

Alabama HC Nick Saban Previews CFP National Championship Showdown With Ohio State



Following its 49-28 victory over Clemson in the College Football Playoff semifinals, Ohio State is amid preparation for a national championship showdown with Alabama, who defeated Notre Dame 31-14 in its semifinal game.

Crimson Tide head coach Nick Saban took the podium first for a video conference via Zoom with members of the media Jan. 4, previewing the highly anticipated title game. What follows is a rundown of what Saban said Jan. 4:

Opening Statement:

First of all, I'd like to thank the College Football Playoff and all the people who have worked hard to give our team, our players, as well as Ohio State's players, who had a great year, the opportunity to play in the College Football Playoff National Championship game.

I know this has been a little bit of a trying year for a lot of folks, but you all have done a great job to give the players an opportunity to compete in a game like this, something that will be a keepsake for them for the rest of their lives.

We're excited about having the opportunity to play against a great Ohio State team. These guys are really well-coached. Ryan Day has done a great job there. They're one of the best defensive teams in the country in terms of points allowed. Tough to run against, really explosive on offense, really good skill players outside. They do a great job of running the ball and control the line of scrimmage on both sides of the ball.

Very challenging game for us all the way around, but these are the kind of games if you're a competitor you really look forward to playing in, and this is a great opportunity for our players to compete against a great team.

I know winning is always the objective, but is there any more satisfaction or less satisfaction from winning a defensive battle versus a shootout? Is one style of play any more satisfying

than the other?

I don't think so. I think you have to do what you have to do to execute, play well in the game, give yourself an opportunity to win.

Every game can have an ebb and flow that may end up being a little bit different, and you've just got to end up playing the next play and hope that you can do the things to finish the game so you give yourself an opportunity to be successful and have a chance to win.

Curious if you could expound more on your thoughts on Ohio State's defense, maybe especially what you saw them do against Clemson in the Sugar Bowl that impressed you.

Well, they were very impressive on the line of scrimmage. Clemson had a tough time running the ball. They've got a great back and a lot of quarterback runs that they did a really great job against.

They were physical up front. They did a good job of pressing the pocket. I think they played outstanding. Their secondary played well enough, made the plays they needed to make in the game.

They've got a lot of good athletes on defense. They're physical, they're athletic, they can run, they play well together. This is just a very talented group.

Similar question, but on Ohio State's offense, Trey Sermon is a guy who's emerged recently after transferring from Oklahoma. What have you seen from him, and how much do you look at the last two games compared to the rest of his career?

Well, he's playing outstanding football right now. There's no doubt about that. He had a fantastic game against Clemson. I think they have two really good running backs. Both are very capable.

Their offensive line does a really good job of blocking your looks up front, getting a hat on a hat, and the runners are very talented.

So the combination of the explosive ability that they have in the passing game, the good receivers that they have outside, the speed that they have, the way they can stretch the field with the playmakers they have, quarterback that can run or pass and can make all the throws, it's just a good all-around team and they have great balance, and I think that's what makes them very difficult to defend.

You've been asked a lot about your receivers, and Devonta is having an amazing year. Aside from just your throwing the ball more, and teams in college football are throwing the ball more, the emphasis on that position seems to have grown in recent years. Why?

Well, you know, I think that any time guys can — you have guys playing any skill position and they have ability to make explosive plays, I think sort of the advent of the spread offense, more spread formations, four-open kind of formations spreads the field, which gives players on the perimeter a much better chance to make plays.

You have to tackle well in space. You've got to get these guys on the ground, even if they catch short passes and turn them into long runs.

And their ability to throw the ball down the field — and I think the passing game in college football is probably what has sort of evolved in a very positive way for most people. RPOs probably contribute to

that to some degree, but really good play action passes that go along with the running game that most teams have. Like Ohio State has great play action pass game which they had a lot of explosive plays on.

I think having those kind of skills guys that can score points are something you certainly want to try and feature, and I see more and more teams trying to do that.

You've had such great success with juniors, advising them whether to stay or go. I wonder what that conversation was like with standout tailback Najee Harris, and obviously it's paid off this year with the kind of season he's had.

Well, I think what we try to do is be realistic with the players in terms of helping them make a good business decision for them and their family. It's ultimately their decision, and I think that we try to make them aware of how the money sort of goes down in the draft, and do you have a chance to improve your value if you stay and play college football.

There's no developmental league in football. Different than baseball, has minor leagues, hockey has a minor league, NBA has a G-League or whatever it is. So the one place that you can continue to develop and create value for yourself is to stay in school.

If your draft grade is not what you think it could be, then you have a chance to enhance your value, and when you enhance your value and the guaranteed money that you get, it also creates security for you and is really the best way to help your family.

Obviously your offense is elite, and I know your defense has had a couple games when it gave up a lot of points. How do you view the way your defense has played, and as a defensive coach in an era of exploding offenses, how do you kind of assess — how does that make you assess or reassess how well a defense is playing?

Well, I think that consistency in performance is really, at the end of the day, what determines how well you're playing, and we have played well in some games this year. Other games not as good as we'd like. And as coaches we need to do a better job of putting our players in a better position so they have a chance to be successful.

We've played some — I think we've played four top 10 teams this year and some very explosive offensive teams and been very challenged with four out of five new starters in the secondary, and those guys have improved dramatically, and I think we need to continue as a team on defense to focus on things that we can improve on so that we can play with a little more consistency game in and game out.

Is there anything about Steve Sarkisian that separates him from other offensive coordinators that you've had, and since you'll be playing him in a couple years at Texas, why can't any of your former assistants beat you in a game?

Well, I think that's probably only a matter of time. We've had a lot of great coaches here and they've done a great job for us, and we're always happy to see them get opportunities. That's what I think they work hard for, whether you're an assistant, whether you're an assistant to become a coordinator or a coordinator to become a head coach.

Sark has done a marvelous job here. He's very well organized. He works very well with all the people in the organization, players and coaches alike. He's a good play caller on game day. He does a really good

job of preparing the players game plan wise for each and every game, and he's just done a great job.

He's been a real asset to our organization, and I think he'll be very successful as a head coach. And he's taken over a good program, so it's going to be challenging for anybody that plays them in the future, I think.

I just want to ask you about the Heisman Trophy ceremony tomorrow. You've obviously attended several of these in person, but this one is virtual. What are your plans to watch it, and how happy are you for guys like Mac Jones and DeVonta Smith to be named finalists?

Well, I'm really happy for all players that have a chance to be recognized. It's always great, and you always love it when your players get recognition. But there's a lot of players on our team that have done a great job all year that are not going to receive recognition, and I think that's a lesson in life, because sometimes you do great things in life and you don't get recognized for it, but you have to kind of satisfy yourself in knowing that you did your best to be the best you could be.

I certainly feel like the guys that are up for awards and have an opportunity hopefully to win some of these awards have done just that, and hopefully they'll get rewarded for it. Internally we kind of keep our plans to ourselves in terms of what we're going to do, and I'm going to talk to the players about it today.

What did you guys learn from that 2018 title game with the coaching distractions surrounding departures, and how do you think that will help this week with Steve Sarkisian?

Well, I think we've had several of these situations where we've had guys playing in the National Championship game and guys are getting head coaching jobs someplace else. I think it's up to each individual.

I went through it when I became the head coach at Michigan State, and I was the defensive coordinator of the Cleveland Browns with Bill Belichick and we had like five or six games left to play in the season and had a chance to get in the playoffs, which we did, and went two deep in the playoffs, won the first game, lost the second.

But I think you just have to separate yourself and focus on — look, if it wasn't for the players, if it wasn't for the players at the Cleveland Browns being the best defense, I probably would have never got the Michigan State job. So you kind of owe it to the players to give your best, to do your best to help them get prepared for the game so they can play well in the game. That's how I always felt. I think that's how Sark feels.

Most of the guys in the past have been able to do that and been effective, and it's not been a distraction for us. We're going to try to help manage it every way that we can so that it's not a distraction for us this year.

I wanted to ask you about Ryan Day. How well do you know him, and kind of what do you see in him as an offensive play caller?

Well, I don't know Ryan well. I've met him before. I think he's an outstanding coach. I think they do a fantastic job with their team, the way their team competes, the way their team plays, the discipline, the togetherness that they have, the way they execute.

And offensively he does a good job of trying to manage and control the tempo of the game on offense. And they do a really good job of executing, which is all about coaching your players to know what to do, how to do it, and why it's important to do it that way, and they do it extremely well.

They present lots of problems with the system and the scheme that they run, but they do a good job of executing it, which is really probably the most important thing you like to see as a coach. And Ryan has certainly done that there at Ohio State, really with his entire team, but I know he's probably a little bit more involved with the offense, and they do an outstanding job.

I wanted to ask a little bit about one of the things you mentioned earlier with kind of this passing revolution that's happened in college football, and it seems like a lot of that began, at least for your program, the last time you played Ohio State in the championship game in 2014. I'm curious how much do you think that game was maybe a watershed in how Alabama approached offensive play calling and structure, and also maybe as Alabama goes, so does college football?

Well, that was a great game. I think the score was like 42-35. They had a great team. We had a very good team. As it turned out, they won pretty handily in the National Championship game, which indicates what a great team they had.

So I don't know that any of our players on our team were around back then, so I don't know how that affects this game. I think this game is all about how do you prepare for this game, what do you do today and every day leading up to this game to prepare yourself to play the best that you're going to play, assuming that the guy you're going to play against may be the best guy you've played against all year.

I think that's got to be more the focus, and I don't know that the history of that game has a whole lot of impact on how we think or what we do or how our players think in terms of what they need to do.

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