

2018 MIAC Football Preview and Preseason Coaches' Poll

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

The nation's No. 3-ranked team in D3football.com's annual [Preseason Top 25](#) secured the top spot in the 2018 MIAC Coaches' Poll thanks to seven first-place votes. Those votes were cast with good reason -- the Tommies won their sixth solo Conference championship this decade last fall, tying a MIAC record set by Gustavus Adolphus College in the 1950s and matched by Saint John's University in the 1990s. Head coach **Glenn Caruso**'s squad also has a chance to make history early in the 2018 season; following the team's home opener against Trinity International -- UST's first non-NCAA Division III opponent since Concordia-St. Paul in 1997 -- the Toms will welcome Hamline University to Palmer Field at O'Shaughnessy Stadium for the 1,000th game in program history. A win over the Pipers would also break a tie with Saint John's (2000-04) for the most consecutive victories over Conference opponents, a mark that currently stands at 28. With 14 starters and 32 key contributors back from last year's NCAA Quarterfinal team, the St. Thomas appears poised for another run in 2018.

Saint John's came in at No. 2 in the Preseason Coaches' Poll with 58 points and a pair of first-place votes, marking the team's fourth straight season finishing no lower than second in the MIAC balloting. Ranked No. 11 by D3football.com to start the 2018 campaign, the Johnnies have reached the NCAA Playoffs each of the last four seasons and hope this will be the year they can unseat their bitter rivals for the top spot in the MIAC... especially with the "Holy Grail" game returning to Collegeville in October. Paced by a trio of D3football.com Preseason All-America picks in guard **Dan Greenheck** (First Team), defensive tackle **Nathan Brinker** (Second Team) and safety **Max Jackson** (Second Team), along with All-MIAC quarterback and Allstate Good Works Team nominee **Jackson Erdmann** behind center, Saint John's has the talent to contend not just for a Conference title, but a national championship as well.

Coming in at No. 3 in this year's Preseason Coaches Poll is Concordia College with 48 points in the balloting. The Cobbers were ranked in D3football.com's Top 25 for much of last season and narrowly missed out on a postseason berth. Despite having to replace several key pieces from last year's squad - not the least of which being 2017 MIAC Player of the Year, Chad Johnson, who finished his four-year career as the program's all-time touchdowns leader - Moorhead is brimming with anticipation. Junior quarterback **Blake Kragnes** took over as the starter midway through last season and veteran fullback **Dane Ringquist** is set to move into the lineup full-time. Preseason All-America picks **Brandon Bundgaard** (Second Team guard) and linebacker **Alex Berg** (Second Team linebacker) also figure to be anchors for a Concordia team aiming to crack through to the top of the MIAC for the first time in 14 years.

Bethel University earned the No. 4 spot in the 2018 Preseason Coaches' Poll with 44 points in the balloting. BU joins Saint John's as the only programs to be ranked in the top-four of every MIAC Preseason Poll since its recorded inception in 2002. That consistency has a fair amount to do with the man at the helm, head coach **Steve Johnson**, who now enters his 30th season leading the charge for the Royals. Under Johnson's guidance, Bethel has not had a losing season in 24 consecutive years. The Royals will aim to extend that streak to a quarter-century in 2018 with an experienced group of contributors back and ready to contend for what would be Bethel's first MIAC crown since 2013. Defensive end **Kyle Kilgore** emerged as one of the league's premier pass rushers last season, earning D3football.com All-Region honors and cracking the D3football.com Team of the Week twice as a junior in 2017.

Gustavus Adolphus College is ranked No. 5 in this year's Preseason Coaches' Poll, having garnered 36 points in the balloting. Injuries derailed what appeared to be a promising 2017 campaign, which saw the Golden Gusties jump out to a 3-1 start to the year. Chiefly among those hit by the bug last season was quarterback **Michael Veldman**, who ranked among the top-five passers in the Conference with 143 completions for 1,931 passing yards and 18 scores, despite missing four games. Most significantly, Gustavus won twice as much as it lost with Veldman behind center, as the 6-foot-4 senior signal-caller registered a 4-2 record as a starter last year.

Augsburg University came in at No. 6 in the Poll. Auggies wide receiver **Nick Heenie** established himself as one of the top receivers in the Conference as a junior last season, leading all MIAC pass-catchers in yards and touchdowns, both in league play and overall. His 15 receiving touchdowns on the year tied for seventh-most in the nation while his five 100-plus-yard games and three multi-touchdown performances against MIAC opponents in 2017 are tied for the most by any Conference receiver in the last 10 years.



St. Olaf College is No. 7, as running back **Khayleb Willis** ranked third among MIAC rushers with 72.3 yards per game against Conference foes as a sophomore in 2017 and strung together three straight 100-plus-yard performances last October. The Oles are undefeated (3-0) when Willis eclipses the 100-yard mark.

No. 8 in the Poll is Hamline University, where senior quarterback **Justice Spriggs** has already claimed three career passing records and four more individual game highs since taking over the starting job midway through his freshman season. Spriggs became the program's all-time leader in passing yards last October, wiping out a career mark that stood for more than two decades and doing so in less than three seasons behind center.

Finishing off the Poll at No. 9 is Carleton College. The **Tom Journell** Era is set to begin at Carleton, as he becomes the 18th head coach in the 115-year history of Carleton football. Journell comes to Northfield by way of Wis.-Stevens Point, where he served as head coach of the Pointers for the last six seasons.

Complete 2018 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 and first-place votes shown in parentheses.

2018 MIAC Football Preseason Coaches' Poll

Rank	Institution (First-Place Votes)	Total
1.	St. Thomas (7)	63
2.	Saint John's (2)	58
3.	Concordia	48
4.	Bethel	44
5.	Gustavus	36
6.	Augsburg	28
7.	St. Olaf	23
8.	Hamline	16
9.	Carleton	8

Around the MIAC

-The MIAC continues to lead the nation in NCAA Division III football attendance. A total of 148,326 fans attended the 48 football games hosted by the MIAC's nine football teams in 2017, an average of 3,090 fans per game – more than 1,200 higher than the DIII national average.

-Former All-MIAC wide receiver and kick return specialist Brandon Zylstra continues to impress as a member of the Minnesota Vikings preseason roster. The Concordia grad signed a futures contract with the team in January following an All-Star season with the Canadian Football League's Edmonton Eskimos last year and stands a strong chance to make the Vikings' opening day 53-man roster. Former Gustavus wide receiver Ryan Hoag was the last MIAC alumnus to crack a 53-man roster, spending time with the Vikings in 2004. One of the most recent MIAC players to play in a regular season NFL game was former St. Thomas All-American safety Neal Guggemos, who spent three seasons in the League with the Vikings and New York Giants from 1986-88. Guggemos' son, **Nick Guggemos**, is a junior wide receiver for the Tommies.

-Former Saint John's wide receiver **Blake Elliott** is back on the College Football Hall of Fame ballot in 2018. Elliott was a member of the MIAC's last national championship football team in 2003 and finished his career with a trio of NCAA Playoff records and 29 SJU highs. At one point, Elliott had more consecutive games with a reception (47) than any player in college football history. Elliott also holds MIAC records for receiving touchdowns in a season (15) and a career (45) and hauled in more balls (369) in overall games played than any MIAC receiver ever.

-The 2017 St. Thomas defense was historically good, ranking no lower than second among all 660 NCAA football teams, regardless of division, in five different defensive categories last season, including net rushing yards per game, which at 21.9 represented the fewest allowed by any NCAA program anywhere in the last 16 years. The Tommies' 157.6 total yards allowed per game also represented the fewest allowed by any team in one season in the last two decades.

For the Record

The MIAC is in the process of overhauling its sport record books to provide a better historical perspective of the Conference and the accomplishments of its student-athletes over the last century. The 72-page MIAC Football Record Book contains annual Conference championship information, year-by-year standings, all-time award winners, individual and team records, NCAA Playoff history, and more. The information included in the 2018 Record Book is based on available data and research for additional historical documents is ongoing. The 2018 MIAC Football Record Book is now available for download [here](#).