

ILLINOIS STATE 2021 PREVIEW

HC Brock Spack is entering his 13th season at the helm for Illinois State and is two victories shy of becoming ISU's all-time leader in wins. Spack has a .616 winning percentage at the school and in '14 led ISU to the FCS National Championship Game. ISU is 53-15 at home under Spack.

Last spring was unprecedented in many ways, but for ISU they had never finished worse than 5-6 under HC Brock Spack. They went 1-3 in '20-'21 following three-straight losses to open the season. ISU's fourth and final game against Western Illinois saw arguably ISU's best overall performance lead to a victory, 26-18.

ISU struggled at times last spring offensively, posting over 440 total yds on two occasions but also averaged just 221 total yds in their other two contests. Luckily for ISU, they have 100% of their passing and their rushing yds returning in '21. So. QB Bryce Jefferson was a backup as a true freshman in '19 before taking over as the starter last spring. Jefferson struggled, with a 3/6 TD/INT ratio while completing less than 50.0% of his passes. Jefferson was sacked multiple times in each game but really struggled against top competition like North Dakota St (completed nine passed on 26 attempts). ISU feature two very solid RBs in Fr. Pha'leak Brown and So. Nigel White. Brown is the projected starter (271/4.8) while White serves as a very capable spell back (230/5.8). ISU lost some depth at WR but does return their top target from spring in Jr. deep threat Austin Nagel (188/23.5). WR Taylor Grimes is the only starter not back for '21, with the entire OL returning from spring.

The defense for ISU was the opposite of the offense, as it was consistent all season while still seeming to get better every week. The defense allowed just 269 yds of total offense while shutting down rushing attacks to the tune of allowing just 95 yds per game (2.9). ISU allowed over 200 yds passing just once, and in that same game still managed to completely thwart any attempts at running the ball against them (79/2.1). ISU did lose their leading tackler from last spring in John Ridgeway after his transfer to Arkansas but return nine starters. The only other starter lost is DB Charles Woods, who also jumped to the FBS with his transfer to West Virginia after leading ISU in INTs and PBUs last spring. ISU still returns 100% of their sacks from last spring, and if they can get consistent pressure on the QB, the secondary should still be able to make plays even with the loss of their best ballhawk.

ISU returns it's entire ST unit from last spring which includes Jr. K Aidan Bresnahan, who converted 5/5 FGAs last spring with a long of 43. Bresnahan also served as KOS. Sr. JT Bohlken averaged 41.5 yds per punt with five punts going for 50+. Everyone who mixed in at either PR or KR is back for '21, but the return units are still a bit of a work in progress. There may or may not be some open competitions in fall camp given the underwhelming return yardage from last spring.

ISU has some very nice, young talent on both sides of the ball and has an excellent kicking game. ST can often make up for certain weaknesses, but in all reality, So. QB Bryce Jefferson must perform better. He has a pair of good RBs behind him and has his favorite target from last spring returning along with his entire OL. The outlook on ISU's season does not depend entirely on him, as great coaching, borderline great defense, and a good kicking game will make ISU a highly competitive team regardless. However, any growth to Jefferson's game will be a welcome addition to this team, because strong QB play could put them over the top as a real contender in an incredibly deep Missouri Valley Football Conference.