The 2006 season was a tough one for Southern Arkansas football. Facing probably the most difficult schedule in school history, plus inexperience and lack of depth in both the offensive and defensive lines, the Muleriders stumbled to a 2-9 finish. Head Coach Steve Quinn plans to rectify that heading into the 2007 season.

SAU will still face a competitive schedule this fall, with a little twist. For the first time since 2001, Southern Arkansas will play only 10 regular season games, with only four of those at home. The Muleriders open the year with a couple of road trips, traveling to their oldest rival, Arkansas-Monticello, for a non-conference match-up on September 1, and then square off in Thibodaux, La., against NCAA Division I-AA Nicholls State on September 8.

SAU opens Gulf South Conference play at home September 15 hosting West Alabama. Following in order will be GSC foes as Southern Arkansas travels to North Alabama and Delta State, before hosting Valdosta State. The team then is at Ouachita Baptist, back home against Harding, and away at Arkansas Tech before an open date on November 3. The Muleriders close the regular season at home the next week with Henderson State.

Despite the loss of part-time starter Damian Melancon at quarterback and D.D. Holyfield at running back, Southern Arkansas returns plenty of experience in the offensive backfield. A deep nucleus also returns in the defensive secondary, however, the Muleriders are still unproven on both the offensive and defensive lines.

SAU returns nine starters from last year on the offensive side of the ball, but only four were listed as starters on the final spring depth chart. Senior quarterback Josh SanFilippo (6-0, 216), who split time with Melancon the past two seasons, racked up more than 1,000 yards of offense last fall and has the nod at quarterback. Sophomore Quintin Porter (5-10, 185) is listed as the backup.

Senior fullback Tony McDonald (5-8, 223), an honorable mention All-America, all-south region, and all-conference performer in 2006, is the leading returning rusher, having piled up 543 yards on the ground. Senior Jayvian Johnson (5-6, 228) backs up McDonald. Junior halfback Ryan Sworn (5-8, 166), who tore his ACL in the 2006 opener, is healthy and holds down the right side, while sophomore Chris Metcalf (5-11, 228), who saw extended action in the final four games last year, came out of spring as the starter at left halfback. Senior Steven Ashley (5-5, 161), a starter last season, and senior Keundric Loucious (5-7, 192) provide depth.

Senior Mario Coleman (6-2, 201) returns at the wide receiver spot after leading the team with 20 catches for 374 yards and two touchdowns. Junior Justin Peters (6-2, 190) was strong in the final three games last fall and secured the reserve spot in the spring. Senior tight end Johnny Fields (6-1, 236) begins his third season as the starter.

Four starters, including only two seniors, return on the line, but none of them came out of spring as the leader on the depth chart. Senior right tackle David Montgomery (5-10, 244) was edged out by red-shirt freshman Nick Cannady (6-3, 290) and senior center Clayton Norman (5-10, 303) was supplanted by red-shirt freshman Matt Yocham (6-0, 285). Sophomore Roderick Taylor (6-0, 238) returns at the left tackle spot, but is listed behind sophomore Joshua Bradley (6-1, 264). Sophomore Charles Proctor (5-9, 281) also is back at right guard, but is behind red-shirt freshman Johnathan Moore (6-1, 329). Sophomore William Kitchen (6-1, 291), who saw action in six games in 2006, holds down left guard, and red-shirt freshman Colton Roberts (5-11, 285) backs him up.

Southern Arkansas returns six starters on the defensive side, led by experience in the secondary. Junior Roland Perkins (5-11, 175), who broke up six passes last year, returns at left corner and is spelled by junior Clarence Wright (5-10, 195). Two newcomers, sophomore Rodney Anthony (6-1, 191) and junior Brandon Wilson (5-8, 190) hold down the other corner. Returning senior starters Rickey Wright (6-0, 205) and C.J. Ellis (5-10, 185) are both listed at rover. Wright had four interceptions and broke up seven passes in the fall and Ellis was third on the team with 45 tackles. Senior John Jones (5-11, 198), who had 33 stops, is the lone name at free safety.

The Muleriders lost five of their top six linebackers from last season, so the coaching staff has done some shuffling to shore up this area. Returning senior starter Cordell Upshaw (6-2, 238) has been moved from defensive end, as has junior Jammar Singleton (6-1, 213). Upshaw had 39 stops, including 10.5 for loss in 2006, and will man the middle. Junior Khedrick Dixon (6-1, 222) backs him up. Singleton is on the strong side and will back up junior transfer Steven Daunhauer (6-1, 219). Senior Ronnie Booker (5-9, 201), a dependable backup last season, has secured the weak side and is relieved by sophomore Ben Williams (5-11, 202).

Junior nose guard DeRalph Guy (6-1, 277) and sophomore right end Ryan Terry (5-11, 234) are the lone returning starters on the line. Of the eight defensive line spots on the spring depth chart, only five individuals were listed. Guy had 30 tackles in the fall, including five behind the line, and Terry had 16, including 2.5 sacks. Senior LaDaryl Kirkwood (5-10, 295) is listed behind Guy. Senior Ken Smith (6-3, 243), who saw action in all 11 games last year, holds down left end, while red-shirt freshman Jeremy McClure (5-11, 266) is currently listed at tackle.

Ashley is the lone returning starter on special teams and should get a look at bringing back both punts and kickoffs. Red-shirt freshman Noc’ Cuevas (5-9, 150) will handle both kicking and punting chores and is backed up by sophomore Seth Borchert (6-4, 173).

The Muleriders have two new hires on their coaching staff, David Reeves and Shane Tolleson. Reeves, who will coach the defensive backs, comes to SAU after having served the past two seasons as a graduate assistant at Alabama. Tolleson is a former graduate assistant at Arkansas State and will handle the running backs. After coaching the running backs last year, Quinn will work with the quarterbacks. Trey LaValle, in his third season, will continue to coach the offensive line, but will also add offensive coordinator duties. Jeff Byrd enters his third year as defensive coordinator and linebacker coach, and Kendall Hill begins his second season as defensive line coach.