

NORTH DAKOTA ST BISON

POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2024

QUARTERBACKS - NDSU has produced two #1 DC QB's since '15 (Carson Wentz & Trey Lance). Cam Miller (PS#228) is in his 4th year with the Bison. He took over for NDSU's last 3 games in spring of '21 and threw for 363 (51%, 2-3). Miller was back in the fall of '21 and they added a power-5 transfer to take the job but he was injured and Miller was inserted back into the starting lineup. Miller was extremely accurate, hitting 68%, led with 1,444 and a 14-3 ratio with 280 rush (4.1). In '22 Miller returned after leading the Bison to a National Title. Cole Payton (PS#207) was a heralded recruit and dressed for every game in '21. Miller started all 15 games. He threw for 1,975 (66%, 13-5), was also their #4 rusher with 561 (4.6) and led with 15 rush td's. He also tied for the Valley lead with 15 rush td's. Payton played in 13 games and threw for 51 yards on 12 attempts (67%, 0-1). Both returned last year. Miller was #2 in the FCS, completing 72% with a 19-4 ratio and threw for 2,688. He was also their #2 rusher with 629 (4.7) and 13 td's. Payton made a huge impact on the ground, rushing for 615 (7.3) and 13 td's. He also threw for 289 yards (67%, 3-0). Amazingly both return. Miller is one of the top dual threat QB's and if disaster strikes they have a backup in Payton who is in his 3rd year in the system.

RUNNING BACKS - In '21 NDSU added SMU transfer TaMerik Williams (PS#74) and he led with 773 (6.3). In '22 seven of their top eight rushers returned. We said this was their deepest group in years. Williams was #2 with 702 and both of their top two RB's had above 7.0 ypc! Last year NDSU lost three of their top five RB's but did return Williams and TK Marshall (365, 6.3). Williams had 162 vs Montana St and led with 767 (6.2) and 8 td's. QB's Miller and Payton were their #2 and #3 rushers. This year they only lose Williams (UFA, SEA) but return both Barika Kpeenu (#4, 501, 5.2) and Marshall (386, 4.9) along with 1st Tm MVFC FB Hunter Brozio (6 st). NDSU uses a lot of RB's in their committee approach and they are actually more experienced this year with four of their top five returning.

RECEIVERS - In '22 Zach Mathis led with 520 (14.9). TE Joe Stoffel had 276 (11.0) and Braylon Henderson was #3 with 222 (15.9). Their top four were back last year and we said they would be relied on more with less experienced RB's. Eli Green had his best two games in the Playoffs and led with 877 (19.5). Mathis was #2 with 665 (14.5). Green transferred to Iowa St after the spring. Mathis also departs but they get back their #3, #4 and #5 receivers who all had at least 280 yards last year. They are down a few notches but most of the depth returns and could be better than expected.

OFFENSIVE LINE - This has been one of the premier Oline's in the FCS. In '21 NDSU rushed for 281 (6.2) but did allow 17 sacks. In '22 they lost a #4 DC but four starters returned and they still rushed for 266 (6.1) with just 13 sacks. Last year NDSU lost a consensus 1st Tm AA and #1 DC as well as another 1st Tm AA LG. Three starters were back but were down a few notches and "only" rushed for 238 ypg (5.8) with 20 sacks. This

year they lose 2nd Tm MVFC LT Jalen Sundell (15 st, UFA CLE), RG Jake Kubas (12 st, UFA NYG) and C Brandon Westberg (15 st). Two starters return including 2nd Tm MVFC RT Gray Zabel. Jake Rock got valuable experience starting 3 playoff games last year when Kubas was out. They added Marshall's Trent Fraley to compete at C. Six NDSU OL are currently in the NFL at presstime. This is their youngest OLine in some time but still among the best in the FCS.

DEFENSIVE LINE - In '22 NDSU lost their top four DL then DE Eli Mostaert played in just three games due to injuries so essentially their top five were gone. They went from just 88 rush ypg (2.9) in '21, their lowest allowed since 2006, to 157 (4.3), the most they've allowed since 2010. NDSU did finish with 40 sacks and last year six of their top eight were back including the Mostaert twins. We said this was their most improved unit and they allowed 117 (3.9) with 39 sacks. This year NDSU loses 2nd Tm MVFC DE Jake Kava (15 st, #5 tk'l'r, 8 sk, 7.5 tfl), DT Javier Derritt (15 st, #11 tk'l'r, 2.5 sk) and Luke Weerts (2 st, #7 tk'l'r, 4 tfl). Two starters return including 1st Tm MVFC DE Dylan Hendricks (14 st, #9 tk'l'r, 6.5 sk) and 2nd Tm MVFC Eli Mostaert (15 st, #10 tk'l'r, 4 tfl). Nine of their top 12 return so they are only a little less experienced and could even improve for a 2nd straight year.

LINEBACKERS - Last year NDSU lost their #1 tackler but returned their #3, #8, #9 and #11 tacklers. Logan Kopp was #2 with 85 tackles (7.5 tfl's), had 3 int's and was 1st Tm MVFC. Nick Kubitz was #4 with 54 tackles. Kopp (15 st), Kubitz (13 st) and #13 tk'l'r Oscar Benson (7 st) all return along with their top two backups (comb 40 tk'l). They only lose Julian Wlodarczyk (#8 tk'l'r). This is now the strength of the defense with Kopp one of the top returning LB's in the Valley.

DEFENSIVE BACKS - NDSU finished #1 in Pass D Efficiency in the Valley in both '19 and '21 (177 pass ypg, 57%, 12-14). In '22 NDSU returned the entire secondary and all four starters started all 15 games. They allowed just 172 pass ypg (61%, 18-16) but finished #2 in the Valley in pass D efficiency. Last year their top five departed and their only starting experience comes from Bowling Green transfer Marcus Sheppard (7 st, 16 tk'l 3Y). SS Cole Wisniewski led with 92 tackles and led the FCS with 8 int's. NDSU posted better numbers across the board (186 pass ypg, 61%, 16-21) but only finished #3 in Pass D Efficiency in the Valley. Their only loss this year is CB Jayden Price (15 st, #6 tk'l'r, 2 int). Three starters return including 1st Tm AA S Wisniewski. This is the strength of their D with five of their top six back and they added Cornell CB Anthony Chideme-Alfaro (40 car tk'l, 2 int).

SPECIAL TEAMS - NDSU returned the entire ST unit last year. Griffin Crosa made 19-22 fg's L/44). Kaedin Steindorf averaged 43.7 ypp but his net dropped from 37.3 to 34.2. Jayden Price had 227 PR yards (14.2) but they allowed 186 PR yards (13.3). Raja Nelson was their top KR with a 28.4 avg. This year they only lose their PR. Their coverage units should be much better and both Crosa and Steindorf are among the best in the Valley.

COACHES - Tim Polasek became NDSU's 32nd HC in school history. He previously coached here from '06-'12 (RB Cch) and '14-'16 as OC. Polasek was OC/QB Coach under former NDSU Craig Bohl at Wyoming the last three years. He was also OL Coach at Iowa from '17-'20. The new OC is Jake Landry who held the same post at St. Thomas the last two years and was QB Coach and analyst at Temple from '19-'21. Former NDSU SS Grant Olson takes over as DC. This is his 6th year coaching at NDSU. He was ST Coor last year and LB Coach since '19. Nick Goesser is his 15th year at NDSU but first as Co-DC. 5th year Cch Joe Beschoner takes over as ST Coor.

FORECAST

OFFENSE - Improved QB play and a dominant run game helped the Bison put up 34 ppg and 432 ypg in '21. In '22 they had eight starters back including QB Cam Miller, their entire RB unit and four starting OL. They had to replace two draft picks, but were more experienced and we said they would top 35 ppg. They just missed the mark, but led the MVFC with 34.3 ppg were #2 with 401 ypg. Last year seven starters returned including QB Miller. They led the Valley with 38.1 ppg and were #2 with 436 ypg. This year NDSU has five starters back. QB Miller is the star but they lose their top rusher, top two receivers and three starting OL so they likely won't quite match last year's production.

DEFENSE - In '21 NDSU brought back 9 starters. They allowed just 11 ppg and 265 ypg while holding foes 110 ypg below their average (#3 in FCS). They had 6 starters back in '22 and 6 of their top 8 tacklers returned. They allowed 20 ppg (#2 in MVFC) and 329 ypg (#3 in MVFC) and held foes 51 ypg below their average (#14 in FCS). Only four starters returned last year and six of their top seven tacklers were gone. NDSU hadn't allowed over 300 ypg in back-to-back seasons since '10 & '11 but just missed the mark, allowing 303 (#3 in MVFC) and 19.9 ppg (#4 in MVFC). This year the Bison have seven starters back including their top 4 tacklers and 17 of their top 22 are back. They have 1st and 3rd Team AA's returning, and this will be one of the Valley's best defenses.

2024 - North Dakota St has won 9 of the last 13 National Titles and their last title was back in '21. Matt Entz led the Bison to National Title in '18 and the fall of '21. In '22 NDSU had 14 starters return and they were the favorites in the FCS. The Bison had their 6 game win streak over FBS foes snapped when they lost at Arizona 31-28 and their loss to South Dakota St dropped them to 5-2. NDSU won their next seven games despite battling injury issues but were blown out in the National Title, a rematch vs rival SDSU, 45-21. They finished 12-3 and were +72 ypg and +92 vs MVFC. 11 starters returned last year. They were 3-0 but were upset by South Dakota 24-19 after falling behind 21-0 early then two weeks later suffered a 2nd MVFC loss at #15 North Dakota 49-24, their most lopsided FCS loss since 2005. NDSU won their next two in blow outs then lost 33-16 at SD State, dropping them to 3-3 in Valley play and suddenly a playoff spot was in doubt. NDSU rebounded with dominant wins over Southern Illinois and Northern Iowa to finish the regular season 8-3 and a playoff bid. After a lopsided win over Drake they stopped Montana St's game deciding 2 pt conversion in OT and won 35-34 then beat South Dakota 45-17 in a rematch. In the semifinals they lost at Montana 31-29 in Overtime. NDSU finished 11-4 and were +134 ypg and +141 ypg vs the Valley. This year they have 12 starters back. HC Entz left to be LB Coach at USC. They brought in Tim Polasek for his 3rd stint here. Miller is one of the top returning QB's in the FCS and they have two All-Americans back on defense. The Bison were +19 TO's last year. NDSU has won six of their last seven vs FBS foes and has a much anticipated opener at Colorado on Thursday Aug 29th on ESPN. They will be heavily favored in their first 3 FCS games. The Bison misses Indiana St and YSU. They host SD State and travel to South Dakota but could be favored in their other 6 MVFC games. HC Polasek has a talented squad and NDSU will once again compete for a Valley Championship and could make a deep playoff run.