

ALABAMA ST HORNETS

POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2022

QUARTERBACKS - Alabama St had to replace their starting QB heading into spring of '21. Ryan Nettles won the job and started all 5 games and threw for a season high 305 vs Mississippi Valley St. He finished with 917 (59%) with an 8-5 ratio and he added 110 rush (3.1) which led to him being named SWAC Frosh POY. Nettles returned but got off to a slow start. After a 3-13 start vs Florida A&M the Hornets turned to Myles Crawley for the next 2 games. Crawley threw four td passes in his first start vs Arkansas Pine-Bluff. Nettles returned to the starting lineup and threw 3 td's vs Alabama A&M. After throwing 3 int's vs MVSU he was replaced by Joe Owens for the last 2. Nettles led with 1,194 (59.5%, 10-7, 104 rush, 2.4). Crawley was #2 with 459 (53.9%, 5-1, 24 rush). Owens was right behind him with 441 (66.2%, 3-2). Nettles transferred to Tuskegee. Crawley and Owens are competing for the starting job. Owens was far more accurate last year but Crawley has better size at 6'4" 200. It's hard to say who wins the job but the experienced they gained last year is a huge help.

RUNNING BACKS - Ezra Gray was their leading rusher in '18 but only had 384 (3.8). In '19 he nearly doubled his output, rushing for 654 (4.2). Gray led for a 3rd straight year when he put up 436 (5.2) in just 5 spring games. He had a career high 195 vs Jackson St. Jacory Merritt was #2 with 164 (3.8). Last year Gray returned but missed 2 games and fell to #2 with 401 (4.0). Merritt led with 422 but only a 3.5 ypc. This year they lose their 3x leading rusher in Gray who signed with a USFL squad. Merritt returns along with Dontrey Manley who had 97 (9.7) in only 2 games last year. Normally losing a 3x leading rusher is tough to overcome but Merritt was just as good last year and Manley adds an explosive element. Dante Norris (73, 3.2) is also in the mix.

RECEIVERS - In spring the Hornets had to replace their top guy but did have Jahod Booker back who was #2 in '19 with 373 (12.9). Booker led in the spring with 252 (14.0). Jeremiah Hixon was #2 with 234 (18.0). Michael Jefferson was #3 with 234 (9.8). Last year they returned Hixon and Wallace Corker (#4, 101, 16.8). Hixon picked up where he left off, putting up 100 vs Bethune Cookman, 112 vs UAPB and 116 vs Alabama A&M. He missed 2 games but still led with 563 (12.8). Keron Jones was #2 with 388 (9.9). Corker was #3 with 325 (9.6) and led with 5 td receptions. No other WR/TE topped 140 yards last year. This year Hixon returns as their top guy again. They also lose Jones (8 st), Corker (11 st) and Hixon (7 st). They only have 1 of their top 4 back but the returnee is Hixon and they added Colorado transfer LaVontae Shenault (6 rec last year). Depth is a concern but this unit isn't in bad shape with their top guy back.

OFFENSIVE LINE - In '18 Alabama St averaged 108 rush (3.0, 25 sk). In '19 they averaged 126 (3.2) in SWAC play but just 88 (2.9) in non-conference play. All 5 starters were gone in spring yet they improved to 154 (4.2) but did allow 13 sacks (7.3%). Three different OL started at multiple spots during last season and they used 8 different starting lineups. They rushed for just 113 (3.4) with 23 sacks (6.8%). The Hornets only lose C Charlie Maxwell (4 st). 10 different OL started at least 1 game last year and 9 of them return so this is a veteran unit coming off a disappointing season. This could be a breakout unit if they can settle with a lineup.

DEFENSIVE LINE - This unit was the weakness of the defense in '18 when they gave up 271 rush ypg (5.7) and at one point allowed 400 rush yards in 3 of 4 games. They made a solid improvement in '19, still giving up 205 (4.9) with 20 sacks then showed real progress in the spring season, allowing 141 (3.7) with 12 sacks. Last year they returned 2x 1st Team All-SWAC DE NG Christian Clark. They allowed 155 (4.8) and sacks increased to 26 which was still markedly improved from '19. Clark was their #3 tackler and added 7 tfl's. This year they lose 3x All-SWAC NG Clark (7 st), DE Cameron Rampersaud (7 st, #7 tkl'r, 3 tfl) and Joshua Long (6 st, #17 tkl'r, 2.5 sk). They only return 2 of their top 5. They are much less experienced than entering last year and lose the top player on the defense.

LINEBACKERS - ASU used a litany of LBs in '20-'21 due to a lack of depth, but are returning two starters from '19, including Nicholas Terry who has started every game at LB since the beginning of '19. Terry led a group with far more depth than it had headed into spring, as the unit now returns it's top six tacklers. Terry was their #2 tackler last year and added 7 tfl's. This year they lose 3rd Tm All-SWAC LB Terry (11 st), Darius Whitehurst (5 st, #14 tkl'r) and Nolan Johnson (1 st, #12 tkl'r, 4 tfl). They do return their #4, #9, #10, #13 and #16 tkl'rs, plus Colton Adams is back after suffering an injury early in the season. Adams was their #4 tackler in the spring season and #7 tkl'r with 5.5 tfl's in '19 so that essentially gives them 3 starters back, making this a strength.

DEFENSIVE BACKS - This has been the strength of the defense 5 years and they are currently on a run of allowing less than 50% completions in 3 straight years. In '19 they gave up just 167 pass ypg (49.3%) then followed that up in spring by allowing 49.4% and 185 pass ypg. Irshaad Davis started 7 times as a true frosh in '19 and was All-SWAC 1st Team in spring after leading ASU with 41 tackles (3 pbu, 1 int). Naytron Culpepper was named 2nd Team All-SWAC in spring after recording 15 tackles and 4 PBUs. ASU returned their top five tacklers from spring and allowed just 48.9% and 197 pass ypg but had only 4 int's (18 td's) so they only finished #4 in pass defense efficiency. This year they lose CB Jazquez Payton (10 st, #19 tkl'r) who led with 10 pbu and Kimar Martin (1 st, #18 tkl'r). Three starters return including Davis who led with 65 tackles and was 1st Tm All-SWAC. They also get their #5, #6, #15 and #20 tacklers back. This is once again the strength of the defense.

SPECIAL TEAMS - Last year ASU had 3 kickers attempt fg's. Hunter Hanson was their best, hitting 6 of 7 (L/47). Cosmin Dancou made 1-3 and Aubrey Grace made his only attempt. Grace also led with a 36.3 punt avg (30.7 net). Robert McMinn had 2 PR td's (10.7 avg) and Ezra Gray avg'd 18.2 KR. Hanson and Dancou depart while Grace and McMinn return. They will need to find solid kicking or this unit is well below average.

COACHES - Eddie Robinson Jr (no relation of Grambling legend Eddie Robinson) was named HC in November. He played 11 years in the NFL and this is his first coaching position. He was the SWAC Defensive POY in '90 and '91 here. The OC is Harry Williams who comes over from Morehouse College where he was OC. He also coached WR's at Prairie View A&M. The Hornets do not have a Defensive Coordinator listed on their roster. Ryan Lewis is the first year ST Coordinator. He was the ST Coach at Bethune Cookman.

FORECAST

OFFENSE - Alabama St put up just 14 ppg and 239 ypg in '17 then 15 ppg and 269 ypg in '18. They made progress in '19, increasing to 23 ppg and 324 ypg. In 5 spring games they averaged 24 ppg and 356 ypg. Last year they were shutout twice in their first 4 games by Auburn and Florida A&M. The offense improved down the stretch and they finished with 22 ppg and 303 ypg. This year they have 6 starters back including all 5 OL. They have 2 QB's with starting experience, their top rusher and top WR so they are more experienced than their total starters suggests. They didn't add any significant transfers so far but this should be an improved offense led by a veteran OLine.

DEFENSE - The Hornets allowed just 18 ppg and 303 ypg in '17 but had a young defense in '18 and slipped to 37 ppg and 451 ypg. In '19 ASU improved to 27 ppg and 372 ypg and against SWAC foes only gave up 22 ppg and 346 ypg. They gave up 24 ppg and 326 ypg in the spring then last year 5 starters from '19 still remained and they gave up 28 ppg and 352 ypg. The Hornets have 6 starters back and xx of their top 20 tacklers back. They have traditionally been a strong secondary and should improve from last year's ranking. With 4 starters back in the secondary they should have an improved pass D and the rush D has gotten better but they have a young front 6 so they might not improve much.

2022 - After an 0-5 start in '17, ASU made a change and Donald Hill-Eley was promoted to Interim HC. They won 5 of the 6 games he was in charge of so he was promoted to HC. ASU won 4 games in '18 and was -181 ypg and were -145 against SWAC foes. They went 5-6 in '19 and improved to -48 ypg (-14 ypg vs SWAC). The Hornets played 5 games in the spring of '21, winning against Jackson St and MVSU and were +30 ypg. Last year they had SWAC Frosh POY Nettles at QB and a 3Y leading rusher and most of their key players on defense back from the spring. They started 3-2 but both losses were shutouts. The Hornets lost their next 4 games and 3 of those losses were by double-digits. Their 4th consecutive loss to rival Alabama A&M led to the Hill-Eley being let go. They rallied to beat Texas Southern and won their finale to finish 5-6 but 2 of their wins were against DII foes. They finished -49 ypg and were -61 ypg vs SWAC foes. The Hornets return 12 starters. They hired NFL veteran Eddie Robinson Jr as Head Coach. While Robinson Jr lacks coaching experience, he was the SWAC Defensive Player of the Year and was a key member of an 11-0 team in 1991 that won the Black College National Championship. This year they travel to UCLA. They host Jackson St, Prairie View A&M and FAMU, all 3 had the best records in the SWAC last year. Their most winnable games are on the road so it will be tough to match last year's 5 wins.