

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

Monday, November 29, 2021

Athens, Georgia, USA

Coach Kirby Smart

Press Conference



KIRBY-SMART: Looking forward to SEC Championship game. Always a great venue, a great event. I spoke on this yesterday. I feel like I'm saying the same thing twice, but it's just an incredible atmosphere to play in.

Never had a chance to play in it as a player, but have coached in it a lot of times, and it's just a special atmosphere. And the fan bases of both teams regardless of who's in it, are always so passionate, and excited for our players to get an opportunity to play in it.

I guess it's the first time since we've been here that we've got less of a portion of guys that have played in it. Our upperclassman have. Some have played in two of them, some in one, and some in zero. Very important to keep your composure and have a good plan of attack and then execute.

Q. Specifically on facing Alabama's defense and Will Anderson and all that entails, your left tackle situation, do you feel good about Broderick Jones being able to handle all that Alabama can bring, or where is Jamaree in his recovery, and would he be well enough to return to that position for this week?

KIRBY SMART: Don't know the answer to that. Jamaree is going to practice today. Jamaree had a setback last week that was minor, but it was enough that he couldn't play this past week.

I thought he was going to play against Georgia Tech, but once he had a setback it was a little tougher for him to. We'll find out where he's at. It's really up to how he practices and what he does.

The good news is he's played a lot of SEC football. He's blocked some really good players before. They have some tremendous edge rush guys, including Will and others. They do a good job of attacking that.

But he has to go against -- all camp he's had to go against really good pass rushers. Every Thursday he gets to go against our guys and compete in two-minute, things like

that.

If he's healthy I feel good about Jamaree being able to play. If he's not, Broderick has played in some big games now too. Broderick has gone on the road and played in a Auburn environment, in a Tennessee environment where he got to play.

I'm pleased with what Broderick has been able to do. Broderick is a really good athlete and they've got good players, we've got good players, and they get to go against each other.

But excited to see them go play, but I'm not overly concerned about just left tackle. We've got to block, we've got to throw and catch, we've got to be able to run the ball, be able to have some form of balance, and we've got to do what we do better than what they do.

Q. How do you use your tight ends not just as a receiving aspect, but also in the blocking aspect of your offense?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, those three guys have kind of been the unsung heroes. In some cases I guess you'd say they're not unsung, but they're the unsung heroes in terms of everything they've been able to go.

Number one, they've been dependable. Outside of Darnell, they've been healthy. When you get dependable, healthy, talent, good pass catchers, I think Coach Hartley has done a tremendous job with them in run blocking. It's hard to find tight ends that can block defensive ends in the NFL, but in the SEC.

Our guys -- we don't leave them out on an island often, but they hold up when they have to block in the run game and get movement and read things. They do a tremendous job. So they've been weapons catching the ball when they've been targets. Obviously Brock has been that, but the other guys have been, as well. They're a big part of our success on offense.

Q. Why do you think you guys have been able to hold up well from a pass rush perspective after Adam

ASAP . . . when all is said, we're done.®
sports

Anderson wasn't available? Did you guys make some tweaks in terms of how you approached that?

KIRBY SMART: Not really. We haven't changed a lot. The guys have bought in. We've got a good group. We've got less depth across the defensive line now in edge rushers than we had previously.

But you get good rushers, you let them rush, they'll go against one of the best tackles in the country and the best groups that we've faced as a whole. We'll have to do a really good job.

Q. In the three times you've coached against him, have you found anything unique about coaching against Nick Saban?

KIRBY SMART: They've got really good players. That's what it's about. I always defer to the players in terms of games. People have just talked about our defense a lot this year, but it's really about the players. It's not about Coach Lanning or myself. It's about the players.

I've got an immense amount of respect for Nick and the job he's done and what he's done at Alabama. I admit it's the phone calls Monday through Thursday and the official visits Saturday and Sunday that get the job done in terms of the players, but it does take a complete organization and great leadership, and he's provided that.

Q. I know you've talked about having your players run early in the week to get ready for a four-quarter game, but the other part of that is the poise in those make-or-break moments in the fourth quarter. Is that something you can simulate or you can't have that until you have that?

KIRBY SMART: It depends on how you view every moment. I look at every moment and the opportunity in practice, we're coaching, we're demanding excellence. We create adversity because we go against each other.

We put -- hey, I tell you we've got five two-point plays. Offense, you're go ones on ones. We're going to go out here and see who wins the most, best three out of five, two points. There's some adversity in that. Those are heat-of-the-moment type plays. I know for a lot of you guys would say, it's not the same as a game. It is. We make it like a game.

You can only want to do it right so bad. If you won't do it really right in practice, you're creating that same situation. A lot of our guys have played in the heat of the moment many times.

I look at the start of every game that way. I don't put greater emphasis -- there's no like, okay, we've got to simulate this or this this week. No, we've got to go be who we are and we've got to do it better than they do it, and that's our goal.

Q. What concerns you most about Metchie and Jameson Williams?

KIRBY SMART: The quarterback -- the ability to get them the ball. They're really elite wide outs, but what puts them over the top is the distributor. He is an incredible athlete, player, decision maker. What he didn't get enough credit for is when the play breaks down, his skill set to deliver the ball, make people miss, he sets up rushers.

He's like a point guard. He's like an elite point guard that can distribute the ball, and when he's dribbling down the court, he's got the ability to throw it over there, throw it over there, and then he can make you miss, and he almost baits rushers.

He sits back there and is very patient, keeps his eyes downfield, great composure. But he makes those guys even better. Because where there might be another guy like that somewhere, they might not have the distributor to get them the ball, and he does a tremendous job.

I think that O'Brien and them do a great job of putting them in positions that they're hard to cover. They mix up where they put them. They're not here and there, and that's where they are. They move those guys around.

Q. Back in the spring I asked you who your field general was on defense, and unequivocally it was Nakobe, even though he wasn't on the field then. How much do you think that experience for him actually helped him be an even better leader? And then also kind of walk through George Pickens' similar journey not being able to field but growing in that role.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Nakobe is an unquestioned leader because of the way he works, the way he works in the off-season, the way he demands that others work, and he holds them accountable. He did that when he was hurt, and he's done it since he's been back. You couldn't ask him to put a better foot forward in terms of his work ethic, and Quay goes right along with that. That group, Quay, he, and Channing work so hard that it raises the standard for everybody else.

For George, he was away for so long that he wasn't really getting to do things with us when he was rehabbing with Ron and not coming to practice and not being out there and working under water and working in the weight room.

There was a long time where he wasn't really with us, and he's been with us now for it's been a while now that he's been coming back and building up to it.

I think he's had a good influence on the young receivers, and some of those guys had to play faster than maybe you would have wanted because of injuries and they've been thrown to the fire, and he's provided some experience for those guys.

Q. Last year's game against Alabama, Stetson had some plays in the second half where he made some poor decisions. How have you seen him grow in that aspect of taking care of the ball and being a distributor to the playmakers and not put the ball in harm's way?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, a big part of it is, number one, protection. How well can you protect and allow him to -- because no quarterback is very good without protection. I think we've seen all good quarterbacks have rough days when the protection is not there.

So the first thing you have to do is protect him well. You have to have a plan. He has to understand the plan. You have to avoid adverse situations. You get yourself in a bunch of 3rd and longs, I don't care who your quarterback is, he's going to struggle because those take longer routes downfield to develop if you're going to try to get a first down.

And experience. That's the number one thing that Stetson has been able to grow from, is looking back at that game, I don't know what that was, his second, third, I don't remember, fourth start, and he's played a lot more football now.

Certainly has improved in terms of decision making. But it's a critical piece to every game, is that player at that position makes so many decisions during the game that the outcome is usually affected a lot by the quarterbacks that play the game.

Q. I didn't notice Kendall Milton playing on Saturday night. You all had targeted Georgia Tech as the return date. Wanted to see if there was an update on his potential to play Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: Hopefully we get him back. He was close this week. Wasn't able to go. Would have loved to have played him. Going to try to work him back in some this week and just see where he is.

That's one of those things where it's a confidence issue, an MCL -- it was an MCL of the knee and he's gained a lot more confidence. I know he looked a lot better on

Saturday than he did on Wednesday and Thursday when he was out there warming up.

Q. First an update on Kearis Jackson, if you've been able to get one since we last talked to you? And second, the Auburn-Alabama game, were you able to watch that in real time on Saturday after the game? I wondered if you did, were you able to watch a game like that and take in kind of the drama of it, or is it you watch it clinically, what is Alabama doing here?

KIRBY SMART: There will be plenty of time to watch it as we've done since the game that way. I think it was more substitution patterns, seeing things you don't see on the coach's copy. You're watching the game in and of itself of offense and defense and special teams, how they kind of go intertwined.

When you watch the coach's copy you're just watching offense, watching defense, or watching special teams. You're not seeing the parts all together. We were able to watch some of it on the bus ride back. It was in and out on the bus. But obviously we've watched it since, yesterday and today, trying to prepare as we watched them play everybody they played.

As far as Kearis, we think he's going to be fine. It's not bothering as bad right now, but we won't know for sure until he goes out and practices this week.

Q. I don't think your team has trailed in the second half. You spoke yesterday about creating adversity in practice situations. Can you expound on how you -- obviously it's a good thing you haven't trailed late in games, but can you talk about how you rely on what you do in practice to create situations you might have to rely on now at this time of the season?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, the situation doesn't change when you trail. If you're worried about that then you're worried about the wrong thing. You need to be focused on what you have to do to execute. You have a plan of how are we going to run the ball, how are we going to throw the ball, how are we going to stop them. What's our plan of attack on special teams. Does that plan deteriorate and evaporate if you don't have a lead? Not necessarily. You may have to tweak some things. You may have move some things around.

But you got to figure out what you're doing well or what they're doing different. That's the chess piece of the decision making process. That's not in and all everything where you have to worry about that. The big thing is what do we have to do to get our players to execute at the highest level in an extreme environment.

Some of them have some anxiety. You want to try to remove that and allow them to play with confidence. That's our emphasis.

Q. I think a lot of people nationally may see what you all are doing on defense and assume, oh, you're just winning the old Georgia-Kirby way of a few years ago. How much do you think what you all did on offense and opening things up is also to credit for what you're doing?

KIRBY SMART: How much is to credit our defense --

Q. Offense, the offense opening up, hiring Monken, everything you've done over the last couple years.

KIRBY SMART: Well, I think we've got good players on offense, and I think Monken is doing a tremendous job of using their skill set. I still don't know if we're as open as we would love to be. We've had injuries at wide out. We've had to do it some different ways. There's not a -- the huge difference in our offense is the production we've been able to have in terms of explosive plays, use of tight ends who are talented.

Let's be honest, insert Brock Bowers and insert Darnell Washington, you've increased the talent level at that position. We've used the backs. I feel like we've used the backs well before and we've got a good group of wide outs. I think Coach Monken has done a tremendous job of using our personnel where we may not be as big on the offensive line as we've been in the past.

I do think playing good offense is important to your success. You can't be one-sided and expect to be successful. But the area that we've left most deficient is probably special teams. I think we're good in special teams; I don't think we're elite or great, and I think that we can improve on that.

Q. Quick update on Chris Smith; and two, last time you played in the SEC Championship game you lost by 27 points. How has this program changed since that game or since that day?

KIRBY SMART: Well, number one, the team we played that day was a really good football team, probably one of the best that I've seen, and I've been in the SEC for 18 or 19 years.

So they were a tremendous football team with a -- a really good football team. We've improved. I think we've recruited well. I think our kids are playing with confidence. I think there's a lot of things outside of just the Xs and Os

of football that this team has really connected, and they've done a great job from a leadership standpoint.

We're not the same team we were then, and there's some areas that team was probably more talented than this team. But the strength of this team, I've said it repeatedly, is the team, and the fact that it is a team and it's not a one-man show of any kind. It's really spread across. That's been the strength of this team.

As far as Chris, hopeful he's able to go today. He did some running yesterday, and we're hopeful to get him back. But again, until I see it in practice I won't know.

Q. What are you impressed with Alabama's offensive line, and what did Auburn do to be so effective in pressure?

KIRBY SMART: Well, first off, Auburn played them in a very different style. It was not what you see Auburn play all the time. They used a couple different methods with their receivers and different things, but their offensive line is -- they had X amount of first-round draft picks on that offense last year, so anytime you have that you're going to have guys who have to get playing time, get experience.

They moved a guard to tackle and he's been able to play. They've moved Chase out to center a couple times, played different guys there. They've had some injuries, they've had guys move in and out at right tackle, just as all of us in the SEC have to do in finding the right combination. You have injuries; you have to move people around.

I think they've had to do that. Anytime you lose the talent they have you're going to have guys that come back and have to grow with experience.

I think they've gotten better throughout, but there's more to it than just what Auburn did. I don't know how you guys look at it, but that's a really tough place to play. So is A&M. That doesn't fall on deaf ears with our staff and understand probably two of the hardest places to play in the country are right there.

We haven't been to A&M, but I've been to A&M, and we've always gone to Auburn. It's a tough environment. That game is always different. The nine years I was there, you never could judge anything on that game because it's such an intrastate rivalry.

Q. I guess this trip to the SEC Championship game is different for you in that there's a perception that playoff-wise you guys could get in even if you lose. How does that change anything with your guys do you think?

KIRBY SMART: I don't see that has anything to do with anything. I've said all my career that to win SEC championships is almost just as hard, because the years I spent at Alabama you could say that winning the SEC Championship was just as hard as trying to win a National Championship, and it's one of our goals.

We want to put it on this wall in here, and to do that, you've got to win the SEC. That's what we're focused on.

Q. Obviously turnover margin is important in every game. How much do you preach that going into these higher sweepstakes guys?

KIRBY SMART: You try your best and you try to simulate as many ways as possible. We've done a lot of different things to try to create some advantage for ourselves in terms of turnovers.

We have not been where we need to be at that. We've had like four or five games were dead even. Three games where we lost the turnover margin. If you're considerably better than somebody, that doesn't show itself. It doesn't come glaring. In these type of games it's huge. This explosive plays, that explosive plays are critical.

We have to be able to generate more and we have to be able to protect the ball, which I feel like our offense has done a good of job protecting the ball. We haven't gotten enough defensively, and that's a big emphasis for us this week.

Q. You talked about the last time you guys were in the SEC Championship. I want to take you back to 2017 when you guys actually won it, your second season here as head coach. What do you remember most about that day, the game, the players afterwards?

KIRBY SMART: A long time ago. Just the excitement, the joy of accomplishing something special with a really good group, all those kids that have come back, all those kids, Georgia meant so much to them. It was our first time really doing it under this staff.

I think the significant feeling they had of winning the SEC Championship kind of superceded the fact that, oh, we're going to be in the playoffs now, too. It's the fact that they had overcome the obstacle, the hurdle that was Auburn earlier in the year and we didn't play our best game and vindication of okay, we've won this game, now we're SEC champs. Let's worry about the next chapter after that. I think that's what made it special.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

