

2014 Big Ten football previews: Illinois (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

To this point, we have discussed [Penn State](#), [Rutgers](#), [Michigan](#), [Ohio State](#), [Michigan State](#), [Indiana](#), [Maryland](#) and [Purdue](#). Our next preview looks at the upcoming season for the Illinois Fighting Illini. Iowa and Illinois will finally meet for the first time since 2008 when the Hawkeyes visit Memorial Stadium in Champaign, Ill., on Nov. 15.

As Illinois embarks on its 2014 season, it's a program that seems stable on the inside, yet is anything but on the outside. Tim Beckman enters his third season as the Fighting Illini's head coach and his current players have bought into what he's selling. Internally, there's no friction. Externally, fans and media alike are starting to wonder if Beckman is even suitable for the job.

Illinois showed improvement from 2012 to 2013 and the only way that trajectory continues this fall is if the Fighting Illini reach a bowl game, something they haven't done since Beckman's predecessor, Ron Zook, was in charge. Yet as brutal as Illinois' path appears to be, this team winning six games isn't really that far-fetched.

Part of what makes the Fighting Illini so intriguing this season is their quarterback situation. Sophomore signal-caller Wes Lunt appears poised to fill the void left by four-year starter Nathan Scheelhaase and the intrigue with Lunt is that this is his first season of eligibility after transferring from Oklahoma State after the 2012 season.

Lunt completed 81-of-131 pass attempts for 1,108 yards, six

touchdowns and seven interceptions while starting five games for the Cowboys. If he secures this job, he'd do so by beating out senior Reilly O'Toole, who made six appearances last season after starting two games in 2012.

Illinois' backfield features both of its top two rushers from a season ago. Junior Josh Ferguson led the Fighting Illini in rushing with 779 yards and seven touchdowns on 141 carries, while senior Donovan Young is coming off a year where he racked up 376 yards rushing and three touchdowns on 93 carries. Ferguson will remain the top back, but Illinois having this 1-2 punch should prove beneficial to Lunt.

The biggest question mark with this offense surrounds a receiving corps missing its top four players in catches and receiving yards from a season ago, a quartet that combined for 13 of Illinois' 23 touchdowns through the air. Among the voids that needed to be filled is that of Steve Hull, who had 993 yards receiving, 59 catches and seven touchdowns (all team-highs).

Statistically speaking, the top returning wideout is senior Martize Barr, who had 26 catches for 246 yards and one touchdown in 2013. One receiver the Fighting Illini are hoping has an immediate impact this fall is junior Geronimo Allison, who joins the program after transferring from Iowa Western Community College. Illinois also returns a pair of senior tight ends in Jon Davis and Matt LaCosse that combined for 45 catches, 445 receiving yards and five touchdowns last year.

Up front, the Fighting Illini return four starters with the one vacancy being at right tackle. Among the returnees are three seniors on the line's left side – tackle Simon Cvijanovic, guard Michael Heitz and center Alex Hill. Junior Ted Karras – the great nephew of former Iowa and Detroit Lion legend Alex Karras – returns at right guard, where he started 10 games for Illinois last year. Junior Patrick Flavin currently sits atop the depth chart at right tackle.

Defensively, the Fighting Illini should feel good about having eight starters back for its 4-2-5 scheme. Paving the way along the D-line is senior nose tackle Austin Teitsma, who recorded 53 tackles in 2013. Illinois also brings back junior defensive tackle Teko Powell. Controlling the two end spots this fall are senior DeJazz Woods and junior Kenny Nelson, who had two fumble recoveries last season.

The linebacking corps took a massive hit losing both Jonathan Brown and Houston Bates. Brown led the Fighting Illini with 119 tackles, while Bates had 40 tackles, including 12 for lost yardage. The two 'backers also combined for 8.5 sacks and were the top two players in that category. One player who is back is junior Mason Monheim, who finished third on the team with 97 tackles a year ago. Junior linebacker Mike Svetina is currently out with a foot injury, but is expected back by Big Ten play. Svetina is coming off a season where he recorded 57 tackles.

Illinois' secondary features a lot of experience and it's a group led by senior safety Earnest Thomas III, who had 101 tackles and a team-high seven pass break ups for the Fighting Illini in 2013. Senior Zane Petty returns at the other safety spot coming off a 75-tackle season. Junior cornerbacks Eaton Spence and V'Angelo Bentley also return. Spence started every game in 2013 and finished with 49 tackles and four pass break ups, while Bentley made nine starts and compiled 22 tackles, along with one of only three interceptions by the entire Fighting Illini defense. Another name to watch is sophomore Taylor Barton at safety.

On special teams, Bentley will likely handle return duties on both punts and kickoffs after returning one of each for touchdowns last year. Illinois also brings back senior punter Justin DuVernois after he averaged 41.1 yards per punt in 2013, as well as junior kicker Taylor Zalewski, who was 12-of-17 on field goal tries.

Looking at the schedule, it's a mixed bag for the Fighting Illini. While Illinois might not be favored in all seven of its home games, there isn't a single game at Memorial Stadium that won't be winnable. The two toughest challenges appear to be Iowa and Penn State, who both visit Champaign in November. Conversely, there may not be a more daunting road slate in the entire country. Illinois travels to Washington during non-conference play, then has to play Nebraska, Wisconsin, Ohio State and Northwestern all away from home. Winning any one of those games might be enough for bowl eligibility if the Fighting Illini can win the games they'll be expected to win at home.

The clock might be ticking on Beckman, but his program seems to be one heading in the right direction. How Lunt is able to transition at quarterback could make an enormous difference one way or the other because Illinois seems to have enough elsewhere that it can turn 4-8 last year into six wins or better in 2014.

AUDIO:

Illinois defensive tackle Austin Teitsma –

<http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Austin-Teitsma-2014-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>