

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Georgia vs Alabama

Saturday, December 4, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Georgia Bulldogs

Kirby Smart

Stetson Bennett

Nakobe Dean

Postgame Press Conference

Alabama - 41, Georgia - 24

THE MODERATOR: We have Coach Smart, Nakobe Dean, and Stetson Bennett.

KIRBY SMART: First off, I'd like to thank our fans. I thought our fans turned out and had a great impact on the game. I felt like we had a majority in the stadium. Obviously, we didn't play very well, but tremendous audience, great support from them. Great atmosphere. I told our kids there's no better atmosphere to play in in the country than the SEC Championship.

I'm disappointed how we played. Give Alabama a lot of credit. Give their defense and Bryce Young and their offensive skill players a lot of credit. They played really well, very accurate, explosive, and he's hard to get down on the ground, which caused us a lot of problems defensively. But we can't turn the ball over and give up 60 and 70-yard passes and expect to be successful.

For the most part this year, we've executed well. We didn't execute well tonight, and that had a lot to do with them.

So give Alabama credit, and we've got a lot to work on.

STETSON BENNETT: Yeah, we just didn't play our best game today. They did. Can't turn the ball over. Just little mental lapses. That can't happen. We're going to work on starting tomorrow. Hopefully get ready for whoever we play next.

NAKOBE DEAN: Yes, like the other two said, we didn't



play our best game. We got a lot of work to do, a lot to work on. I'm pretty sure we're going to continue to work.

Q. Kirby, they hit the play in the middle to Jameson Williams and he broke. From that point on, they just seemed to click there. Was there anything they were exploiting specifically with you all?

KIRBY SMART: Well, their explosive wideouts and a really good quarterback. We changed the coverage up. We had a couple busts. We had a bust on that play specifically where we left a guy wide open. It wasn't anything they did different, same route they ran on Auburn, but we played it a different way and didn't play it correctly. Gave a play up there.

It was more than that play obviously. They hit us several times man to man. They hit us several times zone. I think you've got to affect their quarterback. You've got to get to him and finish, and he's so good at avoiding rush that he buys time with his mobility to make plays downfield. Give him a lot of credit. He did a tremendous job.

Q. For Kirby and Stetson: I think four drives in the red zone tonight, only ten points. Why do you think you struggled there in that area of the field?

KIRBY SMART: They did a good job of stopping us twice. One of them we went for it, where we probably could've have points. But at that point I felt like we needed touchdowns and not field goals. I'll let Stetson answer as well.

STETSON BENNETT: Can't throw a pick down there. The one where they went all out zero, clock was running down, didn't have time, tried to -- whenever we went for it on fourth down, tried to scramble and make a play; it didn't happen.

Just got to finish it. We had opportunities. Like I said, we were moving it. We were driving the ball all four times, and just can't throw picks and got to execute better.

Q. Kirby, why do you think they had so much success through the year so consistently when we haven't seen



that happen to you guys this year?

KIRBY SMART: Well, I think the quarterback had a lot to do with that. Obviously, they have two exceptional skill players outside, really talented tight end. But I would say the quarterback buying time. We called a lot of the same calls we called the other games. We didn't get home or finish on the quarterback, and he was elite at getting the ball to the playmakers.

He knew where to go with the ball. He keeps his eyes downfield with the rush, where a lot of quarterbacks wouldn't do that. They'd look at the rush and start trying to run away from the rush, and we could run 'em down. But tonight he did a tremendous job. He was mobile and made a lot of plays.

Q. This is for Nakobe and Coach Smart: I was really kind of wondering about how you're planning on going into this game and just with the dynamic passing combo of Bryce Young and Jameson Williams. I don't think you've probably faced that kind of duo all year long. So what makes them so difficult to defend? Obviously, you've seen some explosive quarterbacks and some great receivers this year, but was there any way that you tried to prepare for this going into this game?

NAKOBE DEAN: Well, yeah, of course we prepared like every other week. We took it in stride, tried to trust the coaches, trust the plan and everything. They got great players, and they made great plays. We just didn't play our best game today.

KIRBY SMART: I would reiterate what he said. We actually went into this game all week. We didn't work on run much because we didn't feel like with the backs it was coming. It was going to be a pass game. Felt like we'd get a lot of empty, which we did.

I really feel good about the things we worked on, but our ability to execute them -- we had two or three third downs where we have a bust and cut a guy loose, and we haven't done that all year. When you're in man coverage and you cut a guy loose, that's not typical of us.

Now, they may beat you. They beat us on several man coverages, and I can take that, but when you cut a guy loose, you can't do that. When you get these guys in third down, you've got to get off the field.

Q. For Kirby and Nakobe or even Stetson: After a 12-0 regular season to have a performance like this, what does it do to the psyche heading into your next game and the damage it does to that?

KIRBY SMART: It didn't do any damage. What it did is reinvigorated our energy. It recenters you, right? Their greatest thing is when they lost their game against Texas A&M, they garnered some focus and some attention. To me, that's an opportunity for a wakeup call, if anything.

Unfortunately that it comes in a setting like this, but they're a really good football team. And the narrative out there was, well, they just went to Auburn, and they really struggled. Some of the sacks they gave up, their attackers didn't even get out of stance. The crowd noise was a major impact there. Auburn played man of their downs almost every single play, and they won a lot of the battles we didn't win tonight. We knew the narrative coming in, these guys can throw the ball, and they've got a really good quarterback. They gave them the opportunity to make plays, and they made a lot of really good plays, along with their wideouts.

Q. Obviously, you have the College Football Playoff announcement tomorrow afternoon. Even after this performance, do you still feel you're one of the four best teams in college football?

KIRBY SMART: That's not for us to determine that, you know what I mean? Certainly I feel like we are, but it's not our job to determine that. It's the committee's.

Q. What was the biggest challenge in facing Bryce? And then defensively that you had to go against Stetson, what was the biggest challenge for you?

NAKOBE DEAN: He's a great player. We knew that coming in. He's very elusive. He runs the offense well. He did a good job keeping his eyes downfield and avoiding our pass rush. I feel like the pass rush and the recovery's got to work hand in hand. Him being able to keep his eyes downfield and make certain throws really helps them.

STETSON BENNETT: They're a really good team, really good players. We move the ball and just mental lapses. When you do that, they make you pay. Several third downs, the two interceptions -- you just can't have that versus a team of this caliber. We had it, and they made us pay for it.

Q. Stetson, you referenced a couple picks you threw, and there was another one in the first half that was pretty close. I'm just wondering if you at all felt off at all tonight, or was it just a couple of mistakes basically?

STETSON BENNETT: No, I felt fine. The first one was a bad decision. The second one, I didn't see the safety

driving. Like I said, you can't have those two plays against players like this. They made us pay for it.

Q. Kirby, I understand Alabama scored 41 points tonight, but there's always a debate about the quarterback situation. Is there going to be a debate about who should start in the playoffs? Can you just sort of address that and whether you think you have a decision to make about who starts in the playoffs?

KIRBY SMART: We have a decision to make every week at every position, but I have the utmost confidence in Stetson Bennett. I think he did some really nice things tonight. We go and reevaluate everything all the time, but he played well. It's a tough environment we put him in defensively and didn't -- we have to be able to run the ball and have a little bit of semblance of balance, and I felt like there was times tonight where we were getting into a scoring contest because our defense didn't get stops. And you don't want to have to do that.

But I certainly have a lot of confidence in Stetson, and I have a lot of confidence in J.T. too.

Q. Kirby, you talked all week about how quick Bryce was at getting the football out. Do you credit to you guys not getting enough pressure on him to that, or do you feel like their front actually really did a good job of blocking up you guys?

KIRBY SMART: I'd be hard pressed to say without watching it. We got pressure at times, and he got the ball out. He escaped pressure and got it out. There was times we didn't. We rushed four a couple times and didn't get any pressure, and he held the ball. One of those touchdowns, it felt like he held the ball forever.

You can't do the same thing every play. You've got to pitch, and you've got to mix it up. Look, guys, I've seen a lot of good ones in this league. He's special. You might play a quarterback who's talented, but you might not play a group of skill receivers with that. It's the combination of the wideout group they have, at least those two guys, and him making some plays. He made plays with his feet.

Q. Coach Smart, during the week you said you'd have to figure out how your team would respond if you ended up in a close game. Were you surprised the way the game kind of snowballed in the second and third quarter?

KIRBY SMART: I wouldn't say surprised. I think there's a lot of comeback and fight to get the game back to where it was. We're driving down with a 14-point game and had a chance to score to make it seven. I had a lot of

confidence. We had stopped them two or three drives in a row. We didn't want an onside kick. We said let's kick it deep and stop them. We did and drove the ball down, and then we stalled out.

There was a snowball. There was a period where we didn't play well, but there was also a period there where we came back and had a chance to get it to a seven-point game, and we didn't do that.

Q. Kirby, if you all end up playing Alabama again, what adjustments do you think you'll have to make to give yourselves the best chance to win?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know that I could answer that right now. I'd like to review the tape and see it. The first answer would be don't leave people uncovered, you know what I mean? Like that's the first objective. Let's cover them, and then try to win some one-on-ones and get balls down.

Because look now, they're going to throw and complete balls. They're really good at doing that. At the end of the day, you have to put a body on a body and cover them. Some of the plays we gave were gifts.

Q. Kirby, after a loss like this, what's the first thing you tell your team?

KIRBY SMART: I love them, and I appreciate them. The outside noise begins now. We've heard it before. But these guys are so solid. We've got such great leaders in there. I didn't have to say a lot in there because the leaders spoke up and talked about what they wanted and how they wanted the next couple weeks to go.

I think, when you've got that, you've built the right kind of kids.

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