

2025 ILLINI FOOTBALL SEASON

Music City Bowl special section

ILLINOIS VS. TENNESSEE: 4:30 P.M. TUESDAY (ESPN, WDWS 1400-AM, 93.9-FM, WHMS 97.5-FM)

THEY'VE GOT HIS BACK



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

With the entire Gibson City Elementary School showing support, Illinois running back Aidan Laughery and his parents, Greg and Mary, were all smiles during an all-school assembly recognizing Laughery on Dec. 12. Laughery, a Gibson City native, and the Illini play Tennessee at 4:30 p.m. Tuesday in the Music City Bowl in Nashville, Tenn.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT

How Gibson City has helped shape Illini running back Aidan Laughery: 'It symbolizes home'

By MATT DANIELS
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GIBSON CITY — Aidan Laughery did not expect this scene to unfold. Having a break earlier this month from practices with the Illinois football program, Mary Laughery asked her 22-year-old son if he could stop by Gibson City Elementary School on a Friday afternoon in mid-December. It's where Mary works as a reading interventionist for students in kindergarten through second grade. "Mom told me I was coming home to take a few pictures with some kids," Aidan said.

"I envisioned about five or six kids."

Far from it. With each grade called through the speakers to report to the gym, Aidan realized he would soon have a bigger audience. Of course, the Illini running back has played in front of large crowds before. Four

sellouts at Gies Memorial Stadium this season in Champaign. Road games against Penn State, Oregon, Nebraska and Iowa in his Illinois career. A memorable performance in 2024 against Northwestern at Wrigley Field in Chicago


But that's when he's wearing his No. 21 Illinois jersey, with

his helmet on and he can do his talking with how he runs the ball. Actions speaking louder than words. This time, he has 400 students and staff staring out at him, hanging on his every word in his interactions with the crowd.

Please see LAUGHERY, D-6

OPINION: BOB ASMUSSEN


Central Illinois products have come up big for Bielema and Illini this season



NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Where would Illinois football be in 2025 without the contributions from central Illinois players? Not 8-4 and meeting an SEC school in the Music City Bowl. That's for sure. Bret Bielema's pledge to recruit central Illinois when he became the Illini coach at the beginning of this decade has paid off big time. The proof is in the production, from Rochester's Hank Beatty, Atwood's Kaden Feagin and Gibson City's Aidan Laughery. The receiver (Beatty) and two running backs (Feagin and Laughery) have combined for 1,068

receiving yards and 845 rushing yards ... so far. They are responsible for 11 touchdowns on the ground and five on catches. And they have one more chance to add to the totals with a game Tuesday against Tennessee at Nissan Stadium in Nashville, Tenn. So, yes, 1,913 yards from scrimmage is getting it done. And that doesn't include Beatty's 213 yards on punt returns ... with one touchdown. Their high school coaches are thrilled with their college efforts. And proud of them as both players and people. "They've represented central Illinois so good," Rochester coach Derek Leonard said. "They had

a lot of (team) success while it's happening." Leonard saw the work Beatty put in and watched it pay off. "It went Hank's way," Leonard said. "He's everything I expected him to be. I thought maybe a little bit earlier, but it's just kind of how it fell and who was in front of him." Beatty is third in the Big Ten with 64 catches and sixth in the league with 826 receiving yards. Great work for a guy considered, by some, too small at only 5 feet, 11 inches and 185 pounds. Leonard knew Beatty would excel in college when given a chance.



Rochester native Hank Beatty grew up 90 minutes from Champaign, and is the Illinois football team's top wide receiver during the 2025 season.

Please see ASMUSSEN, D-8

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COORDINATORS CORNER

‘They’ve seen an influx of Illini fans walking around the building’

Illinois offensive coordinator Barry Lunney Jr. and defensive coordinator Aaron Henry provide perspective from their respective side of the ball before the Illini face Tennessee in the Music City Bowl on Tuesday at Nissan Stadium in Nashville, Tenn., via beat writer **SCOTT RICHEY**:

What does a strong fan showing mean at a bowl game?
→ **Lunney:** “The last two bowl games I’ve been a part of here, our fans have traveled super well. Whatever the number is, the presence in the stadium has been a positive factor in the games. Obviously, we’re going to be outnumbered in that regard just because of the location of the game, but I know the fans that are going to come and will be there will be on our side and be loud and be a great presence for our team and our players.”
→ **Henry:** “I think it’s been awesome. I had a couple families (Monday) morning as I was taking my girls to get breakfast, they asked me, ‘What are you guys here for?’ They’ve seen an influx of Illini fans walking around the building. I let them know we were here for a football game. We love when our fans travel and give us an opportunity to make it a home-like atmosphere.”

How do you get Luke Altmyer in a rhythm early against Tennessee?
→ **Lunney:** “There’s no secret that when your quarterback plays well and is efficient, you’re going to have success. One of the big things about that is establishing the run, which sets up some more high-efficient opportunities to throw RPOs, quick game and staying on schedule. If you go back and look at (Altmyer’s most efficient games), they’re probably reflective of staying on schedule and staying ahead of the chains. It’s a little bit dealer’s choice as a play caller, and that will be critical for (Tuesday).”
→ **Henry:** “To be able to stay on schedule and run the ball effectively will be a great challenge, but that will be important that we’re able to do that. Everything that we do in our team starts with being able to run the football. That’s going to be something that we’re going to need to be able to do to help our passing game, as well.”

How unique is what Tennessee does with its wide receivers?
→ **Henry:** “You don’t see that every day. They’re already a really talented and athletically gifted team. Had this just been a week in preparation for them, it would be really, really hard trying to do that within the framework of a week.”
→ **Lunney:** “We’ve had a couple weeks to try to prepare for them and slow them down. Their scheme is very unique and problematic, but when you have the kind of players that they have on top of that — their quarterback is very dynamic and can run it and throw it — it’s going to be a game of chess. We know they’re an explosive offense. They’re a top-five offense in the country. We’ve got to limit them. We’ve got to slow them down.”
→ **Henry:** “The key thing to this game is going to be trying to take the ball away and give our offense the ball.”

How crucial is it for the Illini defense to force multile takeaways?
→ **Henry:** “They really change the game. Obviously, when you give your offense more opportunities — especially when they’re clicking — you have the opportunity to really take over the game. I think about the Duke game, coming out of halftime we got a couple takeaways and all of a sudden the score got kind of lopsided. Our offense did a phenomenal job of putting the ball in the end zone and scoring on a lot of possessions.”
→ **Lunney:** “That’s the equalizer. A team can have a bunch of yards, but if you can take the ball away and give your the offense some opportunities to go score, it really changes the dynamic and everything that we do from a defensive perspective. It’s one thing lining up consistently and trying to fit everything up perfect, but when you can punch the ball out or pick the ball off that changes literally everything about a game.”



Holly Hart/The News-Gazette

After three seasons, quarterback Luke Altmyer will start his 35th and final game at Illinois when the Illini play Tennessee at 4:30 p.m. Tuesday in the Music City Bowl.

GAME 13: PREVIEW

ONE FINAL BREAKTHROUGH

Beat writer **SCOTT RICHEY** previews the Illini’s Music City Bowl matchup against Tennessee before Tuesday’s 4:30 p.m. kickoff at Nissan Stadium from Nashville, Tenn. (ESPN, WDWS 1400-AM, WHMS 97.5-FM):

THREE MAJOR STORYLINES

Kreutz, Scott experience entire Illinois rebuild
Josh Kreutz signed with Illinois three days after **Lovie Smith** was fired and three days before **Bret Bielema** was hired as coach, stuck with the Illini throughout and turned into a three-year starter and team captain. **Miles Scott** committed six months after Bielema was hired and joined the program as a walk-on wide receiver before ultimately earning a scholarship, shifting to safety and becoming a two-year starter and team captain. Needless to say, the two in-state products have left their mark.
Illinois won 17 games and played in just one bowl game during Smith’s five seasons as coach. Kreutz and Scott will wrap up their Illini careers in Nashville on Tuesday with 18 wins (and counting) the past two seasons alone, 36 total in their five years in Champaign and with three bowl game appearances.
“That’s why he came here,” Scott said. “Just to be able to keep it in-state. Keep what we’re doing in-state. It’s a blessing to even have done the things we’ve done already. Another win would be another great thing.” “If we can get that done, it would mean a lot to me,” Kreutz added, “a lot to this state and a lot to this program.”

Young players taking advantage of bowl game
Illinois defensive coordinator **Aaron Henry** has had to make some personnel adjustments in the lead-up to the Music City Bowl. Outside linebacker **Gabe Jacas**, who opted out, will be replaced by committee. Strong safety **Matthew Bailey**, who had shoulder surgery after the regular-season finale, will be replaced by some combination of **Miles Scott**, **Saboor Karriem** and **Mac Resetich**.
The shift in the depth chart, though, has allowed some younger Illinois players to seize a bigger role for themselves — even if they won’t be the go-to guy in Nashville. Henry was quick to point out freshman defensive backs **Andre Lovett Jr.** and **Xanai Scott** for how they took advantage of the bowl game practices before the team headed south. **Grant Beerman**, too.
“Grant Beerman is a guy you’re going to look up a year from now and you’re going to be like, ‘Ooh, I remember when he got here. Now, he’s a household name,’” Henry said about the freshman linebacker. “He’s just constantly growing. ... We’ve got a group of guys who are going to be here for the next couple of years, and we’re really excited about coaching them.”

Game prep after a Tennessee coordinator change
Tennessee fired defensive coordinator **Tim Banks** on Dec. 8 after finishing the regular season with a defense that ranked in the bottom three in the SEC in both points allowed (28.8) and yards allowed (395.3) per game. The Vols promptly hired former Penn State, Ohio State, Oklahoma State and Duke defensive coordinator **Jim Knowles** to fill that role. Even with a change at the top — and a disappointing season production wise — Tennessee’s defense isn’t without playmakers.
Illinois offensive coordinator **Barry Lunney Jr.** said he was impressed by the Vols’ speed on defense and the ground they could cover. It’s a similar style, he added, to what the Illini saw in the Citrus Bowl against South Carolina. Just with new leadership.
“You watch and develop a lot of information and then make your best guess of what you’re going to see in the bowl game,” Lunney said. “That’s not different than it usually is — 75 percent of the game is probably things you expect and there’s always a little wrinkle on both sides of the ball. You just have to be able to adapt and hope your system has the answer for wrinkles you could see.”

TWO KEY MATCHUPS

Illinois secondary vs. Tennessee wide receivers
Neither unit will be at full strength in Nashville. Illinois has been without **Xavier Scott** most of the season, and **Matthew Bailey** isn’t available as that in-the-box safety. But the Illini will have free safety **Miles Scott** and cornerback **Juice Clarke** to lead the way against a talented crop of Volunteers receivers. A group that’s missing opt-out **Chris Brazzell II**, who led Tennessee with 62 catches for 1,017 yards and nine touchdowns. That leaves **Braylon Stanley** and **Mike Matthews**, with that duo combining for 114 catches for 1,576 yards and 10 touchdowns.

Illinois quarterback Luke Altmyer vs. Tennessee pass rush
Illinois starting left tackle **J.C. Davis** putting all of his focus on his NFL future and opting out of the Music City Bowl puts the responsibility on redshirt freshman **Nathan Knapik** to help keep Altmyer upright. Tennessee’s **Joshua Josephs’** own opt-out decision lessens some of the potential pressure from the Vols defensive front. But only some. **Dominic Bailey** and **Tyre West** will play, giving Tennessee two-thirds of its impressive pass rush. Bailey and West combined for 47 tackles, 14½ tackles for loss, 9½ sacks and two forced fumbles.

ONE STAT THAT MATTERS

Beating Tennessee will set a new Illinois record for most wins in a span of consecutive seasons. The Illini went 18-4-1 under **Edgar Holt** in 1901 and 1902 with wins against traditional Big Ten rivals Purdue, Iowa and Indiana in both seasons in addition to wins against Chicago Physicians and Surgeons and Kirksville Osteopaths. **John Mackovic** also coached Illinois to an 18-6 record in 1988 and 1989 with five total Top 25 victories. A Music City Bowl victory will be the 19th for **Bret Bielema** in 2024 and 2025.

ILLINOIS WILL WIN IF ...

it can pair the defense it played in the regular-season finale against Northwestern (just 13 points allowed, three interceptions and one fumble recovery) with the best the offense has to show in one last hurrah with **Luke Altmyer**. The former would be a level of consistency — even one month removed — that troubled the Illinois defense throughout the 2025 season. The latter will require some complementary football just on the offensive end, with the run game keeping up with Altmyer and Co. through the air.

TENNESSEE WILL WIN IF ...

the Illini don’t have much of an answer for one of the top offenses in the country. The Vols rank fourth nationally in total offense (without the defense to match, hence **Tim Banks’** firing). Appalachian State transfer **Joey Aguilar** might not have been the first choice at quarterback, but he’s overseen an offense that’s averaged 482 yards and 40.8 points, which puts Tennessee sixth nationally in scoring offense. Aguilar won’t have his top receiver or one of his top three running backs, but the Vols aren’t short on talent.

MUSIC CITY BOWL SPECIAL SECTION: ILLINOIS VS. TENNESSEE

ASK THE EXPERTS: Can Illini hit the right notes in Nashville?

MATT DANIELS
Sports Editor
→ His pick: Illinois, 38-37.
David Olano already gave the Illini a walk-off win this season with a last-second field goal against Southern Cal. He replicates the feat on Tuesday night against the Volunteers.
→ Season record: 8-4



BOB ASMUSSEN
Illinois beat writer
→ His pick: Illinois, 32-21.
I really wasn't sure what to pick until my Uber driver in Nashville, **Nathan**, said he had a strong feeling Illinois will win. Good enough for me. Thanks, Nathan, for the pleasant ride.
→ Season record: 9-3



SCOTT RICHEY
Illinois beat writer
→ His pick: Illinois, 45-42.
Why not treat the people of Nashville to a close, competitive game to end the season? If everyone's going to come all this way, it should at least be exciting — and high-scoring.
→ Season record: 9-3



JOE VOZZELLI
Copy desk editor
→ His pick: Illinois, 27-24.
The Illini and Volunteers will both play without key starters due to player-outs and injuries. But Tennessee has arguably more of its roster depleted. Advantage: Illinois.
→ Season record: 9-3



JOEY WRIGHT
Staff writer
→ His pick: Illinois, 31-27.
Illinois will win its second straight bowl game against an SEC team with a late touchdown. And look good doing so in the navy blue helmets with the script Illinois logo.
→ Season record: 9-3



ZACH PIATT
Preps coordinator
→ His pick: Tennessee, 34-24.
Tennessee's four losses are to playoff teams and one that just missed out. Two of the Illini's four losses are against the top two teams. It's close, but the Vols pull away late.
→ Season record: 5-7



OPINION: BOB ASMUSSEN

SPRINGBOARD OR LETDOWN?

Illini, Volunteers to decide on the field in Nashville what kind of offseason each program will have



NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The Illinois football team's 2024 Citrus Bowl win against South Carolina boosted the Illini to No. 16 in the final Associated Press rankings. And set up an offseason full of optimism and wonder.

The 2025 Illinois team sold out the most home games in decades.

And hosted Fox's "Big Noon Kickoff." Twice.

A year later, Illinois (8-4) faces another SEC opponent in a bowl. This time, Tennessee (8-4) when the Music City Bowl kicks off at 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday.

Both teams enter Nissan Stadium unranked. But with a chance to move into the final Top 25 with a victory.

"It's a national stage playing against an SEC opponent," Illinois coach Bret Bielema said Monday. "I can't stress enough, when we were in the final stages coming out of the second bye week, we knew how we played in these next three or four games were going to be a huge factor

in where we went to a bowl game."

The bowl options at that point were the ReliaQuest Bowl in Tampa, Fla., and the Music City Bowl in Nashville.

Bielema favored the latter, especially when he realized the opponent could be Tennessee.

"I really wanted that matchup," Bielema said. "I've just got tremendous respect being in the (SEC) for four or five years."

During Monday's press conference at the Opryland Resort, Bielema said he had never coached against the Volunteers.

But he had, his 2015 Arkansas team winning 24-20 at Neyland Stadium against then-coach Butch Jones. A head coach 17 years, Bielema is allowed an occasional brain cramp.

First time for Bielema or not, a win against the favored Volunteers will push the Illinois program forward.

"What this does, if we're fortunate enough to win it, a bowl game is very unique in the fact that you carry it with you for the next six, seven, eight

months until you play that next game again," Bielema said. "A tremendous opportunity for our kids."

Another log on the fire

Win or lose on Tuesday evening, Bielema is coaching Illinois in its third bowl in four years.

At a school that had earned two bowl invites the previous 11 seasons, the pace is a significant upgrade.

Just like what Illini athletic director Josh Whitman wanted when the school hired Bielema five years ago.

"I look over and I see Josh, and we talked about sustainable success," Bielema said. "Those two years that we missed were both five-win seasons. I'm just like, '(Darn), if we'd just one more win in those two, we'd be five for five.'"

During his seven seasons at Wisconsin, Bielema never missed a bowl. He earned three invites while at Arkansas.

Now, he's got Illinois in position to win bowls in back-to-back seasons for the first time since 2010 and 2011.

It won't be easy. The 2025 Volunteers have played against the best and held their own. They are a measuring stick for Illinois.

"It's a good, quality opponent, one if we came out on the right side, it would be a step in the right direction," Bielema said.

Whitman agrees about the bounce the team got after 2024 following its win against South Carolina.

"Last year's game gave us a great springboard," Whitman said.

It can happen again.

"Just puts some wind in our sails as we head into the offseason," Whitman said. "It gives us a lot of momentum. It gives our fans something to remember and think about. To be able to get the win and put that cherry on top of everything else makes it all that much more special."

Plenty of motivation

Tennessee just missed being ranked in the final regular season AP poll, earning the 28th-most votes.

A year ago, the Volunteers made the College Football

Playoff field, losing to Ohio State in first round.

Tennessee coach Josh Heupel values the bowl system.

"The expansion of the Playoff certainly has changed the dynamics a little bit," he said. "At the end of the day, for us as a program, this is an entire month where you get a chance to continue to grow and compete."

"In a lot of ways, it's a finish to this season for this program, this staff, this group of players. But it's also a springboard before you get back in January for all of your young players."

"It's part of building connections with the guys that are going to be back."

In 249 days, the 2026 Volunteers open against Furman.

After facing three playoff teams in 2025, the 2026 schedule includes Texas, Alabama, Texas A&M, LSU and Vanderbilt. The Crimson Tide and Aggies both made the CFP.

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WOMEN'S BASKETBALL HOME SCHEDULE

MARYLAND JANUARY 1 // 3 PM GIVEAWAY: CHAMPAGNE FLUTES	OHIO STATE JANUARY 7 // 6 PM WE BACK PAT GAME	NORTHWESTERN JANUARY 18 // 2 PM FIRST RESPONDERS GAME
UCLA JANUARY 28 // 6 PM HAIL TO THE ORANGE OUT	USC FEBRUARY 8 // 12 PM PLAY4KAY / NGWSO	WISCONSIN FEBRUARY 11 // 6 PM K-POP NIGHT
RUTGERS FEBRUARY 17 // 6 PM TIKTOK NIGHT	MINNESOTA MARCH 1 // 2 PM ILLINOIS WATCHES WOMEN'S SPORTS / SENIOR DAY	

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NOTES

KICKOFF IS NEARLY HERE



Scott Richey/The News-Gazette

Illinois football coach Bret Bielema stands with Music City Bowl President and CEO Scott Ramsey on Monday morning in Nashville, Tenn. Bielema and Tennessee coach Josh Heupel each received a guitar before Tuesday's Music City Bowl kicks off at 4:30 p.m. between the Illini and Volunteers at Nissan Stadium.

Before the Illini and Volunteers meet on Tuesday, beat writer **SCOTT RICHEY** has the latest from the scene in Nashville

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Some bowl games present a key to the city to the games' coaches.

The Music City Bowl goes a different direction. Leans into its namesake and host city's nickname. Each coach gets a Fender Guitar instead.

"Excited about the guitar," Illinois coach **Bret Bielema** said Monday after being presented one by Music City Bowl president and CEO **Scott Ramsey**. "Hopefully, we'll take better care of it than our basketball team. Those guys are a little reckless."

Illinois and Tennessee men's basketball played in Nashville on Dec. 6 in Music City Madness at Bridgestone Arena. The Illini won 75-62, and Illinois junior center **Tomislav Ivisic** went viral on social media after smashing the acoustic guitar presented to the winning team as a trophy.

Now, Bielema and his Illini (8-4) are looking for their own against Tennessee (8-4) when the Music City Bowl kicks off at 4:30 p.m. Tuesday at Nissan Stadium. Really, any SEC team will do when it comes to bowl season for the Illinois coach.

It just so happens this one features a Tennessee team coached by **Josh Heupel**.

"Obviously, the game is going to be huge, playing Tennessee for the first time," Bielema said. "I've had huge admiration for Josh going back to his playing days. To see his coaching career and what he's been able to do and what they've been able to accomplish at Tennessee is truly exceptional."

Heupel took over at Tennessee after Arkansas moved on from Bielema in 2017, so the two didn't meet in SEC play as head coaches. Heupel was offensive coordinator at Missouri in 2016 and 2017, however, when the Tigers beat Bielema's Razorbacks in consecutive seasons. The 2016 win was ultimately vacated in 2019 after NCAA hit Missouri with violations after a tutor admitted to doing coursework for multiple athletes.

"I think he pairs his three phases of the game together

extremely well," Heupel said of Bielema. "There's an identity inside of their program with how they want to play and how they want to attack people every Saturday. He does a great job of getting all of his staff and his entire program on the same page, and that's led to the amount of success that he's had. You look at the success that he's had here at Illinois, it's not shocking to anybody."

Tuesday's game is obviously the primary focus for Illinois (and Tennessee). The Illini got in several practices at Vanderbilt's FirstBank Stadium in the run-up to the Music City Bowl, and plenty of preparation on behind the scenes at their hotel headquarters at Opryland.

But bowl games come with a measure of team bonding and fun. Like Saturday's Nashville hot chicken eating contest and, because it's Nashville, some country music sing-a-long.

Illinois won both. Freshman offensive lineman **Griffin Rousseau** took home the title belt for his eating prowess after winning a tiebreaker against teammate and freshman defensive lineman **Isaiah White**. Senior quarterback **Luke Altmyer** led some of his teammates in a rendition of **Garth Brooks'** "Friends in Low Places."

"Luke could almost be a country singer," Illinois linebacker **Kenenna Odeluga** said. "He might as well just stay down here."

Illinois' Nashville hot chicken eating team consisted mostly of young players on the roster. Some volunteered. Some were volunteered by the Illini's leadership council.

"A lot of young guys went out there and were able to take the challenge," Odeluga said. "You know they took that passionately. I was sweating, too. I had to go (back to the hotel) and take a shower because I was cheering our guys on. It means something to us."

"We are super competitive. We compete in everything that we do. ... We know that everything is momentum. The way we go out there and just have fun with the guys — have

fun doing these small competitions — it's really a testament to the mentality of the guys on this team and the way that we support each other when everyone is competing."

James Thompson Jr. immersed himself in the Illinois community after transferring from Wisconsin with a regular social media series, "Big Unc Flava Hunt," during the season where he visited multiple restaurants in Champaign and Urbana.

Thompson knows good food. He didn't, however, get to compete in the Nashville hot chicken contest.

"Coach held me back on that one," Thompson said. "I promise you if I was on there, I would have been first place. I'm a big friend chicken guy. I love some hot chicken."

Illinois athletic director **Josh Whitman** said he could have held his own, too.

"I think I would have done pretty well," Whitman said. "I've got to pat myself on the back on that. I don't have a lot of skills, but I can eat a lot of food. I think I could have done pretty well."

"But I was glad our guys showed up. What coach likes to say is we're going to win every event at these bowl games. For us to show up the way we did and have that kind of enthusiasm really spoke to the experience and, again, how excited our players are to be here."

Altmyer shared a video on social media Sunday that chronicled his three seasons at Illinois. From his initial transfer from Mississippi through multiple big wins — at home and on the road — to becoming a team captain ahead of his final season and plenty of highlights this fall.

The video left Illinois offensive coordinator **Barry Lunney Jr.** feeling a little emotional.

"It was amazing to see Luke's first interview before he played a game even physically how young he looked and the way he presented himself," Lunney said. "I think about what he is now. Everybody (at the

Smith Center) has had a hand in his development, from our life coach to the academic team to strength and conditioning, and obviously, the training room. He has given himself to us in that building, among others on our team, and has trusted our process from a development standpoint."

"I look back on it, and I'm proud to be a part of his development. I think it's a great message when you come in and blindly trust on what you're being coached on — the way we play, the way we train, the way we handle ourselves — and he has just developed and taken advantage of every opportunity he's been given and reached his full potential."

Tennessee knows what it's going to face Tuesday with Altmyer running the show for Illinois. There's a reason the Volunteers tried to lure the Illini quarterback to Knoxville, Tenn., this past spring.

But Altmyer didn't leave. He stayed in Champaign, got his name in the Illinois record book in multiple places and heads into the Music City Bowl with 2,811 passing yards, 21

touchdowns and just five interceptions this season.

"He's got great command of what they're doing offensively," Heupel said. "He plays extremely efficiently and is a very good, quick decision-maker with the ball in his hands. Their ability to run the football and heavy play-action pass and push it down the field, he's been accurate in that way. He's got the athleticism to be a part of the run game as well. It's not a heavy mode of what they do, but, certainly, situationally and field zone-wise, he becomes the extra hat and turns the numbers into their favor."

Dylan Rosiek will put on his No. 28 Illinois jersey for the last time Tuesday against Tennessee. The veteran linebacker is confident, however, in who he's turning over the middle of the Illini defense to in 2026. Particularly freshmen **Grant Beerman**, who carved out a role on special teams and at linebacker this fall, and **Jack Paris**, who spent his first year on Illinois' "look squad."

"Grant, he's a specimen,"

Rosiek said. "An inside backer at (6-foot-5) who can move like he can is exciting. Jack's a guy who kind of reminds me of myself in a way. Not a sexy prospect, but he just came in from day one and he keeps continuing to get it. You can tell he's a football player the way he can understand it."

Illinois linebackers coach **Archie McDaniel** was impressed with Paris' first season — even if it was limited. Paris flashed what's to come during one of Illinois' bowl game practices earlier this month in Champaign, making a play McDaniel said was "freaking unbelievable."

"It was to end one of the practices where we were inside lifting," Rosiek said. "We came out and were watching. It was a screen route, and (Paris) came over the top and as soon as the ball got delivered he just waylaid the guy. You had to go up to him and (remind him) to protect your teammate and all that, but the development out of (Beerman and Paris) is very exciting. I'm excited to see how they continue the trend after I'm gone."

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MUSIC CITY BOWL SPECIAL SECTION: ILLINOIS VS. TENNESSEE



Holly Hart/The News-Gazette

The Illinois football teams enjoyed both the results and the after-party in its 20-13 win against Northwestern on a snow-covered Nov. 29 in Champaign.

The 2025 season for Illinois might not have lived up to all of the preseason expectations — where the College Football Playoff was a legitimate goal — but eight regular-season wins and a shot at nine at the Music City Bowl still counts as a success. Beat writer **SCOTT RICHEY** shines the light on five memorable moments from the past four months:

Breakout star

The path for **Hank Beatty** from little-used wide receiver to key cog in Illinois' success this fall started as soon as the season did. The Rochester native returned the first punt for a touchdown for the Illini since 2013 in the opener against Western Illinois, broke **Red Grange's** single-game punt return yardage record and also had 108 receiving yards thanks in large part to a 59-yard touchdown catch. All of that was simply the first step in the best year of his career.

Early-season statement

Beating Duke 45-19 on Sept. 6 in Durham, N.C., was seen as a solid, if not spectacular, win for Illinois early in the season. It gained in prominence significantly by season's end, with the Blue Devils winding up in the ACC championship game (Duke won 27-20 in overtime against Virginia). In the moment, though, it was a 26-point road win that came as the result of the complementary football **Bret Bielema** desires. The Illini defense forced five turnovers, while the offense thrived behind quarterback **Luke Altmeyer**.

Taking down a blue blood

Makai Lemon's second touchdown in the fourth quarter looked like it might secure a comeback victory for Southern Cal against Illinois. He was borderline unstoppable on Sept. 27 in Champaign with 11 catches for 151 yards and his two late scores. But Illinois got the ball back with just less than two minutes to play, marched 51 yards downfield and secured its first win against USC since 1989 with a 41-yard, game-winning field goal by **David Olano** to top the Trojans 34-32.

Retaining the Cannon

Illinois had to eke out a home win against Purdue in 2024 to get the Cannon back to Champaign. There was considerably less doubt about the outcome of this year's game at Ross-Ade Stadium in West Lafayette, Ind. The Illini took their first lead early in the second quarter on a long touchdown pass from Altmeyer to Beatty and never looked back in a 43-27 victory on Oct. 4 that included five field goals by Olano for the first back-to-back Cannon victories since 2001-02.

Keeping the Hat

Regular-season finale games against Northwestern haven't had the best weather lately. The 2024 game at Wrigley Field happened in bitter cold. It was slightly warmer this year, but several orders more miserable given the combination of snow (the most ever at Gies Memorial Stadium on a game day) and wind (even more so than usual). Illinois toughed it out both times and kept the Land of Lincoln Trophy for another year with its snow-covered 20-13 victory on Nov. 29.



Robin Scholz/ The News-Gazette

Luke Altmeyer has thrown for 7,411 yards, rushed for 687 yards and has 68 total touchdowns for Illinois before Tuesday's Music City Bowl against Tennessee.

The Music City Bowl will mark the end of Luke Altmeyer's Illinois football career. The three-year starter at quarterback has been a crucial piece in the Illini rebuild this decade. Before he leads the Illini onto the field at Nissan Stadium in Nashville, Tenn., beat writer **SCOTT RICHEY** shares five enduring moments from Altmeyer's time in Champaign-Urbana:

Clutch performer

Needing a game-winning drive to beat Toledo in the 2023 season opener wasn't exactly ideal. While the Rockets did go on to win 11 games that year behind their own standout quarterback in **Dequan Finn**, a close call against a MAC school is preferably avoided. Illinois got the 30-28 win, however, after Altmeyer led a 12-play, 64-yard drive that **Caleb Griffin** finished with a 29-yard field goal. Game-winning drives in the final minutes became an Altmeyer staple, as he has six in three years.

Big win on the road

Illinois' 31-24 overtime win at Nebraska on Sept. 20, 2024, stands out for several reasons. Altmeyer became the first Illinois quarterback since **Nathan Scheelhaase** in 2013 to throw for four touchdowns in multiple games with four against the Cornhuskers. The final two touchdowns helped tie the game (a 6-yard pass to offensive lineman **Brandon Henderson**) and then win it (a 4-yard pass to **Pat Bryant** in overtime), as Altmeyer finished the game 21 of 27 for 215 yards.

Beating the best

Altmeyer capped one of the most impressive seasons for an Illinois quarterback (with more than little help from running back **Josh McCray**) by leading the Illini to a 21-17 victory against South Carolina in the 2024 Citrus Bowl. The win against the Gamecocks, who entered the game ranked 14th nationally, was the third victory against a Top 25 team that season in addition to then-No. 22 Nebraska and then-No. 24 Michigan. Altmeyer was 43 of 67 for 469 yards and six touchdowns in those games.

Not just a passer

Most of Altmeyer's efforts to get his name in the Illinois record book came via his ability as a passer, but he showed off his all-around athleticism throughout his time with the Illini as a capable runner. Good enough to score 12 rushing touchdowns. Altmeyer did even more in Illinois' 34-32 win against Southern Cal this season, completing 20 of 26 passes for 328 yards and two touchdowns, rushing five times for 28 yards and another score and catching a 3-yard touchdown pass from **Hank Beatty**.

All out for the Cannon

There must be something about playing Purdue that brings out the best in Altmeyer. Or at least after losing his first shot at the Cannon in 2023. Illinois came out on top in that trophy game in 2024 and again this season with Altmeyer in full-on sling it mode. The 6-foot-2, 215-pound quarterback threw for 379 yards and three touchdowns in the overtime win last fall in Champaign and topped that with 390 yards and another touchdown in the Oct. 4 road win in West Lafayette, Ind.



Congratulations on a great season and best of luck at the Music City Bowl!

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Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

With Gibson City Elementary School Principal Justin Kean holding the microphone, Illinois running back Aidan Laughery points out to one of his favorite teachers growing up in Gibson City — Stephanie Kallal — during an all-school assembly recognizing Laughery on Dec. 12.

LAUGHERY

Continued from D-1

Some wearing his jersey. Others decked out in Illini gear. Multiple supportive signs his family is handed after this visit.

“I got a little nervous there,” Laughery said with a grin when asked about the crowd gathered to just see him in the grade school he grew up attending. “But it’s awesome seeing kids wear orange and blue and wearing my jersey. It’s really special. It’s crazy because I remember being in this gym.”

On this day in this gym, three GCMS Elementary School students stood in awe with Laughery nearby after the impromptu, 10-minute assembly.

“He’s my favorite football player,” said Hayden Salyards, a fourth-grade student. “He works hard. It’s really cool to see him and really fun to watch him play.”

Ditto for Ainsley McComas, a third-grade student.

“Since he’s from here, and I’ve known Mrs. Laughery since kindergarten, that’s why I’m supporting him,” McComas said. “I’m a big Illini fan. I hope they win the bowl game.”

Confidence, like the one McComas shared, isn’t lacking from those in Gibson City about how Illinois (8-4) will fare against Tennessee (8-4) in the Music City Bowl when the two teams kick off at 4:30 p.m. Tuesday at Nissan Stadium in Nashville, Tenn.

Just ask Avery Carley, a fifth-grade student, who channeled her inner Joe Namath when asked for her thoughts on the Music City Bowl.

“Yes, Illinois will win the bowl game,” Carley said. “Aidan will have a good game. A lot of touchdowns.”

What was the best part of seeing Aidan up close, a mere few feet away?

“It was very fun because he came to see us, and we got to be very loud,” Carley said. “He’s good at football, and he’s really kind.”

Call it the Aidan Laughery effect.

‘It was kind of crazy to hear that’

Greg Laughery didn’t have any indication when he put on an Illinois football sweatshirt one day this fall to run errands around Gibson City he would get a chance to talk with a stranger about video games.

But that’s what Aidan’s father did. Stoic and laid-back, he doesn’t hear from folks in his hometown on a frequent basis about his son. Unlike Mary, whose son is a popular topic pretty much every day at GCMS Elementary School.

“I had a guy at the grocery store, and I was wearing a sweatshirt with his name and number on it,” Greg recalled with a slight smile spreading across his face. “He said, ‘Are you related to that young man?’ I said, ‘Yeah, he’s my son.’ He said, ‘I play College Football on Xbox. He’s a go-to guy. I use him all the time.’ It was kind of crazy to hear that.”



Stephen Haas/The News-Gazette

Aidan Laughery running the ball as a Gibson City-Melvin-Sibley freshman during the 2018 Class 2A state title game victory against Maroa-Forsyth at Memorial Stadium in Champaign.



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Illinois running back Aidan Laughery and his mother, Mary, collect posters and signs Gibson City Elementary School students made for him when he visited during an all-school assembly on Dec. 12 in his hometown.

Fun and stressful are two words that go hand-in-hand when Mary describes what the past four seasons have featured watching Aidan play for the Illini. But one sentiment overrides those two descriptions.

Proud.

“I’m proud when people, who might not really know him, ask how he’s doing or that they watched him,” Mary said. “I’m very proud of what he’s accomplished.”

Aidan has rushed for 305 yards on 62 carries and three touchdowns this season with the Illini. A promising performance in the season opener against Western Illinois on Aug. 29 saw Laughery rush for a season-high 101 yards on nine carries and two touchdowns.

But a myriad of injuries he’s had to consistently deal with during his Illini and high school career and splitting carries with both Ca’Lil Valentine and Kaden Feagin has Laughery below what he accomplished in the 2024 season.

Laughery has had nine carries in three of the last four games he’s played against Washington on Oct. 25, Rutgers on Nov. 1 and Northwestern on Nov. 29, combining for 108 yards in those three games. He only needs 16 rushing yards against Tennessee to reach 1,000 for his career after he contributed 589 yards on 97 carries and four touchdowns last season when Illinois finished 10-3.

“I’ve had a rocky road at times. Unlucky, too,” Aidan said. “That’s something that I’ve learned about myself along this journey. Adversity is going to hit. It’s not about what it is. It’s about how you work through it. That’s what has built me up to what I am today.”



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Aidan Laughery receives applause from the crowd on July 14, 2021, when he committed to the Illinois football program during a ceremony at the the Gibson City-Melvin-Sibley football field.

‘It’s awesome to see him come back’

Justin Kean admits he’s a life-long Iowa fan after growing up in the Hawkeye state.

But the GCMS Elementary School principal, who moved to Gibson City when he was a sophomore in high school and has stuck around his adopted hometown, sports an Illinois pull-over earlier this month. Because of Laughery.

“I coached him in youth football, and he was the fast kid that I couldn’t outrun,” Kean said with a laugh. “Just seeing him develop from being just fast into the physical and workhorse every-down back has been awesome.”

Plus, the fact Laughery is the second GCMS player to suit up for the Illini in the last decade after Bryce Barnes contributed on the Illinois defensive line from 2019 through 2023 gives living proof to the young students Kean interacts with every day.

“It shows that even from a small town, you can go and do something big, whether it’s football or whatever else in life,” Kean said. “It’s awesome to see him come back and give back to the community that loves him. It just shows he’s a great kid that cares for others and wants to show that with hard work, you can do it, too.”

Mary said the family typically sees Aidan at least once a week during the football season. Whether that’s Aidan coming back to Gibson City or the Laughery family heading down to Champaign.

They’ll be in the stands at Nissan Stadium on Tuesday in Nashville, just like they were at the 2024 Citrus Bowl in



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Aidan Laughery celebrates with Illinois fans in the northeast tunnel of Memorial Stadium after the Illini beat Michigan 21-7 on Oct. 19, 2024, during the Memorial Stadium rededication game.

Orlando, Fla., and the 2023 Reliaquest Bowl in Tampa, Fla.

“That’s probably been my most favorite thing is having him so close to home,” Mary said. “It’s highly stressful for him at times, so to know we can give him a break from constantly thinking about football is a good thing. When he comes home, we just like being together with our family, playing games and catching up.”

‘It’s everything you could ask for’

The feeling Laughery gets when he drives from Champaign to Gibson City is a familiar one.

His preferred route sees him take Interstate 74 west toward Mahomet and then north up Route 47 to Gibson City.

“You see the skyline of the silos,” Laughery said with a grin. “It just symbolizes home to me, my family and all the people I grew up with and love.”

Even if some of his teammates are taken aback when they visit Gibson City. Like linebacker Malachi Hood and tight end Jordan Anderson, two Joliet Catholic teammates in high school who grew up in the Chicago suburbs. But who, like Laughery, were part of the first full recruiting class Bret Bielema signed at Illinois in December 2021.

“They’ve been to Gibson multiple times, and they always give me heck about the farming and the laid-back lifestyle,” Laughery said. “They can’t imagine growing up in a school this small and being in a place that’s not near a big city.”

More than four years removed from picking the Illini ahead of Iowa and Washington State in a public ceremony at the GCMS football field on July 14, 2021, Laughery doesn’t have any regrets about his decision.

“I can’t really imagine life if I had went somewhere else,” he said. “It’s everything you could ask for. It’s been good. It’s been bad. You learn so much about yourself and you create so many great relationships along the way.”

He’s not just talking about on the football field, where Illinois has compiled a 31-19 record in his four seasons.

Laughery earned his bachelor’s degree in recreation, sport and tourism last spring. He’s currently working on his master’s in management. What career path he’ll eventually pursue, he’s not sure yet.

But the lessons Laughery has learned from his football career, the interactions with his teammates and coaches, and the effect he’s had on young Gibson City students isn’t lost on him.

All he has to do is think back a few weeks ago, with the adoring throng gathered in his elementary school gymnasium, to realize he made the right choice.

“I thought of it as this is where I want to be,” Laughery said. “My family is going to be right here, so it’s going to be awesome, and it’s the best situation for me. Whatever it is I do once I’m done with football, I’ll do what I did with football. And that’s attack it with everything I’ve got.”



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Standing in a quiet hallway at Gibson City Elementary School, Aidan Laughery records a video message for a student who was sick and unable to attend the all-school assembly on Dec. 12.

MUSIC CITY BOWL SPECIAL SECTION: ILLINOIS VS. TENNESSEE

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT

CONFIDENCE NOT LACKING FOR CLARKE

Top Illini cornerback could have his hands full against a prolific Volunteers passing game, but he's eagerly awaiting the challenge

By **SCOTT RICHEY**

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Juice Clarke got his fair share of practice reps in the run-up to the Music City Bowl. Both back in Champaign and then in Nashville after Illinois arrived at its bowl destination on Christmas.

Especially in Nashville. That's where the true preparation for Tuesday's 4:30 p.m. kickoff against Tennessee happened.

Those practices back on campus? Clarke got on the field, but there was no sense overly stressing the starting cornerback in the wake of a long regular season.

So Clarke found himself on the sideline as Illinois' younger cornerbacks got invaluable practice reps. The 6-foot-1, 175-pound junior served as part-time coach and part-time motivation. A similar role to one he was forced into early in the fall, with a hamstring injury sidelining him the first four games of the season.

"The early bowl prep practices you saw guys like Jaheim Clarke leading the group vocally with not necessarily being out there," Illinois defensive backs coach Corey Parker said following Sunday's practice at FirstBank Stadium on the Vanderbilt campus.

It's a role Clarke grew into gradually throughout his third season at Illinois. A change in status he had to embrace once his on-field mentor, veteran nickel back Xavier Scott, was lost for the season with a leg injury after just three games.

"Juice had to eventu-



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Illinois cornerback Jaheim Clarke earned honorable mention All-Big Ten honors this season, and is set to have a big role in Tuesday's Music City Bowl against Tennessee. The Volunteers are fifth in the country in passing offense.

ally emerge on his own," Parker said. "This is what I'm going to do. This is how I see it. This is how I'm going to handle it, and this is how I'm going to communicate with my teammates about it. That was really, really good to see him ultimately emerge as the alpha male in the room."

Clarke wound up earning All-Big Ten honorable mention recognition from the league's media despite playing only two-thirds of the season. The Ft. Myers, Fla., native and Riverdale High School graduate will take 29 tackles, seven pass breakups and one fumble recovery this season for the Illini (8-4) into the matchup with the Volunteers (8-4).

The postseason conference honor was more recognition than Clarke thought he'd get after dealing with the hamstring injury to start the year.

But he has his sights set higher. It wasn't the type of season he was expecting after breaking out toward the end of his sophomore year.

"I was shocked I made Big Ten honorable mention," Clarke said. "The injury played a role. I feel like I didn't meet the standard. I want to be the top, top, top corner — No. 1. It definitely showed me to work. Keep working, keep on trusting your coaches, keep on preparing like a pro, and everything will take care of itself."

Clarke might have wanted more from himself, but the Illinois defensive staff was pleased with how much he progressed during his junior year. The hamstring injury threw up a roadblock, but defensive coordinator Aaron Henry saw growth.

"I think his football IQ level and what Coach Parker has done with him in that room has increased immensely," Henry said. "I can remember him being a wide-eyed freshman. He was just trying to go out there and line up and make sure he didn't mess up the call. Now it's like, 'Where is the back? How wide is the split for the receiver?' He's taken his game to a whole other

level in terms of understanding the game and playing faster.

"What I've noticed from Juice more significantly is he's taken on more of a vocal role, which we love to see that as coaches. When you start to be a lot more vocal, obviously, there's a level of confidence you have in what's going on around you. He's stepped up tremendously."

Clarke was quick to point out the role veteran defensive backs like Miles Scott, Xavier Scott and Matthew Bailey have meant to his development in the secondary.

Xavier Scott pushed him — hard — going into the 2024 season.

Bailey demanded a high level of play both in

practice and in games. Miles Scott was a source of confidence.

Those influences have helped turn Clarke into Illinois' top cornerback with one game left to play this season and the top cornerback set to return for the 2026 season.

"Next year it's going to be us," Clarke said about fellow junior defensive backs Saboor Kariem and Mac Resetch. "We've got to show why they recruited us. We've got to go out there and perform."

"We play the hardest position on the field. If you go out there and one ball gets caught on you and you're out of it, you can't be out of it. You've got to go out there, play confident and choose the technique. You've got to play it and try not to give up another explosive. You have to go out there and be confident. Have some swag and be confident."

Confidence is something Clarke hasn't lacked since his arrival in Champaign. Not when he was thrust on the field as a true freshman, playing all 12 games primarily on special teams. Not as his role grew as a sophomore into more snaps in the secondary. And not this season when he had to contend with a lingering injury through August and September.

"Corner is a hard position, man," Illinois linebacker and team captain Dylan Rosiek said. "You get beat, and you've got to go out there and cover the same guy. The overwhelming confidence he brings to it and the energy he also brings is very contagious."

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ASMUSSEN

Continued from D-1

"This is not a business where you can ever guarantee anything, but he was a close to a sure thing as I thought I've ever had," Leonard said. "He's a first-class kid, and he's earned everything he's got." Leonard knows his stuff. His Rochester teams have won nine state titles.

Beatty's efforts at Illinois make it easier the next time a player dominates in high school without all the measurables.

"There's no question," Leonard said. "It might be somewhere else, a small-town kid. (Bielema) has had three kids that have really worked out well."

Beatty handled his business the right way.

"He's done it in such a good manner," Leonard said. "He's such a great kid and academically, as a person, how he handled the media, how he has handled itself and then just been a great football player. It's going to open it up for more people to come into central Illinois."

Leonard is thinking about making the trip to Nashville for Beatty's last game. He has watched him in person a handful of times during his career, but didn't see him in 2025.

"We're debating," Leonard said.

It is 356 miles from Rochester to Nashville.

Leonard is hoping to watch Beatty next year in the NFL.

"He checks every box, especially for the NFL, even more than college," Leonard said. "I think he can be on every special team. He can be a great receiver. He's going to know the playbook. He's not going to be any trouble. He's going to be a kid (drafted) anywhere from the fifth to the seventh round."

"I really believe he's going to make it, and he's going to be great for somebody."

Mr. Touchdown

Feagin leads Illinois in 2025 with nine scores, seven on the ground and two on catches.



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Arthur-Lovington-Atwood-Hammond graduate Kaden Feagin has rushed for a team-high seven touchdowns this season at Illinois and also has two receiving touchdowns.

Ryan Jefferson, Feagin's coach at Atwood-Hammond-Arthur-Lovington, was hopeful his star player would be a hit in the Big Ten.

"When he first said he was going to be going to Illinois, we knew all this stuff could happen, but we didn't know if he'd play right away," Jefferson said. "Just to see him go down to Florida last year (for the Citrus Bowl) and getting to play in Nashville on a big stage is pretty cool."

Feagin has remained close

to Jefferson and the ALAH program.

The team spent quality time with its former star during the Knights' recent prep playoff run to the Class 2A state semifinals. Of course, Feagin came to a game.

"I can't give him enough credit for sacrificing to come down, knowing that people are going to want to talk to him and take pictures," Jefferson said. "He just knows it's all about the kids and the community. He wants to give back."

It's really cool to see."

Jefferson will be with his family on Tuesday, tuning in to ESPN to watch Feagin at Nissan Stadium.

"Cheering on Illinois," Jefferson said.

Jefferson is all for the dose of central Illinois talent on Bielema's roster.

"I think it's great for Illinois high school football," he said. "Just the fact that high school kids have those guys to look up to. They make it a dream to pursue."

Jefferson appreciates the Illinois staff's focus on area players.

"I think they are staying true to their mission to keep kids in-state," Jefferson said.

Jefferson's sons, 8-year-old Clay and 6-year-old Coby, are both Feagin fans.

"They sport the Kaden Feagin apparel at school," Jefferson said. "They've got some sweatshirts that have his picture on it. They love that."

On the way

Mike Allen, who coached Laughery at Gibson City-Melvin-Sibley, is planning to make the trip to the Music City Bowl. His father-in-law lives 90 minutes from the Tennessee capital city in Crossville, Tenn.

He will travel with son Keegan and wife Jenny.

Allen, who retired in 2021 after more than two decades as the GCMS coach, is thrilled to see Laughery in the Big Ten.

"As a community, as a coaching staff, we're so proud of him," Allen said. "Did we expect this? Yeah, we knew he had the talent. Coach Bielema gave him a chance. That's big."

To illustrate Laughery's toughness, Allen tells the story from Laughery's freshman year at GCMS when the player entered games with the Falcons way ahead.

"I pulled him aside and said, 'I know you want to run the ball. The only chance you're going to get is between tackles,'" Allen said. "He goes, 'Coach, I love that. I love between tackles. I'm not afraid of it. Let's go.'"

The mentality has served him well in college.

"They run a lot between tackles at the UI," Allen said. "He's going to get banged up. That's the nature of the game."

As much as Allen values Laughery on the field, he likes him even more away from it.

"When you meet Aidan and talk to him, you realize how great a kid he is right away," Allen said. "Regardless of football."

Bob Asmussen is a college football reporter and columnist for The News-Gazette. He can be reached at 217-393-8248 or asmussen@news-gazette.com.

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