

VILLANOVA WILDCATS

In 2016, the Wildcats made their 2nd FCS playoffs in 3 years. They beat St Francis at home but came up just short, losing 10-7 at South Dakota St. After 32 years as the Wildcats HC, Andy Talley retired. He had led the Wildcats to 12 playoff appearances including winning the FCS Championship in 2009. In 2017 longtime Villanova Asst HC Mark Ferrante took over but despite both Coordinators returning, they shockingly finished just 5-6 ending a streak of 5 straight winning seasons. In 2018 Villanova opened with a 4th quarter comeback 19-17 upset win over FBS foe Temple and they scored 31 straight in a 31-9 win over Lehigh. In their CAA opener they allowed Towson 35 straight in the 2Q and trailed 35-21 at half in a 45-35 loss. The Wildcats scored 4 TD's on their first 12 offensive plays in a 49-7 blowout of Bucknell. They came up just short vs Stony Brook as their 2 pt conversion w/:56 failed in a 29-27 loss. They took eventual CAA champ Maine to the wire losing on a final play 52 yd FG. The wheels then came off the bus as they were shutout in back-to-back games by James Madison (37-0) and New Hampshire (34-0). They never trailed at Richmond but they trailed William & Mary 24-7 into the 4Q and lost 24-17 guaranteeing a losing season. They upset playoff bound #17 Delaware in their season final pulling away in the 4Q for a 42-21 win. It was their 12th win in the last 13 meetings (7th straight) in the "Battle of the Blue" ending a disappointing season on a high note but at 5-6. In 2019 Villanova had just 5 starters back on offense and 6 on defense but came out of the gates roaring going 6-0 and were +83 ypg! They lost a showdown with James Madison 38-24 and perhaps that cost them even more as they lost to Stony Brook by 1 and New Hampshire by 8 the next 2 weeks. They rebounded to win their last 3 and return to the playoffs and were +61 ypg in CAA play. In the first round they lost a shootout to SELouisiana 45-44. Last year they opened 2-1 but lost to Delaware for a 2-2 season and were +23 ypg in CAA play. HC Ferrante returns for his 5th season Longtime OC Sam Venuto retired after 24 yrs at Villanova and 5th year DC Joe Trainer did not return either in 2019. Ola Adams who had been at Villanova 4 years was promoted to DC in '19 after being the STC the last 2 years. OC Chris Boden, a former 3 yr starting QB here, spent the previous 3 seasons as HC of ASA Miami before taking over as OC here in '19.

In '19 the offense returned just 5 starters from the CAA's #6 scoring (25.0 ppg) & #6 total offense (370 ypg). They lost QB Zach Bednarczyk, who started 34 career games (20-14). IN '19 despite missing 3 games (8 st), he threw for 1,903 (64.4%, 14-6, 84 rush). Both his backup QB's returned in Jack Schetelich (2 st, 246, 53.1%, 1-2) and Qadir Ismail (1 st, 180, 37.9%, 1-1). They added Campell transfer Daniel Smith, who started the previous 2 years for the Camels. In '18 Smith threw for 1,582 (58.9%, 13-3) and led Campbell with 668 rush yds (6.6, 13 td). Smith won the job in '19 and threw for 3274 (59.6%) with a super 35-10 ratio! Smith was back this spring and threw for 253 in the opener but just 151 ypg the final 3 with his completions dropping to 49% with a 4-2 ratio. Connor Watkins hit 5-5-72 and both return. In '19 the Wildcats lost 6 of their top 8 rushers

including 2nd tm CAA RB Aaron Forbes (11 st), who led with 828 (5.4, 9 td, 172 rec). They returned their #2 & #4 rushers in RB's Justin Covington (263, 4.3 1 td) & Jalen Justin (108, 4.9, 1 td). Covington led with 727 (8.1) and DeeWill Barlee was a close #2 with 724 (5.2) but had 48 more rush att's Daniel Smith was #3 with 457 (5.4). In the spring all 3 returned with Covington leading with 308 (7.3) while Jalen Jackson (#4 '19 314, 5.5) was #2 with 222 (6.0). This fall they only lose Smith (141, 5.9) so have a solid veteran unit. IN '19 the Wildcats lost 3 of their top 5 receivers including their top 2 in WR Jarrett McClenton (9 st, 658, 16.9, 6 td, 107 rush) and TE Ryan Bell (4 st, 379, 11.5, 5 td). They returned 5 of their top 8 led by WR Changa Hodge (8 st, 344, 15.6, 1 td), WR Josh McGrigg (194, 32.3, 1 td) and TE Todd Summer (148, 13.5, 1 td). Hodge took control of the group and led with 1118 (17.2) while Jaaron Hayek was #2 with 670 (14.3) and Zac Kerxton was #3 with 417 (13.9). TE Todd Summers was #4 with 364 (10.7). This spring they had to replace their 1,000 yard WR and their #3 WR plus #4 Summers had just 3 catches. Rayjoun Pringle led with 245 (14.4) and Hayek was #2 again with 136 (11.3). This is not an overwhelming group but is more experienced than they were in the spring. In '19 the OLine had to replace 3 starters including 2nd tm CAA LT (10/43), 3 yr starting LG (11 st) and 2 yr starting RT (7 st). They returned 3 OL who started last year in 3 yr starter C Paul Grattan (10 st), RG MJ Dumas (11 st) and backup LT Isiah Appiah. In '18 the O-line only opened holes for 3.7 ypc rush and allowed 10.4% sacks but the less exp'd unit improved to 194 (5.2) rush and just 3.5% sacks! In the Spring they lost Dumas but were strong again with 211 (5.7) rush and just 3.3% sacks. Michael Corbi and Collin Gamroth (all 17 sts L2Y). both make my preseason CAA team. This is one of the top O-lines in the CAA. After just 331 ypg and 22 ppg in CAA play in '18 they improved to 480 ypg and 36 ppg in '19. The abbreviated spring saw 401 ypg and 29 ppg. This should be a potent offense with QB Smith, RB Covington, WR Pringle and a top notch O-line.

In 2019 the defense returned 6 starters from the CAA's #6 scoring (23.4 ppg) and #3 total defense (313 ypg), but lost 5 of their top 11 tackler's. The D-Line lost two 11 game starters in DT Bryan White (36 tkl, 3 tfl), who had 35 career starts & a DE (28 tkl, 5.5 tfl), who had 22 career starts. Their top 2 returnees were DE's Malik Fisher (10 st, 18 tkl, 5 sk, 4.5 tfl) and Aaron Seigle (1 st, 14 tkl, 4 tfl). The LB corps lost just 1 starter in '19 in their MLB (9 st, 44 tkl, 5.5 tfl, 2 int). They returned 4 of their top 5 LB led by Drew Wiley (11 st, 55 tkl, 9.5 tfl), Amin Black (3 st, 48 tkl, 4.5 sk, 4 tfl) and Keeling Hunter (10 st, 43 tkl, 1.5 tfl). The secondary lost 4 of their top 8 DB's who combined for 20 sts & 121 tkl including their FS (10 st, 53 tkl). They returned 6 of their top 10 who combined for 35 sts & 197 tkl led by CB Jaquan Amos (11 st, 57 tkl, 2 int, 6 pbu), CAA Defensive ROY CB Christian Benford (8 st, 49 tkl, 5 int, 6 pbu) & SS Julian Williams (10 st, 39 tkl, 1 int). The defense returned 13 of their top 20 tacklers including 6 of their top 8 but had a new DC and 4 of their 5 starters lost were multiple year starters. The D had allowed just 313 ypg and 23 ppg in '18 but slipped as expected to allowing 389 ypg and 26 ppg. In the spring they had to replace their #2 tklr LB Drew Wiley, #5 tklr DB Chucky Smith, #6 tklr DB Jaquan Amos, and #7 tklr LB Keeling Hunter but did have 7 of their top 11 back. They made small improvement to allowing 378 pg in CAA play (419 in '19) and 24 ppg. They have their top 18 tacklers back from the spring and should be close to that 2018 defense.

The Special Teams unit returned all their top players including P/KO Nathan Fondacaro (41.0 avg, 25 TB/54 KO) and K Drew Kresege, who hit just 6-14 FG (L/40) in 2019. Fondacaro avg 43.8 ppg and Kresege was a coin flip again hitting 7-15 FG with a long of 45. The good news is Fondacaro is back and they add in TCU transfer Cole Bunce at K. WR Dez Boykin avg 25.0 on KR's in '19 and Elijah Solomon 18.5 on PR's. They had to replace Solomon in the spring. Boykin was 23.9 in the spring and Jared Wolfe was at 5.9 on PR's and both return. This unit has solid potential and could be near the top of the CAA.

The Wildcats have made the playoffs in 3 of the last 6 full seasons and come in ranked #3 in the CAA and #16 in FCS poll. They have a veteran offense and defense. They were #3 in the CAA in average game grades in 2019 and have a stronger team than that playoff squad. I think that Villanova has a great shot at getting back to the playoffs and I was surprised that Delaware and Richmond earned 1st place ballots in the Coaches/Media Relations poll and Villanova received 0. They were picked 3rd and they are a clear cut contender. It cannot be like 2019 when they were undefeated when they played JMU and lost then lost the next two. They have Penn St week 4 and then a bye before traveling to James Madison. The schedule is not easy as they face the other 3 top teams in the CAA. I give them a shot at making the playoffs.