

## Illinois Defeats UC Irvine, 79-65

[box score](#)

**CHAMPAIGN, Ill.** – A year ago Brandon Paul started his college career with two big games that powered Illinois to wins before sliding back to the bench and mostly watching the Illini wade through a disappointing season that ended in the NIT.

On Monday night, Paul replayed a little of that history, scoring 18 points to lead No. 13 Illinois to a season-opening 79-65 win over UC-Irvine.

The trick now, he said, is to avoid a repeat.

"It felt like deja vu for me," the sophomore said. "This year the main thing is to stay consistent. I don't want to have a few good games and then slack off the next few games."

All of Paul's points came on 3-pointers and he was 6 for 8 from the field with all of his shots from beyond the arc.

Fifteen of his points came in the first 20 minutes as Illinois took a 42-18 lead.

"One guy shot us out of it by himself," astonished first-year UC-Irvine coach Russell Turner said. "Credit to him."

Paul sparked what had been a sluggish Illinois offense, hitting on three straight early possessions.

His first 3 with 14:10 left in the first half gave the Illini an 11-5 lead.

After a missed jumper by the Anteaters, point guard Demetri McCamey was bringing the Illini up court when Paul yelled his nickname loudly from behind - "Meechi! Meechi!" - looking for the ball. McCamey provided and, before UC-Irvine could set its defense, Paul hit another 3.

Seconds later, on the next possession, he drained a third.

Turner quickly called a timeout, but the Anteaters were already down 17-5 with 12:56 to play in the first half.

While Paul and the Illini were finding their shooting stroke, UC-Irvine hit just six of its 26 first-half shots (23.1 percent).

The Anteaters didn't score during one 5-minute-plus stretch, coming up dry on nine straight possessions after Darren Moore's 3-pointer with 9:03 to play. Chris McNealy's jumper ended the drought, but the Anteaters were already down 34-10.

While Illini coach Bruce Weber was impressed with Paul's offense, that first-half defense was what he wanted to talk about.

The Illini struggled through two exhibition wins over Division II schools that left Weber wondering about his team's intensity and whether they could live up to the preseason ranking.

"We were intimidating defensively in the first half," Weber said. "We were all over the place."

Paul, a key piece of that defense with two steals and a blocked shot, echoed Weber.

"We came out feisty and fighting, diving for balls and stuff like that," he said.

McCamey, often a target for Weber's criticism and, after those exhibition games, a source of his concern, finished with 13 points, two in the first half.

He said after the game, though, that his eight assists proved he had at least part of the kind of night he had aimed for.

"I shot terrible, but at the same time we got a win," he said. "I said in the preseason that that was one of my goals, to make my teammates better."

UC-Irvine opened the second half with more offensive life--helped by a dip in intensity from Illinois--and outscored the Illini 47-37 over the final 20 minutes.

The Anteaters cut the deficit to 49-34 with just under 15 minutes to play on Moore's 3-pointer.

Six minutes later he drove the lane to shave Illinois' lead to 14.

But Illinois quickly snuffed out any ideas about a comeback, scoring five points over the next 55 seconds. The last two, a dunk by Mike Davis, made it 64-45 with 7:32 to play.

Only a late flurry by UC-Irvine closed the gap to the final 14 points.

Moore led the Anteaters with 18 points, while Patrick Rembert added 12 and Eric Wise and Pavol Losonsky had 11 each.

Illinois' Mike Tisdale had 12 points and Mike Davis added 11.

Illinois faces Toledo on Wednesday night in the tournament's second round.