

WESTERN ILLINOIS 2021 PREVIEW

HC Jared Elliot assume his first lead role in '18 for Western Illinois, and it hasn't gone how he probably would have hoped. After WIU made the FCS playoffs in '17, Elliot guided his team to a 5-6 finish in '18. The wheels came off in '19 as WIU went 1-11.

Competing exclusively against MVFC opponents in a shortened '20-'21 season last spring, Elliot and WIU did not fare much better, starting 0-5 before winning their final game of the season 27-24 over Youngstown State to finish the year 1-5. WIU was projected to finish last in the conference this upcoming season at MVFC Media Day.

Western Illinois could not run the football last spring. They managed to average over 3.0 ypc in just one game, and even then, only ended up with 87 yds on 24 attempts in a 35-point loss. Despite their ineptitude running the ball, teams couldn't necessary key-in on WIU's ability to pass the ball. With HC Jared Elliot a former college QB, many would assume it's obvious he wants to throw the ball. Despite literally no run game to speak of, WIU still managed to top 300 yds through the air on three separate occasions and averaged 294 ypg passing. Sr. QB Connor Sampson passed for over 2,000 yds with a 13/9 TD/INT ratio in '19 in his first year as a starter. With the offense centered around his production, he averaged 290.7 passing ypg last spring with an 8/6 ratio. WIU's rushing attack should improve as their top two rushers from last season were Fr. (Ludovick Choquette and Iosefa Pua'auli). Preseason All-MVFC 1st Team selection Dennis Houston (477/11.1) leads a group of WRs that return their top three and five of their top six pass-catching targets from '20. Sr. Tony Tate (64.8) and Jr. Dallas Daniels (61.3) round out one of the better WR corps in the MVFC. WIU has at least four full-time starters and five overall returning to the OL, but to be frank, they need to bring along their run protection to match the effectiveness of the pass blocking.

WIU struggled defensively last spring, allowing 445 ypg of total offense with teams rushing for 218 ypg (4.8) while completing a ridiculous 69.6% of their passes. WIU did show signs of improvement in their final two games, giving up an average of 359 ypg of total offense. WIU's defense returns 12 of their top 13 tacklers from '20-'21, including their top four DL, top three LBs, and six of their top seven DBs. The secondary featured the top tackler from last spring, Sr. Michael Lawson (54/3.5/1.0), who returns in '21 after tying for team lead with two INTs as well. With so much experience coming back, WIU should be much improved on defense this season.

Jr. PK Mason Laramie converted 5/9 FGAs in '20-'21 but drilled a season long 53-yd FG vs Illinois St. Laramie also handled KOS duties, but forced three kicks OB and will have to improve both his accuracy as a PK and a KOS. Sr. P Adam Fellner had a tremendous spring, averaging 41.1 yds per punt while pinning 15 I20 with six punts of 50+. Fellner only allowed two punts to roll into the endzone for touchbacks. RS Tony Tate had a very productive spring after averaging 24.5 yds per kick return that featured a 95-yd return to the house. Tate only had a long of four yds returning punts, but stud DB Michael Lawson took his only return of a punt 36 yds for a TD.

It's not always so clear what a team must do to improve, or at least it isn't always so obvious. WIU must be able to establish the run game so that their passing attack can reach it's fullest potential. If WIU does not pose a threat or force opponents to respect their ability to run the ball, then slowing down the passing game becomes much easier for their opponents. While the defense will most certainly improve, it remains to be seen how much they will indeed improve. WIU has some explosive playmakers but when factoring in their questionable kicking game, too much pressure will more than likely be heaped upon the shoulders of QB Connor Sampson. That said, expect this team to put up some points, just don't expect them to win many games.