

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Florida Gators

Billy Napier

Press Conference



BILLY NAPIER: This is my sixth year as a head coach, and this is the sixth Media Day. Typically, my wife, Ali, and I, always finish up our vacation time and summer break with an anniversary trip and we back that right up to Media Day. My mom and Ali's parents will keep Annie, Sammy and Charlie. And this year was special. We celebrated 15 years together, so it's been a good break. I don't know how your break has been. I don't know that we ever stopped working. I hope you've enjoyed your break like we have.

We are excited to be here in Nashville today as we kind of turn over focus to one of my favorite times of the year. What a blessing it is to be here representing the University of Florida. I've come a long way since my first year with this place about how much the people care, the people that I've met. The University of Florida is a special place because it is impacted so many people. The experience, the memory, the relationships, you know, the calibre of degree of the alumni network. We have, we are approaching 500,000 living alumni at a prestigious place.

I think a flagship institution in a thriving state with 22 million people, we really, really have a unique experience to offer. This is a unique combination: A challenging education with an opportunity to compete against the very best in the SEC and be part of an athletic department that leads the way: 47 national championships, 261 is SEC Championships. They call it the everything-school for a reason.

We have dynamic leadership. Been very impressed with our new president, Dr. Ben Sasse. He's actually the son of a high school coach. He was in my office yesterday. I'm excited about his impact and the ideas that he has for the future of the University of Florida. I look forward to seeing him work. He's been impressive so far. His capacity, his work ethic.

We're one year into the job, and I've been very appreciative of Scott Strickland, our athletic director, and I'm always thankful for an opportunity to lead, but there's

something special about people that believe in what we do and how we do it. His foresight, his integrity, his example, he's got great discernment and he's very focused. We continue to be competitive on the national stage at highest level and have exceptional people all throughout the UAA.

I'm humbled to be a part of an incredible culture of head coaches, a championship pedigree in all 21 sports. I mean what a run this year alone, when you think about gymnastics, track and field, volleyball, swimming and diving, men's golf, baseball, incredible year. It's really a unique opportunity for me to work alongside what I would call some of the absolute legends and the best in their sport. When you talk about Mouse Holloway, Roland Thornqvist, Tim Walton, J.C. Deacon, Kevin O'Sullivan, Jenny Rolland, Anthony Nesty, Mary Weiss, I'm probably missing a few here. But I've got a ton of respect for the accomplishments, the experience and the wisdom.

I love this league that we compete in. I love this footprint. I grew up in northwest Georgia. I'm the son of a high school coach. My dad's family is from Tennessee. My dad is from Celina, Tennessee. Got lots of family in Crossville. My mom's parents had a tobacco farm in Sparta, Tennessee. My mom is from Huntsville, Alabama. I spent 15 years in the State of South Carolina. I've got four years as the head coach of the University of Louisiana, and now to be the head coach of the Florida Gators. So this is special to me and I'm humbled by the opportunity.

The SEC continues to dominate. The College Football Playoff, winning four in a row, 17 years in a row, they continue to lead picks in the National Football League draft. The attendance, 24 straight years with the most attendance. What stands out to me is the level of commitment and alignment by each institution. Their passion, their competition, their desire to win; the margin of error is small in this league. We know that.

We lost five really close games, one-score games, even into the final few minutes of the game. There's mismatched players, there's quality depth; combine that with the calibre of personnel, the diversity of scheme and the great coaching; the challenges of going on the road, given the venues and the fan bases.



I want to congratulate Commissioner Sankey on the extension. I've really been encouraged by his leadership. He's got an extensive staff, well-deserved, high level of decision-making, complicated problems. This guy has navigated a number of, I think, historic issues in a really unique era, and the SEC is positioned for success to continue to continue that dominance.

You know, there's stability and great momentum headed into the 12-team College Football Playoff. Really excited about the player representation we have here with us. These guys are here because of feedback from their teammates and all parts of the organization. It's no accident that they that here today.

Kingsley Eguakun, a COVID junior, he's an undergraduate degree in criminology last December, and he'll get his master's degree in December in tourism and hospitality. He's an SEC honor role player and he's from Jacksonville, Florida.

Ricky Pearsall is a senior receiver. He graduates this spring in education sciences. SEC honor role member from Chandler, Arizona.

And finally, Jason Marshall is a true junior cornerback who is an anthropology major. He's an SEC honor role member. He's from Miami, Florida.

The most powerful tool that we have in leadership is example, and these guys are part of the accountability group going all the way back to January that has accepted that challenge. They embody our values. This group has integrity. They take great pride in being a great teammate. They are very disciplined many their approach. They have always been known for their effort.

It's a tough group, and I think they have got confidence and belief as a result of a lot of hard work. People are never more committed than their leaders. These guys have a voice on our team. They have got great awareness. They are really intentional about their approach and their ability to influence other people.

I'm excited about the energy and the attitude of this accountability group and these three guys and what they bring to our team.

I think in January, we went through an extensive detailed review of year one at Florida. As an entire organization, each individual, each department, you know, what worked, what didn't work, how do we adjust; how do we adapt; how do we evolve. We started the process of getting our 2023 team ready to go.

This is a new group of players and we have a few new staff dynamics but one of the things that I'm encouraged about is we have 97 percent of our team was with us in January. We had 27 midyear players. We have a great group of veterans that have experience and have wisdom from the past.

We have brought in an influx of young talent and I feel really good about what we did in the portal. We added 10,000 stats and 123 starts with that group. I'm excited about the compound effect of year two, the consistency of process, the consistency in our systems. I think we have defined the expectations and renewed the accountability and there is a different level of discipline and a different level of detail as we work today.

You know, we benefitted executing the entire off-season in our new facility. The Hefner Football Training Facility has allowed us to be more efficient. We have great resources to offer our players and we have found that the players spend more time in the building, therefore, they spend more time with each other, and it really has affected our team dynamic.

You know, one of the things we are not going to do with our team is we are not going to allow outside opinion or create a narrative to define the reality for the 2023 team.

You know, the head Bowl coach of Gator legend Steve Spurrier said it best when he said, this is talking season. The games are coming and in the meantime this group will continue to work like it's been working.

We are in week seven of a nine-week program. It's important that we stay focused as we finish up and we transition into training camp. The next five weeks will be paramount for our football team.

I believe life is about people. I believe the game of football is about people, and it's important. This is our great game. I always try to keep it in perspective. I loved to play this game. This is a game I love to play. If I could keep playing, I'd continue to play. It's a game I love to coach. I'm going to enjoy doing it. I'm excited to coach this team, this group of players. I'm proud of this group and I'm looking forward to this coming year.

I'd like to say thank you to the media before we get to the questions. You know, our game is more popular than it's ever been, and that's a result of your profession and the pride that you take in what you do. You know, I want to tell you and challenge you to keep telling the great stories about sport and what it can teach us about life.



I also continue to be encouraged about the way you tell stories about the way sport can impact people. The game of football continues to do great things. It's important that we continue to let it teach us great things.

Questions.

Q. I wanted to talk to you about how your name came up on the list when looking at probable Tennessee coaches. How does that whole situation make you feel and how does the entire Pruitt situation make you feel?

BILLY NAPIER: We were fortunate to have success at the University of Louisiana, and it was really a result of a lot of people's hard work. We had fantastic staff. We had a great group of players. And that created opportunities for myself and other parts of our staff and it's humbling, that's what I would tell you.

But all the success we've had has been a reflection of a lot of great people's hard work, and thanks for the question.

Q. I know you have a pretty ex-tentative offensive background as a coach. The 4-2-5 man defense has taken over college football including your program. What difficulties does that provide to an offensive staff and why do you think so many programs are running that defense right now?

BILLY NAPIER: I think the key to playing really good defense, obviously, is obviously start with great personnel. But I think having an identity, right. Playing complementary football, I think we have decided to go the direction we have on defense because we want to do just that, and we want to have a great working environment, great collaboration between the offense and the defense.

It's important that you're on the same page throughout the entire off-season relative to scripting, installation, practice format. I think the defense that you're describing there creates issues because of the variables, right. I think the variables, not only the front, but the pressure variables to go along with the back end.

Play a good defense, there's a lot of factors, but I think your practice environment and your approach to complementary football are key.

Q. You mentioned the way that the transfer portal helped. Talk about Graham Mertz, the quarterback you picked up from Wisconsin. What made him the right choice for you and what's the battle in that room like between he and Jack Miller?

BILLY NAPIER: I've been very impressed with Graham. Graham is a 32-start player. He's played over 2000 snaps at a really established program in Wisconsin. We went through an extensive process to make that decision.

I think Graham is an accomplished player but more importantly, I've been impressed with the person, the leader. This guy has an incredible motor and work ethic. He is in the building and he is fanatical about his preparation.

That's helped the competition. I think that's caused Jack to respond. Jack has had an incredible off-season and he's in position for great camp.

And we have been really pleased with a young player, Max Brown. He's had a good summer. He's impressed the staff and he's impressed his teammates..

We are excited about that competition. We'll go into training camp and we'll make a decision when we see fit for the team.

Q. Given your success in the Sun Belt Conference, first, do you still keep up with the conference and what are your thoughts on the recent addition of Southern Miss?

BILLY NAPIER: I would say that our time there was fantastic. I think we hit it just right. It just went to the east and west division formats. It's in the SEC footprint. I think that's the thing that's exciting to me because you have that same passion for the game of football.

I do know they have expanded and certainly Southern Miss is in that SEC footprint. I think it made a ton of sense. I think they have really good leadership and they have a number of commissioners that have contributed to that, but much like our league, each one of those schools, there is alignment. There is a commitment and they care about football and want to win.

So a great experience and great conference. It's proven to be very competitive nationally.

Q. You were talking about recruiting and the portal, but specifically on recruiting, I know you have a four-star quarterback in DJ Lagway committed, and you can't talk about him, but recruiting in general, how important is Texas, the State of Texas, to your recruiting plans moving forward?

BILLY NAPIER: I think when you start talking about putting a really good football team together, you've got to have a sound evaluation process and certainly you've got to have

a really good product to recruit to.

One of the things that we've benefitted from at the University of Florida, we spent an entire year completely rebuilding the player experience and we've got a unique combination that we offer, right, and I think players from all across the country do think that there's research relative to kind of what we call the five core states: Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas and Alabama.

But when you are at a brand like the University of Florida and you have things that we have to offer, given who is joining our league, there's no question with the direct flights that we can get in here from Texas, we'll be competitive out there. If the guy is a good enough player and passes the evaluation physically, has the right character, we can get him on campus and we'll have a chance.

Q. I know you just signed a two-year extension with Jacksonville, but would there ever be an interest to make a home-at-home with the Florida/Georgia rivalry, or maybe turning it into a Jacksonville/Atlanta transition?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I think that the Florida/Georgia game is an incredible rivalry. I think there's history there. There's tradition there. There's a ton of economic implications relative to these decisions. We are going to have to cross that bridge at some point due to the renovations in Jacksonville but there's benefit to home-at-home from a recruiting perspective, and I think there's benefit from an economic standpoint for both athletic departments and institution.

Right now we have three more years of the same model. I've got enough grass to mow right now, so I'm going to focus on the things that are in front of me.

Q. There's a trend of head coaches that used to be play-callers for a long time, turning that over to a coordinator. I think you're still going to call your own plays. If that's the case, why do you want to keep doing that and what do you think about the trend of the other guys that are getting away from that?

BILLY NAPIER: I think it's a relevant question. I think it was part of our evaluation this off-season. You know, I think like most part of our organization and our process, we will improve in year two. I think it's something that we'll continue to evaluate.

I like having my hand on the scripts, the installation, that process. I think I can help establish our identity and personality as a team through that process. And I'm always -- I think if you get too far away from that, I think

there could be some things from a sustainable, repeatable part.

So I want to continue to do it, and I think each year, much like all parts of what we do, we'll continue to evaluate.

Q. The Utah Utes have not lost at Rice-Eccles since COVID. I was wondering what y'all are going to do to prepare for that game and also, if the altitude is a factor, as well, in the preparation?

BILLY NAPIER: You know, one of the things, we've got a unique schedule this year, and that starts with a Thursday night opener at Utah, and it's a challenging place to play. I spent a year in the Pac 12. I was at Arizona State. We actually went there to play. So have a little bit of a feel for what that's going to be like.

But we've got a ton of respect for their program, the brand of football that they play. It's less about where we're playing and more about their brand of football.

So there's no question, they are one of the more established and successful programs in the country. You know, I do think we spent a lot of time with our performance team in the off-season researching the altitude. We've done a lot of work with NFL teams and go through that process consistently. We've got a good plan. All of that is already mapped out and ready to go. It's going to be a great challenge and one that we look forward to.

Q. Appreciate you doing a couple interviews with me when you were at UL. I appreciate that. Two-part question. I want to ask you about the transition from that conference now in the SEC in your second year, and the opportunity to play in Baton Rouge this fall in Tiger Stadium, Death Valley, your thoughts on that?

BILLY NAPIER: I think I've had the transition question quite a bit. I think there's three, really, variables that were really a big adjustment. There's no question, the pace of recruiting -- this is my first time at the Power Five level with an early signing period and how that has affected the recruiting calendar, the work flow, the evaluation process and the recruitment process. There's definitely been an adjustment. I think year one to year two, we have made really good improvements in that area. I also think that it's a heck of a year to take over a program, right, with the portal and the NIL coming to the forefront. Those were challenging, right. In particular, you're trying to establish trust in a really short amount of time and those create a dynamic on your team that can be a challenge, right.

So I think we've come up with really good systems to

attack those areas and I'm pleased with the progress that we are making. Again, each part of this, it's very fluid and we'll continue to adjust and adapt as we go.

But I'm pleased with the year one to year two transition relative to the recruiting calendar, NIL, and certainly, the portal.

Q. You talked quite a bit about the portal and that leads into chemistry, team chemistry. I know it changes from year-to-year. Does the portal make it difficult to read the chemistry of your team, and where do you think that your team chemistry is coming out of spring?

BILLY NAPIER: You know, much like I described earlier, I think one of the things that we benefitted from is that, you know, 90-plus percent of our team has been there since January. We had 27 mid-year players. We did minimal work in the spring portal. But you know, I think it's a reality in college football right now. Especially in the earlier stages of building a program. You're going to have to do work in the portal.

Again we want to continue to recruit the best high school players in the country and establish some stability from a roster management standpoint and do less work in the portal in the future.

But there's no question, it's an avenue to acquire a player. There is a chemistry dynamic, and I think you've got to be intentional about all parts of building the team, and that connection that togetherness that required become even more important. So I think you've got to be intentional in terms of the off-season program, the things you do throughout the spring semester, the summer, training camp, and even in-season to create those relationships, some of which can be in a short window of time. It's a great question.

Q. You've spoken about the challenges with NIL in the past, having to really learn on the fly. In your position with having to change partnerships with the collective and just the challenges that you've seen over the past year, could you reflect on some of those and what you've been able to learn from that and ultimately the progress that you believe that you guys have made there?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, we've learned a lot and like every head coach will tell you that. We kind of walked into an unprecedented time in college football and there was no manual for it, right. And listen, this thing continues to change. There's a number of variables that contribute to that.

But I can tell you at the University of Florida, I'm very pleased with where we're at. We have benefitted a group called Florida Victorious who has great leadership. I think the state laws have allowed us to go down a better path. I think we are benefitting from that.

But we have got great leadership. Again, we are in a state with 22 million people. There's strength in numbers relative to NIL and I think we have created some great opportunities through this organization that is doing, NIL, I think with class and integrity. They have got a very established process and I think our players have benefitted, and it's helping the Gators, there's no question about it.

Q. How can you incorporate the tight end more in Florida's offense?

BILLY NAPIER: Dave Schultz, long time, no see.

Dave, it's one of the areas on our team where we are young, right. I think safety and tight end are areas where we are going to have some good, young, talented players that are going to have to contribute to our team. So that is very much a work-in-progress.

I am pleased with the growth we've seen this summer. We'll have some young players in that room that are going to have to play but I'm excited about that group, and we'll continue to play the tight ends much like we have played them in the past.

Q. How much of what you learned coaching with Dabo Swinney at Clemson and Nick Saban at Alabama do you use today, and how much of what you learned is obsolete in today's world?

BILLY NAPIER: I think obviously two of the better coaches in the history of our game, if not the best.

I would say that a lot of the things that you learn from those guys stand the test of time. I think simple things like defining expectations, being really consistent and fair, everyone understanding their role, and you know, kind of putting the ego aside and working to earn more.

You know, I think they are good at what they do because they have conviction about what they want their football team to look like, right, and there's a big picture plan relative to purpose, right. I know for me, our purpose is the player, right. We want to create a life-changing organization that has impact on the person, the student and the football player.

I think we have learned those things. I'm excited about some of the things we have implemented to do just that. So if we can connect the dots with the degree, the experiences that we can create for our alumni, if we can equip, if we can educate and teach and develop football players, we've got a great opportunity to do those things in the future, as well.

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