

## Eastern Illinois 2019 Preview

Heading into the 2018 season, Eastern Illinois was off a fairly successful 6-5 season (started 5-2, went 1-4 down the stretch). The Panthers brought back 13 starters and looked to get back to the playoffs for the 11th time since 2000. EIU's season got off to an 0-4 start and the Panthers never recovered, finishing 3-8. This forced a coaching change & EIU brings in long-time Northwestern assistant coach Adam Cushing. The first-year HC gets back 11 starters, and will have his work cut out for him as he looks to bring EIU back into playoff contention.

EIU struggled to find a starting QB in 2017, which was a key factor why the Panthers averaged just 294 ypg & 18 ppg. Luckily for EIU, they added Tulane transfer Johnathan Brantley, who guided an offense that would average 446 ypg (#2 OVC) and 32 ppg (#3 OVC). Brantley showed his dual-threat ability as he threw for 2,016 yards (65.1%, 14-2) and ran for 310 yards (3.1, 6 TD). Also returning at QB is Harry Woodbery, who started 2 games & finished with 1,374 yards (57.6, 13-6). While EIU is returning both of their QB's, they lose their top RB from a season ago in Isaiah Johnson (9 starts, 708 yards, 7.2, 7 TD) backup RB Jamal Scott returns after rushing for 395 yards (5.7, 3 TD) in '18. Behind Scott is Robert Columbus, who ran for just 58 yards '18, so it looks like it will up to Scott to carry the load at RB this season.

EIU's pass offense averaged just 166 ypg (51%) in 2017, but with stability at the QB position in '18, the receiver unit thrived. Alex Hollins (11 starts) was #2 in the OVC with 1,102 receiving yards (13.8, 16 TD) and was named an All-American. Hollins departs this season along with Aaron Gooch (11 starts, 695, 5 TD) and Nick Atoyebe (11 starts, 241, 8.3). The lone starter to return is James Sheehan, who was #3 with 544 yards (10.9, 3 TD), but EIU will return 2 WR's that each had over 200 yards last season. EIU's OL brought back 3 starters last season, but the rush numbers only jumped slightly to 136 ypg (4.6), but the sacks allowed dropped to 22. This season though, EIU returns just 1 starter to the OL in RG Travis Buckwalter. The 4 OL starters lost include C Elik Tanuvasa, who was a Freshman All-American but decided to transfer to Hawai'i and RT Aaron Callaway, who started 30 games in his EIU career. With 4 OL starters & their top RB gone, EIU's run game & sacks allowed both may take a step back. EIU will also need to replace their 2nd Team OVC K Nick Bruno, who was 12-14 on FG's (L/48) last year.

In 2017, EIU's defense improved to allowing 355 ypg & 26 ppg. Last season, despite losing some talent, the cupboard was not bare for the Panther defense. But over the first 7 games EIU allowed 553 ypg and 48 ppg! Over the final 4 games, the defense improved to allowing 385 ypg & 28 ppg, which brought their season total to 492 ypg & 40 ppg allowed. EIU does return 8 starters of defense this season, but just 1 starter returns to the DL in Terrell Greer (8 starts, #8 tackler, 3 TFL) as they lose DE Josh Price (11 starts, #3 tackler, 7 TFL) and 2nd Team OVC NT Levi Watson (11 starts, t-#4 tackler, 10 TFL) along with backup Taylon Shepard (4 starts, 12 tackles), but should be able to improve their OVC-worst mark of 10 sacks last season.

The LB corps for the Panthers returns largely intact this season as Joe Caputo (11 starts, #1 tackler, 7.5 TFL), Dytarious Johnson (10 starts, #2 tackler, 15 TFL) and Nolan Dean (4 starts, #12 tackler, 4 TFL) all return & this unit should surely help EIU improve their defensive numbers. The secondary also will bring back 4 starters ROVER Edwyn Brown (8 starts, t-#4 tackler, 2 INT), FS Raymond Crittenden (8 starts, #6 tackler) and CB Mark Williams (10 starts, #7 tackler, 3 PBU, 2 INT). With the lone starter lost being CB DySaun Smith (11 starts, #9 tackler, 5 PBU) the secondary should surely improve after allowing 276 pass ypg (63.9%) in '18. EIU will have to replace their punter, as Nick Bruno (who also was the K) departs. Bruno averaged 40.4 yards per punt (L/56) in 2018.

EIU enters 2019 with a first-year HC and will have to navigate a tough schedule. The Panthers take on Chattanooga (6-5 in '18) and Indiana State (7-4 in '18) in their non-conference schedule along with their rival Illinois State, who they face for the 108th time. The Panthers do get their toughest OVC games against Jacksonville St, ECU and SE Missouri all at home, which means most of their winnable conference games are

on the road. While EIU may improve their record by a win or two this season, they still appear to be at least a year away from contention in the OVC.