

HIGH SCHOOLS

Football coach Charles Adams III determined to keep driving change at Minneapolis North

The Northsider since birth and Minneapolis police officer will do anything to serve a community he loves.

By Jim Paulsen (<https://www.startribune.com/jim-paulsen/6370600/>) Star Tribune |

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Practice starts slowly at Minneapolis North. Handshakes and hugs, questions and comments and observations come at football coach Charles Adams III rapid-fire, and he takes the time to respond to each.

There's a task at hand — preparing a football team — but this is more than a practice. This is a community, where Adams grew up, went to school, played football. Where nearly everything significant that has taken place in his 39 years has happened.

Adams is at ease, knowing whom to cajole and whom to criticize, when to watch and when to raise his voice. Others might be louder, but his words are the ones that matter. And no one wants to let him down.

“You're late, late, late, late,” assistant coach Kriss Burrell bellows as a young player carrying his spikes, and careful not to make eye contact, hastily takes the field. Most players are already at this [summer conditioning session](https://www.startribune.com/amid-bigger-concerns-minneapolis-north-football-rediscovers-whole-new-level-of-excitement/571280512/) (<https://www.startribune.com/amid-bigger-concerns-minneapolis-north-football-rediscovers-whole-new-level-of-excitement/571280512/>), ready to work.

“They know if they're late, they've got to run,” said Burrell, who is also a dean of students. “That's why everybody tries to run out here on time.”

Standard football discipline, but at North it wasn't always that way. There has long been a treasure trove of great athletes on Minneapolis' North Side. Reaching it was the problem, hidden as it was beneath layers of socioeconomic troubles.

Adams, a Northsider since birth, has done just that. In his 10 seasons, the Polars have gone from an unstable program to a football juggernaut.

After advancing to the state tournament only twice before Adams took over, North has become a postseason fixture, making seven trips to the state quarterfinals — six in a row — and reaching the Prep Bowl three times.

The Polars [won the Class 1A state championship](https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-north-wins-class-1a-title-30-14-over-rushford-peterson/403164736/) (<https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-north-wins-class-1a-title-30-14-over-rushford-peterson/403164736/>) in 2016, becoming only the third state champion from the Minneapolis City Conference. Washburn won Class 2A titles in 1977 and 1972, the first year of state playoffs.

Adams' success hasn't gone unnoticed. The Vikings named him Coach of the Year after North's state championship and the Minnesota Football Coaches Association gave him its Power of Influence Award last fall.

“People thought I was crazy years ago when I said, ‘We're going to win a championship,’” Adams said. “Well, now we did. And we've been there a few other times, too. Kids will run through a brick wall for you if they know what you say can come true.”

This relationship Adams has cultivated with the students of North High will change when school resumes. Adams is not just a football coach; he's also a Minneapolis police officer, having followed in another family tradition. Everyone knows him by his

nickname: OA, for Officer Adams. For the past 10 years, Adams' role has included being the school resource officer (<https://www.startribune.com/floyd-death-reignites-debate-over-police-role-in-schools/571411192/>) at North.

Adams' world, as neatly as he had arranged it, exploded into chaos the last week of May when the world learned George Floyd was killed while being detained by Minneapolis police officers. Adams hadn't been blind to questionable practices he had seen by his brothers in blue. His loyalties were split.

"I'm caught in the middle," he said. "It's tough."

Adams reached back to his past, to family and community, to find firm footing.

"People know where my heart is at," he said. "I wear blue, but I'm Black. I feel everybody's pain."

In the wake of Floyd's killing, Minneapolis Public Schools ended their relationship with the MPD (<https://www.startribune.com/mps-school-board-ends-contract-with-police-for-school-resource-officers/570967942/>). Adams' job as school resource officer — building relationships, diffusing conflict, walking the line between his fellow officers and the kids he cares so much about — was over.

"I don't know what's next. I don't know how things are going to go," he pondered. "That's what really worries me."

Adams grew up just north of W. Broadway, 22nd and Irving avenues to be exact. His father, Charlie, was a standout athlete at North, as were his uncles. Adams played football for North, a tight end/defensive end who graduated in 1999. He had his share of difficulties — he was held out of football as a junior by his father because of grades.

His players don't just see a coach, they look at him and see themselves looking right back.

"He's got a unique way with these kids," said assistant coach Tom Lachermeier, who also teaches at North. "He's really hard on them because he's got high expectations. He challenges them. He sets the bar high, then says that's not good enough. But they all know it's because he loves them. That is beyond a shadow of a doubt."

Strong safety

The sounds echoing throughout the neighborhood surrounding the fenced-in field behind Franklin Middle School, where the Polars were conducting workouts, were jarring yet familiar. Adams paused during a sentence, looked to the west and listened. Staccato pops, easily mistaken for fireworks except for their frequency.

"Those ain't firecrackers," Adams said, followed by a quick burst of a few more pops. "Those are bangers."

He looked at his phone, equipped with Minneapolis' ShotSpotter gunshot detection system.

"It's close. This is why we're over here," he said. "Helps the kids feel more safe. I don't know of any other team that has to deal with this kind of stuff."

Taking care of those around him is a priority for Adams. Being a school resource officer gave him access and insight into his players' lives. His office was a refuge, a place for his players to congregate, talk football and, more importantly, talk life.

Issues with grades? Talk to OA. Troubles at school? Ask OA. Confused by college recruiters? OA will clarify it.

"All the players, we go to him," senior quarterback Zach Yeager said. "If there's a problem, we'll go to him before we'll go to our counselors."

Losing Adams from the school has brought about an outcry.

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At a scrimmage a year ago Adams joked with Tyler Johnson, a former player of his who became a Gophers star and got drafted by Tampa Bay.

“It’s a terrible decision,” Lachermeier said. “They didn’t talk to anyone at North to get their opinion. They didn’t think how it was going to affect the kids and a lot of them depend on him.”

Adams will be going back to a normal patrol routine, but without being in the school, he fears he will lose touch with his players.

“I’m sure I’ll still find a way to see them,” he said, “but I don’t know how it’s going to change our relationships.”

Showing the way

Much of the destruction that occurred in the aftermath of Floyd’s killing was centered on Lake Street in south Minneapolis, but W. [Broadway suffered significant damage](https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-st-paul-buildings-are-damaged-looted-after-george-floyd-protests-riots/569930671/) (<https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-st-paul-buildings-are-damaged-looted-after-george-floyd-protests-riots/569930671/>) as well. Burned buildings and boarded-up storefronts have slowed the everyday hustle and bustle in the area.

“It’s heartbreaking to see the buildings I grew up walking into burned down,” said Adams, who has a “story for every corner.”

Even though he had police duties, he knew he had to be there for his players. [What must they be feeling?](https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-athletes-coaches-gather-to-talk-about-race-i-m-16-and-i-m-scared/571243762/) (<https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-athletes-coaches-gather-to-talk-about-race-i-m-16-and-i-m-scared/571243762/>)

“The biggest thing to do is let them know I’m here for them,” he said.

He reached out in the midst of the chaos.

“I think it was the day after the Third Precinct burned down that he called his players,” Lachermeier said. “There he was, at roll call, dressed in riot gear, telling his players how he loves them.”

Dom McMillian, a 6-1 senior strong safety, came to North from Atlanta before his freshman year. In Atlanta, where he had been living with his father, the wrong path seemed to constantly beckon.

“I was in a lot of trouble,” McMillian admitted. “This is a better opportunity for me to get focused. I’m doing better.”

With OA, McMillian said, the right path has been much easier to follow.

“He told me he was a police officer from Minneapolis, and my mom liked that,” McMillian said. “She liked that we’ve got that safety somewhere.”

He added that in his short time in Minneapolis, Adams has been “like a second father” for him.

“I can just call him anytime I want about anything. We’ve just got that bond,” he said.

It’s a story often repeated. Adams guides, his players follow.

“Kids want boundaries,” Minneapolis South coach Rodney Lossow said. “Some of these kids don’t have a lot of other structure in their lives. He sets those boundaries that shows he loves them. I think that’s what he does best.”

In three years, McMillian has become a Division I-level recruit with 15 offers, mostly from FCS programs. He is another Polars success story along with the likes of former Gophers wide receiver [Tyler Johnson](https://www.startribune.com/gophers-football-tyler-johnson-pride-of-the-northside/513511762/) (<https://www.startribune.com/gophers-football-tyler-johnson-pride-of-the-northside/513511762/>) and current collegians Jamire Jackson, a linebacker at the University of Mary (Bismarck, N.D.) and Omar Brown, a defensive back at Northern Iowa. All leaned on Adams for support during and after high school.

“It’s what I do,” Adams said with a laugh. “I know the excellence and greatness that comes out of this community. I just want to get the kids to a level I know they should be. This is home. My mom, my dad, my uncles, they graduated from here. We’re Polars.”

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