

Aflac Kickoff Game: Clemson vs. Georgia

Saturday, August 31, 2024

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Georgia Bulldogs

Coach Kirby Smart

Press Conference



If you're a talented freshman and you can learn, then you can play. Malaki's growth is a credit to his humbleness or his humility, and he is a great kid from a great family, and that's what makes Malaki special.

Georgia 34, Clemson 3

KIRBY SMART: I always open with thanking our fans, but I also want to thank Aflac as the title sponsor for this event. What an incredible venue, atmosphere. Anytime you play in Atlanta in this facility and it's part of a title sponsor game where you're playing another top-15, top-20 match-up, to me it feels like a playoff game. It's a great way to try to assess where you are as a team.

No longer do you have to win every game, but you do have to find out when you're going to be playing your best, and you want to be playing your best towards the end of the year, and one of the best barometers is to get quality wins.

I've got a lot of respect for Clemson, Dabo, the way they play, the way they coach. But this event is special to me, and every chance we get to play in it, we want to play in it.

Gary Stokan and his staff do a tremendous job, and so has Aflac.

Q. Coach, Malaki started a few years ago as a freshman. This game he made a big catch, I mean interception. Made another huge interception this game today. And then freshman KJ Bolden, he's a freshman, had a pretty good game. What do you attribute the credit to Stark's growth in this game and being able to put freshmen in games like this and they have a great performance?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think Coach Schumann and his defensive staff have done a great job of making our defense adjustable, complex without being complex, and you can play more players that way.

We play freshmen all the time. We had Malaki play in this game two years ago; KJ played in the game today; Mykel played in the game two years ago.

Q. Coach, a tale of two halves. That first half looked like the game in Charlotte a few years ago. What kind of adjustments or was there anything you saw at halftime? What would you owe the offense getting loose in the second half?

KIRBY SMART: I think Mike and his staff did a good job at halftime looking at pictures, seeing what was there, capitalizing on some explosive plays. We blocked well on the perimeter, and that drive in the second half kind of opened things up. I think it loosened them up. It allowed us to be more explosive, and we used some tempo to help us, and we think we're a really well-conditioned team, and I thought that juice between Nate's quickness brought some energy and Arien and Dillon making some plays on the perimeter.

Q. Mykel goes down in the third quarter and Jalon Walker comes in at outside linebacker. Back to back tackles for loss on one drive; next drive it's back-to-back sacks. What allows him to come in and play inside and outside and make an impact like he did today?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, he wasn't really playing for Mykel. He was playing outside linebacker before Mykel went down. They don't really play the same position. There's packages there where Jalon plays inside; there's packages where Jalon plays outside.

We've had to get uncomfortable as coaches to use his skill set, and I think shim anyone and the defensive staff have done a great job of finding ways that he can be successful.

Mykel and him both are really good football players, and they both need to be on the field. They don't need to share time.

Q. I think during the game, Bull tweeted that Malaki is the best DB in the country, Javon Bullard. Do you



think he's the best DB in the country?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know. How can I judge? I haven't seen him. It's easier for Bull to say that because he has seen the things Malaki has done in practice. I do think the play I saw him make today may be one of the best defensive football plays I've ever seen live in person.

I've seen a lot of them on TV, but that one he twisted and contorted his body and how he can find the ability to go find that ball and get it, it's pretty special.

Q. Obviously the first half it was a little bit difficult to get the running game going. How did Nate Frazier help you open up the offense a little bit and get the offense going?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know that Nate opened up that. We hit some perimeter runs to start the game, and you try to mix and mingle and try to catch people off balance.

We thought that can we could run it a little bit better inside than we did. They have some big defensive linemen. They're big on their edges. They're big up the middle. They are going to give people problems defensively. I have a lot of respect for them.

I think Nate brought a little juice and a little energy there as Cash did, too, and Branson. Branson hasn't playing football in a year, so Branson is going to be fine. He is a really good back and we're going to continue to get better and look forward to using all those guys' skill sets.

We've got a really good dynamic in that running back room in terms of the players we have.

Q. On that note, Nate Frazier had an excellent debut. How would you assess his place on the depth chart after today?

KIRBY SMART: We don't do depth charts at running back. Cash Jones had a great day, too, and I was really proud of all those guys stepping up.

But there's no depth chart. We play the guys that have the best week in practice.

Q. Your transfer receiver today made some big plays. Colbie down around the goal line made a great catch and London showed how fast he is.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, London I thought really stepped up. I thought the play of the game was the play he caught over the middle. Dillon had gone down with some cramping. London had to step up and go play. He made a great

catch. I think it was a 3rd down conversion, I'm not sure, but once we converted that, it kind of was a springboard to being explosive and scoring. I thought that was a clutch catch. London is a great kid.

He's very level headed. Nothing really affects him. It didn't surprise me in the moment that -- the moment wasn't too big for him because he's played in a lot of these SEC match-ups.

Q. You mentioned Mykel earlier. What was the injury for him and for Warren Brinson, as well?

KIRBY SMART: One was an ankle, and Warren's was more of a contusion of some kind. I don't want to say high ankle, but it was above the ankle. It was more calf, in there where he got stepped on he felt like. And Mykel's X-rays, they looked good, but I've seen that before, so we've got to go check it when we get home and see.

Q. Obviously Etienne didn't play. Was that a suspension, and is it over now? Will it carry into next --

KIRBY SMART: You know we don't talk about those things. It was a good try, though. I'm focused on how our guys played today, and that's the focus and energy I'm putting it towards. I appreciate your question.

Q. We all know that Carson is calm, cool, and collected. We're heard you say we want him to show a little bit more passion, get his teammates fired up. Did you see that from him today?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I thought he got a little passion and energy there, too. We started early and didn't have 3rd down conversions in the first half, and I thought he responded well to that. He came in, sat down with the iPad, and he told me, when we come out second half, we're going to go in there and score, Coach, and sure enough, we did. I thought he really handled that well.

Look, that was a good defense, guys. Y'all can say what you want. That's a really high-quality defense.

Q. That kick from Peyton, 55-yarder pretty late in the half there, how big was that?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, it was big at the time, but you can't play these games in three, three, three, three. You've got to score touchdowns. That probably was a little out of my comfort zone, but it looked to me that he had some room to spare on it.

What was it, was it --



Q. 55.

KIRBY SMART: I didn't realize that. I knew when we had to kick it it was out of the zone that I really wanted to, but I didn't have a lot of options there, and we were playing field position, and I've seen him make them, so indoors I think it makes it more significant.

Q. I believe Carson Beck extended some plays with his legs there, a couple 3rd down conversions. Talk to that growth in the area of his game using his legs.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, tremendous. The first conversion was that, it didn't end up in points, but what it did was flip field position. It made play behind bad field position most of the day. He has the ability to do that and I tell people all the time they don't know the athlete he is and it's not the speed it's the body control, decision making.

He can hurt you when you go out there and match everything, and then he takes off on you. He's got really good pocket presence, and he makes some plays with his feet.

Q. With Warren going out, Jordan Hall, Xzavier McLeod not out there, what did you see out of Christen Miller and Naz Stackhouse today middle of your defensive line?

KIRBY SMART: Just tough guys, man. I can't say how they played. I didn't watch it specifically. But to play the plays they played, the number of snaps, the volume they've taken, they have been extremely durable and extremely tough.

Tray has done a great job of bringing the young players along in that room, and we're getting a blessing in some ways of getting all these young guys ready while we're trying to get healthy. That could really pay dividends late in the year if we get everybody back.

Q. Coach, some of the talk surrounding Clemson has been that they have not been utilizing the transfer portal as much as some other teams have. Can you talk about how the transfer portal guys have affected your roster and how they've affected the way that you guys play this year?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, that's hard for me to speak on. I'm not in judgment of someone else. I guess you're not asking me to judge their program, you're saying how the transfer guys have helped our program. We're very selective in the transfer department.

We take a tight end out of Stanford who's played in a similar offense, two tight end sets, we take a wide out who we play against and can run, and we need wide outs because we lost guys at wide out.

We take Colbie who's a high-quality kid. We talk to these kids, visit with these kids. I want my team to stay my team. I've always said that. If you could give me every team kid I sign, they stay at my program for four years and they can't leave, I would take that every day of the week.

But if we're going to lose kids, we've got to replace them with high-quality kids that are character kids that are looking to have an opportunity to win a championship, that want to go somewhere and play, because otherwise you can't survive in the SEC without the depth you need.

It's a forced situation. You have to use it. So we use it selectively because we actually like signing high school players that can develop and the guys that you see in our program most of the time are that.

Q. I think I saw you guys played seven offensive linemen today. What does that say about the depth of your program and what kind of benefit does that provide to you?

KIRBY SMART: Well, we want to play a lot of linemen all the time. Carson works with those guys all the time. We like playing eight or nine. To get through the year you're going to have to do that.

We're thinner than we have ever been. We've played seven, eight guys and we've always played three tackles, and we'll continue to do that if they're playing winning football.

Q. Coming out of halftime, you guys score on the opening drive, Clemson comes back down, threatening to score, your defense holds them to a field goal. What did you like from that series from your defense and how big was that in the moment?

KIRBY SMART: I thought we responded. I'm trying to remember that one. I think they got to a short yardage situation, we were able to stop them, knock them back, gave them a negative play. I thought the defense executed well in the red area which is something we work on situationally a lot. Coach Schumann called some really good calls and Jalon and those guys on defense executed them.

Q. Obviously you guys have new faces every year, but I know you guys have some traits and characteristics that you like to instill in your team. Did you see that

when it's 6-0 and you guys take control in the second half like that?

KIRBY SMART: I didn't understand what you asked.

Q. In terms of some of the resiliency, not looking at the scoreboard, being able to do what you guys practiced to do.

KIRBY SMART: I was proud of the way our team played both halves. I really was.

I think the narrative is out there you're going to roll the ball out and Georgia is just going to win. They're going to win because they have a G, and they are going to roll over these teams.

Football is not that way. That's a really good football team we just played. The fact that we played and pushed through that is indicative of the things you're talking about. We built into our program. We said we had to out-physical them. I thought we did. We had to out-hustle them. I think we did. We'll watch the tape. You got to out-discipline them.

Those are three areas that we thought we had to win to beat Clemson, and our guys proved true in that.

Q. I know you said postgame that the interception from Malaki reminded you of Champ Bailey?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, when Champ was a freshman we were in 42, people don't remember it, he would play middle field safety and he had range that was unheard of. He could go from sideline to sideline and he made some diving plays and extended his body.

Malaki is very similar to that in terms of his ability to play man-to-man, his ability to play safety. He can go out and play corner if he had to. He's just an tremendous athlete but with all that accolades, he's one of the most humble, great kids I've ever been around.

But I saw Champ before the game and I told him that Malaki has a lot of his same traits.

Q. The past couple off-seasons there were some incidents and from the outside there were questions about the culture of Georgia football. On the inside, how would you describe the health of the culture of Georgia football right now?

KIRBY SMART: Awesome. I wish you could talk to our players. I wish you could live in there and see all our guys day-to-day and see Thomas Settles and Bryant Gant

and all the people that stand up in front of our team and talk about connection and share their experiences.

I mean, there's two of them sitting right there. You can ask them. They'll tell you.

What you know on the inside is a lot more than what people can paint pictures to be outside. People use it in negative recruiting, and they throw it out there, and it comes back to bite them, too.

Q. Coach, you guys went 40 consecutive games in the regular season. That means you've got to be a very focused program. What do you think the secret is for you keeping these players focused no matter -- players come and go, but that focus seems to be pretty consistent.

KIRBY SMART: I think it's a process. We believe in what we do. The leaders on our team that I meet with, they believe in it, they sell it, they push it to the younger players. I think somebody said the other day we had 38 or 42 my advisor brought to me. We had 42 or 38, I can't remember what it was. I had to sign something saying they were all eligible and they were all new. We had 38 or 42 new people. New.

When you turn over that much, you'd better have a nucleus around them that can keep them grounded. That is what we've been able to sustain at Georgia is, we're not going to change what we do based on who we play. We're going to do what we do and we're going to try to out-execute you and just do it the right way.

I think a lot of people that's hard to do it the hard way all the time, because everybody wants to find an easier way. There's no easy way to win these games. They're all hard.

Q. On that fade route to Colbie Young, it looked like Beck and Young had been playing together for years. How have they been able to build that connection so quickly?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, it's been tough because Colbie hasn't actually practiced a full practice week. He was very selective. We had him where he was not taking a full load of reps. They had a really good connection early in camp, and then when his hamstring occurred, they lost some of that rhythm, and I think we've got to get more out of Colbie. Colbie is a really good player, and we need him to step up if we're going to go where we need to go.

Q. What can you say about your freshman Nate Frazier and the impact he's had in this game?

KIRBY SMART: Awesome. The players can tell you that I get on him all the time because he's out of control. He is just foot to fire, moving, going at the speed of light, doesn't know he might run into a brick wall, cutting back. He cut back a couple times in practice and I told him, when you get in a real game, you cut back like that, they're going to light you up.

I might have actually said some things I can't say in here, but he cut back and went all the way across the field for about 50, and told him it's okay now. He can do that.

He's a great kid. He got an opportunity; he seized the moment. A lot of people locked in front of him. And like I told you, Chauncey Mullins is a good back. He will have an opportunity to grow and play.

So I'm looking forward to that room because I think we got some juice in that room as they get more experience. Look, guys, Nate is a long way from a complete package. He wasn't here in the spring, so he missed 15 practices of intense work that he's trying to play catch-up on.

Q. Joenel banged up going into this football game. You talk a lot about Malaki and you said he's your best corner, could be your best corner --

KIRBY SMART: I said he could play corner.

Q. Could play corner. What did it mean to be able to slide him in at nickel today for you guys?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, that was huge. That was probably the thing -- you bringing it up, I forgot about that. That was one of the biggest things that got us in the week, when Joenel had a pull, and it happened on Saturday and we didn't know.

He didn't go Monday, he didn't go Tuesday, he walked through Wednesday, and we're all messed up because now we're having to not move one person in his spot, we're having to move Malaki, then Dan, then KJ.

It was really scary because we didn't have the volume of reps with that makeup, so then we tried to go with JaCorey some, but every time JaCorey was in Malaki had to play over here and Dan had to over here. Then when Malaki went in, Dan jumped over here and KJ went over here.

They did a tremendous job of knowing what to do from three different positions, and we really needed to get Joenel healthy, and I thought JaCorey stepped up and took advantage of his opportunity.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.

