

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

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Kirby Smart

Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: Getting ready to go on the road for first time this season. Road SEC tests are always difficult. There is no way around it. I think any conference when you go on the road in it, it's always a test, a test of focus, patience, endurance, composure, all the qualities you need to be a good team. So we get our first one, going to Auburn. Got a lot of respect for Hugh and the job he's done. Everywhere he's been, he's really been successful. He's very bright. He does a great job with his team, and they're playing really, really hard right now. And got a lot of guys in, transfers in that have added to their depth, and they're doing a really good job, playing extremely hard, and I know the environment we'll be going into will be extremely tough.

Q. Coach, when we spoke to you last week about crowd noise, you mentioned simplifying the game plan just a little bit offensively to avoid some of those issues. What does that look like?

KIRBY SMART: Really don't know. You know, I think that's -- depends on the level of maybe experience you have, how you choose to use your offense. I think everybody is different. So we'll put a plan together and do the best job we can.

Q. Based on what you've seen and you know about Carson Beck, how do you feel about his ability to handle his first SEC road start?

KIRBY SMART: I think that's something that we're going to find out. I don't think you know. I think he's been through some ups and downs. He's certainly been against good defenses like Auburn has. He goes against our guys. It's different when it's live. So you gotta find out how he responds to that, and I'm very confident in Carson's ability to communicate, to understand things. He's been in our system. You know, you only get good at these situational football things by playing football for a long time. And he's been with us for a while doing it. This is his first chance to do it on the road.

Q. Auburn uses both their quarterbacks in the run

game. Just what are your thoughts on Thorne and Robby Ashford and how do you deal with both of them?

KIRBY SMART: Well, they're both really good athletes. I don't think people give Payton Thorne enough credit for his athleticism and quickness. Now, obviously, when you talk about Robby, you're talking about a different kind of athlete. This guy is as fast as anybody we've ever played against, with size and a strong arm. So they do a good job of using -- number one, their backs run extremely hard and extremely physical and tough and are hard to tackle. And you combine that with a quarterback run and it creates a lot of eye candy, a lot of misdirection. They do a really good job. Hugh always has done a good job of that.

Q. Kirby, it's been, I guess, seven years since you've gone up against Hugh. How similar is what they're doing this year to what he was doing back then when he was at Ole Miss, especially offensively?

KIRBY SMART: I think that people evolve. They've evolved. They've evolved in protection. They've evolved in route structure. He has -- he's not the same staff he had. Hugh doesn't do everything. So he's got a staff that he puts in charge of doing things, and they've gone out and added some wrinkles. There are quality and traits of his DNA, his offense from years ago that are still a part of this, but there's things that have been added, just like defensively we've added things throughout the years, too.

Q. When Jamon was in here, he said he would characterize his own play as average so far this season. Just what have you seen from him and sort of in year two as a starter and progressing through these first four games of the season?

KIRBY SMART: A good leader. He's been a little more vocal this year, which I think is important. He has the pulse of the team, of when to push somebody and when to back off a young player and help them and pat them on the back. So he's done a good job in terms of that.

Q. Kirby, in July in Nashville at the SEC Media Days, you were talking about how you were so concerned



about complacency and its impact on the team. I'm curious just two months later what have been your thoughts and observations about that?

KIRBY SMART: Whew, hard to say. I think the focus level each week has been good. The results always haven't. But the preparation is what's more important to me. Like I actually put a lot of value on Monday to Friday, mental makeup, disposition, practice habits, improvement. You know, we've repeatedly said we want to be elite at getting better, and I've really been pleased with the progress that we've made. So that makes me feel comfortable that there's no complacency there.

Q. Kirby, I know you've talked about Ladd's situation as frustrating. What is it that you need to see to be able to say, hey, we feel confident in him going out there on Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: Well, he's gotta practice. He's gotta be able to practice, you know. And that's a big part of it. He's going to be able to come back to practice this week, and we're going to be able to do some more things with him. How he does in those things will determine whether or not he's able to play. We had kind of a two-week advised shutdown. He's done that, and we're expecting him to be able to go out there today and do some things, but non contact early in the week and try to move to that.

Q. Kirby, I wondered if you could help break the tie for me. I asked Pop about Brock's patented stiff arm, and he says Brock's too smart to try that in practice on the linebacking crew. Brock says he'd love to do it, but he can't get close to the linebackers. What's your take on who wins those Brock versus your linebacker battles in practice?

KIRBY SMART: We don't have a lot of Brock versus linebacker battles. I mean most of the battles there's no stiff arm because he's usually caught the ball and run away from them when they're on him, you know, there's not an opportunity to. So maybe a run-after-catch type deal, screen or something like that. But Brock's stiff arm is pretty strong. I mean I saw that firsthand.

Q. Coach, I believe they've been using Robby Ashford as more of a red zone threat, or Hugh Freeze at least mentioned a red zone package for him. What would be the advantages of having an athletic quarterback down in the red zone?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, extending plays. It's an extra element in the red zone. Every defense has an extra hat because nobody has to back up and play deep anymore. So it becomes really tough to get the ball in in the red area

in our league, and Robby gives that you dimension. I mean he is elite at the plays they do with him down there. They're really hard to defend because there's so many options to it. They got good runners. They got good people to block, and then you add him to it and the fact he can throw, it makes for difficult situations down there. They do a good job with his package.

Q. Yeah, you mentioned the eye candy and stuff that Auburn creates. Just how critical is it going to be for especially the younger inside linebackers, like C.J. Allen, Jalon Walker, guys who maybe haven't seen that kind of offense before, to stay disciplined against them on Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: It's very important. It's very important every game they have disciplined eyes.

Q. Yeah, Jamon has talked about some of the communication issues that have been happening on the defensive side. When have you a guy like Javon Bullard, who's such an important communicator on the back end, how hard is that to replace when he is out with injury, and the I guess on Javon, playing for this week, practice and then see how he goes as he recovers from that ankle injury?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah. We think he's going to be able to do more, hoping to get him back. We'll know more, if he gets more done today and tomorrow, if he's able to practice any, we'll obviously know more. But I don't feel any communication issues as a result of Javon because Dan is really bright. David Daniel is really bright. They know our system. They've been in it. So I don't foresee any communication issues there with Bull being out.

Q. Obviously the two end-the-half long drives are concerning. You've mentioned that before. I mean just in reviewing that the last couple of weeks, have you found any kind of common denominators that you can point to to improve in that area?

KIRBY SMART: Execution by the offense. Couple explosive plays. Extending plays by the quarterback. Throw and catch the ball, man. They throw and catch the ball, they tend to move it. And in both those cases they did. I helped them last week by calling timeout. So that didn't even do anything but benefit the offense. So some of it's decisionmaking. Some of it's execution. Some of it give them credit when you execute and do things well, you'll have success.

Q. What stands out to you about Auburn's running backs and the fact they've got several different guys that they've used starting this year?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, the difference in the guys, I mean, they've got one of the hardest guys to tackle in the SEC, and he runs really hard; he's physical. They've got fast backs. They have elusive backs, downhill backs. I mean they do a good job. It's like by committee. And they've got several guys that have done really well.

Q. Kirby, you've been at Auburn as a player and assistant head coach. You spoke about that a little bit Saturday night. Could you elaborate on what makes different road environments unique to themselves?

KIRBY SMART: I think they're more similar than unique. I would have a hard time pinpointing differences other than they're all loud as hell in our conference. And they do a great job. I mean we went to Missouri last year, and I thought it was as loud as anything at night. The environment was really loud, and it's not even an enclosed stadium, and this stadium is enclosed, and it's similar to ours. People have always said there's a similarity between the look of theirs and ours. But it's extremely loud. I mean, I don't know how to differentiate one school to another because they're just loud. All their fans are passionate. It's very similar environment.

Q. Coach, you mentioned helping them out with that two-minute timeout. I'm assuming that was because you guys wanted to get the ball back or get a two-minute possession right there before the half. Is that one of those examples of a coaching decision that you might second guess only because it didn't result in a positive result?

KIRBY SMART: Sure. I mean you second guess every decision, whether it works or not. So you can make the wrong decision and it work out good and it was still the wrong decision. You know, and you can make the right decision and it come out wrong and I still think it's the right decision. So it's just a matter of philosophically what you believe in. And I want to be aggressive and always try to get the ball back for our team and show confidence in the players that we're going to stop them.

Q. Brock and Jamon said you blew the speakers last week. First, have you gotten replacement ones in? And is that something that you do, not just for road games, but home games as well, work on that crowd noise aspect?

KIRBY SMART: We use crowd noise year around. We use it in spring. It's a great changeup. Coaches can't coach the players. They don't necessarily like it because people get a headache, but we've done it since the first day of practices camp. We did it for practices in the spring.

We do it all the time. It doesn't matter, though because the crowd noise doesn't always create the anxiety. So you can't simulate that. You simulate the communication it requires. And we play at home in one of the loudest stadiums in the country, so our defense has to communicate during it. So I like doing it both ways, and it makes players -- you find out what they know when nobody's out there yelling and screaming at them. So it's important that, yeah, we got the speakers fixed. I don't think they blew because of us, but may have just been old age.

Q. Kirby, Ron Roberts has been really creative in how they bring pressure, sort of disguising it and trying to make it hard for offenses. What does that challenge that this Auburn defense presents in that way to your offensive line and just knowing where the pressure is coming from and how to pick it up?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah. You don't necessarily know where it's coming from. That's what good defenses do. When you don't know, you got assignments. Right. So I got my guy, I got this guy, and if we don't got that guy, then the quarterback better know it and everybody else needs to know that, too. There's only so many you can bring, and there's lots of them you can drop. And we like to think we do a lot to our quarterback off season and things like that year around here with our defense. But it's much tougher to when you go against somebody that maybe you don't traditionally play against. He does a tremendous job of exactly what you're talking about, so it's important to know your rules and know where your strengths and know where your weaknesses are.

Q. Kirby, I wanted to ask for an update on Mykel Williams and Ty Ingram-Dawkins at that defensive end position. And how did Gabe Harris kind of perform whenever that increased opportunity this past Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I don't know that Gabe played a whole lot more. He did get an earlier opportunity, I felt like. And he's coming along really well. He's developing. He's getting better each week and getting more and more opportunities due to the injuries. But I'm hopeful that Gabe continues to grow. I mean he's a guy that we're repping him a lot during practice. We're giving him a lot of extra work trying to speed up what that process is because of the injuries we've had. Ty is coming into his fourth week, I think. And, again, we don't know how long it's going to take. Don't expect him back this week. Mykel we're hopeful to get back if he's over the sickness.

Q. Kirby, after watching the tape, how do you think Dylan Fairchild and Xavier Truss graded out in their

new roles?

KIRBY SMART: They did a good job. They've played very consistent throughout the year. Both of them have. Dylan obviously has played same spot most of the time. Truss has played multiple spots. Some things they can do better and clean up confidence wise, but I think they're getting better. They understand where their help is, what we're trying to do on certain plays. And the only way you get used to that is to keep playing, and they've done that.

Q. You mentioned wanting to be elite at getting better. As far as just the play on the field, would you say that that is elite, and if not, how close or far do you think that is?

KIRBY SMART: I don't really judge it that way. I don't think that answers your question, but I'm not -- I'm looking at the progress, and I'm looking at how much we improve each week through our practices, because the game is such a small vision of what we see, and we put so much value in the prep, the walk-through, the reps, the good-on-good, the opportunity periods where we get younger players snaps. I mean I put so much into that that I've been very pleased at the progression we've had in that. As far as the field goes, it's so small that every test is another chance. It's like these little small chapters, and we're going into Chapter -- what is it -- 5, I guess. So we're going into Chapter 5 and gotta see how we do.

Q. Just to follow up on Xavier Truss. Is he the first football player you've ever recruited from Rhode Island, and is there any stories you remember about watching that level of football, or that kind of football I should say?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, he is the first one I've recruited from Rhode Island. He takes a lot of pride in that area, and he always defends high school football up there, although I don't know why he tries to defend it, especially in this neck of the woods. But he vehemently declares that they have great high school football in the state and that he's a product of that, and he always reminds us of the other kids that have come out of that area that have made it and played at big schools. But nothing really sticks out about the recruitment. Beautiful family, mom, dad, sisters. And I enjoyed going up there to visit them.

Q. Kirby, curious what you've seen from this defense in run stopping, not just the up-the-middle stuff, but the ability of the defense as a whole to be swarming to the ball?

KIRBY SMART: Are we talking about our defense or their defense?

Q. Yours.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah. I think it's been really good in spurts, and it's been really poor in spurts. I think that's a common theme is the consistency and performance, and like it's not game by game. It's sometimes series by series. And we have had the fortune of playing a lot of players. So that's good. You gain depth doing that. We've played really dominant at times, sometimes against inferior opponents. And then we've had -- you know, I mean, look, our standard of defense here is so high that what we consider good play versus other people, it may be viewed different. I mean we play against a good thrower and good pass catchers, you're going to give up some plays, man. You gotta accept that. But it's how you respond to those that's more important. So our swarm to the ball, I think has been good. I like how our guys fly around. I love how they play. I love the passion they play with. And the controlling the line of scrimmage is something that we have to do. Like if we don't do that, that's the bare minimum.

Q. Yeah, through four games of the season, what have you made of the progress that the wide receiver room has made, especially as that position seems to be battling availability injuries, things like that?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah. I think the younger players have all made great progress. I think the inconsistency of the availability has been the bigger problem with the older players, whether it's Rosemy, whether it's Ladd, whether anybody's dinged up or the use of Dylan at running back. I mean you've had kind of the in and out, in and out. Like last week was the first week that it was pretty consistent. Now, consistent without Ladd, but it was consistent. And then you hope you have that consistency again this week. But we've had some young guys grow up and make some plays. C.J. Smith has stepped up and improved, and we gotta keep getting guys to do that.

Q. I feel like we ask you this a lot, but Andrew Paul got a few more snap shares this past game and got an opportunity to really run the ball. What have you kind of continued to see from his progression going through the season and now being four games in?

KIRBY SMART: Well, he's basically like a freshman, right? And so a lot of our freshmen running backs are they do it by committee. They get their opportunity. They get their turns. He's really improved tremendously at his pass pro, at picking people up. He's thick; he's heavy. And we've got some guys that we feel like are different than him in terms of weapons, so whether it's Cash, Dylan, Kendall Milton, Daijun. Those guys are all playing there, too. So we feel like Andrew has done a good job and continues to

improve.

Q. Kirby, you say you want to be elite at getting better each week. You've had a third of the season, four games. Where have you seen the most progress in getting better with this team?

KIRBY SMART: You know, it's hard to say one area. I just -- I thought we've improved as a whole across the board. We obviously had a really good test there against South Carolina, who's a really good football team in my opinion. And we responded to that. But as far as pinpointing the area that -- it's each day in practice, the perimeter blocking, the ability to execute more calls on defense and growing the library that we're comfortable with, quarterback getting experience in playing, you know, I think they've done a good job. We did improve in the red area, though it's one game. But it's like -- every game you can make a case what you improved and what you went backwards in. So it's hard to pinpoint one thing.

Q. Just a special teams assessment, and kickoff in particular, they had some pretty good returns this past Saturday, looked like -- I don't know if it was adjustment in the second half, but much better. Kickoff coverage?

KIRBY SMART: I've been very pleased with kickoff coverage. I think we've done a great job. The ball placement I wish they could improve. But what Zirkel does, he gets really good hang time. I think, if anything, you'd say they had opportunities to return the ball, where previously he's kicked them out. So to judge it previous to now there's really been nothing there. So for those guys that went out there and covered it and made some nice tackles, nice plays, we want to continue to get more hang time on that with our kicker and continue to get the best guys on it to go down there and make tackles.

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