

NORFOLK STATE 2021 PREVIEW

Norfolk St. has been mired in mediocrity since their last winning season in '11. NSU had posted a record of 4-7 in five of the previous seven seasons headed into '19. In '17, NSU was +11 in TOs but were -152 ypg and posted a 4-7 record for the third consecutive season while going just 1-5 at home. NSU went 4-7 for a fourth consecutive season in '18, went 3-3 at home and were outgained by just 22 ypg, but were -5 in TO margin. NSU broke through for five wins (5-7) in '19 despite more than doubling their difference in yardage (-48 ypg), perhaps due to NSU's +7 TO margin. Dawson Odums (63-32 @ Southern) was hired to take the reins for '21.

NSU's offense in '17 averaged 266 ypg (91 rush ypg) and 19 ppg while being led by freshman QB Juwan Carter. In '18, the Spartans were much improved on offense. They still averaged 19 ppg but improved to 323 ypg. Carter was second in the MEAC in passing ypg and total offensive ypg in '18 and posted the most pass yds in a game in school history (467 vs Morgan St). NSU returned their starting QB (Carter), top rusher, and fourth leading receiver in '19 and for a second straight year, NSU improved offensively. NSU's 4,495 yards of total offense are third most in school history while also posting the third highest average ppg in school history (28.9). NSU once again improved on the ground, rushing for 145 ypg (3.8). The biggest difference was the improved passing attack under the tutelage of former USC QB and passing game coordinator Aaron Corp, with Juwan Carter's TD/INT ratio going from 13/14 in '18 to 23/8 in '19. Passing was +55 ypg in '19 dating back to Carter's freshman season in '17. In '19 Carter had "one of the best seasons by a QB in NSU history" according to NSU Athletics. He led the MEAC in passing yards, total offense, and tied for TD passes (23), which was the most for NSU since joining the FCS. Carter improved in every major statistical category for QBs from '18 to '19 and broke the school record for pass efficiency in a game (260.3 @ HU) while breaking his own record for total offense in a game (482). Carter is now a three-year starter at QB who enters '21 with 31 starts dating back to '17. NSU returned two of their top three leading rushers from '18, including their top RB, but both took back seats to true freshmen Kevin Johnson (walk-on) and Rayquan Smith. Johnson exploded onto the scene with an 84-yd TD run in just his fourth game (second longest in school history) and led NSU in rushing (468/5.4) as well as all-purpose yds in just five starts. Smith made one start but had 430 rush yds (5.1). Both return as underclassmen in '21. NSU is returning it's top two WRs and seven of the top eight, meaning Carter will have a bevy of reliable and trusted targets for his senior campaign. Sr. Justin Smith started every game in '19 and led NSU with 639 rec yds (17.8). So. Da'Kendall James started in seven games as a rFr in '19 and was second on team in receiving (557/15.1).

In '17, NSU was punished on the ground (224 ypg), allowing 5.2 ypc and over 250 rush yds on five separate occasions. The defense improved across the board in '18, allowing -1.0 ppg and -73 ypg from '17. However, NSU allowed an avg of 471 ypg in three of their final four games, which bled into the following year as the defense would regress, allowing 217 rush ypg (5.4) after allowing 195 rush ypg in '18. In '19 NSU allowed 423 ypg and 29 ppg, the most in HC Latrell Scott's era. The regression of Scott's defense inhibited the success of NSU as the team was -48 ypg despite it's historic offense. NSU will have to replace the middle of their defense with the linebacking core from '19 gone but return three starters along the DL and key pieces in the secondary. The DL returns three of it's top four leading tacklers including Sr. Chris Myers, who started all 12 games at DE in his first year at NSU and was All-MEAC 1st Team, tying the MEAC lead with 9.0 sacks. De'Shaan Dixon was 3rd Team All-MEAC in his first season as a full-time starter at DL. They will anchor a front four with returning starter and Sr. Tavien Blackwell. The DL improved it's sack percentage +1.9% from '17 to '19. The LB core will be the big question mark surrounding this defense headed into '21 as they lose their top three tacklers and have no returning players with starting experience. The DBs saw an increase of +56 passing ypg and +4.7% in completion percentage against them, but they are returning three of their top five in the backend. Jr. Brandon Savage started all 12 games at CB in '19. Jr. So. Devyn Coles tied a school record with two INTS vs Morgan St and finished the year starting six games at CB. Jr. Shaviaea Williams started seven games last year, his last two at NB.

Experienced special teams will go a long way in complimenting what should be a hire-powered, potentially (yet-again) historic offense. NSU returns both their starting placekicker and punter. Sr. Josh Nardone set a school-record with 40 PATs in '19 while converting 81.8% of his FGA. Jr. Ryan Richter recorded the fifth highest punting avg in school history (39.7) in '19. So. Tremayne Talbert will handle PRs in '21 after serving as '19s main option as a true freshman. Standout So. RB Kevin Johnson will return kicks (18.2 in '19).

Given that skill positions are loaded with talent and experience, the offense will determine just how far this team can go in year one under HC Dawson Odums. Odums has a legitimate chance to immediately build the first winner in Norfolk in a decade starting in '21. NSU should finish near the top of the MEAC and hosts S.C. State in their regular-season finale, where a MEAC championship and a trip to the Celebration Bowl could possibly be on the line.