

# Big Ten Football Media Days

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## Illinois Fighting Illini

### Coach Bret Bielema

#### Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Coach Bielema, we'll begin with your opening statement.

BRET BIELEMA: Thank you. First, I want to thank the Big Ten Conference for putting this all together. This is my 16th year as a head coach, and a lot of great memories on this day coming over, but I thought I would take a minute at the front end just to talk about college football.

I've been very fortunate to have college football be a part of my life since 1988 as I have evolved as a player, assistant coach to a coordinator to a head coach now for 16 years.

Obviously things have changed a lot. I think one of the most common questions I get is, Coach, at this time in your career, how are kids different? How is the game different? There are so many things that factor into that.

One of the obviously constants is the competitive nature, the environment, the things that make college football so special, and I think to be a head coach right now in 2024 is such a special time. I think a lot of people want to dwell on things or think about things in a negative light. I think perspective is everything.

There isn't a more exciting time for me in my life than to be the head coach at the University of Illinois in 2024, to have the conference, the expansion, the schedule, the world of college athletics with the portal, the NIL, the expansion and the coaching roles, duties, and responsibilities that just literally became a reality here in the last month.

I just can't express how awesome it is to have this job and to be in this opportunity and to make it be very, very special every day when I walk in that building, how awesome it is.

I think college football, because of the way society is today, the players that we're able to recruit from coast to coast, not just traditional high school players anymore, but now because of the portal, you're literally -- I know in the month of December, my first day I flew to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Never been there before. I was going after a

tackle that was in the portal from New Mexico. I thought about that, right?

Then I flew later that day to the East Coast to recruit a defensive lineman that we're pursuing. Just a different perspective, but the same thing. We're pursuing young men that we want to have in our program be a part of a special place and to be part of something special. That hasn't changed.

Our conference, right, in the Big Ten Conference I think about first coming here and sitting in meetings. I started with Jim Delany as a commissioner who obviously on the forefront of a lot of different topics, different issues. To sit in meetings with him and learn and see his view and to see that environment was pretty special.

Then I transitioned to the SEC, and I'll never forget the first meeting I sat in with Mike Slive at the front of the room, and to hear a commissioner lead the meetings the way he did. He had a big old cigar in his mouth and called us all a first-name basis and a different type of leadership. Obviously someone who was very, very talented.

That transitioned to Greg Sankey and was able to be around Sankey several years as a head coach and to see the way he led and obviously still leads today.

Came to the conference and Kevin Warren was here. A little bit different time because it was in the beginning cusp of COVID and all the things that were going on, it was around Kevin.

Now the transition to Tony Petitti and to hear his words. For me as a head coach, I've been through five different commissioners, and to see the leadership he brings, to see the vision he brings. I remember the very first phone call, Zoom call, we ever had. We talked about the idea of technology, coach-to-player, and tablets on the sidelines. I remember him taking note of that, calling me afterwards, and was really the champion to get that through right now.

I think in today's world of college football, that's a different story line because no one is really talking about it, but I think the addition of technology in college football this fall is



going to be huge. So I just immediately saw the impact that Tony can have not just for our conference, but our program and for football in general.

Really, really excited for our conference. I know a lot of people have different views on expansion. Be for me as a head coach, I'm looking at a schedule this year where I play a game on the East Coast against Rutgers in Penn State, and then we play a game on the West Coast against Oregon. We play a game in the middle of our stadium, in Memorial Stadium, against Michigan. 100-year anniversary game that is very, very special to have those type of games on our schedule, not only great for our players, but for our fans.

Just a really neat time to have an environment such as this in the conference. Josh Whitman over there to sit as an active head coach, to have an A.D. that played the game that understands it and understands where we're coming from. Two-time Academic All-American. That doesn't just happen by chance. He played in the NFL.

The leadership he brings our university, the department of intercollegiate athletics on the daily is just absolutely awesome to be a part of this conference and particularly at the University of Illinois.

Brought three players with us today. I think it's important to note that all three players that are with us here today are three players that have been at the University of Illinois their entire career and only at the University of Illinois. Also, three unique stories.

This is my fourth year as a head coach, but these three guys all have different stories. Seth Coleman was a player that was already at the University of Illinois playing when I first got there. Going into a sixth season with us this year. Seth was a unique story because we kind of switched schemes. He actually switched positions from a defensive end down on the ground to an outside linebacker.

He has been very productive. Literally had a chance to jump to the NFL a year ago and decided to stay with us and get his degree and follow his education, but also return for a special year in front of us. Unique that he was already in the program with Lovie.

Pat Bryant, the other player that's with us here today, the only offensive player, was actually signed on Wednesday to the University of Illinois. I didn't become the head coach until Friday. The previous staff had recruited him. He stayed committed even during the transition. I was able to obtain him, unbelievably, by not ever recruiting him.

We started a journey together. He came in the first fall with

us and has been a solid player for three years. Joined us his fourth year.

Also had the opportunity to explore other opportunities in college football, but came to Illinois, stayed at Illinois, committed to Illinois in the beginning, and he is that way now. He will get his degree this fall, and obviously he will have a chance to play beyond the University of Illinois in the NFL.

Gabe Jacas is literally, truly the only player here that I actually recruited. He was a player that was brought to my attention. It sounds like a joke, but had a buddy of mine named Jack Daniels call me who's a high school coach down in Florida and said, Hey, I'm scouting this opponent, this team that we're looking at, and there's this guy on the field that is pretty -- playing at a pretty high level.

I believe at the time he's committed to Tulane. We sent somebody down the next week, started recruiting Gabe. Got him to flip his commitment. It got down to us and another orange school, Tennessee. Got down to us two at the very end, and he chose us. Just thankful he did. He became a First Team -- a Freshman All-American, first defensive player to do that in Illinois history.

He has been with us the last two years, and going into his third year has set himself in a position that's very special.

I think everything gets talked about in this world about NIL. None of these guys were promised or given anything until, obviously, the rule change here the last year or two. These guys chose Illinois because of Illinois. I think it stands for what they represent.

Excited to have them with us. Excited about our team. I know we made reference to a couple of players that returned, but because of the portal world, even though they may have not started for us, but they've started at other places, we have 17 players that are in either our starting line-up or what we consider to be starters in our program. 17 guys that have started more than ten games in their college football career.

We have a wide receiver, Zakhari Franklin, that started over 40 games in college football. Our left tackle, J.C. Davis, has been a multiple-year starter at New Mexico. Melvin Priestly projects to be our starting right tackle, is a guy that has started several games in college football. Luke Altmeyer started a game at Ole Miss and has a nine-game start, so he has had ten career starts in college football.

Just a lot of really good, valuable experience coming into our building as well as the addition of the guys that we had



from last year getting better this spring.

Really excited. They just finished an eight-week program. We open up on a Thursday against Eastern Illinois. We start fall camp on Sunday, and excited to get to work with these guys and see where we can go.

We have a really unique schedule. We have three of our first games that are at home, nonconference games. We open up with Eastern Illinois, have a rematch game against Kansas, and then a game against Central Michigan before we jump to a first Big Ten game at Nebraska on a Friday night.

The schedule includes 12 games -- seven home, five away. First three are at home. Of the last three games, two are on the road, so we have to be our strongest at the end. We have six rematch games and six new games.

We play five games, have a bye week, and four games and then a bye week and then three. A lot of different ways to look at it, but super excited the way this thing lays out.

Got a Thursday game, a Friday game, and ten Saturday games. A little bit of everything, which is college football right now. I think our guys are excited for it.

With that, I'll open it up for some easy questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach, please.

**Q. You have had a loaded secondary since you've been here for Illinois, and this year appears to be no different. Xavier and Miles Scott coming back as your safety duo. Can you talk about what they mean to your defense and also talk to me about Terrance Brooks, the Texas transfer coming to Illinois and what he is going to mean to your defense?**

BRET BIELEMA: Two years ago we had three players drafted in the top three rounds out of the secondary. I knew we had some people to replace there. Unfortunately, last year also was hit a little bit by injury. Matt Bailey, who we factored into our playing line-up, literally played one snap of college football last year and had an injury that cost him his entire season.

Xavier Scott tore his ACL during the course of the year. Two of our main secondary players, in addition to the three we lost, were lost for the season.

I was super excited. Miles Scott transitioned from wide receiver to safety. He had a game-changing play in his first game as a starter against Toledo that returned for a pick six. He got better every year. He looks like a DB now.

Super excited about Miles Scott and Xavier Scott.

On the corner, a guy that hasn't gotten a lot of outside pub, but a guy that last spring and this winter and this summer has had as good a time is Tyler Strain. He is a guy that has played a lot of football for us. He's taken a step in the right direction. Super pumped to see exactly where he goes and where he is at.

Then you mentioned Terrance Brooks, a guy that started, I believe, almost 20 games at Texas on a College Football Playoff team. A guy that, when we saw him get in the portal, we contacted. It was really cool. Everybody has recruiting stories. I can literally sit here and go through them all. I remember all these recruiting stories like they're in my head from yesterday.

But because he was still involved in classes at Texas, we talked to his dad, Chet, because he didn't want us bothering him during the finals weeks and whatnot. We literally talked for probably a week or two with just his dad, his mom, without talking to Terrance, just because that's the way they wanted to get it done, right?

Then I literally was in Orlando at Johnny Newton's draft party, and we got word of Terrance being in the portal. I told Aaron Henry, who was with us who was going to go on and do some other recruiting, I said, Now, you're hopping on a plane and going to Dallas, and I want you to meet his mom and dad, even if he is not there.

We literally set the precedent there about how much of a priority he was. He's been a great addition in the locker room. He's been a guy that's going to focus on where he is. Also have another guy, Torrie Cox, who has started over 20 games in college football, join us as well.

So young players. Mac Resetich, a couple of young corners. Super excited to see that room get to work.

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