

College Football Playoff

Media Conference

Thursday, January 7, 2021

Grapevine, Texas, USA

Alabama Crimson Tide

Coach Nick Saban

CFP Media Conference



COLLEGE FOOTBALL
PLAYOFF

NICK SABAN: Well, it's obviously a great opportunity for our team to play in the college football National Championship game. I think in a game like this, preparation is really, really important. Our practices have been good.

But we're playing against a very good team, so that preparation is always very difficult when you play against a lot of good players and a team that's very well-coached like Ohio State.

I'd like to take a moment to congratulate Smitty on winning the Heisman and also Mac and Najee for being finalists. I think this is the first time for a long time that three guys from the same team have put themselves in that position, and all these guys are fine young men and have done a great job of representing our program and have certainly played outstanding football for us.

I know there will probably be questions about Waddle. He has been able to practice some. His status for the game is still relatively up in the air and it will probably be a game-day decision.

Q. A big picture question, please. Is the fact that we have reached the point of having a National Championship here make this a successful season?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think it's been good for everyone that we've been able to play football, whether it's NFL football or college football.

I think a lot of people have put a lot of time and effort throughout the country, throughout the NCAA, throughout every conference to try to create an atmosphere and environment which gave the players an opportunity to compete, the fans something to root for and look forward to, and I think that's a real positive thing.

I would say under the circumstances that we're pleased with the way this season has gone and the number of

games we've been able to play, the players having the opportunity to compete and now to culminate it with actually a playoff and a championship game.

Q. Dylan Moses has expressed recently just how difficult this season has been for him coming back from the injury. What's been your perspective on his return and just how close he's been to his play before the injury?

NICK SABAN: Well, we knew going into the season, I mean, previous experience with guys like Donte Hightower, who had injuries like this, sometimes it takes these guys a full year to actually get back to 100 percent.

But Dylan has done an outstanding job and shown a lot of perseverance, leadership on our team, and I'm pleased with the way that he's played. I'm pleased with the way he's handled his circumstance, and certainly he's made a positive contribution to our team.

Q. How much do you feel compelled to call other teams to get strategy on how they handled Ohio State, or is that all internal?

NICK SABAN: Well, we do the best job we can preparing internally. I think we obviously watch other teams play against them and try to analyze the strategy that they have on offense, defense, and special teams.

I don't think it's any secret in this profession. Sometimes if you know somebody from another team that played them, you sort of ask some advice and maybe get some knowledge and experience, because I don't think there's any question about the fact that when you play a team every year, you develop a little better history for what you would do against them as opposed to when you just play a team once sort of every four or five years.

Q. You hadn't become a head coach at Ryan Day's current age of 41. He's only in his second year and already in the National Championship game. Obviously life stories are very different and I know you don't know him well, but can you speak to where he is in his career and what your impressions are and what's made him so successful?



NICK SABAN: Well, he does a great job of coaching. He's a very good offensive sort of play caller. He's got a great scheme on offense. Certainly does a great job of coaching his players to execute that scheme. They're very well-coached in every phase, and their team plays with great intangibles, discipline, toughness, play hard. Seem to have great togetherness on their team.

So I think those are all great indicators of what a great job Ryan Day does as a head coach and as a leader of his organization.

I think he's taken advantage of a great opportunity and certainly done an outstanding job with it, and they've got one of the best teams in the country, no doubt about that.

Q. You've had a chance to watch Jaylen Waddle at practice for a couple of days. What does it look like to you?

NICK SABAN: Well, I've already made a comment about that, so I don't have any -- first of all, the issue with injuries is when a guy does practice, how does he respond to the workload. Sometimes if a guy practices one day and gets sore the next, you can't practice him the next day, so you just keep sort of trying to build up his workload to where he might be able to play.

So that's a work in progress right now, so you really can't predict where he might be. And then other guys seem to get stronger as they -- every day they practice they get a little bit better.

This is something that we're trying to evaluate but not anything that we can make any kind of prediction on at this point.

Q. I was just wondering, what went into some of those conversations with guys like Najee, Alex, DeVonta that could have left for the NFL, and how rewarding is it for you to see them not only come back, but almost maybe increase their stock with the great seasons that those three and probably some others had?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think the number one goal in our program is to have players create value for themselves. Value comes in a lot of different ways: Character, attitude, how you represent yourself, the kind of brand that you develop for yourself.

Obviously getting an education and graduating from school certainly contributes to that in a large degree, and then how can you create value for yourself as a football player.

We try to help our guys make business decisions about, Okay, here's where we think you're going to get picked if you come out right now. Here's the upside if you decide to come back. Football is a developmental game. I think all these guys that made those decisions certainly enhance their value pretty dramatically by the way they played this year.

But at the same time I always tell players, Look, if you're not 100 percent committed to getting better at the things that you need to improve on, then you're not going to improve your draft status, so it's probably not going to do any good for you to come back.

We've had quite a few players here that had sort of those second-, third-round grades that have come back and become higher draft picks because of the way they've developed, and I think there's a good example for a lot of guys to see when guys do that.

The money in the draft goes down dramatically, so if you're going to be a second or third round pick you can almost double or triple your value if you can move up into the first round, and I think a lot of guys on our team have the maturity to be able to see that.

I think the other thing that players need to understand is the place football players develop is in college. Every other professional sports, whether it's baseball, minor leagues, hockey, has a minor league. Basketball has a -- whatever they call it, G-league or whatever it is, where they can develop players to actually end up on their team. Football doesn't have that.

So your development has to come in college, so it's kind of an all-or-nothing decision when you go out, and the more the team invests in you, the more security that you create for yourself, and I think our players understand the business side of that fairly well.

Q. You talked about Dylan Moses earlier, but what has his experience, his leadership and everything meant, because you do have some young guys contributing on this defense?

NICK SABAN: Well, I don't think there's any question about the fact that when Dylan Moses plays for us, he makes everybody around him play better. He makes all the calls on defense. I think the players have confidence in him and his understanding of the system and the scheme.

So I think he does enhance the confidence of the rest of the group because of his leadership, his knowledge, and his command of what we're doing on the field when he's in there.

Q. You've had a lot of markers through your career. Can you pinpoint, A, when you knew this was something you wanted to do, Coach; and B, when you realized you're pretty good at it?

NICK SABAN: I don't know exactly what you mean by markers, if I heard you correctly. You know, I never really wanted to be a coach. I think I have to give all the credit for Don James, who was my college coach, calling me in one day and saying, I'd like for you to be a GA, and I immediately responded that I'm tired of going to school, I don't really want to go to graduate school, and I don't want to be a coach, so why would I do something like this.

He was pretty convincing that it's something that I should try. My wife Terry had another year of school, so I really couldn't go on and do anything else because she wanted to finish and we wanted her to finish and we had promised our parents that if they let us get married that we'd both graduate from college.

When I did it, I just absolutely loved it. I think that it was a lot like being a player except you didn't have to run wind sprints after practice or anything like that. But I liked the competitive nature of being a part of a team. And the preparation that goes into it was different, but it was something that was very self-satisfying.

The relationships that you develop with the players on the team and all those things, I feel very fortunate that I've been in a profession where I don't feel like I'm going to work every day because I really enjoy what I'm doing. It's been great for me, not just the fact that we've had a chance to be successful, but really the fact that you really feel like you're in a position where you have an opportunity to impact a lot of young people's lives in a positive way and hopefully help them be more successful in their life because they were involved in the program.

Q. I was just curious your memories of two seasons at Ohio State, if there's anything that sticks out about that. And you've had four jobs in the state of Ohio and graduated from Kent State; what are your thoughts on the love of football in the state of Ohio?

NICK SABAN: Oh, I think Ohio is one of the great states in the United States when it comes to football, football tradition, really good high school football, lots of good football players. There's still a lot of places in Ohio where the school is sort of the center of the community and there's a lot of great support and fans for football programs.

They've certainly produced from a high school level a tremendous number of very, very good players. Ohio State

has always had great tradition in terms of the success that they've had on the field, and having had the opportunity to work there a few years, I kind of understand that tradition very well.

Q. How much has the evolution of college football to become more offensive and the challenge of that for you and how you've sort of had to change some things in your program contributed to your longevity and the drive you still have to try to do this and try to win championships at this stage of your career?

NICK SABAN: Well, I don't think there's any question about the fact that college football has changed dramatically in the last 10, 12 years. I think the advent of the spread, RPOs, blocking downfield when passes are caught behind the line of scrimmage, all those things have dramatically changed the style of play offensively, and that affects every part of the game.

You have to defend how you pick players to play certain positions because the game is so much more a perimeter game now than it used to be, and what your scheme is to defend those kinds of changes has been pretty dramatic, as well.

I think it's a great game for fans. Obviously score a lot more points with this style of play than we used to do, we used to in the past, and I think that always makes it exciting for the fans.

Q. There were some reports that there were discussions about moving this game back a week due to issues at Ohio State. How important is it to you that this game be played Monday as scheduled and not pushed back a week?

NICK SABAN: Well, look, I think everybody respects the disruptions that we've had to endure throughout the season. We have total respect for the safety of players. If there were -- and I think there were some issues relative to COVID, and there were discussions as to whether it was fair to continue or to move the game back and all that.

I think there would have been some probably, I don't know, difficult management issues if we would have moved the game back. Our school is starting this next week. We would have had 35,000 students coming back here. We've played 12 games this year, so we have a lot of guys that have ground through the season, a lot of guys that are nicked up a little bit.

Another week of practice would have been much more difficult for those guys probably. January 18th is a day people got to decide whether they're going to go out for the

draft or not.

So just the whole timing of the whole thing would have been a tough management. But I would have put player safety on either team as the most important factor in this decision.

Q. Just a bigger question about your offense. Kerry Coombs mentioned the other day that since you guys played in 2014 in that playoff game your offense has been able to evolve and change and it's got some more wrinkles, especially with the passing game. How do you think your offense has been able to evolve and be successful over the last six years since the last meeting?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think that our coaches, I think Sark has done a great job, and I think coordinators that we've had in the past have done a very good job in sort of the evolution of where we are right now.

Being a defensive coach, you know the things that are very difficult to stop when you play somebody else and you research some of those things as a staff and see if there's some way you can implement them into what you do, and I think that's kind of what we've done through the years. We've had really good coaches on offense who could research and implement these things in a positive way.

I still think our number one goal is to feature the players that we have on our team and adapt to the style that would best help them have success, and this year's team is a little bit different than last year's team, and I think you could look at every team and say the same.

But our offense has been productive, and we hope to continue to be able to do that.

Q. Seven of the last eight games you've played you've allowed fewer than 17 points. What has been working for your defense in that stretch?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think we're pretty young, especially in the secondary. We have four out of five new starters. We had some young guys playing up front. We have like three freshmen that play a significant role.

I think early on, we made a lot of mental errors. The knowledge and experience that we had was probably not what we needed to be able to make the adaptations and adjustments in game and also in preparation.

So I think that has improved as the season has progressed, and I think with that, the confidence of the players has improved. I think the confidence that the group

has in each other, the understanding of how they need to play to have a chance to be successful and how everybody has to do their job if you're going to be successful has all contributed to some improvement throughout the season.

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