

Josh Talks

TED Talks have nothing on Illinois Athletic Director and Illinois alumnus Josh Whitman



PHOTO: L. BRIAN STAUFFER

Josh recently addressed members of athletics support student group Illini Pride in a TED-style talk at Foellinger Auditorium. Here's the abridged talk.

By Robin Kaler

I want to talk tonight about Illini pride.

Nineteen years ago, I was a freshman football player. I had just finished my first training camp. I was beat up, sore and tired. It was time to start class. My first class was at 8 a.m. I was a freshman. I didn't know any better.

Classical Civilization 115: Greek and Roman mythology.

I heard through the grapevine it was the most popular class on campus. I walked in, and this place was packed – 1,200 students. Every seat was taken, except the front row, of course. That's where I sat every day for 14 weeks.

I could not understand why almost as many people as I had enrolled in my entire high school were taking this class. Then, the professor walked out on the stage, and I knew instantly why it was so popular. The professor's name was Richard Scanlan; he had been here for

decades. He was nearly 70 years old. He was maybe 5-foot-8, skinny, full head of white hair, big glasses, great smile. He could tell a story like nobody I'd ever met. For the next 14 weeks, I fell in love with mythology. I felt like I was Icarus' best friend, like I had dinner with Zeus, like I went swimming with Poseidon.

On Thursdays, with about 10 minutes left in class, he would disappear from the stage (and) come back out dressed as his alter ego, the priest of Apollo. I don't know what the Greeks thought the priest of Apollo looked like, but Professor Scanlan's version looked a lot like Professor Scanlan. Except, he had a cape and an old sweatshirt with a felt letter "A" that looked like maybe his wife had sewn on the front of it. The priest of Apollo had a lot of powers. One of them was he could see the future. But before he would use his powers for the benefit of our class, he insisted that (we) engage in a cheer – the cheer all of you have heard, "I-L-L...I-N-I."

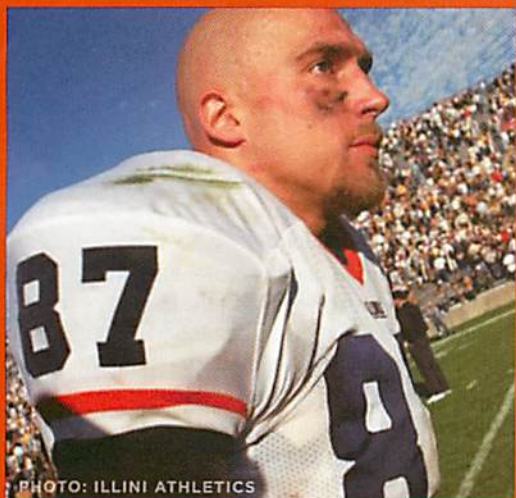


PHOTO: ILLINI ATHLETICS

Josh was a two-time Academic All-American for Illinois. He excelled on and off the field, with Bronze Tablet honors in 2001, and graduating from law school summa cum laude in 2008.

He refused to tell us the future until we made that cheer with so much enthusiasm that it met his level of acceptance. So, we would do it over and over again, until we were as passionate as he felt we needed to be. Then, and only then, he would predict the outcome of that weekend's football game.

Now, the priest of Apollo here at the University of Illinois was, needless to say, a big Illini fan. He did not care if we were playing the Minnesota Golden Gophers or the Minnesota Vikings, we were going to win – every time.

If you look in your record books, you'll see in 1997, my freshman year, 11 times our team took the field, and 11 times we returned to the locker room defeated. Yet every week, (Scanlan) walked out here to the middle of this stage and predicted we were gonna win, and led our entire class in a cheer. So, when I think about Illini pride, I think about Professor Scanlan.

I came back to campus years after I graduated and thanked him. Because as a football player going through what at that point had been the most difficult three months of my life, his willingness to remain confident, optimistic and passionate about our athletic program made all the difference to me. It was an oasis of hope in a very difficult stretch.

I tell you that story because we all need to define for ourselves what Illini pride means. We have a lot of work in front of us, and over the course of this fall we will be announcing bold plans to celebrate our past, to solidify our present and to build for our future.

But we need everybody – everybody in the Illini Nation. As I have said many times, nobody needs to do everything, but everybody needs to do something. So, ask yourself how you intend to show your Illini pride. Show up in the stadium. Make our venues the most intimidating places to play. For some people it might mean writing a check, supporting our scholarship fund or contributing to our building projects. For other people, it might be wearing your orange and blue on Fridays, or flying an Illini flag. Regardless of what you do – do something!

I've heard our athletic program described as a sleeping giant. And it is.

We have over 40,000 students. We have nearly 500,000 living alumni. We live in the fifth-most-populous state in the

Professor Richard Scanlan, dressed as Apollo, to predict the outcome of an Illini game.

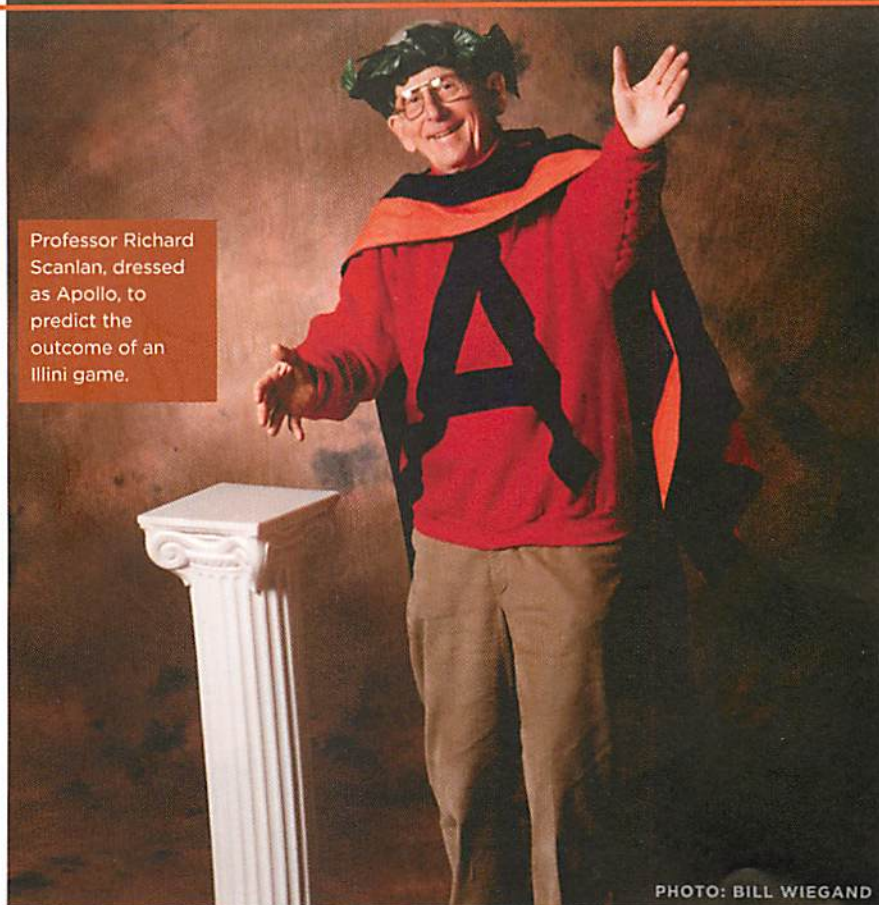


PHOTO: BILL WIEGAND

Union, and we have a tremendous athletic tradition. We have been a sleeping giant.

But my message to all of you – it's time we wake up the giant.

For that to happen, we need everybody in this room. I've had the chance to travel around this state and our country, talking about Illinois athletics. I've seen the enthusiasm in people's eyes. I've felt the fire spreading across our fan base. We need that fire to continue. We need it to resonate in this room, across our campus, and all across the Illini Nation. If we unify, and we energize, and we activate all those people, there is no limit to what we can accomplish.

So often, people say, "I'll do it later, after we're successful. I'll do it after we win the Rose Bowl or go to the Final Four."

That's not good enough. We need to do it now.

We need you now, to help us get to that Final Four, get to that Rose Bowl. The investment has to happen on the front, not the back.

So, ask yourself, what does it mean to you to have Illini pride? Because, when I sat in this room, and I saw that professor

standing on this stage, that embodied it to me.

Optimism. Confidence. Passion.

Professor Scanlan died in 2009. He was 81 years old. He was a friend, a professor and a tried-and-true Illini. It would be very hard for me to leave the stage without paying some tribute to his memory. So, we're going to do three rounds, each one louder than the one before, of our beloved cheer.

And I might just make a prediction for the football game on Saturday.

Here we go. (leads cheer)

Fantastic! Now, here's the prediction. Our Illini are gonna win, and they're gonna win big. And we're gonna keep winning: in football, basketball, swimming, soccer, volleyball and all of our sports.

Because that's what the Illini do. We go out and – what does the T-shirt say – be proud to be an Illini. Let's go Illini!

The entire talk is available at: iamthefund.com/illinitalk-illinipride.html.