

Big Ten Football Media Days

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Chicago, Illinois, USA

Illinois Fighting Illini

Coach Bret Bielema

Press Conference



BRET BIELEMA: Super excited to be here. This is a huge flashback. I actually came here in 1991, I believe, to this hotel as a player representative at the University of Iowa with Hayden Fry. Some of you may have been around at that time, but we came in, a bunch of media scrums. We didn't have individualized and all those breakout sessions.

I'm walking in with Coach Friday, and Mike Devlin was the other guy with me, and they said, Hey, they never ask players any questions. Never. Coach Friday looked at me, like don't worry about it, they're not going to ask you. I got the first question of the day. So I started off humming.

This is my fourth year leadoff hitter in the conference, sixth year back in the league. Super excited.

Wanted to thank you to Commissioner Petitti. Last year they took us to Vegas for meetings, and that was the spot where I met my wife at, the Wynn Casino, which is a whole 'nother story. We met in Vegas, and our first date was in Chicago. So to come back to Chicago, which was the first place my wife and I ever had dinner.

Excited to get back and be in the mix here. A lot of great things have happened for us at the University of Illinois. One of the greatest things, last week Josh Whitman, our AD, who's been a huge part of not just success in football but the University of Illinois over the last 10 years, they gave him a contract that pretty much ensures my contract aligns with his, and his is even a little bit longer. To have that blessing, to have an AD walk that walk with us on a daily basis is absolutely awesome. Been a huge part of why we've had success.

In the last two years in the Big Ten conference, we're No. 4 behind Indiana, Oregon, Ohio State in four really cool categories: win percentages, Power Four wins, home wins and ranked wins.

I think if Illinois was in that messaging as in that spot in the Big Ten conference, a lot of people would find that hard to believe. But not for me. The walk that we walk, the players that we have here today, it's been absolutely

awesome.

In the last two years, we're 8-1 in one-score games in conference play and bowl games, and that was largely generated by a really good player that left us, Luke Altmyer. So to bring Katin Houser here as one of our player representatives, I wanted him to be known as the quarterback at the University of Illinois going into the season. I think he's a great representative of not just who he is but what we represent at Illinois.

I think that's why we've got him. We've had a little bit of a history going back to Russell Wilson was my first-ever transfer quarterback, to Tommy DeVito, to now Luke, and now Katin hopes to fall in that same line.

Two other players with us are two guys we recruited out of high school, Jaheim Clarke came to us from Florida, is going into his fourth year because of the new rule coming about. We'll actually get a bonus year with him. He was a kid that was a little bit recruited, not a lot.

And then Matt Bailey is a great representative, a fifth-year player. His only offer to play college football was from us at the University of Illinois. I offered him on a Sunday before signing day just because I felt he was a really good player, and I knew that if we field people who are good players, a lot of people tend to follow us. So we wanted to make sure we got him to the University of Illinois, and he's been an absolute dream.

Those three players represent a lot about what we have at Illinois going. Just finished our seventh straight semester over a 3.0 GPA. The highest GPA in school history was this past semester. So not just doing it on the field, also doing it in the classroom.

I know a lot of people have different opinions about what's going on in college football. Going into my 18th year, I couldn't be more excited about where we are, not just at Illinois but in our conference and also college football. It's literally at an all-new high by the people that are here, the buzz around this.

I go back and I sit in conference meetings, and I hear Tony



talk to us as a group of coaches. I remember being here as a young coach when Jim Delany got up and would come in and talk to us, and I remember him and Joe Pa getting in arguments every time about different things. It was very comical, very enjoyable to watch.

But to see the growth of this league to get to where we are now -- I spent a couple years in the SEC, was with Slive and then transitioned to Sankey. And I just think about it now, everybody is going to have opinions, and obviously they're going to draw the Big Ten/SEC and all that goes around about that. But to sit in the room with both of those guys, I think with Tony and the vision and experience that he has and to be in the room where Sankey -- I know he's got to protect the SEC, and they kind of want to live in 2005 forever, but I think the forward thinking of where we are in college football is an awesome thing.

Couldn't be more excited about the year. Got a crossover game against Duke, ACC champ. Played them at their place last year, got a victory. So we have them on our docket. Start with UAB, have an FCS in-state school with Southern Illinois and then start Big Ten play on the road at Ohio State is going to be a tremendous challenge.

Have a couple neat games. Got an Oregon game coming at home, got a Friday night home game against Nebraska, got a Friday game at UCLA in the Rose Bowl. So a lot of great things ahead of us, those 12 guaranteed games, and we'll see where it can go.

With that, I'll answer any questions that anybody has.

Q. Coach B, back-to-back seasons with the bowl victory. The success of your good friend in Brad Underwood making it to the Final Four in the spring and just Illinois being in their, quote-unquote, golden age in athletics at the moment, do you believe that that stands at the top of the list when it comes to prestiges and trying to land recruits out of high school or out of the portal?

BRET BIELEMA: It definitely helps. One of the first phone calls I had with Josh, he gave me Brad's number, and I talked to Brad, I think, the two days before I took the job. A big part of that was obviously conversation with Josh, but Brad just assured me how great Josh was to work with and the environment we had at Illinois.

So he's been a huge asset for me as a head coach. Basketball, I think even in the NIL world and all that's changing in college athletics, basketball is a little bit ahead of football all the time, it seems like, in that manner. So, yeah, he's been a great resource.

I think the cool thing is Josh and I commonly talk about sustainable success. Anybody can have a year or two or maybe three, but going into year six, to have the success we've had, really the two years we didn't go to a bowl game we were 5-17, it was a play or two away from going to another one.

Obviously the playoffs and the ability to get into that will take it to a different level. But I do think right now in this world that we're in, we're able to get in on really any kid in the country.

Now, how long they stay talking to us, a lot of times that's driven by contracts and revenue share and stuff like that. But I think any kid in college football that's getting recruited now will go anywhere his chance is the best, and that's why I think Illinois is a great place for everybody.

Q. Illinois has established itself as a contender. What are the next steps to consistently challenge for the Big Ten Championship in a tough league like this?

BRET BIELEMA: Well, a big point of mine is to win on the road. I went back and looked during my window over the last five years and then specifically it's gotten better and better each year. But for us to win and win at a high level and get in the playoffs, you're going to have to win Big Ten games on the road.

We've been able to do that. My first year we knocked off Penn State. I think we were No. 7 in the country in a nine-overtime game. But that was a long time ago, right.

To build a successful campaign to get 10 wins or more in the regular season, which will get you in the playoffs, I think we're going to have to win on the road, so that's a big one.

I do think that to say you contend is a great word, right, but I think championships are what people remember, right, and to get in those conversations, to do it more consistently, you've got to have a lot of great things going for you.

We've got pieces of those puzzles, but we've had a game or two each year that's kind of knocked us out of the playoffs, and to get over the hump, most of those have been on the road. We've been 6-1 the last two years at home, so we've been doing our business there, but each year we kind of have one of those games that snaps up and gets us, and we've got to avoid those games.

Q. You had one of the lowest returning snaps from the offensive line, added about 1,000 through the portal, and protection of Katin Houser is really important with



Duke of Ohio State. Is that the biggest bullet point in fall camp coming in?

BRET BIELEMA: Yeah, last year at this event, it was brought up how many players we had returning in the offensive line, and I knew that. During the course of the year, I made a huge commitment of time on my behalf, on our personnel staff, Pat Hamilton and his crew, to look at potential portal players and make sure we're going after the right people. I feel really good about that.

Like you said, we don't have snaps at Illinois, but Christian Martin, my left tackle, has played a lot of football at Colorado State. Maika Matelau is our left guard, who played a lot -- it was junior college football, but he's played a lot of football. We have Jake Renfro, who started at Cincinnati and at Wisconsin, has got a lot of reps, even though it hasn't been at Illinois.

Brandon Henderson is our right guard, only returning player who's been a starter for two years. Then our right tackle, if it lays out the way it is, Nate, has started in a bowl game for us and played a lot of good football.

I think reps in college football are very, very important. And Katin Houser, even though he hasn't started a game at Illinois, he did play at Michigan State, has been a really good football player for a long time at East Carolina. So I'm counting on those reps to carry into Illinois, as well.

Q. You just said something earlier about the SEC wanting to live in 2005 forever. Can you just explain what you mean by that?

BRET BIELEMA: Well, I think I just made the headline, right? (Laughter.)

When I became a head coach in 2006, so it was going back before I was a head coach purposefully, and I think what I'm saying is I went to the league and went to the SEC and it was a completely different league, in my opinion, than the one I was in in the Big Ten prior.

Just with the -- basically the two biggest things, the biggest components of the transfer portal and revenue share or NIL, however you want to describe it, when those two elements came into college football, the whole world changed. I mean, it's overly obvious to say that, but I think anything to predate that is just a different time in college football. It just is.

It's also really hard -- I said this point to someone earlier. So back when I was in the Big Ten the first time, we were going through this renaming of our league. I think the eventual winner was Leaders and Legends. I don't know

how the hell we got there. But regardless, I remember we were in these conversations, and I was with Coach Alvarez. He was obviously our AD. We did a comparative study over 20 years, and I believe they looked at the last 50 years up to that point.

Of course, 50 years' time, Wisconsin wasn't anywhere in the mix, but in the last 20 years when we took that data, the only other team that had won more games than Wisconsin was Ohio State. It wasn't Michigan, it wasn't Penn State, it wasn't Nebraska who was coming into the league, obviously. But the four teams they all wanted to talk about and that they were worried about distributing evenly was Penn State, Ohio State, Michigan and Nebraska.

I'm pissed, right, because I'm at Wisconsin, and I look at 20 years, and no one is really paying attention to that, right? And Coach just said to me very plainly, said, Don't worry about things you can't control. You can't change people's 50 years of history in the way they think.

I also had that revelation when I recruited a young man, Hjalte Froholdt. He was from Denmark. And Hjalte was a foreign exchange student at Ohio. I offered him a scholarship. And then he went on a tour.

And I was at Arkansas, and we hadn't won anything at that point. I was in my first or second year. He went to visit us, but then he went and visited Alabama, Florida, Ohio State, Michigan, all these premier programs.

And he came to Arkansas, in my opinion, because he wasn't blinded by the 50 years that he didn't know, or the 18 years he had been alive on this earth, because he had been in Denmark. He wasn't blinded by the things that he had been told or learned.

I just kind of take that in a way that, like, it's a different world. The last three years, like, the quarterback I have now, we would not have gotten if the world existed five years ago. I know that. Neither would my left tackle. My left guard, my center and my right tackle wouldn't be here playing for me.

You go around to every team, and the rosters have changed because of those two components. The transfer rule and revenue share. It's a different world. Anything beyond that is nonsense.

That's where I'm coming from.

Q. What's the biggest adjustment to going to the 3-3-5 defense, and what made that the most attractive option for your defense coming up?



BRET BIELEMA: Last year structurally we played a 3-3-5 scheme in 90 percent of our snaps. So it's labeled that way. It's a different way of saying it. But this defensive scheme is uniquely different. It's a genesis of Rocky Long, who was a longtime defensive coordinator, very successful at many different places. When Bobby left UNLV, he went to San Diego State and learned it right from Coach Long and then had installed it and built it into his Montana program.

We played against it a couple years ago when we played Mississippi State in the bowl game. So there's a few teams that have run it, but it's very unique and different.

I think the biggest factor for me is I wanted to get a way that we could play a defense that players could come in and transfer into and play easily, in addition to build something a little bit unique.

I think in the Big Ten play, to prepare for a unique offensive or defensive scheme in a workweek is really, really hard. When I got into the league, the defense we were running, there were about two or three teams that ran it. Last year at the end of the year, there were about 12 -- you could say 13 teams that ran a variation of our defense, most more than anything else. So we've become a really routine prep, and I wanted to have something a little bit more unique.

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