



Lynch vs UDub AP/ElaineThompson

By [Peter Dudley](#)
 Guest Contributor
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Cal is #15 in the nation after pasting 1-AA Sacramento State at home and dismantling Washington in Seattle. Unranked Illinois comes into Berkeley with a new coach, a new starting QB, a brand spanking new 2-0 record, and a banned nickname.

The Illini sit atop the Big-10 standings courtesy of [Rutgers](#) and [San Jose State](#), both victories at home. In the opener, the Illini were down 27-7 early in the second half and had to rally to beat Rutgers 33-30 in overtime. In the second game, the Illini held San Jose State to 15 rushing yards en route to a 40-19 blowout.

Sagarin says that Cal is #18 nationally with 83.17 points. Sagarin puts [Illinois](#) at #54 with 73.09 points, which with the home advantage makes the Bears a 14-point favorite. The odds makers and gamblers among us think that's pessimistic and put Cal out as a 21-point favorite.

Sagarin's ratings also make Cal's schedule the 148th toughest in the Country – in other words, we've got some cupcakes on the schedule. Illinois, meanwhile, has the #117th toughest schedule. Some might argue that UW in Seattle is tougher than Rutgers at home, but then others might argue that SJSU could take on any 1-AA team, at least most of the time.

As for this prognosticator, I think the Bears will cover the spread. Several key players are injured (Longshore, Lynch, Philip, Lupoi), but the Bears have the depth to cover those slots. We now know that Ayoob is capable of completing a pass; in fact, last week he completed them to members of both teams. We know that Cal's defense, monstrous in 2004, is back with speed to spare this year and is not looking at all like a unit that returned only three starters from last year's top-5 defense.

Illinois, on the other hand, has only four starting seniors and a dearth of experience throughout their team, particularly on defense. They start 12 freshmen or sophomores, and seven players started their first collegiate game against Rutgers. Their strength is at running back, where they return their top two horses from 2004. Neither gained 1,000 yards individually, but this team has for several years run as a two-headed beast, with the top two backs combining for good yardage each year. Last year was no exception with a total of nearly 1,400 yards between them. In addition, their new QB is mobile and was their leading rusher against SJSU with 77 yards on the ground.

Forget history, though, because the Illini also have a new coach in Ron Zook from [Florida](#), who brings a Utah-style spread offense to the team. In the first two games, the offense has been balanced, with 224 yards per game rushing and 241 passing. In total offense and scoring offense (36.5 points per game), the Illini are #21 nationally.

The Illini will be on their first road trip of the year, to a noisy and excited Memorial Stadium in Berkeley. One surprising statistic is that, for the moment, Cal sits atop the Pac-10 with the largest average home attendance. I'm not sure that's ever happened before; it probably has something to do with USC having not yet played a home game. But make no mistake: the young Illini players will no longer be in their own comfy house against a weak opponent, and Cal fans can be expected to make an extra effort to show them what a Pac-10 stadium can sound and feel like.

All in all, the Illini are hard to pin down. On the one hand, the QB has 3 TDs and 3 interceptions; on the other, they are 100% in the red zone (7 TDs, 5 field goals in 12 opportunities). They are -1.5 in turnovers and have given up 24.5 points per game to weak opponents. Yet they held SJSU to just 15 yards total rushing. They have good special teams--their field goal kicker is 6 of 6 so far, and their punter is a veteran who is on national award watch lists. They were down 27-7 after a half against Rutgers, but they smashed Rutgers 26-3 the rest of the way.

When Illinois has the ball, they will use deception from their base spread offense to try to keep the Bears off-balance, hoping to establish both a running game and productivity with the pass. The running backs have several receptions, so look for the dump-off and QB runs.

Illinois may try to run up the middle through Cal's least experienced defensive area and behind their biggest, most experienced offensive linemen. The Bears' defensive backfield will be challenged by the spread offense, similar in concept to what Cal played against in the Holiday Bowl loss to Texas Tech – but not against that level of talent. On balance, the secondary should be able to contain the Illinois passing game to moderate yardage, which in turn should allow the linebackers to focus on the run and containing the QB. Cal may be able to confuse the Illini first-year QB with blitzes and deception; we hope to see an aggressive defensive game plan.

When Cal has the ball, the Illinois defense will be hard pressed just to keep up, so we may not see an aggressive, complicated defensive game plan from them. Their DB's have height and the most experience of the defense, but they are still young. This will be good for both Ayoob and the running game because the Bears should be able to get the defense on their heels in the second half and take it to them hard.

The game will turn on three significant items: First, Illinois' youth will have trouble on the road against a much faster, bigger, stronger opponent than they've yet seen. Second, Cal's offensive line and running game will be simply too much for the Illini D-line (1 senior, 2 sophomores, and one redshirt freshman averaging 276 pounds - slightly larger than UW but smaller than Cal) and linebackers (comprising 2 sophomores and one redshirt freshman averaging 220 pounds). Third, Cal's athleticism and fitness will allow the Bears to overpower the Illini in the fourth quarter in the same way that the Illini overpowered Rutgers' players late in their opener – and as the Bears did in Seattle last week.

Like many of Cal's games in the past year and a half, I expect the Bears to start more slowly than many expect, garnering perhaps 21 points in the first half. The second half will be all Cal as the O-line and RB's get warmed up and Ayoob gets more comfortable at home. I think Illinois will get into the end zone, but their ceiling will be 20 points. Final score: Cal 45, Illinois 19.

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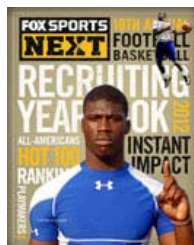
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