

# Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: LSU vs Georgia

Saturday, December 3, 2022

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

**Georgia Bulldogs**

**Kirby Smart**

**Christopher Smith**

**Stetson Bennett**

Press Conference

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Georgia - 50, LSU - 30

THE MODERATOR: We'll open things by asking Coach Smart to make some opening comments and then go to questions.

KIRBY SMART: We came here with a plan to have a connected assault. We talked about it all week. We wanted our team to stay connected, and they did that.

Our team kind of played this game like they played the whole season: unbelievably well in spurts and unbelievably poor in spurts, and answered the bell when they had to.

I'm proud of 'em. They've handled that all year. I want to give a lot of credit to Brian Kelly and the LSU team that never went away, never quit fighting. Had an injured quarterback. They did a really good job of fighting and pushing through.

But this has been a different group. You guys have tried to label them, tried to figure 'em out, tried to analyze 'em. They're not comprehensible. They do what they have to do, and they do it well. They care about each other and they really do it for each other.

No greater example of that than these two men sitting next to me who have been part of our program for a long time.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.



**Q. Chris, walk me through the blocked field goal? Kirby, was it a no, no, no, then all right?**

KIRBY SMART: I'll let Chris answer it. Chris knows we watch those in the team meeting about once every three weeks. I'll let him talk about it.

CHRISTOPHER SMITH: Like Coach said, that's a scenario we go over a lot. We know the ball past the line of scrimmage, we had an opportunity to be able to pick it up. I was waiting for the go to get it from the sideline.

KIRBY SMART: The rule is you're not allowed to pick it up unless you score with it (smiling).

**Q. Kirby, I don't know if you saw when Jalen picked up the LSU quarterback and almost held him there. Stetson is shaking his head. Do you see that sort of stuff from him in practice? Have you ever seen a player with that happen before?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I've seen players do that. They usually didn't end well. They usually don't have the restraint. I told him, I said, You proved to a lot of people that there's a thought process and great restraint to keep from doing something dumb. It showed great discipline on his part to not do anything.

We had a penalty in this game early in the year, I think it was Kamari, on a -- I don't know if you call it a body-to-body suplex tackle. You don't do that. I just got a lot of respect for Jalen to not do that.

Unfortunately we don't let him do that to Stetson, otherwise Stetson would be in pieces.

**Q. Stetson, you seemed extremely confident in the first half. What was it about the game plan that made you feel so comfortable?**

STETSON BENNETT: Well, I mean, I was familiar with the plays. We repped them a lot during the week, during the season. We had executed them during the week. When it's the SEC Championship, you kind of got to play confident. If you don't, then they're going to beat you.



Yeah, I don't know. Got good players. I mean, I don't think I got touched tonight. Our O-line was incredible, so...

**Q. Everybody was talking before the season about all the guys you don't have coming back. What were people missing in their analysis of you guys coming into this season?**

CHRISTOPHER SMITH: I think what they were missing was the culture we were able to create around here, the next-man mentality. Start of the season we had a lot of guys that weren't able to play. But as the season went on, they gained experience, and I think that helped us out a lot.

STETSON BENNETT: For me and Chris, it took us a while to get here, right? Really no option but to play well now, right? When things start going bad, what are you going to do? Stop? Like no.

We knew how hard it was to play for the University of Georgia, right? So now we'll do almost anything to win. I think we have a lot of older guys like that.

**Q. Chris, what's the takeaway from this? Obviously you guys got more work, you've got great big huge games in front of you. 506 yard passing allowed in this game today. What is your takeaway on that? Do you flush that, or are there some lessons learned tonight?**

CHRISTOPHER SMITH: We got a lot of work to do. Definitely don't flush it. But we were able to come out on top with a great team win. We got to get back to the drawing board and continue to work.

**Q. Kirby, you mentioned some unbelievably poor spurts here in the course of the game. What concerned you coming out of tonight? What are you going to work on over the next four weeks?**

KIRBY SMART: Everything. Like, there's nothing that we can't work on during the next four weeks, right? We do camp-style practices. Our guys know everybody can get better. Conditioning level, tackling.

Football's a tough, hard sport. Our guys embrace challenges. So I think they'll embrace the challenge of getting better. You can't say you're going to go work on one thing because then you'll be giving up on some other things. We need to work on a lot of things.

Our guys understand as the year goes on, teams tackle poorly, teams cover poorly. Defense usually deteriorates. That's not the culture here. It won't be accepted or

tolerated, so we got to fix it.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

KIRBY SMART: I'll have to watch the tape to see. We played a different style the second half. That affected us some. Just got to play better. We got to affect the quarterback better.

**Q. Stetson, the coach spoke earlier this week about checking the box as far as this game is concerned. This may sound like a silly question, you won a national title last year, came up short in this one, was there any kind of void that you were determined to take care of today?**

STETSON BENNETT: What's the question? Sorry.

**Q. You won a national title last year, came up short in this game. How important was it to make up for that today?**

STETSON BENNETT: Yeah, winning the SEC is a big deal. This is the best conference in football. National championships is huge and great. That's our next goal. But SEC is the first goal, second goal after winning the East.

Winning the SEC championship, there's only one of those. It's a banner. It's the same thing as a national championship, just a little bit smaller scale.

So, yeah, it was important for us.

**Q. Kirby and Chris, did the example of the ball hitting the LSU player's helmet, the field goal, is that a perfect example of not playing till the whistle is blown?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think it's a trite expression to say play till the whistle is blown. Everybody plays till the whistle is blown. That's what you do.

I think it's more about his instincts. That's the same play and same exact route that he picked off on Clemson last year. He jumped it. He played it aggressive. He understood what the quarterback's check was. He understood his leverage.

How many times do you think you've run that stunt since you've been here?

CHRISTOPHER SMITH: A ton.

KIRBY SMART: A ton. He saw it, jumped it. By him jumping, it caused the ball to go in the air. And then it

bounced off him.

I think Smael's -- we talk about tips and overthrows, Mel Tucker had a saying here, what do we say, Chris, tips and overthrows?

CHRISTOPHER SMITH: Got to get those.

KIRBY SMART: We got 'em. That's a big deal. Smael did it, and then Chris picking it up.

That's football savvy and football awareness for him to pick that ball up. Because we tell them. We showed him video of guys touching the ball after the block and the other team gaining possession. But we also say if you can score, go do it. I don't know if you remember last year, we blocked one on Alabama in the national championship game, and Lewis or Quay about messed it up. They would have gotten the ball. We use that as an example of don't touch it.

Chris thought about that. You could see him thinking about that. Then he realized, There's nobody covering. So he went.

CHRISTOPHER SMITH: Same thing coach said, just savviness and instincts, understanding what we want to get done when we step out there.

**Q. Anything on the McConkey and McClendon front?**

KIRBY SMART: McClendon is light MCL. Don't know how long it will be. He wasn't able to go back in obviously. I don't know what grade it is. We'll get it looked at tomorrow.

Lads is continuation of what he has been having. His knees have been bothering him. He has some tendinitis in there. Didn't so much hurt him on the play, it just started aggravating him more. He didn't feel like he could go.

**Q. Stetson, you had a moment after your touchdown pass to Darnell, you kind of looked over to the sideline and shook your head. What was going through your mind?**

STETSON BENNETT: It's fun to throw to somebody that big and that fast. Thank you for bringing him here and thank you for calling that play.

No, I mean, I don't know. I felt like we were in a rhythm. Ladd was the one after. I guess that was the next drive. I can't remember, sorry.

But, yeah, we were in a zone. It felt like what we were calling we were executing. We were having fun playing

football there.

**Q. Kirby and Stetson, Kendall had another game with several big runs. How big has he been in the last few games back from the injury?**

KIRBY SMART: Man, his toughness. I thought tonight was the first time he really had his pad level and was running through contact. He's made some big runs, but tonight his pads were lower, he ran over people, kept his legs churning. He had the explosive ones. He's really fast when he's broken out of there. It'll almost like he's gaining steam at the end of the year as he's running the ball.

**Q. Chris, earlier in the week you said fourth time is a charm. How does it feel to finally get this one?**

CHRISTOPHER SMITH: It feels amazing. Just coming up short so many times, just to finally be able to get a win, it feels great for sure.

**Q. Kirby, did you call the two-point conversion so y'all could use that play? Stetson, your view on that play?**

KIRBY SMART: We went with it because it was by the book. We felt that differential made it right. I think it was 25 to go to 27, is that right? It was just by the book.

The book said if they were able to score, their analytics were to go for two. We might as well save that play. It's one we've worked on for a long time. In football you don't save plays. You run 'em when you need 'em. We didn't know what was going to happen the next three to four series, so we executed it.

STETSON BENNETT: I liked it. It was fun to just see it. I talked to A.D. in the huddle, because he hadn't played that much. I was like, All right, this is you, brother.

I sprinted left, tossed it to him. We actually threw a spiral I think. I don't think he's thrown one of those in practice. I don't think he's repped that play.

KIRBY SMART: No.

STETSON BENNETT: Somebody else did.

KIRBY SMART: Me and A.D. have something that you'll never have.

STETSON BENNETT: What?

KIRBY SMART: We're both career passing record at UGA is one for one. Two-point conversions, dropped the snap, one for one. You and Bubba are behind me. It's me and

A.D. (smiling).

**Q. Coach, they seemed like they were having some momentum. They scored a couple touchdowns. Y'all get the ball at the five. Eight plays, 95 yards. Took the momentum out of the game. Is that planned? Is there a message in the huddle?**

KIRBY SMART: Let me tell you what was planned. To come out in the second half and drive it down their throat. We were doing that, we had a little mishap, okay? So that was the plan. The plan was being executed, all right? We didn't play real good defense tonight. But there were some opportunities that they didn't just make plays, we just didn't make plays.

Malaki had a couple tough plays. He makes those plays every day in practice. I would bet money on Malaki playing a half safety a thousand times.

He misjudged the ball and the kid is crushed for it. But you know what, he's going to be a better football player for having experienced it. We gave up some plays that we probably shouldn't have.

You give them credit for that. We got to continue to grow. I thought the play of the game was the Marcus Rosemy screen, third-and-five backed up, third-and-six backed up. Stets hits him on a screen. Marcus sticks it in there. Two great blocks. That was the drive you're referencing. Without that conversion we're punting the ball back to them.

Great call by Monk, too.

**Q. Say you had an undefeated quarterback who might be up for an individual award, maybe like the Heisman, would you lobby for that for him?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, absolutely. I mean, I think it's one of those things, this guy's 23 of 29 in the second half, I mean, he didn't get to do a whole lot in the second half, so I don't know what he was in the first half. He's played really well.

I had several people come up to me and say they thought he played the best game of his career tonight. He played really good.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned the third down play, how physical you guys were, able to get that first down. How proud are you of your team on how physical they are, especially your receivers?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, the physicality at our place comes out every day in practice. The thing I'll never shy away

from or tell people is that physical wins in our league. You see, our league's different. Our league's tough. Our league's hard. Week in and week out, it's extremely physical.

There was more depth in our league this year than I ever remember. I mean, top to bottom. You look at what Vanderbilt was able to do, what South Carolina is able to do, Mississippi State is able to do. Everybody is really physical.

So you got to set yourself apart and you got to have a culture, build your culture around guys who think toughness matters. If toughness doesn't matter, you have no chance in this week. You win on the road with toughness. I thought we won tonight with some toughness.

**Q. Stetson, obviously the last two performances in here have been really strong for you. Can you talk about your comfort level playing here, the likelihood you'll be back here again in a few weeks.**

STETSON BENNETT: Well, I don't know what goes into all those decisions.

Yeah, I mean, we like this place. We play pretty good here (smiling). I don't know if it's the turf or humidity. Good Lord, it was hot in there today. I'm about to cramp up sitting here and I didn't barely run.

I mean, I don't know. I don't think it's anything about this place in particular. I think we just had a good game plan and went out and executed it.

**Q. Kirby, obviously tomorrow is the selection show. How much do you know about what awaits you guy, who the opponent might be? Did you see a little bit of the chaos that took place before your game got played?**

KIRBY SMART: I have not seen one thing. I tried not to pay attention to any of it. I didn't have any games on or anything. I haven't heard anything to even know what's going on.

It didn't matter. To me, that's so far away that, like, we don't control it. Number two, so far away you got time to prepare for it. My focus has been on this because I told those kids, I don't want one kid to walk out of our program without an SEC championship ring for their career. That was about to happen if we didn't get that one.

They said enough was enough tonight. They got 'em one.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, guys, thank you very much.

Congratulations.

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