

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Wednesday July 17, 2019

Nick Saban

Alabama Crimson Tide



COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Good morning. The University of Alabama head football coach Nick Saban enters his 13th year of Alabama, overall was 18th as a head coach in the Southeastern Conference. He's an eight-time National Coach of the Year. I think it was well publicized he had hip replacement surgery and was back at work walking within 36 hours, back on the golf course hitting irons within a week or two -- I don't have the exact number of days -- out on the course, but they wouldn't let him use a driver or 3-wood. So if he moved up a little bit, forward tees, used a 5-iron. May he shot a 77 with a 5-iron off every tee, so we're envious of that performance. He's been cleared to hit drivers in late June, full go on the golf course so you can ask him how the driver's going after several weeks of the 5-iron. University of Alabama head football coach, Nick Saban.

NICK SABAN: I can answer that question very quickly in the woods. So it's great to see you all. This is kind of what sort of kicks off psychologically, you know, the new year, the new season, the new challenges for us. I hope you've had a great summer. We certainly always enjoy our summer. It's great family time. It's the one time, from a coaching perspective, that you get a little downtime, and you have an opportunity to have family reunions, develop relationships with people that you've been close to, and continue to spend time with granddaughters and children and nieces and nephews, and we certainly enjoy that.

I hope each and every one of you had a very productive and joyous summer. But I think this is always about the time, you know, this week, when I'm like, start shaking my leg again, start -- you know, my knee starts popping, that I've had just about enough of sitting around, relaxing, jumping in the lake, playing golf in the morning, and really get excited about, you know, the season. And we sort of look at every season as if, you know, we took a new job. We're starting all over, trying to re-establish the principles and values of the organization that helped us be successful with everybody within the organization.

And our program in Alabama is really all about helping players be more successful in life because they were involved in the program. So there's a lot of personal development things that go on to help them make the

kind of choices and decisions that will help them create value for their future and take advantage of their gifts. And obviously, academics, developing a career off the field, we try to emphasize to our players the reason that you go to college is you're trying to prepare yourself for the day you can't play football.

I think culturally, that's changed a little bit. But it's still the most important thing for a young person, you know, to have that goal in mind to be able to be successful in developing a career off the field. And we had a tremendous amount of academic success. We were one of the national and SEC leaders in graduation rate APR, the leader in number of players that played their last game with a degree.

So we've been very fortunate to be able to help our players in that regard. I think career development is also something that's also an awareness that players should also develop relationships that will help them be able to launch their career when they leave, and obviously we want to help guys develop as football players and see if they can have individual success, whether Alabama had team success, be on a championship team and see if they can play at the next level someday.

So we want to have the best coaches, the best teachers, the best facilities, the best strength and conditioning medical staff, nutritionist, you name it. We want to have the best that we can so we give every player an opportunity to reach their full potential.

You know, I think the most important thing for us, you know, in this offseason and going into this season is sort of re-establish the standard that we'd like to play to, standard of discipline, also, players that are going to be responsible and accountable to do their job at a high level on a consistent basis and also put the team first. It doesn't mean you can't have individual goals and aspirations in terms of what you want to accomplish, what you want to do for the team, but it has to be about the team. I think that sometimes people see you when you create numbers for yourself and do great individual things, but you really get noticed when you do those things and the team has success as well.

And a lot of our players have benefited from their great

performance and the team success in terms of the awards that they've been able to get and the recognition that they've got, and you know, leadership on every team is also an important part of being successful because once you establish these principles and values and standards that you'd like to have in the program, you have to have people in the organization who reinforce those, and I think sometimes peer to peer is very effective. And, you know, that's something that I think is important on every team and certainly something that we challenge the leadership on our team to do a great job of this year to help our young players understand the culture and the standard that we'd like to do things to.

And I think it's important for those leaders to set a good example, be somebody that the young players on the team can emulate, care enough about them to help them for their benefit, and serve the team well because it helps everybody play to a higher standard.

We have some very good players here that have had a lot of success and contributed to the success that we've had at the University of Alabama. Tua is here and certainly had an outstanding last year. And Dylan Moses, who was the center of our defense, and will be the signal caller this year and certainly a very talented guy that's very productive. And Jerry Jeudy who won several awards last year as being an outstanding receiver and certainly a guy that has made a lot of big plays for us at the University of Alabama.

But I think that the key to us, the key to our success, is can we internally re-establish the standard of what we need to do to be the best team that we can be. And that's got to be something that's done on a consistent basis, and it has to be able to sustain the season. And that's a challenge for all of us.

You know, we have a lot of new coaches that I've been very pleased with the new staff that we have. I think, you know, the enthusiasm, the excitement, the new energy, new ideas that new coaches bring is always a positive, but I also think the continuity is very important for players in terms of relationships. But the one thing that this coaching staff has been able to do is a great job of establishing relationships with our players, which I think is, you know, the most important thing.

We have two new coordinators, both have been in the program before. Steve Sarkisian has lots of experience as a coordinator, college and NFL. He's also got plenty of experience in developing very good quarterbacks, which I think is really, really important in college football and has done a really good job in transition.

You know, we don't change systems at Alabama. So

we change the system to effectively take advantage of the players that we have in our program. So that's what we want to do. Obviously we'll do some different things and some new things relative to the new coaches that we have, but we also maintain the same system that we've had in the past.

Pete Golding who is the defensive coordinator, he was with us last year, sort of associate coordinator last year, so he's got a lot of experience and really a fine young coach who reminds me a lot of some of the other young guys that have come up in the organization and had a lot of success.

I think from a special teams standpoint,

Jeff Banks is one of the best special teams coordinators in the country, and we were very successful on special teams last year, even though our specialists were not what we'd like for them to be. I think we've added some people that may be able to add some consistency for us in that regard.

We're excited about having the opportunity to play in the Chick-fil-A Classic to open the season against Duke, and we're really looking forward to the challenges that the SEC always presents. I think there's going to be a lot of good teams. There's a lot of good talent. That's going to be very challenging and always difficult to play on the road in this league. So it's going to be important that our players do their very best to get where we need to be to reach our full potential as a team and do it on a consistent basis throughout the entire season.

So I'd like to thank each and every one of you for what you do to create a lot of interest and a lot of positive self-gratification for our players and college football. I think it's important to the fans that they have the kind of access that you provide in terms of information, knowledge. And I think that's very important to continue to be able to promote the game on the level that you do for the welfare of college football and also the welfare of the players who play it.

Any questions?

Q. First off, happy to see you here, Coach. Happy the hip surgery went well for you. My question for you is Alabama in the last couple of years, they've had strong quarterback play with Tua Tagovailoa and Jayden, not just talent, but big-game experience. My question is, where has Mac Jones grown the most to you? What has he grown as a player? What has he grown as a person? If he was to be in a situation, you feel comfortable with Mac Jones in the offense?

NICK SABAN: Well, Mac has made a lot of improvements. He's matured very nicely at the position. He's a very bright guy. He's got good knowledge of the position. Mac is a very emotional guy. So we like to try to get guys to play with emotion, but not be emotional, because sometimes when you get too emotional, you don't make good decisions, and that's one of the things that we worked really hard, and he's made a lot of progress in that area.

And, you know, his consistency and performance has been very, very good. He did get to play some last year. So this is not going to be totally foreign to him if he has to go in a game and play. Hopefully we'll have good enough players around him that it will help him have a chance to succeed. But we've been pleased with his progress. We're confident that he's capable. It's our job to be able to get him to a point where he has enough consistency to be able to play if we need him to.

Q. After the loss to Clemson last season in the national championship, is that something that you or the other leaders in the locker room are using as motivation or an example to get back to the standard you were speaking of?

NICK SABAN: I think if you're a great competitor and you are in a game like we were for the national championship and you didn't perform very well, and given all much the credit to the other team who beat us and took advantage of the opportunities that they have, not to take anything away from them, but if you're a competitor, you're going to respond in a positive way and learn from the things that you didn't do, whether those things were in preparation, game-day decisions, you know, the habits that you created leading up to the game the second half of the season. All of those things contribute to, are we going to be able to have success against one of the best teams, or the best team, in the country. And we obviously didn't do that. That's my responsibility.

But I think that our players learned a lot from that experience. I think that we didn't play with the discipline at the end of the season that we'd like to have as a team. I don't think that our preparation, so that we can go in a game and be very responsible and accountable to do our job at a high level on a consistent basis, was what it needed to be.

And you know, whether or not people were worried about personal outcomes more than team outcomes, it's always hard to judge that. But it seems like we had a lot of distractions at the end of the year. So hopefully we learned from those scenarios, and it will help us do the things that we need to do to be able to play to our full potential throughout this season.

Q. I think you're 16-0 against your former assistants, seven or eight guys. How do you feel about that stat? Do you think any of these guys are ever going to beat you and how much longer -- I think you're facing three of them this season?

NICK SABAN: I think that's not a very fair stat. All of the former assistants that we have, they get jobs. They don't take a program over that has the established, you know, talent, culture, and all that that we have at Alabama. So when they get the opportunity to establish those things in their program, they're going to be able to beat Alabama and compete with Alabama.

So that's something that -- most of the time when you get a job, it's because the guy that was before you didn't do a very good job, so you have lots of work to do to bring that team to that level. And obviously, you know, I think a lot of those guys are going to be able to do that extremely well. Some have done it already. So, I think it's a matter of time until those challenges get greater and greater for us.

Q. Just when you look at Tua and his progression, obviously he had one full year as a starting quarterback. What do you see as his next progression, next step to take going into this year?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think Tua is the kind of guy that's never really satisfied. And I think he had an outstanding year last year. Are there things that he can improve on? I don't think there's any question about that. You know, towards end of the season, we turned the ball over a little bit more offensively than what we had in the first half of the season. And I'm sure that he wants to make sure that the decision making that led to some of those things are something that he can improve on.

I think that, you know, we'd like for him to learn. Tua is a great competitor so he's going to try to make a great play every play. And sometimes those things have worked out extremely well. And other times they've led to some disasters. So having a little better judgment about when to say when can be an asset from an health standpoint as well as eliminate negative play standpoint, even though sometimes he's done that, and it's worked out great.

But we're happy to have him as a leader of our team. He's got great character. He's a hard worker. He affects his teammates in a really positive way. I think he's very well respected by his teammates. And, you know, he's obviously been as productive as anybody in his position in the country. So hopefully we can build on that.

Q. Kind of a two-part question. On special teams, who are the candidates to replace Josh Jacobs on

kick return? And on defense, who if anyone, is pushing Josh McMillon at inside linebacker?

NICK SABAN: Well, we have several candidates of guys that, you know, are kick-off return guys that we think are very capable. You know, Jaylen Waddle is a great return guy. Is he going to be the kick-off return guy? Maybe. Ruggs is very good at that. We've got several running backs that are pretty good at it. So I don't think we made a total decision on that. I think that's one of the questions we have in fall camp to how that goes.

We have a couple of young linebackers. We will see how they progress. The thing Josh does, is he's been in the program for a long time. He understands what he has to do to be successful at the position. He is a thumper. He's very physical.

And so, you know, whether he -- someone else develops from that core group of linebackers to play with the consistency that we need sort of remains to be seen. And maybe they can play in regular, maybe they can play in nickel, maybe Josh can play in regular, maybe Josh can play in nickel. So it may be a committee of people at that position who fills roles relative to situations.

Q. A lot of the talk this week with coaches has been about the transfer portal and how the coaches feel about it. I just wanted to get your thoughts on it and do you think it helps or hurts the players.

NICK SABAN: I'm sorry, I really didn't --

THE MODERATOR: Transfer portal, do you think it helps or hurts.

NICK SABAN: I think the spirit of the transfer portal in and of itself is a positive thing for players. You know, I think when we started with the transfer portal, it was a mechanism for players to be able to say I'm transferring, so everybody knows that I'm transferring, so if that creates opportunities for me to go different places, then that's a good thing for the player.

The issue with the transfer portal is we've gotten very liberal in giving people waivers, so, when we do that, it becomes free agency, which I don't think is good for college football. I don't think it's good for fans.

So, in my opinion, if we're going to have a transfer portal that's good for the players, then we ought to have a rule that says, regardless of what happens when you transfer, you have to sit out a year. That's how it's been for years and years and years. All right. And now we have, I don't know -- at one point in time there was 65 waivers that were given there year. So

everybody's expectation is I can transfer and get a waiver. And I don't think that's a good thing. So, we make commitments to players for four years. They make commitments to us to be in our program. It may not work out for everybody and they may have a better opportunity someplace else, but if they have to sit out for a year, it would be a consequence for them in terms of their commitment.

Q. Coach, what are some of the traits of David Cutcliffe-coached team, offense, defense, special teams, and what is your relationship with Coach Cutcliffe?

NICK SABAN: Well, we have a tremendous amount of respect for David, what he was able to do when he was at Ole Miss and we played all the time and what he's done at Duke with that program and the success they've had there.

First of all, he's offensively probably one of the best minds in this era of our game. Quarterback development, he's very, very talented in terms of how he's been able to develop a lot of good players at that position.

Offensively they do a lot of different things getting empty, do a lot of things to feature the players that they have. And I'm sure they'll do the same thing with the players they have this year. But I don't know of anybody in the country that's done a better job with the program than he has at Duke, not only in terms of taking the program from being fairly unsuccessful to very successful now, but also, the way he goes about it, the honesty, integrity, you know, doing things the way it's supposed to be done when it comes to college football in terms of emphasizing personal development and academic support and player development. I just think he's one much the best around.

Q. I know you would never reveal the secret to your success, but do you think you've figured out something in program building that maybe a lot of other coaches haven't figured out?

NICK SABAN: No. I don't really know the secret to the success other than, you know, we worked hard and we've been in some really good situations through the years with really good people who are very supportive and given us the tools that we have that can create value for players so we can attract good players, and we've been able to develop those players with the knowledge and experience that we have on our staffs and, you know, with what we've been able to create through the years.

So I don't really -- I can't really pinpoint anything. I know it comes from having really good people in your organization, whether it's your administration, your

athletic director and athletic department, the coaching staff that you have, the kind of players that you're able to attract, and the people who can support and influence the players in a positive direction.

So I can't really -- beyond that, there's a lot of hard work and trying to do things the right way. And I'm sort of a perfectionist by nature. And I know you can't be perfect, but we're always working to try to close the gap on perfect if we can and get everybody in the organization to try to do the same.

Q. Nick, there's been a lot made about your staff turnover, the amount of coaches that turn over on your staff. Are you difficult to work for?

NICK SABAN: Well, I don't know. You have to ask some of the people that work for me. Always interesting that, you know, they may say that, but then when they get a job and they go do it, they do it exactly like we did it. So, I don't know.

But we have a difficult job. We have 125 players on our team. They are all adolescents. They need a lot of support. They need a lot of direction. They need a lot of leadership.

Recruiting has become, you know, 24/7 because we've created a scenario where we have to recruit constantly because we're recruiting guys in advance as we move up the recruiting calendar.

So none of this is easy. And I think, when you're in a position of leadership and you're trying to make people be accountable and responsible to a standard that's going to help you continue to have success, that sometimes you have to make people do things that they really don't want to do that may be in the best interest of the overall organization.

So am I willing to do that? Absolutely. So you have to make a choice and decision: You want to do it right, or you want to make everybody happy?

No different than raising your children. I go through this with Terry when we're raising our kids. She wanted to make them happy, and I wanted to make them do right.

So I don't know. I like for them to do right and be happy doing right. That's what I'd like for them to do. And that's the same thing I like for our coaches.

Q. Coach, I wanted to ask you about the addition of Charles Kelly to your coaching staff and also the development of Josh Jobe and what kind of impact he can maybe have in the secondary.

NICK SABAN: Right. Well, I think Charles Kelly has

been a wonderful addition to our staff. He's very knowledgeable. He's got great relationships in Alabama and our part of the country in terms of his experience in recruiting, very knowledgeable coach, great relationships with the players, really gets along well with the people on the staff and makes a real positive contribution to the defensive staff, in general, because of the knowledge and experience he has having been a coordinator. And it's very, very helpful to the development of our defense.

Josh Jobe has made a tremendous amount of improvement and has matured very nicely, and we view him as a guy that is a potential starter and a guy that is playing in a way that, throughout the spring, that we have confidence that if he's a starter, we can -- he can be very successful and we can be very successful with him playing corner for us.

Q. Following up on the transfer portal part earlier. How has the portal changed how you approach adding talent to your roster and also retaining it?

NICK SABAN: We really -- look, we feel like it's a challenge for us to create an atmosphere and environment for our players that we're providing the leadership and the support to do the things that are going to help them be more successful in life.

So, you know, if that's not what they want to do, and they choose not to do it, that's got to be their choice. But I asked players all of the time to establish goals for themselves personally, academically and athletically, and then I try to get them to edit their behavior to be able to accomplish those goals. And if their behavior is not in line with that, we sort of tell them. And some people don't like to believe the truth.

You know, there's three things about the truth. I tell my kids all of the time about, if you don't tell me the truth, I can't trust you. If I can't trust you, we can't have a relationship. But truth is important. I think we all have to tell the truth. I think we have to live the truth, but I also think sometimes you got to believe the truth. So when somebody tells you something you really don't want to hear that you might need to do that's going to help you be more successful, you got to believe it. Some people have a hard time with that.

And if that means they need to leave and go someplace else, then I guess there's not a lot we can do about that. But we have not been very active. We're usually full from a scholarship standpoint. So we haven't really been active, you know, trying to go and recruit transfers from other schools.

We look at who is in the graduate transfer pool. And if there's somebody that can give us immediate help on our team, we have had several graduate transfers. So

we really haven't been active at all in, you know, that part of how we bring players to our team.

Q. Nick, there's plenty of talk about what makes a good offensive play caller. What makes a good defensive play caller?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think knowledge and experience is always really, really important in whatever part of the game that you call. And I think good preparation can contribute to that. And I think, you know, having a philosophy of how you apply things in situations in games can be, you know, beneficial to being a good signal caller.

But I think you have to have a lot of patience when you play defense. And you have to have a philosophy of how do you want to play this game? Are we going to be aggressive and blitz a lot and try to create a lot of negative plays, which also creates opportunities for the other team to make a lot of explosive plays. Or are we going to make them execute and drive the ball through against us, which takes a lot of patience.

I think if you play that way and you're aggressive attacking the ball, and you play fairly well on third down, and in the red zone, and you don't give up explosive plays, you know, you kind of become hard to score on. So that's really kind of been more our philosophy of how we try to do it. But I tell you, it's very challenging. It's much more challenging nowadays, and I think statistics bear this out. I think like 2010 or something, '11 team, I don't know when, gave up eight, seven points a game per year. And I think now if you give up 15, twice as many as that, you'd be one of the national leaders.

So it's been more challenging with the advent of RPOs, some of the rules we have in college football, certainly favor the offense, blocking down field on passes behind the line of scrimmage. I'm not complaining about the rules. I'm just saying it makes it harder to play good defense when you have some of the rules that we have, and we try to take advantage of those on offense, to be honest.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time this morning.

NICK SABAN: Thank you. And again I would like to thank everybody here for the self-gratification that you bring to a lot of players with your attention and the attention that you give them and how much you enhanced our game in terms of interest with fans. I think it's really important to the success of the game long term. So, thank you very much.