

Capital One Orange Bowl: Georgia vs Florida State

Saturday, December 30, 2023

Miami Gardens, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Georgia Bulldogs

Coach Kirby Smart

Kendall Milton

Kamari Lassiter

Postgame Press Conference

Georgia 63, Florida State 3

KIRBY SMART: I'll open with the fact that I want to thank the Orange Bowl committee, the Orange Bowl staff, so many people, Eric Poms, CEO, to make this possible.

It's really unusual to have people care enough about an event. There's a lot of pride in this city. You see people talking about the Orange Bowl. The Orange Bowl is one of the most historic bowls there is. I grew up watching the Orange Bowl, seen so many classic games in the Orange Bowl, and times, they are a changing.

The people that are a part of this committee, people that are part of this city, people that care about this game, it matters so much to them, and I wanted to thank those people who make sacrifices to put this event on. It's a great event. It's a great stadium. It's an awesome time for our players who get a chance to go out and finish out the season.

A lot of thanks to the Orange Bowl committee, our fan base who followed us down here, came, gave these kids great support. So many of these players that were playing tonight in the last game were also a part of two National Championships, and I think our fan base realized that and gave them tremendous support.

Last but not least, our senior class, people who care, who love Georgia, and just wanted to play football again because they love football, and they wanted to do it the right way. I've got a lot of thanks to give out to all those groups.

Q. Coach, what was your message to the players about why this game mattered, and guys, what did you



take from that?

KIRBY SMART: Well, first of all, the game mattered because we're playing a game. As long as winning matters we're going to compete like hell at Georgia. It doesn't matter who it is.

Number two, we gave them about five things and we looked at them each day before practice, and there were five notes on there, and one of them was the senior class turning 49 to 50, and these two guys right here were a big part of it. They're tremendous parts of our culture, and all games matter if you're playing a game.

KENDALL MILTON: Like Coach Smart said, to me, it really mattered to me because it's a game. You want to take every game serious. No matter what the level is you have to prepare the same way, because at the end of the day this is top-level college football any given week, so we took that very personal.

And also just being able to go out there with the guys. This is a team that after this game, nobody -- it's not going to be the same next year. People are going to go to the league, some to the portal, some might not play football. This team might not ever be the same.

I feel like you have to really take advantage of every opportunity, and I really felt that being here for going on my fourth year I've seen teams change, I've seen 13 to 18 people leave, and the locker room is very different. So I feel like you have to really take advantage of every opportunity because you don't get too many opportunities.

KAMARI LASSITER: Yeah, I would say basically I think the game mattered just because if you're a competitor, then every game matters. Every opportunity you get to go out there and play the sport you love, play in front of the people you love, play for the people you love, it's second to none. You can't take it for granted, the opportunity to come out here and play with guys like this, play with coaches like this.

Just being able to come out there and just go out there with the guys one last time this season, it meant the world.

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Q. To follow that up a little bit closer, Kendall, right after the SEC title game you said in the hallway there was no way you were going to abandon your brothers, and I think I saw on social media post Kamari that you and ^ Bullard were talking about running it back one last time. What was it like behind the scenes for there to not be any opt-outs?

KENDALL MILTON: To be honest, the rest of the team kind of took on that responsibility like the whole week. I would have receivers, the offensive linemen, the defensive linemen coming up to us saying we're going to send you out the right way, and that showed in practice, how hard we all practice. You would've thought it was a scrimmage the way we were practicing, you know what I mean.

Everybody really took it to heart, and I'm just blessed to be with a group of guys like that. I been fighting tears all week, before the game fighting tears, after the game fighting tears because this team is a family. Some people just say it, but this team is a real brotherhood.

It really shows day in and day out, and I couldn't ask for a greater team to be a part of.

KAMARI LASSITER: Yeah, behind the scenes there's nothing but connection. Just being able to get up every day and be with a bunch of guys like that, guys that you laugh with, guys that you cry with, guys that you sweat with, tired with, get in the hot tub. You just do basically everything with these guys. We even go to class together.

There's not really much of a reason you wouldn't want to play with these guys one more time when it's another chance to go out with the guys that you love, the guys that you've been with for four to five years.

Q. You just won an Orange Bowl against a 13-0 team by the largest margin in bowl history. Is there any doubt in your mind that if you had snuck into the four that you guys would be the ones holding the trophy at the end?

KENDALL MILTON: To be honest, in any fight, in any war, I'm taking my guys against anybody. That's just the belief that I have. I have faith in my team that everybody is going to go out and lay it all on the line. I take my guys over everybody.

KAMARI LASSITER: Yeah, for me, I'm not really into speculation, but anytime I get to go out there with those guys, I'm going to take my guys 100 out of 100 times because of the things I've seen these guys do day in and day out.

Q. Kendall, you shared a moment with Coach Smart after the game as the clock was ticking out and he gave you a hug. What did it mean to you? Kamari, you shared a moment with Kalen and Warren after the game. What did it mean for you to be with those guys that you grew up with in Savannah?

KENDALL MILTON: To be with Coach Smart after the game, he told me how proud he was of me. I feel like if anybody knows Coach Smart, knows what I've been through here at Georgia, this not in any way has been an easy journey. Has not been a smooth journey. There's been a lot of ups and downs, a lot of speed bumps along the way.

Coach Smart told me how proud he was of me I stuck it out, I ended up making it to the end, I achieved success. I basically told him thank you for believing in me, because at the end of the day that's all you can ask for, your coach to believe in you, your teammates to believe in you.

That's all I really said, just thank you for believing in me, thank you for giving me the opportunity to go out there and play the game.

KAMARI LASSITER: To answer your question, just to embrace those guys after the game, it was kind of awesome. It kept -- everything kind of came full circle. We're just three kids from Savannah, Georgia, and Kalen and I were on the same little league team, Savannah Stars, so for us to play with each other basically on one of the biggest stages in all of college football, it's just a testament for each one of our -- all our hard work and stuff like that.

So just being able to have a moment and just take everything in and just see everything around us, it definitely meant a lot.

Q. Kirby, you won the last game of last season by 58 points and won this game by 60 points. Why does your team play its best football in the final game of the season?

KIRBY SMART: Well, I don't know. I sort of think we get better as the year goes. There's a culture at our place of work ethic and the job is not done. I think a lot of coaches relax at the end of the year and say this game doesn't matter or this game is not important.

There's nothing that's not going to be important at our place. There's not going to be a day we walk out on that field that Kamari Lassiter is not walking through, that's not important. I think that standard has translated into success, and I think that's a big part of the culture that's

been created.

Q. Kirby, the drive in the first half, how important was it at halftime to kind of send that message and what did you think of that play?

KIRBY SMART: I was really pleased. He's a kid that didn't get a lot of reps during the year in terms of game reps. Brock got most of those. I told the team at halftime, we're going to go out there and all the stars are going to play. Gunner is going in. Going to let him play. Called the game and let him go execute and play, because he deserves an opportunity to go play.

The only way you get better at that position is to go play meaningful minutes and get time, and I thought it was big for him to go in.

I thought Mike called a good game for him and he made some really good decisions, and we think he can be a really good player, so I was very pleased with that.

Q. You recruit all these guys and some of them probably know they're not going to get to play that much so when you see Jackson Muschamp get the 14 yards and everybody goes crazy, and some of the other guys that got a chance to play and score today, how much does that mean to you? Is it rewarding to you to get to see that and just the way the sideline reacts?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, the whole sideline went nuts because Jackson has been doing that. We had a lot of gun runs this year and we didn't have a natural quarterback run guy, so Collin and Jackson had to run the ball all the time.

I told Coach Muschamp all the time he's a lot better athlete than Coach Muschamp ever was. Coach Bobo called a scrap. I was like, I don't want to punt again. I want to get this first down. And I said, Coach Muschamp, you might want to step up here, because he was over with the defense.

Jackson is going to sprint out and we're going to throw a pass, and Coach Muschamp was like, oh, God. Oh, God. He sprinted out, they pulled it up, he stuck his foot in the ground, and he got a first st down. He really looked good in that jersey number he had on, too, that 16.

But I was proud of those guys. We had a lot of guys get an opportunity to play tonight. That's the thing that nobody talks about these bowl games. I got to play in three or four bowl games and that was the highlight of my college career.

We didn't make it to a National Championship. We didn't make it to an SEC Championship. The highlight of my career was getting to play in opportunities like that in bowl games and got a lot of kids an opportunity to play today.

Q. Coach Smart, obviously Brock Bowers wasn't able to play in this game but he was on the sideline and I saw him talking to Oscar Delp. What impact did he have on the tight end room and this team as a whole?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know what impact he had today but the impact he had over the last 30 days was tremendous. He came out of the SEC Championship game really beat up, banged up, and did all kinds of work to get healed and get healthy. Mims the same way.

They were at every single practice, every single meeting. They were at everything they were supposed to be at, and we told them we were going to bring them down here later in the week, and we did that. I got tremendous respect for those two guys who pushed everything they had to get back and really to be honest with you, to give us an opportunity to be in the National Championship.

They both came back and really pushed hard. They're tremendous leaders. The team has nothing but respect for them, and I'll never forget what they gave to this program.

Q. Coach Smart, it seemed like two plays really sort of captured momentum for you guys. The tackle by Cash Jones, they turned it over, and Cole Speer, you talk about guys who don't normally get in the box score. Then the play with Ladd McConkey, he was laughing about it in the locker room that he really wanted to throw it. Can you just comment on those plays and their effect on the game?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I forget what the score was when the fumble and the kickoff happened. I guess it was 14-3 or 21-3. When that happened that was a huge momentum swing. Cash, man, all Cash does is give effort. We do special teams all the time, and you're like how does that guy beat some five star down the field? Because he wants to. He cares. It's important to him.

He has a tremendous toughness, and it shows on special teams. Cole Speers the same way. Cole Speers is one of our best special teams players. For Cash to knock the ball off of him and Cole to recover it, those kids were excited as hell, and so were we because of what they did.

We've had that play in all year with Ladd. We just never had a call it. I thought it was a great time to call it. Coach Bobo covered it and it becomes improvisation if he gets

covered, and they got covered.

Ladd turned the improv into a touchdown, and good players make your coaches right, and Ladd made a tremendous play there.

Q. You got to see Kendall, Kamari, you got to see so many younger players, whether Roderick or even Daniel Smith on the other side, and then Coach, also obviously got to see guys like Mykel and Jalon Walker lead the team in tackles. What was it like to see some of your younger teammates play so well towards the beginning and end of the game, and what was it like to see some of the guys that you're also going to have come back and play at such a high level?

KENDALL MILTON: You know, I can think back all the way to the first game of the season, and I remember in warmups I looked at Andrew and Rod and I told them, I believe in you all because I knew there was a game they were going to get in, and I told them I believe in you all.

I know y'all are young so your head is probably spinning getting to the game time, but if nobody has told you I believe in y'all, and to see them go out today and achieve success and Rod running through people, AP running through people, that made me so happy.

I was jumping more on the sideline for them than I was for my own touchdowns because those are my little brothers. I really look at them as little brothers. Like I took them under my wing because at the end of the day this is a family.

So to see them achieve success and do the things that they've been working all year for even when haven't got all the opportunities, there was games they didn't get in, they were frustrated throughout the week in practice or whatever, they still stuck it and kept fighting all the way through.

I'm proud of my boys, proud of my little brothers to see them achieve success, and I'm excited to see them achieve success next year.

KAMARI LASSITER: Yeah, definitely being able to see guys like Daniel, guys like Kalen, guys like Julio, see their growth from the beginning year until now, you know, with Daniel being able to take a punch early in the game and then being able to come back, force a lot of incompletions, it's just so happy to see.

It makes me really happy because during the season things can get hard, especially whenever you're younger. We've all been there before. We're not playing, we're not

the guy. Whenever you come in from high school you're so used to being the guy, and then you get to a place like this and it kind of humbles you.

Just being able to watch those guys just be able to grow and continue to progress and try to do everything the right way, it makes me very happy.

Like Kendall said, those are my little bros. There's not too many things in this world I wouldn't do for them. Being able to see Daniel get the interception, even Chris Peal being able to get in the game, it means a lot to me.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, those guys, Mykel, Jalen, they played tremendous. They were great leaders during the time preparing, and they got bright futures. Really pleased to see all those players get in and play.

Q. You had a handful of guys in the second and third quarter that had only played maybe a handful of games. I think it was six all season long. To have them come on and execute seamlessly throughout this game, what's that like for you to have that confidence in them knowing that they can go out there and play Georgia football?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I wouldn't say they executed seamlessly. There were some mistakes and some things in there, but the results may have been good. We ran the ball hard. We played hard. But we didn't play perfect by any means.

I certainly am proud of the guys that got to go in and represent us, and that's what we said at halftime. We want to go out and continue to attack and play the right way.

Q. Sedrick Van Pran made his 42nd consecutive start today. Can you speak to what that means and how hard that is to do here and what Sedrick has meant for this program?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, that's hard to do. 44th start is incredible in this league, the amount of physicality on the offensive line and defensive lines in our league is brutal, and he's stayed healthy. He's competed. Probably one of the best leaders I've ever been around.

He got the most votes for captain, but not as many as some of our other years. We've had guys really get an outlandish numbers of votes, Azeez and Nakobe. What was amazing was how consistent Sed has been as a leader. He doesn't really care what you think about him. He'll say anything he wants to the team, and he doesn't care what anybody in that room thinks about him.

That's kind of the way the center has got to be. Got to be a little bit of an asshole, and he's not afraid to do that.

I have respect for them. Coach Bobo texted me and said, whatever night it was, either Tuesday or Wednesday, and he's like Sed has got the O-line down here watching film with Stacy not here, not during meeting times. Like not even during meeting time he's got them down there watching tape as a group. That's just unheard of in this day and age.

Q. Bowl games I guess recap seniors leaving, current status, preview next year, you had two freshmen starting linebackers. Can you talk about them and the leadership? Talk about some of the leadership you're going to have coming back and what this game means going into the off-season with some of those guys.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, so leadership at Georgia, I don't know how people do it other places, but leadership at Georgia is never not going to happen. We develop these kids at young ages. We put them on leadership groups. We put them in our skull sessions and they start developing early.

What I've noticed is our captain vote has started spreading out. It used to be five guys, six guys, seven guys got all the votes. Now 11 or 12 guys get the votes and it's more spread out across the board because we have a lot of really good leaders.

We've got a lot of really good leaders going into next year because they got to learn from these guys, and these guys learned from the guys before them. If that's passed down and that culture is created, it's a really good thing.

You're always going to have more turnover on your team now with the age that we're in, but you've got to make sure that your team is built annually the right way, and I'm very excited about the leaders we have coming back for next year and the team we have coming back for next year.

Q. For both players, you guys talked about the importance of having everybody play and sending seniors out on the right note and getting to play with your teammates one last time. That obviously was not true of the opponent. I'm wondering if there was any sort of frustration on your end that you gave them your best shot and didn't necessarily get their best shot?

KENDALL MILTON: One thing that I learned earlier on in college is you can only control what you can control. You can't control what other people are doing, what other people are saying. All you can control is how you approach every day and just how you handle things on

your end.

I feel like that was the mindset our team had. We weren't worried about what other people were saying, what was happening on the other side. We knew that this was our last game together, so we took it serious as such.

KAMARI LASSITER: Yeah, the way I see it is I'm just happy to see whoever is across from me. I don't care who it is, honestly. It could be Coach Smart, I don't care, as long as I got to play somebody.

KIRBY SMART: He means that, too.

KAMARI LASSITER: It really doesn't matter. Just knowing I have 10 guys behind me and knowing there's 11 guys I get to play against, it doesn't really matter who it is. I love the game so much and I like being able to compete, so whoever it out there, I'm going to give it my best shot regardless.

KIRBY SMART: Let me say something, and maybe I'm wrong here and maybe this will be a bad soundbyte, but people need to see what happened tonight and they need to fix this. It needs to be fixed. It's very unfortunate that they, who has a good football team and a good football program, are in the position they're in.

Everybody can say it's their fault and it's their own problem, all right, and everybody can say we had our guys and they didn't have our guys. I can listen to all that.

But college football has got to decide what they want, and I know things are changing. I know things are going to change next year. You know what, there's going to still be bowl games outside of those. People got to decide what they want and what they really want to get out of it because it's really unfortunate for those kids on that sideline that had to play in that game that didn't have their full arsenal, and it affected the game 100 percent.

Q. Kirby, I know Daijun Edwards hasn't announced what he's going to do next, but if he never suits up in the red and black again, can you talk about the player he was and what it was like to coach him?

KIRBY SMART: Well, he's quiet. Kendall will tell you that. You can't get Daijun to say nothing, and he's from Colquitt County, which used to beat up on me in high school all the time. So every time I see him and talk to him, I love on him, hug his neck, and he's become such a great person.

He's one semester away from graduating. So proud of who Daijun is and what he's grown to be. Here's a kid that wasn't even that heavily recruited, but we took the kid

because we knew he was tough as hell, he would work hard, and he had a tremendous season for us to really help us.

Before we break I want to say something about these two guys. Kendall has meant a lot to this program. He's given so much. He's been through a lot. He said that. I still remember going all the way to California, being in his house, seeing him and his parents, and he's sacrificed a ton to make this program a better place, and he's worked his tail off.

So I thank you Kendall publicly for what you've done.

I want to tell this story on Kamari because it shouldn't go unnoticed. Kamari Lassiter had a one-two grade, first-second round grade. Kamari had to make a tough decision, like all these other people, and I called Kamari in and I talked to him, and I told him, Kamari, you should come out for the draft. That's my opinion. You're one of the top corners in the draft. You've got to make that decision. That's one decision.

The second decision is you've got to decide if you want to play in this bowl game. I don't know that you've got a lot to gain in this bowl game, but I do know who you are and I do know how you practice and I do know how to lead. But I'm not going to be disappointed in anything you decide.

He came back about three or four days later and I met with him and his mom and talked to him and fully expected him not to play in this game.

He called me two days later and said, Coach, I can't do it. I can't do it. I'm sitting down, I'm over there coaching. I can't do it. I want to be out there. I want to play with my guys.

I think he did it against his mother's will to be honest. Now, I don't know that, but I think he did it against his mother's will because that's who he is.

All these teams that go shopping, this dude right here wants to play football. That's all he cares about is playing football and his teammates. He ain't worried about the next thing and all that.

He said, I want to play football, and he played football for the University of Georgia. He did it when he didn't have to do it, and that's what's different at this place than a lot of other places. Thank you.

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