

Illinois

Benn puts on a dazzling show

By Matt Beardmore

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CHAMPAIGN—So much for having the nation's 105th-ranked passing offense. It took a freshman all of three catches Saturday to accomplish something no Illinois player did all of last season—rack up 100 yards receiving in a game.

Arrelious Benn, a top recruit from Washington, D.C., was as good, or better, than advertised in the Illini's spring game before a crowd of 10,029 at Memorial Stadium.

"I'm real confident now," Benn said. "When I got here, everything was going fast. Everything has slowed down."

"I was supposed to be at home getting ready for my prom. I made a sacrifice to be here and I'm just having fun with it."

Big man on campus: So what if Benn misses his prom. He's in college now and made five catches for 145 yards. He also had five carries for 42 yards, including 30 for a touchdown.

Benn, a mid-year high school graduate who enrolled at Illinois three months ago, made a 64-yard gain on the second play from scrimmage off a play-action pass from quarterback Juice Williams.

"Getting the ball in his hands is a high priority right now. 'Regis' is a guy I can depend on," said Williams.

So how was it having a new teammate in the backfield rather than split out wide?

"I like Benn as long as he's on the field," Williams said. "If he was at guard, I would like it."

Biggest issue: With the help of his new big-play threat, Williams looked nothing like the quarterback in last week's scrimmage at St. Rita, when he

completed only 5 of 16 passes for 50 yards and an interception. The sophomore-to-be carved apart the defense, completing seven of his first eight passes and finishing 14 of 23 for 301 yards.

"[He is] getting to where he's reacting," Illinois coach Ron Zook said. "He's looking safeties off, he has touch on the ball. The improvement [offensive coordinator Mike Locksley] has made with him is incredible."

After completing just 39.5 percent (103 of 261) of his passes last season, Williams understands he has to convert at a higher rate, but more importantly, he needs to be more accurate.

"You have to give receivers a chance to make plays after the catch," he said.

Biggest battle: It really won't be brother vs. brother, but junior Walter Mendenhall led the team with 48 yards rushing, including a 10-yard run up the middle that capped the first team's second possession.

He scored on the next possession on a 45-yard pass play that saw him break tackles in the middle of the field, spin to the sideline and sprint to the left corner of the end zone.

Rashard Mendenhall is expected to be the big wheel for the Illini, but he didn't play because of an ailing hamstring. If the junior-to-be, who averaged 8.2 yards per carry last season, can't go at full speed in the fall, it could signal trouble.

Biggest question: What's going on with the offensive line?

There are four returning starters, and left tackle Akim Millington is injured, but it gave up six "sacks" Saturday. Last year, it allowed 2.5 sacks per game.

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