

# SOUTHERN UTAH

## POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2022

**QUARTERBACKS** - Southern Utah lost their starting QB (2952, 66%, 15-12) going into the spring season in '21. The new QB was Justin Miller who had every pass attempt during the spring, and threw for 1,713 (65.7%, 15-4). Miller returned as the starter in the fall and had four games of 300+ pass yards and finished the year throwing for 2,416 yards (61.4%, 9-13). The backup was Tyler Skidmore and he was 11-14 for 95 yds. This season Miller returns for his 3rd season as the starter, but the backup Skidmore departs. Miller won't face as tough of competition moving from the Big Sky to the WAC and if he can cut down on his interceptions, we expect Miller to have an improved season for the Thunderbirds.

**RUNNING BACKS** - Jay Green led Southern Utah in rushing in 2018 (829, 5.1) but in '19 was limited to just 120 yds as Thomas Duckett was #1 with 420 (4.9). The Thunderbirds had to replace Green (2 st), who was their #2 rusher with 156 yds (3.6) in the spring of '21. Last fall they did return 3 of their top 4 RB including the top RB from the spring season Dayne Christiansen (1 st, 240, 6.9, 2 td, 84 rec yds). However, the Thunderbirds rush game struggled for much of the season & the leading rusher was Karris Davis, who ran for just 313 yds (4.4). The #2 RB was Isaiah Williams (199, 6.2) and Duckett was #3 (164, 3.0). Davis and Duckett don't return this season along with #4 RB David Moore (151, 3.1). The leading rusher that is back is I. Williams, and they will need players such as Tosh Wright and Jordan Jefferson to step up if this unit is to take a step forward this season.

**RECEIVERS** - Lance Lawson led The T-Birds in receiving with 735 (9.4) in 2019. In the spring of 2021 Landen Measom (6 st) led with 446 yds (14.9, 5 td) was 2nd Tm Big Sky, while Lawson was #3 (275, 7.6). The unit returned 11 of their top 12 receives coming into last fall, led by Brandon Schenks (#2 WR, 5 st), who led with 6 rec tds in the spring & Lawson who led with 36 receptions. In the fall it was sophomore receiver Ethan Bolingbroke who became the top guy, as he led with 54 catches for 523 yds (9.7) while Brandon Schenks finished #2 with 516 yds (13.2) and led all receivers with 6 td's. Six WR's topped 100 yds last year and three of the top four are back this season, with the biggest loss being Frank Harris (7 st, 351, 14.6). Southern Utah also loses TE Phillip Brown (F/7 st, 133, 12.1) but get back TE Mata'ava Ta'ase who started the L/2 gms. With 6 of the top 9 WR's back and a veteran QB, this unit appears to be in better shape for '22.

**OFFENSIVE LINE** - In 2019 Southern Utah's OLine only paved the way for 116 rush ypg (3.1) and they allowed 34 sacks (7.4%). In the spring season the Thunderbirds OLine paved the way for just 98 ypg (3.4) but they did allow just 5 sacks in 6 games (2.1%). Coming into the fall season this OLine returned 4 starters including AALT Braxton Jones. The Thunderbirds overall only ran for 84 ypg (2.9) which was #117 in the FCS. However they allowed just 20 sacks (3.0%) on 671 pass attempts. This season they lose 4 starters on the OLine including B. Jones, who was a 5th Round Pick by the Chicago Bears & was just the 6th player from Southern Utah to ever get drafted in the NFL. As of now Southern Utah lists only 6 OLine on their spring roster, so the depth in this unit is obviously a big concern for entering the season.

**DEFENSIVE LINE** - The DLine allowed 206 ypg rush (#10 BSC) & 4.8 ypc while having just 14 sacks (#12 BSC, 4.0%) in 2019. In the spring they improved to allowing just 146 ypg & 3.8 ypc while finishing #2 in the Big Sky with 18 sacks (8.9%) in just 6 games. The DLine lost 1 starter in NT Mark Kruger (5 st, #14 tkl'r, 1.5 tfl) coming into the fall. The DLine returns 7 of their top 8 led by 1st Tm Big Sky DE Francis Bemley (6 st, t-#5 tkl'r), who led with 4 sacks. Former UCLA transfer DT Greg Rogers (3 st, t-#8, 3.5 tfl) & DE Ty Vaimaona (4 st, t-#14, 2.5 tfl) were also back. The run D started off okay (158 ypg, 4.6 ypc F/5 gms) but over the L/7 games they all'd 234 rush ypg (5.7). Overall they allowed 199 rush ypg (5.1) and collected just 16 sacks (5.4%). Francis Bemley (11 st, #5 tkl'r, 8.5 tfl, 4 sk) was 3rd Tm Big Sky and Aaron Romero (7 st, 12 tkl, 2 sk) also saw time starting. They both return this season but they lose Rogers (7 st, 16 tkl), Vaimaona (1 st, 14 tkl, 4 tfl) and Mykeal White (4 st, 11 tkl 2.5 tfl). Overall just 3 of the top 9 DL return for the Thunderbirds and this unit may regress some against the run this season.

**LINEBACKERS** - The LB unit only lost 1 backup (#17 tkl'r) going into the fall. They returned their top 5 LB's who were all in the team's top 8 tkl'r's led by AA WLB La'akea Kaho'ohanohano-Davis, who led with 57 tkl & 7 sacks. MLB Quaid Murray (#2 tkl'r, 1 tfl) & SLBAJ Stanley (#3, 2 tfl) were also productive. The LB unit also added 2 FBS & 1 FCS transfer. Kaho'ohanohano-Davis again led the Thunderbirds in tackles (10 st, 73 tkl, 4.5 tfl) and was 3rd Tm Big Sky, while Jayden Clark was the #3 tackler (8 st, 52 tkl) and Quaid Murray was the #4 tackler (8 st, 50 tkl, 6.5 tfl). Those 3 players are all gone this season, but they do return Aubrey Nelles (9 st, 48 tkl, 3.5 tfl) and Trent Whalen (2 st, 20 tkl, 1 sk). With this unit losing 4 of 6 top tacklers, they may struggle on defense, at least early on until the lesser exp'd players gain some experience and can build chemistry.

**DEFENSIVE BACKS** - In 2019 the T-Birds allowed 223 ypg pass (63%) but allowed a 22-8 ratio. In the spring of '21 they slipped to #6 in Big Sky allowing 268 ypg passing (63.9%) allowing a poor 12-2 ratio. The secondary lost 1 starter in FS Roderick Ward (6 st, t-#5 tkl'r, 1.5 tfl). They returned 6 of their top 7 DB's led by SS Akili Gray (6 st, #4 tkl'r, 1 int, 2 pbu), CB Damaje Yancey (1 st, #9, 1 pbu), CB Jalen Russell (5 st, #9, 1 pbu), CB Jake Narayan (1 st, #11, 1 int, 1 pbu). For the season Utah Southern allowed 271 pass ypg, but gave up 69% completions and grabbed just 6 int's all season. AJ Stanley led the unit tackles (9 st, 62 tkl) while CB's Alonzo Davis (10 st, 2 tfl, 5 pbu) and Kobe Singleton (11 st, 22 tkl, 6 pbu, 3 int, 4th Tm Big Sky) had solid seasons. However, these three all depart along with Gray (5 st, 35 tkl, 1 int). The top CB back is Damaje Yancey (20 tkl) and the top S back is Jason Thomas (5 tkl). Like the other defensive units, this one may struggle too as they lose all four starters from last season.

**SPECIAL TEAMS** - The Special Teams unit lost their top K going into the fall and that was Manny Berz, who hit 4-4 fg (L/39) & they lost top KO guy, Kekoa Sasaeka, who had 10 TB/28 KO. They returned Judd Crockett who was their top PR (42, 7.0) & KR (341, 24.4). Also back is P Jake Gerardi who averaged 40.0 yds per punt (33.9 tm net) & was 1-1 fg (L/26) & had 2 TB/4 KO. Last fall Noah Alejado hit 8-12 fg (L/39) while Carson Reed was 0-3. Gerardi had a 43.0 average (34.7 net). WR Sa'Chisolm led with 251 KR yards (22.8) while the Thunders totaled just 27 PR yards all season. KR Sa'Chisolm and P Gerardi both return, but Southern Utah must find a new fg kicker if this unit is to have any improvement.

**COACHES** - The new HC of Southern Utah is DeLane Fitzgerald, who spent 2014-2021 as the

head coach of Frostburg St (D-III from '14-'18 and D-II from '19-'21) and posted a 62-19 record there. Blair Peterson is the new OC at Southern Utah, and prior to here he spent 2019-2021 at BYU as the QB coach. Before that Peterson he was an offensive quality control coach at Rice. John Kelling is the new DC here, and he spent the previous 2 seasons as the HC at Lock Haven University. Kelling was the DC at Frostburg St under Fitzgerald. Nick Rosser is the Special Teams Coordinator

## FORECAST

**OFFENSE** - The Thunderbirds offense put up 436 ypg and 34 ppg in 2017 as they made the playoffs and were co-champs of the Big Sky. Despite putting up 435 ypg and 26 ppg in '18 Southern Utah won just 1 game. In '19 Southern Utah only put up 387 ypg and 25 ppg. In the 6 game spring '21 season they put up 380 ypg and 27 ppg. Last season the numbers dipped to 315 ypg and 19 ppg. While QB Miller is back this season, they only return 4 starters and must replace 4 starting OL including a #5 DC. If they can protect QB Miller, the offense might be able to surpass last year's poor output on offense.

**DEFENSE** - Southern Utah allowed 414 ypg and 28 ppg, but those numbers took a nose dive in 2018 as they gave up 541 ypg and 41 ppg and collected just 10 sks in 11 games (3.2%). They also allowed 147 ypg more than their foes typically gain. Those numbers improved some in 2019, as Southern Utah gave up 429 ypg and 38 ppg and they only gave up 39 ypg more than their foes typically gain. In the spring season they allowed 412 ypg and 27 ppg. With 12 of the top 13 tacklers back last fall we thought the numbers could improve, but they actually got worse as they allowed 471 ypg and 39 ppg and allowed foes to gain 80 ypg more than their season average. With just 3 returning starters and 4 of the top 16 tacklers back, we see this unit taking a step back.

**2022** - This is Southern Utah's first season in the WAC after spending the last 10 seasons in the Big Sky. They also made the playoffs 3 times in the past decade but have yet to win an FCS playoff game. They open the season against a rather new FCS team in St. Thomas, who went 7-3 last season. They then spend the next 2 games on the road (Utah, Western Ill) before hosting Utah Tech. Then they face ECU on the road and then host Tarleton St. Three of their last 4 games are against playoff teams from 2021, but 2 of them are at home (Incarnate Word and SF Austin). With just 7 starters back and a new HC, this Thunderbirds team may struggle in year one in the WAC. While they could win a couple conference games, we don't see them factoring in the conference championship race in 2022.