

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Nick Saban

Alabama

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Good morning. Welcome to Wednesday at Southeastern Conference Football Media Days. Our first coach this morning is Nick Saban, the head coach of the Alabama Crimson Tide.

COACH SABAN: How's everybody today? Great to see you all again. I hope everybody's had a fantastic summer. I'm kind of proud of the fact that this is my 16th SEC Media Day, the 11th at Alabama, which I'm sure that there's nobody in this room thought that that would ever happen when it started out

11 years ago.

But it's been an outstanding experience. I think this is probably the best league from a competitive venue standpoint. And I've been a lot of places and coached in a lot of different leagues, including the NFL, but the SEC is one of the best competitive venues in terms of all of the good programs that we have, all of the challenges that it presents, and the way our administrators run our league to create tremendous competitive balance on the field, but also do things that help our players and young people and student-athletes have the best chance to be successful off the field.

That's probably one of the things that I'm most proud of as a coach is our program at Alabama and how we've helped people be more successful in life for having been involved in the program, whether it's personal development and personal development programs, mental conditioning for success, peer intervention for behavioral issues, leadership, communication, how you brand yourself, or having an academic program that has actually been one of the most successful academic support programs in terms of graduation rate, APR, usually nationally ranked in the tops in the country, the fact that we've had

101 players with degrees play in Bowl and playoff games in the last four years, which is each year more than anybody in the country, but, overall, in the four years, way more than anybody in the country.

So we've been able to help people develop careers off the field, which is very important to long-term success. Everybody comes to a day when they can't play



athletics anymore. It's the one thing all athletes have in common regardless of their sport. And we are very proud that we've been able to help people develop careers off the field so they have a better chance to be successful in life and also very pleased with how we've been able to help develop football players and help guys develop careers on the field and have success on the field and try to do it the right way so that it gives them the best opportunity to be the best version, you know, of themselves. So we're very, very proud of that.

But currently we're excited from a football standpoint because the challenges the season presents, starting with our opening game, will be a very challenging game, as well as the challenges that the SEC and the teams that we play in our league and our division always present to us.

And we're pleased with the team's progression through this summer. They are currently working very hard, work out, do a great job of individually staying organized and how they can develop, whether it's in 7-on-7 and the type of drills that coaches aren't allowed to be involved with that I think has really helped the development of our young players, which I think this is going to be one of the youngest teams that we've had probably since maybe 2012, especially on defense, where we lost a ton of really, really good players, I think seven guys drafted off the defense, all in the first four rounds. So it's going to be a challenge to replace those guys.

We're going to be very young on that side of the ball, but it's also something that we're excited about as coaches to try to help those guys develop to play the kind of football that will allow them to be individually and collectively successful defensively.

You know, offensively, this is the first time that we've had a returning starter at quarterback since 2013, which creates the opportunity for that guy to develop in the things that he needs to do better, which Jalen has done a good job in the offseason of becoming a better passer, understanding the passing game better, and we have some good running backs, and we have some good receivers and skill guys, and the offensive line has developed nicely.

So it's going to be a challenge for us offensively to be

able to have the kind of team that we need to have to help our defense, especially early on. But I think it's important that our team develop an identity, which is always a challenge from a coaching standpoint, that all the players buy into, take ownership for, and are accountable to, doing the things that we need to do to establish the identity that we want to establish of being a team that's difficult to play against because of our ability to execute, play with mental and physical toughness, be able to finish, which we weren't able to do last year in the championship game.

So these intangible things of everybody buying in, everybody taking ownership for everything in the house, that's how you conduct yourself off the field, in the classroom, on the field. That's one of the reasons that I think we've been able to be successful is the culture of accountability that we create for our players.

We define the expectation for them personally, academically, and athletically, surround them with the kind of people that can guide them and provide leadership to help them be successful in all of those areas, but they have to eventually be responsible for their own self-determination, which is what being a professional anything is. Somebody defines what you are supposed to do; you got to go out and do a good job to do it. And that's what try to do in our program, which helps our players be very, very successful.

From a coaching standpoint, we have three new coaches on offense. Brian Daboll has done a really, really good job as offensive coordinator. The players have really responded to him well. He's got a great personality. I think he's exactly what we're looking for in terms of helping us redevelop a pro-style passing attack that would go with the athleticism with some of the spread offense that we've used with Jalen and our other quarterbacks, which helped us tremendously, I think.

Mike Locksley, who is assistant co-offensive coordinator and receiver coach, who has great experience, has also been a real benefit to us. And Joe Pannunzio coming back to coach special teams and tight ends after being with the Eagles for a couple years. We are excited about the staff that we have.

Defensively, we are all the same. Jeremy Pruitt has done an outstanding job, been in the system for a long time, understands how to apply it. Last year's defense was probably one of the best that we've ever had, and he certainly contributed with his knowledge and expertise and leadership. He certainly contributed to that last year. You know, JK Scott is probably one of the best punters in the country. So that's the start of having a good specialist.

We'll have some young players compete for long snap and field-goal kicker. And I think special teams is something that we really try to promote with every young player. And if you have good team speed, you usually have pretty good special teams.

So, we're excited about the three players that are here today. Bradley Bozeman, Calvin Ridley and Minkah Fitzpatrick, all guys that have done a fantastic job of representing the University of Alabama and our football program on and off the field. So those guys are all guys, players, that we are really, really proud of as people, as students, and as football players.

So, questions?

Q. Nick, you came so close to winning the National Championship last year. Do you self-assess any differently when you come that close and you lose as opposed to when you win it and do you do it more intensely, and do you think maybe I should tweak that? How do you do that?

COACH SABAN: Well, we really try to do it the same way because whether you win or lose, we're always trying to self-assess to see what we need to do to get better. I think when you lose, everybody's much more -- the mindset is much more I'm willing to change. I want to learn. I don't want to waste a failure. What could we have done better? Because everybody's hurt by the fact that they lost, especially the way we lost that particular game on the last play of the game, but it wasn't the last play. It's what led up to the last play. And I think our players realize that.

It takes a tremendous amount of accountability to be able to execute and sustain the execution for 60 minutes in the game. And we played against a really, really good team, which I think when you get in the playoffs, that should be what you expect. And we weren't able to finish the game like we needed to. And I think there's a lot of lessons to learn, and hopefully we won't waste a failure.

Q. Good morning, Coach. Coach, how is the recovery of Bo Scarbrough and Shaun Dion Hamilton? And how is Najee Harris? Will he fit into the offense?

COACH SABAN: Well, both players, Bo has done all of the work all summer long, no restrictions. So, you know, he's really fine. Najee is a young player, who has a lot of talent and a lot of ability. We're anxious to help him continue to develop an understanding of the offense so that he can make a contribution offensively at the running back position.

Shaun Dion Hamilton, who we held out in the spring, but has done everything all summer long, seems to be

getting along really, really well and should not have any restrictions going into fall camp.

Q. Coach, there's a new rule that allows officials to penalize 15 yards for stepping onto the field. What are your thoughts of that rule? And do you plan on having, for lack of better term, a get-back coach to kind of reel you in during those minutes?

COACH SABAN: Well, we've always had a get-back coach. And we think we need more than one maybe. But, look, I think some of the things that's happened in college football should not be tolerated. You know, we saw Steve Shaw showed us a lot of examples of coaches going all of the way out to the hashmark. And I think those coaches should have been penalized. And if those coaches were penalized, and we didn't have sort of that kind of tolerance for that kind of behavior, maybe we wouldn't need a rule like this that is really sort of a sledgehammer.

And I hope that this is not a circumstance and situation that affects a game in the fall, because it is pretty restrictive, but it is what it is. It's the same for everybody. We're going to do the best we can to manage it. We have a tremendous amount of respect for the officials, and they try to do a great job of managing us as coaches on the sidelines, which can be very challenging at times, especially with the emotion that goes into the game and the passion and intensity that we all have.

And I have a tremendous amount of respect for the way those guys have treated me in the past. And I'm hopeful that I can be respectful enough of them not to ever put them in this position or any of our coaches put them in a position where they have to penalize us for not -- and penalize our team, for not being able to behave properly on the sidelines.

Q. Coach, you guys have won 17 straight SEC games now. You pretty much dominated the league over the last few years. How do you respond to those who say that your program is turning the SEC into a one-team league? And do you sense anybody getting closer to catching up with you guys?

COACH SABAN: Well, I have a tremendous amount of respect for a lot of teams in our league. I mean, LSU is very, very good. Ole Miss has beaten us a couple times in the last few years. Mississippi State has got a good quarterback coming back. Arkansas's got a good quarterback coming back. A&M's always a very challenging team.

I think Kirby's doing a great job at Georgia.

Jim McElwain is doing a good job at Florida.

Tennessee has gotten better and better every year. I am trying to think of somebody in our league that I don't have a tremendous amount of respect for. Vanderbilt went to a Bowl game last year and had a winning season.

I think there's a lot of parity in our league. I think it's very challenging from a consistency standpoint in our league. I think that we have one of the youngest teams that we've ever had. So it's going to be a real challenge for us to maintain the standard that we've been able to maintain in terms of -- especially on defense, especially in the front seven, for all the good players that we lost.

So I have tremendous amount of respect, and I don't see us being a -- being any different than anybody else when it comes to the challenges of preparation and getting ready to play really good teams that we have a tremendous amount of respect for. And we're obviously going to find that out in the first game when we play Florida State in the Chick-fil-A preseason game over in the Mercedes-Benz new stadium.

We're looking forward to that challenge, but at the same time, there's a lot of really good football teams in college football. And we have a lot of guys on our team that have tremendous challenges to be able to replace some of the good players that we lost.

Q. Good morning, Coach. Last year was kind of a revolving door at right guard. Who is somebody you have seen that has taken the bull by the horns coming up for this season?

COACH SABAN: I'm sorry, I didn't understand the question. Revolving door? What revolving door?

Q. It started off with Alphonse Taylor, of course, Lester Cotton came in and did some good things. Korren Kirven came in and did some good things. Who is somebody that you have seen in the offseason that's really starting to take that bull by the horns at right guard and be that leader?

COACH SABAN: Oh, right guard. Okay. I feel like coming out of the spring that we had four players who really demonstrated that they could play winning football in the offensive line. And I felt like we had four or five other players who certainly showed signs that they could be that player that made the fifth starter, whether at right guard or right tackle.

And I think all those players have competed very well this summer. And it will be interesting to see how they mature in fall camp. And I don't think that decision is going to get made until sometime in fall camp. We have a couple new freshman that have shown some potential over the summer. And it's all going to be

about who can develop and who can play with the most consistency and who is the best fit with the other four players that have all started games for us in the past.

Q. You talked about being young on defense. Where does Mack Wilson fit into that? Could he be a guy that can contribute a lot this year?

COACH SABAN: I think inside linebacker is the one position that we probably have the most depth at, with Shaun Dion coming back, with Rashaan Evans finishing the season last year for Shaun Dion and playing very well.

Mack has had a really good summer. We have a lot of confidence in his ability. I think he's starting to mature and develop the confidence and understanding in the system, to have a role, and be a good player for us. So we're excited about him making a contribution, you know, at that position. And he's so athletic, that maybe we could even develop him as a rusher because he is a very explosive guy.

Q. You mentioned that you've gotten good reports in the offseason about Jalen's development as a passer. What kind of reports have you gotten on the skill players that either red-shirted last year, only went through spring, or just got there in May?

COACH SABAN: Well, you guys ask really hard questions. I mean, when you say skill players, you talking about receivers?

Q. And DBs.

COACH SABAN: And DBs. Well, we have a lot of young players, which is really hard to evaluate. I think we had

16 mid-year guys, who are all in spring practice. And then we had 12 other guys that came in and started this summer. So we haven't been able to see a lot of what those guys can do.

We can only go on what the strength and conditioning coaches say in terms of what their development is, but I do think several of those players have demonstrated some explosive ability with great speed. And they're certainly going to get an opportunity to complement the other players that we have in the fall.

Defensively, all the guys on the secondary were here in the spring. So there's not really any new guys that came in, you know, in the fall. So I think we're -- our focus has been on continuing to develop the players that we had in the spring. And hopefully they'll improve and have more guys that can play winning football for us.

Q. You mentioned earlier in your opening remarks,

this is your 11th year at Alabama. What does it take to build up that coaching longevity? Most coaches don't stick around that long at one place. And the days of seeing guys like Bear Bryant, Bob Stoops, Steve Spurrier sticking around at one program for a long time. What do you have to do to kind of do that as a head coach?

COACH SABAN: When? I mean, that's -- well, I think that we all go through transitions. And we learn about ourselves as we go through the years. And I think there was a lot of time and circumstance involved in me coming to Alabama.

I loved LSU. I loved Louisiana. I loved the people in Louisiana, but it was always in my mind that I was going to go be a head coach in the NFL someday. And I did that, and I learned a lot about myself and felt very fortunate to be able to have the opportunity to go back to an SEC school that had a chance to be successful and an administration who would make the kind of commitment to do the things to help players be successful, to create value for players so you can recruit good players and coach good players and have a chance to be successful.

And we've had a lot of people in our program, whether it's a lot of good coaches, a lot of good players, a lot of support staff who are administration -- Mal Moore, Bill Battle, our athletic directors, our athletic administration, Dr. Witt, who was our president and chancellor during my tenure there, who all made our team, including our fans and their support, have a chance to be successful.

So we feel very fortunate every day that we have this opportunity. And hopefully we can continue to do it, and I just look forward to having the opportunity to do it again, you know, this particular year and hopefully can continue to do it in the future for a good long while.

Q. Aside from the rule that was spoken of earlier this year with the conduct, two more additional rules have also been prepared for this year and will be implemented that affect play on the field. The one that is obviously the huddling or the jumping rule to block. The other one is tackling with the collar. When these particular rules are introduced and to be implemented form -- directly affect play on the field, what is the process you and your coaching staff go through to acclimate players to it and try to get them to the point they will be on the field to the point they will be a lot more acclimated to it.

COACH SABAN: Well, I think both of these rules are actually targeted at player safety, which I think is one of the most important things that you always want to emphasize with your players as a coach. You know,

injuries are a part of the game but if there's anything that you can ever do to avoid injuries by the way you practice, the way you prepare, we certainly want to be in the forefront of doing those things the best we possibly can, so, one of the best ways, I think, is to show them examples of how they put themselves at risk, you know, in these circumstances, or how they put another player at risk when they do these thing, and that's pretty much what we do, because we don't ever teach anybody to do that. It's sort of an instinctive thing that a player does, whether he's trying to tackle someone or whether he's trying to gain additional yards. So we show them examples, and I think you can get players to buy in when they see the why it's important to do it that way and what the risk might be relative to them or to someone that they are playing against. And I think players respect that. So, that's the way we implement it the best.

Q. Coach, you had a couple of pretty pointed remarks a couple years back about the Georgia Southern game in 2011, not about that game specifically, but what is the challenge of facing a triple-option team as an SEC team when, say, for Georgia, Georgia Tech, you don't really face that very much during the season. So what is the unique challenge facing a triple-option offense?

COACH SABAN: Well, I think that's one of the unique things about college football is the diversity of the kind of offenses that people play and the various things that you have to defend and play against. But probably the thing that is most different now is the triple-option offense that Georgia Southern, Georgia Tech run because very few teams run it. So your players get very little experience at playing against it. They have very little understanding.

And it's so different in terms of what you see week in and week out that you cannot prepare for it in a single week, nor can you get the kind of scout team look that you need to get to prepare for the speed of that kind of offense and the way those people execute it. So, this is one of the most challenging things about college football is the diversity of offenses that you see.

If you watch NFL games, pretty much -- and I love the NFL and the opportunity it creates for our players, but everybody pretty much runs a pretty stereotype, same kind of offense. So, the challenges defensively are more about the match-ups of the players.

But in college football, there's a diversity of schemes systematically that defensive players have to understand. And this option offense is really, really one that is different and creates a lot of coaching and understanding. And, to be honest with you, we had to bring people in when we played that game to try to

teach us the offense so we could teach our players, you know, how to play against it. And obviously the way we played against it was not very good. So if we ever play against it again, we're going to have to do more research.

Q. Two-part question; first off, you're playing two straight very, very good ACC teams in a row, which means you've probably seen a lot of others on film. First off, what's your overall impression of the quality of athletes and teams in the ACC? And, secondly, there's so much geographical overlap between the two leagues, how much do you recruit against ACC teams?

COACH SABAN: Well, we recruit against ACC almost, I mean, all of the time. I mean, I think everybody tries to recruit the best players. We all try to recruit the best players in the Southeast. And Florida State and Clemson are probably two of the leading teams in the ACC, and they both do an outstanding job of recruiting. And we end up recruiting a lot of the same players. So there's a lot of competition from that standpoint.

You know, I think those two teams that I mentioned probably represent and have dominated the ACC as a league for the last few years. I think they both have great coaches, great programs. You know, they've had good quarterbacks. And they have a lot of good players. And I think that we obviously have played Clemson two years in a row in championship games. And we're kind of one and one against that group.

And I think that Florida State has been one of their biggest challenges in their league and probably have as many good players returning as anybody in college football. So we have a tremendous amount of respect for the league. And we played the two top teams in that league, or will play, have played, and will play, and that's very challenging.

And Florida State, especially, is built like an SEC team, you know, like our teams. You think of Florida State, you think of fast, explosive players which they have a lot of, but they are also a big, physical, play great defense, tough, you know, team. And I think it's probably Jimbo's experience in this league that sort of why he built his team that way. And that's certainly the kind of team that they have this year.

Q. Coach, I had a question about the new rule that allows scouts extra access to a few hundred classmen in the spring. The access that the scouts got in the spring kind of varied a little bit from school to school, just height-weight type measurements in some places and a more complete workout at others. The question is what was the level of access at Alabama and what level

of access do you think would be ideal?

COACH SABAN: Well, we give the ultimate level of access to the NFL. My theory on it is, when we have young players who are making a decision about going out for the draft, we want to get the best possible information relative to where they will get picked because where they get picked goes a long way into saying what is the business decision that I should make.

And I think what people don't realize is, you know, the NFL and football is the only sport that has no developmental league. You know, they have a D-League or whatever they call it in basketball. The NHL has a Minor League. Major League Baseball has a Minor League. Aaron Judge is a pretty good player, but the way I understand it is he spent a couple years in the Minor League, isn't that right, before he really came up and now he's a rookie that is pretty much a dominant player. Well, if that guy wasn't ready to play in football when he was 22 years old, he might not make the team.

So what these players have to realize is when they make a decision to go out for the draft, it's kind of an all-or-nothing thing because there is no second developmental chance for them. That's what college football is for them.

And if a player's not going to get drafted or have a first-round grade, then how do you know that if you don't give the NFL access to know what the guy's speed is, what his character is, what his -- all the measurables that they want. So we want to get the best information to them so they can give us the best information about where a player's going to get picked so our players can make a good decision whether they go or stay.

And we've had a significant number of players who have benefited from staying in school. They've graduated. All right? But they've also moved up significantly in the draft. And your security as an NFL player comes in terms of how much guaranteed money you have. So obviously, if you're a first-round pick, they're not going to cut you. You're going to make the team. You're going to have a chance to develop.

If you're a second-round pick, probably the same thing, to a lesser degree, but probably the same thing. Past that, you're at tremendous risk whether you're even going to make the team or not. And it is an all-or-nothing thing. That is why it's a more critical decision for me for football players, and that's why we like to give them the access that they need. And we actually were a proponent of allowing them to get more access so that they could make a good decision about a business decision about whether to go out for the draft or stay in school.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach, for your time.

COACH SABAN: First of all, I'd like -- in closing, I'd like to thank each and every one of you. I think what you do in promoting our game and the players who play it is a very important part of creating a lot of interest for our fans, and the people who support and love college football. And there's a lot of great things that, you know, college football brings to a lot of young players and a lot of entertainment to a lot of fans.

And I think what you do certainly creates a lot of interest. And even though sometimes you think I'm not in your corner, I certainly do appreciate everything that you do to promote our game and the players who play it. So, thank you very much.