

Big Ten Football Media Days

Wednesday, July 26, 2023

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Illinois Fighting Illini

Coach Bret Bielema

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: To get things started today, please welcome to the podium an individual who's entering his third season in Champaign. The Illini returned 10 All-Conference selections from last season. They ended in the ReliaQuest Bowl last year. It's a guy who I think is one of the best coaches in America. He's done an outstanding job at Illinois.

Last year, on this field on this day, he said, I can't wait for you guys to come back to Champaign, and we will be there week 3 when the Illini take on Penn State.

Bret Bielema, head coach of Illinois.

BRET BIELEMA: Media reality show here. Great to be back. Very excited to be back third year as a head coach at the University of Illinois.

Brought with us three great players. Very exciting time in our program right now. Just starting since January. January we were in our first January bowl game in a long time at the University of Illinois. In February we signed a recruiting class that I think is going to continue to build the tradition of the players and the roster development that we believe in.

In March we jumped into the beginning of spring football and started a ticket campaign that today I was told that we have over 9,500 new season ticket holders. You get close to 10,000 new season tickets in a year, that's doing some good things.

Very excited about that. Ended the spring semester with the highest GPA in the history of the school, with over a 3.0 over our entire roster. Just a really exciting time to be where we're at.

In our conference, I'd like to welcome four new coaches in the Big Ten West, the transition that has happened since a year ago. All these rematch games bring a new perspective, a new staff. We wish them the best of luck.

But especially to bring Tony Petitti in as our commissioner,

obviously it's been a refreshing sight to see him so engaged with our coaches. We've had several talks with him, even just this last week, to have our roster adjust to have 120 players in our fall camp. It's something that every coach in America had been trying to get.

Once Tony and his crew got ahold of that, I know Greg Schiano also had a big part of that. To have that movement happen for our players, I think it just benefits the game in so many ways.

Really exciting time in our program. For me as a head coach, it's my 15th media day, 10th in the Big Ten Conference, seven at Wisconsin and three here. Couldn't be more excited about the state of the game, the football, our players, the roster.

Everybody wants to talk their views on NIL and the transfer portal. I think, as a head coach now going into my 15th year, I've just learned to embrace and really handle change and the nuances and adjust.

You can't complain, and I always say this as a coach. On game day, you just give me the rules and who we're going to play, and I'll play the game. Kind of take that same approach how we run our program and what we do, and it's a very exciting time that as a staff -- obviously lost a coordinator last year; I believe now my sixth head coach or sixth coach that's worked for me that's become a head coach.

With my staff that I currently have, there's five new coaches that are in new roles. Aaron Henry, who was my DB coach a year ago, has now transitioned to our coordinator. And then I brought four new coaches into our program who have been just a home run so far.

We haven't won a game yet, but I love what I've seen in them, the development of our players, the faith in our players, and the recruiting cycles.

I'm excited to answer those questions for seven minutes because those media guys took a lot of time, which I'm not disappointed in. Open it up for questions.



Q. I just want to ask how are you and your coaching staff working to promote a culture of welcoming and safety in your locker room? Obviously there's stuff at Northwestern. I just want to ask how's your welcoming and culture in the locker room?

BRET BIELEMA: One of the things that's really unique in college football right now is there used to be just this influx of freshmen, but now we actually do kind of a program orientation not only in June when we have our new arrivals of high school players, but for us in January we have almost a dozen high school players, about four or five transfer players. We've added another three or four transfer players this summer.

At any point in our year in our program, it never really changes. We get our players heavily involved. I literally don't recruit or have official visits on our campus unless all of our players are there because our players are our greatest representatives of what we want.

I've been a head coach 15 years, and I think about what I learned as a player, as an assistant, and it's so important in today's world to stay on top of everything that touches our players' lives, not only when they're in the building. We literally have some things on the doors when you're walking in and walking out that gives you a way to think about where you're at and what you're doing, and I couldn't be happier.

We actually -- in the portal world we're living in, I don't know where we stand right now, but at one point when we went into the recruiting season, we were tied for second for fewest number of portal lost players. What that's telling me is kids like being in our program. They like the way they get treated. They like the way they get coached.

They take a player that, when we got there, he had started five games. He was an unranked player in the recruiting cycle. Didn't even have a star. He wasn't a one star, two star, or three star. With Devon Witherspoon, he became the fifth pick in the NFL draft. I think that opens people's eyes.

Q. Bret, I'm going to throw a non-football question your way. The new "Barbie" movie is out. Have you taken your daughters to see it? Do you have plans to go see it? Can you give us thoughts on this new movie?

BRET BIELEMA: I saw a social media tweet about the money it brought in over the weekend compared to the next rated movie is pretty impressive. I see a lot of Barbies. I have a 6-year-old and a 4-year-old. I know my 6-year-old is watching. Hi, Briella. We bought a lot of

Barbie stuff for 20 bucks.

I don't really get to talk a lot of Barbie, so I appreciate the question. Have not taken her to see it, but I'm sure we're going to see it. We're in the mermaid mode right now, so we're still heavy into mermaids.

Q. Just two about Jim Leonhard who you announced yesterday. How much did he help you in your first year as defensive coordinator at Wisconsin, and how much is he going to help the staff now this year?

BRET BIELEMA: Jimmy and I first met, I became the defensive coordinator at the University of Wisconsin, and I remember walking in, and Coach Alvarez said, Hey, there's one guy that you've got to talk to on the defensive side of the ball. If you get him to believe in what you're doing, you'll get the entire defense and the entire team to believe in you.

I literally had a meeting set up with Jimmy when I got to campus the first day, brought him in, showed him the package we were going to run. I believe Wisconsin, that year when I took over, it was ranked 87th or 88th in the country in total defense. I talked about what we were going to do. We were going to try to retain the things they did well. Every defensive coach was still on my staff, so it was kind of my audition to teach Jimmy what I had to teach the coaches.

An hour after that, he was smiling ear to ear, and I think he went on to have a very special season, not that he wasn't good before, but it just made a huge impact on me and how quickly he learned the game.

I believe we went to the University of Wisconsin at the end of the year -- I'm sorry, University of Iowa at the end of the year, and I believe he picked the first two picks, or first two third down plays in that game out of a new formation, and we didn't even talk about the adjustment. He made it on the field as a player.

I've really learned early he knows the game. Stayed in touch with him during his entire NFL career. I knew he'd be a good coach. Obviously talked extensively to him while he was up there before I came back in the league. Paul talked about the hit. I know I talked to Coach Alvarez about his presence, his awareness, his feel.

Obviously, when he became the head coach, we had just played them the day before, so I shot him a text and wished him the best of luck and said, I can't help your ass right now. Started a conversation with him even back then that I wish him all the best, all the luck.

Then as the things proceeded, when he didn't get retained, I kind of reached out to him and said, hey, have you thought about what you want to do? We started conversations, invited him down to spend a couple days with our staff. I think he was still trying to figure it out, so it's a question better for him.

He'll be a senior analyst for us, and he'll handle responsibilities that touch all three phases of the game. He's had conversations with Coach Lunney and Coach Henry. And Jimmy was a really good special teams player as well. I'm going to use him in all three phases. He won't be with us on game days when we're away. He'll be in the office Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and then he'll go be with his family on the weekends.

Q. Two-parter, if you can indulge me, Coach. Pat Fitzgerald said that he didn't know what was going on at Northwestern, and given that, as a Coach, do you think you need a more hands-on, proactive investigation to see what's going on within your program? Then the second part, it took 15 years for Illinois to get to eight wins. What can you do, or what are you doing to ensure that you build on that progress?

BRET BIELEMA: Two completely different questions, but I'll kind of tie my answer into both because I think it comes with conversations you have with your own university.

Listen, Fitz and I are very close. Whatever happened there, I don't know anything about and don't have the ability to comment on.

But I can tell you what happens at Illinois. When I received the first phone call from Josh Whitman, I realized this was a guy that I want to be a partner with. He was a guy that played there and played very, very well, played in the NFL, became a lawyer, tried that world, and got into administration and was looking for a coach that wanted to sustain success. That was something that was very important for me.

I wanted to get back into head coaching, but I didn't want to go to a situation where I didn't think it could be sustained. I wanted this to be my last rodeo. Signed a contract that literally has a no compete with anybody in the Big Ten because I know where I want to go.

To walk that walk every day with Josh, I was driving over yesterday, one of my favorite exercises as a head coach, I'd literally drive our players here to the Big Ten media, and the whole time I'm driving, I'm asking them questions, questions that they're going to get. Isaiah Williams, you caught 83 balls last year. Do you got to catch 85 balls to

be a successful season? He answered it the way I thought he would answer it. We'll talk about it, critique it.

I obviously knew they were going to get a question centered around Northwestern. To hear their responses and their reactions they gave tells me what we're doing. They basically repeated everything that I believed had happened.

I distinctly remember, when I circled back to Josh my first spring, we were in the spring practice, and one of the things we do at Illinois is we play in all conditions, so we practice in all conditions. The only thing that makes us go inside is if there's lightning. We practice in rain, sleet, snow, a.m., p.m., and everything in between.

I got done with the rain practice, and Josh, who came to practice, and he and I were talking at the end of practice. It was probably a half hour after we were done with practice. I looked around, and he and I were the only two on the field in the rain standing by ourselves.

At that point, I'm like if an AD is going to stand outside and talk to me in the rain a half hour after practice, this is a guy who cares about our program.

Josh is in our building every day, for the most part, year round, a lot of the times two or three times a week. I'm in the building every day, our coaches.

I don't really worry about what's happening in our building. I don't mention the word "culture." I never have. I'm not a guy who thinks it's a buzzword. It's something that's never set well with me. But I talk about what we do. To have a season like we just had and the talent we have returning and to have the highest GPA in school history, it tells me we're doing a lot of good things.

Q. Bret, on that sustaining success, what gives you confidence that this team can take that next step and help you sustain success?

BRET BIELEMA: It's a great question that I ask myself every day. I look for indicators. I think the guys that are around me, the people that are around me know that, when we were here a year ago, I wasn't going to put a prediction on how many wins we were going to have, but I was pretty sure we were going to be a bowl team. I knew we had a good football team that was going to grow and build.

I look for indicators how guys carry themselves on the field. I look for indicators how they play and adjust to new players.

When I was riding over with those three guys yesterday, I



was asking them questions about players I haven't seen, that only they've seen. Just to hear them say what they said with the intelligence they did, it tells me our best players are observant of what's going on around them.

These three guys we brought over could have easily been three draft picks last year in a class that was highly talented, but they came back to make a better opportunity for themselves and our football program.

We've got a lot of unfinished business. Last year we were an 8-5 team, but it broke up into a 7-1 team and a 1-4 team. And I focus myself on the 1-4 team more than any time in my career. Obviously they all happened at the end of the year, so there had to be contributing factors that are on me as a coach and development and program-wise.

I like where we're at. I love the influx of talent. For me as a head coach, this is my 15th year, as I've said earlier, but I've never felt more engaged with our roster, the way they're being developed, the way they're being coached. And the way that they react to our coaches is pretty cool.

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