

TSN Releases Walter Payton Award Watch List

Written by Craig Haley
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Twelve of this year's initial 20 nominees were finalists for the award last year. Their candidacy began again Thursday as the race for the 26th annual Payton Award kicked off with The Sports Network's announcement of a stellar

Watch List for the Football Championship Subdivision's top individual honor.

After the season, the most outstanding player in the FCS will join a list of Payton Award greats such as Steve McNair, John Friesz, Brian Westbrook, Tony Romo, Brian Finneran, Armanti Edwards and 2011 winner Bo Levi Mitchell.

The 2011 finalists returning to the Watch List are quarterbacks Casey Brockman of Murray State, DeNarius McGhee of Montana State and Brad Sorensen of Southern Utah; running backs Shakir Bell of Indiana State, Jordan Brown of Bryant, Jamaine Cook of Youngstown State, Timothy Flanders of Sam Houston State, Andrew Pierce of Delaware and Terrance West of Towson; fullback Eric Breitenstein of Wofford; and wide receivers Aaron Mellette of Elon and Rodrick Rumble of Idaho State.

Joining the Watch List are quarterbacks Taylor Heinicke of Old Dominion, Kurt Hess of Youngstown State and Jeff Mathews of Cornell; running backs Zach Bauman of Northern Arizona, Matt Denham of Eastern Kentucky and Miguel Maysonet of Stony Brook; all-purpose player Richard Sincere of Sam Houston State; and wide receiver Ryan Spadola of Lehigh. McGhee isn't just a returning finalist, he's the only two-time finalist on this year's Watch List, having finished seventh in the voting as a redshirt freshman in 2010 and 13th last season when he helped Montana State to a share of the Big Sky Conference title for the second straight year. This year, McGhee will go head-to-head with Sorensen in the Big Sky now that Southern Utah has moved into the conference. Sorensen, who has thrown for over 3,100 yards in two straight seasons, is considered the leading NFL prospect among FCS senior quarterbacks.

Brockman is capable of throwing for staggering yardage totals, having already posted games of 497, 570 and 600 yards over the past two seasons. Mathews was quite prolific, too, throwing for over 500 yards in each of his final two games last season to finish with an Ivy League single-season record 3,412 yards.

Hess ranked just behind Mathews as the fourth-most efficient quarterback in the FCS. Heinicke, meanwhile, got a late start on his true freshman season, but wound up throwing for 25 touchdowns with only one interception while Old Dominion reached the FCS playoffs in its first season of eligibility.

Among the running backs, no one wants to take the next step in the Payton voting more than Bell. He tied for second as a sophomore last season when he was the FCS' official rushing leader (1,670 yards, 151.8 yards per game) on 7.3 yards per carry.

Brown actually outgained Bell in rushing yards (1,815) and per-game average (165), but was not recognized among the official FCS statistical leaders because Bryant was in its final season as a provisional school that was reclassifying to the FCS.

West is coming off a season in which he was the inaugural recipient of the Jerry Rice Award as the FCS freshman of the year. He rushed for 1,294 yards, ranking 12th in yards per game, and a national-best 29 touchdowns.

All 10 of the backs, including Breitenstein, the FCS' active career rushing leader with 3,695

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yards, rushed for over 100 yards per game a year ago. Denham ranked third in the FCS in rushing yards per game, Bauman fourth, Cook seventh, Maysonet eighth, Breitenstein 10th, Pierce 13th and Flanders 16th.

Mellette, Spadola, Rumble and Edwards finished 1-2-3-4 in receiving yards per game. Few players mixed the offense together like Sincere. The wide receiver caught 26 passes for 485 yards and four touchdowns, but also ran Sam Houston State's Wild Bearkat formation, finishing with 979 yards and nine touchdowns on the ground.

The Payton Award Watch List can undergo revision during the 2012 season. Ballots will be sent to a panel of about 175 sports information and media relations directors, broadcasters, writers and other dignitaries following the regular season on Nov. 19. The top three vote-getters will be invited to The Sports Network FCS Awards Presentation.

The Sports Network also presents the Buck Buchanan, Jerry Rice and Eddie Robinson awards. The Buchanan Award honors the FCS defensive player of the year, the Rice Award goes to the FCS freshman of the year and the Robinson Award honors the FCS coach of the year. Those three winners will join the top three Payton finalists at the national awards banquet.

Photo Courtesy: Eric Breitenstein, Wofford College Athletics