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Washington looking to shift culture of Illinois recruiting

Lovie Smith continues shifting the culture with his newest addition.

By [Mariah Guzman](#) | [@MariahLGuzman](#) | May 22, 2020, 9:05am EDT ⚙️



Twitter: [@Ash3Washington](#)

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — On Tuesday, Ashton Washington was announced as the first African-American female staff member in the *history* of Illinois Football.

Before taking the position as Director of High School Relations for Illinois, the 23-year-old worked for the **XFL**'s Houston Roughnecks as a business and gameday operations specialist.

“Ashton Washington brings a unique skill set to the Smith Center, really something no one else in the building has at this time,” said head coach Lovie Smith in a statement. “She is high energy, extremely organized, and brings a different perspective in how we will engage with recruits when they are on the University of Illinois campus.”

Without a choice, the Houston native was surrounded by football growing up because of her father and brothers. But her love for the sport wasn't there right away.

As a young girl, she would even go as far as trying to get in trouble to get out of going to games and practices. But looking back on those days, surrounded by all boys in her family, Washington sees how it really helped shape her into this business.

“Just with that, it’s taught me how to be tough in the game of football,” Washington in a conference call Wednesday.

While she may not be down on the field, the business aspect of the sport still requires the same mental game.

‘As long as I’m in football’

In high school, the recruiting process of football players caught her eye. One of those players was **Steven Sims Jr.**, now a wide receiver for the Washington Redskins.

“For him, I was kind of watching the backdrop and learning from his recruitment process of what to do with an athlete that doesn’t have any offers on the table.”

It jumpstarted her passion.

“You could pay me \$5 in the day to go out and scout, recruit, talk, whatever you need me to do. As long as I’m in football.”

Washington’s history with football proves she has the talent and drive that Illinois wants, and the news of her addition to the Smith Center received nothing but positive feedback on social media.

But many Illinois fans raised the question of how someone from Texas will be able to help Illinois recruit, especially in-state, an area that the program has lacked during Smith’s era. From 2018-2021, six BIG programs landed a top 10 player from the state of Illinois. Where the Illini have had a total of eight in-state recruits during that time, none of them in the top ten, and not one in-state recruit in the 2020 class.

Washington is aware of the divide it brings, and discussed changing the Illini’s culture in a recent Zoom call with Smith.

“When I walk into high schools in Illinois, I’m expecting to see coaches with Illinois mugs on their desks,” Washington said. “That’s how much I want to build that in-state love and relationship.”

But it's not only an opportunity for Washington as a trailblazer, but a way for Illinois to build its staff and become more effective in recruiting.

"Football never stops. Recruiting never stops. Look at my life, it's a full circle now."

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