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## *San Diego picked to win 2009 Pioneer Football League race*

ST. LOUIS – For the fourth consecutive season, the Pioneer Football League’s coaches have tabbed San Diego as the preseason favorite in the PFL Preseason Coaches’ Poll, receiving only five of 10 possible first-place votes.

While San Diego was picked to win, the league’s coaches also expect a competitive conference race as only six points separate the Toreros from Dayton and Jacksonville who were picked to finish tied for second. Dayton, a perennial favorite, picked up three first place votes and 71 points while 2008 PFL Champion Jacksonville received the other two first place votes and also finished with 71 points.

Following Jacksonville were Morehead State (51) and Butler (42) to round out the league’s top five. Drake (40) was picked to finish sixth followed by Davidson (37), league newcomer Marist (32), Valparaiso (20) and Campbell (nine).

San Diego has finished first (2006 and 2007) or second (2008) in each of the three seasons since the league returned to a round-robin format, posting a 19-3 record in that span. Third-year head coach Ron Caragher will have 14 starters return, including Walter Payton Award candidate Sebastian Trujillo. Defensively, the Toreros return First Team All-PFL starters Gabriel Derricks, a senior cornerback, and Derek Marten, a senior linebacker. Also returning is PFL Freshman Defensive Player of the Year, sophomore cornerback Al-Rilwan Adeyemi.

Dayton has posted back-to-back six win seasons, finishing second in last season’s race. The Flyers return just 11 starters from last season’s squad with the majority (seven) returning on defense. That defensive group was the league’s best in 2008, leading the league in scoring defense (15.3 ppg), total defense (255.8 ypg), rushing defense (60.7 ypg) and sacks (32). Junior first-team All-PFL linebacker Joe Ries returns after a 74-tackle campaign last season as does senior first-team defensive tackle Kalen Hemmelgarn. A revamped offensive group – only four starters return – will have a steep learning curve in the early going. That effort will be made easier as the entire wide receiving corps returns – senior J Michael Jonard, junior Steve Valentino and sophomore Justin Milio.

Jacksonville returns 16 starters from last season’s team that won the school’s first overall PFL championship last season. The Dolphins return sophomore quarterback Josh McGregor, who was tabbed the league’s Freshman Offensive Player of the Year last season. Also returning is unanimous first-team All-PFL running back Rudell Small, the league’s lone 1,000-yard rusher last season, who finished with 1,364 rushing yards. Nine of Jacksonville’s starters return on the defensive side of the ball, including the entire front seven. Senior safety Jason Wood, the team’s leading tackler last season, will have to shore up a secondary that lost two All-PFL members.

Morehead State relied on its defense last season while a young offense attempted to find its legs. This season, the Eagles return nine starters from a defense that ranked second overall and second against the run. Key among those returnees will be 2008 unanimous first-team All-PFL pick Wes McDermott, a senior linebacker. Meanwhile, the offense returns seven starters, including junior quarterback Evan Sawyer who appeared in nine games last season.

Butler rounds out the top half of the preseason poll with sophomore defensive end Grant Hunter earning preseason All-America recognition. He led the PFL with 14 sacks last season and was second in tackles for loss (18). He is one of 16 starters returning for the Bulldogs in 2009. Junior quarterback Matt Kobli returns after leading the league in total offense (3,011 yards) and ranking fourth among the league’s leaders in passing yardage (228.9 ypg).

Drake won four its final five games in 2008 to finish fifth in the league standings with a 4-4 mark. The Bulldogs’ senior fullback Steve Platek, the lone returning All-PFL player from last season, will help anchor a rebuilding offense where the

<b>Pioneer Football League 2009 Preseason Coaches’ Poll</b>		
<i>Team</i>		<i>Points</i>
1.	San Diego (5)	77
2.	Dayton (3) Jacksonville (2)	71 71
4.	Morehead State	51
5.	Butler	42
6.	Drake	40
7.	Davidson	37
8.	Marist	32
9.	Valparaiso	20
10.	Campbell	9
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First-place votes in parentheses.</li> <li>• Nine points awarded for a first-place vote, with one point less for each succeeding place.</li> <li>• Coaches were not allowed to vote for their own team.</li> </ul>		

biggest question mark lies at quarterback where three players with no previous collegiate experience will battle for the starting job. Defensively, Drake returns five veterans from last season's team which was second in points allowed (17.8 ppg).

Davidson may have to most questions to answer during the preseason, losing its quarterback, top receiver and top rusher from last season's squad that finished seventh with a 3-5 PFL record. With all the fresh faces offensively, it may be up to the Wildcats defense to carry the load early. Senior linebacker Tyler Lemons will lead that defensive effort after finishing second among the league's tacklers last season and earning first-team All-PFL honors.

Marist joins the PFL in 2009 after playing last season as an independent and posting a 4-7 record, which included a 1-1 record against PFL members. The Red Foxes will be led by senior wide receiver James LaMacchia who posted a team-leading 36 receptions for 535 yards. Defensively, junior defensive back Rory Foley returns after interception seven passes last season. Another key returnee will be junior kicker/punter Kevin Pauly, who averaged 41.0 yards per punt and accounted for 40 points last season.

Valparaiso lost 12 starters from last season's team which finished 2-6 in PFL action. However, among the starters are second-team All-PFL picks Ross Weimer and John Popper, both senior running backs, who combined to lead the Crusaders league-best running attack (175.2 ypg). A young defensive squad gained a valuable year of experience with both cornerback Kyle Himmelwright and linebacker Zac Griffin returning in their fifth year.

Campbell had a rough go in its first season of intercollegiate football but returns all 22 starters for its sophomore campaign. Sophomore linebacker Milton Brown returns after an impressive freshman campaign where he finished sixth among the league's tacklers (7.7 tpg) and ninth among the league's pass defenders with three interceptions, including two returned for a touchdown. He is joined by sophomore defensive back Brandon Chandler who also ranked among the league's top 30 tacklers.

With Marist's addition, the league slate saw a few changes for the 2009 campaign. Each team retains an eight-game league slate with each squad not playing one of the league members on a two-year rotational basis. The 2009 Pioneer Football League schedule gets underway Saturday, Sept. 5 with nine of the league's 10 members playing non-conference outings. The 2009 PFL slate starts the following weekend when Marist – the league's newest member – hosts Drake, Sept. 12. For the fourth straight year, the league championship will be determined by regular-season play and the champion will meet the Northeast Conference Champion in the fourth Gridiron Classic, Dec. 5.

**- PFL -**