



Jacksonville State Picked as 2014 Ohio Valley Conference Football Favorites

July 21, 2014

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Kyle Schwartz

NASHVILLE - Jacksonville State has been picked the preseason favorite in the 2014 Ohio Valley Conference football race in a vote of league head coaches and sports information directors. The Gamecocks, who have also been picked preseason favorites in 2005, 2008, 2010 and 2011, picked up 10 of the 18 first-place votes to top the poll.

The Gamecocks totaled 118 total points to out-distance two-time defending champion **Eastern Illinois** in the vote. The Panthers picked up four first-place votes and 110 total points in being picked second. **Tennessee State** picked up the other four first-place votes and was third with 107 points. Those three teams each qualified for and won games in the NCAA Division I Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) Playoffs last season. **Eastern Kentucky** was picked fourth (82 points) and was followed in the poll by **UT Martin** (79), **Murray State** (54), **Tennessee Tech** (48), **Southeast Missouri State** (34) and **Austin Peay** (16).

For the second-straight season Jacksonville State is under the direction of a new head coach as **John Grass** was elevated from the Offensive Coordinator position following the Gamecocks season that saw the team go 11-4 overall and advance to the FCS Quarterfinals. Grass brought an innovative offense with him to JSU, as the team set numerous school, OVC and NCAA records in 2013. This season the Jax State alum has 77 letterwinners returning, including nine offensive and six defensive starters. Among the returning players is Preseason OVC Offensive Player of the Year **DaMarcus James**. James earned numerous All-American honors a year ago after rushing for a JSU record 1,477 yards and an OVC record 29 touchdowns. Also back is sophomore signal caller **Eli Jenkins** who was electric in leading the Gamecocks deep into the postseason; in three playoff games, Jenkins totaled 330 rushing yards and a touchdown and 362 passing yards and three passing scores. Other JSU players selected to the Preseason All-OVC team included sophomore wide receiver **Josh Barge** (the team's leading receiver as a freshman), senior offensive linemen **Max Holcombe** and **Blake Burks**, senior defensive lineman **Caleb Lawrence**, junior defensive lineman **Chris Landrum** and junior punter **Hamish MacInnes**.

Despite the fact the team graduated Walter Payton Award winner Jimmy Garoppolo (a second round pick of the New England Patriots) and FCS ADA National Wide Receiver of the Year Erik Lora (an undrafted free agent signee of the Minnesota Vikings), the talent cupboard is far from bare for first-year head coach **Kim Dameron**. Dameron, who was most recently the defensive coordinator at Louisiana Tech and served as an EIU assistant coach back in 2000, has seven offensive and six defensive starters back from last year's OVC championship squad that was 12-2 overall and finished the season ranked fourth nationally. Among the returnees are eight players who earned Preseason All-OVC honors including junior running back/return specialist **Shepard Little** who was selected at two positions and who is on the Preseason Walter Payton Award Watch List. Little rushed for 1,551 yards (seventh-most nationally) in his debut season with the Panthers while averaging 156.6 all-purpose yards/game (10th nationally). He scored 19 total touchdowns in 2013, including 15 on the ground, two on punt returns and two on receptions while also throwing a touchdown pass. Whoever takes over for Garoppolo at quarterback (either senior **Andrew Manley** or Kentucky transfer **Jalen Whitlow**) will have two Preseason All-OVC selections to throw the ball to in seniors **Adam Drake** and **Jeff LePak**. Drake caught 85 passes and scored 13 touchdowns a season ago while LePak added 51 grabs and eight scores; the team also returns **Keiondre Gober** who had 48 catches and nine touchdowns. Among the team's defensive returners are senior defensive back **Jourdan Wickliffe** (who had a team-best 91 tackles last season), senior linebacker **Robert Haynes** (79 tackles) and junior lineman **Dino Fanti** (team-high 14.5 tackles-for-loss in 2013).

Tennessee State has improved its win total in each of **Rod Reed's** first four seasons, reaching 10 overall wins and a playoff berth a season ago. The team was 6-2 in OVC play and earned an automatic bid to the FCS Playoffs, shutting out Butler 31-0 in the first round to snap the OVC's 19-game postseason losing streak. Now in his fifth season as head coach Reed returns 58 players from last year's team including six offensive and six defensive starters. The defense should once again be solid after ranking sixth nationally in total defense (296.9 yards/game) and scoring defense (18.1 points/game) and ninth nationally in turnovers gained (31) last season. That defensive unit is led by reigning OVC Defensive Player of the Year **Anthony Bass** who was also tabbed this year's Preseason Defensive Player of the Year; in 2013 Bass had 34 tackles, 14.5 tackles-for-loss, 10.0 sacks, four pass breakups, six quarterback hurries, two forced fumbles, two fumble recoveries, a blocked kick and a safety. Also back is senior defensive back **Daniel Fitzpatrick** who was named the National Defensive Back of the Year by the FCS ADA a season ago. Fitzpatrick led all Division I players (FBS or FCS) with eight interceptions as a junior and is on the Preseason Buck Buchanan Award Watch List. The offense will be led by senior quarterback **Michael German** who missed the beginning of last season but worked his way back in the lineup before the end of the season. In seven games German completed 60 percent of his passes for 1,168 yards and 13 touchdowns without throwing an interception.

Eastern Kentucky continued its streak of never being picked lower than fourth in the OVC preseason poll by being tabbed fourth this season after a 6-6 season in 2013. This year **Dean Hood's** squad returns six offensive and six defensive starters including 2013 OVC Freshman of the Year **Devin Borders**. Borders caught a team-best 34 passes for 509 yards and six touchdowns last season and also blocked five kicks on special teams, the most blocked kicks by any player at the FCS level during the season. The Colonels will also be stout at the running back spot, as they return sophomore **JJ Jude** (who rushed for 637 yards and six scores a year ago) and welcome Kentucky transfer **Dy'Shawn Mobley** who rushed for 300 yards on 43 carries (7.0 yards/carry) in the SEC last year. Defensively senior defensive back **Brandon Stanley** returns after leading the team with 61 tackles a year ago. The Colonels have a tough schedule that sees them playing just one home game over the first six weeks of the season.

Jason Simpson enters his ninth season at UT Martin, making him the longest tenured active coach in the league. Simpson has won 48 OVC games in his first eight years with the program; prior to his arrival UTM had managed just 37 total OVC wins in the previous 14 years (under five different head coaches). Simpson guided the team to a 7-5 record a season ago behind a two-quarterback system that featured now junior **Jarod Neal** and rising senior **Dylan Favre**. The duo combined for 2,610 passing yards and 18 touchdowns last season and will each see action once again this season. That duo will have four returning offensive line starters to protect them including senior **Charles Sweeton** who was a Preseason All-OVC selection. On the defensive side of the ball senior linebacker **Tony Bell** is one of 20 players nationally on the Preseason Buck Buchanan Award Watch List. In earning multiple All-American honors a year ago Bell had 80 tackles, an OVC-best 15 tackles-for-loss and 10.5 sacks while being named National Defensive Player of the Week twice during the season.

Murray State returns seven offensive and six defensive starters from last year's team that was 6-6 overall and 4-4 in OVC play. The Racers offense put up 29.8 points and nearly 400 yards of total offense per game a season ago but do have spots to fill at quarterback and wide receiver. Despite the departure of All-American Walter Powell to the NFL, MSU does return the quartet of junior wideouts in **Jeremy Harness**, **Paul Rice**, **Nevar Griffin** and **Janawski Davis** who combined for 122 catches a season ago. The quarterback race is a battle between redshirt sophomore **KD Humphries**, senior **Parks Frazier** (666 yards and four touchdowns last season) and senior **CJ Bennett**, who transferred from South Alabama.

Tennessee Tech head coach **Watson Brown** begins his eighth season in Cookeville and 30th overall as a head coach in 2014. The 2011 OVC Coach of the Year has 49 returning letterwinners from last year's squad that won its final two games of the season. Among the returning players are two Preseason All-OVC selections in senior linebacker **Tra'Darius Goff** and senior defensive back **Marty Jones**. Goff led the team with 101 tackles a season ago while also registering 8.5 tackles-for-loss, 3.0 sacks, three forced fumbles and two fumble recoveries. Jones was second on the team with 98 stops while also netting 5.0 tackles-for-loss, two interceptions, three pass breakups, a forced fumble and two fumble recoveries. The team returns two quarterbacks in senior **Darian Stone** (1,008 passing yards and four touchdowns and a team-best 523 rushing yards and seven rushing scores) and sophomore **Jared Davis** (935 passing yards and 9 touchdowns). Both will see action on the field this season with Stone taking on the new hybrid QW position that will highlight his versatility on the wing.

Southeast Missouri begins the **Tom Matukewicz** Era this season as Coach "Tuke" was named the 13th head coach in program history in December after spending the last two seasons at Toledo after stints at Northern Illinois and Southern Illinois. The Redhawks return nine offensive and eight defensive starters from last season's team. Among the returning players is Preseason All-OVC wide receiver selection **Paul McRoberts** who had a breakout campaign in 2013. After hauling in 11 catches for 138 yards as a freshman, McRoberts increased his total to 44 catches for 646 yards and nine touchdowns a season ago. Also returning is junior running back **DeMichael Jackson** who rushed for 977 yards and four touchdowns a season ago. Defensively **Austin Black** was a finalist for the Jerry Rice Award (given to the top freshman in the FCS) in 2013 after registering 52 tackles, 9.5 tackles-for-loss and 4.5 sacks in 12 games.

Austin Peay begins the second season under head coach **Kirby Cannon** in 2014. Cannon returns 40 players from his first year in Clarksville including four offensive and three defensive starters. Overall the team will be young as 43 of the team's 93 players are freshmen. Among the players to watch this season are senior defensive back **Johnathan Shuler** and sophomore linebacker **Antonio Turner**. Shuler led the team with 76 tackles last season while Turner was second on the squad with 67 stops, despite missing two games. The team will play the season in the newly renovated Governors Stadium which underwent a 19 million dollar renovation in the offseason.

All-OVC Preseason Football Team

Jacksonville State senior running back **DaMarcus James** was named the 2014 Ohio Valley Conference Preseason Offensive Player of the Year while Tennessee State senior defensive end **Anthony Bass** was named Preseason Defensive Player of the Year in a vote of by the league's head football coaches and sports information directors.

Eastern Illinois and Jacksonville State each had eight Preseason All-OVC selections to lead all teams. Tennessee State had six picks, Tennessee Tech and UT Martin had two apiece while Eastern Kentucky and Southeast Missouri each had one. Returning players who were first-team All-OVC selections last season (10 in total) were automatic selections to the preseason team this year. The squad also included nine players who were second-team picks in 2013. Of the 28 total selections, 20 were seniors, six were juniors and two were sophomores.

The offensive unit was led by James who earned All-American honors last season after rushing for a JSU record 1,477 yards and scoring an OVC record 29 rushing touchdowns in leading the Gamecocks to the FCS Quarterfinals. He is joined at the running back position by Eastern Illinois junior **Shepard Little** who rushed for 1,548 yards and 15 touchdowns in helping his team to the OVC title and FCS Quarterfinals. Both James and Shepard are on the Preseason Walter Payton Award Watch List released by the Sports Network in early July. Two quarterbacks are on the squad in Tennessee State senior **Michael German** (84-of-140, 1168 yards, 13 TDs) and Jacksonville State sophomore **Eli Jenkins** (74-of-124, 887 yards, 3 passing TDs; 953 rushing yards, 8 rushing TDs). The wide receiver picks were Eastern Illinois senior **Adam Drake** (85 catches, 1305 yards, 13 TDs), Southeast Missouri junior **Paul McRoberts** (44 catches, 646 yards, 9 TDs) and Jacksonville State sophomore **Josh Barge** (58 catches, 885 yards, 2 TDs) while the tight end selection was EIU senior **Jeff LePak** (51 catches, 723 yards, 8 TDs). The offensive line included Jacksonville State senior **Max Holcombe**, Eastern Illinois senior **Collin Seibert**, Jacksonville State senior **Blake Burks**, Tennessee State senior **Robert Myers** and UT Martin senior **Charles Sweeton**.

Bass was named OVC Defensive Player of the Year in 2013 after registering 34 tackles, 14.5 tackles-for-loss, 10.0 sacks, four pass breakups, six quarterback hurries, two forced fumbles, two fumble recoveries, a blocked kick and a safety in leading the Tigers into the second round of the FCS Playoffs. It marks the second-straight year a TSU player has been named Preseason Defensive Player of the Year (Stephen Godbolt III earned the honor in 2013). Bass is joined on the defensive line by Eastern Illinois junior **Dino Fanti** (45 tackles, 14.5 TFL, 5.0 sacks, 3 FR), Jacksonville State senior **Caleb Lawrence** (46 tackles, 10.5 TFL, 5.5 sacks, 2 QBH) and JSU junior **Chris Landrum** (38 tackles, 10.5 TFL, 4.0 sacks, 4 QBH). The linebacker selections included Tennessee State senior **Nick Thrasher** (110 tackles, 12.0 TFL, 3 FF, 3 FR), UT Martin senior **Tony Bell** (80 tackles, 15.0 TFL, 10.5 sacks, 8 QBH, 3 FF, 3 FR), Eastern Illinois senior **Robert Haynes** (79 tackles, 6.5 TFL, 2.0 sacks, 2 FF) and Tennessee Tech senior **Tra'Darius Goff** (101 tackles, 8.5 TFL, 3.0 sacks, 3 FF, 2 FR). The defensive back choices were TSU seniors **Daniel Fitzpatrick** (75 tackles, 5.5 TFL, 8 INTs, 8 PBU) and **De'Ante Saunders** (39 tackles, 5.0 TFL, 4 INTs, 9 PBU), Eastern Illinois senior **Jourdan Wickliffe** (91 tackles, 3.0 TFL, 3 INTs, 8 PBU, 4 FF) and Tennessee Tech senior **Marty Jones** (98 tackles, 5.0 TFL, 2 INTs, 1 FF, 2 FR).

Specialists selected to the preseason team included Eastern Kentucky senior kicker **Andrew Lloyd** (8-of-10 FGs, 19-of-19 PATs), Jacksonville State junior **Hamish MacInnes** (42.9 yards per punt, Long of 86, 18 of 50-plus yards) and EIU's Little, who was selected as a return specialist (20.0 yards/kick return, 23.5 yards/punt return, 2 TDs) in addition to being a selection at running back.

2014 Preseason All-Ohio Valley Conference Football Team

(Selected by OVC Head Football Coaches and Sports Information Directors)

Preseason Offensive Player of the Year: DaMarcus James (RB), Jacksonville State

Preseason Defensive Player of the Year: Anthony Bass (DL), Tennessee State

OFFENSE

<u>Pos.</u>	<u>Player, School</u>	<u>Ht.</u>	<u>Wt.</u>	<u>Yr.</u>	<u>Hometown</u>
QB	Michael German, Tennessee State	6-2	215	Sr.	Pompano Beach, Fla.
QB	Eli Jenkins, Jacksonville State	6-3	200	So.	Birmingham, Ala.
RB	DaMarcus James, Jacksonville State *	5-10	220	Sr.	Demopolis, Ala.
RB	Shepard Little, Eastern Illinois *	5-10	198	Jr.	Schaumburg, Ill.
WR	Adam Drake, Eastern Illinois **	6-2	199	Sr.	Charleston, Ill.
WR	Josh Barge, Jacksonville State	6-1	178	So.	Carrollton, Ga.
WR	Paul McRoberts, Southeast Missouri	6-3	192	Jr.	St. Louis, Mo.
TE	Jeff LePak, Eastern Illinois *	6-6	222	Sr.	Belton, Texas
C	Max Holcombe, Jacksonville State *	6-3	290	Sr.	Tuscaloosa, Ala.
OG	Collin Seibert, Eastern Illinois *	6-4	277	Sr.	Oswego, Ill.
OG	Blake Burks, Jacksonville State	6-1	318	Sr.	Hoover, Ala.
OT	Charles Sweeton, UT Martin **	6-5	291	Sr.	Lawrenceburg, Tenn.
OT	Robert Myers, Tennessee State **	6-5	310	Sr.	LaVergne, Tenn.

DEFENSE

<u>Pos.</u>	<u>Player, School</u>	<u>Ht.</u>	<u>Wt.</u>	<u>Yr.</u>	<u>Hometown</u>
DL	Anthony Bass, Tennessee State *	6-2	230	Sr.	Clarksville, Tenn.
DL	Dino Fanti, Eastern Illinois **	6-1	273	Jr.	Venice, Fla.
DL	Caleb Lawrence, Jacksonville State **	6-0	300	Sr.	Opelika, Ala.
DL	Chris Landrum, Jacksonville State	6-3	250	Jr.	Sweet Water, Ala.
LB	Nick Thrasher, Tennessee State *	6-2	240	Sr.	Morrow, Ga.
LB	Tony Bell, UT Martin *	6-1	200	Sr.	Memphis, Tenn.
LB	Robert Haynes, Eastern Illinois **	6-0	234	Sr.	Punta Gorda, Fla.
LB	Tra'Darius Goff, Tennessee Tech **	5-11	235	Sr.	Columbia, Tenn.
DB	Daniel Fitzpatrick, Tennessee State *	6-2	215	Sr.	Ft. Wayne, Ind.
DB	Jourdan Wickliffe, Eastern Illinois *	6-1	195	Sr.	Columbus, Ohio
DB	Marty Jones, Tennessee Tech **	6-1	190	Sr.	Cincinnati, Ohio
DB	De'Ante Saunders, Tennessee State	5-11	200	Sr.	DeLand, Fla.

SPECIALISTS

<u>Pos.</u>	<u>Player, School</u>	<u>Ht.</u>	<u>Wt.</u>	<u>Yr.</u>	<u>Hometown</u>
K	Andrew Lloyd, Eastern Kentucky	5-11	190	Sr.	Winchester, Va.
P	Hamish MacInnes, Jacksonville State	6-1	183	Jr.	Victoria, Australia
RS	Shepard Little, Eastern Illinois **	5-10	198	Jr.	Schaumburg, Ill.

* - 1st team All-OVC team in 2013 ** - 2nd team All-OVC team in 2013

2014 OVC Football Predicted Order of Finish

(Selected by OVC Head Football Coaches and Sports Information Directors)

	<u>Order of Finish</u>	<u>Points</u>
1.	Jacksonville State (10 first-place votes)	118
2.	Eastern Illinois (4)	110
3.	Tennessee State (4)	107
4.	Eastern Kentucky	82
5.	UT Martin	79
6.	Murray State	54
7.	Tennessee Tech	48
8.	Southeast Missouri	34
9.	Austin Peay	16

Note: 8 points awarded for a first-place vote, 7 for second, etc. - Coaches and SID's could not vote for their own teams