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EASTERN WASHINGTON HEAVILY FAVORED

PARK CITY, Utah (July 15, 2014) - Beau Baldwin's Eastern Washington Eagles are a heavy favorite to capture the 2014 Big Sky Conference football championship, according to the league coaches and media.

The Eagles topped the preseason coaches' and media polls, which were released Tuesday at the Big Sky Summer Kickoff. Coaches were not allowed to vote for their own team.

Eastern Washington received all 12 of the possible first-place votes and 144 total points in the coaches' poll. The Eagles earned 34 of the 36 first-place votes and 464 total points in the media poll.

Montana was tabbed second in both polls, followed by Montana State, Cal Poly, Northern Arizona and Southern Utah. Montana earned one first-place vote from the coaches and one from the media. Montana State received one first-place media vote.

Eastern Washington has advanced to the national semifinals each of the past two seasons. The Eagles finished 8-0 in conference play in 2013, becoming the first league team other than Montana to go undefeated since 1991.

Eastern Washington is slated to return six starters on offense and five on defense. Junior quarterback Vernon Adams returns to an offense that scored a Big Sky single-season record 83 touchdowns in 2013. Adams, a junior, was the Big Sky MVP and Walter Payton Award runner-up last season. He threw for 4,994 yards and a Big Sky single-season record 55 touchdowns while leading the nation in pass efficiency at 183.1

Adams' top target also returns in sophomore Cooper Kupp, who won the Jerry Rice Award as the nation's outstanding freshman. Kupp led the nation with 1,691 receiving yards and 21 touchdowns, a Big Sky single-season record. Eastern Washington averaged 39.5 points per game last season.

The Eagles open the season on Aug. 23 against Sam Houston State of the Southland Conference. It will be the first Division I football game of the season, and will be televised nationally on ESPN.

2014 Preseason Football Polls

1. Eastern Washington (12)	144
2. Montana (1)	130
3. Montana State	111
4. Cal Poly	108
5. Northern Arizona.....	100
6. Southern Utah	89
7. Sacramento State	79
8. Portland State.....	71
9. UC Davis	66
10. North Dakota.....	34
11. Weber State	30
12. Idaho State	28
13. Northern Colorado	23

Media Poll

1. Eastern Washington (34)	464
2. Montana (1)	416
3. Montana State (1)	364
4. Cal Poly	329
5. Northern Arizona.....	328
6. Southern Utah	299
7. UC Davis	228
8. Portland State.....	227
9. Sacramento State.....	222
10. Idaho State.....	124
11. North Dakota	121
12. Weber State	103
13. Northern Colorado	61

First-place votes in parentheses. Coaches were not allowed to vote for their own teams.

Baldwin guided the Eagles to the 2010 Division I National Championship. He has taken the Eagles to the playoffs four of the past five seasons.

Montana rebounded from a 5-6 campaign in 2012 to win 10 games and earn an at-large bid to the playoffs in 2013. The Grizzlies, coached by Mick Delaney, are slated to return seven offensive and five defensive starters.

Montana's offense will be led by senior quarterback Jordan Johnson, a candidate for the Walter Payton Award, and junior wide receiver Ellis Henderson. Senior defensive end Zack Wagenmann is a candidate for the Buck Buchanan Award.

Montana State, winners of three straight Big Sky titles from 2010-12, looks for a return to the playoffs in 2014. Rob Ash's club must replace four-year starter and two-time Big Sky MVP DeNarius McGhee at quarterback. The Bobcats return six offensive and seven defensive starters. The defense will also be buoyed by the return of linebacker Na'a Moeakiola, who missed last season with an injury.

Cal Poly, which shared the Big Sky title in 2012, figures to contend in 2014 as long as injuries don't hinder the Mustangs like they did in 2013. Tim Walsh's Mustangs return eight offensive and seven defensive starters. The Mustangs led the nation in rushing in 2013 behind senior Kristaan Ivory, who gained 1,113 yards on the ground. Linebacker Nick Dzubnar returns to lead a defensive unit that was tops in the league in scoring and against the rush.

Northern Arizona is coming off its best season in a decade. The Lumberjacks finished 7-1 in conference and earned a spot in the postseason for the first time since 2003. The Lumberjacks return eight defensive starters, but just two from a defense that tied the Big Sky single-season record with six touchdowns in 2013.

Southern Utah was tabbed sixth in both polls. The Thunderbirds are coming off their first-ever NCAA playoff appearance following an 8-4 regular-season that included a win over FBS South Alabama. Southern Utah returns eight starters on offense and seven on defense, including Buck Buchanan Award candidate James Cowser at defensive end.

Sacramento State was selected seventh in the coaches' poll, followed by Portland State, UC Davis, North Dakota, Weber State, Idaho State and Northern Colorado. The media tabbed UC Davis seventh, followed by Portland State, Sacramento State, Idaho State, North Dakota, Weber State and Northern Colorado.

Sacramento State is under the direction of interim coach Jody Sears, who was Weber State's head coach in 2012 and 2013. The Hornets return all 11 starters on offense, including senior quarterback Garrett Safron, and senior wide receiver DeAndre Carter, who hauled in 14 TD passes as a junior.

Weber State and North Dakota both welcome new head coaches. Jay Hill takes over Weber State, while Bubba Schweigert is the new North Dakota head man.

Big Sky Conference play will begin on Saturday, Sept. 27. All conference teams will play eight league games.

The 24-team playoff field will be announced on Sunday, Nov. 23. The national championship game is slated for Jan. 10 in Frisco, Texas.