

NORTH ALABAMA

POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2022

QUARTERBACKS - Blake Dever completed 64.8% of his passes on 54 attempts as the backup in '19. Against much stiffer competition in '20 (played 4 games, 3 vs FBS foes), Dever completed 67.9% of his passes but Soph Rett Files also completed 67.4% of his passes on 7.9 ypa, compared to Dever's 5.8 ypa. Last season both Dever and Files were back, but it was Texas St transfer Jaylen Gipson who began the season as starter, but Gipson (548 yds, 54%, 6-3) started just 3 games as he was injured for most of the season. Dever started a pair of games as was the #2 passer (949, 66%, 7-2) while the leading passer last season for the Lions was Files (1342, 60%, 13-8). This season both Gipson and Files are back & will likely have to battle it out for the starting job, while Brady Pope (39 pass yds LY) will likely be in a backup role. They also add former walk-on Oklahoma QB Ben Harris. Both Gipson & Files have the talent, but they'll just need to remain healthy and work on consistency.

RUNNING BACKS - In the 4 games the Lions played in 2020, not a single player topped 100 yards overall! The leader was WR Parker Driggers (82, 5.5) while Ja'Won Howell was #2 (58, 1.9). Both of those players were back for the Lions last season and Driggers, who moved to RB, would lead the way with 469 yards (9 st, 5.3, 9 td) and was 3rd Tm Big South. Jaxton Carson was the #2 rusher (268, 4.1) while ShunDerrick Powell finished #3 (154, 5.1). Howell finished as the #5 rusher (110, 6.5) as he had just 17 att all season in 10 games. The #2, #4, #5 rushers all depart, but Driggers and Powell return & getting their top guy back helps this unit quite a bit. However, they will need to establish some more depth behind the top two guys if this running game is to take a step forward in 2022.

RECEIVERS - Four players topped 100 rec yards in 2020, with Dexter Boykin (157, 12.1) leading the way. The only starter lost on offense going into 2021 was WR Jakobi Byrd, who did not crack the top five receiving leaders from the 2020 team. Boykin would again lead the Lions in receiving (712, 14.2, 5 td) and was 2nd Tm Big South. Cortez Hall finished #2 (10 st, 564, 12.3, 4 td) while Takairree Kenebrew was the #3 receiver (9 st, 520, 19.3, 8 td) and was 3rd Tm Big South. Boykin (11 st) is the lone starter gone as both Hall and Kenebrew both are back along with 2nd Tm Big South TE Corson Swan (10 st, 414, 14.8, 5 td). With 5 of the top 6 receivers back, this unit should take a step forward.

OFFENSIVE LINE - Against superior competition in '20, the Lions OLine paved the way for just 50 rush ypg (1.8) and they allowed 14 sacks (10.4%!) in 4 games. UNA returned their entire OLine for the '21 season and against a more manageable schedule the rushing numbers did improve some (104, 3.4) but they allowed 43 sacks (11.6%!). This season the Lions lose two starters on the OLine and 4 players that started last season including 4th Tm Big South OL Connor Robbins. UNA does return 4th Tm OL Cam Watson (11 st) along with Nathan Brown (11 st) and AJ Vang (11 st). Three starters back for UNA this season gives them a solid foundation on the OLine, and if they are to find a good pair of starters to plug in, we expect the rushing totals to improve and the sacks to go down.

DEFENSIVE LINE - The DLine did what it could in 2020 against tough competition, as they allowed 230 rushing ypg (6.0) and collected just 3 sacks in 4 games. The Lions DLine lost just 1 starter coming into 2021, but against 11 FCS foes the rushing numbers only went down to 190 ypg (5.0) and they collected just 16 sacks (4.8%). Wallace Cowins led all DL in tackles (10 st, 49 tkl, 4.5 sk, 4 tfl) and was 1st Tm Big South. Micah Bland was next with 42 tackles (10 st, 2 tfl) while San Jose St transfer Terrell Townsend was the #7 tackler (8 st, 36 tkl, 2 sk). This season the Lions lose Cowins and Townsend, along with Bryce Morais (6 st, 26 tkl, 2.5 sk). Overall they lose 3 of the top 4, but backups like Ryan Taylor (3 st, 15 tkl, 2 tfl) and Tyler Antkowiak (1 at, 10 tkl, 1.5 sk) are back, but they will need to step up into those starting roles if this unit is to have any improvement.

LINEBACKERS - UNA gave up 412 ypg and 36 ppg in the 4 game 2020 season. Last season they did lose 1 starter at LB, but against a normal schedule they allowed 410 ypg and 33 ppg. Delaware Butler led all LB's with 52 tackles (2 st) while Will Evans had 35 tackles (6 st, 35 tkl, 3 tfl) and Caleb Dawson made 31 tackles (5 st). Butler and Evans are gone this season, while UNA gets back Dawson and NB Terrell Bailey (7 st 24 tkl, 8 pbu). With just 2 of the top 7 LB's returning, UNA's defense might be taking a step backwards in 2022.

DEFENSIVE BACKS - UNA's pass defense gave up 182 pass ypg (62.5%) and recorded 3 int's. Last season the UNA secondary only lost 1 starter, and while they allowed more pass ypg (219) they did hold opposing QB's to 57.1% completions and UNA started the same 4 players in the secondary in all but 1 game. Kyree Fields led the Lions with 63 tackles (11 st, 2.5 tfl, 4 pbu) and was 4th Tm Big South. Alonzo Craighton was the #3 tackler (11 st, 51 tkl, 2 int), while KJ Smith was t-#5 tackler (11 st, 42 tkl, 6 pbu, 6 int) and was 1st Tm Big South! This season Fields is back, but they lose Craighton, K. Smith and Evan Jones (10 st, 33 tkl). Players such as Jeffrey Battle (30 tkl) and Jonathan Jordan (1 st, 18 tkl, 2 int) return too, but losing three starters may mean a less effective pass defense in '22.

SPECIAL TEAMS - Joe Gurley was Preseason All-Big South 1st Team after averaging 43.8 yds per punt with a long of 60. Sam Contorno was 3/3 on fg's but Gurley was brought on twice for longer attempts, both misses. Andre Little is the leading candidate to serve as the KR man after averaging 26.0 yds per kickoff return in '20. Last season Contorno was just 1-2 on fg's and Grayson Easterling was just 2-5 on fg's. Gurley averaged 43.3 yards per punt (39.7 net) and was 2nd Tm Big South. RB Driggers was the top KR man with 222 yards (22.2) and UNA had just 77 punt return yards all season. This season they lose their all-conference punter along with one of their fg kickers. This unit must work on fg consistency and finding a new punter if they are to find any improved success on ST's in '22.

COACHES - HC Chris Willis started as the TE coach here in 2002 before moving to RB coach in 2003. Then from 2004-11 he was the DB's coach and took over as the DC in 2012 and spent 5 seasons in that role. Willis took over as HC in 2017 and has a record of 19-27 overall (14-22 as an FCS HC). Ryan Held comes in as the new OC and associate HC. Held spent 2018-2021 as the RB coach at Nebraska, and before that was the RB coach at UCF in 2016-2017. Steadman Campbell

enters year #4 here as the DC. Like HC Willis, he has spent several years as a coach at UNA. He started as the CB's coach in 2006 and has also coached the WR's and RB's too. In 2016 he was the OC & spent 3 years in that role before taking over the DC job in 2019. Mike King is the Specialist Volunteer Coach & has worked with UNA kickers & punters for over 30 years!

FORECAST

OFFENSE - In their first season as an FCS team (2018) the Lions offense put up 392 ypg and 26 ppg. In 2019 they faced a tougher schedule after joining the Big South averaged 378 ypg and again 26 ppg. In just 4 games against tougher foes UNA's offense only put up 263 ypg and 13 ppg! Last season the Lions gained 368 ypg and scored 28 ppg. This season 8 starters are back on offense, and we expect some improvement Lions offense, but they likely won't top the 400 ypg mark

DEFENSE - The defense gave up 370 ypg and 24 ppg in 2018. Those defensive numbers jumped to 420 ypg and 33 ppg allowed in 2019. The defense surrendered 412 ypg and 36 ppg in 2020. Last season with 8 starters back the ypg stayed about the same (410 ypg) but allowed 33 ppg. This season just 2 starters are back for the Lions and it is likely that they take a step back in 2022.

2022 - North Alabama was a D-II power that holds the distinction of being the only team to ever win three national championships in a row on that level. After winning a Gulf Coast Conference record four titles in a row ('13-'16), UNA made the decision to jump to D-I FCS in '18. The Lions went 7-3 in 2018 but after the move to the Big South they are just 7-19 the last 3 seasons. Despite going just 3-8 last season they were just -42 ypg and -5 ppg. This season they move to the Atlantic Sun and are now eligible to compete for a conference championship and an NCAA post-season bid for the first time since moving to the FCS level. While they return 8 starters on offense, they return just 2 on defense. They open at Indiana St (Thur) and then after a home game vs D-II UVA Wise, they are at Chattanooga, who went 6-5 last season. UNA faces Tarleton St on homecoming but then have their next 4 games away from home including trips to Kennesaw St, Eastern Kentucky and Central Arkansas. Their final ASUN game is vs Austin Peay before finishing up with Tenn Tech and at Memphis. This looks like a team that may have to rely on their offense, at least early on, to win some games. NAU could top their 3 wins from last season, but they still aren't at a contending level yet, especially in a new conference with some tough opponents.