The biggest turnaround in college football this season got even more impressive Friday night at Ford Field when Miami, a team that finished 1-11 last season, used a late Armand Robinson touchdown reception to slip past favored Northern Illinois in the Marathon MAC Championship Game.

The 26-21 win capped an amazing resurgence for the RedHawks (9-4), and most likely will land them back in Detroit Dec. 26 for the Little Caesar's Pizza Bowl.

"What an outstanding accomplishment by these young men to overcome to adversity in which they were involved from going 1-11 to being 9-4 and winning a MAC Championship," RedHawks coach Mike Haywood said after the game. "I'm so happy for them and all the adversity they have overcome and all the hard work they have done."

Miami trailed 21-20 after Willie Clark gave NIU the lead with a 39-yard touchdown reception from Chandler Harnish. But late in the game, after the RedHawks forced the Huskies to punt from their own end zone, it took Miami six plays to get the decisive touchdown. During the scoring drive Northern Illinois had a chance to put the game away. The RedHawks faced fourth-and-20 from their own 38-yard line and the Huskies defensive line was able to flush Miami freshman quarterback Austin Boucher out of the pocket. Boucher rolled to his left and threw the ball downfield towards wideout Chris Givens. Huskies linebacker Tyrone Clark stepped in front of the pass to pick it off, but it bounced off his hands and into the waiting arms of Givens, who grabbed it at the NIU 45 and took it to the Huskies 31.

Boucher was thrilled to have new life after the lucky bounce.

"Sometimes I say it's better to be lucky then good. MAC Championship game, you couldn't ask for anything more," he said. "Plays like that happen and we were fortunate to have a play happen for us. We still had to score and that's exactly what we did"

The next play Miami caught the Huskies in an all-out blitz, and Boucher found Robinson uncovered on a quick slant. Robinson grabbed the ball and sprinted untouched into the end zone for the game-winner.

"Everyone was on the sideline screaming because we saw the blitz coming," Haywood said. "What a tremendous play on Austin's part to get Armand the ball."

Northern Illinois (10-3) had one more chance, getting the ball with :33 remaining in the game. The Huskies advanced the ball to the Miami side of the field, but Harnish was sacked on the game's final play as the clock hit :00.

"I'm not going to sit here and lie to you. It hurts. It's painful. But coach has done a great job of training us to make sure we can move on," NIU senior linebacker Alex Kube said after the loss. "I'm sorry for our community, I'm sorry for our program, but I'm telling we'll bounce back from this and we'll play the bowl game and we'll play it tough, just like we do every week."

At first it looked like the game was going to be a shootout. Both teams found the end zone twice in the first quarter. Miami running back Thomas Merriweather opened the scoring with a 1-yard run to give the RedHawks a 6-0 lead (the extra point was blocked). It took the Huskies less than two minutes to answer, taking the lead on a 69-yard touchdown reception by Martez Moore on a perfect pass from Harnish. The extra point gave NIU a 7-6 lead at the 6:33 mark.

The RedHawks roared right back with Tracy Moore capping a six-play, 77-yard drive with a 7-yard run to give Miami a 13-7 lead. The Huskies struck again, going on a six-play drive of their

own…this one covering 70 yards and ending when Moore grabbed his second touchdown pass of the quarter, this one from 27 yards out to give NIU the lead back at 14-13.

That was all the scoring in the first half. In fact, the only other scoring chance before halftime came when Miami kicker Trevor Cook had a field goal blocked with 2:02 left in the second quarter.

The RedHawks roared out of the half time locker room, going on a 10-play, 82-yard drive that chewed up 5:02 and ended when Merriweather crashed in from the 1-yard line for his second touchdown of the game to put the RedHawks back on top, 20-14.

Then Clark's touchdown on the first play of the fourth quarter set the stage for the wild finish.

Boucher, who took over as Miami's quarterback when starter Zac Dysert was lost for the season with a lacerated spleen, completed 29 of 46 passes for 333 yards and one touchdown. He did not throw an interception and led the RedHawks to 432 yards of total offense. Haywood was proud of how his young quarterback handled being thrust into the championship chase late in the season.

"Austin did a really good job. Anytime you run an offense and you don't turn the football over, I think you do a tremendous job as a quarterback," he said. "The thing you need to know about Austin Boucher, is that young man studies more tape then any man in that organization. He understands his strengths and his weaknesses and he studies tape to make up for his weaknesses."

Despite the loss, Northern Illinois head coach Jerry Kill thinks his team has come a long way from its 1-2 beginning to the season.

"We're 10-3, and you don't win 10 games not doing a good job," Kill said. "The kids have gotten better and better and they've been very coachable. We'll bounce back. They'll go back to work and learn. This hurts, and it should hurt. That's part of life - you don't win all the time. This is when you find out who you are."

Harnish thinks he already knows exactly who his Huskie teammates are.

“We've got a lot of mature players on this team and have been in situations like this before. I have all the faith in the world we'll bounce back,” he said. “We have great leadership, and I don't expect us to go into the tank at all. I expect us to get better and look forward to a bowl game.

Meanwhile, Haywood took a moment to ponder how his RedHawks were able to go from one of the worst teams in the country to winning the MAC Championship.

"Players had to buy into change their lifestyle. The quality of life we were living as a team wasn't conducive to a winning organization,” he said. “They really changed their life. They started living a better quality life. Our GPA goes up over five points. We started having less problems off the field. They started developing into better men and as we develop into better men we get better results on the football field."

NOTES: Armand Robinson caught a career-high 14 passes for 176 yards and a touchdown…The last time Miami won the MAC Championship Game was in 2003, when Ben Roethlisberger led them to a 49-27 win over Bowling Green…With the victory in the title game Miami took the lead in the all-time season series between the two schools, 8-7…on the first play from scrimmage Thomas Merriweather ran for 46 yards, the second-longest run of his career…Miami’s eight-game improvement from last season to this season was the largest improvement in the nation.