

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Tuesday July 12, 2016

## Kirby Smart

Georgia coach

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Good morning. Today's first coach is Kirby Smart.

COACH SMART: Thanks, Greg. And I just wanted to say what a great job he does as a leader of our conference, and also an awesome job yesterday, I thought, with his opening statements.

But, first of all, good morning. And I appreciate you guys coming out, appreciate what you do for our support. You know, 1985 was the first SEC Media Days, which kind of amazes me. That's 31 years, and it has become this. 1500 people registered here.

And actually on the flight over, one of our players, Brandon Kublanow, asked me if -- I guess a lot of you guys know Claude Felton, our SID, and Claude has been around apparently for a long time, but Brandon Kublanow asked me if I thought Claude drove Herschel Walker over here in 1982. And I wasn't sure. And I asked Claude, and he said the event didn't start until 1985 but he was working with the University of Georgia since 1982.

So Claude has been with us for a long time, and I would be remiss if I didn't thank him for the wonderful job he does for me at the University of Georgia.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank you guys. The coverage you give us is tremendous. The coverage we get in the SEC is second to none, these student-athletes. It's really awesome. That's a lot of credit to the work that you guys do. We know you are away from your family for a lot of this time as well.

This is my first Media Days, but I am no stranger to the SEC. This starts my 18th season as part of the SEC. Had five as a player, one as administrative assistant, three as position coach, and eight as coordinator. In that time, I had the great benefit of being to every venue in the SEC. And the passion and energy that this conference exudes is incredible.

I really want to reemphasize Commissioner Sankey's mantra yesterday: It just means more. It really does in this conference. And you see that when you've been to places that I've been able to go. And I love that about this conference. It's been special to me.



In December I was given an opportunity of a lifetime, and I haven't slowed down since. My first objective was to assemble a great staff. Every guy that I hired has been in an SEC school in some capacity. Has some part of the SEC attached to him. I thought that was important. A lot of NFL experience on our staff. I thought that was important.

By the way, the most important thing in assembling our staff was the quality of men and how they developed leadership and character for our team. And I think each guy I was able to hire on our staff is really good at that, along with the attachment to the SEC.

A big part, the next objective for us, after assembling the staff, was setting the tone in the strength and conditioning program. We were able to hire Scott Sinclair from Marshall, and he hired a great staff. And those guys are really driving our players and getting great gains in the strength and conditioning program.

Our student-athletes in Georgia have responded well to the new expectations. We've driven them in the weight room. We have a mantra now of Attack Today, ATD. And they've done that every day, day in and day out. These kids have come to work, and they've worked hard in the weight room. They've responded well to Coach Sinclair's staff and our coaching staff being in there.

The transition and familiarity for me with our team is most different than most new coaching jobs. A lot of these players I knew through recruiting. I've actually been in a lot of their homes through recruiting. I had a good feel for recruiting. Also been in the conference knowing these guys. In saying that, earning their trust is a different factor.

I really think, in order to push kids and coach kids the way we want to coach them, we've got to have their trust. It takes quality time, it takes being truly invested in them as a person to earn that trust, and our staff has made that a top priority to spend that quality time with our players so we can have their trust and make great demands on them to be great student-athletes at the University of Georgia.

You know, we had a very productive spring that was

capped off by an SEC attendance record. 93,000 hungry Dawg fans came out. And with that I say it means more. It means more at the University of Georgia. To have 93,000 people there is incredible. We capped that spring practice off after 15 days of hard work and getting better to what you can simulate as a real game, and that was great for our kids.

Although spring ball went well in terms of players being responsive to the new coaches, it's the next six weeks that will determine the outcome of our season and success of our season. These next six weeks are the focal point for us moving forward. We've got to find a way to get our freshman class that just came in married up with the current roster we have and make sure those guys get the right seats on the bus.

A big part of what we do is finding out who is on the bus and what seats on the bus they're in. And we, as coaches, got to do a great job during the next six weeks assembling that. A lot of these kids will compete for playing time but will also provide a great amount of depth, which is important in the SEC.

63 percent of our team is going to be sophomores or less. So we've got a young team. And we also only have 12 scholarship seniors on this team. So, I know two of the young men that I brought today are juniors, and they are leaders on our team, and I'm going to speak about them here briefly.

We're also excited and honored to be part of the Chick-fil-A kickoff game. We get to play the divisional ACC champs in UNC. Coach Fedora does an outstanding job with his program. Always has. I've known Coach Fedora since he was at Florida years ago.

We'll open the season in Atlanta. Claude informed me we were the first neutral site to sell out during opening weekend. That's a credit to our fan base and how hungry the Dawg Nation is to play that game in our backyard of Atlanta.

We're excited also about our new \$30 million indoor facility that's gone up. We'll be finished in January and we'll be able to move in and use it in the offseason conditioning program.

The three student-athletes we brought today in attendance are really special to me. These three guys are not only great leaders but they are great people. You know Dom Sanders from Tucker High School. I knew Dom through recruiting. Dom's a junior, defensive back, history major. Great kid. And great competitor. Man, he really is. He's got six career receptions. I have no doubt he'll have a lot more than that by the time his career ends. He works hard day in, day out.

Brandon Kublanow, who is a real estate major, Kublanow is a bright young man. He's fun to be around. When we left, we were over on Eastern Time, we had to leave at 7:30, fly out 7:30, and they came over this morning and each one of them had already worked out. They went in at 6:00 a.m. to get their workout because they didn't want to miss that as they came over to Media Days. And Kublanow organized that. And meant a lot to me to see his leadership.

Jeb Blazeovich. Very high character, insurance major. Both he and Brandon are part of the Terry College of Business, which is one of the best business schools in the country that I was very fortunate to graduate from as well.

I'm excited to have those three guys. I hope you spend time and get to know those three guys as well.

We have eight returning starters on offense. Some of those you could argue are debatable at certain positions. Three of our five offensive line coming back. That's a big key to our success. Will be the front, will be the line of scrimmage, and we have to find eight to ten players that can play winning football on that offensive line for us to be successful.

Obviously we have some questions and injuries at running back, and we have a good tight end corps and receiving corps coming back.

Obviously the quarterback battle that we talked about today is very important. Each one of us in this room understands our coaching staff will put the young man out there who gives the best opportunity to win football games.

We are devoted to practicing the right way and getting each guy good reps. We went back and looked before I came in the spring. We ended up 30 percent, 29 percent, 29 percent of the reps taken. That's right at 90 percent of those three guys, and they were pretty balanced in the reps they took.

I think that's important. When you start cutting down those reps, you cut down their ability to get better. Each coach is trying to find a way to get these three guys better and more prepared for what is to come in the upcoming season.

We have six returning starters on defense. The biggest concern for me and our team is the defensive line. We have to do a great job there and stay injury free. We have to develop the guys on campus. If those guys get better, we'll have good depth there. With only 12 scholarship seniors, like I mentioned, I think any time you have that, the best teams I've been

around in the SEC, whether University of Georgia's running back coach or University of Alabama, the teams that win the SEC, they always have great senior groups. Not necessarily quantity, but quality. I think that's very important when you look at a team.

A big part of it is quarterback position. We all know that. But the seniors lead the team and they kind of determine how you go. 42 percent, I heard Gus mention yesterday, talking about the games that are close, 42 percent of the SEC games, inner-conference games, are decided by one score or less. That's parity. I think when you have that in the conference, your ability to manage close games, your ability to win close games determines a lot about the season you have. So 42 percent of the games last year were decided by one touchdown or less.

That's amazing to me. I even looked and had somebody do a stat last night that in the NFL, where the greatest parity actually is, 51 percent of games are decided by one score or less. And in the SEC it's 42. It's a conference that's very competitive, week in and week out is really tough, and I think depth is the key to surviving that gauntlet, and staying healthy is a big part of that. And we'll preach that to our players. So it's a big part for us.

I'm going to stop there, open this up for questions, and start that now.

KEVIN TRAINER: Thank you, Coach. If you have a question, please raise your hand again.

**Q. Coach, I think a lot of people just assume with your experience with Coach Saban you're going to kind of make Georgia sort of an Alabama East, if you will. What are the types of things you've done or types of things you want to do to put your own personal stamp on this program?**

COACH SMART: Well, the biggest thing for me is recognizing the difference, and I got great value from the nine years I spent at University of Alabama and 11 years I worked for Coach Saban, learning the difference between a team and a program. That's where I want to put my stamp on the University of Georgia, is the difference between a team and program. A team is a group of young men playing together. The program is the entirety of that, what goes into that, how do we support these student-athletes off the field, what things can we give them from a nutrition standpoint, strength and development, their wellness, psychological development, everything we can do for the team and for the entire program is the stamp that I'd like to put on it.

The trademark for us is going to be big, physical, fast

football team. We're not there yet, but we're certainly moving that direction. That's the stamp I would like to put on it.

**Q. Mark Richt had a lot of success at Georgia, 15 years. A lot of Georgia Nation really loved him. I know a lot of players did. For you, Coach, how much of a challenge has it been to get those guys to kind of, I guess, really buy into you and what you're doing? Because I'm sure a lot of them still have loyalty to Coach Richt.**

COACH SMART: First I would like to say Coach Richt is a good friend of mine. I respect Coach Richt and worked for him for a year and respect the man he is and respect what it stands for. I don't think it's a competition between Coach Richt and I to win over this team. I think you earn that by the way you behave and the way you perform. Every kid I've been around as a football player, they want their coaches to make them better as men and as players.

If they see value in you as a coach that you can create value in them as a player and a person, they respect that. And it's not a competition between he and I or me to win the team over. That's never what it has been about. I've got a lot of respect for Coach Richt. He's reached out to me and we've had communication. I think he's going to do a great job at University of Miami. Our team has moved forward. Our team is focused on this season and not looking in the rearview mirror.

**Q. Coach, you were appointed to the Georgia job in December of 2015, but you chose to stay at Alabama and finish up with these guys. Aside from when you look at the players like Reuben Foster, Tim Williams, Ryan Anderson, what made you really stay there with those guys, beyond winning, knowing that you had a job in pocket, but you decided try to finish what you had started?**

COACH SMART: Well, bottom line, it was the right thing to do. And I think that's important. I think you judge somebody on their integrity and their character, and I don't think that I could be judged fairly if I turned my back on some kids who stood out for me and chose to come to the University of Alabama, Reuben being one of those guys. There's a lot of guys that I helped recruit there, and that kind of is what your legacy is.

When they put you six feet under, they remember you for the things you did and the way you treated people. And that was the right thing to do. Now, was it easy? By no means. Would I wish it on anybody? I wouldn't. It was tough at times, but it was the right thing to do and I feel comfortable about that and it was very fortunate to win a national championship by doing it.

**Q. Coach, when you played the SEC, especially strong Florida, Tennessee, now that you're back in the East division, is the SEC better off if the East is as strong as the West? Tennessee and Georgia obviously are the two in the preseason polls at the top. Is the SEC better if the East is as strong as the West?**

COACH SMART: Absolutely. I think balance and parity is a key for any conference. I think if you ask the commissioner, he would like to have that balance. That's why they divided the conference the way they did.

It certainly hasn't been that way. It's our job on the East to do something about that. We've got to do a great job on our side to compete, recruit, get the right facilities, put the right programs in place to be successful.

I think that parity is good for it. It creates a better balance. I think when you get your every-year opponent from the other side, when there's more balance, it certainly is a little more fair. And I think that's important to have that. But it has not been that way, and the onus is on the Eastern teams to do that.

**Q. Coach, your momentum on the recruiting trail has been rather obvious. What does it mean to have guys like Richard LeCounte and William Poole who are sort of pitching the UGA program when yourself and Mel Tucker and other coaches cannot be?**

COACH SMART: First off, I cannot comment on those guys at all. I will say this about recruiting. It's a continuous process. I think so many people get caught up in rankings and where you are and the momentum you have. I think all of that is great. But at the end of the day, you got to go out on the grass and perform. You got to get guys that perform on the grass. It's important to them.

We try not to get too caught up in you guys' ranking of recruiting. I think it's a lot more important to me that we get quality young men, good student-athletes that can be successful at the University of Georgia. That's my number one goal, and have those guys go out and perform on the field.

**Q. Jim McElwain said yesterday he wouldn't be surprised if Nick Saban coached forever. But at this point in his career with all of his success, what still drives him?**

COACH SMART: Well, that's an easy question. He's driven to be the best. And I think that's what makes him different. Because everybody is driven for their different purpose and everybody has their "why." And for Coach Saban, I think he wants to be the best.

And after spending 11 years with him, the things I'm able to take are countless. I've learned so much for him as a coach, as a person, as a man, as a leader. But the -- he will coach for a long time. I do believe that. Because he likes it. He's passionate about it. He's very healthy. He takes care of his body. He hadn't slowed down a bit. I promise you that.

**Q. Kirby, last year as a first-year head coach. Jim McElwain had eight players arrested. Hadn't had any this year so far. You've had seven. Is that a challenge to a first-year coach to get your discipline policy across and it takes a little time for them to get the message?**

COACH SMART: First, I didn't realize that. Maybe I ought to call McElwain to see if he can give me some support there. I think certainly it's an issue. I think any time you have those issues, you got to put things in place in your program to help players. Every way possible we want to help and assist those guys.

We've had five guys that have been arrested. Two are no longer with us. I hate that for them, but our team has moved on. It's very important that we don't make the same mistakes twice. That's a big part of improvement. We'll do everything we can possibly and plenty of support from our athletic department to put things in place to help our players not to make those same mistakes again.

**Q. A two-parter, if you would. First the running back situation. Could you update us on Michel, Chubb, et cetera? And, secondly, in your experience, what is the importance of having quality and depth on the defensive line and competing for championships.**

COACH SMART: I'll answer the second one first. I think we all know the SEC is line of scrimmage league, and the teams that have dominated, you can point to a lot of factors. Okay? I've always thought it was the quarterback, you have a senior quarterback. You look at last ten years, SEC champions, it's not necessarily senior quarterbacks. There's a lot of athletic quarterbacks in those ten, but the biggest thing is defensive line and dominating the line of scrimmage, stopping people from running the ball.

And that's one of the things that, in my history, has been very important, to sign enough big bodies to dominate the line of scrimmage. And those are the hardest positions to come by now. When you go look, those big guys don't grow on trees. You got to go find them. There's not enough of them out there to supply the entire SEC. So finding the big defensive line that can dominate line of scrimmage is critical to your success in the Southeastern Conference.



And going back to your original question asking about Sony and Nick, that's a tough situation. Who would have thought at this point in time both guys would be on the sideline rehabbing. I certainly wouldn't have thought that.

Nick is progressing really well. Nick is working hard. I repeat that every time I talk. I don't think anybody in this room would expect anything from Nick Chubb. This guy is passionate. It means something to him. He's doing everything with the rest of the team as far as summer workouts. That may change when we go to pads. He's not going to go out there and do everything right away as far as tackling and scrimmaging. Ultimately he's got to gain confidence in that knee back, and he's taking the right steps in that direction.

And Sony, kind of a sad injury, very upsetting for him. He's probably in the best shape of his life. He worked hard to be in the best shape of his life. He's a very versatile back, and he's a great kid that had a really good spring practice. He took a lot of load in spring practice with us being down running backs.

I don't know the expectation for Sony, if he'll be back or not. We'll know a lot more when we get closer to the season. A lot of that injury is how does the muscle repair itself round that plated bone. That will be a big part of it.

**Q. You already mentioned the quarterback battle. But I am curious, because you did say you're obviously going to put the best player on the field, but some of those other factors that might come in: You have a senior quarterback with prior experience, you have a freshman quarterback that's kind of considered a fan favorite. How much do you weigh some of those other options while deciding the quarterback?**

COACH SMART: Zero. I mean, the options we're going to weigh are going to be what gives us the best chance to win. Notice I didn't say exactly what you said, where we're going to play the best player. We're going to play the best player that gives us the best opportunity to win football games. And I don't know who that is. If I knew, I promise you, I would tell you. I would give you the information. But I don't know that. And I think that a lot of those 28, 29 practices that we're -- we have will tell us that. I mean, practices we're able to have to show the improvement and leadership that each guy has.

And a lot of this decision -- I know a lot of coaches in the SEC are going through this. I've sat through a lot of meetings the last few years at University of Alabama making that same decision. I think a lot of that is how

he, that person, affects the rest of the offense. Does he make every player on the offense better? That's hard to measure. You know, that's a decision you got to make subjectively as a coach. Coach Chaney and I will sit down and we'll make that decision hopefully sooner than later.

**Q. So do you feel more confident about your offensive line and tackles such as the additions of Tyler Catalina and all of the other transfer offensive lineman that have been added?**

COACH SMART: I actually feel better now than I felt going in the spring. I think that's because I just know more. I don't think you're ever comfortable. If you ask any coach in the SEC if he's comfortable with his offensive line, nobody has enough tackles. There's just not enough of them. You want a 6'5", 6'6" guy, they're hard to find.

I feel much better now going into fall camp having watched what we had in spring and watched those guys improve under Coach Pittman's tutelage. And Tyler Catalina coming in as a transfer, we hope to give us some competition there for a starting job.

I think the toughest job is staying injury free and trying to find eight guys, nine guys to rotate in there.

**Q. You kind of touched on the quarterback situation. There doesn't seem to be a lot of experience at quarterback, just throughout the league. How much do you think that could impact ultimately the ceiling for the league and how well the offenses can go against these defenses?**

COACH SMART: Yeah. It's getting to be more and more of a trend it seems to me. It used to be there's a lot of good quarterbacks, and you hated that as a defensive coordinator for the last eight or nine years, you were facing some really talented guys. And it seems to be there's more question marks every time we have this event. Why is that? I don't know, there's more turnover, more transfers, more competition, more guys coming in to compete.

I don't think it inhibits the league at all. In years past we had these same question marks. People arose. Certainly at this time no one knew who Cam Newton was, and he was amazing. Nobody thought they knew what Nick Marshall would do. Nobody thought Blake Sims was going to do it. Nobody gave Jacob Coker a lot of credit either.

I think the ceiling is there for this conference. We've proven that. There are a lot of question marks at quarterback. That may make a lot of defensive coordinators breathe easier this year. But in years past, you learn quickly that guys can arise and they

have a lot of playmakers with them and they become really good players in the league.

**Q. Coach, you've been on the job for a few months now. How much are you still tapping from what you learned from Saban? How much are you stepping out on your own what you want to do?**

COACH SMART: I think you never leave what you learn. What you have success with, you feel comfortable with, you always rely on that a little bit. I certainly got to be who I am. Our personalities are the not the same, Coach Saban and I. And I have the utmost respect for what he's done and what he's done for me and my family.

Certainly there's a great deal learned over the last 11 years. Ways to handle certain situations, ways to handle players, ways to improve your team. That will always stay with me. There's certainly differences as well, and those are important to me.

**Q. I was wondering what you thought the impact of hiring Jim Chaney and Sam Pittman was. And this is the third SEC school they've been at together. How are those guys as a combo?**

COACH SMART: They are definitely a combo. These two guys are very witty, very funny and they are very good football coaches and they brought a lot of experience and value. Like I said in my opening statements, every guy on our staff has SEC experience of some kind.

Those two guys got quite a bit. You know, they've been successful in a two-back-run-oriented offense. They've been power ball and run the ball really well in a tough conference to run the ball. And it's hard to run the ball in the SEC because you've got really good defensive lineman. They've run the ball. They've thrown the ball in the SEC at a high efficiency at the University of Tennessee.

Both those things attracted me to them. They've got good proven credentials with what they've done. That was important not only in recruiting but to our current roster, and they've been a great pair.

KEVIN TRAINER: All right. Coach. Thank you.

COACH SMART: Thank you guys, appreciate it.