

CFP Semifinal at the Capital One Orange Bowl: Georgia vs Michigan

Sunday, December 5, 2021

Miami Gardens, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Georgia Bulldogs

Kirby Smart

Press Conference

MIKE LIOTTA: Hello, everyone. Welcome to this afternoon's call. We have Coach Smart here, head coach of Georgia, as we gear up for the 2021 College Football Playoff semifinal at the Capitol One Orange Bowl. No. 2 Michigan versus No. 3 Georgia.

Michigan, who will be the home team for this game, as the higher ranked team, comes in with the record with 12-1, champions of the Big Ten Conference. This is Michigan's fourth appearance in a game hosted by the Orange Bowl, owning a 1-2 record.

Georgia, the visiting team in this game, comes in with a 12-1 record after its first undefeated regular season since 1982. Georgia is also making its fourth appearance in the game hosted by Orange Bowl with a 2-1 record.

This year's game will be played on Friday, December 31st, at Hard Rock Stadium, televised by ESPN at 7:30 p.m. eastern.

I will now turn it over to Coach Smart for some brief remarks before we open it up for questions.

KIRBY SMART: Thank you. We're honored as a university to be in the Orange Bowl. It's one of the best bowls I've been involved in. I got a chance to be involved in the Orange Bowl both at Alabama and at FSU. It's a tremendous event. Usually great weather.

I know the players really enjoy getting to go down to south Florida, practice outside, enjoy all the sites and sounds. We're looking forward to the opportunity to play in it. First-class organization. Has meant so much to the University of Georgia.

I got a lot of respect for Michigan and Coach Harbaugh's team. I got to see a little bit of their game last night. I've



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seen a few of their games on TV throughout the season when we had late kicks and they had some early ones.

Got a lot of respect for the job he does. Always respected him as a college coach and pro coach. Obviously with his brother-in-law being Tom Crean, Tom and I have grown to be good friends, a mutual respect for their family.

I know our university is certainly excited to be represented in the College Football Playoff, and our players today are enthused to get this opportunity and get a chance to go back out and play.

MIKE LIOTTA: We will now open it up for questions.

Q. Last night, I'm sure a restless night's sleep, looking back at it, you mentioned the big plays you gave up in the secondary defensively, miscommunication, guys in the wrong spot trying to do too much. What did you take from that?

KIRBY SMART: A little bit of both. There were a couple plays with miscommunication and a couple plays we just got beat. They did it better than we did it. We didn't get a lot of pressure. It was a combination of both.

I mean, the big one early was a bust. Then a couple other ones, we had him manned, we just got beat. When you play that kind of offense, you got to win some one-on-one battles and we didn't win enough of those.

Q. I'll ask you a last night question and a looking forward question. Last night obviously anytime things don't work out, there's a lot of questions. Regarding Stetson and JT, was there any discussion even on the headset or something about should we go in there and give JT a shot in this game since you were down, trying to come back quick? Then looking forward, I know you know Georgia history pretty good, but Georgia is playing in the Orange Bowl for the first time since 1960. Have you heard from Claude or anything like that? Is any part of you excited that the Georgia fan base gets to go to Miami and check that box?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I didn't realize that. Seems like

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maybe Claude earlier today right when it happened told me that. I wasn't aware of that. I didn't realize it was 1960. That's been a long time (smiling).

I know our fans will be excited. I think the matchup with Michigan certainly excites a lot of our fan base and our school because there's a lot of commonality between our president, he used to work there at Michigan. Also Tom Crean, his family being connected to Coach Harbaugh. A lot of connections there.

I think it's a great matchup. Certainly excited to go play in what I think is one of the best bowls out there. A lot of our players haven't had that opportunity, so that part will be cool.

As far as the Stetson and JT question, no, we never discussed that on the headphones last night. Obviously we have to play a lot better in a lot of areas. To put any part of that blame or all that blame on Stetson, there's a lot more to it at that. We got to play better at rounding, special teams, defense, really all facets of the game.

There were some really, really, really good throws last night by Stetson, some throws that only his guy could catch the ball. He made some good plays. We have to work on some poor decisions and a couple throws there that were picked off.

Q. You've talked about the leadership of this team and their mentality. You mentioned it last night. What was the atmosphere like today having a little bit of time removed from last night's loss and the announcement of today's College Football Playoff?

KIRBY SMART: Well, I got to be around the players very little. We got in late last night, had the tape this morning. Kind of worked through that. Then we had a team meeting after it was known where we were playing, we kind of went over the schedule going forward.

But the players had unbelievable energy, communication, talking about moving forward, heading the right direction. A lot of them wanting to know, eager to know what the schedule was going to be, when they could get back to work.

I look at it all the time of you have to be brutally honest with yourself at a time like this. You have to be able to go through and say, Who are we? What are we doing well? Maybe we're not as good as we thought in some areas. Where can we improve that? Sometimes you only see that through a loss. We tried to see it through victories throughout the year.

But these guys were great today. They wanted to have a players-only meeting. A couple of those guys stood up and spoke. I thought that was great that they did that on their own. They were in a really good space today.

Q. Obviously you've talked a lot this season about depth in your secondary. Is there really any way to improve that over the course of this season? You played William Poole a lot. What sort of led to that decision, giving him that much playing time?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, it is hard to add to depth. You're trying to grow the younger players, right? We're trying to get those guys ready, whether it's Javon Bullard, David Daniel, Kamari Lassiter, to grow those guys and get them better and get them to where they can be quality backups or starters.

I think all three of those guys have gotten a lot better because they've had so many reps throughout practice and things. But they're not ready to start. They're not ahead of anybody else. In some ways you have who you have. You have to develop that roster, try to get them better.

Our guys have played well at times this year, and each guy has had some poor plays where we haven't made plays on the ball downfield, and our front has really protected them a lot of the way. It was evident last night when you get zero sacks and you pressure as much as we did, you're probably going to have some one-on-one situations that you don't win them all.

We're going to go back to work at it, work really hard. Poole worked at corner since he's been at our place. He's really more corner by nature in coverage and has some speed. When you watch him last night, he covered some guys really well. We also had some mental busts that we have to help him with, make it simpler so that he can get out there and try to help us.

We felt like he would give us the best chance, especially with Chris being up in the air. Chris wasn't able to practice much last week, only took a few reps. But thankfully he was able to go in the game. He was a guy that played (indiscernible) at Tennessee. He just didn't get many reps this past week.

Q. Have you had any early general impressions of Michigan, what kind of team it is?

KIRBY SMART: Really it would be unfair to say that. We just found out we were playing them. Biggest thing I noticed was the physicality they played with last night, the leadership they had. I was thoroughly impressed with the interviews that I saw among their players postgame. I think

you can always kind of tell where a team stands and what they're all about by what they talk about, the messaging. To hear those guys talk after the game was really impressive. They're a senior-laden, senior-driven team that leads that way.

Q. Were you surprised you all weren't able to get more pressure? It seemed like you guys haven't tried a lot of blitzes and stuff, pressuring too much this season, other than the front guys. Weren't able to get pressure like you usually do.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, surprised? I don't know if that's the right word or disappointed that they weren't able to. It's hard because watching the tape, there were times we did not get pressure, okay? But when we pressured, we got pressure, we got beat. We didn't finish on the quarterback, meaning he outran a guy.

He's really elite at avoiding bad plays, meaning you're about to get him, he gets rid of it, it's not a sack, or he is going down and he throws a completion on third and four coming off the goal line, next thing you know they drive down and score.

We got pressure. We didn't finish and we didn't cover at a premium. This probably has a lot to do with him, him being a good athlete and their skill guys outside beating us one on one.

I guess other teams, when we didn't have to pressure, we didn't get exposed. Well, when you don't pressure this guy, you don't put a body on a body, he's so accurate, they're dynamic against zone, their numbers are just staggering when you play zone against them. They do a great job of that. You have to find ways to get him on the ground and pressure.

Q. I know you talked about George leading up into this game, his availability. What is his status? Is he working back more towards 100% and how much do you want to get him involved especially in this Playoff game?

KIRBY SMART: He worked a little bit more this last week. It's a progression that we feel like we're comfortable with, we feel like he's comfortable with, we feel like the doctors are comfortable with in terms of volume. Some of that's on him from a conditioning standpoint that he continues to work on. Some of it's the ability to get the reps. You can't catch up the reps and get everything that happens.

I thought he did a nice job last night in the role he was in of understanding what his job was. He made a couple plays. I don't know how many plays he ended up playing, but he

certainly is growing in that.

Some of that is also some other guys that are talented. We were able to throw the ball vertical. A lot of them ended up being pass interferences, things like that that prevented big plays.

But George is a guy that number one he's not 100%, he's not his old self yet. We see that from some of the numbers. But he is getting better, he's improving. If he continues to work like he is or he has, he's going to get more opportunities.

Q. Not sure if you're on the road recruiting or not, but how will your staff juggle recruiting, bowl prep? Stetson and JT, will you consider making a change there or do you feel Stetson is your starter?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I've addressed that already. As far as the recruiting, yeah, we're all out recruiting. We'll be out this week. We missed last week. Unfortunate that we missed last week. Fortunate that we got to play in the game we got to play in. That exposure covers a lot of that up.

We're trying to double down, see as many guys as we can this week, because it goes dead on us here soon. We have a big official visit weekend this coming weekend. All our guys will be out.

Our players have a little time off. When I say 'off' off from practice. They'll be lifting, running. We have a program set up for those guys. We'll be getting back into it at the back end of the week as we come off the road.

Q. Being that this is your second College Football Playoff, is there anything that you can pull from the first experience that can better prepare yourself for this year?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think so. I certainly think having experience, having played in it as a coach, organizing it, knowing what's about to happen. You basically got three and a half to four weeks that you've got to try to manage better than four other programs. We're all at square one. Nobody's really ahead of anybody else. It's like the beginning of a new season.

Who manages the next three and a half, four weeks best in terms of award shows, final exams, Christmas break, practices, bowl time. There's a lot that goes into that. Weight discipline. It's a competition. Whoever handles that best is going to have one foot forward and be ahead of the other. We want to manage that the right way.

I think having done that one time certainly helps us from understanding what we need to get down, how we prepare, and those things.

Q. I know you haven't had much time to study Michigan, but I was wondering if you have noticed Aidan Hutchinson and what about him catches your eye?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, number one, I was really impressed with his interview last night, then again today. I caught him on I forget, he was on with the College Football Playoff coverage. You can tell high motor, high intensity, serious. Just a talented player.

It was funny. Last night when I got home, I turned the game on, was watching it. I got a nine-year-old son that loves college football, watches everything YouTube. He started telling me about Michigan's players. That's the first guy he started telling me about.

I'm like, How does my nine-year-old son now about Aidan Hutchinson?

He knew everything about him, was giving me all these stats. I was pretty amazed because I really just started to fill myself in about Michigan last night, and he was talking about Aidan.

Q. I don't know if 'make good' is the right word here, but we'll go with it. Do you feel like there is a feeling of we've got an opportunity here to make good on last night not necessarily going the way you wanted it, the path to get into the Playoffs?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't know if that term fits it. But I do think that we have our players in a position of being a sponge, being able to embrace everything. They'll listen twice as hard now than probably they would have had they won last night.

Like I've said repeatedly, if you went down a stat line that says you're playing a team the caliber of Alabama, you lose the turnover battle 2-0, one them is a pick-six, you lose the red zone battles, you lose third downs, you're probably not going to come out ahead. It's something you can't do when you play really good football teams. That includes all the teams in the CFP.

It's a great learning experience for our guys to understand that now you got to go look at yourself in the mirror. We got to figure out what's the best thing we do, how do I get better at this point.

I do think you can get better at this point. I think our guys

got a good awakening of that. They'll do nothing but work hard now to be the best they can be. We haven't played the best version of ourself. I said that all year. That's our job as coaches, to get the best version of them out. And we got to do that.

MIKE LIOTTA: Thank you, everyone, for being on today's selection day press conference. We're excited at the Capitol One Orange Bowl to be hosting the Playoff semifinal New Year's Eve.

Quick reminder to media, please apply for credentials and hotel reservations at OrangeBowl.org/pressbox.

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