

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Tuesday July 11, 2017

Kirby Smart

Georgia coach

MODERATOR: Good morning. To start off our coaches on this Tuesday, we have Kirby Smart, who's entering his second season as head coach of Georgia also his second season in the head coaching role.

COACH SMART: Good morning. Appreciate you guys coming out to cover us. I'd like to open by telling Greg that I certainly appreciate the leadership that he provides, not only for our conference, but also for our sport. He does a great job of representing us and making great decisions for our conference.

I'd be remiss if I didn't also thank you guys for the coverage we get throughout the year. It's second to none in the SEC. As a former player and coached in this league a long time, the job you guys do is second to none and it makes our conference what it is. So that fires me up.

I'd also like to take this time to shoot some prayers up to a good friend of mine in DawgNation, prayers up to Tommy Parks and his wife, Carmen, who is a legendary high school coach in our great state of Georgia, and he suffered a major heart attack a couple days ago and at the age of 45. In our profession, that's pretty scary. So we're thinking about Tommy and his family at this time.

We're finishing up summer. This seemed to be shorter than ever. These summers get shorter and shorter and they turn around pretty quick. Very excited to get back to work in Athens with our staff. Everybody's back in this week, and we're excited to be there.

But before bragging on the three student-athletes we brought to represent us today, I'd like to brag on one that I actually brought last year which doesn't normally happen, but Jeb Blazeovich, who is on the AFCA Team Works, along with three other football player from the University of Georgia and 15 student-athletes went on a service learning trip to Costa Rica. They gave away over 2,000 pair of shoes to impoverished children in a Soles4Soul project. Any time you do that as a student-athlete, it speaks volumes about your ability to give back to others. There will be a lot of things talked about today, wins and losses and all these things that are great for football, but at the end of the day what Jeb and those three other football players from University of



Georgia did impacted so many more lives. I think that's what this sport is about, and it's also the things they've done.

I think Jeb is part of a senior class for us that's 17 deep, and 10 to 12 of those guys will be contributing. That leadership is going to drive us. We got a much larger senior class, but we've also got a senior class that's going to contribute more.

With me today are three very talented but also well-rounded student-athletes, first of which is a junior linebacker out of Montezuma, Georgia, and not many of you guys will know where Montezuma is, because you got to be driving to Montezuma to find it, but Roquan Smith is one of our exciting players. He's an econ major that has over a 3.0 GPA. That excites me about him. He's representing our program, and you'll get to nope him today.

Sony Michel, a senior who decided to come back for his senior year from Hollywood, Florida, as he likes to call it. He's a communications major. He has just as many talents off the field as he has on, and a lot of the media got to witness that with his recent work with his music.

Last but not least, the man of few words, which is why he was an easy pick to come today, Nick Chubb. Chubb is an ag econ major from Cedartown, Georgia. Nick and Sony are both within a few classes of graduation. Nick and Sony are a neat pair because they came in together. They formed a bond. They came from different backgrounds. You know, one from down in Miami and one from Cedartown, a rural area in Georgia. They came to RBU together, running back U together. And I think that speaks volumes to the fact that these two guys have grown to love each other by living together and competing against each other and sharing carries.

You know, today you'll get to meet those guys. They embody what the SEC is about. I was kidding him last night, and we were talking about -- I really didn't understand the difference in an econ major and ag econ major, and Nick basically told me he was going to start his own hot farm. I had no idea what a hot farm was until I Googled it and looked at it. Nick's into the ag econ part, and Roquan assured me his major is

much better than Nick's. We'll let them compete on that.

We just finished our spring semester at the University of Georgia that we had our highest GPA in the last ten years. Second highest we've ever had since we've been recording it. That excites me about the kind of football players we're bringing back. We had ten guys doing internships this semester, which I think is really important for life after football, their ability to get involved in things outside their sport.

I guess this begins what you call the coach speak portion of the talk. I think understanding expectations is a powerful synergy that exists between a player and a coach. There's no question in my mind the area is significantly heightened after you have been through a season together. You know, the expectations are conveyed and understood much easier after season one.

We've got competition at every position on our team, which is an ingredient that's hard to measure. But it must -- it's a must if we're going to get to the place that we got to get to improvement-wise, and that competition has been much heightened.

Our offseason strength and continuing and mindset training continue to develop our players at a pace I know it takes to compete at championship levels. Spring practice was extremely physical and competitive, and our players got to expand their knowledge of both offensive and defensive systems. We've been able to improve on all three phases, which is important to our growth and development. We had six mid-year enrollees who came in and 16 other newcomers who arrived the last day of May. They've been there more than a month, which I think is important for their academic development but also for their football development. We've been able to integrate those freshmen in with the rest of the team, and our upperclassmen have done a great job helping us with that.

This upcoming season. We start with App State, who is 28-5 over their last 33 games. They are one of the top four teams in wins over the last 33 games in the country. That says a lot about who they are. Their coach does a tremendous job.

We then travel to South Bend to play Notre Dame. I think it's important to mention we'll have a viewing party in our indoor facility of the 1980 national championship game. They'll get to sit and watch that game if they're not actually going to the Notre Dame game. That will be an exciting venue for those guys to come back together and watch that game.

Before we return back home to play Samford -- and I like to mention Samford because my father played football there, here in Birmingham. Also they're led by Chris Hatcher who gave me my first full-time job as a football coach. Then we'll get right into the riggers of SEC play, and all we know that's challenging task.

As far as expectations, I know everybody wants to talk about it and ask questions about it. For me it's important that you understand as the head coach of the University of Georgia, I'm proud to be there, but we embrace those as the coaching staff, we embrace those as our players, when you come to the University of Georgia, the expectation is to win championships. That's what we expect to do at the University of Georgia, and that's the standard we'll be held to.

Thank you, and I open it up for questions.

Q. Coach, you briefly brought up Roquan Smith. During your second year as defensive coordinator at Alabama, you had a linebacker by the name of Rolando McClain who made some big-time plays. This is your second year at Georgia. Do you see any similar characteristics in Roquan that you so in Rolando?

COACH SMART: Roquan is a standalone player. He's a guy you can draw comparisons to a lot of players. If I had to draw a comparison to anybody, it would probably be closer to C.J. Mosley athletically, the ability to cover and move in space.

Roquan needs no comparison. He's a great leader. He's done wonders for our defense because he's a student of the game, but more importantly he helps lead those guys. Roquan didn't get to go through spring practice, which was really hard on him. He wanted to be out there leading. He wanted to be part of that defense. Due to a shoulder injury, he wasn't able to do that. But he was in every meeting. He was at every practice. He got behind the offense, took his footwork steps. He's a unique kid that I think is really special. I had an academic counselor tell me before I came, he actually decided to do one major, and he came back after a couple weeks and said, You know what? I need to challenge myself more than that. He got in the Terry College of Business and decided to major in economics. He's got a 3.0 in that. I think it speaks volumes to his character, and we're really fired up to have him.

Q. Coach, with the veteran defense that you got and running backings that you have, does that mean you don't necessarily have to -- despite his progress, don't have to put a lot on a still young quarterback's shoulders this season? You know, is that a real nice security blanket for him to have a

couple thousand yard rushers and a defense that might get him a lot of short fields?

COACH SMART: Yeah, I think when you play quarterback in the SEC, there's no security blankets for that. I think you can ask any quarterback who's competed in play that you'll go up to some of the most formidable defenses in the country.

Certainly happy to have those rushers back, but we have to create space for those guys and run the ball better, be more productive so we can open up the passing game. He needs that help, and Jacob has been a guy that has openly admitted he's super happy to have Nick Chubb and Sony Michel coming back. We have other backs. And I hope Jacob can open up that part of the offense and be able to expand it and open some things for Nick and Sony. That's one of the big things for them coming back, was to be able to open that offense up and let those guys have more space.

We're excited to have him back, and I know Jacob is.

Q. Were you surprised that Nick and Sony both came back, and what was your reaction when they told you that?

COACH SMART: Total elation. I think Nick was the first guy to inform me, and I think maybe his decision weighed a little bit on the other guys that were deciding. I think he made it okay to do. He showed the confidence, not only in our coaching staff, in our total program, that he knows he's going to have an opportunity to get better and grow.

And he's going to have that opportunity. I don't think -- I think Nick will tell you that he wasn't 100 percent last year, and he certainly has improved that. So with his ability to move up in the draft and create value for himself, he wanted to come back.

I think that made it easier for Sony. Those two guys have a mutual respect. They are very different personality-wise, but they are both very talented.

I think when Nick came back, it made it easier for Sony to make that decision as well.

Q. I was just curious, kind of generally, do you feel like quarterbacks get too much credit, too much blame for wins and losses? What do you think about like the quarterback win-loss records, that kind of thing?

COACH SMART: I certainly think that's what they define coaches by and quarterbacks by. Let be honest. They're always going to define you. They put that record next to your name. No matter how long you end up coaching, it will follow you.

Quarterbacks have that same battle. I think touchdowns to interceptions are the same way. At times it can be misleading, but for some people that's the greatest indicator of success. I'm a big believer in completion percentage. I think Jacob understands, and we've communicated throughout the spring, if he wants to change the win-loss record, we have to change the completion percentage and we have to allow him to make some easier throws, and he's got to be more accurate doing so.

I think everybody's defined initially by that, just like championships define NFL quarterbacks. It is part of it, and it's what you know when you get in the game.

Q. You mentioned the viewing party for the Notre Dame game, and I guess two parts. One, have you coached there since your time at Florida State? And, two, is that the type of springboard game in September that you guys can use to go on to bigger and better things?

COACH SMART: Well, I have not coached there since that. I did coach as a graduate assistant at Florida State. I forget what year it was, but we went up and played in South Bend. We were certainly excited for that opportunity to go, but not one guy on that team has a lack of respect for Appalachian State, who we open with. Let's make sure we are clear: That is our primary concern. We know the kind of team. I know the head coach at App State who does a tremendous job. I think it would be remiss to talk about the second game without first concerning yourself with Appalachian State, who does a tremendous job of recruiting our state and has a great senior quarterback that I got a lot of respect for.

Q. Last year at Media Days you said you were kind of scared thinking about your defensive line. You didn't think they had the size or depth there. Do you still feel that way this year, and is there a position group you are thinking about?

COACH SMART: I don't think scared is a good term. I think any time you talk about units -- there's obviously confidence in the defensive line now. We have so many guys back. We have a lot of freshman that played last year on the defensive front. A lot of those guys have good size. I think stamina is important. I'm a big believer in having guys that can turn and chase the ball because there's so many loose plays.

If you can get guys that can run and they're 300 pounds, that's an added bonus. But the game is turning more and more towards the 280-, 290-pound guys that can really run. That's the thing we've tried to create and get more of. Because we got some big bodies on the defensive front, but we want as many guys as we can fly into the ball.

As far as what concerns me most in any of the units I think overall is each unit is getting better. Every unit we got can improve, and that's what we're going to drive to do from now until fall camp starts and then through fall camp up until that first game.

Q. With a highly talented local guy like Jake Fromm coming in, what are you expecting as far as the quarterback battle, and how much confidence do you have of Jacob Eason as he goes into his second season?

COACH SMART: I'm really excited about Jacob Eason's growth, to watch him over the spring, the confidence he played in the system with, his ability to throw the ball and understand where pressure's coming from. He's grown tremendously. I think Coach Chaney has done a great job with him in this offseason making him realize his weaknesses and continue to work on those.

Just like every position on our team, kicker, punter, right corner, left corner, it does not matter what position, every coach will tell you there's great competition. If you have a returning starter, he certainly has a head start. With Jake Fromm coming in, he did a good job this spring picking up the offense, he will continue to grow developing the offense. He's a really good leader, and we expect him to come in and compete hard.

Q. Coach, as somebody who has been at Alabama, the Tide has won 17 straight SEC games I think. Obviously they dominated the league recently. What's it going to take for the rest of the league to catch up?

COACH SMART: You know, that's a common question at this event. And I think the biggest thing is recruiting and development. A lot of people say it's one or the other, do you recruit great players or do you develop great players.

When you do both, that's when you got something special. And I think every team in this conference is trying to play catch-up in regards to that. I think each one's getting closer, and we'd like to see that gap closed through recruiting. But you can only do that through hard work and grinding, and that's what we continue to do in Athens.

Q. Coach, Vanderbilt got 16 starters back. They obviously had some big wins in the conference last year. What do you think of the job Derek Mason is doing there? Just what do you think about where their program is right now?

COACH SMART: I got a lot of respect for Derek. He's a defensive guy, came up kind of the way I did, through

working in the NFL, he's also been a defensive coordinator, very successful, and now gone to run his own program.

I think they do a tremendous job. Got a great academic situation up there. Those kids have bought in and believe in what Derek's doing. You see it. It's evidenced on the field. They play really hard on both sides of the ball. Have a lot of respect for their coaching staff. They have done a tremendous job and continue to do that.

Q. Coach, how do you think Sony Michel and Nick Chubb play off each other and make each other better, and could you go into more detail about their relationship over the last seasons?

COACH SMART: Yeah. They challenge each other more so -- not necessarily in game, but they challenge each other every day in practice. So in the weight room, when one is lifting beside the other. Nick is not a guy you want to be competing against when it comes to lifting weight because he's really strong. I have seen them race at workouts. When you got a guy that's the same caliber as you, I think it drives your energy level each day to beat that guy.

I know they came in not really knowing each other, but now having lived together, been around each other, both of them have been through pretty horrific injuries, and they've both come back from that, so they have a lot of similarities, even though they come from two different backgrounds and they have really different personalities.

I think throughout the day as you talk to them, you'll get to see that. Sony impacts our team vocally more. Nick impacts or team with an example more, and I think it's really cool that you got both of them doing that.

Q. I know coaches can get pretty emotional on the sideline. What do you think about the new rule about coaches can't go on the field? Is that going to be hard to comply with at times for you and the other guys?

COACH SMART: Well, certainly all us coaches have gotten our assignments, our coaches are going to hang on to us and make sure we don't go across that line. I'm obviously concerned about it at a critical time, but it is the rule, and we follow the rules. And I think as head coaches we got to set a good example, and I think that's what the rules are in place for.

It would be a good job, challenging job to manage that, especially at critical times in the game. You'd hate to see a game decided by something like that. But it's the rule. We've been briefed on it, and we all got to adhere to it.

Q. Yesterday, Commissioner Sankey talked a little bit about the possibility of a universal drug policy in the SEC. What are your thoughts on that type of policy?

COACH SMART: To be honest with you, I don't have thoughts on that policy. That's something that's decided above me. And I think it's something that each institution decides right now, and that's where we are right now. So I will adhere to that.

Q. Looking at coaches like Bob Stoops, for instance, who retired in his mid 50s, what do you do as a coach to continue to reenergize yourself and continue that longevity? And what have you seen from other coaches that you work with that have been able to do that sort of thing?

COACH SMART: I think that's a really cool question. I think as coaches, if you get bored or mundane, first of all, you're not going to recruit very well. So you better reenergize yourself every day you wake up, because it is a war out there in recruiting. Everybody is trying to reinvent the wheel with schemes when recruiting, different ways you recruit. To stay innovative, the best guys I've been around, the best thing you can do is go visit with other people.

We try every year through our quality control and go develop -- we go and visit with somebody else and say how do you do it, what's the best way to do this. That's exciting to me when I get to hear how somebody else does it. I think at 41 years old, you can grow and get better, and certainly the best coaches I've been around do the same.

Q. You have 21 starters returning. How important is that for the leadership of your team?

COACH SMART: 21 starters returning? Wow. That is a new one for me. I can't figure out -- I think we had three senior offensive linemen. So that math don't work there. But last year, we had a coach tell us that we had the best talent. And he had six players taken in the first four rounds after he said we had better talent than he did and we had one player drafted. Sometimes I don't know where those messages come from.

I'm excited about the players we got returning. We have a lot of competition and a lot of positions, and that fires me up. And I think competition is what makes your team better and being able to kind of integrate these freshman into things right now is making our total team better, and we'll continue to do that. But we don't have 21 starters that I know of because we are going to have a lot of competition in those positions.

Q. Kirby, you mentioned expectations at the outset. How do you expect your players to handle those

expectations as they go up fairly considerably this year?

COACH SMART: Well, I'll start with our players expect to win. And we don't want players who don't expect to win. When you come to the University of Georgia, that's the man that sits out in front of you. You're going to be one of the best players in the country, coming from one of the best states in the country, one of the best high school football states in the country. We expect them to come in with that attitude and demeanor. You create that, and it permeates your program by how you carry yourself and perform on the field. And we have not performed on the field from the level we should. That's something we have to continue to improve on.

Q. Kirby, this may sound like a dumb question, but I know it's not your first.

COACH SMART: That's good.

Q. Assistant coaches make a ton of money now. They don't have the responsibilities they have to deal with as far as boosters and media, things like this. What is it that makes assistant coaches want to become, like you did, a head coach? And what's the best thing about being a head coach?

COACH SMART: I think the desire to find out and be great. I don't think you can really say that you have done all you can do until you take advantage of that opportunity. I think it's a natural progression. Why does the assistant coach want to be the coordinator? Because it's the next step. Why does the GA want to be an assistant coach? Because it's the next step.

As a coordinator in college football, that should be your goal to be the head coach. Not everybody may have that goal, but it should be your goal. At the end of the day, everybody has to ask themselves why do I want to be a head coach. You ask me that question, and it's to affect student athletes.

I love the fact that I can go back now after coaching 18-19 years, and I get to see the guys I had an impact on at Valdosta State 18 years ago. I think that's really cool. I don't think you get that all of the time as an assistant coach. You might be on your unit or your side of the ball.

As a head coach, I get to deal with every player on the team. I get to know those guys personally. I hope I affect them in a positive way so they are better people when they leave the University of Georgia.

Q. I wonder what you think about the SEC East race. Do you think it's pretty open competition this year?

COACH SMART: You know, we talked about it, and I

talked about it last year, and it becomes a trite expression. When you talk about parity, I think parity is really good competition. I think last year, going into the last two weeks of the SEC's race, Kentucky is in the race.

And when you have that, you've got almost an NFC East or AFC East effect of these NFL conferences where one loss doesn't put you out. You know the team that won the East last couple years, you can have two, maybe three losses because there's an even race there across the board. I think that's good and healthy for the conference.

I think the way the playoff system is built now, ultimately you have to win your conference. Getting through your conference and the rigors of your conference becomes the most important goal of each SEC team. Because without that, you don't have much of a chance.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, Coach, for your time.

COACH SMART: Thank you, guys.