

Northwestern St 2019 Preview

Northwestern State's streak of losing seasons (narrowly) continued as they ended 2018 with a 5-6 record, but did manage to win 3 of their final 4 games, including a win against McNeese. The Demons also picked up an impressive win at Lamar (made the playoffs in 2018) in Week 3. Brad Laird enters year 2 here and will look to guide NSU to their first winning season since 2008.

Prior to 2018, the Demons only gained over 400 ypg on offense one time this decade, which was back in 2014. Last season NSU's offense put out a decade-best 419 ypg while averaging 28 ppg. The pass offense was, which had not averaged more than 239 ypg this decade, put up an incredible 320 ypg through the air last season, which ranked 5th in all of the FCS. The offense was led by Shelton Eppler, who threw for 2,639 yards (60.7%, 26-10) in 9 starts. Eppler returns this season for NSU, as does Jared West (10 starts, 735, 4.7) and Stadford Anderson (1 start, 340, 4.0) who were the Demons top 2 RB's in 2018. The offense also adds Aubrey Scott, a PS#157 RB who had offers from a few FBS schools including Florida.

NSU's top-five passing attack takes a major hit, as 5 of the top 7 receivers depart this season. The list of players lost includes Jazz Ferguson (11 starts, 1117, 13 TD, 3rd Team All-American), Jaylen Watson (11 starts, 761, 10 TD's) and Marquisian Chapman (2 starts, 392). The lone receiver back that did anything of note in 2018 is Quan Short, a Texas Tech transfer, that caught 56 passes for 542 yards. NSU does beef up this unit a bit with the additions of Benaiah Franklin (PS#223, Purdue transfer) and Akile Davis (PS#200, BYU transfer) and Myles Ward could be a weapon for the offense (717 KR yards last year). While the pass game set new high marks last season, the rushing attack set a new low mark for the decade, as the Demons ran for just 99 ypg (3.1) last season. This season 3 starting OL return for a unit that did allow just 23 sacks despite passing the ball 474 times (4.9%). NSU will need to replace their K from last season, who hit just 5-12 (L/38).

The NSU defense has not allowed under 400 ypg since 2013. Last season this unit returned 6 starters, but the defense would give 475 ypg and 35 ppg which was a step back from what they had allowed the year prior (440 ypg, 31 ppg). While the yards & points allowed did not improve, NSU collected 36 sacks which was their highest total of the decade. Last season 6 of the top 8 DL were back including 2 starters, but the run defense took a step back, allowing 206 ypg (4.8). This year the DL loses 3 of their top 5 which includes DE's Zak Krolczyk (11 starts, t-#7 tackler, 8 TFL) and Obi Iheoma (11 starts, #9 tackler, 8 sacks) as well as NT Jalon Sangster (6 starts, t-#12 tackler, 2.5 TFL). DT O'Shea Jackson (9 starts, #5 tackler, 7 TFL, 3.5 sacks) is the lone starter back, but NT Damian Thompson (5 starts, t-#14 tackler, 6 TFL) also returns.

Last season NSU had to replace their entire starting LB corps, and as a result they allowed their most ppg since 2015. This season is a different story as the Demons top 5 LB's return, including Quin Whitley (10 starts, #2 tackler, 4.5 TFL) and Blake Stephenson (11 starts, #4 tackler, 4 sacks). For much of the season NSU deployed a 5-man secondary with Hayden Bourgeois playing a nickelback role. Bourgeois (10 starts, #1 tackler, 5 TFL, 5 INT, 1st Team SLC) returns this season along with SS Ryan Reed (7 starts, #3 tackler, 2 INT) and 2 other starters. Overall, 8 of the top 9 DB's return and this unit should improve after allowing 274 pass ypg (58.4%) last year. Punter Parker Pastorello returns again for NSU after averaging 40.4 yards per punt (L/68) in 2018.

NSU barely missed a winning season in 2018, and they bring back 13 starts this season including 7 on the defensive side of the ball, so improvement there is expected. The Demons schedule is quite favorable early on, as they face a rebuilding UT Martin team in Week 1, and then get Midwestern State (D-II team) at home in Week 2. Later in September NSU faces Houston Baptist and SE Louisiana, with their toughest game being at LSU in Week 3. After their bye week, the schedule gets tougher as the Demons will face Nicholls, Incarnate Word, and Sam Houston State all on the road. The Demons will have to pull off a couple upsets to secure a winning season in 2019, but it is surely within reach.