

# NORTH DAKOTA 2021 PREVIEW

HC Kyle "Bubba" Schweigert has fans in Grand Forks and beyond buzzing about North Dakota football in ways that many people even inside that state of North Dakota are unfamiliar with. Tired of living in North Dakota State's shadow, UND had a truly breakout year last spring. UND reached as high as #2 in the polls during the regular-season and won their first FCS playoff game, soundly beating Missouri State 44-10.

UND began last spring with three consecutive wins over ranked opponents, including a 28-17 win over eventual national runner-up, #3 South Dakota St. However, it was those pesky NDSU Bison that knocked UND from the ranks of the unbeaten after UND started '20-'21 4-0. UND was just 1-10 on third down and allowed NDSU to possess the ball for almost 37 minutes in a 21-point defeat.

So. QB Tommy Schuster (Preseason All-MVFC 1st Team) was a first-year starter last spring and was given ample space and time to make his throws due to the incredible pass protection he received all season long. Of their seven opponents last spring, six of them were ranked when taking the field vs UND. Despite this, Schuster was sacked just twice all season. In their only game against a non-ranked opponent, Schuster showed off his potential by lighting it up for 328 yds on 29 of 37 passing in a win over Western Illinois. All-American Jr. RB Otis Weah halos experience excellent run blocking as he was named an All-American following last spring (730/7.2). Weah only started the final four games of '20-'21, but under the guidance of RBs coach and Fresno State's all-time leading rusher Robbie Rouse, Weah dominated. In their loss at NDSU, Weah still managed to rip off a career-long 74-yd TD run and had 129 yds on just 13 carries in the loss. Weah has a dangerous first cut and possess all the skills necessary to be a truly dominant back. He finished fourth in the Walter Peyton Award voting last spring and could vie for the most coveted individual honor in FCS again this fall. Schuster helped break-in a relatively inexperienced WR group last spring but returns at least six WRs with one career start to their name. Chief among them is Sr. Garrett Maag, who more than doubled the next closest WR on their team in yardage (523/20.9). As a legitimate playmaker and deep threat, Maag is the perfect top target for a young QB in Schuster to show off more of his ceiling as a down-the-field passer. The OL features Preseason 3rd Team All-American and Sr. Matt Waletzko. While having a hole at RG, this OL features seven players with starting experience and returns four OL who started all seven games in '20-'21. If this OL repeats its performance over a full season in '21, they have to be considered one of the best OLs in the country if they're not already.

UND was great at stopping the run last spring but for whatever reason could not get the job done in their two losses when it came to limiting rushing attacks. NDSU obliterated an undefeated UND on the ground with 316 yds (5.9). To that point, no team had posted better than a 3.9 ypc average on UND, with two teams failing to average above 2.6 ypc. In their following game in the first round of the FCS playoff, UND again shut down their opponents running game (88/2.5). However, in round two, they gave up 468 yds of total offense including 217 yds on the ground (4.1). In both their losses, UND allowed exactly 34 points. UND should be able to build upon their productive run defense from last spring as they return their entire starting defensive line, with each DL having started every game last season. UND also returns their entire starting unit at LB, with all four LBs making all but one start in '20-'21, with even that one-time replacement starter back. The LBs aren't just returning but should be even better. The DBs, like the LBs, return every start from '20-'21 including their pair of CBs who made every start. Sr. S Jordan Canady missed the FCS playoffs but he and Sr. Hayden Galvin return to ensure the backend with Jr. Kadon Kauppinen now a backup with limited but big-time experience as a starter.

Sr. K Adam Stage and Jr. K Brady Stevens co-inhabited the KOS role while Stage handled PK duties. Stage made 3/4 FGAs with a long of 46. Jr. RB Luke Skokna had a good season as KR (315/26.3) and served as the PR as well (7.8).

UND was picked to finish third at MVFC Media Day, slotted behind SDSU and NDSU. UND proved last spring they can not only just "hang" with the big boys, but that they could beat them as well. UND went 1-1 against the two giants and get NDSU at home in '21. UND gets to play SDSU in a showdown the final week of the regular season that could easily serve as a *de facto* MVFC Championship Game. UND also has a chance to build off their historic FCS playoff run from last spring even if they don't win the MVFC. Putting together the season that is expected of them should earn NDU at the very least an at-large bid in the FCS playoff.