

## Eastern Kentucky 2019 Preview

Eastern Kentucky has seen quite a bit of success on the football field, as they have won 21 OVC titles and a pair of national championships in 1979 & 1982. Mark Elder, who is now entering year four at ECU, went 3-8 his first year here before improving to 4-7 in '17 and last year showed solid improvement as the Colonels went 7-4 (5-2 in OVC play), with two of their losses coming at Marshall (32-16) and at Bowling Green (42-35).

ECU's offense had a down year in '17, as they gained 320 ypg and 21 ppg after averaging 394 ypg and 28 ppg the previous two seasons. The Colonels returned 7 players to this unit in '18 and the offense saw an uptick in performance. ECU struggled to find a starting QB after losing Tim Boyle, as four different players recorded a start in '18. Parker McKinney started the last two games for ECU and after passing for 186 yards against Robert Morris, he hit 31-42 for 333 yards and 2 TD's and led the team with 608 yards (65.5%, 4-1). McKinney returns this season, but ECU adds Oregon State transfer Conor Blount, who passed for 1,117 yards (62%, 7-2) in 6 starts for the Beavers in '18. ECU's rushing attack put up 1,141 yards (103.7 ypg, 3.3 ypc) in '17, but last year those numbers more than doubled to 2,246 yards (204.2 ypg, 4.3 ypc). The ECU rush attack was led by 2nd Team OVC RB LJ Scott, who gained 780 yards (8 starts, 5.2, 8 TD) and #2 was Daryl McCleskey who gained 651 yards (4.5, 5 TD). While ECU does lose Scott, both McCleskey (4 starts) and Jason Lewis (203, 4.4) are back, which should lead to another strong year rushing the ball.

Last season ECU averaged under 200 pass ypg (148) for the first time since 2014, meaning the WR numbers were down. Jackson Beerman led with 324 (15.1), Neiko Creamer was #2 with 245 (11.7) and BK Smith was #3 (244, 10.6). Three of the top 4 receivers are back this season and they add UConn transfer Keyion Dixon (147 yards in '18), so with improved QB play on the horizon this unit should be more productive in '19. The OL was a key reason for ECU's improved rush attack in '18 as all 5 linemen started 10+ games, but they did allow 27 sacks (9.3%). While this unit loses three of those linemen including 2nd Team OVC LT Cameron Kowaleski, they do add Trey Livingood (Marshall transfer) and Eric Magwood (Old Dominion transfer). With 2 starters back and 2 FBS transfers, the OL has all the makings to be strong once again. Sam Hayworth hit 15-21 FG's a year ago and returns this season.

Last season the ECU defense returned 7 starters from a unit that allowed 344 ypg and 27 ppg and collected 25 sacks in '17. While the numbers did dip a bit to 372 ypg and 29 ppg allowed, ECU still had the 2nd-best scoring defense and total defense in the OVC as well as forcing 30 TO's on the season (t-#4 FCS). Going into 2019, ECU returns all 4 starters from the DL including 1st Team OVC DE Aaron Patrick (10 starts, #4 tackler, 7.5 sacks, 15 QBH) and Elijah Taylor (8 starts, t-#11 tackler) who originally played at Notre Dame (PS#54). ECU lists 3 LB spots, but Leodis Moore (5'9" 190) plays more of a NB role. Moore (1st Team OVC, 10 starts, #7 tackler, 5 PBU) recorded 5 INT and is back this season along with Steven Crowder (11 starts, #2 tackler, 8.5 TFL). This unit does lose the top tackler from 2018 in Gavin Bryant (11 starts, 76 tackles, 6.5 TFL) but brings in a PS#66 LB from Tennessee in Austin Smith.

Though ECU's defense regressed a bit in ypg and ppg allowed, the Colonels pass defense came up with 19 INT's on the year, which was 5th-best in the FCS. The secondary unit loses both starting CB's from a year ago in Cornelius Floyd (2nd Team OVC, 9 starts, #5 tackler, 6 PBU, 4 INT) and Jared Tucker (9 starts, #13 tackler, 6 PBU, 2 INT) as well as backup CB Jordan Whitfield (4 starts, 4 PBU). However, ECU does return both starting safeties in Ben Bascom (11 starts, #3 tackler, 6 PBU, 2 INT) and TJ Comstock (11 starts, #6 tackler, 2 INT). While the S position appears to be in good shape, the CB spot will need to replace a trio of talented players. Punter Phillip Richards, who averaged 39.5 yards per punt, returns in 2019.

ECU enters 2019 with high hopes, and in Week 3 travel to Indiana State, who are both trying to make the playoffs & this game could go a long way in determining who reaches to postseason. ECU also faces the top two teams from the OVC last season in Jacksonville State and SE Missouri on the road this season, which will be a tough test. But with ECU securing another top-15 recruiting class in 2019 along with returning 13 starters,

they appeared primed to make a run at their 22nd OVC title this season and could make it back to the playoffs for the first time since 2014.