

University of Florida Football Media Conference

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Coach Billy Napier

Press Conference



Florida 49, McNeese 7

BILLY NAPIER: We really appreciate our fans showing up tonight, home opener. We had about 88,000 in there for an FCS opponent. Look, they make a difference. They make a difference. The energy that they create for our players and certainly the difficulty for the opponent, it's special.

We talked to the players throughout the week about it's sacred to compete in the Swamp. We only get so many opportunities. So independent of the opponent, it's just a special experience for our guys. They work hard the entire year for these opportunities, and I thought we had the right mindset early, both sides of the ball, and for the most part did what we should do, truth be known, and ultimately as a coach -- we had a miscue early with the snap and then we fumbled the ball late.

Outside of that, pretty clean day for the most part.

We did some things that were significant statistically, but it really wasn't about that. I told the players in the locker room just now, I appreciate the response that we saw from the players after last week, which was obviously disappointing, but I think the leadership on the team, we said it was going to be about the mindset, the effort, the attitude, and I think we had the right things early.

We'll enjoy tonight, and when we wake up tomorrow we'll get ready for the big one next week.

Q. You touched on some of the positives, but just getting a win maybe after a four-game losing streak, getting back in the Swamp and getting back to the winning ways?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. I mean, there's something to be said for that, I agree. Just relative to the emotion that comes with it, right.

Again, I want to compliment the players. I think that they handled that well.

One of the things about college football and I would say the University in Florida in particular is it gets noisy sometimes, good and bad. If it's bad, then it gets loud, and if it's good, it gets loud.

I think the ability to stay consistent in your approach and evaluate things objectively is important, not only for myself and our staff but I think also for the players, and I think we've got some maturity in that locker room that helped do that.

Look, there's challenges ahead here, but I do think that what you're saying is true.

Let me say one thing that I think is really important for games like this. Some of the guys that we observe work hard every week that don't get to play most weeks. We've got a lot of guys that do a lot behind the scenes that make our team better, and to see some of those guys have an opportunity to go between the lines and play, I think that's really special.

It not only means something to those individual players and for us as a staff, it's one of the more gratifying things about coaching, but to see veteran players excited for those individuals I think was a positive.

Q. 327 yards rushing, building confidence and maybe even playing to your identity, how big were those?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no, I think just efficiency. It's always fun when the plays work. It's always a lot more fun when the plays work.

But I think we had a hat for a hat. I think that we made the right decisions at quarterback, and ultimately the staff did a good job putting the plan together, and we went and executed that plan for the most part on all parts of our team.

That's what you want when you play an opponent like this, and certainly as a coach you'd like to say they're all the same, but we know that's not true. There's a human nature element, and for them to show up and compete was

a positive.

Q. What kind of tone do you think the first drive set, and Montrell in particular, getting him involved because he wasn't quite as involved in the Utah game?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think just staying on schedule, creating favorable down and distances. I think 3rd down was manageable for the most part all night, and really the one 3rd-and-long that we did have, we converted. That's where you're essentially playing with odds on your side, and ultimately that's where you want to live as a play caller.

If you're a defensive play caller you want to live on the other end of the spectrum. We certainly did that tonight.

I think that's the best defensive performance in how many years?

Q. 86 games.

BILLY NAPIER: 86 games or something like that. Look, every time I turn around out there I see a freshman running around. Defense was ready to play, and I think we'll continue to get better.

We've got a lot of young players out there playing, and I think those guys will get a little bit better, not only at game day but their routine during the week I think will be beneficial.

Q. How important was it after last week to play a very clean game? Penalties at a minimum, mental mistakes at a minimum.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think it was a point of emphasis. Reality is as a coach and really as a competitor, and each individual player that plays in the game, you can live with some things. Guy beats you, you run into a really good player, maybe he wins a match-up, but ultimately the things that have nothing to do with the opponent are the ones that keep you up at night. Certainly we had too many of those last week. To come back and play cleaner I think was a positive.

But we all understand we have to continue to improve, to evolve, and bigger challenges are coming.

Q. Just on the defense, how nice was it to be able to see a pass rush be a little bit more consistent tonight and also the run stopping ability? I think you guys held them to under two yards a carry.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I do think our ability to rush the passer in particular, I think we could put a pretty good sub

package out there that could go get the quarterback. That's one of the areas of emphasis in recruiting was to go get guys that can finish on the quarterback.

I think we struggled last year on 3rd down for a number of reasons, and I think we're off to a pretty decent start there so far this year. But yeah, I think you're spot on.

Q. What things are still a concern to you as you now head towards Tennessee here, hosting them?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think ultimately for us as a staff, we have young players that need to continue to develop. A lot of guys have gotten significant experience the first two weeks, and obviously this will be a huge game, and that Swamp will be a lot different next week. It'll be a bigger stage.

I think ultimately getting our players accustomed to the routine and challenges each individual player and even members of the staff that are new, Sunday, Saturday -- because that's where the game is won ultimately as a competitor. If you can prepare, dot all the Is, cross all the Ts, and you're well-prepared when you show up to the park, you've got a chance to play with confidence, and I think our young players need to continue to learn that.

Q. You talked about Graham's efficiency. That was one of the things you liked. 14 of 17, you don't get much more efficient. What's he bringing to the offense? I know it was more run reliant tonight, but I think the 3rd-and-10 play to Ricky, that 12-yarder, that was kind of a big play.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think really two drops, too, I would say, so he's close to being really clean.

The guy is really bright. The guy is a really good communicator. He's one of the hardest working players I've ever been around in my career.

I think his experience bring a steadiness. He has an awareness. It's not too big for him because he's played in big games and big stages. He's made mistakes in his past, and I think he's taken ownership of that.

But he's just in a good place. He showed some toughness last week. I think he's earned the respect of the players with how much he's improved. This guy has grown a lot as a player since the first day he got here.

He's what you would want your quarterback to be. He is the standard bearer. He is the example about anything you want to talk about; if you said who sets the best example, he would be on the list.

I think what you see out there is a product of a lot of hard work, and I really believe if we can continue to grow up around him and play better around him, he's got a chance to be a really good player for us.

Q. After last season, two games fewer than 400 yards against the defense. I know there are circumstances to that, but still, given last year and that stat, what's that say?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I think we added good players in the portal. We added good players that are freshmen that are contributing at all levels of the defense. There's a lot of new players out there running around.

I do think that we have veteran players that are doing a good job leading and setting an example, and I have to compliment the staff. Austin is new, and obviously he's brought a lot of things to the table, but I can't say enough about the growth in year two from Mike Peterson, Jay Bateman, Sean Spencer and Corey Raymond. Not only the on-field guys but we have a lot of off-field guys that are in year two, too. It's year two in the system for players and also for that staff, and then obviously Austin has done a good job of connecting with players, connecting with the staff, putting his spin on things.

Look, I mean, there's a lot of young cats running around out there. This is a good thing for the Gators in the future.

Q. You mentioned the big stage next week and also how many young players. How do you get them ready to maybe not let them get too high or too low with the excitement they'll have with the Tennessee game?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, it's a process. It's Sunday. What do we do on Sunday? What do you do on Sunday? Let's do the best we can do today.

I think we try to map out Sunday to Saturday for the players. That was the point of emphasis inside the locker room there with the players. Look, when we wake up tomorrow, let's go execute your plan each day, and that's every part of the organization, it's not just players.

Ultimately to get to a place where you can go play with confidence, I think you've got to prepare a certain way, and ultimately that's what I think we're learning how to do. Hopefully we'll have our best week this week.

Q. I just wanted to get your assessment on your two backup quarterbacks, Max and Micah coming in. What did you think of them? And how important was it just to get them reps knowing they could be a play away

from having to go in?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think these games are beneficial in that regard. Max did some good things there in the first possession he had.

Each guy probably made a mistake or two, but for the most part, I thought Max did some really good things in that possession when we moved the ball down there and scored. He had a couple naked throws for completions. It's definitely beneficial.

And ultimately those guys take a million reps in practice. That's a small sample size compared to what we see each week.

There's no doubt we need those guys to continue to develop.

Q. How would you assess your young pieces in the secondary, specifically at star with Sharif Denson and Bryce Thornton, given the change you had there this week?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think those guys have continued to grow and improve. They've earned more of a role on the team.

It's a talented rookie group of DBs, when you start thinking about Jordan Castell and Jakeem and DD and Sharif, Bryce. You saw him a little bit more today. Can't compliment that group enough. Not only talented, but I think they all have character, and they all go about their business the right way.

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