

EASTERN KENTUCKY

POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2022

QUARTERBACKS - QB Parker McKinney started the F/6 games in the 2020 season before going OFY with an injury & for the year he threw for 1,358 yds (64%, 12-5). Dakota Allen would start the next 2 gms and hit just 48% and Isaiah Velez started the final game and in 2 games threw for 461 (65%, 3-2). McKinney returns this season and as long as he can remain healthy the QB position should be in good shape. ECU also added former Auburn QB Cord Sandberg (PS#22). McKinney only topped 200 passing yards in 2 of the first 5 games but after that topped 200 yds in the L/6 games including throwing for 338 vs Sam Houston and 290 vs Jacksonville St. McKinney also ran for 100 yds vs SF Austin and totaled 98 rush yds Abilene Christian and Sam Houston. For the season McKinney threw for 2429 yards (60.7%, 18-9), ran for 596 (6.2, 6 td) and was 2nd Tm ASUN. Sandberg only attempted 6 passes LY and does not return this season. McKinney does return and this unit is in great shape as long as McKinney can remain healthy.

RUNNING BACKS - The Colonels lost their top rusher from the 2020 season in Alonzo Booth (9 st, 708, 4.7, 7 td) departed and their top returnee was Kyeandre Magloire (83, 4.0) & they added former Purdue RB Da'Joun Hewitt (PS#117). Hewitt took over the starting role and led ECU with 607 rush yards (3.7, 7 td) and was 2nd Tm ASUN. QB McKinney was the #2 rusher and Magloire was the #3 rusher (232, 4.1). Hewitt departs this season, but Magloire returns. We also look for Braedon Sloan and Jeriah Hightower to have bigger roles this season, but they'll need someone to step up & replace Hewitt if they are to have similar production in 2022.

RECEIVERS - The ECU receiving corps in 2020 was led by Keyion Dixon (9 st, 607, 16.4, 6 td) along with Jacques Jones (5 st, 578, 14.4, 4 td) and Jackson Beerman (6 st, 482, 17.9). Going into the 2021 season 3 of their top 5 performers in Dixon, Beerman, and TE Ethan Bradds all departed. Jones returned last season but ECU needed others to step up like Matt Wilcox (7 st, 229, 8.8 in '20) and they added NIU transfer Jyran Mitchell (PS#287). Wilcox took over as the top guy and led with 460 yards (9.4) and was 2nd Tm ASUN while TE Dakota Allen was #2 with 440 yards (12.9) and was 1st Tm ASUN. Jayden Higgins (L/7 st, 394, 13.6) and Jaden Smith (6 st, 391, 10.3) also were productive & NIU transfer Mitchell was #5 (207, 10.4) last season. This season ECU returns 6 of the top 7 receivers, with the lone loss being Wilcox (10 st). With QB McKinney returning as well this season, we see the receivers having a better season.

OFFENSIVE LINE - The OLine for ECU in 2020 paved the way 129 ypg (3.7) and they gave up 23 sks in 9 gms incl 12 sks allowed in their L/3 games. The Colonels brought back a trio of starters on the OLine in 2021, but lost LG Jordan Johnson and RG Jackson Bardall. They also added Brad Davis (VMI transfer) who has started 31 games. The rushing numbers stayed consistent for ECU as the OLine paved the way for 135 ypg (4.2) but they gave up just 13 sacks (3.4%) with 5 sks coming in the L/2 games. LT Payton Collins (11 st), RG Brad Davis (11 st) and Drew Hart (11 st) were all named 2nd Tm ASUN last season. The Colonels return 5 players who started on the OLine including 4 starters with the lone loss being RG Davis. We expect this unit to do well at protecting the QB and they should be able to pave the way for solid rushing numbers this season.

DEFENSIVE LINE - The DLine allowed 201 rush ypg (5.0) in 2020. For the season ECU collected just 14 sks in 9 gms. The DLine was led by DE Kabbash Richards (9 st, 34 tkl, 6 tfl) along with DT Shane Burks (9 st, 24 tkl) and DT Quinten Floyd (6 st, 20 tkl). They lost 1 starter going into '21 but added former Bowling Green DL Roland Walder who started 5 games for the Falcons in '20. ECU allowed 142 rush ypg (3.9) and collected 20 sacks last season. Ubong Udom led ECU's DLine in tackles LY (8 st, 42 tkl, 4 sk) and was 1st Tm ASUN. Quinten Floyd (8 st, 30 tkl, 5.5 tfl) and Walder (11 st, 26 tkl, 4 sk, 3 tfl, 5 pbu) were both 2nd Tm ASUN last season. The bad news for ECU's DLine is that those 3 are all gone this season. The only returning starter is Shane Burks (9 st, 23 tkl, 2.5 sk) but Kelfon Dawson (31 tkl, 6.5 tfl) and TK McLendon (3 st, 24 tkl) are back this season & they will need to successfully step up into starting roles if this unit is to have a productive season.

LINEBACKERS - The LB unit still was solid in '20 as they were led by Matthew Jackson (6 st, 79 tkl, 8 tfl) and Kaleb Lundy (9 st, 54 tkl, 2 tfl) along with Eli Hairston (7 st, 42 tkl). All 3 starters returned for the Colonels last season and they added Kyle Bailey from WKU (PS#166) who started 11 gms for them in '20 (76 tkl, 5.5 tfl). M. Jackson tied for the lead ECU in tackles (11 st, 102 tkl, 11 tfl, 6 pbu, 2 int) and was the ASUN Defensive POY! Bailey also had 102 tackles (11 st, 6 tfl) and was 1st Tm ASUN while Hairston was #3 with 49 tackles (10 st, 3 tfl, 2 int). The good news for ECU is that both M. Jackson and Hairston both return, and while they lost Bailey, this unit should be strong still with two starters back.

DEFENSIVE BACKS - In 2020 the pass defense did not fare well as ECU was torched for 320+ yards 5 times in 9 games and for the year they allowed 255 pass ypg and gave up 65% completions to opposing QB's. The secondary was led by SS Joseph Sayles (6 st, 35 tkl, 5 pbu) along with CB Davion Ross (8 st, 26 tkl, 4 pbu). Three starters returned last year and they gave up 248 pass ypg (55%) and they collected 13 total int's. Ross was the #4 overall tackler (9 st, 46 tkl, 13 pbu, 3 int) and was 1st Tm ASUN. Ross (1st Tm ASUN) however departs this season along with 3rd Tm ASUN SS Jaden Woods (11 st, 35 tkl, 2 int) and CB Roy Baker (6 st, 19 tkl, 4 pbu). They do return 2nd Tm ASUN FS Sayles (11 st, 42 tkl, 3 int), 3rd Tm ASUN CB John Blunt (7 st, 18 tkl, 8 pbu) and Nic Cheeley (1 st, 15 tkl). This unit loses 3 players with start experience while only returning 2 starters & their secondary may take a small step back.

SPECIAL TEAMS - Alexander Woznick hit 11-14 fg's in '20 but had a long of just 37 yds (0-2 fg's of 40+ yds). Woznick was gone last season, but they added ECU transfer Patrick Nations (PS#15) who hit 12-16 fg's (L/51, 1 blk'd) and was 1st Tm ASUN. ECU had 2 main punters for 2020 in Thomas Cook (40.5 avg, L/59) and Phillip Richards (38.1 avg, L/58) and the team net was 35.0 yds. Richards was back last season averaged 40.6 yards per punt but only had a net of 33.6. CB Ross was the kick return man last season and totaled 522 yards (27.5) and had 1 KR td. The Colonels had just 26 PR yards all season. This season ECU gets back K Nations, but they lose P Richards and KR Ross. ECU brings in Australian Jeremy Edwards to handle the punting & if he can step up, the kicking game will be solid for ECU in '22.

COACHES - Walt Wells, who was the TE coach here from '97-'99, the OL coach here from '00-'02, and the Asst HC/OL coach in 2015 took over as the HC in 2020. Wells enters his 3rd season here with a 10-10 record. Prior to taking over as the HC here Wells was a quality control coach at Kentucky in '18-19 and spent '16-'17 as an assistant coach at Tennessee. The 3rd year OC is Andy Richman. Prior

to taking over as OC here, Richman spent 2015-19 as the OLine coach and run game coordinator at New Mexico St. Jake Johnson is the 3rd year DC, and he played at ECU from 1997-2001 and was a 3-year starter on the Colonels OLine. Johnson also coached here from 2004-2015 and spent the last 11 years as the DLine coach. Kevin McKeethan is in year three as the ST coordinator, before ECU he was the QB at Carson Newman University. Derek Day is the co-ST coordinator.

FORECAST

OFFENSE - ECU's offense had a down year in '17, as they gained 320 ypg and 21 ppg. The Colonels offense stayed consistent as they averaged just 325 ypg and 27 ppg in '18. The ECU offense jumped up to 364 ypg and 28 ppg in 2019. In Wells first year as HC in 2020 the Colonels put up 376 ypg and scored 24 ppg. Last season the offense put up 363 ypg and 28 ppg, but did get held to 10 ypg under what their foes allowed for the season. This season with 8 starters back, including QB McKinney and 4 OLine starters, we looked for some improved numbers from this offense.

DEFENSE - ECU allowed 344 ypg and 27 ppg and collected 25 sacks in '17. The numbers dipped a bit to 372 ypg and 29 ppg allowed in '18, but did force 30 TO's. ECU's defense did improve in '19 to allowing just 325 ypg and 22 ppg. In 2020 the Colonels defense struggled early on as they allowed over 500 yds in 4 of the F/5 games and for the season they allowed 455 ypg and 33 ppg. The defense did show signs of improvement last season as they held foes to 11 games below their season average and for the year allowed 390 ypg and 28 ppg. This unit loses 6 starters including 3 up front on the DLine and they may take a step back this season.

2022 - Eastern Kentucky has seen quite a bit of success on the football field, as they won 21 OVC titles and a pair of national championships in 1979 & 1982. However ECU's last trip to the playoffs was back in 2014 and they have lost 6 straight playoff games, with their last win coming in the 1st round of the 1994 playoffs. They are in year two in the Atlantic Sun after playing in the OVC from 1948-2020. They open the season with back to back road games vs FBS MAC teams (E. Michigan, Bowling Green) and later in Sept travel to Austin Peay. ECU does get 3 home games to start October, but one of those games is against Sam Houston. We expect the offense to have an improved season, but the defense could be what holds this team back in 2022. ECU should be competitive in every ASUN game this season, but finishing with an above .500 record would be a successful season for the Colonels this year.