

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

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Head Coach Kirby Smart

Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: I'd open with a big congratulations to Richard Seymour, who I had the great fortune of playing with here. And he'll be going into the NFL Hall of Fame, I guess at the end of the week or sometime soon.

He's been just an incredible representative of our university. He was a great player here and a teammate. I know we got several guys on our staff going to travel and be with him for that great honor. So congratulations to Richard.

Our guys are ready to grind. It used to be a time when you were -- didn't do anything over the summer or had a long break over the summer or you might have a week off. But that's not really the way it is now. It's continuous.

I talked to our guys last night about separating summer or what you would call a minicamp or what you would call summer practices and training camp. You've got to kind of step out of your mindset/routine and refocus.

Talked about some of the guys I talked to in the NFL currently and what they do in trying to transition our brain from one stage to the next stage. And we kind of talked about locking in and locking out.

You know, lock into what you got to do and lock out everything outside of it and the noise. It's one unique time for a college athlete where you really don't have classes. Our guys are actually finishing summer school classes.

But in the next coming days, they don't have any classes. They get to focus solely on football. They get to spend 11/12 nights in a hotel where they have no responsibilities other than football. And it's kind of when the mental and physical toughness starts to take place for your roster and your team.

So there's no way to really build for it, other than to do it. And that's the stage we're in. And we're really focused on getting better.

We got a lot of good players to replace and we got a lot of

good players to replace them with. It's about getting the right guys on the bus and getting the guys in the right seats, just like it is every year.

But I'm excited to get out there and work with them. Today will be the first time on the field putting on helmets and getting after it together.

I don't have an injury list to go through. But, obviously, you guys will want to ask questions and I'll answer everything I can from an injury standpoint. So open it up for questions.

Q. Yeah, Kirby, you mentioned in media days about continuing to be hungry and separating last year from this year. I was wondering how specifically you've seen that on the defense with replacing so many guys that went in the draft last year.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, the defense is really -- really, both sides of the ball and special teams has been hungry up to this point. We only spent a limited amount of time with them over the summer and the last couple weeks. But a lot of excited guys.

We talked to them last night, about the number of snaps to replace. It's remarkable the number of snaps, especially special teams, that we have to replace. I mean, a lot of your core defensive players make up your special teams.

So there's a lot of experience there that's gone. So they've been excited, opportunistic. Some guys have changed their bodies a little bit and in better shape. I'm excited to go see them practice. They're excited to get out there.

Q. Kirby, at media days, you mentioned Tykee wasn't quite cleared for football. Has anything changed in the last few weeks? And then, also, we didn't ask about E.J. Lightsey. Did he have any limitations once he's got to the team?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, E.J.'s been dealing with a little bit of a knee issue, not related to anything from when he got here. But he's cleared, he's working with us now. He's missed some summer training and conditioning time. But he's with us now and cleared to go.

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Tykee's out there repping, doing things. I wouldn't say he's 100 percent. But he's doing everything we've asked him to do. And may not be completely cleared for live tackle just yet. That'll be up to Ron and how comfortable he feels with or without his brace.

It's gaining confidence in those things. He's doing all the drills without limitation. But with every ACL, just because you're doing it without limitation doesn't put you where you were. You have to gain confidence in that. You have to get back into playing shape. It's just different.

Q. Kirby, you noticed that Malaki was listed as an athlete on the roster. Haven't seen that before. Do you have intentions of trying him out on both sides of the ball this fall?

KIRBY SMART: No.

Q. Kirby, you've talked about not being too worried about complacency. That's something that, obviously, a lot of coaches worry about coming off a championship. Why was that not a concern for you or has it seemed to be a concern for you? And have you done anything different to try to make -- kind of guard against it?

KIRBY SMART: I don't worry about it because you don't -- we don't have a reason to be complacent. I mean, I've been on national championship teams that won it all that I was concerned about complacency because there was a lot of back.

We don't really have that problem. So it's not a problem inherent to us in terms of complacency. Okay, I worry about complacency every year for a guy that started and played for two years. But that was regardless of the record.

Like, it didn't matter if you won 8 games, 10 games, 12 games or 15 games. You worry about a guy being comfortable that has started multiple years and can he grow.

So a lot of that is intrinsic of him. How good does he want to be, how great does he want to be, does he want to continue to grow, develop, does he want to improve his opportunity to for the NFL, does he want to be the best he can possibly be? Because I know the guys who haven't played are hungry. We have to keep the guys who have hungry.

It has nothing to do with complacency. It's not that -- I mean, whether we win or lose every game this year, it's not

going to be because of complacency. It's going to be because of the outcomes and what we did on the grass to make that possible. But it won't be because of complacency.

Q. Kirby, you had a comment about the consensus when -- you don't look at the rankings. But your defensive back class was really highly ranked. I know you haven't seen all those guys play yet because of summer. But can you tell us about each one of those guys and kind of what they bring to your class?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I'm excited. I feel like most of them are not really freshmen. I guess a couple of them were with us in spring. So the two safeties, Malaki and JaCorey, got a lot of work, a lot of work in the spring. And they still got a long way to go to be a viable option to play this year.

I mean, you show me a freshman DB that played in the SEC, I'll show you a guy that gave up plays. All right? That's the common denominator. Now, every now and then you have a guy that comes long who's just -- I think of when Stingley was a freshman, I think of a couple of those guys that had to play as freshman, they played really big. It happens from time to time.

And if you're going to have a guy be an elite player as a freshman, it's usually at a skilled position like receiver, running back, or defensive back.

I don't foresee one of those guys just coming in and dominating. A lot of the accolades that come with them, they dropped them at the door. And they go to sweating and they go to work.

So we're not going to live off high-rankings and what people said about them, because there's a lot of good football players out there that you guys didn't rank high or did have high. So it goes both ways.

We will need those guys to be core special teams players. We will need those guys to be ready to play in the case of, you know, injuries, targetings or whatever may be there. But we've got to get them ready by how we prepare in this training camp. And I'm excited about all those guys.

Q. How have guys on the defensive line like Nazir Stackhouse and Jonathan Jefferson kind of progressed over the last couple years?

KIRBY SMART: I think every day that we're out at practice, you know, we make those guys go over and go against the first offense. That's what we call our developmental squad or scout squad. They got a lot of work in, they get a lot of bowl practice in. And this year,

they got the extra week for the championship game.

I mean, that's a lot of work put in to get those guys prepared. They're not Jordan Davis and Devonte Wyatt and we're not asking them to be. If they were those guys, they would have been out there last year a lot more often.

So we're excited about where they are. Optimistic that those guys will be very productive. We're asking, you know, Zion, Jalen, Naz, Warren Brinson, Bill Norton, Jonathan Jefferson, all those guys.

The two young guys, Bear and Christen, they're going to get thrust up there and have to go out and compete and give us a depth and give us snaps. Because we play a lot of guys upfront. So I'm excited to see what all those guys can do on the defensive line. We certainly need some guys to step up at that position.

Q. Coach, social media was having a lot of fun with it yesterday. I just wanted to hear your opinions Stetson Bennett's new haircut and the Buzz Cut Boys. And what's that about?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know what it's about. I certainly -- there's several guys more than Stetson that decided to get it. And that goes back to that lock in, lock out, lock into camp.

You got no distractions. Lock out all the noise and all the social media things and get really focused on being the best version of yourself. And there were several guys that, I guess, decided to do that through their hair.

Q. Kirby, your running back core, obviously, big shoes to fill there. Can you talk a little bit about the guy -- the next guys up strengths and what you're really hoping to see most out of them this camp, in particular?

KIRBY SMART: Well, I think we know enough about Kenny and Kendall to know their strengths. They're both talented guys and played featured roles within drives within their careers here. But never the featured guy.

They're both talented and improved immensely. In the year, I think Dale's done a great job developing those guys as pass protectors, route runners. I think the more unknown is Daijun, who's been able to get in a lot of games, mop up. And has really done a good job. He's going to play a larger role this year.

And then finding out the two freshmen. Both Branson and Andrew have got to help us from a depth standpoint. So I'm excited to see what those guys can do.

Q. Yeah, Kirby, when you look at Darnell, I guess, one, what's he looking like as far as health status? And two, just how excited are y'all to have him going into a season, I guess, one, healthy, and two a better knowledge of the offense?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I gave Darnell a lot of credit. He's worked tremendously hard putting himself in the best health possible. When he got injured, which I think was over spring break, going into spring practice, we thought he was in the best shape he had been in since being here; both body fat composition, body weight, conditioning level.

I mean, he was really running well in our offseason conditioning program and we were looking forward to spring. He reinjured his foot. And from there, he couldn't train the same and he couldn't do the same things.

And he's really in a good spot. You know, he's a guy that I came in on Sunday, and he's out there running on his own on a day that was off.

He's got a purpose. He's practicing to be driven. And excited to see, you know, what he can do. It's going to be important that we get him in good, physical conditioning shape to be good to go in this training camp.

Q. Kirby, how do you feel about the depth you have at both tackle spots right now? It seems like it might be a guard heavy team. I don't know. As far as the tackles go, who all and how do you feel about the depth right there?

KIRBY SMART: I feel great about the depth at tackle. We'll probably be more concerned about guard than tackle. If I had to pick one, I mean, we've got two guys who have played winning football consistently. We've got two young guys we feel good about that we think can play good football, just haven't had as much experience.

And then we got to figure out who the best guards are and what the depth is at guards. But I feel good about the tackles we have. And if anything, we got to generate some more power out of those positions.

Q. Kirby, yesterday, Nick was talking about rebuilding at Alabama. What's a rebuilding year look like at Alabama?

KIRBY SMART: I mean, I'm not sure. I don't think you ever look at a rebuilding year in the front of it. You can certainly look in retrospect and think of things that way. But I don't think you'll ever find a coach that would say that going into the season. So I don't know exactly what it

looks like here.

Q. Kirby, so how do you feel with -- getting ready to face off against Dan Lanning in the Oregon game? How are you planning to face off against him giving he so much insider inside knowledge about the Bulldogs?

KIRBY SMART: The last thing I'm worried about is Dan Lanning. I mean, we got a million battles to face before that. I'm not even thinking about Oregon. Our concern is our roster. How do we build depth?

I mean, we're not even thinking about that. We're so far away from that right now. We're focused on us, our team, our connection and getting the right players in the right spots.

If we do that, that's going to control the outcome of the game, much more than what he knows about us and what I know about him.

Q. Kirby, can you update us on Tate Ratledge and the inside linebackers?

KIRBY SMART: Tate has been great. He's worked really hard at his conditioning. Ron feels like he's in a position where what we did in summer training would have been tougher on him coming off the injury than actual football practice. So the football practice piece should relieve some of that.

Now, the strain and effort to push off and double teams, as we put on pads, may increase that. But he's in a good spot. He's been rotating in with the first group and the second group.

I do think there is a matter of coming back where you haven't, you know, passed off or twist, you haven't passed off a stunt. There's some quick back guys inside that he's going to take some reps to get that back. But certainly feel good about where he is and his toughness.

Inside linebacker-wise, are you talking about injuries or?

Q. (No microphone.)

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, excited about the guys that we have at inside backer. Those guys were -- I was excited about those guys last year. They didn't get an opportunity to flash and show their talents because of the three guys we had.

But Smael Mondon is as good an athlete as I've seen. He has to increase his physicality, his toughness. He missed spring because of a shoulder surgery. But he's put on

some good, solid weight. Played a lot of snaps on special teams.

Core linebackers get valuable experience on special teams before they're the featured guy. So both those two guys got a lot of experience. Trezmen and Rian are healthy. Jalon Walker is out there doing a good job. Then you got Lightsey.

So when you start looking across at the inside linebacker group as a whole, I mean, I'm fired up to see what the guys can do.

Q. Obviously, replacing Jake Camarda is going to be tough. But how has Brett Thorson kind of come in and filled that role? And is Noah Jones kind of battling him for that punter spot?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, those guys will be battling out all camp. I can't tell how he's done other than spring. We don't get to watch those guys punt and do stuff during the summer. They work kind of independently on their own.

So our first chance to see those guys will be here in the coming days. But I'm excited about what both of them can do. Noah's done a good job increasing his strength and his hang time. So both those guys will be competing for -- they'll be tough shoes to fill.

Q. Kirby, I wonder if you have any memories of camp days for you as a player. And do you try to tweak, you know, year after year now that you're a head coach, what it looks like or is it pretty much the same plan year after year?

KIRBY SMART: No, it's changed every year. I think you change your plan based on your team. You know, we had a different team last year than we had this year.

Yesterday was our first report day and it looked a little different than what it was last year. Now, to the eye, to you guys, it probably wouldn't be any different. But it's different to us because we have different stages.

You know, we're younger in some spots, we know more of this, less than this, more lifting, less of that, more walk. I mean, there's different things we tweak.

But I start with the foundation that these are the days we're going to work, the schedule we're going to keep. But trying to make it work better.

And as far as memories of camp, you know, I talked to the team last night about, you know, my memories of training camp. Because everybody has to get into training camp

mode.

And I always said I would never be the coach that talked about how hard you had it, and you had to walk four miles up the hill in the snow and we had it tougher than them, and Shockley and them had it made and we had to go grind and do all this.

But, you know, it's very evident when you see the old schedules and the format of two practices a day, full pads, picture day in the middle. I mean, these guys are never going to have two practices in the same day. And required off time is different. So the demands were certainly more.

Q. Kirby, can you talk a bit about how this year's offense compares to last year offense, especially with the tight end group, but in general, as well?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we got a very talented tight end group this year. I thought we had one last year. It just was not always present. I think part of that is staying healthy.

You know, with your quarterback coming back and a lot of the skilled positions coming back and a lot of the young players coming back, a lot of the offensive line coming back, there's not going to be huge changes.

What there is going to be is maybe higher execution. Maybe the capacity to handle a little more information and do a little more than we've done in the past, because guys are in the second year and third year, some cases, of doing it.

So, you know, we're going to challenge those guys to embrace the thought of doing more and embrace being better at your execution. It's not what play you call, it's how much better you do it than they do it.

Q. Chris Smith returns for his fifth year this year. You guys have had consistently strong safety play here during your tenure. How much does having him back help and who might be playing to him at that other safety spot with Louis moving on?

KIRBY SMART: Chris has done a great job leading that group. I think he sets the tone each day for the work ethic. He's been a hard worker since he's been here. Tough guy. He plays bigger than he actually is. So we're very lucky and fortunate to have Chris back to help lead that secondary unit.

As far as who will be opposite him, a lot of guys are in that mix. Tykee's worked there some, Dan's worked there some. The two freshmen will factor in there. David Daniel will factor in there.

We're not looking to find the starter opposite him. We're looking to find the best four safeties we can find. We didn't have enough DBs. We don't know what that's going to look like this year in terms of, Do we have six effective DBs or are we more talented at the linebacker position that we have to have more linebackers on the field?

Q. Coach, can you give us one or two strengths of the guys that are going to be battling for your guard spots? You mentioned the guard spot is an issue. You got a lot of guys there. But what -- if Truss were to win, why would he do it? If Ericson were to get in there -- be the starter, why would it work out for him? Can you kind of give us their strengths?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, the why would be based on how they practice. So I think that's hard. Because going into fall camp -- training camp, they might have strengths in the eyes. One guy may be better at pass pro, one guy more powerful. One guy may be more intelligent. One guy may be more dependable because he's there every day because he's able to practice every day and he's not out for injury.

But we're going to base the decision on how they practice. And I don't have that body of work to say what that is. But the guys will roll in there.

Warren Ericson will be in there. Tate will be in there. Truss will be in there. Willock will be in there. Fairchild will be in there. I mean, all these guys are factors and they're there to compete for this job.

And we want the best one to win out. But at the end of the day, we're going to have guys -- Micah is going to be another guy in there competing for it. So there's a lot of guys that have played some football.

But guard's a unique position because it's different than tackle. You can get attacked from all angles. You got to play with power, play against the best defensive tackles in the country who line up across from you, the Jordan Davises and Devontes are in our league.

So you got to be able to withstand their pressure and them pushing the pocket. So you got to be able to generate power and be able to communicate outwardly to your tackle. So the factors that go into playing guard for us are endless. And we're going to find out who the best guys are based on practices.

Q. Kirby, after -- (indiscernible) -- we talked to Kearis. And he was really open talking about he had untapped potential, that we hadn't been the Kearis Jackson he

felt like he could be at Georgia. Just what have you seen from since then through the summer getting ready for fall camp from Kearis?

KIRBY SMART: Kearis is a leader. He represents our university the right way. He's on part of so many committees and boards. And it seems like he's been here forever. So I really appreciate what he's done in that regard.

He's been a team player. He's got to continue to improve. He knows the competition to create value is -- you know, he's also competing with the tight ends. Because when he's on the field, one of them's not.

So for him, it's very important that he knows his role, he understands his role, and he creates value in the way he plays, whether it's special teams or at wide receiver.