

# Football 2003 Season Preview

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After posting the best two-year winning percentage (16-4, .800 winning%) in school history, the 2003 UW-Eau Claire football team has no intentions of slipping out of the upper echelon of the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (WIAC).

That is a tough task considering six different teams have tied or won the WIAC crown outright in the last five seasons. The Blugolds have shared the WIAC title twice during that stretch - in 1998 and 2001.

Despite losing five All-WIAC performers from the 2001 team at the skill positions, the Blugolds averaged 26.7 points a game in 2002. The Blugold offense fired on all cylinders from the mid-way point of the season on, surging from 22.8 points per game to 29.3 over the final six games of the season.

The Blugold defense continued its stingy ways from 2001, ranking second in the WIAC in total defense (300.9 yards/game), scoring defense (18.9 points/game), rushing defense (102.9 yards/game) and sacks (25) while leading the league in red zone defense allowing 21 scores in 32 possessions (65.6 percent).

In 2002 the Blugolds outscored their opponents in three-out-of-four quarters during the season including an 82-32 advantage in the second quarter. The Blugold defense held the opposition to 2.8 yards per carry.

The receiving arsenal will also be bolstered with the return of wide receivers Erik Ferguson and Matt Evensen. After missing the 2001 season, Ferguson made his presence felt immediately with a spectacular 30-yard touchdown catch in overtime to defeat St. John's (MN) in the season opener. Ferguson made 32 receptions for 92 yards and five touchdowns last season. Evensen looks to improve upon his freshman season when he caught 21 passes for 286 yards and two touchdowns.

Turning the switches of the Blugold offense will be quarterback Nels Fredrickson, who was impressive in six starts last year after missing the first four games of 2002 due to a broken bone in his right hand. Under Fredrickson the Blugold offense jumped from 22.8 points per game to 29.3. An Honorable Mention All-WIAC selection in 2002, Fredrickson completed 98-of-138 passes for 1,307 yards and 12 touchdowns producing a quarterback efficiency rating of 138.37. Fredrickson can also beat opposing defenses with his legs as he finished third on the team in rushing with 272 yards.

The rushing attack will return its top two contributors from last season in running backs Joe Gast and Brian Mitchell. Gast led all Blugolds in attempts (150), net yards (637), touchdowns (8) and yards per carry (4.2). Mitchell was second in rushing yardage with 364 yards and five touchdowns.

The biggest question offensively lies on the offensive line where the Blugolds will have to replace five starters including Football Gazette Third Team All-American guard Mike Bestul, Honorable Mention All-WIAC center Andy Jepsen and three-year starter Brian McIntyre at tackle. Pete Monfre returns after suffering an MCL injury in his only start of 2002. Promising upstarts Zach Hayes, Dan Karcz and Dave Scholz also look to factor heavily into the offensive line mix in 2003.

Six starters return for the Blugolds next season, who will look to replace Football Gazette First Team All-West Region and unanimous All-WIAC First Team linebacker Brad Gawronski, Football Gazette Third Team All-West Region defensive lineman Nick Goeser, All-WIAC Second Team defensive back Justin Miller and All-WIAC Honorable Mention defensive lineman Dan Larson. Gawronski led the team with 67 tackles and recorded five passes defended to top all linebackers.

Second Team All-WIAC defensive lineman Austin Crow returns after playing the majority of 2002 with a cast due to a broken bone in his right wrist. Crow finished second in the WIAC in forced and recovered fumbles with two while finishing fourth with six sacks. Joining Crow along the line of scrimmage is noseguard Dave Maas. Maas started the final six games of 2002 and compiled 24 tackles, five tackles for loss and four sacks.

Linebacker Andrew Jones showed the ability to