

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

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Head Coach Kirby Smart

Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: All right, guys, on to Missouri today. A team I have a lot of respect for. Any time you go on the road in the SEC, we talk about it all the time, it's tough to win on the road in the SEC. And I got a lot of respect for Elijah, the job he's done, what he does offensively and defensively. They do a good job.

I've always thought a lot about the job he does offensively and the issues they create defensively, as well. This year, they got big personnel upfront. They play physical. They just played a really tough game against Auburn. A tough way to lose a game.

But we're looking forward to getting ready for these guys and going on the road in the SEC.

Q. Kirby, in that game on Saturday, it seemed like Kent State had some success throwing out on the perimeters, some screens. Looking back on the film, anything that stood out on defense on what happened on some of those plays?

KIRBY SMART: No. We misfit one of them, the one really explosive one. And we just misfit it. Kid didn't get outside leverage. And football 101, you turn the ball back over to your defense. And if you don't turn it back to your defense, you get outflanked. And didn't do a good job of doing that.

And the safety was expecting him to come back inside and he went outside and made for a big play. So that was a good job by them, poor job by us.

Q. Coach, could you update us on the status of Javon Bullard?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I released a statement yesterday. I believe Clog released. And disappointed in Javon. Hate it for him. Got a wonderful family, but made poor decisions and it'll be dealt with internally.

Q. Kirby, injury situation, you know, you got Jalen Carter, Kenny, after the game the other day, Arian and AD Mitchell. I wanted to see if we could get an update

on those guys. And I also noticed that Arian dressed, AD didn't. Is that any sort of any indication where they are as far as coming back?

KIRBY SMART: Well, Arian has been getting better and better and better. He ran some last week. He hit some good numbers. He's not planting or cutting -- or he wasn't planting and cutting last week. His pregame, we felt like he was getting in better shape. He was able to do more in practice last week. But he wasn't 100 percent.

And we'll find out today where he is. He probably is a little bit ahead of AD. But AD's got a shot this week, as well. So we're hopeful to get both those guys back this week.

You asked about who, Jalen? Yeah, Jalen is nursing an ankle injury. He was much better going into this game. And we're hopeful that he's able to play this week.

I mean, he's -- it's just a nagging ankle injury that he's struggled to get over. And it's really tough on a defensive lineman because you're dealing with 6/700 pounds being pressed on you.

Who was the other one?

Q. Kenny.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Kenny, was who I talked about at the game. He had the same thigh bruise that he had already had. He got kind of hit on that same spot. But feels like he'll be fine. He was fine after the game. He was fine yesterday. We may limit him some today. But feel good about Kenny being able to go.

Q. Kirby, when you say that Javon Bullard will be handled internally, does that mean some -- what does that mean? Does he miss games or how --

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we have a process here we go through. And we have a committee that he goes in front of with the athletic director. And that's what I mean by it'll be handled internally with us. There's still a lot in the air there.

Q. Coach, Luther Burden was a guy that you guys



heavily recruited and he's already making a big impact as a freshman. What kind of matchup problems does he present?

KIRBY SMART: Size. Elite skill set. He's strong. He's physical. You watch him as a returner, you know, he makes people miss. They find ways to get him touches. He catches the ball out of the backfield, speed sweeps. He runs deep. And he returns the ball. He's a very elusive, physical runner. You can tell when people go to tackle him, you can tell, he's stout.

Q. Kirby, two-part question. One, not to belabor it, but I guess the status is influx and we don't know if Bullard is going to play Saturday. And two, is a road game healthy for a team like this in terms of getting everybody away in an environment away from campus just to kind of maybe circle the wagons and get the momentum back?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know the road -- I mean, to me, every game is important in terms of circling the wagons and playing well. It doesn't matter if it's home or away.

I mean, we travel a way. I think it'll be at 7:30, the biggest difference for us is the amount of time there is leading up to the game. We've had two of these really, you know, wake up, eat, go play. And this is the reverse of that. So you got to work off of different kind of mindset and approach to it.

But home or away, when you play in the SEC, you got to play really well. I think when you go on the road, you take less people. And sometimes our players aren't around their families as much like when they're at home games. So it will be important that we play well and we focus well and we concentrate well.

Q. Going back to last Saturday's game after you watched the film. Can you give us what you liked and didn't like about your three primary backs in that game?

KIRBY SMART: I think all our backs played really well in that game. They play a different front and we had some tough looks. So I think if you just go merely off statistics, it's hard to go because sometimes they don't get the same looks.

Meaning the defense is not the same. Sometimes the play call is not the same. And sometimes they stunt or move and a guy might miss something.

But I'm very pleased with all three backs and the things they've done. And to be honest with you, Branson, we've

got to keep trying to bring him along and get him ready. Because he's got a physical skill set that we need.

Q. Kirby, what are your other options at the star position? I don't know if you addressed this early, but I don't think I noticed Tykee Smith playing. What's his availability?

KIRBY SMART: Tykee's been doing a good job. Tykee got to play a couple games earlier. I think Tykee does a good job. He's physical. He's tough at the point. I don't know that he's 100 percent back but he's been practicing really well.

Like I told you a couple weeks ago, he's hit some high speeds and has done a good job. So he can play there. Marcus Washington can play there. Chris Smith has played there. Kamari Lassiter's played there. We cross-trained all camp. So, you know, we got all kinds of guys that can play the position as well.

Q. Yeah, Kirby kind of following up on Branson. How much is pass protection and picking up blitzes, that kind of thing, the main barrier that's keeping him from seeing the field more? And how do you bring a freshman running back along on that front?

KIRBY SMART: It's not that. It's the barriers of the three guys in front of him that have a lot of playing experience, have a lot of availability, understand things.

I mean, I think we do a good job of putting the best players on the field. And as he continues to grow and get better and understand things, then he gets more opportunities. You earn that by what you do in practice.

And the biggest thing Branson has jumped up in is special teams. He's taken on a more serious role in regards to those and continuing to get better as a back.

Q. Kirby, you talked about Eliah and the way he runs his offense. What sticks out as far as the ways they look to attack whatever defense they're going up against?

KIRBY SMART: There's a lot of misdirection. He does a good job with eye candy and does a really nice job running the ball, being physical and running the ball.

They're always well coached on the offensive front in terms of the way they block their plays and the way they complement each other and shots down the field and playing vertical.

I think their quarterback's done a good job this year. He's

a good athlete. He can scramble around and extend plays and make plays with his feet.

Q. Kirby, I think coming into this year, all that you lost last year, inside linebacker, the playmaking and everything, where would you say that you are at inside linebacker with the guys that you went with? I know you only played, like, three on Saturday. Is that rotation tightening up or is anybody standing out, or are you getting to the level of play that you want out of that position right now?

KIRBY SMART: I'm very pleased with those guys as leaders, football players. They work -- practice really hard. All of them do. I mean, the guys you don't get to see on Saturday, they practice hard too. They come out there and get better. And you didn't see Smile and Pop much last year and they were out there practicing really hard.

Jalon Walker, Sorey, Ryan, Trezmen. All those guys, they've done a tremendous job of getting better with each and every practice, each and every day. And I think that unit continues to practice well and play well. And we'll play as many as we need to play.

Q. Kirby, I think you've signed at least five -- or four or five star prospects each of the last five classes. What's the -- what have you found the level of buy-in is after being in the spotlight and recruiting and coming to Georgia when there might be guys just as talented fighting for playing time? How do you manage that?

KIRBY SMART: I don't even know who you're referring to. Because I don't know who is four and who is five. I honestly don't have no clue. I couldn't tell you right now on our roster who is and who isn't because I can't keep up with it. It's not important to me.

What is important to me is that they buy-in. And I judge that on a recruiting class, not a rating coming in. And I've been tremendously pleased with our on-boarding process, our education process for them.

That's in terms of what is the expectation, clear and concise, what is my job, what is my role on this team, where do I fit, how can I help the team. And each one of those guys fall in different spots.

Yeah, it doesn't matter how many stars you've got. It matters the culture of the buy-in and the locker room. They usually take on the role of the older players.

So the older players on our team have bought in for multiple years and that leads the younger players to doing the same thing.

Q. Kirby, is Brock a position by himself or is he a symptom of the tight-end position, is just a bunch of different things now?

KIRBY SMART: Are you talking in general for us or, like, in college football? What are we talking about?

Q. Whichever. Take it wherever you want to go.

KIRBY SMART: I mean, he's unique. I mean, but I think the position has evolved, right? So he's evolved with the position. I mean, as he was growing up and younger, he saw tight-ends doing things in the NFL that the traditional tight-end of the New York Giants lining up in 13 personnel with three O-linemen as tight-ends is no longer the tight-end. It's not what it was.

And he didn't necessarily just play tight-end in high school. If you've watched his high school tape, he was not really just a tight end. So I think part of the sell-in recruiting was you won't be used just as a tight-end.

Now, tight-ends are different within tight-ends, just like receivers are different within receivers, and running backs are different within running backs. James Cook was not -- Zamir White, you know, they're different people.

DBs, you know, there's a star, there's a safety, there's a corner. So there's these -- this variety that never really existed. But now at tight-end, there's a variety within the tight-end room that I think exists, which makes him different.

And it's okay to be different at that position because offenses have modernized and he's been part of that evolution.

Q. Bear Alexander made some plays on Saturday. What have you seen out of him and his progression and what did you like out of him on Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: Well, in his progression, he's practiced against better people every day, being over on the scout team for whatever, I don't know what he spends, 50 percent or 30 percent of his time, he goes against our offensive line.

So the number one way to create value is go against really good people and prove you can compete at a high level and you can sustain that level. Last week was his best week of doing that.

Now, what will he do this week, how will he respond to it? I don't know. But he has progressed slowly. He, obviously,

had to deal with a shoulder surgery. So he didn't get to go through Spring. That probably set him back some.

But he has evolved and gotten better just like we want all our guys to do. He's also gotten a little more opportunity because of injuries to other people.

Q. Kirby, about the run game, I know you've told us how the quick pass, the non-screens, the quick passes outside, the long handoffs kind of serve the same purpose as the run game, kind of count as your run game yardage. But is there a priority on trying to get something started in terms of the tackles in how that could affect the play action game down the road?

KIRBY SMART: Well, we think we are successful in the run game. I'm not talking about perimeter passing. I'm talking about we evaluate each and every carry independent of itself. And we think we hit our run goals. So when you start looking at that the way we calculated it, we did that.

Now, being explosive, we certainly could be much more explosive in the run game and improve in that area. But, you know, when you have the number of explosive plays we've had on the year, you have to weigh whether that's a run, a pass, a screen, what -- who are you and who is your identity. And I think that's starting to play itself out for us a little bit.

And I think we've got a really physical offensive line. And I think teams play us a certain way. And we're going to do off how teams play us.

Q. You talk about cross-training in the secondary so much. I mean, what does that look like through fall camp and into the season still working on those guys? And is that something you've had to do more as college football has evolved with spread offenses and spreading the football and all that kind of stuff?

KIRBY SMART: Well, we only really have five positions in the secondary, you can maybe say six. But that's only if you play dime. So I don't know if it's evolved any more in terms of, like, more positions. We don't play more positions.

We're not a seven or eight DB team. We're usually five with the potential with being six, in some situations and we play four sometimes.

But we cross-train all our positions. Receivers play X and Z, slots play outside and inside. Tackles play guard. Centers play guard. I mean, it doesn't matter the position.

You're trying to get the best 11 or 22 or 33 when you count special teams on the field. And that's what, you know, you try to do as a staff, to get your best players out there is to add depth.

Q. When you were recruiting Marcus Rosemy-Jacksaint, did you know that he was going to end up developing to being a dynamic blocker? And what would you make of his developments as a whole, given, you know, so many people look at catches and receptions and that's not all your asking Marcus to do?

KIRBY SMART: I knew his personality bled to fitting our culture, which is toughness, which is physicality, which is special teams. And he's a talented wideout.

I mean, not many people can go in as a true freshman and do some of the things he did prior to his injury. And to come back from the injury and still have the same tenacious attitude and toughness and just buy-in. I mean, he helps create a culture of physicality and toughness in the room.

I can't say that I knew he had that. I knew he was a competitor. I knew he fit what we wanted. And he's done a great job of carrying that message.

Q. Kirby, how much are you guys monitoring the hurricane and will it possibly impact your travel plans?

KIRBY SMART: Not sure. Just really started noticing it last night. And it affected a lot of high school games down there. And guys that we're currently recruiting. But not much information right now to know exactly how it will affect us this far up.

Q. (Question concerning Georgia Tech.)

KIRBY SMART: Man, I'm worried about Missouri. That's all I can tell you. I don't have a lot to say. I mean, since that game, my eyes have been on Missouri and concentrated on them, getting ready to play them.

I wouldn't be the head coach at Georgia if I was worried about other things. I got to owe it to our team and our university to concentrate on what I can control.

Q. (No microphone.)

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I'm focused on Missouri. That's what I'm focused on.

Q. I'm curious about Malaki Starks. Obviously, I mean, he seems to be exceptional at playing the ball in the air, in particular. Is he a total safety? You were talking

about cross-training. Or is he a guy that can play cornerback if you needed him to?

KIRBY SMART: Well, he hasn't played corner, he really hasn't played safety. He's really an athlete, right, that played a lot of high school quarterback.

It's important when we bring a guy in that -- you know, all the reps that we gave him in the spring, we try to get him at strong safety and free safety.

And we cross-train guys at freshman at strong safety/free safety. We try not to break out of that mold to get into things. He gets reps at different times at practice.

We do one-on-ones. We stick people at nickel. We stick people at money. We stick people at corner. We move them all around. Because when -- in spread offenses, the receivers can be inside, the tight-ends can be outside.

So what you might call a corner is a guy on the outside. Well, our safeties play on the outside. So he gets reps at doing that and doing those things. But we're focused on developing him right now as a safety.

Q. Kirby, can you tell us some of the back-story on the recruitment of Darnell Washington, kind of how that went down? Maybe some of the more interesting stuff behind the scenes.

KIRBY SMART: I would say Hartley can probably tell you more details about that. I mean, a lot of trips to Vegas to get to know him. He made a couple trips here and showed interest really in coming to the southeast because he went to some other places. I know he went and visited maybe Florida, Tennessee, Alabama.

So once you know someone has interest in coming this way, then you take a heightened awareness and you evaluate. And, obviously, his size and athletic ability blended with the SEC. And I remember watching a basketball game where he was pretty phenomenal in that.