

# Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Georgia vs Texas

Sunday, December 1, 2024

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

## Georgia Bulldogs

## Kirby Smart

### Press Conference



especially on a first-year team coming in. He built the roster to be SEC compatible. They are extremely big and physical across both fronts. They have experience at a multitude of positions. They've got a great team.

It will be a great challenge for us. We're looking forward to playing there in Atlanta.

CHUCK DUNLAP: Thank you, coach. We'll open it up for questions.

CHUCK DUNLAP: What we are ready to begin with Georgia and Coach Smart.

Coach, thanks for being with us. Congratulations on being back to Atlanta. If you don't mind, before we take questions, could you give us some comments on wrapping up the season and preparing for the SEC Championship game with Texas in Atlanta.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, our guys are excited to return to Atlanta in one of the most iconic games there is of championship games.

I think when you look over the history of this game, it's got a great tradition, great atmosphere. I know having coached in it a lot of years between Alabama and Georgia, it's absolutely an incredible atmosphere.

It's two teams battling for a conference championship, which has eluded many teams in this conference. With the new teams in our conference, the strength of this thing is just incredible.

To look at an opportunity to play for the championship of this conference is really a special moment. So many fan bases are tied to Atlanta. The fact that it's held in Mercedes, it's just such a good venue.

Now we look forward to games after that, as well, in the College Football Playoff, which is new. It should be a great atmosphere.

Texas has got a super quality team. I have so much respect for Sark, for the rivalry game they played in last night. It was extremely a physical game for them, emotional game for them.

Their team has really navigated the SEC really well,

**Q. Coach Smart, from a month and a half ago approximately, have you seen Texas make any dramatic changes to their offense that is going to worry you or cause you to reevaluate how you defend against Texas?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, if you don't know anything about me, I worry about everything, so...

I'm very concerned about everything about Texas because they have an extremely talented roster. They have great special teams. They've got wideouts, backs.

Even through the injuries, I think both of us have had significant injuries at running back, significant. I mean, I think we've been without three of the backs that were supposed to be our best. So has Texas. Both teams have navigated that well. I think it's a credit to their offensive staffs.

Texas' backs have been elite, have played really good. Their defense is elite, one of the best in the country. Special teams, really elite.

When you ask about worries from the last month and a half, I was worried a month and a half ago and I'm worried now because they got really good players. They do a great job.

I know the job Sark does offensively and with his overall staff.

**Q. Kirby, as you prepare for this game, how much do you expound from what you saw from Texas six weeks**



**ago when you played versus more of what they've done recently since you played?**

KIRBY SMART: We look at it all, so... As coaches, you watch all the tape, try to make the best decisions that fit your team.

**Q. Once upon a time in a four-team Playoff, the winner of this game would go to the Playoff, the loser would likely be out. In a 12-team Playoff, both of these teams will be in. Does the SEC Championship game lose a little bit of luster just because both teams are going to a Playoff no matter what happens?**

KIRBY SMART: It depends on who you ask.

When you ask a guy that's been in the SEC for about 30 years, has only been a part of five or six of 'em, five or six national championships, it's equal to that to me 'cause it's just as hard, it's just as elusive. It has been for us.

It's an extreme honor to, number one, make this game with the schedule that you have to go through. Then with an opportunity to win it, I mean, we put the years of SEC Championship on a wall and it's there forever. There's not that many more of those than there are national championships.

It's hard to attain. So I still find value in it.

**Q. What is the status of Julian Humphrey? Today he announced he had intended to enter the transfer portal.**

KIRBY SMART: No status that I'm aware of. I saw the same thing you saw, so... We're worried about the guys that we're going to play Texas with.

**Q. He will not be with the team?**

KIRBY SMART: I'm not sure of that. Again, like I said, I'm worried about the guys that are here.

**Q. You have a ton of respect for Coach Sark and what he does here. What is your opinion of Sark being able to navigate this season and getting Texas to the SEC Championship in year one?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, I mean, I don't know it's ever been done before in terms of the first year in. I think I heard somebody reference besides the first year he had it, somebody had to be first.

First-year teams have not been able to win their league east and west. It's not east and west, but he's still had the

best record in the conference. He played a really tough Michigan team at Michigan and beat them. They've done a tremendous job altogether to make it to this game.

He has a talented roster. When you look at it across the board, they've done a great job recruiting and they've made their team better in the portal. Best thing they've done each year is go out and fill holes in the portal. That's what makes them have a lot of good depth and players.

**Q. You're a huge advocate for the SEC. Why should maybe a three-loss SEC team have a chance to get into the Playoff versus some other teams that maybe don't play in a conference as tough as this?**

KIRBY SMART: Tough question because it boils down to who the best teams are. I have repeatedly said, I don't know the objective of the committee. I have openly said that.

I mean, if they're evaluators, they probably need to get some more coaches and call some people that evaluate football for a living, the quality of it, the depth of it, the teams.

As I understand it, they watch the games. If they're going to watch the games, you can't measure one team against another that doesn't play each other. That makes it hard, first and foremost.

It's hard to measure across conference. I think the most telling stats are how the conferences play against each other when they line up and play.

It's a tough judgment, I know that. This is what everybody wanted. The debate goes from 4th, 5th, 6th to 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, who falls in there.

I don't think you can measure things just based on how many losses you have because the quality of the schedule you play has to mean something.

**Q. What is going to be the challenge of matching Texas' physicality up front Saturday night?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, it's just that. They have tremendous size. They have major disruption in their defensive line, defensive edges. They've got quick, athletic, big people. They're physical both sides of the ball.

I thought their offensive line was really elite last night in terms of what they were able to do against a Texas A&M front that may be the best in our conference. Just tremendous lines of scrimmage.

Like I said, Sark knew that was coming. He built the team that way. Did a tremendous job in preparation of coming into this league.

**Q. Julian announcing he's hitting the portal, how much has Ellis Robinson, some of the other young corners, put themselves in position to potentially help with this game?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, all those guys. We have multiple guys. It really doesn't have anything to do with the redshirt rule or not or the post-season plans. We don't have many guys that were necessarily around that threshold.

They continue to get better. They're going to give us an opportunity to be better. Ellis particularly and Demello both have gotten better throughout the year. They've taken an abundance of reps with our twos and continue to grow and get better.

**Q. Your defense was obviously playing at the top of its game in Austin against Texas. Do you feel Sark has maybe changed their identity somewhat? Do you see a change of identity offensively?**

KIRBY SMART: They're really physical. They're committed to the run. I think their backs are playing at an elite level. I think their front is playing at an elite level. They are a physical group. They got a great passer in their quarterback. They got great wideouts. They find ways. They're very creative in the pass game, the RPO game, the play-action game. Tight end, probably one of the best in the country right now. They do a tremendous job.

But when you look at what the backs have done, they've been off the charts in terms of that run game. Even the Oklahoma game before they played us, I thought the backs have been elite.

**Q. What would you say you want to make improvements on from the last two or three games?**

KIRBY SMART: The list is too long. The list is too long.

**Q. I don't think it's ever been a week you talked about a game when it wasn't about running the ball and stopping the run. Specifically about your running backs, is there a chance that you could have a full complement this week in particular with Trevor, we some of Rodrick and Branson? Any chance those guys could get to the field? How do you feel about your running game heading into this?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, our running game has not been where it's needed to be. I can promise you that. There's a

lot of combination parts of that.

We've had a dang merry-go-round offensive line. I've never been around a group that's had to change lineups especially in practice. We've had probably five starters miss entire weeks of practice. It hasn't always equated at game time, but it equates to game playing ability.

That's one of the biggest things we struggle with, is just staying healthy at the offensive line. That would help our run game some. Not to mention being healthy at running back would help some.

I don't see how you could say we are 100%. Branson and Rod are neither 100%. They're out there trying to play. Trevor is a ways away. I still don't know. We haven't even seen those guys. He wasn't really close to playing last week. I don't know how that's going to play out.

I know that Nate is playing really hard. He's growing up. I don't see him as a freshman anymore. We got to keep getting everybody ready.

**Q. You mentioned Texas being big and physical. How do you feel you match up with their defensive line this time around?**

KIRBY SMART: Which matchup are you asking about?

**Q. Texas' defensive line versus your offensive line.**

KIRBY SMART: I don't really know how we match up. I want to see the last couple games. I haven't watched all of their games. I only have the thoughts that we didn't run the ball real well in that game against them last time. We didn't do a lot of things particularly well. That's why they're the No. 1 defense in the conference, one of the No. 1 defenses in the country.

There's a lot of work to be done on our side to try to prepare for them.

**Q. Another SEC Championship game for you. What have you learned about preparing for this game?**

KIRBY SMART: That whoever you're playing is really good.

**Q. In the Playoff you had an experience playing a team twice. You played Auburn twice. What is the key when you only have so many weeks between seeing a team to preparing and maybe throwing something new, preparing for something new? What are the critical aspects to facing a team a second time?**

KIRBY SMART: Don't overthink it. Don't overthink the entire process. You have to do what you do well. You got to stop what they do well. Offensive coordinators, defensive coordinators, they want to make it about the scheme. They want to make it about changes. They want to make it about how can we execute at a higher level.

At the end of the day it's going to come down to those guys on the field, the strain they play with, probably who executes better. The more things you do differently, sometimes the more you mess things up. You got to go out and execute.

**Q. Your pass-rush really excelled in the game in Austin. What is your take on how that group has progressed since then?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, I don't really assess our unit based on pass-rush. I assess it on ability to affect the quarterback, get off the field on third down, get people to third down, tackling.

We've had our struggles. I mean, I'll be honest with you, we played a better game actually the other night up front defensively than we did against UMass and some other teams.

It was not going to be about the pass-rush the other night. I mean, five sacks on the entire year, they don't throw the ball. It was a very different kind of game.

There's been a lot of games since our last game against Texas all the way to Georgia Tech that we haven't played as well as I would like. Can't put an exact finger on what that might be.

I know this. We're going to have to be playing better than we've been playing because Texas is playing really good.

**Q. What do you think about the league as a whole this year? When Texas came in, it got criticized for not playing certain teams. Do you still think this league has had a very good year? How would you gauge it?**

KIRBY SMART: Relative to what?

**Q. Its history, I guess.**

KIRBY SMART: Okay, so I'm comparing the 2024 SEC to the 2023, 2022, 2021, or to the rest of the country? What are we asking here?

**Q. I'm curious if you think that the SEC is down by adding more teams.**

KIRBY SMART: Down relative to the SEC or relative to the other conferences?

**Q. To the SEC.**

KIRBY SMART: No, I don't think you could say that Oklahoma and Texas came in the conference and it became weaker.

**Q. You don't know about the status of Julian Humphrey. But how difficult is it to have this transfer portal open during a time when you have the championship, now the Playoffs coming up? Would you like to see it moved or changed until after a championship?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, it's not open, so... I don't know if that affects your question at all.

**Q. But you still have to deal with this while you're preparing for the championship and potentially upcoming Playoffs.**

KIRBY SMART: I'm not dealing with it. I'm worried about my team. I mean, I've learned in this thing that you worry about the players that are with you, not the ones that aren't. You focus on the guys that are out there on that field playing it and trying to win games in eight overtimes, who love the University of Georgia, want to compete and be part of it.

You don't really try to focus on the guys that aren't because they'll be looking for the next stop. We got guys all over the place that aren't here now that wish they could come back. It's a decision each kid has to make.

**Q. Just to be clear, you haven't had a conversation or anything yet with Julian about his post or anything like that?**

KIRBY SMART: No. I've been at work today. I'm still at work today. I'm not chasing all the stuff around y'all are looking at. I'm worried about Texas.

**Q. You were in a bit of uncharted territory with the eight overtime game. Do you change anything up this week to give you a little extra rest or stick to your normal schedule?**

KIRBY SMART: We don't have to approach it just yet because it's Sunday. Our guys had off yesterday, which is a little unique for us. We've never had a Friday game. We'll decide how we go forward based on how we look injury-wise tomorrow.

**Q. Monroe Freeling had to miss a couple practices. When he's in there at left tackle, what kind of job has he done?**

KIRBY SMART: He's had his moments. He's played well at moments and he's struggled sometimes. I think he's a kid that's growing up. He's getting better. It's the hardest position to play probably in football outside of maybe quarterback. He and Earnest have manned that position well. Whoever has been healthy and been in the game has done a good job. I'm really proud of the things both those kids have done.

CHUCK DUNLAP: Coach Smart, thank you for your time this evening.

KIRBY SMART: Thank y'all.

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