

## MAC Football Preview- Miami RedHawks

Written by {ga=mikeperry}

Saturday, September 04 2010 8:28 AM -

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Miami RedHawks

Mike Haywood (Notre Dame)

Miami's fall from grace in the Mid-American Conference has been swift and surprising.

Second-year head coach Mike Haywood hopes it has also been temporary.

The RedHawks were the model MAC football program during the 1990's and into the new millennium. The late Randy Walker took over the program in 1990 and built it into a consistent contender, rolling up a record of 59-35 in nine seasons. From '95 to '05 the RedHawks enjoyed 11 consecutive winning campaigns, winning or sharing the MAC East crown four times in the process.

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Miami is the winningest program in MAC history with 14 conference titles in its history, and became the “Cradle of Coaches” for launching the careers of legendary coaches like Paul Brown, Bo Schembechler, Ara Parseghian, Woody Hayes, Bill Arnsparger, Earl (Red) Blaik, Weeb Ewbank, Bill Mallory, Gary Moeller and Ron Zook.

Despite the stunning tradition and history, the football program at Miami has fallen on hard times, starting with the 2006 season. In four years from '06 to last season, the RedHawks posted records of 2-10, 6-7, 2-10 and 1-11. Four consecutive losing seasons, with the class of '09 leaving Oxford with an 11-38 career record, is very uncharacteristic at the school with the top winning percentage in MAC history, .649.

Haywood knew what he was getting into when he accepted the RedHawks' head coaching position and moved to the scenic campus near Cincinnati. Though Miami would be his first head coaching position, Haywood, a four-year letterman as a defensive back at Notre Dame, quickly identified the problems he wanted to solve. The first was classroom performance. Miami has always been an institution known for its academics, and that was the first thing Haywood wanted to revive.

“Because we're trying to change the culture of Miami football we're working to change our young men in a social aspect, and guys are improving significantly,” he said. “We're changing the culture from an academic aspect and we had no young men that had to go to summer school this year to be eligible, which is a significant improvement from the first year. Now we have to change this into wins. We talk to our players about being a relentless, dangerous football team and not looking at the scoreboard. If you're dominating the man in front of you we should be successful when the 60 minutes is up.”

Haywood has plenty to work with this season. The RedHawks return 20 starters from last year, including a number of players that were lost due to injury. During Miami's season finale, against Buffalo at Yeager Stadium, there were 29 players out with injury that had seen playing time during the season. Senior defensive back Jordan Gafford is excited about the amount of experience returning for the '10 season.

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“There’s a lot of game experience coming back on defense, and to add to that there are a lot of guys that sat out last year, who were either injured last year or transfer guys who can play this year,” Gafford said. “And you throw in the mix some freshmen guys who can really play, too. There’s a lot of competition on the defensive side of the ball, and that’s a good thing.”

The offense will revolve around sophomore quarterback Zac Dysert, who many believe is the best returning quarterback in the conference. Dysert averaged 282 passing yards in his nine starts last season, including a 31-for-51 for 426 yards and three touchdown effort against Temple. This was the fourth-best passing game in school history. Dysert is also a threat to pull down the ball and run with it as he rushed for 258 yards last season.

Dysert will be working with a new offensive coordinator, Morris Watts, who was promoted from quarterbacks coach to the offensive coordinator position.

“Coach Watts did a great job of coming right up to us. We got in early with him so we got to know him pretty well. That helped a lot. He explained the offense very well and has been around awhile, so he made things a lot easier for us.”

“In the spring I got a lot more comfortable with the offense. We worked hard on that,” Dysert said. “I feel a lot more comfortable back there with everything, protections, schemes, all that sort of stuff. In the summer we spent a lot of time with the receivers, just learning to time up the routes. We did some seven-on-seven stuff also.”

The RedHawks offensive line had to do some shuffling when starting left guard Brandon Brooks went down with an injury. Brooks could be ready for the season opener, but senior Bob Gully (6-4, 297), with 20 career starts, is an experienced back-up. Redshirt freshman Josh Harvey (6-5, 324) will start at left tackle, Gully at left guard, sophomore Brad Bednar (6-4, 283) at center, junior Nate Williams (6-5, 308) at right guard and sophomore Matt Kennedy (6-5, 245) at right tackle.

Each offensive lineman had to earn his starting position during spring practice and fall training camp, as Haywood opened the competition for every job up front. Dysert thinks this heated

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competition was good for the team, regardless of if the incumbents were upset about having to earn their starting positions again or not.

“I just want them to play hard for me and protect me,” he said of the line. “Competition brings a lot of things out of people and makes them work a lot harder. Some people are going to get mad, but that’s how things go. I just want the best five out there.”

While the RedHawks proved they could move the ball through the air last season, Miami’s rushing attack was anemic. Senior running back Thomas Merriweather (5-10, 214) had led the team in rushing the last two seasons, but last year he was able to rush for just 291 yards. As a team the RedHawks could muster just 841 rushing yards in 12 games.

Haywood brought Watts in to revamp Miami’s offense and focus on the running game.

“I had the privilege of working with Morris when we were at LSU together and he does a tremendous job,” Haywood said. “I think one of the things we’re establishing this spring is the ability to run the football. Previously we didn’t do a very good job of running the football, but Morris put a lot of emphasis on it, along with the play-action pass, getting everyone involved and I think he did a tremendous job with that.”

While Miami is working on the running game the air attack is more than ready. Seniors Armand Robinson and Jamal Rogers form one of the elite receiving corps in the conference, and junior Chris Givens and freshman Nick Harwell could see extensive playing time.

Robinson (6-1, 200) enters the ’10 season ninth in school history with 116 career receptions. He is 14<sup>th</sup> in career receiving yards with 1,438 receiving yards and earned third-team all-conference honors last season by leading the team with 67 catches for 788 yards and four touchdowns. Rogers (5-11, 172) was second on the RedHawks last season with 54 receptions for 505 yards and three touchdowns.

Givens (6-2, 211) suffered a season-ending shoulder injury in the second game of ’09 at Boise State and had 11 catches before the injury. He is healthy heading into the season. Harwell (6-1,

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180) has blazing speed, good hands and is a tenacious downfield blocker.

Dysert thinks the entire offense is entering the season feeling like it has something to prove.

“I think we’re going to prove a lot of things to a lot of people because we’re going to come out with a chip on our shoulder,” he said. “We are working hard and not worrying about anything other than the next play. I think that will make a big difference.”

Defensively the RedHawks will be very young, but will have one of college football’s most experienced and successful defensive coordinators, Carl Reese, calling the shots. Reese was Mack Brown’s defensive coordinator at the University of Texas from 1998-2003, where his attacking defense led the nation in total defense in 2001. Prior to his tenure at Texas Reese was the defensive coordinator at LSU.

He will have a defense that starts just two seniors and six sophomores in ’10. The front four in Reese’s 4-3 defense will be junior Morris Council (6-2, 267), sophomore Austin Brown (6-2, 275), sophomore Mike Johns (6-4, 282) and sophomore Wes Williams (6-3, 240). Council is coming off a shoulder injury that kept him out of action the entire ’09 season while the rest of the defensive line combines for just 21 career starts.

Junior middle linebacker Jerrell Wedge is just 5-foot-9, but he is a sideline-to-sideline tackler with excellent speed and is a sure tackler. He led the RedHawks with 114 stops last year, had 5.5 sacks and his 18.5 tackles for a loss led the conference. Wedge will be flanked by a pair of sophomores, Luke Kelly (6-2, 217) and Evan Harris (6-0, 222). Harris started 11 games as a true freshman in ’09 and had 61 tackles.

Miami’s defensive backfield is an experienced, physical group. Co-captain Jordan Gafford, a senior safety, has 23 career starts in his injury-plagued career. He made 89 tackles as a sophomore and 64 in eight starts last year before an injury ended his campaign. Free safety Anthony Kokal (6-0, 202), a junior, is one of the most feared hitters in the MAC. The first-team Academic All-MAC performer started all 12 games last season and had 105 stops, good for ninth in the conference. He registered 10+ tackles in six games.

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Senior Brandon Stephens (5-10, 205) and sophomore DJ Brown (6-1, 174) will hold down the cornerback positions.

After last season's one-win campaign Gafford hopes his defense will play a big part in turning the fortunes of the program around.

"It all starts with the leadership on the team, with the coaches expecting a lot out of the guys and not letting them be comfortable with a season like that," Gafford said. "We have guys in our locker room that want to win and are willing to work hard to change the direction of the program."

"I want to be a relentless team, and that means working hard every day. Every play you have to want to beat the guy across from you. You have to show up every day, day after day after day, working as hard as we can to change this program."

Haywood hopes 2010 will be a bounce-back season for his RedHawks, but Miami's schedule is one of the most brutal in the MAC. It all starts Sept. 4 when the RedHawks travel to the Swamp to play Florida.

"It will provide us the opportunity to get a lot of people playing time, and also will show us where our strengths and weaknesses are," Haywood said about the trip to Florida. "Also, when we get into conference play, the game will not be as fast as it was when we played Florida."

Miami then returns to host Eastern Michigan (Sept. 11) and Colorado State (Sept. 18). Miami will then hit the road for another tough contest at Missouri (Sept. 25), before coming home to play Kent State (Oct. 2). Road games at Cincinnati (Oct. 9) and Central Michigan (Oct. 16) will follow. The RedHawks will then hit the road for three consecutive weeks, playing at Buffalo (Oct. 30), Bowling Green (Wednesday, Nov. 10) and Akron (Wednesday, Nov. 17) before wrapping up the regular season against Temple (Tuesday, Nov. 23).

"Across the board the gap from first place to last place is very slim," Gafford said. "That

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presents every team a great opportunity to end up in Detroit playing for a MAC championship. One of our coaches phrased it this way, he said 'the outhouse to the penthouse is a short trip.' I think in the MAC that's a very true thing."