

NIU Wins MAC Title, Headed to Orange Bowl

Written by MikeSpinelli

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Northern Illinois won their second consecutive MAC Championship game and ranked 15th in the BCS standings. That gives them a berth in the Discover Orange Bowl January 1st

against Florida State. Six other teams go bowling as well.

The magic ran out one play too soon for the Golden Flashes, as they came up one reception short of continuing their story book season as Kent took the defending champions into the second overtime period, before QB Spencer Keith's end zone pass was intercepted by Demetrius Stone to end the game. Northern Illinois had just scored on a 2 yard Jordan Lynch run to put the Huskies up 44-37. It was do-or-die time for Kent but the clock struck 12 a second too early.

The Flashes repeatedly overcame every obstacle in the game, just as they have all season. NIU outgained KSU 245-50 in the first half, and 524-260 for the game. Huskies QB Jordan Lynch ran over and threw over Kent all night, with 212 yards rushing and 160 passing, including 1 rushing and 3 passing TD's. Akeem Daniels also ran up double digits on the Flash defense (128 yards rushing 67 receiving and 1 TD).

Spencer Keith only completed 42% of his passes for 190 yards. Dri Archer was held to one

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touchdown (15 yds rushing, 81 receiving). Yet there they were, taking the 21st ranked team in the country to two overtimes.

They got out to a 10-3 lead in the first quarter, before NIU came back with a FG and two touchdowns to lead 17-10 at the half. They scored two more in the third to go up 27-13. With five minutes left in the game, Keith ran it in from the 5, and on the ensuing drive Zack Hitchens recovered an NIU fumble and ran it back 22 yards for another touchdown. Game tied at 27. Jordan Lynch responded with a nice drive capped by a 9 yard keeper to go back up 34-27. But Kent would not go quietly. Spencer Keith drove the field with three minutes left and hit Tim Erjavec on a 19 yard score to force overtime. In the first overtime the teams traded field goals. In the second "inning" NIU's Daniels ran 23 yards before being stopped on the Kent 2 yard line. On the second play, Lynch ran it in himself to put the Huskies up 44-37. Kent made it to the NIU 9 before stalling and on fourth down Keith threw to the end zone only to be picked off by Stone. Game set match.

In the process, Lynch broke the FBS record for QB rushing in a season with 1,771 yards. Michigan's Denard Robinson set the previous mark with 1,702. Auburn's Cam Newton rushed for 1,472 in 2010.

"What a great football game, but a tuff one for us to swallow," Kent State coach Darrell Hazell said. "That's a great football team we played and I'm proud of our football team for keeping battling back. We just needed to make a couple of more plays at the end on both sides of the ball. Their quarterback is an exceptional player. We had a hard time tackling him all day. I love our guys in the locker room. They are all in there hurting. It will take a couple of days to get over one."

48 hours later, NIU lost their head coach as Dave Doeren left the program to accept the position at North Carolina State. "I wasn't going to spend a whole lot of time looking around," Doeren said. "At NIU, I had a very good team coming back. ... I wasn't going to leave it for just anything. I wasn't going to leave it for a place I didn't believe in or a place I didn't want to raise my family in."

By beating the 17th ranked Flashes, NIU moved up from 21st to 16th in the AP and USA Today Coaches Polls. When the BCS rankings came out, they were 15th

. That ranking, in addition to an Automatic Qualifying conference's failure to have a ranked

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team, puts the Huskies in a BCS Bowl Game. They will play Florida State in the Orange Bowl on January 1

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In all seven MAC teams were selected to bowl games; 12/15 Toledo vs. Utah State in the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl 12/21 Ball State vs. Central Florida in the Beef O' Brady's Bowl

12/26 Central Michigan vs. Western Kentucky in the Little Caesars Pizza Bowl

12/27 Bowling Green vs. San Jose State in the Military Bowl

12/28 Ohio vs. Louisiana-Monroe in the Advocare V100 Independence Bowl

1/1 Northern Illinois vs. Florida State in the Orange Bowl

1/6 Kent State vs. Arkansas State in the GoDaddy Bowl

All games will be on ESPN.

"I am extremely proud of the student-athletes, coaches and fans at our seven MAC member institutions that have received bowl invitations and our collective accomplishments as a conference this season," said Dr. Jon Steinbrecher, Commissioner of the Mid-American Conference. "The commitment of the student-athletes to excel has earned them this opportunity. I am very excited for our bowl lineup and I look forward to watching the MAC teams compete this bowl season. I also want to thank our primary contracted bowl partners, secondary partners and additional bowl partners who we added within the past three days. I speak for the entire conference, we appreciate these partnerships."

The MAC is the defending champions in the ESPN Bowl Challenge Cup, winning 4 out of 5 bowl games. Going back to the 2009 GMAC Bowl, the MAC has won 7 of its last 10 bowl games.

What a year to start covering the MAC!!! I will have full coverage of all of the bowl games, and in the meantime turn our attention to the hardwood, as another exciting MAC basketball season gets ready to start conference play.