

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

Monday, November 28, 2022

Athens, Georgia, USA

Kirby Smart

Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: So congratulations to him and the tremendous job he's done.

We're on to LSU. We're able to get a start on these guys, some yesterday. The NCAA rules afford us the opportunity on championship weeks to work a little bit on Sundays, so we were able to get at least a good jump start on them. Really more about putting the last game to bed for us.

Then as coaches preparing to get game plan ready to play a really talented team. I've always had respect for Brian Kelly's teams, going way back to when we played him at Notre Dame. They had very high quality preparation, coaching staff. They do a great job in all areas. He's very organized. He has a process. He knows how to run a program.

Back to the Grand Valley State days, he's been tremendous. I was at Valdosta State when Valdosta State ended up playing, I think, Grand Valley State for some D-II national championships. I had left at the time they played him, but I've always had respect for the job that he does and leader of men. He does a great job. I've seen that in the SEC head coaches meetings.

But their team's very talented, and it should be a great matchup. I've always said this is an incredible atmosphere, as good an atmosphere as you'll ever find in any sporting event, outside of just football, I'm talking about all sports. It's a great venue, and the SEC office does a great job putting on a tremendous event.

So our guys are looking forward to playing in it.

Q. Kirby, I think you've said in the past that 13 is kind of the goal for the defense. I'm looking at this stat Leyland put out, you're 55-1 when you score 30 points, and the one you lost was on a hail Mary. Is 30 the goal on offense? Or is there a goal for the number on offense?

KIRBY SMART: Our goal is either 35 or 38, but that's just based on the course of time. I want to say we want to

score right at 38 points a game is our goal. We base that on college football history.

If you want to be number one in scoring offense. If you can do that, you're going to be near it. In most recent years, you wouldn't be first there because the numbers have kind of gone up, up, up and away. I think Coach Monken and the offensive staff agreed this year it was either 35 or 38.

Q. Kirby, how would you assess the play of your outside linebacker room since Nolan's injury and what Robert and Chaz have been able to bring to the team?

KIRBY SMART: They both bring size, speed, toughness, and awareness of our system, understanding how our system works. They were both playing already, so really it's just increased the load a little bit, went from dividing among the three guys snaps to really two guys playing snaps, and I've been very pleased with what those guys have done.

Q. You guys have had some games this year where maybe there's been some lulls then everybody's really turned it on almost when they had to. I don't know if you would count it as desperation time or whatever. Would you agree that's been the trait of this team where some of the guys where the team has played as well as they can when they really have had to this year?

KIRBY SMART: I do think the resilience has shown through, meaning when they've had an opportunity to play in adverse situations, they've done a good job of that.

I don't have an explanation for why we might not play with the consistency. I think every coach would say the number one trait they want to have is consistency in performance, and we really haven't had consistency in performance, maybe not as much as the team the year before has had. But what they have had is resiliency, competitiveness, pridefulness, and response mechanism has been pretty positive.

I think that comes through training. You don't just get good at that by happenstance. You have to really work at it.



We said at the beginning of the year this team was going to be different, and the difference was going to be they had to have a lot of grit and toughness. They've had that so far.

Q. Kind of piggy-backing on that, is the offense -- do you think it's streaky at times in the latter part of the season? Does this offense kind of do a little bit better when it's in a rhythm and kind of piling one scoring drive after another?

KIRBY SMART: I think all offenses are that way. I think it's called momentum, and it's real. Momentum's a real thing, like it's not -- it's not to say that -- shooters are that way in basketball, right? Hitters are that way in baseball. Kickers are that way in football. Defenses are that way.

We've had some really bad drives in like bad quarters, and I'm like where did that come from? Well, it's really no different with offense. You're trying to find the thing that makes you more consistent, but sometimes it's momentum in the flow of things, and when you get things flowing, you play better.

Q. You mentioned it a little bit after the game the other night, but in your opinion, what have been some of the reasons for the ebbs and flows in terms of red zone offense this year, and how might play calling in the red zone be a little different than other areas of the field?

KIRBY SMART: I would say the opponent you play has a lot to do with your red zone, the execution of your offense in terms of ability to execute and do things right at critical times, millions of things. You can't even go into the factors that factor into red zone. It's not one thing.

Ultimately, you'd better be able to move people. You'd better be able to block people, and you've got to be able to make some plays at critical times. You can't beat yourself down there.

We have been up and down at times, and we've been really, really good, and we've been pretty average at times.

Q. I guess this is all kind of related, but toward the end of the year, has Stetson not played as well in your opinion, or has it been more about the opponent?

KIRBY SMART: No, I think he's played well. I think he's done what we've asked him to do. I think, if he continues to do that, then we'll be successful because what we've asked him to do, he's done.

He has played some formidable, good opponents, and he's played really well against those teams. He's made a

couple of decisions I think he would like to have back, but he's also made some really, really spectacular plays.

Sometimes when you put a lot on a player, you may get some of that. You may get a mistake. You may get something he wishes he had back. But he also had some really incredible plays.

Q. Outside of Jayden Daniels being able to break some runs, what have you seen out of LSU's stable of running backs because they seem to spread the ball around carries-wise?

KIRBY SMART: They're physical. Their backs run with a purpose. When you watch their backs, they're explosive through the hole. They have elite toughness. They seek contact. Each one of those guys runs with a really strong purpose. I mean, I've seen some really elite effort plays out of those guys, running to cover down.

When Jayden pulls it, you see backs going out there and blocking for him down the field.

Q. I wanted to ask about Arik Gilbert and why he didn't dress on Saturday. I wanted to see if there was any insight there as to what's going on with him right now.

KIRBY SMART: Again, we're trying to help him be the best person he can on and off the field, and that's decisions we make each and every week.

Q. Where do you think your drive and focus that has seemed to serve you well as head coach comes from? Is that from being around Nick? Is that from something else earlier in your life? How did that develop?

KIRBY SMART: Just I think consistency in performance, wanting to do things the right way and having a process you go through to do it and do it for these kids, these kids that sacrifice so much time and effort in our program. I really just want to serve them and serve the University of Georgia the right way.

There's a right way to do things, and I think that we try to do it the right way here, which is calculated, a plan, and consistent.

Q. Kirby, you talk about your team kind of shifting and changing throughout the season, continuing to kind of learn different lessons. It seems like this LSU squad has kind of done the same thing over the course of this season. What can you say about how they've kind of grown over the season, how that issues a challenge for you guys this weekend?

KIRBY SMART: They've gotten better throughout from the start of the season until now. I know their quarterback has gotten better. They do a tremendous job growing young players. I think everybody across the SEC, there's youth everywhere.

By this time of year, they're no longer young. They have two tackles that are no longer freshmen. They've played in really big games. They've blocked the best of the best in our league. They're not really freshmen anymore.

So LSU has gotten better consistently, and that's what you're always trying to do to win an SEC Championship is ascend and get better as you go along. Sometimes that's easier said than done. I feel like LSU's done that.

Q. When we talked to Warren a little while ago, he talked about the offensive line really took on the challenge of blocking better in the run game. Just what have you seen from that, how they have done in that aspect of their run game?

KIRBY SMART: They've been really physical. They've been physical when we need them to be physical. They've done a good job of making holes, and the backs have done a good job of hitting them, and it helps us as a play action team as a whole.

So I think they've kind of done it by committee, and there's a commitment to doing it with that group and doing it really physical that takes on the personality of your team.

Q. With a player like Harold Perkins, without obviously getting too into specifics here, how do you game plan for a player like him knowing they're going to move him around a lot but also knowing he's not exactly a full-time, every down player for them right now?

KIRBY SMART: I don't really understand what you're asking.

Q. How do you go about game planning for a guy who can be so disruptive but he might not always be on the field in an area where he's going to be most disruptive?

KIRBY SMART: You know where he's at when he's out there, right? They're going to use him in different ways. They've changed up the way they use him throughout the year. That's what good defensive coordinators do. They try to find different ways to put him in maybe a mismatch and utilize him.

You have to know where he is, and you need to know

where he is at all times because he's really athletic. He is very disruptive, and you make your team aware of it.

Q. Didn't see De'Nylon on Saturday. How is he?

KIRBY SMART: He's got a groin issue, but he's back this week and going to be able to practice.

Q. I always feel like it comes at the top of the conversation if you guys go up against a quarterback that can move around a little bit. You guys obviously have Stetson. Can you compare Jayden to other runners you've seen in this conference? How elite is he in that aspect of his game?

KIRBY SMART: Everybody you talk to, he's way faster than you envisioned. He is athletic. He can go into super quick, hyper speed mode, run away from you, run around you. He stiff-arms guys. He's really athletic.

But it's not like he's one of these guys that can't throw. He's a pocket passer, and he's very polished. He throws the ball really, really well, and he's extremely athletic.

So the combination when you start saying, all right, what do I got to have to beat people in this league? It's an athletic quarterback that can beat you with his arm, and he's that.

Q. You mentioned yesterday that in your time in the league, it feels like you've won almost as many -- been a part of as many National Championships as SEC Championship teams. Obviously that speaks to the toughness of the conference, and while I won't ask you if you'd rather win the SEC than the national, but even last year when you came back to win in the playoff, did that feel like a void? What kind of motivation for this team is that for those players who haven't experienced an SEC Championship?

KIRBY SMART: It's more about checking a box. It's not about last year's team or a comparison. It's about that next step and having an opportunity to put a number on the wall that stays there forever. It's an SEC Championship. You don't belittle those. Those are hard to come by. They're what you do what you do for.

There's such a respect, especially in this part of the country, for the Southeastern Conference, that winning a Southeastern Conference championship is extremely impressive for the quality of football and the number of NFL players that come out of our conference. I think our players take a lot of pride in that.

Q. Kirby, just from the standpoint of, I guess, the

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logistics, advantages, disadvantages of playing in Atlanta in a semifinal versus playing in Phoenix. For those that say this game doesn't mean anything, obviously seeding would seem to be at stake. How big of an advantage or disadvantage is it when a team plays in Atlanta versus somewhere near the West Coast, for the Rose Bowl, for example. I don't know how much of a disadvantage that was looking back, would you say?

KIRBY SMART: I don't really know. It's not something that I've really even thought about. To me, the focus has to be on LSU and the preparation for LSU to win this game. You're talking about hypotheticals of what a committee's going to think and where they're going to put people. I really don't even think about it until it comes time. Wherever the dust settles, whatever happens happens, and you make the most of it.

The only thing you can say is the travel and the time spent, but that only really matters to me on a short week, which is a seven-day turnaround. When you have the extension of nine to ten days, it's probably overrated because you're going to get more travel times.

Q. You mentioned some of the decisions that Stetson's made. Can you walk it through for us all the decisions that he has to make on a typical play? What is he looking at when he comes out of the huddle? You talk about there's some that he's made that were really good, a couple that he wants back. For those of us who don't know it, can you walk us through everything that needs to be determined before the ball is snapped?

KIRBY SMART: Not really. I don't have time to educate you on that much football because there's so much detail that goes into it, but every play it's something different, and some plays it's nothing. Some plays it's just about speed and you've got to read.

But there's a lot of plays that a lot goes into it. To go through all that might take a lot of time, and everybody might not understand still. So I'm not going to take my time to go through that with everybody here.

There's a lot of pressure on him and a lot of decision-making on him. There is on every quarterback. It's not privy to just Stetson. Jayden Daniels has a lot on him. They ask him to make decisions and do that, and that's part of being a quarterback. Stetson's done a really good job of handling that for us.

Q. What did Tate bring to the offensive line Saturday, having him back in the lineup with the shoulder?

KIRBY SMART: He has a quality of toughness about him. He plays really physical. I think Devin Willock does too. I think the guys that play at guard have all played really physical.

I thought Truss and Tate brought a demeanor, both of them being dinged up and injured, and they played through that and practiced through that all last week, and they went out and really competed.

Q. Any more on the severity of Marvin Jones' ankle injury?

KIRBY SMART: He's got an ankle injury. I don't know severity until we practice, you know what I mean? I don't know. I know that's all you everybody in here wants to talk about is injuries, but for some reason you guys are more obsessed with that than the players that are playing.

I can't tell you any more than he's got an ankle injury. We'll find out more. I know your readers want to read about that, but for me, I'm focused on the game.

Q. We'll have a chance to talk to Ladd in a few minutes. How big has he been in this season, particularly with A.D. not being available and just the role he's played?

KIRBY SMART: Tough. What he's been is tough. He gives you work every day. He never wants to miss anything. If anything, we've had to overuse Ladd. You'd like to have a rotation of guys at that position, and we haven't been able to have a large rotation.

He's taken a lot of reps. He gives you all he's got. He's really physical. He's been durable for a guy his size and his position. And really proud of the toughness he's shown to push through the injuries and beats and bangs he's had. He's been good for us in the return game. He's also been one of our best gunners down in punts and making tackles on punt coverage. So he's been extremely valuable.

Q. Before the season started, I remember you saying you enjoyed playing in the Chick-Fil-A kickoff because it's where you guys hope to be at the end of the season, and now here you are. Your players are obviously familiar with Mercedes Benz Stadium. McClendon just said the main difference is the turf. How much do you guys have to prepare for that? He said you might practice more indoors this week than out.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, the turf wears on your legs a little more. The guys feel like it wears on your legs a little more,



so we won't go in there the whole time. It will probably be more based on what our surface is like out there on the grass because when it's wet, ours is slick. It's hard to practice on and have efficient practices.

I would like to be outside more this week than inside just because I like being outside a little more, but we'll be inside because the grass is wet and it may rain this week. So we'll be inside some.

Q. How much did the first three games of the season, what you all did on offense, kind of create almost a problem, not in terms of expectations, but in coaches seeing, oh, they're doing this and they're doing this well on offense. Now we're going to shut this down and adjust.

KIRBY SMART: I don't really believe in all that. There's no like -- good offenses are good, and they find ways to attack you. There's no more like you don't trick people anymore and go, ooh, we're going to come up with this new play every week. You do what you do.

The best offenses I've ever been up against, the LSU ones and the Alabama ones, you knew what they were going to do. You just had to find a way to stop it. So it's not about tricking them. It's really more about efficiency and having a good plan and playing well.

When you play good defenses, you have to understand they're going to find ways to stop you. They're going to find and do good things. Some of that's been created off who we play, and a lot of it is how we play. Again, I've been proud of what our guys have done. Sometimes the conditions haven't dictated, and sometimes we haven't played real well.

But I'm always looking for our guys to play their best, and our best game is ahead of us is our goal.

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