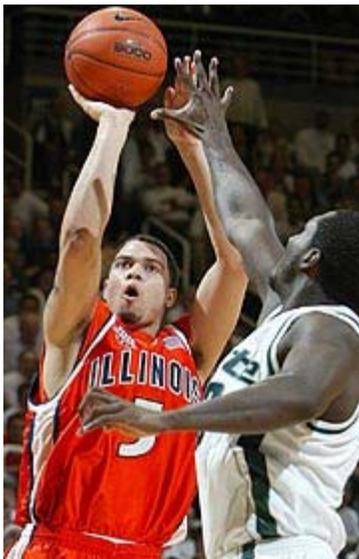


Anything less than undefeated will be slighting Illini

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EAST LANSING, Mich. -- Perfection is waiting on [Illinois](#), stretching out like a plush orange carpet. Perfection is the Illini's challenge. Perfection is their mandate.



Deron Williams and the rest of Illinois' guard rotation continue to dominate games. (AP)

The No. 1 Illini did to Michigan State what they've done to so many other excellent opponents this season, swarming the No. 12 Spartans 81-68 Tuesday night. Eight regular-season games remain, plus the Big Ten and NCAA tournaments, but Illinois' biggest opponent now is the ghost of 1976 Indiana -- the last college basketball team to finish the season without a loss.

The Illini (22-0) have beaten the daylights out of Gonzaga and Wake Forest and Cincinnati. They've ended Wisconsin's 38-game home winning streak, and they've sullied Michigan State's 10-0 home record this season.

Now that they've gotten past Michigan State and the Breslin Center crowd of 14,759, the Illini have no business losing this season. Not once. Anything less than perfection, and Illinois will have underachieved.

That's a harsh gauntlet to lay down, but so be it. The facts demand it. Illinois' situation has changed dramatically since October or November, when everyone knew the Illini would be good -- but not *this* good. Just a few months ago, the 2005 national championship was a lofty goal for the Illini, reachable but worthy.

It's not a worthy goal now. Not any more. Winning it all? That's not good enough for these Illini, who are better than merely the best team in college basketball.

They are good enough to be perfect, especially with what promises to be the perfect postseason itinerary.

If the Illini can make it through the regular season unscathed, they'll be the de facto home team in every game they play the rest of the way. The Big Ten Tournament is March 10-13 at the United Center in Chicago. For the first two rounds of the NCAA Tournament, the Illini expect to be sent to the Indianapolis pod. For the next two rounds, the Illini probably will go to the Chicago regional.

And then the Final Four is in St. Louis.

Illinois fans won't have to get on a plane again. Neither will Illinois.

That kind of unusual home-court advantage through March, coupled with this kind of unusually talented team, has Illinois on the threshold of perfection. Michigan State coach Tom Izzo tried not to put too much pressure on Illinois and Bruce Weber, even apologizing at times for what he was about to say, but his postgame comment made clear what should already be clear to everyone:

The only team that can stop Illinois is Illinois.

"That's one of the best (teams) I've seen," Izzo said. "I just don't see them having the mental letdown. No egos there -- there's not an ego on the team. You can just tell by the way they play. There's no distractions. It's getting like a rock-group tour where everybody's following them, but you've got four or five seniors and I think they're prepared to handle that.

"I hate to be a predictor, but I like their chances. I think a team's going to have to play awfully well, and (Illinois is) going to have to have more than a few guys play poorly."

College basketball has been waiting nearly 30 years for another perfect national champion. Larry Bird-led Indiana State came awfully close in 1979, taking an undefeated record into the NCAA championship game, where it lost to Michigan State. Those Spartans had Magic Johnson at point guard. The closest thing these Spartans have to Magic Johnson is an enormous statue outside the Breslin Center.

The closest thing these Spartans have to a point guard is senior Chris Hill, a natural shooting guard who has sacrificed his shooting (he's hitting 40.2 percent overall from the floor and 38 percent on 3-pointers, down from 50 percent overall and 45.4 percent on 3's as a junior) to become the point guard Drew Neitzel was supposed to be.

Neitzel, a 6-0 freshman and the state of Michigan's 2004 Mr. Basketball winner from Grand Rapids, may still be the Spartans' point guard of the future -- but only because Hill is a senior.

As for the Illini, they're brimming with point guards.

"It's like they've got three," Izzo said.

Deron Williams is Illinois' point guard deluxe, so strong, skilled and savvy, but Dee Brown and Luther Head also could start there. All three were excellent Tuesday night, combining for 54 points and making 11-of-20 3-pointers while swarming the Michigan State backcourt into ineffectiveness. The Spartans offense was at its best when it went through power forward Alan Anderson or even center Paul Davis.

Illinois' backcourt is so good, so mature, that it neutralized the Spartans' rabid home crowd. Students who already had tickets for the game nonetheless were lining up at 6 a.m. Tuesday to get the best seats in the house. Check the weather for East Lansing, Mich. -- it's cold here at 6 a.m.

It was hot inside the Breslin Center at 6 p.m., one hour before tip-off, when the Illini emerged from their locker room to find the Izzone filled with white-shirted, green-faced students booing each Illini player by name and cheering for every missed shot ... during warm-ups. A circle nine rows deep, the Izzone bathed the court in chaotic noise.

In the rafters, another six rows of Izzone surrounded the top of the Breslin Center. That's what happens when you don't wake up at 6 a.m.

What happens when you play Illinois? You lose, and more times than not you lose badly. Only three of Illinois' first 22 foes have stayed within single digits, a body of evidence that is hard even for the confident Brown to believe.

"Sometimes it's like, 'Wow -- how did we go out there and play that well against that team?'" Brown said. "I'm serious. Cincinnati, Gonzaga, Wake Forest -- we've beaten some tough teams in some tough places."

Not many tough places left.

Half the Big Ten schedule remains, but Illinois has survived its two toughest league games -- by far -- by winning at Wisconsin and Michigan State. None of Illinois' four road opponents (Michigan, Iowa, Penn State, Ohio State) is even .500 in league play, though Iowa on Feb. 19 could be tricky.

Illinois also has to contend with Wisconsin on Feb. 12, but we're saying it right now: Illinois' perfect run won't end at home. The Illini have been almost unbeatable at Assembly Hall, where their 74-3 record since 1999 is the best in the country -- and Illinois racked up most of that record with teams nowhere near as good as this one. This season, the Illini have won their 11 home games by an average margin of 23.1 points.

Weber says it's too early to talk about going 16-0 in the Big Ten, much less 37-0 on the season.

"If we get to 12-0, 13-0, we'll start talking about going undefeated," Weber said. "But that's a long way off."

It is indeed. But we can see it from here.