

LEAVING A MAJOR MARK

ALL-BIG TEN SAFETY MATTHEW BAILEY KEY PART OF HYPE SURROUNDING 2025 ILLINI

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Matthew Bailey led the University of Illinois in tackles (94), pass break-ups (10), forced fumbles (3) and set a bowl-game record (13 tackles) last season.

However, according to the former Moline High School standout, he left a lot of meat on the bone.

“There was a good portion of the season last year where I was really frustrated with how I was playing. I had much higher expectations in terms of what I thought I could be doing for our defense,” said Bailey, who earned All-Big Ten honors at the safety position for the Illini. “I don’t really look at stats to justify or measure my impact. It’s about the effect I’m having. Am I helping my teammates? Am I doing what my coaches want? Am I being a good leader? Most importantly, are we winning?”

“By the end of the season, yeah, it was better, but to me, it wasn’t like I was satisfied when you factor everything in.”

That’s not to say Bailey was disappointed. Quite the opposite.

“Our whole 2022 recruiting class came in with the mindset of helping move this program forward, getting to where we think it should be,” he said. “I think it’s a testament to coach B (Bret Bielema). He had a vision of how to build this program, and how to do it the right way and I think it’s starting to pay off.”

Bailey and the Illini are coming off one of the best seasons in program history.

Illinois went 10-3 and defeated South Carolina in a bowl game, setting the table for heightened expectations in 2025. The Illini have been pegged as a potential top 10 preseason pick. Bailey was quick to point out that they are not buying into the hype.

“One of our first meetings as a defense this year, coach (Aaron) Henry (defensive coordinator) had basically this big presentation about teams that had exceptional seasons in 2023 and had a lot of guys coming back last year and how things didn’t work out for those teams,” Bailey said. “It illustrated to us that complacency is a real thing. What we did last year doesn’t mean anything looking ahead to 2025.”

“Our coaches have done a really good job of being on us and making sure we’re locked in every day, whether that’s in January or coming up here with spring ball.”

‘NIL not a deciding factor’

Bailey missed all but one game of his sophomore season due to injury but still could have opted to enter the NFL Draft after his banner 2024 campaign, his third collegiate year overall.

The chiseled 6-2, 215-pounder remembered Bielema saying in an interview in 2022 that he considered Bailey a future pro, but leaving Champaign now was never an option.

“I want to get at least one more year under my belt. I have a lot of things I need to work on and with the phenomenal coaches we have here, I really believe this is the best place for me,” Bailey said. “I love playing at Illinois. I love my teammates. Whether you want to call it unfinished business or whatever, this is where I want to be.”

With players able to profit from their name, image and likeness, and next year full-blown revenue sharing — allowing for even further financial possibilities — there are more reasons than ever to stay in college. Bailey, also an All-Academic Big Ten honoree studying kinesiology, said money did not factor into his thinking.

“(NIL) it definitely does help. It takes some things off my plate, and I’m able to help my family, and I’m able to learn about things like taxes,” he said. “But in terms of me coming back, (NIL) was not a deciding factor. I came back because this is where I want to be.”

That decision was not surprising to his former head coach.

“Matt’s a special guy, man. He’s always had such a mature and analytical process of how he makes decisions,” Moline football coach Mike Morrissey said. “His attention to detail, his accountability to his teammates, his coaches, his friends, his family ... people gravitate towards him and follow him and I’m sure everyone with the Illini were thrilled that he came back.”

Morrissey saw those traits very early, but one example stands out to this day.

“The story we always tell people is that when Matt turned 17 in August before his senior year, he had a birthday party and invited everybody from our team — not just his friends, not just the seniors, not just the coaches — every single member of our team. Then he stood outside his front door and shook everybody’s hand, thanked them for coming and got their name, so he could try to know everyone when the season started,” Morrissey recalled. “His parents have done a wonderful job. His two brothers are the same way, just great people. Aside from being a great football player, the leadership, the character, the accountability, when you have guys like Matt, who take those things very seriously, it sets a tremendous example for your younger kids to aspire to.”

‘We’re not there yet’

For Bailey, playing in the NFL “has always been a dream,” but he takes great pride in wearing the orange and blue of the Illini as he did wearing Moline maroon.

After a short vacation to the Bahamas after the season ended, the page quickly turned to the upcoming season.

Illinois will enter the season with high expectations after winning 10 games for the first time since 2001 and just the fifth time in program history — the others coming in 1902, 1983 and 1989. Maintaining positive momentum from one season to the next has been an issue, however. The last time Illinois had consecutive winning seasons was in 2010 and 2011.

Another winning season will not come easily. The Illini have road games at Duke, Indiana, Washington and Wisconsin, plus home tilts against USC and defending national champion Ohio State. Illinois opens its season at home against Western Illinois on Aug. 30.

On paper, things look promising.

The Illini are projected to have 18 returning starters, including 12 of the 14 that earned All-Big Ten honors last season. Among the notable returners is Bailey, who has accumulated 109 tackles, 4 interceptions and 13 pass break-ups in just two seasons in Champaign. Of those 109 tackles, 13 came in the bowl game win for the Illini, their first win over an SEC team ever.

“That was a memorable game; a lot of fun to play in. The intensity was at an extremely high level,” Bailey said. “(The record) that’s secondary. The win was huge for us in terms of what we’re trying to build as a program. We want to play in more games like ... even bigger games than that.”

Illini fans appear to be buying into the hype, literally. More than 3,000 new season tickets have been sold for the upcoming season.

What happens now and through the summer could go a long way in determining how things play out in the fall, Bailey said.

“Coach B always says, ‘how you do something is the way you do everything.’ You might not think something you’re doing now or in May or June is that important, but it is. Everything adds up,” he said. “We have a group of guys that love the grind. Whether it’s in the weight room, the practice field, the classroom ... we all share the same goal of getting this program to where it should be. We’re not there yet, we’re not satisfied, but it feels like we’re going in the right direction.”

I love playing at Illinois. I love my teammates. Whether you want to call it unfinished business or whatever, this is where I want to be.”

Matthew Bailey, Illinois safety from Moline

CAREER STATS

Year » Games » Tackles » INT » PBU » FF

2022 13 10 3 5 0

2023 1 0 0 0 0

2024 13 94 1 8 2

Note: Redshirted due to injury in 2023

MATTHEW BAILEY

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