

Key game: **Sept. 6 vs. Maryland.** It's a neutral site game at M&T Bank Stadium in Baltimore, and it's going to be an opening weekend statement for each. Maryland is trying to put the miserable 2009 season, and the controversy around the Ralph Friedgen hot seat, in the past, while Navy needs to keep showing it can beat the average BCS teams to prove that it's for real. To go cliché, **the Maryland game will be a tone-setter.**

2010 Schedule:

Sept. 6 vs. Maryland (in B-more).
Sept. 11 Georgia Southern.
Sept. 18 at Louisiana Tech.
Sept. 25 OPEN DATE.
Oct. 2 at Air Force.
Oct. 9 at Wake Forest.
Oct. 16 SMU.
Oct. 23 vs. Notre Dame (in NJ).
Oct. 30 Duke.
Nov. 6 at East Carolina.
Nov. 13 Central Michigan.
Nov. 20 Arkansas St.
Nov. 27 OPEN DATE.
Dec. 4 OPEN DATE.
Dec. 11 vs. Army (in Philly).

Ten Best Navy Players:

1. QB Ricky Dobbs, Sr.
2. DE Jabaree Tuani, Jr.
3. SS Wyatt Middleton, Sr.
4. FB Vince Murray, Sr.
5. CB Kevin Edwards, Sr.
6. OT Jeff Battipaglia, Sr.
7. P Kyle Delahooke, Sr.
8. FS Emmett Merchant, Sr.
9. FB/KR Alexander Teich, Jr.
10. OT Matt Molloy, Sr.

Preview of Navy Football 2010.

By Pete Fiutak <<mailto:pete@collegefootballnews.com>>

Ever since Paul Johnson turned the program into something more than just a novelty, Navy has been one of college football's best stories. The team never has more than a handful of FBS-caliber players; much less BCS league talents, relying on a brilliant offensive system, ruthless efficiency, discipline, and a high motor that few other teams can match on a game-in-and-game-out basis. But for all the success and all the positives, winning 60 games from 2003 to the end of the 2009 regular season with seven straight seasons of eight wins and with seven straight bowl appearances, it's not like Navy beat anyone.

And then, the 61st win. Of the 60 wins before the stunningly dominant 35-13 blowout over Missouri in the 2009 Texas Bowl, 12 came against teams from BCS conferences. Of those 12, only two, a 23-21 win over Rutgers and in 2008 a 24-17 win over Wake Forest, were against teams that finished with a winning record, while four came against some miserable Duke teams, two came against Wake Forest, and two were against Vanderbilt. There was a 2006 win over a Stanford team that finished 1-11, the two bowl wins came against Colorado State and New Mexico, and the victories over Notre Dame, while historic in nature, came against mediocre teams.

Of the 46 wins against non-BCS teams other than Notre Dame, before the victory over Missouri, a mere seven came against teams that finished with winning record and four of those games were against Air Force. In other words, during this terrific run of success, Navy has mostly beaten up on the weak and the sad. However, with the win over an athletic and talented Missouri team that had the make-up to stop the Navy offense and the adequate time to prepare, and with the way the defense shut down a high-octane offense, it might be time to realize that this isn't just a cute little story.

There's some real, live talent being mixed in to the system, so now the Navy spread-option attack has more than enough quickness to go around, the linemen in place to do what's needed, and the defensive playmakers to be more than just a bunch of pluggers. Oh sure, no one's going to confuse the talent in Annapolis with the talent in Gainesville, but with an overall upgrade in athleticism combining with the system and the style, there's no stopping the current run of success.

Not only is Navy good, it's good enough to reload and be deep enough to withstand some major hits if they come. QB Ricky Dobbs is a fringe Heisman candidate after a record-setting 2009, but his backup, Kriss Proctor, would be more than fine if he had to step in. The backfield lost its top option, Marcus Curry, after he was kicked off the team, but there are still too many speedy playmakers for one football. There's depth at nose guard with size ready to rotate in, and there are options at corner and receiver to play around with.

The defense might have its best secondary in years, the line has some actual size to go along with the quickness, and the linebacker corps that has to replace all four starters is expected to be fine with so many options and athletes waiting to show what they can do. Throw in, arguably, the best kicking game in Navy history thanks to PK Joe Buckley and P Kyle Delahooke, and all the ingredients are there for another successful season and a bowl run (to the Poinsettia Bowl if the team is eligible).

After the Missouri win, it's time to start truly believing in Navy as a threat that belongs in the top 25. And if everything, everything breaks right, this could be a special season with a possible run for a BCS slot (the national sentiment would more than be there if Navy could finish 11-1). The schedule is favorable, the team is good, and the coaching is top-shelf. It's time to realize Navy is the real deal.

What to watch for on offense: **The effectiveness of the slot backs.** The Navy speed backs are usually interchangeable; every year a new seemingly irreplaceable playmaker is replaced. This year, the backfield was expected to be deadly with Marcus Curry taking pitches from QB Ricky Dobbs, but Curry was booted from the program for a series of violations of team rules. That leaves a slew of very small, very fast, very green backs trying to pick up the slack. 5-8, 180-pound Gee Gee Greene, 5-8, 167-pound Aaron Santiago, and 5-7, 180-pound Bo Snelson are just a few of the quick backs who'll try to make big plays on the outside so Dobbs and fullback Vince Murray can shine on the inside.

What to watch for on defense: **The linebackers.** The front three should come up with a great rotation around end Jabaree Tuani with good size on the nose and some decent athletes combining at right end. The secondary gets back three starters and a veteran in Kwesi Mitchell who can step in at corner without a problem. And then there are the linebackers. They're all gone—except for Tyler Simmons, a veteran backup ready to take on a bigger role after finishing third on the team with 68 tackles and a tackle for loss. There are plenty of tough, quick players around him, but they're going to be under fire on a defense that counts on the linebackers to make most of the big plays.

The team will be far better IF ... it doesn't blow it against an inferior team. The pass rush is going to be a problem, as always, after finishing last in the nation in tackles for loss, but that's part of the design; the defense is aggressive and swarms to the ball, but it doesn't take any risks to get into the backfield. The difference between a good, bowl-bound season and a great year will be for Navy to beat everyone its own size. Navy might have a great system and it plays at another level effort-wise, but it doesn't have the depth or the talent to take anyone lightly. Last year there were losses to Hawaii and Temple that should've been layups. Two years ago there was a loss to the FCS's Delaware, in 2004 there was a clunker against Tulane, and in 2003 it was Delaware.

This year, there isn't any team on the schedule that Navy can't beat— one game at a time. There's a solid chance the Midshipmen will be favored in every game except Notre Dame and possibly the opener against Maryland. When the best team on the slate might be the Terps, or a rebuilding Irish, there's reason to get excited. However, Air Force is going to be terrific, and the yearly showdown will be in Colorado Springs as part of a three-game road trip. SMU isn't a layup anymore, and going to Wake Forest isn't a given. Then playing at East Carolina will be a serious test. Albeit Army should be much, much better, closing with Central Michigan, Arkansas State, and December 11 with the Knights isn't all that bad.

Best offensive player: **Senior QB Ricky Dobbs.** There was a moment in the 2009 offseason when it looked like the Navy season would be lost. Dobbs went down with an ankle injury and the worst was feared, but it apparently wasn't an issue ... he set the NCAA record for the most touchdowns by a quarterback in a season scoring 27 times. Making the season more remarkable was 1) he missed a few games hurt and 2) he fought through a cracked kneecap and underwent surgery this offseason. A true leader, he's a standout among the student body, and not just the team. How impressive is he? Two of his goals are to win a Super Bowl and to become the President of the United States, and the latter is more realistic than the former.

Best defensive player: **Junior DE Jabaree Tuani.** Senior safety Wyatt Middleton is the captain of the defense and a big-hitter who owns the back eight, but it's the 6-1, 265-pound Tuani who's arguably the team's most talented defender. Wanted by BCS schools, he has been a standout from the start making 96 tackles, five sacks, and 14.5 tackles for loss in his first two years. While not a pure pass rusher, he's a quick all-around lineman who's terrific at holding up against the run.

Key player to a successful season: **Junior LB Caleb King.** The inside linebackers mean everything to the Navy defense. Tyler Simmons spent last year working behind Ross Pospisil and came up with a fantastic 68-tackle season; he'll be fine. The 6-0, 223-pound King is very fast, very athletic, and very raw. He has seen a little time on the field and is a big-time hitter in practices, and now he has to come up with the stats and the stops on the inside.

The season will be a success IF ... Navy wins 11 games. The team should've beaten Temple and Hawaii and won 12 last year, and this year's team is better. It's not going to be easy, but there's no reason the Midshipmen can't be tight enough against the mediocre schedule to go 10-2 before winning a bowl game. There can be a few slip ups, like against Notre Dame and, say, at East Carolina, but if the offense is playing up to its capability, there's no defense on the slate that can stop it. An 11-win season would be another huge step forward for a successful program looking for more.