

# Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Georgia vs Texas

Thursday, December 5, 2024

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

## Georgia Bulldogs

## Coach Kirby Smart

### Press Conference



This game is tough. The atmosphere, the electricity around the game is really awesome. We're looking forward to it. Honored to be playing Coach Sark and his team at Texas. What a great job he's done there. Getting them into this game is a gauntlet. It is a reward to play in it. Both teams have earned that.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions.

THE MODERATOR: We're now joined by the head coach of the Georgia Bulldogs, Kirby Smart. Georgia was 10-2, has advanced to the SEC Championship game.

Coach, we'll start with an opening statement, then take questions.

KIRBY SMART: Before I begin, I'd like to take a moment on behalf of all of Dawg Nation and all the Georgia athletic department and send our condolences to the families and friends of Bob Holt of "Arkansas Democrat-Gazette." I know he embodied what this conference is all about. He's a great man. One of my favorites. Every time I went to SEC media days, always had great questions and great candor. Just a part of this conference that I think is really special.

Our condolences go out to his family and the Arkansas community.

With that, I'll open with what a great opportunity in front of us. I've always made mention many times, sound like a broken record, but thinks the greatest championship game of them all in terms of conferences. It means a lot to a lot of people. Atlanta has been the really hotbed home of this game for a long time. I still remember my senior year in high school playing in the playoffs. It was a Saturday night game in Birmingham, Alabama. Alabama was playing Florida in one of the greatest SEC Championship games of all time.

I remember listening to the radio, hearing the outcome of that game as I was getting ready to play in our game. It's been a long time because I'm old now (smiling). It's a great game. It's one that I played in a lot of times, had a lot of heartbreak and a lot of triumph. That's what makes this conference special.

**Q. As far as Texas, when you see them now as compared to when you played them in October, it seems like they're obviously doing better with the run. Do you see it as a change in philosophy a little bit or just better running and blocking by the line?**

KIRBY SMART: It's both. There's a commitment to it. When you have 30 and 40 carries in multiple games, there's a great commitment to the run. They're extremely physical. They've got really good backs. Their offensive line is massive. The quarterback does a great job putting them in the right runs. They attach RPO pass game to those runs. They change tempos on you.

It's traditional Sark football. He formations on you, takes shots on you. Don't lull to sleep that he's just going to run the ball. They have every protection and pattern, every use of personnel available. They're really good at what they do.

I do think that he's played in some tough conditions, whether it's really cold on the road playing somewhere. He knows how to win in the SEC. You don't win in the SEC with a beauty contest. He's won with really good defense. I think it's been one of his best coaching jobs in terms of the way he's won, the style of games he's won.

**Q. We all knew when it was announced a couple years ago Texas and Oklahoma were coming, they were joining the league. Here is Texas, first year in this game. Surprised? Not surprised? Can you put some perspective on what that means. A big-time program, big-time fan base. I imagine they're going to be in Atlanta big-time.**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, you're asking if I'm surprised by



them being in the game?

**Q. Essentially. Your thoughts on it. That accomplishment. First year they got in.**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, they earned it. They played an SEC schedule. They won the most games of any SEC team this year. They have a tremendous program. They're built that way. They're built to do that. They have a tremendous amount of talent. They've done a great job recruiting to that team. They've done a great job of that.

**Q. What have Trevor and Christen Miller been able to do to this point in the league?**

KIRBY SMART: They've been taking part in some parts of practice, taking reps. Hopefully those guys are able to do something. They're both listed as questionable right now.

**Q. I know you talked Smael Mondon yesterday. He didn't play in the first game. The impact he could make in this. When he's healthy, like he is, how different does he make your defense?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, he provides depth. That's not a position that I think you can go out and play every snap. Inside linebacker, it's a conditioning position where you have to rotate and play guys.

He's given us flexibility to play multiple packages. His coming back has made us a little deeper, not have to play as many snaps with the other guys. He's allowed Jalon to do more things, take a little bit of the inside backer off Jalon. Those are all key opponents to the success of our defense.

He gives a lot of experience in third down. He gives a lot of experience in being multiple because he matches up well with guys, whether it's out of the backfield or tight ends. We're thankful to have him back. Wished we had him the whole time.

**Q. In that first game I believe Carson tossed three picks. He's been careful with the ball the last month or so. What does Texas do particularly well on pass defense, and how is Carson better equipped right now to handle it?**

KIRBY SMART: Texas does a tremendous job. First of all, they have really good players. They have very sound schemes. They out-execute you. They figure out your tendencies. They do a great job of recognizing formation routes. They have instinctive defensive football players, especially on the second level where they read routes, they jump routes. They do a tremendous job.

They get hands on balls. Get a lot of tips. When you get a lot of tips, you tend to get interceptions. They are one of the best in the country at doing that.

**Q. Carson and Tate came in together, often seen talking on the sidelines. They're friends. How have you seen the two of them grow together, mature?**

KIRBY SMART: I think Tate has a different path. He obviously was playing early in his career. His path has been marked by some tough injuries, overcoming those injuries, battles back. He embodies offensive line, toughness mentality.

Carson took a different path, didn't play as early as Tate. He fought for what he got. He fought for his position. He grew while he was waiting. He worked while he was waiting, which we say around here, you work while you wait. He did that. He grew and got better.

The two of them have been close for quite some time. I think anytime you have a veteran offensive line and a veteran quarterback, those two groups will always bond because they protect each other.

**Q. The early returns of the early signing period moving up to yesterday, what are your thoughts on national signing day being yesterday?**

KIRBY SMART: It's not really a good time. There's no good time to have it. Do you wait longer into December where we were? You're dealing with not knowing your roster.

The point in moving it up was to solidify your signing class and be sure of that, then focus on your own roster. It may be the lesser of two evils. I'm not sure. It was tremendously tough. I'm sure with Sark and Texas as well. You got a lot going on. You're trying to manage a tough situation in terms of prep for a game and a signing class.

Others weren't in the game, they probably like it better because they're not dealing with issues that will be coming up next week.

**Q. In your mind, does this year's title game have the same meaning and value as it has in years past, given that both teams appear to be Playoff bound in some form no matter Saturday's result?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, I certainly think so 'cause I'm an SEC enthusiast that believes in an SEC title is a significant marker to your season, the kind of season you had.

Also it gets you a bye and it gets you an opportunity to rest and recover while others play formidable opponents, tough opponents. It removes you from that. You're playing for an opportunity to rest possibly.

**Q. Analytically, with analytics really taking ahold of this game, what does it do to you in particular just strategy-wise on what to go for it on fourth down or... Strategy-wise, how much has analytics maybe molded your mind a little different in how you think about formulating a game plan?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, analytics don't change your game plan. I think that's maybe a mistake in the way we're saying it. It does not. Game plan is something you do before the game, right? Analytics is something you're deciding in the flow of a game. It's changing by the second, remaining time, situation, what's going on. It's taking all that stuff into account.

It's changed over time. I'm not a person that believes every single time you go to the analytics. I know we talked about that with the Georgia Tech situation. I like knowing what the analytics say. I like making decisions based on the flow of a game.

It's good to have the knowledge. It's good to know it. But ultimately you have to make the decision in-game how you feel.

**Q. Obviously Arch Manning played a couple series against y'all in Austin. Didn't do too much. They used him differently against A&M. How much stress do you think that puts on a defense? How much time do you have to worry about new wrinkles from that?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I mean, first of all, there's not enough time in the week to worry about the stress that Texas and Sark's offense puts on you. You can't cover it all. We could have two weeks. We still will feel, What if they do this? What if they do that?

There's too much offense they can select from to try to chase ghosts. You have to do it on principle. No different than Arch. We've practiced knowing Arch can be in there. Had to defend a lot of quarterback runs.

Arch is not just a quarterback run guy. He's a really good athlete and can take off and run at any time, which is the toughest kind to defend. I'd rather have a guy that only runs instead of can do both. He certainly can do both. He opens up the playbook in terms of the things he can do with his feet.

Quinn does a great job, too. We have to be prepared for

both guys. It would not shock me at all to see both those guys play and Arch be able to play because he has a different element he brings to the game, as well.

**Q. With the direction things are going with Playoff expansion and the focus on the Playoff, plus the December portal window, do you think the bowl season is going to continue to be viable as it is?**

KIRBY SMART: Not sure the reference of the question. Are you taking the Playoff bowl games out of it?

**Q. The teams that don't make the Playoff.**

KIRBY SMART: That's a tough question because I'm a big believer in development of your roster. If you want to make the assumption that 40%, 30% of your roster is going to turn over and people are going to leave, it's going to be hard to continue having bowls.

Kids want a reward for their season. Still get an opportunity to play an opponent. Yeah, it may look a little different, may be younger players, may be a forecast to the next season.

I think that's a reward for young players who maybe didn't get to play as much during the year or the guys that may be injured. We have guys that were injured, didn't get to play, they want to play in the last opportunity to play for their university.

I still think it matters, it's important. I certainly don't minimize the fact that the turnover rate has increased. With that, you can make a case that it makes those games either less significant to some, or it makes those games harder to manage and have.

**Q. I don't think Joemel Aguero played against Georgia Tech. Is he still dealing with a finger injury? How have other guys done at that position?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, since the Ole Miss game, he's had to have a surgery and a pin put in. He's been trying to practice and play with a club. It's been tremendously tough for him to be able to do that.

He's out of the club now and in a much better position to be able to practice and play. He's practiced each week and stayed with us. It's just been tougher, as you can imagine, playing with the use of really one hand. He's back now and able to do a lot more this week.

Hopeful that he can help us.

**Q. Back to the craziness of yesterday. How did you**



**go back delegating responsibilities to make sure you had all your bases covered from the team standpoint, recruiting standpoint?**

KIRBY SMART: I mean, my focus is on Texas, I'll be honest with you. I think it's hard to navigate. But we try to recruit kids that when they say they're coming, they're coming. We've had a large sum of commitments for quite a while. It doesn't keep teams from reaching out to them, throwing things at them late.

It's never different than it was. It's only higher priced and more money being thrown now, which is unfortunate, but fortunate. The kids think it's fortunate to have an opportunity to make more. It's unfortunate that it gets done the way it gets done in terms of people throwing pieces of paper in front of them at the 11th and 12th hour while we're trying to prepare for a game.

I go on the relationships we built over time, assume that people told us they were coming, they're coming. For the most part, we've had pretty loyal constituency when it comes to our commitments.

My day yesterday was as close to a normal Wednesday as it could be. We did third down and red area and we focused on that.

**Q. I know that Will Muschamp has been with you guys during the week this season, watching his son on the weekends. Would he rejoin you guys or be in a different role on Saturday with Vanderbilt season now over?**

KIRBY SMART: To be honest with you, I'm not even sure. He's with us right now. He's with us today. He stays with us throughout the week I think until usually on Thursdays.

But I can't even answer that question, to be honest. Most weeks he leaves after Thursday.

**Q. Obviously you guys did a great job on the Texas offense in the first half of the first game. What really impresses you about Quinn's response and what are some of the challenges that he poses?**

KIRBY SMART: What impresses me about Quinn? Say that question one more time. I'm not sure I understood it.

**Q. What impresses you about Quinn, his response in the second half? In general, what kind of impresses you about him and the challenges he poses?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, he's experienced. I mean, I think the number one thing when you look at the quarterbacks

playing in the SEC Championship, the two common dominators, I don't know there's anybody across the league that had more experience than these two.

I tell people all the time in the SEC, you don't know what it's like playing on the road until you do it. You don't know what it's like playing at night until you do it.

These guys have been in some tough fights across this league in terms of Quinn playing in the Playoffs last year, playing SEC opponents last year. He's been around it. I'm most impressed with his toughness, his ability to stand in the pocket, to navigate the pocket. He's made plays with his legs. He makes plays with his mind, as great quarterbacks do. They can change protections. They know where to go with the ball, stand in there. He's got tremendous experience and he's also got tremendous arm talent.

**Q. I want to ask you from a rules standpoint, the Rules Committee, especially going through this season, whether or not there might be a thought moving forward on simplifying some rules, making things less complicated for the betterment of the game?**

KIRBY SMART: In reference to what?

**Q. There's plenty I can reference. Immediately what comes off the top of my head is say you muff a punt, you can't advance the ball. If you catch the punt, can you advance the ball. There's just certain intricacies of this game that feels like it needs to get simpler, from my point of view.**

KIRBY SMART: Well, they've been doing it for a long time, okay? I sit on these Rules Committees. Steve Shaw is a bright man. So are the people on this group that I'm a part of for rules changes.

Most of the time it's health and safety. You're talking about maybe the simplification of some things. There's usually a rhyme or reason why they have the rule. I don't know which specific ones you're referencing. But they will look at them each and every year and try to make the best decisions for the game of football.

THE MODERATOR: Kirby Smart, thank you for your time today. We look forward to seeing you here on Saturday in Atlanta.

KIRBY SMART: Thank you. Go Dawgs.

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