

College Football Playoff

Media Conference

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Nick Saban

Tua Tagovailoa

Xavier McKinney

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GINA LEHE: On behalf of the College Football Playoff, we'd like to congratulate Alabama and look forward to welcoming them to the Bay Area. We'd like to welcome head coach Nick Saban. If you would, please make a brief opening statement.

NICK SABAN: Well, you know, it's a real opportunity for our players to be able to play in the championship game again against an outstanding Clemson team. Coach Swinney and his team have had an outstanding year, and being 14-0 and ACC champs, they've got a really nice group of players on both sides of the ball. They're a complete team in terms of their offense being very productive, averaging 44 points a game and 530 yards. The freshman quarterback, Trevor Lawrence, has done a fantastic job for them all year long. They've got great balance on offense in terms of their ability to run and throw and a talented group of receivers. Their defense is one of the best defensive teams in the country in lots of different categories, and they've got a really good front seven, and they're very well-coached. This is certainly a complete team.

But again, our team is very excited about having the opportunity to be in the college football championship game again. This is several years in a row we've had to play, or got the opportunity to play Clemson, which is one of the great programs in the country right now. We're certainly looking forward to the challenge.

Q. Obviously you were talking about what a great job Dabo has done at Clemson. He tells the story about when Tommy Bowden was fired and he was coming into coach, he kind of regretted that he hadn't taken the job with you that you had offered him. Then he talks about after his second year where he thought he was going to be fired but then he wasn't and said it was going to be the best decade in Clemson football. Can you tell me what you saw in him as a young coach, obviously, other than being an Alabama alumnus, and just the job that he has done and coming through with their



problems and having the best decade in Clemson football?

NICK SABAN: Right. Well, I think everybody here at Alabama, because Dabo was a player here and a coach here, has a tremendous amount of respect for him. He's really a personal friend that I personally have a tremendous amount of respect for, as a coach, as well. They've done just as good a job as anybody in the country when it comes to what they've been able to accomplish over the last decade in terms of consistency and performance each and every year. They do a great job in recruiting. They do a great job of developing players. It's just a really, really good program.

We have a lot of respect for him, and that's why we tried to hire him years ago, but things worked out extremely well for him, and we're happy for him and his family.

Q. I'm wondering if you can think back to your preparation for the 2015 game, and if you had taken much notice at that time of Hunter Renfrow, and having now played him about to be for the fourth time, how your opinion of him or take on him or preparation for him might have evolved since then.

NICK SABAN: Well, he's an outstanding player, no doubt, and he's got great quickness. They do a really good job of using his skill set effectively for what he can do. He's difficult to cover because of his quickness. He's a very crafty, smart player, got great hands, and I can't remember back to 2015. But we thought he was a good player then, and we think he's an even better player now.

Q. Do you find it interesting at all, or is it more commonplace maybe than people give it credit for, that there are guys with that kind of talent that still managed to kind of fall through the cracks in recruiting?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think that probably even more so now than ever before because of early signing date and what some of this does is for a player who maybe is undersized or develops a little later or has a great senior year, maybe a lot of programs have already signed a lot of guys, and they're not really going back looking for players like this because they've already made all their decisions in recruiting.

I think it's a little bit of a disadvantage for late-developing players, not that I know enough about Hunter Renfrow to say he was late developing. I know he was a smaller guy that really worked hard to get to where he is right now, and it's certainly paid off for him.

Q. I was just curious, you've talked about how you tend to focus on looking ahead, not behind you, but in preseason when Alabama and Clemson were rated No. 1 and No. 2, how much even in the back of your mind you were anticipating this match-up coming this point of the season?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think as the season evolved, just knowing how well Clemson played all year long and how they were pretty dominant in their league, it was no surprise to me that they would end up where they are right now. You're always looking at the next game and not looking too far ahead and all that, but it's no surprise to me that they're in the championship game, as well.

Q. How much have some of these match-ups in the past, the past three years really, do you feel like have come down to kind of a single -- I wouldn't call it like a trick play, but pulling something out of your sleeve like the inside kick, things like that, to make a difference in a game like this?

NICK SABAN: Well, I think when you're playing against a very good team and you anticipate that it's going to be a really tight game that you're always looking for somewhere or someplace in the game where you can create an advantage for yourself and try to put your players in the best position to have a chance to be successful. You know, I think we do that for every game, but I think when you play in games like this, sometimes those plays can have a huge impact because it's probably going to be a pretty close game.

Q. I just wanted to see, what do you remember from the recruiting process with Justin Ross, and what have you seen on film from him this year at Clemson?

NICK SABAN: Well, he's played outstanding for them. I mean, he's made a lot of big plays. He's a great vertical threat. He's a big target. He's very crafty for a guy that is just a freshman. We thought he was one of the best players in Alabama a year ago, and certainly recruited him with as much enthusiasm as possible. We just came up short. It's no surprise to me that he's having an outstanding year, and we'd love to have him here, but we've got to try to prepare to play against him.

Q. Didn't it come down to very late in the process that you guys felt like you were still in the mix with him, even the final 24 hours where it was still up in the air as to where he could go?

NICK SABAN: You know, I don't really know. That would probably be a better question to ask him. We thought we were in the mix, but sometimes you think that, and sometimes a guy has already decided what he wants to do. We knew that the competition was always going to be really keen versus Clemson, and it's unfortunate for us that it didn't work out our way.

Q. Going even back to the recruiting process, do you remember the first time that you saw Trevor Lawrence play?

NICK SABAN: Ooh, I think it was when he was maybe a sophomore. Even then, there was no question about the fact that he was going to be one of the best players in the country at his position. He certainly is that. Had a great high school career, and again, we tried to recruit him here, as well, and things have worked out well for him in terms of the position that he's in and the job that he's done for them. We know he's a fine young man and really a great competitor. He's certainly proven that over the course of this season.

Q. I'm not sure how much time you've had to watch on film, I know you guys have been traveling, but what specifically kind of stands out with his game based on just what you've seen from him on the field during his freshman season?

NICK SABAN: Well, he certainly doesn't look like a freshman, that's for sure. I mean, he's got a lot of poise and does a really good job of executing their offense. He's very instinctive in terms of making the reads that he needs to make and doesn't make a lot of mistakes in terms of where he wants to throw the ball, and he's got a great arm and he's very accurate. He's got some really good skill players, and they've made a lot of explosive plays because of it. But he's also done a good job of taking what the defense gives in terms of making a read sometimes. They have great balance, so their ability to run and throw I think is what makes them effective, and he certainly does a great job of executing it for them.

Q. You've faced Dexter Lawrence the last couple of years; how much of a loss do you think that will be for Clemson facing them this time around if he should not be eligible for this game?

NICK SABAN: Well, obviously we have a tremendous amount of respect for Dexter Lawrence. He's probably one of the best linemen in college football, no doubt, in terms of his production and his performance. He's played really well against us in the past. They've got a great front seven. I know they've got a lot of other really good players, and they all complement each other. They didn't seem to have a lot of issues last week in the game, still sort of playing to the standard that they've been able to play to all year long on defense. But we think he's a real special player, really

special person, from having recruited him, and he's got a great family, and I'm sure he's got a very bright future ahead of him.

Q. There's already been some questions about some players you missed out on recruiting, but the decision three years ago to take Josh Jacobs, I was hoping you would comment on his development and overall his development throughout this season.

NICK SABAN: Well, Josh has been a really good player for us, very consistent player in all phases of the game in whatever he's been asked to do. He's one of our best special teams players, and he's really played well for us all year long, especially in these last few games. He's had some outstanding performances. We've always been really pleased with Josh and what he's been able to contribute and his contribution has certainly helped us be successful offensively. I think our offensive staff here has done a really good job of utilizing his talents, and his production has reflected that.

Q. If Christian Miller can't go, could we possibly see LaBryan Ray have a bigger role in this game?

NICK SABAN: Well, they don't really play the same position, so LaBryan has done a nice job for us, and we want to continue to be able to play him in the role that he's played in. But they don't play the same position, so I don't think that'll be a factor.

Q. There's this sort of conventional wisdom that the defensive line is probably the toughest position to recruit to, that it's just harder to find these great players. Clemson and Alabama obviously have done a very good job of that. What is your opinion on that particular aspect of recruiting, finding defensive linemen?

NICK SABAN: Well, I do think that most people would agree, whether it's the NFL Draft or trying to find guys and recruit guys when they're in high school that have the size and athleticism to be effective in terms of their power, ability to strike, as well as athletic enough to pass rush. I think it's even more difficult now with sort of the spread because there's more loose plays, plays in space, where it requires guys to be able to run and play in space.

I would agree with you that these guys are hard to find, and I would agree with you that Clemson has a really good crop of guys that have played well for them, but that's been the case every year that we've played them.

Q. I'm curious, you're sitting here with six titles, potential opportunity here for a seventh, which is just tremendous. I wonder when you first started out as a head coach and you kind of looked down

the line about what you had hoped to achieve, your most fantastic dream or thought or definition of success, how would you have defined success this deep into your career?

NICK SABAN: Well, you know, I think that my goal is always -- I define success by are you getting your team or that particular team that you're coaching right now to play to their full potential or their capabilities or the standard that they need to play to to be the best version of themselves. That's individually and collectively on all sides of the ball, and that's how I've always looked at it, and that's how I continue to look at it. Hopefully if you've got good enough players and you can do that, they're going to have the best chance to be successful.

I think as a coach, that's always what you want to try to achieve with your players, and I'm not sure that I've always been able to do that. Some years better than others, some teams better than others, and certainly that's a challenge that keeps us going in terms of what we're trying to do looking ahead to the next game, to the next opponent, to the next thing we have to do to try to help our players play better.

GINA LEHE: We'd like to welcome Tua Tagovailoa and Xavier McKinney. We'll open it up for questions.

Q. I was wondering if you had had any interactions with Trevor Lawrence, if you knew him personally at all, or what you think about the way that -- since you obviously had to go through a situation last year and into this year of QB controversy and who's going to start and all of that stuff, I was wondering how you thought it was handled at Clemson by Trevor Lawrence and some of the challenges that go along with that.

TUA TAGOVAILOA: Yeah, well, I haven't really gotten the opportunity to speak with him or get to know him on a personal level, but I think he's done a tremendous job with handling the quarterback situation they've had, you know, early in the season.

I think he's done a tremendous job throughout the season keeping composure throughout the season, and going out there and helping his team become successful. You know, at the age that he is, coming in as a freshman, to be able to handle everything he is the way he is, I think he's doing a tremendous job, and he's got really good guys surrounding him, as well, on that offense, and I just think overall he's done a tremendous job throughout this point in the season.

Q. Do you find or did you find over the course of your career that being able to kind of play on a big stage as you have at a young point in your career, is that a skill you had to develop, or is it just sort of

the natural part of your personality, to be calm, cool and collected during those situations?

TUA TAGOVAILOA: I think it's something you kind of develop, but then again, I think it also comes down to coaching. When you go out there, you've got to feel comfortable first, and when you're comfortable, then you're able to play fast. I definitely think that comes from practice, you know, the amount of reps that you take over practice and just the coaching that you get, because once you start to feel comfortable, then I mean, the sky's the limit.

I think for Trevor, he can attest to the same thing.

Q. Obviously you went into last year's game with a different role, but from an experience standpoint what's the biggest difference for you in terms of being back on this stage at the College Football Playoff?

TUA TAGOVAILOA: I mean, this is just another great opportunity for not only me but for me and my teammates. This is something that we've wanted since the ending of last year's game, you know, so we're just one step closer to achieving what we want to as a team. Just got to go in with the mindset that this is a big game, but you've got to go in being confident, I mean, and just go out there knowing it's football.

Q. What would you attribute to -- obviously against Oklahoma, 28-0 start in the first quarter or got off to a 28-0 lead going into the second quarter, sorry, but it was kind of the fast start you guys usually get off to. Why weren't there those nerves, those jitters that go with those big games, that happen in big games sometimes?

TUA TAGOVAILOA: Well, I think we had a lot of off time, and being that we're practicing against our own guys for a good amount of time, it's like you just get antsy. Throughout practices, our practices have been pretty hard, you know, going against one another. I think we all just wanted to go out there and just play. That's a testament to the guys that I'm surrounded with, the O-line, the skills. The defense gave us the ball back early in the game, as well, and we didn't execute as well as we wanted to, although the score showed a little different with it being 28-0.

I think there still could have been opportunities for us to have done a lot better, but I think overall, our guys have done better with just, I guess, finishing, starting fast and finishing strong.

Q. Xavier, a lot was made going into the season about the secondary's lack of experience and the kind of quality players you were replacing, and then you had some injuries along the way, too, so how much has this group kind of grown with each

game and each week?

XAVIER MCKINNEY: Well, first of all, I appreciate the question. I feel like this group has definitely done a great job this year. I know we had a lot of questions coming into the year about, I guess, how good we would be and how well we would play and who we lost and who we didn't have, but we felt like we had the guys to get the job done from the start. So I feel like we've worked hard all year, tried to prove everybody wrong that kind of doubted us, that still doubt us. But we just keep going, and we're going to keep working hard and keep improving from here. Our goal is to try to be the best secondary in the country, and I feel like we've done a great job in doing that and getting that done, and we've still got a lot of work to do, of course, but of course we're going to keep working and try to get that accomplished.

Q. And for Tua, Josh Jacobs is one of the few guys, key players on the team that wasn't like a really highly rated recruit. Can you see his work ethic, his drive? How much do you see that drive to be good in kind of every aspect of his position?

TUA TAGOVAILOA: Well, you know, when you look at a player like Josh Jacobs, you just see someone who's very small, but I'm grateful that Josh has got his opportunity. You know, I think he's a person who comes in day in and day out, working really hard, and he does everything the right way. I mean, it's nothing that surprises me, nothing that surprises my teammates, but Josh could be the first to tell you that his success could never have been done without the people that surround him. I think he's done a tremendous job for us up to this point, and I think he will continue to keep doing that.

Q. Xavier, where do you feel like you've improved the most through 14 games, and where do you feel like you need to get better?

XAVIER MCKINNEY: Well, I feel like there's a lot of things that of course I still need to do to get better. I try to work on that every practice, every game. But a couple things that I feel like I have gotten a lot better with is just my open-field tackling, my man-to-man coverages, but of course there's still a lot of things like just blitzing the quarterback, getting pressure, working on my pass rush moves as far as either going off the edge or going up through the gaps or wherever I have to blitz, just getting better with my disguises. But like I said, there's still a lot of things that I need to improve on, and I'm never really satisfied with how I play and kind of what I do in the games and do in practices. I try to make sure to keep that an emphasis and just keep pressure on myself as far as me getting better because I know good is not good enough, and I just keep working every day and every practice and every game.

Q. Tua, same question for you. Where do you feel like you've improved the most through these 14 games, and where can you get better?

TUA TAGOVAILLOA: Well, I'd say for me, I think the biggest thing with improvement has been, I guess, being a leader on the offense, and I guess my decision making. I feel the second half of the season, I kind of fell off from the things that have helped me become successful throughout the first six games, seven games in the season. But I definitely think decision making, and I think improvement. There's always room for improvement, you know, and I'm going to continue to improve on my decision making, continue to improve to be a leader for the offense and for the team, but you know, it makes everything a lot easier when you have coaches like the coaches that we have and players that want to be great. So yeah.

Q. Tua, the plays when you and Jalen are on the field together at the same time, how fun are those for you, and working those into the game, do you enjoy kind of getting that opportunity to have both of y'all on the field at the same time?

TUA TAGOVAILLOA: Oh, I enjoy it. It's really fun. I think it's fun for the fans, as well, you know, no one knows who's going to get the ball, and I mean, if I get the ball, I mean, it would be unique because I don't run as much, and when Jalen gets the ball, he can run and he can throw it, as well. I mean, it helps us out as a team. I mean, it's just a unique way of being able to use both of us.

Q. Xavier, when they unleash some of those plays at practice, Jalen was saying the other day there's a lot more they haven't used. What's it like trying to defend them, whether Tua is out wide at receiver or whatever the package looks like?

XAVIER McKINNEY: Well, we don't -- the ones and the ones, we don't really get to see that package very much.

Q. Then from the sidelines, what's it like seeing that when they've used it this year?

XAVIER McKINNEY: Oh, it definitely -- I kind of get excited because I know something good is about to happen. Just to have both of these two guys out there on the field at the same time, that's pretty amazing, and it's a lot of -- between the both of them, there's a lot of different things that they can do in that one play or whatever play they're running. So just to see that lets me know that we're going to have some type of big play or something good is going to happen.

Q. Tua, I'm sure you're getting tired of answering this, but how is your ankle doing, and do you expect a similar sort of training treatment routine this week as you did going into last week's game?

TUA TAGOVAILLOA: Yeah, you know, after the game, it was definitely sore. I couldn't tell if it was any better or if it was the same. But I guess I can say it's better. I have treatment going on right now, as we speak, and I think we're still going to stick with that 24-hour treatment protocol. Up until the game, I think I'm still going to be getting treatment, and I'm still going to be going through rehab and therapy, as well. But I definitely think it's improving, you know.

Q. Tua, going back to last year where Jake Fromm gets to play in a National Championship game as a true freshman, you get to play in that game and now with Trevor Lawrence, what does it say about that position that you're seeing all of you guys get to shine on this big stage? What's the contributing factor because it's not just working hard, because guys have been working hard for the last 20 years, but why do you think that's been able to happen so much recently?

TUA TAGOVAILLOA: I won't be able to speak for Jake or Trevor, but I think for me, I think that's the determining factor is how you start. You know, I definitely don't think it starts from high school or your early years in college. I think it starts earlier than that, and I think it -- it goes from home I would say. Your parents are your first teachers, and I think your work ethic comes from the teachings of your parents. I think they're a testament of that. Their hard work with their families and what they've put in throughout the years up to this point is just paying off, so they're reaping what they've been sowing all these years. It's not just something that popped up for them or they're kind of new to. I'd say this is just something that they've been growing and growing with, and it's something that you grow into.