



NORTHERN ILLINOIS HUSKIES

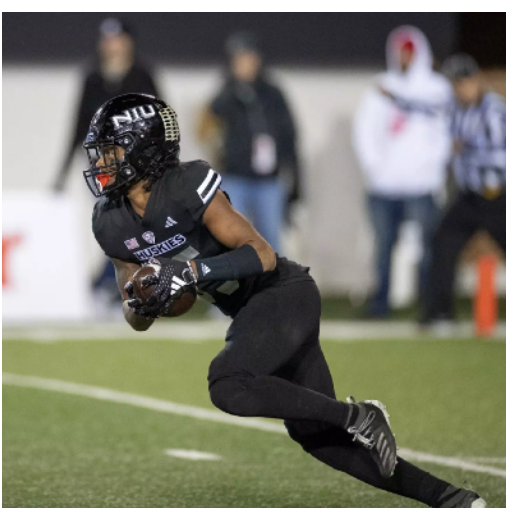
2023 Record: 7-6

Mid-American Conference

Dekalb, IL

FBS Ranking

92



TRAYVON RUDOLPH – RB

Photo via NIU Athletics

The Huskies had one of the stranger 2023 seasons in the MAC. In the opening week of the season, they scored a premier upset over ACC foe Boston College on the road. The following week, they dropped the home opener against FCS opponent Southern Illinois which kicked off a four-game losing streak which included a valiant comeback attempt against Toledo that fell just short. Northern Illinois then proceeded to win five of the next seven games to clinch their spot in a bowl. Considering the Huskies were improving on a three-win 2022 campaign, winning seven games was a success. However, there was still a lingering sense of “what could have been.” The three conference losses against Toledo, Central Michigan, and Ball State came by a combined 10 points.

Can Thomas Hammock and the staff find a way to turn those close losses into victories? If they do, the Huskies will be right in the mix for a MAC Championship like they were nearly every season in the 2010s. The 2024 edition of Northern Illinois football is loaded with experience including 16 returning starters (only Western Michigan has more in the conference).

OFFENSE

Even though Northern Illinois was led by veteran quarterback Rocky Lombardi for much of the season, the offense never found consistent footing. That’s not to undercut his contributions in both passing and rushing, but turnovers were part of that equation too. **Ethan Hampton** made brief appearances in the Nebraska and Akron games and played the majority of the Tulsa game but with fairly limited success. He’ll have the opportunity to earn the starting job but he may need to fend off FCS transfer **Jalen Macon** (Arkansas-Pine Bluff) who completed 66.3% of his passes and ran for 119 yards in limited playing time.

Whoever takes over the quarterback position will have the luxury of handing the ball off to **Antorio Brown**. He almost certainly had several suitors in the transfer portal but he chose to come back to Dekalb. Pair Brown with a healthy **Trayvon Rudolph** and the Huskies might have the scariest two-headed monster of playmakers in the MAC. Rudolph led the receiving corps with 531 yards and his 51 catches more than doubled the second leading pass catcher **Grayson Barnes**. In 2021, Rudolph posted 892 yards on the same number of catches as he had last season. He’ll be another year removed from an injury that cost him all of the 2022 season and he’s a potential weapon in the return game.

The offensive line loses some of their stalwarts from a unit that allowed only 16 sacks and helped produce 179.6 yards on the ground per game, but it’s still one of the MAC’s best groups. Even with some of the talent lost, the Huskies will likely feature four seniors up front. Combine a great offensive line and a running back like Brown, and you have a recipe for success.

DEFENSE

The biggest hurdle preventing the Huskies from truly competing in the MAC has been the defense. That is, until last season. Northern Illinois put together one of the biggest improvements on that side of the ball of any team in the nation. After allowing 32.8 points and nearly 400 yards a game, those numbers were trimmed to a very respectable 21 points and 319.5 yards. A host of experience returns, so it’s quite possible those numbers improve even more in 2024.

It’s not often that a defensive end leads a team in tackles, but that’s exactly what **Raishein Thomas** did. He registered 74 tackles and a pair of sacks. **Devonte O’Malley** added three sacks and **Roy Williams** tops the list of returners with 3.5 sacks.

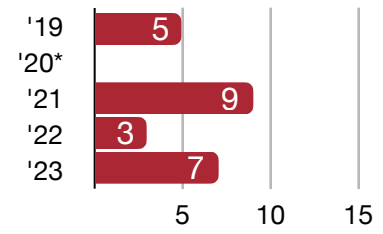
If you’re trying to throw against the Northern Illinois secondary, good luck. The Huskies finished top 10 in the country in passing yards allowed and virtually the entire secondary returns including two second-team All-MAC performers **Javaughn Byrd** and **Nate Valcarel**. Depth at the cornerback and safety positions is both talented and experienced. The only thing that will make it more difficult to complete passes against Northern Illinois is if the defensive front can create more sacks and quarterback pressures. If all goes well and the defense avoids major injuries (especially in tough road clashes against Notre Dame and NC State), this unit will flirt with being the best in the conference and will make NIU legitimate contenders to win the MAC.

Will the strong NIU run game and defense guide the Huskies to another MAC title?

HC: Thomas Hammock
(6th Year, 24-33)
OC: Wesley Beschorner
(2nd Year)
DC: Nick Benedetto
(3rd Year)

2024 Class Rankings
Recruiting
99
Transfer Portal
123
Via 24/7 Sports

NORTHERN ILLINOIS WIN TREND



Wk	2024 NIU Schedule	
1	Sat, Aug 31	vs. W. Illinois
2	Sat, Sept 7	@ Notre Dame
4	Sat, Sept 21	vs. Buffalo
5	Sat, Sept 28	@ NC State
6	Sat, Oct 5	vs. UMass
7	Sat, Oct 12	@ Bowling Green
8	Sat, Oct 19	vs. Toledo
9	Sat, Oct 26	@ Ball State
11	Wed, Nov 6	@ W. Michigan
12	Wed, Nov 13	vs. Akron
13	Tue, Nov 19	@ Miami (OH)
14	Sat, Nov 30	vs. C. Michigan

■ Home ■ Away

Key Games

vs. Buffalo: The Bulls are expected to be in rebuild mode under a new head coach, but from the Huskies’ perspective this game is an important first step in the MAC title race especially since it’s sandwiched between two grueling road games.
vs. Toledo: Their West division feuds may be over, but there’s no love lost between the Rockets and the Huskies.
@ Miami: These two programs have produced three of the last five MAC titles. If everything has gone well for both teams, this game could even be a preview for the 2024 showdown in Detroit, Michigan.

2023 Results (7-6)
@ BC (W 27-24 OT)
So. Illinois (L 11-14)
@ Nebraska (L 11-35)
Tulsa (14-22)
@ Toledo (L 33-35)
@ Akron (W 55-14)
Ohio (W 23-13)
E. Michigan (W 20-13)
@ C. Michigan (L 31-37)
Ball State (L 17-20)
W. Michigan (W 24-0)
@ Kent State (W 37-27)
vs. Arkansas St. (W 21-19)
68 Ventures Bowl



Player Spotlight

Photo via Hustle Belt



ANTARIO BROWN – RB

Brown has always been a high yards-per-carry runner. In 2021 he ran for 538 yards at a 6.6 per attempt clip and his 2022 numbers were comparable (689, 6.3). He received double the carries in 2023 and he did not disappoint, rushing for the most yards in a season since Jordan Lynch in 2013. Statistics aside, Brown is an instant impact player who is a threat to score any time he touches the football.

2023 Stats: 212 CAR, 1296 YDS, 10 TD

Photo via NIU Athletics



LOGAN ZSCHERNITZ – C

Zschernitz is now in his sixth season with the Huskies and he leads a skilled offensive line that boasts depth and experience. No player is more experienced than Zschernitz, who has 33 career starts. Most of those came from the guard position, but he played center a bit last year after missing most of the year due to an injury sustained in 2022. He's expected to be the full-time starter at center this season.

2023 Stats: 6 Games, 1 Start

Photo via College Gridirons



Huskie Stadium (23,595)



Raishein THOMAS

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Miami RedHawks won the MAC in part due to elite special teams. If Northern Illinois wants to accomplish the same, they'll need to improve in that category. Punter **Tom Foley** returns for his third season but his 40.6 yards per punt last year ranked him in the bottom half of the conference. Kicker **Kanon Woodill** made only 11 of 17 attempts but he did boot a 49-yarder against Toledo. Rudolph has been a lethal kick returner in the past.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Northern Illinois should be able to lean on their defense while the offense works out the kinks of a new quarterback running the show. Even then, handing the ball off to Antario Brown will always be a good decision. The MAC schedule gets serious in October with back-to-back games against two preseason MAC contenders Bowling Green and Toledo. The Huskies must also take a road trip to Miami in late November in a game that could have serious MAC Championship ramifications.

Hammock has one of the most senior-laden rosters in the conference. That group has experienced a lot. Many of them were part of the 2021 MAC Championship team and even the 2020 team that went winless. In other words, this group of players won't be phased by any adversity the team may face this season.

Appointment Television



vs.



Tuesday, November 19

A trip to Yager Stadium, the first one since 2019, likely marks a critical hurdle in Northern Illinois' MAC title aspirations. The last three meetings have all been decided by a single possession and no team has crossed the 30-point threshold in those matchups. Don't expect those trends to change in 2024 as two of the best MAC defenses from last season will clash. The Huskies' ability to run the ball could be the difference maker even on the road.

2023 Statistics

Offense			Defense		
Statistic	Per Game	FBS Rank	Statistic	Per Game	FBS Rank
Points	24.9	79	Points	21.0	T-26
Rushing	179.6	36	Rushing	148.4	60
Passing	189.8	103	Passing	171.2	6
Total	369.4	75	Total	319.5	23
Sacks	16	T-19	Sacks	23	T-95

2024 Projection

8-4

4th in MAC

Trophy Case



XO



XO



X6

**1983 2011
2012 2014
2018 2021**