

## Central Arkansas 2021 Preview

Central Arkansas has only been an FCS team since 2007, but have had their fair share of success since making the jump. The Bears have made the FCS playoffs 5 times in the past 10 seasons with their last trip coming in 2019 where they lost to Illinois St. Despite making the playoffs 5 times, UCA has never advanced past the 2nd round. Last season UCA was picked to win the Southland Conference but then the season was pushed to the Spring. However, UCA played 9 games in the fall and finished with a 5-4 record, winning 3 of their last 4 games. This season UCA will move out of the Southland and play the "AQ7" schedule before fully transitioning to the WAC in 2022. The Bears are coached by Nathan Brown, who enters his 4th season here & holds a 20-13 record.

UCA's offense in '17 averaged a decade-best 465 ypg and scored 36 ppg. The offense took a bit of a dip '18 as just 4 starters returned and the Bears averaged 409 ypg and 31 ppg. In 2019 the offensive numbers again took a dip down to 382 ypg and 28 ppg. Last season UCA was held to under 300 yds in 4 of their first 6 games and for the season they only averaged 363 ypg but did put up 32 ppg. QB Breylin Smith started 8 games LY for UCA and he threw for 1,861 yds (56%, 19-10) while Luke Hales made 1 start in the finale and overall threw for 345 yds (65%, 2-2). Hales departs but Smith returns with 6,652 career pass yds (4th all-time at UCA) and 58 career TD's (4th all-time at UCA) and was an FCS All-American back in 2019. Kierre Crossley led the Bears last season with 596 rush yds (9 st, 5.2, 4 td) and he departs this season, but returning at RB for UCA is Cameron Myers (263, 4.0) and Marshun Douglas (125, 6.2) who will battle for the starting job.

Dating back to 2010 the UCA pass offense has topped 210 ypg each season. During the 2019 season the Bears threw for 293 ypg and hit 64% as a team. Last season the pass offense averaged just 195 ypg the F/4 games before topping 300 yds in 4 of the final 5 games. The leading receiver LY for UCA was Tyler Hudson (9 st, 845, 16.9, 7 td) and the #2 receiver was Lajuan Winningham (9 st, 522, 14.1, 12 td) while Mitchell Perkinson was the #3 receiver with 268 yds (L/5 sts, 9.6). The top 7 receivers all return for UCA this season & with QB Smith returning the Bears pass attack should be potent in 2021. UCA ran for 177 yds (5.7) in the opener & 235 yds (6.7) against D-II Missouri Western St. Other than that the Bears were held to 100 yds or less in their 7 other games & overall the OLine paved the way for 114 ypg (3.8) and they allowed 20 sks, but only gave up 3 sks in the L/3 games. This season the Bears return 6 players who started multiple games along the OLine including 4 starters with the most notable returnees being LT Jaylin Hendrix (22 career sts) and C Toby Sanderson (33 career sts). The biggest loss on the OLine is LG Will Burgess (6 starts LY). Kicker Hayden Ray hit 12-16 FG's last season with a L/47 yds & he returns this season for the Bears.

The UCA defense allowed just 319 ypg and 18 ppg in '17, but those numbers jumped up in '18 as the Bears gave up 406 ypg, 26 ppg. In 2019 the Bears defense remained about the same as they allowed 404 ypg and gave up 28 ppg. Last season the Bears defense had some ups and downs during the season, but overall gave up 387 ypg and 29 ppg. The DLine was led by DE Logan Jessup (3 st, 37 tkl, 6.5 sk, 4.5 tfl) along with DE JW Jones (9 st, 35 tkl, 3.5 sk) and NG A'Javius Brown (9 st, 21 tkl, 5.5 tfl) & this unit allowed 163 rush ypg (4.0) and did collect 27 sks including 9 in one game against Missouri St. This season 6 of the top 7 DL's return including all 4 starters and we expect them to improve a bit vs the run and rack up the sacks once again.

UCA's LB corps last season was led by Dre Matthews (7 st, 43 tkl, 5 tfl) along with TJ Campbell (3 st, 41 tkl, 2.5 sk, 4.5 tfl) and Darin Davenport (8 st, 31 tkl, 5 tfl). This season Matthews departs along with NB Davis Harrison (L/5 sts, 35 tkl, 1.5 tfl, 3 pbu) but Campbell and Davenport return & overall 4 of the top 5 LB's are back and this unit, teamed up with the experienced DLine should be a superb front seven this season. Going back to 2018 the UCA pass D allowed 293 ypg (57%) and the following year in '19 they gave up 257 ypg (62%). Last season the pass D for the Bears did improve slightly as they allowed 225 pass ypg and allowed opposing QB's to hit 57% for the season. The secondary was led by S Cameron Godfrey (9 st, 51 tkl, 2 int) along with CB Deandre Lamont (9 st, 39 tkl, 5 pbu, 2 int) and Nick Nakwaasah (9 st, 33 tkl, 2 pbu) & these 3 players all return. The lone starter gone from the UCA secondary is CB Robert Rochell, who made 7 sts last season & collected 27 tkl's and 3 pbu's. With experience back in the secondary, we expect the Bears to have an improved pass D in 2021. The main P for UCA last season was Seren Hughes-Ford, who avg'd 39.2 yds per punt (L/63) and the team overall had a net of just 33 yds. Hughes-Ford returns this season & the kicking game should be steady for the Bears with both their K and P returning.

While Sam Houston was the favorite to win the "AQ7" conference this season, the team voted right behind them in the preseason poll was Central Arkansas. The Bears return a wealth of experience on both sides of the ball & if they stay healthy should be in the hunt to reach the playoffs. The Bears open the 2021 season with B2B road games at Arkansas St then at Missouri St. UCA then comes home to host Arkansas-PB before hosting Sam Houston in a marquee early season matchup. The Bears then are on the road for 3 of their next 4 games and this includes a trip to play Jacksonville St. UCA closes out the season with a home game vs Stephen F Austin & then a road contest at Tarleton St. That early season meeting with Sam Houston could help decide the AQ7 early in the season, but even if the Bears don't knock off the defending champs, there is still the possibility of them making the playoffs if they can handle the rest of their schedule.