2018 Football Preview

Utah State University

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Recommended Citation
Utah State University, "2018 Football Preview" (2018). The Utah Statesman. 640.
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“There’s been a great foundation laid here.”

-KEITH PATTERSON
SEASON OUTLOOK

Every team starts the season with a 0-0 record. Theoretically, every team has the chance over the next several months to write their names down in the history books. Usually, that chance is minimal at best. Not every team can win the Super Bowl. Not every team can go to a bowl game. Not every team can go to a bowl game. By the sheer mathematics of sports, there has to be equal parts losing and winning and ecstasy. But it is that gamble of misery versus euphoria that makes these special teams special in the first place. As the clichés go, the sweet without the bitter is never as sweet.

Utah State football is no stranger to the bitter. For decades, Aggie football has been synonymous with pain and misery. To be an Aggie fan was to buy into that “every team starts the season undefeated” malarkey and ultimately succumb to the pain and misery of yet another losing season.

Then, something changed. A second half comeback at Hawaii. A 5-game winning streak to make it to the school’s first bowl game in almost 15 years. An undefeated conference record and a WAC championship. An 11-win season capped with a bowl victory, the first of three straight bowl wins in the past three years. The sugar rush has worn off, and fans are clamoring for more.

Perhaps this is the year of plenty fans have been waiting for? The team returns mentors of depth at nearly every position on the roster, also bringing in one of the most hyped recruiting classes of the Matt Wells era. Sophomore QB Jordan Love returns to lead what could be a high-powered offense bolstered by returning playmakers like senior WR Ron’quavion Tarver, junior TT Dax Raymond, and RB Gerold Bright as well as incoming transfers like junior RB Darwin Thompson, junior WR Devin Heckstall, and graduate transfer Jalen Greene.

Defensively, the team returns nine starters from last year’s team, led by senior Tuli Tamasina and sophomore Ja’Marcus Ingram, and a staggering amount of depth. Meanwhile, Lou Groza award finalist Dominik Eberle and senior punter Aaron Dalton anchor a talented special teams unit. The talent is there for the Aggies to become something special, and the schedule obliges.

By several preseason projections, Utah State is favored in 10 of their 12 regular season games, with ESPN’s FPI giving the Aggies more than a 66 percent chance of victory in eight games. In all seriousness, the Aggies could travel to Boise in late November with a MW championship berth on the line.

It’s one thing to speak of preseason projects in August, however. It’s another thing entirely to actually be in the midst of conference title contention in November. The next few months could be filled with the ecstatic return of Utah State football to MW prominence or the familiar dread of another disappointing season. One more season failing to meet expectations could throw the entire program into turmoil. The future of Utah State football hinges on this season.

In four months, we’ll know the story of this Aggie football season. Until then, the question will be asked: bitter or sweet?
SCHEDULE

08 / 31  USU @ MICHIGAN STATE  5:00 PM
09 / 08  USU VS NEW MEXICO STATE  6:00 PM
09 / 13  USU VS TENNESSEE TECH  6:00 PM
09 / 22  USU VS AIR FORCE  8:15 PM
10 / 05  USU @ BYU  7:00 PM
10 / 13  USU VS UNLV  2:00 PM
10 / 20  USU @ WYOMING  12:30 PM
10 / 27  USU VS NEW MEXICO  2:00 PM
11 / 03  USU @ HAWAI’I  10:00 PM
11 / 10  USU VS SAN JOSE STATE  2:00 PM
11 / 17  USU @ COLORADO STATE  12:00 PM
11 / 24  USU @ BOISE STATE  TBD
Quarterbacks

It’s a fair question to wonder if this year’s batch of quarterbacks may have the most talent we’ve seen at Utah State in decades. The question to answer, however, is how much of that talent can be realized this season and how much of it will remain untapped potential until further notice. Jordan Love returns after a promising freshman campaign which saw the product from Bakersfield, California appear in 12 games and start in six. Over those appearances, Love threw for 1,361 yards with a 54.9 completion percentage, and tallied eight touchdowns while adding another two scores on the ground. Plugged into the starting lineup halfway through the season, Love then led the offense to post single-game point tallies of 52, 38, and 35 and eclipsed 440 yards of total offense four separate times. But with the promising upside also came the expected growing pains. Love failed to surpass 170 yards passing in three of the final five games of USU’s season, and was unable to lead the Aggies to paydirt in the Arizona Bowl, with Utah State’s offense going only three of eight on opportunities inside the 10-yard line. All told, the insertion of Love into the starting lineup resulted in Utah State averaging almost 50 yards more per game over the second half of the season relative to the first. Now, with a full offseason as the entrenched starter, and with offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach David Yost sticking around for a second season, Love could be poised for a breakout season. Coaches have boasted his work ethic and improved accuracy this offseason, though it’ll be another thing entirely for such improvements to appear in a live game. If Love falters, options stand ready on the sidelines. Redshirt freshman Henry Colombi, a former 3-star recruit out of high school, boasts impressive arm strength and accuracy and could quickly ascend into a starting role if given the chance. Even behind Colombi, true freshman Andrew People has shown flashes in both spring ball and fall camp and could push for the starting job in future seasons. True freshman QB Will Dana out of Alta High School in Sandy, Utah rounds out the quarterbacks room.

Running Backs

A running back group which USU head coach Matt Wells described as one of the deepest positions on the team may be one of the highlights for the Aggie offense this season. Though the Aggies lose their top-two players from last season in terms of rushing yardage in running back Lashan Hunt and quarterback Kent Myers, they hope to rely on young talent and newcomers to carry the load this season. Junior Gerald Bright and senior Eltoro Allen are the top-two returning running backs from last season, but both combined for just 559 yards on the season. Junior college transfer Darwin Thompson should provide a much needed spark for the running game, as he was named a National Junior College Athletics Association 2nd-Team All American last season at Northeastern Oklahoma A&M where he led the nation in all-purpose yards with 1,910, and ranked second in the nation with 7.5 yards per carry. Sophomores Jordan Walker and Tre Miller had injury-ridden seasons last year, but will look to break into the rotation of running backs in 2018. An offensive line which returns five starters from last year should make the job of the running backs significantly easier.

Wide Receivers/Tight Ends

This year’s USU squad returns seven of its past 10 pass catchers, but that didn’t stop Wells from bringing in several new talented players during the summer. Last year’s top receiver, Jojo Qinuave Turner, returns for his senior season looking to top the 500 receiving yards and seven touchdowns he brought in last season, while preseason All-Mountain West tight end Dax Raymond comes back bigger, faster and stronger for his junior campaign. The Aggies did lose a strong outside receiver to graduation in Brandon Butter, but fans are hopeful that his production can be replaced with some new faces. USU adds graduate-transfer wide receiver Jalen Greene, who spent his first four seasons at USC. They also add 6’5 junior college transfer Devin Heckstall to the outside, while bringing back sophomore Savon Scarver who hit his stride toward the end of the season. Sophomore Jordan Nathan adds electricity at the slot receiver position, and will likely see an increase in workload this year after catching the ball 25 times for 324 yards last season. Seniors Aaron Vaughns and DJ Nelson add depth to the slot position, and a handful of freshmen will vie for playing time at the receiver spot as well.
Offensive Line

The offensive line can be the key to success for any offense. Give your quarterback enough time to throw the ball and nearly any QB can pick apart a defensive secondary. Give your running back a large enough gap to run through and nearly any RB can look like an NFL talent. USU’s O-line has fallen short of those abilities in the past few years, but this season’s group has a tremendous potential to elevate the Aggie offense to new heights. The group returns seven lettermen from last season, including all six players who started a game. Seniors Sean Taylor and Roman Andrus return to bookend the line at the tackle positions, while junior Moroni Iniguez and senior Rob Castaño once again man the guard spots. MW All-Conference honorable mention center Quin Ficklin leads the group in his senior season. Behind the starting five, reinforcements will be frequent and plentiful according to coach Wells. Sophomore Demytrick Ali‘ifua returns after starting two games last season at right guard. Towering 6-foot-7 tackle Alfred Edwards steps in after redshirting last season, while sophomores Ty Shaw and Kyler Hack plus senior KJ Ulavave provide depth all across the line.

Defensive Line

The defensive line struggle mightily last season in helping stop the run. In 2017, the defense gave up nearly 220 rushing yards per game. Avoiding a repeat of that will start with the big boys in the trenches. All but one player from last year’s rotation returns this year. Christopher ‘Unga and Adeowale Adeoye are both preseason selections for the Mountain West All-Conference team and will lead the charge for a rotation that has just two seniors among 13 players that will likely see time up front. Devon Anderson will line up alongside ‘Unga and Adeoye as a defensive end. Others in main rotation should be defensive end Jacoby Wildman and nose guard Caden Andersen.

Linebackers

All four linebackers who started at the end of last year returned for Utah State but the fall camp depth chart saw a new face at both outside linebacker positions. Junior transfer Tipa Galeai could be a big impact player. As a sophomore at TCU in 2016, he had 5.5 tackles for loss, 3.5 sacks, a forced fumble and two fumble recoveries in eight games. Kwistell Recquemore, a defensive back last season, has been moved into the other outside linebacker spot. USU’s inside linebacker depth will be tested early in the season. Senior linebacker Suli Tamaivena, who led the team in tackles last season, broke his finger and could be out as many as four games. The main candidates to fill in are David Woodward and Mason Tobeck. Playing at the other inside spot will be Chase Christiansen. The senior was fourth on the team in tackles while also recording 4.0 tackles for loss and forcing three fumbles.

One of the main things to watch with this linebacker corps will be its versatility. Galeai and Recquemore can complement each other as Recquemore can cover any position while Galeai, a 6-foot-5 monster, can cause terror in the backfield. That combined with the solid play from inside linebackers like Tamaivena, Christiansen, and the rest, will give the crew versatility and depth; something first-year defensive coordinator Keith Patterson wants to have as part of the defense.
Defensive Secondary

With Dallin Leavitt and Jaden Davis graduated, USU’s secondary will have questions galore to answer over the first few weeks of the season. The offseason has included numerous reshufflings of the roster to fill some of those gaps in the secondary, but those maneuvers are far from a sure thing. Former safety Jontrell Rocquemore was moved down to the linebacker corps, while former cornerback Ja’Marcus Ingram has moved to safety. The end goal of this shuffling seems to be versatility, as Coach Wells has indicated many of these shuffled players will line up at multiple positions during the season. As it stands, the Aggies will be counting on senior Deante Fortenberry and juniors DJ Williams and Cameron Haney to take most of the reps at the outside corner positions. Ingram leads a safety group deep in talent with seniors Gaje Ferguson and Aaron Wade plus sophomores Shaq Bond and Baron Gajkowski. Behind those names, however, inexperience abounds. Necessity will bring several of these names to the field. Freshman Zahodri Jackson, Jarrod Green, and Andre Grayson will have ample opportunity to fight for field reps at the corner spots.

Special Teams

What was once in the not-so-distant past a glaring defect in the Utah State system is now an area where the Aggies are perhaps the best. The days of Aggie fans wincing every time they watch special teams take the field are over, and there is a lot to be excited about on the “third-side” of the ball this season. A unit which Phil Steele Magazine ranked the No. 4 special teams group in the nation, USU has come a long way. The Aggies welcome back Lou Groza Award finalist Dominik Eberle for his junior campaign. The German kicker ranked near the top in the nation in nearly every statistical category while going 18-of-24 on field goal attempts and a perfect 47-of-47 on PAT attempts. Senior punter Aaron Dalton is back as well after averaging 42.0 yards per punt last season on 76 attempts. Sophomore receiver Jordan Nathan will likely be the Aggies go-to punt return man after ranking in the top-25 nationally in average return yards with 9.3, while sophomore receiver Savon Scarver ranked 31st in the nation on kickoff return, returning 26 kicks for an average of 24.0 yards. The Aggies did lose special teams coordinator Mark Tommerdahl, who accepted a similar position at Purdue during the offseason, and this season they will be one of just three teams in the nation which does not have a designated special teams coordinator.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># / NAME / CLASS / POSITION / HEIGHT / WEIGHT / HOMETOWN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Ron’quavion Tarver Sr. CB 5’10 185 Logan, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Jarron Ingram Sr. CB 5’10 185 Logan, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Henry Calabria Jr. CB 5’10 200 Madison, Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Aaron Wade Sr. S 5’11 200 Los Angeles, Calif.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Darwin Thompson Jr. RB 5’8 200 Logan, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Cameron Haany Jr. CB 5’10 185 Las Vegas, Nev.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 OJ Williams Jr. CB 6’0 200 Pensacola, Fla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Gerald Bright Jr. RB 5’10 185 Pomona, Calif.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 David Woodward Sr. CB 5’11 225 Olympia, Wash.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Jordan Love Jr. CB 6’0 225 Bakersfield, Calif.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Jordan Hayes Jr. S 6’1 205 El Dorado Hills, Calif.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Antonio Vargas Jr. WR 5’7 190 Allendale, Calif./Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 DJ Nelson Jr. WR 6’0 200 Logan, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Darin Hecktall Jr. WR 5’10 200 Raiford, Fla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Chad Artist Jr. WR 5’10 190 Logan, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Will Davis Jr. WR 5’11 200 Sandy, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Baron Gjokajski Jr. S 5’10 205 Alvin, Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Jordan Nathan Jr. WR 5’10 190 Westminster, Calif.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Taylor Cogdon Jr. WR 5’11 190 Logan, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Dwayne Thompkins Jr. WR 5’7 155 Fort Myers, Fla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Tony Miller Jr. WR 6’1 215 St. George's, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Jake Greene Jr. WR 6’2 205 Colorado Springs, Colo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Elwan Allen Jr. RB 5’9 185 El Dorado Hills, Calif.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Tiga Galai Jr. LB 6’5 230 Elko, Nev./CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Gage Ferguson Sr. S 6’0 210 Monticello, Idaho/Snow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Dalton Baker Jr. DE 6’4 205 Payson, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Shapoee Bean Sr. S 5’10 180 Utah, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Chase Nelson Sr. S 5’9 195 Logan, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 Deonte Fortenberry Sr. CB 5’9 190 Oakland, Calif./SF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Mitchell Anyanwu Jr. CB 5’9 175 Reno, Nev./Cougars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 Zach Sweeny Sr. S 5’11 200 Salt Lake City, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 Marian Walker Jr. Sr. RB 6’1 215 San Jose, Calif.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 Andre Grayson Sr. CB 5’8 175 Rhome, Oklahoma/Cougars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 Zahidi Jackson Jr. CB 5’10 190 San Antonio, Tex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 Chaunce Parker Jr. S 6’1 205 Kaysville, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 Sinne Felheke Jr. RB 5’1 185 Salt Lake City, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37 Brianen Gutthor Jr. S 5’10 185 Wendell, Wash.</td>
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<tr>
<td>38 Kona Meiottkneiken Jr. LB 5’11 220 Monroe, Calif.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39 Justin Hervey Jr. RB 5’10 210 Boise, Idaho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 Daniel Langi Jr. LB 6’0 200 South Jordan, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>41 Christian Noh Jr. S 5’11 185 Salt Lake City, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 Jarred Green Jr. CB 5’11 185 Elk Grove, Calif.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44 Otto Lato Sr. LB 6’2 225 Provo, Utah/Slc College</td>
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<tr>
<td>45 Elijah Shelton Jr. LB 5’11 210 Salt Lake City, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>46 Santi Tamania Jr. Sr. LB 6’0 230 Kirkland, Wash./SA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47 Simon Matagi Sr. LB 6’1 230 South Jordan, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48 Fee Leilani Jr. DE 6’0 285 American, Calif./Elko</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49 Mitch Winkle Jr. FR 6’1 210 Sandy, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 Mason Toleman Jr. FR 6’2 235 Poplar, Wash.</td>
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<tr>
<td>51 Logan Lee Sr. DE 6’3 210 Renton, Wash.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52 Chase Christianson Sr. LB 6’1 230 St. George's, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>53 Derek Larsen Jr. DE 6’3 235 Logan, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54 Quin Fielder Jr. DL 6’2 300 Nixa, Ariz./BYO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 Justus Teri Jr. DL 6’2 215 Draper, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56 Sam Taylor Jr. DL 6’5 300 Kajiga, Calif/Canby College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57 Breon Harris Jr. LB 6’2 230 Gavinsville, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>58 Noah Howett Jr. LS 6’0 225 Tafahi, Calif.</td>
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<tr>
<td>59 Adewale Adeoye Sr. DE 6’3 275 St. Louis, Mo.</td>
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<td>60 Gasetto Schuster Sr. NG 6’0 295 Long Beach, Calif.</td>
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<td>61 Brandon Pada Sr. LS 6’1 205 Shadle, Ariz.</td>
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<tr>
<td>62 Demetryck Alifita Sr. DL 6’3 310 Hayward, Calif.</td>
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<tr>
<td>63 Connor Cole Sr. PK 5’10 190 Bremerton, Wash.</td>
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<tr>
<td>64 Wyatt Bowles Jr. DL 6’4 280 West Point, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>65 Wyatt O'Brien Jr. OL 6’1 275 Des Moines, Iowa</td>
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<tr>
<td>66 Dwayne Porter Jr. OL 6’2 270 Utah, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>67 Tyler Hufner Jr. OL 6’1 270 Idaho, Idaho</td>
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<tr>
<td>68 Devin Averadko Jr. OL 6’3 315 Utah, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>69 Karter Show Jr. OL 6’3 285 South Jordan, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>70 Kiy Shuang Sr. OL 6’4 300 Lee, Hawaii</td>
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<tr>
<td>71 Carmon Myers Jr. SA 6’1 260 McLean, Va./Shawnee State</td>
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<tr>
<td>72 Murmel Legeze Jr. Sr. LB 6’2 320 Kyleville, Utah/Slc</td>
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<tr>
<td>73 Jake Templeton Sr. LB 6’1 265 Rex, Idaho/Phoenix/1st</td>
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<tr>
<td>74 Rob Custodio Jr. OL 6’4 310 Pocatello, Idaho/Na.</td>
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<tr>
<td>75 Jacob South Jr. OL 6’5 300 Amherst, Wash.</td>
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<tr>
<td>76 Wade Maehan Jr. Sr. LB 6’5 300 Logan, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>77 Dylan Spradling Jr. WR 5’11 185 Lehi, Utah</td>
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<td>78 Saiven Searan Sr. WR 5’11 185 Las Vegas, Nev.</td>
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<tr>
<td>79 Preston Curtis Sr. WR 5’10 180 Salt Lake City, Utah</td>
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<td>80 Tim Patrick Jr. WR 6’0 180 San Diego, Calif.</td>
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<tr>
<td>81 Sam Luckott Jr. WR 6’0 200 Spokane, Wash.</td>
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<tr>
<td>82 Emerson Woods Sr. TE 5’10 245 Sandy, Utah/Slc College</td>
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<td>83 Bryce Martensek Sr. TE 5’10 235 University, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>84 Dan Raymond Sr. TE 5’10 250 Provo, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>85 Carson Torrell Sr. SA 6’1 185 Boise, Idaho</td>
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<tr>
<td>86 Travis Bowers Sr. TE 6’4 245 Henderson, Nev.</td>
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<td>87 Aaron Dobbs Sr. P 6’4 220 Bozeman, Mt.</td>
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<td>88 Rittenhouse Fatu Sr. SA 6’1 250 Redwood, Calif.</td>
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<td>89 Devon Anderson Sr. DE 6’1 215 Utah, Utah</td>
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<td>90 Kelvin Tanoe Sr. DE 6’2 265 Cedar Park, Texas</td>
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<tr>
<td>91 Holtie'apaka Jr. DE 6’2 330 Hemet, Calif.</td>
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<tr>
<td>92 Jacoby Wildmon Sr. DE 6’2 265 Logan, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>93 Caden Anderson Sr. MG 6’2 250 Logan, Utah</td>
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<tr>
<td>94 Christopher Ying Sr. MG 6’0 205 Rado, Croatia</td>
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<tr>
<td>95 Jake Pithner Jr. MG 6’3 215 University, Utah/Slc College</td>
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<tr>
<td>96 Mikeboh Ousko Jr. MG 6’1 215 Esko, Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97 Jackson Prince Jr. MR 6’6 170 Centerton, Ark.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MEET YOUR 2018 USU FOOTBALL TEAM

MEET YOUR 2018 USU COACHING STAFF

Matt Wells
Head Coach

Frank Vaile
Asst. Head Coach/Gus Sett/Coast/OL

Kettra Patterson
Defensive Coordinator/Defensive Ends

Troy Vellis
Offensive Coordinator/QBs

Jevon Holway
Outside Receivers

Julius Brown
Defensive Backs

Stacy Collins
Inside Linebackers

Steve Farmer
Defensive Line

DeAndra Smith
Running Backs

Eliath Vanga
Outside Linebackers

Luke Madsen
11/Inside Receivers

Wayne Diamint
Assistant - Football Operations

Dave Hargrave
Special Assistant to the Head Coach

John Cassena
Offensive Graduate Assistant

Cheskie Keeton
Defensive Graduate Assistant

Al Laspade
Defensive Graduate Assistant

Cesar Duval
Defensive Graduate Assistant

Justin Udy
Defensive Assistant Coordinator

Worthy Gregory
Special Teams Administrative Assistant

Jason Shumaker
Senior Analyst for Special Teams

Dave Scholz
Head Strength and Conditioning Coach
**FOOTBALL PREVIEW**

**ARTICLE**

**USU STUDENT MEDIA**

**AGGIES IN THE NFL**

**FOOTBALL PREVIEW**

**ARTICLE**

**USU STUDENT MEDIA**

**AGGIES IN THE NFL**

Fackrell saw 447 snaps in his second NFL season in 2017, and he is expected to increase on this number even more in 2018. With the tenuous health history of fellow Green Bay outside linebackers Nick Perry and Clay Matthews, Fackrell is going to be relied on to provide stability as an edge rusher and run stopper in 2018. With Mike Pettine taking over as defensive coordinator in Green Bay, Fackrell is in a make-or-break point of his career. The ultra-athletic former Aggie recorded 26 tackles and three sacks in 2017.

Turbin has carved himself a solid niche in the ever-changing tides of the NFL backfield. After spending the first three years of his career in Seattle, Turbin played briefly for the Cleveland Browns and Dallas Cowboys before settling in with the Indianapolis Colts. The powerful ball-carrier signed a two-year, $4.1 million contract extension before the start of the 2017 season. It has been a bit of a bumpy ride since then - his 2017 campaign was cut short due to a dislocated elbow, and he was suspended for the first four games of the 2018 season for violation of the NFL’s performance enhancing drug policy. The Super Bowl champion has expressed a commitment to owning up to his mistake and a desire to contribute to his team’s success upon his return.

It’s been a bright start to Vigil’s career after being selected by the Bengals in the third round of the 2016 NFL Draft. In his rookie year, Vigil played in all 16 games and recorded 15 tackles. He stepped things up in a big way in 2017. Vigil started the first 12 games of the season before succumbing to ankle and back injuries. In those 12 games, Vigil racked up 45 tackles to go along with an interception and a sack. The hard-hitting and hard-working linebacker should continue his upwards trend in 2018. Vigil’s older brother and former USU teammate, Zach, currently plays linebacker for the Washington Redskins.

Wagner returns for his seventh season with Seattle. Wagner has established himself as one of, if not the most, premiere linebackers in the NFL. The middle linebacker recorded a career-high 97 tackles in 2017 to go along with 1.5 sacks, 2 interceptions and a fumble recovery. Wagner has been named a First Team All-Pro member for three of the past four seasons, and has been named to the Pro-Bowl for four consecutive years. The former Aggie is the unquestioned leader of the Seahawks. In the prime of his career, 2018 will be a chance for Wagner to further establish himself as an NFL star.

Many NFL players don’t get an opportunity to sign the coveted second contract, but Mo Alexander has proven that he’s worth it. After spending his first four seasons with the St. Louis/Los Angeles Rams, the former fourth-round draft pick will have a new home this season on the Seattle defense alongside former USU teammate Bobby Wagner. Though Alexander started 22 of his first 23 games with the Rams, they released him five weeks into the 2017 season. While hopes to find new life in Seattle, he will need to prove himself quickly since he is on just a one-year deal. In his career, Alexander has 113 tackles along with three sacks and two interceptions.

He might be 35 years old, but Donald Penn is still dominating defensive lines. The 13-year NFL veteran earned his third career Pro-Bowl selection in 2017, making that back-to-back seasons he was named to the Pro-Bowl squad. Penn did miss the final two weeks of the regular season because of foot surgery, forcing him to not participate in the game. He recently signed a two-year, $21 million contract extension with the Raiders, but if last season was any indication he still has plenty of gas in the tank. Penn has played in 174 NFL games, starting 170 of them.
With the start of another season of Aggie football comes hope, optimism, excitement, and a handful of new names and faces for Utah State fans to get familiar with.

Despite only losing two starters on each side of the ball from last year’s squad, and bringing back a team which Phil Steele Magazine ranked 26th in the nation in terms of experience, the Aggies are going to rely heavily on some of their newcomers in an effort to turn last year’s 6-7 record into a Mountain West Conference championship.

Adding 28 newcomers in the offseason, including eight who transferred to the team from different junior colleges and universities, the Aggies have added much-needed depth and talent to a team which lost three games by just a touchdown or less last season. In fact, USU head coach Matt Wells felt confident enough at the beginning of fall camp to say that this year’s team probably has more depth than any other that he’s coached during his six-year stint at the helm.

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Trying to fill in some of that void is and just 33% of its rushing touchdowns. ing yardage production from last season, large shoes to fill. and 18 touchdowns, graduated, leaving who amassed 1,846 career rushing yards career starts while playing in 51 games, and Aggies took a hit during the offseason was State. not begin their collegiate careers at Utah returning starters from last year’s squad did not begin their collegiate careers at Utah State. One of the most notable places where the Aggies took a hit during the offseason was in the offensive backfield. Running back LaJuan Hunt, a player who accounted for 24 career starts while playing in 51 games, and who amassed 1,200 career rushing yards and 18 touchdowns, graduated, leaving large shoes to fill. Utah State retains just 60% of its rushing yardage production from last season, and just 33% of its rushing touchdowns. Attempting to fill in some of that void is junior college transfer Darwin Thompson. Thompson, a junior transfer from North-eastern Oklahoma A&H, has turned many heads early on. In an NFL.com article published in June, the Oklahoma native was named one of the 18 “most freakish athletes” in all of college football. It’s really no wonder why, when he had a video of him front-squating 300 lbs go viral on Twitter during the summer. “My Twitter went crazy for like three days straight,” Thompson said. “But really, lifting weights is cool and all, but I do it to prevent injuries. When I’m at my strongest I have confidence over everybody. I’m like ‘you can’t handle me, I’m way stronger than you are, I’m faster, I’m a better all-around athlete.’” On the field, it shows. In high school, Thompson was what he described as an “average athlete, average player,” and he didn’t receive a single collegiate offer to play football. Viewed as slightly under-sized for his position at 5’8, he walked on to play at Northeastern Oklahoma A&H. There, he spent two years shattering records and leading the Norsemen to climb as high as No. 4 in the national rankings. Last season, Thompson was named a National Junior College Athletic Association second-team All-American after leading the nation with 1,619 all-purpose yards, and ranking second in the nation in overall rushing yards with 1,391. He averaged 7.5 yards per carry, the second-highest average in the nation as well. While he was heavily recruited following such a successful sophomore campaign, Thompson chose Utah State for one main reason. “This school stood out because it was business when I talked to Coach Wells,” Thompson said. “He’s from Oklahoma and Coach Farmer is from Oklahoma, so it made me feel like home. Then to top it off when I met Coach Doe (Scholz) the deal was over with. I was ready to sign here and come here that day.” “There’s no kiddy stuff any more. If you want to play here, you’ve got to be a grown man, so that’s what I was looking for. I’ve only got two years left and I needed a program that would be all business, so this was the best spot for me.” While the running back position is sure to be competitive this season with returning players like junior Gerald Bright and sophomores Morian Walker and Tre Miller, Thompson said he is excited for the competition. “It’s a family competition,” he said. “One thing we came up with is ‘forget about me, I love you.’ That’s what a family means to us. We’re all working cause we’ve all got dreams of playing in the league, and we all push each other to become great every day.” The other offensive position which needs to replace a starter is perhaps one of the position groups with the most overall talent and depth: outside wide receiver. With the graduation of eight-game starter Brachen Roberts, the Aggie coach staff made an enormous push to bring in more talent to fill the gap at the receiver position. Along with adding four high school recruits at the position, USU brought in junior college transfer Devin Heckstall and USC transfer Jalen Greene. “The outside receiver position will be completely different than you saw in the spring games,” Wells said. “The competition in that room just amped up, it just got better. Guys are going to have to be consistent and prove that they deserve playing time.” Greene is possibly the highest-profile player the Aggies added during the off-season, and he will have a chance to earn playing time and have an immediate impact on the team. Though he was recruited out of high school as a quarterback, Greene committed to USC and quickly switched over to play receiver. After redshirting his freshman season, he played in 21 games and earned three starts over the next three years. Soon after making the decision to leave USC the graduate transfer committed to play for Illinois, though he had a chance of heart once Utah State made an offer. “The big thing is I’m a big family person, and Coach Wells immediately contacted my dad and my mom, and my family felt it was a good decision,” Greene said. “They got behind me and motivated me and told me that this might be the best place for me, and that was all it took.” While Greene is likely one of the front-runners to earn a starting spot in camp, Wells has made it abundantly clear that no spots on the depth chart are guaranteed and that every day of camp will be a battle. That didn’t deter Greene from wanting to be an Aggie. “Another thing that sold me to come here as well was Coach Wells telling me ‘I can’t promise you anything, I can’t promise you a certain amount of catches, you’re gonna get what you work for,” he said. “One thing that I pride myself on is the amount of work that I put in on a daily basis, and that’s recognized through the amount of plays and playing time that they give you.” On the defensive side of the ball, Utah State suffered two significant hits by losing safety Dallin Lavitz and All-American corner-back Jaden Davis, each of whom graduated and landed spots on NFL rosters. The duo combined last season for nine interceptions, 20 pass breakups and 127 tackles. The overall production and the leadership that the Aggies lost with these two seniors would be very difficult for any team to replace. However, they will rely in part on the playing time and experience returning with players such as senior safeties Gai Ferguson and Jontrell Brookmire, sophomores safety McMarcus Ingram, senior corner-back Dante Forbenbush and junior corner-back Cameron Hancy.
Along with bringing several experienced players from last year’s squad, the Aggies also added a couple of junior college prospects to the defensive secondary in sophomore safety Shaquez Bond and junior cornerback DJ Williams.

Wells said that these are two guys Aggie fans should probably get familiar with.

“A lot of the fans don’t know their names yet, but there’s some talented guys back there,” he said. “How well they gel, can we stay healthy, how much better does the front-seven play? The better the front-seven plays, the more the secondary will be tested.”

Bond spent his freshman season playing at Southwestern Community College in Chula Vista, Calif. where he recorded 36 tackles and eight interceptions. He also played an enormous role on special teams, blocking three kicks for the Jaguars.

USU was able to bring in another big-time JC commit with Williams, who started his career at the University of Chattanooga before transferring to Independence Community College. Williams recorded 56 tackles, three pass breakups and two fumble recoveries his sophomore season to earn first-team NJCAA All-America honors. He received 11 Division I offers before ultimately choosing Utah State.

Williams said that the transition from Independence to Utah State has been nearly seamless.

“It’s really a big family here,” he said. “The transition was very good for me because I had a guideline (Salanoa Galea’i) in the back (Julian Bower), and since the day I got here he’s been with me every step of the way. But it’s not just him, I’ve had offensive linemen and a bunch of guys there for me, it’s just really been a family since I got here.”

The linebackers corps will be adding a new face as well this season. Though he is not truly a newcomer since he spent last season in Logan redshirting due to NCAA transfer rules, Tipa Galea’i is one name Aggie fans will likely learn quickly this year.

Galae’i, a transfer from TCU, has every bit of potential to wreak havoc on Mountain West offenses this season. Out of high school, Utah State recruited him to play with his brother Salanoa, who was a long snapper for the Aggies from 2014-15. In fact, USU was the first D-I program to offer him a scholarship.

However, with offers from 10 different Power Five schools including teams from the SEC, ACC, Pac 12 and Big 12, Galae’i’s only visit to USU was an unofficial visit while coming to watch his brother play in a spring game.

Playing defensive end for TCU his first two seasons, he became an important part of the defense. The Texas native played in 10 games, while recording 24 total tackles, 5.5 tackles for a loss, and recovering two fumbles. Now, with a year to adjust to his new position, as well as to get acclimated to the culture and program at Utah State, Galae’i is ready to get going.

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“Now we’re going to go be a good team,” Wells said. “We strive to put ourselves in the position in the month of November to compete for a Mountain West Championship. That goal hasn’t changed since we walked in there, and it’s something we truly believe we can put ourselves in the position to do and we can’t wait to do it.”
SAME PLAYERS, NEW DEFENSE

The faces on Utah State’s defense will be almost the same from 2017, but don’t expect to see the same product out on the field.

The Aggies return nine starters, making the idea of simply copying and pasting last year’s defense into 2018 very tempting. However, the coaches and players are determined to do anything but that.

One of the first steps the team took was to bring in new defensive coordinator Keith Patterson. He might be one of many solutions Utah State and Wells hope will fix some of the issues that plagued his defense in 2017. And coming in, Patterson had praise for what he saw about the program he is now an integral part of.

BY JASON WALKER
FOOTBALL PREVIEW

There’s been a great foundation laid here,” Patterson said. “You can just tell that kids play extremely hard. They play a tough, physical brand of football.”

Patterson’s 15 years as a collegiate coach, — seven as a defensive coordinator— will bring experience to the defensive staff. And so far, they’ve been receptive to his ideas.

“I’ve been very pleased,” Patterson said, “just by the tweaks that I’ve brought in that are a little bit different than maybe the way we’ve done something in the past, or even a philosophy on how we handle certain situations. I’ve been very pleased with the openness and willingness to learn and adapt to each other and I think that’s created a great synergy among our coaches and our players.”

Primary among the issues needing resolution was a near complete inability to stop the run a year ago. The Aggies ranked 129 out of 129 teams in division one in run defense in 2017. The early returns on that solution are promising according to Suli Tamaivena, who said the veteran coordinator “fixed” the defensive run game with his adjustments.

“What he tweaked,” Tamaivena said, “it was what we needed. We feel comfortable now. We know what to do, we know where to go, we know if you get blocked, who goes where and whatnot. We’re just more comfortable now. His adjustment was good.”

All of these adjustments in the front seven have been made easier with USU returning all of its starting defensive linemen and linebackers.

“Last year we were very young and didn’t know too much and we were still pretty good,” junior nose guard Christopher Unga said. “This year, knowing the experience that we all have — I honestly don’t know what’s in store, but I’m excited.”

While the front seven remains largely the same with minor changes, the secondary will look very different from last year. The first item on the to-do list in spring ball was to figure out who will replace the production of John Davis and Dallin Leavitt against the pass.

Wells said most of those players are still unknown commodities to fans and media, but is confident in his guys. Leavitt’s counterpart on the backend of the defense, Gaje Rocquemore could bring a high level of experience and willingness to learn and adapt to the role.

“The better the front seven plays, the more the secondary will respond well to the tests it will face when going up against various opponents and not just the Aggie offense in camp. The positional changes from Ingram and Rocquemore could bring a high level of versatility with the ability to show offensive multiple looks. When asked if that was the case, Patterson replied “no doubt.”

“We’re a multiple aggressive attacking style of defense,” Patterson said. Any time you have guys that can cover…obviously it gives you more flexibility in things that you can do without having to put in different sub packages per se. So you can be more multiple.”

The hope from Patterson is that the defense as a whole will respond well to the tests it will face when going up against various opponents and not just the Aggie offense in camp. The positional changes from Ingram and Rocquemore could bring a high level of versatility with the ability to show offensive multiple looks.

“The shakeup on the backend makes repeating last year’s success defending the pass (USU ranked 10th in pass yards allowed) even more of a challenge. In the media day press conference, Wells said improvements from the front seven will end up testing the secondary.

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Circumstance gave the Aggies a bevy of returning experience and the players, coaches and trainers have put in the offseason work to make the most of it. Time will only show if the adjustments, positional switches and attempts to replace NFL-level talent actually bears fruit.

Patterson said he is wary of changing players’ positions without necessity, but saw an opportunity and got positive results.

“We moved those guys right from the get-go just to see if they could do it,” Patterson said. “And I was very pleased by what we saw this spring from those guys. And I just expect great things from all of those position changes and they’ll get more comfortable the more playing time they get.”
FOOTBALL PREVIEW

IMPACT PLAYERS

OFFENSE

Ron'quavion Tarver
Is it possible for a guy who led the team in receptions, receiving yards, and receiving touchdowns to be under-utilized? Because at times that felt like the case last season. That's how good Tarver can be. The senior from Belle Glade, Fla. put together a solid 316-yard junior campaign, yet it felt like he could have taken on an even larger role. Tarver's best performance of the season came in the Arizona Bowl when he caught eight passes for 97 yards, and he will look to pick up where he left off this fall. Though the wide receiver position may have more depth than any other USU receiving corps in recent years, expect for the Love-to-Tarver connection to grow even stronger and for Tarver to put up career highs all across the board.

Dax Raymond
Dax Raymond was one of the ultimate "x-factors" for the Utah State offense in 2017. The 6'5, 250-pound Provo native was second on the team in receiving yards with 456 on 41 receptions. Raymond has the size and strength to play at the next level, and made strides in each of his first two seasons. He's caught the eye of the national media, often being ranked as one of the top-10 tight ends in the nation, and earning pre-season All-Mountain West Conference honors. While Raymond wasn't target as much by Jordan Love as he was by Kent Myers, the two have had a full offseason to work together and build chemistry. A healthy and productive Dax Raymond may be a big key to a successful season for the Aggies.

Jordan Love
Maybe this one is a cop-out, of course the starting quarterback is an impact player. But USU's season in 2018 may hinge on Love's performance, and the offense will go as far as he can take them. After earning the starting job midway through last season, the freshman passed for six touchdowns, two interceptions and an average of 208 yards in the six games he started. In order to truly lead the Aggie offense effectively this season, he will need to raise his completion percentage which was just 58% last season. Love also average 33 rushing yards per game during that stretch, and he will likely end up making even more plays with his feet this season. He's just a sophomore, but the Aggies need their young leader to play like an experienced veteran.

Gaje Ferguson
With two huge leaders in Dallin Leavitt and Jalen Davis gone, the mantle of leadership in the secondary will likely fall on Ferguson's shoulders. The senior has the most starts of anyone in the secondary and started right alongside the two aforementioned pair of DBs, whom he called his mentors. Ferguson will look to fill the role of hard-hitting safety that Leavitt vacated at the end of last year. Ferguson should be plenty up to the task as he finished last season with 11 tackles — two for a loss with one sack — which was good for second on the team. It's very likely that teams will end up passing the ball more often if the front seven plays better and the Aggies are ahead on the scoreboard more often. Should that be the case, the secondary will need to whether that test and Ferguson will have to be there to lead them through it.

Suii Tamaivena
Though he will miss the first quarter of the season with a broken finger, Tamaivena's impact on the rest of the Aggie's games will be unmistakable. As a junior last season, Tamaivena led the team in tackles (111), tackles for loss (6.5), and was tied for second in sacks (8.0) while also defending two passes and recovering two fumbles. In USU’s 3-4 base defensive formation, inside linebackers play a huge role in cleaning up the run lanes and getting to the quarterback on blitzes. At 6-foot and 250 lbs, Tamaivena is stout and strong enough to plug up any hole and shut down run plays while also being quick enough to chase down running backs.

DEFENSE

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Tipa Galeai
A transfer from TCU, Galeai is an imposing physical specimen. Standing 6-foot-5 and tipping the scales at 250 lbs, the junior can take on anyone and has the athleticism to chase them down. With the Horned Frogs in 2016, Galeai played in eight games as a defensive end as a sophomore and had 5.5 tackles for loss, 3.0 sacks, one forced fumble and two fumble recoveries. Now placed at outside linebacker, defensive coordinator Keith Patterson will be able to use the athlete Galeai in a variety of ways, but the most terrifying will be when he battles into the backfield in search of unwitting quarterbacks and rushers.
Throwing passes, catching passes, running, blocking; making tackles, blocking punts— it doesn’t matter how it takes place. DJ Nelson just wants to make plays.

He knows the secret to fulfilling that desire lies in taking advantage of opportunities. After all, that’s been the most consistent facet of Nelson’s career on the gridiron.
Seven years ago, he had the opportunity to direct a high-powered and talented high school offense. Nelson took advantage of it - he was named All-American and won a state championship.

Next came the opportunity to play at Utah State, something that’s been a family tradition of sorts. In fact, the Nelson family’s ties with USU athletics date back to the 1930’s, and they’ll continue into the future; DJ’s younger brother, Chase, is currently a sophomore defensive back. Nelson took advantage of this opportunity finding a role as a team-leader at the backup quarterback position.

In his junior year, Nelson latched on to the position has been a work-in-progress dating back to the 2015 season. “I’m not going to look back. It’s not that I can’t play quarterback, but Jordan (Love) got however many reps he did last year. I’m behind him on that, and whatever I can do to help the team win, I will do,” Nelson said.

With the position change, Nelson will take with him a unique and potentially valuable perspective. “I learned the game of football as a quarterback,” he said. “That’s how I’ve always seen the game. Even when I’m watching, I’m watching the game from a quarterback’s perspective. That really hasn’t changed at all. In the wide receiver room, a lot of guys will ask me what the quarterback is thinking in certain situations. I’m able to answer and give them a good idea. Like I said, I still process and think like a quarterback.”

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Utah State’s season will go as far as Jordan Love can take them.

Aggie fans got a taste of the future over the second half of last season. Following two straight losses in Mountain West play, the reins of the offense were handed to Love completely in hopes of turning the season around, with the team standing at 3-4 and in danger of missing out on a bowl game for the second straight season.

The offense responded immediately, dropping 52 points in a road victory over UNLV to kick off a stretch of three wins in four games to become bowl eligible. Love continued to impress as a freshman, throwing for over 200 yards per game on average while tossing six touchdowns to only two interceptions.

“Anyone that watches, they know he’s a gamer and I think that’s the biggest thing I want in a QB personally,” said junior tight end Dax Raymond, who saw. “You sense the passion. He’s not out there just to throw the ball a couple times. He’s out there to win. He’s out to get the first down and get touchdowns. He wants to win games and that’s what we need at the QB position especially.”

But for USU to climb back into the MW’s elite, Love will have to elevate his play even higher. The Aggies have not averaged over 400 yards per game in a season since 2013, their first in the MW conference. Utah State has been outgained by their opponents in each of the past two seasons. A defense that returns nine starters should help in that regard. An improved Love would further bolster it.

“I’m trying to improve on always having a place to go with the ball,” said Love. “That comes with knowing the offense, being able to read defense and knowing where people are going to be at. Another thing that comes with that is my accuracy, trying to improve that and have this year be just another step forward. I’m always trying to find the guys up on the field and hit them.”

That mindset may lead to a far more open offense than has been the custom recently for USU. After topping 30 attempts in a game just once over the first 11 games of the year, Love passed that threshold in each of the final two games of the season, including a career-high 44 attempts in the bowl game versus New Mexico State. The increased workload didn’t affect efficiency however, with the two games ranking as
Love’s fourth and fifth most accurate outings on the year. That momentum carried over into the offseason, Love’s first as the entrenched starter.

“This offseason he knew he was going to be the guy. I really think that just built confidence for him,” said Raymond. “It built confidence in the O-line and the receivers and tight ends where we trust him and he trusts us more and it’s more confidence for him which I think has really helped his ability to play.”

Knowing his importance as the team’s starting QB, Love recognizes his need to step up in terms of on-field play and off-field leadership. With a number of the team’s leaders from last season now graduated, the void of leadership is largely Love’s to fill.

“He’s prepared himself as a starter,” said offensive coordinator David Yost, “and that way you’re not really competing with others, you’re competing with yourself. What we’ve tried to ask him to do is step outside of what he’s done in the past and do more.

“The more probably comes from leading the offense and being the vocal guy as much as you can and he’s done a good job within his own personality because he’s not a big talker that’s not natural for him but it’s preparing himself to be the best player he can be.”

Now in his second year as offensive coordinator at Utah State, Yost has spent over three decades in the coaching ranks of college football, working specifically with quarterbacks for over 20 seasons. In that time, he’s overseen quarterbacks including Heisman Trophy finalist Chase Daniel and first round NFL draft pick Blaine Gabbert.

During his 12 seasons on the coaching staff at Missouri, all five starting quarterbacks went on to the professional level after graduating. Suffice it to say, Yost knows quarterbacks.

“Jordan Love is right among them,” Yost says. “If he continues to progress with his skill set and his ability... he’s an NFL-level type quarterback as we go forward. That’s the expectation. That’s what we talk to him about. That’s what he’s going to be evaluated on. He should be playing Sunday when he’s done playing for us.”

That’s lofty praise to heap on a QB yet to throw more than 250 passes, but it’s praise Love himself believes in.

“I want (fans) to know I’m coming out here and I’m going to work every day and I’m going to be the best quarterback I can be,” said Love. “I want the best for this team. I want to win a Mountain West championship. I’m not going to settle for anything less.”

A MW title might seem a lofty and (for some fans) an untenable goal, but ESPN’s FPI projections give Utah State more than 50 percent chance of victory in 10 of their 12 regular season games. The rest of the team seems to follow suit in Love’s confidence.

“We’ve felt the energy all offseason,” said Raymond. “I really believe that the whole team is on the same track. We are on the same thought process and that’s to go compete for a Mountain West championship and I really think we have a legit chance to do it.”

That ‘legit chance’ rests almost solely on Love’s ability to catapult the Aggie offense upwards. Utah State averaged almost 30 more yards per game after Love established himself as the full-time starter last season. The opportunity is there.

All the Aggies need is Love.
In short, Utah State should consider themselves lucky to get through this game without injury. MSU is 27-7 within the confines of Spartan Stadium in the past five years and they come into this season as a consensus top-15 team in the country. Head coach Mark Dantonio continues to make a claim as the most underrated coach in all of college football. After a startling 3-9 season in 2016, the Spartans rebounded to go 10-3 a year ago. This year, they return the most production from last season of any team in the country. QB Brian Lewerke returns as a junior after throwing for nearly 2,800 yards with 20 touchdowns last season, and a stellar receiving corps has Michigan State poised to compete in what could be a wide-open Big Ten title race.

For USU, this game will be the single greatest test this season of a rush defense that struggled through much of last year. For the 2017 season, Michigan State averaged 42 rushing attempts PER GAME, and averaged four yards on each of those carries. An Aggie defense that allowed 4.5 yards per carry on an average of 48 attempts per game last season will struggle to slow down the pro-style Michigan State rushing attack, meaning Utah State could be in for a long day to start the season in East Lansing.

If Utah State fans get a sour taste in their mouths when thinking about New Mexico State, that’s understandable.

The Aggies from down south earned their first bowl victory in 57 years by defeating Utah State back in December in the Arizona Bowl, ending USU’s season with a loss and leaving an up and down 2017 season for Utah State on a low-mark.

However, the New Mexico State team coming to Logan in September will have a much different look. The Aggies lose a three-year starting quarterback in Tyler Rogers, a four-year starting running back in Larry Rose III, and a star wide receiver in Jaleel Scott, who now plays for the Baltimore Ravens.

The good news for NMSU is that it returns a full, experienced offensive line, and adds several junior college transfers which it hopes to see make an impact. Senior quarterback Nick Fantz does have some experience lining up for the crimson and white, tallying five career starts along with 1,028 yards, six touchdowns and six interceptions. Palomar College transfer Matt Romero should add competition at the quarterback spot as well.

Defensively, an NMSU team which made strides in 2017 returns seven starters keeping much of its core group in tact. They will need to replace linebacker Dalton Herrington, who led the team with 134 tackles, along with 16 tackles for a loss and 6.5 sacks.
A moment of silence for the Golden Eagles.

Every team at the FBS level of college football typically plays one FCS team each year, FCS being the second level below FBS within Division 1 football. Call it an opportunity for an FCS team to play against some higher competition on a grander stage than usual. Call it a glorified scrimmage for an FBS team. Still, these games do sometimes become competitive, just look at North Dakota State’s history versus FBS teams. Utah State had their own scare several seasons ago when they squeaked out a 12-9 win over FCS Southern Utah thanks to an 88-yard punt return TD from Andrew Rodriguez.

Tennessee Tech, however, is not Southern Utah. That SUU team fielded three guys who went on to the NFL. Last year’s Golden Eagles went 1-10 and were nearly doubled up by their opponents on total points for the season. Not only that, but the Golden Eagles lose their leading passer from a year ago, with the starting job coming down to senior Luke Ward or freshman Bailey Fisher. Junior RB Andrew Goldsmith does return after leading the team with over 600 yards rushing last season, but this game shouldn’t be close. With a roster full of FBS scholarship players, USU should simply outclass their opponent here. If it is close, it may be time to pull the sirens.

The Aggies are slated to go head-to-head against the Falcons on September 22 at home in Maverik Stadium. This season, Air Force has been predicted by the Mountain West preseason coaches poll to finish fifth out of 12 teams in the conference. Along with finishing fifth, the Falcons have no representation on both the offensive and defensive sides in the preseason all-conference selections. Last season, Air Force recorded a total of five wins in 12 regular season games, and averaged 31.4 points per game while allowing 32.4. Although Air Force ended the season with a 5-7 record, they did rank first in the conference for passing defense, time of possession, and fewest penalties per game, while ranking fourth in the nation in rushing yards with 307.4 per game. Utah State lost to Air Force last year after the Falcons began to put up a fight during the third quarter and took control of the field for the first time in the game. With a back-and-forth struggle during the second half of the game, sophomore quarterback Isaiah Sanders ran in this third touchdown of the match to put the Falcons back on top and to win the game 38-35. During that game, Sanders made a successful debut appearance with his three rushing touchdowns in 44 carries, which resulted in an all-time program record of most carries in a single game.
BYU

10 / 05

AWAY

To say that BYU had a rough season in 2017 would be putting it nicely. The highlight of the season for the Cougars in head coach Kalani Sitake’s second season at the helm was a ten-point victory over 5-7 UNLV. Losses to East Carolina, UMass and Fresno State solidified a 4-9 record, the worst season for BYU since 1970. The good news for the Cougars is that they bring back 14 starters from last year’s squad, the bad news is that they lost many of their most important players. BYU will be without last year’s leading tackler, linebacker Fred Warner, and second-leading rusher, running back Ula Tolutai. The quarterback situation for the Cougars is one of the biggest questions heading into the season. Sophomore Joe Critchlow and senior Tanner Mangum are the most experienced at the QB spot for BYU, but neither had a completion percentage north of 57% last season, and both finished with more interceptions than touchdowns. They may turn things over to freshman Zach Wilson in an attempt to create an offensive spark. Regardless, if the Cougars want to get back in bowl contention they will need to improve on an offense which ranked 123 in the nation, scoring only 17.1 points per game last season. While the season is sure to start out difficult for the Cougars with games against Wisconsin, Washington and Arizona, it mellows down significantly in the second half of the season, keeping their dream of bowl eligibility within reach.

UNLV

10 / 13

HOME

UNLV may be one of the few true wildcard teams in the Mountain West Conference this season.

After falling to Utah State 52-28 last season in Las Vegas, the Rebels went on to win three of their final five games, including road victories against Fresno State and New Mexico. Still finishing a game short of bowl eligibility, UNLV has a clear-cut goal in mind this season.

An electrifying offense which showed flashes of brilliance last season and put up over 300 rushing yards in the first half against USU returns seven starters, including sophomore quarterback Armani Rodgers and senior running back Lexington Thomas. Thomas had a huge junior year, finishing in the top-25 in the nation in rushing yards per game, rushing touchdowns, and yards per carry.

Defensively, a squad which ranked near the bottom of the nation in nearly every defensive category and which allowed opponents 459 yards and 32 points per game brings back seven starters as well. However, four of the top five tacklers from last season are back for the Rebels this year as they look to take the next step toward bowl eligibility.

All-time, the Aggies lead the series with UNLV 16-7, and the Aggies have come out victorious in 13 of the past 16 meetings.
Wyoming football is a tale of two units. Defensively, the Cowboys should field one of the best units in the entire Mountain West. Football Outsiders' S&P+ rankings project Wyoming to field the 18th-best defense in the entire country. Senior defensive back Andrew Wingard received preseason MW Defensive Player of the Year honors... for the second year in a row. The Cowboys return nearly all of their rotation players from last season. In summary, it will be difficult for any team to run away from Wyoming. 

Offensively, however, is an entirely difficult story. The Cowboys ranked 100th in the country in yards per game last season, and a paltry 127th in total yards per game. Wyoming was held below 20 points on six different occasions last season. The offense was, frankly, putrid. Now remove NFL first-round draft pick Josh Allen from the mix. This offense could approach BYU-levels of bad this season... if they hadn't already reached that last season. No rusher surpassed 500 yards on the ground last season, and despite having an NFL QB under center, no receiver managed to top 600 yards. Now, the Cowboys will turn either senior Nick Smith, the guy who Josh Allen beat out for the starting job three years ago, or to redshirt freshman Tyler Vander Waal to try to elevate the offense. With their defense, the offense may only need to average around 20 points per game to be competitive, but even that may be a difficult ask. Head coach Craig Bohl has earned the benefit of the doubt after back-to-back 8-win seasons (to say nothing of winning back-to-back championship at North Dakota State), but it’s tough to see the Cowboys reaching that win plateau this season. Six wins and bowl eligibility is already a lofty enough goal for this year’s squad.
After a respectable 7-7 campaign in Nick Rolovich’s first year as head coach of the Rainbow Warriors, Hawai’i took a step backward last season as it earned just three victories and finished in last place in the Mountain West Conference West Division. This season likely won’t be much easier for the Warriors, as they lost 14 total starters from last year’s squad. The offense will be nearly unrecognizable to anyone who watched Hawai’i play last season, as they lose eight offensive starters including two-year quarterback Dru Brown, All-MW 2nd team running back Diocemy Saint Juste, four starting offensive linemen, and two wide receivers. However, with new faces comes new hope for Rainbow Warrior fans, and that may be exactly what they need. Defensively, Hawai’i does return five starters including All-MW 2nd team linebacker Jahlani Tavai, who ranked 10th in the nation in total tackles per game during his junior season with 10.3. The Rainbow Warriors were picked to finish fifth in the West Division this season by the media. All-time against Hawai’i, Utah State leads the series, including four-straight wins and five of the past seven for the Aggies.

Last season, Utah State limped into their first MW matchup of the season after losing by a combined 105-20 to their first two FBS opponents of the year. That game versus San Jose State, a 61-10 beatdown in San Jose, kicked off a 5-3 stretch for the Aggies to reach bowl eligibility for the sixth time in seven years. This year shouldn’t be much different in Logan. SJSU ranked 126th in the nation (out of 130 teams) in points per game last season, and somehow their defense managed to be even worse, ranking 128th in the nation in points allowed per game. Wins over FCS Cal Poly and a Josh Allen-less Wyoming represent the only “bright” spots of the 2017 for San Jose State.

The Spartans are in the midst of a major youth movement across nearly the entire roster. QB Montel Aaron, RB Tyler Nevens, and WIs JaQuan Blackwell and Tre Walker are all sophomores who contributed greatly to the offense last season. Gone, however, is defensive leader LB Frank Ginda, who led the NCAA in tackles last season with 135 on the year. The Spartans should be improved in their second season under Brent Brennan, but it’ll be hard for SJSU to improve enough to climb out of the basement of the MW West division.
The 2018 season has the potential to be a rough one for Colorado State.

The offense lost its leading passer, receiver and rusher this offseason. Nick Stevens led the Mountain West in pass attempts (459), completions (284), yards (3,804), and touchdowns (29). Michael Gallup was first in receptions (100) and second in receiving yards (1,418). And Dalyn Dawkins was third in rush yards (1,399) and yards per carry (6.2).

On the defensive side of the ball CSU is in much better shape. Six starters return from last year’s squad, three linebackers, two defensive backs and one defensive linemen. Josh Watson and Jordan Frogal return as the team’s top two leading tacklers in 2017. Cornerback Anthony Hawkins also returns following a campaign where he recorded three interceptions and five passes defended.

Utah State has lost each of the last two matchups against the Rams and three of the last four. In 2017, the Aggies didn’t put up much of a fight, going down 24-0 after just over a quarter of game time. Kent Myers was sacked seven times in the game and had no help from the running game that gained 37 yards on 12 attempts from the running backs.

Under fourth-year head coach Mike Bobo, CSU has gone 7-6 each year and lost in three straight bowl games.

BOISE STATE

In 15 tries, the Aggies have managed just one win against Boise State in the last 20 years. And this year will be no easier than any of the last 15 games as outside of Utah State’s season opener against Michigan State, Boise State will be its toughest opponent by far.

The Broncos have the legitimate possibility of going undefeated in 2018 and getting themselves into the discussion for a New Year’s Six bowl game. BSU returns seven All-Mountain West players from last year (two first-team, five second-team) and seven honorable mentions.

Brett Rypien is a three-year starter at quarterback entering his senior year. Assuming he doesn’t go down early in the year with an injury, he will surpass 10,000 career passing yards this season. In his career, he’s completed 62.7 percent of his passes and has a nearly 3-1 touchdown to interception ratio.

Boise State also returns running back Alexander Mattison, who had 1,570 yards from scrimmage and 13 total touchdowns.

Both of the Broncos’ first-team selections in the Mountain West were on defense in the form of corner Tyler Horton and Curtis Weaver. Horton tallied 44 tackles, three interceptions and 10 pass breakups in 2017. Weaver, a freshman defensive tackle last season, finished tied for sixth in total sacks in the NCAA last year with 11.0. Starting safety Kekoa Nawahine, the team’s second-leading tackler from last year, also returns.
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