

Murray St 2019 Preview

Murray State enters 2019 off the heels of their most successful season under 5th year head coach Mitch Stewart, as the Racers went 5-3 in OVC play (5-6 record overall). MSU started OVC play 4-0, averaging 498 ypg and 43 ppg. Though the Racers would finish the season 1-3 (held to 389 ypg, 26 ppg) their lone win in the stretch came against SE Missouri 40-38 (550-297 yd edge, -4 TO). With 14 starters back and the addition of some highly-touted players, the Racers are set up to have another solid season.

Heading into 2018, the MSU offense was coming off of a pretty dismal season as they put up just 294 ypg including twice not breaking 100 total yards in a game. Last year 8 starters returned along with the offensive production as MSU gained over 100 more ypg (404) and scored a TD more per game (28 ppg). The Racers were led by QB Drew Anderson, who was 2nd in the OVC with 2,864 pass yards (60.1%, 20-15, 2nd Team OVC). A big question for the Racers in '19 will be who replaces Anderson, and while there are a trio of candidates who are battling to win the job. MSU also loses their top rusher from last year in DJ Penick (543, 4.8) but unlike the QB position, this unit has a solid replacement for Penick in Rodney Castille, who ran for 471 (5.9) and also get back Justin Connor (orig Ole Miss, PS#15) who sat out '18 due to injury.

Whoever wins the QB job for MSU will have a talented WR corps to throw to, as the Racers return 6 of their top 7 receivers including Malik Honeycutt (477 rec yards, 4 TD, 1 punt return TD, 1 kick return TD, 1st Team OVC as return man) and James Sappington (439 rec yards). This unit also adds a PS#23 Florida transfer in DaQuon Green. Another factor that will help the new QB is 4 OL starters returning and in 2018 they allowed 20 sacks (4.4%), but the run game did average 128 ypg so with 4 starters back, that number could be improved as MSU may focus on the run game early to take pressure off the new QB. MSU also brings back their 1st Team OVC K in Gabriel Vicente, who hit 15-19 (L/50) last year.

In 2017, Murray State's defense held teams to under 400 ypg (390) and 30 ppg (29) for the first time since 2011 (from '12-'16 MSU allowed 498 ypg & 37 ppg). But with 5 starters back in 2018, MSU's defense took a step back to allowing 456 ypg and 35 ppg. The run defense did show some improvement last season, allowing 192 rush ypg (209 rush ypg allowed in '17). Two of the top 3 tacklers from that DL last year move on in DE Kenny Wooten (11 starts, #7 tackler, 10.5 sacks, 1st Team OVC) and NT Rashad Johnson (8 starts, #13 tackler, 2 TFL). The 3 starting LB's from '18 were the top tacklers, and 2 of them return in Kendrick Catis (PS#83JC, 10 starts, #2 tackler, 5.5 TFL) and Anthony Koclanakis (9 starts, #3 tackler, 4 TFL, 3 PBU, 2 INT). But the lone starter lost from the LB unit is a big one in Quincy Williams (111 tackles, 9.5 TFL, 4 PBU, 1st Team OVC) who was taken in the 3rd Round of the NFL Draft by Jacksonville.

While the rush ypg improved in '18, the pass ypg numbers went the other way as MSU allowed 265 pass ypg, which was #110 in the FCS. The secondary does lose their top tackler in CB Marquez Sanford (10 starts, #4 tackler, 4 PBU) but brings back CB Nigel Walton (11 starts, #5 tackler, 4 PBU) and SS Don Parker (11 starts, #6 tackler). MSU also loses FS Qmond Woods (11 starts, #8 tackler, 3 PBU) but bring back Dior Johnson (PS#22JC, t-#11 tackler, 5 PBU). The Racers will also return 1st Team OVC P Steve Dawson, who averaged 42.1 yards per punt (L/66).

Murray State brings back a good amount of talent this season, but have a question at the most important position on the field. The Racers get Pikeville and Morehead State in their non-conference slate (also play Georgia & Toledo) and can work out the QB kinks during those games, but once OVC play hits it is imperative MSU has their man under center. The Racers did beat SE Missouri and Eastern Kentucky in 2018 and gets ECU at home, but must go on the road to both SE Missouri and Jacksonville State. While

MSU may be in a lot of their OVC games this year, it may be tough to match last year's 5-3 conference mark.