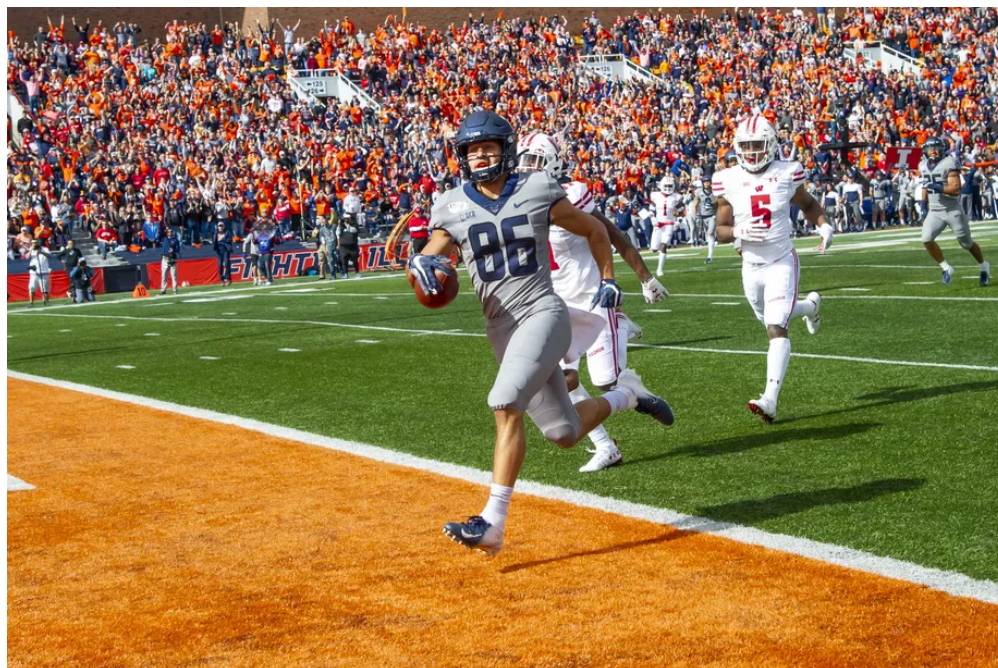




Donny Navarro is getting his opportunity

The wide receiver's big moment has put him in the spotlight.

By [Mariah Guzman](#) | [@MariahLGuzman](#) | Oct 23, 2019, 11:05am EDT ⚙️



Patrick Gorski-USA TODAY Sports

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — If you didn't know who **Donny Navarro** was before Saturday's game against Wisconsin, you know him now.

"All I wanted was an opportunity to be able to show what I can do," said Navarro, who transferred to Illinois as a preferred walk-on.

And on Homecoming against the No. 6 team in the nation, he showed what he's capable of. Navarro, a sophomore, was the first player to tally a touchdown in the first half on Wisconsin this season — also marking his first career touchdown.



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.@donnynavarro24 with his first career touchdown on a 48-yard pass from Brandon Peters

Badgers 10, #Illini 7 | 5:53 2Q

GIF

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Navarro's college career started at Valparaiso, but he wasn't offered any scholarships when he decided to transfer away. But he said Illinois had always been a top choice for him, being a Naperville native and Nequa Valley alum, so when he was offered a preferred walk-on spot, he happily took it.

"Back in high school Illinois had always been the dream school. Obviously, me seeing Mikey [Dudek] at my high school do it...I was kinda like wow that's exactly where I want to be," said Navarro.

Illinois' coaching staff, including head coach Lovie Smith, praises its walk-on program, mostly because several walk-ons *have* ended up with scholarships — just not right away.

In August, redshirt-freshman **Ethan Tabel** was awarded a full scholarship. Two months later, Tabel, Illinois starting long snapper, snapped for **James McCourt**'s game-winning 39-yard field goal to upset the Badgers.

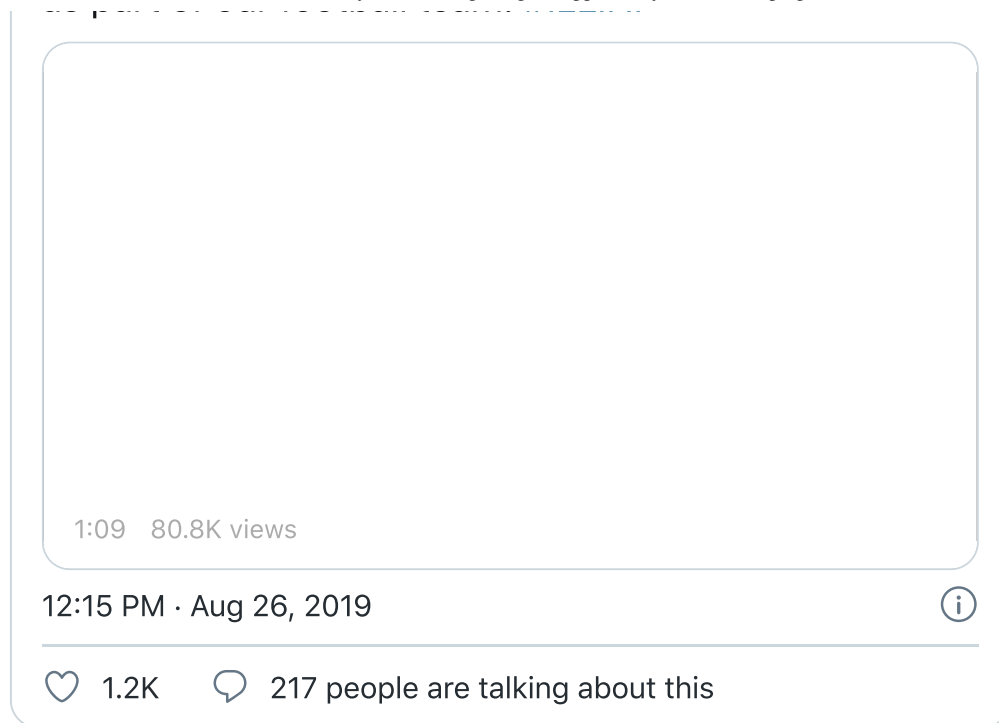


Lovie Smith ✓

@LovieSmith



Couldn't be more proud of @ethan_tabel, this is well earned. We're lucky to have such a hard working man as part of our football team! #ILLINI



But when presented with the thought of following in Tabel's footsteps and possibly getting a scholarship next year, Navarro said that wasn't his biggest concern.

"Right now my concern is getting better each day," Navarro said. "Looking at film everyday and practicing hard. Doing any extra work that I can."

Sitting Out

Due to NCAA transfer eligibility rules, Navarro was forced to sit out the 2018 season, which he said was "tough" and "was almost heartbroken not being able to be out there" during the Illini's 4-8 campaign.

But he won't describe it as a 'down year.' Instead, he took all of that time to catch up, prepare, and learn what he needed to know about the offense.

"Your ears need to be perked up all the time and listen to everything that's going on so when you get your opportunity you can know what to do and be prepared."

Stuck on the sidelines, Navarro noticed several differences between his time at Valpo and in Champaign, especially in terms of expectations for players.

"There's less room for mistakes [with Illinois]," Navarro said. "You have to be very sharp at all times. When they demand that it's for the best, and it brings out the best in me."

Extra Work

Illinois practices for about three hours a day during the season, but Navarro says he puts in even more time beyond that. He explains that it's important for him to feel as if he improves every week and makes sure his pinpoint and footwork are sharp — even if he isn't regularly on the field.

“Nobody sees it. Nobody talks about it. I hope that this is just the beginning for him.”

And now, Navarro's success — and effort — is not going unnoticed, especially by his teammates.

“People don't know this but every single day Donny is in the indoor [facility] working on his releases,” said wide receiver **Josh Imatorbhebhe**. “Nobody sees it. Nobody talks about it. I hope that this is just the beginning for him.”

Even in the process of reporting for this story, Navarro was one of the last players off the practice field.

Navarro veered away from solely talking about football during our conversation, too. He brought up academics, and how Illinois' prestige and communications program had something to do with him making the jump to the University.

Unlike most college students, Navarro even said he works on assignments *early* in the week to assure himself they will be done by the time they're due.

“Time management is everything. Any little opportunity I have to chip away at an assignment or go to office hours is one thing that is big for me.”

But, let's be real: You don't know who Donny Navarro is because of his academics, practice time, or because he sat out last year.

You know him because of his big touchdown that set the table for the upset. A moment he said hasn't yet set in.

“I haven't sat down and thought about it just because I'm so busy all the time,” Navarro said.

“The reaction from my family and hugging my mom after the game, the kind of emotions I had.

“You work so hard, and put so many hours into moments like those. So to see that result that we had is very fulfilling.”

Whether Navarro’s breakout moment is a turning point for him — or the program — is yet to be seen.

But, hey, at least you know who he is now.

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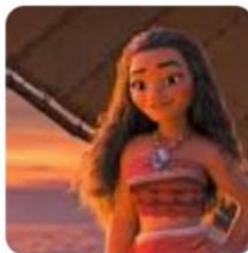
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