

# 2005 OUTLOOK

**The Overview:** "Make plays." If tenth-year Northern Illinois University head football coach **Joe Novak** owned iPod, there would only be one song on it. "Make Plays." That same title always made Novak's personal *Billboard* Top 40 list. "Make Plays."

Coming off five consecutive winning seasons, two straight years finishing in the national major-college Top 30, and a victory in the Silicon Valley Football Classic, The Boys of Novak aren't done. The buzz still engulfs The Huskie Nation.

Winners in 19 of its last 25 games, Northern Illinois ranked as high as No. 10 in the Bowl Championship Series standings and No. 12 in the Associated Press poll two years ago when the Cardinal and Black stunned the nation with wins over the University of Maryland, the University of Alabama, and Iowa State University en route to a 10-2 season. After near misses on the road against Maryland and Iowa State in 2004, Novak's squad regrouped, shared their third Mid-American Conference West Division title in four years, wound up 9-3, and made its initial bowl appearance in 21 seasons.

"Our goals are the same," Novak said. "Win a MAC championship and go to a bowl game.

"Our kids believe in themselves. They know how to work. The believe they can win. That mindset is a critical factor in our turnaround process. That said, right now, this is the most inexperienced team we've had over the last four-to-five seasons and we start with an awfully tough schedule. At this point, we have many question marks.

"We've lost 26 starters the last two years—check it out—and 13 or 14 (14) of those guys were All-MAC caliber players. People need to have a little patience," Novak added. "In recent years, we've been fortunate to have kids who came in and stepped it up for us. Kids like a Vinson Reynolds, a Brad Cieslak, a Brian Van Acker, a Ray Smith, a Ben Lueck, a Garrett Wolfe." What is Novak saying? His 2005 Huskies might be getting even younger.

"We may not have a choice," Novak admitted. "I can see several freshmen contributing—at wide receiver, at linebacker, and in our secondary. Maybe some starting. It's a sign that we stepped up our recruiting. We're excited about this freshman class. If they're good enough to play, they'll play." For the record, the incoming Northern Illinois recruiting class ranked No. 1 in the MAC by national expert **Tom Lemming**, Collegefootballnews.com, and *The Sporting News*.

Roster-wise, Novak greeted 36 returning lettermen (and 15 starters) from the bowl team to August drills—which represents the lowest number of Huskie veterans this century (40 returning letter-winners in 2000, 44 in 2001, 45 in 2002 and 2003, and 41 in 2004). Questions? Sure, there are questions.

Can Northern Illinois produce its sixth consecutive winning season—the longest such stretch in Cardinal and Black gridiron history since the school-record 21-year success string during 1929-49? With the new faces, how competitive can the Huskies be early, particularly against the one-two Big Ten Conference punch? Can there be a better big-time tailback tandem in America than **Garrett Wolfe** and **A. J. Harris**? Who replaces "The Beast" and "Boogie" on defense? Who's the punter?

How well can the revamped Northern Illinois O-line play in 2005? Can the locals win the outright MAC West title and finally win at the University of Toledo for the first time since 1972? Stay tuned.

**The Offense:** With apologies to the late **Ed Sullivan**: The really big question?

No doubt it will be finding a No. 1 quarterback to replace the graduated **Josh Haldi** who posted a 25-8 career won-lost record as a three-year starter and led Northern Illinois to that 9-3 mark, a No. 20 spot in both final major polls, and a 34-21 triumph over Troy University in the Silicon Valley Football Classic last year.

"We do have some experience and some talent at quarterback, but you don't immediately replace the experience that Josh had," Novak said. "That's impossible. Josh could make some big plays, but, most of all, he played sound football within our system. Everybody wants an athletic quarterback who can break contain and make a ton of big plays. No defense can stop that. That drives defensive coordinators crazy. (Michigan's) **Jim Harbaugh** did that all the time to us at Indiana. At the same time, you can't have a high-powered offense, make mistakes, and turn

over the ball all the time. The turnovers will kill you. You can't beat yourself. If we make a ton of mistakes early in the year, we'll get killed."

So how does Novak's staff replace that leadership, that moxie, that soundness, and those career statistics (427-of-776 passes for 6,015 yards, 55 touchdowns, and 19 interceptions in 2001-04) that Haldi brought to the Huskie table? This was a team quad-captain who carried a 3.89 cumulative grade point average in accountability and went to the National Football League Combine last winter.

One has to admire the efficiency that Haldi brought to Novak's One Back offense. Northern Illinois ranked No. 17 in the nation in turnover margin (+0.7 per game average) and led the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division 1-A ranks with the fewest fumbles lost (a school-record one) in 2004. At the same time, the Huskie attack rated No. 11 in NCAA team rushing (238.2 yards-per-game average), No. 13 in 1-A team scoring (35.1 ppg.), and No. 14 in major-college total offense (438.8 ypg.) last fall. Northern Illinois also set single-season team records in total offense (5,265 yards), scoring (421 points), and TDs (53) a year ago.

What does Novak's offensive scheme require in a triggerman? Two things: Make plays and make no mistakes.

Heading into August, junior **Phil Horvath** and soph **Zach Ullrich** rank one-two on the Huskie QB depth chart and rightfully so. But it's two red-shirt freshmen named **Britt Davis** and **Dan Nicholson** who intrigue the coaching staff and the diehard Northern Illinois fandom. People have memorized Davis' and Nicholson's prep stats and heard about the Ripley's Believe It or Not Scout Team performances of both.

The 6-foot-2, 200-pound Horvath went from zero 1-A snaps to 346 last year and won his first letter. In Haldi's early-season absence due to a right foot stress fracture, Horvath went 2-1 as a starter—including a near-perfect game in the Huskies' 34-17 trend-setting league success over GMAC Bowl-bound Bowling Green State University on ESPN2 last September. Under Horvath's leadership, Northern Illinois generated 483 yards total offense in the BGSU victory. In that triumph, Horvath hit 16-of-23 passes for 191 yards and rushed for 32 yards on six carries with no turnovers.

Season-wise, Horvath wound up as the most productive No. 2 Huskie QB since **Pete Genatempo** (94-of-171 passes for 916 yards and five TDs in 1984) by completing 72-of-123 aerials for 954 yards, six TDs, and seven interceptions. Against Independence Bowl entry Iowa State, Horvath threw for a career-high (1) 285 yards, (2) four TD strikes, and (3) four "picks" only six days prior to the BeeGee win. "Phil learned," Novak said. "He came to (offensive coordinator) John Bond and said 'I'm not throwing any more interceptions.'"

"I thought Phil established himself in the Bowling Green game," Novak said. "That gives him an edge. Zach Ullrich has some playing time. Britt Davis and Dan Nicholson have tremendous potential. Britt is athletic and can run. Dan might have the best throwing arm of any quarterback in my tenure here. Even if it's Phil, he hasn't played that much. And to open there (Michigan), that's a tough way to go. That's what it is. It will be a great experience, but the kids are gonna have to grow up



Garrett Wolfe (1), TB



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fast. I could rank them today and that could change in a minute. I like the competition at this spot. Someone could win the job in August two-a-days or it might be the week of the Michigan game. The summer is critical. All four can run our offense, but each brings something different."

If there's one phase of Huskie football that no one can question, then it's the running game. Northern Illinois has manufactured five consecutive First-Team All-MAC tailbacks, six straight 1,000-yard rushers, and seven in Novak's nine campaigns. The Fab 1,000-Yard List: TB **Charles Talley** (1,008 in 1996), TB **William Andrews** (1,127 in 1999), TB **Thomas Hammock** (1,083 in 2000 and 1,096 in 2001), TB **Michael "The Burner" Turner** (1,915 in 2002 and 1,648 in 2003), and Wolfe (1,656 in 2004). In fact, only one "major" school has produced more consecutive 1,000-yard runners than the Huskies—the University of Texas (nine straight years).

America's top returning 1-A rushing duo? Easy. It's Wolfe and Harris who combined for 2,478 ground yards and 22 TDs on 430 carries (5.8 ypc. average). "That is, in my opinion, the best running tandem in the country—bar none," Novak said. "What a year both Garrett and A. J. had. They're pretty darned good. With A. J. and Garrett, we've got a great change-up situation—one with power and another with speed." Good enough that the veteran Northern Illinois head man wanted to push both runners for All-MAC honors at the same position.

Think about the possibilities. Wolfe and Harris lined up in the same backfield simultaneously? Not exactly. Novak and his staff toyed with that notion a few years back with Hammock and Turner. How about moving either Wolfe (:04.7 speed in the 40) or the 221-pound Harris (:04.39, yes, he is faster) into the slot? H-back maybe? The Wolfe-Harris duo represents the second-best ground-gaining tandem in the Huskie Record Book since **FB Mark Kellar** (1,719 yards) and **TB Jerry Latin** (884) in 1973. Both Harris and Wolfe sat out the spring game with minor shoulder injuries.

Named on the 2005 Maxwell Award "watch list" and cited as a Honorable Mention **Street & Smith's** preseason All-America, Wolfe stepped into the national limelight during the second half of the Bowling Green State game on ESPN2 with 204 yards in the final 30 minutes (202 overall), subbing for the injured Harris (left ankle sprain). Even All-Century greats such as Kellar, **LeShon Johnson**, or "The Burner" could not match what followed.

The elusive, quicksilver 5-foot-7, 174-pounder (don't you want to go "beep, beep" ala the "Roadrunner" in the classic Warner Brothers "Looney Tunes" cartoons when No. 1 breaks one?) rang up a Northern Illinois-record seven consecutive 100-yard rushing games, plus set the school's single-game rushing (325 yards) and all-purpose (341) records vs. Eastern

Michigan and NIU's single-season scoring (126 points) and TD (21) standards.

By the end of 2004, Wolfe ranked among the nation's Top 40 individuals in at least 16 game and season statistical categories—including No. 3 in season scoring (11.5 ppg.), No. 3 in season all-purpose yardage (182.2 ypg.), and No. 5 in season rushing (150.6 ypg.). The so-called national secret went from a back-up to team Offensive MVP, First-Team All-MAC, four-time Mid-Am Player of the Week, and Honorable Mention All-America (by *CNN-Sports Illustrated.com* and *collegefootballnews.com*).

"The amazing thing is that at the same time last summer, nobody knew who Garrett was," Novak observed. "Sure, our coaching staff knew, but I don't think anybody would envision the monster season that Garrett would have with 1,600-plus yards rushing and 21 TDs. What a great year."

Roles reversed at the Silicon Valley Football Classic. When Wolfe (hip) got hurt after his game-changing 50-yard TD burst in the second period vs. Troy, Harris came off the bench and ran for a school-record 1-A era bowl record 120 yards (119 in the second half) on 23 carries, plus one TD, against the nation's No. 7 major-college rushing defense. "That

will tell you what kind of team player A. J. is, to step into such a situation where Garrett has been the man most of the season," Novak said.

With Wolfe, Harris, senior TB **Adrian Davis**, Horvath, and Ullrich, NIU returns 93 percent of its 2004 rushing offense (2,655 of 2,858 yards), 89 percent of last year's rushing TDs (25 of 28), and 88 percent of its 2004 carries (485 of 550). During the bowl preparations last December, (now) red-shirt frosh **Montell Clanton** moved into the TB picture. Put soph **Cas Prime** and true frosh **David Bryant** on the list and Novak goes six-deep at tailback. As Wolfe told one interviewer in 2004: "We run the football. That's Northern Illinois football."

Most of those **Donald Trump**-like numbers resulted from the Huskie offensive line front ("...the best overall, across the board, in my time here," said Novak). With a little help from the NCAA, Novak can start 2004 holdover O-line regulars—senior **C Brian Van Acker**, (2) junior OT **Doug Free**, and (3) sixth-year senior OG **Ben Lueck**.

Novak strongly believes that Van Acker and Free deserve serious All-America consideration. The 6-4, 287-pound Van Acker—a First-Team All-Mid-Am selection in his first year as a regular and the runner-up in team knockdown blocks (76)—made the 2005 preseason Rotary Lombardi Award "watch list." Thanks to a 415-pound bench press and 425-pound squat lift, Van Acker is no shrinking violet. Free—the best all-around athlete on the Northern Illinois O-line—was a Third-Team Freshman All-America pick by *The Sporting News* in 2003 and earned Second-Team All-MAC honors in 2004. With 24 consecutive starts, including two at tight end, the 6-foot-6, 290-pound Free led his peers in blocking grades (91 percent) last year and posted a 565-pound squat this summer. Novak compares Free to ex-Huskie (pun intended) OT **Ryan Diem** (now with NFL Indianapolis Colts). The 6-4, 310-pound Lueck—a Second-Team All-MAC selection last fall—gained a medical red-shirt year from the NCAA, similar to the one granted to OT **Mark Orszula** in 2004. Voted the team's Most Improved Player by the coaching staff, Lueck made Novak's VIP list of premier Mid-Am OG types.

Add senior OG **Jake Ebenhoch** with his 16 career starts and junior OG **Matt Rogers** with nine more and the Van Acker-Free-Lueck-Ebenhoch-Rogers fantastic fivesome owns 71 collective 1-A starts. Back-up soph OT **Chris Acevedo** rates as the sixth returning O-line performer with some experience. The Hog future? In good hands since Novak's six O-line frosh recruits average 6-foot-5 and 285 pounds.

Whomever gets the nod at quarterback will miss Northern Illinois' top 2004 receiving duo and big play seniors, i.e., First-Team All-MAC TE **Brad Cieslak** (31 catches



**Quince Holman (96), DE**

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## Huskie Plus / Minus Chart

### Offense:

#### Lettermen Returning (18)

SE	SAM HURD (6-2, 187, Sr.)-### Matt Simon (6-1, 190, So.)-#
FLK	Jarret Carter (6-2, 205, Jr.)-# Marcus Perez (5-10, 170, So.)-#
WR	Shatone Powers (6-0, 183, Sr.)-###
TE	JAKE NORDIN (6-4, 253, Jr.)-# Pat Raleigh (6-4, 239, Sr.)-##
OT	DOUG FREE (6-6, 290, Jr.)-## Matt Rogers (6-4, 267, Jr.)-## George Douglas (6-4, 286, Sr.)-#
OG	BEN LUECK (6-4, 310, Sr.)-## Jake Ebenhoch (6-4, 295, Sr.)-##
C	BRIAN VAN ACKER (6-4, 287, Sr.)-##
QB	Phil Horvath (6-2, 200, Jr.)-#
TB	GARRETT WOLFE (5-7, 174, Jr.)-# A. J. HARRIS (6-1, 221, Sr.)-### Adrian Davis (5-5, 181, Sr.)-##
PK	CHRIS NENDICK (5-11, 160, So.)-#

#### Impact Newcomers (3)

FLK	Greg Turner (6-1, 176, Fr.-RS)
QB	Britt Davis (6-3, 187, Fr.-RS) Dan Nicholson (6-2, 187, Fr.-RS)

#### Lettermen Lost (11)

FLK	David McDermott (6-2, 173, Sr.)-##
WR	DAN SHELTON (5-10, 180, Sr.)-#### Andy Lothson (6-2, 199, Sr.)-### Kevin Woods (5-8, 187, Sr.)-###
TE	BRAD CIESLAK (6-5, 257, Sr.)-###
OT	JAKE VERSTRAETE (6-6, 305, Sr.)-#### Mark Orszula (6-7, 307, Sr.)-##
OG	MATT MCGHGHY (6-3, 302, Sr.)-###
QB	JOSH HALDI (6-2, 216, Sr.)-###
FB	Jeremy Pugh (6-1, 225, Jr.)-#
TB	Robert Wallace (5-8, 208, Sr.)-###

**Key:** #—Indicates number of varsity letters won.

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for 384 yards and three TDs) and Second-Team All-MAC WR **Dan Sheldon** (40 receptions for 936 yards and nine TDs)—who both made it to NFL camps as free agents. The underrated Sheldon led the nation in yards-per-catch (23.4) and recorded eight of the 13 longest Huskie receptions (73, 63, 61, 60, 45, 43, 42, and 41 yards) in 2004.

Time for seniors-to-be **Sam "Birdman" Hurd** and **Shatone "Tone" Powers** to raise the bar and play more consistently at WR. Hurd caught 27 balls for 298 yards and three TDs and Powers made 19 receptions for 248 yards and four TDs a year ago. Both can go deep. Watch for the emerging **Jarret Carter** (four catches for 102 yards in spring game) and grey-shirt frosh **Greg Turner** (four grabs for 81 yards and two TDs in spring finale), sophs **Matt Simon** and **Marcus Perez**, plus new recruits **Orlando Moore**, **Justin Williams**, and **Preston Williams**. Not only did the 5-10, 170-pound Perez top all Huskie true frosh catchmen (10 receptions for 166 yards), he also threw a 61-yard TD pass versus Southern Illinois. In an offense, where the run sets up the pass, look for junior TE **Jake Nordin** to double his 2004 catch total (14 for 122 yards) and senior **Pat Raleigh** (two for 29 yards) to do more than block.

**The Defense:** Every spring, Novak scours his personnel board in his office for future Northern Illinois playmakers. How does one replace graduated three-time All-MAC LB **Brian "The Beast" Atkinson** (and his 346 career tackles), All-Mid-Am FS **Lionel "Boogie" Hickenbottom**, twice All-MAC DE **Travis Moore**, LB **Jason Hawkins**, or CB **Rob Lee** this year?

Statistically, six of Novak's Top 10 tacklers, nine of the leading 13 hitters, six starters, and 17 lettermen on defense return. That's the good news. The bad news? Only one defensive All-MAC performer comes back in 2005. Again, young and old, the personnel in Novak's "Attack Four-Three" defense need to employ strong pursuit, sound tackling, and passion—in other words, make plays.

The Next Generation Huskies are now senior LB **Javan Lee**, senior SS **Ray Smith**, senior DE **Quince Holman**, senior LB **Jason Hutton**, senior NT **Martin Wilson**, junior DT **Eric Pittman**, junior DE **Ken West**, plus twin junior CBs **Adriel Hansbro** and **Alvah Hansbro**, soph DT **Zack Holycross**, soph NT **Adam Schroeder**, and red-shirt frosh DE **Larry English**.

The impact newcomers on Novak's two-deep personnel board? Can these people develop into All-MAC picks by 2006 or 2007? What about 2005? Will these future Northern Illinois regulars mature quickly enough by the season opener at Michigan or the Mid-Am schedule in late September—English at DE and fellow red-shirt frosh **T.J. Griffin** and **Tim McCarthy** at LB, or soph **Mark Reiter** and junior **Dustin Utschig** at FS?

The 6-foot-2, 222-pound Lee pursues like a traffic cop, notched the program's most single-season tackles for loss (16 for 51 yards) since DE **C. J. Rose** (17 for 63 yards) in 1993, finished second in overall team hits (119) behind Atkinson, and already has made the



Chris Nendick (25), PK

2005 preseason Rotary Lombardi Award "watch list." Only the school's sixth First-Team All-Mid-Am LB since 1975, Lee can deliver the spectacular—such as (a) three tackles for eight yards in losses versus Troy in the bowl game, (b) the career-high 18 stops (15 solo) and one pass deflection in the nationally televised (ESPN2) showdown against Bowling Green State, and (c) 16 hits, two QB pressures, and one TFL versus Toledo on ESPN2 last year. Lee enters August as the No. 1 "Willie" LB.

With 19 career starts, Lee has posted eight career twin-digit tackle games wearing that Huskie No. 47 uniform. "Javan can make a lot of big plays," Novak said. "He has a lot of ability, runs to the ball well, and kind of slithers through

seams on offense. Overall, Javan's faster than Brian Atkinson, very instinctive, and just needs to be more consistent."

Oddly enough, the traditionally strong Northern Illinois LB corps—though loaded with the p-word (potential)—rates comparatively "thinner" in career snaps with the loss of Atkinson and 12-game starter Hawkins. Next in line of succession would be No. 1 "Mike" LB Hutton, a workman-like 6-foot-1, 239-pounder who owns 58 tackles and two starts—including one in the bowl vs. Troy—in 36 career appearances. Subbing for the injured Atkinson last year at Ball State University, Hutton registered a career-high 13 stops, two pass deflections, two QB hurries, and one TFL.

If there was a promising by-product of the Huskies' first bowl practices in 21 years, then it would be the emergence of red-shirt TB turned—"Sam" LB Griffin. The athletic six-foot, 218-pounder really impressed the staff on the Scout Team, made the platoon switch, and moved up the depth chart—starting in December. "T.J. played both ways in high school," Novak said. "With all the depth at tailback, we felt we could get another good athlete on the field by moving T.J. to linebacker instead of having him standing on the sideline next to me."

Though untested in varsity play, McCarthy got Novak's attention. "Tim is a tough kid, instinctive," the Huskie boss said about the six-foot, 217-pounder. "He minds me of (All-MAC) **Nick Duffy**. Tim will be a good player. We just have to be patient with Tim and all these younger guys." Don't be surprised to see soph **Bob McLearn**, plus true freshmen **Josh Allen** or **Cory Hanson** in the LB mix.

At the same time, there is no doubt that the Northern Illinois D-line might be in the best shape in recent years since the Huskies go two-deep in three of the interior spots and three-deep at a fourth. The eight veterans upfront boast at least one varsity letter and combine for a total of 14 letters at the four positions.

Senior DE-DT All-Mid-Am candidate Holman can start at either spot and create match-up headaches for the opposition at both. The 6-foot-3, 261-pounder started nine games (eight games at DT and one at DE), led the local defensive front in tackles (34), contributed a single-season 38 school-record QB pressures-hurries, and blocked a field goal in the Bowling Green State success in 2004.

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"Quince is unique. He has really matured in the last six-to-eight months. He's a big kid with natural quickness and explosion," Novak described. "Inside, he's quicker. On the edge, he's bigger. I think Quince is one of the better pass rushers in our league."

Two other Northern Illinois regulars return upfront—West (eight starts at DE in 2004) and Schroeder (six starts). In 11 appearances last season, West registered exactly one-third of his 30 tackles behind the line of scrimmage (10 for 52 yards in losses). The 6-foot-3, 235-pound West led the Huskies in QB sacks (eight for 48 yards in losses) and became the first Northern Illinois defender since 1984 to record a school-record, three QB sacks in back-to-back games vs. the (1) University of Akron and (2) University of Central Florida. Inside, the 6-4, 277-pound Schroeder wound up with 20 tackles and six combined QB pressures-hurries.

With a 400-pound bench press, Wilson ranks among the best lifters on the Northern Illinois roster. The 6-foot-1, 279-pound senior DT owns three varsity monograms and 16 career starts. Juniors **Brad Benson** and **Eric Pittman**—both two-year letter-winners—add depth. Soph DE **Robert Oruche** and soph DT **Zack Holycross** sat out spring ball due to off-season surgery (left ankle and left shoulder, respectively). Novak also holds high expectations for DE English who made his major-college debut in the Maryland opener as a true frosh and then missed the next 11 games with a left ankle problem.

Novak would be the last person to complain about any oversights in league post-season matters with a league-high 12 All-MAC performers in 2004. If there was one possible slight, it might have been senior-to-be SS **Ray Smith** who put up some of the most convincing "pest" statistics in the league. The 6-foot-2, 185-pound Smith—Mr. Catalyst with dreadlocks—never idles his motor. In his first campaign as a regular, Smith got his hands into everything (114 tackles, a team-leading 10 pass deflections, three fumble-cause hits, two pass interceptions—one a 68-yard TD vs. UCF, and one fumble recovery). Can there be a better SS in the Mid-Am? Or bigger "nuisance" in the loop? Exactly what Novak likes. Smith makes plays.

"Ray's active out there," said Novak with maybe the 1-A Quote of the Year. "I really like the way he plays. Ray plays like he has stuck his finger in an electrical socket. He makes things happen."

At the corners—no, it's not a mirage—Northern Illinois features "The Twins." Not the Bobbsey version, but the Hansbro Twins—Adriel and Alvah. The 5-foot-10, 175-pound Adriel—the oldest identical twin by 60 seconds—is also the most experienced on the field with 14 career starts (81 tackles, 11 starts, seven pass deflections, and two interceptions in 2004). The 5-10, 174-pound Alvah owns one career start against Eastern Michigan—subbing for his brother (who else?)—and produced 38 stops and one deflection last autumn. Nicknames for both Hansbros? "Twin."

Right now, junior **Dustin Utschig** appears to have won the No. 1 FS job over classmate **Mark**



**Brian Van Acker (65), C**

**Reiter.** The 5-11, 189-pound Utschig blocked a punt that led to a field goal in the Troy game and was named Silicon Valley Football Classic Special Teams MVP. In 10 2004 appearances, Utschig posted 13 tackles overall. The 6-foot-1, 192-pound Reiter made three stops in 12 contests a year ago.

"Right now, two of our defensive strengths in the past—linebacker and the secondary—are not that deep," Novak said. "Some of our red-shirt and true freshmen might have to help us." Novak's top-notch 2005 recruiting class featured seven or eight athletic types who could play in the secondary. On the summer personnel board, five are listed on the DB board—**Bradley Pruitt** and **Melvin Rice** at CB,

**Jeff Fontana** at SS, plus 6-3 **Justin Anderson** and **Spencer Williamson** at FS. Senior **Deon Smith** and junior **Andre Morris** are in the mix at CB.

**The Special Teams:** This area mirrors the overall 2005 Northern Illinois prospects—in other words, rock solid in some phases and on-the-job training in others. Name a better PK in the MAC than soph **Chris Nendick**, one of the top frosh in-steps in America and, statistically, the best freshman PK in the Huskie Record Book. Named Honorable Mention All-MAC and Second-Team Frosh All-America by *The Sporting News*, the 5-foot-11, 160-pound side-winder finished No. 9 in NCAA 1-A kick-scoring, plus No. 22 in overall scoring (8.3 ppg.), and No. 22 in field goals (1.33 pg.) last fall. Nendick's 99 kick-scoring points marked the second-best overall single-season total behind all-time Northern Illinois leader **Steve Azar** (104 points in 2003). With the graduation of two-year regular **Anthony Gallagher**, the punting duties will probably be handled by true frosh **Andy Dittbenner** or soph transfer **Jason Baez**. Senior **Jason Labus** returns as the lone snapper. On returns, the Huskies will miss the daredevil Sheldon who set at least seven school PR standards and led the NCAA with a 22.7 average as a soph in 2002. Sheldon topped the locals with 24 punt returns for 394 yards last year. On KO returns, Hickenbottom led the way with 16 for 367 yards in 2004. Watch for Utschig and Reiter returning punts and Harris, Perez, or Wolfe on kickoff return duty.

**The Outlook:** Sixth straight winning season in Huskieville? Could be, if Novak and Company survive the grueling Michigan and Northwestern start and round into form by the start of the MAC schedule. With its first taste of postseason play in 21 years, Northern Illinois enjoyed the experience and wants to repeat the bowl process. Despite the graduation losses, the Huskies rank among the MAC's Big Four and the Top Two in the West Division. The long-time program goal—the school's first Mid-Am championship since 1983—means Northern Illinois must win in Toledo for the first time since 1972. In Novak terms, the Huskies must find a starting quarterback, produce a seventh straight 1,000-yard rusher, and, oh yes, make plays.

## Huskie Plus / Minus Chart

### Defense:

#### Lettermen Returning (18)

DE	QUINCE HOLMAN (6-3, 261, Sr.)-## KEN WEST (6-3, 235, Jr.)-## Robert Oruche (6-2, 241, So.)-#
DT	Eric Pittman (6-2, 272, Jr.)-## Zack Holycross (6-5, 268, So.)-#
NT	ADAM SCHROEDER (6-4, 277, So.)-# Martin Wilson (6-1, 279, Sr.)-### Brad Benson (6-3, 251, Jr.)-##
LB	JAVAN LEE (6-2, 222, Sr.)-### Jason Hutton (6-1, 239, Sr.)-###
CB	ADRIEL HANSBRO (5-10, 174, Jr.)-## Alvah Hansbro (5-10, 175, Jr.)-## Deon Smith (5-9, 183, Sr.)-### Andre Morris (5-8, 172, Jr.)-#
SS	RAY SMITH (6-2, 185, Sr.)-###
FS	Mark Reiter (6-1, 192, So.)-# Dustin Utschig (5-11, 189, Jr.)-#
LS	JASON LABUS (6-1, 240, Sr.)-#

#### Impact Newcomers (4)

DE	Larry English (6-2, 231, Fr.-RS)
LB	T. J. Griffin (6-0, 218, Fr.-RS) Tim McCarthy (6-0, 217, Fr.-RS)
P	Andy Dittbenner (6-1, 180, Fr.)

#### Lettermen Lost (11)

DE	TRAVIS MOORE (6-1, 257, Sr.)-#### Kursten Strothman (6-2, 255, Sr.)-####
LB	BRIAN ATKINSON (6-1, 235, Sr.)-#### JASON HAWKINS (6-2, 218, Sr.)-#### Marlon Watson (6-2, 216, Sr.)-## Dallas Bassett (5-11, 228, Jr.)-#
CB	ROB LEE (6-1, 193, Sr.)-### Joe Hilby (5-6, 161, Sr.)-##
FS	LIONEL HICKENBOTTOM (5-11, 197, Sr.)-### Devron Francis (5-9, 187, Sr.)-####
P	ANTHONY GALLAGHER (6-0, 194, Sr.)-##

**Key:** #-# Indicates number of varsity letters won.

2004 STARTERS CAPITALIZED

# Q&A WITH JOE NOVAK

**Q: What thoughts flashed through your mind last December during the moments you held up the Silicon Valley Football Classic trophy?**

A: "All the progress we've made. How rewarding that moment was for everybody involved in our program. There's only a few of us who know how far we've really come. The trophy says 'Champions.' That's what it's about. Our kids are champions."

**Q: The bowl win certainly was a fitting reward for a program that has won 19 of its last 25 games. But your bottom line goal is still winning the Mid-American Conference championship, correct?**

A: "Exactly. That hasn't changed the last 10 years. Our goal is to win the MAC. Win the (West) division, get in the Championship Game, and win the MAC. Then, the bowl thing takes care of itself. To be honest, we've come close. But we haven't gotten the job done. We still have work to do. Our kids know that. Win the MAC."

**Q: So the word complacency is not in the Northern Illinois off-season vocabulary?**

A: "There's two things about our MAC championship goal. With our first bowl win in 21 years, our kids will be driven to do it again. They've gotten a little taste of success. That's important. You're conditioned by that success and driven to do it again. Coming off a bowl and then opening at Michigan, our team morale and off-season have been great. What better motivators could you have other than a bowl and Michigan?"

**Q: Okay, you come off five consecutive winning seasons—which is unprecedented during the Huskies' tenure as a major-college since 1969, shares of three MAC West Division titles in the last four years, back-to-back Top 30 poll finishes, and a bowl success, what are the expectations of this group?**

A: "With our success, sure, the expectations are higher. Our kids believe in themselves. They know how to work. They believe they can win. That mindset is a critical factor in our turnaround process. That said, right now, this is the most inexperienced team we've had over the last four-to-five seasons and we start with an awfully tough schedule. At the same time, we have many question marks at this point. We've lost 26 starters the last two years—check it out—and 13 or 14 (14) of those guys were All-MAC caliber players. People need to have a little patience. In recent years, we've been fortunate to have kids who came in and stepped it up for us. Kids like Vinson Reynolds, a Brad Cieslak, a Brian Van Acker, a Ray Smith, a Ben Lueck, a Garrett Wolfe."

**Q: Are you saying the 2005 Huskies might get younger?**

A: "We may not have a choice. I can see several freshmen contributing—at wide receiver, at linebacker, or in our secondary. Maybe, some starting. It's a sign that we stepped up our recruiting. We're excited about this freshman class. If they're good enough to play, they'll play."



**Q: Who replaces three-year starter Josh Haldi at quarterback?**

A: "This happens all the time in football. Every three or four years, you're looking for a new starter at a certain position. We do have some experience and some talent at quarterback, but you don't immediately replace the experience that Josh had. That's impossible. Josh could make some big plays, but most of all, he played sound football within our system. Everybody wants an athletic quarterback who can break contain and make a ton of big plays. No defense can stop that. That drives defensive coordinators crazy. (Michigan's) Jim Harbaugh did that all the time to us at Indiana. At the same time, you can't have a high-powered offense, make mistakes, and turn over the ball all the time. The turnovers will kill you. You can't beat yourself. If we make a ton of mistakes early in the year, we'll get killed."

**Q: So who's the No. 1 QB?**

A: "I could rank them today and that could change in a minute. I like the competition at this spot. Someone could win the job in August two-a-days or it might be the week of the Michigan game. The summer is critical. All four can run our offense, but each brings something different. I thought Phil Horvath established himself in the Bowling Green game. That gives him an edge. Zach Ullrich has some playing time. Britt Davis and Dan Nicholson have tremendous potential. Britt is athletic and can run. Dan might have the best

throwing arm of any quarterback in my tenure here. Even if it's Phil (Horvath), he hasn't played that much. And to open there (Michigan), that's a tough way to go. That's what it is. It will be a great experience, but the kids are gonna have to grow up fast."

**Q: How good are your tailbacks A.J. Harris and Garrett Wolfe? Any thoughts about playing them in the backfield at the same time?**

A: "That is, in my opinion, the best running tandem in the country—bar none. What a year both Garrett and A.J. had. They're pretty darned good. With A.J. and Garrett, we've got a great change-up situation—one with power and another with speed. Both in our backfield at the same time? I don't know. We experimented with that a couple of years ago with Thomas Hammock and Michael Turner. You might see A.J. or Cas Prime out on the flank at H-back in a passing situation for us."

**Q: What's the status of your receiving corps?**

A: "No question we lost a good one in Danny Sheldon. At wide receiver or on punt returns, he was a big play guy for us. At tight end, Brad Cieslak had a career year last season. Which

is why both Danny and Brad are National Football League free agents. Sam Hurd and Shatone Powers need to have great senior years. Jarret Carter had a great spring. This is where some of the younger guys—Matt Simon, Greg Turner, Marcus Perez, and even true freshmen like Orlando Moore, Justin Williams, or Preston Williams—can help us."

**Q: Outside of the deep backfield, what's the other major plus in the Northern Illinois One Back offense?**

A: "Our offensive line. (Last year, it was) the best overall, across the board, in my time here. There may not have been a Ryan Diem or McAllister Collins in there, but as a group, as a unit, the top seven or eight were solid. We're going to miss Jake VerStraete and Matt McGhghy, but we've got three returning regulars from 2004 in Brian Van Acker, Doug Free, and Ben Lueck. I thought Ben and McGhghy were the two best offensive guards in our league last year. After the Maryland game last year, Brian did nothing but improve each week. Doug is so athletic and has a future at the next level. Thanks to the NCAA, Ben received a sixth year. He was our Most Improved Player last season. Jake Ebenhoch and Matt Rogers both started in 2003. Ebenhoch is an overachiever and made himself into a starter. Guys like Chris Acevedo, George Daglas, Kevin Serfort can step up for us. I think our football team will be as good as the O-line can be."

# Q&A WITH JOE NOVAK

**Q: What do you feel is the best attribute of your offense?**

A: "Two things. One is balance. I think we have the ability to be able to run the ball or throw it. That's important, because people in this day and age will try to take either one away on defense. To me, having the ability to be balanced on offense is critical. It is unbelievable to me that we only lost one fumble last year—and that was on a kickoff return in our opener against Maryland. For the number of times that we carry the football, that is truly an amazing statistic. I will say this: That we preach, drill, and emphasize ball security all the time. Again, you don't want to beat yourself."

**Q: Where's your Attack Four-Three defense by comparison?**

A: "It's the age old problem. What's better? Talent or experience? As a group, our defense is a little more inexperienced than in the past. Look at our roster. We've lost 11 defensive starters the last two years. That's a big hit, but that attrition eventually affects everyone. We have talent. But some new guys have to step up and make plays for us. Our young guys are not going to play like veterans off the bat."

**Q: Traditionally, Northern Illinois has featured big play linebackers. Is Javan Lee in that Nick Duffy / Brian Atkinson mold?**

A: "Javan can make a lot of big plays. He has a lot of ability, runs well to the ball, and kind of slithers through seams on offense. Overall, Javan's faster than Brian Atkinson, very instinctive, and just needs to be more consistent. Right now, two of our defensive strengths in the past—linebacker and the secondary—are not that deep. Some red-shirt and true freshmen might have to help us. T.J. Griffin played both ways in high school. With all the depth at tailback, we felt we could get another good athlete on the field by moving him to linebacker instead of having him stand on the sidelines next to me. T.J. really surfaced (last December) and I think he will really be a player. Tim McCarthy is a tough kid, instinctive. He reminds me of Nick Duffy. Tim will be a good player. We just have to be patient with Tim and all these younger guys. Look at that incoming freshman class. There's some exceptional athletic talent in that bunch. It could be an interesting August."

**Q: What's the status of your defensive line?**

A: "We're better upfront than we have been. We've got some numbers, some depth, and some decent experience. I thought Larry English showed great potential last year before getting hurt early. Ken West showed he was capable. Marty Wilson is one of our top weight-lifters,

worked hard, and played well. Quince Holman is unique. He has really matured in the last six-to-eight months. He's a big kid with natural quickness and explosion. Inside, he's quicker. On the edge, he's bigger. I think Quince is one of the top pass rushers in our league."

**Q: You always talk about putting playmakers on the field, particularly in the secondary. What made you notice strong safety Ray Smith?**



A: "Ray's active out there. I really like the way he plays. Ray plays like he has stuck his finger in an electrical socket. He makes things happen. I thought Ray was very underrated last year. He stepped in for Akil Grant and never missed a beat. Ray is a very intelligent player and watches a lot of film. It's a cliché, but he is a coach on the field. At 6-foot-2, he can be an imposing figure back there."

**Q: Strong special teams play has always been a Northern Illinois hallmark in your tenure. How do they rate for 2005?**

A: "Special teams are an area that I feel really good about. Who could've figured the tremendous freshman year that Chris Nendick had? Chris is kicking better now than he did last year. Steve Azar had a great career here. I think Chris might have a little better leg strength and could be better than Azar—and that's saying something. With Anthony Gallagher graduated, we'll have a new punter whose first college game will be at Michigan. We're not sure who are punt returners are right now. Lionel Hickenbottom did a great job on kickoff returns. Maybe we can use A.J. or Garrettt there. I felt good about our kick coverage. That's an area where we put in some time and effort."

**Q: How did Northern Illinois go from an also-ran to a Mid-American Conference contender?**

A: "It comes with time, patience, work ethic, belief, teamwork. In our case, it's 10 years and, remember,

we still have not reached our original goal of winning the MAC. It's not an overnight process. You don't have to go back that far to recall the 23-game losing streak and fighting tooth-and-nail for that first winning season."

**Q: Do you feel comfortable with the Huskies being included among the current MAC "Big Four" with Toledo, Miami (OH), and Bowling Green State?**

A: To a degree. It's flattering. To take nothing away from our program, I don't think we've accomplished as much as Toledo, Miami, and Bowling Green have in our league. We have not sustained the consistent winning or reached the MAC Championship Game as they all have."

**Q: Every preseason football publication predicates the success of your 2005 season based on the outcome of the November 16 showdown at Toledo. What are your thoughts on that match-up?**

A: "Toledo is the pick in the West. That's who I would pick to win the West. Since 1997, they have made the MAC Championship Game five times. Toledo is Toledo. To get where we want our program to go, we have to beat them or go through them. You know, maybe it's my fault. Maybe I've put too much emphasis on this particular game and, in the process, somehow psyched out our kids or put too much pressure on them. I've thought about this since last November. I don't know. I really don't believe in jinxes or whammies or whatever."

**Q: While Northern Illinois has played Big Ten Conference football opposition since 1971, this marks the first time the Huskies have played at Michigan. Your reaction?**

A: "A couple things. We look at it as a great challenge and opportunity for Northern Illinois football. Michigan is the wingest major-college football program in recorded history. What is it, 30 consecutive bowl appearances for them? Remember when we scheduled Alabama and Nick Duffy wanted to know if we could play in 'The Big House' (Michigan). Two years later, we are. Amazing. It's a great venue. That said, we have ten other games—including one at Northwestern the next week. If we learned anything from the 10-2 season in 2003, it was to take care of business in the MAC. Sure, the national recognition would be super for our program, but we have one goal: Win the MAC."

# PRESEASON 2005 DEPTH CHART

## Offense (One Back)

<b>SE</b>	84	Sam Hurd
	2	Matt Simon
<b>LT</b>	62	Doug Free
	70	Chris Acevedo
<b>LG</b>	79	Ben Lueck
	74	Matt Biondi
<b>C</b>	65	Brian Van Acker
	75	Ryan Tuggle
<b>RG</b>	68	Jake Ebenhoch
	60	Jon Brost
<b>RT</b>	61	Matt Rogers
	58	George Daglas
<b>TE</b>	86	Jake Nordin
	80	Pat Raleigh
<b>QB</b>	3	Phil Horvath
	4	Zach Ullrich
<b>R</b>	91	David Koronkiewicz
	88	Brandon Beal
<b>TB</b>	1	Garrett Wolfe
	24	A.J. Harris
<b>FLK</b>	14	Jarret Carter
<b>or</b>	5	Marcus Perez
<b>WR</b>	83	Shatone Powers
	15	Edgar Rodriguez

## Defense (Attack Four-Three)

<b>LE</b>	34	Ken West
	55	Erek Benz
<b>DT</b>	98	Eric Pittman
	63	Zack Holycross
<b>NT</b>	90	Martin Wilson
	49	Brad Benson
<b>RE</b>	96	Quince Holman
	51	Larry English
<b>SLB</b>	43	T.J. Griffin
	46	Luke Athans
<b>MLB</b>	85	Jason Hutton
	53	Tim McCarthy
<b>WLB</b>	47	Javan Lee
	9	Josh Allen
<b>SSCB</b>	12	Adriel Hansbro
	28	Andre Morris
<b>SS</b>	48	Ray Smith
	23	Saul Ibarra
<b>FS</b>	35	Dustin Utschig
	8	Mark Reiter
<b>WSCB</b>	11	Alvah Hansbro
	29	Deon Smith

## Specialists

<b>PK</b>	25	Chris Nendick
	10	Luke Biondi
<b>H</b>	3	Phil Horvath
	4	Zach Ullrich
<b>LS</b>	46	Jason Labus
	53	Dan Holzapfel
<b>KO</b>	25	Chris Nendick
<b>P</b>	18	Andy Dittbenner
	45	Jason Baez
<b>KOR</b>	1	Garrett Wolfe
	24	A.J. Harris
<b>PR</b>	35	Dustin Utschig
	8	Mark Reiter

(July 23, 2005)

# FINAL 2004 DEPTH CHART

## Offense (One Back)

<b>SE</b>	84	Sam Hurd
	14	Jarret Carter
<b>LT</b>	62	Doug Free
	70	Chris Acevedo
<b>LG</b>	79	Ben Lueck
	61	Matt Rogers
<b>C</b>	65	Brian Van Acker
	58	George Daglas
<b>RG</b>	71	Matt McGhghy
	68	Jake Ebenhoch
<b>RT</b>	66	Jake VerStraete
	77	Mark Orszula
<b>TE</b>	89	Brad Cieslak
	86	Jake Nordin
<b>QB</b>	10	Josh Haldi
	3	Phil Horvath
<b>TB</b>	1	Garrett Wolfe
	24	A.J. Harris
<b>FLK</b>	81	Marcus Perez
<b>or</b>	7	David McDermott
<b>WR</b>	5	Dan Sheldon
	83	Shatone Powers

## Defense (Attack Four-Three)

<b>LE</b>	96	Quince Holman
	34	Ken West
<b>DT</b>	90	Martin Wilson
	63	Zack Holycross
<b>NT</b>	92	Adam Schroeder
	49	Brad Benson
<b>RE</b>	56	Travis Moore
	95	Robert Oruche
<b>SLB</b>	85	Jason Hutton
	41	Marlon Watson
<b>MLB</b>	38	Brian Atkinson
	33	Keenan Blalark
<b>WLB</b>	22	Jason Hawkins
	47	Javan Lee
<b>SSCB</b>	12	Adriel Hansbro
	28	Andre Morris
<b>SS</b>	48	Ray Smith
	17	Mark Reiter
<b>FS</b>	9	Lionel Hickenbottom
	23	Devron Francis
<b>WSCB</b>	27	Rob Lee
	11	Alvah Hansbro

## Specialists

<b>PK</b>	25	Chris Nendick
	26	Anthony Gallagher
<b>H</b>	3	Phil Horvath
	5	Dan Sheldon
<b>LS</b>	46	Jason Labus
	50	Kursten Strothman
<b>KO</b>	26	Anthony Gallagher
<b>P</b>	26	Anthony Gallagher
	3	Phil Horvath
<b>KOR</b>	81	Marcus Perez
	9	Lionel Hickenbottom
<b>PR</b>	5	Dan Sheldon
	9	Lionel Hickenbottom

(December 30, 2004 - vs Troy)