

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Dallas, Texas, USA

**Georgia Bulldogs**

**Coach Kirby Smart**

Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: Good morning. Appreciate you guys coming out. I do want it to be duly noted that I got in here without a credential today. First time I've gotten through that door there after the news I heard yesterday.

Thanks, Greg. I really appreciate the leadership he provides for us. I've been very fortunate to have nine years. I mean, that is just crazy to think about. This is my ninth one of these.

Greg has done a tremendous job, from every meeting I've ever been in, from every issue we've ever dealt with, the every-changing flow of college sports, the guy is incredible in the room with us, and I appreciate it.

I enjoyed Greg's message yesterday about all the other sports in this the SEC. Look, I am a son of the SEC. I counted 30 years since I went to the university of Georgia in 1994; 25 of the last 30 years I've spent in the SEC.

I love bragging about that and O love bragging about our sports. There is not a sporting event that I don't go to in Athens Georgia and watch the highest level of competition in all sports.

So a lot of credit goes out to all the other sports in the SEC, and this event is an chance to honor that. Greg did a great job of that yesterday. Just had a media member hit me with this and I wanted to share it.

Seth Emerson, one of the national writers, just hit me a few minutes ago. We were talking about the nine years, and he had a great line from the Indiana Jones movie I watched growing up. My brother Carl always loved Indiana Jones. The great line was: It's not the years, it's the mileage.

And I tell you, being an SEC head coach, that's a true statement. It's not the years, it's the mileage. It's been a great nine-year run for us at Georgia.

I'll start a little with my family.

Yesterday was the 18th year anniversary of my wife and I, Marybeth, and we are excited and honored to have spent nine of those 18 years in Athens, Georgia, where both of us were student-athletes. We got to spend that anniversary in the great city of Savannah at a Little League baseball game. You do what you have to do to spend time with your kids, and we certainly enjoy that.

My 16 year old twins, who I like talking about, are rising juniors now. I don't know geography and I don't know how well you guys know geography, but I have one who's in Fiji and one who is in Croatia on trips.

I looked at the globe last night, and it's hard for me because I'm a South Eastern Conference baby. I'm not a very worldly gentlemen. I have one in Fiji and one in Croatia, and I don't think you could be two further points apart from each other than they are right now.

But they're enjoying those trips and getting to kind of develop and further themselves. My wife loves traveling; I don't. She kind of one-upped me this year when I had a chance to go with my youngest son to Cooperstown, which Greg mentioned, and I had an unbelievable time in Cooperstown. Got visit the Baseball Hall of Fame and play in a lot of baseball games, and then went to Mississippi with my youngest son for a baseball tournament and spent three, four days there.

My wife decided to go to Amsterdam and go to a Taylor Swift concert. She is a huge Taylor Swift fan and took my twins there and said, if you're going to go all around the world playing baseball, I'm going to go to Amsterdam and enjoy Taylor Swift. She is a big fan.

Three guys we got here today, I want to speak on behalf of those guys. Give you a quick story to show you when you know you're getting old and it got me yesterday. Not to pick on Coach Saban because I got a lot of kind words to say about him coming up.

I always thought that like, oh, man, I saw him as older when he was coaching and I saw myself as younger, and now I'm looking at it the like, man, I'm old. I'm riding in the



car yesterday with Mykel, Malachi, and Carson Beck. We are coming from the airport to the hotel. I am sharing conversation with Mykel and Malachi. Of course, what's everybody talking about yesterday? What is all college football players talking about? The NCAA football game, right, the new game that's out.

I'm just trying to get in the conversation and talk to them about it. I said, man, that game is pretty awesome. They are like, yeah, I can't wait to get to the hotel and I'm going to play it tonight. Everybody is talking about it. It's trending all over everything. I was like, how do they keep that thing in stores? It's got to sell out. How do they keep it in stores?

Mykel and Malachi just fell out laughing. They're like, Coach, they don't sell those things in stores anymore. They're not in the stores. I was so embarrassed, but I was glad they got a kick out of that. It made me realize how out of touch I actually am with how far things have come. You can just download it and go play. It's that simple. So the stores don't have to keep it.

But the three guys we brought today, Carson Beck, Malachi Stark, Mykel Williams. You know, Carson's parents, Tracy and Chris have done a wonderful job with him. He is a great example of college football.

The day and age when you go somewhere and you jump school to school, it's a popular trend, this kid stuck it out. He didn't get the starting job in a tough moment when the starter went down, and he lost the starting job to Stetson Bennett the week of the UAB two years ago, and then said you know what? I'm sticking with it. I'm going to persevere. I am going to show resiliency, which is one our core traits, and he did that. He was able to monetize that as well by staying and succeeding where his feet are.

He is a great elder for us and great example of resiliency in college football. Please visit with him today, as he's one of the leaders of our team.

Malachi, you know, he is such an incredible kid. His mom Tisha and Larry, they do a great job with him. It was a joy recruiting him. He is a local kid. He started for us since day one. So all the knocks and all the things said out there about you can't start as a freshman at Georgia, it's too hard to play on defense, the first game he ever was in, I guess Oregon, he started, and started ever since.

He's a quiet, humble leader. He is a very Christian young man. He represents our university the right way, and I'm really proud to have him here today.

Mykel Williams, his mom Shemekia and John are both

great people, and what a great job they've done. He's become very versatile for us in terms of what he does on the field. There is no greater value than what he does in the locker room because he works every day. He is physical, enjoys practice. He is a great leader for us. He should be a huge asset for us.

Please enjoy these guys and visit with them. They're indicative of the locker room we have and great guys to be around.

Couple words I want to say to Coach Saban, who meant so much to me in my career. First of all, the words he shared at the ESPYs the other night were incredible, very touching, very moving. What he's meant to myself, my family, as a mentor, as a friend, as a competitor, that drives to you get better.

There was never a day in 11 years I worked for him that we didn't share a room in some sort. Whether that was the defensive room, defensive back room, staff room, and I think it made me who I am today.

Because the demand for excellence is met by none other than him. So that standard that he set for me, day in and day out, he met himself. Every coach that ever worked with him or for him will tell that you he does it all himself as well.

He doesn't hold you to any different standard than himself. So a lot of the success I've had I give credit to him and thanks. I know he'll be critiquing me today, so I am looking forward to that as well.

But he has started responding to texts. I told people the other day, that's the first time ever. Either somebody has his phone or he learned how to text. That makes all of us in his circle of friends proud because we get to reach out to him.

We're dealing with new challenges this year. We don't have a chip on our shoulder in terms of people trying to use that as motivation. I've never used a failure from the previous year as motivation and never used the success of a previous year as motivation; we won't do that this year. That's not who we are.

We want to recreate ourselves to say in the best light we can. This team has been fun to coach. I tell people all the time we had 15 really tough spring practices, and that includes the spring game. I probably would only trade one of those in and say could I do it over. We got a lot out of those.

I enjoy being on the grass with this group. Fun to be with.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

We have a great locker room, we love each other, and they're working their butt off right now. We have four new coaches. That's a new challenge for us. I don't think we've had a situation where we had four new coaches. We got four new coaches coming in it.

I'm excited about the energy they brought, the buy-in they brought, learning our culture, and how we do things at our place. Some have been with us before and some at similar places, but I am really excited about the four new coaches.

And being able to retain Coach Muschamp. He was incredible because he's still an integral part of our program and he is also going to be able to watch his son play for Clark at Vanderbilt, so excited about that.

Every off-season we do a study and try to find something to look outside of football to redefine ourselves and recenter. It's great for me. I really think it's good to study successful people, whether in the sports industry or whether that's in the business industry.

This year we took Nike, who I've had the great pleasure of meeting Phil Knight and his wonderful wife Penny. Wish I could get some of that NIL money he's sharing with Dan Lanning, but that's other note.

The study of Nike for us has been incredible. I didn't know some of the things about when Nike originated. We took a week-by-week look in skull sessions, break-out sessions, as well as together and studied their model.

One of the first things we studied was the belief of assume nothing. I think that's so important in football, because when you assume something or you assume you know someone or that you know somebody's name that you're in the room with, you can take things for granted.

Just like starting over from a previous year, assume nothing. Assume nothing. Start from ground zero and build the team different than every other team; Nike did that. Assume nothing. Where does a name come from? If you assume you know everybody's name you may not know what that name means.

We had each player get up in front of the team and say what their first, middle, and last name and where that came from. I encourage you if you've never done that exercise in an organization, do it. You learn more about somebody when you know where they got their name from and what it stands for, what it means in their family and lineage.

It's very important and you get a lot of deep conversations to know somebody better, which when you're on the field with somebody and go to battle, you better be able to know

what their reasoning is. I really enjoyed that and our study of Nike.

With that, I want to be able to be judgmental of you guys' time and answer any questions you have, so I'll open it up.

**Q. In this new SEC, Georgia got a pretty tough road draw. Alabama on the road, Texas on the road, Ole Miss on the road, Kentucky on the road. Talk about your road schedule and how you are preparing your team for this tough 2024 schedule.**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, initially I was wondering how I got that draw, but we're not one to complain. We're one to be excited. I think when you step into the shoes of a University of Georgia football player, you accept that challenge is going to be there.

I mean, we kind of embrace that and we love it. I mean, what you didn't get to mention is we open with Clemson, too, one of the top programs in the country. So we're really excited about that. I think that motivates our off-season so that we have the right kind of approach to the off-season.

You know, our guys embrace that. As coaches we want to play the best. People forget that when you've spent time in the NFL, every week was like that. So when Texas and Oklahoma came into the conference, every schedule was going to get harder.

We embrace that. We look forward to it. We are excited for the challenge to go to some really tough places.

**Q. Much like your mentor, Nick Saban, when you compete at the highest level you do have staff changes. You mentioned the four guys you brought in. Was your thought on bringing in Travaris Robinson, and what does he bring to your staff?**

KIRBY SMART: First of all, he has a great pedigree as a player. He played in the SEC. One of the things you can never really justify or explain to people is the culture of the SEC. No. 1, recruiting. It's tough. It's hard. It's cutthroat.

You don't have experience in those battles it's hard to win them. He was a really good player. Played for coach Tuberville who has a lot of stories about T-Rob and the great job he's done.

I've always recruited against him and had respect for him on the road, the way he carries himself, presents himself, the fact he worked for Coach Muschamp. Coach Muschamp vouched for him and talked about the great job he has done, and brought in a tremendous energy into our secondary, which is a young secondary, and he got the

valuable time over with Coach Saban at Alabama, which is invaluable in terms of knowing how our program operates.

So I'm excited to have T-Rob. His family, he's got a wonderful family and I know he's excited to be with us.

**Q. You mentioned that moment at UAB with Carson Beck. When he reflects on that, moment he thought of it as an opportunity to say, hey, I'm not quite ready for this. I need to continue to develop. Stuck around for a couple more years before he was a starter. Is that a repeatable trait or common trait you can look for in future athletes that you recruit? It's important nowadays. Guys leave when they don't have an opportunity to play. Is it something you might be able to replicate in the future?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I would love to be able to replicate the DNA he has with which to respond to adversity that way. As you go recruit a kid, staying power is important now. I don't think there is a huge difference in the players we recruit. It's a difference when they stay in your program.

So the retention is really critical. We think the process we go through of the off-field training, on-field training, weight room training, football training is gonna pay off in the years they been there. Carson is a great example of that. All the years of practice and third down and pressure periods and blitz pickups paid off when he got to start.

That's not to say he wasn't ready at UAB. He may have been ready. We felt like Stetson gave us the best chance to win that game and he played lights out that game and never really looked back after that. Who is to say that Carson might not have done the same thing. He certainly responded the right way.

I wish we could inject a chip and say every kid had that response, but we know that's not going to be the case.

**Q. When you look at your schedule and the potential of playing 16, 17 games, do you think that will change how you guys manage maybe a lead or trying to get guys out of games earlier? Will it add any importance to the overall strength of your roster from 1 to 85?**

KIRBY SMART: Playing the schedule we play and improving the strength of roster, I don't know if that's the case. The way we go about practicing is critical. I believe in having a physical, tough camp. I don't think you back off about that. If you do, it may not matter about those games. If you're not physical enough at the line of scrimmage and tough enough and you don't demand excellence, because during the season there is only so much we can do to

create the toughness that we need at the line of scrimmage and the toughness we need as a overall football team.

Camp is tough. I think that's important that it remains tough. We did have to be smart to stay healthy. We have certain areas we have more depth, and you have to be smart and calculated about the risk you take of losing guys.

I think every coach is reflecting right now, okay, we may have a longer schedule. We certainly have a tougher schedule. How we play games is play to win. How we play at the end of the game, if we have leads, we're always look to get guys opportunities and grow players like Carson Beck getting in a lot of games when he was behind Stetson so they're ready when their opportunity comes.

**Q. You lost three senior leaders in the secondary: Javon Bullard, Tykee Smith and Kamari Lassiter. Who are some of the guys stepping in this off-season that you're excited about competing for those starting spots?**

KIRBY SMART: I'll correct you there. Two of those guys were actually juniors, not seniors. That's what really gets your program, when you lose two juniors in one room that are excellent players and have been unbelievable kids within our program. And they love football.

Now, they came to every practice this spring and they were getting ready to get drafted, and at every practice cheering on guys, coaching guys, the right kind of guys to have around your program.

They're tough losses. We got some good young players in the secondary. It's going to be really important they grow up fast. They are going to go against a really high tempo offense in Clemson to start. Our job is to prepare them. Get to go against a really good offense day in and day out with Carson Beck, so I'm excited about the guys we have in that room.

They'll step up to play. We have some experience in the safety position between Dan and Malachi, but it will be nickel position and the depth at those positions that's really critical.

**Q. Coach, how do you navigate the world of NIL where you have to participate in it to be competitive, but you also have players who lead with that and just want to get paid? What are your conversations like with recruits and current players and how do you navigate it all?**

KIRBY SMART: I think it's a mistake to assume that all players lead with that, or that's the primary objective. I



think that would be an insult to high school football players and really insult to all people being recruited.

I don't experience, I don't get to the finish line of official visits where that's the primary objective. If it is, we're probably not getting to that point. We're probably not going to be in the conversation.

Is that one of the key decision makers? Yes. Should it be? Yes. I'm happy that these kids get an opportunity to improve their situation or make money and give back to their families or in some cases their communities.

So that doesn't bother me at all. I have no problem navigating that. I've gotten less attached and said, you know what? If it's better for that young man because of a financial difference between us and another school, I respect that decision and opinion they have to make.

I have to worry about the players we do get, okay? I worry about the ones that we do sign, that they're the right kind of kids and they're coming for the right reason. That includes money; but it's not just money.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned wanting to play the best. You have Texas this year. Do you consider them to be one of the best, and what stands out to you about them?**

KIRBY SMART: Every team we play is the best that week. Please understand that. In the SEC humility is a week away. I have a ton of respect for Sark and the job he does.

Got to watch them play last year against several common opponents, got to watch them play in the playoffs. They have a tremendous recruiting base. They do a tremendous job in recruiting, that includes NIL and everything included in that.

They're a big, physical team. They are built like an SEC football team, so looking forward to an opportunity to come play them. What a tremendous matchup it will be.

**Q. What kind of impact did the Auburn game have on you guys' season last year, and what kind of challenges did that pose for you all?**

KIRBY SMART: Let's start with this: Auburn is one of the hardest places to play in the world. I know that from 25 years being a common opponent at Georgia and Alabama. When you step in that stadium you better being laced up, strapped up, and ready to go regardless of their record, regardless of the expectation, regardless of what the people in Vegas say.

You better be ready to play. I think Hugh does a tremendous job motivating his team. In the recruiting aspect, as he gets more and more of his players and style of play in there, which he got some guys this year. They're going to be a force to be reckoned with.

That game helped give us confidence that we could play from behind. Also let us know we're vulnerable and we had to improve on those. So enjoyed playing in that venue. I always have. It's one of the toughest places to go play.

**Q. With the 12-team playoff coming up, do you worry about attrition? Two teams will play at least 17 games. Do you think maybe abolishing the conference championship game for all leagues would help the matter.**

KIRBY SMART: You know, I'm not for doing that. I still think there is value in winning an SEC championship. The unique thing about the career that I've had coaching, I've almost won as many SEC championships as national championships, and I've won two national championships when I didn't win an SEC championship as a program. That is unique. I mean, it's not supposed to happen that way. So do I worry about attrition in terms of having more games? I worry about attrition having four teams. Every coach worries about attrition, right?

You have to do a good job maintaining your roster, staying healthy, practicing the right way, being smart, and I think being a watchdog is part of my job. I'm not a coordinator anymore. I want to watch the drills we do, see how we practice, make sure we can maintain health.

It's hard to do in the SEC. That's why you get a chance to recruit to 85 scholarships, so that you have depth. Can you get your younger players ready faster than your opponent is a huge advantage.

No, I don't want to see the conference championship go away. I think it's one the greatest venues in all of college sports, in all of sports.

The games we played in Atlanta have been some of the best, most memorable games that I've ever been a part of, and to take that away, I think there is teams that are going to look back at that SEC championship, and it's very meaningful, and I don't want to take away from that meaning.

**Q. Your defenses throughout your incredibly innovative. I was wondering, with offenses evolving, do you react to them or do you want them to react to you? And where did you go for the inspiration? Do**

**you go forward or go all the way back to the beginning of the game?**

KIRBY SMART: That's a long question that I can spend a lot time on, and I learned a lot from the defensive guy in the back of the room back there that you're always adapting. You have to adjust to them, but you have to dictate to them as well.

If you sit back nowadays and let offenses dictate to you, they can do enough things to drive down the field and be explosive and make big plays and score quickly that it can become frustrating. You have to have ways to create negative plays. I think every defensive coach would say that.

I do think looking forward and backwards is important. We have a relatively young defensive coordinator in Glenn Schumann. He spends more time on Zooms. He loves talking football. He spends time with NFL coaches, high school coaches. Some of the best ideas we have ever gotten defensively came from great high school minds in the state that we were coaching in because they came up with really innovative ideas because they defend these offenses sometimes before we do. I've always been enamored with that in-game adjustment of what we can give a kid or defense. They're always reacting, but you do want to dictate at times too by the way you pressure and the things you do.

**Q. You've played a lot of great games against the University of Alabama in your time. How do you expect those matchups to change with Kalen Coach DeBoer in charge?**

KIRBY SMART: I don't expect them to change. That is two great universities. You're talking about two teams that have been at the forefront of college football, and it's probably going to be that way for a long time.

Both great universities, both committed. The commitment to excellence at both places is really high. The standard that coach created there at Alabama and the standard we've created, those two are going to be matching up for a long time, and I think that's what is great about college athletics.

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