

NORTH CAROLINA A&T 2021 PREVIEW

North Carolina A&T won three straight MEAC titles and four in five years before realigning to the Big South for this upcoming season. A&T seemed to outgrow the MEAC, even winning the Celebration Game against the SWAC champion four out of the five years it has existed, including the previous three. Before sitting out last spring, A&T had collected three straight HBCU national titles. A&T is looking to push it's program to the next level by now being able to compete for FCS national championships. HC Sam Washington was A&T's DC from '11-'17 before taking over in '18 after the retirement of legendary coach Rod Broadway.

A&T has gone 10-2 and 9-3 under HC Sam Washington in '18 and '19 respectively. A&T was 6-2 to start the season in '19 before shockingly dropping a game at Morgan St, 22-16. A&T took that loss and proceeded to win their final two regular-season games by a combined 84 points before claiming another Celebration Game over Alcorn 64-44.

With the loss of their starting QB, top WR, and both Ts, it's evident how A&T will approach this upcoming season. With the interior of the OL returning, including two all-conference selections, they will be asked early and often to pave way for arguably the best RB in all of FCS, Sr. Jah-Maine Martin. Martin led the nation with 23 rushing TDs and an average of 7.7 ypc in '19 and finished fourth in FCS with 1,446 rushing yds. Martin was named preseason All-American in '20 and enters '21 having been named preseason All-American yet again despite A&T not playing a down last spring. Former QB Kyli Carter ran the offense to perfection in '19 with an 18/3 TD/INT ratio while passing for over 2,000 yds. However, Jr. Jalen Fowler proved in limited action what he provides to the offense. He completed 58.1% of his passes with a 3/0 ratio. Fowler is a true down-the-field passer, as he averaged 8.5 ypa. Perhaps the biggest loss for this team offensively will be leading WR Elijah Bell (855/15.6). However, A&T does return three of their top four WRs from '19 and should provide new QB Jalen Fowler with much needed depth and experience on the boundary.

While the offense in '19 could be considered somewhat of a juggernaut (38 ppg on 447 ypg of total offense), the defense for A&T was downright nasty. Only allowing 286 ypg of total offense, A&T snuffed out any attempts to run the ball (80/2.4) while harassing opposing QBs with their 10.5% sack rate. A&T recorded three or more sacks seven times in '19. A&T now returns eight starters on defense including their top three tacklers. This defense has what it takes to stand toe-to-toe with any offense inside the Big South. The defense is highlighted by it's two preseason All-Big South honorees, Sr. DL Jermain McDaniel and Jr. LB Kyin Howard. Howard led the team with 79 stops and was second with 8.0 TFL. TFL leader (12.0) and So. Jacob Roberts is not only back, but points to how deep and skilled this defense is and will be for years to come.

Jr. P Michael Rivers (41.0) had a very good season flipping the field for A&T in '19, pinning 17 I20 with a long of 55 yds. A&T has three placekicks listed on it's roster, excluding Rivers who now also lists as a P/PK. Rivers, if called upon, has incredibly big shoes to fill. Former PK Noel Ruiz, who is now kicking for FBS Georgia State as a graduate transfer, was an FCS All-American in '19 after leading the country in FGM per game (1.92) and converting a ridiculous 23/27 FGAs. Ruiz had the second-highest scoring season in A&T history, behind only his teammate and RB Jah-Maine Martin from the same year in '19. Sr. RS Korey Blanks, Sr. LS John Davis, and So. KR Chance Pride are all back from '19 and A&T's only concern early on this season will be whoever exactly is called up for PK for them.

A&T being picked to finish third in the Big South feels like the absolute floor for this team. A&T will punish opponents defensively and run the ball right at them with zero fear given they have the most productive RB not just in Big South but perhaps in all the land. A&T was looking for more respect nationally when it made the move to the Big South despite it's recent slew of HBCU national titles. To be the man, you've got to beat the man, and Kennesaw St and Monmouth will certainly have their work cut out for them.