



**2019 Allstate Sugar Bowl
Georgia
Team Arrival Press Conference
December 27, 2019**



COACH SMART: I'd like to thank the Sugar Bowl committee for coming out and greeting us. It's gotten to be a time-honored tradition that I've been a part of a lot of times. Always like the festive music and the guys coming out to welcome us.

It's great to be here. Our players love coming to this bowl because of the extracurricular activities they're able to give us in the city of New Orleans. I know our players really enjoy it. The bowl activities are really. Good and a lot of guys were looking forward to being able to come back and do some of the things they didn't get to do last year.

Before starting, I'd like to offer condolences to Ed Aschoff's family. The time you spend in this business, you get to know people, you get to be around them. And it was a major punch in my gut when I heard the news on Ed. It was just tragic and tough time to hear it. But I love what he did for our profession, and he truly was one of the best at what he did.

Our teams had 11 practices back home. They've had really good practices. I've enjoyed seeing these guys compete. We've had a lot of guys battling for opportunities to play, and they've done a tremendous job.

We had to change some things up from last year. We've been able to do that. Our format of practices has been different. We've really preached fast and physical. We've had, I guess, 11 sessions that have all been right at an hour and a half. We usually practice for two hours. Because of some depth and different issues, we've really had to practice smart and get after it. And we had to do a lot of good on good. So our players have really enjoyed that. And with the competition for all the open spots, it's been really good to have those.

A lot of them have been backup spots and 2s and 3s and even special teams, so it's been like starting over. And that's been fun for our guys. I really enjoyed coaching them doing that.

We arrived here today, and we've been focusing on three things. We talked to our players about three things. And you're going to hear this common theme probably among our players because for 11 practices, they've been hearing about this trip, this team, and this game, and that's really it.

It's a one-game season for us. It's like a new season, and it's a one-game season. But they're focused on the trip, the team and the game. And those are the three things that we're focused on most importantly.

Got a lot of respect for Baylor. The job that Coach [Matt] Rhule has been able to do in such a short amount of time is remarkable. And the more you delve into watching them, you see his personality traits, his coaching staff's personality traits on his team. They are extremely competitive. They are extremely tough.

You think about every game they've played in. They've been in a lot of tight ball games. But I have a lot of respect for the way they've played. They have an unbelievable defensive unit. Their quarterback is healthy and back. Obviously have played Oklahoma tooth and nail in two fourth-quarter games. We have got a lot of respect for them, and we'll have our work cut out for us as we head out and prepare for them.



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I know you guys are concerned and focused on who may or may not be here or who is or is not playing, but that is not the concern of this team. This team is focused on who is here; and that's going to be a very common theme as well, for our guys to be focused on who's playing. What we're worried about is how we can get better, how we can get this team better; and that's to go out and play a complete football game. Our guys are focused single-handedly on that.

I will update you on a couple of injuries and other updates. James Cook is cleared to play. We don't discuss details, situations, like this publicly usually. But we thoroughly reviewed this situation. In compliance with our drug policy, we tested him immediately after he had an arrest. The test was negative. And James is cleared to play. It's that simple. Not proud of his behavior, but he suffered some discipline for what he did, and that's done. James is cleared to play, and that should be updated.

Injury update: Kearis Jackson still recovering from his high ankle sprain from the SEC championship game. He has not been able to completely practice. He's running a straight line, he's doing some good things, but he hasn't been full go. We hope to get him full speed this week.

D'Andre Swift has been recovering from a shoulder injury, due to the end of the season. He's been able to do more and more each practice, the last two doing the most. He's been doing the most out of the last for a couple of recent practices. We're hopeful he's able to go at 100% for the game. He wants to play in the game. If he's able to go 100%, he'll be able to play.

Q. The fact you just said D'Andre Swift wants to play, in a game where you're starting three offensive linemen, what does that say about difference in attitude about this game this year? And maybe if you could talk about you wanted to find guys that wanted to play.

COACH SMART: The practices have been different. We've had to make the practices different, and the kids have been really competitive. We've made sure we held everybody to a standard, and that standard is I'm going to come, compete and go play. If you weren't going to play to that standard, then you aren't going to be here. So it's really important for our guys to understand that.

D'Andre says, "I have a role as a captain. I want to be there to support the team, I want to be there to play, I want to be there to help." Again, he's practiced more in the last two practices than he did the entire time leading up. He was healing the shoulder, trying to get better, and we're hopeful he's 100% and he's going to be able to play. I know he wants to play. That's important to him.

Q. I won't ask you to go over the entire travel roster. Are there any other underclassmen or seniors or graduates who are of their own volition skipping the game?

COACH SMART: Rather than go over that, we're going to focus on the players who are here and you guys are going to get to see that first-hand tomorrow. We're excited about the ones that are here.



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Those two young men over there, Monty Rice and Charlie Woerner, they want to share time with you, too. They want to talk about this team, this trip, this game means. And it means a lot to the people that are on that plane right there that just got off.

Q. Is Brian Herrien here, Coach?

COACH SMART: We're going to focus on the players playing in the game.

Q. What about Tyler Clark?

COACH SMART: We're going to focus on the players playing in the game.

Q. What are you looking forward to experiencing most in New Orleans?

COACH SMART: The food for me. I love the food. Beignet, that's probably my favorite. It's probably not real good considering my wife doesn't like me to eat all those. I enjoy those the most in the times I've come. Getting to have those in the morning and enjoy them.

We get to go to a couple different restaurants and get to eat. It is just exciting to be back here and get to enjoy that. You don't really appreciate the place until you've been here several times and you know exactly what everything is.

Q. Have you gotten any answers about how that line-up is going to look for the game? Is that still being considering?

COACH SMART: We've got nine or ten guys rotating there, and those guys are all rotating. Cade [Mays] and Jamaree [Salyer] are both working. They have been both working as a tackle the whole time since Andrew [Thomas] and Isaiah [Wilson] made their decisions and we've been rolling guys. Xavier Truss is working at tackle. Warren [Ericson] has been working at tackle. So we've had kind of a plethora of guys rotating and rolling through there.

Good news is they have got a new coach that has got new energy, and he's been able to work with those guys. I'm really excited to see those guys play. The unique thing is both those guys have played tackle in games. They've not played tackle together. They've played tackle in games and played against good competition. That's what's great about this game for us. We've got guys who are going to get an opportunity to do things they haven't done before. Very similar to last year. When you think about last year's game, we had guys step up and play big in big moments that had not maybe even played a major role. Most of the guys you're going to get to see play in this game have played major roles. They played in games, they've started in games. But the guys that have been on our campus practicing have done a tremendous job.

Q. I know you said your team's invested in this game and the practices. Would you like to have more flexibility in the bowl system to allow teams to have more variety in bowl games?



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COACH SMART: That's not things that we can control, you know what I mean? That's beyond our control. We are blessed and happy, we are thrilled to be here because this historically is one of the best games in college football.

You think about the match-up we've got, it's the two highest ranked teams that are non-playoff. So you get an opportunity to go against a team that was a lot closer than us to making the playoffs, overtime, a one-game difference. And we have got a lot of respect for them.

So probably the biggest concern is when you get matched up in a situation where it's a team that was not as high ranked, one of those down there further down. We have got an opportunity to play a really good football team. I know our team respects that when you turn on the tape.

They've certainly responded to that by how they've practiced, and that's what's important to me. It has not been pulling teeth to practice. It has been just the opposite because there's so many guys with an opportunity to go prove something.

Q. Since doing a deep dive into Baylor, what's one or two things that stand out that you didn't previously know before preparing for them?

COACH SMART: I probably didn't know how good their wideout was. Denzel Mims is unbelievable. Their quarterback is extremely athletic. He does a good job finding ways to get him the ball.

And then the second part of that was their creativity in creating pressure. They're not a normal -- when you look at an SEC defense, nobody in our conference plays the same style of defense as they do. They're a little more 3-3 stack. They're not just a three down. People thought 3-4. That's not necessarily what they are. So it's very unique. It's not like our odd defense. It's a different style of defense.

So preparing for that has been a challenge because you don't have something to compare it to. We don't play -- everybody we're playing in the SEC, they might be four downs or they might be odd. These guys are very unique in what they do defensively, and they do it really, really well.

Q. Kirby [Smart], are you looking at this as the last game of this season or the first game of next season?

COACH SMART: I'm looking at this as a one-game season. It's a one-game season for us. That's exactly what it is. And our kids have been driven to say, you know what? We're going to have an opportunity to send these seniors out the right way and we're going to have a chance to propel ourselves into next season the right way. It's a combination of both always.