

VMI KEYDETS

Scott Wachenheim is the defending Eddie Robinson national FCS coach of the year and is it any wonder as he took a VMI team that was predominately at the bottom of the league and they were league champs last year! They earned their FIRST EVER playoff bid and captured their first Southern conference title since they finished in a first place tie with Chattanooga in 1977. It was their first outright SoCon title since 1974. VMI was coming off 16 straight losing seasons and had not had a winning record in THIRTY EIGHT YEARS dating back to 1981!! Wachenheim went 3-8 his first year (most wins here in 5 years) and was -91 ypg. The rebuilding process continues with their first winless season in 13 years going 0-11 and -188 ypg. In 2018 they managed to beat Division II Tusculum 20-11. VMI was -123 ypg in SoCon Play. Finally year 4 there was light at the end of the tunnel as they opened 4-3 and beat ETSU, The Citadel and Samford in that stretch. They lost their next 4 but won the season finale vs Chattanooga to finish 5-7 their most wins since 2006 but were still -79 ypg in SoCon play. They were actually picked 6th in the media poll last year and shockingly opened up 4-0 but lost long time starter QB Reece Udinski in week 4 to a torn ACL. Seth Morgan has just 7 passes but threw for 344 ypg in his 4 starts. VMI got past Wofford 36-31 their 3rd close win (1, 1, 5 pts) then lost 24-20 to ETSU despite a 382-275 yard edge. They beat the Citadel in the finale to claim the league title. Despite appearing in their first ever playoff game vs one of the toughest teams in the FCS (and a grizzled playoff vet) James Madison they only lost 31-24. VMI was +86 ypg in conference play!

In 2016, Wachenheim installed the Air Raid Offense at VMI and they dropped from 387 ypg to 347 ypg. Year two was a nightmare with the QB's hitting just 52.3% and a paltry 219 ypg of offense for the year and in SoCon as well. They improved to 57.9%, 28 ppg and 399 ypg in SoCon play in 2018, 66%, 33 ppg and 418 ypg in 2019. Last year despite losing their QB after 4 games it was 73.5%, 431 ypg and 30 ppg in league play! QB Reece Udinski led the team in passing in 2018 and in 2019 threw for 3276 (63.9%, 19-5). Last year in the first 4 games he threw for 1082 (71.5%, 7-2) but then tore his ACL. Seth Morgan stepped right in throwing for 343.5 ypg (1374, 71.35, 10-4). This year Udinski transferred to Maryland but Morgan should have one of the top season in the SoCon this year. He needs to stay healthy as there is no experience behind him but he does add mobility to the position and rushed for 221 (3.9) as the #2 rusher. Last year they had to fill the large shoes of RB Alex Ramsey (1326, 5.5). Korey Bridy was fifth in the nation in KR yards and appeared on his way to a solid year with B2B 100 yard games vs Mercer and Samford then suffered an ankle injury and had just 31 yds the last 4 games. He still led with 349 (3.8) while Rashad Raymond (215, 3.7) was #2 rusher. Both return making this unit much more experienced than last year and if Bridy stays healthy, should be much more productive. Last year VMI returned their star WR in Jakob Herres who led

with 1091 (15.2) in 2019. They did lose their #2 (648, 12.7) and #4 (323, 6.5 RB) receivers. Herres had an amazing season as in just 8 games he had 978 (12.2)! Michael Jackson (5 rec '19) emerged as the #2 man with 394 (10.9) and Max Brimigion (#5, 253, 10.5 '19) was #3 with 291 (9.1). TE Aidan Trombly was #7 with 11 catches. The great news is all 4 return! They do lose one starter on the O-line but coach Wachenheim calls it the Biggest Strongest O-line that he has had and they return 4 starters. The leader is OL Marshall Gill who was voted preseason 1st team SoCon. They have 10 starters back on offense and while I look for the run game to be improved they do need to keep QB Morgan and WR Herres healthy.

In 2018 the VMI defense allowed 522 ypg in SoCon play and 47 ppg including 275 (5.7) on the ground. In 2019 they gave up 237 ypg rush (5.3) and 497 ypg and 37 ppg in SoCon play. Last year they changed the emphasis of the defense to stopping the run. Mission accomplished as they allowed just 149 ypg rush (3.4) and the D allowed just 346 ypg and 20 ppg in conference play. With almost every team returning nearly their entire defense VMI takes some big hits as they lose 5 of the top 7 tacklers and 7 of the top 17 tacklers. The biggest losses are LB Connor Riddle (#2 tklr, 5 sk, 5 tfl), DB AJ Smith (#3 tklr), DB Tyren Cloud (#5 tklr), DL Jordan Ward (#11 tklr, 4 sks), DB Josh Sarret (#4 tklr, 2 int), Aljareek Malry (#7 tklr, 4 pbu). They do return the preseason Defensive Player of the year in the SoCon in aptly named Stone Snyder (#1 tklr, EIGHT sks) and DL Warren Dabney (11 tfl, #9 tklr). Also back is preseason 1st team LB/DB Ethan Caselberry (#6 tklr, 2 sk, 2 int). The D made great strides last year but with just 5 starters back they figure to take a step back this year.

P Jack Culbreath had a 38.7 avg last year (36.3 net) and is back. Jerry Rice hit a solid 11-14 FG in the spring with a long of 44 and is also back. Chance Knox was the top KR (22.7) and PR (8.2) and he is back. This unit was average last year but should be improved with everyone back.

What a Cinderella story VMI was last year and that is precisely why their coach was rightfully named FCS coach of the year. The big question this year is can VMI maintain their success for a 2nd straight season. As long as the offense keeps WR Herres and QB Morgan healthy they will be potent. The D will be good but does lose 5 of the top 7 tacklers in a year when all other defenses have everyone back. VMI was picked 2nd by the media with 6 first place votes and 3rd by the coaches with 2 first place votes. This team rates at the top of my Going Down in the Stock Market Indicator and they now have a target on their back after living as the underdog forever. I think it will be tough for them to repeat as conference champs but then again who would have thought they could even come close last year?