

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Florida vs Alabama

Sunday, December 13, 2020

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Nick Saban

Alabama Crimson Tide

CHUCK DUNLAP: We'll continue with Alabama's Nick Saban.

Coach, if you could give us some brief comments as you prepare to face Florida in the SEC championship game.

NICK SABAN: Certainly an honor and privilege to be in the SEC championship game. I'm really proud of what our team has been able to do to create this opportunity for themselves. Having been in this game in the past, I think this is one of the best venues in college football.

Certainly the opportunity to play a very, very good Florida team, probably one of the top teams in the country, top 10 probably teams in the country, maybe even better than that. Obviously on offense, they're the No. 1 passing offense in the nation. They've got some great skill guys. Quarterback Kyle Trask does a fantastic job. Kadarius Toney is a mismatch player with 62 receptions. Pitts is a tough mismatch player. These guys do a lot of stuff on defense that create a lot of negative plays for you.

It's going to be a real challenge for us to be able to execute the way we need to against a very, very good team to be able to have success. We got a lot of respect for Dan, the job he's done there.

CHUCK DUNLAP: We'll take questions for Coach Saban.

Q. Having faced Dan Mullen many times in your career, what stands out about him as a play-caller? Have you seen how much an array of options and weapons in a quarterback like this before?

NICK SABAN: Well, we played him at Mississippi State when he had a great quarterback, Prescott, Dak Prescott.

I think what Dan does is he really utilizes his personnel well, moves people around, tries to create mismatches with formations and motions and shifts. Makes it difficult for the



defense to adjust.

Had great concepts in the passing game. Certainly his players do an excellent job of executing it. I think he's probably one of the best play callers in the country.

Q. Kyle Trask in particular, what stands out about him?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think he does a really good job of getting the ball in the right place relative to reading the defense and knowing the offense like he does. He's very accurate with the ball. I think those two things are probably the most important things. Makes a lot of good decisions that gets the ball in the hands of the play-makers. They certainly made their share of explosive plays this year, that's for sure.

Q. Is there an update on Christian Harris yet?

NICK SABAN: He's got a shoulder injury. He's got a chance to play. We have to see how he progresses this week.

Q. With Todd Grantham, they do a lot of things defensively that create a lot of negative plays, how do you think what Mac Jones has faced this year, has that presented him an opportunity to face anything similar? How do you think he'll handle that challenge?

NICK SABAN: We have a lot of confidence in Mac. I think they do present a lot of challenges. A lot of it is making sure you get the protections right, point out the right Mike so you can get a hat on a hat. That's not just Mac's job, that's also the offensive line's job. You can't block them all. Everybody has to be on the same page of how to get the ball out quickly so you don't take negative plays.

I think that's the big thing we have to do a great job as coaches in preparation of not allowing them to make a lot of negative plays. I think they kind of feed off that on defense.

Q. Particularly heading to an indoor facility for the game, talk about how much Will Rogers has



contributed this year in terms of the consistency and the confidence you have in him?

NICK SABAN: Well, I had a lot of confidence in him last year. He did a great job for us early in the season. Then he got hurt, never ever got well. I think that impacted our season last year in a difficult way.

But he has been really, really good this year, very consistent in his ball striking. He's done an outstanding job for us. You love having a weapon like that that you can certainly count on. We have a lot of confidence in Will.

Q. To what do you credit Alabama's improvement on defense in the latter part of the year, getting back to playing what is considered Alabama-style defense?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think early on we had four out of five new starters in the secondary, some young guys playing up front on defense. I think their confidence, knowing what the expectation was in terms of what we were supposed to do as a defensive team, was not probably from a knowledge and experience standpoint where it needed to be.

Also you face a lot of different multiples of things that you have to prepare for when you're playing against different offenses. That contributed, too, to the sort of learning curve that these guys had to go through. I think as they gain knowledge and experience throughout the year, they improve. We made less mental errors, sort of played better as a unit, tackled better, played better as a unit.

Q. You mentioned Kyle Pitts earlier as a mismatch. O.J. Howard comes to mind right off the bat, is as long, as fast, as much of a mismatch as Pitts can be?

NICK SABAN: I think you probably mentioned one of the guys we've had here that has sort of been that kind of player.

Kyle Pitts, he's a fantastic player. His size and speed and athleticism, all those things make it very difficult to guard the guy. He's a very versatile player. He can play tight end, he can play on the line, he can play off the ball, out as a receiver. They move him around a lot. Creates a lot of issues and problems for you, no doubt. Probably as well as anybody we played against for a long time.

Q. Did you see the Arkansas player there on the tackle of DeVonta Smith on the punt return? Your assessment of Pete Golding as this defense has really improved down the stretch?

NICK SABAN: I watched the film of the game. I don't

really have any comments. Smitty is a great player, a really good competitor. Football is a tough game for tough people. He's certainly a tough guy. He has to handle himself out there. He's done a great job of doing that all year long.

Pete has really worked hard this year, done a really good job with our players in terms of being patient and teaching, allowing them to learn and grow. Yeah, I can't say enough about the job he's done.

Q. With Kadarius Toney, someone you recruited coming out of high school, what kind of growth have you seen in him as a pure receiver?

NICK SABAN: He was an outstanding high school player. His quickness and ability to run jerk routes and change direction, get in and out of breaks, is fantastic. I just think he's a really complete player as a receiver, especially when he's in the slot.

He's a difficult matchup, creates a lot of problems. We'd love to have him here, I can tell you that.

Q. Kyle Trask, not sure if you ever talked about his story, kind of the journey he's had from career backup to the season he's having now. Can you talk about that, what his strengths are as a quarterback from your standpoint?

NICK SABAN: Well, I know he's had a tough road coming up, just like kind of Mac has. But I have a lot of respect for guys that stick with it, persevere, come through a lot of adversity, go through growing pains.

When they get an opportunity, they take advantage of it, do it extremely well. Kyle certainly has done that. Has had as fine a season as any quarterback in the country. I can't say enough positive things about him.

But I do have a lot of respect for guys that come up the hard way that way. It's good to see that there are guys that play the game that still do that. It's good to see them have success after they go through those ups and downs and adversities.

Q. Defensively for Florida, when you look at them, how do you feel they're going to challenge you most on Saturday?

NICK SABAN: Well, they're very athletic. They got a lot of team speed. They do multiple things to pressure you, multiple coverages, try to disguise what they do extremely well.

I used to coach with Todd a while back. Have a lot of respect for him as a signal caller, a guy that will put together a really good game plan. I'm sure they'll do something that will create some problems for us. We'll have to adapt and adjust. Our players will have to do a good job of trying to execute against them because they're a very, very good unit.

Q. Your thoughts watching Florida's game last night with LSU. How unique is it playing a team in an SEC championship game coming off a loss like that?

NICK SABAN: I don't know. You have to ask them. I really don't know.

I feared that our players might be looking forward to the SEC championship game in terms of playing up at Arkansas. I was really pleased that we didn't start out great but played pretty well in the game.

I think it's a challenge for any coach with any team when you're in that situation. But I can't answer that.

Q. Your reaction to Auburn parting ways with Gus Malzahn after eight years?

NICK SABAN: I have a tremendous amount of respect for Gus. He was difficult to play against when he was the offensive coordinator. He's always been difficult to play against as a head coach. Their teams always played hard. Their team is always well-coached on both sides of the ball and special teams. I have a tremendous amount of respect for Gus.

Sometimes you wonder why people do what they do. I don't know what the reasons are. I certainly think he's an outstanding coach, has been a tough adversary for us to have to play against in the Iron Bowl every year.

Just have a lot of respect for Gus and the job that he's done.

Q. How much influence would you say he had or maybe his first team had on what you did at Alabama? Your 2012 team that won the national championship was very different by 2014. Did Gus' first team help influence the shift or evolution you've kind of undergone during your time in Tuscaloosa?

NICK SABAN: I don't think there's any question about it. Gus' style of play, he's not the only one, the whole sort of Baylor influence, Hugh Freeze, those guys sort of come from the same roots in terms of some of the innovations that they've made, tempo offenses, RPOs, really changing the game. I think Gus has been at the forefront of all that.

I guess playing against those guys, you almost get to the point where you say, If we can't beat them, we might as well join them. I guess that's why we changed some of the things we do around here.

CHUCK DUNLAP: That will wrap you up, Coach. Thank you for your time.

NICK SABAN: Thank you.

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