

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

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Head Coach Kirby Smart

Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I want to take a minute to acknowledge the Vince Dooley celebration of life they're having Friday night at the Coliseum. You know, it's open to the public. And I encourage fans and supporters to attend to celebrate a man that meant so much to our community. I know I'll be over there for a brief stopover.

But he meant so much to us. This is an opportunity to celebrate his life and do it over at the Coliseum, I guess. Correct? Yeah, and that will be 7:30 on Friday night.

So with that, we're on to Georgia Tech, a program I know a lot about. And a coach that I have a lot of respect for. Known Brent for a long time. He played at Tech while I played at Georgia. We played against each other. And we spent some summers together. And I have a lot of respect for him as a coach.

You know, he was the O-line coach at Alabama one of the years we played them. And they did a really good job. His offensive lines are always physical, get after it. There's a lot of familiarity with their staff, with ours, Chip Long, Cheney, and all the guys that have been over there.

And so, they're playing really well now. They're playing really hard now. And I think he's done a tremendous job at getting these guys to compete.

Q. Kirby, you mentioned Georgia Tech coming off a win against North Carolina. What stood out to you from their performance in that game, particularly on the defensive side of the ball?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, you know, they started a little slow. And then once they got in their groove, they were really aggressive, extremely physical. You know, I think held UNC to their lowest output in terms of yardage and maybe points in the season.

You know, they played really hard. And they did a great job defensively. They always have -- you know, Tech has good personnel. And the guys there know football and you can see that the kids are playing with a lot more passion

and energy. They're one game from bowl eligibility and you saw it come out in the play against UNC.

Q. To follow up on what you said about Brent Key: When there's an in-season change, can a team begin to adapt the personality of an interim coach during a season? And when you're reviewing film of Georgia Tech, do you see any changes in the team, you know, under his watch?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah. They take on his personality of toughness, not beating themselves, being physical. You can tell they've probably honed down some things. He made some changes to special teams.

You know, he played there. And when you've got someone that played at that university and that's their alma mater, there's a certain level of want to desire to represent the University the right way.

And, you know, when they won the first game, they beat two top 25 teams with him as the head coach. And you can see the emotion that he had after the Pitt win in the locker room because of how much it means to him.

Q. Kirby, you were talking about buying in a second ago at Tech. Can you talk about Jalen Carter and the snap count. I mean, I think he went from 48 to 40 to 46. I don't know what the typical defensive tackle snap count is, but I guess to have a guy with, I guess, generational wealth on the line that bought in at this stage of the season, can you just talk about what that means to the defense and Jalen's commitment there?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't know. The assumption you make is the generational wealth is on the line. I mean, I look at it as he's earned it. Generational wealth, it's not given, right? He hasn't had an opportunity to play the all year and show his skill set and really show his stamina.

In all his years playing here, he never got to play that many snaps, so he's creating value for himself with the way he's playing.

And, you know, if you look at the top-end of the draft, it's



one of those things where it's a huge difference between pick 3, and pick 10, and pick 14. It's a lot more different than it is down there towards the end.

So it's not about that for him. It's about, you know, being with his teammates, wanting to do something special. He was really close in a brotherhood with those guys last year. And they're gone now, and he's trying to do something that they didn't do. You know, and he's given us all he's got.

Q. Coach, can you talk a little bit about your seniors? Obviously, had a chance to set a mark in this game. And it's so much unusual -- so much more unusual these days, now you have some six-year guys and fifth-year guys. So it's changed a little bit more than recent years. Can you talk about that class is?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, it's really not a class. It's like a jigsaw puzzle. Like you mentioned, I mean, you've got seven or eight guys -- I think we got seven or eight that will be repeat walkers. Meaning, they walked last year and they're walking this year. And then we'll probably have the same because the timetable for decisions and things like that. It's off in college football.

So, when you look at it, you got a kid that's going to out there and walk for his last home game, but he hasn't decided if that's his last home game. But that is what we deal with.

And these guys, just like the group last year, have been really special. I mean, we can have anywhere from 20 to 25 guys walking out there and to look and see what they've done, to be the winningest class and go through a COVID year where every game was an SEC game.

I just -- you know, I find that respectful and amazing. Because you don't get the games outside the conference in that season. And they were still able to do it. And a lot of credit goes to the character of that group.

There's not a huge star-studded cast. There won't be 15 draft picks out there. But there's some guys that really care about UGA and have sacrificed a lot to this program.

Q. Kirby, I wanted to ask you about one of those seniors. With Stetson, when did you -- do you remember your first conversation with him? And when did you first know about the competitive nature he has?

KIRBY SMART: Well, I knew his high school coach, I knew who he played for. I knew the area he was from. I roomed with a kid -- guy that was from down there and

college here as a walk-on. And he always talked about Stetson. We kept in touch.

Stetson was getting recruited by other people. Chris Hatcher and several guys recruited him. We got him up on the official visit. I think the first time I really got to talk to him and visit with him was around the OV.

And, he's got, you know, a lot of siblings. A great family. And I remember the siblings being around during our camp days and working out and his OV in the stadium. You could tell there was something different about him in terms of a chip on his shoulder. And that's helped drive him to where he is now.

Q. Hey, Kirby. I wanted to ask you: What was AD able to do last week with you guys as far as practice goes? And also, is there any scenario playing deep into this thing where you guys might have a chance at all to get Nolan back? Or is that kind of like a done --

KIRBY SMART: No, Nolan's surgery was a repair. And he'll be out -- hopefully make it back to his workouts and his combine stuff. AD was similar last week as he's been to the previous weeks. I mean, he did run. He had a little few higher speeds. And he did some individual drills.

But he didn't do teamwork, like, 11-on-11 teamwork. And that's the goal. You know, that's the goal each week, to get him out there to do 11-on-11 and take some reps.

Q. Yeah, two questions, one injury related. You mentioned Tate had a subluxation. What body part was that for? And then two, with this Georgia Tech game, obviously, you didn't play them at home in 2020. I think this is Stetson's first home game against Georgia Tech in his career. Has the sort of the nature of this rivalry shifted at all since you've been here at Georgia?

KIRBY SMART: No, it's still a big rivalry. I mean, I think maybe it shifted in the dynamic of what their offense was. Because it went from one extreme to the other in terms of that.

But Tate had a shoulder subluxation. And, again, he probably could have gone in the game. It's one of those things he checked out before the game last week and we weren't comfortable putting him in and wanted to give Devin a chance to play.

And this is Stetson's first opportunity to play Georgia Tech here, unless one of those years he was here as a freshman that we played here against them. I'm not sure.

Q. Hey, Kirby. So can you talk a bit about what Pop means to this team in terms of communication on the field and also what he brings to the defense each week, I guess?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, he's the go-between between from the back-end to the front-end. So he and Smael are like messengers. You know, they have to deliver the message frontways and deliver the message backways and make sure we're on the same page.

Which is critical in today's day and age of offense, where people are constantly moving, nobody's sitting still, things change. You got to have great eye control.

He's also the signal caller, the one that gets the signal and tells people what to do. And he holds people accountable, you know, including himself.

He hasn't had some of his best games and best weeks of practices here recently. But yet he still holds himself to a high standard. And he acknowledges that he can do better. And when you have a guy at that position that thinks that way, it's good hardwiring for your defense.

Q. Kirby, with Georgia Tech, they use two quarterbacks in that win against North Carolina. What kind of challenge does that present knowing that you might see two guys with two different skill sets on Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, they definitely got different skill sets and they're both good players. I mean, I was -- I caught some of a Thursday night game earlier this year and got to see the Gibson quarterback.

And, then, you know, watching Tyson go against the UNC team, it was a different flavor. You know, they really complement each other. Big, physical guy. Both of them can actually run.

And the improvement that Gibson's made over the recent games to me is astounding. He's throwing the ball much better, much more efficiently.

Q. One last question on Stetson. Coach, never minding what he's been able to do here on the field here these last couple of years, but just the fact that he has earned a starting position as a former walk-on in Division I, I mean, what are the odds of that, I would guess if you look around the country? And can you speak to the accomplishment of just being able to make that happen to get on the field?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, it takes a competitor. I mean, it

takes somebody to overcome the odds because you're not given the benefit of the doubt. You know, you have to earn it. You have to beat guys out.

And, you know, we as coaches did everything we could to not give him the opportunity and he just kept banging away at the door. And he was very persistent.

Thank goodness we decided to bring him back when we were sitting in a tough quarterback situation. And probably the best decision we made when you look back of bringing him back here in what it looked like as a backup role, but not to him. I mean, he saw it as an opportunity to come in and play and he took advantage of it.

Q. Kirby, on red zone touchdown percentage, obviously, the other day it wasn't good, there's been some stretches this year where it has been good. What's your level of concern on that?

KIRBY SMART: You know, we worked really hard on it. It was one of our big things coming in. We actually had moved -- we started off really slow in that area, offensively. And we moved into the twenties and we were creeping up. And it was getting really good and then we took a step back, you know, last week.

And the level of concern is about execution. It's not like you can say it's one thing or, Oh, you have a problem here. No, you didn't do this right.

And every play we can point to and say we have a failure here. And when you have a failure here, we don't execute. You play good defenses, they capitalize on you.

And, you know, our defensive red zone team percentages has been really, really special. We've stopped a lot of people. And we go against each other all offseason. They get to see our guys go. We do it every week on every Wednesday we go out and do it.

So it's been a point of emphasis for us. But it's one of those things we got to keep working on and getting better at.

Q. Coach, since Nolan has been out, how has his position performed in his absence?

KIRBY SMART: Okay. Up and down. I mean, we've had some good performances, poor performances, some good plays, some bad plays. Some guys playing more snaps than they've ever played, so fatigue sets in.

And you've got to have more stamina. Because as you play more snaps, you find guys make more mistakes. And

they -- the mentality of cardio and exercise can -- fatigue makes cowards of us all. So when you make mistakes because you're fatigued, you got to get in better shape. And the snaps have gone up, really, on that whole group.

Q. Kirby, you mentioned Georgia Tech is on the edge of being bowl eligible. Is that something that's going to be talked about with the team, just understanding that Tech comes into this game with a lot to play for?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I mean, we'll mention it. But it's not about them. It's about what we do.

Q. Back on the red zone scoring, what kind of luxury is it and what kind of confidence does it bring to have a consistent kicker?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, it's awesome. But I'd rather have seven than three. So, I mean, it's -- but the flip side of that is you have to go for seven if you don't have that. And it is a luxury to have him.

And he's been Mr. Consistency since he's been here. And he's mentally wired the right way and does a tremendous job for our program. But, you know, the more we use him, the more we realize that those are points left on the board.

Q. Kirby, you mentioned on Saturday that there were a few times where you needed to get one yard and you should be able to get one yard, third and one, fourth and one. How do you fix it?

KIRBY SMART: You've got that -- I mean, you be creative. You have to sit and think, Are we in the best personnel grouping to do it? Are we giving it to the right side? Are we attacking the weakness of their defense?

There's all kinds of things that go into it in preplanning. Where are their best players? Where are our best players? Are we in our best personal grouping? Do you have to get big to get one yard or can you stay little and can you spread them out?

There's a lot that goes into it. But philosophically, we've been using what we think is the best grouping. And you look at that each and every week, how it matches up against the opponent.

Q. Kirby, in addition to all the football championship on the field that you're focused on, there's this transfer window coming up, there's early signing day that's closing in. I want to ask you about NIL and roster management. Stetson's NIL deals, I think he's over a million dollars now. How important is that in recruiting that Georgia quarterback can make that kind of

money? And also how important is that NIL pool when it comes to maybe keeping some of these players that have options elsewhere after December 3rd?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we'll know a lot more, you know, in the next coming weeks about all of it. Because nobody's really been through this window. It's very similar to last year.

But the window -- portal window opening and closing and not letting coaches go out on the road during the SEC Championship week so they can get their rosters right, it's all kind of new and different.

So for us, we're going to be preparing -- you know, we have a game. So we don't get to go and have those conversations and do those things. So each and every player has to have an ability to put the team first while at the same time realizing that, Hey, their individualism now in college football is bigger than ever in terms of decisions you make.

I'm just always real open and honest about it, that not many guys that don't start here end up -- you know, if you're not good enough to play here, you're probably not going to be able to play in the NFL. So what do you want to be a part of? Do you want to be a part of something winning, something special? And that's what we sell. And it's not for everybody, but it's what we sell.

Q. Kirby, Devin stepping in for Tate in that Kentucky game, what did you make of his performance starting in that role?

KIRBY SMART: He did a good job. He took a lot of reps during the week over there on the right side. And he shows a lot of toughness, a lot of size, things he can do better, things he could have done better in the game that he'll continue to work on.

Q. Kirby, I can't recall if you brought it up today. But I think you've said before that, you know, Georgia Tech was -- you lost them your last home game as a player here. You know, you talk to some of the guys -- I mean, I'm sure you're friends with some of the guys you played with and you kind of take that coach hat off. What does this rivalry kind of mean to you and kind of stick with you over the years that you've -- I guess, the first Georgia Tech game as a coach, you know, you guys lost that one, as well. Is it clear old fashioned hate to you in some ways?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, certainly it is. I mean, it's what this program's biggest rivalry was many, many, many years ago when they were in the SEC.

one that sticks out that it really bothered him the most. But I don't really recall.

Our kids don't know that history. They don't know the history of this rivalry and what goes into it. It was a really big rivalry, you know, during Paul's years here because of the triple option and playing something different and the physicality of the game, you know.

And I think educating our players on that so they understand it -- because it means a lot to our players in terms of what they want to achieve and they got to win this game to achieve those things.

So making sure they understand that is really important. And teaching the history of that is important because it'll mean something to the Georgia Tech players and the Georgia players 20/30 years from now.

Q. Kirby, I know the running game is a matter of 11 guys doing it well, it's not just the running back. But I'm curious with guys like Macintosh, you know, Kendall, are they running the ball better in terms of vision, burst when you're reviewing film?

KIRBY SMART: It's all relevant to who you're playing. I mean, I don't think you can judge a running back based on game by game because the front's different, the opponent's different, their run schemes are different, the ability to throw the ball is different. I mean, it varies from game to game. I'm very pleased with what our backs have done.

Q. Kirby, what's the schedule for your players this week with Thanksgiving? I mean, I know you have a pretty set one, but I can't recall what it is. What will they do this week?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, normal Monday, Tuesday -- we have school Monday, Tuesday. So normal practice Monday and Tuesday. Wednesday we'll practice pretty normal. We'll move it up a little bit in anticipation of Thursday being earlier. And Thursday will be a little earlier practice. And then we're back getting ready for the game Friday.

Q. Talking about this rivalry, when you look at the 2017 team and specifically the guys that came back, how much do you think that loss they had the previous year at home was sort of a motivator of some of the guys who decided to come back?

KIRBY SMART: I don't know if it was that game or the whole season. I don't really know. You'd have to ask those guys. I think that may have played a part. I remember, you know, Nick brought that up and it bothered him that his last game going off was that way. And he's the