



Jacksonville State Picked as 2015 Ohio Valley Conference Football Favorites

July 20, 2015

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Kyle Schwartz

NASHVILLE - For the second-straight year **Jacksonville State** has been picked the preseason favorite in the 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, 2011 and 2014, picked up 16 of the 18 first-place votes to top the 2015 poll.

The Gamecocks totaled 128 total points to out-distance **Eastern Illinois** and **Eastern Kentucky** in the vote. Eastern Illinois finished second in the poll with 107 total points while Eastern Kentucky picked up the other two first-place votes and finished third with 106 points. **UT Martin** was tabbed fourth (78 points) and followed by **Tennessee State** (66), **Southeast Missouri** (63), **Tennessee Tech** (45), **Murray State** (38) and **Austin Peay** (17).

Last season in his first year as head coach **John Grass** led the Gamecocks to a perfect 8-0 Conference record, 10-2 overall mark, Top 10 national ranking and a berth in the FCS Playoffs. In the process Jacksonville State won its fourth overall OVC Championship and first since the 2011 season. This year the team returns an experienced squad that includes nine offensive and seven defensive starters and 12 players who were named to the Preseason All-OVC Team. Among the returning players is junior quarterback **Eli Jenkins** who is 17-3 as JSU's starting quarterback over the past two seasons. Last year Jenkins threw for 1,870 yards and 12 touchdowns and rushed for 698 yards and six scores in leading the Jax State offensive attack. Despite the loss of All-American DaMarcus James at running back (1,151 yards and 14 touchdowns), JSU does return **Troymaine Pope** who rushed for 715 yards and six scores and **Miles Jones** who added 630 yards and seven scores on the ground, giving the Gamecocks plenty of options in the backfield. The team should also be strong on defense as three of its defensive linemen were named Preseason All-OVC including senior **Devaunte Sigler** who was tabbed the OVC Preseason Defensive Player of the Year after being named the 2014 Defensive Player of the Year at the conclusion of last season. The other linemen named to the preseason team were **LaMichael Fanning** and **Chris Landrum**; the trio helped JSU rank 17th nationally in total defense (317.4 yards/game) last season. Also returning is senior cornerback **Jermaine Hough**, who along with Sigler is on the STATS FCS National Defensive Player of the Year Watch List.

Last year in its first season under head coach **Kim Dameron**, the Panthers struggled out of the gate against a tough schedule (starting 1-5) but won four of its final six contests to finish 5-3 in OVC play and finish in a tie for third place. Last year the team ranked 11th nationally in rushing offense (236.3 yards/game) and should once again be strong in that part of its offensive attack. Returning is senior quarterback **Jalen Whitlow** who passed for 2,075 yards and 15 touchdowns last year in addition to rushing for 792 yards and 12 scores in his first season after transferring from Kentucky. The 792 rushing yards were the most by a quarterback in EIU history. This season Whitlow will have the luxury of handing the ball off to a healthy **Shepard Little** out of the backfield. Little battled injuries last year and still managed to rush for a team-high 797 yards; the year prior he gained 1,548 rushing yards from scrimmage. The backfield also includes a pair of first-year FBS transfers in **Korliss Marshall** (Arkansas) and **Devin Church** (Illinois). Defensively the Panthers return three players who were named to the Preseason All-OVC Team in senior linebacker **Kamu Grugier-Hill** (97 tackles, 9.5 tackles-for-loss, three interceptions), senior defensive lineman **Dino Fanti** (64 tackles, 15.5 tackles-for-loss) and senior defensive back **Jourdan Wickliffe** (62 tackles, 4 interceptions).

A year ago Eastern Kentucky finished second in the OVC and won nine games overall, including a victory at FBS-member Miami (Ohio), on its way to earning an at-large berth to the FCS Playoffs. It marked the 21st Division I playoff appearance for the Colonels, the second-most all-time. This year the Colonels return eight offensive and eight defensive starters from that team including Preseason Offensive Player of the Year **Dy'Shawn Mobley**. In his first season with ECU, Mobley rushed for 20 touchdowns (the sixth-highest total nationally) and 1,491 yards (the 12th-most yards nationally) in earning OVC Offensive Player of the Year honors and being named a finalist for the Walter Payton Award. Mobley averaged 138.5 yards/game of total offense and tied an OVC record with six total touchdowns (5 rushing, 1 receiving) in a game. **Bennie Coney** returns at quarterback after splitting time at the position last year; Coney passed for 1,185 yards and seven touchdowns last year. The offense is protected by an offensive line that includes a pair of players on the Preseason All-OVC Team in seniors **Trey Shelton** and **Brett Eyckmans**. A season ago the ECU defense ranked second nationally in turnovers gained with 33; this year the team will be bolstered by senior **Stanley Absanon** who is a Preseason All-OVC selection after intercepting four passes a year ago. The Colonels defensive unit also includes Ohio State transfer **Noah Spence**, who earned first-team All-Big Ten honors in 2013.

UT Martin begins its 10th season under head coach **Jason Simpson** who has won 58 total games in his tenure at the school, a mark that ranks 10th in OVC history. After guiding the team to a 5-3 OVC record a season ago, his team returns six offensive and seven defensive players this year including starting quarterback **Jarod Neal**. Last year Neal completed 63.5 percent of his passes for 1,880 yards and 14 touchdowns while also rushing for six touchdowns. Defensively senior linebacker **Nick Dance** leads the defense unit; last year he had 56 tackles, 5.0 tackles-for-loss and forced two fumbles in his first year after transferring from Western Michigan.

Tennessee State returns 58 players from last year's team that was 6-6 overall, including five offensive and three defensive starters. A season ago **Rod Reed's** team ranked 11th nationally in total defense (303.3 yards/game) in addition to forcing 25 total turnovers, which was the 29th best total in the country. Among the team's returning players is Preseason All-OVC selection **Gabe Terry** who had 11.5 sacks last season in his first year in a TSU uniform. Also returning is senior defensive back **Bernell Brooks** who had two interceptions and six pass breakups a season ago. Offensively the team will have a new signal caller as junior **Ronald Butler** takes over as the starting quarterback. Butler saw time as a starter as a freshman in 2013 (throwing for 1,405 yards and 13 touchdowns) but was the backup last season, passing for 420 yards and a touchdown in limited action.

After winning just three total games for three-straight seasons, Southeast Missouri took a leap forward in its first year under head coach **Tom Matukewicz** in 2014. Despite losing several key players to injuries during the year, the new look Redhawks ranked 33rd nationally in total offense (422.5 yards/game) while averaging 32.0 points/game. The squad also topped No. 3 ranked Southeastern Louisiana, marking the highest-ranked opponent the program had ever defeated. Among the team's returning players are senior wide receiver **Paul McRoberts** and senior running back **DeMichael Jackson** who each earned All-OVC honors last year and are on the Preseason All-OVC team this season. McRoberts caught 44 passes for 711 yards and nine touchdowns in seven games while Jackson rushed for 734 yards and five touchdowns in eight contests. Also back

is junior kicker **Ryan McCrum** who was the only FCS kicker to make four field goals of 50 yards or longer during the regular season in 2014 and who has earned Preseason All-American honors. Defensively the team returns junior linebacker **Roper Garrett**, a Preseason All-OVC selection, who tallied 96 tackles, 7.5 tackles-for-loss and 3.0 sacks and forced five fumbles (a mark that ranked second nationally) in nine games.

Tennessee Tech head coach **Watson Brown** begins his ninth season in Cookeville and 31st overall as a head coach in 2015. The 2011 OVC Coach of the Year has 51 returning letterwinners from last year's squad that won four Conference games, its highest total since winning the League championship in 2011. After missing most of last year with an injury and receiving a medical hardship, fifth-year senior linebacker **Tra'Darius Goff** returns and was named a Preseason All-OVC selection. In his last full season (2013) he led the team with 101 tackles while also registering 8.5 tackles-for-loss, 3.0 sacks, three forced fumbles and two fumble recoveries. Also back is senior **Ladarius Vanlier**, a preseason All-American who is one of the most versatile players in the OVC. Last season Vanlier was one of just four players in the FCS with both a kickoff and punt return for a touchdown and one of just five players nationally with multiple punt return touchdowns (2). He also rushed for 494 yards and five touchdowns and caught 21 passes for 130 yards for the Golden Eagles.

Murray State features the only new coach in the league as **Mitch Stewart** takes over the program after five years as an assistant coach (the last four as the team's offensive coordinator). Stewart helped the Racers offense rank 15th nationally in total offense (468.3 yards/game) and scoring offense (36.6 points/game) a season ago. He will continue to work with junior quarterback **KD Humphries** who emerged as the MSU starter a season ago. Humphries led all FCS players in completions/game (26.5) last season while ranking fourth nationally in completion percentage (67.4%), sixth in passing yards/game (290.3) and eighth in total offense (306.5 yards/game). Humphries has seven other offensive starters returning including Preseason All-OVC wide receiver **Janawski Davis** who caught 63 passes for 909 yards and 13 touchdowns a year ago. While the team will look to improve its defensive rankings from a year ago, they do return Preseason All-OVC linebacker **Jonathan Jackson** who tallied 135 total tackles (the fourth-most per game nationally last season) in 2014.

Austin Peay continues to build its program under third-year head coach **Kirby Cannon**. Cannon and his team welcomed a newly renovated Governors Stadium last season and this year once again have a young team, but this time around those young players have a year of experience under their belts. The Gobs have eight offensive and seven defensive starters back including sophomore running back **Otis Gerron**. Gerron led APSU in rushing a season ago (596 yards and 112 carries) despite making just four starts. On the defensive side of the ball junior **Antonio Turner** returns after leading the team in tackles (81) a year ago.

All-OVC Preseason Football Team

Eastern Kentucky senior running back **Dy'Shawn Mobley** was named the 2015 Ohio Valley Conference Preseason Offensive Player of the Year while Jacksonville State senior defensive lineman **Devaunte Sigler** was named Preseason Defensive Player of the Year in a vote of by the league's head football coaches and sports information directors.

Jacksonville State led the way with 12 total Preseason All-OVC selections. Eastern Illinois, Eastern Kentucky and Southeast Missouri had four picks apiece, Murray State had three selections and Tennessee State and Tennessee Tech had one player each on the squad. Returning players who were first-team All-OVC selections last year (13 in total) were automatic selections to the preseason team this year. The squad also included 10 players who were second-team picks in 2014. Of the 29 total selections, 21 were seniors, seven were juniors and there was one sophomore.

The offensive unit was led by Mobley who earned OVC Offensive Player of the Year and All-American honors last year after rushing for 20 touchdowns (the sixth-most nationally) and 1,491 yards (the 12th-highest total nationally). Mobley, who was sixth nationally in scoring (9.7 points/game), was a finalist for the Walter Payton Award in his first season in an ECU uniform and is a candidate for the STATS National Offensive Player of the Year to begin this season. He is joined at the running back position by Southeast Missouri State senior **DeMichael Jackson**, who rushed for 734 yards in eight games last season. Jacksonville State junior **Eli Jenkins** was the pick at quarterback after accounting for 18 touchdowns (12 passing, 6 rushing) in leading the Gamecocks to the OVC Championship last season; Jenkins is 17-3 as a starter over the past two seasons. Three wide receivers made the preseason team in Southeast Missouri senior **Paul McRoberts** (44 catches, 711 yards, 9 TDs), Jacksonville State junior **Josh Barge** (56 catches, 919 yards, 4 TDs) and Murray State senior **Janawski Davis** (63 catches, 909 yards, 13 TDs). The tight end selection was Jacksonville State senior **Bo Brummel** (7 catches, 124 yards, 4 TDs). The offensive line included three Jacksonville State players in junior center **Casey Dunn**, senior guard **Adam Wright** and sophomore tackle **Justin Lea** (the 2014 OVC Freshman of the Year), a pair of Eastern Kentucky players in senior guard **Trey Shelton** and senior tackle **Brett Eyckmans** as well as Eastern Illinois junior tackle **Evan Kanz**.

Sigler earned both OVC Defensive Player of the Year and All-American honors in 2014 after finishing the year with 36 tackles, 9.0 tackles-for-loss, 3.5 sacks, an interception, two pass breakups, two forced fumbles and a blocked kick despite drawing numerous double teams. He helped lead a defense that ranked fourth nationally in third down conversion defense (28.1%) and 17th nationally in total defense (317.4 yards/game). He was joined on the defensive line by senior teammates **LaMichael Fanning** (32 tackles, 5.5 TFL, 4.0 sacks, 3 QBH) and **Chris Landrum** (33 tackles, 9.5 TFL, 3.5 sacks, 4 QBH) as well as Eastern Illinois senior **Dino Fanti** (64 tackles, 15.5 TFL, 1 sack, 6 QBH) and Tennessee State senior **Gabe Terry** (24 tackles, 11.0 TFL, 11.5 sacks). The linebackers included Eastern Illinois senior **Kamu Grugier-Hill** (97 tackles, 9.5 TFL, 1.5 sacks, 3 INTs), Murray State junior **Jonathan Jackson** (135 tackles, 8.5 TFL, 3.0 sacks), Southeast Missouri State junior **Roper Garrett** (96 tackles, 7.5 TFL, 3.0 sacks, 5 FF) and Tennessee Tech fifth-year senior **Tra'Darius Goff** (was injured last season but recorded 101 tackles, 8.5 TFL, 3.0 sacks, 3 FF in 2013). The defensive backs included two Jacksonville State players in seniors **Jermaine Hough** (36 tackles, 4 INTs, 7 PBUs) and **DeBarrius Miller** (55 tackles, 4 INTs, 6 PBUs), Eastern Illinois senior **Jourdan Wickliffe** (62 tackles, 4 INT's) and Eastern Kentucky senior **Stanley Absanon** (56 tackles, 4 INTs, 9 PBUs).

Specialists selected to the preseason team included Southeast Missouri junior kicker **Ryan McCrum** (18-of-23 FGs, including 4 over 50 yards), Jacksonville State senior punter **Hamish MacInnes** (39.1 yards/punt average, Long of 58, 16 inside opponent's 20-yard line) and Murray State senior return specialist **Pokey Harris** (3 kickoffs returned for touchdowns, including 2 of 100 yards; 28.8 yards/return average).

2015 Preseason All-Ohio Valley Conference Football Team

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

Preseason Offensive Player of the Year: Dy'Shawn Mobley (RB), Eastern Kentucky

Preseason Defensive Player of the Year: Devaunte Sigler (DL), Jacksonville State

OFFENSE

<u>Pos.</u>	<u>Player, School</u>	<u>Ht.</u>	<u>Wt.</u>	<u>Yr.</u>	<u>Hometown</u>
QB	Eli Jenkins, Jacksonville State *	6-3	200	R-Jr.	Birmingham, Ala.
RB	Dy'Shawn Mobley, Eastern Kentucky *	5-11	215	Sr.	Powell, Tenn.
RB	DeMichael Jackson, Southeast Missouri **	5-10	190	Sr.	Louisville, Ky.
WR	Paul McRoberts, Southeast Missouri *	6-3	197	Sr.	St. Louis, Mo.
WR	Josh Barge, Jacksonville State **	6-1	172	R-Jr.	Carrollton, Ga.
WR	Janawski Davis, Murray State **	5-7	164	Sr.	Eight Mile, Ala.
TE	Bo Brummel, Jacksonville State **	6-3	240	Sr.	Arlington, Wash.
C	Casey Dunn, Jacksonville State	6-3	289	Jr.	Trussville, Ala.
OG	Adam Wright, Jacksonville State *	6-4	293	R-Sr.	Centerpoint, Ala.
OG	Trey Shelton, Eastern Kentucky **	6-4	300	Sr.	Chester, Va.
OT	Brett Eyckmans, Eastern Kentucky *	6-4	290	Sr.	Lexington, Ky.
OT	Justin Lea, Jacksonville State **	6-4	271	R-So.	Henagar, Ala.
OT	Evan Kanz, Eastern Illinois **	6-5	310	R-Jr.	Luxemburg, Wis.

DEFENSE

<u>Pos.</u>	<u>Player, School</u>	<u>Ht.</u>	<u>Wt.</u>	<u>Yr.</u>	<u>Hometown</u>
DL	Devaunte Sigler, Jacksonville State *	6-5	292	Sr.	Mobile, Ala.
DL	LaMichael Fanning, Jacksonville State *	6-7	281	R-Sr.	Whitesville, Ga.
DL	Dino Fanti, Eastern Illinois **	6-1	265	R-Sr.	Venice, Fla.
DL	Chris Landrum, Jacksonville State **	6-3	263	R-Sr.	Sweet Water, Ala.
DL	Gabe Terry, Tennessee State **	6-2	225	Sr.	Palm Beach, Fla.
LB	Kamu Grugier-Hill, Eastern Illinois *	6-2	215	Sr.	Papakolea, Hawaii
LB	Jonathan Jackson, Murray State	5-11	211	Jr.	Mayfield, Ky.
LB	Roper Garrett, Southeast Missouri	6-1	234	Jr.	Farmington, Mo.
LB	Tra'Darius Goff, Tennessee Tech	5-11	240	R-Sr.	Columbia, Tenn.
DB	Jourdan Wickliffe, Eastern Illinois *	6-1	200	R-Sr.	Columbus, Ohio
DB	Jermaine Hough, Jacksonville State *	5-10	180	Sr.	Lovejoy, Ga.
DB	Stanley Absanon, Eastern Kentucky	5-11	185	Sr.	Auburndale, Fla.
DB	DeBarrius Miller, Jacksonville State	6-0	190	Sr.	Fort Valley, Ga.

SPECIALISTS

<u>Pos.</u>	<u>Player, School</u>	<u>Ht.</u>	<u>Wt.</u>	<u>Yr.</u>	<u>Hometown</u>
K	Ryan McCrum, Southeast Missouri *	6-0	228	Jr.	St. Charles, Mo.
P	Hamish MacInnes, Jacksonville State *	6-1	178	Sr.	Victoria, Australia
RS	Pokey Harris, Murray State *	5-10	173	Sr.	Winchester, Ky.

* - 1st team All-OVC team in 2014 ** - 2nd team All-OVC team in 2014

2015 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 (16 first-place votes)	128
2.	Eastern Illinois	107
3.	Eastern Kentucky (2)	106
4.	UT Martin	78
5.	Tennessee State	66
6.	Southeast Missouri	63
7.	Tennessee Tech	45
8.	Murray State	38
9.	Austin Peay	17

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