



# 2025 IlliniBoard Football Preview



## Footballing

Let's just talk about it. Let's get it out of the way. You find yourself wanting to talk about it, then you don't want to talk about it, so ... let's just talk about it.

What are we supposed to do with expectations?

If you're like me, your summer has been one big swing between "it's our time" and "oh God this is gonna hurt so bad when it doesn't happen." We don't know how to handle expectations – we literally don't, as a fanbase, know how – and so we're left to flap around in the breeze. Are we allowed to say "get ready to have the ball shoved down your throat, Indiana," or should we just remain silent and hope for the best? Will Lucy hold the football?

We need to start there because nothing else matters. You haven't known what to do and I haven't known what to do. When you wake up at 3:35 a.m. and you have to pee because you drank too much Powerade Zero after mowing the lawn, and you get back in bed, and you wonder to yourself if you're going to be able to fall back asleep, and you're hoping to drift off but find yourself thinking about this Illini football season with rising anxiety (because every 3:35 a.m. thought is an anxious one), where does your mind go? I believe that for 99% of us, there's one central thought: what are we supposed to do with "No. 12 Illinois football"?

I can run in both directions with it. I can find the opposite ends. Hell, publications like The Athletic can find the opposite ends. Two of their college football writers (Chris Vannini and Stewart Mandel) have written about the Illini recently. Here's what they said about Illinois:

Vannini, ranking all 136 FBS teams, has Illinois No. 11 nationally and right on the cusp of a playoff bid depending on how the auto-bids shake out. He wrote one sentence for all of the top teams, and here's what he said about Illinois:

“Everyone is back from a top-15 season and the defense could take a big step forward.”

Mandel, meanwhile, has Illinois ninth in the *Big Ten*, finishing 7-5 (5-4).

(Yes, the same publication has Illinois 11th nationally in one article and ninth in the *Big Ten* in another article.)

Stew has this to say:

“The closer we get, the more I think the Illini are a classic case of ‘big bowl win + returning starters = ranked too high the next year.’ They did win 10 games, but the best of those wins came against Michigan (8-5). And they were 5-1 in one-score games, which often turns back around the following year. So, I’m going with 7-5.”

Yes, South Carolina was a better win than Michigan. Yes, in the same article, Mandel talks about how Indiana “isn’t going away” despite losing twice the number of starters and their quarterback. Yes, Stewart Mandel went to Northwestern.

But the thing is, as I’ve looked at this season over the summer ... I could see both. There’s a part of my heart that agrees with both statements. No. 11 nationally and possibly in the playoff? YES! Ranked too high this year after the razor-close games last year that could have gone either way? PROBABLY!

Why such wild emotional swings? Because we’ve never done this before.

Here, let me bring you back to earth for a moment. Don’t worry, I’ll still shoot you to the moon later. This is page two and there are dozens more. But let’s start with, “is Stewart Mandel’s assessment correct?” To accomplish this, we need some NERDstats.

“Robert, you’re on the second page of the preview and you’re already turning to NERDstats?”

Don’t worry. Please stay with me. I’m just gonna stick to one stat here: Success Rate.

Success Rate isn’t the be-all and end-all. It’s a stat that tells us things, but it can immediately be trumped by “but then they fumbled twice and eliminated all of the Success Rate advantage they had gained.” It’s predictive – it tells you if you move the ball on offense and stop the ball on defense – but there’s a lot more to football than just moving the ball. Like hanging onto it. And scoring 7 instead of 3. And a dozen other things.

Success Rate is just a tally mark for one side or the other on each play. The offense is “successful” if it gains 50% of the needed yards on first down, 70% of the needed yards on second down, and a first-down conversion on all third-down and fourth-down plays. Some examples:

If it's first-and-10 at the 20-yard line and you get four yards, that's less than 50% of the needed yards for a first down so the defense "wins" that play. If it's then second-and-6 and you get four more yards, you only have two yards to go and that's more than 70% of the way to the first-down marker so the offense "wins." It's not going to equal out to 50/50 (some plays will be a push), but in general, you want a positive Success Rate.

Ohio State last year? 50% Success Rate on offense, 35% Success Rate for opposing offenses, +15% Net Success Rate, national champions. Purdue last year? 38% Success Rate on offense, 49% Success Rate for opposing offenses, -11% Net Success Rate, uh, not national champions.

Again, it's not everything. You still need to convert in the red zone, and you still need to make your field goals, and you still need to force turnovers, and you still need to limit interceptions. Teams win Net Success Rate and lose games all the time. Auburn was +9% in Net Success Rate last year – that's a 10-2 season if I've ever seen one – and they went 5-7. Stupid is as stupid does.

But it is informative. It does tell you the teams that move the ball and the teams that stop the ball. Oklahoma couldn't move the ball last year and Oklahoma lost seven games. Arizona State could move the ball and Arizona State went to the playoff.

Why am I telling you this? Because you're not prepared for the moment here in a few paragraphs where I tell you the Illini Net Success Rate from last season. Remember, this is the "I'll bring you back to earth before building you up" portion of the intro, so I'm intentionally playing to the "yeah, there are concerns that last season wasn't sustainable" side first. So just be ready to say, "oh man" before you say, "oh yeah."

I'll just give you the Net Success Rate from 2020 to 2023 before telling you the 2024 number. I'll do that so you can see how it follows what kind of team we had. Actually, maybe I'll go back to 2017 so that I can give you eight years of data. Net Success Rate is simply "percentage of wins on offense compared to the percentage of wins by the other offense." If your defense gives up a ton of successful plays and your offense cannot assemble any successful plays, then you need a heavy dose of everything else (field position, turnovers, red zone conversions, etc.) to win a game.

Illini Net Success Rate since 2017:

2017: -9%

2018: -5%

2019: -4%

2020: -13%

2021: -4%

2022: +12% (!!)

2023: +1%

2024: -2%

Yes, really. A 44% Success Rate for our offense and 46% Success Rate for opposing offenses. Minnesota Net Success Rate in 2024: +7%. Rutgers Net Success Rate in 2024: +1%. Illinois Net Success Rate in 2024: -2%.

So how did we get to 10 wins with a Net Success Rate worse than the 2015 Bill Cubit team? There are a lot of reasons.

For starters, it's partly the brand of football. Get the lead and then strangle. When we switch to "I don't care if we punt, just don't turn the ball over" mode (we have one of the most conservative approaches in all of college football), it kills our Success Rate numbers.

Once we had a two-touchdown lead in the Northwestern game, in the last *seven* drives, Luke Altmeyer completed two short passes for 11 total yards. Everything else was a run. We punted four times and kneeled out a fifth drive. The game was won, so we bogged it down and ran clock. Playing that kind of conservative football is always going to kill your Success Rate numbers.

We also did all kinds of footballing. Field position numbers were great. Turnover numbers were great. Redzone numbers, drive numbers - we did everything that Auburn didn't. I'm not sure if you noticed last season, but we aim to frustrate with our approach. And I don't just mean players jogging on or jogging off with the T-bar out. We're frustrating to play against because we're so methodical.

It works, though. Let's just look at the Field Position numbers. That's a stat that includes special teams (hi, Hank Beatty) as well as turnover margin (force/prevent turnovers and your field position numbers from those interceptions/fumbles will skyrocket). Here's another NERDstat for you: FP-AEP (Field Position - Average Expected Points). Meaning, from your average starting field position on offense and defense, how many expected points are you adding or subtracting? Start at midfield every drive and pin the opponent at the two-yard line every drive and these numbers will be huge regardless of how successful your individual plays are.

Our FE-AEP on offense in 2024: 1.398

Our FE-AEP on defense in 2024: -1.235

Remember the chart that Bret Bielema has talked about since he got here? How if you start at the 35-yard line you're expected to get X number of points but just 15 yards back as an average starting field position drops your expected points dramatically? That's what this

number is. From where we started our drives, the expectation was essentially 1.4 points per drive.

So, let's compare that to a team that doesn't know how to football like Michigan State. Here's their numbers last year:

Michigan State FE-AEP on offense in 2024: 1.123

Michigan State FE-AEP on defense in 2024: -1.438

If there are around 150 drives in a typical college football season:

Additional points Illinois should score (compared to MSU) just based on starting field position: **41.25**

Additional points Illinois should prevent (compared to MSU) just based on starting field position: **30.45**

That's *just* field position. You could have a great offense or a terrible offense, it doesn't matter. Just by the average yard line where we're starting our drives, we're already **71.7** points better than Michigan State across a full season. They need so many more offensive yards (and defensive stops) to make up those 72 points. And that's just to even the playing field.

I guess I'm already talking up the other side (the "you CAN trust in Illinois" side) here. If we call them the Mandel Side (7-5) and the Vannini Side (No. 11 and possibly in the playoff), the fact that we had a negative Net Success Rate last year screams that we're not very efficient at moving the ball and would require a lot of conversions (and ball control without turnovers). That's a big point for the "yeah, maybe 7-5 is the right answer here" side.

But there's also the "we football really well" side. We make things easy on ourselves. When Hank Beatty returns a punt to the opponent's 39-yard line, we don't need a very high success rate to score points. When Xavier Scott jumps a route, we make "are you getting at least 50% of the needed yards on first down?" way less important. Success Rate does tell the story of "good offense" or "bad defense," but footballing can cancel it out.

I mentioned Auburn above. They put up 6.7 yards per play on offense, only gave up 4.9 yards per play on defense, and they didn't go to a bowl game. That's nearly impossible to do. Meanwhile, Illinois put up 5.9 yards per play on offense, gave up 5.5 yards per play on defense, and won 10 games. How? Was it luck?

No, silly. It was footballing.

Illinois turnovers: 14

Auburn turnovers: 22

Illinois turnovers forced: 20  
Auburn turnovers forced: 13

Illinois punt return yards: 358  
Auburn punt return yards: 130

Illinois field goals: 18-for-22  
Auburn field goals: 12-for-22

Illinois red zone scoring percentage: 86.3%  
Auburn red zone scoring percentage: 78.1%

Illinois third-down conversion percentage: 46.5%  
Auburn third-down conversion percentage: 41.8%

Remember, Auburn had a WAY better offense and a WAY better defense last year. Significantly better on both sides of the ball. I'd trade for their offense and defense in a heartbeat. Better athletes, better production.

Don't believe me? Here's the kicker of all kickers:

Auburn offensive yards: 5,153  
Auburn yards allowed: 3,969  
Difference: +1,184 yards

Illinois offensive yards: 4,743  
Illinois yards allowed: 4,851  
Difference: -108 yards

(Yes. We were outgained. On the season. And we won 10 games.)

Add it all up and what do you get?

Auburn record: 5-7  
Illinois record: 10-3

It's crazy, right? Just in yards – just in hand it off or pass it and stop the handoffs or stop the passes – Auburn was +1,292 when compared to Illinois. That's 13 times up and down the football field. They were so, so much better than us at “quarterback drops back, completes 11-yard pass, moves the chains.” But because Illinois was better at field position, turnovers, punt returns, field goals, red zone scoring percentage, third-down conversion percentage, and a dozen other stats, we not only evened out those 1,300 yards, we went 10-3 while they went 5-7. *Just by doing the little things.*

So, there's your framework for this season. That's where we start with this entire preview. You hear that Illinois was actually negative in total yards on the season and you think, "yeah, that checks out, I mean - Illinois 50, Purdue 49." You realize that we might not come back to tie a Purdue-like opponent this season (and then beat them in overtime), and you think, "oh man, is Stewart Mandel right? Is this thing headed for 7-5 or worse?"

But then you think about what might happen if we combine "we football like nobody's business" with better numbers on offense and defense in 2025. If we can have a negative Net Success Rate on the season but still win 10 games because we're so good at every "little things" category (like, seriously, nearly every single one), what might we do if we have a positive Success Rate this season? What if we can move the ball, stop the ball AND football?

If you're a few pages in here and you're saying, "Robert, we're deep diving NERDstats already?" please know that it's very important that I place this viewfinder up to your eyes before you read the rest of this preview. If you're still lost in "one minute I think we're gonna go to the playoff, the next minute I remember that we're Illinois and I'm scared to death" land, this is my road map for you. Don't be distracted by everyone waving their arms and screaming "5-1 in one-score games and that won't happen again." Don't watch those "Illinois is a playoff LOCK, baby" reels. Keep looking through this viewfinder.

Illinois football was [places flat hand near knee, palm down] here for 30 years. Illinois football is now [raises hand to eye level] up here. Ohio State is still [reaches as high as my hand goes while remaining parallel to the floor which, honestly, is embarrassingly close to the top of my head given my alligator arms] up here. But our advancement from knee level to eye level is not recruiting. It's not really even the schemes and playcalling. Our advancement from down there to up here is pretty much just footballing.

The interception stats that I've tracked every summer since 2013? The ones where I compare our most recent 10-year window to every other college football program's? Here's our national ranking since Bielema took over:

When he took over: 107th

After 2021: 106th

After 2022: 64th

After 2023: 51st

After 2024: 33rd

I'm not going to go back through all of the stats above (the comparisons to Auburn) but let me just remind you of everything we just went through. Solid turnover numbers, both in getting takeaways and limiting giveaways. Fantastic field-position numbers. Great kicking game. Fantastic return game. And when you dig in on the NERDstats, very solid at limiting explosive plays while on defense and producing explosive plays on offense. To top it off, a

very sound approach to risk management (there is a 0.0% chance we would have thrown the pass that Kansas threw with 30 seconds left in the first half that led to Xavier Scott's pick six).

Let me repeat myself. We did not build from [hand down by knee] here to [hand at eye level] here by some massive Ron Zook talent surge – 4,743 yards for, 4,851 yards against says that we were pretty much equal with our opponents last season in the category of “our big guys shoved their big guys around and then our ballcarriers tried to evade their tacklers.” We were somewhere between 20th and 30th in the various “strength of schedule” ratings last season and we played those teams straight up in the yards department. And then everything else pushed us to 10 wins.

So, as we slowly increase our talent level, what do you expect to happen? We beat South Carolina in the Citrus Bowl and now return 18 of the 22 players who started that game. With more experience, don't you kind of expect our yards differential to increase? I do. Using FEI, our strength of schedule last year was 20th nationally and this year it projects as 28th, so the schedule is a bit easier overall. That would project a jump in yards as well, right? Kelley Ford's numbers say that the average defense we'll face is ranked 32nd and the average offense we'll face is ranked 64th. All of this suggests the yards will get better. So, if the yards get better and the footballing stays the same...

Look, it's still football. It's never consistent. It will never make sense. One week you're giving up 49 points to Purdue and the next week you're holding Michigan to seven. There are tons of variables, and it never follows a straight line. Ohio State won the national title last year ... but very nearly lost to Nebraska to take themselves out of the playoff altogether. Every season is a roller coaster, even for the national champs.

So, I'm not compiling all of these stats to say, “everything's fine! ZERO potholes ahead!” As I wrote in another article recently, Kansas had no idea their 2024 schedule included 10-win Illinois, 11-win UNLV, and 11-win Arizona State. Illinois was coming off a five-win season and Arizona State was coming off a three-win season, so they had no sense of the storm that was coming. We might wake up on Dec. 1 and say something like, “wow, we had no idea both USC and Washington would be top-10 opponents.”

I needed to say all of *that* before I could make this point. In the same article where Stewart Mandel put us 7-5 (5-4), he showed the bottom of the Big Ten standings to be like this. The teams he projects finishing 12th through 18th:

 USC	4-5	6-6
 UCLA	4-5	6-6
 Rutgers	3-6	6-6
 Wisconsin	2-7	4-8
 Northwestern	2-7	4-8
 Maryland	1-8	3-9
 Purdue	0-9	2-10

We play six of those seven teams (plus Ohio State, Indiana, and Washington). I understand why he said that the close games will go the other way this year, but what if there aren't many close games? What if the standings DO end up like this and six of our nine conference opponents have losing records in the Big Ten? I wanted to make the "you never know if the preseason SOS matches the postseason SOS" point before I wrote this (because we don't know if this will be the actual bottom seven), but on the flipside, had he looked at our actual schedule, it might have been quite difficult for him to find the four losses for his 5-4 prediction.

I'm bouncing back and forth here intentionally. I'm speaking to both of your summer thoughts at the same time. And, hopefully, I'm delivering one message:

The football. It's competent.

I don't know if this will be a great year or a terrible year. It's possible the players believe their own hype and are suddenly staring at 3-3 with Ohio State coming to town. It's possible we win the Duke, Indiana, and USC games by comfortable margins and go into the Ohio State game No. 4 in the country and yet to be tested in the fourth quarter. Those are all within the realm of possibility. Football will do some weird stuff (like it always does) – just hopefully to our opponents and not to us.

But the resting place, at least for 2025, is competence. When you have most of your roster back, you can usually rest on *how* they play the game. In general, older teams football and younger teams struggle to football. A coaching staff that develops its roster to play smart

football – think Wisconsin under Alvarez or Kansas State under Snyder – helps a lot, but even for those coaches, sometimes a young roster learning the ropes means the footballing goes away for a bit. (But it always returns.)

Last year was a bit of a mess when it came to yards. Wisconsin was +92 yards on the season, Illinois was -108. In the core elements of football (moving the ball and stopping the ball), the two teams were more or less identical. So how did Wisconsin go 5-7 while we went 10-3? Footballing (and, honestly, only footballing). When the yards are even, the team that footballs the best will win.

That's where I've landed in August after an early summer of, "how am I supposed to handle all of this?" That's why, "Illinois was lucky to win ten games last year" doesn't bother me as much as it did when it was used as a weapon back in the spring. Was there luck involved? Sure. As I wrote a dozen times in the last nine months, we were an 8.2 Second Order Wins team that won 10 games. A season that statistically looked like 8.2 wins and 4.8 losses ended up 10 wins and three losses.

And I'm over the moon that we were an 8.2 Second Order Win team. We controlled the controllables, put up an 8.2, and the football gods rewarded us with 10 wins. This year, maybe we control even more of the controllables and put up a 9.8 before the football gods get involved?

8.2 is everything to me, by the way. I know you're having a, "oh God he's about to go deep on another NERDstat in the intro" moment right now but it's important. This point I am making as I start this preview is VERY IMPORTANT for anyone planning to read the rest of the preview. I believe that when you reach the final page, I will have helped frame this season for you after a summer of "what am I supposed to do?" And to get you there, I need to share stuff like this:

Second Order Wins (2ndOW) is a simple stat. You simply add up your Postgame Win Expectancy (PGWE) for all of your games. Because football is a funny game, take the stats from a game, compare those stats to thousands and thousands of games in the past, and come up with "Team A wins a game with these stats 89% of the time and Team B wins a game with these stats 11% of the time." That way, when you win one of those 11% games (like the Michigan State game in 2019), you know to temper your expectations. Play that same game nine more times and you're gonna lose all nine. 11% chance we'd get the river card we needed and it hit.

It's why I was so pop-the-champagne about the Citrus Bowl. Our PGWE on Dec. 31? 90.7%. Had Daniel Brown not broken through the line and hurried the fourth-and-goal pass for South Carolina with three minutes left, and had it been a touchdown, and had we not driven into field goal range, then the Citrus Bowl would have been South Carolina sneaking

out of Camping World Stadium with a wildly lucky win. We TOOK THAT SHIT TO THEM (sorry, mom) in that game.

Illinois had the explosive plays. Illinois did the things that winning teams do. Had South Carolina won, it would have been Illinois-at-Michigan-State-in-2019 lucky. Play that game with those stats 1,000 times and we win it 907 of the 1,000 times.

Stats like that make me feel better than any preseason top-25 vote or recruiting win. What you feel when you tune into some hat-picking ceremony and the 4-star athlete puts on the Illini hat – that’s what I feel when I refresh Bill Connelly’s Postgame Win Expectancy spreadsheet and see 90.7 pop up. My eyes did not deceive me in Orlando. South Carolina, who had just 77.5%’d Clemson in their previous game, got 90.7%’d by Illinois. I’m so fired up just typing that again that I might go run around the block.

(I did not run around the block. It’s hot. Or something.)

Second Order Wins tell the *real* story. The 2ndOW in 2022? 9.6. We were way better than our 8-5 record showed. It’s just that some football stuff happened (like, we put up a 64.7% at Michigan but lost) and what really could have been a 10-win team finished 8-5.

Last year, I think 2ndOW tells the full story as well. When “change one play in each game and Illinois loses to Nebraska, Purdue, and Rutgers” discussions happen, I run to PGWE.

Nebraska game: 81.7% Illinois

Purdue game: 74.5% Purdue

Rutgers game: 83.2% Illinois

We should have won the Nebraska and Rutgers games. We shouldn’t have beaten Purdue.

We also played three 50/50 games (Kansas, Michigan, and Minnesota), we won two and lost one, and when you add everything else together, we were an 8.2-win team that won 10 games. With the final game being a 90.7% destruction of a top-15 team.

Throw out all of the “Illinois was 5-1 in close games so look for them to lose all of those games this year” stuff. Don’t ignore it, just ... throw it in the bin next to the garage (but don’t drag it to the curb yet). “Close game magic won’t last!” is just one way to answer the same “was Illinois REALLY a 10-win team in 2024?” question that Second Order Wins just answered. We were ... an 8.2-win team. Add up our PWGE for Kansas, Nebraska, Purdue, Michigan, and Rutgers and it’s 2.8. Statistically, we should win 2.8 of those five games. We won all five.

And that’s fine! It’s football! That’s great! We’re Illinois! In 2022, we should have gone 2-2 in the Indiana, Michigan, Purdue, and Michigan State games. We went 0-4 with some weird

stuff not going our way (like the Brian Hightower non-touchdown at Indiana and the fourth-down pick play at Michigan). It's rare to finish dead center right on your 2ndOW. There are seasons when stuff goes your way and seasons when stuff doesn't go your way. Last year was a "stuff went our way" year.

*But let's not forget that it was still an 8.2 year.* Connelly likes to say that Second Order Wins means the team "had the look of" a team that wins that many games. We had the look of an 8.2-win team last year. And that's *incredible* for Illinois football. ESPECIALLY since we're fourth nationally in Returning Production going into this season. A team that "had the look of" an 8-5 team now gets everyone back with an easier schedule? My "yeah, I doubt we'll be as fortunate as we were in 2024" fears immediately go away when I hear that.

Does that mean, "look out, people, Illinois is headed for the playoff"? Absolutely not. It's still football. Kansas was preseason No. 22 last year, ran into a buzzsaw September schedule, got a zero in the "fortunate" column, and that meant a 6.3 2ndOW season finished 5-7. Lance Leipold can still coach, they've still rebuilt, it's just that their 2024 season (a season with zero home games since they were rebuilding their stadium) turned into one of those "lost to Illinois by 6, UNLV by 3, West Virginia by 4, and Arizona State by 4 and before they knew what hit them the season was lost" seasons. It happens to absolutely everyone besides maybe the five or six "we have NFL rosters in college" programs.

Which is why I concentrate on that 2ndOW number. In 2006 we "had the look of" a 5.5-win team but we went 2-10. Even with that 2-10 record, 2ndOW was pointing to the fact that we did a lot right. We had a ton coming back and took a big leap in 2007. Similarly, 2ndOW (and SP+) told us that 2014 wasn't exactly a big jump into "now a program that should expect bowl games" territory. You can always filter "what happened that season" through "what the numbers say should have been the result."

And, yes, "did dumb things" is part of this. It's not all happenstance. We went through all of Auburn's terrible footballing above. Field goals, turnovers, field position – they would get lots of yards and then do dumb stuff. So when you look at Auburn's 7.8 2ndOW last year, a lot of their "should have won 7.8 games" (and, frankly, a lot of "Ron Zook's 2006 team should have won 5.5 games") can be answered with, "if they would have made better field position decisions and didn't turn the ball over so much and didn't have a kicker that was close to 50%" they might have reached their potential. Sometimes it's bad luck and sometimes it's "poorly coached." Kansas last year was a lot of bad luck. Auburn last year was a lot of "poorly coached."

I've finally set it up for you. We're probably 5,000 words in and I'm finally ready to bring the intro home. It was VERY IMPORTANT that I set everything up like that because I want you to reach my same conclusion.

The last time we had these preseason expectations was 1990. I was entering my senior year in high school and applying to Illinois. I had gotten a 70.1% in chemistry my junior year which meant that, by the skin of my teeth, I had a “ready to apply to Illinois” transcript. On the chart of “ACT Score compared to class rank,” I was one line below what the book in the guidance counselor’s office said I needed to attain in order to be accepted into the Landscape Architecture program at Illinois. I tuned into Illini football games that fall – those were “preseason No. 11 Illini football games” – with two hopes: I hope we’re really No. 11, and I hope I get into Illinois. When we beat Colorado in September (that’s eventual national champion Colorado), I was pretty sure No. 11 was legit. And when I got into Illinois ... aw, hell, this is the preview where I go on forever about stuff. I’ll tell that story again.

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I was more into basketball recruiting as a high school senior than I am today. There wasn’t even such a thing as “into recruiting” at the time (with no internet, it was basically just “check the Parade Magazine in the Sunday paper to see if it’s the one that ranks high school senior basketball players” back then), but a few high school friends and I – one of those friends is a fire truck owner – would travel to local high school games to see Illini recruits. One night in November, we went to see Collinsville play ... I believe it was Centralia?

Why did we do this? Because Richard Keene was a beast for Collinsville and I wanted him to go to Illinois.

“Robert, what did you do senior year of high school? Did you drive an endless stream of high school junior girls around town in your 1984 Laser while blasting Skid Row?”

“Sometimes. But that night I drove several towns over to see Richard Keene play in the first game of his junior season because I hoped that he’d eventually pick Illinois.”

When I got home, I parked in the carport (my parents’ van was in the garage and my sister’s car was on the street). The backyard lights were on, which was weird. When I say backyard lights, my dad had paved half of the back yard as a basketball court and then set up floodlights on two 12-foot light poles on either side of the court. Everyone in the neighborhood would play late into the night until the bouncing ball was too much for open-window sleepers.

So, the backyard was fully illuminated. Why? Well, because my dad had opened the mail, saw my letter from Illinois, opened it, and then used his dot matrix printer to make a banner hanging above the back porch. He called me “Bub,” so the banner read:

**CONGRATULATIONS BUB. UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS CLASS OF 1995**

I threw my car keys high into the air. They landed on the roof of the garage (but I didn't care). My parents knew I would show up 30 seconds before my curfew so they were waiting up for me in the kitchen. I had basically spent every moment from the Final Four in April of 1989 until November of 1990 with one focus: somehow get into Illinois.

And I got into Illinois. Top-five memory in my life.

(I didn't graduate in 1995; went five full years with two academic probations and graduated in 1996. Like a BOSS.)

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So, we beat Colorado in September 1990. We climbed as high as No. 5 in early November. Then Bret Bielema and the Iowa Hawkeyes destroyed the Illini in Memorial Stadium (he was a sophomore walk-on at the time and didn't play much in that game). We lost to Michigan the next week, which sent us to the Hall Of Fame Bowl (No. 14 Clemson vs. No. 16 Illinois), we got thumped 30-0, and what began in September with beating the eventual national champions ended 8-4 and No. 25.

Since then, we have not returned to the August 1990 feeling. Because we haven't been ranked in the top 12 in the preseason since then. Because we haven't had any real expectations since then. A quick recap:

- After a terrible 0-3 start to the season in 1993 we did go 5-3 in the Big Ten, which led to us being ranked No. 22 preseason in 1994. There were some expectations that year, but the loss to Washington State in the opener killed all of that. We'd finish 6-5 at the end of the regular season and unranked (in what really should have been a 10-1 season). There were hopes that August, but ... tempered hopes that were quickly dashed.
- We went 8-4 in 1999. The season started out 3-3 after getting thumped by Minnesota at home in mid-October. But starting with The Rocky Harvey Game at Michigan the next week, we went on a roll, finished 7-4, and won the MicronPC.com Bowl. That led to some high expectations for 2000 (not top-12 high expectations, but No. 21 expectations). That summer was full of bad news, however, especially Brandon Lloyd's broken foot. We were ranked, but expectations were tempered by roster holes to fill and the question of "who is the top receiver without Lloyd?" In the end, the Michigan game broke us, and we finished 5-6.
- We won the Big Ten the next year, though (2001). We weren't ranked in the preseason, but with Lloyd back and other dependable receivers found, we came out of nowhere to win the conference (our last conference title). You know the rest - lost to LSU in the Sugar Bowl because the Rose Bowl was the national title that year

- but we're talking expectations here, and in 2001, there were none before the season.

- 2002 had ... some expectations. We had just won the Big Ten, so the fanbase was engaged, but we had won the Big Ten with double-digit seniors in the starting lineup. Because they had all graduated, we weren't ranked in the preseason despite being the defending conference champs. And the pollsters were right. We finished 5-7.
- The next time we had expectations was 2008. You young kids might say, "Robert, the Rose Bowl year was 2007, right?" but we were coming off a 2-10 record in 2006 so there were zero expectations before the Rose Bowl season. 2008 did see a preseason ranking of No. 20 (our last preseason ranking before this year), but the roster losses after 2007 proved to be too much. We finished 5-7. (See a theme here?)

I can probably hustle through the rest of the seasons since then. 2009 honestly had the highest fanbase expectations (we were too young in 2008, but with Juice a senior, Arrelious Benn in his final season before declaring for the draft, and a lot back on defense, expectations were up despite not being ranked). We went 3-9. 2010 had no expectations but we went a surprising 6-6. 2011 then had higher expectations after a bowl game, and our 6-0 start found us ranked, but we lost the final six games and Ron Zook was fired.

2012 through 2020? Honestly, we never once had expectations. Not a single time. I started writing this preview in 2013, so I've written a 20,000-plus word preview for all of those seasons and let me tell you, there were no expectations. The highest it got was, "might actually make a bowl?"

After a great 2022 season, 2023 is the only other year that had "expectations." But we had lost so much from the roster that my personal expectations were tempered. My prediction was another nemesis season: 5-6 going into the Northwestern game just begging for a sixth win. That ended up happening, we didn't convert the two-point conversion, and Northwestern won. 5-7 season. Again.

That muted expectations for last season. And then we came out of absolutely nowhere to win 10 games. Which means we had our third "out of nowhere" great season this century: 2001, 2007, and 2024.

The difference now?

Pay attention because this is the whole thing.

The difference now?

We had an out-of-nowhere season and we didn't do it with seniors. Let me write that two more times.

We had an out-of-nowhere season and we didn't do it with seniors. 2001 was an out-of-nowhere season and then we lost a ton. 2007 was an out-of-nowhere season and then we lost a ton. Even most of our minor-success seasons (like 2014) led to zero expectations because we immediately lost a lot. In 2024, we had an out-of-nowhere season and we didn't do it with seniors.

We had a *successful by every measure, including Second Order Wins* season and it didn't require "well, yeah, these guys have all had 1,500 snaps playing next to each other" to get there. We combined talent and coaching and scheme and produced good football. And now we have nearly everyone back, bringing about our first preseason expectations since 1990.

Even 2022 couldn't say that. 2022 was the year of the sixth-year senior. And once those seniors were gone, we had some rebuilding to do in 2023. Go back through our last 35 seasons and you won't find a single "won big with a young team" Illini football season. It's been 35 years of some degree of "once the players had experience, we had some minor success." 2024? Bielema Didn't Do It With Seniors. BDDIWS. I know we're a Nike school, but I wear BDDIWS.

"BUT ROBERT, ILLINOIS WAS LUCKY TO WIN 10 GAMES."

I actually agree. 8.2 ain't too shabby, though, for a young team.

"THE CLOSE-GAME LUCK IS GONNA RUN OUT, ILLINI!"

I agree there as well. But with 18 starters back, did you consider that we might blow out some teams?

"JUST ACCEPT IT. ILLINOIS WILL ALWAYS ILLINOIS WHEN THERE IS HOPE."

Buddy, we are on the same page. I've lived it for the past 35 years. But don't you think this is a little different? We won without many seniors last year. Voters didn't have us No. 12 after any of the other great seasons. What do you think might be different this time?

"THE PLAYERS WILL READ THEIR PRESS CLIPPINGS AND COLLAPSE UNDER THE PRESSURE."

Maybe. We've seen it happen to so many "wait, *that program* finished with 10 wins last year?" teams in the past. Only the truly great programs and coaches have ever been able to overcome it.

Maybe there's just a very simple conclusion here? I know there was for me after my summer of discontent. After several months bouncing back and forth between wearing a cup and "I'M OUT THERE, JERRY, AND I'M LOVING EVERY MINUTE OF IT," I've settled on one very simple thing.

BDDIWS.

We get to watch a season like none of the seasons before. We get to see what it's like to watch a team the season after they won with juniors and sophomores. The NERDstats said it was 8.2 football and now we get most of that back.

All of the other fanbases have had their own experiences over the last 30 years. For the first time in forever, Wisconsin fans are currently asking themselves, "what are we supposed to do after a losing season?" Ohio State fans are testing out their "can we maintain a top-five team after losing FOURTEEN players to the NFL Draft?" theories. Every fanbase has its collective thing.

For Illinois fans, we are testing out one simple thing this offseason. A thing that makes all of the "Illinois always falters when expectations are high" articles this summer seem somewhat silly. A very, very simple thing: What happens when you win big and it wasn't a senior-laden team that won big?

I don't care if Kansas State has faltered in this scenario in the past or if Iowa has surged. I'm not looking across college football for a comp. I'm fully focused on Champaign and the one big question facing our program in 2025. It's the single most exciting preseason question I've asked myself in the last 35 years. I can't wait to end this intro with it.

What happens when you win big and then get everyone back?



## The Offense

This isn't the Quarterbacks section. We'll get to that in a bit. But I feel like I want to start the offensive preview specifically talking about Luke Altmyer. It might feel a bit weird later on when I'm going through every player if I'm talking about Altmyer again, but ... let's just talk about Luke Altmyer.

I don't want this to sound like pressure. I'm not a Bears fan speaking of Caleb Williams in "it's year two, you're making \$10 million dollars per year, it is time to be a top-10 quarterback in the NFL or else" tones. I know that college players are paid now, and I'm sure Altmyer is being paid handsomely, but I still fall in the "fan at a high school game cheering on the boys" category and not the "fan at an NFL game cheering on the men" category when it comes to college football. College is when they transition from boys to men, but they're not there yet. I treat them accordingly.

So, when I say some of these things, it's not really pressure. I said some of these things before Juice Williams' senior season, and then Juice's senior season was a huge disappointment. He did not jell (at all) with Mike Schultz's offense and the Juice we saw in 2007 and 2008 in the Mike Locksley offense did not blossom into something otherworldly in 2009. (And yes, there were injuries and other extenuating circumstances.)

Disclaimers out of the way, I just want to say this:

He has the chance to become an Illini legend, right? Like, above the Nathan Scheelhaase tier, maybe even above the Eason/Trudeau tier, and it's just "Jeff George, Kurt Kittner, Juice Williams, and Luke Altmyer," right? Am I wrong about this? If I were to list those other six quarterbacks in order, I'm going with:

1. **Jeff George.** All American Bowl in 1988 and then went out with a 10-2 season, a Citrus Bowl win, a No. 10 ranking in the final poll, and was the No. 1 pick in the NFL draft. Gonna be hard to ever top that.
2. **Kurt Kittner.** Started for 3.5 years, led us to a Big Ten title and a BCS bowl in his senior season. It could be a while before we win another Big Ten title, so “last quarterback to do it” will last for a long time.
3. **Juice Williams.** Also started for 3.5 years, led us to the Rose Bowl, is the one name that anyone remembers if you ask someone about Illini football in the last 25 years.
4. **Jack Trudeau.** Rose Bowl in 1983, connection with David Williams only rivaled by Kittner-to-Lloyd, 1985 falling flat (6-5-1) after starting the season No. 11 probably holds him a tier below the other three (although Juice’s 2009 fell flat as well). Maybe I should have said that there’s a George/Kittner tier, a Juice/Trudeau tier, and an Eason/Scheelhaase tier.
5. **Tony Eason.** You all loved the 1986 Super Bowl because your Bears won it all. I loved the 1986 Super Bowl because Tony Eason was starting for the Patriots. Eason only had two years as the starter in Champaign, but he was part of the resurgence that found us playing Alabama in the 1982 Liberty Bowl (Bear Bryant’s last game).
6. **Nathan Scheelhaase.** Four-year starter. Hurt by terrible teams like 2012. But the 2013 offense was probably the second-best offense of the last 15 years? And he won bowl games in 2010 and 2011.

No. 7 is Jason Verduzco (definitely the most underrated quarterback of the last 50 years), but after that it gets fuzzy. And I didn’t really set out to rank all Illini quarterbacks of the last 50 years here anyway. I’m trying to figure out where Altmeyer stands right now and where he might end up if this season reaches its full potential.

Right now, after two seasons, Altmeyer is in a 5-6-7-8 bunch with Eason, Scheelhaase, and Verduzco. The Citrus Bowl win (and leading us to 10 wins) puts him ahead of Verduzco already. So, let’s say that he’s No. 7 right now.

How high could he climb this season? That’s not rhetorical, I’m asking. I don’t really have an answer here, but I want to talk it out.

I know these are heady words, but if we were to make the playoff – if Luke Altmeyer’s final two seasons are a 10-win Citrus Bowl year and then playoff appearance – he’s No. 1. George and Kittner both had two bowls (1-1 for each of them), but there aren’t two quarterbacks on here with two 10-plus-win seasons for their team. Because it’s really, really, really, really hard to win 10-plus games two years in a row. We’ve never done it. We only have four 10-win seasons *ever*.

Yes, I know that the history books state that we went 10-2-1 in 1902. But those ten wins included, I kid you not, Lincoln Park High School, Englewood High School, Monmouth

College, the “Haskell Indians” (an independent team in 1902 coached by John Outland of future Outland Trophy fame), and something called the Kirksville Osteopaths. Rumor has it that the Kirksville halfback sprained his ankle in the second quarter, but his teammates healed it by telling his connective tissues to heal themselves.

(Hey, don’t get mad at me. I went to a D.O. for five years right out of college. That’s why I can make the jokes. I didn’t even know the difference between a D.O. and an M.D. until years later. He’s just the guy who would give me the Z-pack when I needed antibiotics.)

(OK fine, a few more paragraphs about osteopathy. I lived at home for six months after college when I worked in downtown STL and then I got an apartment in St. Louis once I got a new job in Chesterfield. I got sick early that spring in 1997 and I didn’t have a doctor besides the doctor I went to when I was a kid. My coworker, later my roommate, gave me the name of his doctor so I could go see if I had the bird flu or whatever. His name was Dr. Demetrios Politis and my roommate had this great joke where he said that it sounded like a muscle strain. “Yeah, I was on the shelf for a few weeks because I pulled my demetrios politis.”

It was also where I first learned about the pharma boom. I was at his office for something, and they had to do some kind of test that took 15 minutes. So, they sat me in a chair in the hallway (kind of behind the receptionist) for 15 minutes. As I sat there, two pharma reps came in trying to get behind the counter to see one of the doctors, with the receptionist rejecting them.

And then one of the most attractive females I’ve ever seen in my life came in. She worked the entire office like some kind of spy movie. Charmed the receptionist with knowledge of her haircut and got passage through the door. Charmed the male nurse in the hallway with simple steady eye contact. A doctor came through the hallway, she hypnotized him into saying, “yes, please order me more samples because I can’t stop giving them to patients,” and that was that. Off to the next office before anyone knew what hit them. A true pro’s pro.

I was in love. I also was 25 and didn’t know the difference between an M.D. and a D.O.)

WHAT AM I TALKING ABOUT? Yes, Luke Altmyer. Illinois winning ten games in 1902 but me not counting it as a 10-win season because we beat two high schools and the Kirksville Osteopaths. How do you hide a \$100 bill from an osteopath? Hide it in a peer-reviewed medical journal.

I’ll stop. Shoutout to the M.D.s *and* the D.O.s out there. I have love for you all. Including ... Luke Altmyer’s father who is an orthopedic surgeon. We’re back.

If Luke Altmyer leads us to two of our five 10-win seasons, he's No. 1 on that list. He's an Illini legend. He starts getting talked about on the tier below Red Grange and Dick Butkus. Speaking of Red and Dick, I went to this osteopath one time because...

I WILL STOP.

Again, I'm not saying any of this to put pressure on Luke. It's not "he needs to win 10 again to cement his legacy." We just haven't had this scenario before. Jack Trudeau is the only Illini quarterback to win 10 games and then return for another season. And he did that while losing a ton of starters from that 10-win season AND with the bowl ban hanging over their heads (we were banned from going to a bowl in 1984 and banned from being on TV in 1985 because of recruiting violations). Having so many new fans jumping on the bandwagon right now is fun for me because most of them aren't aware that this paragraph is 100% true:

There were two NCAA investigations when Mike White was coach. The first led to a bowl ban in 1984 and a TV ban in 1985; the second cost White his job in 1987. The second one, because it happened while we were on probation for the first, came within a whisker of leading to the death penalty (one year suspension of the program) after current Colorado athletic director (the guy who hired Coach Prime) and former Illini assistant Rick George spent money on hotel rooms for recruit Hart Lee Dykes. Had the hotel room thing happened nine months after it did (which is when the death penalty became a tool that the NCAA infractions committee could use), our 1987 season wouldn't have happened and we would be SMU.

(Next time on Welcome, New Illini Fans Theater, Robert discusses the 1980 Dave Wilson/Big Ten affair where the conference – not the NCAA, but the conference – came down with massive sanctions on Illinois that essentially boiled down to Dave Wilson's high school mistakenly submitting a transcript for David B. Wilson, a high school teammate of David C. Wilson, Illini quarterback, not catching the error for three weeks, and the Big Ten grandstanding and claiming that Illinois was trying to deceive the committee which then levied two years of sanctions including bowl bans and NCAA Tournament bans, penalties which led to a campaign of Illini fans petitioning to leave the Big Ten.)

I don't even know how to catch back up now so I'm just going to start over.

Everything is in front of Luke Altmyer this year. He's already going to be top-seven in my lifetime, regardless of how this season goes. But if the season reaches its ceiling, I'm curious if he goes down as the most beloved Illini quarterback of the last 50 years. Regardless of what happens after he leaves Illinois (being the No. 1 overall pick certainly helped Jeff George's reputation), it would be hard to argue that a quarterback who led Illinois to back-to-back double-digit-win seasons deserves any "legend" ranking lower than No. 1.

Does he have the offense that can get him there? Let's dig in.

## **Quarterbacks**

I don't think I need to cover Luke Altmyer, right? I just wrote 1,900 words on Luke Altmyer immediately above. Well, 1,900 words on Luke Altmyer and osteopaths. So, let's immediately jump to the backups.

Perhaps the best way to describe the revenue sharing era is to point to Ethan Hampton. Actually, maybe I should talk about revenue sharing first and then talk about it as it relates to NIU transfer Ethan Hampton.

There were three lawsuits consolidated into one under the title "House vs. NCAA." "House" – specifically Grant House, a former Arizona State swimmer – is the name on the lawsuit, but it could have just as easily been former Illini defensive lineman Tymir Oliver. There were three lawsuits combined into "House," and one of them was Tymir Oliver vs. NCAA. All three were similar – now that NIL is approved, why did the NCAA ban NIL for athletes before 2021? – and the settlement for House changed the landscape for college athletics.

The result: 22% of all revenue from ticket sales, media rights, and licensing will now be distributed to the players in the revenue sports. It's not paying them for their play – they're not employees – but it's paying them because their fame brings money to the university, and they should get their fair share of it. Direct NIL payments, essentially. You're on the billboard and the poster, people buy tickets because they saw the billboard and poster, you should get some of that ticket money.

The total revenue of all the teams in the conferences who were part of the lawsuit – the current "Power Four" plus the Pac-12 teams wherever they are now since the Pac-12 was part of the lawsuit – is averaged and then the 22% is established based on that average so that all schools pay out the same. That total for the first year, which began on July 1 when everything went into effect: \$20.5 million.

The general outline that schools are mostly following in the distribution of those funds follows the general outline of how much money the revenue generating teams bring in: 75% football, 15% men's basketball, 5% women's basketball, and 5% "other revenue spots" (varies by school – at Illinois, volleyball is the only other team that sells tickets). So, football will – again, big round numbers – have around \$15 million to distribute to the players. There are still direct NIL deals with the players – the next LSU gymnast with a billion followers will be able to sell clothing and make millions – but the payments that collectives were making to the players in the past now come directly from the schools.

There are a lot more layers to that, of course. Collectives are still going to try to play the "what if we pay this player \$200,000 to appear at a hospital because hospitals pay

celebrities \$200,000 for half hour appearances all the time, right?” game. The new clearinghouse for NIL deals (NIL Go) will be fighting the teams looking for loopholes for years. But what was the Wild West this time last year is now much quieter. Teams can’t make up ways to pay players money with no entity reviewing those deals. Everyone has the same revenue sharing amount that they can give ... and then the NIL stuff will get sorted out as teams try to reach into the cookie jar and NIL Go slaps their hand.

That’s the general structure, though. And that’s why Ethan Hampton is at Illinois.

I don’t *know* that’s why Ethan Hampton is at Illinois. Maybe he just dreamed of wearing the orange and blue. But he left a starting job at Northern Illinois with eligibility remaining to be the backup at Illinois. And I’m sure “we can pay you a very nice portion of our rev share money” was part of the decision.

It’s not that NIU cannot pay rev share money to players. I’m sure they opted in (conferences outside the ones in the lawsuit have the option to “opt in” to the new structure). It’s just that the House settlement comes with two little but very important words: “up to.” Schools can pay “up to” 22% of their revenue directly to the athletes. But if they cannot afford that, they can pay ... what they think they can pay. I don’t think there’s any way NIU pays the full \$20.5 million.

Which is why I think you’re going to see this happen all the time. This is the new structure. Starting quarterback at NIU (who went into Notre Dame and won last season) has one year of eligibility and he ... takes the backup job at Illinois. And don’t tell me you wouldn’t. All 105 players won’t get the same rev share money. Gabe Jacas will get a lot; a special teamer will get a little. But if you divide \$15 million across all 105 players, the average is \$142,000 (and that’s in addition to your full ride scholarship). I don’t know what the offer would have been to Ethan Hampton (yes, there are offers now) but don’t tell me you wouldn’t have taken it. I want to re-enroll so I can take it.

Anyway, that’s how it will work. Players will move up to take backup roles. We are one of the schools who can pay players to come take backup roles and boost our depth. I like that.

(And yes, Hampton, who only played in more than four games once at NIU, might be eligible for a medical redshirt, meaning he could return for a sixth season in 2026 and try for the starting quarterback job.)

Ideally, we never see Hampton start a game. But if he does play, he’s a solid backup option. This is like that NFL team that went out and signed a sneaky-good backup in the offseason. Never hurts to have a backup plan.

If Hampton does get some kind of waiver and returns for 2026, I think his main competition will be from current freshman Carson Boyd. I don’t want to count out Trey Petty, but there’s

a reason Boyd jumped in front of Petty in the spring on the quarterback depth chart. Boyd is only 6 feet tall, but that's a good thing. If he was 6-foot-4-inches, he would have been a 5-star quarterback recruit offered by everyone on the planet.

He is a quarterback with the IT factor. I don't know if he can run a college offense at his height, but he has IT. I'm excited to see what he can do in the future.

Also, while looking at his profile right now, I saw that his major is "Exploratory Studies." And I was all "what's Exploratory Studies." Apparently, what we used to call "undeclared" was then changed to "The Division of General Studies" and, as of Aug. 1, it's been renamed Exploratory Studies. And here I thought they'd be studying Vasco de Gama.

That's right. When I reach into the bag for an explorer, I got Vasco de Gama. Deal with it.

The other two quarterbacks on the roster are Trey Petty and Shauny Newton, brother of Johnny Newton. Petty looks like a college quarterback. Shauny looks like ... a high-end athlete who might soon learn that his NFL future is at another position? I don't mean to doubt that Shauny could eventually play quarterback. Fantastic athlete. It's just that he doesn't seem to have the throwing motion that leads to accurate passes. And quarterbacking in college is pretty much all accuracy.

All of these things are things that will be decided in March. It will be a quarterback battle with no clear favorite. For now, though, it's The Luke Altmyer Show. Senior leader who had two years at Ole Miss, then a rough-to-decent year at Illinois in 2023, then a great year at Illinois in 2024, and now, potentially, an All-Big Ten year at Illinois. Sky is the limit. We go as far as he can take us.

## **Running Back**

I can already feel it. These position breakdowns won't be anything like the last 10 previews. I'm always thinking about what the reader might know and what the reader might not know, and the reader here (you) knows almost everything. About the whole roster. Because it's the same team. Next year you'll read the preview wondering who is going to replace our 15 senior starters from the previous season. This year you're going to go through each position and say, "right, so basically the same as last season?"

I mean, Josh McCray is gone. He transferred to Georgia. And in the quarterback room, Donovan Leary is gone. He transferred to Tulane. When we get to the tight ends, yeah, we'll learn a few things. But I'm reaching into the "what things might the reader not know?" bag and I'm finding it to be mostly empty.

It's the central theme of this team, of course. You won't need a program for the game on Friday night because you'll know most of the numbers on the field. Last year's Senior Day

had nine scholarship seniors, so yes, there are nine regulars and backups who aren't there anymore. But for the most part, you'll need to learn some wide receiver numbers on offense and that's it.

In the running back room, things couldn't be more crystal clear. It will be a rotation of three guys. We don't know how the carries will be divided – my guess is that the running back in the 2022 recruiting class gets the most carries, the running back from the 2023 recruiting class gets the second-most carries, and the running back from the 2024 recruiting class gets the third-most carries – but it might go a different way. That's really the only suspense, though. “Put these three running backs in order of most carries to fewest carries: Aidan Laughery, Kaden Feagin, and Ca'Lil Valentine.”

If Josh McCray were still around, maybe we would have something to discuss. “McCray and Feagin are very similar backs – who gets the bulk of those carries? Will it be the guy who can catch the ball out of the backfield the best?” But McCray transferred to Georgia (VERY curious to see how many carries he'll get) and now Kaden Feagin will get 100% of the “power back” carries.

I do think we'll run the ball more this season. The entire offensive line returns, and we have a quarterback who can run. Pat Bryant and Zakhari Franklin's skills demanded we get the ball in their hands, but maybe this year it's, “this stable of running backs demands we get the ball in their hands.” Or, in a slightly darker timeline, maybe it's, “man, we just don't have the go-to receivers like we had last year so we're going to have to lean heavily on these running backs.”

Will one back emerge as the main guy? Honestly, I'm not sure. That seems to be the case across college football. Like, I always view the Illini tailback room in terms of multiple guys because I know the full roster. But nearly every other team (besides some scenario like Penn State this year), I know opposing teams for their one main tailback. Even for teams in the past, I'll say things like “the Wisconsin team with Brent Moss” or “the Iowa team with Ladell Betts.”

So, I always wonder ... will I say “the Illinois team with Kaden Feagin”? “The Illinois team with Aidan Laughery”? We identify 2007 with Rashard Mendenhall and we identify the 2010 team with Mikel Leshoure and we identify the 2022 team with Chase Brown. If we're a running offense, which running back will be our identity?

The good news: it could be any of those three. We might also see true freshman Cedric Wyche. We might even see former walk-on (there aren't really walk-ons anymore) Aaron Ball, especially if they plan to redshirt Wyche. We went four deep last year (Valentine was the fourth) and we'll probably play a fourth tailback this year.

But the order of 1-2-3? I can't really say. That's a good thing.

Before we get to the tight ends, let me tell a little side story. I'll put one of those little lines here and then when you see the other line you'll know the side story is over. Or, you know, you could just go by the fact that I'll be starting the next section with a bolded "Tight Ends."

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Here's where my brain has been this evening. I'm a "let's make sure everything is buttoned up" guy, and the last few hours have been maddening. If the Quarterbacks and Running Backs sections didn't feel like me, my mind was somewhere else.

My wife is at her global sales meeting in Denver. The whole company is there. She's been a bit stressed about the gala on Saturday evening (who has prom for their company? Should IlliniBoard have a prom? Does Craig own a tux?), so I wanted to surprise her. She's been looking at this one necklace, so I bought the necklace and had it FedExed to her hotel in Denver. I talked to the assistant manager at the hotel, she told me she would personally handle delivering the necklace to her room, I talked to the jeweler, I had the correct "ATTN:" name for the delivery so that the woman at the hotel would put the package in her room while my wife was at her meetings ... I had it **BUTTONED UP**.

And then I wasn't getting a text from my wife after her meetings. Which meant that she had gone to the room but hadn't found the necklace. Was it not somewhere she could find it? Did the woman forget? I called the hotel. The person I had set it up with wasn't there (WHAT?) and no one knew where the box was. I had the name of the person who signed for it, so they went looking. (And while I was on hold, I was losing my mind inside. I **HAD EVERYTHING BUTTONED UP!**)

They find the box. They say they will immediately take it to her room (I knew my wife was at dinner with her team at this point) and place the jewelry box on her bed for the surprise. I rest assured. I'm pretty tired at this point but my wife's location is still at the restaurant, so I know she hasn't returned to see the necklace yet. No chance I'm gonna do anything else but sit here and write until I see my phone light up with a "YOU GOT ME THE NECKLACE!" text.

My wife finally returns to the room, she texts me about her night, and then she says, "I'm headed to bed - goodnight." WHAT? She **HAD** to have seen the necklace, right? I call her. I hate to ruin the surprise but I have to know. No box in the room? No box in the room.

Now all the buttoned-up buttons are popping off. These are the moments where I'm not ... very good. I don't go in the Karen direction, I go in the internal "I went out of my way to triple check everything - how is this plan failing?" meltdown direction. The woman was going to put it in her room as soon as she received it today. She didn't. The other woman

was going to put it in her room this evening. She didn't. Is this NOT EXACTLY INEXPENSIVE necklace just sitting at the front desk right now? The meltdown is always internal and always reaches "you were SO STUPID to send a necklace on an overnight airplane without assurances that the package would be in the possession of responsible adults."

I call the front desk. The guy is very nice. He says the necklace is in the safe. The woman tried to deliver it this evening, but my wife had the "No Service, Please" thingy hanging on the door (I know that she hangs it the moment she arrives at a hotel and never takes it off because she never wants a maid to enter the room). They have a hotel policy to not enter the room if that thing is there, so the woman didn't enter the room and returned the necklace to the front desk.

The guy at the front desk takes care of it. He brings the necklace directly to my wife's room. She loves it. Husband points earned. A huge thank you to my subscribers for giving me some money for my Illini words so that I can buy my wife the necklace she wanted for this gala. But dammit if a double-check-triple-check guy's mind isn't driven completely insane when two different people assure that guy "it will be in her room, sir, you don't have to worry" and then neither person puts it in her room (nor do they call to say, "sorry, couldn't put it in her room").

My wife did tell me what probably happened to the assistant manager's day. A substation had a fire near the hotel, and they were without power for a long time today. Here's my wife's entire company taking every meeting room in the hotel and they couldn't even use projectors because the substation fire took the power out of the PowerPoints. I am certain that the assistant manager who told me that she would personally deliver the necklace was a *tiny* bit busy today. It all makes sense.

But I am not a person who can think of ANYTHING ELSE until an issue like this is resolved. My ability to check my phone to see if it's ringing with a Denver hotel manager calling is unmatched. I will be 100% distracted until something like this is resolved. The single thought will linger for HOURS until the situation is resolved.

And now that it's resolved and I'm no longer distracted, I can return to previewing the offense. I honestly think you'll be able to sense my brain freeing up as I write the next few sections and they'll read better than "Quarterbacks" and "Running Backs." The lesson: never write while you're obsessed over a necklace in a box on some shelf in some hotel in Denver and your inability to put it into your wife's hands.

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**Tight Ends**

Look! A position with question marks! We don't know everything! A section I can write like it's the 2016 preview all over again! Unknowns!

There's one known. And, honestly, behind Luke Altmeyer, he's the No. 1 player on the "he cannot get [redacted] this season because there's a big drop-off from him to his backup" list. We could withstand an [redacted] to Gabe Jacas or Xavier Scott before we could withstand an [redacted] to Tanner Arkin. He's our No. 1 tight end with a bullet.

Just look at the tight end snaps from PFF last year. In our 13 games:

Tanner Arkin – 748 snaps

Carson Goda – 202

Henry Boyer – 135

Jake Furtney – 4

Clayton Leonard – 1

That's more snaps than Daniel Barker ever had in a single season. That's more snaps than Tip Reiman ever had in a single season. He is Mr. Dependable. Probably the most underrated player on the entire offense. Three receiving touchdowns (and one fantastic fake punt against Michigan) last year and hopefully more this year.

It's a theme across this entire team, right? Arkin should have his best season in 2025. There are some seniors who have shown us who they are and will give us the senior season we expect. Gabe Jacas. Luke Altmeyer. Xavier Scott. JC Davis. But there are also so *many* seniors who are on the "if just he takes one more step forward this fall" list. And Arkin might be at the top of that "one step forward and he might push for an all-conference team" list for the 2025 offense.

That's the good news. The bad news – it's not really bad news, so let's call it the unreported news – is that we have zero idea what happens after that. No idea whatsoever. I have a few concepts that I picked up during the open practice periods the last three weeks, but really, we won't know until Friday night.

Last year, Carson Goda was No. 2 in snaps and Henry Boyer was No. 3. Goda graduated (after one very solid year after transferring from Division II St. Anselm) and Boyer transferred to Kentucky after only getting third-string tight end snaps last year. So that means the only returning snaps at tight end are four snaps from walk-on Jake Furtney.

I felt my brain tug at me there. It said, "you need to talk about Goda a little more as it relates to the Player Personnel Department." Always listen to my brain.

***Recruiting staff in 2020 under Lovie:***

James Kirkland – Director of Player Personnel

Patrick Embleton – Director of Football Student Athlete Development  
Ashton Washington – Director of High School Relations  
Travis Perry – Graphic Design/Social Media  
Cam Skelding – Recruiting Assistant

**Recruiting staff in 2025 under Bielema:**

Patrick Embleton – General Manager  
Nate McNeal – Executive Director of Player Evaluations and Acquisitions  
Patrick Pierson – Director of Football Branding and Creative Media  
Pat Ryan – Director of Illinois High School Relations  
Drake Leeper – Director of Recruiting  
Jon Proto – Director of College Scouting/NFL Liaison  
Terry Hawthorne – Director of Defensive Player Personnel  
Eddie Simpkins – Director of Offensive Player Personnel  
Natalie Woch – Director of Recruiting Operations  
Ben Dessauer – Player Personnel Assistant  
Quentin Singleton – Operations and Recruiting Assistant  
Aaron Quinn – Director of Football Graphic Design  
Caleb Wood – Director of Football Creative Video

Yes, they're already blowing out walls in the six-year-old Smith Center to build more offices.

2017: three people. 2020: five people. 2025: THIRTEEN people in the recruiting department. And when you count student assistants doing the grunt work, it's 16 people.

What's their job? Find a Carson Goda.

Tight end wasn't where it needed to be after spring ball back in 2024. There weren't many options in the portal. But this staff evaluates every portal possibility on their big board, and they had a pretty high grade for a tight end at Division II St. Anselm College in New Hampshire. Goda announced his commitment to Illinois on Memorial Day weekend in 2024 – to very little fanfare because, come on, it's a Division II tight end who played his first three years in a stadium that looks like this:



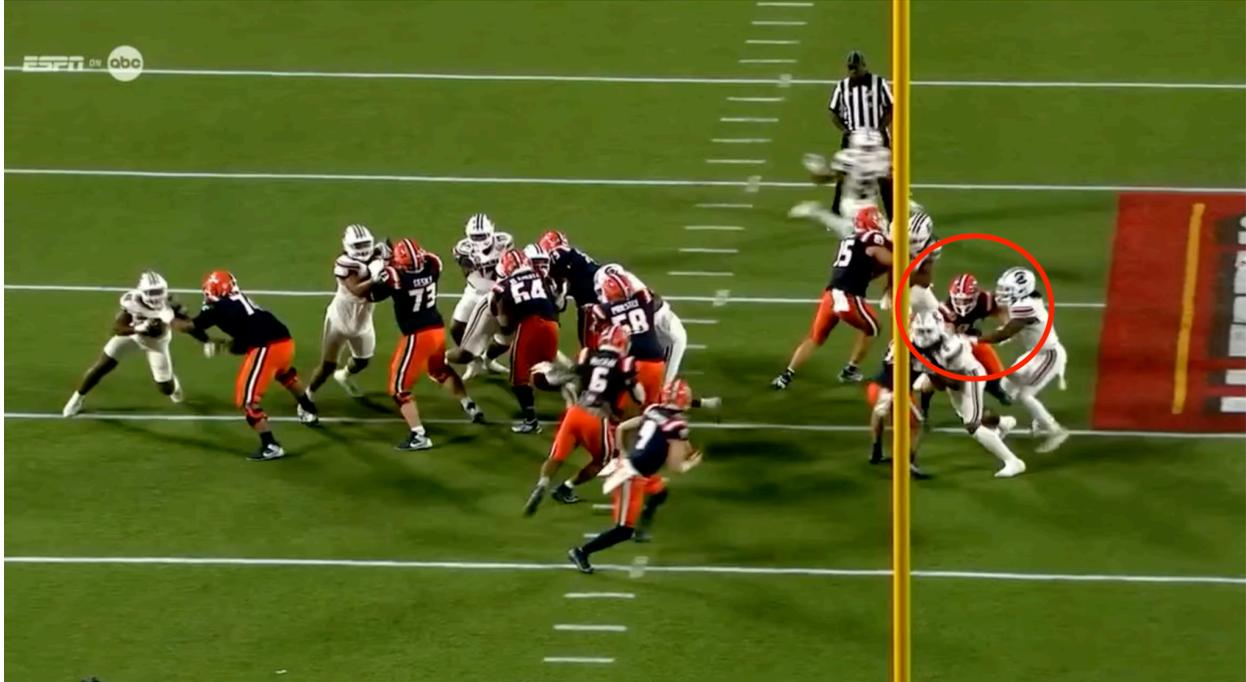
And then, after Cole Rusk's injury in the preseason and Henry Boyer falling out of favor during the season, Goda quickly became our No. 2 tight end in the second half of the season. The statistics:

Carson Goda snaps in the first six games: 38

Carson Goda snaps in the final six games plus the bowl game: 164

Do you understand how screwed we would have been without Goda's 31 snaps in the Citrus Bowl? We didn't have another tight end we trusted in any of our blocking schemes, so we would have had to eliminate every single play from the playbook that called for more than one tight end. Henry Boyer had already transferred by then (and Boyer only played 19 snaps the entire month of November), so it was Goda or don't run those plays.

And then, on the biggest Illini football play of the last 17 years, the offensive line wipes everything left while the wide receiver in motion (Collin Dixon) plus two tight ends (Tanner Arkin and Carson Goda) hold the edge to create the largest Illini hole in the last 17 years:



That guy in the red circle there? Added Memorial Day weekend from a college that has a smaller football stadium than Paxton-Buckley-Loda all because our recruiting department has 13 people and someone raised their hand in a May meeting about tight end depth and said, “what about this kid from St. Anselm?”

I’m not saying all of the players this recruiting staff discovers will work out. I’m telling you why we have so much depth in a world where it’s very hard to land a Carnell Tate because the Carnell Tates will still always want to leave Chicago for Ohio State. We’re trying to outwork everyone in the hidden gem department and the late bloomer department. We’re assembling a plan in case there’s tight end concerns after spring ball and the top 50 tight ends in the portal are already committed somewhere. And it’s helping us win bowl games.

(See, I told you the words would start to flow as soon as the lost necklace stopped occupying 81% of my headspace.)

So, the tight end concerns last year continue this year. The reason we brought in Carson Goda in 2024 (“maybe Boyer isn’t who we thought he’d become and if not, and if we have any injuries, we really need some upperclassmen there”) still exists in 2025. Boyer and Owen Anderson didn’t pan out, Nate Guinn was an athlete but not a football player, and even the guy they brought in to plug the hole for 2024 (Cole Rusk) tore his ACL last August which is why Goda was so key. Now Goda has graduated so we’re back to square one.

Cole Rusk has completed his knee rehab, so the hope is that he picks up where he was supposed to leave off last season. The one issue there is that 2024 was supposed to be all

about Rusk gaining strength and bulk to move from playing tight end at Murray State to playing tight end in the Big Ten. With the ACL injury (and I think some other ligaments, too), it was a lost year for Rusk. So, while he's back healthy and will be used a lot in the passing game, I'm not sure he's the guy who would be in there on third-and-two with two minutes left in the Citrus Bowl and a two-TE set called.

Cue the "let's get our eyes on every college tight end so we have a big board when players enter the portal" recruiting department. The additions:

- Davin Stoffel from South Dakota State
- Christian Abney from Ball State
- Jordan Anderson from the running back room down the hall

Those are the players competing for the backup spots behind Arkin. Rusk is there too, obviously, but I think Rusk will be more of a wide receiver than a tight end. I'm not saying he *moves* to wide receiver, just that he will be used in four-wide passing sets. If we're going to find blockers in two-TE and three-TE sets, they'll likely come from that list of three guys above.

There are several freshmen as well, but one of the freshmen (Grant Smith) is out for the season and another (Logan Farrell) has been nursing a camp injury. So, if any other player joins the mix, it might be the guy who got four snaps last year, walk-on Jake Furtney. Or maybe it's redshirt freshman Tanner Hollinger, fresh off the "get stronger in the weight room the first year" program.

My guess: Arkin get as many snaps as he can handle, Rusk gets all the passing routes, Stoffel gets all the blocking assignments, and Jordan Anderson is the Swiss army knife who is running a belly play at fullback one minute and a tight end passing route the next.

Hopefully, Stoffel = Goda and we keep on keepin' on.

### **Wide Receiver**

I was texting with Tonio the other day (son of Jack, grandson of olive oil tree owner, and fruit-reaper). I think I'll use that next time when I see him like it's the Middle Ages. "How are you Tonio, son of Jack?"

Let's try again. I was texting with Tonio the other day and we landed on something. What if the 2025 offense is the 2013 offense?

We started down this road because my friend Adam (not Shakespeare Adam, Rantoul scrimmage in 2010 Adam) had texted me his Alex Capka-Jones comp: 2013 Spencer Harris. I liked that comp and sent it to Tonio (who was a student manager in 2013). Then I started to

wonder aloud who might be Miles Osei on this roster and who might be STEVEHULL. The text discussion:

Harris + Osei + STEVEHULL  
getting it done.

With a senior proven QB....

2 backs....

I think we're on to something. This  
will go in the preview.

That offense was so fun

Best offense of the 2010's.

For you youngins, the 2013 team was 4-8 because of the defense (or the lack of defense). The offense was solid. Let me see if I can quantify that somewhere.

Here we go. FEI. Brian Fremeau has Illinois 69th nationally that year with the No. 37 offense and the No. 97 defense. Yes, the defense was the entire problem. Fremeau didn't have a single Illini offense rated higher than 37th until last season (24th). So, best offense of the 2010s. Only 2010 comes close, and Fremeau has that one 51st.

The offensive turnaround from 2012 to 2013 was, if you'll believe it, Bill Cubit's offense fitting Nathan Scheelhaase like a glove. The 2012 offense was terrible during Scheelhaase's junior season and co-coordinators Billy Gonzales and Chris Beatty were fired after only one year. Bill Cubit was hired and immediately started preaching how he wants his quarterback to read the defense and change the play at the line of scrimmage "40% of the time." Nathan Scheelhaase – that's "turned down the Jacksonville Jaguars OC job in January to stay with the Rams as passing game coordinator and learn even more from Sean McVay" Nathan Scheelhaase – was very good at that part.

At receiver, Beckman and Cubit surrounded Scheelhaase with his best friends from the team. Miles Osei moved from quarterback to wide receiver. Steve Hull (STEEVEHULL) moved from safety to wide receiver. Add in Spencer Harris and Ryan Lankford and the offense took off. Hull ended up seven yards away from a 1,000-yard receiving season.

It wasn't one of those seasons where we had a couple of star receivers (like last year). It was a collection of receivers. And because they jelled with the quarterback, we moved the ball.

Add in a power back-speed back tandem in the backfield (Donovonn Young and Josh Ferguson) and the offense was top-five in the Big Ten. The defense ... wasn't.

So, let's look at what we've already covered so far. Senior proven quarterback. Pair of tailbacks (maybe even three). Quarterback who can run a little bit but makes good decisions with the ball. The two main receivers left from last year so ... can we find receivers by committee like 2013?

The catches that year:

STEVEHULL - 59

Josh Ferguson out of the backfield - 50

Spencer Harris - 39

Miles Osei - 35

Ryan Lankford - 15 (he missed half the season with an injury)

Maybe the best way to tell the Hull-Harris-Osei story is to list their catches in 2012 and then their catches in 2013:

Hull - 0 to 59

Harris - 21 to 39

Osei - 6 to 35

The 2013 offense: surround Nathan Scheelhaase with the guys who were in his wedding that July, even if they were playing safety, and watch the offense take off.

Could this wide receiver group do the same? Do we have any safeties who want to move to receiver? Did Luke Altmyer get married this summer? (He did not.)

Even with no marriage and no converted safeties, I still feel like it's a good comp? What if...

Collin Dixon is Steve Hull

Hank Beatty is Miles Osei

Alex Capka-Jones is Spencer Harris

What if all three of those guys catch more than 35 passes? There's no Pat Bryant, and there's not an Isaiah Williams, so it won't be an "I'm looking for my guy" season for Altmyer like the last two seasons. But what if it's a spread-it-around season?

That's the hope, I think. Spencer Harris wasn't flashy nor was he a crazy athlete, but he was consistent. ACJ can be consistent. Miles Osei found 35 pockets and Nathan Scheelhaase found him in all 35 pockets. Hank Beatty can certainly do that. And Steve Hull had a knack for getting open. I know Collin Dixon can do that.

There are many other receivers on this roster. We'll get to them in a moment. But every time we got to see the receivers line up in depth chart order this August, those were the main three guys. ACJ at split end, Dixon at flanker, Beatty in the slot. I feel like if we're going to maintain the passing game where it was last year, it's going to mostly be up to those three guys.

Let's move on to Malik Elzy next because I know a lot of you are already wondering why I'm not mentioning him. The ideal scenario for 2025: a breakout season for the 4-star wide receiver from the 2023 class. Third year is when the breakout season usually happens. Five catches in 2023, four catches in 2024, 40 catches in 2025?

All I can say is that for the portions of practice we saw in the spring and in August (and it's rarely 11-on-11, so it's sometimes hard to say), Elzy was with the threes in the spring and with the twos this August. Maybe that's motivational – I remember seeing Casey Washington buried on the practice depth chart, a ploy from the staff to get him motivated – but for now, I feel like Elzy might be the fifth or sixth receiver.

Again, the best scenario this fall is that our best athlete at receiver is our best receiver. He's a ball-winner, and we need a ball-winner. I just need to see the coaches relying on him more in the spring and in August if I'm going to predict a breakout.

And we have transfers, too. Transfers sometimes take a bit to develop a rapport with their new quarterback (and their new offense), but we added West Virginia's top receiver (Hudson Clement) and Ball State's top receiver (Justin Bowick) for a reason. Neither jumped off the page to me at the open practice periods we saw, but that's not because they're not talented. It just takes some time to learn the offense and develop a rhythm.

Maybe there's a good way to sum all of this up here before I run through the rest of the receivers. I could really see a scenario where this year is 2013 – a collection of receivers sustains things instead of a go-to guy like Isaiah Williams or Pat Bryant – and then next year is when Justin Bowick, Hudson Clement, and Malik Elzy all have huge senior seasons. We don't get to see enough 11-on-11 for me to get a read like I used to get a read, but that's what I'm feeling as of right now.

And I should note: if I'm wrong? If it's the Elzy-Bowick-Clement show? Then that's even better.

Two guys I should have discussed already are Ashton Hollins (back from having both shoulders repaired and missing most of last season) and Rio Sanders (juco transfer who redshirted last year). We saw Alex Capka-Jones start to emerge last year after redshirting in 2023 following his transfer from a juco. I could see the same for Sanders in 2025. He'll back

up Beatty in the slot and I'm certain we'll have a few plays drawn up for him since no opponents have ever scouted him.

For Hollins – and I dislike putting things like this in the preview, but I do need to lay it all out for you – the dropsies need to be fixed. Within 24 hours last week, I A) talked to someone about Hollins working on his hands after all of his drops lately, and B) saw him drop two passes in a drill. 100% fixable, but if he's not in the rotation on Friday night, I'm guessing it will be “still working on the dropsies.”

One other receiver I'll mention: freshman Brayden Trimble. He's the future. Looks the part in every way. But as I've written several times this August, this appears to be a “go for it” year for this coaching staff, not a “let's get a few of these younger guys reps for the future.” So, at this point, I could see Trimble playing in four games and the bowl game and preserving a redshirt.

I could also see Trimble as the kickoff returner all season. He good.

### **Offensive Line**

Wouldn't it be hilarious if I just wrote something like “same as last year” and then ended the offense section? All of these words about all of these things (including osteopathy!) and then four words on the offensive line.

I mean, there's really not much to talk about. I'm sure I'll still write a thousand words on the offensive line, but there's not much I can teach you. The line from the game where we took it to Michigan and the line from the game when we beat South Carolina will be the line for the game where we take it to Ohio State. We settled on a line during the Penn State game in September (that's when Brandon Henderson truly beat out Zy Crisler), we stuck with Henderson for all of October, November, and December, and now we have the entire line returning. Zy Crisler? Transferred to Colorado.

You know, this preview will come out on Monday, and since you'll be reading this Monday, the Monday before the first weekend is a great time to search around for depth charts. I'm always curious to see where Illini players who transferred out end up on the depth chart at their new team. Will Josh McCray be the third tailback at Georgia or the starter? Will Henry Boyer be in the tight end rotation at Kentucky? Can Alex Bray start at Kansas? And will Zy Crisler start on the offensive line at Colorado? I saw that Donovan Leary didn't get any reps in the Tulane scrimmage last week (three other quarterbacks did) so I guess he's not going to win that job. Anyway, if you're reading this Monday, some teams still do release depth charts, and that's a good time to see where our transfers are landing on other depth charts.

For us, on the offensive line, we have our guys: JC Davis at left tackle, Josh Gesky at left guard, Josh Kreutz at center, Brandon Henderson at right guard, and Melvin Priestly at

right tackle. We were supposed to be looking for a new left tackle after last season, but then Vanderbilt's Diego Pavia won his court case to earn an extra year of eligibility (he argued that juco seasons shouldn't count as eligibility since he couldn't earn NIL ... and won). Because Pavia was granted another year, all seniors who had come from juco ball (like Davis) were granted another year. Bret Bielema flew to Oakland on Dec. 23, convinced Davis to come back, and now we have our starting left tackle (and All-Big Ten candidate) back.

What's the outlook for that line? I thought you'd never ask. I've been listening to different Mahler symphonies each day while writing this preview – today is Mahler 6 – but I think I need the last movement of Mahler 3 to write this one. Ready ... go.

In a perfect world, this is the offensive line we dream about.

Senior-senior-senior-senior-junior. Played really well together the final eight games of 2024 and then everyone returns. How many times – HOW MANY TIMES – have I written about Illini offensive linemen in various countdown posts in the last 16 years where I've said, "get him in the weight room, add 30 pounds, get his legs stronger, and then let's see what we have when he's a junior and a senior." They don't always work out, but sometimes they do.

And this year we have four seniors and one junior who all worked out. JC Davis was just a kid going to juco and then he went to New Mexico, became a first-team all-conference player, transferred to Illinois, was third team All-Big Ten, and now returns for one final year to possibly be the best left tackle in the conference. Josh Gesky was a nobody until he was a somebody (the ultimate "let's see what we have") and now he's ready to have his best season as a fifth-year senior. Josh Kreutz was a somebody – the son of a Pro Bowl center – but it took him a while to live up to his name. Now, he has a chance to be the eyes and ears of a line that could win the Joe Moore Award. Brandon Henderson was one of those great "holy crap, check out this freshman" linemen when Craig and I were watching practice in the spring of 2023 (he enrolled early and then played some as a true freshman, which is extremely rare). He pushed past Zy Crisler a month into his second season and is now ready to take another step in his third season. And Melvin Priestly is the "got no offers, proved himself at Grambling, and now has a legitimate NFL future" guy.

ALL OF THOSE THINGS are happening at the same time. This is a stars aligning kind of line. No, it's not some Ohio State line that has five guys who will play 13 years in the NFL. But for an Illinois line, it's a stars-align line. Align line. Offensive (a)lign. I'll keep working on it.

Look, there are no guarantees. Remember when I thought the 2015 offensive line would take a huge step forward? The pieces were there. Teddy Karras is still playing in the NFL as Cincinnati's starting center. Christian DiLauro played in the NFL (hi, Carmen). Chris Boles was a fifth-year senior at guard. Joe Spencer started at center for three years. And right tackle was gonna be some combination of fourth-year Austin Schmidt or first-year 4-star

Gabe Megginson. The line had been pretty good in 2014 (a bowl season) and it felt like it would only get better. It wasn't better than 2015, and the offense took a big step back, and that was that.

(I should also acknowledge that the coach getting fired a week before the first game might have had a tiny impact on the chaotic 2015 season.)

But offensive lines don't always jell. It's all about knowing the guy next to you, and the 2007 line was this puzzle to solve where the coaches went "but what if we put Millington at right tackle instead of left tackle and then move Fulton over from the defensive line to left tackle" and PRESTO Rashard was suddenly running over everyone. It's tricky finding the right balance.

When you have five guys back, however, you already solved the balance thing. The line we saw in November and December as the running game took off is the line we'll see on Friday night. So, everything *should* be aligned. I'm very, very hopeful that this can be our best offensive line season since 2007. There, I said it.

(Thanks for the inspirational music, Gustav.)

The rest of the line is all about the future. Well, see, I type that and then I realize that I should say something about JC Davis and his plantar fasciitis. So, hold that "the rest of the line is all about the future" thought for a moment.

I had plantar fasciitis once. And it was so painful. Now, I should note that I have the pain tolerance of a six-year-old child, so I'm not one to speak on "so painful" (although my nine kidney stones could tell some stories), but it was soooo painful. I got a walking boot, and I couldn't even walk in the walking boot. So, I went with crutches for five days. It felt like someone was shoving a hot poker from a fireplace directly into the arch of my foot. My wife with plantar fasciitis? Maybe winced once. Me with plantar fasciitis? Texting Tyler at 11:45 p.m. asking what else I can do to relieve the pain (the "rub with an ice cube" thing kinda did work).

So, I understand that it's nothing to mess with. And I understand the staff's reluctance to play Davis at camp. It's possible Davis isn't even out there on Friday night. Perhaps they want him fully rested by Duke, so they've started with the Duke game and worked backwards. Once my plantar fasciitis was gone, it was gone and hasn't returned. So, I'm sure they're hoping for the same with Davis. This is me telling you not to worry if he's not out there on Friday night. If it was Ohio State (or even Wisconsin), he'd play. I just think they're pushing his rest as far as it can go so that when it's gone, it's gone.

We now return to "the rest of the line is all about the future." Un-shun!

The rest of the line is all about the future. Senior Dez Schuster (finally healthy) should provide a solid backup at tackle, but most of the other second-stringers are underclassmen. Brandon Hansen is a future starter and will probably be the sub on the inside. Sophomore TJ McMillen is the starting center next year, so he has one more year as Kreutz's understudy. Ayden Knapik was probably brought in from Idaho to be the starting left tackle next year, not this year (he's a two-to-play-one guy), so I expect him to play in four games and redshirt. 2025 is probably also a season where we get Eddie Tuerk ready to take over at left guard for Gesky next year. And redshirt-freshman Zafir Stewart might really be in the mix for the starting right tackle spot in 2026 as well. So ... next year, next year, next year.

This year? All about these four seniors and a junior. Put simply, it's time to have our best offensive line since 2007.

"I might only write four words for the offensive line."

[Proceeds to write 1,582 words about the offensive line]

I'm an idiot. Let's move on.

### #1 - Gut The Assistant Coaches

No, I don't mean disembowel them (although I wouldn't mind seeing a little last-scene-of-Bravehart performed on... nevermind). I mean a fire sale - (nearly) everyone must go. If we can't start over with a new head coach, let's start over with two: an offensive coordinator who is completely in control of the offense, and a defensive coordinator who is the same. Sorry Ron - you go sit over there and Twitter.

I hear you. "Zook will never go for it." I know. But he has to. (More on that in point #2).

There are nine assistant coaches. I'm keeping two, mostly for recruiting continuity.

#### **GONE**

Jim Pry (Wide Receivers) - Loads of talented athletes, way, way, way too many bad routes. I said back in August that I was least impressed with Jim Pry's coaching (especially his drills during breakout sessions). Now, he goes.

Mike Woodford (Special Teams) - 50 punt return yards. On the season.

## Revisiting The 19 Point Plan

I've been saving this for years.

Honestly, I've been asked to do this for more than a decade now. But I wanted to wait until a moment like this.

Let's revisit The 19 Point Plan For Fixing Illinois Football.

First, the history. The reason I started the blog in the first place was a shift in our family dynamic. Our oldest went off to college. Our middle son turned 16, got a job and a girlfriend, and we rarely saw him. Our youngest entered the "door shut to his room" phase. And my wife switched to a job that meant a 4:45 a.m. alarm most days, so she started going to bed at 8:45 p.m. Which meant that I had all these evenings where I needed to do *something*.

My friend Brian was in web development (is that even the right term?), so he set me up with a WordPress blog. I started writing Illini words. And the first season I "covered" was 2009. You know the one. The "7-to-9.com" website set up for Juice and Rejus' double Heisman campaign, and then ... 3-9.

At the end of that 3-9 campaign, Ron Zook was retained. There was talk immediately after the season that Ron Guenther might make a move (the Rose Bowl season was followed by 5-7 in 2008 and then 3-9 in 2009), but Zook was told he would keep his job. And so Critical Mass sat down to write out a plan for how to fix Illinois football.

That's right - I didn't use my name back then. I'm not sure many people remember that. When I first starting writing, not wanting anyone to know my real name, I wrote under the moniker "Critical Mass." It wasn't really a nickname, but it was on the back of my slow pitch softball jersey (long story). I preferred to be anonymous, and for whatever reason, I felt like

the Twitter should be “A Lion Eye” and the blog should be “Critical Mass,” so I wrote as Critical Mass for well over a year.

I made this particular screenshot several years ago (back when we were having that issue on the old site where everyone’s Twitter would show up as “@IlliniBoard” which is Brumby’s account that he has used once in the last seven years), but here’s how the very first 19 Point Plan post began on Dec. 8, 2009:



I wonder what photo I used back then. We still have the text of all articles since 2009 (well, we lost some around 2012 and 2013), but the attached photos have been lost over the years as we’ve changed website formats. This last website change in January 2024 knocked out all comments before then. But for the 19 Point Plan, I began with saying two things. 1) Ron Zook is being retained and therefore the plan will be written with him at the helm, and 2) the plan would be, essentially, “how to revive a hibernating college football program showing no signs of wanting to wake up.” Desperate times.

Because of that, I’m not going to review all 19 points to the plan. Several of them were 100% Zook-centric. It was announced that he would return, and the alternative was just a one-point plan (“Fire Ron Zook”), so I wrote a 19–point plan for fixing things with him at the helm.

Let’s start with the full list. It should be easy to spot the six points we’re not going to cover (because they were specific to the 2010 team):

## **The 19 Point Plan For Fixing Illini Football**

1. Gut The Assistant Coaches
2. Zook As A Figurehead
3. Find Some “Bad Cops”
4. Find A Way To Keep Arrelious Benn Here One More Year
5. Terry Hawthorne = Chris Gamble
6. Move Players Around
7. Utilize The Depth Chart
8. Schedule Like We’re Illinois
9. Build The Offense Around My Man Mikel
10. Build A Program
11. Catch The Ball When The Opposing Quarterback Throws It
12. Change The Way We Practice
13. No More Celebrations
14. Build On Our History
15. Quality Control
16. Know Your Role
17. Just Win, Baby
18. Sensational Seniors
19. Fans Must Stick Around

If you want to read any of the articles, just go to the search bar on the front page of IlliniBoard and type “19.” As soon as you type the number, all 19 articles will show up.

Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 9 are all specific to the 2010 team with Zook at the helm. It was supposed to just be the first five points, but then I did some restructuring and changed point No. 9 from “please get the ball to your stars” to “build the offense around Leshoure.” Let’s go through those six real fast:

- I wanted to gut the roster of assistant coaches and only keep two. I wanted to retain Joe Gilbert as OL coach and Dan Disch as recruiting coordinator (but NOT as defensive coordinator).
- I wanted Zook to become a figurehead whose job was to recruit talent and then I wanted a new offensive coordinator to take over every aspect of the offense and I wanted a new defensive coordinator to take over every aspect of the defense.
- I wanted to hire some “bad cop” assistants. I thought that Zook was too buddy-buddy with his players. No one was afraid to make a mistake.
- I wanted to somehow convince Rejus to not declare for the draft (if only there had been NIL at the time).

- I wanted to use Terry Hawthorne on both offense and defense (and as the return man).
- And for point No. 9, I wanted to turn over the offense to Mikel Leshoure. He only had 108 carries for the entire 2009 season (yes, really), and I thought that to be a travesty. FEED FIVE, said I.

I should probably spend a little more time on that last point. Just so you young kids can understand what it was like back then.

In the final game of 2009, against Fresno State at home, through 56 minutes, Leshoure had 184 yards rushing on 11 carries and Jason Ford had 62 yards rushing on 14 carries. Illinois had the ball with four minutes left just needing two first downs to put the game on ice. It was ... Jason Ford who trotted out onto the field for that series. Illinois went three-and-out, Fresno State got the ball back, they drove the length of the field, they scored to potentially tie it, they went for two to win it, and an offensive lineman caught the deflected two-point conversion try which gave Fresno State the 53-52 win.

Things were ... a bit insane back then.

When asked about this decision, Running Backs Coach Reggie Mitchell said that Ford was in because “it was his turn.” The fanbase lost its collective mind. Leshoure had 16.7 yards per carry that day, Ford had 4.3 yards per carry, but Ford was in for the put-the-game-away drive because it was his “turn.”

Of all of the points, that one was the one which, when implemented, was wildly successful. I’m not saying Zook read this and took it to heart; I’m saying that new offensive coordinator Paul Petrino arrived on campus and essentially asked, “why isn’t Mikel Leshoure getting every carry?” Leshoure got 281 carries the following season and set the single-season Illini rushing record, a mark that still stands today. FEED FIVE.

OK, now we can go through the other 14 points. The rest were all centered around how to build a program in Champaign. And that’s the reason so many people have asked me to revisit The 19 Point Plan the last few years. We appear to have a program in Champaign now. So how much of The 19 Point Plan has been implemented by the current coach?

### **No. 6 – Move Players Around**

I was frustrated that we did not move athletes around to other positions. The specific example I gave that year: Cordale Scott. He was a 4-star receiver who Zook had signed from Cleveland. But he was pretty big for a receiver and didn’t really fit in the offense. I wanted him tried elsewhere. We kept him at receiver. He eventually transferred (to Toledo, where he played tight end since the Toledo coaches could tell that he wasn’t a wide receiver).

Scott was just the 2009 example of my frustration at the time. Why not move athletes around to see if there's a position that better suits them? Zook would move linemen from defense to offense (like Xavier Fulton), but the ATH's were given one position and then left there. I wanted practice to be used as a testing ground.

*Grade for Bielema's staff: A-*

Lovie was the first coach to really attempt this change. Kerby Joseph played corner, safety, and wide receiver under Lovie before Bielema moved him back to safety. But we've seen Bielema continue the same thing. Look no further than our starting free safety Miles Scott. He played at receiver as a freshman and now will enter his third season as a starting safety. Bielema will move linemen around (Eddie Tuerk from defensive line to offensive line), he'll move corners and safeties back and forth (Xavier Scott has played a little bit of everything), and he'll take a deep room and spread the talent to other positions (Jordan Anderson from running back to tight end).

So, yes, this one has been fully implemented. To rave reviews.

### **No. 7 – Utilize The Depth Chart**

This one is rather hilarious. For this post in The 19 Point Plan, in early 2010, the example I used for what I wanted to do was ... Bret Bielema at Wisconsin.

Here's that section from the post:

Let me give you an example. Wisconsin uses its depth chart well. Fans check the releases weekly to see which players have earned a promotion, even if it's just to see who the new backup center is. And the players pay attention – I don't know if Bret Bielema tapes it to a wall in the locker room or what, but judging by their quotes in the media, Wisconsin players are very aware of who has the starting role and who made the depth chart at backup. And Bielema used it to perfection last season, waiting until he earned it to move John Clay into the starting spot at tailback.

At Illinois? I kid you not – this is what our depth chart looked like at running back for the Fresno State game:

#### **Running Back**

22 Daniel Dufrene (5-11, 205, Sr.) **-OR-**

21 Jason Ford (6-0, 230, So.) **-OR-**

5 Mikel Leshoure (6-0, 225, So.) **-OR-**

29 Troy Pollard (5-8, 185, So.)

26 Justin Green (5-11, 178, Fr.)

I can almost picture Reggie Mitchell at the end of the position meeting.

“Gold star for you, Daniel, and a gold star for you, Mikel, and a gold star for you, Troy, and a gold star...”

Four starters! One running back had emerged at this point (My Man Mikel), one running back deserved the majority of the snaps, and one running back deserved to be at the top of the depth chart, motivating every other player to crank it up or be left behind. But no. We have four starters and a backup. Poor Bud Golden. I mean, I know he was redshirting and all, but he had to taste the sadness when every other player at his position got his name in the press release.

So, this one grades itself. Publishing depth charts is kind of a thing of the past now because injury lists are required. A school doesn't want to publish a depth chart during the week which then doesn't match with the injury release Saturday morning.

But in terms of utilizing it on a daily basis...

*Grade for Bielema's staff: A*

We don't get to see the depth chart displayed on the field every day when the start of practice is open to the media, but we see enough to know that some guys are moved from first string to third string to motivate them. And that was my entire point back in late 2009 and early 2010. WAY too much coddling of players. Depth charts with four starters? Come. On.

There's no coddling now. So, this one is fully implemented. (By the Wisconsin coach I used as the example.)

### **No. 8 – Schedule Like We're Illinois**

Another snippet works best with this one as well. Mostly because my focus here was Ron Guenther's non-conference scheduling compared to Jim Phillips' at Northwestern. Here's what I wrote back then:

Illinois' non-conference FBS opponents the last two seasons: 52-20

Northwestern's non-conference FBS opponents the last two seasons: 16-56

For a little more perspective, let's stay with those two teams for a bit. Overall regular season record of all opponents for the last two seasons?

Illinois: 82-50 (2009), 82-50 (2008)

Northwestern: 58-74 (2009), 60-72 (2008)

Um, why, again?

This one became a regular feature on the original blog. I wrote about it at least five more times before Guenther retired and Mike Thomas/Jason Lener changed our scheduling philosophy. In fact ... story time. It's fun for me to revisit this because The 19 Point Plan was the first thing I did where the original blog really got noticed. As I've shared many times, I had an "if it's good, people will find it" philosophy so I only linked it two times on message boards (one post on Loyalty, one post on The Deuce). And then I started a Twitter account and started tweeting my articles (without tagging anyone). If it's good, it will be found. There were a few moments where it was "found," but the biggest moment was The 19 Point Plan. I started getting commenters. I started getting people responding on Twitter. And after a few years, there was another big moment that pushed me further out there.

I wrote a follow-up to this "Northwestern scheduling vs. Illinois scheduling" before the Northwestern games in 2010 and 2011. And in 2011, Ron Zook, at his weekly press conference, unfolded a piece of paper where he had printed out that blog post and then read it to the media. I wasn't there - I wasn't credentialed at the time, and I was still nine years from moving to Champaign - but Lindsey Willhite wrote about it in the Daily Herald and then a bunch of people showed up to read the blog. I mean, if the head coach is reading, why not all Illini fans?

Anyway, this one has obviously been implemented. Mostly by Mike Thomas and his deputy AD Jason Lener. This Duke series? Scheduled by Lener more than 10 years ago. At the time, Jim Delany was requiring all Big Ten schools to play one power conference opponent in the non-conference portion of the schedule every year. The Big East had just broken up at the time, and some schools petitioned the Big Ten to allow games scheduled against Big East programs to count as "power conference opponents." Delany allowed it ... and Lener quickly scheduled South Florida and UConn.

At the time, Lener attempted to schedule the weakest power conference opponents he could schedule. I'm sure a lot of schools already had schedules way far out in advance, so he was left to pick from maybe 20 programs, but after Ron Guenther's Washington series was finished in 2014 (a game Guenther scheduled because he wanted to host a 1964 Rose Bowl reunion for his teammates to watch the team they beat), here are the home-and-homes that Lener scheduled:

2015/16: North Carolina

2017/18: South Florida

2019/20: UConn

2021/22: Virginia

2023/24: Kansas

2025/26: Duke

So, I can't award the A to Bret Bielema or even Josh Whitman here. It goes to Mike Thomas and Jason Lener. They adopted a "weakest power conference opponent we can find + an FCS team + a MAC team" scheduling philosophy and scheduled it out to 2026, ending Ron Guenther's "we already have Fresno State and Missouri on the schedule in 2009 - what if we added a road game at a Cincinnati team coming off a BCS bowl?" reign of terror.

That still isn't talked about enough, by the way. Let me remind you of something and blow your mind.

Mike Thomas had to buy out of a road game at Western Michigan that Ron Guenther had scheduled. Yes, we were going to be the road team, and Western Michigan was going to give us \$400,000. A buy game with ILLINOIS getting the money. Just as we finished that disastrous contract that had us play Western Michigan at Ford Field in Detroit in 2008 and had us travel to Kalamazoo for a basketball game in 2010. Guenther, a month before retirement, signed a home-and-home with Western Michigan that had a game in Champaign in 2012 and a game in Kalamazoo in 2016.

I can't link an article about it (since there are many of you saying "no way" right now), but I can grab a screenshot:

"This is a good deal," WMU athletic director Kathy Beauregard said Tuesday, while confirming the details of the contract. "Any time we can get a Big Ten opponent in our facility is really exciting."

The game with the Illini is tentatively set for Labor Day weekend and is the return date in a home-and-home series that begins with a previously announced game in 2012 in Champaign, Ill.

MSU and Illinois are the second and third Big Ten programs ever to play at Waldo Stadium, following only Indiana's visit in 2007.

WMU will pay Illinois \$400,000 for the Sept. 3, 2016 game, the same amount Illinois is guaranteeing the Broncos for their 2012 trip to Memorial Stadium, Beauregard said.

This coming season's game at Illinois on Sept. 24 wraps up a previous contract with the Illini, which included the 2008 game at Ford Field, considered a WMU home game, as well as the home-and-home men's basketball series, which was completed this past December.

A home-and-home with a MAC team, \*scheduled in the 2010s\*. I'm certain that when Kathy Beauregard (now retired) is invited to speak at an athletic administration conference, she's immediately asked to tell the story about the time she got Illinois to agree to a home-and-home for football AND basketball. We used to be such incredible chumps.

Anyway, Mike Thomas eventually fixed Guenther's mistake. He paid to move the game to Champaign. And Lovie ended up losing that game to the PJ Fleck Western Michigan team that went 13-0 before losing to Wisconsin in the Cotton Bowl. (And now we're playing Western Michigan in Champaign again on Sept. 13.)

Why am I telling you all of this? Yes, this 19 Point Plan point was about scheduling and how we used to suck at it. Ron Guenther was still the AD when I wrote this, and I was going directly after his "we'll play any TEAM anyWHERE" scheduling philosophy. Northwestern was racking up bowl games and we were going 5-7 because he thought it was cool to play Western Michigan in Detroit. Hell, in 2003 he scheduled UCLA, California, AND Missouri as our three non-conference games (absolute insanity). And by the end of the 2009 season, I was sick of it.

Remember, I wrote that point in The 19 Point Plan only a few months after we played No. 5 Cincinnati in Cincinnati. A game that was added to the schedule in February of that same year. Ron Guenther saw Cincinnati go to a BCS bowl in 2008 and, with a non-conference schedule that already had Missouri and Fresno State on it, he added a game AT Cincinnati during the era where only the top-10 programs were adding difficult non-conference games in order to qualify for the BCS title game - while everyone else was scheduling wins so they could turn their 2-6 conference seasons into bowl games and gain some momentum.

I'll stop.

(I'll never stop.)

Anyway, we fixed this. The times they are a-changin', and it seems that scheduling will be standardized soon for all Big Ten teams (something like nine conference games, one SEC opponent, one G5 opponent, one FCS opponent), but for what I was complaining about in 2009 (and in 2010, and in 2011, and in 2012, and in 2013...), we fixed it.

*Grade for the DIA: B*

## **No. 10 – Build A Program**

Holy shit, I started to tear up going back and reading this one. Here is what I wrote 5,676 days ago. This is how I started that post:

This really should be Point #19. Because it's probably the most important. It is also my deathbed wish. You know that scene in Rudy (I know, I feel dirty even making the reference) where his dad is all "this is the most beautiful sight these eyes have ever seen"? That's me viewing Illinois Football as a healthy, vibrant program. Mr. Fredrickson looking out the front window of his house and seeing Paradise Falls? Me in my seats at Memorial Stadium, 23rd consecutive sellout, watching us destroy Northwestern once again, viewing it as if my life's work is complete. Lean over me at the end of my life on my death bed and it will be very easy to decipher what I meant when I whispered "Rosebowl".

That's the dream. And to achieve it, we need to Build A Program.

You guys. YOU GUYS! The feeling I had with tears in my eyes on Oct. 19, 2024 when we beat Michigan and the sellout crowd flooded the field? I wrote about what it might be like in early February 2010. It was a dream, and then it happened.

(Also, great work with the Citizen Kane reference, 37-year-old Robert – er, sorry, “Critical Mass.”)

I mean, 37-year-old me is really inspiring me today as I read these. The next point in that post is how I wished that we would have hired another coach but if Ron Zook is the guy, I can talk myself into it. Because every time you stare at another coach and think that they might be the savior when you hire them, it doesn't work out. I can see why this was the first time people noticed my writing because I was dropping dimes like this:

But that's no more than me in my college years, thinking about that girl in my Econ 105 class, just knowing that life would improve with her by my side. It didn't. It rarely does. You see, there's a rose in the fisted glove. And the eagle flies with the dove. And if you can't be with the one you love, honey, love Ron Zook.

Who remembers “always put two spaces between sentences” Robert? Nathan surely does. I can't believe I cured myself.

You probably know this point the best because I did not shut up about it for the next 10 years. This was the “just do something – anything – consistently for a 10-year period” point. I said that I wanted the Petrino offense, “whatever it is” (he had just been hired), to last for 15 years. And I went on to talk about what Barry Alvarez had established at Wisconsin while we kept changing coaches and coordinators. I can already give you the grade here because I know what immediately changed in December 2020.

*Grade for Bielema's Staff: A*

The only reason it's not an A+ is the one year of Tony Petersen as the offensive coordinator. Other than that, we're now in year four of the same offense and year five of the same defense. When the defensive coordinator left to become the head coach of Purdue, we promoted an assistant and kept the same defense. And now Dylan Rosiek will be the middle linebacker in a defense he started learning the moment he got on campus five years ago.

I also requested 10 years of one coach (any coach). I wanted to see what the program looked like if we stuck with one guy and built something instead of changing everything all the time. Here's what I wrote:

But in my Illini football lifetime, we've never gotten to Year 9 with a coach. White and Turner had 8 years, Tepper and Zook 5, and Mackovic 4. I've always wondered what 10 years with the same coach would look like, especially a recruiting coach. When Zook was hired, the plan, in my head, would be The Barry Alvarez Plan: Three years of crap while building, followed by a breakthrough year 4 and 5, followed by a few years of rebuilding again, and then, the mountaintop: sustained success. I didn't want Ohio State success or Michigan success (giggle) or Penn State success - I wanted next tier Wisconsin success.

How has that worked out for me? Not well. The talent is there, but the coaching is not. The fans have arrived, but the team hasn't shown up. And the athletic director continues to schedule 82-50 opponents.

What a dark place February 2010 Robert was in. I wish I could go back and tell him that it will take a while, but someday, he'll get what he was dreaming about.

### **No. 11 - Catch The Ball When The Opposing Quarterback Throws It**

I've covered this point yearly since 2013. Just go to the search bar on the site and type in "interceptions" and you'll see several of the yearly articles. Every July, I run a 10-year window of all interceptions in college football. Our national ranking in those 10-year windows (out of the 120 teams I track) since 2013:

2013: 120th

2014: 120th

2015: 119th

2016: 118th

2017: 115th

2018: 116th

2019: 114th

2020: 107th  
2021: 107th  
2022: 106th  
2023: 64th  
2024: 51st  
2025: 33rd

Do I need to go on? I don't think I need to go on. Bielema's staff still has six previous seasons (five from Lovie, one from Cubit) holding them back. Once those seasons fall off and the 10-year window is just the data for this staff ... top 5?

*Grade For Bielema's Staff: A+*

## **No. 12 – Change The Way We Practice**

I considered not using this one because it was very Zook-centric. The original title was “No More ‘On The Hop’” but then I changed it to something that made more sense. I wanted to change the way we prepare.

“On the hop” was how Ron Zook ran practice. It was ... frantic? The idea was urgency, but it always felt a little too “the dam has broken, and the flood is coming down the valley we need to get everything done as quickly as possible so we can go home and save our families.” Ron Zook was a caffeinated person, and if his linemen were going from the field-goal drill to some blocking sled drill, he'd sometimes run after them, making them run, while yelling “on the hop on the hop on the hop on the hop.”

Here's what I wrote back then:

I think I understand why it's handled that way - Zook wants the entire program to have a sense of urgency, so why not have players run from one station to the next? Everything is done quickly at practice, trying to cram as much into their allotted time as possible. "Let's go let's go let's go - today, gentlemen."

I don't think it works.

In fact, I KNOW it doesn't work. We're not a disciplined football team. Halfway into the second quarter of the Missouri game, the ESPN announcer nailed it: "Illinois just can't help but shoot themselves in the foot." So true (soooo truuuuuuue). It was like that for 12 excruciating games.

Discipline starts at practice. So I want to change the way we practice.

Man, just reading that I can remember the desperation of the second quarter of the 2009 Missouri game. The new offense wasn't working. We were favored by seven, but Missouri was dominating (again). All of my summer confidence fading away in 60 minutes.

Since that time, I've observed more Zook practices, Beckman practices, Cubit practices, Lovie practices, and Bielema practices. So, I think I have a good handle on how things can be run. I don't think I can give out all A's in this exercise, so...

*Grade For Bielema's Staff: B*

It's definitely disciplined. It's very technical. He'll stop practice just to point out down, distance, and clock (something I never saw Zook do, and the other coaches only did it when they were running a two-minute drill). Every rep is a situation. You're not just practicing Right Slot Zero Cookie 58, you're practicing Right Slot Zero Cookie 58 on second-down-and-7.

So yes, this has definitely improved. There's still a "today, gentlemen" aspect to practice but it's not frantic. I guess I'm handing out a B because this one doesn't hit me like all of the others. I KNOW that we've improved the last three. This one, we simply have a better coach who understands how to set up practice and teach his players. It's not some drastic change to "how we practice," but it's a drastic change to mental discipline that's carrying through from the meeting rooms and the walkthroughs.

Yeah, I guess he nailed this one, too.

### **No. 13 – No More Celebrations**

This one makes me laugh. If you're a fan who hopped on the bandwagon in the last 15 years, you're not aware of the fan angst about this during the 2008 and 2009 seasons. Ron Zook players would CELEBRATE, man.

We'd be losing 38-10, a linebacker would make a tackle for a one-yard gain, and he'd get up and wave his arms like the field goal was no good. Zook wanted his teams to play with swagger (and it worked in 2007), and so he didn't ever discourage this. But when you're 1-4 and you're losing at Indiana which means you'll soon be 1-5 and you're down by 10 and your tight end does a big first-down point because you crossed the 40 ... it's not a good look.

It makes me laugh because I remember the timing of that post. I had just teased "no more celebrations" as the next point coming up in the 19 Point Plan. And then it was all anyone was talking about that week because spring practice began and new defensive coordinator Vic Koenning had given this quote:

“They’re not in the NFL. In college football, when you celebrate individually, you tend to get a flag. That’s part of it. And part of it, those guys on the other side are our teammates. We don’t need to get up and do all that stuff. One time, it was a two-minute drill. Well, you’ve over there celebrating and they’re lined up, ready to go. That’s not real smart. That’s part of the learning curve. College football is supposed to be wholesome and not have all of that celebration stuff. We’re not going to do that. That shows no class. I know Coach Zook doesn’t want it and I know the people of Illinois don’t want it and I guarantee you that I know I don’t want it. We’re not going to do it.” – *Illinois defensive coordinator Vic Koenning on chastising his players who were celebrating on the field.*

I believe this quote was after a video clip went around Twitter showing Koenning losing his mind at a player who was celebrating a tackle in practice while the offense lined up and ran another play. Again, this was kind of a “you had to be there” moment because it was THE issue with the fanbase and Zook. Yes, the 2007 season restored the swagger we had been missing. Rashard’s running style and J Leman’s hair and all of that. But when players were still celebrating while offenses were getting lined up for the next play in 2008 and 2009, and when offensive players were using the first-down point in a game where we trailed by 20, restoring swagger had gone too far and “lost focus on the task at hand” became the issue.

That really hasn’t been a problem since. I can’t remember the opposing offense running a play while the defense wasn’t lined up in the last 10 years. Tempo plays, sure, but “celebrating the sack in the offensive backfield and then nearly getting called for being offsides on the next snap” was a Zook-only thing. So, I think my grade for this has to be “incomplete” because it was fixed by that Vic Koenning quote in 2010 and hasn’t returned.

Maybe I’ll make it pass/fail.

*Grade For Bielema’s Staff: Pass*

#### **No. 14 – Build On Our History**

This one makes me chuckle. 37-year-old Robert was a bit ... exuberant.

You know the points of this one because I’ve talked about them over and over in the last 15 years. I’d point to Red Grange and I’d point to Dick Butkus and I’d say that the entire world needs to remember that two of the absolute icons of college football played at ILLINOIS. So, this one is more grading the DIA and not grading the coaching staff.

But I had developed a four-point plan for any fan needing to know about the history of Illinois football. I wanted it to be presented to the freshmen the moment they stepped on campus. The four steps:

1. Listen to Ray Eliot's "Proper State Of Mind" speech. "Send Ameche at me – SEND AMECHE AT ME."
2. Review the stadiums in the Big Ten. There were just 11 teams back then, but I wanted everyone to realize that the reason we have a historic stadium (while places like Purdue, Minnesota, Indiana, and Northwestern do not) was because WE HAVE HISTORY.
3. Review ESPN's Top-25 College Football Players Of All Time. Butkus #19, Grange #1.
4. My speech.

Yes, I gave a speech. I'm not going to link the whole thing here because it was a bit ... exuberant. But I'll copy and paste a snippet:

I would tell them that Illinois fans don't have outrageous expectations - but that they can help us get there. Right now, we just want a solid team that plays hard, competes week-to-week, and sends us somewhere warm for the holidays. I'd talk about the atmosphere in Memphis in December of 1994 and in Miami in December of 1999 - not so different from the atmosphere in Pasadena in January 2008. We travel well because there are tens of thousands of Illini football fans just waiting for the program to make the climb. Just get us to the Insight Bowl on New Years Eve and we'll show up to Tempe in droves.

I would close with a simple picture of myself sitting alone in the east balcony, freezing, shirtless with a giant orange "N" on my chest, staring at nothing in particular, 25 minutes after Brian Milne went in from 4 yards out and #1 Penn State completed their comeback on November 12, 1994. I resolved that day that this team would one day reach the mountaintop, and if there was any way I could help get us there, I would; the result of that moment was this speech. I would tell them that there were tens of thousands just like me, waiting for that day. That the University of Red and Ray and Dick and Simeon needs to take its rightful place.

The Greatest College Football Player In The History Of The Game played here. We owe it to him.

A little "cringe," as the kids say. But 100% me.

I'm glad that I waited until 2025 to do this because so much has happened in this area in the last 15 years. I wrote many "Build The Butkus Statue" articles until the Butkus statue was built in 2019. It was installed outside of the Smith Center, which has several displays of our deep history (something we really didn't sell before besides having a Grange statue on the other side of the stadium). And, most importantly, we went over the top in promoting the Michigan game last year, one century and one day after The Red Grange Game in 1924.

2010? Shockingly few Illini fans were aware that Red Grange scored four touchdowns in 12 minutes against a Michigan defense that had allowed four touchdowns the previous three seasons. 2025? I feel like the majority of Illini fans know that now. I even saw some Michigan fans having “I totally forgot that Fielding Yost was so angry about The Red Grange Game that he un-retired, fired the coach hired to replace him, and coached Michigan again in 1925” moments last year.

Four touchdowns allowed in 1921, 1922, and 1923 combined. And then four touchdowns allowed (all by the same player!) in 12 minutes. Given how the game was played back then (and the complete lack of offense), it remains the greatest single game performance from any player in college football history.

THAT’S IMPORTANT. I don’t know why I’m telling you but THAT’S IMPORTANT. And we finally see that it’s important. So, the DIA gets high marks.

*Grade for the DIA: A*

### **No. 15 – Quality Control**

This one should have probably gone on the “this was specific to Zook” pile. But it’s an important point, so I’ll kind of pivot off of what I was saying in this post to make a larger point.

Also, I’m enjoying this trip back to Ron Zook Land. Just reading these words takes me back to my emotions at the time. There’s something about the waterskiing video that will always grab me.

For this point, I wanted Zook to add a spotter. I used the NASCAR example of a spotter telling the driver of a wreck ahead. Zook was famous for accepting penalties on third down after a failed conversion attempt and calling timeout with five seconds on the play clock instead of 35 seconds on the play clock on a late drive (while the entire crowd was screaming “TIMEOUT! TIMEOUT! TIMEOUT!”). It was a trip back then, folks.

So, I wanted him to add a spotter. Take the timeouts and the penalty accepts/declines completely out of his hands. What I wrote back then:

Let's face it - our head coach is not the cool, calm, and collected type on the sideline. He paces and races and yells and paces, and his timeouts are a spur of the moment decision. He's not the calculating type (which is why he's solid in the recruiting living room). He has his positives, but calm, precise game management definitely isn't one of them.

I want to change that. I want an eye in the sky (and a voice on the headset) that is doing nothing more than managing the game for 3 hours. Not a decision maker - a guide. Not a coach - a counselor. Equal parts shrink, motivational speaker, messenger, seer, treaty negotiator, driver's ed instructor and life preserver.

Zook never fixed it. Zook was fired. Beckman, Cubit, and Lovie all had varying degrees of success and failure with things like this. Bielema? Bielema has a plan. Bielema spends so much practice time on every scenario that might come up in a game.

And that's been a pleasant change. We're good with the clock now. We're good with accept/decline penalty decisions. There have been several instances where the crowd was screaming "TIMEOUT! TIMEOUT!" but we had one more timeout, we waited until the second-to-last play of the half to use it, and we kicked the field goal with four seconds left just like we planned (while the TIMEOUT! TIMEOUT! guy's wife in the stands says to him, "good thing we didn't take the timeout you were screaming for").

The only game management issue I might take issue with (for Bielema) is punting decisions instead of going for it. It was mostly a 2021 thing (the Maryland game and the Purdue game, specifically), and he's definitely made adjustments to that as college football has become more self-aware about punt/kick the FG/go for it decisions in the last three years. I still find myself questioning a few of those decisions, but that's just every football fan. It's part of fanning.

But overall, we've fixed all of this. We were a disaster before and now it's a strength.

*Grade For Bielema's Staff: B+*

### **No. 16 – Know Your Role**

I already know that this one is getting an A+. I've thought of it many times these last four years. I begged and begged for this and have finally gotten it.

The point I was making with "know your role" – make special teams a strength, not a burden. Teach specific roles to specific players. We have 85 guys (now we have 105), so for the players that aren't starting and aren't redshirting, get them specific roles. Show me there's a plan for every scenario that comes up in a game.

A snippet from that one:

There are 85 guys on the roster. Let's say that 30 of them are redshirting and/or too young to really contribute anything yet. With 25 starters (including punter, kicker, and long snapper), that leaves 30 players that fall into the backup/specialists roles. Yes, they'll need tons of practice time at their position so that if /when their

number is called, they're ready. But beyond that, I want to see us design specific tasks for each of these guys.

An example of this? Troy Pollard - Kickoff Return Specialist. When Justin Green comes back, Pollard is likely our 4th or 5th tailback. What about devoting 40% of his practice time to kickoff return? What if when he studies film, he's studying kick return blocking angles? What if you sat him down right now and told him that kickoffs were going to be his specialty, and he needed to study as much kick return film between now and August as he could possibly watch?

A non-special teams example? Justin Lattimore - Tight End In Space. (In space, as in, like, out in the flat and seam routes - not in space). Teach him four routes, practice them over and over and over until the muscle memory clicks, and tell him that while he's probably doesn't have the strength yet to block a full-head-of-steam outside linebacker, he can play a role this year by running these four routes to perfection when called on. Over and over and over.

Leave the "he's probably doesn't" above when you're editing this, Nathan. I want people to know I made typos like "he's probably doesn't" back in 2010 so that they understand I'm 15-plus years into frustrating reading experiences. They've been reading this preview and not experiencing that (because you've been editing it) and I want people to understand that you're the reason they're not stumbling over "he's probably doesn't" sentences. And you can leave this paragraph in, too. Adds to the word count.

*(Editor's note: I leave all the typos in the old pieces. It's called job security.)*

This one is an absolute A+ for the Bielema staff. I'll just make a list off the top of my head:

- Peyton Vining, unknown senior walk-on until he returned the opening kickoff of the 2022 season back 50 yards, as the kickoff return specialist
- Tight ends we've used specifically for certain passing sets (like you'll see Cole Rusk this year)
- Different kickers handling kickoffs and field goals. Hell, letting the kickoff kicker kick the 59-yard field goal last year
- One hundred thousand special teams specialists the last four years. Just name a walk-on linebacker turned into a special teams maniac: Isaac Darkangelo. Sean Coghlan. Alec McEachern. Ryan Meed. Luke Zardzin. And walk-on defensive backs, too, like CJ Bufkin, Grayson Griffin, and Ben Clawson
- Certain massive offensive linemen used on the line for field goals and extra points

This is the A-plus of all A-plusses. A complete and total turnaround from how the other coaches handled it.

Grade For Bielema's Staff: A+

### **No. 17 – Just Win, Baby**

Reading this one also takes me back. If you weren't a fan yet in the late 2000s (I mean, a freshman student that began their fandom in the fall of 2010 would be 33 now and unaware of what 2008 and 2009 were actually like), just know that it was very "we promote ourselves like we're the team that went to the Rose Bowl in 2007 yet we just went 8-16 the last two seasons" at the time. Zook was recruiting when he was brushing his teeth, so there was this constant stream of positivity. And it felt like we were pretending (because we were).

So, I wrote "just win, baby" to say that the only focus should be wins. Yes, recruiting leads to wins, but when the recruiting sales pitch is the program pitch, it starts to feel very "these coaches know they just went 3-9, right?" Here's how I explained "Just Win, Baby" in that post:

If you asked any member of the football staff, from the coaches to the administrators to the SID office, they would all tell you the same thing. "OF COURSE that's what we're trying to do." It's most certainly the whole point of having a football program and a Division I University. Everybody wants to win.

Then why have we suffered through 6 home games when 90% of the BCS schools at least 7? Why did we wait until late 2009 to attempt to fix some glaring "they can recruit but can they coach" assistants? Why do we take our three FBS non-conference games and schedule Missouri-Cincy-Fresno?

Want the best example of how we have it backwards? BTN's "The Journey" in 2008. I'm sure the meeting when that was finalized went over great. I'm sure everyone left the room thinking "wow, what fantastic exposure for Illinois Football". I'm sure we thought every recruit from Jacksonville, IL to Jacksonville, FL would watch and run to the fax machine. Did anyone think about how adding the cameras and the notoriety might, you know, affect our win total? Was a discussion had about how the constant presence of cameras might give the players a sense that they'd arrived when, in fact, there was much more work to do?

Just. Win. Baby.

If you're not aware, back in 2008, "The Journey" was only focused on one school. BTN was embedded with the Illini team for that season. It was Hard Knocks but for college football. And while the theme was that we had "arrived" after reaching the Rose Bowl, the reality was that we lost a lot, couldn't repeat our 2007 success, and fell to 5-7 that year (and then 3-9 the next year). We hadn't arrived.

So, I wanted us to stop acting like we had arrived. I wanted “we haven’t won a damn thing yet.” Just focus on more wins. Schedule more wins. Sneak out some road wins. “Dress for the program you want, not the program you have” wasn’t working.

This staff? We don’t know how the players will respond to all of this notoriety over the summer. It’s very possible that “No. 12 Illinois” is a dangerous thought for our roster to take in. But the staff is delivering non-stop “we haven’t won anything yet” quotes, so I’m happy. Preseason 2025 is absolutely nothing like preseason 2008, at least from what’s been said into the microphones.

When you combine that with all of the other changes (we look to schedule MAC and FCS wins in the non-conference now, we max out our home game opportunities, there’s no sense of “fake it ‘til you make it” in the way the team is promoted), we have put the cart back behind the horse. This staff is easily the most “one game at a time, we haven’t won anything yet” of any staff we’ve had.

*Grade For Bielema’s Staff: A*

### **No. 18 – Sensational Seniors**

This one was simple. It was a demand to get old and stay old. We did not value age, we promoted the team like every player was going to leave for the NFL after three years, and Iowa’s 2-star seniors would beat our 4-star sophomores.

It was a plea for culture, really. I opened the post talking about Zeke Markshausen at Northwestern and O’Brien Schofield at Wisconsin (coached by? Bret Bielema). Markshausen had one catch for six yards his first three seasons at Northwestern and then 91 catches for 858 yards as a senior. Schofield had five sacks in his first three years at Wisconsin and then 12 sacks as a senior.

A snippet:

Where’s our senior breakout stars? Why don’t I get one? I deserve one, right?

(Quick aside: That’s how I feel much of the time as an Illini football fan. My fandom is defined by petulance. “Why don’t I get a Champs Sports Bowl? Where’s my Davey O’Brien Award finalist?” All the other kids get to go down to the park and play, and I have to practice the piano. Someday, kids. Someday.)

(And if by chance one of you has Biff Tannen’s sports almanac and you know that Illinois football never gets over the hump, please don’t e-mail me and tell me. I don’t think I could handle it. Never. Give up. Hope.)

Anyway, there was a common theme to our two BCS-bowl teams in 2001 and 2007: Senior leaders. Kurt Kittner and J Leman. Luke Butkus and Kevin Mitchell. Brandon Moore and Martin O'Donnell. Sure, there were talented underclassmen on both squads that pushed us over the top, but if you look back at the last decade and look for the two teams led by the most seniors, it's definitely 2001 and 2007. (2009 would probably rank third, but we must never discuss 2009 again.)

Most of the top programs have this common thread. Senior leaders. Much like yours and my high school, there's a hierarchy, and the underclassmen can't wait until it's their turn at the top. The lackadaisical kids snap it together because there's only one year left, and the true leaders emerge. Any college coach will tell you that he'll only go as far as his seniors lead him.

It just makes you feel warm and fuzzy now, doesn't it? The first thing Bret Bielema did when he got to campus in December 2020 was identify that "Super Seniors" was going to be a thing with the Covid waiver so he set about accumulating as many fifth- and sixth-year seniors as he could gather. The reason we had the most Super Seniors in 2021 and still had so many of them around in 2022? An effort by the staff to be one of the oldest teams in college football.

I was floored. Just imagine writing about something in 2010 and then it finally starts happening in 2021. I couldn't believe my eyes.

That emphasis on seniors has remained throughout the four years. We're in the transfer portal era now, and so roster turnover happens everywhere, but we're consistently on the low end of portal numbers. We've heard "we're still a development program" from Bret Bielema at least 100 times in the last four years. He is very much a "yes you need 4-star sophomores, but you also need fifth-year seniors like Josh Gesky who have been developing inside your program for a five full years" guy.

Ron Zook leaned heavily into his underclassmen (all seven years, really). Tim Beckman was similar (quickly transitioned from the seniors to the first-year players in 2012 when the season went south). Lovie had one of the youngest teams in the last 20 years of college football in 2017 when 15 of his true freshmen started at least one game. This remains one of

the most hilarious, out-of-pocket statistics in the entire media guide:

## **SINGLE-SEASON CUMULATIVE TRUE FRESHMEN STARTS**

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1.	2017	87
2.	1977	34
3.	2018	33
	2006	33
5.	1980	27
6.	2008	26
7.	1997	18
8.	2009	17
	2005	17
10.	2010	16
	2003	16
	1998	16

Bielema believes in seniors. My depth chart currently has 15 seniors starting this fall. Yes, the portal has changed a lot about college football (if Zook needed immediate help, he turned to a true freshman; if Bielema needs immediate help, he recruits a third-year or fourth-year guy out of the portal), but this is still a staff hellbent on finding juniors and seniors who emerge after several years in the background.

What Bielema did developing O'Brien Schofield at Wisconsin in 2009, he's now doing developing Pat Farrell at Illinois in 2025. It's intentional. And for that, he gets an A.

*Grade For Bielema's Staff: A*

### **No. 19 – Fans Must Stick Around**

This one won't be graded because it wasn't directed at the coach or the DIA. It was directed at the fans. If you think I only recently came up with the whole "fan support feeds everything and here we all are, getting angry and withholding money," think again. What I wrote in my Back The Team To Gain A Victory article last summer is the same thing I wrote in the Fans Must Stick Around article in 2010.

Snippet:

You know the scene in 'It's A Wonderful Life' where there's a run on the Bailey Building and Loan and the one dude is all "I'm going to Potter - he'll pay me" and George Bailey runs to the door and begs them all not to leave? That he'll pay them with his own money to keep them from bailing and going to Potter? Well, consider me George Bailey. (Except for the handing-out-money part.)

Please don't go. This program needs your support. Fan support is vital to a football program (both in money and game-day environment). I know the product on the field has been frustrating, but you can't give up now. We can't return to 2003 (or 1997). We can't let season tickets dwindle to the low 20's again, with late-season crowds of 34K sending recruits home with a sour feeling. We're so close.

OK, maybe we're not close at all. Maybe our coach doesn't have a clue how to turn it around. I understand your anger. We have the 4th or 5th best talent in the conference and we've won 8 games in two years. I get that. I really do.

But we have the 4th or 5th best talent in the conference. We have new coaches who, at least preliminarily, seem to understand the fundamental faults of this team the last few years. We have improved facilities that provide a pretty fantastic game-day experience. The student section, the way the noise bounces around with the new tower - all of it is improved.

Spoiler alert: By the end of the 2010s, season tickets dwindled into the low 20,000s again. Late-season crowds of 34,000 sent recruits home with a sour feeling again. Hell, it wasn't even late-season crowds. By 2021, average attendance was 35,347 fans. It did, in fact, fall apart again. We were not, in fact, so close.

I still feel good about writing it, though. I asked fans to stick around just for 2010 and 2011, and we did go to a bowl in both seasons (albeit with a 2-6 conference record in 2011). If there are a few people who read that and said "fine, I'll give it two years" (I wrote that one the day that the ticket renewal email came out), then I feel like they'd be happy with me for urging them to give it two more years. And then, if they renewed again for 2012, I'm guessing they quit and didn't come back until this year.

There's no grade here because there's nothing you can demand of fans. I can order the coach to stop letting punts bounce 15 or 20 more yards because he's frightened of fumbles and I can beg the athletic director to stop scheduling Cincinnati because he thinks we'll need that Strength Of Schedule to make the BCS title game in 2009, but I can only ask the fans to stick around. I can only lay out my case (that in college football, fan money actually changes the ability of the coach to build a better program and the NFL mentality of "put

pressure on the owners” actually harms the program) and hope that people will take it to heart. It’s what I spent the entire 2023 season doing (yes, there’s a reason I was symbiote/black suit Peter Parker on Twitter in 2023, tugging at the roots of fanbase cancers). If you’ve ever thought, “Robert isn’t delusional enough to think he can actually alter the course of the fanbase, right?” – yes, Robert is delusional enough.

I want Illinois football to gain its rightful place in the upper tier of the Big Ten. Red led us to a national title in 1923, we claimed four other solo or shared titles up through 1951, and we’re fourth all-time in Big Ten titles (yes, ahead of Wisconsin and Iowa). The difference between Illinois and Indiana at this very moment in time where both programs are surging? Illinois has 15 Big Ten titles, Indiana has two.

And that’s why I wrote The 19 Point Plan For Fixing Illinois Football. I believe it’s all possible. I’m just that delusional.

(Yes, we should probably get back to the 2025 team now. Let’s move on to the defense.)



## The Defense

I've been writing the preview since 2014. That means this is the 12th IlliniBoard Football Preview I've written. The shortest one was around 17,500 words. The longest one (before now) was around 28,000 words. So, I've written previews of our offense and defense many, many times. Twenty-three one-side-of-the-ball previews in total so far. This will be number 24.

And this will be the least informative of all 24. The defensive line? Yes, you're going to pay attention because you want to know how these transfers look. Outside linebacker? Inside linebacker? Cornerbacks? Safeties? You're going to find yourself saying, "right, I already knew all of this."

Never before have I written one of these previews where four of the five position breakdowns have nearly every starter AND backup returning from last year. I could probably dig out last year's preview and then cut-and-paste large sections. Same coordinator, mostly the same position coaches, same defense, same players.

Here, I'll just add what I believe to be the current two-deep (a few adjustments from the one I published last week) and I'll put the new players in bold. These are the players I didn't write about (as either a starter or a rotation guy) in the preview last year:

OLB | Bryant (SR) | D. Brown (JR)  
DL | **Thompson** (SR) | Warren (JR)  
NT | **Neal** (JR) | McCollum (SO)  
DL | Farrell (rs-SO) | **Durojaiye** (JR)  
OLB | Jacas (SR) | Barna (SO)  
MLB | Rosiek (SR) | Ja. Kreutz (JR)  
WLB | Hood (JR) | Odeluga (SR)

CB | Patterson (JR) | Clarke (JR)  
CB | To. Cox (SR) | **Heckel** (SO)  
NB | Xav. Scott (SR) | Rooks (JR)  
SS | Bailey (JR) | Karriem (JR)  
FS | M. Scott (SR) | Resetich (JR)

I list 12 positions when I do a defensive depth chart, so this list has 24 names, and of the 24 names, only four are new. It's not just that we have a bunch of starters back; 20 of the 24 rotation guys return. Of the four that wouldn't have been on last year's two-deep, three are defensive line transfers and Tanner Heckel is the sophomore our coaches can't stop talking about who has pushed past rotation guys from last season.

(I guess I could say that Daniel Brown wasn't a rotation guy last year, but he missed the first 11 games with an injury and then immediately joined the rotation for the final two games including the bowl game. Where he made ... I'll get to that point in a bit.)

So, I'm going to have to put my brain in a different spot when writing this one. I also feel like this section will be much shorter than the typical defensive preview. I always task my brain with "tell people who is new, tell people who is ready to make a big jump from their sophomore production to their junior production, and then give a general feel of the strength of each position group" when writing stuff like this. And now I'm left with just "give a general feel of the strength of each position group."

Maybe the best place to start is here: it won't go like you think. It won't be, "we just picked up where we left off." It's never, for any program with large numbers of starters and backups returning, "we just picked up where we left off." There are ebbs and flows.

We were certain that the 2023 defensive front would dominate. We had the potential Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year in Johnny Newton (and he *was* BTDPOY that season), we had Keith Randolph returning for a fifth season, and we had Gabe Jacas coming off a Freshman All-American season. At the end of 2022, all of those players were playing at a high, high level.

But, as you might remember, it didn't go that way in the 2023 season. Teams took a "just stop Johnny" angle and with Randolph dealing with nagging injuries, Seth Coleman not taking the next step, and the loss of Calvin Avery at nose hurting a little more than we thought it would, we didn't capitalize on the Johnny double teams. We just didn't pick up from where December 2022 left off, even though most of the players were the same.

Go read the 2023 preview and I'm certain I was all "we might have the best defensive line in the country, y'all." In fact, I think I tweeted it that year? Let me go look.



**Robert Rosenthal**  
@ALionEye



PEOPLE.

Everyone thinks I do this all the time but I don't really do this all the time. I save it for moments like this.

There's a chance we have the best defensive line in the country. Jacas-Newton-Randolph-Coleman is the best DL on the Big Ten and. possibly. in. the. country.

4:11 PM · Jan 16, 2023 · **29K** Views

That was right after the "I'm back" tweets. A few weeks after those four played really great in the ReliaQuest Bowl. They did all return. And they didn't recapture late 2022.

Is that on the coaches? We switched from Ryan Walters to Aaron Henry that season, so was Henry not able to scheme for better defensive line play? Should he have had a better counter for the "double Johnny" offenses? Maybe. But I don't usually think of it like that. Maybe I can explain it this way.

I watched the Citrus Bowl again recently. As you might remember, South Carolina quarterback LaNorris Sellers was getting a lot of hype coming into that game after their win over Clemson in their final game. If you were paying close attention the week before the game, the Citrus Bowl was basically "LaNorris Sellers' 2025 Heisman campaign begins NOW."

And it's striking how much our scheme threw him off his game. There are even a few moments where he flinches. He's made his reads, he knows the play and the defense, he's ready to deliver the pass, and ... wait, why is that defender there? Aaron Henry and Terrance Jamison cooked up some defensive tweaks that made him uncomfortable all game. As my scheme friends told me after the game, these were tweaks that Henry hadn't shown one time all season. Cards in his back pocket he held for the bowl game.

(Which, as a fan, immediately sends me to "well then why didn't we play similar unused cards when Darius Taylor and Minnesota were running all over us in the fourth quarter in November" places, but I digress.)

It's stuff like that which has shifted my thinking about depth charts and "starters returning." I think a little more in terms of packages now after watching four years of Bielema ball. Yes, you want returning starters. Of course. But you also want returning flexibility. The ability to seamlessly shift to a different look with different personnel.

As I wrote for most of the decade of the 2010s, our biggest issue was depth. Not in the "our starters get tired" sense, although we were famous for folding in the fourth quarter because we just didn't have the horses back then, but in the "injuries will come, and can you overcome them?" sense. We'd lose two defensive tackles – the only two defensive tackles who were Big Ten-ready – and the opposing offensive coordinators would lick their chops. Now, every play call in that game is based upon "they're playing two sophomores inside who have no idea what they're doing yet." That's not just "let's run it up the gut," it's everything.

Time and time again across the entire decade, a weak point would appear and opposing offenses would go right after it. If your starting middle linebacker is an 8.3 on the "Big Ten readiness" scale but his backup is a 4.6, the moment the starter goes out the opposing team is scheming for it. If the backup is a respectable 7.4, then no, they can't really do that. But if the freshman corner comes in because the starter has played seven straight series (and it's a freshman corner because the sophomore guy and the junior guy just never panned out), the spotters up in the press box start lighting up the headsets. Maybe in high school you can sneak a sophomore who doesn't know what he's doing onto the field for a series or two, but in college, the moment he hits the field, it's noticed and immediately communicated to everyone.

The counter to this "opposing spotters are always watching" is having the flexibility to change up your packages. When we were rushing Daniel Brown from different spots on the line during the Citrus Bowl, I'm guessing the South Carolina headsets were all, "who is No. 4? Why is he constantly in our backfield? Is he a defensive tackle we didn't scout because he just came up the A gap." Keep them on their toes by not only having unknown players coming onto the field – have those unknown players prepared to run a package they don't understand.

And it's not just a look or a player you haven't shown before. It's flexibility. Not only are your backups prepared, shutting down the "I think we can pick on this corner" stuff from the opposing offense, but the backups are prepared to shift into a different look because the players can do both. Yes, "do what you do best" is necessary for all defenses. Don't get too cute. But flexibility is key to this. If you can shift into other stuff *and stay sound to your assignment* (easier said than done), you can do what we did in the Citrus Bowl.

The issue is maintaining it. The main theme of our defense the last four years – and this is my label, not the staff's – is "do not, under any circumstance, give up the huge play." We are

a “keep everything in front of us” defense (which is why you’ll sometimes see Miles Scott play free safety from Tolono). And the one thing about a keep-everything-in-front-of-you defense? If we get cute with one single look and the players aren’t 100% repped and ready, and if that look gives up 45 yards on one play, it’s going in the trash until the head coach can trust that it’s as dependable and repeatable as everything else we do.

It’s in THAT structure that it’s hard to maintain the late 2022 defensive line into the 2023 season. Offenses pick on something else, you find that you can’t react to it, you try X, they try Y as a counter to X. The game within a game that I’ll never be able to fully grasp as it’s happening.

That’s why I say, “it won’t go like you think.” I had some questions about the defensive staff after the 5-7 season in 2023, and they answered them in 2024. They won with juniors and sophomores and surprised everyone. The natural expectation is that they get even better in 2025.

But it kind of never goes like that? They might have a rough September and then a fantastic October. They might try something against Duke that gives up two first-quarter touchdowns and learn a lesson the hard way. They might dominate all the way up to the Ohio State game and then get masterclass-ed by Brian Hartline. Or some defensive analyst might run down the hall to Aaron Henry’s office and burst in screaming, “I found Hartline’s Achilles heel!”

We have, I believe, finally escaped the hell of “I just hope they don’t realize how slow our linebackers are” one season followed by “we only have one Big Ten safety on our roster, and I think every team in the conference knows it” the next year. We have shored up four of the five positions and hopefully the new transfers will maintain strong defensive line play this season.

Once that’s accomplished, it becomes the other stuff I just mentioned above. *How flexible can we get?* What if we stay as vanilla as possible against Western Illinois so that Duke knows nothing (that’s a guarantee)? What if we try some things against Western Michigan to see if those packages are really ready for Indiana? The basic roster/depth problems – you know, the problems we dealt with for the better part of 30 years – are solved. At least for 2025. So how can we have a full arsenal of looks and packages ready for Ohio State?

I do expect some surprises early in the season as we work through that. There are a few players who might be spoken of in “we can absolutely depend on him” terms below who head to the bench by Oct. 1 because they just weren’t prepared for this defense in this current format. So, I don’t think this is as simple as “we dominated South Carolina in December and we’re going to be that defense from now on.” Lots to prepare these first few weeks before Indiana, USC, and Ohio State in the four weeks after that. Each season is

different, and even though we have a ton coming back, there will still be a lot of learning going on in the next few weeks.

Let's get into it.

### **Defensive Line**

Let's do a quick strikethrough for effect. Defensive line does not refer to the edge guys here (the outside linebackers), so this is just the three interior positions. Here are the snaps at those positions last season with a line through the players who have departed.

~~Dennis Briggs Jr.~~ - 645 snaps

~~TeRah Edwards~~ - 629

~~Alex Bray~~ - 391

~~Ezekiel Holmes~~ - 225

Jeremiah Warren - 187

Pat Farrell - 108

Gentle Hunt - 33

Angelo McCullom - 16

~~Enyee Sledge~~ - 16

Yes, we return eight starters on defense from the bowl game. Only Briggs and Edwards started that game, so neither Bray nor Holmes showed up on the "starters lost" list (Ryan Meed at linebacker was the other starter from that game who graduated). But on the defensive interior, we did lose our No. 1 guy, our No. 2 guy, our No. 3 guy, and our No. 4 guy.

"Illinois has a ton coming back." True.

"Illinois has to rebuild the entire defensive interior." Also true.

This is the position that might look like a mess over the first month. We brought in talent. I believe Wisconsin transfer James Thompson is better than all of the players with a line through their name above. But every "bunch of new guys" position takes some time to find its footing. I'm encouraged that Farrell is ready in his third season (he's at 285 pounds now), and of all the position coaches, Terrance Jamison is No. 1 on the "will figure out his rotation and have them repped and ready" ranking, but we still lost the top four guys from last year. If TeRah Edwards would have gotten his waiver approved for a fifth season it would have been massive for us because ... we lost the top four guys from last year.

And before we go through the names here, I should note that there's a wildcard to be played. A Wild Draw Four. Because we're so deep at outside linebacker, and because we have one outside linebacker built like a sci-fi robo-soldier, we can solve one of the three interior positions by sliding Gabe Jacas inside. If I know that Thompson will be as good as

or better than Dennis Briggs, and if I know that I know that I KNOW that Gabe Jacas can be quite effective with his hand in the dirt (see: Gabe Jacas, Big Ten Defensive Player of the Week after the Michigan game where he put up 13 tackles, 2.5 sacks, 2 QB hurries, and a forced fumble playing with his hand in the dirt more than standing up on the edge), then two of the three defensive interior positions have a solution. At that point, it's "figure out nose guard + the backups at each position."

What a wildcard to have, right? "Oh, if we're struggling at that position, we can just put a different ready-to-go outside linebacker on the field, slide Jacas inside, and have him play like a first team All-Big Ten player at that position as well." Maybe that should be my campaign for this season.

PUT GABE JACAS ON THE FIRST TEAM FOR BOTH OUTSIDE LINEBACKER AND DEFENSIVE LINEMAN.

OK, with all of that established, a quick run through the important players.

James Thompson, all 6-foot-6-inches of him, is the key to it all. His pectoral injury at Wisconsin last year was the best Illini football news of the summer. He missed the first 10 games, took a redshirt, had one more year of eligibility, entered the portal, and landed at Illinois. He has All-Big Ten talent and will now hopefully have a massive senior season – one he was supposed to have at Wisconsin last year – for Illinois this year. The top portal get of the offseason.

The other big portal get, Tomiwa Durojaiye from Florida State, is a bit of an enigma to me. He's ... a mercenary? A hired gun? I don't know if he'll wear dark sunglasses with a hat pulled down low as he sits across the street observing the cafe while tense music plays, but that's the vibe here:

2022: Redshirted at Kentucky

2023: Played one season at West Virginia

2024: Played one season at Florida State

2025: Playing the season at Illinois

Have burst, will travel.

How much will he contribute? I don't know yet. This mix between "third-year guys who Jamo trusts and might be ready for significant snaps" and these transfers is something I'll be monitoring for the first month. I'm not sure we'll know the real rotation until Indiana.

It's the same for Wisconsin transfer Curt Neal, brought here to take over for TeRah Edwards at nose. Is he gonna be the main guy? Or is sophomore Angelo McCullom ready to take over? McCullom is the future. When does the future begin?

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I need to clear my brain for this final push. This is the final section I need to write. It's early Sunday evening. Four more position breakdowns and then I'm done. So, to clear my brain, maybe I should give you a peek behind the curtain?

I'm doing a month at Lodgic right now. It's a "coworking" place in Champaign. Corner of Neil and Fox Drive. I say "Neil and St. Mary's" but the moment St. Mary's crosses Neil Street it becomes Fox Drive. So, it's technically at Neil and Fox.

It's a place to have an office if you don't have an office. You can rent one of their small offices, or one of their large offices, or rent no office at all (that's what I'm doing) and take any desk/cubicle/booth. You can sit anywhere, it's open 24/7 for paying members, and with the home office not cutting it for me this week for whatever reason, I've written almost all of this preview up here. Writing is about headspace, and this is the headspace I needed.

Do I *need* to pay for it? No. There are actual startups with offices here, people who need actual offices + printers + on-site childcare + conference rooms. As a one-man show, I don't really *need* any of that. I'm just a man, standing in front of a football team, asking it to love him.

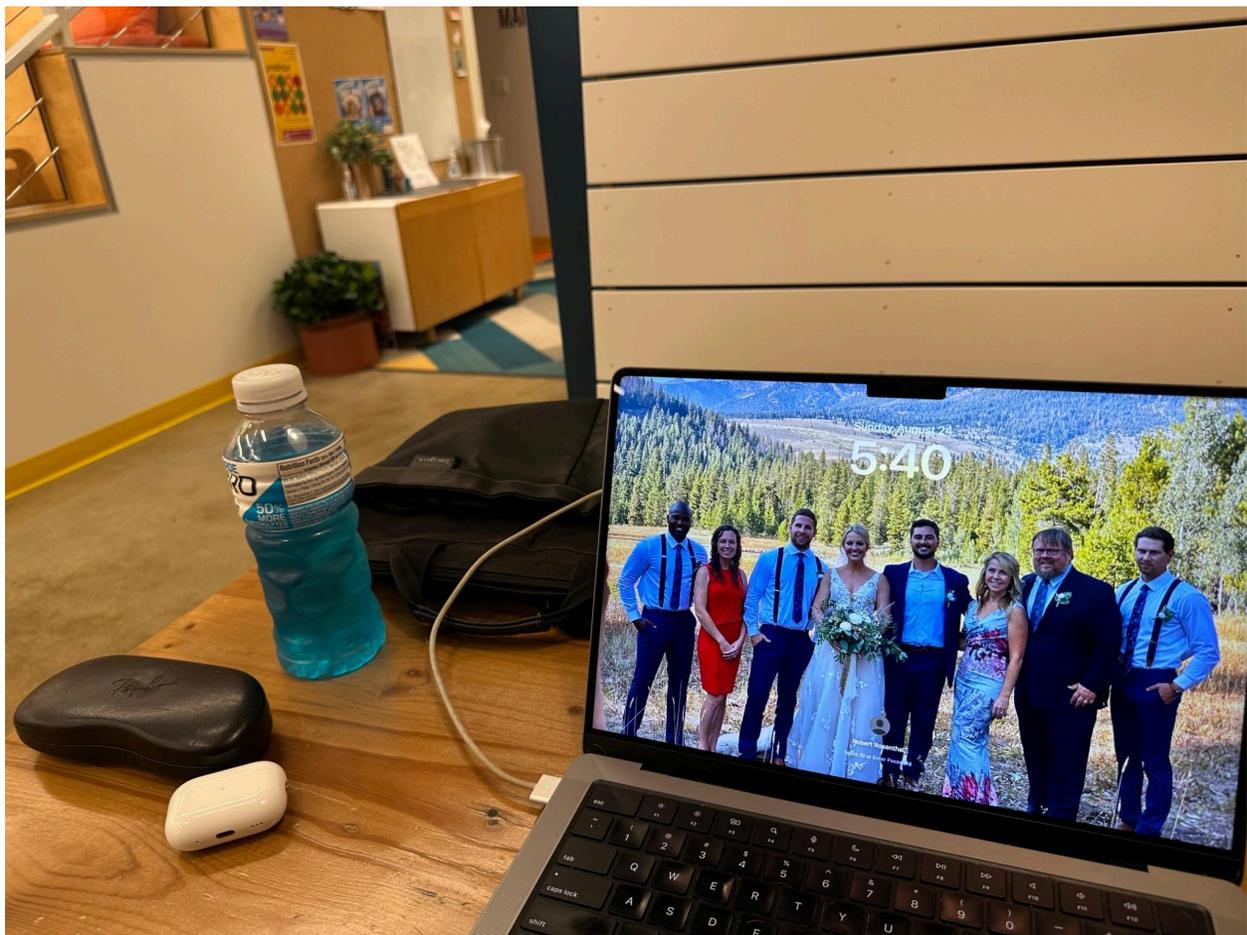
But damn if it hasn't been amazing. Remember how the preview used to always include "I'm up at Coffee Cartel again" stories? 80% of the previews from 2015 through 2018 were written at Coffee Cartel in the Central West End in St. Louis, less than a mile from our condo. It was a 24-hour coffee shop, so I'd be writing this thing at 2:45 a.m. while drunk Wash U freshmen on their first weekend away from home came in and soaked up the alcohol with muffins. In 2019, the last year I wrote the preview in St. Louis, Coffee Cartel had closed, and I felt completely lost writing the preview.

Since moving to Champaign, I've written this thing mostly at home. There were a few years where my mother-in-law, sister-in-law, nieces and nephews came to visit on the last weekend in August and so my wife would entertain them, and I'd escape to a 24-hour place in Champaign. Parts of 2021 and 2022 were written in the McDonald's on Neil and the Steak 'n Shake on Neil, respectively. During the day, maybe it's Espresso Royale. At night, there's not many options. I tried Merry Ann's once but WAY too noisy at night. Like Coffee Cartel on steroids.

This year I'm trying to be more intentional about things (about all things). So, I figured I might try Lodgic. I'm a little frightened because A) my brain really seems to love it and B) it's fairly expensive for a one-man shop like me. But my brain has come alive. I hope you can tell.

I mean, I'm almost done! Nathan said he can edit this final section at 9 p.m. after his kids go to sleep, so the plan is to finish before 9 p.m., wait for his edit, compile everything into the final version at home tonight, and then publish first thing in the morning. At this point (nearly 6 p.m. on the Sunday before the preview comes out on Monday), I don't think I've ever been 90% done. I don't even think I've been 70% done. Almost every year I finish the second-to-last section around 3 a.m., sleep a bit, and then try to finish the final section in the morning before the head coach press conference at 1 p.m. Tonight, I think I might go to bed at a regular time and then wake up at a regular time and not stress about anything?

Pretty much all because of this booth:



Mixed Berry Powerade Zero, of course. My glasses case for my computer glasses – my sister, an optometrist, gave me a pair of glasses focused for 18 inches from my face (to wear when I'm sitting at my laptop) and a pair of glasses focused for everyday use. So, I have that case with me at all times to swap them out. My wife got me latest generation AirPods for our 20th anniversary and the noise cancelling is ridiculous. That's my cheap Targus bag that I've carried with me to every game for close to six years now, and that's my MacBook (and, you know, the whole famdamily before any of the little babies were added).

And that's one of the booths at Lodgic. I went with a desk on Tuesday and then a booth on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. I'm a booth guy, I guess. And it's been the most bizarre (and rewarding) experience.

Like, I packed a lunch for four days and put it in the fridge here with my initials on it. I had a conversation with someone around the coffeemaker. I didn't really talk to many people - it was mostly me with my AirPods canceling noise and delivering Mahler - but the environment (and maybe going to an office?) made the words fire out of my fingers this week. People will say it's because we're No. 12, and I'm sure that's part of it, but my goodness did my brain come alive here.

If this thing sells well, I might spend all of my money on a year at Lodgic. Or maybe I could just charge them for this free ad. Either way ... the booth in that picture shifted some things for my career in a very positive way. I'm paid up through Sept. 30, so I'm curious to see how much I come up here post-preview.

OK, back to the words firing out of my fingers.

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I didn't finish the defensive line, so let's finish the defensive line.

It's the position with the most question marks on the team. It's either defensive line or tight end. The top four snap-getters left. I covered how Gabe Jacas might slide inside 50% of the time, I covered how James Thompson is clearly the No. 1 guy, and I covered how the other two positions are battles between the guys who the staff has been developing versus the guys brought in as transfers.

Actually, as I say that, I'm not sure that's true? I started to talk about Curt Neal vs. Angelo McCullom at nose guard, but I'm not sure I finished. Let's pick it up there.

The guys the staff has been developing: Angelo McCullom, Pat Farrell, Jeremiah Warren  
The guys the staff brought in as transfers: James Thompson, Curt Neal, Tomiwa Durojaiye

From what I saw at practice, I saw those six the most. The balance will be between the developed guys and the instant-fix guys. I'm not sure how it will all shake out.

But then I should also mention The Ghost. I'm calling Northern Iowa transfer Carter Hewitt "The Ghost" because I swear I can't remember seeing him at any of the practices I attended. He was there - I do remember seeing him - but I don't remember watching him. I got home from practice no less than four times and thought, "wait, was Carter Hewitt there?" And then I'd go to the next practice, and I'd see his number during warmups and I'd think, "yes,

he's here." And then I'd drive home from that practice and think, "I don't think I saw Carter Hewitt do anything?"

It's possible he had a soft-tissue issue (the Bielema term for "pulled a muscle") and just wasn't participating in contact drills. It's also possible he was participating in contact drills, and my brain saw the number 94 and thought it was a walk-on or something. But Carter Hewitt is a ghost. Coach Jamison told me, in person, that he thinks he will be "special" when he gets here. I just can't convince my brain that he's actually here?

Now watch him start and tear Western Illinois apart. I'm sure he did last year.

OK, I think that's it. Gentle Hunt is the only other player who could surprise, but he got only 33 snaps last year. So, I'm gonna call him eighth for now. And since Hewitt fits with the transfers and Hunt fits with the "guys they've been developing," here are the defensive line Sharks and Jets:

Transfers: Thompson, Durojaiye, Neal, Hewitt

Developed: Farrell, Warren, McCullom, Hunt

Guy who goes into the office now: Robert

### **Outside Linebacker**

Let me just warn you about the pace. I already warned you about the pace but let me remind you about the warning about the pace. For these four sections (OLB, LB, CB, S), it's going to feel like we're flying by. But no, it's not because I'm almost done. It's because you know absolutely everything you need to know about these positions, even if you're not very good at remembering players' numbers.

For these last four positions, we lost Seth Coleman at outside linebacker and Ryan Meed at linebacker. And that's it. Every other starter and backup is back. The 2024 preview is the 2025 preview. You know how it will go because it will go like last year.

I'm still going to go through it – don't you worry – but if the defensive preview comes out to 6,500 words while the offensive preview was 9,500 words, this is why. I'm here to inform you and you already have the information.

At outside linebacker, yes, Seth Coleman is a loss. It's a shame he missed the bowl game with an injury (he deserved to go out on top), but ... solid career for us. He'll be missed.

But the depth is so deep here, I think his graduation has already been absorbed. We went out and grabbed a starting outside linebacker from Wisconsin to replace him, and I'm not sure that guy (Leon Lowery) is in the top four right now? I mean, Jojo Hayden played 141 snaps out on the edge last season and the staff moved him to inside linebacker this year

because there's too much talent at outside linebacker. When you're changing positions for third-year sophomores who really started to come on at the end of last season, you have a plethora of options at the position.

The options:

- Gabe Jacas. No big deal. Just a potential All American and Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year. Jacas was voted sixth in the preseason poll for Big Ten DPOY, so all he has to do is convince the voters that he's better than the five guys voted ahead of him. I think he could maybe do that?
- Alec Bryant. He had a year at Virginia Tech and now four years at Illinois. He played third fiddle the last few years while Coleman and Jacas started, and now he likely steps into the starting role for his final season.
- Joe Barna. He's the future. After Jacas and Bryant graduate, he takes over as the main guy next season. Highest motor on the team? Highest motor on the team.
- Daniel Brown. Missed 11 games with an injury but thank god he came back for the final two because (you already know what I'm going to say) his QB hurry on fourth-and-goal for South Carolina closed out the Citrus Bowl. (Well, that and McCray's run.)
- Leon Lowery. We added a pass-rushing piece from Wisconsin in the offseason but I'm struggling to see how he finds the field on Friday night because I think he's behind these other four? Hope I'm wrong and he's a huge transfer surprise.
- Mason Muragin. Missed all of last season with an injury, and while he was going through rehab, he watched the guys in his room start to become the deepest position on the field. He's a really talented kid and a big part of the future. There's just such a steep hill to climb this year as a redshirt sophomore who missed all of 2024.
- Ismael Kante. Juco outside linebacker arrives and wonders ... how am I going to play here with all of these experienced guys in front of me?

See why Jojo Hayden was moved to inside linebacker? If this was 2016, Mason Muragin would be starting on the edge. It's 2025, and Mason Muragin is currently sixth at a position that starts only two. If there are failures on the edge this year, I'd say they'll be 95% coaching and 5% talent. The talent is certainly there.

### **Inside Linebacker**

See what I mean about the pace? But what else am I gonna say about the outside 'backers? It's super deep and you already know their names.

Speaking of super deep and you already know their names ... inside linebacker!

In my practice notes two weeks ago, I made a note about the 10 linebackers going through individual drills with Archie McDonald. Inside linebacker in this scheme is a two-position thing (generally, Middle Linebacker and Weakside Linebacker, but sometimes I just call them ILB1 and ILB2 to keep it simple). But in the last few years, there have been so many times that we've been in a 5-1-5 that it's almost like we only have one inside linebacker spot. Ten guys for one (or even two spots) feels insane.

Like, remember when Easton Baker committed? The buzz was that we landed the top linebacker in Utah and when do linebackers in Utah ever end up at Illinois? That was in early June 2023. It's now late August 2025 and ... have you heard Easton Baker's name mentioned once? It's not because he's a bust or anything like that. It's because we just have so many linebackers. What's he going to do, suddenly leap over the four guys who have all played extensively in the past as a redshirt freshman? There's still a steep mountain to climb.

And that's how I feel about all of the linebackers six through ten on this roster. Grant Beerman is really talented, and if this was 2017 when Lovie was turning his program over to the freshmen, Grant Beerman would play 700 snaps this year. But there are four or five guys repped and prepped to take on everything opposing offenses might throw at them this season, so Grant Beerman is going to have to wait a year or two. Yes, Ryan Meed graduated, so there are some snaps available. But Dylan Rosiek returns from a broken leg, so there go those snaps.

Maybe I should just list the linebackers 1-10 so you can see what I'm trying to say here?

1. Dylan Rosiek – Senior, captain, focal point.
2. James Kreutz – Experienced now, but maybe better suited for MLB so might be Rosiek's backup?
3. Kenenna Odeluga – Hopefully finally healthy as a senior and ready to return to his underclassman form.
4. Malachi Hood – The surprise of all surprises last November. If he continues that climb, maybe the starter at WLB?
5. Jojo Hayden – Having him fifth here feels wild given how he looked in the last month of the season. But where do you fit him in?
6. Luke Zardzin – We've had a former walk-on break through almost yearly of late (Isaac Darkangelo, Ryan Meed), but where's the opening for Zardzin to break through?
7. Grant Beerman – I think he's the next Rosiek. Maybe even as soon as next season. But where does he fit this season?
8. Easton Baker – Could be a future superstar but he'll have to show it on special teams for now.

9. Jack Paris – The last guy we’ve added late in the class has been a future star of late (Matt Bailey, Mac Resetich, Tanner Heckel). Paris is that guy for the 2025 class.
10. TJ Griffin – Best kind of guy to have in the locker room. I hope he forces a massive fumble on a kickoff this season.

All of that and, when we’re in a 5-1-5 defense (three down linemen and two outside linebackers on the line, one linebacker in the middle, and then three corners and two safeties), just one of those ten can be on the field. When we switch to more of a 5-2-4 or even a 4-2-5, yes, there are two on the field, but that means we have a five-deep at both positions.

Maybe this is where packages come in? Maybe there’s a package that has Rosiek and Hood on the field and then the offense changes something so we put in the package with Kreutz and Hayden. Perhaps we’ll have specialists at linebacker.

That’s the only thing I can figure, because when we’re in the 5-1-5, we have a ten-deep on the depth chart. (And you’ve already seen a lot of football from five of the ten.)

### **Cornerback**

You think I’m done. You think, “OK, fine, there’s no chance for a young linebacker to break through this season, but what about some of these younger corners? We might get some of those guys on the field this year, right?”

No. No chance. We would have to have four or five [redacted] to reach the young guys. The available snaps in the secondary come from a third-string guy who left the program after playing in only five snaps in the Oregon game (Terrance Brooks). Those snaps were quickly gobbled up in November and December, so we now have the full roster of cornerbacks returning.

Remember, part of this depth comes from the 105 thing. The House settlement changed things from a scholarship limit of 85 to a roster limit of 105. Some teams are just using Nos. 86 through 105 as walk-on spots where they give out some partial scholarships. But given the makeup of this roster, I think we’re using them to have a 10-deep at mike linebacker and an outlook for freshmen cornerbacks that they’re gonna have to wait 12-to-24 months for snaps.

And the best way to frame that, again, is to reference a year from the 2010s. We saw true freshmen and redshirt freshmen at cornerback all the time back then. It was one of the positions where players constantly got on the field early (to mixed results). But now, there’s just no room.

Take RJ Jones, a true freshman corner from Vero Beach, Florida. I know that the staff really likes RJ Jones. He's the perfect fluid corner that they want to train into a wide receiver-hounding monster. But there's zero chance we see any of that this year.

Or take Tanner Heckel. He played eight-man football in Kansas, so he was an unknown recruit. But he's an incredible athlete. Bielema told me that he finished No. 1 on their summer athleticism grade-outs (not football stuff, just speed and agility drills – NFL Combine-like stuff). The staff lights up when they talk about him. They think they recruited Cooper DeJean.

And he won't start this year as a sophomore. He's a star for the 2026 and 2027 teams. They want to get him on the field so he's ready to be that star, but with the experience at corner, it's really hard to break up the "we know these schemes like the back of our hand" corners who have several years of experience.

Maybe I'll list the corners like I listed the outside linebackers.

- Xavier Scott. No big deal. Just a potential All American and Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year. Here's a stat that sometimes blows people's minds. Who on our defense was first team all-conference last year? Almost everyone says Jacas. No, it was Xavier Scott. Jacas was third team.
- Torrie Cox. He was the biggest portal revelation last year. We were all focused on how we had added a former top-100 recruit in Terrance Brooks, but Cox was the star (three interceptions).
- Kaleb Patterson. So glad the staff kept to their plan to redshirt him in 2023, because he was solid as a starter last year, will be great this year, and still has another year of eligibility in 2026.
- Juice Clark. Maybe I should say Jaheim, but everyone on the team calls him Juice so I think we should call him Juice. He was another late-season surprise last year. Would start on probably 25 of the last 30 Illini teams but won't start this season.
- Tanner Heckel. Mentioned above. The staff talks about what he showed them his freshman year in the exact same way as they talk about what Gabe Jacas showed them his freshman year.
- Tyson Rooks. How many times have you heard Aaron Henry say, "watch out for Tyson Rooks, man." Made that great interception at Oregon last year, has the athleticism to be top-three on this list by the end of the year.
- Tyler Strain. Entered the portal but then came back. Has started six games in the past, in this defense, for this staff, but is our seventh corner.

Does that tell you everything? How does that not tell you everything?

(Don't worry, I'll end the defense section by reining things back in. But don't stop me. I'm on a roll.)

## **Safety**

This one I'll approach a different way. Yes, we have all of the same players back. No, none of the freshmen or redshirt freshmen will play a single snap. Yes, the only thing you need to do before the season is check to see if any of the main guys changed their numbers. No, they did not.

But I see safety this way. Everyone on the two-deep returns, but with Mac Resetich's emergence as a guy they want to get on the field more, we have three safety pairings this season:

SS – Matt Bailey  
FS – Miles Scott

The same safety pairing we started with in 2024 (Bailey only played one game before the shoulder injury) and now 2025.

SS – Matt Bailey  
FS – Mac Resetich

When Miles Scott needs a breather, Mac Resetich comes in and takes over at free safety.

SS – Miles Scott  
FS – Mac Resetich

When Matt Bailey needs a breather, we don't bring on the second-string strong safety. We move Miles Scott to strong safety (he can do both) and we put Mac Resetich at free safety.

In that sense, we have three starters at safety. All of them could potentially play 66.67% of the defensive snaps. If we look at snaps in 2024 and 2025, I could see it playing out like this:

2024

Bailey – 876 snaps  
Scott – 815 snaps  
Resetich – 176 snaps

2025

Bailey – 800 snaps  
Scott – 750 snaps  
Resetich – 500 snaps

(15 games in 2025, of course. Because of the playoff.)

My point is that I think they trust three guys. I'm hopeful that Saboor Karriem could prove me wrong (or even that former walk-on Ben Clawson could prove me wrong). The test there, of course, is that Karriem or Clawson would have to be better than Miles Scott as the second-string strong safety. If they are, that's even better for us.

But the way I see safety, it's three pairings. The starters get the most snaps, but Resetich likely doubles his snaps from last season. This was similar to what they did last year, so I guess I'm just saying that I think they'll do it even more this year. We have three guys we trust, two positions, and that's that. Which is fine because safeties don't have to turn and run with receivers as much, so they don't tire out as fast. Corners need a full rotation; safeties can play most of the snaps.

So where does that leave everyone else? Well, if you read the rest of the sections above, you know the answer. There's just very little room for the first- and second-year players. Best I can offer is that maybe we'll see Xavier Scott's brother Xanai Scott start to creep into the rotation at strong safety? If there's a true freshman on defense who might break through and not redshirt, I think it's him.

But again, it's just so hard to do that when the coaches are in meetings saying, "guys, we HAVE to get Mac Resetich on the field more. How do we do that?" For true freshmen to play, there has to be some kind of, "are we sure we can trust that guy at [starter or backup position]?" And they seem to trust these starters at safety (and one of their backups) more than any other team I've covered.

Yes, I probably need to talk you down a bit. Please remember that "everyone's back and they know every single play call" does not mean "we're going to have a top-10 defense!" Every season comes with a unique set of challenges, and we haven't seen this team on the field yet. Once we do, we'll know if they're ready to face all of those challenges or if, I don't know, all the losses on the defensive line couldn't be replicated in 2025 and so when it started to fall apart up front we couldn't figure out a linebacker rotation that made sense when the offensive linemen were ripping through the defensive line. Nothing is guaranteed.

But as far as pieces? This defense has every piece to be great. If the defensive line has been transfer portaled and developed in the right way so that there's no drop off up front, watch out. Because the back seven can run this defense with their eyes closed.

(Please don't play with your eyes closed, boys. Thanks.)



## Special Teams

The short section! This is always a fun one for me because it's so easy to write. There's not much to cover, so I can do it from memory and just crank it out. And I can do the longsnapper capitalization thing that maybe four people remember exactly why I do it.

The other sections feel like lots of weight on the bar; this section feels like, "wow, maybe I'm getting stronger because this is much easier," when it's just less weight on the bar. So, let's get right to it.

### Kicker

Stop me if you've heard this before. The starter from last year did a great job and we already know everything we need to know about kicker. Moving on!

### Punter

Just kidding.

### Kicker

David Olano was 17-for-20 last season. When you're 17-for-20, the only issue for future depth charts is whether or not you're going to live up to the "hit 85% of your field goals" bar that you set for yourself. He missed three field goals: one was blocked and the other two were from beyond 50. So, technically, he made every field goal inside of 50 if we assume that the 44-yarder against Michigan was going in if it hadn't been blocked (and we can assume that because he made every other kick inside of 50).

He made pressure kicks (38-yarder to send the Purdue game to overtime). He made windy kicks. He really only had one blemish: 1-for-3 from beyond 50. So, I guess that's what he

needs to work on? I don't know. 17-for-20 is just about ideal. I'd take it in a heartbeat if you proposed that for this season.

So, the only question at kicker is whether Olano handles kickoffs or if North Carolina transfer Lucas Osada handles kickoffs. Last year's kickoff specialist (and 59-yard-field-goal maker against Central Michigan) Ethan Moczulski transferred to Washington when he saw no chance to ever pass Olano. So, I'm guessing Bielema's staff will do what they've done in the past: let the backup kicker handle kickoffs so that the starting kicker doesn't pull something trying to hammer the ball into the wind.

See how easy this section is? Let's keep it rolling.

### **Punter**

We have a new Aussie. And next year we'll have another new Aussie. Actually, that just made me realize something. Our last three punters have been Blake Hayes and then Hugh Robertson and now Keelan Crimmins, a transfer from Purdue. Three Australian punters in a row. Aussie! Aussie! Aussie!

Oi! Oi! Oi!

(I don't know what it means but I've heard it a bunch of times and my one subscriber in Australia enjoyed the hell out of that Oi! Oi! Oi!)

Somebody predict what I'm going to say next. Maybe three of you will get it. I just mentioned Australian punters. What do I say next?

The pinnacle of my interviewing career was the "rise up lights" thing.

There's this thing where if you ask someone to say "rise up lights" it sounds like they're saying "razor blades" with an Australian accent. Go ahead, say it out loud. Rise up lights.

Knowing this, the first time I interviewed Australian punter Blake Hayes, I asked him to speak in an American accent. And he did pretty good. It was a bit southern, but I feel like so many people go there if they're trying to talk with an American accent. THEN I asked Blake Hayes to say "rise up lights" with that American accent to see if he sounded Australian.

I asked an Australian to fake an American accent and then asked him to say something with that accent that made him sound Australian. I'm a genius.

ANYWAY, our new Australian punter is Keelan Crimmins. He only has one year of eligibility (he already punted at Purdue and Mississippi State), but the staff hopes that he can be the best punter in the Big Ten. He was honorable mention all-conference last year, so they're looking for him to maybe be first team All-Big Ten this year.

His backup is another transfer: Lars Rau from Texas State. I think this will just be how it goes from here on out. I'm sure backup punters aren't doing massive rev share and NIL numbers, but I'm also sure whatever share he's getting is much larger at Illinois than Texas State. We've already dipped back into the Australian pool for a punting commit next season, and Rau will compete with him, but I'm nearly certain that when power conference teams are looking for a second punter from now on, they'll just grab a starting punter from (name any G5 conference). This is the new world.

Look at that! Kicker and Punter already done. And Longsnapper is incredibly easy.

### **Longsnapper**

It's Jake Hansen's brother, Lane, just like it was last year. Go check out my audio interview with Him last week on the site. His dad is now in his 10th year of attending every game. And most weekends he flies to the Illini game for Saturday, then flies to wherever the Texans are playing on Sunday to watch Jake play and then flies back to Tampa. I love that so much.

Hansen has been the starting 'snapper the last two years and He has one year left. So – broken record alert – we have no question marks here. I'm sure He just wants one more fake punt so He can tell everyone He was on SportsCenter as the lead blocker on a play.

His backup will be Patrick Mahoney III. I don't really have anything to say about Patrick Mahoney III besides the fact that He has one more year as the backup before He gets His turn.

Done!

### **Punt Return**

You realize how ridiculous this is, right? Every freaking position I just keep saying, “yeah, same guy as last year.” We have a new punter, and we covered some new stuff with the defensive line and with tight ends, but everything else is just “same... same... same... same...”

Punt return? SAME. Hank Beatty was fourth nationally last year. Time to be first nationally this year. He jumpstarted so many drives last year, and I expect many teams to kick away from him this year. And when they kick away from him, it's a shorter kick and we get better field position. Win-win.

I'm not sure who his backup will be – probably Mac Resetich? – but we know that Beatty will be the starter. There's a chance he's the best punt returner in the country this year.

I guess there is one thing I can mention here. Bret Bielema mentioned it in a press conference this August. How crazy is it that Beatty didn't win the job in camp last year?

Resetich won the job in camp. They wanted to get the ball in his hands with all that speed. But he bobbled one and fumbled one against Kansas (and thankfully fell on it in the end zone) and that gave Beatty the job. Which he then used to become one of the top punt returners in the country.

### **Kick Return**

Look, ma, a position for Friday where I have no clue! There will be 12 positions like this next year at this time, but for now – again, this is something Bielema talked about in press conferences – kick returner was maybe the most wide-open competition at camp. They started with “could be anyone” and whittled it down.

And we don’t really know who it will be. The coaches told the media who they thought it would be in 2022, but then from the first game on it was walk-on Peyton Vining (who they didn’t even mention during camp). So, for the first kickoff return in the game on Friday night, I’m gonna be STARING at the sideline to see who runs out. It’s the only “who is the starter?” fun I get to have.

My guess? Ca’Lil Valentine or Brayden Trimble. I’ll talk about the second and then I’ll talk about the first.

Because of the depth at wide receiver, I could see them saying, “we need to get the ball in Trimble’s hands as a true freshman so let’s give him kickoff returns.” Lots to learn before he makes the receiver rotation; “let it bounce through the end zone or return it” is all he’d need to learn at returner. So, I’d love to see it be him.

But I really could see it being Ca’Lil Valentine. If he’s the third running back, this would be a great way to get the ball in his hands. Even if there are only maybe 15 returns every year since every kickoff is a touchback.

The dark horse? Resetich. Fast. Get him the ball.

That’s it! We’ve covered it. Fast section! Let’s finish this thing out.



## Relevance

A simple question:

In the last 100 years, how many times, after Illinois has won eight or more games in a season, have the Illini followed that up with a winning season? I'm saying "100 years" here because I don't want to get lost in the 1902 teams that were playing high schools and YMCAs. It's just a simple question. It obviously happened in 1923 and 1924 because we just bathed ourselves in that history last October. Illinois and Michigan shared the national title in 1923, they met on the field to settle it in 1924, and Red ran all over them.

So, since then, in the last 100 seasons, how many times has it happened? Take a guess.

Would you believe ... only four times?

Here's the full history since it happened in 1923 (8-0) and 1924 (6-1-1). The other times it happened:

1946: 8-2

1947: 5-3-1

1963: 8-1-1

1964: 6-3

1983: 10-2

1984: 7-4

1989: 10-2

1990: 8-4

And here's the times it failed to happen. Eight-plus wins and then no winning season the next year:

1951: 9-0-1

1952: 4-5

1990: 8-4

1991: 6-6

1999: 8-4

2000: 5-6

2001: 10-2

2002: 5-7

2007: 9-4

2008: 5-7

2022: 8-5

2023: 5-7

Of the ten times we've won eight or more games in a season in the last 100 years, we failed to have a winning season the following year six times. We pulled it off four times: the Dike Eddleman teams, the Dick Butkus teams, the '83 Rose Bowl team and the '89 Citrus Bowl team.

Is that some kind of warning? Absolutely not. Am I saying we're cursed to go 5-7 this fall? No. Am I saying that college football is an impossible mountain to climb? Yes.

I just want everyone to understand the degree of difficulty here. The over/under in Las Vegas for this season is 7.5 wins for the Illini. If you're a fan who has been saying "the Illini will win 9, possibly 10, and maybe even 11 games" all summer then by all means go bet one billion dollars in Vegas because 7.5 wins should be the easiest bar to clear in betting history.

I mean...

The over/under for No. 8 Alabama: 9.5

The over/under for No. 9 LSU: 8.5

The over/under for No. 10 Miami: 9.5

The over/under for No. 11 Arizona State: 8.5

The over/under for No. 12 Illinois: 7.5

Hell, even No. 14 Michigan and No. 19 Indiana are set at 8.5. So, if you fully believe in us as the No. 12 team – as even just an 8-4 team – go bet on us and make millions.

I doubt you'll do that, though. I certainly wouldn't advise you to. Listen to what you'd be saying. I'll lay it out for you:

Illinois just won 10 games for the fourth time in my lifetime (I'm 52). And now you'd want us to win at least eight games (to cover the bet) for the *eighth* time in my lifetime. Ten-plus wins has happened in 7.7% of the Illini football seasons since I was born. Eight-plus wins has happened in only 15.4% of the Illini football seasons since I was born. 84.6% of the Illini football seasons during my lifetime have ended with seven or fewer wins. And you're wanting to bet on the 7.7% thing and the 15.4% thing happening in back-to-back years?

Yes, I'm aware of the 33,000 words I just wrote and the "if any team can do it, this team can do it" theme. I'm headed somewhere here. Stay with me.

I've talked to so many people this summer who have suggested that 8-4 would be a disappointment. And, given that we're No. 12 preseason and we have the second-easiest schedule in the Big Ten (at least when looking at the Big Ten with the preseason expectations for each team), they're probably "correct." Chances to go to the playoff don't come around very often, and this is our chance. We have the coach. We have the seniors. It's time.

But it is absolutely impossible for me to think that way. Not humanly possible. I spent the last 30 years conditioning myself with "if someday we can win seven games every year, I'll never ask God for anything else" and I think I'd have to go through electroshock therapy to change that about myself.

I don't know about you, but I put in the *time* here, people. Let's just go back through the last 15 years. My haters will say "he's making it about himself," but as I said above, stay with me here. I'm going to land the plane.

I've been to every home game but three in the last 16 seasons. And since I moved here in 2020, I've also been to every road game but two. I know there are many fans who have attended every single home game, and I know there are staffers and media members and parents who have attended all of the road games (Jake and Lane Hansen's dad has attended every game, home and away, for ten seasons now and he lives in Tampa). I'm not trying to win a "who has been there the most" contest.

I AM trying to say that I go to nearly every game, home and away, and I live and die while I'm there. LIVE and DIE. I record From The Stands after every game and you can tell if I'm in LIVE mode or DIE mode.

At a random road game, the rest of the media will be calmly sitting there typing on their laptops and chatting about the game and I'm DYING inside. Sweating, heart racing, getting up to pace if the game is close. When the Michigan pick play wasn't called in 2022, I melted

into a puddle. When John Paddock hit Isaiah Williams at Minnesota for the game winning touchdown (and I couldn't make a sound because I was in the press box), I nearly imploded. LIVING and DYING.

I'm telling you this because I believe my perspective is unique. Because you pay me to go there and tell you what I saw, I intentionally embed my emotions into the process as best I can. And that means that when I'm writing a season preview, I'm uploading what those emotions have reported back. Given that specific experience – there are bigger fans than me, there are better observers than me, but given the path I've walked and all of the living and dying at home and on the road – I can tell you this.

I have all I've ever wanted.

I have it. It's over. In that sense, honestly, I kind of don't care if we go 10-2 or 7-5. You can't spend decades living your life as one big "if you give me this, God, I'll never ask for anything ever again" and then ask for something else.

Look at this moment atop the fire truck after the Michigan game. This is just a fuzzy screengrab from a video, but look at this moment atop Engine 77:



The payoff found in that moment – the *redemption* – is something I can barely put into words. Only Illini fans can understand it. The decades of fan despair. The acceptance we all reached that it might not ever happen. And then, 100 years after Red beat defending national champion Michigan, we beat defending national champion Michigan again.

I mean, you heard my despair when you re-read parts of The 19 Point Plan, right? When writing all of that, I hadn't even endured the 2010s yet. Go listen to one of the From The Stands recordings after we'd lose to Iowa *again* and I'd record FTS while standing with the Iowa fans as they celebrated with their team in the corner of our stadium *again*. I said on those recordings that I felt like I had to do that if I wanted to fully appreciate what it would be like if we ever escaped our status as one of the five worst college football programs in the country. I had these articles in mind, even back then. Intentional torture just so I'd have the purest perspective if it ever happened.

That's what was released into the air in that moment atop the fire truck. The six of us who bought it, all of us alums of the greatest university on planet earth, engaged in an I-L-L, I-N-I chant with the crowd that gathered as we lit the I while the sky glowed an approving shade of orange in the background. If that's not the mountaintop then I don't even understand how to climb.

Look, I understand the "win a championship!" side of sports. I know that some Michigan fan would read these words, share them with everyone they know, and laugh at how pathetic I am. They live in a TITLES world, they would do anything to attain it (have you heard?), and in the end, their 2023 trophy is permanent and our 2024 victory on Oct. 19, 2024 is just ink in the media guide.

But they don't know this feeling. They can't appreciate what it's like to have your fan endurance tested for 30 years. They have zero idea what it's like to look up from the valley at the peak in the distance, tell your friends "go on without me – there's just no way I can make that climb," and then share a beer with those friends from the peak. Sure, Michigan took a helicopter to a higher peak (it's called cheating) and got the photo for social media that they wanted, but they don't know the purity of the climb.

We all, at one point or another, made a decision. That decision was, essentially, "I know it will never happen, but I'm still in." We accepted that we would probably never have a football program, but we still pointed our car to Champaign on fall Saturdays. When you're coming from that mindset and then, out of nowhere, you find your team ranked No. 12 preseason, you can't believe your luck. You gave up hoping for it years ago and then someone granted your wish.

I just cannot be granted that wish and then engage in "would 8-4 be a massive disappointment?" conversations. I fully understand the logic behind "you only get a few

chances like this in your lifetime” and all of that, but my brain isn’t there. And I’m not even trying to make the “I said I’d be happy with 7-5 for five years, so I MUST be happy if we go 7-5” point here. I’m just saying that I have it now. I got my wish. I wanted to be relevant and we’re relevant. Incredibly relevant. No. 12 relevant.

I don’t know if that means multiple playoffs in our future or if it means another 30-year struggle in the valley. But I kind of don’t care. Once you know you can push the boulder to the top of the hill, do you really fear the valley anymore?

THAT’S why this is the most anticipated season of my lifetime. That’s my answer. I fully understand the degree of difficulty here because I’ve lived it. “We’ve only followed up a 10-win season with a winning season four times” is not a warning, it’s my entire reality. No one understands “Illinois doesn’t have the kind of history that suggests multiple 10-win seasons are possible” more than this Illini fan. You’re not going to scare me with your “watch Illinois pull an Illinois and fall all the way to 6-6” and you’re not going to trap me with your “10 wins is not only possible, it’s probable.”

The great question of my fandom lifetime has been answered. This will be the first time since I moved into my dorm room in 1991 that I can approach an Illini football season without “will it ever happen?” keeping me up at night. I wanted a program, I begged the heavens for a program, and we have a program.

Do you know how much I’m looking forward to watching Illini football without that devil on my shoulder? Do you know how freeing it is to talk about the next steps to make this program better instead of the things we need to do to prevent a freefall? After a spring and early summer of panic about how to approach this season (mostly because we’ve never been here), it finally became crystal clear in my mind. The program that I’ve always wanted is here. And that relevance provides comfort, not pressure. It’s now “how far can this go?” not “what if this is another failed attempt?”

The University of Illinois Fighting Illini will take the field as the No. 12 team in the country on Friday night. We will be more than 40-point favorites. There’s a chance – it’s not probable, but there’s a chance – that we play Ohio State as a 6-0 football team ranked something like No. 4 in the country. What was once a distant dream is now actually possible. 10-3 and 18 starters back from the bowl game makes everything, including the freaking *playoff*, possible. The buzz when you enter Memorial Stadium for these seven home games will be more palpable than any single season in the last 35 years.

Breathe it in. Soak it up. Light the I.

See you there.