

University of Florida Football Media Conference

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Billy Napier

Press Conference



BILLY NAPIER: Before we get going here, congratulations to Lake Mary winning the Little League World Series. Hopefully some future Gators that may win a few College World Series.

I would tell you not only their performance on the field, but just it's a class act organization, just observing those players, the coach, the coaching staff. Awesome to see that success in our state.

Excited about season tickets being sold out. I think it's a big deal. Obviously this home opener is sold out. Our Gator fans continue to impress. We're looking forward to the season.

We're excited about our opportunity. Our opponent this week, we're very familiar with. Obviously it's in our state. We have familiarity. Their head coach and I worked together for four years in the past.

They have a very talented roster. You do your homework about the recruiting classes, and certainly the players they've added to their team in the portal. So this presents a great challenge, one that I would like to say we've been preparing for going all the way back to January.

This is an opportunity for our team to start telling their story relative to 2024, to put on display some of the intangibles that we've developed over time through a lot of hard work.

I do think in these types of games emotion will not be needed. Energy, we won't be lacking for that. I think the key here is that we execute. I think execution will be key. I think it's important that between now and the game that all of our decisions reflect kind of our vision for who we want to be, what type of outcome that we want Saturday.

I think it's important, there's one way to develop confidence, and I think that's how we prepare. It's really critical that we take advantage of all of our time here. We have some self-discipline throughout the week as we get ready for the opener.

What questions do we have here?

Q. Where do you think this team has made its most progress?

BILL NAPIER: I think our football has improved. I think we have a formula that we kind of subscribe to. I think that we've improved taking care of the ball, creating takeaways. I think our fundamentals have improved. I think we have better awareness and knowledge relative to situational football.

I do think that we've gotten to a point where I think we can play fast. Our height, length and speed can be a factor in the game. Be aggressive in how we play.

I think we're in good condition. I think our team has gotten into football condition. Hopefully that creates opportunities for us to finish, whether that's finish plays, finish possessions or finish the game.

Ultimately I think all parts of our team we've improved.

Q. You mentioned your time with Mario. What was he like as a colleague?

BILL NAPIER: I had tremendous respect. Very passionate. I think he took pride, tremendous pride, in his role. I love his family. Just a great human being.

We were in the trenches on offense. We were in the trenches together in recruiting. There's certainly a relationship there. It's an added element to the game, to some degree.

Q. With Bain in the seven front...

BILL NAPIER: I think they've got a whole group of front seven players that can create issues for you. Bain, yeah, I think he's just really unique. Loose-hipped, twitchy power. He's instinctive. I think he played as a rookie, he was physically ready. Comes from a great program there at Central. Had a good fundamental base. He was able to get there midyear and be a factor as a freshman.

We anticipate him even being better in year two. That will certainly be one of the key matchups of the game, to go along with several other players up front.

Q. Cam Ward, what do you see on film? His story, how inspirational is that?

BILL NAPIER: I like I've been watching Cam Ward forever (smiling).

No, I think he's obviously been very productive. You look at the yards, the touchdowns, the completion percentage, multiple stops. I do think that his ability to extend the play is a part of the game, will be a key factor in the game.

But he's got arm talent. They've got a great group of skill, an incredible group of linemen to protect. The tight end group has athleticism and size. They have a really good surrounding cast to go along with a guy who is a very accomplished quarterback.

Heck, even as a transfer, they got him picked to be the pre-season player of the year in the ACC. Obviously highly regarded.

Q. When you look back over your career, home openers, knowing what your team can do, the confidence level, have you been surprised after the games how your team played either positively or negatively? What is your confidence in this team?

BILL NAPIER: I think experience matters in openers. I think if you've got a crew that lacks experience, sitting there in the locker room, this is their first opportunity and time, I think sometimes that may not bode well.

We've got a veteran group for the most part. We're playing at home, which will be a comfort level there. But yeah, I think you try to keep the staff, you have more time to prepare, so making sure that it's simple enough so that your guys can go play with confidence and play fast, communicate well, and try to eliminate some of those errors. I think you can have a little bit too much offense and defense and special teams in the plan, if you're not careful.

Q. The sense of urgency in Graham in fall camp going into year two...

BILL NAPIER: He had a couple really impressive practices before we took a break Sunday. I thought he was really sharp Friday, Saturday, all throughout practice. You can sense, he came back for a reason. He's excited about this opportunity.

Q. Last time we spoke to you, you mentioned some competition still on the offensive line. Where do things stand in that unit and how have they progressed?

BILL NAPIER: I still have confidence in that group. I think it's a group where there's competition, there's depth. I think a lot of those, the combination of players that you'll see, will reflect what we observe I think throughout each week.

Yeah, I think we've added a couple portal players, and I think we've developed some of the high school players that were on our team. We're looking forward to that group playing well Saturday.

Q. You mentioned earlier about self-discipline. How is that translated into getting your team focused and ready? Are you seeing the focus that hasn't been there in the past?

BILL NAPIER: Yeah, I think the key is the routine, right? I think you get into the season, you only have a certain amount of time, right? How you use your time Saturday to Sunday, with an opener you have a little bit of a trial run, we've been through a couple practices, but you want to get them in a little bit of a rhythm that they can repeat each week.

Let's not forget, these guys are taking 12 to 15 credits on campus, too. The students are back. They've got a lot on their plate. I think that's where we've tried to talk about the importance of having self-discipline. What you do with your time, your commitment to sleep, hydration, nutrition, your film study routine. We try to map that out for the players. It's one of the things we've done over the last week to get them ready.

Q. What have you seen out of Jason Marshall and how much more of a vocal leader is he?

BILL NAPIER: I think Jason has taken a step forward as a leader. I'm proud of him. I think he's been more vocal. I think his practice habits have improved. I think Coach Harris has been good for Jason. I also joke with him all the time, it's a contract year for him (smiling).

He's back. I think he came back for a reason, not only to leave a better legacy at UF, but to increase value at the same time.

Q. What do these new coaching hires do for fall camp that you didn't see in the past?

BILL NAPIER: I think it's even more than fall camp, just

starting from the beginning. I think we've improved as a result of those. I think as a leader, you quickly realize, regardless of what level football, it's critical that you surround yourself with capable people, competent people that have character. I think this group has made a difference.

I think we'll prove that this fall.

Q. You do a good job of teaching your teams about the history. Who did you bring in to teach on Miami? How did that go?

BILL NAPIER: Nothing to talk publicly about (smiling).

I mean, ultimately for me, we understand. I think that's one of the things about this group of players, is that I think they've got pretty good awareness. I think they've got some experience and they understand the magnitude of the game, not only just for the season as a whole, but also it being an in-state opponent.

Look, our opponent this week is highly regarded. They're ranked in both polls. They've got several all-American, all-conference players. I think ultimately they're picked to make the playoffs. They're picked to win their conference, right?

I don't think we're lacking in regards to respect for the opponent.

Q. We saw on the Georgia Tech game, Haynes King was doing this all game with the helmet communication. That was in a neutral site. How much do you expect the Swamp to impact Cam?

BILL NAPIER: Yeah, look, I mean, Gator Nation is going to be on full display Saturday. Look, we're not taking on this challenge just as a team. We're going to have 93,000 of our dearest friends out there, right?

It's critical. We talk about as a football team we want to create a nightmare for the opponent. This is one of the most iconic venues in all of sport. I would anticipate it will be pretty special in their Saturday.

Q. How is the running back situation shaping up?

BILL NAPIER: Good, yeah. We got a good group. I think you'll see several of those guys throughout the season. Right now there's a ton of competition.

Q. So much emphasis has been placed on this game as a tone setter for the whole season. Do you think maybe too much? Is it tough keeping it in

perspective?

BILL NAPIER: Well, you see a little bit of that after week zero. I think they all matter. We're playing in a different era of college football, right? As you get into the meat of the schedule, dependent on your status, I think you're alive for a lot longer maybe than you were in the past relative to the playoff.

I think there's a little bit of an NFL feel to it in regards to keep playing, stand up and fight one more round. You got to continue to try to be at your best each week, knowing that we have a schedule that we could play ourselves right into the middle of that thing.

I think it's a little bit different era in that regard. I think in the old model maybe you would say that.

Q. How has Aidan Mizell progressed?

BILL NAPIER: I've been very impressed with Aidan. I think he's one of the players that probably improved the most from year one to year two. In particular, just the skill level, the route running, the releases, the top of the route, the detail there. Then the hands, his ball skills. He's made some very impressive, challenging catches the last couple days.

I think he brings a speed element to our team that we need. We're hopeful that he can make an impact.

Q. The speed element, how much better equipped do you feel you are in that regard?

BILL NAPIER: Yeah, I think our team speed has increased. I think we've improved the roster in that regard. Also I think our off-season program has proved to be beneficial in that regard.

It's time for us to go play. I mean, I'm excited to watch this group play. I think the key is that we channel the urgency that we feel, right? I think you start watching a handful of games this past weekend, it becomes real to the players.

I think execution will fuel the outcome of the emotion we want. We have to make disciplines, we have to make decisions that reflect our vision, then we need to have self-discipline in how we approach the week.

I think good preparation breeds confidence. You want to have a confident team in the opener. Ultimately if we do the work the right way this week, we have a chance to do that.

Q. Right tackle, any separation there?

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

BILL NAPIER: I think we have a ton of competition. I mean, I think there's very few on our team. I've got confidence. There's four tackles on our team that I think we could put out there and play in a game right now.

Got to remember that Austin and Kam were both out in spring, so Devin and Brandon played the majority of the time. They're very familiar with the offense and have had a ton of reps. I think those two additions have proved to be beneficial.

Then you get a healthy Barber, healthy Waites. Then the two freshmen are going to be good players with time, Caden and Fletcher.

Q. Do you go into an opener trying to play as many guys as you can, all the backups in, to see what they do?

BILL NAPIER: We're going to try to win the game (smiling).

But yeah, I mean, I think you got to play the long game a little bit. I think especially if you have rookie players who you know have the physical ability that maybe just need to get their feet wet, maybe their role increases as the season goes if they prove that they can handle it. I think we have some of that on our team.

I mean, it's critical. Teams continue to get better throughout the season if you do it right, individual players get better. This team has competitive depth, right? You're going to see each week there may be slight changes in the depth that we play one to one, two to one, three to one, what role do they have on special teams, which is a huge part of the game. It's one of the values of having a veteran team, there's more competition and there's more competitive depth.

I think that will prove to be beneficial for the Gators.

Q. How does DJ fit into what you're talking about?

BILL NAPIER: Yeah, I think DJ is in that category. DJ, as he gains more experience, I think all the things that we do will mean more to him. I think it's one thing to sit around and talk about it. It's another thing to experience it. You kind of frame your preparation a little bit different going forward.

All the things that young players go through, he's in the middle of that.

Q. Did you realize this is the start of your 20th college

football season as a coach?

BILL NAPIER: 20 years.

Q. Did you know that?

BILL NAPIER: I did.

Q. You talked about the story of this team. What is the story of Billy Napier? Can you put in perspective what this season means to you?

BILL NAPIER: I mean, look, I'm going to coach until I can't coach anymore, right? I'm 20 into hopefully a couple more rounds.

For me, it's about our players, it's about this staff. That's the cool thing about football. I can remember growing up as the son of a high school coach. When the season's over and the playoffs are finished, the state champion holds the trophy up, we're back to zero and zero. There's a new team in the weight room, on the practice field. Then you have the same ambition and the same goals, right?

The gratitude of coaching is taking that group of people and trying to get the most out of 'em, right? This year's no different than any year in the past.

This game is the start of the story of the 2024 Gators.

Q. Is this game a little weightier in some ways?

BILL NAPIER: Yeah, I think you feel that way obviously the way you're asking that question (smiling).

Q. I wonder what you think about it.

BILL NAPIER: Look, at this place, they all matter. There's no question about it. I'd like to think that we take tremendous pride in representing the place. It doesn't matter who you play. I think there's got to be some type of internal standard relative to how you represent. You're a steward of your opportunities, right?

I think we've got a great group of young men and a staff that's worked hard, and we're excited about representing the University of Florida this year.

Thank y'all.

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