



# SAM HOUSTON BEARKATS

Western Athletic Conference (WAC)

2020: 10-0

Elliott T. Bowers Stadium

## Bearkats Breakdown

**Location**.....Hunstville,Texas  
**Head Coach**:.....K.C. Keeler  
**Record at SHSU**.....69-22  
**Career Record**.....243-95-1  
**Offensive Coordinator**.....Ryan Carty  
**Defensive Coordinator**.....Clayton Carlin

**Last League Title: 2021**

**Last FCS Playoff: 2021** (Won FCS Championship vs South Dakota 23-21)

**Players to Watch:** QB Eric Schmid, RB Ramon Jefferson, RB Noah Smith, OL Prince Pines, WR Jequez Ezzard, WR Ife Adeyi, WR Cody Crest, TE Isaac Schley, DL Joseph Wallace, DL Trace Mascorro, LB Trevor Williams, LB Markel Perry, DB Jaylon Thomas, Zyon McCollum

### Team Record Last 5 Years:

**2016:** 12-1, 9-0 (Southland) Coach Keeler

**2017:** 12-2, 8-1 (Southland) Coach Keeler

**2018:** 6-5, 5-4 (Southland) Coach Keeler

**2019:** 7-5, 6-2 (Southland) Coach Keeler

Key Wins: #9 Nicholls

**2020:** 10-0, 0-0 (Spring 2021, Southland) Coach Keeler

Key Wins: #18 SLU, #7 Nicholls, #25 UIW,

#10 M... #6 ND... #1... #2 SD...

## **COACH/ PROGRAM**

An easy start in discussing the Sam Houston football program is their run in the Spring 2021 and becoming the FCS National Champion. In a season full of COVID cases, contact tracing, protecting players, limited practices, and an almost non-existent preseason camp. Veteran Head Coach K.C. Keeler is entering his eighth season with the Bearkats and is second among active FCS coaches in total wins. Keeler earned his first national championship ring as a player in 1979 as a linebacker for Delaware. His second came as a head coach in 2003 with Delaware, where he also played from 1978-1980. Keeler's coaching resume is impressive approaching 250 wins and leading his team to the NCAA Playoffs 16 times. Keeler started his coaching career in 1981 at Amherst College (Mass) as an assistant. As an assistant, he continued to coach at Rowan University (NJ) from 1986-1992 but was elevated to head coach in 1993 and went 88-21-1. Coach Keeler was hired at Delaware and brought in a no-huddle spread offense. He became a darling of the State of Delaware earned a 10-year contract in 2008. Just four years later, the relationship soured. The administration heard the calls to replace Keeler, and Hen fans were shocked when he was fired in 2012. Sam Houston hired Keeler in 2014, replacing Willie Fritz. Keeler stepped into a successful program that had played for an FCS Championship in 2011. Under Fritz, the Kats returned to the playoffs in 2012 and 2013. Keeler kept the program moving and advanced to the semifinals of the FCS playoffs his first season. Sam Houston has made the FCS Playoffs in all but two seasons under Keeler and is the favorite among the AQ7 teams to get the automatic bid to defend their title.

Sam Houston has an active rivalry against Stephen F. Austin (WAC) played at NRG Stadium in Houston. The Battle of Piney Woods will remain alive as Sam Houston joins SFA in the new WAC.

The Kats are Nationally Ranked at 172 in recruiting and 5th in the Southland for 2021. Winning a national championship will help with the national attention, but grinding on the recruiting trail and scouring the transfer portal will remain a priority for the coaching staff.

The Bearkats have officially joined the Western Athletic Conference (WAC) and will play in the ASUN-WAC Challenge (AQ7) for the 2021 season. The Bearkats look to continue their run in the refurbished WAC and are the team to beat coming into the preseason. But, new opponents in Jacksonville State and Central Arkansas will challenge Sam Houston, and it will not be an easy journey. STATS Perform FCS Top 25 has Sam Houston at #1 in the national poll.



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## 2021 AQ7 Preseason Football Coaches Poll

Rank	Team (1st Place)	Points
1.	Sam Houston (7)	49
2.	Central Arkansas	40
3.	Jacksonville State	37
4.	Stephen F. Austin	27
5.	Eastern Kentucky	20
6.	Abilene Christian	15
7.	Lamar	8

## OFFENSE

### Quarterback:

The FCS National Champs features one of the best in the FCS under center in **#3 Eric Schmid** (6'1" 180lbs) from Woodlands, Texas. Named to the 2021 Walter Payton Watch List for 2021, the WAC Offensive Player of the Year (Preseason) and All-American has a chance to build on the team's triumphs from last season. The speedy dual-threat QB impressed all season long. Schmid led the FCS Nation in passing yard (2,208 yards) and rushed for 569 yards with eight TDs. He had a QB rating of 147.04, completing 59.7 percent of his passes. Schmid did have nine interceptions in ten games on the season, with six of his nine INTs coming in the playoffs. With a solid staff around him, the Bearkats overcame those mistakes, but Schmid has some improvement in limiting turnovers through the air and on the ground.



Behind Schmid is a group of young and inexperienced QBs, including **#5 Keegan Shoemaker** (6'3" 200lbs/ Lafayette), a transfer that garnered honors as the Phil Steele Patriot League Freshman of the Year and All-American status with Hero Sports. Shoemaker was with Sam Houston for its Championship run; however, this will be his first full off-season under coach Keeler and Offensive Coordinator/QB coach Ryan Carty. **#11 Gunner Capps** (6'3" 210lbs) adds depth to the QB room but is again untested and inexperienced. Good size and phenomenal HS stats make him a potential future starter for the Kats and a challenger to Shoemaker for the backup job. **#13 Tristan Brady** (6'3" 190lbs) and **#17 Matthew Southern** (5'11" 190lbs) are first-years who are there to learn and grow in their talents.

With a star like Schmid leading the way, Sam Houston is in good hands. Staying healthy will be crucial, and he is surrounded by a ton of returning starters from the 2021 Spring season.



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## Running Back:

The Kats rushed for 158.8 ypg (34<sup>th</sup> nationally) and had 25 rushing touchdowns. Returning leading rusher from 2021, **#4 Ramon Jefferson** (5'10" 215lbs/ Maine), is a preseason All-WAC selection after rushing for 781 yards on 126 carries and seven TDs in the spring. Jefferson had three 100+ yard rushing performances and tallied 96 yards in the championship game vs. South Dakota State. Jefferson is a solid back that understands his role in this versatile offense. **#6 Noah Smith** (5'10" 190lbs) was a Southland All-Conference Third Team selection who saw good action in the spring carrying the ball 35 times and was a threat downfield in the passing game with 28 receptions and four TDs. Senior **#26 Kyran Jackson** (5'9" 190lbs) had a breakout season in 2018, earning All-American honors his sophomore season by HERO Sports. Jackson rushed for only 26 carries in 2021 for 95 yards. Add **#29 Jacob Berry** (5'11" 190lbs/ Grand View), a junior transfer from Grand View and a quad of freshman in **#1 Dayron Triche** (5'9" 190lbs), **#26 Zach Hrbacek** (5'9" 175lbs), **#28 Charles Crawford** (5'10" 180lbs), **#32 Weston Stephens** (5'11" 185lbs) and the RB group has good depth. Still, question marks in the experience and quality of talent behind Jefferson, Smith, and Jackson are looming. Sam Houston will likely need a highly talented transfer or four-star type recruit to build for the future. Hrbacek could be that diamond in the rough for the Bearkats. He is considered an electric back from Troy High School and was named one of 25 semifinalists for the Mr. Texas Football Award. He rushed for more than 7,500 yards and 100 touchdowns in his prep career.

## Offensive Line:

The Bearkats offensive line will return all five starters from the Spring 2021 season. Tackle **#79 D'Ary Patton** (6'4" 290lbs) and guard **#52 Colby Thomas** (6'2" 300lbs) anchored the right side and tackle **#75 Eleasah Anderson** (6'4" 345lbs/ Baylor), and guard **#76 Prince Pines** (6'5" 340lbs/ Baylor) handled the left with **#57 Ethan Hagler** (6'2" 305lbs/ Blinn College) at center. Although it took some time to find the chemistry on the offensive line, the Kats O-Line was tremendous once set. This group started all four playoff games for Sam Houston, and they continue to have depth on the line with **#52 Jalen North** (6'4" 295lbs), **#73 Moses Johnson** (6'5" 300lbs), and **#77 Peyton Fifield** (6'4" 285lbs) returning to the offensive unit. North and Johnson both started games for the Kats last season at right guard and tackle, respectively. Fifield returns to the field after a season-ending injury prevented him from playing in the spring. Offensive line coach Chris Rogers is high on Texas State transfer **#50 Reece Jordan** (6'3" 290lbs/ Texas State), who comes in with 24 collegiate games under his belt. The Offensive Line room is stacked with talent and is a true strength for the Bearkats. Another young prospect for the Kats is **#59 Will Jones** (6'2" 310lbs), a three-star recruit from Atascocita HS in Humble, Texas, who was the **#22** ranked center in the nation. Sam Houston lists 19 offensive linemen on their roster, and all have big athletic frames.

## Wide Receiver/ Tight End:

If you paid attention to the FCS Playoffs in the spring, **#12 Jequez Ezzard** (5'10" 195lbs/ Howard) was an unavoidable name. The standout transfer WR for the Bearkats was showered with accolades, and deservedly so, as he helped the Kats run the gauntlet of FCS powerhouse programs to their first title. Ezzard was second on the team in receptions with 38 catches for 861 yards and nine TDs. Coming into Fall 2021, Ezzard has been named to the Walter Payton Award list and Preseason All-American honors from several sources. On the other side of the field from Ezzard is **#2 Ife Adeyi** (5'10" 170lbs), who was another effective receiver for the Kats. Adeyi had 30 receptions for 588 yards and 3 TDs





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and made some of the more athletic catches seen during the spring season. Adding to the weapons for Schmid is the leading receiver for the Kats in the spring **#9 Cody Chrest** (6'1" 200lbs/ Harvard). Chrest changed his jersey number from #89 to #9, had 41 receptions for 463 yards, and averaged 11.29 yards per play. He also reeled in two TDs. **#88 Chandler Harvin** (6'2" 195lbs) returns for Sam Houston and is a big target for Schmid. Harvin caught 13 passes for 169 yards in seven games during the spring season. **#82 Michael Murray** (6'1" 200lbs) is a freshman but is athletic and talented to get some experience in the Fall. A three-star from Lampasas, Texas, caught 39 passes for 810 yards and 15 touchdowns as a senior and had total career stats of 2,361 receiving yards and 31 touchdowns. Waiting in the wings is Kilgore College transfer **#83 Red Jones** (5'11" 170lbs/ Kilgore), FIU transfer **#84 Xavier McGriff** (6'2" 182lbs/ FIU), and redshirt freshman **#81 Derrick Rose** (6'4" 190lbs). There is also a slew of first-year players that will develop as the season progresses.

**#16 Isaac Schley** (6'5" 260lbs) was the most productive in offensive stats with 16 catches for 191 yards at the TE position. **#18 Jacob Kainer** (6'4" 240lbs/ Tulsa) comes to Sam Houston through the transfer portal and is a three-star prospect who played QB in HS. Another former QB is **#86 Jarvis Brooks** (6'2" 235lbs/ Texas Lutheran). Brooks started at QB for the Bulldogs before transitioning to TE in 2019. He comes to the Bearkats and adds size and depth to the TE group.

## DEFENSE

### Defensive Line:

Defenses win championships, and the Bearkats proved that in the spring. The defensive line was impressive every snap. They return 13 players that saw action on the defensive line for Fall 2021. The Kats' front line of defense has been particularly stingy against the run in the last two seasons, leading the nation in rush defense in 2019 and then ranking 11th in the nation in that category in 2020. Returners **#55 Jahari Kay** (6'2" 260lbs/ Laney), **#95 Joseph Wallace** (6'1" 300lbs/ Texas Tech), **#90 Trace Mascorro** (6'1" 270lbs/ UTEP), **#94 Jevon Leon** (6'3" 265lbs) all received All-American honors. The Kat's depth is significant as they can rotate **#92 Scean Mustin** (6'3" 325lbs/ Citrus College) and **#97 Chris Scott** (6'1" 280lbs) into the line and not lose any skill. Kay turned in a breakout season in 2021, finishing as a Buck Buchanan Award finalist after finishing with 13.5 TFLs, 6.0 sacks, and three forced fumbles a year ago. He, along with 2019 Southland Conference Newcomer of the Year Mascorro and 2020 All-American Wallace give the Kats not only a formidable front but an experienced one as none of the three seniors have missed a game over the past two seasons after having transferred in before the 2019 season. Leon led all freshmen in the FCS in both sacks and TFLs in 2019. He followed that up by landing on the all-Southland first team in 2020, while Mustin and Scott proved to be menacing in their rights on the interior. Other returners **#96 Zach Loane** (6'0" 255lbs/ UMASS) and **#44 Juan Henry** (6'3" 230lbs/ Trinity Valley CC) also played key roles a year ago. In comparison, Huntsville native **#59 Briceon Hayes** (6'3" 225lbs) could work his way into the rotation in his second full year with the program despite not seeing any action a year ago. With an experienced group already on hand, the Kats also made it a point to prepare for the future with a strong group of defensive linemen in its last recruiting class that includes **#99 Kamren Washington**, **#56 Cameron Plummer**, **#98 John Mathis**, **#91 Maize Washington** and **#49 Matthew Aribisala** (*excepts from gobearkats.com*).

### 2021 Bearkats Schedule

Sept 2 @Northern Arizona

Sept 11 vs. Southeastern Missouri

Sept 25 @ Central Arkansas

Oct 2 vs. Stephen F. Austin\*

Oct 9 vs. Lamar

Oct 23 vs Jacksonville State

Oct 30 @ Tarleton

Nov 6 vs. Dixie State

Nov 13 vs. Eastern Kentucky

Nov 20 @ Abilene Christian

\* Houston/ NGR Stadium



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## Linebackers:

Sam Houston wants its linebackers to be quick, physical, and intelligent on the field. **#8 Quentin Brown** (6'1" 230lbs/ Tulane) exhibited just that for the Bearkats, as did **#1 Trevor Williams** (5'9" 205lbs). In his first year with Sam Houston after transferring from Tulane, Brown was an instant impact starter finishing as a first-team All-Southland selection and totaling 33 tackles to go with 9.0 TFLs. His length and speed helped him to make plays all over the field. William led the Kats in total tackles with 88, was an All-Southland Conference second-team member, and tied for the FCS lead with 15.0 TFLs on the season. The junior LB and leader of the Bearkat defense have a nose for the ball, and you can often find him wreaking havoc in the opponent's backfields. Rounding out the all-conference selections from 2020 for the Kats is **#33 Markel Perry** (6'2" 220lbs). As a member of the All-Southland second team, he totaled 40 tackles, and 6.5 sacks as the Beaumont natives' physical presence was seen week in and week out. He was outstanding during the playoff run, setting a career-high with 3.0 sacks vs. Monmouth while also forcing an early fumble vs. North Dakota State that helped set the tone for the game. A trio of true freshmen in **#10 Jaylen Phillips** (6'2" 215lbs), **#7 Ysidro Mascorro** (5'11" 210lbs), and **#6 Trey Fields** (6'0" 210lbs) saw their fair share of playing time. Phillips saw time in each of the Kats' 10 games and finished with 5.0 TFLs as well as an interception and fumble recovery. Mascorro also appeared in every game with notable contributions on special teams and collected 18 tackles and a sack. Fields saw action in three games, making a tackle in each. Redshirt freshman Rance McInnis was a mainstay on special teams and grabbed 13 tackles on the year.

Other returners that did not see action include senior **#29 Danzell Sims** (6'1" 225lbs), who dealt with an injury throughout the year. A trio of true freshmen in **#48 Goodness Nwawuihe** (6'1" 240lbs), **#51 Trey Mappe** (6'1" 210lbs), and **#54 Nick Abengowe** (6'2" 205lbs) did not see action in their first season.

Coach Jared Hensley will welcome two transfers this season as well. **#52 Luke Horne** (6'2" 215lbs/ Colorado) comes to Huntsville from Colorado, while Memphis transfer **#35 Tim Hart** (6'2" 230lbs/ Memphis) was a midyear addition last year and practiced on the Bearkats' scout team as he was ineligible due to transfer rules. While at Memphis appeared in 41 games, starting 13 of them. He had 32 multi-tackle games, including 6.5 TFLs. (*excerpts from gobearkats.com*)

## Cornerbacks/Safeties:



The Bearkats allowed 262.10 passing yards per game and 6.79 yards per completion in their championship season. Leading the pass defense was **#4 Braiden Clopton** (5'10" 180lbs). Clopton was a redshirt freshman in 2021 but led the DBs 40 tackles and had a season-high with 13 stops vs. Northwestern State. **#23 Tristin McCollum** (6'4" 200lbs) was also a solid defender in the spring with 50 tackles and a pair of interceptions and earned All-Southland honors. The leader of this defense and the twin brother of Tristan is Buck Buchanan Award watch list honoree **#22 Zyon McCollum** (6'4" 200lbs), named AFCA and HERO Sports All-American. Zyon started all ten games at cornerback and finished with 46 tackles, 3.0 TFL, two forced fumbles, and an interception. He picked off a pass in the second half of



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the semifinal win over James Madison, making him 1 of 7 players in SHSU history with ten or more career interceptions. Zyon landed on the WAC Preseason All-Conference first team. **#13 Isaiah Downes** (6'0" 180lbs/ College of San Mateo) finished the spring with 38 tackles (20 solo) and had a breakout game vs. #18 Southeastern Louisiana when he tallied seven tackles and a TFL. Another Preseason All-WAC selection is **#9 Jaylen Thomas** (5'10" 170lbs) after his spring season with 27 tackles (17 solo). Thomas caused havoc on defense with his dynamic play, causing turnovers in the RedZone and forcing fumbles. He can also be trusted to rush the backfield on a CB Blitz. The depth in the DB room is another area Sam Houston is loaded. **#17 Ke'Shon Murray** (5'10 170lbs), **#10 Jaylen Phillips** (6'2" 210lbs), an impact freshman, **#0 Taylen Blaylock** (5'10 190lbs), and **#2 Kameryn Alexander** (6'0" 170lbs) are solid DBs and could start on most depth charts.

## **SPECIAL TEAMS**

### **Place Kicker:**

**#8 Seth Morgan** (6'2" 200lbs) had a tremendous year as a freshman kicking for a nationally competitive program. He was named HERO Sports All-American after making 45 of 48 on PAT attempts and was 12 for 14 on field goals. Morgan was three for three from beyond 40 yards, including his season-long of 45 yards. That 45-yard field goal was made near the end of the 3rd quarter of the FCS National Championship Game that put the Kats up 17-7. He was solid during the post-season with crucial field goals in playoff wins over North Dakota State and James Madison. It will be a relief for Coach Keeler to have a solid leg returning to his championship team.

### **Punter:**

**#47 Matt McRobert** (5'10" 185lbs/ Barker College), another Preseason All-WAC special teams player, returns to the Bearkats for fall football. McRoberts was a Ray Guy Award watchlist honoree, and a STATS Perform FCS First Team All-American. He led Southland Conference and ranked 15th in FCS with an average of 42.1 yards per punt. Morgan pinned opponents inside the 20-yard line 18 times and had at least one punt of 50+ yards in each of Kats' four playoff wins. Field position was an essential part of the championship run by Sam Houston. McRoberts is building an impressive resume as he was also a nationally ranked punter in 2019 and a Ray Guy Award finalist the same year.

### **Kick Returner/ Punt Returner:**

**#12 Jequez Ezzard** is a gam of FCS football. Not only is he an essential offensive weapon, but he is also a tremendous threat in the return game. Ezzard fielded 18 punts and returned them for 314 yards with two TDs (1<sup>st</sup> Nationally). His average was 17.44 yards per return (3<sup>rd</sup> Nationally) and flipped the field position for the Bearkats, lending to their offensive success. Additionally, **#17 Ke'Shon Murray** was a solid alternative as teams kicked away from Ezzard.

**#21 Kameryn Alexander** served as the returner and averaged 21.0 yards per return as far as kickoff returns. Alexander had his longest return of 56 yards vs. Lamar but did not have a return for a score.

### **Big Question:**

The big question for Coach Keeler has little to do with his team. The big question is, was the spring season an "asterisk" season because of opt-outs and players missing games due to COVID protocols? There is no doubt Sam Houston is talented and would have likely made a deep run into the FCS Playoffs if it were a typical season. Many fans question if North Dakota State was at full strength? Is James Madison's stock rising or falling? Literally, three plays could have changed the course of Sam Houston's playoff run. They were just one play better than NDSU, JMU, and SDSU in the playoffs. The Bearkats want to use their spring experience and camps to separate themselves from others in the FCS top tier.



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## Grades

### Offense

Eric Schmid got a lot of national attention because of the long run in the spring for Sam Houston. Schmid is a very speedy, athletic, and decisive QB. He has had some issues holding onto the ball, but he is still one of the best at the FCS level. Sam Houston is in good hands as long as Schmid stays healthy. Behind Schmid, there is a battle for a backup between sophomore transfer Keegan Shoemaker, second-year freshman Trapper Pannell, and freshman Gunner Capps. Bearkats fans don't want to think about a snap without Schmid, but behind him looms questions for who backs him up. **Grade A (9/10)**

### Defense

Looking at the Bearkats defense, it is easy to see they are good...really good. There are not a lot of holes to be concerned with as far as personnel goes. The Linebacking corps got picked on a bit by excellent QBs like SLU's Cole Kelley. But as a unit, they only allowed 19.6 ppg and are returning all their key components. Players like #33 Markel Perry and Memphis transfer #35 Tim Hart have been mentioned by the coaching staff as stepping up in the camps. This defense is going to be one of the best in the nation once again. **Grade A (9/10)**

### Special Teams

PK Seth Morgan and P Matt McRobert are two of the best kickers in the FCS, and they sit (or stand) on the Sam Houston sideline waiting to be called upon. They both are of great value and return to continue to make Sam Houston's special teams another nationally ranked group. Add in Ezzard returning punts, and the special teams' threat is legit. It's the best special teams unit in the FCS, and it isn't even close, despite Morgan missing a crucial PAT in the national championship game. **Grade A+ (10/10)**

### Intangibles

As a new member of the WAC and playing in the new ASUN-WAC Challenge for 2021, Sam Houston's schedule difficulty will increase, but they still have a favorable schedule, with no money games on it and both ranked opponents come after a bye week at home. Sam Houston starts 7,000 feet in Flagstaff, Arizona vs. Northern Arizona University (Sept 2). They get to use their new locker room at Bowers Stadium for the first time vs. Southern Missouri (Sept 11) for First Responder Appreciation Day in Hunstville. The Bearkats' first bye week comes after SEMO...yes, FIRST bye week. The Kats open up their ASUN/WAC Challenge schedule on the road off the bye week vs. #14 Central Arkansas (Sept 25). The Battle of the Piney Wood (vs. Stephen F. Austin) in Houston is on October 2. The Sam Houston hosts Lamar (Oct 9), and then after their second bye week, they host #10 Jacksonville State (Oct 23). The Bearkats don't have to leave the state of Texas after the third game week. Their final four games are @ Tarleton (Oct 30), vs. Dixie State (Nov 6), vs. ECU (Nov 13), @ Abilene Christian (Nov 20) to round out the regular season.

Sam Houston averaged 4,878 fans (2019) at the 14,000-seat Elliott T. Bowers Stadium, below the FCS average for 2019. The home of SHSU opened in 1986 and featured a new AstroTurf 3D3-60 turf system installed during the summer of 2016 and a state-of-the-art video board. In 2021, the Ron Madrigue Field House was renovated, leaving the team with no locker room or laundry room during their championship run. A design proposal approved in August by The Texas State University System Board of Regents states that the project is expected to be finished in July 2021, with an estimated \$11,667,000.

The @BearkatsFB has 24.9K followers and has been highly active, especially since the national championship. They have great content, including graphics, photos, and the occasional video.



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Being the defending (or as Coach Keeler says, the "attacking") national champions puts the spotlight on the entire team. The Bearkats are deep and healthy and are expected to make another run at Frisco, Texas. They are loaded, and that comes with a lot of pressure. Therefore there are expectations, which means anything less than another championship will disappoint the Bearkats.

**Grade B+ (8/10)**