

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

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Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets

Coach Brent Key

Kyle Efford

Haynes King

Malik Rutherford

Press Conference



BRENT KEY: What's up, everybody? Question I probably get asked the most is why Georgia Tech. I wanted to come up here and just give a few reasons why Georgia Tech is the place it is to me, to these guys here. Some of the things we've accomplished, first back to back winning seasons and bowl appearances in over a decade at our school, 5-0 at home last year, largely in part because of our fan base and the reenergized students in our student section and the how they really are a part of our team on game day.

The last two media days we've come up here we've been picked to finish 12th and 10th in the conference and we've finished fourth, one of only two teams to finish fourth in the league in the last two years, us and Louisville. We had multiple wins last year over top 10 teams for the first time in program history. But on top of that, we had our third consecutive semester of over a 3.0 GPA with a 3.03. It was the highest in the history of the football program, and that's at Georgia Tech.

We're building a new football building that will be completed next March. We'll be able to move in the middle of March of next year, and that's to be followed by a massive stadium renovation of Bobby Dodd Stadium. We're the top program in the country in terms of our investment in how we use sports, science and technology and the cutting edge that we are with that, which you would expect nothing less from a place like Georgia Tech.

The Atlanta business community and how they've embraced our team and embraced our programs and all of our athletics programs in our entire school, and we know moving forward how important that's going to be in the landscape of college football with the real NIL

opportunities, sponsorships, job opportunities when these guys are done playing. Our 5th Quarter Program, which is our life after football program that we have. It really sets these guys up for when they are done playing football and prepares them for that life. To be in the state of Georgia with the outstanding high school coaches that are there in our life, our lifeline of recruiting and the relationships we have there and the support we have from them. And at the end of the day, Georgia Tech is a place where you can come to be a first-round pick and a CEO.

That's why Georgia Tech is important to me. That's why it's important to these guys. My belief in those things, and that's important. Talking about football and really to recap a little bit of last year, we took a big step forward last season. Really, the last two years we have. But we ended the season with two very disappointing losses that we felt like we had an opportunity to win. But we know at this point we've established an identity of this football team, and that's not going to change. We know who we are as a football team. Everyone in the country knows who we are as a football team, and we embrace that.

You sign up to play a game with Georgia Tech and people know what they're going to get. They know what they're in store for. That's something that we've worked extremely hard to build over the last two years, the identity that we have as a team.

Look, we're going to celebrate that. We're going to embrace that and make sure that we enjoy the fruits of the labor it's taken to put that together because it's not going to stop.

You come to Georgia Tech, you have no choice but to be a part of that identity as a football player.

So when people talk about our identity, yeah, we get excited about it, but that's done nothing to guarantee us anything during the season. To celebrate an identity just gives you a chance and an opportunity at the end of the year to be able to possibly celebrate more things. We've got a ways to go. We're working to continue to close that gap that we've been working for the last two seasons.



After the season is over, you move into the off-season and you start addressing the things that you have to address to make yourself a better program. That starts with roster retention, roster additions, how you might make some adjustments and tweaks within how you build your roster to be able to win games that you have to win at all points in the season, increasing your depth as a football team, staffing, staff retention, staff adjustments, staff additions, upgrades.

Then it really goes to the players and what they do in the off-season with our strength and conditioning staff, our athletic training staff, our nutrition and dieticians. What they've done with these guys and how they've worked them really from the beginning of January up until this point now, where now, AJ Artis, our strength coach, they can hand them over to the coaches. What they've done with these guys to build them into who they are has been great, but really the best part of the off-season is we're not just a bunch of teammates running around. These guys have built a bond and a brotherhood, friendships, relationships, that when they go out on that field, they are truly willing to lay it on the line for each other. That doesn't come by just saying it or talking about it. There's a lot of action and work that takes place to make that happen.

Looking forward to this year. We've got a great opportunity in front of us. We really do. It's not about other people's expectations that matter. Only expectations that matter are ours. Nothing externally should ever trump what our internal expectations are for ourselves.

When you look at returning players on our team, we have 18 players returning that have started football games for us, 27 seniors on our team, which in this day and age that says a lot. It says a lot about the guys that wanted to stay here and be a part of this. We return 87 percent of our passing yards, 84 percent of our rushing yards.

You look at some of the guys we brought with us today. Haynes King, our quarterback, his pass production numbers, when you look at the yards, touchdowns, completion percentage, lack of interceptions, he's one of the best in modern college football history in what he was able to do last year.

Offensive linemen, Red, Keylan Rutledge. He had All-American recognition last year. First time that a non-specialist at Georgia Tech has been named and All-American since 2014, and that was Shaq Mason. Malik, little Energizer Bunny. People don't know, he's been Georgia Tech's most productive wide receiver in terms of receptions, single season and career, since Calvin Johnson.

Kyle doesn't have his neck roll on today, but Kyle Efford, he's a big part of, if not the biggest part of the reason we had the biggest turnaround in run defense that we've ever had. I think it's 30 years that that type of turnaround has happened. We've still got a lot of work to do to continue to improve as a football team.

We brought transfers in this year. We retained our roster. These guys all had opportunities to go other places. That's the nature of the beast, but they chose to be here, and I'm indebted to these guys for that.

Transfers we brought in, we had a certain approach we wanted to look at when we brought in transfers. We wanted to sign guys as transfers to fill gaps and holes that had proven production at other colleges. We did not want to bring guys in that had been sitting on the bench. We wanted guys that had production at other places. To be able to fill holes. We brought in the Ivy League Offensive Player of the Year, Malachi Hosley, running back. Southern Conference Defensive Player of the Year, Brayden Manley. All-American wide receiver in Eric Rivers. Two conference -- his teammate Dean Patterson, another wide receiver All-Conference USA guy. Freshman All-American DB in Daiquan White. Starting SEC defensive tackle, who returned back to where he started because he wanted to be with us, wanted to finish where he started. A lot of those were reasons why the outlook is very positive.

But we can sit up here as head coaches and talk about the season, but none of us really have any idea how it's going to unfold. We can't control that. All we can control is the work we put in, how we prepare, how we build our team, and how we play for each other.

I'm extremely excited about this season coming up. I'm extremely excited about these guys we were able to bring with us today, as well as all the other guys on the football team. And with that, we'll leave it open for any questions.

Q. What were some of the factors that led to the Georgia game being played at Mercedes-Benz Stadium this year instead of at The Flats?

BRENT KEY: Those are way above my pay grade. I couldn't care less. We could go play in Piedmont Park. I couldn't give a crap where we play.

Q. How much do you think the on-field performance of your team has impacted the ability to attract Georgia's top talent and keeping them in state?

BRENT KEY: Yeah, that's something we set out in the very beginning is to recruit the best players for Georgia



Tech. All that starts in Atlanta, and then in the state of Georgia, and then it works out to Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, and through Louisiana, and maybe every now and then we'll find somebody from a little small town in East Texas, Longview.

Q. Haynes King, just what you've seen from him, be it injuries, going back out on to the field, being relentless, willing to play through something. What his leadership has shown you, not just in word but also in deed?

BRENT KEY: I don't have enough time to talk about what he's done for the football team, how he plays the game. I can tell you one story that probably just encompasses everything about Haynes King. Two seasons ago we were playing in a bowl game and it was towards the end of the game, and I don't know if many people know this, but we were playing against UCF in the bowl. Haynes had an opportunity in that football game to break four all-time single-season passing records at Georgia Tech. Like close. And at the end of the game we ran the ball 27 straight times, and he was saying, run it again, run it again. He was telling Buster, run it again, run it again, because he knew that was the way to break their will. When you've got a guy like that that puts the team above himself and is willing to lay it on the line for his teammates, everybody else is going to run through a wall for him.

Q. Quick question about opening games, and I know forever you're getting ready for teams that have a different look from the previous year, but nowadays it's even more pronounced with the changes. But specifics about Colorado, different quarterback and a lot of different faces, but the quarterback -- new quarterback had played at Liberty before. When you're getting ready for this game, are you going to watch some Liberty? Are you going to be watching what Colorado did to get prepared for the opener in Boulder?

BRENT KEY: I'm probably the worst person to ask that because I watch a lot of film. I've watched their last two years' seasons, every offense, defense, special teams, every game the last two years. I think I've watched them twice now. Their transfer players, probably about three quarters of the way through watching the film of where they've come from, regardless of who may or may not be a starter, if they have an opportunity to be, and you piece it together. But when you go into a first game, you're only as good as your base offense, defense and kicking game. It's about a game of adjustments by coaches, but you're as good as your base fundamentals.

Q. Last year at Florida State, you guys put the ACC on

notice by upsetting them and you've got Boulder coming up this away opener for you guys. Deion Sanders, we know what kind of spotlight he brings being in Boulder the last two years and the Deion effect. How are you going to prepare your guys mentally being under that type of microscope on a national level?

BRENT KEY: Yeah, we've played a lot of games on the national level in the last two years and on the national stage, and that's what we want to do. We want to play games that are on the national stage. We want to play games that the public has a chance to see our brand of football and who we are as a team, and that's what we're going to continue to look to do when we play those games.

We're excited to go play Colorado. It's an opportunity to settle the 1990 National Championship. Look, to be honest, Deion was one of my heroes growing up as a kid. I played baseball and football. It was Deion and Bo Jackson. Pretty cool thing.

Q. Buster Faulkner, the news came out he was extended this morning. What has he meant to this program and what does it mean that he's going to be around The Flats for the foreseeable future?

BRENT KEY: Yeah, first off, Buster is not only an extremely respected football coach, but he's a very dear friend. Him and his family, they're very close. I entrust him with the offense. I entrust him with putting a plan together. We converse a lot and talk a lot. He's one of the closest confidants I have on the entire staff with a lot of things. But at the end of the day, I trust Buster Faulkner.

Look, what transpired with that, that just is another sign that shows the commitment that starts with Dr. Cabrera, with his commitment to Georgia Tech athletics and his commitment to Georgia Tech football, and giving us the resources to compete with anybody out there, anybody in the country.

I can't thank him enough for allowing those things to continue to happen. But at the same time, it's no different than I talk to the players about all the time. There's one thing to walk in somebody's office and ask them for an increase in NIL or go out and earn it, and we're very transparent when it comes to these things. I want people to earn what they get, earn what they go out and receive, not just have it given to them. We talk about that.

To have a coach mimic that same thing, there's not anybody up here that's going to disagree. He's the best play caller in the country. Talk about getting the ball in the hands of different guys, and we've got a lot of really good

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

skill players on offense this year. Everybody talks about running the football, by the way. We're throwing the ball 70 to 75 times a game this year, at minimum (laughter).

But I'm excited for him, excited for the opportunity, but more excited for these players to be able to have continuity on the staff. Continuity on your team, retention of your team, your roster, continuity on your coaching staff. That shows stability of a program.

Q. Kyle, you went through some injuries and so forth last season. How are you feeling now, and how does the linebacker room like to you?

KYLE EFFORD: Man, I feel great now. My body feels great. I'm just ready to get on that football field. The linebacker room looks good. We've got some good depth in there. We've got some guys that are ready to play ball.

Q. Kyle, just what it's like to work with defensive coordinator Blake Gideon and what your takeaways are from the way he goes about his job, and maybe some of those little pieces that we don't see every week that you see in those intricate details?

KYLE EFFORD: Yes, sir. Coach Gideon has been great so far. He's going to have us playing real fast out there, real instinctual football. He's speeding that defense up for us and we're really excited to get out there and play instinctual football again.

Q. Kyle, I want to ask you a little bit about the linebacker room. You've got some guys, obviously yourself. I want to talk about the growth and development of Tah'j Butler.

KYLE EFFORD: Yeah, man. Tah'j, EJ, them boys are coming along, man. When it comes to them, it's just going to be about them slowing the game down in their head, staying healthy. When you have a true freshman coming back with, I don't know what, 50, 60 tackles, it says a lot. His game says really all what it needs to say about it.

Q. People described you as a throwback linebacker in the past. Who are your biggest inspirations in terms of playing linebacker that are throwbacks?

KYLE EFFORD: If I'm honest, I only watched Ray Lewis growing up. That was my go-to guy.

Q. Georgia native, your home is only about 35 miles away from Bobby Dodd Stadium. What's it like for you to represent that school, and what is, in essence, right around the corner from your hometown?

KYLE EFFORD: It means a lot to me. Staying local was one of the aspects that played into my decision. It kind of is nice being like a hometown hero, per se. But it's just an added, like, intensity towards it. I want to put on for my city.

Q. Kyle, Coach Key talked about how the defense took a big step forward in run defense this year. Where is this defense improving this year and do you think you can replicate that success?

KYLE EFFORD: 100. I think our front is going to start at the front, obviously. I mean, really all three levels, it's going to be something serious. I definitely think just getting out of such a defined defense and letting us play instinctual football, the game we were playing since we were kids, it's definitely going to work out for the better.

Q. You've been a consistent presence in the middle of this Georgia Tech defense. How have you approached being a leader over the past two seasons, and how are you looking to improve on that even further in 2025?

KYLE EFFORD: One of my major things going into this year was becoming a more vocal leader. I've always been somebody who preferred to lead by example and kind of get things done and just following by default. But I'm to that point now where I'm not going to sit back and watch anything anymore. If I see an issue, I'm going to address it. Definitely becoming a more vocal leader has been my focus.

Q. You had a shoulder injury and the decision afterwards was to use you as like a running-only quarterback/battering ram there. It was one of the more unique things I've ever seen in my time being around football. What went into that decision to say, I may not be able to help throw but I'll put my body on the line as a runner to help this team win?

HAYNES KING: Well, I missed the two games before that, wishing I could be out on the field but couldn't. Then Buster came and asked me, he was like, hey, would getting hit on that shoulder hurt it any worse. I was like, I don't know, we'll ask the doctor. The doctor says no, and he's like, we're going to put you in a couple running packages.

I was like, okay, whatever the team needs. I don't care if I have to hand it off or run it or just be on the field, my presence -- I have no idea, but I'll do whatever it takes.

Q. Haynes, with the turnaround in a lot of quarterbacks in the ACC, what advantage do you feel you possess over a lot of other quarterbacks in your



conference?

HAYNES KING: Like Key said, with the retention that we have with the guys coming back, the camaraderie, not just with my teammates but with the coaching staff as well, just being together with those guys for at least two to three years is really big. We know each other. We know what we're good at, what we're not, things that we need to work on, get better at, and just the amount of reps and experience that we have together, it takes us to the next level, and it just is going to improve us.

Q. You played Georgia three times already and you came very close to winning against them, the overtime loss. What are you looking into the next time you play against Georgia?

HAYNES KING: Well, hopefully to beat them. I know it's a big rivalry game. Like you said, last two times have been really close, last one being eight overtimes. They're a really well-coached football team, but at the end of the day, it's to hell with Georgia, and we're trying to beat them.

Q. You had I think it was 24 carries for over 100 yards and three touchdowns against Georgia, which I think everyone watching the game said, man, this dude is a dog. But I'm curious, as a quarterback, 24 carries, is that something that you think we'll see again this year?

HAYNES KING: Whatever it takes. It might be 24 carries, 24 passes or 24 handoffs. Whatever it takes to win and move the ball I'm willing to do.

Q. Can you talk about your decision to come back to Georgia Tech? You've been bought into this. This is an age we see tons of guys transferring around. We saw some here at this ACC Kickoff as well. What made your decision to come back so easy for you and what made you decide Georgia Tech was the place for you to be?

HAYNES KING: It was very simple and easy. I believe in what we're doing, what we're trying to do, and we have a really good opportunity, like we've said before, with all the people coming back, whether it's players, coaches, strength staff, nutrition. You name it. Everybody coming back, we have a great building, great people, people I trust and people that are wired the same and want to do things the right way. That just makes the decision so much easier, so much simpler when you put in stuff like that and decisions like that. It's not about chasing whatever, chasing greener grass or chasing that -- it's like I'm surrounding myself with the right kind of people, and I will be successful if I do that.

Q. You heard your head coach say that you'll do whatever it takes. You're willing to run that ball, and when you had so many records on the line, you shifted to the run instead. We live in a selfish world. Why are you a selfless quarterback?

HAYNES KING: That's just how I was raised. My dad, he was a longtime high school football coach. He's also an offensive lineman, and I think that's why me and Key get along so well. I've got an offensive-minded mentality.

If we're running the ball and that's the way to win the ballgame, I'm going to do that. I don't care about stats. I'm not a stat guy. If you continue to win, everything else is going to fall into place, whether it's accolades, whether it's stats, stuff like that. Sometimes you're going to have to throw it for 400 or sometimes you're going to have to hand it off for 400. Like I said, as long as we're finding ways to win and moving the ball and scoring, we're going to give a lot of teams hell this year.

Q. You withdrew your name from the transfer portal back in December. What feels right about returning to The Flats for your final year of eligibility?

MALIK RUTHERFORD: Playing for that guy right there, Coach Key, and playing with these two guys. And also my mom, she wanted me to graduate from Georgia Tech. That played a big part. I just wanted to be here. I've been committed to Georgia Tech since my sophomore year of high school, so I wanted to finish what I started. I was a part of the rebuild, so yeah.

Q. How have you developed your route running skills to take full advantage of your position and utilize your skill set to the best of your capability?

MALIK RUTHERFORD: Just taking advice from our receiver coach, Coach McKnight and watching a lot of film day and night, even if I'm just on YouTube watching NFL guys training and things like that. I'm always trying to piggyback off of things that I see.

Q. Why is this Georgia Tech team ready to compete at the next level?

MALIK RUTHERFORD: Because of the depth we have. We never had this much depth in all the years that I've been here. I feel like every guy on our team could play ball at the highest level that Coach Key wants us to play at.

Q. You said you had a commitment to your mother. Describe your family. What is it about family that drives you so much?



MALIK RUTHERFORD: Since I was a kid, my mom, she literally -- my mom and my dad and my two older brothers, they literally did anything that I asked of them. There's no way that I can repay them but just go hard for them and get them anything that they want. One of my biggest goals is to retire my mom and dad.

Q. I want to ask you about the wide receiver room. We know it's deep this year, but talk about putting the work in daily with these guys. You've got Dean Patterson, Eric Rivers, yourself, got some young guys, been hearing about Isiah Canion. Talk about the room a little bit.

MALIK RUTHERFORD: All great guys. We're all competitive. This fall camp there's about to be a lot of competition. We don't know who's going to be a starter. It's up to Coach McKnight. But we come in and work every single day. We go out there and we have fun. We're always dancing around, things like that. Yeah, we just go out there and compete.

Q. You had a great season last year, finishing just shy in terms of being the team leader for receiving yards and you were tied for the lead in touchdowns. Do you at all feel a little slighted that more people nationally are talking about who left the room than you returning and withdrawing your name from the transfer portal?

MALIK RUTHERFORD: I don't really care about any of that, to be honest. I'm just worried about winning and becoming a better teammate for my team.

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