

Central Arkansas 2019 Preview

Central Arkansas enters year 13 as an FCS member, and has enjoyed a good amount of success. UCA has not had a losing season this decade, and have reached the playoffs 4 times in that span but have not gone beyond the 2nd round. UCA began the 2018 season 5-2 (4-1 in SLC play) but would lose 3 straight games to McNeese, Lamar, and Incarnate Word and finished the year 6-5 overall. But the Bears did finish with a winning conference record (5-4) for the 9th straight season. Under 2nd year coach Nathan Brown, UCA is looking to jump back up to the top of the SLC in '19.

UCA's offense in '17 was efficient, as they averaged a decade-best 465 ypg and scored 36 ppg. The offense did take a bit of a dip in '18 as just 4 starters returned, as the Bears averaged 409 ypg and 31 ppg. Brevlin Smith was the Bears new starting QB and was playing well, but just 4 games into the season he was out for the year with an ankle injury. Luke Hales would step in and start the final 7 games and he finished the season with 1,857 yards (18-8 ratio) but did only complete 48.6% of his passes. Smith, who was hitting a SLC-best 68.8% of his passes at the time of his injury, returns at QB along with Hales. UCA also will return their top 2 rushers in 1st Team SLC RB Carlos Blackman (9 starts, 786, 4.8, 9 TD) and Kierre Crossley (1 start, 600, 5.7) and just lose their #3 rusher Cedric Battle (196, 4.9, 522 kick return yards, 2nd Team SLC KR).

The Bears had to replace their top 2 WR's last year, and they must do the same again this year as Jakari Dillard (11 starts, 745, 7 TD) and Lester Wells (11 starts, 652, 4 TD) both depart along with Dwayne Smith (229, 12.7). The leading receivers back for UCA are Brandon Myers (11 starts, 484, 5 TD) and Lajuan Winningham (158, 13.2), but they do as PS#94 WR Jarrod Barnes (transfer from Arkansas). After losing 4 OL starters last season, the Bears rush numbers took a dip to 145 ypg (4.0) and the sacks allowed went up to 20 (allowed just 11 in '17). This year UCA brings 4 OL starters in '19, which include 1st Team SLC LT Hunter Watts and LG Andre Harris (8/19). With 4 starting OL back along with the top 2 RB's, improvement should be expected in the run game. The Bears will have to replace K Matt Cummins, who hit 13-17 FG's (L42) last year.

The UCA defense only returned a handful of starters in '18, and the unit saw a dip in production. After allowing 319 ypg and 18 ppg in '17, those numbers jumped, as the Bears gave up 406 ypg, 26 ppg and the sacks dropped to 30 (UCA had 39 sacks in '17). The DL did return 5 of top 7 tacklers from the unit as well as 2 starters, and UCA allowed 113 ypg (3.0). Both 1st Team SLC DE Chris Terrell (10 starts, #6 tackler, 8.5 sacks, 7.5 TFL) and 2nd Team SLC DT Eric Jackson (11 starts, #7 tackler, 9 TFL) depart. The top returning DL is DE Nathan Grant (10 starts, #8 tackler, 4.5 TFL, 4 sacks) and just 3 of the top 7 DL return this year, meaning the rush ypg could increase. UCA primarily runs a 4-2-5 defense and both starting LB's Raphael Garner (11 starts, #4 tackler, 5.5 TFL) and Reggio Dean (11 starts, #5 tackler, 8 TFL) depart this season. The top 2 backup LB's also depart this season, leaving Hunter Toomey (16 tackles) as the most experienced LB returning.

Four players that started 5+ games for UCA in the secondary in '17 departed last season, leaving several new faces at the starting positions. This unit for UCA was inexperienced and that would result in UCA having 5th-worst pass defense (#120) in all of the FCS, allowing 293 pass ypg. This season 1st Team SLC SS Juan Jackson (11 starts, #1 tackler, 4 PBU) and NB Jackie Harvell (11 starts, #2 tackler, 6 TFL, 4 sacks, 2 INT) return along with CB's Robert Rochellet (9 starts, t-#10 tackler, 6 PBU, 4 INT) and Trai Mosley (11 starts, t-#10 tackler, 6 PBU, 2 INT). Overall 7 of the top 8 DB's return in 2019, with the lone loss being FS Michael Ware (11 starts, #3 tackler, 7 PBU). With a ton of experience back in the secondary, improvement is surely in store for the pass defense. Punter Taylor Wallace, who averaged 39.1 yards per punt (L/59) returns for UCA.

Going into 2019, UCA appears to have another good shot at contending in the Southland. They do face 2 FBS teams in Hawai'i and Western Kentucky along with Austin Peay in the non-conference schedule. The Bears conference schedule features a trip to all 3 playoffs teams from 2018 (Nicholls, Incarnate Word, Lamar) and get McNeese and Sam Houston State at home. But as long as the QB can stay healthy and the defense shows improvement we could see the Bears win 8-9 games and get back to the playoffs for the fifth time this decade.