TULSA GOLDEN HURRICANE

2023 Record: 4-8   American Athletic Conference   Tulsa, OK

FBS Ranking

115

OWEN OSTROSKI – DE
Photo via Tulsa Athletics

How quickly can strong recruiting turn into Tulsa victories?

HC: Kevin Wilson
(2nd Year, 4-8)

OC: Steve Spurrier Jr.
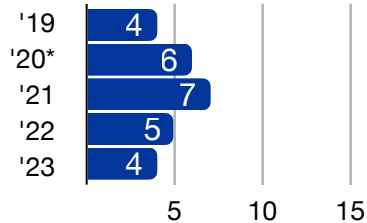**(2nd Year)**

DC: Chris Polizzi
(2ndYear)

Let me direct your attention to the "2024 Class Rankings" box on the right. It's not a typo, Kevin Wilson and his staff have produced the #54 recruiting class out of all 134 FBS teams (according to 24/7 Sports). That ranking gives Tulsa one of the best recruiting classes in the entire conference - only South Florida's class is ranked higher. It's clear that Kevin Wilson has been able to build a strong belief in this Tulsa program despite the fact that the Golden Hurricane have suffered through five losing seasons in just the last seven years.

Clearly, a foundation is starting to build, but what will this year hold? The Golden Hurricane started 2023 with a 3-2 record and the lone losses against quality opponents in Washington and Oklahoma. However, the wheels fell off the wagon a bit and Tulsa lost six straight games until claiming a victory in the season finale by virtue of a 37 yard field goal as time expired. The top passer, runner, and catcher return on offense but the defense losses most of last year's production on a side that was not especially effective. The schedule is much more manageable, so could Tulsa flirt with a bowl game?

OFFENSE

The offense scored 30 or more points in conference play just once, a 48-26 rout of Temple. Yet, Tulsa finished the season in the top half of FBS teams in terms of total offense. How is this possible? The short answer is turnovers. Four quarterbacks saw playing time in 2023 and all four struggled with turnovers. The unit as a whole threw 20 touchdowns compared to 19 interceptions. Thankfully, the defense was opportunistic and grabbed 10 interceptions of their own including a handful of fumbles and Tulsa finished just -3 in turnover margin. However, the team has finished in the negatives in turnover margin in every season since 2018, so it's critical that Tulsa values possessions this season.

Of those four quarterbacks, two return this season. **Cardell Williams** led the team with 1,149 passing yards and he offers the most with his legs (202 yards, 5 touchdowns). **Kirk Francis** maximized his redshirt season by appearing in four games. He was arguably the most effective quarterback on the roster, throwing for 345 yards in a close loss against Tulane and guiding the Golden Hurricane to a victory over East Carolina. He also posted the best touchdown-to-interception ratio (6 to 3). Tulsa will also add **Cooper Legas** in the mix from Utah State. He had his ups and downs last season with the Aggies but threw for 1,815 yards and 19 touchdowns and he's the most experienced of the three quarterbacks. It would not be surprising to see all three quarterbacks play early in the season.

Leading rusher **Anthony Watkins** (889 yards) returns as does **Bill Jackson** (414 yards). One of the strengths of last year's team was the run game and that should be the case again in 2024 as long as the offensive line doesn't regress significantly after losing four starters. **Tautai Marks** is the lone returning starter and will likely slot in at center after making a handful of starts at that position the past two seasons. Receiver **Kamdyn Benjamin** is back following a strong season that featured 727 yards and six touchdowns but other weapons will need to emerge behind him. **Jeremiah Ballard** had 551 yards last season for UTEP and transfers here.

DEFENSE

Tulsa's defense took it on the chin last season, especially when they ran into quality opponents like Washington (43 points), Oklahoma (66 points), and SMU (69 points). In order for the Golden Hurricane to improve their win total in 2024, it'll need a much better effort from the defense. Taking that step could be a challenge since seven of the top eight leading tacklers are gone including the conference's leading tackler Kendarin Ray (131). Ben Kopenski had nearly half of the team's sacks (8.5) and was a first-team All-AAC member.

Dayne Hodge now becomes one of the veterans after making 8 starts at safety last year and registering 57 tackles. **Demarco Jones** battled injury but came up with an interception against Oklahoma and East Carolina in limited playing time. He'll face his former team Oklahoma State on September 14. The starting linebacker trio could be comprised of all transfers in **Myles Jackson** (Indiana), **Gavin Potter** (Kansas/Arkansas State) and **Chris Thompson** (USC). **Owen Ostroksi** is a player to watch at defensive end and he had the second-most sacks on the team with four.

2024 Tulsa Schedule

Wk		
1	Thu, Aug 29	vs. NW State
2	Sat, Sept 7	@ Arkansas State
3	Sat, Sept 14	vs. Oklahoma St.
4	Sat, Sept 21	@ Louisiana Tech
5	Sat, Sept 28	@ North Texas
6	Sat, Oct 5	vs. Army
8	Sat, Oct 19	@ Temple
9	Sat, Oct 26	vs. UTSA
10	Sat, Nov 2	@ UAB
12	Thu, Nov 14	vs. East Carolina
13	Sat, Nov 23	@ South Florida
14	Sat, Nov 30	vs. Florida Atlantic

■ Home   ■ Away

Key Games

vs. Oklahoma State: This rivalry dates back to 1914. The Cowboys have won the last nine meetings in a sparsely contested series going back to 1999. An upset would turn the heads of the entire college football world.

vs. Army: Transitioning from the passing frenzy offense of the Mean Green to the run-heavy triple option of Army just one week later could be challenging

vs. East Carolina: A Thursday night showdown from Chapman Stadium pits the Golden Hurricane and Pirates together after Tulsa pulled out a thrilling season-finale victory in Greenville last season.

2024 Class Rankings

Recruiting
54

Transfer Portal
102

Via 24/7 Sports

TULSA WIN TREND

'19	4
'20*	6
'21	7
'22	5
'23	4

5   10   15

2023 Results (4-8)

UAPB (W 42-7)
@ Washington (L 10-43)
Oklahoma (L 17-66)
@ No. Illinois (W 22-14)
Temple (W 48-26)
@ Florida Atlantic (L 17-20)
Rice (L 10-42)
@ SMU (L 10-69)
Charlotte (L 26-33)
@ Tulane (L 22-24)
North Texas (L 28-35)
@ East Carolina (W 29-27)

Player Spotlight

KAMDYN BENJAMIN – WR

Benjamin caught fire in the final three weeks of the season. He exploded for 8 catches, 157 yards, and 2 touchdowns against Tulane and followed that performance with 93 yards against North Texas and 143 yards from East Carolina. He had better quarterback play in those games and his 2024 production will surge if he gets more consistent play from that position. Look for more 100+ yard games from the senior.

2023 Stats: 47 REC, 727 YDS, 6 TD

CARDELL WILLIAMS – QB

Even if Williams doesn't win the three-way quarterback battle, it will be hard to keep him off the field with his athletic ability and running skills. He tallied 319 yards (ignoring sack yardage) and a team-best five touchdowns on the ground. Kevin Wilson coached quarterbacks like Braxton Miller and J.T. Barrett at Ohio State, so Williams' abilities should fit well in Wilson's scheme. And if he can improve as a passer? Even better.

2023 Stats: 59.9% COMP, 1149 YDS, 10 TD, 7 INT

H.A. Chapman Stadium (30,000)

Anthony WATKINS

Appointment Television

OSU VS. Tulsa

Sat, Sept 14 - 12:00 PM ET ESPN2

Oklahoma State makes the short journey to Tulsa for the first time since 2019. The Cowboys have dominated the series recently and have won the last nine meetings dating back to 1999. If Tulsa wants a test to see how strong their run defense is, they'll get everything they want and more as the Cowboys boast one of the most experienced and talented offensive lines in front of Doak Walker favorite Ollie Gordon II.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Seth Morgan transfers in from Memphis and is the kicker with the most experience (albeit, five attempts). **Reed Malphurs** is also here from Texas. Punting is **Angus Davies** who had a strong season, averaging 42.7 yards per boot. Kamdyn Benjamin handled punt return duties in 2023 and could also see time in the kick return game with Jordan Ford departing.

THE BOTTOM LINE

There is clearly positive momentum building in the Tulsa program. Will that energy translate to wins this season or will it take a year or two for that recruiting class to become upperclassmen before the Golden Hurricane really flourish? The offense appears poised to take a step forward. There are multiple options at quarterback and enough weapons to get the job done, so long as the offensive line can figure things out. The defense could be another story, however. It's hard to see Tulsa holding opponents to under 30 points per game this season which means the offense will need to routinely outscore the opposition in order for Tulsa to reach their first bowl game since 2021.

The schedule mostly works in favor of the Golden Hurricane. They face just one Power 4 team and they actually get that contest at home when rival Oklahoma State comes to town. Even road games against Arkansas State and Louisiana Tech are very winnable. To make matters better, Tulsa avoids both Tulane and Memphis in conference play. This team is probably a year away from really competing in the American, but there's some obvious upside to the Golden Hurricane, and a couple of upset victories wouldn't be shocking.

2023 Statistics

	Offense			Defense	
Statistic	**Per Game**	**FBS Rank**	**Statistic**	**Per Game**	**FBS Rank**
Points	23.4	92	**Points**	33.8	117
Rushing	180.8	35	**Rushing**	164.8	92
Passing	204.7	92	**Passing**	279.8	127
Total	385.4	65	**Total**	444.7	125
Sacks	26	T-74	**Sacks**	21	T-101

2024 Projection
4-8
13th in AAC

Trophy Case

XO   XO   XO