

NORTHERN ARIZONA LUMBERJACKS

POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2022

QUARTERBACKS -Case Cookus in his first season as a full-time starter in 2019, threw for 4,114 (60%, 31-71). In the spring of 2021 season they had to replace Cookus. They brought in Oklahoma St transfer Deondre Wudtee. He started all 5 games throwing for 1,080 (58.4%, 4-1). Backup QB Jeff Widener hit 213-24-189-0-2. Both returned and they also added Oregon transfer Cale Millen (PS#33) and true frosh RJ Martinez (PS#232). Wudtee started the opener but was knocked out of the game with injury & for the season played in just 3 (3-11-(4)-0-0). Widener started the next 2 but was replaced early 2Q vs Arizona by Martinez, who was making his first appearance. Martinez went on to lead the upset victory & started 7 of the last 8. He threw for 1,714 (61.8%) with an impressive 14-2 ratio & also finished as the #2 rusher (187, 3.5, 5 td), Martinez was the Big Sky Frosh of the Year. Nico Haen played in 3 games including starting vs Montana, but for the season threw for just 18-36-159-0-2 (21 rush). Widenwer finished with 542 (.60.0%, 3-5) & was the #4 rusher (138, 4.2) Millen played in 7 (7-15-42-1-1, 3 rush). This year they lose Millen & Wudtee but return their top 3 & Martinez should have another solid season.

RUNNING BACKS - Cory Young led the team in rushing in 2018 with 470 (4.6) while Joe Logan was a close #2 with 437 (4.7), Brandon Porter #3 (379, 6.1) and Aramis Aldredge was #4 (221, 5.7). In 2019 they had to replace Young but Logan took over and led with an impressive 860 (4.5). George Robinson was #2 with 165 (4.6) followed by #3 Nate Stinson with 120 (5.2) and #4 Aldredge with 80 (4.4). In the spring of '21 season 3 of the top 4 departed. They returned Robinson who finished #2 with 192 (3.7). Draycen Hall led with just 241 (5.0) in 5 games. Jeff Widener was #3 with 46 (2.3). Last year they returned their top 2 but Kevin Daniels, who had just 24 (2.2) in the spring burst onto the scene. He started all 10 games he played (injured UNC) and became NAU's first 1,000 yd rusher since 2015. In the season finale he rushed for 280 yds to finish with 1,146 (6.2, 7 td, 141 rec) & was a Frosh AA (2nd Tm BSC). Robinson was the #3 rusher (160, 3.5, 2 td) behind QB Martinez. Hall finished as the #5 rusher (120, 3.4) behind QB Widener but was also the #4 receiver. Tyler Grubbs was #6 (50, 2.6, 1 td). All 4 RB's return and if Daniel's can remain healthy, he could approach that 1,000 yd barrier once again.

RECEIVERS - In 2019 Brandon Porter had an outstanding season with 85 catches for 1,198 yards (14.1). Stacy Chukwumezie had just 50 receptions but at 19.3 ypc was #2 with 963 yards. Hendrix Johnson was #3 and a frosh AA with 828 (13.8). In the spring of 2021 all 3 returned but Porter missed the first two games and was not 100% the rest and finished just #4 with 137 (15.2). Johnson led with 273 (13.0) and Chukwumezie was #2 with 270 (16.9, 1 td). Coleman Owen finished #3 with 202 (12.6, 2 td). Last year the top 4 returned but Porter played in just 3 (32, 6.4, 1 td) & Chukwumezie was OFY with a knee injury after starting the first four. Chukwumezie still finished as the #6 receiver with 213 (13.3, 1 td). Owen earned Frosh AA & led with 713 (16.6, 6 td). Johnson was #2 with 509 (18.2, 5 td). Jamal Gaspie had 11-167 rec vs Idahos St and finished as the #3 receiver with 332 (12.8, 1 td). This year they return 6 of their 7 receivers but lose TE Matthew Kempton (11 st), who finished #5 with 214 (7.4 1 td). They also add Morgan St transfer TE Isaiah Gerena (4-38 LY) & UMass transfer Tray Pettway (PS#99JC), who started 4 last year finishing with 217 (12.8) rec. This is a deep unit that should help QB Martinez put up some improved pass numbers this season.

OFFENSIVE LINE - In 2019 the OLine opened holes for just 123 (4.3) rush (#11 BSC) while allowing 18 sacks (3.5%). They had to replace two starters off the OLine in the spring of 2021 season. Their rush numbers were almost identical at 126 (3.5) but that was #6 BSC but they allowed 11 sacks (6.4%) in just 5 games. Last year all 5 OLine starters returned and they added UNLV OL Donovan Outlaw & Cal transfer PJ Poutasi. They improved to #3 in the BSC with 173 ypg rush (4.4) but did allow 24 sacks (6.5%). This year they lose LT Outlaw, who started the first 10 last year. They return 7 OL who combined for the other 45 starts including three 11 game starters in LG Poutasi, C/RG Jalen Hooper & 3rd Tm BSC RT Jonas Leader, who has started 32 consecutive games. They also add Oklahoma transfer Noah Nelson (PS#60) & UTEP transfer Michael Flood. This is a talented & experienced unit and should again pave the way for one of the Big Sky's best rush attacks.

DEFENSIVE LINE - Under a new coaching staff in 2019, NAU despite similar numbers dropped from #7 in the BSC in rush defense (203 ypg, 4.7 ypc) with 21 sacks to #11 (215 ypg, 5.1 ypc) with 20 sacks. In the spring of '21 season the DLine lost 2 of their top 4 in Aaron Andrews (43 tkl, 4 tfl) & Emmanuel Joseph (19 tkl, 1 sk). They returned 2 of their top 3 in Carson Taylor (43 tkl, 5.5 sk, 4.5 tfl) and Elooi Kwete (28 tkl, 3 sk, 2 tfl). They allowed just 165 ypg rush (#6 BSC, 4.6 ypc) and had 11 sacks in their 5 games. Last year they returned their top 5 DL in DE Carson Taylor (29 tkl, 3 sk), DE Elooi Kwete (18 tkl, 2 sk), DE Cosmas Kwete (11 tkl, 1 tfl), DT Nehemiah Magalei (8 tkl, 1 sk) & DL Malik Johnson (8 tkl, 1 sk). They allowed 162 ypg rush (#8 BSC, 4.5 ypc) with 21 sacks. This year they lose DE Taylor (6 st, 6 sk, 3 tfl) & DE Johnson (3 st, 17 tkl, 1 tfl). They return 5 DL who combined for 35 starts last year in DE Elooi Kwete (11 st, 45 tkl, sk, 4 tfl), DT Sheldon Newton (3 st, 22 tkl, 2 sk), DE Cosmas Kwete (6 st, 14 tkl, 2 sk, 3 tfl), NG Mark Ho Ching (10 st, 13 tkl, 1.5 sk, 1 tfl) & DE Magalei (5 st, 12 tkl, 1.5 sk). Despite the losses this is still an experienced group & should be on par with last years unit.

LINEBACKERS - The Lumberjacks run a 4-2-5 defense but we include the AXE position here. In 2019 the defense was learning a new system and finished last in the Big Sky in Scoring (41.3 ppg) and last in Total Defense (527 ypg). In the spring of '21 season they had to replace 3 of their top 4 LB's in Brooklyn Hardiman (#3 tkl'r, 69 tkl, 4 tfl), Keenan Mitchell (#5, 1 tfl) & Chris Jules (#7, 2.5 sk, 2 tfl). They returned #2 tkl'r Harrison Beemiller (69 tkl, 2.5 tfl, 1 int) along with #14 Hasten Laments (21 tkl, 3 tfl). They allowed 27.0 ppg (#7 BSC) & 443 ypg (#6). Last year they returned their top 5 LB's in #2 tkl'r Beemiller (33 tkl, 5.5 tfl), #4 Tristen Vance (26 tkl, 0.5 sk), #11 Jhasi Wilson (15 tkl, 2 tfl), Dyvine Wallace (8 tkl, 2 tfl) & Cejai Parrish (6 tkl). Despite playing three top 10 teams and an FBS foe they only slipped to allowing 30.0 ppg (#9 BSC) & 438 ypg (#11). This year the LB unit loses their top 3 in #2 tkl'r SLB Vance (11 st, 84 tkl, 5.5 tfl, 2 pbu), #3 WLB Beemiller (11 st, 77, 7.5 tfl, 3 pbu) & #7 AXE Parrish (6 st, 32 tkl, 1.5 tfl), who missed 3 games. They top returnee is LB Wilson (29 tkl, 4 tfl) & three that combined for 5 starts at AXE in Eddie McClendon (22 tkl), Wallace (17 tkl, 1 int) & Brady Shough (11 tkl, 1.5 tfl, 1 int). While their is some experience the loss of their top 3 may have them take a step back this season.

DEFENSIVE BACKS - In 2019, with a new defensive system, the Lumberjacks struggled against the pass allowing a Big Sky worst 312 ypg pass (65.3%) allowing a poor 27-7 ratio. For the 2021 spring season they lost 3 of their top 4 DB's in Khalil Dorsey (68 tkl, 12 pbu), Brian Barry (57 tkl, 1.5 tfl, 2 pbu) & Jalen Cook (46 tkl, 4 pbu). They returned #1 tkl'r Anthony Sweeney (83 tkl, 5 tfl, 5 pbu, 1 int) but their next returnee was CB Jacob Mouni (19 tkl, 1 pbu). They improved to #5 in Big Sky in Pass Efficiency Defense allowing 278 ypg pass (#7 BSC, 63.1%, 13-4). Last year they looked to return their top 7 DB's but #5 tkl'r Sweeney (24 tkl, 1 tfl, 1 int) missed the season with injury & former Auburn transfer John Marsh (#6, 2.5 tfl) left the team. Then #9 Brendan Johnson (17 tkl, 1.5 tfl, 2 pbu) was injured & OFY after starting the first 6. They still returned #1 tkl'r Morgan Vest (53 tkl, 2 tfl, 1 int, 5 pbu), #7 CB Devontae Ingram (18 tkl, 1 int, 2 pbu), #10 CB Jacob Mpungi (15 tkl, 1 pbu) & CB Colby Humphrey (9 tkl). While they were last in the Big Sky with 277 ypg pass allowed they were #7 in pass efficiency Def (59.8%) allowing a very respectable 17-14 ratio. This year they lose #6 tkl'r CB Ingram (5 st, 43 tkl, 3 int, 10 pbu) & #8 S Johnson (32 tkl, 1 int, 4 pbu). They return 8 DB's who combined for 33 starts last year led by 2nd Tm BSC S Morgan Vest (11 st, 4.5 tfl, 5 pbu) who led the Lumberjacks with 106 tkl & 5 int. They also get back #5 tkl'r CB Humphrey (6 st, 44 tkl, 2 int, 7 pbu), #11 S Trejan Apodaca (28 tkl, 1 int) & #14 CB Mpungi (19 tkl, 6 pbu). They also get back Sweeney, making this unit a very experienced unit that could improve on last year's numbers.

SPECIAL TEAMS - In 2019 NAU returned K Luis Aguilar (4-8 FG) & he set an NAU ssn record for kicking pts (118) & FG% (88%) hitting 22-25 & 59-59 XP earning 1st TM AA.. They also returned 3rd Tm BSC P DJ Armon (44.6 avg) & he averaged 45.8 ypp earning 3rd Tm AA. Both returned for the spring of '21 season. K Aguilar hit 9-10 FG & all 9 XP earning 1st Tm AA again. P Armon had 44.0 ypp. Both returned last year. K Aguilar hit just 9-17 FG & 32-33 XP and had 33 TN/57 KO. P Armon had just a 43.6 avg. This year they lose both kickers but they add McNeese transfer P Eemil Herranen (30.5 avg on 2 punts LY).

COACHES - HC Chris Ball enters his 4th season at NAU with a 12-16 record (9-12 BSC). Prior to coming to NAU, he was the DC at Memphis ('16-'18), Co-DC at Arizona St ('12-'15) & co-DC at Washington St ('08-'11). Aaron Pflugrad enters his 8th season at NAU including his 5th as OC. He came here after 2 yrs as a grad asst ay Arizona St. Jerry Partridge enters his 4th season as DC. He was formerly the DC at Delta St ('17-'18) and prior to that spent 20 seasons ('97-'16) as the HC at D-II Missouri Western St. Dave Ungerer returns for his 2nd season as STC/RB cch. He has been the STC at Maryland, Cal, Oregon St, Alabama & Washington St. He coached together with HC Ball at Alabama ('03-'07) & Washington St ('10-'11).

FORECAST

OFFENSE - In 2019 QB Case Cookus led the Big Sky's #2 Scoring (37.2 ppg) & Total Offense (484 ypg) with the Big Sky's #1 passing offense (361 ypg). In the Spring of 2021 season, the offense had to replace QB Cookus, 3 of their top 4 rushers (#2 returned) & 2 OL starters but returned their top 3 receivers. They also added Oklahoma St transfer QB Deondre Wudtee, who started all 5 games. They dropped to #7 in both Scoring (23.4 ppg) and Total Offense (379 ypg). Last year they returned Wudtee but he was injured in the opener, his only start & played in just 3. Backup QB Widener started the next 2 but with MAU down 13-0 in 2Q, True Frosh RJ Martinez replaced him and led the comeback upset victory. He started 7 of last 8 (out vs UM) and was named the Big Sky Frosh of Year. Another Frosh stepped up at RB in Kevin Daniels who thanks to 280 rush yards in the season finale became NAU's first 1,000 yd rusher since 2015 earning AA honors While they improved to #6 BSC in Total Offense (396 ypg), the slipped to #9 in Scoring (24.6 ppg). This year the offense return 9 starters, with their top 3 QB's, top 6 rushers, 5 of their top 6 receivers & 4 OL starters. The Offense should take a solid step up this season.,

DEFENSE - In 2019, the defense was learning a new system under a new DC. They went from allowing 32.2 ppg (#6 BSC) & 382 ypg (#2 BSC) in '18 to allowing an BSC worst 41.3 ppg & 527 ypg. In the 5 games of the spring of '21 season with just 5 starters back on defense they still improved to #6 in both Scoring (27.0 ppg) & Total Defense (443 ypg). Last year they returned all 11 starters but played 3 Top 10 teams & an FBS foe and slipped to allowing 30.0 ppg (#9 BSC) & 439 ypg (#11 BSC). This year the losses are heavy as they lose 6 of their top 9 tkl'r including 2 of their top 3. The defense returns 6 starters & get back their #5 tkl'r from the spring of '21, who missed last year with injury. They will be led by 2nd Tm BSC S Morgan Vest, who led NAU with 106 tkl & 5 int. While they may slip some, they are more experienced than you would expect, and may not drop far. but much will depend on how quickly the LB unit is rebuilt.

2022 - The Lumberjacks have only won the Big Sky Title twice in their history (1978 & 2003). They made the playoffs 5 times under former HC Jerome Soures (1998-2018) including in 2017 but after finishing just 4-6 in '18 brought in new HC Chris Ball. He opened his fir season 4-4 but finished 4-8. In the Covid shifted spring of '21 season, they won their last 2 gms to finish 3-2. Last year they opened with a 42-16 loss to #1 Sam Houston & lost their starting QB. They were 0-2 and down 13-0 2Q to Arizona before true Frosh QB Martinez, took hids first career snap & led the comeback victory their first vs Arizona since 1932 & their first ever over a PAC12 foe. Maybe a little too high off their huge win they lost in OT at Northern Colorado. They blew out Idaho St by 31 & Southern Utah by 24 before they were shutout by #19 Sacramento St 44-0. In a game with 8 lead changes they bear Idaho 38-31. They were 4-4 but then lost back-to-back games to #7 UC Davis & #9 Montana. They only trailed once (7-0) vs Cal Poly to close out the season 5-6. This year they open at Arizona St & at FBS bound Sam Houston before hosting former Big Sky foe North Dakota. While Montana drops off the schedule so does S Utah and they are replaced b Montana St & Webers St making the schedule close to last year's. HC's usually do well in their 3rd season but crazy 2020 may have put that back a year. This year if they can stay healthy, they should again flirt with a winning season, but may be a year or two away from returning to the playoffs.