

University of Florida Football Media Conference

Wednesday, December 20, 2023

Gainesville, Florida, USA

Coach Bill Napier

Press Conference



BILLY NAPIER: I think when you get to a day like today, realization is it takes a team of people. I think we're very fortunate at the University of Florida that we have a great team. Can't thank the administration enough relative to what they've done here the last two years to improve the process, to improve the experience of the player, and to give us the opportunity to compete and sign the very best players in the country, and we did that today.

I want to thank our coaches who have been on the road. Our on-the-field coaches go on the road for two weeks here, a little over that. We put Kali Kames on the road, Chad Lucas on the road, and both of those guys did a terrific job.

Certainly Coach Harris, to have the opportunity to get out there a little bit, was impactful as well.

We've got great people in our personnel department. Jacob LaFrance, Nick McDonald, Joe Hamilton was an All-Star in this cycle. Bird Sherrill.

We've got really, really good people in the back there. I can't compliment them enough relative to the evaluation process, the roster management process, young, talented, and certainly their work ethic was impressive. I think we improved there.

The on campus recruiting department, Bri Wade was exceptional. We added Skylar Wise to the mix here, halfway through the process there, and she did a great job. Certainly Katie Turner's leadership in that recruiting strategy role across the board, again, another All-Star that is a difference maker, and I think we all can agree to that.

We've got great pilots that work around the clock. They did their job and were a difference maker for us. I think the players did a nice job in this cycle. I can't compliment them enough in terms of the messaging, their ability to resonate with the players, their families. They're the best recruiters that we have relative to their experience here.

We'd be remiss if we didn't thank Florida Victorious, and

certainly we spent probably 18 months working towards a true systematic approach there. We've got great leadership there. Jose Costa, Nate Barbera, their time investment and a number of investors that have certainly impacted our ability to recruit at a high level.

A lot of local venues. Spurriers has been outstanding. We certainly appreciate Coach and Freddie and all they do to help us. 1908 Grand was impactful this year and Hotel Ilio as well.

It's a good group top to bottom. I know you've got a lot of questions here. We do have a mix of high school and portal to talk about today, but I think there's a few positions left. We're going to try to fill some holes here, but 19 of these guys are mid-year, and I do think that we've got a little bit of room here to work. It's a mid-year spot.

I know you've got questions. What do we got?

Q. Billy, you mentioned the coaches that were able to go out on the trail, Kali and Chad. Last time we spoke with you, there were obviously two different coaches in those spots. Can you take us to the decision to move on from those coaches and bring in new guys?

BILLY NAPIER: Sure. I think part of leadership is making tough decisions. I think that ultimately we felt like we needed to make changes there -- new voices, new leaders, new teachers. Those are tough. A ton of respect for Sean and Corey. They're exceptional at what we do. We felt we needed to make a change and certainly excited about the new faces we've been able to add.

This is a production business. We all understand that. Ultimately it's part of leadership.

Q. How did those changes affect this recruiting class? Obviously there were some losses at those positions in particular.

BILLY NAPIER: Which positions?

Q. Defensive back and defensive line.



BILLY NAPIER: What losses at those positions?

Q. Coaching staff, commitments.

BILLY NAPIER: I don't think we lost players at those two positions. ^ Phil SMAED *, but I think that was in the works prior to making that change. I do think that we were able to get commitments at those positions as well. So I think there's a little bit of both there, if that makes sense.

Ultimately, the position coach is part of the equation, but it's not the end-all, be-all. I think this cycle probably proves that. We may have lost one player, but we also added players at those positions. Good question.

Q. A lot of nice pieces in this class, but some pieces that maybe were expected at one point didn't make it into the class that reached as high as No. 3 in the rankings. I don't know where it sits now, but it's dropped precipitously. Is that just the way it's going to be after a season like you guys had? And is it just harder to convince guys to get on board then?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think you see it all across the country. I think down to the finish line, there's an element of recruiting. It's a battle, no question about it.

We're here today to talk about the players that we got, and we got some elite players. We got elite people. We got leaders. We have young men that were up for the challenge. Some weren't up for the challenge, but this group that we're here to talk about today and celebrate today decided, hey, you know what, I believe in what's happening there. I'm up for the challenge.

I think ultimately for me I respect the group that's committed, that signed today, that's excited about the work that's in front of us, and that's what I'm here to talk about. I'm not here to talk about those other situations.

Q. DJ Lagway, that was going to be my follow up. His buy-in, he committed more than a year ago. He's been on campus more than I have. He's just been bought in from day one and sealed the deal today. What does that mean and say about him?

BILLY NAPIER: DJ, the biggest compliment I can give DJ is that, as much attention as he has received throughout the recruiting process, he's a better human being, he's a better leader. His character, his faith, his example, the way he treats people, his work ethic, his focus, his drive to get better.

Yesterday in particular, the guy got up 4:30 a.m. He worked out. He drove 45 minutes. He did a throwing

session. He accepts the National Player of the Year Award, and then he calls and says, "hey, let's jump on a zoom here and talk about formations and motions."

That's the type of young man we're talking about here. There's substance to him, and I think he's been raised by an exceptional family.

Derek and Nikita Lagway are consummate with respect to parenting and what they've instilled in that young man. I went to Willis last week and had the chance to observe DJ and his team get recognized at the local school board meeting. To see him with his teammates in that community that he got recruited to leave, but he stayed there with his roots, where his family grew up. He left that place better than he found it.

Ultimately, we all know DJ's talented, but that's not what makes him exceptional, in my opinion. It's these intangible things that make him a difference maker. So DJ Lagway, he's talented, but there's a lot more to that young man than just the talent.

Q. To kind of teach DJ, whether it's film, preparation, taking care of your body, how much do you expect Graham to help and help DJ grow?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I told DJ last week it's probably -- when we look back at DJ's career, we're going to say that one of the more impactful decisions in his career was the fact that Graham Mertz made the decision to play an additional year of football, and I think Graham's a professional.

He's certainly had a good year, but I think more importantly DJ's going to get a chance to observe a guy who knows how to prepare, knows how to lead, understands the attention to detail, the discipline. What does that year round process look like to be a college quarterback at this level? And DJ's transition would have been a lot more difficult if Graham wasn't here.

DJ is the kind of guy that's going to come in and embrace that. I could say that Graham is the same type of leader. He's confident enough and selfless enough. Those two guys are very much like minded, and they're going to hit the ground running here. It won't be long.

I think we're going to look back and say, you know what, that was a huge decision relative to DJ's long-term career.

Q. Billy, you got four in the portal. Would you talk about those four. And then would you expand upon that about how many more do you anticipate that you're going to be landing out of the portal, or is that a

fluid situation?

BILLY NAPIER: I think Joey Slackman would be the first to talk about. Joey was the conference Player of the Year at Penn, 6'3" 1/2, 295. He's got good length. He's a former wrestler. The film was impressive. I think he got 20-plus offers pretty quickly in the cycle. We started communication. He came on an official visit.

I'll tell you, I wasn't expecting the height and length that walked in the door, but more importantly, when this guy started engaging our staff and people throughout the organization, he made an impression. He left an impression. This guy's got leadership. He's got a motor, he's driven, he's ambitious, and he's got a plan.

But the number one thing I would say about Joey, our players love the guy. This guy leaves campus after an official visit, and I'm getting calls and texts every day about Joey Slackman and how, man, we've got to get that guy on our team. I think just his personality and demeanor resonated with our players, all parts of our team, not just that position group, but offensive players, specialists, defensive players.

So I was really impressed with Joey and certainly excited about getting him here and getting to work.

Who else? Trikweze Bridges is height, weight, speed, ton of production. The guy has played corner but has got some position flexibility. He can play safety. Very intelligent. Was on the leadership council at Oregon. He's got one year of eligibility, and I think looking to create some more value for himself a little bit closer to home, being from Lanett, Alabama.

So really excited about the flexibility that he offers and experience that he has.

Chimere Dike is a receiver from Wisconsin who played with Graham. Chim is 6'1" and change, about 185 pounds; he's a 10.8 100 meter guy. Very productive two years ago. He's got flexibility inside and outside. Polished player. Very consistent, dependable player that I think brings some speed.

But he's a very smart, mature, aware player. He's got a ton of experience. Certainly there's a relationship with Graham there that helped.

Who else do we got? Brandon Crenshaw-Dickson, 6'7", 310, 35 arm. He's played, I think, 2,500 snaps. He started 35-plus games. Very productive player, All-Conference player in the Mountain West, and equally as impressive when you meet him.

Good complementary -- good compliments out there related to teammate, toughness, leadership, smart player. Looking to play against better competition. Very similar dynamic to maybe what C'Bo was trying to do when he came here.

I think we added 7,000-plus snaps, over 100 starts with just those four players alone. We've got some more work to do in the portal. I do think the number you're juggling here is the mid-year number. So we will have a little bit of flexibility there and have the capability of adding a few more players.

Q. I think you guys have had 16 players announce they plan to go elsewhere. Is that a level of attrition you expected at this point? Is there a level of concern with however many there was that you brought here, players that have signed here under you?

BILLY NAPIER: I think a little bit of the attrition was expected, much like we discussed before. I think you look across college football right now, I think we're probably below average to some degree.

I think each one of these situations is a little bit different. I respect all the decisions. Like I mentioned before, you're either in or you're out. My message was don't come back in January unless you're fully committed to what we want to do as a team.

I think, of those 16, there's a handful of walk-ons, there's a handful of guys that are getting their degree. Some of those are relative to role in the team. And then there's a couple that we probably would like to have back.

But I don't think it's going to change. I think every year you're going to face a very similar situation. It's a new element to roster management in college football.

Q. Would you prefer something that's more like transfer in December and then you put signing day back to where it was in February?

BILLY NAPIER: We've got to do something, I'll tell you that much. We've got to do something. I think the challenge is you get -- I think most coaches are going to tell you that June is a challenge and then December is a challenge.

The end of the season, the portal opening, official visit paired with early signing period, bowl prep, staff changes -- I mean, you're juggling a lot of balls here. So we've got to do something. I think ultimately -- we've added a layer of work here relative to roster attrition, but also you've got to fill those needs.



As you can see, you do your best to over-sign to some degree anticipating attrition, and then you've got to make a lot of tough decisions. So the second portal period presents an opportunity to kind of correct any issues you have.

Yeah, I think it's a lot. There's a lot of things that need to be fixed in college football right now, and that's one of them.

Q. With a player like LJ, how difficult is it to get someone like him that's very highly sought after over the line when you don't have a coach at that position officially?

BILLY NAPIER: He's going to play over the edge for us. Mike Peterson has been recruiting him. We kind of see him in that F mode. He certainly has got a lot of position flex. We were able to cross that bridge. It wasn't a factor. I think we're in a position here where we'll have an announcement the next couple days, and certainly that wasn't a factor. We were able to bridge that gap.

I think LJ -- one thing I'll say about LJ that I respect about him is he is up for the challenge. We talked to LJ in the very beginning of the process -- LJ is an alpha. He's a leader. He's an elite competitor, and he's done very similar things at his high school. I think he's got that type of presence and that type of voice, and he's an impact player.

So there's a handful of players in this class, LJ being one of them, Myles Graham being one of them, DJ Lagway being one of them, that were leaders the entire time. LJ's got a terrific family. Dad's got a coaching background. His mom is incredible. Sister's a very impressive young lady.

There's substance there, and I think ultimately LJ was up for the challenge that he's going to be a difference maker here for sure.

Q. To provide some clarity on the future of the strength and conditioning program heading into January...

BILLY NAPIER: I think, like we talked about previously, we're kind of in -- we've been in an evaluation mode. I do anticipate some different leadership there, different approach there. You guys all know Mark. Mark's an unbelievable leader, person. He's done an unbelievable job for me personally for six years. I can't compliment him enough in terms of character and loyalty.

One of the things that Mark and I have always talked about is what's next for him in his career? Ultimately we're going

to try to help Mark with that, and he's going to be doing different things for our organization, a lot more upstairs, kind of making some of that transition into the coaching element.

He's always had aspirations to do those things, and I think that presents an opportunity for us to bring new leadership from a strength and conditioning standpoint.

And I do think that we're right in the middle of that process. But I can't compliment Mark enough relative to the work he's done for us. We wouldn't be here without Mark Hawke. I'm excited about helping Mark pursue some of the things that he and I have always discussed.

Q. To follow up on that evaluation process, do you anticipate any changes to the offensive staff in that competition?

BILLY NAPIER: It's to be determined. Much like we discussed before, we're in the middle of that. We're going to go through -- it's one box at a time here, right? We're going to have new leadership in the nutrition area. I'm excited about potential candidates there. Then we've got a lot of other areas, much like most years, where we're going to do things to try to improve our team.

Q. There's a report that a new defensive line coach is in place; is that accurate?

BILLY NAPIER: We'll have that announcement as soon as we can. We'll get it to you. We've been going through that process, and I feel comfortable with where we landed.

Q. You touched on Crenshaw-Dickson. Five offensive linemen, very sizeable guys, I assume some true tackles in there. How important is that to get that area of your team maybe a little bit beefed up?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, for sure. I think, in particular, height, length on the edges. I think Fletcher Westphal in particular. Let's see here, Mike Williams. Both of which, you look at height, length, you're talking about 6'8", 330, 6'6", 308. Mike Williams is a football junkie and a phenomenal family.

We kind of had to get out of our footprint there, but I go up to see Mike. We're sitting down, and this guy starts talking football. It's like talking to a coach. He's a student of the game. He's talking about speed rush, speed to power, long-arm, ghost, double hand swipe, all the things he does to combat those things.

He's got football pedigree. He's a worker, and I'm excited about Mike. He's a very bright, smart young man. He's got

great presence to him.

And Fletcher Westphal, I can't compliment Fletcher enough in terms of the recruiting process. I think his mom and dad and Fletcher executed that process, just total professionals, educated, flipped over every rock. Fletcher's a unique athlete. You look at junior tape to senior tape, he may have made the biggest jump of any player in this class. He'll be here mid-year. He's 330; he looks like he's 260. So Fletcher is going to make us better.

Then the inside players, Mascoll. Mascoll has position flexibility. He's got height and length as well. He plays in a really good program, and I think he's played a lot of football. He's 4 3/4. He's a lean 285. He's played some tackle and some guard.

Then Noel Portnjagin --

Q. How long did that take you to get that?

BILLY NAPIER: Me and Rick were working on it earlier. Noel Portnjagin, when you get a chance to meet this guy, this is one a heck of a story. This guy is 19 years old. He's been playing semi-professional football. He plays against 20- and 30-year-old men Tuesdays and Thursdays and gets in a van and drives an hour and a half for team practice, then gets in a van and drives back to his community.

He does individual practice the other days of the week. This guy is a freak athlete. He does some things -- he's 6'5", 330 pounds. He runs around. Go watch his tape. This guy's one of the more impressive players in the class.

He comes to our camp, we see him, and it's immediate. We're like who is he? And then he goes to -- every camp he goes to he gets a scholarship offer.

Brandon Collier has a unique organization that takes international players, brings them over here in the summer, and gets them exposure and creates opportunity. Brandon is a phenomenal human, has passion to help young people, and he's using football in some of these unique areas of our world, and it's creating opportunities. Noel is a great example.

But Noel, he'll be here soon. This guy is really -- I don't think he's ever even lifted weights. He started like a couple weeks ago. So he's a heck of an athlete. Very bright. Speaks three languages. He's impressive.

Q. Were you surprised by Trevor Etienne leaving? And it's a unique dynamic. I know the portal. Next season you're going to be facing -- I mean, Princely is

going to be on senior night, for example.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think Trevor's been great for the Gators. That's what I would say. I've got nothing but respect for Trevor. His attitude, his practice habits, his contribution to the team, nothing but respect. We wish him well going forward.

Q. I understand why you didn't want to talk about the guys who flipped and aren't here, but what would you say to the guys who are talking so much about it? Social media was the buzz today, sort of sky is falling narrative.

BILLY NAPIER: I think we anticipated some attrition. Reality is we might have been okay with some of it. I think you find out a lot about where you're at when you go through a process and how things are handled to some degree.

Look, it goes back to, if you don't want to be here, let's go ahead and get that out of the way now, especially in today's dynamic because, if they get it wrong now, then maybe it's not right for them.

We've got a couple different opportunities here going forward to add players. I'm looking for players that want to play at the University of Florida. It means something. It is a privilege. It's a sacred opportunity to be a part of this place.

Look, it's for some, and it's not for some. Ultimately recruiting is a battle, and I think every team across the country, it's down to the wire. I'm excited about the players that we added to our team, and looking down the list here, there's some great stories.

These two backs that we added to our team, they're both exceptional. Kahnen Daniels rushed for 2,700 yards. He's a team captain. He won a state championship. He's Player of the Year in his classification at Mississippi. He's got a phenomenal story when you get a chance to get to know KD and the things he's overcome and the people that have impacted his life, the program that he plays for, the toughness. If you're from West Port, Mississippi, you're a tough dude.

He's been a guy that sets the tone in the program. Not only a tough program, but we got the toughest dude out of a tough program. So KD, it's impressive to watch his body of work as a runner.

And Jadan Baugh. In my opinion, if you just go watch senior film and you know that guy is 6" and 3/4s. He weighed 230 pounds on his official visit. He's carrying the

ball, running routes, playing safety, linebacker, wildcat quarterback.

You go in his school, he's the president in that place. Every teacher, every administrator that you meet, Jadan Baugh is an exceptional young man, right?

His mom and dad are incredible. So a lot of great stories in this group.

Q. Myles Graham, a local guy, a guy that you and your staff got to watch closely this year. What are your thoughts about what he can provide for the defense?

BILLY NAPIER: He's a legacy, and there's something in Myles Graham that's different because of that. I think Myles was our first commitment, and he was my last home visit. You're sitting at that dinner table in his home and you're observing his mom, his dad, his sisters, his cousins, and you observe that, and you listen to their story.

It's in him, right? He cares about this place. I think he's an exceptional football player, but this guy's a leader, man. He's got presence. He's articulate. This guy is going to do a lot more than just be a great football player for the Gators.

Myles pretty well documented that he's not just a great linebacker, he's a heck of a running back too. Myles is ready to go too. He's physical. He's mature. Very smart player. And he's been very consistent and vocal, right? I think that's one of the reasons we were able to finish with a really good group is because of his leadership presence and the way he kind of carried the flag for this class.

Q. Losing Ricky and losing Caleb, you needed to fill in that wide receiver. You talked about DK, but you also signed Jerrae Hawkins and Tawaski Abrams. Can you talk about them a little bit?

BILLY NAPIER: Speed and more speed. I think Tank is probably one of the more electric skill players in the country. Took a huge step forward this year at IMG, just relative to adding some play strength, run the full route tree inside and outside, dynamic returner, phenomenal story coming down from West Virginia.

Tank's been incredible to get to know and work with, and he's -- I mean, immediately, when you see this guy on ground level there's just a different level of speed. He'll immediately be the fastest player on our team, and I think he's got a chance to change the game.

TJ Abrams is almost a running back build. He's 190 pounds at 5'10" and change. He's got 10-inch hands. He's

long. He's a 33-inch arm for 5'10". He's a big man, and he's got a ton of versatility. 10 500 meters, now that's rolling, especially at 190. He's another guy. He's taking AP Stats. His mom is awesome, and he's just got character.

In his school, you go in there, he's one of the leaders of the school and certainly was a leader on that team, which had really a historic year for that program. Their coach has done a really good job there.

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