

## Tennessee St 2019 Preview

Ron Reed enters year 10 as the HC of the Tennessee State Tigers. Since reaching the FCS Playoffs back in 2013, Tennessee State have gone five seasons without making it back to the postseason. The 2018 season started off in a unique way for the Tigers, as they won their opener, but then saw their next 2 games, both winnable games against Jackson State and Hampton, cancelled due to weather. TSU got off to a 2-0 start, but would get hit with injuries as the season progressed and went just 2-5 the rest of the way to finish under .500 at 4-5. TSU did finish 2018 at 2-1 in the Sgt. York Trophy games, but Austin Peay retained the trophy.

TSU's offense dipped to 326 ypg and 24 ppg in 2017, but with 8 starters back on offense those numbers jumped back up to 432 ypg (#3 in OVC) and 29 ppg. Despite QB Michael Hughes (1,304 yds, 53%, 15-6 in '17) returning for the Tigers, Demry Croft (PS#55, orig at Minnesota) was named as the starter and started the first 4 games (888 yards, 60.4%, 8-2) before going down with a season-ending injury. Hughes stepped back in to start the final 5 games & finished with 1,405 yards (62.2%, 9-7). Both starting QB's are back in '19 and no matter who wins the job in the fall, this unit should see solid production once again. Last season TSU's leading rusher in '17 Sabree Curtis (439 yards) returned, but was injured on the first series of the season. Te'Kendrick Roberson stepped in for the injured Curtis and would lead with 527 (5.3), while Shawn McColley was #2, rushing for 324 yards (6.8) and Earl Harrison finished #3 (261, 5.7). The top 3 rushers all return for TSU as well as Curtis, and this unit could improve on their 156 rush ypg from a season ago.

The Tigers pass offense only put up 186 ypg (54%) in 2017, but last season the pass offense took a giant step forward. TSU's offense threw 276 ypg (61.7%), which was their best passing numbers this decade. Chris Rowland led the Tigers with 727 yards (12.8, 5 TD, 2nd Team OVC as WR & PR) while DeVon Johnson was #2 with 543 yards (18.1, 6 TD, 423 KR yards, 2nd Team OVC as KR) and coming in #3 was Treon Harris (476, 13.6, 5 TD). Both Johnson & Harris depart this season, but with their #1 WR back along with Steven Newbold (300, 10.7) this unit should still be productive, and they add PS#109 WR from Louisville Jatavious Harris. Four starters were back on the OL in 2018 for TSU, which helped their run game bounce back, along with the sacks allowed dropping from 30 in '17 to 16 sacks last season. TSU loses LT Chidi Okeke (LSU transfer, 19 starts in 2Y) and 3-year starter RT Justin Brooks. Three starters return on the OL for TSU this season, including 2nd Team OVC Raekwon Allen. TSU also returns their kicker, Antonio Zita, who was 12-14 on FG's but had a long of just 38 yards.

Heading into last season, TSU was down 6 starters from the 2017 defense that allowed just 278 ypg and 20 ppg. Besides the Tigers defense having to replace over half their starters, they also had to deal with injuries. This led to TSU's defense allowing 430 ypg and 32 ppg in 2018. The run defense stayed consistent for TSU in '18 as they allowed 143 ypg (4.3). The Tigers run defense should improve some as they return 3 starters on the DL this season in DE's Mekhi Brown (9 starts, #6 tackler, 4 sacks, Alabama transfer) and Dante Ferguson (6 starts, t-#9 tackler, 6.5 TFL) along with DT Justin Culpepper (7 starts, 4.5 TFL). TSU also adds DE Rhashaun Epting (43 tackles, 5.5 sacks in '18 at New Mexico), DE Mike Boykin (PS#114) from Louisville, and DT Allen Daniels (PS#234) from Purdue.

The LB unit will take a hit in '19 as both Blair Edwards (9 starts, #2 tackler, 4 TFL) and Vincent Sellers (5 starts, #4 tackler, 5.5 TFL) depart, leaving Terry Straughter (5 starts, #5 tackler, 3 TFL) as the lone starter back. The secondary did return a trio of starters in '18, but the pass numbers took a nosedive as TSU allowed 287 ypg (61.8%) through the air (147 pass ypg allowed, 56% in '17). The Tigers lose both starting safeties LaQuarius Cook (8 starts, #3 tackler) and Shakur Jackson (6 starts, t-#7 tackler, 2.5 TFL). TSU does however return CB Dajour Nesbeth (8 starts, #1 tackler, 7 PBU, 4 INT, 1st Team OVC) as well as CB's Neiman Armstrong (3 starts, #14 tackler) and Nick Harper (4 starts, 16 tackles). Overall, with 6 starters back on defense there should be some improvement after 2018's down year. Punter Kaleb Mosley, who averaged 36.8 yards per punt (L/50), will return for TSU in '19

If the Tigers are to get back over the .500 mark in '19, it will be important for them to win both their FCS non-conference games against Mississippi Valley St and Jackson St (also play Middle Tennessee). OVC plays begins with 2 straight tough road games at ECU and then a trip to Jacksonville State. TSU success this season will largely come down to a 4-game homestand they have, which includes a bye. If TSU can stay healthier than last season, a winning record is certainly within reach for 2019.