

Southern Conference

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – Samford quarterback Liam Welch has been named the Southern Conference Preseason Offensive Player of the Year and VMI linebacker Stone Snyder has been tabbed the Defensive Player of the Year in voting by the league's nine head coaches. The coaches and media both selected Chattanooga to win the league, which is embarking upon its 100th season of football competition this fall.

The coaches also selected all-conference first and second teams and were not allowed to vote for their own student-athletes or teams in the voting process. Due to ties in the voting, the first and second teams both includes an additional offensive lineman, the first team includes an extra running back and the second team includes an extra linebacker.

The SoCon's co-Offensive Player of the Year and first-team All-SoCon quarterback in 2020-21, Welch ranked second in the FCS with 424.2 yards of total offense per game. In just six games, the graduate student from Augusta, Georgia, threw for 2,242 yards – fifth-most in the FCS – and 12 touchdowns, going 161-for-236 with just five interceptions. His 68.2 completion percentage was good for fifth in the FCS, while his 26.83 completions per game ranked sixth. Welch threw for a SoCon-record 570 yards in an overtime loss to eventual SoCon champion VMI on March 20, the highwater mark in the FCS for the season. He earned SoCon Offensive Player of the Week presented by GEICO honors twice during the 2020-21 campaign and was the SoCon Offensive Player of the Month in February and March. Welch finished 10th in the voting for the Walter Payton Award and earned second-team All-America honors from Stats Perform. VMI's first-ever SoCon Defensive Player of the Year last season, Snyder shared the award from the coaches and was the media's pick for the honor. The junior from Richmond, Virginia, paced the SoCon with 11.0 tackles per game in 2020-21, ranking eighth in the FCS, while his average of 1.0 sacks per game ranked ninth. His 21 tackles against rival The Citadel on April 17 were a career high and helped clinch the SoCon title for VMI, its first since 1977, and its first-ever FCS playoffs berth. The SoCon Defensive Player of the Month for April, Snyder earned All-America honors from the Associated Press, Athlon Sports, Stats Perform, Phil Steele and HERO Sports after his breakout season, which saw the Keydets enter the FCS national rankings for the first time in program history. Snyder finished third in the voting for the Buck Buchanan Award.

Chattanooga is the preseason pick for the first time since being the favorite three straight years from 2014-16. The Mocs went 3-2 overall last season, dropping a hard-fought 13-10 decision at FBS Western Kentucky in the fall before going 3-1 in league play in the spring before opting out of the remainder of the season. Chattanooga was nationally ranked for five weeks last season, entering the top 10 at No. 9 in the Stats Perform poll on March 22 after topping 11th-ranked Furman. A win over No. 11 Wofford on Feb. 27 propelled the Mocs into the national top 25 for the first time on the season. Coach Rusty Wright returns all 25 starters for his third season on the sidelines as he begins UTC's quest for its first title since 2015. The Mocs claimed four first-place votes and 59 points in the coaches poll and 18 of 30 first-place votes and 248 points in the media poll.

Samford edged defending SoCon champion VMI in the coaches poll, getting 52 votes to the Keydets' 50. Both squads picked up two first-place votes. The Bulldogs went 4-3 in the spring, earning wins over No. 20 Wofford and No. 23 Mercer and dropping contests to No. 17 Furman and No. 19 VMI in overtime.

VMI, which went 6-2 overall (6-1 SoCon) in 2020-21 and finished the season ranked No. 12 in both the AFCA and Stats Perform polls, was picked second in the media poll, collecting six first-place votes and 217 points to finish well ahead of a three-way tie for third between ETSU (three first-place votes), Furman (one) and Samford (two) with 181 points each.

ETSU, which went 4-2 and finished the season ranked in both the AFCA and Stats Perform polls, was fourth in the coaches poll, collecting the remaining first-place vote and totaling 49 points as the second through fourth spots were separated by the just three points. The Bucs also return every starter from last season.

Furman was fifth in the coaches poll with 34 points, followed by Mercer (29), The Citadel (22), Wofford (21) and Western Carolina (eight), which is under the direction of first-year Catamount coach Kerwin Bell this season. In the media poll, Mercer was sixth with 123 points, followed by Wofford (108), The Citadel (79) and Western Carolina (32). ETSU had a league-best 10 preseason all-conference selections, while Chattanooga and Samford had nine each. Furman and VMI each had six selections, Mercer had five, The Citadel and Wofford had four each and Western Carolina had one.

ETSU and Samford shared league-high honors with six first-team selections apiece. All nine schools had at least one first-team pick.

ETSU's Quay Holmes and Furman's Timmy Bleekrode were both honored twice, with Holmes claiming a first-team spot at running back and a second-team spot at return specialist. Bleekrode earned second-team honors at both placekicker and punter.

The SoCon's 2021 season gets underway with four games on Thursday, Sept. 2, with the remaining five teams in action on Saturday, Sept. 4.

2021 Preseason Southern Conference Coaches Poll

Team (1st-place votes) Total

1. Chattanooga (4)	59
2. Samford (2)	52
3. VMI (2)	50
4. ETSU (1)	49
5. Furman	34
6. Mercer	29
7. The Citadel	22
8. Wofford	21
9. Western Carolina	8

Media Poll

1. Chattanooga (18) 248
2. VMI (6) 217
3. ETSU (3) 181
4. Furman (1) 181
5. Samford (2) 181

6. Mercer 123
7. Wofford 108
8. The Citadel 79
9. Western Carolina 32

2021 Preseason All-Southern Conference Football Teams

Offensive Player of the Year: Liam Welch, QB, Gr., Samford

Defensive Player of the Year: Stone Snyder, LB, Jr., VMI

First team offense

QB Liam Welch, Gr., Samford
 RB Quay Holmes, R-Jr., ETSU
 RB Devin Wynn, 5th, Furman
 RB Ailym Ford, So., Chattanooga
 OL Tre'mond Shorts, R-Jr., ETSU
 OL Gavin Orr, Jr., Samford
 OL Cole Strange, Sr., Chattanooga
 OL Marshall Gill, Sr., VMI
 OL Tyler Smith, R-So., Western Carolina
 OL Zak Kurz, Sr., Wofford
 TE Nate Adkins, Jr., ETSU
 WR Ty King, R-So., Samford
 WR Jakob Herres, Sr., VMI

First team defense

DL Solomon Zubairu, So., Mercer
 DL Armond Lloyd, R-Sr., Samford
 DL Devonsha Maxwell, Jr., Chattanooga
 DL Micheal Mason, Jr., Wofford
 LB Willie Eubanks III, Sr., The Citadel
 LB Jared Folks, Gr., ETSU
 LB Stone Snyder, Jr., VMI
 DB Tyree Robinson, Sr., ETSU
 DB Chris Edmonds, So., Samford
 DB Brandon Dowdell, Sr., Chattanooga
 DB Ethan Caselberry, Sr., VMI

First team specialists

PK Tyler Keltner, So., ETSU
 P Matthew Campbell, Jr., The Citadel
 RS Montrell Washington, Sr., Samford

Second team offense

QB Seth Morgan, R-So., VMI
 RB Brandon Marshall, Fr., Mercer

RB Nathan Walker, Sr., Wofford
 OL Haden Haas, R-Sr., The Citadel
 OL Tavon Matthews, So., ETSU
 OL Anderson Tomlin, R-Jr., Furman
 OL McClendon Curtis, Jr., Chattanooga
 OL Harrison Moon, Sr., Chattanooga
 OL Al Hogan, Jr., Wofford
 TE Michael Vice, So., Samford
 WR AJ Toney, So., Samford
 WR Reggie Henderson, Sr., Chattanooga

Second team defense

DL Parker Stokes, 5th, Furman
 DL Chris Hill, Fr., Mercer
 DL Jay Person, So., Chattanooga
 DL Warren Dabney, Sr., VMI
 LB Anthony Britton Jr., So., The Citadel
 LB Donovan Manuel, R-So., ETSU
 LB Isaac Dowling, Fr., Mercer
 LB Trimarcus Cheeks, So., Samford
 DB Alijah Huzzie, R-Fr., ETSU
 DB Travis Blackshear, R-Jr., Furman
 DB Lance Wise, So., Mercer
 DB Jerrell Lawson, Sr., Chattanooga

Second team specialists

PK Timmy Bleekrode, R-So., Furman
 P Timmy Bleekrode, R-So., Furman
 RS Quay Holmes, R-Jr., ETSU

NOTE: Coaches were not permitted to vote for their own players or team.

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