

# University of Florida Football Media Conference

Saturday, April 13, 2024  
Gainesville, Florida, USA

## Head Coach Billy Napier Press Conference



Blue 19, Orange 17

**BILLY NAPIER:** Okay, guys, I think we had about 48,000 out there today. Maybe a few more. Very thankful for that. What a day for football, man. It was about as good as it gets.

I'm going to tell you, I think for the most part it was pretty clean. I think there's a lot of balance in the game and a ton of situation work, in particular right there at the end.

I'm proud of our time. I told them that on the field. You think about we're at the halfway point through the offseason. I think we've made a ton of progress. This group in particular, I think the leadership, the accountability, the self-discipline, and we've got a team. We've got a group that gets along with each other and has worked hard.

And we got out of here injury-free today for the most part, and we'll be able to take a break and kind of restart here in the middle of May. It's been a good day's working.

I found out today Zach is going to be -- it's his last day. Headed to Jacksonville, and we're certainly appreciative of all of your time here and wish you nothing but the best going forward.

What questions do we have here?

### **Q. How would you assess the quarterback play?**

**BILLY NAPIER:** I think when we -- I thought the rush and the coverage at times today -- the rush and the coverage worked well together. You could see that. I thought they did a nice job affecting the quarterback. The coverage was tight. Overall we've made progress in the secondary.

Yeah, I mean, I think we threw it to the other team a couple of times. We would like to have those back, but overall when given opportunity, I thought we took advantage of it.

I do think that those guys have been awesome. I mean, I

can't compliment those two guys enough. Just to see them, you have a guy -- it's like polar opposites, right? You have a guy that started 43 games who is incredibly aware, smart, different type of player than DJ, and then DJ obviously you can see he is athletic. He can make plays with his feet, and he has no experience.

To see those guys collaborate, to go back and forth throughout the spring, and today you can see DJ has made some progress. Just got here in January.

So overall a lot of good today. I do think there will be things that we can do better. There's no question about it. I thought at times the rush was effective, and I think the coverage had something to do with that. I thought we covered them pretty good today.

### **Q. What about the game-winning drive there, Graham? You obviously set that up with the punt, and it worked out to perfection for you.**

**BILLY NAPIER:** Yeah.

### **Q. Was there any playing with the clock and the numbers and the...**

**BILLY NAPIER:** Yeah, unique about the format of the game. Once it gets to four minutes, both teams have to play two-minute mode like they're behind, right? So we had time-outs in our pockets, both teams. I think we had some incomplete passes. We had some completions that got out of bounds, and that led to a couple of turnovers and possessions there. Yeah, I mean, I think it's fourth down, and you have three time-outs in your pocket to punt it away and then get it back and then to get some chunks.

I'm telling you right now, the situation that happened in that last possession, we have worked all of those situations in the last couple of weeks. It was like clinic tape. Even the clock and then they gave us 7 seconds and then there's the one more play scenario, and then to be able to line up and kick it. So got a chunk play -- two chunk plays in reality, and then to be able to execute the play with 7 seconds and get the time-out I thought was good situational ball.



**Q. (Off microphone)**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, it's a very specific situation, and I think Arlis -- we're going to be able to coach Arlis off the tape. He took a couple of rotations after he caught that. He literally needs to catch the ball and slide and then it's time-out. So, yeah, it was really good ball. I mean, that's as good of a situation as we could have asked for.

**Q. Coach, you talked about Graham's leadership all spring. Obviously he comes back. He's had a really good year last year. How has he handled all of the hype surrounding DJ? You just talked about how those guys work so well together.**

BILLY NAPIER: I think one thing about Graham, and you guys know him that are here all the time, is he is confident, he is humble, and he's a great teammate. I think he's got enough awareness. We're talking about 43 starts. He's been through the highs and lows throughout his career.

I think he sees a young player that's talented, and he is doing everything that he can do to help him take on more. I think not only teaching him the football part, but I just think the example everyday of how to prepare, how to approach meetings, the self-discipline part relative to how to take care of your body, how to study film.

I think we're going to look back and we're going to say that it's one of the best things that happened to the University of Florida is Graham Mertz came back for another year while DJ Lagway was a true freshman. It's going to benefit both guys.

I think there's something to teaching. I think that's the best way to learn. I think both guys are just good human beings, right, and I think they've got character. Yeah, so it's been fun to watch. Fun to be a part of.

**Q. How much more confident are you after this spring than you have been the previous two springs looking forward to see what you've got and how far you've come?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think I look around the room in a team meeting setting and I see some guys that are in year two, year three of our system that have played a lot of football. The top of that list is the quarterback position.

But overall the stat we've been using with the 41,600 snaps of experience, I think the guys that are coming back on this team understand the expectations. They know what we expect of them as people, as students, as players. I think as a coach, man, the players are what give you

confidence.

I think when you look around the room and you can trust the people that are in the room, and I think we're in a different place as a result of all the work we've done with the roster.

We're deeper. We've got more height and length. We've got more veteran players, and I think the young talent, the freshmen and the portal players, are going to help us. That to go along with the changes that we made after evaluating the season, I feel good about where we're at.

**Q. What did you kind of think from DJ Lagway in terms of the poise perspective? Obviously playing out there in front of all of those fans is different than what he has done in practice.**

BILLY NAPIER: I'm going to tell you I think Thursday is when I saw it. We actually finished Thursday practice with an overtime period, Orange versus Blue. We taught the situation and reviewed it in the team meeting and went out and executed and declared it's going to be worth three points. Whoever wins the overtime will start with a 3-0 lead.

I kind of saw him. Okay, it's time to compete. I think ultimately even showed that a little bit out there today. He kind of flipped the switch. You could see that competitive spirit a little bit.

That's the good thing because you don't know. You can practice all spring, but when it's time, I think he showed he's a competitor, and he had the ability. It wasn't too big for him. I think that was healthy.

**Q. How do you feel about the amount of field goals that got attempted today? Obviously that means the defense is getting stops. Pup Howard had that great pass breakup, but I'm sure you wanted the offense to finish some of those.**

BILLY NAPIER: It will be part of the evaluation of the game. I think we all understand red zone touchdowns are important. A couple borderline go-for-it situations where we maybe can manage the game a little bit better first, second, and third down.

Then, you know, you divide the specialists up. Each team has strengths and weaknesses. Part of the game is red zone touchdowns, and I think it's going to be that way each game next year in the season.

It's important every week, and I think that will be part of the lesson from the game. It's one of the reasons we play a

spring gang.

**Q. LJ got some run with the starters today. How do you feel like he did with that opportunity?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, we divided the teams up to try to create some balance between the groups. You're rotating players once the teams are declared, and there's no question, LJ has gotten better each practice.

I feel the same way about him. He showed out there today that it's not too big for him either. He was able to kind of get into that competitive mode. It's one thing to practice. It's another thing when that ball is put down, and there's a crowd in there to be able to narrow your focus and turn into a competitor and not be distracted.

I think he's in that same mold as DJ. There's some maturity there. Being a coach's son helps, but he is definitely a talented young player that's got a promising future.

**Q. Nice routes and catches for Marcus Burke today. What did you think about his spring, and I guess what's the next step for him? How does he elevate his game? What does he need to do?**

BILLY NAPIER: Marcus is one of the players that I'm most proud of on our team. Marcus has made a ton of progress since we arrived a couple of years ago. Just overall.

I think he has matured. I think he's grown a lot, and I think overall his approach to life has helped his approach to football. I think he's had the best offseason since he's been here. He changed his body. He's added quite a bit of lean muscle. His durability has been better. He's been available. He's battled the injury bug a little bit.

I'll tell you, he finished the spring strong. He stacked up. Practice 13 was probably his best, and then he had a good day Thursday, and then today. So we need Marcus Burke to grow up and mature. I think this offseason he's proven that he is capable. I'm excited about 88, as I call him. I'm proud of the way he has grown as a person. I think ultimately we're seeing that the football is better because of that.

**Q. What have you seen out of that star position? You've seen a couple of guys get some run there, Sharif and Aaron gates. What has been your evaluation throughout the course of the spring and then again today?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, we have two phenomenal players. I mean both those guys. Look, I think they both have

position flex too. Both those guys are really good young players. I'm not so sure both of them couldn't play corner, safety, and that's a challenging spot because you're in the run fits. You have to cover the slot. You're a blitzer.

Some of the stuff that we do, you've got to be in the half, right? So both those guys are really good young players. So both those guys are going to impact our team for sure. I think we'll be looking for ways to get those guys on the field and potentially both of them, right?

Two good young ones that I think are going to prove to be a major factor next season.

**Q. Talk about obviously a lot of pressure on Andre heading into the season with Ricky gone. He had a lot of big catches. Obviously the long touchdown. Talk about what you thought about his day.**

BILLY NAPIER: It's a product of a lot of hard work. I think he's did today what I've been watching him do all spring. Been very productive. He has great practice habits, mature. His dad was a pro player. I think that contributes to his mindset a little bit.

Then I think overall we have a lot of players on our football team that are just like Trey. They played for the first time last year as rookies or unproven players, and then they've went into this offseason. Now they know what it's like out there, and they've trained with that intent. I think you've seen him change his body.

The other thing that I think is beneficial is he observed Ricky Pearsall all summer and all season, and Ricky was a professional in terms of the way he approached the game. Much like DJ is getting to observe Graham, I think Trey got a chance to observe Ricky last year, and that's contributing to what we see there. We're going to get our money's worth out of Trey Wilson. I can promise you that.

**Q. I think you guys had to fight off Nick Saban and Alabama for Jadan Baugh right around signing day. What was your initial evaluation, and then has he met that and proved your evaluation right this spring?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, another rookie that put on a show out there today. It was fun to watch. He 238 pounds. Yeah, listen, first of all, I went to Jadan's school in January, and initially we thought he was a linebacker. I go to the school. That was the initial evaluation. He's playing linebacker. Then we find out that he wants to play running back, and we had a really good evaluation on him. We had a high grade on him.

He ended up going to Arkansas. Phenomenal kid, right? I

remember the first time I went into that school. His dad actually played linebacker at Columbia High School, and I played against his dad. His dad played linebacker. I played quarterback.

Phenomenal family. Just a class act. You go in that school with that kid, I mean, he is what you are looking for. Not only passes the physical evaluation, but he's a leader. He can run the route tree as a receiver. He was a Wildcat quarterback, and he played linebacker and safety too. He played the entire game. He was a very productive player.

I think we'll look back at that one, and that's going to be good for the Gators. I think we saw a little flash of that today.

**Q. The defense was very active. Last year had a bunch of sacks ultimately that didn't really translate. What do you see from this unit that makes you optimistic that it's going to translate better in season?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think that we just have height, length, depth. I think the rush has improved throughout the spring. We got a lot of players that are capable there.

I think sub rushers, we have height, length. We have numerous players that I think can be effective as rushers. The coverage is better. I think that's half the battle. When you start talking about affecting the quarterback, coverage is part of that, right? Disguise, pressure, the rush lane integrity. We tipped some balls today. That's one of the ways that you can affect the quarterback.

Yeah, it will add up. Yeah, I just think we have good players there top to bottom.

**Q. You seem to be in charge of the sacks. Was that a tough job to decide whether to let the offense get a play or --**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, you're trying to do your best for both teams there without being jaded. It's one of the tougher jobs.

**Q. And guys are pleading, right?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, they all like to yell, "Sack," no matter what's happening. I think we got it right for the most part today.

**Q. I know it's only the end of spring, but have you thought about DJ's role next year, package of plays?**

BILLY NAPIER: I've answered that question about 500 times I think since we signed the guy. I think the big thing

here is we have to get DJ to a place where he's confident and then a place where we trust him and his teammates trust him. I think he's definitely proven to be mature enough. His work ethic is outstanding. He's developing nicely.

I think can make us different, right? I think there are some wrinkles there that can cause issues for defenses, and we have to understand we're taking 15 off when we put him out here. I'm excited about how that can make us more difficult to defend. That's what I would say.

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