

# CFP Semifinal at the Rose Bowl Game presented by Capital One: Alabama vs Notre Dame

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Arlington, Texas, USA

## Coach Nick Saban Alabama Crimson Tide

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we'll start with a quick opening.

COACH SABAN: First of all, we'd like to thank the Rose Bowl and Capital One for all that they've done to make this game be possible for us in what has been an unusual year for college football and sports in general and all the folks out there. So we certainly appreciate your efforts for that.

We're excited to have the opportunity to play in the playoffs this year against a really, really good Notre Dame team. And our players are certainly looking forward to the opportunity.

Even though the game will be played in Dallas, we understand the tradition of the Rose Bowl as well as anybody for our time in the Big Ten. And when we played in 2009, out in California in the Rose Bowl against Texas.

So this is something that every player sort of plays for all season long. And it's something that, you get this far, you don't want to just get this far. You want to keep on going. That's why it's a playoff. And that's why it's important to the players.

Our players have had good focus in practice. We actually practiced Saturday, Sunday and this will be our third day of work against Notre Dame. And our spirit has been good. The attitude has been good. We know the challenge is going to be great.

You may be interested in Landon Dickerson had successful surgery. He's obviously out for this game. But we're certainly excited about the fact that he's going to be okay in the future. And he's been a great leader on our team and will certainly be missed.

I know we had several guys. I'd like to congratulate all the guys that were All-Americans. They certainly have done a



great job for our team. It's a great honor. We certainly love it when our players get recognized for their efforts and what they've been able to accomplish throughout the season. And Sark being named the Broyles Award winner as Assistant Coach of the Year. He's certainly done a phenomenal job for us as well.

Notre Dame is an outstanding team, as I mentioned before. Their defense really plays hard. They're very physical. Run to the ball. Really have played well. Present lots of problems with some of the things that they do.

So certainly going to be a challenge for our offense to finish and do things that we need to do to be able to have success against a very good defensive team.

Offensively, these guys are one of the best offensive teams in the country. They've got lots of weapons outside. Ian really distributes the ball well, runs the offense well, makes plays with his legs as well as his arms, can make all the throws.

They've got an excellent running game. Have really, really good balance, really good tight ends. So this is a team that presents a lot of challenges for us in every way. But that's what we would expect, I guess, from any team that you play in the playoffs. And certainly be a great football game.

**Q. In general, the College Football Playoff, the games have not been close. I know you've played in great close games. But the average margin of victory in all these games is over 18 points. I wonder if you thought about a reason why.**

COACH SABAN: I haven't really thought about it. I know that all the teams that get in the playoffs are very, very good teams. And I think this time of year it's very difficult, depending on what's your circumstances on your team relative to injuries and all the disruptions that we've had in this season. Certainly really hard to manage the mindset.

And I can't really explain -- I think a lot of games in college football, it's not like the NFL where most games or just 70 percent of the games are decided by a touchdown or less. It seems in college football the teams that can score points



usually fare well in games like this.

And you've got to be able to play good defense. So you sort of try to keep from getting beat before you can win. And that's something we certainly have to work on to try to make this game be a close game.

**Q. We all know what kind of stats DeVonta and Najee and Mac have put up, but how well have they done in staying consistent and focused and not getting caught up in all the hype and everything?**

COACH SABAN: I've been really pleased with the maturity they've shown and the focus they've had. I think they all have lots of goals and aspirations for our team, and they also have lots of goals and aspirations for themselves.

I think when you have the right character, competitive character, you can keep those things in balance. I think those three guys have done a marvelous job of managing and handling that in a very, very positive way for themselves, their performance, and for how they contribute to our team.

**Q. Wonder about the decision to put Jahleel Billingsley back as the kick returner, how often or how rare is that to have a tight end capable of returning a kickoff?**

COACH SABAN: I think it's probably the first time it's ever happened in my career. I only remember ever having seen it from another team.

But Jahleel is kind of a special talent in terms of what he can do. He's tight end size but really kind of wide receiver athleticism.

We've had some injuries back there in terms of who has been our kickoff return guy. And he seems to be able to do it the best, and that's why we've given him an opportunity to do it.

**Q. You spoke earlier about the difficulty of the Notre Dame defense, what they present. What is the secondary presenting, what type of challenges do they present for you?**

COACH SABAN: Well, they're very physical. They're very tough. They've got some multiple schemes. Do a good job at disguising what they do and really, really good support run guys. Good tacklers. And they've covered people when they've had to really, really well. So the front seven I think is very active. They've put good pressure. They've got great effort rushers that can affect the quarterback.

So I think their secondary is very good, but I think their overall defense, they play extremely well together and play very good team defense and complement each other.

**Q. Coach Sarkisian was named the winner of the Broyles Award. (Indiscernible). Talk about what his role has been in Mac's development and in the development of the offense as a whole?**

COACH SABAN: I think Sark has done an outstanding job in terms of, first of all, system and scheme; secondly, in terms of how he teaches the players. And he's a very good quarterback coach. So he's really helped the development of the quarterback. I think Mac would be the first one to probably tell you that.

And I think a combination of all those things and how he manages his staff and everybody's on the same page and works really, really well together.

I think the players have a lot of confidence in what we're doing, and I think they sort of have confidence in the fact that they're well prepared for every game so they don't go in with a lot of question marks or apprehensions in terms of how we're going to handle certain things and what adjustments we need to make in the game to be able to continue to have success.

So he's just done an outstanding job. He's contributed as much as anybody that we've ever had here in terms of his knowledge and experience and how he manages the offensive side of the ball.

**Q. I know you don't like to deal in expectation, but when you and your staff signed the recruiting class of 2017, did you have a sense of how special that class was eventually going to be?**

COACH SABAN: I don't ever think of it that way. And you answered your own question because we don't have expectations. And we just try to take the guys from wherever they are and try to develop them so that they can be the best that they can be.

And there's some guys that we have very high hopes for and think are going to be great players that don't really pan out, and there's other guys that become great players when you really didn't think that they might become great players.

So I think we just take each individual player and try to help them develop personally, academically and athletically so that they can be the best version of themselves and go out and compete and create value for themselves as football players.

**Q. Kind of piggybacking off Dennis' question earlier about the lopsided nature of some of the semifinal games, I know there's been conversation this year about maybe what the future of the playoff looks like and expanding it. But do you think that the nature of these games and the results being a little bit lopsided is perhaps an argument to reduce the format? I mean, what do you see as the future of a playoff there?**

COACH SABAN: Well, I've always been a guy that, when we started the playoffs, when we started picking through teams to play in a championship game, my biggest fear was -- you know, college football had a great venue. It was the only thing that everybody -- a lot of people got rewarded for having a great season by going to a bowl game or whatever.

And my concern was as soon as we started to have playoffs that all the focus would be on the teams in the playoff and there would be a minimal amount of interest in some of the other games.

I don't think it's healthy for college football players when players opt out, don't play in bowl games and all those things, but it is what it is because most of the emphasis is on the playoffs. And in some ways that's unfair to the other teams. And I don't really know what the solution is.

I know this is the system that we have. And we work really hard to try to make our program work in this system in a positive way. So I do think it's great for the players to have a chance to be in a competitive venue like this and play against some great teams and some great venues.

So there's good and bad in both. And I don't really know what the perfect solution might be.

**Q. How do you think your defense will hold up against quarterback Ian Book?**

COACH SABAN: I think it's certainly going to be a challenge for our defense. I think their entire offensive team will be a great challenge for us because of the great balance they have on offense, their ability to run the ball, also make explosive plays in the passing game, and the quarterback's ability to make all the throws as well as extend plays with his feet, scramble and run.

He's certainly a dual-threat guy that presents a lot of problems for us, and we're going to have to be very disciplined in terms of the way we play and everyone doing their job if we're going to have a chance to be successful against Ian Book and Notre Dame's offense.

**Q. Could I ask you about DeVonta Smith's brief cameos on defense in spring ball from earlier in his career and what that says about his toughness and his unselfishness to be able to step in play that role?**

COACH SABAN: I think it speaks volumes for what kind of person he is, what kind of competitor he is, what kind of team player that he is. Probably one of the most selfless guys that I've ever had the opportunity to coach in terms of whatever he can do to help the team he wants to do.

He did a great job when we asked him to do that. Never asked any questions. Was happy to do it. And I think that just shows what kind of person he is and what kind of teammate he is.

The guy is one of the most popular guys on the team and also one of the leaders of the team that everybody looks up to because of the example that he sets every day and how he goes about his work.

**Q. Wanted to ask you about Jaylen Waddle and LaBryan Ray, how they've come along in their recoveries and their availability moving forward?**

COACH SABAN: LaBryan Ray is not practicing. He's still rehabbing. I'm sorry, I didn't hear the other guy. Who was the other one? Who else did he ask about?

**Q. Waddle.**

COACH SABAN: Jaylen's rehab is coming along. He's doing dry-land running. Still working to try to get back. But he is making progress. And we're happy to see him be able to at least go out there and do some running and do some things, but he's not back in practice yet.

**Q. What do you see in Notre Dame's offensive line as a run-blocking unit?**

COACH SABAN: I think these guys are really, really good. They have a lot of experience. They've played together for a long time. They don't miss their targets very often. They finish blocks. They play hard. They're physical. And I think that's probably the best word to describe them on both sides of the ball up front is they're very physical.

But these guys do a really good job. They don't make very many mistakes, I can tell you that.

**Q. What does Chris Owens offer from the center position? How have you seen his leadership kind of grow throughout his, I guess, five years with the program?**

COACH SABAN: Chris has been a really selfless player as well. He's been kind of a jack-of-all-trades for us. He's played center. He's played guard. He's played tackle. Probably all this year. And has done a really good job in whatever we've asked him to do.

This is certainly going to be a challenge, no doubt. But we have total confidence that Chris can go in there and get the job done because he's a fifth-year center and he has a significant amount of experience. And he really has played a lot of football here.

So Landon did a great job, and I don't think you replace guys. But I think Chris certainly has the ability and the attitude and the character to get the job done for us.

**Q. Curious if you can comment on the growth of John Metchie from the start when he was with Alabama to now, and how his play can be seen as an inspiration to Canadians wanting to play football?**

COACH SABAN: Well, I think that it's hard for me to answer the second part of that question. But I think anytime somebody sets a great example for young people, wherever they're from, and they do it in a first-class way, like John Metchie does for us, I think it's a positive for college football, and I think it's a positive for young people. And I think it's an inspiration for anybody who has goals and aspirations of maybe being able to play at the collegiate level or any NFL or whatever.

And John Metchie has been a very, very positive contributor to our team. He's tough. He plays hurt. He plays physical. He gets open. He makes catches. He makes plays. He never complains.

So this guy is the epitome of what you look for in a wide receiver. And he certainly hasn't disappointed us in terms of how he's developed here, how he's worked here and what he's developed into.

**Q. Earlier today Brian Kelly lauded your evolution as a coach, saying you're constantly trying to improve. Where have you seen Brian Kelly's evolution since you played him back in 2012?**

COACH SABAN: I thought they had a very good team in 2012, and I've always had a tremendous amount of respect for Brian Kelly wherever he's been a coach. He's had a tremendous amount of success.

But I think their team reflects the kind of team that anybody would want to coach in terms of how they compete, how hard they play, sort of the discipline and all the intangible things you try to develop and build in your team and in your

program.

And I think they do it extremely well, and that's obviously a great compliment to him and his leadership and ability to get his team to be able to play that way on a consistent basis.

But I think they do a great job of featuring their players. So they had a great tight end as a receiver. They used him really well when we played him before. They got some really good tight ends now. They use them in multiple different roles that creates issues and problems for you.

So I think the one thing that he does do is a great job of featuring the personnel that he has. And obviously they have a different team now than they had then, but they're very effective in how they use the players that they have.

**Q. I know you don't like to look in the rearview mirror, but when you reflect on this program that you've built at Alabama, what stands out the most in your mind? And also, did you get anything special for Christmas this year?**

COACH SABAN: Well, I got to spend time with my family and my grandchildren and my children. So that's pretty special. And it's always special to see them be happy for the things that you're able to give them. It's always greater to give than it is to get. And so really positive from that standpoint.

I really don't spend a lot of time looking back. I think the thing that makes me the most proud is the number of players that we've had in the program, how they've developed and how much success they've had in their career, whether it's on or off the field, because ultimately that's the goal of the program: Can we have a program here that helps our players have a better chance to be more successful in life because they were involved in the program?

Because there's tremendous amount of lessons to be learned in competitive sports, in terms of the characteristics that you need to develop success in your life. And I think that would be the one thing that would make me feel most proud of all those individual players who have been here who contributed in this program and have gone on to be successful in whatever their future endeavors were. And that's the ultimate goal that we have for everyone involved in our program.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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