

# Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Georgia vs Alabama

Sunday, November 28, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

## Georgia Bulldogs Kirby Smart

### Workout Day Press Conference

CHUCK DUNLAP: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to SEC Championship game week. Each coach will be with us for 20 minutes today to take questions. We'll have each coach make an introductory statement, and we'll take questions.

With that, we'll introduce the head coach of the Eastern Division Champion Georgia Bulldogs, Kirby Smart. While we're awaiting questions, would you mind commenting on your team as you prepare to face Alabama for the SEC Championship.

KIRBY SMART: I'm assuming that everybody can hear me.

CHUCK DUNLAP: Yes, sir, we have you.

KIRBY SMART: Thank you. Just excited, first and foremost, to be in this game. I've always said it's one of the greatest atmospheres in all of sports. It rivals against everything I've been a part of, from College World Series to National Championship games to anything and everything. Just the atmosphere is incredible.

So many people in this region care so much about this game, and I think the SEC administrators have done a tremendous job keeping this game at the level it has for many years. I grew up watching this SEC Championship when it started in Birmingham. It's grown. It's grown and grown and grown. It's a large part of the Southeast footprint.

Our guys have performed well, have done a good job this season, and you earn the right to have an opportunity to go out and play a team from the West.

I know Alabama well. Really good football program. Coach has done a great job over there. We've got a lot of



respect for their team and the way they play and the style of play. As we all know, we've had some matchups in the past and look forward to this one.

It's a great opportunity for our guys to go out and play a really, really good football team. So I'm excited for that. I know our players are really excited. Just ready to get back to work tomorrow.

**Q. You've been around some of the best players in the history, defensive players in the history of the Southeastern Conference, and you've got a team full of them again this year. I'm just wondering from Alabama, have you seen Will Anderson, and what do you think of his game?**

KIRBY SMART: Yes, we've overlapped two or three opponents, maybe Tennessee and Florida. Maybe somebody else, I can't remember. Yeah, he's a tremendous athlete. He plays with so much passion and toughness and energy.

When I see him play, it reminds me of Rashaan Evans at times before Rashaan moved to inside backer. He's so explosive, twitchy, and tough. So he strikes people and really strikes blocks really well. It will be a key part of the game in terms of the way he plays and affects the game. He does a really good job.

**Q. Kirby, just wondering what your thoughts were after watching the tape of Alabama yesterday. Offensively, what were your thoughts about the game they played at Auburn?**

KIRBY SMART: To be honest with you, I haven't even gotten all the way through that game. We put this game to bed. We've had cut-ups and things like that done, work that was done beforehand. That game goes in today. We've got a lot of things to continue to work on.

I know the type of quarterback that we're up against. I know the skill at receivers that we're up against, the running backs they have, the tight ends, the O-line. They're not recruiting players that can't play in the SEC over there. So they've got a tremendous staff and a



tremendous offense.

**Q. Coach, you know it will be brought up this week. Obviously, having lost six in a row to Alabama, Georgia has, your games have all been tremendously competitive, probably including last year over in Tuscaloosa. Halftime leads in all of them. Is there any -- what can you point to about having those leads and not being able to sustain them to the end? If there's a commonality or just owed to what Alabama is year in and year out.**

KIRBY SMART: Well, I hadn't been a part of all those, but obviously, this year is this year, and every year is independent of the previous. I don't think there's any overlap between the two. I know people want to make it that, make it some kind of overlap. Every year is independent of the previous. Our job is to go play the best possible game we can. That's what we've been trying to build towards this year.

We haven't played our best yet, and we think our best is still out there. That's the goal.

**Q. Kirby, you guys went through an 8-0 league run by an average score of 40-8, and Alabama has played 5 of its 8 games decided by a touchdown or less. I'm asking about in-game adversity. I know you've had adversity this year with injuries and next man up type of things, but have you had any like what you would call a significant in-game adversity? Is that kind of -- I don't know if concern is too strong a word, but just kind of wondering what your team will respond if it's a 14-14 game in the fourth quarter.**

KIRBY SMART: I don't know. I think you have to find that out. The team that we're coaching out here every day, they've been through some adversity, I can assure you that. We make for adverse situations every day in practice, and we challenge them each and every day.

So to the level that they can be challenged, they go against each other every day, and they go compete. That's what we ask our guys to do is to play like there's no scoreboard. If you play like there's no scoreboard, what does it matter if you've been in one of those situations or not?

If they truly compete like every play is independent of the previous, then you feel good about the way they compete. If you don't and they're relaxed, then they're not who we think they are. The biggest thing is preparation and understanding that you don't want the moment to be too big for you. You do what you're asked and let our guys go play. That's our goal.

**Q. Also wanted to ask about recruiting. You've got most of the league that's able to recruit this week. Is that something, as much as you love recruiting, does that gnaw at you? Obviously, you want to be in this game, but does that bother you that other teams are out there recruiting, or does this game, the magnitude of just being in this game kind of outweigh that?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I would agree with the latter there. I mean, the magnitude and coverage and exposure that we'll get, those same coaches and those same teams will be watching the same players that we're recruiting. They'll be watching this game, I can assure you of that.

That's the best advertisement you can have is to go out and play well.

**Q. Understanding that this is a different Alabama team, is there any value to be gained from having played them? I guess particularly in the case of Stetson.**

KIRBY SMART: Any value to gain in what?

**Q. Yeah, having played against Alabama last year, will that help him in any way this time around on Saturday?**

KIRBY SMART: I think experience is extremely valuable, but I don't know that it's pertinent to having played them. What it's pertinent to is playing in the SEC schedule and playing the gauntlet that you play. And him playing last year certainly helped him this year, and playing more this year helps him this year.

It's not relative to who you play. It's relative to playing.

**Q. Coach, what do you like about this team that may remind you of your 2017 team and maybe what's different?**

KIRBY SMART: This team has responded to all the things we've challenged them with. We hit them with different things each week, things we want to really focus on accountability from their standpoint of holding other players accountable from week to week for different things. And they've done it each and every time, every time we've asked. They've been up for the challenge.

The 2017 group had some really good leaders on it. I feel like this team -- you know, that team, it wasn't fully recruited by our staff. So we had a lot of guys that bought in and believed what we were selling, where this year all these guys have kind of been recruited by the staff. They seem to connect well. There's a lot of really good kids on

it.

**Q. Kirby, obviously Alabama is the team that Georgia hasn't gotten past yet. Everyone knows the history. Do you confront that with your team this week, or do you do your best to ignore it?**

KIRBY SMART: I don't know what you mean confront. Do you talk about it? We talk about the opponent every week we play somebody, right? But we focus on ourselves. We focus on execution. We don't focus on history.

I think every team is independent of the previous. So I mean, it is what it is. Our guys got to go out and play well. What happened in those games will have no relevance to this game. I think anybody with good coaching sense would tell you that. They're independent. Both teams are different in a lot of ways.

The focus will be on what we can do, what we can control, how we play, and how we execute. I think that's the most important thing.

**Q. You said yesterday the strength of this team is the players. You have complimented them at other times on their focus, and they've avoided any temptation to look ahead. What does that -- how does that maturity play now that you're up to this stage of the season in the postseason? Is that something that you think you can lean on and have a trust in this group of players?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I wouldn't worry about them looking past anybody we've got left to play, I can assure you of that. They've had great focus thus far in the season. Obviously, that's not a concern. The maturity level of the team to not look past those other teams just tells me that they're listening and they're focused and they're driven.

But their energy will have to be put in a different direction because it's not going to be the lackadaisical, the doesn't matter if I do it exactly right. Hey, Coach, we're better than them. It's one of those, hey, look, we've been working to be at our best. All these weeks we've practiced, we've practiced to be at our best, not to practice to the level of who we're playing.

Regardless of who that was, we want to be at our best when the best is needed. The more you recall that, the better you do at doing it. So the big challenge is can you execute in the moment when you're needed to?

**Q. I was also going to ask if you know anything more about Kearnis Jackson today?**

KIRBY SMART: No, I don't know much about any of our

guys in terms of the injury things and that. Some of them have been in for treatment and things like that, but until you get on the field with them, that's usually the sign that you find out more.

**Q. Kirby, what stands out about this cast of Alabama receivers? Obviously, you guys are familiar with Metchie from last year, but they've obviously lost a number of guys there.**

KIRBY SMART: They've got one of the best players in the country in transfer, and he's elite. He's really good. The guy comes out and dominates at gunner. He's a weapon out at wideout. He does a tremendous job. Slane Bolden's been there, it feels like forever, a punt returner and a slot guy.

The young receivers they've gotten, we recruited most of those guys. The kid Ja'Corey that made the play last night, known him a long time. A South Florida guy that's made a lot of plays for them. They've got wideouts from all over. There's no shortage of talent at wideout, I can promise you that, never has been.

The guy distributing the ball to them is playing extremely well too.

**Q. Coach, do you feel like there's any advantage, us wrapping up our game, having our starters out by 1:00, and Alabama playing a pretty physical game late into the night in four overtimes? Does that hurt us from a preparation standpoint going into the game next week?**

KIRBY SMART: I don't know. I just got three questions about how many games have been played that are really tight in the fourth quarter. That seems to be thought of as an advantage. I think it can be parlayed however you want it to look.

Certainly people can say that, and they can say that -- I'm a big believer in strain. In football, most of these kids grew up playing week to week. The good ones all played 15 games in a high school season and played for state championships. They played back to back to back to back. That's kind of what you're used to.

I'm a big believer, if you strain, you get used to straining, and you strain. Our guys in the second half haven't had to strain as hard because they haven't had to play. It's one of those things, it's just however you want to look at it.

**Q. Following up to that, do you feel like that will be something you'll focus on practice this week is pushing them to play four quarters?**

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KIRBY SMART: Well, we can't play four quarters in practice. We wouldn't be as good on Saturday. So you have to be -- a fine line between your team that's your team right now, and if you want to get them better and get them in condition, you should have done that a long time ago.

I think the big thing right now is making sure you're at your fastest, you're healthy, and you can execute.

**Q. Coach, we've talked quite a bit so far about Bryce Young, but when you look at the first year starting quarterback, what impresses you about his poise, his accuracy, and just how the moment never seems to be too big for him?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, he's just what you said. It's like he's composed at all times and has great presence in the pocket, great distributor of the ball. Knows where all his outlets are. Can draw the defense to him and dish the ball, much like a point guard in basketball.

This is just one of the best I've seen as far as quick release and getting the ball out, distributing the ball really good.

**Q. Coach, certainly appreciate the time here today, I can't help but want to talk about Stetson Bennett. I know you've been asked about kind of his journey, but to do what he has accomplished after leaving the program and coming back, I was hoping you could speak to where he is, maybe where he started and where he is today.**

KIRBY SMART: He started as a walk-on that came in -- I guess he came in with Jake Fromm's class. Correct? I'm sadly mistaken if I'm wrong there. He started as a walk-on, and he's now playing for the SEC Championship. What a wild ride he's had from start to finish.

You go back and look at the newspaper articles and the media outlets after the -- maybe the Rose Bowl when he had to play Baker Mayfield. That's when the legend really started. But he started as a quarterback that played the role of Baker Mayfield for 12, 13 practices, and that's kind of where his legend began with us because we knew this guy was a really good athlete, smart with the ball, did a lot of good things.

But as it would have it, he did want to go play, and he wasn't going to play at the time. So he went and played junior college and got playing experience and ended up coming back.

**Q. Brock Bowers is one of the candidates for**

**freshman of the year. You kind of talked about him off and on. Can you just talk about Brock's evolution, and is there any player that you've coached or prepared for comparable to what we've seen from Bowers this year?**

KIRBY SMART: There's been special freshmen that you go against, and now that you're asking that question, nothing really pops out. There's been really talented wideouts to me, and there's been really talented like backs because I feel like, to play running back and receiver in our conference, it's the one place that an elite, really good prospect can walk in and impact a game.

It's less getting overpowered out there. It's rare to me to see a tight end and do the things he's done as a freshman. I think we're going to see it more and more with these kids coming midyear because it helped Brock to get here and get started where he did and get that timing under his belt. Just no moment has been too big for him.

Going back to the Clemson game, it was just another game to him. We knew from that game when he started out catching it, running after the catch, I mean, he made some plays that this guy is going to be a weapon. I can't think of any. There have been some really, really talented freshmen in our conference. But just at that position, it's kind of unique.

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