

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Florida vs Alabama

Thursday, December 17, 2020

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Nick Saban

Alabama Crimson Tide

KEVIN TRAINOR: We are joined by our SEC Western champions, Alabama Crimson Tide. Alabama is ranked No. 1 in the College Football Playoff Selection Committee rankings.

Coach Saban, opening statement. Thank you.

NICK SABAN: First of all, I'd like to congratulate Dan Mullen and his Florida team for winning the East. They've got an outstanding team. They have played really well all year long. We're looking forward to the challenge of playing in the SEC championship game, which we think is one of the best competitive venues our team has ever been a part of.

It's also the city of Atlanta, Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Southeastern Conference has made this really something special for the teams who participate. We certainly appreciate and thank them for that.

Florida is a very challenging team, one of best offensive teams in the country in a lot of different ways in terms of touchdowns, scoring points, pass offense, great quarterback, really good mismatch players on the perimeter. It's going to be a very challenging game for our defense. Defensively they create a lot of issues and problems. Todd does multiple things and pressures, negative plays. They have very good players. They're very good on special teams.

This is really a solid team from top to bottom. Going to be a very challenging game for us. We're looking forward to having the opportunity to play in the championship game.

KEVIN TRAINOR: We'll open it up for questions.

Q. A bigger picture question. You're a guy who stays focused on the here and now, but you're the same age as Bear Bryant was when he retired. Have you given any thought to how long you want to do this? What



kind of keeps you going at age 69 when a lot of guys can call it a career?

NICK SABAN: Well, I'm excited about the opportunity that we have in front of us. Obviously I love doing what I do, and want to continue to do it for as long as I feel like I can contribute in a positive way to the program. That's about the only plan I have for the future.

We got a lot of good players here. We try to create a lot of value for our players here so they have a better opportunity to be successful in the future. It's very self-gratifying.

If I thought that my presence here was not something that was a positive for the University of Alabama or with the program, with the players, then I'd say it would be time not to do it any more.

Q. When you look back to the 2009 SEC championship game, the first of your five National Championships that year, did you anticipate or could even fathom at that point how much of a landscape-changing game that would be as you fast-forward 11 years after that?

NICK SABAN: I think the 2008 game probably had somewhat of a significant impact on the program here in the fact that we lost to a very good Florida team. Tim Tebow, they went on to win the National Championship the next year. I think our players learned a lot from that.

The next year for us to be able to play a very similar team with Florida, a very similar team for us, and to win the game probably was a significant confidence builder that we could win games like that against good teams. I think it did change the culture of the program in a positive way, which I think it was just another one of those steps that you take when you're trying to build a program to national prominence that you have to take. Our players did a really good job of it.

They had a really, really good team. It was a really good game.

Q. After that 2008 SEC championship game you went to face Utah in the Sugar Bowl, fell to Utah. Brian



Johnson obviously now the offensive coordinator at Florida. What do you remember about him in that game? How much was it a learning curve in defending tempo?

NICK SABAN: I think their style of play was a little different than what we anticipated. They were in empty almost the whole game. We had a lot of big guys at that time, didn't have a lot of good pass-rushers, probably didn't have a very good plan to play in the game.

I think one of the most difficult things that you have to do, or that I've ever had to do, is when you lose the SEC championship game, get your team ready to play the next game. That's always been really, really difficult.

They had a great scheme. They did a great job of executing against us. We didn't play great. They had a really good team. They deserved to beat us and win. They certainly did.

Q. I was hoping you could speak to your defensive improvements this season, specifically your front seven, how they've affected the pocket here in the latter portions of the season. Where do you think they've improved the most?

NICK SABAN: I think we've improved as an overall unit. I think early in the year we had four out of five new starters in the secondary, a lot of inexperience, made some mistakes. We had some new guys playing up front. I think it took a while for the group to develop confidence that they could play well, they could play together as a unit, get the concept of if everybody does their job, we have a chance to be successful.

I just think that the confidence got better with the young players. The confidence got better with the inexperienced players. I think we just made some steady improvement.

We're going to get challenged in this game Saturday in a different way than we've been challenged for a long time because of the quarterback, the scheme that they run, the mismatch players that they have. This will probably be the ultimate challenge for this defensive group this week.

Q. What is your secret year in, year out, those guys come out to play for you? How are you able to get those guys to go out there and do what they're supposed to do each and every weekend? How do you do it?

NICK SABAN: First of all, we have good players. I think we've tried to create a culture here where everybody has to buy into the principles, values of the team and the

organization, respect those principles and values, and respect each other, and have confidence that those things are going to help them be successful individually in terms of how they create value for themselves and also collectively how effective and consistent our team can execute.

This year's team has done a really good job of that. We haven't had a lot of issues and problems on our team all year long. It's been a very disruptive year from the whole COVID standpoint, what we've all had to go through to improvise and adapt to what we've had to do to play football this fall. But our players have done a good job of handling that, shown a lot of maturity.

The intangibles that we instill with that culture, whether it's discipline, mental and physical toughness, people understanding how important it is for them to be responsible for their own self-determination in terms of doing their job, doing what they need to do. The work that it takes to be able to create these opportunities for yourself.

I think it's all part of the culture that we try to create. I think when people come here, that's the expectation that they have. That's what they buy into.

Q. You talked about it with the front seven. What have you seen from Will Anderson? How has he taken his game to the next level over the last three games?

NICK SABAN: Will has played well for us all year long. He's one of the young players that I was talking about that obviously got a lot better through the game experience, knowledge and experience, that he gained throughout the season. He has played extremely well.

Again, he's more comfortable and confident in what he's supposed to do, and has the confidence that he can do it well in the game. He has been a really good player for us. But I think he's played well all year long.

Q. What is the difference with Will Reichard this year? He's been very successful. You have criteria for all the positions. What is the criteria when you're evaluating a kicker?

NICK SABAN: Well, the difference for Will Reichard this year is he was very good last year. People don't remember that after four or five games, he was injured and never was able to come back from that injury. But he was very successful for us prior to that injury.

We were excited to get him back. He certainly had a phenomenal year this year in terms of his consistency, accuracy, field goal kicking. That's been a real positive for

our team.

Q. Where have you seen Christian Harris improve the most since last season? If he's able to play, what sort of qualities does he bring?

NICK SABAN: I think last year playing as a freshman was probably difficult in terms of he was playing with another freshman, so there wasn't even anybody for him to sort of lean on to make calls. There wasn't a lot of confidence probably in either guy. They played with a lot of apprehension at times in terms of not having a total feel and understanding for what was required of them.

Again, through that same knowledge and experience that he's gained, playing with Dylan this year who has knowledge and experience to make all the calls, plays with a lot more confidence.

But he's very athletic. He can run. I think once players get rid of the anxiety of worrying about what I'm supposed to do, really know what they're supposed to do, then they can go play fast, make plays. He's certainly done a good job of that for us all year long.

Q. A kid from north Alabama, LaBryan Ray. Is there an update on him? How is he progressing?

NICK SABAN: Well, he's struggled a little bit with his elbow injury. It's been kind of on again, off again. He's probably questionable for the game.

Q. I know you were asked earlier about coaching, your career. This year alone, given that you had the week with the false positive, you did test positive, has this personally been a more trying year for you compared to other years because of what we've all had to encounter?

NICK SABAN: I think it's been that way for everybody in the world. I mean, I told our players early on this season, told all the coaches, everyone, that there was going to be a lot of disruptions in this season, things were not going to be normal, they were probably going to be more abnormal than normal. The team that could handle those disruptions the best would have the best chance to be successful long-term.

I think our whole organization was kind of geared up for. We've had a lot of those things happen and it hasn't affected us. Now we have an opportunity to try to finish the season the right way, which is another sort of obstacle. I don't care if you're running track in junior high school or high school, the coaches always say, Run to the finish line. That's the challenge we have right now.

Yeah, it was different. It was different. First time in a long time that I couldn't go to practice, first time in a long time I had to sit and do everything Zoom meetings, team meetings, players on the field. It was very different.

We all adapted and adjusted, and everybody stayed focused on what they needed to do to be able to contribute in a positive way and made it work.

Q. Do you feel, given the way the CFP rankings are at right now, that the SEC would be deserving of having two teams in the College Football Playoff regardless of how Saturday night's outcome shakes out?

NICK SABAN: Man, I don't really like to speculate on things like that. The thing that we want to try to do is play our best so that we can determine our fate and our future by how we perform on the field, probably not have to leave it up to other people who have a very, very difficult task, especially in a year like this where everybody didn't play the same number of games, didn't play out-of-conference games in most cases.

It's a very difficult task. We understand that. But we also respect the people that have to make it. We're just hopeful we play well enough to get an opportunity to play in the Playoffs.

Q. How difficult was the challenge of preparing for an SEC championship game and wrapping up the early signing period in the same week?

NICK SABAN: I think there are lots of challenges when it comes to recruiting. But fortunately or unfortunately most of the players that we had the good fortune to sign Wednesday had already committed in the past, and they were very solid in their commitment. We didn't have any sort of last-minute issues to deal with.

I think our coaches did a really, really good job of developing relationships in a different way this season. I had to do the same thing through Zooms and basically doing home visits on Zoom rather than being able to go see people. So it was a different kind of recruiting.

But it's always challenging in game week when you have a signing day. You're trying to focus on the game, but you're worried about what's going to happen with certain players. It takes some of your time, takes some of your focus. I thought we did a pretty good job this week. We were pleased with the results we got in recruiting. I don't think it's in any way hampered what we're doing to try to get ready for this game.

Q. From hearing after the Iron Bowl and missing the Iron Bowl, is it fair to say maybe that kind of reinvigorated you a little bit? At least it sounded that way since the Iron Bowl.

NICK SABAN: Well, I didn't know that I was not vigorated [sic]. I guess you have to not be vigorated to get revigorated. I was vigorated before.

I was disappointed, then I was happy to get back. I don't know what the speculation there really is about. I hope I've been vigorated all year. I owe that to the players. That's my job.

Q. What have you told your players not to get complacent just because you've been there this many times, everybody is behind you, what do you instill in those players to make sure they keep an even keel?

NICK SABAN: First of all, I think you have to respect who you're playing. Florida has a really, really good team who is probably capable of beating any team in the country. We're going to have to play very well, focus on what we have to do really well in this game to have a chance to be successful, number one.

Number two, I think the opportunity to play for the SEC championship is something that players should be very motivated to try to do. The thing that I talk to the players about is there's not very many teams that go undefeated in college football. There's only a few each year. Do you have to have a loss, since we're using the word 'reinvigorate' yourself, do you have to have a loss to be able to do that as a player or can you stay focused, can you keep the intensity, can you continue to create the right habits in practice, in preparation so that you have an opportunity to go out and play well regardless of the grind of the season, regardless of how many games you won?

You got to focus on what's in front of you because at this point in the season it's like the Playoffs, it's like a new season. What you did during the season really doesn't have any influence on the outcome of what you do moving forward. You have to have the maturity to understand that and stay focused on what you need to do to continue to play well and think that the people you're going to play against at this time of the season are going to be the best players you played against all year long.

KEVIN TRAINOR: Coach Saban, thank you for your time today.

NICK SABAN: Thank you. Appreciate you.

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