

NORTH DAKOTA FIGHTING HAWKS

POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2022

QUARTERBACKS - North Dakota had to replace their starter from '19 heading into their spring season. Tommy Schuster completed 65.5% for 1,428 yards with a 10-5 ratio. Quincy Vaughn threw a 21 yard td pass on his only completion of the season in a backup role. Last year both Schuster and Vaughn returned. Schuster only topped 300 yards once but that was against Utah St when he hit for 345. He finished with 2,493 yards, completing 65.5% again and a 13-7 ratio with 89 rush yards. Vaughn was given a role as a dual threat QB each game and ran for 134 (3.5) but only threw for 70 yards (52.9%, 3-0). This year Schuster and Vaughn both return. Schuster is an accurate veteran and Vaughn's role may expand. They are in good shape with two experienced QB's. Behind them rFr Simon Romfo has been impressive in practice but is undersized at 5'11" 190.

RUNNING BACKS - The Fighting Hawks had to replace their leading rusher (530, 4.3) heading into their spring season. Dillon Gee was their top returnee after rushing for 210 (4.8) in '19. Otis Weah led in the spring with 730 (7.2) and finished 4th in the Walter Payton Award voting. He had 163 vs South Dakota and 129 on just 13 carries vs North Dakota's St's vaunted D. Weah returned last year and finished 5th in the Valley with 818 (5.1) and added 161 receiving in just 9 games. He had 156 vs Missouri St and 125 vs Western Illinois. Isaiah Smith was a solid 2nd option, finishing with 356 (6.8) and had 111 vs Southern Illinois and 125 vs Drake when Weah was absent. Luke Skokna was #3 with 221 (6.3,) and had 183 receiving. He had 123 vs Drake. Weah departs but Smith and Skokna should pick up the mantle quite easily. They both had over a 6.0 ypc and North Dakota's top 2 rushing performances last year came when Weah was out. They also add Northern Iowa transfer Tyler Hoosman who led the Panthers in spring with 373 (4.2).

RECEIVERS - This was an inexperienced group heading into spring but they did return Garrett Maag who had 610 (10.3) in '19. Maag doubled his ypc in spring and led with 523 (20.9). Bo Belquist had 255 (10.2) and Jake Richter was #3 with 167 (13.9). They had 6 WR's with at least 1 start return in '21. Belquist led this time with 535 (10.3). Brock Boltmann played multiple roles and finished #2 with 377 (9.9). He also rushed for 30 yds and threw 2 td passes. Richter had 328 (13.1). TE Zavalney was #4 with 303 (15.2). Maag missed 2 games and had a disappointing season, finishing with just 266 (12.7). This year they lose Boltmann (3 st) and Richter (1 st). Six of their top 9 are back including Bolquist and if Maag gets back to his spring production then they are just as good. 6'6" Soph Elijah Klein has battled injuries but could have a breakout season and JUCO transfer Red Wilson has made plays every day in

camp. This is their deepest WR corps they've had in years and will be better than last year's unit.

OFFENSIVE LINE - The Fighting Hawks Oline did an admirable job opening holes for their RB's in spring when they rushed for 185 ypg (5.2). They did an even better job protecting QB Schuster, allowing just 2 sacks (1%) in 7 games! Last year North Dakota returned 4 starters from spring including 3rd Team Preseason All-American Matt Waletzko. They had to replace their RG but had 7 back with starting experience. They rushed for 163 (4.8) and allowed just 8 sacks (2.1%) with 3 coming in their finale when Waletzko was out. This year they lose 1st Team FCS All-American Waletzko who was drafted in the 5th round by Dallas. Also gone is C Babak Ghadaksaz (11 st). They are less experienced than they were coming into last season and they struggled more when Waletzko was out last year. This is still a solid Oline but they will almost certainly give up more sacks this year.

DEFENSIVE LINE - North Dakota runs a 3-4 defense. Their rush D was their weakness in '19 when they allowed 193 rush ypg (4.4) but did have 29 sacks (8.4%). In spring they were much better, allowing 137 (3.8) with 24 sacks (11%). The Fighting Hawks came back in fall with their entire DLine back. They allowed 139 (4.0) with 26 sacks (8.8%). This year they lose DE Quentin Seguin (10 st, #8 tk'l'r, 2 tfl), DT Chandon Pierre (4 st, #10 tk'l'r, 1.5 tfl). Two starters return and this is a quietly productive group with their #11, #12 and #15 tacklers back.

LINEBACKERS - In spring North Dakota returned 2 starters including #3 tk'l'r Noah Larson. OLB Jaxson Turner led with 5 sacks and had 29 tackles. Devon Krzanowski was #1 with 51 tackles and led with 6.5 tfl's (3 sk). Last year all 3 returned. Krzanowski led with 68 tackles (5 tfl). Larson was #2 with 59 tackles (5 tfl) and Turner led with 6 sacks (#7 tk'l'r). This year they lose Larson (11 st), Turner (11 st) and OLB Ty Shannon (#6 tk'l'r, 10 st, 2.5 sk, 2.5 tfl). Krzanowski is the only starter that returns, their next 3 LB's combined for 37 tackles. Soph OLB Wyatt Pedigo has potential for a breakout season. This is where they took the biggest losses so this is a big concern this year.

DEFENSIVE BACKS - The Fighting Hawks were gashed for nearly 400 pass yards in 3 different games in '19 but also held 5 foes to under 120 passing so they only gave up 205 ypg (58.1%). In spring they allowed 224 ypg (58.4%). They returned 3 year starting S Jordan Canady and CB Hayden Galvin. North Dakota allowed 197 pass ypg but 62.6% (18-12) and finished 8th in Pass D Efficiency. This year they lose S Canady (9 st, #3 tk'l'r, 2 pd), 4th Team All MVFC CB Evan Holm (11 st, #4 tk'l'r, 2 int, 4 pbu), S Galvin (10 st, #5 tk'l'r, 3 pd) and Caleb Nelson (2 st, #17 tk'l'r). They added JC transfer Devin Hembry to compete at CB with Richard Agyekum and Clayton Bishop. The secondary needs rebuilt and they lost their top 3 guys so this is their biggest concern.

SPECIAL TEAMS - In spring Adam Stage made 3 of 4 fg's (L/46). Last year he returned. Stage made 5 of 6 fg's (L/46) and Brady Stevens made 5 of 7 L/41). Cade Peterson averaged 40.4 (37.9 net). Evan Holm had 410 KR yards (20.5) and Luke Skokna had 52 PR yards (10.4). This year they lose Stage but Stevens returns along with Peterson and Holm. Their kicking game was solid last year and overall this is an above average unit.

COACHES - Bubba Schweigert is in his 9th year as HC. He has led the Fighting Hawks to three trips to the FCS Playoffs in '16, '19 and '20, tying for two conference titles. Their 4th year OC/QB Coach is Danny Freund who has coached here since '11. Their 3rd year DC, Brett Holinka was OLB coach here in '19. He was the ST Coor/LB Coach at Winona St for 3 years and DC at U-Mary for 1. Shawn Kostich is the 9th year ST's Coordinator.

FORECAST

OFFENSE - North Dakota averaged between 25 and 30 ppg each year from '14 through spring of '21. They put up 27 ppg and 384 ypg in '19 but were better against Big Sky foes, averaging 29 ppg and 419 ypg. They moved to the Missouri Valley in spring of '21 and put up 30 ppg and 395 ypg. Last year the Fighting Hawks returned 10 starters including All-Americans at RB and LT. They only put up 24.4 ppg but ypg went up to 403. They averaged 29 ypg more than their foes allowed on average (#32 in FCS). This year 7 starters return including QB Schuster. They lose All-Americans RB Weah and LT Waletzko who was drafted in the 5th round by Dallas. The Oline is a concern but their RB's should be fine with two back that averaged over 6.0 ypc and their WR unit is their deepest in years. Their offense was better than their production indicated last year and we think they get back above that 25 ppg marker they set consistently.

DEFENSE - In '19 North Dakota allowed 398 ypg and 29 ppg. They were better in the spring when they held foes to just 21 ppg and 361 ypg. Last year nearly the entire defense returned in-tact with strengths at LB and DB. They allowed just 20.3 ppg and 337 ypg, holding foes 42 ypg below their average (#24 in FCS) and only twice allowed more than 24 points to FCS schools. This year is a much different story. They only return 4 starters and must replace 8 of their top 10 tacklers. Both their LB's and DB's are depleted so it isn't likely they match last year's excellent season. LB Krzanowski and CB Siegel were both 2nd Team Preseason All-MVFC but the rest of this defense is inexperienced.

2022 - 2019 was North Dakota's last season in the Big Sky. They finished 7-5, losing in the first round of the FCS Playoffs to Nicholls 24-6 and were -14 ypg but also -8 TO's. They moved to the Missouri Valley in the spring and had a surprising 4-0 start with 3 straight wins over ranked teams including over eventual FCS runner-up South Dakota St. They lost at rival North Dakota St 34-13 and were -152 yards. The Fighting Hawks were co-Champs of the Missouri Valley and won their first ever FCS Playoff game, soundly beating Missouri St 44-10 but lost to James Madison 34-21 the following week. They finished 5-2 and were +34 ypg. Last year they opened 1-0 and led Utah St 21-7 1Q. They only trailed 24-20 to start the 4Q but lost by 24 in a misleading final. That was the story of their season as they suffered 5 more losses by 7 or less. They led eventual Nat'l Champs NDSU 9-7 at half but lost by 6. They were -3 net close losses and finished 5-6 but were +66 ypg and +60 ypg vs Valley foes. 11 starters return this year. North Dakota was picked 7th in preseason and they have 11 starters back. They miss Western Illinois and Illinois St, both who were picked #11 and #8 in preseason. Their two easiest conference games (vs YSU & ISU) are on the road. This was a very unlucky team last year but they are less experienced and the schedule is extremely unfavorable so we don't see them finishing in the top half of the conference.