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## PFL coaches give San Diego nod, project tight race in 2015

ST. LOUIS – For the fourth consecutive year, the University of San Diego has been picked to win the Pioneer Football League regular-season race in a preseason vote of the league’s coaches.

The PFL will announce its preseason All-PFL teams, Wednesday, followed by a preseason coaches teleconference, Thursday.

The upcoming 2015 season marks the 23rd year for the Pioneer Football League – the nation’s only non-scholarship, football-only NCAA Football Championship Subdivision conference. The league will feature 11 teams each playing an eight-game schedule to determine the league champion and recipient of the automatic bid to the 2015 NCAA FCS Championship.

Defending champion San Diego again received the coaches’ nod to win the 2015 PFL title, but the coaches also predicted an exciting race. The top three teams in the preseason poll were separated by just three points.

San Diego received seven of a possible 10 first-place votes and 89 of a maximum 100 points as coaches were not allowed to vote for their own team in the poll. Dayton received three first-place votes and was ranked second with 87 points. Drake gained the remaining first-place vote and was third with 86 points.

Campbell was picked to repeat its fourth-place finish, earning 71 points. Butler rounded out the top half of the preseason poll with 59 points.

The bottom half of the poll begins with third-year program Stetson (6th, 54 points). It was followed by Marist (7th, 50), Morehead State (8th, 40), Valparaiso (9th, 37) and Davidson (10th, 22). Jacksonville was not ranked in the preseason poll and will not be eligible for the PFL regular season title while serving its league penalty.

Defending PFL champion **San Diego** returns 13 starters – six on both offense and defense and one on special teams – from last season’s 9-3 squad. Junior running back Jonah Hodges returns to pace the Torero offense after rushing for 1,214 yards and six touchdowns last season. Hodges will have the luxury of running behind an offensive line that returns four starters, including first-team All-PFL selection Pono Keni. Junior cornerback Jamal Agnew – last season’s FCS leader in passes defended (2.1 per game) – returns to pace a defensive unit that held opponents to just 191.8 passing yards per game (second in the PFL).

**Dayton** owns a league-best 11 PFL championship trophies, but has not claimed a title since 2010. Redshirt senior running back Connor Kacsor, the returning PFL Offensive Player of the Year, returns after amassing 1,547 yards and 17 touchdowns last season – the best yardage and touchdown totals by a PFL running back since 2006. The Flyers have traditionally hung their hat on defense and led the league in passing defense while ranking fourth in total defense. Redshirt junior linebacker Christopher Beachler (First-Team All-PFL, 10.1 tackles per game) and redshirt junior defensive end Nate Sudnick (11½ tackles for loss) return to anchor that defense.

**Drake** finished 2014 tied for second place with Dayton and was nearly picked in a deadlock for second place again in 2015. The Bulldogs owned the PFL’s best defensive in 2014, allowing just 318 yards per game, while ranking among the league’s top three in both rushing defense and passing defense. Redshirt senior defensive back Brad Duwe and redshirt senior linebacker John Hugunin each return after earning second-team All-PFL honors last season to anchor the unit. Offensively, junior running back Conley Wilkins returns after finishing second in the PFL with 13 touchdowns in 2014.

**Campbell’s** fourth-place finish in 2014 was its best showing since 2011 when it finished third in the league race. The Camels defense will be anchored by its defensive line as seniors Ugonna Awuruonye (12 tackles for loss, eight sacks) and Greg Milhouse (58 tackles, fourth among PFL defensive ends) each return after earning first-team and second-team All-PFL honors last season, respectively. The questions lie on the offensive side of the ball where quarterback Dakota Wolf, who ranked eighth

### Pioneer Football League 2015 Preseason Coaches’ Poll

Team	Points
1. San Diego (7)	89
2. Dayton (3)	87
3. Drake (1)	86
4. Campbell	71
5. Butler	59
6. Stetson	54
7. Marist	50
8. Morehead State	40
9. Valparaiso	37
10. Davidson	22
Jacksonville	–

- First-place votes in parentheses.
- 10 points awarded for a first-place vote, with one point less for each succeeding place. (Maximum score = 100)
- Coaches were not allowed to vote for their own team.
- Jacksonville not included in preseason poll due to league penalty.

in PFL total offense last season, has departed and no other Campbell player ranked among the league's top 10 in rushing or receiving.

**Butler** enters 2015 seeking to bounce back from a 2-6 record last season that was its worst PFL mark since 2010. The Bulldogs will see redshirt senior quarterback Matt Shiltz return after an injury-shortened 2014 that saw him pass for 1,329 yards and 10 touchdowns in just over five games. Butler also will see redshirt sophomore running back Sam Schrader return after ranking third in touchdowns in his first season. Defensively, Butler returns six of its top seven tacklers, including redshirt junior linebacker Sean Horan (80 tackles), and that unit should be helped by the return of redshirt senior punter Brian Akialis, who was a second-team All-PFL honoree last season.

Preseason All-American and returning PFL Defensive Player of the Year Donald Payne highlights the 2015 **Stetson** football squad. The redshirt junior safety set the PFL record and led all FCS tacklers with 175 stops last season and returns to anchor the Hatters defensive unit. The third-year Stetson program is not a one-man show as junior quarterback Ryan Tentler (152.8 yards per game, 17 TDs) and junior running back Cole Mazza (10 TDs, second-team All-PFL) returning on the offensive side. In addition, junior defensive back Chris Atkins returns to join Payne in the secondary after ranking second among PFL defenders with 18 passes defended last season.

An unsettled offense held **Marist** back in 2014, resulting in a 4-4 PFL record one season after claiming a share of its first league title. The Red Foxes offense retains hope for a rebound in 2015 as Marist will see senior redshirt wideout Matt Tralli (69 receipts, 626 yards) return as well as two quarterbacks – junior Anthony Francis and senior Ed Achziger – that each threw more than 140 passes last season. The Red Foxes defensive unit ranked second among PFL teams and should be in good hands with redshirt senior safety Zach Adler (seven interceptions, 78 tackles) returning after commanding All-American in addition to first-team All-PFL honors.

It's year three behind center for **Morehead State** junior quarterback Austin Gahafer, who in two seasons has amassed 5,270 yards and thrown for 36 touchdowns. However, the Eagles have back-to-back 3-5 PFL campaigns around him. Morehead State should again move the ball offensively as Gahafer will have junior wideout Jake Raymond (71 receipts, 697 yards) and redshirt sophomore Kitaro Lewis (49 receipts, 529 yards in 2013) out on patters this season. The Eagle defense will have its three leading tacklers returning, including senior linebacker Luke Keller (87 tackles, 11½ tackles for loss) and junior safety Brandon Louder (65 tackles, three pass breakups).

In his first season, **Valparaiso** head coach Dave Cecchini led his team to two-win PFL effort for the first time since 2008 and its first four-win campaign since 2007. Losses at quarterback and wide receiver are tempered by the return of its three leading running backs that combined for more than a third of the team's offense – senior Brandon Hall (173 carries, 885 yards, 10 TD), junior Grayson Bastin (95 carries, 308 yards) and redshirt senior Jake Hutson (65 carries, 237 yards). A considerably improved defensive unit gave up 100 fewer yards per game last season and is again anchored by senior linebacker Alex Green who has posted 108 and 110 tackles in his last two seasons.

**Davidson** will be led by senior wide receiver William Morris who has garnered Preseason All-American recognition this season and earned first-team All-PFL honors last season after amassing a school record 1,224 receiving yards – the best performance by a PFL wideout since 2008. Offensively, he will be joined by sophomore Jeffrey Keil whose 725-yard, eight-touchdown rookie campaign saw him earn PFL Freshman Offensive Player of the Year honors. Senior defensive lineman Chris Woods returns to anchor the defensive unit after earning honorable mention All-PFL recognition last season.

Though ineligible for the 2015 title due to a PFL imposed penalty, **Jacksonville** will have a strong say in the league's championship as it will play a full conference schedule and its wins and losses will count in the standings. The Dolphins will see redshirt senior quarterback Kade Bell, a first-team All-PFL honoree last season, return after leading the league with 3,181 passing yards and 31 touchdowns to pace the league's best offense. Meanwhile, senior defensive back Terrance Bryant (58 tackles) and junior linebacker Grady Redding (79 tackles) – both first-team All-PFL picks last season – return to anchor a defensive unit that was the league's best in both scoring and yardage allowed.

Two PFL squads – Campbell and Valparaiso – will kickoff the 2015 campaign on opening day, Thursday, Sept. 3, followed two days later by the league's remaining nine teams. The 23rd season of PFL regular-season action gets underway with a full five-game slate, Saturday, Sept. 26.

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