

# Two-bowl Illini nearly found their cupboard bare

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Now it can be told.  
The University of Illinois walked a tight-rope, and righted itself after several missteps before receiving positive announcements this week on not one, but two bowls.  
The UI entered November trailing Ohio State for the Big Ten's berth opposite Southern Cal in the Glasnost Bowl on Sept. 2, 1989, in Moscow.  
The perennially strong Buckeyes had a 1989 game already scheduled with USC, and it was a relatively simple process to move the game from Los Angeles to Moscow. OSU had obtained Big Ten clearance to shift the game and, secretly, was in the driver's seat

with the sponsoring company, Raycom.

Thanks to the efforts of Illinois' Ron Guenther, the unranked Illini clung to a backup role chiefly because Michigan, the obvious choice, never got in the discussion loop with Raycom, because sharp-talking coach AD Bo Schembechler hadn't endeared himself with statements that he believes Raycom's supplementary Big Ten package causes too many games to be televised.



GUENTHER

OSU's stock sagged early, then began to plummet into a free-fall. A positive image was replaced by the perception of a losing Buckeye football program, which turned ugly with complaints of racism and dissatisfaction with first-year coach John Cooper. Raycom took another look while Guenther tub-thumped for Illinois.  
And on Nov. 9, Guenther received the first official word that John Mackovic's up-and-coming Illini had been selected.  
If that isn't nerve-rattling, Illinois surviving what was once a 1 in 30 shot, consider that UI was also riding a roller-coaster for about 12 hours last weekend in its All American Bowl quest. Because the Illini failed to "cover the spread" at Michigan,

the 16-point underdogs tumbling 38-9, Michigan State's Big Ten runners-up had burgeoning support in Birmingham late Saturday night.  
Those were the coals Guenther was tiptoeing through. Two volatile negotiations, two critical decisions for Illinois, were moving in and out of his grasp.  
At first, Illinois had neither. Taking advantage of his relationship with Raycom's Ken Haines, Guenther sold the good points of Illinois and Mackovic, painted a glowing picture of an up-and-coming Cinderella team, with a great quarterback (Jeff George). Guenther slipped lightly over the fact that the athletic program is even now on probation, and lost both its football

coach and athletic director earlier this year. He kept Illinois alive for the Russian trip... just in case.  
Suddenly, in the wake of a stirring Illini rally that upset Indiana two weeks ago, the All American Bowl people got interested. They saw a team that has revived fan interest, and they realized that Illinois would be playing Michigan for the Rose Bowl berth.  
Three days later, swinging from one to the other, Guenther held the Glasnost commitment (Raycom might have acted sooner, but had to handle the OSU put-down, carefully). Three days later, the All American Bowl, once in hand, was slipping away

hours after the weak showing at Michigan. And then, following feverish weekend talks, Illinois received thumbs-up on both.

Now it's up to the Illini football team to defeat Northwestern. There is considerable pressure on the team to accomplish that because Raycom, poised to sell the Glasnost Bowl in an international market, is gambling on putting two bowl teams on the field in Moscow... not a 5-5 team vs. the national champion.

As one UI official said, "It's back in Mackovic's lap. He's got to get this team ready to play Northwestern. With so much on the game, I'm sure the attitude will not be the same as the last two years."

In his Chicago office this week, Guenther has his fingers crossed. For two months he's been chasing a dream. He still has to wait to see if it blooms full flower.

"THIS GLASNOST THING is just amazing," he said by telephone. "You'll understand this better later, but the U.S. state department is amazed, from a cultural exchange standpoint, at the willingness of the Soviet Union to let 2,500 U.S. citizens come trooping into Moscow. I don't think we fully realize the ramifications of what we've done. They've never seen anything like it."

Guenther saw the possibilities two months ago when schools were lining up to play USC. Miami wanted the slot, but Raycom was more interested in an entry from the large land grant universities that dominate the nation's breadbasket. The Big Ten came naturally because of its Rose Bowl link.

"I was supposed to attend a Division I meeting of athletic directors in Kansas City Oct. 10," said Guenther, "but I felt it was real important to fill a hole in our basketball TV package. We had no carrier for the Illini network in Chicago. Because of the university's contract with Raycom, they sent Ken Haines to Chicago, and we managed to get Channel 66 to carry 10 games, giving us 21 altogether in the city this season."

"I got to know Haines. I was also aware that ABC would carry the Glasnost Bowl, and I knew Denny Swanson (sports CEO for ABC-TV) because he is an Illinois graduate. We had good relationships with the key people. We were in a good position although it appeared that Ohio State had the game."

"When I talked to Haines, I sold Mackovic and the things he had done to uplift Illinois. I told him this is the kind of program that everyone can be proud of, a program on the rise."

There are risks connected with the Moscow trip. Southern Cal, 9-0, has virtually as many returning

starters as Illinois, and figures to be even better in 1989 if coach Larry Smith can replace quarterback Rodney Peete. An Illini loss could set the team back at the outset of Mackovic's second season. And the second UI game is at Colorado, which lost to Oklahoma 17-14 and Nebraska 7-0 this season.

"WE ARE COUNTING on this team being able to play in Moscow and recover from whatever happens," said Guenther. "It's a challenge. It's also a great opportunity."

If the Buckeyes of Ohio State are disappointed, they are consoled by the realization that this will probably become an annual affair and the payoff, a few years down the road, could be considerably greater than it will be for Illinois. International sales could skyrocket and provide huge revenue for the lucky participants, and a rule will certainly be passed at the NCAA convention to allow teams to compete without it counting against their 11-game schedule.

But, barring the kind of boycotts that prevented the U.S. and Russia from competing against each other in two Olympic Games, Illinois and USC will be the first to attain this kind of exposure. No other football team can be the first to be televised throughout the USSR on Soviet TV, throughout Europe and who knows where else.