

# University of Georgia Football Media Conference

Wednesday, August 2, 2023

Athens, Georgia, USA

## Coach Kirby Smart

### Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: I would start with the release that was distributed yesterday, I guess. They're sending that out again to you guys about the improvement to Sanford Stadium. We're certainly proud of those. We value fan experience. Josh Brooks and myself both do.

All the details will be included, but we're looking forward to those improvements, and certainly needed in those areas of the stadium. So we're excited about those.

We're opening camp today, and we don't open practice, but we are practicing earlier tomorrow, which is not a seven-, eight-year tradition for us. We've traditionally practiced in the afternoon. We've got some guys still doing final exams, and it was going to cause us to miss a few guys, so we flipped the practice schedule around and going to go a little earlier at least tomorrow, then go back to our normal practice time in the afternoon moving forward from that.

That probably prompted this meeting to happen today as opposed to tomorrow with us going earlier with the first practice.

I'm excited to get the guys out there. They've had a great summer workout session. You usually measure summer success by where you are injury-wise in terms of soft tissue injuries, trying to avoid those, but you're also trying to be in shape. The only way to get in shape is run and run in the heat.

I've felt like up until maybe the July 4th break we had not had the heat exposure we had needed. We had not been outside and conditioning in the heat, and then as soon as I said that, it flipped really quick, and it got really hot, and from our July 4th break on, our guys have trained really hard in the heat, had a lot of acclimation.

We don't do, quote-unquote, testing anymore where you come in and have to run a test, but I feel really good about where our guys are from a conditioning level.

The biggest focus for us in training camp is physical and

mental toughness. That's why we do training camp. We try to expose our guys to a lot of scheme. We try to expose our guys to getting to know each other, moving into one central location, and really just focusing on ourselves.

I think the difference in the two teams from the last two years is they connected well in training camp. That will be a goal in this training camp, to see how well we connect and how well we compete.

We've got a lot of jobs that are going to be up for grabs and up for competition, and I'm very eager to see our guys compete for those spots.

With that, I'll open it up.

**Q. When you look at quarterbacks specifically, what do you want to see from all three of those guys through this fall camp, the things you're looking for from the quarterbacks?**

KIRBY SMART: I want to see them be where their feet are. I just got through talking to the team 10 minutes ago, and I had three or four older players, fifth-year and fourth-year players tell the younger players what the expectation for training camp is.

That's exactly what I think about when I think about quarterbacks. To worry about today's walk-through, today's recovery period, today's meetings, whatever we're allowed to have, we're going to have today, and only thing you should worry about is that, then tonight you start worrying about tomorrow.

But for those quarterbacks, it's not to overwhelm themselves with results, to overwhelm themselves with the process of getting better. They're going to get a lot of reps in the next 25 practices. They're going to get a chance to compete in the next 25 practices.

Each one of them has individual things they need to work on, but for the whole I want to see them manage the offense, understand the offense, get people lined up and execute.



The guy that does that best in critical situations will be the guy that becomes the quarterback.

**Q. With the secondary, how is the process going of replacing of leadership left by guys like Chris and Kelee, and two, with a guy like Javon, how do you evaluate what he could bring to the defense at star or what he could bring at safety when you're evaluating where to play them at on Saturdays?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, the leadership, we have really good leadership in our secondary. I think Coach Muschamp and Coach Fran do a great job of developing leadership. Probably one of our strongest leadership positions between Bullard, Tykee, Kamari, Malaki, Dan Jackson. The names go on and on in terms of good leaders in those rooms.

The second part of your question as far as Bullard, you don't always weigh it based on what Bullard's best position for the team. It's who can play the positions around him.

We're weighing that option. We feel like he's a very experienced star. He spent the majority of his development as a football player at star since being here. So we have really tried to push the safety issue in order to create more depth there and then figure out who's the best around him.

I think Javon is one of our best 11 football players, but who is No. 10 and 11 and where do they fit, and all that should play out in camp.

**Q. Staying on the secondary, how do you determine when it comes to cross-training in the secondary? Is it by position, these positions are going to cross-train, or is it by player, and how is it working out for you?**

KIRBY SMART: I would say with cross-training it's probably more contingent on the age of the player, the experience level of the player. We don't like to have an incoming player trying to cross-train. That's usually not fair to them.

We have volume in our defense. We've proven that you can play as a true freshman and be successful in our defense, so it's not too much to learn, like some people say, and try to use it against us in recruiting. We had a kid, Malaki Starks, that walked in and played every single game at safety from a true freshman perspective, but we're not going to ask that guy to cross-train.

We usually do cross-training based on the volume they can withstand and how much they can learn, and we make those decisions very, very delicately because there's a lot

of guys you'd like to cross-train that you can't, and you've got to pick the right spot. Part of being a good coach is where do you put the players or where do you put the people in the seats on the bus.

**Q. You mentioned injuries at the very beginning. Is there anybody that's going to be on the shelf for you to start preseason camp? Who's probably going to be slowed or out to begin camp for you?**

KIRBY SMART: So I think y'all know Smael and Branson will both be running. They're cleared to run, land running and do things, but they're not going to be full-speed practicing. Smael and Branson would be the two that are both ahead of the schedule that we thought five, six weeks ago, but they're not going to be cleared to just go out there and practice.

Mykel has been able to do some activity and do some football activity and conditioning with us, and he should be a lower volume, but he should be able to practice some.

Ty Ingram-Dawkins is dealing with a little bit of navicular foot issue, but it's not a break or anything right now. It's a stress reaction that we've had to hold him out some and keep him out of activities some, but he should be cleared soon. I don't think there's anybody else.

We've got a few hamstrings and things like that, but the major deal right now is Ty, Smael and Branson, I think.

**Q. On that topic, how do you go about preparing your team for the physicality required to win in this league while also making sure you're healthy and ready to go at the beginning of the season?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, I think that's a goal of training camp is to establish physical and mental toughness. How do you do that? You don't go out and say, oh, God, please don't get hurt. Football is a tough and dangerous sport, which we practice as smart as anybody in the country. We feel like we have a method that allows us to be physical and be tough and also protect our players. We've been very fortunate in terms of training camp in the past, and we're still a month out.

We want to get better, and we want our players to grow and get better, and you don't get better by not practicing. We're going to be physical, we're going to go against each other, and we're going to compete.

**Q. Kirby, what kind of leader is Carson? Is he more in your face or by example, and have you been pleased with what he's shown you from a leadership standpoint?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Carson is a very even-keeled individual. He's been that way since we recruited him all the way back to his 11th grade year. He's not a high and low, not a real emotional guy. He's not a real fiery guy. He's very laid-back, and he understands his job. He's very intelligent.

Every leader has their own way, and he certainly commands the room. I think the players around him understand how bright he is, and they trust him.

Carson has had a lot of reps and a lot of work, but it just hasn't all been game reps. He's had a huge mass of reps against good defenses, against really good defense in ours.

But his leadership method is kind of still being developed, no different than Gunner and Brock. Each one have different ways about them, and that's true with the guy that just left, too.

**Q. You've got a guy, Austin Blaske, who's going into year four with the program. What has his progression been at tackle, and what kind of player is he on and off the field?**

KIRBY SMART: He's extremely tough. He's extremely dedicated. He's very prideful in his work. He's one of the most versatile linemen we've had. He's played center, played tackle, he can play guard. He's smart. He strains so hard that he makes himself relevant in terms of the movement he gets in the run game, screen game. He can go out on the perimeter and block guys.

He's a good athlete. He was a real good wrestler in high school.

Just been really pleased with how much he's improved to put himself in a competition to where he can contribute and play.

**Q. I think you said in the spring that you weren't sure if you had train wreckers and habit makers and you'd have to see. Have you seen anything this summer, anybody had a strong summer, stand out physically, guys developing on the interior defensive line?**

KIRBY SMART: I don't know that I could measure by anything we see in the summer. Summer is built so much around conditioning, lifting weights, which are not -- they're just not pertinent to being train wreckers and habit makers with football pads on. It may be a measure of strength, may be a measure of stamina, but not necessarily disruptive nature.

I don't know where we're at in terms of that. I certainly concern myself with the depth at all positions, but that's a position, the defensive line, I would say end, tackle and nose, all in one, that concerns me in terms of depth.

But a lot of positions worry me in depth. Offensive tackle concerns me at depth. We've been spoiled at some positions, and every year it's different. It's a different issue each and every year. But that's one of the issues we have this year is do we have enough players that can play winning football at each position group.

**Q. As you guys get going, a big picture question in terms of the non-conference schedule. How do you think it might impact you at the end of the year, not having Oklahoma, adding a Ball State, when the playoff committee is deciding (indiscernible)?**

KIRBY SMART: That thought has never even crossed my mind. Is there any part of that that I control?

**Q. No.**

KIRBY SMART: No. So I can't -- I cannot concern myself with any part of that.

All we can do is go out and try to schedule the best we can, and when we scheduled the game with Oklahoma, we were trying to do that. We were trying to create this identity that we wanted to play our conference schedule, we wanted to play Georgia Tech and we wanted to play others.

We lost out on that because of a realignment, adding teams to the conference, and that just is what it is.

I certainly don't concern myself with the thoughts of College Football Playoff committee because I don't have any control over it.

**Q. It's common when you have a successful program that you're going to lose assistant coaches. Obviously you lost a really good offensive coordinator this past off-season. What did Todd bring to the program, and how difficult will it be to replace him in your view?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think anytime you lose a coordinator, you can rank it up there with like, okay, is that equal to an assistant coach. Probably not. You would think losing a coordinator is greater than others.

I think retaining the rest of the offensive staff, and I think Todd would be the first to tell you, once I knew he was leaving and I sat down and had a long meeting with him,

he re-emphasized how good this staff was at doing their job of presenting him ideas.

I think a lot of people look at offensive coordinator as an island and this guy that sits over there and comes up with this stuff himself. Well, they have 15, 20 meetings a week on Sunday night, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, where each coach gives a presentation of ideas or things they can do offensively, and he gets to sit back and be the decision maker on what's in and what's not.

Those ideas really helped him, and he was quick to say, Coach, you're going to be fine no matter who you put in that position because you're going to oversee it and make sure they do it right as the leader, and then they're going to do a good job because they have pride in their performance as assistant coaches on offense, and then whoever you put in that position is going to have good players and be able to be successful.

We were very fortunate to have Todd the time he was here, the growth he allowed us to make, the confidence he exuded with the players, and he had a package of offense that he felt confident in that fit the players that he was given. He made the personnel fit in his scheme.

I don't see that changing. Obviously the quarterback is a major, major part of that, and we had really good quarterback play last year. A lot of times your offense is predicated off your quarterback play, so how well will our quarterback play, and that's the question.

**Q. Each year you will host some coaches from other programs. Some of your guys will go to other programs. Can you tell us some of the teams you hosted, some of the programs you hosted and some of the guys you collaborated with?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, since the COVID year we've kind of quit doing it because we've found it's a lot easier to do through Zoom methods. We didn't go out and visit. Now, several of our coaches went to pro camps or went and met with maybe a D-line community or an O-line community group and they all kind of share ideas, but we didn't per se have anybody in particular we went and met with, but our individual coaches certainly studied teams that had the most turnovers, teams that did the best in the red area, teams that did something well. We tried to pick their brain on how they did it, without getting into any specific school.

**Q. Not of an off-season now, but high school coaches started practice this week. We talked to those coaches and they say they're so excited the night before they could barely sleep and first day feels like Christmas Day. Do you still get those emotions, feel that way?**

KIRBY SMART: I get excited, yeah. Not so much for today but for tomorrow I do, I think tomorrow being the first day we can go out and practice.

But the NCAA has allowed you to do so much more in the summer. I was just telling our players, it's so different. We didn't see our coaches when we were here in the summer. We had testing when we got back. It was the first day that freshmen reported for us today.

Now we've got 19 kids here in the spring. We had four or five show up summer, but they've even done workouts. It's not like the buildup of an NFL training camp where you haven't seen guys.

We've seen our guys. They're here. They work out every day.

It's very important to separate summer to training camp. Sometimes as a kid you can't see the separation because it's just constant. It's just all in a row.

So we try to make a clear delineation between this is the end of this, this is the start of this.

**Q. How have you seen Xavian Sorey develop in his time in the program, and how important is he as one of the older guys and with Smael banged up in that locker room?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, probably the most growth Xavian has had has been in the last five months, six months. Since Smael's injury, he has exponentially grown in terms of confidence, ability to execute. He's been healthy, number one, and he's had a lot of opportunity of reps of being out there with the ones.

I mean, he's a guy who has really picked it up in terms of leadership and growth, and he has a lot of athletic ability.

**Q. I know last year you moved Jalon Walker to outside back after some injuries cropped up. Specifically with Nolan, how did he do with that moving outside, and do you anticipate him staying at that position, or could he also play some inside as well?**

KIRBY SMART: No, he'll start at inside. That's his natural position. That's what he wants to grow at, and he'll be in that competition for guys that get an opportunity to play.

He has a unique trait of being able to rush the passer well, which not all inside linebackers have. He has some outside linebacker characteristics and he helped us a lot last year on 3rd down.

Because of the injuries we had, we were like, okay, he's got a better chance of playing OLB than ILB. This year and really the entire time he was out in the spring with a shoulder, he still was in the ILB room, and he'll start in the ILB room, but he'll be part of the 3rd down package that allows him to rush the passer.

**Q. At outside linebacker you guys lose Nolan, lose Robert. You're young at that position. How do you get the most out of that group this August, especially when they can't hit the quarterback in practice?**

KIRBY SMART: Well, I don't think hitting the quarterback makes you a better outside linebacker. I think we can determine whether they win or lose each rush based on result. I'd love to be able to practice finishing, but we never get to practice that.

I'm excited to see that group grow. We have a lot of young, eager guys that need to grow, and we've got the oldest vet in the room is Chaz, and he sets the tempo and the tone of the room all the time.

I'm looking forward to seeing those guys grow. We've got to find unique ways to use those guys because some of them have really good athletic traits, and we've got to have times where we have two and three guys on the field at that position.

**Q. Could you assess what you're hoping to see from the running back group, specifically Daijun Edwards? I know he carried the ball a ton last year, but you mentioned at SEC media days you really need to see some pass catching ability out of that whole group. Can you assess that group?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think that'll be the challenge. I think Andrew coming off the knee, where is he in terms of catching the ball, stamina, burst, acceleration; Branson, when can we get him back. Obviously Kendall and Daijun have the most experience.

A guy who had a great off-season and put up really good numbers in the weight room is Cash. Cash is maybe our fastest back. Pound for pound, he may be the strongest guy on the team. His unique ability is to catch the ball out of the backfield, but Daijun has got to be a guy that is consistent, stays healthy, durable and be kind of the -- he and Kendall both be the leader of that group in terms of the way they work, catch the ball out of the backfield.

I'm just excited to see all those guys work. I don't know that we have a superstar in the room. We've got a group that by committee does a tremendous job, and they work

really hard, and they put the team first. All those guys play on special teams, and they've been a huge help for our special teams unit.

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