

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Alabama vs Georgia

Thursday, November 30, 2023

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Georgia Bulldogs

Coach Kirby Smart

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Coach Smart, if you could give some opening remarks and then we'll open it up for questions.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, our guys are excited for an opportunity to play in what I've talked about all week is one of the best venues and just incredible environments in all of college football, and been very fortunate to coach in a lot of these games, and they are special.

Our guys are excited for the opportunity. We're working hard at preparing for what is a really unique, physical Alabama team, and our guys got another day's work and another day's work tomorrow to put in to be ready for it.

Q. I know you've been asked this before, but the portal opening Monday, why hasn't that been more of an emphasis on you? Have you needed to have it? Player retention obviously is huge. What is your philosophy on that?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we utilize the portal, utilized the portal last year. We had one year we didn't, but we had a lot of retention.

I think times are changing, and everybody adapts with it. It's unfortunate to me that it's picking up pace. I think this year will be a record-breaking year because the attention, the opportunity, the seeking out the monetary side of it is going to become a really norm.

Our philosophy for the portal may be different than maybe what people actually use it for. We're trying to make our team better. We want to recruit really good high school players, and I think that's important to college football and our game, to recruit really good high school players and develop them, but unfortunately the more that go in, the more we have to research the portal and take, otherwise you can't sustain.

It's not a matter of a philosophy. I would retain everybody on my team if I could, and I would play with the guys we have. But you have to take others in order to be able to field a team unless you want all freshmen.

Q. What does the availability look like this week for Brock, for Ladd, for Rara and for Tate?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, great question because I'm trying to figure that out myself. I don't have a lot more answers now than I had on Monday. They have not been able to do a lot. Each one has worked kind of independently. Tate has done some drill work, some 11-on-11 stuff, Brock has sprinkled in some of that. The other guys have been able to run and do some things.

But we're going to find out today what their availability is, to be honest. It's tough because it bothers me that people have said out there that we sat these guys for the last game. That wasn't the case at all. They couldn't go.

I don't know if they're going to be able to go in this game. It's just unfortunate to have those kind of injuries, especially four starters on offense.

Q. We've talked a lot about Carson Beck this year and kind of his maturation. I just wonder if there's been any kind of moment where you felt like coming out of it that he had made sort of that breakthrough. Clearly at this point he's an exceptional quarterback for you. I'm thinking like that 98-yard drive against Auburn on the road, moments like that, did you have that kind of moment with him?

KIRBY SMART: Certainly the Auburn experience was big for him in terms of confidence. It was his first true road test like to be in that environment, have a tough environment to play in, and he did a really nice job in that game.

But I can't pinpoint one moment. I didn't see it like you saw it. It's like you have somebody that's been in your family or been in your house for a long time, and you treat them as family, and he was family for a long time before he started to get these opportunities, and I had seen his ups and

downs and his trials and tribulations and the things he had gone through on the field. He had already proven to me his talent level by the way he prepared last year.

So I wasn't seeing things that I thought were like groundbreaking, they were things that I had seen before, and his maturation has been a game-by-game process, and he's done a nice job of that.

Q. I know your focus has been on this game, but do you hope to have a hire to replace Fran Brown before the signing date, and do you know if Fran would stay with the team if you guys make the playoffs?

KIRBY SMART: You answered the question already. We've been really focused on Alabama. That's all we're really thinking about. Those decisions that you're talking about, they're not important. They have no relevance whatsoever to this game. Our focus and energy is on this game.

I really don't have to decide that right now and don't even look to. I don't even know why it's newsworthy because what's newsworthy is he got a hell of an opportunity and he's done a tremendous job for us, and we're super happy for his family and for Syracuse to be getting someone of his character.

But we're not worried about anything past Alabama.

Q. How do you think the importance of this game is going to be impacted in the 12-team playoff era, and do you have worries that SEC teams might be hurt by playing in this game?

KIRBY SMART: I don't have a -- well, I haven't really thought about it that way in terms of how it would be hurt in the 12-team playoff. The only thing we have to indicate the future is what's happened in the past. Before all this came about, Greg Sankey and the staff and the minds that lead our conference looked into that and did a lot of -- y'all can do it, go back and look at the last 15 or 20 SEC Championship games and ask yourselves how many of those losers or those two teams would get into 12-team playoff. I don't know what that is, but I would venture to say that most would, and I would also say with no east and west division play, you're going to have a better chance of obviously getting the two top teams, therefore the two top teams would traditionally be in the top 12.

I think if you've looked at the history, there has been some teams in the west that didn't go to this game that would have been in that top 12. I can't say whether it hurts or helps. I certainly think there's been years that might have been four teams get in out of 12. I don't know whether the

game loses its importance. It'll never lose its importance in a program that I'm coaching at because you're trying to win a championship, and that becomes the focal point of a conference that's going to be even more powerful winning a championship like that.

I don't know, people try to demean the value and say that, oh, it's only important that you win the playoff and you win the National Championship. There's a lot of merit to winning an SEC conference championship, especially when you add the teams we're going to add.

Q. In your career you've either been a part of or coached against plenty of Alabama teams, and it seems like for the first time in several years now, Alabama has not had the stability of starting a first-round NFL Draft pick all season long. Given that context, how would you evaluate Alabama's offense this year and the kind of offense that you will be playing against on Saturday compared to the one that maybe people saw in the Texas game?

KIRBY SMART: I didn't understand the first -- you said they don't have a first-round offensive what?

Q. Just saying that this is the first time in several years now that there hasn't been a quarterback for the entire season that's gone on to become an NFL first-round draft pick. Nothing against Jalen Milroe, but given the inconsistency at the starting position at the beginning of the year, that is the piece I was trying to highlight.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I'm not sure I still fully understand the question. How different is this team from the others? It's very different, if that's what you're asking.

Q. Just the offense and the kind of coaching job it's taken to get them to this point.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think they've done an incredible job because what you do is you take your players and you do what your players can do best, and although it's not the -- they don't have the exact same coordinator, either, they don't have a lot of the same coaches they had three and four and five years ago maybe what Mac was there or when Bryce was there. They've taken their players and they've made their offense fit their players, and they do a really good job of that. I've had a lot of time to watch what they do and what they ask him to do, he's really good at what he does. It features their offensive line, which is the biggest most physical offensive line in the country in terms of size and just sheer size and strength.

Then the quarterback is able to make plays. They know

that. They allow him to make plays with his feet, and some of his best plays are on players that are off schedule. It's very different than what they've had in the past, but he's also grown and gotten better as the year goes on.

I think they've taken some things out and said, hey, that's not what he does best, we've tried to make him do that, and they've made it where what he does best, they do, and they do that really well.

Q. What is the most important thing in this week, the mental stuff or the physical stuff, and could you say some words to all the Mexican fans who will be watching this SEC Championship game next Saturday? Gracias.

KIRBY SMART: The most important stuff will be the mental stuff. I think at this point, the physical part is what it is. You're not going to get physically better at this point in the season. I think you can get mentally better, and you want your players to not be anxious, not be nervous, and they're playing a big game. The talent separation is not there. There's very equal talent when it comes down to it. Mentally you want to be prepared for a moment like this and go play your best and not have anxiety.

To all the fans in Mexico that will be watching the game, we certainly appreciate you guys watching us and look forward to seeing a great game and a great atmosphere with the game being in Atlanta.

(Commercial break.)

KIRBY SMART: The staff that we've created, and there's a lot of support staff that people enough see behind the scenes that make up that family, too.

Q. After watching Alabama for a couple days offensively, what do you make of their running back corps, how they mix them in with Jalen Milroe and specifically what Jase McClellan brings to the table.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, they have really good backs. They rotate three guys in and out, and they all complement each other really well. They're powerful. They play behind a really good offensive line.

Yards after contact is something that jumps off the screen at me. They don't go down at the first tackle. They catch the ball well out of the backfield, all three of them pick people up really well in pass pro, and we watch that, and the first thing I look at on the back is what kind of protector is he on 3rd down, does he know who he has, can he block him, does he cut every time, does he stay up, what is their strengths, what is their weaknesses as pass pro and pass

receivers, and they have very complete backs, which you would fully expect at Alabama.

Q. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on why there are so many contenders this year, more than ever for the College Football Playoff. That's the first part. The second part is because there are so many contenders, how concerned, if at all, are you that you have to win this game for the SEC to be in?

KIRBY SMART: I can't explain why there's more. I certainly haven't even thought of why that is. I mean, I always look at things as everything happens for a reason, and you have the years you have. There's been other years that there was close debates, maybe not as many as there are now. I certainly would think that the people with knowledge out there would say it has something to do with the portal, has something to do with the parity maybe that the portal creates.

But I don't know that it's that as much as it creates haves and have-nots. The biggest difference to me I see out there is quarterback play at the high level. A lot of these teams that are, as you called them, contenders, really good football teams, they have really good quarterbacks for the most part. I don't know the exact number, but of these teams in the top 7 or 8, I can think of three or maybe four of them that have quarterbacks that came by way of an experience somewhere else and moved in and had success.

Quarterback play to me is one of the No. 1 indicators of how good you are, and the teams that have them have a shot in every game, so they have an opportunity to win games.

As far as your other question, I don't really want to get into it. I want to focus on what we have to do to win this game.

Q. I was wondering what you've seen from Caleb Downs this season and if he looks like a freshman out there.

KIRBY SMART: No, he doesn't look like a freshman at all. He looks like a guy that's been playing for three years. He's instinctive. He's fast. He's fearless. He's everything that he was in high school. I've seen him play about 100 7-on-7 games at our stadium and at our facility when his high school team came over all the time, and he's everything that we thought he was, punt returner, he's just a football player that is instinctive, great tackler. Just what you draw up when you want a defensive back.

Q. I want to talk to you about Carson Beck's development and what he was able to learn under

Stetson Bennett and the ability to learn from Stetson for this upcoming season and this SEC Championship moment.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think he would tell you that he learned a lot from all the quarterbacks that were here. People just keep forgetting that he was here with J.T. Daniels, so he sat in meetings with J.T. and Monk when they would go back and forth about what the read is, what we're looking at, how we're doing it. J.T. was a really bright quarterback, and Carson sat in those meetings, heard him, and then as J.T. moved on, he got to sit in and listen with Stetson and hear him talk and learn things.

He was really the entire time a sponge, and he was growing through all that. Like we knew sitting in meetings that he was a very bright quarterback. He was right there with J.T. and Stetson in terms of competition.

It's clear that he was growing as he was experiencing all those reps and moments, and certainly glad that all those spring practices and fall camps he just got so many twos reps to help him get to where he is now.

Q. I did want to ask about the secondary for the Crimson Tide. I know you were asked about Caleb Downs, but Kool-Aid McKinstry, how well has he played this year do you think?

KIRBY SMART: He's done a really good job. I think Kool-Aid was very talented. He played a lot in the game that we played three years ago, the game there in Indy, and he was young, talented then, really good player.

I think it's typical Alabama to have a guy opposite him who has developed really well in Terrion and has grown and played really well, too. A lot of times the guy you forget about at a young age is the one that comes along and is hungry and keeps growing and getting better and aspires to be great as opposed to a guy that maybe was more ahead when he got there and more capable of playing.

They both have made for a really good tandem along with the safeties and stars, Malachi and Jalen, the portal kid they picked up, and they've got a lot of good players, and they've had to play a lot of them. They've had about six guys that have rotated around and played in the secondary this year, and it's really impressive what they've been able to do with those guys.

Q. You've been a part of this game every year since 2014 in some capacity, whether it was at Alabama or Georgia. Have you had time to think about that, and what does it mean to you?

KIRBY SMART: Well, I don't know if that's exactly accurate. I don't know that we've been a part of it every year. But we've been in a lot, that's for sure. I don't look at it -- I look at it as only this year because only this year matters. The past years, great experiences, great teams, but my focus is on this game and this team.

Q. I know that centers don't always get a whole lot of attention or love, but Sedrick Van Pran has been a guy in your program that looks like one of your pillars. Can you share some insight as to what he's meant to the team and his growth coming in?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, he was a tremendous leader. We knew when he decided to come back it would impact our team in more ways than snaps and blocks. He would be a major figure in pushing guys to be excellent, to reach their goal. He's one of the most driven, dynamic leaders I've ever been around. He just cares so much and is so selfless. His practice habits this week alone have been stuff of legend, and we'll be showing videos of how much effort, how far he covers down, how important it is to him. He's one of the guys that doesn't look out for himself. He pushes everybody, and that's hard to find, and he's certainly a super high-quality leader.

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