

# 2009 OUTLOOK

The Arizona Wildcats are better for their Pioneer Las Vegas Bowl championship over No. 17 BYU than can be imagined. The albatross of nine years of holidays at home flew the coop with the dominant showing in Las Vegas last December. And winning the final two games of the year gave the program some serious momentum. The Pac-10 went 5-0 in 2008 bowl games and Arizona chipped in. The effect cannot be understated in terms of what it did for the program.

The 2009 schedule gives Arizona a chance to grow into its skin. The Cats play a three-segment season: four games and then a bye, three games and then a bye, and five games down the stretch. UA opens against bowl-savvy Central Michigan and then Northern Arizona at home, and then travels to Iowa and Oregon State. October is a road game at Washington and Stanford/UCLA at home. The late stretch is WSU, at Cal, Oregon, at ASU and at USC. Six of those clubs played in 2008 bowls and this year it's likely eight of them will be projected to get into the postseason, but if the Cats can take the season step-by-step, it's a good schedule.

In 2008 UA lost a trio of games by a touchdown or less – by one point at Stanford, by two points to Oregon State and by seven to USC. The Cats lost by eight at New Mexico, and 10 at Oregon. Again, as in recent years, taking advantage of late possessions and playing defense down the stretch in the waning moments will make a difference here.

The program has progressed in that three of those close games came against three of the 2008 upper division squads in the Pac-10.

Head coach Mike Stoops' recruiting efforts are going well. He and his staff have recruited people they like and players they've evaluated. Each class in five years has brought in immediate skill-position difference makers, young linemen who can grow and learn, and football players who can help Arizona win. A normal college football game involves about 45 guys and if they're on the same page in your development programs and practice preparation, you can win. Last year Arizona used 12 of its 2008 signees in their first year in the program and this year it will be tougher to crack the lineup for a new guy. There's no question player development is a strong point in the program and that takes some time.

The Arizona coaching staff has a good blend of experience and youth. Stoops had to replace two offensive coaches and hired a young spread specialist and another more veteran coach familiar with the system. The staff has some big influences -- Big 12, Big Ten and Big East -- but it's mostly a Pac-10 group now, one that fully understands the style of preparation, strategy and play involved in the weekly challenges.

The Wildcats should be a better team than the 8-5 group in 2008. Depth is evident, players are bigger and stronger and the question marks are the kind that coaches find engaging.



Junior running back Nic Grigsby

**Arizona has beaten ranked teams each of Mike Stoops' five years in Tucson. Last year it was No. 17 BYU and No. 25 California. The Pac-10 will have its share of ranked squads in 2009, if the 5-0 league bowl record means anything to observers, so more opportunities will come.**

## OFFENSE

**Coordinator:** Sonny Dykes, quarterbacks coach

**Headliners:** TE Rob Gronkowski, RB Nic Grigsby,

WR Delashaun Dean, WR Terrell Turner, C Colin Baxter

Arizona enters the post-Willie Tuitama era at quarterback. The 6-foot-3, 220-pound passer started at the end of his true freshman year (2005) and afterward, spending the last two running the UA's multiple spread.

Spring ball did not determine whether true sophomore Matt Scott, Tuitama's '08 backup, or redshirt transfer sophomore Nick Foles (Michigan State) has a leg up on the quarterback job, but it did determine that the choice is a good problem. Scott (6-3, 190) is a mobile passer who rushed for a team-best 8.2 yards on the move 23 times in 2008; Foles is a big (6-5, 235) thrower who also has escapability talent. They make for an outstanding twosome. A third sophomore, Bryson Beirne (6-3, 225), has been around offensive coordinator Sonny Dykes more than the other two and knows the system.



Junior tight end Rob Gronkowski

## SOME CAREER NOTES

Senior DT Earl Mitchell . . . . .	25 starts on both sides
Senior WR Terrell Turner . . . . .	94 receptions
Junior WR Delashaun Dean . . . . .	90 receptions
Junior TE Rob Gronkowski . . . . .	16 touchdown catches
Junior RB Nic Grigsby . . . . .	1,757 rushing yards, 15 TDs
Senior DB Corey Hall . . . . .	Nickel/safety versatility for 3 years
Junior C Colin Baxter . . . . .	24 starts in two years
Junior P Keenyn Crier . . . . .	43.8 average on 107 punts
Sophomore PK Alex Zendejas . . . . .	His next FG will be his first
Junior DE Brooks Reed . . . . .	Eight sacks in first year as starter

Arizona's 'spread' offense was more of a power game, thanks in part to All-American tight end Rob Gronkowski, a junior to be, and a focus on being physical enough in short yardage to make a difference. The Cats rushed for 33 touchdowns while Tuitama threw for 23. He set nearly all Arizona career passing records in support of a more rugged overall team style.

The quarterback who gets the nod Sept. 5 against Central Michigan could be a key to what the Cats do in the backfield, but UA will continue to be able to run the ball. UA had a 3:2 pass-run ratio in building its 5000 yards (402.4 ypg) offensive system. No one expects a drop in production.



Senior receiver Terrell Turner

Two years ago the Wildcats rated around 100 in the FBS in passing (94), total offense (115), rushing (110) and scoring (105). Ouch. This past year UA checked in at 16th in scoring (37 ppg), 33rd in total offense (402 ypg), 36th in passing (244 ypg), and 48th in rushing (153 ypg). The improvement coincided with the arrival of current offensive coordinator Sonny Dykes, line coach Bill Bedenbaugh and outside receivers coach Dave Nichol. The 2009 version of what Arizona does with the ball should be adept at one thing – putting points on the board. UA averaged 17 points in 2006 and an average of 33 points the last two seasons.

Rob Gronkowski, junior tight end, should be the best in the nation at his position. He's a monster in the running game, handles Pac-10 defensive ends and blitzers in pass-pro action, and at a swift 6-foot-6, 265, can get open. He can catch the ball, and yards after catch come easily to a guy who can run people over. He's versatile enough to play as a split receiver and he'll be found running numerous patterns. His 10 receiving TDs led UA in 2008 and helped earn him third-team AP All-America honors and twice win John Mackey National Tight End of the Week honors. He has 16 career touchdown receptions and will play on Sundays.

Junior Nic Grigsby rushed for 1,153 yards at a 5.4 clip a year ago, while then true freshman Keola Antolin added 525 in a supporting role. They'll be part of what happens. Grigsby scored 13 touchdowns in 2008 to help boost his big-play stock, but Antolin had 10 TDs on 100 fewer carries.

The guy on Willie Tuitama's blind side for the past two years, left tackle Eben Britton, took his future promise to the NFL Draft a year early. Finding his replacement will be key. UA returns some people and recruited a pair of juco tackles at mid-year. Junior Colin Baxter returns for his third year of starting



Junior center Colin Baxter

(one at guard, one at center). Senior Adam Grant, who started five 2008 games at RT before an injury, is back. Senior Mike Diaz took over the left guard role a few games into 2008 and will be a factor, possibly at left tackle. Coaches expect some strong pushing from sophomore Vaughn Dotsy guard and redshirt frosh Trace Biskin attackle, along with juco transfer Jack Julsing at tackle. Junior guard Conan Amituanai had a solid spring and also figures to push at guard. The Cats will have some experience to anchor the line, and need the new talent to jell.

All-league guys Willie Tuitama (2nd team) and Mike Thomas (1st team WR and PR) are gone, but everyone else who handled the ball is back. Whoever ends up throwing, it's clear who will end up joining Gronkowski catching passes – junior receiver Delashaun Dean (90 catches the last two years) and senior Terrell Turner (94 grabs the last two years). The elder Gronkowski, H-back Chris, turned into a big-play (25 yards per catch) occasional target who can break into the patterns and make teams pay for double coverage elsewhere. Sophomore lettermen Bug Wright, Juron Criner, David Douglas and David Roberts also will vie for routes and balls in the receiving corps. Tailbacks Grigsby and Antolin combined for 19 receptions in 2008 after Grigsby snared 35 alone as a true freshman in the pass-happy 2007 inaugural year of the UA spread.

One thing Arizona wants to repeat is its Red Zone success. In '08 the Cats were sixth nationally with a 92 percent effectiveness. Running the ball (33 rushing scores) had a lot to do with it. UA scored 45 touchdowns on 60 possessions inside the opponents' 20 yard-line. Throw in 10 field goals and the Cats only missed on five RZ trips. If being able to power people is the key, that's where the focus will lie. Moving the ball when the field closes down was a strength UA will again emphasize.



# 2009 OUTLOOK

## DEFENSE

**Coordinator:** Mark Stoops, secondary coach

**Headliners:** CB Devin Ross, DE Brooks Reed, DT Earl Mitchell, LB Xavier Kelley, S Cam Nelson

Senior cornerback Devin Ross returns as the top cover guy in the secondary, with senior safety Cam Nelson also back. Senior Corey Hall has played nickel back for two years and will be penciled in as a backup to the LB spot the nickel replaces. Sophomore Robert Golden gets his first chance at showcasing his prep All-America talents, and will get the shot at strong safety.

UA has some secondary depth with corners Trevin Wade (soph) and Marcus Benjamin (mid-year juco), plus junior Mike Turner back on the field after a 2008 suspension. Junior Joe Perkins and senior Brandon Tatum Anthony Wilcox are No. 2 at the safety spots. Everyone's a letterman except Benjamin so UA's secondary will not be in a rebuilding mode despite the loss of Nate Ness (FS) and Marquis Hundley (CB).

Senior defensive tackle Earl Mitchell's 2008 move from tight end to defense worked wonders, and Arizona returns six interior and four exterior men who have played on the front. Inside, four guys - Mitchell, Kaniela Tuipulotu, Donald Horton and Lolomana Mikaele - have started before. The Cats should have the luxury of freshness toward the end of games because of the depth up



### Junior defensive end Brooks Reed

front - 16 scholarship defensive linemen including newcomers.

Outside, junior DE Brooks Reed could be the most dynamic. He came on strong and led the squad with eight sacks and 10 tackles for loss

as a sophomore. He's a pressure guy who can run and hit. Ricky Elmore started opposite him and sophomore Apaiata Tuihalamaka is in the DE mix along with junior D'Aundre Reed, both with Pac-10 experience.



Senior cornerback Devin Ross

## WILDCAT RETURNING STARTERS

### OFFENSE

Player	Position	Year
Terrell Turner	Receiver	Senior
Rob Gronkowski	Tight End	Junior
Mike Diaz	Guard	Senior
Colin Baxter	Center	Junior
Nic Grigsby	Running back	Junior
Delashaun Dean	Receiver	Junior
Adam Grant	Tackle	Senior

### DEFENSE

Player	Position	Year
Brooks Reed	End	Junior
Earl Mitchell	Tackle	Senior
Donald Horton	Tackle	Senior
Ricky Elmore	End	Junior
Xavier Kelley	Linebacker	Senior
Cam Nelson	Safety	Senior
Devin Ross	Cornerback	Senior



Senior defensive tackle Earl Mitchell

## 2009 OUTLOOK



Senior linebacker Xavier Kelley



Senior safety Cam Nelson

At linebacker, Arizona should feature three senior starters – Xavier Kelley, Sterling Lewis and Vuna Tuihalamaka. They will give the Cats as swift a contingent as any in the league. Kelley showed some prowess with a career-best 15 tackles in the Las Vegas Bowl, Tuihalamaka played as a backup and was a downfield presence on special teams and Lewis was a major contributor and frequent starter in '08 after transferring from junior college in mid-year. Getting to the ball will be their forte. UA will have to check its incoming class for some help in this corps, and recruited three prospects toward that end.

Arizona's defense should have the quality to provide the most key of contributions – keeping the Wildcats in games until the end. There were a few anomalies a year ago, but in most games the group kept opponents' numbers down and gave UA a chance to win. The program posted a scoring margin of plus-15 points, and it's probable that will improve.

The Cats dumped 42 points on a good Cal team, held USC to 17, and then went to Eugene and played a 1,000-yard contest that the Ducks won in the final minutes, 55-45. Defense in the Pac-10 in recent years has seemingly come down to one basic: give your offense a chance to score the winning points, and don't belabor the angst in between.

Arizona ranked 24th nationally in total defense last year and thinks it can do it again, or better.

**SPECIAL TEAMS**

*Coordinator: Jeff Hammerschmidt, defensive ends coach*

Junior punter Keenyn Crier will give Arizona an all-league performer. He was a first-team pick as a freshman and a Ray Guy Award candidate as a sophomore. His career average of 43.8 yards per punt is solid and he doesn't often outkick coverage – he has the hang time. The Cats were 27th nationally in net punting and he was a key.



Junior punter Keenyn Crier

Hopefully the name counts for sophomore place kicker Alex Zendejas, whose uncle Max Zendejas is the storied Arizona Sports Hall of Fame kicker. Zendejas got some mop-time extra points (5-for-5), a pooch punt and five kickoffs in his redshirt freshman year in 2008, but has not attempted a field goal. He apprenticed behind Jason Bondzio for two years, and if he was paying attention he'll be fine. Bondzio set school season and career field goal percentage records. Zendejas did a superb job in spring ball and coordinator Jeff Hammerschmidt feels he's a good one.

Arizona will have to find another Mike Thomas, the departed first-team All-Pac-10 punt returner and an occasional KOR guy. Sophomore receiver Bug Wright, who should move into Thomas' inside receiver role, also could take over the punt return duties. He had a couple as a freshman, including a 55-yarder. He also had a few kick returns. Sophomore running back Keola Antolin may well contend for the top kickoff return specialist, with a 41-yarder to his credit among 15 for a 21.5-yard average. Senior cornerback Devin Ross also has open-field speed and may be a factor.

UA has found a few guys like walk-ons Orlando Vargas and Tito Foster, erstwhile DBs, to provide spark on coverage units. They, safety Joe Perkins and linebacker Vuna Tuihalamaka were top downfield tacklers in 2008 and will again man special teams.

*See depth chart and rosters on pages 206-208*