



2025-26 IlliniBoard Basketball Preview



The Merrymen

By: Robert

I have a lot of Illini conversations. At tailgates. In group texts. In line at the grocery store. The guy at Niemann's last week told me, "You're probably sick of talking about this stuff" and I told him what I tell everyone: I never, ever get sick of it.

That means I'm asked a lot about upcoming seasons. This summer, before this football season, it was, "Are we really going to be top-25 good?" This fall, before basketball season, it's, "What will we see from this team?"

I have no idea. I've always had an idea, but honestly, this time, I have no idea.

The metrics I've always used are no longer reliable. I've kept this list of RSCI top-100 recruits since 1998 and I've always previewed the season by noting how many are on the roster and how far they are in their development. Having top-50 players reach their third season has always been the key for us. When we fell to only two RSCI top-100 players in the early 2010s, we knew that we didn't have the talent to keep up. When Underwood landed Ayo and Kofi and got them to their junior seasons, we knew we'd have something special. For 25 years, we could project future rosters just using lists of top-100 players.

Now? Well, now, two things:

1. Nobody really evaluates high school basketball players anymore. At least, not in the way that rankings used to be compiled. They don't get anywhere close to naming the 100 most impactful newcomers in college basketball anymore.
2. Adding players from the portal (or adding international players) in April and May is now probably three times more important than high school recruits you sign in November. Quick – without looking, name the three high school players who will sign with Illinois next Wednesday. You can't.

This dynamic is exaggerated at Illinois, of course. The only team that rivals us in terms of international players is probably Virginia. (And maybe Gonzaga?) But the “spring portal is pretty much all that matters” thing is true across all of college basketball. Basically, it’s a feeder system now. The best player at Toledo transfers up to a high major. The best player at Gardner-Webb then transfers to Toledo. And Gardner-Webb will then grab a player from a D-II program who is probably ready for D-I. And so on.

You know all of this. I can stop talking about this. Let’s get to the “how do we talk about this team?” part.

When people ask, “What do you expect from this basketball team?” I’m basically left with the argument I hated in 2007: “I trust this coach to figure it out.” I’m a Merryman. An explanation of *that*:

When things started to fall apart for Bruce Weber between 2006 and 2008 – Sherron Collins and Julian Wright picked Kansas, Jon Scheyer picked Duke, and the *pièce de résistance*, Eric Gordon flipping from Illinois to Indiana – there was a very loud section of the fanbase who were in denial. The run from 2000 to 2006 for Illini basketball is probably unmatched in Illini history (three home losses in six years), and so it was really hard for everyone to admit that it was all slipping away.

There grew a subset of fans who were very vocal in supporting Bruce Weber. This is before social media, so their volume was heard on message boards (like the message board version of IlliniBoard). On the IB, at the time, we dubbed them The Merryman. Everything, and I mean everything, was met with, “well, I trust Bruce Weber to figure it out.” And I can remember the first time I heard it.

The 2005 recruiting class consisted of three players, none of them top-100 players. Weber added Chester Frazier, Jamar Smith, and CJ Jackson. Top target Julian Wright picked Kansas and our class ended up not being anywhere near the top 25. On the court, we were the #1 team in the country. In the AAU gyms, we weren’t landing any of our targets.

Many started to question Weber’s recruiting ability. Especially after adding CJ Jackson, a player who might have gone to a low-major school if not for the Illini offer. And that’s when The Merryman made their first appearance.

One of them found a box score from a high school game. CJ Jackson’s high school had been matched up with Auburn recruit (and 5-star) Korvotney Barber’s high school down in Georgia. And Jackson had more points and rebounds than Barber in that game. Well, that settled it. CJ Jackson is obviously better than 5-star Korvotney Barber.

If questioned – if anyone said, “Well then why doesn’t a single evaluator have him in their top-100?” – the answer was, “Bruce Weber has us #1 in the polls right now. Are you going to question him?”

That continued for years. Perhaps up to five years. Even when we were 16-19 in 2008 (just three years after the title game), The Merryman were still pointing every criticism to, “Are YOU gonna question Bruce Almighty, the coach who had us in the title game? Do you think you can evaluate talent better than him? If he thinks Stan Simpson is the future, then I trust that Stan Simpson is the future.”

(Stan Simpson was not, in fact, the future.)

Eventually, The Merryman relented. Honestly, many of them held on until we lost 12 of our final 14 games in 2012 and then they had to finally admit that it was failing. But the whole ordeal, for our fanbase, led to the words “I just trust the coach” being put on the No-Fly List. Bruce Weber won exactly two NCAA Tournament games at Illinois after 2005 (a first-round win over Air Force in 2006 and a first-round win over UNLV in 2011). From the title game to two NCAA wins in seven years. But still, “if he wants this recruit, I want this recruit” persisted.

What am I saying in 2025? If Brad Underwood thinks Mihailo Petrovic and David Mirkovic are the future, then I trust him.

I mean, that’s all we can do, right? You can pull up Twitter and see some evaluator say, “David Mirkovic is a really good prospect,” but we could find evaluators saying that Matic Vesel and Greg Eboigbodin were really good prospects. There’s no “seven evaluators watched 50 AAU games in July and they all agree that Dee Brown is a top-20 player” anymore. There’s just ... a few stats from European leagues that might or might not translate to college basketball.

So, when Ken Pomeroy or Bart Torvik are trying to assemble preseason NERDstats, it has to be an impossible task now. When it was just high school recruits being added, they had formulas where they’d project points for those players based on high school ranking. And then they’d add in returning production and age of roster and history of the coach and presto, preseason ratings.

Now? Now I’m guessing that they’ve leaned heavily into “history of the coach.” As I’ve written many times over the last few years, there’s this new class of basketball programs who have figured it out in the portal/NIL era. Your Tennessees and your Iowa States and your Texas Techs and your BYUs and your Alabamas. Yes, and your Illinoises.

Just like it’s important that forward-facing metrics account for “this is a Nick Saban team, and we should expect a certain quality,” the basketball metrics must do the same. And I’m

certain Underwood gets high marks. If he found Jakucionis and Riley, there's probably some trust there that the projected numbers assigned to Petrovic and Mirkovic can be fairly high. Add it all together and presto, Illinois is #6 on KenPom preseason and #8 on Torvik.

Which brings me back to those fans in line at the grocery store asking me what I think about the basketball team this winter. They don't really know if the Balkan recruits are great or just OK, so they're asking me. And my answer is the same one that would have made me cringe back in 2007: I simply trust this coach.

I published a 20-minute interview (the audio of the interview) with Director of Player Personnel Neel Ganta last month. If you missed it, just search for "Chattin' Analytics" in the search bar on the front page of IlliniBoard. Most of my questions were based on how Neel views the game of basketball in 2025, but we did cover a lot of how he scouts players. And there are specific skillsets they're looking for in those stats (be it high school or Europe). He was hired to look through the stats and find those players.

Which just moves me more in the "I trust this coach" direction, right? We've seen it work (we're tied with Purdue for the most Big Ten wins in the 2020s), so we just can trust that it will continue to work, right? Gone are the days of "Bill Self landed Julian Wright and Sherron Collins so Kansas will be good and Illinois will be bad" and now we have to rely on ... which teams have shown that they can find the specific players they need to make their schemes work.

Yes, it makes me uncomfortable to land on "I just trust this coach." I promised myself I'd never do it again. I fell for "I just trust this coach" in the late 2000s when I didn't want to admit that Weber was failing. But after this run...

1-seed – 4-seed – 9-seed – 3-seed – 6-seed

...in the last five years, I can trust that this coach will keep it up. And if he thinks these five Balkans are the path to filling out the empty "2-seed" slot above, then I trust him.

I should note – there are other reasons to be excited. Kylan Boswell returns for his senior season and should make that "junior leap" I always used to talk about (he enrolled at Arizona a year early, so he's the age of a college junior). Tomislav Ivisic also returns and has the potential to have an All-Big Ten season. This is not all just, "I hope Underwood found some gems in Tomi's brother and Peja's son."

But the majority of the hype is built on trust – not just with the transfers and the European players, but the freshmen, too. We're trusting that these freshmen are something despite not being in the RSCI top 100.

That recruiting class I referenced earlier from 2005? The one with Jamar Smith and CJ Jackson? It didn't have a single top-100 player in the class. After Lon Kruger had brought in the Frankies and the Cooks and after Bill Self had brought in the Dees and the Derons, Bruce Weber was bringing in players ranked well outside the top 100.

It's the single biggest reason we went from, "even though the unbeaten streak is over and the Illini finish 15-1 in the Big Ten after this loss at Ohio State, the Illini will remain #1 in the polls and the top overall seed in the NCAA Tournament" on March 6, 2005 to, "the Illini will welcome Minnesota to town on Saturday for Senior Day, hoping for their 13th win against 18 losses in a season that was over months ago" exactly three years later. The recruiting rankings told us that the recruiting had dried up and the talent was gone. And The Merryman were there on IlliniBoard to tell us to ignore the rankings because "if Bruce Weber wants Richard Semrau and Rodney Alexander on the roster, so do I."

The 2025 recruiting class? If Brad Underwood wants Brandon Lee and Keaton Wagler on the roster, so do I. If he thinks a recruiting class of those two plus David Mirkovic and Mihailo Petrovic is the way to build on last year's 6-seed team, so do I. None of them are ranked in the top 100. The 247 Composite rankings have Brandon Lee #123, David Mirkovic #138, Mihailo Petrovic #182, and Keaton Wagler #260, but if Underwood wants them here, I want them here.

See what I mean? I'm a Merryman again. 1-4-9-3-6 has turned me into a Merryman. I just ... trust that these are the players we need. What was the very sign that Weber was killing a once-proud program (couldn't land any top-100 players) is now brushed away with, "Underwood knows what he's doing." What I promised I'd never do, I'm doing.

(I should note that Weber did start to turn the corner with recruiting. After the recruiting drought from 2004 through 2007, the 2008, 2009, and 2010 classes had enough talent to get us back. But it was all too far gone at that point.)

So, the best I can do in those Illini conversations is just point to the head coach. He obviously saw something in Tomislav Ivisic so I'm going to trust that he sees something in his brother. He obviously knew that Kylan Boswell would be a great fit transferring back home from Arizona so now I'll trust him that Andrej Stojakovic is the right fit to transfer here from Cal. He found Jakucionis in a professional league in Europe so now I'll trust that he found something in Petrovic in a professional league in Europe. He's gonna compare Keaton Wagler, an unranked player, to Will Riley, our highest rated recruit since Dee? OK, let's not get TOO crazy.

My point: this is all built on trust. This is not, "nearly the entire roster returns," nor is it, "these highly ranked freshmen complement what is already a talented roster." This is, very

simply, “I trust this coach to assemble (and coach) a roster that can fight for a protected seed.”

Call me a Merryman. The good kind, this time.



The Schemes

By: Tyler

It's become an annual tradition: me griping about writing the "schemes" section of our season preview with no real certainty about what Brad Underwood's team will actually look like once the games begin.

In recent years, this has been the hardest part to write – or more precisely, the hardest part to write *accurately*. Underwood has regularly modified his schemes on the fly (I mean, he changed his entire defense after just ONE GAME in Kofi Cockburn's first season), and last year's roster with ten new players made any projection feel like guesswork.

This year feels a little different, though. I've got stuff to work with...

I've got a bunch of Underwood video clips from preseason media appearances outlining his thoughts on the upcoming season.

I've got 23 minutes of gold from Robert's preseason interview with Director of Player Personnel Neel Ganta, explaining how Illinois uses analytics to tailor schemes to roster strengths.

I've got full scrimmage film from the exhibition against Illinois State (albeit with three key players missing).

I've got a new assistant coach, Camryn Crocker, poached from Colgate to serve as "Defensive Coordinator."

And most importantly, I've got continuity and returning production – roughly 45% of last year's minutes.

So, let's get to it.

The Defense

As I noted in my write up of the ISU scrimmage, last year's defense wasn't awful (40th in KenPom defensive efficiency nationally and fourth in the Big Ten). Our drop coverage against ball screens allowed for fairly effective rim protection (at least when Tomi was on the floor), usually forced teams into poor two-point field goal shooting, and was once again quite good at limiting three-point looks (and makes).

As the season progressed, though, the defense had become predictable and rather easy to scout. Teams were picking us apart on the regular in February and March, culminating with Kentucky scoring on 14 of 18 possessions through a second-half stretch in our NCAA Tournament loss.

The irony is that the defense fell victim to the very shots it invited – the mid-range paint jumper. It's still an inefficient shot compared to uncontested threes and layups, but because the drop coverage was often so very soft, those mid-range jumpers were usually lightly contested. In that loss to Kentucky, the Wildcats made eight mid-range jumpers – a third of their total two-point makes that night. I'm not sure the Illinois offense made that many all season.

Last year's defense was also passive to a fault. Of course, we all remember Brad Underwood's early defenses. Those teams forced a million turnovers, fouled all the time, and lost a lot of games. In Underwood's first season here, his defense forced turnovers at 23.2% rate, good for fourth highest in all of college basketball. Last season? The defensive turnover rate was a paltry 12.4%. 360th in the country. Only four spots removed from dead solid last. Talk about a pendulum swing.

Quite simply, the recent defenses have not been complementary to the pace Underwood wants to play on offense. Needing a new approach to strike a balance between his early defenses and more recent ones, he made a change.

This summer, he hired Camryn Crocker away from Colgate to serve as his new "Defensive Coordinator." Zach Hamer, who was responsible for the defense the last two seasons, was reassigned to a new role as "Director of Player Development."

By Underwood's own words, he gave Crocker "a long leash" with which to update the defensive unit, and that influence was immediately visible in the ISU exhibition: more aggressive ball-screen coverage, a few zone possessions, and even a full-court trap.

Underwood is not likely to stray too far from his base scheme but forcing a few more turnovers a game will allow his offense more possessions. Additionally, some of the other new wrinkles give him more options to consider when he needs to steal a possession or two in close games.

One major issue with those early Underwood defenses was that if they didn't force a turnover, they would likely give up a dunk instead. This season, though, the luxury of size on the back end lends itself to a more aggressive approach on the perimeter. Even if the first line of defense breaks down, there will still be rim protectors waiting. This team should also once again be strong on the defensive glass, as Underwood simply wouldn't abide otherwise.

I should also mention Kylan Boswell here, because it was impossible for Brad Underwood not to do so when talking about this year's defense. Underwood went out of his way on several occasions to praise Boswell's prowess as an on-the-ball defender. This makes me believe that he is going to allow Kylan some freedom to go turnover hunting on the perimeter.

It's going to take some time to hardwire some of these new concepts simply because many of the key rotation guys on the roster have not had a lot of practice time together so far (Petrovic's late arrival in summer, Stojakovic's knee injury, Tomi with illness issues again), but I'm looking forward to seeing how this defense evolves when at full strength.

The Offense

While the Illini defense muddled along last season, the offense once again thrived. As a follow-up to the Terrence Shannon, Jr. and Marcus Domask-led Elite Eight team that finished as the third-best offense in college basketball (per KenPom), last year's offense finished 14th in KenPom offensive efficiency.

This despite a full roster retool in the offseason, inconsistent – OK, bad – three-point shooting, a high turnover rate, and a litany of injuries and illnesses throughout the year.

Let's just call it what it is: Brad Underwood is a really good offensive basketball coach. Some of that must also run in the family, as his son Tyler has served as his offensive coordinator for the past two seasons.

The Underwoods have smartly realized that in a sport full of guys who want to get to the NBA, maybe the best way to run an offense is to model it after what the NBA does. That involves using size, versatility, and NBA-style spacing to hunt mismatches, create pressure at the rim, and generate the most efficient scoring opportunities available – namely, free throws, layups/dunks, and open threes.

How do you get a layup or get to the foul line? You create action at the rim. How do you create action at the rim? You keep the lane open. How do you keep the lane open? By spreading the floor. What does spreading the floor also allow? Open threes.

This offense wants to find that first mismatch and find it quickly, be it in transition, isolation or through ball screens and letting the possession flow from there. When the defense has to help – whether on the perimeter or in the post – rotations begin and good shots appear. It all sounds easy enough, but it's near impossible to create those mismatches when only three or four of your guys on the floor can shoot or score the ball. Personnel matters.

- You need multiple ball handlers who are effective in ball screens: Kylan Boswell, Mihailo Petrovic, Keaton Wagler. Check.
- You need a rotation of versatile bigs who are comfortable on the block or shooting from the perimeter: Tomi Ivisic, Zvonimir Ivisic, David Mirkovic, Ben Humrichous. Check. In fact, this might well be the best-shooting frontcourt in all of college basketball.
- You need a wing who is comfortable both in ball screens and in the paint, and who can score all three levels – a booty ball guy, if you will. Andrej Stojakovic. Check.
- You need frontcourt playmakers who are comfortable in space with the ball: Tomi Ivisic and David Mirkovic. Check.
- You need positional size all over the floor to crash the offensive glass and generate additional shot opportunities. Check.

And maybe most importantly, the roster has offensive “connectors” to keep the offense flowing. This is why retention is so important – having veterans like Boswell and Tomi Ivisic who understand when to pass, cut, or screen to turn a potential advantage into a realized one is paramount. Keep an eye on Mirkovic as well, as his versatility also fits the connector role perfectly.

Underwood also wants to play even faster than they did last year, which is crazy considering last season was the fastest team (per KenPom adjusted tempo) of his entire coaching career. We already touched on his desire to tweak the defense to better dictate tempo, but he's also encouraging his bigs to help push the pace. Following the ISU game, in response to a question about David Mirkovic bringing the ball up the floor, he explained: "Pace is huge for us ... we work really hard on not outletting the ball after we rebound."

In other words? Grab it and go. Don't waste precious seconds of a possession standing around looking for an outlet pass recipient. This was a Terrence Shannon, Jr. (or Nick Anderson from my day) specialty. Mirkovic might not attack the rim with the same angry intentions as TJ and Nick often did, but the point stands – anyone can start the break, and Underwood wants this team to run. Buckle up.

One last note on the offense. As wannabe-coach George so eloquently noted in the movie Hoosiers, "You can't score if you don't shoot!" Last year's offense certainly took those words at face value, putting up a school record 1,054 three-point shot attempts.

In retrospect, the more accurate maxim from old George should have been, "You can't score if you don't make shots!" We only made 330 of those 1,054 attempts for an icy 31% on the season. We were even brick-ier in Big Ten conference games, shooting just 30%, worst in the league.

Underwood kept telling everyone it was a good-shooting team, but it just never materialized. He insists this group will be better, with one caveat – they have to seek better shots. There were far too many early, contested threes taken last season. He's made shot selection a point of emphasis in practice.

None of the 28 threes we took against ISU seemed particularly egregious to me at the time, so here's hoping that bodes well for the future.



Fantasy Draft

By: Robert & Tyler

Last year, this section was Tyler & I writing out our rankings of the players from #1 to #13. You might remember that a certain someone who is one of the 17 Illini fans who cares more about football than basketball ranked Tomislav Ivisic ninth on his rankings. NINTH.

(In my defense, it was written before Tomi was cleared and since his brother didn't get his clearance at Kentucky until January, I was keeping Tomi low on my list because he might miss the first half of the season.)

The same week we were writing that section last year, Will Leitch offered to restart his Illini Power Rankings column on IlliniBoard, which was essentially the same thing (ranking the players 1-13). Will has already written his first Power Rankings on the site, so Tyler and I decided to do this differently this year. We'd draft two teams and then follow their stats all season. A two-man Illini basketball fantasy league.

Points for that? I had no idea how to do points for that. Tyler did (because he's not one of the seventeen Illini fans who cares more about Illini football than basketball) and he sent me this outline:

A league I was in before was set up like this ...

1 point scored = 1 FPs

1 rebound = 1.5 FPs

1 assist = 2 FPs

1 steal = .5 FPs

1 block = .5 FPs

1 turnover = -1 FPs

(Can I be completely honest with everyone right now? I have no idea what “FPs” means. Fantasy Points? It has to be fantasy points. At this point, I’m scared to ask Tyler so I’m just running with it. An assist gets you 2 Fantasy Points.)

We did this one as a back-and-forth. I decided that we should do a snake draft (someone gets pick #1, then the next guy gets picks 2 and 3, and so on), but then, when I had someone on Slack draw a random number and it gave me the first pick, I immediately hated having the first pick because it meant Tyler would get #2 and #3 and that might hand him the season-long contest right there.

You know what? We discuss that in some of back-and-forth emails. So, let’s just get right to it. Email #1, from me to Tyler, choosing my first pick, right here:

Here's the thing. I really wanted the second pick. Because that meant I'd have the second and third pick. I feel like – maybe you don't feel like this, but I feel like this – I feel like there will be three main scorers this fall. And a snake draft means that you'll get two of them.

Perhaps I'm overthinking that. There are points for rebounds and assists, so as I'm typing this out (literally as I'm typing these words) I'm rethinking about rethinking my pick. If rebounds are worth 1.5 and assists are worth 2, then maybe the picks aren't as obvious as I thought?

I'm getting that feeling again from back when I played fantasy football (over 20 years ago at this point). During each draft I was That Guy who picked stars and not fantasy stars. I'd pick Jerome Bettis, and everyone would snicker and then someone else would take Chargers rookie LaDanian Tomlinson and I'd be all “who?” and then he'd get 23 carries AND eight catches every game and I'd say “ohhhhhh I get it now.”

So maybe I need to think about this some more before I make my first pick. And maybe I should do that thinking out loud for all to see:

I'm torn between Tomi and Kylan. There's a chance that Stojakovic is the leading scorer and Tomi is the leading rebounder and Petrovic is the leading assist man but I still kind of want to take Kylan? Especially since we get points for steals. Tomi seems like the smartest choice (points + rebounds + some blocks and even a fair number of assists). Actually, let me look up assists last year. Kylan 3.4 per game, Tomi 2.3 per game. So that makes Tomi the obvious first pick, right?

But I still think I want Kylan? I still think he takes the biggest leap. We have a bunch of experienced bigs but only younger guards (the freshmen + Petrovic) so I feel like we're

going to lean heavily on our senior guard this winter. Which means I'm anticipating that his points, rebounds, and assists all go up.

I'm gonna make my pick before I talk myself back into Tomi. With the first pick, I take...

Kylan Boswell

A funny thing happened on the way to our draft – I totally misread your text about the draft order.

Over the past 24 hours since we decided we were going to leave the Power Rankings to Mr. Leitch and do our little 1-v-1 season long fantasy duel, I was under the impression that I had the first pick. As such, I was having the same internal “Tomi or Kylan” struggle with which you grappled.

I had also talked myself into Kylan last night, for many of the same reasons you described. I'm hoping (expecting?) a second-year leap for Kylan in the same vein as what we saw from Terrence Shannon, Jr. in year two. Mind you, I'm not expecting an All-American, jersey-in-the-rafters type season from Boswell, but I think his numbers will definitely bump up, both from a usage and an efficiency standpoint.

All that to say when I got your text a few hours ago that you were ready to kick this off, I changed my mind back to Tomi. I literally said out loud to myself, “Don't overthink this.”

Tomi is likely going to be our leading scorer and rebounder and he's going to tally his fair share of assists and blocks as well. Plus, he's likely to have fewer turnovers than a primary ballhandler such as Boswell – although I should note that his TO rate last season was around 15% (a little loose for a center) while Kylan's was only 18%.

So, at the end of it all, we both end up with the guy we wanted as our first pick. You got Kylan and I officially draft **Tomi Ivisic** with the second pick.

On to pick number three. Again, I'm not going to over think this one – my pick is **Andrej Stojakovic**. The Mirkovic thing is tempting, but Stojakovic was brought in to play 30 minutes a night and score a bunch points for this team, so he's my guy here.

My one apprehension is his health. The time frame of his knee injury has been nagging at my physical therapist (retired but still licensed!) brain for some time now. The injury was first reported in early September, so he's been working through this for seven weeks at the very least, and per Brad Underwood he only very recently was cleared to return to “basketball activities.”

So, whatever the injury, it was severe enough to completely shelve him for a full month-plus. That is, in a word, concerning. I was relieved to see him going through what looked like a pretty rigorous workout prior to the Illinois State scrimmage on Sunday, so it appears his return is imminent. Still, it might be a while before he gets back to full “game level” conditioning, which will obviously limit his production. But we’re playing the long game here and he’s the right pick.

Back to you...

I feel like the entire outcome of this little contest will hinge on these picks. To me, it felt like Kylan, Tomi, and Andrej were the obvious top three (at least points-wise) and I knew you would get two of them. But I don't think #4 or #5 are as clear, so I have a real decision here. I'm hoisting a shot at the buzzer down one. If it falls, I win; if it doesn't, I lose.

I've honestly considered five players for these two spots. Let me just go through that real quick. A bunch of “because honestly...” statements. I could draft:

~Mihailo Petrovic because honestly, he's a grown man playing college basketball. “Get old, stay old?” How about “start old?”

~Zvonimir Ivisic because honestly, he's entering his third year of college basketball and perhaps ready to fulfill his massive potential.

~David Mirkovic because honestly, how could I not after seeing what he did in the exhibition game against Illinois State?

~Keaton Wagler because honestly, Brad Underwood did say that he sees him in the same one-and-done category as Riley and Jakucionis.

~Ben Humrichous because honestly, “second year after transferring” has become a very real thing. If Boswell leaps, will Ben also leap?

I think I'm going to eliminate Wagler just based on the “Calvin Brock is the next great Illini guard” rule. As you know (but our readers might not), during the 2005 season, there were practice reports that Calvin Brock was “next” (he was redshirting that year). That Illinois wouldn't miss a beat after Luther Head graduated because Calvin Brock would immediately fill that role. That ... didn't happen. And I've never trusted offseason practice reports since. Brock never lived up to it and Alex Legion never lived up to it and Leron Black never lived up to it.

The only data we have on Wagler: 9 points and 2 rebounds (and 5 fouls) in the exhibition game. I feel like it will be late in the first half of the Texas Tech game, Wagler will miss a defensive assignment (he's just a freshman), he'll head to the bench only to play three more minutes in the second half, and we'll all remember that sometimes 18-year-olds don't play

as much at first due to defensive issues. (In this case, perhaps reaching and fouling too much?) I'm excited that Underwood is excited, and he looked super smooth out there, but still ... 18 years old.

I think I'll also take Humrichous off my list. He averaged 7.6 ppg and 3.8 rpg last season, and while that might go up this season, I'm not sure I can take him with the 4th or 5th pick. Especially since we went out and added guys like Big Z and Mirkovic. I think I know where I'm going, so I think I should just make my picks right now before I talk myself out of them.

With the fourth pick I'm taking **Mihailo Petrovic** and with the fifth pick I'm taking **David Mirkovic**. Petrovic because he's 22 and has already been called up to play for the Serbian national team (at the senior level). And Mirkovic because his Illinois State performance was just that good.

I mean, as I'm typing these out, both picks feel obvious to me right now. Petrovic averaged 7.3 assists per game last season in the ABA (Adriatic League, a fairly high-level league) so that would get me a lot of points here since assists are worth 2. And Mirkovic's 19, 14, and 6 (six assists!) basically forces me to take him. At first, I thought, "Well, Tomi and Andrej didn't play in the exhibition," but then I shook that thought away. *Nineteen, fourteen, and six.*

So, that's my final answer. Team Robert so far: Boswell, Petrovic, and Mirkovic. I'm happy.

Yep, using the snake format, this draft was always going to come down to picks four through seven. Although now it occurs to me that maybe the snake format wasn't ideal for a draft between two guys with an effective talent pool of just nine to ten players. Or maybe I'm just bitter that you were able to grab Mirkovic, as I strongly considered him over Stojakovic at pick three. I mean you already established during the ISU exhibition that Mirk was "YOUR GUY," so it was clear he would be one of your two picks.

Let's revisionist history this here. Had I picked Mirkovic at three, you would have gone with Stojakovic and Uncle Miho (I'm making this a thing simply because it amuses me). So, in this alternate universe I have Tomi and Mirk while you have Kylan, Andrej, and Uncle Miho. So, it basically comes down to a Stojakovic vs. Mirkovic season-long stat line. We weighted rebounds and assists heavier than regular points and Stojakovic's rebound and assist rates last season were rather tepid, so I might already be second-guessing the pick.

In any case, I need more rebounds and more assists on my team, which I think makes my next picks rather straightforward. My roster is missing a true playmaker, so my next guy has to be **Keaton Wagler**. It seems pretty clear that he's going to get minutes as a ball handler for this team – at least early on – so here's hoping those minutes remain consistent

throughout the season, both for me and for the long-term success of this team. Don't slow the hype, Keaton!

So, now it's either Ben Humrichous or Big Z, and this pick comes down to consistency versus production. I feel like Ben will earn steady minutes again this season because Underwood trusts him on the floor, and that's no small thing. By contrast, Big Z's minutes figure to be less consistent because it is a crowded front court and because his game leans rather mercurial, which does not lend itself towards earning that trust factor with Underwood.

That said, Z's production has the potential to be much more efficient even with fewer minutes. If we look at our fantasy point scoring legend and apply it to last season:

Humrichous (26 mpg): 229 points/134 rebs/31 asst/23 blks/16 stls/17 TOs = 531.5 FPs

Z. Ivisic (19 mpg): 299 points/151 rebs/28 asst/66 blks/23 stls/49(!!) TOs = 576.5 FPs

First off, those turnover numbers for Z – yikes! I mentioned Underwood and trust above, and 49 turnovers from a frontcourt guy in just 19 minutes per game is exactly what I'm talking about.

But still, the raw numbers are undeniable, and I also don't feel like Ben is a 26-minutes-per-game guy this season. So, despite the obvious volatility factor (there will be nights were Z gets 30 FPs and nights were he gets 4), my pick in round seven is **Zvonimir Ivisic**.

So, it's back to you – and it while it seems your next two picks would be pretty straightforward, there is one wild card sitting out there which allows for some late round intrigue.

OK, so I'm obviously taking **Ben Humrichous** with pick #8. I listed five guys in contention for picks 4 and 5, four of them are off the board, so give me Ben. I really like that I've landed both "second-year-after-transfer" players. Who knows? Maybe Ben becomes the Ben that everyone was hoping for last season.

Pick #9 seems pretty straightforward (to me), but your "there's one wild card sitting out there" comment has me curious. This is where I speculate that you meant, "when does Ty Rodgers return?" when you said the word "intrigue" and then I come to find out that you meant Jake Davis or something. You meant Rodgers, right?

I mean, Ty would have been selected by now if not for the injury. And we don't know if the injury keeps him out until December, February, or April. So that has to be what you meant.

This is the common fantasy sports conundrum of, “When you do draft the pitcher who is slated to return in July?”

For me ... I think I'm going to let him fall to you. Drafting a guy who ends up 11th in Fantasy Points but plays a full season is better than drafting a guy who ends up sixth but only plays 12 games, right? That's how I'm looking at this. Of course, I might draft a guy who goes to the bench when Ty returns, so ... yeah, I guess this is tougher than I thought.

You know what? I have to go with my gut. When you win this little contest, we can look back and say, “Robert, you were WAY too influenced by what happened in that Illinois State scrimmage when Ty, Tomi, and Andrej didn't play,” but give me Brandon Lee's 17 points on 5-5 from the field and 6-8 from the line with the 9th pick. He's obviously going to do that every game, right? This will almost certainly be Trent Frazier/Mark Smith Part II where everyone is talking about Wagler the first half of the season but then Lee is the guy the second half of the season, right? I'm sure this will be the case.

So yes, final answer. I'll take **Brandon Lee** with the 9th pick. And just a little word of advice for your 10th and 11th picks: My Aunt's Mailman's Brother's Accountant said that Ty Rodgers won't return until February 31st so just go ahead and leave him there for me at #12 because my Aunt's Mailman's Brother's Accountant is never wrong.

So yeah, I was talking about Ty, but I will get to him in a second.

My 10th pick is **Jake Davis**. He's the only possible pick here. I'm not all that confident in projecting how much time there is available for him this year, but 8-10 minutes a game feels about right again (he averaged just over 9 mpg last season). I mean, injuries are inevitable, and he'll likely be the one of the first guys off the bench in garbage time. And to be fair, when Jake was on the floor, he was productive. His scoring and rebounding numbers extrapolate to 13 and 6 per 40 minutes, so yeah, shoot your shots, Jake. I'll take what I can get.

Now back to Ty Rodgers.

I confess to not knowing much about the specifics of his injury. I don't know what exact structure in the knee he injured, and I don't know the timeline of when it happened or when he underwent surgery. Based on the knee brace he was wearing, I can assume it was no minor arthroscopic repair. I do know he's now out of that post-surgical knee brace – and I witnessed his gait and movement patterns prior to the ISU exhibition. With all that context, my physical therapy brain can surmise that he is likely somewhere around the 16-18 week mark with his rehab. And that's about all I can estimate with any degree of confidence.

Depending on the injury/surgery, his return to sport could be anywhere from 6-12 months post-operatively. Obviously, a six-month clearance puts his return in the possible category, while a 12-month clearance puts it in the impossible category. Fantasy points aside, I just want him available to come back soon because, man, he deserves to.

All that said, he's good hedge pick at this point because anything I would get from him – even in just one or two months of availability – would likely be more production than I would get from our 12th man. So, my 11th and final pick (and the last person added to Team Tyler) is **Ty Rodgers**.

(Now of course, watch this little contest come down to the 15 points and 20 rebounds that Jason Jakstys collects in his garbage-time minutes over the course of the season.)

Right, but what if I take AJ Redd or Blake Fagbemi with the final pick? I know that Jakstys is the most likely 12th guy, but what if? WHAT IF BLAKE FAGBEMI IS KEVIN TURNER 2.0?? I mean, he was the point guard who led Benet Academy to a state title. When we need PG help this winter, maybe he's the guy?

(Also, why is it pronounced “Bennett”? My whole life I read it and thought it was buh-NAY Academy. If we're gonna make fun of Missouri for pronouncing Versailles “ver-SAILS,” then we can't have a Benet Academy pronounced “Bennett” in Illinois.)

I'm stalling. I'm taking **Jason Jakstys**. He might only get Omar Payne minutes this year, but that's still enough for me to take him with the 12th pick. We're going to have bigs in foul trouble this winter, and when we have two bigs in foul trouble, we could see Jakstys even though he's just a redshirt freshman. So that's my pick.

Let's recap the two teams:

Team Robert

Kylan Boswell

Mihailo Petrovic

David Mirkovic

Ben Humrichous

Brandon Lee

Jason Jakstys

Team Tyler

Tomislav Ivisic

Andrej Stojakovic

Keaton Wagler

Zvonimir Ivisic

Jake Davis

Ty Rodgers

I already like Team Tyler more. Let's just move on to the next section because ... I already like Team Tyler more.



New World Order

By: Robert

I mentioned above that there's a "New World Order" in college basketball. And when I wrote those words, I knew I had another 1,000 words on the subject bouncing around in my brain. Let's get those words out of my brain.

We'll start with wins this decade. Here's a list of high-major programs (the top five conferences) and their win totals since the 2020 season:

1. Houston - 183 wins
2. Duke - 159
3. Kansas - 155
4. Arizona - 150
5. Purdue - 150
6. UConn - 149
7. Baylor - 148
8. Auburn - 146
9. Alabama - 145
10. Tennessee - 144
11. Creighton - 143
12. Illinois - 139
13. UCLA - 138
14. BYU - 136
15. Oregon - 135

North Carolina isn't on there. Kentucky isn't on there. Programs that were incredibly dominant in the 2010s like Villanova, Virginia, and Wisconsin aren't on there. Indiana and Michigan both only have 114 wins this decade. A historically dominant program like

Syracuse is 103-87 this decade. Butler went to back-to-back title games in the 2010s and they're 93-96 in the 2020s.

I first made this point when the final rankings came out in 2024 (after we had made the Elite Eight). The top 8 in that final poll:

1. UConn
2. Purdue
3. Houston
4. Alabama
5. Tennessee
6. Illinois
7. UNC
8. Iowa State

That's pretty much just a list of the teams that have figured out college basketball in the NIL/Transfer Portal world, right? UNC is the only true Blue Blood there. Kansas had started the year #1 and finished ranked 19th. I'm not sure if there's a clearer, "Uh, guys, college basketball is shifting" than the polls in 2024. Preseason top 5? Kansas, Duke, Purdue, Michigan State, Marquette. Final top 5? UConn, Purdue, Houston, Alabama, Tennessee (with Illinois #6).

I mean, just look at the title games in the years around that. In 2023, the title game is UConn and San Diego State. In 2025, the title game is Florida and Houston. The 2010s? Titles were going to Duke, North Carolina, Villanova, Kentucky, and Louisville. The 2020s? UConn is the only common thread while teams like Baylor and Florida are winning titles (and teams like Alabama and Tennessee somehow find themselves ranked #1 during those seasons).

My point: there's been a shift. We're clearly part of that shift. After only two NCAA appearances in the 2010s (and only one win), Illinois has been in the last five (should have been six) NCAA Tournaments. Keep quoting it over and over: 1-seed, 4-seed, 9-seed, 3-seed, 6-seed. Tied atop the Big Ten in conference wins this decade? Illinois and Purdue with 88 Big Ten wins. The three teams that dominated the 2010s in the Big Ten – Wisconsin, Michigan State, and Michigan – have 79, 76, and 67 Big Ten wins in the 2020s, respectively.

Look at every conference and you'll see a shift to teams that currently have NIL and the Transfer Portal figured out (Alabama and Tennessee in the SEC; Baylor, Texas Tech, and Iowa State in the Big 12, and so on). And do you want to know the common thread between many of them? They schedule each other in the non-conference.

It's like there was some big meeting at a secret country mansion in Colorado known as The Meadows where teams like North Carolina and Kentucky weren't invited. And at that meeting, it was decided that this New World Order would start playing each other in the non-conference. Purdue and Illinois were the two Big Ten representatives at the secret meeting, and that's how these non-conference schedules were born:

Purdue last year: Alabama, Marquette, Auburn, Texas A&M

Illinois last year: Alabama, Tennessee, Duke, Arkansas

Purdue this year: Alabama, Iowa State, Marquette, Auburn

Illinois this year: Alabama, Texas Tech, UConn, Tennessee

I see it as this "other" club. Michigan State still has that "Champions Classic" thing. This year, on Nov. 18, Michigan State will play Kentucky and Kansas will play Duke in the next installment of the Champions Classic. MSU also has Duke and North Carolina on the schedule this year in their never-ending pursuit of being mentioned alongside them.

But then here's Illinois and Alabama and Purdue and Tennessee and UConn and Texas Tech all over here scheduling each other. UConn is the only school there that has earned Blue Blood status, but UConn is scheduling Illinois, Florida, and BYU instead of North Carolina and Kentucky. And North Carolina? They picked their main four "challenge ourselves" non-conference opponents out of the 2008 phone book: Ohio State, Kansas, Kentucky, and Michigan State.

Do you see what I'm saying? I'm not saying we're ignoring the "name" teams. We played Duke in Madison Square Garden last year. I'm just connecting dots. Illinois plays Tennessee and Tennessee plays Houston and Houston plays Auburn and Auburn plays Purdue. And Illinois plays Alabama and Alabama plays Purdue and Purdue plays Iowa State and Iowa State plays Creighton. So many of the teams on that list up there – the 15 teams with the most wins in the 2020s – are scheduling each other. All while Michigan State and Kentucky continue their Champions Classic.

I find it interesting. I'd personally love to be invited to The Meadows. I want to know if they exclusively say, "Nobody schedule Izzo" or if that's a coincidence. Yeah, you're right. Izzo is probably still enamored with Kansas and North Carolina.

I'm joking about that, but there's definitely a "wonder who else is rolling right now – let's schedule each other" kind of thing going on. Ohio State has all this money but their "tough games" in the non-conference are North Carolina, Notre Dame, and Pitt. I'm guessing they'd want to get an invite to The Meadows, but they haven't proven themselves worthy yet. With the way Dusty May has attacked the portal, Michigan clearly wants in, but their

best non-conference opponent is KenPom #30 San Diego State. They're not invited to the Tennessee-Alabama-UConn club yet, apparently.

I know this next section is Tyler's look at the schedule. I'm certain he'll talk about some of this stuff. He told me he was going to focus on how it seems like our goal is to play teams 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 and then teams 361, 362, 363, 364, and 365. So, I should probably shut up and let him write about the schedule. But I wanted to point out the New World Order first.

I'm so glad we're part of it.



Schedule Superlatives

By: Tyler

After the Illinois-Illinois State exhibition game a couple of weeks ago, ISU head coach (and former Illinois assistant) Ryan Pedon was asked a question that allowed him to expand on the challenges that mid-major schools have when putting together a schedule.

For the mid-majors who live in the purgatory of 100-200 in the NET rankings, getting into the NCAA Tournament each year is like that old job-seeking conundrum.

“To get a job, I need experience, but the only way I can get experience is to find a job.”

In essence, the only way mid-majors can boost their tournament resume is by beefing up their non-conference strength of schedule, but the best way for power conference schools to optimize their tournament resume is by avoiding the scheduling of mid-majors.

The irony of him saying those words inside the arena of a power conference school who follows that exact scheduling philosophy was not lost on me.

Brad Underwood has fully leaned into that “no middle ground” philosophy of scheduling opponents. The majority of the heavy lifting on the Illinois schedule will always come from the 20 Quad 1 and Quad 2 games that the Big Ten conference slate provides every season. To fill in the other gaps, he just needs a few marquee Quad 1 matchups and a handful of Quad 4 games to juice the scoring-margin metrics. Last season was the perfect example of said philosophy: Outside of the conference, Illinois had five Quad 1 games, six Quad 4 games, and exactly zero Quad 2 and Quad 3 games.

“All or nothing” is how I categorized last season’s non-league slate of games, and this season looks like more of the same:

“ALL” (Q1) games: Texas Tech (#12 in KenPom); Alabama (#23); UConn (#5); Tennessee (#9), and MIZNOZ (#28)

“NOTHING” (Q4 – at home against teams over #160) games: Jackson State (#252); FGCU (#184); Colgate (#205); Long Island (#287); UTRGV (#247); and Southern (#165)

It’s possible that the FGCU and/or the Southern games could eventually squeak into Q3 status, but the takeaway remains the same – no middle ground. Sorry, Ryan Pedon.

Take another look at that Quad 1 lineup though – I mean, that’s a gauntlet. Last season’s non-conference lineup (Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, Missouri, and Duke) ended up with a season-ending NET average of 13.1. This year, the preseason average ranking of those teams (using KenPom since NET is not a thing until December) is 15.4 – and that’s without the #1 ranked team in the metrics on the schedule, as Duke was last season.

It should be noted that the “NOTHING” part of the schedule looks like it will offer at least a little more resistance than in previous years. There are no 300-level teams to be found (we played #358 and #362 last year) and the average KenPom ranking of the six teams comes in at a somewhat respectable 223 (compared to 275 last year).

The Big Ten schedule breaks down as follows:

Home and Away opponents: Northwestern, Nebraska; Maryland (ugh)

Only opponents: Ohio State; Michigan State; Penn State (in Philly); Iowa; Purdue; and the West Coast trip this season is at UCLA and USC

Home-only opponents: Rutgers, Minnesota; Wisconsin; Indiana; Michigan; Washington; Oregon

That leans less than favorable from my view. Over half of our home games are against teams ranked in the bottom half of the conference preseason media poll, while we only get three of the top half at the State Farm Center: #2 (Michigan); #5 (Oregon); and #7 (Wisconsin). Meanwhile, we play five of the top half on the road: #1 (Purdue); #3 (UCLA); #6 (Michigan State); #8 (Iowa); #9 (OSU).

Also, I did this here last year (poorly in retrospect), so once again I present my stream of consciousness (done in 60 seconds) Big Ten picks:

1. Purdue
2. Oregon
3. Illinois
4. UCLA
5. Michigan
6. Ohio State
7. Wisconsin
8. Michigan State
9. Indiana
10. Iowa
11. Nebraska
12. Washington
13. USC
14. Northwestern
15. Maryland
16. Minnesota
17. Penn State
18. Rutgers

So now let's get to the fun part...

SCHEDULE SUPERLATIVES!!

+Best game on the schedule

November 28 – vs. UConn at Madison Square Garden in NYC. Seriously, New York must be Brad Underwood's favorite place on the planet, as this will be Illinois' fourth trip to MSG in as many years. This game offers the chance to wipe the ledger clean on a couple of levels. Illinois can erase the memory of last year's disaster at the Garden against Duke and also ease a tiny bit of the 30-0 pain that still lingers against everyone's favorite college hoops villain, Danny Hurley. Here's hoping that the Illini roster is at full strength by then so we can get a proper measure of this team's mettle.

+Worst game on the schedule

November 24 – Home vs. UT-Rio Grande Valley. This is a necessary pre-Thanksgiving tune-up for the UConn matchup, but a game against #247 in KenPom on a Monday with the students home for the holidays? Snooze fest.

+Best game that used to always be the Best game:

November 20 vs. Alabama at the UNITED CENTER IN CHICAGO! I can't believe it's been seven years since Illinois played a game at the UC. What used to be an absolute "circle the date on the calendar" event had fully lost its luster (only 5,000 fans showed up for the most recent game against Ohio State in 2018), and the decision to pull the plug on the game was the absolute right call. But that season marked the end of the dark ages for the program, and with the arrow of the Illinois program now fully tilted skyward, the time was right for a revival. The game is on a Wednesday which might mute the attendance somewhat, but I'm excited to see if the program has fully recaptured the attention of its Chicago-area fanbase. Oh, and the game should be a blast as well.

+Best game against a team featuring a former Illini

February 27 – Home vs. Michigan. The Airing of Grievances. Illini fans absolutely loved Morez Johnson with every fiber of their collective being. The kid who committed to the program as a high school sophomore and then lived up to every single expectation as a freshman. He was destined to be the face and the foundation of the program moving forward – until he wasn't. You all know the story and the rather contentious aftermath, so I won't belabor that here. That said, I'm sure you all can guess the reception Johnson will receive that night from the Orange Krush et al. Oh, and it also just happens to be a matchup of two conference heavyweights.

+Best road trip

February 18-21 – @USC and @UCLA. Nashville in early December should be a nice consolation prize for Illini football fans who previously had visions of a Big Ten Championship game appearance that weekend, but no doubt the best trip on the schedule is a sunny escape to Southern California during the dead of the Illinois winter. Besides, every college hoops fan should visit Pauley Pavilion at least once. The building itself is rather underwhelming, but you cannot deny its history or significance to the sport. Hit the beach, hike to the Hollywood sign, have an In-N-Out Burger, and watch some hoops. Can I tag along, Robert?

+The annual "When I learn everything I need to know about this team" game

January 21: Home vs. Maryland. First off, this team needs to get the Turtle off their back. Underwood is 3-9 against Maryland over his Illini tenure, including just 1-5 at the State Farm Center! The Terps had some difficulty rebuilding their roster this summer after Kevin Willard bolted for Villanova, and they were picked just 13th in the conference preseason media poll. This Maryland thing has gone far enough, and I need to see it end. This game will also mark the end of six straight games against the expected bottom feeders of the conference, and if I'm to entertain any thoughts of this Illinois team as a serious contender

in the conference prior to the matchup against Purdue, then five wins in this stretch is the bare minimum.

+Best chance for a “statement” game in the Big Ten

January 24: @ Purdue. You have to beat the best to be the best. Purdue is the runaway favorite in the conference and a legit National Championship contender. I’m not expecting a win in Mackey here, but if this team wants to make a statement on a national scale, then they best show their stuff in this one.

MEGA-PUTER PREDICTIONS!

Let’s first check in on MEGA-PUTER’s performance from last season:

How It Started:

“OK then, MEGA-PUTER says 21-10 overall with 8-3 in the non-conference and 13-7 in the Big Ten. That’s probably in 4-5 seed territory again, but I could also see something in the 6-7 range as well because of early season struggles.”

How it Ended:

2024-25 Actuals: 20-11/12-8

NCAA Tournament Seed: 6

Only one game off on the records and a solid NCAA tourney projection. That’ll do, MEGA-PUTER. That’ll do.

Now, let’s dive right into this season. Hopefully by now you all know how this works. But for those of you who don’t, I’ve developed a proprietary prediction algorithm that I call: Walkon’s Holistic Analytical Thought Encompassing Variables for Essential Ranking, or **W.H.A.T.E.V.E.R.** for short. I tweak that algorithm each offseason through a painstaking research process that generates approximately 4 trillion unique data points relevant to this year’s team and then input that into the MEGA-PUTER to generate my season predictions.

It took longer than usual to get these projections up and running this year as MEGA-PUTER was up to her usual shenanigans. I entered the data multiple times but when asked for the record predictions she just kept spitting out “6-7” and cackling like a schoolgirl. She’s so amused with herself. I threatened to replace her with Clippy and that seemed to snap her back to attention.

But, wow, once we finally got down to business, she kind of put it out there this year:

Absolutes:

(H) Jackson State; (H) FGCU; (H) Colgate; (H) Long Island; (H) UTRGV; (H) Southern; (H) Rutgers; (H) Minnesota

8 games — predicted record: 8-0

Probablys:

(H) Nebraska; (H) Northwestern; (H) Washington; (H) Maryland; @Penn State; (H) Indiana; (H) Wisconsin

7 games — predicted record: 6-1

Toss Ups:

Alabama in Chicago; (H) Texas Tech; vs. MIZNOZ; @Northwestern; @Ohio State; @Iowa; @Maryland; @Nebraska; @USC; (H) Oregon; (H) Michigan

11 games — predicted record 8-3

Probably Nots:

Vs. UConn; @Tennessee; @Purdue; @UCLA; @Michigan State

5 games — predicted record 1-4

23-8 overall; 9-2 in the non-conference and 14-6 in the Big Ten. That's 3-seed territory assuming the schedule strength holds up as expected. She REALLY likes the offensive potential of this lineup and thinks the defense will eventually find its way. That said, the last time she went out on a limb like this (the 2022-23 season), it did not go well for her.

So, as we always say right here in the preview: Bring. It. On...



By The Numbers

By: Tyler

+14.8/-13.6

Our scoring margin averages in wins and losses against power conference teams last season. We all thought it would be a better team in March than it was in December, but the growing pains never subsided. By comparison, the 2023-24 team did not have a single double-digit loss until their last game of the season. I expect we'll see a much more even keel with this year's more veteran group.

45% - 41% - 40%

The respective returning percentages of minutes, scoring and rebounding from last season. By contrast, last season's returning production consisted solely of Dra Gibbs-Lawhorn. "Get old, stay old" is the philosophy Brad Underwood has often preached, but it's been a tough line to hold for him (for most programs, really) in the current free market era of college basketball. As the season rolls along, I expect Underwood will often remind us how nice it is to have veterans to lean on night in and night out.

47.2%

Our percentage of three-pointers taken relative to total shot attempts last season. Our 3-point shot rate was one of the highest in the country (top-30) and second highest among Big Ten teams behind only Wisconsin. I mentioned earlier our 31% accuracy on those threes, so it's fair to say the math wasn't mathing. I don't think we're going to shoot fewer threes this season, so it stands to reason that better shot selection will be key to help pair volume with accuracy. Speaking of which...

34%

The percentage of made three-pointers last season by Kylan Boswell which came off an assist. Fewer than even Kasparas Jakucionis! By comparison, 95% of Ben Humrichous' three-point makes were assisted. Sometimes a pull-up three on the break is a good shot, and a step back three can be the only option in late shot clock situations, but Boswell took far too many of both kinds. It's not hard to understand why a proven good shooter (38% from the arc in two seasons at Arizona) tanked to just 24% last season.

129

The number of three-point attempts taken by Andrej Stojakovic last season. Brad Underwood is on the record as saying that even though Stojakovic's usage won't be nearly as high as it was at Cal, he does expect that he will shoot more threes than he has in the past. Considering we had five separate players with more than 140 three-point attempts last year (Ivisic, Boswell, KJ, Will Riley, Humrichous), the "over" on 129 seems like a safe bet.

16.4

The average length (in seconds) of each offensive possession by our opponents last season. It seems like an arbitrary number, but it tells us a lot about our defense. First off, it's an extremely low number. Per KenPom, our average defensive possession length was the seventh shortest in all of college basketball. We've discussed our drop-coverage tendencies at length, and with that style we are actually inviting quick shots (the shots we want the defense to take, but the point stands). We typically don't extend possessions on defense by making it hard for teams to get shots off with pressure, or doubles, or aggressive ball defense. With the defense refresh we discussed earlier, I would look for this number to increase substantially this season. As for the offense...

71.5

Our adjusted tempo (possessions per 40 minutes) last season per KenPom. Seventeenth "fastest" in the country and the fastest Big Ten team by a mile. In fact, our tempo was quicker than every other power conference team save for Alabama. Crazy, right? Underwood mentioned "pace" about a million times this preseason, so it doesn't seem like he wants to slow things down any time soon. Zoom zoom.

7.1%

Our "Two-Foul Participation" percentage from last season. It's a KenPom stat and he defines it as "the percentage of time a starter with two fouls in the first half has been allowed to play." Underwood's percentage from last season ranked as the 31st-most "cautious" in college basketball. He's been ahead of the curve on a lot of metrics, but he's been slow to warm to the idea of playing guys with two fouls in the first half. I think there

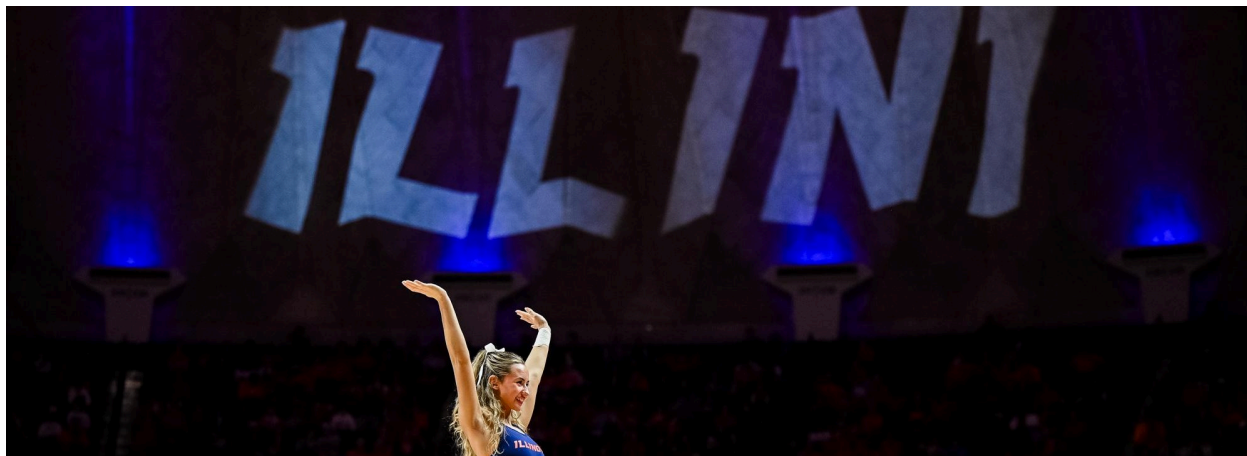
are merits to both sides of this conversation, but it's worth noting that defending National Champion Florida was one of the least-cautious teams in this regard last season.

82

The number of dunks we had as a team according to T-Rank, our lowest total since the Pre-Kofian era of 2020. A third of those dunks were courtesy of Morez Johnson. I think we got much better from last season, but I don't think we got more athletic. With the exception of maybe Big Z, I think this season promises to be a decidedly below-the-rim kind of experience. I'll set the over/under on dunks this season at 65 – and I'll take the under.

20

We're going to Eamus Catuli (Cubs fans will know) this thing for as long as I write this piece of the preview. It's now been 20 seasons since Illinois' last Final Four appearance.



Rasputin

By: Robert

I'd really love to know how the brain works sometimes. Never in a million years could you guess what song was bouncing around in my head when I rolled out of bed this morning. Well, you can probably guess because I just used it as the title. But GUESS ANYWAY.

The song in my head at 5:36 a.m. this morning? I'll just show you a screenshot of the last three songs I searched for on my phone. I'm currently listening to Mahler's 7th. Last night, while writing, I pulled up the soundtrack from "Spy Game" (as I've mentioned before, that's my "if I need to get something done" music). But between "Spy Game" and Mahler 7, I searched for...



Symphony No. 7 in E Minor: III....

Song · Berlin Philharmonic & Claudi...
From Your Library



Rasputin

Song · Boney M.



Spy Game (Original Motion Pict...

Album · Harry Gregson-Williams



*Rah-rah-ras-pooh-teen
Lover of the Russian queen
There was a cat that
Really was gone*

Yes, my brain served up the 1978 disco hit “Rasputin” this morning. What in the absolute hell? I’m sure it’s something like, “When I was watching that show on Netflix last week it was playing in the background and I didn’t realize it” or whatever. It can’t just be the hamster in my head spinning the wheel towards 1978 disco. But yes, “Rasputin” was the first choice from my head DJ this morning. From the album “The Essential Boney M.” *Essential*.

(I’ll be honest, though. That “hey hey hey hey” part in the bridge where you can just picture some Russian dancers doing the whole “squat and then kick” dance? It would be a BANGER in the State Farm Center. Maybe we can bring that over to Club Memorial Stadium, too.)

I have no idea where I’m going with this. I was kind of stuck on this section last night and Tyler told me to just start writing so that’s what I’m doing. I think I’ll try to tie in Rasputin and Illini basketball.

What do we know about Rasputin? There’s one thing that Rasputin brings to mind, of course. He wouldn’t die. Every reference to “he just would not die” is always Rasputin. I bet there’s something on Reddit somewhere that summarizes all of the assassination attempts. I’ll go search for that and then cut and paste here. Nothing like boosting the word count with a cut-and-paste from something I didn’t write:

Grigory Rasputin survived 4 assassination attempts. He was poisoned with cyanide. When that failed, he was shot in the chest. An hour later he awoke, ran, and was shot in the back and head. He was then tied and dumped in a river only to be found the next day by the coroner to have asphyxiated.

It goes on:

After his dead body was thrown into the river a couple of people found him and took him out of the water. They went to go burn his body and because they didn’t cut the necessary tendons in the body, Rasputin sat up because of rigor mortis caused from the heat of the fire. It freaked the guys out so much, they thought he came back from the dead, and I believe they even shot the body multiple times.

My point to all of this is that [looks around the room, desperate for any tie-in] ILLINI BASKETBALL WILL BE HARD TO KILL IN 2025-26!

Nope, that’s not it.

The point I'm trying to make is that the song says, "it was a shame how he carried on," and that's a WILD way to minimize the crimes he was accused of.

What am I even talking about?

My point to all of this is that college football and basketball, as you knew them for decades, have been poisoned, shot, asphyxiated, and dumped in a river.

That will have to do.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately. They've mostly been football thoughts (duh, I'm me), and you expected at least one of the Robert sections to veer into football here, so let's veer into football. Don't worry, I'll make it back to basketball. And Rasputin.

For years, when discussing the upcoming season for the Illini (and all of college football), I have quoted Bill Connelly's "Returning Production" stats. It's "returning starters" on steroids. He's studied which positions have the biggest impact on next season if you have to replace those starters (it's easier, historically, to have new starters at tailback than it is to have new starters at receiver). And he puts out a list of Returning Production based on this formula. So often, for years, it has pointed to teams that might surprise.

This year, it still does that, but it's also pointing to teams that completely imploded. And implosion teams used to never be on this list.

Here's the list from August. The 15 college football teams with the most Returning Production:

TEAM	RET PROD	OFF (RK)	DEF (RK)
1. Clemson	80%	85% (1)	76% (6)
2. Arizona St.	79%	78% (6)	79% (2)
3. Vanderbilt	77%	78% (8)	77% (3)
4. Illinois	75%	78% (7)	72% (9)
5. Kennesaw St.	74%	67% (30)	82% (1)
6. Texas Tech	73%	70% (20)	76% (5)
7. Texas A&M	72%	70% (21)	75% (7)
8. Rutgers	71%	81% (3)	61% (39)
9. Baylor	71%	79% (5)	64% (24)
10. Oklahoma	70%	77% (9)	63% (32)
11. Wisconsin	67%	68% (26)	67% (16)
12. USF	67%	69% (23)	66% (19)
13. Boise St.	67%	75% (12)	59% (49)
14. Michigan St.	67%	71% (17)	63% (27)
15. Arizona	67%	72% (16)	62% (37)

Vandy? Texas Tech? Texas A&M? Yes, it nailed those. All three brought back a ton and all three might be playoff teams.

But across the top ten, there are teams that absolutely tanked. And that's been so shocking to watch. Clemson, famous for avoiding the portal and building from within, is now 3-5 despite having the highest Returning Production percentage in the country (from a playoff team last year). The three Big Ten teams below us (Rutgers, Wisconsin, and Michigan State)? Returning production hasn't helped at all.

In general, on that list, Vandy, Texas Tech, Texas A&M, Oklahoma, and USF took a leap. Arizona State and Illinois will both likely finish 9-3, so we'll call that a push. But Boise State and Clemson, two playoff teams last year, got significantly worse (Boise just lost to Fresno State 30-7). And Rutgers, Baylor, Wisconsin, and Michigan State have seen no improvement at all after bringing back a ton.

And it's made me wonder aloud if refreshing your roster from the portal is now ... just as important as bringing back starters? Are all of my "continuity is king" thoughts now dead? Doesn't Clemson prove that it's criminal to *not* portal?

Now, let's switch back to basketball. Is it maybe the same thing on the hardwood? As I said at the start of this preview, I used to have a formula I followed – recruit top-100 players (preferably top-50), get them to stick around until their junior seasons, and win big – and now, a.) I don't have accurate rankings to run those numbers, and b.) no one really ranks transfers and internationals accurately, so we're left to "I trust this coach." It's all about finding the right fit for what you're trying to do, and everyone is trying to find a coach who understands the players that *fit*.

I should also note: this section is also another intro to something Tyler is writing on his side of the preview. He told me how he was going to close out his thoughts, and my brain went off into a direction of, "I agree with that and here's the background to why I agree with that." I haven't read what he has written yet, so I might be OK, but I don't want to step on his toes.

I'll just close this section by saying this: I never expected the portal and NIL to change the sport this much. I never expected Kentucky and Kansas to be scrambling to figure out what Baylor and Alabama discovered. Never in a million years did I expect "get old, stay old" to be usurped by "we can get old and then keep getting old again every offseason and never have to worry about the 'stay old' part." My brain is wired in "get Brian Cook and Frankie Williams in the program, keep them around for at least three years, and then watch them dominate as upperclassmen," and so it's really hard to understand "just add Domask, Guerrier, and Harmon to Shannon and Hawkins and go to the Elite Eight."

Roster building, as we knew it, has been poisoned, shot, asphyxiated, and dumped in a river. And here's Tyler to tell you where Brad Underwood has driven this thing after leaving the funeral.

(At least I hope that's what he writes about.)

(Yeah, he'll come through.)

(Actually, I think his section is already in the folder. Let me go read it.)

(Yeah, he came through.)



Ahead Of The Curve

By: Tyler

Brad Underwood was hired as the 18th head coach in Illinois men's basketball history back in March 2017. But let's be honest – the *real* Underwood Era didn't start that spring. It started seven months and one day later – on October 19, 2017.

That was the night Ayo Dosunmu officially announced his commitment to play for Illinois. Ayo's decision gave Underwood his first five-star recruit, established him as a force on the recruiting trail, and restored the **ILLINOIS** brand nationally. I was on hand for that ceremony eight years ago, and man, I remember it like it was yesterday.

The momentum from that night paid dividends down the road with commitments from Kofi Cockburn, Andre Curbelo, and Coleman Hawkins in 2019. Just one year later, Underwood's first NCAA Tournament bid as Illinois coach – and the program's first since 2014 – awaited. It had taken just three seasons for Underwood to reawaken a program that had been asleep for the better part of a decade. WE WERE BACK.

Then the world got sick, and everything changed.

Underwood's Illinois tournament debut would come one year later, but in response to the COVID year, the college basketball rulebook was rewritten almost overnight. Coaches were now forced to navigate a college basketball landscape with dramatically altered eligibility and transfer rules. The NCAA waived the traditional "five-to-play-four" eligibility clock for athletes entering Division I between 2017 and 2020 and granted players a one-time transfer without the usual "sit-out" year. Something called "the Transfer Portal" soon became part of every college basketball fan's regular vernacular. Teams were now doing the heavy lifting of roster construction in April and May instead of October and November.

And then in the summer of 2021, another seismic change came. Three little words which redefined the NCAA: **Name. Image. Likeness (NIL)**.

Suddenly, college athletes could cash in on their own brands, and the sport became a free (for all) market. Players could transfer freely *and* get paid to do so. The NCAA, desperate to maintain some kind of order, greenlit NIL collectives which allowed schools to establish a pool of donor money earmarked to pay players directly.

Underwood and Josh Whitman were ahead of the curve in launching **ICON**, Illinois' official NIL collective. With a well-funded war chest, Underwood hit the ground running – bringing in impact transfers such as Terrence Shannon Jr., Marcus Domask, Matthew Mayer, Dain Dainja, and Quincy Guerrier while other traditional Big Ten powerhouses initially struggled to adapt.

It's easy to see how quickly Underwood adapted his philosophy on roster construction in the post-COVID era by looking at the percentage of total minutes played by transfers over the next four seasons:

- **2020–21:** 7% (Jacob Grandison)
- **2021–22:** 31% (Grandison, Alfonso Plummer, Omar Payne, Austin Hutcherson)
- **2022–23:** 38% (Terrence Shannon Jr., Matthew Mayer, Dain Dainja)
- **2023–24:** 58% (Shannon, Dainja, Marcus Domask, Quincy Guerrier, Justin Harmon)

In just three seasons, Illinois went from barely using transfers to fully relying on them – but we all certainly enjoyed the upside: three consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances culminating in our Elite Eight run in 2024.

So, while life was great for these veteran transfers, it wasn't nearly as good for traditional high school recruits and developmental players who were now blocked from meaningful minutes. There was a tax to be paid for this new approach, and that bill came due after the 2024 season.

The roster imploded on itself that offseason. Homegrown players –Hawkins, Luke Goode, Sencire Harris and Amani Hansberry – along with Dainja, all transferred out in search of more minutes and/or bigger NIL opportunities. With only Dra Gibbs-Lawhorn and Ty Rodgers returning, Underwood faced a full roster rebuild – but this time without the financial edge he once enjoyed, as the college basketball pecking order was gradually reestablishing itself in the NIL arms race.

So, Underwood angled himself ahead of the curve once again. This time around, the untapped market wasn't in the transfer portal. It was overseas. He went fishing in

international waters, reeling in Kasparas Jakucionis (Lithuania), Tomislav Ivišić (Croatia), and Will Riley (Canada).

The strategy flipped his roster composition overnight. Transfer minutes dropped from 58% to 44%, while those underclassmen (Morez Johnson included) accounted for 55% of total minutes played. Last season ended up being one defined by growing pains, injuries, and inconsistencies, but the talent on display was undeniable as both KJ and Riley developed into first-round NBA draft picks. First-round picks are gold for a program's visibility and credibility, and they promise to pay recruiting dividends for years to come.

This past offseason Underwood was able to reap the benefits of the stability of the program and build his roster by playing all of his greatest hits.

He continued to lean into the international recruiting strategy, bringing in Mihailo Petrovic (Serbia) and David Mirkovic (Montenegro), as well as Tomi Ivišić's brother, Zvonimir, as a transfer from Arkansas. All three figure into the primary mix this season. He "stayed old" by retaining key pieces – Tomi, Kylan Boswell, Ben Humrichous, and Jake Davis. Finally, he activated one of his previous cheat codes: spotting "diamond in the rough" type talent at the high-school level. Freshmen Keaton Wagler and Brandon Lee are both regular rotation candidates, with Wagler a potential starter.

Brad Underwood will tip off his ninth season (man, time flies) at Illinois tonight with his program now a fixture in the top 25 and a perennial contender for Big Ten Championships. Through it all, one thing has been constant – his ability to pivot and adapt to stay ahead of the curve in response to the always-evolving college basketball landscape.

In a sport where both the players and the rules of engagement change on the regular, it feels certain that he isn't yet done growing and adapting.