

Jacksonville St 2021 Preview

Head coach John Grass enters his 8th year at Jacksonville State, amassing a 68-21 record over his first seven seasons, and led JSU to the FCS Title Game in 2015. JSU has made the FCS playoffs 6 out of the 7 years Grass has been the HC here. Last season JSU played 4 games in the fall and after losing to Florida St in the opener they won their next 3 games including a win at FIU. In the spring JSU jumped out to a 4-0 OVC start & won all 4 gms by at least 17 pts but then fell to Austin Peay despite holding them to 238 yds (JSU was -5 TO's). JSU would go on to win their final 2 OVC games by double digits and blew out Davidson 49-14 in the first round of the FCS playoffs before losing in the next round to Delaware 20-14. JSU is leaving the OVC to join the Atlantic Sun Conference.

JSU's offense in 2018 was in the top 5 in total yards per game (497 ypg) and top 10 in points per game (40 ppg). In 2019 the offense returned 9 starters but the numbers did drop to 419 ypg and 27 ppg. Last season with QB Zerrick Cooper back under center (former Clemson QB, PS#27!), who set a JSU record with 32 td passes in 2019, the offense put up just 359 ypg in the 4 games in the fall. The bad news for JSU was that QB Cooper was OFY with an ankle inj against FIU and would have to miss the spring season, Cooper finished with 671 pass yds (67%, 1-1). In the spring Zion Webb would take over as the starter and the Gamecocks offense put up 414 ypg and 29 ppg in OVC play. For the season Webb finished with 1,777 pass yds (58%, 13-8) and did show dual-threat ability as he ran for 399 (5.4, 5 td) and was 1st Team OVC. JSU had a strong rush attack last season led by 2nd Team OVC RB Josh Samuel (7 st, 773, 5.6, 8) and Uriah West (7 st, 687, 5.0, 8 td) as well as pat Jackson (369, 4.0). The top 3 RB's all return along with QB's Cooper and Webb and the Gamecocks will have a talented backfield this season.

The passing game in 2018 (297 ypg) and 2019 (296 ypg) was strong for JSU's offense. However, with more of a focus on the run game (62% of JSU's play LY were runs) the Gamecocks only averaged 195 pass ypg which was their lowest total since 2011 (166 ypg). The leading receiver was TE Trae Barry (10 st, 534, 16.2) while Dave Russell was #2 with 352 yds (12 st, 13.5, 3 td) and Ahmed Edwards finished as the #3 receiver (9 st, 284, 16.7, 2nd Team OVC). Overall 4 of the top 7 receivers are back this season with the biggest losses being TE Barry (1st Team OVC) and Logan McVay (8 st, 181, 12.9). But with QB Cooper back healthy and several returning targets to throw to this season, we expect the pass numbers to increase. As for the OLine there was some movement early on as there were 5 different starting lineups in the first 7 games but that lineup stayed the same for the final 7 games. Despite the early shakeups on the OLine they would pave the way for 189 rush ypg (4.6) and that number jumped to 211 ypg (4.7) vs OVC foes. The JSU OLine allowed 18 sks on the season and 10 of those sacks allowed came in 3 games. All 7 players who started a game on the OLine LY return, which includes LG Cam Hill (1st Team OVC), LT Tylan Grable (1st Team OVC) and C Zack Cangelosi (2nd Team OVC). This unit should pave the way for strong rushing totals again this season. This season JSU also returns K Alen Karajic, who hit 14-19 FG's last season (L/46) with 2 of those misses getting blocked.

In 2017 the Gamecocks allowed just 240 ypg! In '18 the JSU defense allowed 311 ypg, but allowed over 20 ppg (25 ppg) for the first time since '14. JSU brought back 6 starters on defense in '19 but would allow 380 ypg (most since 2012) and 28 ppg. Last season after allowing 531 yds to Florida St in the opener JSU's defense would give up just 229 ypg over their next 8 games & the most yds they allowed in that span was 287 yds to Mercer. For the season the JSU defense gave up 283 ypg and 18 ppg. The Gamecocks strong defense started with their strong DLine, as they allowed just 92 rush ypg (2.6) including allowing just 48 rush ypg (1.7) against OVC foes! They also collected 28 sks for the season. The DLine was led by DE's DJ Coleman (13 st, 55 tkl, 8.5 sk, 3 tfl, 1st Team OVC) and Umstead Sanders (13 st, 39 tkl, 5.5 tfl, 2nd Team OVC). Chris Hardie (2 st, 34 tkl, 7 sk, 4 tfl) and Jaylen Swain (48 tkl, 3 sk, 8.5 tfl) were talented role players and DT Lemuel Gordon (9 st, 21 tkl, 3 tfl, 2nd Team OVC) along with NT Anthony Nesby (7 st, 20 tkl, 3 tfl) were strong players up the middle.

The Gamecocks had a talented group of LB's coming into LY and Marshall Clark led the unit in tackles with 85 (13 st, 10.5 tfl, 2nd Team OVC) and Markail Benton came on as the starter mid-season and finished as the #3 tkl'r (6 st, 2.5 tfl, 2nd Team OVC). Zack Woodard was the starter to begin the season, but he entered the portal midseason & finished with 24 tkl's. Kolbi Fuqua began the season at NB and collected 32 tkl (2 pbu) but after 7 starts he suffered a bad ankle inj and missed the rest of the year. Stevonte Tullis would finish the season as the starter at NB and he collected 44 tkl (3.5 tfl, 4 pbu) in 5 starts. Both starters at NB return this season along with Clark and Benton and this LB unit should be formidable once again in the middle of the field. The JSU secondary improved to allowing 190 pass ypg last season & they allowed opposing QB's to hit just 55% for the season. This unit was led by OVC

DPOY Nico Harper who had 92 tkl's (12 st, 2.5 tfl, 3 pbu, 3 int) from his Safety position. The other Safety position was manned by Jeremiah Harris (9 st, 66 tkl, 3 tfl, 2 pbu) and Jacquez Payton (11 st, 30 tkl, 10 pbu, 3 int) held down one of the CB spots. Yul Gowdy began the season starting at CB but was OFY after 5 games. George Steele would start the L/7 games and he ended the season with 32 tkl's & 3 pbu. The lone starter not returning in the secondary CB Payton (2nd Team OVC) but there is depth in the secondary and this unit will be strong again. Jack Dawson was the main punter for JSU last season and he averaged 41.8 yds per punt (13 I/20, long of 61) and the team had a net of 38.2 yds.

Once again under coach Grass, JSU looks like a team capable of not only making the FCS playoffs but making a deep run. The Gamecocks open the season in the Montgomery kickoff against UAB, then they travel to Florida St. After their opening 2 games vs FBS foes they come home to face North Alabama and then UT Martin before traveling to play Kennesaw St. JSU then faces Stephen F Austin and then off a bye they travel to take on the defending FCS national championship Sam Houston. JSU's final 2 home games are against Central Arkansas and Abilene Christian before closing the regular season at Lamar and at Eastern Kentucky. While JSU is joining the Atlantic Sun, they are playing the "AQ7" which is why they are playing several former Southland Conference members. This schedule has some tough challenges, but this Gamecocks team is loaded with talent and we wouldn't be shocked to see them making another playoff run this season.