

THE BLITZ PACKAGE



TROJANS

NOLES

TIGERS

BACK FOR MORE

By Bill Zimmerman | For the AJC

Many college-football fans enjoy the same sarcastic questions every year: “Is Miami back?” Or, “Is Texas back?”

The latter might finally come true for the 2005 national champions, if a key statistic proves useful for the Longhorns: Returning starters.

With 15 players still atop their position on the depth chart in 2023, Texas checked in at 11th in this year’s Associated Press preseason Top 25. Only Wisconsin and Florida State had more, at 17 and 16 respectively, as calculated by Athlon Sports.

What’s more, Florida State returns 87% of its production across the field, as calculated by ESPN, with Texas A&M the only other program to hit the 80% mark. The Seminoles check in at eighth in the AP rankings, the Aggies 23rd.

Clearly, returning starters isn’t the only key to potential greatness. Georgia returns 13 starters and 61% of production but still tops the preseason top 25.

For fans who want to know the top challengers to the Dawgs’ back-to-back titles, though, the teams with the most talent returning are a solid place to start.

Here are 10 of the teams to watch in order of their AP preseason ranking – and some of the players whose success would be critical to reaching the playoff, with stats from Sports Reference and notes from reporters across Tribune News Service.

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No. 6 Southern Cal

- 14 starters return
- 76% of overall production

QB Caleb Williams | 6-1, 218, Jr.

■ **Why he matters:** Won the Heisman, 'nuff said. Williams only needs to shake off the distraction of the imploding Pac-12 and instead focus on his second year in L.A. (and third total) with head coach Lincoln Riley.

■ **2022 stats:** 4,537 yards passing with 42 TDs, 380 yards rushing with 10 TDs.

■ **Newsworthy nugget:** The most obvious beneficiary of new USC offensive analyst Kingsbury's services? Caleb Williams, who could be heading into a perfect storm on the heels of a Heisman Trophy-winning season with not but one but two quarterback savants in his corner - both gurus who once coached Mayfield and Murray in earlier years. When asked about Kingsbury's impact and role Thursday, Williams murmured in affirmation, "With him not being a head coach, he's around us a lot more." Williams said. — Luca Evans, *The Orange County Register*

No. 7 Penn State

- 14 starters return
- 65% of overall production

RB Nick Singleton | 6-0, 224, Soph.

■ **Why he matters:** The 1,000-yard rusher can key the Nittany Lions' offense once again, but with a lot of familiar faces still around him he won't need to shoulder the pressure to win his division by himself.

■ **2022 stats:** 1,061 yards rushing with 12 TDs, 11 receptions with 1 TD.

■ **Newsworthy nugget:** Penn State has an experienced offensive line to protect QB Drew Allar. Olu Fashanu, who was regarded by many as the best offensive tackle in the country last season - better even than Broderick Jones - surprised everyone by coming back for another college season. Penn State has returning backs Nick Singleton and Kaytron Allen, who combined for 1,928 rushing yards and 22 rushing touchdowns last season as true freshmen. It has receiver KeAndre Lambert-Smith, who caught an 88-yard touchdown in the Rose Bowl win against Utah last season. — Ron Cook, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*



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No. 8 Florida State

- 16 starters return
- 87% of overall production

DL Jared Verse | 6-4, 248, Jr.

■ **Why he matters:** The former Albany player transferred to Tallahassee before last season, and disrupted backfields across the ACC. He passed up a chance to go to the NFL in favor of another year as a Seminole.

■ **2022 stats:** 47 tackles, 36 pressures, 16.5 tackles for loss, 9 sacks.

■ **Newsworthy nugget:** Verse earned a spot on the All-ACC first-team after finishing second in the league in sacks and tackles for loss (16.5). He led the team in pressures, with 3 quarterback hurries, a fumble recovery and a blocked kick. His performance had many projecting him as a first- or second-round pick in the NFL draft before he announced on social media he would instead return to FSU. "He is just scratching the surface for where he can go," head coach Mike Norvell said. – Matt Murschel, *Orlando Sentinel*

No. 9 Clemson

- 15 starters return
- 69% of overall production

LB Barrett Carter | 6-1, 230, Jr.

■ **Why he matters:** An AJC Super 11 alum, Carter played two different linebacker spots for the Tigers last year and excelled at both.

■ **2022 stats:** 77 tackles, 10.5 tackles for loss, 55 sacks, 2 INTs.

■ **Newsworthy nugget:** Make no mistake: Clemson's stacked at this spot. Star middle linebacker Jeremiah Trotter Jr. and weakside linebacker Carter were preseason All-ACC picks. And the versatile Wade Woodaz will slide in for NFL Draft third-round pick Trenton Simpson at strongside linebacker. Trotter and Carter are iron men and should play a ton and rack up stats in 2023. But they can't take every snap, and Clemson will also lean on Woodaz's versatility as a nickelback and safety. The emergence of a clear fourth linebacker wouldn't hurt – even if Clemson can get away with trotting out two most of the time. – Chapel Fowler, *The Charlotte Observer*



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No. 10 Washington

- 14 starters return
- 73% of overall production

QB Michael Penix Jr. | 6-3, 213, Sr.

■ **Why he matters:** The former Indiana Hoosiers signal-caller did just fine in his first season with the Huskies, and with lots of teammates returning he'll look to lead UW to its second playoff appearance.

■ **2022 stats:** 4,641 yards passing with 31 TDs, 92 yards rushing with 4 TDs.

■ **Newsworthy nugget:** This is a team bringing back more than just Penix, the quarterback who led the nation in passing yards per game last year and finished eighth in the Heisman voting. This is a team bringing back wide receiver Rome Odunze, who made first-team All-Pac-12 last year. Second-team offensive lineman Troy Fautanu also comes back, as does first-team edge player Bralen Trice. – *Matt Calkins, The Seattle Times*

No. 11 Texas

- 15 starters return
- 74% of overall production

QB Quinn Ewers | 6-3, 206, Soph.

■ **Why he matters:** Yes, Arch Manning is there if Ewers looks over his shoulder. But the confident passer is more likely to keep his eyes downfield looking for targets, after losing now-Atlanta Falcons RB Bijan Robinson.

■ **2022 stats:** 2,177 yards, 15 TDs in 10 games.

■ **Newsworthy nugget:** Ewers figures to secure his status as a first-round NFL pick next spring. That's not to say all went smoothly for Ewers last season. Injured during a breakout performance against Alabama, he returned to lead a 49-0 destruction of Oklahoma, only to throw three interceptions in a 41-34 meltdown against Oklahoma State two weeks later. "We've seen his body composition change, we've seen him speak up in meetings," head coach Steve Sarkisian said. "There's not a throw he can't make." – *Tim Cowlshaw, The Dallas Morning News*



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No. 14 Utah

- 14 starters return
- 76% of overall production

QB Cameron Rising | 6-2, 220, Sr.

■ **Why he matters:** An uncharacteristically sloppy Week 1 at Florida altered the Utes' season, but Rising is widely respected as a field general who can get the most out of his teammates - who know him well.

■ **2022 stats:** 3,034 yards passing with 26 TDs, 465 yards rushing with 6 TDs.

■ **News-worthy nugget:** The Utes' star QB is coming off a torn ACL in the Rose Bowl and may not be ready for an opening two-week stretch against Florida and Baylor - tough games early, but non-conference battles that might not hurt their overall cause. Williams, Penix and Oregon's Bo Nix generate more attention as Pac-12 QBs than Rising, but if the Utes have another big year it'll be because of him. - *Case Keefer, Las Vegas Sun, and James Crepea, oregonlive.com*

No. 19 Wisconsin

- 17 starters return
- 72% of overall production

RB Braelon Allen | 6-2, 238, Jr.

■ **Why he matters:** It's no surprise to highlight a Badgers ball-carrier, but Allen and his teammates stand to add energy from new head coach Luke Fickell and offensive coordinator Phil Longo.

■ **2022 stats:** 1,242 yards rushing with 11 TDs, 104 yards receiving.

■ **News-worthy nugget:** Fickell has spoken with Allen about aiming for an average of 18 carries and about 150 yards per game. Those benchmarks, in Fickell's estimation, mean Allen's had a significant impact on the game while not getting Allen hit too frequently. Allen was limited by injuries to close the past two seasons, and keeping him healthy down the stretch is a priority. - *Colten Bartholomew, The Wisconsin State Journal*



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No. 21 North Carolina

- 14 starters return
- 68% of overall production

QB Drake Maye | 6-5, 220, Soph.

■ **Why he matters:** If he's motivated by his unexpected struggles in last year's ACC Championship Game loss to Clemson, Maye could forge an eye-popping season for coach Mack Brown.

■ **2022 stats:** 4,321 yards passing with 38 TDs, 698 yards rushing with 7 TDs.

■ **Newsworthy nugget:** "He can make every throw," offensive coordinator Chip Lindsey said. "The biggest thing for us is just continue to do the things he's comfortable with and he's good at." Maye was picked to again be the ACC Player of the Year in 2023. There's Heisman Trophy talk. He's on the watch lists for any trophy worth winning. "I've never seen any signs that anything like that affects him in any way, good or bad," Lindsey said. "... He comes to meetings and practice every day and he's locked in and focused and trying to get better." – *Chip Alexander, The Charlotte Observer*

No. 23 Texas A&M

- 15 starters return
- 80% of overall production

WR Ainius Smith | 5-10, 190, Sr.

■ **Why he matters:** Smith missed much of 2022 with an injury but made ESPN's list of the top 100 players in the nation. Last year's young roster gained needed experience and Smith can be the cherry on top.

■ **2021 stats:** 509 yards receiving with 6 TDs; 384 career rushing yards with 4 TDs.

■ **Newsworthy nugget:** Asked who exactly would be calling plays with the addition of new offensive coordinator and former Atlanta Falcons head coach Bobby Petrino, Aggies head coach Jimbo Fisher hedged a little, saying, "We'll go through that as we go." After a brief pause, he seemed to catch himself and add: "Plan on him (Petrino) making calls, plan on him calling plays, I have no problem with that at all. ... I've known him a long time. We've had great respect for each other." – *Chuck Carlton, The Dallas Morning News*

