

Purple reign

RUNNING BACK 141 SEASONS OF
northwestern FOOTBALL.

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PHOTOS FROM **UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES**

It was November of 1948, and *The Daily Northwestern*'s front page had the words "No School!" plastered across the top, with a huge headline reading, "ROSES!"

On Nov. 23, Northwestern students had flooded the streets of Evanston in celebration of a sport that, these days, is more often a source of frustration than delight.

For the first time in history, the school's football team had qualified for the Rose Bowl and would be setting off for California that weekend. Little did they know, the team would not make it to another bowl for 47 years.

While Northwestern excels in some sports, football has not always been one of them. As the Wildcats conclude their 141st season, *North by Northwestern* takes an archival journey down memory lane to chronicle the highs and lows of Northwestern football.

Taking the field

Football first found its place on campus as a game casually played between friends. As its popularity grew throughout the 1870s, students formed

1870-1900

Northwestern's football team and the Big Ten are born.

1905-1907

Football is suspended at Northwestern due to safety concerns.

1921

Northwestern hires its first full-time coach and begins recruiting players.

1925-1926

The Wildcats finish second in the Big Ten, Dyche Stadium is finished.



Local publications highlight Northwestern's inaugural Rose Bowl berth in 1948.

a team and played a few annual games against other schools.

By 1889, Northwestern students were enamored with the gridiron pastime.

"A final football game is now the society event of the season in New York and Chicago," said an edition of *Northwestern*, a campus publication at the time. "And we think we see signs showing that our faculty are beginning to recover from

their unaccountable prejudice against the noble game, so that next season will be one of glory and fame for the glorious and famous N.W.U."

Glory came just three years later in a nail-biter of a game against the University of Michigan that set the school's attendance record with a turnout of over one thousand fans. With lots of enthusiasm but no Midwestern league to

1900

1910

1920

1930

1940

play in, Northwestern became one of the founding members of the Intercollegiate Conference of Faculty Representatives, which later became the Big Ten.

For all the excitement on campus, football was a dangerous sport in those days. A *Northwestern* article reported that, in a game between Yale and Princeton, "nearly every man was painfully hurt, and two of the participants were crippled for life ... Blood flowed as freely as at a prize-ring entertainment, and in several instances fists were used with serious consequences."

Along with a number of other schools, Northwestern suspended its team over safety concerns. By 1907 though, the second year of suspension, more than 90% of the student body had signed a petition to reinstate the team. With new NCAA rules in place that made the game safer, football came back to the University.

Although students were excited to have a team once again, there weren't many wins to celebrate. Northwestern football just couldn't stop losing, and by 1921, the University had had enough. They hired a full-time head coach and, for the first time, began recruiting more intentionally.

Pick SIX

With these changes in place, the next 30 years were marked with success. The Wildcats finished second in the Big Ten in the 1925 season, followed by the inauguration of state-of-the-art Dyche Stadium (now Ryan Field). A decade later, the Wildcats beat number-one-ranked University of Minnesota, and 1941 brought Northwestern three record-breaking years with All-American Otto Graham as quarterback.

What is still remembered as one of the most remarkable moments in Northwestern football history came soon after, in 1949.

1948

Northwestern qualifies for and wins the Rose Bowl for the first time.

1950-1970

The Wildcats record several hard-fought winning seasons.

1973

Northwestern's slide down the rankings begins.

1981

The University hires Dennis Green, the Big Ten's first Black coach.



Celebrations began the day the team's Rose Bowl bid was announced in 1948. According to *The Daily*, "the demonstrations were proof that the much-mentioned Purple Spirit was back after its long wartime vacation."

Chicago Sun-Times reported on a "Wild day for Evanston," saying that "Evanston's dignity was tossed for a heavy loss today as 8,000 Northwestern students swarmed into Fountain Square, tied traffic in knots, and took over ... They sang, cheered and cavorted. It was all spontaneous, which increased the fun."

School was canceled for the remainder of the week, and the Wildcats traveled to the West Coast and triumphed over the University of California, Berkeley, in front of 92,000 fans.

The football team continued to play a number of hard-fought winning seasons in the following years, but the good times didn't last forever.

Fumbling the ball

1973 marked the beginning of Northwestern's slide down the rankings. In the next five years, the team won 12 games and lost 43. In the two years after that, the team won only a single game.

During those losing years, Northwestern also reconciled a history of racism within the team.

Black athletes reported that coaches pressured Black players to return from

1950

1960

1970

1980

1990

injuries before they were ready and kicked Black athletes off the team for minor offenses. The head coach at the time, Rick Venturi, also allegedly said he “wished he could get rid of the entire senior class of African-American athletes,” according to a report by *The Daily Northwestern*.

Thirty-one Black Northwestern athletes banded together to create Black Athletes United For the Light (BAUL) and came to Vice President of Student Affairs Jim Carleton with allegations of unequal treatment.

BAUL’s efforts were instrumental in Northwestern’s decision to fire Venturi. In his place, they hired Dennis Green, the first Black coach in the Big Ten.

“We hired what I consider to be one of the finest coaches in the country who has had many offers from other institutions,” then-Athletic Director Doug Single said in a 1981 *Daily* article. “I think he’s going to be very successful.”

A hail mary

Green had high hopes for his first season coaching the team, but nine months later, the headline of *The Daily*’s sports page read, “Not Again! Same old Wildcats Lose 42-0.”

In the article, Green was quoted saying, “For the last nine months I’ve been here, I’ve been saying pretty positive things. But how could you sit and watch that game without throwing up?”

The statistics backed up Green’s sentiment. That year, Northwestern became the Division I team with the longest losing streak in history: 29 losses in a row.

After the team’s record-breaking loss to Michigan State, students rushed the field, chanting “We’re the worst” in an ironic celebration. They tore the goalposts out of the ground, tossed them over the edge of the stadium, marched them down Central Street and threw them into Lake Michigan.

“Dyche Stadium south goalpost covered more ground yardage Saturday than the Wildcats,” a *Daily* staff reporter remarked.

The event attracted journalists from national outlets like CBS, NBC and *The New York Times*. Many fans and journalists attributed Northwestern’s athletic failures to the strict academic standards student athletes had to meet, but not everyone agreed.



The Daily reports on two victorious seasons in recent history: Northwestern’s 1995 Big Ten title and 2018 Big Ten West title.

“You don’t need to lower the standards to win,” one student pointed out. “How can we have good tennis and volleyball teams but not football teams?”

Still, the football team did not improve much, and by the mid-1980’s, most students only went to the game for the “wild, booze-drenched tailgates” and to throw marshmallows at the marching band.

The comeback

Although it seemed inevitable that successful years would be followed by embarrassing ones, it also became clear that no matter how much the football team lost, they would eventually make a comeback.

“IT WAS ALL spontaneous WHICH INCREASED THE FUN.” **CHICAGO SUN-TIMES**

In this case, it took 15 years and a new head coach. Gary Barnett replaced Dennis Green, and he came to Northwestern with a mission to “take the purple to Pasadena.”

The Wildcats had not been to the Rose Bowl since 1949 and hadn’t won a Big Ten title since 1936. Under Barnett, the team did both. They shocked the football world with an upset win against Notre Dame. Then, in front of a sold out crowd at Dyche Stadium, they beat Penn State. The next game, at Purdue, clinched Northwestern’s Big Ten title.

The team didn’t have many record-breaking seasons over the next five years, but by the early 2000s, Northwestern football became consistent. As a team that was notorious for its ups and downs, consistency was something to be proud of.

Fourth quarter

Pat Fitzgerald led the team to a number of victories during his almost 17-year tenure coaching the Wildcats, including back-to-back bowl wins and Big Ten West division championships in 2018 and 2020. But his legacy was marred by a hazing scandal that overtook the football team this past summer.

Former football players alleged “egregious and vile and inhumane behavior,” including players being “restrained by a group of 8-10 upperclassmen dressed in various ‘Purge-like’ masks, who would then begin ‘dry-humping’ the victim in a dark locker room,” according to a *Daily* article.

The scandal led to Fitzgerald’s dismissal as head coach, and the University named new defensive coordinator David Braun the interim head coach.

With a program shaken by this summer’s revelations and coming off an almost winless 2022, many students had low hopes for this Wildcats football season. But the team has more wins than last year, and many are hopeful about Braun’s leadership going forward.

In any case, history has proven that no matter how bad things get, Northwestern football will bounce back.