

Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Alabama vs Michigan

Sunday, December 31, 2023
Pasadena, California, USA

Coach Nick Saban

Coach Jim Harbaugh

Media Day Press Conference



been almost 15 years since you played in this Rose Bowl. What are some of your fondest memories from playing that National Championship game against Texas, whether it be the lead-up to the game, the game itself, or just anything you remember?

JIM HARBAUGH: Good morning, everybody. Happy new year. Excited to be here. Just excited to attack this day. Have one day left with our preparations, and we've got a good day in front of us. Getting ready for the task at hand.

Looking forward to an incredible football game.

Thank you.

NICK SABAN: Well, certainly we appreciate the opportunity to be playing in the College Football Playoff. We appreciate the opportunity to be in the Rose Bowl, and we certainly appreciate everybody's effort, for the hospitality they've provided us.

It's been a good experience for our players, and I want to congratulate Coach Harbaugh and his team for an undefeated season and winning the Big Ten Championship. They've done a great job in terms of what they've been able to do with their players. They're a very well-coached team, very challenging for us, and we'll use the day today to try to clean up what we need to do to hopefully play a really good game.

Q. Coach Harbaugh, how do you limit Jalen Milroe, who clearly has gotten better every game this season?

JIM HARBAUGH: Yeah, that's a great question. Really all 11 on our defense. He's a great player. Great runner. Did 500 some yards of scramble yards, another 250 or so in quarterback-driven runs, outstanding thrower, big offensive line. Outstanding running backs, tight ends, receivers.

Yeah, all 11 for us really on defense. We've got a game plan, and getting things cleaned up.

On our toes at all times. It's a big challenge.

Q. Coach Saban, you've played in a lot of big bowl games throughout your career at Alabama, but it's

NICK SABAN: Well, the Rose Bowl has always been a first-class granddaddy of them all. Growing up in the Big Ten for 12 years, it was always the goal to be able to win the Big Ten and get to the Rose Bowl. That's sort of special, and it was special to play in that game.

Really haven't thought a whole lot about it. There's a lot of challenges that go with this game, so we've been trying to focus on what we need to do to go out and execute and play well in this game against a really, really good team.

I don't reminisce much about what's happened in the past. I'm kind of looking forward to today and the next day. We've just got to take it one day at a time.

Q. For Coach Saban, you found immediate success in your first head coaching job with the University of Toledo. Reflecting on that inaugural head coaching season, what is a coaching philosophy or lesson you acquired in that Toledo job that helped set the tone for the rest of your coaching career until now?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think that initially, I was probably counting on some of the things that I learned from former mentors, whether it was George Perles, Bill Belichick, whatever, in terms of how they built success in their programs and tried to emulate that as much as we could.

But it's always been our philosophy to try to create value for players in terms of their personal development, developing careers off the field, developing a career on the field, being the best that they could be at whatever they choose to do.

That's always been the philosophy. It's always been what we tried to build on.

It's worked fairly well for us through the years. We're going to continue to have that philosophy so that players can be



more successful in life because they were involved in the program.

Q. Coach Harbaugh, for a lot of the year your team has been one of the best two teams in the country, but now, no pun intended, Alabama comes in rolling with a lot of momentum, maybe even overshadowing your team a little bit. Are you sort of embracing maybe an underdog type role or maybe guys are not talking about Michigan as much now as you get ready to face Alabama?

JIM HARBAUGH: There's a lot to unpack there (laughter), but just excited for the game. I feel the team is in a good place. Things we've learned from being in this game for the last couple years, we're applying those. We're just really locked in. We're ready to go. Ready to play.

It's going to take one more day, though. We still need to clean up a few things. But feel like we're in a really good place.

Q. Coach Saban, there's been a lot of trick plays, gadget plays, et cetera, in Michigan's offense, at least compared to other teams. Can you speak to the preparation for all that stuff?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think, first of all, they do a great job offensively in being able to create balance in the offense with runs and passes and play action passes. Really good quarterback, really good runners, really good receivers, lots of good tight ends, do a lot of personnel groups.

I think it's a part of their offense, part of the misdirection that they do to do some of the things that they do that are complementary to the plays that they run.

I think discipline and eye control on defense is really, really important when you play anyone who has that kind of diversification in their offense, which I think is really good, and it's been very effective for them.

We're going to have to do a really good job to try to prepare our players for it. But you never know what's coming up next, so you've got to be focused on every play.

Q. Coach Harbaugh, since walking off the field at the Fiesta Bowl last year, how much have you seen JJ McCarthy change over the last year?

JIM HARBAUGH: Change? Grow would be the better word. Just phenomenal in everything that he does. I would call it growth. He's just better each day. I see him better today than he was yesterday, better tomorrow than he was today. It's just that's his mindset.

It's fun to be around. It's infectious. Rubs off on everybody, including us coaches and me. We'd follow him anywhere.

He's like the kid in the candy store, whether we're in a meeting, at practice. It's just infectious in every way.

His play has been outstanding. He is really locked in for this game.

Q. Coach Saban, if you could talk about Jalen Milroe, as well, the progression you've seen. I know we've asked you throughout the year, but I think some of the story yesterday about the cake being finished, do you feel that way? Do you feel like he's at the right spot at the right time?

NICK SABAN: I think Jalen has made a tremendous amount of progress throughout the course of the year. A lot of it has to do with he prepares well for the game. I think that the success that he's had has gradually increased his confidence throughout the course of the year and understanding of the offense.

The guy has always been a great ad libber as a quarterback in terms of scrambling and making plays when the play breaks down, but I think he's gotten so much better at executing the play, reading the play out, getting the ball to the right guys at the right time, distributing the ball more like a point guard and not thinking he has to make every play, and I think that's made him a very effective player.

Q. Coach Harbaugh, Isaiah Bond has really stepped up his game the last few games for Alabama, asserted himself as one of the go-to guys. In your preparation for him, what does he do well as a route runner, playmaker, receiver, that could give you guys some difficulties on Monday?

JIM HARBAUGH: Yeah, creates separation, increases separation, snatch the ball out of the air, good with the ball security. It's like Coach said, it's a dangerous offense to defend. You have to defend the play, and then you have to -- the next play, which is in the same play because they do such a good job of extending the play.

Q. Coach Saban, what has impressed you the most about Caleb Downs and the way he's played this year as a freshman?

NICK SABAN: Well, Caleb is a very special person in terms of his maturity, his leadership. He's sort of a driven guy to really learn and grow and understand. I've never

seen anybody make a commitment to -- the first day he got there coming up in the offense every day, learning the defense, learning the coverage, learning the adjustments.

He's a very instinctive player. He loves playing football. He's a great competitor.

He's played really, really well for us all season long, probably as well as any freshman player we've ever had in the secondary.

Q. Coach Saban, I asked all the players yesterday what their favorite moment was from the season, and a lot of them said the 4th and 31 play in the Iron Bowl. It seemed like a pivotal moment for the team. What specifically did you learn about the team after that game?

NICK SABAN: You know, that game was a difficult game for us. We had already kind of clinched the SEC, and I think everybody was looking a little bit ahead of what might be in store for playing in the SEC Championship game, and I don't think we respected the Auburn team like we should. I don't think we played one of our best games.

I think we were very fortunate at the end of the game to be able to execute and come out with a win.

Hopefully the players learn that it doesn't matter who you play, they're going to give you -- when they play us, we're going to get their best game, and we need to be prepared to play our best game every time we go out on the field.

Q. For both coaches, with so much outside hype with the College Football Playoff games, what have your experiences in this game taught you about how to handle the 24 hours leading up to kickoff?

JIM HARBAUGH: Today we're -- the hay is never in the barn for us. We never think of it that way. Things to clean up, polishing the diamond as we like to say, make the most of this day.

Tonight we'll get together, watch a movie, talk to the team, different things like that. Kind of get the red blood pumping a little bit so you can visualize it. Then go to sleep and see how good of a night's sleep you can get.

Sometimes you do; sometimes you don't. We really stressed a good night's sleep last night. Kind of feel like that's the sleep you play on. Got a darned good one last night. Anything tonight will just be a bonus.

Wake up tomorrow, and everybody has their own approach to game day. JJ has one. Other guys have a different

approach.

Just going to have to go through our routine and then get to the stadium, and then it's like new. You're in a new setting, and it takes five or ten minutes to adjust. But at some point you've got to lock in and you've got to get the rhythm. Rhythm, get the rhythm, get the freaking rhythm, and then toe meets leather and it's on.

I never worry about our guys once the game starts because I know that they're going to react and do what they do and do it really well.

Yeah, can't wait for that moment. Can't wait to watch our guys compete in this game.

NICK SABAN: I think one of the things I try and emphasize with our players is not only leading up to the game but the whole bowl experience and the opportunities they have to do other things, is how important it is to stay committed to the task at hand.

Not that you can't enjoy yourself when you do other things, other activities, but we really need to stay focused on what we came here for, especially each day in meetings, each day in practice.

I think trying to create the right mindset in the last 48 hours leading up to the game, to really focus on execution, because we have a plan. Everybody has got an accountability and a responsibility to do a job.

Being able to focus on that, whether it's in one reel when we watch a film or when we're in a meeting, and what they think about when they're on their own leading up to the game based on their ability to focus on what they need to do to execute and have good emotional discipline in how they approach doing their job.

I think that's one of the most important things.

If we have to motivate guys to play in this game, it's probably not a good thing. They should be pretty motivated. I think channeling the energy in the right direction is really, really important in games like this.

Q. Nick, yesterday you said the game has changed more in the last three to five years than in the last 50. I just wonder from both you guys where you see the game headed in the future. Jim, you've talked about sharing revenue with players, but big picture, where is this game headed?

JIM HARBAUGH: Big picture, day before the game? State of the union is not -- to address some of those things

after the game would be my preference.

NICK SABAN: Yeah, I would say it this way, in agreement with Jim. Day before the game I think it's a great question. I also think that it would be a really, really good discussion to have at some point in time.

I don't think sitting up here today is the right time to do it.

Q. For Coach Saban, we spoke with both coordinators early in the week and both Kevin and Tommy reiterated that this team is as coachable as any team they've ever worked with. Is that from a leadership standpoint or how much more enjoyable is it to work with a team that takes coaching and then takes information and runs with it?

NICK SABAN: Yeah, I think the way this team transformed itself had a lot to do with it. We didn't start out very well early in the season, and I think the players got to the point where, hey, we want to dedicate ourselves to proving that we can be a good team.

The leadership on the team was good, the chemistry on the team is good, everybody kind of buys into the principles and values of what you need to do to be successful. I think that's helped us improve throughout the year. It's something that we need to continue to do as a team because there's still room for growth.

Q. Talking about your opponent's defense, what you've done to prepare to go up against such tough defenses, and what sticks out about the defensive units for your opponents throughout the season?

NICK SABAN: You're talking about Michigan's defense? I think they're a very talented defensive team. They've got really good guys up front. Their linebackers are very athletic. The secondary is very disciplined in terms of how they play and how they execute and what they do.

They've got some pretty interesting ways that they pressure the quarterback, whether it's single back or plugs, kind of the way they present trying to pressure the quarterback, which I think can be challenging to the offensive line.

I think they play really, really well together as a group in terms of how they execute. They have lots of experience. They don't make a lot of mental errors, and they don't give you a lot.

You've got to take what they give, and I think that's really important in the decision making for the guys when you try to attack a defense like this.

JIM HARBAUGH: Alabama's defense, really good. Defending the run up the middle and on the perimeter. The backers can run. The edges are outstanding. There's always an edge to the defense.

In the passing game, it's the combination of the really good coverage and the pressure on the quarterback.

Pass more out of a three-down scheme, appears to be more of a four-down scheme right now, a 4-2-5, and a two potential first-round picks at corner I would say. All-American safety. Really good safety play.

Very well-coached. Very good. Not so much of the split safety coverages as we look to face them right now, but that combination of pressure and really good coverage, there's no real weak points to attack in the defense.

We're going to have to play really good on offense to be able to move the ball.

Q. This is for Coach Harbaugh. You'll be one of only 12 men to play and coach in the Rose Bowl. Is being back here something that evokes any memories or feelings for you?

JIM HARBAUGH: Yeah, so I mean, it would take a long time to talk about it, but like Coach talked about, I grew up in Michigan, Ohio, part of Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, that Midwest area.

You grow up watching the Rose Bowl New Year's Day. There's a couple feet of snow outside and you're like laying on your stomach in front of the TV, hands like that, looking at palm trees and the parade and the football game.

Halftime we were outside playing football in the snow and then watching those -- kind of turns from the day to the night when you watch the Rose Bowl.

I know that's why a lot of people in the Midwest probably move to California. You wanted to be there.

Got to be there as a player and got to actually be there as a kid because my dad was coaching at Michigan, and we went to -- the team went to three straight Rose Bowls.

Now here as a coach, it's pretty awesome. Got to participate as an 11, 12, and 13 year old, twice as a player, and now as a coach.

Q. Nick, are you concerned with the sign stealing stuff out of Michigan, and what has Alabama done to prevent some of that?

NICK SABAN: No, we're really not concerned about that. Integrity in the game I think is really, really important, and our team has had every opportunity to prepare for this game just like they have every other game.

I think that especially when you're a no-huddle team you've got to adapt and adjust how you communicate with the quarterback, and hopefully one day we'll get to the NFL system where you can just talk to the guy in his helmet. I think that would be a lot better.

But for now, we just have to adapt to how we communicate with the quarterback, and we'll change it up and try to not put our players at a disadvantage in any way.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports