



Allstate Sugar Bowl
Georgia
Head Coach Kirby Smart
December 31, 2019



COACH SMART: It's an honor to be here. I always like to thank the bowl representatives. I've gotten to know the bowl representatives here at the Sugar Bowl really well. Feel like they're close friends. Jeff, Monique [Morial], thank you. It's good to see you again. Enjoyed dinner the other night. They've been wonderful hosts. We've had a lot of really great experiences here.

So sitting with Monique the other night getting to enjoy dinner, me and my wife were sharing that my twins who are 11 now were ten months old at their first Sugar Bowl and were actually staying right over in basically the same hotel. And it was a very unique experience for them to be ten months -- they took their first steps in the Sugar Bowl hotel. Now they're here, 11, enjoying all the experiences of the Sugar Bowl. And I know our players are, too.

So I know a concern of mine coming in was, well, what are they going to think about doing some of the same events. Our players have absolutely loved being able to go and share in the experiences. I think maybe you've seen some of the video of it. But getting to go to the Pelicans' game the other night. They all raved about that. Going bowling, they go bowling in Athens all the time. They loved getting an opportunity to do that. Our guys have really embraced it, enjoyed it, had a tremendous time.

Got a great challenge tomorrow night playing Baylor. They have done an unbelievable job. Coach [Matt] Rhule and his staff, the turnaround they've been able to do is nothing short of incredible. When you turn the tape on, it really jumps out at you how well they're coached, how hard they play. They played in several close games this year in which they outfought, they outcompeted the other team.

I know when you look at them defensively, they're very different than anything we see in our conference, and they're really good at what they do. Offensively, they spread you out and do a really good job and athletic quarterback.

So the challenge is there for our team. I'm excited to see our team go out and play. It's been a while since both teams have played. And as you can see in these other bowl games, sometimes you don't know what you're going to get when you go out there and haven't played in this long, this much time off.

So conditioning will be important. Playing under control and with composure will be important. But I'm excited to let our guys go out there and play and play in one of the best atmospheres in all the bowl games.

Q. Kirby, you said you thought last year's team practiced well and thought they were ready to play and everything. That said, as this game nears, do you like the intensity you've seen here and maybe feeling even more intensity? And are the guys really ready to play tomorrow night?

COACH SMART: Yeah, I don't know that I've ever went into a game that I didn't feel like our guys didn't practice well. That wouldn't be a good situation to go into.

Turning the ball over last year really hurt us early and didn't help us in that game. That probably -- anytime you have turnovers, it's going to be one of the greatest indicators, that and explosive plays. We had those last year.



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The punt early shook us when we took a knee on the punt. It's hard to overcome once you start losing the momentum in the turnover battle.

But this group has been great. Have had really great practices. The best part has been with a little bit lack of depth, we've gone against each other more. One of the luxuries of having depth is you're able to get a lot of reps against the opponent in what we call scout work. But we call it quality scout work when you have enough O-linemen to have two or three units and you can put a really quality scout team in there. We haven't had that luxury.

What we have had to do is be really smart, practice more against each other and do high-competitive environments, high-competitive reps, which the players have liked. They practice harder when they are lining up across from a guy they know is a starter. So you get good competition and practice a little bit shorter with that in mind, too, because the same guys are taking most of the reps.

Q. Coach, we know we're going to get a look at some younger guys in this football game. Who are some of those guys who have really stood out in the last 12 to 13 practices?

COACH SMART: Well, most of them are guys that have played throughout the year. When you think Zamir [White] and James [Cook] have had a lot of work. I would probably say Kenny [McIntosh] is one of those guys. Kenny didn't get as much work in practices until now. He's gotten a tremendous amount of work and done a really good job.

Depends on how the game goes. Depends how much [D'Andre] Swift plays how much Kenny's [McIntosh] going to get play. Kenny's done a really good job. He's grown up and played a lot more. Really, every other position, I don't know that you're seeing -- you're seeing two offensive tackles. That's the biggest difference, those guys. And then Warren Ericson is a guy that has stepped up and had to play a lot more. Outside those guys, it's mainly depth more than it is a new guy.

Q. Coach, talked to the players that are here, they're all engaged, they're all excited. How have you motivated them when so much of the outside narrative has been Georgia is supposed to be in the playoff every year? And how do you deal with those expectations that you were able to create in your first three or four seasons?

COACH SMART: It's really not hard. There's only four teams that can be in the playoffs. If you don't earn the right to get in there, then you deal with the cards you've dealt. We're in a pretty good situation when you look at it and say you could win 11, 12 games every year, have an opportunity to play in a New Year's Six bowl game every year, you're doing something right. And our kids recognize that. That doesn't take away from the disappointment of not making the playoff. But you can't whine and cry over that, not for very long.

And the unique experience is we've had an opportunity to go to that playoff for every single game up until this one. So that part, you're not dealing with a game a week later. I've always said when you have to deal with a game a week later, you get over it a whole lot faster, within 24 hours.



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With this one, I don't know how many days it's been since we played. Y'all know better than me, 20 something days. It's been a long time. Get over it, time to get better and go grow.

The biggest thing, I like to being able to play a high-quality opponent that we get to play that you respect and know comes from an awesome conference. They played a team in the playoffs to the very end twice. So you know you've got an opportunity to go out and play a really good football team.

Q. Coach [Matt] Rhule's name is being brought up a lot this week for jobs in the NFL. When you began your coaching career, did you have any aspirations or dreams to be a head coach in the NFL? If not, why did you feel college was always the perfect fit for you?

COACH SMART: No, I haven't had those aspirations. I coached in the NFL. I've been there. I think it's a wonderful league. But the passion I have for college football is the fact that you get to have a deeper relationship with these players.

I think the connection is more unique in college. You're looking at probably 20 to 30 roster spots in the NFL that don't turn over annually. So you're only getting around 20 to 30 players where we get 130 guys and you get most of them back the following year. And you grow to know these young men. You go in their homes. You promise their parents they're going to get their education. You get to watch them walk across the stage graduating. You get to watch them walk across the stage and get an opportunity in the NFL, their lifelong dream.

I get satisfaction out of having those relationships and having those kids come back. I think it's tougher in the NFL.

Q. Kirby, I think you mentioned back in Athens early on that you were going to make sure you brought guys that wanted to be here based off last year. Obviously, there's some injured guys that are here. There are some injured guys that aren't here. There's even some guys who have been reported in the transfer portal who are here. Some people who for disclosure reasons aren't here. What was the decision-making process on who you were bringing and you weren't bringing?

COACH SMART: I don't think it went into that. If they could play, they were going to be able to come. That was the big deal. Transfer portal is not a statement that you're leaving. I think people misconstrue that.

Every kid that goes in the transfer portal is not actually leaving or trying to leave. They may be exploring other options, but it's not a situation where they're not committed to the university.

To me, that goes back to sitting down and having a one-on-one conversation between me and them. And each one of those guys that's in there contemplating coming back, and they're trying to figure out what's best for them. And I don't mind that. It's a dead period. So there's nothing they can do right now in regards to that.



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And the rest of it, guys, the guys that are here are the focus. And they have done a tremendous job. All these kids have known who's going to be here the entire time we're practicing. You guys were the first to become aware of it once you got here. But our kids are used to it. They know who's been practicing and who hasn't.

Q. Kirby, you were talking about the lack of depth I guess because of some of the guys that maybe aren't here. I know NFL draft decisions and injuries are one thing. Guys who couldn't be here for other reasons, how do you explain that or is it troubling at all to you as a head coach that so many guys are missing?

COACH SMART: It's not troubling. Not at all. Each one is different. Some of these guys are injured. Some academically didn't do what they needed to do. That's part of college football. It's part of dealing with the things you have, the cards you're dealt.

The NFL environment we have, if we continue to recruit at a high level, which we've done, this is probably going to be an annual deal where guys decide that I'm not going to play in the game based on certain reasons or whatever they choose. And that's the choice they have. I respect that.

When we go recruit kids, we sell the fact you can get an unbelievable education. We also sell the fact you have an opportunity at the NFL. When you recruit at a really high level, you're going to have kids with an opportunity to go in the first round that are going to make, quote-unquote, business decisions for them. I don't always agree with all of them, but I support them 100%. And that's what we're going to continue to do.

Q. Kirby, I don't know how much time you've spent looking at Baylor's defense. But I'm just curious your impressions with that odd stack that you're starting to see become more popular?

STUDENT: Yeah, they do incredible job. When you turn the tape on, it pops out at you how fast they are, how athletic they are, how well they rush the passer because one of the knocks people would say from a 3-3 stack look is it's harder to effect the quarterback. They're always firing a fourth, a fifth guy.

They really get knocked-back penetration and allow people to run to the ball. It creates an illusion for the quarterback. You don't always know the coverage. You can scheme more. There's more depth in the defense. And I think they are the leading innovators, talking about Baylor and their staff, at creating confusion about what they do.

If they're so good at it, why isn't everybody doing it? I don't think most people in college football are comfortable with that front and that defense. And they are kind of being evolutionary in regards to what they're doing defensively because they're doing it really well. And they're getting-- I mean, they're eighth or ninth in the country in sacks. It just jumps off the screen at you.



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We've taken -- actually during the year we look at other teams that are doing well, Baylor was one of the teams we had picked in our off week and saying, hey, what can we take from what they do to make us better. It was going to be an off-season team we studied. It's very unique we end up playing them because we got to see them a lot closer.

Q. Coach, when you got here, Tae Crowder was a guy that was deep in the running back depth chart and then changing positions and now starter on defense. How have you seen him grow from being a guy that was trying to find a spot to now starting? And he's got his final game coming up with the Sugar Bowl, of course. Just what have you seen from him just throughout his career? And what do you see for his future?

COACH SMART: Yeah, Tae is a tremendous story. People don't talk about the stories that are here enough, and he is one of them. You talk about a special kid. I think Dan [Lanning] did a stat the other day -- and I may be wrong -- but he said he had 1,081 days that he's been at University of Georgia or something like that. He's a five-year guy, he and Mike Barnett.

They've been here this entire time. And he has had trials and tribulations, academic ups and downs, and now he's within one class of graduating. He came in a skinny little receiver. And we put up a picture of him in the defensive meeting room as a high school senior getting recruited. He's a skinny, little 180-pound receiver that used to come to camp. And now he's grown into a 235-, 240-pound athletic linebacker that has transitioned smoothly and has an opportunity to play at the next level. He's developed.

And that's what you want to do with these kids that come in. He was an afterthought. University of Georgia took him late in the signing process, beat Georgia Southern out for him, and here he is starting and playing on the number five team in the country.

Q. Coach, a two-part question for you. Divaad Wilson, can you address why he's not here and how that's going to affect the star position? Also, kind of where does D'Andre Swift stand as far as participation tomorrow night?

COACH SMART: Yeah. Divaad won't affect anything because Mark [Webb] has played star the entire year. Mark Webb has been the starting star. He and Divaad shared some of that time. But Mark started every game, and he's been healthy at that position.

As far as D'Andre, I don't know. We're going to wait and see. He's competed. He's done everything we've asked him to do. I keep repeating that because he has. Certainly, if he feels like he's able to go and go at 100%, we're going to use him. He's done more this last week in practice than he did before the SEC championship game, that's for certain. So excited to see where he goes.