

SOUTH CAROLINA STATE 2021 PREVIEW

South Carolina State is entering its 20th season with Oliver "Buddy" Pough at the helm, and he provides S.C. State with not just the most head coaching experience, but the most accomplished resume of any coach in the MEAC. Pough has a .645 career winning percentage, is a three-time MEAC Coach of the Year, and has won seven MEAC championships. S.C. State had a down year in '17, and although they outgained opponents by 23 ypg, they finished just 3-8 with a -3 TO margin. Pough and S.C. State did however produce LB Darius Leonard, who was drafted #36 overall in the ensuing 2018 NFL draft and has been an All-Pro selection at LB every season since joining the Indianapolis Colts. S.C. State's good fortunes continued into the '18 season, as they flipped their TO margin to +6. Despite a difference of -99 ypg, S.C. State rebounded to finish 5-6. S.C. State seemed to be back to their usual selves in '19 as they outgained opponents by 46 ypg and ended the year with a +8 TO margin. Their TO margin in '19 would've been even more impressive if not for their -8 TO margin in their matchup with FBS opponent USF (five lost fumbles). Although they were projected to finish sixth in the MEAC, S.C. State concluded the '19 season in a tie for 2nd. Their only losses in '19 were to USF, MEAC 1st place finisher Florida A&M by four, and to fellow 2nd place finisher NC A&T by two. Florida A&M was deemed ineligible for the MEAC crown and barred from representing the MEAC in the Celebration Bowl prior to the season, so S.C. State and N.C. A&T were officially named co-champions, with N.C. A&T receiving the bid to play in the Celebration Bowl because of their head-to-head tiebreaker. Pough was named MEAC Coach of the Year at the conclusion of the '19 season for the third time in his career. After missing out on their first ever Celebration Bowl appearance by two points, S.C. State went 3-1 during a shortened spring '20-'21 season, including winning their final three games. S.C. State was outgained by 11 ypg but for a third consecutive season finished with a positive TO margin (+1).

S.C. State struggled to have a productive offense in '17, particularly when it came to running the football. S.C. State was held under 100 rushing yds on four separate occasions and were held to 10 or fewer points in four games. In '18, the offense was far worse, completing a head-scratching 43.2% of its passes while allowing a sack rate of 8.7% and managing just 293 yds of total offense per game. '19 saw the emergence of 2019 MEAC Rookie of the Year Corey Fields at QB, but the offense again completed just 50.0% of its passes and were held to under 100 rushing yds in five more contests. Somehow, in a 24-0 win @ NC Central in '19, S.C. State was 5/23 passing for 42 yds. The inconsistency from the QB position continued in the shortened '20-'21 spring season. Fields completed just 49.3% of his passes and had a TD/INT ratio of 2/5. S.C. State will have to be more consistent at QB if they want to continue along their upward trajectory in '21, as the emergence of NSU's Juwan Carter and NC Central's Davius Richard will force the issue for S.C. State. Inconsistent QB play could be the difference between S.C. State hoisting another MEAC title or sitting at home for the Celebration Bowl once more. Luckily for the So. Fields, he will have arguably the most explosive receiver in the conference the previous two seasons coming back in fellow So. Shaquan Davis (926/20.6). Coach Buddy Pough mixed in rFr Kendral Flowers for the final three starts of the shortened '20-'21 spring season at RB, and he did quite well (194/4.9). Flowers will be leaned on early and often in '21, as Pough is forced to replace his top four RBs from the '19 season. Jr. OL Tison Gray was moved to starting LT for the shortened '20-'21 season after being the starting LG in '19. Along with Sr. and starting RG Jalen Page, these two have great experience as multi-year starters and can bring along the rest of the OL, which began getting starting experience this past spring.

Coach Buddy Pough's defense in '17 was very good. They allowed just 280 total ypg and held opponents to 93 rush ypg (2.6) while giving up just 19 ppg. The defense took a step back in '18, however, allowing 392 ypg. The run defense all but disappeared in '18, allowing 209 ypg on the ground (4.9). S.C. State immediately fixed their problems with stopping the run, allowing 123 ypg in '19 on the ground (3.2). S.C. State held opponents to under 100 rush yds in five different games, including a dominant performance where they allowed just five yds on the ground on 32 attempts from Morgan State. They allowed 20 ppg and 322 ypg and bordered on being a championship-caliber defense. S.C. State proved to be just as good overall in a shortened '20-'21 season, allowing 19 ppg and 327 ypg of total offense. However, the rush defense wasn't quite nearly as effective, allowing 157 ypg on the ground (4.1). This is more than likely because S.C. State was working in an entirely new unit upfront, having lost their top four from '19. The LBs do have So. BJ Davis returning, who has started every game since arriving at S.C. State and tied for third in tackles on a very good defense in '19. However, aside from Davis, the entire front seven must be replaced from that defense in '19, which further alludes to the dip in production against stopping the run in the shortened '20-'21 season. The defense will be led by its exceptional backend, however. The secondary returns four starters from '19, including three full-time. All four then started at least three of the four games in '20-'21. This same unit held opposing QBs to a rancid 48.2% completion percentage for the duration of '19 and 51.3% in limited action in '20-'21. This group is undoubtedly highlighted by Jr. ballhawk Decobie Durant. Durant led the team with three INTs and an attention-grabbing 12 PBU in '19. Durant will line up across the opposing team's best WR all season long in '21 after posting a three-pick first half vs. Alabama A&M and four INTs in just four games total in a shortened '20-'21 spring season. Durant was named 1st Team HBCU All-American for his spring '20-'21 campaign and declared "this fall is going to be a breakout season for me," according to SCNow.com.

Jr. K Dillon Bredson provided solid kicking as a So. in '19, converting 11/15 FGAs. He also served as the team's KOS in '19. The team will have to replace its P from '19, but they return Sr. DB Zafir Kelly, who has experience as a RS. In '20-'21, Sr. QB/WR Tyrece Nick began earning reps at both PR and KR. So. WR Juwan Moody also got in reps at PR, possibly cementing the starting PR job after his impressive, shortened '20-'21 season (22.0).

More than likely, the most overlooked result on S.C. State's slate from '19 would be their 20-17 victory over Norfolk State in OT. NSU was 5-6 headed into the game and led by a coach no longer with the program. Dawson Odums has entered the fray at NSU and, surprisingly, sports a higher career winning percentage than S.C. State's Buddy Pough (.663). If they're not careful, the anticipated rise of S.C. State to the top of the MEAC could be thwarted rather quickly by an NSU team that is not only in win-now mode, but with a star at QB, vengeance on their mind, and a possible MEAC title and coveted Celebration Bowl berth on the line when NSU hosts S.C. State in the last week of the regular-season. S.C. State and NSU's season-finale could easily serve as a de facto MEAC Championship game for the six-team league.