

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: LSU vs Georgia

Thursday, December 1, 2022

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Georgia Bulldogs

Coach Kirby Smart

Press Conference

CHUCK DUNLAP: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the 2022 SEC Championship Game pregame press conference.

We'll begin our press conference with the Eastern Division champion Georgia Bulldogs and head coach Kirby Smart.

Coach, welcome back to the SEC Championship Game. Would you mind making some opening statements before we take questions.

KIRBY SMART: I'll just start with the tremendous job that our conference does. They are really incredible at preparing for this event. It's the best game to play in since I've been a coach, a great environment. I think they do a tremendous job.

Proud of our team, what we've done to this point. Getting an opportunity to play in this game means you've won your division, one of the toughest things to do in the SEC.

I have respect for Brian Kelly and the LSU program. What a tremendous job he's done in his first year there. We're looking forward to the opportunity to play in Atlanta.

CHUCK DUNLAP: Questions, please.

Q. I wanted your thoughts, thinking back when you were a young assistant at LSU (indiscernible), did you have any thoughts of being a coach in this position, coaching a national championship program? What did you aspire to back then?

KIRBY SMART: Survive the day back then. That was quite some time ago. Was my first full-time SEC job. I'd come off being a graduate assistant (indiscernible). It was my first time coaching in the SEC. Really competitive environment. It was the year following their national



championship there, so a lot of tough times, getting acclimated. A lot of expectations after winning the national championship.

We had a lot of good players coming back on that team. I think most of the defensive players were back from the national championship team. It was an exciting year. I learned a lot.

But as far as aspiring to where I am now, not really thinking about that then.

Q. Last time we talked to you, you were starting your preparation, taking a look at LSU. Anything kind of stand out now that you've had additional days to break down their film?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, they got a lot of talent, a lot of really fast, athletic players. You look across, the skill level on both sides of the ball for them, great size, great speed. They got one of the most physical offensive lines we've played. They're really, really talented in the red area defensive area and red area offense, which we went hard yesterday. Third down, they do a great job defensively on third down because they don't get in very third-and-long situations.

Q. You've talked a lot over the years about the importance of having player-led teams. I was wondering how that aspect has proven to be this year? What is the biggest impact a player-led team can have on a program?

KIRBY SMART: Well, any team is going to be player led. I don't know a good team that's not player led. There's probably some bad teams that wish they had better leaders as players.

But the good teams that I've been able to be a part of, they're all player led. That's the way you should want it. If you do your job, the players follow the directive to lead the other guys. This team has done that.

They've tried to emulate and kind of mimic the group that did it last. They saw those guys do it. They set a standard



for them that they've tried to emulate. I think this team has done a good job of being player led, and they continue to do so.

Q. How big would it be to essentially have home-field advantage if you end up making the Playoffs in Atlanta for that first round? Does that add any to the motivation of winning on Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: Not really. There's no thought of the next step. There's such a long break between this step and next step. This is the culmination of a season. The next opportunity, we'll cross that bridge when we get to it.

Q. What science is there to keeping your defensive linemen fresh? Obviously they can't play every down. They're so impactful. What goes into keeping those guys fresh, not wearing out?

KIRBY SMART: Well, conditioning is the number one thing. It helps to have depth where you can play multiple players and not have players drop off. I don't think anyone in the country will tell you they have enough defensive linemen. It's a rotational position. It requires effort and strain.

We do conditioning all year. We condition multiple times a week. If you want to be a really good football team, you got to be best conditioned. Best conditioned is not a word, it's a requirement and a strain that you have to put in.

We've conditioned enough to be at our best in moments like this Saturday.

Q. What has A.D. Mitchell been able to do this week, and what will his status be this Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: Same as recent weeks. He's been in some practice weeks. He's going to be out there and rep. The hopes are he's going to be able to contribute.

Q. What is your thought on looking at freshman linebacker Harold Perkins after you watched him on film?

KIRBY SMART: Extremely athletic. Very twitchy. We've had a crossover with them on several teams we've played this year, whether that be Tennessee, Mississippi State, Florida, a couple others, Auburn I think. He's just extremely athletic.

I think they do a tremendous job utilizing his skill set, edge rusher, zone coverage guy, man-to-man guy. He's a force to be reckoned with. He's very talented.

Q. I wanted to ask you, we're starting to see all sorts of names pop up announcing who's going in the portal, who is not. Is there a protocol that your program has established as far as when guys will announce? Have you already heard from players? I wonder about the new housekeeping item that coaches now have to manage, part of this new roster management.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we're really focused on LSU, to be honest with you. That's where our concentration is. We'll deal with that when the time comes.

Q. Obviously this is a tough game. What makes this such a tough game to win?

KIRBY SMART: You're playing the best team in one of the best conferences. The team that won the most games or won their division on the other side. It's a matchup of the two, what usually is the two best teams in the SEC, which is a very competitive conference.

It's a championship game. It's an opportunity to win the conference that has represented (indiscernible) college football in recent years.

Q. If the SEC one day goes to one division like a lot of conferences are doing to match their two test teams, will that make much of a difference in the SEC?

KIRBY SMART: I don't understand the question. Would it make a difference how?

Q. Competitively. The fact that an 8-4 team to upset an undefeated team, take away from post-season opportunity. If you have the two best, that enhances a conference's ability to get two in.

KIRBY SMART: Sounds like you answered it.

I'm not following what you're asking. In my opinion, the two best end up in this game, take the divisions out, you're going to get the two best, maybe the best. I mean, one team could have had a harder schedule than the other.

Some of these conferences, everybody plays everybody. I don't think you're looking at that ever happening in the SEC. It's a hypothetical to assume you're going to get the two best. You're going to get closest to the two best records based on that with tiebreakers.

With the expansion looming, I don't think this game is going to be a make or break, get you in or out in most cases. It's probably going to be a situation to maybe move up or something.

Q. Obviously news today about the expanded Playoffs in 2024. The seasons have continued to be expanded recently. How does that play into how many snaps you play guys? Is there any saving players, any conscious effort to try to keep guys fresh going into late November, early December, or is the league just too competitive?

KIRBY SMART: I think you're way overthinking it. The objective is to win your football games. I don't know many teams -- in our conference, you don't go in and say, Can I play this guy 20 snaps and not 60 snaps?

I mean, you practice every day out at practice, and you're practicing 30, 40 snaps. A lot of our guys may play more snaps in a practice than they do in a game. They're going against pretty good competition like this.

So I don't look at the games as I'm trying to not play my guys. I think they earned the right to play the game. You're trying to win each and every opportunity. That means putting the best players out there.

Q. With the transfer portal heating up next week, have you identified as a staff (indiscernible) cycle in terms of position (indiscernible)?

KIRBY SMART: That's not really a conversation piece for us right now. We have a process in our organization, we have different divisions. Everybody has a timeline for what they're working on. We have player development staff, recruiting. We have all these facets within our organization that work their parts year-round.

The most important right now is staffing our team, preparing for LSU. That's really where our focus is.

Q. Third time you've matched up with Brian Kelly. How important were the two previous wins for your program building into what has become today?

KIRBY SMART: Well, I think they were great matchups. They were national exposure game. Any time you're playing Notre Dame, it's not just about Brian Kelly, it's about Notre Dame's name across the country. Certainly helps you maybe recruit across the country, become a national brand, play on a national stage.

That's what it gave us an opportunity to do. Both hard-fought, physical football games in both cases. Got a lot of respect for Notre Dame's program. I thought it was great college ball to have Notre Dame and Georgia matched in those two games.

Q. Several years ago I think under Mark Richt they talked about knocking the lid off the program, how that's an important function to be able to achieve higher. Do you feel like you've been able to knock the lid off this program?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't know. I don't really understand. Lids on programs? I'm doing the best job we can for our young men each and every year. I think that would be a subjective question that each person, each fan that has an opinion might see a different way.

I'm doing the best we can for our guys every year.

Q. What mindset do you want your players to have going into this game? What are some of the things you've said to them this week to prepare them for this weekend?

KIRBY SMART: That preparation is the key to any game. This is no different. Our other SEC games we've had in terms of the difference, we're playing at a neutral site. It's an opportunity to go out there and play. Nobody else is playing in our conference but us.

Our peers get to watch this game. One of the most watched games of any football season. We talked long and hard about being at our best as needed. Those critical situations in games that decide games, they'll decide this game no different, whether that's turnovers, explosive (indiscernible).

Q. When you're looking at this LSU team, there's a lot of transfers on this team. When you're scouting them over this week, how much are those transfers standing out?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, a lot. When their staff got put in place, it's hard to compare that against other programs across the board in the SEC. I would argue they did the best job of filling holes and creating roster opportunities for guys coming in.

You start with the quarterback. I mean, quarterback has played phenomenal for them. He's a tremendous athlete. He's been a tremendous asset for them.

But also filled some really big (indiscernible) on defense (indiscernible). Probably, if they don't do as good a job, it's hard to say where they would be right now. They put together some really good defensive players as well as the quarterback.

Q. Georgia and LSU have matched up five times in the SEC Championship, second most of anybody. What is

it about these two programs that they've been able to sustain success over the course of several different coaches?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, it's the geographic areas. They both have great high school football in and around their universities, the proximity to good players. Got New Orleans, got Atlanta. Per capita, when you look across the NFL, the state of Georgia and Louisiana are always near the top. It has a lot to do with the success of the programs.

Q. You were asked earlier about the Playoff expansion. What are your general thoughts on that coming up? What it will mean for the sport?

KIRBY SMART: I'm not real sure. I think only time will tell. I read and see a lot of opinions out there. Length of games, number of games. I don't think we'll truly know. Like when we went to the four-game model, there were a lot of questions involved there, too.

It's not something I've got a huge opinion on right now, especially right now because of what we're focused on. In the off-season I'll think about it a lot more.

Q. How does the turf compare? How have you divided up outside and indoor practice this week?

KIRBY SMART: Very similar. Theirs is a little bit newer model of it there at the Mercedes. Very similar to ours. We've practiced. We've had some weather, so we've been inside and out each day, but mostly inside.

CHUCK DUNLAP: Coach Smart, thank you very much for your time today. We'll see you in Atlanta on Friday.

KIRBY SMART: Thank you.

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