

GARDNER-WEBB BULLDOGS

POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2022

QUARTERBACKS - Carlton Aiken started all 4 spring games and threw for 709 (61%) but with a 3-7 ratio. He was also their #2 rusher with 103 (2.3). Wake Forest transfer Tayvon Bowers (PS#91) had 1 pass attempt and Jy Tolen had 9 attempts and 1 int. Last year they added Tennessee Tech transfer Bailey Fisher HC Lamb coached as OC there. Fisher was the OVC Frosh POY in '18 when he threw for 1,681 with 11 td's and 346 rush. He set the school record for total yards by a true frosh. He was 2nd Tm OVC in '19 after throwing for 2,643 and rushed for 489. His 3,132 total yards and 32 total td's were also school records. He saw action in just 3 games and was shut down due to an injury in the spring. Aiken departed last year and Fisher started all 11 games. He threw for 2,335 (59.8%, 18-5) and rushed for 187 (2.3). Both Tolen (151, 62.5) and Bowers (4 att's) depart but Fisher is a 4 year starting QB and over a year removed from an injury so he should be even better. Depth is a huge concern with only 2 other QB's on the roster and Kendall McCoy's 1 attempt last year is the only other experience they have.

RUNNING BACKS - In '19 Narii Gaither was their #2 rusher with just 139 but an 8.7 ypc. They lost their top RB who had 930 (4.4) heading into spring but Gaither stepped up with 349 (5.7). He topped 100 in their first 2 games including 151 vs Presbyterian. Last year GW returned their top two RBs from spring. Gaither had a slow start then had 151 vs Western Carolina and 150 vs Campbell. He topped 100 in 4 of his last 7 including 116 vs Kennesaw St. Not only did Gaither lead with 966 rush (5.5) but he also topped the Runnin' Bulldogs with 43 catches (375, 8.7). Donovan Jones was #2 with 201 (5.6). Jalin Graham had 143 (7.2). Their top 4 rushers all return including 1st Tm All Big South in Graham so we are calling this the best RB unit in the conference.

RECEIVERS - Izaiah Gathings was their GW's top WR in spring with 267 (10.3) but he transferred to Middle Tennessee and they also lost their #2. They did add transfers from Stetson, Wofford, and UConn to immediately bolster the unit. True frosh Justin Franklin had 19 offers from FBS schools. He was #1 with 562 (15.2). Justin Jordan was #2 with 398 (15.3) and Wofford transfer TJ Luther was #3 with 384 (16.7). The Bulldogs lose Jordan (11 st), James Ellis (4 st, 139, 9.3) and Quayvon Skanes (5 st, 151, 15.1). They still have five of their top 8 returning including Franklin who has 4.5 speed. They also added Cutrell Haywood from Idaho who had 1,323 yards in 32 games. They are much more experienced than last year and have a veteran QB throwing their way.

OFFENSIVE LINE - GW ran for just 102 (3.0) and allowed 40 sacks (10.6%) in '19. They fared better in spring, averaging 152 (4.1) and allowed 8 sacks (5.9%). All 5 starters from spring returned with valuable experience. The addition of a mobile QB helped raise their ypc to 4.8 and they only gave up 20 sacks while rushing for 156 ypg. Surprisingly they fared better in non-conference play (172, 5.2) than they did vs Big South foes (123, 4.0). This year they lose LG Will Webster (9 st) and C Francis (5 st). Four starters return and they have 6 that started at least 1 game last year. They are led by two 2nd Team All-Big South OL's in RT Clayton Frady and C/G Gabe Thompson. This is an improved unit if they stay healthy.

DEFENSIVE LINE - GW's run D struggled in '19, allowing 242 ypg (6.0) with just 12 sacks. In spring they made some improvements and allowed just 124 (3.3) with 15 sacks (10.1%) in just 4 games. Last year most of the unit returned in tact including their top player on defense DE Ty French. They gave up over 200 yards against each of their first 5 FCS or FBS foes but held Robert Morris to just 5 rush yards then in their last 4 they only gave up 146 (3.4). Overall they allowed 179 (4.1) with 25 sacks (7.7%). French led with 8.5 sacks (1st Tm All Big South). This year the only loss is Shai Thomas (10 st, #4 tkl'r, 4 sk, 4.5 tfl), Tremayne Booker (#14 tkl'r) and Kendall Bailey (1 st, #19 tkl'r). Three starters return including French who is one of the top players in the conference. They get 6 of their top 9 back, making this an experienced group that could be much better in the weaker Big South.

LINEBACKERS - In the spring season GW added JUCO transfer Honus Wagner and he finished as their #2 tackler. Last year GW returned Wagner and William McRaney (#7 tkl'r) but Cade Hamilton was lost for the season in the 2nd game. It was McRaney who not only led GW but led the entire conference with 9.9 tackles per game (109) and chipped in 13 tfl's. This year both McRaney and Wagner return while they lose NB TJ Comstock (11 st, 3.5 tfl, 4 pd and Kyndall Clark (#13 tkl'r, 5.5 tfl). They get their #1, #7 and #9 tacklers back so they are a little better off than entering last season but they can't afford injuries.

DEFENSIVE BACKS - In their spring season Gardner-Webb allowed 227 pass ypg and 59.1% completions. Last year they returned their #3, #7, #11 and #12 tacklers. The Bulldogs gave up 427 vs Western Carolina but no other team threw for 300 and they improved, allowing 213 pass ypg (60.4%, 20-12). This year they lose FS Malachi Buckner (6 tkl'r) who led with 5 int's and was 1st Tm All Big South. Also gone is SS Dameon Williams (6 st, #10 tkl'r, 2 int) and Matt Robinson (#17 tkl'r). The rest of the unit returns including their #3, #11, #15 and #16 tacklers plus Jamari Nelson should make a bigger impact after playing in just 4 games but started 2 late in the season. This is yet another very experienced group.

SPECIAL TEAMS - Last year the Bulldogs had to find a new kicker and lost their top return man. Austin McKay made 5-8 fg's (L/46) while Jay Billingsley was 2-2 from short range. Jack Pawloski averaged 40.8 on 47 punts and they had a team net of 37.1. Dexter Brown was their top KR (228, 20.7) and Quayvon Skanes averaged just 6.8 PR. This year they lose both McKay and Pawloski. They do add Cutrell Haywood who was 2nd Tm All Big Sky as a punt returner but this unit is down unless they find a reliable kicker.

COACHES - HC Tre Lamb, who was a decorated QB at Tennessee Tech ('08-'12), is entering his third season with Gardner-Webb. He was the OC at his alma-mater from '18-'19 and QB Coach at Mercer from '14-'17. Lamb serves as his own OC. Josh Reardon is the first year DC. He was the Asst HC and DB Coach at Eastern Kentucky from '18-'19 and DB Coach at Mercer in '17. He was a CB Coach and Co-ST Coordinator at UConn from '14-'16 and a grad asst at Notre Dame in '12-'13. The Bulldogs split ST's duties among 3 Co-Coordinators.

FORECAST

OFFENSE - In '17 Gardner-Webb only put up 17 ppg and 318 ypg then followed that up with just 20 ppg and 291 ypg in '18. Tre Lamb was hired in '19 and the offense had a slight increase to 24 ppg and 320 ypg but were much better against Big South foes, averaging 28 ppg and 354 ypg. Their spring season started with 2 excellent offensive performances (42 & 31 pts) against weak foes then two poor performances (19 & 7 points) against tougher competition. Last year the addition of Tennessee Tech transfer Bailey Fisher sparked the passing game and they put up 30 ppg and 397 ypg. They were impressively consistent vs FCS foes, only held under 21 points once. This year QB Fisher, RB Gaither and WR Franklin all return. They also get 4 starters back on the Oline. As long as they stay healthy they should put up even better production and contend with Bryant for the top offense in the conference.

DEFENSE - Gardner-Webb's defense needed completely rebuilt by new HC Webb in '19. They allowed 490 ypg and 37 ppg the season prior and closed by allowing 790 yards vs Monmouth, so Lamb had his work cut out for him. They improved slightly to 36 ppg and 461 ypg in '19. They showed more development in spring of '21 when they held 3 of their 4 foes to 24 points or less and gave up 28 ppg overall (351 ypg). Last year they looked like the same old poor defense in their first 5 games vs FCS foes, allowing 39.6 ppg (526 ypg) in their first 5 games vs FBS and FCS foes then allowed just 27.4 ppg and 322 ypg. Overall they allowed 30.5 ppg and 392 ypg. Seven starters return on defense this year including 1st Tm All Big South DE Ty French and LB William McRaney. This is an improving defense and they get 14 of their top 22 tacklers back including their top 3.

2022 - GW won just 1 game in '17 then 3 in '18 and were -198 ypg. Carroll McCray was let go with a 27-53 record. Tre Lamb was brought in to spark the offense. They went 2-10 in '10 and were still -141 ypg but did improve from -113 to -86 vs Big South foes. They went 2-2 in their spring season and were -21 ypg. Last year the majority of their roster returned having gained valuable experience in the spring and Lamb found his QB in Bailey Fisher from Tenn Tech. They opened with 2 losses to FBS foes then smoked a lower division school 56-0. The Bulldogs beat Western Carolina 52-34 despite getting outgained 650-552. They lost 5 of their next 6 but nearly upset #10 Kennesaw St. The Bulldogs led 30-27 and allowed the game winning 15 yard td with :11 left. They followed that up with 6 and 8 point losses sub .500 teams. In their finale they dominated NCA&T with a 415-168 yd edge but only won 35-27. GW finished 4-7 but was +5 ypg. 16 starters return and with Kennesaw and Monmouth leaving this conference is wide open so they could get their first conference title since 2003. They only play 4 home games but host Bryant and NC A&T. Their non-conf schedule is brutal with 3 FBS teams. GW was picked 3rd in the preseason but also had the most players honored by the conference and this is our pick to win the Big South.