

# University of Georgia Football Media Conference

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Athens, Georgia, USA

## Kirby Smart

### Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: Hitting the road again, going to a tough place to play in the SEC, which they all are. This is one of the challenging ones. They got a great environment. Mark Stoops has done an incredible job there with the program. Coming off a tough loss against Vandy.

I know we'll get the response from them that you would expect out of a team that's the quality of Kentucky. They have done a tremendous job the last two or three years with what he's done with their program. He's built it through keeping players there, developing players, extremely physical and tough. When you ask our kids over the last two years what the most physical game they played in, to a man, almost everyone of them talks about how physical the Kentucky game was two years ago up there and then at our place last year where they went on a 20-something play drive against our defense to end the game.

And their defense is one of the tops in the conference year-in and year-out, but that way this year as well. So a great challenge for us to go on the road, tough environment, day game, and looking forward to the opportunity.

**Q. I know you're big on logistics and stuff and you mentioned it Saturday night. Just wondered how it practically played itself out with you guys getting back so late, having to get ready for Kentucky on Saturday night and Sunday. How did that end up working out and looking for you guys?**

KIRBY SMART: I think we got back around 1:30, back into Athens. And then yesterday was business as usual. Preparing for Kentucky.

**Q. Chris Rodriguez is coming off of one of his best games of the season. Just what makes him such an effective running back and the challenge he presents?**

KIRBY SMART: His willingness and love for contact. He seeks and cherishes contact. And it's that time of year where you watch defenses across the country and people

turn down contact. They turn down hits. We make a point to try to show it to our guys that as the year goes, tackling gets worse and worse and worse. Are we going to be bit by that contagious bug of lack of a willingness to thud and tackle people, especially a guy that loves it. I mean, he seeks it. He wants to hit you.

One of the most physical runners I've seen, and it just seems like Kentucky always has that guy. Snell. Benny was that way. They're just, it almost feeds to their personality. And you watch and you're like, well, how did he get through that tackle? And you don't really know because he just keeps going when people hit him. Great challenge. Great challenge to be physical with this guy and match his love for contact.

**Q. Weekly request for update on Mitchell and also specifically on, just to be clear, did he aggravate the high ankle sprain when he came back against Auburn and that's why he's been out since then?**

KIRBY SMART: I can't say that for certain. The MRI and the X-rays don't show that anything was done. He felt like he might have tweaked it some. That slowed his progress some. But it's a pain-in-the-butt injury. And like I've talked about repeatedly, it didn't have an option to go do the tight rope and do the surgery that Tillman got, Tua got, Arian got. That wasn't an option.

So it's been frustrating for him. He wants to get back. He works really hard at it. He was better last week than he's been every week previous. He actually got to do individual drills last week and did some things. But he's still not, or at least last week, I don't know where he is this week because I haven't seen him yet, but he was not where he could come out of breaks and do the things required to play receiver, and that's tough.

So he stayed here. He got extra rehab here, felt like he got a little better rehab here not having to be on it all weekend and during the game. So we're, again, hopeful to get him back this week, but it will be day by day.

**Q. Y'all have won the East five out of six years. From your perspective, what does it take to sustain that kind**

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**of success through multiple recruiting classes, multiple different teams, that kind of thing?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, it takes consistency in performance. It takes a commitment to excellence from your entire administration. It takes physicality in this league. It takes a really mature team to manage every game like it has a history and life of its own. That's what it takes.

But it's not the be all and end all to just win the East. There's a lot of things left out there for this team to do.

**Q. Kearis mentioned coverage recognition is what he felt has been one of the bigger improvements he's seen from the wide receiver corp as the season moves along. Kind of what's been your deal with that this year?**

KIRBY SMART: As far as what's the improvement?

**Q. Yeah. He mentioned that as being one, being able to recognize quickly what the other defense is trying to do.**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah. Some routes that affects the routes, some routes it doesn't. It depends on what kind of passing game we're calling.

So, yeah, that's really just an experience quality. The more you experience it, the better you are at it. It's kind of like a defensive back recognizing a route. The more you see the routes, the more you recognize them.

Same way for receivers. The more you see the coverages, the more you see the things you got to do to attack 'em. But some coverages it doesn't matter. Man's man. So you don't have to recognize man. You got to be able to go beat it. I think B-Mac and Coach Monken have a lot of experience developing guys in that area.

**Q. Two questions here: One, anything new on Javon Bullard; and two, what kind of challenges does playing a guy like Will Levis, who is so physically gifted, present to your defense?**

KIRBY SMART: Bullard has a lower leg contusion. It's like below the knee. I think he's going to be fine. I think he was limited a little bit yesterday in some of the workout stuff they did. But we fully expect him to be able to play. I haven't seen him practice. I haven't seen him myself. So we'll see more today.

As far as Will Levis, this guy's got a bazooka for an arm. He can make all the throws. He's a really good athlete, and he's physically and mentally really tough. He's wired

that kind of way to compete against you. It's not like he's going to shy away from contact. He doesn't get flustered by rush. He's not afraid of standing in there and taking shots.

That's one of the number one qualities of a quarterback is can they stand in there and be unaffected, and he has been. He's shown that. He's actually shown the ability to break tackles and make plays out of the pocket.

**Q. I was going over some of Mike Leach's post-game comments and he was crediting your defensive line, which has been a hallmark of your defenses all the way back to Alabama, and he said that, not a come-up-the-field group, a pull-and-yank group, and then he also said that you're good at transitioning. When he talks about the transitioning part, can you, what is he referring to? And as far as the way you coach these defensive lines, can you go into some of the details of what he's explaining there?**

KIRBY SMART: I don't know what means by the pull and yank. I would think he means strike and attack because that's what we do with our defensive line. We strike, attack, and then get off blocks. It's block protection more than it is anything else.

But transition could mean many things. Do they cover down hard where you can throw a screen, do they transition to go cover down, or do they transition from a run play to a conversion of transition to pass rush. That's what a lot of defensive guys call transition is can you convert from I'm playing the run to now I'm playing the pass. But I don't know without asking him exactly what he meant.

**Q. Kentucky's pass defense has been one of the best in the conference. Just what stands out about how they've played the pass throughout this year?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, their entire defense has been one of the best throughout the conference and they have been consistently every year, let's be clear. Because they have really good defensive coaches. Coach Stoops is very involved. Coach White does a tremendous job. They're very consistent because they're physical. They don't allow you to get the run game going. They play a lot of odd front, which makes for really tough sledding in terms of large human beings being inside. You don't move and displace them very well.

They're very multiple in coverage, so we've had 'em on tape multiple times. I know going into Tennessee, Mississippi State, you find yourself watching Kentucky a lot. And I have a lot of respect for what they do defensively and the players they have that do it. They do a great job.

**Q. You talked a little bit about this the other night after the game, but when you're striving for perfection day by day, week by week, season by season, what are some of the things that have been effective for you to keep these guys wanting that, knowing it's always going to be, not out of reach, but that's what you're striving for? And is there anything about this group in particular coming off a National Championship that seems to have maintained that hunger? You spoke to that a little bit the other night, how tough that is to, people don't realize to keep it going day by day.**

KIRBY SMART: I mean, it's the pitfall of every profession or everything people do in society is being able to repeat habits and can you do that. Can you do what you do better than the people in your profession on a daily basis and not get bored with monotony.

It's hard to sustain anything in life, in your career, whatever it is. And if you want to be the best sports writer, you want to be the best broadcaster, you got to do it better than the other people in your profession. You got to do that by recreating yourself, by consistently outworking someone, and sometimes people get comfortable. When you get comfortable, you don't always, you're not always at your best. We're trying our best to be at our best. That's our job. The challenge is how do you do that better than the team you're up against.

**Q. Kearis talked about not wanting to be a selfish player, and given now the time that you've been here, do you think as an evaluator you've gotten better at identifying guys that are going to fit your culture and who you know are going to push through difficult times or when things might not necessarily be going your way?**

KIRBY SMART: No, I don't know that we're better at identifying 'em. I think we certainly delve into that conversation more than we used to. But I don't know that we're better at it. There's no written script or perfect DNA quality that you say.

You assume all players you sign are unselfish and care about the program and want to be here no matter what, but let's be realistic, that's probably not going to be the case. So you do the best job you can and you try to move that needle while they're here because I don't think that people are where you can't change. I think you develop that and you get buy-in and you sell it through your older players, and the older players sell it to the younger players, and you win some and you lose some.

**Q. Obviously with Nolan out, Jalon walker got a lot of**

**those snaps on Saturday. What have you seen from him in terms of his play and just embracing that challenge? And second thing, have you seen Nolan kind of work with him closely in the film room or in practice to just help him get better?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Nolan's been a tremendous asset for us. The snaps you're referring to on Jalon really weren't anything to do with Nolan's. Nolan's was with Robert Beal's.

But Jalon has developed and is getting better and still got a ways to go, and he'll believe the first to tell you that he's got to grow and get better. He did get more opportunities the other night because of the passing situations that they were in. But he's got to do more of those opportunities. He's got to continue to grow. He has not taken what he does in practice to the field just yet. He practices sometimes better than he plays, and he's got to get through some of that anxiety and that's part of being a freshman.

But Nolan's done great job with all those guys. He's right there with 'em, teaching, cheering, being a leader.

**Q. Going back two answers ago, you were talking about kind of staying at the top of your field, being the best, and you said that getting comfortable can be one of the biggest obstacles to that. At this point in your team's journey, in your team's season, how do you keep players from getting comfortable?**

KIRBY SMART: Keep talking recentering, coming back to the purpose and what we started all this about. We did have the good fortune of not a lot of these guys were major parts of the run that went on last year, so it was new for a lot of them. The energy and enthusiasm towards making a mark themselves and creating their own identity was the lead factor.

And sustaining that is now we're getting in the fourth quarter. We're at the 15, 20 yard line like trying to go finish off the regular season and that's got to be sustained. So far, they have had a good attitude and they have approached each week independent of the previous.

**Q. You've used the word "connection" a lot to describe the bond between these players, and I saw the clip of you talking to them in the locker room saying that they're the most connected group that you had ever seen. What are some of the things that you see from them that make you say that?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, the reactions to good and bad. We say we're at our best when the worst happens. That's

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where we want to be at our best. That's the spot you can be the most connected. It's easy to be connected when Ladd McConkey runs 80 yards for a touchdown. It's hard to be connected when a guy misses you for a touchdown pass and you don't pout about it. You know, a guy fumbles, a guy throws an interception, a guy gives up a huge pass interference. Where's your connection now when it's needed most?

And that's the muscle that we like to say is our strongest muscle on our team. So if you got it, why not use it. No reason not to use it if you got it. I thought our kids did a good job of that the other night.

**Q. They said on the ESPN broadcast that Stetson was experiencing some right arm discomfort. Is that just the nature of 10 games into the season or was there a particular hit he might have taken?**

KIRBY SMART: Not real sure. No telling.

**Q. Tramel is one of these guys, I guess a program guy may be a way to describe it. He's been around a long time, had to wait his turn to earn the position he's in right now. How much appreciation do you take for guys like that who are willing to kind of make that sacrifice?**

KIRBY SMART: It's awesome. The consummate team player that has played his role and is playing his role now. Still doesn't play a ton of snaps. But he makes the most of the snaps he takes and he has tremendous toughness and he has tremendous buy in to the way we do things.

**Q. Going back to Tramel, can you tell about his recruitment at Georgia? I remember he went to Hutchinson. Were you guys on him before hand and told him go there and then come here. How did his recruitment work out?**

KIRBY SMART: I thought he was a really good athlete from down there. We had seen him when we recruited Richard. He needed some development. Needed to go play some to be able to come in here and help us. He was willing to do that. And he got, came in more ready to play than a kid from high school after being there. He's done a good job since being here.

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