

CFP Semifinal at the Capital One Orange Bowl: Georgia vs Michigan

Wednesday, December 29, 2021

Miami Gardens, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Georgia Bulldogs

Kirby Smart

Press Conference



**PLAYOFF
SEMIFINAL**



Q. Earlier this year you said you can't out coach recruiting. Your defense is more talented on paper than any team in the country. What sort of flexibility does that depth provide your coaching staff?

KIRBY SMART: Well, I think the argument that they're more talented than anybody in the country boils down to how they play because talent gets you so far and effort and toughness are a lot of qualities that we demand here, and both sides of the ball on special teams. We're certainly excited about the defensive players we've got, and we're young at some positions on defense, and we're old at some positions on defense. It seems in my years of coaching that you have one or the other. I've been through some really experienced teams in the secondary, been through some really experienced front teams, and this team has a lot of experience in the front and probably not as much in the secondary, but each year it's different.

But this group has been fun to coach because they come to work every day. They've never really concerned themselves with outcomes and results. They've really just enjoyed working. They like to practice. They like being around each other.

I enjoy being around them. They've made it a joy to coach them. It's not every year you get to coach a group like this, so we've certainly been excited. I think Dan and the defensive staff have done a tremendous job with those guys.

Q. How much of an issue has COVID safety and protocol been in your preparations? Is it something you spend a lot of time logistically dealing with? Obviously has it affected your roster availability from players?

KIRBY SMART: You know, I think just across the country

as a whole, it's obviously -- you turn on the national news, it's the lead-in story. You look across the country and the impact it's had on other games, whether that be NBA, NFL, the bowl games that it's impacted. It's certainly had an impact across the country. Ron Courson and his staff have been unbelievable, just awesome. We've had protocols in place throughout the year. Probably not as strict earlier in the year as it was last year with the vaccination and really the low numbers and issues. When Ron saw things starting to spike, we increased our sensitivity to that. He's done a tremendous job of that really over prior to the SEC Championship, we increased a lot of things around our building and our awareness of our players and understanding what's going on. He's had four different times he's offered guys opportunities to get booster shots, and some of our guys have, some of them haven't, but they've really adhered to the policies we've asked them to and been able to steer clear for the most part.

We had a little bout the last couple weeks that we lost some guys, and we've gotten most of those guys back, and really that's the biggest thing is being at full strength when you have to be, and that's what we're aiming towards.

Q. Four years ago when you all were in the CFP, it was coming off of an SEC Championship win, it was new, there was all this energy, excitement, enthusiasm. This time around coming off a loss, how is it different? Is it good? Is it bad do you think?

KIRBY SMART: Oh, no, to be in the CFP is where you want to be. All the tactical motivation techniques you have for whether it's Texas, Baylor or Cincinnati in one of the New Year's Six bowls certainly creates a different kind of energy than this, this being in the CFP. Really when you pan the room, I think we've got, I don't know exactly how many, but two or three guys that can even remember being in that CFP and know what that was like, and when you look at those guys, they embrace that. They've been hungry for that opportunity.

I think every player, that's what you set out to do. There's been no downside to that. The timing between is really the same, right, so the time between games is relatively the same that we would have regardless of what game we

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were in. The fact that you're in the playoff, it makes the practices so much more energetic, the work ethic so much better, and coming off the loss at the SEC Championship, certainly disappointing, but it was also a little bit of an awakening for our guys of where the brutal truths and how can we work on those.

You grow probably the most you grow in a year after a loss, and things are made a lot more relevant to you when you have those.

Q. When did you realize that Bowers was different than the typical freshman?

KIRBY SMART: Early on. I mean, he came -- when we recruited him, I thought he was different than a typical freshman. This was a guy that would put his phone up and go run up a mountain or a hill out in Napa and sprint up the hill and back down the hill and send video of it. Like he was wired differently. During COVID we would challenge recruits to send us video of them working out, and he embraced that. Like he worked out every day. He competed every day. He sent video of going to throwing sessions with friends, and you knew right away this guy had some great one-step quickness. Played tailback in high school, could hand him the ball and he could do special things with it.

When you combine good size and speed with great work ethic, you tend to get a good player. But we felt pretty good that he was a special player while we were recruiting him, and then during the spring he made some flash plays that we knew he was going to be a good player.

Q. When the quarterbacks come up, you've likened it to other positions as far as the competitions, but is it different when it comes to making a substitution at that position just because of the gravity, as you've mentioned, the rhythm. Are coaches maybe more reluctant to make a change there than they would at safety or right guard because of that team rhythm or the styles of the quarterbacks?

KIRBY SMART: I think that's hard to say. I think that's all based on situation in the game, the things you discuss prior to, what's going on in the game, how has practice gone during the week and in previous weeks. It's certainly something that we talk about as a staff.

But yeah, it's different than other positions when it comes to making that decision for your whole team, and certainly that guy is the face and the leader of the team and gets the most reps. But it's something that the offensive staff and ourselves, we talk about a lot.

But I'll be honest with you, I've been really confident in Stetson. I'm confident in Stetson now and I'm confident in JT. I thought Coach Monken did a great job addressing that yesterday, and we've got confidence in all our quarterbacks.

Q. You had mentioned your really talented tight end. I wanted to ask, as a defensive guy dealing with these types of players who have become more prominent in offenses, what are the challenges to defenses -- Michigan is going to be like this, too. They use their tight ends a lot. What are maybe the unique challenges to defenses of dealing with these type of athletes being used in these types of ways?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, size, speed, match-ups. You've got to be careful, you can't put a little guy on a size-speed guy. He can get overpowered, overmatched. You've got to have the personnel to match the offensive personnel. I don't care if that's five wides or if that's 14 personnel, and they've got a back and four tight ends in there.

Everybody can control the match-ups they want to try to emphasize to what the strength of their team is, and Michigan does a tremendous job of utilizing those tight ends.

They're easier to use in play action. They're good match-ups for intermediate routes. They're really good for the play-action game off of wheels, off block and release. They do a tremendous job of that. I think both these teams utilize their tight end skill sets really well.

Q. Can you just describe the challenge of facing not only Aidan Hutchinson but also David Ojabo and the way those two feed off of each other and have been a nightmare for some other offenses to have to slow down this season?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, the first thing you have to do is match their intensity. Regardless of the talent they have, the strain, the desire, the want-to leaks through on the film. You talk to people that have played them, it's one of the first things they talk about is man, we didn't take into account how hard they played, how much effort, how much want-to, how much desire. That has to come from within. That doesn't come from a star that was given to you out of high school. That doesn't come from a reputation you got. That comes from like within, what do you have inside you, what stamina do you have in the fourth quarter to pass pro or run block, whatever it requires in the fourth quarter, to outwork the player, out-strain the player in front of you. Those two guys just are tremendous want-to -- you can tell they push each other. They go against a really good offensive line every day in practice, so those guys are

really good competitors, and they're a huge challenge for our offensive line.

Our offensive line embraces challenges like this. They want these opportunities. It's what you come to college to go play against is the best in the country, whether that's the best in the country at run defense or best in the country at rushing the passer. You want to play against the best. You want to be measured against the best, and that's what the playoffs allow you to do.

Q. Do you have any COVID issues right now? And unrelated to that, is there a plan for how much JT plays?

KIRBY SMART: I think the first question, do we have COVID issues right now, we really don't address COVID. We don't talk about it with our guys, and we don't talk about it publicly. It's kind of been our rule all along that we have. So not a lot to address there in terms of talking about it because we don't share that information out.

Again, in terms of quarterback, Stetson is our starting quarterback. Again, the JT situation will be a matter of is the situation right, and also is he healthy enough.

Q. How different is this experience at the bowl for your players and coaches compared to the Rose Bowl due to COVID-19 concerns, and regarding Daniels, you mentioned his health. Is there any rustiness as he gets back on the practice field?

KIRBY SMART: I'm not understanding your question. I really didn't understand the two parts there.

Q. They're separate. I was just trying to cram them in together. I was asking the experience this time versus the last CFP, just because of limitations, watching out for your guys with COVID. And the other part is just with Daniels on the practice field, is there rustiness for him?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, first part I'll address. Second part really there's not a lot to address there. But when it comes to COVID, the players have been able to do the outings. CFP has made it very safe for them to do that. I think probably the worst thing you could do would be have these kids come to a hotel and just be in the hotel for four days and not move and not do anything. So they've made it safe for our players to be able to function. As a matter of fact, being outside probably helps them more than anything else, as long as they're in a safe environment and not around crowds of people they don't know.

For the most part, our guys have done a tremendous job.

They've done what we've asked them to do. To be honest with you, the Orange Bowl staff has made it seamless. I mean, I don't remember a lot about the Rose Bowl, but where we stayed, I don't think we ever left the hotel. We didn't go out and do a lot.

We did go to an amusement park maybe and we haven't done that here, but we've had a tremendous time so far and spent a lot of our time preparing and locked in and focused. That's the most important thing is how are we preparing for Michigan, and are our guys building to a point of being ready to play at 7:30.

Q. In terms of Chris Smith, Jamaree Salyer, what have you seen from those guys in bowl prep? I know those two were really battling at the end of the regular season, but have they improved, and how ready do you think they are to go to play in this game on Friday?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think both those guys are healthy. They were fighting to get back and weren't able to do much there the weeks after Georgia Tech, leading up to Georgia Tech and then going into the SEC Championship. There weren't a lot of practice reps for them trying to recover.

They've had a week off before we started back, and then they've had some good practices buildup. The benefit they got was a little bit of recovery time there for two days, from the time we left for Christmas and then coming back and starting again.

Both those guys, they work hard. They're in the training room. They do what you ask. It's very important to them. So they do the rehab necessary to be as healthy as possible.

There's really no way in the middle of a season, even with this break, to get 100 percent, but at the end of the day these guys are fighters. They're two of our leaders on our team, and they fought back. We've had to be smart with the number of reps we give them.

Q. The question I get from a lot of people is from folks who don't understand why the current starter was not the best option to start the season but is now. Is that something you can kind of shed some light on what you guys were thinking at the time?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah. We play every game independent of the previous, and we do what we have to do to put the best players out there in a position to win the game. Every decision we make as coaches is to give our team the best opportunity to win the game. We sit down as a staff and

talk about it, and we had those talks throughout the year. I think Stetson has played at a high level, done a really good job with our offense. He has not played perfect by no means, but he's played well.

It's a decision that we make as a coaching staff, and for whatever reason, there's fans that may not agree with it, that may agree with it, media may not agree with it, may agree with it. Our team understands that we're going to give our team the best opportunity to win and Stetson does that. And that's not to knock on JT. That's the part that's so sad about this is that you guys want to ask us as coaches questions, I want to answer them as honest as possible, but the hardest thing is every time you ask a question, you drive the comparison home. Really at the end of the day they're both different quarterbacks, and they're both good in their own right, and I think we've got four quarterbacks capable of winning big here at University of Georgia, and Stetson is our quarterback right now.

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