



NORTHWESTERN WILDCATS

2023 Record: 8-5

Big Ten Conference

Evanston, IL

FBS Ranking

67



BYRCE KIRTZ – WR

Photo via UW Dawg Pound

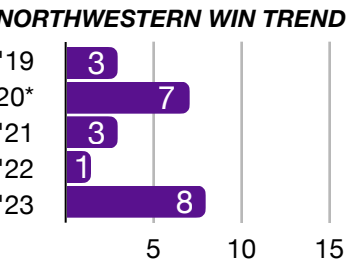
Given the nature of how Pat Fitzgerald’s tenure at Northwestern ended and considering how much of a disaster the 2022 season was (1-11 record, only 13.8 points per game, -19 turnover margin), there wasn’t a lot of hope for the 2023 season. Well, at least not from an outsider’s perspective. Inside the program, the team obviously held belief in what David Braun was bringing to the table and amazingly finished the season 8-5 including a victory over Utah in the Las Vegas Bowl.

Braun deservedly earned the full-time coaching duties after guiding the Wildcats in an interim role last season. As great as the 2023 season was, there may be some things working against his Wildcats in 2024. For one, Northwestern went 5-1 in games decided by seven points or less. Their success in those tight games was admirable, but given the randomness of college football, it’s often very difficult to repeat such a mark. The Wildcats must also replace their top passer, top receiver, and top tackler. Finally, Northwestern will have to make the adjustment to playing their home games at Lanny & Sharon Martin Stadium while Ryan Field undergoes a massive \$800 million renovation. The former home of Wildcat soccer and field hockey gives this football team the most unique venue in the sport, and Northwestern will also play a couple of games at Wrigley Field. However, if you think about it, those challenges pale in comparison to what the program was facing last season, so doubt David Braun’s team at your own risk.

After remarkable surge last season, what’s next for the Wildcats?

HC: David Braun
(2nd Year, 8-5)
OC: Zach Lujan
(1st Year)
DC: Tim McGarigle
(1st Year)

2024 Class Rankings
Recruiting
80
Transfer Portal
112
Via 24/7 Sports



2023 Results (8-5)
@ Rutgers (L 7-24)
UTEP (W 38-7)
@ Duke (L 14-38)
Minnesota (W 37-34)
Penn State (L 13-41)
Howard (W 23-20)
@ Nebraska (L 9-17)
Maryland (W 33-27)
Iowa (L 7-10)
@ **Wisconsin (W 24-10)**
Purdue (W 23-15)
@ **Illinois (W 45-43)**
vs. Utah (W 14-7)
Las Vegas Bowl

OFFENSE

By no means was the offense a strength last season, but that group did show marked improvement from the 2022 team that averaged only 13.8 points per game. They improved their points per game by nearly 10 points (up to 22.1) despite actually gaining less yards than the year prior. Both Ben Bryant and Brendan Sullivan saw time at quarterback. Both posted very similar numbers although Sullivan added more in the run game. Bryant graduated and Sullivan transferred to Iowa which renews the quarterback competition for 2024. **Mike Wright** may get the nod after four seasons in the SEC. He spent most of his time and saw the most experience at Vanderbilt and while he’s never wowed as a passer, he is a very capable runner. **Jack Lausch** also possesses dual-threat ability.

Last year’s leading receiver Cam Johnson is gone, but **Bryce Kirtz** finished only 14 yards and one touchdown behind Johnson and he led the team in yards per catch. **AJ Henning** also returns after 45 catches for 418 yards. **Cam Porter** returns after leading the team with 651 yards. Northwestern struggled significantly to move the ball on the ground, rushing for just 2.9 yards per carry and only 101.9 yards per game. Significant offensive line issues were largely to blame and it’s still an unproven group entering 2024. Northwestern does add Colorado transfer **Jack Bailey**. He and **Ben Wrather** (41 career games) offer the most experience on the line.

DEFENSE

Bryce Gallagher, the unquestioned leader of the defense, departs after a remarkable career at Northwestern. Thankfully, his linebacker running mate **Xander Mueller** returns after posting a career-high 110 tackles and influencing the game in many other ways.

As a unit, the Wildcats made improvements up front but there’s still some room to grow. The defensive front is the most experienced level of the defense with players like **Carmine Bastone** (26 tackles, 3.5 tackles for loss), **Aidan Hubbard** (team best six sacks), and **Richie Hagarty** (2.5 sacks) all return and transfers have been added to bolster the line.

Even without Cameron Mitchell, a fifth-round draft pick in 2023, the Wildcats made life very difficult on opposing passing games. Northwestern allowed only 182.9 pass yards per game, although it’s worth noting they faced several teams who struggled to move the ball through the air as it is. Still, this group made several big plays and helped guide the Wildcats to a +13 turnover margin, a stark contrast to the -19 mark posted in 2023. Corner **Theran Johnson** and safety **Devin Turner** lead this group.

In order for the Wildcats to find success this season, the defense will need to travel. Over the last five seasons, Northwestern is just 5-18 on the road and there could be an adjustment period as the team bounces back and forth between Martin Stadium, Wrigley Field, and road games.

Wk	2024 NW Schedule	
1	Sat, Aug 31	vs. Miami (OH)
2	Fri, Sept 6	vs. Duke
3	Sat, Sept 14	vs. Eastern Illinois
4	Sat, Sept 21	@ Washington
6	Sat, Oct 5	vs. Indiana
7	Fri, Oct 11	@ Maryland
8	Sat, Oct 19	vs. Wisconsin
9	Sat, Oct 26	@ Iowa
10	Sat, Nov 2	@ Purdue
12	Sat, Nov 16	vs. Ohio State*
13	Sat, Nov 23	@ Michigan
14	Sat, Nov 30	vs. Illinois*

Home Away Neutral

Key Games

vs. Indiana: Playing in separate divisions means the Hoosiers and Wildcats haven’t faced one another since 2019 and they’ve only played twice in the last decade. Can Northwestern take advantage of a team with a first-year coach?

@ Iowa: If you love defense and smash mouth football, then look no further than this matchup. The losing team has been held to 20 points or fewer in the last seven meetings.

vs. Illinois: The Fighting Illini and Wildcats will close out the regular season from Wrigley Field. Last year’s 45-43 shootout not only knocked Illinois out of bowl contention but it snapped their two-game win streak in the rivalry.

Northwestern

Player Spotlight

Photo via WV News



XANDER MUELLER – LB

Mueller has been one of the best defensive playmakers in the Big Ten the past two seasons. Last year he set career highs in just about every statistic including a team-high three interceptions. He's a versatile pass rusher who has a nose for the football, and when he hits someone, they know it. With Bryce Gallagher gone, Mueller assumes the role as the team's leader and the likely "green dot" on defense.

2023 Stats: 110 TKL, 10.5 TFL, 5 SACK, 3 INT, 1 FF

Photo via Athlon Sports



CAM PORTER – RB

On paper, 651 yards doesn't seem all that impressive, but Cam Porter really had to work for those yards. Running in front of an offensive line that allowed a whopping 51 sacks, he posted the best season of his four year Wildcat career with four touchdowns on 166 carries. He's also a valuable contributor in the passing game, catching 21 passes for 121 yards and he earned a touchdown against Maryland in a win.

2023 Stats: 166 RUSH, 673 YDS, 4 TD

Photo via Northwestern Athletics



Lanny & Sharon Martin Stadium (Temporary)



AJ HENNING

SPECIAL TEAMS

Hunter Renner punted the ball 71 times but averaged only 38.7 yards per kick. Jack Olsen returns to place kick after making 14 of 19, and two of those misses were from 50 yards or longer. Will the wind off of Lake Michigan impact the kicking game more than usual in 2024?

THE BOTTOM LINE

Fitzgerald's best teams leaned on their defense, so it's not surprising that when Northwestern allowed 29.0 points in 2021 and 28.3 points in 2022 that the team went a combined 4-20. Braun helped restore the prowess of that unit last year and the defense should again be a strength. The offense is still a work in progress, but bringing in OC Zach Lujan, where he held the same role for the two-time defending FCS champions South Dakota State, is a fantastic hire that is flying under the radar.

Northwestern no longer benefits from life in the Big Ten West. Although the schedule is a little more tenable than some others in the conference, the Wildcats will likely see their streak of facing two or fewer Top 25 teams in a given year end after four seasons. Northwestern plays their last "home" game on October 19 and the competition steps up at that point, too. So, if the Wildcats want to return to another bowl game, they may need to do their work early in the 2024 campaign.

Appointment Television



Saturday, November 30

Northwestern has dominated this series over the last decade and, as a result, the all-time series is nearly deadlocked with Illinois holding a slim 57-55-5 advantage. Turnovers have been a big story in the battle for the Land of Lincoln Trophy. In 2022, Illinois forced six turnovers and cruised to a 41-3 win. Last year, Northwestern capitalized on several turnovers which helped them escape Champaign with a 45-43 victory.

2023 Statistics

Offense			Defense		
Statistic	Per Game	FBS Rank	Statistic	Per Game	FBS Rank
Points	22.1	104	Points	22.5	40
Rushing	101.9	119	Rushing	157.8	81
Passing	202.0	94	Passing	182.9	15
Total	303.9	121	Total	340.8	35
Sacks	51	127	Sacks	30	T-47

2024 Projection
5-7
15th in Big Ten



BIG
x7

1926 1930
1931 1936
1995 1996
2000