

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Alabama vs Georgia

Sunday, November 26, 2023

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Georgia Bulldogs

Kirby Smart

Press Conference



CHUCK DUNLAP: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to SEC Championship game week. Hope everyone had a great Thanksgiving.

We will begin our media activities with head coaches' teleconferences here in just a couple of moments.

This will be the final SEC Championship game which picks the winners of the Eastern and Western Division. Both teams are undefeated in SEC play. That is only the second time in the championship game's history that has occurred - the other being 2009 when Florida and Alabama both played.

We'll begin today's call with the Eastern Division champions Georgia Bulldogs and head coach Kirby Smart. I believe we have Coach Smart on the line.

Coach, while we wait on questions, if you wouldn't mind giving your thoughts on the regular season and your team as you begin the process of preparing for the SEC Championship game in Atlanta against Alabama.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we wrapped up the regular season last night in Atlanta against Georgia Tech. Incredible atmosphere there at night. Very passionate rivalry game. That's what college football is all about. I think everybody across the country or at least the southeast ends on that rivalry week. Usually a lot of emotions spent in those kind of games. That's the tough thing about our conference and college football: you got to bounce right back and get ready to go play in a championship game.

It's an opportunity that was earned by our team and this program. I know our players are certainly excited for the opportunity. I tell them all the time it's one of the best venues, best atmospheres in all of sports. I've been very fortunate to be a part of it a lot of times.

I know our guys are excited about the opportunity. We'll have their full attention preparing for Alabama this week.

CHUCK DUNLAP: We'll begin with questions.

Q. What are the challenges of prepping for a player like Dallas Turner? How do you prepare for that in practice during the week?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know if I caught the whole question. Sounded like you were asking about preparation for Dallas and how...

Q. How you try to recreate that during the week designating a player to mimic him.

KIRBY SMART: Well, I mean, you put a plan together. The best you can do is not put yourself in bad down-and-distance situations to try to stay ahead of the sticks. You got to stay on schedule and stay ahead of the sticks.

He's got speed, talent, ability. He's improved so much throughout his career. We've seen him grow, study under Will. He's gotten bigger to me, much more impactful on the run game. Every-down player. Still elite on the pass-rush side of things.

You can't really mimic that. You do the best you can to simulate it and you work technique and you put a game plan together. At the end of the day you got to have skilled people that can block those kind of guys. They're hard to block.

Q. You and Nick Saban obviously have met a few times in this game. You coached with Coach Saban in the 2009 game. When you go up against Coach Saban, what is it like to go up against someone you worked with and know so much about and knows so much about you?

KIRBY SMART: Seems like you go against people you worked with more often I guess the older you get. I don't know, maybe the longer you've been here. Not the first



person that you've worked with that you go against.

It's one of those deals it's happening more often as you go across a coordinator like last night or somebody that used to be on your staff. It happens with more and more regularity as you get older and you've coached with more people.

But I can't say enough about the tremendous respect I have for him, the job he's done, how long he's done it. People don't really understand how hard it is to be consistently really good, consistently great. He's accomplished that at the highest level to me. Our conference is certainly really tough and hard. He's done it for every year he's been there besides maybe the first. He's had really successful seasons.

He's a really good leader. He's good at motivating. I think he's kind of evolved with the times in the way he goes about things.

Q. Any update on Brock, Ladd, Rara or Josh?

KIRBY SMART: Who is the last one?

Q. Ratledge.

KIRBY SMART: Tate Ratledge.

As far as last night, Brock was probably the closest of being able to go of those guys. Just didn't feel as good as he had. He was a little sore. We wanted to be able to use him situationally, see what he could do if he felt comfortable with it.

Just didn't think he could go. Nothing about who we're playing or anything else. He's got to be able to go compete at the highest level and be able to feel good about what he's doing. We didn't feel that he had that last night.

Tate, he may have, could have played, but he wasn't 100%. We're hopeful to get him back.

As far as the other guys go, it's going to be day to day. We just don't know anything. We certainly don't know anything more today because we haven't done anything.

Q. Has this game changed to you, the SEC Championship game, from when you were a player, when you first participated in it? You spoke this spring about the 12-team Playoff, you got concerns about teams that may not get to play in a conference championship game. Do you view this exactly the same as you once did or as another rung in the ladder of where you ultimately want to go?

KIRBY SMART: Hmm... Not really understanding exactly what you're asking.

Q. I guess I'm asking, do you worry about the importance of this game as we move forward in a 12-team Playoff? Do you think conference championships will be as important moving forward?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know that for other conferences. It's hard for me to answer. I would think that other conferences will have conference championship games that will impact the 12-team Playoff in terms of if a team wins, they jump into the 12, and if a team loses, they fall out of the 12.

Certainly if you look over the history of the SEC, it might not impact the 12. It might impact who has to play when, who gets byes. You're playing for a bye, for a home game. You're playing to get in, to get knocked out.

None of all of that matters to me as much as an SEC Championship does. I think that's lost on everybody. Nobody cares. All they want to know is who's the champion of the NCAA and the national champion, who is not the conference champion.

Maybe that's lessened in value to the outside world. It hasn't lessened in value to the coaching world or the men in our room, the players. We had a team meeting not too long ago. I said we've won as many SEC championships as we have national championships around here.

They're hard to win. You better appreciate 'em. They're really hard to do. So I have an appreciation for winning a conference championship. It's hard.

Q. Ladd, he's played in half of your games this year. Being the competitor he is, how has he handled just a year that has had a lot of ups and downs?

KIRBY SMART: Frustrated. I mean, I think he gets frustrated with it. A lot of it's beyond his control. He's done everything he can from a rehab standpoint to get back. He's filled his role as a leader, an energy guy on the sideline, a supporter of the other guys. That's all you can ask him to do. He was right there last night pulling and supporting everybody.

Q. Jalen Milroe and Carson Beck have been in the same boat, replacing star quarterbacks for teams that had national championship aspirations. How has Carson handled that from the start of that to now? What have you seen from Jalen's progression from earlier in the season?

KIRBY SMART: Well, I mean, we're just starting on those guys. Watched two games. That's hard to answer. I haven't watched a lot of the earlier stuff. We didn't get to cross over with them a whole lot in the regular season, so I hadn't seen them, especially offensively, as much.

When you talk about Carson and his growth, I think he gained more confidence through playing time and being in some tough contests going on the road, playing in hostile places. He's grown up and gotten better. Excited to see where he can go.

Q. With all the questions that surrounded Alabama in September, for them to get to where they are now, what can you say about the coaching job that Nick has done this year?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, tremendous job. I mean, year in, year out he does. Like I said, he does it with different formats of teams. I think just like us, every team has a different identity. This one for him, I mean, without seeing much more than two games, it's a different identity than previous years.

They certainly have talented players. They got talented players all over the place on the offense and defensive line. Their line of scrimmages are big and physical, which that always is an identity of an Alabama team. You know that.

But this one has been very unique. They play really hard. They play well together. They respond for each other. They've been in some tight ball games, made some big-time comebacks in games.

Q. You always very consistently talk about how much you love this game, the importance of the game. Obviously in your young coaching career, you've accomplished about everything, pretty much everything, but you have not beaten Alabama and Coach Saban in this game to say Georgia is in the best in the SEC. Is that a motivation for you?

KIRBY SMART: Not really. The motivation for me is for our players to get better throughout the year. I don't look at it as who we play. I look at it as we don't control who goes into that game we play.

We had a chance to beat LSU and didn't. Then we had a chance to beat LSU and we did. We had a chance to beat Auburn and we did. We had a chance to beat Alabama and we haven't.

When you're playing in this game, you're going to play a

really good team. You're going to play really good teams as you go along.

It's not an extra motivating factor for me. I'm not looking for checkmarks or checking boxes or certain tick marks to try to get on your belt. That's not what I got in this for.

For me it's for giving our kids a chance to do something special and represent this university. That's what we want to go do, we want to go play our best.

Q. What have you seen from a guy like Jermaine Burton and how much of a threat has he become from Alabama?

KIRBY SMART: I'm sorry, I'm not catching the beginning of these questions. Like I'm catching halfway through them. I didn't hear the beginning.

Q. The improvement you've seen from a guy like Jermaine Burton and how much of a threat has he become?

KIRBY SMART: Well, I mean, I just don't know if I've seen enough tape to fairly answer that question. We catch some of their games when we're done playing. I haven't watched enough tape.

I know he was a really good player when he was here. To be two years removed from that, the impact he had in that national championship game against Alabama, to have two years under his belt and grow as a player, we know how talented he is. Certainly has a lot of ability.

Q. What are two things that you learned real early on when Coach Saban first hired you that you still implement today? Could you have imagined back then that the two of you would go on to become such iconic SEC coaches?

KIRBY SMART: No, I couldn't have thought of that then because I was just -- I mean, I'd never been a full-time Division I coach. I mean, I'm talking about an assistant coach then. Never would have fathomed that it would have come this far during those days when I first got hired at LSU. I mean, that was a long time ago. 2004 maybe. I mean, that seems like ages ago.

What was the other part of the question?

Q. What are one or two things that you learned from him early on there at LSU that you still implement today?

KIRBY SMART: Just attention to detail. The ability to be



locked down on the task at hand. Never before has our sport or this level of college football required such multi-tasking. One minute you're working on special teams, the next minute you're chasing guys, dealing with the portal, dealing with transfers, NIL.

His ability to compartmentalize and work at the task at hand was always incredible to me. It's something that I try to do. I don't know that I do it as well as he does when it comes to being able to focus on the task at hand and not get distracted on the little things.

Q. A lot of Georgia players scattered around to the FBS ranks. 16 in the two deep, 11 starters. A couple at Alabama that you're facing. What of that, playing against former players, kind of your general thoughts about facing guys that you helped develop?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think the first thing you look for is, is it a better opportunity for them. In each one of those cases on a case-by-case basis, they have to determine that, not us.

The guys that helped us win games, whether it was last year, two years ago, three years ago, they're somewhere else, I want them to do well. I don't wish negative upon anybody. I certainly want Georgia to do well. They were part of building something. If they were part of that, then more power to them. When we play against 'em, we're going to do all we can to make sure we come out on top.

It's not a personal thing by any means. It's the nature of the beast. The NFL, that happens all the time, right? Do we get traded? People have free agency in college, they make choices and decisions that fit what they need to do or what they think they need to do for their career.

We don't look at it as a negative. We had two guys last week that we played against that were here and did great things for us.

Q. It seems like the perception with Coach Saban that he had mellowed a little bit. Are you buying that? Seemed to be pretty fired up yesterday?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't know. I'm not over there. I don't have eyes and ears on that program to be able to answer that. It's a hard one for me.

Q. Hard for me to believe it myself, but thank you.

CHUCK DUNLAP: That's going to be all, coach. Thank you for your time. Look forward to a great week.

KIRBY SMART: Thank you, guys. Appreciate it.

