

SOUTH DAKOTA ST JACKRABBITS

POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2022

QUARTERBACKS - In 2019 3 QB's shared the job as J'Bore Gibbs missed two early games then missed the last 4 games of the season but threw for 1,058 (59%, 10-4). Keaton Heide started the last 4 and threw for 905 (71%, 6-2) and Kanin Nelson started those two early games and threw for 293 (57%, 3-0). In spring true frosh Mark Gronkowski took over as the QB and threw for 1,549 (58%, 15-3) and also was their #3 rusher with 567 (7.0!). Unfortunately he was injured in the National Title game and had to miss last season. Heide and Gibbs returned and they added in Chris Oladokun as a transfer. While at Samford Oladokun threw for 2,058 (62%, 18-7) and rushed for 491 (3.9). He was injured in the opener in spring (35-54-222-1-2) and only played in one more game (2 passes). Oladokun won the job and started all 15 games. He threw for 3,164 (62.3%) with a 25-7 ratio and had 166 rush (#4, 2.3). Heide completed 10 of 14 passes for 203 (2-0). This year Oladokun (2nd Tm All MVFC) departs while Heide returns and they get Gronkowski back from his injury. Gronkowski was the Jerry Rice Award runner-up in their spring season (Frosh POY) and is already a team captain. As long as he stays healthy they are at least just as good as last year at QB.

RUNNING BACKS - RB Pierre Strong led in 2019 with 1,018 (7.1) and had 169 receiving. In spring SDSU had to replace their #2 and #3 rushers (comb 1206 rush yd) and Strong led again with 650 (5.8). Isaiah David emerged and rushed for 640 and a super 7.8 ypc. Last year their top 2 were back and we said Strong would be one of the MVFC's top players. He had 138 in their opener vs Colorado St and topped 100 in nine games. Strong led the FCS with 1,686 (7.0!) with 18 td's and added 150 receivein and was a consensus All-American! Davis had 701 and an even better ypc at 7.4. Amar Johnson added 427 (5.0). Strong was a #4 draft choice by the NE Patriots. Davis and Johnson return. The loss of Strong can't be overstated but Davis has been dynamic and is next in line for a huge season.

RECEIVERS - In 2019 they had to replace their top 4 receivers (combined 1967 yds) but Cade Johnson led the WR's with a super 1,222 (17.0) while Adam Anderson was #2 with 474 (12.8) and Jaxon Janke was #3 with 353 (12.2). Last spring they had to replace their top 2 (combined 1696 yds). Jaxon Janke led with 438 (15.1) and Jadon Janke was #2 with 412 (21.7). TE Zach Heins was #4 with 156 (15.6, 7.3). Last fall the top guys were all back. Jaxon Janke nearly matched Johnson's '19 season by finishing with 1,165 (16.2). TE Tucker Kraft was #2 with 780 (12.0) and was a 1st Team All-American. Jadon Janke was #3 with 641 (15.6). TE Heins added 250 (10.4). This year their top 4 guys all return AGAIN. Jaxon Janke was 2nd Team All-MVFC last year. This is one of the best WR/TE units in the FCS.

OFFENSIVE LINE - In 2019 the SDSt Oline opened holes for 198 ypg rush (5.4) and allowed 30 sacks (10.2%). In the spring they only returned two full time starters but did get back Wes Genant who had 11 starts in 2018 and 3 starts til injury in '19 so basically had 3 starters back. The Oline numbers greatly improved to 232 (6.1) rush with 4.6% sacks allowed. Last year all 5 starters returned. This was one of the top Olines in the MVFC although they did slip to 212 rush ypg (5.8) with 17 sacks (3.8%). The Jack Rabbits lose 3 starters in 1st Tm MVFC Aron Johnson (14 st), 3rd Tm MVFC C Wes Genant (15 st), RG Edward Miller (8 st) and RG Eagan Lickiss

(7 st). Two starters return including 2nd Tm MVFC LG Mason McCormick but this group is much less experienced than last year.

DEFENSIVE LINE - In '19 SDSU allowed 129 rush ypg (3.4) and nearly doubled '18's sacks with 37 sacks (10.5%). The Jack Rabbits allowed just 116 (3.2) in spring but sacks dropped to 7.5% (22). Last year they returned their entire DLine from spring including Reece Winkelman who was tied for the lead with 6.5 sacks. They allowed 110 rush ypg (3.3) and got back to 37 sacks but still 7.6%. This year they lose DT Xavier Ward (15 st, #11 tkl'r, 2.5 tfl), Terveer (1 st, #18 tkl'r, 5 sk), DT Krockett Krolkowski (#20 tkl'r) and DE Tolu Ogunrinde (8 st, 17 tkl, 4.5 sk, 2 tfl). Two starters return including Winkelman who led with 13.5 tfl's last year and was 2nd Team All-MVFC and Caleb Sanders (#7 tkl'r, led with 6.5 sacks and was 1st Team All-MVFC. They lost 4 of their top 7 but their top two are back so they are less experienced but still one of the top Dlines in the Valley.

LINEBACKERS - In '19 Logan Backhaus was their #3 tackler and had 5.5 tfl's and 4 int's. He was back in the spring and was #2 with 72 tackles and led with 9.5 tfl's. Adam Bock led with 74 tackles and had 5.5 tfl's. Last year both returned. Bock was 2nd in the Valley with 125 tackles (2.5 sk, 7 tfl, 2 int). Backhaus was #5 with 62 tackles (4.5 tfl). This year they lose Backhaus (12 st, 2nd Tm All-MVFC). They get their #1, #7, #14 and #15 tacklers back. Bock was 2nd Team FCS-All-American last year and leads a strong group that should be just as good as last year.

DEFENSIVE BACKS - In '19 South Dakota St was 2nd only to NDSU in pass D Efficiency. They allowed 166 ypg (57.1%, 13-18). In spring they came in 2nd to Illinois St in Pass D Efficiency, allowing 166 pass ypg (62.4%, 9-14). Last year they returned 3 starters, only losing their #3 tackler. They allowed 172 pass ypg but fell to 4th in the pass D rankings (60%, 22-21). This year they lose SS Michael Griffin (15 st, #3 tkl'r, 5 pd), FS Josh Manchigiah (5 st, #13 tkl'r) and CB Don Gardner (9 st, #12 tkl'r, 5 pd). This year 2 starters return and they get their #4, #6, #10, #17 and #19 tkl'rs all back. This wasn't their strength last year and it doesn't appear to be this year either with no one on the Preseason All Conference team.

SPECIAL TEAMS - K Cole Frahm did a great job in spring, making 13-19 fg's with a long of 52. Ben Dinkel averaged 41.6 ypp. Last year both returned but Dinkel was beat out for the punting job. Frahm made 19-28 with a long of 54 and 3 of his misses were from 50+. Hunter Dustman averaged 42.4 ypp (40.3 net). This both Frahm and Dinkel depart. Dustman is a solid punter with good control (1 TB out of 32 punts). They will need more from their return game (4.4 PR, 18.8 KR) for us to say this unit is above average.

COACHES - John Stiegelmeier is in his 26 season as HC at South Dakota St. He has led the Jack Rabbits to the FCS Playoffs 10 straight years including a trip to the finals in spring of '21 and Back-to-Back trips to the Semifinals in '17-'18. He has a career record of 185-111. The OC is Zach Lujan who has served as the QB Coach since '19 and coached RB's in '18. Lujan was a starting QB here from '14-'16. The DC Jimmy Rogers has coached here since 2013 and he was named Co-DC. The ST's Coordinator is Rob Erickson who joined the staff in March of '20.

FORECAST

OFFENSE - SDSU started true freshman QB Gronkowski in the spring of '21 and were better vs MVC foes, averaging 30 ppg and 411 ypg. Last year most of the offense returned in tact but Gronkowski was OFY so they added transfer QB Oladokun from Samford. The result was an increase to 38 ppg and 441 ypg and 66 ypg more than their foes allowed (#13 in FCS). Six starters return, plus they get Gronkowski back from injury. They lose the MVFC Offensive POY in RB Strong and 3 OL depart but the WR's remain in tact and Davis had a higher ypc than Strong. FIVE players from SDSU were on the preseason 1st Team All-MVFC team which was easily the most in the conference and Gronkowski was 2nd Team so this could be the Valley's top offense.

DEFENSE - The defense was the strength for SDSU in '19 when they allowed just 17 ppg and 295 ypg. They held their foes 63 ypg below their average (#11 in FCS) and were impressively consistent, only allowing one team to put up over 400 yards and they held 6 teams under 300. The JackRabbits D was similar in the spring season when they allowed 15 ppg and 288 ypg and again only one team topped 400 yards against them. Last year SDSU returned 23 of their top 24 tacklers from spring. They allowed 19.7 ppg and 347 ypg. This year they return 6 starters. 8 of their top 10 tacklers are back including 3 who were 1st Team Preseason All-MVFC. We could see this defense being better than last year's version.

2022 - SDSU has made the FCS Playoffs in each of the last 10 years, and they've had double-digit wins in 3 of the last 5 seasons. In 2017 the JackRabbits won a school record 11 games. They were bounced from the FCS Semifinals by James Madison 21-16. In '18 they went 10-3 and were +102 ypg, this time losing to rival NDSU 44-21 in the Semifinals. They started 6-1 in '19 but lost 4 of their lost 6 yet still finished +99 ypg and were -4 net close wins. They were much more fortunate in spring of '21 and for the first time ever they made the FCS National Title game. The JackRabbits led Sam Houston St 21-17 late 4Q but gave up the GW td with :16 left. They finished 8-2 and were +115 ypg. Last year SDSU started the season with 4 straight blowout wins including one over Colorado St 42-23. They lost 2 of their next 3 including an OT loss to SIU. They were the only team to beat eventual Nat'l Champion North Dakota St but fell flat the following week in a 3 point loss to South Dakota. They won their next 4, reaching the FCS Semifinals but lost to Montana St to finish 11-4 (+94 ypg). This year they return 13 starters. They had twice as many players named 1st Team All MVFC (8) as NDSU did but were picked to finish 2nd. The JackRabbits open with a trip to Iowa and they play 5 FCS playoff teams from last year. They travel to NDSU, Missouri St & UNI (#1, #3, #5 in MVFC pressn). SDSU has beaten NDSU each of the last 2 years and are the Bison's biggest challenger again this year.