

## **Great West Football Conference 2008 Preview**

By Kent Schmidt, CSN West Columnist

### **Predicted Order of Finish:**

1. Cal Poly
2. North Dakota
3. UC Davis
4. Southern Utah
5. South Dakota

**Offensive Player of the Year: Ramses Barden, WR, Cal Poly, Sr.**

**Defensive Player of the Year: Rory Manke, FS, North Dakota, Sr.**

### **Biggest Shoes to Fill: Weston Dressler, WR, North Dakota**

The DII Harlon Hill Finalist (Top Player Award) will surely be missed on the FCS newcomer Fightin' Sioux offense. Dressler finished his UND career as the holder of 19 different school records, including career receptions (243), career receiving yards (3,382), career touchdown receptions (38) and career all-purpose yards (7,072). Dressler was named to the All-North Central Conference first team at three different positions, the first player in league history to do so. It was also his fourth straight All-NCC first team honor.

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Throughout the five year history of the Great West Football Conference, one thing has been a consistent and that has been change. Before the league even began play its seventh member of Saint Mary's of California dropped its program to bring the league down to six teams in 2003. After 2005, the league was down to five teams with the loss of Northern Colorado to the Big Sky Conference. And this year, the league losses two more members in North Dakota State and South Dakota State to the Gateway Football Conference.

While the most recent losses bring the number of original GWFC members to three, the league will have two new Dakota teams move in for 2008. Former North Dakota State and South Dakota State rivals of the University of North Dakota and University of South Dakota are transitioning from the Division II ranks to take their place.

A year ago, SDSU and NDSU finished first and second respectively so replacing those two Top 25 ranked schools will be a tall order for UND and USD but both the Dakota newcomers have had their runs at the DII ranks.

UND has a DII national title (2001) under its belt and another championship game (2003) appearance to go with 14 playoff seasons. USD has one DII

championship game appearance (1986) and four DII playoff seasons in its history.

The two Dakota newcomers will not play a full GWFC slate this year due to playoff implications for the other playoff eligible schools. UND and USD will count as a DII team for any DI team playing them so each is minus one GWFC game. UND will not play Cal Poly, while USD will not play UC Davis. These two teams, however, will both have Southern Utah on their schedules.

While there is change in the GWFC this year, one of the three original teams seems to be the one to beat in **Cal Poly**. The Mustangs were a win away from a playoff spot last year after narrowly losing each to Texas State, FBS Idaho, and NDSU to finish 7-4. The biggest concern for the Mustangs may be their schedule where they will play sandwich two FBS teams—opening at San Diego State and closing at Wisconsin. The Mustangs also face perennial playoff team Montana to open their home schedule on Sept. 6 and travels to former GWFC rival SDSU on Oct. 18 to make a playoff push a tougher task for 2008.

The Mustangs return 15 starters from last year's team with 10 of those from last year's national top total offensive squad (487.1 yards/game). Leading in the Mustang offense will be All-American senior wide receiver Ramses Barden, who enters his final season in San Luis Obispo with 139 career catches (fifth all-time at Cal Poly) for 2,947 yards (second) and 32 touchdowns (first). Fellow senior wide out Tre'dale Tolver (31 receptions, 537 yards, 5 TD) should take pressure off Barden from the opposing defensive secondaries. Barden and Tolver will have senior quarterback Jonathan Dally returning to throw the ball but Dally also excels running the Mustang option offense. He completed 104-of-192 passes for 2,238 yards and 29 touchdowns while rushing for 763 additional yards and 12 scores. Dally was second in the nation in passing efficiency and 14<sup>th</sup> in total offense in 2007.

Behind Dally, Coach Rich Ellerson has a plethora of tail backs led by seniors Ryan Mole (424 yards, 3 TD) and James Noble (464 yards, 3 TD). Full back Jon Hall is also back after muscling for 449 yards and one score a year ago. The offensive line will have four starters returning led by All-GWFC senior performer Stephen Field, who made the switch from the center position to a guard spot in spring ball. Last year's GWFC Freshman of the Year Jason Cox will take over the center position.

The Mustang defense, which historically has been its top performing side of the ball, must rebound from a squad that finished just 63<sup>rd</sup> in the nation in yardage (370.4 ypg) allowed after being sixth (248.3 ypg) in the same category in 2006. With five returning starters, the Mustangs hope to return to the days where they had the top defensive performer in the country (Buck Buchanan Award) from 2004 to 2006. A playoff birth for the Mustangs this year will likely depend on how the defense improves.

Leading 2007 tackler senior Mark Restelli (73 tackles, 3.5 for loss), along with sophomore Marty Mohamed (70 tackles, 3.5 for loss) and junior Ryan Shotwell (28 tackles, 9.0 for loss), should lead the charge from their linebacker positions. Sophomores nose guard James Chen (injured in game one last year) and end Gavin Cooper (16 tackles, 1.5 sacks) should help anchor the line up front with senior end senior Sean Lawyer (28 tackles, 7.5 for loss). The Mustang secondary will have three strong performers returning in senior Martin Mares (3 pass breakups) and junior Xavier Gardner (42 tackles, 9 pass breakups) as the cornerbacks and senior David Fullerton (34 tackles, 3 INT) at strong safety.

Newcomer **North Dakota** may be new to the FCS ranks this year but is not new to defeating FCS squads. Two years ago, the Fighting Sioux defeated typically tough Northern Iowa on the road and last year defeated future GWFC mate Southern Utah again on the road. This year, the Sioux will have just one FCS opponent (Southern Utah) in their friendly confines of the Alerus Center. UND will play five FCS opponents on the road including GWFC mates UC Davis and South Dakota.

The Sioux are coming off a 10-2 DII season that ended with a loss to Grand Valley (MI) State in the second round of their playoffs. UND, along with transitioning GWFC mate South Dakota, will now not be eligible for the postseason until 2012 due to the transition process from DII to DI. Changing divisions is not the only change this year for UND as they will also welcome a new head coach. Previous coach Dale Lennon moved to the Gateway's Southern Illinois and was replaced by offensive coordinator Chris Mussman to take the Sioux into their first FCS season.

The Fighting Sioux have typically been strong on defense and 2008 should be no different with seven starters returning on this side. UND gave up just 18.3 points per game in 2007. Senior free safety Rory Manke, who was named to several All-region and conference teams, should be the leader on the defense again this year. He led the team in total tackles (73) and solo tackles (49), while ranking second in pass breakups (five) and interceptions (two). He, along with senior cornerback Drake Otto, will need to be the team leader in the secondary after DII All-American and NFL hopeful Donavan Alexander graduated.

The Sioux also should see a key performance from linebacker senior Brett Holinka (52 tackles, 7.5 TFL)—an All-North Central Conference teams a year ago. All-NCC linebacker Bobby Stroup was dismissed from the football team this past May to leave a void. Stoup had a Sioux team high five sacks a year ago.

The UND offense also will see a number of returning members but they do lose their top member in wide receiver Weston Dressler, a Harlon Hill (DII best player award) finalist from a season ago. The Sioux, however, will have several back on the offensive side from a team that scored over 38 points per game. Those

performers will be and senior All-American DII center Mitch Braegelmann and All-NCC senior quarterback Danny Freund back after throwing for 2,860 yards and 24 touchdowns and just six interceptions. Running back Ryan Chappell (1,640 yards, 14 TD) was slated to be a key performer in his junior year after also being named to the DII All-American teams but was ruled academically ineligible this summer. Josh Murray, who played last season as a true freshman, likely will move into the top spot on the depth chart this fall. Murray rushed for 530 yards on 94 carries last season.

The Sioux will have a star kicker in DII All-American junior Brandon Hellevang, who converted 15-of-25 attempts and had a long of 56 yards in a game against now-conference rival Southern Utah. Hellevang will likely handle the punting duties this year as well.

**UC Davis'** run of consecutive winning seasons came to an end last year after 37 such seasons. The Aggies finished a win short of continuing the streak with a 5-6 mark as the team opened their new Aggie Stadium. The Aggies, however, did win three of their last four—an indication that the young team from a year ago will likely start another winning season streak this year.

This year's team will have eight returning starters back on Coach Bob Biggs historically top passing attack offense. One starter that will need to be replaced, however, is the signal caller. The top two quarterbacks from last year were seniors (Matt Engle & Tim Plough) and led the Aggies to an average of just short of 28 points per game. Sophomore Greg Denham came to Davis highly touted and did see some minor action a year ago (4-of-7 passing for 25 yards) behind the top two quarterbacks on the depth chart and will look to continue the Aggies' history of top signal callers.

Denham will have three top receivers to find down field, including senior Brandon Rice (59 receptions, 870 yards, 10 TD) and junior Bakari Grant (47 receptions, 621 yards, 5 TD), who were both members of the All-GWFC squad. Junior Chris Carter is the other member of the three-some. Carter was named the 2006 GWFC Freshman of the Year but was limited to just three games last year with a knee injury but still amounted five catches and a touchdown a year ago in just three games of action. The new quarterback will also have some other aid in a pair of sophomore running backs in Joe Trombetta (676 yards, 8 TD) and Brandon Tucker (385 yards, 4 TD). Both the passing and running games will have a pair of All-GWFC guards blocking for them in seniors Jonathan Compas and Mario Gonzalez and another in junior center Tommy Hernandez.

The Aggie defense will hope to improve on their statistical rank this year with leading tackler Mike Morales leading the team of five returning starters. The junior linebacker recorded 75 tackles with four of those for a loss and a pass breakup. He will be joined by fellow linebacker, senior Tyler Pringle, who had a team second high of 67 tackles, 4.5 TFL, and 2.0 sacks. These two linebackers

hope to lead an improved, although young defensive group that gave up over 31 points per game a year ago.

**Southern Utah** had one of the most stringent schedules a year ago and the Thunderbirds were unfortunate to lose all eleven games on their slate. The winless season cost Wes Meier his head coaching job and Ed Lamb has taken over the reigns in Cedar City. Lamb comes to SUU after previously being the special teams coordinator, recruiting coordinator, and defensive backs coach at the Pioneer League's San Diego. Lamb is knowledgeable to the state of Utah as he played linebacker and defensive end from 1992-96 on Brigham Young and also was an assistant for BYU in 2001 and has also served as a defensive coordinator in his career (Idaho, 2002-03).

Lamb should have a solid returning corps on the defensive side even though the group gave up over 409 yards per game last year. Leading the way will be junior All-GWFC linebacker Robert Takeno, who led the team in tackles for the second straight season. He finished the year with 82 stops, seven tackles-for loss, a pair of pass break-ups, and had three fumble recoveries with one for a touchdown and forced a fumble. He will have sophomore All-GWFC defensive back Collin Pretlow behind him. Pretlow had 34 tackles, 25 solo, with five TFL, a half sack, an interception, and three pass deflections.

The Thunderbird offense will have senior quarterback Cody Stone back after he took over the starting job mid-way through the season a year ago and had a team high 1262 passing yards and seven touchdowns but did throw 15 interceptions. He will need to reduce that number to improve on an offense last year that averaged just over 16 points per game. Stone will have second and third leading receivers; seniors Nick Miller (35 receptions, 433 yards, 1 TD) and Craig Gritton (33 receptions, 377 yards, 1 TD) to be his main returning targets through the air. The T-Birds lose All-GWFC running back Johnny Sanchez, and will look to sophomore Josh Fitisemanu to fill his shoes.

SUU will have two All-GWFC kickers back in senior place kicker Steve Pulver (7-of-12 with a 52 yard long) and junior punter Trevor Ward (39.1 ypp, 17 inside the 20 yard line). Both were named to as all-honorable mention GWFC performers last year.

The second new team in the Great West is **South Dakota**. The Coyotes finished their last Division II campaign at 6-5 and got a taste of FCS action with a loss at Southland champion McNeese State (31-7). USD, like North Dakota, will have just one FCS opponent at home in the DakotaDome at that will be against the Fighting Sioux. The Coyotes will, however, have five FCS road games including games against Gateway champion Northern Iowa and against GWFC mates Cal Poly and Southern Utah.

Coach Ed Meierkort's team was very prolific on offense a year ago—finished the regular season as the ninth ranked team in total offense (496.2 ypg), eighth in rushing (263.5 ypg) and 41st in scoring offense (31.4 ppg) in Division II. A big reason South Dakota was productive was the legs and arm of junior quarterback Noah Shepard. He finished the season ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in DII in total offense with 290.5 yards per game and his 2,547 passing yards were 29th in the nation. He finished with 21 touchdown passes, which was second in USD single season history. He also ran for 649 yards and five more touchdowns. Offensively, however, Shepard is the exception as the Coyotes lost six starters that were named to the All-North Central Conference (NCC) team a year ago. In total, seven starters were lost from last year's offense.

The Coyote defense is the more experienced side of the ball but will need to improve as they gave up 27.5 points per game a year ago. While eight starters return, USD lost three starters that were All-NCC performers. Of the eight returnees, three were also named to the All-NCC team headed by leading tackler Blake Hojer, who recorded 80 tackles in 2007. He will be joined by fellow seniors Isaiah Dixon and T.J. Simmons. Dixon tied for the team lead in interceptions (2) and led the team in pass deflections (7). Simmons tied for third on the team in tackles with 54, had four pass deflections, an interception and a fumble recovery.

The Coyotes also possess a strong punter in junior Tim Stanek, who had a 40.1 yard average which was second in the NCC. He had a long punt of 56 yards and placed 11 punts inside the opponents 20 yard line.

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### **Great West Games of the Week**

Cal Poly @ San Diego State, Aug. 30

*The Mustangs hope to upset the FBS Aztecs for a second straight time. Cal Poly defeated SDSU 16-14 two years ago.*

South Dakota @ Northern Iowa, Sept. 6

*The Coyotes get their first post-transition test against a FCS opponent. Will they be able to stay competitive against the 2007 Gateway champion Panthers?*

Cal Poly @ McNeese State, Sept. 13

*This is the first of two straight Southland games for the Mustangs. Can Cal Poly pull off the upset in Lake Charles?*

UC Davis @ Montana, Sept. 20

*The Aggies last trip to the state of Montana resulted in a 45-0 victory over Montana State. Can the Aggies fly home with another victory from the Treasure State?*

North Dakota @ Southeastern Louisiana, Sept. 27

*The Fightin' Sioux make their first trip to a Southland foe. Will this trip to Hammond result in a pleasant journey back to Grand Forks?*

South Dakota @ Cal Poly, Oct. 4

*The Coyotes first GWFC contest and will be against the tough Mustangs in San Luis Obispo.*

Southern Utah @ UC Davis, Oct. 11

*The Thunderbirds last defeated the Aggies in 2004. Will the Aggies continue their dominance over SUU?*

Cal Poly @ South Dakota State, Oct. 18

*The Mustangs travel to the former GWFC mate Jackrabbits. SDSU has won the past two past two contests. Will traveling to Brookings a second straight year help or hurt Cal Poly?*

North Dakota @ UC Davis, Oct. 25

*UND travels to Davis for the first time ever. The two teams last met in the DII playoffs in Grand Forks in 2001—a 14-2 Sioux victory.*

North Dakota @ Southern Illinois, Nov. 1

*Coach Dale Lennon's Salukis hosts his former team in the Fightin' Sioux. How will the emotions play out in this contest?*

Sacramento State @ UC Davis, Nov. 8

*The Causeway Classic battle has been one sided with the Aggies defeating the Hornets eight straight times. Will this 2008 contest be number nine in a row?*

UC Davis @ Cal Poly, Nov. 15

*The Aggies get a second straight rivalry game in this Horseshow Classic matchup. Will last week's game against Sac State take too much out of them to steal a win on the road against the Mustangs?*

North Dakota @ South Dakota, Nov. 22

*These two teams used to play for the Chief Sitting Bull Trophy but have not had a traveling trophy recently. Even without a trophy, this will be a bragging rights game in the Dakotas.*

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## **Team Capsules**

### **Cal Poly Mustangs**

Location: San Luis Obispo, CA

Stadium: Alex G. Spanos Stadium (11,075 Capacity)

Head Coach: Rich Ellerson (48-31, CP & 52-38 overall) 8<sup>th</sup> Season @ CP  
Who's Gone: OL Daniel Bradley, DE Adam Torosian, P Tim Chicoine, LB Jason Relyea,

Who's Back: RB James Noble, WR Ramses Barden, OG Stephen Field, QB Jonathan Dally, OC Jason Cox, , DE Ryan Shotwell, LB Mark Restelli, WR Tredale Tolver, FB Jon Hall, CB Xavier Gardner, SS David Fullerton, LB Marty Mohamed.

Historical Fact: The Mustangs won their first and last FCS playoff game in the opening round at Montana in 2005 before losing to Texas State in the quarterfinals.

Last Season: For the second straight year, Cal Poly finished one victory (7-4 overall) shy of a FCS playoff berth, losing a heartbreaker to North Dakota State on the second to last weekend of the regular season to get their fourth loss.

This Season: The Mustangs return 15 starters but will need to overcome two FBS opponents to start (San Diego State) and finish (Wisconsin) their season to get back to the postseason.

### **North Dakota Fighting Sioux**

Location: Grand Forks, ND

Stadium: Alerus Center (12,283 Capacity)

Head Coach: Chris Mussman (0-0, UND & Overall) 1<sup>st</sup> Season @ UND

Who's Gone: CB Donovan Alexander, WR Weston Dressler, RB Ryan Chappell, DE Alex Cadwell, LB Bobby Stroup.

Who's Back: QB Danny Freund, FS Rory Manke, OC Mitch Braegelmann, OG Brian Troen, PK Brandon Hellevang, LB Brett Holinka, WR Ryan Dressler, DE Mike Ebanks, CB Drake Otto.

Historical Fact: UND made the DII playoffs 14 times and have one national title and another championship game appearance in their history.

Last Season: The Sioux are coming off a 10-2 DII season that ended with a loss to Grand Valley (MI) State in the second round of their playoffs in former Coach Dale Lennon's last year in Grand Forks.

This Season: This is the first of four transition seasons for the Sioux, which will start with new Coach Chris Mussman. UND will be FCS playoff eligible again in 2012.

### **South Dakota Coyotes**

Location: Vermillion, SD

Stadium: DakotaDome (10,000 Capacity),

Head Coach: Ed Meierkort (33-13, USD & 88-68 Overall) 5<sup>th</sup> Season @ USD

Who's Gone: RB Amos Allen, WR Brooks Little, OC Christian Morton, OT Tim Schneider, LB Justiss Scales.

Who's Back: P Tim Stanek, CB Isaiah Dixon, LB Blake Hojer, QB Noah Shepard, CB T.J. Simmons, LB Eric Leon.

Historical Fact: The Coyotes have made the playoffs three times, including a championship game appearance in 1986 as a Division II member.

Last Season: USD finished 6-5 a year ago after competing in the DII playoffs in 2006.

This Season: The Coyotes hope to rebound from last year in their first Division I campaign.

### **Southern Utah Thunderbirds**

Location: Cedar City, UT

Stadium: Eccles Coliseum (8,500 Capacity)

Head Coach: Ed Lamb (0-0, SUU & Overall) 1<sup>st</sup> Season @ SUU

Who's Gone: QB Wes Marshall, OL Matt Roan, RB Johnny Sanchez, S Jovan Jackson, S Chase Pendley, DE Jimmy Judd.

Who's Back: WR Mike Logan, WR Nick Miller, WR Craig Gritton, DT Austin Curtis, DT Aaron Fernandez, CB DeWayne Lewis, CB Collin Pretlow, S D.J. Senter, LB Robert Takeno, DE Chad Westwood.

Historical Fact: The Thunderbirds last had a winning season in 2004, going 6-5.

Last Season: SUU finished winless at 0-11 and it cost former coach Wes Meyer his job.

This Season: New Coach Ed Lamb comes to Cedar City after being the DC at San Diego and hopes to turn around the losing ways.

### **UC Davis Aggies**

Location: Davis, CA

Stadium: Aggie Stadium (9,000 Capacity)

Head Coach: Bob Biggs (119-54-1, UCD & Overall), 16<sup>th</sup> Season @ UCD

Who's Gone: DL John Amos, DB Adam Cook, LB Chris Buck,

Who's Back: WR Brandon Rice, OL Jon Compas, WR Bakari Grant, OL Mario Gonzales, RB Brandon Tucker, OC Tommy Hernandez, TE Luke McDonough.

Historical Fact: Coach Biggs had success as a UC Davis quarterback. His legend was sealed in 1971 when he was the quarterback for the Aggies' "Miracle Win" over Cal St. Hayward. In that game, he directed a comeback that featured 16 points in the final 20 seconds and resulted in a 30-29 victory. That win paved the way for the first of UC Davis' national-record 20 straight league titles.

Last Season: The Aggies opened their new stadium with their first losing season in 37 years—finishing 5-6.

This Season: UC Davis, embarking on its second full season of competition as a member of the NCAA Division I Football Championship Subdivision, hopes to start a new winning streak.