

Illinois recruit delivers thrills to 2,600 at UIS

Robinson's 7-foot Leonard dunks St. Teresa

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Being the 7-foot center of attention has meant a lot of pushing, shoving and occasional verbal challenges for University of Illinois-bound Meyers Leonard this basketball season.

Tuesday night's Class 2A supersectional at the University of Illinois Springfield was no exception, but the Robinson High School senior kept his cool for the most part.

But as the Robinson Maroons were pulling away from the Decatur St. Teresa Bulldogs for an eventual 81-60 victory, Leonard saw a chance to make a statement for the near-capacity crowd estimated at 2,600 at The Recreation and Athletic Center.

Dribbling down the floor and toward the free-throw lane early in the fourth quarter, Leonard took flight just inside the free-throw line and fired home a one-handed dunk over St. Teresa's 6-1 senior, Matt Moran.

"About half-court, I saw an open lane," Leonard said. "I was like, 'First of all, this guy (Moran) had already been talking trash.' Then I thought, 'He's going to try to take the charge, so I'll have to jump over him.' And I did."

Added Robinson coach Bob Coffman: "That was probably pretty neat. It was probably a charge, but the referees probably liked it so much they didn't want to call a charge."

With Robinson outscoring St. Teresa 50-27 in the second half, the Maroons (25-5) punched their ticket to the state final four in Peoria. Ranked eighth in the final Associated Press Class 2A state poll, Robinson will face No. 1 Chicago Hales Franciscan (28-2) in the second semifinal at about 8:15 p.m. Friday.

Weber in house

But with his future college coach — Illinois' Bruce Weber — occupying a front-row seat near the Robinson bench, Leonard turned in Tuesday's singular highlight in a game that drew far and away the biggest basketball crowd in TRAC's three-year history.

Yet Leonard, who totaled 21 points and eight rebounds, finished as Robinson's No. 2 scorer on this night. Senior guard Ben Jones scored a game-high 29 points — including 12 in a decisive third quarter that saw Robinson change a 33-31 halftime deficit into a 55-43 advantage.

"He played a heck of a game," Leonard said of Jones, who averages a team-high 19 points per game to Leonard's 17. That's how he is all the time. He's strong and athletic. He can take over a game, period."

But Jones said he and Leonard make each other successful, including Tuesday night.

"It was a typical night," Jones said of the Bulldogs' defensive focus on Leonard. "A lot of guys don't get to ref 7-footers very often in our 2A (games). Meyers keeps his cool most of the time, although sometimes he might get a little out of control."

"I know I'll get passes if Meyers is getting double- or triple-teamed. And if I'm going to penetrate and they come to me, then he's going to be open. It all works out."

Bulldogs' run ends

Tuesday's outcome broke a 29-game winning streak for the 29-2 Bulldogs, who were trying to earn their first trip to state since 1986. Nick Sanford, St. Teresa's 6-4 senior who kept a body on Leonard much of the night, said the Bulldogs had to make it as tough as possible on the 7-foot, 215-pound all-stater.

"(Leonard) was what we expected; he hit just about every shot he took," said Sanford, who had a game-high 19 points before fouling out in the fourth quarter. "He's just a really good player.

"But Jones is a good player, too. It's not just (Leonard). They work well together."

Leonard was 7-for-9 from the floor and Jones was 9-for-16 as the Maroons finished 26-for-40 for 65 percent. St. Teresa shot almost 60 percent from the field in the first half but faded after intermission to finish at 40 percent for the night.

Leonard began to set the tone after halftime, getting one of his five blocked shots and then scoring inside to tie it 33-33.

It launched a 17-4 Robinson run that was capped when Leonard dunked home his own rebound, was fouled and added the free throw for a 48-37 lead with 3 minutes 36 seconds left in the third period.

"I don't think it was necessarily that," said St. Teresa coach Bill Ipsen, referring to Leonard asserting himself. "The game plan kind of got away from us. We wanted to run the basketball and try to get to the foul line.

"We took some shots from the outside, and they weren't falling. But I told the guys, they'll still remember how far they got and what they did, including 29 in a row."

Leonard said he's gradually learned to deal with physical play on the high school level, even though he knows it will be much tougher at Illinois.

"With all the tough defensive play they had, I tried to battle my way through it," Leonard said. "I tried to get myself established, even though they brought two or three guys at me sometimes.

"As long as I play hard and do my thing, I think I'll be all right."

Dave Kane can be reached at 788-1544.

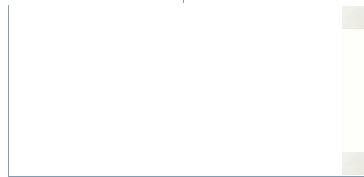
Comments (18)

Mark Observed

6 hours ago

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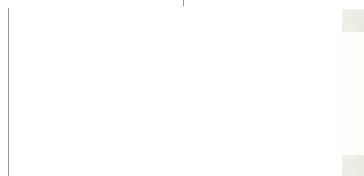
'Leonard said hes gradually learned to deal with physical play on the high school level, even though he knows it will be much tougher at Illinois.' We can only hope he learns that lesson better than Tisdale has.

grsetze

5 hours ago

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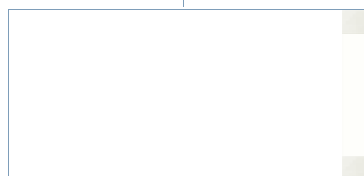
You know, everybody likes to give Tisdale a shot, let me ask you this.'Did you ever play and start for the University of Illinois?' No, I didn't think so. Give the big guy his due, try saying something positive about him, just once. Thank-You.

makesnosense

4 hours ago

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Great another Nick Smith ,Tisdale player.

sadiedinkers

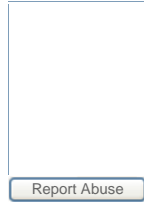
3 hours ago

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7', 215 pounds? Man, that is a skinny guy.
loose cannon
3 hours ago
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This kid is NOT another Nick Smith! He can play! His arrival may allow Weber to move Tisdale to forward next year allowing his strength 'outside shooting' to shine.
the beach
3 hours ago
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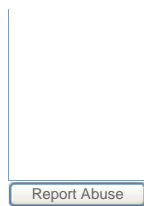


A bad season and such negativity. Give the kid a break. This is why if I was a Top High School player I would never put Illinois on my list with fans like this. I bet in 04-05 you acted like the biggest Illini fans ever. Just jump off the band wagon, hopefully while it is moving.
Illini457
3 hours ago
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Leonard is a beast. He has a ridiculous amount of athleticism, a frame that he will grow into and, most importantly, a bit of a swagger. He'll force his way onto the court, even as a freshman. That's no small feat for a center in the Big Ten.

The dunk over the St. T kid should end any comparisons to Nick Smith or Tisdale. That's not a knock on those guys, it's just that Leonard is a completely different player.
Illini457
3 hours ago
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Also, that wasn't a 'near capacity' crowd. It was sold out. They were turning people away an hour before the game.
BillyZabka84
3 hours ago
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Chainsaw 2
cb1986
2 hours ago
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Hey Mark Observed....thats a clueless comment. Tisdale is certainly not the problem this year. 11 and 7 is pretty good. So hes not the strongest guy in college ball, but hes worked his butt for over 3 years now to be a starter for high level division 1 basketball team. And he has certainly learned to play much tougher in college ball. Get over yourself
NoSpinHere
2 hours ago
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I was a big Tisdale supporter...at least for as long as I could be. Look, the guy can't rebound, he can't play defense and struggles many times on offense. He does shoot good free throws though. Leonard will replace Tisdale in a heartbeat. Tis just doesn't really seem to care anymore and that's fine, but there is no room on a team for a player like that. I would set Davis, Tisdale and McCamey all in a row on the bench next year. The new players coming in will be pumped up and trying to earn a spot. I don't think that these 3 guys can contend with that.
reality
2 hours ago
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Tisdale has stepped up more then I ever thought he would/could.....sure he probably isn't an NBA player but he is one million times better then Nick Smith ever was on his best day! When the game is on the line.....I want the ball in Tisdales hands.....period!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
thatguy
56 minutes ago
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One thing me and everyone around noticed is the 6'5' kid from St. T phycally manhandle Leonard all night long. Leonard didn't like the physical play and showed it more than once. I'm not saying he doesn't have talent cause he does but Robinson faithful talk of NBA is a bit premature. The kid has a long ways to go. But, like gretzse said, he's going to Illinois and I didn't. I'm just making a observation.
Liberty_First
51 minutes ago
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The place is normally empty except for the flood of mandatory student fees going to the place. Few of the players on these teams will end up at UIS. It is a waste of funds to sponsor this hobby.

wiser one

42 minutes ago

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It will be nice to finally have someone aggressive in the paint at Illinois. It's been a few years since we had that.

reality

Yes Tisdale is one we would want to have the ball at Illinois but that's our problem at Illinois right now. He's not a leader just an average to above average follower.

bulldogbaseball

32 minutes ago

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Robinson's Leonard will step into the center role for the Illini next year. That doesn't necessarily mean he'll be a starter. And as far as bashing Tisdale goes...that kid has worked his butt off to get to where he's at. He's one of the top shooting centers in all of college basketball. You can't bash the kid just because he doesn't have the genetics to get bulky. Plain and simple, he can shoot an 18-footer over anyone in the country. He won't make it to the big time; but if he chooses to pursue his basketball career, he can be a very successful European center.

SuperFan

31 minutes ago

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I'm thinking Meyres is gonna beef up some by next November and I personally would love to see him take over the 5 spot and let Tis' play Power Forward full time. Twin Towers as it were.

Davis should be about the 7th guy down the bench that Weber turns to next year. If Mac learns how to play D, look out! That means they still have DJ, Brandon, Tyler, Joseph, Jerome, Crandall and even Bill Cole to use before Davis should be called upon. And, situationally, Jeff Jordan may even come in before Captain Pouts-a-Lot.

flavemeister

10 minutes ago

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European center? Jens Kujawa comes to mind. Well, it is almost Easter and I must have marshmallow Peeps on my mind!

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