

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Wednesday, July 16, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Florida Gators

Coach Billy Napier

Press Conference

BILLY NAPIER: All right. Well, I hope everybody's had a great summer and a good break. My wife, Ali, and I just finished up our annual trip. We go and celebrate our anniversary, 17 years, actually knew her for eight years before that, so 25 total. And I'm extremely thankful for her, her selflessness and the job she's done with our children. Certainly being a coach's wife can be a challenge.

It's good to be here in Atlanta. I grew up a little bit north of here. My dad was a high school coach in Chatsworth, Georgia. Dad's teams when they would get eliminated from the playoffs, we used to get in the car every Friday growing up and go watch a playoff game in this state. I can still remember getting in that pickup; I'd be in the middle seat, and one of my dad's coaches would be in the passenger's seat, and we would go around.

But never fail, every year we would drive south on 75, and we would watch the semifinals in the old Georgia Dome. And I'm riding through Atlanta today. Used to stop at The Varsity and get something to eat on the way. I can remember sitting up in the upper deck with all those high school coaches watching high school football in this state.

It's good to be at SEC Media Day. We're 45 days away from the opener. Football is right around the corner. Everybody is undefeated, and there's a lot of potential to talk about.

It's a blessing for me to be here today to represent our football team. Really, really special group of players; our staff and our organization from top to bottom.

You know, the University of Florida is a very special place. It's arguably the top public school in the entire country. Incredible network of people. We're approaching 500,000 living alumni, and we have an elite education to offer. And we pair that elite education with a championship culture in our athletic department. 49 national championships, 269 SEC titles.



And I will tell you this spring was one of my all-time great sport experiences, going to the Final Four. If you haven't been, you need to go. I had the privilege of taking my two sons to San Antonio to be in the Alamodome, to watch Coach Golden and his team compete and win the National Championship, to just be a fan, to rub elbows with Gator Nation. Our fans, their passion is second to none. It was an incredible experience.

You think about how this place has affected so many people, the tradition, the history. There's so much pride that comes with that. Whether you're alumni or you grew up a Gator, that's something I'll never forget.

I'm extremely thankful for Scott Stricklin our athletic director, his leadership, his discernment. I think he's a forward thinker, and he's done a great job of providing a vision for our athletic department and putting our sports teams in position to win championships.

You know, how do you sum up the SEC? I think for me as a competitor you want to play against the best, the very best. There's an old saying, to be the best you gotta beat the best, and I think we get that opportunity competing in this league.

I think about this league, I think about the history, the tradition, the venues, going on the road to play in this league, the rivalries, the great players and great coaches, the level of investment by the administrations, the depth that's required to play week in and week out in this league.

I think the personnel is different in this league. I think there's diversity of scheme. And don't forget about the recruiting gauntlet that we go through in this league. This Netflix documentary is called "Any Given Saturday" for a reason, and you gotta be ready to go every week.

For the third straight year it's the most watched conference in college football. 19 years in a row the most draft picks in the NFL draft. This past draft had 79 draft picks, which shattered the record of 65, which was a previous record for the SEC.

I think our league has great leadership. Very thankful for



Greg Sankey. I can't compliment him enough what he's done for our league, but more importantly, the work that he's doing for college football and really the game of football in general. I think he's stepped up in a very pivotal moment for college athletics. This is a tough job in a very demanding time. So I'm thankful for the job he's done.

We also have a great group in Birmingham at the SEC office that contributes. There's a long list of folks behind the scenes. We're better because of their hard work, and I'm thankful for that.

I'm excited about the players that are here to represent our team today. Jake Slaughter is here. Jake is an All American and an All SEC player. He was voted team captain by his teammates last year, and he very much lives it out. He's a guy that sets the tone every day. He's a pace setter, and he's a great football player, but he's an even better person and leader. He's got his degree in agricultural education and communication. He's SEC honor roll member every year.

Defensive lineman Caleb Banks is here. He's from Detroit, Michigan. I would say he's one of the best defensive linemen in the country, really played dynamic football down the stretch for us at the end of the year. He's getting a degree in education sciences in December, and he's on a mission. He came back, and he's primed for a big-time year.

DJ Lagway is here, our quarterback from Willis, Texas. Obviously DJ, it's well documented the job that he did last year becoming our quarterback midway through the season. I was most impressed with how he handled that, the type of teammate that he was, the humility, the character. And the guy was phenomenal on game day. He's just a great competitor. He showed a ton of grit and toughness, played through some injuries, and obviously I thought he grew every week as he continued to get better, and I think year two for him has got a chance to be really special. His degree will be in education sciences.

One of the great things about this 2025 team that we have is we have a lot of football players that have leadership traits. We got some guys that have been through some battles. They have experience. It was tough to pick three guys to be here today. We got a lot of guys that are deserving. And I really believe that's the most crucial ingredient when you start talking about having a great team, the character of the players that are leading the team. And I think we have that with this group.

This group believes in what we do. I think that's where we really took a big step in the right direction last year is we found a level of confidence that we could go toe to toe with

any team in the country any place, anytime. You spot the ball last year -- at the end of the year, you could argue we were playing as good of football as anybody in the country, and I think that that's a result of our development process.

Our development process is working. It's working for the players as people, students and football players. The organization as a whole is executing as well as it's been executing since I've been the head coach.

We're healthy on the inside. We've got great leadership in every part of the organization. I'm really proud of the work that I see every day.

The bottom line is we're seeing our people get better, and I think there's something to backing that up. We have 12 guys that are reporting from training camp from last year's senior class. The discipline and accountability for this group is at an all-time high.

We had 80 players on the SEC honor roll last fall, and that's a Florida record, but that's an SEC record in the history of this league playing football, 80 guys. We had a 3.48 team GPA this past spring, which is another record for Florida football, and that's a result of the ownership of the players. I think they're driving this.

And I'm going to tell you, one of the things I'm most proud of is the player development space. We are dominating in that space. The Gator-made program is second to none. I think the experiences that we're offering the players, the resources that are available, they're on another level.

There's a little something different in the air right now in Gainesville. Everywhere I go, I hear "the Gator boys stay hot." And to me how do we keep that momentum? And I think we do that by keeping the main thing the main thing. This is a challenge that's worth pursuing, and there's no other group that I would want to do it with. I get excited when I go in that building and I observe our team and our staff work.

This '25 group is a new team. There's new roles. There's a new set of challenges, and I think it's important that we stay the course. We need to continue to teach values. We need to continue to prioritize education, and we've gotta teach football at a high level.

We're going to be values based. We're going to be purpose driven. I believe we have enough talent. I think this team is going to be all about doing the things that require no talent. And we have to stay consumed with improvement. We gotta keep getting better.

We plan our work and then we work our plan. It's not



about yesterday. It's not about tomorrow. It's about today, and we gotta follow through. I respect this group and their commitment. They take action every day. They continue to stack days.

The most important thing right now is that we finish this summer. We need to try to create some momentum here as we get into training camp. The next 40 days are going to be critical. I think it's important that we focus on how we prepare. We gotta continue to build the resiliency and the toughness of this team. We gotta stay process oriented, and we have to have the discipline to keep following through, and we gotta be the best teammate that we can be.

I think if this group, if we're loyal to each other, all right, and we do the absolute best we can do for each other, we got a chance to have a really, really good football team that can put the ball down and play with any team in the country. I'm confident that our best is good enough to get it done, and I think this is a special group.

Before we wrap it up here I want to thank you for what you do. I've been in football my whole life, and I believe in the game. I believe in what the game can teach. And as our sport and athletics in general go through a lot of adversity, I think it's important that we don't need to forget what our game can teach young people. And you guys tell that story, and I think it's important that we find some balance here in terms of what we write about. And you guys do a phenomenal job. Our game is as popular as it's ever been because of the pride that you take in your role. I'm thankful for the stories that you tell.

All right. We'll open it up for questions.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach Napier. If you have a question, raise your hand.

Q. Billy, is it fair to say that you arrive with more outside expectations than your previous years? And what's it going to take to meet down, particularly against this schedule a lot of people think is the nation's toughest?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. The first thing I would say about expectations is when we talk about expectation, I think the important part is what we expect from each other. I think we've learned that, right? I think it's not only -- not only do you need to block out noise, but it's absolutely necessary that you do it. So I think we've gotta have high expectations for each other. We see each other every day. I think this is player to player; it's coach to player, coach to coach, all parts of our organization.

So that's where we spend our focus. I really believe that's when the magic happens, right, is when, you know, you look around that locker room and you trust the people. I think there's connection. There's a chemistry that's needed in this game. I think if you look at who's had success over the last couple years, it's veteran teams that have really good connection. So when I think about expectations, I think about what we expect from each other.

I also think that it's about execution. You talk about our schedule. You know, I firmly believe that that'll be earned in the fall. So we can talk a lot about potential for the next 40 days, but we'll play the games in the fall.

Q. Coach, you mentioned the next 40 to 45 days between now and the start of the season. What will be your biggest priority in continuing that foundation of resiliency that was built last season?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I think it's a new team. There's a group of young players on our team that we need to get ready. We're fortunate that we have a good core group of veteran players that understand what winning football looks like in this league. But we need to develop depth. I think in this league there's no question you're going to need it, especially when you start getting into the bulk of the conference schedule.

We have to keep our group focused on how did we develop some of this confidence. I think we anchored that in how we prepare, our toughness, the discipline, being process oriented and certainly being a great teammate. And I think training camp is critical in those areas.

Q. Coach, gotten to know your brother, Matt, from La Grange High School over the last couple of weeks. Talk about his progression, the amazing job he's done and talk about your relationship with high school coaches, how important that is in growing the brand.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. I've got two brothers that are coaches, and we're all a result of watching our dad growing up. I just happen to be coaching college football. We love the game, and we get a chance to get together each year around the 4th of July, and it's awesome to hear from them about their teams, their off season, what they're trying to do, what challenges that they have. But I'm proud of Matt because I think the program that he is running has not only been successful on the field, but I think he's doing things right off the field.

High school coaching is as important as it's ever been in my opinion. I think there's tremendous opportunity at that level. And really, again, what I said earlier I mean that. I really believe in what our game can teach. It's different



than any other sport. I think the synergy required, offense, defense, special teams, even on our team, 50 players are playing every week. We need 120 players to practice that practice each week to help prepare the team. So I think high school is no different.

Q. I wanted to ask if you could take me back to the final days of DJ's recruitment and especially with other schools trying to make a late push, like A&M.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no. DJ, we were fortunate that we found DJ early in his high school career. We built great rapport. DJ stayed the course, and I think one of the things that's unique about our team is that we recruited each one of these groups with the mantra of kind of like you have to be up for the challenge in terms of what we're trying to take on here.

So DJ was no different in that regard, and I think his mentality towards recruitment, the consistency in his attitude and approach, he never wavered, obviously in a little bit of a difficult time as well. So DJ has got great parents. I think he's got a great foundation in terms of the values. I think he's a great teammate. So he was phenomenal throughout that entire process, and he's certainly made a difference in our team.

Q. Your 2023 recruiting class has largely remained intact, which isn't really the case across the league. What do you attribute that to when the results haven't quite been there?

BILLY NAPIER: That's a great question. Look, we committed to recruiting high school players. We signed, for the most part, three big groups of high school players, and we've been strategic with the portal in terms of immediate needs. But I do think that we're trying to build a veteran team.

Now, that '23 group, I tell them every day, you know, look, you came here, you have this experience. We're in position to keep the momentum that we have. It's important that they're the example.

I think nowadays it's more important to identify the character component and the circle of influence around the kid. You know, I think that if you recruit a problem, they'll continue to be a problem, and I think we present our product in a way where we're selling the degree, the alumni network, the Gator-made program, and you have to be up for the challenge of trying to get Florida back to where it's been before.

And I think that's one of the reasons we've been able to keep it together is we told them when they came in, you

know, look, it's not going to all be sunshine and rainbows here. We're in this thing for the long haul. So I think a lot of this is how you pitch it in recruiting. We're going to continue to do that, and retention is more important than it's ever been.

Q. Kind of a two-part question. You landed Dallas Wilson late in the process. He actually went to another school first before deciding to go on down to Gainesville. Can you talk about the importance of recruiting until the final whistle to where you have to kind of turn that page off? And then, also, how much has Dallas been so influential on building your offense for this upcoming season?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, Dallas's recruitment was really unique. I think his family dynamic with his mother and his grandmother -- and Dallas actually contacted us. I think he asked out of his national letter and then contacted us.

We recruited Dallas the entire -- ever since we knew he was a really good player.

But, look, Dallas is going to make our team better. I think what I really appreciate about Dallas is this spring his work ethic, his work capacity, his toughness, the way he competes in practice, his practice habits. He's a big, physical player. He's a tough guard. He's a tough matchup, right.

Now, look, the guy hasn't played in a game yet, right. So there's some growth that needs to take place. He's got some good veteran players around him that have experience. So there will be a different level of self-discipline and intensity and urgency once we get to the season, but there's no question Dallas is going to make our team better.

Q. Last season you pulled off one of the more remarkable coaching turnarounds that we've seen in recent history. When you reflect back, and I know today is about the future, but what would you attribute that to and what you were able to accomplish and what your team was able to accomplish after the start that you had?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. I've been asked that question quite a bit. Look, I think we had really -- I think we had a quality group of kids. I don't think a normal group would have been able to handle that. And I will say that, and then I'm an adult; I can turn my phone off. I can continue to work. These guys, they live in a digital world, right?

I think that they had unique relationships with each other, and, you know, we've got choices, right? We can choose



to blame other people or we can choose to be accountable, and I think we had really good leadership. They took ownership. We collaborated, players and coaches. We made changes. And I think we saw some of those young players grow up, right?

And I think that, you know, there was a critical stretch right in there around Tennessee-Kentucky where all of a sudden we flipped the switch, and there's a confidence and a belief that we could play with anybody. And from that point forward, you know, I think they felt like they were good enough, and it was about just going and executing and playing on game day.

So the good thing for us is a huge majority of that group is back. And we've added some more really good young players to the mix.

Q. Now that revenue sharing is upon us, I was curious how you go about allocating salaries per person or per quarterback room and so on. How big a commitment is that, and do you mess with that during the football season itself?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. Look, I think one of the things that we've been blessed to do is we hired a front office at the University of Florida. I think Nick Polk and Ben Elsner, Jacob LaFrance's role; Chad Lucas has done a great job in that space as well. But I think the more pressing issue -- okay, and I'm going to kind of divert here -- is what do we do to provide the structure for the players. I think one of the things that we gotta make sure we don't overlook and we're really taking pride in is we gotta teach our young men fiscal responsibility. We have to teach financial literacy, budgeting, tax strategy, long-term planning. And I think that -- I don't know about you guys, but I messed all that stuff up when I was young. So this is these guys' first job, and I think we've gotta create a structure and a place where we can give them guidance. And I think it's a huge issue that not many people are talking about. I mean, we got a generation of athletes in college sport where are they going to be, we look up five, ten years from now, did they, you know, make good decisions, did they create stability for themselves long-term and take advantage of the opportunity? Because not all these guys are going to the National Football League.

So I do think that it's professionalized the game to some degree. Everybody wants to use the word salary cap. I think right now it's more of a cash budget, to be quite honest. But I don't want to take away from the fact that I do think that it's important that we have to continue to fight the fight here and find some common ground and create some guidelines and get some direction that we all can kind of abide by the same set of rules.

Q. Billy, where is DJ in terms of throwing the ball and the OTAs? And is he making all the throws you feel like he's going to need to make in a game situation?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. DJ has continued -- we throw the quarterback three times a week. He's continued to do that. He actually got a good session in this morning before he came here. So, yeah, we feel confident in terms of him being ready to go.

Q. Coach, what did you see early on in DJ Lagway, and how much has he helped you in recruiting and avoiding logo fever when you look at that schedule?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. DJ has -- look, I think what's impressed me with DJ is how he has handled success. We knew DJ before he dominated Texas high school football his senior year. He became the Gatorade National Player of the Year. So seeing the humility, seeing how he treated people, how he embraced his role in that community on that team, the steadiness, I think his parents obviously provided a great example there. But he did the same things last year as he started to kind of become a bigger -- have a bigger role on the team.

So the other thing I would say is just the competitor on game day is really unique. I think his ability to block out all the external factors and really get consumed with leading the team, playing winning football, executing.

And we've built around the guy. There's no question. Players want to play with DJ. We've built his class around that and certainly some of these guys that are in the rookie group were a part of that as well.

MODERATOR: Coach Napier, thank you for your time this afternoon.

BILLY NAPIER: Thank you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports