

# University of Georgia Football Media Conference

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## Kirby Smart

### Press Conference



KIRBY SMART: Certainly excited today, as I am every day, I think you could hit repeat on every time we've had this signing day press conference because we get our new kids coming in. I'm really excited about this class.

Obviously it started long before this time last year. We're really confident in our evaluations. We do a thorough job. I think somebody told me on here, I was looking at this before I came out here, I think 24 of maybe 28 or 29 guys worked out on our campus with our coaches. 25 of 28 guys were multi-sport athletes. 13 different states. No. 1 player in maybe four or five different states.

But more important than all that is the kind of kids they are. I'm excited to get them to come in and work. I really don't know, we've got eight or nine guys here working with us that are competing, and hopefully more to come midyear. I think it's something like 23 guys coming midyear, which seems to be the trend in all of college football, which is important because you cannot develop players if you don't have them here. You can't practice to develop the other players if you don't have enough depth here.

We have really gone with the model of going through the high school ranks, developing players. The way it's looking right now is somewhere around 40%, maybe 50%, maybe even 60% of our roster next year will be in the first two years of the program. You got to have spring practice. You got to have development to do that.

A lot of credit goes to our staff. Our coaches have done a tremendous job in what is an extremely difficult time. But most of our class was done. I think this might have been the earliest class we've had the numbers committed. Really proud of them. Look forward to kind of indoctrinating these guys into our culture, getting them better.

I guess that's it. We'll open it up for questions.

**Q. You mentioned that evaluation process. Particularly with the quarterback position, what are some of the physical, intangible rates you're looking,**

**for and where does Ryan Puglisi fall?**

KIRBY SMART: The physical traits are size, speed, intelligence. For the intangible traits, character, what the kid's makeup is. The velocity with which he throws the ball... We have had guys that can throw it hard, guys that can't throw it hard. They've had different levels of success.

The common denominator for us has been intelligence, ability to create and extend plays. So we look at all those things.

He came down here, Ryan came down here, I'll bet five or six times. He checked the box every time for the right kind of kid, the right kind of competitor.

He's embraced the part about learning. I think he sees himself as a guy that needs to come in and develop under a system. He's seen Carson's success, so I think he understands that. He wants to grow and get better.

Quarterback is the leader of the team and leader of your class. He's really intelligent, fun kid to be around. He's been out here at practices competing. He's got a really live arm. Another one of these baseball guys that can catch it and get it out really fast, which I think is important in today's day and age.

**Q. Would you say Carson's decision to come back for another year had an effect on the number of quarterbacks you ended up signing today? Do you anticipate signing any more through the next period?**

KIRBY SMART: I don't think Carson's decision had any impact on our quarterback recruiting situation. I think a lot of independent variables there.

We felt pretty good that Carson was coming back the entire time. He's communicated with us. He did his research. Certainly had options. He's communicated that he wanted to grow and continue to get better. So he made that choice.

What was the second part of that?



**Q. Whether you would still need to sign another quarterback.**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, that's something we have to think long and hard about. Our hard number is four. We want to be at four. We're not at four. Again, we'll look at our options and see what we can do there.

We would like to be at four, though. That's our goal.

**Q. You mentioned the various states you had the No. 1 player across the board. Was that by design that you wanted to go out of state or expand the reach or is that how it shook out this year?**

KIRBY SMART: No, you go where you go. I mean, you go find the players. A lot of times it's their interest level in us. We don't target states and say, We got to get one from this state or that state.

I love getting kids from the state of Georgia. If I could sign every kid from the state of Georgia, I would love to do that. That would be great. That's not realistic. It's just not.

Some years our state provides us speed, athleticism. Some years it provides us size. Some years, I don't know what the right word is, it doesn't have a sample size of that position. You got to go search outside that. We usually know that long before now.

So for the '25 class, we can tell you the strengths of the state. I call GMs all the time. Hey, this is a great linebacker class, but it's not a great corner class in the draft.

Same thing for us in our state. We know what we got to go out and look for outside that. We don't look at where you're from. We look at who you are, how you compete, how do you behave when you're here, what do people say about you, what your makeup is.

I could really care less whether they're No. 1 in their state or No. 2 in their state. I care more about how they behave when they get here and do they buy into our culture.

I don't think their rankings matter. I really don't think they matter.

**Q. What are you getting in the wide receivers you've brought in?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think I'm excited about all our guys. Certainly you build your wideout room through high school. We feel like we should build every room through high school. Over the last I guess two to three years,

we've gone into the portal and been able to get some experienced wideouts. I think that's critical.

I do think you can play early in college football at wideout. I think people have proven that. George proved it, A.D. proved it, Jermaine, Dillon Bell. You can go out and play as a freshman. It's nice to get some SEC experience. The two guys we lost last year.

We need more depth at receiver. It's a position that we're thin at. We've got to have enough people to surround Carson with to create weapons.

**Q. You talked about how you've been communicating with guys about their plans, who was going into the transfer portal, who wasn't. Was most all of that settled or is it fair to say all that is settled in terms of who is going to be on your roster and who may be leaving?**

KIRBY SMART: I don't know that I can say it's settled. You don't know that. I certainly don't know when guys make decisions they make. The window is what the window is. Those guys have those opportunities.

I think for us, we had conversations long before the SEC championship. We meet before the season. We meet during the season. We meet during the bye week. We meet again after the SEC championship.

Probably about 95, 90 percent of those guys, that conversation had already happened. I think everybody in the country will tell you you have surprises. You guys can probably figure out who those are. They make decisions that they think fits what they need. I respect that. That's the rules we have. That's what we abide by.

I mean, I feel good about the group we have. I'm really worried about the guys that are here and not the ones that aren't.

**Q. One of the things that jumps out is just the size of the offensive line class. What stands out most to you about those six guys and what they can bring to Athens, maybe the importance of getting them enrolling early on campus?**

KIRBY SMART: Collier Madaleno is going to need a raise because she's in charge of our nutrition. She has her work cut out for her based on some of these weights that are probably not even accurate, to be honest. Let's call it what it is: some of these guys are too heavy. They'll be the first to say it. They think heavy is good.

How many 350-plus offensive linemen have started at



Georgia that you know of? I can't think of one guy that's been 350 plus. I can't think of a guy that's been 345 plus.

Whatever they are, they're going to have to reel it in to be successful. Everybody can print all the 'big is better' they want. If they don't lose weight, they won't play. That's the key, is are they wired the correct way to lose the weight.

I was just talking to a couple guys out there at practice, Earnest Greene came in here at 355, and Earnest Greene was at 320 by the first snap of spring ball. He was committed to a process. These guys will have to be, too.

**Q. What is the short version of everything that you all and your staff did with KJ Bolden from when he committed till today?**

KIRBY SMART: I mean, we did what we do on every kid: we recruited. I mean, I met KJ Bolden and his mom his ninth grade year in the indoor and sat and talked to them for 45 minutes.

Had a great appreciation for her and him. He was a young kid then. He actually had worked out at our campus at wideout. We knew that he was a really talented young man. From that point on, I mean, he's been on this campus 20 or 30 times between coming over here for different events, seven-on-sevens.

There was no different recruitment for KJ. It was just consistent. A mutual respect is probably the right word. I reached out to him when he committed elsewhere. I told him we had a lot of respect for him, and we weren't going to stop recruiting him, that we thought this was the best place for him. Andrew Thomas' parents taught me that consistency is the key. We were very consistent every time he was here.

You know what, it worked out. Doesn't always work out. It worked out in this case. We're not going to change our method how we go about things.

**Q. Obviously looking at this secondary group, you mentioned KJ, a couple of the other guys, a lot of those guys played offense and defense. How important is that to that position group in particular? What are your overall thoughts of this group?**

KIRBY SMART: The secondary group?

**Q. Yeah.**

KIRBY SMART: It's fast. They can go out and run a four-by-one team and probably win a national event because they can fly. They all got good speed.

Demello is a track guy, can run. Ondre Evans can run. Ellis can run. And KJ runs track and can run. They are all four got great speed. They all four have really good length. I think the wingspan on Ellis and those guys is extremely long.

They're all tremendous character kids. They're fun to be around. Demello is a fun guy to be around. Those other guys are fun guys to be around.

They'll have growth to do. They'll have to grow up. But we're in need at that position. We're under what I call our quota. We're under our quota there. They're going to be thrust into some opportunities to go out there and play and compete.

They all have toughness. They all have speed. I saw KJ play one night. He had a defensive touchdown, a kickoff return touchdown, a running touchdown, and a receiving touchdown. I don't know that I've ever witnessed that and seen something like that in person. He's a dynamic player.

**Q. You mentioned a few surprises in the transfer portal, some of the players that transferred. Is there any concern with a large number like that or is that the nature of where we're at in college football?**

KIRBY SMART: No, I mean, you don't control that. You don't control that. What you do control is who you bring in here. You don't control what goes out.

Our messaging has been all along, Let's get the right guys in here. This group we just signed, I'm a lot more worried about the retention. When I look at last year's class, I think it's two or three out of last year's class, that would be more concerning for me.

Portal is a good thing. Let's don't make it a negative. If you've been in a program for three years and you're not playing, and you don't feel like you're going to play or you don't feel like you're being developed, it doesn't look great, you might need to look somewhere else. It's an okay thing, okay?

It's when you're first year and you're doing that it becomes a little bit more alarming. Why did you go there in the first place? You never really gave it a chance to grow.

I evaluate the portal based on that, not the total number. The total number to me, it's just not relevant because the day and age we're in. Kids feel like the grass is greener. Sometimes it is. Sometimes it's not.

We don't control those decisions.



**Q. What are your early impressions of these December enrollees, what you've gotten to see?**

KIRBY SMART: They're lost. They're overwhelmed. They're high character. They're very intelligent. They're hard working. They're out of shape. They're winded. They're enamored. But they won't be in the spring.

I can't wait to coach 'em.

**Q. You signed Justin Williams and Joseph Jonah-Ajonye from the same high school. How big of an impact can that have to be comfortable with somebody like that? What stands out to you about those two defensive players?**

KIRBY SMART: Size, speed, length. They both have tremendous length. Extremely high character. I mean, Justin, I've not been around many kids in a meeting like Justin Williams. This kid had everybody in the country recruiting him, throwing all things at him, doing all kinds of stuff. He never blinked. He was like, I'm coming to Georgia. I want to be a linebacker at Georgia. This is my plan. Very intentional about everything. His GPA is above a 4.0. Just incredible.

Joseph is his teammate who has an incredible story. He's really filling in a need. We've gone two years without signing a solid, like, D ends. He and Justin Greene are two solid what we call ends, big ends. Mike Hill and Ty's position.

We need some help there. Both those two guys are going to help us fill a role.

**Q. A non-signing day question. Obviously this is different than the last two years. Is it strange to be preparing for a game that's not a Playoff game? What has that experience been like?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I wouldn't say strange. We're in the same routine. You could say it might not have the same...

We've tried to make it the same sense of urgency. There's times you have to step back and look and take a deep breath and say, We're getting these guys better, we're working really hard, we're buying in.

The leadership on this team has been absolutely incredible because what I hear from other coaches about these type games, it's been a nightmare for them. It has not been a nightmare for us.

We have dudes out there practicing. This is their last

go-around. I told them, the last 15 or 20 you guys are practicing, you're going to be trying to make a roster. You only have 10 or 15 practices to make a roster spot in the NFL. Use these practices to help you make a roster and get better.

The guy you're competing against, he might not be in the practice for a bowl game. They want to finish on the top. A lot of them that want to walk off that field for the last time on the winning side. There's a lot of competitive character.

It is different, but it's not for like the coaching staff. We're going to go up there, meet, do the same thing we were doing if we were playing in the Playoff. It's a routine for us.

**Q. Three running back class. What were you trying to accomplish with this running back class? What have you seen from the three guys you brought in?**

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, they complement each other. They're very different. You got the James Cook, Zamir White, Sony-Nick complementary package there.

Dwight is completely different altogether. He is very unique skill set, very elite skill set. How we use him will be very important because he's not just a normal back. He can do a lot of things. He can create a lot of matchup nightmares. We don't think he's even seen his full potential.

The other two kids complement each other very well. Give us big backs. All three of those guys run sub 11 hundred meters, which is rolling, and they're big. We feel really good about those guys.

**Q. I know you're big on each year to its own. You have some program streaks here with the six bowl wins, top 10 finishes. Is there an awareness to the players in terms of maintaining that standard? As far as the portal goes, you've said before that you'd have to be more aggressive maybe than in past years. Is it safe to say there's still work to be done in the last couple weeks in terms of additions?**

KIRBY SMART: Two very different questions.

Are we bringing up the bowl streak? Probably not. We have talked about the seniors having an opportunity to be the winningest group of seniors ever the way we've calculated the math. I don't know if we're accurate or not. We're one away from beating last year's group. It's really critical to me that we do that. That's a motivating factor. I don't think the streak is as much of a factor. Sometimes you don't control that. They weren't part of some of those games.

As far as being active in the portal? It's like grocery shopping. You can't go get groceries unless you know what you have at home. That is the hardest part, the timing of everything. You say, Well, you know what you got on your team. You don't technically because it's not over.

So we have to be careful that we don't get more bottled water than we need. We got to get more bread to match up with our sandwich meat.

We can't go about it that way. You can't go out there and get all this, then you need this. That's the hardest part, is not knowing.

The really hard part is a lot of the kids, you're getting pressured in the portal to make a decision. They're getting pressured into saying you got to take this, you got to take that. The window is just so wide that it's hard to know what you're going to have.

**Q. KJ Bolden was complimentary of Fran Brown in terms of him helping him come to Georgia, Fran repaid it to you. What kind of impact did he have on this class? You hired Donte Williams. What did you see in him?**

KIRBY SMART: Fran was unbelievable, first of all. He came here with a purpose. He told every kid he recruited he wanted to be a head coach. He said, I want to be at Georgia until I'm a head coach. I want to be a head coach. If I get to be a head coach, then I'm leaving Georgia, but I'm going to leave Georgia in a better place than I found it.

He did everything he said he was going to do. We did everything we said we were going to do in terms of preparing him for that, giving him a pedigree of a national championship and a way to run the program.

It was a very smooth transition. He communicated very well to the guys he helped recruit. It wasn't like he lied to any of 'em. He told him all. Every one of them told us, Yep, he told us when he got a head job, he was going to go. He said you and Coach Muschamp were going to be in the secondary with us.

We went out and looked for what we needed. We said that we want somebody that can develop and teach corner play. Coach Muschamp and I work hard with the safeties. We wanted somebody that could form relationships like Fran. Fran was a really relationship-driven person. He spent a lot of time communicating with kids, not just KJ, but a lot of kids. He formed solid relationships. We wanted somebody that could do those same things.

I tell you, he's proven he can do that. He's a really good football coach.

**Q. On those players that Fran recruited, what stands out to you about the corners, specifically Ellis?**

KIRBY SMART: What stands out about Ellis?

**Q. Yes.**

KIRBY SMART: His length, his character, his family. His parents made sacrifices. They sent their son to IMG to grow and get better. I don't know if he's the person he is and the player he is if he doesn't go down there and go against the best in the country. He played with Dalen. He played with all those kids. He basically has been in college for two to three years.

He's a wonderful, wonderful kid who he has high expectations. We have high expectations. But he's going to work to get better and develop within our program. So we're very excited to have him.

Thanks.

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