

College Football Playoff Media Conference

Thursday, December 6, 2018

Nick Saban

Lincoln Riley

Dabo Swinney

Brian Kelly

College Football Playoff Media
Conference



football to get back here and have another chance here in the College Football Playoff.

Certainly looking forward to playing Alabama. They've had an historic run with one of the greatest coaches of all time here in Coach Saban. We couldn't possibly have any more respect for them, the way they play, and it'll certainly be a great challenge but one that we're very much looking forward to. Thank you so much for having us.

GINA LEHE: We'll now turn it over to the coaches participating in the playoff semifinal at the Cotton Bowl. Please welcome Dabo Swinney.

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, thank you. Yeah, it's an honor to be back here and represent our team and our staff. This is something that we have a great appreciation for and what it takes to get here, but congratulations to these teams and these coaches, as well. We're excited about going to the Cotton Bowl. I've never been to the Cotton Bowl, and I think it was Clemson's first bowl ever in 1939, so it's been a long time since Clemson has been there, and obviously to have the opportunity to compete against one of the most historic programs in all of college football with Notre Dame and Coach Kelly. Just look forward to a great match-up and just hopefully a great experience for our players, and appreciate all that the College Football Playoff people do in putting this on. I know there's an enormous amount of work that goes in to making this a great experience for everyone involved, so I appreciate that, as well.

GINA LEHE: Next, please welcome Brian Kelly.

BRIAN KELLY: Well, it's certainly an honor for the University of Notre Dame to be a part of this great group of coaches and certainly teams. We're the new kid on the block. This is our first time in the College Football Playoffs, but it's something that we obviously look towards each and every year. We're certainly looking forward to an incredible match-up against a team in Clemson and a coach in Dabo Swinney who's been here four years, knows what it's like, and we'll have a great challenge. But we have a great respect for all of the coaches that are here. They've done it before. We certainly look at it each and every year as a goal for our football team. It's a difficult one but one

GINA LEHE: I'm Gina Lehe with the College Football Playoff, and on behalf of everyone at the CFP, we'd like to welcome you all to tonight's news conference. We'll ask each coach to make an opening comment and then we'll turn it over for questions. Let's begin with the coaches participating in the playoff semifinal at the Orange Bowl. To my immediate left, please welcome Nick Saban. Coach, welcome.

NICK SABAN: Thank you so much. It's certainly an honor and a privilege for our team, our players, our coaches, the people involved in our organization to be involved in the College Football Playoff this year. I'd first of all like to congratulate the coaches here with me for the great team and the great year that their teams were able to have.

We certainly have a tremendous challenge in playing Coach Riley and the Oklahoma Sooners, who have a great tradition and a great program, and certainly one of the most prolific offensive teams that I've seen in recent times, and their defense has certainly made a lot of plays in critical times in the games that have helped them win some close ones.

This is a tremendous privilege. We've been here before, and this is one of the great venues in sports to be a part of, and we feel very proud to be here with some other very, very good programs that have great traditions.

GINA LEHE: Next, please welcome Lincoln Riley.

LINCOLN RILEY: Yeah, it's a great honor to be back here. I think the guys here, we all realize how hard it is just to get to this point, the College Football Playoff. It's a dream for everyone at the start of the season, but the fact is there can only be four, and it takes a lot of people, a lot of hard work. Very, very proud of our players, our staff, everybody involved with Oklahoma

that we all look forward to in getting to this. So again, a great honor, great to be with these coaches today, and looking forward to the challenge in front of us.

Q. Coach Saban, you seemingly every off-season have to replace coaches, and you've seemed to have success being able to bring in new coaches and have them fit in to what you guys try to do inside the building. Why do you think that is?

NICK SABAN: Well, we've been very fortunate to have some outstanding assistant coaches, and they've done a really good job for us, and I think because of the success that we've been able to sustain, obviously they work hard, as I worked hard when I was an assistant, so you could have the next opportunity, and we're certainly always happy for them, that they have the opportunities to go on and be head coaches.

I think that you love continuity on your staff, but I always look at this as a challenge and an opportunity to add new energy, new enthusiasm, new ideas to your staff. We don't change our program. We don't hire people to come in and be independent contractors and do what they want to do. They sort of have to buy into what we do, but the new ideas, the new energy and enthusiasm that they bring is always very helpful to improving our program.

We're happy for those that get opportunities. We're happy to give opportunities to other people who can make a positive contribution to our program.

Q. Coach Swinney, kind of along the same lines there, it's been the exact opposite for you. You've been able to keep that continuity and keep coaches in place. How has that helped you, and how is the different contrast to what Coach Saban was saying?

DABO SWINNEY: Well, same thing. We've had really good continuity over the past few years. We've had some change on our peripheral staff and support staff and some things along the way, but just two years ago, Marion Hobby went to be the co-D-coordinator I guess with the Jaguars; Dan Brooks retired, had been with me from day one, so it gave me an opportunity to hire Lemanski and Todd Bates and to promote Mickey, so those were guys that had been kind of on our staff in a support role. So it created new opportunity for them.

So you know, it's good. But we've got several guys on our staff that will have opportunities to be head coaches at some point, whenever that time comes, and you hope that you do a good job in preparing them for that opportunity if they want to do that, and you wish them well.

And then, again, as he said, it's great for them but also

an opportunity for you to bring new energy in to your building.

Q. Coach Saban, with your offensive coordinator heading to Maryland at the end of this year, how significant of a role did he play in helping develop an offensive scheme for Tua to thrive in?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think the thing that our offensive staff did, and Mike made a great contribution to that, is we always try to adapt to what our players can do, and I think that always starts with the quarterback, but we said in the beginning of the season this year that we're going to have a different kind of team on offense because we have really good skill players, we've got good runners, and we've got a couple quarterbacks who can operate the way our guys have in the system that we have.

I think all of our coaches contributed to it, but I think Mike did a really good job of organizing that, and the players responded well to it, and we made a lot of explosive plays. I'm sure Mike would tell you that we'd like to be more consistent at times, as all coaches would say, but we feel really pleased with what we were able to accomplish offensively, and Tua did a great job, as did Jalen, I think, improved dramatically this year, as well, so I think our entire staff did a really phenomenal job.

Q. This is for all four coaches. What is the X factor you've seen in your opponent?

BRIAN KELLY: Well, obviously when you talk about playing an opponent, it's the ability to close games out, the ability to know how to win, and that's Clemson. They know how to win football games. They've been winning.

I think everybody that's up here has developed and built a winning culture within their football team. You can't pin that on any one particular player. That's something that's within the fabric of the football program that's been built over time. So that would be the X factor.

DABO SWINNEY: I would say they're battle tested. They've been in some great venues this year, some unique places that they've had to go play. They've played some excellent teams, and they have -- they've had a lot of different challenges. I'm just kind of really diving in deeply into their season.

But they've handled adversity. They've played with leads. They've come from behind. They've done a little bit of everything. So I think just that overall experience that they've had this year, you can see a very confident football team. They're incredibly well-coached. They don't make a lot of mistakes, and I

think the balance that they have really presents some problems. This quarterback and the change we went through, kind of a similar thing that they did, and their quarterback has just grown and grown and grown as the season has gone.

I would just say the confidence and the fact that they're battle tested and from the experience that they've had this year gives them every reason to be confident going into this postseason.

LINCOLN RILEY: Yeah, tough to narrow it down to one when you start to study Alabama and all they do well. The thing I've seen from afar, and I don't want to act like an I'm expert on their program, I'm not in those walls day-to-day, but you see the unselfishness in that program. The most obvious notable examples is Jalen Hurts because we need more guys like him. So really impressed with how their whole program managed great players at different positions.

And then as a team the obvious thing would be to say that Alabama has certainly been more explosive offensively than they've been in a while, and they've been good offensively, no question. But this group has been different, and they're certainly fantastic defensively like they've been forever. A great challenge, but could not be more impressed with Jalen Hurts, how he handled that just from afar. Big fan of that kid and how that entire situation was managed.

NICK SABAN: Well, I think that Oklahoma is a team that certainly knows how to win. They've had some great games this year, high-scoring games where their defense has come through when they've needed to, but I do think this is one of the most dynamic teams that I've seen for a long, long time in terms of the way they play offense. I think Lincoln does a great job with their players. They've got some really explosive players. The quarterback is an explosive player. They can run the ball. They have great balance. I don't know that there's one particular thing, other than I think their players know how to win, and they've won a lot of close games, and they've come from behind in games.

This is a team that is as explosive as any that I've ever seen, and it's not -- I mean, it's designed that way. It's not like -- and I think it's very difficult to stop a team like that. And I think that Coach Riley does a great job, and their players believe in it and execute it extremely well.

Q. Coach Riley, do you mind telling me what it's been like from an experience standpoint coaching Kyler? What has it been like to have a guy like that in your program and be such a leader on your team?

LINCOLN RILEY: Yeah, it's been a joy. It's been a challenge. I think we were fortunate in the way that it

unfolded, first getting Kyler in his transfer year as he sat, got a chance just to get to know him, his makeup, start to develop the relationship that you've got to have between player and coach to be elite. And then balancing the baseball and football -- the biggest challenge was on him, of course, just to do it. It's hard enough just to -- we all know, just to play college football at this level and balance that and academics is remarkably hard by itself, and then you add in a whole 'nother sport, I don't think people realize the challenge.

Every spring practice just about this year, this guy would go through a full meeting, a full football practice, I'd get his reps done 10 minutes early so he could hustle over there and get five or six swings of BP and go play college baseball at a high level, traveling back and forth, very few days off. But the kid did it, and we learned a lot from last year.

You look at kind of his success, he didn't play much for us football wise last year. When he did, he played well, but he had just an average year two years ago baseball wise, and I really think we all learned, us, our baseball staff and Kyler, on how to manage it, what is too much, because you've got a thoroughbred like that, you've got to make sure and handle it the right way and set it up the right way.

So I think we had a much better plan this year. I think Kyler had a much better mindset coming in, and you've seen results, obviously on the baseball field and certainly what he's done for us this year has been pretty remarkable.

Q. Coach Riley, it's very rare to see a school win back-to-back Heismans. If Kyler were to achieve that this Saturday, a year after Baker did, what would that mean?

LINCOLN RILEY: Tough to describe. You know, it's such a unique moment when your guy has a chance to win that. It's been a great thing for our school. We've been very fortunate, we've had six, and to have a chance to have the seventh would be really something special.

But at the end of the day, the Heisman goes to a great player, but you've got to be on a great team. There's not many Heisman winners on average teams. So Kyler would be the first to tell you you're proud of what this team has done, proud of what Kyler has been able to do, and that creates opportunities like this. Certainly I don't want to downplay it. It's obviously a very significant award, means a lot to our program, would mean a lot to Kyler, I know, but to have a chance to have guys back to back, it's -- yeah, you'd really never dream it. But give those kids the credit. Give those players credit around him. They've done a great job for a few years and given those guys those opportunities.

Q. Nick, I know Sunday on the teleconference you said it would be a couple weeks for Tua. Has that timeline changed, and how is he feeling?

NICK SABAN: I think Tua is right on schedule. The procedure they did usually takes two weeks for a guy to be able to have any explosive movement, and then they go from there. So we'll see how he progresses from there. But we're pleased with the progress that he's made to this point.

Q. Dabo has said that there's Alabama and then the rest of y'all, and he's just glad to be on the rest of y'all. They've been here four years in a row now. Just your thoughts on the program and what he's done at Clemson?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think Clemson has got an outstanding program, an outstanding team. I think Dabo does a really, really good job on a consistent basis. They have good players, but their players really play well. They're well-coached. They don't make a lot of mistakes. They execute well. It's a difficult preparation when you have to play against them. And I think they've been one of the most consistent, dominant teams throughout this entire season.

You know, I always say there's a lot of books written about how to be successful. There's not many written on how to stay successful. I have a tremendous amount of respect for the fact that they've been able to do it on a consistent basis and be here over and over and over and over and play at that high level all the time and not have any complacency in the program, and their players are continuing to try to play to a high level and be the best players that they can be, and I think that's a tribute to his coaches and their staff and himself.

Q. Coach Saban, you guys have two members on the Outland watch list this year, two finalists. Can you talk about how Quinnen has kind of developed this year into his role as a bench player last year to being one of the most prolific defensive lineman, and a little bit about Jonah, how he's been a leader since day one?

NICK SABAN: I think both those guys are hard workers, great competitors. They really want to be the best that they can be. I don't think they're motivated by just winning or losing. I think they really legitimately are perfectionists in terms of how they go about their work every day and how they want to improve. I think Q probably has made as much progress as any player in our program because of his work ethic and the things that he's done to try to improve himself. He was an undersized guy that worked hard to get bigger and stronger. Always was a good athlete and had good quickness. Jonah has started every game I think since

he's been there with us, and he's a bright guy and really pays attention to detail, and it shows in his play because he's a very, very consistent performer.

I don't ever remember having two guys up for the same award. You hate to see your players compete for something, but I think both guys would tell you that if they are fortunate enough to have the success, it would be because they play on a good team and their teammates have supported them and helped them to grow and develop to be where they are, and it would be probably kind of a team award for either one of them if they had success winning.

Q. Obviously the new redshirt rule has been a bit of a game changer this year. I'd just like to know how that has affected each one of your teams and if there's a player or two that you could name that you're redshirting that you think might be able to help you in the playoff.

NICK SABAN: Well, it didn't really change much for us. We always tried to -- we never predetermined redshirting anyone. We want to give everybody an opportunity in our program, and I think after fall camp we used to always have to say, well, we're going to go ahead and play this guy, we may play this guy if we need to play him because he may not play enough to enhance his development, and then there's a group of guys here that probably need to get redshirted.

The fact that you can play guys in four games, I think you still have the same categories, but you have a lot more flexibility in when you have to make those decisions. Other than that, I haven't seen a lot of change. You know, I hope this doesn't become something that players try to utilize to manipulate their career and that they always put the team first in terms of their development and what happens with their future.

LINCOLN RILEY: I would agree. It really didn't change much of our approach. It does change the timeline. There were some benefits. There were certainly some guys throughout the year that we were able to play, in times when maybe we were lucky enough to get ahead in the game and you get some valuable game experience that you maybe wouldn't have been able to get otherwise, so I think it will pay dividends for those guys as they move forward in their careers. I have some of the same concerns as Coach Saban on the approach of players with it, and that four-game benchmark gets to be something that these players are really, really thinking about.

And on one hand, you don't blame them. It is their careers. But at the same time, this is a team game. So I was proud of the way our players approached it.

We had a few guys throughout the year that were on the bubble of do they do it or not, and it was a legitimate question, and I thought one of the reasons this team is in the position it is is because those guys chose what's best for the team, and they put their personal feelings aside.

So appreciative of how our guys handled it and great example for our future players as our program goes on.

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, same with us. We did not change our approach. We've always said the same thing. We're going to play this guy, this guy is on the bubble, this guy is definitely going to redshirt, you know, as we get toward the end of camp, because we want to give everybody the same opportunity. Same thing, I don't ever go in with any preconceived notions. But it was great. I loved it in that we were able to -- we played every freshman, was able to get some type of experience. And then even a guy like Jamie Skalski, who broke a toe, so he's a veteran player, played as a true freshman, played as a true sophomore, really good player, a potential starter for us, but broke a toe and was going to miss some time. So we saw it as an opportunity to maybe get a year back, and it was something he really wanted to do, as well.

So we've kind of -- now he played in -- he's played in two games, and he's green-lighted now for two more games. And so it's kind of a big shot in the arm to be able to get a guy like that available here in the postseason because of this rule change.

And then a guy like Justin Mascoll, who's a young defensive end that we've held all year. He's played in one game. So he's a guy also that I think could maybe help us here in the postseason.

But it's been good. I mean, there has been some unintended consequences that I don't know that many of us thought about, but I think overall it's a good change.

BRIAN KELLY: Yeah, I would agree with everybody in terms of we make most of those decisions early in the year and then kind of progress relative to who's going to be redshirting, who's not. But there are some positives. We lost a good player in the first game of the year. We'll be able to get him back for this game, and then he'll have only two games and the potential to gain a year back because he wasn't redshirted.

We played a freshman quarterback that probably we would not have played in mop-up duty, so you get a chance to get him out and get a little experience in those situations. But I think by and large, I think it's -- it really hasn't changed the landscape. It gives you maybe a little inventory on special teams here and

there, but I think by and large, it's been a good rule.

Q. Coach Saban, Saturday after the SEC Championship game, you said Georgia was one of the top four teams in the country and then your coaches' poll you voted them fifth. Just curious what went into that change in mind.

NICK SABAN: Well, I do think they're one of the top four teams in the country but I didn't think they were going to get in the playoff with two losses. So I voted the teams that I thought had the best chance to get in, but I do think after playing Georgia they were one of the best four teams in the country.

What this basically indicates is the SEC Championship game was a playoff game. You know, the 1 and 4 team in the country played, and it was a heck of a game, and they played a great game, and they have a great team, and I think they're one of the best four teams in the country, and that's no disrespect to any of the people that are here, but I didn't think they had a chance to get in with two losses.

Q. You're saying that these playoff games aren't necessarily the four best teams?

NICK SABAN: I'm not saying that. I'm just saying -- I'm saying what I said, and I'm not changing what I said. When we played Georgia I thought they were one of the best four teams in the country. That doesn't mean that they're any better than the teams that are here, and I voted for the four teams that are here. Is that correct? Okay.

Q. Lincoln, if Ryan Day was going to look around for somebody who's been through what he's about to go through, he'd look at you replacing a legendary coach, being promoted to do so. What's the best advice having gone through that first year you could give him?

LINCOLN RILEY: Well, I think it's a challenge. I think more than anything, you've got to believe in yourself. You've got to be yourself. That was the best advice that I got from Coach Stoops when this happened. I'm lucky he was always -- has been and still is there when anything comes up that I need to pick his brain about. That happens often, and I'm very, very appreciative of that. I know in a lot of situations it doesn't work that smoothly.

So you're going to have a lot of great people around you, a lot of great opinions, but at the end of the day, they hired you because they believe in you, and so you need to be yourself. You can't try to be the guy that was there before you or what everybody thinks you're supposed to be. You've got to do it the way that you believe is right, trust your instincts, and I think he'll do a phenomenal job. He's done it there. He's set up there

at a tremendous program. There are certainly challenges, expectations, all that that comes with it, but that's why you want to coach at places like this, because you have challenges but you also have great opportunities, and I'm sure he'll do a fantastic job.