FCS in yards per game (108.4) as he finished with 63 receptions and 11 TDs, earning second-team FCS All-America honors.

"He was one of the top guys in the country a year ago in terms of contested catches and we felt like that would be an important add to our offense," Diaz said Monday. "What has impressed us in the first 12 days so far (in camp) is his body control, his acceleration, his top-end speed. His ability to sink his hips and really run good routes has been very impressive."

That's the coach's trained eye taking a look. Others, including Rivers and Robinson, have gotten on-the-field looks going up against him.

"It didn't take very long before he was making a big play in practice and the defensive backs were starting to notice him," Diaz said.

Rivers noticed.

"Coop's a dog. That's one thing I can say, Coop is a dog." Rivers said Tuesday, smiling. "I feel like he brings something different to this team that we haven't seen in a long time. We feel like we have the best receiving room in the country."

Barkate, from Newport Beach, California, was rated the No. 3 athlete in the state and No. 10 wide receiver as a senior at Mater Dei High. His father, Hal, was a punter at UCLA -- wearing No. 18, now his son's number -- and the Barkate family often turned up at football games at the Rose Bowl to cheer on the Bruins.

UCLA was one of the schools interested in signing Cooper Barkate.

Instead, he picked Harvard.

At the Ivy schools, there are no athletic scholarships, no full rides. It also meant the Barkates had two kids at Harvard – Cooper's sister, Maddie, was on the women's lacrosse team.

"Cooper's always been a really competitive kid," Hal Barkate, an orthodonist, said in an interview Tuesday. "You didn't have to teach Cooper about caring to win. That came in his DNA.

"I think he likes to be a student of football. He likes to learn the concepts. He enjoys the process. He loves coach Diaz, and one thing he mentions to me is that coach Diaz always talks about the process and says, 'Don't worry about what other teams are doing, what other players are doing. Just worry about yourself and how you're getting better and the opportunities you get.'

"So he likes the process of working hard. He's OK with grinding like that. He likes to compete and win and he's OK with putting in the time."

Cooper Barkate said he has eyes on a future beyond football – in finance. That's another reason why after graduating with a degree in economics, he decided on making the move to Duke, where he was accepted into the Fuqua School of Business and is pursuing a Master's degree.

"In my mind there were really two prongs," Barkate said of his decision. "One is the football aspect. With two leading receivers leaving, there was a big opening in the (receivers) room. Also there was the addition of Darian, one of the top quarterbacks in the portal.

"Also I really value high academics. I want to get into business and finance when football is done and getting into the Fuqua school is big for me."

California kids chasing a championship

For now, there's the matter of helping Duke try and contend for an ACC title, its first since 1989, when Steve Spurrier was the coach.

Barkate noted that he and Mensah both were "Cali kids" with similar interests in music and clothing – Mensah, a redshift sophomore, is from San Luis Obispo. They quickly gotten a feel for each other on the practice field, he said.

"Definitely the more time we spend together the more chemistry we build," Barkate said. "We hit it off pretty instantaneously."

Barkate said Mensah can be an "electric" dual-threat quarterback, adding, "Anything can happen and it makes every play we run exciting."

As for going up against the likes of Rivers and Robinson, two of the best corners in the ACC, Barkate turned to the phrase "iron sharpens iron" and added that a big part of moving from the FCS level to FBS was facing tougher, quicker competition.

Barkate said his biggest adjustment in making the football jump from Harvard to Duke was as much about mindset as pass-catching skills and talent. It's about watching and learning from how his new teammates approach practice, approach the game and what they're trying to get out of the game. "It's really elevated my mindset and my inspiration to play harder," he said.

Duke football reunites childhood friends and Texas natives Chandler Rivers and Landen King

Anna Snyder: Fayetteville Observer (August 13, 2025)

Duke football's Chandler Rivers and Landen King go way back.

All the way back to Beaumont, Texas, to be exact.

The duo have been teammates since they were kids growing up about 90 miles east of Houston in Beaumont. Now, they're once again suiting up on the same team – just some 1,000-plus miles from home at Duke.

Even more so: the duo are set to wear the same number for the Blue Devils – No. 0.

"Me and Landen grew up together," Rivers said in an Aug. 12 availability. "I've been knowing him since I was like 4 or 5."

While the two did not attend the same high school – with Rivers attending Beaumont United and King Atascocita – they spent majority of their childhood on the same teams.

"We played little league together, went to middle school together, everything AAU wise we played together," Rivers said. "... We're both from the same city, grew up together, played with each other all our life."

Rivers, a senior cornerback for the Blue Devils, came to Duke as a three-star prospect in 2022 and has since turned into one of the nation's premier defensive backs. In 2,557 career snaps, Rivers has appeared in 39 games with 32 starts, tallying 164 tackles, 21 pass breakups, 12.5 tackles for loss, 5 interceptions and 1.5 sacks. He is a returning All-American and First Team All-ACC cornerback for the Blue Devils and heads into 2025 as the nation's No. 7 defensive back per ESPN.

King announced his transfer to Duke in May 2025, arriving at Duke via Auburn and Utah. He began his college career with the Tigers before spending the next two years with the Utes. In 36 career games with five starts, the 6-foot-5 tight end has recorded 23 receptions for 303 yards and five touchdowns. He will play his final year of eligibility with the Blue Devils.

Rivers is set to be a leader in the Blue Devils' backfield while King is set to bolster a Duke tight end room that returns a starter in Jake Taylor.

Duke officially opens its 2025 season on Thursday, Aug. 28, hosting Elon at Wallace Wade Stadium. For Rivers and King, it's a full circle moment – a journey from childhood teammates in Beaumont to suiting up together again at Duke in their final collegiate season.

"Having him come here is very cool," Rivers said.

Meet Sergei, the tablet-controlled robot painting NC sports fields

Jadyn Watson-Fisher: Raleigh News & Observer (August 11, 2025)

On most Mondays during football season, two Duke employees can be found at Wallace Wade Stadium painting the field to get it ready for the upcoming weekend. They spend a few hours meticulously spraying paint to provide bright lines and clean designs in the end zone.

Except one employee, Sergei, isn't a person at all.

A little over five years ago, Duke invested in a Turf Tank. It's a tablet-controlled robot that uses GPS to accurately paint field designs and logos up to 30 miles away with one centimeter precision.

Duke takes pride in its field maintenance — it was named the 2023 Sports Field Management Association Field of the Year — and Sergei's implementation became a way to improve its processes further.

The endeavor began as a way to simplify and make football turf management more efficient, saving the university money, time and creating a better product. It has turned into a campus-wide art project of sorts, helping the university hospital, admissions office and other departments around the school.

"My favorite part is it can do a lot of different things that people don't even know about," said Ian Christie, Duke senior superintendent of landscape management. "It's like an artist having a crayon or pencil or whatever you want to use. The robot is that pencil, and you as a user can tell it what to do. That creativity is limitless."

How does the Turf Tank robot work?

The traditional turf painting method requires a lot of people, math, measuring and time. When painting a fresh field, Sergei cuts down on all four variables.

Christie works closely with turf managers Cooper Boyce and Piper Richardson. They previously spent hours at a time marking boundaries and other points on each field with long tape measures and string. That was before the painting process even began.

If paint from a previously-used field remained as a guideline, the process wasn't quite as laborious but still required hours of work at a time.

Now, painting is a matter of real life copying and pasting.

Duke's staff programmed various geometric shapes into the software, which it uses on most fields. The initial setup for a new design still takes measuring to ensure accuracy, NCAA requirements are fulfilled and everything meets the eye test. The paint can be mathematically correct and perfectly straight, but if a foul pole or goalkeeper's net isn't exactly aligned, the lines will look incorrect.

Once a field is painted for the first time and its settings are saved, though, it's just a matter of pressing "start" for all future jobs.

"That's why I kind of tweak things very precisely in the beginning," Christie said. "It takes me a little while, but once it's there, it's there."

Even though the robots are tablet-controlled, they don't require complete hands-on monitoring.

Instead, the stationary GPS technology to determine accurate paint locations for each saved field, making the robot semi-autonomous.

Richardson likes to call each paint job "babysitting." She often keeps an eye on Sergei for potential problems but doesn't feel the need to be overly involved because it knows where to go. At softball, it knows where the batters boxes are and the pitchers' circle. The GPS guides the robot where it needs to paint the goalkeeper's box for soccer.

Christie said in the past, coaches would request painting but the staff wouldn't have enough time. Or, campus would get unexpected rain and cut into the time available to paint. It now takes half an hour to paint soccer or lacrosse fields. Baseball and softball can be done in 10 to 15 minutes.

Turf Tank, a Danish company, created the robots as a way to save paint and save time. Duke purchased the robot primarily for efficiency — Christie is willing to use as much paint as necessary to provide bright lines — but its capabilities have still reduced the amount of paint used.

The facilities team previously painted fields even when they weren't in use just so they wouldn't lose the previous lines and have to re-measure. That is no longer necessary with the coordinates saved in the software.

Additionally, the staff can decide if it wants to paint quickly or perform a slower job. The paint can be watered down, too, if that's what's best for the project.

"We can paint things quicker, and it's stored in the iPad, so I don't have to keep painting it for no reason," Christie said. "As a result, I don't use as much paint as I did before. ... We can do all these different things that we couldn't before. It, in turn, saves the amount of paint that we do use and it's better for the grass."

Why Duke bought a Turf Tank

Former Duke head football coach David Cutcliffe wanted multiple layouts painted on the team's practice fields, so the facilities team painted them regularly. It handled that in addition to regular upkeep required for the primary playing surface.

When Christie and his staff needed to measure every aspect of Brooks Field, it took three people and 10 hours. Painting the practice fields took roughly the same amount of time. He called it "very intense."

Christie began evaluating alternative options, asking other people in the industry for advice and recommendations. That's how he discovered the Turf Tank.

Virginia, led by its sports turf manager Jesse Pritchard, was the only school in the ACC and one of the first in the nation at the time to have a robot.

The Cavaliers added theirs, named U-VAngogh, about six years ago, after the university added an additional pair of grass practice football fields. The staff just wasn't big enough to handle the upkeep. Pritchard opted for a three-month demo before entering into a six-year contract.

Virginia uses it primarily for soccer, lacrosse, football practice and camps. It does not use the robot for football games, softball or baseball.

When the Blue Devils decided to streamline their work processes, Christie called Pritchard. They discussed what the robots could and could not do, positives, negatives, challenges and whether it was worth trying.

Duke quickly became the second ACC team with a painting robot.

"I like being a guinea pig. You can be on the cutting edge of new technology before 90% of people get it," Christie said. "I like being the first and I just like trying new things. I like trying to see if we can be better, if we can be more efficient. We're afforded that opportunity at Duke to try to really be the best, whether it be a paint machine or fields or landscapes."

N.C. State uses a robot for football and soccer, the a university spokesperson said. The Wolfpack updated its lease in April for a Turf Tank Two, the contract is worth $39,700 through April 2028, according to a receipt obtained through a public records request.

UNC purchased a robot this spring. The Tar Heels leased the Turf Tank Two on a professional software subscription, according to UNC's contract. It is expected to cost $99,200 over six years. Carolina requested a quote for the robot on Jan. 21, six days before it announced Kenan Stadium would return to a natural grass field.

As one of the company's early clients, Duke served as an unofficial product tester and developer. (Pritchard called Duke's robot as "Frankenstein.") Christie said the facilities staff has adjusted, or gotten the company to adjust, software, field layouts, logos and even mechanical components to make the product better.

The software can now paint every conference logo in the country, Christie said. His team also found new parts that worked better and presented its suggestions to Turf Tank, which implemented those recommendations on new models. "It turned out very well," Christie said. "They've been very happy with it. It's been a great mutual partnership."

How much does the robot cost?

A Turf Tank is not any basic remote-controlled machine. The Duke facilities staff compared it to a vehicle – and it has the price to match. Christie said the university spent roughly $50,000 to buy the robot outright, but the company now primarily focuses on leasing its different models. Prospective customers can also choose between different subscriptions, which are focused on the warranty, customer support options and software tools available, based on an organization's needs. Lease agreements typically last roughly six years and range, on average, $6,000 to $16,000 per year. At the end of each subscription, the company replaces the parts to allow for reuse.

Those that are not part of that program last 5 to 10 years, though regular maintenance can extend their useful lives for additional years. The company has expanded across the globe, and most teams in the ACC have one. Christie said some teams, including professional organizations and SEC programs, have multiple. Duke saved enough money in labor and supplies in the first 12 to 18 months on football-only work to pay for the robot, Christie said.

Additionally, the program no longer has to pay the $4,000 to $6,000 required for any end zone stencils. Pritchard, meanwhile, estimated UVA spends 80 or 85% less to lease its robot than it would cost to hire another full-time employee and provide benefits. "We knew that if we saved [that money] just for one sport, for one year, basically to pay it off, then what would we save if we did it for every sport, every field?" Christie said. "And that was even before really uncovering the different things they could do with class logos and logos at the hospital."

Cross-campus paint robot success

While painting athletic fields serve as the primary purpose, Duke puts Sergei to work across campus.

Christie said his staff has painted images and messages for the hospital's annual Donate Life campaign, breast cancer awareness and during Covid-19. It also began working with admissions to spray paint numerical outlines for the annual "Class of" portrait, which places first-year students inside a barricade of sorts to create their expected graduation year.

"We don't have to, but if I can save three people six hours every time they want to do it, and it takes me 20 minutes, I'd love to," Christie said of the inter-departmental collaboration.

The facilities department is open to any project or idea. Richardson said her favorite design ever painted was the Hellraiser logo on the softball infield. Christie said detailed logos like that, or ones for the football end zone, usually require work with Turf Tank developers.

"They do all their way-above-my-pay-grade computer stuff and they [give] me the logo back in a couple weeks," Christie said, noting ultra-detailed pieces may still need some hand-sprayed work. "I like to say anything's possible and that we can do it. I just gotta make a couple phone calls."

Sergei has gotten a break this summer, but with football season right around the corner, the robot will be back in action soon.

When asked if they'd go back to painting the traditional way, Christie, Boyce and Richardson all gave an emphatic no. There are software and mechanical hiccups that pop up, which can be a hassle. The robots are built to European standards, also requiring troubleshooting. Despite the imperfections, the robots have made painting easier, faster, more precise. And, frankly, they're kind of fun.

"I will work with this technology and get it right versus any other issues we have and the labor intensity that it takes to do it the old fashioned way," Christie said.

Inside Duke football quarterback Darian Mensah's training with No. 1 NFL Draft pick Cam Ward

Anna Snyder: The Fayetteville Observer (August 6, 2025)

Duke football transfer quarterback Darian Mensah kept himself busy this offseason.

The Blue Devils' new signal-caller out of Tulane spent part of his summer training with Cam Ward, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2025 NFL Draft. He also spent time working with Ward's quarterback coach, Darrell Colbert Jr. of Select QB Athletics, who also trains Shedeur Sanders and Kyron Drones.

"I'm just always looking for ways to improve my game," Mensah said in an Aug. 5 episode of Inside ACCess. "I think (Colbert) is one of the best quarterback coaches in the country so I definitely wanted to go work with him. Worked out with him and some of our receivers, a great time down in Tampa."

Mensah's training with Ward extended beyond Florida, as he also joined Ward in Nashville, where the former Miami standout was drafted No. 1 overall by the Titans.

"He invited me to come to Nashville and learn from him, which was an awesome experience," Mensah said. "I think he's one of the best young quarterbacks out right now, so that was just an awesome experience for sure."

Both Ward and Mensah share similar stories coming out of high school. Mensah, out of San Luis Obispo, California, held just one FBS upon graduating high school: Tulane. Ward, out of West Columbia, Texas, did not have an FBS offer out of high school, beginning his college career at Incarnate Word then Washington State before transferring to Miami and eventually becoming the No. 1 overall draft pick.

"One thing about him is he's highly competitive," Mensah said. "Just seeing that, and I think he keeps that same chip on his shoulder that I think I have, was cool to see. The position that he's in, I think that's somewhere I would want to be one day as well."

The 6-foot-3 Mensah started all 13 games for the Green Wave in 2024, going 189-of-287 (65.9%) for 2,723 yards with 22 touchdowns while carrying the ball 60 times for an additional 132 yards and touchdown. He will have three years of eligibility remaining at Duke.

The Blue Devils officially open their 2025 season on Thursday, Aug. 28, hosting Elon at Wallace Wade Stadium.

Why Duke's Manny Diaz is as much a program CEO as football coach

Chip Alexander: Raleigh News & Observer (August 1, 2025)

If you spot Manny Diaz away from the football field in a coat and tie, you might confuse him for a Charles Schwab Wall Streeter.

Diaz has the well-coiffed black hair, neatly styled. He has the stubble beard so common among business professionals. He's 51 and still looks 41. He's fit. He has a quiet intensity about him.

In many ways, Duke has a thoroughly modern football coach, one who has embraced the new look of college sports and accepted the increasing demands that have come with its reshaping – transfers, NIL, roster retention and now revenue sharing with the athletes.

"The revenue sharing era is here," Diaz said at the ACC Kickoff in Charlotte. "And guys are getting what they've been long overdue.

"By the way, it's not like you have to invent this. It's the same way in any organization, the way that everybody works. There's a way that people are compensated for their work. I don't know why it would be any different."

Sounds like a corporate chief executive officer, doesn't it? Diaz, beginning his second season at Duke, also fits the part, said defensive end Wesley Williams.

"He's a super cerebral guy," Williams said. "He looks at football, and just life, with a totally different perspective. He takes a super comprehensive approach to the game.

"He's like a CEO of a team, rather than just a coach."

Diaz, for his part, doesn't disagree with the CEO comparison.

"I don't think there's any other way," he said. "From the time I was in Miami to Duke now, the way this landscape has changed, you have to be.

"You're still the head coach, but there's so many things that distract your attention, so for sure you are a CEO."

The silent killer

Duke's new quarterback, transfer Darian Mensah, has another description of the head coach.

"He's like a silent killer," Mensah said in an interview.

Silent killer?

"He doesn't talk very often but when he talks, you listen," Mensah said, smiling. "He always has positive input. I've always had open ears whenever he's talking."

Diaz does have an unusual background. He did not play college football. Graduating from Florida State, where he was sports editor of the student newspaper, he initially worked with ESPN as a production assistant.

Eager to get into coaching, Diaz was a volunteer coach at FSU before his first opportunity as a full-time assistant in 2002 -- at N.C. State on Chuck Amato's coaching staff.

Diaz got his first head coaching chance with Temple in December 2018. But two weeks after being named the Owls coach, he was offered the job as head coach of the Miami Hurricanes. He made his apologies to the folks at Temple, and left. For Diaz, a native of Miami and the son of a former Miami mayor, it seemed the right spot, right time and team. He had been the Hurricanes' defensive coordinator under former coach Mark Richt, and now was coming back to run the program.

After three years and a 21-15 record, Diaz was fired after the 2021 season. But he was only unemployed a few days. He quickly accepted an offer to be defensive coordinator at Penn State under James Franklin, then was Duke's choice to replace the departed Mike Elko, who left for Texas A&M.

Sticking to the standards

It was quite a change. Elko was the big, burly, more quintessential football coach. In comes Diaz, bringing a different kind of voice to the room but quickly winning the trust and respect of his team.

Duke won. Immediately. The Blue Devils were 4-0 when they faced North Carolina at Wallace Wade Stadium, matching Diaz against Hall of Fame coach Mack Brown, once Diaz's boss at Texas.

The Tar Heels led 20-0 at the half. The question among the Duke players: how would Diaz react at this football flash point and what would be learned about their new coach?

"We preach our standards," offensive lineman Justin Pickett, a graduate and team captain in 2024, said this week. "When stuff hits the fan and nothing is going our way and we're down like we were against UNC, down 20 at the half, Coach Diaz comes in and says, 'Nothing changed. Our standards are our standards and they're going to lead us where we need to go.' That's our philosophy."

Diaz said a few other things, of course. He later said he stressed to the team about "hitting singles" in the second half and not attempting to catch up with one big swing or play. "Body blows," he said. Deliver them over and over, Diaz said.

Duke, trailing the Tar Heels 20-7 after three quarters, came back to win, 21-20. The Blue Devils would finish the regular season 9-3, with a 5-3 ACC record, and go to the Gator Bowl.

ACC football analyst Tom Luginbill, who played at Georgia Tech, said Diaz is viewed nationally as a "program builder and program stabilizer" much like former Duke coach David Cutcliffe.

"I think the respect of being able to continually be competitive and be consistent is there among his peers," Luginbill said. "David Cutcliffe restored some respectability and competitiveness for a consistent period of time and I think that's what they're looking to do now.

"This is the hardest time ever to coach in college football, to sustain that high level of success. And especially if you're at an academic institution, because you may not have the advantages some others have when it comes to locating guys in the portal and getting them into school."

Mensah started as a redshirt freshman at Tulane last season, completing 66% of his passes and notching a season high 342 yards against Kansas State. His football ability made him one of the top portal players available after last season, but he also had a 3.5 GPA in high school and fulfilled the academic requirements.

Granted, it's hard to overlook the fact Mensah will be paid $4 million each of the next two seasons through his NIL package, according to several media outlets. But that's also a reflection of the financial commitment and support being shown to Diaz and his football program.

Getting the best talent can be costly. Any good CEO would know that.

How Duke football's strong 4th-quarter play can evolve into a consistent season

Chip Alexander: Raleigh News & Observer (July 30, 2025)

Duke was a strong fourth-quarter football team last season, making big plays and winning close games.

Duke's goal this season: be a strong 48-quarter team.

That's the way Blue Devils coach Manny Diaz likes to explain it. The Devils were 9-4 a year ago on the strength of being able to win the tight ones, many decided in the final quarter or final minutes. The hope is that it was habit-forming and will be repeatable.

"I think the biggest challenge in college football is can you be the same for 48 consecutive quarters?" Diaz said last week at the ACC Kickoff in Charlotte. "You get assigned 12 games. You've got 48 quarters in those 12 games. In a league that's so tightly packed, that's so competitive, you think about all 48 and it can be two or three quarters that dictate who's back here in December and who's not."

Back in Charlotte for the ACC championship game, that is. That's where the Blue Devils want to be this season.

Duke was 9-3 in the regular season in 2024, Diaz's first as head coach after replacing Mike Elko. The Blue Devils won six of seven games decided by seven or fewer points, and sealed a 29-19 win over N.C. State with some stout defensive play in the fourth quarter and a field goal in the final two minutes.

"Two or three bad quarters can be the difference of whether you're playing in Charlotte at the end of the year, or, you know, going to Shreveport for a bowl game or not going to a bowl at all," Diaz said at the recent Pigskin Preview in Raleigh.

"So you have to win the fine margins. You have to stay healthy, you have to protect the ball, all the things that are obvious. But it's going to come down to a kick, a fourth-down stop, a red-zone score. That's how the league is won or lost every year."

Wolfpack coach Dave Doeren, seated to Diaz's right at the Pigskin Preview, was quick to reaffirm what Diaz said.

"Manny is right on," Doeren said. "We played in nine one-possession games a year ago and lost five in the last 60 seconds. It was a team on the verge of something great that ended up with something average."

The Blue Devils ended up in the Gator Bowl, where it took a 52-20 loss to Mississippi. The Pack lost to East Carolina in the Military Bowl for a disappointing 6-7 close to the 2024 season.

"Football is such a confidence game," Doeren said.

After 26 wins in the past three seasons, trailing only Clemson and Louisville in the ACC, the Blue Devils aren't lacking confidence. There was a smooth transition from Elko, who left for Texas A&M, to Diaz and the Devils opened their first season with their new coach by going 5-0.

The fifth win was a sweet one. Duke fell behind North Carolina 20-0 at halftime, then battled back for a 21-20 victory that had the Blue Devils ringing the Victory Bell after the rivalry game at Wallace Wade Stadium.

The Devils finished off the victory with an interception, putting a big rush on UNC quarterback Jacolby Criswell and forcing a fluttering pass that linebacker Tre Freeman picked off.

"Our guys believe if we get the game to the fourth quarter, that's our quarter and gives us a chance to win," Diaz said after the game. Diaz said the Devils called the fourth quarter the "sewer," noting that continuing to outwork opponents for the full 60 minutes can pull them out of dark places and get the job done.

The Blue Devils' most frustrating loss likely came in an Oct. 26 home game against SMU, one of the league's newcomers. The Mustangs had six turnovers but minimized the damage and took a 28-27 victory when Duke scored in overtime and went for the win on a two-point play, only to miss on a pass.

SMU reached the ACC title game in its first season, losing a close one to Clemson, and advanced to the College Football Playoff.

By season's end, Duke had put up some impressive defensive numbers, finishing fifth in the FBS in sacks per game and second to Ole Miss in tackles for a loss per game. The Devils also led the ACC in turnovers-forced with 27.

Defensive end Wesley Williams, who led the Devils with 7.5 sacks, believes the defense can be even more effective, efficient and disruptive this season.

"Instead of being fifth in the nation in sacks, we can push for first and take that step," the redshirt junior said in an interview at the ACC Kickoff. "It's hard to go from five to one versus going from 121 to five. That was easier. The jump from B+ to A+ is hard.

"For all the plays we made, there was probably another play or play and a half we missed in games. We want to make those plays and take the next step."

Despite coming up with 27 turnovers, tied for seventh nationally, Duke tied for 24th in turnover margin and was plus-8 for the season – Clemson was fourth at plus-16 and the ACC leader. Diaz is hopeful that better offensive play, with transfer Darian Mensah now at QB, could bring improvement in a category many coaches call the most important of the slew of analytics.

Leading by seven points in the N.C. State game in Raleigh, the Blue Devils stopped a fourth-quarter Wolfpack possession with a heavy rush on quarterback C.J. Bailey that had safety Terry Moore crashing into the pocket. Taking over the ball with about six minutes left, Duke then ran off four minutes before a field goal that pushed the lead to 10.

Close game, close win. Those can make for big seasons and it's something the Blue Devils, who host the Pack in their ACC opener on Sept. 20, want to carry over into this season.

"We know what the goal at hand is," Williams said. "We know what it takes to be a 48-quarter team.. We know that last year or years prior we weren't there yet.

"Our standard is the championship, absolutely, and we work every day towards that standard. With everything we do, every rep is championship standard."

Duke football's Chandler Rivers ready to lead young Blue Devil cornerback room

Anna Snyder: The Fayetteville Observer (July 29, 2025)

Duke football's Chandler Rivers is used to playing a big role in the Blue Devils' secondary. This season, he is ready to do even more.

The senior cornerback, a returning All American and First Team ACC selection, has logged 2,557 career snaps and started all 26 games over the past two seasons. He is coming off a junior season that saw him be named as Duke's 2024 defensive most valuable player, tallying 54 tackles, 7.5 tackles for loss and three interceptions while surrendering 13 completions.

Now, as Rivers enters his fourth season in Durham, he's taking on a new challenge: leading a young and largely inexperienced Duke cornerback room. The 5-foot-10 Beaumont, Texas native enters 2025 as the lone returner in the group with meaningful starting experience after Joshua Pickett, who started opposite him last season, exhausted his eligibility, going on to join the NFL's Denver Broncos as an undrafted free agent.

"We have a young cornerback room, obviously," Rivers said last week at the 2025 ACC Media Kickoff. "But I feel like me setting the standard of what the corner room needs to be for the coming years, even after I'm gone, me setting the standard is going to help guys elevate their game. Because we're going to need a bunch of those guys to step up, that's just a spade a spade."

Rivers enters the 2025 season tabbed as Pro Football Focus' No. 5 returning cornerback and ESPN's No. 7 defensive back. In the cornerback room with him is redshirt sophomores Kimari Robinson and Moussa Kane, sophomore Vontae Floyd, redshirt freshmen Landon Callahan and Kyren Condoll and freshmen Kolbe Harmon and Kaleb Lanier.

Of the group, only Robinson has started in a contest, getting the nod in Duke's 2024 contest vs. Miami, finishing with two tackles. Floyd, Callahan, Kane, and Condoll all saw game action last season, but none have yet cracked the starting lineup.

Duke coach Manny Diaz has been clear about the vital role Rivers plays, along with his expectations of him this season.

"He's been extremely valuable because he affects winning in so many ways," Diaz said at last week's media days. "... I also want him to inspire the younger guys in his room to take the same type of leap he did coming from his first to second to third year for us to really be a complete defense."

Duke officially opens its 2025 season on Aug. 28, hosting Elon at Wallace Wade Stadium. As Rivers prepares for his final collegiate season, his mindset is simple.

"Just being better than I was last year," Rivers said. "Take it a day at a time, just be better than I was yesterday. That's really my goal, keep my head down, prepare to the best of my ability because, ultimately, we're a team that believes our preparation, that breeds our confidence. That's my mindset."

Attention NFL: Duke's Tre Freeman knows how to find teams on the upswing

Tom Shanahan: The Tom Shanahan Report (July 28, 2025)

Duke All-ACC linebacker Tre Freeman knows how to pick his spots while finding an inconsistent football program on the upswing.

When his family relocated from Georgia to Durham in 2017, Northern Durham wasn't one of the Bull City's traditionally strong high school programs. Before he arrived, the Knights were coming off a 5-7 season – their fourth straight losing record.

In Freeman's time at Northern, the Knights finished 9-3, 11-2 and 8-3 and advanced to the postseason. But during his career across town at Duke, the Knights have slipped back to 2-8, 2-8, 2-8 and 1-7.

The pendulum has swung with a similar arc since Freeman donned the Blue Devils' colors.

Freeman was recruited as a three-star prospect in the 2021 class when the Blue Devils were coming off a 2-9 record. Duke finished 3-9 during his freshman year, which preserved as a redshirt season by limiting him to four games.

Since then, Duke has gone 9-4 and 8-5 under Mike Elko and 9-4 in 2024 under Manny Diaz. Freeman earned second-team All-ACC in 2023 and honorable mention All-ACC in 2024.

"I wanted to say close to home," said Freeman when he met with the media Monday after practice. "Fifteen minutes down the road is not bad. It's been a great journey, and I've loved every minute of it. The academics and the football you can get at the same time is the main reason I picked Duke."

Duke opened practice for its second season under Diaz in preparation for the season opener against Elon. Duke faces the Football Championship Subdivision member in a Thursday night game on August 28 at Wallace Wade Stadium.

For many years a Durham kid wanting to stay home couldn't be confident he would play for a winning team in the friendly confines of Wallace Wade. There was the nadir of 2-33 from 2005 through 2007 before David Cutcliffe returned in 2008. Cutcliffe recorded a stretch of respectability – with a high-water mark of 10-4 in 2013 – before the downturn of losing records in the final three years of his 14 seasons in Durham.

When Diaz was a candidate for the job to replace Elko, he learned the school wanted to commit more resources. Diaz addressed that transformation with one of his more interesting and overlooked comments last week during the ACC Kickoff. Cutcliffe's final record at Duke was 77-97 over 14 seasons.

"I think what we have been able to accomplish, because of our administration giving full support to make Duke football excellent, is for a long time the decision to come to Duke was you know you're going to get the elite academics," Diaz said. "With those elite academics, that's going to set you up for life after football, which everyone is going to face at some point. And those two things are still true.

"The question was can I compete for championships, and can I get to the National Football League? Maybe there's an idea like, well, you know what, I'm going to go for the academics, and maybe I'm going to settle a little bit on the football side. I think, whether it's this past recruiting class but most importantly it's the guys in our locker room, guys on the stage, they believe that you can accomplish all four things now here at Duke.

"To be honest, there's not very many schools in the country where you can really go 4 for 4. You can compete for championships and go to the National Football League, but you're not getting an education that's going to help you in life after school. You may get a piece of paper that says you graduated from college, there's plenty of those getting passed out, but that doesn't mean you have a proper education."

Fifth-year offensive tackle Justin Pickett, a Freeman classmate, also spoke on the increased expectations when he met with the media.

"We're the last group of seniors in their fifth year who understand the struggle of where Duke football was when we started," said Pickett of Carmel, Indiana. "It's super exciting. We see where the program is and where it will be after we're gone.

"A 9-4 record is the bar now. We don't want anything less than that. We're going to push to excel. We want to be in the college football playoff, and we want to be in Charlotte for the ACC Championship game."

Wesley Williams prepares for Duke football's 2025 season with new offseason training

Anna Snyder: The Fayetteville Observer (July 28, 2025)

Duke football defensive end Wesley Williams took an unconventional approach to his offseason training.

Along with working with his defensive line coach and with his teammates up front, Williams added something new to the mix: hot yoga and hot pilates.

Williams began taking classes this summer – much to the influence of his girlfriend – and now attends classes once or twice a week. As he added weight this offseason, going from 245-pounds on last year's roster to now being listed at 265, the sessions became a way to build core strength and maintain mobility while carrying the extra mass.

"Trying to build up core strength to be able to hold that and still be able to move with it," Williams said last week at the 2025 ACC Media Kickoff. "I feel like I've been able to do that."

The workouts, though, haven't always gone smoothly.

"I've looked bad in those classes before, I've looked horrible," Williams said laughing. "Catching cramps and the whole nine yards. It's gotten pretty bad. But it's honestly really fun. It's different muscles. You got to respect every type of workout. You go in there and think you're a big dog because you can bench and squat."

The 6-foot-3, Gainesville, Virginia, native is one of a handful of returners on Duke's defensive line. He led the Blue Devils with 7.5 sacks last season, earning All-ACC honorable mention and being named Duke's defensive lineman of the year. In 12 total starts, he finished with 48 tackles and 13.5 tackles for loss. He also made an impact on special teams, adding a blocked punt and a blocked field goal in 2024.

In total in his four-year career at Duke, the redshirt junior has played 1,185 career snaps.

Duke's 2024 defense was a main talking point. In its first year under head coach Manny Diaz, the unit ranked second nationally in tackles for loss per game (8.9), second in fumbles recovered (14), fourth in sacks per game (3.3) and seventh in total turnovers gained (27).

And Williams believes the group can take it even further in 2025.

"I think we got so much talent, we got a lot of returners," Williams said. "... (There's) a hunger to win, a hunger for a championship. What we did last year was great but it's not enough."

Duke football opens its 2025 season on Thursday, Aug. 28, hosting Elon at Wallace Wade Stadium.

Duke's new QB checks all the boxes

Conor O'Neill: Devils Illustrated (July 27, 2025)

When Duke's coaching staff decided it needed a new quarterback for this season, the fit was the most important part of it.

Obviously he had to fit Duke's offense. But it goes beyond that.

Whoever the Blue Devils' new quarterback would be had to fit Duke's locker room and culture. It's a point of pride throughout the program to have underrated and underrecruited players who develop into stars.

Enter Darian Mensah.

"We did our homework when he went in the portal and talked to people around him, I think that was the thing we were most excited about was how he fit in our locker room," coach Manny Diaz said this past week.

Among the four players accompanying Diaz to ACC Kickoff at the Hilton Charlotte Uptown this week was Mensah – the only one of them who isn't entering his fourth season at Duke.

"Any time you're the new guy it might be a little bit intimidating," Mensah told Devils Illustrated last week. "But … I just know I've got to go out and be myself and I think dudes rally around that."

Indeed, it's not just Diaz that has been pleased with the quarterback's fit at Duke.

"He didn't come in here chest out … 'I'm this, I'm that. Y'all did this for me,'" senior cornerback Chandler Rivers said of Mensah. "He just came in like, he's going to play his game. He's going to put his work in.

"He fits in perfectly because he can relate to everybody, he can have a conversation with anybody on the team."

Rivers said watching Mensah around the program, you can see him having more conversations with players who entered the program as walk-ons more often than scholarship players.

"Seeing that it's like, 'OK, he's a genuine guy.' It's not hard to accept somebody like that," Rivers said.

Mensah's fit in the offense

The discussion of why Mensah is an upgrade at the quarterback position for Duke is a strange one when looking at counting stats.

It's an easy case to make when you watch the film.

Last year, his first as a starter, Mensah completed 65.9% of his passes for 2,723 yards and 22 touchdowns. He was only intercepted six times and had a sack-adjusted 250 rushing yards (per Pro Football Focus).

That last bit is where we understand why Mensah is an upgrade over the quarterback who threw the most touchdowns in a season for Duke.

Maalik Murphy threw 26 touchdowns last season. But he was inconsistent and turnover prone (12 interceptions) in ways that Mensah wasn't for the Green Wave. Murphy was also immobile and struggled to throw from outside of the pocket.

Adding a quarterback who doesn't give the ball away, can extend plays with his legs and excels in improvisation should lead to a more efficient offense.

"I think it's going to be a huge piece of what we do this year," Mensah said of using his mobility. "Especially just getting outside of the pocket. That's what I like to do. But making off-schedule plays is something the offense last year … lacked.

"(I'm) excited to go out and compete with the guys and make some plays."

Mensah's addition is the biggest in a modest transfer class at Duke. Other schools represented in the batch of newcomers are Dartmouth, Harvard, Sam Houston State and South Dakota.

His reported NIL deal for $8 million over two years makes Mensah stand out; his blend into the locker room is why that won't be a hangup.

"You want to have a guy, especially in that position, that matches the same type of mental makeup as our players," Diaz said. "I think Darian has fit right in. I think our guys respect him for who he is as a person.

"And then certainly as a player, they think he gives them a chance to win every game we play."

Willie Ray Smith high school memories stay with Rivers as he climbs college ladder to NFL

Tom Shanahan: The Tom Shanahan Report (July 26, 2025)

Duke's Chandler Rivers took a seat for an ACC Kickoff media days interview. The vast third-floor conference rooms at the Hilton Charlotte Uptown were filled with returning stars discussing their team's upcoming season.

The 5-foot-10, 180-pound cornerback belonged in the company of such heavyweights. If the Hilton Charlotte's third floor was modeled after a 1950s New York bar with boxing pictures hanging from the walls, his framed photo would be displayed over one of the choice booths.

The senior is projected as high as a first-round pick in the 2026 NFL draft. A big senior season maybe helps the Blue Devils build on their 9-4 record last season.

Rivers earned 2024 All-American honors from four publications while allowing only 13 pass completions in 13 games. Amazing. He can maybe add MVP bowl honors in 2025 to his 2023 Birmingham Bowl MVP Trophy.

But no matter how brightly his trophy case glitters by the end of the season, Rivers regrets an empty spot on a shelf at home from his high school career at Beaumont United in the Houston area.

"I wanted to win the Willie Ray Smith Award," Rivers said. "One hundred percent, I did. Every kid in Southeast Texas wants to win it."

Some high school dreams stay with elite athletes even as they climb to new heights.

According to the Beaumon Enterprise newspaper, high school athletes in the area consider the Willie Ray Smith Sr. Offensive and Defensive Player of the Year Award the "Heisman Trophy of southeast Texas high school football." The finalists are announced Heisman Trophy-like prior to the winner's honored at a dinner.

"I remember when I was a sophomore and one of the seniors on our team was in the running for the award," Rivers said. "They have a big ceremony. It's really a major award. It's second to none in Southeast Texas."

'Championship standard': Duke football sets season expectations at ACC Kickoff

Ranjan Jindal and Caleb Dudley: The Chronicle (July 24, 2025)

The dog days are almost over. Football season is upon us.

This week, the ACC held its annual Football Kickoff event in Charlotte, gathering all 17 teams in the conference and their selected representatives to recap the offseason and preview the upcoming campaign.

Duke head coach Manny Diaz, new quarterback Darian Mensah, senior cornerback Chandler Rivers, redshirt junior offensive tackle Brian Parker II and redshirt junior defensive end Wesley Williams spoke in the Queen City for the Blue Devils.

Diaz's bunch is coming off a 9-4 record in his inaugural season with the Blue Devils, marking the team's third consecutive winning season and bowl appearance. With an experienced line on both sides and a new quarterback, expectations are once again high for Duke.

Portal splash

For the third straight year, Duke will have a new signal caller leading the charge.

Mensah, the 112th-ranked quarterback in the class of 2023 according to 247Sports, was one of the top quarterbacks in this year's transfer class. He will now lead the Blue Devil offense in the second year under offensive coordinator Jonathan Brewer.

On why he chose Durham, Mensah mentioned "the opportunity to compete at an elite conference like the ACC, an elite head coach with Manny, and an offense where you spread people out and throw the ball vertically."

Mensah's dual-threat ability will be a welcome sign to a Duke unit that struggled at times to run the ball. He threw for 2,723 yards last season, frequently moving around the pocket to extend off-schedule plays. Mensah's ability to layer the ball to all levels of the field demonstrates his potential as an elite quarterback, but he will need to take care of the ball and produce consistently against higher levels of competition.

"I feel like one of my superpowers playing the quarterback position was just being accurate, and I don't miss [short] throws very often."

While wideouts Jordan Moore and Eli Pancol departed after historic careers, Diaz also dipped into the portal to surround Mensah with weapons. Wide receivers Andrel Anthony Jr. and Cooper Barkate and tight end Landen King bolster the receiving core.

"The first question we ask any time you're going to take a transfer is, when that guy walks into the building, do the players say, 'Thank God that guy's here?' We want guys to stay at Duke for four years to meet their goals, but it is nice to have the portal to make more surgical types of cuts to your roster," Diaz said.

Mensah mentioned he took the receivers on a bonding trip to Tampa, Fla., to be "around the guys as much as possible." By his side will be returning senior running back Jaquez Moore, who missed the majority of last season with a foot injury.

With the added motivation of proving himself on a Power 4 stage, Mensah remembers his days without much attention as a high schooler from San Luis Obispo, Calif.

"No one wanted me when I was in high school. I had three offers coming out," Mensah said. "That will be something that I'll hold close to my heart and keep remembering, so that's something that drives me every day, for sure."

Development never sleeps

The 2025 Blue Devil squad is chock full of continuity and veteran experience, especially in the trenches. Four offensive line starters return as redshirt juniors or older, and the fifth projected starter in Jordan Larsen has played over 1000 career snaps. On the other side of the ball, Williams, Vincent Anthony Jr. and Aaron Hall have all logged impressive stats during their time at Duke, and graduate transfer Josiah Green only figures to boost that veteran presence.

"This is two years of cohesion, and really, for me, [Justin] Pickett, and [Matt] Craycraft, it's three, four years of cohesion," Parker said. "We've been here our whole time together ... We're proud of our room, and we were ready to get out there and be nasty."

One major benefit of this familiarity is an easy transition into offseason training, which started for the Blue Devils as soon as the final horn sounded on their loss to Ole Miss in the Gator Bowl. Since that point, the group has worked relentlessly to prepare for the upcoming campaign.

"The one thing I will say about what our guys have done since we returned to school in January is they have worked with an intentionality, a business-like demeanor, where they feel like they can do more," Diaz said.

Luckily for Duke, it has one of the best coaches in the strength department in David Feeley, who is notorious for his grueling workouts that only seem to ramp up when there is no football being played. With most of the roster now having multiple years under Feeley's tutelage, the Blue Devils seem to be in better shape than ever.

"This is the strongest team we've had at Duke in the last four years. This is the fastest team we've had at Duke in the last four years since our strength coach David Feeley has been around," Diaz said. "Really with those two things being together, if we get challenged into an arm wrestling competition, we should expect to come out on top, and if anyone wants to run relay races against us, we feel confident we can win relay races."

Of course, getting more physically fit does not directly translate to greater success on the field. But with impressive roster retention and another season of schematic continuity under returning coordinators Jonathan Brewer and Jonathan Patke, Duke is confident the Saturday product will reflect the offseason successes.

Schedule spotlight

The future seems bright, but the path ahead won't necessarily be smooth sailing. Duke still has questions it needs to answer, most notably a receiver rotation and the continued fit between Mensah and the rest of the offense.

Last season, the Blue Devils excelled in tight contests due to their locker room culture and connectivity, going 6-1 in contests decided by one score – the lone less coming in overtime to College Football Playoff participant SMU. Duke will likely need to replicate some semblance of that success if it wants to navigate its tricky schedule and travel across every corner of the nation. However, Diaz and company seem primed to be relevant once again as they go to battle in a talented ACC.

"I think that's why we prevailed in so many close games a year ago, because we were a team that didn't flinch, that was mentally tough, and believed in one another, seeing that whether it came down to the last play of the game, that we had each other's back to do it," Diaz said.

The season's schedule contains several high-profile contests, the first of which comes in Week 2 against Illinois. The Fighting Illini will likely start the season ranked in the top 25, and hosting them in Wallace Wade Stadium will be the first big test for Diaz in his second year at the helm.

Then, Mensah will have a chance to prove he has found greener pastures when he takes on his former school in New Orleans the following week. Tulane figures to be one of the top Group of 5 teams in the nation this season with the addition of former BYU quarterback Jake Retzlaff, providing the Blue Devils an excellent road test ahead of conference play.

League play will begin Sept. 20 with a home matchup against N.C. State, where Duke will try to start off on the right path before embarking on a unique midseason journey. Over a five-week stretch spanning September and October, the Blue Devils will travel to Syracuse and Cal in consecutive weeks before sandwiching Georgia Tech between two bye weeks. The merciful end of that interval is a trip to Death Valley to take on proverbial ACC favorite Clemson, kicking off the homestretch of the slate that includes a road tilt with North Carolina.

The groundwork has been set for Duke to succeed consistently at football. The rising senior class has played in a bowl every campaign that they have been on a campus, and a fourth this season would match a program-best stretch from 2012-15. Bowl games are no longer the goal; the Blue Devils have their eyes set on marquee wins and ultimate contention for the ACC crown. Duke will begin to find out what it is made of when the first whistle sounds Aug. 28 against Elon in Wallace Wade Stadium.

"Our standard is the [ACC] Championship, absolutely, and we work every day towards that standard," Williams said. "With everything we do, every rep is championship standard. So with that in mind, we don't have to worry too much about the result. Right now we're just focused on our standard and the process day to day."

How Duke football team learned how to save a life to the rhythm of 'Staying Alive'

Chip Alexander: Raleigh News & Observer (July 23, 2025)

Duke defensive tackle Preston Watson pushed himself Tuesday, working hard, displaying good technique on his repetitions while softy singing, "Stayin' alive, stayin' alive."

But Watson wasn't on the practice field. He was inside the Yoh Football Center, joining 85 or so of his teammates in getting CPR training, pushing up and down on the chest of a dummy torso.

It's the kind of training you hope to never use. It's also the kind of training that can save a life.

Watson, a sophomore from Lake Mary, Florida, was watching ABC's Monday Night Football on Jan. 2, 2023, as the Buffalo Bills faced the Cincinnati Bengals. Bills safety Damar Hamlin made a jarring tackle, stood up, then fell to the ground, motionless.

Hamlin had suffered cardiac arrest, and only the quick response of the Bills training staff and doctors to administer CPR saved his life. The first person to him was assistant trainer Denny Kellingon, now the Carolina Panthers' vice president of player health and performance.

"Denny saved my life," Hamlin later said in an ABC interview.

Hamlin, who played college football at Pittsburgh, recovered and plays for the Bills. His life-threatening incident only underscored the need for CPR training. Cardiac arrest, in which the heart stops, usually is fatal if not treated in the first three minutes.

"It was really scary," Watson said. "I think the people who were more scared were my parents, because they know I play that sport and that something I want to do when I grow up is make it all the way to the 'League.'

"It really puts it into perspective to them of how important learning stuff like CPR is and just how dangerous … it can be rare, but it can happen to anybody."

The training session Tuesday was handled by members of the American Heart Association in the Triangle and Eastern North Carolina. They instructed the players on the proper CPR technique – right hand applied to the middle of chest, left hand planted on top of the right hand, elbows locked and up-and-down pressure constantly applied until medical personnel are on the scene.

The players were told to get in 120 compressions a minute, and that a good cadence would be to the strains of the Bee Gees 1970s hit, "Stayin' Alive." Also fitting.

"Me and my partner timed it for two minutes each and it was pretty tiring," Watson said, smiling. "It's a simple process, but just doing it for an extended period of time can definitely be a little bit tiring, so sure.

"You had to keep in the back of your mind that it is a training exercise, but you've got to treat it like it's real, just in case …It's a skill you can never really forget."

Kevin Siesel, the Blue Devils' head football trainer, helped set up the session with the American Heart Association, which also included the how-to and use of defibrillators.

"When it came across my desk it was like, 'Yeah, this is a no-brainer,'" he said, noting Hamlin's medical scare hit home with the players.

Siesel said he liked the response of the players. Some took it a bit more seriously than others, others combining a little fun with the training – some of the dummies took extra-hard poundings – but the key was receiving the training.

"They were really engaged," he said. "These guys are with each other all the time and we're not always here with them. I think that clicked for them."

Debra Lowder, executive director of the American Heart Association in the Triangle and Eastern North Carolina, said the "Nation of Lifesavers" campaign has a goal of providing millions of people with the life-saving skills of CPR – "One in every family," she said.

Lowder said Duke's football team was the first in the area to have the CPR training but that the hope was football staffs at other schools in the Triangle and Eastern North Carolina might join in.

"I was impressed today," Lowder said of the Duke players. "It was a lot of fun, definitely lively. Probably the liveliest training I've been to. Definitely dramatic, but the guys were asking a lot of great questions and I would trust them to save my life.

"One thing I shared today is that they have influence, and we want them to use that and share the message to as many people as possible, so that the people in Durham and the community can hopefully learn from them. And hopefully learn to save a life."