

# 2010 Big Ten football previews: Illinois (premium)

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After looking at [Minnesota](#) on Tuesday, we turn our attention to previewing the upcoming season for the Illinois Fighting Illini in our series of Big Ten season previews. Iowa does not play Illinois this season.

So here's the deal with Illinois. Head coach Ron Zook has pressure to win now. He may not say he feels the heat, but after only winning a total of eight games over the past two seasons, that Rose Bowl appearance in 2007 looks like a distant memory for Fighting Illini fans.

His coaching staff went through a significant overhaul, as Illinois now has new offensive and defensive coordinators entering this season. The offense will be guided by Paul Petrino, the brother of Arkansas head coach Bobby Petrino. In fact, Petrino comes to the Fighting Illini after being the Razorbacks' offensive coordinator in 2009, where he got to work with quarterback Ryan Mallett.

The defense will be led by Vic Koenning, who joins Zook's staff after being a co-defensive coordinator at Kansas State for Bill Snyder. Before that, he was Clemson's defensive coordinator for four years and a head coach at Wyoming.

Offensively, the Fighting Illini are planning to start a redshirt freshman at quarterback in 2010 with Nathan Scheelhaase, a Kansas City native who is listed at 6-3, 195 pounds. From all accounts I've seen, he has potential to be a solid quarterback for Illinois. I just don't see this happening right away.

Fortunately for Scheelhaase, he is going to have some experienced playmakers to get the ball to. The Fighting Illini have a 1-2 punch at running back that showed improvement as 2009 progressed in juniors Mikel Leshoure and Jason Ford.

Leshoure had 734 yards rushing on 108 carries last season for Illinois, with his best performance coming in its season finale against Fresno State. In that game, the 6-0 running back had 11 carries for 184 yards on the ground, and scored two of his five touchdowns from last season in a 53-52 loss.

As for Ford, he had 588 yards rushing on 97 carries for four touchdowns last season. However, three of those scores came in the Fighting Illini's final five contests, including a 38-13 win over Michigan where Ford had a 79-yard touchdown run.

While the ground game is going for the Fighting Illini, it's the receiving corps providing intrigue. The biggest story here is with former quarterback Eddie McGee converting to receiver during the middle of last season. He had four receptions in 2009, but looks to be a major contributor as one of Illinois' wideouts after having the entire offseason to work on route running and establishing a rapport with Scheelhaase.

The Fighting Illini's leading also return senior Jarred Fayson, who had 16 catches for 218 yards, and junior A.J. Jenkins, who had 10 receptions for 123 yards during the 2009 season.

Defensively, there are a couple of upper-classmen Illinois will be heavily depending on to lead the way. Up front is defensive end Clay Nurse, who had 31 tackles and 5.5 sacks for the Fighting Illini last season. In the linebacking corps, Illinois returns Martez Wilson, who had nine tackles against Missouri before suffering a herniated disc in his neck, costing him the remainder of the 2009 season.

Looking at the Fighting Illini's 2010 schedule, it does them no favors whatsoever. Its non-conference slate might be one of

the most challenging in the Big Ten, opening with Missouri for the fourth straight year in St. Louis, followed by home games against FCS power Southern Illinois and Northern Illinois out of the MAC. Illinois will once again end the season playing Fresno State in December, but this time, the Fighting Illini will be traveling to Fresno, Calif., as opposed to the Bulldogs visiting Champaign, Ill., again.

As if the difficult out-of-conference portion wasn't enough for Illinois, the eight straight weeks of games against Big Ten foes isn't easier. While the Fighting Illini do dodge both Iowa and Wisconsin for the second straight season, its first three games in conference play are at home against Ohio State, followed by consecutive road trips to Penn State and Michigan State, all of whom beat Illinois in 2009.

Illinois will also get a good opportunity to showcase its program on Nov. 20, when the Fighting Illini play Northwestern. Instead of the game being played at Ryan Field in Evanston, Ill., Northwestern agreed to move its home game with Illinois to Wrigley Field in Chicago, home of the Cubs and former home of the Bears.

All this said, I'm not sure this is the type of season that is going to lead to success for the Fighting Illini. There are some talented players in place, as Zook has shown with his recruiting. But considering how that even took a dive in the past year, and with the changes in place along the coaching staff, one has to think time is slowly running out on Zook in Champaign.

[Illinois WR Eddie McGee](#)