



# EAST CAROLINA PIRATES

2023 Record: 2-10

American Athletic Conference

Greenville, NC

FBS Ranking

88

Can ECU improve offense to compliment strong defense and reach a bowl?

**HC: Mike Houston**  
(6th Year, 24-34)

**OC: John David Baker**  
(1st Year)

**DC: Blake Harrell**  
(4th Year)

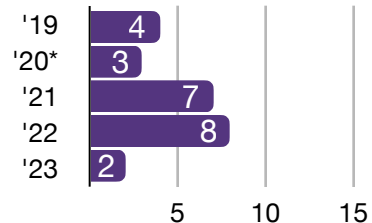
## 2024 Class Rankings

Recruiting  
**73**

Transfer Portal  
**63**

Via 24/7 Sports

## EAST CAROLINA WIN TREND



## 2023 Results (2-10)

- @ Michigan (L 3-30)
- Marshall (L 13-31)
- @ App State (L 28-43)
- Gardner-Webb (W 44-0)**
- @ Rice (L 17-24)
- SMU (L 10-31)
- Charlotte (L 7-10)
- @ UTSA (L 27-41)
- Tulane (L 10-13)
- @ **Florida Atlantic (W 22-7)**
- @ Navy (L 0-10)
- Tulsa (L 27-29)



It was almost a guarantee that 2023 would be a rebuilding year or at least an adjustment season after losing the school's all-time leading passer Holton Ahlers and perhaps the fastest running back in the country in Keaton Mitchell, but I'm not sure fans in Greenville were quite prepared for the season that unfolded in 2023. The loss of the two offensive stars was substantial (and the Pirates only brought four returning starters back on that side). After scoring 32.5 points in an 8-win 2022 campaign, the points plummeted to just 17.3 and the efforts in both the run and pass games were futile.

When the dust settled, ECU finished with their worst record since 2003. Mike Houston has done an otherwise stellar job at rebuilding the program after some lean years in the Scottie Montgomery era (three straight 3-9 seasons). Can Houston and his staff bounce back in 2024 or was the Ahlers/Mitchell duo truly one of a kind?

### OFFENSE

John David Baker steps into his first year as offensive coordinator. The 2023 numbers suggest that the cupboard is bare, but that isn't necessarily true. The Pirates brought in not one but two Power Five transfer quarterbacks. **Jake Garcia** is the more experienced of the two after a few starts at Miami (FL) in 2022 but he missed all of last season (at Missouri) with an injury. So, the player with the most recent experience is **Katin Houser** who started the majority of Michigan State's season completing 58.6% of his passes and throwing for 1,130 yards, 6 touchdowns, and 5 interceptions. The quarterback play should improve for the Pirates this year regardless of who emerges as the eventual starter. Pirate quarterbacks tossed twice the number of interceptions as they did touchdowns in 2023.

The rushing attack wasn't much prettier last year. Keaton Mitchell ran for 1,452 yards in 2022 and the Pirates ran for 1,360 yards *as a team* in 2023. **Raja Harris** led with 485 yards but only 3.8 yards per attempt. **Javious Bond** is more of the speed back (190 lbs compared to Harris at 5'11" 211) and he ran for 231 yards on 40 carries. Both quarterbacks factored into the run game too. Baker will transition the offense into an air raid system so don't expect the Pirates to meet or even approach the rushing numbers they did when Keaton Mitchell was in the backfield, but there should be improvement especially with four experienced starters on the offensive line.

The new air raid system means that receivers like **Chase Sowell** and **Shari Patterson** could flourish if there's not too much of a transition period with the new scheme. It could also mean that transfers **Winston Wright** (Florida State) and **Anthony Smith** (North Carolina State) step in and make immediate impacts. Wright hasn't had a healthy season since 2021 but he had two strong seasons with West Virginia in 2020 and 2021.

### DEFENSE

The defense actually had a tremendous season especially considering they were routinely placed in difficult situations. In fact, they even surpassed the statistical numbers of the past two seasons which featured two bowl trips (although the 2021 Military Bowl was cancelled). There's a fair bit of returning experience including the #2, #4, and #6 tacklers from last season. If there's room for improvement, it's getting more pressure on the quarterback. The Pirates mustered only 18 sacks on the season. The defensive front features three returning seniors including second-team AAC tackle "Big Tae" **D'Anta Johnson**.

**Michael Edwards** leads the linebacking corps after a 61 tackle campaign that featured eight tackles for loss and a sack. This group is probably the only unit on the defense that is less experienced as a whole than the year prior, but they do add more transfers here in **Dameon Wilson** (Missouri) and **Gavin Gibson** (Maryland).

The secondary could be a source of strength in 2024 with pair of returning starting corners who will don the purple and gold again. **Shavon Revel** earned all-conference honors and **Isaiah Brown-Murray** logged 459 total snaps in his redshirt-freshman season. Safety **Jordan Huff** was getting back up to speed after an ACL tear in 2022 but appeared in all 12 games for the Pirates. **Dontavious Nash** could play opposite Huff after transferring in from North Carolina in 2022 and posting 34 tackles and an interception for East Carolina in 2023.



**RAHJAI HARRIS – RB**

Photo via ECU Athletics

### 2024 ECU Schedule

Wk	Date	Opponent
1	Sat, Aug 31	vs. Norfolk State
2	Sat, Sept 7	@ Old Dominion
3	Sat, Sept 14	vs. App State
4	Sat, Sept 21	@ Liberty
5	Sat, Sept 28	vs. UTSA
6	Sat, Oct 5	@ Charlotte
8	Sat, Oct 19	@ Army
9	Sat, Oct 26	vs. Temple
11	Thu, Nov 7	vs. Florida Atlantic
12	Thu, Nov 14	@ Tulsa
13	Sat, Nov 23	@ North Texas
14	Sat, Nov 30	vs. Navy

Home Away

### Key Games

- vs. Appalachian State:** The Pirates put up a valiant effort against the eventual Sun Belt East champs but fell short in a rare game where the defense was taken advantage of on the ground.
- @ Liberty:** Are the Pirates really ready to bounce back and reach a bowl or even make noise at the top of the American? Enter a big litmus test against a Liberty team that is eyeing the College Football Playoff.
- vs. Florida Atlantic:** The Owls were the lone FBS win for East Carolina last season in their second-ever meeting. The Pirates have claimed both games and welcome FAU into Dowdy-Ficklen on a Thursday night.

# Player Spotlight

Photo via 24/7 Sports



## CHASE SOWELL – WR

The stars might be aligning for Sowell to have a breakout year, although the term “breakout” might not actually be the correct term since the word could actually be used to describe his 2023 performance. He caught 47 passes for 622 yards and a touchdown despite shaky quarterback play. ECU plans on transitioning to an air-ride attack which could mean Sowell posts big numbers in 2024.

**2023 Stats: 47 REC, 622 YDS, 1 TD**

Photo via 24/7 Sports



## CHAD STEPHENS – DE

The Pirates would benefit from more pressure on the quarterback and Stephens was one of the more effective weapons on the defense last year. The coaches named him to the honorable mention All-AAC team after team bests in sacks (3.5) and tackles for loss (11.5). He's played in 43 games in his Pirates career that started as a scout team redshirt freshman back in 2019. The D-line is a strength in 2024 thanks to Stephens.

**2023 Stats: 39 TKL, 11.5 TFL, 3.5 SACK, 1 FF**

Photo via ECU Athletics



**Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium (50,000)**



## Shavon REVEL

**SPECIAL TEAMS**

Photo via TBD

**Andrew Conrad** has been the place kicker for East Carolina in each of the last two seasons. His accuracy has wavered some but he was almost perfect from inside 40 yards and the coaching staff gave him more opportunities to hit long field goals and he did connect on a career-high 51 yarder against UTSA. Punting is **Luke Larsen**. Jsi Hatfield returned both punts and kickoffs in 2023. Bond returns some kicks and may take over in both roles.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

East Carolina has the chance to be the most improved team in the conference this season, at least in terms of the win total. In fairness, up is really they only way to go after last season's disaster. The offense should stabilize with either Garcia or Houser running the team at quarterback even with a new offensive scheme being installed by John David Baker. If the offense can take the needed steps forward, the defense can actually just replicate what they did last season and that effort should get East Carolina into a bowl game.

The schedule works in the favor of East Carolina, too. There's no Memphis or Tulane on the schedule and they get UTSA at home. The non-conference features two games against teams who appeared in their conference championship in Appalachian State (Sun Belt runners up) and Liberty (Conference USA champs) and Old Dominion was a bowl team last year. If they can enter conference play with a 2-2 record, I think ECU would take it.

### Appointment Television



vs.



**Sat, Sept 14 - 4:00 PM ET ESPNU**

The Mountaineers will make the eastward trek across the state to face the Pirates. The two teams have played twice as FBS opponents and App State has claimed both games including a convincing 43-28 victory in Boone. If not for a rash of turnovers, East Carolina might have claimed the victory and they did have a 28-22 lead. The Pirates will also look to snap a five-game home losing streak to FBS opponents.

### 2023 Statistics

Offense			Defense		
Statistic	Per Game	FBS Rank	Statistic	Per Game	FBS Rank
<b>Points</b>	<b>17.3</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>Points</b>	<b>22.4</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Rushing</b>	<b>113.3</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>Rushing</b>	<b>122.2</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Passing</b>	<b>163.9</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>Passing</b>	<b>219.2</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>277.2</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>341.3</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Sacks</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>T-99</b>	<b>Sacks</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>T-114</b>

**2024 Projection**  
**7-5**  
**5th in AAC**



**XO**



**XO**



**XO**

### Trophy Case