

Hoosier Happenings

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The lost season

The 2008 football season was far from what Bill Lynch hoped it would be, but he's confident the Hoosiers are still pointed in the right direction

By Ken Bikoff

More than a few IU fans were excited about the 2008 football season, believing the Hoosiers were ready to make a statement by returning to a bowl for a second straight year. Head coach Bill Lynch's team was looking to turn the corner and start to establish a solid, winning program at Indiana.

We all know that didn't happen this year.

Injuries and leadership issues kept the Hoosiers from being competitive for most of the year, and the season-ending whipping at the hands of hated rival Purdue convinced a segment of the IU fan base that Lynch wasn't the right guy to lead the Hoosiers into the future. Lynch, however, is optimistic that he and his coaching staff are building a program that can bounce back from the disappointment of 2008 to be strong and competitive in 2009.

Inside Indiana sat down with Lynch in mid-December to talk to him about the failures of '08, what position changes might be coming and whether he expects his coaching staff to return intact for the 2009 campaign.

Inside Indiana: What went wrong in 2008?

Bill Lynch: I think going all the way back... I thought expectations were probably high because we had some success. But when you look at it, it was the first winning season in 14 years and the first bowl game in 14 years so expectations were high. I've been on the road recruiting so I haven't had a chance to really analyze everything, but in reality, maybe we weren't quite there where the expectations were. I do think there were a lot of things that happened in the off-season, the summer and leading up to camp that... the injury bug that we talked so much about during the year, if you look back at it, we had a lot of injuries prior (to the season). We had a lot of guys who didn't practice last spring. Besides Kellen (Lewis), quite a bit of the offensive line (didn't practice). The development we hoped to have there didn't pan out like we thought. That being said, I thought we had a good camp, and I thought our first two games—and obviously, the first two teams we played weren't like the ones that followed—but I thought coming off (those games) we were a pretty good football team. I thought we had things going in the right direction. Then we really lost it from that point. We started getting hurt. I know there were quite a few offensive linemen who didn't practice during the off week as a result of injuries from the first two weeks. The injuries didn't keep them out (of games), but in reality, (Mike) Stark's back, (Alex) Perry and (Pete) Saxon's ankles, (Cody) Faulkner, he



Photo by A.J. Mast

had something, (Rodger) Saffold's back, he couldn't practice. Then Austin Thomas breaks his leg. So we play Ball State, and we knew going in that Ball State was a really good football team. Ball State wasn't the same Ball State team we had played two years prior to that. If you look back at a play here or a play there... we're 28-20, not playing great, kicking a very reasonable field goal to make it 28-23 in the fourth

quarter. We don't make it, then the momentum turned and they really kind of jumped on big Nate (Davis') back and rode that to a win. From that point on, we lost (Nick) Polk, we lost (Chris) Phillips, we lost Thomas, and then we started playing accordion with the offensive line. Then the schedule, we played some pretty good people. There were eight bowl teams. Ball State won 12, Penn State won 11,

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Photo by A.J. Mast

Work to do — Kellen Lewis battled a suspension and injuries in the past year, and he heads into his senior season still looking to lock down the starting job at quarterback.

Northwestern and Michigan State won nine, Central Michigan won eight, Wisconsin and Minnesota won seven, and Illinois was still a pretty good football team. That has something to do with it. I'm not making excuses, but you kind of gave me an open-ended question. I think the thing that was disappointing was that you always want to get better as the year goes on, and the lack of continuity in two areas in particular—the offensive line and the secondary, and then a few weeks later at quarterback—we were just trying to find who was going to play that Saturday. As you do that and you go through the work week, in reality, you don't get that much better. That kind of happened. Then you add in that we didn't have great leadership. We didn't have a big number of seniors, and we had some injuries in that group. I think the group (of juniors) we have coming up have great leaders, and they have already shown that leadership since Thanksgiving. There's a combination of a lot of things, but by the end, we were so beat up that it really wore on us mentally as much as physically.

II: As a staff, what do you think you did really well this year, and what do you think you could have improved?

BL: I think that it's really hard to sit back right now and say, 'Well, we did this really well.' I'll be honest

with you. When you have a disappointing season and a disappointing record, it's pretty hard. But there isn't any panic. I really do believe this. We have a really good senior class (for next season), not only with really good talent but good leaders. When your leaders are good players, it lends itself to success. You think about the kids we have coming back on defense with (Jammie) Kirlew and (Matt) Mayberry and (Will) Patterson and Thomas and Polk. On offense, you've got Saffold and Saxon as seniors. Ray Fisher. I think we have good quarterbacks. I think if we can keep the offensive line healthy, we're certainly going to be better there. One thing that is interesting, Mike Reiter, who was a fourth-year walk-on, was our only fourth-year offensive lineman. We didn't have any other fourth- or fifth-year offensive linemen. It's hard to win in the Big Ten against the people we're playing with, especially when you add in injuries, when you don't have any of those older linemen. So we're going to be stronger there. We're going to get healthy in the secondary again. I think we have good wideouts back. I don't know the exact number of starters, but there are a lot. Some of the young offensive linemen were really coming along before they got hurt like (James) Brewer and (Dennis) Ziegler. Those are guys whose names aren't really in the mix because they never got far enough into the mix before getting hurt. I think we've got

some really good tailbacks coming back. I think the kids we redshirted are going to make us a better football team immediately. Darius Willis is everything we thought he would be. I take full responsibility for where we are, but I also know we have a philosophy on how we're going to get there by redshirting kids and developing kids. We think that's the best way to get it done.

II: When the injuries started to mount, how hard was it to stay disciplined and not turn to those true freshmen who might have been able to help?

BL: It was hard, and I know there are people on the outside who say, 'You should do this,' or 'You should do that.' But you have to see the big picture. That's my responsibility. We're going to build this program, and our goal is to win a Big Ten championship. I've been around long enough to know it doesn't happen overnight. All of a sudden, you can look out there and an Alabama does it, but that's Alabama. There are a lot of programs where you have to go through some steps. There are things we will learn and experiences we gained (from this season), but all along we were going to play as few (true freshmen) as we possibly could. We knew in the preseason that we probably would play a wide receiver or two, but we didn't know which ones it would be. (Tandon) Doss and (Damarlo) Belcher ended up being those guys. Playing (Justin) Pagán was out of pure necessity. I still think long-term for this program, redshirting is the right thing to do.

II: Are you anticipating any position changes?

BL: Yeah (laughing). You know what? I don't really... here's what it is. As soon as the season was over, I met with every player individually, and at that time there were guys who I gave some food for thought. I threw some things out there. I didn't make any decisions where we told a player, 'You are now going to be this.' But we've got to make sure we have the right amount of depth on both sides of the line. If that means moving some of those guys, we'll do that. For example, Jarrod Smith is a guy I talked to. He's one of the strongest guys on the team. He's a tough guy, and he has two years left. He played D-line in high school, and I think that's something we're going to take a good look at. Shane Covington is another guy. He's a really good football player. He was a tailback. He was a safety in high school. He came here, and we needed a little depth at wideout. He thought he would give it a shot. We will probably move him to safety. We will probably look at some guys at corner. We'll find out who that is to provide more competition there, probably at linebacker, as well. We need more competition and depth. I don't like panicking. I don't like making emotional decisions right after a tough year because all of a sudden, you're spinning your wheels after you get through recruiting and the dead period. I would rather go through the tape and think about it. I think I had great meetings with all 96 returning guys. I feel really good about their attitudes and willingness to take on new things so there will be some changes that way.

II: Going into the spring, is there going to be an open competition at quarterback?

BL: Yeah, I think so. No... I know so. I think that's the right thing to do, and I think that's going to make them—Kellen and Ben (Chappell)—better football players. Also, this isn't the NFL. I can see why in the NFL, everybody has to know who is the guy, partly because of salary and everything else, but in college football, it has to be competitive at all positions. I think right now, that (position) will be very competitive. I think throwing (Adam) Follett into the mix—and he still has some steps to go through to get where those two are—but I think we have another guy who is potentially a really good thrower, a guy who is really into it. And that's before we even talk about—and I can't talk about—the guys we have signed.

II: Do you expect the coaching staff to return intact?

BL: Yes. I'll tell you what. I really like this staff. We've been through a lot together. There has been some great transition throughout this thing. It's a good, hard-working group, a loyal group. We certainly are disappointed in the season, but again, the responsibility starts with me. I think it's a really good staff

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who works well with these guys, and I look forward to working with them in the future.

II: Are you planning on any changes on offense in terms of scheme, such as making changes with the no-huddle?

BL: You know, I don't want to... it's too early. You can get caught up in watching games on television or get into bowl season and think, 'Yeah! That's what we should be doing.' I like what we're doing. If you look at our numbers, they were really good until... there was a point in the season where they dipped. There were injuries on the offensive line, then we got hurt at tailback with (Marcus) Thigpen and (Bryan) Payton, and at quarterback. It isn't really fair to evaluate where we were after that. But there was a point where our numbers offensively were pretty good. They didn't end up that way, but I think there were some real reasons for that. I do think we will certainly look at it. We're going to be in a new era at tailback, and we have to be sure to do what they do best. Also, where we settle in at quarterback will obviously be a factor. Overall, the no-huddle tempo is a good fit with our personnel and what we've recruited, too.

II: Who will be the playmakers next year?

I think the receivers will continue to grow. I think that Doss and Belcher... I think Mitchell Evans has a chance to be a great player. He got thrown into a lot of stuff this year, then he got hurt. He has been kind of a role guy for us, but he's more than that. I see him as being an (Andrew) Means and beyond kind of guy. Ray Fisher, obviously, is also a playmaker. I love Bryan Payton. I think (Demetrius) McCray, if he gets healthy — he had surgery again — he can be a good player. I think little Zach (Davis-Walker) has got some things, and I think people are really going to like Darius (Johnson). I think we've got playmakers at the different spots, and we're starting to build that experience.

II: Can you give us an update on how the players are recovering from their respective injuries?

BL: (Thomas and Polk) have had surgery so certainly we feel like the surgeries were early enough that

both will be in good shape to play similar to what Terrance Turner and Tyler Replogle went through last year. I feel good about that. (Chris) Adkins, (Richard) Council, Cortez Smith are in the mix. Adrian Burks just had shoulder surgery. We've got some guys who were banged up, and I think that's where we will make some moves to provide some depth in the secondary. For one, we can't go through what we went through this year where we got drained so badly from a depth-chart standpoint. We've got to have ourselves covered. Patterson will be fine. Mayberry will be fine. (Darius) Johnson and (Ian) Reeves are good. (Justin) Carrington, his elbow that he played with toward the end, he's in a sling. I would think he will be in good shape by spring ball. Up front, what we went through, there was a lot of knees and ankles. Deonte Mack, most noticeably, I think he will be fine. Kevin Burrus will be fine. He was slowed a lot with a knee. On offense, Perry and Saxon were ankles, but they should be fine. Stark is a concern because he is having back surgery. But anymore, where back surgery used to be so scary, those guys bounce back a lot faster than the knees and shoulders right now. I'm anxious to see him in the off-season. Saffold is over the hump with his (back) problem, and I think he will be fine. Payton had a high ankle sprain, and he will be fine. The quarterbacks, they were an ankle and a concussion, and they will be fine. I don't worry about the ACLs anymore because Dr. Fox does a great job with the rehab and they bounce back so far. Ziegler should be fine with his knee being scoped. Brewer is back with a foot deal, but he bounced back from the last one. (leaning forward and lowering his voice almost to a whisper; clearly Lynch is excited) Those two guys were coming along, and that's what you need to play the Wisconsin and the lowas of the world. We took them knowing they were going to take time to develop, and nothing has changed my opinion that they can do it, but they do have to get healthy.

II: Some fans have been clamoring for your job to the point where incoming athletics director Fred Glass felt compelled to comment on your job status. What do you say to those people to calm their fears?

BL: I certainly understand their disappointment in the season. I do think that expectations became so high

because... and you want the expectations to be high because of having a bowl season. There are lessons to building a program, and I think everybody has to realize that this program has been through a lot of transition over the course of the last 10 years. What does that have to do with now? I think everything builds upon itself. We've got to learn how to win. We won seven games a year ago, and everyone said, 'We now know how to win.' There are other steps you have to learn to overcome adversity and win in the fourth quarter and things we did not do very well this year. A football team starts with leadership, and I think we've got great leadership. I think we have a great senior class of experienced guys—both fourth- and fifth-year guys—who have played a lot of football. Our philosophy of redshirting is starting to pay off. I don't know what is going to happen here but in the last three years, I think we've recruited 61 kids. We still have 59 of them with us. With the transition period (when this staff was hired), we lost a lot of guys. That's why we didn't have any fourth- or fifth-year linemen. We have always tried to look at the big picture and not sacrifice the goal of winning a Big Ten championship. We want to do the right things in terms of development. We've had success in the classroom. People don't really want to know about the 22 Academic All-Big Ten selections. Those are all part of building a program and doing it the right way. I understand the disappointment. We're disappointed, as well. But being inside it every day and being in the meeting rooms and looking at these kids eyeball-to-eyeball, we know good things are ahead.

II: What is your vision for next year?

BL: I really believe we're going to be a much-improved football team. As I'm talking to you in December, I'm not going to say, 'We're going to win this many games.' There are so many things we have to do. One, we have to have a great off-season. But again, I think we have great leadership that is going to lead us through that off-season. We have to have a great spring and summer, and then we go (into the season). I think the pieces are in place, as I look at it right now, where we're going to have more depth. We're certainly going to have good talent, and we're going to have a team that with leadership is going to be very anxious to show the improvement coming off last season's disappointment.

There are lessons to building a program, and I think everybody has to realize that this program has been through a lot of transition over the course of the last 10 years. What does that have to do with now? I think everything builds upon itself.



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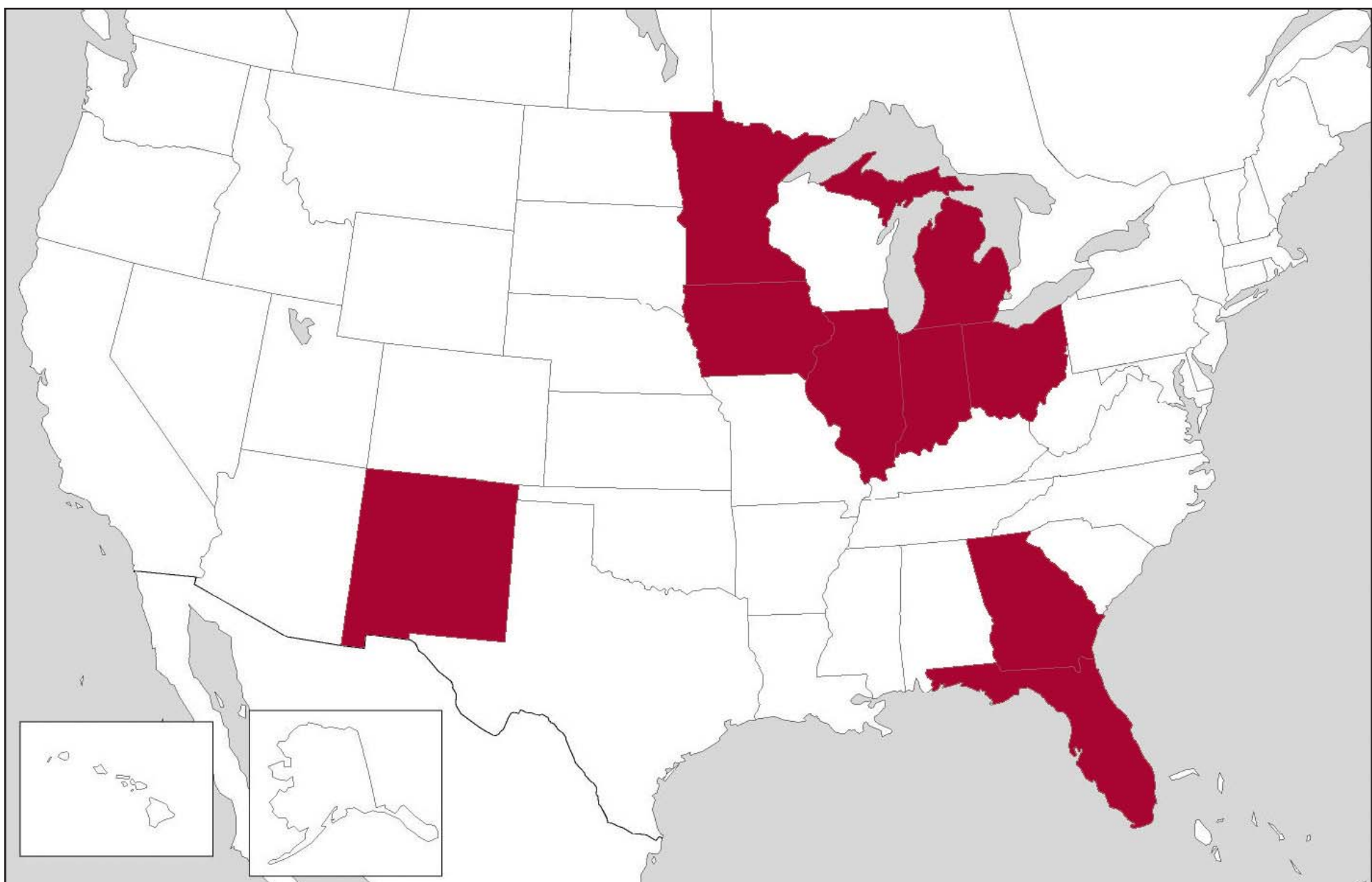
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Where are the Hoosiers?

Indiana's winter athletic schedule is in full swing, and the Hoosiers are traveling across the country to carry on the glory of old IU. Take a look at the map below to see if the Hoosiers are going to be visiting your state and check the schedules at the bottom of the page for information about when Hoosier athletic teams might be visiting your area.



Men's January athletics

Basketball

- Jan. 3 — at Iowa
- Jan. 7 — Michigan
- Jan. 10 — at Illinois
- Jan. 13 — at Ohio State
- Jan. 17 — Penn State
- Jan. 25 — Minnesota
- Jan. 28 — at Northwestern
- Jan. 31 — Ohio State

Swimming & Diving

- Jan. 10 — Michigan/Tennessee
- Jan. 17 — Missouri/Ohio State
- Jan. 24 — at Evansville

Tennis

- Jan. 4-11 — Florida Gulf Coast Tournament; at Ft.

Myers, Fla.

- Jan. 17 — Eastern Kentucky/Toledo/Gardner-Webb; at Bloomington
- Jan. 23 — New Mexico/New Mexico Military Institute; at Albuquerque, N.M.
- Jan. 24 — Texas A&M-Corpus Christi; at Albuquerque, N.M.
- Jan. 30-Feb. 1 — National Indoor Qualifier; Athens, Ga.

Wrestling

- Jan. 10 — National Duals; Cedar Falls, Iowa
- Jan. 18 — IU Quad
- Jan. 23 — Penn State
- Jan. 30 — at Ohio State

Dates subject to change

Women's January athletics

Basketball

- Jan. 4 — Iowa
- Jan. 8 — at Minnesota
- Jan. 11 — at Penn State
- Jan. 15 — Wisconsin
- Jan. 19 — Purdue
- Jan. 22 — at Michigan
- Jan. 25 — at Illinois
- Jan. 29 — Penn State

Swimming & Diving

- Jan. 9-10 — Michigan/Illinois/Tennessee
- Jan. 17 — Missouri/Ohio State
- Jan. 24 — Purdue

Tennis

- Jan. 18 — Western Michigan/ Miami (Ohio); at Bloomington
- Jan. 25 — Marquette/Ball State; at Bloomington

Water Polo

- Jan. 24-25 — at Michigan Kick-off

Dates subject to change

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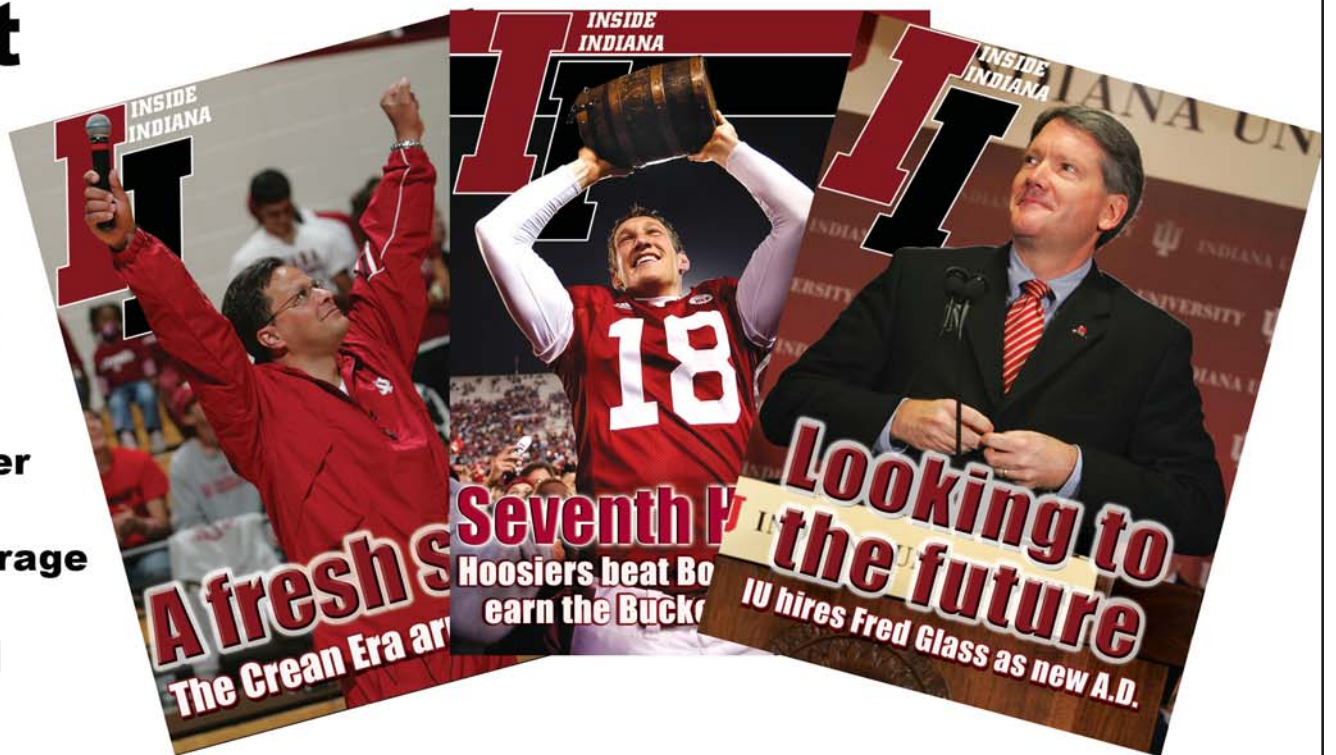
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