

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

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Kirby Smart

Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: We're on to Tennessee. It's a really difficult prep week, probably the hardest one of the year in terms of trying to replicate what they do. They do a tremendous job, stressing you in all phases. They've always been good with Josh in terms of offensively, but I think what they've been able to do defensively this year, to me, is really impressive. They play really good defense, really good offense. The tempo is hard to match.

And then their special teams, you know, that's the phase nobody talks about. These guys are really elite on special teams. You can tell they put a lot of time and effort into it. So it's a huge challenge. When you go on the road in the SEC, I say it all the time. Doesn't matter who, where, when. Doesn't matter anything about anybody's record. Only thing that matters is you're playing on the road in the SEC in a really tough environment, and the prep for that is kind of the challenge that our team has to embrace. You have to embrace -- it's different when you go on the road in our league, especially when you go to play a team as talented at Tennessee is. With that, I'll open it up.

Q. Coach, they've been able to run the football exceptionally well under Josh Heupel. I'm curious, what's the key to being able to stop the run with light boxes, because they're going to do a good job of spreading you out as well.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah. You can't stop it with light boxes. They make it where you can't. You gotta be able to strike a man, get off a block. And football is so simple when it comes down to your ability to play block protection or block people. You know, like you either get blocked or you don't get blocked. And you gotta win a whole bunch of one-on-ones, if you don't have enough people in there, because they expose you quickly, and they're very physically tough. Their O line plays that way. Their backs are easily the best stable of backs we've seen this year in terms of the backs, the package of backs they have. And that includes the quarterback with the backs. So it's a really tough prep. They do a great job. The box count is what it is. They know what you got. They know what you don't got. So it boils down to who can strike a block and

get off a block.

Q. Kirby, you mentioned the offensive line the other night. Just, one, how have you seen that group get better throughout the year? And, two, like you mentioned the other night, how much of improvement is just depth, being able to rotate guys in and keep guys fresh?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah. Our O line has gotten better with the year. We've had games we've played better than others, but sometimes that has to do with the opponent you play. We're healthier. So with health comes depth and the ability to play more guys. I think we stayed fresher in terms of the guys we rolled in and played, and there was a unity among that group of we can achieve together, and it's not really about us getting the credit; it's more about the backs getting the credit. But a lot of offensive line play is usually dictated by who you're playing against and how you play and those kind of things.

Q. Kirby, what is the latest on Julian?

KIRBY SMART: Hopefully going to -- I don't know how long it's going to be. He's got a dinged-up injury. It's an upper body injury that hopefully we're able to get him back from, but don't know how long it's going to be. There's a chance. You never know. But he's dinged up. So I'm hoping we can get him back as soon as possible.

Q. They have a veteran defensive line. Is it just the experience you've seen them take that next step or are they just doing something different defensively to have that sack total where they are in the nation?

KIRBY SMART: No. They got good players. They play really hard. They strike at the point of attack. They're aggressive. They're hard to move because they're big. And then they have elite pass rushers. When you got an elite pass rusher that you got people that can push the pocket, it creates sacks and things. So they are very good defensively and a really big challenge, especially when you talk about the front. There's the rush, but then there's the controlling the line of scrimmage for your ability to run the ball. And they're good at both.

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Q. I know you touched on him a little bit on Saturday night, but having a chance to review the film, what did you make of C.J. Allen and how he handled the moment on Saturday?

KIRBY SMART: Exactly like I expected C.J. Allen to do. He's already played this year, he's played, I think, almost every game. He's smart, intelligent, instinctive, athletic, great kid. So he did what he's supposed to do, and he can play better, and he'll get even better this week.

Q. I think I saw Brock played 40 something snaps Saturday night. Just curious going forward, I assume there's room for improvement in terms of his health, or is that 100 percent right there? Do you feel like he can still get stronger in terms of recovering from the injury, and were you surprised just to see that he was able to go that much?

KIRBY SMART: No. He didn't play every snap of every game anyway. So I don't know, I mean, you'd have to look and see his snaps in the other games. I don't know. I'm sure he had more snaps in other games. But he's in good shape. He's conditioned. I don't know that he's 100 percent, but he's healthy and safe enough to play. And we're going to allow him to play as long as he wants to. And he wanted to go out there and compete and play, and I don't think it's a matter of how many snaps he can take. I think he'll be fine.

Q. Coach, obviously having Kendall and Daijun healthy at the same time is beneficial, but can you speak to the difficulties that it's provided the defense when they have such distinct running styles? They run so differently.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah. I don't know that I can answer that one. We play backs that have different running styles. I think both those guys are really good backs. One's bigger and one's a little bit smaller. They both have good vision. They both have great toughness. But I can't speak to how the defensive guys prepare to it.

Q. To follow up on your all's run game, obviously beat up for a good part of this year, but where do you feel like your run game is right now with Daijun and Kendall, but also we got to see Andrew Paul, Roderick Robinson. Just the state of your all's run right now.

KIRBY SMART: It's all relative. You got to see Andrew and Rod because the game was more in hand. They got an opportunity to go out and show what they've done and we've got some games in the last that hasn't happened. It's relative to how the defense plays us, you know. And

these guys are really tough to run the ball on. So we're going to have to find ways.

Q. Coach, I know we kind of talked on it on Saturday, but a ton of people were honored, from Jeff Wallace to Mark Richt. What was that moment like for you to see so many people be honored on the field from seniors to so many legendary coaches and beyond?

KIRBY SMART: I'll be honest with you. I didn't see much of it. The only one I noticed of everybody was Coach Richt at one time. But in the middle of the game, I'm thinking about what we could do to stop Ole Miss and what we can do to score points. I'm not enjoying the moment like you guys are.

Q. I think maybe we're going to getting a chance to talk to Mykel here in a little bit. What have you seen out of him this year and how he's developed and grown as a contributor for you guys, obviously knowing what he did last year for you guys as a freshman?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah. He's been a really good leader for us. He didn't get to do -- he didn't get to show the improvement he would like to in the spring because he didn't get to go through all the spring. So he came into camp coming off a summer injury, and he didn't get to practice as much in fall camp in spring. So I was really pleased when he came back how much he asserted himself into getting in shape, conditioning shape. I actually think he's just now starting to play his best football. The last two to three weeks he's been able to shoulder a little more burden of the snaps and moving quick, playing with speed. He's a really good leader. He understands our defense, and he really studies offenses really hard to know their tendencies. And he's been a great addition for us and played even better this year than last.

Q. What have you thought of the job that Dylan Fairchild has done this season, the amount of work he's gotten in and how he's played?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, he's gotten better. He's a guy that grew up, played a year on the scout team, worked as a two most of the year, and he got to play in a lot of games last year where the margin was great enough late to get in. It's like your ability to do that brings your team along faster. So all that time last year made him better this year, and he's played well this year with the injuries we've had. He got to jump in and play. And he and Micah have done a really good job of sharing that spot, and really pleased with the way Dylan is playing.

Q. Coach, obviously Nazir had the sack on Saturday

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and the interception the week before, not to mention being honored on senior day. What have you seen from his development and how much he means to this team?

KIRBY SMART: He's worked really hard. We've challenged him. Early in the season didn't know if he was playing as well as he was the year before when he was hungrier, it was his first time starting and doing those things. And he's answered the bell here lately. He's really focused on his condition level, and he's come in and run extra. He knows the weeks we've got, last week and then the next weeks ahead, the tempo is a factor. So I love the fact he's embraced in getting in the best shape of his life so he can play his best football towards the end of the year.

Q. Coach, I'm sure you've had a chance to review it, but what did you think about how C.J. Allen and Raylen Wilson played in their kind of first -- I know they played a lot, but they were leaned upon for the first time this week.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we talked about C.J. already, but thought Raylen played well. He had -- I don't know what the snaps were, but he had some plays that we wish he could get over, but he also had some really good keys. He's a physical kid. He's a great blitzer. He's going to be a really good football player the more he plays. So I think that game at least gives them some confidence, and it almost -- because Ole Miss doesn't go the same pace as Tennessee, it gives them a good, hey, this is a window into what this is like, but now this is going to be twice as fast, and they're really good at running it. Now, Ole Miss had really good backs. Tennessee has got really good backs. So there's some carryover there in terms of alignment assignment, but not necessarily the pace.

Q. Coach, many times you've talked about the importance of being in the present moment. What are some of the big challenges as a coaching staff getting a bunch of 18- to 23-year-old guys to not focus on past success and future expectations, but on what's important now?

KIRBY SMART: It's a challenge. I mean, it's a challenge we accept. It's part of the passion you have for the job is to reinvent yourself every week and not succumb to the stuff that's out there. And it's something we take a lot of pride in, and our players believe in what we tell them. That's the number one thing. You gotta have the trust of the players or your messaging doesn't work. The messaging is that we're trying to find the best version of ourselves, and every week we're trying to find the best version of ourselves. And that doesn't change based on who we play.

Q. You talked about how tough it is to play on the road in the SEC. What's the key to your guys' success on the road, and particularly the games you've had at Neyland?

KIRBY SMART: You gotta find ways to run the ball. You can't sit there and think you're going to be able to just throw it every down and win the game. You gotta win the line of scrimmage. The keys to winning on the road are the same as keys to winning at home. It's just more difficult. I mean, it doesn't change. The game doesn't change. You gotta be able to take a punch. You gotta be able to take momentum changes. But the people in the stands aren't playing in the game. So the outside elements of all the undisciplined penalties and all those things, we try really hard to avoid those when we go on the road, because they're self-inflicted wounds sometimes. But that's the challenge. The challenge is win the line of scrimmage, win the turnover battle, win the explosive battle. And you do that by blocking and tackling people.

Q. What's the latest on Dumas-Johnson, and secondly, what difference have you seen in Carson from week one to week ten? When you go back and watch the film, that we don't see what do you see different in him from when he started to where he is now?

KIRBY SMART: Not a lot of difference. I thought the kid started well, and he's playing good football now. He was playing good football then. He's just got more experience and more confidence, but I don't know that that's anything different than you would see. Because I think he's got good experience and good confidence. In terms of Pop, again, we're trying to get him back.

Q. I saw that Dolly Parton is going to be attending this game. One, are you aware of who Dolly Parton is? And, two, when you have so many extracurriculars around this game, especially with what happened last year, how do you go about, as a coach, sort of blocking that out and getting your team to just focus on being, as you said, the best version of yourself?

KIRBY SMART: I do know who Dolly Parton is. I got parents that watched the "Grand Ole Opry." Was not aware she was going to attend the game. I don't understand the second part of your question of what does this year's game have to do with last year's game.

Q. Just in terms of with all the extra attention that might be on this game, 3:30 CBS game, and how that game went last year. How do you go about just focusing on you guys?

KIRBY SMART: We focus on us every week. Has nothing to do with last year's game. And every time we play Tennessee, it'll probably be 3:30 CBS or 7:00 ESPN. I mean, it's a big game every year we play Tennessee, because it's a big game. They're a good program, and we're a good program, and the two are going to match up. So as far as our focus on it, our players respect the hell out of Tennessee. They know how hard it is to play them. We had to play them up there two years ago, and it's tough. It's a tough prep. So we'll be focused.

Q. Coach, I wanted to ask about Squirrel White. That's a guy that I feel like maybe has a few shades of a guy like Jalin Hyatt that you guys had to prepare for last year. What does he do really well and what is your defense doing to prepare to face a guy like that?

KIRBY SMART: It takes great prep to prep for all their wideouts, and the thing that makes it hard about their wideouts is their run game. So the run game is just incredible what they're able to do. And then off of that comes the pass game. So he's a great player. We recruited him. He's really fast. He's dynamic. He's gotten better with his age, and he's played a major role for them in terms of run after catch and vertical speed.

Q. What stands out to you about Joe Milton?

KIRBY SMART: Elite arm talent, really, really good athlete. You know, sometimes at DB you're looking for recovery, so I can close and get a ball out because maybe the ball is not there, but the ball gets there .5 seconds faster, and in the game of football .5 seconds is an eternity. It's two, three steps, and he's elite at doing that. They create run game with him. So they get an extra hat in the run game, which we'll see. And they're good at doing it.

Q. Obviously, Len'Neth Whitehead hasn't seen the field much this year, but he came back to Athens from Tennessee. Just what was it like bringing him back and how is he doing?

KIRBY SMART: He's doing great. He's been scout team player of the week a couple times in terms of the scout special teams units he plays on. He's very intelligent. He gives us a great look and a great picture in terms of effort and really proud of what he's been able to do.

Q. Kirby, I wanted to ask you about Daylen Everette, and especially with Julian banged up. Seems like last couple games he's had some opportunities to make plays on the balls, hasn't made those. And for those of us that don't know exactly what his responsibilities are, can you kind of assess how he's played and how he's handled those, maybe some plays he's given up?

KIRBY SMART: Daylen is very confident. He plays against really good wideouts every day in practice. We do one-on-ones. We do reps every day. I got a lot of confidence in Daylen to be able to make plays on the ball, and he's made plays on the ball. He made an incredible play against Auburn. And those are plays that sometimes you make them, sometimes you don't. They're 50/50 balls. We want to win more than we lose. There's a lot that he has won, and some that he's lost. But doesn't mean -- a lot of it has to do with how your other corner is playing, too, and we got another corner that's playing well, playing good. So I'm really proud of where Daylen is. He's a really good tackler, and he's physical. He's heavy handed. He's intelligent. He understands things. So he's a guy that's going to keep getting better with playing time.

Q. Kirby, is the Aussie style of punting, is that particularly challenging, not only for the returner, but for the fakes?

KIRBY SMART: Well, it's for everything. Yeah. It's the hang time, the fakes, the op time. The punter is really elite at what he does, because very few people can rub you both directions, and he's got an ability to kick left-footed, right-footed, go both ways. It just makes you have to defend more grass, and they do a really good job of that.

Q. To follow up on Jay's question about the other cornerbacks kind of about Nyland and A.J. Harris, how are they looking right now?

KIRBY SMART: Both those guys do a good job. Daniel Harris, A.J. Harris, Chris Peal has done a good job. Nyland has done a good job. Those guys all continue to get work. We get really good quality work with them each and every day against our guys and against the opponent work.

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