

# University of Florida Football Media Conference

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## Coach Billy Napier

### Press Conference



Florida - 27, LSU - 16

**BILLY NAPIER:** I think before we get to the players and the staff, I think we have to give the crowd a ton of credit. That place was electric tonight and played a major factor in the game. Obviously the kids feed off of it. And 11 straight sell-outs, and something about when the sun goes down, it's pretty special in there. Very thankful for our fans. And to continue to show up, right, and do their part. Obviously we've struggled at times, but I'm just very thankful for the overall support and the way they impacted the game tonight.

I think you've got to give this group of kids a ton of credit. Relative to the resiliency they've showed, I think for me there's a purpose behind the game, and that starts with the players, and I certainly think this group would not be able to have done what they did tonight without a good foundation, something to stand on. I think they've got good character, and I'm very thankful for them relative to how they've stuck together and continue to work extremely hard and continue to improve. A lot of young players continue to grow up out there.

So this was complementary ball at its best. Felt like an NFL game. It was back and forth. We did a lot of things well. There are areas we can do better. I do think we made them earn it on defense. We limited the big play, but obviously we've got to do a better job getting off the field on third down, especially in the first half. The play count and time of possession was very unique. It was 48-21 at halftime, and then obviously look at it really out of whack at the end of the game. I think they ran 92 plays to our 43. We had a few penalties on offense we need to clean up.

We had some delay of games. Couple of false starts. Obviously a holding. But in general, we did enough to win, and we stood up in that second half and I thought the defense got a couple of takeaways. Obviously a sack fumble. And then the missed field goal, and we played clean on offense and didn't turn it over. Punted them deep a handful of times. And I thought the field position was key.

So credit to the staff for having a good plan. In particular, on defense, I felt we were really sharp on normal downs. And these kids showed up and played. And I'm proud of them.

**Q. What did D.J. do to elevate things, and one throw in particular where the guys were coming in, he steps up, he's walking a little gingerly at this point in the game fires it to Badger?**

**BILLY NAPIER:** Elite play. That throw to Badger, stepping up into the pocket, left tackle was on an edge and just those are throws -- God blessed that young man, is what I would say.

But, yeah, I think your question is key, and I think we all felt that last week and this week. I thought there was a difference knowing that he was working his butt off with our training staff to get back and be available in the game and the way he approached that this week, the way the training staff worked overtime.

And again, the guy wasn't 100 percent. He wanted to play last week. And then obviously he came in the building Sunday, said, "I'm playing this week." And we kept him in the pocket for the most part, limited the read game and the run game and overall it ended up working out.

**Q. The pressure you were able to get with the front seven throughout the night, especially in the second half, after giving up a good bit of rushing yards, just how critical do you think that was? And kind of a microcosm of the strides the defense has been able to make all season long.**

**BILLY NAPIER:** Seven sacks. I thought we stayed on top of them for the most part. I thought the leverage in coverage was pretty good. That was one of the keys to the game was we covered them with the group of DBs that we had, I felt we hung in there pretty good.

A lot of those are coverage sacks, where we're landing, but we certainly affected the quarterback. And he made a lot of unannounced plays, off-schedule plays, where we did



get him off of spot, and then giving Nussmeier some credit, I thought he made some plays on the run, a lot of impressive plays.

**Q. How critical to be able to protect D.J. given his injury situation not giving up a sack, what did you make of the offensive line play outside of the penalties?**

BILLY NAPIER: I thought it was solid. Obviously we did enough in the run game. Obviously the one explosive helps the numbers. But keeping him clean was a big mission. Part of the mission was to keep him clean. They've got some good rushers. But overall I felt for the most part we did a good job in that area.

**Q. How much of that defensive effort was pride from last week, like, you get hurt like that, 49 points, and it shows how resilient these guys are?**

BILLY NAPIER: I think last week was unacceptable, is what I think. And I think they took ownership of that. There wasn't a lot of moping around. I think they ultimately took ownership of it, and we did some of those things better. We tackled better.

I thought the rushing the coverage worked better together. We covered them. We played with the right leverage and we were able to get to the quarterback.

So gotta clean up third down. I think they were 15-28 on conversion downs. A little over 50 percent, which is a good day. About 45 percent would be a goal, and they obviously met their goal.

**Q. How much of a launching point can this game be for Caleb Banks, and what has he done in recent practices to elevate himself to the point where he had a game like he did tonight?**

BILLY NAPIER: I'm proud of Caleb. We tried to include him more on third down. And I think he's really worked hard this offseason. Really 58 plays at his prior stop. 300 plays last year. And this year, a starter, and obviously trying to grow his role and create more value for him. So playing him on third down tonight, and he was a factor. I think Caleb has a bright future in front of him. He can really go places.

**Q. The drive, when you're up 20-16, you're probably think four-minute offense, but beginning with D.J. finding the tight end and ending with the explosive end there, how big it was to finish it off?**

BILLY NAPIER: Huge. We had a lot of bullets in the gun

at that point, right, because we had run minimal plays; but, yeah, I think the quick game completion to Hansen over the middle was huge and Haden did a great job running after the catch.

And you're going to watch that play where Jadan scored, and you're going to see guys playing without the ball, Badger, Hansen, Barber, critical point of attacks there on the perimeter run, and 13 did the rest. But it was a good-looking play.

**Q. Was it more or less trying to pick the spots for D.J. to pass tonight? I know that you wanted to protect him and he wanted to establish the running game, but was it more just finding those moments and finding those receivers when you needed it?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think we threw it 26 times out of 43, right? So he had opportunities tonight. I think we've got to protect him a little bit better, and I think there were some opportunities to make some plays. In the seams, there was a lot of bang-bang throws in the seams, couple of opportunities early with DK. And then I thought he did a good job extending a little bit, throwing it away when he needed to. But, yeah, I mean, 26 passes out of 43 plays, he got a lot of opportunities.

**Q. Talk about what Chim and Elijah have meant to D.J. and his maturation, having experienced guys to throw to and working with a young quarterback, what they've meant to the development of the passing game?**

BILLY NAPIER: Those two guys have been key, really good evaluations. I think the personnel, Burt did a phenomenal job identifying those guys, and we were able to recruit them and they hit the ground running. DK was here in the spring. But Badger, getting here in the summer, both have improved as players.

Coach Gonzales has done a great job with both players. They've really -- the scouts are high on them. They've increased their value. But there's no question, when you play quarterback, the players around you have to play well. And those guys, they separate, they get open and they make plays on the ball. They make contested catches, and there's no question those guys have done a great job for the Gators.

**Q. Special teams came up big, 55-yard field goal. You touched on it. And I think probably the play of the game was maybe the punt that you dropped in at the 8-yard line, changed the whole game right there.**

BILLY NAPIER: We did. We had some frustrations in the

fringe landmarks there and we had to hang punt a couple times and play field position. Jeremy obviously is a Ray Guy finalist this week. Has an elite future. Best punter in the country.

And those are the little things. Those are the situational football things. Really good job by Rocco. Chim was in position. We were able to play field position and the defense took advantage of that position. You're spot on.

**Q. Shemar, 11 tackles, couple of sacks, bunch of pressures, kid with a lot of adversity after injuries. Is that the best he's played, and how gratifying was it to see?**

BILLY NAPIER: I think lately he's really starting to play well. Shemar is a three-down player. He can play -- I thought he's improved as a tackler. Just his stopping power has improved. And I think just in general him as a communicator, as a leader. He's a guy that has a ton of positive energy. Fun to be around. Does a great job throughout the week affecting the other players. He can play on all three downs, good match-up backer on pass coverage. And he's a heck of a blitz. He's loose and slippery and a guy who weighs 235 pounds. Shemar continues to get better. Obviously overcome a lot with injury. We're proud of him.

**Q. How do you feel like Jadan and the other linebackers did stepping up for Pup and also Bridges going full time at corner this week?**

BILLY NAPIER: I think with Pup being out, Jadan -- Myles Graham and Aaron Chiles played significant snaps tonight as well.

But that's a room that has depth. A lot of smart players in that room. And we've been rolling those guys, playing some of the young guys, and certainly I think that experience paid off tonight.

But Jadan Robinson is one of my favorite players. Guy just shows up and works, and he obviously was a factor today. Good to see those young kids in there making some plays too.

**Q. What's this do to validate things for you a little bit, beating a ranked opponent, big game, keeps you on track to get a bowl game and rivalry? And then the Texas game, obviously, coming right on the vote of confidence has kind of left a bad taste.**

BILLY NAPIER: Look, I think the big thing is just you've got to compliment our players and staff just for staying the course. I mean, it's no easy task to keep focused on the

work in front of you and be present.

We talked all week about working as if we're on a one-day contract. And every day, hey, look, if we're watching you the entire day and evaluating how you work, would you get the call back for the next day? And I think they took that personal, and I think that we had a good day every day of the week. I thought we built momentum to the end of the week. And certainly they played that way with that type of attitude tonight.

**Q. Sort of going off that question a little bit, obviously the signature win for the season and ending the streak of losses against ranked opponents. What's this win say about the future of the program, not just for the last two games of the season, but kind of the seasons and beyond potentially for recruits that are interested anything of that nature?**

BILLY NAPIER: I think it's the players reflect that. I think obviously we're trying to create a culture here. I think the intangibles of the group are what we would want from our players. Obviously the football needs to continue to improve. I do think it is improving, and I think that's a result of each individual player contributing.

The way we practice, the way we prepared throughout the week, if you're going to have a good football team, you've got to do it all. And I think this group continues to show that they're up for the challenge.

When we recruited these guys, part of this sale was like, look, you have to understand, you have to be up for the challenge. If we're going to rebuild this place and create a championship contender, it will be rocky at times and you've got to be a tough guy and you've got to be up for the challenge. And I think this group has proved they're up for that and we need to continue the work. We're right in the middle of this journey here.

Look, it's harder than ever, in my opinion. I think these guys could have pointed fingers and splintered a long time ago. That's what I'm most proud of. We played well tonight, but the way they've handled their business throughout the year and for them to continue to show up and work and care for each other and try to get better and compete, I think we're learning how to win and ultimately I think belief is the most powerful, belief and hope are the most powerful things in the world, and I think we've got that. Just proud of the players.

**Q. Your secondary remains really banged up but Dijon Johnson had a big tackle early, and you had to play (indiscernible) and Aaron Gates, how they've held the things together in this game.**

BILLY NAPIER: Quez versatility has been critical. Played both safeties and corners. And Gates continues to improve. And Denson played some snaps, but for Dijon Johnson, he's out there playing banged up, showed toughness, grit, sacrificing for the team. He's in the training room every day of the week all day to try to get ready. He played last week and he was not even close to 100 percent. I think him and Gates and Castell and Thornton, big part of the game tonight is we covered them, and I think ultimately hats off to that group.

**Q. It looked to me like the game has slowed down a little bit for D.J. He's starting to make more reads going through progressions. I'm not saying the ball looks like a beach ball, but do you think it has slowed down for him? There was a rumor from an ESPN cameraman that Steve Spurrier said to the team that if they won and the fans stormed the field that he would pay the fine.**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I'll tell you what, I think, first of all, let me say this, okay, our players got wind of that. And they were talking about it earlier today. I think it juiced them up a little bit. Anytime a head ball coach speaks, we listen. This is his place. Player, coach, Gator legend, and I'm thankful for Coach. Coach has been phenomenal since the first day I got here, for him to continue to support these guys, I think, is a big deal. And we'll get to do that in the future.

**Q. (Inaudible)?**

BILLY NAPIER: I think it slows down. You'll have to talk to him a little bit. D.J. told me specifically earlier in the week the game was slowing down. You've got to go back all the way to January. This guy is playing plays in the Gator room. Coach O'Hara has done a phenomenal job, all the way back to day one, he's had a chance to observe Graham Mertz and how he worked like a professional, how to prepare, how to lead, and I think D.J. has -- the game has slowed down. He'll tell you that.

Look, he's only going to get better. I respect him as a competitor on game day, the way he handles himself between the lines. The guy's completely into it as a competitor, doing everything he can to win the game, and he did enough tonight.

**Q. I don't think many people before the season started would have thought you guys had a 1-2 punch at running back with Ja'Kobi and Jadan. You have that now. And what do you think it says about Jabbar and his ability to develop running backs with Jadan only being a true freshman?**

BILLY NAPIER: They're good evaluations from the personnel department. I think both are fantastic kids. Look, they both had incredible training camps. They ran the ball like that in training camp. Jabbar continues to produce. I mean, look, now as much as they play well on Saturday, I don't ever have to worry about a running back off the field.

I mean, his group is accountable. They do everything right. They're a class act. And he did it at Louisiana. He's done it at other stops in his career. I think his background as a high school coach, he cares for kids, and he's tough on them and he holds them accountable. Hats off to both those guys, and certainly hats off to Coach Juluke as well.

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