

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

Friday, December 31, 2021

Miami Gardens, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Georgia Bulldogs

Kirby Smart

Stetson Bennett

Press Conference

Georgia 34, Michigan 11

KIRBY SMART: I'd like to open it up with I'm really proud of our players, the whole organization, our staff works really hard to put a plan together. Our players bought into that plan. We came out from the very start and executed that. Defensively and offensively, we had a really great opening drive. I thought that set the tone for the game. I did not think we played as well in the second half as we're capable of and got a little flat, but I appreciate the effort and the commitment to the players. Nobody understands how long a layoff that is and how many practices you've got to continue to have, and they bought into that each day and came to work and answered a lot of questions that everybody had for them.

Q. Derion, we haven't talked to you all year. Obviously it's been a huge year for you, and to get Defensive MVP in this game with two picks, you're an experienced guy, can you put into perspective what really the last year has been like for you and being kind of back on this stage again and playing big?

DERION KENDRICK: Last year I just had to keep my head up, keep grinding. God put me in this spot, University of Georgia gave me a chance, and I just put my head down and kept working, and this is what it led to.

Q. Kirby and Stetson, Stetson's performance, how much of a statement do you feel like that made to those who have been questioning him and the performance that he had against Alabama in the last game?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know. I don't get into much about statements. I really focus on performance and do things



based on performance, and I thought he performed at a really high level today. He's been really focused the last couple weeks. I think it's amazing to have a guy his age block out all the noise and just focus harder. It's almost like every time he hears noise he just focuses harder on the game plan and what he has to do to execute. You look at some plays he made out there with his feet, they couldn't account for his mobility and some of the plays he made with his feet, and just really proud of the way he prepped for this game.

STETSON BENNETT: Yeah, like Coach Smart said, this game is all about how well you play. There's really nothing -- I didn't go out there and play well today in spite of people. I came out there and played well and worked hard throughout the few weeks we had off because my teammates needed me to do that, and we needed that to win.

So as far as a statement, that's my goal every week is to play that well.

Q. The deep ball to Cook, can you talk about getting the ball downfield and hitting those guys in stride, both Cook and Burton over 50 yards?

STETSON BENNETT: Yeah, I tried not to underthrow them this game. Cook ran a great route, Jermaine kind of baited the receiver or the DB and I just trusted him on that one. Those guys on the outside just make it a lot easier because you can trust them and you know that they're going to get to a spot and they're just athletic and great football players.

Q. Stetson, with the empty backfield success you guys had tonight, was that something you guys had seen on film or was it just kind of the results were there on some of those plays?

STETSON BENNETT: Yeah, I think you said it. I think sometimes things just work out. We didn't know that the empty backfield would help like it did, but anytime we can get our skill players in space, we think that works.

Q. Kirby, you guys held Michigan without a sack.



Obviously they have some really good pass rushers, and then you guys kind of flipped the script from the Bama game with four sacks of your own. What was the key to doing that?

KIRBY SMART: You know, I think we practice against good rushers each day. Jamaree and Warren, they listen to everybody talk about those guys rushing, and Jamaree and Warren are good pass protectors. They do a nice job. When they don't or they give up penetration, Stetson did a good job avoiding. There was a couple times we got beat, even on the touchdown pass. I thought Stetson did an incredible job of getting the ball in the air. We did not block the edge rusher and he came scot-free and Stetson got the ball out to James, which was our only next score of the second half. So tremendous job there defensively. We generated some better rush, and again, we have to be able to do that to be successful. Was it a magic potion? I don't think it was a magic potion. We called a lot of the same calls we called against Alabama. But the quarterback probably didn't escape as good as Alabama's did, and we finished a little better.

Q. Kirby, wanted to ask you real quick, I know Brock Bowers was kind of banged up there late in the game. Do you know anything about what he's dealing with and how he's doing right now?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, he's had a shoulder for a couple weeks. We've had him practicing in a black jersey limiting his contact some. But he's a tough dude, man. He's a warrior. He wanted to get back in tonight and we just didn't let him, but he should be fine.

Q. Stetson, you went a lot with the quick game, passing game to begin with. Was that something to counteract some of their pass rush? What did you see in putting together the game plan with that?

STETSON BENNETT: You know, from -- I don't know, since the time football started spreading out and you started throwing the ball a little bit more, you have to account for the extra guy in the box, whether it's a blitz or a down safety for your run game. That was a bunch of the stuff that we did early on. Like I said earlier, when you get our guys out in space, especially with the blockers at the skill positions that we have, good things happen.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't think it was a calculated get-the-ball-out-quick answer. It was what the defense gives you. Nowadays you take what the defense gives you, and Stetson had to make a lot of decisions people weren't aware of, and he made good decisions on where to go with the ball.

Q. I was curious a little bit about the play calling there and how that all happened because it seems like when the pass game was clicking in the first part of the first quarter you started opening it up a little bit and going for more deep balls. Stetson, if could you tell me a little bit about what the conversations were like with Todd Monken and whether you decided to be a little more creative once you got the confidence going with your receivers.

STETSON BENNETT: You know, I don't worry about what's called, I just go out and try to execute it. Coach Monk is a great play caller, so a bunch of those throws that you saw were run plays, and I just spit them out there. So it wasn't like we were calling pass plays every play. Michigan was just trying to stop the run sometimes, putting pressure, and so we'd spit it out there on the edge.

But I don't worry about what's called. That's not my job. Coach Monk prepares like nobody else, and so we trust what he calls, and we just go out and execute.

Q. What happened there with the Gatorade bath at the end and how quickly do you turn ahead to Alabama now?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I was wanting to get a real shower, not a Gatorade bath, because I want to get focused on Alabama. They got a five, six-hour head start. To be honest with you guys, I'm not interested in celebrating that. We'll look back on that win and that'll be great, but we're focused on the task ahead, and that's the objective and that's what our guys -- they worked their tail off for three to four weeks to get this opportunity, and it was a one-game season, and now it's another one-game season. I'm not focused on Gatorade baths.

Q. As that game gets out of hand in the early going, is it any added juice for your defense to face a team that really wants to run the ball, and they came out before the game before the game started with shirts that said run the damn ball on it?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know, there was a little chip on the shoulder of the defensive guys. Their offensive coordinator is the Broyles Award over Coach Lanning, who we think did a hell of a job. Their offensive line -- the Joe Moore Award you know what, somebody that made that decision that's a lot smarter than me, but we've got a hell of an offensive line, too, and our guys played with a chip on their shoulder tonight. DK did on defense, and all the defensive guys did and they were kind of backed up by a great offensive effort.

Q. Defensive backs is your specialty dating back to



your days in Bainbridge, Georgia. How impressed were you with the performance of Derion Kendrick?

KIRBY SMART: I'll tell you something about this man right here, DK. There is not a player on our team that prepares harder than he does. He comes to practice every day, gives great effort, takes notes in meetings. I've never been around a kid that is so attentive in meetings at the corner position. A lot of them just think I've got to go play man. He tunes in, and he's a competitor. There's never a walk through that he's not focused and locked in. He set a great example for our other players. He came from a really good program. He came from where they play really good defense. He fit right in with our guys, and he's been a tremendous leader, and I'm really proud of everything he -- he's gotten a lot of the accolades and the things he deserves tonight in the form of interceptions. He hasn't gotten those awards in the past, but he's played really well.

Q. Just wondering, how much does having the experience in this kind of setting help someone -- Coach Smart mentioned how prepared you always are, but having been in this spot how far does it help?

DERION KENDRICK: I wouldn't say it helps somebody like me. I'd say it just helps my teammates being able to be there for them. When stuff goes wrong, just being able to pick them up for the next play. Everybody is going to make plays, it's about what you're going to do the next play and the next play. I gave up a few plays, but I kept pushing, and you see the results.

Q. Stetson, four years ago you were on the sideline at that Rose Bowl and now you helped lead your team to three touchdowns against Michigan in an Orange Bowl and helped them go to a National Championship. How special was that moment on the field when the clock hit zero?

STETSON BENNETT: Yeah, it's been a long journey. Me, just like every player in this room or on our team, we love the University of Georgia, and we wear the G with pride. For us to come together after all the hours and all the off-season work and fall camp and just the grind of the season and be able to give ourselves a chance to go to a National Championship, it's pretty special.

But like Coach said, this game was just so we could play the next game.

Q. Kirby, this is the first time this year your team has had to bounce back from a defeat and face some questions. I'm just wondering what this game proved to you and if it answers any questions that you might have had about this team.

KIRBY SMART: I really never had questions about this team. The resiliency, the bounce back, the amount of character, I've seen it all year. We didn't play well, and we turned the ball over and didn't get any turnovers and played poor in the red area. You can list all the things we did in the last game. That's all our kids have heard about for three weeks. Our focus has been on, okay, what can we get better at, where can we turn our energy, because it does no good to look backwards. It only does good to look forward and who was our opponent. We always say you can't let a loss beat you twice, and we didn't let that happen today and now we get to focus our energy on a really good football team, and that's where we'll turn our head and attention now.

Q. Derion, Coach Smart mentioned that the defense had a chip on its shoulder. I'm guessing part of that was because of the performance against Alabama. I'm just wondering, are you looking forward to getting a chance to redeem that performance?

DERION KENDRICK: As a football player you always -- you're ready to go out there regardless of what game it is. We're ready to go play regardless of who the opponent is, but just so happens it's Alabama who beat us. We've got to go back and clean up on some things we did and just review over the film and just do what we do.

Q. Stetson, just how helpful is it to have a running back as reliable and explosive in the pass game as James Cook?

STETSON BENNETT: You know, obviously he creates match-ups that a lot of people can't do. Are you going to play a DB on him? Are you going to put a linebacker on him? That's a tough decision for a defensive coordinator to make. And then you can run the heck out of the ball, too. What are you going to do? Are you going to sub in a DB or are you going to play a linebacker on him? He's a special talent, and I'm sure he was happy with the game he had here at home.

Q. Stetson, I'm wondering if you could have imagined this moment five years ago when you were with the team at the Rose Bowl.

STETSON BENNETT: I mean, no. No. Every day from then until now you just go about your business and put your best foot forward, and hopefully -- you can't predict the future, but hopefully something works out.

Q. This is just for any of you. How do you all stick together as a team in all situations? How do you guys remain together even if there's a period of adversity?



How do you guys do it?

DERION KENDRICK: It starts from really summer workouts and just working together. You always have hard times. You've always got times where somebody is down, so you just pick them up, push through, whatever you've got to do. It's always ups and downs in whatever sport you're in. It doesn't matter what you play. You've just got to keep looking forward and try to be better the next time.

Q. Going back to your time in Bainbridge, Georgia, what were some life lessons that prepared you for your role today?

KIRBY SMART: My dad was a high school coach. I grew up around football. I grew up around players. I got a lot of friends and family back there, and I'm proud of where I'm from. You ask these guys where they're from, everybody takes pride in where they're from. I take a lot of pride in being from south Georgia where we played good football and I grew up around a lot of good football players. Those are the guys I kind of grew up looking up to, and now I get to watch my son look up to these two guys and they take him under their wing like the players did me, so it's something to be proud of.

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