

# Western Carolina Catamounts

Mark Speir took over as head coach in 2012. Western Carolina had won just 2, 1, 3, 2, 2 and 1 games the previous six years. Speir had two expected rebuilding years to start at 1-10 and 2-10. Year three is usually when new coaches hit their stride and he had a better than expected 7-5 season (-5 ypg CAA) in 2014 and was tied for 2<sup>nd</sup> in the powerful Colonial. In 2015 it was another solid year at 7-4 (-12 ypg CAA). They took a step back in 2016 to 2-9 (-155 ypg CAA) but rebounded in 2017 with their 3<sup>rd</sup> winning season in 4 years going 7-5 (+48 ypg CAA!). It was the first time they had had 3 winning seasons in 4 years since a 3 year stretch way back from 1992-1994 and that included a pair of 6-5 seasons. It was the first time they had won at least 7 games in 3 of 4 years in school history dating back to 1931. His final three years did not go as well as they opened 2018 at 3-0 but lost their last 8 games to fall to 3-8 (-38 ypg CAA). In 2019 they went 4-8 and were -49 ypg in CAA play. This year they played both Fall and Spring. The Catamounts lost at NC State 41-0 & at Alabama 66-3 in 2019. Last year WCarolina played their very first game of the year vs a powerful Liberty team that had 7 games under their belt and lost 58-14. They lost to an Eastern Kentucky team that had 8 games under their belt and was playing their season finale 49-17. They played a potent North Carolina that was off a loss and would put up 778 yards and 62 points the week after WC vs a powerful Miami defense. The Catamounts “only” lost 49-9 allowing 540 yards for an expected 0-3 fall. In the spring they went 1-5 with a win over The Citadel 21-14 and were -190 ypg and Speir was let go and Kerwin Bell was hired.

The Western offense was led by QB Tyrie Adams in 2018 as he threw for 2147 (63%, 16-4) and was the #1 rusher with 1022 (5.4). Adams was back in 2017 but missed two early games and ran it 70 less times as he was #3 rusher with 437 (3.6) and threw for 1697 (64%, 11-9). Will Jones started two games and threw for 443 (64%, 1-1). Last year Adams moved on and Jones started the 3 fall games and threw for 256 (50%, 2-2). In the spring Ryan Glover took over at QB and he threw for 832 in the 6 games (58.5%, 3-4) and rushed for 93 (1.8). Glover transferred to Cal but they bring in Rogan Wells who led Bell's Valdosta St to a national title in 2018 and was 28-3 as a starting QB with them. He was twice a finalist for the Harlon Hill trophy. He rushed for 1932 yds with them and had 9026 total offense yards. Last year he led Tusculum to the South Atlantic Conference championship throwing for 1852 yds (62%) and had 100 rush. As long as he stays healthy this unit is much more experienced and more talented than last year. RB Donovan Spencer was the top RB in 2019 with 530 yds (4.0) and last year led with 718 (5.5) including 220 yds in the lone win vs the Citadel. Spencer moves on with the top returnee being Mikai Stanley (222, 4.9). They do add Valdosta St grad transfer Kenny Benjamin and Tusculum transfer TJ Jones. Benjamin played in 30 games in 3 years at



Valdosta with 75-765 receiving, 34-265 rush and 1056 KR yards. TJ Jones was at JUCO in '19 and last year in 5 spring games at Tusculum led with 62-337 rush (5.4). Bell likes the transfers but I will call this unit down a notch. In 2019 the top 4 receivers had 433, 302, 254 and 233 yards. None of the 4 was a regular last year as Frosh Calvin Jones led with 185 (8.4), TE Clayton Bardall was #2 with 156 (15.6) and TE Raekwon Heath was #3 with 152 (12.7). All 3 are back and they add USF Transfer Terrance Horne (PS#373, 9 rec), Alabama transfer CJ Williams (walk on 0 rec), Tusculam transfer Raphael Williams (13-194 LY) and East Carolina transfer Mydreon Vines (19 rec 3Y). This unit is vastly more experienced with added talent. The offensive line paved the way for 135 ypg (4.1) with 7.8% sacks. They return 3 starters with Soph Tyler Smith earning 1<sup>st</sup> team preseason SoCon honors and he was the player on the team on either the first or 2<sup>nd</sup> team. They also add Temple transfer Griffin Sestili and should be improved. Last year with new QB's and receivers the offense which had dropped from 467 ypg in 2018 to 330 ypg in 2019 fell even further to 275 ypg and just 16 ppg last year. Even with just 6 starters back on offense I like the transfers at QB and RB and they will be much more potent.

The defense allowed 229 (5.2) rush in 2018 and in SoCon play yielded 505 ypg and 46 ppg! In 2019 they gave up 265 (6.0) on the ground but cut it to 420 ypg and 35 ppg in SoCon play. Last year it was 300 (5.1) on the ground with 471 ypg and 34 ppg in SoCon play. This year 9 starters return on defense with the biggest losses being DB AJ Rogers (#3 tklr 3 pbu), and S Dorian Davis (#6 tklr). To combat the rush defense woes Bell brings in 310 lb DL Antwann Fann from Kennesaw St, 320 lb DL Marlon Alexander from Gardner-Webb and 355 lb DL Ronald Wilson also from Gardner Webb! Roman Johnson was #7 tklr (3.5 tfl), DE Micah Nelson was #9 tklr and DE Darrius Bell was #11 tklr and all return. The teams top two tacklers were their solid LB duo of Ty Harris (#1 tklr, 4 sk, 4 tfl) and Trevor Childers (#2 tklr, 2 tfl, 1 int) and they should be even more productive with the bigger Dline freeing them up. While they do lose two DB's they return CB Ronald Kent (#4 tklr, 1 int) and S Jacob Harris (#8 tklr, 1 int) who will benefit from a stronger front 7. Naturally the defense should be improved especially in the run heavy SoCon.

Last year Richard McCollum hit 3-6 FG (long 45) and Paxton Robertson hit 2-2 with a long of 52 and both att's 40+. Robertson had 34 punts (39.5) and Brandon Dickerson had 20 (38.5) with the team net of 35.8. All 3 return. Daquan Patten was the top PR (7.8) and Reggie Jones the top KR (20.5). They lose Jones but have added some KR potential and can only improve in this unit.

Western Carolina has not made the playoffs since 1983 when they won 3 games and got the FCS Championship game and lost to Southern Illinois. That was their only playoff berth in school history. Kerwin Bell was 66-35 with the Jacksonville Dolphins from 2007-



2015 in the Pioneer Football League. He took over Valdosta state in 2016 and in 3 years was 27-7 including a 14-0 National Championship in his 3<sup>rd</sup> year. He has a 93-42 career record with just two losing seasons in his 12 years. Last year he was the OC at USF but was let go along with Charlie Strong after that year and sat out 2020. Bell inherited the leagues weakest team as they were -190 ypg in league play and are coming off 3 straight losing years including 1-8 last year. I like the transfers he has brought in across the board and this team should be much more competitive but he did not have spring practice to work with the team and is getting a late start as the leagues only true new head coach. All eight of the leagues coaches picked the Catamounts last in the SoCon and only two of the 30 writers did not. I cannot argue with that assessment and would be surprised if they escaped the basement this year.