

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

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Head Coach Kirby Smart

Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: Yeah, open with thanking the fans again for Saturday. What a great atmosphere. I enjoyed being back in Samford. And certainly enjoyed being around Chris Hatcher and his program. And a good friend.

Now, it's on to South Carolina for us, an SEC East rival that we get to play each and every year. Going into an extremely tough environment to play in with a lot of guys that haven't played in any kind of environment like that.

You know, the Mercedes game was probably 70/80 percent Georgia fans. So it will be our first chance to play on the road, first chance to play SEC opponent. And looking forward to an opportunity to play these guys.

Q. Kirby, just a few housekeeping notes. Anything on AB, any update? Do you think he'll be able to practice today? And, also, didn't see William Poole on Saturday.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, definitely AD will not be able to practice today. We're hopeful that he's able to make it. Ron's optimistic, but you know how that goes. It's more where he goes and where he's at. And we'll see on Poole. Right now, he just wasn't in the lineup to play.

Q. Just curious. Coach, having gotten to review the tape from this weekend and knowing what you're facing in South Carolina, their defensive front. Arkansas had run. How did you feel about your run game, retrospectively this past week? How much does it need to improve this week?

KIRBY SMART: Well, we've got to improve everywhere, starting with every unit. You know, it's a hard measuring stick when you start talking about comparing it to Samford. No offense to their team or their program. It's just hard to evaluate. So we got to improve in every facet.

That includes throwing the ball, that includes running the ball. Includes defensively, stopping the run, and rushing the passer. So that's always going to be the case.

I thought we did run the ball well Saturday. You know, but, again, it's a little different front, a little different coverage in terms of the way they played. But when you're getting four or five yards a rush, you know, it's hard to complain about that. You got to do it at a higher level against a better opponent.

Q. Yeah, Kirby, kind of following up on the run game and the red zone. How much do you kind of view the run game as the key to getting these right to the red zone, being able to run the ball, space is condensed and everything like to that?

KIRBY SMART: I think you got to have a run game to win tight ball games, you know, to be a good, physical team. And I have -- there's not a lack of confidence in our run game, for me.

I think people look at statistics and that's all they look at. I look at it as what have we asked our guys to do. And there's a lot of things, no offense, that you guys don't understand about football.

You know, when you talk about passing and yardage, I would say probably 30 to 40 percent of the plays you're calling a pass or yardage is a run play. And they can be very successful run plays.

The question is: Are they more successful as a run play or more successful when we decide to throw the ball out of that run play?

So the evaluation, for us, is those plays are running plays. And a lot of times, we put them in rushing yardage. Because they're actually replacing rushing yardage.

I know that's really complicated. But that's the way we look at it. So we're not evaluating it just alone how many times we rush the ball.

Q. Kirby, I seen one of those -- like they called a long handoff, high percentage passes when you're talking about substituting for the runs. I wanted to ask about Spencer Rattler, though. I mean, I'm sure you saw the film. Some of those deep balls he threw, I mean, how



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much alert does your secondary need to be for him and the South Carolina receiving core?

KIRBY SMART: Well, they got a great receiving core. They've got really good wideouts. Fast wideouts. Guys who struggled with last year, they've got -- you know, quarterback's got an elite ability to throw the deep ball. He can throw the ball over 70 yards, stretch the field. And he's an athlete.

So when you start talking about, you know -- like we played against Bo, we know Bo can throw the ball, Bo can scramble. He's a guy that can move around. You got to be disciplined.

You're going to have probably five to six snaps a game where you got to use scramble rules, you've got to plaster, take shots down the field. You've got to win 50/50 balls.

That doesn't change based on who we play. I mean, everybody we play, especially in the SEC, is going to be challenging us down the field. And you got to be able to win those one-on-one matchups. They got really talented guys to do that with.

Q. Through the first two games, what has been your assessment of Kendall Milton, especially after the hamstring injury he dealt with in preseason and how he's played so far?

KIRBY SMART: Kendall's done a great job. He did what he did in the spring. He's run the ball with toughness. He's very smart in terms of his pickup. He's improved as a pass receiver out of the backfield. He's done everything we've asked him to do to this point. He's hard to tackle. He's physical.

Q. Kirby, on the passing game, I know explosive plays are not defined as, like, 40/50 yards. But you guys are excelling at the intermediary passing game. Is that ideal? Is it by design to -- and can you think -- do you think y'all can sustain that?

KIRBY SMART: Can we sustain it? I think it's probably dictated more by what the defense does and what the defense gives us. You know, I wouldn't -- I would like to think we could sustain it when it comes to accuracy, completion percentage, decision-making.

A lot of those plays, there's multiple people that the ball can be thrown to. It boils down to, Did we read the coverage right? Did we take what the defense gives us? Did we hand it when we should hand it? Did we throw it when we should throw it? Did we -- a lot of things involved in that, you know?

I would certainly think we can maintain that, but it's going to take staying healthy, protecting the quarterback. It's going to take protecting the football. But that's the expectation.

Q. Yeah, Kirby, you mentioned Bo when talking about Spencer Rattler, does facing a guy like Bo recently help at all when you're preparing for a guy like Rattler or is it -- you know, is the page kind of completely turned to two different guys?

KIRBY SMART: I mean, I think it helps any time you face an athletic quarterback. We face one every day, you know? So it's like one of those deals that you get better the more you face a guy who has athleticism.

You know, Spencer's a little different than Bo. I mean, he's a really good athlete. He's got great arm strength. He's got a lot of playing experience. But each guy's different because their offenses are different.

Q. Kirby, the last you guys played in South Carolina, it was a COVID year. So, basically, nobody on this team has played in that bonkers environment. Is it silly to say or to think that Stetson's being a fan so far back and knowing that environment, is that an asset for a team that's going into, like I said, a really crazy place to play?

KIRBY SMART: The only asset to going into an environment like this is experience. And we've probably got 20 or 30 guys that have experience going into Auburn, Tennessee, places similar in terms of fan experience.

So we've got some guys that can draw on experience. We've got some guys that will lean on those guys because they'll be new. Any time you go on the road for the first time, guys have to get comfortable with that.

We had that a little bit in Atlanta in terms of not being on our own field. But it certainly wasn't the same kind of environment we're going into this time. And we'll have some guys that are young guys that will have to lean on those older players.

Q. Kirby, how would you describe your offensive identity and how has that evolved over the years that you've been here?

KIRBY SMART: It's evolved based on the players. And that will never change, right? So when the strength of our team is the backs, then we feature the backs. If the strength of the team is the tight ends, you try to feature the tight ends.

The strength of the team is the quarterback, O-line -- you know, right now the strength of this team is probably its depth upfront, experience at quarterback. And a distribution of the ball across the entire offense to make you defend 53 yards. So the evolution is based on what players you have.

Q. You guys are ranked No. 1 in the AP poll. And talking with Cedric, it was sort of met with a shrug. What does it say about your program when you've gotten to that point and it's not that big of a deal to be the No. 1 team in the country?

KIRBY SMART: It's never a big deal. It only matters at the end of the year. I mean, I don't know that we've spent many weeks outside of the top 10. And it never mattered whether we were inside the top 10 or outside of the top 10. It just is irrelevant.

I mean, it's a lot more -- a lot more worried about how we execute a combo block than I am worried about what we're ranked. And hopefully the kids are the same way.

Q. Hey, Coach, just wanted to ask about Tyrion Ingram-Dawkins. Given that he is from South Carolina, you said when Channing Tindall went to play, you assigned him as a captain because you understood how much that game meant to him. This is Tyrion's homecoming game. I was wondering if you've seen him approach the game differently in practice and such.

KIRBY SMART: I hadn't seen him yet. (Laughing.) So, I mean, it's -- he approached it the right way last week. But, literally, we have not seen the guys yet.

You know, I know he'll be excited. He's going back to play in South Carolina, he is from there. He's not going to be a captain this week. But Tyrion does a great job for us. And we'll see as he approaches the game as we start practice.

Q. Coach, you just mentioned that one of the strengths of your team is your depth upfront. What have you seen from rotation guys like Amarius Mims and Willock? And when it comes down to it, it's more marquee matchups. How many guys would you like to rotate upfront?

KIRBY SMART: Well, it depends on how guys practice. You know, you'd like to think guys separate themselves in games. But I get a better evaluation of those guys Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, than I probably did Saturday. And we'll continue to evaluate it and see who plays well and who competes.

And we get to go against a really good team three days in practice, then we get to go against another good team on Saturday. So we'll figure it out.

Q. Over the years, I feel like you guys have been very intentional about having a mantra that the players can latch onto. This year we've heard so much of, We won't be hunted. We've heard, Nobody cares. Where did those come from and how do you feel like they help the team kind of focus?

KIRBY SMART: They come from the players. The messaging comes from them. And you create an identity about what you believe in. And we've had a pretty good identity around here for along time about being really physical.

And the message might be tweaked game to game, year to year. But we hope the results and the process is the same. Because we don't really change the approach based on who we play, based on scoreboard, based on anything. So the focus is on us. And that doesn't change.

Q. Kirby, what stood out when you hired Shane to this staff and what really stands out to you about the job they've done over there at South Carolina so far?

KIRBY SMART: When I hired Shane, I'd known him for a long time. He was interested in coming and I thought it would be a great opportunity to jump into SEC and be part of our program and he did.

And he's created a lot of energy through his program through enthusiasm, their staff, they got an excellent staff at South Carolina. And just creating an environment of competition for their program to compete at a high level.

Which South Carolina's always historically played Georgia, you know, really hard. It's usually the first SEC game most years. They recruit our state hard. We recruit their state hard. So there's a lot of things to that.

Q. Kirby, obviously Warren McClendon's been on the field for three years. He's a tremendous asset. How has he grown particularly in the leadership in this year in particular?

KIRBY SMART: I think he's more vocal this year than he was in the past. Last year -- he's a naturally quiet guy. Last year, probably didn't have much to say with Jamaree and Shaffer around. This year you know, he would -- he and Sedrick together would be considered the leaders.

I'd throw Broderick and Warren Ericson in that boat, too. But Warren McClendon is like a -- you know, just a very

well respected vet. And they just -- players respect him because his durability's been incredible. His toughness is remarkable in terms of doesn't miss practice. And just works really hard. So he's a guy that the players look up to and listen to.

Q. South Carolina entered the SEC a few years before you came to Georgia. Do you have any specific memories against the Gamecocks and the games you've played against them?

KIRBY SMART: Not really. We kind of went back and forth. I don't know, we probably split with them while I was a player. That it would seem like, you know, we won at home and lost there a couple times and had some really good football players.

Played against Duce Staley and some of those guys were just unbelievable athletes. And don't remember much about it.

Q. Coach, Travon Walker made some pretty incredible plays yesterday. What was your reaction when you saw those plays and have you been able to speak with him since then?

KIRBY SMART: No, I haven't spoke to him. But I did see the little clip or whatever they call it, the little snippets of the highlights. And pretty incredible. You know, it's unique for a guy that size and speed to be able to do some of the things he does.

But over the last three years here, we saw those. You know, when you see practice, you see thousands more reps we've seen in a game. So we've seen some really freaky events by him. And to have those three in the same game, pretty spectacular.

Q. Kirby, will you reach out to Sam Pittman this week seeing how he just faced Shane Beamer? And how often would you, as a head coach, reach out to the staff of a team that played the team you're about to face?

KIRBY SMART: Probably more as a position coach or a coordinator, that's a very common thing to try to reach out, talk to people, see if they got any nuggets, anything you can learn, they learned maybe in game, maybe how they look on the hoof, you know, pace of play, things like that.

I think as coordinators you like to talk to the other team and you can share ideas and things like that. But as far as Sam and I, we text. But we text every so often anyway.

Q. Kirby, I know you have a lot of preparation, but do

you allow yourself a little bit of time -- I think the majority of these 48 Georgia guys in the NFL you coached or developed or guys like Tae Crowder that are now budding into stars and then, I guess, secondly not a scoreboard watcher, but when we see a Notre Dame lose to Marshall and lose to Appalachian, is that something that you can -- that makes it pretty real for your players in terms of maintaining that standard regardless of an opponent?

KIRBY SMART: On the NFL front, I haven't talked to any of those guys. I try every now and then to shoot a guy a text when I think about them. And to be honest, it hits me more when I'm watching our tape, you know, a tape of us playing and one of them is on it.

Meaning you go back and watch an opponent from the year before, watch the South Carolina game last year, and DK has a pick. And, you know, I send a text to him or, you know, watching Samford. Saw a Roquan Smith play at Samford and shoot a text to him. Thinking about him from when he was playing.

But not necessarily. Because I don't get to watch NFL games and communicate with those guys. But, I mean, as far as the upsets and stuff, guys, it really doesn't -- it's a part of college football. It can happen to anybody on any given day. And I really try to focus my attention on how we get better.

That's all I concern myself with, is what are we going to do today at practice that gets us better. Because I'm not worried about tomorrow's practice or Saturday's game until I get through today's practice.

Q. Coach, Malaki started this past game. Obviously, Dan Jackson still played a lot, Chris is playing a lot and several other, safeties kind of in that rotation. Can you just talk about the backend a little bit and how you see that going forward with Malaki, obviously, needing to get on the field but having such an experienced guy in Jackson?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Dan, he doesn't have a ton of experience. He got to play some last year. I don't know that he started any games. But he does -- he got to play in our dime package. So he gained some confidence from that.

He's got two pretty good years of practice under his belt. Which usually in our system, you get to where you're comfortable and you don't require 100 percent of reps to get ready if you've been in the system two years.

So Dan's in a position where we feel like he knows what to



do. But Dan can still grow and get better as a player. Chris played a lot of football from us. We had the luxury of trying to help Chris take care of his body and have a good year and be productive by, you know, putting his reps at 75 percent.

And then Malaki needs all the football he can play. He still hasn't seen everything, done everything. Tremendous talent and continues to stay level-headed and work really hard.

Back there, David Daniel's a guy that I really think has had a good camp. He had some good plays against Oregon. He's shown confidence. He knows our defense. He's playing with more confidence and awareness. And we need him to keep getting better.

Q. When you make a lineup change like that and someone is going to start and someone is not going to end up starting, what are those conversations like with the players? And for the guy that ends up not starting, what do you do to sort of make sure that you are able to keep him engage, knowing that he's probably still going to need to help you at some point?

KIRBY SMART: Just honest with him. I mean, honesty is the best way to go about it. I mean, it's no different in the NFL. It's no different anywhere in production.

Most of our kids know. I mean, they'll be the first to tell you that we're going to play the best players. And Malaki has earned that right. Dan's not upset about that. He's a team player. He gets it.

Dan has a major role on our special teams units and he continues to play on defense. So you're one play away at all times. Those conversations are not hard or complicated.

Q. We saw it on Saturday some when AD went down. But when a guy like Dillon can come in and perform in that spot, you know, how important is a young guy like that to come in and take AD's role a little bit?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Jackson actually went in and played. And I thought Jackson did a good job in the moment. And Dillon got to play, as well. You know, it's hard to play just two or three wideouts in a game, especially early in the season when the temperature is as such and you're trying to get guys in game-condition.

So we have a lot of guys that play at wideout. We've got several young players that are really talented. Dillon being one of those. They've got to grow up. And the best way to grow up is to go play.

So we're going to keep getting those guys better and keep giving them more opportunities. They got to be able to play in the moment.

Q. Kirby, can you give us an update on how Arian Smith is looking right now?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Arian is coming back. He's been able to do some weight-bearing running. He's been hitting some good speeds. Hopefully he'll be able to get back -- we don't know when he's going to be back. It's doubtful he's back this week.

But he is back running and he's not 100 percent. But excited for what he's been able to do. He's not cutting and breaking. He's only at altered G. He's getting better and you can see it in his eyes. He's getting healthier. We just got no idea when he's going to be back.