

## The MAC

Written by {ga=mikeperry}

Friday, September 03 2010 8:00 PM - Last Updated Friday, September 03 2010 1:42 PM

---



The Mid-American Conference has always been a “chip on their shoulder” kind of league, especially in football.

The MAC is where you will find the players who just don't quite meet the prototypical sizes or speeds...the 5-foot-9, 175-pound running backs, the 6-2, 278 offensive tackles and the 6-1, 215 quarterbacks. These are the guys with the talent to play Division I football, but not of the preferred shapes and sizes for the Big Ten or the SEC.

Because of this, when a MAC team gets a shot at one of the “big boys” you will usually see an intense battle with the MAC players relishing the opportunity to prove that, yes, they do belong in major college football.

Which is what made Northern Illinois' showing against Big 12 Conference Iowa State last night so puzzling.

## The MAC

Written by {ga=mikeperry}

Friday, September 03 2010 8:00 PM - Last Updated Friday, September 03 2010 1:42 PM

---

The Huskies were picked by the Mid-American Conference media to give Central Michigan a run for the MAC-West division title this season, while Iowa State was picked to finish last in the Big 12-North Division.

What do the MAC schools look for in games like these? Well, first and foremost these are the games that provide quite a bit of a MAC school's football budget for the season. Do you really think Bowling Green really wants to open the season at Florida in the Swamp? Think Kent State thinks it has the horses to match up with Penn State in Happy Valley? (O.K. Toledo fans, I remember Penn State in 2000...and Minnesota in '01...and Pitt in '03...and Michigan in '08...and Colorado last season. Relax, I am getting to my point here in a minute). The MAC teams play these schools from the so-called power conferences for a paycheck. A win makes things that much better, but even a loss is a bit of a success on the balance sheet.

So what did Northern Illinois do, in a widely-televised game on Fox Sports' regional family of channels against a marginal team from a decent conference? Went out and laid an egg. Though the final score wasn't embarrassing, losing by 17 points, 27-10, the way the Huskies played the game – lazy, uninspired football featuring missed tackles, dumb penalties and junior high-level mistakes – is exactly opposite of what Huskies fans, as well as MAC fans across the country, would have hoped for.

An aside here for a moment. Fans of the Mid-American Conference are a special breed. With hundreds of thousands of MAC graduates across the nation and around the world, more people are interested in Mid-American Conference athletics than the networks might think. And, pretty much across the board, they root for even their most heated rivals when those rivals step out of the conference.

I went to a MAC school, and I remember clearly watching the Rockets hammer Penn State. I was actually watching the game with a Penn State graduate and had one of the best afternoons I can remember. All week he said things like, "Oh yeah, a MAC team, really scary." And "The game is nothing but a payday for Toledo and a tune-up for Penn State." It was not even within the realm of possibility that the game would even be competitive. He was long gone by the time the final guy went off in the Rockets' 24-6 victory.

Games like Toledo over Penn State in 2007, Bowling Green over Pittsburgh in 2008 and Central Michigan's win at Michigan State last season are the fuel that feeds the MAC fan's fire. These are the things we live for...seeing one of the big boys have to write a big check for the privilege

## The MAC

Written by {ga=mikeperry}

Friday, September 03 2010 8:00 PM - Last Updated Friday, September 03 2010 1:42 PM

---

of getting their tails whipped by a MAC team.

Instead of drawing inspiration from these stunning MAC upsets from years past, Northern Illinois played with all the competitive fire of an eye examination. And Iowa State's Jack Trice Stadium has provided a season-opening springboard for a MAC school before, in 2007 when Kent State handled the Cyclones 23-14 in Ames.

Prior to the game, Huskies' head coach Jerry Kill kept everyone in the dark concerning his starting quarterback. Would he go with Chandler Harnish, the redshirt junior that sports a 129.6 quarterback rating in 18 career starts for Northern Illinois? The quarterback that had a 137.9 rating last season, with 11 touchdowns against just six interceptions in 10 games before going down with an injury?

Or would he go with DeMarcus Grady, also a redshirt junior, who won all four of his starts for the Huskies last season while filling in for the injured Harnish? Or how about redshirt freshman Jordan Lynch, the team captain on USA Football's 2009 gold medal-winning junior national team?

He went with Grady, but the quarterback decision was the only suspense Northern Illinois provided last night. Despite the Cyclones doing everything they could to keep NIU in the game it just wasn't meant to be.

Iowa State jumped out to a 17-0 lead in the first half as the Huskies failed to get anything going offensively. It was so bad that, at halftime, Kill was so eager to yell at his players he gathered them up on the field and tore into them before they left for the locker room for intermission. They were 0-for-7 on third down offensively, missed two field goals (actually four as senior place-kicker Ryan Fillingim missed a pair that did not count before the first half came to an end as ISU coach Paul Rhoads tried to ice him with timeouts just before the snap). The Huskies were able to pick up just 112 total yards in the first two periods.

Defensively the Huskies allowed ISU senior quarterback Austin Arnaud to pick them apart in the spread offense. He completed 17-of-22 first half passes for 169 yards and rushed for a touchdown to put the Cyclones into a comfortable lead.

## The MAC

Written by {ga=mikeperry}

Friday, September 03 2010 8:00 PM - Last Updated Friday, September 03 2010 1:42 PM

---

The game pretty much ended early in the second half. The Huskies took the second half kickoff and marched deep into Iowa State territory. They moved all the way to the 1-yard line and had first-and-goal from there. Instead of handing the ball to running back Chad Spann, who scored an eye-popping 19 touchdowns on the ground last season, they tried Spann once before two rushes by Grady were stuffed and the Huskies had to settle for a 20-yard field goal from true freshman Mathew Sims, who took over kicking duties for Finningim.

The Huskies moved to within a touchdown at 17-10 on a 1-yard Grady touchdown plunge midway through the fourth quarter, but it never really felt like NIU believed it was in the football game. It didn't really matter because the defense made sure the contest was out of hand anyway. A foolish roughing the passer penalty on senior defensive end Jake Coffman on third down kept the ensuing drive alive for the Cyclones, and on the next play Alexander Robinson scampered into the end zone for the final score of the game.

Just to make sure Grady throw his second interception of the game to Jake Knott, who also forced a fumble in the contest, allowing ISU to kneel on the ball and run the clock out.

The MAC, as I said before, is a league that is full of players that want to prove themselves. They were, for the most part, passed over for scholarships from the Iowas, Purdues, Ohio States and Michigans of the world and went to programs where they would be given a chance to play, regardless of size or 40-yard dash times. Pride goes a long way in the conference, but that pride has to translate into intensity on the football field.

All collegiate football programs and collegiate football conferences want to raise their national profiles. Kent State ripping Div. I-AA Murray State, Buffalo skunking Rhode Island, Central Michigan pounding Hampton and Ball State easily knocking off Southeast Missouri is all well and good...those are games the MAC teams are supposed to win...but the way to increase the MAC's national profile is to knock off those Big 12 or Big 10 bottom feeders. Northern Illinois missed its opportunity to do just that last night, and I imagine Kill and his team will be looking back at this game for quite awhile. Losing is one thing, not competing is quite another.