

Incarnate Word 2019 Preview

Incarnate Word football is just a decade old, and for the most part has not been a factor in the Southland. However, that changed last year when the Cardinals brought in Eric Morris (OC at Texas Tech from '14-'17). Morris, who was 32 years old when hired, turned this program around right away. After dropping their first 2 games to FBS teams, UIW would go on to win 4 of their next 5 games, including a 45-17 blowout win over #6 McNeese. The Cardinals ended the regular season with wins over #21 Sam Houston State and at Central Arkansas and claimed a share of the SLC championship. UIW clinched their first-ever trip to the playoffs, but lost at Montana State 35-14 and finished the season 6-5 and Morris was the SLC Coach of the year.

UIW's offense was woeful in 2017, gaining just 295 ypg while scoring 21 ppg. That all changed when Morris became the HC last year and installed the Air Raid offense. This Cardinals adapted to this system quickly and averaged 323 pass ypg (4th-most FCS) and scored 32 ppg. Freshman QB Jon Copeland was named the starter and would go on to set the UIW record for passing yards (2,984 yards) and TD passes (22) and was the SLC Freshman of the Year & 2nd Team SLC. Copeland did suffer an injury the final week of the season and missed the Cardinals playoff game. The run attack did not suffer with the switch to the Air Raid, as Ra'Quanne Dickens led the Cardinals with 1,117 yards (6.3, 14 TD) and was 1st Team SLC. Dickens departs this season, but his backup Ameer King (3 starts, 460, 5.5) returns so the cupboard is not totally bare.

The Air Raid attack opened this offense up, and the receivers unit stepped up last season. Five players in this unit caught 10-plus passes for 100-plus yards, led by Kody Edwards (10 starts, 932, 4 TD) and Phillip Baptiste (9 starts, 905, 9 TD, 1st Team SLC), but they both depart this season. UIW does bring back 1 starter in Lamont Johnson (11 starts, 444, 5 TD) as well as Kam Williams (4 starts, 588). The Cardinals OL brought back 4 starters last season, and after their rush ypg dipped 3 straight seasons UIW rushed for 160 ypg (4.6) and only gave up 5 more sacks (26) despite the shift to the Air Raid. This unit returns all 5 starters in '19 including 1st Team SLC C Brandon Floores and 2nd Team SLC LT Terence Hickman II. UIW loses both FG kickers, who combined to go 9-17 (L/48), but brings back P David Balcomb who averaged 39.4 yards per punt (L/66).

UIW's defense gave up 495 ypg and 48 ppg in 2017, but last year returned 6 starters and improvement was expected. However, the improvement was minimal as the Cardinals still allowed 479 ypg, but did cut their ppg allowed down to 34. UIW brought back 3 of their top 4 DL last year, but this season 2nd Team SLC DE Justin Alexandre (10 starts, #4 tackler, 8.5 sacks), DT John Williams (11 starts, #9 tackler, 6 TFL) and DE Darrius Montgomery (7 starts, t-#15 tackler, 2.5 TFL) all depart along with Malik Harris (1 start, #8 tackler, 7 TFL). The lone starter back is DT Luke Termin (10 starts, t-#11 tackler, 4.5 TFL) and it may be tough to match the 184 rush ypg they allowed last season.

Heading into last season UIW lost 2 of their 3 starters at LB, which could explain only a slight improvement in the defense in '18. This season the Cardinals once again lose a pair of starters in 2nd Team SLC LB Silas Stewart (11 starts, #1 tackler, 7 TFL, 4 PBU, 3 INT) and West Lambert (7 starts, #2 tackler, 6.5 TFL). Mar'kel Cook (10 starts, #3 tackler, 4.5 TFL) is the lone starter back, and this unit will need some less experienced guys to step up if their defense is to improve at all in '19. UIW's pass defense gave up 328 pass ypg in '17 and despite having their top 3 DB's back last year the pass defense only improved to allowing 295 pass ypg (#123 FCS). In the secondary SS Kyle Covington (11 starts, t-#11 tackler), returns along with CB's Louis Otis (3 starts, #6 tackler, 2 INT) and Malick Phillips (20 tackles, 8 PBU, 3 INT). The 2 biggest losses in this unit will be DB Jawun Jiles (5 starts, #5 tackler, 3.5 TFL, 4 PBU) and FS Cam Knight (11 starts, #7 tackler). There is enough talent back to think the pass defense could improve some in '19.

The Cardinals are off their best season in their (brief) program history. The Cardinals offense should have no problem scoring points, the bigger concern should be the defense, which is improving but still has work to do. UIW's schedule has them playing 2 FBS teams in UTSA and New Mexico State as well as SWAC member Texas Southern. UIW does not face McNeese in SLC play and gets their toughest conference games against Nicholls, Lamar, Abilene Christian, and Central Arkansas all at home. The Cardinals toughest SLC contest

could be their week 3 trip to Sam Houston State, who will be looking for revenge after UIW beat them 43-26. If the defense shows sound improvement, UIW could find themselves in the playoffs once again in 2019.