

Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Alabama vs Michigan

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Pasadena, California, USA

Alabama Crimson Tide Coach Nick Saban

Press Conference

NICK SABAN: How is everybody doing today? First of all, happy new year. We're excited about being here and having the opportunity to play in a Rose Bowl, which is a fantastic opportunity for our players and playing against a really good team.

Excited to be in the playoffs. Proud of the way our team has sort of developed through the season and overcome a lot of adversity and showed resiliency to have the opportunity to get here.

Now it's all about can you finish. That's why we play the games.

Q. Coach Harbaugh has been outspoken in his belief that revenue sharing should go towards the players, including television deals (indiscernible), Big Ten, \$7 billion in contracts. SEC had a \$3 billion in contracts. Do you think players should receive revenue sharing deals?

NICK SABAN: Look, I think name, image, and likeness, revenue sharing and all these things are a really complex issue, and I do think they're worthy of discussion.

I'm all for the players being benefitted in a very fair economical way, but I don't think this podium here is the opportunity or the time to really have a discussion about that.

We'd like to focus on the game. It's something that we've worked hard for all year long, and hopefully we'll be able to prepare well, sort of go out and play well. That's really what I'm focused on right now.

But I do think it's a complex issue, and I do think it's worthy of discussion. I just don't think this is the right place to discuss it.

Q. How do you feel about the break? (Indiscernible).



Are you worried about that?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think you're always concerned about when you have a layoff, how are you going to respond. I've had a lot of confidence in our players. I trust our players. I think they've worked hard to prepare for this game.

But you've got to have the right mindset and you've got to know what it takes to go out and play against a really good team. There always are concerns about how are we going to respond, but I think I have those concerns when we play every week (chuckling).

Just because we had time off, it's really no different.

Q. How did you think the team would respond after Texas and then USF in consecutive weeks?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think what we did as a staff and as an organization is we tried to focus on what we needed to do to improve and get better and how could we make our team better.

I do think the players responded magnificently to the challenges that we had, really focused, wanted to prove something, were not happy with the circumstance that they created for themselves.

That was a real motivating factor for them. I thought our coaching staff did a really good job of sort of making the corrections and adjustments that we needed to make to give our players the best opportunity to be successful, and they responded well to it and it worked out really well.

Q. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but (indiscernible) just judging by your interviews.

NICK SABAN: Well, I think that if you're a competitor and things aren't going the way you'd like for them to go, you certainly get motivated about it. But it was sort of inspirational to me that the players sort of bought into this whole thing of trying to get better and to prove something.

I want, coaches want to do a great job for them, so it was



inspirational in some ways.

Q. Is it easier or harder to prepare for a game when you have this much time?

NICK SABAN: Well, on one hand, because you have more time you can say you get more repetitions, so you could be more prepared because of the repetitions you got.

On the other hand, the other team has got more time to change up some of the things that they've always done, but you don't know what those things might be.

So you may not be prepared for some of those things. So it kind of goes both ways.

Q. You guys have played in a lot of different games over the years. Do you have a favorite bowl game as far as pageantry?

NICK SABAN: Well, this is a fantastic opportunity for our players. The Rose Bowl does a great job from a hospitality standpoint. They have the reputation of being the granddaddy of them all.

Kind of growing up in the Big Ten I think for 12 years, that was always the goal, can you get to the Rose Bowl.

But every bowl that we've been to and every opportunity that we've had to play in the Orange Bowl, Cotton Bowl, Sugar Bowl, Peach Bowl, whatever the venue was, it's always been first class.

The people that are responsible for all of those bowls, including the Fiesta Bowl, all do a wonderful job. I think we're just pleased and happy to have the opportunity to be here.

Q. (Indiscernible).

NICK SABAN: That was my first year of being a head coach, so instead of tying for the championship, if I'd have been a little better back then, maybe we'd have won it.

But anyway, I have great respect and admiration for the players on that team. My first opportunity to be a head coach, you never know how players are going to respond, but they really bought in, and it was really different for them, the way we approached it, the way we did it, and they bought into it and had a really good season.

I have a tremendous amount of appreciation for that. Probably appreciate that group more than they know.

Q. You said you appreciate that championship as

much as any other national titles you've won. Why is that?

NICK SABAN: Well, I appreciate the high school championship we won in 1968 or 1969. I think there's a special sort of bond that goes with a team that wins a championship. Everybody sort of buys in.

Everybody does what they need to do. That's what you're always sort of trying to develop from a psychological disposition standpoint as a coach, and when a group does it and they have success, it's a great feeling. It's really kind of special, so you don't tend to forget it.

Q. (Indiscernible).

NICK SABAN: Well, this team has been fun because the relationships on the team are really good. The leadership on the team is really good. The buy-in that the players have has been really good.

I think that you're always trying to develop guys putting the team forward. Everybody can have more success if we all play together.

People buying into the principles and values that help them do that, having positive energy about trying to do that, being able to be responsible to do your job at a high level and a high standard is something that we sometimes as fans can take for granted, but that's just something everybody wants to do.

But it really is pretty special when you have a group that does that, and this group certainly did, and that made it a lot of fun to be around them, and the relationships on the team made it even more inspiring.

Q. Talk about Tommy Rees and the buy-in that he's got at the present.

NICK SABAN: Tommy has done a fantastic job. I was really impressed with Tommy when we spoke to him about taking the job. He's very bright. Players respond well to him. He's a really good teacher. He's a really good quarterback coach. I think he's done a magnificent job of developing all of our quarterbacks.

You see Jalen all the time, but I think they've all improved under his tutelage. He's got really good planning ability in terms of -- you always look at the opponent, and you want to have a plan for an opponent and then get the players to buy into it and execute it, and I think that's something that he's done a really, really good job of.

He didn't sort of stay in the place of this is what we're going



to do no matter what, this kind of can adapt and change in order to teach the players what we have, and I think he's just done a marvelous job of that, and it sort of transpired our team offensively, which I think had a lot to do with the success.

Q. (Indiscernible).

NICK SABAN: Well, the record speaks for itself in terms of his sort of ability to make big kicks in big games. I have all the faith, trust, and confidence in the world that anybody could have in any player.

He's not let us down very often, but we'd certainly be supportive of any situation like that that he gets in that he'll do his best and we'll do our best to support him.

Q. Kevin Steele was saying that you're the same guy he knew in 1985. What is your energy level at 72 compared to what it was at 42, and is it any more difficult to maintain it, or is it always there?

NICK SABAN: You know, you probably ought to ask somebody else that question. They probably could judge better than I can.

But I've not changed through the years in terms of the process of what we go through to try to get the team ready on a week-to-week basis or the off-season, spring practice, summer conditioning.

Whatever part of the program that you have to try to build the team, I've not really changed how we go about that or how much time it takes to do it or the energy level that it takes to do it because I kind of think there's one way that you go about these things. There's one way that you do it. I've never really ever deviated from that.

There's been some times when I'd say I should smarten up and take a day off. That comes from Ms. Terry more than me. But it is what it is.

I wouldn't feel comfortable and confident if I didn't go through the process of what we go through on a week-to-week, month-to-month, year-to-year basis to try to build a team that I would be unfair to the team if I didn't do that.

Q. (Indiscernible)?

NICK SABAN: He's fantastic. He's got a lot of confidence. I think he trusts and believes in the plan that we've had week in and week out. He's done a really good job of trying to execute the plan. He's been a guy that has possibly grew in his ability to self-assess, when he did

things correctly and what I could have done better has always been good.

His positive energy has really had a huge impact, I think, on our team as well as on the offense.

Obviously he's the most inspirational player and also the most valuable player voted upon by his teammates, so that in and of itself sort of tells you the impact that he has on college football.

Q. (Indiscernible) take another job elsewhere, whether it be the NFL. How frustrating was it back then (indiscernible)?

NICK SABAN: You know, it's kind of -- first of all, I'm honored that anybody would consider me for anything, so from that standpoint, I guess the fact that there's interest would be appreciated.

But never since I've been at Alabama have I ever considered going anyplace else. I think no disrespect to you all, but you create a lot of that by your own speculation of what might happen, and that's okay.

I'm not upset about that or disappointed in it. But the only frustrating thing about it is does it impact our program, does it impact what we're trying to do, does it impact the players on your team.

That part of it is always something I've tried to manage so players didn't have to have that as a sort of impediment that would affect their ability to be successful.

Q. (On team focus.)

NICK SABAN: I think that's one of the hardest things as a coach to do on a consistent basis -- consistency and performance is really, really difficult to sustain. It's a part of human nature that when you have success, you're supposed to get rewarded for it, which means do I have to work just as hard or should I be able to sit in my easy chair and eat Tostitos and cheese. That's kind of our culture.

There is a lot of rat poison out there when you have success and have people talk about you in a positive way, and you have to be able to manage that.

I think from just a human nature standpoint, it's much more difficult to manage success than it is when you have failures. When you have failures, everybody is motivated to try to prove that we can do better.

I think that was one of the stimulating factors for our team early on when we didn't play well. Now that we've had

some success, the challenge is can you stay focused and really trust and believe in the things that helped you be successful and continue to do those things at a high level so that you can have success.

Q. How well if at all do you know Jim Harbaugh?

NICK SABAN: Yeah, I know Jim. I've known his family for years. I loved his dad. When I was a young coach, his dad was a secondary coach at Michigan, and I was an up and coming, trying to learn how to coach a secondary, and he was always helpful to me.

I've always had a tremendous amount of respect for the family. His dad was a great coach, John is a good coach, Jim is a good coach. Tom Crean was on the staff with Coach Izzo at Michigan State and we had a relationship, and he's married to Jim's sister. I've had a tremendous amount of respect for the family for years.

They've got a really good team. They're well-coached. He's done a tremendous job with his team, so I have nothing but respect and admiration for what he's been able to accomplish.

Q. (Indiscernible).

NICK SABAN: I coached Ohio State-Michigan State, so in those days I mean, Woody Hayes didn't even allow you to buy gas in Michigan if you were recruiting there when he was there.

I don't think I have any lingering feelings, but I know and respect the traditions of those rivalry games.

This is a big game for our team, and that's what I'm focused on is our team and what we can do to try to play well against a really good Michigan team.

Q. How is this a different team than a lot of your other teams at Alabama?

NICK SABAN: Well, we had some really good rat poison early. It was almost like Wheaties because everybody criticized us and said we weren't any good and we were done and Coach Saban is past his prime and all that. It was like eating Wheaties, breakfast of champions. That helped us.

So now can we handle the success, that's the next question.

Q. Did you have less of the other kind, the bad kind, because the expectations were --

NICK SABAN: I think we had bad early, then we've had a lot of good lately, and I think we've got to handle the bad well, and now we've got to prove we can handle the good and try to finish the season the way we'd like.

Q. (Indiscernible) why is defending the tight ends so critical to your success in general?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think I've always said that the two most difficult match-ups is when they have a mismatch on a back or a mismatched tight end because the guys that guard those guys are usually -- are the same kind of athlete. Because they're linebackers most of the time.

You've always got to pay special attention to how you do things so that are you allowing them to create those kind of mismatches in the way you play on defense, and that's very challenging sometimes because that's not the only thing you have to stop.

You still have to stop the run. You still have to stop the other players that can be involved in play action passes and taking vertical shots downfield. The team we're playing has a really good tight end, and they also have a really good running back, but they also have a good receiving running back.

They have opportunities to create issues and challenges for you, as well.

Q. The "is he past his prime question," what was your reaction?

NICK SABAN: Yeah, I've heard them before. I think when you get my age, everybody is waiting for you to -- you, know it kind of is what it is.

Q. How is the camaraderie with all the extracurricular activities that are going on?

NICK SABAN: I think my message to the team early was we've got to stay committed. It's a great opportunity for you. You create a great opportunity for yourself when you go to a bowl game. There's things you can do that are really good experiences for you, but you've really got to stay committed to what is the task at hand.

When we're in meetings and we're practicing and those types of things, we've got to be focused and committed to those things and stay committed to that and not allow the other stuff to sort of creep into your ability to stay focused.

Q. You're an inspiration to a lot of people. What was your inspiration to bring you to the pinnacle you've achieved?



NICK SABAN: I've had a lot of great mentors. First of all, I had really good parents growing up that I think sort of promoted the right kind of values in terms of compassion for other people, doing the right thing, being a good person, having great character.

But then from a professional coaching standpoint, Don James was my college coach. My high school coach had a tremendous impact on what it took to be successful. George Quarles was a great inspiration. He was the first guy to give me an opportunity to be a leader as a defensive coordinator.

I learned a lot of football from Bill Belichick.

But I would say Don James, who I played for and who really was the inspiration to get me to be a coach because I never really wanted to be a coach, but he was the one that recognized that, hey, be a graduate assistant for one year and see where it takes you, and I said, well, I don't really want to go to graduate school. And I don't really want to be a coach so why would I do that, so that one year turned into however many -- 50, I guess.

But he had a tremendous impact on me as a person because he always promoted through athletics, through playing football, which I've adopted this through the years, too, with our players, is how can you create value for your future in terms of the lessons that you learn as a competitive athlete.

That's something that I've always tried to do with our players, but it's something that he instilled in me when I was playing.

Q. When you talk about all the changes and adapting, was there a moment you realized you had to be flexible in things you do --

NICK SABAN: I think you always have to -- things are changing rapidly. I mean, they're changing in business. AI is changing things. Things that we have happening in college football are changing things.

You have to be able to adapt. I always say dinosaurs couldn't adapt and they're not around anymore. You have to be able to adapt to a constantly changing world.

If you look at the changes in college football in the last three to five years, it's probably changed more than it did in the 50 years prior to that. Not being able to adapt would be a huge detriment to continuing to be successful.

Q. Is there something that made you realize that, or is

there an example that you've always looked at as I don't want to go down that --

NICK SABAN: You know, to be honest with you, probably COVID. I mean, when they told us on March 13th on Friday that everybody had to go home, that was supposedly our first day of spring practice, my first thing was how are we going to adapt.

So we bought everybody an apple watch and scale and gave them a workout program and sent them home. But the fact that we did that and we stayed in touch and we had Zooms with the players, we ended up winning the National Championship, and I think it was because of the way we managed all the challenges that COVID created.

That kind of made me realize, wow, when something comes up, you'd better be one step ahead of the problem so you can adapt to those situations. I really do think that was probably the thing that comes to mind.

Our players handled it well, and I told the players, I said, whoever handles this disruption the best will have the best opportunity to be successful when we do play. They did it.

Q. When you were a defensive coordinator (indiscernible)?

NICK SABAN: I'll tell you what, man, there's been a lot of 3rd downs, a lot of 1st downs, a lot of penalties, a lot of missed opportunities to call time-out when I should have.

I do remember Jim was a really, really good player, but I don't remember a lot about the game.

Q. I was wondering how much this year's Michigan team and the Michigan teams from the last few years maybe emulated how he played.

NICK SABAN: Well, he was a great player, but I think football has changed so much. But there's one common denominator: They're a physical team. They try to run the ball and they have great play-action passing, so maybe the way that all gets presented is different, but philosophically they're very similar to the type of team that he played on way back in the day.

Q. When were you first made aware of any potential issues surrounding Catapult?

NICK SABAN: I'm not concerned about that. Our players have had every opportunity to get ready for this game just like any other game. That's not an issue that I'm concerned about or that our players are concerned about or that's worst discussing here 48 hours before the game.



Q. (Indiscernible) Alabama for a long time had the intimidation factor. Do you feel like that intimidation factor (indiscernible)?

NICK SABAN: You know, I don't know that I can necessarily agree with any intimidation factor. I think every team develops a character of their own by how they play and how they compete, and that's something that every team has to earn.

I mean, so I don't necessarily see things the way you do when it comes to that. I think you want to play to a high standard, and that's always the goal. If that creates an advantage for you, so be it.

Q. The past couple days some of your players have been (indiscernible) what caused that, and what are you looking to get out of these relationships?

NICK SABAN: I don't know if that's really changed. I've always done that with the players. I think this may be the first time it came to light because I think you all have always painted me as a really serious, no-nonsense -- and I think that's probably true to some degree.

But nobody has ever talked about the light side of things in terms of how I have some fun with the players. I have good relationships with them.

I think a lot of that comes from having respect for them and understanding what they're going through on a day-to-day basis and try to make sure they understand that you appreciate that as well as seeing them as not just a player but a person and you care about what they do and you care about their future.

There's an old saying that says, players don't care what you know until they know that you care. That's always been a part of who I was. I just think that it's just something that's been talked about lately.

Q. After this new era of college football, some of your players have talked about Alabama being the one standard for the country. How do you maintain the standard of the Tide as you enter this new era and what's been a crazy last couple of years?

NICK SABAN: It's going to be much more challenging because the circumstances around it have changed a little bit. I think one of the reasons that we've been able to be successful is it's always been our philosophy to place more value for a player in terms of their future and helping them be successful. Whether it's personal development and having the right sort of mindset to set goals, understanding

what they have to do to accomplish the goals, how they have to edit their behavior, the discipline, what it takes to do it, behavioral issues and how they create value for their brand by making good choices and decisions, getting an education.

I always tell players that going to college to prepare yourself for (indiscernible). They all want to play in the NFL, but that's not going to be forever and it's not going to be for long. We've always tried to create value for our players' future.

Now, that's changed a little bit in terms of dynamic of college football. It's not just about -- that's what college used to be all about for all of us. We all went to college to do that, have a better lifestyle when we graduated. So that's always been where we've invested everything that we do to help players be successful.

Now there's a shift in a little bit of what can I get as a college player. I'm not saying that's a bad thing, I'm just saying it's a shift. I still think it's possible to try to create value for guys' future and that they need to understand this is why you're going to college, even though your quality of life is going to be better now because of what you can achieve as a college player.

I'm all for it, but I really don't necessarily agree with guys choosing a school based on how much they can get. It still should be on what they can accomplish.

Q. (Indiscernible) hasn't seen as much action. (Indiscernible).

NICK SABAN: I think cornerback is a position that you're going to have five or six plays in the game that are going to be critical plays to make or not make because they all could end up being big plays.

I think it's the nature of the beast that if you're out there playing for ^ 55, 70 plays in a game that you've got to stay focused on every play because you don't know when those five or six plays are going to approach a corner or something. You've got to be in great position to do it and you've got to focus every play so that you're not in bad position when that one play comes up.

I think that's the nature of the beast at this position, and I think when you're a player like him, you've got to especially stay focused because it may not happen as often, but when it does, you've got to be able to respond and you've got to be in great position.

Q. (Indiscernible).

NICK SABAN: Yeah, he's done a great job of that. He's really done a really good job all year for us. He's been very consistent, and he's made most of the plays that he needed to make.

Q. (Indiscernible).

NICK SABAN: I call him Kool-Aid all the time.

Q. You've made these bowl game trips for quite a while now. What is essential that you have to bring to bowl week?

NICK SABAN: I think the big thing you have to be able to do is stay committed to why you came here. There's a lot of other things to do and you should enjoy those things, but you've also got to stay focused on what you need to do to play well in the game. I think staying committed to those things are really important.

Now, that doesn't mean you've got to do it 24/7, but when it's time to focus, you've got to be able to focus, prepare, practice, and get ready for the game. Hopefully our players have done a really good job of that.

Q. How have you seen Kristian Story develop in your program over the last three years?

NICK SABAN: Well, Kristian is a really good athlete and a really smart guy. He's a high school quarterback so he understands the game really well. When he's had to respond to play this season, he's done a really good job for us.

Q. How about playing in the Rose Bowl for you, where does it stack up in terms of the bowl experience?

NICK SABAN: This is a great bowl game, but it's really -- I don't like comparison questions. I don't like to compare this to something else. This is one of the greatest experiences in college sports, but I think all the bowl games do a great job of trying to be hospitable and bring an outstanding experience to the players.

This is great. I grew up in the Big Ten, so being able to come to the Rose Bowl has always been special. But I think the six bowls that are involved in the playoffs, they're all pretty special.

Q. (Indiscernible).

NICK SABAN: I think Michigan has a really, really good defense. I think the players do a really good job of executing. They do create quite a few multiples in terms of the things that they do, but I think it's very effective and

they play it very well.

So it's going to be very challenging for us to be able to read and see those things and get the ball in the right place at the right time. They do a lot of plugging batches, too, so getting a hat on a hat in the run game is also something we have to do.

Q. There's been a lot of talk about the 12-team playoff. (Indiscernible) or do you think it won't be too different?

NICK SABAN: I don't think it'll be too different. The big games are going to be the big games, and there's always going to be speculation of who the best 12 teams are just like there's speculation now who the best four teams are, just like there's speculation in the NCAA basketball tournament when there's 68 teams in it, and then you have a two-hour show talking about who got in and who didn't.

I don't see how it's going to minimize the importance of big games. No different than the NFL playoffs. People want to win the division. They don't want to be the wildcard team. If you have a chance to be a wildcard team that's better than not being in the playoffs. Everybody is fighting for home field advantage. I think all those things will exist in college football, as well.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the recruiting process, when you start to understand a kid is a little bit different.

NICK SABAN: You know, Caleb was special from the start. He's mature beyond his years in terms of wanting to be successful, the kind of character that he has. He's got great parents, great family.

I think it was the first time I met him, I said, this guy fits us, and that's certainly turned out to be the case.

Q. What stands out or what makes him successful?

NICK SABAN: He's really instinctive. He's a fast reactor. He's not intimidated by any circumstance or situation. He's really, really committed to learning how to do things. He never wants to be wrong. He kind of takes that approach to how he prepares.

I mean, just like learning the defense, he came with the offense every day to try to learn the calls, learn the defense, learn the adjustments. That's not the kind of commitment that most freshmen coming in have.

Obviously it paid off for us and paid off for him in terms of how he plays.

Q. (Indiscernible) have you had an experience like that before where you've had a different circumstance playing a guy like that?

NICK SABAN: Well, yeah, we had Jesse Williams way back in the day coming from Australia. We had an Australian punter. We've got an offensive lineman from Finland. I do think that the NFL by expanding and having games all over the world basically and in Europe, football has become a little bigger sport.

Now they have some decent leagues where the kids develop and grow up.

I see it like basketball, where it was like 15, 20 years ago and you started seeing guys come.

Q. The translation part of like being a linebacker, what is that process like (indiscernible)?

NICK SABAN: I think one of the big things that helped us in his circumstance was we had him in camp. Anytime you have these guys come from a different culture, language barrier, all those kinds of things, all things that you have to try and make sure you address and that guys are understanding, no different than the defensive lineman from Quebec, French speaking at home.

But I was at LSU, and some of those guys from south Louisiana, they spoke French in their home, too, and when I was recruiting them they didn't know what I was talking about and the family started talking in French, so I was like, I guess I'm not supposed to know what's happening here.

Q. Did you pick up any Cajun phrases?

NICK SABAN: I used to have a player and they spoke French in the house. I said, man, you've got to teach me some French. I never learned anything.

Q. (Indiscernible).

NICK SABAN: No, I really liked Tommy. I thought he was bright. I thought he did a great job in presentation. He does a really good job with players. He's a really good quarterback coach. The guy is smart. But he's got great teaching progressions in terms of how he does things.

He's transformed our offense and transformed our team this year, and I think he's one of the best coaches in college football.

Q. Did you have any connection with him --

NICK SABAN: I knew his dad, but other than that, I didn't

really know him.

Q. I talked to Chuck Martin last week about him. He had coached him at Notre Dame. He said the thing about Tommy was when he played quarterback, he lost the starting job but he never wavered. When they needed him later in the season he stepped in and came through, which is what you want obviously. Have you seen that this year, the way that's played out?

NICK SABAN: Yeah, I don't think there's any question about the fact that especially some of the issues that we sort of work ourselves through early in the season, he never wavered. He stayed committed to the things he needed to do, but he was flexible. He wasn't inflexible saying we've got to do it this way.

I think that's how we sort of transformed our offensive scheme to the players that we had, and we did a really good job of development.

Q. (Indiscernible).

NICK SABAN: I don't think there's any question about it. If they played in the SEC, they'd be one of the best defensive teams in the SEC. Their team is a very, very good team, and they do a good job of executing it.

They've got good players, they've got experienced players, and they don't make a lot of mistakes. This is going to be a real challenge for us offensively.

Q. Have you had a game this year (indiscernible)?

NICK SABAN: I forget what year it was, but kind of went through a little bit of the same transition when Jake Coker became the quarterback and now early on when you're playing different quarterbacks changing back and forth and then we finally settled on Jake and the team started to grow around him and we ended up winning the National Championship that year. I forget the year that year --

Q. 2015.

NICK SABAN: That team was a little bit like this, this team. But this team has been a lot of fun.

Q. (Indiscernible) do you have to step back?

NICK SABAN: I think anytime you see a team grow and develop and improve, it's always what you're trying to get. Sometimes it's a little more difficult, but it creates this expectation for your team, and there's a little more, I'm going to say, anxiety with everybody trying to meet those expectations rather than just focusing on what they need to

do to be the best they can be.

So it was fun this year to see these guys grow and develop.

Q. They got to do it kind of without that anxiety (indiscernible)?

NICK SABAN: Yeah, I think that's -- we've had something to prove all season after a bad start, so that's kind of been an incentive. I always have some anxiety when you're getting ready because you want to try to get the team ready, and you never know exactly how ready they are until they go out there and play.

Q. You get presented with massive (indiscernible) do you look at it as a puzzle at all?

NICK SABAN: There's no question you have to figure it out. You have to adapt to the changing environment, changing circumstances.

We try to do that the best we can.

Q. When you look at the foundation of the program, how much do you look (indiscernible) to get you guys on the trajectory that you are now? I wonder how much that team, that group of people means to what you've been able to do.

NICK SABAN: Well, there was a lot of guys on that team that contributed to the success in future years. But we went through a lot with that team. I think everybody learned something. I think we were like 6-2 at one time and had to suspend five players for some NCAA thing that had happened in the past, all five starters, and then we won a bowl game.

But the guys that came back from that team, they bought into what we needed to do, and we had a really good recruiting year which they contributed to because they believed in what we were doing.

So I think all those factors really contributed to 2008 and the start of a really good season for us, even though we lost to Florida in the SEC Championship game. They were the foundation for the whole program.

Q. Wasn't Julio part of the next class?

NICK SABAN: Julio was part of the next class.

Q. You finally got salt and pepper shakers on the table that year. I remember that story.

NICK SABAN: Yeah, we did.

Q. How much time do you give your team (indiscernible)?

NICK SABAN: You know, I think there's two ways to look at it. There's the historic nature of the game and then there's the game itself, which is we're playing in the playoffs and we're playing against a really good team.

I think everybody sort of respects the tradition of the Rose Bowl, but at the same time, they also need to focus on what they need to do to try to play well in the Rose Bowl, which is all about playing against the team they're going to play against.

Q. Back when you were at Michigan State, if you were to look forward into this part of your life, did you ever think you'd be at a Rose Bowl Game getting ready for a national semifinal way back then?

NICK SABAN: I think way back then, I was trying to just keep my job. I wasn't thinking much about what's going to happen in the future.

But we did play in the Rose Bowl when I was a defensive coordinator at Michigan State in 1987, I think.

Played in the Rose Bowl here in 2003 against Texas.

We actually played in the Rose Bowl in 2020 but it was in Dallas instead of California.

All those have been wonderful experiences. But we've certainly done everything we can to -- the Rose Bowl has been great for our players. Their experience has been wonderful. But keeping them focused on playing against a very good Michigan team.

Q. (Indiscernible).

NICK SABAN: I think the bigger the playoff gets, the more it minimizes bowl games. One of the great traditions of college football for many years was if you had a great season, you got to go to a bowl game. It's great for the players. They got a lot of positive reinforcement. Maybe you didn't win a championship but you had a good team. It was great for the fan base.

As soon as we started having playoffs, this is new and I'm not complaining about that, it started to minimize the importance of bowl games. The more we expand the playoffs, which I'm not against, I'm for, it minimizes the importance of bowl games.

Q. I talked to some of your players about (indiscernible) who would you pick because (indiscernible) he said he'd hit a 40-yarder.

NICK SABAN: Well, we've got three kickers on this trip, so again, you're asking me a hypothetical question that I hope never, ever happens.

But it brings to mind that when you're in the NFL you've only got one kicker. So Michael Dean Perry when I was with the Cleveland Browns, he was our backup kicker, and I don't know if very many people knew that, but he could make an extra point or a 30-yarder. He's a really good athlete so it wouldn't surprise me. I've never seen him kick, but maybe we need to try him out.

Q. Seems like there's a subtle difference between a good team and a great team and then a great team and a championship team. It's just a game of inches. What's that one or two percent that separates a great team from a championship team?

NICK SABAN: It's probably a lot mindset, how important it is to the players, because a good team is going to have good players. A great team is going to have good players. A championship team has got to have good players.

But probably the mindset and ability to sustain the focus, to execute, to buy into the things that it takes to play winning football, whether it's discipline, togetherness, buying into the principles and values of what it takes to be successful, positive energy and attitude, leadership. Some of the things that contribute to it.

But I think you've got to have all those elements to win a championship.

Q. How much of that is developed versus your trying to recruit the right guy?

NICK SABAN: I think it's a combination of both. I think it's hard to develop it if it doesn't exist. I think if it exists, it needs to be developed.

Q. The ability to generate big plays, where does that rank on the checklist of success on a given day?

NICK SABAN: I think the two probably critical factors in determining -- statistically I'm talking about -- success in football is turnover ratio and explosive plays. Those two things probably are one and two in terms of what impacts the outcome of the games the most.

Q. Jermaine has done a great job with that. Is that one of the reasons you wanted him is the ability to

generate --

NICK SABAN: Yeah, well, we knew he had big play ability. I think you always need to have guys like that at the receiver position. He certainly has done an outstanding job for us in terms of not just explosive plays but in terms of position, top to bottom.

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