

ABILENE CHRISTIAN

POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2022

QUARTERBACKS - Going into the 2020 season ACU lost a 2-year starter, who threw for a combined 5,514 yds in '18-'19 (64.6%, 40-20 ratio). The new QB for ACU was former Iowa QB Peyton Mansell and in his first year as the starter he hit 62% and threw for 1,237 yds (5-4 ratio) in a shortened 6 game season in 2020. Stone Earle made 1 start and for the season he was 21-33 for 173 yds on the season. Both of these QB's were back last season & Mansell started the opener at SMU but was just 1-7 early on and was replaced by Earle. The next week vs an NAIA school Earle threw for 233 (18-19 passing!) and 6 td's. Later on at Lamar he passed for 185 and 3 td's. Earle suffered a leg inj in ACU's 2nd game against Lamar and Mansell took over starting duties once again for the final four games. Mansell threw for 301 vs J'ville St but had 3 int's and in those L/4 starts he had just a 5-7 ratio. Overall Mansell threw for 1,108 yards (65.4%, 5-8) and ran for 432 (5.2, 6 td) while Earle led with 1,216 yards (65.6%, 13-4) and was 4th Tm WAC. Mansell returns & will be the favorite to win the job with Hayden Anderson (6-10, 44 yds LY) the likely backup. Mansell will need to work on limiting his turnovers if he is to have an improved season in 2022.

RUNNING BACKS - The Wildcats rush attack didn't have much success during the 2020 season as their leading rusher, Jeremiah Dobbins, ran for just 227 yds (5.4, 5 td) & the #2 RB Tyrese White totaled only 171 yds (3.3) for the season. Both of those RB's returned last season and we expected an uptick in the Wildcats rushing attack. White took over as the top RB, as he started 11 games, led with 539 (6.7) and was 3rd Tm WAC. QB Mansell was #2, Anthony Smith was #3 (264, 4.1) and Dobbins was #4 (220, 4.5). The Wildcats get back their top 3 RB's and should be able to at least match what they did last season, if not take another step forward.

RECEIVERS - The receiving corps in 2020 was led by Lionell McConnell (4 st, 366, 10.2) and Kobe Clark finished #2 (3 st, 362, 13.9, 4 td) while TE Branden Hohenstein was the #3 receiver (6 st, 191, 15.9). Coming into 2021 the Wildcats lost both McConnell and Hohenstein, but Clark returned and we expected players such as Darius Lewis (1 st, 147, 8.2) and TE Remington Lutz to get more reps and be bigger factors. Clark stepped up and became the top guy as he topped 100 yds in a game twice, led with 741 (11 st, 11.6, 8 td) and was named 2nd Tm WAC. Despite starting just 3 games Denver Holman was the #2 receiver (338, 15.4) and Davion Johnson did not get one start all year but finished #3 (239, 7.7). TE Lutz did take over as the starter, and finished with 208 yds (9 st, 18.9). Lutz and Darius Lewis (7 st, 197, 12.3) both depart, but the top 4 WR's are all back and Noah Caldwell (2 st) could be the next starting TE. Overall this unit is in much better shape entering 2022 & with stability at QB they should have an improved year.

OFFENSIVE LINE - In 2020 the ACU OLine paved the way for just 113 rush ypg (3.5) and they allowed 15 sks in 6 games. ACU lost 4 starters on the OLine with the lone returnee being RT Zach Terry coming into the '21 season. A trio of players who started a game in '20 did return as well so the cabinet wasn't as empty as you would think. They also added Reese Moore (PS#60!) from Texas. However, Terry did not play in '21 so the entire starting 5 was brand new. New C Collin James started all 11 games and was 3rd Tm WAC, while Moore started all 11 games at LT and was 2nd Tm WAC. The Wildcats OLine did open more run lanes as ACU ran for 166 ypg (4.9) and they only allowed 13 sacks in 11 games (4.0%)! James transfers out along with Derek Simmons, who started 11 games at RT. This season Moore returns along with LG Truett Knox (4th Tm WAC) and RG Jacob Thielen (11 starts in '21). With this unit having 0 returning starters coming into LY and now they return 3 starting OL, they are in much better shape up front.

DEFENSIVE LINE - An issue for ACU in 2020 was their run defense as they allowed 225 ypg (5.0). After allowing just 98 yds to UTEP in the opener, ACU's rush defense would give up over 400 yds twice! The ACU defense had little success getting to the QB in 2020 as they only collected 8 sks in 6 games. The same 4 players started all 6 games on the DLine for ACU and they all returned for the '21 season. The run defense started out better last season, as ACU allowed 128 ypg (3.3) over the F/4 games, but over the final 7 games that number jumped to 202 ypg (5.3). After collecting 9 sacks in the F/4 games, the ACU pass rush collected just SIX sacks the L/7 games! The starting DE's Jordan Paup (10 st, #13 tkl'r, 5.5 tfl) and Garviea Freeny (11 st, t-#11 tkl'r, 3 tfl) were solid, as was backup Osaretin Obadeyi (#10 tkl'r, 5.5 tfl, 3rd Tm WAC). However, Freeny and Obadeyi both depart along with DT Quent Titre (8 st, 19 tkl) and backup DT Dre Jones (2 st, #15 tkl'r). Paup and DT's William Morgan (8 st, 15 tkl, 3 tfl) and Jack Schultz (3 st, #14 tkl'r) return. However, with only 2 starters back this unit may take a step back in the run game, but hopefully are more effective at getting to the QB.

LINEBACKERS - ACU's linebackers stayed healthy in '20 as Jack Gibbens started all 6 gms and led with 49 tkl (2 sks, 1 int) and both Tory Hargrove (24 tkl) and Hunter Kier (22 tkl) started 5 gms. Gibbens departed LY but both Hargrove and Kier were back & Kier led all LB's in tackles (11 st, 68 tkl, 5 tfl) and was 3rd Tm WAC, while Greg Green was the #4 tkl'r & 4th Tm WAC (10 st, 54 tkl, 5 tfl) and Hargrove was the #5 tkl'r (11 st, 50 tkl, 4.5 tfl) and 3rd Tm WAC. Dating back to '14 ACU has surrendered at least 27 ppg in 7 straight seasons, but last season their defense allowed under 400 ypg (385 ypg) for the first time since 2018 and they held foes to 25 ppg. While Hargrove returns, they lose two starters in Kier and Green. ACU does also return Chike Nwankwo (30 tkl) and Trey Adams (26 tkl) so these two will likely take over the starting spots, and this unit shouldn't see too much of a dropoff this season.

DEFENSIVE BACKS - In 2020 ACU did face two run-heavy teams (allowed a comb'd 150 pass yds in those gms) but twice gave up over 350 pass yds including 403 to Virginia. ACU's pass defense allowed 65% completions to opposing QB's as well. The pass defense recorded just 8 pbu's on the season and only picked off 1 pass all season. All 4 secondary starters returned last season, so the hope was that ACU would be better vs the pass. ACU did allow 3 teams to pass for over 300 yds, but overall allowed 210 pass ypg and allowed 61% completions and they recorded 6 int's. S Brian Bullock led ACU in tackles (11 st, 75 tkl) and was 3rd Tm WAC. S Elijah Moffett was the #3 tkl'r (11 st, 61 tkl, 4 pbu, 2 int) and was 4th Tm WAC. CB Ryan Stapp (10 st, 44 tkl, 4.5 tfl, 10 pbu) was named 2nd Tm WAC. CB Stapp along with S Bullock depart this season, but ACU gets back S Moffett and CB's Roland Williams (8 st, 20 tkl, 4 pbu) and Triston Anderson (3 st, t-#8 tkl'r, 6 pbu) so while they don't have 4 st's back like LY, this unit is still in decent shape.

SPECIAL TEAMS - Blair Zepeda hit 6-8 fg's in 2020 with a long of 41 yds. Zepeda returned last season and connected on 13-17 fg's, including hitting 7-9 from 40+ yds (L/53)! Zepeda was also named 2nd Tm WAC. Logan Burke was the punter for ACU in 2020 and averaged 38.5 yds per punt (L/51) and had a net of 36.4. Burke was back last season for the Wildcats and averaged 43.5 yds per punt (L/60) with a net of 39.1 and was named 4th Tm WAC. WR Javion Davis was the top KR for ACU as had 373 yds (18.7) and the Wildcats only had 53 punt return yards all season. With both K Zepeda and P Burke returning, along with their top 2 kick returners, this unit is in pretty good shape entering the season.

COACHES - After 5 seasons Adam Dorrel (19-32) was fired as the head coach, and the new head coach for Abilene Christian is long-time coach Keith Patterson, who has been an assistant coach in college football since 2003 when he was the LB coach at Tulsa for 3 years. More recently Patterson was the DC at Texas Tech from

'19-'21 and before that was the co-DC at Utah St ('18) and spent 2014-17 at Arizona St as the DC. Stephen Lee is the new OC who spent 2016-2021 as the OC at Mary-Hardin Baylor, who are a D-III powerhouse & won the national championship last season. Skyler Cassidy is the new DC for Abilene Christian, and he spent the past 2 seasons coaching OLB's, NB's and S's at Missouri St. Matt Clark is the ST Coordinator for the Wildcats.

FORECAST

OFFENSE - After averaging just 333 ypg and 19 ppg in 2017 the Wildcats offense took a large jump to 440 ypg and 30 ppg in '18. They again had a productive season in '19, averaging 28 ppg and 413 ypg. In the shortened 2020 season ACU's offense went down to averaging just 346 ypg and 21 ppg. Those numbers improved last year to 380 ypg and 28 ppg. This year's ACU offense does return 7 starters including 3 on the OLine, but they do have to learn a new system so expectations early on could be limited until they get up to speed in the new offense.

DEFENSE - The Wildcats defense in 2018 allowed 385 ypg and 27 ppg, but held foes to 15 ypg under their season average. The ypg allowed took a bit of a dip in 2019 (403 ypg allowed) but the ppg jumped up slightly to 29 ppg. In the 7 game season in 2020 ACU faced a trio of FBS teams and allowed over 450 yds to a D-II team. Overall that year ACU gave up 422 ypg and 36 ppg. Last season the defense had it's ups and downs, but allowed 385 ypg and 25 ppg. However they did allow foes to gain 40 ypg more than their foes average. This season 5 starters are back and they will need some new faces to emerge, especially with a new system being installed.

2022 - Abilene Christian is still relatively new to FCS-level football, as their program just moved up to this level in 2013. The Wildcats still have yet to reach the FCS playoffs since joining and have only had 2 winning seasons since moving up. ACU does get 3 of their first 4 games at home this season but then travel to both Utah Tech (formerly Dixie St) and Sam Houston. Then after 1 home game vs Southern Utah, the Wildcats are back on the road for 3 straight games, with one of those games coming against Incarnate Word, who made the playoffs LY. They finish at home against SF Austin, who made the playoffs last year. The Wildcats bring back 12 starters this season (7 offense, 5 defense) so there is still plenty of talent, but they are going through a coaching change & do lose some key All-WAC players. The Wildcats could fight to get to .500 this season, but we don't see them being a contender in the WAC for 2022.