

NC CENTRAL 2021 PREVIEW

NC Central experienced a four-year stretch from '14-'17 where they went 31-15, including an impressive 18-4 at home. This stretch was highlighted by a 9-3 campaign in '16 that saw NC Central go a perfect 5-0 at home and capture their first MEAC title since '73 while finishing #19 in the nation in the FCS Coaches Poll. NC Central earned a trip to the Celebration Bowl and is the only active MEAC member to appear in the game. NC Central outgained opponents by an average of 87 ypg in '16. In '17, however, the number shrunk to just 3 ypg. The TO margin improved from -7 to +3 in '17, but NC Central went 7-4 and failed to repeat as champs. In '18, NC Central once again improved its TO margin (+6) but fell to -68 ypg and recorded their first losing season in five years. HC Trei Oliver, who spent three seasons under current NSU HC Dawson Odums while at Southern as DC and was also a decorated P/DB at NC Central, was brought in to lead his alma mater in '19. NC Central showed improvement, more than halving the difference in ypg (-32) while remaining efficient in TO margin (+2). Regardless, the team slipped to 4-8 and had their first losing season at home since '13 (2-3) while being shutout by a combined 78-0 in their final two games. Oliver will be back for his third year as HC in '21.

NC Central had a dynamic offense in '16, featuring a balanced attack that averaged 385 ypg. The offense averaged 4.4 ypc while completing 60.5% of its passes. In '17 the offense lagged to 321 ypg, averaging just 3.8 ypc and completing 54.9% of its passes. The offense recovered somewhat in '18 to average 348 ypg while rushing for 4.7 ypc. However, the passing game continued to worsen, with the offense completing just 50.0% of its passes and throwing for less than 200 yards in seven contests. Chauncey Caldwell was the incumbent starting QB going into '19, having started 12 games dating back to his true freshman season in '17. Despite his 8/1 ratio in '18, Caldwell only made four starts that season and then failed to start in '19. Instead, So. Micah Zanders started the first two games of '19 before 1Y HC Trei Oliver handed the reigns to true freshman Davius Richard, who started the final 10 for NC Central. Richard was just the sixth QB in school history to pass for over 2,000 yards (2,020) and completed 51.8% of his passes. The passing attack all told was rather unimpressive, but it was hampered by a lackluster running game. Nevertheless, Richard returns as an underclassmen QB with solid experience as the starting QB. NC Central returned two-year starting RB Isaiah Totten in '19 but lost the next four leading rushers behind him. Totten had a very productive campaign his So. season in '18, rushing for 768 yards (5.5). He made every start at RB for NC Central in '19, but as the do-everything-back, Totten was able to gain just 619 yards (3.9). Totten returns for his senior season but now with plenty experience behind him, as NC Central has their top four rushers returning, which should greatly improve Totten's production and the run game in general. Totten is seventh all-time at NC Central in rushing yards and needs just 887 to own the record. NC Central is returning its top five WRs and seven of their top nine, which will be invaluable to the maturation and progression of young QB Richard in the still-developing offense of Oliver. Tulsa transfer Ryan McDaniel led the team with 368 receiving yards (9.4) as a Jr. in '19 while fellow Jr. E.J. Hicks, who was second in receiving in '18, led the team with 14.6 ypc (351) during '19. Along with Daeshawn Stephens, this now senior-laden WR corps could potentially be one of the best in the MEAC. So. Devin Jordan will likely slide over to LT after making his last two starts at blindside (nine starts total). Sr. Robert Mitchell is a versatile interior lineman who started 10 games at three different positions last year (LG, C, RG). Depending on where they're slotted, there should only be one major hole to fill along the offensive line, as NC Central returns two others with decent starting experience at OL. The OL's ability to protect Richard and give him time to find his experienced WRs could prove to be the difference for this offense.

In '16, NC Central's defense allowed 340 ypg, but the homefield advantage for NC Central was proven by the fact they only allowed 250 ypg in friendly confines. The defense was even better in '17, allowing only 318 ypg while still giving up just 269 ypg at home. The defense collapsed in '18, allowing 415 ypg while giving up 413 ypg at home. Rushing yards allowed nearly doubled to 200 ypg in '18 (111 in '17). NC Central's defense was gashed for 4.8 ypc in '18. Under defensive-minded HC Oliver in year one, NC Central allowed just 253 ypg at home in '19, a potential sign of a return to championship-caliber defense at NC Central. However, Oliver will have his hands full in '21 as he looks to retool his defense that returns only four starters, three of which are on the backend. Overall, the defense is losing its top three tacklers and four of its top five. The DL is losing its top two tacklers and return just one of the top five (Jr. DE Jessie Malit). There are still reasons to remain optimistic about the DL, as what was once a 9.5% sack rate for a good defense in '17 became 9.6% for NC Central in '19. Malit started all 12 games at DE for NC Central in '19 as an underclassman and can possibly help maintain NC Central's great sack rate, although it will be difficult. Apart from Malit, Oliver will have to makeover his front seven entirely. The LBs are losing their top three tacklers and return just one of their top five tacklers. Oliver has no one on his roster that has started a game for him at LB. If Oliver can coach up his front seven, the secondary should be ready and set to go as they are the unquestionable strength of this defense. The DBs return their top two tacklers and three of their top four. Sr. Stephen Stokes (12 starts) and So. Manny Smith (11 starts) will comprise one of the best starting safety duos in the MEAC after growing in tandem during '19. Jr. Justin Nicholson made eight starts at CB in '19 as an underclassman and led the team with nine pass breakups, displaying some real talent. So. Romeo Stancil made four starts at CB as a freshman in '19.

Coach Oliver will take a hands-on approach ensuring that his special teams are up to par. He will have to replace his P, but the special team has loads of potential. So. PK Adrian Olivo was a Phil Steele Freshman All-American (4th Team) in '19 after converting 10 of his 13 FGAs and serving as the KOS as a true freshman. So. Brandon Codrington was named All-MEAC 3rd Team after his true freshman season in '19 as a return specialist which was highlighted by returning a kickoff 75 yards in the final minute of a tie game vs DSU for a game-winning TD.

NC Central's championship run in '16 was built on a balanced offense, great defense, and a true homefield advantage. Much of that advantage was tied to the exceptional defense, which seemed to be back in '19. NC Central has the possibility to have an effective, well-balanced offense in '21, as well as having solid special teams. The key concern for this team will be Oliver's ability to bring back that very solid defense from '19 that's lost so much talent and experience upfront, as well as the progress of So. QB Davius Richard. Still, NC Central should enough experience at the skills positions to compete in the MEAC in '21.