

University of Florida Football Media Conference

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Coach Billy Napier

Press Conference



BILLY NAPIER: We've begun our preparation for the opener, and obviously Utah is a very formidable opponent. This is Pac-12 champ back-to-back years, and certainly a ton of respect for Coach Whittingham, Coach Scalley, Coach Ludwig, just the brand of football.

Had a chance to compete against them in the past. Certainly last year was a heck of a football game. But they definitely have an identity, and it's one of the reasons why they've been able to perform with consistency and be a contender year in, year out.

This is a veteran defense, veteran quarterback, and word out of Utah is this is the most talented team they've ever had there.

We understand the implications of playing there relative to their record, all the things that come with that, and I think the focus here is planning our work and working our plan. I think we've got to be committed to following through each day: What is our daily plan, all parts of the organization. This is not just players, this is staff, as well.

You want people walking around the building thinking that their role on the team and within the organization might just be the difference, right, and that what they do each day makes an impact and can make an impact on the final result here.

I think we've got to really zero in here, going to play on the road in a very tough, competitive environment. Our attitude, our mindset, we've got a lot of momentum. We've been working for a long time since January. We've got to get the details right here at the very end.

What questions do we have?

Q. Coach, you mentioned the quarterback Cam Rising. Do you expect him to play? Seems like he hasn't been cleared yet, that they might have some uncertainty at quarterback.

BILLY NAPIER: Well, we're preparing for all of the above.

That's what I would say. And I do think they have very capable players.

But we got to see Cam live and in person. Certainly know Cam, his family, ton of respect for him as a person. Competitor, leader, football player. He's a real quarterback.

We're doing all the homework we can here, but there's really some unique players at quarterback that they have on the roster that cause you to really evaluate all the scenarios that could happen. I know our defensive staff has been working on that.

Q. A lot has been said about the team dynamic this year, the level of buy-in, family atmosphere. Where do you see that show up in a game?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I think we're going to -- I think that's to be determined. I think each team is a little bit different. I think you work to build intangibles, to establish connection, that there is a certain level of loyalty relative to each person's role on the team. You've kind of got to agree to an expectation.

It's really what this game is all about. We play a great game. I'm walking off the field yesterday, and I'm telling our guys, I love football. I love it. Love everything about it.

I think it's about the people that you do it with, the players, the staff, when done the right way, it's hard to beat.

We'll see where we're at. I think the competition oftentimes uncovers if you've been working hard to build a healthy team and a healthy team dynamic, those things get uncovered in competition.

This group has worked at that, and it certainly for me feels like some of the teams that we've had in the past.

Q. I think I read in the game notes, the third true road game in the last 35 years to open the season. The challenge of that, and did you think about going a day early with the altitude?



BILLY NAPIER: Well, obviously regardless of when the game is, playing at Utah, and really more about the program, right, and what they've established there, we respect that. They've got a fantastic record at home. It is an opener. It is a red-out. We understand they'll be at full capacity. There will be some Gators out there, too, I imagine.

The altitude, we've spent extensive time researching that relative to our sports science and our training staff, and all indications tell us to go stay in your normal routine. It really takes 10 days to get adjusted. Get in, get out. We've met with a lot of NFL teams regarding that.

We feel good about our plan.

Q. What is the potential impact? All teams have home-field advantage. Is that something to it? Late in the game, for example, you've got a lot of guys that are pretty big, 350-pound guys. Does it cost maybe a few snaps potentially endurance-wise, or is that a non-factor?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I think we have a good plan. I think it's more about the football. I think the altitude, obviously, everybody likes to talk about that, but Coach Whittingham's teams and the way they play football have been ultimately more important than that.

I think he's done a fantastic job creating an identity for his team that's allowed them to be consistent.

Q. Another thing you talked a lot about this off season was the familiarity and continuity in year two. How does that play out heading into a game week?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, we've got a core group of veterans that are in this system for the second year. They understand all the processes, the structure, routine. All those things matter.

I do think we also have a lot of new players.

I go back to the analogy, students aren't in the material for the second time; the teachers teach the material for the second time.

We've spent more time on things that will affect the final result than maybe last year. You've got a long set of problems to solve, coming up with solutions for those, getting to know people, not only your roster but new people you've hired. Not to mention administration and recruiting. We're just in a little bit better place relative to establishing routine and familiarity, so I think we'll benefit from that.

Q. Along the lines of rebuilding, fans aren't known for patience, and they've seen the rebuilds that have been quick over at LSU, TCU, places like that. What would you tell them about the rebuild and what would be a fair gauge of success this year?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I'm not into comparisons on rebuilds. I think that we have been tasked with not just being competitive here. We want to accomplish significant success big picture. We know what this place is capable of.

I think what we try to do is get consumed with the impact that we can have on the player, as a person, as a student, as a football player. We want to teach a set of values. We want to develop the player as a person relative to what he can accomplish when the game is over. We're going to prioritize education for the player, and then we're going to teach football at a high level and develop football players that make up our team. Then we're going to be process oriented, system oriented, and we're going to get really good at those processes and systems. Those things ultimately will affect the end result.

There's a number of things that affect result, right, and we all want to talk about results and what results matter, but ultimately for us, it goes back to what I just said. We plan our work each day. We work our plan. We get consumed with the details that we know will affect the result, and ultimately we're in the middle of that process.

This is evaluation. It's recruitment. It's development. It's building a team. It's leadership. It's accountability. It's fundamentals and techniques. It's communication. It's how we practice.

I could go on and on about all the things that affect whether we win or lose, but ultimately, I think you've got to get consumed with each day and what that entails. That's what we're in the middle of doing.

Q. Obviously last year was a different team, but for the guys that were a part of that win against Utah, what can they take from that experience and what that took to open up the season within a match-up like this?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, that game is going to have nothing to do with this game. The players on our team and the players on their team are going to line up and play this year.

I think that we have some familiarity. Obviously we spent time planning for that game. They spent time planning for that game. There's a little bit more background in that regard.

But ultimately, this team that we have this year has got to put the ball down and go compete and find a way to win the game.

There's a lot of motivators here, and certainly on their side they'll be very motivated.

Q. When we met with Graham last week, he talked a lot about playing free and that he can do that now here and in this offense. What does that mean to you, and how do you feel like that's going to show up on the field?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I think you can play the game the right way when you're well prepared, and ultimately the season presents the challenge of preparing one week at a time. We started preparation for Utah. Yesterday was our first practice. Monday was our first planning day. I think if you're doing what you're supposed to do as a player each day, then when you get to the game you're well-prepared and you can go play with confidence.

I think he's experienced training camp from that regard because he did what he was supposed to do all winter, all spring, all summer, and he's equipped to go out there in a practice setting and be competitive and do his job for the team.

Now the variables change. The personnel changes, where we're playing, their scheme, our scheme. I think being a quick study, having a process to get ready to play the game, that's where it's won.

I think Graham will do a good job in that area. That's what he's done so far. I think each player on our team has to understand that.

I think we're beginning a new competition each week, and certainly we're in the process of getting ready for Utah.

Q. What stood out to you about Jordan Castell over the last couple of weeks?

BILLY NAPIER: Jordan is a really smart player. He's instinctive. I think Jordan has always been -- you go to Jordan's school, I think he's well-respected there. His character, he's a good teammate, and he was a leader on his team. Jordan has been a worker. He's in the building. He's doing extra meetings. He's trying to get up to speed.

But he's got height and length. He's got traits for that position. I think he's a guy that -- he's proved to be very productive in a practice setting.

The game is a whole new world, and I think his growth throughout the season, he's only going to continue to get better.

Q. You touched on Utah's brand of football, physicality. I'm curious about the physical match-up and how important you see that in terms of Thursday.

BILLY NAPIER: It'll be -- it's part of the equation. Certainly it's part of who we are and how we play, and certainly the same for them.

The key is that the game is about one-on-ones, and I think the way they play, the way we play, there will be individual match-ups in the game, the technique, the effort.

We talked a lot about that with our team. They're going to be all over the field. We've got to be well-prepared, and you've got to do your job within each play.

Q. The tight end position is one that right now I think you maybe used the label "by committee approach" to refer to that. What's maybe the opportunity for some of these guys?

BILLY NAPIER: We've got really good young players in that room. I'm very pleased with the progress that they've made.

Now, can they -- new game plan. There's a lot of information relative to that. The variables change.

So we'll have some growing pains there, but I do think that that group, their attitude, their approach to practice, meetings, walk-throughs has been really good, and they've made -- they've really gotten a lot better.

Hansen, Livingston, Boardingham, really no experience. We do anticipate getting Zanders back. He'll be able to participate today and tomorrow, so we'll see where he's at relative to being ready for the game.

But that's one of the positions on our team where we're going to have young players playing. Safety is very much in the same world.

But I do have confidence in those guys and their approach.

Q. Where is Kingsley Eguakun at this point? I don't think we were able to ask you about him last week, but do you anticipate he'll be good for game day?

BILLY NAPIER: Kingsley is to be determined. I think he's day-to-day. We do like the progress that he's making.

He's gotten a little bit incrementally better as we go here, and certainly he's a very veteran player, too. I think that's part of the equation.

But we'll let you know when we get to the end of the week.

Q. Following up on that, how have guys like Jake Slaughter and maybe Knijeah Harris performed in their reps at center while Kingsley has been out, and how has that unit progressed?

BILLY NAPIER: No, Jake Slaughter is a player I have the utmost confidence in. He's been outstanding in his role. It's really important to Jake. He wants to do his job for his teammates. He cares about the University of Florida. It's kind of in his DNA to some degree, being local.

So he's done fantastic, and I do think we've worked other players there. Obviously you talked about Knijeah, by Richie Leonard can play center. Rod Kearney is a good young prospect that can play there.

I think we feel good about the depth there of the interior offensive line. It's a good group.

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