

Big Ten Football Media Days

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Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Illinois Fighting Illini

Coach Bret Bielema

Press Conference



BRET BIELEMA: Welcome, everybody. What a great time to be in Vegas. What a great time to be in college football. What an awesome time to be in the Big Ten Conference, and especially at the University of Illinois.

Just very exciting time. Good to see a lot of familiar faces. One of the things is you go into your 17th year as a head coach, you develop a lot of relationships, in every avenue of life, obviously with administrators, people within your school system, but a lot of you as well as media.

I told my players -- I bring them in as we prep for these media days, and every year I tell them a story in that 1992 I was a representative at the University of Iowa. It was myself and another captain, a guy by the name of Mike Devlin, who's the offensive line coach for the Chargers, been in the NFL for a long time.

We drove over for the media days. I'm sure a lot of you remember it was in Chicago. The first guy I met in the hotel lobby was Kirk Herbstreit. He was the starting quarterback at Ohio State. I think about that weekend and the people that I met and the people now that have been a part of my life since that weekend to where we are today, you know.

Brought three great players with us, Luke Altmyer, our quarterback; J.C. Davis, our left tackle; and Xavier Scott at corner. Those three guys all have unique journeys to get to where they are today, but I wanted to share with them, hey, the opportunity you're going to get here today at Big Ten Media Days is something you've earned. It's very rare and special. Only three players at every school get to do the same thing.

They don't bring just guys on the team. They bring their best players that represent the University of Illinois in the best way. Super excited for you to get to know them. Kind of a unique story. Kind of the way college football is today, you just asked the question about the conference-wide pay system. I think about 1992 my first question, I walked into the meeting room, and Hayden Fry said: Hey, don't worry. Nobody ever asked the players any questions.

Guess who got the first question? Me. I think about that to this day.

As a player, I was a walk-on that earned a scholarship and think about that phone call when I called my parents to tell them I earned a scholarship. They were crying on the other line. I thought they were just happy, but I also realized that scholarship made a big payment difference in that household I was raised in.

To now have a system where starting in July we actually paid our players through PayPal, holy shit, the world has changed. It's just a different, different world. Absolutely awesome. So awesome to see our players we were able to bring out in the back. I have my wife back there, and also bring friends of the family with our football program, a few donors that have been huge the last several years since I've come to Illinois and way before that with different buildings around campus and fundraising.

Last night was pretty awesome. We went to Piero's, a little Italian joint here, and we were able to have a couple of our parents of our players join us. And to hear from those parents to speak to what their son has accomplished since he came to Illinois really has nothing to do with the football side, just who they've become as young men. That's something that I think has just makes what college football is today so awesome.

Super excited about this. Our football team is one that has gained a lot of headlines just by the way we finished a year ago with ten wins. Have a number of players, whether it's time 16, 17, 18, of our 22 starters coming back. We have a kicker that's very accomplished, David Olano. We were able to acquire a punter from Purdue, who I think is one of the best players in the country at his position. Have acquired some other players through the transfer portal. Continued to be one of the leading schools in the country.

We signed 21 high school players, which is a really high number compared to a lot of other people. I have 20 committed to this next class already. We are the foundation of a high school college football program, but we acquired two of our players today, two of our three,



Luke and J.C. are both transfers. To combine that with what we've recruited and where we are today, super excited for that number.

Everybody always focuses on the players. And as a head coach, we get a lot of attention. But the true work gets done by our coaches, our ten assistant coaches and our support staff, my strength and conditioning staff, my medical staff, our training staff, our nutritional staff. We got Brett Moore here with the media, Pat Pearson, creative department heads in our building, just the amount of work that goes into building a football program.

And more than anything, Josh Whitman, our athletic director here. I walk a daily walk with him on this journey at Illinois football. He not only obviously played at Illinois, played very, very well, played four years, two-time academic All-American, which is absolutely unbelievable, played in the NFL for a number of years, and went out and practiced law, came back, and is now in my opinion the best athletic director in college football, in college athletics.

So many things to be excited about. Vegas also holds a special place in my heart. My wife and I met here in 2008 at the Wynn Casino. We don't need any other stories than that other than it happened. We went back yesterday and reenacted the moment for a little bit and was able to have that.

Also, I would say this, I grew up, like I said, coming to the media day in Chicago. We transitioned to Indianapolis, and to come to Vegas, when I sat down with our players to go through the events, they were so excited to be here in Vegas. I think it's just another great indicator of college football and how much it's evolved.

I heard the question earlier from a gentleman here in the front row about his view on what he thinks the playoffs should be. Obviously Tony answered the question. The SEC answered the question. The ACC answered the question. The Big 12 answered the question. The question is very relevant and awesome because college football has never been where it's at.

As a head coach, I'm in charge of our football program and what we do, and I just sit back every day and try not to go back. I only want to go forward. Through 17 years I learned don't worry about the things you can't control. Leave it to those who can. Usually the best results will happen.

We can always argue about the way it could happen, but it couldn't be more exciting. 12-team format. I hope it does go to 16. I'm not going to go Eli Drinkwitz's 30 or whatever he came up with. I think a bigger number is a better

number to have a play-in game. I appreciate your point that you thought the four teams should just get in and go, but if there are seven, eight, nine, ten teams alive in November that can have a chance to be in the playoffs, that's going to do a world of good for our college football team.

A lot of different things working. Super excited, and couldn't be more thankful for the opportunity to Tony Petitti to come up here.

I will say this, I'm been very fortunate. John Delany was the commissioner when I took over. Mike Slive was the commissioner in the SEC, transitioned to Greg. I was the head coach at Arkansas, and I reached out to Greg and other people involved and said, hey, what can we do as coaches in the SEC to make sure Greg gets a job? Because I had been around him for a couple of years and thought he was extremely bright, intelligent, and loved the SEC. That's exactly what he has done.

Now to join the league with Tony, and I will tell you this, and every year that I've been a head coach, he keeps us more informed as coaches of any other commissioner I've ever been involved with. We have personal contact with him on a monthly, sometimes twice-a-month basis, has meetings with us several times throughout the course of a year where it's not him and his staff, it's him running the meeting with us individually.

It's just the connection with him. I think a lot of these other conferences one of the things that happens is the coaches don't find out something until it's brought to their attention at an event. Then they have a quick reaction. They haven't thought it through.

I give Tony and his staff just an unbelievable credit for keeping us in the loop and making it all go forward. With that, I've got a couple of minutes. I'll open it up for some easy questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. What did you like about your team last year, and specifically your quarterback? What would you like to add to that, things that you liked about your team?

BRET BIELEMA: I think in life we're all -- we love the great memories. I love the bowl game. I love to beat a South Carolina team that everybody thought should be in the playoffs. I did too. I thought they should have been in there. And when we beat them, it opened up the question up even further for everybody else. Those highs.

We beat Michigan at home at 100-year anniversary game



that Josh and his crew -- we really truly recreated a moment 100 years later. It was one day off from the opening of Memorial Stadium when Michigan played Illinois at Memorial Stadium, and to have the history of that event relived and to have two ranked teams battle out. We won that one. Those are easy ones.

I would tell you as a head coach, we're defined more by our moments of adversity than by moments of success. We absolutely went to Oregon and performed as poorly as we could in the first half. I just went into halftime and said, listen, we're not going to repeat what just happened. We didn't win the game, but we did play significantly better in the second half. That next week I think we had a little bit of carry-over to the Minnesota game and lost a heartbreaker at the end.

I knew I had a good football team before I went to Oregon. I knew I had a great football team when we got beat by Minnesota. We put the dots together to connect and win those last three games that were important to get us to a nine-win season to get us a chance to win ten.

So I love the resilience of our football team. These guys are better when they've been punched in the face. That doesn't mean I need to punch them, but you know what I mean. They respond very, very well. In this world I think that we're in, a lot of kids can have distractions that take them away from the main thing. Our guys would tell you, everybody is worried about Illinois with the expectations. Expectations are earned. They're never given.

Some people give expectations, and that's great, but for us at Illinois we have to earn them. We have to have a chip on our left shoulder and our right shoulder. The way we've earned these expectations will be the way we earn success this year. We'll do it on a daily basis with our teammates and our coaches. I have a coaching staff that retains my offensive, defensive and special teams coordinator for the last three years. I have the starting quarterback for the last three years. Those are the things that get me excited.

Q. At times on social media you have stood up for your program, stood up for the Big Ten, pushed back against some SEC narratives at times. The Big Ten has to win on the football field. Do you think the Big Ten also needs to fight that perception battle at times, and why are you maybe the right guy to do it?

BRET BIELEMA: I'm not the right guy to do it. I may do it. My wife will tell you she gives me a couple of slow your roll deals once in a while when I'll get going.

I will tell you this, I learned early in life, right, if you don't stand up for yourself, no one else will. Sometimes that's a

little bit driven on what I believe in, but I will tell you, I stand here as a head coach that has been very fortunate. I was an assistant coach. I played and coached under Hayden Fry. I worked for Kirk Ferentz and Bill Snyder and Barry Alvarez, Bill Belichick. Those first four guys, in college football, those guys are all first-ballot Hall of Famers.

I today represent a lot of what they taught me. I also remember being at my first Big Ten spring meeting, and Lloyd Carr and Jim Tressel pulled me aside, and I was 35, 36 years old, and they basically said, hey, from what Barry has told us, you're going to be a really good football coach. You're at an age right now that as you move forward in your career, you're going to have to be a voice for this game when we need it the most.

I think about that all the time. I was just sitting there, oh, Lloyd is a pretty good dude. Jim Tressel, he's got the sweater vest and all, but he's a pretty cool dude. I didn't realize the impact of what those guys put in me as a young coach.

I sat in there and listened to Joe Paterno and Delany get in fights. Like, I was like, This is awesome. Right? They're going back and forth on debates. And the part that's been so awesome for me in my career is, like, what's right is right, what your opinion is great to express on your own, but you have to listen to others, right? You said right away, like, I don't go after the SEC. I like making points or re-tweets, but I want to make college football great. I want all of us to get to a place that everybody can have success.

When this gentleman mentioned earlier about capping it at four and why should those four teams have to play another game, I would say why the hell would you not want to play another game? Keep everybody going in the right direction. College football is at a world where the depth that you can acquire and attain however you want to do it, some people believe in if you pay somebody a lot of money, they're going to play really well.

I don't believe that's the case. I think kids play well when they've been coached, developed, and treated the right way. They'll make their money when they make their money.

It's just I know that I get labeled at that a little bit, but I will tell you there's several coaches in the SEC that I consider very great friends. Mark Stoops and I used to share a hotel together in spring recruiting when we both made \$50,000. We split a Motel 6 for \$36 a night so we could keep our per diem money. When he got his big contract -- I know I got a little one too, but I said come a long way since Motel 6, right?



Some of those guys are my best friends, and respect the hell out of who they are and what they are.

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