

# University of Georgia Football Media Conference

Monday, September 5, 2022

Athens, Georgia, USA

## Head Coach Kirby Smart

### Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: I'd be remised if I didn't wish Coach Dooley a happy birthday. And I think they had a nice surprise for him the other day. And, certainly, happy for him to celebrate his 90th, I guess it was. So that's a heck of a deal. I hope I can get there one day.

But looking back at the tape, I think it's never as good as it seems and it's never as bad as it seems. And that's kind of the mantra coaches use. And to be honest, it's true.

So it's never -- you know, you go to the tape to watch it and you think you played really good, and you see glaring mistakes and errors that you made that you got away with. And, you know, it brings you back to reality really quick on Saturday night and Sunday morning when you watch that tape.

But I was pleased with the way our players went about the connection piece. We challenged them to stay connected and be connected. There was a lot of examples of guys celebrating other guys' plays. So I thought that was awesome from our guys.

But now it's moving on to a guy I know a lot about and a program I have a lot of respect for. And he's done a tremendous job everywhere he's been. And it'll be a challenge for us getting ready for Samford at home on Saturday.

**Q. Kirby, you kind of forewarned us to expect the unexpected. Obviously, you guys came out no-huddle. But in terms of expecting the unexpected from all those freshmen, what would you say about the young players that saw their first opportunities on that big stage?**

KIRBY SMART: They have a lot to improve on. The most obvious is there was a lot of mistakes. I mean, mistakes that even they'll tell you are, like -- we call them WTFs.

There's, like, a lot of things that are, like, Why did you do that? You didn't do that all year. And they have a -- the largest growth for those guys is game one, two, three in

terms of reaction to their mistakes.

And, you know, what makes a guy -- I've always wondered, you know, who's going to sell the potion that allows a player not to make the most glaring mistake, things that you repped a lot.

And you have those in the first game. I've come to accept them. It's more what's your response is to them. And I guess we'll get to find out what those young freshmen's responses are this week.

**Q. Kirby, you mentioned the other day that you feel the staff here is the best it's ever been. I just wanted to follow up on that and see what makes it that right now, you think, especially when you've added four new coaches to the staff coming in this year?**

KIRBY SMART: The buy-in of those four coaches, the alignment, the understanding of this program's bigger than me and that I'll sacrifice for the program. They understand their role. They've done what they've been asked to do and they embrace it.

And there's a lot of positive energy and enthusiasm at practice. And it works. So it's created a really good kind of connection among the staff.

**Q. Coach, a little bit of an operations question. Noticed Stetson holding on the placement kicks. What went into the decision of doing that and what are the logistics involved? You know, obviously, those guys are up on another field a lot of the time. But I'd say, obviously, you're comfortable with him having enough work and being able to handle that responsibility.**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, he's held ever since he's been here. I mean, he's held probably a thousand times. He was Camarda's backup holder. So it wasn't a new thing. It was we lost the guy that held before, so we go to the next best holder or the guy that's next up. And we're training a guy for when Stetson isn't here.

So it's one of those things that I think it's important to the kicker to have who they're comfortable with. And those two



guys get to spend time together, and they do. They take a lot of time after practice, pre-practice, pregame to make sure they're on the same page.

**Q. We saw Ladd make some plays on Saturday. What kind of growth have you seen from him, you know, even from this last offseason going into this season?**

KIRBY SMART: Probably confidence. Ladd's always been a good player. That's not something new. He's always been an extremely hard worker. He's dependable. He's conscientious. It's important to him. He gives you everything he's got every day.

And the biggest difference is, you know, he has confidence in himself to perform because he performed on big stages last year.

And when you're one of these guys that has confidence, talent and you work really hard, then the sky's the limit for you. And he's worked really hard each and every day. And he knows the things he's still got to work on and he's got a lot of those things, too.

**Q. Hey, Kirby. Do you think you found your best five offensive linemen yet? What did you make of Amarius' moves on Saturday? I noticed he got in there on the third series of the game at right tackle.**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, you're constantly in search of the best five guys, right? It's not on a marker where we say we've got the best five. It's a continuum. It's, like, What did they do today at practice? Because you're only as good as your last practice.

So how are they going to perform today, how are they going to do tomorrow, how are they going to do the next day, how do they do the next matchup, how do they do when things get tight and pressure grows, when things don't go well.

We didn't see that. You know, we didn't have a situation where there's a lot of adversity or required a lot of composure.

So we'll figure out who those best guys are as we go along. Amarius did a good job in the game. He came in, I think, the third series. Played with some confidence.

Those guys getting some experience, it's critical so they're ready to play when their opportunity comes every down. And I think early in the season, especially, those guys' conditioning level, it helps to have three guys playing at those positions.

**Q. Coach, getting back to Ladd again, but also AD Mitchell. What's the biggest improvements you think those young guys have made from last year to right now?**

KIRBY SMART: Confidence. They're both much more confident. And in the system a second year. So, you know, there's -- every play you run, there's a reaction to what the defense does. They've seen what the defense does at a higher level. So the number of times they've run a play and had to react to something, it's almost infinite. And they now are starting to get where they can react faster.

**Q. Kirby, I know you supported a 12-team playoff. Ultimately, do you think having 12 teams is better for Georgia football in terms of winning championships?**

KIRBY SMART: I don't know how it affects Georgia personally. Yeah, and I think -- hesitant to say that just supported it. I wouldn't say that I've been clearly in one camp over the other. I think there's some good and bad to both.

And I don't think we know the repercussions of going 12 over 4. There's been some good things about four. There's probably some good things about 12. It's just everybody loves change. It's on a continuum. So it's, like, there will be somebody complaining about something about 12.

I don't really get into whether or not it's going to be beneficial for us or not, because I think it's year to year on what kind of team you have and how the other teams do in the country.

**Q. Kirby, on playing FCS teams, I know you talked about the importance for it financially for these schools. The direction that college football is going, I know it's uncertain whether SEC goes to nine games yet. But do you think and do you want to continue to play these games going into the future?**

KIRBY SMART: You know, I think it depends on where it goes. What they require you to do and where the FCS, some of those conferences end up with the realignment and some of those things, it's going to depend a lot on what you talked about; the scheduling, how many conference games you're playing.

I do know it's critical for these programs to be able to survive. And, look, high schools are our feeder programs, just like we are for the NFL. And if you're going to have good high school programs, you got to have kids getting opportunities to play at all levels. Because there's a lot

more kids playing at a non-Power 5 level than at the Power 5 level.

So if you're a supplier of talent and the growth of the game comes from your youth sports and your high school sports, you're going to diminish that as these programs fade away.

And some of these programs cannot, cannot survive without these games. That doesn't mean that I embrace them and love them. It just means that the programs can't survive without these kind of funding without these games.

**Q. Going back 20 years when you were hired at Valdosta State by Coach Hatcher, what were some things you took away from that experience and coaching under him?**

KIRBY SMART: You know, his charisma. He's always been one of the best recruiters in terms of his relationships with high school coaches. He was incredible, his disposition with the team, was always confident.

And just believed that we could win every game. And he embodied that. He embraced that. His players loved playing for him because of the energy he exudes with the players.

**Q. Hey, Coach. I know you came in protecting the lead. But do you have any takeaways from Beck's performance on Saturday?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Carson was very calm, cool, and collective. His disposition is such, that the moment's not too big for him. Like he's done multiple times before, I thought he did a good job.

He made some good decisions and had a couple poor decisions. And I think he'll be the first to tell you that he would like to improve on some of those. But the good thing is he got to come in and have an opportunity and run the offense just where it wasn't a run-oriented system just to end the game.

**Q. Yeah, you guys are filling some pretty big shoes there on the defensive line. And you turned to Mykel Williams to play a lot of snaps for you. Can you talk about kind of what led to, you know, allowed him to earn that time and what you thought about the way he played on Saturday?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, practices led to it, just like it'll lead to him not starting. If he doesn't practice well, it's not real hard for us -- you know, you base it on who practices the best, who gives you the best chance to win.

And he's done that, really, since he's got here. His work ethic and his humility has been off the charts. And if he continues to do that, coupled with his ability, then he'll probably continue to start. But he's got to play well and he's got to play big for a guy that's 260, 265.

**Q. Kirby, Samford's coming off a game where the first-time starting quarterback threw four touchdowns. Just with Coach Hatcher's offense, what are the challenges of trying to stop their offense?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, they do a lot of different things. They do a good job in the passing game. They have a lot of confidence in the passing game. Quarterback came in, played really well against Kennesaw State.

They believe in throwing the ball. And they -- people mistake that they can run the ball, as well. They did a good job at the end of the game to be able to run the clock out and handle that.

I think if you look and see what they did last year against Florida and throwing the ball all over the field and scoring points, they did an incredible job.

For them, for their players, this is an opportunity to play on a really large stage. And Chris Hatcher does a great job of getting his team prepared for moments like this and confidence in throwing the ball.

**Q. Yeah, Kirby, you mentioned after the game that y'all wanted to get Malaki Starks in the game early. I know safety's a position where you kind of want to have two guys rolling. What's the plan in getting him experience? What was the plan looking like in terms of getting him experience and in the game early against Oregon? How important was that for y'all?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, we just talked about how to play the players. We had a plan all along. All depended on how he practiced in fall camp and how he grew.

And we have a plan on every player. We talk about every and where they are and what our plan is. And that plan can change in a game.

The plan was to get him in early and we did. And he made a few mistakes and he made a few plays. And we got to try to limit the mistakes.

**Q. Kirby, having gone back and watched the film, what did you make of the play of your inside linebackers, specifically Smael Mondon?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, I think those guys had some WTFs

and they have to improve on those. They can't have those in order to be elite players. But they played with confidence.

And we call it, you know, being loud and wrong is better than quiet and right. And they had some moments where they were loud and wrong. But they were confident in what they called.

You know, when you go with a team that plays some tempo and hurry up, it creates a little chaos. And I thought those guys managed that well. They managed the leadership position well.

Physically, there's things we can improve on in terms of toughness, tackling. All the guys can. I mean, we didn't tackle the man with the ball real well.

**Q. Yeah, Kirby, I know Chris Smith said he had the stingers. Is there any sort of limitation on him this week? And then having a veteran like there back at safety who's able to make a play like he did against Bo Nix on that interception, how valuable is that for a defense that has to replace a lot from last season?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, it's important. All the pieces we have that have played are integral to make the other pieces play well. So Chris is a piece that's played and he brings a lot of confidence to the other players around him, especially in the eye of the storm.

I told the players today, we asked for composure and connection. We got a lot of connection. We don't really know, we never really got tested. So it's not their fault. But they didn't get tested in the composure category. And that's going to come. And when that time comes, are you going to be ready for that storm? And Chris is a guy that you feel pretty good about.

**Q. Kirby, what did you see in the performance of Javon Bullard? I saw he kind of got the start and you mentioned he was pretty tough. What did you see when you watched the tape?**

KIRBY SMART: I think Javon, he'll tell you, he probably had some first-game jitters like the other guys. And a couple times where he didn't get lined up right, maybe didn't have his eyes in the right place.

He plays really hard. He plays really physical. He's going to continue to get matched up on some big guys. He's got to play big for a guy that's not a real big size.

But he's another guy that doesn't back down from contact. And works really hard every day. He gives you everything

he's got. And he's a starter I think on every special teams, too, which is a credit to the way he plays.

**Q. Kirby, I know you're hyper-focused on your team. But do you look up at the scoreboard? Do you see a different East division this year, one and two? How important was it for your guys to have that sort of success in an opener with so many young players?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I'm focused on us. I'm focused on how we can get better. Because we got so many glaring things we can improve on. And that's going to be critical, how mature our team is to grow.

Look, standards don't need motivation. So when you look at it, if you play with a standard, you don't need motivation from outside sources.

I don't care if it's who we're playing, who we're going to play, how somebody else is playing. Standards don't need motivation. So if we're a mature team, then we'll go practice today to our standards.

**Q. Kirby, is there a difference in how much you learn about your team in an opening week? Like, obviously this year, a blowout win compared to last year, Clemson, it was tight for the whole game?**

KIRBY SMART: Is there a way --

**Q. (No microphone.)**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't know how to answer that. Because, I mean, each one, I think you learn something. You know, I think you learn something valuable about your team and their approach to the team.

A lot more learned in the steps leading up to the game and during the game than the result of the game. You guys are about results. I'm about process of how we went about the game, how did we do in the game, how did we do as coaches, how did we do as players during the game, halftime adjustments, end of game, a lot more than I am just the results.

(The live-stream connection was interrupted.)

KIRBY SMART: There's a million things you don't see against a pretty good defense, against a pretty elite defense. So there was enough of that to convince me that we were going with the right guy.

For who we were and who needed to be, he gave us the best chance to win. And it didn't take a lot of conviction to stick to that. It doesn't really matter what people say

outside of our organization. It matters what we think in it. And we had conviction on that.

**Q. Coach, Nazir Stackhouse was a guy that played a prominent role on defense. Can you just talk about what you've seen from him? And it seems like he's a pretty personal guy, a pretty big TikTok following, that kind of thing. Is that personality reflective of the Nazir Stackhouse you know?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't know how to answer the last part. I've never seen any of his TikToks. So I wouldn't really know. I'm a lot more concerned how he plays on the field and how he handles himself off the field and all the things he does to help our team.

He's worked himself to get better. He's gotten in better shape. I think Trey is one of the best developers of defensive linemen in the country. And this is a guy that, hey, he needed development. He came in here really raw.

And he wasn't the player when he got here that is today. He's come a long way. And he can still get better. But he's one of our thicker, tougher guys that can anchor. And if he continues to get better, it gives us a chance to have a really physical presence in there.

**Q. Kirby, you spent kind of the whole offseason national champions and everything that comes with that. I'm sure there was a point, two weeks, whenever, that you wanted everybody to kind of flush if, move on, let's get ready for the next season. Is there a sense of relief now that that first game's out of the way? And I know the journey had begun far before that, but now that you're actually back into a season and you're going full speed ahead now?**

KIRBY SMART: It's never a relief. I mean, I don't think relief is an adjective that comes with anything positive. Because when you become relieved reeled, you become complacent. And that's just not who we are.

So there's no -- you don't approach things that way. I don't think from a mental standpoint it's good to approach it from relief.

**Q. Kirby, can you tell us a little bit about what you saw in Oscar Delp when he got on the field and maybe what Arik Gilbert can do to see the field a little bit more?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I thought both those guys got to go in the game, tried to gain some confidence. Certainly, they've got two good players playing in front of them. We think the sky's the limit for both those guys. I'm looking forward to seeing them work today.

