

On campus today

SPORTS AT NMU

1975: NCAA Champions

Football Program Celebrates 35th Anniversary of Title Game

By Dylan Ebbers

When the 1974 season ended, the Wildcat football team put that year's 0-10 record in the rear view mirror and didn't look back. From that point on, it was all about staying positive and regrouping. When the 1975 season began and wins started racking up, especially the one against Division I Central Michigan (17-16), that attitude changed from "being positive" to "keep winning." Northern rolled to a 13-1-0 record in '75 and used grit and determination to win three come-from-behind NCAA Division II playoff games, including the 16-14 win over Western Kentucky in the Camellia Bowl for the national crown.

But it almost didn't happen. In the last regular-season game, a 27-23 win against Western Illinois, the 'Cats were behind late in the game. NMU was used to rallying back for wins—they'd been doing it all season—but the Wildcats were down 17 points going into the fourth quarter. NMU managed to score the two TDs needed in the fourth, but were still down three points in the closing seconds of the game. To this day, the players can't describe what happened on the last play.

"All I remember is seeing Maurice Mitchell sprawled out mid-air, then a celebration," says quarterback Steve Mariucci, who is now an NFL Network commentator and a former NFL head coach. "I threw the

ball to the corner of the end zone and Mitchell stood up with it seconds after. Apart from a total team effort to never give up, that catch was what sent us to the playoffs. The team never quit at any point that season. It was as if we knew our destiny."

Says tackle Tom Gilbert, now owner of Gilbert & Associates, a real estate appraisal firm, "I got back home from the Western Illinois game and my frat brothers were giving their condolences saying can't win 'em all, better luck next time. To my confusion, they had turned off the game in the third quarter."

Having captured an NCAA playoff bid with the win, NMU began practicing on Memorial Field for its upcoming games. There were sheets of snow covering the field in late November, blizzards in early December. "There is a running joke on the team that we invented arena football because of the snow banks the plows would make around Memorial Field," says Randy Awrey, 1975 running back and current NMU defensive coordinator. "They had to plow it every day so we would be able to practice, and by the time we got to Boise, Wichita Falls and Sacramento, we were wearing our summer gear in their 40-degree weather."

Due to NCAA transfer rules at the time, a few players who had been key to the Wildcats' regular-season success were ineligible to play in the

postseason, and that complicated matters. For example, running back Kurt Albrecht was forced to play line-backer, a position he had never played before. Such adjustments left many NMU fans doubting the likelihood of playoff success, but the team didn't veer from its goal: Find a way to just keep winning.

Game Highlights

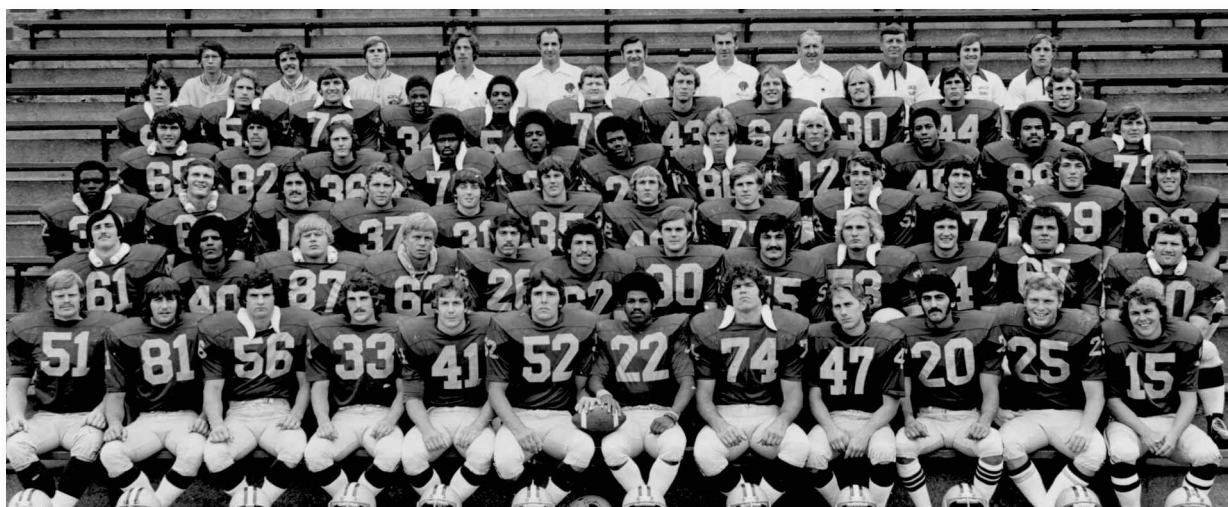
Quarterfinal: NMU 24, Boise State 21 at Boise, Idaho

Key Points of the Game:

Down 7-3 at the end of the first half, the spark of a 33-yard touchdown pass to Zach Fowler ignited the Wildcats offense. NMU didn't let down for the rest of the half, finishing the game with 213 yards rushing, 99 of which were from Mariucci. Thanks to strong NMU defensive play, including six recovered fumbles and an interception, NMU held off the Broncos for the win.

Player's Perspective:

Awrey: "There were a ton of people packed into Broncos' Stadium and the crowd was very loud. Boise State had a big team that was very hard hitting. If it hadn't been for a huge comeback in our previous game against Western Illinois (that got us into the playoffs), we wouldn't have been as prepared as we were. We went out, made good plays, good defensive stands and advanced to the semifinals."



The champion 1975 Wildcats. To learn more about the '75 team, go to www.nmu.edu/football.

Semifinal: NMU 28, Livingston 26 at Wichita Falls, Texas

Key Points of the Game:

Livingston ran its no-huddle wish-bone offense—a spread offense with two running backs—to perfection, finishing the first 15 minutes of play 10-0. The tide turned when NMU came out in the second quarter and scored on the first play with Mariucci completing a 57-yard touchdown pass to Maurice Mitchell, who caught the ball despite a defensive deflection.

Player's Perspective:

Mariucci: “We came out of the first quarter knowing we were down, but we also knew how to come back. You only believe you can come from behind if you’ve done it before. On the first play of the second quarter, I threw a pass to Mitchell and he took it down the right sideline to the end zone. We scored 21 more points after that in the same quarter, and rode those points ‘til the end of the game.”

Championship: NMU 16, Western Kentucky 14 at Sacramento, Calif., Dec. 13, 1975

Key Points of the Game:

Western Kentucky may have been starting its fourth-string quarterback for the entire season, but that offense

had got the team to the championship game. Against NMU, however, WKU was inefficient through the air, having to find success on the ground where two running backs tallied 302 yards, and behind its solid defense. After two WKU touchdowns and a rescinded NMU TD due to a penalty, the Wildcats settled for a field goal and had to prove once again that they had the grit to come from behind and win. A 49-yard Mariucci to Mitchell touchdown late in the first half was a turning point. Then on the first play of the third quarter, Awrey ran up the middle for a 67-yard TD, but the extra point attempt failed.

Down by only two, WKU had plenty of opportunities to retake the lead, including a missed field goal attempt. In the closing seconds of the game, Western Kentucky’s quarter-

back threw a ball to the red zone only to have the receiver’s feet go out of bounds. Gilbert, who had a forced fumble in the semifinal game, came up strong once again in the clutch with a sack on the next play, a fourth-down situation, ending the WKU drive and sealing the deal for NMU’s first National Championship.

Player's Perspective:

Gilbert: “Our defense at the time would switch tackles; I was strong-side tackle and Arden Olsen was left-side tackle. I had to switch to the right—almost didn’t switch—but decided to at the last second. I faked an inside move and went outside, got around the end and got the sack. The QB let out some profanity, which reminded me it was fourth down. I knew the game was over. We had won.”

Voigt joins 'Cats

Heidi Voigt was named the NMU swimming and diving coach, replacing Bob Laughna '69 BS who resigned in the spring after three years in the position. Voigt spent the past two seasons as an assistant coach at New Mexico State.

Last year, Voigt helped direct the Aggies to a program-best second-place showing at the Western Athletic Conference Championships. Voigt joined the Aggies after five seasons at Wyoming as graduate assistant and as assistant coach. She has a bachelor’s degree in athletic training and a master’s in health and kinesiology.

