

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Wednesday July 13, 2016

Nick Saban

Alabama

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Good morning, and welcome to Day 3 of the SEC's Media Days. This morning we begin with Nick Saban.

COACH SABAN: Good morning. Great to see everybody here. You know, this is always a great event because no matter when we have it or what day you come or what time of day you come, this is really what stimulates a lot of excitement about the college football season, the new football season that's coming up. And even for me, after all of these years, and I think this is my 15th SEC Media Day, it's exciting to come here. It's exciting to see you. It's exciting to know that you're all here to promote the sport that we love and the players who play it. So, that's special. And it's still special, you know, to me.

The one thing that I will miss is I'm usually up here responding to some barb from Coach Spurrier, who is no longer with us and is retired, and probably playing a lot of golf, which we just wish he and Jerri the very best in the future. He's made a tremendous impact on the game and I'm sure will continue to do that with his leadership and deeds and actions even though he's not coaching.

Verne Lundquist who is the only person that I know, and there may be somebody else out there in the media or somewhere, that has spanned my entire career. Verne tells my wife Terry about a game that I was coaching at Kent State when I was first coaching 40-some years ago that he actually covered. So he -- and he's done a tremendous amount for the SEC on CBS in terms of the great job that he's done with his telecast, and we wish him very well after this season, because this will be his last.

So, you know, we're all in the process, I think, of finishing up our vacations, and I'm sure you are as well.

One of the very difficult experiences for us this summer was the terrible flood in West Virginia, which is where we're from. And I think you probably all know we made a statement about trying to get some equipment for I think seven high schools that lost just about everything. So anything that you all could do to promote that to get equipment for these young people so that they'll be able to participate and have a season this year,



because otherwise they won't, would certainly appreciated.

But after this week, our coaches will be back, and we'll be making final preparations for our season. Our players report on August 3rd and we practice on August 4th, and we're certainly looking forward to that. We continue to try to develop our players in so many ways, even over the summer, where we have all of our players now for summer school in terms of personal development programs, whether it's mental conditioning for success, peer intervention for behavioral issues, leadership, communication, all of these things that create value in players that help them be more successful in life, and obviously academics is a big part of that.

We're really, really proud of what we've been able to do to create a very positive history of academic success with our players in terms of -- I think our graduation rate is well over 80 percent for several years now. One of the tops in the country, one of the leaders in the conference. Also a number of graduates that participate in playoff and bowl games and championship games. Last year we had 29. Three guys who already had master's degrees, guys out there playing against Clemson that already had their degrees. I think we've been the leader in that regard for the past three years as well.

We're really proud of some of those accomplishments that have really enhanced the lives and ability of our players to be successful. I think this is the great thing about college football that sometimes gets overlooked; that there's so many good things that we do to help young people have a better chance to be successful, and sometimes we just choose to focus on the few negative things that happen, but we don't see all of the other people who have a much better chance to be successful, because they got some leadership, developed some relationships that helped them take advantage of the opportunities, and they certainly developed the work ethic and the discipline to be able to do those things. And I think that's the thing that's going to help them be more successful in the life.

I'm really proud of the players that we have here representing our team. Jonathan Allen and Eddie Jackson on defense. Both players will graduate in

December. O.J. Howard, who has already graduated and working on a master's degree in sports medicine. All three of these players probably could have gone out for the draft and chose to stay in school and sort of enhance their draft status as well as finish their education or continue their education.

You know, I think that we all sort of stand up here and talk about, you know, our team. And if the truth really be known, anything that I'm going to say about our team, because you all have seen spring practice, you know who's coming back, you know who graduated. You already have what the issues are relative to the challenges that we have to solve for our team.

So, I'm going to sit up here and very seriously talk about our team, and everything I'm going to say about our team, you've already written about. You've already written a story about. Somebody in this room has already written a story about what I'm going to talk about. But you're going to be serious and I'm going to be serious about talking about it again. That's the way we do things.

So, our team has had a very good offseason. I've been very pleased with the progress that we made. We obviously lost some really, really good players from last year's championship team, good leadership, good people. Great team chemistry. All things that are intangibles that are difficult to build, and our challenge is to recognize as they develop, because those things just don't happen overnight. You know, it's a work in progress. And it's certainly been the case with our team this year.

But a year ago I didn't know that we were going to have that kind of team chemistry when I stood up here and talked to you. I didn't know we would have that kind of commitment. I didn't know we would respond to adversity the way we did. And even though we're trying to work on creating those things with the personality of this team, we don't know that for sure either. But I've been pleased with the progress that we've made in the offseason, the spring practice that we had, the summer conditioning program.

We obviously had some challenges. For the third year in a row, I'm standing up here talking about somebody's going to be a new quarterback for us. Somebody's got to win that job. Somebody's got to win the team. You know, that has not necessarily happened yet and, you know, I'm not going to sit up here and sort of try to, you know -- I don't know the right word, but give you some statistics on who's winning the race and how the race is going and who's ahead, are they on the back stretch or in the final turn. That's something that's going to happen probably in fall camp. I hope in fall camp.

We have three starters back on the offensive line, which is a good start of building a good nucleus there, and we have some good young players that can develop at that position. You know who our receivers are, and we have a pretty talented group. This is the first time for many, many years that we have not had an experienced, talented running back who has proven his value, whether it was way back when Glen Coffee played, it was Mark Ingram. Mark Ingram came back and played with Trent Richardson. Trent Richardson played with Eddie Lacy. Eddie Lacy played with T.J. Yeldon. T.J. Yeldon played with Derrick Henry.

We always had one of those guys coming back. This year we lost both guys in Derrick Henry and Kenyan Drake. This will provide opportunity, even though they are less experienced, for some other players who are talented players to have a chance to succeed at that position.

Defensively, we have six starters back, we lost some really, really good players, and we lost a lot of depth on defense, which will be a good challenge for us to replace especially up front. The diversity in players that we had on last year's team was almost perfect for what you need in this day and age of football with the spread, with no huddle. You need a lot of depth, you need a lot of athletic guys that can make plays in space, can rush the passer. And when you play some of the power teams in our conference, you need some bigger, more physical guys to stand in there. We kind of had all of those parts. I'm not sure we have all those parts this year, but certainly we're working to try to develop them.

We have our three specialists back which goes a long way in being helpful to having good special teams, but I think we have to have good special teams players as well, which is always a little bit of a work in progress as you develop the chemistry on your team and hope you have more and more players who can contribute in all of those roles.

We have new coaches on our staff. We have a new defensive coordinator, Jeremy Pruitt, who was with us for five or six years prior to going to Florida State where they won the national championship when he was defensive coordinator and did a really good job improving Georgia's defense. And he knows the system.

Derrick Ansley is going to be a secondary coach who has also been on our staff before. Karl Dunbar will be the defensive line coach who has also been on our staff before way back at LSU.

So, we have people, but they have experience. They

have experience in our system. And it's a very, very good group of guys and work well together, and I think we'll be able to be a very effective defensive staff.

Brent Key was brought in to be the offensive line coach, and Mario Cristobal will be tackle tight end coach. I thought we needed some help in that area. Brent has certainly done a good job, and his energy and enthusiasm has been very helpful.

Bobby Williams is special assistant to me now, which has been very helpful to me and a very important part of our staff.

So, I guess that's about as much about our team as I know right now. And I know you'll ask more specific questions, but I welcome those questions.

Q. What consistent themes, I guess, did you identify in the losses to Ole Miss the last two seasons?

COACH SABAN: Well, first of all, Ole Miss has had really, really good teams. They've done a really good job against us. I think critical things that happened in the game that affect outcome of games -- we had five turnover last year. They played on a short field and scored a lot of points. Made a couple big plays that, you know, we didn't defend very well. Had some breakdowns in the secondary.

I think if you're going play well against those kinds of teams who are very prolific offensive teams and play good defense, you got to play good field position, first of all, and we're going to have to do a better job of eliminating the big play so they don't score so many points.

Q. Nick, two questions. One, your thoughts on the fact that there are now three of your assistants on the other side of the division. Everybody seems to be trying to find the formula that you applied at Alabama. And, secondly, when you evaluate defensive lineman, how much was the evaluation and how much is the actual development?

COACH SABAN: Well, first question first. You know, we're always very happy and pleased, whether it's Jimbo Fisher at Florida State, Mark Dantonio at Michigan State, the three coaches in the SEC, to see guys who have done a fantastic job for us for a long, long time in some cases get the opportunity or have the opportunity come to fruition that they've worked hard to try to achieve in their own personal career.

Hopefully some of the things they've learned in our program will help them be successful, and we certainly wish every one of those guys the utmost luck in terms of turning their programs and having successful

programs. And every one of those guys did a fantastic job for us, and we have a tremendous amount of respect and appreciate the job that they did.

The second part of the question -- you want to repeat that?

Q. About developing the defensive lineman.

COACH SABAN: I think that in every position, including defensive lineman, talent is really, really important at every position. Now, the critical factors to play that particular position vary, like what a wide receiver has to do is very much different than what a defensive lineman has to do.

And I think we all have our own critical factors that we look at to see if this is a guy that has the right stuff for us to develop as a player in his position. I think that once you identify the talent, you know, that it takes a tremendous amount of passion, perseverance, hard work, discipline, to develop that talent into a skill. And once that skill is developed, it takes the same passion, perseverance, hard work and discipline to turn that skill into something that creates achievement and production. And I think that's true in anything that you choose to do.

And so I think it's a combination of both, being able to recruit guys that have the critical factors, whether it's size, initial quickness, power, strength, pass rushability, moving your hands and feet at the same time, whatever those critical factors are that you look for in that position, and then does that person have sort of the right intangible characteristics to develop that talent into a skill that can be developed, then, into some productive achievement on the field.

Q. Coach, my question for you is how has Lane Kiffin improved you as a coach?

COACH SABAN: I'm sorry?

Q. How has Lane Kiffin improved you as a coach?

COACH SABAN: I think that everyone on our staff, I think we all try to improve each other. I think every new coach that you bring to your staff, when you bring them, brings positive energy, new ideas, new enthusiasm.

So, I think every coach that we brought in has made an improvement in terms of helping me develop new ideas, new experiences, because we're always all looking for a better way.

And I think all of the coaches on our staff have done very well when it comes to that responsibility of looking for a better way and doing a good job. And I think, you know, coaches do a good job in a lot of ways. You know, if they are coordinators, are they good play

callers? Are they good on game day? Do they do a good job of game planning and helping teach the assistants on your staff how to teach that game plan to the players? That's critical. It's not just calling plays in the game. It's doing that part of it.

And then we all have to coach a position. So you have to develop the players at your position fundamentally and technically. Not only just teaching them the game plan of what to do, but how do you need to do it. And then recruiting is such a big factor in what we all do. So, it's a lot more than just one particular thing of calling plays that make somebody a real asset on your staff.

Q. Good morning, Coach. O.J. Howard had a record-setting performance in the championship game. Do you foresee an expanded role for O.J. this season?

COACH SABAN: O.J. has been an outstanding player for us and a very unselfish guy in terms of, you know, the things he's done and how he has contributed to our team. He's contributed to our team in a fantastic way. It doesn't always get recognized because it seems like it's always recognized on how many big plays you make or how many passes you catch. And he had several really big games for us.

I think he's definitely someone who is a threat and should be developed as a threat in our offense and should be used as such. And would certainly like to do that. We have other players that, you know, are outstanding, whether it's Calvin Ridley or ArDarius Stewart or maybe the running backs that we've had, and hopefully we'll develop and have success this year.

So, we want to feature all of the players on our team that have a chance to be successful, and O.J. Howard should be a guy that should certainly create mismatches and do some good things stretching the field.

Q. Nick, a few years ago you were very passionate about your dislike for no-huddle offenses because of concerns about safety for players and fatigue. The past couple years you have kind of changed -- you've used that more and step out of your comfort zone offensively. You hired Lane, kind of changed your offense. How difficult is that for you to make the decision to kind of go somewhat in a different direction but still incorporate some of the things that you do?

COACH SABAN: I think, first of all, Lane was really a no-huddle guy. That was something that we did philosophically because of the issues that it created for us, you know, defensively. And it was the rule. You know, just like I don't necessarily agree with the illegal

man down field rule and a guy should be able to go seven yards down field on a pass play. I don't agree with that. But it is a part of our game. It is the rule.

So, for us to not use those plays is a disadvantage for us. All right. So even though we may not philosophically agree that this is the way football was meant to be played or should be played, if it creates issues for the other team and for the defense, and pace of play has been something that I think has done that, so have all of these run pass option plays that people run, then we need to use those things, too, or we're creating a disadvantage for ourselves.

It's been a work in progress for us to learn how to do that because we do not have an offensive coach on our staff that came from that background, came from that hurry-up, no-huddle offense. I think our coaching staff, including Lane, has done a fantastic job sort of developing a system that has been very effective for us in terms of what we've been able to do.

So it's the issues and problems that it creates that made us move in that direction, and that's what we will continue to do.

Q. Coach, you have a lot of NFL experience, of course, and we've seen a rash the last couple years of even some good NFL players stepping away from the game maybe a couple years early. Do you expect some kind of trickle-down effect to the college game, especially since most of the players you recruit have professional aspirations?

COACH SABAN: I think that's a decision every individual has to make. I think that in all that we do, everyone comes to a point, a station in their life, where they look for new challenges or want to do something different, or maybe they are a little tired and not as motivated.

I think that the thing that I respect is some of these players that you speak of have been very dominant players, and the level of commitment that it takes, the work that it takes, the year round sort of commitment that you have to have to play at the highest level and be an outstanding player on a consistent basis, it can, you know, get a little bit sort of difficult to sustain that, and I think it speaks volumes for somebody who realizes when maybe they are not as motivated as before and their pride and performance would not allow them to do something that they don't feel like they can give their very best to do.

So, do I think there's going to be some trickle-down effect? Most of the players that we're dealing with in college are aspiring to develop careers. You know, they are still developing personal characteristics that

can help them be successful. They're aspiring to develop a career off the field by graduating from school. They're aspiring to develop a career as a football player that maybe they can play in the NFL someday and they want to have success in college.

So, there's some players that as far back as when I played that decide at some point in their college career that it's not worth it to them. And I think that's going to happen and continue to happen. I don't know that it's going to have a direct correlation to players who make that decision based on the station of life they're in and what their motivation is. I think every individual is going to have a little different sort of feel about what works best for them and what they should do.

Q. Good morning, Coach. All week there's been a lot of questions to other coaches about you. So, I figured I would ask you a question about other coaches. With Kirby Smart now at Georgia, Jim obviously at Florida, Will at South Carolina, you got to coach against Jim last year in the SEC Championship game, when you go against your former colleagues you spent so much time with, is there extra excitement for you, or is it business as usual?

COACH SABAN: There's a lot of excitement for me because these guys have opportunities and we want to see them do extremely well and the opportunities that they have. I think it reflects favorably on our program and what we've done, and those guys all did a fantastic job for us.

But, when it comes right down to it, when we play each other, even though you have a tremendous amount of respect for them, all they've done for you and the job they've done where they are, and you have that respect because you work with them and you know them really, really well. You also have a tremendous amount of respect for your team now, you know, the players on your team, the work they've done, the coaches on your staff that have worked hard to sort of develop this chemistry.

So your focus is on what do we do to help our group of players, regardless who we're playing against, sort of do their best in that circumstance and situation. I think in every case when I've played against a former assistant, whether Mark at Michigan State or Jim at Florida last year in the SEC Championship game or Will when he was at Florida, the respect has grown each time because of what they've been able to do as head coaches. And makes you proud that they are doing well. But you're also proud that, you know, your current team is doing the best they can do as well.

Q. Following up on O.J. Howard, what does he do

best as a tight end and how close is he to reaching his potential?

COACH SABAN: Well, I think O.J. has improved and developed as a blocker each and every year, which, being an athletic guy, sort of a taller, thin-bodied type guy, that has been a challenge for him. But he has worked so hard at that and improved dramatically at that to be very effective blocker. And I thought last year was his best year in that.

But as a receiver, he is a fabulous receiver. He's got great hands. He's got speed to stretch the field. He can make the tough catch. He can separate from man to man. So, he has been an effective receiver, one that we probably, as we talked about before, need to use more, because of his ability to make plays.

Q. Coach, good morning. I know the West Virginia floods affected you personally, as the tragedy hit the residents in the communities. I know also you've formed a partnership with FSU head coach Jimbo Fisher to help be able to raise those donations of high school equipment to the football teams. So, I'm wondering if you could elaborate on how the partnership from the initial onset was formed and how you've done in raising those donations.

COACH SABAN: You well, you know, Jimbo is one of those guys that coached for us for five years. We probably grew up less than ten miles apart in West Virginia, where our hometowns are. Also Rick Trickett, who is his offensive line coach, grew up near there. Joe Pendry, who is on our staff, grew up in Oceana, which is really closer to where the floods occurred.

So there's a lot of sort of tie-ins there. And Jimbo and I both wanted to do something that would be helpful to -- I mean, we made contributions to, you know, some of the flood relief to help the people, but we also wanted to do something to help the young people who seasons could be wiped out if we can't replace the equipment that they lost in the flood. And I think it was a great idea. And I think it was Coach Trickett's idea that he presented to Jimbo and I both. And so he and Joe Pendry did a lot of the background on this, but the NCAA was very cooperative, as the SEC was, in giving us a waiver to allow us to do this so that we're hopeful that we have a really, really positive response so these young people will be able to play.

Q. Coach, you were rotating like 14 or 15 guys on your front seven defense last year. How unique was that in your career, and how did that come about, and how many do you think you may be rotating this year on the front seven?

COACH SABAN: Well, I -- I'm not sure how many we had exactly rotating, but we did have a lot of guys. We

had, you know, five effective outside rushers. We had three or four effective inside rushers. We had several linebackers that would adapt and change roles relative to third down situations, and I don't think we have that many guys this year.

That's one of the things that I addressed earlier, was it was going to be a challenge for us to be able to replace some of the depth that we had in terms of the specialty players that we had last year. A guy like Tim Williams, for example, had, I think, 10 1/2 sacks. Only played on third down. Never had another role on the team. Well, that's very effective, because he's always going to be fresh in those situations. He's a very effective pass rusher.

So, Ryan Anderson was similar in that regard. Rashaan Evans did some of that. Those guys are going to have to be full-time players for us this year, and we're going to have to look for the next guys to be able to have those roles.

So, Jonathan Allen, who was one of our best defensive lineman, did not have to play all of the time and was a really, really effective rusher, especially on third down in situations where the other team was passing the ball.

So, that's one -- that was unique that we had that kind of depth on last year's team. I don't think we'll have it on this year's team, even though we have some really good players. It will be more challenging for us to create some different roles for some other guys who can sort of have a role so that these guys don't have to play all of the downs in the game, because when we've had teams like that in the past, those guys aren't fresh on third down and it affects your ability to pass rush.

KEVIN TRAINOR: Coach, thank you for your time.

COACH SABAN: Thank you. And one thing I would like to say, which I always say here, is we really appreciate -- even though I get sort of blasted sometimes for how I sort of view the press, that's not really the case. I really appreciate what you do, because you promote our game. You promote our student-athletes. You create a lot of interest for these young men, which I think inspires a lot of them to really want to play even at younger ages.

And I think we have a great game and I think sports is something that young people can learn so much when it comes to work ethic, discipline, pride in performance, perseverance, overcoming adversity, lessons in life that can help them have a better chance to be successful in the future. You all promote that for us, and I certainly do appreciate it and thank you for it. So, thanks.