

2017 Preseason Baseball Ranking Large School Division

By Michael Coker/Black College Nines

Alabama A&M University

2016 Record: 13-44 .228 **Conference:** MEAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** Unranked

Alabama A&M will be returning three starters from last year. They are Shortstop JT O'Reel, who was the toughest to strike out in 2016 Division 1 NCAA, along with 3B Cornelius Woods, who hit in the middle of the lineup and OF Carlton Peppers. Also returning is Bulldogs number one starter on the mound LHP Brandon Maronek, who will be the regular Friday night weekend series starter. Maronek throws in the low 90's range. Several newcomers will play a huge impact this year. JUCO transfers INF Carson McGregory and RHP Blaine Milam who will be the number two starter. AA&M expects big things out of those two along with JUCO C Frank Phillips.

Freshmen to watch are OF Njike Hunter, C Zeth Malcom, and Caleb Gay who should be counted on as the number three weekend arm. Pitching will carry the team, according to head baseball coach Mitch Hill.

Biggest Strength:

Effective weekend starters

Biggest Weakness:

Lack big sticks in the middle of the lineup

Alabama State University

2016 Record: 38-17 .691 **Conference:** SWAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** No.1

Two-time defending Black College Nines National Champion Alabama State University is looking to defend its national title without former head coach Mervyl Melendez, who moved on to Florida International University after building Hornet baseball into a powerhouse. Melendez' long time assistant Jose Vazquez takes over the program as ASU head coach and should not miss a beat with nearly all returning top position players and pitchers in 2017.

On offense, the Hornets return 8 of 9 starters in the field. The team will be led by senior Conference Player of the Year, Carlos Ocasio, Freshman of the Year Eriq White, and 1st Team All SWAC selections 3B Ray Hernandez, C Hunter Allen, 1B Chris Biocic, OF Yamil Pagan and OF Diandre Amion. Freshman C/OF Cage Cox, from Cairo, GA, should make an immediate impact in the lineup. Tyler Howe returns to anchor the pitching staff along with relievers Darren Kelly and Austin Bizzle. Terrell McCall had a great summer in the Valley League going 7-1 and being named on the top prospect list. Overall good fall with everyone staying healthy.

Biggest Strength:

Hitting, pitching and fielding

Biggest Weakness:

Under .500 vs. top DI non-conference in 2016

Alcorn State University

2016 Record: 16-36 .304 **Conference:** SWAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** Unranked

Brett Richardson is in his second season at the helm of Braves baseball. "We will be very balanced offensively and defensively this season. Offensively we should be able to hit. Defensively we're working everyday to improve and to get better. Our season, I feel, will hinge upon how well we pitch this season. If we pitch well, I think we will have a chance to compete for the SWAC Championship."

Projected Starting Lineup: 1B Brandon Barna, 2B Wallace Rios, SS AJ Makarewicz, 3B Walter Vives, C Jason Sanez, LF Der'Vincent Hampton, CF Justin Barna, RF Patrick McMahan, SP Jahborus Smith, SP Reggie Johnson, SP Austin Willis Greene, RP Conrado Skepple and RP Carlos Lopez. Top newcomer, Anthony Acosta INF/RHP.

Biggest Strength:

Young position players

Biggest Weakness:

Finding effective weekend and mid-week starters

Arkansas Pine-Bluff University

2016 Record: 22-25 .468 **Conference:** SWAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** No.7

Head Coach Carlos James figures to have a talented roster in 2017 returning six starters from last season with strong hitting and pitch from top returners 2B Aderly Perez, OF/DH Julian Jones, OF Jordan Knox, INF Dontrell Brown, OF Jaquese Moore, INF Jaylen Jackson and JC Sorrono. UAPB will have a stronger pitching staff than last year. Hard throwing RHP/OF Jeremiah Figueroa who throws in the mid-90s, Canadian RHP C.J. Lewington and a wealth of mound mates should make for a solid staff.

Top freshmen are OF Casey Higgins and RHP Jordan O'Queen. Coach James says, "we have the best talented team at Pine-Bluff and are looking to jell."

Biggest Strength:

Good strength of schedule against top DI RPI opponents

Biggest Weakness:

Under .500 vs. Non-conference in 2016

Bethune-Cookman University

2016 Record: 29-27 .518 **Conference:** MEAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** No.5

Fresh from winning the 2016 Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference Tournament title and advancing to the ninth NCAA Regional in the past 11 seasons, sixth-year head coach Jason Beverlin and Bethune-Cookman look to re-supply the hitting heading into the 2017 campaign. After losing top homerun hitter Michael Cruz to the MLB Draft, as well as junior catcher Clay Middleton to the pros, the Wildcats will be looking for hitting from sophomore and reigning MEAC Rookie of the Year, Danny Rodriguez.

The pitching duties for the Wildcats will be back in full supply as ace Tyler Norris returns, followed by Tyler Krull and Donte Lindsay in the projected weekend rotation. One of the MEAC's best relievers, Joseph Calamita, returns out of the bullpen, as well as CJ Eytel. The

newcomers are plenty for the Wildcats in 2017. It is a crew that includes 13 fresh faces. Of the bunch, reigning FHSAA Class 7-A Player of the Year Bobby Stewart from Naples, Florida headlines the group.

Biggest Strength:

Batting, fielding, pitching, good DI RPI opponents

Biggest Weakness:

Under .500 vs. Non-conference in 2016

Coppin State University

2016 Record: 14-38 .269 **Conference:** MEAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** Unranked

Coppin State University's baseball team is preparing for the upcoming 2017 season. Seventh year head coach Sherman Reed and his Eagles welcome in 19 newcomers with the return of 16 letter winners. The team will be led by senior infielder Bryant Miranda who topped the team in batting average (.333) runs scored (52), hits (64), stolen bases (16), games started (52) and at bats (192). In the MEAC conference he ranked fourth in runs scored, tied for sixth in stolen bases and tied for ninth in batting average.

The Eagles have a slew of freshman and Junior college transfers heading to start the 2017 season. First year impact players should be RHP Joshua Hancock 6'6" RHP mid-upper 80's, RHP Jacob Lewis 6'3" RHP with great command of three pitches, RHP/OF/ left-handed bat Corey Treyes, C/INF Cole Gerula, and mid-infielder Allen Saar. JUCO transfers like (RHP Caleb Duhay, (C) Brett Helmbrecht, and (MIF) John Bonanca, rounds out one of the more successful recruiting classes in coach Reeds 6 year at Coppin State. The program welcomes the supporting cast that was bought in this year to return to the MEAC championships.

Biggest Strength:

Freshman and JUCO transfers

Biggest Weakness:

Unproven freshman at the DI level

Delaware State University

2016 Record: 13-37 .260 **Conference:** MEAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** Unranked

Delaware State University baseball program went through a reloading phase for the past two seasons with young talent. The team has matured, as most of the young talented players were thrown into the fire early and learned how to play the games by taking their lumps against outside competition. The Hornets still fared well in the conference, making the tournament and placing second in the MEAC North with a record of 13-10.

Heading into the 2017 season, the team as a whole has matured with the lead of a potentially very imposing pitching staff. Excellent senior leadership this fall has led to more accountability and attention to detail both on and off the field. The Hornets will be led with a solid pitching staff and a mindset of winning by playing solid defense and getting timely hitting. The position players are more athletic as a whole and will have the depth that has been lacking in the past. The overall mood of the program and the athletic department behind the team is optimistic and eager to begin the 2017 campaign. As always the goal is to first make the tournament then take care of business and win it. Top freshmen who will receive playing time are C Ciaran Devenney and LHP/DH Garrett Lawson.

Biggest Strength:

Experience developed position players

Biggest Weakness:

Developing pitching staff

Florida A&M University

2016 Record: 31-21 .596 **Conference:** MEAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** No.3

Florida A&M baseball enters the 2017 season having won at least a share of the MEAC Southern Division in each of the first three seasons under head coach Jamey Shoupe, including a MEAC Championship in 2015. The Rattlers return 16 players who saw action in 2016 on a team that recorded its third 30-win season since becoming a Division I program in 1980. Under head coach Jamey Shoupe, FAMU has set a school record for MEAC wins in each of the last three seasons as Shoupe has as more conference wins (48) in his first three seasons than the previous six seasons combined (41), before his arrival at FAMU.

With 19 newcomers on the roster in 2017, the pitching rotation returns seven members of the 2016 staff including starters JoJo Durden, Sawyer Betts, Chase Jarrell and Ryan Anderson. The Rattlers also return Catcher Jacky Miles, Jr. (.328), 1B/C/DH Brian Davis (.370) and 3B Ben Ellzey (.388) who helped lead the MEAC's top offense in 2016. Junior Aubrey McCarty, who leads an extremely strong class of newcomers to the Florida A&M roster, is an ambidextrous pitcher is also is a switch hitter at the plate. McCarty who spent his freshman season at Vanderbilt, came to FAMU from Gordon State where he hit .392 with 10 home runs, 20 doubles and three triples in 2016. Look for junior college transfer Thomas Nicoll, who tops out in the low to mid 90s to help bolster the starting pitching rotation.

Biggest Strength:

Loaded. Solid hitting, defense, pitching rotation and middle relievers

Biggest Weakness:

Under .500 vs. top DI non-conference in 2016

Grambling State University

2016 Record: 22-27 .449 **Conference:** SWAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** No.8(Tie)

Grambling State has one of the toughest schedules in the SWAC conference and the country, as well as one of the toughest in Head Coach James Cooper's tenure. The schedule is going to get the Tigers ready for a prime run when conference tournament starts in May. Grambling plays 3 SEC opponents in LSU, Alabama, and Arkansas. The Tigers travel to Norman, OK to face a Big 12 opponent in the University of Oklahoma. As well, Grambling plays a DI perennial power in Dallas Baptist University. Says Cooper, "our fans can expect to see a team that plays solid defense, pitchers who pound the strike zone and aggression on the basepaths."

Top returners include 2B Wesley Drain, 3B Daniel Barnett, C Johan Mojica, RHP Issac O' Bear, LHP Tanner Raiburn LHP and 1B Tray Bell. Barnett was selected 2016 Black College Nines Elite second team. Grambling also hopes for help from transfers, LHP Christian Marquez and RHP Raul Baduel. Top incoming freshman re OF Ian Bailey, INF Rafael Ramirez III, RHP Kaelin Woodard and OF Quintin Guice. This team is loaded.

Biggest Strength:

Good solid all-around ballclub, will make some noise

Biggest Weakness:

Must not fizzle out towards the end of the season

Jackson State University

2016 Record: 34-25 .576 **Conference:** SWAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** No.6

The Jackson State baseball team returns in 2017 looking to grab the Southwestern Athletic Conference East Division title and the SWAC Championship title which they narrowly missed during 2016 effort. Key returners are Cornelius Copeland, CJ Newsome, Miguel Yrigoyen, Bryce Brown, and Jesus Santana. These players were all named to the 2016 All-SWAC Conference Team while Copeland and Santana also grabbed several All-American honors. Santana was also Black College Nines' Elite Player of the Year. Returning pitchers Jesse Anderson, Jonathan Aponte, and Joshua Santiago are expected to step up and fill the void left by Jevon Jacobs, Jamal Wilson, and Vincent Anthonia.

Seven newcomers join the Tiger roster this season. Among them are Wesley Reyes, Kevin Perez, Jose Tirado, and Stephan Vidal. The group is expected to make an immediate impact on JSU's success this season. The JSU Baseball Tigers will look to continue building on success under 10th year head coach Omar Johnson. The Tigers are coming off another 30+ win season under Coach Johnson, 9th in 10 seasons, hoping to add to that total.

Biggest Strength:

Solid core of returners in Cornelius Copeland, Bryce Brown, and Jesus Santana

Biggest Weakness:

Under .500 vs. Non-conference in 2016

Mississippi Valley State University

2016 Record: 6-36 .143 **Conference:** SWAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** Unranked

Aaron Stevens is in his second full season as head coach of Mississippi Valley State baseball program. His belief for the coming 2017 season, "I believe our new guys will be our strength this year along with our numbers being up. We are a bit more athletic this year, but we still

have to get better. Another one of our strengths this year will be that we will be able to match-up better with teams because we do have some lefties (arms and bats). When everyone gets a better understanding of our system, we will also be a bit more aggressive."

Three freshmen will see action this year in IF Paul Hamilton, C/RHP Aaron Barkley and LHP Zach Uecker. "I have more but I believe these guys will have an impact all year long."

Biggest Strength:

Freshmen everyday starters

Biggest Weakness:

Starting pitching and bullpen

North Carolina A&T University

2016 Record: 13-41 .241 **Conference:** MEAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** Unranked

North Carolina A&T baseball can hit. They have four men throughout the lineup who can get on and drive in runs with the best sluggers in the MEAC. Where N.C. A&T wants to improve is in the area of pitching. The Aggies had the worst ERA (9.16) in the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference during the 2016 season. The Aggies ERA in the conference wasn't much better as they posted an 8.84 ERA against MEAC foes. In order to fix the pitching issues, the Aggies added nine pitchers including two left-handers to their roster during the offseason. The Aggies also return arms such as RHP Robert Peck, RHP Will Greene, RHP and RHP Kaeson Wilson, who shared time as weekend starters last season to reconstruct the pitching staff.

If the Aggies can do a better job of stopping opponents from scoring, then the offense led by SS Milton Rivera, C Adan Ordonez, 1B Kyle Clary and 2B Timothy Ravare should help the Aggies improve on its disappointing 13-41 season which included a 6-18 MEAC record. N.C. A&T is led by third-year coach Ben Hall. Hall took over the program on an interim basis in October of 2015. This past offseason was his first chance to sign his own recruits. He hopes the improved offense along with the additional pitcher will lead the Aggies back to the MEAC tournament for the first time in four years.

Biggest Strength:

Offensive manpower

Biggest Weakness:

Entire pitching rotation

North Carolina Central University

2016 Record: 25-30 .455 **Conference:** MEAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** No. 8 (Tied)

This year's team makeup will be considerably different than previous years. The Eagles lost 4 key pitchers from last year's team, including MLB draft pick Andrew Vernon and All-Conference selection Alex Dandridge. NCCU returns junior starter Devin Sweet and Senior Chris Gonnelli, as well as a key bullpen arm in Sophomore LHP Justice Sampson. The Eagles added six JUCO arms and three freshman arms to the staff. Offensively all-time home run leader Carlos Ortiz returns for his senior year as does leading hitter, Ellington Hopkins. Conrad Kovalcik will catch the majority of the games and is garnering serious pro interest. All three are left handed hitters.

According to Head Coach Jim Koerner, "the keys for success this year will be for us to gel quickly, get quality starts from our weekend arms, and allow what should be a strong bullpen to win us games late. We should be strong offensively."

Biggest Strength:

All-Americans outfielder Carlos Ortiz and pitcher Devin Sweet, Chris Gonnelli, All-Conference 3B Ellington Hopkins, Conrad Kovalcik

Biggest Weakness:

Closer

Norfolk State University

2016 Record: 29-21 .580 **Conference:** MEAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** No.4

Norfolk State poised to continue the momentum it generated from winning the last two MEAC Northern Division regular-season titles and advancing to last year's MEAC tournament championship round, where the Spartans suffered a 1-0 loss to Bethune-Cookman. Finished the season ranked No.4 in Black College Nines HBCU baseball poll in 2016, setting a regular-season Division I era school record for total victories for the second straight season. The Spartans expect to be strong on the mound welcoming back three hurlers led by RHPs Jonathan and Alex Mauricio, LHP Devin Hemmerich, closer/mid-week starter RHP Michael Parmentier.

This is an upperclassmen-dominated lineup featuring one of the MEAC's top stolen-base threats in OF Denathan Dukes, INF Roger Hall and RHP/Utility Brian Beard. The Spartans also have a promising recruiting class. NSU expects SS Adam Collins and RHP Tyler Humphrey to make an early impact.

Biggest Strength:

Aggressive at the plate, speed on the base paths, fielding solid core of arms

Biggest Weakness:

Under .500 vs. non-conference in 2016

Prairie View A&M University

2016 Record: 10-32 .238 **Conference:** MEAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** Unranked

This year's team will be a case of new faces on the baseball field. The 2017 PVAMU Panther baseball team will have 16 new players who should make a significant impact on the season. Prairie View has two returning starters in 2B Kevin Macias and OF Cody Den Beste. Both will provide strong leadership in the outfield and infield positions, respectively. Expect freshman SS Andrew Garcia, 3B Tyrone Thomas, C Tyler Gordon to make a serious push to compete for starting positions as true freshman. JUCO utility transfers Jalyn Baker, Daniel Lingua, and C Nathaniel Carter will vie for starting spots and playing time.

The Panthers will have key returning starting pitchers who will anchor a starting rotation that will be improved from last season. Senior RHP Edgar Sanchez and Junior RHP Darrien Williams will key the starting rotation where JUCO transfer RHP Andreus Faltsek, Freshman RHP Tyler Laux are expected to compete for the other spots in the rotation. According to Head Coach Auntwan Riggins he expects the Panthers to make big strides as a team for the 2017 season.

Biggest Strength:

Depth at all positions

Biggest Weakness:

Pitching main concern against tough non-conference and SWAC opponents

Savannah State University

2016 Record: 12-40 .231 **Conference:** MEAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** Unranked

The 2017 baseball team at Savannah State has brought in 24 new players for the season with 16 returnees. The new players will make a significant impact on the field both offensively and defensively. Savannah State's lineup will have drastic changes as it will have 8 new players in the starting lineup.

The pitching staff will be much improved with incoming players (4 transfers and 4 freshmen). Savannah State has added 3 lefty pitchers to the staff and they all will contribute. Majority of staff had a terrific fall with both strength and velocity gains. Offensively the team will have 5 JC transfers in the starting lineup. All JUCO transfers hit over .300 during their last season at their respective colleges. Coach Hardy stated "we have added more speed and power to the lineup. Overall I am excited to start the 2017 season and see these young men play."

Biggest Strength:

Improved pitching, power at the plate, speed on the base paths

Biggest Weakness:

Inconsistency on the mound

Southern University

2016 Record: 14-32 .304 **Conference:** SWAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** No. 10 (Tied)

The Southern University Jaguar baseball team will be lead by a good senior class of pitchers and position players. Returning on the pitching staff for their senior season will be RHP Troy Lewis, RHP Harold Myles and 4 year letterman LHP J'Markus George. This year we're returning

all 3 weekend starters, along with Robinson Mateo IF, Troy Lewis IF, Malik Blaise IF, and Franky Montesino IF. In the outfield we're returning All-SWAC Dondrayas Harris along with Ashanti Wheatley and Javeayan Williams. We're looking for good things out of all these guys returning.

With the return of so many players this year our 2017 recruiting class wasn't very big, but we have a couple of freshman who stood out in HS and this fall like outfielder Hampton Hudson, from Baton Rouge, LA and RHP Wilhelm Allen from New Orleans, LA. As Head Coach Roger Cador enters his 32nd season as head coach he just wants to see the kids improve and work harder at their skills.

Biggest Strength:

Big time bats from Dondrayas Harris and Troy Lewis, quality pitching from LHP J'Markus George

Biggest Weakness:

Lack solid pitching rotation

Texas Southern University

2016 Record: 23-26 .469 **Conference:** SWAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** No.5

Head Coach Michael Richardson is very excited about this upcoming season, largely because of the way this team finished in the postseason going 3-1 and outscoring opponents 42-11. "I am eager to see several players perform." Standouts are sophomore Black College Nines first team Elite OF Olajide Oloruntimilehin along with juniors Kamren Dukes, Richard Alamo, and RHP Seth Oliver (55 k's in 62 inn).

"We are still young and should be an exciting team to watch due to team speed and versatility. We will embrace two juniors and one sophomore who sat out last year. They should provide good leadership along with the team play of Jose Camacho, Champi Lucca and Sterling Motley." Freshman pitcher Michael Villeneuve is expected to log lots of innings.

Biggest Strength:

Hitting, station to station speed

Biggest Weakness:

Suspect arms in the bullpen

University of Maryland Eastern Shore

2016 Record: 16-32 .333 **Conference:** MEAC **BCN 2016 HBCU Baseball Final Poll:** No.10(Tied)

Maryland Eastern Shore's baseball team is going to be young in 2017. The team consists of four seniors, nine juniors, three sophomores, and 14 freshmen. The Hawks may have the youngest pitching staff in the country with all freshmen and three juniors. The return of quality players up the middle and in the lineup will give the Hawks the leadership they will need to guide this young team. First year head coach Charlie Goens will be pushing these young men to grow and mature early and they will get that chance with such a young team.

A couple of players to watch for are returning catcher Jessy Valdez (SR), shortstop Jordan Martin (SR) and centerfielder Justin Somerville (SR). The Hawk nine will also feature a good balance of power and contact hitters throughout the lineup. There will be some growing pains for this young team, but experience will come early with playing time. A couple of freshmen to look for are pitchers Marty Tolson, Steven Cook and INF Randy Pineda.

Biggest Strength:

Return player at middle of lineup, Power at the plate

Biggest Weakness:

Young pitching staff