

Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Florida vs Alabama

Sunday November 29, 2015



VS



Jim McElwain

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to SEC Championship Game week. We'll begin today with Eastern Division Champion Florida Gators and Coach McElwain.

Coach, good afternoon. Thanks for being with us.

COACH McELWAIN: You bet.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, while the questions filter in, could you just comment on your team and season as you enter the SEC Championship Game versus Alabama.

COACH McELWAIN: I got to say, this has been one heck of a year. I've got to tell you how proud I am of our team and how they've competed week in and week out and really invested in each other. To be a part of an SEC Championship Game, with two storied programs -- obviously, the University of Alabama, which, let's face it, gave me the opportunity to be here at the University of Florida, and then to have the Gators playing them, that's something special.

It's also something that, year in and year out, two of the programs that should be playing in this game. I know how excited we are to have this opportunity to play such a great program and a team that I would argue is the best team in college football, obviously. For us to go in and have that opportunity to play in Atlanta, it's something that the Gator fans around the country and in this football team, based on what they've done, deserve. Really excited about the opportunity.

Q. Coach, thanks for being with us. Can you remember a couple of specifics about how you and Coach Saban connected, the circumstances that led you to you getting that job.

COACH McELWAIN: Well, I'd never met him. Obviously knew of him, rightfully so. You can say the best ball coach in our era. I think, when he first called, I actually might have hung up thinking it was one of my buddies busting my chops, not knowing they had a job open.

I was just really excited he called back, and how fortunate I was to get an opportunity like that and to

learn from, obviously, the best. I owe a ton to Coach Saban and what he gave me an opportunity to do.

Q. And then if you could pick one thing that you learned from him, what would that be?

COACH McELWAIN: I don't know whether it's one thing because it's a lot of things. Probably the overall plan for the whole organization, not just the football specific, and how it all ties and how everybody has to be -- have one common goal and no independent contractors. It doesn't matter whether you're selling popcorn or calling plays, everybody has got to be on the same page going in the same direction. That's something he's done an outstanding job of obviously.

But the one thing he did tell me on the way out the door, he said, Mac, whatever you do, make sure you do it with your personality and put your thumbprint on it. That's a great piece of advice.

Q. For those who don't follow you every week, can you talk about what Treon, maybe how he looked in that LSU game and why you have not been able to match that productivity since then.

COACH McELWAIN: I think part of it is, I think, a little bit of the unknown in the LSU game and what people have done to take the things away from him that kind of made him successful there.

It also has to do with the other ten guys around him as well. When I took this job, as you know, we had some rebuilding to do on that side of the ball, but the best thing is the way this team has hung together and, for the most part throughout the year, found a way to win ball games.

Treon is going to prepare this week and go in and play a heck of a game in this SEC Championship Game.

Q. And also wanted to get your reaction, before your season, you were picked fifth in the East, Georgia was picked first. The news today that Mark Richt is out at Georgia, just your reaction to that.

COACH McELWAIN: This is a miserable time of year in this profession because there's a lot of great coaches that have done great things at the different places they're at.

Let's celebrate what he has done. He's had a great career there.

As far as being picked fifth, I think a couple people probably had us sixth. For us to be where we're at, that's pretty cool.

Q. You got a really good running back there in Kelvin, and you had some obviously great running backs at Alabama. When you look at Derrick, what you see and what kind of separates him and makes him the back that he is.

COACH McELWAIN: All I can say is wow. K.T.'s done a great job for us, and he's gotten a little better every week. I thought he was a bright spot for us in this last ball game.

The speed and the power and really the way Derrick goes -- always goes forward in a long line of great running backs that were there, I think it's a testament to Coach Saban and what they're committed to doing year in and year out. Getting that guy behind center like that that can make a difference in any ball game. He's definitely a difference maker. We've got our work cut out for us trying to jump on his back and slow him down.

Q. I'm just curious what kind of changes you've seen from Alabama on the offensive side of the ball since you've been out there.

COACH McELWAIN: There's a lot. I think the best thing that probably happened to Coach Saban was me getting the Colorado State job so they could get better on offense. They've gotten a lot better. What they're doing now is getting the ball in the playmaker's hands and being very efficient in what they're doing.

In fact, I think Coach was probably excited about me leaving. They're doing a heck of a job.

Q. Coach, can you talk about -- and you were around it for a while -- but Alabama's ability not to let one loss become two losses. They've always seemed to bounce back from that one loss.

COACH McELWAIN: I think that's a testament for how he trains and how he teaches the season. No matter what happens, you've got to win the now. If you start worrying about stuff, that's when stuff starts to kind of clutter, starts jumping into you, and you don't focus on what you need to do to win.

I think the consistency of what he's done year in and year out, it's hard to do in college football. The way he has gotten these players to understand, look, that game's over, learn from it, but let's move on forward and get a little bit better. That's one thing you see is they continually get better year in and year out.

You know what, it was fun to be a part of to see how he does that.

Q. And also, last week you talked about how there's more juice in the SEC Championship Game than there is sometimes in the National Championship Game. Can you talk about your experiences of being in that game and just the level of excitement that it brings.

COACH McELWAIN: Well, first and foremost, all I can say is wow. It was amazing in both years we were in it. I think what the difference is -- and whether it is or isn't, I don't know -- but you've got two fan bases that split the stadium. The energy that's in there because they're all true fans. I think sometimes, where maybe some of the other games have some maybe corporate tickets and aren't necessarily -- because you get students there, you get true fans. The place it's located, everybody can get to. I got to tell you, it's something special.

Q. Just want to touch on a question, a little bit more than you touched on before. With Derrick Henry, how is he different, what makes him different from Trent Richardson and Mark Ingram before?

COACH McELWAIN: First and foremost, throw Eddie Lacy in there, throw some other guys too that were pretty darn good players. Glen Coffee -- that's a guy people don't talk about. That was that first year I was there. That guy, it was unbelievable what he did that first year I got to Alabama and kind of, I think, started really a tradition at that position and carried from the past.

You look historically, Alabama's got running backs. I think Derrick's just in a long line of that, and they'll continue to get the best players in the country at that spot, as they do all the spots.

When I see what he does -- and not being there day in and day out, it's hard to really say, but I know how fortunate I was to have those other guys. You know what, they're all really good players too.

Q. Secondly, you coached with Kirby Smart quite a bit. What kind of head coach do you think he'll be?

COACH McELWAIN: He'll be a great head coach. He's been trained by the best. That's something that we're both very fortunate to be around and be a part of how Coach Saban sets it up. He's been waiting for his time, and you know what, he'll get the right one, and he'll do a great job. I just wish he'd get it maybe on the other side of the country where I wouldn't have to see him except in the National Championship Game or something like that.

Q. Were you involved at all when Jake was down in mobile, in recruiting him? Jake Coker. Do you remember him at all from high school?

COACH McELWAIN: Yeah, we obviously had A.J. I didn't -- not a bunch, to be honest. Yet he had kind of jumped on early, if I remember right, to Florida State and -- for whatever reason. Obviously, I screwed it up. He's doing a great job for them now.

Q. Just looking at him, if you've seen any tape or any games, what are your impressions of what he's done?

COACH McELWAIN: The guy's got a great handle on what they're trying to do, and he's getting the ball to those playmakers. He does a great job on play action. I love the way he gets his feet set and delivers the football. You can tell he's well coached, a guy that's -- you can't sit here and say you're going to stop there because this guy will kill you in the passing game.

They're doing a great job with him. He probably made the right choice because I'd have screwed him up anyway.

Q. Impressive your front seven play considering the depth issues.

COACH McELWAIN: I didn't catch the first part. You kind of broke in.

Q. Just how impressive your front seven has been this season considering the depth issues at linebacker.

COACH McELWAIN: I got to tell you, Randy Shannon was done an unbelievable job, as all those guys have on our defensive staff. What they've done, Coach Rumph up front, getting our guys to play gap control and doing their job and allowing those linebackers to make plays. They're a lot of fun to watch.

I sure hope Antonio gets an opportunity this week because he's a little beat up, but at the same time, those guys play the game the way it's supposed to be played, and they study hard, and it's important to them. It's sure been fun to see.

Q. And on the other side, what have you seen from Alabama's front seven?

COACH McELWAIN: I think his front 30, how many guys they've got. I just hope our offensive line, their knees don't crack together from shaking as they got to play against those guys. They just keep rolling them through there.

That's something Coach has always done is play physical and put a plan together to whatever you do, they're going to take away. We've got to do an

outstanding job of trying to keep them off balance in formation and do some things to try to gain an edge.

As always, that's as good a defense as there is in the country year in and year out. He and Kirby and those guys on defense do a great job of studying the opponent and knowing exactly what to take away. They're the best at it, and you can just look at history and look at numbers. They keep getting them in there.

All I can say is just watch the film. As a football purist, people should just sit down and watch how they play together. It's pretty amazing.

Q. Coach, I wanted to follow up on a comment when you were asked about Mark Richt and the coaching profession. Is this profession just -- I mean, when you see what's happening with guys -- guys leaving during the middle of a season, guys getting fired -- how rough is it now being a head coach in college football when you see what's happening?

COACH McELWAIN: Yeah, it's rough, but I'm not complaining because, at the end of the day, when I look in the Sunday paper at the want ads and realize I'm not qualified to do anything else, just fortunate to have a job. So it comes with the territory.

I do know this now, those guys. Man, there's great coaches out there, and sometimes you just never know. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but it's not because they haven't put everything they have into it.

It's getting worse and worse, and yet we sign up for it, and we all know going in. It was interesting, you look at it, and it's no different nowadays. You don't see the longevity of staffs that there was. I think that's societal, man. We get upset if we don't get our hamburger in the drive-thru lane in 45 seconds. People expect it, and it's just what it's become.

Q. Just another question. Obviously, it's going to be all week talking about you and Nick because obviously you coached under him, but how badly do you want to beat him in this game?

COACH McELWAIN: Well, I just want our guys to go out and play well. You know what, I want to make him proud too. He took a flyer on some guy from Montana who was out west and gave him an opportunity to coach at one of the greatest places in all of college football in the best conference in the United States of America. For that opportunity, I just can't tell you how grateful I am and how lucky I am.

Q. You mentioned Kirby earlier. I was just interested in kind of your experience in Alabama

when Colorado State started pursuing you and just kind of whether Coach Saban had a policy as to when you could or couldn't interview and just kind of how that process played out with the season going on and everything.

COACH McELWAIN: I kind of let representatives handle that, and I think it was, in that particular case -- and everything's different. I think we kind of -- there was that week between what was the SEC Championship Game or something and before we kind of got ready for Bowl practice, if I remember right, and then we went back to work and fortunately were able to win a national title on the way out. That was pretty awesome.

But Coach was very supportive, and that was probably because he wanted me gone, who knows, but he -- I couldn't have done it without him, I know that.

Q. And I know that a lot of times coaches will accept a job, and then they go to that school and start recruiting and all that. But you decided to coach in that Bowl game. Just why was it important to you, I guess, to maybe push off starting that new head coaching life and stay and coach that Championship Game?

COACH McELWAIN: Well, I was put into this business because of the players, and you know what, those players gave me everything I had, and I wanted to finish it the way we came in. That just meant so much. Really, Coach allowing me to do that meant so much.

Yeah, it was hard, but you've got to remember that was a couple time zones away, but starting your calls at 1:00 in the morning out here, I could still get people out there. That worked out pretty good. It's something that I think -- you can even ask him. I think he did it when he was with the Cleveland Browns, before he took his first head job, and he actually helped me with kind of how to organize it, and I owe him a lot for that.

Q. With Geoff Collins, I think he was gone from Alabama by the time you got there, what was your relationship like with him before hiring him? And what had you heard or what did you know about him that led to you wanting to bring him in as your defensive coordinator?

COACH McELWAIN: He was actually there in the transition. So I got to know him when I first got there, before he left. And we had stayed in touch. He's a guy, obviously, that I had followed through what he had done.

Part of putting our staff together here was guys that had worked in that kind of organization and guys with familiarity on how we were going to try to piece this one together, and I was really fortunate that Geoff was in

that. It's not like having to teach someone new as to how we're going to do it, if that makes sense. You know what, he's done an outstanding job, and he's going to be a great head coach too.

I got to tell you, he's just been a lot of fun, as has our whole staff been. We've got some really good guys here and guys that want to understand how we want to do it.

Q. I was just about to ask you. With his name being floated out there for head coach --

COACH McELWAIN: It should be.

Q. What are some of the qualities or characteristics that he has that you feel like make him capable of being a good head coach?

COACH McELWAIN: His energy and his -- the way he is with the players and how he can affect them. He's got a great wife, and he's a football guy, and he gets it. I've got a bunch of coaches on this staff that are going to be really good head coaches, and I'm really proud of them too.

Q. Coach, just how big a challenge is this for you guys, and how do you approach it?

COACH McELWAIN: Well, it's a huge challenge. We're playing the best team in college football. We're a program on the rise, and we're a program that's going to continue to get better. This is just another opportunity for us to get out there and, you know what, match ourselves against the best.

As you go through life, having opportunities to test yourself against the best is something that's invaluable. We sure look forward to the challenge.

Q. And, Coach, what are some things that you can do to kind of help Treon work his way through this and maybe get more out of him and the offense in general?

COACH McELWAIN: He's going to have a great week of practice. You know what, I'm proud he's a Gator. He's going to lead us through that tunnel in the Dome there in Atlanta, and we're going to put our best foot forward and give him everything we've got.

Q. You kind of talked about being lucky to be part of Nick's coaching tree --

COACH McELWAIN: Very lucky.

Q. Why do you think so many of his former assistants have gotten opportunities to head coaching jobs, coordinator jobs, other high profile jobs, even many now on staff, three or four already being mentioned for head coaching jobs right now. Why do you think that is?

COACH McELWAIN: Well, I think that's a testament to him and how he trains us. I just can't tell you how fortunate I was to be around it and be a part of it. Those guys, it's rightfully so.

Here's one of the great things that I think people need to know is what Coach does. It doesn't matter whether it's a coach or whoever it is in the organization, he hires great people, and he lets them do their job. He sets the parameters, and usually great coaches work really well under the -- just give me the schedule. Let's go. That was the one thing I really appreciated was him allowing us to do our job.

I go back to the two things he said to me before I started. He said, basically, Mac, I only need two things from you, to work hard and be complete in what you do. You know what, growing up in Montana, it was the same thing my dad told me. That was pretty easy to work under.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the 2009 SEC title game. I was kind of looking back at the connection and kind of things being made there. How much do you feel like that game kind of set some things in motion really across college football -- Alabama winning 3 of 4, yourself getting a job the next year, Urban Meyer moving on to Ohio State and winning it all the next year. How much do you feel that one game might have had a ripple effect through college football?

COACH McELWAIN: I know it had a great effect on our program there because it was one of those deals that this is what it's all about. I think having the experience of being in it was something that was invaluable.

That was a heck of a ball game now. Let's not forget there were some pretty good players on the field too. That goes back to it. I'm excited to take our Florida Gators, who haven't been there in a while, back into seeing what it's all about. You know what, we're excited to be there.