

THE HEART AND SOUL OF THE ILLINI FOOTBALL TEAM

By Eli Rodibaugh



The Illinois football team is enjoying one of their best seasons since the 2008 Rose Bowl year. The Illini have their first winning season in over a decade, and are led by a bone-crushing defense and a talented offense. But who are the emotional leaders on this football team? The ones that have overcome challenges to be looked up to? The ones that keep the wrecking ball of Illinois destroying every opponent in its path? The answer: Team captain linebacker Tarique Barnes and difference maker wide receiver Isaiah Williams. Both have shredded challenges to become key players in Illinois' run. They've had to adjust, develop, and work tirelessly to get to this point. And now they're ready for more.

Tarique Barnes told me that when he came to Illinois, his recruiting class was expected to make a difference in the future. No wonder. Many of the recruits have become key players for Illinois this season, including Barnes himself. When asked about what it was like going from a role player on a powerhouse high school team to a special teams player on a struggling Illinois football program, he said that playing special teams helped him know the speed of the game and get accustomed to playing college football. As a team captain, he said he feels like he has a big brother type of role, making sure to talk to everyone and being in their ear on both good plays and bad ones. He tries to keep it light, trying not to make them get defensive. When asked what is the biggest reason for Illinois' success this season, Barnes said "We believe in each other. The relationships we've built in the building reflect on the field. I feel like we're closer than we have been in a long time." He credited his former high school linebacker coach, Charles Smith, for calling him after every Illinois game and going over his performance. When questioned about the Illini crowd vs. the away crowd, he said that you can turn opposing fans'

energy into your own. At home, you play with more swag, he declared. Tarique Barnes, a team-leader linebacker has come through to contribute highly for Illinois this season, and hopefully his hard work will pay off and he will soon be playing on Sundays.

Y'know how I said that Tarique Barnes' recruiting class was expected to make a difference? Yeah, well the second guy, nifty wideout Isaiah Williams was also in that class. As a quarterback. Now, this guy is one of the better up and coming receivers I've seen this season and he started out as a QB? What the heck! When he came in as a 4-star recruit from Missouri, he had absolutely no experience as a wide receiver, except for his high school all-star game. He played two years at quarterback before head coach Brett Bielema asked him to make the switch with two days of spring practice remaining last year. Since then, he has taken form as a high flying speedster and threat on the Illini offense.

Let's go back to when he was blowing up defenses in high school. After winning many championships with high school team Trinity Catholic, he was one of the top recruits in Missouri and was being recruited by teams like Alabama, Ohio State, Clemson, Oklahoma, and Florida. Along with those dominating teams, he was also offered a collective 34 additional scholarships. During high school, he also accepted the following awards:

2019 Under Armour All-American selection

2018 Elite 11 Finals invitation

2018 and 2019 Missouri Gatorade Player of the Year

2018 USA TODAY Missouri Offensive Player of the Year

2018 USA TODAY All-USA Missouri first team

2018 Missouri Football Coaches Association Class 3 All-State first team

So yeah, he was a good quarterback in high school. And yet I get the feeling that something isn't right. Something is still wrong. But what is it? Oh yeah, I've got it. I know the problem. It's just the fact that **HE'S A DARN WIDE RECEIVER!!!** But for Illinois, that isn't a problem.

When Isaiah Williams made the switch

After taking a redshirt year in 2019, he was a part-time QB for Illinois in 2020. He was a demon as a runner and killed teams like Rutgers (192 rushing yds.) and a talented Penn State squad (102 rushing yds.) with his athletic ability and speedy feet. He threw for 392 yards and four touchdowns and amassed 389 rushing yards. With two days of spring practice remaining in 2021, coach Brett Bielema requested the wideout position. Williams said it “felt natural” once he tried it. He told me the main difference between QB and WR was that playing wide receiver included a lot more running and physical strength than playing quarterback, which was more of a mental game according to him. He grew into the role knowing that he would be involved in play packages at the least but he ended the year, his first as a receiver, with 521 yards and four touchdowns. He also ran for 61 yards and a touchdown. Going into this year, he was expected to jump to the next level. He has not disappointed. This season, he has 595 receiving yards and five touchdowns, already topping last season’s total. He now is a starting receiver for the Illini, and he’s excelling at his role. Although he probably has a future involved with football, he is still making sure to give back to the community. He plans to open a training facility once his football life is over. He said giving back through football is one thing he would like to do; he wants other kids to have the same opportunity as he had. As you can see, Isaiah Williams is the real deal both on the field and off it.

These two Illini have persisted and grinded to the top of the mountain. They have never given up. They've gotten through rough patches, and learned and developed. After all this hard work, they are finally where they want to be-the real heart and soul of the Illinois football team. The future of Illinois is Tarique Barnes and Isaiah Williams.