

College Football Playoff

Media Conference

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Coach Nick Saban

Coach Ryan Day

CFP Media Conference



COLLEGE FOOTBALL
PLAYOFF

NICK SABAN: We certainly appreciate the opportunity to play in the National Championship game. We thank all the people at the College Football Playoff to work so hard to give the players on both teams the opportunity to play in this outstanding venue.

We have a lot of respect and appreciation for Ohio State's team, what they've accomplished this year. They're very well-coached and a very good football team. We look forward to a great game.

I know this has been a challenging year for all teams in college football, and I think there's a lot of folks out there that we need to thank for making the season be what it is.

I think it's been helpful to the players and the opportunity that they have to compete and play, create value for themselves, as well as a lot of fans who have great interest in college football.

Our team has gone about this, I think, all year long in a very positive way in terms of trying to take advantage of the opportunities that they've had, and this is obviously a great challenge and a great opportunity for them in this game.

RYAN DAY: You know, like Coach Saban said, I feel the same way. It's an honor to be here, honor to be in the National Championship game, and there's so many people that you have to thank for putting all this together, certainly all the people here in Miami and at the CFP.

Our guys are elated to be part of this, and, again, great challenge here. Coach Saban and his staff do an unbelievable job. It goes without saying, one of the best football coaches in the history of college football.

And then their players, really good players, again, goes without saying.

But our team has been on a journey just like so many other teams this year. To watch some of the different programs go through so much adversity, I'm sure like our team, so many of these teams have learned a lot about themselves. They've learned a lot about what it means to overcome adversity. It wasn't always as clean as a typical year.

Kind of a special year that way. Not always exactly the way we drew it up, but here we are, and excited to play tomorrow night.

Q. Ryan, back on August 12th, it was the day after the Big Ten canceled the fall season, you talked about the need to have a season in early January, that it had to come then if you guys were going to have any season. Instead it's early January, only five months later, and you're playing Alabama for a national title. When you think about that, what comes to mind? Did you think there was any chance that you guys would be here back on August 12th?

RYAN DAY: I mean, when you think about that, it just kind of emphasizes the point of just how chaotic this past three, four, five months have been. Some days you woke up, you didn't know which direction you were going in.

Yeah, certainly there was a time where we didn't think we'd have a season, when we weren't sure if we were going to restart a season.

I think, again, which goes to show you how strong our guys have been. Every program has gone through some different version of it. But yeah, I mean, at some point we're going to sit back and go through all this stuff; now is not the time.

All the focus is on playing in this game. But it certainly has been a strange road to get here.

Q. I think in the three games before the Sugar Bowl, neither Luke nor Jeremy had a catch, and then they just really dominated that first half. We know how important they are as blockers, but were you saving them up for the right moment?

RYAN DAY: No, I mean, these guys have grown all year.



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They came in this season as one of the more experienced groups on the team. I thought they got better as blockers, did a good job in the run game, and then to see them make some plays in the pass game last week was huge.

We need those guys to play good and play their best game tomorrow night.

Q. Coach Saban, I wanted to ask about the class of 2017 that's now the seniors here. I don't know if you want to go into hypotheticals, but given the return of Alex Leatherwood and DeVonta Smith and Najee Harris really has shaped both sides of the ball for you, what do you think that -- do you think this Alabama team would be here if those seniors had decided not to stay?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think all three of those guys have done an outstanding job for our team, not only in terms of the way they've played, the standard of excellence that they've sort of competed to, but also in their leadership and how they've impacted other players.

We had four other players in this class that were pretty significant players: Jerry Jeudy, Henry Ruggs, Tua, and Xavier McKinney, who all did go out for the draft. So this was an outstanding class.

I think these guys have competed at a high level. They've been great ambassadors for the University of Alabama, and I think they've made a significant impact on our team this year.

Hard to say where we'd be without them, but we're certainly happy to have them with us.

Q. I had a very similar question for Ryan regarding the 2018 class. Your 2017 class last year with some of the guys you had, I think they came in with really high expectations and in large part filled them, and this year's 2018 class had to do the same. What have you seen from that class stepping up? A lot of them, other than maybe Chris, a lot of these guys have maybe made the biggest contributions for the first time.

RYAN DAY: Yeah, I mean, first off, when you look at this senior group, just tremendous. Four Big Ten Championships and will go down probably as one of the more successful groups to ever come through. And then as you see some of the younger guys step up, it's been tremendous.

It's one of those things where you have to make your impact early on and not wait around because by the time you get to that third year, there's certain guys that will

decide that they want to declare for the draft and move on. We've had several of the guys who have done that.

You can't be patient. You've got to push to get on the field, and I think a lot of those guys have done that, and certainly in that '18 class. They've pushed to get on the field early and they've made their impact felt, and because of that, got an opportunity to play in this game.

Q. Coach Saban, do you have an update on Malachi Moore and LaBryan Ray ahead of this game?

NICK SABAN: Malachi Moore is probably still very questionable for the game. LaBryan Ray probably a little bit more probable. He's been able to practice this week and hopefully we'll get some contribution from him.

Q. This is maybe a little bit offbeat, but wondering if either one of you had any superstitions related to the coin toss or if you had any specific strategy to employ in the coin toss and how you decided what to do.

NICK SABAN: We don't. We decide what we're going to do if we win or lose, but it's a flip of the coin, so you've got a 50/50 chance. I let the players decide how they want to call it, and it is what it is. Not really anything we can do about it.

We don't have any superstitions to try to win or lose.

RYAN DAY: Yeah, the same thing here. No superstitions there.

Q. Ryan, just kind of similarly to what was asked earlier, do you view getting to this stage, and obviously you would like to win tomorrow night, but is getting to this point in the season and playing in the National Championship game a win in and of itself because there was so much uncertainty the last five months?

RYAN DAY: Well, I mean, no one ever talks about getting to the National Championship, they talk about winning the National Championship. Along the way there are certain goals that you have to reach to get to this point, but the ultimate goal is to win this game.

When you have your goals of beating your rival, of winning the conference, of winning the semifinal and then finally this game, you have to check off those boxes.

But ultimately this is the final goal. That's what all the focus is on right now.

Q. Ryan, kind of a follow-up to that, how much

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satisfaction and pride or relief, pick the word, is there for getting to this point?

RYAN DAY: Well, I mean, if you start to talk about those, think about those, focus on those, it's just a distraction towards playing in this game.

I think regardless of what happens on Monday, Monday night, you take the next couple weeks and reflect on the season. Now is not the time for that. Now it's all about playing in this game, playing well, because that's what matters.

I totally understand what you guys are saying, but any minute focusing on something like that is just a distraction towards playing in this game, and we can't let that happen. We've got too good of an opponent; have to play too good to be thinking about anything like that.

Once the game is over, you sit back, you reflect, and go from there.

Q. Nick, can you talk about how Jaylen Waddle has handled the workload of practice this week and any update on his status for tomorrow?

NICK SABAN: Well, he has been able to practice to some degree. I think the biggest challenge is can he sustain in the game, and it'll be a game-time decision as to whether he thinks he can play and go out there and do his job well enough to contribute to the team, and we won't know that until we get out there after pregame warmup.

Q. Ryan, when you're preparing for a game like this, are you talking to the team a lot about how big the stakes are of this game, or are you kind of trying to still keep it as regular of a game prep as possible?

RYAN DAY: Well, I think our guys understand what's at stake. At the end of the day, it comes down to executing your job and doing your job and being accountable to the guy next to you. That's what it is.

You can make it bigger than it is, but at the end of the day you've got to do your job, and it's about the execution and preparation.

The more you prepare, the more confident you can be on game day. So that's really what it comes down to.

And certainly there's going to be excitement and all those things with a big game, but once the foot hits the ball, it's another game and it comes down to doing your job. That's really all you do is you just continue to spend as much time as you can preparing for the game so you can play faster

on Monday night.

Q. How did playing for and then getting started in coaching with Sean McDonald kind of influence the way you approach the job now?

RYAN DAY: Well, I've been fortunate to be around some great coaches that helped me be in a position to where I'm at today, and thankful for all the people that have helped me along the way.

Certainly would have no opportunity to be where I'm at right now without a lot of those people. And Coach Mac was a huge part of it. His son is an intern for us now, so the coaching world is small. Certainly very, very grateful and thankful for all the people that helped me along the way and would like to do that in return to others.

Q. Kerry Coombs pointed out the other day that Alabama has five All-Americans on offense, a Heisman winner, and a couple of runner-ups. What is the sense of urgency for your offense to score and score early and often? Is this the sort of game that could get in the 40s or 50s?

RYAN DAY: Well, they have a very good defense. They're very, very well-coached. They have a powerful front. They do a great job on the back end. Really good players.

You've got to take it one play at a time. You never know how games like this are going to play out. They certainly have great weapons on offense. The quarterback is tremendous. The offensive line is as good as I've seen, the running back. I mean, they're as talented an offense and play as clean as I've seen.

So yeah, you've got to be on your game, but you can't go into a game other than just trying to get the first 1st down.

Q. Nick, you have some staff members who will or could be moving on to other jobs after this game. How has the level of focus and preparation been this week amongst those coaches?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think our coaching staff has done a really good job working with our players. Sark is the one guy that has shown great maturity, I think, in how he's handled his situation, moving on to be a head coach, which is what he's worked for, and we're happy for him relative to the opportunity that he's created for himself by the great job that he's done for us here.

But I have no complaints at all with the way our coaches have sort of handled the situation, and I think everybody has sort of -- wants to do the best job that they can for the

players so that the players have the best opportunity to have success in the game against a very good team.

Q. Ryan, I wonder if you could -- how Justin Fields looked the last couple of days in practice? Do you expect him to be pretty close to 100 percent on Monday night? Following that, as you prepared for this game, what is something that's kind of surprised you a little bit about this Alabama team from your vantage point?

RYAN DAY: Yeah, Justin has had a good week of practice. He's done a really good job preparing, and I think that's the thing that he felt like he did a good job going into last game, was just preparing at a high level, and he's continued to do that this week.

I mean, in terms of surprise, no. When you play Alabama you expect them to be really, really well-coached, really good fundamentally, really good tacklers, hands -- just so many things they do a great job of.

So no. When you're playing against a team like this, you kind of expect a high level of play, really good personnel, really good scheme.

Q. How important is this game for recruiting in South Florida? And with Thau Jones-Bell, he hasn't had tons of opportunities on the field so far this season, but how has his work ethic been off the field in regards to film room and conditioning?

NICK SABAN: Well, first of all, I think our program is built to try to create value for players so that they can be more successful in life for having been involved in the program. And I think that the more success you have on the field, the more interest you create, whatever that circumstance is. Certainly playing in a game like this allows you to be sort of the center of attention for at least this week of the game and maybe beyond.

All those things are probably positives when it comes to recruiting.

Thau Jones-Bell is certainly a guy that has a tremendous amount of potential. He's made a tremendous amount of improvement throughout the season, and even though he hasn't had a lot of opportunities, the more he stays focused on his development and how he can improve I think is going to help him be a very productive player in the future.

Q. Coach Saban, I wanted to ask you about Trey Sermon. You played against him when he was at Oklahoma. What have you seen from him especially the last three games? He's had high production. And

Coach Day, I wanted to ask you about Najee Harris. What have you seen from him this year?

NICK SABAN: Trey Sermon is a really, really good player. Ohio State has a really good offensive scheme. The balance that they create, run and pass, with the weapons that they have, which is outstanding receiver corps, really good tight ends, good offensive line, a quarterback who has played extremely well.

Trey has taken advantage of all those circumstances and situations and played extremely well, especially against Clemson last week. He had a phenomenal game. I think he's an outstanding player and certainly going to be a challenge for us to try to at least do a decent job of not letting them be able to run the ball and create positive down and distance situations so that we're always on our heels on defense, which when you have great balance, that's always the fear you have for your defensive team.

Trey Sermon has certainly been a guy that's contributed to that in a very positive and significant way.

RYAN DAY: Yeah, I think Najee Harris is playing at a high level this season. I think that a big part of it is the offensive line, the tight ends, how well they block. But he's running really hard. When you get him to the second level he can make guys miss in a variety of ways. I think he runs hard. He falls forward a lot.

He's also done a good job in the pass game, in protection. He's caught balls as a receiver. He's caught balls coming out of the backfield, his check-downs. So he's a complete back. Very versatile.

Again, probably the most versatile guy we'll see all year.

Q. Coach Day, you did mention early on in your coaching career being around certain coaches, and Coach Saban, I just mentioned your offensive scheme. How much has your base offense changed over the years? And of course at a place like Ohio State with a few more weapons on offense that you can use, do you think your base offense has really stayed the same from early on in your coaching career?

RYAN DAY: Well, I think kind of the art of coaching college football is adjusting your scheme to utilize the personnel that you have at that moment. We recruit the best players and then adjust our scheme. That's the coach's job, to put them in the best position to be successful.

We have certain philosophies that don't change, but the way you get there sometimes does, whether you're in one

tight end, two tight ends, four wideouts. It changes year after year how you attack coming out of the gates, and you want to put guys in position to be successful.

Also, with your offensive line, what style of offensive line do you have, what kind of backs do you have, what kind of quarterback do you have, and so then you have to evolve. We don't just say, Here's our system and start plugging guys in. We try to adapt year after year.

Q. This question is for you, Nick. I guess what does it say about your team -- obviously winning all your games is great, but you also played at a very, very high level through a very odd season with a lot of, I guess, distractions or potential complications. What does it say about your team that they have been able to do that, aside from the fact that you just have great players?

NICK SABAN: Our team has shown a lot of maturity and perseverance throughout the season. I think you mentioned the fact that there have been a lot of disruptions, and I think we anticipated that early on when this all started back in March. We told our players basically the team that shows the maturity to be able to handle disruptions is going to have the best chance to be successful in the end, and consistency in performance is always a key to success, and that perseverance has shown up in the way we've been able to play with consistency.

But you also want to finish strong. That's always a part of any season. That's going to be the challenge for us in this particular game against a very good team.

Q. Nick, with this being you and Alabama's eighth National Championship appearance in the last 12 years, what about this season's certain group of players is different in comparison to the rest of the insanely elite, talented teams in years past?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think every team is different. Every team has its own personality. All those teams certainly did an outstanding job creating an opportunity for themselves to play in the National Championship.

But it's hard to compare teams. You always want your team to have great togetherness and be positive in their work and what they try to do to accomplish the goals that they have, and people have to be responsible for their own self-determination so they can go out there and do their job at a high level.

I think those things probably are similar with all these teams, but the personality of this team has been really

good all year in terms of their buy-in and how they've tried to establish those qualities that make them a good team. I'm very proud of what this group has been able to accomplish and what they've done to this point to create this opportunity for themselves.

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