

2017 MIAC Football Preview and Preseason Coaches' Poll

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BLOOMINGTON, Minn. – For the second consecutive year, the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (MIAC) football coaches have tabbed the University of St. Thomas as the preseason favorite to claim the Conference Championship.

On the heels of a 12-1 record and the program's fifth MIAC championship in the last seven years, the Tommies are expecting to make another run in 2017. In addition to garnering seven of a possible eight first-place votes in the 2017 MIAC Football Preseason Coaches' Poll, St. Thomas also enters the season on the national radar, ranked fifth in all of NCAA Division III by D3football.com. With a pair of Preseason All-Americans – tight end **Jackson Hull** and running back **Jordan Roberts** – aiding the offensive attack, and 14 position players with starting experience back in the lineup, the Tommie faithful are no doubt anticipating more December football on the horizon.

Saint John's comes into 2017 ranked second in the MIAC and 10th in the nation by D3football.com. The Johnnies finished 2016 with a 10-2 record and a third consecutive trip to the second round of the NCAA Division III Playoffs. Junior defensive lineman **Nathan Brinker** had a breakout season as a sophomore in 2016, leading the Conference in both tackles for loss (12) and sacks (7.5) during MIAC play en route to D3football.com All-West Region honors, while Preseason All-American **Evan Clark** is back in the lineup at wide receiver for one more season in red and white.

With an offensive backfield stacked with All-MIAC talent and a Preseason All-American patrolling the defense, No. 3-ranked Concordia may be in prime position to not just notch a seventh-straight winning season, but also contend for the program's first Conference title since 2004. The MIAC's leading rushing attack from a season ago will need to replace four of its five starting offensive linemen; however, the Cobbers do return senior running backs **Chad Johnson** and **Jason Montonye** – who combined for nearly 1,300 rushing yards and 19 scores last year – along with senior signal-caller **Michael Herzog**, a First Team All-MIAC selection at quarterback in 2016. **Alex Berg**, who led the Conference in tackles as a sophomore and was selected to the D3football.com Preseason All-America Team earlier this month, will also play a key role in determining the Cobbers' destiny in 2017.

Coming in at No. 4 in the Preseason Coaches' Poll are the Bethel Royals, a program that enters the year also receiving national votes in D3football.com's Preseason Top 25. Despite graduating several key seniors from last year's squad, the future appears bright in Arden Hills. Underclassmen came up big for Bethel last season and that experience figures to pay dividends for the Royals heading into 2017 with sophomore quarterback **Jake Marsh** (honorable mention All-MIAC), junior running back **Gunnar Bloom** (Second Team All-MIAC) and junior wide receiver **Jon Pytlak** (Second Team All-MIAC) leading the offensive charge this year. Senior linebacker **Josh Dalki** – a nominee for the 2017 Allstate AFCA Good Works Team – figures to be a leader on the defensive side of the ball for the Royals.

A team looking to break through to the top of the Conference, Gustavus enters the season ranked fifth by MIAC football coaches. A consistently solid program as of late, the Gusties will be tasked with replacing a pair of All-Conference offensive linemen this season, while linebackers **Casey Decker** (First Team All-MIAC) and **Matt Berkner** (Honorable Mention All-MIAC) will look to pick up the slack on defense. Senior wideout **Hunter Johnson** – who led the team in receiving and all-purpose yards in 2016 – looks to be the offense's primary target again heading into the new season.

Complete 2017 Preseason Coaches' Poll

Coaches voted for every team in the Conference except their own team. Points were assigned for each vote (8 for first, 7 for second, etc.) Teams are ranked in order of highest point total to lowest with vote totals listed in the far right column and first-place votes shown in parentheses.

2017 MIAC Football Preseason Coaches' Poll		
Rank	Institution	Total
1.	St. Thomas (7)	63



The top-ranked Tommies have high aspirations for the 2017 campaign.

2.	Saint John's (2)	58
3.	Concordia	50
4.	Bethel	43
5.	Gustavus Adolphus	34
6.	Hamline	27
7.	Augsburg	21
8.	St. Olaf	18
9.	Carleton	10

Around the MIAC

-Senior running back **Jordan Roberts** returns to the St. Thomas lineup after missing most of 2016 with an injury. The 2015 NCAA Division III Offensive Player of the Year has scored 39 touchdowns and surpassed 2,500 yards of offense in 17 games at UST. A D3football.com Preseason All-American heading into the year, Roberts returns to a crowded Tommie backfield that now features three playmaking halfbacks, including sophomore **Josh Parks** and junior **Tucker Trettel**. The trio has combined for 4,721 yards and 70 rushing touchdowns over the Tommies' last two seasons.

-Carleton could return as many as 17 2016 starters for the season opener against Macalester on September 2. Among the key contributors back for the Knights will be Honorable Mention All-Conference offensive lineman **Tyler Rolland** and defensive back **Mark Leedy**. Though wins have been difficult to come by over the last several years, an experienced roster could lead to a few more positive outcomes this season.

-The James Kilian era has officially arrived at St. Olaf College, as the former University of Tulsa quarterback and St. Thomas offensive coordinator was named the Oles new head coach last December. Kilian will be tasked with rebuilding a St. Olaf program that has amassed just six wins – three of which came in Conference play – since 2012. With a pair of National Championship appearances under his belt as an assistant at Louisiana State (2012) and St. Thomas (2015), to go along with a 25-7 record as an offensive coordinator in the MIAC, Kilian could very well be the man to right the ship in Northfield.

Can't-Miss #MIACtion

-*Sept. 9, 2017: Wisconsin-Whitewater at Concordia-Moorhead.* The Cobbers are set to begin a home-and-home non-conference series with the six-time NCAA national champion Warhawks. The defending champions of the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (WIAC) enter the 2017 campaign ranked third in the nation by D3football.com and should prove to be an excellent measuring stick for Concordia, a program with aspirations of contending for a MIAC title this season.

-*Sept. 23, 2017: Saint John's vs. St. Thomas.* The 87th all-time meeting between the Johnnies and Tommies will no doubt be historic. Not only will this year's "Holy Grail" matchup be the first football contest ever played at Target Field – home of the Minnesota Twins – but with more than 23,000 tickets already sold, the game is poised to shatter the NCAA Division III attendance record. A pair of Wisconsin schools, UW-Oshkosh and UW-Whitewater, set a new bar by playing in front of an estimated crowd of 17,535 last season. With both Saint John's and St. Thomas ranked in the top 10 of D3football.com's national preseason Top 25, fans can expect this rivalry game to be well worth the price of admission.

-*Oct. 28, 2017: Hamline at Augsburg.* Two programs fighting to break through from the middle of the pack will go at it once again on the last Saturday in October with "The Hammer" on the line. Led by All-MIAC junior quarterback **Justice Spriggs**, the Hamline Pipers continue to show steady improvement, recording the program's best campaign in 19 years last season. Meanwhile, Augsburg's lineup features a handful of returning Second Team All-Conference selections, including junior wide receiver **Nick Heenie** and senior defensive back **Isiah Malone**. Throw the records out and The Hammer down – this rivalry game will be one to watch.

For the Record

-Six-time MIAC Coach of the Year Steve Johnson ranks fourth among active NCAA Division III football coaches with 202 career wins in his 28 seasons at Bethel University. He is also tied with St. Thomas head coach Glenn Caruso for the most MIAC championships among active coaches with five. The 2017 MIAC Football Record Book is available for download [here](#).

Odds and Ends

-The MIAC led all of NCAA Division III in football attendance both overall (156,449) and per-game (3,193) in 2016. In fact, the MIAC has led DIII in football attendance each of the last six seasons and 11 times in the last 12 years.

-This year marks the 100th season of Concordia Cobber football. Concordia first started football in 1916 and has played every year since 1920, accumulating a record of 525-296-40 to go along with 18 MIAC championships in the program's first 99 seasons.

-St. Thomas head coach Glenn Caruso is one win shy of 100 at the helm for the Tommies. The 2015 AFCA National Coach of the Year has put together a record of 99-15, including a 59-5 home record and 17-7 NCAA playoff mark in his nine seasons patrolling the sidelines at O'Shaughnessy Stadium. St. Thomas opens the 2017 season at home against the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire on September 2.