Illinois Fighting Illini 2008 College Football Betting Preview

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It didn’t take Illinois coach Ron Zook long to revive a struggling Illinois football program taking them from Big 10 laughingstock to the Rose Bowl in two years. While the Fighting Illini lost their great running back Rashard Mendenhall to the NFL, they do return the nucleus of the team Zook has put together. Oddsmakers at online sports betting giant Sportsbook.com see the Illini as one of the stronger teams in the Big 10 having installed them at 4/1 odds favorites to win the league and return to the Rose Bowl. To win however, they must get past Big-10 powerhouses Ohio State (2/3 odds) and Wisconsin (3/1). Oddsmakers see the Illini as long shots to win a BCS National Championship installing them at 75/1 odds. [pictured: Juice Williams returns for his junior year at quarterback at Illinois bringing experience to the Fighting Illini offense] In season (wins) total betting , odds opened at EVEN that Illinois wins OVER 7-games while the price of an UNDER (7) is at -130. With the season still six weeks away, it’s still early for online and Las Vegas sportsbooks to be releasing odds, however; Las Vegas Sports Consultants has installed the Fighting Illini as 7 ½ point underdogs to the Missouri Tigers for their opening game Aug. 30 at Edward Jones Dome in St. Louis. Thirteen starters return for the 2008 season, as well as the starting punter. Among the returning starters are junior quarterback Isiah “Juice” Williams, three offensive linemen and the 2007 Big Ten Freshman of the Year wide receiver Arrelious Benn. Defensively, three members of the defensive line, one linebacker and both cornerbacks will be back for 2008. In 2006, true-freshman quarterback Juice Williams was thrown into the Big Ten fire, starting nine games. During that time, he passed for 1,489 yards, but completed only 39 percent of his passes. He only reached the 200-yard passing mark in one game in 2006 vs. Syracuse. But despite the criticism, Williams did show that he was able to convert the big play through the air with 20 passes over 20 yards. One year later, Williams goes from leading his team to one win, to the “Grandaddy of them All”, the Rose Bowl and a nine-win season. He passed for 1,743 yards, an improvement of just 250 yards, but his completion percentage rose 17 points and he surpassed the 200-yard passing mark three times. He showed one of his best career performances when he connected for four touchdowns in the air to defeat No. 1 Ohio State. He also managed to maintain that big-play ability with 27 passes over 20 yards. For the past two years it has been the Illini rushing offense atop the Big Ten statistics at the end of the season. The Illini only improved that number in 2007, posting 256 yards per contest on the ground with Mendenhall, Daniel Dufrene and Williams as the top three rushers. Despite losing Mendenhall’s school record 1,681 rushing yards, 49 percent of the rushing offense from a year ago remains intact. With three starters and eight players with game experience returning, the defensive line, it is the strength of the 2008 defense. Three defensive ends, Will Davis, Doug Pilcher and Derek Walker rotated as starters last season, while utilizing Antonio James and Jerry Brown in reserve roles. The ends combined for 28.5 tackles for loss, led by the 12.5 of Davis. Among those tackles behind the line were 21.5 quarterback sacks, which accounted for 48 percent of the sacks by the Illini defense last season. The good news for the defensive backs is the return of a strong group of cornerbacks in Vontae Davis, Dere Hicks and Miami Thomas. The three combined for seven interceptions, and Davis is a returning Thorpe Award semifinalist and All-Big Ten honoree. Looking to challenge for the starting jobs are sophomores Nate Bussey, Bo Flowers and Garrett Edwards, and redshirt-freshmen Darius Purcell and Mike Locksley, Jr. In the fall, the Illini will gain new recruits for competition, including junior-college transfer Donsay Hardeman. Illinois will open up the season in St. Louis against Missouri in the State Farm Arch Rivalry game at the Edward Jones Dome. After a strong finish last year, the Tigers will surely be a top-10 preseason pick. With no let up in the Big Ten season, Illinois will have to travel to Michigan, Penn State and Wisconsin, teams who always boast of hostile stadiums for their visitors. Ohio State will visit Memorial Stadium in November, where the Buckeyes have won six straight. The Illini also will host Iowa, who has won the last five meetings.

2008 Illinois Football Schedule

Aug 30 Missouri (St. Louis, Edward Jones Dome)
Sept 6 Eastern Illinois
Sept 13 UL-Lafayette
Sept 27 @ Penn State
Oct 4 @ Michigan
Oct 11 Minnesota
Oct 18 Indiana
Oct 25 @ Wisconsin
Nov 1 Iowa
Nov 8 Western Michigan
Nov 15 Ohio State
Nov 22 Northwestern