

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Georgia vs Texas

Saturday, December 7, 2024

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Georgia Bulldogs

Coach Kirby Smart

Daylen Everette

Tate Ratledge

Postgame Press Conference

Georgia 22, Texas 19 OT

THE MODERATOR: We'll begin with an opening statement by Coach Smart, then take questions for players, then for Coach Smart.

With that, we'll begin with an opening statement.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I'll start like I traditionally do. This is an unbelievable event, venue. SEC Championship, we've told our players it's incredible in terms of the atmosphere, the opponent you play. Typically for us it's been a play-in or play-out game. I just have a lot of respect for this conference, the universities in it. Greg Sankey, our president, President Morehead, Josh Brooks. The support they've given us has given us to be at the point we are right now.

Texas is a tremendous football program and team. They have big, physical defensive linemen, offensive linemen. They are a really strong SEC team. But our team never quit tonight. I was really proud of them. I thought our fan base helped us.

So really proud of the win.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, Daylen or Tate.

Q. Tate, can you talk about Gunner's performance and what he meant? Did he give an energized lift when he was in there?

TATE RATLEDGE: Yeah, I think Gunner did a great job stepping up like he had to. Him coming in the game, I think



it made everybody realize this is a new juice we got to come out in the second half with. I think everybody did a great job with that.

Q. Daylen, you had two game-changing interceptions in this game. What were you seeing from Ewers, and what went through your mind during those plays?

DAYLEN EVERETTE: I really didn't see anything from him just 'cause I was in man. I was looking at my guy (smiling).

Really just playing the man, getting in the position to make that play. It's a great feeling. I couldn't do it without any of my teammates or any of my coaches, so...

Q. With Carson out at halftime and Gunner coming in, you seemed extremely juiced up about him coming in. Can you talk about the emotional response to what looked like a dire situation.

TATE RATLEDGE: Yeah, of course it's never a good thing when your starting quarterback goes out.

I think it was big for everybody in the locker room to let Gunner know that we believed in him and had full confidence in him to get the job done.

DAYLEN EVERETTE: Really just he did a great job stepping up. Kind of talked to him before we went on the field, just telling him we all got your back, don't be nervous, you got this. He did a great job stepping up.

Q. Tate, Trevor, 94 rushing yards, touchdown. He didn't play the last three games. What do you do over the course of the game to open up the holes for him?

TATE RATLEDGE: Kind of just talked to him about what we're saying, how the linebackers are playing, playing up front on the combos, stuff like that. Keeping him confident and trust in us eventually knowing one is going to spit.

Q. Tate, quarterback, everybody thought that was the last we were going see of Beck. For him to come back for the last snap...



TATE RATLEDGE: I didn't notice him until I turned around and her him giving the play call. When we got the play, everybody saw it was Carson, everybody was pretty juiced up in the huddle. Ended up being the one that won it.

Q. With you potentially earning a bye in the College Football Playoff, how much do you need that rest? How much do you think that extra game off will help you guys?

DAYLEN EVERETTE: I think it's good. We get a chance to go back, continue to get better, recover, take care of our bodies and stuff like that.

TATE RATLEDGE: I think anybody at this point in the season can I use some time off. It's good time to get back and work on ourselves and get healthier.

Q. Where college football is now, what meant more, winning the conference championship or positioning yourselves now the way y'all have in the Playoff?

TATE RATLEDGE: I wanted to win the conference. That was something I came back for. I hated the way I felt after last year. Coming back and winning this is one of my goals.

DAYLEN EVERETTE: Yeah, it was definitely big. We weren't really thinking about the future. We was just worried about winning the conversation, like Tate said.

I was part of the team last year that we came up short. This one, it was a little more personal this time.

Q. Daylen, did you ever think you would be the SEC Championship game MVP?

DAYLEN EVERETTE: Probably not (smiling).

But, I mean, it happened, so... Yeah, I'm grateful for that.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, congratulations. Thanks for joining us. We'll continue with questions for Coach Smart.

Q. Could you just shed some light on what happened the last sequence there. Gunner came out I'm assuming because the target was... Talk about the craziness of that situation. First the call, then having to turn back to Beck. Was there any question about what y'all were going to do in that instance?

KIRBY SMART: No. I can't remember what game it was this year. We had a targeting somewhere where the helmet came off, and the officials came over and told us

the kid could stay in if it was confirmed targeting, he had to come out if it wasn't.

I assumed Gunner would be able to stay in because I thought it was going to be targeting. I saw the replay, realized he leveled his shoulder, we were going to have to take a snap with another quarterback.

We were prepared to put Ryan in. He knows the system, he knows what to do. But we felt like Carson can take a snap, it's not an issue. So we did that. I thought Mike and them had a good plan, really good plan, on that play. Executed it. It was a really physical play. It's a good, quick decision because we had already burned our timeout on defense. We wanted to be efficient and not run down the play clock.

Q. How do you feel about the place of conference championship games in the 12-team Playoff era, the idea that your team and Texas are taking on 61 minutes of wear and tear?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know what to say about that. I mean, you play football to play the game. Like, you play football to win your conference.

You're asking the wrong person about that because I had almost the same number of national championships as I do SEC Championships. I've had years I won the SEC that I didn't win the natty, and then years I won the natty that I didn't win the SEC.

They're really hard to come by. I don't know. I think it's going to be interesting, the direction of college football, because I hate to say it, but I didn't think early in pregame that the game had the same juice, didn't think it had the same atmosphere that I've seen it have before.

Now, once the game started, I don't know if that's because more Georgia fans know where to tailgate, they're hanging on outside because they've been here seven straight years, so the atmosphere improved, but it wasn't as electric early. I think the game made it more electric because it was a great game.

The games that have been played in this venue for a conference championship are incredible. For people to devalue that over a Playoff, I just don't see it that way. I value SEC championships. I hold them in high esteem because the work it requires to do that is incredible.

Q. You've talked time and time again this season about the resiliency of your team, the willingness to never give up. What is it about this team that just never gives up?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think Mike said it best when I was talking about our team. Man, we're beat up. We're tired. I was talking to our staff this week about how to practice. This week was just absolutely absurd for Sark and I because we're trying to sign a signing class in the middle of a championship game week, which is one of the craziest things ever.

Mike said, We're mentally fatigued, but we're one of the toughest mental teams, mentally tough teams that we've ever coached.

I've had more physically tough, more physically talented. I don't know that I've had a more mentally tough team. They just keep coming and keep coming. They never say 'die'. I have a lot of respect for the leaders in that room because of what they've been through. Probably the hardest schedule in history that we've ever had. They endured it, they came out on top, and they fought their way through.

Q. I thought one of the biggest swings in the game was the fake punt. Could you talk through what was going on in the headsets, what you saw.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I got some history with fake punts in that building. It's one that went our way, you know? Something we've worked on. We carry it. It was great design by our staff, Kirk Benedict and Coach Hartley and those guys.

They do a lot of work on punt. We have a lot of formations on our punt. The biggest risk of snapping to it Drew Bobo, he had to catch it and toss it. He'll go down in history with a higher passing percentage than his father at one for one (smiling). He should be a thousand percent.

I just really appreciate Arian. I thought Dom Lovett made an incredible play on that play because he got a look that we had not seen. He made a decision. He did what we told him not to do, but he did it because he got another look.

London had a key block. Did we end up scoring on that or not? It gave us a field goal, a little moment, a little juice. We lost a little momentum at that point. I think it was after they scored the touchdown. It's a lot easier to call it when you think you're going to be in the Playoffs either way.

Q. Carson leaves at the end of the first half. What is the status of his injury? Do you worry about the Playoff?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, he's got an upper extremity injury. We don't know to what extent. Basically we looked at it in

there. It looked okay. But he couldn't have grip strength and throw the ball in the locker room. It was a little bit painful for that.

We need to at the end of the day out exactly what's going on, have an MRI, look into it.

Q. Can you talk about Gunner's play, especially three really lengthy, time-consuming play, how you thought he performed?

KIRBY SMART: Incredible. The players believe in Gunner. They love Gunner. The juice that he brought and the passion and energy. He lives with three of four of those guys, Drew, Oscar, some of them. It gave us an added boost of energy. They were fired up. They were trying to keep him composed.

I felt the offensive staff did a good job helping Gunner out with the way they called the game. He did a good job executing.

The only mistake he had, I feel it was partially on us, he got the call in early, he didn't get the call out. He didn't have time to evaluate what they're doing. He sees that, can pick it up. We were down in the shot clock. He had the third down. He throws the pick there that could have been costly.

I mean, the kid played just tough as nails. He hasn't gotten to play much this year. That's the hardest part. You don't get a chance to play these guys. The Florida State game is probably the most he's played.

But can't say enough about his toughness, character, whatever you want to say. The guy is a phenomenal leader. He made some good plays. I think everybody else rose up around him.

Q. Talking about everybody rising up around him, I think at halftime they had two to one possession on you guys. He finish as I said the game with more time of possession. Your offensive line, was there a moment where they were kind of challenged to go and move people so you could run the ball and help Gunner? Did that develop as the game went on?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I got on 'em at halftime. I was disappointed. I think we got a good offensive line. We got good backs. It wasn't that they were stoning us. We couldn't get the run game going. I didn't feel like it was just mashing us. We would get three or four. It's hard to run the ball in the SEC. They're the number one defense in the country for a reason.

Man, if we were going to have a chance to win, we are going to have to rally around Gunner, we are going to have to be able to run the ball. We challenged the offensive line.

I do think as we went, we're physical. You wear people down on snaps, long drives. They did it to us. There was long drives it felt like for them.

Look, it's a line-of-scrimmage game. Sark knows that. That's why he recruits the way he does. He gets big people. We get big people. That is the difference in our conference and the other conferences.

Everybody can find skilled players, everybody can find quarterbacks, receivers, DBs. But the mass in the defensive line and offensive line is the difference in there. Tonight ours helped us in the rushing game. It's probably the only stat we outperformed them in, was rushing.

Q. I can't remember the exact moment, when Arian recovered that fumble to save points, what was that like?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't even remember either. Nate made a great run, broke through there. It looked like the guy did a great strip-out. Arian like a missile dove in between two of their players and recovered it.

I feel like that ended in a field goal. I had a tough decision on fourth and three to go for it or take the points. I felt like our defense was playing good enough that taking the points would be fine and we would hold them. We had a lot of momentum at that point. I think they came back and scored a touchdown.

Q. Can you walk us through the decision to go for it on fourth down from your own 30 yard line. Can you talk about Trevor's performance.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, to me Trevor Etienne, no respect to Daylen, I love Daylen, he had a big game and got the MVP. Trevor Etienne was the MVP. He came and said, Coach, I want to play this game. I came to this school because I want to win a championship.

He stood up in front of the team, told the team, I don't know how you feel about this game because I haven't been here. Y'all have played in it a lot and I haven't. I want to play in this game. This game means something to me. I want to win this championship. It's part of the reason I came here. I want to win a SEC Championship.

He spoke from the heart. I knew right then, this dude is going to play if he can. He plays physical. He's got cuts. We got good backs, but he made some special runs

tonight that gave us some juice and energy. He took some pressure off of Gunner.

The fourth and three, the fake punt?

Q. (No microphone.)

KIRBY SMART: Again, we talked about it earlier. I felt we were losing momentum. We needed a spark. That gave us one. You're playing with your backup quarterback. You got to be willing to take some risk at that point and get some things going.

Q. Did Gunner sustain a concussion?

KIRBY SMART: No, I think he's fine. He was prepared to come back in the game. We won the game on the play that he was out. So he was fine.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations. Best of luck in the CFP.

KIRBY SMART: Thank you so much.

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