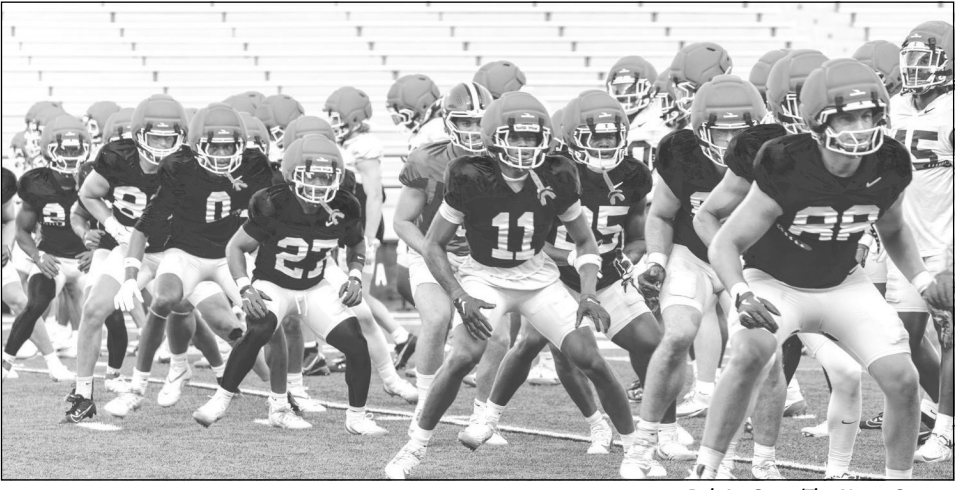


THE BEST OF TIMES

Luke Altmeyer and his talented teammates are on the cusp of something special



ILLINOIS FOOTBALL: 2025 SEASON PREVIEW



Rob Le Cates/The News-Gazette

Meet the 136th Illini football team

A look at the entire roster before the 2025 season kicks off Aug. 29 against Western Illinois in Champaign:

NO.	NAME	POS.	YR.	HT.	WT.	HOMETOWN	PREVIOUS SCHOOL
0	Justin Bowick	WR	Jr.	6-4	210	Powder Springs, Ga.	Ball State
0	Mac Resetch	DB	Jr.	6-0	210	Spring Valley	Hall HS
1	Kaleb Patterson	DB	Jr.	6-1	195	Jackson, Miss	Pearl River CC
1	Mario Sanders	WR	Jr.	5-10	195	Minneapolis	Iowa Central CC
2	Ashton Hollins	WR	Jr.	6-5	195	Lucedale, Miss.	George County HS
2	Saboor Karriem	DB	Jr.	6-3	210	West Orange, N.J.	West Orange HS
3	Alec Bryant	OLB	Sr.	6-3	250	Houston	Virginia Tech
3	Kaden Feagin	RB	Jr.	6-3	255	Atwood	ALAH HS
4	Carson Boyd	QB	Fr.	6-0	190	St. Louis	Cardinal Ritter HS
4	Daniel Brown	OLB	Jr.	6-1	250	Kansas City, Kan.	Hutchinson CC
5	Torrie Cox Jr.	DB	Sr.	5-9	170	Miami	Ohio
5	Ca'Lil Valentine	RB	So.	5-11	200	Hayward, Calif.	Chandler HS
6	Jaheim Clarke	DB	Jr.	6-1	175	Ft. Myers, Fla.	Riverdale HS
7	Matthew Bailey	DB	Jr.	6-2	215	Moline	Moline HS
7	Alex Capka-Jones	WR	Sr.	6-4	195	Oak Park, Calif.	Moorpark College
8	Malik Elzy	WR	Jr.	6-2	225	Chicago	Simeon HS
8	Jeremiah Warren	DL	So.	6-3	310	Belleville, Mich.	Belleville HS
9	Luke Altnmyer	QB	Sr.	6-2	215	Starkville, Miss.	Mississippi
9	Leon Lowery Jr.	OLB	Sr.	6-3	255	Elizabeth, N.J.	Wisconsin
10	Ethan Hampton	QB	Sr.	6-3	230	Elburn	Northern Illinois
10	Miles Scott	DB	Sr.	5-11	210	Dolton	St. Thomas More Prep
11	Brayden Trimble	WR	Fr.	6-1	190	Mt. Zion	Mt. Zion HS
11	Donovan Turner	DB	Jr.	6-2	190	Long Beach, Calif.	Long Beach City CC
12	Trey Petty	QB	R-Fr.	6-0	205	Starkville, Miss.	Starkville HS
12	Amar Reynolds	DB	R-Fr.	6-0	190	Fort Pierce, Fla.	Vero Beach HS
13	Hudson Clement	WR	Jr.	6-1	215	Martinsburg, W. Va.	West Virginia
13	Xanai Scott	DB	Fr.	5-11	205	Riviera Beach, Fla.	Cardinal Newman HS
14	Cole Rusk	TE	Sr.	6-5	250	Rock Island	Murray State
14	Xavier Scott	DB	Sr.	5-11	195	Riviera Beach, Fla.	Dwyer HS
15	Andre Lovett Jr.	DB	Fr.	6-1	190	Blue Island	Eisenhower HS
15	Jershaun Newton	QB	Fr.	6-0	215	St. Petersburg, Fla.	Clearwater Central Catholic HS
16	Logan Farrell	TE	Fr.	6-2	260	Arlington Heights	Hersey HS
16	Tanner Heckel	DB	So.	5-11	195	Lyndon, Kan.	Lyndon HS
17	Collin Dixon	WR	So.	6-1	215	Tallmadge, Ohio	Tallmadge HS
17	Gabe Jacas	OLB	Sr.	6-3	270	Port St. Lucie, Fla.	Fort Pierce Central HS
18	Michael Bartolotta	WR	Sr.	6-2	215	Orland Park	Iowa Central CC
18	Mason Muragin	OLB	So.	6-4	250	Macomb, Mich.	De La Salle HS
19	Tyson Rooks	DB	Jr.	6-4	205	St. Simons Island, Ga.	Glynn Academy
20	John Forster	RB	Fr.	5-10	195	Montvale, N.J.	St. Joseph Regional HS
20	Tyler Strain	DB	Sr.	5-9	200	Pace, Fla.	Pace HS
21	Ben Clawson	DB	Jr.	6-0	205	Arlington Heights	Hersey HS
21	Aidan Laughery	RB	Jr.	5-11	200	Gibson City	Gibson City-Melvin-Sibley HS
22	RJ Jones III	DB	Fr.	6-0	175	Fort Pierce, Fla.	Vero Beach HS
22	Cedric Wyche II	RB	Fr.	5-10	215	Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.	St. Thomas Aquinas HS
23	Jordan Anderson	TE	Jr.	6-4	240	Naperville	Joliet Catholic Academy
24	David Olano	K	Jr.	5-11	180	Naperville	Naperville North HS
24	Vernon Woodward III	DB	R-Fr.	6-1	200	DeLand, Fla.	Winter Park HS
25	Aaron Ball	RB	R-Fr.	5-11	205	Chicago	St. Laurence HS
25	Des Straughton	DB	Fr.	6-0	210	Detroit	Roseville HS
26	Ismael Kante	LB	Jr.	6-2	235	Brooklyn Park, Minn.	Iowa Central CC
27	Lucas Osada	K/P	So.	6-1	200	Charlottesville, Va.	North Carolina
27	Corey Rashard	RB	So.	5-8	185	Chicago	Marist HS
28	Karson Kaiser	WR	R-Fr.	6-1	175	Weston, Fla.	Centennial HS
28	Dylan Rosiek	LB	Sr.	6-1	234	East Lake, Fla.	East Lake HS
29	TJ Griffin	LB	Jr.	6-0	220	Hickory Hills	Stagg HS
30	JoJo hayden	LB	So.	6-2	245	East St. Louis	East St. Louis HS
31	Murphy Clement	RB	R-Fr.	6-0	215	Martinsburg, W. Va.	West Virginia
32	Tywan Cox	DB	Fr.	5-10	175	Miami	Miami Northwestern HS
33	Grant Beerman	LB	Fr.	6-5	230	West Chester, Ohio	Laktoa West HS
34	Erik Gayle	OLB	Fr.	6-3	230	Cincinnati	Withrow HS
35	Grayson Griffin	DB	Sr.	5-11	200	Aurora	St. Francis HS
36	Tomiwa Durojaiye	DL	Jr.	6-5	300	Philadelphia	Florida State
36	Lane Hansen	LS	Sr.	6-0	235	East Lake, Fla.	East Lake HS
38	Jack Paris	LB	Fr.	6-2	220	River Forest	Fenwick HS
39	Kenenna Odeluga	LB	Sr.	6-1	235	South Holland	Mount Carmel HS
39	Trey Peters	TE	Fr.	6-5	230	Mahomet	Mahomet-Seymour HS
40	Keelan Crimmins	P	Sr.	6-3	230	Spotswood, Australia	Purdue
41	James Kreutz	LB	Jr.	6-2	225	Bannockburn	Loyola Academy
42	Luke Zardzin	LB	Sr.	6-0	225	Mount Prospect	Prospect HS
43	Joe Barna	OLB	So.	6-4	265	Wheaton	Wheaton North
44	Patrick Mahoney III	LS	So.	6-2	225	Northbrook	Glenbrook North HS
44	Angelo McCullom	DL	So.	6-2	300	Pickerington, Ohio	Pickerington North HS
45	Malachi Hood	LB	Jr.	6-2	235	Plainfield	Joliet Catholic Academy
47	Easton Baker	LB	R-Fr.	6-0	220	Stansbury, Utah	Stansbury HS
48	Carter Smith	OLB	R-Fr.	6-3	245	Rolling Meadows	Fremd HS
49	Harrysson Ngassa	OLB	R-Fr.	6-4	225	Chicago	Whitney Young HS
51	Clayton Leonard	OLB	Jr.	6-4	250	Danforth	Iroquois West HS
52	Pat Farrell	DL	So.	6-5	280	Oak Lawn	St. Rita HS
54	Demetrius John	DL	R-Fr.	6-3	280	Columbus, Ohio	Dublin Coffman HS
54	Griffin Rousseau	OL	Fr.	6-7	320	Stoughton, Wis.	Stoughton HS
55	TJ McMillen	OL	So.	6-3	295	Naperville	St. Francis HS
56	Guillermo Gallardo	DL	Jr.	6-3	320	Bloomington	New Mexico Military Institute
56	JI Hirdes	OL	Fr.	6-6	290	Coopersville, Mich.	Coopersville HS
57	Zach Barrett	OL	R-Fr.	6-3	295	Orland Park	Carl Sandburg HS
58	Melvin Priestley	OL	Sr.	6-4	305	St. Louis	Grambling State
63	Dezmond Schuster	OL	Sr.	6-5	335	Gonzales, La.	Hutchinson CC
64	Josh Kreutz	OL	Sr.	6-2	290	Bannockburn	Loyola Academy
65	Kellen Francis	OL	So.	6-5	320	Princeville	Butler CC
66	Brandon Hansen	OL	So.	6-6	335	Mundelein	Mundelein HS
68	Michael McDonough	OL	Fr.	6-3	310	Tinley Park	Andrew HS
70	Tyler McMillan	OL	Jr.	6-5	335	Detroit	Southeast Missouri
71	Nathan Knapik	OL	R-Fr.	6-7	300	Kennewick, Wash.	Idaho
72	Ayden Knapik	OL	Sr.	6-6	305	Kennewick, Wash.	Idaho
73	Josh Gesky	OL	Sr.	6-5	335	Manteno	Manteno HS
74	J.C. Davis	OL	Sr.	6-5	335	Oakland, Calif.	New Mexico
75	Brandon Henderson	OL	Jr.	6-5	335	East St. Louis	East St. Louis HS
76	Dylan Frechette	OL	Fr.	6-6	310	Central Falls, R.I.	Cardinal Newman HS
78	Eddie Tuerk	OL	R-Fr.	6-4	320	La Grange	Lyons Township HS
79	Zafir Stewart	OL	R-Fr.	6-6	350	Philadelphia	Imhotep Charter
80	Hank Beatty	WR	Sr.	5-11	185	Rochester	Rochester HS
81	Lars Rau	P	So.	6-3	215	Novato, Calif.	Texas State
82	Jake Furtney	TE	R-Fr.	6-4	250	St. Charles	St. Charles North HS
83	Tysean Griffin	WR	R-Fr.	5-10	180	Chicago	Morgan Park HS
84	Grant Smith	TE	Fr.	6-5	225	Forsyth	Maroa-Forsyth HS
85	Tanner Arkin	TE	Sr.	6-4	265	Fort Collins, Colo.	Colorado State
86	Christian Abney	TE	Jr.	6-6	255	Zionsville, Ind.	Ball State
87	Tyler McClure	WR	Sr.	6-2	205	Champaign	Kaskaskia College
88	Davin Stoffel	TE	So.	6-6	260	Mosinee, Wis.	South Dakota State
89	Tanner Hollinger	TE	R-Fr.	6-5	230	Stromsburg, Neb.	Cross County HS
90	James Thompson Jr.	DL	Sr.	6-6	310	Cincinnati	Wisconsin
91	Cameron Brooks	DL	Fr.	6-3	305	Chicago	Homewood-Flossmoor HS
92	Gentle Hunt	DL	Sr.	5-11	295	High Springs, Fla.	Florida A&M
94	Carter Hewitt	DL	Sr.	6-5	300	Jewell, Iowa	Northern Iowa
95	Isaiah White	DL	Fr.	6-2	335	Indianapolis	Ben Davis HS
96	Eli Coenen	DL	So.	6-7	290	Baldwin, Wis.	Bemidji State
99	Curt Neal	DL	Jr.	6-0	310	Cornelius, N.C.	Wisconsin

GET TO KNOW THE COACH



Bob Asmusen/The News-Gazette

Illinois football coach Bret Bielema has had this binder since 1993. He uses it to track his daily thoughts and has for the last three-plus decades.

BOB ASMUSSEN

CONSTANT COMPANION

A little-known gift at his first coaching convention 32 years ago has turned into a daily staple of Bret Bielema’s life: ‘That brown notebook means the world to me’



CHAMPAIGN — The B.B.B. (Bret Bielema Binder) is showing its age ... or is that wisdom? The leather is a bit worn. But the lettering that reads “Wilson College Football USA” remains crisp.

The coach’s name, written in permanent marker in the lower, right corner, makes sure you know it belongs to the fifth-year Illinois football coach. If the binder could talk, well, that would be really cool. It has been through plenty. Many hires, one firing and jobs in seven states: Iowa, Kansas, Wisconsin, Arkansas, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Illinois in that order. Bielema knows, too, when he first acquired what has become a constant companion: 1993. He was in his first year of coaching and went into a convention with Iowa legend Hayden Fry, his college coach-turned-boss. “We walk by a Wilson booth and the Wilson guy (says), ‘Coach Fry, do you want a folder?’” Bielema told The News-Gazette. “Coach Fry is like, ‘No,

but give one to my man here Bret. He’s going to be a very good coach one day.’ “I’m 23 years old, and I’m standing there. He’d never said anything like that before to me.” Though the conventions tend to blur together after 30 years in the business, the binder helps Bielema remember he was in Orlando, Fla., for that particular convention. “I was like, ‘This is going to be my coaching notebook,’” Bielema said. Good call because 32 years later, he’s still got the same one. “I carry that with me every day,” Bielema said. Not on the field. But he has managed to hang onto it. Of course, prized possessions inside add to the value. Such as: ➔ The first father’s day card from his daughter. ➔ The letter when he got fired from Arkansas. ➔ A photo of his older daughter Briella as a newborn.

Please see ASMUSSEN, B-3



Bob Asmusen/The News-Gazette

A baby photo of Bret Bielema’s first-born daughter Briella is one of many keepsake items in his binder.



Bob Asmusen/The News-Gazette

The Illinois schedule and one of Bret Bielema’s favorite phrases are part of his coaching binder.

ILLINOIS FOOTBALL: 2025 SEASON PREVIEW

ASMUSSEN

Continued from B-2

→ A note from Illinois athletic director Josh Whitman after Bielema's first game as the Illini coach in 2021. "That brown notebook means the world to me," Bielema said. "I would be uncomfortable if I lost it. I would lose my mind. "It's been with me through the biggest win and the worst loss."

Making it work

A practical side does exist to Bielema's binder business. "I'm routine-driven," he said. "If I don't do something, I believe I'm going to screw up because I didn't do it the same way I've always done it. "It's just how I process." And there definitely is a method to Bielema's system. When he hands out notes to staff members, anything written in blue is proactive and anything in red is reactive. When Bielema is writing notes on the field, anything written in blue or black is before practice and anything in red is during practice. "A year or two later, when I go back to my notes, I'll know if it was a pregame note or a postgame note," he said. "It's how I do it."

Matching set

Bielema actually has two binders in his collection: the original larger one with Wilson on the cover and a smaller model that includes a notebook. His name is inscribed at the bottom.

Bielema got the second binder from a fan while he was coaching at Arkansas. "She created it for me," Bielema said.

The initial smaller binder broke, so Bielema reached out to the same company and bought another.

Bielema refers to the second binder as his "journal."

"If I don't have that with me, I'm always looking for it," he said. "I always think, 'I might have to write something down.'"

The front of the binder



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Bret Bielema carries a 28-22 record with Illinois into his fifth season leading the Illini football program. His 28 wins are already the ninth-most in school history, and, if Illinois matches its 10-win season from 2024 in 2025, he would move into fourth all-time. Robert Zuppke (131 wins from 1913-41), Ray Eliot (83 wins from 1942-59), Mike White (47 wins from 1980-87), Ron Turner (35 wins from 1997-2004), Ron Zook (34 wins from 2005-11), Pete Elliott (31 wins from 1960-66), John Mackovic (30 wins from 1988-91) and Bob Blackman (29 wins from 1971-76) are the Illini coaches Bielema is chasing.

includes the 2025 Illinois schedule and a saying that is a mantra for Bielema: "Every player deserves a coach that believes in him."

He practices what he preaches. "That little saying right there is what drives me every day," Bielema said. "Every kid that I coach, I want them to know I believe in them. If you empower somebody, that's way more than teaching them something. If you make them believe they can play the best

football they've ever played, that's the greatest gift you can give them."

The Illinois players are aware of Bielema's binders.

"A lot of wisdom, a lot of knowledge, a lot of football IQ," Illinois starting quarterback Luke Altmyer said. "He's always in it, always writing down his thoughts, putting pen to paper. You never see him without it."

Bielema told Altmyer about the binder during the player's recruiting visit.

"It's very deep in who is as a person," Altmyer said.

Hands-on approach

Other ways exist to keep track of the daily happenings for a Big Ten football coach. Like on the computer or smart phone.

Bielema prefers his way. "A lot of guys do the laptop thing, but I can't type," Bielema said. "If I give you an e-mail that is more than five sentences, know I just gave you 10 minutes of my life."

It makes sense. When Bielema was in college at Iowa from 1989-92, the computer world was in its infancy.

Bielema doesn't toss the journals at the end of the year. He saves them and turns back to them whenever needed.

"I keep them all," Bielema said.

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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ILLINOIS FOOTBALL: 2025 SEASON PREVIEW

MEET THE QUARTERBACK

THE BRIGHT LIGHT

POSITION SPOTLIGHT

Lofty expectations. Positive vibes. A No. 12 national ranking. All hype the Illini are generating. Having a 'confident and convicted' Luke Altmyer returning for his third season certainly helps.

By **SCOTT RICHEY**
srichey@news-gazette.com

CHAMPAIGN — How involved college football coaches can be with their teams during the summer months has shifted during the course of the last several years.

Summer workouts remain the primary domain of strength and conditioning coaches, of course. It's their time to whip the 100-plus players on the roster into shape ahead of the season. But the rest

of the staff can actually spend some time on the field — with a football, no less — in the period between the end of spring practices and the start of fall training camp.

Even with those changes, though, July remains a players-only month at Illinois. The coaching staff isn't around. A dead period on the recruiting calendar means they take the month as their only moment to get away, spend time with family.

Luke Altmyer's assignment this July? Run the Illini's summer quarterback school.

Two weeks were spent on preparing for early-season road games at Duke on Sept. 6 and at Indiana on Sept. 20. The third was all about situational football.

Altmyer was in charge.

"It was like, 'Hey, bro. We're not here. You're the coach. You run the meetings. You set the time. Here's the cut-ups and go for it,'" Illinois co-quarterbacks coach Art

Sitkowski said. "He attacked it. I was calling the other guys once or twice in the summer to see how he was doing. They were calling him Coach Altmyer by the end of the thing. It was pretty cool."

How the 22-year-old Altmyer handled Illinois' summer quarterback school was another indication of how much the Starkville, Miss., native has grown heading into his third season in Champaign.

Please see **ALTMYER, B-5**



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Luke Altmyer hams it up for the camera at the Irwin Indoor Practice Facility in Champaign in mid-August. The fifth-year senior quarterback for Illinois is entering his third season as the Illini starter and is as confident as he's ever been. 'He's willing and really excited to play his best football,' Illini offensive coordinator Barry Lunney Jr. said.

ILLINOIS FOOTBALL: 2025 SEASON PREVIEW

ALTMYER

Continued from B-4

Into his third year as the Illini's starting quarterback for a team coming off one of the most successful seasons in program history with the accompanying lofty expectations this fall.

Illinois is ranked No. 12 nationally heading into its 6:30 p.m. season opener on Aug. 29 against Western Illinois at Memorial Stadium. How successful the Illini might actually be will hinge, in no small part, to how far their starting quarterback can take them.

"I'm so confident and convicted I'll be such a better player from last year to this year," Altmeyer said. "A bigger jump in 2025 (compared to last offseason) just because of the work I put in. I understand what I need to do to create success from head to toe — body control, strength, mechanics at quarterback.

"My confidence has just gone to a new place. I'm so confident and convicted it's going to be an awesome year for me. I'm exhausting all my gifts — physically and spiritually and emotionally — to be my best."

The ups and downs

Altmeyer made important strides a year ago. His first season at Illinois was uneven. The Mississippi transfer arrived in Champaign as the top option to replace Tommy DeVito following DeVito's successful one-year stint with the Illini in 2022, but interception trouble plagued Altmeyer early in the year. He eventually lost his starting job to walk-on John Paddock even after getting cleared from a late-season concussion.

A more comfortable, confident Altmeyer showed up in early 2024. Better results followed, as he set career highs with 2,717 passing yards and 22 touchdowns against just six interceptions.

Returning for year three has Altmeyer in the same preseason conversations as some of the top quarterbacks in the country. The 6-foot-2, 215-pound senior has been recognized, to date, on the Maxwell Award, Walter Camp Player of the Year, Davey O'Brien Award, Manning Award and Johnny Unitas Golden Arm Award watch lists this month alone.

"A lot of people wrote me off coming off of 2022 from Ole Miss and even 2023 coming off that year, too, but I just did the right things," Altmeyer said. "That's thanks to the people around me here at Illinois between these walls and the community just bringing out the best of me every single day. Getting out



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

When Luke Altmeyer runs by Grange Rock next Friday night at Memorial Stadium in Champaign before the Illinois football team kicks off its 2025 season against Western Illinois, the Illini quarterback will do as one of six team captains.

Passing fancy

Luke Altmeyer still needs a few productive games to move into the top 10 at Illinois for passing yards as he enters the 2025 season with 4,600 passing yards. But if the Illini quarterback replicates what he did in 2024 in 2025, he'll move up the leaderboard this fall:

RK., PLAYER	PASSING YARDS	TDS	YEARS
1. Jack Trudeau	8,725	55	1981-1985
2. Kurt Kittner	8,722	70	1998-2001
3. Nathan Scheelhaase	8,568	55	2010-2013
4. Juice Williams	8,037	56	2006-2009
5. Jason Verduzco	7,532	42	1989-1992
6. Tony Eason	7,031	38	1981-1982
7. Wes Lunt	5,900	36	2014-2016
8. Johnny Johnson	5,293	35	1993-1995
9. Jon Beutjer	5,190	39	2002-2004
10. Jeff George	5,189	31	1988-1989

of my comfort zone has been such a blessing. The people here have been nothing but good to me. Forever thankful and just excited to be doing something I love to do with a lot of good people.

"I'm so focused on creating more memories and more moments for this team and this community, but I realize that something special is being built and a big part of it is this team and what we're doing. It means a lot to a lot of people. That's bigger than myself."

Influencing the Illini

Altmeyer's teammates and coaches have seen him throw himself wholly into the preparation for the 2025 season. Illini coach Bret Bielema said his starting quarterback is "intentional in everything he does." Offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Barry Lunney Jr. sees Altmeyer as an example of what can be accomplished in growth through adversity when coupled with maturity, humility and leadership.

"He's really been sharp in camp, and I've been really pleased with what he looks like and the

improvements there," Lunney said. "The intentionality he has with just the fundamentals and the details of the position. The overall command of the offense. We want to put him in the best position we can because if he plays well, it's going to be good for our team.

"He's got a lot of confidence in what we're doing and how we're doing. I think I know him very well. He knows me very well. It's just the little small details for him — rhythm, timing, decision making, consistency. All the things you ask from any quarterback. I know he's willing and really excited to play his best football."

Lunney and Sitkowski started to see that level of preparation and performance from Altmeyer in the run up to the 2024 season. Mostly because they challenged him coming off the disappointing conclusion to the 2023 season.

Sitkowski, as much as anyone, understands the ups and downs of quarterback development. Thrust into a starting role at Rutgers as a true freshman in 2018, Sitkowski struggled. He found some consistency as a part-time start-



Mike Heiniger/The News-Gazette

Luke Altmeyer has thrown for 4,600 yards and 35 touchdowns during his first two seasons at Illinois, but he has also shown he can affect games running the ball, too, with 499 career rushing yards and seven rushing touchdowns with the Illini.

er after transferring to Illinois before the 2021 season and has cemented himself as an indispensable staffer and now coach for the Illini.

Sitkowski believes Altmeyer has become "a better person, a better player and a better quarterback because of those moments" in 2023. The Illinois quarterback just needed to realize the effect he had on the program.

"I told Luke, I said, 'Bro when you're the quarterback, man, your energy, your personality, your charisma impacts everyone in this organization, from the janitor to the secretary to the head coach to the coordinator to your position coach,'" Sitkowski said. "Luke's a very deep thinker, and Luke thinks very critically. I really believe he responded to it because I see him do it on a daily basis.

"Luke screams, 'Coach me coach!' He wants to get coached. It's our job as coaches to bring our 'A' game every single day because he's going to bring his 'A' game every single day. He's going to challenge you to be the best version of you. It's awesome."

His lasting effect

Altmeyer has chal-

lenged the younger quarterbacks on the Illinois roster, too. This year's dynamic is unique with Altmeyer and backup Ethan Hampton both in their fifth season of college football and a trio of freshmen — redshirt Trey Petty and true freshmen Carson Boyd and Jershaun Newton — that haven't taken a single snap in college.

Boyd is tracking everything Altmeyer does as preparation for the day he could possibly step into the starting role.

"Just being a sponge and sitting behind him and watching how he attacks meetings and the film room and the weight room and just leading as a whole," Boyd said. "When the group's energy is low, the little things he says, they really mean something to me. Me watching him is going to be real beneficial for me in the future.

"He texts me after practices here and there and tells me things I can work on. He kind of compares me to him when he was a freshman. He's on the stage — he's playing at a level I would want to get to in my football career — so it means a lot coming from a guy like him."

Altmeyer views his time with Illinois' younger quarterbacks as part of

the legacy he could leave in Champaign. It's made him reflect on his first two years at Mississippi and how he learned from Matt Corral and Jaxon Dart.

While Altmeyer's focus remains on the season ahead, it's not unexpected he's had a few thoughts on what he'll leave behind — how he'll be remembered — as he approaches his final season of college football.

"I remember how greatly the quarterbacks ahead of me affected me and the way I play today and the way I carry myself," Altmeyer said. "I know the younger guys behind me are going to kind of take that same approach. When they're older, they're going to remember me, hopefully, as a good dude and a good leader. A good competitor. A guy who led with toughness and worked in the best way possible.

"I've always wanted to leave a legacy of good faith, good character. My talents are my talents. I've been gifted by the man above with those things. ... I'm going to leave and people are going to come in and play really good quarterback play here, and people are going to forget me, but I think my character and the tradition that I leave of good faith will stick."

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ILLINOIS FOOTBALL: 2025 SEASON PREVIEW

OFFSEASON TRANSFER TO WATCH

FINDING A FIT IN CHAMPAIGN



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Sixth-year senior defensive lineman James Thompson Jr., far right, demonstrates technique to his fellow Illinois defensive linemen during an early August training camp practice at Memorial Stadium in Champaign. Thompson arrives at Illinois for the 2025 season after spending his first five years at Wisconsin.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT

A Cincinnati native and former defensive lineman at Wisconsin, Thompson standing out so far with the Illini

By SCOTT RICHEY
srichey@news-gazette.com

CHAMPAIGN — The can of Skyline chili was hard to miss in James Thompson Jr.'s locker during the Illinois football team's on-campus media day. A place of prominence right next to his helmet befitting his upbringing in Cincinnati.

"Big Skyline chill guy," Thompson said. "Each time I go back home I get my three-way, get some hot sauce, oyster crackers and get my chili cheese nachos."

This can of Skyline chili was part of a training camp care package from Thompson's sister. A taste of home as he entered his sixth and final season of college football. In a new home the former Wisconsin defensive lineman didn't necessarily anticipate he'd have.

Thompson missed nearly all of the 2024 season at Wisconsin after suffering a torn pectoral muscle. Instead of one last go-around with the Badgers that might have propelled him to the NFL, he hit the transfer portal instead and wound up in Champaign.

No Skyline chili to be found, of course, but more than a few restaurants he's grown to love after putting out a request for recommendations after arriving in January.

Hamilton Walker's in downtown Champaign was an early favorite. Baxters American Grille and Neil St. Blues weren't far behind in winning over the Cincinnati transplant via Madison, Wis.

Champaign quickly became home for Thompson, who calls himself a "homebody."

"I had no idea where I'd end up, to be honest," Thompson said. "Especially in this portal thing. Everybody's got offers left and right, and it can be very chaotic. Illinois, to me, was a place for me to really have a plan for me and have the same amount of goals I have for myself. I believe this program has a real strong bond of family and loyalty and love for each other and the coaches really care about the players. That's the environment around Champaign. It was very welcoming to me. It just felt like at home for me."

"Champaign fit me just right. Champaign is a really good, friendly community. ... It didn't take a lot for me to get situated, and Champaign was a very easy transition easy for me."

It didn't take long for Thompson to find a fit on the football field in Champaign, either. The 6-foot-6, 310-pound defensive lineman quickly became a veteran voice for a position group long on newcomers but short on experience.

Filling that void is the sixth-year player everyone at the Smith Center calls "Unc."

"James Thompson is a one of one," Illinois defensive coordinator Aaron Henry said.

"We call him 'Unc' for a reason. He's wise beyond his years. I mean, that dude can walk into a room and, automatically, the room's happier. It's brighter. People are laughing. I mean, he's special, man."

"He's so wise beyond his years. He has such a level head and such great perspective that he can give to our younger guys that is vital when you're talking about being a developmental program. Obviously, James came out of the portal and we are beyond excited not just to have him, but we have a couple portal guys that we think highly of just in terms of their maturity, in terms of their level of play."

Thompson has embraced his role as the elder statesman among Illinois' defensive linemen.

Down to his sartorial choices.

He showed up for his recent media availability during training camp in a bucket hat and white Illini graphic sweater that would have been at home in any closet in the 1990s.

The difference Thompson can make for his younger teammates, though, is just as important to the veteran defensive lineman.

"I'm very detail oriented," Thompson said. "Sometimes, I can be a little bit tough on the younger guys, but at the end of the day, I've got a lot of love for them. I want to pass down experience. I want them to be the best player they can possibly be, and if I see something that's not such a good habit, I'll tell them and try to give advice to them so they'll be able to grow and learn. Just spread out wisdom and experience to them, so they don't make the same mistakes that I probably did when I was younger."

Curt Neal got to see Thompson work through some of those mistakes up close. Saw him turn into a leader during their three seasons together at Wisconsin. That both of them landed in Champaign out of the transfer portal was not a coordinated move, but the bond they built with the Badgers has only strengthened at Illinois.

"That's like my big brother," said Neal, a junior defensive lineman. "To luckily end up at the same school coming out of the portal is so crazy, but I think it's all God's plan. He's been everything and more — a mentor, a big brother. I love James like my mom had him."

Thompson has settled into his role as a leader in the Illinois defensive line room and arguably it's most disruptive option on the field before the season kicks off Aug. 29 against Western Illinois at Memorial Stadium.

Joining the team in time for spring practice was a serious benefit, and Thompson said he kept his head in the playbook this summer. Not just to know his role in the Illini defense, but also everyone around him, too.

"I'm just trying to make sure that I know the ins and outs of the D-line and even what the outside linebackers and linebackers are doing," Thompson said. "If I know what they're doing, I can play faster with what I can do and possibly make plays. I'm just trying to improve at the mental game aspect."

"We're competing every day. (Defensive line coach Terrance Jamison) does a really good job of rotating the D-line and showing that nobody's spot is safe. Even my spot is not safe. Every day, everybody's got to compete and put their best work on tape. No plays off. We look at every single play, and if you take a play off or you're not doing something well, it will get evaluated. Also, if you're doing a really good job, we evaluate that, too."

Thompson wants his own effort on the field to have his leadership take root. The idea that respect is earned is meaningful to him.

"The way you carry yourself is very important," Thompson said. "I've always had a standard for myself to make sure I'm the hardest working person on and off the field. I try to carry myself through that. Hopefully the D-line and my peers around me see that, and I try to visibly show that."

Local SPOTLIGHT



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ILLINOIS FOOTBALL: 2025 SEASON PREVIEW

FACES OF THE PROGRAM

IMPORTANT DEBATE TO SETTLE NOW



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Kaden Feagin is entering his third season at Illinois, and the junior running back from Atwood is one of the more physically imposing players on the Illini roster.

Preseason expectations have soared for Illinois football heading into the 2025 season. That's what a 10-win season will do. Beat writer **SCOTT RICHEY** spotlights five Illini who are the most vital to more success this fall:

LUKE ALTMYER

The improvements Altmeyer made from his first season as Illinois' starting quarterback to his second were stark. Namely in how few times the 6-foot-2, 215-pounder threw the ball to the other team. Interceptions plagued Altmeyer in 2023, but he bounced back in 2024 with 22 touchdowns and just six picks. More of that is key this season for Illinois to reach its full potential.

J.C. DAVIS

Keeping Altmeyer upright is a priority. While his internal clock could speed up on occasion to avoid getting sacked, the first line of defense is the offensive line. Particularly Davis, the 6-5, 335-pound left tackle who protects his blind side. The priority for Davis as the 2025 season approaches is not letting the plantar fasciitis in his left foot become a season-long issue.

KADEN FEAGIN

Most conversations about Feagin's potential include the "if he can stay healthy" disclaimer. Because that's been an issue for the 6-3, 255-pound running back both in his first two seasons at Illinois and at the end of his high school career. The Atwood native has rushed 162 times for 744 yards and five touchdowns in his career, but has missed 11 total games the last two years.

GABE JACAS

Jacas' bounce-back 2024 season mixed the best of former Illinois defensive lineman **Johnny Newton's** disruptive traits. Jacas finished his junior year with 13 tackles for loss and eight sacks and could have bolted for the NFL. The 6-3, 270-pound outside linebacker opted for one more year in Champaign, where the expectation is he causes just as much havoc.

XAVIER SCOTT

Cornerback will likely be Scott's landing spot in the NFL and he'll fill that role this season in Champaign when Illinois runs its base 3-4 defense with just four defensive backs. But when the Illini send out a five-man secondary, the 5-11, 195-pound Scott can easily slide into the nickel back spot. Versatility that made him a Jim Thorpe Award semifinalist in 2024.



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ILLINOIS FOOTBALL: 2025 SEASON PREVIEW

FRESHMAN TO WATCH

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT

DISCOVERING A NIMBLE TRIMBLE

Wide receiver from Mt. Zion making his presence known among veteran Illini: 'He's been a joy to be around'

By JOEY WRIGHT

jwright@news-gazette.com

CHAMPAIGN — Brayden Trimble has wasted little time affecting the Illinois football program.

In a positive way.

Just ask his teammates about the freshman wide receiver from Mt. Zion who is about to experience his first college football season.

"He's been a joy to be around," fifth-year senior and Illini quarterback Luke Altmyer said. "He always puts a smile on my face, I'll tell you that. You can tell he comes from a great place and community in Mt. Zion, and he exudes that. ... He's going to do really, really awesome things for this program."

Last fall, Trimble helped the Mt. Zion football team reach the 2024 Class 4A state championship game, hauling in 61 receptions for 805 yards and 14 touchdowns for the eventual 4A state runner-up team.

But he decided to forgo his senior basketball season — after playing a key role on the Braves' run to an eventual fourth-place finish in the 3A state tournament in March 2024 at State Farm Center in Champaign — to enroll at Illinois this past January after signing with Bret Bielema's program a month earlier.

That decision has paid off in the seven months he's been around the Illini ahead of the Aug. 29 season opener against Western Illinois.

"I wouldn't know how I'd be doing it right now if I didn't come early," Trimble said. "It was so good to get a jump start on the plays and really just get acquainted to being in the system."

The 6-foot-1 Trimble is about 20 pounds heavier now than he was at the end of his high school career, checking in at 190 pounds. And he said he's picked up Illinois' system with relative ease.

"Coach (Bielema) does such a great job about not only teaching you plays and how to play football, (but) teaching you actual concepts of football," Trimble said. "That's the biggest thing. I've grown so much mentally as a football player, not even just in the physical aspect."

The Illinois coaching staff has noticed Trimble's rapid development and continued progression since arriving in Champaign, too.

"I think if you asked Brayden, I think the best decision he's ever made in his life besides coming to Illinois was com-



Illinois athletics

Former Mt. Zion standout wide receiver Brayden Trimble graduated from high school early and could contribute as a freshman this fall with the Illini football team.

ing here in January," Illini wide receivers coach Justin Stepp said. "Great attitude. I don't know if that kid's ever had a bad day. He comes in and works really hard, so we're excited about him."

Illinois' receiving room will look quite a bit different this fall than it did when Illinois capped its 10-win 2024 season with a Citrus Bowl victory.

Gone are Pat Bryant and Zakhari Franklin, with that duo combining for 1,636 yards and 14 touchdowns in 2024. Hank Beatty, Collin Dixon and Malik Elzy are among the returnees, but Trimble will try to vie for playing time alongside fellow newcomers like Ball

State transfer Justin Bowick and West Virginia transfer Hudson Clement.

"A lot of bodies in there that are going to mix it in and be very productive for us," Altmyer said. "We don't know who the main guys in the main roles will be, (but) got a good thing going. A lot of talent."

Trimble echoes that sentiment.

"In my opinion, it's one of the deepest wide receiver groups I've ever seen," Trimble said. "Everyone in the room is so versatile. ... The room is just so deep. So it's been really nice to just be in that room and be with those guys."

Trimble has spent the last few months

soaking up as much information and knowledge as he can from the older receivers on Illinois' roster.

Beatty — who grew up about 35 miles from Trimble in Rochester and is entering his fourth season at Illinois — has helped show Trimble the ropes since he's been at Smith Center.

"Physically, he came in and impressed us all with his speed and physicality," Beatty said. "But I think where he's grown the most is just mentally and seeing him take each day by each day. Wanting to learn and soak up as much information as he can is really impressive."

Clement — who had 741 receiving yards at West Virginia in 2024 — has also gotten a chance to bond with Trimble since arriving in Champaign.

"He's going to be great," Clement said. "He's got a good work ethic, good passion for the game. When we both first got here, we got close pretty quick, so it's been fun."

That the 18-year-old Trimble is fitting in within the Illini locker room isn't surprising to his high school coach.

Mt. Zion coach Patrick Etherton had Trimble and Mississippi tight end commit J.C. Anderson at his disposal last fall, and realizes the type of athlete Trimble is.

"Everything (Trimble) has done, he's earned," Etherton said. "Just from his approach, from high school practice, games, everything. And then the ability to graduate early, go there and put in the work, and put in the work and everything to be successful."

Trimble was a calm and steady presence in the Braves' locker room.

"He's a leader by actions," Etherton said. "He just goes about his business and does it right. For us, he just set the tone because of how he worked. ... He's a quiet kid. He's a reserved kid. But he's goal-oriented, and he has high expectations. I believe he'll achieve those."

Plenty of familiar faces — including Etherton — are ready to make the short drive from Mt. Zion to Champaign to see No. 11 this season. Trimble's close-knit family is particularly eager.

"It's been a lot of excitement around my whole family, which I'm super excited about," Trimble said. "That's a big thing about being close: Your whole family can come to the game. So, just the big excitement through my whole family in town. Always having someone saying, 'Yeah, we'll be at the games,' is super cool."



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ILLINOIS FOOTBALL: 2025 SEASON PREVIEW

NEWCOMERS TO WATCH

TRANSFERRING THEIR TALENTS TO C-U



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Illinois wide receiver Hudson Clement, middle, had 51 receptions for 741 yards and five touchdowns last season at West Virginia.

Illinois added 18 transfers from the FBS and FCS levels this offseason. Beat writer **SCOTT RICHEY** spotlights five that could have an immediate effect on the Illini this fall:

JUSTIN BOWICK

The last full season Bowick played was 2023 at Eastern Illinois where he caught 35 passes for 499 yards and five touchdowns in 11 games. He put up similar numbers last fall at Ball State — 20 catches for 383 yards and three touchdowns — despite playing just four games. The 6-foot-4, 210-pound receiver gives **Luke Altmyer** a big target, with speed, in the passing game.

HUDSON CLEMENT

The open competition at wide receiver heading into the season features mostly receivers long on potential and short on production — particularly at the power conference level. Clement is the exception. The 6-1, 215-pound West Virginia transfer started 20 of the 23 games he played for the Mountaineers and caught 73 passes for 1,221 yards and nine touchdowns.

KEELAN CRIMMINS

Illinois coach **Bret Bielema** has already expressed his desire to get Crimmins another season of eligibility in 2026 after the 6-3, 230-pound punter was declared a sophomore by the NCAA in 2023 when

he arrived from Australia. Crimmins was an All-Big Ten honorable-mention pick last year at Purdue, averaging 44.9 yards per punt with 17 of his 64 punts downed inside the 20.

CURT NEAL

Defensive line coach **Terrance Jamison** has turned Illinois' nose tackle position into an NFL pipeline. Neal is the likely starter after transferring from Wisconsin, where the 6-foot, 310-pounder started all 12 games in 2024, and will eventually try to become the next Illini sent off to the league. **Roderick Perry II**, **Calvin Avery**, **Denzel Daxon** and **TeRah Edwards** set the standard.

JAMES THOMPSON JR.

Save for a torn pectoral muscle last season at Wisconsin, Thompson might be spending his August in an NFL training camp and not in Champaign. But the 6-6, 310-pound lineman did receive a sixth year of eligibility and will be a focal point of the Illinois defensive line this fall. The way he's worked in camp makes his previous career highs in tackles for loss (6½) and sacks (three) look beatable during his lone season with the Illini.



Patrick Pierson/Illinois athletics

Grant Beerman is a highly-touted freshman linebacker for Illinois from West Chester, Ohio, who originally committed to Purdue before flipping to the Illini.

Nearly two dozen true freshmen populate the Illinois roster. Beat writer **SCOTT RICHEY** spotlights five that could make their way onto the field and play this fall:

GRANT BEERMAN

Flipping Beerman from Purdue made him Illinois' highest-rated recruit in the Class of 2025, and Illini linebackers coach **Archie McDaniel** has sung the 6-5, 230-pound freshman's praises since he arrived in January. The West Chester, Ohio, native has the skill and ability to get on the field. The only question is where given the presence of four veteran linebackers atop the depth chart.

TYWAN COX

It might be difficult to keep an athlete like Cox off the field. Athleticism Cox comes by naturally, with his dad **Torrie** playing five seasons in the NFL, his older brother **Torrie** in his second season in the Illinois secondary and his twin sister **Tyra** about to start her college track and field career at Florida. Special teams might be his pathway just like other young defensive backs in the **Bret Bielema** era.

GRIFFIN ROUSSEAU

There always seems to be one offensive lineman that plays as a true freshman for Bielema — even if just on special teams. Typically, it's been a freshman physically

ready for the Big Ten like **Josh Kreutz**, **Hunter Whitenack**, **Brandon Henderson** and **Brandon Hansen** the past four seasons. That could be Rousseau this fall. The Stoughton, Wis., native already checks in at 6-7 and 320 pounds, looking the part of a Big Ten offensive lineman.

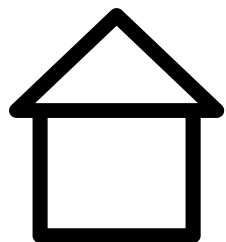
XANAI SCOTT

Could Scott be the successor to his older brother, **Xavier**, as Illinois' starting nickel back? The 5-11, 205-pound defensive back has split time in training camp working with the Illini cornerbacks and safeties. Nickel back is the crossover position where dynamic athletes land, and the younger Scott, like his brother, qualifies after being a three-sport standout in high school.

BRAYDEN TRIMBLE

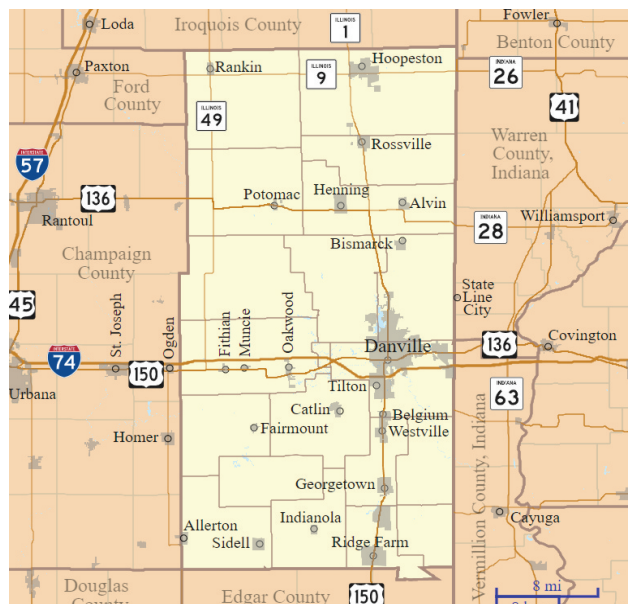
Trimble impressed during spring practices after enrolling early, and that hasn't changed as the Mt. Zion native gets closer to his first season. The 6-foot-1, 190-pound wide receiver was one of the most prolific pass catchers in IHSA history — ranking ninth all-time with 215 career receptions — and could be in the mix in the Illini's wide-open wide receiver competition.

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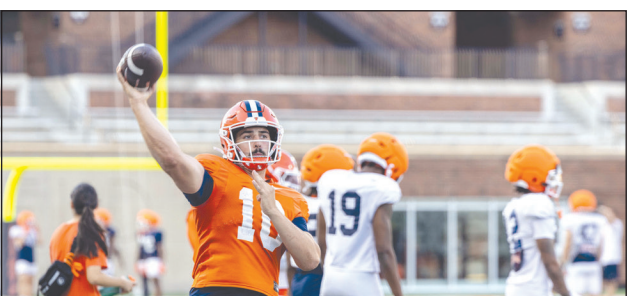


UNOFFICIAL DEPTH CHART

PROJECTING THE STARTERS AND BACKUPS

Illinois likely won't release a depth chart ahead of its Aug. 29 opener against Western Illinois. An assumption based on Bret Bielema declining to do so in each of his first four seasons in Champaign. So, beat writer **SCOTT RICHEY** took it upon himself to put together a two-deep for the Illini as the season approaches:

OFFENSE				
QUARTERBACK				
9	Luke Altmyer	6-2	215	Sr. Starkville, Miss.
10	Ethan Hampton	6-3	230	Sr. Elburn
RUNNING BACK				
3	Kaden Feagin	6-3	255	Jr. Atwood
21	Aidan Laughery	5-11	200	Jr. Gibson City
TIGHT END				
85	Tanner Arkin	6-4	265	Sr. Fort Collins, Colo.
88	Davin Stoffel	6-6	260	So. Mosinee, Wis.
WIDE RECEIVER				
13	Hudson Clement	6-1	215	Jr. Martinsburg, W.Va.
0	Justin Bowick	6-4	210	Jr. Powder Springs, Ga.
LEFT TACKLE				
74	J.C. Davis	6-5	335	Sr. Oakland, Calif.
72	Ayden Knapik	6-6	305	Sr. Kennewick, Wash.
LEFT GUARD				
73	Josh Gesky	6-5	335	Sr. Manteno
65	Kellen Francis	6-5	320	So. Princeville
CENTER				
64	Josh Kreutz	6-2	290	Sr. Bannockburn
55	TJ McMillen	6-3	295	So. Naperville
RIGHT GUARD				
75	Brandon Henderson	6-5	335	Jr. East St. Louis
66	Brandon Hansen	6-6	335	So. Mundelein
RIGHT TACKLE				
58	Melvin Priestly	6-4	305	Sr. St. Louis
63	Dezmond Schuster	6-5	335	Sr. Gonzales, La.
TIGHT END				
14	Cole Rusk	6-5	250	Sr. Rock Island
23	Jordan Anderson	6-4	240	Jr. Naperville
WIDE RECEIVER				
17	Collin Dixon	6-1	215	So. Tallmadge, Ohio
80	Hank Beatty	5-11	185	Sr. Rochester
WIDE RECEIVER				
7	Alex Capka-Jones	6-4	195	Sr. Oak Park, Calif.
8	Malik Elzy	6-2	225	Jr. Chicago



Rob Le Cates/The News-Gazette

Northern Illinois transfer Ethan Hampton is the likely Illini backup quarterback to start the 2025 season.

DEFENSE				
OUTSIDE LINEBACKER				
17	Gabe Jacas	6-3	270	Sr. Port St. Lucie, Fla.
43	Joe Barna	6-4	265	So. Wheaton
DEFENSIVE LINE				
90	James Thompson Jr.	6-6	310	Sr. Cincinnati
94	Carter Hewitt	6-5	300	Sr. Jewell, Iowa
NOSE TACKLE				
99	Curt Neal	6-0	310	Jr. Cornelius, N.C.
44	Angelo McCullom	6-2	300	So. Pickerington, Ohio
DEFENSIVE LINE				
36	Tomiwa Durojaiye	6-5	300	Jr. Philadelphia
52	Pat Farrell	6-5	280	So. Oak Lawn
OUTSIDE LINEBACKER				
3	Alec Bryant	6-3	250	Sr. Houston
4	Daniel Brown	6-1	250	Jr. Kansas City, Kan.
INSIDE LINEBACKER				
28	Dylan Rosiek	6-1	235	Sr. East Lake, Fla.
45	Malachi Hood	6-2	235	Jr. Plainfield
INSIDE LINEBACKER				
39	Kenenna Odeluga	6-1	235	Sr. South Holland
41	James Kreutz	6-2	225	Jr. Bannockburn

CORNERBACK				
1	Kaleb Patterson	6-1	195	Jr. Jackson, Miss.
12	Amar Reynolds	6-0	190	R-Fr. Fort Pierce, Fla.
NICKEL BACK				
14	Xavier Scott	5-11	195	Sr. Riviera Beach, Fla.
16	Tanner Heckel	5-11	195	So. Lyndon, Kan.
STRONG SAFETY				
7	Matthew Bailey	6-2	215	Jr. Moline
2	Saboor Karriem	6-3	210	Jr. West Orange, N.J.
CORNERBACK				
6	Jaheim Clarke	6-1	175	Jr. Fort Myers, Fla.
5	Torrie Cox Jr.	5-9	170	Sr. Miami
FREE SAFETY				
10	Miles Scott	5-11	210	Sr. Dolton
0	Mac Resetich	6-0	210	Jr. Spring Valley

SPECIAL TEAMS				
KICKER				
24	David Olano	5-11	180	Jr. Naperville
27	Lucas Osada	6-1	200	So. Charlottesville, Va.
PUNTER				
40	Keelan Crimmins	6-3	230	Sr. Spotswood, Australia
81	Lars Rau	6-3	215	So. Novato, Calif.
LONG SNAPPER				
36	Lane Hansen	6-0	235	Sr. East Lake, Fla.
44	Patrick Mahoney III	6-2	225	So. Northbrook
KICK RETURNER				
5	Ca'Lil Valentine	5-11	200	So. Hawyard, Calif.
1	Mario Sanders II	5-10	195	Jr. Minneapolis
PUNT RETURNER				
80	Hank Beatty	5-11	185	Sr. Rochester
0	Mac Resetich	6-0	210	Jr. Spring Valley

NOTE: Twelve positions are listed for both offense and defense given the likelihood Illinois will run 11 and 12 personnel equally on offense and shift between a 3-4 and 3-3-5 defense.



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ILLINOIS FOOTBALL: 2025 SEASON PREVIEW

COACHING STAFF

Beyond Bielema: Who else helps coach up the Illini?

Just one of Illinois' 10 primary assistant coaches is different heading into the 2025 season compared to this time a year ago, and even that coach was on staff in Champaign. Continuity that is a clear positive for the program. Beat writer **SCOTT RICHEY** breaks down those 10 assistants:

Barry Lunney Jr. Offensive coordinator/ Quarterbacks coach Illinois quarterbacks Tommy DeVito (2022) John Paddock (2023) and Luke Altmeyer (2024) have put up three of the four highest efficiency marks in program history under Lunney's tutelage.	Aaron Henry Defensive coordinator/ Secondary coach Henry's second season as defensive coordinator last fall was a vast improvement on the first one from 2023, with the Illini vaulting 62 spots to No. 31 nationally in scoring defense during the 2024 season.	Terrance Jamison Co-Defensive coordinator/ Defensive line coach Jamison has a reputation for developing defensive linemen and sending them to the NFL. His most impressive effort was helping turn Johnny Newton into an All-American and eventual second-round draft pick in 2023.	Robby Discher Special teams coordinator/ Tight ends coach While Discher helped Tip Reiman turn into an NFL tight end, his work with Illinois' special teams is just as important. That group ranked 16th nationally in ESPN's special teams efficiency metric in 2024.	Archie McDaniel Linebackers coach McDaniel joined the Illinois staff ahead of the 2024 season, arriving from Houston, and played a key role in Dylan Rosiek earning All-Big Ten honors for the first time in addition to Ryan Meed 's growth from special teams stalwart to starting linebacker.
Bart Miller Offensive line coach Three Illinois offensive linemen — Doug Kramer Jr. , Vederian Lowe and Alex Palczewski — reached the NFL with Miller in charge of their final development, and that number should grow in 2026 with at least J.C. Davis .	Corey Parker Defensive backs coach Parker arrived in Champaign in 2024 fresh off turning Toledo's Quinyon Mitchell into a first-round draft pick and helped the Illini secondary post a coverage grade, per PFF, that ranked 23rd nationally last season.	Justin Stepp Wide receivers coach Pat Bryant became the latest Stepp-mentored wide receiver to be selected in the NFL draft, following in the footsteps of South Carolina's Xavier Legette , Arkansas' Treyon Burks and Trey Knox and SMU's Courtland Sutton .	Thad Ward Running backs coach Ward's first stint in Champaign (2016-18) saw Reggie Corbin turn into a breakout star at running back, and his second stint that started in 2023 could see the same from Aidan Laughery , Kaden Feagin or maybe both.	Trent Harris Outside linebackers coach Harris joined the Illinois staff last year as assistant outside linebackers coach and took over that position group during the 2024 season, with Clint Sintim moving over to help Jamison coach the defensive line.



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

An enthusiastic approach to coaching and developing relationships has come to define Corey Parker as he enters his second season on the Illinois football coaching staff.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT: DEFENSIVE BACKS COACH

'THIS DUDE HAS A BALL OF ENERGY'

A longtime high school coach, Parker delivers passion and production before he starts his second season with the Illini

By **SCOTT RICHEY**
srichey@news-gazette.com

CHAMPAIGN — Terrance Jamison was the first Illinois coach to speak with Corey Parker during the team's search in the spring of 2024 for a new defensive backs coach.

The report Jamison passed to defensive coordinator Aaron Henry about that phone call?

"Coach JMo calls me and was like, 'Bro, I thought I was talking to you,'" Henry said. "I'm like, 'What?' I get on the phone with him and, no lie, in about a five-minute conversation of me talking to Coach Parker, I thought we might be related."

The similarities between Henry and Parker aren't hard to spot. Both have developed high-level defensive backs. Both have a distinct energy — on-field instructions can't be missed and closed doors can't contain their exuberance in a meeting.

Parker simply fit, making his hire by Illinois coach Bret Bielema ahead of the 2024 season a no-brainer. Nothing has changed in the course of his year-plus in Champaign either.

"Coach B. always talks about finding the right people in your program," Henry said. "I can't say enough of what that guy has done for me just in terms of him being around. That dude walks into a room, and it's something about him that attracts you to him. ... Any time I leave my meeting room, as soon as I open the door to my meeting room, you can hear him down the hallway and his door is closed. He's in there coaching, and he's so passionate. It's just contagious."

"This dude has a ball of energy. He's positive. He's phenomenal for our room. He's phenomenal for the dudes in our program. He's been a high school ball coach. He understands what it's like to start at the ground floor and work your way up. He knows what tough love is."

Parker arrived in Champaign with a major success story during his time at Toledo where cornerback Quinyon Mitchell put up back-to-back All-American seasons and turned into a first-round pick in the 2024 NFL draft by the Philadelphia Eagles. It was development — a process — he could sell to Illinois' cornerbacks.

It's not the techniques or skills Parker has dispensed to the Illini cornerbacks, however, that stand out the most to that group. It's the personal touch he provides.

"Coach Parker, for me, he's like a second father figure," Illinois cornerback Kaleb Patterson said. "I go to him for anything. I'm able to tell him anything, if I'm going through something or if I need help with something, whether that's football or outside of football in life. He's someone you can go to to be there for you."

"It's very special because my parents, they're 10 hours away. Of course I can give them a call, but it's nothing like going to have a face-to-face conversation with somebody that actually cares for you."

That's a pillar of Parker's own coaching philosophy. The bedrock of his career dating back to his time as a high school coach in Michigan for 16 years, mainly around the Detroit area, before he got his shot in college coaching at Toledo in 2022. And, from the way he discusses it, not just something he pays lip service to, either.

"One of my main standards as a coach — the thing that keeps me grounded always — is to treat every single player as if he's my own son," Parker said. "That's what drives me every day. It's constant growth as a man they're going through that I get to experience with them. Every single day, every single rep, is an opportunity for me to help these guys grow."

"I enjoy it, man. I really enjoy what I do. I'm passionate about it, and that's one of our pillars for our defense. I'm really passionate about what I do, and, most importantly, I'm really passionate about the people that I do it for. That's me in a nutshell."

Endless energy is also Parker in a nutshell. It's arguably his defining characteristic as a coach and something the Illinois cornerbacks feed off and value. Especially this time of year.

"Some days, fall camp is a long process," Illinois cornerback Jaheim Clarke said. "If you come in and sometimes you're tired he's like, 'All right guys, it's time to go! It's time to go! We're not going to get blurred today!'"

"When I look at him, we're like the same person. He's got a lot of energy, and I've got a lot of energy. He brings that fuel, that fire, and he just lets us be us. We all have different skill sets, so he lets us utilize our skill sets while adding some of the things that he has been coaching over the years."

The primary directive from Parker to his cornerbacks on the field, according to Patterson, is to "just be dogs."

Compete. No matter the circumstances or outcome.

All delivered with Parker's trademark enthusiasm.

"Him being the same person and bringing the same energy and pouring into us the way he does, it just allows us to have somebody to grab onto when we're low," Patterson said. "It's a hard game. It's hard to be consistent. It's hard to go out there every day and hit each time and time again and compete time and time again. He's just like an anchor — somebody we can lean on whenever we need a pick me up."

Exactly what Bielema and Henry were looking for in the coaching search process last spring. A defensive backs coach with solid on-field credentials and a better reputation as a man.

"I can see why he has had success everywhere he has been," Henry said. "Because no matter your limitations on that island as a corner, he makes you believe you're (6-foot-8) and you run a 4.3 (second 40-yard dash). That's what he's pouring into our players. When you see them play with that kind of passion and that level of effort, that's because it's being poured into them."



Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Fla., is the site of the College Football Playoff national championship game on Jan. 19, 2026.

Will the season end in Miami? Nashville? Champaign? Time will tell. But until the 2025 season plays itself out, beat writer **SCOTT RICHEY** offers up three end-of-season possibilities for Bret Bielema’s most hyped Illini team:

Miami, here they come
Starting the season ranked 12th in both the preseason Associated Press Top 25 and preseason coaches poll means the powers that be think Illinois has the talent to be a College Football Playoff team. Right on the edge of qualifying — at least until Big Ten Commissioner **Tony Petitti** gets his way with a 28-team bracket — but CFP bound all the same in the current 12-team era. Following through on those preseason prognostications would require another 10-win season in Champaign, with all 10 of those wins coming before the end of the regular season this time. Three-loss teams might have a CFP future in years to come, but for now, two losses seems like the maximum.

Bowling, but in Nashville
Would a regular bowl game appearance be something of a disappointment this season? Sure. Illinois is aiming higher based off last year’s success and the sheer number of starters returning (16 total) from the 10-3 team that went out with a Citrus Bowl victory. But Bielema is trying to build a consistent winner in Champaign, and consistency in college football is measured in consecutive seasons with at least six wins. The Illini haven’t played in consecutive bowl games since 2010 and 2011. Going 8-4 or 9-3 and winding up in a solid, if non-CFP bowl game, isn’t the end of the world. It’s not out of the question this season with multiple games that could be coin-flip outcomes.

The big letdown
History has had a way of repeating itself in the history of Illinois football. Breakout seasons — like winning 10 games and a major bowl — have almost always been followed by a serious slide back to mediocrity (or worse). The first step to avoiding that same kind of letdown this season could rest in the first four weeks. Games at Duke and Indiana are not guaranteed victories. Lose both and the door is wide open for a winter at home with no postseason play. Seven losses seems like a stretch given the Illini’s experienced roster and relatively benign schedule, but it’s on the table if Illinois starts 3-4 with tricky home games against Southern Cal and Ohio State also in that stretch.

The 12-game Illinois football schedule has been set for a while. But now, the games for the 2025 season are almost here. Sports Editor **MATT DANIELS** offers up a game-by-game breakdown — and his picks — before it all gets going Aug. 29 against Western Illinois:

DATE	OPPONENT	SERIES HISTORY
Aug. 29	vs. Western Illinois	Illinois leads 3-0
→ Pick: Illinois, 38-3. Luke Altmeyer is resting on the Illini bench at the start of the fourth quarter after he and his teammates overwhelm the Leathernecks.		
Sept. 6	at Duke	Series tied 1-1
→ Pick: Illinois, 21-17. Darian Mensah , meet Gabe Jacas . Duke’s well-paid quarterback will get familiar with the standout Illini outside linebacker as Illinois starts 2-0.		
Sept. 13	vs. Western Michigan	Illinois leads 4-2
→ Pick: Illinois, 31-14. No Ford Field letdown. Or P.J. Fleck upset. Kaden Feagin tops 100 yards for the first time this season as Illini climb to No. 9 in AP poll.		
Sept. 20	at Indiana	Illinois leads 46-25-3
→ Pick: Illinois, 38-35. Illini fans search Google (sorry, Curt Cignetti) and start making CFP plans after a last-second field goal by David Olano saves the day.		
Sept. 27	vs. Southern Cal	Southern Cal leads 11-2
→ Pick: Illinois, 24-20. No way Illinois loses its homecoming game. Right? Right. In a matchup of two unbeaten teams, the Illini beat the Trojans for first time since 1989.		
Oct. 4	at Purdue	Purdue leads 48-46-6
→ Pick: Illinois, 35-21. The Cannon comes back to Champaign since Ryan Walters isn’t in West Lafayette anymore, and the Illini clinch bowl eligibility early.		
Oct. 11	vs. Ohio State	Ohio State leads 68-31-4
→ Pick: Ohio State, 31-21. The first visit by “College GameDay” to Champaign is warranted with two unbeaten teams. But only Ohio State is still perfect after this one.		
Oct. 25	at Washington	Washington leads 7-4
→ Pick: Washington, 27-17. Ryan Walters is in Seattle this season. The Huskies’ defensive coordinator crafts the perfect game plan to hand Illinois its second straight loss.		
Nov. 1	vs. Rutgers	Illinois leads 6-3
→ Pick: Illinois, 24-14. Hudson Clement is the latest Illini wide receiver to gash the Scarlet Knights’ defense, helping Illinois avoid a three-game swoon.		
Nov. 15	vs. Maryland	Maryland leads 2-1
→ Pick: Illinois, 34-24. Bret Bielema becomes the first Illini coach to beat the Terrapins in Champaign. OK, it’s only the second time these two teams have met in C-U.		
Nov. 22	at Wisconsin	Wisconsin leads 45-39-7
→ Pick: Illinois, 17-13. The snow falls in Madison, but takeaways by Xavier Scott and Miles Scott are enough to give Illinois back-to-back seasons of at least nine wins.		
Nov. 29	vs. Northwestern	Illinois leads 58-55-5
→ Pick: Illinois, 48-24. Aidan Laughery continues his mastery of Northwestern and Illinois starts campaigning for a CFP spot seconds after the final whistle.		

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