

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

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Kirby Smart

Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: Thanks, guys. We're onto Georgia Tech and excited for the prep and love rivalry week across the country. What makes college football really special to me is all the rivalries you get to watch on this week.

A very unique week timing-wise, a lot of distractions with Thanksgiving going on. Those are good distractions, but they are different. How you manage that and how you deal with that is important.

A lot of respect for Brent Key and his staff. I've known Brent a long time. He played at Tech when I played here. His staff does a great job. Obviously there's several guys on his staff that we have worked with before, a lot of overlap.

I think we're both very grateful for a state of high school football in Georgia that provides both of us with a lot of really good football players. He's done a tremendous job this year. Buster's done a tremendous job for them, and Kevin taking over the defense kind of midstream there, he's done a really good job.

With that, we'll turn it to Georgia Tech.

Q. It's been mentioned multiple times this year from different players about how Georgia Tech is specifically a rivalry that you mention at the top. What is it about Georgia Tech that you dislike so much, or why are they your premier rival, according to your players?

KIRBY SMART: Geographically, they're close. They're in our state. You're playing for something every time you play for them because you're playing for a state championship, so it's important. They do a good job.

It's the next opponent. I don't rank them any higher than anybody else because I look at all the games as rivalries. I let everybody else debate what's the highest. I don't get into those comparisons, but a lot of respect for Brent and the job they do.

Q. What do you see as the biggest difference in a team that's won as many games this year as their last two years combined? And a little bit on Haynes King, their quarterback, how he's established himself in that system.

KIRBY SMART: They're winning games because they're playing good football. Number one, they've done a good job upgrading talent. He understands what it takes to win at Tech, what kind of players to go and recruit. And I think, as he gets his recruiting classes in there, he's not going to do anything but get better.

When you have an offensive line coach as the head coach, you're going to have a physical, tough team. That's number one.

Haynes King is like that. He's fast. He's athletic. We've got several coaches that came from the Texas area that talked about his athleticism in high school, and you see it on tape. Buster's done an unbelievable job with him, and he utilizes his entire skill set.

These guys know how to run the football now. They are really good at running the football. They find best runs available, scheme runs, quarterback runs, unbalanced runs, good backs, really tough O-line.

It's a day's work when you go to play these guys with the way they play, in terms of toughness and all of those things. That's what's allowed them to win is they have an identity.

Q. Do you guys have a sense of the severity of Ladd's ankle injury and his availability going into this week?

KIRBY SMART: He's got a tweaked ankle that he tweaked in the game here at home. He was able to go some at the end of the week but didn't practice much. It bothered him a little bit Saturday, but nothing any more severe than that.

We've done MRIs since the game and doing even more testing, but feel good that he's going to be able to return. It's not -- I guess somebody said right before I came in here, Claude said there's questions about tightrope



surgery. That's not the case at all. I don't know where that's coming from.

Q. Coach, you talked about all the familiarity on their staff, obviously Buster and Kevin and a couple of players over there. I just wonder, what is the logistical issues with it -- are there logistical issues with that in terms of maybe how you make checks, what you use for checks or signs or different things like that? Or is it more intangible, them just knowing what it is you're trying to achieve in different situations?

KIRBY SMART: No issues.

Q. This game in Atlanta has been a noon game for all your years as head coach. What do you think of playing this at night? Obviously you and 'Bama have a game the week after as well. What's the preparation?

KIRBY SMART: Not a lot of change in preparation. It's different because of the timing of our kids coming back from Thanksgiving, getting here, going over there. The Saturday will be different, but that's really the extent of it. Cooler, night, but that's what we deal with all the time. We have a lot more night games this year than we've had in the past.

Q. I know you've got a lot of metrics to look at when you're gauging your team's health or energy level, and you mentioned last week -- I don't know if you used the word tired. You may have. How do you keep your team on edge and ready to play physical, but at the same time, take your foot off the gas and get them that extra breath they need during the week?

KIRBY SMART: I think there's mental and physical exhaustion. They're two different things. You've got to balance those two things and weigh them. You could have both. You could have one or the other. You're trying to have neither. As a coach, you're always trying to balance those two pendulums the best you can.

I don't think you ever know for sure. I think you sense things and you talk to your players. If they're honest with you and tell you how they feel, you listen to them.

Q. I noticed Warren Brinson didn't make the trip. Is it still the calf injury with him? And Rara, you said it wasn't an ankle on Saturday. Is it still sort of a foot injury that he had tweaked?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Rara has a foot sprain. We don't know the severity of it. It's really probably better listed as a bone bruise on his foot. I think he's going to be okay. We don't know yet. We'll see here during the week if he's ever

to go.

And Warren had the calf strain. Yeah, we wanted him to get rehab and stay here and get well, and hopefully he's able to go today.

Q. Back in June, the longtime Children's Healthcare representative Shelton Stevens passed. Do you have some good memories about him, and then can you also talk about the presentation of the Governor's Cup and being on both sides of it?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I've never been on the Georgia Tech side of it.

Q. Not you.

KIRBY SMART: Okay, I got you.

Shelton is a great, great man. I have a lot of respect for Shelton and what he's done. The immediate image I get when I think of CHOA is Shelton Stevens. He embodies and embraces everything they stand for and did such great work for them for a long time.

I've known Shelton for a long time. I didn't really know Shelton until I got to be a head coach. The one thing I'll say about him is he always did the duty that lies nearest. That's the kind of person he was.

Q. Georgia Tech has one of the top scoring offenses in the ACC. What do they do that makes them so effective?

KIRBY SMART: I talked about it earlier, they have a quarterback that can run the ball, which gets you an extra hat in it. He's really fast and really athletic, who happens to throw the ball really well too. He has speed on the perimeter. They've gone out and gotten some really good, fast receivers, some through the portal, some through the high school ranks, that are playing at a high level.

They know what they're doing in the run game. They know how to attack you, where to attack you, they understand it, and they have good backs. Same questions you have against our offense. When you've got people that know what they're doing and they have good players doing it, they become really hard to stop, and they are really good offensively.

Q. Going through 11 games, your team hasn't given up a punt return yard yet, not even listed. What goes into that, and have you ever had that in your career?

KIRBY SMART: No, never had that in my career. I've

never seen it. I've actually seen negative more than I've seen zero return yards because we've played a couple of teams that have held people to negative return yards, meaning the returner went backwards but he got a return.

Ours has just been the fact they haven't given up a return is really credit to the staff, the punt coaching staff, the punt players, and the punter, who has to match distance with hang, and you have to have elite coverage and gunners.

I don't think people give enough credit to Arian and Dom. They've been our gunners on every single route of every single game that the game was not at hand. They've been out there, and they've done an incredible job. It comes back to your punter and your gunners to how you do things.

It's pretty remarkable what they've been able to do. We've also had fewer punts than most teams have, which helps with that stat.

Q. Having been on staff with Alabama and being born in that state, how much did you know about Bear Bryant and Gene Stallings' teams that won as many games in a row as you guys have?

KIRBY SMART: I was too young on the Bear Bryant teams. My parents would tell me about him. My dad coached during his tenure there. Gene Stallings, I was actually in Georgia. So I was starting to follow college football in and around the south during that time, but not a lot. I was too young.

Q. You mentioned the challenges of Thanksgiving being this week. Does anything change in terms of practice or weight room or nutrition leading up to Thanksgiving or afterwards because you know they'll consume a lot of calories on Thursday?

KIRBY SMART: Just times. Our times are off a little bit. We move practice up a little bit Wednesday, up a little bit Thursday, do some extra things Friday to help activate, get going. Changing times, not changing the routine, which the change in time makes for a change in routine, but that's the biggest changes.

Q. What's allowed Carson to be as consistent as he has been, especially over the second half of the season, with what he's doing on a week-by-week basis?

KIRBY SMART: Protection, scheme, hard work on his part. That's probably it. Protection, scheme, hard work on his part, watching tape, and really good skill player play.

Q. Last year when Mike Bobo and Buster Faulkner were both on the staff here, what were their separate roles? And what have you seen out of the job Buster has done at Tech this year?

KIRBY SMART: Like I said earlier, he's done a phenomenal job. He would be the first to tell you that it's not he who gets all the credit. He has a great staff of offensive coaches with him. They do a great job. Their offensive line is dirty, nasty, physical, play hard -- Everything you want in your offensive line. You can tell they're a unit. Like I said, your head coach is an offensive guy, that's what you're going to get.

Buster's done really well offensively everywhere he's been. Statistically, the reason he came here is he wanted to get an opportunity at a bigger Power Five school, and he got that opportunity. He came here and did good things. He helped us tremendously. He helped the coaches. He brought ideas to our staff.

I think he and Mike both played a major support role for Todd last year, and Todd would be the first to say they were both idea guys. They brought ideas to the table. They were great to bounce ideas off of. It's always great to have an extra set of eyes.

The thing about Buster is he never cared really who got the credit or what the role was. He played a key part in helping Coach Monken with Stetson in terms of developing him.

Q. What else stood out to you about Dom Blalock when he was here. And what does it mean to have success since he left?

KIRBY SMART: Selflessness is probably the number one thing that stands out. Toughness. He's such a great competitor. Dom is one of those who never says anything. He doesn't complain. He doesn't moan. He goes to work every day.

He made some really, really big, critical plays for us over the years, in terms of the stretch run. Going back to his freshman year, touchdown catches, all the way to last year, making plays. He's just very dependable.

You've seen the same thing there. They've got him returning punts and doing things offensively. You can see his value as a football player.

Q. Another Buster question. When you have someone who is so involved with the offense like he's been for the past few years, does that cause you all -- I don't want to say change what you're doing, but does that give you other concerns that, hey, he might be doing --

we might be in that situation?

KIRBY SMART: There's this thing called tape, and they watch it, and they see what you do. There's no secrets out there. They're not going to go out there and trick them and say, oh, man, Buster knows when that double reverse pass throw back to Brock Bowers is coming. He doesn't know when that's coming.

I think you waste a lot of time and energy thinking about that. I think it's great for you guys to write about. Sorry I didn't give you more juice on it.

Q. How's Tate Ratledge, and how did you guys feel Micah played stepping in for more playing time?

KIRBY SMART: Micah's been playing. Micah's been playing a good bit. I thought he did a good job, continues to work hard, get better, condition himself.

Tate's good. Tate has a bone bruise. He banged knees like we thought. He was sore yesterday and is sore today, limping around, but no structural damage, which is good. Will be just a timetable of how long it takes to turn around.

Q. Kirby, obviously the players were different from last year's game with Tech, but they really came out. In my opinion, they won the first quarter for sure. It might have been tied. What do you think they did in that last year? Was it a surprise, or did they just hit, come to the strike first?

KIRBY SMART: No, they had a good plan. They did a good job. They have good players. I thought they had a good plan. We didn't play exceptionally well early for whatever reason, but they did a good job.

I think, when you've got good coaches and good players, that's what you have to defend. You've got to go out and play well. They certainly did a great job starting it off last year.

Q. Georgia Tech has been able to create a lot of turnovers this year. What stands out to you about the way they attack and the way they approach defense?

KIRBY SMART: I think Kevin, having worked with him before, we all know that games turn on explosive plays and turnovers. You've got to find ways to get those. They've been really disruptive doing that. I know how hard Kevin and them work on it, just like we do, and they've been able to capitalize on those things. That's big. That turnover margin is one of the biggest stats out there.

Q. Year two for Malaki. You've obviously coached a

lot -- you don't do comparisons. I won't go there. He's obviously evolved. Where is his ceiling? Where do you see him at right now?

KIRBY SMART: He's really athletic. He could probably go out and play corner for us if he had to. I think, when you look at players, you have to say what can he do and what can't he do? He can do a lot of things, and there's very little that he can't do.

He's gotten tougher and more physical with his tackling. He's much more knowledgeable and confident in his abilities. He understands the check system. He gives us the luxury of being able to do extra things that maybe people can't do. A lot of safeties can't really tackle well and play man. He gives us the ability to do both those things.

He's done nothing but get better and lead since getting here.

Q. Can you give us an update on Brock Bowers? We saw he's limping. You said on TV that you asked him, he said he's fine, but he looked like he was in pain. And do you have any updates on Dumas-Johnson and Julian Humphrey?

KIRBY SMART: Both those guys are fighting to get back. They're week to week and trying to get back as soon as they can.

Brock is okay. He's a little sore. What's happening is he's on his ankle more during the game and getting live tackled, and the catches he got, there's more soreness after the game than there is during the week. So the recovery takes a little longer with that process.

We go lighter on him early in the week because, if you don't, he'll overwork himself. That's been the plan each week.

Q. I know back in the day you guys on your staff, I've heard the basketball stories. Is there a way you guys get out your competitive juices as a staff now? Is there anything that you guys do?

KIRBY SMART: In the season, no. In the season every hour is accounted for, and the hours that aren't, we want to be with our families. So it's not like, hey, man, we're going to go play basketball at lunch time today. We just don't have time.

The off-season, there's a lot of things we do, and we get a lot more time. I enjoy being with my family during my off time, and most of the coaches do that too. Unless you're

doing something within the work hours, it's harder to do things just as a staff. We do them with our team a lot.

Q. There was the practical joke that you pulled when you had the coaches run against the players. Any lighthearted stuff like that that you guys still do with the players?

KIRBY SMART: Off-season, we do that all the time. We have chipping contests, putting contests. We'll have a field goal contest. But in a work week, we're trying to use every minute we can towards work. So there's a time for fun and things like that, especially when you get a break in the action, but when you're on a week-to-week routine, it's harder to do some of those things.

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