

# ILLINOIS ST REDBIRDS

## POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2022

**QUARTERBACKS** - QB Bryce Jefferson was a backup as a true freshman in '19 before taking over as the starter last spring after Brady Davis departed (1570, 52%, 9-9, 160 rush). Jefferson struggled in the spring with a 3-6 ratio while completing less than 50% of his passes. Jefferson really struggled against top competition like North Dakota St (9-26-124-1-1). Jefferson finished with 640 yards in 4 spring games and was the only QB to attempt a pass. Last year Jefferson opened the season as the starter but was injured early vs Eastern Illinois. Jackson Waring started 5 games on the season. He led with 879 (54.6%, 6-4). Jefferson returned to start 3 more games later in the season but missed 2 of the last 3 and finished with just 494 (47.9%, 3-3, 40 rush). This year Jefferson departs but Waring returns and they added Minnesota transfer Zach Annexstad (PS#94) who started the first 7 games for the Gophers back in 2018 (1277, 52%, 9-7).

**RUNNING BACKS** - Last year ISU had to replace a nearly 2,000 yard rusher from '19 in James Robinson who went undrafted then ran for 1,000 yds as a rookie for the Jacksonville Jaguars. The Redbirds did feature two solid RBs in the spring in Pha'leak Brown who led with 271 (4.8) while Nigel White was a very capable spell back with 230 (5.8). Cole Mueller was a scout team player in '19. He missed the spring due to injury but returned in the fall. He had a two game stretch where he had 178 vs South Dakota and 159 vs Western Illinois. He became their workhorse and led with 977 (5.2, 72 rec). Brown was #2 but only had 163 (3.5) while White came in third with 125 (3.8). All 3 return this year including Mueller (2nd Tm All MVFC LY). This is clearly the strength of the offense this year.

**RECEIVERS** - In '19 Kasper Rutkiewicz led with 429 (18.7) and Andrew Edgar was #2 with 321 (16.9). Three of their top 5 returned in spring with Edgar departing. Andrew Nagel had just 178 (11.9) in '19 but led in the spring with 188 (23.5). Taylor Grimes was #2 with 162 (20.3). Rutkiewicz only had 4 catches. Last year Grimes departed so only 2 of their top 5 were back from '19. Nagel had 100 vs Western Michigan and Southern Illinois each but also had 4 games where he had 0 or 1 catch. He still led with 407 and a 21.3 ypc with a team high 3 td's. TE Bryson Deming was #2 with just 184 (13.1). Rutkiewicz added just 155 (14.1). This year Nagel and Rutkiewicz depart. They do get 4 of their top 6 back but no one topped 200 yards last year. They add 3 FBS transfers including Micah Jones (PS#77, Notre Dame), Brock Annexstad (PS#458, Minnesota) and Jerome Buckner (PS#387, 4 st, 121, 12.1, Ohio). They are more experienced this year and the transfer additions make them a little better.

**OFFENSIVE LINE** - The Redbirds rushed for 182 (4.2) in '19 but allowed 30 sacks and 11.2%. In spring they increased to 173 rush ypg but ypc actually dropped to 4.0 and they gave up 12 sacks (10.9%). Last year 2 starters were back from '19 and 2 more gained valuable experience in spring. They lost Peyton Ashe after 2 games due to injury. They rushed for 128 ypg (3.6) and 33 sacks (14.7%). They struggled even more vs MVFC foes, averaging just 108 (2.9). This year they lose 2nd Team MVFC LG Trey Georgie (9 st) and RT Cole Anderson (11 st). Three starters are back including C Drew Bones (11 st) who was named Preseason 2nd Team All MVFC. Ashe returns from injury and

they add Kentucky transfer Jake Pope (PS#146). They are more experienced and more talented so they should finally get that sack percentage down but this has been a weakness for a few years now.

**DEFENSIVE LINE** - The Dline has been a strength for Illinois St for quite some time. They haven't allowed 4.0 ypc in a season since 2013. In '19 the Redbirds allowed just 117 (3.2) and 139 (3.6) vs MVFC foes. They led the MVFC with 48 sacks, led by DE Romeo McKnight (12 sk) and DT John Ridgeway (#9 tkl'r). McKnight transferred to Charlotte prior to spring yet they only allowed 95 (2.9) and had 9 sacks in 4 games (6.9%). Last year Ridgeway transferred to Arkansas and they only had 1 starter back from '19. The Redbirds were still solid, allowing 139 (3.6) but their 20 sacks (5.4%) were a far cry from '19's production. This year ISU loses Jacob Powell (10 st, #11 tkl'r, 1.5 sk, 7 tfl) and Michael Gomez (#12 tkl'r, 2 tfl). Three starters return including DE Brandon Deming (#10 st, #7 tkl'r, 2.5 sk, 6 tfl) and they added 4 FBS transfers. They were very young last year and should get back on track with more experience.

**LINEBACKERS** - Only 2 of their top 7 LB's from '19 were back in the spring. They did have 3 starters get experience and came back in the fall with great productino. Shanon Reid was a transfer from Tennessee that they brought in for spring. He had 18 tackles then returned in fall and led with 86 (5 pd). This year Reid (4th Tm MVC) departs but the Redbirds have their #2, #3, #6, #14, #18 and #19 tacklers all back. Two starters return including Zeke Vandenburg who was tied for a 3 way lead last year with 8.5 tfl's. The loss of Reid hurts but they built great depth last year.

**DEFENSIVE BACKS** - ISU finished 4th in the MVFC in Pass Defense Efficiency in '19, allowing 186 ypg (57.9%, 18-19). In spring they allowed 174 pass ypg (51.5%, 4-6) and was #1 in Pass Defense Efficiency. They lost Charles Woods to transfer to West Virginia but still had 2 starters back in the secondary. ISU allowed 214 pass ypg (59.3%, 15-12) and they dropped to #6 in the pass D rankings. This year they lose 3rd Tm All-MVC Clayton IsBell (9 st, #4 tkl'r, 3 pbu, 3 int), Iverson Brown (11 st, #5 tkl'r, 1 int), 2nd Tm All-MVFC Jerrell Jackson (11 st, #8 tkl'r, 10 pbu, 3 int). This is a depleted unit but they get back their #9, #10, #13 and #17 tacklers. They added 3Y starter DeAndre Lamont from Central Ark (63 tkl, 8 pbu, All-ASun), Larry Tracy (PS#108, Indiana) and Sy Dabney (BG, 75 tkl LY). With the portal additions they should at least match last year's group

**SPECIAL TEAMS** - In spring Aidan Bresnahan made all 5 fg attempts (L/43). JT Bohlken averaged 41.5 ypp. Last year Bresnahan made 5 of 9 fg's (L/47) and Bohiken made his only 2 tries (L/34). Bohiken averaged 44.1 ypp last year and his net rose to 41.3. Once again their return game was lackluster. Both Bresnahan and Bohiken depart so this unit will need rebuild

**COACHES** - Brock Spack was hired here in 2009 and has led the Redbirds to 5 FCS Playoff Appearances. He was the DC at Purdue from 1997-2008 prior to coming here. New OC Tony Peterson comes here after spending LY as OC at Illinois. He was OC at App St in '20, ECU ('16-'18), LA Tech ('13-'15) and Marshall ('10-'12). Travis Niekamp is the 4th year DC. This is his 2nd stint here (LB Cch '98-'99). He was ST Coor at Montana for 2 years and DC at ULM in '15.

## FORECAST

**OFFENSE** - In '18 ISU averaged 32 ppg/397 ypg. They fell to 20 ppg and 300 ypg in '19 and the struggles were worse against Missouri Valley foes, where they put up just 15 ppg and 248 ypg. In their last 5 games they averaged just 51 pass ypg and were held under 300 yards in 9 of their 15 games. In spring they only put up 17 ppg but ypg did rise to 333. Last year only 4 starters from '19 returned. They averaged 18 ppg and 251 ypg. Against MVFC foes they scored 15 ppg and 241 ypg. This year they return their top passer, a 1,000 yd rusher, three of their top 4 receivers, 3 starters on the Oline and they added a QB with Big 10 starting experience. The Redbirds finished 10th in scoring offense and 11th in total offense last year so their is really only one way to go and they certainly look better on paper.

**DEFENSE** - ISU's defense carried them deep into the FCS Playoffs in '19 when they allowed just 16 ppg and 303 ypg and they held their foes 80 ypg below their season average (#4 in FCS). After giving up 22 ppg/264 ypg in spring they returned with a less experienced defense in spring and allowed 21 ppg but ypg rose to 356. This year they get 6 starters back but added a load of transfers at DL and DB. Only 6 of their top 12 tacklers are back but #13-#20 all return and they are more experienced than they were entering last year.

**2022** - Brock Spack is the all-time leader in wins at Illinois St and led the Redbirds to the FCS National Title in '14 where they lost to NDSU. In '19 they were 8-4 heading into the FCS Playoffs, upset SE Missouri St and Central Arkansas before losing to NDSU again 9-3. The Redbirds finished 10-5 but were -3 ypg and against MVFC foes they were -58 ypg. They went just 1-3 in spring but was +64 ypg. Last year their lack of offense caught up with them. After blowing out Butler, they were shutout by Western Michigan and held to 57 yards. They scored the GW td with 1:54 against Eastern Illinois then lost 3 straight to ranked foes by 18, 21 and 20 points. They upset #15 South Dakota on the road 20-14 but lost the following week at Western Illinois in a game they led 28-13 3Q. The Redbirds pulled their 2nd ranked upset, beating Northern Iowa 13-10 2OT. They lost their last 2 by 7 & 5 points to finishe 4-7 and were -105 ypg. This year they have 14 starters returning and hope to spark the offense with a new OC. Last year's schedule was brutal with 5 ranked teams and a strong MAC team. They were -121 ypg vs MVFC foes. This year they open with a trip to Camp Randall vs Wisconsin and as usual will have to navigate a tough Missouri Valley schedule and were only picked to finish 8th in the Valley but they should be better with last year's season under their belt and they have 5 players who were named All-MVFC so we think they will at least top last year's 4 wins.