

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Hoover, Alabama, USA

Georgia Bulldogs

Coach Kirby Smart

Press Conference



COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Good morning. Welcome to day two of SEC Football Media Days, the 2021 version. I do want to say thank you to our friends at Regions Bank for their support of our activities this week.

It's my privilege to introduce Kirby Smart, who enters his sixth season as the head football coach at Georgia. He's guided University of Georgia to four consecutive New Year's Six games. He has been involved with his family in raising funds and contributing to charities in the Athens area, including the Clark County Children's Home, Boys & Girls Club, the Downtown Academy.

Kirby and Mary Beth were front and center back in March in Greenville, South Carolina, for the SEC Women's Basketball Tournament championship game, supporting the Georgia Bulldogs, who played University of South Carolina that day for the SEC Tournament championship.

Kirby began his summer at the Regions Pro-Am in a foursome with me. I would take whatever he says about my game of golf with a grain of salt because it's the last time I touched my golf clubs all summer.

It's my privilege again to introduce the head coach of the University of Georgia Bulldogs, Kirby Smart.

KIRBY SMART: Thank you, Commissioner Sankey, for those kind words. And I will say, since he brought it up, he is a mighty fine golfer. He poor mouths better than coaches do, and his drives are longer than some of the pros we played with and straighter. I was very impressed with his golf game in Birmingham.

Commissioner Sankey does a great job leading this conference. He doesn't need me to say that, but I appreciate the leadership, especially navigating what we've navigated in the past 15 to 16 months. He's been incredible. He's got 14 head coaches in football that all are pulling in different directions, and he manages that with the best of them. He's tremendous. I learned a lot of

leadership from him. He's been great.

I'd also like to thank our SEC medical task force, the people who give their time -- I wish that somebody would do an article on the amount of time that Ron Courson, our athletic trainer, who does a tremendous job, he's the head of the SEC medical task force, he spent on Zoom in the past year. He is relentless. He's in constant pursuit of finding a better way of helping us have the season we had last year and also moving forward into this year. So their staff's done a tremendous job.

The leadership at UGA that I get to work under, President Morehead, Greg McGarity, who's now done, and Josh Brooks, who's incredible, they're great leaders. They're great people. They've done a wonderful job making it easy to be the head coach at the University of Georgia, and I appreciate what I've done for us.

Also, I would like to mention this will be the 50th anniversary season at the University of Georgia for our first five African American football players that enrolled. So we're going to have an opportunity to honor those men. They came and spoke to our team. They did a wonderful job when they came and saw them -- Horace King, Clarence Pope, Larry West, Richard Appleby, and Chuck Kinnebrew. Those five men will be recognized for what they've done, being trailblazers. They were incredible when they came and spoke to the team, and I really enjoyed getting to meet those guys, and we look forward to honoring them at a home game this fall.

There's also a loyal Dawg fan and UGA grad I'd like to send well wishes to. She also happens to be part of my family, my sister-in-law, Annie Lycett Toothaker (phonetic), and she's beginning her battle with breast cancer starting this Friday. We wish Annie the best, and we love you, Annie, and we can't wait to see you beat this tough battle.

With that said, on a lighter side, I'd like to share a quick story from the off-season that I got to experience with my kids. I don't think enough people really acknowledge the time that coaches spend recruiting, especially this June. I don't think we had one day in June that we didn't have somebody come visit our campus when it was permissible.



So it was constant, and they came, and people came from all over, and our staff answered the bell and hosted a lot of prospects coming out of the COVID time and did a wonderful job.

I was able to spend a lot of time in July with my family and wanted to share a quick story. I have three kids that all play different sports. So I get to spend time with my daughter, Julia, at AAU basketball. We travel all over and get to watch her play. Then I get to watch my son Weston play tennis, and I spent four nights recently in Rome with some rainouts watching USTA tennis. Then my son Andrew playing baseball, we get to go around and travel.

Quick story. When we go to Augusta for five straight days of All-Star baseball, five days of one-game-a-day baseball, I take my other two, Julia and Weston, to a restaurant. We get to eat there at a fancy little hamburger place in Augusta. Several people come over and want autographs. I get to give a couple autographs as being a head coach in the SEC. I held a baby, took a picture, did several autographs with young men.

And I had an elderly lady come over to our table and say, You must be somebody famous. I said, No, ma'am, I certainly don't think so. She said, Are you a professional golfer? I said, No, ma'am, I'm not. You're thinking Augusta, right? Then she said, Are you a NASCAR driver? I said, no, ma'am, I'm not.

By now, my kids are kind of giggling, and the last one she said, Are you a track star? And my daughter almost spit out her food and just thought it was hilarious, and at this point, I said, No, ma'am, I coach football at the University of Georgia.

I always say humility is a week away, so it was pretty humbling to have the elderly lady accuse me of being a NASCAR driver, golfer, and also a track star, which couldn't be anything further from the truth.

But I got to spend a lot of time with my kids. That's what it's all about to me, being with those children, being able to watch them play their sports. That's my passion. That's what I do in my free time when I'm not getting to recruit. It's big I got to do that. It's also important that our players see us as coaches, as real men and fathers.

The two young men we were able to bring today, man, I'm excited. Everybody is always excited about their guys, but if you get an opportunity, you won't find a better interview than Jordan Davis. Jordan Davis is from North Carolina. He's a religion major. He's a big man. He's been upwards of 370 before. He's been down around 330. We encourage him to be closer to 330. But he has been a big

part of our defense. One of the number one reasons we've been able to stop the run and be one of the top defenses in the country at stopping the run is because of Jordan Davis.

But he's a lot better person than he is a player. His mother, we recruited, and she's a great lady. To have him here representing the University of Georgia today, please spend time with him and ask questions. He's very intellectual and fun to be around, and he's a great personality.

And then JT Daniels, a product of transfer portal that came to us last year, has worked his tail off, very humble, hardworking, diligent, a film guy, a guy that studies film as hard as anybody. Todd Monken and our offensive staff have done a tremendous job with JT and continue to do that to grow him as a player.

So I'm excited to have those guys here. He's a psych and sociology major as well. So those guys will be here to talk to you today.

We've got a new football facility I want to brag on. It wouldn't be possible without our administration and fan support, but it's incredible. Brand-new, largest weight room in the country, new locker room, new coaches offices, new training room. And I kid Ron Courson all the time, he's the best in the country at being an athletic trainer, but he's also the best in the country at acquiring square footage because he has the largest athletic training facility that I've ever seen, and he's done an incredible job with our players, their rehab.

For you guys that don't know, most of our pro players now come back to work out and train with us. So they've got an unbelievable facility with which Ron can treat guys medically, and we're ahead of the game when it comes to that. So I'm excited about that.

I could sit here and brag and talk about the things that Greg talked about, four straight New Year's Six bowl games. We'll have the most players playing in a postseason this year graduated than we ever have. We've got 29 players drafted over the last four years, nine last year, was the most we've ever had.

There's a lot of things that I could brag on and you guys could print, but the one thing I want to drive home being up here, it's so important to me the messaging that you understand: Our players collectively came together last year during a lot of the social inequities and injustices across the country, and they wanted to have a team meeting. They wanted to bring about change. They wanted to be agents of change.

One of the things that spawned from this meeting was I kept preaching I want some action. I don't want it just to be words. I just don't want it to be lip service. I want some form of action. And a group of our players said, let's form a group named Dawgs for Pups. Cortez Hankton and Courtney Gay have headed up that group, Dawgs for Pups, and they have been phenomenal in our community.

A couple things they've done I want to really hit home. They've raised over \$100,000 for Wi-Fi in the Athens/Clark County area so that every child will have an opportunity to do online learning throughout the last year. A lot of kids at home don't have Wi-Fi, don't have that capacity. Our players did that, not anybody else, not the coaches, nobody made them do it. They chose to do it. They had a food drive, where they raised over 30,000 pounds of snacks and food for local community shelters and also kids in schools. They also raised \$100,000 for Downtown Academy, which Greg mentioned, which underprivileged kids get to go to that school.

And they continue to work today -- when we left last week, they were going out and read to 13 of the 14 elementary schools across Clark County, promoting reading to these children.

So all those accolades, all the great things we've been able to do at the University of Georgia, the thing I'm most proud of is what Dawgs for Pups are doing. It's a nationally recognized grassroots initiative that Cortez and Courtney have headed up, spearheaded. And that's one of the positive things that's come out of the conversations we were able to have last year and meaningful things we were able to do. I'm very proud of what those young men have done and continue to do.

NIL. I'm going to talk about NIL without you guys raising the question because I think it's important to understand. Our young men in the sport of football, in all athletics really, and student-athletes, are getting an opportunity that has not been afforded to anyone before them.

You think back to the likes of a Hines Ward or a Champ Bailey at the University of Georgia, an A.J. Green, a Todd Gurley, what they would have been able to do with NIL.

These young men and women have earned this opportunity. We are so excited for them. The opportunities are really limitless.

I don't think personally that it's going to blow up college football or change anything substantially. What we have really been focused on is the education of our student-athletes. You are now putting on 18 to 21, 22-year-olds tremendous time demands. They already

have time management between being a student, being an athlete, and doing everything we ask them to do, and now they have extra demands placed on them.

We also have been very educating in selection process of what they choose to do. I think that's one of the key ingredients. I got a text from Quavo, who's an avid Georgia fan. A lot of people in this room probably don't know who Quavo is. The first text I got was two weeks after NIL started, and he said, Coach, please tell the players be selective who they put their brand with. Don't just do anything. He used the term "thirsty." Don't be thirsty. Be selective in what you do, selective in how you handle your branding. You've got tax issues now you've got to deal with.

There's a lot of education that we're doing in house to make this an advantage for our young men, and that's something that we continue to drive home with our players, and they understand.

We've got two young men today that are here, one has NIL deals, one that doesn't, and that's by their choice. We know there may be inequities within positions and things, but our team is very confident that we will manage that, and that will not be a distraction during our off-season, and I'm excited to see them handle that.

Expectations. That's the next one. I've got a quote for you here that really drives home what we think about expectations at University of Georgia. Success comes to those who are too busy to be looking for it. Say that again. Success comes to those who are too busy to be looking for it. That's Henry David Thoreau. For me, that's it. I'm too busy working. I'm too busy trying to do the next thing. I'm too busy trying to take the next step to give our team a competitive advantage to really worry about expectations. That's you guys' question today, that's usually what people want to know about, but for me, I'm too busy working to worry about that.

We want our team to think the same way. We've taken a very introspective look this year after the season last year. We did a lot of surveys, a lot of talking to our players, and one of the key words, the biggest thing came out is connection. When you're on a Zoom with somebody, it's hard to have a connection. When you're not allowed to sit within six feet of somebody, it's hard to have a connection. We had some players that didn't get to meet and know everybody on the team throughout the season because so much was done through Zoom and different methods of communication.

So connection is one of the key ingredients for this team. We have been very intentional about it. We've given up



football time. We've given up workout time to spend more time with each other, and that's beginning to pay off as we see it here in the summer with guys leading, guys getting in front of the group and leading skill sessions and being very active.

So I'm excited about that part. Proud of the expectations for this team. Our team doesn't back down from those expectations.

Then the next topic I'd like to hit on is vaccinations. Our roster is over 85 percent. So our group there is over 85 percent, and we're proud of that, but we're not stopping there. It's not about a number. It's not about a threshold. I think everybody wants to write who's over and who's under. What it's really about is being able to save our season, being able to keep our players safe. We want to keep our players safe. We want to keep our coaches and staff safe. We want to keep our family members safe, and that comes through vaccinations.

I share quickly and briefly with you one of the key ingredients. We had each of our coaches stand up, the guys that got vaccinated, and said, hey, why did you get vaccinated? Dell McGee, one of our African American coaches and running back coach, did a tremendous job. It moved me to hear him speak to our team and say, Guys, I'm from the same community you are. I got my vaccine for three reasons. Primary reason, I want to spend time around my family. He wants to spend time around his dad, his father. He wants to be around his family and be safe to do that. That's the primary reason he got it.

Second reason, he wanted to be a pillar in the community. He wanted to be a representative in the community. He wanted to show the people in his community where he's from, that it's safe and be a role model to do it.

And the third, probably most important, is he had had COVID before, and I didn't want to go through it again. For our players to hear that coming from Dell McGee, that was very impactful.

And Ron Courson and his staff have done a tremendous job -- I know I keep mentioning Ron Courson, but over last year, he is the MVP because we are where we are and we are moving forward -- because we're not stopping just because you get over 85 percent. We're trying to keep our team safe, keep our team at a competitive advantage so that we don't lose playing time with our players.

With that, I'll open it up for questions. I know I didn't talk much about the depth charts and the team, but I know you guys will ask those questions.

Q. Through your introspection and self-evaluation of last season, where do you need to be better to win the East this year?

KIRBY SMART: We need to be better everywhere. It starts with what we do. But the introspection was for us to find maybe a different way to do things and hear a different voice, and we've done that.

The weekly meetings that we've had, that we've drawn time away from football, have been incredible. The gains we received in players being able to confront each other. It's easy to say the guy's not doing his job, to demand him to do it right, but it's hard when you have a unified group pulling the same direction to be the outlier.

We've tried to make that more difficult through our introspection and through our meetings and through our growth as a team. I'm just excited to see the dividends of that in fall camp of where we can go and where we can get better.

Q. Do you think that for the elite players, the guys that are headed to the NFL, that the name, image, and likeness opportunities can benefit them as a way to expose them to the business side of football before they get to the NFL where it's even more of a business?

KIRBY SMART: Yes and no. Definitely, that experience can be valuable for them, but they probably are the ones that have to be the most careful with brand selection because, if your identity becomes the lowest on the totem pole just to get \$200, \$300, that's not going to be real good branding when you get the opportunity to go to the NFL.

Those guys probably need it the least although they're the most valuable, the face of the organization, the high draft pick, they need to be the most selective because what you brand yourself with doesn't change.

Q. In the past, you've said you only want to use the transfer portal on a need basis, so what needs do the three guys that you did bring in -- Arik Gilbert, Tykee Smith, and Derion Kendrick -- help fill?

KIRBY SMART: Well, the first two, the defensive backs, we're under our scholarship quota of defensive backs. We had two guys come out early, two guys come out of the portal. We're at a deficit just from scholarship numbers, not to mention experience. Those two guys bring an immense amount of experience.

With Arik, anytime you can get a skill player that can do things with the ball, you're always looking to be dynamic.

You look at teams that have won the National Championship recently, they're most dynamic on offense and at the skill positions.

Q. To kind of continue the thought you just said about the dynamism on offense, the last handful of title winners, we've really seen quarterbacks who have been able to stretch the field and have really played at an elite highest level in the sport. Do you think JT has that type of arm talent to be comparable to those guys? Where do you need to see him grow to get there?

KIRBY SMART: Absolutely, he has that arm talent. Actually, I don't think that arm talent is the number one quality for being a great quarterback. There's a lot that goes into being an elite quarterback.

The two guys that were the last two years' national champions, they were really good quarterbacks. They were great decision makers. They were actually better athletes that people give them credit for. The decision-making process, touchdown-to-interception ratio, protecting the ball, using your playmakers, which both had really good playmakers around them, JT has those skill sets. Coach Monken has that experience doing it in the NFL. With Tampa Bay, they led the league in passing. We have the recipe for those things.

We've got to stay healthy, we've got to protect the quarterback, and we've got to find more skill players to make plays for us.

Q. I was wondering if you could tell me the story of how you became to have the cell phone number of Quavo. Secondly, another question, the NIL, how has that changed recruiting so far, and have you seen a trickle-down effect to high school?

KIRBY SMART: Haven't seen a trickle-down effect to high school. Has it affected recruiting? It's a discussion -- how has it affected recruiting? I don't think it's impacted recruiting, especially when you talk about SEC to SEC recruiting. We're under certain parameters, so it doesn't make for a competitive advantage.

The biggest concern, and I think Commissioner Sankey hit on it yesterday, is federal legislation would be nice because, if you looked and you combed across the country, not everybody's playing by the same rules. In other words, some schools are allowed to arrange deals. Some schools are not allowed to arrange deals.

In the SEC, our footprint has been very simplified, and it's the competitive balance is there. So there's not a distinct

advantage. That's not necessarily true across the country.

So it has not affected recruiting in a grand way. Does that change as more deals come out? Possibly.

As far as Quavo, that started back around the playoff run, National Championship run, he reached out, communicated through a couple of our players. He's come and spoke to our team before. I have a lot of cell phone numbers in my phone.

Q. Can you just talk about the importance of having a spring practice in a summer when the team has really formed as opposed to kind of last year with the craziness of not having the whole team be able to go through a full spring and a summer to bring the group together.

KIRBY SMART: I can't even put that into words. I think the biggest difference is spring practice. Having spring practice and the summer workout program that is traditional, in terms of conditioning, getting yourself ready for the heat, we didn't even have that last year. So you can't even put a measurement on that, not to mention a new quarterback with a new coordinator. So it was extremely different.

You don't appreciate spring practice until you don't have it, let's just say that. A lot of states in the United States don't have spring practice for their high school programs, so the development of those young men is impacted.

The footprint of the SEC, almost every state has spring practice, and you can see why in the roster that we have, with the young guys who have been impacted of having a spring practice. I'm talking about mid-years and players last year that didn't get it.

Q. Sort of speaking on that spring practice thing, how have you seen the relationship between JT and Todd Monken grow in this somewhat normal off-season? And how critical is that relationship, especially between a quarterback and an offensive coordinator?

KIRBY SMART: It's the biggest relationship there is because it's not a set of positions. Every other position has multiple starters, different guys that play. At quarterback, it's not typically that way. Whoever your starting quarterback is, he has to have direct communication.

You treat a quarterback differently at times. You give him lines of communication to tell you things he likes and doesn't like, and they have it. Todd does a great job speaking with JT, and JT understands what he likes to do. JT does a great job of making sure that he's keeping skill

players accountable for what they have to do and demanding excellence.

I appreciate the thought that JT puts into the game plan. I appreciate the thought that he puts into the guys playing positions around him. That shows he's a true quarterback and a true leader.

Q. I want to ask about Mike Bobo. Just what's that relationship been like going back to y'all's playing days together, and what do you think Auburn is getting in having him be offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach?

KIRBY SMART: Mike and I go way back. Both of our fathers were high school coaches and crosstown rivals. We grew up competing against each other and then got to live together in college.

He's a dear friend. Close to their family. Excited for him to be back in the SEC. I think he makes the SEC a better conference. Glad to get him back this way.

Q. Obviously, Shane Beamer was on your staff for a couple of years. What do you remember most about Shane as an assistant and working with you? And now seeing him on the head coaching stage as well, what comes to mind, and what is that like to see?

KIRBY SMART: The preparation he puts into special teams, tight ends play, whatever he's in charge of, he spends a lot of time and takes a lot of pride in the performance. That's what successful people do. They take a lot of pride in their performance. They want it to be right.

I like to think it's a demanding place that we work at, and he did a tremendous job meeting those demands.

Q. Kirby, can you explain kind of the back story of Jordan Davis deciding to come back to school. I think there's a lot of people who watched the Peach Bowl and assumed, after the performance he had, that he would go off to the NFL.

KIRBY SMART: It's not a big back story. We have a process we go through of educating our players. We get them information. Jordan was very deliberate about "I want to get information, Coach. I'm not making a decision prior to." In this day and age, I don't know that that happens all the time. I think a lot of kids make their mind up, it's a predetermined decision, and he didn't do it that way.

He's got wonderful guidance at home. His mom, Miss

Shay, that's his why. Tray Scott has done a wonderful job with his relationship with Jordan. Jordan wanted to graduate. It's really important to him that he graduates. He wanted to have a better season. He wanted the opportunity to do what so many SEC players have been able to do, to move up, and a lot of times the financial reward for moving up is greater than going right where he is.

He enjoys the college game. I think he's excited about playing in Charlotte. He gets to go back to his hometown and open the season there.

Q. Kirby, I wanted to follow up on Derion Kendrick. How did the opportunity for you to add him come about? I know obviously he hasn't been on campus too long, but what's the significance of adding an all ACC player like that, as you said, in a secondary that didn't even have the scholarship quota?

KIRBY SMART: D.K. is a kid that we knew through recruiting. We recruited him at University of Georgia, but Coach Muschamp also recruited him at South Carolina. Both of us felt like we had a good feel for his family and his dynamic there. He's a young man that comes from a program that's been very successful. He's played and had a lot of experience.

When you look at what the portal took away from us and we lost, we were able to gain as well. I think that's an interesting situation when you look across the board at what's going to happen to the future of college football, whether it be NIL, combination of portal, of the haves and have nots, and that line of parity separating even more because we were able to get a guy that had a lot of great experience playing, and we needed someone at that position, having lost four DBs. They all got drafted. It was a dynamic situation we had to replace.

Q. Demetrius Robertson headed over to Auburn. What are they getting out of him as a player, and are you looking forward to seeing him again during the season?

KIRBY SMART: D. Rob is a tremendous young man. He's a kid that I feel like I've known -- I mean, I can go all the way back to the years at Alabama when we were recruiting D. Rob as a young player. Then I come to Georgia, continue to recruit him, don't get him, get him by transfer, and now he's going to graduate this summer and be able to go to Auburn.

I'm so excited for D. Rob because he's a great young man. This young man did everything the right way. He's got a lot of speed. He's a vertical threat. I know Bobo and those

guys at Auburn are excited to get him.

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