

Sam Houston 2021 Preview

In KC Keeler's first 4 seasons at Sam Houston, the Bearkats went 46-12 and reached the FCS Semifinals three times, twice losing to North Dakota St. However, in '18 SHSU went just 6-5 and missed the playoffs, then again missed the playoffs in '19 with a 7-5 record. After a narrow 43-38 win in the opener LY against SE Louisiana, the Bearkats took down Nicholls 71-17 and then crushed Lamar 62-7. SHSU would finish the shortened spring season 6-0 & got back to the playoffs where they would go on to win their first 3 games by a combined 13 points to reach the National Championship. In the title game SHSU went up on South Dakota St 17-7 in the 3Q, but would give up 2 TD's in the 4Q and trailed 21-17. SHSU went on a 16-play/65-yard drive & scored the game-winning TD with 16 seconds left. Keeler is 69-22 here at SHSU and was named Southland Coach of the Year last season. SHSU will be playing the "AQ7" conference this season before transitioning to being a member of the WAC next season.

The offensive numbers dropped from 538 ypg & 43 ppg in '17 to 420 ypg and 30 ppg in '18. The offensive numbers stayed consistent in '19 as the Bearkats offense put up 428 ypg and 32 ppg. Last season the SHSU offense was strong in the regular season as they put up 525 ypg & 45 ppg against conference foes. In their 4 playoff games the Bearkats offense put up just 314 ypg and 27 ppg. The offense was led by Southland Player of the Year QB Eric Schmid who threw for 2,599 yards (60%, 17-9) in 10 games and he also ran for 436 (4.4) and 8 td's. 2nd Tm Southland RB Ramon Jefferson led the Bearkats in rushing LY as he totaled 656 (6.0) and 7 td's while backup Noah Smith put up 133 (3.8) & also had 28 rec for 261 yds and was 3rd Tm Southland. Both Jefferson and Smith return this season, as does QB Schmid and the Bearkats offense should have an even more productive season running the ball.

In 2018 the Bearkats offense put up 296 pass ypg and in '19 that number dipped slightly to 281 ypg. Last season against Southland foes the SHSU pass offense put up 338 ypg, but that number dipped to 197 pass ypg in the 4 playoff games. The receivers were led by Jeequez Ezzard (10 st, 861, 22.7, 9 td, 1st Tm Southland) along with Ife Adeyi (10 st, 588, 19.6, 3 td, 2nd Tm Southland) and Cody Chrest (8 st, 463, 11.3). This season for SHSU all 3 starting WR's and starting TE Isaac Schley (8 st, 191, 11.9, 2nd Tm Southland) all return & overall 6 of the top 7 receivers return and this unit combined with QB Schmid bring a lot of experience & talent to the pass game this season. As for the OLine they paved the way for 159 rush ypg (4.5) for the season, but SHSU ran for 187 ypg (4.8) vs conference foes & 117 ypg (3.8) in the playoffs. The OLine did allow just 17 sks on 334 pass attempts (5.1%) but 8 of those sks allowed came in the playoffs. This unit returns all 7 players that started a game last season including 1st Tm Southland C/G Colby Thomas, 2nd Tm Southland LG Prince Pines and 2nd Tm Southland C Ethan Hagler. This experience up front should lead to even better rush totals & solid pass protection. SHSU also brings back their FG K Seth Morgan, who hit 12-14 FG's (L/45) and was named 1st Tm Southland. WR Ezzard was also 1st Tm Southland PR after racking up 314 PR yds and taking 2 of them back for TD's.

Coming into the 2019 season Sam Houston had not fielded a defense that held foes to under 400 ypg since 2012. However, that season saw the Bearkats allow nearly 100 ypg less (330) and they held foes to just 18 ppg (gave up 28 ppg in '18). Last season the SHSU defense had their good moments (held NDSU to 229 yds in a playoff game) but also had their struggles (gave up 430 yds to James Madison in the semifinals). The DLine for SHSU held conference foes to just 52 rush ypg (1.7) but gave up 160 rush ypg (3.7) in the playoffs. For the season the Bearkats defense did collect 37 sks. The DLine was led by 1st Tm Southland DE Jahari Kay (10 st, 38 tkl, 6 sk, 7.5 tfl) along with 1st Tm Southland NT Joseph Wallace (10 st, 2.5 sk, 6 tfl) and 1st Tm Southland DL Jevon Leon (22 tkl, 4 sk). With the top 5 tkl'rs on the DLine returning this unit should be even stronger.

From 2013-2018 the SHSU defense allowed between 28-31 ppg. In '19 the defense improved to allowing just 18 ppg. Last season the LB's were a key to the SHSU defense allowing just 20 ppg. The LB corps was led by Trevor Williams (10 st, 88 tkl, 3 sk, 12 tfl, 5 pbu, 2nd Tm Southland), Quentin Brown (9 st, 63 tkl, 4 sk, 5 tfl, 1st Tm Southland) and Markel Perry (10 st, 40 tkl, 6.5 sk, 6.5 tfl, 2nd Tm Southland). The LB corps returns the top 7 tkl'rs from a season ago and just like the DLine this should be a strong unit once again. In '18 the SHSU pass defense allowed 219 ypg but held opposing QB's to 54%. In '19 the Bearkats gave up 260 pass ypg but held opposing QB's to just 53% passing. Last year against conference foes SHSU allowed 307 pass ypg but that number dropped to just 195 pass ypg allowed in the playoffs. The SHSU secondary was led by FS Braiden Clopton (9 st, 72 tkl, 3 tfl), SS Tristian McCollum (9 st, 50 tkl, 2 pbu, 2 int, 2nd Tm Southland) and CB Zyion McCollum (10 st, 46 tkl, 6 pbu, 1st Tm Southland). The SHSU secondary brings back their top 8 tkl'rs for the 2021 fall season & we see the pass ypg allowed improving. The P last season was Matt McRobert and he averaged 42.1 yds per punt (long 59, 18 inside 20) and was 1st Tm Southland & returns this season.

SHSU opens at Northern Arizona on a Thursday before hosting SE Missourii, who should be in contention for the OVC crown this season. The Bearkats open their "AQ7" conference play as they travel to Central Ark before playing Stephen F. Austin on a neutral site in Houston. SHSU then hosts Lamar, who they beat 62-7 LY and then off a bye they host former OVC powerhouse Jacksonville St (10-3 LY, made it to 2nd round of FCS playoffs). Then SHSU faces the 2 FCS newcomers in Tarleton and then travels to Dixie St. They host former OVC member Eastern Kentucky before finishing the regular season at Abilene Christian. The defending national champions have ALL 22 starters back this season and there is no reason think they won't get back to the title game this season.