

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

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Head Coach Kirby Smart

Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: I would open with congratulating my former teammate, Champ Bailey, to the College Football Hall of Fame. Which he's already kind of gotten the nomination and gotten in. I guess at halftime or sometime during the game I know he's going to get recognized.

And he was also -- the Georgia/Florida Hall of Fame was there Saturday. But congrats to Champ and what he's meant to our program and the way he represents our program and what he means to the University of Georgia is pretty awesome. So I'm happy for him.

Then moving to Tennessee, who's done a tremendous job. I got a lot of respect for Josh. Always have. I knew him as a player and now as a coach.

He was at Missouri for a few years early on. And had a lot of success and now's moved to Tennessee and done a tremendous job. His entire staff, they've done an incredible job with all the work they've done.

And our guys are excited and looking forward to a top matchup in Sanford Stadium. I know our fan base will be loud and proud. I want to challenge our fan base to be -- I mean, everybody talks about the Notre Dame game, but we wanted to be louder than that. We wanted to be there earlier than that.

We had some great matchups last year here at home. And I thought they really affected the game each time we had a big matchup. So we'll need them again and we'll be ready to go.

Q. Coach, I just wonder if you guys found out whether Nolan did actually have a separated shoulder and if his availability has been determined yet this week?

KIRBY SMART: His availability has not been determined. It does not look good for availability this week. It's a pec muscle. It's one of those deals we're doing an MRI on. We're still getting some opinions on it. But he's probably doubtful for this week.

Q. Kirby, since Josh has gotten to Tennessee, they've been very good at scoring in the first quarter and getting off to good starts. What strikes you about what has allowed them to start games so strongly and just the importance of doing that on offense this Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, they go really fast. They get a lot of at-bats in terms of possessions and they do start fast. And, you know, I think our team has done a really good job of growing and getting better throughout this year.

And each week, including the off-week, it's, like, I see marked improvement. And I really want to continue to do that. We're trending in the right direction in terms of getting better both offensively and defensively.

Q. Just any quick injury updates or prognosis for AD Mitchell, Amarius Mims, Kendall Milton this week?

KIRBY SMART: Not sure because I have not seen them practice. Kendall's still got the quad strain that's bothering him. AD has the ankle and we took him on the trip and allowed him some more recovery time. So I'll find out some more with him today.

And Mims has a slight MCL, that we hope he's going to be able to go. But we haven't practice, so it's going to be hard to say.

Q. Back when you guys would have to face the triple-option every year, you kind of used up over the summer, maybe the bye week. Is this offense that different where you had to maybe do a little bit in the summer, do a little bit on the bye week to try to get ready because one week to do it is too much?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we worked on them in the offseason, but we work on a lot of opponents in the offseason. We worked on them in the bye week, but we worked on two or three opponents in the bye week.

It is a challenge to get ready for because -- they'll be the first to tell you, they don't watch all of your tape because they -- some of it they use, some of it they don't.

They have some traditional formations and traditional plays. But a lot of theirs is very different. It's very unique and they have a plan of attack based on how you're going to play them.

It's not like they haven't seen -- you're not going to trick them. You're not going to show them something they haven't seen. You got to do what you do better than they do. And they're really good at what they do.

Q. Coach, obviously, it was last year, but I'm curious: This Tennessee team has a Heisman level trophy quarterback, they've got some good wide receivers, kind of similar to what maybe Alabama had last year. Do you take anything from a game like that last year with a high flying offense like that going into a game like this?

KIRBY SMART: No. No. No comparison in terms of the offenses. They're just completely different.

Q. Coach, I believe Jalen got 20 snaps the other day. I know most of them were on third down, perhaps on the first play? How did he look to you? How did he come out feeling after the game and what was your take on it?

KIRBY SMART: He played probably better than I expected. You know, when y'all asked me after the game, I didn't really know how much effect he really had. He was in on run, he was in on pass. He executed well. He held the point. He didn't feel like it bothered him.

So, you know, it's really about stamina and him being able to hold up in conditioning. And one thing he's been doing a lot of lately is conditioning. He hadn't been practicing. So we hope to have him in great shape and hopefully he's able to go and be full speed.

Q. Kirby, how did Chaz Chambliss look when you reviewed film and what were some of the other guys that might have picked up some snaps with Nolan out?

KIRBY SMART: Well, Robert played. He played a little more number of snaps once Nolan was injured. Chaz did a nice job coming in. It was great to get him back. Didn't know that he would have to play that much in that role. His hamstring has still been bothering him. It bothered him a little bit the other night after the game.

So it's one of those that we're going to see how he does today and moves around. Looking to get Marvin, MJ, all those guys going. So nobody really played more because it was just Chaz and Robert, really.

Q. Coach, what's one of the biggest lessons that you learned from Coach Duli that you still carry with you leading this program?

KIRBY SMART: Probably the way he carries himself. Such a class man. Just the humility is the biggest thing.

Q. Kirby, Rodney Garner has been coaching in this league a long time. And this Tennessee defensive line has been really good, particularly, against the run. What comparisons are you used to seeing with a line that Coach Garner has coached and what do they do well?

KIRBY SMART: Toughness. You know, he's old school when it comes to striking people and playing with physical toughness. You know when you're playing against one of his defensive lines, they're not going to run from contact. They're not going to shy from contact. They're not going to back down from a challenge.

And it's not because of what they're going to do this week, it's because of the way he's molded them and the way he's coached them. You know, he coaches tough, he coaches hard. And he hadn't changed that with the change in generations of players. He's always done that. Even when I was a GA here, he was coaching them hard.

Q. Kirby, I know comparisons isn't perfect. But 2019, you played that LSU offense. Did you walk away from that just saying the best way to fight that is to have a good offense, too, or were there some defensive tweaks you thought you also had to take?

KIRBY SMART: Well, going back to that game, it was tough. Because they had five, six, something first rounders. When you throw Jamar Chase and the quarterback, they had all these first rounders in there. And they were really talented and they did a really good job executing.

They did use some tempo. Probably it's not the same tree of coaching, you know. There was some things we learned from that that had helped us in the future and we always kept them in our package of the three-down different looks they had.

You know, we used 7 DBs in that game. Used different looks and you try to give them some confusion. But there's not a lot of similarities between the two offenses, if that's what you're asking.

Q. Yeah, obviously, you work on conditioning every week. But the way Tennessee's tempo is, how much of an extra emphasis do you have on that this week,

knowing especially defensive side of the ball you have to play multiple snaps and also shuttle in and out of the field quickly?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I mean, you can't get your players in shape in a week. If they're not in shape, then you did something wrong long before. So we've been building towards this week in terms of -- since week one, the conditioning level of our players has been a concern every week for me.

It's one of the major concerns, Are you in good enough shape? Because if you're not, you can't make it up in one week. So it's one of those things we work really hard on.

I don't know how much other teams condition in the country, but we do a lot because I think it's really important. Unfortunately, we haven't had a lot of games where we've played a lot of snaps. So that goes back to, If you're not playing them in the game, you better get it done during the week.

And, you know, we've worked hard at it. We're going to find out on Saturday if we're in shape or not. I can promise you that because they're going to try and get a lot of snaps in.

Q. What makes Tennessee's four receivers so explosive? Is it the ability to create separation successfully or is there any other aspect?

KIRBY SMART: Speed, space, scheme, talented arm. You know, you can have the best receivers in the world, and they get open all the time, if you don't have somebody that can get it to them -- they have somebody that can protect them and get it to him. They do a good job of that. Again, that's the challenge for us this week.

Q. Yeah, Kirby, when -- just from experience, when you have your defense facing an offense like this like in 2019 LSU, last year, Alabama, how do you see a defense embrace that challenge when they're facing an offense that's so highly regarded and explosive in terms of the points they put on the board?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know what you mean. How you see them embrace it?

Q. (No microphone.)

KIRBY SMART: Yes. I see them embrace the challenge every week.

Q. Kirby, you mentioned Hendon Hooker. Just what really stands out in preparing for him and maybe how

far he's come even from facing him last year?

KIRBY SMART: Just another year experienced in the offense. You know, he's one step ahead of where he was. To think of the reps and the games he's played since the games last year, he's just as elusive, he's got probably the same arm talent. Those two don't improve. It's his decision-making and his processing.

And the guys around him are playing better, too. I mean, they're playing much better across the offensive line, they're running the ball, they got explosive playmakers that are playing better. So they've improved around him and he's improved.

Q. Coach, I think you said -- Stetson definitely said one of his best games Saturday against Tennessee. Looking back on it, how do you think he performed on Saturday and how do you feel like he's ready for this challenge on Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: He'll get ready this week. And he did some really good things in the game. Some elite, elite things he did in the game. He had some decisions that he wish he'd take back. And I don't know many quarterbacks that play a game that you can't say that about. You're just trying to wipe those away.

Because in the game of college football, including Tennessee and every team in the country, they put a ton on the quarterback to make decisions. And we do the same with Stetson.

So, you know, he's not always going to make the right decision. We just got to make the right one more times.

Q. Kirby, what are some of the big factors that go into making the call to go for it on fourth down, especially when it's not the most favorable distance sometimes?

KIRBY SMART: Just, you know, study. Tape study. How have they played those situations, how we play those situations, what is our plan for those situations, what are our plays, what's the time of the half, what's the score, what's the momentum, what's our red zone defense, what's their red zone offense like?

I mean, there's a lot that goes into it. And ultimately you got to make a decision and affect whatever happens afterwards and roll on. You know, we're next play mentality. If we hadn't gotten it, then we got to go out there and stop them.

Q. With this being only the third time in SEC football history that the top two teams AP poll have played

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against each other in the regular season, is this just another conference game or do you prepare for this any different way?

KIRBY SMART: No, I don't -- we don't prepare for it any differently based on rankings, if that's what you're asking. The rankings -- I mean, I don't even know the rankings or what they were. It's a big game, right? There's nothing about a number being in front of it. It would be a big game regardless. Because both teams are in the East.

Q. Coach, that being said, your team has been in this environment, in this situation a lot in recent years. Tennessee has not. Do you take that at all to be an advantage for you in addition to being at home?

KIRBY SMART: I think the home helps. I think playing on the road's always a little different. But I don't know that -- I mean, they played in some big games this year. They played at Pitt, they played Alabama at home. They played some really big teams and they played really well against them.

So I don't think that the playing in the big games -- every game is a big game, to be honest with you, in the SEC. So it's not like some guys go into it thinking of it differently. But I do think playing at home is important and certainly an advantage in our conference.

Q. Yeah, obviously big game. Chris Smith has played a lot of those. And he's made interceptions last year against Clemson, Alabama. What has sort of allowed him to elevate himself in those types of games in those big moments?

KIRBY SMART: Experience. He's one of the few guys back there that's got a lot of experience. I mean, we don't -- when you look across our secondary, there's not guys that have a ton of experience outside of this season. You know, Ke's got a little bit. But outside of that, Chris has played a lot of football games. So that's allowed him to make some of the plays he's made.

Q. Is there an update on Darius after that hit he took Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, he's dealing with a head injury and hopefully we get him back. But we don't know when.

Q. The tempo they play with, it feels like one of those weeks where your field generals got to do a lot of recognition, maybe even without being able to look to the sideline. How do you feel about -- you talked about Chris Smith. Guys like him have grown into those roles of being able to recognize on the fly and kind of

get guys lined up right.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, it's tremendously important every week. But it's even more important at the decision-making and the process with which they go with pace. They got multiple paces they use and they can go as fast as anybody in the country.

They practice it, they preach it, they do a really good job researching themselves and figuring out how they can faster. And our job is to be able to match that tempo and match that conditioning level.

Q. Coach, in the Missouri and Florida games, you guys lost the turnover battle but still came out on top. It seems like this is a game where you can't afford to give this team extra possessions. Is there an extra emphasis on protecting the football and creating turnovers this week?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, it's incredibly important. I don't know if there's an extra emphasis because I would never say that we emphasize one week more than another.

You know, you can't not emphasize turnovers, right? Like, that's the emphasis -- that's what we start every practice with. That's what we hang our hat on. That's what we protect our program with, is the ball. So I can't say it's extra, but it's certainly important.

Q. (No microphone.)

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, he -- his back had a lower back spasm. But I think he's going to be fine. I think he should be able to go today. He didn't play any more after that when he landed on that fade ball, the interception.

Q. Kirby, how do you feel about your secondary given the unique challenges that this offense presents?

KIRBY SMART: We're excited to see them go compete. I think they've gotten better each and every week. Grown some depth in the secondary playing some other guys. I'm looking forward to the opportunity.

I mean, they're going to -- one thing is for sure, they're going to get to cover. They're going to find out. Because there's no hiding anybody when you play these guys.

Q. Coach, we obviously don't evaluate every play all the time. How do you feel like Kelee Ringo has done this year? It seems like he's struggled at times, particularly in that one-on-one outside situation?

KIRBY SMART: Well, when you play the position he plays,



that's the only thing you do notice. You don't notice the 70, 80 other plays that he's in phase and he covers somebody and he does a nice job. He's done a good job this year.

He's big, he's fast, he can press people. He didn't make a great play on that ball. But he made a really good play the next time they went over there and did it. And, you know, you got to bat better than 50 percent. And he's done that most of the year.

So it's one of those that -- again, I don't think Kelee's lacking in confidence. What he has ability-wise is the tool set that most guys wish they had.