

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Atlanta, Georgia, USA

## Georgia Bulldogs

## Coach Kirby Smart

### Press Conference



**GREG SANKEY:** Next up, Kirby Smart. Kirby is the defending national championship coach obviously, two-time SEC Coach of the Year. Kirby and I postgame in Indianapolis had an interaction. We had two teams, you want to be respectful, victorious team and losing team. Really energetic postgame celebration. I've never seen a head coach running up and chest bumping as much as Kirby did after the victory. He started to do the same with me. I looked at him and say, If you do that to me, you'll probably knock me down and hurt me. We had a handshake moment.

His family was part of all that happened around the game in Indianapolis. The College Football Playoff has a foundation, supports a program called Extra Yards for Teachers. There's a 5K held every year around the College Football Playoff. I ran this year in the freezing cold along with Kirby's wife, Mary Beth, and his oldest son, Weston. Fun to see their family experiencing the full scope of the national championship events.

Georgia has played in the national championship game twice in the past six years, the other being here in Atlanta. As a player he led the SEC in interceptions in 1998 with 13 career interceptions, he still ranks sixth in the school's record book.

When he's not coaching, he's a father. Highly competitive in pickleball. I'll let you ask him about that. Since I made a Netflix reference yesterday, he and Mary Beth enjoy Netflix. They're fans of "Ozark" and currently, with their children, watching the show called "Stranger Things."

It's my pleasure to introduce the coach of the national champions Georgia Bulldogs, Kirby Smart.

**KIRBY SMART:** Sounds like my wife has given away all the secrets away. I wondered why she asked me the other day if her talking about pickleball was okay. She obviously had gotten requests from Greg.

Thanks, Greg. I appreciate all you do for our conference, our game. He works tirelessly alongside of our presidents. I'm very fortunate at the University of Georgia to have one of the best presidents in the business, President Morehead is the member or leader of so many committees. I can't even remember all the names of 'em. He does a tremendous job trying to make sure that our game is safe and that things are headed in the right direction. I appreciate what he does for us.

I want to go reverse order today. I usually thank you guys at the end. I would be remiss if I didn't thank you guys for the incredible coverage you give us. And this conference is second to none. I've been in other conferences, worked in other conferences, this is my 24th year being involved in the SEC. It literally is the best there is. You guys make it that way. I really appreciate what all you guys do.

I also want to take an opportunity to give a shout-out for the 50th anniversary of Title IX. I got a wife at home that played college basketball. That wouldn't have been possible without Title IX. And also am a girl dad. My daughter Julia is an athlete, runs cross-country, plays basketball. I want to thank the people and the leaders in the SEC who have promoted women's sports for a long time.

Our women's sports programs in the SEC are incredible. Most competitive there is of any conference there is out there in all sports. I love being able to honor that anniversary as well.

I'd also be remiss if I didn't talk about our opening game. The Chick-Fil-A kickoff game for us, I get to open against Oregon, go against a longtime friend, a guy that meant so much in our program in Dan Lanning. We open against Oregon right here in Atlanta. We're excited for that opportunity. We get a chance to represent the SEC right off the jump.

Our players are excited about that, and so am I.

I'm also going to go in reverse order and talk about the players we have here today. We got a special group here. I think anybody would be proud of the players they bring.



It's why you bring 'em. This group is really special to me. Stetson Bennett, we all know his story. If you guys ever wanted to do a documentary, this guy has been through it, when you look at what he's done. He's going to graduate this fall in economics. He's from -- I like to kid him, because people think he's from Blackshear. He's actually from Nahunta. If you want to do some research, look that up, Nahunta, and he was a transplant from Blackshear to Nahunta down in south Georgia. A great family, and is going to graduate in the fall.

Nolan Smith is now a math major. Soon to graduate. He's come back for his senior year. What an incredible personality he has. He's one of these players that pushes our team. I tell the story all the time about our players working out, as strength coaches and leaders in our organization, we don't like for our players to bend over. We feel like it shows weakness if you bend over during your runs.

Nolan was screaming so loud one day at our players, I had my young 10-year-old out there, Andrew. He was trying to keep up with the players running 40s. Nolan screamed and yelled about being bent over. I was looking at Andrew, my son, and he was bent over, and he popped up real fast. When Nolan screams at you, you wake up quick. He demands a lot of respect in our program because of the way he works. He's from Savannah, Georgia.

And then the third guy we were able to bring was Sedrick Van Pran, who's been our center, kind of our caller of fronts. He was a tremendous guy to recruit. He does everything the right way. He's from New Orleans, he's a communications major, and one of our guys that we think is a leader on our team and a part of an offensive line unit that's got a lot of guys returning.

I'm excited about those three players. I hope you'll spend time, talk with them, visit with them, get to have a good time with them.

One other quick story I wanted to share about Nolan. He's kind of the jokester on the team. He likes to crack jokes and do things. Around December 23rd of last year, we were planning for Michigan, the Playoff run. We had a team Christmas party, and we had a team meeting before it. I was up in front of the team, everybody was there, we had a little roll call check, checking the seats.

Nolan wasn't there. He comes running in. He had a box in his hand and said, Coach, Coach, the team bought you a Christmas present. Well, it was Just for Men hair coloring to help out with these grays that I got going on here. I thought it was hilarious, he thought it was hilarious. He keeps everything loose for the guys. I didn't make him run

but about 30 sprints for that. He's a fun guy to be around, needless to say. You guys will spend time with him today.

We started this thing off last year with the quote: Success comes to those who are too busy to be looking for it. Well, we embraced that last year. Guess what? That doesn't change. For our team, it's embedded in what we do.

We didn't build this program on hoping for one-year-wonders or hoping for one opportunity. We built the program to be sustained. You sustain it by what you do every single day.

This program was built to be here for a long time. We have an unbelievable footprint with which we get to recruit. So the five-hour radius of Athens, Georgia, gives us a chance to be around some of the best football student-athletes there are in the country. We'll continue to recruit those, develop those. Also going nationally.

But the team we have coming back, I've done the rounds this morning, I'll bet you at least 50 people have asked me the question, so feel free when we open up for questions to ask me, the concern there is for complacency.

That does not concern me in the least. To be complacent, you have to have done something and achieved something. The men on this team for this season have not done that. They have not. We had 15 players that have now gone to NFL camps or draft picks. They're gone. We have some returning players, but they're hungry as ever.

People ask the question, How does it feel to be hunted? We will not be hunted at the University of Georgia. I can promise you that. The hunting we do will be from us going the other direction. We're not going to sit back and be passive about.

Our guys have asked questions, and we've done a lot of studies on how the mighty have fallen. We have skull sessions, 15-minute meetings, 20-minute meetings and breakout groups. We talk about how the mighty have fallen. I'm talking about in business, sports, history. You learn from the mistakes of others.

For us, it really steers down to one cultural belief: That we have a connection that's greater than our opponent. We're all going to be tough, we're all going to be physical in the SEC, but can we be better connected together? Can we have 1 plus 1 equals 3? For us, 1 plus 1 equals 3 means we get more together than we do apart. This team believes that.

I'm excited about this team because there's a lot of opportunity. People say, Do you have the talent? Do you

have enough talent within your program? We have plenty of talent. What we lack right now is experience. That's our job as coaches, to put those guys in a position to be successful and react in the calm manner and have the experience they need to play well against Oregon. That game will help set us up for the SEC gauntlet we have coming up after that.

With that, I'll open it up for questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. What did you learn during the title run that can help y'all this upcoming season?**

KIRBY SMART: I think the biggest thing is time management for us during that time. We probably did more work in that championship run than we did in previous years. So the previous Playoff we had, we didn't practice as many days in pads, we didn't condition as much as we did in this one. We felt like that was a very integral part to our team, is could we be the best conditioned team when we played Michigan, when we played Alabama. That was something that we really honed in on and thought was important.

Our players bought into it. You can't go in a room and say, Hey, guys, we're going to run extra after practice, and they're going to feel good about it. They got to believe it. So we had a small group that felt like that was important, and they did it. That was probably the one thing pushing the guys at the end of the year more than we usually do.

**Q. You said after the spring game that this team needed to find its own identity. With fall camp just around the corner, do you have any indication of what this team's identity might be?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, hungry. I talked about it earlier. There's a hunger among this group. A lot of guys want to prove that they can replace the other guy. They don't want to be the other guy, they want to be the next guy. You look across the board, we had some high-profile players on defense and offense when you count the backs and receivers that we have to replace those guys. The hunger comes from the opportunity the talented players behind them have.

I'm excited. Complacency is something that happens to people, they don't look what's going on. We don't have that problem. There's not a day we don't wake up and think what can we do to make our program better, and our players are doing that right now.

**Q. I notice second game of the year you're playing**

**Samford. Coach Hatcher, as well. If you could talk about your experiences at Valdosta State in the Gulf South Conference and kind of coming full circle, if you will, in game two.**

KIRBY SMART: How long you got? I could tell you about a 20-hour bus ride I took to Arkadelphia. I can tell you about Texarkana, all the places I went in Mississippi that I didn't know existed.

It's where I cut my teeth as a coach. There were some really long bus rides. We built our own lockers. I was hired for \$5,000. He later promoted me to 10,000 after I did academics and a salary cap on Division II, which you work off of equivalencies, you don't have full rides.

I learned a lot while I worked at Valdosta State. You only learn trial by fire, and I certainly appreciate Coach Hatcher for giving me that opportunity. He's at Samford, which is my father's alma mater. My dad played at Samford and was a college football player there. So it's always unique when we get to play Samford, because my dad gets to pull for his old school.

Hatcher is a good friend. He's done a tremendous job.

**Q. You alluded to this earlier. You've been a part of national championship programs with Georgia and Alabama. You've also seen the other side of that coin. What's the biggest differences and similarities in the off-season and being able to manage expectations as you prepare for an upcoming season?**

KIRBY SMART: I think they're all different. I go back to my first year at LSU. People don't realize they were coming off a national title. I was not part of that. But we had a tremendous team coming back, like uber talented. A lot of draft picks.

That was probably one of the toughest jobs that's ever -- because you had complacency. You had guys that were going to be first round picks, no matter how they played, off of how they played the year they won the national championship. And then you fast-forward through the four that were able to win in Alabama, you have experience.

Right now our staff at Georgia, I have a tremendous staff. Probably the best staff I've ever had since I've been there in terms of continuity. We had four coaches change, but the four new coaches we've gotten have jumped onboard, grabbed things. They know how to manage the situation. We got three or four coaches who have done this before in terms of having won a championship, understanding what it takes to do it again.



It's really every situation is different because I've been on teams that had a lot of talent coming back, and I've had a lot of them that I had to replace talent. We're having to replace a lot of really good football players. Great news is we've recruited well. We've got good football players. We need experience.

Complacency is not the concern. Experience is our concern. Our kids will buy into that, and we'll get them ready in fall camp.

**Q. You've obviously known Will Muschamp for a long time. What does he bring as a co-defensive coordinator this year?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Will has been a tremendous asset for me as a head coach because you value people who have been in your seat. So Todd Monken has been a head coach. Matt Luke was that way for us as well, he'd been a head coach. Mel Tucker had been in a lot of roles before he left us.

So I value that experience he's had and understanding the dos and don'ts, ways to do things, how to practice, how you run your organization. Also, it gives you the ability to delegate, too, take some things off your hand. I can focus my attention in other areas if he's in charge of something because he's done it.

He's been unbelievable. A great staff guy. Super positive with our players. Players enjoy and love being around Coach Muschamp. I'm thankful he and his family are on our staff and with our program.

**Q. Arik Gilbert seemed to have a lot of positive momentum going through the spring. How has the rest of his off-season gone? What do you expect from him?**

KIRBY SMART: I expect him to give us an A effort every day. When you give an A grade effort, you got the talent that he has, it's a great combination. He's a tremendous athlete. He's had to do some extra conditioning. He was a little heavy for the spring. He's worked really hard on bringing that town. He had a really good year academically, which was a big hurdle. He had to focus on his academics upon coming to us from LSU.

He got a great opportunity this spring. People forget Darnell and Brock were both out. The opportunity he got, he seized that opportunity to grow and develop. He will have to continue to do that to be a major contributor for us. He's bought into doing that, being a team player. There's a lot more to being a tight end than just catching the ball. He's bought into that.

**Q. Mykel Williams, can you talk about his development and what stands out about him?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, number one thing that stands out about him is his work ethic. You never hear anything about him academically. I look out my window, and I see him out there doing extra after every practice.

I left work the other day on a Sunday, and he's out there hitting a sled on Sunday. When you have a freshman that's out there on Sunday on his own, on turf, 115 degrees out there, he's out there striking a sled, something special.

He's talented. I'm excited for him. I can't say what his role is going to be right now because I don't know fully which way we'll use him, where we'll play him.

He's a great athlete. He's a great young man. He comes from a great family and a great program.

**Q. Lane Kiffin told us how much you enjoy talking about Alabama and Nick Saban when you come here. I want to ask you about object constancy, if you've ever heard that, number one. Number two, I guess it was a few years ago you said, if it ain't broke, find a way to make it better. Are there some things you're looking at at Georgia, coming off a national title season, maybe not broke, that you plan to make better?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we do a kind of intrusive look every year at what we can do, how did we do in red area, how did we do in turnovers, what are we doing wrong, how are other people doing it better? I think you know every college coach that's worth a dime, he's going to talk to other coaches and find a better way.

I give a lot of credit to Coach Monken and Coach Schumann. Both those two guys, they love getting on Zoom. They love talking to NFL coaches and figuring out a new way to do it. How deep do you play your safety? How do you run your mesh route? What's something new you're doing on the inside zone?

We're constantly looking to get better. Our staff does a lot of projects. We've got a lot of quality analyst guys that bring a lot of information to our staff and have made us a better program.

Yeah, we're constantly looking at getting better. At the end of the day, it's how do you use your players best. Who utilizes James Cook or Brock Bowers, a guy like Channing Tindall as a third linebacker? How are you using the skill set of your players?

That's what players want. At the end of the day, players want to say how are you going to utilize my skill set, what package can you take me as a rusher, me as a run stopper, me as a pass catcher, and utilize that skill set, and that's what we spend our time on.

**Q. You get to the national championship game, Stetson Bennett has been the scapegoat, it seems like, for almost two years as the quarterback. You're down one in the fourth quarter. Up until that point, he had thrown five interceptions in the two games against 'Bama. He was like 2 of 5 for like 14 yards in the second half. You still go back to the well, and he goes three for three, has a game-winning drive. What kind of sense of personal victory did that feel like for you trusting your own instincts on somebody that has been questioned so many times before on games against 'Bama?**

KIRBY SMART: I don't know that it was any personal vindication. It's what you do as a coach. I go off how we practice, what guys show us in practice. I'd seen Stetson Bennett make those plays repeatedly in practice.

The conversation with Coach Monken was to be aggressive and go play to win the game. You're not going to hide behind your quarterback and win a national championship. You got to go let him play.

I thought Coach Monken and the offensive staff did an unbelievable job bouncing back. Really fortunate in a lot of those opportunities early in the game. It wasn't a matter of Stetson playing poorly, it was self-inflicted wounds. We started inside the five, we had the penalty, we averaged second down over 10 yards. You're not going to win games doing that.

A lot of it was what we did. When we control what we do, do it the right way, Stetson can be a major factor. Look, Stetson is one of the least respected good players there is in this country. Guess what, we get to see it every day. The kid is a tremendous athlete, he's got good arm strength. People keep doubting him, and that's fine with me.

**Q. You mentioned in your opening statement that you feel good about the state of development at the University of Georgia. Stetson Bennett didn't start the season as your starter, but he finished the national champion. Given the state of development, how do you feel about the pipeline behind him? Have you identified a guy this spring? Has anybody stood out to step in in case you need him at quarterback?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, if you're a good coach, you don't go

into the season without thinking you got two or three guys that can come in and play. Especially in our conference, you're going to get hit, tackled, knocked back. He's probably going to run the ball some. That puts him at risk much injury.

Our quarterback room right now, I'm extremely confident of. Carson Beck has been in the program, done a lot of good things. He was a guy that won a state championship in high school. Did a tremendous job.

Brock Vandagriff is a tremendous athlete who has got a tremendous upside. He's gotten better and better.

Those two guys are growing rapidly because of the number of reps they're getting. Gunner Stockton spent the spring with us, a good athlete we're excited about.

I feel really confident about our quarterback room, confident because we have Stetson returning, but confident because we have well-coached backups as well.

**Q. I know you worked with him extensively at the University of Alabama, then two years you brought Scott Cochran with you. He had to take a step away from your program. He tweeted out: Meaning more than the national championships he won at Alabama and Georgia is being one year sober. What does he mean to your program? How did you support him to help him come back and be a big part of your program?**

KIRBY SMART: We commit to having conversations. The commitment to Scott was that he's committed to our program and getting better. You look at what he's done with our players. We got a lot of exceptional people in our organization, Jonas Jennings, Bryant Gantt, Scott Sinclair. I could go on forever.

Scott Cochran spends a tremendous amount of time with our players on a personal level. They value the relationship that he creates with them. He spends time with them, meaningful time with them.

I think a lot of our players saw the human side with Scott, that we all know addiction is real. It probably affected me as the leader of the organization for the first time, to have someone on your staff be involved with that.

I got a lot of help from outside sources on how to do it. I'm so proud of what he's done and how he's fought back to bring himself back and be the husband and father that he's always been. He's a tremendous husband and father. That's first. He's a mentor to the players on our team.

He's got tons of players that played at Alabama that still reach out to him and talk to him. They come and work out at our place and see him because they value that relationship that he had with them.

He's a special person that's meant a lot to a lot of people. We've stood there by him and supported him, and we'll continue to do that.

**Q. Circle back to Stetson. You mentioned about how you think he's one of the least respected good players. Looking more as a leader, can you speak to what differences, if any, you see in him as a leader now as opposed to when he first stepped into the starting job?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think now he has a little more - what's the right word - support because he is the guy. It's hard for players around you to have conviction you're the guy if you're not the starter. He wasn't the starter at this time last year, at this time two years ago. He started intermittently throughout two years ago, then once he won the job, I think he's created a little bit of momentum with our players, our skill players, because there's not a doubt there.

They understand he knows the system. He can get them the ball. He can throw the ball vertically down the field, deep comebacks, he can scramble and make a play with his feet. I think they value that.

That's given him a little bit more credibility, which credibility to me is earned, right? He earned that by the way he played at the end of the year and most of the season. He continues to do that the way he leads out there on seven-on-sevens, practices and things.

**Q. Earlier Nolan Smith described the defense as the oldest brothers of the group. What do you expect from this defense this season and moving forward?**

KIRBY SMART: My expectation for our defense is to be fast and physical. Look, we don't shy away from the fact that we've had success on defense. I can't tell you how many times I've gone to recruit a kid, they said, Well, they told us y'all weren't going to be good on defense this year, you're losing to everybody. They said that last year, two years ago.

Look, if you go recruit really good football players, you're fast and physical, you'll play good defense.

'Good defense' sometimes is a loose term in college football right now because giving up 20 sometimes is a good defense.

We don't like to change our standards. We know we're going to have a good defense year in and year out. We're going to have different strengths and different weaknesses. Nolan will certainly be a big part of that.

**Q. When it comes to NIL, how does your program approach it? Is there anything you think needs to change about how it's structured in college football?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, the pivotal question, right? Everybody waits for that one for all the conversation.

The NIL program we have in place, we have a Classic City Collective run by Matt Hibbs who does a tremendous job. It's built on being sustainable. I don't think what's going on in college football right now at some places is sustainable, meaning, Can you do that year in and year out and repeat that? Can you honor the commitment that some people are trying to make to kids to get them to go to their school? It's not good for college football, what's out there.

What's good is NIL is good on the basis of what NIL is based on, okay? For Dan Jackson to be a walk-on from Gainesville, Georgia, come in and get an opportunity to earn money for his education, that is good. For a young man that has a father that's on dialysis in south Georgia and he can't support his father unless he goes back and works or he gets NIL, that is good.

We have 95 players right now with NIL deals that are on our roster. That's incredible, the depth of that. There's so much good there.

It's the guardrails. It's the parameters that we need to protect our game. Not only protect our game, guys, it's protect young men, okay?

We may have had the highest-paid defensive lineman last year in NIL in Jordan Davis. We had the highest-paid tight end in Brock Bowers. Kelee Ringo I would argue is probably one of the highest-paid corners there is in NIL. So NIL can be a good thing and they can learn to manage money at a young age.

But to use it as inducement to get a young man to go to your school is not good for anybody or the game. I don't have the answer for how to guardrail that, but NIL has been good to Georgia and it's been good to our players and it will continue to be.

**Q. With your tight end room being all the rave right now, how do you think the new blocking rule will affect tight end play at Georgia?**

KIRBY SMART: It shouldn't affect us. The new blocking

rule, which I was a part of the committee that put that in place, we're not a big team that cuts and blocks that way. So it's a safety issue. We like to block man-to-man, face up. We're not a big cut team. We don't rely on the cut block so it shouldn't change a lot for us.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time this morning.

KIRBY SMART: Thank you, guys. Appreciate what you do.

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