

■ Urbana enjoys return to field with shutout victory, and Rantoul posts its first varsity win.

UI will miss camaraderie most of all

"No matter what five we bring in, we'll never recruit five better people than those who are leaving us."

— Illini coach Bill Self

Gradually, in the course of Tuesday's Kiwanis basketball banquet, it became clear to the 610 in attendance why Illinois has enjoyed its run of success.

These guys love each other. They really do. The tears that poured down the old stone face, Cory Bradford, were real. Even Mr. Energy, Lucas Johnson, sputtered and broke down when he received a "hustle" trophy named after his late good friend, Matt Heldman.

So, you see, Bill Self is losing more than 5,040 points, more than 2,110

rebounds, more than the 13,273 minutes of varsity action accumulated by Johnson, Bradford, Frank Williams, Robert Archibald and Damir Krupalija.

He is losing the camaraderie, the teamwork and the guts that became evident at the end of a dismal 1999 season, when a

freshman-sparked team came charging out of last place to defeat Top 25 teams Minnesota, Indiana and Ohio State in the Big Ten tournament. And they've been bouncing back ever since, sharing the 2001 Big Ten title with a star-studded Michigan State club and battling back from a 4-5 start to gain a share with an 11-5 record this season ... and making it to the Elite Eight and Sweet 16 in the NCAA tournament.

"We came from such different backgrounds, and now it looks like we grew up on the same street," said Archibald, a tall Scot who arrived by way of St. Louis.

Archibald battled back trouble throughout his career, Self joking that "he'd play one day and take the next day off ... a good deal if you can get it. But when the time came, he competed."

Overcoming the odds

So it was with all of them. Krupalija sat out what amounted to an entire season with myriad injuries and, like Archibald, never complained. Bradford made no excuses when knee trouble slowed him to a walk as a junior, and he closed strong this season to finish a career in which he started every game.

And Self called Williams "a warrior" for the way he took "undeserved heat this season. While he comes across as a guy with ice water in his veins, what I found is that he loves his teammates."

As a quintet, they were welded together by the difficulties they were obliged to overcome. On this team, individualism — a team-splitting element for many — was never a consideration. Each one was willing to make the extra pass, right up to the final seconds against Kansas, when first Krupalija and then Sean Harrington passed on the shot Williams ultimately missed.

When it was mentioned that Archibald, Krupalija and Johnson lived together, Archibald added: "Yes, and Cory lived with us when we were sophomores. We weren't a highly touted group, except for Frank. We had so much in common, and yet we're so different."

"I feel good about everything I've done here. I came in knowing it would be a long process and we'd have a chance by our junior year. We've been through a lot of tough spots. To succeed, it had to be all of us together. This was never about individual accomplishment. There was always a team-first mentality."

A cohesive unit

Looking back, the Faithful Five could have made last year's movie, "The Replacements," because that's what they were. Only Williams was on Lon Kruger's A-list. If Kruger had his druthers, he'd have taken Bobby Simmons and Lance Williams and Corey Maggette and Quentin Richardson, and that team almost surely would have been shattered by early defections. These Illini stuck together, even Frank Williams remaining an extra year, possibly to his own detriment.

But if Williams fell in the draft, here's what he said: "This is the place I wanted to be. I'd send my own son here."

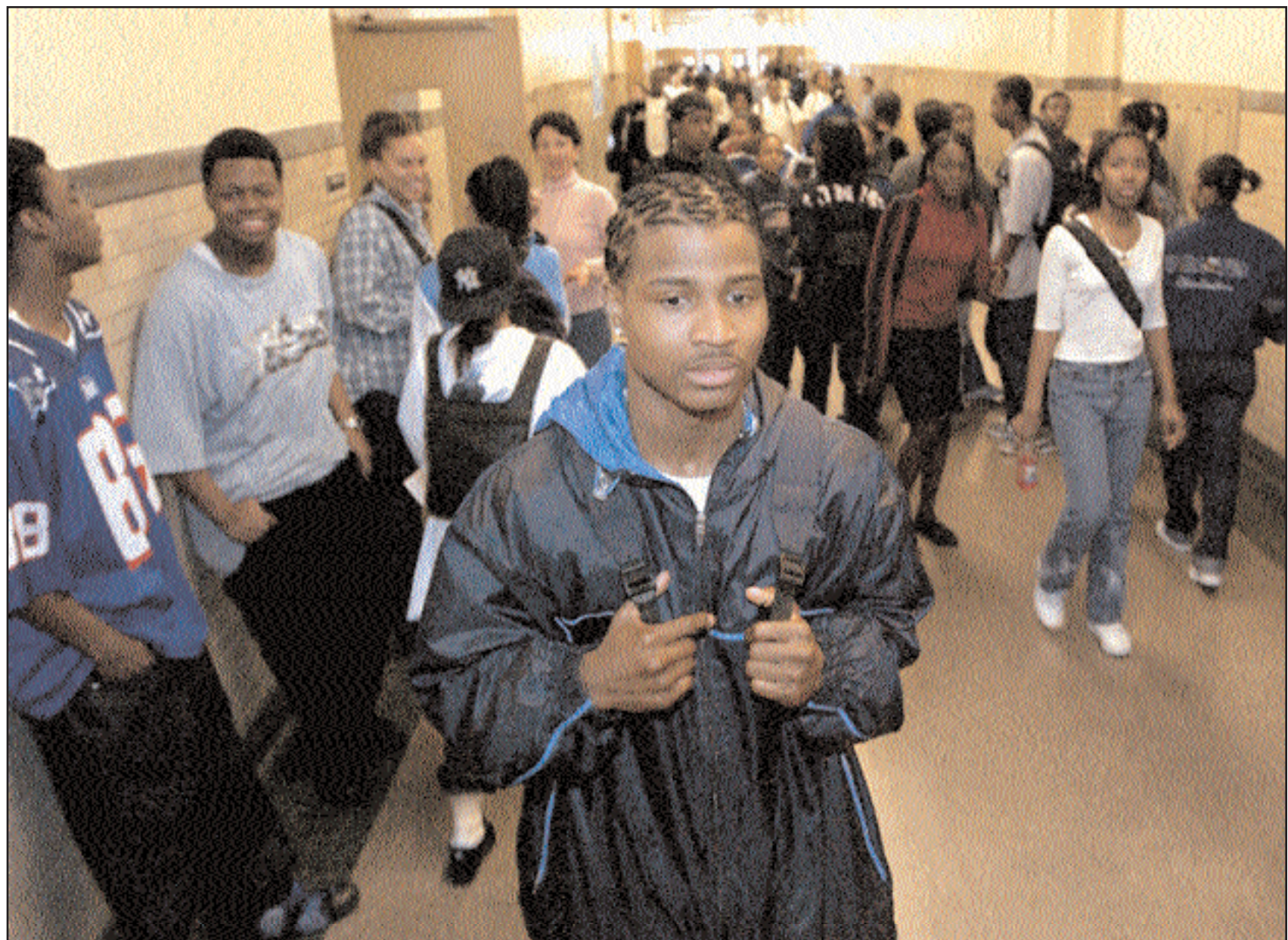
That's what came across at the Round Barn: a deep-seeded loyalty that was cemented over time, that was celebrated while next season's projected Big Ten leaders, Indiana and Michigan State, are suffering defections by sophomore stars who, by any judgment, are not ready for the NBA.

All the better for Brian Cook, who probably will be the Big Ten Preseason Player of the Year and will join hands with Harrington and Bandon Ferguson as senior leaders next season.

Theirs is an enormous legacy. The UI only has occasionally seen the special magic that brought the Faithful Five together.

Loren Tate writes for The News-Gazette.

SPRING SIGNING PERIOD



News-Gazette photo by John Dixon

▲ Dee Brown: McDonald's All-American the jewel of a nationally recognized recruiting class

It's one classy move

■ Future Illini have shot at sticking together for a while

By BRETT DAWSON
News-Gazette Staff Writer

CHAMPAIGN — Al McGuire once said the best thing about freshmen is that eventually they become sophomores.

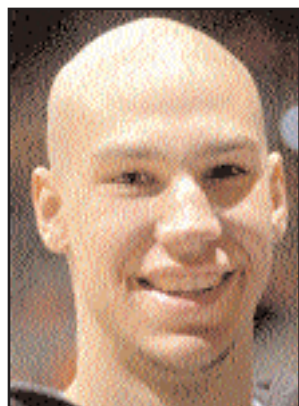
The best thing about Illinois' incoming basketball frosh could be that they eventually become juniors.

Recruiting analysts are likely to rank Bill Self's second Illinois class among the nation's best, but the real impact of the Illini's 2002 recruiting class might be down the road. "I think it's conceivable that down the road, this class will actually stick together," said Rob Harrington of Prep Stars. "They may actually evolve into juniors and seniors together."

Until then, Self will have to make do with them as freshmen.

But his five incoming players — James Augustine of Lincoln-Way Central, Dee Brown of Proviso East, Deron Williams of The Colony, Texas, Kyle Wilson of Dallas Jesuit and Aaron Spears of Chicago Dunbar, who signed today — should be capable of helping out as rookies.

"I don't think these are guys who



▲ James Augustine



▲ Aaron Spears



▲ Deron Williams



▲ Kyle Wilson

are going to have great years and leave after one year," Harrington said. "But I do think they can help them next year. A guy like Spears has the physical maturity to play in the Big Ten right away, and I like that about Deron Williams, too. I think he can guard some of the bigger guards in the Big Ten."

Brown is the crown jewel of the class. The News-Gazette All-State Player of the Year is a McDonald's All-American and the highest-profile signee in Illinois' haul.

Add in Williams, like Brown ranked one of the class' top 10 point guards, and a trio of big men with skills both in the post (Spears, Augustine) and on the perimeter (Wilson), and Illinois has the mak-

ings of one of its best recruiting classes.

"I think Aaron Spears is one of the top two or three unsigned big men in the nation," said Bob Gibbons of All-Star Sports, who ranks Spears the 82nd-best player in the class. "To get him and add him to a class that we had ranked among our top 20 in the fall, I think Illinois could very well end up with a top-10 recruiting class when it's all said and done."

Harrington echoed that sentiment, saying when his publication's final recruiting class rankings are established this fall, Illinois figures to be among the top 10 nationally.

"Certainly it's an elite class with two great guards," Harrington said. "And that group of big men, three

years from now, conceivably could be the best in the nation from this class. I assume some of the other guys are going to make an early jump (to the NBA), where I think Illinois' class could be there for the long haul. That's the future of college basketball: finding talented players who aren't going to bail on you after one good year."

And the future at Illinois is bright if this is, as Gibbons suspects, the beginning of a run of top-ranked classes.

"Bill Self has done a nice job with this class, going into Chicago and getting an Aaron Spears, going into Texas for a Deron Williams," Gibbons

Please see ILLINI, C-5

Woods still man to beat at Masters

AUGUSTA, Ga. (AP) — Tiger Woods walked briskly out of the Augusta National clubhouse Tuesday morning and was headed for the first tee, unaware of a small problem his caddie already solved.

A wooden clock at the tee box told golfers the course would open at 8, but it was only 7:25.

More on the Masters:

- Mark Whicker column, C-6.
- Daly makes his return, C-6.
- Notes from Augusta, C-6.

Steve Williams simply moved the hands back a half-hour, and when Woods arrived at 7:28, the defending champion flicked the big hand back two more minutes. Then he teed up his ball and launched a drive that landed safely just left of the massive fairway bunker.

Yes, it's always Tiger Time at the Masters. Most of the focus at the 66th Masters is the renovation of Augusta National, which stretched the course by 285 yards and changed half of the holes.

What hasn't changed is the man to beat. "The player to look at is the No. 1 player ranked in the world: Tiger," Phil Mickelson said. "He's the guy that everybody has got to watch out for. And given his length and accuracy and distance control, he's going to be the guy to beat."



Associated Press

Tiger Woods comes out of a bunker near the seventh green Tuesday at Augusta National Golf Club. Woods will begin defending his Masters title Thursday.

So what else is new? Woods set 20 records when he won the Masters in his professional debut in 1997, including the 72-hole scoring record (270) and the margin of victory (12 strokes).

Even more stunning was his performance last year, when he became the first player to sweep the four professional majors by holding off David Duval and Mickelson, his chief rivals, on the back nine for a 2-stroke victory.

When the Masters begins Thursday, Woods

Please see MASTERS, C-6

Cards' super sub sinks Milwaukee

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Even Eli Marrero is surprised by his sizzling start.

Marrero had three hits, raising his average to .733, and scored the go-ahead run as the Cardinals beat the Milwaukee Brewers 6-5 on Tuesday night.

"I can't even imagine it," Marrero said. "I'm not going to think about it."

Marrero, who entered the season as a .229 hitter and the No. 3 catcher, has been playing the outfield and is 11 for 15 with a home run and five RBI. He hit a two-run double in the second, singled and scored in the fourth and singled and scored on Fernando Vina's sacrifice fly off Jose Cabrera (0-1) in the eighth.

"I'm just going out there when he gives me a chance and having fun," Marrero said. "That's all I'm doing: going out and having some fun, trying to play hard, and see what happens at the end of the game."

The Cards' bullpen couldn't hold a 4-0 lead and ruined a fine start by Garrett Stephenson in the seventh as the Brewers rallied for five runs to take the lead. But St. Louis tied it in the

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bottom half on four walks by Takahito Nomura, the last coming on four pitches with the bases loaded to Tino Martinez.

Marrero led off the eighth with a single and went to third when Cabrera slipped and fell. Fielding pinch hitter Miguel Cairo's bunt and then bounced a wild throw to first for an error. Marrero barely beat the throw from right fielder Alex Ochoa on Vina's sacrifice fly.

Brewers starter Ruben Quevedo also botched a bunt play, falling down and throwing wildly on Stephenson's sacrifice in the fourth.

"I don't know what happened out there," Veres said. "You've got to be able to field a bunt out there."

Dave Veres (1-0) pitched two innings for the win. Jason Iringhausen struck out three batters for his first save after Geoff Jenkins' leadoff double against Steve Kline.