

SEC Football Media Days

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Coach Nick Saban

Alabama



KEVIN TRAINOR: We're now joined by Alabama head coach Nick Saban.

COACH SABAN: It's great to be here for my 14th SEC media conference, 9th at Alabama. I hope that all of you have had a tremendous summer and eventful in a positive way, or uneventful if that's what pleases you. We have certainly had an eventful summer. Maybe you haven't had the opportunity to have a daughter get married, but that was a marvelous experience. When you live in 17 different houses all over the country, it was an opportunity to have a lot of relationships come back to visit and be a part of gaining a son-in-law. So that was a real positive experience for us. I would like to welcome Greg Sankey as our new commissioner of the SEC. I know he'll do a fabulous job. He's always been a great asset to our conference. And I'd also like to say that Mike Slive will be missed, who has been one of the leaders in college football. We have one sort of -- we lost a great ambassador for the University of Alabama in Kenny Stabler recently and certainly one of the all-time great competitors at the University of Alabama and in the NFL and a great friend of ours. Sorry for him and his family, and our thoughts and prayers are with him. The good news at this time of year is there's no news because, if there's no news, that means your players are doing the right things personally, they're doing a good job academically, they're all into what they should be doing to get prepared for the season, and that has certainly been the case with our team this summer and since spring practice. They've done extremely well in terms of their decision making and judgment. Academics has been a real strong suit for us at the University of Alabama. It goes a little unnoticed, but we actually have been one of the top schools in graduation rate in our conference and on a national basis, also in terms of APR rating by the NCAA in our conference and on a national basis. I think we had seven guys that had graduate degrees in the Sugar Bowl last year, 22 graduates, 28 graduates the year before. All of these things are just a part of the good things about college football that I would like to make sure it gets mentioned. But I just had a meeting yesterday with our team to reiterate to them how well I think they're doing this summer -- working hard, everybody's all in to doing things the way we want them to do them, not a lot of negative energy around, a lot of positive energy, a lot of good character, a lot of positive leadership. I think, to continue to build

leadership between players and players and players and coaches -- because every player wants to know that his coach knows how well he's doing. So to communicate, to see it, to value it, to notice it, and to reinforce it, I think is really, really something that we all need to do more of, catch them doing it right, and that's something that's been pretty easy to do. I think this will benefit our team in the future. It's important for players to do the right thing the right time, the right way, and do it all the time, to have a vision for what they want to accomplish, and understand the defined process of things they have to do personally, academically, and athletically. It takes a lot of discipline to be able to execute that every day, and that's certainly something that we try to get our players to buy into. You know, discipline is a funny thing. It's not only doing the right thing the right way, the right time all the time. It's making choices and decisions that we all make every day. Discipline to me is here's something that I know I'm supposed to do that I really don't want to do. Can you make yourself do it? And then over here there's something that you know you're not supposed to do that you want to do. Can you keep yourself from doing it? So this is kind of the decision making that creates a moral compass for all of us to help us do the right things, to stay focused on the process of what we need to accomplish our goals and aspirations, and something that's certainly going to be important for our team to do a good job of if we're going to be able to have the kind of team that we'd like to have. It's going to be a challenge for our team to re-establish the identity that we would like to play with. We want to be more physical, tougher on the line of scrimmage, be relentless in the way that we compete so that we're never affected by what happens in a game, that we can keep playing at a high level on a consistent basis, and that we take care of the ball and do the kind of things to execute with consistency that's going to give our team the best chance to have success. These are things that we need to improve on. We did not finish the season the way we wanted to last year in terms of the way we played. And some of these things, we turned the ball over too much at the end of the season, we gave up too many explosive plays on defense, we gave up too many points because of a combination of all those things. So we need to improve in all those areas. So this year's team has its challenges, like all teams do. In college football, you probably lose 25 percent of your team every year, which is what makes it great,

makes it fun to rebuild, but this year especially on offense, we're going to have a lot of new faces, and we have some talented players. They don't have a lot of experience. So how rapidly they develop is going to be a key to how well we come together on offense. I know you're anxious to ask me about the quarterback situation, but that's going to be one of the keys to the drill in terms of somebody taking the bull by the horns at that position, being assertive, playing with confidence, distributing the ball and executing in a positive way, being a good decision-maker, and showing leadership at the same time. We do not have an experienced player at that position. We did not have one last year. Blake Sims did a fantastic job. So we need somebody to take the bull by the horns this year and be that kind of player for us at that position. I think we have several guys that are capable of it. I don't think anybody's come to the forefront as of yet, and I don't think it's something that we can force to happen. I think we've got to let it happen. And I cannot give you a timetable of when that's going to happen. Defensively, we have a lot more experience, a lot more veteran returning players. We're going to have a very, very good front seven, and I think it's important that the secondary does not give up the kind of explosive plays we gave up at the end of the season last year. And I think it's also important that, if we're going to be a no huddle team like we were last year, I think we have to manage the season better with our team, because I think at the end of the season last year, we ran out of gas a little bit. We played more plays, I think by 170 on defense, which is like a couple, three more games. And our players showed it. So we're going to have to do a better job of keeping our team where they need to be so that we can finish strong. We have some outstanding specialists on our team. We have a great punter. I think a good field goal kicker who seems to be healthy again. And because we have good team speed and some pretty good depth, especially on defense, it should contribute in a positive way to being very, very strong on special teams. So even though this team has its challenges, it also has a lot of very good returning players that can provide leadership and example for a lot of other young players so that we can have a very competitive team. As always, our schedule is going to be, as I think everyone's schedule in our league is, very, very difficult. We're going to play a number of teams in our division that are outstanding teams, and we're going to play several teams from the East that are outstanding teams. So I think in our league you have to look at it like there are always going to be seven or eight teams that can beat you. So it's important that you build a team that looks at every game as the challenge and plays to a high level on a consistent basis. So that gives you the best opportunity to have success long term. With that, any questions?

Q. In a conference that has the ultimate recruiting tool, a 24-hour-a-day network and revenue sharing of more than \$31 billion a year, how come you and the other SEC coaches got really upset about satellite camps and Jim Harbaugh, as far as did you all feel threatened as far as recruiting, and what was the reaction to that?

COACH SABAN: I just think that I wasn't all that upset about it. I don't agree with it. I think that we have a recruiting calendar that clearly establishes times when you can be off campus to recruit. That's not a time where you can be off campus to recruit. So we do not feel in our league that it's a time we should be off campus to recruit. So if other people are going to be allowed to do things, then I think it's important that we all have a level playing field. So whatever the decision is about satellite camps, whether I'm for it or against it or the league's for it or against it, I'm more for having the same rules govern the entire Power Five conferences because we're not just playing in our league now, we're playing in a playoff at the end of the season. So the people that play in that playoff should all do it with equal ability to recruit, be it on or off campus or whatever it is. I think in the NFL they do a really good job of everybody has a level playing field, and I think that's the same way that we should sort of try to operate in college football.

Q. Coach, I was just curious, how do you feel with you and Bentley being such good friends, how do you feel about the decision he made to have the confederate flag removed from the front of the capitol grounds?

COACH SABAN: My opinion is any time we have a symbol that represents something that is mean spirited or doesn't represent equal rights for all people, I'm not for having that symbol represent anything that we're involved in. It's not my decision as to what the Governor does or my decision what our university does, it's just my opinion about the way I feel about symbols that are not positive towards human rights and everybody having equal opportunity.

Q. You lost a real versatile player in Jalston Fowler. Can you talk about who might fill in the many roles that he played?

COACH SABAN: Jalston certainly was an outstanding player for us, and he will be missed, but it will create an opportunity for other players at other positions. We have always operated more with two tight ends and one back and two receivers as a base formation. When we had Brad Smelley and players like that in the past. And Jalston, being a fullback, was kind of an anomaly for us because it's not a position that we really recruit. So we'll probably go back to tight ends playing those types of roles in our offense, whether it's O.J. Howard, Ty Smith, those bigger, athletic guys who have some of

the same skill set.

Q. Coach, with all the awareness of domestic violence against women, I'm just wondering, do you regret the Jonathan Taylor situation? And your thoughts on the new SEC rule that doesn't allow schools to take players with domestic violence issues.

COACH SABAN: First of all, we don't at all condone any kind of domestic violence or any kind of violent behavior toward women. But I do think that this is an emotional issue that's very, very complicated. It's against the law, and we respect the law, and we will continue to do things that respect the law and our organization. I think that we should create, because this is a complicated circumstance, that we should be creating as many opportunities to try to solve this problem and use this as an opportunity to try to solve this problem with young people, male and female alike, because this is an issue across the board with any emotional relationship. And I would be very supportive if, as a league or as an institution, we did some of those types of things so that we could better manage this in the future. Being specific to Jonathan Taylor -- and I've answered this before -- I do not regret giving players opportunities. This is an opportunity that we gave a player that didn't work, but in fairness to the player, he didn't really get the kind of due process before he was judged as maybe he -- as any person should. But it is what it is. We've all moved on. He was in zero tolerance, and therefore, we've moved on. We do not condone that kind of behavior in our program.

Q. Coach, you've had, since you've arrived in Tuscaloosa, so many of your quality backs go on to play on Sundays before their senior season. With that being said, Kenyan Drake, of course, is coming back for his senior season. Can you talk about what it means to have him not only for his rushing ability and adding another quality back onto the depth chart, but also his viability as a wide receiving threat?

COACH SABAN: Well, I think Kenyan Drake has tremendous diversity as a player. He has so many things that he does well. He has great speed. He has very good running skills and running instincts, but he's a fantastic receiver. In his position, it's a little bit easier to almost create mismatches for him to be able to use those skills as a receiver than it would be if we played him at receiver because I think, if we played him at receiver, he would be one of the better receivers on our team. And I think this is one of the assets that he's going to possess moving forward that's going to make him a very, very effective player in the future for us and as well as probably being a really good professional player. And we need play maker types like him,

especially this year when we've lost so many players who were play makers for us. He was an outstanding play maker last year, and I think Lane does a good job of featuring players like Kenyan Drake in our offense so that they can be very productive.

Q. Nick, can you just talk about how this year there's so many new defensive coordinators, seven, eight if you count Derek Mason, and just the challenges of that. Even though you're familiar with a lot of them, including, of course, Will over at Auburn?

COACH SABAN: Part of our off-season study is always to look at new offensive, at coordinators or defensive coordinators, and try to figure out how much they will impact their particular program that they're representing, and that's always challenging. But in a case of defensive coordinators, especially with offensive coaches, you can pretty much assume that they're going to do their whole scheme, and you're going to see a lot of the same things. But I think we continue to add a lot of quality people, from a coaching standpoint, to our league, and I think that's important to playing real quality football. I think there's a lot of proven coordinators that have come into the league that are going to improve their areas, which primarily is a lot of defensive guys.

Q. The speed of the game is obviously a subject you'd trust in your opening statement. With that offense being sped up so much, how much has that altered your philosophy on what you do on the defensive side of the football?

COACH SABAN: I think it's affected it tremendously. Being an old NFL guy, the way you play defense in the NFL is you play a lot of specialty defense because everything is based on situations. What pace of play has done to the college game does not allow to you do that. So you have to basically play the same players in every situation because, if you do play situation defense and you're allowed to sub in that particular situation, you can't get the players out of the game. So it affects how you recruit. You can't recruit as many specialty players. And you have to be able to match up in all circumstances and situations with teams that actually play that way, which is more difficult. I don't think there's any question about the fact that it's more difficult to play defense, and I think that's why you see more points being scored, and I don't think that trend's going to change any time soon.

Q. What do you think are the factors that have enabled the SEC West to achieve the competitive balance that it has?

COACH SABAN: Well, I think the SEC as a league is still one of the -- top to bottom, one of the best leagues there are, and that includes the East and the West. We

just happen to have in the last few years a lot of really, really good programs in our division in the West, a lot of good coaches either do a great job of recruiting and a great job of developing players. I think the footprint of our league has changed a little bit, which probably enhanced us in the West a little bit more. I can't really answer beyond that. I just know that there's a lot of good football players and a lot of good football coaches in our division, but I have that same respect for everyone in our league. I know the teams that we play in the East are very, very good as well. I can't really -- I don't really have an explanation for it. I just have a tremendous amount of respect for the people who have accomplished what they've accomplished in our division.

Q. Coach, I understand a little bit earlier you had some thoughts about the timing of the NFL's system for providing feedback to underclassmen. Could you expand on that a little bit.

COACH SABAN: I just felt like, in our experience last year, our team chemistry from the SEC Championship game to the playoff game was affected by something. I think that to have a December 15th deadline from when a junior can submit for a draft grade and then you get that assessment back sometime right before or right after Christmas, and then you have a playoff game coming up on January 1st or 2nd, and I think it's my obligation as a coach to inform that young man when I get that information because it's his information, it's not my information, to make him aware of that. And we're talking about a young person who has to deal with a lot now. We had six guys in this situation this past year and 11 the year before. So we're trying to get ready for a game, and all of a sudden, a guy finds out he's a first round draft pick or a guy that thought he was a first round draft pick finds out he's not a first round draft pick, and we're trying to get ready to play a playoff game. I think that it would be better not to submit that information to a player until he was finished competing in college. We've moved the draft back. We have not moved the date that a player has to declare back. Now, those who oppose this type thinking would say, well, how would that affect recruiting? We used to play Bowl games on January 1st. Now the championship game's on January 11th or 12th, and the 15th is still the day that people have to declare for the draft. So I think a week, ten days would be beneficial, and I think a rule that says you don't get information to players on draft status until after they've completed their college competition would be beneficial.

Q. Nick, I just wanted to see, what's the evolution been like for Jay Coker from last fall to the spring and to where he is now heading into this fall? How much and where has he progressed, gotten better, and what does he still need to do better to win that

job?

COACH SABAN: Jay Coker has done an outstanding job for us. I think he's made a tremendous amount of improvement. I think that a better understanding, better knowledge of the system, better knowledge of what we expect, what's expected of him in our offense are all things that have contributed to his confidence and his performance level. We just want to see him continue to develop the kind of consistency to make the kind of decisions and judgments to process the information quickly and make quick decisions that allows him to play winning football at his position. We're encouraged by all the things that he's done to this point.

Q. Coach, how has the specific cost of attendance offered by your school impacted your recruiting and your program?

COACH SABAN: First of all, I think this is an outstanding thing that we've done to improve a scholarship for a young man, student-athletes in general, to be able to have a little better benefit as a league and as a coach. We've always advocated a little better quality of life for the players relative to what they do for their institutions, and I'm glad to see this. I've not really, in my experience, our experience so far in recruiting -- now, we don't use this as a recruiting tool. We don't talk to players about this. We talk about the value that we create in personal development, in the success that we've had with our players academically and their opportunity to develop a career off the field if they attend the University of Alabama, and the quality of how we've developed players and the success that those players have had individually, from a team standpoint, as well as having an opportunity to have a career at the next level. And we do a lot of career development stuff to help them launch their career when they leave. So those are the things that we sell. So this has not changed our recruiting, and there's not been a lot of questions asked about it. Now, maybe it will have an impact in the future. I don't think that's the intention of cost of attendance. I think it's to improve the quality of the student-athlete's life, not to be used as a recruiting tool.

Q. You were the first and only team from the SEC to represent in the College Football Playoff last year. How did you feel about the process of that compared to the BCS format? Is there any improvements you'd like to see made on it?

COACH SABAN: No. I think the playoff is -- was a great competitive venue for us. I think in our league, I think we learned that playing a team like Auburn at the end of the season, who is a very good team, playing an SEC Championship game against a very good team, and then going to play in a College Football Playoff is -- you know, your players really have to be geared into

what it takes to finish the season because, before, maybe you didn't have to do all this. I think it's better. I think it's better for college football, and I think it's better for fans. The only thing that I've ever been an advocate for is to maintain the quality of Bowl games because Bowl games provide a positive self-gratification for a lot of college football players. So hopefully, we can get this playoff and the college system to work together so that Bowl games are still a very positive experience for a lot of young college players.

Q. I know probably having Amari Cooper return last season gave you some confidence with an inexperienced quarterback. I'm wondering what your receiving corps has shown you so far this off-season that kind of gives you a similar confidence.

COACH SABAN: We have some talented guys at the receiver position. They obviously don't have the experience some of our players have had in the past, including Amari Cooper, as you mentioned. But I think it's an interesting challenge for us to try to get those guys to develop the confidence and the attention to detail that's necessary to develop the chemistry and the passing game between the quarterback, the pass protection, the receiver running the route, so that people can have the kind of success that they'd like to have. I think it's going to be important that this group stay positive in their approach so that they can improve throughout the course of the season. We have some talented guys. So to see them develop the confidence to be the kind of players they're capable of is going to be a real key to that unit developing and our offense developing and our team's success. I'd like to thank everybody here for all that you do in terms of promoting college football, in terms of the attention that you give our game and the players who play the game. I think there's a lot of positive things done in college football, and all that you do to recognize some of the great things that these young student-athletes do is certainly appreciated. You've always done a fantastic job of that, and I don't want you to think that it goes unnoticed, and we certainly do appreciate it and appreciate you. So thank you very much.