Northern Illinois senior tailback Chad Spann does not fit the role of the stereotypical college football player. Instead of taking classes like “Psychology of Coaching” or “Introduction to Leisure” Spann has almost completed his English degree, which he will secure in May.

As opposed to grabbing the Playstation 2 control Spann is more likely to pull out a dog-eared copy of Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, flip to his page and start reading. Or he might break out his tenor sax and play a few tunes to wind down.

Spann does not aspire to be a broadcaster or work in communications - like a lot of collegiate athletes - when his college career is done. He wants to teach high school English and maybe coach football while he is at it, although he might have to wait until he is done playing on Sundays before he sends those resumes out.

It has been a long and hard-working road for the former walk-on from Indianapolis North Central High School.

After a standout high school career, one in which the 5-foot-9, 198-pound Spann rushed for

3,522 yards and 34 touchdowns (1,935 and 22 as a senior) he was not highly-recruited. Northern Illinois showed some interest along with some Division I-AA schools and Division II programs.

Spann and his mother, Wanda Spann-Roddy, drove around the Midwest looking at schools during his junior year and ended up in DeKalb, Ill.

“Me and my mom went out a lot my junior year and looked at some schools. We came up to Northern Illinois and she loved it,” Spann said. “She loved the school, she loved the academic program that they have for student athletes…which was most important for her.”

Her son did not need much convincing.

“I loved the coach and loved the environment of the team,” Spann said. “They recruited me pretty hard my senior year, but things happen and it didn’t work out. When my mom asked me where I wanted to go I told her I still liked Northern Illinois.”

Though he did not head to campus with a scholarship in his back pocket, it did not take long for Huskies brass to realize Spann was the kind of player they wanted in their program.

“She was with me the whole way and Coach Phelps, the guy that recruited me, offered me a preferred walk-on spot and I took it,” Spann said. “Two weeks into fall camp my freshman year Coach Novak gave me a scholarship, so I was never not on scholarship but I did not sign a letter of intent.”

Spann saw limited action his freshman year, appearing in 10 games and carrying the ball just 11 times for 61 yards. In 2008 his playing time increased. He saw action in all 13 Huskies contests, made a pair of starts including earning the starting nod in the Independence Bowl against Louisiana Tech. He carried the ball 88 times for 429 yards and scored eight touchdowns.

2009 was Spann's breakout season. Though he started just four games due to head coach Jerry Kill's running back rotation and the Huskies' depth at running back, Spann rushed for 1,038 yards on 179 carries (a 5.8 average) and found the end zone 19 times. He also caught 14 passes out of the backfield for 153 yards and scored the first receiving touchdown of his college career. He was named to the All-MAC First Team and finished tied for 12th in the nation in scoring with 120 points.

However, this success came with a price. Towards the end of the season he injured his shoulder, an injury that would require surgery after NIU's appearance in the International Bowl.

This led to extensive rehabilitation and caused Spann to miss the Huskies' spring camp. Meanwhile, with a bevy of talented backfield recruits as well as Iowa State transfer Cameron Bell eligible after sitting out the required year, Spann knew he would have to work as hard as possible if he hoped to hold on to his starting position once the season rolled around.

"We have a rule in our program; if you get injured to beat you out the other guy's got to be playing better than you were when you were injured," Kill said. "Chad had a pretty good year and I think he understood he was the starter. But if he were to rest on his laurels and didn't work and do the things that he needed to do in the summer that he could lose that job.

"He's always worked pretty hard. He was a kid that was a walk-on here, which is a pretty incredible story as well. But I think he's always had a good work ethic. That's one thing I've never had to worry about with that young man. He's always worked hard because he's had to, and I think that's what makes him so good."

Spann, to his credit, said he did not worry very much about his eventual place on the depth chart. He just wanted to get ready for the season.

"I didn't think about it too much," he said. "We've always been a successful team; we've always split carries between the running backs ever since Coach Kill's been here. So it wasn't anything too big a concern. But it was definitely something I wanted to keep track of and made sure I stayed on top of because, like I said, these guys were out there getting better while I had to sit and watch. So it pushed me to train harder than I ever have this off-season."

Spann was in the Huskies' starting backfield for their season opener against Iowa State, rushing for 80 yards on 17 carries. He followed that by rushing for 140 yards on 21 carries and a touchdown in NIU's 23-17 home win over North Dakota. In the third week, against a stingy Illinois defense, Spann was held to just 15 yards on 13 carries, but he did score a touchdown in the Huskies' road loss.

This set the stage for the biggest day, to date, in Spann's college career.

In Minneapolis, against the Big Ten's Minnesota Golden Gophers, Spann was a one-man wrecking crew. He torched the Gophers for a career-high 223 yards on just 15 carries and scored a pair of touchdowns as Northern Illinois pulled off the upset, 34-23. This gave him 458 yards this season, good for 13th in the nation, with the softer portion of NIU's schedule coming up.

Kill thinks the reason Spann has been able to put the injury behind him and increase his productivity (he had just 152 rushing yards after four games last season) is the fact that all his time in the weight room has led to added strength on the football field.

"Chad is getting better. I think he's a stronger back than he was a year ago," Kill said. "He had a good year a year ago, but he had shoulder surgery and didn't go through spring ball. He spent a lot of time in the weight room rehabbing and I just think he's a more physical, stronger back. I think he's breaking a lot more tackles than he did a year ago."

Spann agrees that he is stronger, but, like any politically correct running back, wanted to share some of the credit with the guys up front.

"We have a great offensive line. They don't get enough credit along with the fullbacks," he said. "Those holes were humungous on Saturday night (against Minnesota).

"It gives me a tremendous amount of confidence, especially in my offensive line. Coming into

the season we had a couple of questions in our offensive line and I think this last game really does more for them than it did for myself because we had question marks there. For me to be able to dish out a 220-yard game I think that's really going to help their confidence and get their playing level up."

Northern Illinois will finish its stretch of four road games in its first five to open the season Saturday when it travels to InfoCision Stadium to take on Akron. The Zips defeated the Huskies, 31-30, in the 2005 MAC Championship Game on a last-second 36-yard touchdown pass from Luke Getsy to Domenik Hixon. Akron will enter the game at 0-4 while Northern Illinois stands at 2-2. Spann gained 125 yards on 21 carries and scored a pair of touchdowns in the Huskies' 27-10 win over the Zips last season.