

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

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Head Coach Kirby Smart

Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: I want to open with thanking the fans, again, for a tremendous home environment. That's the expectation we've set at UGA; for an environment to be intense and fun and exciting. And I thought that the crowd did that. And we want the same this week.

Vanderbilt, got a lot of respect for Clark. You know, he's an alumnus to the school, similar to me. I've always respected the work and job he did. He did a tremendous job when he was at Wake. And we copied a lot of the things he did defensively there. And then competed against him as a defensive coordinator at Notre Dame, as well.

So through the SEC head coaches' meetings and gotten to know him better. And got a lot of respect for the way he carries himself and the way he leads his program. So that, we're on to Vandy.

Q. Kirby, after looking at the tape, is there any common thread you've noticed in the slower offensive starts in the first half over the past two weeks?

KIRBY SMART: Not that I can speak of. I mean, some missed opportunities. But there's an opportunity to grow and get better each day at practice. And our guys have kind of adopted the mentality that they're going to do that each and every day.

They get to go against a really good defense in practice. And I think everybody defines "slow" differently. So I don't let our guys fall vulnerable to maybe what you think's slow and what we think's slow. I think that's a definition for each party.

I think when you play in the SEC, you play against really good quality defenses. And usually at the start of the game, they're at their best.

Q. Yeah, Coach, you kind of did sneaky, almost 100 yards from Branson Robinson. Obviously, he's a guy that creates a lot of buzz, Nick Chubb 2.0, and Baby Chubb, that kind of stuff. Can you talk a little bit about

how he's developing and why he's able to do what he was able to do this past Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: He was able to do it because of opportunity. And he was able to do it because a really good game plan in the run game and our offensive line moving their defensive line.

But he was given the opportunity to do it and he seized that opportunity. He created that opportunity for himself through his work habits, how hard he's worked since arriving.

But it's not like he hadn't been talented the whole time he's here. He's earned the opportunity through the work he's done. And you gain confidence through what you do in practice. And I think he continues to grow, have attention to detail in terms of pickups on checks and protection, and protecting the ball and making good run reads.

And he's done a lot of those things. And we certainly felt strongly enough about him in the job he's done in practice to get him some in-game carries.

Q. As a follow-up on Branson: I know you don't really do comparisons. But, you know, going back to when you were a running back coach here in 2005, it seems more of as -- he's more of a Thomas Reynolds-type back than Chubb. Can you kind of -- you know, can you give me any indication on that?

KIRBY SMART: No, not really. Because I don't think it's fair. Like, I'll let you guys do all the comparing. I'm happy with who Branson is. Like, Branson's his own person.

I think you -- everybody tries to give everybody a style of running back. But I don't know that you got a body of work large enough to know. We probably do because we get to see him each and every day.

But I don't think giving him comparisons is fair to him or the others. And I think he's going to be a really good football player. He has great burst and acceleration. And he has great toughness.



Q. Kirby, I know you guys meet with the broadcast crew before the game. I noticed in -- when getting to watch the game again, they mentioned something about Stetson and a shoulder issue. I wanted to see what he was dealing with there, how limiting that is for him, for you guys, week of practice, game plan. Is there anything going on there?

KIRBY SMART: No. Stetson's been good. He was dinged up after the Missouri game in terms of -- he took some shots in that game. I think he got knocked down a couple times.

The shoulder was bothering him. But there hadn't been a lot of large limitation. He hadn't missed practice time and things. So he's been good in regards to that.

Q. Kirby, what does Stetson's running ability bring to your offense that maybe some of your other quarterbacks -- starting quarterbacks didn't have, and, you know, beyond just the loan touchdown the other day?

KIRBY SMART: He brings the ability to make defenses play him honest. You know, you can't play a guy that can take off running a certain way. And if you do, he'll expose you.

So he gives the ability when people man-match, play split safety converges. He can do things with his feet; third down he becomes a weapon, boot and nakers, read plays, where you can read and read the backer and read the flow.

And, you know, you're actually defending one extra person. And we know that defensively, from some of the quarterbacks we've had to face, the nightmare that can create. So we got to do a good job of utilizing that skill set while also keeping him safe.

Q. Kirby, you -- I don't remember -- maybe this was true. 35 minutes of time of possession a game. What's the evolution of that been for this team? How's this offense -- why has that worked for this offense?

KIRBY SMART: I think every year is different. You know, some of your time of possession is how many three and outs you have on defense. So, you know, you got to look at it both ways.

There's been years here where we've been really good defensively and we got the ball back fast for the offense. There's been years that we ran the ball more successfully and that eats more clock.

Time of possession is a very misleading stat if you look at it

long and hard. But it's something we pride ourselves on and, you know, finishing the first half, starting the second half fast, trying to be elite at doing those things.

But it's not a stat that we overanalyze. We don't sit and talk about did we hold the ball long enough. We talk a lot more about plays. Did we get enough -- the number of plays we get offensively? And then defensively, how many snaps have we played? I would much rather have disparity there than time of possession.

Q. Just injury updates on Jalen Carter, Kendall Milton, and Smael Mondon after I don't think -- obviously, Kendall leaves the game with a groin injury, and then Smael and Jalen don't play on Saturday.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't know. I have to wait and see. I haven't seen them yet. You know, Jalen, obviously, we'll find out. He's -- every day he's getting better, he's rehabbing. I'll see more today.

Smael was close to being able to go in the game. Didn't practice last week. Hopeful to get him back this week. And the same with Kendall.

Q. Coach, as far as their play on the -- as far as the point of attack play goes as far as your defensive line is concerned, how do you think those guys did this past week, especially some of the younger players?

KIRBY SMART: Some good, some bad. And guess what, it's the exact same as every game. So it's -- you want to go everything -- measure everything by stats.

But there's times we got cut out of our gap. There's times we got knocked off the ball. There's times we got bumped. Times we got beat, you know, in the secondary. And times we did it right.

You know, probably didn't have exactly the quarterback and the receivers to expose that sometimes when we didn't do it right.

But I'm proud of the development those guys have had. They keep getting better and we've got to. We got to get more guys on defense that can play winning football.

And that's going to be the key down the stretch as we play these games coming up, including Vandy, you got to have more guys that can play with stamina the more snaps you have to play.

Q. Coach, last week, one of the Auburn players was talking about keeping Georgia out of its third down packages on defense. But I noticed when you're in

your third down package a lot of we see Xavian Sorey, Mykel Williams and Bear out there. That's some young guys on your money down. Can you talk a little bit about the faith you have in putting those three guys out there?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, they've earned the right to be out there. They're extremely good athletes. They have quickness, explosive. Might not have the strength in terms of the core weight room.

I mean, Bear's coming off a shoulder surgery. Mykel is a freshman that went through spring. And then Sorey's a guy that came in and had not played a lot of football in high school because of injuries. So they all three have really good traits.

I think one of the best things we do here at Georgia is take a freshman and say, What does he do really well? How do we utilize that in year one?

And you go back to the year that we had any Nakobe on third down, Trevon was on third down, Tyrique Stevenson was on third down. We had these players that were playing as freshmen on third down because they could go out and execute at a premium.

Some of those guys you're talking about are playing out of necessity. We had other guys that might be in front of them, some that might be Smael or Jalen that get dinged up, those guys got to get ready to go play. So, been pleased with what they've done, but we got to execute a little better with each one of them included.

Q. Kirby, you mentioned the opener kind of creating this monster of an impression what people have of you and kind of expectations every game will be like that. Is the games being closer, the last three games, a reflection maybe of opponents adjusting a little bit to you guys? Or are there other factors? Or is it just that, you know, you don't have to necessarily blow out teams 49 to 3 every game?

KIRBY SMART: Well, the factors truly are limitless. When you factor in millions of things that come to impact a game, whether it's what they're doing, what we're doing, headspace, the location, time of day, the temperature. I mean, you could factor a million things into that.

At the end of the day, you want to execute at a high level. And sometimes the person on the line across from you does a good job at the point of attack and stops that. And you got to find other ways to attack them where you can win at.

And in some cases, it has nothing to do with the opponent and has everything to do with us in just executing better. But that -- that's nothing to do with our offense or how we started with Oregon or how we're did on defense.

It's just, to be honest with you, having 11 guys on the same page, executing better, and more consistently. And I think if we get that across the board, you'll always have good results.

Q. Coach, you already talked about Xavian Sorey. But Rian Davis was another guy that had to step up with Smael Mondon being out. How would you describe his game on Saturday, especially in a spot where you got to communicate to both the front-end and the back-end and execute?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, it's twice as hard because we're at home. So we pumped crowd noise in Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, even Friday-walk. Saturday before the game, we're still doing crowd noise to try to get the simulation of those backers having to communicate because they're such an interval role to what we do defensively.

And I thought Rian stepped up. I mean, his maturity showed in terms of having composure and play. We had to play Sorey more than maybe more he's played in the past in first and second downs. And we have to continue to work on that position. Because it's not a position that we have tremendous depth at. And we've got to look and always find ways to get our best guys on the field.

I was proud of Rian, though, because he's not a guy who's played a lot of snaps. He's had a lot of injuries. He's been dinged up even in recent weeks, but he went out and pushed through and played well for his team.

Q. Kirby, I have a coaching philosophy question for you. When you have a guy who's struggling a couple weeks ago you had Ladd McConkey with dropped passes and a muffed punt, when do you pull a guy? Is it based on your position? Is it based on faith in him or when -- or not so much pull him. How do you stick with him? Do you change it by position? Do you have criteria from position to position or is it player to player?

KIRBY SMART: Just watch practice. Millions of reps of practice. And I put a lot of value on that. And we do all we can from a sports psychology standpoint and you go out there and practice.

And if you practice the right way with toughness, effort, energy, passion, and believe in yourself, then we're going

to continue to believe in you.

I believe in all these guys we've got. I see these guys work really hard every day in practice. So I give them an opportunity to play free in a game and go cut loose.

Q. Coach, just the passing game the last few weeks, obviously, Stetson missed some open receivers deep. How, in general, do you feel like his ability is on deep balls? And then the passing game as a whole, do you feel like that's struggling and needs to be tightened up or it just hasn't been necessary the last couple weeks?

KIRBY SMART: I feel great about Stetson as a passer. Always have. He does a tremendous job seeing the field. He does a great job going through his reads. He's got great arm talent. He can throw touch passes.

He can anticipate throws as good as anybody in terms of anticipating a guy getting open while he's getting pressure. I've seen him repeatedly do that here. And he's done a good job in the passing game. So I'm very pleased with where he is in regards to that.

Q. Kirby, you guys jumped on Vandy early last season. And, obviously, a very lopsided result. In what ways do you see that program improving from year one to year two under this coach?

KIRBY SMART: A lot. We start with the first game of the year. You know, they go out to Hawaii and played in a tough environment. Tough time change. Very mature to handle that and play well.

They played last week. I mean, you watch the Ole Miss tape, they came out and attacked and played well. I mean, well coached. So the expectation is that you're going to grow and get better. And everybody measures that in different amounts.

I'm sure Clark has his way of measuring it just like we have our way of trying to measure improve. But they, probably to me, one of the most improved teams in league in terms of the way they're playing right now.

Q. When you have a player as talented as Brock Bowers, how -- as a coach, how do you balance getting him the ball enough to make sure that he's consistently making an impact on this offense but also not forcing the ball where the opposing team know's he's going to get it and try to cover him up as triple coverage, as we saw on Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: Triple coverage?

Q. (Question concerning triple coverage.)

KIRBY SMART: Well, I'm going to be honest with you, I love you media guys, but if you think somebody's triple covering somebody, please send me video of that so I can see that. Because that means we've got somebody else wide open. Okay?

Now, he may have thrown it in the vicinity of somebody and they broke on it, but there's no football player known to man that's going to draw triple coverage. Okay? That's just not going to happen. Because there's too many good players around him. Especially at the level we're at.

But it's hard to answer that question because I don't think I've ever even heard it. But I don't think we can force the ball to Brock. We have to have touches for Brock.

And if you go back and chart our games, there's -- when he touches the ball, usually good things happen. Also what Brock does a really good job of is when he doesn't get the ball -- go look at Kenny McIntosh's run. Go look at the frog play where we ran Darnell and Brock on the perimeter for Kenny to set up a score.

There's a lot of weapons that Brock does. And because Brock and Darnell are both really good point of attack blockers, it makes him really good in the play action, as well.

Q. Coach, you talked about picking up some things from Coach Lea in the past. Is there any kind of example that you can give without maybe not giving away too many specifics about some of the things you have learned from him?

KIRBY SMART: Really, more studying scheme. They did a tremendous job at Notre Dame. If you remember, played Notre Dame those years and his defenses had elite tackling, really physical, disguised things really well. And he was the architect of that. And those are things we copied in the offseasons.

Q. We won't get to ask you next week because you have a bye week. But what is your priority for the bye week coming up after Vandy?

KIRBY SMART: I haven't even thought about the bye week. I'm concerned with Vandy and getting our team better. To look at the bye week right now would be -- you know, would be dishonorable to Vandy.

I mean, let's be honest. This is a good football team. I just told you they're one of the most improved football teams. And we respect and value that in our organization how

their kids will play and how they played last weekend.

Q. Kirby, what did you think the difference was in the fourth quarter in your passing success versus, I guess, first half you had 25 yards? Maybe that was the slow start people were talking about throwing it. But in the fourth quarter, you guys really lit it up. What do you think the difference was? Did Monken change some things?

KIRBY SMART: Maybe they were tired from the striking attack of the 290 yards that had been gained and they weren't quite rushing as fast and they weren't getting back there as fast.

We were a little more accurate in terms of it. Threw the ball a little better. I mean, we had a couple passes in the first quarter that we either threw high or we dropped. And then we overthrew a guy on third down.

I mean, to be honest with you, when you run the ball better, guess what you also normally do? Throw the ball better. So on the drives that we ran the ball well, we threw the ball well. On the drives that we didn't run it well, we usually didn't throw it well because it brought up third and long.

Q. Coach, I wanted to ask you about the star position. First, Javon Bullard, his first game back. How pleased were you with his approach and attitude before the game? And then Tykee Smith, I think that you mentioned before is mainly his health and confidence in his knee. Where do you think he is in terms of that point?

KIRBY SMART: Both those guys continue to get better. We're going to need both of them throughout the year. We had a role for both of them in the last game. I thought they both accepted that role well. Played really hard.

Both had a couple, you know, mental mistakes that you can't afford to make at that position that we didn't get exposed on. But I like the way both those guys practiced. And I love the energy they kind of bring. And they kind of feed off each other. And proud of those guys.

Q. Coach, we're going to get to talk to Jackson Meeks in just a little bit. Kind of what has he done early this season to kind of open your eyes?

KIRBY SMART: Well, the No. 1 thing that he's done is he's been a special teams demon. You know, you guys don't get to see it enough. But he's taken over a role on special teams in terms of kickoff coverage, punt return.

He's really been really good at what he does. He executes

his assignment. He plays with great toughness. He's gotten some opportunities at wideout. But he's really physical.

And, you know, that -- the whole culture and team building and special teams being first, he's really bought into that and brought kind of an era of toughness to that room that we haven't had in a while.

Q. Kind of on that front: I noticed a real good block by De'Nylon Morrisette to spring Branson on one of those runs. How's your young -- him and the other young wideouts coming?

KIRBY SMART: Doing well. De'Nylon has gotten better each week. He was thrown into a little more action a couple weeks ago. You know, he went a long time in camp without practicing. So he's still maybe 15/20 practices behind the other guys.

But I'll tell you what, when we've asked him to show toughness and make some plays, he's done it. Dillon Bell continues to do that. C.J. Smith has gotten better with every practice. I hope I'm not leaving anybody out. But I feel like those guys were betting better.

Q. Kirby, it looks like Brett Thorson has a pretty good ability to kind of pin them inside the 20. Did he have that right when he walked on campus or has that been something that has developed in the last 10 months or whatever?

KIRBY SMART: Well, I wasn't with him when he was in Australia. I can promise you that. So I don't know how he kicked it there other than the videos they sent. But they do an incredible job of preparing those guys for coming to the States, being part of a college atmosphere, being a part of a team. And he's accepted that really well.

I thought his punting Saturday was one of the positives in terms of the -- not only the pins, but the hang and distance was really good.