

Winning not only NIU goal

BY ANDY RESNIK
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Seeking their school's first Mid-American Conference championship and bowl appearance in 20 years, Northern Illinois football players also aspire to a more spiritual goal this season.

Honoring the memory of sophomore offensive lineman Shea Fitzgerald, killed in a Chicago apartment porch collapse in June will be the Huskies' ultimate objective.

"We can go out and win one for Shea, but what I told the kids was 'You tell me what you liked about Shea Fitzgerald,' and right away they said 'hard worker,'" coach Joe Novak said.

"Shea was a kid that had some learning disabilities but overcame them to be a pretty good student. I said let's take some of his good characteristics like that and let's try for each one of us to be a better worker, be a better student."

The Huskies could be better on the field as well.

They return virtually all their top players from a team that tied for the MAC West title the past two seasons — only to lose tiebreakers both years to Toledo.

Media who cover the MAC have selected the Huskies to win the West, which would put them in the league championship game for the first time.

Miami of Ohio, typically one disappointing loss away from a division title, was picked in the East over perennial power Marshall.

Miami has finished second to Marshall in four of the past six seasons and also was runner-up in 1995 and '96 — the last two years before the MAC split into two divisions.

Northern Illinois, which rejoined the MAC with Marshall but has enjoyed little success, is trying for its first postseason game since the 1983 California Raisin Bowl.

This season players will wear a No. 76 patch on the shoulder of their jersey to honor Fitzgerald.

2002 STANDINGS

	EAST DIVISION MAC		Overall	
	W	L	W	L
Marshall	7	1	11	2
Cent. Florida	6	2	7	5
Miami (Ohio)	5	3	7	5
Ohio	4	4	4	8
Akron	3	5	4	8
Kent St.	1	7	3	9
Buffalo	0	8	1	11

	WEST DIVISION MAC		Overall	
	W	L	W	L
Toledo	7	1	9	4
N. Illinois	7	1	8	4
Bowling Green	6	2	9	3
Ball St.	4	4	6	6
W. MICHIGAN	3	5	4	8
C. MICHIGAN	2	6	4	8
E. MICHIGAN	1	7	3	9

A capsule look at the MAC, based on predicted order of finish:

EAST DIVISION

MIAMI: QB Ben Roethlisberger being boosted for Heisman after completing 63 percent of his passes (271-of-428) last season for 3,238 yards with 22 touchdowns and 11 interceptions. ... Former walk-on Luke Clemens rushed for 1,009 yards and 16 TDs. ... Seeking 10th straight winning season.

MARSHALL: Junior QB Stan Hill passed for 292 yards and four touchdowns and rushed for game-winning score in first career start, a 36-34 victory over Miami last season. ... WR Darius Watts needs 41 receptions and 569 yards receiving to become MAC career leader in both. ... Herd have won bowl games in each of the last five seasons.

CENTRAL FLORIDA: Went 6-2 in first MAC season, with only losses to East champ Marshall and West winner Toledo. ... Will play first home game ever on cable (ESPN or ESPN2) on Nov. 19 against Marshall. ... QB Ryan Schneider is 15 TD passes and 2,385 yards passing short of Daunte Culpepper's school records.

AKRON: Zips return all 11 starters to offense that averaged 27 points and 404 yards a game. ... Went 4-2 last season when rushing for more than 150 yards and 0-3 when passing for more than 300.



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Northern Illinois junior receiver Dan Sheldon makes a catch as junior linebacker Kursten Strothman (50) moves in for a tackle during the team's preseason practice.

KENT STATE: Coach Dean Pees takes on added role of defensive coordinator. ... Allowed 35.4 points a game while posting 3-9 record in 2002. ... QB Joshua Cribbs trying to become first Division I player to have three straight seasons with at least 1,000 yards passing and rushing.

OHIO: Need to replace leading rusher Chad Brinker and top tackler Joe Seller. ... Miami transfer Ryan Hawk will press Freddie Ray for playing time at quarterback.

BUFFALO: Bulls have 3-29 league mark and 6-39 overall since joining MAC in 1999. ... Aaron Leeper earned league's freshman of year honors with 987 yards rushing and 10 TDs.

WEST DIVISION

NORTHERN ILLINOIS: Huskies open season with Thursday night home game (Aug. 28) against Maryland and travel to Alabama on Sept. 20. ... WR Dan Sheldon had longest punt return (90 yards) in nation last season. ... Have a 28-50 record in Novak's seven seasons.

TOLEDO: Trying for third West title in coach Tom Amstutz's three years. ... Must replace first-team All-MAC linebackers David Gardner and Tom Ward and QB Brian Jones.

BOWLING GREEN: Rookie coach Gregg Brandon's team returns multitasking QB Josh Harris to lead offense that aver-

aged 40.8 points a game last season. ... Falcons lost three of last four in 2002 after 8-0 start.

WESTERN MICHIGAN: DE Jason Babin named MAC Defensive Player of the Year in 2002 after recording 72 solo tackles and 15 sacks. ... Defense allowed league-low 330.7 yards a game last season. ... Season-closing 35-10 win over Central Michigan was first victory in Mount Pleasant since 1973, ending a 0-12-1 streak.

CENTRAL MICHIGAN: RB Terrence Jackson, a 1,000-yard rusher in 2001, returns from foot injury to replace Robbie Mixon, who set MAC single-game record with 377 yards rushing against Eastern Michigan last season. ... Opens season at Michigan, where head coach Mike DeBord was an assistant from 1992-99.

BALL STATE: First-year coach Brady Hokes, a four-year letterman with the Cardinals, has tough schedule that includes Missouri, Pittsburgh and Boston College. ... Seven starters return on defense.

EASTERN MICHIGAN: Nine starters back from defense that allowed MAC-worst 47 points and 520 yards per game in 2002. ... Offense losing top three threats in QB Jeff Edwards (2,762 yards, 22 TDs), RB Ime Akpan (1,221 yards, 15 TDs) and WR Kevin Walter (93 catches, 1,368 yards, nine TDs).

2003 SCHEDULES

CENTRAL MICHIGAN

Date	Opponent	Time
Aug. 30	at Michigan	Noon
Sep. 6	vs. New Hamp.	1 p.m.
Sep. 13	vs. E. Kentucky	1 p.m.
Sep. 20	at Ball St.	2 p.m.
Oct. 4	at Bowling Green	4 p.m.
Oct. 11	vs. N. Illinois	1 p.m.
Oct. 18	vs. Toledo	1 p.m.
Oct. 25	at C. Florida	4 p.m.
Nov. 1	vs. E. Michigan	1 p.m.
Nov. 8	vs. Akron	1 p.m.
Nov. 15	at W. Michigan	2 p.m.
Nov. 22	at Navy	1:30 p.m.

EASTERN MICHIGAN

Date	Opponent	Time
Aug. 28	vs. E. Tenn. St.	7 p.m.
Sep. 4	vs. W. Illinois	7 p.m.
Sep. 13	at Akron	6 p.m.
Sep. 20	at Navy	1:30 p.m.
Sep. 27	vs. Maryland	6 p.m.
Oct. 4	vs. W. Michigan	6 p.m.
Oct. 11	at Toledo	7 p.m.
Oct. 18	vs. Bowl. Green	6 p.m.
Nov. 1	at C. Michigan	1 p.m.
Nov. 8	vs. C. Florida	1 p.m.
Nov. 15	vs. Ball St.	1 p.m.
Nov. 22	at N. Illinois	2 p.m.

WESTERN MICHIGAN

Date	Opponent	Time
Aug. 30	at Mich. St.	3:30 p.m.
Sep. 6	vs. William & Mary	7 p.m.
Sep. 13	vs. Virginia	2 p.m.
Sep. 27	at Ohio	8 p.m.
Oct. 4	at E. Michigan	6 p.m.
Oct. 11	vs. Bowl. Green	2 p.m.
Oct. 18	at N. Illinois	2 p.m.
Oct. 25	vs. Marshall	2 p.m.
Nov. 1	at Connecticut	Noon
Nov. 8	Ball St.	2 p.m.
Nov. 15	C. Michigan	2 p.m.
Nov. 22	at Toledo	7 p.m.