

# University of Florida Football Media Conference

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## Billy Napier Press Conference



Florida 24, Ole Miss 17

**BILLY NAPIER:** I'm going to keep it quick because I know you've got something planned for tonight.

Look, I think first of all, man, just incredible atmosphere today. It doesn't get much better than that. 12:00 noon kick, 65 degrees, sunshine and a packed house. Our fans were incredible, played a major role in the game. Just to see them rally behind our team and players, and certainly for me, our seniors. I think this group -- I told them in there just now, leadership is really hard. It requires a lot from you. I think these guys have stepped up in a major way.

That first month of the year was a challenge in every facet, and I think young people, at that point they've got to decide who they want to be and what they're about. I think this group of seniors, there's very specific players in that group, very grateful for them.

I think we challenged the team we play today should reflect that group and the courage and the adversity that they've shown.

I think the whole message this week was earn the right to win, and I think that we have to earn the right to win throughout the week, and then ultimately when we get to the park, it's not about yesterday, it's not about tomorrow, it's not about who's on the other sideline. You've got to spot the ball and you've got to go earn the right to win.

I do think that today was special in a lot of regards in terms of Dr. Fox, this being his last game, and thankful for him and his leadership and certainly for him being a part of the group of people that gave me an opportunity here. Thankful for Dr. Fox.

The game was a game of turnover margin, red zone scoring, and ultimately I think you put those two things together, we'll be very difficult to beat.

Obviously the defensively was lights out, we played great field position, and we made just enough explosive plays we

were able to rush the ball against a good front.

Complementary football, football in its purest form, and just really proud of our players and team.

**Q. You touched on the red zone, but you stopped a guy who doesn't get stopped very often. You stopped him twice on short yardage there. What have you seen from that defense and their ability to play in this atmosphere?**

**BILLY NAPIER:** Yeah. I think that when we were trying to build our team and put our team together, there's an understanding in this league that you've got to be really good in the trenches. We all understand that. Really not just this league but ultimately to be a championship contender and to play consistently every week, you've got to be good up front on both sides.

I thought we were better on both sides today up front, and short yardage defense is a big component. Those are identity plays. I think we had guys step up and make plays.

But again, I think they had six turnovers if you include the 4th down stops and the missed field goal and a couple picks and the muffed punt. We took full advantage of those. Wasn't always pretty on offense. There's certainly some things we can do a little bit better here or there, but that's a good group over there, and I thought we managed their front with the way that we played the game.

**Q. Coach, on the second play of the game, No. 13 Aaron Gates goes down. Was there an adjustment you had to make on the defensive end to accommodate for him? Because he had a massive game at Georgia.**

**BILLY NAPIER:** Yeah, Aaron has been one of our best players the last probably five or six weeks of the season. He's still a young player but extremely talented. Played corner and receiver, punt returner, kick returner in high school.

The big adjustment was the kicking game depth chart. He does a lot for us in the kicking game, as well. Then Sharif



Denson is playing basically the entire game.

Sharif has been a rotational player. He and Aaron play equal snaps the entire week, and then today he got all of the load.

**Q. Just talk about Montrell Johnson a little bit, obviously coming back. He had been injured the past couple weeks and seemed to be healthy and stepped up, especially on senior night.**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, Montrell is a special kid to me for a lot of reasons. He's a class act, first of all. Has been since I've first met him. But just a selfless guy who really sets the tone and the example in the running back room. I think we've got young players in there that have been able to transition and play well and be successful, and they're watching him, and I think that he set the example, he sets the standard in that room.

Look, I'll be honest with you. That possession where we threw the shot to Chim and then fed him the ball three plays in a row, I told Jabbar, hey, let's get one in there. He's feeling it pretty good today, and he delivered. I think he had 127 yards today; is that correct? So 18 carries.

Look, the guy, all he does is produce. He's been doing it. I remember the first scrimmage we had at Louisiana. He was wearing No. 25 back then. I wrote down out there behind the scrimmage, hey, 25 is a real guy. He's been toting the rock ever since.

**Q. You've been preaching culture building throughout your first three years here, and there's obviously been some impatience just in terms of immediate on-the-field results, but the last five weeks, how does it feel to see everything coming together in such beautiful fashion, and what would you attribute this breakthrough to?**

BILLY NAPIER: Well, we've got a long way to go, and I think obviously we've improved. I think it goes back to what I've told you guys before. I think belief is the most powerful thing in the world, and I think that at some point there mid-season, I think we figured out and we started to believe, look, we can play with any team in the country.

We've tried to direct our players' attention to things that require no talent and convinced them, hey, you have the physical ability, but it's got to be about more than that.

You know, you've got to dream big, and then you've got to have little process. So it's about daily, can you do it daily, can you be consistent. I think that was the big leadership challenge this week. Hey, let's go do it again.

I think we were able to -- the staff did a really good job getting them physically ready, mentally ready and emotionally ready to go, because it requires a lot to compete at that level in that arena, and I thought the staff had them ready today.

**Q. There's a lot of voices you mentioned throughout the season as potential leaders for this squad. Who would you say has been key in building a foundation for this program?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, we've got more than -- I'm not singling one person out because we've got more than I can count. That's what it takes. Look, not just players; I had them counted up one day, we've got about 275 people that contribute to our team, and they all matter.

I think we struggled early; it would be easy for a lot of people, not just players, to maybe not take as much pride in what they do or blame others. I think you've got to be solution oriented. Anybody can talk about problems; who can work together with other people and come up with solutions.

There's no substitute for people remaining humble and continuing to take pride in what they do.

**Q. Fourth quarter you really put on your defense. Obviously late game when you got the lead. What did you see on the field or what gave you the confidence they were going to close it out?**

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I think that we had -- we were able to stop the run with a light box. Really all the running game was quarterback scramble. For the most part, I'd say outside of those two explosives in the first half, we stayed on top of them. I thought we had good leverage in coverage. Again, we were able to affect the quarterback. I think we hit him a lot, and then you could see that it was affecting him, and obviously we've got really good specialists, so the field position portion.

So yeah, I just think in general we played complementary ball and it ended up working out.

**Q. Can you talk a little bit about Bryce Thornton's performance today. It seems like he's always popping up in the right spot at the right time?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, Bryce has been a huge bright spot, stepping up in a major way. Obviously we've had some injuries there. Two picks and a career high in tackles, and coming off of an injury. Bryce has been in that training room every day for weeks, and I think he's really stepped

up for our team in a major way.

Bryce got good experience last year, and I think ultimately he's a very capable player. He showed out today.

**Q. Late in the fourth quarter, backed up and you allowed DJ to roll out and throw the out route there. There's a lot of experienced quarterbacks that don't get the trust from their coach to be able to do that. What was the thought process there, and just even his reaction to say, hey, we're going to throw it out of the end zone here?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think backed-up offense is about five first flip. You've got to get five yards, you try to get a 1st down, then you try to get another and flip the field. Sometimes you need to do that.

He has made progress. We didn't move him around a lot. He did make some plays with his feet today.

But I asked him how he was feeling, and he said, I'm good, so we went with it. It was a heck of a catch by Badge and certainly don't have to protect to throw a movement pass. That's one of the best things about it.

**Q. Guys like Quincy Wilson, Teez Tabor who were around the last time Ole Miss came to the Swamp, what have they meant to being around the team and maybe showing some guidance to some of the guys based on playing in the NFL and some of those things?**

BILLY NAPIER: Well, one of the more impactful things that we've tried to be very intentional about is including our former players. I think it helps our players because there is a generational gap here in terms of some of those successes from the past.

I think this place has been to the top of the mountain, and I think it's important for our young people to understand what that looks like. Sometimes meeting young players who have done it and players from the past I think helps them, and the way we want it to work around here is you come here, you finish the race, you get your degree, and you come back and you do what those guys are doing.

I'm very thankful we've got some great former players that have made an impact. Those are a couple of them.

**Q. You touched on your opening statement, but outside of this building, not many people gave you much of a chance after the first month of the season. To see the guys work through it, beat two ranked teams in a row and now you're bowl eligible, how**

**much fun was it to celebrate with the guys in the locker room?**

BILLY NAPIER: Look, I think it's not about yesterday, it's not about tomorrow, it's about today. You've got to get extremely hard to get to a place where you have some belief. I think belief comes as a result of a lot of integrity, togetherness, discipline, effort, toughness. I think this group has done that.

I challenged the players yesterday to be a today guy, not a someday guy. I think sometimes we like to punt it down the road and say, someday I'm going to, rather than, you know what, today I'm going to do that. Just taking actions, being present, living in the moment, focusing on the things you can control. These are said over and over.

But I think this group has done it. The product speaks for itself. They played their tail off today.

**Q. Following up on that, I don't want to go too far back, but September was a pretty low point after those two home games and now you've had consecutive wins against ranked teams here. I heard what you just said, but is it almost in some ways hard to believe, or is this as gratifying as it is to win a championship in some ways?**

BILLY NAPIER: No, I would just say we're just getting started. This is just part of the big picture journey.

Look, I think for me, yeah, I've watched this group -- college football is unique. We play 12 regular season games, maybe get to play another or two, but I'm around these guys every day. Behind the scenes there's a lot that happens and a lot that goes on. We go and we put it on full display 12 times a year.

I've been saying it the entire time, I just think there was something special about this group, and when the football wasn't right in the beginning of the year, man, it hurt me a little bit to be honest with you because I've been watching these guys working and anticipating us being much improved.

So I think I just was consumed with anything and everything that I could do to help them get better, like how do we fix this. Give them some credit; they were vocal. They took ownership. They collaborated with the coaches. I think we chipped away at it, and today obviously played good enough to win.

**Q. You might have touched on DJ to a degree, but those three throws where he kind of escaped situations --**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, those are the plays of the game. Again, I'll say what I said last time. The good Lord blessed DJ Lagway. It pays off to be 6'3¼", 240 pounds. Yeah, those were phenomenal plays. Guys are draped all over him, he finds a guy, keeps his eyes downfield. For the most part, we kept him clean today. We caught a game where their front wasn't able to be a factor to some degree. I think we did what we needed to do to win, and he was a huge part of that for sure.

**Q. You had a moment with everyone today, but last was Graham Mertz. It looked like you were fired up watching him walk out. What was that moment like to share with him today and what has Graham meant to you?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, man, Graham is one of those on that list. When I say we should be thankful for this group of seniors, he's one of those guys. Look, injuries are a challenge, so one thing I'll tell you about that guy, he don't flinch, man. He's been the same guy throughout the entire deal. And what a -- last year, just an inspirational -- these guys know his heart. They know how hard he's worked, and for him not to be able to play is a big deal. But the humility, the class, the selflessness, the way he's handled the situation with DJ, their relationship, his example to the team, his knowledge. One of the reasons why 2 is playing like he is out there is because he got to watch Graham Mertz for six, eight, ten months, so I think that relationship has been critical.

We've got a lot of examples like that on our team. Montrell Johnson, Jadan Baugh, Ja'Kobi is another example of that.

Look, I think in college football, when you get it rolling is when the veteran players are establishing expectations and standards and young players show up, they get in line and they do what they see being done. Until you get to that place, you haven't established anything, and I think this year was the first time I could say with conviction that we've established that.

**Q. Over the last three years we've heard you say stay the course a bunch of times. Was there a point that you thought maybe we needed a course correction in here? And at what point did you think we're on the right course, we really have it now and going in the right direction?**

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I mean, I go back to that open date, that first open date. I walked off of that field on that Wednesday, and man, it's like abuse out there. I can ignore it. I can kind of control my environment and live life. But for these young people, in the digital world they live in,

they can't do that. They live a life where they cannot do that.

So just to see them -- sometimes you get to an open date, and I've been on teams where an open date is a disaster, and you're trying to work, you're trying to come up with plans for improvement. But just to see this group, man, they were like, Coach, what do we do, what do we need to do.

Yeah, I mean, just passion and energy and the way they worked that week and that Wednesday practice, I'll never forget that. I walked off that field and said, that's the best practice I've been associated with in 20 years of college football. So at that point, I'm like, we've got to figure this out.

I think Tennessee was a turning point. I think in that locker room after the game, that was when it was like, okay, we can do this, and I think obviously Kentucky, another open date, what we experienced in Jacksonville. I just think hope is powerful, man. Just proud of these guys, man.

Sometimes you've got to go through stuff. They're different because they went through that. They don't really care what anybody thinks. They care what the people around them think. They care about doing their job and being accountable and being responsible to the people around them. I think what they've been through has forced them to do that, and I can say the same thing.

Football is a conditional game. You've got to find something that's unconditional. Pretty good crew. That was fun. That was fun.

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