

# Northeast Conference

399 Campus Drive • First Floor • Somerset, NJ 08873  
(732) 469-0440 • Fax (732) 469-0744 • [www.northeastconference.org](http://www.northeastconference.org)



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## UAlbany Tabbed NEC Football Favorite for Fourth Year Running *Great Danes Take Aim at Third Consecutive Conference Crown*

**Somerset, NJ** -- UAlbany stands as the unanimous favorite to capture the 2009 Northeast Conference football crown, which would be its third straight. The Great Danes received eight first-place votes to finish atop an annual survey of league's head coaches for a fourth consecutive season. Monmouth, the 2008 NEC runner-up, garnered the lone remaining first-place nod to finish second in the preseason poll, the results of which were announced during a media teleconference Tuesday morning. The Conference also unveiled its Preseason All-NEC Team during the media session, which served as a prelude to the NEC's 14<sup>th</sup> season on the gridiron.

Central Connecticut State, which has posted a winning conference record in each of the past five seasons, claimed third in the poll ahead of Sacred Heart in fourth and Robert Morris in fifth. Embarking on its second NEC season, Duquesne was chosen sixth while new league member Bryant took seventh. Wagner, in eighth, and Saint Francis (PA), in ninth, round out the preseason selections.

The Northeast Conference kicks off the 2009 campaign on September 5 when all nine of its members take the field. Monmouth will host Duquesne to open the league schedule on September 19 in front of a NEC-TV audience, but it is not until October 3 that the NEC slate steps into full swing.

No program in Northeast Conference history has secured three consecutive outright league crowns, let alone three straight undefeated seasons. Not having lost a conference game since the 2006 season finale, **Albany (9-3, 7-0 NEC)** has the opportunity to accomplish both feats in 2009 and reigning NEC Coach of the Year Bob Ford welcomes back six preseason all-NEC performers to help in the effort. Walter Payton Award candidate **David McCarty (Gansevoort, NY/LaSalle Institute)**, the league's all-time single-season rushing leader (1,852), returns for his senior season at tailback. After moving from flanker into the backfield prior to the 2007 campaign, McCarty has rushed for a program-record 3,355 yards and 26 touchdowns in 24 games as the starter.

The Great Danes enjoy continuity at the other offense skill positions as well. All-NEC receiver **Tim Bush (Saratoga Springs, NY/Saratoga Springs)**, who gained a fifth year of eligibility due to medical hardship, owns Albany's single-season receptions record (67). Senior quarterback **Vinny Esposito (Demarest, NJ/Northern Valley Regional)** has a 17-7 career record as a starter and has thrown for 25 touchdowns to only 16 interceptions during that span.

Despite opening the 2008 season with three of four games against top-10 teams in FCS, Albany managed to lead the NEC in both scoring defense (18.2 ppg) and rushing defense (119.1 ypg). The Great Danes' three preseason all-NEC selections had much to do with that. Sophomore defensive end **Eddie Delaney (Holtsville, NY/Sachem East)** made 37 tackles and broke up six passes. Senior captain Justin Brancaccio led the linebacking corps with 91 tackles. Meanwhile, senior **Dave Casale (Troy, NY/Troy)** was all over field in making 74 tackles and seven interceptions.

### 2009 Northeast Conference Football Preseason Coaches Poll

1. Albany (8)
2. Monmouth (1)
3. Central Conn. St.
4. Sacred Heart
5. Robert Morris
6. Duquesne
7. Bryant
8. Wagner
9. Saint Francis (PA)

*First place votes in parentheses*

#### (2009 NEC Football Preview; 1-of-3)

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 • Bryant University (2012-13)

**Monmouth (7-4, 6-1 NEC)** has not finished lower than third in the Northeast Conference standings since 2002. The perennial title contender was the league's runner-up in 2007, falling only to NEC champion Albany on the road. Selected second in the preseason poll for the third straight season, Monmouth sets out in search of its sixth conference crown, and first since 2006. The last time the Hawks sunk their claws into the NEC crown, **Dave Sinisi (Cedar Grove, NJ/Cedar Grove)** was in his first year of duty as the starting tailback. Three seasons, 3,612 rushing yards, and one NEC Offensive Player of the Year award later, Sinisi would love to close his collegiate career in the same fashion he started it. The three-time all-NEC tailback, who rushed for 1,674 yards and a NCAA-best 22 touchdowns in 2008, is one of five returning starters on offense. The four others are on the offensive line. Senior captains **Kevin Sterling (Marlton, NJ/Cherokee)** and **Shawn Wright (Fort Washington, MD/Dematha)** return to a unit that not only paved the way for 192.7 yards per game rushing, but also provided premium protection for the passer. Monmouth ranked eighth amongst Division I FCS teams in surrendering only nine sacks in 11 games. Monmouth will miss 2008 NEC Defensive Player of the Year Kevin Walsh, but the former defensive end is only one of three starters lost from the NEC's second-ranked scoring defense (20.5 ppg). Fifth-year senior **David Kennedy (Fort Lee, NJ/Paterson Catholic)** returns to his interior line position from which he recorded 10.0 tackles for loss, including 5.5 sacks, last season. Starting free safety **Jose Gumbs (Queens, NY, Hebron Academy)** is the reigning NEC Defensive of the Year after making 60 tackles (43 solo) in 10 games last season.

The rushes and wins have piled up since Jeff McInerney's arrival in New Britain. **Central Connecticut State's (7-4, 4-3 NEC)** ground attack has ranked amongst the nation's top 10 in each of the head coach's three seasons at the helm, a span during which the Blue Devils own a 21-12 record. One of the NEC's three 1500-yard rushers last season, running back **James Mallory (Buffalo, NY/Kenmore West)** will be the focal point of a run game that features a mobile quarterback as well. Seniors **Aubrey Norris (Staten Island, NY/Hargrave Military)** and **Hunter Wanket (Rancho Santa Fe, CA/Palomar JC)**, both dangerously athletic, shared the snaps last season.

After earning 2007 all-NEC honors at tight end, **Greg Grochowski (Bristol, CT/Bristol Eastern)** made a successful transition to tackle where he played eight games in 2008 and will likely start again as a senior. Senior **Anthony Pineiro (Brooklyn, NY/Xaverian)** earned all-league honors as a sophomore guard and will attempt to repeat the feat as a senior center. The defensive front will miss former all-NEC end Ernie Greywacz, but the conference's sacks leader returns in the form of **Ray Saunders (Temple Hills, MD/Oxon Hill)**. The vaunted pass rusher earned first team all-NEC accolades along with junior cornerback **Alondre Rush (Middletown, CT/Xavier)**.

**Sacred Heart (8-3, 4-3 NEC)** was the NEC's most improved team a year ago. Following a 3-8 record and winless conference showing in 2007, the Pioneers won seven of their first eight games of 2008 to surge up the standings. Possibly even more impressive was that Sacred Heart did not surrender a quarterback sack for the season's first seven games. Four of the five offensive linemen who provided premium protection to all-NEC quarterback **Dale Fink (Swansea, IL/Althoff Catholic)** are back, including second team all-league tackle **Justin Smith (Binghamton, NY/Binghamton)**.

Now a seasoned signal caller heading into his third season as a starter, Fink will lead an offense that scored 29.1 points per game a year ago. The league's most-efficient passer (140.3 rating) is fortunate enough to have one of the league's most-accomplished receivers on his side. Senior **Steve Tedesco (Mission Viejo, CA/Trabuco Hills)** set the conference single-season record for receptions (77). Sixth-year head coach Paul Gorham also welcomes back senior defensive leaders, and preseason all-NEC selections, **Bill O'Brien (Lafayette, NY/Lafayette)** and **Andre Isla (Brookhaven, NY/Bellport)**. O'Brien made 61 tackles, 8.0 for a loss, from his lineman spot while Isla made 50 tackles and four interceptions at safety.

The growing pains were evident for **Robert Morris (5-6, 4-3 NEC)** during its 1-4 start to the 2008 season, but the Colonials congealed on their way to finishing in a tie for third place in the NEC standings. RMU won four of its final six games to finish with a winning NEC record for the ninth time in 13 seasons under legendary head coach Joe Walton. The second-half surge and the return of its numerous culprits have Robert Morris thinking about its first NEC title since 2000. The Colonials welcome back 17 starters (not including specialists), including second team all-NEC tailback **Myles Russ (Boca Raton, FL/West Boca)**, who totaled 1,255 yards and six touchdowns on 215 carries as a sophomore. Amongst Robert Morris' 10 returning defensive starters are a trio of all-NEC performers, one in each line of defense. Senior defensive end **Mark Szymanski (Cadogan, PA/Ford City)** has made 24.0 tackles for loss over the past two seasons as a starter. One year after transferring from Temple, junior linebacker **Alex DiMichele (Pittsburgh, PA/Sto-Rox)** made 116 tackles to rank fourth amongst NEC leaders. Senior safety **Michael Landers (Springdale, PA/Springdale)** defended a league-high 15 passes last season and recovered three fumbles.

One season after bringing its tradition-rich program into the Northeast Conference, **Duquesne (3-7, 2-5 NEC)** looks to establish itself as a contender. The Dukes won their inaugural league game, a 21-7 decision over western Pennsylvanian rival Saint Francis, but triumphed only once more during the remainder of the seven-game NEC slate. Duquesne, which captured an unprecedented 11 league titles as a Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference member, has an early opportunity to make a statement when it opens the 2009 NEC schedule, and television package, at five-time league champion Monmouth on September 19.

Junior quarterback **Connor Dixon (South Park, PA/South Park)** led the NEC in passing yards per game (211.0) during his first season after transferring from Michigan State. Dixon, who threw a single-game program-record six TD passes in last year's opener at Bucknell, became more familiar with senior tight end **Sean Bunevich (North Ridgeville, OH/North Ridgeville)** as the season progressed. The Dukes' top returning receiver averaged 64.9 yards per game. Junior linebacker **Nathan Totino (Pittsburgh, PA/Seton-LaSalle)** is the leader on the defense. The hard-hitting Totino was a first team all-NEC pick after making 110 tackles in nine games.

**Bryant (7-4)** enters its first season as a Northeast Conference member not far off from being a contender. Competing as an independent in 2008 when they began the NCAA reclassifying process, the Bulldogs defeated four of the six NEC members they faced. Head coach Marty Fine welcomes back 17 of 22 starters, 10 of whom played for one of the stingiest run defenses (99.4 ypg) in Division I FCS. Senior linebacker **Pat Polowski (Franklin, MA/Franklin)** made a team-high 67 tackles in his third season as a starter while classmate **Don Smith (Attleboro, MA/Attleboro)** tallied 8.5 sacks, broke up seven passes, and was credited with nine quarterback hurries from his defensive end position. Senior tailback **Jerrell Smith (Brooklyn, NY/St. Francis Prep)**, who takes aim at a second consecutive 1,000-yard season, highlights a list of seven returning starters on offense. Smith posted averages of 6.2 yards per carry and 114.0 yards per contest, while **Lindsey Gamble (Boston, MA/Reading Memorial)** added 79.2 yards per game and scored a team-high seven touchdowns in 2008.

**Wagner (3-8, 1-6 NEC)** hasn't stumbled very often under long-time head coach Walt Hameline. The few times the Seahawks have stubbed their toe, they've rebounded rather quickly. Wagner's uncharacteristic 3-8 record last season marked only the third sub-.500 campaign in Hameline's 28 years at the helm. The Seahawks had no shortage of injuries, one of which ended offensive lineman **Matt Martin's (Pennsauken, NJ/Pennsauken)** season in September. The sixth fifth-year senior, who has proven effective at both guard and tackle, in the trenches will be a welcomed one by Hameline.

Martin and his line mates will be protecting either **Adam Farnsworth (Ogden, UT/Weber)** or **Tyler Newberry (Germantown, MD/Mercerburg Prep)** in the pocket. The former was hampered by a bad shoulder, which required offseason surgery, during his first season after transferring from Iowa. Meanwhile, Newberry has seen limited action in two seasons as a reserve, but impressed during last season's spring game. Bruising back **Shane Smith (Susquehanna, PA/Honesdale)**, a senior, was the team's top rusher (79.9 ypg) during what was his first season after transferring from Central Florida. Wagner lost two-time all-NEC selection Robert Brown, who graduated, from its defensive front, but returns all-league talent to its backfield in the form of **Stefan Gage (Syracuse, NY/Henninger)**. The 2008 second team all-NEC pick made 95 tackles and defended four passes from his safety spot.

From facilities to performance, **Saint Francis (PA) (0-11, 0-7 NEC)** has made great gains as a program under eighth-year head coach Dave Opfar. The Red Flash enter the 2009 season with a new weight training facility, one of numerous upgrades the athletic department has made in recent years, and a number of all-NEC performers to use it. Injuries, mistakes, and bad breaks prevented the Red Flash from taking another step forward and were key culprits to a winless 2008. Still, optimism remains for the Flash.

The Red Flash defense features a feared linebacking corps headed by two-time first team all-NEC selection **Scott Lewis (South Fork, PA/Bishop McCort)**. The Keystone State native followed up his 2007 NEC Rookie of the Year award by setting the conference's single-season tackles record (142). Fellow sophomore **Matthew Parker (Darlington, PA/Blackhawk)** made 122 stops, ninth-most in league history, en-route to second team all-NEC accolades. After all-league receiver **Antoine Rivera (Willingboro, NJ/Willingboro)** went down with a season-ending knee injury in week three, **Omar Winston (Cleveland, OH/Cleveland)** stepped up to catch 56 passes. The sure-handed Winston impressed enough to win all-league second team honors and now returns for his junior season alongside a healthy Rivera. In 2007, his last full season, Rivera made 48 catches for a NEC-best 885 yards and seven touchdowns.