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6-5 junior Doug Wallen is part of a deep and talented 2019-20 cast. (Photo by David Proeber, The Pantagraph)

[Season Preview Q&A with Illinois Wesleyan Head Coach Ron Rose](#)

BQ: "Season #14...does it feel like it?"

RR: "It does not feel like 14 years, wow. It seems like about 2 years ago Coach Bridges announced me as the coach. When I think back on all the teams I've had the opportunity to coach, and all the players, I feel very lucky. I guess though when I look at my picture from my first year I can see that it has in fact been 14 years unfortunately."

BQ: "Let's start with last year. Your team won 18 games, but I know from some of our past conversations you are a bit frustrated, if that is the right word, with the way last season played out. What are your thoughts looking back on 2018-19?"

RR: "I couldn't be more proud of how we rallied together at the end of the season, but at the same time, certainly it also hurts to think about last year. We had a really good team last year, and we showed we could play with anybody in the country. But for whatever reason we hit that tough patch at the end of the first semester and, unfortunately, we lost some games that we absolutely could have won. Our inability to get the big stop is what ultimately led to our demise and the difference between 18 wins and maybe, who knows, 24. That is the part that hurts – that we had that ability. And that is on me. My job is to get the most out of every single team and while we did that last year a lot of the time, we didn't others. The part that I look back on with a lot of pride though is that we competed until the end. That team wore the Illinois Wesleyan jersey with tremendous pride."

BQ: "You really lost a lot with the graduation of Brady Rose, Colin Bonnett, Jason Gregoire, and Danny Baker. What did those guys mean to your program?"

RR: "These guys were just so rock-solid. You knew what you were going to get from these 4 every night out. They represented our school and program with class and they were part of a lot of wins at Illinois Wesleyan. We certainly lost a lot when these young men graduated and we will miss them."

BQ: "Your son, Brady, is currently the leading scorer for the Dusseldorf Giants in the German Pro B league. Over the course of the last 5 years, I have tried to not ask you any Dad questions – only Coach questions. But with your Dad hat on for one question, can you talk a bit about what it's like to see Brady starting this new chapter of his life?"

RR: "I am really proud that Brady was willing to step out and do this. I have had a front-row seat since he was little to see how hard he has worked to give himself this opportunity. We have had a lot of really hard workers at Illinois Wesleyan over the years, and he is as hard of a worker as anybody. He has spent hours in the gym and weight room. I know last year was really hard on Brady because he grew up with the Titans and it was a huge deal for him to put on that jersey. As a Dad I'm just very happy he has gotten this chance to fulfill a dream he has always had. He had the courage to step out and pursue it. I am very thankful to Adam Dauksas ('06) and Zach Freeman ('07), who were both really instrumental in helping Brady navigate the process and figure out how to do this."

BQ: "You had another good recruiting year. Talk a little about the newcomers and some of the key guys IWU fans should keep an eye on."

RR: "We really like this recruiting class. Our goal was to bring in more athleticism – guys who could really run and jump. We also wanted to bring in size. We accomplished these things. It is a well-rounded class with quality perimeter players and quality big guys. This group also has a nice balance of guys who are college-ready now, and others that have a high ceiling down the road. If you're looking at this season, point guard Luke Yoder is really advanced in his understanding of the game. Cody Mitchell

at 6-7 and long and athletic has a unique skill set for a freshman. These two have the potential to play this year and then several other freshmen have a lot of potential in our program. And then we have a transfer – Keondre Schumacher (Division 1 Winthrop). Keondre has the advantage in that he has two years of college basketball under his belt. He brings an element of college basketball experience and an understanding of the intensity needed. He has a unique blend of athleticism and skill.”

BQ: “You’ve been practicing for 3 weeks now. How has the pre-season been?”

RR: “Before practice started, I set some very specific goals of where I wanted the team to be at the end of each week of practice, and so far we have met each of those. It has been a challenge because we have 19 healthy players (1 injured) and of those, 9 are newcomers – 8 freshmen and a transfer. So almost half the players in the gym have never run our system. It has been a lot of teaching. But in the last week, the light bulb has really turned on for a lot of the newcomers to where they are understanding what we are trying to accomplish – we are able to move much quicker now.”

BQ: “You actually return a lot more talent from last season than most people probably realize. Can you talk about some of those players?”

RR: “We did lose a lot – 4 guys who started at the end of last year, and our starting 1, 2, and 3 from the previous two years. But we had a 10-man rotation at the end of last year, so while we graduated 4, we do return 6 with experience. Most people didn’t look at us as young last year, but actually, we were as young as anyone in the league in terms of playing freshmen and sophomores – we had 5 underclassmen in the top 10. The experience these guys got last year is big for this year. You start with Grant Wolfe at the point guard position. Grant played over 20 minutes per game last season and is prepared to take on a bigger load. You have Doug Wallen. Doug came on really strong last year and his development late was a big part of why we finished so strong. Charlie Bair had a year where he gained valuable experience. He had a big start to the year, then hit a patch where he struggled a bit and lost some confidence. But what I love about Charlie is that he kept battling and finished strong. Peter Lambesis was our first wing off the bench all year. His defensive abilities allowed him to get on the floor as a freshman. He played a lot of critical minutes for us. And then Matt Leritz, who I thought had had an outstanding year. Unfortunately, Matt has been injured since the summer but hopefully he will be back in a few weeks.”

BQ: “Your team is picked third in the CCIW this year, behind national #2 North Central and #17 Augustana. How do you assess the conference this year?”

RR: “Last year was ridiculous. When you start looking at the quality of teams last year, top to bottom, and the quality in the senior class – just crazy. There is never a down year in the CCIW – the coaches work so hard at this and the quality of the programs is so impressive – but there are transitional years. I think this is a transitional year where many teams have new talent getting a chance. You certainly have North Central with a very experienced team. You have Augustana with several key players back from the CCIW championship team last year. I think like most years, we will see 3 or 4 CCIW teams in the Top 25 poll at different points in the season.”

BQ: "You played another Division I exhibition this year, this time against Southern Illinois. I know the final score is not what you wanted, but what did you take away from that one?"

RR: "Anytime we have the opportunity to play a Division I game, we are going to. Playing at Southern Illinois was a great experience. The game felt bad as it was going on because we got down 10-0 and we certainly didn't shoot well. But what I like is that if you look at the middle 30 minutes of that game, it was even. We actually did a lot of nice things in that game. We got better in those 40 minutes and it was a big part of our preseason development. If you just look at the rebounding numbers, you will see how hard we competed in that game."

BQ: "What do you feel the identity of this team is or will be?"

RR: "We are going to be a very balanced team. For us to be successful, we will have to play very unselfishly. On any given night I think we will have 3 or 4 guys in double figures, and those 3 or 4 will probably be different from game to game. We have to have a defensive mindset, where we are creating some offense from our defense and where there is a level of toughness. We have to be good at the tough things like screening and rebounding. If we are good at the tough things we will have a very good season."

BQ: "What are the keys to the season?"

RR: "We have to establish our roles and then have guys embrace those roles and perform consistently. This is a year where everyone who gets on the floor will need to play well. We will need guys who play tough and smart and hard. The margin for error this season is thinner than in some seasons where we have returned more clearly defined roles coming in. If we embrace roles and being tough, I like our chances."

Depth Chart

(listed in order of IWUhoops.com projection of depth chart position; player comments by Ron Rose)

PG (1):

- [Grant Wolfe, 5-11/185 Jr.](#) – "Comes in having two years of varsity experience under his belt...is poised to make a big jump...understands our system...has gotten more and more comfortable running the team...really crafty with the basketball with an ability to get into the lane and finish plays for himself and create shots for teammates...the last two years has kind of been that steady backup point guard off the bench, but this year I think we will see more of 'Effingham Grant' where he looks to score...and we need that."
- [Luke Yoder, 6-0/170 Fr.](#) – "A hard-nosed freshman that has a great feel for the game...understands how and who to deliver the ball to...defensive-minded point guard that really has a nose for the ball...he handles it, he guards, and he is tough...a guy that is always going to make you better...forcing my hand a bit in thinking about having Grant (Wolfe) and Luke on the floor at the same time some."

- [Bernie Coderre, 6-4/200 Sr.](#) – “Our captain...Bernie is always going to give you absolutely everything he has...the consummate teammate and player...a great perimeter defender...Bernie will find his way on the floor this year in situations where we need a big stop.”

SG (2):

- [Keondre Schumacher, 5-11/175 So.](#) – “Lighting-fast combo guard that is also highly skilled...his shooting ability is a real weapon for us...just needs to get more comfortable with our system...I can’t believe there are any faster players in Division III than Keondre.”
- [Cory Noe, 6-2/175 So.](#) – “Uber competitive shooting guard...can heat up and score a lot of points in a hurry...Cory is just a hooper, plain and simple...can be a shot maker even when well-guarded...as he continues to get stronger you will see him continue to develop.”
- [Lucas Heflen, 6-2/185 Fr.](#) – “In a short time has established himself as a hard worker...an athletic wing than can shoot the ball and get to the basket...we are going to have him start at the point on the JV team this year and we think that will be great for his development.”
- [Ryan Verhulst, 6-3/185 Fr.](#) – “A fantastic spot-up shooter with range...a real gym rat that loves to play.”
- [Ben Grunder, 6-1/190 So.](#) – “A hard worker...a good athlete...comes from a great program at Lincoln...all about the team...will do anything you ask of him.”

G/F (3)

- [Pete Lambesis, 6-4/195 So.](#) – “Athletic, left-handed perimeter player that can play the 1, 2 or 3...earned varsity playing time last year as a freshman because of his defensive ability...can put the ball on the floor and get to the rim...can also shoot the 3...his versatility is a huge weapon for us...we are going to lean heavily on Pete this year.”
- [Gavin Markgraff, 6-4/205 So.](#) – “Incredibly smart player...a gifted communicator on the court...understands the game...big, physical 3 who can shoot it.”
- [Colin Cheaney, 6-4/190 Jr.](#) – “Smooth jumpshot...bouncy...a great teammate...has gotten more aggressive in practice lately which has been great to see.”
- [Sam Painter, 6-4/185 Fr.](#) – “Crazy athletic wing that can handle it...great mid-range game...good court vision...just needs to get comfortable within our system and with how we play...has a bright future ahead of him here.”

F (4)

- [Doug Wallen, 6-5/210 Jr.](#) – “A bouncy, energetic, skilled 4 man...can float to the perimeter...playing with a high level of confidence...can shoot the ball from the outside but has also added the bounce and ability to get to the rim...his continued development will be critical to our team’s success.”
- [Cody Mitchell, 6-7/205 Fr.](#) – “Really talented newcomer that is long and athletic...has the ability to play the 3 or the 4...Cody grew late and was a perimeter player his freshman and sophomore years in high school before he grew to be 6-7...brings a perimeter skill set to the 4 position...plays fearlessly...we are excited about his future.”
- [Brendan Smith, 6-8/200 Fr.](#) – “A long, bouncy post player...plays really hard...has natural instincts on the defensive side of the ball...a tremendous rebounder because he is not afraid of contact...has gained 20 pounds since he has been on campus.”
- [Tommy Nelson, 6-6/205 Fr.](#) – “High motor guy that runs the floor really well...plays with a lot of energy...is really active and has a nose for the ball.”

F/C (5)

- [Charlie Bair, 6-7/220 Jr.](#) – “Has gotten better and better each year...gotten stronger and craftier each year...will give you 100% every second he is on the floor...a fierce competitor with natural leadership ability...not afraid to get in and mix it up...gets tough rebounds in a crowd.”
- [Alex O’Neill, 6-9/245 Sr.](#) – “Has rare physical abilities for a post at our level...can get the top of the square...can provide rim protection for us...can go up above everyone to get big rebounds for us.”
- [Cole Khoury, 6-9/235 Fr.](#) – “A college-ready body...runs the floor...is a sponge in terms of learning...in 3 weeks has improve exponentially but still pretty raw...Grant (Wolfe) recently told me he’s never seen someone improve so much in a short time as Cole...we are excited about his future in our program.”
- [\[Injured/If healthy #1 or #2 F/C\] Matt Leritz, 6-7/235 So.](#) – “Showed a lot of potential as a freshman...he is tough and physical...can score with either hand inside...can step out and shoot it...a fierce competitor...can really rebound the basketball in a crowd...we just need to get him healthy.” [If all goes well, will start practicing 12/1.]

Projected Varsity Rotation

Pos.	Starter	Bench	In the Mix
PG	Grant Wolfe, 5-11 Jr.	Luke Yoder, 6-0 Fr.	Bernie Coderre, 6-4 Sr.
SG	Keondre Schumacher, 5-11 So.	Cory Noe, 6-2 So.	Colin Cheaney, 6-4 Jr.
G/F	Pete Lambesis, 6-4 So.	Gavin Markgraff, 6-4 So.	
F	Doug Wallen, 6-5 Jr.	Cody Mitchell, 6-7 Fr.	
F/C	Charlie Bair, 6-7 Jr.	Alex O’Neill, 6-9 Sr.	<i>Matt Leritz, 6-7 So. (Injured)</i>

Projected JV Starting Lineup

Position	Starter
PG	Lucas Heflen, 6-2 Fr.
SG	Ben Grunder, 6-1 So.
G/F	Sam Painter, 6-4 Fr.
F	Brendan Smith, 6-8 Fr.
F/C	Cole Khoury, 6-9 Fr.

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Final Thoughts

Thanks to Ron Rose for the time he provided to me in the development of this preview and throughout the preseason.

My general observations and thoughts heading into the November 12 season opener:

- The 2019-20 Titans have a lot of talent. The Titans will have 5 players in the rotation that had NCAA scholarship-level opportunities – Keondre Schumacher (D1 transfer), Grant Wolfe (D2 offer), Doug Wallen (D2 offer), Luke Yoder (D2 offer), Alex O’Neill (D2 transfer). The rest of the players in the rotation were heavily recruited by strong Division III and NAIA programs – guys like Pete Lambesis, Matt Leritz, Charlie Bair, Cody Mitchell, Cory Noe, etc. I start here because I don’t think the narrative coming into the season should be “rebuilding year” – there is plenty of talent on this team for a big year.
- That said, every guy in the rotation, in some way, will be in a new role this season. Whether a guy like Grant Wolfe, who played a lot last year but will now be a starter and be looked to as a

scorer; or Doug Wallen, who started last season but will be looked to as a 'go-to guy' now; or the newbies – guys like Keondre Schumacher, Luke Yoder, and Cody Mitchell. No player enters the season ready to assume the same role from the year before.

- Based on the above, I have to believe this is going to be a work-in-progress kind of season. I envision early games, and stretches within games, that look great...and others that look not so great. As Coach Rose said, this season will be all about how guys settle into roles and develop within those roles.
- I really like the thought of how quick, athletic, and defensive minded the Titans will be on the perimeter.
- My biggest question is probably related to how well the Titans will shoot the 3. IWU lost some big-time shooters in Brady Rose, Colin Bonnett, and Jason Gregoire – those guys knocked down open 3s at an impressive clip. The 2019-20 Titans have plenty of good shooters – but will they shoot it well from beyond the arc consistently? If they answer is “yes” I think this will be a big year. If “no” it could be a struggle at times.
- I believe 6-9 Alex O’Neill is the X-factor of all X-factors. Alex was great at the end of his sophomore year; he was really inconsistent last year. Alex having a good season would help this team immeasurably. I think bringing him off the bench is a good call. With all of the size in the CCIW, the Titans will need Alex to come in a bang with other bigs and get big rebounds.
- I’m excited to watch freshmen Luke Yoder and Cody Mitchell develop. I’ve heard great things about each – sounds like both will help this season.

That’s all I got for ya. Enjoy the season, Titans fans. Best of luck to the 2019-20 Titans as they get things rolling tomorrow. It should be another really fun season.

