

Big Ten Football Media Days

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Illinois Fighting Illini

Bret Bielema

Press Conference



BRET BIELEMA: Thank you. Very excited to be here today for a variety of reasons. But first and foremost, it kind of comes full circle for me to come back in here to Lucas Oil. Last time I was in this building was my last game as a head coach in this conference and we played Nebraska. To open up the season this year against Nebraska is a completion of a journey that has brought me to where we are. But to be at the University of Illinois now, as an Illinois born, played high school football in the state, to come back to this conference as a former player, former assistant coach, former defensive coordinator, former head coach in this league, especially in this Big Ten West, it really has come full circle. So I couldn't be more excited to unite with the fan base that I think is excited to not only see where we can go, but where we can sustain this. When I first had a conversation with Josh about coming to the University of Illinois, the thing he kept harping and remaining and staying on to this day we're at right now is just the overall commitment to not only get Illinois where we want to be, but to get Illinois to stay where we want to be. And in 2021 to have a program sitting in a position to be discovered for the long-term is a very exciting time. Excited to be back here today, recognize a lot of familiar faces. It's been awhile since I've seen some of you. So to be back and rekindle relationships with the media and build new ones is an awesome, awesome time. Couldn't be more excited for this opportunity to be here with you today.

A little bit about what's been going on in Champaign. Unfortunately, we had the passing of Bobby Roundtree last week. Obviously a player that was there before I was there, but as soon as I took the job, until I received the news last week of his passing, just been overly impressed with who he is, what he represented, the lives he touched in a short amount of time. And I know that you'll be around our players later today. It was immediately well known to me how much of an impact he had on our team, obviously when he was a player, a great player, but also during his time of recovery and the way he fought and the way he battled up until his passing last week is truly special. So we're with him and his family as they go through a very, very difficult time.

The three players that I brought with me today are just a small representation of what we have in Champaign. Coach Smith, Lovie, did a really nice job. I can't talk about anything that happened before I got here, but I give him a lot of credit for, A, these three young men that are here for me today as well as a lot of young men that are in Champaign that represent us on a daily basis. We all want to win games, we all want to do certain things, but the character, the virtue, the type of people he brought to our campus is really special and these three players today represent that. Vederian Lowe, who has also been selected by the conference to represent us as an entire conference and to be the speaker would normally be at a luncheon, but we'll do it virtually this year, at least a recording of it, has been a player from the University of Illinois in 15 years to be selected in that role. And it's a lot more than just the football player he is, it's the person he is. His personal life, to be married, with a couple kids, to have the guardianship of his young brother, just a truly, since I walked in the building, have never been more impressed with a player in such a short amount of time.

Doug Kramer who is from Chicago, a guy that came back for a sixth year and a guy that I'm excited with, to be a guy that represents us, he's also will handle our commands at center, great demeanor, great attitude, just an awesome, awesome kid to be around.

And then Owen Carney, our outside linebacker who came back as well actually entered the transfer portal, right, before I was there or during my time there. We continued to have conversations and to kind of re-recruit him and there's probably not a player in our program that had more individual time, contact meetings with, to get to where we are today. So those three guys are the representation of a super senior class of 22 players. We lead the nation in the number of super seniors back at 22. We have 18 seniors that are coming back, which would be their normal senior year. Whether they come back for an additional year because of COVID is going to be determined in the future. But that's 40 seniors in our program right now who are very hungry. Very excited about the attitude they have shown, about the demeanor they have brought, the way they have accepted our coaches, the way they bought into what we have been asking them to do, not so much just in our time



in the football facility at the Smith Center, but what we ask them to do in their personal lives. The way that they walk their walk and handle their routine on a daily basis has been pretty impressive.

With that being said, I think the part that is exciting for me especially is you learn so many things in life as you go through it that you had no idea you were going to learn that day, right? So to be in this conference, to be in this role, is truly a moment in my lifetime that means everything to me. I'm now married with a couple small children and to have a home in Champaign that we're building, literally a home, that I'm not building, but we have hired people to hire or to build and to grow my family, to have our children be raised in Champaign is something I'm very, very excited about and looking forward to building something there that lasts forever.

So we open up the game, open up the college football season, what a great opportunity. It was going to be in Ireland. Of course everybody wanted to go to Ireland, especially our kicker, James McCourt, one of our dynamic duo of kickers we call the lads. One's from Australia and one is from Ireland. We were going to kick off the college football season over there, but because of COVID that got cancelled and bring it full circle back into Champaign, to have a kickoff against Nebraska, a team that we have great respect for, I've known Scott for a long time, a team that brought a National Championship to the Big Ten when they came into it and now the opportunity to open up the college football season at noon, literally as the first college football kickoff of the year is truly an exceptional opportunity. So with that open it up for some questions and look to be enlightened.

Q. So much is made in this conference of the ground and pound running game, power game, obviously the two schools in the conference that you've been affiliated with in the past. But how do you assess the offensive skill position guys, the finesse game, when you look at what Illinois has at wide receiver and DB, like what do you see kind of the strengths and weaknesses there?

BRET BIELEMA: Absolutely. Very excited. Again, walking into a situation like you did during transition you really don't know what -- I had been out of college football for three years -- as soon as Josh called I began to research the roster, identify players, offense, defense, special teams. Really I think one of the moments that I really go back to is that first opportunity to watch the team play at Penn State the last game of the year. And then to come back and meet with the team the next year I offered an opportunity for everybody in that room to come back. I didn't look at a stitch of film, I didn't care if they were a

great player or a player that was last on the depth chart, I wanted them to know that I was the newest family member in that room and from this point forward we're going to walk this walk together.

Offensively, you had a variety of different quarterbacks, kind of some different skill sets and the offense they had run previously. I brought in Tony Peterson our offensive coordinator for a reason, I never worked with him, so I knew everybody would gravitate to my past experiences. What we really tried to concentrate on is building the Illinois offense. And since I've taken over there's been some transition obviously in the quarterback room with BP, Brandon Peters, getting the majority of the workload during the spring with Isaiah Williams. Isaiah switched to wide receiver after the conclusion of spring ball. It's been a great asset for us. Not only is he a good football player, I think he's an exceptional person, great leadership qualities. He's lightning in a bottle, just a very, very active, natural receiver. So I think that simple transition right there made us better at the wide receiver position by transition from the quarterback.

Also added a grad transfer or a transfer from Rutgers with Art Sitkowski who has been a player in this conference already, a guy that we're excited to be part of the program. Matt Robinson.

So quarterbacks. Feel really good about four or five of our running backs that I'm excited to see. We had 15 practices with them in the spring, but this type of offense that we're running and the variety that we can bring, I think they will fit into that well. I have a couple tight ends that I feel are very, very good Big Ten-type players, so they could transition to possibly something later in their life in the NFL. I've been blessed with two edge tackles in Vederian Lowe and Palco that have started 30 games each apiece and many more and to have two guys like that with Doug Kramer in the middle and a couple guys fighting if out at the guard position I'm really excited where our offense is.

Q. As a defensive coach with the limiting of contact practices and fully padded practices, particularly when you're starting a new program and taking over a program, how does that work and how do you feel that those changes are for safety versus the quality of football that's put on the field?

BRET BIELEMA: Great question. So first, anything that involves player safety, as a coach, I couldn't be more excited for. Anything that allows us -- I grew up playing in this league, obviously coaching it for a long time and I think the evolution that we have naturally taken as coaches, as a college football world, with the NCAA, with the backing of our doctors and the medical people have made us better

as coaches, right? Like I can sit here and take a stance or it doesn't do any good -- I always say, and I talk to Josh on a daily basis -- just tell me the rules and let me play. Just give me the rules and we can make an adjustment. I think one of the things the last three years, being in the NFL, because of the NFLPA they really take a proactive approach to player safety, because guys are making livelihoods off of being able to play, correct? So it really enlightened my eyes about the way to practice efficiently, from things like tackling, pass rush, one-on-ones, different things that maybe were higher risk to player safety and then also the ability to practice efficiently without full pads, right? To not actually have to go out there and take people to the ground, to learn how to play on your feet.

One of the things that jumped out to me when I used to visit NFL teams as a college coach is how much the players and the coaches demand players to play on their feet. The game is played while you're playing on your feet, right? So to get players to understand that and preach it -- if you ask our three guys here today how many times I talk about staying up, it's just overwhelmingly positive. So I think where we're at as an organization is where we're at and to accept it and move forward. We have nine padded practices, the way I structured our first four weeks before we played Nebraska it was actually difficult to even get that ninth padded practice in the way I wanted to do it. So I think it's more than enough if you're doing things the correct way.

Q. I wanted to ask you, you mentioned you last time you were in this building was after you won a Big Ten championship. You had a lot of success in this conference. What kind of details go into having that same success at Illinois as you did at your previous institution?

BRET BIELEMA: I think it's a combination of I stand here now as a 51-year-old head coach versus a 36-year-old head coach I was 15 years ago. I learned things through success, but I've also learned things through failure. And to be aware and cognizant of that and be very diligent in our daily approach about how we maximize our strengths, minimize our weaknesses, but first you have to partnership with the right people, right? At my previous institutions I was with some great people that made those opportunities be special. And now to walk hand in hand with Josh, a guy that played here at the University of Illinois, got a degree from here, and now leads our entire athletic department, that's critical to have a partnership with the people that are going to support you.

I think the other two big components is recruiting the state of Illinois. Recruiting -- any time I've seen a great organization, right, both in football and in life, right, or in

marriages or in a business platforms, you have to represent and understand the environment you're in. For us to be successful at Illinois we need to be supported by the people that make Illinois possible. So fans, alumni, donors, administration, general university, all those things are very, very important to make Illinois be great for a long time.

Q. I was just wondering what your approach is to in-state recruiting and how you're hoping to kind of reclaim the state, especially since you compete with Iowa a lot and you have a (inaudible) tattoo?

BRET BIELEMA: I got that tattoo at 19. It was a great idea then, not so much now. But I think it's important to realize that that is a big part of where I am today. I always tell our players, we all come from different parts of the country, we all come from different homes, different backgrounds, different religions, different communities, the first is to know that you're here because of that, that made you who you are today. For us to be successful at Illinois we have to recruit in the state, but we also, the states that border us, right, so they come in our state, so we can go into their as well. So we'll cross the border and go out and recruit. Because a lot of times those similarities are very, very real than people think. Like a kid that grows up in down-state Illinois is very similar to a kid that grows up in the middle of Iowa, the kid that grows up in the middle of Wisconsin, the kid that grows up in the middle of Ohio, all those things transcend to what we think we can bring here, right? So it's an exciting time. Recruiting is something that people -- I remember when I left the University of Iowa went to Kansas State and was involved in recruiting battles, that's one thing that they get very personal. It's easy on Saturdays, Saturdays you're just 11 guys competing on the field at a time, but recruiting is personal if you're doing it the right way. And to be able to have a foothold and to continue to build that with our in-state players but also branch it out and find Illinois-type players in other states that's what it's all about.

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