

# University of Florida Football Media Conference

Wednesday, December 21, 2022

Gainesville, Florida, USA

## Billy Napier

### Press Conference



BILLY NAPIER: National Signing Day, culmination of a lot of hard work certainly. What a group of recruits here and families. Just that shows the University of Florida and all the things that come with that.

A ton of respect for the belief that they have in what we're building here. Certainly a blessing to welcome such a talented group but also a group that's got character. Really thankful for this group.

I think, if you're into rankings, to have a top ten class in the first year, just really proud of our staff and all the hard work that went into that. Time will tell if our evaluations were spot on.

This is where it all starts, though, right? It starts with evaluation and recruitment. Really proud of this staff, all parts of the organization. It really takes a team -- operations personnel, on campus recruiting, the equipment staff. GatorMade does a fantastic job, plays a big part in our recruiting, with creative media, video.

Can't thank the Hawkins Center enough, and we have a number of professors that contribute. And the UAA pilots. Always got to give them a shout out. They certainly make life easy this time of year.

I'm thankful for our administration, the resources that they've provided, the infrastructure that we've been able to build, the university community, the Gainesville community.

I'm going to thank a number of vendors. Just talking to Katie, Brie, and Sierra about the event planning part, we had a number of vendors that helped us out. Keith Watson, Tailgate Guys, Hotel Eleo, Sonny's Barbecue, Spurriers Restaurant, Alpha Lit and Hennessey Events, The Swamp Restaurant, Exclusive Eats, Tosh Events, Mexi Cocina Food Truck, Mister JB's Wings and Things, Swamp Religion Food Truck, Prime and Pearl Restaurant, Upper Crust Bakery, Mama Sweet's Blessings, and last but not least, Jack's Black Car Service.

So a lot of people contribute to what we're trying to do

here. Great group. I know you all have individual questions about this group, but we'll add this group to the core group of veterans that we've got coming back, and we'll continue to work in January and certainly in February, evaluate all the players that are available.

Still got some work left to do, but couldn't be more proud of this staff and humbled by this group and their trust in us.

What questions do we got here?

**Q. Let's start with your quarterback. Obviously Jaden, recruit fans followed for a long time. You guys put in a lot of work to make that commitment happen. Talk about that process of recruiting him and then what he brings to the quarterback room.**

BILLY NAPIER: Can't compliment Jaden enough relative to who he is as a person, as a leader, his character. Jaden is a guy who came here and fell in love with the University of Florida and really connected with a lot of people here. It was sincere.

Certainly comes from an unbelievable family, his mom, his dad, his sister. Just nothing but respect for them and the young man that they've raised.

He had a fantastic senior year, made a huge playoff run. Came up a little short in the state title there, but just phenomenal run there as a senior. That's always a good sign, I think.

One of the more highly regarded quarterbacks in the country. I think the ball really jumps out of his hand. He's a junkie. He loves the game. He's all about the work. I think he's got a good sturdy frame that we can add weight to. Just been very impressed with his approach.

Certainly excited he's going to be here in January. Ace and is coming down to play in the All-Star Game here soon in the state and will come right over. So look forward to working with him.

**Q. He made an initial decision to another school. How did you and your staff work through that not let that**

**ASAP** . . . when all is said, we're done.®  
**sports**

**deter you from continuing to come after him?**

BILLY NAPIER: I think we felt like the connection is real, and we felt like there was something there. We felt we were really close.

Obviously a lot goes into these decisions, but certainly as time went on, we were consistent there, and I think the things that -- there was common ground, and I think the connection was real. Just think there's a high level of trust on both ends there. I'm really excited about what he's going to bring to our team.

**Q. Four or five, probably depending on the year, guys in that room. I think that just gives you three. How aggressively do you get in the transfer portal to fill out the quarterback room?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, there's no question we anticipate adding a player in that room through the portal. We like to definitely have four scholarship players. We do intend to add a preferred walk-on as well in that room to give us five players for the spring and next year and really feel good about that situation.

So all those guys will be able to be here for the entire off-season program, which will be a big deal. But definitely anticipate taking another player.

**Q. The three receivers, Mizell, Wilson, and is it Jean or Jean (pronunciation)?**

BILLY NAPIER: Jean.

**Q. I didn't know if it was French pronunciation. What are their skill sets? Can you kind of break down each guy?**

BILLY NAPIER: Tre Wilson is one of the more dynamic slot, run after catch returners. Just a very explosive, instinctive player. He does some really unique things on tape, relative to adjusting to the ball, run after catch. He's dynamic. You can throw an intermediate short pass to this guy, and he's a one touchdown player.

He also played both ways. He played corner, and he was fantastic there too. He's tough. Really excited about what he can -- I think he's one of these players, very polished. He'll bring a lot to our team right away.

Aidan Mizell is 6'1-1/2". He's probably up to 170-plus pounds and just verified speed. We're talking about elite speed. Both parents were track athletes here at the University of Florida. This guy plays the game the right way.

He was injured this year, obviously missed the majority of the year, but he's a tough guy, plays the game that way. Very explosive player in the vertical throw game and run after catch. But this is a very unique athlete. He's going to run track here as well. He's one of the best 400-meter guys in the entire country, and certainly ran 10.6 100 meters this past spring as a junior. So we're talking about elite speed.

Got character. Very bright. Just an unbelievable family. He's got a little brother and a little sister, and they're just phenomenal people. It means something to him to be at the University of Florida, and you certainly can appreciate that. So he's going to bring a lot to the table.

Andy Jean, I think is another player, 6'1", a little bit bigger, 192 pounds. This guy can run the route tree. This guy has a unique acceleration. He can really eat up the coverage. He can get behind you.

I respect Andy, just his attitude and approach to life. He's a blue collar guy. He's a worker. Really a lot of respect for his family. They work extremely hard, Haitian background, just really respect what they're about, who they are as a family.

So I think all three of those guys -- obviously Tre's dad was an NFL player. These are really good people and fantastic football players. I think three of the best receivers in the entire country.

**Q. Are any of them going to be early enrollees?**

BILLY NAPIER: Two of the three. Aidan and Andy will be here early.

**Q. Overall, how many do you expect?**

BILLY NAPIER: Right now we have 20. So 20 players who will start early.

**Q. You've said in the past, when Florida's had success, it started internally in the state with recruiting. How do you assess the performance that you did with in-state recruiting this time?**

BILLY NAPIER: That's a great point. I think, if you look at the group, we definitely used an inside-out approach. We obviously branched out a little bit with the quarterback and obviously into Georgia and Alabama. But I think the majority of the players being Florida players, that's one of the reasons why this is a great job.

Now, obviously there's a lot of others out there we'd like to



have too, but I do think this group reflects our philosophy if that makes sense, and certainly the history of championship teams at the University of Florida, and I think overall in general when you look at the numbers.

**Q. Talk about Kelby Collins and the defensive line class as a whole and how much that was identified as an area of need when you came in here.**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no question. Some really unique players when you look at this group. Kelby being, I think one of the -- you just turn the tape on, one of the more polished, ready to play players in the country. Just fundamentally advanced, 6'4", 260 pounds, and really a violent player, plays with effort.

He comes from an unbelievable family, just his mom and dad, their character, they're competitors. He's been raised -- that might have been the cleanest house I've ever been in. I think that's an indicator of things.

Kelby's mom and dad, got a younger brother, his grandma, they're just awesome, salt of the earth, and he's a reflection of them certainly. He's a leader. He's been a leader in this class, and certainly he's going to be here in January and certainly a guy I believe is in prime position to be a difference maker.

So he's got some leadership traits. He's a hard worker and a guy that I think is, it's a big deal for him to be a Gator.

**Q. What are you getting this program from Treyaun Webb, and having two running backs that already played a good bit this season, how much potential do you think that room has moving forward?**

BILLY NAPIER: Treyaun, to me, what stands out about Treyaun is the instincts, the vision. At running back oftentimes I think it's about production, and he's been running the ball for a long time. He's kind of a legend there in Duvall. Coming up, he's always been a guy to put that ball under his arm. He produces.

I was pleased with how physical he played. He's a tough guy. He's played through some injuries in the past. He's been a part of a winning program. I think you can never overlook that. And a guy that I think has got a little bit of an edge to him. He catches the ball well.

Couldn't be more excited about Treyaun. He'll be here early as well.

**Q. How much knowledge do you think the coaching staff gained that you think can benefit you moving forward into next year?**

BILLY NAPIER: I would think that's reflected in every part of what we do. Year one, you learn a lot. I think you get familiar with your product but also familiar with the competition, how to present your product better, what works, what doesn't work.

I think we continue to get more efficient, more effective in everything we do. Certainly recruiting that calendar year, what that looks like, anticipating what's coming next.

Just right now today, you think about where we were at this time last year, we're light years ahead. So I think it's a great question.

**Q. What do you think of the secondary class and just what they bring to the table? It seemed like some guys you had to maybe hang onto at the end, a lot of schools coming after them. But what do you get from a cornerback standpoint and obviously some guys that can play nickel and safety?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, very versatile group. Just going down the list, Jordan Castell is a 6'2", 200 pound player that plays corner, but I think is going to start in the safety room. I thought he really improved as a tackler as a senior.

We had him in camp, the height, the length. He can cover. You go in that school, he is the guy. The principal, the teachers, the counselors, his mom is an unbelievable person, obviously a great story.

Just a tough dynamic with his dad and all that happened, but just really a guy that I think is unique, just love to be around him. I thought he had a great senior year, and to be 6'2", 205 and move around like he does, I think is a big deal.

Sharif Denson is -- you know, when you go around the area and you visit different high schools, every coach talks about Sharif Denson and the competitor he is. He's a matchup player. He can play corner. He can play star. He is a competitor.

We had a chance to observe him in the seven-on-seven competition. Obviously both of his parents being University of Florida folks, just cares about the place, and I think a very smart player that comes from a great culture there at Bartram Trail, he's going to bring a lot to our team. Mature and ready to go. So he is an early enrollee.

Ja'Keem Jackson, I think, is probably one of the more talented players in the class, just relative to he's got a high ceiling. Receiver moved to corner. I originally evaluated

him as a receiver. We had him on the receiver board. He makes the move. He runs 10.9 as a junior at 6'1/2", 189 pounds. Two-way player in some games as a high school player. Put on a show as a senior.

One of the best players in the state, in my opinion. And really a guy this time last year, not a lot of people talking about the guy. So height, length, verified speed, and mom and dad are awesome.

He's got a history of athletes in his family. A lot of track background, so they know what it's like. He knows how to work. Great program there that made a run in the playoffs.

Dijon Johnson, I think, is a very unique player for his size. Plays corner, very physical, can make a play on the ball. 6'1", close to 190 pounds, and a guy that you put him up there and he can put his hands on you. He's great in press coverage. I think he's instinctive, he's a great tackler, and he makes plays on the ball. Had a phenomenal year there.

Bryce Thornton would be the last player on the list. If you want to just go watch a highlight tape, go watch his highlight tape. This guy, he's 5'10", close to 200 pounds, 190 pounds, big features. His mother was an athlete, basketball family. You go in this guy's school, everybody loves Bryce. He's got an unbelievable smile, just brings great energy.

Played through some injuries, tough. And another player that comes from a great culture, where they've won, they overachieve. The coaching staff there, to get what they got out of their team this year, they lost a ton of players.

Very, very impressed with Bryce, not only his production as a player, but just his demeanor, and he's another early enrollee.

**Q. To identify a guy like Kelby as gettable when he's in the backyard of a certain program, how did you guys make that connection early and stick it out?**

BILLY NAPIER: That's a great question. We've got a handful of staff members that are from there. There was a connection early, just within that area. I'd be lying to you if I didn't think it was an uphill battle the entire time. We just kept coming back, and there was a sincere, it's like okay.

We've got a grading scale we use. Kelby Collins is a phenomenal player. It worked, and I think again it's another one of those situations where they come here, they connect with all the people, there's common ground there, and it just worked.

I think Kelby sees opportunity, and he's a guy that's willing

to be different. I think that's what it takes sometimes.

You know, you think about that defensive line class, I'm excited about that group. Gavin Hill is a local player, 6'3". He's up to 275 pounds. Unique in that he played some tight end in the past. I thought his senior tape was special. He played with a shoulder, tough as nails.

Obviously Coach Whittemore runs a great program over there. They made a great run in the playoff. He's a Gator through and through. There's just a different level of passion that he's going to bring.

I do think Kamran James is one of the more impressive athletes in the class, 6'5-1/2", 260 pounds, and a former basketball player turned football. I think he has a high ceiling and really can't compliment that family enough.

Their approach to recruiting, just about all the right things. Just really enjoyed getting to know him and his family. Excited about Kamran being midyear. I just think his upside is tremendous.

Will Norman is one heck of an athlete for 6'3-1/2", 300 pounds. Former basketball player, turned football. Was at IMG, went back home for his senior year. This guy could play on the edge for his size, really unique traits. I think his best football is in front of him. Lights up the room when he walks in. He's got a great personality about him. His mom is a great lady.

You know, really excited about that group. Obviously we've got others that will join them, but it's a good group of defensive linemen. If you're going to be good, it starts up front.

**Q. How have you guys learned, I guess this past year in the state, and just this navigating name, image, likeness when it comes to recruiting both at the high school level and at the college level?**

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I think it's been -- there's no question it's been one of the challenges of the year, if that makes sense, because it's new. I think that -- and you're creating your system, if that makes sense.

It's not like a lot of what we do, we've been around before. We've worked at some of the better places in the country. We spent a lot of time researching that, refining that. A lot of what we did at Louisiana, we bring it here and hit the ground running, and there's certainly things that are new to college football -- NIL, the portal.

And those are the strategies and what is your approach going to be continues to evolve and be fluid. But we've

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

done a tremendous amount of work on them. Certainly I think we've made a lot of progress and pleased with where we're at and the direction there and continues to be a really good thing for the University of Florida.

But definitely a dynamic, I think every college football coach will tell you, just adds a variable to the game. But it's another part of your product. Certainly I think we've done a great job. Can't compliment our administration, our alumni. We've put a lot of smart people in a room and come up with a great plan there. So I'm excited about that part.

**Q. You were talking about Gavin Hill, but you also brought in Jaden Robinson. How important was it to keep recruiting around the Gainesville area as a whole?**

BILLY NAPIER: That's a great question. Jaden is one of my favorite players in the class. Jaden is a guy that, you know you watch his junior tape, he's playing safety. He's playing apex. He's out in space. He shows up at camp, and we get him at 6'7", 221. He's kind of grown into his body. They played him at will linebacker in the camp, and we had a chance to watch him. It became pretty evident that he could play linebacker.

Comes from a great program, a great area. There's a certain passion that comes with being from the area, if that makes sense. So as many of those guys that pass the evaluation that we can get on our team, the better. I think, if you look back at the history, when Florida's been good, they've had the better players in the surrounding areas that have come here to play. So we want to continue that trend.

Jaden is another guy that has a phenomenal family -- mom, dad, his grandmother. Really good people and certainly a lot of fun to be around.

Jaden Robinson, I think he scored a defensive touchdown seven weeks in a row in high school football. Think about that for a second. Seven weeks in a row, this guy scores a defensive touchdown. Very difficult to do. Very instinctive player. He's got a knack. He's tough. Excited about him being here early. Certainly got a critical need at inside backer, and he's going to help that.

**Q. How many do you think are ready to come in and contribute right away?**

BILLY NAPIER: Time will tell. I don't necessarily think you -- sometimes as a coach, you say you think some are ready and you think some aren't. One thing I would say about this group as a whole is I do think there's some

awareness, there's some maturity there. I think they're all bright. I think they all come from great, solid, stable situations at home. I think that helps.

The other thing that's going to help is you're going to have 20 players that start in January, and I think that translates to more reps and more teaching and more opportunity to get orientated to the university and just life in general in college.

But I do think that there will be a number of this group, they're going to have to earn it. I think very competitive group that looks forward to trying to do just that.

**Q. As it goes, I think there are a handful of prospects that considered Florida up until the end but ended up choosing elsewhere. With that in mind, do you feel as though you guys were able to address all of your pressing needs, or is there still work to be done over the next month and a half or so?**

BILLY NAPIER: I think we're going to continue to be aggressive. We'll evaluate every player that's leftover. Typically about 85 percent of the players will sign early. Last year we were able to add a handful of players in February.

Certainly the portal presents some opportunities between now and school starting. So we've got a number of spots left here, and we'll continue to add players.

Who did I not talk about? T.J. Searcy.

Aaron Gates, there you go. Let me say this about Aaron Gates. Aaron Gates was the one member of this class that was committed when we arrived, I think, right? Man, I can't tell you how much respect I have for A.G. and just who he is as a competitor.

My brother's team plays against his team. I remember my brother called him in the summer and said Gates is a problem. Plays both ways returner, DB, receiver. Got injured as a senior, but his parents probably have more -- I mean, the wisdom, right? I'm a guy who's raising a 10, 8, 6-year-old, but when I'm with them, man, I'm asking them questions because just so much respect for who they are and their son and what their family's about.

Aaron Gates is a worker. He's relentless. He's in the process of rehabbing right now. Aaron Gates is going to make the Gators better on the field, but just his presence, his character, the work ethic, the drive, he's a very unique person.

T.J. Searcy is someone I did not mention earlier, but

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

probably one of the freakier dudes in the group. 6'5-1/4", 250 pounds-plus, probably 260 now. This guy played tight end, outside linebacker as a junior, played more of a 4-3 end as a senior. Unique movements for this size now and a very disruptive player.

His mom's an incredible lady. His brothers are -- just made some great memories with his family visiting them. This is a really great kid and one we're excited about he enrolls early.

This offensive line group, I'm really excited about this offensive line group. Starting with Knijeah, Knijeah's a guy who's been at IMG for three years. He's one of the more physically ready. Did a great job this off-season. I thought he really changed his body in this past off-season, played great as a senior. Just great presence about him, always got a smile on his face.

You go around the IMG campus, just the way people talk about him, the respect that they have for him. Great family. Certainly he'll be here early. And a guy, you know those IMG guys, it's almost like they've been at college already to some degree.

I do think Rod Kearney, Roderick is -- if you want to turn film on and say, okay, who's got the best tape? I would argue Roderick Kearney's film is some of the most impressive tape of any offensive lineman in the country. This guy's a really unique player. He's driven. He's focused. He's got discipline. He's always doing the extra, very bright. He's got an edge about him.

His mama's a phenomenal lady. Just a great family there. Really enjoyed them.

Bryce Lovett is 6'5", 350 pounds. Bryce is very young for his age. Probably should be a junior. Still very much growing. I thought his senior film is really impressive. Certainly he's a guy who gets in the program and grows a bit, I think he's got a bright future in front of him.

Three good ones there, and hopefully we'll add some more. I think that's pretty much it. Anybody we left out there? Got them all?

**Q. I wanted to ask about the in-state focus. Obviously it's important to kind of recruit in your backyard. I think we talked about this before, but 13 of 20, and then you had three from Georgia. Just how important is it to mine those areas?**

BILLY NAPIER: I think you talk about sustainability, proximity to players, really focusing on your radius, I think it helps the evaluation process because you get more

exposures to the kid, to the family. They get more exposure to your staff and the University of Florida.

So the more times we can get them here, I think that helps inform them of how special this place is, but also I think it helps us evaluate players.

I do believe Florida is a national brand, and we can recruit anywhere. We proved that. Florida has got 275 Division I players a year, so does the state of Georgia. Carolinas are nearby. Alabama is nearby. Kind of consider that the core area.

You think about National Championship teams in the last 13 years, 66 percent of the rosters come from those five states. That's why this is a good job, right?

The key is each individual player is its own entity. You've got to evaluate. You're looking for the right mindset, wired the right way, the right character. Then also think we're big into the height, length, traits, functional movement, instincts, production. We're about as thorough as you can be.

Just got to keep making good individual decisions from an evaluation and recruitment standpoint and get the roster where it needs to be, and then continue to improve. I think evaluation and recruitment is a separate entity.

The minute they step foot on campus, then we start the development process and all the things that come with that. So teaching football, teaching life, time management, life after football, really trying to create a place where they get -- they're impacted in a positive way. Equipped, educated, well prepared, connect the dots through GatorMade and really maximize this window of time that they have in their lives that really can set them up for a great future.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports