

# Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: LSU vs Georgia

Sunday, November 27, 2022

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

## Georgia Bulldogs

## Kirby Smart

### Press Conference

CHUCK DUNLAP: Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for being with us as we begin SEC Championship Week.

We'll begin with the Eastern Division champion, Georgia head coach Kirby Smart. Coach, good afternoon. Thank you for being with us. Could you comment on your team at the conclusion of the regular season as you prepare to meet LSU for the SEC championship on Saturday.

KIRBY SMART: We finished up regular season yesterday with Georgia Tech. We've earned the right to play an additional game, the SEC championship.

I'm a personal big fan of this championship game and the environment that it creates for our players, the memories, the opportunity to play in a venue such as this.

What a great opponent to go against in Brian Kelly and the job he's done with his team. I'm very familiar with their program. Got a lot of respect for their players and the way they play. It's a brand of football that's very physical.

Both teams are I'm sure looking forward to a great event and a great game.

CHUCK DUNLAP: Questions, please.

**Q. How big of a deal is it to have experience in games like this? What kind of impact can it have?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, I think it's important to have any kind of experience. It's not about this game. It's big-game experience. When you play in the conference that we both play in, there's been no shortage of big games for either team.

When you look at them opening up, getting to play Florida State early in the year like they did, what a huge game that



was. The Alabama game for them. Florida. You go through all these teams you play, and they're all big.

Do I think experience matters? Yes. Big-game experience matters? Yes. Do both these teams have it? Yes. Playing SEC championship games before, I don't know that that experience...

A big game is a big game.

**Q. We spend so much time talking about the Playoff, Playoff rankings. This was one box you guys were unable to check last year, winning the championship. How much of an incentive is that, just winning the league title?**

KIRBY SMART: It's the next game. For us it's been about the next one all year. The great teams worry about the next one more than the last one. That's what we're trying to be, is a team that worries more about the next one than the last one.

**Q. It seems like these last probably two or three games you guys have really run the ball even better than y'all had earlier in the year. What has stood out about that the last two or three games?**

KIRBY SMART: The physicality at the line of scrimmage. I think the line of scrimmage is playing really well, they're playing really physical. Challenged those guys in some instances because of the weather conditions, some because of the look that the defense gave us. Each one's different.

But those guys have played physical. The backs have done it by committee. That's been helpful.

**Q. Besides the warmup on Saturday, how are you feeling about Ben going into this week?**

KIRBY SMART: He's better than he has been. He's improved each week. He was able to practice a little bit last week. Was able to do a little bit more this week in terms of warmup and during the game.



**Q. How do you handle the psychology of the Playoff awaiting? There's a lot being written that you guys are probably in the four-team Playoff regardless of what happens on Saturday. Do you address that with your team at all? Does that affect any decisions you make this week?**

KIRBY SMART: No. We're worried about winning the SEC championship. That's the most important thing on our agenda, is to have an opportunity to do something that rarely gets done.

I mean, it's tough to win an SEC championship. I've been part of this league for a long time. I have almost as many national championships as I do SEC championships. They're really hard to come by.

We're focused on LSU.

**Q. How are you feeling? I hear you coughing.**

KIRBY SMART: I feel great. I have a little cough, but I feel great. I was sick earlier in the week, but I feel great.

**Q. I know it's kind of a unique week for the Muschamp family. How hard is it to be able to watch your kids play with the hours you put in? What do you think this experience has meant for Will this fall?**

KIRBY SMART: I didn't hear the question. I heard what you said about Will. What was the question?

**Q. The fact that it's kind of a unique week for him, his son is playing for a state championship on Thursday. I was curious, how hard is it to watch your children play with all the hours you put in? What do you think this experience has meant for Will, getting to see his son?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, it's what you do this profession for, to have the relationships you have, be able to be a father. I think he does a tremendous job of balancing that.

It's not a new thing for him. He's been head coach of two SEC programs. He's been a part of a lot of really good programs. He's been a father while doing it.

I know that getting to watch his sons play has been a very important part for him. He's done a great job managing that. I know hopefully he'll be able to watch him play this week. He's gone to see him play I think three, four times this year.

**Q. He has the means to get there and back pretty quick. Some of those games could be three or five hours away. Does he come into the Saturday morning**

**meetings blurry eyed? You probably do that with recruiting, too.**

KIRBY SMART: We have coaches that go out during the season. It's very commonplace for guys to do that. He's done it probably a little more. Just to be able to watch him play.

**Q. At whatever point the Playoffs is expanded to 12, I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about how that might affect, if at all, the stakes and the level of enthusiasm about the conference championships?**

KIRBY SMART: That's not a concern for me for the SEC. I don't have a concern for that because if you go back in history and look at the game, the game has been extremely important to the universities that play in it. There's a certain level of respect that goes to the SEC champion. You're playing for a championship of your conference. I think that's a big deal.

If you look over the last 10 years, somebody would be playing for maybe a bye, somebody would be playing maybe for a home field, somebody might be playing to play themselves into the 12-team field. Every year it could change with the expansion.

I don't worry about the relevance of the game with the state of football, the way it is in the SEC.

**Q. In your ideal world, would the expanded Playoffs have been sooner rather than later or do you have a point of view?**

KIRBY SMART: No point of view.

**Q. Obviously BJ Ojulari's older brother played for you a few years ago. How would you describe him as the player he was?**

KIRBY SMART: He was a tremendous leader that all the players had a lot of respect for. He embodied toughness. He was a guy that never shied away from contact. All the guys on the team respected him. He was almost a unanimous captain. Had the most votes we've had at the time for a captain. He was a great leader. He's a great young man.

**Q. Todd Monken, there's some connections with him, Coach Kelly. As an offensive coordinator, what is it that he does so well to design the scheme?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, he utilizes the talents of the players he has. He does a really good job of tying run game and pass game together, using different tempos. He does a

good job calling the game aggressively and keeping things mixed up.

I think if you talk with the defensive coordinators that go against him, he ties the run and pass game together really well, the play-action part of that.

**Q. You guys went up against a Kentucky team that came off a loss to Vanderbilt, gave you a lot to handle that week. Do you expect the same from LSU knowing they're disappointed losing last night to Texas A&M?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't know that the week before's result is a major factor. I mean, you think they'd want to win any less if they won last night? I just don't look at things like that.

I look at it as we're preparing ourselves to give ourselves the best chance to win this game. Regardless of the outcome of last night's game, I think LSU is going to be ready to play us.

**Q. I can't help but ask, going throughout this season with a bullseye squarely on your team, how has the team responded to that?**

KIRBY SMART: The team has had a bullseye on about everybody we've played. That's our goal, is to put a bullseye on the people we play, target them, attack them.

**Q. What is your early impressions of Jayden Daniels, the LSU quarterback?**

KIRBY SMART: Extremely, extremely athletic. Smooth. Great release. He's quick and he's fast. There's a difference. He's both.

But still early on for us. We're trying to prepare for these guys and watch tape. Very impressive composure and demeanor.

**Q. What goes into rebuilding a defense which lost five first-round draft picks last year? Why do you think you've been able to be consistent this year?**

KIRBY SMART: We had good leadership last year, and we've got good leadership this year. If you have good leadership, then you've got an opportunity to grow and get better.

This group was not where it needed to be in the spring. We had some long days in spring practice. But they filled in the holes nicely that we needed. They've improved throughout the year.

They need to be at their best now when their best is needed. We need to get better this week to be the team we need to be defensively.

**Q. Who have been those leaders and how have they done so?**

KIRBY SMART: Jamon Dumas has been a really good leader for us. Chris Smith has been a great leader for us. Jalen Carter, Robert Beal. Nolan was a great one that's now injured.

But they do it by the way they practice and the tone they set with physicality and striking people.

**Q. Looking at LSU personality-wise, how comparable or different is this Brian Kelly version of football versus what you saw when you faced Notre Dame in 2019?**

KIRBY SMART: Just a different makeup. They got these big, physical SEC players. Not that they didn't when they were at Notre Dame. They've got really good skill players. They've got an extremely athletic quarterback. Do a tremendous job defensively. I got a lot of respect for their defensive staff, what they do.

But they're really athletic. I mean, LSU never is going to be short on players. The state, that area, high school football is so meaningful, and they do such a good job recruiting, that he's got some really talented guys, really talented players playing.

**Q. What is your impression of Harold Perkins Jr.? Did y'all have any recruiting interactions with him?**

KIRBY SMART: No, he's from out in Texas. We were aware of him, evaluated him. He was probably one of the most talented linebackers coming out that season on tape. He's proven that. He's extremely explosive, athletic. They do a very good job of utilizing his skill set.

**Q. On Harold Perkins, how similar of a challenge will it be compared to the challenge of facing Will Anderson?**

KIRBY SMART: Different players in their career. They use them in different ways. Got a little different defense than what Alabama used. But they're both explosively quick, powerful and disruptive.

**Q. What sort of stands out to you about how LSU's defense attacks and what makes them a good defense?**

KIRBY SMART: To be honest with you, it's still early on.

This is not a team we prepared for during the regular season. It's early to say. I'm just getting to watch them.

I know a lot about their defensive coordinator. He's been in our league for a while. He went to the Chiefs for a while. He's one of the best in the league. He understands how to attack offenses and what to take away.

We've had him some on defense in crossovers of teams we've played this year.

**Q. Do you have an update on Marvin or Zion out of yesterday?**

KIRBY SMART: Marvin has an ankle sprain. Not sure of the severity. Zion is good. He was dealing with that same injury from the Kentucky game. I think Zion is going to be fine.

**Q. You mentioned Jayden Daniels a minute ago. Any comparison, past players, explosive quarterbacks in the league that he reminds you of?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't really like doing comparisons.

He's extremely athletic. He's got a great arm, great release. He's got a lot of talented players around him. I remember watching him play, knew he was going to be a good player. They've invested in him. You talk about significantly improving from game one to now, he is unbelievably improved. They've done a great job with him.

**Q. -- do you think the transfer portal is the reason why, there's quality coaches, but to be able to change the trajectory of a program pretty fast?**

KIRBY SMART: I'm not sure what you said at the beginning of that, what the beginning of that question was.

**Q. I'm talking about first-year head coaches at new programs having a lot of success in year one. Is that a product of how fast rosters can be flipped these days?**

KIRBY SMART: I don't know what to attribute that to. I would usually start with what did they inherit and who's their quarterback. So much of the success is tied to that position as a whole, being able to make good decisions. Their guy has done an elite job of doing that.

CHUCK DUNLAP: Thank you, coach.

KIRBY SMART: Thank you. Go Dawgs.

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