

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Florida vs Alabama

Sunday, December 13, 2020

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Dan Mullen

Florida Gators

CHUCK DUNLAP: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to SEC championship week. This is Chuck Dunlap with the SEC, who will moderate this call. Each coach will be with us for 20 minutes.

We'll begin with Dan Mullen with the Eastern Division champion Florida Gators.

Coach, congratulations. Welcome to SEC championship game week. If you could start us off with some general thoughts as you prepare to take on Alabama in the championship game on Saturday.

DAN MULLEN: Well, I know we're excited for this. When you start off every year, your goal is to win the East, have an opportunity to come play in this game.

I mean, there's no bigger championship game than the SEC championship game. I know for a lot of our guys, it will be their first opportunity to play in the game. They're excited to go see the atmosphere, have the opportunity to win the conference championship Saturday.

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

Q. Now that you've had a chance to dig in a little bit on Alabama, a few thoughts maybe what really jumps out.

DAN MULLEN: Obviously they got talent at every position all over the field. Not a lot of weaknesses in any aspect of their game. Obviously they can put up a lot of points offensively. They can do it through the running game, they can do it through the short passing game with getting the ball to their athletes in space, letting them go make big plays, or they can do it with shots deep down the field. They do a great job protecting the quarterback, and let him take those deep shots down the field.

Defensively solid up front at the linebacker level and on the back end. Just great athletes all the way around. There's



a reason they're the No. 1 team in the country. You see it on film, how they play, how they execute.

Q. I'm sure you could hold a symposium on this. If you had to pick one quality in Nick Saban-coached teams, a common thread, what would it be?

DAN MULLEN: Talent. They got a lot of talent.

Q. You've certainly been asked plenty about your guy. What do you see when you look at Mac Jones?

DAN MULLEN: He's a guy that has had a great year. Very similar to Kyle. Does a great job managing their offense, distributing the ball to all the different play-makers, getting them in the right plays at the right time, taking what the defense gives him.

He's had a great season.

Q. Can I ask you about how you overcome any sort of I guess, for lack of a better phrase, awe factor when you're facing Alabama? They've been there so often. All your guys know what Alabama is.

DAN MULLEN: Well, I think guys come to Florida, our guys think they're pretty good players, too. I think they're going to be excited for this opportunity to go compete. Our guys are competitors. They love playing the big games. I think they're going to be excited for this opportunity.

Q. Obviously you're a great offensive mind. What do you see in Steve Sarkisian, what he's brought to this Alabama offense?

DAN MULLEN: I think he does a good job of utilizing his personnel. Offensively one of the big things you want to be able to do is utilize your personnel, make sure you're putting guys in position to make plays, utilize your play-makers to take advantage of opportunities, opportunities to get them one-on-one. I think he does a great job with that, of utilizing all the different personnel, whether it's their wideouts, and just getting the ball. Like I said, getting the ball underneath or deep down the field, mixing the tight ends in to make sure you respect them.



Obviously utilizing the great offensive line, their backs in the running game. I think he does a really good job of utilizing his personnel.

Q. How do you think your team is going to respond coming off the game you had last night against LSU?

DAN MULLEN: I mean, hey, that was last night's game. We get the opportunity to go compete for a championship.

I think our guys are going to be excited to go play in this game. I expect us to have a great week of practice, have a lot of energy, have a lot of excitement. This is what you work for: the opportunity to go play in this game. I don't know how much of an effect that will have on them.

Q. Could you update us to the extent that you can on your injury situation, particularly Kyle Pitts?

DAN MULLEN: Yeah, I mean, he didn't practice last week. We'll see how it goes. We don't practice till tomorrow. But talking to our trainers, they expect him to be cleared to play this week.

We'll see. Banged-up team, which that happens this time of year. But in meeting with the trainers, they feel there's a good chance we could get some guys back on Saturday. The opportunity for Shawn Davis to come back, Jeremiah Moon to come back. Let me think. Nay'Quan Wright should be back for us. We still expect to be without David Reese. Ty'Ron Hopper was out last game. We expect to have him back. Marlon Dunlap got banged up last week. We expect to have him back this week, as well.

Q. I know this has been kind of an awkward year, to say the least. The way your team responded after that first loss against Texas A&M, I realize it was a long layoff, could you take anything away from that experience that helped you into the SEC championship?

DAN MULLEN: Well, I think our guys just take in the adversity we've faced throughout the entire year. I mean, it's been a long year, playing a tough schedule. We had the layoff in the middle of it.

I mean, having to deal with reduced numbers because of injuries, being down a bunch at different times. To be honest with you, like I said, our guys have responded well to all the different adversities all year long.

Hopefully coming off that loss yesterday we'll be able to look at some things, get some things cleaned up, look at the things we did well, things we did poorly, opportunities

we missed during the course of that game, and come out there and play better next week.

Q. What impresses you most about the Alabama defense?

DAN MULLEN: Like I said, they got talent on every level. They've got their big, physical, athletic defensive line. Their linebackers can cover and run sideline to sideline to make plays. They have play-makers on the back end.

They do a good job. They know the system. They've got a very veteran group, it looks like. So it will be a good challenge.

Q. Obviously this week coming off a loss, a lot of people are going to be looking at Alabama as the favorite in this game. How do you feel like your guys are going to take the underdog role, something they haven't been in this season?

DAN MULLEN: I don't think they pay attention to that stuff, whether we're the favorite or the underdog. They're looking at a team, knowing we have to play an excellent football team in Alabama, knowing they're going to have to come out, and play a great game. This time of year is when you want to play your absolute best football. I know they're going to be excited to do that.

Q. Obviously you talked about how this team responded to the first loss. You were part of the last team that won an SEC championship at Florida in 2008. Everyone from that team talks about that practice after the Ole Miss game, that was one of the best week of practices ever had at Florida. What was special about that week and what do your guys have to do to have a week like that?

DAN MULLEN: Well, I mean, that was a really good football team. I think there are a lot of guys, they had a goal of going undefeated that year. They were really disappointed when that happened. They felt like they lost to a team that was better than them. That was a spirited, spirited week of practice. That was early in the season. I mean, you're a little bit fresher, a little bit healthier at that time of year to have those types of practices.

But, you know, I think the guys came out, there was great intensity, there was a great sense of purpose, of knowing that, hey, when you lose that game, it's a long, long road back that early in the season. Kind of similar to us losing the Texas A&M game earlier this year. We responded to that with kind of a week off.

Our guys responded well to that A&M game. Now it will be

interesting to see how we respond to this one with the opportunity this week to play a championship game and play in the SEC championship.

Q. Obviously you weren't thrilled with the red zone production last night on offense. After reviewing it, what was holding the unit back?

DAN MULLEN: There's a couple things. We made a couple of critical errors, some missed reads by the quarterback on a couple of key plays down there were one.

I mean, we went for it on a fourth and goal from the one, didn't get great movement. With a different play, combination of things, a fluke play that was an interception that they decided to make the call stand on kind of a fluke play, so...

I don't think there was one thing that when you go back and look at it in that game, you're not saying, Here is the one thing. There's a combination of different things.

Q. What jumps out to you, impresses you the most about DeVonta Smith?

DAN MULLEN: Obviously he's got electric, scheme-breaking speed. He's a great route runner. He's a very, very polished football player with running his routes, the discipline of his routes. Then he has hands that he makes some absolutely spectacular catches.

I think a pretty good combination. That makes him a very dangerous player out there on the field.

Q. A lot of people are looking at this game as a matchup of two guys who could potentially be Heisman finalists. For Kyle in particular, the type of season that he's had, do you feel like he's brought back the standard of what people expect should happen at the quarterback position for Florida?

DAN MULLEN: Sure, I think people have pretty high standards. I have high standards for our quarterback position. We're an offense that is very quarterback-based in that of what we put on them, what we ask the quarterback to do, very much a pro style offense in that way of what we ask the quarterback to do within our system.

So I think he's had a great year, and I know that certainly it excites Florida fans. The one thing you know about Gator fans, they love points and explosive offenses. I know they've enjoyed the points that we've put up this year.

Q. Have you had a chance to speak with Marco

Wilson, how he's doing after the last 24 hours?

DAN MULLEN: I talked to him. We spent some time with him last night after the game. Obviously I know he's disappointed. I mean, it's a shame. I went back to watch the play. He made the tackle. I mean, part of the football move, the kid's shoe was in his hand. He kind of threw it, jumped and celebrated with his teammates. It's pretty unfortunate in that situation. I don't think there was any intent to taunt. It wasn't like he was throwing it at their sidelines, doing any of that. It was a huge play, possibly a game-winning play. Threw a shoe, went to celebrate with his teammates. Unfortunately it was a penalty.

I think that stuff, really an unfortunate situation and a mistake instead of somebody really trying to disrespect the game or taunt the opponent or anything of that nature. You know what I mean?

Just really unfortunate it happened. But I know for him, I think he'll look at things and realize, Hey, that's certainly not the reason that we lost the game. There's many, many factors that went into that. That's just an unfortunate one in that situation. It was a key moment in the game.

Q. You made a move on the offensive line shifting some players around. What was the decision process there?

DAN MULLEN: I mean, we finally got some guys back healthy. Coming into the year, Ethan White was a starter. He's been hurt most of the year. So we had some different lineups, some different things we wanted to do. He's a guy that we originally expected to be our starting center coming into the year. Brett Heggie has done a pretty good job at center.

We're trying to move some guys around to get everybody on the field, see the different combinations now that we have people healthy. We had some guys healthy on the offensive line to see how that played out.

Q. It wasn't so much about performance during the game, just you had guys back to 100%?

DAN MULLEN: Yeah, I mean, it's that. Then as you go, we're looking at what combination was working best. Kind of a lot of times how we do things. You try to find something you like during the course of the game, then stick with it. It was more that maybe than anything else. It was something we knew going into the game that, Hey, this is the first time we have some guys healthy, ready to go. We'll try some different combinations.

Q. Will you still work on that this week?



DAN MULLEN: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Q. I'd like to know, what do you like most about your team heading into this SEC championship game?

DAN MULLEN: I think the resiliency they've shown throughout the course of this year. It's been a very, very difficult year with everything that's going on. To win the SEC East and play in the SEC championship game, in a year the first time in history you're playing ten conference games in the league.

The resiliency to make it there. We've played seven straight games after a long layoff due to COVID. Just the resiliency our team has shown throughout the entire course of the season to kind of keep battling, keep coming back, keep making plays.

I'm proud of everything they've done to give us this opportunity. I can't wait to watch them go enjoy the moment and go have fun on Saturday in the championship game.

Q. From a physicality standpoint, how different of what you have seen on a week in, week out basis, you mentioned going seven straight weeks, how different is it in your world to see the wear and tear on your team seven consecutive weeks?

DAN MULLEN: I mean, it takes a toll. You have guys that you have the COVID issues, you have the opt-out issues, you've got the injury issues. It certainly makes it a challenge in all the different phases, rotation on offense, defense, as well as special teams, of just finding the different rotations, different opportunities.

Guys have really stepped up. Guys have taken advantage of opportunities they had throughout the year. I'm always happy to see when guys have an opportunity, they jump up and take advantage of that opportunity.

CHUCK DUNLAP: That's going to wrap you up, Coach. Thank you.

DAN MULLEN: Thanks. Go Gators.

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