

Eastern Illinois 2021 Preview

Heading into the 2018 season, E.Illinois was off a 6-5 season and brought back 13 st'rs but finished 3-8. This forced a coaching change & EIU brought in long-time Northwestern assistant coach Adam Cushing. The first-year HC got back 11 starters in '19 but the Panthers went just 1-11. Last season the Panthers played 6 games in the spring and finished just 1-5 with their lone win coming against Tennessee Tech 28-20. Entering year #3 Cushing has just 2 wins, but has an experienced team that should be more competitive this season.

The Panthers averaged just 294 ypg & 18 ppg in 2017. In 2018 EIU's offense would show much improvement as they put up 446 ypg and 32 ppg. The offense again regressed in 2019 to averaging just 275 ypg and 15 ppg. Last season EIU's offense still struggled to move the ball as they put up just 324 ypg and 20 ppg. Harry Woodberry (1374, 58%, 13-6 in '19) started 3 games and threw for 631 yds (46%, 3-3) while Otto Kuhns started the other 3 games and passed for 509 yds with a 5-4 ratio and hit 51%. Woodberry departs so the QB job will be Kuhns to lose going into the year. Jordan Smith was the leading rusher for EIU despite starting just 2 gms as he ran for 278 yds (5.1) while Jaelin Benefield finished right behind him with 258 yds (4.4) and Kendi Young was #3 (121, 4.8). Smith departs but Benefield and Young return and should be able to have better production this season.

EIU's pass offense averaged 309 ypg in '18 but that dipped to 169 ypg in 2019. Last season saw that number climb up a bit to 191 ypg but as a team EIU only hit 48% of their passes. The receiver unit was led by WR DeWayne Cooks (4 st, 15 rec, 241 yds, 16.1) and SB/TE Jay Vallie, who started 7 gms (18 rec, 190 yds, 10.6). Robbie Lofton added 9 rec for 180 yds (5 st, 20.0) and Matt Judd was #5 with 8 rec for 109 yds (4 st, 13.6). While not ultra-productive last season, this unit returns the top 6 pass catchers and with steady QB play should have an improved fall 2021 season. The OLine for EIU allowed just 1 sks in the first 2 gms but gave up 12 sks the L/4 gms and paved the way for 133 rush ypg (3.9). The OLine does return 4 starters with the lone loss being RT Cole Hoover. With 4/5 of the OLine returning intact this unit should pave the way for better rushing numbers and limit the amount of sacks they give up. Stone Galloway went 5-7 for the season on FG's and had a long of 44 yds with 1 FG getting blocked.

In 2017, EIU's defense improved to allowing 355 ypg & 26 ppg. In '18 over the F/7 games EIU allowed 553 ypg and 48 ppg! Over the L/4 games, the defense allowed 385 ypg & 28 ppg, which brought their season total to 492 ypg & 40 ppg allowed. EIU returned 8 st'rs of defense in '19 and they carried over their performance of the L/4 gms of '18 as they gave up 351 ypg and 30 ppg. Last season the defense allowed 474 yds in the opener and 540 yds in the finale, but in their other 4 gms allowed 335 ypg. For the season EIU gave up 393 ypg and 34 ppg. The DLine did a solid job against the run for all but the finale (105 ypg, 2.8 ypc) when they allowed 282 rush yds (6.0) to Jacksonville St. The pass rush was not there for EIU though as they collected just 7 sks on the ssn and 6 of those sks came in 2 games. The DLine was led by DE Jordan Miles (5 st, 23 tkl, 6 tfl) along with Tim Varga (3 st, 20 tkl) and Cameron Leach (5 st, 16 tkl, 2 tfl). With all 4 starters back on the DLine this unit should be solid vs the run all season & will just have work on getting to the QB more

The LB corps for EIU returns pretty much intact this season as the top 4 LB's all are back this fall including Jason Johnson (6 st, 66 tkl, 6 tfl, 1st Tm OVC) and Colin Bohanek was the #2 overall tkl'r (40 tkl, 2 tfl) despite starting just 2 games. With the core of this unit back they should help lead the charge of an improved Panthers defense. After 209 pass ypg in '19 the EIU secondary regressed to allowing 258 pass ypg and gave up 61% completions to opposing QB's. The EIU defense loses 3 starters this season and they all come from the back end of the unit as CB's Mark Williams (6 st, 22 tkl, 4 pbu, 2 int, 2nd Tm OVC) and JJ Ross (5 st, 18 tkl, 5 pbu) both depart along with NB Ray Crittenden (6 st, 33 tkl, 5 tfl). This unit will have to rely on returnees FS Kaelin Drakeford (6 st, 36 tkl, 2 pbu) and SS Jordan Vincent (6 st, 25 tkl, 2.5 tfl) if they are to show any improvement in defending the pass this season. Stone Galloway was also the punter for EIU and he averaged 38.3 yds per punt (32.3 net) with a long of 65 yds.

EIU opens the fall 2021 season with a trio of road games as they open with a trip to Indiana St and then follow that up with a trip to South Carolina and end the road trip with a game against Dayton. Their first home game is against rival Illinois St in the 109th Mid-America Classic (EIU trails the series 57-42-9). EIU opens OVC play with 2 roads games at Tenn Tech and at Murray St before coming home off a bye to host UT Martin and Tenn St. EIU then has 2 tough road games back-to-back against SE Missouri and Austin Peay. EIU then closes the season with a second game against Murray St. The end of the schedule does EIU no favors and while they have talent returning, it is hard to envision the Panthers being in contention for the OVC title this season.