

University of Florida Football Media Conference

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Coach Billy Napier

Press Conference



COACH NAPIER: One of the most historic rivalries in all of college football. And I think it's a privilege to be an opportunity of that for not only our players but the entire organization.

This is a game that matters 24/7, 365. We're certainly excited about being in the Swamp Saturday night, sold-out crowd. I think that's five straight for Gator Nation. So we're very thankful for that.

It's also senior day for a group. This will be their last opportunity to play at the Swamp. And certainly this is a group that's done a lot of good in their time. We've seen a lot of growth out of a lot of these young people.

We're having Tim Tebow back to recognize him for his College Football Hall of Fame. Certainly one of the best Gators to have ever done it. And awesome to have Tim back this weekend.

It's also Thanksgiving this week. And I think there's an element of perspective and gratitude here that I think we all could benefit from. And certainly we've started some of the things we do with the players this week.

So I think in weeks like this, it's important that every person within the organization and the team understands that their role matters. And I think it's important that we -- the people in leadership, players in particular -- they need to go out of their way and be vocal about that and making sure that everyone knows that. I think there's something special about being a part of something larger than yourself.

I think football creates that opportunity, and we have to remember -- I was talking to the accountability group just a while ago -- I think you've got to ask a question: What does our team need from me? And certainly weeks like this, I think it's magnified a little bit.

You're in the position to serve. Ultimately leadership is about service, and really challenge those guys between now and Tuesday. What does the team need from you and what are you going to bring to the table throughout the

week?

So we control how we prepare. We can't ever lose sight of that. I think it's important that, given the dynamic of this game, certainly the two quarterbacks and the situation there, I think there's going to be an element of that.

So we control our energy. We control our attitude. We control how we prepare. We all understand the importance and magnitude of the rivalry game and certainly an incredible opportunity for our team to play against a well-thought-of Florida State football team.

Q. Does the practice schedule alter with Thanksgiving, or does it at all?

COACH NAPIER: We'll slide things back briefly on Tuesday and Wednesday to grab a little bit of time knowing that Thursday we move everything up three hours. So we just exchange a little bit of time there. Add a little bit to the back end on Tuesday, Wednesday, and then we grab some time so that we can speed things up on Thursday.

We try to be out of the building by 4 o'clock Thursday and give the players an opportunity to spend time, if they have family in town or family nearby locally. And if not most of these guys will go to their position coach's house.

Q. Does the schedule within the schedule change because of the change at quarterback now?

COACH NAPIER: I think ultimately we just have to play a brand of football that relative to Max and his experience, what he knows and what he's got confidence in. I think we've still got to feature the players that we know are important each week.

But ultimately every offense I've ever been a part of starts with what the quarterback can do well. So that will be part of the plan. No different than they're going to be going through some of the same dynamics.

Q. How is Graham doing on his collarbone?

COACH NAPIER: We took another image yesterday. We



felt good about that image. We're basically going to go in a two-week period here where we're going to give a chance for the fracture to start the process of growing back and then we'll reevaluate things.

I think in the meantime we're going to do exhaustive research on like cases in college football and the National Football League relative to players that have been through similar injuries, just making sure we're giving him the best map for him going forward with the rest of his career.

Q. How is Graham dealing with it and having something like this happen especially late in the year?

COACH NAPIER: Graham is mature. I think he's really bright. He's got -- much like any great competitor, I think he obviously wishes he was able to do everything he could do for the team. But he's going to be around, and he'll still contribute to the team in the ways that he can.

But, yeah, it's tough. I think injuries -- sometimes for players those are the most some of the more challenging things that you go through because you think about things that you could do differently, but ultimately a lot of things it is what it is. So I think he's done a terrific job for our team. I think he'll continue to do that.

Q. What was kind of your impression what you saw from Rodemaker, now their starting quarterback when you watched him on film?

COACH NAPIER: I've got a long-standing history with Rodemaker. His dad is a long-time friend of my dad's. And when I was growing up, heck, Coach Rodemaker was always around at different events and camps and things we would go to. So I think we even started the recruiting process a little bit with him at Louisiana.

So he's a coach's son. He's very bright. This is his fourth year in the system. So he got there in '20. So I mean he's acquired reps throughout his time there. He'll have a good grasp of what they do.

A little bit different type of player but certainly he's got his strengths. And they've got terrific skill around him. So there will be an element of experience. I think that's the big thing.

And he's played -- I think if you go back to the Louisville game last year he had to step in there and play, and certainly he's played a lot; when the games have been in control they've put him in there. So there's a pretty good sample size of him playing.

Q. What struck you about Max's demeanor the other

night?

COACH NAPIER: I think Max kind of did what I thought he would do. I think Max is a competitor. He's got a level of belief in himself. He's always been a very confident guy. And for the most part, I think we had the one ball exchange, the ball-handling issue be. Outside of that, he did what he was supposed to do.

And I think we changed gears a little bit there to try help him out. And I think critical fourth-down throw into a tight window. And then he threw a nice ball on the outside on the double move.

So first plays in there he throws a strike to Ricky on the naked. So he did a lot of good things. He's been working hard since the first day he's gotten here. He's improved.

And I'll tell you, I think the players have -- he's got good connection and camaraderie with the players. So I think they see him every day. They know who he is and what he's capable of.

Q. (Indiscernible) the margin of error, (indiscernible) the other team, it's slight. What are a couple of things maybe down the stretch that stood out to you? One that's been talked about is Trevor not getting out of bounds. Like, what was he told and that cost you guys?

COACH NAPIER: Yeah, it's --

Q. You said you were going to review.

COACH NAPIER: Yeah, I think there's a handful of situational calls in the game. Obviously Trevor knows not to run out of bounds. I think a simple mistake there.

And I think the grounding penalty before the half was a missed opportunity in my opinion. We're about, I would say, 10 or 15 yards away from the kick line there. So Graham can obviously do better there.

And I think the fourth-and-17th call, we've just got to do a little better job in the hook areas of the field. We've got players there. I think just there's players in position there; we just have to have a little more awareness. And we can execute the rush plan a little bit better.

So, yeah, I think there's 12 to 15 plays in that game, I think, that impacted the end result. When you lose these games by these point totals, it's all magnified. So every possession counts. We're talking about 12 possessions a game on average for both sides of the ball. I think each one of those where you don't maybe get the results you

want, there's something in that possession you can point to that you can do better.

That's where we're at as a program. Every time we put the ball down, no matter who the opponent is, that margin of error that you're talking about I think that's who we are. That's where we're at, every play counts, every possession counts.

Q. Graham has another year of eligibility. Obviously we won't be able to speak to him because of injury. But what indication do you get as far as him wanting to be back with the program and so forth, and the decision he'll have to make in his future?

COACH NAPIER: Sure. I'll let him handle that. Much like we've done with players in the past, they have their process that they want to go through. And out of respect for that we're going to allow them to do that.

But Graham has been fantastic. And, again, we'll let him, how does he want to announce his decision, how does he want to go about that, we'll let him do that.

Q. (Indiscernible) different is the play calling with Max? He has the running ability that maybe he's the only quarterback in the room that has that. How do you adjust what you've done all year with Graham to better fit Max for this week?

COACH NAPIER: That's what we do. I think we take -- every offense that you have evolves based off what the quarterback is really good at. And certainly Max is a little bit different type of player.

They're kind of going from Jordan Travis to Rodemaker. We're going from Graham Mertz to Max Brown. There's an element of change for both teams. And certainly that's part of the strategy relative to the game.

Q. After the fourth-and-17, I know it's hindsight, but do you wish maybe you brought pressure there instead of playing? Was it sticks defense? Was it pattern match? What was it?

COACH NAPIER: I think sticks defense, define that for me.

Q. Rush four, the rest of everybody else, don't let anybody behind you and try to make the tackle in front of the sticks.

COACH NAPIER: No, I think we called what we called, and I think we have players in the area of completion. I think we need to do a little bit better job distributing in our

zones.

We did rush four. And look, I think hindsight's 20/20. There are other options. And I think we spend a ton of time on these fourth-down, got-to-have-it scenarios. And I think we went with what we thought was best at the time.

Oftentimes it's not about what you do, it's how you do it, and there's a coaching and player element to both, if that makes sense.

Q. From a recruiting standpoint (indiscernible) debate on these instate rivalries, like, one team wins and it impacts the recruiting of (indiscernible). There's been a lot of chatter about keeping your recruiting class together when you're struggling. How big of a concern is that right now? Have you noticed any impact of these decisions being based on struggles lately?

COACH NAPIER: Yeah, you know, I think one of the things that's been interesting about this group that we have committed is I think they understand where we're at relative to our current dynamic.

I think part of the pitch and in the conversation I think there is a desire to be a part of something being built. How do we get Florida back to where it's been before? We have to acquire really good groups of players back to back to back. And I think there's a good relationship between this class and some of the younger players in our team. I think there's some key people within each of those groups.

And look, anytime you struggle as a program, there's an element of that that affects recruiting. But there's no doubt about it. But there's also, you're early in your tenure, I think there's a reality relative to the big picture. And I think some are up for the challenge. I think this is a unique pace and a special place.

So it's a great group. And I think they're made of the right stuff. They're up for the challenge. I think recruiting is always a battle. I don't know that it's ever been easy.

So we're trying to recruit elite players at every position. We have a number of them committed. And we've got about a month or so to get to the finish line. And I think I've been pleased with their response, let me put it that way.

And I think, ultimately, they have relationships to the players on our team, and that gives them insight to what's it like here, what's taken place here. And I think that gives me some confidence, if that makes sense.

So we all understand you've got to stack several groups back to back to get to where you want to go. So we're in

the process of doing that.

So, yeah, winning and losing affects recruiting, momentum affects recruiting. There's no doubt about it. But we've got a great experience to sell here and one that I think people have confidence and belief in.

Q. You guys are a game-winning kick against Arkansas and a fourth-and-17 stop away from being 7-4. Do you think that this team is better than its record is right now?

COACH NAPIER: You know, I think we are a team -- I think it goes back to Edgar's comment earlier -- I think we're a team that can be competitive with about anybody, if that makes sense. We're capable of beating anybody and anybody's capable of beating us, if that makes sense. I think that's who we are.

I think our struggles have been inconsistency. We're yet to put it together, a dominant performance in all three parts of our team. Some of that is injuries, lack of depth, youth. I mean, we're not going to allow excuses to creep into what we're trying to accomplish, if that makes sense.

We are trying to improve. We're trying to get the most out of our players. And I think it's a fun team to coach because we've got some veteran players that are just awesome in their approach, attitude, leadership, they've maintained energy. The work ethic, the practice habits.

And then we've got a lot of guys that they don't know any different. We've got a lot of young cats that are just showing up and it's like, what's next. And I think there's some things about that that you respect.

So, look, we are what our record indicates. We've come up short in a handful of games. And we can coach better and play better. That's what I think about. I'm thinking about things we can do -- I'm going back to that question that I'm asking our accountability group: What does our team need from you now?

And ultimately we're in the service business, right? We've got to do the best job we can do for our people from a leadership standpoint, both the players and all parts of the organization.

So I can tell you that this is a resilient group, just being around them the last couple of days. Went to Missouri and competed, played our butt off. And not perfect. We've got work to do in that area.

Q. (Indiscernible) is going to be a challenge week-to-week with any team, but is it easier this week

given bowl eligibility is at stake, you can knock your rival out, senior day, night game in the Swamp -- does that make it easier?

COACH NAPIER: I think all of those are external but they have impact. There's no question about it. I think when you lose a couple in a row, you're looking for buttons to push.

And I think this week provides some of that if that makes sense. We haven't had that problem. So I think for me that's one of the blessings about this team is that we don't necessarily have that issue. I'm not looking for some secret formula to get them to play hard.

I think there's some intangibles and loyalty that's been developed. They want to do their job and do their best for each other. So we just need to do our job a little better, that's the key.

Q. Back to recruiting, talking to stacking elite-level classes, what's your philosophy on the transfer portal? Is that viewed more as supplemental year to year and focus on high school? Or how do you mix the two?

COACH NAPIER: Yeah, I think holistically, much like -- I think that NFL analogy is realistic. I think you want to build your team through the draft. You want to add quality players through free agency that fit and maybe fill needs. And I think ultimately that's the approach that we've taken. That's the approach we'll continue to take.

And, look, I've said this to you guys many times, this math problem changes every day. So we may not have a salary cap, but we do have a roster number limitations. So that's the cap.

So I think ultimately it's a fluid dynamic. But I mean, there's no question, I view it very much like free agency. We go get a Ricky Pearsall at receiver, we got get a Graham Mertz at quarterback. There's a number of examples of that.

So you've got to evaluate your team annually, if that makes sense, much like the National Football League does relative to what do you need.

It's almost like the old junior college model. You used to go get players at positions where you had depth issues or you needed a significant impact player. This game has evolved, and now the portal provides that.

Yeah, I think ultimately that's the way I view it. You want to build your team through the draft. You want to retain players, you want to develop players. And then obviously

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

there's positions of need along the way, and you go get them through the portal.

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