

ILLINOIS FIGHTING ILLINI FOOTBALL

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Daniel Barker's game-winning catch was one for the books

Daniel Barker and Brandon Peters describe the game-winning touchdown against Michigan State

By Mariah Guzman | @MariahLGuzman | Nov 13, 2019, 11:14am EST ⚙️



Mike Carter-USA TODAY Sports

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — Illinois has had its best season yet under Lovie Smith, and with that, comes better opportunities for young players.

One of those young players is sophomore tight end **Daniel Barker**, who scored the game-winning touchdown against Michigan State this past Saturday.

“It meant a lot for me to just be as young as I am and come out and make history how I did,” said Barker, helping send Illinois to its first Bowl game under Lovie Smith and first since 2014.

This was Barker's third touchdown this season, but the one against the Spartans is at the top of his list. As a freshman, he played all twelve games, but only had three starts at tight end. But with the graduation of **Austin Roberts**, the transfer of **Lou Dorsey** to Memphis, and **Luke**



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Ford not given immediate eligibility, Illinois paved way for Barker to be firmly put at the starting tight end list.

When it happened, Barker said it felt great, but he was also aware of the responsibilities of being given that spot.

"I knew I had to step up and be a leader for the team," Barker said.

And how he chooses to step up is simply put. "Making plays when my name is called and doing all the right things on and off the field."

Going back to Saturday's game, Barker said he felt the team knew how to handle being down 28-3, saying that they have been in situations like that before.

Michigan's defense performed well, which exposed Illinois' weaker points. Quarterback Brandon Peters said he didn't play his best ball in the first half but coming into the second half, he said the team was able to adjust to what Michigan State was doing, and started calling the right plays.

Illinois had fought through an incredible comeback, but the score was still 30-34, with five seconds left on the clock at the Spartans five-yard line.

Peters described what he saw on that play, "Normally it's our 2-point play, try to hit the flat right away, we know they played zone coverage in the corner kinda sat on the flat. So I just looked to the back of the end zone, kept my eyes working, kept moving, and luckily the corner kinda flowed with me and DJ (Barker) just kinda sat in the spot and I found him," Peters said.

Baker explained the same moment for him, "As the play started I was the first read, but the safety beat me to the pylon so I did my responsibility to find the open spot." Barker said connecting with the ball was like second nature.



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Daniel Barker catches the game-winner for Illinois vs Michigan State

The [#Illini](#) came back from 25 points down to get the W



And for Peters, it was an emotional moment, “I got pretty emotional after that...just the way we fought back in that moment, there was definitely a lot of built up emotions with that catch,” he said.

When asking Barker what the moment afterwards was like for him, he paused for a moment before giving an answer.

“I kinda blacked out walking back to the sidelines knowing I caught the game-winning touchdown. I was excited knowing that I made a big-time play, in a big-time game, in a big-time moment.”

Barker does remember walking over to Lovie Smith on the sidelines who embraced him, Barker said he thanked Smith and told him, “I know this is what you brought me here for.”