

# Northeast Conference

200 Cottontail Lane • Vantage Court North • Somerset, NJ 08873  
(732) 469-0440 • Fax (732) 469-0744 • [www.northeastconference.org](http://www.northeastconference.org)



For Immediate Release  
August 12, 2008

## NEC Football Preview: Albany Expected to Succeed in NEC Football Title Defense *2007 Champion Great Danes Edge Out Monmouth In 2008 Preseason Poll*

**Somerset, NJ** -- After completing an undefeated run through its 2007 league schedule, defending Northeast Conference champion Albany finds itself atop the conference's 2008 preseason football coaches' poll. The Great Danes, who are in search of a fourth league crown, garnered five first-place votes in the annual survey of the league head coaches. The NEC announced the rankings along with its preseason all-conference teams during a media teleconference on Tuesday morning in preparation for the league's 13th football season.

Attracting two first-place nods, five-time league champion Monmouth finished second in the poll followed by 2007 NEC runner-up Central Connecticut State, and its one first-place vote, in third. Wagner claimed the fourth spot, edging out the league's two Pittsburgh, PA-based members. Selected to finish fifth in its inaugural NEC football season, the 11-time Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference champion Duquesne Dukes sit one place ahead of local rival, and five-time conference winner, Robert Morris. Sacred Heart and Saint Francis (PA) round out the poll, respectively.

### Northeast Conference Football 2008 Preseason Coaches Poll

1. Albany (5)
2. Monmouth (2)
3. Central Connecticut State (1)
4. Wagner
5. Duquesne
6. Robert Morris
7. Sacred Heart
8. Saint Francis (PA)

*First place votes in parentheses*

**Albany (8-4, 6-0 NEC)** owns the moniker of preseason favorite for the third year running. The Great Danes were the 2006 runner-up after taking first in the preseason poll that season before living up to their preseason billing in 2007. With a 6-0 league record, Albany became the first team to run through its conference schedule unscathed since Sacred Heart won all eight of its conference games in 2001. Before Albany officially begins its title defense when it opens league play at Duquesne on October 4, head coach **Bob Ford**, as he routinely does, will put his team through a crucible known as the Great Danes non-conference schedule. Opening the season with four consecutive road dates at Colonial Athletic Association Football members (Massachusetts, Hofstra, New Hampshire, Delaware), the Great Danes will see four programs that were all ranked amongst the nation's Top 25 at numerous junctures during the season.

Going up against some of the CAA's top defenses in the early going, preseason all-NEC junior tailback **David McCarty (Gansevoort, NY/La Salle Institute)** will run behind a burly, but skilled, offensive line that contains two fellow preseason all-league choices. Senior tackle **Raphael Nguti (Rochester, NY/Brighton)** and junior center **Kevin Richards (Clifton Park, NY/Shenendehowa)** helped power the conference's top scoring offense (28.4 ppg) and second-leading ground game (208.9 ypg). Perennially a run-heavy offense that ranks amongst the league's top ground games, Albany's 2007 attack featured a potent passing game too, and 2008 opponents can expect more of the same. In addition to tailback David McCarty's 1,503 rushing yards, which came up 21 yards shy of the program's single-season record, junior quarterback **Vinny Esposito (Demarest, NJ/Northern Valley)** passed for the second-most yards in UA's history. Esposito completed 154-of-277 attempts for 1,810 yards and 12 TDs.

(2008 NEC Football Preseason Poll Release; 1-of-4)

Central Connecticut State University • Fairleigh Dickinson University • Long Island University  
Monmouth University • Mount St. Mary's University • Quinnipiac University  
Robert Morris University • Sacred Heart University • St. Francis (NY) College  
Saint Francis (PA) University • Wagner College

As has been the case for a number of years, the Great Danes found themselves amongst the league leaders in scoring defense (second), rushing defense (first), and total defense (second). Preseason all-NEC selections **Dave West (Toms River, NJ/TR North)**, **Justin Brancaccio (Rockaway, NJ/Morris Knolls)**, and **Tom Pandolf (Holbrook, NY/Sachem)** will have the task of keeping Albany there for yet another season. West, a senior and second team all-NEC safety, has 34 career games and 100 tackles under his belt. Brancaccio, a team captain, will no longer have two-time NEC Defensive Player of the Year Colin Disch playing alongside of him at inside linebacker, but the man who made 63 tackles last season has the confidence of his coach. Pandolf, a senior nose guard, made 34 tackles and four sacks last season.

**Monmouth (4-6, 3-3 NEC)**, the preseason poll's runner-up, hopes its vast experience across the board will help the Hawks climb back to the perch it held atop the NEC in 2006. Head coaching veteran **Kevin Callahan** returns one of the league's more experienced squads, which features numerous fifth-year seniors at key positions. One of those veterans will start under center in the form of 2007 all-NEC first teamer **Brett Burke (Wall, NJ/Wall)**. Taking over the starting reigns last season, Burke smoothly administered the NEC's top-ranked passing attack. The Jersey Shore native, who is precise with his throws, led the league in passing yards (1,957), attempts (296), completions (191), and completion percentage (64.5). Fellow fifth-year senior **Nick LoCastro (Wenonah, NJ/Gateway Regional)** will protect Burke's blindside after surrendering only one sack in that spot last season. His all-NEC colleague Jon Dunn is gone, but preseason all-conference guard **Shawn Wright (Fort Washington, MD/Dematha)** is a proven commodity, having started in all ten of the Hawks' games en route to second team all-league accolades.

In addition to experience, Monmouth has its share of explosiveness, epitomized by the running of all-conference back **Dave Sinisi (Cedar Grove, NJ/Cedar Grove)**. Sinisi, one of the league's four 1,000-yard rushers a season ago, ran for a program-record 1,184 yards on 206 attempts. Ranked ninth nationally in all-purpose yardage (178.7/g) en route to establishing another single-season program record, the Monmouth tailback found the end zone 17 times on the season. On the defensive side, senior cornerback **Ayo Falae (Newark, NJ/Barringer)** combines experience and explosiveness to anchor the secondary. Falae, who was credited with 13 passes defended last season, is one of two preseason all-league picks for the Hawks on defense. Senior **Kevin Walsh (Mt. Laurel, NJ/Lenape)** received the honor for the second consecutive summer after leading Monmouth with 10.0 tackles for a loss a year ago. Walsh, a 2007 postseason second team choice, showed a tendency to raise his level of play against top competition, registering ten tackles at Maine while forcing a fumble to go with two tackles for a loss at Delaware. That tendency will be a welcome one this season, considering the Hawks' tough non-league slate that opens at Rhode Island followed by home dates with Maine and Coastal Carolina.

**Central Connecticut State (6-5, 4-2 NEC)** nearly captured a share of its third NEC crown in four years before Albany dashed those title hopes on the final day of the regular season at Arute Field. Head coach **Jeff McInerney's** Blue Devils hope to duplicate the great rushing success that propelled them into that title game with Albany. The Blue Devils boasted the nation's 10th-ranked rushing offense last season, averaging 258 yards per contest with contributions from numerous ball carriers. Although the man responsible for carrying about half of the rushing load last season, Jo Jo Freeman, is gone, CCSU should not have much trouble in finding a capable replacement. Junior running back **James Mallory (Buffalo, NY/Kenmore West)** saw action in all 11 games last season, gaining 243 yards and a touchdown on 42 attempts. Preseason all-conference return specialist **Josue Paul (Delray Beach, FL/Pope John Paul II)** provides McInerney with a lightning-fast option who received only eight hand-offs last season, but took one of them 82 yards for a touchdown in addition to wreaking havoc in the return game. Senior quarterback **Aubrey Norris (Staten Island, NY/Hargrave Military)** should also heavily factor into the ground game. Sharing snaps with the since-graduated Ryan Holmes, Norris, the 2005 NEC Offensive Rookie of the Year, rushed for 405 yards and four scores while maintaining a league-high 152.12 passer efficiency rating in 2007.

Behind first team all-NEC defensive end **Ernie Greywacz (New Canaan, CT/New Canaan)**; CCSU will look to improve in the area of scoring defense after allowing 28.4 points per contest. Greywacz showed his capabilities to play the run and rush the passer, making 73 tackles and notching eight sacks (-40 yds) while his play-making ability resulted in five pass break-ups, three fumble recoveries, and two forced fumbles. Any pressure Greywacz and his linemates can put on the passer will only help the Blue Devils' already-strong secondary which features senior cornerback **Anthony Wilson (Norwalk, CT/Brien McMahon)**, a 2006 all-NEC second teamer that saw his 2007 season cut down to two games due to injury. Senior **Michael Bailey (Yonkers, NY/Gorton)**, a captain for a second straight season, made 54 tackles and one interception at safety last season for the Blue Devils. The versatile senior has added bulk and could see some time at linebacker

in 2008 to compensate for losing former all-league linebacker Chris Stimmel.

After a tough 2006 season, long-time **Wagner (7-4, 3-3 NEC)** head coach **Walt Hameline** brought his Seahawks back into contention last season before some late struggles sunk their title hopes. Hameline graduated three first team all-conference players who made immense contributions in sparking Wagner to a 3-0 conference start. Although the Seahawks will surely miss Jason Butler and his 1,713 rushing yards, the second-greatest single-season total in the NEC's history, they will be glad to welcome back starting senior quarterback **Matt Abbey (La Canada, CA/St. Francis)** and welcome in University of Iowa transfer **Adam Farnsworth (North Ogden, UT/Iowa)**. Abbey, a two-year starter, ranks tenth on the program's all-time passing list, but may face a challenge from Farnsworth after the junior transfer's impressive spring outings. As for the running back void, Hameline may look to senior **Rodney Davis (Bristol, PA/Neshaminy)** or transfers **Prince Young (Neptune, NJ/Brick Memorial)** and **Shane Smith (Susquehanna, PA/Honesdale)**, who began his career at Central Florida.

Wagner's top-ranked scoring defense, which surrendered a stingy 16.1 points per game, remains fairly in tact with the return of three important players up front and two experienced linebackers. Senior **Adrian Adderley (Carver's Ranch, FL/Monsignor Pace)** and junior **Joseph Harkins (Washington, DC/St. John's HS)** join third team Associated Press All-American **Robert Brown (Rome, NY/Rome Free Academy)** on the defensive line. Brown amassed 10 sacks for a per-game average that ranked him fourth nationally to go along with 45 tackles, including his 15.0 hits for a loss. Although leading tackler, and first team all-league choice, Bryan Brand is gone, seniors **Jason Haskins (Jackson, NJ/Matawan)** and **Jeremy Spinks (Tampa, FL/Chamberlain)** bring back 72 tackles apiece with the latter earning a preseason all-league nod.

Duquesne brings years of a successful tradition into the Northeast Conference as head coach **Jerry Schmitt** prepares the 11-time Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference champions for their inaugural NEC season. Schmitt acclimated the Dukes to their new league by scheduling four NEC members during the Pittsburgh-based institution's final season in the MAAC. Duquesne won three of those contests thanks, in part, to the performance of preseason all-NEC quarterback **Kevin Rombach (Harrisburg, PA/Central Dauphin)** who passed for an average of 264 yards per game in those victories. Displaying an accurate arm, the skilled signal caller set a single-season program record with his 61.0 completion percentage in leading an offensive unit that gained an average of 407 yards per contest. Two-time all-MAAC selection **J.T. Stefanik (Uniontown, PA/Laurel Highlands)** will protect Rombach's blindside, manning the left tackle spot where he has started 19 of the past 20 games.

On the other side of the ball, where Stefanik played as a freshman, **Mykol Gardiner (Cleveland, OH/Benedictine)** anchors the defensive front. Gardiner, a two-time all-MAAC selection, posted 7.5 sacks over ten games last season to up his career total to 14.0 and rank amongst the nation's best pass rushers. Gardiner enjoyed his best game in a tight, 24-17 victory over regional rival Saint Francis (PA) during which he totaled seven tackles and two sacks. Returning to join Gardiner on defense is the extremely versatile **Greg Hough (Gibsonia, PA/Pine-Richland)**. Earning first team 2006 all-MAAC honors at linebacker before his all-conference performance as a fullback last season, Hough will look to make his mark on defense once again. Hough started all ten games at outside linebacker as a sophomore, making 53 tackles and numerous key plays. The switch may pay dividends in reducing the 314 yards per game the Dukes surrendered when Hough was a member of the offensive unit. Leading a secondary that only allowed 170 yards per game through the air, preseason all-NEC cornerback **Aaron Strader (Pittsburgh, PA/Westinghouse)** has nine career interceptions in 27 games. Making nine starts at cornerback last season, the first team all-MAAC selection made 38 tackles, 26 of the solo variety.

**Robert Morris (4-6, 3-3 NEC)** continues its quest to return to NEC prominence under legendary head coach **Joe Walton**. The offensive mastermind, who once called plays for the Pittsburgh Steelers and New York Jets during his NFL coaching career, has a veteran under center. Senior quarterback **Erik Cwalinski (Jacobsburh, OH/Shadyside)** has the arm strength and physical tools to excel, but a 49.6 completion percentage in 2007 prevented the signal caller from living up to his preseason all-NEC selection. The senior quarterback will look to improve on his 183.8 yards per game passing average and 12 TDs from a year ago with senior receiver **Sherrod Evers (Philadelphia, PA/Mastbaum Area)** as his main target. Evers, an athletic target with good hands, returns after missing his junior season to injury. Sophomore tailback **Myles Russ (Boca Raton, FL/West Boca)** quickly climbed up the depth chart to lead RMU's ground game during his freshman season of 2007, carrying the ball a team-high 155 times for 594 yards.

Junior defensive end **Mark Szymanski (Cadogan, PA/Ford City)**, a 2007 second team all-conference member, averaged nearly seven tackles per game while pestering the passer as well as anyone in the league. The 6'2", 255-pound end registered seven solo sacks in nine games up front. Playing behind Szymanski, junior linebacker **Adam Lawrence (Big Run, PA/Dubois Area)** is the team's top returning tackler with 86 stops and should get plenty of play-making opportunities now that 2007 NEC Defensive Player of the Year Chad Wengert has graduated. In addition to boasting the NEC's best pass defense last season, Robert Morris was home to the league's punting leader. Sophomore **Nick Schirtzinger (Hurricane, WV/Hurricane)**, a preseason all-conference pick, averaged 41.4 yards per kick as a rookie.

**Sacred Heart (3-8, 0-6 NEC)** features one of the conference's most exciting young players in 2007 NEC Offensive Rookie of the Year **Dale Fink (Swansea, IL/Althoff Catholic)**. As a freshman, the field general led the NEC's third-ranked scoring offense (26.6 ppg) by tossing a league-best 23 touchdown passes. Despite missing two full games, and three quarters of a third, due to an ankle sprain, Fink completed 160-of-257 passes for 1,730 yards and a 142.11 passer efficiency rating on his way to winning four NEC Rookie of the Week awards. His main target, preseason all-league receiver **Steve Tedesco (Mission Viejo, CA/Trabuco Hills)**, is back for his junior season after making a league-high 59 catches for 737 yards and a conference-best 11 touchdown grabs. Tedesco, a 2007 CoSIDA Academic All-District honoree, stands only three touchdown catches short of the school's all-time mark with 16 and is also a dangerous punt returner. Jason Payne, whose 1,282 rushing yards last season ranked third in the NEC, has graduated, but that opens the door for the ever-capable **Evin Jones (Pennsauken, NJ/Roman Catholic)**. Splitting carries before Payne's mid-season eruption earned him more work, Jones will be head coach **Paul Gorham's** primary option in the backfield this season after reporting to camp in great shape.

The Pioneers started last season with back-to-back wins, but struggled in conference play due to an injury-depleted defense. Although leading tackler John Wilson is gone, the Sacred Heart unit looks to improve under the leadership of safety **Steve Young (Brooklyn, NY/Xaverian)**. The team's top returning tackler after logging 68 (42 solo) a year ago, Young anchors an experienced secondary that features senior cornerback **Rishard Brown (Miami, FL/Palmetto)**. Senior linebacker **Andrew Clayton (Egg Harbor Twp., NJ/Holy Spirit)** was slowed by injury last season, but still managed 43 tackles, including 3.0 hits for a loss, and a fumble recovery.

Sixth-year head coach **Dave Opfar** has undoubtedly elevated the Red Flash program during his first five years in Loretto, PA, but he hopes his Red Flash can take the next step with its young core paving the way. After a slow start, **Saint Francis (PA) (3-7, 2-4 NEC)** generated some late excitement by winning three of its last four contests. With the sixth-year head coach being a former defensive lineman on Penn State's 1982 National Championship squad, defense is naturally the first place for one to look when gauging an Opfar-led team. Featuring three talented sophomore linebackers, the Red Flash seem poised to dramatically cut down the 34 points per game Saint Francis (PA) surrendered last season. Sophomore **Scott Lewis (South Fork, PA/Bishop McCort)**, the 2007 NEC Defensive Rookie of the Year, leads the unit after completing his freshman season ranked fourth amongst all DI FCS tacklers (12.60 tackles/gm). Lewis' league-high 126 tackles stand as the fourth-best single-season total in NEC history and his 55 solo stops were 18th in the nation. Classmates **Matthew Parker (Darlington, PA/Blackhawk)** and **Ryan Shepard (Kittanning, PA/Kittanning)** ranked second and third behind Lewis in tackling with 82 and 57, respectively.

Junior quarterback **George Little (Duquesne, PA/Duquesne)**, who showed signs of progress as his first season as the starter unfolded, is back under center. The NEC's top-ranked player in total offense by edging out Monmouth's Brett Burke, Little will look to up his numbers with the help of all-NEC second team receiver **Antoine Rivera (Willingboro, NJ/Willingboro)**. The senior wide receiver led the league in receiving yards (885) and receiving yards per game (88.5) in 2007 as seven of his 48 receptions went for touchdowns. Junior **Calvin Williams (Cleveland, OH/Cleveland South)** developed into a reliable option at tailback as his sophomore campaign transpired. Highlighted by a 159-yard performance in a 23-20 road victory at Wagner, Williams totaled 721 yards and five scores on 147 attempts.