

# Big Ten Football Media Days

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Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

## Illinois Fighting Illini

### Coach Bret Bielema

#### Press Conference



KEVIN WARREN: Our next head coach from the University of Illinois, we are so happy that he's back in the Big Ten Conference where he belongs. He's been an active member of the Champaign community with the Susan G. Komen foundation and also the Boys & Girls Club.

He's excited about his home game, first game against Wyoming. That will be here before we know it.

So we welcome to the stage head football coach Bret Bielema.

BRET BIELEMA: Good afternoon. Awesome to be here. Driving down here last night with our players, and I always try to have a moment with them, try to prepare them, and give them some questions. In retrospect, I share with them.

I first came to this event as a player in the early '90s. My head coach was Hayden Fry. I remember back then we got an issued Iowa Hawkeye jacket that I'm pretty sure 15 to 20 people had worn before I actually put it on that day and wore a tie and got all dappered up.

Earlier this summer, when we knew we were going to take our players, we take them to a clothing store and give them the opportunity to purchase a suit for them. That's the world we're in now.

I found out afterwards, through our people that were working with them, Pat Pierson said, Hey, Coach, the guys kind of don't want to wear ties.

I'm kind of a purist and an old traditionalist, and I'm like, Oh, man, they've got to wear a tie, don't they?

I asked my staff, and they unanimously told me I was in the wrong, to actually let them be independent and go without ties.

So I'm walking in this morning behind them, all four of them good-looking, strapped-up, well-trained athletes. And I'm

looking, and they don't have ties on, and they're all wearing tennis shoes. I think about the world we're in, and I think about Hayden Fry would literally probably slap me in the back of the head if I showed up with a pair of tennis shoes and no tie, but I think that's the part of college football that's awesome, right? There's never been a time or a place where I think college football could be more exciting.

To see the world evolve, I'm very unique in this position, to come to the Big Ten Conference the second time as a head coach, played in this conference as a player, I was an assistant coach in this conference, actually in the West Division, became a coordinator in the Big Ten at the University of Wisconsin, became a head coach there, left a little bit of time and spent some time in the SEC and the NFL and came back and couldn't be more excited about the opportunity and the challenges that are in front of us.

I'd like to thank the commish and the Big Ten staff to make this possible. So glad they split this into a two-day event. I'm sure you guys have mixed feelings on that, but it's great to see familiar faces and be around you guys. Anything we can do at Illinois to make your job easier, that's what we try to do. I never try to make anyone's job anything more than to respect your profession.

The four players we brought with us today represent everything that we want at Illinois. Quan Martin, a DB that was on the roster before I got there, has really been impressive to me since day one that I met him.

Probably one of the coolest things about this event today, when we decided to bring Quan as one of the original three, the Big Ten said we could bring three, we added a fourth when everyone else did, but one of the original three was Quan. And I reached out to tell him to come see me in my office. He said, Coach, my dad's in town. You care if I bring him by to meet you?

One of the things that's a little bit of a disadvantage when you inherit a roster is you never get to recruit these young men. So the first time I was able to meet his dad, I was able to sit him down and tell him he's coming to this event to represent the University of Illinois. To see the joy and pride in his dad's eyes, I think was pretty cool.



Isaiah Williams, who we added on here when the Big Ten allowed us to bring a fourth, really a cool story. He was recruited out of high school by one of my current coaches. Cory Patterson was his high school coach and involved with him growing up. Isaiah was a guy a lot of people recruited as a wide receiver. He wanted to play quarterback. That's what he was playing when I got there. Now he's transitioned to wide receiver. His journey for us to be together is really awesome. I think the best thing is the best is yet to come for Isaiah.

And then our last two guys, Sydney and Chase Brown. Very unique opportunity to have twins. When we decided who was going to come, I literally said let's do some research and recon. I've been coming to a lot of these, I've been watching for a long time, I've never seen two brothers, let alone a set of twins, represent a program. I don't think that's been done in college football that we could find. Those two guys, not only are they two of our better players, they're great representatives here. From Canada, went to high school in Florida. Actually Chase transitioned before the portal world existed, transferred from Western Michigan, and I'm glad he has because those two guys represent everything we can.

Also a thank you to Josh Whitman. Josh is here with some of our admin. To be the head coach of a Big Ten school that he actually coached -- or, I'm sorry, he actually played at, two-time Academic All-American, very decorated player, to go play in the NFL. Got in the world of being a lawyer, and then to come back full circle as an administrator for me. Been very blessed to be around a lot of great ADs, but to be partnered right now with Josh at the position we're in at the University of Illinois in the time that we're in is truly very special. To have his support on a daily basis, a lot of things that he does never get noticed, and on the big scale, I know how much it means as a college football coach.

A couple things just to hit on. We actually start this week. There's only one other time in my career where we actually started in the month of July. So we start Saturday because we play week zero against Wyoming and then have a Friday night turnaround at Indiana and then have a rematch game against Virginia before we have a bye week. We kick it off in a big way.

Very excited about my team. Probably one of the things I'm really just thankful for is I probably know our roster now better than I ever have. Been there over a year and a half, have added a lot of players but also developed a lot of players in the way we think, how we do things, and are able to get them.

I think just knowing our roster -- not that I didn't like our roster a year ago. It's just you're more comfortable, you know their strengths, you know their weaknesses. You know how they handle moments. We've had experiences now through a 5-7 football team a year ago, and all of those players coming back to the new players we've added. So very excited about that. With that, I'll open it up for questions. Is.

**Q. Bret, this year you returned 25 percent of your offensive linemen snap-wise from last year. You made comments last year that your two deep wasn't significantly contributing. How do you feel about your offensive line this season?**

BRET BIELEMA: Everything is in perspective. It's a PFF stat you probably pulled there. One thing I think that is probably for me, as a head coach, I kind of noticed all the things that happen before they're going to happen. Last year when I made those comments, I just was expressing where we were currently on our roster, but more importantly, where we needed to go in recruiting and possibly in the portal world.

So the players that we have coming back from last year's roster start with Palcho. He looks incredible. He's kind of redefined his weight. We've had an entire year to work with him. If he continues to be what we think he'll be, he'll leave college football with the most career starts in the history of the game. He's played a lot of really good games at guard and tackle. His leadership has been unwavering since we got together in January again.

Another guy, Pihlstrom, Alex Pihlstrom, who played both tackle, guard, and now playing center for us, those two guys have kind of been our mainstay and our anchors. We've added Isaiah Adams and Zy Crisler, two players who came through junior college but were full qualifiers out of high school. Nontraditional JUCO guys.

Jordyn Slaughter and Julian Pearl both played a lot of -- well, Jordyn was injured in fall camp. Julian Pearl had a pretty good year. Played guard and tackle for us also.

Those three guys, in addition to the new faces you're going to see, have got me very excited about our offensive play.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned the week zero game with Wyoming, but in the follow-up with Indiana, conference play starting early, but even earlier for Indiana. From a coaching perspective, talk about having that week zero game to prepare and then Indiana not having a game to prepare from your perspective as a coach.**

BRET BIELEMA: I think through 14 years as head coach, I

definitely would say a coaching cliché that is true, you guys call it coach speak, you see a huge amount of improvement in players that have never played the game from week 1 to week 2.

That's kind of why I was lobbying, when the original schedule was set up, we actually were opening up at Wisconsin. So the driving force, it ended up being Indiana now, but was a Big Ten road game. I thought if we could play one game at home, get our feet under us, and get a week zero in, and Josh, our admin, got it done.

I would tell you Indiana, huge respect for Coach and what he's developed and what he's built there two years removed from a very, very special season. I know they've had all spring, all summer, all fall camp to work on the Fighting Illini, and it's a quick turnaround. It's a Friday night game.

We've got a little prep on Indiana. They've made some transition, as you know, in the coordinator position. But a tremendous challenge for us, regardless of the scenario, and to have them be week 1, a Big Ten game on the road is going to be a tremendous challenge.

**Q. Bret, I know the goal is sustained success at Illinois. So what did you change in year one? How did you change it? What needs to be changed next?**

BRET BIELEMA: Great question. I think because this is my third head coaching opportunity, and I've been in this league a long time, and my time in the NFL, I had a lot of experience, a lot of success, but also some failures. I think in 52 years on this earth, I've realized, not just in football but in life, a lot of times you learn more through moments of adversity, through the tough times.

I think that to have experienced last year, the 5-7, to get back into college football, I think I have a better perspective of what our team can do and what they can't do. Also just some moments we lived through together. We opened up week zero a year ago against Nebraska. We were fortunate enough to win that game. I think a lot of not only our players, people in the community, like everybody, thought, oh, this is easy. This is just going to happen. Then next week UTSA put a knot on our head.

Then to come full circle and win on the road at Penn State, at Minnesota, I think I learned a lot about the things I feel are important. We talk a lot about tough, smart, dependable. That's our DNA. That's what we're made of. It's easy to regurgitate that. A lot of teams use it as a catchphrase, but it's a really hard thing to live. It's a hard thing to do.

I think the DNA of our football team headed into this season, I know better, and I believe they feel it, they understand it. They definitely can regurgitate it, but I think they understand and know what it means. Your DNA is part of who you are. It's unique to you, and no one else has it. As a football team, we have to have those same things.

The way we played at the end of the year, to come full circle and win a game against Nebraska on the front end, to beat Northwestern, a team we have great respect for, at the end of the year, really tells me the growth we have in that first season.

I would say going into this year, that's what I know and appreciate more is I think I just know our roster so much more. We've had moments of adversity and moments of success and added players now that we've recruited. So there's a really good vibe in the Smith Center right now.

One of the things that jumped out to me, everybody that comes into that building and is around our players and engaged with our players, they talk about the vibe that's in the Smith Center. I think it's very real, and I can't wait to see where it leads.

**Q. Following up on the Indiana question, you haven't played the Hoosiers since 2017, and now they will be your first conference game of the season. It's no secret that Indiana had a pretty rough conference schedule last season, but like many teams before the season, have done a lot of reconstruction. What have you seen Indiana prep for in the off-season and last season to get ready for September 2nd?**

BRET BIELEMA: Coach has done a nice job of keeping that under wraps. I think one of the things I've tried to do and learn in this profession, these early games are usually the most difficult because of the unknown. Coach made a lot of -- there was transition on his staff, which obviously brings along new schemes.

I think, when you watch this football team and go back and watch when he was the defensive coordinator, there's a little bit of a return to that. So we really have a tremendous challenge in front of us. To do what he's done, I think in particular Indiana -- and I know Jeff just walked off stage. When we went to Purdue last year, the culture and the environment of those two teams is quite a bit different from when I was in the league last, and I have great respect.

I think that's the thing about the Big Ten West right now, from top to bottom, the rosters, in particular coaching, Fitz is a guy that I have huge respect for, for what he's done and what he's built at Northwestern and the sustained

success they've had. And now to see Jeff at Purdue, and Indiana, it's going to be a tremendous challenge.

I think the Friday night element, I have never played a Friday night game in college football. We did it in the NFL a little bit. But I think the challenge of playing that quick turnaround from a Saturday game to a Friday is a unique challenge, and then everything that Indiana is going to do on the field will be icing on the cake.

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