

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Georgia vs Alabama

Thursday, December 2, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Georgia Bulldogs Kirby Smart

Workout Day Press Conference

KEVIN TRAINOR: Good afternoon and welcome to today's 2021 SEC football Championship Game coaches press conference. Again, we are glad you are with us as we get ready for Saturday's SEC Championship Game.

We will start today with the champion of the SEC Eastern division, the Georgia Bulldogs. Georgia enters Saturday's game with a record of 12-0 and ranked No. 1 in the College Football Playoff selection committee rankings.

We're now joined by head coach Kirby Smart. We'll have Coach Smart to make an opening statement, and then we'll take your questions. Coach Smart?

KIRBY SMART: We're excited to be here. Great opportunity for our football team. Really proud of the job they've done this year, to get this opportunity to play on one of the largest stages there is in college football.

I know our players are excited about that. They've put a lot of intense, hard work in this week, as well as the entire season. We tell them all the time, they've earned this opportunity, so embrace it, enjoy it. It's one of the best competitive environments there is in all of sports.

So our guys are really excited about it. Looking forward to it.

Q. Coach, could you update us on the availability status of Jamaree, Christopher Smith, Kendall Milton, and Kearis Jackson, please.

KIRBY SMART: Yes, we're hopeful to have all four of those guys be able to play. They've been able to participate in parts of practice all week and feel good about them, but again, it will boil down to a game-time decision, how they are in warmups and how they look.



Q. It seems like we've finally dispatched with the mentor-protégé talk with you and Coach Saban. I just wonder if you can just update us a little bit on your relationship. Obviously, it's been six years since you've been over there, but I assume he still remains somewhat of a focal figure in your life. Could you expound on that a little bit.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I had a tremendous time while I was at Alabama, accomplished a lot of great things. I'm very appreciative of the things I got to grow as a coach there and raise a family, and all my kids were born there. My wife still has a lots of friends there in the Tuscaloosa community. So it's been a big part of it.

Coach and I are both very appreciative of our relationship. I think a lot of him. He's meant a lot in my career, as he has a lot of coaches out there in the country. I think you appreciate the job he does more when you're gone than maybe when you were there because, when you move on, you appreciate the fact that he works really hard, he doesn't ask any of his assistants to do anything that he doesn't do, and he holds everybody to a high standard.

He and I, we don't communicate daily or anything, but I've got a lot of respect for him. He spent some time in the summer up around where my parents live, but it's not like we get to keep in touch a lot. We both have our own families and own things going on.

Q. Kirby, you have two new corners compared to last year's Alabama game, in Derion Kendrick and Kelee Ringo. How have they developed, and where are they sort of at entering this game when they're going to have to defend Alabama's very talented wide receivers?

KIRBY SMART: I think both guys have improved throughout the year. They've got a lot of areas that really tried to concentrate on and tried to help them out and understand leverages knowing where your help is, man-to-man technique, everything there is to play at corner.

They'll be going against two of the very best in our



conference in this game, and they've got some really outstanding speakers. And they also have a distributor that is elite in getting the ball to them. So it's a big challenge.

Nobody's really covered these two guys very well because they're certainly excellent wideouts, and the quarterback's done a tremendous job getting the ball to them.

Q. Congratulations on the season you had to this point. Just wanted to ask you, at this point in the year, how much are you able to by the end do a lot of self-scouting and things like that? Or at this point are you kind of the DNA is you are who you are, you just have to improve at what you do?

KIRBY SMART: It's a combination of both. We self-scout each and every week. We had the great fortune the last two weeks of going through our entire season and trying to look at what our strongest tendencies are, what are things we can do, what are other people doing that might give us an edge. We're always looking to tweak things, change things, but at the same time we want to be able to do what our kids know.

Sometimes that's making a different call. Sometimes that's changing something, maybe with the front, maybe something with offensive motion or presnap. We try and change things up so you don't stay the same because they've got a video projector too and they get to watch the same things we get to watch. But we do a combination of both this time of year.

Q. Kirby, overall just how has the mindset been of your team going into this game in really what is the biggest game of the season for them? And when are you guys getting to Atlanta since you don't have that walk-through day?

KIRBY SMART: We'll come to Atlanta tomorrow, like a traditional road game for us. We'll travel over tomorrow, very similar to what we did last week, going over to play Tech.

The mindset has been great. The energy has been great. Our guys have really been focused. I think it's very important as a coach that you curb the enthusiasm, you have it under control. This is one of those weeks you've got to be careful you don't leave the battle out on the practice field. You want to make sure they're ready to go. It's going to be a really tough, physical game, and you don't want them to use it all in practice where our guys have been pretty spirited in getting after it.

Q. Kirby, kind of a broader question for you: Your

school and Alabama are only two of four schools in the SEC that hasn't changed coaches or will change coaches in the past two years. What concerns does that make you have for your profession, where it's going in terms of lack of maybe patience people have with the jobs coaches do these days?

KIRBY SMART: I haven't really thought about it. I've been pretty busy this week. There is a lot of change. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about things outside my control. Just off the hoof, it makes me worry because we're trying to change young people's lives, trying to win championships, trying to make sure guys get their education.

We all know that this game, especially in the SEC, the amount of pressure that's put on coaching staffs to win now is immense, and never has that shown more than in the stats you just mentioned. So I think you have to understand when you get into this business, the nature of this business and the high stakes that are involved in the SEC coaching, that's part of it. It's not for everybody.

I think people find that out when they get in our league, not only how physically tough it is, but the grind in recruiting and year-round transfers and portal. It's taxing, so you'd better have a very quality staff, a great administration, and you'd better be able to manage a lot of situations.

Q. I know this is off your radar again. I appreciate you answering these questions. The coaching carousel has been big news. In Billy Napier and Brian Kelly, those are two coaches you're familiar with. Just what it says that a Notre Dame coach would leave Notre Dame for the SEC, and your past experience with Coach Napier.

KIRBY SMART: Again, I haven't had much time to think about it. It's been a really busy week here with recruiting starting up and the games. I think both those guys are tremendous coaches. Got a lot of respect for both of them. I know both of them personally. I know they're excited for their new starts with their new programs.

Q. Obviously, talking about coaching movement, Coach Bobo found himself out of a job this past week. I know you guys are tight. You've done it in the past. Have you brought him on in any kind of way to get ready for this game? Will that be something you try to do going forward?

KIRBY SMART: I haven't had much time. There's a pretty big game lined up this week, so my focus has been on our team and preparing our team to the utmost of our staff's ability.



Really I've tried to shut my phone down and focus. There's so many outside things going on that as a coach you can get distracted pretty easy with what's going on between people going to see your commits and all the coaching changes, where I'm trying to be committed to these kids and the guys on the field and getting them prepared. So I really haven't thought about it much.

Q. Just wanted to ask you about George Pickens, kind of how he came through the Georgia Tech game physically. Is there a point where we could maybe expect some more reps from him this weekend?

KIRBY SMART: We'll have to wait and see. He's done a good job in practice. Physically he was fine from the Georgia Tech game. He didn't play many snaps. He's been in a lot of practice routes getting confidence back and starting to become his old self, and I think that's important.

Q. Kirby, you mentioned going Friday to Atlanta. This is your fourth time as head coach in the SEC Championship Game. Does your team's Friday and game-day routine look the same each time outside of doing this today? Do you switch it up? Is the team going to a movie or anything tomorrow night?

KIRBY SMART: We typically keep the same routine based on the game we have on Saturday. We don't change that. It's usually the same routine we keep throughout the season based on when the kickoff is. So we'll stay with our traditional schedules.

Q. The Alabama pass rush, what makes that group so successful? And also Will Anderson Jr., can you talk about what makes him and that Alabama pass rush so successful?

KIRBY SMART: Talent. They play with tremendous effort. They've got a really talented group. Their ability to push the pocket and disrupt the pocket is really good. They've got really good edge rushers. They've got tremendous talent in Will Anderson, and they've got other guys who have played really well throughout the year.

They are able to push it on two sides. There's four points of pressure in the pocket, and they push it on the edge and up the middle. So as they melt the pocket in the interior, those guys on the edge get an opportunity to make plays and push the quarterback back.

So they've done a tremendous job affecting the quarterback and getting sacks and disrupting the quarterback throughout the year.

Q. Given the enormity of this game, does your attention to recruiting at all change this week, or does it take on an even greater focus given, obviously, you're allowed to go in the home and visit prospects around the country?

KIRBY SMART: As far as recruiting this week, our focus is on the game obviously. We can't really do much in terms of going out and doing things. We try to get a few guys out here and there. Our schedule is pretty much Wednesday nights are recruiting during the season. So we follow that schedule. Thursday nights in season are scheduled for recruiting.

So we try to get a few guys out here and there because it's permissible now, but the focus is on the game obviously and preparing our players to be the best they can be after this game.

Q. Here in Mexico and Latin America will be broadcast the SEC Championship. Could you say some words to all the Mexican and Latin America fans with great passion for the football. It's a big game. It's a huge game here in this country. Thank you.

KIRBY SMART: I hope everyone down in Mexico enjoys the game and gets to watch it and be entertained by a great game on a great stage. We're certainly very appreciative in the SEC of all the coverage we get outside the United States, and it's a great opportunity to kind of advertise our conference and show that it's the best in the country.

Q. You spoke a little bit about Bryce Young in the teleconference on Sunday, but what kind of challenge does he present specifically, a quarterback you haven't faced? And how have you been simulating that during the week? Has anybody been playing his role in practice specifically?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we don't have a lot of options. We go good on good, so we get to go against Stetson quite a bit who's got some similarities. Bryce is just elite with his touch, his accuracy, decision-making. His release is so quick.

As I told our players, he's got tremendous spatial awareness. He sees the field really well, I mean really well. So he feels things and understands where holes are in coverage, and he knows where his targets are. They've done a tremendous job teaching him in understanding coverages and how to attack them.

At the end of the day, it's his mobility and his accuracy and his quick release that make him hard to defend.

Q. Kirby, we saw in the Iron Bowl how difficult it is to throw a knockout punch against Alabama. They just keep hanging in there. You've seen evidence up close and personal of that in games you've had with them. How key has that been to Nick Saban's success there?

KIRBY SMART: I think it's important to anybody's success. If you're going to win games and win close games, you're going to play in the SEC especially, you're going to play really high competition, which forces you into close games. You want to be able to win games in the fourth quarter. You build your program based on the belief that you can be a dominant team, and you always want to dominate in the fourth quarter.

There's not a team out there that won't admit that the fourth quarter is the most important one in terms of going out and being a dominant, physical team. A lot of that has to do with depth. A lot of that has to do with conditioning, but those all play a factor. And we take a lot of pride in that here.

Q. You recently got to play a quarterback like Hendon Hooker, who's been able to get outside the pocket and make plays, kind of like a Bryce Young. Is it good for your defense to be able to already play a quarterback kind of like Bryce Young in the last four weeks?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't know that I would draw that comparison. Very different style of offenses in terms of what you're referencing. Similarity being they're both mobile, but very different because Hendon's a really big physical guy that runs with power and runs designed runs. Bryce doesn't out of necessity, he runs because he can. He's really good at scrambling to throw or run.

So I don't know that there's a lot of similarities between those two.

Q. So Stetson said on Monday that he's really progressed since this last Alabama game, and he said something along the lines of when he's not trying to force throws, he says that incompletions don't really kill you. Can you kind of talk about his progression from then to now and his ability to extend the play and how important that is, especially against this Alabama defense that features guys that have been previously mentioned like Will Anderson.

KIRBY SMART: Stetson's gotten a lot better through experience, right? The best way to grow as a football player is to play. He's gotten an opportunity to play, and he's gotten an opportunity to throw to some skilled players, and he's distributed the ball well to make the strength of

our offense, the number of players we have out there that are able to make plays.

It's kind of been different each game where he's stepped up and made some plays for us. That makes you feel comfortable, that if you have to rely on different people, he's prepared to do that.

His improvement has really come through the work with our offensive staff, the players around him, and his commitment to getting better and growing. That was one of his first games in a big-time environment last year, and I think that experience is invaluable in terms of his growth this year. The more games you get to play in, the better you get.

Q. Coach, when did you sense that Brock Bowers would become a major contributor to your program, and has he done anything this year that surprised you?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah. We felt like at spring practice, probably after the first three or four days when he put pads on. You never really know what you have in a player until the pads come on. Somebody's got to go hit somebody, and you know they're not shying away from it.

Once he got into contact, he's got really good toughness. He's got great lower body strength. He's got great pass-catching radius and good speed. These things combine to make for a good tight end.

The fact that he's been so composed has surprised me the most. There's not been a moment too big for him. It doesn't matter to him whether he's playing in the backyard or playing our defense against the scout team or he's playing Clemson in the opening game, for him he wants to do it the right way. It's important to him to do it the right way.

So the pressure doesn't tend to get to people like that because they put so much pressure on themselves.

Q. Kirby, you and your team have talked a lot about skull sessions over the course of the season. I just wanted to know for you and your staff, who are in high stakes jobs, have you gotten anything out of doing skull sessions with your players over the course of the season?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, a lot of times the staff gets more than the players get. They get to see a side of the players they might not have seen. They get to meet players they might not have normally gotten to know. You usually have a recruiting coach, a position coach, and a coordinator.

Throughout these sessions, we've been able to mix and mingle. Maybe a receivers coach gets to hang out with the defensive linemen. You learn more about the team, and it certainly helps in terms of feeling more connected.

Q. Talk about the unity at running back, with Kendall Milton being banged up the last few weeks, how have you seen it from Zamir and Cook and not being selfish with the ball this year and all of them taking care of their job?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I've always felt that way. I don't feel like it's just a this-year thing. That room is selfless. They play on special teams. They fight, scratch, and claw for team victories. They protect the quarterback in blitz pickups. They sacrifice their own bodies. They do what we ask them to do.

They're great teammates. I think Dell McGee does a tremendous job in his team of selling team first. Those guys, we've had so many contributors in our program from the running back room that contributed outside of carrying the ball, in terms of leadership and special teams. I think it's been great.

Q. How much different is this Alabama offense this year from the Alabama offense they faced last year? I know they've got a new quarterback, but also a new offensive coordinator as well.

KIRBY SMART: There's some similarities. There's some concepts they carry over because they really good skill players. So a lot of that stuff carries over. You can see identity traits from Coach O'Brien and some of the things he's done from the Texans down in Houston, but for the most part it's similar.

Then Bryce Young, he brings about a different element than Mac did in terms of movement, extending plays. He's done a lot of really good things, and I think what they've done offensively has certainly fit him well.

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