

# MERCER BEARS

## POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2022

**QUARTERBACKS** - Mercer used two QB's in '19. Robert Riddle started the first 7, completing 57% and threw for 1,453 with a 15-11 ratio (124 rush, 3.9) but was injured and missed the last 5. Kaelan Riley started the last 4 and threw for 1,023 (54%, 5-5) while Harrison Frost added 101 (75%, 1-2). Riddle transferred to Chattanooga. Mercer split their season between 3 fall games and 8 spring games in '20-'21. Frost started the 3 fall games then true frosh Carter Peevy took the job in the spring. Frost threw for 407 in the fall then added 94 in the spring (501, 60%, 4-4). Peevy became the first QB at Mercer to throw for 400+ yards in a game with 406 vs Mercer and led the Bears to their best season in their SoCon history with 5 wins. He threw for 1,304 (54%, 8-4). Last year Riddle transferred to Chattanooga. Peevy was back but he got beat out by Coastal Carolina transfer Fred Payton who started 11 games at Coastal Carolina over 3 seasons and had a 21-11 ratio. Payton threw for 1,661 (57.4%, 12-10, 128 rush). Peevy added 293 (60.9%, 2-2). Payton threw for 2 td's vs Bama and if he cuts down on the int's then they've got one of the best QB's in the SoCon.

**RUNNING BACKS** - Mercer runs a Furman type offense with a TB, FB and Jokers (AB/Slot's). They did lose their top RB last year in Deandre Johnson who had 414 (7.4) in '19 and 386 (6.2) in '20-'21. App St transfer RB Nakendrick Clark returned and was #2 (382, 3.8) playing only in the spring. Joker Fred Davis was #3 with 273 (3.7) and returned as well. Davis moved to TB and rushed for 847 (5.2) and was #2 in the SoCon with 14 td's, plus he had 117 receiving. Brandon Marshall was #2 with 339 (4.8). Al Wooten added 136 (7.2). Davis was 2nd Team All-SoCon but he departs. Marshall and Wooten return so they do have some experience and are in the same shape as they were last year. They also add Coastal Carolina transfer Fred Jackson.

**RECEIVERS** - In the spring they had to replace their top 3 WR's (647, 558, 466 yds). Georgia transfer WR Ty James led with 518 (17.3), Joker Ethan Dirrim was #2 with 417 (19.0) and Lenior Rhyne transfer TE Drake Starks was #3 (220, 20.0). Last year all 3 returned and they added Gardner Webb transfer Devron Harper (2nd Tm All-Big South). James led with 611 (23.5). Devron Harper was #2 with 293 (16.4). Dirrim was #3 with 371 (16.7). Parker Wroble had 220 receiving (10.5) and 124 rushing (4.1). This year only Dirrim departs so 3 of their top 4 are back, making this another strong unit.

**OFFENSIVE LINE** - The offensive line is built smaller and quicker in an offense that mirrors the Air Force offense. Last year they returned 5 OL who started at least 7 games in the fall/spring season. They benefitted from having the same lineup for the first 9 games and rushed for 170 (4.1) vs FCS foes which was their most since '16. This year they lose 1st Tm All SoCon RG John Pie (10 st) and LG John Harris (11 st). Three starters return so they aren't as experienced as last year but this is still a solid unit.

**DEFENSIVE LINE** - Mercer was gashed on the ground for 211 ypg (4.8, 12 sk) in '18 and things got worse in '19 when they allowed 269 (5.7) with just 10 sacks. In their combined spring/fall season they were much better, allowing 184 (4.5) and over their last 5 gave up just 131 (4.4). They also jumped to 28 sacks (9.2%). Last year they lost DE Jaden Taylor but the other 3 starters were back. The Bears allowed just 148 (3.9), their best since 2013 but sacks dropped back to 12 (4.2%). This year they lose NT DJ McDaniel (10 st, #10 tkl'r) and Barron King (#17 tkl'r). Six of their top 8 return including 1st Team DE Solomon Zubairu (#7 tkl'r) who led with 5 sacks last year. This has been their most improved unit the last few years and we now consider it a strength.

**LINEBACKERS** - True Frosh Issac Dowling had 90 tackles and led with 6.5 sacks in their fall/spring season. Dowling led with 73 tackles and was tied for #1 with 7.5 tfl's last year with #2 tackler Ken Standley. This year both Dowling and Standley return along with their #5 and #9 tacklers. Gone are Alvin Ward (4 st, #13 tkl'r), Jordan Williams (3 st, #14 tkl'r) and Zach Hopkins (#15 tkl'r). A lot of their depth is gone but their top 4 are all back so this is their best unit on defense.

**DEFENSIVE BACKS** - Mercer only allowed 191 pass ypg but gave up 66% completions in their fall/spring season. Last year they had all 4 starters back including their #2 and #7 tacklers. They allowed 179 pass ypg and just 59.9% with a 13-12 ratio which put them at #2 in the SoCon in pass defense efficiency. This year Mercer loses CB Yashyn McKee (11 st, #8 tkl'r), S Luke Ward (8 st, #4 tkl'r, 2 int), CB Harrison Poole (3 st, #5 tkl'r, 3 pbu) and S Kainalu Pu'u Robinson (2 st, 14 tkl). Two starters return and they get their #3, #12 and #16, #18 and #19 tacklers back. They aren't as experienced heading into last year but depth was solid and their numbers will only dip slightly.

**SPECIAL TEAMS** - P Caleb Dowden had a 40.2 avg and hit 5-10 FG with a long of 45 and one miss from 50+. He was back last year but was beat out by Devin Folser. Only their top KR moved on. Folser hit 10-17 fg's and had a long of 51. Trey Turk averaged 40.6 ypg with a 33.1 net. Devron Harper averaged 12.1 PR and 21.3 KR. This year they Bears get Folser, Turk and Harper all back so they should rank near the top of the SoCon in Special Teams.

**COACHES** - Drew Cronic was a two year HC at Division II Lenoir Rhyne where he took the Bears from 3-8 season in 2017 to a 25-3 record under his guidance over two seasons. After being named the AFCA National Coach of the Year for the 2018 season, he led the Bears to a school record-tying 13 wins in 2019 and a second consecutive berth in the NCAA Quarterfinals. LR carried a perfect season all the way to the quarterfinal round of the NCAA Division II Playoffs in 2019. He was the OC at Furman in 2017. Bob Bodine is in his 3rd year as OC and also coaches the Oline. He was OC for 2 years at Lenoir Rhyne under Cronic. He also coached at Army in '14. DC Joel Taylor also is in his 3rd year after following Cronic from Lenoir Rhyne. He was a def asst at The Citadel from '14-'18. David Cole is the 3rd year ST Coord.

## FORECAST

**OFFENSE** - The Mercer offense put up 376 ypg and 31 ppg in 2018, then slipped a little to 359 ypg and 27 ppg in 2019. In their fall/spring they fell further to 333 ypg and 24 ppg with a first time starting QB. They did improve from 345 ypg and 26 ppg in SoCon play to 358 ypg and 27 ppg. Last year 8 starters returned. They averaged 27.6 ppg and 369 ypg vs FCS competition. Against SoCon foes they put up 29 ppg and 388 ypg. 7 starters are back this year. They have 2 experienced QB's, two of their top 3 rushers, 3 of their top 4 WR's and 3 starting OL. The Bears were #4 in the SoCon in scoring offense and total offense. They could be just as good this year.

**DEFENSE** - The defense was a major reason for the coaching change as they allowed 472 ypg and 32 ppg in 2018 and 473 ypg and 35 ppg in 2019. They made immediate progress in their fall/spring season, allowing 30 ppg and 375 ypg. Last year the Bears only allowed 23 ppg and 328 ypg. Against conference foes they allowed just 22 ppg and 344 ypg. Seven starters are back and they get 4 of their top 5 tacklers back. They were #3 in scoring defense and #2 in total defense in the SoCon last year. They've improved each season under Drew Cronic and we expect that to continue.

**2022** - Drew Crowe enters his 3rd year as head man at Mercer. Mercer was 4-8 the year prior to Cronic in '19. Mercer played a short three game fall schedule and in their opening game trailed Jacksonville St 34-21 but drove 80 yards for a late garbage TD, 34-28. Mercer had a 10-8 FD edge vs Army but trailed 21-3 and lost 49-3 only being out FD'd 21-14. In their last fall game they came up short vs Abeline Christian 20-17 (292-397). Cronic then faced a full 8 game conference schedule in the spring. They opened 1-2 to fall to 1-5 but then reeled off 4 straight wins before a season ending loss to Samford. Through it all not a single player missed a single game due to Covid. Overall the final record was 5-6 (5-3 in SoCon!) but I consider it a solid year for a first year head coach and they were -26 ypg in league play after being -143 and -64 ypg the previous two years. Last year Mercer was picked 6th in the SoCon by the Media but we said they had a shot to end a streak of 4 straight losing seasons. Mercer started 4-1 with the loss coming at Bama by 34. They were gave up a pick 6 on the first play against VMI then fumbled the kickoff and trailed 14-0 less than 2 minutes in before getting crushed 45-7. They dominated Wofford with a 567-176 yard edge and won 45-14, beat The Citadel by 27 on the road then beat Chattanooga 10-6 despite getting outgained by 122 yards. They met ETSU with the SoCon Title and a playoff spot on the line. Mercer led 35-31 but gave up a td with 1:47 left then missed a 42 yard fg. Mercer's 7 wins were their most since 2013 (6-2 in SoCon) and was +82 ypg and +44 in SoCon. This year 14 starters are back. They travel to Chattanooga but host ETSU and Furman. They also have winnable non-conf games vs Morehead St and at Gardner-Webb while also traveling to Auburn. This team has improved each season under Cronic and this could be the season that he gets them to the playoffs.