

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

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Head Coach Kirby Smart

Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we opened our starter and work on Mississippi State today. Took a day in the bye week to work towards these guys. Very different. Really different in two ways.

Different defensively. Their defensive coordinator does an incredible job. Different kind of scheme than we faced before.

And then offensively, obviously, they're very different. And people would probably think they're similar to Tennessee. But they're really not similar to Tennessee.

So it's become a third week of facing a different kind of offense in terms of what they do offensively. And very, very few of our calls and schemes carry over from one week to the next when you play this offense. So it's a new challenge for our guys.

And I know our guys will be excited getting ready for it. It's an extremely tough place to play. A place I've been many times. Their environment is electric. It'll be at night.

And their guys play really hard and they're really physical. We saw that, you know, a couple years ago, here at home against them. I guess it was during the COVID year. So...

Q. Kirby, you mentioned that game a few years ago here in Athens. What is different about this Mississippi State offense from that game to this one that you've seen on film?

KIRBY SMART: Well, a lot more experienced quarterback. You know, that was the kickoff for him. And he played really well in that game and kind of got a lot of confidence playing against us.

And he's -- I don't know how many games he's played since then, but a lot. He's broken a lot of records. He's very intelligent. He doesn't make mistakes. He uses Coach Leach's offense to his strength.

And they understand, very similar to last week, triple

options. They know who they are. They have answers for what they do. They're usually one step ahead in their answer than you are because you don't play against them but once a year and they do it all the time.

So they have exposure to everything. Every defense has tried on them. And, you know, their quarterback is very experienced. And that's the biggest difference.

Defensively, they may not be the same players they were because a lot of players are gone. But they are extremely physical, disruptive. The defensive coordinator does a great job. Zach Arnett does a good job of it.

Q. Kirby, you talked before you only get better at things by doing them. You've done this No. 1 thing a lot. I know you don't obviously pay attention to it. But you also know the players see it. Is that kind of a muscle -- that composure muscle you talked about earlier this week that your team has learned to be able to flex over the years having been in this position, block that out?

KIRBY SMART: We just don't talk about it much. I mean, they understand -- it's wasted energy when you talk about it. And you guys want to write about it, do all that. You just focus on Mississippi State.

And, like, what do we have to do to play well against them?

What do we have to do to play well on the road in the SEC? What -- those are the focus. That's nothing but a number and a distraction and it's irrelevant. It just really doesn't matter.

They see it. But they don't get it discussed around here. Because I think the more you talk about it, the more attention you bring to it.

Q. Kirby, talking about Mississippi State's offense, they're averaging, like, right under 49 attempts per game. Just what does the mindset got to be especially if the players in your secondary know that they're going to come out and throw it as much as they do?

KIRBY SMART: Well, you'd be mistaken if you think



they're just throwing it. Because they got some really good backs and they're really physical upfront.

And they space you out. There's more gaps in the run game. They're really gashing people running the ball this year. And I think that's the biggest difference, is they are committed to running the ball and being physical upfront.

And people have the wrong demeanor when they go to play this team that, Oh, man I'm going to go out here and pass rush and get all these sacks. They're not going to let you do that.

No. 1, they pass-cover really well. No. 2 they run-scheme really well. And they got good backs. So it's not going to be a deal where it's all about secondary. Secondary's got to play well every week.

Q. (No microphone.)

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Robert had a stinger and feels good. Hopefully we'll see. I mean, I hadn't seen him today. But feel good about him being able to play.

Q. I guess other injuries: AD, Truss, and Mims, how are the updates on them?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, the update is we're hoping to get each one of them back this week.

Q. Kirby, you got a lot of second-year guys on defense that are, obviously, starters and contributing a lot. How much happens from a true freshman year to second year that is in development and how much of it is still relying on pure talent and instinct?

KIRBY SMART: Well, we recruit based on talent and instinct and, you know, character. Things like that. But you develop everybody that comes here.

So when they come, they become part of the development. We teach our scheme. We teach our scheme in the spring. We teach it in the summer. We teach it again in fall camp. And then we teach it again throughout the season. And the more you teach and the more you expand someone's brain, the more information they can handle.

And we try to push the limits of the expansion so that they can hold more and they can do more. And it doesn't matter where they come from, when they get here, what age they are, or what their rating was. We just take the guys that choose to be part of it and we try to develop them.

And whether you're a first year, second year, or third year,

fourth year, they get better. I mean, NFL scouts come, they want to see a player get developed. They want to see you've improved. They don't say, Well, your juniors are all good. They're ready to go.

No. There's a lot of things they can get better at. There's just more things the first year and second year guys can get better at. And we just try to prep the way that the young players get a lot of reps so they're ready when their turn comes.

Q. How do you go about creating a both physically and mentally tough teams, especially in a day and age where players do have more freedom and can possibility enter the transfer portal if they don't like what they see here?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we hit mentally tough and physically tough. We hit a lot. So they get that speech before they come. Because I don't want to lie to them.

So we tell them, We're going to be in pads Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. And we're going to be physical. And we're going to practice physical, we're going to be physical in the spring. We're going to be comfortable being physical. So that's agreed upon when they come.

Q. Coach, how much did Jalen Carter actually end up playing in the game, you know, total snaps-wise?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know.

Q. And then his impact on the game, just what did it bring to the game? And lastly, the -- was that a -- I'm sure you've looked at several times since then, and I have too -- it looked like that was a safety. I don't know what they saw there. If that -- how angry were you about that particular call?

KIRBY SMART: Does it matter? I'm worried about Mississippi State, to be honest.

The Jalen question: It's -- I don't know how many snaps he played. I didn't check it. We count it. We do production. We know how many points he made. He certainly was productive in terms of tackles, calls, fumbles.

He was -- the first time this year -- I won't even say he was 100 percent healthy. I would say the first time this year he was above 90/95.

Because on the very first play of the game against Oregon, he took a tough ankle injury and has not really been 100 percent since. And he's committed to getting back and he's worked really hard.

So I don't know how many snaps he played. He didn't play perfect. And he needs to get in better shape to be able to play more snaps. But he has taken ownership in working on that.

That was the big thing for him coming into the season is, How good of shape can you be in to play a larger volume of snaps? Well, we've had this great fortune of getting a lot of dudes ready around him because he hasn't been here.

So it's like a luxury to have him back and have him playing well. He still has a few things he's got to work on in terms of playing the right way within the plan. But he played really well the other day and we need him to continue that.

Q. Yeah, Kirby, what are some things your defense can take moving forward from a Tennessee game in terms of, you know, those things we talked about the other day; buying into the plan, eliminating explosive plays, that kind of stuff?

KIRBY SMART: I think maybe some confidence from them. But it doesn't carry over. You know, like, there's nobody we'll play these next three games in the regular season that are -- that's really like that. It's just -- I mean, you watch the tape, it's different. It's very different.

Q. Yeah, Kirby, two things: One, Kendall Milton reemerged. How important was it to add that depth to the backfield? And then, two, moving on completely from that last game: We hear so much about hurry-up offense. Can you comment more about your hurry-up defense? Because I don't believe there was ever an issue with your substitution of them catching in the wrong personnel? I might have missed that.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Kendall Milton has worked his tail off. He practiced much better last week. Although I wouldn't say he was 100 percent last week. He practiced much better. He got better as the week along. We felt more comfortable -- going into the game, we felt like he was going to be able to help us if we needed him to.

And we -- you know, Daijun was a little dinged up. Kenny was a little dinged up during -- in the game. So it gave us an opportunity to play Kendall. And he stepped up and did a nice job.

So I'm hoping that Kendall can get back to 100 percent this week because we need him and the others for the stretch we're on.

And as far as the hurry-up stuff, everybody has a way for practicing for it and there's no perfect way. So you do the

best you can. It's hard to simulate.

Q. Kirby, how did you evaluate Devin Willock stepping in as a started and then with Warren Ericson, keeping him engaged, you know, when he hasn't been playing as much? Obviously, he was ready when y'all needed him.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Warren does a great job playing each week. He's a guy that can play across the board across, all five positions. He's very versatile. He's very experienced. He's a leader of that group. He commands respect of the men in the room because of the time he's done and, really, the way he works.

He has an extremely valuable role on our team, you know, starting on punt. Because he makes a lot of calls for our punt team and he does a tremendous job of that and then his versatility.

But Devin, I thought, did a good job. I challenged Devin to play with more confidence. He's got to play with confidence and play like a starter.

And he really gets good movement on people. And his size allows him to do some things. He can recognize some things probably a little quicker.

But you can tell, he came out with a demeanor of playing physical and I thought that's probably what he does best, is play physical.

Q. Coach, you talked about the noise that Mississippi State -- the shoe kind of being on the other foot this week -- (audio interference) -- when your offense is on the field. Having gone through team spirit last Saturday, how much can that help as a whole?

KIRBY SMART: Well, it's a huge competitive advantage. That's why there's a home and away. And that's why I always say in the SEC, it's greater than NFL, other than playoffs. Because the environment is not the same in any conference, division, level of football as it is in the SEC when you play on the road.

And I've been in this conference for 20 something years. And I've seen it. I know what it does in terms of the effect it has on pass rush, the effect it has on momentum. And it's something you really can't measure.

So you have to prepare the right way. It's a firm reason why I believe in practicing with crowd noise throughout the year because both sides of the ball need it.

Q. Yeah, I was also going to ask you, Kirby, about the

environment there from your time at Alabama being there. What makes it unique?

KIRBY SMART: Loud. I mean, they're passionate. You know, I mean, it's -- I can't say that it's unique. Because every SEC school, I feel, is that way.

I mean, you guys were there at Missouri. It was loud, it was passionate there. I do think there's a fielding and start role because it's a rural community that everybody comes from afar and everybody's sold-out and in love with their football team.

That's what they have to hang their hat on, their pride in. Which is usually indicative of all SEC schools. But especially there. I know, you know, being in Tuscaloosa for those years, it was right there right down the road. There's a lot of pride and they're really physical.

Q. Kirby, whether it was Robert Beal or just the defense overhead light, how do you feel the guys stepped up with Nolan Smith being out and how do you feel about that moving forward?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, the guys -- a lot of the guys see it as an opportunity. Probably inspired and motivated some guys. And others, you know, were inspired with an opportunity to play against a good team, play at home.

But I felt good about our guys stepping up. We certainly need Robert to be healthy. Because otherwise we're going to be really thin at that position. But, you know, the other guys are growing and getting better.

Q. Coach, I think earlier in the season you said that Daijun Edwards was the one back that was consistently breaking tackles. But it seems like the past couple of weeks Kenny McIntosh has been able to win one-on-one matchups in open space. How have you seen him develop as a runner? Do you think his confidence has gotten a boost as a result of that?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think Kenny always does a great job as a runner. He had some elusive runs last week. He breaks tackles downfield. He had a lot of those against Florida.

I mean, he's running the ball really well this year. Sometimes it's not there, and he makes the most of it. And sometimes it is there, and he makes more of it. And I'm pleased with all those guys' performances.

Q. Kirby, you mentioned Mississippi State's defense. Just what sort of stands out how they attack on defense and what they do well?

KIRBY SMART: Well, they're aggressive, relentless, they're experienced. They got, like, seven or eight starters back. Disruptive with the way they move and do things.

Look, they're -- it's known across the league, from the coaches, that defense, it's probably -- it's probably more unique. There's a lot of similar defenses, I guess, across our leagues.

Maybe the coaching trees have come from a lot of the same places. This is different. And it stands out. But you better have a good plan because they can take what you do away from you quick.

Q. You mentioned just a little bit Saturday night, I thought you said something like it maybe took the air out of it more than you would have liked in retrospect with the way the game ended this past Saturday. Was that more -- well, let me not put words -- let me ask you straight out. Did you feel like you guys finished the game that you -- the way you wanted it?

KIRBY SMART: Did we take the air out of it? Yes. But did I question doing that? No. Not based on the circumstances. I don't -- I certainly didn't intentionally question it.

Because I think that was the play in the moment because the conditions changed. And you got to be smart when you're coaching. It could be wind, it can be rain, it can be anything. It can be an injury.

But you got to be smart. When you see two exchanges with two guys, their backs never -- hardly ever do they fumble. And our backs very rarely do, too. I mean, you see two things happen back-to-back, talking about Branson and Ericson -- changes the way you think about it a little bit.

Q. Kirby, I guess I just asked you about Mike Leach. I mean, he's considered one of the offensive minds, legends, et cetera. What is it about Coach Leach? And you've gotten to kind of know him probably better than most behind the scenes. He seems a bit eccentric. Is he like that behind the curtain as well? And just kind of your thoughts on his offensives and who and what he is?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I enjoy being around him. I don't know him that well. Probably as well as I know some others because he was out west for a large time I've been coaching here.

But he was at Valdosta State when I was in high school.

And his staff recruited me to go to Valdosta State from right down the road. So I know he was there at that time. And I know a lot about him and followed his career because of Coach Hatchard and because of the air raid kind of family.

But I got a lot of respect for what he does. He's evolved, too. He's not stayed exactly the same. Their backs and their commitment to the run -- the so-called just air raid. And he's brought that physicality, really, to the SEC in terms of what he does.

Q. Kirby, you mentioned about the weather in the second half regarding the fumble, I guess. But is there anything else from when you guys are watching film and you look at the number of fumbles you have that you want to emphasize to the players in terms of coaching points?

KIRBY SMART: Ball security. It's really important.

Q. You guys last week with such an emotional game, No. 1 team, and all -- everything that went into it, how do you battle against the letdown or keep the same standard, you know, that you guys are used to?

KIRBY SMART: Well, you do that by no matter who you play, you have a process and you have -- but we're not going to go do anything different today than when we played Vandy, Auburn, Kent State, Missouri or anybody else. Because when you treat it different, you make it different.

So that's not what this program was built on. We do it week-to-week and we worry about the opponent that week. And it's not what you want me to say, not what you want to write, but it's true.

Q. Coach, you spoke a little bit about Jamier Moten after the game the other day. But after looking back, can you tell me anything else about him?

KIRBY SMART: Played really hard. Tackled well. He's physical and he loves -- he's passionate about playing the game. He didn't play perfect, now. He grabbed and held a couple times and got called. But he played hard. He understood the game plan and he executed it.

Q. Yeah, when Robert went out, we see him taking snaps from Chaz. And Chaz played a lot in the game, regardless, and then Marvin Jones, as well. How would you assess how those guys did, especially being young players being thrust into bigger roles on Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: The best news is they got to practice

going into it. Because of the rep -- the loss of reps and it kind of got dispersed out among those guys. So they were better prepared because they were one notch up. So they were -- they were a little more prepared for it. Still didn't play perfect. Jalen got to get in and get some snaps. Jalen Walker played some. He's kind of an in between hybrid guy that can play third down rush but he can also play inside backer. So Jalen got a little piece. Marvin got to plays. And Chaz did a nice job. The key is keeping those guys healthy.

Q. Coach, I believe you said maybe after the game -- maybe some of your guys were battling through the flu last week. How is everybody kind of from that standpoint right now?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we got the -- a couple guys have been battling the flu. Went into the game that way. And a couple tried to push through. I had a couple walk-on guys that were out.

But, you know, we had two or three going into the game that we were worried about. They seemed to come out all right. I haven't seen them today. But I'm sure they'll be fine.