

# University of Florida Football Media Conference

Sunday, July 30, 2023  
Gainesville, Florida, USA

## Austin Armstrong Press Conference



AUSTIN ARMSTRONG: First off, grateful to be back with our team and our staff. Excited to build off the momentum we've made since spring ball. I want to commend Coach Hocke and his staff, Tony Hill and their staff, of just the health and wellness of our team. Just excited to watch them work.

Also want to praise our players. I thought our summer work was very, very good. Very pleased with them and their work. It's easy to see the progress of the unit when you watch them out there.

At the same time, I want to praise our defensive staff. Obviously our transition here in February was pretty unique, and I want to praise Jay Bateman, Sean Spencer, Corey Raymond, Mike Peterson, CJ Wilford, our entire support staff. It really takes a village to do what we do on a daily basis, and so many people contribute to that.

I want to praise our players. It takes a tremendous collaboration between player and coach and staff to make this what we need it to be, and they've done a phenomenal job.

I think this time of the year, relative to our team, you've got to start with the individual, and one of the things we share with our unit all the time is that individual greatness equals collective success, and collective success equals individual greatness. What I mean by that is if each person associated with our unit is joyful, competent, capable, they're performing their duties and obligations on the field, off the field, collectively we as an organization benefit from that.

Then the coolest thing about being a team is when we have collective success, each individual benefits from that regardless of their contribution.

This time of year is about establishing your identity as an individual where you can create value for yourself and you can contribute on and off the field for us. 90 percent of our defense, I think six total guys weren't here in the spring.

The cumulative effect of the reps, the walk-through, the install, it will be the fifth time a lot of these guys have gone through that with us. Now it's an opportunity for them to prove themselves and play, so I'm excited about that.

The identity of our defense, we want to be a tough, physical, relentless -- a group that plays with relentless effort and physicality, situational experts, plays with joy and enthusiasm, and we're going to be the aggressor and we're going to hunt. With that, we'll open it up for any questions.

**Q. Attitude-wise, what would you say -- you stepped into a brand new situation late in the game. How would you say that the acceptance has been toward you from everybody, the enthusiasm, et cetera?**

AUSTIN ARMSTRONG: Absolutely. First off, commend the coaching staff. Coming in 10 days before spring practice with a guy that none of them -- none of us knew each other, and their buy-in to what we're doing has been awesome.

The players, it was a really unique thing for me getting. I try to develop a personal relationship with each player and spend time with them, figure out their goals, their aspirations, and how we as our role as an organization can help them, so that was a weird thing for me getting here. I didn't know anybody. That first day of practice I knew like five people's names.

That connection there has really taken place through a lot of deliberate and hard work from our staff from the time we got here the third week of February to today.

I can't show my appreciation for our players enough for their buy-in to what we're doing, and like I've said in the past, I don't think you can take a man and make him reach his God-given potential unless you know him, and I think we've done a good job of that, and hopefully we can benefit from that.

**Q. When you dug in on 3rd down defense last year, what did you see that needs to improve there? How much film did you watch of all that? Did you watch every snap of last year? What was your process?**

AUSTIN ARMSTRONG: I think there are some layers there. One, I think the key to being good on 3rd down is being good on 1st and 2nd down. One of the hardest things to do in football for an offense is in known passing situations, which is usually like 3rd-and-6 plus, to drop back, block people, and complete a pass. It really takes an offense, 11 people working on one accord to do that. It's pretty significant.

Then defensively, you've got to create those situations on 1st and 2nd down where you're in manageable situations on the defense where you have the advantage. Calling defense now on 3rd and 4 is really, really hard, especially when you get to the plus side of the field. We're truly like 2nd and four because the analytics, people go for it on 4th down.

So we really spend a lot of time being good on 1st and 2nd down where we create opportunities on 3rd down for us to be successful, and then with that, using the players that we have and their skill sets and which we believe we have some guys to affect the quarterback with pre-snap disguise, post-snap execution, and the ability to affect him puts us in those favorable situations.

Other than that, we quality control everything. We watch it. But I think a lot of it goes to you have some unique players in this league, as well, on 3rd down. You can rush and cover, but if you can't control the quarterback and the guy takes off scrambling, you've got an issue.

Well, you can blitz and pressure, well, if you can't cover him or get to him, you've got an issue.

I think we've really emphasized that, and then, too, tried to create a tremendous amount of urgency, that it's a privilege to play on 3rd down here. We don't get a participation trophy on 3rd down. We've got to get 11 guys out there that can execute inside the framework of our scheme and have the right mindset and approach of that it's a privilege to be out there on it; let's make it happen, let's execute.

**Q. One of the strengths last year on defense was number of takeaways. How much is that going to be emphasized again this year?**

AUSTIN ARMSTRONG: Yeah, you always emphasize it. Everywhere I've been, we spent a tremendous amount of lip service and action really to creating takeaways. I've been places that we've been really good on defense, and we ain't created any takeaways. I've been places that we have not been good on defense at times or not what we aspired to be and created a bunch of takeaways. There's a lot of layers to that.

I think it starts with affecting the quarterback, exposing ball security of people on offense, and you have to emphasize that daily. Each time in practice, hey, it's great to show in the unit meeting, hey, we forced a fumble here or we intercepted it, right, but was that a mistake by the offense or a good play by us, and there's times in which we don't knock the ball out or intercept the ball when there's an opportunity for us to expose the ball carrier, and by doing that daily in practice, that helps our entire time.

If the running back is here loose with the ball, we've got to expose that because if we don't expose it, it's going to show up in the game.

Then the urgency with it of when you get your hands on the ball you've got to take it away. That's why it's a takeaway, not a turnover.

**Q. The last couple years have been pretty rough defensively and fans are looking for improvement. Big picture, what is it about this team that will be better? Why should people be optimistic about this defense?**

AUSTIN ARMSTRONG: Well, you know, we can't control anything that happened before we got here. But our players and our staff have worked relentlessly to make the Gator defense what it's supposed to be.

We kind of joked around a little bit, I was talking to recruits yesterday, we were known for the fun-and-gun around here, but a lot of success during that time was because of hitting and running.

We've got to bring that back. We've got to get the mindset back of we're the University of Florida, and there's a standard to uphold here, and a lot of players have come here and laid a foundation with their execution, not their lip service, and we've got to do the work that's required to be able to do that and to put a product out here that we all can be proud of.

That starts with knowing what to do, your training, your execution, and we're certainly working every day to do that.

**Q. Last year missed tackles everywhere. How do you improve that in an off-season, and coming up here where you only have 15 practices and very limited contact?**

AUSTIN ARMSTRONG: Yeah, I think the most underrated and unspoken part about defensive football, everybody wants to talk about scheme and everything like that, is you've got to get the guy to the ground. Thankfully I work for a head coach that really understands that, and from

starting in our off-season program in January, we worked versions of tackling. Tackling isn't just going out there and head-butting each other. It's the pursuit, it's angles, it's leverage, it's the relentless effort how to finish, and then the technical aspect of finishing plays.

Everything we do regardless of wearing helmets, shells, pads, there's a specific tempo that we have to practice with, and even though we may not be tackling somebody to the ground, the pursuit, the leverage, right, the angles, and we spend a lot of time about that.

At the end of the day, you've got to be able to get the guy to the ground, and we try to be very specific about the situations that arise in games, and we spend time with our staff -- Coach Bateman is kind of our tackling coordinator, and we watch a lot of film of the tackles that actually happen during the game, so we try to recreate that as much as possible.

It's decision making tackles. We talk about end-of-the-down tackling when you're in short space and you've got to get the guy to the ground and the different techniques that come with that.

We emphasize it to its fullest.

**Q. Is some of that fundamental like not having your feet the right way, having your shoulders lined up correctly? What is it?**

AUSTIN ARMSTRONG: Yeah, certainly. I think, like I said, there's a technical aspect to it, of the approach, what leverage am I, am I inside-out, am I outside-in, my left shoulder, my right shoulder, what foot do I have up, how do I finish the final deal, how do I finish the blow, do I grab cloth, do I wrap and roll. There's a lot of situations.

We kind of view tackling kind of like baseball. If you're playing baseball, you put the ball on the tee and you move it around. You do soft toss, you get in the batting cage, you throw, you do BP, you get live pitching. I think they do great job in their sport of creating as many ways possible to swing.

We try to do the same thing with tackling. We try to create as many opportunities, and we get shots in the specific situations and move the tee, if that makes any sense, in team periods and tackling circuits and individual. We try to create that as much as possible.

**Q. Who are some guys that you feel like have stood out during the spring and summer that made your transition easy and have been leadership guys that kind of set the example you want on defense?**

AUSTIN ARMSTRONG: Yeah, I don't want to get into individuals, but you talked about the D-line, you have Desmond Watson, Cam Jackson, Caleb Banks, Chris McClellan, Tyreek Sapp, Jamari Lyons and Will Norman all battling to play and contribute. You've got seven guys in there to play two spots. We've got to figure out four or five that can do it for us.

Coach Spencer and Coach James have done great job there.

Then you think about our edge category guys, Princely, Boone, Kelby Collins, Searcy, Cam James, Jack Pyburn, a new addition Quincy Ivory. You know, Coach Kruchten and Coach Peterson have done a great job with that.

That position is very flexible for us because one of them is almost like a D-lineman. The other one is more like a linebacker. Then 3rd down they're two totally different type players. You have inside linebacker, which is a huge tactical position for us. You've got Shemar, Scooby, Wingo, Teradja Mitchell, Mannie Nunnery, Robinson, Spurlock. All those guys have done a good job.

Coach Bateman, Coach Gibbs have done a phenomenal job with them.

There's a lot of moving parts there. We use our linebackers very differently here, right. Sometimes we play with a Mike-Will-Sam, sometimes we just play with a Mike-Will, sometimes we just play with a Mike. So there's a lot of layers to that.

Then you think about the star, the nickel, right, that plays a pretty decent amount of time, Jadarius Perkins, Jay Hill, Sharif Denson and Bryce Thornton. A lot of position flexibility there. They've done a great job.

We have CJ Wilford and Corey Raymond in our secondary helps us out, and then you add Blake Schraeder and myself to it, so we've got a lot of people that individually meet with those players, and they've done a great job.

At safety, Kamari, Miguel, R.J. Moten is a new addition for us, Jordan Castell has had a great summer.

Then you have Bryce again, you've got Ja'Markis Weston we've moved over, so we've got a lot of guys there that can help us play.

Then at corner you've got J-Marsh, Devin Moore, you've got Jalen Kimber, Ja'Keem Jackson, D.D., Aaron Gates, and then obviously Coach Raymond does a phenomenal job with Allen Brown.

So we have a lot of players that have bought in.

I think our biggest thing is each individual reaching their potential, right, before we start categorizing people as leaders. I think that's a cool time about this year.

But overall, I've been really pleased with the unit, their buy-in. I think we're in the process of getting the culture right, and that's not just from their buy-in, it's from their execution.

Everybody has got good intentions when everybody has got good execution. I've been pleased with them, and I enjoy being around them.

**Q. How important was it to add R.J. to the secondary with his experience, and what was his recruitment like going after him and his dad?**

AUSTIN ARMSTRONG: Yeah, it was a cool deal that R.J. is a Gator.

I think in today's college football climate that having guys that have a sentimental value or a geographical value to your team is really, really important. I started recruiting him, get on the phone with him and we offered him, per se, you know how unique that is. The guy was almost in tears because it meant a lot to him.

His dad obviously was a good player here, and they come down for their official visit and about three hours into it we kind of moved on and were ready to go. Guy has over 25 plus starts at a place that we have a lot of respect for, University of Michigan, and two College Football Playoff starts, and he brings a lot of maturity to that room.

He's done a great job with the transformation of his body. The guy got here in June, and everybody else had gone through install in February and the spring, and he had to catch up in a really competitive room.

I commend him and everybody in that room's work right now, so he's a great addition for us, and we're glad to have him.

**Q. Where is he defensively?**

AUSTIN ARMSTRONG: Yeah, we go through our install. He plays safety for us. He's going to probably be to the boundary, does a good job. He's got some flexibility. We're glad to have him.

**Q. You said something just a second ago about kind of the importance of that sentimentality time and**

**geographical -- can you elaborate on why that's important?**

AUSTIN ARMSTRONG: Yeah, I mean, I think that there's a lot of positive things going on with college football relative to choosing where to go, and there's ways and avenues when things probably aren't perfect you can get out, and I think there's something to when you see our recruiting blueprint and Coach Napier's leadership of adding players that when they walk out to Ben Hill Griffin Stadium, there's tears in their eyes. It means a lot to them, their sentimental value of being a Gator and the importance to that, and the inevitable of there being challenging things through your experience as a young person in college football is going to happen. Fortunately we have the support system to help you, but I think there's probably some unrealistic expectations on young people when they come in to play, and there's avenues to not work through the challenges with that.

I think when you have somebody on your team, like I said, that there's a sentimental geographical value to playing on your team and you have the support system that we have here, they're going to be able to work through those challenging parts, especially when they're a young player.

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