

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

Thursday, December 30, 2021

Miami Gardens, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Jim Harbaugh

Michigan Wolverines

Kirby Smart

Georgia Bulldogs

Press Conference



PLAYOFF
SEMIFINAL



KIRBY SMART: It's never hard to enjoy it. If you don't enjoy it, you're in the wrong profession. I enjoy the relationships with the players, block out the outside noise, day-to-day, go into practice, recruiting, being around our guys, that's what I enjoy. I enjoy the smiles on the faces when they make a big play, when they give up a play and they've got to fight through it. The joy is in the relationships with the coaching staff and the organization. It's not in the expectations.

That's part of what comes with being at the University of Georgia, but that's not what I concern myself with. I concern myself with guys having fun, competing at a high level, and when you do those things right, you can coach guys tough, they can have a chance to be successful. We've had a chance to be successful every year.

Certainly happy and honored to be in the College Football Playoff. But I don't look at the other seasons as failures, either. I get the joy out of the relationships with the guys.

Q. Both of you played at schools that you are now coaching in the playoff; given that, what does it mean to you personally to have your school in the semifinals with a chance to win a national title? Also, I know you shared the same birthday last week. Did you get any presents that stood out?

JIM HARBAUGH: Yeah, I got some real good ones. The kids made some things. I got these cool GPS locators that you can put in your wallet and on your keychain. My son Jay gave me that. It was a good birthday. It's really cool. It's cool whenever I meet somebody that has the same birthday it's so unique, December 23rd, two days before Christmas. We've got that in common, Kirby. That's pretty cool.

I'd be interested to see what Coach thinks of this, but growing up when you've got the December 23rd birthday, you get the short end of the stick so many times because people are running out of money, you don't really have a party because everybody is getting ready for Christmas, and a lot of the times you get the same birthday present as you do -- Merry Christmas and Happy Birthday.

KIRBY SMART: I'd like to thank the Orange Bowl committee and the group that's been with us hosting this Capital One Orange Bowl. They've done a tremendous job, and our players have thoroughly enjoyed the weather and the state, and excited about moving on with this game. It's been a tremendous honor to represent the University of Georgia. Certainly got so many people down in the Miami area to thank, and just a wonderful host to our team. We appreciate that.

Our guys are excited. We've got a lot of respect for Coach Harbaugh and his team. They've always played a physical brand of football, and our guys are looking forward to that opportunity to go out and play. It's really what you work all year for is to get this opportunity on this grand stage, and our guys are excited for this opportunity.

JIM HARBAUGH: Likewise, it's been a great honor to be here. Orange Bowl is a fantastic bowl and venue, the host of this playoff game. Our guys are excited. We're happy to be here, but not just happy to be here; it's been a tremendous amount of preparation that's gone into this game. We know the task at hand.

Georgia is a great football team, and we've had good days, really good days, good meetings, good practices. We're getting the energy up, and it's time to go play.

Q. I'll direct this question to Kirby. I think back to 2017 and your team was a little bit more of a still-developing -- the program was still developing. I wonder if a season like this where the expectations not just externally but internally are so high and you've had so much success, is it still hard to enjoy it?

As I've gotten older, it's kind of nice because people really just don't even know it's your birthday and another year goes by, and did you really get another year older. Did you have a similar experience?

KIRBY SMART: I like that thought, the old doubled up was definitely the case. It's much easier to give one than two. Hey, I'm just going to let this be your Christmas and your birthday gift. I certainly think I got a lot of that.

It makes it easier, I agree with that. I didn't think of it in the way Jim did in terms of not having to count the year. If that's the case I'm probably 40, not 46. That probably helps with -- I do like the fact that it comes at a time in a coach's life that you're usually off. We've traditionally taken off somewhere either the 22nd or 23rd, somewhere around Christmas. Seems like all the years I was at Alabama and other places I've been, you took the bowl time, a couple days right there. For my wife it's been convenient because she's had me around on the birthday.

Not like we did a whole lot. I can't speak to any gifts. I didn't get a whole lot. This tie I'm wearing and that's about it, but not a whole lot I'm asking my kids for right now.

Q. Both you guys are known for the whole -- your power football. Everybody says they're physical. Everybody says they play power football. But we've seen Michigan and Georgia take it to another level in terms of the commitment. I guess I'd ask you, Coach Harbaugh, about that strategy that Michigan has had over the years and the payoff in a day and age when it seems like offensive football and fireworks is the new way to go.

JIM HARBAUGH: Well, I mean, just always striving to be really good at that at the phase of running the football, and on defense being able to run and hit and wrap up and make tackles and pursue. It's a physical sport. Yeah, you always strive to be as good in that area as you can, and you want to be good in the kicking game just like you want to be good in the protection phases, you want to be good in the throw game. You're striving to get really good in all those phases.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, to me being physical is part of the sport. If you're not going to be physical you're probably going to struggle. That starts with the line of scrimmage. There comes a point in almost every game where you have to be able to run the ball, whether that's four-minute end of game stuff or that's short yardage. There has to be a commitment to moving forward and putting your hat on people.

Nowadays it's probably done a lot more on the perimeter in

terms of there's hats on hats on the perimeter now more than ever, and every play has multiple plays to it, and you're playing a defensive line block technique, you're playing it out on the perimeter. You're blocking somebody at receiver more now than ever because there's a perimeter screen attached to every play. I think that's made the premium on being physical more. Certainly I understand the game is played outside the box more than ever, but at the end of the day when it gets cold or it gets the end of the year, wherever you're playing, you'd better be able to run the ball.

Q. Kirby, Coach Lanning the other day alluded to him being the one calling the plays tomorrow night. Had you talked with him about going through that experience of having to balance both the job that you have right now and also the job that you have in the future?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we spoke. We spoke when he took the Oregon job and spoke about it at length. It was quite some time now, quite some time ago now. That's not a major concern for me. It's something that I did as a coach and many coaches have done. We talked about it.

There's not a 24/7 continuum on being just the coordinator. There's guys that have other things on their mind, and he delegates his time. I trust Dan. He's done a tremendous job here. Number one, he's a great recruiter. He's loyal to Georgia, he's loyal to these players that he recruited. He knows for his sake and Oregon's program's sake he wants to play well. He's as invested in this process as everybody is.

That's not a major concern for me having him call the defense being the head coach at Oregon. I've seen it done many times and very confident that he's giving us every effort he has. He's got a great staff with him, along with Coach Schumann and Coach Muschamp and myself all have eyes over there, so it's not like he's alone, and he hasn't been alone all year.

Q. Coach Smart, Todd Monken spoke earlier this week on James Cook, but could you expound on his leadership and what he's meant to the team and your assessment of him in his four years at the program? And Coach Harbaugh, this is your third trip to the Orange Bowl in your coaching career but your first time in the College Football Playoffs. What will it take for you to duplicate your success in 2011 when you won your first Orange Bowl as head coach?

KIRBY SMART: James has been a tremendous asset to our program. First of all, James is like a South Florida kid that's really tough that loves the game of football. I mean,



he wants to go out and play tackle every day. That's just who James is. He's like, let's go hit today, let's go play tackle football, Coach. He just grew up down here. He loves the game. Wants to play well at home. His brother played in this game, Dalvin, and it means a lot to him to get to play down here.

He's been a great leader for us because he speaks, people listen. He doesn't speak very often, but when he gets up in front of the team, people know it comes from the heart, and the way he practices and the way he plays, they respect him. Sometimes less is more, and with James, that certainly is the case.

JIM HARBAUGH: Yeah, to answer your question, we're going to have to play good. It's going to be about that for us to have a chance to be successful, chance to win. We're going to have to play good. Probably right up there with our best. That's what it's going to take in this ballgame.

Q. Jim, I'm curious, after the 2020 season, your guys have talked so much about this week and throughout the year, what does it mean for you personally to win Coach of the Year and for you to be here in the College Football Playoff?

JIM HARBAUGH: It's been great. As I said at the opening, we're happy. We're really happy to be here. Coach Smart was talking about it just a little bit ago and just it really resonated, yeah, you're -- there's a great joy. There's a great joy around the team, the locker room, practices. It would almost be like if you weren't happy about that, then there would be something else we've got to look into. Why? Why wouldn't you be happy? But not just happy. There's a real narrow focus that the team has concerning this football game and making each day -- making them good days. Having great meetings, having great practices, get the energy up and go play the game.

Q. Coach Harbaugh, a couple crass money questions if I could. I wondering how you reacted on a pride level to the concessions you had to make with the new contract and what led to your idea to donate the bonuses to people affected by COVID, and has any of that money gone out, and have you heard from anybody affected by that?

JIM HARBAUGH: Yeah, I have. Actually people have been very appreciative. I was really happy to be blessed to be in a position to be able to do that. It really resonated with me, something our coach -- my coach and a lot of our coach, Bo Schembechler has a saying here at Michigan. It says, "those who stay will be champions," and it's always resonated with me from day one.

Those that stayed through the pandemic when there was voluntary pay cuts, mandatory pay cuts, that kind of thing, just to be able to reward those that stayed in that way was something that Sarah, my wife, and I wanted to do.

Q. Coach Harbaugh, I had a question about with so many of the coaches that you've hired this year with connections to the program as players, your athletic director you played for back in the day, I'm curious how that sort of pride and how that experience has sort of contributed to some of the dynamic in the locker room that you're seeing this year with the team looking like it's really playing for something bigger than just wins and losses per se?

JIM HARBAUGH: Yeah, playing for each other, playing for the love of the game, playing to get practicing and to get really good at football. There's all those things. It's like we were talking about before, there's a lot of joy that players, coaches have. The relationships are tremendous, and everybody enjoys each other's company.

We came back here from a really tough practice on Monday, and then to see our guys, 50, 60, 70 guys kind of head out to the water and head out to the beach, and they were doing the chicken where they got the guy on their shoulder and they're tossing the ball around in the water and running around on the beach, it's cool. There's a lot of moments like that. There's a lot of moments where you see that, whether it's coaches in the staff room, guys who went to Joe's Stone Crab and had a nice dinner as a staff, and it's just easy. There's a great camaraderie there and fellowship among the coaching staff. You enjoy each other's company.

I see that with our players, as well. Yeah, it's wins, it's games, it's touchdowns, but there's a lot more to it. Coach Smart said it really well earlier; there's a lot to it, and those relationships are huge.

Q. Is Dax Hill with the team this week in Miami?

JIM HARBAUGH: His status is going to be questionable. He's working through something right now. We'll know more today whether he'll be able to play.

Q. Jim, with Coach Macdonald coming on board, I know there have been several players on defense who didn't play a whole lot that have really been outstanding for you guys this season, DJ, David Ojabo. What do you feel like Mike has done to identify some of the players that you've had and give them these opportunities to find themselves for them to have success this year?

JIM HARBAUGH: Mike has done a great job. He's got his roots at Georgia. There's a lot of things that we do I see Georgia do. I know where Mike got a lot of his ideas. He'll be the first one to tell you that.

He's done a tremendous job. The entire defensive staff has. He's been a really good teacher. Smart, got a great passion for the game of football, and a couple of the players that you talk about, DJ Turner, really going into his junior year, has really had a tremendous season, so has David Ojabo, and Mike deserves a lot of credit for that.

Q. Just want to see what was the plan today; is it just a light walk-through, picture day, meetings tonight, pretty much off the grid? Do you think there's too much downtime, kind of like let's get after this three days ago kind of thing?

KIRBY SMART: We've got a routine we go through, and we'll keep that routine the same, basically as if we're going to play a road game today, change over some things mentally, get ourselves in a place of we haven't been here for four or five days and put yourself in a mental position of just arriving for a road game to keep that routine the same. We've got a walk-through that we do on Fridays before games, so we'll simulate that same setup and have our meetings and meals throughout the day and do it just like we would a road game.

Q. Jim, can you share some about the impact John Madden had on you and what the team's response has been in supporting Jesse?

JIM HARBAUGH: Yeah. Everybody knows John Madden. Jack Harbaugh, 82, me, 58, at every -- down to my son who's nine years old, and the players and the Madden game, just so many ways he's affected not just the game of football but in so many ways. A great man. Just a great man, a legend.

Jesse on our team, he's adored. He's contributing, been a big factor contributing to our success. The day John Madden passed away, I looked over there and saw Jesse Madden, there's a Madden on the football field contributing to this team's success, and his grandfather would be very proud.

Q. Jim, when last season ended and obviously we know of all the changes that were made and everything else, the preseason Michigan was unranked, the first unranked team to make it to the playoff. When it began did you think it would be -- A, this would be possible to get this far this quickly from where you were last year to now; and B, is it fair to say has it

been even smoother than you thought it would be?

JIM HARBAUGH: The approach always from the beginning and each year, every day matters, and the games are the ones that count. We're going into our 14th game that counts. Our guys have done a tremendous job each day, making each day matter, and then when they get to the games, they've made those days count. They've been quite successful doing it.

We'll continue the same formula, which is to strive to have great days. We're going to do that today, have great meetings. We'll have a really good walk-through, strive to have that, and then get the energy up and go play the game.

Q. I know you have a unique approach, unique relationship with somebody on the other side, your sister obviously married to Tom Crean. Has your sister told you who she's going to be rooting for on Friday night?

JIM HARBAUGH: No, she hasn't, but the relationship with Tom, Tom is great. Tom is a great coach, great brother-in-law. He's like a brother to John and I. We're so fired up when Joani started dating Tom and then when they got married it was like getting a second brother for me.

Through the years, he's just awesome. What a guy. What a tremendous brother, person, coach, father. He is so rock solid.

Just really proud. Just really proud to have a brother-in-law like Tom Crean.

Q. Coach Harbaugh, getting back to the first part of my question before, how do you react to the new contract and some of the concessions you had to make, and how did you kind of realign your -- did that hurt your pride at all?

JIM HARBAUGH: I reacted -- no big deal, attacking each day with an enthusiasm unknown to mankind, as always. It didn't really mean anything to me. It's just money. Big deal.

Q. Coach Smart, I know you've talked several times about saying it's unrealistic to say that guys are going to jump into playing time spots that are younger over just bowl practices, and I'm not saying that, but have there been any guys that have impressed you in general, maybe the younger guys, through the bowl practices?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we've had some really quality -- especially early on, getting after it and letting guys scrimmage and go play. So many of these young guys are coming off COVID high school careers where they got shortened seasons, they didn't get spring practices, they were unable to have a spring here. So there's been some guys that have done some good things.

I thought that Micah Morris has really stepped up and played well on the offensive line, both guard and tackle, and Dylan Fairchild has played well, really physical. Both those guys are going to be high-quality, really good football players. Seen a lot of promise out of Smael and Pop at linebackers. Those are guys that we're counting on for the future, and they've gotten a lot better, and then the young DBs got a lot of reps in the last two weeks. They've gotten a lot of work all year, mostly as twos, but they've gotten a lot of work here in the last couple weeks of scrimmage and did some things.

There's been a good group of guys that have gotten quality work. A couple of our walk-ons from last year have made plays and done things that are going to help us. We go back, go to the core fundamentals and go back through special teams and try to teach and develop these guys, because so many of them, they want to play at the next level and part of the special teams aspect is big, and try to go back and really compete and have fun, and those guys have done a great job of that.

Q. You're both obviously perfectionists that demand a certain level. Are you able to take it in yourselves and really relish in what you've accomplished? Secondly, do you think college football is ready for a CEO or a czar or someone to help be more unified in decision making, et cetera?

JIM HARBAUGH: Yeah, really happy to be here and proud of our team for getting here. Got a really tough Georgia team to play, and hopefully that's coming through. Enjoying the heck out of it, and can't wait to watch our guys go compete.

KIRBY SMART: Same way for us. It's an awesome opportunity. Been able to be a part of a lot of big games like this on the CFP stage and then back in the BCS stage. Just watching the guys play, it's memories for a lifetime as a coach. You hope to be back. As a coach you've been here before, but it's the players that it's really about. It's about these guys enjoying it and going out and competing and making memories of a lifetime and just thankful for the opportunity that college football gives us.

As far as a central person, I think that's great in theory. Maybe it's not as simple as that for the world of college

football to have somebody because you're representing a lot of interests from all across different conferences. But I think in theory it would certainly be beneficial.

Q. I feel like there's a lot of comparisons made amongst fans, the media, that you guys share some similarities, personality-wise, program-wise. Do you see a little bit of yourself reflected in each other and in each other's programs? What would be some of the main differences you might notice, as well?

KIRBY SMART: I think that's hard to answer because I don't know if I know Jim well enough for that. I have seen him throughout the years compete and go to camps and work out with kids. I remember at Alabama when he played a little football down in Prattville, took his shirt off. I could never do that. He can get away with that a lot better than I can, so I have to keep my shirt on. But he has a lot of energy, and I know the recruiting events I've been to and the camps, he certainly coaches with a passion and style that I certainly admire and respect.

JIM HARBAUGH: Yeah, that was shirts and skins. I wasn't trying to take my shirt off to show off or anything. Certainly not a lot to show off. But it was an old-fashioned shirts and skins game.

But probably just a lot of similarities. Both football coaches, doing what we love. I can tell listening to Coach talk about his team, feels -- that's the way I feel. You're in it for these relationships and these long and trusting friendships, and trying to get good at football.

Yeah, I see those similarities, and I've been in those camps, too, and Kirby was right down in there, right down in there running the drills, as well.

There's probably a lot more similarities than differences.

Q. When you come into a season like this with a little different dynamic, is the ride to get to the top sometimes a little more -- I don't know if enjoyable is the right word, or is there some different meaning in the ride to get to the top as opposed to when you have already reached the top? Is there a different dynamic to a season when you feel like you're sort of building to something as opposed to you've already accomplished it?

JIM HARBAUGH: That was a complicated one for me. I don't know about Coach Smart.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I've enjoyed the ride. I enjoy the ride every year. I feel like at Michigan and Georgia, you're never not the target. If you go through the year and say,

well, we're ascending this year and we're climbing and this and that, look, it doesn't matter who we play, both teams, we have a lot of rivals. We're very unique in that there's -- everybody is a rival in your conference when you go to play, and you're one of the top programs in the country, premier programs in the country, you get everybody's best shot. It's not about their shot, it's really about your shot.

My job is to make sure we give our best shot to everybody we play. I'm not interested in the climb and the rise. What I'm interested in is being at our best when our best is required, and that's ultimately what we're trying to do every single game, how do we get it better. The process and the ride that you go through along the way, the bumps and the bruises, the injuries, the players in, the players out, all those pains are part of the ride and part of the process that you try to enjoy.

JIM HARBAUGH: I would say it doesn't matter what day it is, it's enjoyable to be working on football. Great to be out there. It could be a practice day and you're just out there on the field, under the sky, on the turf. It's a wonderful thing.

You asked me before about -- I'd do it for free. I would do this job for free. I just love it.

Whether it's the first day, first game, or position we're in now, which we're very -- feel really happy about that. I guess I've just enjoyed the ride the whole time. Every day is a blessing, and happy for it and blessed for it.

Q. You guys were talking about the camps. The last time we saw you guys together, Coach Harbaugh, you were running around in a camp in Atlanta in a Hank Aaron jersey. I wonder what you remember about that day, and how fertile a recruiting area is the city of Atlanta, and obviously you've got some guys on your defense there. How important is it to you?

JIM HARBAUGH: What I remember from that day is huge meeting Hank Aaron, spending time with him and getting to know him. Later he became an honorary captain for us at a Michigan game. His granddaughter went to Michigan. That was a really special day getting to cross paths with the great Hank Aaron and also Coach Smart at that camp.

It's a tremendous place for football, as everybody knows. It's a great spot. They take their football really serious, and their baseball. It's a great place for sports. Kids grow up doing it year-round and take it really seriously, and they're really good at it.

Q. Kirby, you've obviously had to come back from losses as every coach has. What's the biggest thing

you've learned in bringing a team back from a loss, whether it's through trial and error or maybe something you've observed from a coach that you worked for?

KIRBY SMART: Biggest thing is be technical about the process. Nobody wanted to win that game more than those kids and the coaches, the amount of time invested, the amount of work and sweat invested into it. Certainly the desires and the want-to is always there, but be technical on things we can improve. Don't be judgmental, don't say things if you do this and if you do that, you're going to get your butt beat. You're very technical about it; what can we do better from everything. That's the way we approach anytime we have a loss.

As a matter of fact, we approach every win that way, too, and believe it or not, there's a lot of games we won this year that we didn't play well, and people find that hard to believe, but there's so many technical things you can correct, and we try to do that. We don't approach it different with a loss, no matter what kind of loss that is, whether it's close, distant, what the reason is. Be technical about it, really try to improve in the areas that you -- a lot of times that's the most improvement you can make, and they seem to listen a little more after a loss. That's certainly the way we approached this last one.

Q. You're coaching at both your alma maters. How is it different coaching there than other places, if it is, and obviously you both have had high-profile jobs in other places. Clearly there's some advantages. Are there disadvantages, and how is it different?

KIRBY SMART: Biggest difference to me is the tie-in, the amount of your time. I know since arriving in Athens, there's a tremendous amount of support and encouragement, but you being a former player and alumnus, there's an expectation of time of the people you had relationships with, the people you played with. It now transcends when I was here, to before I was here, to when I left. Everybody wants some part of that time. I never felt like at other jobs that I owed that. It was like I could go do my job and really work hard on the football piece because you weren't tied in to so many other commitments. Now, I also was not the head coach. But I think the biggest difference is you feel an emotional tie. You feel a gratitude. You're able to sell that in recruiting. But the hardest part is just the time commitment to so many that have an expectation of it.

JIM HARBAUGH: For me it's been great. Enjoy the heck out of it. There's no downside. Just really honored to be the coach here.

It's always been a big team effort. That's the thing that I learned as a player here, and it started with Bo Schembechler. It's all about the team. The team, the team, the team. We try to continue that idea, that legacy.

None of us is as smart as all of us, and as a team, the more we play like a team, the better off we're going to be.

Q. Jim, Andrew Stueber I think it was yesterday was talking about how encouraged he is by this offensive line, the conditioning, the mental approach in late-game situations, and I was wondering your impressions of that. And also for clarification, I was just wondering, is Dax in Florida?

JIM HARBAUGH: He's not right now. He might be. He could be here today. He may not. But not currently in Florida, no.

Q. I had asked Andrew Stueber about how strong this team, this offensive line has been in late-game situations particularly late in the season, and I was wondering your impressions of that.

JIM HARBAUGH: I would agree. They've been fantastic. They've been strong. That shows up in a lot of ways. The group have stayed healthy pretty much all season long. The starters have remained healthy and available every game. They look like they're moving around in the fourth quarter as well as they were in the first quarter. In shape, strong, smart, cohesive group. Yeah, would agree with that all the way.

Q. Jim, just a quick follow-up. In an ESPN interview you did maybe last week, you talked about before the season bringing the buzz back and where is the buzz right now about Michigan football. Do you feel like that is back, and do you personally feel rejuvenated?

JIM HARBAUGH: Yeah, I feel like the buzz -- created some new buzz with this 2021 team. Yeah, let's face it, it had died down a little bit, and I do feel like our guys have created some new buzz, and it's been a good thing.

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