

EASTERN ILLINOIS

POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2022

QUARTERBACKS- Harry Woodberry (1632, 51%, 10-10 in 2019) was the leading passer in the spring of '21, but threw for just 631 yards (46%, 3-3). Otto Kuhns played in 4 games in the spring and threw for 509 yards (51%, 5-4). Woodberry left last fall, but Kuhns was back and he started in 7 games and was the leading passer, but with just 1,134 yards (46.5%, 6-10). Chris Katrenick started 3 games and threw for 605 yards (49.2%, 1-3). True frosh Zach Weir started 1 game, played in 4 games and threw for 386 yards (48.5%, 1-4). Weir is the only QB that played last fall who returns this season. EIU brings in Charlotte transfer Dom Shoffner (missed '21 ssn with inj) and Virginia transfer Ira Armstead (PS#83). There is not much experience at the QB position heading into 2022, but the hope is one QB can step up, take the reigns and be consistent for a full season.

RUNNING BACKS- Jordan Smith was the leading rusher for EIU in the spring of '21 despite starting just 2 games as he ran for 278 yards (5.1) while Jaelin Benefield finished right behind him with 258 yards (4.4) and Kendi Young was #3 (121, 4.8). Smith departed last fall but Benefield and Young returned. However Benefield was injured in fall camp and only came back for the final 4 games & ran for 171 yards (4.9). Harrison Bey-Buie took over as the top RB as he started all 11 games, but ran for just 479 yards (3.6). Markenzy Pierre (former Illinois RB) was the #3 rusher with 125 (3.2) and K. Young was #4 (79, 3.4). They lose Bey-Buie, but Benefield is back healthy along with Pierre and Young so this unit looks to be in solid shape despite the loss of their top rusher.

RECEIVERS- The receiver unit was led by WR DeWayne Cooks (4 st, 15 rec, 241 yds, 16.1) in the spring of 2021. While not ultra-productive last spring, this unit returned the top 6 pass catchers going into the fall of 2021. Despite playing in just 5 games Isaiah Hill led with 493 yards (12.6) and was 1st Tm OVC. Arron Foulkes finished as the #2 receiver (6 st, 311, 12.0), while DeAirious Smith was #3 (4 st, 209, 14.9) and Tyler Ringwood was #4 (3 st, 199, 13.3). Hill and D. Smith return along with D. Cooks (2 st, 141, 10.8), but they lose Foulkes and Ringwood along with Robbie Lofton (6 st, 172, 9.6). With three of the top six WR's back this unit is in decent shape, but will need improved QB play if this unit is to see any increased production.

OFFENSIVE LINE- The OLine for EIU allowed just 1 sks in the first 2 games in the spring '21 season but gave up 12 sacks the L/4 gms and paved the way for 133 rush ypg (3.9). The OLine returned 4 starters last fall, but the numbers went down as EIU failed to rush for 100 yards in 6 games and their highest rushing total in one game last fall was just 125 yards and that was in the opener. EIU's OLine also gave up 28 sacks including 13 in the final four games. EIU brings back 3 starters on the OLine led by 4th Tm OVC LT Chad Strickland. C Ivan Glayzer and LG Elkhanan Tanelus are the other 2 starters back, while they lose RG Ben Solomon and RT Bryson Broadway. Simon France started the L/3 games at RG and is back this season so he could plug in at that spot. With plenty of experience back on both the OLine and at RB this rushing attack should see some improvement in 2022.

DEFENSIVE LINE- The DLine did a solid job against the run in the spring of '21 for all but the finale (105 ypg, 2.8 ypc) when they allowed 282 rush yds (6.0) to Jacksonville St. The pass rush was not there for EIU though as they collected just 7 sacks on the season and 6 of those sacks came in 2 games. The DLine was led by DE Jordan Miles (5 st, 23 tkl, 6 tfl) and he returned in the fall along with all 4 DLine starters. Last fall the rush defense allowed 4 games of 200+ rush yards and overall allowed 181 rush ypg (4.3) and they collected 16 sacks, but 12 of those sacks came in 4 games. DE Tim Varga led the way (11 st, 46 tkl, 4 sk) along with DE Miles (11 st, 38 tkl, 7 tfl, 4 sk, 11 QBH). This season Miles (1st Tm OVC) is back along with Varga (2nd Tm OVC) and they also return DT's Cameron Leach (11 st, 32 tkl) and Alton Jefferson (6 st, 14 tkl). With 4 starters back on the DLine again, we expect more sacks and a better season from the rush defense.

LINEBACKERS- Jason Johnson was the top tackler in the spring of '21 (6 st, 66 tkl, 6 tfl, 1st Tm OVC) and Colin Bohanek was the #2 overall tkl'r (40 tkl, 2 tfl) despite starting just 2 games. Last fall the top 4 LB's all returned and Johnson again led the Panthers in tackles (11 st, 112 tkl, 8 tfl) and was 1st Tm OVC. Bohanek was again the #2 tackler for EIU (11 st, 89 tkl, 11 tfl) and NB Bryce Dewberry was the #7 tackler (35 tkl, 4.5 tfl). This unit loses Johnson, but returns both Bohanek and Dewberry. Backup LB Phoenix Porter (7 tkl) is back and they add Foday Jalloh from Central Conn St who was 2nd Tm All-Conf is 2019 (81 tkl, 8.5 tfl). Despite the loss of their top tackler this unit still is in fairly good shape entering 2022.

DEFENSIVE BACKS- After allowing 209 pass ypg in '19 the EIU secondary regressed to allowing 258 pass ypg and gave up 61% completions in the spring of 2021. Going into the fall of '21 FS Kaelin Drakeford (6 st, 36 tkl, 2 pbu in spring '21) and SS Jordan Vincent (6 st, 25 tkl, 2.5 tfl in spring '21) both were back but this unit lost both starting CB's. In the fall Vincent again led the unit in tackles (11 st, 60 tkl, 5 tfl, 3 pbu) and Drakeford was the #2 tackler for this unit (11 st, 41 tkl, 2.5 tfl, 3 pbu). Russell Dandy (9 st, 31 tkl, 2 int) and Mark Aitken (9 st, 21 tkl, 4 pbu) were the two new starters at CB and both were solid. Overall EIU's pass defense did improve to allowing 171 ypg and 58.4% completions. With all four starters back in the secondary this unit could be solid once again.

SPECIAL TEAMS- Stone Galloway handled the kicking (5-7 fg, L/44 yds) and the punting (38.3 avg, 32.3 net) in the spring of 2021. Last fall Galloway was again the fg kicker and was 8-13 fg's (L/44) but Logen Neidhardt took over the punting and averaged 41.5 yds per punt (L/72) with a net of 34.9 yards. EIU didn't have much of a return game last fall as they had just 205 KR yards and 58 PR yards on the season. EIU brings back their K, but will need to find a new punter and need someone in their return game to step up if this unit is to take a step forward at all this season.

COACHES- After 3 seasons and just 3 wins EIU fired Adam Cushing after the 2021 fall season. The Panthers hired Chris Wilkerson to be the next HC here. Wilkerson spent 2013-2021 as the HC at the University of Chicago (D-III) where he went 51-27 in 8 seasons. Before that he was the associate HC at Dartmouth from 2005-2012 and was previously an assistant here from 1995-2001

and played football here from 1991-94. Joe Davis is the new OC at EIU and prior to coming here he was the OC/Associate HC at Albany from 2018-2021 and prior to that was the Pass Game Coordinator at Fordham from 2016-17. Adam Gristick came to EIU in 2018 as the LB coach but was promoted to DC in 2022. Kyle Derickson is the new ST coordinator and was on the Chicago staff last season as an assistant and was on the Western Michigan staff from 2017-2020.

FORECAST

OFFENSE- The Panthers averaged just 294 ypg & 18 ppg in 2017. In 2018 EIU's offense would show vast improvement as they put up 446 ypg and 32 ppg. The offense regressed big-time in 2019 to averaging just 275 ypg and 15 ppg. In the spring of '21 EIU's offense still struggled to move the ball as they put up just 324 ypg and 20 ppg. The Panthers returned 8 starters on offense last fall, but the numbers actually got worse, as EIU put up just 289 ypg and 15 ppg for the year. This season EIU loses their top 2 QB's, top RB and 3 of their top 6 WR's. EIU does get back 3 starters on the OLine, but with a new HC and a young QB under center, this offense could struggle to improve greatly over what they put up a season ago.

DEFENSE- In 2017, EIU's defense improved to allowing 355 ypg & 26 ppg. In '18 over the F/7 games EIU allowed 553 ypg and 48 ppg! Over the L/4 games, the defense allowed 385 ypg & 28 ppg, which brought their season total to 492 ypg & 40 ppg allowed. EIU returned 8 st's of defense in '19 and they carried over their performance of the L/4 gms of '18 as they gave up 351 ypg and 30 ppg. Last season the defense allowed 474 yds in the opener and 540 yds in the finale, but in their other 4 gms allowed 335 ypg. For the spring '21 season EIU gave up 393 ypg and 34 ppg. Last fall 8 starters returned on defense and while they gave up 46 pts and 443 yds to S.Car they gave up just 343 ypg and 26 ppg against 10 FCS foes. This season the Panthers return 10 starters on defense and 13 of the top 15 tacklers, so while the offense may struggle, EIU should get good production from this defense in 2022.

2022- EIU brought in long-time Northwestern assistant coach Adam Cushing in 2019 but went just 1-11. In the spring of '21 EIU played 6 games and went 1-5. Last fall EIU went 1-10 but were only -63 ypg as their defense played quite well for much of the season. Cushing lost the HC job and in steps Chris Wilkerson. He gets back 10 starters from the defense, but just 5 on offense. EIU's non-conf schedule has them facing NIU, Illinois St, and McNeese on the road, while they get Chattanooga & NWSt at home. In OVC play EIU travels to UT Martin, Murray St & Tenn St while they host Lindenwood, Tenn Tech & SEMO. EIU faces a tough schedule and while their defense should keep them in some games, their offense will have to show more life if they are to break their streak of 3 straight seasons with just one win.