

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Florida Gators

Billy Napier

Press Conference

BILLY NAPIER: Good afternoon. Had a great flight over this morning. Really looking forward to today.

It's that time of year again, and it's great to see everybody. Thank you for the introduction, Commissioner Sankey.

I'd like to start today with a few comments about Monte Kiffin and the Kiffin family. This week we lost one of the all-time greats in our profession, Monte Kiffin. I worked with Lane for three years at the University of Alabama, and I would tell you Lane coaches because of his dad and what he observed growing up. I certainly chose the profession because of my dad.

I lost my dad seven years ago to ALS. Lane and I have been communicating throughout the week. I texted him earlier in the week. I said, I've been through this before, and I told him, I said, coaching is a profession where you have an opportunity to make an impact on people and leave a legacy, and his dad did just that. He made an impact because of how he treated people, the approach that he took to coaching, the way he made people feel.

The impact isn't linear in coaching. It's exponential. The most important part here: Exponential impact. This is third generation, fourth generation impact, and that comes with the blessing and the opportunity of being in this profession that we call coaching.

I was reading a quote this week, and I told Lane this last night when I talked to him. Inheritance is what you leave for someone. Legacy is what you leave in someone. Few did it better than Monte Kiffin. Our thoughts and prayers are with Lane and the Kiffin family as they celebrate his life this weekend in Tampa.

It's great to be here in Dallas. We're blessed to be here to represent the University of Florida. Myself and three players are here on behalf of our team and our entire organization.



The team represents a great university. There's significant history. You think about all the Gators that came before us, the championship culture of our athletic department. Gator Nation goes worldwide this summer. We've got 34 athletes that are Gators that are going to be in the Paris Olympics, three coaches that are participating on teams. All the while the University of Florida climbs the ranks as the No. 1 public ranked school in the entire country.

Great institutions, teams, have dynamic leadership, and we have that at the University of Florida. I've been impressed with our president Dr. Ben Sasse. He's done a phenomenal job over the last year leading the University of Florida into the future.

I'm excited about what that looks like. Our athletic director, Scott Stricklin, continues to impress in how he's navigating the current landscape of college athletics. I can say with confidence because of the work that's been done by our administration that we are in position for the future. It's humbling to think that as a team and an organization that we represent a great institution like the University of Florida and such a powerful brand.

Speaking of brands, the SEC brand is stronger than it's ever been before, 16 strong. Certainly we'd like to welcome the newcomers, Oklahoma and Texas. This league is special. The commitment that you see from each administration, the caliber of coaching, the passion, the rivalries, the venues, the talent level, we're talking about a literal lifeline to the NFL. It just means more, point blank, period.

Listen, the SEC is in prime position for the 12-team playoff and the future of college athletics. My hat is off to Greg Sankey. He's created stability, a ton of momentum, and let's face it, it's not only what he's done for our conference, it's what he's done for the future of college athletics the last few years. He's got a terrific team of people behind him. Just overall top to bottom, a first-class organization.

We're personally thankful for William King, David Cutcliffe, Matt Boyer. There's just a whole team of people here. There's a lot of people that contribute. But very impressed with the work that's been done, the leadership we've seen



the last couple years.

Let's get to our team, the 2024 Florida Gators. I'm excited about the players that are here today to represent this team. One of the reasons I believe in our team is we have credible leadership. These guys are a small sample size. We have a ton of guys that could have been here today.

I knew this team had a chance to be different. Go back to January, I'm taking the boys to the office. Sammy and Charlie are with me. It's Saturday, it's January, it's February, we walk around the corner, we've got 70 guys in the weight room on a Saturday doing extra work. I used to play for an old coach that said champions do extra. I'm going to tell you, this group, that has continued. It's been consistent.

Just a few weeks ago, 4th of July, we have 53 guys that are in there on Saturday doing extra work. These guys that are here today are at the root of that.

Graham Mertz, the biggest, the No. 1 storyline and the biggest decision that was made to affect our team is when Graham Mertz decided to come back and play quarterback for the Gators. 43 starts, 8,300 yards, 58 touchdowns, Overland Park, Kansas. His parents are phenomenal people. Ron and Amy are incredible. Graduated this spring from UF, currently pursuing a Master's Degree in sport management.

Montrell Johnson is here. He's the senior running back from New Orleans. He's our journeyman, came to us from the University of Louisiana. He'll graduate this winter from UF. Right at 2,500 career yards rushing. One of the best practice players that we have. His habits -- he's been loyal from the beginning.

I can still remember, I'm talking to him, he was recruited in COVID, many FaceTimes with him and his mom Keeti. This guy is a productive player, but he lives it every day. He's concrete examples of the values that we would want for our players.

Shemar James is also here. Shemar is a linebacker from Mobile, Alabama. He was in our first recruiting class. His mom Alyssa is awesome. He's earning his degree in sociology, and he had a great freshman year. Shemar started the first eight games last year as a sophomore then got hurt. It's a big deal to have him back.

I like our team. I believe in our team. When people ask me why, it's about experience. It's about production. We've got 463 starts on this team, 17 starters returning. We've got 41,000 snaps coming back this year, and we're fourth in our league in returning production. We've got

competitive depth for the first time.

We're in year three. Our roster has stabilized. We've got credible leadership at the player level. The discipline and accountability of this team is at an all-time high, and I think some of the adjustments that we made in the off-season have proved to be effective.

These guys, these new staff members have made a difference, and I've been pleased with the progress. You'll have questions about a lot of these guys, but Ron Roberts, Gerald Chatman, Will Harris, John Decoster, Joe Houston, Tyler Miles, Jake Sankal, Mark Robinson -- all are changing our organization for the better.

We always view each team as its own entity. New players, new coaches, new roles, new voices, new opponents. Every team is a work in progress. I want to emphasize the word "work." This group is about the work. There's an old saying, it's not about the size of the Gator in the fight but it's about the size of the fight in the Gator.

We've been hard at work, going all the way back to the beginning of this off-season, developing the fight, a mentality, the intangibles of our team, our core values, the integrity, the togetherness, the discipline, the effort and toughness of the team. If we can do these things consistently, we'll develop a high level of belief.

This group is hard at work developing the fight and the mentality. This team has purpose, and that's why I believe in this team.

It's important that we finish strong. We've got 10 days left in this training block, and we're 45 days out from the opener. It starts right there in The Swamp in all kinds of weather.

I'll leave you with this. In Hebrews it says, Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. I've got all the faith in the world in the people in our building. They're prepared to represent our institution, our fans, our great tradition, our state in a first-class manner.

Before I wrap up here, I want to thank you personally. I want to thank the media personally. I've spent my whole life in this game, and the game is more popular than it's ever been before, and that's because of your dedication to your craft, and I get it.

In a time when you have more on your plate and you're producing more content than ever before, I'm thankful for the great stories that you tell about our game, and I go back to what I said in the very beginning. Your profession, much like ours, has a chance to make an impact and



create a legacy. Go Gators. Questions?

Q. We've all been examining your schedule this year in a big way, and there's a lot determining of success. What would you define as a successful season this year, given your schedule?

BILLY NAPIER: I think one of the things I've learned in our profession is you've got to break things up into short periods of time for your players.

If we can execute consistently and get consumed with the work and how we prepare, how we train -- for example, the next 10 days are extremely important, and we'll turn the page for training camp.

Look, the great thing about our schedule, we don't have to take this on as individuals. We get to do this as a team. I believe that the thing that I've learned and observed in this league, you have to have the ability to self-discipline to prepare the same way each week, regardless of the outcome. Ignore the noise, don't believe the hype, erase the board, start over, and every person in that building has got to prepare the same way.

So we're going to do that. We're going to focus on the work that's ahead. Then we'll look up at the end of the season and we'll see what that earns.

Q. Following up on that and what we were talking about earlier, you were saying how your first couple years, given everything, when and what you inherited, you guys were kind of on schedule to some degree. What does staying on schedule look like in year three? What are the milestones and things along the way?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I think the game has changed quite a bit. I think it probably -- we're evaluating the game over the last couple years. It's changed significantly every six months, every season, every off-season. Not only are we trying to create culture at Florida; we're building new facilities, we're creating infrastructure.

You go back to the very beginning, you're hiring a staff, you're trying to improve the roster. The game continued to evolve while we've been doing that, so that's where the challenge has been.

I've been -- I'm on the inside. I get a chance to be around our staff and our players, going all the way back to the beginning of this off-season. That's what gives me confidence.

I think you've got to get consumed with the process, not the outcome, to some degree, and the thing that I would say

with conviction is we have been very close. We've played in a lot of close games. We've got to learn how to close those games out, and I think that's where the leadership and experience of this team -- we have to leverage that experience, the lessons that we've learned, get in position in the fourth quarter and close those games out consistently.

Q. I know these last two seasons didn't go as you hoped, a lot of close losses. I don't think I've ever seen a tougher schedule. How daunting is that? How much pressure are you feeling? How do you keep that pressure from not going over to the players?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think a little bit of that is, look, we've got a different team. I think we have 35 new players. Every team in our league, about 25 to 30 percent of their roster is new. So I think some of these teams that we play aren't the same teams that they had last year, and we certainly are not the same team that we had last year.

College football, more than any time in our game, has become one year at a time. I think you start a process in January, you build momentum to the fall, and you do the best you can.

I think ultimately, again, it goes back to what I mentioned earlier, as cliché as it sounds, it's literally one week at a time, learning how to have the self-discipline to prepare, the same level of focus, same detail, same urgency, and get into position to where you can execute and do your job for the team, and I've got confidence in our team because I've been observing the work.

Q. You take Graham Mertz out of the transfer portal last year. His career high is across the board: Yards, yards per attempt, completion percentage and a career low in interceptions. How did you get him to play to the rate he did last year, and what are some areas of improvement you're still looking for?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I think Graham -- first of all, Graham has got character. He cares. He's a worker. He's probably one of the more fun players to coach I've had in my career. He matches your level of preparedness. You show up to the meeting and you're coaching Graham Mertz, you'd better be ready to go.

I think he learned a lot while he was at Wisconsin. I can still remember having a conversation with Paul Chryst about Graham, and he had ups and downs. He had had some really great days, and then he had some really tough days. I think some of that maturity helped him reset, recenter, and approach our team in a little bit different way.

Ryan O'Hara is our quarterback coach and analyst, and he does a phenomenal job. He works tirelessly, and he's done a great job. He did a great job with Anthony, and certainly Graham hit the ground running.

But I would tell you it's a product of the work. Graham, he earned every bit of it, and he earned the respect of his teammates with the way that he competed last year. He's primed to have a breakout year here. It's a big deal for Graham to be back to play quarterback for our team.

Q. The three C's now: Campus, culture, coaching. With NIL, talk about that at Florida, and also Cole Cubelic, Roman Harper on Read and React, they use the term "logo fever" when you look at a schedule. Talk about how you get your guys to say, one chapter at a time.

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I think any coach that's a coach in this league will tell you you'd better be ready to play every week. If you're playing an SEC team, no matter what logo is on the other side, you'd better have your team prepared or you'll get embarrassed. I think we've got enough maturity in our locker room to understand that, just the benefit of experience.

So I think we've got ownership at the player level, and all the great teams that I've been a part of, when the players take ownership and they have expectations for themselves and the rest of the team, that gives you a chance.

Every logo matters in this league. We've got 16 of them now, so you've got to be ready to go every week.

Q. New advent with the 12-team playoff. What does that do for schools in terms of opportunity, the chance to -- how successful your season might be, goals you can attain more easily, those kinds of things?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, it's going to be -- it completely changes the game. You think about our league, 12-0, 11-1, 10-2, some argue maybe even 9-3. Each team that's in the game, not to mention in our league but across the country, so many more teams have hope when you get into weeks 6, 7, 8, 9, whereas maybe that wasn't the case in the four-game format. So I think it's a game changer.

Look, it's not just the teams and the coaches and the organizations. It's the fan bases. We thought our game was popular before. It's getting ready to be -- we're going to engage more people than ever in the history of the game.

Q. You guys are playing Miami in the opener, UCF in the middle and then the finale against Florida State.

What does it mean for you in the program and then the state of Florida to be playing that many teams from your state?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, it's a unique year. I think ultimately when you think about all the P4 teams, each conference represented to some degree, two teams from the ACC and the Big 12, it's an incredible opportunity, and I think it's going to be huge. Each one of those match-ups is critical. We have a ton of respect for each one of those teams and coaches, and it's part of the schedule that everybody likes to talk about.

Just like I described before, you've got to have your team ready to play each week. All those teams have got great programs, and it's a big deal in our state. Each one of those match-ups will be critical.

Q. You put an emphasis on finishing in the spring and you alluded to that a little earlier with some of the struggles you've had finishing games the first two years. You had Craig Fitzgerald in the strength and conditioning program. He's moved on, and of course Tyler Miles there now. What can you share with us that you've seen from Coach Miles and his staff that gives you the confidence to build that team up mentally to finish these games?

BILLY NAPIER: You know, I think it's going to prove to be one of the biggest storylines about this team. I think we made a philosophy change there. Tyler Miles has been phenomenal. If you ask each one of the players that are here today, and really it would be the consensus amongst our team, the change in approach there, the whole strength and conditioning and sports science, nutrition, training room team, the discipline, the accountability. Just in January to April -- we do DEXA scans at the beginning of a training block, and then at the end we gained 500 pounds of lean muscle, and we were 500 pounds leaner, as well.

We made significant progress. Our team looks different. All the numbers, the metrics, the speeds, the strength improvement, not to mention the culture.

I think it's critical that your players believe in that part of your process, and I think right now, that's one of the benefits of that change. It's going to be a huge part of our success this year.

Q. You mentioned faith and some close games last season. What I'm asking, I want to know as far as this season goes, what are you hoping to see from your guys when their faith is tested in some of those close ballgames?

BILLY NAPIER: The game has got a human element to it. I think relationships matter. We do a lot of work with our team trying to create chemistry and camaraderie. We do what we call journey 101 throughout the entire year. We also have a leadership group that meets every two weeks.

I think when you get into those critical possessions in a game, that connection matters. I think -- I was talking to our players a little bit about that on the way here. Every detail matters. The margin of error is small.

Again, I think we have to leverage the experience that we have, and I think their expectations rub off on the rest of the team.

We've been there. That's the unique thing. All this experience that I'm talking about, they were in that locker room after each one of these experiences that we've had. We played some of the best teams in the country down to the wire the last couple years.

We're close, and we've been working to get in position to prove ourselves, and this schedule presents every opportunity to do that.

Q. You mentioned getting over the hump, close games. What is the change this off-season about your program to win those close games and go on to be at the SEC level when it comes to making the championships?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think we made some changes on the defensive side of the ball. We added another layer of expertise in special teams. We overhauled the nutrition program, and we changed our philosophy in the strength and conditioning area of our organization.

Each year we try to ask ourselves, if you were starting over, what would you do differently, and make the necessary changes. I think we've got to continue to evolve and adjust.

We've also added a front office component to our organization as a whole.

The game continues to change, and I think each off-season you've got to evaluate those things and make tough decisions.

Q. Picking up DJ Lagway, obviously he's a big deal this year. Could you talk about how he's coming along and what he will mean for the future of your offense?

BILLY NAPIER: I was talking to -- obviously DJ, we were very fortunate to get in the game early and build a great

relationship with him, and he was a great leader in that class. It's an impressive class.

DJ comes from a great family. I think if you had a chance to drive up to Willis, Texas, to meet his family, to walk the halls of that school, to see how he's been raised, the community that he comes from, he's got a unique character and faith element to him that I respect, and I certainly respect his family. We all know he's talented. He dominated high school football his senior year.

But he showed up ready to work. I can remember having a conversation with him after the spring game. We have our IDP meeting, and we're sitting there in the cafeteria. He's sitting there eating dinner, I sit down and eat with him and we're talking about Graham coming back and how I told him that was going to be the best thing that ever happened to him, and he said, Coach, I get that now after going through the entire first semester.

It's been an awesome spring with DJ. I think it's unique, 43 starts, first offense, you're scripting, and then you've got this guy who's a little bit different type of athlete, no experience, and you're scripting for the second group. It's been fun. DJ has made great progress.

If you go back to some of the throwing sessions in January and then you watch the spring game, he continues to improve. That's what I appreciate about DJ. He wants to get better. He's a worker, and he's getting a chance to observe, in my opinion, one of the best quarterbacks in the country who goes about it the right way in Graham Mertz.

DJ has got a chance to make our team better, and we can never forget he's one play away from running out there. Critical coming days for DJ in his development and getting ready to do his job for our team.

Q. When you talk about NIL and where we have gone in the last six months, even with the revenue sharing and potential for where that goes, how have you guys as a Florida Gators program kind of discussed (no microphone)?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I'm with you. I think we've done a good job evolving at the University of Florida. We've built a great system. We've got a great organization called Florida Victorious that really has helped us execute in the recruiting space, not only football but all of our sports at the University of Florida have benefitted. Great leadership with José Costa, Nate Barbera, their collaboration. As the laws changed we were able to collaborate more. But we've benefitted in a major way.

I would tell you it's unique, their approach, with the



community services. They partner with the nonprofits and charities, helping our players get engaged in our community, throughout our state and their hometowns and their communities, and then they've got a huge emphasis on financial literacy which I think has been extremely beneficial for our players and athletes.

Some of the things that Commissioner Sankey said on the opening day, we need national standards. Ultimately that's where we're at, and I think that's what we're pursuing. There's five components that are critical to that that he mentioned in his opening comments, but I think ultimately when you talk about NIL revenue share, the game continues to evolve, and I think it's critical we have to move forward here and pursue some national standards.

The players want it, and I promise you the coaches want it.

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