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Year 3 for Neal Brown

The WVU head coach talks expectations in 2021

BY SEAN MANNING

SManning@DominionPost.com

Now in Year 3 at WVU, head coach Neal Brown is hoping to take the next step on his climb, coming off a 6-4 season in a COVID-19 shortened 2020.

With experience back on offense and defense, as well as trying to replace key pieces defensively, Brown likes what he sees from the Mountaineers heading into the 2021 campaign.

This is Brown's interview from Big 12 Media Days on July 14 in Arlington, Texas. It has been edited slightly for clarity.

QUESTION: All of your losses except for

one last season were only two-score losses. What are you looking to focus on offensively this season to close that gap?

NEAL BROWN: So we finished 6-4 last year. Really, we're in the game. The other three games, right until about the two-minute mark with an opportunity with the ball to score and take the lead in two of those games. So, again, defensively you look at the scores of those games, we were right into it.

What we have to do is — third downs and red zone — are the most important pieces for us offensively to take advantage of. We have to score touchdowns. We're going to kick field goals in the red zone, and then on third down, we have to

be able to convert, especially in the middle.

Q: You're picked to finish sixth in the Big 12 preseason poll. Are people sleeping on West Virginia, and what do you have to do to get higher up in the rankings?

NB: Well, we can't control where you're at in preseason. I'm sure there's reasons why we're there. It's like I tell our players, you either prove them right or you prove them wrong. And our goal this season is to prove them wrong, and to do that you have to play better and to play better you have to practice better. That's our goal and what we're focused on. Our theme for this year is to be

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BROWN

FROM PAGE I-2

better, and that's the objective in every phase is to be better.

Q: You mentioned just now that quarterback Jarret Doege was your most improved player on offense in the spring. One obvious area for improvement on offense is more explosiveness in the passing game. Is that an area or improvement or where did he impress you?

NB: Two things with Jarret in the spring is pocket awareness and pocket movement, and second thing was really his accuracy on the deep ball. That's something that we've got — as an offense, we have to be more explosive. We missed too many shots down the field. We had people open a lot of times that we didn't connect. We had some drops that were a factor in that. But we have got to be more explosive.

If you look at teams that have played at an elite level, they are not grounding out drives. They are explosive plays. And to have explosive plays, you have to be able to break tackles, you have to be elite, run after the catch, or you have to hit shots down the field.

We think we have some guys in Leddie Brown and others that can break tackles, and we have guys, Winston Wright and Sam James who have shown the ability to run of the catch. But we have to make a step and it's a significant step, is having more explosive plays.

Q: You only had Tony Fields for one year, but what does it take and what are you looking at to replace his production for what he was able to do across the middle of the field in second and third level of defense?

NB: What Tony Fields did so well, and it's important to note, Tony got to us about three days into fall camp. He wasn't there in summer, nobody had spring ball, so he wasn't there then, but he was an eraser for us. He played the game at full speed, was really fast sideline-to-sideline and



William Wotring/The Dominion Post file photo

WVU coach Neal Brown talks with quarterback Garrett Greene during fall camp.

could match up coverage-wise with running backs in our league.

I think what we have to do is not one person necessarily makes that. We have to do a better job as a linebacker corps in general of playing in the box, which we are capable of doing. We have to do a better job when we blitz. We didn't do a good enough job last year blitzing.

But I like the guys. We have guys that are unproven. Josh Chandler played extremely well in our Bowl game. I was telling the ESPN crew, if you look at our bowl game, the people that we lost on defense, outside of Darius, they didn't play in a bowl game (Field, Tykee Smith, Dreshun Miller) and we still played at an elite level versus a very difficult offense to defend.

So we've got guys with experience. Josh Chan-

dler was the MVP of the bowl game, and then we have Lance Dixon who transferred (from Penn State), Exree Loe has played a lot of football for us, and then we have Deshawn Stevens who just transferred in from Maine. So we have guys that have played football at a high level. Just they have got to get reps within our system.

Q: I know you've put in a bunch of programs to address a lot of the things around football, but how are you and your staff making time for yourselves with all these new demands and how are you making sure that football remains the focus?

NB: I think this is a challenging time for coaches. What I mean is we're in an evolving world, and I don't know if anybody will sit at this podium necessarily has answers for what the future of our game looks like. As far as football, I think you have to keep our guys — the two main priorities that our players have right now are academics and football and you have to maintain those.

Now, I think they can continue within the right structure. They can maintain those priorities and still profit off name, image and likeness. They can still do things socially. I think those are all possible.

As coaches, the important piece with the players is relationships. None of that changes. Name, Image and Likeness, that doesn't change. You have to focus on relationships, and I think for our staff's perspective, that's what our focus is. And then everybody on our staff was hired because they are experts in football. And we have to continue to maintain that expertise by staying up on schemes, staying up on evaluations, those type of things.

So all the stuff on the perimeter, whether it's our fifth-quarter program, whether it's different time demands due to name, image, likeness, we have to keep the main things the main things. That's the role of the head coach, to make sure that myself and our staff and everybody, players-wise, as well, are keeping the main things the main things.

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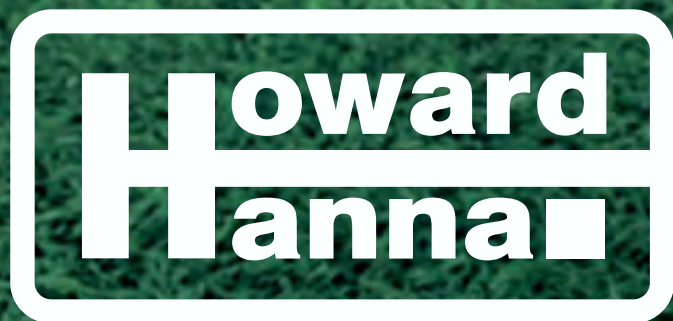
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Neal Brown Head coach**Personal**

Birthday: March 11

Hometown: Danville, Ky.

College: Kentucky/UMass

Family: Wife, Brooke; daughters, Adalyn, Anslee; son, Dax

The Mountaineers improved from 5-7 in Brown's first year to 6-4 last season, continuing the climb he promised the program when he was hired as WVU's 35th head football coach in January 2019.

Since arriving in Morgantown, Brown has covered much territory representing Mountaineers football as its chief ambassador, ensuring the great story about his program is told to everyone.

Brown has implemented a "5th-Quarter Program" for the team to assist in the development of the total player. The pillars of the program are character development, leadership development, real life, social responsibility and career development.

Another component of the 5th Quarter program is the Bridge Program. Its goal is to introduce the student-athletes to the college experience when they first enter WVU and then give them their final training and prepare them before they embark into life after graduation.

In September 2020, Brown was named the honorary head coach for the AFCA AllState Good Works Team, honoring him for his commitment to leadership, the Morgantown community and Mountaineer Nation as a whole. In January, he was named to the AFCA's Board of Trustees.

The 2020 season was Brown's most challenging season to date, testing his ability, not only as a coach, but as a leader. He was forced to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic since mid-March, which didn't allow for spring practice or offseason workouts and skill instruction, while social unrest was at a high level nationally during the summer.

Prior to WVU, Brown spent 2015-18 as the head coach at Troy University, compiling a 35-16 record, including 3-0 in bowl games. The Trojans posted a 31-8 record (.795) over the past three seasons (2016-18), tying for the highest winning percentage nationally among non-Power 5 schools. Troy won 17 of its last 20 games and 22 of its last 26.

After directing the Trojans to the 2017 Sun Belt Conference Championship, Brown was honored as the league's coach of the year. During his tenure at Troy, Brown's signature wins included a 24-21 victory in 2017 at then-No. 22 ranked LSU in Baton Rouge, which snapped the Tigers' 49-game nonconference home winning streak and a 24-19 win at Nebraska on Sept. 15, 2018. Also impressive was his team's 30-24 loss at eventual 2016 national champion Clemson.

Troy finished 10-3 in 2016, including a 6-2 mark in the Sun Belt and a victory over Ohio University in the Dollar General Bowl. The Trojans became the first Sun Belt Conference school to open a season with eight wins in its first nine games, and they became the first league school to appear in a major top 25 poll, checking in at No. 25 in the Associated Press' Nov. 13 poll.

Additionally, Brown's 2016 squad tied for the best turnaround in the country (6 wins). Prior to Brown's first season at Troy in 2015, he spent two years (2013-14) as the offensive coordinator under Mark Stoops at Kentucky

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Matt Moore Assistant head coach/offensive line

7

Personal

Birthday: Oct. 18

Hometown: Canton, Ga.

College: Valdosta State

Family: Wife, Kelly; children, Tanner, Reece, Sutton

Matt Moore joined the football coaching staff as the Mountaineers' co-offensive coordinator and offensive line coach in January 2019. After the 2019 season, he was promoted to assistant head coach.

Moore came with WVU coach Neal Brown after serving as the offensive coordinator and offensive line coach for four years at Troy (2015-18). He spent two years on the offensive staff at Texas Tech in 2010-11 and was on the staff with Brown at Troy in 2006.

In 2018, the Trojans finished 10-3 and tied for first place in the Sun Belt Conference East Division. Seven players from the Trojan offense earned All-Sun Belt Conference recognition, including three first-team selections. Four Trojan offensive linemen earned All-Sun Belt Conference honors in 2017, including left tackle Antonio Garcia, who was the highest selected offensive lineman in conference history. Garcia was selected No. 85 overall in the NFL draft by the New England Patriots.

Moore's offense led the Sun Belt in scoring offense in 2016, and finished No. 2 in the league in passing offense and total offense. Troy finished 10-3 and earned its first top-25 national ranking in school and conference history. Prior to Moore's first season at Troy, he spent the previous two years as the assistant head coach and offensive line coach at Louisiana Tech.

In 2014, the Bulldogs won the Conference USA Western Division Championship and earned a trip to the Heart of Dallas Bowl. Moore also spent time at Middle Tennessee (OL/2012), Texas Tech (OL/2007-11) and Troy (OL/2006).

He began his coaching career at the high school level, producing successful runs in Georgia and Alabama. While at Middle Tennessee, the Blue Raider offensive line ranked No. 2 nationally in fewest sacks allowed. His Texas Tech offensive line paved the way for the Red Raiders to score 28 rushing touchdowns in 2008, second most in school history.

With Brown and Moore on the Texas Tech staff together in 2010, the Red Raiders finished No. 7 nationally in passing, No. 15 in total offense and No. 23 in scoring offense. The following year, the Red Raiders ranked No. 7 in passing, No. 13 in total offense and No. 22 in scoring offense.

Moore's career began as the head coach at Pickens High in Jasper, Georgia, from 1997-98, before spending the next six years as the offensive coordinator and offensive line coach at perennial powerhouse Hoover High School in Hoover, Alabama. Moore helped lead the Buccaneers to a 77-7 record and three consecutive Class 6A state titles.

Moore also served as head coach at North Gwinnett High School in Suwanee, Georgia, before beginning his collegiate coaching career at Troy.

A native of Canton, Georgia, Moore played at Valdosta State, starting 34 games at left guard from 1991-94. He earned All-Gulf South Conference First-Team honors as a senior.

Moore graduated from Valdosta State in 1996 with a bachelor's degree in health and physical education.



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Gerad Parker Offensive coordinator/wide receivers



Personal

Birthday: Jan. 4

Hometown: Louisa, Ky.

College: Kentucky

Family: Wife, Kandi; children, Kolbi, Gwyneth, Rosalyn, Oliver

Parker is in his second year as the offensive coordinator and wide receivers coach at West Virginia.

In 2020, despite having to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, West Virginia had one of the most improved offenses in the nation in terms of total yards, showing gains of more than 60 yards rushing per game, almost 30 yards passing a game, more than 90 yards of total offense and almost seven more points a game.

The offensive line had a productive year with Leddie Brown rushing for 1,010 yards and nine touchdowns, Jarret Doege throwing for more than 2,500 yards and 14 touchdowns and receiver Winston Wright Jr. was an All-Big 12 Conference Second Team performer after leading the Mountaineers with 47 catches for 553 yards and two touchdowns and T.J. Simmons finished with 23 catches for 401 yards and a team-high four receiving touchdowns. Simmons was named the WVU Offensive MVP as well as the Bowl MVP for finishing with two touchdowns, including the game-winning score.

Parker was reunited with head coach Neal Brown and co-offensive coordinator Chad Scott, as they were all former student-athletes with the Kentucky football program. He came to WVU after serving as the passing game coordinator/wide receivers coach at Penn State in 2019.

The Nittany Lions offense averaged 35.8 points per game, ranking No. 15 nationally, was No. 21 in red zone offense (.904) and averaged 13.3 yards per completion, ranking No. 33 nationally. One of his receivers, KJ Hamler, led the team with 56 catches for 904 yards and eight touchdowns. He was named All-Big Ten First Team as an all-purpose player by Sports Illustrated and was a second-team honoree on several lists.

Parker spent two years on the football staff at Duke (2017-18). During the 2018 season, he coached T.J. Rahming, who was named an All-ACC Second Team selection. His wide receivers accounted for 2,252 passing yards of the Blue Devils' 3,199 total offensive yards (70.4%).

He served his first year as the football operations assistant working with the offense in 2017. The Blue Devils offense had three All-ACC selections and for the first time in program history had three players with 500 or more rushing yards, while also having a quarterback throw for more than 2,500 yards. Parker spent the spring as the running backs coach at Cincinnati, before joining the Duke football staff.

Prior to that, Parker spent four seasons at Purdue, where he coached the tight ends (2013-14) and wide receivers (2015-16). He was the recruiting coordinator and also spent the final six weeks of the 2016 season as the Boilermakers interim head coach.

One of Parker's receivers, DeAngelo Yancey, finished with 49 receptions for 951 yards and 10 touchdowns, earning All-Big Ten Second Team accolades in 2016. He ended his career ranked No. 7 in receiving yards (2,344) and receiving touchdowns (20), and No. 16 in receptions (141). In 2015, Yancey grabbed 48 receptions and led the team with 700 yards, while Danny Anthrop led the Boilermakers with 57 catches.

Parker spent two years as the wide receivers coach at Marshall (2011-12). The Thundering Herd led the nation in passing offense, averaging 365.1 yards per game. Receiver Tommy Shuler led the country and set the school record for receptions (110) and was No. 18 nationally in yards per game (94.8). He earned All-Mid-American Conference First Team honors. In 2011, Aaron Dobson had 49 catches for 668 yards and a team-best 12 touchdowns.

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Chad Scott Co-offensive coordinator/running backs

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Personal

Birthday: June 11

Hometown: Plant City, Fla.

College: Kentucky/North Carolina

Family: Wife, Shambrica; children, Kori, Jakobe

Scott joined the Mountaineer coaching staff as the co-offensive coordinator and running backs coach in January 2019. He is reunited with Brown after working with him during three different coaching tenures: Kentucky (RB/2013-14), Texas Tech (RB/2010-12) and Troy (RB/2007-09). He came to Morgantown after serving as the tight ends and hybrids coach at North Carolina from 2016-18.

In 2018, the Tar Heel offense ranked No. 31 nationally in total offense, averaging 442.1 yards per game. Tight end Carl Tucker was named to the Mackey Award preseason watch list, and he and his teammate, Jake Bargas, averaged more than 10 yards per reception.

In 2016, Scott was part of an offensive staff that oversaw the establishment of more than 40 individual and team records, including passing yards and passing yards per game. Tight end was the most inexperienced position group on the team, but they made valuable contributions as the Tar Heels won eight games and played Stanford in the Sun Bowl. Tucker and Fritts averaged more than 10 yards per reception.

Scott returned to Chapel Hill after coaching at Kentucky, where he tutored running backs from 2013-15 and was the run-game coordinator in 2014-15. In his six seasons at Troy and Texas Tech, Scott's teams averaged 34.1 points per game. He spent three seasons at Texas Tech from 2010-12.

While the Red Raiders were known for throwing the ball, Scott's running backs made significant contributions to the offense. The Red Raiders rushed for 135.7 yards per game and scored 52 rushing touchdowns during his three seasons. TTU's primary running backs averaged 5.0 yards per rushing attempt. Scott inherited a running attack that ranked No. 115 in rushing offense in 2009 at 84 yards per game, improving that mark in his first season to No. 75 nationally with 141.3 yards per contest. The team's leading rusher, Baron Batch, was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers and spent three years with that team.

The improvements continued in Scott's second season as Texas Tech was on pace to have its best year rushing since the late 1990s before Tech's top two rushers sustained season-ending injuries. The Red Raider running backs still rushed for 1,516 yards on the season.

In 2012, TTU averaged 139.9 yards per game on the ground with three backs rushing for more than 400 yards each. Scott earned his first full-time coaching job at Troy as an assistant coach for running backs from 2007-09, helping lead the Trojans to three consecutive Sun Belt Conference Championships and a pair of appearances in the New Orleans Bowl.

Scott was a part of an offensive turnaround at Troy, inheriting an offense that ranked No. 66 in rushing offense and No. 77 in total offense prior to his arrival. In just one season, Troy moved to No. 35 nationally in rushing offense with 182.6 yards per game and No. 16 in total offense with 452.8 yards per contest. In his final season at Troy, the Trojans ranked No. 3 in the nation in total offense.



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10 Sean Reagan Quarterbacks



Personal

Birthday: Dec. 27

Hometown: Conyers, Ga.

College: North Georgia

Family: Wife, Elizabeth; children, Heidi, Chloe, Maggie

Reagan joined the Mountaineer coaching staff as the quarterbacks coach in January 2019. He came to West Virginia after serving as an assistant coach at Troy from 2008-18..

In 2019, quarterback Austin Kendall averaged 20.8 completions per game, ranking No. 4 in the Big 12 and No. 25 nationally, and Jarret Doege led WVU to wins in two of its final three games of the season.

He was the co-offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach in 2018, oversaw the quarterbacks and running backs the previous three years (2014-17) and was the quarterbacks coach from 2011-14. He also served as a graduate assistant in 2010 at Texas Tech, where he worked with Brown, the offensive coordinator of the Red Raiders at the time.

In 2018, Troy finished with a 10-3 record and tied for the Eastern Division championship in the Sun Belt Conference. The Trojans went on to defeat Buffalo in the Dollar General Bowl, marking the third consecutive season with a bowl win. Quarterback Kaleb Barker started the first six games and posted more than 1,000 passing yards and 10 touchdowns and ran for 261 yards and three touchdowns, before a season-ending injury forced him to hand the reins to Sawyer Smith. Smith threw for almost 1,700 yards and 14 touchdowns and ran for almost 200 yards and a touchdown.

Prior to that, Reagan worked with three record-setting quarterbacks at Troy: Brandon Silvers (2014-17), Corey Robinson (2011-13) and Levi Brown (2008-09).

Robinson also had an impressive career with the Trojans, finishing as one of the top passers in school, Sun Belt and NCAA history. He led Troy with school and league records for touchdown passes, attempts, completions, passing yards and total offense. He finished his career as one of five players in NCAA history to throw for more than 3,000 yards and have more than 3,000 yards of total offense in four different years. He finished No. 9 in FBS history in passing yards and set the NCAA record for completion percentage in a game (30-of-32 against UAB in 2013), earning Capital One National Player of the Week honors.

After returning to Troy in 2011 as the quarterbacks coach, Reagan coached All-Sun Belt performer Deon Anthony. In 2012, Anthony set the Troy single-season record by completing 69.9 percent of his passes (79-of-113) and was named the Allstate Sugar Bowl Manning Award Player of the Week.

As a graduate assistant coach in 2008-09, Reagan was on the Trojans' staff that won two Sun Belt Conference championships, including finishing with an undefeated conference record in 2009.

Reagan began his coaching career at the high-school level as an assistant at Rockdale High School in Conyers, Georgia, for four years (1998-01), before moving to Chestatee High School in Gainesville, Georgia, for four years (2002-06), including the final two as the offensive coordinator. He spent the 2006-07 seasons as the offensive coordinator at Monroe Area High School in Monroe, Georgia, before heading to Troy.



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Travis Trickett

Tight ends/inside receivers

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Personal

Birthday: May 29

Hometown: Hattiesburg, Miss.

College: West Virginia

Family: Wife, Tiffany; children, Maverick, Camilla, Holden

Trickett returned home to West Virginia as the tight ends/inside receivers coach in February 2019.

In 2019, receiver T.J. Simmons was WVU's third-leading receiver with 35 catches and four touchdowns. He finished in Big 12's top 20 in receptions per game, receiving yards per game and receiving touchdowns. Isaiah Esdale showed a lot of improvement over the course of the season and caught the winning touchdown at TCU.

Trickett, who was a student assistant coach at West Virginia from 2003-07, is part of a Mountaineers football family. His father, Rick, a longtime collegiate offensive line coach, was an assistant coach at WVU in 1978-79 and 2001-06. His younger brother, Clint, was a starting quarterback for WVU during the 2013 and 2014 seasons.

Trickett returned to West Virginia after serving as the offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach at Georgia State in 2017-18. In 2018, his quarterback, Dan Ellington, threw only five interceptions in 292 pass attempts, ranking No. 2 in the Sun Belt Conference and No. 14 in the nation. One of his receivers, Penny Hart, a three-time All-Sun Belt selection, finished his career as the fourth-leading receiver in conference history and was selected to play in the Reese's Senior Bowl.

Trickett was the offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach at Florida Atlantic in 2016. His offensive unit set FAU season records for rushing yards, yards per carry and rushing touchdowns, as well as most yards in a game, while the Owls receiving corps produced seven 100-yard efforts. Prior to FAU,

Trickett served five seasons at Samford, including the last four as its offensive coordinator. He helped the Bulldogs record five straight winning seasons, highlighted by a Southern Conference championship and NCAA FCS playoff berth in 2013. He coached 23 all-conference selections in four years as the play-caller.

In 2015, Trickett employed a pair of quarterbacks, and the duo led the nation in completion percentage (69.7 percent) while combining for 3,662 yards and 22 touchdowns. The Bulldogs had a season-high 752 yards against Florida A&M and set school season records for completions (324) and first downs (324). Samford's 2014 offense averaged more than 30 points per game while posting the program's largest margin of victory in a Southern Conference game (45-0 at Furman) and the program's largest output in a SoCon game (63 vs. VMI).

In 2013, he mentored record-setting quarterback Andy Summerlin, the conference player of the year, who passed for a school-record 3,640 yards.

He originally went to Samford in 2011 to coach the slot receivers and tight ends.

Trickett's coaching experience also includes graduate assistantships at Alabama and Florida State. He spent 2007 as an offensive graduate assistant on Nick Saban's staff, and then three seasons (2008-10) with the Seminoles, working under Bobby Bowden and Jimbo Fisher.



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12 **Jordan Lesley** Defensive coordinator/outside linebackers



Personal

Birthday: Dec. 15

Hometown: Fulton, Miss.

College: Troy

Family: Wife, Ann-Katherine; children, Mary-Kate, Mae-Blake

Lesley joined the Mountaineers coaching staff as the defensive line coach in January 2019 and was promoted to defensive coordinator after co-coordinator last season. He also switched from defensive line to outside linebackers this offseason.

Lesley came with Brown after serving as an assistant coach at Troy for the last three years, the first two years as the defensive tackles coach and the 2018 season as the defensive line coach.

From 2016-18, Troy's defense allowed 20.8 points per game, ranking No. 4 nationally among non-Power 5 schools. In 2018, the Trojans were ranked No. 10 nationally in sacks, No. 16 in tackles for loss, No. 24 in rushing defense, No. 28 in scoring defense and No. 31 in total defense. Three of Lesley's defensive linemen were named to the All-Sun Belt Conference team, including Trevon Saunders, who earned first-team honors.

Troy finished 10-3, tied for first place in the Sun Belt Conference Eastern Division, and defeated Buffalo, 42-32, in the Dollar General Bowl. The Trojan defense was No. 3 nationally in turnovers gained (31), No. 5 in interceptions (18) and fumbles recovered (13), No. 11 in turnover margin (0.77), No. 21 in red zone defense and tied for No. 28 in first-down defense (240). Troy also led the Sun Belt in sacks, interceptions, turnovers, red zone defense and was No. 2 in rushing defense, total defense. The Trojans were No. 3 in the league in scoring defense.

Prior to Troy, Lesley was the defensive coordinator at East Mississippi Community College in Scooba, Miss. (2013-15), before serving two stints at Northwest Mississippi Community College in Senatobia, Miss., first as defensive line coach in 2010 and then as the defensive coordinator and defensive line coach in 2012. He also spent two stints at Kilgore College in Kilgore, Texas, first as the linebackers coach from 2007-09, and as the defensive coordinator in 2011. He spent a year as a graduate assistant coach at Troy in 2006.

While at East Mississippi, Lesley's defenses allowed an average of just 10.3 points and 232.1 yards per game as the Lions posted a combined 32-1 record with national titles in 2013 and 2014. Additionally, the Lions tallied 149 quarterback sacks and 57 interceptions in his three seasons.

In his first season at East Mississippi, the Lions recorded an NJCAA-best 67 sacks and finished second nationally with 30 interceptions and by allowing just 9.8 points per game.

The 2012 NWCC squad claimed the school's first bowl victory in 20 years and earned a No. 9 NJCAA final ranking. The 2010 Northwest team posted an undefeated regular season on the way to finishing with a No. 6 national ranking.

Lesley helped lead Kilgore to the 2007 Southwest Junior College Football Conference Championship en route to an appearance in the Heart of Texas Bowl. During his four seasons at Kilgore, Lesley helped direct the Rangers to three consecutive playoff appearances while helping tutor 11 players that went on to sign at four-year schools, including six NJCAA All-Americans.

As a graduate assistant at Troy, he began his coaching career on the 2006 Sun Belt Conference championship team. The Trojans won seven of their last eight games that season, including a 41-17 victory over Rice in the New Orleans Bowl.

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ShaDon Brown Co-defensive coordinator/cornerbacks 13

Personal

Birthday: Nov. 20

Hometown: Danville, Ky.

College: Campbellsville University; University of the Cumberlands

Family: Wife, Rhonda; children, Shaelyn, Braylon and Keenan

Brown joined the Mountaineers coaching staff in February 2021 as an assistant coach on the defensive side.

He came to Morgantown after serving as the safeties coach at Louisville for the past two years.

In 2020, the Louisville secondary led the Atlantic Coast Conference in passing defense and was No. 17 nationally, giving up 189.2 yards per game. The Cardinals defense was No. 3 in the ACC in scoring defense, total defense and pass efficiency defense. Senior safety Russ Yeast was UL's fifth-leading tackler, registering 45 tackles, including 31 solo stops, three pass breakups, one forced fumble and two fumble recoveries. Isaiah Hayes was the seventh-leading tackler with 37 tackles, including 23 solo stops, 1.5 tackles for loss and four pass breakups.

In 2019, Brown guided a safety group, which was led by Khane Pass, who posted a career high 81 tackles and made the key defensive play in the Music City Bowl win by returning a fumble for a touchdown late in the game. Brown was named one of the top 30 recruiters in the ACC by 247Sports.

Prior to Louisville, Brown spent the 2017 and 2018 seasons at Colorado, overseeing the secondary. He was promoted to defensive passing game coordinator for the 2018 season.

The Colorado secondary thrived during Brown's tenure in Boulder, allowing opponents to complete just 56.2% of their passes. The Buffaloes led the Pac-12 Conference in opposing completion percentage (56.7 percent) in 2018 and ranked fourth in 2017. Colorado was No. 2 in third-down defense and No. 5 in total defense and pass defense in 2018 and No. 6 in scoring defense and pass efficiency defense in 2017.

Brown coached a pair of all-conference selections, Evan Worthington, who earned honorable mention honors in 2017 and 2018, and Isaiah Oliver was a second-team All-American and an All-Pac-12 First Team selection in 2017. Oliver was a second-round selection by the Atlanta Falcons in the 2018 National Football League draft. Five players that Brown coached at Colorado signed NFL contracts: Oliver (Atlanta Falcons), Delrick Abrams (Atlanta Falcons), Davion Taylor (Philadelphia Eagles), Afolabi Laguda (Los Angeles Rams) and Worthington (Baltimore Ravens).

Brown spent the 2016 season at Army, coaching the cornerbacks. The Black Knights' defensive backfield ranked No. 2 nationally in first-down defense, No. 4 in total defense, No. 6 in pass defense (170.2), No. 11 in interceptions (17), No. 16 in scoring defense and No. 17 in pass efficiency defense (115.12).

While Brown was on staff, Army went from a 2-10 record in 2015 to an 8-5 mark in 2016 and a win in the Heart of Dallas Bowl against North Texas.

Prior to that, Brown spent five seasons (2011-15) at Wofford, the first four as cornerbacks coach before switching to the safeties for his final year. Brown was also special teams coordinator during the 2013-14 seasons, before being promoted to recruiting coordinator in 2015. He coached three all-conference corners at Wofford, including Blake Wylie, who earned third-team All-America honors in 2012.

In the summer of 2015, he participated in the NFL's program for minority coaches by interning with the Super Bowl 50 runner-up Carolina Panthers, where he worked with the defensive backs.



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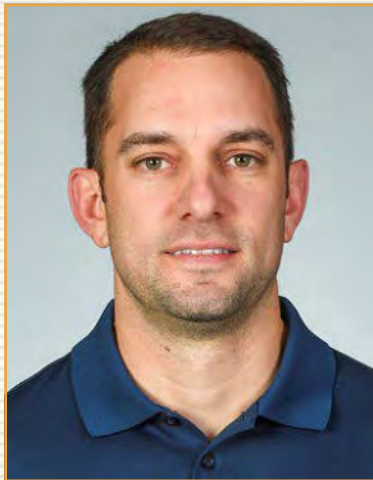
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Jeff Koonz Special teams coordinator/inside linebackers**Personal**

Birthdate: May 30

Hometown: Wallkill, N.Y.

College: Auburn/Texas

Family: Wife, Maura; children, Mary, Jameson, MacKenzie

Koonz joined the Mountaineer coaching staff as the special teams coordinator/inside linebackers coach in January 2020.

Koonz came to West Virginia after serving as the inside linebackers coach at Ole Miss for the 2019 season. Two of his linebackers, Lakia Henry (81 tackles) and Jacquez Jones (62 tackles), were two of the three top tacklers for the Rebels and Jones tied for second on the team in tackles for loss (6.5). The defense finished with 30 sacks for the season, ranking No. 2 in the SEC and No. 25 nationally.

Prior to that, Koonz spent two years at North Texas, coaching the linebackers, before being promoted to co-defensive coordinator for the 2018 season. He helped develop E.J. Ejiya, who led UNT in tackles, tackles for loss and sacks both years.

Koonz spent three years at Cincinnati, coaching the safeties in 2014, and linebackers in 2015 and 2016. In 2015, he mentored second-team All-AAC selection Eric Wilson and freshman standout Bryce Jenkinson, who finished first (106) and third (59) on the team in tackles, respectively. Cincinnati finished its 2014 campaign with a 9-4 record, an American Athletic Conference Championship and a matchup against Virginia Tech in the Military Bowl.

Before his tenure at Cincinnati, Koonz spent four seasons at Louisiana Tech. During the 2013 campaign, Tech's first as a member of Conference USA, he coached the linebackers, led by Conference USA honorable mention player Daniel Cobb, who finished the season with 82 total tackles. In 2011, Tech's starting linebackers Adrien Cole and Jay Dudley accounted for 230 total tackles - 65 percent of Tech's tackles for the season. Cole led the team with 128 tackles and 13 tackles for a loss as he was named first team All-Western Athletic Conference and the WAC Defensive Player of the Year. Dudley was responsible for 102 tackles, eight tackles for a loss and four interceptions, three of which were returned for touchdowns. In 2010, his first year at Louisiana Tech, three of his linebackers finished the season in the top four on the team in tackles, with Cole earning second-team All-WAC honors.

Koonz previously served as a defensive quality control assistant at Texas, helping lead the Longhorns to a Big 12 title and an appearance in the 2009 BCS national championship game against Alabama. He also served at Texas as a graduate assistant from 2005-06 and linebackers' coach toward the conclusion of the 2006 season. The Longhorns won the Big 12 championship and national championship in 2005.

Prior to his second stint at Texas, Koonz was the secondary coach at Iowa State for two seasons under Gene Chizik, while also assisting with special teams from 2007-08. Koonz was also a graduate assistant coach at Auburn during the 2004 campaign under Tommy Tuberville, coaching the secondary. While at Auburn, he worked on staffs that led the Tigers to the 2002 Capital One Bowl championship, a 2003 Music City Bowl victory, the 2004 SEC championship and a win in the 2004 Nokia Sugar Bowl.

He graduated from Auburn in 2004 with a bachelor's of science degree in physical education and received his master's degree in educational administration from Texas in 2006.



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Andrew Jackson

Defensive line

15

Personal

Birthday: Feb. 18
Hometown: Middletown, N.Y.
College: LIU Post

Jackson joined the Mountaineer coaching staff in January 2021 as an assistant coach on the defensive side.

Jackson comes to Morgantown after serving as the defensive line coach and recruiting coordinator for defense at Old Dominion for the past year.

Jackson joined the Old Dominion staff after spending the 2019 season at James Madison as the defensive tackles coach. While at JMU, the Dukes led the FCS in total defense and was third in scoring defense. Defensive tackle Mike Greene led the Colonial Athletic Association in sacks by an interior lineman and earned all-conference honors.

Jackson was the defensive quality control coach at Mississippi State in 2018, where he helped the Bulldogs to an 8-5 record and berth in the Outback Bowl. MSU ranked in the top 10 nationally in eight defensive categories, including a No. 1 national ranking in total defense (263.1). Jeffery Simmons and Montez Sweat earned All-Southeastern Conference honors.

In 2017, Jackson coached the defensive line at Fordham. He was responsible for game planning the run game, pass protection and third-down blitz packages and prepared the opponent scouting report for the defense.

Prior to that, Jackson was a graduate assistant with the defensive line for two years at Penn State. He completed all opponent and self-scout defensive breakdowns and coached the scout team. Two players he worked with earned national attention, All-American Carl Nassib and consensus All-American Anthony Zettel. Nassib was the Big Ten's Bronko Nagurski-Woodson Defensive Player of the Year and was the Hendricks Award and Lombardi Award winner.

Jackson spent two years as an assistant coach at Stony Brook, first as a graduate assistant and then as assistant defensive line coach. One of his players, Aaron Thompson went on to rank among the top 10 nationally in sacks and earn All-CAA First Team honors. Jackson started his coaching career at LIU Post as a graduate assistant.

Jackson was a three-year captain and three-year starter for LIU Post. He was an All-Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference Second Team honoree as a senior after recording five sacks and 12 tackles for loss for the Pioneers. He was a member of the National Football Foundation's Hampshire Honor Society and was awarded two of the athletics department's most prestigious honors, the Christine Webb Award and the Roy Illowit Award.

Jackson earned his bachelor's degree in physical education science and coaching from Long Island University in 2011 and three master's degrees, one in Interdisciplinary studies from Long Island in 2012, liberal arts and science from Stony Brook in 2014 and educational leadership from Penn State in 2017.



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16 Dontae Wright Safeties



Personal

Birthday: May 26
Hometown: Louisa, Ky.
College: Miami (Ohio)/Kentucky

Wright joined the Mountaineer coaching staff as the outside linebackers coach in February 2020 and moved to safeties in July 2020. He came to Morgantown after serving as the safeties coach at Western Michigan for the past two seasons.

His safeties helped WMU turn around its scoring defense in 2019, yielding 25.9 points per game, the best for the program since surrendering just 19.8 in 2016, and nearly nine points per game better than the 34.5 points a contest allowed in 2018.

The unit was led by senior Justin Tranquill's 83 tackles and two interceptions and junior A.J. Thomas' 47 stops and six pass breakups. The group held three of its final five opponents to less than 150 passing yards. The 2018 season saw Wright guide Tranquill to 82 tackles and two pass breakups while Thomas finished with 47 stops.

Prior to WMU, Wright served as an assistant coach at Tennessee Tech for two seasons (2016-17), mentoring the specialists and the defensive ends. At the beginning of the 2017 season, Wright was promoted to defensive coordinator.

In 2017, the Golden Eagles yielded 15.8 points per game, dropping more than 11 points from the 2016 average of 26.9. Wright guided the 2016 defensive squad to five Ohio Valley Conference wins. The program ended the campaign on the upswing with consecutive victories against Tennessee State and Murray State.

Before joining Tennessee Tech, Wright spent three seasons (2013-15) at Morehead State. He was the defensive coordinator for the 2015 season and worked with the defensive line, special teams and was a recruiting coordinator during his tenure.

As the defensive coordinator, he lowered Morehead State's points allowed per game by 18.3, which was the second-largest improvement for all Division I schools, FBS and FCS, from the year prior. The Eagles ranked in the top 10 in the FCS for interceptions (18) and turnovers (28) and in the top 20 for tackles for loss.

Wright also made a coaching stop at Centre College and spent two seasons (2010-11) at North Alabama, helping the Lions to a combined 18-8 record and an NCAA Division II playoff appearance.

Wright was a graduate assistant at Kentucky from 2007-09, working with the linebackers his first season and the defensive line the last two. During his time in Lexington, the Wildcats made two Music City Bowl appearances and one Liberty Bowl trip.

As a player, Wright was a four-year linebacker at Miami (Ohio) from 2003-06 and was a part of two Mid-American Conference East Division championship teams. The RedHawks won the conference outright in 2003, earning a spot in the GMAC Bowl. They won a division crown in 2004 and participated in the Independence Bowl.

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Mike Joseph Head coach for football strength and conditioning 17

Personal

College: Fairmont State/WVU

Family: Wife, Andre; sons, Quincy, Brolin

Joseph has overseen the strength and conditioning unit at West Virginia since 2008, serving as the director until being named assistant athletics director in 2018 and assistant athletics director/head coach for football strength and conditioning in 2019.

Joseph administers, coordinates, develops, implements and teaches strength and conditioning programs for all Mountaineer student-athletes with a major emphasis on the football program.

Joseph, who was presented with his Master Strength and Conditioning Coaching distinction in 2014, served for five years as the assistant strength coach at Notre Dame (2003-08) working with football and was responsible for the strength and conditioning programs for baseball, volleyball and softball prior to coming back to West Virginia.

Joseph worked with the head strength coach with football, assisted with workouts, testing, conditioning, speed and agility training and in-season and offseason training schedules on a daily basis. He also was responsible for developing and training the quarterbacks, tight ends, linebackers, fullbacks and injured players.

Joseph also had the same responsibilities with the sports of baseball, volleyball and softball. He supervised and maintained facility and equipment and scheduling all student-athletes for the school's 27 sports.

He spent two years as an assistant strength coach at Eastern Michigan (2001-03) and served as a graduate assistant at WVU for two years (1999-2001). He worked at Healthworks Fitness and Rehabilitation in Morgantown during the summer of 2001.

Prior to that, he was the strength and conditioning coach at Fairmont State (Aug. 1998 – May 1999). He was the camp instructor at the Mountain State Speed and Strength Camp hosted by WVU from May 2000 until April 2001, served as a guest speaker and instructor at many camps and clinic and was a classroom instructor and state director for the National Association of Speed and Explosion.

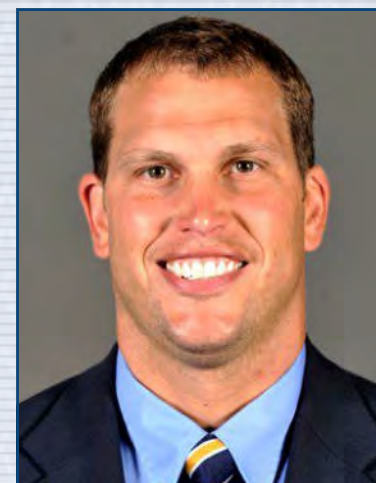
Joseph has coached 25 football players who earned All-America honors and more than 100 athletes who were either drafted or signed free-agent contracts in the NFL.

While at Fairmont State, Joseph was a four-year letterman and three-year captain on the football team from 1994-97. He was a three time first-team all-WVIAC selection and was named the WVIAC Offensive Player of the Year in 1996.

A 1997 regional All-American, a Burger King Scholar Athlete and a WVIAC Scholar Athlete, Joseph was selected the vice president of the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee and to the Fairmont State Student Council.

Joseph earned his bachelor's degree from Fairmont State in 1999 and received his master's degree in from West Virginia in physical education with an emphasis in sport movement and development.

He is certified by the Collegiate Strength and Conditioning Coaches Association (CSCCa) and the National Strength Coaches Association (NSCA).



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Ask me about the Howard Hanna **ADVANTAGE** Magazine

College football kicking off in pandemic all over again

Associated Press

The Wild West nature of the upcoming, pandemic-challenged college football season can be illustrated in part by 160 miles of Texas highway that connects the trendy college city of Austin with the bustling metropolis of Houston.

At one end lies the University of Texas, where more than 100,000 fans will pack Darrell K Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium to cheer the Longhorns this fall. Many, along with some players and coaches, are likely to be unvaccinated after Gov. Greg Abbott's executive order prohibiting vaccine requirements for any organization that receives state funding.

At the other of that highway is Rice University, where 40,000-plus hope to see their Owls turn things around this fall. And because it is a private research university, Abbott's executive order does not apply, and vaccine requirements put in place by the school mean just about everybody that shows up will get in only if they have received their COVID-19 shots.

That's just two of the 130 schools that will be playing Division I football this fall.

Each will have vaccination plans shaped by governors and legislatures, medical officials and university leaders, and they are likely to change from week to week. Politics and policy are certain to collide as red states and blue states, often with schools playing in the very same conference, attempt to make it through an entire season without an outbreak.

"Inevitably," Longhorns coach Steve Sarkisian acknowledged, "we're all just trying to protect one another."

There are more than 2,500 schools across the country with varying COVID-19 mitigation policies, according to the College Crisis Initiative at Davidson College, which has been tracking higher education responses to the pandemic. Nearly a quarter of them —

hundreds of schools such as Michigan and Notre Dame — required students arriving this fall to be vaccinated, a number is certain to increase after the FDA's approval of the Pfizer vaccine this week.

Now, one of the biggest roadblocks to requiring the vaccine — its emergency authorization — has become a moot point.

"I think six or seven states, by gubernatorial decree or state legislative decrees, could not do it," explained Chris Marsicano, a Davidson professor who specializes in education policy, "and Ohio, Arizona and Texas are among the most high-profile of them."

At places where the vaccine is not required, such as Kansas State, players who have not received the shot are subject to rigorous COVID-19 control plans. They include regular testing, the wearing of masks in all public areas and, quite often, the inability to join teammates for meals and other out-of-practice activities.

"I know we're over 80% now," Wildcats coach Chris Klieman said midway through fall camp. "We had a handful the last week of July, the first week of August, that were able to get their first shot. So we're not out of the woods. But nobody is. I wish we could say we're done with this but we're not."

In Mississippi, where vaccination rates are among the lowest in the nation, Rebels coach Lane Kiffin raised eyebrows last month with the news that his entire team had been vaccinated. That wasn't the case at the start of the summer program, Kiffin said, but players took it upon themselves to encourage each other to get their shots.

"You're coming in, you're near these guys, you're impacting people's ability to play the games on certain weekends and getting shut down," he said. "This is not a normal job where you can just stay at home and zoom in on Saturday."

Alabama coach Nick Saban said

his team was closing in on 90% vaccination rates, the byproduct of a robust education effort and natural peer pressure. The same at SEC-rival Georgia, where coach Kirby Smart said "we feel really comfortable where we are" at the start of fall practice.

"My goal is always to be 100%," Smart said. "I think it's the safest for our players."

The NCAA doesn't require its 1,100 member schools with some 450,000 athletes in dozens of sports to follow a one-size-fits-all COVID-19 policy. Instead, the beleaguered governing body issued a set of recommendations for testing, quarantining and isolation that were designed to fit within a framework of widely varying state mandates.

Texas and New Hampshire are among those that barred requiring the vaccine; Hawaii demands athletes be vaccinated.

It's not just on the field, either. LSU announced that fans must show proof of vaccination or a recent COVID-19 test just to enter Tiger Stadium this fall. Oregon and Oregon State have similar policies in place.

Not surprisingly, there have been legal challenges. In one, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett denied an emergency application to bar Indiana University from requiring faculty, staff and students be vaccinated against COVID-19 — a ruling that suggests athletes and students that challenge other vaccine requirements would likely fail.



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Running back
Leddie Brown

BY SEAN MANNING

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What to expect

West Virginia head coach Neal Brown went into an odd 2020 season with the expectation the Mountaineers would be one of the most improved teams in the nation. A 6-4 finish (4-4 Big 12) with statistics to back it up allowed Brown to meet his goal. Now in Year 3 in Morgantown, the next step is to compete at the top of the Big 12, and key returners across the board could make that a reality.

The offense will be a veteran group that shows flashes in both the pass and run game, but needs to find consistency. Defensively, WVU finished No. 1 nationally in pass defense and top 5 in total defense, but NFL aspirations and head-scratching transfers hit that unit hard in the offseason. Jordan Lesley is now the sole man in charge of the defense after sharing duties with Jahmile Addae, who departed for Georgia.

Offense

The Liberty Bowl against Army brought up a lot of questions at the quarterback spot heading into the offseason. Jarret Doege started all 10 games last year, but a poor first half forced Brown to go to Austin Kendall in the second. Doege still had a good season, throwing for 2,587 yards with 14 touchdowns and just four interceptions and will be the favorite heading into this season. Redshirt-freshman Garrett Greene and true freshman Will Crowder will battle at backup.

The offense will likely go through running back Leddie Brown after he ran for 1,010 yards and nine touchdowns last year. Tony Mathis and A'Varius Sparrow will get carries, and the Mountaineers have a dynamic duo coming in as part of the 2021 recruiting class.

There is a wealth of experience at receiver, led by Sam James, Bryce Ford-Wheaton and Winston Wright. James is hoping to bounce back from a disappointing 2020, while Wright and Ford-Wheaton hope to take the next step after combining for 74 catches, 969 yards and five touchdowns. Sean Ryan, Reese Smith, Sam Brown and Isaiah Esdale have all started games in the past. True freshman Kaden Prather could also get in the mix.

At tight end, Mike O'Laughlin and T.J. Banks are red zone and short-yardage threats.

The offensive line could be a strength, loaded with experience. Brandon Yates established himself at left tackle, Zach Frazier will slide from guard to center, and James Gmitter and Virginia Tech transfer Doug Nester will slide into the roles at guard. Parker Moorner will move from guard to right tackle to compete with John Hughes.

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Last season: 6-4 (5-4 Big 12)

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Defense

The Mountaineers were stellar defensively last season but lost a lot of production, led by Darius Stills at nose tackle. The defensive line should still be a strength, led by Darius' younger brother Dante at tackle, who had 10 1/2 tackles for loss in 2020. Jeffery Pooler transferred to Northwestern but Taijh Alston is looking to breakout after injury plagued seasons the last two years. Akheem Mesidor is coming off a freshman All-American campaign where he finished with 5 1/2 sacks.

The Mountaineers one excellent season from Tony Fields, but now have a gaping hole at middle linebacker. Josh Chandler-Semedo is the likely replacement, moving from Will linebacker, while Exree Loe will get reps at Will. At Bandit, VanDarius Cowan and Jared Bartlett will get the most looks.

Transfers hit the secondary hard, led by safety Tykee Smith, an All-American in 2020. The good news is Sean Mahone and Alonzo Addae opted to return for another year at the other safety spots. Arizona transfer Scottie Young started the bowl game in Smith's place and will likely replace him at Spear. He played in 32 games with the Wildcats before transferring prior to the 2020 season. Cornerback Dreshun Miller surprised the coaching staff by transferring to Auburn, but Nicktroy Fortune will man the other spot. Jackie Matthews and Daryl Porter Jr. are the likely favorites to replace Miller.

Special teams

Evan Staley was injured toward the end of last year and was replaced by Casey Legg and Tyler Sumpter. The three combined to make 14 of 20 field goal attempts and will battle it out in camp. Sumpter handled the majority of punting duties, especially with precision, while Kolton McGhee handled longer punts. Winston Wright could handle kick returns after he returned 20 last season.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

RB Leddie Brown, Sr. — When the team needed a shot in the arm, Brown provided the spark last year with over 1,000 yards in 10 games.

DT Dante Stills, Sr. — Forgoing the NFL draft, Stills wants to build off an already-impressive 2020 season, finishing with 10 1/2 tackles for loss.

S Sean Mahone, Sr: Starting the last 22 games for the Mountaineers, Mahone will provide a veteran presence. He had 50 tackles, four pass defended and an interception last season.



Defensive lineman
Dante Stills



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Quarterback
Taulia Tagovailoa

BY SEAN MANNING

SManning@DominionPost.com

What to expect

Mike Locksley is now in his third year at the helm for Maryland, looking to finally take the Terps to the next level in the Big Ten.

In a shortened campaign in 2020, Maryland went 2-3, but the offseason was key, including a very good recruiting class and changes to the coaching staff. Former Cincinnati coach Dan Enos is the new offensive coordinator and Brian Stewart is in his second year as the defensive coordinator.

Locksley believes the pieces are in place for major improvement, and it starts against WVU on Sept. 4.

Offense

Taulia Tagovailoa, the younger brother to former Alabama star Tua Tagovailoa, should get the nod at quarterback for his second year. After transferring from the Crimson Tide, Tagovailoa finished third in the Big Ten last year with 252 yards per game through the air.

There is talent at wide receiver, led by Dontay Demus Jr., who has 10 touchdowns in his career. Rakim Jarrett, Brian Cobb and Jashaun Jones are experienced receivers who will likely be at the top of the depth chart.

Tayon Fleet-Davis had just 26 yards on 10 carries last season, but he is versatile out of the backfield in the passing game, as well. Penny Boone is the leading returning rusher but had just 86 yards in 2020.

At tight end, Chigoziem Okonkwo is back after missing last season.

On the offensive line, the Terps will be anchored by Jaelyn Duncan at tackle, and Johari Branch, Austin Fontaine and Ditto Spencer Anderson could make up the rest of the line.

Defense

The defensive side has been a major problem for the Terps during Locksley's tenure, and last season, they ranked 10th and 11th, respectively in the Big Ten in points (32) and yards (430) allowed per game.

Teams were also able to run the ball effectively with 230 yards allowed on the ground.

The pass defense, though, is a different story. In five games, the Terps allowed just six passing touchdowns and will be led by free safety Nick Cross. At the other safety, Jordan Mosley will get the nod but former WVU signee Osita Smith could see the field. Tarheeb Still will be the top cornerback after an All-Big Ten performance last year.

Where they hope to see improvement is along the defensive line and at linebacker. End Durrell Nchami is back after missing last year with injury, and they also hope to

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Last season: 2-3 (2-3 Big Ten)

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get production from edge rushers Fa'Najae Gotay, Ruben Hyppolite II and Demeioun Robinson.

Special teams

Joseph Petrino is back as the team's kicker after making all of his extra points and going 4 of 7 on field goal attempts. Maryland uses a two-punter system with Anthony Pecorella and Colton Spangler depending on the hash, and both are also back.

The return game will likely see a completely overhaul since the Terps were last in the Big Ten in kick and punt return.



Head coach Mike Locksley

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Taulia Tagovailoa, Jr. — A big coup for Mike Locksley after transferring from Alabama, Tagovailoa hopes to keep building off an impressive 2020.

S Nick Cross, Jr. — As an All-Big Ten honorable mention in each of his first two seasons, Cross has a ton of experience on the back end of the defense.

WR Rakim Jarrett, So. — A former 5-star prospect, Jarrett could emerge as the next great Maryland receiver after Stefon Diggs.



Safety Nick Cross

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LONG ISLAND SHARKS



Running back Jonathan DeBique

BY SEAN MANNING

SManning@DominionPost.com

What to expect

Now in its third year as a Division I program, Long Island is still in its infant stage. The Sharks went 0-10 in their first FCS season in 2019, then had the 2020 campaign wiped out because of COVID-19.

However, LIU picked up its first two wins during a shortened spring season within the Northeastern Conference.

But momentum was again halted as longtime head coach Bryan Collins resigned June 29, so quarterbacks coach Jonathan Gill is serving as the interim coach. With Collins gone, there were personnel changes on the roster that will affect the team come the fall.

Offense

The biggest change the Sharks will have to deal with is the loss of quarterback Conor Regan, who did not have his scholarship renewed and entered the transfer portal. Regan threw for 516 yards and four touchdowns in four games during the spring.

Whoever wins the QB job, the Sharks will still rely on the running game. They ran exactly 250 plays last season and 151 of those were on the ground. LIU will be led by junior Jonathan DeBique, who had 360 yards on 59 carries (6.1 yards per carry) with a touchdown. Sophomore Ricky Conway and freshman Demonhic Jennings will also get carries.

Wide receiver Tosin Oyekanmi is back after leading the team in yards and receptions with 163 and 19, respectively. Derik Eugene is also back after hauling in two touchdowns in four games.

Defense

It was a mixed bag for the Sharks defensively in the spring, especially in the passing game. They allowed over 200 yards per game through the air, but were opportunistic and snatched seven interceptions.

Linebacker Ricco Aaron Jr. had two picks and also led the Sharks in tackles with 39. He is back for his senior year, as is junior safety Tariq Snead.

Special teams

There isn't much returning of note for LIU on special teams. Kicker Paul Inzerillo only had three field goal attempts last season with two makes, but he is no longer with the program. Punter Justin Hertlein averaged just 33.6 yards per attempt but had five downed inside the 20-yard line as he is back for his sophomore year.

Wide receiver Davon Wells is the most electric kick return after averaging 29 yard per return as a true freshman last spring.



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Last season: 2-2 (2-2 Northeast)



PLAYERS TO WATCH

RB Jonathan DeBique, Jr. — DeBique has a good spring, averaging 6.1 yards per carry. He will be the go-to player on offense.

LB Ricco Aaron Jr., Sr. — With two interceptions and a team-leading 39 tackles, Aaron is a veteran presence in the middle of the defense.

S Tariq Snead, Jr. — As a ball-hawking safety, Snead is a dynamic threat in the back-end of the secondary.



Linebacker Ricco Aaron



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Quarterback
Braxton Burmeister

BY SEAN MANNING

SManning@DominionPost.com

What to expect

Virginia Tech head coach Justin Fuente is on one of the hottest seats in the nation heading into this season, coming off a 5-6 season a year ago and did not make a bowl game.

This is the second losing season in five years for the Hokies, and athletic director Whit Babcock was forced to publicly state why Fuente was going to return for 2021.

VT has the talent and most of their success will rely on their health. Defensive coordinator Justin Hamilton also hopes to see a big leap with his unit after the Hokies allowed 32.1 points per game last season. Offensively, they ran the ball effectively but struggled in the passing game.

Offense

VT finished 12th out of 14 in the ACC in passing yards, but a big reason for the lack of production through the air was how explosive the Hokies were on the ground.

However, a few key reasons for that were running back Khalil Herbert and tackle Christian Darrisaw, who are both now in the NFL. Quarterback Hendon Hooker ran for 620 yards and nine touchdowns but transferred to Tennessee.

Braxton Burmeister was banged up last season but still showed he was capable when he was on the field at QB, finishing with 687 yards and two touchdowns. He will likely be the starting quarterback when the Hokies visit WVU on Sept. 18.

Replacing Herbert will not be easy, but Jalen Holston (189 yards, two touchdowns) and Raheem Blackshear (255 yards, two touchdowns) will be the likely successors.

The most experienced unit on offense will be wide receiver with all four top targets back, led by Tayvion Robinson, who had 592 yards and three touchdowns last season. Tre Turner and Blackshear are also at the top.

The biggest threat could be tight end James Mitchell who had 11 touchdown grabs the last two seasons.

The Hokies will need to replace three starters on the offensive line, including Doug Nester who will get a lot of playing time at WVU this fall.

Defense

Hamilton struggled in his first year replacing Bud Foster, but there were hefty opt outs in the secondary because of COVID and NFL potential. Now, Jermaine Waller is back, and Dorian Strong played well as a freshman last year thrust into action.

Vanderbilt transfer Tae Daley could be solid at strong safety, playing alongside Keonta Jenkins. Nickel corner Chamarri Conner may be the best of the bunch with 81 tackles, two interceptions and 3 1/2 tackles for loss last season.

Amare Barno led the ACC with 15 tackles for loss at defensive end and Clemson



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Last season: 6-6 (5-6 ACC)

27

transfer Jordan Williams will anchor the defensive line at tackle.

Dax Hollifield will man the middle linebacker spot and will play alongside Alan Tisdale.

Special teams

John Parker Romo will replace Brian Johnson at kicker after Johnson went 20 of 26 in field goal attempts last season. Punter Oscar Bradburn is also gone and freshman Peter Moore is the favorite to take over.

Robinson will look to take his punt return duty back after the Hokies turned it over three times last year on punt return attempts.



Head coach Justin Fuente

PLAYERS TO WATCH

TE James Mitchell, Jr. — A big target, Mitchell could be a safety net for a young offense trying to put the pieces together.

QB Braxton Burmeister, Jr. — While he doesn't quite have the past success, Burmeister will be critical to the Hokies offense, especially with a revamped running game.

CB Chamarri Conner, Jr. — Playing close to the line of scrimmage, Conner can be disruptive in he passing and running game.



Safety
Chamarri Conner



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Quarterback Spencer Rattler

BY SEAN MANNING

SManning@DominionPost.com

What to expect

Oklahoma head coach Lincoln Riley has established his own identity with the Sooners, and it's College Football Playoff or bust.

Their run of CFP appearances ended in 2020 after making three straight, but OU is still the team to beat in the Big 12, also appearing in several preseason top 25s as the No. 1 team in the nation.

The Sooners will put up a ton of points per usual, but the defense is expected to be a strong point under coordinator Alex Grinch, so a stacked roster has OU with high hopes for 2021.

Offense

The Oklahoma begins with star and Heisman-contending quarterback Spencer Rattler, who was phenomenal as a freshman last season. He threw for 3,031 yards and 28 touchdowns last season and finished the year on a hot stretch as OU won eight straight, including a blowout of Florida in the Cotton Bowl.

Kennedy Brooks is back after opting out of last season — he's averaged 7.5 yards per attempt in his career and has found the end zone 18 times. Gone are Rhamondre Stevenson and T.J. Pledger, but Seth McGowan and Marcus Major will provide depth in the backfield.

The top three leading receivers, Marvin Mims, Theo Wease and Austin Stogner, are back, led by Mims' 610 yards and nine touchdowns last season. Drake Stoops is a reliable target and Arkansas transfer Mike Woods will see the field a lot.

Stogner and Jeremiah Hall are big options at tight end.

The offensive line is something the Sooners will need to figure out, losing stud center Creed Humphrey and tackle Adrian Ealy to the NFL. Tyrese Robinson, Marquis Hayes and Erik Swenson are returning starters, while Anton Harrison and Wanya Morris should plug in at the other two spots.

Defense

The Sooners' defense has improved every year under Grinch the last two seasons, but there have still been games where his unit has struggles.

Now in Year 3 with seven returning starters, mainly along the front 7, this is expected to be Grinch's best.

On the defensive line, Perrion Winfrey and Isaiah Thomas were starters last year, and LaRon Stokes is a senior with plenty of experience at defensive end.

Nik Bonitto almost jumped to the NFL after an All-American season as an edge rusher at linebacker and returns, as does DaShaun White at inside linebacker. White will play alongside Caleb Kelly, who was injured the last two years.

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Last season: 9-2 (6-2 Big 12)

29

Delarrin Turner-Yell and Pat Fields provide a solid duo at safety, while OU will need a complete overhaul at cornerback. Woodi Washington and D.J. Graham are the favorites to start outside, while Justin Harrington is the favorite at nickelback in the slot.

Special teams

Kicker Gabe Brkic made 20 of 26 field goals and was a Lou Groza Award finalist in 2020. Punter Reeves Munschau is one of the best in the Big 12, so the Sooners' kicking combo will not be an issue.

Mims is just as dynamic in the return game as he is at wide receiver.



Head coach Lincoln Riley

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Spencer Rattler, So. — One of the best quarterbacks in the Big 12 and the nation, Rattler could be in New York for the Heisman ceremony.

RB Kennedy Brooks, Jr. — After taking the year off last season, Brooks should be fresh as one of the most dynamic backs in the Big 12.

LB Nik Bonitto, Jr. — The pass rushing linebacker had 10 1/2 tackles for loss last year.



Linebacker
Nik Bonitto



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TEXAS TECH RED RAIDERS



Wide receiver Erik Ezukanma

BY JUSTIN JACKSON

JJackson@DominionPost.com

What to expect

Matt Wells enters his third season as Texas Tech's head coach, while the Red Raiders are searching for their first winning season since 2015.

Wells has some holes to fill in 2021, beginning at quarterback. Last year's starter, Alan Bowman, transferred to Michigan.

But, Wells has leaned on signing a number of players from the transfer portal to help create a quick fix, especially on defense, where Texas Tech was ranked 99th in the country in allowing 445 yards per game.

Offense

The biggest splash Texas Tech may have made in the offseason was bringing in offensive coordinator Sonny Cumbie, who was the Red Raiders' coordinator during their high-octane offensive days.

The one spot Texas Tech does not have to worry about depth and experience is along its offensive line, where four starters return from last season.

The line also got a boost when Texas Tech signed former TCU standout tackle T.J. Storment from the transfer portal. Storment is a senior who was a second-team all-Big 12 selection last season.

Leading rusher SaRodorick Thompson also returns after rushing for 610 yards and eight touchdowns last season, which saw him rush for 133 yards and two scores in a loss against Oklahoma State.

Thompson finished the 2020 season on a strong note, finishing with a combined 222 yards and four TDs in games against Texas and Houston Baptist.

As for replacing Bowman, Henry Colombi filled in for him last season when Bowman went down with a collapsed lung. Colombi completed 66% of his passes and threw for 1,065 yards and eight touchdowns.

The one to watch may be Oregon transfer Tyler Shough, who helped guide the Ducks to a Pac-12 championship last season while throwing for 1,559 yards and 13 scores.

The Red Raiders also return leading receiver Erik Ezukanma. The 6-foot-3 standout caught 46 passes for 748 yards and six touchdowns last season, but he broke his arm in the spring and may be limited early.

Defense

The Red Raiders return promising prospect Tony Bradford Jr. at defensive tackle, as well as their starting linebackers unit.

In all, Texas Tech returns eight starters on defense from 2020, but it was a unit that allowed nearly 30 points per game.

Krishon Merriweather and Colin Schooler both return at linebacker and were the



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Last season: 4-6 (3-6 Big 12)



team's leading tacklers last season.

They'll be joined by Riko Jeffers, who had 8.5 tackles for loss last season. All three linebackers are seniors.

The secondary welcomes Duke transfer Marquis Waters and he'll team up with Eric Monroe at safety, but Texas Tech does need to replace two starters at cornerback.

Special teams

One of Texas Tech's best weapons last season was punter Austin McNamara, who returns for his junior season. He averaged 46.3 yards per kick, the second-best average in school history for one season. Jonathan Garibay also returns and was 8 of 11 on his field goal attempts last season, including a game-winner against Baylor.



Head coach Matt Wells

PLAYERS TO WATCH

WR Erik Ezukanma, Jr. — Was second in the Big 12 last season with 74.8 receiving yards per game. Broke his arm in two places during spring drills, but Texas Tech expects him to be healthy heading into the season.

QB Tyler Shough, Jr. — A transfer from Oregon who threw for 1,559 yards and 13 touchdowns last season.

LB Krishon Merriweather, Sr. — Was third in the Big 12 with 8.3 tackles per game in 2020. He also added 6.5 tackles for loss and one pass breakup.



Linebacker Krishon Merriweather



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College football 2021: Return to normal wrapped in change

Associated Press

The 2021 college football season holds the promise of a return to normal after a pandemic-wrecked fall led to cancellations, postponements and headache after headache.

The games are on. Fans are getting ready to head back into the stadiums.

At the same time, college sports is entering a new era, with less-restrictive transfer rules and players who are permitted for the first time to be paid endorsers.

And the pandemic is not over. While there are plenty of reasons to be optimistic that this season won't be the struggle 2020 was, there is still more than a little uncertainty about how this all plays out — off the field and on as No. 1 Alabama tries to win a second consecutive national title against a host of challengers.

"It's an interesting time," North Carolina coach Mack Brown said.

Is it ever.

Super seniors and transfers

The NCAA froze eligibility for every football player who played through the uncertainty of the pandemic last season, essentially handing them another year to play if they wished.

The result is hundreds of players who would have otherwise had no choice but to move on after 2020 will be

back playing in 2021. Call them super seniors, and they won't count against the scholarship limit of 85. Other players are back after opting out of 2020.

Longtime Utah coach Kyle Whittingham described his roster, brimming with extra experienced players, as "the most unique since I've been a football coach."

Then there are the transfers.

After an NCAA rule change in the spring, football players can now transfer one time and be immediately eligible to play. For decades, transferring players would have to sit out their first season after switching schools. It led to more player movement than ever.

"Transfer portal's changed everything. Super seniors coming back has changed everything," Brown said.

Athlete compensation

The NCAA lifted its ban on college athletes earning money from their names, images and likenesses on July 1, and football players started cashing in immediately.

Quarterbacks are endorsing fast food and offensive linemen are promoting barbecue joints. At Michigan, Ohio State, North Carolina and Texas, players will be making money from jersey sales.

Every Miami football player was offered a deal to make \$500 a month to promote a local gym and a Utah-based company will pay every walk-on at BYU the equivalent of tuition to

promote its protein bars and snacks.

Saban said Bryce Young, next up to be Alabama's starting quarterback, has NIL deals lined up that could be worth \$1 million.

There are concerns about how all this money will affect team culture, competitive balance and corruption, but college sports is mostly trying to embrace the change.

NCAA reform and CFP expansion

Two of the biggest stories in college sports will be taking place off the field this season.

A plan to expand the College Football Playoff from four to 12

teams is in the pipeline. There still appears to be support, but the Southeastern Conference's planned addition of Texas and Oklahoma in 2025 seems to have leaders in other conferences stepping back to take in the full picture.

"There's lots about the current playoff expansion proposal that is good," said Pac-12 Commissioner George Kliavkoff, an unequivocal expansionist. "The real question is the details of that. The details unfortunately were worked out with a subset of the folks who have to sign off on it. The result is not every detail was covered and not every concern was addressed."

WVU SCHEDULE

Sept. 4: at Maryland, 3:30 p.m. (ESPN)
 Sept. 11: Long Island, 5 p.m. (ESPN+)
 Sept. 18: Virginia Tech, noon (FS1)
 Sept. 25: at Oklahoma, TBA
 Oct. 2: Texas Tech, TBA
 Oct. 9: at Baylor, TBA
 Oct. 16: BYE
 Oct. 23: at TCU, TBA
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 Nov. 20: Texas, TBA
 Nov. 27: at Kansas, TBA

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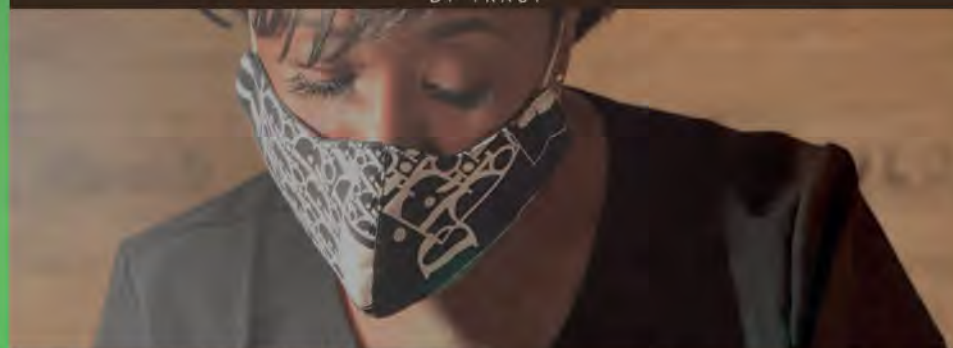
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BAYLOR BEARS



Linebacker
Terrel Bernard

BY JUSTIN JACKSON

JJackson@DominionPost.com

What to expect

The good news for Baylor is its running game can't get much worse than it was in 2020 and head coach Dave Aranda will have a full preseason and spring drills to get a handle on his program.

That was not the case last year through the COVID-19 pandemic, when Aranda first took over the program after Matt Rhule left to coach the NFL's Carolina Panthers.

The bad news is Baylor is still trying to develop talent across its roster, starting quarterback Charlie Brewer transferred to Utah and the offensive line needs to be rebuilt.

Offense

Baylor was the only team in the Big 12 last season not to average at least 100 yards rushing per game.

The Bears averaged 90.3 per game, which ranked 123rd in the country.

Enter new offensive coordinator Jeff Grimes, who comes to Baylor from BYU with the hope of getting the Bears' offense to reach a higher level.

Replacing Brewer, who threw for 9,700 yards in his Baylor career, will be the first task at hand.

It's a wide open race that includes the runner (Gerry Bohanon), the passer (Jacob Zeno) and two freshmen in Kyron Jones and Blake Shapen.

Zeno saw limited action last season and completed 5 of 8 passes for 18 yards.

Baylor does have talented receivers returning, including senior R.J. Sneed, who was fifth in the Big 12 in yards per game (55.2).



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Last season: 2-7 (2-7 Big 12)

35

Tyquan Thornton also caught 16 passes last season, but Baylor coaches are expecting him to have a breakout season in 2021.

The running game could be led by Trestan Ebner, who rushed for 413 yards and averaged 6.0 yards per carry in 2018, but he was limited to just 50 carries last season.

The offensive line does return senior tackle Connor Galvin, but the line must perform better. Baylor was 118th in the nation in total yards last season, averaging 310.2 per game.

Defense

Baylor returns nine starters on defense, which was solid against the pass last season.

Opponents threw for just 203 yards per game against the Bears in 2020, which was No. 2 in the Big 12.

Senior cornerback Raleigh Texada returns as a fifth-year senior and Baylor is hoping Kalon Barnes can stay healthy to form a solid secondary that will also include seniors J.T. Woods and Christian Morgan, who combined for six interceptions last season.

The biggest news is up front, where Siaki Ika should make an instant impact after transferring from LSU. He'll join returning starter T.J. Franklin along the defensive line.

Senior linebacker Terrel Bernard is a two-time second-team all-Big 12 selection. He recorded 55 tackles and 3.5 quarterback sacks in 2020, but missed the second half of the season with a shoulder injury.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

WR R.J. Sneed, Sr. — Caught 39 passes for 497 yards in 2020 and added three touchdowns.

DB Jalen Pitre, Sr. — A preseason all-Big 12 first-team selection. Pitre led Baylor with 60 tackles and added two interceptions last season.

LB Terrel Bernard, Sr. — Was averaging 11 tackles per game before a shoulder injury ended his 2020 season. A preseason first-team all-Big 12 selection.

Special teams

Ebner was the Big 12 Special Teams Player of the Year in 2020 after averaging 32.2 yards per kickoff return, so he'll be the main focus.

John Mayers went 10 of 15 on his field goal attempts last season and punter Issac Power returns after averaging 40.3 yards per punt last season.



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Quarterback Max Duggan

BY JUSTIN JACKSON

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What to expect

TCU won five of its last six games to end 2020 and returns six starters on offense and seven on defense to provide the base for some high expectations.

Max Duggan returns at quarterback, where he was one of the best dual-threat QBs in the country, as well as one of the best stories.

During COVID-19 testing in 2020, a heart defect was detected and Duggan underwent surgery not knowing if he would ever play football again.

He came back and threw for 1,795 yards and rushed for 526 in leading the Horned Frogs to their 17th bowl game in 20 years.

Offense

Duggan is the unquestioned leader of the Horned Frogs, but he has some talent around him, including three starters on the offensive line, as well as Memphis transfer Obinna Eze, who had 25 career starts on the line at Memphis before transferring.

TCU was the top rushing team in the Big 12 in 2020, mainly because of Duggan, but running back Zach Evans returns after showing promise as a freshman.

Evans had two games in which he reached at least 100 yards on the ground and he finished with 415 yards and four TDs.

TCU's running game did take a hit, though, when sophomore Darwin Barlow transferred to USC in May.

Taye Barber returns at receiver after catching 31 passes for 318 yards and freshman standout Quentin Johnston led the team with 22.1 yards per catch last season.

Also keep an eye out for freshman tight end D'Andre Rogers, who originally signed with Cal, but never enrolled and sat out during 2020.

The former 4-star recruit was ranked the country's No. 8 tight end coming out of high school.

Defense

For the first time in three years, TCU did not lead the Big 12 in total defense in 2020, but the Horned Frogs have the pieces in place to regain their standing this season.

Defensive lineman Ochaun Mathis and cornerback Tre'Vius Hodges-Tomlinson are preseason all-Big 12 first-team picks.

Hodges-Tomlinson had 13 pass breakups last season, which ranked second in the country, while Mathis recorded nine quarterback sacks.

Defensive lineman Corey Bethley also returns after flirting with the 2020 NFL Draft.

Dee Winters is the top linebacker, but that is a position that lacks experience for TCU this season.

Winters had 65 tackles and two quarterback sacks last season.

Last season: 6-4 (5-4 Big 12)

37

Special teams

Derius Davis ranked fifth in the country last season, averaging 14.5 yards per punt return and he's returned three punts for scores over his career.

Griffin Kell will take care of the kicking duties for a third consecutive year. He went 12 of 17 on his attempts last season and finished with 72 points.

Jordy Sandy averaged 41 yards per punt last season and he's downed 49 kicks inside the 20-yard line over his career.



Head coach Gary Patterson

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Max Duggan, Jr. — Totaled 2,321 total yards (1,795 passing, 526 rushing) last season. He threw 10 TD passes and also rushed for 10 more scores. Has thrown for 3,872 yards and 25 TDs over his first two seasons.

DE Ochaun Mathis, Jr. — A preseason all-Big 12 first-team selection after recording nine quarterback sacks in 2020.

CB Tre'Vius Hodges-Tomlinson, Jr. — Was second in the nation with 13 pass breakups last season. He also added 26 tackles.



Cornerback Tre'Vius Hodges-Tomlinson



Running back Breece Hall

BY JUSTIN JACKSON

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What to expect

Iowa State dominated Oregon for three quarters and won the Fiesta Bowl and enters the 2021 season with 19 returning starters from that game.

Just off those numbers, the Cyclones are set for their most anticipated season maybe ever.

Iowa State head coach Matt Campbell has never seen his stock higher and the Cyclones boast eight all-Big 12 first-team preseason selections, as well as one of the top defenses in the country.

Offensively, Iowa State returns a three-year starter at quarterback in Brock Purdy, the Big 12's leading rusher in Breece Hall and a top NFL prospect in tight end Charlie Kolar.

If the Cyclones are to ever make a push for the College Football Playoff, this season may be their best opportunity.

Offense

Purdy completed a career-high 67% of his passes last season and threw for 2,750 yards and 19 touchdowns.

He, along with Hall, enter the season as Heisman Trophy hopefuls, which is only the tip of the iceberg on offense for the Cyclones.

Iowa State returns all five starting offensive lineman along with a bonus in left guard Trevor Downing.

Downing was considered one of Iowa State's top lineman in 2020, but missed the majority of the season with a leg injury suffered in the season opener.

The experienced line could pave the way for Hall to build on a stellar 2020 season, in which he rushed for 1,572 yards and 21 touchdowns, just six scores shy of the all-time Big 12 season record.

Purdy's top target will be senior receiver Xavier Hutchinson, who caught 64 passes for 771 yards and four TDs last season.

Kolar has been Mr. Dependable over the last two seasons, in which he's combined for 95 receptions, 1,288 yards and 14 touchdowns.

Chase Allen has 23 career starts at tight end (Iowa State often goes with a bigger two tight-end look) and caught 19 passes for 236 yards and two scores last season.

Defense

Any discussion with Iowa State's defense begins with senior linebacker Mike Rose, the Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year last season.

Rose had 96 tackles and 10.5 tackles for loss last season and added five interceptions and six quarterback hurries.

He was a preseason all-Big 12 first-team pick, as were teammates Will McDonald (DL) and Greg Eisworth (safety).

The trio are the leaders of an Iowa State defense that was No. 2 in the Big 12 in yards allowed (340.4), points allowed (21.4) and gave up the fewest rushing yards per game

Last season: 9-3 (8-1 Big 12)



(103.1).

McDonald registered 10.5 quarterback sacks and 13.5 tackles for loss, while Eismann had 47 tackles and four pass breakups.

They'll be plenty of talent around them.

Defensive end Eyima Uwazurike recorded eight tackles for loss and linebackers Jake Hummel and Vance O'Rien were right behind Rose for the team lead in tackles.

Special teams

Senior kicker Connor Assalley returns after going 13 of 19 on field goal attempts and he'll have some competition from Fordham transfer Andrew Mevis.

Senior punter Corey Dunn also returns and should fill in for last year's starter, Joe Rivera.

Dunn punted twice last season, averaging 44 yards per kick.



Head coach Matt Campbell

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Brock Purdy, Sr. — Already owns or shares 25 school records heading into his fourth year as a starter. Has passed for 8,982 yards and 62 TDs for his career. He is 19-6 against Big 12 teams during the regular season.

RB Breece Hall, Jr. — Was named the Big 12 Offensive Player of the Year in 2020 after rushing for 1,572 yards and 21 touchdowns. He also caught 23 passes for 180 yards and two TDs.

LB Mike Rose, Sr. — Had 96 tackles and five interceptions last season. Rose had five games with at least 10 tackles, with a season high 13 against Texas. Was named the Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year last season.



Linebacker Mike Rose



Quarterback Spencer Sanders

BY ALEX HICKEY

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Mike Gundy is all-business in 2021.

Gone is the party in the back, as the Oklahoma State coach had his trademark mullet trimmed into a hairstyle you'd more expect to see from a grown man in his 50s.

Will the always entertaining but never fully there Cowboys follow suit?

Despite being a charter member of the Big 12, Oklahoma State has yet to reach a conference championship game. The pieces seemed to be in place for such a run last season, but it was Iowa State that asserted itself as the team to play Oklahoma for all the marbles.

Despite losing several key components, the Pokes could find a way to top last year's 6-3 mark in league play.

Offense

The Chuba Choo-Choo has left the station, as star running back Chuba Howard is now vying to back up Christian McCaffrey for the Carolina Panthers.

The backfield cupboard isn't bare, though, as Dezmon Jackson (5.5 ypc) and LD Brown (5.3 ypc) each averaged more yards per carry than Hubbard last season. Utah State transfer Jaylen Warren should help make it a dynamic trio.

If junior quarterback Spencer Sanders makes the next step in his career growth, the Cowboys will fare far better than last year's No. 5 league ranking in scoring. Sanders has shown flashes in two years starting, but must turn it into consistency.

The ability to do so may hinge on who he will be throwing to.

The Cowboys are without their Top 3 wideouts from last season, including first team all-Big 12 receiver Tylan Wallace. Traditionally, though, receiver has been a position where the Cowboys never seem to run out of new guys to plug in.

A transfer-laden offensive line will be headed by former Mountaineer Josh Sills, who was a preseason all-Big 12 pick.

Defense

Justifiably, no one ever thinks of Oklahoma State as a defense-first operation.

But last year's Cowboys were good when it counted, leading the entire country in third-down conversion percentage.

Oklahoma State's safeties are the envy of the league, with Tre Sterling, Kolby Harvell-Peel and Tanner McCalister each capable of ending the year as a first or second team all-Big 12 selection.

That said, the Cowboys need someone to become more of a ballhawk in order for this season to be special. Last year's squad was eighth in the league with six interceptions, and the only two teams behind them (Texas Tech and Kansas) had genuinely bad defenses.

Last season: 8-3 (6-3 Big 12)



41

Special teams

Kicker Alex Hale made 13 of 14 field goals last year before sustaining an injury while warming up for the Oklahoma game. (Kickers, right?)

Fully healthy, he could be a weapon again.

31-year-old junior punter Tom Hutton doesn't figure to be a Ray Guy Award candidate, even if he's nearly old enough to have seen Guy play.

Hutton only averaged 40.5 yards per punt, but was a master of hang time and placement with opponents average 1.5 yards per return while 26 of his 59 punts were fielded inside the 20.



Head coach Mike Gundy

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Spencer Sanders, Jr. — Battling injuries last season, Sanders looks poised to come back as a more experienced threat for the Cowboys after throwing for over 2,000 yards and 14 touchdowns.

OG Josh Sills, Sr. — A transfer from WVU become a leader up front and settled into the starting guard spot. Another year should make Sills more comfortable.

CB Kolby Harvell-Peel, Sr. — A lockdown defender on the outside, Harvell-Peel will hope bolster what was one of the better defenses in the Big 12.



Cornerback
Kolby Harvell-Peel



Running back Deuce Vaughn

BY ALEX HICKEY

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Underwhelming doesn't even begin to describe Chris Klieman's second season at Kansas State.

It began with a dud — a loss to Arkansas State — and ended with a thud — a 69-31 defeat to a Texas program about to fire its coaching staff. That humiliation was the conclusion of a season-ending five-game slide that kept K-State from reaching a bowl game.

Despite that, there is reason for optimism in the Little Apple this season.

Sandwiched between those nightmares was one of the unlikeliest results in college football last season — a 21-point rally for a 38-35 win over Oklahoma.

The Wildcats were the oft-spoken of but rarely seen team that was literally capable of beating or losing to any team on its schedule.

Offense

All hopes of a bounce-back season hinge on the offense.

The Wildcats return all five starters on the offensive line, which is always a good place to start.

Quarterback Skylar Thompson, who has seemingly been with the program long enough to have thrown passes to Jordy Nelson, is also back for another year thanks to the NCAA granting players an extra year of eligibility due to the pandemic.

Thompson was sidelined with injury for the final seven games of the season, so it feels safe to presume the Wildcats wouldn't have finished with five straight defeats if he was playing.

Thompson has a pair of veteran targets to work with in senior Chabastin Taylor and junior Malik Knowles. Taylor and Knowles had underwhelming numbers last year, but that may be related to not having Thompson there to put the ball where they wanted.

In keeping with K-State tradition, there is also a lightning-quick running back who is about the size of a lightning bug.

Sophomore Deuce Vaughn — all of 5-foot-5 and 171 pounds — rushed for 642 yards and seven touchdowns. More impressively, he averaged 17.3 yards per catch on 25 receptions.

There might not be a more exciting player to watch in the Big 12 this season, and if Thompson gets the K-State passing attack back on track this team will be able to score with anyone.

Defense

But will this team be able to stop anyone?

The Wildcats were tattooed through the air last year, allowing a league-worst 267.5 passing yards per game. A year after permitting 12 touchdown passes in 13 games, they allowed 20 in a 10-game slate.

And it's not as if teams were constantly throwing on them. Opponents attempted 353 passes against Kansas State, which was only the sixth-most in the conference. They were simply torching the Wildcats downfield with regularity.

Klieman is counting on transfers to bolster the beleaguered secondary, including former Iowa cornerback Julius Brents and former Louisville safety Russ Yeast. Returning

strong safety Jahron McPherson is solid against the run — he led the team with 54 tackles — and maybe now he'll have some help.

The loss of Thompson wasn't the only factor in Kansas State's season-ending losing streak. The Wildcats didn't force a single interception in those five defeats.

Special teams

No matter how the other units perform, you almost always know what you'll get from Kansas State special teams.

Case in point: The K-State punting unit allowed 0.3 yards per return and only permitted one punt to roll into the end zone for a touchback. And that was using a punting platoon of Jack Blumer and Ty Zentner, both of whom are back.

Punt returner Phillip Brooks is the best in the Big 12, with a pair of touchdowns and an average of 23.7 yards per return last year.

The one question mark — no one on the roster has attempted a field goal or extra point in their careers following the graduation of Blake Lynch.



Head coach Chris Klieman

PLAYERS TO WATCH

RB Deuce Vaughn, So. — Vaughn was one of the most electric players in the Big 12 as a true freshman. He should exceed his production this year.

QB Skylar Thompson, Sr. — After suffering a season-ending injury last year, Thompson is the undoubted leader for the Wildcats. He can make plays with his arm and legs.

DB Jahron McPherson, Sr. — McPherson led the team in tackles last year at safety and is a solid contributor against the run.



Defensive back Jahron McPherson



Running back Bijan Robinson

BY ALEX HICKEY

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Only Texas could manage to create an off-season story even bigger than a coaching change.

But as seismic as its eventual move to the SEC will be across the college sports landscape, there is still the matter of the 2021 season to get through.

After an underwhelming four years under Tom Herman, the eyes of Texas turn to former Alabama offensive coordinator Steve Sarkisian — the latest in a line of failed former head coaches who rehabbed their reputations as assistants to Nick Saban.

In Sarkisian's case, that rehab was literal after alcoholism cost him his job at USC in 2015. Now sober, he's on to his next big turnaround project.

Sarkisian's honeymoon period could be short-lived.

The Longhorns open the season with a veteran Louisiana-Lafayette team that topped Iowa State last season. The Ragin' Cajuns are even better now, and the Horns won't be as good as last year's Cyclones.

Offense

One would expect a drop-off after losing four-year starting quarterback Sam Ehlinger, but former backup Casey Thompson is surrounded by solid weapons. And redshirt freshman Hudson Card may well be the starter by the time Texas visits WVU on Nov. 20 if not a couple months sooner.

The expectation in Austin is that receiver Jordan Whittington can put up all-Big 12 numbers with a capable nucleus around him.

Running back Bijan Robinson is poised for a breakthrough season behind an offensive line expected to have four returning starters. Despite only 86 carries in his freshman season, Robinson managed to finish third in the Big 12 with 78.1 rushing yards per game. His average of 8.2 yards per carry topped the league among qualified rushers.

With Sarkisian's offensive background, there's a chance this will be a potent unit in Year 1.

Defense

This is the area where Texas has to make strides if it is actually going to live up to its third-place selection in the Big 12 preseason poll.

The Longhorns were eighth in the conference in total defense and sixth in scoring in 2020, and are losing four of their top five tacklers. As always, there's still NFL-caliber talent there, particularly in the form of linebacker DeMarvion Overshown and cornerback D'Shawn Jamison.

Texas must improve a pathetic pass rush. Only Kansas recorded fewer sacks in the Big 12 last season.

The inability to get to the quarterback cost the Horns dearly on the back end, where they also ranked ninth in pass yards allowed.

Last season: 7-3 (5-3 Big 12)



Special Teams

Even in a league where Kansas State perpetually performs as one of the nation's top special teams units, the Longhorns have a chance to be the Big 12's best in this category.

Senior kicker Cameron Dicker and senior punter Ryan Bujcevski could be the best combined tandem of legs in the country.



Head coach Steve Sarkisian

PLAYERS TO WATCH

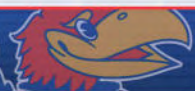
RB Bijan Robinson, So. — While limited last season, Robinson still averaged nearly 80 yards per game and will now run behind an experience line.

CB D'Shawn Jamison, Sr. — Jamison not only is an NFL prospect at cornerback, he was also named the Big 12 Player of the Year last season as a punt and kick returner.

LB DeMarvion Overshown, Sr. — Like Jamison, Overshown has a lot of pro potential, but at linebacker. He is a dynamic defender.



Cornerback D'Shawn Jamison



Wide receiver Kwamie Lassiter

BY ALEX HICKEY

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Only two types of people will read a Kansas football season preview: Existentialists and true football junkies.

You can decide which you are if you get to the next paragraph.

The Jayhawks are starting over, again, as the Les Miles comeback tour overcame the odds and turned out to be a bigger disaster off the field than on the field.

Miles made it only two seasons into his five-year deal once details of his prior behavior towards female student workers at LSU came to light.

Athletic director Jeff Long, who overlooked all of this when hiring his old pal in 2019, was next to get the axe.

All of that was the cherry on top of a cow-pie sundae of a winless season.

Riding to the rescue is former Buffalo coach Lance Leipold, who seemingly could have waited for something better to come along.

The highly regarded Leipold was 37-33 with the Bulls, finishing his six-year tenure with three straight winning seasons. Before that, he was a 109-6 with six national championships at Division III Wisconsin-Whitewater.

If anyone is qualified to make this program better, it would seem to be him. But it's going to take a whole lot more than one season for the biggest makeover in the Big 12 to take effect.

Offense

It seems perfectly fitting that Kansas will turn to someone named Mr. Bean to solve its quarterbacking woes.

Jason Bean started seven games for North Texas last season before deciding to take his talents to Kansas. Bean is a dual-threat who passed for 1,131 yards and rushed for 346 yards for the Mean Green last season.

Expecting a star turn from Bean feels like a bit much, however.

He only completed 54.5 percent of his passes against Conference USA competition, and it's hard to envision a drastic improvement playing behind a ragtag offensive line. The Jayhawks allowed 5.2 sacks and 11 tackles per loss per game in 2020.

Receiver Kwamie Lassiter is a nice weapon, and finished with 43 catches for 458 yards last season. Those numbers will improve if anyone around him proves capable of taking off some pressure.

Defense

If the offense smelled like a paper mill, the defense had the scent of a pig farm.

The Jayhawks allowed 459 yards and 46 yards per game. They intercepted a meager four passes, which seems like it should be possible if 11 guys just stood in the same spot all season.

To make matters worse — somehow it's possible — Kansas is even weaker up front than it is in the back. The Jayhawks had a pair of nice defensive tackles in Marcus Harris and DaJon Terry, who picked up and left for Auburn and Tennessee respectively.

The Kansas D-line will be undersized against every league opponent and will need to compensate with speed.

Special teams

For a team that does so much punting, you'd think Kansas might at least have a bit of expertise in the art. But the Jayhawks stink at that, too.

Without much roster depth, the punt unit was vulnerable against returns, allowing a league-worst 5 yards per return. Tacked on to an already weak punting average, Kansas only managed a net of 33.1 yards per punt — respectable, perhaps, for a Class A high school program, but not a college football team.

Yet punting somehow wasn't even the worst element of Kansas special teams.

The Jayhawks finished the year with a total of minus-5 punt return yards. That's right. Four returns, for a total of minus-5 yards.

WVU's Graeson Malesevich out-gained their whole roster with his one return for 5 yards. For that matter, so did Bryce Ford-Wheaton, who lost a yard on his lone return in 2020.

So even if Kansas does nothing in the punt return game this season, it will be an improvement.



Head coach Lance Leipold

PLAYERS TO WATCH

WR Kwamie Lassiter, Sr. — Lassiter was a reliable target last season, finishing with 43 catches and over 450 yards.

QB Jason Bean, Jr. — A transfer from North Texas, Bean is a dual-threat option at signal-caller.

LB Kyron Johnson, Sr. — Johnson started last season and was an All-Big 12 honorable mention. He can rush the passer at defensive end, as well.



Linebacker Kyron Johnson



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