

University of Florida Football Media Conference

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Gainesville, Florida, USA

Head Coach Billy Napier

Press Conference



Florida Gators 29, Tennessee Volunteers 16

BILLY NAPIER: ...significant impact in the game. I think in this league, home field advantage is a big deal. And they were a factor tonight. There's no question. How many procedure penalties did the crowd create? I think Austin had a really good plan. We stemmed the front on occasion. They were a factor. All the third downs, the fourth downs, really significant. Really thankful for that. 90,000 strong.

Man, I'm just really -- this game will teach you a lot about life. I was telling the players just now, if you'll let it, this game can teach you a lot about life.

And it's hard. It challenges everything in you. And anything that's significant that you accomplish in life is going to be a challenge. It's going to be hard.

And I think for that to be rewarding, there's got to be some difficulty. There's got to be adversity. There's got to be days that you wake up and you question yourself to some degree, right? And that's important that you surround yourself with really good people. And we certainly have good people here.

But I'm proud of the players. You know, you go back a couple weeks ago. We went to Utah. We did not play our best football. There was no finger pointing. I didn't hear one guy in that locker room complain or make an excuse. They took ownership and ultimately responded the right way. And we've been working ever since.

So, you know, this group can get better. That's the exciting thing to me. There's areas of our team out there where we still struggled a little bit, areas where we can get better. We have young players that are playing. And I think as they get more experience, they'll continue to improve. But, overall, I know there's tons of keys to that game, and I know you'll ask questions about that, but I want to compliment our players, the response and, ultimately, the leadership from the staff. We've got good people. They stuck together. We found a way to win a game.

And, ultimately, if we can keep our humility and try to sustain this and get ready for the next one, that will be the objective. We're going to celebrate tonight, though. I can promise you that. So what questions we got here?

Q. Thoughts on how the defense responded from that first drive to the beginning of the game to kind of shut them out the rest of the half and get the turnover, and what kind of momentum did that provide for the rest of the half?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. I think it was difficult early, right? We moved the ball down into the red area. It forced us to kick a field goal. We missed the field goal. And then they just go straight down the field and score. So that's when you know I think you're onto something when you see a group rally and continue to work and stick together. Some of those intangibles that we've built showed up tonight. I think ultimately there was adversity in the beginning.

Q. And Graham's ability to manage the game throughout the game, especially in the first half, 17 to 20?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. Some of those third downs were epic. The pump fake scramble. You know, the scramble on the right side where he feathered it right over the defender and Kahleil gets his feet in. Those are two off the top of my head. But you go 17 and 20 1/2, you played pretty good football. And look, we stayed on schedule. I think we only got sacked maybe one time. We kept third down manageable. We were able to rush the ball. I think the guys up front did a great job. The tight ends did a great job. That's who we've got to be. We played really good complementary football tonight. And, ultimately, the plan that we had worked. You know, and offense and defense, the kicking game, we obviously got a lot of things that we can clean up. But what else we got?

Q. So you have one game and you mentioned humility. But what does it mean to the program to be the team that won the Orange Bowl last year, had such a great season, beat you guys, was picked to finish very well this year, comes in ranked. What does that

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do for this program?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I think it -- you know, I think as a leader, what you want is you want your people -- I can't say the amount of work that's been done since we hit the ground here, okay. Look, I know we haven't won as many games as we'd like to win, but the amount of work our people have done since we hit the ground here until today. Obviously we, have a lot of work left to do. You want to see your people experience some success, right, see the fruits of their labor. And I'm not just talking about the players. I'm talking about the adults too, right? So we worked hard. And that's the thing that it gives you is it validates your plan, it validates what you're selling, to some degree, the things that you continue to harp on. Yeah. I think you just -- that's what you want as a leader, right? And, ultimately, when I woke up after the Utah game, that's what I think about. I think about our people. I hate it, you know. I hate looking them in the eye and seeing that, if that makes sense. That's a lot more fun.

Q. Trevor's run, just how critical was that just to kind of ignite everything?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. I mean, Trevor was on fire out there tonight. I mean, just the instincts, the vision. Him and Montrell both were in situations where they made guys miss tackles. And then after contact created big plays. You think about the screen, Montrell gets a little piece of the guy. Both of those guys have got great contact balance. And what's good for our team is they're some of the hardest working kids that we have. They have character. They're extremely bright. They set a great example. So I think that helps your team when your best players are the best examples.

Q. You have another game when first half, four consecutive scoring drives there. How important was that, the efficiency to help your defense out the rest of the way?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. Well, we knew we needed to start fast. If you look at the analytics, if you're down at halftime against this crew -- now, it's a different Tennessee team, but I think just in general the importance of starting fast. We emphasized that. And I think they were ready to play early. Although we didn't get points in the first possession, we were ready to play. And then defensively, after that first possession, we kind of settled in. And we chewed up some clock. Not only did we score -- I don't know how many play drives those were, but we were able to be efficient and rush the ball, convert on third down and have a pretty good lead. We found a way to win. I probably was a little too conservative in the second half. All that being said, when it's a three touchdown game and your defense

is playing well, you're trying to get to the house with a W.

Q. You had 21 minutes plus of possession there in the first half. Would you talk about that.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. I mean, I felt like the pace of their offense, the play count, numbers can get up there. You're talking high 70s, low 80s on average when you play a Tennessee team. So, ultimately, if you can move the ball with some consistency and convert on third. We took a two-down approach a couple times knowing that we would go for it if we needed to. And those worked. And, ultimately, we just converted on third down. The quarterback was fantastic. And you get those two backs going, and it makes everything easier for the quarterback.

Q. Just how gratifying was it to see the way you executed the game plan? And then ESPN reported that Eugene Wilson had a collarbone issue?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. So Trey is going to be fine. The x-ray was normal. I think he has a bruise of some -- you know, but he wasn't able to return. Just didn't have the strength to return. He wanted to play, but I don't think he was ready to play. So we'll be able to give you a little bit more of an update on Monday or Wednesday of next week. But right now, he wasn't able to play in the game.

Q. Billy, what kind of jumped out to you about your defense's performance as a whole tonight? I think that's the third fewest points Heupel has ever scored as a head coach.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. I think, first of all, Coach Armstrong and the defensive staff had a terrific plan. We obviously spend a lot of time on these things not just in season but off season. We did our homework. We spent extensive time in the off season and certainly a little bit in training camp and obviously throughout the week. I think what gets overlooked here is maybe the scalp teams and the job they did throughout the week replicating the tempo. Numerous walk throughs. We put them in the indoor with crowd noise. We threw two teams at them. I'm not sure how many reps we took this week, but we took a lot. And, ultimately, we played -- we tackled for the most part in space well on the perimeter, especially as the game settled in. We created negatives. We knew going into the game, first down would be important. We created some negative plays. They had procedure penalties. The crowd affected them. And, ultimately, you talk about third down stops and fourth down stops, right? So those guys played their tail off, man. I can't imagine playing much better outside of that first possession. Don't forget the turnover in the short field, right? That was a huge momentum play in the game.



Q. The turnover and then to create a short field with Devin there. How significant was that? And to be able to generate turnovers in a game where Tennessee is trying to operate so quickly?

BILLY NAPIER: How many fourth downs did they -- three, right? So, to me, those are turnovers, right? So, I mean, when you have a four turnover game on defense, it's going to be hard to beat you. So the pick was huge, right, just because we affected the quarterback. All the things we talk about all week. Protect our quarterback, affect their quarterback, to hit the guy and the ball to go up and get it on the short field and then to cash it in. And you're at home and that crowd gets behind you and there's a ton of momentum there.

Q. And then just with Adam struggling in the kicking to be able to change kickers like that and bring in something who could be effective. How significant was that? And just on Trey's performance?

BILLY NAPIER: Adam -- nobody wants to do their job more than he does. And I think much like many of you when you go play golf sometimes you show up and you don't quite have it, you know. He hit a couple low balls early there. And we just felt like Trey has been doing well in practice, and we decided to put Trey in there. And, look, Adam's not the only player out there that made mistakes tonight? You know, there were several others out there. I made a bunch of mistakes myself. We'll continue to work and try to improve. And I promise you nobody wants to do their job more than Adam does.

Q. Coach, you talk about your people and your players seeing the fruits of their success and the validation. What about you personally? I don't know if you hear all this criticism out there, but what about you?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, you know, I think, ultimately, I think you got to keep perspective. I mean, I think that -- you know, I think that if you're seeing things relative to your standard, right? If you're always evaluating am I doing the best I can do relative to my role on the team, right? And oftentimes you don't feel like you did your best, you know, and sometimes that affects your team, it affects your players, it affects your staff. That's a huge motivator, right? So I think if you're building a culture, you want a loyal group. And I think as a leader, it's really, really important that you do your best for your people.

And, look, you've got to have a foundation. You've got to have some value. You've got to have an identity independent of the game, right? And I think for me, that's a faith foundation. Right? So that helps you keep perspective, right? And I think this game's always been

about people. And I think if you've got purpose, right, and you have a foundation, and you view the game for what it is -- it is a game. And I think it gives you an opportunity to teach things. If you lose sight of that, I don't think you've got a chance, right? So, ultimately, those things will continue to be tested. There's no doubt about it, right? So success is a dirty process, right? And, ultimately, it's rewarding. You have to go through some ups and downs along the way.

Q. Billy, in odd years, you get some big recruiting weekends. And this one is always one of them. What does a win like this do from that standpoint to have a night like this in The Swamp?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. You've got to get them in the building and you've got to cash it in, right? You know, that place is special, you know. I grew up watching games on TV, right? I grew up watching Florida and Tennessee. So we've got one of the best game day experiences in all of football. I mean, that place, when it's sold out and they're into it like they were tonight, there's not another place like it in the country, right? So to get kids in there for them to have a front row seat to that, for them to see our players play with the effort and to play with the loyalty that they played tonight, I mean, it only helps. It adds to the product and the experience that we have to offer the players. University of Florida is unmatched, the student-athlete experience here is second to none, right? So pretty good night. Pretty good night.

Q. How do you explain the leadership of Kingsley and Tyreek Sapp tonight in the trenches?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. No. I think without question, you know, we won the battle up front on both sides of the ball. And I think Kingsley, there was a presence there during the week and I think before the game, within the game. His personality -- I mean, Kingsley is an alpha, right? And he's got an edge to him. And I think that rubs off on the group. And Sapp's the same way. We talk about being a black flag guy, Sapp is a black flag guy, right? So Sapp is a player that never has a bad day. He is an effort guy. He's tough. He's physical. He's one of our best practice players. You walk around the corner and you see Sapp, he makes you better. And those two definitely impacted our team for the better tonight.

Q. Hey, Billy, as you continue to build this thing, what's a win like this in this environment -- we talk about belief, how much does that augment that belief going forward? I know you guys have made a lot of gains in the program, recruiting, facilities, but to win one like this at your place in your environment.

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BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. I think the most important thing is the players in that locker room. I'd like to think the staff -- we got young staff that may be -- you know, what are they thinking in their head at times. But I think ultimately for your players, there is -- it galvanizes your team a little bit. All of a sudden you say, hey, you're late. You got a 300 yard shuttle after practice. All of a sudden that carries a little more weight than it did before. Right? So just the discipline, the attention to detail. We're probably a little over the top at times, but I think, ultimately, it's helped us have success in the past.

We ask a lot of our players. And, look, when you're not getting a return on the investment, you know, much like you guys do, you take your money and go somewhere else, right? So, ultimately, I think that group will double down. We got good veteran players that have set a good example, and we've got some really talented young players that I think it's good for them to experience what they experienced today.

All right, guys, thank you all.

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