

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Georgia vs Alabama

Thursday, December 2, 2021

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Alabama Crimson Tide Nick Saban

Workout Day Press Conference

KEVIN TRAINOR: We're now joined by the head coach of the SEC western division champion Alabama Crimson Tide, head coach Nick Saban. Alabama entered Saturday's game 11-1 and ranked No. 3 in the College Football Playoff selection committee rankings. We'll ask Coach Saban for opening comments, and then we'll take your questions.

NICK SABAN: First of all, I'd like to congratulate Kirby and Georgia's football team for winning the East. They played tremendous football all season long, probably the most consistent team, the most dominant team all year. I think that's because of the competitive character they have, the great coaching staff they have, and the great job they've done together as a team.

It's certainly a privilege and an honor for us to be in the SEC Championship Game. We think that's one of the best competitive venues in college football. It's certainly going to be a great challenge for our team to play what I feel is probably the best team in the country in this particular game. So we're looking forward to that opportunity.

Q. Is there an update on Brian Robinson, where he is this week in practice?

NICK SABAN: We're doing some things with him today in practice and see how he responds. So it's going to be day to day. We'll just have to see how it goes.

Q. For Darrian Dalcourt's ankles, where he's at heading into this game?

NICK SABAN: Pretty much the same situation that B. Rob's in. He's been able to practice on a limited basis. We'll see what he can do today, how he responds to it, and it's going to be a day-to-day situation as well.



Q. Make it one more injury question with Jalyn Armour-Davis and how he's gotten through the week.

NICK SABAN: He's been able to do just a limited amount of things. He doesn't play a position where, if he's not full speed, he can be expected to play, but we're still going to sort of look at him on a day-to-day basis too and see how he progresses. So we'll just have to wait and see.

Q. Nick, given the way that this game's kind of played out and the talent of both quarterbacks on Georgia's roster, have you prepared for both of them for this game? And in addition, just what does each of them have to offer in terms of skill set, in your opinion?

NICK SABAN: I think both the guys do a really, really good job with their offense. I don't think their offense changes significantly. I think Stetson Bennett is very athletic. He extends plays. He's quick, fast, and has made plays with his feet probably a little more.

But their offense doesn't change. Both guys are very talented. Both guys do a really good job of sort of executing their offense. They run the football effectively. They have a great balance. They have good play action passes. They've got good skill guys outside. And they've got a good effective scheme when they do have to throw the ball, whether it's third down, two-minute, whatever.

I don't see that they're going to do different things with these guys in the game.

Q. We haven't talked as much about your relationship with Kirby. I guess it's getting to be old hat, the fourth time you guys are going against each other. I'm just wondering, in a business that is so wickedly competitive, does any part of you been able to enjoy what he's been able to do at Georgia? You know, pretty much using your blueprint over there, the things he learned under you, and now he's obviously trying to do that to use those principles to finally defeat you.

NICK SABAN: Kirby's done a marvelous job. He did an outstanding job in all the years we were together. I don't know, nine or ten years. It was a long time that we worked



together. He did as good a job as anybody that I've ever had on our staff. I knew that when he got his opportunity to be a head coach, he would do a really good job.

He's bright. He's smart. He's enthusiastic. He does a good job in relationships with players. He's a good recruiter. So he's done a great job there.

Look, I'm always very gracious in terms of the gratitude that I have for what guys did when they were with us, and I understand that they do it well because they want opportunities themselves. And it's always good to, A, appreciate what they did for us, but also there's some pride in it that they have gone on and done very well in building their own program. Kirby has just done a fantastic job.

Q. Coach Saban, you caught Kirby in year two in the National Championship and you faced him early in his career two years later. What you seen, how has he developed as a coach the last couple years in putting Georgia in a spot that it hasn't been in really since 1982?

NICK SABAN: Well, they were in the spot two years ago or whenever it was, 2017, whenever we played in the National Championship Game. So I think they have been in this spot, and I think Kirby's done a really good job the whole time he's been there.

He's got really good players now. They're really well coached. They've been the most consistent team all year long, which is a tribute to he and his staff and being able to have a sense of purpose in what their team is out to try to accomplish and do.

So I can't really point to anything because I've always thought they did a great job. I thought it was a great game that we had -- every game that we've had has been a great game. I've had the utmost respect for Kirby and his team in those games, and I certainly have it in this game.

Q. Going back to injuries, just how has JoJo Earle progressed, and do you have an update on Robbie Ouzts?

NICK SABAN: Robbie Ouzts has a stress fracture in his foot. So he's not going to be in the game.

JoJo is making progress. I don't think enough to be able to play in the game at this point, but probably will be back sometime shortly.

Q. Have you made a decision who will be the holder for the field goals and extra points? And what does Georgia do to provide so many opportunities for the

freshman tight end Brock Bowers, and what are the difficulties guarding him?

NICK SABAN: He's an outstanding player, no doubt. Probably as good a tight end as we've faced all year. I think they have three really good tight ends. He's probably the best receiver although they're all very capable, good players. He's difficult to guard. He's got good size. He's very athletic, great hands, good route runner. So he's very challenging to guard.

Any time you've got big guys that have that kind of skill level, it's harder for smaller guys to cover them. It's harder to find bigger guys that are athletic enough to cover them.

From a holder standpoint, I'm going to listen to the kicker. It's who he's most comfortable with and who he has confidence in in terms of getting the ball down. So that decision will get made based on what our kicker thinks, what Will thinks.

Q. I wanted to ask you about a couple of players that have been in the program for quite some time, in LaBryan Ray and Kendall Randolph, and what they've meant to you in your program throughout the years.

NICK SABAN: Those two guys have done really well in the program, not only on the football field but they both developed very nicely personally and done a good job in school. Both these guys have had really good years and made solid contributions in a very positive way to our team this year.

LaBryan has played -- has really had to overcome a lot of injuries in his career here, but he's playing probably the best football of his career right now because he's healthy.

Kendall has been a role player for us and always willing to buy in and do whatever he can to help the team. So those guys have been real solid people in our program, and they've been really solid performers for us.

Q. Another Stetson Bennett question for you. I know when you played in Tuscaloosa last year, I believe it was his fourth career start. He's started a lot of games now since then. I was just wondering, whenever you watch him on tape now, is there anything about him right now, the way he performs, versus what you saw that game last season?

NICK SABAN: I think he's playing with a lot of confidence, and obviously the experience that he's gained through having additional starts, having more time in the offense. He does a really good job of executing what they do. He doesn't make a lot of mistakes. He's accurate with the ball.

He can extend plays. But I think he's really smart. He sees what the defense is going to do. He gets the ball out of his hands very quickly to the right guys for the most part.

And I think those things sort of just develop with knowledge and experience. I can definitely see how that's benefited him in materials of the consistency that he's played with this year because he's been outstanding.

Q. Playing off an answer from earlier, what did Billy Napier bring to your program that maybe foreshadowed his rise in the coaching ranks?

NICK SABAN: Billy did an outstanding job for us. He was a very good coach. He was a great recruiter. He had great relationships with the players. He was a good teacher on the field. Hard worker, great character, good personality, very, very good family.

I mean, there's nothing bad that I could think of to say about Billy Napier in terms of what he did here. No surprise to me, because he's a very well organized guy and does due diligence before he makes any decision about anything. Very calculated in terms of how he tries to do things in a very positive way for his organization.

So not a surprise to me that he did really, really well when he got a head coaching job. I think he'll continue to do well.

Q. Coach, we've seen you adapt and change over the years with the game, whether it's strategies, things like that. What about adapting and adjusting to teams and their personalities in terms of your ability to relate, motivate maybe this year's team being a little bit younger and less experiences than the group you had last year, which seemed to be a little bit more self-governing?

NICK SABAN: I think you make a good point. I think, when you have an older team, you have a little more maturity in terms of leadership, guys buying in, guys understanding exactly and believing in and trusting him in what they need to do to be successful. I think sometimes that can be a little bit of a work in progress when you have younger guys as they develop into that, even though those older guys that you had last year, they went through that same sort of process when they were younger players.

And I do think the approach is a little different in terms of the patience you have to have and just trying to be a good teacher. Every opportunity you have to try to get these guys to learn the lessons that's going to help them in life as well as going to help them be better players.

I think, when they see that their behavior, the habits that they create are going to be helpful in them being successful, whether it's personally, academically, or athletically, they kind of mature and get into it and understand what it takes. They develop.

I think our team has developed. A lot of young players on our team have developed this year, but I think we need to continue to work in that direction.

Q. Coach, the players on the team have been and just continue to be excited for Trey Sanders getting on the field. When you watch him in practice, whether it's in drills, different situations, what has his mentality, his mindset been when he touches the football?

NICK SABAN: I think Trey has been through a lot. I think everybody knows the adversity that he's had to overcome with an injury, car accident. And I do think that it took a while for him, A, to get confidence in himself physically that he could go out there and do the things that he's capable of that he could do in the past.

But I also think that the opportunities he's had to play this year, the role that he has, a more significant role now, has also helped him develop confidence. And knowing that we trust and believe that he can go out there and play well and do a good job I think is also something that always helps a player in terms of the responsibility and accountability that he takes to go out there and do his job well. I think he's done a good job of that for us, and we have a lot of confidence in him moving forward.

Q. I wondered if you had any thoughts on Brian Kelly coming to LSU. Also, LSU and Florida are two of ten schools in the SEC that have changed coaches since 2019. The only ones that haven't are you, Georgia, A&M, and Kentucky, as you probably know. I was just wondering what concerns maybe you have for the coaching profession or the way things are heading with people's patience for trying to build a program.

NICK SABAN: Well, to be honest with you, I haven't really thought a lot about it. I think everybody has got to make their choices and decisions and have the freedom to do that relative to what they choose to do professionally.

I've always had a lot of respect for the coaches that you mentioned in terms of the job that they've done, where they've been. But comments on -- I haven't really thought about it. We're trying to get ready to play a game here, a very challenging game. I haven't really thought a lot about what everybody else is out there doing, but trying to focus on what we need to do here.

Q. The offense under Todd Monken in his second year, how does it look different than last year, and certainly the Georgia offense, as you saw it in '17 and '18 when you went up against them?

NICK SABAN: They're very good offensively. They've got a lot of diversity in what they do. They do a good job of utilizing the personnel that they have in various positions. They've got a lot of good skill players, a lot of good running backs.

I think he does a good job of quarterback efficiency in terms of what he does, the system that he has, and those guys have responded very well at the quarterback position as well.

But I just think it's not a different offense. I just think it's an offense that is a very difficult offense to defend but one that they just do a really good job of executing. You can tell that there's been seasoning with the players, and their knowledge and experience with what's expected of them has really improved as they've grown in the offense. They're very, very good in terms of what they do.

I think it's a good system. It's well-implemented, and the players do a really good job of executing it.

Q. It's not very often that your team is considered an underdog, but now you're going up against No. 1 Georgia. So how is your team dealing with the pressure of playoff implications already coming in with one loss? And then kind of making this a must-win situation for you guys.

NICK SABAN: I think what our players need to do is just focus on playing one play at a time, trying to win as many plays in a game as they can, don't worry about the scoreboard, don't worry about what the outcome means because we just need to focus on what we need to do to play well in this game, as you've said, against the No. 1 team in the country and a very, very good team.

It's going to take a very good effort by a lot of people to be able to win those plays. So that's what we're focused on here now. We're focused on what do we have to do to try to get the outcome rather than worrying about what the outcome is, which as you say, creates a lot of anxiety. So that's basically how we're trying to approach it.

Q. I wanted to ask about kind of the strategies in building the program and how it's shifted towards maybe favoring the transfer portal, in that in previous years you weren't really a big coach in that area, but you've had great success with players recently, with Landon Dickerson and Jameson Williams and Henry.

I'm just curious what sort of utility do you see in it now, and how does that change the way you approach roster management?

NICK SABAN: I think you have to look at it as, whether you agree with it or disagree with it, you have to look at it as a source of bringing talented players to your team. My philosophy has been, if a player can help our team be more successful and he's got the right kind of character and attitude and he wants to buy into the things the way we try to do them here to help him be successful, then we're certainly going to consider every avenue of how you can bring players to your team.

We still believe in young players that we can develop in our program, but at the same time, I think you have to consider this no different than a free agent pool if you were in the NFL. It's a pool of players that are available that can help your team.

Q. If you had the choice, would you select a defensive lineman that can rush up the middle, or is it more effective on the edge?

NICK SABAN: I think whatever's more effective in getting to the quarterback. It depends in some cases on the quarterback. When guys are really good runners, you want to make sure you can contain them. And other guys, maybe you can have a little different approach if they're not as mobile or whatever.

I don't really have a choice. You just like to have effective pressure when you choose to pressure. Hopefully, it affects the quarterback.

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