SoCal Surge: Azusa Pacific Picked To Repeat As GNAC Football Champions

PORTLAND, Ore. – A year after defeating Central Washington on the last day of the regular season to secure a share of the conference title, Azusa Pacific is picked to win it all again in the 2019 Great Northwest Athletic Conference Football Preseason Coaches Poll.

The Cougars received two of four first-place votes to finish with a total of 24 points. The program enters its eighth season in the GNAC having won or shared four conference titles. The Cougars’ appearance in the NCAA Division II Playoffs was the program’s second since joining the conference in 2012.

Central Washington, the other defending co-champion, received one first-place vote and was picked second with 18 points. Western Oregon received the fourth first-place vote and was picked a close third with 16 points. Simon Fraser rounds out the poll, picked fourth with a total of six points.

After opening the 2018 season by winning four of its first five games (the only loss a 37-35 last-second defeat at North Alabama), Azusa Pacific closed the regular season on a three-game win streak. The Cougars survived a pair of close contests during that stretch before handing Central Washington its only home loss of the season, 42-35, in the regular-season finale on Nov. 10 in Ellensburg. That was enough to earn the Cougars an invitation to the NCAA Division II playoffs, where they bowed out in the opening round to Tarleton State.

Azusa Pacific ranked second in the GNAC in total offense (397.6 yards per game), passing offense (259.3 yards per game) and scoring offense (27.5 points per game). The offensive line allowed the team to produce, ranking fifth in Division II with 3.67 tackles for loss allowed per game. The defense recovered 11 fumbles in 2018, ranking 28th nationally.

The Cougars return plenty of experience, including all but two starters on offense. Senior tight end Lucas Widmer was a First Team All-GNAC selection, catching 13 passes for 114 yards and three touchdowns. Junior quarterback Tyrone Williams, Jr., completed 195 passes for 2,679 yards and 23 touchdowns and rushed for four more touchdowns to earn Second Team All-GNAC honors. Junior wide receiver Brandon Jackson caught 47 passes for 534 yards while junior Darrell Adams caught 39 passes for 553 yards and three touchdowns.

On defense, junior defensive back Quentin Frazier earned First Team All-GNAC and Third Team All-Super Region 4 awards after finishing with 66 tackles, four tackles for loss and three interceptions. Senior linebacker Willie Fair was also a First Team All-GNAC choice after compiling 75 tackles, 14 tackles for loss and two fumble recoveries. Junior cornerback Josh Olave also returns after coming up with 44 tackles and five interceptions, earning First Team All-GNAC selection.

The APU returners will have some significant holes to fill, however, with the graduation of All-American linebacker Aaron Berry and all-region selections in defensive lineman Ma’ake Muti, center Sakalaia Hungalu and kicker Jacob Hall.

After falling in the season opener at Division I-FCS Eastern Washington, Central Washington managed to roll through most of the GNAC schedule undefeated to claim a share of its second-straight conference title. The regular-season finale loss to Azusa Pacific, however, proved to be a killer and prevented the Wildcats from returning to the postseason.

### 2019 GNAC Preseason Football Coaches Poll

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<tr>
<th>Team (1st Place Votes)</th>
<th>2018 Record (Finish)</th>
<th>Pts.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Azusa Pacific (2)</td>
<td>8-4 (7-1, tie 1st)</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Central Washington (1)</td>
<td>8-3 (7-1, tie 1st)</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Western Oregon (1)</td>
<td>5-6 (4-4, 3rd)</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Simon Fraser</td>
<td>1-9 (0-8, 5th)</td>
<td>6</td>
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Votes awarded on a 7-5-3-1 basis.
The Wildcats finished with one of the most potent offenses in the nation, ranking second in Division II with 540.9 yards of total offense per game and 47.7 points per game; sixth with 272.6 rushing yards per game and ninth in red-zone offense (.892). In addition, Central Washington took care of the ball well as the team ranked seventh in fumbles lost (4) and ninth in passes had intercepted (5).

But much has changed since the shocking end to the season in November. Head coach Ian Shoemaker was tapped by Eastern Washington as its offensive coordinator. The Wildcats also lost All-American offensive lineman James Moore, all-region quarterback Reilly Hennessey and all-region running back Cedric Cooper. Central handed the coaching reins to offensive coordinator Chris Fisk, who inherits 84 returners and 17 returning starters.

The Wildcats will build its offense around First Team All-GNAC and all-region running back Michael Roots. The junior and 2018 GNAC Newcomer of the Year carried the ball 139 times for 1,067 yards and 10 touchdowns, averaging 97 rushing yards per contest. The team returns a solid offensive line, led by First Team All-GNAC senior Nicholas Streubel.

The corps of nine defensive returners is led by senior linebacker Donte Hamilton, who earned First Team All-GNAC and Third Team Don Hansen All-Super Region 4 honors with his 88 tackles, 6.5 tackles for loss and three sacks. Also back is senior linebacker Tevin Gray, also a First Team All-GNAC choice, and Second Team All-GNAC senior defensive back Tyren Sams.

Picked to finish third after placing in that position last year, Western Oregon will attempt to move up in the standings by playing a complete Division II schedule. In addition to the six conference games, the Wolves will play five games against teams from the Lone Star Conference. The schedule includes a home-and-home series against Texas A&M-Kingsville, beginning with a game on Sat., Sept. 14 in Monmouth.

The Wolves excelled as a defensive team, leading the GNAC and ranking 34th in Division II with 318.3 yards of offense allowed per game. Western was 10th in Division II with 99.1 rushing yards allowed per game and 31st with 180 first downs allowed. Offensively, Western Oregon averaged 323.5 yards per game and ranked second among GNAC teams with 150.9 rushing yards per contest.

Western Oregon returns a stout defensive lineup led by First Team All-GNAC defensive back Curtis Anderson, who finished with 44 tackles, three interceptions and a fumble recovery. Anderson also earned first-team honors on special teams, returning 27 kicks for 647 yards. Senior defensive lineman Court Hammond was a Second Team All-GNAC pick with 19 tackles, five tackles for loss and four sacks. Senior defensive back Derek Parnell also earned second-team honors with 23 tackles.

Offensively, sophomore running back Omari Land will pace the Wolves’ running game. Land was fourth in the GNAC with 71.6 rushing yards per game, carrying the ball 137 times for 788 yards. The Wolves also return an experienced offensive line anchored by First Team All-GNAC senior Aaron Turner and Second Team All-GNAC junior Jakob Pruitt.

Simon Fraser found the win column for the first time in three years to open the 2018 season, scoring a 54-7 victory over Division III Willamette. While the Clan did not get a win during the conference season, they certainly closed the gap under first-year head coach Thomas Ford. Of the eight conference games, the Clan lost three of them by 10 points or less. In addition, Simon Fraser put up the top passing offense in the GNAC, ranking 14th in Division II with 291.1 yards per game.

Senior wide receiver Rysen John leads the SFU offense after earning Second Team All-GNAC honors in 2018, finishing with 706 receiving yards and six touchdowns. He will be teamed with sophomore Robert Meadors, who caught 39 passes for 400 yards last year. Sophomore Justin Sieber assumes the quarterback role after apprenticing under Miles Richardson. Sieber completed 105 passes for 1,116 yards and seven touchdowns as a freshman.

Defensively, Second Team All-GNAC defensive end Isaac Evans returns for his junior season after finishing with 43 tackles, 8.5 tackles for loss and four sacks. Junior linebacker Griffin Barrett led the SFU defense last year with 85 tackles, 4.5 tackles for loss and a sack. On special teams, sophomore Kees Metzelaar returns as an experienced kicker after puntiing 51 times for an average of 36.6 yards per punt.

Western Oregon opens the season for GNAC teams when they play at Angelo State on Thurs., Sept. 5. The remaining three teams start play on Sat., Sept. 7, with two teams playing Division I opponents. Central Washington will play at Idaho while Simon Fraser opens at Portland State. Azusa Pacific will close the day as it plays at Lone Star Conference rival West Texas A&M.

**GNAC Football Team Capsules Follow On Next Page**
2019 GNAC Football Teams At A Glance

AZUSA PACIFIC

Head Coach: Victor Santa Cruz (Hawaii, 1995, 83-60, 14th Season)
Assistant Coaches: Cesar Rivas-Sandoval (Assistant Head Coach/Defensive Coordinator), Rudy Carlton (Offensive Coordinator/Quarterbacks), Bo Beatty (Whips & Bandits), Richard Brown (Wide Receivers), Marques Cooper (Cornerbacks), Wil Gilmore (Special Teams Coordinator), Cory Harkey (Tight Ends), Kyle Kianpour (Defensive Assistant), Craigston Robbins (Running Backs), Justin Utupo (Linebackers).

2018 Overall Record: 8-4  GNAC Record (Finish): 7-1 (Tie 1st)
Total Players Returning: 52 (21 Offense, 29 Defense, 2 Special Teams)
Starters Returning: 15 (9 Offense, 5 Defense, 1 Special Teams)  Starters Lost: 10 (2 Offense, 6 Defense, 2 Special Teams)

Basic Offense: Power Spread  Basic Defense: Odd Front

Top Offensive Returners: Lucas Widmer (TE/HB, Sr., First Team All-GNAC, Third Team Don Hansen All-Super Region 4, 13 receptions, 114 receiving yds., 3 TD), Tyrone Williams, Jr. (QB, Jr., Second Team All-GNAC, 195-316-12, 2,679 passing yds., 23 TD, 243.5 passing yds. per game, 102 carries, 336 rushing yds., 4 TD, 30.5 rushing yds. per game), Brandon Jackson (WR, Jr., Second Team All-GNAC, 47 receptions, 534 receiving yds., 5 TD, 48.5 receiving yds. per game), Gaige Allen (WR, Sr., 42 receptions, 674 receiving yds., 2 TD, 61.3 receiving yds. per game), Darrell Adams (WR, Jr., 39 receptions, 553 receiving yds., 3 TD, 46.1 receiving yds. per game), Bryce Grandison (RB, Sr., 114 carries, 558 rushing yds., 6 TD, 46.5 rushing yds. per game, 15 receptions, 160 receiving yds.).

Top Defensive Returners: Willie Fair (LB, Sr., First Team All-GNAC, 75 tackles, 30 solo tackles, 14 tackles for loss, 5.5 sacks, 1 forced fumble, 2 fumble recoveries), Josh Olave (CB, Jr., First Team All-GNAC, 44 tackles, 33 solo tackles, 2.5 tackles for loss, 5 interceptions), Quentin Frazier (DB, Jr., First Team All-GNAC, Third Team Don Hansen All-Super Region 4, 66 tackles, 37 solo tackles, 4 tackles for loss, 0.5 sacks, 3 interceptions, 1 forced fumble).

Top Returning Special Teams: Josh Olave (PR, Jr., 11 returns, 65 yards).

Key Losses: Aaron Berry (LB, First Team All-GNAC, GNAC Defensive Player of the Year, First Team D2CCA All-Super Region 4, Second Team Don Hansen All-Super Region 4, Second Team AFCA & Associated Press All-American), Ma'ake Muti (DL, GNAC Defensive Lineman of the Year, Second Team Don Hansen All-Super Region 4), Weston Carr (WR, First Team All-GNAC), Sakalaia Hungalu (C, First Team All-GNAC, Second Team D2CCA All-Super Region 4, Third Team Don Hansen All-Super Region 4), Jacob Hall (K/P, First Team All-GNAC, Second Team D2CCA All-Super Region 4).

Key Freshmen Newcomers: Justin Skidmore (LB, 6-4, 200, Simi Valley, Calif. – Grace Brethren), Aaron Ramirez (OL, 6-4, 290, Covina, Calif. – Charter Oak), Jassiem Goodall (DL, 6-2, 295, Playa del Rey, Calif. – St. Bernard), Rayvon Benson (DB, 5-11, 180, San Diego, Calif. – Morse), Niles Hibbert (DB, 5-9, 150, Compton, Calif. – Compton), Jahleel Holmes (LB, 6-2, 205, Moreno, Valley, Calif. – Moreno Valley).

Key Transfers: Tim Dolan (OL, 6-5, 300, Jr., La Puente, Calif. – Mt. San Antonio Coll.), Gil’Scott Jackson (RB, 5-10, 200, Jr., Thousand Oaks, Calif. – Ventura JC), Damani Lowe (DL, 6-2, 240, Jr., Lodi, Calif. – American River JC), Lucas Olgiati (LB, 6-3, 220, Jr., Gilroy, Calif. – Santa Barbara CC), D.J. Wright (DB, 6-0, 200, Sr., Los Angeles, Calif. – Boise State Univ.).
CENTRAL WASHINGTON

Head Coach: Chris Fisk (Jamestown, 2001, First Season)
Assistant Coaches: Ivan Cordova (Defensive Coordinator), Kelly Bills (Offensive Coordinator/Quarterbacks), John Picha (Asst. Head Coach/Tight Ends), Spencer Capitani (Special Teams Coordinator/Safeties), Grant Torgerson (Defensive Line), Charlie Rizzo (Asst. Coach), Leon La Deaux (Asst. Coach), Brandon Gibson (Outside Wide Receivers), Subodh Kumar (Inside Wide Receivers), Reggie Long (Offensive Assistant), John Kuhn (Special Teams Assistant), Kevin Bodie (Linebackers), Jack Singler (Graduate Assistant/Running Backs), AJ Cooper (Graduate Assistant/Defensive Backs).

2018 Overall Record: 8-3  GNAC Record (Finish): 7-1 (Tie 1st)
Total Players Returning: 84 (31 Offense, 50 Defense, 7 Special Teams)
Starters Returning: 16 (5 Offense, 9 Defense, 2 Special Teams)  Starters Lost: 11 (6 Offense, 2 Defense, 3 Special Teams)
Basic Offense: Spread  Basic Defense: 3-4

Top Offensive Returners: Michael Roots (RB, Jr., GNAC Newcomer of the Year, First Team All-GNAC, Don Hansen Third Team All-Super Region 4, 139 carries, 1,067 rushing yards, 10 TD, 97 rushing yards per game), Tony Archie (WR, Jr., 28 receptions, 438 receiving yards, 3 TD), Nicholas Streubel (OL, Sr., First Team All-GNAC).

Top Defensive Returners: Donte Hamilton (LB/DB, Sr., First Team All-GNAC, Don Hansen Third Team All-Super Region 4, 88 tackles, 42 solo tackles, 6.5 tackles for loss, 3 sacks, 2 interceptions, 1 forced fumble, 2 fumble recoveries), Tyren Sams (DB, Sr., Second Team All-GNAC, 23 tackles, 15 solo tackles, 2 tackles for loss, 2 interceptions), Tevin Gray (LB, Sr., First Team All-GNAC, 49 tackles, 33 solo tackles, 6.5 tackles for loss, 3 tackles for loss, 4 interceptions).

Top Returning Special Teams: None.

Key Losses: James Moore (OL, AFCA First Team All-American, First Team D2CCA & Don Hansen All-Super Region 4, First Team All-GNAC, GNAC Offensive Lineman of the Year), Reilly Hennessey (QB, First Team All-GNAC, Second Team Don Hansen All-Super Region 4), Cedric Cooper (RB, First Team All-GNAC, Don Hansen Third Team All-Super Region 4).

Key Freshmen Newcomers: JJ Leming (QB, 6-5, 220, Steilacoom, Wash. – Steilacoom).

Key Transfers: Eric Wilkes (RB, 5-7, 200, Jr., Las Vegas, Nev. – Weber State Univ.).

SIMON FRASER

Head Coach: Thomas Ford (Linfield 2004, 1-9, 2nd Season)
Assistant Coaches: James Holan (Offensive Coordinator), Taylor Summers (Defensive Coordinator), Mike Rigell (Special Teams/Wide Receivers), Jordan Linnen (Defensive Backs), Coleton Ethier (Defensive Line), Josh Koford (Tight Ends), Marcus Grandison (Cornerbacks), Jordan McCarty (Offensive Assistant), Kierre Johnson (Offensive Assistant), Ben Minaker (Defensive Assistant), Bruce Westbrook Lee (Defensive Assistant).

2018 Overall Record: 1-9  GNAC Record (Finish): 0-8 (5th)
Total Players Returning: 53 (34 Offense, 16 Defense, 1 Special Teams)
Starters Returning: 10 (7 Offense, 2 Defense, 1 Special Teams)  Starters Lost: 10 (3 Offense, 7 Defense)
Basic Offense: Spread/Multiple Personnel  Basic Defense: Multiple Front/Zone Coverage

Top Offensive Returners: Justin Sieber (QB, So., 105-185-7, 1,116 yards, 7 TD, 139.5 yds. per game, 112.35 efficiency rating), Ry森 John (WR, Sr., Second Team All-GNAC, 50 receptions, 706 yards, 6 TD, 70.6 receiving yards per game), Robert Meadors (WR, So., 39 receptions, 400 yards, 1 TD, 40 receiving yards per game).

Top Defensive Returners: Griffin Barrett (LB, Jr., 85 tackles, 40 solo tackles, 4.5 tackles for loss, 1 sack, 1 fumble recovery), Kolby Buljevic (45 tackles, 31 solo tackles, 3 tackles for loss, 1 interception, 1 forced fumble, 1 fumble recovery), Isaac Evans (DE, Jr., Second Team All-GNAC, 43 tackles, 28 solo tackles, 8.5 tackles for loss, 4 sacks, 2 forced fumbles, 1 fumble recovery).

Top Returning Special Teams: Kees Metselaar (P/K, So., 51 punts, 1,867 yards, 4/10 field goals made).

Key Losses: Miles Richardson (QB, Honorable Mention All-GNAC), Brad Lyons (DE, Honorable Mention All-GNAC).

Key Freshman Newcomers: Bailey Elder (OL, 6-6, 310, Tacoma, Wash. – Stadium), Ian Crocker (LB, 6-1, 205, Seattle, Wash. – Ballard), Evan Nolli (DL, 6-3, 250, New Westminster, B.C. – New Westminster), Jerrell Cummings (CB, 5-10, 180, Vancouver, B.C. – Notre Dame).

Key Transfers: Brandon Kennedy (DL, 6-1, 215, So., Tacoma, Wash. – Reedley Coll.), Dawson Marchant (CB, 6-0, 190, So., Surrey, B.C. – Univ. of Montana).
WESTERN OREGON

Head Coach: Arne Ferguson (Western Oregon 1991, 82-68, 15th Season, 30th Season Overall at WOU)

Assistant Coaches: Brian Harris (Offensive Coordinator/Quarterbacks), Matt Overlin (Special Teams/Wide Receivers), Josh Manning (Offensive Line/Receivers), Jason Slowey (Linebackers), Trey Shimabukuro (Quarterbacks), Tim Rude (Offensive Assistant), Kyle Lavender (Defensive Backs), Leif Schanche (Offensive Graduate Assistant), Mason Tobeck (Defensive Line)

2018 Overall Record: 5-6

GNAC Record (Finish): 4-4 (3rd)

Starters Returning: 16 (7 Offense, 7 Defense, 2 Special Teams)

Total Players Returning: 36 (17 Offense, 17 Defense, 2 Special Teams)

Starters Lost: 10 (4 Offense, 4 Defense, 2 Special Teams)

Top Offensive Returners: Omari Land (RB, So., Second Team All-GNAC, 137 carries, 788 rushing yards, 1 TD, 71.6 rushing yds. per game, 6 receptions, 40 receiving yards), Jakob Pruitt (OL, Jr., Second Team All-GNAC), Aaron Turner (OL, Sr., First Team All-GNAC), Joseph Gonzales (OL, Sr.).

Top Defensive Returners: Curtis Anderson (DB, Jr., First Team All-GNAC, 44 tackles, 20 solo tackles, 3 interceptions, 1 fumble recovery), Court Hammond (DL, Sr., Second Team All-GNAC, 19 tackles, 10 solo tackles, 5 tackles for loss, 4 sacks, 1 forced fumble), Derek Parnell (DB, Sr., Second Team All-GNAC, 23 tackles, 21 solo tackles), Nate Proctor (LB, Sr., Honorable Mention All-GNAC, 73 tackles, 39 solo tackles, 12.5 tackles for loss, 4.5 sacks, 1 interception, 2 forced fumbles, 1 fumble recovery), Tyler Wharf (LB, Sr., 30 tackles, 16 solo tackles, 2 tackles for loss, 2 interceptions).

Top Returning Special Teams: Andrew Gross (K/P, 46 punts, 36.5 yards per punt), Curtis Anderson (KR, Jr., First Team All-GNAC, 27 kick returns, 647 yards).

Key Losses: Bo Highburger (LB, First Team All-GNAC, First Team D2CCA All-Super Region 4), Isaiah Molden (DL, First Team All-GNAC), Adrian Saldana (K, Second Team All-GNAC), Ron Rose (OL, Honorable Mention All-GNAC).

Key Freshman Newcomers: Gavin Larson (WR, 6-5, 184, Scappoose, Ore. – Scappoose), Jackson Simmons (DL, 6-4, 262, Gladstone, Ore. – Gladstone), Germaine Flentroy (DB, 6-0, 190, Portland, Ore. – Central Catholic).

Key Transfers: Kaleo Garrigan (WR, 6-1, 186, Jr., Petaluma, Calif. – Humboldt State Univ.).