



# Southern Conference Football

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## **SoCon media tab Wofford preseason football favorite** **Two-time defending champs shared league title last season**

**SPARTANBURG, S.C.** – Two-time defending Southern Conference champion Wofford is the media's pick to win the league again in 2019, earning 21 of a possible 29 first-place votes. The Terriers are the media's preseason pick for the second time and first since 2017.

Wofford went 9-4 overall and 6-2 in SoCon play in 2018, head coach Josh Conklin's first season, spending the entirety of the season ranked in the top 15 nationally, including eight weeks in the top 10, and finishing 12th in the AFCA Coaches' Top 25 and 13th in the STATS poll. The Terriers, who earned 253 points in the media poll, claimed a share of their sixth SoCon title last season and reached the second round of the FCS playoffs, where they fell to second-ranked Kennesaw State, 13-10. The Terriers no longer have the services of All-American fullback Andre Stoddard but return third-team All-American offensive lineman Justus Basinger among their nine offensive starters. Basinger was joined on HERO Sports' Preseason All-America third team by fellow lineman Michael Ralph. Wofford lost six starters on defense, including third-team All-American lineman Miles Brown.

Furman, which also claimed a share of the 2018 title, was second in the media poll with 229 points and six first-place votes. The Paladins went 6-4 overall and 6-2 in the league last year, downing then-No. 4 Wofford and winning their final four league games to clinch a share of their record 14th SoCon title. Furman, which was also picked second in last year's preseason media poll, returns eight starters on offense and seven on defense and both specialists. Among those returners are bandit linebacker Adrian Hope and kicker Grayson Atkins, who both earned second-team All-America honors from the Associated Press last year. Hope finished fourth in the voting for the STATS Jerry Rice Award, given annually to the top FCS freshman. The Paladins began last season ranked in the AFCA and STATS polls.

ETSU finished third in the preseason media poll with 187 points and the remaining two first-place votes. The Bucs were one of the most pleasant surprises in college football last season, going 8-4 overall and 6-2 in the SoCon to claim a share of their first SoCon title. First-year coach Randy Sanders was named the SoCon Coach of the Year after leading the Bucs, who were picked eighth in the SoCon polls entering their fourth season since resurrecting the program, to a top-25 ranking and their first FCS playoff berth since 1996. The Bucs won six games by three points or fewer, including a 17-14 win over then-No. 24 Chattanooga, and finished the season ranked in both the AFCA and STATS polls. ETSU must replace consensus first-team All-American offensive lineman Matt Pyke, who won the SoCon's Jacobs Blocking Award, but returns second-team All-American defensive lineman Nasir Player, second-team All-American defensive back Tyree Robinson and Freshman All-American running back Quay Holmes, who was the SoCon Freshman of the Year and finished third in the Jerry Rice Award voting. Player enters this season as the SoCon Preseason Defensive Player of the Year and has earned spots on the HERO Sports and Athlon Preseason All-America squads.

Mercer, which tied for fifth in the league last year, was picked fourth in the poll with 146 points after posting its third straight 4-4 SoCon campaign. The Bears' pick matches their highest since joining the league in 2014. Mercer, which earned a signature win with its 30-24 victory at No. 9 Samford last year, returns eight starters on offense and eight on defense. The Bears will also see the return of quarterback Robert Riddle, who won the

starting job as a redshirt freshman last year, leading Mercer to the win over Samford and throwing for a school-record 374 yards against The Citadel before suffering a season-ending injury in September.

Chattanooga is fifth in the poll with 134 points. New head coach Rusty Wright inherits a squad that went 6-5 overall and 4-4 in the league last season, opening the season with four straight wins, including a 27-20 triumph over No. 17 Samford, to enter the national polls at No. 24 (AFCA) and 20 (STATS). The Mocs return nine offensive starters but must replace consensus All-American and SoCon Defensive Player of the Year Isaiah Mack from their defensive line.

Samford finished sixth in the preseason poll with 125 points after a fourth-place effort in 2018. The Bulldogs return seven offensive starters and six on defense but lost three All-Americans in quarterback Devlin Hodges, wide receiver Kelvin McKnight and defensive lineman Ahmad Gooden, who all exhausted their eligibility. Hodges, the Walter Payton Award winner and FCS ADA Offensive Player of the Year last season, wrapped up his career as the FCS record-holder for passing yards with 14,584, passing Alcorn State great Steve McNair late in the season.

The Citadel is seventh in the preseason poll with 111 points after finishing among the three-way tie for fifth at 4-4 in league play last year (5-6 overall).

Western Carolina, which boasts SoCon Preseason Offensive Player of the Year Tyrie Adams, is picked eighth with 88 points. The Catamount quarterback led the league in rushing last season, becoming one of just 11 players in FCS history to run for 1,000 yards and throw for 2,000 in the same season.

VMI rounds out the poll with 32 points in ninth.

The 2019 season gets under way when Samford takes on Youngstown State on Aug. 24 at 3 p.m. Eastern in the Guardian Credit Union FCS Kickoff in Montgomery, Alabama, on ESPN.

#### **2019 Preseason Southern Conference Media Poll**

| <b>Team (1st-place votes)</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|-------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. Wofford (21)               | 253          |
| 2. Furman (6)                 | 229          |
| 3. ETSU (2)                   | 187          |
| 4. Mercer                     | 146          |
| 5. Chattanooga                | 134          |
| 6. Samford                    | 125          |
| 7. The Citadel                | 111          |
| 8. Western Carolina           | 88           |
| 9. VMI                        | 32           |

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