RICE OWLS

2023 Record: 6-7   American Athletic Conference   Houston, TX

FBS Ranking

104

LANDON RANSOM-GOELZ – WR
Photo via Rice University Athletics

It's been a long process for Mike Bloomgren and the Rice program, but he has slowly improved the Owls year after year since he took over in 2018. He inherited a team that went 1-11 and scored just 16.3 points per game while allowing 35.8 points. Since then, he's gradually improved the team's win totals and Rice has made two straight bowl appearances for the third time in a rather long program history. He has yet to win one of those games after losses to Southern Mississippi and Texas State, but Rice might have another shot this season if they can navigate a challenging conference schedule.

Last year the Owls had their best offensive performance in over a decade (2013, 29.6 points per game). There are a lot of key components returning on that side of the ball but Rice may be able to hang their hat on a defense that returns the top six tacklers and a number of starters. The Owls played in six one-score games and won half of them, so improved defensive play could quite literally be the difference between bowling or not bowling in 2024.

OFFENSE

Journeyman quarterback J.T. Daniels guided the Owls to the best passing production since Bloomgren and offensive coordinator Marques Tuiasosopo took over. They'll miss his skills and veteran savvy but they may have found the perfect replacement in **EJ Warner**. The son of NFL Hall of Fame Kurt Warner (yes, you're old) produced back-to-back 3,000 yard seasons with Temple despite very little support around him. He'll have a variety of weapons to choose from at Rice. Although leading receiver and versatile athlete Luke McCaffrey departs, the next six pass catchers all return.

Speaking of versatile athletes, running back **Dean Connors** is the team's leading returning rusher *and* receiver. **Boden Groen** played a big role in the Rice offense at tight end with 39 catches for 383 yards and 3 touchdowns. **Landon Ransom-Goelz** and **Dawson MacNeill** both recorded 25+ catches, 300+ receiving yards, and three touchdowns. It's great for Warner and the offense that there are so many returners who caught passes last year, but who will emerge as the "WR1" in 2024?

The biggest improvement needed from the offense this season is arguably the offensive line. Rice averaged just 3.7 yards per carry as a team and they were in the bottom half of the FBS in sacks allowed. The group projected to start this year is not quite as experienced as last year's group but Georgia transfer **Chad Lindberg** appeared in 12 games and **Spencer Cassell** had a strong season at Harvard. **Brant Banks** was fourth-team All-AAC and **Ethan Onianwa** has started all but one game over the past two seasons. The early schedule works in favor for the Owls and they'll have two great opportunities to find their rhythm before the big showdown against Houston.

DEFENSE

Defense has been a challenge for the Owls in recent seasons, but they took a leap forward in 2023, improving their points allowed from 34.2 to 28.1. Can the 2024 version of the defense cause more turnovers? Rice has been -13 and -14 in turnover margin in the last two years respectively and while part of the onus is obviously on the offense, the defense could stand to create more plays. Safety **Gabe Taylor** has already done that in his four seasons with Rice. In the last three seasons, specifically, Taylor has recorded at least 50 tackles and at least two interceptions. He returned a pick against Tulane 72 yards and helped the Owls nearly pull off an upset against the defending American champions.

Taylor leads an experienced secondary that also includes senior cornerback **Sean Fresch**. Fresch will be the one matching up against the best wide receivers of the opposition but this group appears to have some depth. The linebacker position is also in good shape with leading tackler **Plae Wyatt** back (81 tackles, 3 tackles for loss) and **Myron Morrison** (80 tackles, 3.5 tackles for loss) patrolling the middle of the field. **DJ Arkansas** added 34 tackles and a couple of quarterback hurries.

The defensive front features some major size, especially at the tackle positions. **Blake Boenisch** checks in at 330 pounds and **Izeya Floyd** also tops 300 pounds and registered 26 tackles. The Owls add **Charlie Looes** after a remarkably successful season at Dartmouth. **Josh Pearcy** registered seven tackles for loss, the most of any returning player. The Owls recorded 23 sacks last season. With the talent at the disposal of defensive coordinator Brian Smith, expect that number to increase this year.

Can Mike Bloomgren's steady improvement of the Owls continue?

HC: Mike Bloomgren
(7th Year, 22-46)

OC: Marques Tuiasosopo
(4th Year)
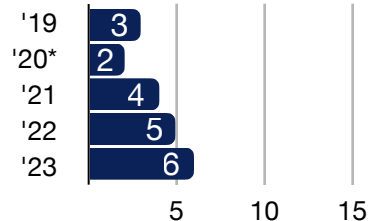
DC: Brian Smith
(6th Year)

2024 Class Rankings

Recruiting
122

Transfer Portal
114

Via 24/7 Sports

RICE WIN TREND

Year	Wins
'19	3
'20*	2
'21	4
'22	5
'23	6

(axis: 5, 10, 15)

2023 Results (6-7)

@ Texas (L 10-37)
Houston (W 43-41 2OT)
Texas Southern (W 59-7)
@ South Florida (L 29-42)
East Carolina (W 24-17)
UConn (L 31-38)
@ Tulsa (W 42-10)
Tulane (L 28-30)
SMU (L 31-36)
@ UTSA (L 14-34)
@ Charlotte (W 28-7)
Florida Atlantic (W 24-21)
Texas State (L 21-45)
First Responder Bowl

2024 Rice Schedule

Wk	Date	Opponent
1	Sat, Aug 31	vs. Sam Houston
2	Sat, Sept 7	vs. Texas Southern
3	Sat, Sept 14	@ Houston
4	Sat, Sept 21	@ Army
5	Sat, Sept 28	vs. Charlotte
7	Sat, Oct 12	vs. UTSA
8	Sat, Oct 19	@ Tulane
9	Sat, Oct 26	@ UConn
10	Sat, Nov 2	vs. Navy
11	Fri, Nov 8	@ Memphis
13	Sat, Nov 23	@ UAB
14	Sat, Nov 30	vs. South Florida

Home   **Away**

Key Games

@ Houston: The Owls ended a seven-game losing streak to rival Houston in grand double-overtime fashion. Rice out-muscled the Cougars, running the ball 51 times for 231 yards.

vs. UTSA: Rice welcomes an in-state opponent who is projected as one of the favorites to win the American. The Roadrunners have had their way with the Owls, winning eight in a row and the last three meetings have been blowouts.

vs. South Florida: The Owls won the final two games of the 2023 season to clinch a bowl bid. Will their season finale against the Bulls have similar stakes? The Bulls won the schools' first-ever meeting 42-29 last year.

DEAN CONNORS – RB

As if 771 rushing yards on only 121 carries (6.4 yard average, the best mark by a Rice runner since 2005) wasn't impressive enough, Connors also played a major role in the passing game and caught 43 passes for 403 yards and 3 touchdowns. With Luke McCaffrey gone, Connors could see the ball even more (if that's possible). The Hawaii native will clearly be a major focal point of the offense again in 2024.

2023 Stats: 121 RUSH, 771 YDS, 7 TDS

JOSH PEARCY – LB

When Pearcy takes the field in 2024, it will mark the third season as a captain for the Owls. Last year he registered 44 tackles, seven of those for loss. He leads a defensive front that has every opportunity to be a disruptive force. His 18 hurries and 26 total pressures in 2023 were both career highs as was the 661 defensive snaps he took. The honorable mention All-AAC performer should flourish in his senior season.

2023 Stats: 44 TKL, 7 TFL, 1 SACK

Rice Stadium (47,000)

Sean FRESCH

Appointment Television

 VS.

Sat, Sept 14 - 8:00 PM ET ESPN+

After a few year hiatus, the rivalry has been preserved until at least 2025. Last year, the Owls raced out to a 28-0 lead and held on to win a 43-41 thriller, marking their first victory in the series since 2010 and breaking Houston's seven-game win streak, the longest in series history. The Cougars will obviously be very interested in revenge but if the Owls pull the upset they'll probably enjoy a grand 3-0 start to the 2024 season.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Tim Horn only attempted 12 field goals last season and hit eight of them although two of the misses came from inside 40 yards but he did connect on a 48 yarder against Texas Southern. When he's not locking down receivers at corner, Sean Fresch returned both punts and kickoffs last season.

THE BOTTOM LINE

This team could very well be the best Mike Bloomgren has had in his six prior seasons here in Houston. However, to reach a third straight bowl game, the Owls will likely need to pull some conference upsets. The non-conference slate is extremely manageable. Rice opens with two games against in-state opponents (Sam Houston and Texas Southern) that *should* be wins. They'll make the long journey to Storrs, Connecticut in October but the Huskies have been floundering as a program so that game is winnable too. The final non-conference game is the rivalry matchup against Houston which the Owls won last year!

On the other hand, Rice avoids both Temple and Tulsa and they travel to Memphis, Tulane, and UAB and they must face both South Florida and UTSA at home. Even though our prediction has Rice missing a bowl game, if the Owls can jump over some of those hurdles, they'll have the chance to produce their best season since the 2013 Conference USA Championship team.

2023 Statistics

	Offense				Defense		
Statistic	**Per Game**	**FBS Rank**		**Statistic**	**Per Game**	**FBS Rank**	
Points	29.5	54		**Points**	28.1	80	
Rushing	110.5	113		**Rushing**	153.1	72	
Passing	252.5	44		**Passing**	211.6	43	
Total	362.9	82		**Total**	364.7	52	
Sacks	29	T-79		**Sacks**	23	T-95	

2024 Projection
5-7
11th in AAC

Trophy Case

XO   XO   XO