

# Southeastern Conference Football Championship Game: Florida vs Alabama

Sunday November 29, 2015



VS



## Nick Saban

THE MODERATOR: Coach, while the questions filter in, would you mind commenting on your Western Division Championship and coming back to Atlanta to defend your title.

COACH SABAN: I'm certainly very proud of what our team has done. They've had their backs against the wall since the Ole Miss game early in the season and really come through just about every time they needed to in some tough circumstances on the road as well as playing well at home against some very good teams.

I think we've improved as the season's gone on. So I'm very proud of what they've been able to accomplish. But the legacy of the team gets determined by how they finish.

Obviously, having an opportunity to go back to the SEC Championship Game is an honor for all of us, but we're also going to be playing against a very good Florida team, who has a lot of talented players and a really good coach. Jim McElwain has done a fabulous job with the players that they have. They're a very talented defensive team, and they've got really good skill players, and they're always very, very dangerous. So this is a dangerous team to have to play and certainly a team we're going to have to play our best against to be able to have a chance to be successful.

**Q. So with Geoff Collins, back when you brought him in in 2007, what did kind of put him on your radar, and what stuck out during the course of the process leading up to when he was hired that made him somebody that you wanted to bring into the organization?**

COACH SABAN: Well, that was a long time ago, but we think a lot of Geoff Collins. He did a fabulous job here for us. He had a great reputation as being a very good recruiter, and he was coming from Georgia Tech. They had very good recruiting there. We brought him in as our head recruiting guy. I know he wanted to coach. We didn't have an opportunity to coach here. He's gone on and done a really good job everywhere he's been, and we have a tremendous amount of respect for him.

**Q. And with Kenyan, I know you said yesterday you**

**guys are hopeful to get him back at some point soon. He was obviously in uniform leading up to the game yesterday. Was that a game time situation yesterday? Was there any point leading up to the game where he got close to being at a point where you guys were comfortable putting him out there?**

COACH SABAN: I think the key, the drill there is that he's comfortable being out there. We wanted him to dress for the game. We didn't think he'd practiced enough to really be effective in the game, but by going through pregame warmup, I think he's getting better and better, and we're taking him day to day.

We're certainly going to practice him this week and see how he responds and how he develops. We're not going to put him back in there until he's confident to be in there.

**Q. Obviously, at this time of year, there are coaching vacancies around college football, some in the SEC, and obviously some of your staff members will be mentioned as candidates for those. Is that any potential distraction? How do you handle that this week?**

COACH SABAN: I've got a lot of confidence in our guys that they're certainly committed to our team and doing the things they need to do to help our team be successful, and I think each and every one of them know that, if they are being considered, it's certainly an honor for them, and I certainly want to help them every way I can.

But the better we play in every game that they're responsible for, the better opportunity they have to advance and reach the goals and aspirations they have professionally. But I'm totally confident the guys will do everything they can to help this team play well in this game.

**Q. Coach, how did Jim McElwain get on your radar before you hired him? What's your recollection of that process?**

COACH SABAN: Man, you guys ask some tough questions, man. I'm getting old to where I have a hard time remembering where I was yesterday. I had a question about something that happened in 2007 and now one that happened five, six, seven years ago.

Pat Hill, I coached with at the Cleveland Browns. We coached together at the Cleveland Browns. So I knew the Fresno State offensive coordinator. He had told me that Jim was a really good coach and had done a good job. When we had an opening, I sort of always do a pretty thorough job of trying to look around and see who's available and who we might be able to get to come here and be our offensive coordinator.

Jim was one of those guys, and Pat Hill thought so much of him that I trusted him, and that went a long way. When I met Jim and talked with him and worked with him, we were certainly happy with the decision to have him on our staff.

**Q. And what's Jim's best attribute as a coach, do you believe?**

COACH SABAN: I just think that he's got a lot of great assets as a coach. He's a great teacher. He's got a really good mind. He's innovative in terms of some of the things he does and some of the problems he creates. I think he coaches with discipline and works hard to get his players to execute things the right way. He's got a good personality, and he's a great competitor. There's a lot of positive attributes there, I think.

**Q. I was just wondering if we could get an update on Denzel Devall. He was injured there. Is he okay?**

COACH SABAN: Yeah. He actually went back in the game and played, or could have gone back in the game or was cleared to go back in the game and play. We may not have needed to play him at the end. He sprained his knee a little bit, but no real big problem, and we feel like he'll be okay this week.

**Q. Coach, can you talk about your team's ability, really going on for several years, to come back from a loss and play so well and not let one loss become two.**

COACH SABAN: I don't really know exactly what our ability has been to do that. It's just, I think, our players have always responded. We sort of approach every game here the same in terms of what its importance is and what they need to do to get well prepared so they can play their best when the game comes. Sometimes players are a little more apt to respond when things don't go well.

So I can't give you the answer to that. I don't know exactly what that might be.

**Q. And can you also just talk about how different the SEC Championship Game is? You've been in a bunch of them. Just the energy level that's in that building.**

COACH SABAN: I think the SEC Championship Game is one of the best competitive venues, other than the National Championship Game or the playoff game, that I've ever been in. It still means a lot to us to be in the SEC Championship Game, and it certainly means a lot if you can accomplish winning the SEC. Regardless of what anybody might say, there's a lot of good teams, a lot of good coaches, a lot of good programs.

It's something special to me to be able to play in the game and have an opportunity to maybe win a Championship. That's what your players work for, and that's certainly what our guys have worked for all year long and certainly something that we're certainly pleased to have the opportunity to do.

**Q. Coach, wanted to first just get your reaction. I know you were asked about Les Miles last week on the SEC teleconference, but just your reaction to today's news about Mark Richt getting fired after a 9-3 season.**

COACH SABAN: Well, I don't know what the world is coming to in our profession. Mark Richt has been a really good coach and a really positive person in our profession for a long, long time. I think, when you win nine games, that's a pretty good season, especially with the body of work that he's been able to put together there for however many years he's been there, I think it's 15 or so.

I hate to see people that have the character and quality and ability to affect young people in a positive way like Mark Richt not be a part of our profession. People don't realize the importance of some of the other things that go into college coaching, whether it's helping develop young men as people, helping them develop careers off the field by graduating from school.

We all get it. We know we have to win games. Winning nine games is not bad, and he certainly won a lot of games for a long time. I hate to see these kinds of things.

**Q. And then I wanted to ask you about the game yesterday. You play however your talent plays. Whether it's power running or throwing to Amari Cooper like you did last year. With Derrick coming back this year, though, when did you kind of realize -- you called him a workhorse. It seems that he's been that way ever since the Wisconsin game. When did you realize that that would be kind of the identity of this offense this year?**

COACH SABAN: I think we grew into it, and I think some of the things that happened, some of the circumstances -- Robert Foster was a very talented receiver we lost in the Ole Miss game for the season. We lost a couple other receivers to injuries, Chris

Black. We had a new quarterback, and he's developed nicely and done a really good job for us all year long.

But it just seemed to me that the offensive line made progress throughout the course of the year, and Derrick played better and better. We certainly need to create balance in our offense and do more things maybe, but that's something that we've been able to do fairly well, and we certainly don't want to give up on it.

**Q. Nick, can you just talk about the development of your front seven this season, and when did you know this would be a pretty special group?**

COACH SABAN: A lot of the guys that are playing on our front seven have played in the past. We only have one freshman who contributes and plays. All the rest of the guys have played quite a lot of football and have a lot of starts. We thought this should be one of the strengths of our team from the very beginning.

They certainly haven't disappointed us in terms of how they performed and how they played this year. We still look to try to improve and be a little more consistent in our performance. This is something that was our expectation for this group all year long.

**Q. On the other side, what have you seen from Florida's front seven so far?**

COACH SABAN: I think they're as good as anybody I've seen all year long. They're very talented guys. They're very athletic. They play hard. They're well coached. They've got a lot of playmakers, and they're obviously one of the best defensive teams in our league, and I think probably a very, very talented defensive team overall.

**Q. Just a followup on the coaching profession. You have a young man who's a graduate assistant and thinking of becoming a graduate assistant and wanted to be a head coach in college football. With the nature of the profession now, what would be your advice to him?**

COACH SABAN: I think the only advice I could give someone is try to do the things that I did when I started out as a graduate assistant and try to work hard and do the things that you need to do. Whatever your responsibility is, do them well so that people recognize the fact that you may be capable of developing into a good teacher and a good coach and a good recruiter. I guess that's the only advice I could give anyone.

It's a tough profession to break into, but I think guys have to be willing to sacrifice and get experience. I started out as a graduate assistant at Kent State. That was my first job at Kent State. I thought, when I got a job at Syracuse, that was a really big thing, and I've been really fortunate to get a lot of opportunities a lot

of good places, but I've always tried to work hard and do a good job for the people I work for. I think that's the most important thing anyone can do.

**Q. Just another question. It's been nearly 20 years since the team has repeated as SEC Champions. What does that say about the league and the competitiveness of it that there's been a lot of great teams that have won the league but then haven't been able to repeat as Champions?**

COACH SABAN: I just think it speaks to the quality of the league and how many good teams there always are in this league. There's certainly a lot of good teams this year. Florida's one of the best teams I've seen. I've only watched a little bit of film this afternoon, but they're a very, very good team and very capable of winning the SEC. So I think this is just an indication of the quality of the league and how many good teams there are.

**Q. Going to jog your memory a little bit more. Wanted to ask you about Kelvin Taylor. He's having a breakout year at Florida this season, carrying the offense in a lot of games. I know he was really coveted by you. His dad Fred told me he thought for a while he was going to come to Alabama. What did you think of him as a recruit and then now?**

COACH SABAN: We thought Kelvin was a fantastic player in high school and one of the top backs in the country and certainly somebody that would fit nicely into our style of play. He certainly hasn't disappointed, in terms of the production he's had this year and the way he's competed and the way he's played. He's everything and more than I thought he'd be. I'd love to have him here.

**Q. He and Derrick Henry are actually pretty close friends and were competing for that record as seniors and actually played against each other in a big game. I know, obviously, Saturday's matchup is not about Kelvin versus Derrick. What's it like for a coach who recruited both guys to see them come full circle and be able to face each other again?**

COACH SABAN: I have a tremendous amount of respect for great competitors, and I think both of these guys are great competitors. I think, when you play and have the opportunity to play in a great competitive venue like the SEC Championship Game, there's a lot of great players out there. I think that's why they go to the schools that they go to, to have opportunities to play in games like this. And I think it speaks for both those guys as well.

**Q. I wanted to just follow up on a question that you got earlier and just you have assistant coaches**

**that are starting to be pursued by other schools. I was interested in whether you had any sort of official policy as to when they could interview other places and maybe whether you advise them to wait after the Championship Game or whenever to when they can kind of start considering those opportunities.**

COACH SABAN: We take every one of those situations individually. We don't really say there's a particular policy. I would like for our guys to stay focused on what they're doing here right now. I have no reason to believe that anybody isn't totally focused because for us to play well at whatever they're responsible for is certainly going to be helpful to any opportunities that they can create for themselves.

So it goes without saying. I had this situation. I had already gotten the job at Michigan State when I was with the Cleveland Browns as a defensive coordinator. For the players, for the team, for your own personal pride and professionalism, you want to do a good job of finishing the job that you have right now. I think those values are really, really important, and I think the guys on our staff, I trust that they believe in those as well.

**Q. And just kind of going off of that, seems like that's pretty much what happened with Coach McElwain, in which he accepted the job and still comes back and coaches in the Championship Game. Just kind of what it means to you to have him come back for that?**

COACH SABAN: It speaks volumes of his character and his professionalism. He did accept the job there -- we might not have even played in the SEC Championship Game that year. I can't even remember. You know, he got the job, and we did everything we could to help him get the job. He came back and did a fabulous job, and we won the National Championship in the National Championship Game.

I think that people can focus on the job that they have now and take advantage of opportunities in the future, and you can do both things extremely well.

**Q. I wanted to kind of follow up on a question that talked about the winning back to back of SEC Championships. You talked about how much you like this group, this veteran class that you have this year. What would it mean if this group did accomplish a feat that hasn't been accomplished in 18, 20 years almost?**

COACH SABAN: I think this team is focused on what they can accomplish as a group, what they've worked hard for all year long to try to accomplish, and I don't think they think about who won back-to-back Championships. I don't think they think that winning last year's Championship is going to have anything to

do with winning this year's Championship Game.

I just think that they really would like to -- for what they work for and what they want to try to accomplish, this is the game that they've worked to try to get into, and I think they want to be successful in this game because of that.

**Q. Nick, wondering what are the biggest areas you've seen Derrick Henry improve from this year compared to last year?**

COACH SABAN: Well, I think Derrick's improved every year he's been here. Derrick's always been a really good ball carrier, but he's improved as a blocker. He's improved as a receiver. He's improved in all areas where he doesn't have the ball and has become a much more complete player.

Now, you can say, as much as he carries the ball, how important is that? I think it's very, very important, and I think he sees the importance in it. The big thing that he always wants to do is everything that he can do to help the team. He's done a really good job of that all year, whether he's had the ball or he hasn't had the ball.

So I think those are probably the areas that he's improved in most. Now, I think he has a better understanding of the offense and does a really good job of reading the running plays that we have, understands things a lot better, and I think that's happened and he's grown in that area each year he's been here.

**Q. Coach, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about Kirby Smart, just do you get a sense of how ready he is for all the organizational and the speaking and everything that's involved with being a head coach? Do you get the sense that he's ready, that this might be a good time for him if an opportunity comes?**

COACH SABAN: Well, I've said many times before in years past that Kirby has done a fantastic job for us, and I think he'll be an outstanding head coach. I don't think everything you do as an assistant necessarily prepares you as a head coach, but I also think in the same -- by the same token, that Kirby is very capable of doing all the things necessary to be a head coach.

He's a good teacher. Players respond to him well. He's outgoing. He's got a good personality. I think he'll do a good job in all the other areas that you're talking about. I don't have any question about that at all.

**Q. Have you gotten any feelers of interest from other schools that would like to talk to him?**

COACH SABAN: No. I think everybody sort of

respects where we are and what we're doing, and I think that's probably the reason that we haven't, that I would expect those things to happen when we get finished playing.

**Q. Just looking at their offensive struggles a little bit in recent weeks, what's different about this Florida offense compared to one you saw a year ago here in Bryant-Denny?**

COACH SABAN: Well, they have a different coach and a different coordinator. They still have a lot of good players. I think they've shown an ability to run the ball. They have a very good back. They have a very good receiver. This is a good football team, and I don't see them struggling.

I think they played against a very good Florida State team, had the ball in the red zone a couple of times and didn't score or that game would have been right down to the wire. We have a lot of respect for Florida and their offense. I can't really answer comparison questions based on different coaches and all that. I just think this is a very good football team.

**Q. Defensively, they're top five, top ten in almost every category. Just what does that defense bring?**

COACH SABAN: They're very athletic up front. They're very aggressive. They've got good pass rushers. They've got really good linebackers, really good down guys, two really good safeties, good cover corners. This is top to bottom one of the top defensive teams in the country.

**Q. I know you've gotten a bunch of Kirby questions already. Obviously, his name has come up. He stayed on your staff through the years. Do you think Georgia is different because of his ties there and the ability to win there?**

COACH SABAN: I don't understand what you're saying to me. Georgia's different? What do you mean Georgia's different?

**Q. In terms of a top ten type job and area to recruit, that kind of thing.**

COACH SABAN: In my opinion -- I don't really know what you're asking me, but I'll try to answer. Georgia is an outstanding institution. It's great academically. They've got great tradition there. They've won a lot of games. We have a tremendous amount of respect for the program that they have. They're 9-3 this year, which a lot of teams would like to be. I think it is a really good place to coach, and I think you have an opportunity to win there if you're the coach there.

So I don't know what you're asking me, but I have a high opinion of the University of Georgia and their

football program.

**Q. Have you guided him in terms of what might be the right type of job? Not just to jump at one of the first opportunities he has.**

COACH SABAN: I think Kirby's had opportunities in the past, and I think you need to ask Kirby about that. I'm not really in a position to answer for Kirby. I think he's a really good coach. He's done a great job for us, and I think he'll be a really good coach someday, head coach.