

## Jacksonville St 2019 Preview

Head coach John Grass enters his 6th year at Jacksonville State, amassing a 52-12 record over his first five seasons, and led JSU to the FCS Championship Game in 2015. Through his first four seasons ('14-'17) Grass lost just four regular season games (one per season) and they were against LSU, Georgia Tech, Auburn, and Michigan State.

The Gamecocks 36-game Ohio Valley Conference winning streak (longest win streak in OVC history) came to an end this past season when they lost to Southeast Missouri 37-14. Despite losing three regular season games, JSU made the FCS playoffs and took down East Tennessee State 34-27 in the first round before losing to Maine 55-27 the following week.

JSU's offense in 2018 was in the top 5 in total yards per game (497 ypg) and top 10 in points per game (40.0 ppg). This season the Gamecocks return nine starters on offense, which is led by QB Zerrick Cooper (13 starts) who began his career at Clemson (PS#27!) before transferring here. Cooper threw for 3,416 yards (60.2 percent) and a 32-14 ratio. Cooper's 32 touchdown passes set a new record for most TD passes in a single season at JSU. The top two RB's, Jaelen Greene and Michael Matthews, also return for JSU. Greene (7 starts) led the way 723 (5.4 ypc) rushing yards, while Matthews ran for 419 yards (6.3 ypc).

Six of the top seven receivers from 2018 return for the Gamecocks, including leading receiver Josh Pearson (13 starts), who was an All-American in 2018 with 1,123 receiving yards and an FCS-best 17 TD's. Also returning is Jamari Hester (11 starts), who had 864 yards and 11 TD's, and 1st Team OVC TE Trae Barry (6 starts, 503 rec yards). While 3 OL starters return for JSU this season, including 1st Team OVC guard Darius Anderson, and 2nd Team OVC tackle Hunter Sosebee, they do lose their All-American left guard B.J. Autry and 1st Team OVC center Tyler Scozzaro from a unit that allowed 23 sacks in '18. The Gamecocks also lose kicker Cade Stinnett, who hit 10-16 field goals in 2018.

In 2016 (275 ypg) and 2017 (240 ypg) JSU's defense allowed under 300 ypg, and last the Gamecock defense allowed 311 ypg (#15 in FCS), but allowed over 20 ppg (24.8) for the first time since 2014. JSU does bring back six starters from that defense, but loses their entire four-man front that allowed 126 rush ypg, which includes 1st Team OVC NT Randy Robinson (12 starts, #7 tackler, 3 sacks, 5 TFL, 10 QBH) and 2nd Team OVC DT Connor Christian (12 starts, t-#12 tackler, 5.5 sacks 5.5 TFL). Two of the three starting LB's from 2018 do return including leading tackler Jalen Choice (12 starts, 88 tackles, 12 TFL's) who was 2nd Team OVC. 2nd Team OVC SS Traco Williams (13 starts, #3 tackler, 8.5 TFL, 6 PBU, 4 INT) and All-American FS Marlon Bridges (12 starts, #2 tackler, 2.5 TFL, 2 INT) each return this season along with both starting CB's from a secondary that gave up 182 pass ypg. JSU does return their punter from last year in Jason Pierce, who averaged 41.4 yards per punt.

Once again under coach Grass, JSU looks like the overwhelming favorites to win the OVC and make it back to the playoffs for a 7th straight season. JSU gets a marquee non-conference game at home week 3 when they host Eastern Washington, who made it to the FCS Championship game last season. Another key game for JSU will be their homecoming game against Southeast Missouri, who snapped their 36-game OVC win streak last year. With quite a bit of talent returning on either side of the ball, the Gamecocks appear primed to make a deep run in the playoffs after not making it past the second round the past three years.