



# EASTERN KENTUCKY COLONELS

## COACH AND PROGRAM

**LOCATION.....Richmond, KY**

**LAST SEASON (2020)..... 3-6 (.333)**

**Key Victories:** UCA 31-28; WCU 49-17 (2020 Opportunity Bowl)

**CONFERENCE (Ohio Valley).....(0-0)**

**COLORS.....Maroon & White**

**HOMEFIELD.....Roy Kidd Stadium (20,000 capacity)**

**HEAD COACH.....Walt Wells (Belmont '09)**

**RECORD AT SCHOOL.....3-6**

**CAREER RECORD.....3-6**

**ASSISTANTS:**

**Jake Johnson** (Defensive Coordinator/ ILB) (EKU '02)

**Andy Richman** (Off Coordinator/ RB) (Wis-Steven Point '02)

**Eric Losey** (O-Line/ Recruiting Coord) (WKU '06)

**Trent Steelman** (QB Coach) (Army '13)

**Kevin McKeethan** (TE Coach/ Sp teams) (Maryville '07)

**Caleb Cox** (WR Coach) (Kentucky Christian '13)

**Mike Dietzel** (Safties) (Otterbain, '83)

**Jeremy Hawkins** (Defensive Line) (Troy, '09)

**Derek Day** (OLB/ Co-Sp Teams) (Butler, '09)

**Chris Franklin** (CB Coach) (WKU, '09)

**TEAM WINS (LAST 5 YRS)....3-4-7-7-3 (24-30)**

**2019 FINISH.....(7-5, 5-3)**

**Key Wins: Murray State (34-27), JAX State (29-23)**

The Colonels have not had a winning coach since Dean Hood (2008-2015) went 55-38 and had two OVC championships. Hood, the current HC at Murray State, followed Danny Hope (2003-2007) and legendary ECU coach Roy Kidd, who coached at ECU from 1964 to 2002. The Colonels have turned to Walt Wells, who coached under Kidd from 97-02 as the offensive line coach., Wells, hired in 2019, had his first season during COVID and one of the most rigid schedules in their history. The Colonels went 3-6 but faced three FBS opponents and were two plays away from finishing 5-4. On October 3 against Houston Baptist, ECU scored a touchdown to pull within one with 4:04 left in the game. The game-tying extra-point was blocked and returned for two points in a 33-30 loss. Two weeks later, ECU was chosen as the Stats Perform FCS Team of the Week after the Colonels took a 29-28 lead over the Trojans with 21 seconds left in the game, but Troy made a 47-yard field goal as time expired. Many Maroon and White fans are impressed by what they see coming from Coach Wells and his staff and look for better days ahead for ECU as they enter the ASUN.

### Coaching Bio: Walt Wells

|                     |                                  |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>2020–present</b> | <b>Eastern Kentucky</b>          |
| <b>2018–2019</b>    | <b>Kentucky (QC)</b>             |
| <b>2017</b>         | <b>Tennessee (OL)</b>            |
| <b>2016</b>         | <b>Tennessee (OQC)</b>           |
| <b>2015</b>         | <b>Eastern Kentucky (AHC/OL)</b> |
| <b>2014</b>         | <b>New Mexico State (OL)</b>     |
| <b>2013</b>         | <b>South Florida (OC/OL)</b>     |
| <b>2003–2012</b>    | <b>Western Kentucky (OL)</b>     |
| <b>2000–2002</b>    | <b>Eastern Kentucky (OL)</b>     |
| <b>1997–1999</b>    | <b>Eastern Kentucky (TE)</b>     |
| <b>1994</b>         | <b>Cumberland (TN) (AHC/OC)</b>  |

The Eastern Kentucky football team has a storied history dating back to 1909. The Colonels are considered the first dynasty of FCS football when they played for the FCS Championship in four consecutive seasons ('19-'82). The Colonels have had the second most FCS Playoff appearances (21) since the playoffs began in 1978. During that time, ECU went 46-7. But recently, the playoffs have not been in the cards. Their last appearance was in 2014, and their previous six appearances have ECU being bounced in the first round. The Colonels sported 31 consecutive



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seasons with a winning record (1977-2008) and want to get back to that brand of success.

## Last 10 FCS Playoff Appearances

|                      |  |   |                             |
|----------------------|--|---|-----------------------------|
| <a href="#">1991</a> | First Round<br>Quarterfinals<br>Semifinals | Appalachian State<br>Middle Tennessee<br>Marshall | W 14-3<br>W 23-13<br>L 7-14 |
| <a href="#">1992</a> | First Round                                | Marshall  | L 0-44                      |
| <a href="#">1993</a> | First Round                                | Georgia Southern                                  | L 12-14                     |
| <a href="#">1994</a> | First Round<br>Quarterfinals               | Boston University<br>Youngstown State             | W 30-23<br>L 15-18          |
| <a href="#">1995</a> | First Round                                | Montana   | L 0-48                      |
| <a href="#">1997</a> | First Round                                | Western Kentucky                                  | L 14-42                     |
| <a href="#">2007</a> | First Round                                | Richmond  | L 14-31                     |
| <a href="#">2008</a> | First Round                                | Richmond  | L 10-38                     |
| <a href="#">2011</a> | First Round                                | James Madison                                     | L 17-20                     |
| <a href="#">2014</a> | First Round                                | Indiana State                                     | L 16-36                     |

As ECU leaves the Ohio Valley Conference (OVC), they break into new grounds and untapped potential. The Colonels had been a part of the OVC since 1948 and won their first OVC Championship in 1952. With two National Championships under their belt, ECU has excellent support and a great fan base. Playing at Roy Kidd Stadium and average more than 8,000 fans per game. Their new home in the ASUN will feature new potential rivalries with Kennesaw State and North Alabama, two schools ECU has never played. It will also allow them to continue with a spirited rivalry against Jacksonville State, who owns the current series 7-10 over the Colonels. The **Battle of the Bluegrass** vs. Western Kentucky and the **Old Hawg Rifle** fight against Morehead are the two natural rivals for ECU, but they haven't played WKU since 2017 or Morehead since 2018. Upcoming opponents for ECU feature Louisville (2021), Eastern Michigan (2022), Bowling Green (2022), Kentucky (2023), and Mississippi State (2024). Of course, a clash with the reigning FCS champ, Sam Houston, awaits the Colonels on November 13, 2021, as part of the ASUN-WAC Challenge.

After 72 years as a member of the OVC, ECU will be changing conferences. The Colonels will play in the alliance between the ASUN and the WAC, known as the ASUN-WAC Challenge for 2021. The seven teams, including ECU, will be known as the AQ7 teams. The alliance allows both conferences to merge for one season and have an automatic qualifier for the 2021 FCS Playoffs. After the 2021 season, the ASUN and WAC will divide into their own football conferences.

## QUARTERBACKS

Redshirt sophomore QB **#18 Parker McKinney** (6'3" 208lbs) started the first six games before suffering a season-ending injury. McKinney threw for 12 touchdowns and completed 63.8 percent of his passes. He is a big athletic dual-threat QB who can scramble. He limited his interceptions to just five, and he threw to 1358 yards and 226.3 passing yards/ game. McKinney is expected to return under center and be ready for the September 2 opener at Western Carolina.

Five QBs are listed on the 2021 roster. McKinney is joined by **#19 Matt Shearer** (6'4" 215lbs), a redshirt-sophomore and transfer from Concord University, and Auburn transfer **Cord Sandberg** (6'3" 222lbs). **#13 Dakota Allen** (6'4" 225lbs) took over for McKinney when he went down against UCA. Allen led the Colonels to



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victory after a 9-for-14 performance with a TD. He also rushed for 59 yards and a TD. Allen is a versatile athlete who serves as a short-field punter and is listed on the 2021 ECU roster as a Tight End. With the depth at QB, Allen will be freed up to play other offensive positions.

**#10 Elias Allen** (6'0" 210lbs), freshman, is a mid-year enrollee allowing him to be around the ECU coaching staff preparing his body for the 2021 season. He is a dual-threat QB and Coach Wells said he throws the ball well and has good leadership qualities. True freshman **DJ Boney** (6'3 210lbs), who had offers from several FBS programs, had 5300 all-purpose yards and 53 touchdowns during his high school career, including his 2021 season with IMG Academy. "DJ is a talented quarterback who coach Steelman identified early in the process and stayed on," Wells said. "He had a great senior year and is one of the standout players in the central Florida area."

## RUNNING BACKS

The Colonels will have to replace their leading rusher Alonzo Booth from the Fall season. **#4 Kyeandre Magloire** (Fr), **#24 Quentin Pringle**(So), and **#29 Jeriah Hightower** (Fr) all had limited carries last season. Magloire led the state of Florida in rushing yards (2,500) and (34) touchdowns during his senior season in HS. Hightower was chosen first-team all-state after rushing for a school-record 3,001 yards and scoring 33 touchdowns as a senior at Madisonville North Hopkins High School in 2019. "He brings a lot of versatility to the running back position with his power running and receiving abilities," said Coach Wells. Big question marks loom for ECU at the running back position. They have depth at the position and have added three-star RB **Da'Joun Hewitt (r-Fr)** transfer from Purdue. Hewitt played in a total of six games for the Boilermakers before entering the portal. Redshirt sophomore **Jyran Mitchell** is another transfer (Northern Illinois) where he returned kicks, played wide receiver, and carried the ball twice in 2020. An interesting pick up for ECU is RB **Izzy Fields**. Fields' father, Lorenzo, played QB for ECU' 87-'90, and his twin brother WR Isaac Fields also transferred into ECU. Izzy lands as a Colonel after transferring from Kentucky State.

### **Additional RB:**

**#32 Nate Skidmore** –R-Fr – 5'9" 2017lbs, Stanton, KY, Powell County HS

**#42 Eli Snowden**-R-Fr – 5'7" 201lbs, Virginia Beach, Va, Ocean Lakes HS

**Braedon Sloan** – Fr – 5'11" 195lbs, Frazer, Ky, Wayne County HS, HS: Two-time all-state selection and two-time Class AAAA, District 7 Player of the Year. Sloan rushed for 1,607 yards on 153 carries with 28 total touchdowns as a senior in 2020. He set the single-season scoring record for the state of Kentucky as a junior when he rushed for 2,804 yards on 227 carries and finished with 3,775 all-purpose yards and 56 total touchdowns. "Braedon is one of the top players in Kentucky," said Wells. "He set numerous records at Wayne County High School for coach Shawn Thompson. He's got good size and speed. Braedon will be able to do a lot of different things on the field for us. He's a really good football player." Offers from Eastern Illinois and Fordham

**Ritchell McCallister** – Fr – 5'9" 180lbs, Streetsboro (Ohio) HS: 2020: rushed for 1,615 yard, caught nine passes for 119 yards. "Telly is an elusive and explosive back," said Wells. "Coach Andy Richman identified him early in the recruiting process. He was the offensive player of the year in his division. He had a lot of explosive runs and he's solid catching the ball out of the backfield. We're looking forward to adding him to our running back room." Offers from Akron, Liberty, Kent State, and Robert Morris.



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## WIDE RECEIVERS/ TIGHT ENDS

**#3 Jacquez Jones** (5'10" 169lbs) led the team in catches with 40 and averaged 14.4 yards per catch and averaged 64.2 yards per game. Jones found the end zone four times in 2020 and shared the spotlight with Keyion Dixon, who left ECU for a chance to play professionally. **#6 Matt Wilcox Jr.** (5'10" 185lbs) caught 26 passes and three TDs. Wilcox had a big game to help the Colonels defeat Central Arkansas, including the game-winning TD. ECU added a depth with South Alabama transfer **#16 Mo Edwards Jr** (6'3" 195lbs) and **#17 Keke McFadden** (6'4" 215lbs/ Kent State), both three-star recruits out of high school with high potential. **Isaac**

**Fields**, a transfer from Kentucky State, has played RB at the collegiate level. In HS, Fields was a two-time district champion and a region champ in 300-meter hurdles. The remaining ECU WRs are young and inexperienced. The Colonels will need someone to step up to help improve the passing offense, which was 25<sup>th</sup> in the nation with 247.4 passing yards per game.

As far as Tight Ends go, five TE are listed, and they have one upper classman, Dakota Allen, who served as the backup QB in 2020. The remaining four are freshmen or redshirts. **#82 Malik Owens** (6'5" 250lbs) played in nine games in 2020 and has good size and strength. He was a favorite target against Western Carolina in the Opportunity Bowl. He runs good routes, has good hands, and can provide pass blocking protection.

## OFFENSIVE LINE

The Colonels are fortunate to return 2019 All-American and All-OVC (Phil Steele) Center **#52 Tucker Schroeder**, a 6'4" 295lbs R-Jr from St. Cloud, Florida. Schroeder suffered a season-ending injury after five games of 2020. His return is critical for the ECU offensive line. LT **#74**

**Payton Collins** (6'7" 280lbs) started eight games for ECU in 2020 as a R-Fr and was a welcomed addition to the O-Line. He joins a returning group of O-linemen, including **#64 Howard Watkins Jr.** (6'4" 285lbs), who started seven games in 2020, mainly at RT. Also returning is **#66 Jarrett Mathews** (6'0" 270lbs), LG **#72 Drew Hart** (6'7" 302lbs), who played in six games in 2020. Mathews started six games at center as a true freshman filling in when Schroeder was shelved with an injury. The Colonels O-Line is another concerning area, but two transfers, **Brad Davis** (6'4" 303lbs/ VMI) and **Zack Ferris** (6'5" 311lbs/ Marshall), will help with the options upfront. Davis played four seasons as a Keydet and started all eight games, five at RG and three at Center. He is an experienced and talented athlete that brings much-needed help to the line. Ferris was a two-star out of HS and has played two seasons at Marshall. He has five games under his belt and will add good size to the depth chart. **#50 Jake O'Buck** (6'4" 285lbs) is a hometown guy, although he played senior HS ball at Sprayberry (Ga). His father, Brett, played OL at ECU. "Jake is someone who lived in Kentucky before moving to Georgia," said Wells. "He is a really good football player and really passionate about playing the offensive line. He's someone we really had to fight for and are glad we have him. Jake was born to wear the maroon and white." **#58 Juan De La Torre** (6'5" 300lbs/ Pasadena CC) is another transfer added in 2019, but has not participated in a game for the Colonels. In the end, the ECU O-line has its centerpiece in Schroeder to build around.

### 2020 ECU Stats

|                         |             |
|-------------------------|-------------|
| Rushing Off.....        | 129.0       |
| Passing Off.....        | 247.4       |
| Total Off.....          | 376.4       |
| <b>Scoring Off.....</b> | <b>24.4</b> |
| Third Down Off.....     | 35%         |
| Third Down Def.....     | 47%         |
| Red Zone Off.....       | 26/31 (84%) |
| Red Zone TD.....        | 48%         |
| <b>Scoring Def.....</b> | <b>33.2</b> |
| Net Punting.....        | 38.9        |
| Punt Returns.....       | 3.8         |
| Kickoff Ret.....        | 20.2        |
| Rushing Def.....        | 200.6       |
| Passing Def.....        | 254.6       |
| Total Def.....          | 455.1       |
| Red Zone Def.....       | 31/35 (89%) |



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Significant pickups in the off-season and some talented freshmen make this a front line one that has the potential to be good protection for their QB. But, there are a lot of questions to be answered.

## KICKERS

Replacing kicker Alexander Woznick will be another gap to fill for the coaching staff. Woznick was the sole placekicker for field goals and PATs in 2020. The Colonels list two kickers on the roster. **#39 Mason Molique** and **Patrick Nations**. Molique came to ECU in 2019 and redshirted his first season. He did not play in 2020. Out of Ryle HS in Union, Kentucky, Molique was recruited by Western Kentucky, Cincinnati, and Louisville. He made 74 consecutive PATs and kicked 26 FGs in HS. Nations is a transfer from East Carolina and brings an impressive HS resume, including a two-time Ray Guy Prokicker.com Top Prospect Award winner (2017, 2018). He was rated as the No. 1 kicker nationally by ProKicker.com and No. 4 nationally by Kohl's Kicking. Various recruiting services listed him as a five-star prospect as a kicker and a three-star recruit as a safety. Nations ranked among the best 30 players (overall) in the state of South Carolina, according to ESPN.com. He was recruited by Clemson, South Carolina, and Georgia Tech. Legend has it that Nations made a 68-yard FG during a practice session. If that is the case, let the kicking competition begin!

## DEFENSIVE LINE

**#92 Shane Burks** (6'0" 298lbs) is a returning starter from 2020 and joins **#59 Quinton Floyd** (6'2" 285lbs) return to the D-line and welcome back sophomore **DE #45 Kabbash Richards** (6'4" 215lbs) who all started last year. Like other positions, the defensive line is young and has some transfers that will help with an experience deficit. DL **Ubong Udom** (6'3" 265lbs/ CMU) is a three-year starter from Central Missouri, but he did not play in 2020. In 2019, Udom had a breakout season and led the MIAA in sacks with 10, tied for the fourth-most in a single season at UCM. He became the first Mule since 2015 to make the All-MIAA First Team as a defensive lineman thanks to his 44 tackles, with 11 going for a loss and six quarterback hurries. Udom's aggressive play led to four forced fumbles and recovered two. **Roland Walder** (6'3" 250lbs/ BGSU) started his collegiate career at Kentucky but transferred to Bowling Green after one season. 2021 will be the sixth season Walder will be in a camp preparing for a football season. His vast experience will be a shot in the arm to the depth to the O-line. The defensive line will also feature another SEC transfer in **#17 TK McLendon Jr** (6'5" 270lbs/ LSU), a top junior college prospect for 2019 out of Copiah-Lincoln CC. LSU was the landing spot for McLendon, but he only saw the field three games as a tight end. Coming to ECU, McLendon, a solid three-star, will play on the defensive edge for Coach Jeremy Hawkins. A three-star recruit from Grayson, GA, **#55 Jady Bost** (6'2" 230) got significant playing time off the edge for ECU as a true freshman recording 15 tackles and one QB Hurry. Bost is a prospect to watch as he was highly recruited by FBS programs, including LSU, Minnesota, Louisville, Ole Miss, Miss State, and USC. Circle #55 on the roster and watch him have an impactful season in 2021.

The defensive line position is another interesting aspect to analyze. From the talent level on board, they may be one of the most talented in the AQ7, but still, the line must gel and play together to prove their worth.

## LINEBACKERS

The Colonels feature a talented LB corps, including stud **#33 Matthew Jackson** (6'2" 205lbs), who led the team with 79 tackles, including 8.0 tackles for a loss and 2.5 sacks. Jackson had two fumble recoveries and two pass



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deflections. He led the nation in the fall in fumbles recovered, ranked ninth in tackles per game (9.9), and was 15th in tackles for a loss per game (1.0). He joins returners **#44 Eli Hairston** (6'3" 230lbs/ Urbana) and Redshirt freshman **#15 Kaleb Lundy** (6'2" 200lbs) in the middle of the defense for ECU. Hairston started seven games in 2020 and was third on the team with 42 tackles, including 0.5 tackles for a loss and 0.5 sacks. He also forced one fumble and recovered one fumble. Lundy played in and started all nine games at linebacker and finished the season with 54 tackles, second on the team. **#14 Je'Vari Anderson** (6'0" 226lbs/ UCLA) played as a reserve LB in 2020 but did get two starts. He returns as a Redshirt Senior with good experience under his belt. The transfer from UCLA played at Laney Junior College for two seasons and was considered a three-star pickup for the Bruins. He got the redshirt in Los Angeles and saw the field in three games in 2019. **#28 Jaylen Herrud** (6'3" 214lbs) played in five games for the Colonels and furnished 15 tackles, including five vs. West Virginia. Indiana transfer **#7 Madison Norris** (6'5" 214lbs/ Indiana) appeared in eight games in 2020 and will help add to the LB force.

## DEFENSIVE BACKS

The defensive backs for the Colonels feature returning starter **#27 Daulson Fitzpatrick** (6'1" 193lbs). Fitzpatrick started all nine games at safety and ended the season having started 21 straight games. He totaled 38 tackles, two interceptions, and five pass breakups and added a blocked field goal attempt against Houston Baptist (October 3). Fitzpatrick has started every game he has suited up for as a Colonel, and his leadership and experience is excellent for the secondary. He is joined by junior **#11 Joseph Sayles** (6'0" 187lbs) played in all nine games with six starts at safety, and **#5 Davion Ross** (5'10" 165). Sayles totaled 35 tackles, including one tackle for a loss, and reeled in one interception. Ross is a speedy former WR that transitioned to DB in 2020. He played in all nine games and served as a dangerous return man. Redshirt Senior **#12 Josh Hayes** (6'0" 185lbs/ Purdue) had an excellent 2019 season and earned All-OVC Conference preseason accolades (Phil Steele). In 2020, he only started two games, playing in nine, and finished the season with 24 tackles and four pass deflections. He adds more experience and depth to the DBs. A standout in 2020 for ECU was **#31 Kmare Carey** (6'1 190lbs/ Western Michigan), who had three interceptions and 17 tackles. He also forced a fumble and had four pass deflections. Carey has a high ceiling as he continues to learn from the position coaches.

## PUNTERS

Australian-born **#87 Phillips Richards** served as ECU's holder and punter. He had 20 punts for an average of 38.1 yards per punt. He placed seven of his 20 punts inside the 20-yard line and boomed two punts of 50 or more yards. Richards has extensive experience as a three-year starter.

## 2021 Schedule

- Sept 4.....@ Western Carolina
- Sept 11.....@ Louisville
- Sept 18.....vs Indiana State
- Sept 25.....vs Austin Peay
- Oct 2.....vs Tarleton
- Oct 9.....vs Abilene Christian
- Oct 16.....@ Central Arkansas
- Oct 30.....vs Lamar
- Nov 6.....@ Stephen F. Austin
- Nov 13.....@ Sam Houston
- Nov 20.....vs Jacksonville State



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## SPECIAL TEAMS

Safety **#5 Davion Ross** (5'10" 165) handled most of the kickoff returns in 2020. His 18 returns netted 378 yards and a 21.0 return average. Ross had one kickoff return for a touchdown in the Raisin Canes Opportunity Bowl vs. Western Carolina, the season's final game. **#24 Quentin Pringle** (5'9" 178lbs) serves as the second KR for ECU, with four returns and an 18.8 return average.

**#6 Matt Wilcox Jr** (5'10" 185lbs/ Independence CC) was the PR for ECU in 2020 but only had two returns on the season.

## RECRUITING CLASS

The Eastern Kentucky University football team has added nine transfers for the 2021 season. The transfers are welcomed additions after losing five starters on offense and two on defense. "The state of college football today with the transfer portal provided us with the opportunity to add these nine players to meet areas of need in our program," Wells said. "We're excited about what they bring to our team, on and off the field. We were excited about what we saw from their high school and college experiences. They were all highly sought-after recruits. I'm very pleased with what our staff did in adding these nine men to the ECU football family." The Colonels lost 35 players, a lot to the transfer portal. They will bring in 20 total newcomers, including four-star QB Cord Sandberg and six three-star transfers into the program, including DL Dante Johnson (NC State) and DE T.K. McLendon (LSU). The Colonels added RB Da'Joun Hewitt (Purdue), WR Jyrant Mitchell (NIU), and OL Zack Ferris (Marshall) to their offense to fill gaps. In the early signing period, ECU announced seven signees, including QB DJ Boney, OL O'Brien Jackson, RB Ritchell McCallister. The recruiting class was smaller than usual due to the players sticking around for their extra COVID year. There appear to be some quality players that will be impactful for the future of the Maroon & White.

## QUESTIONS/ ANSWERS

The big questions for the Eastern Kentucky University football program begin with their roster holes and how Coach Wells and his staff have been able to fill them. On its face, the recruiting has been impressive by ECU. They have attracted some serious talent to their football program, but the players have to gel and get it done on the field. Colonels face FBS opponent Louisville (September 11) after starting with Western Carolina, who ECU defeated to end their fall 2020 season. OVC's Austin Peay (September 25) stays on ECU's schedule, and then the AQ7 gauntlet begins for the Colonels. The competition for the AQ bid will be fierce, with Sam Houston, Jacksonville State, and UCA receiving preseason notoriety. An at-large may be the most likely way ECU can make the FCS playoffs in 2021. To do that, Eastern Kentucky University must remain consistent and pick up a quality win in the AQ7. The game to circle on the schedule is Central Arkansas (October 16). If the Colonels take care of business against the FCS opponents and come into the game with a 5-1 or 4-2 record, taming the Bears will show they have filled the gaps necessary to compete for the AQ or At-Large bid. But that will not be enough. ECU will need to pick up a road win versus Sam Houston, the reigning FCS Champion, or against Jacksonville State at Roy Kidd Stadium.



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## GRADES

### **Offense**

**C+**

The Colonels have pieces on offense, but the big question is how it will come together and improve in 2021. EKU's rushing offense was thanks to Alonzo Booth, who is no longer on the roster. The Colonels running game needs to improve on the 129.0 yards per game in 2020. QB Mickinney will need to stay healthy and get help from those around him. The passing game in 2020 was much improved and was top 25 in the nation, but they lose Keyion Dixon, who pulled in six TDs last season. Replacing Dixon will be challenging, but WR Edwards and McFadden bring good size and athleticism. The Offensive Line may be the best aspect of the EKU offense, which is a good cornerstone.

### **Special Teams**

**C+**

Mason Moliq and Patrick Nations will battle for the starting kicking job, but both have strong legs, are accurate, and have experience.

Punting was another area that EKU fell into the middle of the pack. Phillip Richards averages 38.0+ yards per punt, but net punting was only about 35 yards per punt. In comparison, the top punter in the FCS, Noah Gettman (Sacred Heart), averaged 46.5 yards. With question marks on the offensive side of the ball, punting is an area that could prove valuable until the Colonels offense starts clicking.

The return game was so-so, averaging 20.17 average yards per return in 2020. Davion Ross has an exceptional talent, and if he gets the blocking needed, he could be a standout KR at the FCS level.

### **Defense**

**B+**

A solid defensive line, great linebackers, and strong defensive backs are what make the Colonels' defense competitive. Defenses win championships, and EKU will have a tough D. There are fewer questions about the defense, but fans will be thrilled with the aggressiveness of the line and athletes off the edge. Increasing the number of QB hurries, tackles for loss, and sacks will be statistics to watch to see how this defense is improving.

### **Intangibles**

**C**

The ASUN-WAC Challenge instantly became one of the strongest conferences in FCS Football. As mentioned before, EKU has to play more consistently and pick up AQ7 wins. The strength of the AQ7 teams will challenge EKU and Coach Walt Wells.

A great stadium and fan base make EKU's intangibles a net positive. The Colonels averaged more than 8,000 fans per game at Roy Kidd Stadium. All teams in the AQ7 will be at 100-percent capacity for the fall. The stadium is on campus and an easy walk for students. An additional 3,000 seats in new bleachers and a concourse was added in 2017. It's a unique structure that seats 20,000 screaming EKU fans.