

MAC Football Preview- Akron Zips

Written by Mike Perry

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University of Akron

Head coach: Rob Ianello (Catholic University of America, 1987)

Chances are the Akron Zips will not compete for a MAC title this season. But if first-year head coach Rob Ianello can live up to his reputation you can expect the Zips to become a fixture atop the MAC East standings in the very near future.

Ianello spent 24 years as an assistant coach/recruiting coordinator at some of the top football programs in the nation. He started as a graduate assistant and recruiting co-coordinator at the University of Alabama under Bill Curry (1988-93) where he had a hand in bringing 17 of the Crimson Tide's 22 starters on their 1992 national championship squad. He moved on to the University of Arizona, where he was the recruiting coordinator in '94 and '96 before becoming the receivers coach as well until he left in '02.

He moved on to Wisconsin as the tight ends coach for two seasons before joining Charlie Weis' staff at Notre Dame as the receivers coach and recruiting coordinator for the Irish. He was promoted to assistant head coach by Weis, and actually was the interim head coach at ND after Weis was fired after a subpar 2009 season. Ianello was the man that brought what is widely regarded as a top five recruiting class to South Bend prior to the arrival of new head coach Brian Kelly.

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Though he is regarded as one of the top recruiters in the country, he had never run his own program until Akron tabbed him to replace J.D. Brookhart, who was ousted after a 30-42 record in six seasons at the helm of the Zips. Ianello has looked forward to this opportunity his entire career...and he thinks Akron is the perfect place for him to leave his mark.

“As an assistant coach for 24 years I have developed a vision for running a football program,” Ianello said. “I’ve aspired to run my own football program and I wanted to go someplace where football was very important. When I went to work every day I wanted to make sure what I did was extremely important and, certainly, at the University of Akron it is.”

“The University has made a huge commitment to our football program with the stadium, with our facilities and the commitment (university president) Dr. Proenza and (athletic director) Todd Wistrill made to our players and our staff. I want to work every day to give them the type of program that’s equal to that commitment.”

Ianello has been able to bring in new players to fill holes everywhere he has coached, and at Akron he has plenty of holes to fill. He inherited a team that went 3-9 overall, 2-6 in the conference last season and had difficulty finding any kind of consistency on both sides of the ball. In '09 the Zips finished in the bottom half of the conference in virtually every important statistical category; tied for ninth in scoring offense (19.2 ppg), 10th in scoring defense (28.8 ppg), ninth in passing offense (182.5 ypg), 11th

in punting (31.9 net avg.), eighth in turnover margin (-5), eighth in rushing offense (118.4 ypg), ninth in rushing defense (171.9 ypg) and 12th

in third down conversions (32 percent).

Even worse, the Zips finished last in the conference in opponent third down conversion (49.1 percent), field goal percentage (7-17 for 41.2 percent) and last in time of possession (27:12). They also failed to place someone in the MAC top 10 in rushing, passing or receiving.

“Before we get to game day we have a lot of things to do,” Ianello admitted. “I’d like to see the second day of training camp to be a lot better than the first, and the third to be a lot better than the second as we build up and grow together as a family and get better. Before Akron can worry about playing an opponent, Akron has to take care of Akron. And Akron has to make sure that Akron doesn’t beat itself.”

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Along with one of the top recruiting classes in the conference, Ianello does have some building blocks in place. Sophomore linebacker Brian Wagner (Dayton Springfield Catholic Central) finished second in the conference with 132 tackles as a redshirt freshman, and paced the MAC with 72 solo stops. Senior linebacker Mike Thomas finished 35th in the conference with 71 tackles.

All told the Zips return nine defensive starters, a fact Thomas thinks will give the Akron defense a leg up as it tries to learn a new system. Thomas has also liked what he has seen on campus during the summer.

“During the off-season we’ve been enduring a season of preparation,” he said. “(Ianello) brought in a great strength coach who has done a great job of developing a routine for us that we have been following the whole summer. The cliché about bigger, faster, stronger...we’ve been doing a great job in that area and that’s going to help us going in to training camp.”

Sophomore Patrick Nicely started eight games behind center for the Zips in 2009, connecting on 120-of-222 passes for 1,349 yards with six touchdowns and six interceptions. The Akron offense, however, averaged less than 20 points per game as the Zips failed to win a road game and split three games at InfoCision Stadium.

Throw in learning a new playbook and a new system and you could have a recipe for disaster. Senior offensive lineman Mike Ward, who has started all 23 games in his Akron career, thinks the new staff has helped in the transition.

“It’s obviously a challenge with a new coach coming in and a new system, but the coaches have done a great job of breaking it down for us and giving it to us in easy to understand steps,” Ward said. “They don’t overload you with stuff. Obviously it’s going to be challenging because football, as a sport, is challenging. But they’ve done a great job of helping us understand the concepts more than the plays. They’ve done a great job with that.”

One thing Ianello stressed to his players early on was that he did not expect overnight miracles. He also stressed how much he valued the players currently on the roster.

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“The first thing I told my team is that they are my team, they’re my guys,” Ianello said. “I know they had been recruited by someone different, but this is my team and we’re all in this thing together. My goal is to get everyone on the same page and everyone working for the same brand. My goal is not to come in and have a bunch of guys leave the program. If there are some guys on the fence my goal is to get everyone to buy into what we’re doing in the football program.”

“Then I want to establish the way we’re going to do things. As you build a program you go through different phases. You go through the off-season lifting and running program, you go through spring practice, you go through summer. Now we’re getting into training camp and the season, and each time there is a little bit of a learning curve for the guys.”

One thing Ianello had to deal with early in his tenure at Akron was the saga of two-time Ohio Division I Player of the Year Erick Howard (North Canton Hoover). Howard, on paper, was considered the jewel of the Zips recruiting class. But academic eligibility issues were never resolved and Howard, who committed to Akron in February, decided to enroll at Fork Union Military Academy in Virginia instead of reporting to Akron, hoping to end up at a BCS program eventually.

Ianello said his team wouldn’t really miss out on anything with Howard since he never enrolled at the University. He is more worried about the players and coaching staff he has in place, not worrying about the one that might have gotten away. Looking ahead is how he does business.

“I have a veteran staff, a tremendous staff I can lean on. I have great mentors I can lean on if I have questions. But I have been clearly defining a vision during my time as an assistant coach to how I want to do things,” he said. “And we’re working that plan every day. We’re about improvement, we’re about getting better and we’re about the process. And we’re going to be process-oriented in everything we do.”