

# MERCER BEARS

Drew Crowe enters his 2<sup>nd</sup> year as head man at Mercer after a ridiculous first year. Mercer was 4-8 the year prior to Crowe in '19 and 5-7 in '18. Mercer used two QB's in '19. QB Robert Riddle (57% 1453, 15-11, 124 rush) returned but Harrison Frost beat him out and is hitting 55% with a 2-4 ratio. Riddle transferred to Chattanooga. They had 7 starters back on offense including top RB Tyray Devezin (1047, 4.5). They had a revamped WR corps with the top 2 gone and #3 WR Mckee moved to CB. They had a veteran Oline. Mercer did lose 5 of their top 7 tacklers on defense. Mercer played a short three game schedule and in their opening game trailed Jacksonville St 34-21 but drove 80 yards for a late garbage TD, 34-28. They held Jax St to 297 yards after the Gamecocks had put up 307 vs Florida St. Mercer had a 10-8 FD edge vs Army but trailed 21-3 and lost 49-3 only being out FD'd 21-14. In their last fall game they came up short vs Abeline Christian 20-17 (292-397). Crowe then faced a full 8 game conference schedule in the spring. They opened 1-2 to fall to 1-5 but then reeled off 4 straight wins before a season ending loss to Samford. Through it all not a single player missed a single game due to Covid. Overall the final record was 5-6 (5-3 in SoCon!) but I consider it a solid year for a first year head coach and they were -26 ypg in league play after being -143 and -64 ypg the previous two years. Crowe was a two year HC at Division II Lenior Rhyne where he took the Bears from 3-8 season in 2017 to a 25-3 record under his guidance over two seasons. After being named the AFCA National Coach of the Year for the 2018 season, he led the Bears to a school record-tying 13 wins in 2019 and a second consecutive berth in the NCAA Quarterfinals. LR carried a perfect season all the way to the quarterfinal round of the NCAA Division II Playoffs in 2019. He was the OC at Furman in 2017.

The Mercer offense put up 376 ypg and 31 ppg in 2018, then slipped a little to 359 ypg and 27 ppg in 2019. Last year they fell further to 333 ypg and 24 ppg with a first time starting QB. They did improve from 345 ypg and 26 ppg in SoCon play to 358 ypg and 27 ppg. Frost was the starter in the fall then Carter Peevy took over as the starter in the spring. Peevy threw for (1304, 53.7%, 8-4) and Frost threw for 501 (59.5%, 4-4). Frost departs but they get the big time addition of Fred Payton who started 11 games over 3 years at Coastal Carolina and he is my favorite to win the job. They run a Furman type offense with TB, FB and Jokers (AB/Slot's). They do lose their top RB in Deandre Johnson who had 414 (7.4) in '19 and 386 (6.2) last year. App St transfer RB Nakendrick Clark returns and was #2 (382, 3.8) playing only in the spring. Joker Fred Davis was #3 with 273 (3.7) and returns. Tyray Devezin was #4 and departs (201, 4.2). Last year they had to replace their top 3 WR's (647, 558, 466 yds). Georgia transfer WR Ty James led with 518

(17.3), Joker Ethan Dirrim was #2 with 417 (19.0) and Lenior Rhyne transfer TE Drake Starks was #3 (220, 20.0). This year all 3 return so they are in much better shape. QB Peevy did have the first ever 400 yd passing game in school history in the new offense last year. The offensive linemen are built smaller and quicker in an offense that mirrors the Air Force offense. This year they return 5 OL who started at least 7 games last year so it's a veteran unit and know the scheme well. They add in Air Force transfer Parker Wroble at Joker. With 8 starters back on offense they are a much more veteran unit and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the new offense.

The defense was a major reason for the coaching change as they allowed 472 ypg and 32 ppg in 2018 and 473 ypg and 35 ppg in 2019. They allowed 5.7 ypc in 2019! Last year they did allow 227 ypg rush (4.5) the first 6 games but 130 ypg rush (4.3) the last 5 games. Overall they improved by almost 100 ypg to allowing 375 ypg and 30 ppg. This year 9 starters return on the defense but 18 of the top 19 tacklers are back. They lose DE Jaden Taylor (3 sk). Making first team SoCon preseason is DL Solomon Zubairu (#5 tklr, 5.5 sks, 4 tfl). On the preseason 2<sup>nd</sup> team are Frosh DL Chris Hill (20 tkl, 3 sk), true frosh LB Issac Dowling (90 tkls, #1 6.5 sks!) and DB Lance Wise (#2 tklr, 86!, 4 tfl, 8 pbu!). Other key returnees are S Luke Ward who was #3 tackler in '19 and #7 tackler last year. DB Richie Coffey had 2 sk and 2 pbu and DB Harrison Poole had 27 tkls and 4.5 tfl. Naturally this unit is very experienced and should continue to improve.

P Caleb Dowden had a 40.2 avg and hit 5-10 FG with a long of 45 and one miss from 50+. He is back and will be pushed by Devin Folser and Trey Turk. Top KR McKee Yahsyn had a 23.6 avg and top PR Landon Miller was at 7.1 per return with only Yahsyn moving on. This unit was average last year and looks to be middle of the pack again this year.

First year head coaches had a rough time getting their teams ready last year but after going thru a fall AND spring this experienced team should make strides after starting 1-5 last year then winning 4 of the last 5. Mercer was picked 6<sup>th</sup> in the preseason polls by both the coaches and the media and did not receive a first place vote. The Bears have now had 4 straight losing seasons but even with Alabama on the schedule week 2 they have a shot at finally ending that streak this year.