

SAMFORD BULLDOGS

Chris Hatcher begins his 7th season with the Bulldogs after being the head coach at Valdosta State, Georgia Southern and Murray State and has a career record of 157-86 and is in his 22nd overall season as the head man. He does have a new Defensive coordinator in Nick Benedetto and a new offensive coordinator in Mitch Stewart who was the head coach at Murray State in '20-'21 (5-2!). Samford was 15-9 the two years prior to Hatcher with a playoff berth in 2013. Hatcher opened 3-5 his first year but won the last 3 for a 6-5 record and +34 ypg in SoCon action. 2016 was the opposite as they opened 5-1 but went 1-4 down the stretch after putting up 627 yds on Miss St in a 56-41 loss. They were 7-4 and +33 ypg in SoCon but lost to Youngstown St in the playoffs 38-24. Year three is when new head coaches usually find their stride and Samford went 8-3 and were +97 in the SoCon. This time they lost in the first round to Kennesaw St 28-17 despite a 454-383 yard edge. Samford had made the college football playoffs in 1991, 1992 and 2013 or three times in their history prior to Hatcher getting them there 2 of his first 3 years. 2018 they got off to a rough start at 1-4 but went 5-1 down the stretch to nab their Xth straight winning season and were an outstanding +161 ypg in SoCon play. In 2019 the team had 4 OT games (1 OT, 2 OT, 3 OT & 4 OT) which tied an NCAA record which was held by Hatcher's Georgia Southern team in 2008 when they also had 4 OT games. They went 1-3 in the OT games and lost a game in which they scored 58 points but won a game where they allowed 55 points (both were multiple OT games). They time they were 5-7 for a rare losing season and -3 ypg in SoCon play. Last year they had losses by 7, 7, and 1 and led by at least 14 points in all 3 of the losses! They opened 2-3 but beat The Citadel 55-7 and Mercer 44-20 to get back to the winning side of the ledger at 4-3 and were +70 ypg in SoCon play.

The Bulldog offense led by QB Devlin Hodges had 540 ypg and 40 ppg in SoCon play in 2018. They lost their QB, their top WR (1453, 14.5) in '19 and fell to 420 ypg and 32 ppg. QB Chris Oladokun led with 2058 (62%, 18-7) with Liam Welch taking over the last 3 games and throwing for 759 (54%, 6-7) on the season. Chris Oladokun began the year as starter but the Liam Welch full time era began when he threw for 311 vs WCarolina and he also had 570 yards vs VMI and in just 6 games threw for 2242 (374ypg, 68%, 12-5) and they put up 514 ypg and 40 ppg in SoCon play. Welch was named the preseason SoCon Offensive Player of the year. With Oladokun moving on 5'8" Ty Hatcher (8-8 career) is the only semi experienced backup. Jay Stanton was the top RB in 2019 with 690 (5.7) while QB Oladokun was #2 (491, 3.9). Demarcus Ware was #4 with 167 (4.2). Last year Stanton led again with 479 (5.4) while QB Welch was #2 (303, 4.3) and Ware was #3 with 101 (6.3) and got that in just 3 games. Dakota Chapman a Jacksonville State transfer was #4 with 96 (3.7) and the top 4 rushers are all back. Last year they had to

their top 2 WR (565, 474 yds). The top returnee was Montrell Washington (405, 14.5) and he was #3 again with 406 (15.0). Washington is a dynamic player and will be used on jet sweeps, PR, etc. AJ Toney was #5 in 2019 (289, 9.0) and #2 last year with 437 (10.7) and is 2nd team Preseason SoCon. Ty King came out of nowhere to lead with 609 (18.5). The top 3 are back. TE Michael Vice (293, 12.2) was #4 and is 2nd team Preseason SoCon TE. #5 Kendall Watson (229, 14.3) is also back. Texas Tech transfer Caleb Durham-Honer (0 rec TT) was on the scout team last year. Four starters return up front from a unit that opened holes for 168 ypg (3.8) rush and allowed 9.0% sacks. The top returnee is 1st team preseason SoCon Gavin Orr. This unit was average last year and should be improved but is middle of the pack conference wise.

In 2018 Samford allowed just 366 ypg and 26 ppg allowing 3.8 ypc rush and 57% passing. In 2019 they allowed 236 (4.5) rush and 453 ypg and 38 ppg. Last year they had had a new Defensive Coordinator and it took time to gel and they allowed 444 ypg and 27 ppg. They did cut the ypg rush a little to 212 (4.2) but did only allow 55.6% passing. Samford did lead the SoCon in 3rd down defense (31%) and forced turnovers (18). Hatcher feels that the new defense took time to get going and feels they will be much improved on defense this fall. They lose just 1 starter from the defense in DL Joshua Long (#7 tklr, 2.5 tfl). They return two 1st team preseason SoCon players in DT Armond Lloyd (33 tkl, 2.5 sk) and S Chris Edmonds (#3 tklr, 2.5 tfl, 4 int!). They have one 2nd team preseason SoCon player back in LB Trimarcus Cheeks (#2 tklr, 2.5 sk, 2.5 tfl, 2 qbh, 1 int). Other key returnees are LB Nathan East (#1 tklr, 3.5 tfl, 3 pbu), S Ty Herring (#4 tklr, 4 pbu) and LB Noah Martin (#5 tklr, 2 sk, 4 qbh). With 10 of 11 starters back and 20 of the top 21 tacklers, I will buy into Hatcher's assessment of this being a much improved D but this league has some top notch D's so not sure if they can break into the upper half of the rankings.

K Mitchell Fineran hit a super 15-18 FG with a long of 50 and was a perfect 7-7 from 40+. Unfortunately he transferred to Purdue. They bring in North Texas transfer Zach Williams who had 81% TB's on KOff's in '20. They also add Coby Neenan who was a kickoff man at UAB and spent 4 seasons at Tulane. P Bradley Porcellato avg just 38.6 per boot in '20 with a net of 37.3. Montrell Washington was an All American PR with 200 yds (11.1) in just 7 games and Ty King was the top KR (22.7) and both return. It will be tough to match the FG production but this is a solid unit.

Samford was the typical Turnovers=Turnaround team in the spring as in 2019 they were -13 in TO's and improved to +8 in TO's last year. They had the best offense in the SoCon last year and return the leagues preseason Offensive Player of the year in QB Liam Welch. The defense will be improved but the loss of their K who connected on 15-18 FG's in a 7 game season might be felt as 4 of their 7 games were decided by 7 or less

(did lose 3 of those). Remember they either won their game or held a 14 point lead in all 7 games last year! Samford was +70 ypg last year in league play and they get to host league favorite Chattanooga on Oct 23rd. Samford was picked 2nd in the Coaches poll receiving 2 first place votes but surprisingly 5th by the media with 2 of the 30 first place votes. I will side with the coaches on this one and Samford is a title contended and also has a shot at a 3rd playoff appearance in 6 years as Welch continues his upwards ascent.