

WEEK THIRTEEN
ILLINOIS AT NORTHWESTERN

EVANSTON, Ill. -- With nothing really to play for, and with the Big Ten championship game looming next weekend, Northwestern coach Pat Fitzgerald decided to pull many of his starters in the second half Saturday against rival Illinois.

Fitzgerald stuck with the plan in spite of unexpected tense moments down the stretch.

Clayton Thorson accounted for three touchdowns, Isaiah Bowser rushed for 166 yards on 18 carries and No. 20 Northwestern beat Illinois 24-16 for its seventh straight Big Ten win.

Thorson completed 12 of 18 passes for 110 yards and two TDs. He also ran for a score, and Bowser posted his fourth 100-yard game of the season.

Neither was on the field as the game tightened late.

"You should have heard the headphones," Fitzgerald said of the communication with coordinators Mick McCall and Mike Hankwitz. "Hey, I want ... No. Hey, can I have ... No. But what about ... No.

"Sorry, I apologize to Mick and Hank. But to win our rivalry game with the amount of guys we had out -- and what I didn't allow our coordinators to do -- was awesome by our guys."

The Wildcats (8-4, 8-1, No. 19 in CFP) will face No. 10 Ohio State in the championship game in Indianapolis.

"We've got an unbelievable opportunity in front of us," Fitzgerald said. "I'm fired up to take the Purple to Indy. That's our goal every year, to win the Big Ten West. We've finally gotten over that hump, and now we have an opportunity, a 60-minute opportunity, to take this team to the Rose Bowl."

Illinois (4-8, 2-7) lost for the sixth time in seven games. AJ Bush Jr. completed 23 of 39 passes for 281 yards and a touchdown, and Ricky Smalling finished with seven receptions for 72 yards and a TD.

"Our guys fought hard from start to finish," Illini coach Lovie Smith said. "We left a lot of plays out there would like to have over, but the guys competed."

"We know we need to improve on a lot of things. But I like the way the guys came to work each day."

Northwestern retained the Land of Lincoln Trophy with its fourth straight win in the series, tying its longest winning streak.

"Beating our rival every year has been awesome," said Thorson, who started all four games.

With Illinois driving for a potential tying score, linebacker Paddy Fisher intercepted a Bush pass at the Northwestern 8-yard line with 3:34 remaining. The Wildcats, with TJ Green at quarterback and backups at running back, then ran out the clock.

The Illini have dropped 23 straight and 32 of 33 against teams ranked in the AP poll since beating No. 1 Ohio State in 2007.

Illinois moved the ball effectively -- particularly through the air -- in the first half, but only managed a pair of Chase McLaughlin field goals.

Northwestern was leading 7-6 when it scored on its final two possessions of the first half.

Thorson capped an 11-play, 75-yard drive with a 1-yard sneak. The Wildcats got the ball back with 1:47 left, and Thorson found Riley Lees for a 5-yard TD pass.

Jake Collins added a 25-yard field goal on the opening drive of the second half to make it 24-6.

FINISHING STRONG

Although the West Division title was clinched two weeks ago at Iowa, Thorson said the last two games were far from meaningless. "We never wanted to let off the gas," he said. "We never wanted to back into the Big Ten championship game."

NO CHANCE

Fitzgerald was asked if there was a chance Thorson might re-enter the game if Illinois had tied it. "One hundred percent, no," he said. "One million percent, no. Infinity, no."

THE TAKEAWAY

Illinois: The Illini are one of the youngest teams in college football, and they played like it. They had explosive plays throughout, but had to mostly settle for field goals because of mistakes at the wrong time. Smalling is elusive and routinely broke free in the secondary. But he struggled to catch the ball and had nearly as many drops as receptions.

Northwestern: Despite saying they wouldn't overlook Illinois because it was a rivalry game, the Wildcats clearly didn't have the same fire as in previous weeks. Bowser was shut down in the third quarter and Thorson was replaced by Green early in the fourth.

"I felt like we could win with the personnel we had in the game," Fitzgerald said.

Final	1	2	3	4	T
ILL	3	3	0	10	16
NW	7	14	3	0	24

Scoring Summary -----

	ILL	NW
FIRST QUARTER		
NW TD 5:53		
Bennett Skowronek 8 Yd pass from Clayton Thorson (Jake Collins Kick)		
9 plays, 92 yards, 3:25	0	7
ILL FG 0:32		
Chase McLaughlin 21 Yd Field Goal		
15 plays, 85 yards, 5:15	3	7
SECOND QUARTER		
ILL FG 8:31		
Chase McLaughlin 29 Yd Field Goal		
13 plays, 49 yards, 4:58	6	7
NW TD 3:43		
Clayton Thorson 1 Yd Run (Jake Collins Kick)		
11 plays, 75 yards, 4:48	6	14
NW TD 0:17		
Riley Lees 5 Yd pass from Clayton Thorson (Jake Collins Kick)		
9 plays, 80 yards, 1:30	6	21
THIRD QUARTER		
NW FG 10:03		
Jake Collins 25 Yd Field Goal		
12 plays, 68 yards, 4:57	6	24
FOURTH QUARTER		
ILL FG 13:22		
Chase McLaughlin 26 Yd Field Goal		
15 plays, 80 yards, 6:39	9	24
ILL TD 7:57		
Ricky Smalling 10 Yd pass from AJ Bush Jr. (Chase McLaughlin Kick)		
8 plays, 81 yards, 2:43	16	24

Team Stats	ILL	NW
First Downs	24	19
Total Yards	435	371
Total Plays	71	64
Avg Gain Per Play	6.1	5.8
Net Yards Rushing	154	261
Rushes	32	46
Yards Per Rush	4.8	5.7
Net Yards Passing	281	110
Comp-Att	23-39	12-18
Yards Per Pass	7.2	6.1
Times Sacked	0	1
Yds Lost To Sacks	0	-11
Interceptions	1	0
Punts	3	4
Punt Average	41.0	45.8
Penalties	7	1
Penalty Yards	66	15
Fumbles	0	0
Fumbles Lost	0	0
Possession	31:06	28:54

Individual Stats

RUSHING						
	Rush	Yds	Avg	TD	Long	
ILL						
Reggie Corbin	13	78	6.0	0	24	
AJ Bush Jr.	16	56	3.5	0	9	
Ra'Von Bonner	3	20	6.7	0	14	
NW						
Isaiah Bowser	18	166	9.2	0	55	
Chad Hanaoka	8	48	6.0	0	14	
John Moten IV	8	47	5.9	0	29	
Solomon Vault	5	7	1.4	0	4	
TJ Green	1	2	2.0	0	2	
Clayton Thorson	3	-2	-0.7	1	8	
Jelani Roberts	1	-3	-3.0	0	0	
Team	2	-4	-2.0	0	0	

PASSING

ILL	Comp	Att	Yds	Y/A	TD	Int	QBRat
AJ Bush Jr.	23	39	281	7.2	1	1	58.2
NW	Comp	Att	Yds	Y/A	TD	Int	QBRat
Clayton Thorson	12	18	110	6.1	2	0	86.1

RECEIVING

ILL	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD	Long
Ricky Smalling	7	72	10.3	1	18
Sam Mays	4	69	17.3	0	28
Dominic Stampley	4	69	17.3	0	28
Caleb Reams	3	46	15.3	0	21
Reggie Corbin	4	22	5.5	0	8
Trenard Davis	1	3	3.0	0	3
NW	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD	Long
Riley Lees	3	25	8.3	1	11
Ramaud Chiaokhiao-Bowman	1	25	25.0	0	25
Charlie Fessler	1	15	15.0	0	15
Isaiah Bowser	1	14	14.0	0	14
Cameron Green	1	9	9.0	0	9
Kyric McGowan	1	9	9.0	0	9
Bennett Skowronek	1	8	8.0	1	8
Chad Hanaoka	1	8	8.0	0	8
Berkeley Holman	1	4	4.0	0	4
JJ Jefferson	1	-7	-7.0	0	0