

University of Florida Football Media Conference

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Billy Napier Press Conference



Florida - 45, Samford - 7

BILLY NAPIER: We gave them a little bit more to cheer about this week. I think the key here, and I just talked to the football team about it, that's a good step in the right direction. We all understand the level of competition and the opponent. We have a tremendous amount of respect for Coach Hatcher and Samford, but better teams and better opponents are coming.

There's still a handful of things for us to clean up as a whole, but I thought the defense settled in, and obviously DJ Lagway had a phenomenal night. We played well around him.

We challenged the team and every position group and on special teams to kind of rally around him and raise their level of play, knowing that he was a rookie and it was his first start.

I thought we started fast. We had some energy about us early. So compliment to the players. It's been a long week. It's been a tough week. I do think our players got a little bit better each day. Wednesday we had a phenomenal practice, and I think the leadership was in a good place heading into the game today.

Q. How did DJ just energize the attack and really the crowd too? Last week I don't think he had one 20-yard pass and gave six 35-yarders himself.

BILLY NAPIER: The explosives in the first half obviously were a big piece to the puzzle, two big plays. And we had some balance, right? I think we established the run early. He had time too, right? I think that's the important part as well. We protected better.

So, yeah, very impressive. I thought he was pretty clean. I think he had a mental error on the first drive. Outside of that, overall he managed it pretty well and played pretty clean.

Q. What does this do for his chances of playing more

going forward?

BILLY NAPIER: I think that our intentions are the same. We intend to play him every week. I think we intended to do that last week as well. I think we had 20 plays or something at halftime last week. So we struggled to get any rhythm going.

But he brings a different element to our team. There's no question he'll be a part of every plan going forward.

Q. More on DJ, what kind of impressed you most about his performance?

BILLY NAPIER: I would tell you there's two things. Before he got here, I was amazed with the humility and how he handled all the attention. Now, we knew him before he exploded. We found him early, and he was committed to us. Then his high school career just blew up that senior year.

But to just see how he handled himself, the way he prioritized his team back at Willis and the way he carried that community and represented his family. So that was extremely impressive.

Then to get here, I think it's never too big for the guy. I almost think it's like he raises his level a little bit. When you think about the spring game, last week when he went in, you would have never known any different this week. He was just moving right along.

I think he's had a chance to watch Graham prepare, knew what to expect, had a week under his belt. Then obviously he was excited, and I think he made the most of his opportunities.

Q. Three of DJ's first four passes tonight were for 40 yards or more. How would you say that his ability to just throw the deep ball and push the offense that way expands your guys' attack just when you guys are looking to make some moves offensively?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, it's impressive. I think the vertical passing game, not just -- I mean, these are accurate, right



in stride. They were impressive.

You know, the first one was naked, right? It's almost like he said I'm throwing that double move on the outside. So he set his feet, first two guys in the progression were open, and he threw it down there to Badger. That was impressive.

Yeah, he's got that in him. He's been battling, his arm has not necessarily been a hundred percent the last couple weeks. He's been banged up a little bit. I think he finally kind of end of the week this week was healthy. You saw that tonight.

Q. Coach, you stressed execution this week and how important that was on both sides of the ball. Just at face value before you look at the tape, how would you gauge that this week?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I think we communicated better on defense, and I think that we adjusted well. They gave us a ton of wrinkles early, a lot of loose plays on the perimeter. I thought that the defensive staff did a good job of adjusting, getting to the right concepts based off of how they were playing offense.

Yeah, I think offensively -- I'm frustrated with the penalties. The offensive line had a handful of penalties that we need to clean up, but, yeah, it was clean. I would say they gave us a few things different on defense, but for the most part, it's what we practiced, and I think the guys handled it pretty well.

Q. Just following up, what kind of shoulder issue, arm issue had DJ been dealing with? Secondly, could you just take us through did you call plays in week 1, and did you call plays tonight?

BILLY NAPIER: Lagway just had coming out of camp, I think it's just a volume thing for a rookie, just the wear and tear of training camp and the number of throws. No significant issue there. But it was an issue right there headed into Miami. I think he had a phenomenal week, and he's 100 percent healthy now.

We call the plays. I don't necessarily -- our entire offensive staff worked hard all week. So I think that that's overrated. I think the offense executed well today. But we called the plays week 1, and we called the plays tonight as well.

Q. You mentioned penalties disappointing or frustrating you. There was like several personal fouls, I guess again. Last week there was a couple, but this week there was three or four.

BILLY NAPIER: We had to -- one was, I think, the roughing the passer, I think we'll go back and look at that. The ref was bang-bang. I saw the replay. I could see where that could go either way.

Now, the kid that shoves the guy after the PAT, that's not acceptable. We have to eliminate those types of things, right? Those are personal decisions, and you compromise the entire team when you do those types of things. We're not going to tolerate it. Nothing frustrates me more than things like that.

Q. They might have missed one because DJ took a pretty nice shot to the head. How did he kind of handle that and shake that off?

BILLY NAPIER: No, he's good. I think he's probably a little more fatigued than maybe he was hit. I think he ran around a little bit, but definitely took a shot there. But he was clear, got to the sideline. He was all good to go.

Q. It was mentioned before, the fact that DJ just energized everybody from your team to the stadium and everything. 456 yards is something to be very proud of. But how much is that performance -- and, yes, it is Samford and you're going to be playing an SEC team next week. How different is it going to be -- how much does a thought go into maybe if we give him the start, we could see something different out of him? Is that going through your mind right now?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, that's a hypothetical question. We're going to enjoy this game tonight. We're going to go back and watch the tape. We've got a good young quarterback, and we have an incredible veteran quarterback as well. So it's a good thing for our current team and the future of the program to some degree.

Look, I think we have the makings of a really good football team. I think that, if we can play complementary ball and we can play good defense, good offense, good in the kicking game, we've got a chance to have a good team.

This group of players is very disappointed with how they performed in week 1, and it's personal to them. I think that they're on a mission to prove that all this work that they've been doing, and that was not who they want to be. I think it's been a tough week in that regard.

Maybe that gives us the spark that we need to prepare the right way, to start fast, to bring energy. But there's no doubt the level of competition that we're getting ready to face over the next couple of weeks will be completely different.

They understand that. We understand that. Ultimately we've got to have a good week of prep. We've got a chance to be in The Swamp next week again at 3:30.

Q. The receivers today, Badger obviously. I know Kahleil Jackson had the tough situation this week, but Badger, Mizell, Hawkins -- it seemed like a lot of guys spread the ball around really well. What are your thoughts about their passing game today as well?

BILLY NAPIER: We've got some good young receivers. I think you kind of saw that today. I think Tank is capable. Marcus Burke is capable. He's had a great week and got the start. Badger happened to be in the game when the ball came his way. Trey came out of halftime, and we felt like we hadn't involved Trey enough, and we got him the ball early.

But, yeah, I think the depth of that group will be tested, and we're going to need some of those young players to step up and be productive every week. Receiver is tough, right? Because you're out there playing and you might play 50 plays and catch three balls, but you played really well. You ran a lot of good routes. The coverage was maybe tilted your direction, and the ball went somewhere else.

So I think that group needs to continue to improve and develop as the season goes. It's going to be a big piece of the puzzle for us.

Q. I know Graham was dealing with his own recovery throughout the week, but how much did you see him involved helping DJ prepare for his first start? I know you mentioned he'd be in the box potentially, but what did you see from him on the sideline being kind of that player coach that you talked about throughout the game today?

BILLY NAPIER: He's been with him the majority of the week, especially the latter half of the week, once he was cleared and back in meetings, back in practice.

The night before the game, they had like a little walk-through in the room. Graham was going through every play with him. That's the type of relationship that they have. I've been watching them since January, so they're both incredible young men and really good teammates.

Q. So this won't be like a Wally Pipp situation, if you know that reference, with Graham losing a job because of injury?

BILLY NAPIER: No. I just think it proves what we thought in the beginning. This guy was a Gatorade National Player

of the Year. He's one of the best players in the entire country, and he had the opportunity to play the entire game today, and he is what we thought he was.

We're going to stay the course, and much like we described in the beginning, we'll have a plan for DJ every week going forward.

Q. And then George Gumbs, tight end, only played a year of defense, just what did you guys see from him? Tonight three tackles for loss, a sack.

BILLY NAPIER: It's a great evaluation. When Bird Sherrill found George, he went in early, and obviously they did a good job of kind of doing the research, the homework.

George was a former walk-on that turned scholarship player as a receiver and then tight end. He played on special teams. Then last year he moved to defensive end and had a good year. He's got traits, and he's one of the better -- he's incredible.

You guys should do a story about George Gumbs. He's an impressive young man. He's got a great story, COVID recruit. Definitely a guy that has done a good job with our team. He's got some personality, maturity. His work habits are second to none. We anticipated that he had a chance to be a good player, and he's proven that over time.

Q. Is Mertz cleared, and do you expect him to be cleared by Monday?

BILLY NAPIER: He's not officially cleared. He's expected to go through the non-contact practice. We expect him to be full speed next week.

Q. Obviously there was a lot of negative buzz in the days after the Miami game, some rankings having Florida dropping to only three wins on the season. What does a dominant performance like this, what does it do to change the attitude in the locker room and get you guys back on track as you look forward to a tough matchup against A&M this weekend?

BILLY NAPIER: It's a good step forward. Ultimately, our players are very aware. I have leadership coming up to me and saying, hey, Coach, look, we all understand this was a good day, good step in the right direction, but we've got a lot of work to do, and we've got to make sure we're in the right frame of mind when we show up tomorrow.

Look, better competition is ahead. We all understand that. We have more to prove. We have a lot to prove. This group, I think it's personal to them.

Look, we've got a chance to play a really good A&M team next week, an SEC opponent, and be back in front of our fans. I think that this group takes a tremendous amount of pride in representing the university and all the things that come with that.

They didn't feel good about how they did that week 1, and they're anxious to get back out there and do it better the next time.

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