



Inside the Lines

Official Newsletter of the Tampa Bay Bowl Association Winter 2023



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Illini, Bulldogs Looking To Finish The Job

By Joey Johnston

This year's ReliaQuest Bowl between the Mississippi State Bulldogs and Illinois Fighting Illini should be fun and competitive. It promises to be colorful and compelling. It's precisely the type of environment that Mike Leach always enjoyed.

When Leach passed away on Dec. 12, the Bulldogs lost their leader. But their season's purpose remains resolute: Go out in memorable style. Illinois has the same incentive.

In one very tangible respect, the Illini and Bulldogs are mirror images. They received little respect. No one — no one — predicted that the Illini or Bulldogs were capable of reaching a prestigious bowl destination on New Year's Day weekend.

Illinois, under third-year coach Bret Bielema, was picked sixth in the seven-team Big Ten West Division.

Mississippi State was picked sixth in the seven-team SEC West Division.

But make no mistake: After beginning this season with question marks galore, the Illini (8-4) and Bulldogs (8-4) desperately want to finish with a resounding exclamation point at Raymond James Stadium.

So get ready for the venerable chant of Oskee-Wow-Wow by the Illini and the ever-present cowbells of the Bulldogs. It's a

matchup of passionate fans and tradition-laden programs.

It's sometimes difficult to find commonalities between programs from the Big Ten Conference and the Southeastern Conference, particularly when their last meeting was more than four decades ago (for the record, it was Mississippi State 28, home-standing Illinois 21 on Oct. 4, 1980).

Yet here they are, enjoying Tampa Bay's paradise-like setting.

Illinois raced to a 7-1 start, spending five weeks in the Associated Press top 25 rankings. It came within one play of upsetting Michigan, the Big Ten champion and a College Football Playoff selection.

Mississippi State began 5-1, then used late-season victories against Auburn (39-33 in overtime) and Ole Miss (24-22 on a two-point conversion defensive stop) to clinch a momentum-building finish.

Following the Egg Bowl rivalry victory against Ole Miss, when players celebrated with victory cigars, Leach joked that it looked like the locker room was on fire. To keep that flame burning, the Bulldogs will rely on ultra-productive quarterback Will Rogers and one of the nation's most disruptive defenses.

It takes a lot to knock Bulldogs legend Dak Prescott from the top

*continued on
next page*



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\$1.1 BILLION*

ECONOMIC IMPACT

*over history of the bowl

\$170 MILLION*

TO UNIVERSITIES

PLUS \$27 MILLION TO UNIVERSITIES OVER NEXT 4 YEARS

\$3 MILLION

TO CHARITIES SINCE 2016

PLUS \$1.5 MILLION TO CHARITIES OVER NEXT 3 YEARS

rungs of the Mississippi State record book. Rogers is doing just that. He's the eighth SEC quarterback ever with a 4,000-yard passing season and needs just two touchdown passes to match his own program record (36). He also has seven 400-yard career passing games (no SEC quarterback since 2000 had more than five).

Rogers is quick to pass along the credit for his gaudy statistics, pointing out that Mississippi State has no fewer than seven players with at least 32 receptions, including Rufus Harvey (50), Dillon Johnson (48), Jo'quavious Marks (45), Caleb Ducking (44), Rara Thomas (44), Lideatrick Griffin (35) and Austin Williams (32).

On the other side, Mississippi State's defense is downright stingy. The Bulldogs are ranked 11th nationally in ESPN's College Football Power Index, fueled by a plus-5 turnover margin (with an SEC-leading 14 interceptions), 18 sacks and 57 tackles for a loss. This season, the Bulldogs ranked in the SEC's top five in total defense, yards per play allowed, takeaways, rushing defense and yards allowed per rush.

Two of Mississippi State's most dynamic defensive performers were cornerback Emmanuel Forbes (nation-leading six interceptions, three returned for touchdowns, giving him an SEC career record six scores on picks) and linebacker Nathaniel Watson (SEC-leading 108 tackles).

That Mississippi State defense, which has held 14 opponents to less than 100 rushing yards in the last 35 games under defensive coordinator Zack Arnett, is about to undergo its most severe test.

Illinois features junior running back Chase Brown, the nation's second-leading ground-gainer (1,643 yards), who needs just 58 yards to break the Illini's single-season rushing mark (1,697 by Mikel Leshoure in 2010). He was a finalist for the Doak Walker

Award, presented to the nation's top running back, and rushed for 100 yards or more in 10 consecutive games (a 98-yard effort against Purdue halted that streak).

"Chase Brown is a problem," Arnett said.

"Chase Brown is a great, great player who has helped to carry our offense in every single game," Bielema said. "He's a pretty big asset."

So is quarterback Tommy DiVito, a Syracuse transfer, whose 70-percent completion rate ranked third nationally and provided a new wrinkle for Bielema Ball, which had been perceived as a grind-it-out attack.

Those are formidable offensive weapons for Illinois, but the biggest arsenal might exist on defense. Illinois has the nation's second-ranked total defense (263.8 yards allowed) with a Football Bowl Subdivision-best 22 interceptions.

"Both teams need to be careful, I guess," Bielema said. "Both of these defenses are pretty good at taking the ball away."

The Illinois defense, which features seven starters from Florida, ranked in the top 10 nationally in 17 different defensive categories, including second in scoring defense (12.2 points).

Illinois is making its first bowl appearance since 2019, while Mississippi State is participating in its 13th straight bowl game, a distinction shared by only six other teams.

In the matchup of intangibles — Who needs it more? Who wants it more? — it appears to be dead-even.

Don't overlook the battle for conference pride. Mississippi State owns only one bowl victory against a Big Ten opponent (beating Michigan 52-14 in the 2011 Gator Bowl). Meanwhile, Illinois is 0-3 against SEC bowl foes.

"It's more of a leap start for the future," Bielema said. "We are very excited to be in Tampa."

Leach, a noted swashbuckler, would've had the most fun of all. You could almost picture him checking out the pirate ship in the north end zone, maybe even calling a play or two from the bow.

The Bulldogs can best honor his memory by playing the game of their lives. But the Illini will be a formidable obstacle.

Incentive won't be a problem for anyone January 2nd. After all, nobody expected the Illini and Bulldogs to earn this ticket to Tampa. But here they are with the same thing in mind — successfully finishing the job.



MISSISSIPPI STATE
Bulldogs



ILLINOIS
Fighting Illini

Coaches Meet Bowl Supporters At DeBartolo Contract Signing

More than 600 ReliaQuest Bowl sponsors and VIP Club members got to meet the coaches from the Mississippi State University and the University of Illinois at the **DeBartolo Contract Signing** on December 8th.

After a media session with local media outlets, Fighting Illini Head Coach Bret Bielema and Bulldog Coach Zach Arnett mingled with ReliaQuest Bowl supporters and their guests in the West Club of Raymond James Stadium.

Guests also got to hear from the coaches, as well as Athletic Directors Josh Whitman and Bracky Brett.

The event was capped-off with the coaches signing a ceremonial contract agreeing to play in the bowl game on January 2nd.

Check out our photo gallery from the event on the ReliaQuest Bowl web site at www.ReliaQuestbowl.com



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Clearwater Beach Day Welcomes ReliaQuest Bowl Fans

Presented by Visit St Pete Clearwater

One of the most popular traditions of ReliaQuest Bowl Week is **Clearwater Beach Day** where thousands of visiting fans from around the country join the teams, college bands, cheerleaders and local residents. This year's event will be held Friday, December 30th and feature performances by the University of Illinois and Mississippi State University marching bands and cheerleader squads. The day also includes live music on stage, a tug-of-war contest between the cheerleading squads, and even a pie eating contest among fans.

Fans will also be able to take their picture in front of a huge custom designed ReliaQuest Bowl sand sculpture, as well as dolphin statues designed with the team uniforms.

Dozens of visiting and local media typically cover the event as well with TV footage of fans enjoying the beautiful beaches of Pinellas County beamed throughout the country.

All the festivities take place behind the **Hilton Clearwater Beach Resort & Spa** (just north of Pier 60) and run from 11:30 AM to about 4:00 PM.

Fans are encouraged to arrive early for the best parking. There are a number of new parking options along the island along with a park and ride ferry service from downtown Clearwater and the Clearwater Ferry service via the water. Food and drinks along with bowl merchandise will be available for purchase.



Come on out and enjoy No. 1 ranked U.S. beaches with your Illini and Bulldog friends!

Visit St Pete-Clearwater is the presenting sponsor of the event. Additional sponsors include the , the **Hilton Clearwater Beach Resort & Spa**, BayCare, Amplify Clearwater, the **City of Clearwater**, Allegiant, St Pete-Clearwater International Airport, 970WFLA, 620 WDAE and 93.3 FLZ FM radio.

For more information on the ReliaQuest Bowl and Clearwater Beach Day go to www.ReliaQuestBowl.com or call the Bowl office at 813-874-BOWL.



Busch Gardens to Host Players, Fans as They Enjoy A Wild Day

ReliaQuest Bowl fans will get to join the Illini and Mississippi State players for some wild rides, shows and even animal encounters at Busch Gardens when they head to the park on Thursday, December 29th. Each year the world famous theme park hosts the participating teams for a special day during "Bowl Week."

The park features many great animal exhibits along with exciting coasters such as Falcon Fury, North America's tallest freestanding drop tower, Cheetah Chase, Montu and the new Iron Gwazi.

Players will mix with fans to enjoy these rides along with the many shows and animal interactions. So don't be surprised if that big guy sitting next to you with a death grip on the handles is a famous football player for one of the teams!

Some of the players will also get a behind-the-scenes animal encounter as well.

In addition, the Illinois and Mississippi State Marching bands are expected to make an appearance at the park on December 31st at 12:30 P.M. Normal park admission prices apply for both days and tickets are available at the gate or online at

www.BuschGardens.com.

Teams typically arrive in mid-afternoon on the Team Day.



ReliaQuest Bowl New Year's Eve Parade To Ring In 2022

Thousands of Illinois and Mississippi State fans will head to Tampa's Ybor City historic district on December 31st for the annual **ReliaQuest Bowl New Year's Eve Parade**. The parade steps off at 5:30 PM. as high school marching bands and floats join the University of Illinois and Mississippi State University marching bands, along with numerous floats and other units. This family-friendly parade will travel along historic 7th avenue in this beautiful and unique Latin quarter of the city.

Immediately following the Parade both college marching bands and their cheerleading squads will participate in a pep rally on stage in front of the Centro Ybor complex at 16th St. and 7th avenue where the groups will take turns firing up their fans. After the parade check out all the unique

places in Ybor or jump on the trolley cars and head to downtown. It's a fun way to usher in the new year with family and friends!

The Parade & Pep Rally is sponsored by **970 WFLA, MIX 100.7, 98 ROCK FM, 620 WDAE** and the **City of Tampa**.



ReliaQuest Bowl Charitable Giving Initiative Continues To Impact Region.

The ReliaQuest Bowl continues to impact the Tampa Bay region in multiple ways. In addition to generating more than \$1.1 Billion in economic impact for the region over its history along with millions each year in exposure, the bowl's Charitable Giving Initiative donates at least \$500,000 each year to local non-profit organizations. Since the Charitable Giving Initiative has distributed over \$3 million to more than 160 charities, including \$1,000,000 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

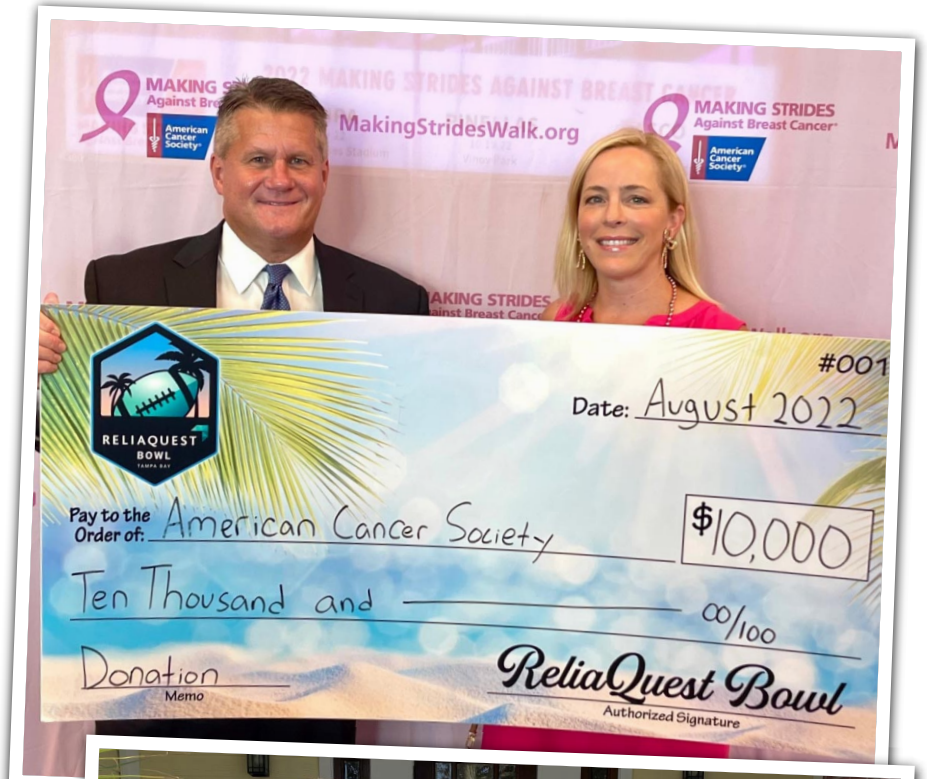
This giving is in addition to the \$164 million contributed to universities over its history.

"The Bowl was started as, and remains, an economic engine for the region and contributes millions to universities each year, but we also want to do more to help the day-to-day lives of local residents," explains Bowl President/CEO Jim McVay. "Our Charitable Giving Initiative provides much needed funding to the dozens of deserving Tampa Bay organizations that are directly

meeting the needs of the community."

The Bowl selects recipient organizations that assist people in need through a variety of causes including disadvantaged youth, the disabled, the homeless, military veterans, medical research, food banks and more.

"The Bowl has a tremendous impact not only on Wheelchairs for Kids but the entire Tampa Bay area," notes Wheelchairs for Kids Executive Director. "Most people think of it as a football game, but it is so much more."



Learn more about the ReliaQuest Bowl's Charitable Giving Initiative and the organizations it has supported online at www.reliaquestbowl.com/giving-back.



Bowl Supporters Celebrate College Football Season at Happy Hour Huddle

More than 450 ReliaQuest Bowl supporters celebrated the college football at the 2022 **Happy Hour Huddle at Splitsville Presented by Buchanan, Ingersoll & Rooney**. Guests gathered to network and play games at the entertainment concept located at the Sparkman Wharf complex on Tampa's Downtown Waterfront. It was the perfect way to celebrate the season and the bowls fall VIP event calendar. Bowl sponsors, Club Members, local media and other VIP guests enjoyed a variety of food as well. Guests also mixed in a variety of games including bowling, darts, ping pong, shuffleboard and billiards. There was also a special photo area where they could take

photos with different back drops and fun props to post on social media. The Huddle was one of many VIP events that ReliaQuest Bowl VIP Club Members and Sponsors get to attend leading up to the big game. Splitsville will also host the participating college teams on December 28th. Fans can join in the fun that that night beginning at 7:00 p.m. For more information the ReliaQuest Bowl VIP Club Membership program and how you can get the best seats to the game and join us for our other VIP events contact Blake Guthrie at blake@reliaquestbowl.com or 813-874-2695.



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| TAMPALAW | Nue Vodka |
| Calamity Gin | Sixty Men Whiskey |

New VIP Club Members (As of Nov. 28)

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|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Cathy Edwards- Keller Williams | Lema Construction |
| Christopher GIBLIN, CMP | Lowman Family |
| CIBC | M.E. Wilson |
| Colliers | Mega Service Solutions |
| Compass Real Estate | NOW CFO |
| Floridan Palace Hotel | OSPORTS |
| Gonzalo Mora & Family | Parde Calistri Group |
| Hartin Dynamics | Presenting Powerfully |
| Hilton Carillon Park | Quality Lockout |
| Hilton Downtown Tampa | R&S Compliance Group |
| Hyatt Place Hyatt House Tampa | Seacoast Bank |
| Downtown | Sysco West Coast |
| Inframark | TD Bank |
| Jeff Dovedot | Unique Wealth |
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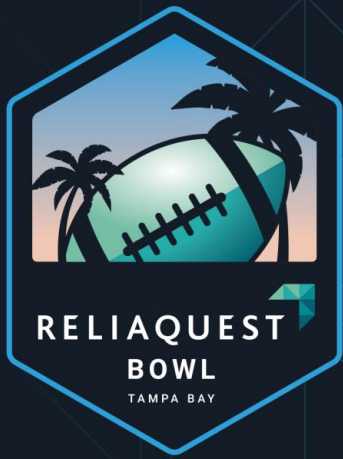
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2022-2023

Calendar of Events

Note: All events, locations, dates and times are subject to change. ** (indicates event open to general public all others are invitation-only)

SEPTEMBER 29 RELIAQUEST BOWL HUDDLE AT SPLITSVILLE PRESENTED BY BUCHANAN, INGERSOLL & ROONEY

The ReliaQuestBowl kicks off its fall event calendar with a festive evening at Splitsville in the Sparkman Wharf entertainment complex in downtown Tampa sponsored by Buchanan, Ingersoll & Rooney. (Invitation only)



DECEMBER 2 DEBARTOLO CONTRACT SIGNING PARTY

Bowl supporters will celebrate the announcement of our teams and welcome the participating college head coaches to the Tampa Bay area. The party will be held in the West Club Lounge of Raymond James Stadium. (By invitation only)

DECEMBER 26-27 TEAM WELCOMES

Bowl officials and media greet the participating teams as they arrive at the team hotels. (TBD)

DECEMBER 28 SPOUSES LUNCHEON

Spouses of both teams' coaching staffs will enjoy a special luncheon at the Tampa Yacht Club. (Private event)

PLAYERS NIGHT AT SPLITSVILLE**

Join the teams as they enjoy the fun at Splitsville at Sparkman Wharf. This unique venue offers bowling, billiards, ping pong and more. Teams only from 6:00-7:00 PM. Doors open to public at 7:00 P.M.

DECEMBER 29 BUSCH GARDENS TEAM OUTING**

Both teams and their fans will enjoy the unique blend of thrilling rides, live shows and animal exhibits. Admission tickets are available at buschgardens.com or at the front gate.



DECEMBER 30 CLEARWATER BEACH DAY** Presented by Visit St Pete - Clearwater

Join the school marching bands and cheerleaders as they enjoy the sun and beaches at the Hilton Clearwater Beach Resort & Spa. Enjoy this fun day which will also feature live music, a tug-of-war and other contests from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Sponsored by Visit St. Pete-Clearwater, the Hilton, BayCare, Amplify Clearwater, Allegiant, St. Pete Clearwater International Airport, 93.3FLZ, 970WFLA and 620 WDAE Radio.



TAMPA LAW GRIDIRON GALA

This is a prestigious evening event for bowl sponsors, VIP's and the college administrators at the Marriott Waterstreet (by invitation only).

DECEMBER 31 BATTLE OF THE BANDS AT BUSCH GARDENS**

Join the two college marching bands at Busch Gardens as they square-off for a special "Battle of the Bands" performance. Admission to park required. Time TBD.



DECEMBER 31 NEW YEAR'S EVE PARADE & PEP RALLY**

Eclectic Ybor City is the site of this festive celebration featuring the ReliaQuest Bowl New Year's Eve Parade and a pep rally by the college marching bands & cheerleaders. The parade will feature floats, high school marching bands from around the country along with the two college bands! This free family event is sponsored by the City of Tampa, Ybor City, Mix 100.7, US 103.5, 98Rock, 970 WFLA and 620 WDAE Radio. Be there early. The Parade starts at 5:30 p.m. and runs along 7th Avenue.

JANUARY 2 PREGAME BOWL BASH**

Bowl fans can warm-up for the big game with live music, displays and a pep rally. Food & refreshments will be available for purchase. The fun begins at 9:00 a.m. on the south plaza outside the stadium between the 5/3 Bank Gate and Gate D, so come out early.



TAMPA GENERAL HOSPITAL PREGAME SHOW**

Enjoy a colorful pregame show featuring the pageantry of high school and college bands along with numerous special activities including skydivers. A popular ReliaQuest Bowl tradition you won't want to miss. Show time begins at 11:20 a.m.

RELIAQUEST BOWL 2023**

The ReliaQuest Bowl matching two of college football's best teams from the SEC and Big Ten or ACC Conference. Kickoff is scheduled for 12:00 p.m. (Gates open 10:30 a.m.).

RELIAQUEST HALFTIME SHOW

Wait until you see this colorful show featuring more than 2,000 performers!

Official Game Sponsors

