

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Alabama vs Georgia

Thursday, November 30, 2023

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Alabama Crimson Tide

Nick Saban

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll continue today's press conference with Alabama's head coach Nick Saban.

Coach Saban, we welcome you back to the SEC Championship game. If you could give us some opening remarks.

NICK SABAN: We're glad to be here. First of all I'd like to congratulate Kirby and the Georgia team for going through an undefeated season and winning the East. They certainly had a fantastic season. They've proven to be one of the best football teams in the country.

This is certainly a challenge for us to be able to compete in the SEC Championship game against such a quality team. I'd like to thank the Southeastern Conference for making this one of the greatest venues in college football, Mercedes-Benz Stadium, the people of Atlanta, all the people that do a lot of work to make this game a first-class event.

Our team is trying to focus on what they need to do to go play the kind of game that we'll need to play to beat a very, very good team - probably the best team we played all year.

I think the challenge for us, as a player, you got to be ready to play and assume that the guy you're playing against is the best player you played against all year. I think if you take that approach, channel your energy and enthusiasm into execution on the field, that will give you your best chance to be successful.

THE MODERATOR: We'll begin with questions.

Q. Looked like Caleb Downs played a bit of star in this past game. How has he handled learning and playing multiple roles? How has that helped the defense out?



NICK SABAN: We started doing that in the Kentucky game, especially when they played bigger people. He's handled it very, very well. Gives a little bigger body at star. A guy that can play the runs and stuff a little better. That was the thinking behind it. That's why we did it.

It's not been an issue at all for him and his learning curve.

Q. Jason McClellan, how has he progressed health-wise so far this week?

NICK SABAN: He's not been able to do a lot. We'll see how he does today, where he is. I would have to say he's probably questionable for the game at this point.

I think it's probably too early to tell.

Q. What do you want the committee to see about your team as they watch you on Saturday?

NICK SABAN: Look, we're not really worried about the committee. I'm not concerned about any of those things. I mean, we've got a big challenge here in terms of trying to play the best football that we can play and prepare our team to play the best that they can play.

I want our team to focus on the game because that's what we can control. We really can't control anything externally, but we can try to control how we play. I think that's the most important thing for us to be focused on right now.

Q. Jermaine Burton has been playing with a little bit of a chip on his shoulder, it seems. How important was it in the last two weeks to get him involved in the offense?

NICK SABAN: Well, he's been a big part of the offense all year long. He's played well all year long. I think you say a guy gets involved, but it's really reading the play based on the coverage. Sometimes one guys gets an opportunity to make a play, but sometimes it's somebody else. When he's had his opportunities, he's certainly taken advantage of them. We're happy to see that.



I think that he's an outstanding player. We want him to go in and stay focused on what he needs to do to do his job well in this game. He's been a great contributor to our offense, and he can make explosive plays. Hopefully we'll get some opportunities for him to do that in this game.

Q. Hello from Mexico. The question is simple: what is the most important thing in this week, the mental stuff or the physical stuff for your players? Could you say some words to all the Mexican fans of Crimson Tide. Gracias, coach.

NICK SABAN: Well, we thank everybody who supports Crimson Tide in Mexico and anyplace else in the country or the world for that matter. We appreciate your support.

I think both things are really, really important. I think at this time of the year players get a little tired, they get a little banged up, they get a little hurt up. The psychological part of being able to grind through that and have the mental toughness to stay focused on the things you need to do to play well, create the right habits in practice, prepare for the game like you need to, is a challenge. But I think it's very, very important.

I think it's very important to take care of yourself physically, not only on the field, but getting the right kind of rest, eating right, hydrating correctly. All those things contribute to how you can sustain performance in a game.

Q. You were kind of on the front end of this portal transfer, NIL a few years ago. Spring meetings you told us this was the world we might be getting into. How challenging is it to manage the portal, NIL, recruiting and roster management while you're preparing a championship game? Is this model sustainable?

NICK SABAN: I don't know if it's sustainable or not.

Look, I've always been in favor of the players having a better quality of life and sharing in some of the benefits. I think that if we could create competitive balance so it's the same pretty much for everybody so that one school can't choose to invest more than another and create a competitive imbalance. I think that's the major concern that I have. I do think it's a tough management.

We've been trying to focus on the game here. We're going to look to manage all those things when this game is over. But it's not easy. It's not easy to do. There's a lot of balls in the air. I'm sure players are thinking about a lot of things right now, too. Probably tough for them to manage.

Q. I wanted to ask what you said right after the Iron

Bowl, the dangers of winning a game like that. If you could further explain what you meant by that, maybe how the week of practice has gone as well.

NICK SABAN: Well, I think sometimes when you win and don't play like you'd like to have played, players aren't as interested in the why do we have to make these corrections, why is this so important. You have to have a certain maturity about you as a competitor to understand that there's lessons to be learned when you win as well as when you lose.

When you lose, everybody's really, like, humiliated and really wants to go focus on all the things they need to do to play better because they don't feel good about themselves. Having the maturity to be able to manage and learn and build on the good things that you did as well as still be able to learn the lessons that go with some of the mistakes that you made, I think that's the key to the drill.

I think our players have handled that pretty well this week.

Q. You've been very vocal this season about the support that the fans have given you, the positive energy they've give your players throughout the contest. What message do you have for your fans that will be attending the championship game on Saturday?

NICK SABAN: I don't think it changes much. I mean, as many fans as we can get there, as much enthusiasm as they can create to try to help us sustain energy throughout the game is certainly much appreciated.

Also I think it's beneficial to the players being able to stay focused and engaged on what they need to do in the game.

Q. I know we've all written the story about you and Kirby, the mentorship there. I want to give you a chance, could you share about some of your mentors that led you down this path to championships and greatness in college football?

NICK SABAN: Yeah, I don't know about all the compliments, but I appreciate 'em.

I had some great mentors along the way. First of all, had a great college coach in Don James, who actually encouraged me and talked me into becoming a coach because it's not something I really wanted to do.

He was very well-organized. He really sort of looked at developing players not only on the field but off the field in terms of developing character that would help them be more successful in life, which is something we've always



tried to do.

Bill Belichick was a great mentor in terms of organization football, from every part of the organization. How you evaluate players, the kind of players you want on your team, the kind of team you want to have, the kind of system you want to use.

George Perles was a great mentor at Michigan State. First opportunity I had to be a coordinator, first person to give me responsibility. He had been very successful with the Pittsburgh Steelers, winning four Super Bowls there.

Those three guys probably had the biggest impact on me. But I've had and learned so much from so many people. I hate to leave anybody out because I've never really invented anything in this game. I always just learned from other really good coaches and good teachers.

Q. Where do you think your team has improved the most since Texas, in particular?

NICK SABAN: I think the team has improved dramatically in terms of transformation of confidence, playing together, good leadership.

But if you had to say where did we improve the most, I would say it's probably offensively. The transformation of Jalen Milroe at quarterback, to be productive, has been huge in terms of elevating the confidence of the entire offensive team. The improvement in the offensive line has helped us be able to have a little better balance in the game. The receivers have all played better. If there is a specific area, I would say that would be.

I think the team as a whole has also improved because of their confidence, playing with more confidence.

Q. Off-the-wall question. I asked Lane Kiffin the week of the Ole Miss-Georgia game about some Kirby stories. He mentioned about a tug of war in Alabama in which he beat Kirby. Do you recall that?

NICK SABAN: I do not. But my money would have been on Kirby (laughter). If I was going to bet... I don't remember it, but that would be my comment (smiling).

Q. I understand that you're not worried about what the committee is doing right now. I think that you talked about this, about the narrative of the possibility that the SEC could get left out because if you win this game, that loss in Tuscaloosa to Texas did happen. I wanted to ask your reaction to that and your thoughts on the SEC's place in the Playoff?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think I commented on it earlier. To reiterate it, I think that the SEC is one of the best conferences in the country. I think Georgia is one of the best teams in the country. I think they're one of the best four teams in the country. I think if we beat them, we'd be one of the best four teams in the country.

With teams, there's a transformation that goes through the season. How are you playing now. Where is your team now. How good are you now. I think all those things come into play.

I think it would be a disrespect to the SEC if there isn't an SEC representation in the final four. I do believe that.

Q. What have you seen from Jihaad Campbell in this season, the way he stepped up when others have been injured?

NICK SABAN: Well, he makes a ton of plays. He's very athletic. He can run. He's fast. He's a good football player. It's a new position for him, so he's made consistent improvement throughout the season, understanding what he needs to do at his position to execute his role in that particular call.

But his production and performance has been really, really, really good for us. We certainly needed him because we've had a lot of injuries at that position throughout the season.

Q. Deontae Lawson being the alpha dog on your defense, talk about what he means to your defense this season and his growth this year.

NICK SABAN: He's played extremely well for us. He played well all year long. I think the one thing that he does, he is kind of the leader. He is very smart, very intelligent. He understands the game plan. He prepares well for the game. He knows exactly what he's supposed to do and what everybody in the front seven is supposed to do.

I think when he's out there, everybody's more comfortable, everybody's more confident because he's a signal caller. He's very confident in making the right calls and getting everybody playing together in the front seven, which is really important.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, that's going to wrap you up for today. Thank you for your time. We look forward to welcoming you back to Atlanta tomorrow.

NICK SABAN: Thank you. Appreciate y'all.

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