

Cheez-It Citrus Bowl: South Carolina vs Illinois

Tuesday, December 31, 2024

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

Illinois Fighting Illini

Bret Bielema

Josh McCray

Matt Bailey

Press Conference

Illinois 21, South Carolina 17

BRET BIELEMA: Yesterday, I was talking to the TV crew about our game, and they asked me, Coach, what was the thing that made this team special. I said it's kind of a secret sauce that I felt really since last January to where we were today.

We have 120 guys that started the season on our roster. We had a group of coaches, support staff, a lot of people that walk in the building every day in the Smith Center. We have an administration around us in the department of intercollegiate athletics at Illinois that cares about our place at an unprecedented level, and it's all those little stories. These guys right next to me, two incredible stories and journeys in their own right to get to where they are today. Today is kind of a culmination of all those things.

I am very excited for our fans to be able to come down here. There were a lot of them. I went to that pep rally yesterday and was like, holy Toledo. I knew people loved to come to Florida in December, but this is pretty live.

Give credit to South Carolina, Coach Beamer. Obviously, an incredible football team, a nine-win team that was on the verge of 10 wins, as well, but to get 10 wins for us, to be the fifth team in program history is something very, very special. I'm excited and honored to be a part of this one, but both these guys know we have a chance to do something very special in the future. We wanted to have sustainable success, and this was the culmination of 2024, but it was really the start of 2025.

Happy new year, and let's roll.



Q. For both Bret and Josh, you've made it known Josh was your first high school recruit and now four years later he's MVP of the Citrus Bowl, 10 wins. What's that mean to you to see that play out, and Josh, what has his belief in you meant to help get to this point?

BRET BIELEMA: I think I'm an excellent evaluator, but we had a connection with a coach that I'd worked with previously at the University of Wisconsin. That's what connected us. We really just started to talk and figure things out. I know some people were trying to recruit him as a defensive player. I saw his tape. I said, tell him he's a running back, and that's what we got to ourselves this day.

You guys have interviewed him. You understand him. I love his humility. I love his passion. He cares about people in a very special and unique way. He never looks for outward excuses or anything, but just works hard, does a lot of really good things to make these days happen. I'm super excited for him.

JOSH McCRAY: I would definitely add on to that. Coach B had called my head coach, Coach Kennedy, and that's who he's talking about when he says he's got a close relationship. So Jack Kennedy, that's my guy.

But other than that, the relationship just came from the first call whenever he said I could play running back, because I did not want to play defense.

BRET BIELEMA: I think I told him, because everybody wants a big commitment graphic, and he wanted a welding graphic with a welding mask. I said, this is my kind of guy.

Q. You win this game in 2006 and win it again 18 years later. Now is it nostalgic to do it again in a different chapter of your career with this group?

BRET BIELEMA: Yeah, I think anytime you have a journey with people, one of the things I commonly do in our recruiting weekends is I have a graphic of all the rings that I've amassed as a player and as a coach. I show a ring that I got in 1990 that's a Rose Bowl ring and then show a Super Bowl ring in 2018. Each one of those stories are independent moments in your coaching career. It's the



stories with these guys that make it special and unique.

In 2006, I think my now wife was at the game with maybe an old boyfriend, and we hadn't even met yet. To come full circle now, to come here married with two beautiful daughters and a beautiful wife. To come back, Steve Hogan and his bowl game, they put an unbelievable show together from day one in 2006 to where we are today. Our bowl hosts in Pat and Karen, and just so many great things. It's been an awesome weekend for all of us.

Q. Bret, obviously this is a moment to savor and I know you are, but you kept saying this is a catapult into next year. How do you do that, and how important is it to flip the mindset right way?

BRET BIELEMA: Every year is a little bit different feel or a little different mojo, just different chemistry. Take these two guys, for example, like Matt came in and I had a feeling he was going to be a pretty special player, but had tremendous success that first year kind of in a reserve role, played a lot of special packages for us. He scored a touchdown on special teams, and then that next year he literally has a shoulder injury on the very first play of the game that he was in. He had to battle through an entire year of recovery to get to where he is today. I think just a great microcosm of his story, his journey over the last couple years.

Josh really had two years back-to-back kind of cut short due to injuries, and the perseverance to not lose sight. Both these guys have done an incredible job in the weight room and in the academic room, as well. It's all those little things that make this place so special.

We have lost some guys in the portal, but nobody that we were surprised with. This group really sticks together. They play together. They understand it. We understand what's going on in college football, but it's the joy of the time that we have together and also the things we can achieve.

Q. Bret, earlier this week Aaron was talking about how much pride he takes in not focusing on landing four-star and five-star guys and developing one-star, two-star, three-star guys. My question to you is what is the key to development, like someone like Spoon would be a great guy, ended up a Top 5 pick and wasn't highly rated. Is it execution? Is it fundamentals? How do you bring those guys along?

BRET BIELEMA: You know, I'll let these guys answer it, but we have this DNA philosophy in our program called TSD -- Tough, Smart, Dependable. I kind of recruit to it. I hire staff to it. It's something we live in our program every day. Toughness, smart and dependable are really to do. I

don't think it has to do with how fast you are, how high you can jump, how far you can throw a football, how well you run with the football, how well you can tackle. It's about how you live. These guys are great examples, but I think we always go back to our core principles.

I don't know what these guys' stars were coming in. I talk about the stars going out. I think that's the part that I really don't care what other people think. I do care a lot about what I think and my coaches think, and that's what we kind of drive as the reason for our success.

I think more and more people are beginning to understand and hear that. We literally have programs that follow us in recruiting. If we offer a kid, they'll literally get an offer within the next 24 hours from people that follow us.

I stop following certain recruits before they commit, because I don't want to tip off people who we recruit. Matt Bailey, I think we offered him three days before signing day. I knew I was going to offer him for about a month, but I didn't tell anybody else, because I didn't want anyone else to come and try and grab him. I was able to tell him and his mom in my office. I told Josh about his offer, and he took it right away. These are the stories that make us great.

Q. Two-part question. First is I just want to know how it makes you feel yourself to be you're coming up on 55 to be on a stage like this in a New Year's game and to win, how gratifying it is for you personally, and part two is Shane Beamer was very detailed in describing what he didn't like about your gesture during the game. I wanted to ask for your version as specifically as you'll tell it.

BRET BIELEMA: First off, I'm only 55. I've got 12 more days of 54. I'm going to embrace all those. Plus, my wife is a day before my birthday.

I think this is fulfilling, because the part that I have enjoyed now more as a coach. When Josh [Whitman] gave me this opportunity, Chancellor [Robert J.] Jones there that the day, when I was relieved of my last college coaching job, I knew that I wanted to prove what I could do, and I wanted to do it my way. I wanted to do it with a group of people that I thought could do things. Now to do this and to cap a 10-win season, and at Illinois we often get -- well, we haven't ever done this or they want to go back to certain times. I always say, that's great, let's turn the page, let's move forward, and I think today is a big step in that direction.

I don't know exactly about the other thing. I know the only thing that I did was there's an unwritten philosophy in coaching that when you do this as a college kickoff return

guy. What you're doing is you're telling everybody else that it's going to be a fair catch, and it's going to be dead in the end zone when the ball lands.

The reason we do that and I first became aware of it was in the NFL kickoffs. Kickoff return is the highest percentage of injury in the sport, so one of the things that coaches began to do was everybody out of respect started T-barring. I think these guys would tell you, everybody does that. I've never seen it any other way. It's not an official [sign]. There's nothing illegal. They didn't do anything illegal, but it put us in a position that we now -- the ethics of what that is got evaporated there, because our kids stopped. When you're a kickoff return unit, if I'm running at you and the kickoff returner back there, the guy blocking me, he doesn't know what's going on, so he's going to begin to engage you. We see somebody do that before the whistles are blown, you can stop, decelerate, and you don't have these massive collisions.

Listen, I love Shane. He's a good person. I know somebody said that he thought I did it at him. I did it at their whole damn sideline. I wasn't going personally at him. I did it at their whole sideline. I wanted them to understand that I know what just happened.

There's nothing illegal, there's nothing wrong. I just have never seen it done in any level of football, college or pro. That's it.

Q. Back to the motivation thing you talked about earlier, preseason you were picked 13th in the Big Ten. Did you mention that to the guys, and how did they react to that, and how does it feel to overcome that?

BRET BIELEMA: I think we were talking earlier this week, one of the things I do harp on these guys is when you come in the building, before you come in here there's a lot of things that have already happened that you don't have to worry about. We're putting them in a position to have success from the way we walk, talk, train, eat, sleep. I always tell these guys they're going to make more decisions out of the building that are going to affect all of us than in the building and just get them to understand that.

I don't want to bed check these guys or put them through, but if a team needs curfew then I think you're going to have a team that's going to have problems. We really don't have a lot of rules in our building.

I did see these guys the other day. For a lot of these guys in the room, this is their first bowl game. There's a couple of them that it was their second, and two or three guys this is their third. I said, well, great, congratulations, this is my

17th, so just listen to what I have to tell you.

I don't say that often, but I think everybody was kind of laughing. They're like, oh, shit, he probably does know what he's doing.

I don't say I do everything right, but I appreciate these guys. They kind of without any hesitation kind of just believe in what we're doing and don't ask a lot of questions.

Q. Bret and Josh, we got a reeducation on barge package today. Everybody talked about South Carolina's front. What did you think that the barge package and specifically your run game would be successful today?

BRET BIELEMA: Well, the Penn State game a couple years ago, we just had a lot of big people, and sometimes to neutralize some athleticism, some movement. When you get bigger people, people don't move and they don't pressure, so I thought it would be a way to calm them down a little bit. Sometimes people don't know how to align at it. You saw the very first -- Josh's first touchdown run, he just saw the vision. A lot of times there's big holes. Him and Aidan, both, I think are very good at those type of runs. They see things vertically and do it.

Josh really took a liking to it there during the course of the day.

Q. Josh, three years ago we saw the birth of the barge package with you and Chase at Penn State. As a running back, what do you think about when you've got nine offensive linemen in front of you --

JOSH McCRAY: I love having nine offensive linemen on the field. Just having blockers up front that's going to do their job each and every play, that's a blessing. Just being quarterback, I love being behind the quarterback, but I also love the inside part, too.

BRET BIELEMA: It's funny, they had a corner that when they're lined up like that, we don't have any wide outs, so a corner is out there, he's like, I don't even know how to line up. He doesn't really like lining up on big people. Usually, little people don't like lining up on big people in those moments, so that was kind of a fun one for us.

Q. Coach or any of you up there, but earlier this year I talked to Terah Edwards and he says one of the big things about this team was just everybody tells each other to just be happy and to just be positive. How has that positivity and that optimism translated into you guys' success, especially today with this bowl game?

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

MATT BAILEY: I think the movement into expecting to win and having that success. It allows us all to come together and trust each other more. When things are high and having that happiness and that joy, it helps everybody keep it up. Even when we go into those depths or valleys, when things are rough, we still have that mindset that I've got your back, you've got my back and, then, we're going to go in this together. You know what I'm saying?

BRET BIELEMA: There was a moment this year at the Nebraska game, I believe. It was at halftime, was it Michigan, too, that I heard this guy's voice enforcing some things at halftime about what we needed to do better, so there's also tough love in there, too. It's not all marshmallows, kumbayas and fireflies. We have to have moments where we get after one another and try to get the best out of one another at a high level. I think when there's love and respect. I think that goes a long way.

Q. Matthew, seems like you were coming downhill quite a bit today with a lot of plays developing right in front of you. Was there something about the game plan or the scheme or the opponent that kind of put you in position to make the plays?

MATT BAILEY: Yeah, so like we definitely switched up the game plan for this game with all the time that we had to plan for it. It kind of just put me in that role to be kind of a middle safety about 10, 12 yards off and kind of play the run play the pass and react to whatever happens. I personally love that position, and hope it happens moving forward.

But yeah.

BRET BIELEMA: I would say -- he's just said something that I think people understand in our building. The time that we had to prep. I said this has to be our advantage. We had three weeks of preparation, and we really designed our prep to take advantage of early downs. 75 percent of the game is early downs. We only did early downs for the entire first week. A lot of people don't understand what that means, but I wanted these guys to lock into the first down and second down success and nothing else, because we can't get to third down on defense. We definitely can't help ourselves get to third down on offense unless we have early down success.

It was one of our keys, so to put Matt -- I'll tell you, Aaron Henry and the defensive staff did an incredible job of game planning and Barry Lunney offensively, Robby Discher in the back end, special teams wise, really just a very, very special game plan here, and the results are what you saw.

On game day, I get to do all the other stuff. I can kind of manage, apparently piss off an entire sideline and half the stadium, but there's parts to my job that I just really enjoy, because I know I don't have to over-coach other positions. It's really a fun job as a head coach.

Q. When did the momentum turn in the second half just concerning that it kind of was a defensive slugfest in the first half. You guys had a little bit of trouble getting some stuff going, and you may have had a touchdown that probably should have been a touchdown that wasn't. Take me through that sequence.

MATT BAILEY: Yeah, so I think it really started with the big ol' event. I think it got everybody juiced up on our sideline for sure. To your point about how the game was played and how early on it was a defensive game, I think that later on, we could have done things better on defense. Just playing like situational football and the offense having our back and us having the offensive's back, it just allows us all to play more free. I think that's what helped us win today.

Q. Coach, you have one of the youngest rosters in the FBS with only 14 guys in their final year of eligibility. Talk about what that means with that turnover, also winning 10 games with such a young team. Talk about how you were able to get that done?

BRET BIELEMA: I think it goes to our recruitment, our development of players. Both these guys both actually truly have redshirt years. They played as true freshmen. We have a lot of guys come in and play early for us, and they're playing their best football at the end of the year. They're also playing their best football at the end of their career. These guys have an incredibly bright future ahead of them next year.

I knew last year and during the prep work to get ready for the fall. I'm like, man, we don't have many seniors, and then I saw an article that someone wrote that we were the youngest team in Power Four football. We have so many sophomores and juniors. We're really a sophomore-driven football team. We're a very smart football team. Anytime you have your quarterback coming back, there's a lot of great things to that, because I think even Matt will tell you that our defense feeds of Luke Altmeier, and the confidence that we have in our offense.

I made a decision at halftime to run a bunt kick at the start of the second half. The only reason I did that is, because I had an unbelievable amount of confidence in our defense. We executed. It's perfect, just unfortunately we weren't able to get the bounce -- the ball bounces weird

sometimes. The only reason I had that is, because at the end of the half, they went out and answered the bell right away.

As a head coach, it allows you to play the game a lot more aggressively knowing those things. Case in point, the dagger from Josh here at the end of the game, and then the awareness, a lot of guys would have just taken it to the end zone. They would have had a chance to get it. He knew we were going to grind to get done, and that decision that he had in the middle of that run was absolutely one of the smartest things to happen this year.

Q. Josh, did you fumble that -- did you feel like you were losing that ball? What happened? Bret, did you hear anything from upstairs about it?

JOSH McCRAY: I would definitely say I did not fumble the ball, but we're going to watch that on tape. I definitely did not fumble I feel like, but it did get kind of loose at the end I would definitely say whenever I went to the ground, but that's the only time it got loose.

BRET BIELEMA: I think it's a testament to Josh. I know he says he didn't fumble, and I believe my players. One of the reasons I was going to challenge it is, because he was telling me he didn't fumble. One of the things we always talk about in challenges, we all want to be successful, but only tell me the truth. Josh was adamant, so I was really pressing those guys. I was going to challenge it, but there was a timeout, and the ref, who's a Big 12 official came over and he said, Coach, you can challenge it, but it'll be literally the quickest challenge in the history of college football. I said, okay, I don't need to be obstinate here, let's just take the defensive stand and see where we go. I believe it was a no-fumble.

Q. Bret, Josh gave you the second chance or third chance to come back here and second chance in the Big Ten. Four years later you're at the Citrus Bowl with him on stage there. What's that relationship meant and what's made that relationship work to where you're leading Illinois to this success?

BRET BIELEMA: It didn't take me very long to figure out the first time we met was through Zoom. We had actually bumped into each other a long time ago in Phoenix at a coffee shop at a Fiesta event. When he called me, I guess when I got the call from Illinois, I had obviously done my research on Josh, and I knew as an athletic director that's a former player, and especially at his alma mater you've got something special.

I was very fortunate in my first head coaching job with Coach [Barry] Alvarez to have a former football player as

an AD, and I just thought that was the norm, and I quickly realized it wasn't when that didn't exist.

But Josh, his love and appreciation for the University of Illinois is unprecedented level, but also just at football, because he played it, walked it, talked it. I think the growth that we've had during my time here. I told him early on I'm not going to ask for the fanciest uniforms, I'm not going to ask for the flashiest things, but I am going to ask that our guys get fueled, protected and developed unlimited budget wise and did things that I think were important to build players, and he's been great about that.

Then to Chancellor Jones, I know he was excited on stage today. He's the one that ultimately had to sign off on it and do it. To have him go out, I know we'd rather have him stay with us a long time, but he's moving on to the next chapter in his world, and there's so many other unprecedented things. So many supporters. To have Roger Denny in here. Roger has been an incredible asset to our program. We have him in our building every day.

What Josh has acquired and accumulated in the department of intercollegiate athletics with Brad Underwood, Shauna and other coaches. The way our football, basketball, women's basketball and all these other programs are playing. It just hasn't happened in college athletics, and it's all the credit in the world to him and the people around him.

Q. Josh, want to get your feelings first of all in a situation, no offense to Luke in this situation, you just see the quarterback getting the players of the game. How cool is it that they gave it to you, a running back, and how do you feel like the offense played without Pat?

JOSH McCRAY: As an offense I feel like we gelled very well, especially in the second half. I feel like we were able to move the ball how we wanted to. In the first half, we couldn't really get things going. I went out there, lost the ball on like the second drive of the game. \I was kind of like pretty hard on myself.

But my boys kept me up in there, kept my head on right. Then, we just got the job done. But for a running back to get MVP, you don't really see that a lot, but that's pretty awesome to me in my world.

FastScripts Transcript by ASAP Sports