



Kirby to Georgia ... a perfect fit

By Jeff Dantzler
Bulldawg Illustrated

These are happy times for the Georgia football program. In just over the past month, the Bulldogs have beaten Auburn to take the all-time series lead in the South's oldest rivalry, held off what would have been an embarrassing upset loss by topping Georgia Southern in overtime, and beaten Tech in Atlanta for the 12 time in the last 13 games contested between the Bulldogs and Yellow Jackets on the flats. Following the win over Tech, the Bulldogs and Mark Richt parted ways. It was the right move. A week later, Kirby Smart, with a shining resume, infectious enthusiasm, steely resolve and a Georgia pedigree through and through was named the Bulldogs new head coach. Great days are ahead for the Bulldogs. Soon. Consistent greatness is the aim of Smart and so many red and black faithful. And why not? Every natural resource is in place for the Bulldogs to enjoy the same successes that his previous school Alabama, LSU and Florida have displayed in various stretches of the 2000s. In fact, as defensive coordinator at Alabama for Nick Saban, Smart has been an integral part of an incredible run for the Crimson Tide, in which they have gone 12-0 or 11-1 in the regular season seven of the last eight years. Bama is reliving their ultimate glory days of 1971-1979 to a T. The Bulldogs greatest days came from 1980-83, with a national championship, three straight Southeastern Conference crowns and four straight finishes in the top five of the national polls. That can be Georgia. Again. There is tremendous history, tradition, pageantry, a fervent and hungry fan base, top flight facilities, an incredible university and a state that is amongst the top four to five in the union annually in producing elite recruiting talent. It is time to cash in. Georgia should strive for consistent greatness. That is the Smart plan. Over the last eight years, the Bulldogs have averaged four losses per season. The simple fact played out this year that the Dogs were closer to losing to Georgia Southern and Tech than beating Alabama and Florida. Those two are the standard. There have been 24 SEC Championship Games, Bama and Florida have played each other eight times. The Gators have made 11 trips. The Tide 10. Georgia has been just twice in the last 10 years. That's not good enough. The move to part ways with Richt was nearly made following the 2010 campaign, but he was given the opportunity to rebuild. Two years later, the Bulldogs were on the doorstep of the SEC Championship and a date with Notre Dame to play for the national title. The Bulldogs came up just short. Then regressed. In each of the last three seasons, Georgia was a preseason top ten pick and the consensus favorite to win the SEC East. The Bulldogs, who just three times during that stretch have been an underdog, lost 12 times and failed to return to Atlanta, while Missouri, Missouri and first-year coach Jim McElwain's Gators made it to the Georgia Dome. There were many more good days than bad in the Richt era. The stretch from 2002-2007 is one of the great runs

in Bulldog annals. But in the second half of his tenure, that 2012 campaign was the outlier – the lone great one since Georgia finished No. 2 in the land in 2007. Richt brought stability and class to the Georgia helm, adding greatly to the tremendous legacy and foundation of the program. He was incredible in his outgoing press conference, displaying incredible gratitude, humility, class and grace. It's hard to imagine anyone handling a similar situation in as grand a fashion. That weekend was a time of celebration, another win over Tech, Richt's accomplishments, and an incredibly bright future with one of the most popular sons – and daughters – of Georgia coming home. Smart was recruited to Georgia by Ray Goff's staff following an outstanding prep career at Bainbridge, where he played for his father Sonny Smart. He was an All-SEC performer in the secondary at Georgia, playing the bulk of his career for Jim Donnan. Smart's 13 career interceptions are amongst the top five in Bulldog annals. He intercepted eventual No. 1 overall pick Tim Couch twice each in back-to-back Bulldog victories over Kentucky in 1997 and 1998. Kirby was an Academic All-SEC performer as well. His father was a coach, his mother an English teacher. Coaching was in his blood, and quickly he rose through the ranks. During a stop at Georgia, he began dating Mary Beth Lycett, who is one of the great shooters in the history of the Lady Bulldogs basketball program, for legendary coach Andy Landers. Mary Beth was an academic All-SEC performer as well. Both had Georgia running through their veins. They were "three star" recruits who became five star Bulldogs in every aspect. Both tireless workers. Both tremendous competitors. Their courtship began when Kirby was coaching and Mary Beth was working in the athletics department as the school's travel coordinator. Mary Beth told me a story, that on a Sunday morning after a Georgia win and early church they were on the waiting list at the Cracker Barrel. 45 minutes was the wait. So they played checkers. Their name was called. Mary Beth said "finally," Kirby asked if she was conceding the game. She said no. So they played on until the game's conclusion and several other folks moved up the list. When Smart was officially introduced before the assembled media, he stole the show, thanking his family and mentors and showing great respect. Then came a passionate mission statement on what the plan is for Georgia. "We'll play with confidence and pride," Smart vowed. "We'll work towards this with relentless energy and passion." Every Bulldog listening and watching was foaming at the mouth, anxious to embark on this new era of supreme recruiting, player development, academic and off field performance and a program that all the sons and daughters of Georgia will be justifiably confident in and proud of. Kirby has the bloodlines, having played for and/or worked for every Georgia coach dating back to Vince Dooley, who was Athletic Director during his playing days and first coaching stop in Athens. With that background, his father, the decade plus under Saban, Smart is connected, focused and ready to embark on the job he has always wanted. The Georgia people are united behind Kirby Smart, and the 'Majority Party of the Empire State of the South' can joyfully and energetically visualize the Bulldogs climbing the highest of college football's mountaintops. It is a perfect fit. It is a perfect time.



Kirby Smart with son, Weston

photos by Rob Saye



Coach Sonny Smart and Sharon Smart



Andy Landers congratulates Kirby



Kirby Smart and Greg McGarity



Kirby Smart with the media



Mary Beth Smart



Athens

Watkinsville

Auburn

Lawrenceville