

PHIL STEELE'S 2023 FCS PRESEASON TOP 40

- 1. SOUTH DAKOTA ST** - Last year's returning champs bring back 19 starters for new HC Jimmy Rogers. They host NDSU and Montana St and don't play an FBS team. They do rate a -4.5 on my SMI and were +15 TO's last year but are clearly the favorites to go back-to-back after winning every playoff game by at least 21 points last year.
- 2. MONTANA ST** - The Bobcats reached the FCS Semifinals LY. They are 24-5 under 3Y HC Brent Vigen and finished last year +135 ypg and +16 ppg but were also +12 TO's. 14 starters return including both QB's Mellott and Chambers. Their five road games are at South Dakota St, Montana, Sac St, Weber St and Idaho (all teams ranked in our Top 25) but they are still the most talented team in the Big Sky.
- 3. NORTH DAKOTA ST** - NDSU has won 9 of the last 12 FCS Nat'l Titles. This year only 11 starters return including QB Cam Miller from last year's team that finished 12-3. NDSU has lost 4 straight to rival SDSU and travel to Brookings this year but even an inexperienced Bison team is a contender and they did lead SDSU 21-7 last year in the regular season.
- 4. WILLIAM & MARY** - W&M is off a school record 11 win season where they were +91 ypg but were also +7 TO's. They reached the quarterfinals of the FCS playoffs, losing at Montana St 55-7 and finished #8 in the final poll. 16 starters return including our Preseason FCS Def POY in OLB John Pius. The Tribe don't play NH and host Richmond, setting them to be favored in every game except at Virginia.
- 5. FURMAN** - Furman went 10-3 last year and were +33 ypg. This year they have 18 starters back including QB Huff, RB Roberto (1120, 5.7) and 16 of their top 17 tacklers. The Paladins are the favorite to win the SoCon but do have tough road games at UTC, Samford, Western Carolina and South Carolina.
- 6. IDAHO** - Last year first year HC Jason Eck led Idaho to a 7-5 record, were +97 ypg and +11 ppg. This year they have 13 starters returning, including Jerry Rice Award winner QB Gevani McCoy. They get Montana, Montana St and Sacramento St all at home and we think they build off LY.
- 7. NEW HAMPSHIRE** - NH reached the 2nd round of the FCS playoffs, finishing 9-4 though they were -5 ypg. The Wildcats have 19 starters back from a team that ended #15. They miss W&M and only face 1 of the 4 playoff teams from the CAA. NH does have tough road games at CMich, Del & RI but this is the most experienced team in the CAA and capable of a longer playoff run this year.
- 8. HOLY CROSS** - The Crusaders only have 11 starters back and face a tough early sked (at BC, at Yale) but were +129 ypg vs the Patriot LY and have won 19 straight conf games. They also were tied in the 3Q vs SDSU in the playoffs LY. They are a heavy favorite to reach the playoffs again.
- 9. INCARNATE WORD** - IW reached the semifinals last year, narrowly losing to NDSU. They lose 18 starters and their HC took the job at Texas St. New HC Clint Killough relied heavily on the Portal, bringing in QB Zach Calzada who led A&M's upset over Bama 2 years ago. Despite the roster turnover they are the favorite in the Southland and could make another deep playoff run.
- 10. NORTHERN IOWA** - UNI finished 6-5 last year but was +83 ypg in the Valley and finished #12 in our AGG. They gave SDSU their toughest game and 4 of their 5 losses were to playoff & FBS teams. The Panthers have 13 starters back including QB Theo Day (PS#31) who started out at Michigan St. UNI has made the playoffs 6 out of the last 9 years and have a great shot to get back this year.
- 11. SACRAMENTO ST** - The Hornets just missed on a trip to the FCS Semifinals last year, losing to IW 66-63, held a 738-579 yd edge but -4 TO's. 15 starters return for first year HC Andy Thompson. They have a big ? at QB and face ID, Montana & UC Davis on the road.
- 12. MERCER** - Each of the last two years Mercer has needed to win the finale to reach the playoffs, only to suffer brutal close losses. They finished 7-4 last year and were #21 in the final Coach's Poll. HC Cronin has 16 starters back including 10 on defense. They get Samford at home in the finale. Mercer was #5 in our AGG last year, and we think they get over the hump and make the playoffs this year.
- 13. UC DAVIS** - Dan Hawkin's Aggies suffered close losses to SDSU, Weber St and Sac St last year, just missing on the playoffs. They did finish 6-5 and were +95 ypg. 13 starters are back and the schedule is more favorable.
- 14. DELAWARE** - Delaware started 5-0 LY and reached the 2nd round of the Playoffs and were +126 ypg. The Blue Hens have 10 starters back, losing QB Henderson and their top 5 tacklers. They miss W&M, Richmond & Rhode Island and host NH and Elon with a trip to Penn St as the only guaranteed loss.
- 15. SOUTHEAST MISSOURI ST** - SEMO has 14 starters back from LY's 9-3 team (+109 ypg). The Redhawks avoid GW in conference play and may be favored in all 10 FCS games. They should have a potent offense led by AA RB Geno Hess.
- 16. NC CENTRAL** - HC Oliver led NCCU to a MEAC Title and Celebration Bowl win last year, finishing #17 in the final Coach's Poll. The Eagles have 16 starters back including MEAC OPOY QB Davius Richard and MEAC DPOY FS Khalil Baker. They are a huge favorite to win the MEAC again.
- 17. WEBER ST** - The Wildcats finished 10-3 last year, were +75 ypg and finished #9 in my AGG. They only have 11 starters back and a new head coach but miss both Sac St and Montana and get UC Davis and Idaho at home.
- 18. SOUTHERN ILLINOIS** - SIU reached #14 at one point LY before losing 4 straight, all by 7 points or less including by 3 to NDSU. The Salukis have 12 starts back. They were 5-6 LY but +93 ypg in Valley play and -3 net close losses and will be favored in as many as 7 games this year.
- 19. NORTH DAKOTA** - The Fighting Hawks have 15 starters back including QB Tommy Schuster after reaching the playoffs last year. They were -23 ypg. This year they travel to Boise St, SDSU and UNI as well as hosting NDSU but are more experienced and could match last year's 7 win ssn.
- 20. CENTRAL ARKANSAS** - UCA went 5-6 last year but were +81 ypg in conf play. They do face OKSt, NDSU and SEMO in non conf but get ACU and ECU at home and have 16 starters back.
- 21. MONTANA** - The Grizzlies only bring back 8 starters from LY's playoff team but they do have all 5 OL starters back. They should start 5-0 before B2B road games at UC Davis & Idaho and later get Sac St & Mon St at home.
- 22. WESTERN CAROLINA** - WCU has had strong finishes the last two years and bring back 15 starters. They had the #1 in the SoCon in Total Offense last year. They finished 6-5 but were +95 ypg. They were -13 TO's on the road LY but get Furman, Samford and Mercer all at home.
- 23. SAMFORD** - The Bulldogs won the SoCon LY led by AA QB Michael Hiers who led the FCS in comp % (76.6%)! This year Hiers returns but only have 11 starters return, were -1 ypg, +4 net close wins, had a DEF YPP of 17.1 and rate a -6.5 SMI. They may not match last year's 11 wins but still could make the playoffs.
- 24. RICHMOND** - The Spiders have just 10 starters back from a team that finished 9-4 and were +91 ypg, reaching the FCS Playoffs. Richmond should easily start 5-1 before the CAA schedule heats up. There is a great shot the Spiders could even be 9-1 going into their reg ssn finale at W&M.
- 25. RHODE ISLAND** - RI has won 7 games in back-to-back seasons. The Rams have 10 starters back, losing most of their defense but get QB Kasim Hill back. They miss W&M, and host both NH and Richmond, putting them in the mix in the CAA.
- 26. SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA** - SELA has reached the playoffs in 3 of the L4Y. The Lions bring back 13 starters from last year's 9-4 squad. They do play road games at two FBS schools, Eastern Washington and Incarnate Word.
- 27. CHATTANOOGA** - UTC started 6-1 and was #6 in the FCS Coach's poll before losing 3 of their L4 and just missed the playoffs. UTC has 15 starters back including the SoCon DPOY Jay Person and add UCLA transfer QB Chase Artopoulos.
- 28. YALE** - Yale won the Ivy League LY, going 9-1 and were +73 ypg. They have 14 starters back including Ivy League OPOY QB Nolan Grooms back. If they beat Holy Cross at home in the opener they would have a great shot to go undefeated.
- 29. EASTERN KENTUCKY** - EKU went 7-6 last year, losing in the 1st rd of the playoffs. They return just 11 starters but one of those is QB Parker McKinney (3956, 69%, 33-8). Their non-conf slate is brutal, with 2 FBS teams, 2 playoff teams and WCU but they avoid ACU in conf play.
- 30. GARDNER-WEBB** - Last year GW was our pick to win the Big South and they did, finishing 7-6 and were +42 ypg. 14 starters return including 2x All Conf RB Gaither and Big South Def POY Ty French.
- 31. FLORIDA A&M** - After an 0-2 start LY the Rattlers won 9 straight. They bring 14 starters back including 10 on offense including QB Jeremy Moussa. They get an inexperienced Jackson St in the opener and could be favored in 10 games.
- 32. YOUNGSTOWN ST** - YSU won 5 of their last 6 LY and just missed out on the playoffs. Four of those wins were by 7 pts or less. QB Davidson had a 12-1 ratio and gets his first full offseason as starting QB.
- 33. ABILENE CHRISTIAN** - The Wildcats went 7-4 last year and were 3 plays away from 10-1 (3 losses by 3 pts!) They miss ECU and have 14 starters back and a road game at Central Ark will decide their fate.
- 34. ST. FRANCIS** - The Red Flashes went 9-3 last year and won the NEC. Only 10 starters are back but QB Cole Doyle did have a 21-3 ratio last year and could be favored in at least 8 games.
- 35. BRYANT** - Bryant only went 4-7 last year but were +29 ypg and had 4 close losses including at Holy Cross. The Bears have 17 starters back and we think QB Zevi Eckhaus cuts down on the turnovers (15 int's LY).
- 36. FORDHAM** - The Rams reached the 2nd round of the FCS Playoffs LY. They have 12 starters back but lose both AA QB DeMorat and AA LB Greenhagen. They did add NMex transfer QB CJ Montes.
- 37. MONMOUTH** - LY the Hawks finished 5-6 but were +33 ypg. They have 14 starters back with AA RB Jaden Shirden back and add a 3Y starting QB from Sacred Heart but have face 3 of the 4 CAA playoff teams.
- 38. ELON** - Elon has 10 starters back from an 8-4 squad that made the playoffs, but were +7 TO's. They have road games at 3 FCS playoff teams and WF.
- 39. PRINCETON** - Bob Surace is in his 14th year at Princeton. The Tigers haven't had a losing season since 2012. They were 8-0 last year but lost their last 2 by just 5 comb'd points. Only 8 starters return but they haven't had a losing record s/12.
- 40. DAVIDSON** - Davidson has reached the playoffs the last two years. They have a dream schedule, missing St. Thomas, and could be favored in all 11 games.