

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: LSU vs Georgia

Thursday, December 1, 2022

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

LSU Tigers

Coach Brian Kelly

Press Conference

CHUCK DUNLAP: Coach Kelly, could you make an opening statement.

BRIAN KELLY: Certainly excited to be playing in the SEC Championship Game. It has been quite a journey. I think this is a year since my press conference here. Really proud of our staff, certainly our players and everybody associated with LSU football and the accomplishments that we've made here in a very short period of time.

You got to win it on the field. Our guys did a great job of playing their very best when their best was needed. Now we get an opportunity to play the No. 1 team in the country.

Certainly have a great deal of respect for Kirby and what he's accomplished. To do this back-to-back years is a great accomplishment. Obviously we have a great deal of respect for this football team that we're playing in Georgia.

We're excited about the challenge. Look forward to coming to Atlanta, being part of this championship, playing our very best football when it's needed.

CHUCK DUNLAP: Questions, please.

Q. I wanted to check on Jayden Daniels. Will he play on Saturday?

BRIAN KELLY: The bigger question is, Will you be able to make it? I heard you're a little bit under the weather. You going to be okay (smiling)?

Q. Yes. It looks like I'll be all right. Thank you for asking.

BRIAN KELLY: Okay, good.

He's going to be good, too (smiling). He's had a good



week of practice. He'll play for us on Saturday.

Q. Can you give us an update on Josh as well as Jarrick? How have they practiced, and their expectations for play?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, I was really pleased with Josh yesterday. I think he looked like himself finally. This is an injury that takes some time because of the way he runs. He's such a physical runner. He plays so hard. His physical exertion and effort is one where he's not a guy that's going to go at less than 100%.

I think yesterday was really the first time where I felt like, Okay, we've got Josh back to where he needs to be, to be confident and effective.

And Jarrick was cleared through our concussions protocol. He is obviously going to play an important role for us, as well.

Q. What has BJ Ojulari meant to this team on the field and off the field?

BRIAN KELLY: I would say off the field he embraced the change. He embraced really the mission. That is graduating champions, the excellence that we wanted as a standard here from day one. You need that, right? You need your best players to embrace that. Elected as a captain for us. Led both on and off the field.

He's been an edge play-maker for us. I think when you're talking about excellence both on and off the field, BJ Ojulari would be that guy that we would bring up.

Q. I know it's only been one year in the SEC, but what do you think is going to be the impact when divisions go away and how that fits in with the Playoff picture and the meaning of the SEC championship?

BRIAN KELLY: I'm so young to this league, I've kind of had blinders onto try to get through day after day, to have a bigger picture perspective of it is kind of hard for me right now.



I can tell you this. Our commissioner has a great sense of what's best for the SEC. Look, I usually speak my mind, and haven't had a problem doing that most of my career. It's helped me and gotten me in a lot of trouble (smiling).

In this instance, I would say Greg Sankey would be the best one that would put us on the right path in terms of what's best for the SEC as a conference and what's best for us as a national conference relative to the Playoff implications.

I would defer to him. Whatever he tells me to do, I'm good to go on that.

Q. You mentioned this story a few weeks ago about Will Campbell coming to the sideline, noting what he needed to fix, how he was going to fix it as an example of freshmen having this special mentality. What are some other examples of these starting freshmen showing that mental maturity throughout the season?

BRIAN KELLY: Well, I mean, I could give you a number of different examples of Mason Taylor, who is just playing a tight end position, but involved in so many aspects. He's got to have the ability to pick up the running schemes as well as all the passing schemes. The tight end position is not an easy position to play.

To put the physical with the mental at that position as a true freshman, we saw with Brock Bowers did it at Georgia, it's quite unique. So just his ability to bring that every single day in his first year here I think is extraordinary for a young player.

Emery Jones coming in after camp and being inserted into the starting lineup. You've got to have a short memory at that position in this league. There's such great pass-rushers that you're going to give up a sack or two.

I think what I love about Emery is he forgets it and moves on to the next play. Each one of them has their unique traits.

I think we know about Perkins and his ability to impact defensively. Look, we've played him in two or three different positions already. All of them, if you put them all together, we know about their physical ability, but it's been certainly their mental capabilities and their maturity beyond their years to come in and play at this level.

Q. I know that you obviously have many more years behind you as Notre Dame's winningest coach. What gives LSU a higher ceiling to win championships than Notre Dame? Quite a storied program. Now it appears there's more room for success at LSU than Notre

Dame.

BRIAN KELLY: Well, I mean, look, there's so many different elements. I think Notre Dame has a great opportunity, as well. That's why I was there for 12 years. We had opportunities certainly in the College Football Playoff, playing for a national championship. We were right on the doorstep of playing for championships and winning national championships.

What is unique about LSU is the in-state recruiting. We didn't have that certainly at Notre Dame. It was much more national. So you've got to go into each state and pull out the best players in those states at Notre Dame, whereas you have it right here in the state of Louisiana.

This is the flagship university. Kids want to go to LSU. They grow up wanting to be a Tiger. There's a bit of an advantage from that perspective right out of the gates when it comes to recruiting.

Q. You obviously did a fantastic job, you and your staff, filling holes with the transfer portal. It benefited you greatly at the quarterback spot and defensive backs, et cetera. What are you expecting this to be like in this coming transfer portal season? Is it going to be beyond anybody's imagination? Doomsday scenario in what you might see?

BRIAN KELLY: Well, I think obviously we're all in a situation where it's uncharted territories in so many ways. Guys are saying they're in the portal, but the portal hasn't opened yet. I think everybody's very conscious that we're worried about tampering, things of that nature.

You have to re-recruit your own roster, making sure retention is as important as recruiting now. There are many more factors. Obviously the NIL is part of this, as well.

I think we're thinking about so many different things. When you get down to it, it's protecting your roster, retention, player development, then use the tools that are available to you. The portal is going to be a tool that everybody is going to look at. You also have to understand that with that comes a chance to upset the chemistry of your football team, too.

You got to be very intentional. I think you have to be moving into this next week or so very carefully because you've got to balance recruiting freshmen with the transfer portal and retaining the players on your own roster. It's going to be a very interesting next couple of weeks.

Q. You have obviously been in playoffs and bowl



games in your career. You have this one experience in the ACC Championship Game a couple years ago. Unusual situation being a COVID year. What, if anything, do you take from that experience that you can apply to this game?

BRIAN KELLY: Not really that much. I mean, I think in terms of just balancing your schedule because you're losing opportunity relative to staying ahead of it in recruiting.

I think it's just balancing your schedule more than anything else. The preparation is the same. There's no difference. We're preparing just as if this is a 13th game. Obviously the best team in the country, but preparing it the same way. No change there.

You have to adjust your schedule accordingly based upon not being able to do recruiting.

Q. Your third time matching up against Kirby Smart. Georgia came away with the win those games. Sorry to bring that up. What were your takeaways after playing the Georgia program those two times?

BRIAN KELLY: They're really good and well-coached. Good players. Very competitive games. One of them was home, one of them was away. They were great atmospheres.

It's just really good college football. Look, it's going to be a similar situation. We're going to play a physical football team that has the style of its head coach. They're going to play great defense. They're going to be physical on both sides of the ball.

That's the nature of a well-coached football team that's won a national championship and is competing for another. You know what you're going to get here.

I mean, everything's going to come very difficult. Nothing's going to be easy. You're going to have to earn everything.

Quite frankly, that's the exciting part about it. You know what you're going to get. You're going to get a really well-coached football team, fundamentally sound, and they're going to play hard for four quarters and it's going to challenge your football team to play its very best as well.

It doesn't get any better than this.

Q. I wanted to ask you about one of your better stories this year. Your leading scorer is a walk-on kicker who didn't see the field at all last year. And just what you and Coach Polian saw in the off-season, and how he

has converted that to the game field and become a weapon for you when you needed him?

BRIAN KELLY: We're so smart, we didn't invite him to camp until the very end. That's how smart we are (smiling).

When he came to camp, he demonstrated I would say his consistency more than anything else. We have some really good young kickers, but I thought that what Damian really exhibited in camp and then leading into the pre-season was the consistency. Nothing seemed to really bother him. He had a really good routine. We just felt comfortable that we knew what we were going to get from him.

Yeah, we're not perfect there. I think what we know is that we're going to be in it with him, and he's not going to be overwhelmed by the moment. He's going to be able to stick with his routine and he's going to put a good effort on every single kick that he's asked to make.

Q. Can you speak to Malik's impact on the offense, especially on third down?

BRIAN KELLY: Well, certainly he's developed a relationship with Jayden, one that certainly they trust each other. We match them up in a position where he gets quite a bit of one on one matchups. Teams sometimes have to double cover him, which clearly can influence how we can get the ball to other receivers as well.

He's been obviously very consistent for us. I think that relationship that Jayden has developed with him relative to the timing, getting the ball out of his hands before he gets out of the break, has really been, I think, more than anything else, why third down has been so effective.

Coverage is so tight on third down. Everybody knows what you're trying to do. You just have to be so efficient. Your throws, they're phone booth throws, tight throws into tight windows.

They've built a really good repertoire and they're on the same page. I think that is what has been the difference between Malik and why he's led our team in receptions up to this point.

Q. (No microphone.)

BRIAN KELLY: Certainly there are times when we were not happy with our passing game against Arkansas. But leading into those games, I thought we were extremely efficient, moved the ball down the field.

I think it's like anything else, quite frankly: you can't be predictable. You've got to be able to push the ball down the field, different levels. You've got to attack the defense in all areas. If you're predictable in terms of where you're going to throw the football, defenses are going to take that away.

I think it's really much more about being more aggressive and attacking all areas of the field which opens up the ability to hit some more of the higher-percentage passes that keep the chains moving and keep you ahead of the chains, quite frankly.

Q. You talked briefly about the two previous meetings against Georgia. They've had some coordinator changes since then. What are the biggest schematic differences between those Georgia teams and this Georgia team?

BRIAN KELLY: I'd say there's probably more similarities on defense than there are on offense. I think there's a little bit more wrinkles, if you will, on the offensive side of the ball.

Every defense is going to have a little bit of a change in personality. But their three down, four down, they're going to mix it up on third down, their third down packages are difficult. The personnel is outstanding on the defensive side of the ball, as it is on offense.

I think maybe the offensive structure is one where there are more things to defend and make it difficult, especially with both the tight ends. The two tight ends make it very difficult because of personnel-ing it and they take away some of your calls from a defensive perspective.

Q. How has the preparation been this week in anticipation of this game?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, it will help us in our performance. It's not just what we do on the practice field, it's the decisions that we make away from the field, it's all the things that we do relative to nutrition, sleep, the training room, film study.

Our guys are building better habits with that. That's really what this has been about. It's how they think about it, it's the habits that they've been building relative to their preparation.

We've come a long way, quite frankly. This week they've been very intentional, understanding how important it is playing Georgia, the best team in the country, that those habits have to be really good if they want the kind of performance that they're looking for.

Q. Maybe you're aware of this, you guys are a pretty significant underdog according to Las Vegas in this game. Do you want your players to be thinking about trying to shock the world? Is it just focus on the kinds of things that have gotten you to this point no matter who you're playing?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, look, social media is so prevalent out there. They don't live in a cave. They don't need me to bring things up. They knew that they were a 10-point favorite against Texas A&M, and look what that did for them.

Look, the distractions of social media do not help in your preparation. So what we've tried to do is get them to think the right things about what's important in their preparation. If you think that you get into the right emotional zone because you're an underdog, well, that's fine. But it's still about your mental, your physical, your technical and tactical preparation.

Whether you're an underdog or a favorite, that has nothing to do with your total preparation. That's how we try to get our guys to think.

Q. Obviously you talked a lot about it this week, but the very unique offense you guys are going against with these two tight ends that are so prolific. What has the progress been like in terms of how you're going to try to defend these guys, without going too deep into the weeds, obviously?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, I mean, you have to game plan for them or they're going to wreck your day. I mean, it's as simple as I can get it.

I don't think it's a secret that both of these guys, in particular what Bowers does, he does everything from getting handoff sweeps to screens, to verticals, to seam routes. I think Coach Monken does a great job with them.

Washington splits out as a receiver. They're difficult to defend. Yeah, you have to have a game plan. If you don't you're going to have some problems.

Q. Not sure how much, if any, you went back and looked at the 2021 Georgia preparation for this. If you have, what have been some of the subtle differences in the Bulldogs' offense compared to last year?

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, I would say it's probably a little bit more two tight end. I think they've utilized McConkey very well, very strategic in terms of getting him the football. Look, this is the classic case of an offense that uses

players over plays. That's good coaching, right?

You're not going to carry a scheme just because, well, this is the scheme we run. I think it's an outstanding quarterback, right, who is extremely confident and gets to the ball that have been making plays.

This offense has been successful because the coordinator is leading them and Kirby is leading them towards get the guy the ball that makes plays for us. That's in the running game, too. They have an outstanding offensive line.

Just good coaching and getting the ball to the players that should have the ball in their hands.

Q. You said earlier this week how you were in favor of more teams in the Playoff. Obviously now officially today there will be a 12-team Playoff starting in 2024. Why are you in support of this? What do you think it does for LSU as you move forward?

BRIAN KELLY: I just like more access, I guess. I'm a Division II football coach. I grew up with more teams involved in the playoffs. I liked that atmosphere. I don't know that I have any kind of earth-shattering statement on it.

I just like more access. I think you get some playoff games on campus, you involve the bowl games, you keep them involved in it. I think it keeps more teams in the hunt as the season goes on in terms of vying for playoff spots. I think it's exciting for college football.

I don't think in any way it takes away from the championship, the conference championships. We'll see how that goes. That's certainly up for discussion.

Excited about the growth. I think it just keeps obviously the interest in the Playoff chase further into the season.

CHUCK DUNLAP: Thank you, Coach.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports