

Northern Illinois and Miami Lock Horns Tonight in Detroit

Written by {ga=mikeperry}

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Tonight, when Miami takes the field against Northern Illinois, not many people give it a chance of winning the MAC championship and advancing to either the Humanitarian Bowl on Boise, Idaho or the Little Caesars Bowl in Detroit.

The RedHawks are taking on a dominant Huskies team that can score from anywhere on the field, one that scored 195 points combined in its last three games and one that led the Mid-American Conference in rushing by over 100 yards over the team that finished second (279.2 to No. 2 Eastern Michigan's 173.3).

Northern Illinois is on a nine-game winning streak, and during that streak has outscored its opponents by an average of 29.4 points. The Huskies have two of the top six rushers in the MAC, Chad Spann with 1,239 yards and 20 rushing touchdowns to lead the conference and quarterback Chandler Harnish, who rushed for 761 yards to finish sixth.

While Spann is clearly the heart of Northern Illinois' offense, winning MAC Offensive Player of the Year honors this season, Harnish is the one that, to steal a reference from Reggie Jackson, stirs the drink. Not only can he run the ball, Harnish was one of the most efficient passers in the conference this season. He completed 157 of 258 passes for 1,949 yards and 17 touchdowns against just five interceptions. He was the conference leader in quarterback efficiency with a rating of 154.16, and Miami coach Mike Haywood knows what he can bring to the table.

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“Their offense does a good job, Harnish does a tremendous job with play-action passes and running the football,” Haywood said. “Then, with his five-step game, he has really emerged into a talented football player in this conference.”

The Huskies were the preseason pick to win the MAC West, but stumbled out of the gate. They lost two of their first three games, by 17 at Iowa State and by six at Illinois, and did not look like a very dominant football team. To make matters worse, prior to the Illinois game (the third game of the season) NIU head coach Jerry Kill was admitted to the local hospital to monitor his heart.

It was a difficult time for Northern Illinois players, but when he looked back Spann thought the week prior to the Illinois game...when Kill was in a hospital bed instead of on the practice field...was a critical turning point for his team.

“We’ve got a great leadership council. When Coach Kill took those days off, being in the hospital, the coaching staff stepped up and we really didn’t miss a beat,” Spann said. “That’s what brought us all together and got us all to mature. We had the seniors keeping everyone focused and on task and the coaching staff did a great job of getting us prepared for that week. We all matured and it definitely has shown throughout the season.

“We were worried about it, but our coaches did a great job keeping us informed of what was going on. We all came together and decided we were going to play for him and make sure he didn’t think we let him down by any means. He came back and coached that game and we gave it our all, but we just didn’t get it done.

“All the things we experienced at the beginning of the season actually brought the team together. After that Illinois game, when Coach Kill was not at practice all week, we haven’t lost another game since. We came together and we all matured as a group. And that’s definitely added to our success.”

While things have come together for the Huskies, things have basically worked out in Miami’s favor. Heading into the final three weeks of the season Miami was tied atop the MAC East with Temple and Ohio University. With a 34-13 loss to the Bobcats already on their schedule, the RedHawks needed a lot of help if they wanted to end up in Detroit tonight. First they had to take care of business on their own, which they did by winning their final four games...three straight

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road contests against the three worst teams in the conference followed by a home tilt with the Owls in their season finale.

Ohio went on the road and knocked off Temple in Week 10, and was in the driver's seat going into the final weekend of the season. But it all fell apart for the Bobcats as they lost to an emotional Kent State after Miami handled Temple, 23-3. This gave Miami a ticket to Detroit.

However, it did not all go as well as Miami would have hoped. Sophomore quarterback Zac Dysert, who ended up on the All-MAC second team, was lost for the year with a lacerated spleen suffered in practice. Second-string quarterback Austin Boucher was able to win the final two games for Miami, but will have a tall task in front of him tonight.

The RedHawks have a solid defense and sophomore linebacker Evan Harris, in this writer's opinion, is the most underrated defensive player in the conference. But will they be able to handle the Huskies' power running game? Last season, in the Huskies' close win in Oxford, the answer was "no." Haywood knows what his defense has to do against the well-coached, disciplined Huskies.

"We have the ultimate respect for Jerry Kill and Northern Illinois," he said. "I think Jerry is an outstanding person that really does a great job with his football team. He really does a nice job of running the power and Spann is a tremendous athlete. One of the things we have to do is that we can't have arm tackles. Just like last year when we played them, he'll break through arm tackles and go for touchdowns."

It will all unfold tonight at 7 p.m. at Ford Field. Northern Illinois is the smart pick to win the game and represent the MAC, probably in the Humanitarian Bowl against (hopefully) Boise St. But games are not played on paper or on the chat boards. Coach Kill and Coach Haywood will both bring deserving football teams to the dance...and you can never be sure who the better dancer will be on any given night.