

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

Wednesday, December 14, 2022

Athens, Georgia, USA

Gary Stokan
Kirby Smart
Josh Brooks
Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: The President and CEO of the Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl, Gary Stokan, also J. Reid Parker Director of Athletics Josh Brooks, and of course head coach Kirby Smart.

Then we'll show a short video about the Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl, and then Gary will be available to take questions, and we'll roll right into Coach Smart's presser.

At this time, I'm going to turn it over to Matt Garvey, who's vice president of communications for the Chick-Fil-A bowl.

MATT GARVEY: Good to see everybody. This is so funny, on the drive over here I'm thinking how nice this is. It's kind of like a home game for us. We already know everybody. Good to see you guys. Thanks for being over here with us today.

We've got a lot of excitement for this matchup, and to be able to host the No. 1 Georgia Bulldogs in our game this year.

As Christopher said, we'll have some comments from Gary and Josh and Coach and show you a quick video on our bowl week experience. Then we'll make Gary available afterwards, after you guys are done with Coach, if anybody needs that.

Here we go. Gary, take it away.

GARY STOKAN: Thanks, Matt. Chris, thanks for hosting us.

Let me introduce David Epps, our COO and vice president of marketing, back there. You've met Matt Garvey, our VP of Communications. They're part of the team that I believe is the best in the bowl business.

Look forward to hosting you, the Georgia Bulldogs. The

team, the administration and staff, Kirby, Josh, their families, we really believe in southern hospitality, and for us it's going to be kind of interesting because in 2020 we really didn't get a chance to host Georgia like we wanted to with COVID.

Let me also -- I don't see Claude here, but I want to say hello to Claude. Claude is someone I go all the way back to 1980 when Hershel was playing here, and I was with Adidas, and he helped me with a credential for the Heisman Trophy. So I want to see Claude and tell him hello.

Let me thank everybody here for coming. You guys, I know you've got a lot to do. Probably here to see Kirby, but we've got a little business before. If I can talk a little bit about the bowl and how excited we are to host No. 1 Georgia and No. 4 Ohio State.

This is the third time we've hosted the CFP Semifinal, and every one of those years, in '16, '19, and now '22, we've hosted the No. 1 team in the country. So we're really excited to host the SEC champs and No. 1 Georgia Bulldogs.

Congratulations to Josh on a record sellout in one day of 13,000 tickets. I don't know that that's ever been done before for a bowl game. So I know he needs probably about 15,000 more like I do. But we have added 2,000 more seats, beyond the expandable seats, to Mercedes-Benz Stadium, standing room only-wise.

So we're going to be close to, if not break our record that we hold for the 2019 No. 1 LSU versus No. 4 Oklahoma CFP Semifinal game in Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

Congrats to Kirby and Josh, the Bulldog team, the administration staff, for just a tremendous year. To be No. 1 -- and I know it's somewhat taken lightly around here because the success, but to be No. 1 after finishing No. 1 in the country, and Kirby would tell you -- probably has numerous times -- they're not defending National Champions. This is a whole different team.

So to see 15 guys go to the NFL and bring a whole new

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team together, to be No. 1 again, it's an incredible accomplishment. Hasn't been done very often and probably won't be done too many times in the future either. So great credit to Kirby, and congratulations on winning the SEC Coach of the Year as well.

Kirby is special to us individually. Not only is he a great guy and a great person, but Kirby is the only player -- little trivia for you guys. You might win some beers on this. Kirby is the only guy that's played in our game, won our game as a player, won the Chick-Fil-A Kickoff Game in his first game coaching here at Georgia against North Carolina, and also won 2020, won the Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl as a coach.

Now all he has to do with is win our Peach Bowl Challenge Golf Tournament, which he's finished second or third a couple of times. Am I right?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, second.

GARY STOKAN: He's got a little work to do on the golf game, I guess, but I'm sure he'll figure that out as well.

History-wise, this is special for us with the Peach Bowl. I started this job back in 1998, and we had, as I mentioned, Kirby and Georgia play against Virginia. Georgia was ranked No. 19 in the AP and Virginia was No. 13. And the AJC wrote that Georgia is going to a third tier bowl game. So we've come a long way in these many years to host now No. 1 Georgia in the CFP Semifinal game.

So quite an accomplishment by our board, our staff, which is the best in the business, our volunteers, and all the corporate support and our stakeholders we have in Atlanta.

Champ Bailey, who was the MVP of that game, interestingly enough, another history, is going into the National Football Foundation College Football Hall of Fame this year, and he'll be the Georgia honorary captain, which is great history. Obviously Vince Dooley, who was our great friend, was the AD then, who we celebrated his 90th birthday on the field at the Chick-Fil-A Kickoff Game.

The other thing is Mark Richt will be going into the Peach Bowl Hall of Fame this year. So we'll be hosting not only Champ Bailey, but the rest of the National Football Foundation College Football Hall of Famers at our game this year as well as the Dodd Coaches of the Year will be hosted at the Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl. So a lot of activities going on.

Let me tell you a little bit about our game. Obviously to have No. 1 against No. 4 with Georgia playing in its second consecutive semifinal game, this is only the second

meeting between these two teams. They played in 1993 in the Citrus Bowl. So kind of interesting to have two huge brands, probably two of the best five, if not the best two top ten teams in the history of college football playing in our game this year in the Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl.

Talk about players, having two of the four Heisman Trophy finalists, and I think the last count was about ten All-Americans playing in our game is really special for us.

I've always said styles make fights, so when you're talking about the nation's best scoring offense against the second best scoring defense in the country in Georgia, and you're talking about the 13th scoring defense in Ohio State against the 11th ranked scoring offense in Georgia, that makes for a great game on New Year's Eve, December 31st, at 8:00 in Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

We've got GameDay coming, the SEC Network, Big Ten Network. Everybody will be there for the game. 2020/21, if it's anything like that, going down to a last kick. Most of our games, 53 percent of our games have been decided by a touchdown or less in our 55-year history.

We soldout 22 of the last 24 games thanks to the great fan support we have in Atlanta, which a lot of media call the capital of college football. That's one of the reasons, just great fans, the College Football Hall of Fame, the SEC Championship, obviously the Chick-Fil-A Kickoff Game, Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl.

We're the fourth largest convention town in the United States in Atlanta, Georgia, behind Las Vegas, Chicago, and Orlando. And to have four of the top six conventions in Atlanta, that's how big college football economic impact-wise means to this city, especially coming out of COVID.

Our payout will be \$6 million. So nice check for Josh, particularly since you just have to take Uber over and will save a lot of money in expenses.

Then talking about the bowl game. We were founded in 1968, the ninth oldest bowl game in the country, and we were founded by the Lions Lighthouse to give back to charity. Unlike some of the other bowls -- the Rose, Sugar, Orange, Cotton -- a lot of those bowls were created for tourism, which we do. We'll provide probably about \$100 million of economic impact this year between our two kickoff games and our Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl.

But we were founded to give back, and we do so humbly. It's our mission. We've given \$60 million back to charity and foundations since 2002, which is more than any other bowl organization in the country. We'll give \$6 million this



year to charity, which is a lot more than any other bowl game in the country.

We're also proud to announce that we'll donate \$100,000 to endow a scholarship at the University of Georgia, which we already have endowed one, but this will be one that will be a part of our John Lewis Legacy of Courage Scholarship, which those scholarship moneys go to kids from title I programs, schools, that are underprivileged kids that don't have the money to go to college.

This year alone, we've given \$293,000 out through those endowed scholarships, which are at 34 universities throughout the country. Ohio State will be a new one that we'll add. So that \$100,000 will go into the existing endowed scholarship program.

With that, what I'd like to do is I'd like to be able to -- and hopefully he accepts -- offer a letter of invitation to Josh Brooks to play in the 55th Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl, which is the CFP Semifinal game. So, Josh, I hope you'll accept this invitation.

JOSH BROOKS: I do. Appreciate it.

Thanks, Gary. First of all, I want to thank Gary. I don't think Nathan will know this, but when we had the game scheduled with Oregon, the neutral site kickoff, and we knew it was Coach Dooley's birthday. Reached out to Gary and said, hey, I've got an idea. We'd really like to celebrate Coach's birthday and do some things.

He took the ball and ran with it and really did a first class job celebrating Coach. I know it meant a lot to his family. I want to thank you for that. That was very special.

This game is really special to me. A little more trivia. This was my first bowl game as a student 22 years ago, and it was my first bowl game as an AD two years ago. So this bowl game is really special. Obviously in our own state, in Mercedes-Benz, and Gary and his staff, all of them, do a phenomenal job. The hospitality, it matches up with the Chick-Fil-A model and how they operate.

We're so grateful of you and everyone and how you treat us. I know that we didn't get the full experience in 2020, so I know that our student-athletes, our staff, our families are real excited to experience this bowl game. It's one of the best, and the way you treat and take care of everyone.

So I know it's going to be a great experience and obviously a great game. We could have used some more tickets. We'll take as many as we can get. Obviously it's a testament to our fan base, how well they support our program, and just excited to kick things off.

Now I'll turn it over to Coach Smart.

KIRBY SMART: Thanks, Josh and Gary. Appreciate it.

Happy and fired up to have an opportunity to play in what I always thought is one of the best bowls in the country because Atlanta is home to so much of college football, especially when you've been part of the SEC. So it makes for an awesome opportunity.

Our players are excited for the opportunity to play in a CFP Semifinal against an opponent that we all have immense respect for. Ohio State is one of the premier teams in the country. Coach Day has done a fabulous job with his team, in terms of recruiting across the country, putting out NFL talent, and playing in the CFP over recent history. So the challenge lays in front of us, and our guys are excited to do it. We're honored to be in this game.

I know a lot about the Chick-Fil-A Peach Bowl and have for a long time. Like Gary mentioned, having played in it, coached in it, and been around it, it's pretty special when you get an opportunity to play in it in your own state.

(Video played.)

Q. With the news yesterday about Mike Leach and you look around College Football today, how much influence do you see from Coach Leach?

KIRBY SMART: His impact is wide and broad. He traveled all over the country to coach. He went from bottom right, Valdosta State, all the way to Washington State and coached all over the country.

His impact is really felt more at the high school level, I think, because we see the vision that he had in terms of passing the ball, throwing the ball, from his young years with Coach Mumme all the way through now.

But what you don't see is the trickle down effect that he's had where we go watch a high school team play and the elements of his offensive system are pervasive. It's like all over the place.

He changed the game from years ago when it was wishbone, triple option. You couldn't watch a high school game without Wing T, veer option, triple option, wishbone, to now you actually see more air raid elements than you do those. And he had a large part to do with that.

A special man and heartfelt feelings going out to his family, his wife and his kids.

Q. Kirby, when will you guys start practicing for this game? And when you do, Ladd and Warren McClendon, what will their statuses be at that point?

KIRBY SMART: We've been practicing. Not specifically for Ohio State, we've been practicing to maintain staying in shape and making sure our guys are ready, sharp physically and ready to do things. So we've kind of been practicing ongoing.

I don't know when exactly we'll get those guys back. I don't know that. They're not practicing with us right now. They're conditioning, they're running, they're moving around, but they're not practicing just yet. We're still, I guess, 16, 17 days out.

Q. In a similar vein, an update on Marvin Jones Jr. And then Bill Norton, is he practicing with the team, or once you go in the portal, you're no longer practicing?

KIRBY SMART: There's a set standard on that, so that's not really important. We're worried about the guys that are getting ready to play.

Marvin Jones has been great. He's run. He's conditioned. He's been doing a ton of conditioning things with us on the side. Probably going to be able to start practicing with us here soon, if not today.

Q. I know this time of year is always big for younger players getting practice. Has anybody really caught your eye in what they've been able to do through the practices to this point?

KIRBY SMART: They all have. They do a great job working. It's great to put them at the forefront and let them get quality reps where they're not necessarily the scout team. They make up the twos and the threes and sometimes the fours in some positions that get a lot of reps and a lot of growth.

This is, at the end of the day, almost another set of spring practice. We get 15 practices for spring practice. We may not get that many in, but we get a lot of practices in, once you include walk-throughs. So I've seen these guys have exponential growth and really become good players before spring even starts.

Q. Kirby, after losing 15 guys to the NFL, at what point this year did you maybe realize this team was capable of putting together a run like this? And can you just expound a little bit on your decision not to go into the transfer portal to get help? I think you guys were the only team in the FBS that didn't.

KIRBY SMART: Well, we didn't make a decision not to go in. We called and recruited several guys that fit our criteria. Number one, need. Number two, culture. Number three, we knew something about them out of high school. They'd been on our campus. But we didn't get any of those guys.

So it wasn't a philosophy. It was more of that's the way it played out.

As far as this team, I thought in the spring we were going to have a good team. We were a long way away defensively from where we needed to be during the spring, but I knew we had a good football team. I knew we had a good football team when the season ended last year because we have a core of good players.

Q. Kirby, you guys are obviously going up against some good receivers. I'm curious what your impressions are of Marvin Harrison Jr., watching him, what kind of challenge he presents?

KIRBY SMART: All of those guys, really good receivers. Not just him, across the board very talented, probably one of the most talented groups we've faced. When you combine it with the talent of the quarterback, it really grows because he has the ability to get the ball to him all parts of the field -- vertically, horizontally, side to side. Really good job.

Historically, Ohio State's had great wideouts. When you play Ohio State, you know they're going to have really good wideouts. When you look across the NFL, they've produced really good wideouts, and that's no different than what they have on their roster right now.

Q. With Buster Faulkner taking a job at Georgia Tech, will he still be involved with the program leading up to the bowl game? If not, does Mike Bobo's position or job, whatever you want to call it, kind of get increased a little bit?

KIRBY SMART: We're going to determine that probably at a later date. Still in conversation with Buster and Brent. It's not something that's pressing right now because he doesn't really need to do anything at practice.

So we're practicing right now. He's a supplement to ideas with Coach Monken, and he can certainly still do that from the position he's in, and we'll determine that at a later date.

Q. You talked a lot towards the beginning of this year about all the guys who might not have been huge contributors last year stepping into bigger roles this year. What's it been like watching the growth from

those guys, like Pop and Zion, all the guys that had to step up this year to get you all to where you are now?

KIRBY SMART: It's great. The maturation process, really Zion was already very mature and a leader before this year. He's kind of earned it and done it. He's been around here for a while. A lot of guys have stepped up to give us an opportunity to be where we are.

A lot of coaches have done a fabulous job. We took on four new coaches, had 13, whatever it is, guys leave in the portal, and we had a lot of guys step up.

We had a freshman class who a lot of them came in last year at this time and have been major contributors. I think we had the third most, or fourth most true freshman snaps, so we did a good job of onboarding our incoming freshmen to give us depth behind the guys we had on our team.

So I think that's a big part of college football right now, how fast you can transition your team each year.

Q. Kirby, what offenses have you faced that might have some of the elements that Ohio State has, and what lessons are there for you in maybe some past games?

KIRBY SMART: I'm not sure who to relate them to. They're different probably than really anybody we faced maybe in years past. I can't say they're exactly like anybody we've played this year.

Q. Kirby, last week Stetson becomes the first Georgia player to be a finalist for the Heisman in 30 years. As someone who's been around this program for a long time, and especially you being there to see what Stetson has gone through, just what did that accomplishment mean to you to see Stetson get a chance to go to New York?

KIRBY SMART: It's a great honor for his resiliency. I mean, to be named one of the four finalists, I don't know anybody could have written a script with what he's done in terms of start to finish with trials, tribulations, ups and downs, highs and lows, throughout his career.

To have that be near the end of it is pretty special. It's special for Georgia. It's special for our program, our university, and it's special for Stetson and his family because he earned it by the way he played on the field.

Q. Kirby, you talked a lot over the years about accelerated schedules in terms of recruiting, and now we throw the portal on it, we throw NIL on it. Transfer policies have changed. My question is about retention

of players. A scenario that could be way off here. Like a guy like Nolan Smith is injured, maybe an NIL gets put together. What can you offer? Can you offer these guys NIL money? Can you offer them insurance policies? How quickly do you got to determine this because you're looking in the portal for needs as well. So I guess I'm just kind of wondering about that process and what you can do to maybe make it worthwhile for a guy to come back to improve his draft stock.

KIRBY SMART: Complicated question. I really don't know honestly how to answer it. Just not like pressing need. I mean, we have a process that we follow, so our process is step by step.

There's a day in the month of each calendar month that I go through and say, okay, it's time to do this. It's time to have this conversation. It's time to gather this information. It's time to educate our players on this in this process. I think communication is the key on that.

You reference Nolan, and I'm confused because Nolan is kind of done. He's through playing. If you're talking about this time last year, sure, we have conversations with every player that has eligibility remaining.

I think you're juggling a spreadsheet that I keep, we keep, that has what each guy's doing and where their eligibility is. And over here where each guy potentially that could come in. And you're trying to match in flow and outflow is essentially what you're trying to do.

NIL is a part of that, but NIL is not -- it may be dangled as a carrot at some places, but really it's about do you want to be part of this team? Do you want to grow and get better? Do you want to get a chance to do what Devonte Wyatt did? Do you want a chance to do what Chris Smith did? Do you want to have a chance to do what Jordan Davis did? Do you want to have a chance to do what Quay Walker did?

So there's great opportunities to move from a late round draft pick with your grade to an early round draft pick. That's not really what I'm concerned with right now. I'm concerned with making sure our football team is developing at all stages and phases. We have guys who are at the stage of, man, he's going to start next year. He really needs to get ready.

And the phase is offense, defense, special teams. How are we improving? That's my focus. It's really not on NIL, not on portal, not on those things, because the focus is on our team.

GARY STOKAN: Couple points. On our Live, Laugh, and Learn, everything is a reward for our players. We want them to live great, stay in great hotels, travel first class, play in a first class facility, get great gifts, eat great food like Chick-Fil-A. That's number one in our Live.

Laugh, we have our Battle for Bowl Week, which is a 40-pound WWE belt that we give away every night based on the competition. These kids are going through a week of practice and video, and so to lighten things up in the evening after the events, we have a competition against the other team.

And Learn, there's two things that we do. One is take them to Children's Healthcare where those kids didn't get out of the hospital for Christmas and may never get out of that hospital. So for the coaches and the players to give back during the holiday to those families and those kids is awfully important.

Then lastly, this year at Ebenezer Baptist Church in the actual pews -- you're not supposed to do this as a bowl, but we bring both teams together and sit them next to each other in the pews at Ebenezer Baptist where Dr. King spoke from the pulpit and his mother got shot and died there at the organ. It's a very, very special place.

This year we'll have ambassador Andy Young, who was one of the original eight people involved with Dr. King in the civil rights movement, and Dr. Bill Curry, who played for Coach Lombardi and Coach Shula, who has a book out if you're a reader, "Ten Men in the Huddle," where he talks about you have a black kid from Compton, you've got a white kid from the hills of North Carolina, and you got a Jew and a Christian and a Catholic all in the huddle together. None of that really matters once you're in the huddle because it's all about teamwork, it's all about togetherness.

In such a divisive society that we live in, it's a great message for these kids to hear from Bill Curry, but also from Andy Young about what actually took place in the civil human rights movement because these kids weren't even born. So it's a living history lesson.

So we're in the college experience, we're in the collegiate enterprise here, so we want these kids to have a history lesson, which they'll get that evening.

So Live, Laugh, and Learn. Our Media Day is 29th in the College Football Hall of Fame, so you're all invited there. December 30th is our media party, where we'll host everybody.

Anything we can do. Obviously Matt is in charge of that,

but I'll make myself available. Whatever we can do, obviously, we want to provide service to you guys and make this a memorable experience for the media as well. Thank you.

Q. Gary, obviously you've done an unbelievable job with the Peach Bowl. You're a top of the line bowl executive. I'm sure you talk with some of the other leaders about players opting out. Obviously this is a playoff game so it's not an issue. Last year Michigan State lost their greatest player Kenneth Walker, hence the quarterback doesn't show up. What can the bowls do to combat, or is it an issue to combat? What's it mean to you to get players to play in bowl games?

GARY STOKAN: Yeah, obviously we went through it, like you mentioned, last year with Kenny Pickett and Kenneth Walker, who were both First Team All-Americans. Both were hurt at the end of the year, like most players are hurt, banged up at the end of the year.

It's one of the unintended consequences that I think everybody in college football has to be aware of is playoff. If you're going to play 12 teams in a playoff, everybody is banged up at the end of the year, and now you're going to play a first round game for some teams and then a quarter and a semi and a championship game.

I think there needs to be taken into consideration insurance of some kind to protect these kids because, when you get that first round draft card now, you're talking about generational money. Hutchinson from Michigan signed for \$20 million. Well, that's generational money. So for these kids to play another four games, I think either a relationship with the NFL or through the CFP or letting the colleges through the NCAA do something more insurance-wise to make sure these kids are protected and they do play in the playoff. I think it's something that needs to be taken into consideration.

It's interesting. I've spoken about this liberally. I think college football needs its own commissioner, and I would create a board that's comprised of two coaches, two commissioners, two student-athletes. Those people would drive the business.

We need to create a vision of college football. We're the second favorite sport in the country behind the NFL, without a vision. In one month signing day, transfer portal, bowls, coaches changing jobs. That's not the way to run a business, right? It is an enterprise.

We're doing things tied to the top 1 or 2 percent who are going to play in the NFL. We need to worry about the other 98 percent that aren't going to play in the NFL that have to

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pick up a lunch pail. So in my eyes, these collectives shouldn't be for kids on the front side for these kids to come to your school. They should be on the back side. These donors and alumni should be giving these kids jobs that aren't going to the NFL.

That's what we should be doing. We're a college. Get the kid a degree, and once he gets his degree, get him a job. Let him form, be a great person in society. That's 98 percent of the people out there.

I don't know how many college football players we have, but if you take 2 percent to the NFL, there's thousands of kids out there, and that's just football. We need to be doing that in volleyball and lacrosse and everything else. We're a college enterprise. My belief is we need to continue to reinforce that rather than move to a professionalized format or structure.

I don't know if that answered your question or not, but that's my personal belief.

Q. Do you know just how quickly Georgia was able to sell its seat allotment?

GARY STOKAN: Yeah, we find out on Sunday like everybody else. We've obviously had calls with pretty much the top 12 schools, going through the institutional guide of events and where they'd be staying, et cetera, et cetera. So they know where the allotment is. We go 50 yard line up and over with 13,000 tickets for each school, and Georgia sold out on Monday.

So they had one day, and they sold out. I got a call from Josh before the SEC Championship game, hey, can you help me? I'm going to need some more tickets. It's a great problem to have, but it's a problem. I wish we had more tickets. I've had to tell a lot of people I don't have any tickets, which is tough.

We have added 2,000 more. We're using all the expandibles on both sidelines and in the end zone. So we'll probably get up to about 78,000, maybe a little bit more, potential, which maxes out pretty much Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

Q. So 26,000 allotted to the schools, 2,000 that you're selling as standing room only. Where does the rest go to?

GARY STOKAN: So there's pockets. You've got sponsors. You have comp tickets. You have trade-outs. You've got Mercedes Benz, which their PSL holders have the right to buy tickets to the game. We've got a huge renewal base after years of selling out all those years.

So that's probably the billing chunks of where the tickets have gone. And we were soldout in July before we even knew who the two teams were. I think a lot of people in our renewal base, they'll buy the tickets waiting to see who the teams are. If they like the teams, they'll use the tickets. If they have a friend who's an alumnus of one of those schools or a business associate, they give the tickets to them.

Or as we've learned, all of us who buy tickets, the secondary market becomes the primary market.

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