

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Alabama vs Georgia

Sunday, November 26, 2023

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Alabama Crimson Tide

Nick Saban

Press Conference

CHUCK DUNLAP: We'll continue our call with Alabama head coach Nick Saban.

Coach, good afternoon, thank you for being with us. While we're waiting for questions, would you mind commenting on your team throughout the regular season and as you prepare to face Georgia in Atlanta for the SEC Championship on Saturday.

NICK SABAN: This is a tremendous opportunity for our team. They sort of created that for themselves by making a tremendous amount of improvement throughout the season. I'm very proud of the transformation of our team from the beginning to the end, the hard work and preparation that our players have been focused on all year long.

Georgia obviously is to me the best team in the country. Got a great offensive team. They run the ball. Great passing game. Quarterback's really, really good. They got great running backs. Their defense is one of the best defenses in the country, probably the best defense in the SEC.

There's a lot of challenges relative to playing a great football team. The SEC Championship game is one of the best competitive venues I've ever been involved in. Our team is excited about having the opportunity they created for themselves to play one of the best teams in the country.

CHUCK DUNLAP: We'll begin with questions.

Q. It looked like Jase McClellan was on crutches after the game. Do you have an update?

NICK SABAN: He's had a little foot injury all year long. He tweaked it in the game. He'll be day to day this week. I can't tell you how much progress he'll make. Probably the



next 48 hours will tell us whether he'll make the kind of progress he needs to be able to practice some and play in the game.

Q. How have you seen this Georgia team change and evolve from the last time you played them two years ago?

NICK SABAN: Well, I haven't had a whole bunch of time to study them on both sides of the ball. I've seen them throughout the course of the year.

I think their defense is a lot like it's been in the past. They've got really good players. They've got a really good system. They do a good job of executing. They got good tackling, good secondary people.

Offensively they're running the ball very effectively. A lot of squeeze formations. Have a great play-action passing game off of that to go with the running game. Obviously with the quarterback and the receivers they have, they have an excellent passing game as well.

I don't see tremendous difference, but they certainly do a great job at utilizing the players that they have.

Q. We've talked a lot about how the progress of Jalen Milroe. He could have gone maybe a different way and taken the Texas game, not playing against Florida, had a negative impact on him. How did he handle that and how key was that kind of winning over the coaching staff and teammates?

NICK SABAN: I think his transformation at the quarterback position has helped us transform our entire offensive team. The confidence that he's playing with, the confidence that our players have in him. I think we've done a pretty good job of trying to utilize the skill set that he has.

He's learned that the most important thing at his position is to distribute the ball. He's done a really, really good job of that. I think that's really enhanced the transformation of our offensive team to be much more effective and productive.



Q. You've been obviously associated with this game since LSU knocked off Tennessee in 2001. Has this game evolved in any way? Do you think it would have the same magnitude next year once it gets into a 12-team Playoff? Will winning the SEC be as important next year as it is this year?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think winning the SEC is always a big thing. Ever since I've been in this league, when you played in this game, when maybe the Playoffs weren't the significant outcome that it is right now, it was still something special to be able to win the SEC.

I mean, this is a great league. There's a lot of good teams. For your team to get in the position to play another great team in this league... Most of the games we've been involved in involved great teams.

It means a lot to me. I think it means a lot to our players. I think it will mean a lot in the future, as well. I don't think whether there's four teams in the Playoffs or 12 teams in the Playoffs, I mean, this game has some significance in terms of what might happen in the Playoff, but that's not necessarily true all the time.

There is a significance to playing in the SEC Championship game.

Q. Two years ago you had a game at Auburn where you struggled for a lot of it before pulling it out. You turned around the next week and played well against Georgia. Are there lessons you can take from that week-to-week deal that you can use this week?

NICK SABAN: Well, we didn't sort of channel all the passion and the great execution in this last game. I think that was very similar to the game you're referring to a couple years ago.

To get our players to sort of have good perspective on building on the things they did well and improving the things we didn't do well so that we can channel our passion into positive execution on a more consistent basis. I think that was the focus a couple years ago, and certainly going to be the focus in this game.

Q. When you first hired Kirby back in the day, did you have a sense he would be a successful Division I head coach right away or soon into his career? Having done much of what he has accomplished in his career already, are you still kind of amazed at what he's been able to put together at Georgia?

NICK SABAN: I think to answer that honestly, I hired Kirby, he was really, really young. He was a position

coach and did a great job as a position coach. We elevated him to be the coordinator.

I kind of knew that he had great leadership qualities. That's why we made him coordinator. When he was a coordinator, he did a great job of managing that side of the ball. I knew he'd be an outstanding head coach someday.

It's phenomenal what he's been able to accomplish at Georgia. I mean, to win as many games in a row, win a couple championships, have another chance to do it again a third time, I mean, that's phenomenal.

It's phenomenal to win however many games - what is it, 29, I don't even know for sure - but how many games they've won in a row... We won 19 games in a row here twice. I know how hard that was. It's hard to sustain.

So he's done a phenomenal job of recruiting and developing players in the program. I think the result bears that out.

Q. I read where you said the games that haunt you the most are the lost championship games. Is that the case the last time you played Georgia in Indianapolis? If so, what in particular?

NICK SABAN: It was a great game. I don't know, I think we were at 18-13 with, I don't know, 10 or 11 minutes to go in the game. They just outplayed us tremendously in the last 10, 11 minutes of the game.

You always want to be able to finish. We lost on the last play of the game to Clemson way back when. I felt like I should have called timeout and didn't. So there's always things that haunt you when you don't have success.

They outplayed us the last 10, 11 minutes of the game. You always want your team to be able to finish.

Q. A lot of Kirby/Nick talk again. Kirby has accomplished an awful lot at Georgia, but he hasn't been able to beat you or Alabama in this game in particular. You see each other in the off-season. I know you to be a competitive guy. Is there any away-from-the-arena ragging about that? Is it a piece of motivation for you and your staff to hold sway in this game?

NICK SABAN: Well, they beat us in a national championship game the last time we played, so I don't know that one game is more important than the other.

Obviously whoever plays the best in this game will have the best chance to win. I have a lot of respect for Kirby.



We don't jostle about winning and losing, dog each other about it. I think I have respect for what he's been able to accomplish.

He did a great job for us when he was here. I just appreciate him a lot for the kind of person he is, kind of coach he is, kind of job he's done.

Q. It looked like Auburn's safety clapped (indiscernible) Seth McLaughlin into snapping the ball in the final drive. Did you see that? What can you do in the future to avoid that situation?

NICK SABAN: First of all, the defense is not allowed to clap. If that's what you're using as a cadence...

If what you say actually occurred, and I did see the film, then I'm not criticizing the officiating, but I'm saying that's supposed to be a penalty.

Q. Is there a thought of going towards maybe a silent count in that situation? Are you just relying on the officials to make the call there?

NICK SABAN: Look, we've gone to the silent count before, and that has its issues, too.

Look, you're not allowed to clap on defense. If you're using clap as your cadence, why would you change the cadence so that somebody does something they're not supposed to do on the other side of the ball? It doesn't make any sense to me.

We went silent at Texas A&M. We had nine false starts. It didn't work too well.

Q. Another Kirby question for you. Watching from afar, what would you say the area that he's grown the most in? How have you seen him implement what y'all do into Athens?

NICK SABAN: I can't answer the second part of your question because I don't see what they do every day. I do see the product they have on the field. Their players are well-coached. They play with really good discipline. They're focused on doing their job. They do it the right way. I assume that all those things are sort of coached into 'em and the players are taught and go out and respect what they need to do to be able to create value and success for themselves.

I can't answer that because I'm not there on a day-to-day basis. I don't really know how they do what they do. I know the finished product is really, really good.

Q. How does a talented tight end challenge a defense?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think first of all, tight ends are bigger people. When they're very athletic and very good receivers, it's a little bit like basketball in a way. If you have a really talented big guy, and he's athletic enough, you got to guard him with a smaller guy, that creates some advantages for the bigger guy. If you cover him with a bigger guy, and the bigger guy is not as athletic, that creates some problems, too.

I think it's a mismatch issue that comes from having guys that are really good blockers. If you have smaller guys guarding 'em, then you got a mismatch in the running game, too.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Carson Beck. What have you seen from him this season that impresses you?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think he does a really, really good job of executing their offense. He doesn't make very many bad reads. He throws the ball in the right place. He's very accurate with the ball. He throws it on time. He understands their offense very, very well. Executes the play that's called and distributes the call correctly, almost flawlessly.

CHUCK DUNLAP: That's going to wrap it up, coach. Thank you for your time today. Look forward to a great week.

NICK SABAN: Thank you. Appreciate it.

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