

# Lovie, the Illini and gold days



*"Memories, Seem like yesterday, Old days, Good times I remember, Gold days..."* — "Old Days," written by James Pan-

kow and recorded by Chicago.

With the recurring hub-bub about the Chief and cartoon show war chants, perhaps it's worth remembering some gold days.

Last year, before his first game as head coach of Illinois, Lovie Smith told The News-Gazette "there's nothing more exciting than being on a college campus on Saturdays during football season ..." Well, I can think of a few things, but we're focusing on the positive here, so I'll give a nod to Lovie's sentiments. College football Saturdays at Illinois hold a special place in my memories, and I enjoy attending as many games as possible.

But they have not always been the most exciting. Since Red Grange galloped off campus in the 1920s, Illinois football has been spotty. Yes, there have been good teams and great players. The Ray Eliot squads of the mid-'40s, with a national championship in '51, Dick Butkus leading the Rose Bowl champs in '63, Mike White's run in the 1980s, seven bowl appearances in the '90s, the Sugar Bowl in 2002 and the Rose Bowl in 2008 provide great memories. Yet, in my 55 years on Earth, the Illini have never been consistently good, unable to build a nationally

recognized program on a par with Midwestern rivals like Michigan, Ohio State or Notre Dame.

Even so, there are days. Gold days.

When I was a kid in the late 1960s and early '70s, my folks crammed us into our green, speed boat length Plymouth station wagon a couple Saturdays each fall and drove from Bloomington-Normal to Champaign. We caravanned with other families. Often we swung by my oldest brother Scott's Acacia fraternity house and he joined us. I remember walking up the steps to my brother's room with Mom and Dad. As we approached each floor, Scott hollered: "Female on second floor ... female on third floor ..."

Sometimes we ate buffet style at a bowling alley. Other Saturdays, we tailgated in the Memorial Stadium parking lot, a spread of cold cuts, crackers, cheese, fruit and vegetables with brownies for dessert laid out on card tables. The adults had a few drinks, the men carrying leather cases containing high ball glasses and stainless steel mixers, martinis and Manhattans a favorite of the World War II generation. The men smoked, flicking gray ash on the concrete, stubbing the cigarettes out with the toe of leather-soled shoes. The kids drank Coca-Cola and tossed a football, pretending to be Mike Wells, the all-state quarterback from Normal.

Wells, who Scott played high school basketball with, was the then designated savior of

## About Voices

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Illinois football. He was an impressive athlete: 6-foot-5, 225 pounds and a three sport star in high school. The San Diego Padres offered him a hefty bonus to sign as a pitcher. Wells threw ropes on the football field as well, tight spirals zinging past defenders, the lanky Garvin Roberson one of his favorite targets. Wells' long legs gobbled up yards when he scrambled. Bigger than many of the linebackers and secondary backs of that era, Wells did not go down easy. He also placekicked, using the old straight-legged method, rocketing the ball high and deep.

In 1969, many major colleges recruited him, including the then-new coach at Michigan, Bo Schembechler. My dad, who Wells asked to sit in on a breakfast meeting with Schembechler at the Bloomington-Normal Holiday Inn, was impressed with the Michigan

coach and hoped Wells would play for the "Maize and Blue." Treasonous talk in Illini country, but Dad, a pragmatic man, spoke the truth as he saw it. Wells, however, chose Illinois and we drove down to cheer him on. While a great player for the Illini and drafted in the fourth round by the Minnesota Vikings, Wells could not resurrect the Illinois program.

That said, what I remember is the day Wells won his first game as starting quarterback and we followed the Marching Illini through the streets, the band members caps turned backward, horns blaring and drums thumping in victory.

Gold days.

Fast forward 30 plus years. Nathan Scheelhaase was quarterbacking and Illinois faced nationally ranked Arizona State. It's the type of game Illinois usually loses and, at that time, the 2001 team was the last to beat a ranked nonconference opponent. I tailgated with a good friend, grilling fajitas with my wife's homemade tortillas. The kids next to us tossed a football, while we tossed back a few brews. Some ASU supporters, sporting gold and red shirts, were nearby and we talked to them about everything but football, the game to settle that debate. Rumor had it ASU alum and golf great Phil Mickelson was in the crowd. Later we hooked up with friends from high school and my younger sister, Holly, before taking our seats, a typical tailgating game day not much different from when I was a kid.

But then, an unexpected thing happened: Illinois won.

Scheelhaase ran the ball well and made some big throws. The Illinois defense was aggressive and opportunistic, collapsing the pocket on ASU's 6-foot-8 quarterback, Brock Osweiler, forcing turnovers and making big stops. After one last defensive stand, the Illinois offense took possession with six minutes to go and on the final play of the game with four seconds remaining, Scheelhaase ran out the clock, taking the snap and racing backward.

As we waited for the traffic to clear, my buddy and I raised the hatchback of my rust spotted Windstar minivan, slouched in lawn chairs and listened to the post-game show on the car radio. Sun dipping, the kids next to us took turns being Nathan Scheelhaase just as we used to mimic Mike Wells.

This year it's Chayce Crouch, with Lovie the latest savior.

Sure, there may be more exciting things to do on a Saturday afternoon in the fall. Some seasons with the Illini, there are many more. But Lovie's right, there are days when I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

Gold days.

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