

## Abilene Christian 2021 Preview

Abilene Christian is still relatively new to FCS-level football, as their program just moved up to that level in 2013. Adam Dorrell is entering his 5th season as the HC of the Wildcats and has gone 14-26 in those 4 seasons. Last season the Wildcats opened with road games at UTEP (nearly won in 17-13 loss) and at Army (lost 55-23). ACU lost to SF Austin before picking up their lone win of the season against Mercer 20-17. ACU would fall to D-II Angelo St and then dropped the finale at Virginia 55-15. Dorrell is 9-9 the previous 2 seasons in Southland Conference games & now the Wildcats are headed to the WAC & will play the "AQ7" teams this year before fully transitioning to WAC games in 2022.

In 2017 the ACU offense put up their lowest offensive totals as an FCS team, as they were held to 333 ypg and just 19 ppg. The following season in '18 those numbers drastically improved to 440 ypg and 30 ppg. In '19 the Wildcats offense still was strong as they put up 413 ypg and 28 ppg. Last season the Wildcats had a new QB under center and in a unique season the Wildcats played 6 games in the fall (faced 3 FBS foes) and they put up just 346 ypg and 21 ppg on offense. The new QB for ACU was former Iowa QB Peyton Mansell and in his first year as the starter he hit 62% and threw for 1,237 yds (5-4 ratio). Stone Earle made 1 start and for the season he was 21-33 for 173 yds on the season. Both of these QB's are back this season & with another season in the offense we expect Mansell to have a more productive season. The Wildcats rush attack didn't have much success during the 2020 season as their leading rusher, Jeremiah Dobbs, ran for just 227 yds (5.4, 5 td) & the #2 RB Tyrese White totaled only 171 yds (3.3) for the season. Both of those RB's return this season & with a more normal offseason under their belts the RB's should have a more productive season.

ACU passed for 278 ypg in 2018, then in 2019 they threw for 244 ypg. With a new QB throwing passes last season the Wildcats still managed to throw for 233 ypg and hit almost 62% of their throws. The receiving corps was led by Lionell McConnell (4 st, 366, 10.2) and Kobe Clark finished #2 (3 st, 362, 13.9, 4 td) while TE Branden Hohenstein was the #3 receiver (6 st, 191, 15.9). The Wildcats do lose both McConnell and Hohenstein, but Clark returns and they will need players such as Darius Lewis (1 st, 147, 8.2) and Taelyn Williams (2 st, 122, 20.3) to step up in their absence. Expect Remington Lutz to get more reps at the TE position this season. As for the OLine they paved the way for just 113 rush ypg (3.5) and they allowed 15 sks in 6 games. ACU loses 4 starters on the OLine with the lone returnee being RT Zach Terry. A trio of players who started a game LY do return as well so the cabinet isn't as empty as you would think. Blair Zepeada returns as the Wildcats field goal kicker. Last season Zepeada hit 6-8 FG's with a long of 41 yds.

The Wildcats returned 6 starters in 2018 and gave up 385 ypg and 27 ppg. In 2019 the numbers rose a bit as ACU allowed 403 ypg and 29 ppg. Last season the Wildcats defense allowed 422 ypg and 36 ppg including allowing 467 yds to D-II Angelo St. An issue for ACU last season was the run defense as they allowed 225 ypg (5.0). After allowing just 98 yds to UTEP in the opener, ACU's rush defense would give up over 400 yds twice! The ACU defense had little success getting to the QB last season as they only collected 8 sks in 6 games. The same 4 players started all 6 games on the DLine & they all return for ACU including DE Jordan Paup (27 tkl, 2.5 sk). With the same starters all back up front it is likely that the run defense sees an improvement along with an increased amount of sacks.

ACU's linebackers stayed healthy last season as Jack Gibbens started all 6 gms and led with 49 tkl (2 sks, 1 int) and both Tory Hargrove (24 tkl) and Hunter Kier (22 tkl) started 5 gms. Dating back to '14 ACU has surrendered at least 27 ppg, the lone starter lost in the front seven is Gibbens, but with 6 of the 7 front seven starters back this unit may have a shot to allow under 27 ppg for the first time. In 2018 the pass defense gave up 272 ypg and in 2019 they allowed 265 pass ypg. Last season ACU did face two run-heavy teams (allowed a comb'd 105 pass yds in those gms) but twice gave up over 350 pass yds including 403 to Virginia. ACU's pass defense allowed 65% completions to opposing QB's as well. The pass defense recorded just 8 pbu's on the season and only picked off 1 pass all season. With all 4 secondary starters returning this season led by S Brian Bullock (6 st, 34 tkl, 2 tfl) and CB Triston Anderson (5 st, 16 tkl, 2 pbu) this unit should hopefully have better success against the pass. Logan Burke was the punter for ACU in 2020 and averaged 38.5 yds per punt (L/51) and had a net of 36.4. Burke does return this season for the Wildcats.

The biggest concern looking at the 2021 ACU Wildcats is their OLine. While they didn't produce great rush numbers and sacks were an issue at times, it is tough to replace losing 4 starters with experience. How the OLine comes on this season is key to how the offense performs. With 10 starters on defense back, this defense has the looks, at least on paper, to have an improved season. After opening with a game at SMU, the Wildcats have a good chance to pick a pair of wins as they face NAIA Louisiana College and D-II UT Permian Basin. ACU faces Lamar 2 times this season (road/home) they close out the season facing Jacksonville St on the road then 2 weeks later hosting Sam Houston in the finale (game vs Tarleton in between). ACU should definitely top their 1-win mark from last season but it is tough to see them make the playoffs this season, even with 15 starters back.