

# Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Georgia vs Texas

Sunday, December 1, 2024

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

## Texas Longhorns

## Steve Sarkisian

### Press Conference



Ton of respect for what they've done at Georgia.

Obviously this will be a heck of a challenge for us going to Atlanta, competing against them.

CHUCK DUNLAP: We'll begin with questions.

**Q. Do you feel like your team is playing its best football now? How hard is it to sustain that over what may be five more games?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think the key for us is to really get recentered, refocused on one game. That's what we've been doing here probably over the last month or so, is not getting caught up in what's down the road but what do we need to do this week to play our best football, whether that's physical, whether that's mental, whether that's emotional. I'm trying to analyze every aspect of it, then trying to get them in the best frame of mind and condition to do that.

I'd like to think that we have still better football ahead of us, quite frankly, that we've got room to grow, areas that we can improve. We're always trying to point out areas where we can improve and show them how we're going to improve upon them.

But I have been proud of the way we've been playing. I think we've been playing well as a team. Again, you can point to last night's game. We were not perfect. Two turnovers in the red area, a punt blocked, missed a field goal. There were things in that game that didn't go exactly the way we would have liked. Again, that just offers us up things that we need to improve on.

**Q. I don't think you really changed your identity offensively. The running game has really come together the last two games. Has it just been a bigger point of emphasis or offensive line blocking better?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: We do have a variety of run schemes. The one scheme that if we don't get that right, the rest of them never work quite as good. That's when we're running our outside zone stuff.

CHUCK DUNLAP: Coach Sarkisian, thank you for being with us this evening. Would you mind commenting on the season before taking some questions, advancing and preparing for the SEC Championship game.

STEVE SARKISIAN: Sure.

First of all, this is a heck of an honor to earn an opportunity to go to Atlanta and compete for an SEC Championship. It was something that was clearly one of our team goals before the season began. We knew it would be extremely challenging. Anytime you can make it to an SEC Championship game, that means you kind of were able to survive to some degree the treachery that this conference has.

We see it year in, year out. We saw it again this year, just how difficult it is to navigate the schedule, especially going on the road in some of these environments. I'm sure there's a lot of teams looking back on this season right now with a lot of should have, could have, would have's because it's difficult when you get on the road.

The fact that our guys were able to manage that throughout the season, we knew when we had the matchup with Georgia earlier in the year, we didn't play great football, they beat us pretty handily that night, that our margin for error was really very small. We'd have to win every game and hope that it would be enough to control our destiny to get ourselves in this position. Our guys were able to do that. Credit to our coaches. Credit to our players for getting that done.

It's a heck of a challenge. What Kirby has done at Georgia over nine years now has been pretty incredible. They've become the standard of college football. Couple national championships. Couple SEC titles. What they've just done on a consistency basis in recruiting. Their style of play.



We got to it a couple different ways over the past couple weeks: manning it, zoning it, doing different things. When this gets going the right way, then the other things kind of come off of that.

We made an emphasis about a month ago that we had to improve upon it. Our rhythm was off. Our timing was off. We were getting penalties. The running back's tracks weren't married with where the offensive line was.

I think the commitment to getting that cleaned up gave me more confidence to call more stuff running the football, but it also allowed for the variety in the running game really to come to life, as well.

**Q. Could you give us a quick update on Kelvin Banks? After having gotten a chance to watch the film, could you give me your thoughts about Trevor Goosby and how he played.**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I don't have an update on Kelvin yet. As far as Trevor, I was really proud of him. His first time playing in real football in obviously a very difficult environment. Played over 70 snaps in that game, I think 71 snaps. Really had one procedural penalty, and no other penalties beyond that.

I thought he showed great poise and composure. The moment didn't seem too big for him. I thought he played a physical brand of football. I think it's definitely something that he can build upon for his future.

**Q. What are typically the biggest challenges when you're playing a team for the second time in a year? Are there advantages to doing so?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Well, I think the one thing that I've tried to lean into here today, as we're in the preliminary stages of it all, is kind of take myself back to the NFL. You get in your division there, you play teams multiple times a year. Then over time, a couple years go by, you start playing them four times in two years. If it's the Playoffs, five times in two years.

You try to, A, do the things that you do well. B, you try to take in the information that maybe you can gather from seeing them in person as opposed to what it looks like on tape. Then making sure that you have an idea of some of your own tendencies, that you're able to break some of those things.

At the end of the day our job is to put our players in the best position to be successful, whether that's physically, mentally, schematically, whatever that looks like. That's what we always kind of fall back to.

Again, I do think there are some things you can take from a first matchup, good and bad. Clearly there were enough things we need to fix from the first time we played 'em. You don't get shut out in the first half, you don't have four turnovers in the game, you're not trailing 23-0, to get better from the first time we played them.

**Q. The Texas secondary, another interception on Saturday night. A year ago the secondary probably didn't meet your expectations. What has been the catalyst behind that transformation?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I think it's probably a combination of things. I think, one, when we assessed the whole thing, we said, Okay, we need to make a shift, an adjustment. What is our style of play? What do we want to do?

I think the first layer of it was to get Jahdae Barron to come back to school for his senior year. That's probably the thing that happened first. When he decided to come back, part of him coming back was to go play corner, not exclusively, but primarily play corner. That would allow us to play Jaylon Guilbeau at nickel, two of our better players back there.

The next part of it I think was the hiring of Johnny Nansen to offer some different perspective on kind of style of play, coverages, different things of that nature.

I think the third layer to that was the addition of Andrew Mukuba transferring from Clemson, a veteran safety with a wealth of experience.

The fourth piece to it all I think is the development of that group. That group now is a really veteran group. When you look at Michael Taaffe, Andrew Mukuba, Jahdae Barron, Jaylon Guilbeau, Manny Muhammad, those guys have played a lot of football.

Some of the new faces. What Derek Williams has been able to do. Gavin Holmes is starting to play a little bit more. Kobe Black, those guys. But that core group of guys is a veteran group of guys.

I think the thing that they're doing so well is they're playing within the scheme, they're doing their job, and they're trusting one another. That trust is coming from great communication. I think there's a lot of layers to it.

Lastly, through all of that, they've built up a great deal of confidence. I think that's why turnovers occur, is because guys are playing with confidence. They're trusting their keys. They're making the breaks on the ball. They're making plays on the ball when they get there.

**Q. Do you think they're more confident today when they played Georgia last time?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I don't know that.

**Q. We've talked a lot in the last few weeks about Alfred. What did you think of Vernon last night? You had several guys that we haven't talked about a lot make big plays both last night and Kentucky. What do you think of how so many different players are getting involved defensively?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Yeah, I think Vernon had a tremendous game last night. A couple sacks, fumble recovery. He was right there in the mix on that goal line stop, right at the point of attack.

I'm really proud of Vernon because, again, he's a guy that has grown with us over four years, very similar to Alfred. Finding that level of consistency, trying to get them to be three-down players, not just pass-rushers, but defending the run. He's really worked at that, but yet he still is a very effective pass-rusher for us with his length and athleticism for his size.

He's played with a lot of confidence. He's playing from a leadership perspective and not a follower's perspective. I think that has bode well for him. He's made some real impact plays for him. Proud of him for that.

I think the variety of guys making plays, the variety of guys playing on defense right now is exciting. That stop right there on that goal line stand, we talked about Vernon, but Bill Norton does a heck of a job knocking the guard back to create a new line of scrimmage. Ethan Burke comes off the backside to make the play. A subtly on that play is Michael Taaffe in position. If the quarterback pulled it, he'd be in position to play the quarterback. It was all the guys doing their job of whatever their job was supposed to be on that play.

Jermayne Lole last week on a fourth-down stop. A lot of the some of the new faces are really starting to make plays now, have grown into their role on our team, to go along with some of the familiar faces of guys that have been making plays for us all year.

**Q. You played late on Saturday night. Georgia played on Friday. Of course, they went eight overtimes. Any advantage in that, having an extra day? Is that negligible or something you have to deal with?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I don't know. I don't put too much thought into that. I just focus on what we need to do to

prepare.

It's a normal workweek for us. I'm sure they need the extra day. That was a long game. I stayed up and watched it. That was a marathon. I was exhausted watching it myself, so...

In the end it's a normal workweek for us. I don't put too much thought into an extra day or not.

**Q. Do you have any experience with Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I coached for the Falcons for two years, so I got a pretty good feel for finding my way around that place.

**Q. You know where the visitors' locker room is?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: No, I've only ever been in the home locker room.

**Q. Knowing that Kelvin Banks is likely moving on after this season, how much more excited are you about the performance that Trevor Goosby gave you against some really talented edge guys? Did anything stand out from Goosby's recruitment?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Again, any experience we get is helpful. I think back to last year, Kam Williams getting the start. I believe it was against BYU, if I'm not mistaken last season, or maybe Kansas State, one of those two. I think that helped him and his future and what he's capable of and gave us confidence in him. Not a perfect game for Kam at that time, but it gave us a little bit of a peek into the future of what he'd look like.

I think last night did the same for us with Goosby and for him as well. He's been working really hard. A lot of these guys have been working really hard, working their tail off.

You love to see when a guy gets his opportunity to play significant time and minutes that they perform and they put their best foot forward. I thought Trevor did that last night. I think the future's bright for him.

I think the one thing that stood out for me in Trevor's recruitment, I think for a lot of players on our team that are performing at a high level right now. Trevor wasn't this five-star recruit that was allegedly the top tackle in the country, rated by everybody. I think he might have been a three-star guy that you could see potential.

Once you got around him and you saw the competitive spirit that he had, the work ethic that he had, the mental

and physical toughness that he had. Although he was maybe a little I don't want to call it undersized because he's a big human, but needed some filling out to do.

But you could see the athleticism and the nastiness with which he played the game. That's a credit to Coach Flood identifying that. It's a credit to Coach Becton and Trevor and their commitment to the weight room as he's continued to develop physically as well as a player.

The thing I remember about his recruitment was exactly that. It wasn't this huge, high-profile recruit. It was a guy that we tried to identify that we felt could fit our scheme. I think he and his family recognized that. He's come here and been just that: a guy that has worked his tail off.

He's never lost that competitive edge that he had in recruiting. It's served him well. He performed well for us last night.

**Q. Sometimes when a team loses a big game, there's a domino effect. How were you guys able to compartmentalize that Georgia loss and not let one loss beat you twice this season?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: Just that. We talked about that exact way. We're not going to allow that to happen. We are going to get refocused. Our sole focus is on the next opponent and our sole focus is on what do we need to do to improve.

I really just leave it at that. I don't speak negatively. I say this isn't going to happen, this is what's going to happen, here is how we're going to go about our business.

The good thing this year is we were able to lean on the experience from last year because a similar thing happened last year, losing to OU, especially in the fashion that that game went. Our ability to rebound last year, then go run the table in the conference to get back in the championship game, I think it gave a lot of the veteran players confidence that we could do it again, to follow the formula for success to make that happen.

**Q. You've had your quarterback that's been injured, running back, left tackle, yet you haven't skipped a beat. Talk about the resilience.**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I just think one thing around here, we don't whine, we don't complain and we don't make excuses. Whatever the roster looks like for that week, we've got plenty enough good players on this roster that we can devise a plan to put those guys in position to have some success and to compete.

The one thing is about our roster, it's a very competitive roster. All the guys, I know some of them aren't front line players that don't get to play all the time, but all of them are working really hard and they're improving at their craft.

We've gained a lot of trust on this team as the season's gone on. A lot of the times it's what does training camp look like, can you trust players or not. We really try to keep trying to find ways to trust 'em as the season goes on.

Guys like a Trevor Goosby are a prime example of that. When their number gets called, you've got a lot of confidence in them that they can go in there and perform.

**Q. You talked about the outside zone, how much y'all dedicated improving in that area. Having that personnel package in one of the keys to the improvement?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I mean, it's part of it. Obviously we probably major in 12 personnel and 11 personnel. We've evolved in our 21-personnel packages.

We're always trying to look for angles and fronts and ability to get people blocked. The one thing that that personnel does for you, especially late in the game, it allows you to protect your edges a little bit better. You don't like having free runners at the running back when you're trying to protect the ball late in the ballgame. That's what that personnel does for us.

Again, we'll run an outside zone out of all those different personnel groupings. It's not so much the personnel that allows that run scheme to go, but what's helpful for that personnel is there are specifics of why we get into it at certain times.

In that particular moment, what you're referring to, late in the game, is to make sure our edges were really well-protected.

**Q. Have you done the play two teams in the same season as a college coach?**

STEVE SARKISIAN: I don't think so. I don't believe so. I'm racking my brain here real quick, but I don't believe so.

CHUCK DUNLAP: Coach, thank you for your time this evening. We look forward to having you in Atlanta on Friday.

STEVE SARKISIAN: All right, y'all. Thank you.

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