

University of Florida Football

Media Conference

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Scott Stricklin

athletic director

Billy Gonzales

Interim head coach

Press Conference



Been a part of this place when we were winning championships. He understands that pedigree.

This place is important to him. I think he'll do a great job of leading this group and the staff through the remainder of this season and believe this gives us the best chance to have the kind of success we want to finish this season on a strong note.

I also met with the staff. We have a lot of high-character people in positions of coaching or support staff. And they're going to continue to work hard for the University of Florida, work hard for these players and put them in the position to be successful.

Had a really good meeting with the team. I'll share three things I told the team with you. I've been around this group, some of these players have been here for a few years, but even the young guys, I'm around, I'm at practice. I travel with them on game days on road trips.

There's three things I know about this group. Number one, this is a really talented group. We have a lot of ability on this roster. I saw this note the other day. This team became the first team in 57 years to play four straight top-10 opponents. And we competed on the field, talent-wise, toe to toe with all those teams.

We didn't win as many games as we wanted to but there was no question we had the talent to win at that level. I believe we have the talent to compete with anybody left on our schedule. This is a talented group of football players. I know that.

The second thing I know is the University of Florida matters to this group. They chose the University of Florida. They wanted to be here. And they want to have the success that you expect to have when you come play for the University of Florida.

That's the third thing. They want to win. Winning is important to this group. They look around. They see other teams on this campus winning at a high level. They see what the basketball team did last spring, they want to be a part of that. They want to have those experiences.

SCOTT STRICKLIN: I wanted to kind of just touch base after the news yesterday, the decision to make a change in the head coaching position here at Florida, and felt like that was in the best interests for our football program going forward.

It was not an easy decision. Anytime you make those kind of decisions that impact people personally, especially people that you care about, those are just tough, challenging decisions.

I had a meeting with Coach Napier, and as you would expect, he handled it as graciously as anybody could. None of us will find a finer individual. His integrity, his character, the way he's led this place, the investment that he's made into this football program, will always be appreciated. I think we will benefit from it for a long, long time.

I'm incredibly appreciative of Billy, and I think we're all sad and disappointed it didn't work out from a results standpoint the way we wanted, but just feel so strongly about who he is as a person.

He's leaving this place in a much better position than when he found it, from the quality of the roster, a lot of the support structure that our team benefits now, whether it's the life skills program like GatorMade or other things, the kind of people he's brought in this program has been top-notch. I just want to acknowledge that and how much respect and appreciation. We wish him and Ali and their kids nothing but the best. He's got a lot of good days ahead of him, I'm convinced of that.

After that meeting, I met Billy Gonzales and asked if he would step in as interim head coach. And obviously he agreed to do so. I've known Billy a long time. Obviously he's been around the University of Florida, now in three different decades, been a part of three different staffs.



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They're really talented, they care about the University of Florida. And they want to win.

And our coaches and our staff and our administration, Gator Nation, we owe it to them to do everything we can to support them through the rest of this season and give them every opportunity to go out and win some ball games and finish strong and don't let what's happened up to this point be what defines them, but what happens the rest of the way be what defines them. I think they'll do that.

On the next steps, from the leadership part of the football program, obviously we have a search that we're going to conduct. And that's my responsibility. Goal's pretty simple. We want to compete for championships and not just compete but we want to win championships.

University of Florida, as you guys well know, is the only school in the country that's own three national titles in football and men's basketball. It's the only school this decade -- I'm sorry -- this century that's won at least one title in football and men's basketball. And the Gators have won three in both.

There's very few places that provide the opportunities that you have at the University of Florida. There's somebody out there who can come in here and put this football program in a position where it can win championships.

This search is going to be thorough. It's going to be deliberate. Despite speculation about particular candidates or things that have already been done, we are early in this process, and it will be a very thorough process.

To that end, we have engaged with TurnkeyZRG as a search consultant in this process. I think they can bring a lot of value and looking forward to working with them.

This university has a lot of alignment. We have a really strong group of board of trustees. They provide great leadership.

Excited about Dr. Landry. I think he was a great selection as our president, and looking forward to continue to work with him but really impressed with the leadership that he's providing.

Throughout the university, there's just great leadership. And there's a shared commitment to excellence in every corner of this campus. It's a world-class university. We have a world-class athletic program -- the only athletic program in the country that's finished in the top 10 of the Directors' Cup every year it has existed -- routinely in the top five in all sports. 49 national championships.

There's a lot of success here. There's a lot of things to build off. It's a standard of excellence and winning that we have to continue to perpetuate.

The other thing I'd say is the University of Florida has for a long time been invested in being good at football. I don't think we've ever been as invested as we are right now.

There's never been a time, as many financial resources and as much commitment has gone into making Gator football as good as it can be, whether it's elite facilities like the one standing in here now Heavener Training Complex, and strong NIL infrastructure, all the other comprehensive things we do to help our athletes, whether it's the Hawkins Center at Farrior Hall, from an academic standpoint, nutrition with the Condon Dining Center -- there's just so many things in place for this program to be successful at the highest level.

And we're here to win championships. And I think we have a really unique opportunity for somebody to walk into.

Q. At some point (inaudible) didn't work out, especially given what you just said, everything's in place?

SCOTT STRICKLIN: There's probably another day and time for a postmortem on that part of it. Obviously I had a lot of faith in Billy and had a lot of confidence because he had so many traits of what it takes to be successful.

These things are inexact science when you're dealing with choosing people. And I'm not exactly sure why. I have some thoughts. But obviously he did a lot of really good things. Just at the end of the day we didn't win to the level we needed to.

Q. There was a lot made to the offensive side of the football. What were conversations with him, like during offseasons to maybe recalibrate what was going on there? Because it just didn't seem to ever get traction.

SCOTT STRICKLIN: We had a lot of conversations related to that. We spent probably hours in conversation.

I shared with him that I thought that his strength may be in leading the program and overseeing the bigger picture. But at the end of the day, my philosophy is, you hire head coaches -- as athletic directors, you hire head coaches -- you give them authority to make decisions on how they want to run their program, and you hold them accountable to that. That's probably part of the reason we're here today.



Q. Are you going to be solely responsible for hiring the next head football coach here?

SCOTT STRICKLIN: I am.

Q. How much input will you get from the board of trustees, from Turnkey, from maybe some of your direct reports?

SCOTT STRICKLIN: I'll use every available resource. We have two ears and one mouth for a reason. I'll be listening to a lot and taking a lot of suggestions and advice. And we do have a lot of access to a lot of information. So we'll utilize all of that.

Q. Wanted to clarify something with Billy and the play calling. When you decided to bring him back last year, was that part of the discussion and part of your decision to bring him back was the expectation that he would hire a play caller? When he decided not to do that, what was your reaction?

SCOTT STRICKLIN: I'm going to keep those conversations between the two of us private. But we had a lot of conversations related to that. It wasn't this or else. As I said, ADs hire head coaches. They don't hire assistant coaches. That was his decision.

Q. At what point was the decision made to dismiss Billy? And at what point was he told he would no longer be here?

SCOTT STRICKLIN: I met with him yesterday morning. I just felt like that was the right time to go into the open date for us to move ahead here.

Q. (Inaudible) a type in what the fans want, but in terms of parameters, some people say a Group of Five offensive minded -- what are you looking for in terms of the type of coach?

SCOTT STRICKLIN: My sense is we will have a wide variety of candidates. We want people who can win championships at the University of Florida. That's going to be our goal. We want somebody who can come in here, be a strong leader and win championships. And, like I said, there's probably people from a lot of different backgrounds that could have the potential to do that.

It is tricky. There are three current coaches in college football who have won national championships. So unless one of those three decided that they want to come and we think they're the right fit, we're going to have to be making a projection somewhere along the line.

Sometimes you find that person. And we've had instances here where we've brought people in. My guess is most of the coaches have won national titles at the University of Florida across various sports. I don't know this for a fact, but my guess is the first time they ever won one won was at the University of Florida. We need somebody to come join that list.

Q. (Inaudible) job market pretty active this cycle and might get crazy. What are the advantages for you all in being officially open at the juncture?

SCOTT STRICKLIN: Tom is an asset. You would certainly I think it's going to be beneficial. The more time you have the, the easier it is.

One of the unique things about these high-profile position -- searches like football and men's basketball, usually those are, the time to make those searches is compressed.

Usually you have a week or two and there's some kind of impending date that you want to get it to because it's a portal opening up or signing day occurring or whatever.

We have a little bit more time in this circumstance. Signing day isn't until the first week in December. Portal doesn't open until January. We have a chance to be very thorough.

Q. How advantageous are the new transfer portal rules? You can compare it to the first bye week. If this move was something that you were deliberating at that time, how much does this change the picture?

SCOTT STRICKLIN: I think it makes a lot more sense, the new rules that got put in a couple of weeks ago on a lot of different levels. So I'm glad they've made those changes.

Q. How much more confident are you in making the third hire as opposed to the first and second?

SCOTT STRICKLIN: Every time you go through these processes you use that information and what went well, what didn't and how can you improve on it. I'm confident that we've learned lessons, whether it's football or men's basketball.

Those two, all coaching searches have their unique rhythm to them, but those two are unique relative to the rest. We certainly have been through enough of those. We'll keep learning from the process.

Q. What are some of the lessons you've learned that you could share with us?



SCOTT STRICKLIN: I think time is always more valuable when you're in these processes. The more time you have, I think you have the chance to be more thorough and talk to more people.

Q. (Inaudible) the program and the benefits, but it's a very crowded job market. How do you stand out when you're up against other big programs?

SCOTT STRICKLIN: I think that logo stands out. The Gator head is pretty special. And a state of 22 million people, third largest state in the country, over 500,000 living alumni, a top-five public university. We've had 16 straight sell-outs, I've lost track of the number, at the Swamp.

And the results on the field haven't been accustomed to, yet our fans, Gator Nation, keeps coming and supporting at such a high level. The facilities, the access to talent -- young people want to be at the University of Florida. This is a place that just people are drawn to.

Every coach that we have on this campus will tell you that kids will answer the phone when they see it's from the Gators. So I just think we have a lot of advantages that we need to utilize.

Q. There is a narrative out there that the boosters drug you to this reluctantly. Can you set the record straight in terms of what was their -- how much of that did you listen to and how much did that affect your decision?

SCOTT STRICKLIN: This is a really unique place because of, our boosters are incredibly supportive. But they also take a lot of pride in the fact of how they conduct themselves.

I have a lot of encouragement. I have a lot of support. But I don't have anybody reaching over trying to grab the steering wheel. I think that's one of the things that makes this place really unique, and one of the reasons we've had as much success.

The board of trustees hires the president, the president hires the athletic director, the athletic director is supported by the boosters and season ticket holders and everybody else who loves the Gators to go make the right decisions.

Q. How challenging is the financial hit?

SCOTT STRICKLIN: It's not insignificant. The market kind of dictates that. We're blessed that we have tremendous resources, but it's not unlimited. We'll have to manage that, and we will. And the resources are not going to be a

reason why we don't make the right decision going forward here.

Q. The market, can these contracts continue the way they are? You're looking at what happened at Penn State. This is a drop in the bucket compared to that.

SCOTT STRICKLIN: Again, I go back to we all want to be competitive, whether it's NIL, whether it's coaching salaries. We're all responding to what the market dictates. We could sit here and talk high and mighty how we're going to draw the line, and it would probably impact the pool of candidates you have depending how strict you draw that line.

We're going to try to be as smart as we can with our resources and make the best possible decision. But we're also going to be very competitive.

Q. Will this be a negotiated buyout or --

SCOTT STRICKLIN: We're going to honor the contract as it's written. We'll get Coach Gonzales up here now.

BILLY GONZALES: Good afternoon. Good morning. First off, I'd like to thank Coach Napier for his four years of work and dedication in service to this program and the student-athletes here at the University of Florida.

Coach Napier is a terrific coach and a better man. And he's built a tremendous culture here at the University of Florida. I have nothing but great things to say about Coach Napier. And I'm very thankful for my time working with him and getting to know him and his amazing family.

I want to thank Mr. Scott Stricklin and the administration for the opportunity to lead the program for the remainder of the season and their belief and trust in me to do so.

In spite of the circumstances, I'm honored and humbled to be speaking in front of you today.

Florida is a special place to me. I've worked for this program for 12 years. I take this new role to heart. It means a ton to me. I've seen what this program can be firsthand, like Mr. Stricklin said in his statement. The standards and the expectations at the University of Florida and Gator football program are to win championships, not to simply just compete.

For us moving forward, we need to get back to work. The results so far this season have not been up to the Gator standard. I have full trust not only in our student-athletes, but in this staff to make the most of the season. We have a responsibility to do that. Not only for this program but for



our fans.

Florida is a destination. This program is one of the premier programs and schools in the country. I'll do my very best every day to make sure our student-athletes and our staff work tirelessly to meet and uphold our Gator standards.

Q. Are you making any staff changes moving forward?

BILLY GONZALES: As far as staff changes, everybody that's on the staff is going to be continued as of right now, still going to be on the staff.

Q. What about roles and who is going to call plays moving forward?

BILLY GONZALES: Sure. I think as you look at the defensive side obviously it's led -- coach has done a fantastic job over there. He's done a fantastic -- the whole defensive staff has done an amazing job. They work extremely well together. Their players are motivated. And they play with a lot of energy.

Offensively, I will -- we're going to do kind of a collaborative effort as far as how we game plan. It's something I've been used to over the years. Coach Sale, Coach Juluke will have a lot of input as far as the run game, what we're doing to make sure that we're going to be able to break down and see what the opponents are going to be giving us that we're going to have an opportunity to hopefully take advantage of.

And then obviously in the pass game, you're going to have Coach Callaway, who is our offensive coordinator, who leads the offensive staff. He does an unbelievable job. He does a fantastic job at leading. He does a fantastic job of making sure that everybody's on the same page.

He's going to continue to work hand in hand with Coach O'Hara and the rest of the staff, offensive staff that we have.

But as I said, it's going to be a collaborative effort. Coach will still be highly involved in everything.

But I think one of the unique changes that I've mentioned with Mr. Stricklin is football has changed. What I mean by that, there's been a time, NIL has changed and recruiting has changed. Well, the addition of the green dot on that football helmet has significantly changed how we coach and how we communicate.

Five to six years ago, it was anybody would go out there and you would have the scripts, you come out, you type them up. And it didn't matter who would call the play.

You're sitting there with the quarterback. You're in the huddle, and they can call the play. The quarterback reads it right off the sheet. And that's how we went. But the green dot, I think, is something that's been a game-changer.

In my opinion, this is my opinion, I think it's going to be helpful for us, but I'm going to let -- Coach Callaway is going to be the OC, but I'm going to let Coach O'Hara call the plays.

I think the most important piece to that is there's a rhythm piece between him and DJ. I think it's really important that the quarterback is an extension of his teacher. In this particular setting, for the next five games, I think that's going to be critical. DJ has got a great relationship with both.

But I think it's going to be an opportunity just to hit home over and over the teaching methods that go on in the meeting and let him be familiar with that voice over and over in the practice setting and in the game.

Q. (Inaudible) offense changed with some wrinkles and things now with this new structure?

BILLY GONZALES: I think you'll see some things that are a little different. I think one thing that I want to hopefully continue to assert in the offense is I think we've got a lot of playmakers, and I'd like to be able to spread it out a little bit hopefully and get some of those players involved.

Not necessarily change a lot -- here's the great thing about Coach Napier's offense. We actually have an arsenal of plays within the system. So it's kind of basically picking and choosing and allowing our quarterback to be in a position to do the things that he does best.

I think that's the ultimate goal is our offensive staff -- again, Coach Callaway does an amazing job. He's going to continue to keep us together as an offensive staff and put those plays together for us.

Q. Are you trying to be more of the executive head coach and let somebody else coach the receivers? Or will you continue to be hands-on receivers?

BILLY GONZALES: I'll continue to be hands on with them still. But at the same time I think as we move forward in this situation I'd like to be more of a manager to make sure that we're moving in the right direction as a football program, making sure that the players are getting everything that they need.

Again, obviously we've got a good group of receivers in the



meeting room right now. We've got some good young coaches, and we've got some coaches on staff that have coached that position that will get to visit it.

Q. Who particularly would taking over some of the receiving --

BILLY GONZALES: We haven't specifically talked yet as far as who will truly take over that position as we go forward. But I feel very confident in the guys we have on staff right now. Coach Lucas and Coach Doeker do a fantastic job along the way with me as well.

Q. Coach Meyer (inaudible) 20 years ago. Did you lean on him or any other mentors in this role?

BILLY GONZALES: Yes, I did. I spoke with Coach Meyer last night. We had a chance to catch up a little bit. He was my position coach in college. I obviously had a chance to work with him at three different stops.

And I did, I reached out to him. I wanted to have a chance to talk to him a little bit about the team concept. One of the unique things he talked about and we talked about is you're walking into a situation where it's not the perfect situation for you, Billy, but at the same time you want to make sure you're here for the players.

We've got a bunch of seniors on this football team. We've got a bunch of underclassmen that are fighting and are going to do everything they can to be successful.

But when you look at it, we went back and we started talking about the two national championships. I was very fortunate to be part of those teams. We started talking a little bit, and we weren't perfect back then either. We had to fight. We had to change some things, the things that we wanted to work at and possibly, when we first got here we thought we were going to be a spread, but we didn't have all the pieces.

We changed. We had Billy Latsko and Eric Rutledge. We utilized the personnel that allowed us to be successful.

Like I said, I know it's not a perfect situation. But nothing in life is. But one thing that I do know for sure is that these players are resilient. They're tough. They're competitors. And they don't have quit anywhere in their DNA.

I'm excited for the opportunity to have a chance to work with them. And, again, from my standpoint, I want to continue to build them and grow them as men. We talked about this as our staff. Our staff is the same exact same way. Our responsibility is to help these young men grow and continue to grow as young men.

And if we can continue to help them grow as men, the athlete's always going to rise to the top.

Q. How did they handle the news?

BILLY GONZALES: I was not in there for the time that Coach Napier had the opportunity to speak with them. I've been through this before, obviously, as a coach, as a player. Anytime you lose a figurehead like Coach Napier -- Coach Napier was an incredible man, incredible leader. I look around and what he's done for this program, it's always hard. It's hard for coaches. It's hard for staff members.

So you've got to be -- as somebody that's part of the staff, I've got to be aware of it and make sure that everybody is on the same page. But, yeah, there's feelings that are involved -- from the players too.

Again, we've met with the leadership committee and they do a fantastic job. One of the things we talked about was, a question that was raised and asked was, who do we need to make sure we keep an eye on, whether it's the freshmen, the sophomores, one of the older players. No, Coach, it's the entire team. It's everybody. We're in this together.

They've got a heartbeat. And so, yeah, the change will be hopefully a smooth transition, and that's kind of why I'm here.

Q. Is it your hope to be part of the next staff?

BILLY GONZALES: I love Florida. You all know I love Florida. This is a special place to me. My daughter was born here 20 years ago. I've been here with three different head coaches. Won two National Championships. I've seen what it can do -- not just the University of Florida football, but Mr. Stricklin talked about the academics. You talk about all the other athletic programs around here. It's a special place.

A goal of mine would be obviously be able to stay here. My first goal is to make sure we put a fantastic group of players on that football field that are going to compete and play for the University of Florida.

I told these guys yesterday -- it's really important that I tell my room this -- when you're in my room, the wide receivers, I always talk about you play for the patch. And that means a lot to me. It means a lot to our players.

I had a long talk with Brandon Spikes this past year. We went back. It is, you play for the patch. And I think that's

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the most important thing. The players, we play for the patch. You represent your name on the back of your jersey.

I think when you put them together, I think you get something special.

Q. Just what does it mean to you to have this opportunity and to lead this program?

BILLY GONZALES: It means everything to me. It all comes back down to, you know what, it's do your job. And we have a job to do. We've been hired -- we were hired here to do a job.

The great thing about it, Coach Napier put a staff together. I'm looking around at some of them, and you see they're all on board. They understand where we want to be. We understand that, like I said, he put together an incredible staff of coaches that have one goal, to move forward, continue to do our job. I talked about that with the players yesterday and I talked about it, our job and our responsibility is to do our job.

Everything we do is put on film. Everything we do is going to be out there. Make sure you -- every rep you take as a player, it's your resumé. And for us, as a coaching staff, we've got to go do the same thing. Every chance we teach our players we've got to do the best that we can possibly do to put them in the best situation to be successful on the field, because we know they don't have any quit. We know they're going to compete for us. So absolutely.

Q. Obviously you know what it's supposed to look like offensively here at the University of Florida. It hasn't looked that way. What has it been like behind the scenes to kind of watch the offense struggle like this? And do you think these last five games gave you maybe a chance to maybe even take the chains off, unleash it a little bit?

BILLY GONZALES: From the same side and then looking out from your side, I see the same things. Obviously we want to be more productive. We want to be more explosive. That's going to be something that we'll talk about as a staff, offensively, to see what we can do.

But I think every player has strengths, and I think the one thing that we want to be able to do is put our players in the best possible position and play to their strengths.

If that means tweaking some things where we can get guys -- whether it's RPOs, taking different types of shots, different types of play-actions -- that's all part of it.

But I've said this over and over, it's not about the play, it's about the player. It always will be. The player is the one that's going to go make the plays. You've got to put them in an advantageous position.

We've got great players here. If we can get some guys the ball in space and let them work, I think you'll see a Florida offense that's ready to roll.

Q. Will Coach O'Hara move upstairs?

BILLY GONZALES: As of now we've not talked about that. I do like him on the ground, getting a chance. I think it's important that he has an opportunity to sit and talk to DJ and have DJ look at him in the eyes. I think that's always something that I've always thought was an important piece as a quarterback coach, getting a chance. That's the main reason to me why I would like him to call plays, just because of that relationship of being able to look at the quarterback, talk to the quarterback, visualize the quarterback, so they're seeing the same things and hearing the same things.

Q. (Inaudible) playmakers, we haven't talked to you all season. The two freshmen, what's your assessment of these two young men and their impact?

BILLY GONZALES: I really like all my freshmen, to be honest with you. Some are redshirting. If you talk about V.B., he's an incredible football player. He's super smart, super detailed. If you were to walk into a meeting, you'd see him taking notes. He's got his iPad out. He's taking notes.

And that translates. If you're good in the academic setting and you take care of what you need to do as far as learning, the learning atmosphere, it translates. And he's done a fantastic job.

He's super quick when it comes to picking up an offense or a play. You can talk to him about it. He can visualize it. He can see it. Then we go out and rep it, obviously.

He has an innate ability. He's got great make and miss, he's got great speed. And he's got a great desire to be great. He's got that want-to. He's a competitor. He wants to be great.

I'm extremely, extremely excited about his productivity so far and his future, obviously.

Dallas, it's been great to get him back out. Obviously we knew he had an injury that he battled through at the beginning of the season. And it weighed heavy on him. It took a toll on him. It bothered him. It hurt him as an

individual.

And you hate to see it happen, but you always like to see somebody that cares, somebody who is not afraid to shed a tear because they want to be on the football field.

But the great thing about Dallas, every walkthrough, every, I guess I should say, game prep, every time we did anything, he stood right next to me. We signalled to the receivers, he stood right next to me. When we went out on practice, he stood right next to me.

He was constantly getting his mental reps standing next to me, seeing the signals, getting a chance to talk to me. He's a competitor. He's obviously got great size. He can cause some mismatches.

Q. Having played for Urban, having coached under Urban and how demanding he is, what have you taken from him that translates into what you're going to be doing now?

BILLY GONZALES: I think Urban obviously was a fantastic coach and still a fantastic coach. When you start looking at things we talk about, how we want to win and why we win, obviously we want to be able to score in the red zone. We want to be able to play great defense. We want to win the turnover battle. And we want to be great on special teams, obviously, again.

But he's a great motivator. He's a great mind. And the players, the one thing he did, he had his team ready to play. I think that's a goal of mine. Obviously they've entrusted me and have given me that opportunity.

And my goal is to make sure that these guys understand I'm going to be me. I'm a little different than Coach Napier. I love Coach. I'm different than Urban. I'm different than some of the other coaches that I've worked for. I'm going to be me. But I want make sure these guys know we'll try to put them in the best possible position to go make those plays. And I'm excited. I'm excited about the opportunity, by all means.

Q. Do you want to be a head coach? Colorado State is open. This could be a five-game audition for you.

BILLY GONZALES: I want to win. I want to win here. This is a special place. I want to win here. I want to take care of these guys over there. I'm looking at those three football players right there, what they've been through.

Obviously I've known Jake for quite a long time. He played football with my son in high school. I've had a chance to follow his career.

These guys are competitors. The one thing I want to do, we want to win and we want to win the right way. We want to put these guys in a great position to go out and go out a winner for some of these seniors, absolutely.

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