

CFP National Championship: Georgia vs TCU

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SoFi Stadium

Coach Sonny Dykes

Coach Kirby Smart

Press Conference



**NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP**
LOS ANGELES 2023

THE MODERATOR: Good morning. Welcome to today's College Football Playoff national championship head coaches news conference. We're joined by TCU head coach Sonny Dykes and Georgia head coach Kirby Smart.

Coach Dykes, we'll start with an opening remark from you.

COACH DYKES: First of all, I want to thank you all for being here and covering college football. And we're all really, really fortunate and blessed to have an opportunity to work in this great game, Kirby and I as coaches and you guys as the media.

Kirby and I both grew up sons -- we're both sons of coaches. And I grew up reading articles and columns and newspapers talking about football and my dad's games and other people's games as a child. So we have a real appreciation for what you guys do and how important you are to college football and what makes this game so great. And just want to thank you all for being here and covering this event.

It's been a heck of a week for us. This is obviously our first time to be on a stage like this. And our players have really responded well to the challenge of taking all this in, because it's new for us, and it's uncharted territory for most of our players.

You've heard me say this before, but we have four players on our team that had ever participated in a bowl game before this year's Fiesta Bowl.

So bowl prep, playing in big games like this is new for many of our guys, not necessarily new for TCU but certainly for the players on our team.

So I'm really proud of the way they've handled everything. I think that they have exceeded expectations in terms of their ability to focus on what's important and not get distracted.

There's so many opportunities to do that, obviously, with all the things that are going on, especially being here in Los Angeles.

So, it's been a heck of a journey for these players.

I've been really proud of the way they've handled everything. It's a humble group. They know how blessed they are to get a chance to go to TCU and to play football at TCU and represent the Big 12 here in the national championship game.

So it will be a big challenge for us. We know that. Obviously Georgia's a team that's very, very talented. The thing that I've found most impressive about them, however, is how well-coached they are. Kirby and his staff do an excellent job really in all three phases of the game.

They play hard, regardless of the score. And again, I think that's a big credit to their culture they have in their program. And Coach Smart and his staff, I just have a ton of respect for their football program and the way they do things.

So we're looking forward to Monday night. Know it's going to be a big challenge for us, but our guys have never backed down for challenges and they have a lot of confidence in themselves and our program and what we're trying to do. And we'll go out and play good football Monday night, see what happens.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Smart.

COACH SMART: A lot of the same sentiments as Coach Dykes. Tremendous honor to be here, 130-something teams start out trying to achieve this. And there's two left.

And I think it speaks volumes to the character of both teams, the way each team has been able to win football games. I think so much is overrated about talent and what so many people put into the game of football, when a team cares about each other and they have a lot of intangibles and really good players at the right positions, it makes for a special group.

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And hearing the story of TCU's season, getting to see Coach Dykes at the Heisman; Max, you start looking across the board, it's a hell of a story for these two teams to be playing each other.

And it's an honor for us to be here. I'd like to say thanks to the CFP committee and the CFP group that's hosted us. What a tremendous job they've done in LA to host our players. I know over at our hotel, the players have enjoyed the hospitality room. They've had an opportunity to be together.

And we have the fortune of having a lot of guys last year that left for the NFL but every one of those guys that left for the NFL tell our players you better enjoy this moment because it's different at the next level. And these guys have a special bond that they get to spend together.

There's countless hours and minutes that these teams, both of us, have spent preparing. It's a long process to get to the semifinal in terms of 28 or however many days, and then you've got another 10. And you end up spending a lot of time together through Christmas and through New Year's and through travel.

And our guys have really enjoyed that. I've enjoyed it. That's why we get into this business.

And what a great stage we get to play on Monday night. And just honored to be here and represent the University of Georgia.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Kirby, for you, what is needed to maintain excellence? Your former boss has been in this similar situation, sitting up where you are now and has had to explain it. I'm wondering if you could explain what is needed to maintain excellence like your program has over the last couple of years.

COACH SMART: A lot of hard work, standard, a belief in the culture within it. It doesn't start when the season starts. It starts Tuesday when the season ends. And it just continues.

I don't know that you can relax and just say, okay, we're going to be fine. You have to make it happen. And I think each and every year you have a different team.

Obviously recruiting plays a part of that. If you don't have good players, you've got no chance.

But a big part of that is the organization that I've been given the ability to hire at University of Georgia. They are

second to none, my administration, of supporting us, bringing in analysts, bringing in coaches, having the nice facilities.

You need those things to be successful and sustain. But at the end of the day, you better have buy-in with your players. And I think the older I've gotten, the more I acknowledge the relationship with the player matters much more than maybe the play you call, than maybe the practice habit you create, or anything else.

It's will those players play hard for each other, and do they believe in their coaching staff, that their coaching staff cares for them. And that allows you to sustain.

Q. Coach Smart, what kind of challenges specifically does the 3-3 stack present? And conversely, Coach Dykes, the 12 personnel that Georgia stays in offensively or has offensively, what kind of challenges does that present?

COACH SMART: Coach Gillespie does a hell of a job. It amazes me the job he does consistently even from Tulsa, because, like I've talked about, we played Cincinnati a couple years ago, and Tulsa by far and away did the best job against Cincinnati. And we became enamored in that when he was doing it then.

And it allows you to have more depth in your defense. It allows you, when you play spread teams, you have more speed on the field. There's different layers to it, more layers to it. They do a tremendous job.

Take all the scheme part out. It's how you play and strike people. When you watch them strike blocks with hat in hands and the speed with which they play downhill and just strike people, it's a beauty. It's a thing of beauty to myself because I enjoy watching really good defense. And they play it. And it's very unique.

So when you go to prepare for it, it's not as easy. It's different. Now, you could make a case in their league, they may see some defenses like that, but I think the thing, everybody says, everybody plays that defense in their league. They're not all the same. They're not all the same.

And when you play another team in another conference, you get to see their conference and see the defenses. And people would say, well, everybody runs that in that league.

That's not really true. And this is probably the most unique and, in my opinion, played the best of all those defenses in the conference.

COACH DYKES: I think the second part of the thing,

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asking about 12 personnel. You know what's interesting about 12 personnel, a lot of people run 12 personnel. What you do is -- this is something that, it's something that we've done in the past. I was a Mike Leach disciple, kind of 10 personnel guy. That was something that Mike did different was, to Cal's offense, it was a lot of 20s and 21 personnel groupings.

And made it basically a 10 personnel offense and started to play with tempo and all the things that kind of made Mike's version of the air raid different and unique.

As a young coach, I took a coordinator job at the University of Arizona. And had a tight end named Rob Gronkowski that was a pretty good player.

So it was like, okay, I've never played with a tight end. I don't even know what a tight end looks like. And this is what he looks like.

So let's figure out a way to get this guy the ball. So all of a sudden we're lining up in 11 personnel and some 12. And the thing that's different about it is, you know, you've got to play eight gaps. Your run fits are much more complex, how you're going to get to them is much more difficult.

Now, from a run game perspective you've got to cover all these gaps that you don't necessarily have to cover without the 12 personnel. So it just changes the way you approach the game defensively.

Most people, when they go 12, they're taking two good players off the field and putting two average players on the field. Well, Georgia certainly is the exception to that. Their tight ends are exceptional. And they are -- wide receivers are like Rob; they're wide receivers that are 270 pounds and can block.

The thing that's unique about those two tight ends is they like to block. They're physical-minded guys. They're very skilled receivers, but they play a tough brand of football.

And that's what makes Georgia's 12 different than everybody else's.

As I said earlier, most guy are taking out a good player and putting in some average, at best, player because they want to change the run fits or make it a little bit more difficult for a defense to prepare for.

These guys are doing it with, you know, arguably two of the best tight ends in college football and some really exceptional athletes.

And again the thing that stands out about them is their

toughness and their willingness to go in there and mix it up and their effectiveness as blockers.

Q. Kirby, we get to see Javon on the field and on the sidelines. A charismatic guy, a leader. What is he like behind the scenes and how have you seen him grow in the last couple of years?

COACH SMART: Just a great kid. He loves football. When you start combing our state, I wouldn't say there's kids as talented as Javon everywhere but there's just a lot of kids in our state that love football.

That's what we found during the COVID year. He never got to come to campus, he never got to come to camp. But he sent in at least 100 videotapes of him working out in his backyard and putting out calls, and I said this guy is different. Kids aren't doing this in COVID times where they're going out to work out and making sure they get scene.

And we just kind of fell in love with the culture and the toughness of the kid. And he's become -- he makes our team tougher. He's had injury after injury. He's had some shoulders. He won't put on a black shirt. He creates a dynamic on our team of, if you think you're hurt, look at Javon. He'll go out there and practice every day and he'll have contact and play with toughness.

I think in this day and age that's different in football, and it creates a little bit of an attitude for our team that makes us better. It permeates the special teams. And even receivers see it. They're, like, man, if he can go, then I can go. So I think that's the biggest thing he brings to our team.

Q. Addressing injuries going into tomorrow's game, what's the latest update on Darnell Washington, Coach Smart, and Kendre Miller, Coach Dykes?

COACH SMART: We're hoping to get Darnell ready. He's continued to work really hard, done a lot of rehab. I know he wants to, his first chance to play on the West Coast. He's from Vegas and this game means a lot to him. And I know it's an important one to him.

COACH DYKES: Kendre, we'll have a run through today that's our typical Friday run-through, the day before the game, full speed run-through. We'll get a really good sense of what he can and can't do today, and then make a decision going into tomorrow.

So running backs are different, when you talk about a running back and you're talking about a thigh bruise or a sprained shoulder or a contusion some place, those are



things that running backs can typically play through.

When you start talking about a knee and a sprained knee and the things that go along with that, potentially, then you've got to be very, very careful.

And obviously Kendre is going to want to play. It's a big stage. He's a tough kid. But he's a young man. And our job is to take care of him and make sure that we don't just see Monday night, that we see the big picture as far as taking care of Kendre's health and in doing the right thing for him -- again, not just for Monday, but for his immediate future.

So we'll take it all in today, see where he's at, then make a decision.

Q. Coach Smart, I know you talked about not feeling like you were the hunted, but the pressure of being installed as the favorite and being the No. 1 team in the country, to face this group of guys who were unranked all year. For you, Coach Dykes, can you speak to the fact of TCU's becoming a national brand. Earlier this week on TNT, Ernie Johnson, a Georgia grad, bet Shaq that Georgia would win by 28. And Shaq, who lives in Texas, said he'd eat a Horned Frogs if it happened here. But here's an NBA show talking about TCU football.

COACH SMART: I'm not sure I understand the question exactly. In regards to the hunted or being hunted, I promise you there's no greater pressure on any sport than there is on college athletics, especially for major football programs. And I don't think Coach Dykes or myself would be in this business if we weren't used to pressure.

And I don't -- I look at it in a vacuum. I don't get to watch much TV or social media. I just worry about our team and don't get caught up in anything outside of that.

And we've had a saying around our place for a long time that probability is not reality. So we don't control what people say and probability. Reality is what happens on the field in between those lines. That's what takes a lot more courage than just putting out probability.

COACH DYKES: I'll say this: You look around college athletics and look at the NCAA basketball tournament, and you see teams that you don't expect to be there, end up in the top eight or Final Four. That's something that's an annual occurrence these days.

You know, college football is different. It just is. There's a lot of plays that go into that game. There's a lot of players. Instead of five guys and one or two guys get really hot,

you've got to have an entire team doing it and execute at a high level.

So I do think it's more difficult to kind of emerge from the shadows in football than it is maybe in basketball.

Our group has had a little bit of a magical ride. And I think the biggest difference is that it's our first year. We were still trying to get to know the guys. We're still trying to get a culture established.

I just think at the end of the day that's the most important thing is what is your culture, because it drives the decision a player makes from the time they wake up in the morning to the time they go to bed.

What is their level of commitment? What's their level of responsibility to their teammates? How deeply are they truly invested in the team? And so there's all these things that sometimes take time. To our players' credit, for whatever reason, it didn't take as long this time as it usually does.

Our guys were hungry and they were mature. They had a chip on their shoulder. And they bought in quickly.

Now, the challenging thing, as we move forward, past Monday, is where do we go from here?

And there's a standard now that -- and a set of expectations that accompany this kind of success. And to me that's the exciting part. It really is.

I mean, you really get to find out how good you are. It's one thing to get to the top. It's another thing to be able to stay there.

And, again, that's why I have so much respect for Coach Smart and his staff and the Georgia program because that's a hard thing to do.

It's very, very difficult to do. And it takes a lot of factors and a lot of people and a lot of commitment to be able to do that on a consistent basis.

So we're looking forward to that challenge. There's some doors open to us now, because of this success, that have been closed for a long time. And it's up to us to figure out how to reap the benefits from -- when it comes to recruiting, the opportunity to recruit a different kind of player, when it comes to the opportunity to have access to staff members and additional staff and just all the things that can help you take the next step as a program.

So, you know, it's been a journey to get here. But we're



excited about not only Monday night, but where do we go from here. And how can we continue to build our brand from a national standpoint.

And I think the second part of the question, look, I've always been a Shaq guy. I told the story before, my wife and I have been married 17 years now. We've had three disagreements in our marriage in 17 years. And one of them was about Shaq and Kobe. I'm a Shaq guy; she's a Kobe girl.

That was probably about an eventful argument as we've had in our marriage. Look, I'm a Shaq dude through and through. Always have been. He's a Texas guy, San Antonio Cole.

(Laughter).

That's more information than you wanted but it's truth.

COACH SMART: I'm more impressed you've only had three arguments with your wife in 17 years. I'm still trying to conquer that.

(Laughter).

Q. Kirby, I think you're still on the rules committee. I wonder what you both thought of the concept of limiting what are now being called "exposures," not plays, but exposures for or against. What are the advantages or disadvantages of that?

COACH SMART: You're talking about, total number of plays in game exposures you're talking about?

Q. Yes.

COACH SMART: I think one of the first things you look at the on the rules committee they bring it up every year is the length of games. I think there can be two things there. You're talking about TV viewership and you're talking about exposures to contact in terms of number of plays. There's a lot of ways to manipulate the number of plays, including the clock.

Our big brother in this world of football is the NFL. And so much of what we do is modeled off what they do. They spend a lot, a lot, a lot of money on trying to get it right.

And they shrunk their game into a timeframe that's probably a little bit tighter window than ours, and also trying to limit exposures as well. Although they have a longer season and they've added games to their season.

So when you look at all that, it encompasses a big

decision. We are dealing with student-athletes, and I think it starts with that.

So I wouldn't sit up here and say I'm in favor of shrinking the game. I do think our game has gotten long, and there are a lot of plays. Because in college football there's a lot more teams that use tempo therefore they want more snaps than you see in the NFL.

That's not prevalent in the NFL. It's a different game when it comes to that.

So it probably boils down to what's safest for our players without changing our game, because our college football game is different than the NFL, and we don't have to mimic that, although we want to make it as safe as possible for our players.

COACH DYKES: Look, we're getting ready to play our 15th ball game. I think this is 22 consecutive weeks that our players have been practicing. It's been a grind. It's a long process. There's lots of factors to consider, not only physical health but mental health as well when it comes to that type of grind with 18- to 22-year-old kids and the emotional toll and mental health toll that it can take on them. So I think we've got to consider everything.

And as the number of plays in games increase and the number of games increase, then we have to say, okay, look, that's the way this is played. Let's make adjustments in practice. Let's cut down the number of exposures that we have on a daily basis in practice.

And so it's like anything else. There's a set of rules. We have to figure out how to best take care of our players and put a quality product on the field within the set of rules. I do think that that needs to be something that is a constant conversation about, okay, how can we take care of our guys, again, not only physically but mentally.

Because there is, look, these guys are preparing to take big ball games but they're also preparing to take final exams. And they're also dealing with issues off the field with family and friends and all the different things that these young men are exposed to on a daily basis.

So it can be a very complicated thing. And we've got to do the very best we can to look after not only our players mentally but also physically and their mental health because that's the most important thing at the end of the day.

Q. Obviously the mission is to compete for a national championship. But can you explain how the practice time and this time of year is so important to the

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development and maturity of your younger players?

COACH DYKES: It's obviously been a big thing for us. Again, we've had lots of practice opportunities. We've had an additional 15 leading into the semifinal game that our players haven't had in the past.

So if you think about it, you know, if you're a senior team and if you're a senior player and you've been in a practice that has consistently been to bowl games, and particularly New Year's Day bowl games, or bowl games that occur later during the bowl game cycle, you look up and you go, okay, it's 15 practices for four years. That's 60 practices. Okay. Well, that's four years of an additional spring training.

And that's a big deal. That's a really big deal. And that goes back to what I talked about earlier in our program. We have four guys leading into this year that have participated in a bowl game.

And so we're a little behind in terms of our development in trying to catch up to some of the folks in front of us because we just haven't had that many practice opportunities.

So what we've had to do is maximize them. Again, to our players' credit, they show up every day with a willingness to go to work. And it makes a difference.

And we try to sit down and say, okay, look, we were fortunate enough to get into the Big 12 Championship game, which was an extra four practices, five practices.

We were fortunate enough to get into the College Football Playoff, which is an extra 15 practices. We were fortunate enough to get into the national championship game, which is an extra five practices. All those things add up.

So we sat down and we said what do we want to accomplish by this? Number one, win the last game. That was our goal. And number two, develop our team, and including our young players.

And so it's been a great opportunity for some of our young players that have been on scout team that haven't had a chance really to get to develop that much to get developed.

And so we go back and we check our work all the time. We have objectives we want to accomplish and we go back and say, are we really doing this. Are we really giving those young guys an opportunity to shine and develop and compete and become the kind of players we want them to become? And we're making sure that's the case.

And so far I think that's happened. And it can't help but carry over, I think, we'll find out.

COACH SMART: A lot of the same. I said this yesterday at media day, and I hate to repeat myself, but I really think a lot of the reason we were able to turn our roster over from last year to this year was the practices and preparation we had at this time of year. As we were finishing the year last year, we were getting really high-quality work out of about, I would say, seven or eight kids starting for us.

Right now in the game, tomorrow night, we're -- scout team players or 2s -- and the way we do our reps as the year goes, our 2s get a little more volume and our 1s get a little less knowing that the 2s need the work and might be up for call as you have injuries.

So the guys that are playing now that were 2s last year, in some cases 3s, they got a lot of work. And I think Coach Dykes is right; that cumulative effect -- I've always said the states that have spring practices, their kids leave high school football one year ahead of states that don't because they've had four spring practices from ninth grade to 12th grade.

And our kids have had a lot of practices. The counter thought to that is how much we do practice. We have a lot. And we target a lot of days for our kids to -- the 1s go condition, and the 2s and 3s go get opportunity. And they literally go against each other and just play football.

And I think that does help in terms of getting your team prepared.

I also think, we're in the portal age, when kids feel like they don't have a role, they're quicker to leave. And we're really selling the development.

We're going to show Jordan Davis, from his freshman and sophomore year, working on the scout team, and say, hey, look where this guy was and look at what he became doing it this way. And selling that within your program becomes a selling point to them to stick and stay and truly develop and grow in the organization.

Q. How do you feel about the current college football calendar with regards to recruiting and transfer and signings? And what changes, if any, would you like to see?

COACH DYKES: Kirby left this one for me to answer first. (Laughter).

Look, the calendar is the calendar. It's a strange thing.



We've had a calendar that we followed a long time that made a lot of sense because the players signed in February and they made their decisions when they took visits in October and November, December.

And that's not the case anymore. It's different.

And so what we've done is we've made revisions through the thing that have made sense at the time. But we've kind of ended up with a little bit of a hodgepodge of stuff.

And everybody has their feelings on what they want. You talk to 10 different coaches, you get 10 different opinions. The one thing I think that we have to do in this profession is, as Kirby alluded to earlier, this is an ultra, ultra competitive, high accountability profession. And we're all incredibly driven.

And I think that what we have to do is protect ourselves from ourselves as coaches. We have to legislate time off, because not only do young people have mental health, we have mental health as well.

This deal is a grind. And you've got to take care of your coaches and you've got to take care of your staff, and you've got to take care of yourself. And the only way that you can do that is by legislating time off. Because if we have a day -- and Kirby is the same way, I'm sure, I know he is. If we have an opportunity to recruit a player, by God, we're going to recruit him. We'll have him on our campus or we're going to be in a high school or we're going to be on the phone or we're going to do something to try to secure that recruiting commitment.

So it's a complicated issue. We could sit here and talk about it for hours, but at the end of the day, to me that's the most important thing is legislating time off.

I have a 14-year-old and an 11-year-old daughter and a 6-year-old son, and I want to be able to see them and be part of their life and have a chance to spend time with them. And it's very difficult if we don't have some kind of legislated time off where we can get away, where we focus not only on our players and our program, but our families and doing our job as a father and as a husband in that capacity as well.

It's complicated. There's work that needs to be done. I think the good thing about the NCAA now is we're trying to do things. There is more of a "let's try to do something" as opposed to "let's ignore this problem."

And I think some of the issues that we're having in college football now were because for years and years we stuck our head in the sand and didn't address issues that

involved our student-athletes.

And now, thankfully, we've been forced to address those issues. And I think it's led to some great opportunities for our student-athletes as a result.

COACH SMART: Tough balance. I concur with a lot of things that Coach Dykes just said. It's not the profession that I originally got into in terms of relationships and coaching. It's changed so much.

My position has changed as well from when I first got into it. But it's become a much tougher profession to navigate in terms of your own family and your time constraints on that, especially if you want to try to stay at the highest level and what it requires to do.

And I think the NCAA and the minds that help put all the information together, including ourselves as coaches, we're all to blame for kind of eating our own. And it's like a cannibalizing, because you won't stop. And it just keeps going.

And I think with the playoff system coming up, it's going to be really interesting to see what happens: Are you going to be playing games while you're trying to sign guys in the early signing period in December? It's gotten more competitive than ever.

I mean, you're already looking at junior days, six, seven days from right now. And we're trying to play a national championship. So it doesn't stop for the coaches at the highest level. I'm not sure any of us have the exact right answer, but I do think being smart and legislating time for coaches to be with their team and with their families is important.

The flipside of that is the prospects want their opportunities to make a good decision and the time that's very demanding is tough, it's tough to make those decisions.

COACH DYKES: I want to add one thing to that. Look, we were preparing this week for a national championship game and we had six transfers on campus on an official visit. And you're just kind of like, really? I mean, are we really doing this?

And so that's just the way it is now. And those days were going to be 18-hour days before and the 18-hour days turned into 20-hour days.

And that's the nature of our business. Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining. I have the opportunity to do something else if I want to. But we do have to, at some point, kind of sit down and say, okay, look, here's the

calendar; what can we do to serve the players, first and foremost. And second of all, try to retain some kind of ability to be a good father and a good husband.

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