

University of Florida Football Media Conference

Monday, November 25, 2024

Gainesville, Florida, USA

Coach Billy Napier

Press Conference



BILLY NAPIER: Okay, guys, obviously no time to play around here. Obviously pleased with the outcome of the game. Man, just very thankful for the atmosphere. Ben Hill Griffin, The Swamp, Steve Spurrier Field, just really special. I thought Saturday, 12 noon kick, 65 degrees, sunshine, just Senior Day. Very thankful for our fans coming out and doing their part. I thought they made a significant impact on the game.

Again, it was complementary ball. We had a lot of comments with the game afterwards. We have no time to play around here because we're turning the page. Started the process yesterday in preparation for Florida State, a rivalry game, which we all know the magnitude of the game.

We have a healthy respect for the personnel. We're very familiar with the personnel. Certainly the success they've had as of late. Had a heck of a year last year. Regardless of record and regardless of outcomes, this game is always a very significant one.

I think it's really, really important for our players to be able to hit the reset button in here, and within the walls execute our routine and prepare the way we have been preparing. I think we need to continue to improve.

Obviously we have a ton of respect for Coach Norvell and his history and the makeup of that staff. This is going to be a challenge, play at their place. We've been there before. They've beaten us the last two years. We know the records will be thrown out.

Put the ball down, 7:00 up there. We got to get ready to go.

What questions do we have here?

Q. This is the first time you have been favored. Another test for competitive maturity, or how important is going to be the approach this week, holiday week?

BILLY NAPIER: I think we've been pretty good at ignoring

the noise and having the right combination of humility and enthusiasm, right? Obviously when you're going through struggle and you've had some setbacks, to be able to maintain your enthusiasm is really important.

But, okay, you experience some success. Can you handle that? Can you ignore maybe the hype? Can you have the right mix of humility with that? I think that's the key.

We have a pretty big number of players that have been on the grass and on the sideline when these guys have beaten us the last two years. That will contribute. But I think you're spot on. Do we have enough maturity to get ready to play again?

I think that is mental, physical and emotional because it requires a lot of every person.

I've challenged every part of our team. I think that's the key. It's going to be about point-of-attack wins across the board. We have to prepare for those individual matchups.

Q. Did you see last week after a big win over LSU, emotional win, rivalry, to how do we handle success and still go about our work before Ole Miss comes in?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think every week's a little bit different in terms of what buttons you push, what motivates the players. I think that's where you've got to have good leadership at the player level, where there's collaboration.

I always ask some of our key guys, Where are we at? They know. They're the ones. They know more than I know or our staff knows. I think that's going to be the key.

You do have to work your way through your punchlist and do each day as if it's the most important game of the year. I would say that it is the most important game of the year, not just because it's the next one, but I do think there's a ton at stake here.

I think we have to realize all that comes with this game big picture-wise. I think our players, they'll have a pulse on where we're at, then we'll adjust the cells each day of the week as we try to build momentum towards kicking it off up



there.

Q. It seemed like for a while if things could go wrong, they were for you guys. The last couple weeks, things have gone your way. If you look at statistically the LSU game, Ole Miss, dropping some passes, they didn't execute as well as they had been. How do you temper the excitement and the momentum of the team by pointing out these things, emphasizing don't get too ahead of yourselves here?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I mean, look, I've stood up here and said this many times. You have to have a very objective way to sum up the game, evaluate the game. What contributed to winning? What did we overcome because we were strong in these areas? We overcame these things.

I think the LSU game is an indicator, time of possession and play count was out of whack because of the third down issues on defense. But because we did play well in the red zone and we were very explosive on offense, we overcame it.

This past game was all about red zone scoring, turnover margin, right? Those were the two significant stats in the game.

Learning how to win is having a comprehensive understanding of what contributes to winning football. I think the math problem may be a little different each week. It's always a combination of these factors that we talk about every day.

Sometimes you may have some issues in one area, but you overcome it because you're really strong in another area. How all those contribute to playing winning football I think is key. Ultimately if a guy is in your program for a number of years, he starts to develop an understanding of why those things are so important.

Q. Have fun, a little swagger, whether it's the dunk in the Billie Jean King Cup, big deal made of that. Do you enjoy them kind of enjoying themselves?

BILLY NAPIER: Those things come with winning, you know? Yeah, there's nothing that makes me happier. What I want for them is to realize the result is not necessarily, we celebrate it, but I want you to realize why you got the result that you did.

Look, we got another game to play, okay? I mean, I don't want to spend all day talking about what's happening in the past here. We play Florida State Saturday night, and that's the most important thing right now.

Q. Do you bring anyone in to talk about the rivalry this week?

BILLY NAPIER: We've already done that.

Q. You talked about playing up to expectations so far. Are there areas of this team that maybe have exceeded what you thought or made improvements from what they looked like in August?

BILLY NAPIER: Well, I mean, I would say that we've managed the injuries as of late pretty well. I think the secondary, again, for another week, given the dynamic, played pretty well in the game, stayed on top of the routes, outside of a couple plays in the first half. They really made some really good plays in the game, covered a good group of skill players.

The quarterback, I think DJ obviously surpassed my expectations for a rookie. Graham Mertz deserves a lot of credit for this, and Ryan O'Hara, who is an absolutely phenomenal coach and teacher, his contribution, the way he goes above and beyond.

DJ has been blessed. He's got a ton of physical ability, but he's also been in the grinder with Ryan and Graham, has made a bunch of progress as a result of a lot of hard work.

Q. Graham was in a couple of the tackles, he's made some plays. Talk about his patience, how he's waited his turn.

BILLY NAPIER: Well, not waited his turn. I'd say he got a chance to play pretty early. He's a rookie. But I get what you're saying.

Myles Graham has a bright future in front of him. Just like you're saying, I would agree, I watched the game from the sidelines, and oftentimes I catch myself going, Man, who was that? It was Myles. I think his football intelligence, growing up in a football family, then his running back background. I think he has good instincts, vision, understanding for the game.

He's a three-down backer. He can play on all third downs. He's one of our best special teams player. Myles has impressed me with how bright he is, retains information. Obviously missed a big portion of the spring having the surgery. I think he's getting into a rhythm now. I think he's going to have a good career here.

Q. Strength and conditioning earlier in the year, how you felt the new program was coming along I asked you. You said it was great, but you have to finish. Do

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

you feel like these last two results, especially the way you have played in the fourth quarter, is what you were hoping for?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I don't like how we played at Texas. I think we played -- outside of that, we've played the way we need to play.

Look, that's got to become who we are. I mean, I think ultimately, in the perfect world we have many more games left. I think that's one of the reminders to the team here is back up a little bit and think big picture. If we would have handled our business at some point, physically, mentally, emotionally, there would be many more games to play here to get to where we want to go, right?

I think painting that picture for them and emphasizing how critical it is to have some routine, self-discipline. The work we do downstairs with Coach Miles and Coach Sankal and their staffs pay off, right? I think our players are pretty vocal. They feel that has made a difference in their performance.

We need that to become part of our DNA. We're blue-collar, we go down there and we work and we prepare. They're down there working right now. We need to continue that. That needs to be a part of who we are.

Q. Aaron Gates, where he's at?

BILLY NAPIER: We'll have an injury report Wednesday evening. Obviously couldn't return to the game. Wasn't able to return, so... Wednesday night we'll be able to get that to you.

Q. You mentioned Coach O'Hara. How beneficial do you think it was the NCAA changed to allow off-the-field assistance, communicate during games?

BILLY NAPIER: I think it's big. Look, the guy's been working for me for a while. Just continues to evolve. I think that's the thing I respect. He never rests on his laurels. He's always looking for a little better way, another layer of detail. He's creative. He continues to push the envelope. We grind the quarterback, okay? Ryan deals with me, right? I respect the way he handles that.

Obviously, every time I challenge something or try to add more detail to an area, he steps up and does it.

I would say that's another -- in a perfect world, all elite football programs, the quarterback sets the tone, at all levels, in my opinion. The importance of that position, not only with how they perform but how they rub off on the other players on the team, how they set kind of a bar, this

is how we work, this is how we prepare, this is how we communicate, this is how we practice. I think it's key the quarterback has got to set the tone.

Q. Two freshmen quarterbacks starting for FSU. Kromenhoek is starting. The importance of keeping him in the pocket?

BILLY NAPIER: Very talented. I worked him out here. I was impressed with him. We offered him a scholarship.

Really sharp. Actually was a dual-threat guy in high school. Played safety. Very physical. Was a good tackler. He's one of the more highly regarded quarterbacks in the country. I mean, now he's getting his chance. From what I see, he played really well last weekend. When he's been given good opportunities, he can play.

Q. You mentioned changing the way you practice throughout the year, how that's worked for you. Is there something week to week that you use as a barometer to make sure that's still kind of going the way you want on a daily basis?

BILLY NAPIER: We're in tier three now. We take one of our scout periods and move it into a walk-through format. We individualize all of our work capacity, all of our player loads. It's daily adjustment based off the individual player.

I think Tyler and the sports science staff working with the training room, all of that is coordinated daily.

Then we have a number of metrics that we use to gauge where a guy is at in terms of trying to ramp him back up so he peaks at the right time.

I mean, I don't even know the name of some of these things we got downstairs. We have tons of ways to kind of give the player feedback. Hey, you're in a good place. Hey, there is some asymmetry.

We are extremely grateful for the things that we have access to and the smart people that we have leading those areas. I think that's a big piece of the puzzle.

Q. Still doing the competitive piece?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, that's not going anywhere, I can promise you.

Q. Two freshmen starting in a game like this, pretty unique, right?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think so. Probably we'll be playing against each other for a while here. I think, yeah, I'm kind

of beyond DJ being a freshman anymore.

Q. They all are.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah (smiling).

Q. Played against a stretch of really good quarterbacks here, and doing it with DJ and Dijon Johnson in there, how has he handled this stretch?

BILLY NAPIER: DD and Trikweze, just the secondary as a whole. Bryce Thornton probably had the best game of his career, two picks, 15 tackles. Jordan continues to impress and is kind of the leader, communicator back there.

Yeah, I think DD has impressed me with his toughness. DD is playing through injury. He's in there every day in the training room working his way through it. Stepped up in a major way. All those guys still play special team snaps on top of the defensive snaps.

Yeah, DD has really grown up in my eyes. He's matured. I have a ton of respect for him just in terms of where he was at when I first met him to who he is as a young man today. He's grown quite a bit, so...

Don't underestimate Trikweze Bridges, the position flexibility. What an incredible finish to his career. Scouts are very high on him here in the last couple weeks.

Q. Given the freshmen, high school recruiting is still extremely important. Is it as important as five years ago, especially with the transfer restrictions the way they are now, or lack of? How does that change your strategy? Are there certain positions you're better at in the portal versus high school?

BILLY NAPIER: At some point you would hope that you stabilize and you kind of have 'em stacked. You kind of see some strategy within each position relative to how you layer each position.

But there's a lack of patience. You know what I mean? There will be a bunch of attrition. You map out your high school class. You never reach on an evaluation. Then you do your best to fill the class that way.

Then you prepare. If you struck out, you got to go portal. Obviously if you have attrition with players you didn't anticipate, then you got to plug-and-play.

85 scholarship players, 20 walk-ons, then four opportunities to add players to the team. You just kind of put the best 85 player pieces of the puzzle together as you can.

Q. Are there positions that you'd be more apt to portal?

BILLY NAPIER: I think some are easier to play than others. Midyear is a big deal. The ones that have a ton of learning to do, tight end, quarterback, interior offensive line, inside linebacker, safety, where they are the communicators, they are the guys that are processing a lot of information. Those are the ones in a perfect world you have around for a while.

It's easier to play defensive line, edge, corner, receiver, running back, tackle, specialists. Those are a little bit more plug-and-play I'd say, in my opinion.

Either way, it's not necessarily about that. It's just about we need a certain number at each spot, and we do the best we can to fill those roles.

Q. Now that you are bowl eligible, how do you feel about getting the extra practices in December?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I mean, don't get me wrong, everybody throws out this big you get 15 more practices. We will not practice 15 more times, I can promise you that.

I mean, we're not to that place. We just have access to the players a lot more than we used to in the old days. All spring, all summer you can be on the field. It's a little bit more of a reward for the players. It's another opportunity to create momentum for the program. A lot of our redshirt players that will be able to play in the game will be big.

Just in general, you try to pare the workload. These guys have been grinding. It's not like it used to be. I just think we will build a schedule that will be about getting healthy, lifting weights, getting bigger, stronger, working on fundamentals.

I just don't think 15 practices... If I told our guys we were going to practice 15 times for one game, that wouldn't go over well, right (smiling)?

We'll have a good plan and try to peak at the right time. The practice environment will be more about just kind of trying to peak for the game.

Q. Given where FSU is, how surprised are you in how the roof has caved in there?

BILLY NAPIER: I have my own grass to mow. My yard is big, has a lot of weeds in it. I have my own issues. I don't necessarily think it would be right for me to comment on that.

Look, I understand all the things that come with the job. Job's probably more challenging than it's ever been. I have a ton of respect for Mike. He's a good football coach. I think we're trying to get the Florida Gators better. That's my focus.

Q. How did Bryce do stepping in? How has he done with the opportunities he's gotten?

BILLY NAPIER: He's done good. I think Bryce is an athlete. I think he's smart. He is tough. I think Bryce is still a young player.

Bryce has position flexibility. He probably could play all five. He could play left tackle, both guards, right tackle, center. Bryce is a guy who developed late. He's kind of a late-bloomer. I think he's a good off-season away from being a heck of a football player. He's still very young. I think at that position, the nutrition, the strength and conditioning, the weight room.

We have a lot of players on our team that fit into that category. This coming off-season will be a big piece of the puzzle for guys like Bryce. There's a long list of guys that fit into that category.

Q. Game day got you to try to hit the crossbar on Saturday. How did they convince you to do that? How close were you?

BILLY NAPIER: When somebody says they're going to donate \$1 million to hurricane relief, I started taking my jacket off at that point, right?

But I don't think I've thrown a football in six months. I mean, I'm still sore from one throw (smiling). No, we nearly pulled it off.

But yeah, got to take 'em up on that offer.

Q. They wanted to give you a second try.

BILLY NAPIER: I've had so many people comment on that. I'm going to leave it as it is.

Q. What was the challenge?

BILLY NAPIER: To throw the ball and hit the crossbar. I was doing the Game day and had a ball in my hand. One of the managers threw it to me. They were like, Man, never seen a coach throwing the ball around pregame. Then obviously they challenged me to throw it and hit the crossbar. Here comes \$1 million, so... We gave it our best shot.

Q. 35-yard throw?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah.

Q. (No microphone.)

BILLY NAPIER: We have a bunch of guys doing it in post practice. They do it all the time. I should have been practicing more.

Q. How much can the outcome of Florida-Florida State in your backyard help or hurt recruiting?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I mean, I think that's what we got to make sure we understand here, is the significance of the game. And the impact of the rivalry, not only for our program and our players and the people within these walls, but all the Gators out there that have had to deal with things for the last two years.

We get it. I think the key is that we focus on today. We used different themes. One-day contract, earn the right to win. We'll have our way to get them ready to go this week.

Q. SEC going to 85 and only 20 walk-ons, how much does that change the way you guys do recruiting, and how can NIL help make those last 20 spots really competitive?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think there will be an evolution of the game there in terms of practice format, then obviously strategy behind how you implement those 20 spots, who gets those spots, how competitive that will be. That's my concern.

If we don't define these things and make it very clear cut, it will be manipulated. If there's loopholes, if there's wiggle room, they're going to wiggle. In this conference, if there's wiggle room, they're going to wiggle, too.

I think we need clarity about what does that look like. When do we have to declare the 105? Can we carry more than 105 in the off-season? Can they participate in revenue sharing, right? There's a number of things that need to be cleared up here so that we can game plan a strategy, right?

I've been hammering that home. We'll continue to do that.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports