

High hopes for Smith

Returning player shows early promise in skill camps, practices

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Jamar Smith has been the talk of the offseason for the Illini. Maybe it's all valid or maybe it's just been a while since Illinois has seen a player score with the ease Smith has this summer. Either way, many think the team's success will rely on the guard's performance this season.

If evaluations of his summer workouts are any indication of how he will play during the Big Ten season, the Illini may not have much to worry about.

No one has seen Smith play more than sophomore Alex Legion, who began working out with Smith after transferring from Kentucky in December.

"I think (Jamar) is probably going to be one of the top-five players in the country, just off his skills alone," Legion said. "He's really been working hard."

But playing at practice in front of teammates, coaches and a couple reporters does not exactly translate to playing at Assembly Hall in front of 16,000 fans. Playing away from home, where he may hear abusive words from the mouths of heckling fans, may be an even bigger obstacle for Smith.

Smith redshirted last season after serving two weeks in jail after pleading guilty to a count of aggravated driving under the influence. The sentence stemmed from a Feb. 12, 2007, car accident that hospitalized former teammate Brian Carlwell with a severe concussion. He recently transferred to San Diego State.

Smith, whom Bruce Weber has kept off-limits to the media, hasn't played for the Illini since the accident. He led the Big Ten in 3-point percentage as a freshman (48.2 percent), converting 66 of 137 attempts from beyond the arc on his way to averaging 8.0 points.

But Smith's accuracy fell off in his sophomore season, shooting 31.7 percent in 3-point attempts. He averaged 8.1 points in 21 games before sitting the rest of the season after the car accident.

But Legion — who said Smith is "like a big brother" to him — isn't the only one praising the returning Illini guard. Former Illini Sergio McClain, a first-year head coach at Parkland, has played in several pickup games with the Illini players this summer and believes Smith has taken his game to another level.

"He's been getting bigger, stronger, jumping higher and shooting it better," McClain said. "I don't want to make the expectations so high, but I feel he's probably one of the best players in college basketball right now without even stepping on the court. I feel like if he just goes in and has a decent year he could



Illinois' Jamar Smith drives the ball past Indiana's A.J. Ratliff during a game at Assembly Hall on Jan. 23, 2007. After missing all of last year with a redshirt, Smith is expected to be an integral part of the Illini offense this season. JOSH BIRNBAUM DAILY ILLINI FILE PHOTO

probably be a lottery pick."

McClain thinks having to sit out a year, learning and watching his team lose has changed Smith for the better.

"Things work out for a reason," McClain said. "Even though the situation he got into was very disturbing and troublesome, in time I

think it helped him with his growth and maturity. He seems to have a more level head, a better work ethic."

It seems like a lot of hype for someone who hasn't played a college basketball game in 15 months, but those who have seen the Illini practice last season and this sum-

mer claim Smith has been the best player on the court.

"One of my weaknesses is probably defense, and with a guy like Jamar on the floor ... it's done nothing but help me out," Legion said. "If you can take a guy like Jamar, you can probably take anybody in the country."