

Emergence of QB Tommy DeVito adds balance to Illini offense

October 27, 2022

By: Jack Larson

[Article Link](#) (PAYWALLED)

Heading into the week seven matchup against Minnesota, offensive coordinator Barry Lunney Jr. was bound for his greatest test yet.

Facing an intimidating Gopher defense, the outlook for the Illini offense was uncertain with the questionable health of quarterback Tommy DeVito, who was nursing a sprained ankle.

Finally, Illinois announced two and a half hours before kickoff that DeVito would play, and fans breathed a sigh of relief.

The partnership between Lunney and DeVito had another opportunity to shine. The result was a well-balanced offensive performance against one of the top ranked defenses in the nation.

Orange and Blue News' Jack Larson takes a look at the improving Illini offense with Lunney and DeVito at the center.



Tommy DeVito #3 of the Illinois Fighting Illini drops back to pass during the game against the Wisconsin Badgers at Camp Randall Stadium on October 01, 2022 in Madison, Wisconsin.

An arranged marriage

Illinois' 2021 season was another ho-hum year for what at the time was a mediocre football program. Finishing 5-7, first-year head Coach Bret Bielema decided it was time for a rebrand.

He hired Lunney away UTSA, but that was just part of the reconstruction of the offense. Bielema needed a new starting quarterback.

With Brandon Peters paying out his eligibility, Bielema hand-picked Tommy DeVito out of Syracuse. Lunney, who doubles as the QB coach, wasn't involved in the recruitment of DeVito but he's happy with the union.

“Our parents did a nice job arranging the marriage,” Lunney said. “We just kind of showed up at the altar together, and there we were. It’s worked out pretty well from that perspective.”

It took some time to get to know each other; Spring football, fall camp, and a few hard knocks early in the regular season.

It’s jelling now. Illinois has built its reputation and 6-1 record on defense. Now, the offense is catching up.

With a trip to Nebraska up next, DeVito is coming off of his best performance of the season in the win over Minnesota and now sports a solid 145.8 passing efficiency rating and is completely over 70 percent of his throws.

With DeVito at the helm, Lunney’s offense is dynamic and a major step up from Bielema’s first year. DeVito can make all of the throws, and he brings the added dimension of escapeability.

His skill set may be a model for what Lunney is looking for in future quarterbacks when out on the recruiting trail.

“I think he’s perfect for what we’re trying to do- he’s a natural fit,” Lunney said. “They all come in different shapes and sizes, but he moves well enough to create plays on his own. He can run, and he’s made a lot of plays with his feet.

“I don’t think we’re going to go cookie cutter and say we’re going to look for a guy just like Tommy DeVito, but seeing his skills apply to what we’re doing offensively, he helps us focus in on some of the attributes that we’re looking for.”

Coming to Illinois marked a new beginning for DeVito. He was coming off of a frustrating season at Syracuse and a series of injuries slowed his progress.

He was the keys to the offense and new lease on life at Illinois, and he's delivered.

"I think he makes us ten times better," wide receiver Isaiah Williams said. "He's a special talent. When he's on the field, he gives us a sense of confidence."

Balance on offense

Running back Chase Brown is getting a ton of well-deserved attention as the nation's leading rusher. He's popping up the watch list for several post-season awards.

Bielema's teams at other stops have been about establishing the run. This is a balanced offense, though, with a nearly even number of yards on the ground and through the air. That wouldn't have been possible without DeVito.

He has monumentally improved the Illini passing game. The offense thus far has 1,518 passing yards. That comes pretty close to last year's end of season total of 1,874.

"I'm super thrilled that coach had been aggressive in recruiting (DeVito)," Lunney said. "We've been able to showcase some of his skill, and I think there's more available in that regard as he continues to settle in. His instincts have really kicked in lately"

DeVito's play has a ripple effect. The wide receiver corps, a group that had many question marks heading into the season, may be the most improved position.

Williams leads in the team in catches. Sophomore Pat Bryant is having a breakout year with a team-best 371 yards and is averaging 14.8 yards per reception. Miami transfer Brian Hightower is playing his best football and has become a deep threat.

"We're getting better every single day," Williams said. "We had to pick it up. We took it upon ourselves to just get better and take on the challenge."

Nebraska is up next after a much-needed bye week to rest up and recharge the batteries for the stretch run and a shot at a Big Ten West divisional title.

Unlike the Minnesota game, there's no question who the starting quarterback will be. Things might have gone much differently for the Illini had DeVito sat out against the Gophers.

In his mind, it was never in doubt, despite the ankle injury that knocked him out of the game the previous week.

As soon as it happened, I told [trainer Jeremy Busch] 'I'm playing on Saturday,'" DeVito said. "I trusted everything that he had set up for me and it worked out."