

SOUTH DAKOTA ST JACKRABBITS

FORECAST

LB ADAM BOCK



POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2023

QUARTERBACKS - In spring of '21 true frosh Mark Gronowski was the Jerry Rice Award runner-up (Frosh POY) after he 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 the fall '21 season. He returned last year and led the JackRabbits to their first FCS National Title in school history. Gronowski threw for 2,967 (65.2%, 26-5) and was their #3 rusher with 408 (3.7). Keaton Heide (6 att, 14 yds) departs so they have no experienced depth. Gronowski has good size at 6'3" 220 and was the MVP of the National Title game. He is also in his 2nd year coming off a serious injury so we expect even better production.

RUNNING BACKS - Isaiah Davis emerged during their spring season when he rushed for 640 and a super 7.8 ypc. He had 178 in the National Title game. In the fall of '21 Pierre Strong led the FCS with 1,686 (7.0!) with 18 td's and added 150 receiving 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 last year. Davis topped 100 in nine games including 103 in the National Title. He led with 1,451 (5.8) and tied for #1 in the Valley with 15 td's. Johnson had 126 in the National Title game and finished #2 with 744 (5.7). This year both Davis (1st Tm MVFC) and Johnson return. Angel Johnson (99, 4.7) adds depth. Davis is fast and explosive at 220 lbs and will likely follow Strong's lead and get drafted next year. This is the top RB duo in the FCS!

RECEIVERS - SDSU had all of their top guys back in fall of '21. Jaxon Janke was phenomenal and led with 1,165 (16.2). TE Tucker Kraft was #2 with 780 (12.0) and was a 1st Team All-American. Jaxon's twin brother Jadon Janke was #3 with 641 (15.6). TE Zach Heins added 250 (10.4). Last year their top 4 guys all returned again. Jaxon dipped to 857 (14.3) while Jadon was #2 with 774 (15.2). Heins was #3 with 347 (12.0). TE Kraft was a #3 DC for Green Bay but he missed six games last year and finished #4 with 348 (12.9). Both Janke's (2nd & 4th Tm MVFC) and TE Heins (2nd Tm MVFC) are back. Technically they are less experienced with "only" their top three back but this is still one of the best in the FCS.

OFFENSIVE LINE - In fall of '21 SDSU had all 5 starters return. This was one of the top Olines in the MVFC, though they "slipped" to 212 rush ypg (5.8) with 17 sacks (3.8%). The JackRabbits lost four that started 7 games in '21 including 1st Tm and 3rd Tm MVFC performers. They slipped to 185 rush ypg (4.9) with 19 sacks (5.1%). This year all

five starters return and they have 130 career starts! LG Mason McCormick and LT Garret Greenfield were 1st Tm All-Americans last year and are on NFL radar's. This will be their most improved unit.

DEFENSIVE LINE - The JackRabbits 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. This year they had two starters return including Winkelman who led with 13.5 tfl's and was 2nd Team All-MVFC and Caleb Sanders (#7 tk'l'r) led with 6.5 sacks and was 1st Team All-MVFC. They were the top rush D in the FCS, allowing just 88 ypg (2.8) with 40 sacks (9.5%). This year DT Sanders (14 st, #5 tk'l'r, 6.5 sk, 3 tfl) and DE Winkelman (14 st, #10 tk'l'r, 8 sk, 7.5 tfl) both depart. Two starters are back and five of their top seven DL return. They also add Iowa St transfer Blake Peterson (PS#97). It will be tough to match what has to be their best Dline in school history but this will certainly be among the best in the FCS again.

LINEBACKERS - Adam Bock led with 74 tackles and had 5.5 tfl's in their spring season. He was 2nd in the Valley with in fall of '21 with 125 tackles (2.5 sk, 7 tfl, 2 int) and was 2nd Tm All-American. Last year he lost one starter but Bock was back along with their #7, #14 and #15 tacklers. Bock missed four games, and finished #2 with 76 tackles (4 sk, 3.5 tfl). Jason Freeman led with 84 (3 sk, 4 tfl, 2 int). Isaiah Stalbird was #3 with 55 tackles. All three return this year along with their #6, #8 and #13 tacklers. This is now the strength of the defense.

DEFENSIVE BACKS - In '21 SDSU allowed 172 pass ypg but fell to 4th in the Valley's pass D rankings (60%, 22-21). Last year they returned their #4, #6, #10, #17 and #19 tk'l'rs. No one in the secondary was preseason all-conference yet they finished #1 in the Valley's pass D efficiency rankings after allowing 186 pass ypg (56.4%, 15-18). Gone are CB Malik Lofton (14 st, #18 tk'l'r, 5 pd) and S Chase Norblade (6 st, #19 tk'l'r). CB Dalys Beanum only started two games but actually led with 11 pd's. They get their #4, #7, #9, #11 and #12 tacklers back, making this the top secondary in the Valley.

SPECIAL TEAMS - In '21 Hunter Dustman averaged 42.4 ypp (40.3 net). Last year he pulled triple duty as their P, K and KO guy. Dustman averaged 42.6 ypp but their net dropped to 36.1. Dustman made 18 of 25 fg's (L/45) and had 31 TB's on 85 Kickoffs. Jadon Janke averaged 13.3 PR and 20.2 KR. This year Dustman returns. It's a lot to ask one kicker to handle all three so he may need some help this year.

COACHES - DC Jimmy Rogers takes over after John Steigelmeier retired following his first National Title. Rogers played here, has been on staff since 2013 and has been the DC and assistant Head Coach since '19. Zach Lujan remains on staff as the OC. He was the QB Coach since '19 and coached RB's in '18. Lujan was a starting QB here from '14-'16. The new DC is Jesse Bobbit who played LB here and coached safeties last year. The new ST's Coordinator is Pat Cashmore.

OFFENSE - SDSU started true freshman QB Gronkowski in the spring of '21 and were better vs MVC foes, averaging 30 ppg and 411 ypg. In the fall most of the offense returned in tact but Gronkowski was OFY. They still increased to 38 ppg and 441 ypg and 66 ypg more than their foes allowed (#13 in FCS). Six starters returned last year, plus they had Gronkowski back from injury. They did lose three OL starters and MVFC OFF POY RB Pierre Strong. They still finished 2nd in scoring offense (34.2 ppg) and 4th in total offense (385 ypg). This year 10 starters return including QB Gronkowski, RB Davis, WR Janke (twin bro's) and the entire OLine! This looks like the top offense in the Valley.

DEFENSE - The JackRabbits D allowed 15 ppg and 288 ypg during their spring season and only one team topped 400 yards against them. In fall of '21 SDSU returned 23 of their top 24 tacklers from spring. They allowed 20 ppg and 347 ypg. Last year they returned 6 starters. 8 of their top 10 tacklers were back and we said we could see this defense being better than last year's version. They allowed just 15.8 ppg (#3 in FCS) and 274 ypg (#2 in FCS). They finished #2 in the FCS, holding foes 108 ypg below their average. Nine starters and 13 of their top 15 tacklers return this year. This is the FCS's top defense.

2023 - SDSU has made the FCS Playoffs in each of the last 11 years, and they've had double-digit wins in 4 of the last 6 seasons. In '18 the JackRabbits 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 last 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. In fall of '21 SDSU started the season with 4 straight blowout wins then 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 and reached the FCS Semifinals but lost to Montana St to finish 11-4 (+94 ypg). Last year they returned 13 starters. They had a slugfest with Iowa in the opener and lost 7-3 which probably took a toll and they only beat UC Davis 24-22 the following week. SDSU won their next four by double digits. They were down 21-7 at #1 NDSU but rallied to win 23-21. They trailed 21-7 2Q at #20 North Dakota the following week but regrouped and led by 21 4Q (won 49-35). They also needed a fg as time expired to beat Northern Iowa 31-28. The JackRabbits won all four playoff games by at least 21 points, beating rival North Dakota St 45-21 for the school's first National Title! They finished 14-1 and were +111 ypg. They did finish +15 TO's and had 3 close wins over FCS foes. HC Steigelmeier returned following the triumph and DC Jimmy Rogers was promoted. 19 starters are back this year. They have a semi-finals rematch with Montana St in the Beef Bowl. The JackRabbits host NDSU, North Dakota and Northern Iowa who figure to be #2, #3 and #4 in preseason. They don't play an FBS foe but they miss the two bottom teams in the Valley and new member Murray St. SDSU will be favored in every game and to win another National Title.