

# NORTH ALABAMA 2021 PREVIEW

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. HC Chris Willis was part of the UNA staff since '02 and was tasked with literally taking UNA to the next level when he was named HC ahead of the '17 season.

After finishing 5-5 in '17 while looking ahead to their big leap, UNA landed in D-I FCS as an independent in '18 and finished 7-3. Officially a member of the Big South starting in '19, UNA will not be eligible for a conference championship or postseason play until next year in '22 while they continue their transition into FCS. UNA went 4-7 in '19 and in '20 played a fall schedule that included one home game against an FCS opponent and three road games against FBS opponents. UNA finished their tough slate 0-4 but return to a normal, Big South schedule in '21 while remaining ineligible for postseason play for one final year.

As with Campbell, although having not been as consistent at the FCS level, UNA's decision to play superior competition will ultimately pay dividends. It starts with the offense, which struggled to move the ball in '20, but will return 10 starters from last season. Sr. QB Blake Dever completed 64.8% of his passes on 54 attempts as the backup in '19. Against much stiffer competition in '20, Dever completed 67.9% of his passes but So. Rett Files also completed 67.4% of his passes on 7.9 ypa, compared to Dever's 5.8. Often when a team has multiple QBs, they have none. It truly seems like UNA has a good QB room that they can build from for years to come. Projected starting RB, So. Ja'Won Howell, struggled to find his footing against the big boys (58/1.9). In fact, Fr. WR Parker Driggers led the team in rushing and had easily most success of any ballcarrier (82/5.5). UNA scored three rushing TDs on the season with Driggers hitting paydirt two of those times. The only starter lost on offense is WR Jakobi Byrd, who did not crack the top five receiving leaders from last year's team. With their entire OL returning, as well as Preseason All-Big South Honorable Mention at WR in Jr. Dexter Boykin (157/12.1), this offense can only improve in '21 now that it is back to playing similar competition.

The superior competition that UNA faced in '20 made the choice early and often to run the ball right at them. While the defense played well enough to keep the first three games close, BYU simply overpowered the UNA defense. UNA allowed 555 total yds of offense against BYU, including 278 on the ground (8.4). The defense returns eight starters, losing one starter at each level (DL, LB, DB). Like the offense, the defense did what it could against superior competition and were relatively unexposed until running into BYU. The defense can hold it's head high coming off '20 and should be very competitive this season in the Big South. The defense returns four of their top five tacklers from last fall, and LB Will Evans is the top returning tackler (28/4.5/1.0).

Gr. Joe Gurley was Preseason All-Big South 1st Team after averaging 43.8 yds per punt with a long of 60. Fr. Sam Contorno was 3/3 on FGAs but Gurley was brought on twice for longer attempts, both misses. Jr. Andre Little is the leading candidate to serve as RS after averaging 26.0 yds per kickoff return in '20.

There is essentially no pressure on UNA as they still are unable to compete for a conference crown, especially after going winless in '20. They should take the experience they received last year and apply it to their performance on the field in '21. Make no doubt, UNA will win games in '21, and they may win a fair share. There are concerns about playmaking on offense, but UNA seems to have very competent QB play, which they can surely build the offense around beginning this season. If UNA plays it's cards right, they can easily position themselves to make a run at the Big South crown in year one of eligibility in '22.