

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

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Arlington, Texas, USA

Offensive Coordinator

Steve Sarkisian

Alabama Crimson Tide



THE MODERATOR: Coach Sarkisian, an opening comment?

COACH SARKISIAN: Obviously it's an exciting time. I think our football team has worked extremely hard to get to this point. It's always cool to be in kind of -- playing the traditional powers, the Alabama-Notre Dame-type game in the Rose Bowl.

So all in all we're excited for the opportunity. Proud of the accomplishments that our team has had up to this point. And now we've got a great challenge ahead of us.

Q. Your colleague, Lane Kiffin, was famous for holding his hands up when he saw a play open up on the sidelines. I know you don't do that, but the way things have gone, do you ever feel that on the sidelines when you see things opening up, the way things have gone this year, like this is going to work?

COACH SARKISIAN: I think when you put in the time and the effort and the work and you start to see things develop in the way they do, you feel the excitement for the players.

And I probably hold back my emotions some more than others. But generally when you see something play out the way you practiced it and the way you hoped you're excited for the work of the coaches and everybody putting it in and ultimately the player's execution.

All in all, that's the preparation side of it. We put in our work and then the results are the results. But that comes from the hard work leading in. And I think everybody expresses themselves a different way when good plays happen. And then we look forward to the results.

Q. This is the first time we've talked to you since the

Iron Bowl. Looking back at that game for a second, just how much of an appreciation did you have just for your own personal journey these past couple of years, just being in that seat again and having that role of a head coach for a game?

COACH SARKISIAN: Obviously it was a unique scenario. And it was one that I just wanted to do the best job I could do for the university, for our football program, for Coach Saban.

And ultimately it was about the players. The guys played their tails off in that game. They played really well in all three phases, and I just kind of did my part the best I could. And again, I didn't want to lose sight of what my initial role always is, and that's to have our offense ready to play and to call plays.

So the end result it was an awesome opportunity. It was great to kind of be back in that role for a few hours. But the reality of it is it was about the players and their performance. And I was proud of the way they played in the game.

Q. How was Smitty used differently after Waddle went down to kind of compensate for his absence and then create the opportunity for him to have the statistical output he's had in the second half of the regular season?

COACH SARKISIAN: I think what Smitty brings to the table, he's a very smart football player. I mean, this guy's got a very high football IQ. He's a guy that understands the game big picture. Not just in one position or another.

He recognizes coverages really well. So it's allowed us to move him all over the field, whether it's in the slot, isolation-type plays, in bunches. And the reality of it is he knows why we're calling what we're calling and what we're calling those things for.

And the result is he's got a quarterback who prepares really well, who knows why we're calling those plays as well, and takes advantage of the opportunities when they're there. And then ultimately it comes down to the players



making plays.

And I think Smitty has demonstrated that all year long, and it's been probably magnified since Jaylen went out, that his unique play-making ability shows up. And he's had a tremendous season.

I'm so proud of him because I know it was a tough decision for him at the end of last season to come back, but clearly him coming back has been worth his while, and I'm sure it's been very gratifying for him.

Clearly we've benefited from that as well, from a football standpoint for our team. So all in all I think it's been a win-win, but really proud of Smitty, his leadership that he's displayed, the work ethic he displayed and ultimately the play-making ability.

Q. Against Florida you ran a play where you had Najee out wide, and he sort of runs this hitch into this slant post. Obviously you can't run that type of play without having trust in your offensive line. Does that offensive line -- does it allow you the liberty to play maybe the plays you otherwise wouldn't be able to call with a lesser line?

COACH SARKISIAN: Without a doubt. I think I said it early on in the preseason, we have a very veteran group up front. Even with Landon out and Chris Owens stepping in, we've got a veteran group. They've played a lot of football. They've seen a lot of defense.

So you get a feel for them in preparation of the things that they're comfortable doing, the things that maybe they're not as comfortable doing, and then you trust the dialogue that you have with them.

And so all in all I felt good about where we're at from a pass-protection standpoint in that game. And those guys assured me of that. It allowed us to do some different things maybe out of empty and whatnot, that play in particular to allow us maybe another second to let a play develop.

Q. I was wondering if you could probably dissect the Notre Dame defense for us. And where do you see some similarities in some other defenses you've played this season?

COACH SARKISIAN: I don't know if I could completely dissect them. They do a great job. I mean, Coach Lea is a tremendous football coach. They've got a great scheme. They've got a team that plays hard, that plays tough, that plays sound football. They're very aggressive up front. They're aggressive in the back end. They create

turnovers. They attack the football.

They do a tremendous job of getting off the field on third down. They do a really good job of stopping the run on first down to put you into the tougher second-and-longs and then the third-and-long-type scenarios.

At the end of the day, these guys are a very good team. Obviously they've got some highlight-type players in No. 6 and No. 14 who make plays in the perimeter, make plays pressuring the quarterback. But I think they play really complementary football with their defense -- offense. They get you off the field on defense and they possess the ball on offense.

We've got to do a great job in this game of extending drives on third down and then ultimately maximizing opportunities in the red area to score touchdowns.

Q. DeVonta is up for Heisman this year. How has the receiver position evolved with this new era of offense in college football, making it, I guess, more impactful and important?

COACH SARKISIAN: I think clearly you look around the country, a lot of people are throwing the ball. Receiver numbers are what they are right now. I can't speak for everybody. Where I speak for us is we lost two great receivers last year in Henry Ruggs and Jerry Jeudy. We lost Jaylen Waddle early in the year this year. Obviously John Metchie has stepped up for us.

But it created a unique opportunity for DeVonta Smith to be a guy where we had been spreading the wealth around so much here for the last couple of years that all of a sudden now he can become a real feature guy.

I don't know if that's what everybody else does. I know our system is complementary on offense. We like to be a balanced attack. We run the football, clearly, with Najee. We try to spread the ball around. We're obviously a big formation team.

But from a receiver standpoint, I'm sure it's a lot of fun for a lot of guys, because the game has changed so dramatically over the last 10, 20, 30 years to where more guys are getting more opportunities to make plays down the field, catching the ball. And I think that stems back to high school and seven-on-seven and what everybody has going on there.

And again I can't speak for everybody else and the receiver play. I do speak to the fact that we're fortunate enough to have one of the best ones in the country on our team. And he provides a great deal of leadership on our football team.

Q. Following up on John Metchie III, Coach Saban, mentioned the positive impact he's had on the program and how tough and physical he is. Could you elaborate on the growth that you've seen in John from the start of the program to now and how he'll be utilized against Notre Dame on Friday?

COACH SARKISIAN: When he came in, he was the fifth guy in that room. I think to his credit he really tried to learn from those guys and he really tried to see what does Ruggs do, what does Drew do, what does Waddle do, and what does Smitty do, and how does it if it my game.

When this year came around, he's still a little unknown. A&M shows up and the guy has a breakout game against a quality opponent, top-five opponent in the country. I think that's when he stepped on the scene. I think for himself the confidence kicked into all the work I've been putting in is starting to pay off now.

He's a huge asset to us. I think he provides, again, a lot of versatility. He's a very smart player, which is key in our system. So complementary football with he and DeVonta, and then obviously what Najee is doing in the backfield, we've got some pretty savvy players that can move around the field.

Q. Wanted to get your thoughts on Mac Jones and DeVonta Smith. What have you seen in those two individuals as far as their progression and their growth over the course of the season both on and off the field?

COACH SARKISIAN: Well, they're both great leaders. I think the one thing, especially in this day and age of college football, very rarely do you have guys that are highlight, really good football players for you in their fourth year. So many guys leave early, right? So both those guys have been around the program. They've been through the battles.

DeVonta is notorious for the second 26 catch against Georgia in the National Championship game. Mac came in as kind of the three-star grind-it-out, sitting behind Jalen Hurts and Tua Tagovailoa. But at the end of it all, it's the perseverance and leadership they provide and ultimately the performance.

These guys prepare better than anybody right now on offense for us in their preparation for the game, and it shows in the way they play the game. And their preparation is at the highest level. They remind me of NFL players when it comes to that.

And the result is they're prepared for what they may see from the opponent. They're prepared for what's asked of them from us, from an offensive standpoint, but more importantly they provide a model for our younger players of this is how you want to go about your business if you want to play at a high level.

That's not just on the field; that's off the field in their preparation. So all in all I'm so proud of these two young men because for DeVonta, which we talked about, for him coming back for his senior season and then having the results that he's having, and then also for Mac for the perseverance. This is a guy who waited his turn, got thrown to the fire late last season, showed some resiliency bouncing back from a couple of interceptions in the Auburn game. And then this offseason came and almost just wouldn't be denied and set himself up for a tremendous season. And so the results that he's having now I'm very proud of him, and I'm happy for him because he's earned it.

Q. What does it say about the balance of this offense that you guys have three of the top five Heisman vote getters? And how much fun is it to coach these players when they buy into that and have success on the field?

COACH SARKISIAN: I think it speaks volumes to our team in general. I think any time awards like this come up, and like for us to have three of the top five in the Heisman means our team is playing good football. Those things don't happen if you're not winning football games, if you're not in the situation in the College Football Playoffs.

So I think that's a byproduct of being on a good football team. But for us as an offense, I think the idea that these guys bought into the run game helps the passing game, the passing game helps the run game. We're not one dimensional. We don't recruit one-dimensional offensive linemen. We ask them to run block, we ask them to pass protect.

We don't recruit one-dimensional backs. Clearly Najee with his versatility of running the ball, catching the ball out of the backfield. And Brian Robinson kind of in the same mold.

And very intelligent receivers. And so we do use quite a bit of formations and motions and things, and that can be taxing on you if you don't know what you're doing.

So all in all the buy-in for the players on offense has been something I'm proud of because it's not always easy. It's easy to say, man, we just want to run the ball or why aren't we throwing it more. But I think our players are mature

enough to know that we need both aspects of our offense to make the other one go. And the result is those guys are not the only ones, but those guys are getting the accolades that I think they deserve.

Q. Just talk about how much your relationship with head coach Nick Saban has grown. You came back to Alabama in 2019 as the offensive coordinator. What have you learned the most from Coach Saban and what do you hope that he's learned from you?

COACH SARKISIAN: I don't know what he's learned from me (chuckling).

But I would say, at the end of the day, I've just tried to be a sponge here, man. I had a choice here two years ago with some other opportunities, and had the opportunity to come back here to Alabama. I jumped on the opportunity, not just to coach the players and be part of the team, but to be around him. Coach Saban is the best ever to do it.

And then a year ago I had a couple opportunities to become a head coach, and I decided to come back because I felt like my work here wasn't done. I felt like I owed it to him. I made a commitment to him to be part of this program.

And I just try to do the best I can do. I try to be the best version of Steve Sarkisian every day that I show up and be a sponge, all of the aspects of the program that he has his fingerprint on, which is literally everything.

And I think probably the biggest thing I've learned from him is his ability to balance all aspects of the program, whether it's on the field, off the field, recruiting, all that goes into being a head coach at a place like Alabama. Those are all the things that I've tried to take in from him because his balance of all of that, I think, is what is pretty incredible.

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