

Mark Smith makes his choice; it's Illinois

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE – An incredible journey that started last summer when he was a Missouri baseball commit came to an equally incredible end Wednesday evening when **Edwardsville basketball point guard Mark Smith** announced in a press conference at Edwardsville's Lucco-Jackson Gym that attracted the attention of media representative from the Metro St. Louis area and from the Champaign-Urbana area that he had chosen to attend the University of Illinois and play for new men's basketball coach Brad Underwood.

“This has been a crazy time for my family,” Smith, who was named Illinois' Mr. Basketball and as Gatorade's Illinois Player of the Year following a season that saw him help the Tigers to the Southwestern Conference title and to the IHSA Class 4A Normal Super-Sectional, where they were eliminated by eventual Class 4A runner-up Chicago Simeon, said about the recruiting process that saw Smith's games be attended by former Illinois coach John Groce, Kansas State coach Bruce Weber, Ohio State coach Thad Matta and former Indiana coach Tom Crean and in-home visits from Michigan State coach Tom Izzo and Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski, “but the recruiting process has been an exciting time. Through this experience, I have met incredible coaches and assistant coaches. I enjoyed getting to know them and I greatly appreciate the time they spent recruiting me.

“Throughout the process, there was one school that stood out above the rest that had everything I was looking for, a world-class academic reputation, a great history and tradition and a style of play that is exciting and offers me the opportunity to be at the start of something big and leave my mark in leading one of the best college programs back to the top again.”

At this point, Smith took off the Edwardsville basketball jacket he was wearing and put on a baseball cap, along with the shirt he had on underneath the jacket, to reveal he was heading to Illinois to the delight of Tiger and Illini fans that were in Lucco-Jackson Gym to hear the announcement.

“It was difficult,” Smith said in an interview following the news conference about the recruiting process that blossomed in mid-season when Smith began attracting attention from across the nation, “but Illinois showed me a lot of love; I mean, coach Underwood is excited about me playing for him and he's got a good plan – he's got a blueprint for me and they have good players now and good players coming in, so it's going to be an exciting time.

“It was a tough decision, but when I took my unofficial and official visits, I learned a lot – getting up to the campuses and meeting the coaches – that really played a big part.”

“It's been a long process,” said Smith's father, Metro East Lutheran boys basketball coach Anthony Smith, who accompanied Smith – with his mom Yvonne, sister Maria and younger brother A.J. - on the dais when Mark Smith announced his decision, about the recruiting process. “At times, it was really hectic, but it was fun for Mark; we were having a good time with it, but it was a good thing. We tried to have a little fun with it; it got the point where there were so many schools calling and were like, 'OK, we've got to wind this thing down.'”

“We went from mid-major Northern Illinois, Wright State and SIUE to Tom Izzo, (John) Callipari (Kentucky's basketball coach), and Mike Krzyzewski, so it was a good process; we saw every major school in the country. It's been a great process; I think Mark made a great choice. We talked on Sunday, we called (Illinois player) Malcolm Hill; Malcolm and Mark are good friends and Malcolm is like his big brother, so they did some talking. He felt it was just a good place for him.”

Smith is relieved that the process has come to an end. “We can put the phones away,” Smith said. “I can get some sleep; me and Mark can get some too.”

“Good for Mark,” said Tiger coach Mike Waldo. “He's done a good job of trying to get better each year, he's worked hard and improved every year; he had a great year this year and he's a really good teammate. I think the fact that all of his teammates were here for him and were generally happy for his success I think says a lot about him.

“Mark just did a good job of improving each year – good for him. You know, if you're a good athlete and you work hard, good things happen for you.”

Smith averaged 21.9 points per game for the 2016-17 season, a season that saw him join teammates A.J. Epenesa and Oliver Stephen reach the 1,000-point plateau, and shot 60.7 percent from the floor, including 70.1 percent from two-point range and 37.6 percent from behind the three-point arc and 82 percent from the free-throw line while averaging 8.2 rebounds per game, 8.41 assists per game and 2.13 steals per game.

Smith's signing with the Illini could be the start of a new era for the UI basketball program, and it's a decision Waldo fully supports. “I think Mark's glad to be going to Illinois,” Waldo said. “I think he really likes the coach (Underwood) and players and he's looking forward to be playing in their system. Mark has a lot of skill and he's a really smart guy and he was able to do a lot of things on the floor; he was very much fun to coach.

“Mark's a very good playmaker and he sees the floor very well; he's a very unselfish player. He deserves the success he's received.”

“I've developed into a better basketball player,” Smith said. “I'm going to get an education, but I'm going in to try to win a Big Ten championship and get into the (NCAA) tournament; hopefully, I'll be able to go into the NBA Draft at some point.

“It's been an amazing process; I thank God for giving me the opportunities – I'm speechless. I'm excited for the future; I'm excited to get out there.”

