

University of Florida Football Media Conference

Wednesday, December 4, 2024

Gainesville, Florida, USA

Billy Napier

Press Conference



BILLY NAPIER: All right, guys. Today's a culmination of a lot of hard work. I think it truly takes a team of people. Really excited about the players that we added to the team today. Certainly not only the players, but the families, the circle of influence that kind of chose our process, our group of people, our organization, our philosophy, our formula, whatever you want to call it.

Just very humbling when a young man and his family makes a decision to join your team and your journey. It's a blessing to welcome a very talented group, in my opinion. I think the personnel department did a really, really good job in this class top to bottom of identifying players and obviously the recruitment begins and the coaches go to work. Our on-campus recruiting staff, their efforts.

This is a team effort. We certainly would not be able to do this without the support of the administration, the resources, Florida Victorious, the efforts that they've put into this, building a system that allows us to be successful in this space.

Time will tell. Obviously somewhere in that top 10 class range. We're very pleased with the group. I think in general a lot of people contribute. The operations people contribute. The equipment. We have an incredible group of pilots that fly us all over the country. Our Gatorade staff I thought was elite in this cycle. Creative media, video. The academic staff over at the Hawkins Center, they're always on-call. We have a great product to sell there. They've done a great job of connecting with people. A number of professors contribute on official visits. Then you have obviously our university community, Gainesville. A ton of people here contribute to where we're at today.

These days are a little bit different than they used to be. I can remember when you could only sign 25, you only had one time a year, and it was much more dramatic. I think now we have multiple windows to add players. We added a lot of good ones today, not only good players but good people.

Good day for the Gators. What questions we got?

Q. The other day you were talking about before the FSU game, winning in the number one factor in recruiting. How much has these last three weeks meant? How far has this class come in a few weeks?

BILLY NAPIER: I think for the last couple years, the big pitch is you have to be up for the challenge. We have work to do. We came here with the intent of rebuilding the place top to bottom, being a championship contender, getting back to where our team has been in the past.

I think we have a hungry fan base. We have an administration that's dedicated and committed. We have a number of investors who have stepped up. We've improved the player experience here.

I think the missing piece was the on-field brand of football, the winning formula, the execution. Hey, that's a brand of football that is effective and I can develop, I can experience success. The right kind of kids, they're either up for the challenge and they show up here to do it, they want to be associated with a winner.

Look, we are not done, okay? We just showed promise. I think that the vote of confidence, the stability, then how our team competed, you pair that with the hard work of our staff, I think ultimately that's why we were able to close.

Q. (No microphone.)

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, just leadership, an incredible story. Love his family. I do think obviously a very historic storied program. There's a ton of Gators in Tampa, right? There's been a lot of great Gators there.

He was a guy we identified early. Had him in seven-on-seven camp. Documented speed. A guy that just keeps getting bigger. He can run the full route tree. Good punt returner, kick returner. He's been kind of the leader of the group, the steady, consistent voice there. He's stuck with us. He's got a bright future in front of him. We're excited about him.

Q. Your top two guys are legacy guys, Vernell Brown

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and Ben Hanks. Speak to their talent and the importance that they come from Gator families?

BILLY NAPIER: I think we're hitting that just right where there's going to be a couple of those every year, I'm hopeful.

Look, those two guys, it's in the DNA. Certainly I can respect how they went about the process 'cause they did go visit other places. They did evaluate and compare.

I think that we worked extremely hard. I think it's important to add players like that to your team because I think they care. I think there's just a little something different about it for them. I'm always looking for that kid that grew up a Gator, that has passion for the place, that has always wanted to play here. I think in crunch time, it just means a little bit more to them.

So those two fit into that category. Both are fantastic players. I mean, VBIII had a phenomenal year, still playing. Certainly Hanks Jr., 13 picks, Miami-Dade County record. 6'1". You go back to VBIII, the documented speed, the production. I mean, both fit exactly what we're looking for.

They're phenomenal kids. Then the family, just salt-of-the-earth people. Both home runs for this class.

Q. How much did D.J. having success this year help you guys recruit offensive skill players?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no, I think a huge piece to the puzzle. Probably the biggest piece, truth be known.

Just in general I think the excitement about a why good, young player who showed promise as a freshman. Then his leadership and presence and the way he handles himself. His humility, values, the way he's been raised. I think his perspective. The way he handled getting an opportunity as a young player. The improvement. I think he showed a ton of promise.

So I think it helps with current player retention, but also certainly these young recruits are just one year younger. We all understand the importance of the quarterback in today's game. Certainly we've got a good young one.

Q. The portal has become such a vital part of the recruiting process. How many kids do you anticipate you're going to be looking at to bring in here from the portal? Is that a fluid number that's going to be based on who's available?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no, it is fluid. I mean, we certainly

have certain positions that are specific, like a lot of it will be based off of player retention. You will find out as we are evaluating the pool of players that are available, we will get a pulse on who we've retained, who we've lost, paired with who we sign today.

Each position we kind of have a quota. We carry this number of players. We'll be hitting that quota. The portal will be the next opportunity to add a player.

I tell Bird Sherrill and our staff in the back that we always anticipate needing one player out of the portal at every position just in case. You never know what type of attrition you may have.

Right now we're evaluating every position. Then we will be strategic about who we bring in for visits. We'll bring in more players for visits this year because there's an unlimited number.

Again, we will include our players in that process, right? We will get those players around our veteran leaders. We'll make sure they fit from a cultural standpoint. Obviously they've got to pass the evaluation physically, as well.

Q. The on-field success that the program had over the last three weeks to end the season, I think you said the negative recruiting that was going on was a big factor. How much do you think the statement from Scott Stricklin kind of clearing the air aided your efforts a little bit?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no, I think the combination of how our players competed and played, obviously winning. I think the character that they showed through the tough first month of the season, how they responded, how they continued to fight. I think that spoke the loudest of all.

Obviously for you to get the administration's stamp was a big deal. Then you go prove it down the stretch on the field with a couple big wins. It's like, Okay, you can kind of sense the momentum.

I mean, the recruits are observing the players. They see the camaraderie, the morale, the effort, the intensity, the competitive spirit, how hard they're playing, then ultimately that the formula is working, all parts of the team, offense, defense, special teams having success.

This is a game of momentum. I think we've had momentum at times I would say in the first three years, but we've struggled to keep it, right? I think for the first time we kept it. Today is kind of another step in the right direction.

Q. Is there an advantage or disadvantage to having the signing day as early as it is? Usually it's about the third week in December.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think every college football coach in America is celebrating right now, okay (smiling). We're getting ready to go into a quiet period. Our assistant coaches are going to be here with the players as we prepare for the bowl.

We can host visitors, but we're going to be sleeping in our own bed, we're going to be seeing our wife and our kids. We've got the class signed. It didn't present any hurdles in that regard. We can focus on the portal. We can focus on the most important thing: player retention, obviously, preparing for the bowl game.

I think it's healthy change to the schedule. I think it will improve the quality of life. It is needed, given the Playoff dynamic, right? You got this championship game that pole vaults into a 12-team Playoff and a number of bowl games.

I think it's a good move for all coaches.

Q. With that being said, coming off of a three-game winning streak, signing day is five days after your last win, how much of an advantage was that as you spoke to momentum?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no, I think we wouldn't have been able to close it out. I think we've been on the other end of the spectrum for two years in a row, right? I think we know what it's like on the other side. I prefer this way (smiling).

So yeah, I mean, I think it affects your ability. You typically win a couple more than you would have recruiting battles. When you're on the other end, you tend to lose a couple. It's a little harder.

Yeah, it's a huge impact, for sure.

Q. Vernell Brown, how quickly can a freshman receiver impact? How quickly can a guy impact? What does he have that will allow him to?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no, I mean, some players are more ready than others. I learned a long time ago, like, you typically kind of wait and see. Some of the guys that you think aren't ready, they end up being ready. The ones you thought would be maybe aren't.

If you pick one that's mature enough, has the character, the football intelligence, has the skill set. I think his skill level is up there. VBIII impresses in the seven-on-seven setting, all these combines and camps, but he's good with

pads on. That's what I like about him. He probably plays his best ball with helmets and shoulder pads on.

He's a tough kid. He's just very mature as a competitor. Obviously his dad and his family, their pedigree is athletes. I think there's something there. They've just been competing their whole life.

He'll have every opportunity. He'll be here early. He'll get his reps. We're going to play the best player, so...

Q. His return element...

BILLY NAPIER: Big punt returner, kick returner. He's been dynamic in those regards.

You think back to Tre Wilson. He played as a rookie, but he was not midyear. He had a hamstring issue that first summer.

You'd like to build systems on offense and defense where some of the impact players can play early: running back, receiver, offensive tackle, corner, defensive line. I think your processes and your communicators are the ones where it maybe takes a little time: linebackers, safety, interior, O-line, quarterback, tight end. You would like to think your system can accommodate a unique skill player.

Q. Do you see someone filling the void of as DK is leaving?

BILLY NAPIER: Position doesn't matter. Formation and motion. We'll get their best guy and their worst guy. I think we just try to get the best couple players out there and get 'em matched up.

But DK, we're losing a ton of production at receiver. Badger and DK are walking out the door. Somebody's got to fill that role.

Q. You saw the importance of quarterback depth year. Jones, getting him to flip last month, what do you see in him?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I was always impressed with Tramell. Known him since he was very young. He's over here on Friday Night Lights throwing darts. Looked like he's 11 years old out there back then.

I've just seen him grow, mature. I love his dad. His dad has a level head. Really smart. Kind of a coach on the field. Just the way he led that program. I've seen him on the seven-on-seven setting. The success the team has had. He's a leader. The kids around him in the area, across the state, they all respect him. He was dominant in

Elite 11. Put on a show out there.

He's a 6-footer, but he's a quarterback, so... Excited about what he brings to the table.

Q. You guys had a dozen flips in a two-week span. Have you ever been a part of a run like that where it was strictly flips? How do you pull something like that off?

BILLY NAPIER: I mean, it's hard. I don't like it, to be honest with you. I think I'd like all those guys to commit to us back in June. That would have been a lot better (smiling).

But, I mean, we finished second on a lot of 'em. I think the common deal was like, Hey, we got to prove it on the field, there's got to be some stability. I think once we proved those things, it led to, Hey, this is where we want to be. Now we get to do that.

We battled the narrative. Then we obviously didn't help ourselves with how we played in the first month, right? I think this off-season was challenging to recruit to because of the narrative. We contributed to that, right? Nobody's making excuses. We had every right to make that narrative better. I think we did that with the way we played at the end of the season this year.

Yeah, I just think a lot of kids that really probably in their gut wanted to come here, they were worried about the future. Obviously, play well on the field, that was the missing link: the stability and the product.

Q. You've talked about how UCF week was kind of a turning point in the football season. Was there a flip or stretch where you felt like there was a turning point in this recruiting class? Was there a run of commits where you thought this thing might turn, start getting them daily?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah.

Q. Maybe after one of the wins.

BILLY NAPIER: I think we had a really good group of visitors here for the LSU game. Then we had a number of players here for the Ole Miss game. We just kind of set the table. I mean, I think it was there. Big-time players on campus, play well. Our fans were incredible, right? Those game day environments were special. There's nothing like that Swamp, man. I think just the energy that our kids were playing with, just the overall vibe here was positive.

Stability, big wins, in there to feel that momentum. I think,

obviously, those were a bunch of guys that we finished second on, right? I think we were able to turn it around there.

Q. Lagonza Hayward was another one, kind of a late flip. Strong kid at safety, Georgia kid.

BILLY NAPIER: Good player, man. Really good player. Plays both ways. Plays returner. Incredible program. Still playing. Playing this week. It's a tough place. They lift weights. They practice the right way. They've had success. It's a winning program. He's the leader. So three hours away, in our footprint.

Obviously we got him on campus a number of times back in the spring and summer. Came up a little short. Just another one of those guys that we were able to get on campus here the last couple weeks. In his heart he knew he wanted to be here, so...

You got to continue to chip away at these guys that you maybe finish second or third on. You can turn it around if you play well.

Q. Jayden Woods, any Tyler Miles help out on the farm?

BILLY NAPIER: Jayden Woods is one of my favorites. We evaluated Jayden. Really high grade. Then he came on campus with his grandmother in the spring. After meeting him, it was like, Okay, that's exactly what we're looking for. 40-inch vertical. Elite thrower. Freaky throws. 6'3", 235. Plays stack backer. He can rush. He'll be able to run. He's loose-hipped. He can play on special teams. Just a phenomenal human being and worker. Dad played at Kansas State.

His grandma reminds me of my grandma. It's all business, okay? Yeah, we hit it off. I think we stayed in touch. Mike did a good job there. I think ultimately got him back for a game. I'm excited about him. He's a special kid.

Q. Looks like he wrestled at 285 one year.

BILLY NAPIER: That's right.

Q. Wild athletic traits.

BILLY NAPIER: He's exactly what we're looking for.

Q. What's your sense for how many of these guys you expect to be on campus here in January?

BILLY NAPIER: I think it's about 18 guys, if I'm not mistaken. Yeah, right now we're at 18 mid-years.



Q. With the changes that are coming for size of coaching staffs, scholarships, do you anticipate adding more coaches in the next month or so? Now seems to be the time to address those issues.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I think the first thing, the next agenda that's extremely important is player retention, right? We'll start dialogue with our current players. That's kind of next on the list, right? Then we'll move into bowl prep. We'll do an exhaustive review of the year, what we need to get better at, areas where we need to restructure.

I do think there's going to be some evolution there in terms of how you format your recruiting and your coaching because of the new rules with anybody being able to give instruction on the field. I think you kind of reformat your staff in terms of the coaching part and then the recruiting part.

We're in for a little bit of an overhaul in this off-season in terms of how we put that together. Then we'll evaluate. We'll evaluate everybody. That typically takes some time. It will be intentional.

Q. You've given a lot of credit to DJ Lagway, your staff, for the success of this season. You got to pat yourself on the back for the successful run. What was your personal message to these recruits? Was there something that you told them specifically in how you could develop them, have a successful year at Florida?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, I mean, I think ultimately we built an organization here that's about the person, the student and the player. Culturally I think we're going to teach values. We're going to prioritize education. We believe in our football formula.

Then we just try to get really smart people. We try to get people that are competent, that are experts at what they do. We try to find people that are sincere, that are authentic, that care for people, that can help these guys accomplish their goals and live out their dreams.

Look, we've put together a good group of people. I think each kid's a little bit different, each family. We want them to view it as a journey to some degree. Like I'm coming to Florida to do it all, not just be there. We want them to come here and finish here, right? We're selling a career, a life.

We want you to come here. We want you to develop great relationships with your teammates, all the leadership within the organization, all of our alumni, the university community. We want you to have individual success. We

want you to have team success. We want you to come back here, bring your family back one day, tell stories about all the things you accomplished. It's your home. It's your place.

I think today that's missing a little bit. Yeah, sometimes a kid may be talented, but maybe he doesn't fit. You tend to attract what you're selling to some degree. I think overall that's the intent behind what we're doing.

So yeah, I mean, I think overall that's the approach. Still believe in the game and what it can teach. It has become transactional, but we'd like to think we're not that type of program. We can still view the game in a certain light. I still think there's people out there that are looking for that.

Q. Your offensive line and defensive line class, what do you like about them and the signees on both lines of scrimmage?

BILLY NAPIER: Good question.

These OLs, I was really excited about all three. I Medlock is a freak of nature. He's 6'5", heavyweight wrestler, just unique hip, ankle and knee flexibility. The guy can really run. He plays both ways. I'm not sure he couldn't play defense, he's that athletic. But a guy that really came along. Tough, blue-collar family. Yeah, just unique movements for his size. A guy that can play offensive tackle for you.

Dice is a big, powerful, lean, 310-pound guy. Got some position flex. He's 34 and a half arms, got some length. Maybe he can play tackle. I think he's got some position flex. He's got power to play guard. Loves football. Very motivated. Comes from a winning program. Knows how to work.

I think Daniel is really one of the freakier guys. He's a human forklift. That's kind of how I would describe him. We've had a couple guys like him in the past at Louisiana. 6'4" and a quarter. Really long 35 arm, 84 wing. Really good bender. He's got good functional movement. Extremely smart. Very bright. Very knowledgeable about football. Studies players. Then I like his mom and dad. They're exceptional. I think they're both educated, high character. He's made of the right stuff.

D-line, big Shivers. We're losing big Des in camp. I think we were looking for a big man in there that could play nose. Four and three quarters, 380. I think big, long guy. When is the last time you've seen a 380-pound guy run a 75-yard touchdown. The guy is running the ball Friday Nights. Just a big, athletic guy. Guy scored 1400 points in basketball now. Elite basketball player. Just a unique

situation there and an athlete. Got a lot of upside.

McCloud is a former linebacker that kind of grew into a D-lineman body. Two and three quarters, 299. Can really run. Twiched up. Three-down player. Can rush the passer, play on the edge. Got a motor.

Then Mbatchou I think is the hidden gem. Put a helmet on for the first time this past spring. Four and three quarter, 285. Is going to be a monster. Has been well-coached. I think his coaches at the school he went to did a great job. That's one of the better programs in the state. Just accelerated.

We kind of found him before he blew up. Everybody in America came in there and offered him. Great parents. Blue-collar parents, working family. Obviously an African kid. Education is important. Values are important. But yeah, that was a big win.

I like the edge players. Wiggins was one of our first commits right there in the backyard in the panhandle. He's an extra-effort player. He's four and three quarters, 260, extremely long. Also a heck of a baseball player. Just overall good mom and dad.

Like all those guys. Jayden Woods. You think about a couple of these guys we added right before the season, they're almost a part of this class, in my opinion. Enoch, Zandamela, Tarvorise Brown, Cormani. They're really in this class to some degree. We just added them early.

Q. Talk about the specialists that you added in this class.

BILLY NAPIER: That's one of the things that probably nobody wants to talk about. I mean, go watch the tape of the Evan Noel guy. This guy is hitting 62-yarders off the ground. I mean, out here in kicking camp, I think he had a 62-yarder. We called timeout. We doubled timeout out there in the Swamp. He lined up, piked it right down the middle. I don't give many elite grades. He's got an elite grade.

Obviously we're extremely excited about Mac and Hayden. I think we've got specialists that are a big piece of the puzzle. We've seen the value of those over our time here. Credit Coach Houston and Coach Couch and Coach Fletch for going out and recruiting some of the best in the country.

Q. Have you already started your exit interviews or do you do that after the bowl game?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, we'll start that process here in the next couple days. We get this over with, then we'll start

moving in that direction, yeah. That will begin here pretty soon.

Q. On the recruiting trail, what is tougher, recruiting the kid or the mom and dad?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, that's a good question.

I think each family is a little bit different. Sometimes it's the uncle, the coach. I think you have to identify who's important. I think that's part of being able to figure it out. I think each situation is a little bit different pitch, what's important. I try to ask a lot of questions, try to do a lot of listening.

Not only that helps you recruit them, but once they get to your program, it helps you lead them, keep them on the right track. What's important to them. Obviously you feel obligated as a coach to kind of continue what the family has started. What's the best way to do that?

I think while you're recruiting them, you're getting to know 'em. All those things add up once they arrive. You're recruiting every and anybody. I used to joke around. You should have a dozen contacts around each kid. If you're doing it the right way, you have 12 people you're talking to. That used to be my kind of, All right, who are the 12 most important people around the kid? Should be talking to all of 'em.

Q. You went to Canada for a punter.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, we did.

Q. Not Australia?

BILLY NAPIER: No, he's a lefty. Even (indiscernible) stamped him at camp. Oh, that lefty from Maine, from Canada. Yeah, I think he's also a really good kicker. He made a 50-something-yarder to win a game for his team this past year.

I love his parents. His parents, ton of sacrifice for him to come to the States and play. Boarding school. A ton of sacrifice there for that family, what they did.

That whole recruitment of specialists is a gauntlet, right? For them, they're on a mission there to help them. I think they did that.

Q. (No microphone.)

BILLY NAPIER: I think there's more than six.

Q. That aren't coming early?



BILLY NAPIER: Daniel, Pierre-Louis, Byron Louis, Muizz, Joseph, Myles Johnson.

Q. Thoughts on the class that Will Harris put together. A lot of checkmates on social media the past few weeks.

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, no, I was very pleased with Hanks Jr. Obviously a legacy there. Then the two safeties. I mean, I think on our board, those were top-of-the-board players. Those were late additions.

I think anytime you recover and go back and get one it's because you had really good relationships. Those guys are in our footprint. I think we built enough rapport to where we were able to overcome in the end.

Hopefully we're not done there at that position. We got a little bit of work left to do.

Q. The importance of getting Ty Jackson...

BILLY NAPIER: Ty Jackson is one of the best football players I've watched in my career. I mean, I watched 800 players a year at Louisiana. Watched about 650 here. His junior film is probably one of the best football players I've ever seen. He keeps getting bigger. I remember when he was in camp, he was like 197 pounds. He just keeps getting bigger.

Legit track speed. Plays receiver, returner. Just accelerates through contact. Unique play strength for a guy that maybe doesn't have the bulk. His mom and dad are incredible. His mom -- I'm not going to say that (smiling).

We had a great relationship throughout the recruiting process. I mean, I had more fun recruiting him and getting to know his parents. They were awesome. That was a big one.

Q. Was that one where you kept the communication going, never stopped talking?

BILLY NAPIER: Absolutely. I wanted that one.

Q. Do you expect anyone else here? Do you believe this is the class for the signing period?

BILLY NAPIER: No, there's a couple still out there. Maybe not today, but maybe as time goes.

Q. For the guys who didn't flip, how important was the opportunity to build relationships with those guys with

the opportunity to maybe recruit them again down the line?

BILLY NAPIER: Look, I think you just do your best. I think nowadays there's a lot of variables that you can't control, right?

I think for me, what I've learned, just keep moving. I've joked around with you guys about this before. It's like being in the Major Leagues, right? Bat .300, it's pretty good. You can't waste any time on it. You just go to the next one.

There's a bunch of good players out there. It's important to get 25 or so that are good enough. There's lots of ways to add players to your team now, right? It's just a different era. You just got to at this point evaluate, continue to recruit, get the best 105 you can get.

I think for me, you can spend your time on building culture within the building, working on your process, your systems. I think the landscape has settled down a little bit. I'm excited about rev share. In general, we have a system built now that we didn't have when we showed up. It didn't exist. Now we're much more efficient with our team and focus on keeping the main thing the main thing.

Q. Is there an element of this being foundational and developing relationships with guys who aren't part of this class, you can circle back?

BILLY NAPIER: 100%. Don't burn any bridges.

Look, some of these situations you understand why. Like, it's just like, I get it. You just got to end up with enough at each position. It is what it is, right? It's not that big of a deal.

Q. Does it mean anything to you to be a top 10 class?

BILLY NAPIER: I mean, time will tell if it's a top 10 class.

Q. Being in the rankings, does that matter to you?

BILLY NAPIER: Yeah, it absolutely matters. I think the rankings are probably more accurate than they've ever been, in my opinion. You go back 15 years, it used to be a joke. But I do think now there's more exposure. They hire good people. They have educated people, people that have a real opinion. They don't always get it right.

We'll see. But I do think we've proved that we can evaluate players, right? Ultimately how many of these guys stick? Will they develop? Are they good people? Can they be consistent?

The intangibles will decide how far they go, right? The recruitment is over. Now we're into the development phase. Hopefully we got a bunch of height, length and speed, intelligence. Now we go to work on all the other stuff.

Q. No attrition from your class. How gratifying was that with the schools coming after some of your commits?

BILLY NAPIER: I view it the same way. Commitment these days, you know... I think these guys committed today. That's what I would say. Ultimately today they committed, right?

Obviously the work begins now. That's the thing to understand here. This is all fun and games. I mean, the work begins now. They'll get here, we'll plug 'em in and we'll go to work.

Q. Tre Wilson, how has he come along? How excited is he working with DJ?

BILLY NAPIER: He's doing great. He's doing really good. He's out of the brace. He's walking around normal. That's about a four-month recovery. He'll be back in full speed here shortly.

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