

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Alabama Crimson Tide Coach Nick Saban

Press Conference



COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Good morning. Welcome to day 3 of SEC Football Media Days 2021 version. We begin the day with Nick Saban, who enters his 26th season as a college head coach, entering his 15th season at the University of Alabama, where he has led his team to six national titles since 2009; only coach to win seven national titles overall in the college football poll era. Nine-time national coach of the year, making his 19th appearance at SEC Football Media Days, second only to Steve Spurrier.

This summer, you may have heard, but if you haven't, I'll make sure you know now, he had a hole in one on a 154 par-3 with an 8 iron. Through his Nick's Kids Foundation, he and Terry have contributed to storm relief, built 18 houses, working on their 19th house, and dedicated \$1 million to a project that's part of the city of Tuscaloosa's Elevate initiative.

University of Alabama's head football coach, Nick Saban.

NICK SABAN: Good morning. It's great to see everyone here. This is an indication that we're moving back to normal in a lot of ways after last year and the things that we had to overcome. I think sometimes, when we have the opportunities to get back to normal, we actually have a greater appreciation for the things that we missed, and you all know this is one of my favorite things to do each and every year. So I actually have a greater appreciation to be here and to see you again.

But this is always sort of the thing that -- this is the kickoff for the season. It means the season is right around the corner. The excitement starts to build. The interest builds, and we have great memories from this event. I don't know how many of you have been here long enough to remember when our dog, Lizzie, Miss Terry came here with me and was on the seventh floor with our dog, and Miss Terry decides to go shopping and leaves the dog in the room, and the maid opens the door and scared to death, lets the dog out. It was a boxer. And from the seventh floor to the elevator to down here to the interview

room, she ends up on my lap.

I don't know how many people have remembered that, but we have some great memories to being here.

This is also the indication of sort of this is our vacation time as coaches, in most cases, the first part of July. That vacation is over and the next couple of weeks are going to be back in focus on final preparations for the season and what we need to do to get ready for our August 5th report date.

We've had a really good off-season with our players. I've been pleased with the way we sort of transitioned back into normal. The new training regimen that David Ballou and Dr. Rhea have put in with our players is something that our players have really embraced and enjoy, and it's actually improved us in explosive movement, and also injury prevention because it's a much more technical approach, scientific approach to training, and it's been very, very beneficial, and it's something that I think has helped us improve tremendously.

From a program standpoint, nothing really has changed from a culture standpoint for us. We're still all about helping our players have the best opportunity to be more successful in life because they were involved in the program, whether it's personal development, academic support, career development, or their development in terms of developing a career as a football player.

We continue to be very proud of the fact we had 25 players playing in a National Championship Game that already had their degree, and we had 168 players have their degrees in the championship games and the bowl games that we've played in since 2015.

So we continue to try to do a really good job in terms of helping players develop careers and improving the quality of their life through the opportunity that football has created for them.

We have two players here today, John Metchie, who is a finance major, who will graduate in 3 1/2 years, who's been a very successful receiver for us, and Phil Mathis, who has



been -- started for a couple years and is already graduated in criminal justice. We're proud of those two young men, and I'm sure they'll do an outstanding job of representing our team.

The penalty for success when you win a National Championship is you won because you had a whole lot of good players. They were well coached, so you had a lot of good coaches. When you lose some of those players, and we lost six first-round draft picks and ten guys overall in the Draft, and you lose some of those coaches to better opportunities, the challenge is you've got to rebuild with a lot of new players who will be younger, have new roles, less experience, and how do they respond to these new roles? That's why rebuilding is a tremendous challenge. That's why it's very difficult to repeat.

But I've been pleased so far with the way our players have embraced their new roles and new responsibilities, how the new faces on our team have worked hard to develop in a way that they can have enough consistency in performance to have success and develop the confidence they need to be able to have success.

We're going to be a work in progress as we focus on improvement, and that's going to be critical to our success. We have a lot of difficult games early on the road, new coaches, new quarterback, eight new guys on offense. We do have some eight or nine starters back on defense.

I was asked earlier how does not having spring practice last year impact how you develop? And I used the example last year because we couldn't practice against each other, that it really affected the development of defensive players because they're reacting to somebody and you couldn't react to anyone because we couldn't practice against each other.

But this year, fortunately, we're back to normal and we could go through spring practice, and I do think that has helped the development of a lot of the eight new starters that we're going to have on offense. Hopefully that will pay off, especially early in the season.

One of the things that I'd like to make mention of is I'd like to commend the leadership in the SEC for how they handled the whole COVID situation. I think Commissioner Sankey and his staff really did this with kind of a calm measure that gave the players the best opportunity to have a chance to compete and play, as we played 13 games last year.

Very thoughtful, set a good precedent to give the players the best opportunity to be able to compete and play. I know that was really, really important to our team to have

that opportunity, and I certainly commend the SEC and Commissioner Sankey for the great job that they did for the players.

As for all the changes that we have in college football, I know there's a lot of interest in a lot of those things. I almost feel that anything that I say will probably be wrong because there's no precedent for the consequences that some of the things that we are creating, whether they're good opportunities, even if they're good opportunities, there's no precedent for the consequences that some of these things are going to create, whether they're good or bad.

But a year from now, whatever comments that we make probably will be a lot more effective than the ones we make now because we don't have precedent and we don't have experience for how this is going to affect the future of college football and college football players.

So we want to focus on what we need to do to adapt on a day-to-day basis and try to help our players manage through these opportunities and circumstances the best that we can.

Our team certainly is looking forward to the opportunity to play in the Chick-Fil-A game, kickoff game against Miami. We really enjoy playing in neutral site games.

It's been good for our players. It's been good for our fans. We certainly have a lot of respect for what Manny Diaz has done, the team that Miami has. They were 8-3 last year with a lot of good returning players. So this will be certainly a challenge for us as an opener and something that we're certainly looking forward to. We're looking forward to fans being able to come back to games.

I think, if there was one thing that our players that went out early for the draft last year all said to me with very, very sad eyes is I just hate it that my last year that I played college football we didn't have fans. I think that's how important fans are to players, to the game, and I certainly thank you for promoting our game, promoting the players, creating interest for our game so there are fans and there is excitement, and it is something that reinforces the players in a positive way for all the hard work that they do to be able to play and participate in a game that they love.

With that, any questions?

Q. Could you expand on the comments about Bryce Young approaching seven figures for NIL? Maybe the good and the bad of that, how that affects the locker room and the chance for any player who comes to Alabama maybe could earn that.



NICK SABAN: I think, first of all, what I said before, anything that I say now, because there's no precedent for it, you don't really know how it's going to affect things. Players have always been able to work and earn money. That's something that you could do ten years ago, 20 years ago. It's something that I did when I was a player.

The college landscape changed to some degree when players got cost of attendance. We made rules that allowed them to go to summer school on scholarship, which we didn't used to have. So most players with this additional money and the opportunity to advance their academic circumstance chose not to work.

So all we've done is create an opportunity for players to work. The only thing is, the question is because it's not going to be equal, and everything that we've done in college athletics in the past has always been equal. Everybody's had equal scholarship, equal opportunity. Now that's probably not going to be the case. Some positions, some players will have more opportunities than others. And how that's going to impact your team, our team, the players on the team, I really can't answer because we don't have any precedent for it.

I know that we're doing the best we can to try to get our players to understand the circumstance they're in, the opportunity they have, and how those opportunities are not going to be equal for everybody, and it will be opportunity for our team's success that people are not looking over their shoulder at what somebody else does or doesn't do.

But any other comments that I would make about this, with no precedent, no experience, would probably a year from now not be looked on or viewed on as very smart.

Q. More than half the coaches here were not here two years ago, and as Commissioner Sankey said, this is, I believe, your 19th appearance. What would you say is the key to longevity in just such a fickle business?

NICK SABAN: I think that's simple. You've got to win. So what does it take to win? I think that answers the question better than anything. I think you have to have culture in your organization, which probably comes from the mindset of the people in your organization to have goals and aspirations for what they want to accomplish and what they want to do - and I'm talking about players as well here - and they have to have a good understanding of what does it take to accomplish those goals and aspirations to be the best that they can be, and how do they have to edit their behavior to be able to do that and can they have the discipline, self-discipline on a daily basis to execute and do the things they need to do, make the choices and decisions

they need to make, so that they can be the best that they can be?

I think what we've always tried to do for our players is create more value for the players by how we use personal development, academic support, career development, the way we develop football players to create a successful culture for them to see the players before them, in terms of what they bought into, what they did that helped them be successful so the next player has the best chance to buy in to the same things and to that culture so they have the best chance to be successful and the best chance to develop personally, academically, and athletically.

That's how we try to win, but I think it's probably good players, good coaches, supportive administration that gives you the tools that you need to be able to continue to provide the resources to help the players be successful are all probably key ingredients of that.

Q. I wanted to ask you, football changes, strength and conditioning has evolved and changed. You built a sport science center recently at the University of Alabama. Now that you've seen a year of the impact of David Ballou and Dr. Matt Rhea, talk about your program and what you thought when you hired those gentlemen to take over your strength and conditioning.

NICK SABAN: We wanted to make the change several years ago, and we brought several pro teams in with their old strength staff to try to change from the power lifting to more of the velocity training used and the technology to actually test players on a daily basis, to minimize injury but also to increase explosive movement.

So when we had a change in our strength and conditioning staff, we felt very fortunate to be able to get David Ballou and Dr. Rhea, who actually were from a college football standpoint in the forefront of this particular philosophy of how to develop players strength and conditioning-wise. So they have done a phenomenal job.

Last year our injuries were down by about 50 percent, soft tissue injuries. We increased explosive movement during the season by almost 5 percent, which we had not done for several years. So we bought in to the things that they do. Our players get feedback on a daily basis, which they really like because they can determine the progress they're making on a daily basis.

We eliminated all testing. We don't run 16 110s anymore. We don't run 10 40s with 15 seconds rest in between. Because of the knowledge we use we know how fast a player is running every day, and we know what his capability is because of the GPS system that we use. So

we don't need to test, because the players are getting immediate feedback every day.

So it's a much more positive approach. The players have really bought into it from a flexibility standpoint and a strength and conditioning standpoint, and the technology has been very instrumental in helping the players see their progress and buy in to this process.

David and Dr. Rhea have done a phenomenal job really, and this has, I think, helped our program tremendously.

Q. How excited are you to coach a young man like Henry To'oTo'o, and what does he bring, or what could he bring to enhance the defense this season?

NICK SABAN: We thought Henry was one of the best players, defensive players in our conference, in watching him play at Tennessee, and we had recruited him in high school. We thought he was an outstanding player in high school. We're talking about a fine young man who's very intelligent, very instinctive player, very conscientious. He wants to know everything about not only what he does, but everybody on the defense. He's got really good leadership qualities.

So I think that there's a lot of positives that he can bring, especially -- you always want to have a great signal caller or quarterback type guy on defense. Regardless of what kind of player they are, those things really enhance the chances of all the other players on defense playing with confidence because they're confident in the call that they're getting, the adjustment that they're making, and I think that's something that Henry can really add to us as well as being a very productive player.

Q. We had an opportunity to talk to Lane Kiffin yesterday, and he had a lot of nice things to say about you. I'm just curious, from your perspective, where have you seen him grow the most from when he joined your staff to where he is now?

NICK SABAN: Well, Lane did a fantastic job for us when he was the offensive coordinator, and I don't think that he probably gets -- we made a tremendous change when Lane came in, and Lane had always been the same kind of philosophy-wise as we were in terms of pro style football. And because of what Ole Miss -- and it's ironic that he's at Ole Miss now -- had done and beaten us several times running the spreads, running the RPOs, running the screens and things that are difficult to defend because of the rule of blocking downfield when the ball is thrown behind the line of scrimmage -- and we weren't utilizing some of those things, which I thought put us at a disadvantage, and Lane really hadn't done much of that

stuff either.

So when he came in, I said, Look, we want to change this. You need to research this. You're smart. We can do this. He actually did implement that and was the first one to sort of change how we did things on offense. It enhanced our opportunity to score more points. So he did a really good job, and I think there's been -- because we're a little different, a lot of people have sort of wondered what the relationship was, but we never really had a bad relationship because this was always a lot of mutual respect for the kind of play caller he was, the kind of coach that he was, and the job that he did.

I actually said and told the people when he went to Florida Atlantic that Lane will be a better head coach than even he is an assistant because he has those kinds of qualities. Obviously, he hasn't disappointed in the job that he did there or the job he's done at Ole Miss. So none of this is a surprise to me. And I didn't hear his comments, so I can't comment on those, but I can only say from my perspective how much respect I have for him as a coach.

Q. I want to ask about a couple of local players, Javion Cohen and Kristian Story. What have you seen from both of those guys as they get ready for their second year with you all?

NICK SABAN: Javion Cohen has developed very nicely and most likely will be a starter, as a starter on our team probably even now. So if he continues to do his job well, he'll be a starting probably left guard on our team. He's done really well in school. He's been a good person. He's worked hard. So we're very pleased.

Kristian Story is playing a new position. When you play high school quarterback and we make you a defensive back, which he thinks he is a defensive back and we think that's his future as well, probably takes a little bit more time to develop at a new position because you don't have sort of background experience, knowledge that some players have that played that position in high school.

But he's doing a good job and has made a tremendous amount of improvement. He'll probably be a quality backup and a special teams player for us this year.

Q. I'm interested in how Bill O'Brien's NFL background might mesh into what you were just talking about, the kind of offense you want to run at Alabama. What principles that might help Bryce and what you want to do offensively.

NICK SABAN: Bill has done a really, really good job, but everybody's got to remember Sark came from the NFL.

Lane had coached in the NFL. I've coached in the NFL. So I don't think systematically what happens in the NFL is all that much different than what happens in college when it comes to football itself.

I think the difference is in the NFL it's how you bring players to the team and you're coaching a different kind of guy, and the whole philosophy of developing players is not the same as it is in college. I think they want to develop players. They don't have the same opportunity to do it personally, academically, and athletically.

It's a whole different dynamic, and the football part isn't all that different. We're not changing offenses. We've got a good offense. We've got a good system. We've got a good philosophy. Bill has certainly added to that in a positive way, and we'll probably continue to make some changes. But from a terminology standpoint, from a player standpoint in our building, our offense was very, very productive, and we want to continue to run the same type of offense and feature the players that we have who are playmakers who can make plays, and I think Bill will do a good job of that.

Q. I'm going to refer to you as Coach and not Nick, if you don't mind. Coach, vaccine rate, where are you guys with that? There's at least one conference who's mandating vaccines among coaches and players and a couple of institutions. Is that such a bad thing to mandate vaccines among athletes because they're in such close contact?

NICK SABAN: I think there's two issues when it comes to vaccines. First of all, we have a majority of our players who have gotten the vaccine, and we've given every player on our team the choice to do that. I think there's a couple things to consider. First of all, you have a personal decision, which comes down to risk -- risk of COVID, relative risk to the vaccine. It's the same thing. We don't really have a lot of knowledge about how this stuff is going to affect people in the future, so that's a personal decision that everybody has the right to make.

On the other hand, you also have a competitive decision to make because you're going to be a part of a team. So how does the personal choice and decision you make affect the team? There's been a couple examples here in baseball now that has had a huge effect and impact on teams. North Carolina State in the College World Series maybe had an opportunity to win the National Championship, and because of their circumstance with COVID, which I don't really understand who got vaccinated, who didn't, what caused what, but the whole issue created a circumstance where they couldn't continue to play.

The Yankees now have, what, six players? I don't watch it that close, but a significant number of players who are out, and I don't understand their circumstances either, whether they're vaccinated, not vaccinated, whatever.

But players have to understand that you are putting your teammates in a circumstance and situation. We can control what you do in our building. We cannot control what you do on campus and when you go around town, who you're around, who you're associated with, and what you bring into our building.

So every player has a personal decision to make to evaluate the risk of COVID relative to vaccine, and then they have a competitive decision to make on how it impacts their ability to play in games, because with the vaccine you probably have a better chance. Without it, you have a lesser chance that something could happen, a bigger chance that something could happen that may keep you from being on the field, which doesn't enhance your personal development.

Then how does it affect the team if you bring it to the team? So these are choices and decisions that every player has to make. Our approach has been I think we've had three medical doctors sort of give lectures to our team about the pros and cons of the whole COVID circumstance, the vaccine circumstance, so that they can make intelligent decisions about what they do.

I think that we're pretty close to 90 percent maybe of our players who have gotten the vaccine, and I'm hopeful that more players make that decision, but it is their decision.

Q. Dave Aranda last week at Big 12 Media Days says defenses now are getting more aggressive, getting negative plays, tackles for loss stats are more important. So he thinks that an evolution might be 12 personnel, 13 personnel wide zone. Do you see that, the college game going that way, or is it still important to spread it out and hit explosives at the vertical pass game?

NICK SABAN: What is 12 personnel?

Q. Two tight end set.

NICK SABAN: Two tight ends and two wide receivers or one? I'm just kidding. I know what 12 personnel is.

(Laughter).

Look, I think things always sort of cycle, and I think that the trend has been -- and in a very positive way the trend has been very productive to be in the spread and to spread the

field with three and four wide receivers and four open formations and implement RPOs and lots of screens and spread the field and make the defense defend 53 yards wide and 100 yards deep, which has not always been the case when the more people that line up tight -- I call it wad ball -- the more constrictive you can be in terms of how you create space for offensive players to make plays.

So I do think that defenses are catching up and creating more issues with some of the things that they do, and people who get back in regular formation as we do -- we never, ever abandon that. That's always been a part of what we do to run the ball. People have a more difficult time adjusting to that, which used to be the starting point of where you taught everything that you did.

So I can see that there may be some movement back in that direction to more conventional type football to people that spend time on the direct runs and things that you create in regular formation.

Q. For a lot of teams in the regular season, playing Alabama is as close as they're going to get to being in a National Championship with some of them. With the roster turnover and the coaching turnover, what do you tell your coaches and your team week in and week out about playing bad teams versus playing good teams? Do you tell them something different? What's the mindset going into every game?

NICK SABAN: I think the mindset for our players is be the best player that you can be. I always use the example with our players to understand the scoreboard should not determine how you play in the game, whether you're 14 points behind or 14 points ahead.

Who the opponent is should not determine the level that you play at, because if you're controlling what you control, you want to be the best player that you can be, and you want to do that every single down because that's what creates value for you.

I always use the example that, when I was in the NFL they made me a cut-up of a player, so every player in the Draft, I would look at a cut-up. I didn't know who you were playing against, whether it was a good guy, bad guy, good team, bad team. I didn't know what the score was, but I was evaluating how you played.

So if you didn't create value for yourself because you were ahead in the game or behind in the game or you didn't play well against some opponent and others you got fired up to play against, then you're not creating the kind of value for yourself that you're capable of.

So consistency in performance usually defines success, and that means you can play down in and down out at a high level and you can sustain that level because you can persevere through good plays and bad plays and refocus and be able to play the next play, and that's the philosophy that we use with our players.

We can't control what our opponent does, but we can control what we do. We want to control the outcome of the game by how we execute and what we do, so that's what we want to stay focused on.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Saban, thank you for your time this morning.

NICK SABAN: Again, I'd like to thank the media and all the folks here for all that you do to create interest in college football, how you promote players, help players get a lot of positive reinforcement for the hard work that they do. So you're appreciated more than you know.

So thank you very much and roll tide.

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