

Cheez-It Citrus Bowl: South Carolina vs Illinois

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Camping World Stadium

Shane Beamer

Bret Bielema

Press Conference

BRET BIELEMA: Absolutely, very excited obviously for tomorrow. I've really wired our guys into postseason play, since it started in early December. Kind of talked to our guys about watching things as they proceed and go through -- awesome, even the Pop-Tart Bowl the other night, culminated, as I said yesterday, by the sacrifice of a Pop-Tart, which I thought was pretty awesome to watch and witness.

Postseason play is just one of those things that I think once you're a part of it you get addicted to it more and more. Obviously, these guys have earned the right to be here. Congratulations to Coach Beamer and South Carolina, just an incredible football team, one of the best in college football. Obviously winning their last six games, they're as hot as hot gets. Tremendous challenge for our guys.

A couple neat things, to be here with Josh, just the ride that we've been on to get to this point, to be in the culmination of a nine-win season, hope to get 10, is just absolutely awesome to be here and be a part of it.

Another little sidebar, Mike Hopkins, who played in the 1990 game here, as well, will be our veteran of the game. Got to space walk five times, 333 days in space, just a cool thing for one of our former players to be a part of the game in a very special way.

I saw Darrick Brownlow and Chris Green last night at the function. Just to see former players come back. I was getting a cup of coffee this morning and met some people from Dixon, Illinois, that, apparently, went to school with the wife's hairstylist. She couldn't remember her maiden name, so I didn't know her, but just a lot of really cool things around this event.

I think to come to Orlando and to the Florida Citrus Sports, to be a part of this event with them, just absolutely couldn't be happier. Hogie and I started off as rookies together as



the head of this bowl since 2006; to come back and be reunited with this group is really awesome.

Excited about the opportunity and very, very excited for tomorrow.

SHANE BEAMER: Yeah, absolutely. Been a fantastic week. Thanks to Steve Hogan and everyone here with Florida Citrus Sports. It's been an awesome time here at the Cheez-It Citrus Bowl. When the playoff rankings came out the week after we beat Clemson and it was evident that we weren't going to be in the playoffs, Coach Tanner and our administration immediately went to work on getting us into this game.

I think that's what's really cool about this game is you have two teams, two really good teams that easily could be in the playoff that want to be here. This is as good as it gets. The week here in Orlando. The hospitality is first class in every which way, and our guys couldn't be more excited about being here. It's been a great week.

A ton of respect for Bret and his team. We were at an event together last night and told the people there, and it's the truth, that they do things the right way at Illinois. You can watch tape and you can tell the teams that are about the right stuff, and playing the game the right way, and they absolutely play the game the right way.

To be a nine-win team and easily could be in the playoff, as well, two losses to playoff teams, as well, he's got a really good football team. Will be a really big challenge for us tomorrow. Our guys are fired up about the opportunity and finishing the season the right way.

They're playing for something. We're playing for something. Should be a great match-up, and it's neat being back here.

I mentioned it to our local media on the teleconference or the Zoom, the day that this was announced, I guess my second game ever as a college -- second bowl game ever as a college football coach was back in 2001. I was a graduate assistant at Tennessee, and we came down here and played Michigan after the 2001 season. That week in Orlando as a young graduate assistant, young and dumb,



no family, was a hell of a week, but they set the bar high as far as bowl games go that week. To be back now as a head coach and married with three kids and maybe still dumb, but, definitely, not young has been full circle.

A lot of fun that week and a lot of fun this week, as well.

Q. Coach Shane, I know that it's always popular for fans and we media folks to talk about offensive players that are missing the game, but what makes you confident on the defensive side going without the Nagurski Award winner, all of that -- what makes you confident about the defense going into the upcoming game that they'll keep the attack strong up front?

SHANE BEAMER: Yeah, one, the leadership that we returned on this year's team from last year. Certainly, we'll miss Kyle. When you don't have the SEC Defensive Player of the Year here, that's a loss. We've got three defensive tackles that are still here that have been a part of our program, since either 2020 or 2021. We have three linebackers that are older guys. Our secondary, they've played a lot of football together. We have a lot of really good players and leadership around them.

Then at that position specifically, certainly, Kyle and Dylan Stewart are the two guys people talk about the most, but we've, typically, rotated six guys every game at that defensive end position, guys that have played a lot of football, as well. It'll be a great opportunity for those other guys to step up, and certainly with those defensive tackles on the inside, that's the meat of your defense, if you will, and those guys are still here, as well.

Everyone has got to be better. That's a big loss not having Kyle, but our guys are excited for the challenge. It'll be a challenge going up against one of the better offensive lines we've seen, an offensive tackle that's as good as we've seen, as well. It'll be a big challenge for them.

Q. Coach Bret, how much of an opportunity is this for Zakhari Franklin to step up and show his skills a little bit?

BRET BIELEMA: Zakhari has been a guy that's been with us all year, but, obviously, when Pat made the decision to pop out from this game, Zakhari knew his role was going to be increased. Really excited about Malik Elzy, Capka-Jones, Hank Beatty, just a slew of guys that will hop into the wide receiver position.

Echoing Coach's thoughts, I was not disappointed to see the SEC Player of the Year not be here. I think it's about the guys that want to be here and are in it.

I think these are opportunities. I've watched this, witnessed this. I've been to 17 bowl games, guys that kind of take these last three or four weeks that are stepping into new roles. This culmination of the year will obviously be tomorrow, but it's really the steppingstone into next year. I think a lot of our guys believe that, feel that, see that, and that's what we've been preaching to them, so very excited about those guys.

Q. Shane, you mentioned you both want to be here. This is a really important game for both of you. Bret, what can bowl games mean in the College Football Playoff era for programs like you guys?

BRET BIELEMA: Yeah, it's a great question. Bowl games have evolved so much. Commonly during my recruiting pitches when we have kids on campus, I show them the 1990 Rose Bowl that I was a part of as a player. That Rose Bowl ring, when I bring kids on campus, sits right next to a Super Bowl ring.

I think that Rose Bowl ring was \$150 by NCAA rules back then, and it sits next to a Super Bowl ring that was \$88,000. 20 fake diamonds versus 220 real diamonds. I always say to people, those are two cool rings, and a lot of people would say the Super Bowl ring has more value, but both of those rings mean everything to me, because it represents a year.

I think that's what it gets down to. We're not saying any kid any amount of dollars to play in this game. I know some teams have done that and that's perfectly great for them, but our kids want to be here and are a part of it.

Also, I found it interesting, there's just so much misinformation out there. I was watching a game the other night, and they made a big deal that they insured their players for the bowl game. We insured our players for the whole freaking season, so our guys know that we take care of them from before we even started in fall camp through the whole year. We have guys that qualify for insurance. We paid for them the whole year. From Josh in the athletic department to do that, it just tells our kids that we believe in them and we care for them, and I think that's a really big deal.

This last game is an opportunity to show that.

SHANE BEAMER: Absolutely, would echo all that, as well. I think it shows that you have a lot of players on both teams that are very invested in their programs and want what's best for their program. There's a perception out there with other teams that guys play in bowl games, because they have to play in a bowl game to pick up an NIL check at the end of it, and that's not accurate with us. In fact, I changed

it, because I didn't want that. I'm like, if they don't want to be there, let them get the check at the beginning of December, and they can go.

Our guys want to be here, and I think it's just great that you get an opportunity to come to a great place like Orlando, have a week together. We've talked about it as a team that all year long we've just been creating awesome moments as a team, just like his team has, as well, and coming down here for a week in Orlando with your guys, with your teammates and families, it's just an awesome time.

I said this back in Columbia and probably took some criticism for it, like I was saying that I didn't want to be in the playoff, but I hate the part of the playoff if you make the playoff and you lose the first round, your season is over and it's just an away game. All you do is if you go play whoever, Penn State, you leave on Friday, you go to State College, PA, you play the game and you come home. That's it.

Great for them, don't get me wrong, I would have loved to have been in the playoff, but the fact that we get to come down here and spend a week in Orlando and our guys get to go have fun together and create great memories. At dinner last night, someone was asking me what's your favorite bowl game that you've been to either as a player or coach, and you just start going back through the years, and there's so many awesome memories from all the different bowl games that I've had a chance to experience.

It's one of the things that makes college football so great, and just hope and pray that as college football continues to evolve that bowl games won't be affected in an adverse way.

Q. You had spoken about how a couple of months ago before the season started you talked about how this was 2024-2025 season. What would a win do for the ceiling for your program and moving forward?

BRET BIELEMA: Yeah, I guess first and foremost, we put that because normally this game is on the 1st, so I was hoping to go into 2025 so we're going to fall a day short unless we go into a bunch of overtimes.

But, it's a great point. I say it, because I think that the world of college football that we're living in, your roster literally flips almost on a daily basis. To use this as a game that we'll fly home on January 1st and we have a visitor coming on January 2nd for the 2025 season, it's a catalyst to do that.

I think one of the things Josh and I had a conversation literally in our first phone call when we talked about taking

this job was to build something that was sustainable. Two years to get to an eight-win team and play January 1st and then to get to where we are today. I know last year was a 5-7 season that I didn't enjoy. We used it as a catalyst to get to this year and, hopefully, we'll continue to take this thing forward and build something that can sustain success in Illinois for a long time.

Q. Bret, you said a couple days ago that injury-wise you're pretty full-go rodeo. Does that include Seth Coleman, and if it does, can you talk about how cool it is to maybe get him one more?

BRET BIELEMA: Yeah, Seth, I give him a lot of credit. Obviously, a guy even a year ago at this time made a decision to come back, passed up on an NFL opportunity to come back and join us and really build himself into a special senior year.

Unfortunately, got injured in the Northwestern game. I believe he practiced on -- forgive me, I don't even know what today is. I know it's the day before the game. In our world it's Friday. So Tuesday's practice, which it really wasn't a Tuesday, you can sort it out. He practiced. Wednesday he didn't. Then, yesterday was just kind of a walk-through tempo period.

I think Seth is going to be out there. If he's not, I know he's been invited to a Senior Bowl opportunity, will be able to do that. But really, he's the only one -- we've had a couple guys with the flu bug. A couple of our players brought that with them from the holidays.

But other than that, the guys that have been injured throughout the course of the year won't be with us, but other than that, we should be full go.

Q. With preseason rankings being very relevant these days with the College Football Playoff, how important is it to maximize what you guys can set yourselves up for as far as preseason expectations and that aspect of things?

SHANE BEAMER: Yeah, it's important. I hadn't thought about it in regards to rankings next year in regards to this game. To me, it's more about finishing this season the right way and having a chance to win 10 games and send these seniors out the right way.

I alluded to it in that first question, that I think we have something like the second or third most number of seniors in the country just because we have so many guys that are a part of this program that are older guys. Sending them out the right way, but there's no question you want to win your last game to have momentum going into the

off-season. They've had great momentum in the month of December coming off a win over Northwestern, and we've had great momentum coming off a win over Clemson.

To be able to sustain that momentum and keep that throughout the off-season is very important, but regardless of what happens tomorrow. Looking at Bret's roster, he has a really good team coming back it looks like next year. Looking at our roster, we're going to be preseason picked, I would imagine, somewhere fairly high, just with who we have coming back and the young men that are coming into the program.

It's two teams, Coach just mentioned it, sustaining it for the long-term, and two teams that are built that way for sure that I think both have really big futures in front of them, because of the foundation that's been laid and the progress that's been made.

Q. Shane, with Rocket forgoing this game and declaring for the NFL Draft, how have you seen that running back room come together, and how have you seen them relish the opportunity to step up and maybe make a statement for 2025?

SHANE BEAMER: Yeah, they have. Certainly, we'll miss him, but that's another group where it's not a lot of young players. You've got Juju McDowell, who has been a part of our program and making impactful plays since I became the head coach back in 2021. I go back to the East Carolina game, my second game ever as the head coach, and he had a long kickoff return that essentially won the game for us up in Greenville way back in 2021. He's an older guy that's played a lot of football.

Oscar Adaway is an older guy that's been our No. 2 guy throughout the year. So we have experience in that room.

But then, we also have some really talented young players that I'm excited about for 2025. When you talk about Jawarn Howell and Matthew Fuller, both those guys are going to be really good running backs for us. Tomorrow will be an opportunity for them to get out there and show what they can do, as well.

Q. What was the point during the season, a game or a moment, where you felt like you knew what was possible?

SHANE BEAMER: As a team, we had higher expectations than anyone on the outside did throughout the year, but for me, probably the Kentucky game. Just the way that we played, particularly on defense. In practice, you see these guys and think you're pretty good, and then we played Old Dominion the first game, but then week 2, we went and

played at Kentucky in Lexington against Coach Stoops, who's blue collar, physical -- that's their MO there at UK. To go up there with a redshirt freshman quarterback, and what did we do, seven sacks, something like that, to control the line of scrimmage like we did in that game. Then, see your freshman quarterback get knocked out of the game with an injury, but come back and make some plays. I walked off the field that day not saying that we're going to end the season on a six-game winning streak and be down here in Orlando, but I remember walking off the field that day thinking we have a chance to be pretty good, because of the way we can play defense. This young freshman defensive end we have is going to be okay, and our freshman quarterback didn't get -- in his first road start in the SEC was poised as could be and made some plays to other true freshmen that day in the passing game, as well.

BRET BIELEMA: I would say halftime of Nebraska. We were at that point a football team that had done some good things. We beat a ranked Kansas team at home, but to go on the road and play a ranked Nebraska team at the time, I thought we just answered ourselves a lot of questions that we had just about where we wanted to go, what we wanted to do.

When we beat Kansas, I just thought our guys were going to be into that game. It was a home game. It was all that and a ranked opponent. To go on the road and play a Nebraska team at the time that was undefeated, I think they lost five more after us in a row, so I think we -- I always talk about when we play a team. It's not what we do to them that week, but what they do after us, because of the physicality that we embrace and try to play. I would say that game in particular.

I want to just comment, Shane brought up a great point, a great question about preseason rankings. Because we were a 5-7 team a year ago, no one really thought much of us going into this year. I did as a football coach. I did as a head coach. I could tell the type of team I had, but it takes a while for the outside world to see those things.

I would just put an emphatic issue out to the college football rankings, but you have a right, and you also vote, to take each individual year. I think the College Football Playoffs do a good thing in the fact that they don't rank anybody until week five or six. I think that's probably a great way to look at it, because there's going to be teams that are going to be held to a high standard that everybody just thinks they're a top-20 team and they can't hold up to it. On the flipside, there's teams that people think certain teams are going to be a bottom-20 football team, and they're not.

I think each year individually has its individual season, and



we have to rank teams accordingly.

Q. For both coaches, you talked about building a foundation for next year, but with so much going on with the House settlement and things like that, how challenging has it become to keep your team together year in and year out and try to build something for the future when the future seems to be moving around left and right all the time?

BRET BIELEMA: Yeah, great question. I've been fortunate enough, this will be my 17th year coming up as a head coach, and every year has been uniquely different, but I don't think there's ever been a time where a head coach has worn as many hats as he has, which is something I love and embrace.

I think about it all the time, like we truly -- I always use this quote: If you choose a job you love, you never work a day in your life. I'm 54 years old, and I don't know that I've worked a day yet. Even the best of days or the worst of days, I love every job.

What I don't like is I think the one misleading fact of this whole world is graduation rates. We have a thing called APR that they can actually track every head coach has an APR ranking that is trackable on the NCAA website, and part of the reason I've been able to get jobs that I've got is, because of that APR ranking.

We're a good football team, good players, but I believe in graduating kids, and part of this whole transition thing when kids transfer from school to school is they throw off their graduation rates, and there are a lot of kids that will make final-year decisions that will forego graduating.

It's all great right now and NIL is great. The chance to play in the NFL is awesome, but I think about a lot of kids 10, 15 years down the road. They're going to be doing a "30 for 30" on sometimes we are living in right now, and that upsets me as a head coach. But, it is crazy.

To have a kid on your team today that you realize you might play in your opener on another football team is just a crazy world that we're living in, but it also makes it fun. I know Coach has done a great job of retaining -- there's been kids on our team. I believe we have five guys that are going to play in this game that are in the portal, and I wouldn't do that if I didn't love them, if I didn't trust them, if I didn't believe in who they were. I want to help them go to where they want to go, but I don't think every place is like that.

I think that's the part that I'm glad -- I've heard Shane talk several times now, and I know his care and his love for his

team is real, but I don't know if that's always commonplace in college football, which I hope we get to.

SHANE BEAMER: Yeah, the same. It's a challenge. I've followed Coach Bielema's career for a long time and have a ton of respect for him, and he's very much a team builder. It's hard now as a college football coach because you really, truly -- because there's a spring portal window, as well, you don't know who's going to be on your team until the middle of May.

You go through spring practice, and that may or may not be your football team in the fall. We added two receivers after spring practice last year, Dalevon Campbell and Vandrevius Jacobs, and it's hard when you're trying to build a team in the off-season, January, February, March, April, May, all that stuff, that you don't know until May, who's going to be on your team. It's changing every day, every week, like you said.

I was kidding with someone, Jeff Crane, our deputy athletic director, who does an awesome job. He was out at practice back in Columbia last week or the week before, and we were standing on the side. I said, take a look at practice right now, and this is a snapshot of college football in 2024. We were missing two players who had just played a couple weeks earlier against Clemson that opted out of the bowl game. We were missing a coach who took the App State head coaching job. We had a high school recruit on the sideline, a great offensive lineman in the state of South Carolina. He was there on an unofficial visit with his family. Then, we had two guys that were visiting from the portal that we had played that season from other SEC schools that were standing on the side watching practice.

To me, it's chaos, but it is what it is. I agree with what Coach said. I love what I do, and I'm certainly a glass-is-half-full kind of guy and see the positives in what we get to do as coaches, but certainly it's challenging right now and concerning in a lot of ways, as well.

BRET BIELEMA: And Dalevon Campbell played for me my first year.

SHANE BEAMER: That's right, Illinois. Crazy. I'll check his loyalties when I get back to the hotel here, as well.

BRET BIELEMA: It was a different OC.

Q. Shane, I think today marks a whole month since you've played the Clemson game. I'm sure it feels like an eternity over this past month between the excitement of winning that game, missing out on the playoff, losing Dowell to the App State job and of course what you mentioned with the entire whirlwind

of an off-season. What's it been like trying to make sure your team keeps that momentum fresh from winning the last six games of the season where you're winning six games in seven weeks?

SHANE BEAMER: Yeah, it's a challenge because it is such a layoff and you want to balance -- bowl games are great. Going back to one of the questions about the bowl games, because it gives you an extra spring practice, as well, so you were able to really work and develop your young guys and really your entire roster, because it gives you extra time. You want to do that, but you also want to balance not wearing them out in the month of December. It was a long year, because in our minds when we were 3-3. For us to have any shot at the playoff, we knew we had to win every game. In our mind, we were playing a playoff elimination game every single Saturday after the Alabama game. That takes a toll from a mental standpoint, as well. It was a long year in a lot of ways.

You want to give your guys a break, but you want to continue to stay sharp and prepare for a really good team that you're playing. Keeping them motivated wasn't hard. They're very motivated to play in this game for a lot of reasons, as we've alluded to, just like Illinois is.

To me the biggest challenge is just keeping, with that long a layoff, keeping the sharpness, if you will, from a technique and fundamentals standpoint, because it is such a long layoff. It's like a game 1 in so many ways when it comes to tackling and blocking and special teams, because there's so many -- with the portal there's so many new players that are going to be playing on special teams in games. You can't watch a bowl game and not see impactful special teams play.

I haven't watched a ton of bowl games this week - we've been busy - but it feels like every time I see a highlight or watch five minutes, there's a blocked punt, there's a return for a punt, there's a fake punt, there's a fake field goal. It's amazing. Really just focusing on that, so we can be at our best tomorrow in the game.

Q. Looking again at big picture, how are you and Bret, as well, managing whoever is coming in from the transfer portal who you're actively recruiting, who's coming in out of high school, and also, who could potentially step up and have a big game tomorrow afternoon?

SHANE BEAMER: Oh, and to go back to the snapshot of college football in 2024, I forgot to mention that we had seven high school players that had just played in a state championship game two days earlier that were going through December practices with us, as well, because they

had finished up all their academic work, as well. It's hectic.

Yeah, it's a challenge, no question about it. For us, it always starts with high school recruiting, as well. We've liked the group that we have coming in there from a high school standpoint. One thing that I do like that the NCAA did this year, and I don't know if Bret feels the same way, but just moving the signing day up earlier in December, it allowed you to at least sign that class.

Now, it stunk, because you didn't get to do home visits, and every freshman on our team, I was in their house last year. You didn't do that this season, because the signing day was right after the Clemson game. You got your high school signing class signed and then you can go and attack the portal.

There's still some high school guys out there that didn't sign in December that we're recruiting, but right now we're primarily "portaling," if you will, for just positions where you need some experience, immediate need. We lose a center in -- our starting center and both offensive guards after this game tomorrow, so that's going to be a position where we need to get some experience in here, and that's been a point of emphasis in the portal, as well.

Then in regards to guys stepping up tomorrow, certainly, I would think just because of who's missing, the running back position, somebody is going to have to make some plays there tomorrow, without a doubt. Easier said than done. This is a really good defense we're playing and a really good front seven particularly.

Someone there is going to have an opportunity, and need one of those guys, without a doubt.

But fortunately in the secondary, those guys are playing, linebackers are playing healthy, without a doubt. But the tight end position, Brady Hunt is still hurt and won't play tomorrow. Josh Simons, still good to go, but Michael Smith, those two guys are primarily going to be the two main guys tomorrow from a tight end standpoint, as well.

Outside of that, we kind of got the guys, and, hopefully, we don't have to go too far down the depth chart, if you will, if we can keep everybody healthy tomorrow.

BRET BIELEMA: Yeah, I think one of the things that's crazy in this portal world is there's so much pre-portal information. You get tipped off either from a high school coach, college coach -- you saw it just a couple nights ago here in the Pop-Tart game, where a guy opted out in the middle of a game, so I think it's just a really unique time in the world that we're in. Because Shane and I's team played past the deadline for the transfer window to open, it stays

open for, I believe, six more days, so our guys -- anybody on our roster would be able to declare for the portal up until January 5.

I don't think you should be naïve to the fact that it's going on everywhere else in college football. I think our guys think a certain way, but that's probably the game within the game that is really unique, because people will test the waters before they're in the waters, if you know what I mean.

It's unique time as far as players stepping up. I'm really excited to see our wide receiver corps, Justin Stepp, who I know Coach knows personally, came from South Carolina, has made an incredible impact on our football team and especially in the wide receiver room. He is really excited about this group, obviously, with Pat Bryant our leading receiver stepping down from this game. To have Zakhari but also those faces, those names I mentioned earlier, it's really exciting to watch Malik, Capka, Hank Beatty, a couple other new faces come into the fold that I'm excited to see them play out as well as several guys at other positions.

Q. The situation the other night, can we get your reaction when you learned about that, and can you imagine having a player coming to you and say I'll play a half but then I'm done?

BRET BIELEMA: I don't know enough about the situation. I just know it happened. I pissed Miami off once earlier; I don't need to do it again.

I'll just say that I always try to stay within my own world. I always think the greatest thing you can do from others is learn. If you're not a part of the situation, you can at least learn from it.

It's not unreal to think that that may happen. I think all of our guys intend to play in four quarters or whatever is needed tomorrow, but that's just the world that is there right now, and I think for me, the relationship with our athletic director Josh, being a former lawyer, he's kind of really ahead of the game on many different facets, and I think you've just got to be proactive in things that are going on in college football. To think that it could not enter into your building has got to be something you have to be aware of.

Q. Does that dissuade you? You talk about having a wonderful job. Does that dissuade you when you think about this guy is going to leave after a half?

BRET BIELEMA: I became a coach, because of the way the coaches had an effect on my life. I know that's one thing they can never take away from us. It can get

frustrating. I'm sure Shane's wife and my wife will tell you that -- I flew to Oakland, California, two days before Christmas and took a day away from my daughters that I was really looking forward to. I knew to go visit a player that I loved and try to tell him things that will make him come back and play with us would have a huge effect on not only our football team, but also my life.

Nothing can ever take away how much you enjoy coaching young men and getting them to reach their dreams. There are a lot of things that -- I'm glad I'm in my 17th year, not my first year, because I know I can do this probably another 10 years, but I don't know if I can do it 17 for a variety of reasons. Yeah, I don't think that can ever take away from what we're doing.

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