

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Florida vs Alabama

Thursday, December 17, 2020

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Dan Mullen

Florida Gators

KEVIN TRAINOR: Welcome to today's 2020 SEC championship coaches press conference.

We are ready with the SEC Eastern Division champion Florida Gators. Florida enters Saturday's game with a record of 8-2 and ranks seventh in the College Football Playoff rankings.

We're joined by Head Coach Mullen. We'll ask Coach Mullen to make an opening statement, then take questions.

DAN MULLEN: Our team obviously very excited for this opportunity to play in the championship game. Having been there on several occasions before as a coach, the environment, the stage you're on, competing for a championship in the best conference in college football is a great opportunity. I know we're excited for this chance, this opportunity, and the opportunity to go play a great team in Alabama.

KEVIN TRAINOR: At this time we'll take questions.

Q. Obviously since Nick Saban took over at Alabama, incredibly dominating run in such a tough conference. What is it like to go against him as long as you have? Obviously a lot of coaches haven't survived in this Saban era. What is it like to go against him and what is it going to take to bring him down, make the conference a little more competitive?

DAN MULLEN: I mean, he's done a great job of building the program. They do a really good job with a great recruiting base, getting really good players. I mean, everything you know about them, they've built the program around what he believes in. Look, they've put the resources in behind it with the stadium, with their football facilities, with their staffing. It's paid off for them, the university. They do a great job. They run a great football program.



I guess I've survived because I'm still here. But to get there, I don't know that it is knock them off or replace them.

I don't know that they're going to go anywhere. It's the opportunity to go compete with them, get up to their level, be competitive with them year in and year out is the goal more than trying to say that they're going to disappear. You just want to get up to their level and go compete on the same level as they are, and then go compete with them on a yearly basis.

Q. How are you able to get your players to zone back in after a loss and get them to be on the same page? How do you get them to come out and play for you?

DAN MULLEN: The competitiveness edge of these guys. We have competitive guys. Each week is a new opportunity, a new challenge in itself.

Whatever happens the week before, you can enjoy that on a Saturday night or you can be upset on a Saturday night, one or the other. But on Sunday morning, none of that really matters any more. You're back to work, back on to the next week, back on to the next challenge.

I think that's kind of easier. It might sound like coach talk, but there's reality when you're a competitor to that. You're on to the next one. Win or lose, you want to win the next one.

I'll be honest with you, Saturday night we're either going to be really celebrating in our locker room, happy, or we'll be sad in our locker room. Sunday morning we're on to the next one. That's how it is. That's what you do as a competitor.

Q. How much will this game be a litmus test for where you are as a program?

DAN MULLEN: I don't know if one game ever judges. The fact that we're in this game I think this year of going through this season, getting to this game, is a bigger test than one game. I mean, we come here to build a program, you want to consistently compete for championships. The fact we got here shows we can get here.



With the program, it's going to be a bigger test of are you there for consecutive years, multiple years, how often you get there. That's kind of the judge in the program.

You know what, come out there, whatever the result of the program is I don't think judges, whatever the result of the game is, doesn't have a lot to say completely about the program. We still got a lot of work to do with building a program to the consistent level we want to go do it, do it over a long period of time.

A win on Saturday night doesn't mean we've arrived in any way, shape or form.

Q. You don't have many holes in your head coaching résumé. Beating Alabama and Nick, 0-9. How much do you relish the opportunity to match wits with him and maybe even get one of those wins?

DAN MULLEN: It would be huge. Like you said, at Mississippi State we had a couple times we were right there, had opportunities to win in close games with them. Weren't able to pull it out at the time at Mississippi State. First time playing here at Florida.

Yeah, you know what, it would be great. I don't view it in terms of that. I view it it would be great in terms of this year's team for us to go win an SEC championship, it would be really special for all the work that these guys have put in over the course of this year.

Q. I know you were in your first year at Mississippi State the year that 'Bama beat Florida in the SEC title game. It sort of launched the 'Bama dynasty under Nick. Looking back at that game, I'm sure you probably watched it, did you ever imagine that game would be such a landscape-changing game not only for Florida but for Alabama as well?

DAN MULLEN: No, I mean, who knows. I would have said it was really the year before that, the 2008 championship game. I think they were the No. 1 team, Florida was No. 2 that year. I would say that more started the run for them of being a consistent program, getting there on a consistent basis to go compete for championships.

Like I said, I think you could go back even the year before that that they got the opportunity to go play in the game, I know, I was there, Florida won that game. I think that was kind of the launch point of their consistency and their consistent performance of opportunities.

I mean, obviously haven't been there every year since. They missed several of them. When you look and you identify programs, like I always say, it's the consistency of

doing it. It's not, I was there once, twice, three times. It's the consistency of your opportunity to go compete for championships.

Q. If you could, talk about the week of practice, Kyle Pitts in particular. How has the week of practice gone?

DAN MULLEN: It's gone pretty good. I think I really like the energy our guys have had this week. I don't want to say probably the -- it's been a long season, a big grind. We've been down so many players at different times during the year. It's been a challenge.

But I will say I think the energy level of practice is the highest it's been in quite a while this week. I think that's just the excitement the guys have for the opportunity to go play in this game.

Kyle has had a great week of practice. We'll see. Hopefully he's able to play. Hopefully he's able to get cleared to play on Saturday.

Q. Jeremiah Moon and Shawn Davis, how are those guys progressing with their injuries? Will they be available Saturday?

DAN MULLEN: Yeah, they're working hard to get back out there. We'll know on Saturday who will be available for us. Those guys have been working hard to try to recover and get back. Like I said, we have a lot of guys banged up this year, with it being a long season. But that's a normal thing. I guess this year is probably a little bit different than other years with everything going on. But that's just where you're at.

Those guys have been working hard to try to get themselves ready for Saturday.

Q. Usually you hear defensive guys say that we want to make the quarterback beat us with his arm. That sounds like something you don't want to do with Mac Jones. Different issues in the secondary, how much more important will it be Saturday night for that front seven to get in there and fluster Jones?

DAN MULLEN: I think always. What you don't want to do is let a quarterback basically play seven-on-seven. I mean, you go watch, there's a lot of quarterbacks, makes life a little bit easier when no one is touching you.

Up front it's important to kind of try to change up the looks. You got on them on the back end, but you got to get pressure up front to not let them just stand back there, can't just let them stand back there and have all day to just kind of take his time, go through every read, get to fourth,

fifth progressions in reads. You have got to get after the quarterback a little bit, get him out of rhythm early in the game.

Q. We've talked about you facing Coach Saban-led teams for a number of years. This defense facing a Nick Saban defense, what are some characteristics that you've seen over the years? How does this defense compare to ones you've already played against in the past?

DAN MULLEN: We haven't played them in a couple, three years, so...

I think last time I played them was 2017. Trying to think of that defense. I think generally when you see them, I think they do a really good job, very sound schematically. I think obviously Nick is an excellent defensive coach. They have a good scheme. Know the scheme inside and out. Does a good job of putting players in position to make plays. Gives you multiple looks. Changes the looks up front with the different fronts for being a three-down and a four-down team.

He has several different nickel and dime blitz packages that they put together that cause you great challenges back there. Then obviously they always have a ton of talented guys. They have talent on every level, talent in the front linebacker, the secondary.

I mean, every time you're going to play them, I mean, it's always a great challenge when you play them defensively.

Q. You were the one that told us early on in the season how much you felt offenses would be ahead of defenses this year in the SEC. When you look at Alabama's defense this year, how different is that defense from what you've seen on tape since September, early October, versus the defense you see now?

DAN MULLEN: I mean, I think I was pretty right on early in the season. I think everybody sees that now, that you're pretty right on with it (smiling).

You're looking at guys that are more in the football mode, more comfortable with what's going on, they're comfortable with the schemes, all the different pattern reads they do, putting themselves in position. The big one is guys being comfortable tackling, where you probably didn't get as much of that as you normally would. Now you kind of get yourself into game mode. I think they're playing at a much higher level now than they did earlier in the year.

Q. Listening to your players this week, it's been pretty

clear you have them understanding the importance of this game. Has that been really a big point of emphasis, to get them to refocus and understand even though some things may not be dangling there, this game is absolutely huge in terms of career projection, all that stuff?

DAN MULLEN: I think this game is such a big game. Having played in it before, I think you realize that the stage that it's on, the scene that it is in Atlanta for the SEC championship game is such a big deal.

I mean, like I said, maybe with the exception of the National Championship game, now the Playoffs, but even before, this was always the biggest game of the year in college football.

The opportunity to go out there to play, I think you got to go out there, enjoy the moment, you got to be a guy that wants to play in big games, and be on big stages. I know our guys do. I think that's where the excitement comes from. These guys have worked for this opportunity. They want the opportunity to go play on this stage.

Q. With the national signing day in the rearview mirror, getting ready for an SEC championship game no less, how difficult was that to juggle this week?

DAN MULLEN: I mean, it was different, I'll tell you that. It was different. Your mind racing, you're not getting a whole lot of sleep, just trying to go through every scenario. I was talking to one of my friends in the NFL, I said, Imagine playing like the NFC Championship game the week of the draft. You got to be kidding me (laughter).

It was a unique challenge this year, but this year has brought so many different unique challenges. You've kind of learned to adjust to them, find the best way to adjust, maybe try to create new ways to think. Sometimes just kind of work your tail off. I guess we were able to get a little more sleep when we were shut down last spring than you normally would with missing spring practice. We're making up for that time now of not getting any of it, making sure you're prepared to get everything done.

Q. Can you talk about the magnitude of this game. Alabama has been there a bunch. How do you handle your guys? Is it through walk-through on Friday or on Saturday morning, Hey, take it in now, be nervous now, and not get lost in the moment of how big the stage is?

DAN MULLEN: We're going to do our regular routine. I mean, these guys came to Florida to play in this game. We've talked about make sure you enjoy it, enjoy the



atmosphere, the experience. But understand this is why you came here, not just to play in this game, to go win this game.

I mean, that's been our approach all week, regular game week, but make sure you enjoy it but understand that the purpose is we're here to win the game.

Q. You had a shuffle on the offensive line last week. Is that something that continues in prep for Alabama this late in the season?

DAN MULLEN: Oh, yeah. It happened because we had a bunch of injuries. We had injuries, that hurt our depth. Now that our depth's back a little bit, we're a little bit healthier on the offensive line, it allows us to do that.

Q. Were you surprised at all that you only dropped one spot to No. 7 in the Playoff poll or do you think that was a testament to playing all the games?

DAN MULLEN: I'm not in the room, so that would be a question for all of them. I think it showed respect for us and for this league, the qualities of the opponents in this league, the grind and the demand of playing, this is our 11th SEC game in a season. I think that's certainly a challenge. Other conferences haven't been through that.

That would be my guess. I'm not on the committee, so that would be a question for them. But I think it shows some of their respect for the guys going out there and trying to play.

I mean, obviously I'm not knocking other teams or other schools, but a team that has played on game number six or game number seven is going to be fresher, healthier, this late in the season probably have more depth than a team that's on game 11 that is trying to have to walk through early in the week because guys aren't ready, guys are banged up, you're trying to keep everybody healthy.

I think everybody that knows the game of football understands that, people that really know the game of football understand that. That would be my guess. I don't know. That would be a question for the committee.

Q. Obviously a two-loss team has never made the College Football Playoff. Obviously with your second loss, if you go ahead and win the SEC title, do you feel like there should be any question about whether you should be in the Playoff even though it would be unprecedented?

DAN MULLEN: We'll think about that on Saturday night after we win. I think LSU made it when there were only two teams with two losses, if I'm not mistaken. Does that

sound about right? It was back in one of those years with the BCS. I thought they had two losses. Maybe I'm off on that one.

Let's see. We'll worry about winning on Saturday night because that's all we can control. What happens after that, we'll see what happens next.

Q. How will you expect your defense to match up against that offense at Alabama?

DAN MULLEN: I mean, you have to be sound, be assignment sound. They got a lot of weapons all over the field, in the pass game, in the run game. You got to be sound, understand your scheme, and then you got to have 11 guys running the ball as hard as they can every single play.

They're going to make plays. You can't worry about the play before, you just worry about the next play, being sound on that next play, force them to have to execute for an entire game.

Q. You mentioned strength of schedule earlier in the season on being an important factor in a team's ranking. With that being said, does the SEC champion deserve to be in the final four?

DAN MULLEN: It would be hard to say that the SEC champion doesn't. I mean, this is our third top-10 game of the year. This is Alabama's third top-10 game of the year off current rankings.

I don't know other people that are on game number three of top-10 teams in other leagues. I guess it would be hard to say. Again, I'm not on the committee. That would be a question for them.

Q. Your first season, we saw some new looks when you got to that Peach Bowl versus Michigan, the jet sweeps. Without giving away your game plan, is Saturday an opportunity to really sort of open the playbook up, show stuff maybe nobody has seen before on tape?

DAN MULLEN: We're going to go back, I'm going back, kind of put in some of the wishbone stuff we did back in 2010.

Q. You promised that the other day and didn't deliver.

DAN MULLEN: Got to keep you on your toes (laughter).

I think sometimes when you have a bowl game, you have a little bit more time to prepare and experiment with some

new things. Some of those things are things you're looking at long-term into the future. In a normal year in a bowl game, sometimes you have three, four weeks to prepare. Part of your practice is experimenting with things you want to look at in the future, then you incorporate getting them into a game. This has been much more of a just regular game week.

KEVIN TRAINOR: Coach, thank you for joining us today. Good luck on Saturday.

DAN MULLEN: Thank you. Thanks, everybody. Go Gators.

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