

WESTERN ILLINOIS LEATHER-

POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2022

QUARTERBACKS - QB Connor Sampson passed for over 2,000 yds with a 13/9 TD/INT ratio in '19 in his first year as a starter. With the offense centered around his production, he averaged 291 passing ypg in spring of '21 with an 8-6 ratio. He topped 300 yards in 3 of their 6 games and finished with 1,744. Last year Sampson started every game. He threw for 367 vs Ball St, 425 vs Eastern Washington and 449 vs Indiana St. Sampson finished with 3,183 and was 3rd Team All-MVFC but he departs this year and the only other player to throw a pass was WR Tony Tate (128, 80%, 1-0) who is gone as well. They have 6 QB's on the roster. Nick Davenport was a JUCO transfer last year with great size (6'5" 232). Henry Ogala started 11 games at his JUCO back in '18 and threw for 1,683. He completed 2 passes in their spring season. They also have Memphis transfer Drake Day who has seen no action. Whoever wins the job has big shoes to fill and they are completely inexperienced.

RUNNING BACKS - In '19 WIU's leading rusher had just 258 (4.7). In spring of '21 their top two were gone and they were led by a pair of frosh. Ludovick Choquette had 116 (3.6) and Iosefa Pua'auli was 2nd with 107 (3.1). They added transfer Myles Wanza who had 1,519 (4.9) in 28 games at Lamar. Wanza was their leader in 8 of their 11 games and led with 487 (4.7). Choquette only had 145 (3.4) but made a bigger impact in the passing game with 390 (8.1). Dallas Daniels had 70 (5.4). Wanza and Daniels depart. They have 4 RB's on the roster after moving Pua'auli to LB. Jaylen Reed is the only other RB to get carries last year (5-10-2.0). Justin Hall (orig Nillinois) didn't play last year but did see action in spring and made a big impact on Special Teams as a rFr here in '19. Without a top notch QB to keep the defenses honest this inexperienced unit could really struggle.

RECEIVERS - In '19 Dennis Houston led with 539 (15.0). Tony Tate was #4 with 386 (10.4). Houston and Tate made up a solid duo in spring, putting up 477 (11.1) and 389 (10.8) respectively. Dallas Daniels was #3 with 368 (10.8). Last year all 3 returned. Houston started the season off with career highs of 12 catches and 237 yards vs Ball St. He had 175 vs E Washing two weeks later. He had at least 4 catches in every game and led with 1,015 (11.3). Tate was a do-it-all player, finishing #2 with 598 (9.5), throwing for 128 on 5 attempts and rushing for 98 yards (3.8). Daniels was #3 with 524 (11.9). This year they lose 1st Team All-MVFC WR Houston, 4th Team All-MVFC WR Tate, Daniels and Daniel Bender (341, 16.2). Only 1 of their top 6 receivers return in RB Choquette. They have 3 experienced TE's but no WR on the roster has ever caught a pass in a game.

OFFENSIVE LINE - In '19 WIU rushed for 109 (3.1) and went from 16 sacks to 44 (10.3%)! They rushed for just 56 (2.5) last year with 13 sacks (4.6%). They had 5 with starting experience come back in the fall and only had one way to go. They improved slightly, rushing for 62 (2.5) but their sacks regressed to '19's level, allowing 48 (10%). All 5 starters are gone this year. The only experienced player back is Ty O'Janovac who started all 6 in their spring season and 3 last year. They didn't add any transfers so this is a completely inexperienced group but it's not like last year's unit was playing well so maybe some new guys will improve them.

DEFENSIVE LINE - WIU's run D was decent back in '18 when they allowed 135 (3.4) and had 36 sacks but '19 was a different story as they allowed 222 (4.9) and had sacks were more than cut in half with 17 (4.7%). The spring season saw more of the same as they allowed 218 (4.8) but did record 15 sacks in 6 games (9.3%). Last year their top 4 DL from spring returned but it was more of the same. The Leathernecks allowed 210 rush ypg (5.4) with 21 sacks (6.6%). This year they lose DE Hunter Mason (11 st, #8 tk'l'r) who led with 5 sacks, DT Daniel Carson (7 st, #17 tk'l'r, 2 tfl) and Brandon Arnold (11 st, #11 tk'l'r, 4 tfl). Only 2 of their top 6 return and they lost all 3 starters from their 3 man unit so they aren't likely to improve this year.

LINEBACKERS - This unit made up WIU's #1, #2 and #6 tacklers in '19 and all 3 were gone in spring. Michael Lawson led with 54 tackles. He returned in the fall along with their #3 tackler Greg Benton and #4 tackler Herschel Blankenship. Last year Michael Lawson was #2 tk'l'r and had 5.5 tfl's. He also led with 4 int's. Benton and Blankenship were #3 and #4 tk'l'r's again. All 3 depart along with Dallas Martin (#6 tk'l'r) and Nakota Shepard-Creer (#14 tk'l'r). They return their #9 and #13 tk'l'r's but this is the least experienced they've been in a few years.

DEFENSIVE BACKS - WIU was #8 in Pass D Efficiency in '19, allowing 248 pass ypg (62.4%, 26-5). In spring the Leathernecks finished last after allowing 70%, a 10-4 ratio and 227 pass ypg. Last year they slipped to 246 ypg allowed and finished last in Pass D Efficiency again (63.9%, 26-6). They lose SS Darius Joiner who led the Missouri Valley with 142 tackles and was 3rd Team AA. Also gone are FS Jalen Powe (10 st, #5 tk'l'r, 5 pd, 5.5 tfl), CB Terin Adams (6 st, #10 tk'l'r, 4 pbu) and Zaire Williams (#16 tk'l'r). One starter returns in CB JJ Ross (#7 tk'l'r, 6 pbu). The Leathernecks have finished last in the conference in Pass D the last 2 years so they have only one way to go.

SPECIAL TEAMS - In spring Michael Laramie made 5-9 fg's but did bang a 53 yarder vs Illinois St. He went 8 of 10 last year (L/50). Adam Fellner averaged 41.1 in spring and 40.4 in fall. Their net dipped to 37.1. Tony Tate averaged 2.4 PR and 18.4 KR. This year Laramie returns but Fellner departs. They do have one of the better kickers in the conference so if they find a decent punter then this is an above average ST's unit.

COACHES - Western Illinois alumni Myers Hendrickson takes over as head coach. He had a 30-4 record at NAIA Kansas Wesleyan as HC. He was twice named Coach of the Year and spent a year as an analyst at Auburn in '12. Hendrickson serves as his OC. He was an OC at Kansas Wesleyan, Coe and Northern St. Their DC is Todd Drury who was the HC at Missouri S&T the last 3 years. The ST's Coach is Michael Priefer.

FORECAST

OFFENSE - Jared Elliott took over at WIU in '18. The Leathernecks dipped to 24 ppg and 376 ypg. In '19 they only averaged 19 ppg and 315 ypg and finished 9th in Scoring Offense but 7th in Total Offense. They didn't get much better in spring, allowing 20 ppg and 350 ypg. Last year they had 10 starters back including 3 year starting QB Connor Sampson. Sampson topped 3,000 yards passing and they had a 1,000 yard WR yet only averaged 24 ppg and 363 ypg. They were 9th in Scoring Offense and 8th in Total Offense. This year they lose QB Sampson, their leading rusher Wanza, 5 of their top 6 receivers and all 5 starting OL. Only their starting TE returns so this is one of the least experienced offenses in the entire country.

DEFENSE - WIU only allowed 26 ppg and 328 ypg in '18. In '19 they fell to allowing 37 ppg and 470 ypg and were last in both Scoring and Total Defense. They allowed 33 ppg and 445 ypg in their 6 spring games. In the fall they had 12 of their top 13 tacklers back but fell to 39 ppg allowed and 456 ypg. They were last again in Scoring D and 10th in Total D. This year they lose 9 of their top 11 tacklers and their top 6 tacklers are gone. They are running a new defense and didn't add any significant transfers. They play in the most competitive conference in the FCS with a completely inexperienced cast so this isn't likely to go well.

2022 - Western Illinois's last conference championship came in 2002 when they were a member of the Gateway Conference but they did reach the FCS Playoffs 4 times between then and now ('03, '10, '15 and '17). Charlie Fisher was hired in '16 and led the Leathernecks to the playoffs in just his 2nd season, going 8-4 (+67 ypg). They were +13 TO's. Fisher left to be the WR Coach at Arizona St which was actually a significant raise. They hired Jared Elliott and dipped to 5-6 in his first year but were +48 ypg. In '19 the Leathernecks lost their first 8 games. They beat South Dakota then lost their last 3 to finish just 1-10 and were -156 ypg. WIU lost their first 5 games in spring before beating YSU and finished -95 ypg. Last year they had 20 starters back from spring. They only lost to Ball St 31-21 and came back from down 34 to only lose 62-56 against Eastern Washington to start 0-3. They beat YSU 38-35 on the road then lost 5 of their last 6 to finish 2-9 and -93 ypg. Only one of their losses were by single digits and HC Elliott was let go. WIU brought in former Leatherneck player Myers Hendrickson to turn the program around but first he needs to completely rebuild the roster. You don't often see a team this inexperienced. They lost their 3,000 yard QB, their leading rusher, a 1,000 yd WR, all 5 starting OL, all 3 starting DL, 3 of their top 4 LB's and 3 of their top 4 DB's. Only 3 starters return and naturally they are picked to finish last in the Valley again. Not a single player made the preseason All-MVFC team. They do get their 3 most winnable games at home against Southern Utah, YSU and Indiana St but we think they are the underdog in all 3 and they play 6 FCS playoff teams from last year as well as Minnesota. Hendrickson was successful as a head coach at an NAIA school and he is passionate about turning this program around but this is going to be a full rebuild so we don't see them even matching even last year's 2 win total.