

University of Florida Football Media Conference

Monday, October 7, 2024

Gainesville, Florida, USA

Coach Billy Napier

Press Conference



BILLY NAPIER: Okay, guys, before we get going here, I think it's important to say that in anticipation of the hurricane coming through, obviously all involved, you know being kind of in our thoughts and prayers.

Having been a part of a handful of these, I think the key is in preparation. Got to take it very seriously and do your part to prepare. As we know they can be very challenging.

Just recapping the game, much like we discussed after the game, I'm very appreciative of our players and the staff in terms of their leadership, not only last week but throughout the open date. Just the mentality that we showed up and played with early. I do think we took a step forward on defense. We played a good half of the football on offense and then obviously can perform much better in the second half.

In the kicking game we continue to do a lot of good things. Definitely a step forward. I know you'll have other questions about that.

Again, I do think that it's important for us to hit the reset button and try to do that with some consistency going forward.

And as I said before, if we want to be a consistent contender here and have a championship caliber team, we're going to have to play championship caliber defense. So pleased with the direction there.

Tennessee has a really good football team. I think all three parts of their team present challenges. I have a ton of respect for how they play, the tempo on offense, but the physicality of the run game paired with the explosive plays and vertical plays and perimeter concepts can be very challenging.

I think defensively they continue to get better. We played them each year since we've been here. I do think they've done a really good job on this side of the ball.

Personnel and fundamentals, you know, statistically if you

look at the numbers there, they're at the top of our league in most categories. I do think they do a nice job in the kicking game. It's evident they play really hard and sound in what they do and have been very productive.

Going to play in Knoxville against a team that in my opinion has a ton of capability and certainly has been impressive so far this year. I know they struggled a little bit last week, but in our league right now, heck, each week is like an NFL game. It's coming down to the last seconds.

We've got respect for Tennessee. Obviously this is a rivalry game, one that has a ton of history and tradition. I grew up watching this game and have a ton of family dynamics here in terms of having history with this game.

We know the importance and certainly our players will be focused and excited about preparing. I do think fundamentals are very, very important in games like this. I do think you have to be tough minded to go play on the road in this league. That will be part of the prep.

Overall, excited about the week here, and looking forward to getting to work with the players today.

What do we got?

Q. In the SEC now, one unbeaten remaining, is this what you expected or anticipated with the expansion of the league? Everybody just beat up on each other?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, this is my opinion: I just think the personnel, because of the portal, I think there is just the ability to put teams together, fix things on your roster. Got two times a year where you can address through free agency. Got to go patch up some holes.

I just think all the good players at the lower levels are moving up. There is a huge desire to play in this league, but also the teams in this league have the resources to put together really good teams and rosters.

So I think a little more parity maybe.

And then the other thing that's evident is it's always



challenging to play on the road, right? So I think in general, most coaches would probably say that.

Q. A little bit early, but altering the practice schedule or travel schedule due to the upcoming hurricane?

BILLY NAPIER: We have had several discussions yesterday and today. I think ultimately what we know is that we anticipate today and tomorrow being traditional and then we're ready to adapt Wednesday, Thursday.

Look, I think one thing I've learned, I've lived in some places that deal with this type of weather consistently, is that you play it 6, 12 hours at a time and I think you're ready. You build out plans A, B, C. We did that yesterday.

Got to have a good ops crew. We have a great one. UAA staff being to go with Josh, I think we've got really good people there. So we'll be fine and we're ready to adjust.

Q. How do you think this team maybe fared from a tackling standpoint? I know that was a little bit of an issue in the first three FBS contests. Do you think you saw some strides in UCF?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think overall the effort, energy, pursuit, just fundamentally I thought we were better; still got a handful. The one touchdown possession they had, that play in particular we had two players in the secondary that can be better from a fundamental standpoint.

So we definitely -- look, we played well, but we have to do this consistently. We have to continue to improve, right? We know that we need to continue to trend in the right direction.

I think tackling is a huge part of that.

Q. Along those lines, how close are you to getting a championship level defense here? Something you think we'll see this year or down the road given the situation that you have?

BILLY NAPIER: No, I think we've recruited well. I think that the personnel, the height, length, and speed over there; we're developing experience. I think some these guys got experience last year. I do think that we're capable, you know.

Again, I've said this, I anticipated and we anticipated having a chance to be pretty good on defense. Now, we haven't performed like we would like, but I do think the open date was healthy and I think this past Saturday we took a step in the right direction.

So again, we've recruited. I think there is still a lot of good, young talent on that side of the ball that's gaining experience, and we need to continue to improve all parts of what we do over there.

Q. Line of scrimmage, getting after the quarterback, protecting the quarterback is improving a little bit. How critical is that to continue to progress? Six straight SEC games and it's a line of scrimmage league.

BILLY NAPIER: I think what you're describing there is accumulative effect playing the early downs well, creating some negatives, TFLs, and creating the passing downs where you can play coverage and go get the quarterback. I thought we did that better.

I think the coverage in the rush worked together. Covered them pretty good. I think the rush plan was sound. We did a nice job with the rush Lane integrity. Crushed the pocket.

When we did get a chance to finish on the quarterback, we did that. I think you're spot on there. Got to play the early downs well to create favorable D&Ds where you can go get the guy.

Q. Given the flex of the SEC right now, how much do you see opportunity coming up in this stretch, the fact that you got these games coming up?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, again, in this league, in the current dynamic, it's one week. It's like you got to get consumed with preparing. You got to prepare with some humility so that you can play with confidence.

There has to be a healthy respect for each opponent regardless of the opponent, where you play or who you're playing. And then you got to grind it out. You know, I mean, I think each day of the week there is a certain self-discipline to check the boxes and continue to prepare and be prepared for the players when they show up to the building.

Certainly their attitude towards this preparation is really important. Self-discipline to do that consistently each week I think can separate you.

Q. Tennessee's offense the other day wasn't great, and Oklahoma even, not so potent. At home, really puts it in another gear statistically. Couple a touchdowns more than on the road under Heupel. Could this be the kind of track meet kind of game where you'll have to be scoring a good amount?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I mean, I do think you're -- some of what you're saying I would agree with relative to home and away. In particular, the challenge of playing on the road in this league. That's been the case for a lot of teams in our league, not just Tennessee. I think we would probably say the same.

In general, I hope it's not a track meet. I do think that...

Q. (Indiscernible.)

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no, I'm with you, but I do think like ultimately, when you play Tennessee, you know there will be an element of strategy in regards to keeping up. How do you do that? I think last year we were able to play complementary football in the game, and I think there is a component to that.

Look, points are a premium. You do what you got to do to score. Again, go back to what I said in the opening statement. This is not just an offensive football team. I think they are pretty good on defense in my opinion, personnel, and I think in the kicking game their history there, they've had some success.

So they're ranked and been highly regarded in the pre-season for a lot of reasons. I think ultimately that's what I see on tape.

Q. You mentioned the other night, you used the word sputtered I think in the second half. This is a four quarter game, what do you think happened in terms of was it what they were doing defensively, what you guys were doing?

BILLY NAPIER: No, we had three possessions in the second half. First one we had a false start penalty. We had a mental error on third down. We had to punt.

The second possession we had second and one holding sack in the fringe. I mean, inexcusable play.

So I think ultimately, we shot ourselves in the foot. Look, they had the ball a lot in the second half, right? But the three possessions we did have prior to the four-minute possession, we screwed it up. Missed a field goal. Had two penalties.

And then obviously, yeah, for us to get sacked, to take a sack in the fringe on this D&D is inexcusable. Got to do much better there.

Q. What did Arkansas' defense do so well against Tennessee, especially shot down their pass game?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, Arkansas has been playing good defense for a long time. Wasn't just Saturday night versus Tennessee. You know, I think I've had a chance -- we played them last year, and you just keep up with our league. I think they've done a really good job over there.

What I see on tape is really good fundamentals. Playing good at all three levels. On defense, the front is second level being tackling well in the open field. I think they're buttoned up on the back end. They got good personnel. They're a tough, physical, gritty group and that's what I saw.

Q. What do you think of Tennessee's quarterback, Nico?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, man, he's a unicorn. That guy a 6'6". I don't know how much he weighs, but he's a big athletic -- he's ripping balls in the outside third, 15, 20 yards deep. He's throwing it. All the vertical shots, he's got a big time arm. He's accurate. He can escape, extend.

Just a young player who is getting experience, and he'll continue to get better. There is a lot of hype around him, and I think on the tape you can see why.

Q. When you see DJ make the throw the other night, he's growing up right before our eyes, isn't he?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no, I think much like we've talked about, I think he'll continue to get better. The more he plays the more he prepares in anticipation of playing, that's the compound effect here. You're preparing knowing you're going out there knowing the team is counting on you.

I think we're hitting a little bit of a rhythm there where both those guys are playing well. Don't get me wrong, I still at times there are things that situationally he's learning, right?

I think that's the importance of the playing experience. I think ultimately both those guys got a chance to be pretty good. Got to continue to play well around them. But we're getting pretty good play from both guys right now.

Q. Seemed like Jake Slaughter and Graham were really working well. UCF had some exotic fronts and pressures. Is that something you showed DJ on tape just in terms of recognizing and hey, talk to Graham, talk to Jake?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no, I mean, I think it's part of each week. I think the pressure variables, it's big part of playing center, playing quarterback, and in particular for us.

Look, UCF, it was a game plan type of game. There was a lot of pressures that weren't on tape that we didn't anticipate, so some of the struggle there was a reflection of that.

Now, they did a nice job making in-game adjustments. I thought the coaches and players did a really good job. That's next level quarterback play, being able to redirect Mikes and protect yourself. Certainly with how we play, we give them an opportunity to do that. He's growing in that area.

Graham, obviously it's a Ph.D. He's got his Ph.D. in that stuff. I think he's always done a good job of that. I think just year two command of the system. I mean, he knows the answers right after the possession is over. Hey, maybe we should consider this. He's like a coach.

So I think that's where there is a difference obviously. But DJ, he is progressing nicely.

Q. We've asked and you Graham a ton about increasing explosive plays. When you're facing a high-powered offense, whether UCF or Tennessee, would you almost rather have a 15-play, eight-minute drive in a sense to win it there?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I mean, I think there is some complementary ball there. Yeah, just had a ton of conversion downs and were able to move it. We would like to make more explosive plays. That's an area where we didn't quite hit our goal Saturday.

You got to take what the defense gives to you some degree. Sometimes you get caught in there playing coverage and end up throwing the intermediate route or check down. I think there was some of that Saturday. Any time you can chew up some clock and keep your defense on the sideline and keep the play count down, I think there is some positives to that.

Q. Two in a row. Safe to say you're stepping up, a little bit of competition this week? What would it mean just from a confidence standpoint to go up there and win? Shut down a lot of noise anyway.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no, I think, look, we have to live in the world of preparing for competition. You know, I think obviously we know the implications. We understand what it would do for the program or this team.

This is a big game. You know, Florida-Tennessee on the road and certainly a lot on the line. I think for our team, again, you got to get back to we are in training for competition, right? We're in the process of preparing. We

have to go about that the right way.

When we have done it the right way I think we've got a good result. You know, self-discipline in terms of the things we do off the field, our practice habits, the focus and intensity on the field, and then just continue to prepare all the way up until we kick that thing off.

And look, it takes hundreds of people to do that. We get to play 11 at time on game day. But today we'll have 250 plus people that contribute to how we practice and how we prepare.

I think ultimately everybody has a responsibility to do and you want to do the best you can do for the team. I think if we got a lot of the people doing that gives us a better chance to have success.

Q. What did you think of Jeremy's 53-yard punt that checked up like a Mickelson wedge?

BILLY NAPIER: Looked like your sand wedge right there.

Q. Mine was a skull over the green.

BILLY NAPIER: It was a unique field position. I think we went back and forth there in terms of punting it or just to go traditional. Really unique in how that happened. Wasn't a hang punt situation, but it hit the ground and checked up.

So big time play, right? We're talking 5.05 hang, 55 yard punt. I think the op was like 196, and obviously flipped the field completely. It's one of the things we did well Saturday. Every time Central Florida got the ball they had to go the long field. You know, so I think we have to continue to do that.

Q. How big a weapon is he? That punt, looked like he didn't even step into it. Like he caught it and just kicked it. Machine like.

BILLY NAPIER: He's elite. If he's not the best punter in the country I would like to see who is. And look, Jeremy is not only extremely talented. I've watched him improve, just the way he's developed just this year, the finer details, this guy grinds.

The specialist meeting room is right beside the quarterback meeting room and that guy is in there early. He stays late.

He's an attention-to-detail guy. The thing you can appreciate about him is he's a leader on the team. He is a voice. Team meetings, leadership groups, he speaks up. He has the ability to affect the other players. He's a great competitor. Goes back to he was a really athlete before

making the decision to transition to American football. That's a heck of a story.

Q. He got run into on Saturday night, too.

BILLY NAPIER: No comment.

Q. Jake slaughter, if you look at his advance numbers, among one of the best centers in the country right now. Just what has that performance meant and his leadership meant to that group?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah he's an anchor right now for our team and the offense for sure. Just his energy, daily approach. He sets the tone, him and Mertz. We got some really good -- a good dynamic on offense right now in terms of what it's like to go in the unit meeting, the meeting rooms, practice field. We got a lot of the mature guys that are tough, durable, prepare the right way.

I think that's rubbing off on some of the young guys. Think about Chim, DK, Montrell Johnson, Jake Slaughter, Barber, Mertz. Got some really good football players and guys that are going about it the right way.

Q. Offensive line seems pretty settled. You've said that before. We saw Bryce in there on Saturday, Kam Waites. What has Bryce shown you specifically with Kam that made you comfortable giving them some snaps at guard?

BILLY NAPIER: I mean, both those guys, I think there is still competition there. There is still not huge separation. So Waites is a guy who is a capable player. We need to continue to give him reps and experience and hopefully can continue to trend the right direction.

Bryce really impressed us this off-season and spring. And then we just think the guy has a ton of position flex. We're trying to -- game experience is so valuable. Just gives them confidence and then they take a little bit different approach to practice and meetings.

So keep them engaged. There is not a significant difference there, so keep pushing them out there and giving them experience.

Look, we all know those guys get banged up, so when the back up is more comfortable, confident, I think that can help you down the road.

Q. A lot more to playing running back at this level than just carrying the ball. What have you seen from Jadan Baugh? He had a couple nice blitz pickups.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah.

Q. Just from him in that pass protection.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, huge. Always an issue with a young back. I think part of their growth and earning playing time is their ability to protect those quarterbacks. Ton of responsibility and protection in our system.

I thought UCF in particular, we knew going in that was a huge challenge, especially the internal pressures. He did a good job. He had a couple key pickups on third down where we converted.

So it's actually one of the plays I'm going to show in the team meeting today, is the third down where he does a nice job on the double A gap cross pressure and then we hit Tank to the field. He made a guy miss. Baugh is a good young player.

He's got to play without the ball. That's what young skill players, how you play without the ball typically, to me reflects how much you care about your teammates. But also I think it's part playing the position. Receiver is the same way.

So I think how you block as a receiver is very much like the running back position.

Q. Did he come in with that or something you've seen him pick up quickly?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I mean, look, the guy, he's a very willing player. He'll do anything you ask him to do. These guys, I mean, him, Ja'Kobi, Treyaun, all those guys are incredible. They work at that.

It's just knowledge. In high school you don't go into a game and have a half dozen six-man, seven-man protections where you got to understand your responsibility.

For him, he was playing Wildcat quarterback. I mean, playing receiver, linebacker, and safety, he's playing every play of the game.

How many times has he had to actually know what the front is, who the Mike is, go through a full progression. So just the accumulation of reps. He'll continue to get better.

Q. Back to Jeremy, kickers, punters are off in their own little orbit. Maybe they don't have -- are not considered real football players sometimes. How unusual for a guy like that to come in and be a team leader and for other players to respect him?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah. I will tell you not on our teams. We're culturally 100% about those guys. They're weapons, man. I think we got them. Rocco, Trey, Crawshaw, all three of those guys have a presence on our team.

Not only the values they bring to our team, but just their relationship, the way we engage them in meetings and practice. They're a huge piece of the puzzle.

Specialists can be the difference. Nobody wants to talk about it until you don't have one. We happen to have three of the absolute best in the country. All three of our specialists are Alphas. They're in the mix. Rocco is making big plays on punt coverage.

I think Trey has a voice in our locker room. He's a guy that can bring some presence.

Not on this team. These guys are in the fold and they bring a lot to the table. Not just six, eight, ten plays they play on game day, but throughout the week.

Q. And have to have the personality for it.

BILLY NAPIER: Correct. I mean, that's an element. I'm looking for that. Like Trey was a good skill player in high school. You know, Rocco was a heck of a football player. Any time you can find a guy that has a personality, maybe think played other sports, maybe they were a really good soccer competitor, I think you're looking for guys that have that competitive spirit.

These cats certainly do.

Q. Did you get clarification? You mentioned running into the kicker was a new rule this year. When you sent that in did you get clarification?

BILLY NAPIER: It's not back yet. I think ultimately it's all interpretation of is he in the pocket, out of the pocket. How many steps once he takes a certain number of steps. There is a specific rule that speaks to that. And then you got to really look at the tape and what happened.

So, again, look, those guys are phenomenal. That's a good crew. They do a good job. They got a hard job.

Can we agree to disagree, absolutely. I think nothing but respect there. Yeah, we'll see what the interpretation comes back as.

Q. Different teams have different margins for error. I assume you've had a bunch of teams that had varying degrees. Where is this one for this team, the margin

for error? You talked about you have a penalty and it really sets you back offensively. Same thing we've seen defensively, big penalty. So is it razor thin? Do you guys not have a lot, especially going on the road?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no, I mean, I think what I would say, I think, look, there has to be a certain level of discipline in terms of not beating yourself. First way you win is don't beat yourself.

And then you also have to go into the game in anticipation that you're never going to play perfect. Always going to be momentum plays. You're always going to make a handful of mistakes.

Got to be tough minded and you got to be ready to respond to some of that adversity and play through it. Look, on offense you get four downs, right? I think you got to have a good plan to get back on track. Got to have a good second ans long plan.

And then it's about getting first downs. Sometimes you get that and you don't -- got a third down avoidance, sometimes you have a great down of conversions.

I think there is a lot of ways to win.

But I think in my opinion, the best football teams minimize error, especially when the talent levels are very similar.

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