

MONTANA STATE BOBCATS

POSITION OUTLOOK FOR 2026

QUARTERBACKS - Starter Tommy Mellott returned in '23 to throw for 1064 (8 st, 62.4%, 10-2, 689, 8.1 rush, 2nd Tm Big Sky). He returned in '24 and took his game to a new level with 3809 tot yards (46 tot td, 2 int, 1st Tm AA, Walter Payton Award). The Bobcats lost their star last year but added Stanford's PS#78 Justin Lamson (804 pass, 428 rush, 46% L2Y). Chance Wilson was 10-23 for 141 yds. Lamson wasn't Mellott but he was very close, throwing for 3172 (71.6%, 26-3), rushing for 734 (4.2, 16 td) and earning Big Sky Newcomer of the Year (2nd Tm Big Sky). Lamson is back as is backup Patrick Duchien (9-13-86-1-1). The '25 concerns about beginning life after Mellott are completely gone this year.

RUNNING BACKS - MSU had its top 4 rushers back in '24, led by Julius Davis (718, 6.9, 6 td in '23). However, Scottre Humphrey (441, 8.0, 8 td in '23) seized control of the job. He led with 1386 (7.0, 16 td, 4th Tm AA) while #2 Adam Jones ripped off 1172 (6.4, 14 td, 214 rec, 2nd Tm Big Sky). While Humphrey transferred in '25, Jones was back along with Colson Coon (373, 5.9), Jared White (254, 5.5) and Julius Davis (led tm in rushing in '23). Four of the top 5 were back to fuel the ground-and-pound attack. For the 2nd time in 3 years, Davis led with 1123 (9 st, 6.6, 8 td, 2nd Tm Big Sky). Jones was close behind with 1093 (9 st, 6.3, 15 td, 301 rec, HM Big Sky). Coon (248, 8.0) and White (139, 5.0) chipped in off the bench. Davis is gone but Jones can carry the load and Coon and White return with an eye on more touches. The Bobcats have slightly less depth than last year but still have an experienced RB room.

RECEIVERS - Four of Montana St's 7 100-yard receivers were back in '24. The run-first Bobcats only threw 32% of the time but produced their most passing yards since '15. Taco Dowler led with 597 (15.7, 11 td), the way (597, 15.7, 11 td) and Ty McCullough was #2 with 529 (16 st, 12.6, 5 td). In '25, Dowler was back but McCullough, TE Rohan Jones (470, 15.7, 9 td) and Lonyatta Alexander (12 st, 264, 12.0) were gone. Only 1 of the top 5 was back, so Ryan King (162, 10.8), TE Ryan Schlepp (129, 16.1) and newcomer Chris Long needed to step up. Dowler took it to another level with 1025 (13.3, 7 td, 2nd Tm Big Sky). Dane Steel was #2 with 501 (9 st, 12.8) followed by Jabez Woods (378, 15.7) and Long with 338 (14 st, 14.1). This year, the top 3 are back plus TE's Rocky Lencioni (2 st, 206, 10.8, 6 td) and Schlepp (9 st, 43, 5.4). They also added Bruin Fleishmann (370, 17.6, 6 td LY at Air Force). The receiving corps is in much stronger shape than at the same time last year.

OFFENSIVE LINE - Montana St returned 3 starters in '24, led by RT Marcus Wehr (2nd Tm AA) and C Justus Perkins (4th Tm Big Sky). They lost a 3rd Tm AA RG and 2nd Tm Big Sky LG. The ground game remained steady at 294 ypg (6.5) with only 12 sacks on 342 passes (3.5%). Last season, RG Wehr (3rd Tm AA), LT Conner Moore (4th Tm AA) and C Cole Sain (3rd Tm Big Sky) had to be replaced. The returning vets were RT Titan Fleischmann (2nd Tm Big Sky) and LG Burke Mastel. The retooled unit saw rushing

ypg fall to 226 (5.7, #2 Big Sky) while sacks rose to 32 (8.5%). Fleishmann was 1st Tm Big Sky while C JT Reed (16 st), RT Cedric Jefferson (16 st) and LG Mastel were all HM Big Sky. Reed and Jefferson are gone but Fleishmann and Mastel will anchor a line that includes LT Braden Zimmer (16 st) and LG Everett Carr (3 st). MSU goes from 2 returning starters to 3+, giving them an improved unit compared to a year ago.

DEFENSIVE LINE - The Bobcats returned 5 of the top 8 DL in '24, including DE Brody Grebe (50 tkl, 9.5 sk, 4th AA). The run D improved to 121 ypg (4.4) to go along with 37 sacks. Last year, they lost Grebe (42 tkl, 8.5 sk, 1st Tm AA) but returned 3 starters, DE Kenneth Eiden (32 tkl, 9 sk), NT Paul Brott (49 tkl, 3 sk, 3rd Tm Big Sky) and DT Alec Eckert (28 tkl). With 6 of the top 7 tacklers from the DL back, the Bobcats led the Big Sky in run defense (119.4, 3.8) but sacks slid to 32. Brott (28 tkl) earned AA recognition, Eiden was 1st Tm Big Sky (56 tkl, 8.5 sk) and Eckert (28 tkl, 3 sk) and DE Hunter Parsons (37 tkl, 9.5 tfl) were HM Big Sky. Those 4 starters are gone, so depth and experience are concerns. But MSU uses a deep rotation, so NT Talon Marsh (1 st, 22 tkl), DT Zack Black (16 tkl), and DE's Zac Crews (38 tkl, 6 sk), Dominic Solano (23 tkl, 3 sk) and Seth Brock (19 tkl, 3 tfl) are ready for their moment. This unit will be down, especially in run stopping, but still terrific with Crews set to play at an All-Big Sky level.

LINEBACKERS - The Bobcats lost a 2nd Tm Big Sky LB and their starting NB (10 st, 36 tkl) in '24 but returned Danny Uluilakepa (59 tkl, 5.5 tfl in '23) and McCade O'Reilly (4 st, 70 tkl in '23). Uluilakepa started the first 7 in '24 then was OFY. O'Reilly was the #2 tkl'r (16 st, 3rd Tm AA), while NB Miles Jackson (#9 tkl'r) started all 16. MSU allowed 18 ppg and 312 ypg, holding foes 82 ypg under their average (#2 FCS!). In '25, they lost O'Reilly, Uluilakepa and Jackson. Three of the top 4 were gone, with Neil Daily (8 st, 51 tkl, 6.5 tfl) as the top returner. MSU was solid again, allowing 19 ppg and 329.4 ypg while holding opponents 68 ypg below their average (#2 FCS). Cole Taylor led the team with 107 tkl (7.5 tfl, 2nd Tm Big Sky). Bryce Grebe started 14 and was #3 with 72 tkl. Tayden Gray took over at NB and started all 16 (55 tkl, 2nd Tm Big Sky). Not only are the 3 starters back but so are top backups Ryan Krahe (18 tkl) and Brock Steel (18 tkl). After losing 3 of the top 4, the top 5 are back, giving the Bobcats an elite and experienced LB unit.

DEFENSIVE BACKS - Montana St returned the top 7 tacklers in '24, led by S Rylan Ortt (12 st, 74 tkl, 7 tfl, 3 int, 4th Tm Big Sky). The Bobcats finished #2 in the Big Sky at 191 ypg (59.7%, 20-9). However, last season, they lost CB's Simeon Woodard (16 st, 26 tkl, 8 pbu) and Andrew Powdrell (14 st, 41 tkl, 7 pbu, 2nd Tm Big Sky) and safeties Dru Polidore (8 st, 35 tkl) and Ortt (16 st, 85 tkl, 4 pbu, 2nd Tm Big Sky). Taki Uluilakepa (2 st, 18 tkl) and Caden Dowler (12 tkl) returned but this was an area of big concern in the offseason. However, new stars emerged and MSU led the Big Sky in pass efficiency D (210 ypg, 62.3%, 22-16). SS Dowler went from backup to All-American and Big Sky DPOY (91 tkl, 6.5 tfl, 6 int, 2 td). He was joined by FS Bryant Meredith (14 st, 55 tkl). The main CB's were Jhase McMillan (15 st, 43 tkl) and Seth Johnson (11 st, 28 tkl). Six other DB's had at least 16 tkl. Three Bobcat DB's are now with P4 programs but 6 of the top 10 are back, none more valuable than Dowler. Meredith also returns so S is rock solid but all 32 CB starts from '25 are gone so that's a priority. MSU has gotten reinforcements from Penn's Alec Wills and Arizona's Gianni Edwards

SPECIAL TEAMS - Myles Sansted was 15-19 of fg's (L/49) in '24. Meanwhile, P Brendan Hall (4th Tm AA in '23) averaged 45.8 yards (42.4 net, 3rd Tm Big Sky). KR Adam Jones led with 165 (23.6) and Taco

Dowler was the top PR with 664 yards (12.5, 1 td, 3rd Tm AA). Last year, MSU lost Hall but returned Sansted and Dowler. True frosh Colby Frokjer took over at P and averaged 41.7 (37.3 net). Sansted hit 17-21 (L/48) and the RS's were PR Dowler (13.5, 1st Tm Big Sky) and KR Jabez Woods (29.2). Everyone returns this season, so the ST's unit will rank among the best in the FCS this season.

COACHES - Brent Vigen has done a remarkable job in 5 seasons here. He's 61-12 (37-3 Big Sky) with 3 league titles, 5 top 10 finishes and last year's national championship. He has spent his entire career in The Great American West region of the country. Pete Sterbick enters Year 2 as the OC. He came from Colorado School of Mines where he was HC from '23-'24 and OC from '19-'22. Bobby Daly, one of the great LB's in school history, begins his third season as DC. He's been on staff since '19. The second-year ST coordinator is Marcus Monaco.

FORECAST

OFFENSE - MSU's run-first offense continues to rank among the most potent in the country. In '23, the Bobcats returned 9 starters, including all 5 OL, and averaged 39.9 ppg (#2 FCS) and 474 ypg. They rung up 108 ypg above foes average (#4 FCS). In '24, QB Tommy Mellott headlined the return of 7 starters and the Bobcats averaged an FCS-best 40.8 ppg and 479 ypg (#2 FCS). In '25, without the AA Mellott and with just 3 returning starters, they still averaged 37.9 ppg (#8 FCS) and 433.6 ypg (#4 Big Sky). With 8 starters returning in '26, including QB Justin Lamson, a 1000-yard RB, the top 3 receivers, and 3+ starting OL, MSU will return to being a 40 ppg offense that wears down opposing defenses with a north-south rushing attack.

DEFENSE - With 7 starters and a well-stocked DL back in '23, the Bobcats improved to 21.8 ppg and 330 ypg, while holding foes 66 ypg below their average (#7 FCS). MSU returned 7 starters again in '24 and further improved to 18.3 ppg (#11 FCS) and 312 ypg (#15 FCS). They held opponents 82 ypg below their norm (#2 FCS!). A year ago, the Bobcats had to rebuild around just 4 returning starters and 5 of the top 14 tacklers from '24. There was a dropoff but not by much. They still yielded just 19 ppg and 329.4 ypg (both #1 in Big Sky). The '26 Bobcats are ready for an encore. This year 5 starters return and the back 7 will be fantastic now that the top 3 tacklers are a year older. The D-line rotation needs some work after losing 4 starters, but last year's backups are itching for promotions and MSU has the talent and muscle memory to once again be a top 10 D nationally.

2026 - This is quickly becoming the Golden Age of Bobcat football under HC Brent Vigen. Montana St made the FCS championship game in '21 and '24, losing both times to North Dakota St. However, last year they broke through with a season-ending 14-game win streak capped by an OT thriller over Illinois St for the school's first national title since 1984! They're 29-3 over the last 2 seasons and have won 16 straight Big Sky Conference games. Last season, they dropped the first 2 to Oregon and South Dakota St but didn't lose again. MSU were +18.9 ppg and +104.2 ypg, all with a new starting QB and OC. This year, the QB is a year older and surrounded by a terrific supporting cast, and the defense is as good as any in the FCS. In other words, the Bobcats remain the class of the Big Sky and are built to make a serious run at back-to-back national championships. The schedule begins with new league foe Utah Tech and Butler before a trip to Reno to face Nevada and a chance to cop an FBS victory. The schedule is very manageable and ends with rival Montana having to travel to Bozeman. Idaho St in Pocatello is a potential landmine in November, but the Bobcats could be favored in every game this year and anything less than an 8th straight playoff berth would be a major surprise.