

University of Georgia Football Media Conference

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Kirby Smart

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll start with Coach Smart's opening statement.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, welcome back, guys. We're getting ready to start spring ball. Feels like we just finished and we've been transitioning, doing a lot of work, football work, meetings, lifting, running. It's been really good for us.

January we go out recruiting so we don't get to see our young, newer players. I think we got about 30, between portal and mid-years. A big group of guys, almost one-third of your team that keeps turning over each year. That's really critical to me.

February we got to spend more time with them, but that's also a time that we as a coaching staff don't have recruiting on campus. We try to spend time with our families and spend time with our team.

This is when March hits and we get to actually for out there and practice football and be around our players and implement our systems.

I love spring practice because you get the day off in between. There's a big recovery day. There's a big install day. There's a lot of information to be shared.

I want to be able to provide you guys with as much information as possible. A lot of updates. As you know, we have post-season surgeries. We had guys that had pre-bowl game surgeries, post-bowl game surgeries, a lot of medical information.

They come into practice on Thursday or when? Thursday. You'll probably see a lot of that stuff Thursday. I'll try to do this as quickly as I can, then you're free to ask about whatever you need to ask about.

Bo Hughley had left shoulder surgery after the season to repair a labrum. We've had on average about four labrums a year. Bo will be out for spring. He should be ready for fall camp. He had a good fall, but we had to repair the surgery. That's been done.

Ty-Ingram Dawkins had a left foot navicular fracture. He had surgery following the season. Progressing well. He's going to miss spring practice, but should be ready for fall camp. He dealt with that a lot during the year. We were able to get him back, let him play. Felt best with the downtime to have the surgery done.

Kris Jones, the midyear young kid, he gave up the back half of his senior season to have surgery on his foot. He's progressing well. You'll see him out there practicing, doing things, but he'll be limited some with what he is doing.

Christen Miller, he had a meniscus prior to the Orange Bowl. He had surgery post Orange Bowl. Progressing back into activity. Should be fine. He's been limited a little bit as well.

Smael underwent his stress fracture to his navicular to get it fixed. He's going to miss spring ball but should be ready for fall camp. He decided to come back this year. That played a large part in him returning to be healthy.

Branson, that was a significant injury if you remember. Patella tendon rupture, nine-month recovery, he's at seven, eight. He looks good, running straight ahead. He's not going to be cleared for spring. He's going to do a lot of walk-throughs and things. At nine months he should be ready to go, which should be the end of spring.

Malaki, shoulder surgery. He'll be limited in the spring. He'll be able to do some things, but won't be full go.

Rara is coming off his foot injury. He's out there repping and do things. He won't be full speed.

Damon Wilson, who missed the Orange Bowl, has been really good. He got the meniscus repaired. He had surgery. He is doing really well. Full activity now. Doing some good things.

Demello is dealing with a little bit of a hamstring spring.

The one update and probably the toughest note for us is Pierce Spurlin is going to have to take a medical

disqualification. He can no longer play football. He had a congenital heart condition, which we were aware of, closely monitoring. Over time he had to make a decision, he and his family. They made the decision to give up football to be safe. It was really a tough decision for him. We're praying for him and his family.

He's going to be fine. He's out there helping. But too much risk for him so he won't be able to play. You hate it for the kid because he was going to be a really good football player. He got so much better during the season. It was something we were monitoring closely. It got to the point where he had to make a tough decision to give up football for the safety of his well-being.

His mom, dad, family, both of them are Georgia grads. He'll stay with the team on scholarship in a role and he'll help us day to day out there. We've had people have to do that before.

That's a lot of words to open it up for you guys.

Goals of spring for me would be to expand our roster of winning football players. What defines above the line and below the line is can you play winning football. We probably got 30 or 40 guys that have proven that. We have another 30, 40 that have to prove that to get the team we need to have to play the schedule we have.

With that I'll open it up to you guys.

Q. 30 players, can you tell me if all the midyears and transfers will be present for spring? My main question is, you got four new coaches coming in, I don't know how many support staff. How much onboarding does that require for you in terms of they haven't been through one of your practices either, all the things unique to your program?

KIRBY SMART: I think anytime you have four new position coaches, it's obviously a big transition.

What helps with that transition is Donte went through the entire bowl practices. He's done practice with us. He knows our players. He knows how we practice, the detail of it. Huge advantage of it.

James Coley has been on our staff before, understands the standard and the expectations, which is part of the main reasons we hired Coach Coley, was the fact I knew he knew the standard, he knew how things operate here. He's a really good recruiter, great teacher. That was an asset.

T-Rob has been with Coach Muschamp for many years,

came from over at Alabama where there are some things similar. I don't worry about those expectations.

Coach Crawford is a guy we had on the radar for a long time. He worked for Coach Key, who was also under a lot of the same things.

I don't worry about the standard of excellence, the transition. They got to go out and do it. We got to go out and practice, and that starts today. We've had a lot of training time up till now.

I think that answers your question, or...

Q. New guys, is everybody here?

KIRBY SMART: When you say 'everybody here', I don't know what you mean. The guys that came midyear, they're all here.

Q. Transfers, particularly.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, everybody that came. The Stanford young man is not here, he's not here yet, but the rest of those guys are all year. Guys came in the portal, that signed with us, came. Some of them got to practice in bowl practice. Some of them chose not to practice in bowl practice. They're here with us since January. We've been working out. They should be out there, unless they were aforementioned injured.

Q. You mentioned about a third of your roster turning over. At what point in the off-season, new leaders might emerge, if so if anyone has kind of vaulted into that level of discussion?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, the leadership thing is going to be a question everybody asks. But you earn that. You don't just inherit that. You don't inherit it from previous years.

From January, off-season conditioning, February, all the running we've done, practice, will show a lot of that. There's been guys popping up in skull sessions doing a good job.

We get to cultivate more leadership in these small groups. I'm very pleased with where we are. I'm very pleased with some of the returning not accepting complacency for themselves. As much as it is onboarding the 33 new guys, it's taking the top 33, one-third of your team, and making sure they're not on cruise control, just back to be back, just back to be around.

The guys like Naz, Tate, Truss, Carson Beck, these guys have been a core part of our program for a long time.

They've got to continue and grow and develop themselves, otherwise we're pretty stagnant.

The leadership will continue to reveal itself over the coming weeks.

Q. With changes in college football, we've heard about coaches having to be in more CEO roles. Has your time allocation changed? You've been known to say, If it ain't broke, find a way to make it better. Any changes with spring?

KIRBY SMART: I think we're always changing and evolving. If anything, it's how you cultivate your team each year because the team is changing so much each year.

For me, I don't know the exact number, y'all know the number better than I know, but once you count a walk-on, a midyear, freshman, y'all tell me what we're at, four, five. I don't know. When whatever those numbers are combined, that new part of your team integrating it into the culture and what you believe.

There's nothing that says those guys can't be good leaders. Everything that we've heard about Etienne before we got here has held true. He's a tremendous leader, high-character kid. He immediately surges into a leadership role because he's not a first-year player. He's been in our league, in our conference. He has standards and expectations. He's high character. He's proven that the time he's been here.

We try to reinvent our team each and every year with a new identity. I can't say what this team's identity is yet, but I can say they're well on their way to defining who they want to be and who they are. I'm pleased with who they are in that progress.

Q. With Carson specifically, at this point last year he never started a game, so much he still had to do. Have you noticed a change in him over the past couple months taking more of a leadership role?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Carson is not an extremely assertive young man. He doesn't try to assert himself mechanically. He doesn't just jump in there and do it. I think he's done that more in the last couple days since being back from spring break. I expect to see it even more today in terms of leadership in the huddle and the things he does.

He has high standards. He has high expectations. His decision to come back was built around doing something different, doing something special.

I think he's got to build a rapport with some of these new wideouts we've got. Several new wideouts in that room that are going to be important for him to grow with.

I'm very comfortable with where he is as a leader. The way he leads is the way he's comfortable leading, which is primarily through his actions.

Q. What was your initial reaction to Coach McGee taking the head coaching job at Georgia State? What made you confident that Crawford would be the right guy to replace him?

KIRBY SMART: Kind of been anticipating that with Coach McGee for a long time. He certainly is well - how do I say this - deserving a long time ago, okay? He has not gotten his opportunity till now. He'll seize that opportunity and do a great job.

Dell, Linda and their son Austin have been tremendous for Athens, Georgia. Nobody that I relied on more heavily the last nine years, eight years, than Dell McGee. I'm so excited for him to get this opportunity. Something he's always aspired to do. He'll be successful whatever he does.

As much as we benefited with Dell's growth, he helped our growth. He helped me become a much better head coach having had that experience at the high school level and the places he's done, and the relationships he has. That part will be missed.

I'm very confident in him. Very confident in Coach Crawford who we interviewed as a wide receiver candidate, felt so strongly about him as football coach. I don't think you have to be any certain position if you're a good football coach. That was evident across the state, the places he's coached in our state. I have a lot of respect for the places he's coached, how he's done, and we think he fits our program.

Q. Give me your thoughts on the proposed mid-summer signing day. What can you tell us about your three new wideouts that you got through the transfer portal?

KIRBY SMART: I can't tell you anything about 'em really. I'll be honest, I can't, because I haven't seen them go out and do anything. I've seen them run around in circles, touch a cone. I've seen them lift a bar. That doesn't define a football player for me.

I can tell you the research we've done to bring them into our program was: do they care more about the team than themselves, do they believe in culture. They all checked

those boxes. I'll find out a lot more as the spring goes and as they grow.

I'm excited about their addition to the wide receiver room.

As far as the mid-summer possible signing date. Look, there's positives and negatives to everything. We can sit here and debate. Y'all guys put them all over the Internet and things. There's high school coaches that say, They won't play their senior year. If a kid doesn't play his senior year because he signed, I don't really want him on his team. If he's going to opt out for his senior year, he'll do the same to me.

I don't really know if that's a viable option. A lot of high school coaches think, At least I'll get my kid signed. High school coaches and players are losing opportunities and nauseam by signing in December and not having spaces because of the portal.

I don't like the idea of someone signing before their senior year 'cause I think the senior year matters. In the state of Georgia, the Southeastern Conference footprint, the high school season of you senior year still matters. I want to watch kids plays.

Do you know any NFL teams that want guys to skip the fourth year and not evaluate them, third year that they will be draft eligible? I prefer to have them play and grow. I think it's good for the game.

I'm kind of indifferent. If that goes that way, we'll adjust to it and do the best we can with it.

Q. Speaking of rules proposal, I'm asking about the new proposal about the communication devices in the helmet. Is that something you have had a chance to test yet? If so, how is that going? What's the potential impact for that new rule?

KIRBY SMART: A lot of talk about nothing for me. We've used helmet communication before, whether it's talking to our players at practice, having earphones and walkthroughs and things. We have used it.

We are going to get to experiment with that. We have not yet. But we haven't practiced yet. As I understand it, each SEC team would have three helmet devices they could use in practice. It's a supply chain issue. Nothing like this school has 10, this school has two. A lot of liability involved in touching the helmets and putting pieces in. They're going to distribute those equally among the conference.

We'll have three. We would use them in practice. You

have till 15 seconds left on the play clock to talk to them. We have plenty of time to implement that. We'll use some of that in walk-through, but not the actual helmet because you can't have a helmet in a walk-through.

We're going to find ways to simulate it, try to get used it, get the players accustomed to it. We're going to visit with some NFL teams on how they use it, what all information you get to the player. You don't want to overload them with information.

Q. I'm curious, does it feel any different coming in as a team that came up just short of the ultimate goal of a national title as opposed to the past two years? Advantage or disadvantage as a coach coming in in this situation?

KIRBY SMART: No. I mean, every year starts fresh. I say that all the time. Y'all say it's coach speaking redundant. For me it's a fresh beginning with a new team. I'm trying since the last whistle to recreate this team. What does the 2024 team look like? That would be regardless as to how last year finished. Each season is independent of the previous.

Thank you, guys.

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