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ALABAMA

Defensive Coordinator Kirby Smart and DL Damion Square

JOHN HUMENIK: With us today is Defensive Coordinator Kirby Smart and Defensive Lineman Damion Square. Questions, please.

Q. Coach, the normal trend is to have the offensive coordinator in the booth and the defensive coordinator on the sideline. Why is that so? And what are the advantages and disadvantages of being on the sideline as a defensive coordinator?

KIRBY SMART: Well, that's kind of the trend. I think each head coach wants their coordinators to kind of look their players in the eye during the game and get a feel for the tempo of the game. You spend all days with those guys, you practice with those guys, they hear your voice, so it kind of makes it convenient if there's adjustments during the game, you've got those guys down there and the coordinators are able to look their players in the eye. It's very important to me to be able to see those guys during the game, and I think it goes twofold back and forth.

Disadvantage of being down is maybe seeing everything. There's times when you're watching the video and the camera shot is from upstairs. You rely on information from other coaches. You don't get to see it like you do in the film room. You can't see as well from a level playing field as you can from up top.

Q. Damion, the Notre Dame offensive coordinator said watching cut-ups of the defense from Alabama play snaps that are 3rd and 7 or more is depressing to him. What do you think, what about Alabama's defense do you think will lead him to think that or say that?

DAMION SQUARE: I don't know. We've played a few games where we had a whole bunch of snaps we played in the game. We're a well-conditioned team, prepared to fly out of formation as we have to play, whatever is required for us about that game.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I think any offensive coordinator you ask in the country if they had to play 3rd and 7 or more, they're not going to be real fired up about it because it's the law of averages, you're not going to get as many from 3rd and 7 or more. If we can get them in long yardage situations, it's an advantage. Their goal is to not be in 3rd and 7 or more.

So we try to mix it up, pressure and covering in 3rd and 7-plus, but teams have had success against us in 3rd and long, and it'll be a challenge for us because the quarterback is such a good athlete.

Q. For two championships now being with Nick, what have you learned from him? And how much of it is your call as far as the play calling and the design of the defense?

KIRBY SMART: Well, I'll tell you this: I have become who I've become as a coach from working for Coach Saban. He does an outstanding job of managing our organization. There is nobody I could put him up against anybody in the country. His ability to facilitate, that's great. He helps game planning on defense, he's a great mind in the room.

Obviously the play calling comes to me, and I call all the defenses. I have ever since I've been the coordinator, and that's just the way it is in our system. He's able to give input during the game, as well as the other coaches. Jeremy Pruitt, who is leaving us, has done a great job helping me with information. But at the end of the day, somebody has got to be the guy to make the call, and that's usually my responsibility.

Q. I hope you can indulge me here for a minute, Notre Dame uses three backs, so when I say "Theo Riddick" to you as a runner, what jumps into your mind first?

KIRBY SMART: One-step quickness, explosiveness, great receiver.

Q. Cierre Wood?

KIRBY SMART: Speed.

Q. Robert Atkinson III.

KIRBY SMART: Speed. Them two dudes are fast. They are really fast. We recruited Atkinson, so we knew that, and the other guy is just as fast. Riddick is probably quicker than the other two. Great one-step quickness, the ability to make you miss, good stiff arm. Didn't think a former receiver would run with that much power, but he does run with power. They're really good backs.

Q. When you game plan and it's not one guy, does that affect you at all?

KIRBY SMART: Well, you try to find tendencies, but as we do with anybody we play -- LSU last year, they had four back. So you try to say, what do they run with guy, run this guy? When you bring Notre Dame down, they run a lot of the same plays with the same backs, so there's not a true tendency per se unless you get to bead on one during the game. Some guys are better outside runners than inside runners. They run all the same plays with each one of them. So they don't give you a tendency, you look at another area and try to focus there.

Q. Just wanted to ask you, what are the challenges in preparing for a tight end like Tyler Eifert who is so versatile and can be used in so many different ways on the offense?

KIRBY SMART: A lot of challenges. That's what we're experiencing now because we haven't faced a tight end with this much talent. The guy is a special player. People don't give this kid enough credit for his blocking ability. He blocks with great toughness and effort. He really forces you to play different defensively because he's so multiple. And they do a great job as an offensive staff of managing their players and using their skill players in the right way. I mean, they put he and Riddick on the same side, makes it hard to cover, they put them opposite and empty. They do a great job with what they do of getting No. 80 the ball.

It forces you to do things that you're not used to doing. You can't cheat the system and lean to one guy when they've got two guys out there like Eifert and Riddick and the wideouts. They do a really good job.

Q. When you break down everything that Notre Dame has done this year, as I imagine you have once or twice, does Golson even resemble the same player now as he was Navy, Purdue, that sort of thing in September? Did you notice a lot of growth?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, he plays with a lot more confidence, a lot more skill, more decision making. They've allowed him to do more, more flexibility in the system, in the scheme. He's grown a lot. I can only imagine in the last 35 days however many it's been, they're going to let him do some more. We expect that. He's a great player, very talented.

Q. Question for both you guys: What did you learn about what a quarterback who can extend plays can do in a facing Mandell that might help in facing Everett?

DAMION SQUARE: That's a great weapon for any team. A quarterback like that make them right for anything that he calls. He can call a play that's probably busted, and then the quarterback can scramble around for five seconds and create things and create havoc for our defense. So as a defensive lineman you've got to rush in the right lanes and have communications with what kind of coverage on the back end

and know how to rush and how to keep the quarterback contained, so that receivers won't be running for an extended time on our DBs. So we have to do a great job up front containing a guy like that, because that is great for our offense to have a guy like that in our backfield that can make a play right when it was wrong.

KIRBY SMART: I agree exactly with what Damion said. Extended plays are how they've made a lot of big plays. You look at their scramble reel there's a lot of plays that a guy has really great arm talent because he can throw one side of the field to the other. I can see in my mind three plays we watched over and over, he scrambles to his right, throws it all the way across the field to his left to a wide open receiver where a guy just lost him. They had him covered and they lost him. To that kid's credit that creates a different angle of the offense that's hard to prepare for. It's hard to simulate that, simulate a play that extends that long. You can't do it, you really can't. You just play with great effort and great discipline and do your job as a defense.

Q. Kirby, Nick acknowledges that you're only in the 3-4 defense about 20 percent of the time. Why do you continue to call that the regular base defense? And what's the long-term commitment to 3-4?

KIRBY SMART: Well, you've got to base out of something. When you meet as a defense, you've got to have kids in a room to meet. So ultimately you decide whether you're a 4-3 or a 3-4 based on how you meet. He's correct, we're not in 3-4 as much as people think, but that's what our personnel, that's what we recruit to. We do that for a lot of reasons: It gives you ability to recruit more linebackers, more skilled players, so that allows us to do that. We don't always line up in a 3-4, we have to line up in both. In today's day and age, offenses force you to.

So our reasoning for doing that is much, A, recruiting; B, gives us more skill players and we can recruit D-linemen that grow our outside linebackers that grow into D-linemen, which has happened to a couple of other guys. It's more about that, and we still think it's the best defense to be in for two-back offenses.

Q. What's the recruiting pitch to pass-rushing phenoms?

KIRBY SMART: Well, you're going to play both 3-4 and you're going to play in the 4-3, if you go down the NFL ranks most of those teams that I see at the top of it, the Texans, the Ravens, the Patriots, a lot of those teams are 3-4 teams, and they play both.

Q. When you look at everybody you lost last year, guys to the NFL, some of the challenges you faced on defense, how pleasing has this been, what you've been able to do to get back here on this stage and the variables that are involved in sort of overcoming some of those things defensively?

KIRBY SMART: I'll tell you, this group has probably been one of my most favorite to coach since I've been at Alabama because of the expectations. They didn't have bad expectations, but a lot of the media, you guys had bad expectations for this group. I never was worried about their competitive character. Sure, we lost some good players. Coming over here I guess it was four or five draft picks, whatever it was, last year we lost off that team. But we had a lot of good players behind those guys, and this group to me had a little chip on their shoulder and felt slighted that people didn't think they'd be good. The leadership of Damion and Nico and Dee and these guys kind of took over from the Michigan game.

We haven't played great all the time, but we've played with great competitive character. I mean, they have competed hard. We've been behind at LSU, we've been behind against Georgia, we lost to Texas A & M but we were behind in that game and fought back. So every time these defensive guys have been challenged, they've responded.

Q. Talk about being behind a couple times, how much of that was not being able to force turnovers? You guys didn't get any against Texas A & M and only one against Georgia. How important is it to get some against Notre Dame.

KIRBY SMART: It's huge to get turnovers, any game it is. I don't feel like we were behind because we didn't get turnovers, we were behind because we didn't stop them, especially the Texas A & M game

and the LSU game. We didn't stop them when we had to. We had some losses in the red area that if we hold them to field goals on 3rd down, we have a better chance. To hold them to three instead of seven it's a big difference.

But obviously turnovers always play a great outcome in the game, and I think they know that, we know that. We're kind of the same. Our head coach is the same. Philosophically we both agree that we're not going to turn the ball over and beat ourselves.

Q. You mentioned the red zone, and I think you guys lead the country in red zone defense. What are the dos and don'ts in the red zone as far as you're concerned? What are the keys to being successful there?

KIRBY SMART: I think it's a change in your style of play. I don't think enough people, and Coach Saban does a great job allowing us to practice red zone. It's kind of like anything, when you've got a backstop behind you, you can play a little more aggressive. They can't throw the ball over your head. Only so far they can throw at them. So you have to change the style of defense you play. We work really hard on that each year to be one of the top teams in the country in red zone, and if you're going to do that, you're going to have a chance to play good defense. We really emphasize that a lot.

So the dos and don'ts for us is don't back up out of the end zone, because you ain't got to defend behind it.

Q. It probably feels like you get asked about this a lot but maybe it's because we don't talk with you a ton. But your name gets bandied about as a head-coaching candidate this time of year. Can you talk about what your goals are, and what's your criteria for leaving a nice job at Alabama to be a head coach?

KIRBY SMART: First off, I'd like to say, obviously all my time, emphasis and effort since the last game has been on this game since we knew we were playing Notre Dame. That's all I can think about and all I want to worry about is winning this game for these guys. Ultimately my goal is my career is to be a head coach. Where that is, I have no idea. It's not like I wake up every day trying to leave Alabama. I have the best non-head-coaching job in the country, period, because I've got a great administration, we've got a great facility. I want to be where I can win, and I know you can win at Alabama. I think that's so important.

I'm now 37, I forget how old I am sometimes, 36, 37, I think I just turned 37. I am so worried about Notre Dame, I don't know my age. I don't worry about where I'm going to be in three years or ten years. I think if you win, that takes care of itself, and I'm not in such a hurry to run off and do anything that I don't have a pressing issue. If I was 47, I might feel differently. But most important thing to me right now is winning championships and developing young men into better players and better people.

Q. Anytime you interview for a job, do you benefit from that? Do you learn from each step of that process?

KIRBY SMART: I certainly think you do. I think the interview process is beneficial for you because you find out a lot more about the people you're talking to, and you also find out a lot more about yourself and you get better experience doing that. I certainly think it's a benefit. And Coach Saban has been extremely supportive of me in that process and has told me on a number of occasions that he knows that I'm going to have opportunities, and he's happy for me for those opportunities.

Q. I was just wondering, for both guys actually, what is it like when you guys go good on good in practice? And how important is that for the development of a young defense like you were talking about?

DAMION SQUARE: I feel like we have one of the best offenses in the country, especially up front with Barrett Jones and D.J. Fluker and Chance Warmack. So to get that experience of going against those guys and cracking helmets against those guys, playing against that hard power run that they have, and T.J. Yeldon and Eddie Lacy, that's great experience for Saturday. It's kind of hard for any team to match that on

Saturdays going against those big guys that we've got up front and the competitive attitude that they've got every day at practice.

KIRBY SMART: I smile because I think about Damion for the last three years, four years, going against Fluker every day good on good. Damion does a great job, but I just cringe at the thought of having to hammer big Fluker every play. Those two have had some really -- they have good wars, and they're really spirited and in the right mindset. I'm not talking about talking trash or fighting. They get after each other, and I think that's what makes us who we are. I think that creates our identity by going good on good quite a bit.

Q. Ed Stinson is a hometown guy from Florida. Talk about what he's meant to the team this year.

DAMION SQUARE: Like Coach said, he's one of those guys that converted over to D-line from playing linebacker. Ed is one of those guys with a high motive and extremely athletic. He's a fast guy, jump high, he's very strong, got great size. He's one of those guys that's just a great football player. I think Coach could put Ed at safety and he'll play that with everything he's got. He's just a guy that can do whatever you ask of him. And I play with a lot of great guys, but very few guys that can do anything that you can ask of them on the football field. Some guys are limited to certain things, but Ed is one of those guys, whatever you ask him to do, he can do it. He has the speed to do it, he has the strength to do it, he has the mindset to do it. He just wants to be great and practice high tempo all the time.

KIRBY SMART: Every day we run sprints he's always in front of Damion on the D-line group, so I know he can run good. He can run like a linebacker. He does run well.

Q. Can you talk about the development of Jesse Williams and the decision to change positions with him this year even though he's still just learning the game.

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, he's a unique player. I've coached however many years, 13, 14 years now, and never been around a guy quite like Jesse because when he first got to us, there were things he didn't understand about the game or more the American kids grew up saying, all right, what does the flat mean? He didn't know the flat -- we said drop to the flat, he had no idea what that was, and had to learn a lot of things. But he always had great quickness and could really run fast and very strong, obviously. So it's been a unique experience for us to coach him.

As far as moving positions, there's not a whole lot of difference in playing deadhead up the tackle as opposed to play deadhead up the center. It wasn't a big change for him. Obviously there's a guy coming from your left and right when you're inside, so he had to get used to reading blocks and reading angles, whereas when he was outside he just had it coming from one way.

But he's a special talent, he's a unique player that we weren't quite used to having.

Q. This question is for Coach Smart: You were with Nick Saban in Miami with the Dolphins and in the NFL. How closely do you guys run this Alabama program to the same program you had in the NFL? And what are some of the benefits of running an NFL-style program at the college level?

KIRBY SMART: I think it helps you with the development of your players. I think in the NFL everybody develops their players. In college it's not always that way, as far as the number of reps you get in the off-season, how many reps do you give your threes and fours in your training camp, how many reps do you give those guys. To me the development of the younger players, so that when you lose five guys or six guys on defense, you've got guys ready to replace those, and I think his focal point is always, how are we going to make ourselves better at every position, and he's always working towards that.

And I want to say this: My stay down here was really great. I have a son, I've got twins at home, one named Weston, I named after where I lived in South Florida. He went yesterday to the city limits and got his picture taken right there, and he was really happy about that. He's now five years old or fixing to be five years old.

Q. Given what you said about your aspirations in coaching, given what you said about Alabama, would your ideal situation, maybe your dream be to succeed Coach Saban at Alabama and coach there some day?

KIRBY SMART: Well, I'm like Coach Saban, I don't get into hypotheticals. That's completely a hypothetical. I think Alabama is a special, special place, and it's obviously a great place to coach. But as far as anything outside of that, I'm just worried about this game and being successful at Alabama.

Q. For Coach Smart: What does a guy like Damion bring to the table on and off the field? And then for Damion: What do you think you're going to remember most when you look back on your career at Alabama?

KIRBY SMART: Well, first off, Damion Square is a special player because he was one of the first players to come -- he came from Houston, Texas, and he had a lot of chances. He could have gone anywhere he wanted to go, and he chose Alabama over LSU. Everybody that offered him, he chose to come to us. I still remember Damion, we had a little Bama ballgame we call air ball, where the kids run around and throw the ball forwards, backwards. It's really like basketball on grass, and I can remember sitting out, and it seems like a long time ago, five years ago, he's out there running around as an athletic, dominating the game. That's a big body guy, and we knew right then this guy was a special defensive lineman. He has special talents to be able to run around like a skill player. And for him to decide to come to Alabama over all the choices he had, he was one of the first guys that knew, hey -- he came when the program wasn't as good, and that's a great commitment. He went through a really tough knee injury his freshman year, overcame that, and has become one of our best leaders we've ever had here.

And the players respond to him. I always say leadership is about how they respond to you. Well, they respond to Damion, and they respect the work that he's done.

DAMION SQUARE: For me, just the development all around as a player, as a father, as a son, as a man, coming here to the university, they expect you to do things a certain way, and they hold you accountable for that at all times. And that's kind of how I live my life now. It's kind of tough on my wife at home because I am a straightforward guy when it comes to getting things done, because that's how they handle me and that's how I handle my home. And I think that's the best way to do it.

So just the development all around, you know.

Q. Obviously one of the big defensive plays that you made was CJ's tip in the Georgia game. He said over there they got four fingers on it. Can you just talk about what you had set up for that play? And also, I know you and your family and Coach Bobo's family go way back. Have you talked about that game since?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, I'll be honest, that was a really tough moment for me in coaching because Mike is really my best friend, and we group up together. To go up against each other it was really a sick feeling before the game because you knew somebody was going to be unhappy at the end of it. And for it to end that way was really hard. So we kind of had a special moment after the game, and got to visit a little bit.

But CJ has done that all his career. I remember his first freshman practice, we do the freshman separate than the older guys. The older guys we had ran a pressure where we brought two guys to the running back, and the older guys ran it, Donte, maybe Ro or -- maybe Ro was gone, Chris Jordan, ran the same play against the ones, and they didn't bat the ball down. CJ did it at the night practice, same place, same script, CJ jumps up as he's blitzing and batted the ball down. Just an instinctive, really smart football play, and from that point on, he's always had a knack, even in the LSU game there's a 3rd down they were going to convert, and he was dropping, and he kind of just batted the ball. He naturally does a good job of that. He was a really good basketball player in high school. He did the same thing in that game.

Didn't surprise me at all that he did it. What surprised me was Geno was supposed to be blitzing with him, so I always wonder to this day if Geno had blitzed, he probably would have batted the ball down to the ground, and there would have been another snap fact. So the fact he didn't come and bat it down and they caught the ball, it's a little bit of fate there.

Q. How did you and Scott Cochran's families become so close? And also, what kind of effect has he had on the program?

KIRBY SMART: Scott and I have been close since LSU, the year I spent there with Coach Saban, Scott was there. But our wives both are raising three kids, and both our kids are kind of the same age. So our families mirror each other. So the wives end up spending a lot of time together, and as anybody knows with coaching, there's not a lot of time in season spent at the house, so they spend a lot of time helping each other out, and we've become really close through that.

Scott's impact on this team has been tremendous. Scott does a great job. He always had energy, enthusiasm, and the players like him, the players respond to him, and he enjoys his work. Anybody that enjoys their work like he does, they become successful.

Q. Damion, could you talk about just the effect that Cochran has had on the program.

DAMION SQUARE: The energy that he has. He always says energy is a choice, and at first I didn't feel that way, but if he can come -- I've been here five years, and he hasn't missed a day with that energy and enthusiasm that he brings to the weight room and to the practice field every day. And if he can do it, I know I can do it. He's just an example of what we should be every day out on the practice field, loving what you do, loving your work and just coming to work.

Q. You've retooled over the past three years. What's been your blueprint in putting a defense back together after having a great one? And what do you need to see out of a player, out of his eyes that tells you he's ready to take that step into that pivotal role?

KIRBY SMART: The blueprint would be big, physical, stop-the-run, dominate line of scrimmage, very similar to Notre Dame's defense, big linebackers, stop the run, force a team to be one-dimensional and try to suffocate them from there. Try to create negative passing situations and loss yardage plays. That's the blueprint, is getting big, physical defensive linemen that control the front that allow you to special coverages on the back end, that's kind of what we've always done, and tried to replace those guys with guys like them. So if you can recruit to that blueprint, you've got a chance.

As far as what you see in a player's eyes, I think every player is different. I can't look at a player and say, oh, he's ready to play, because each player is different. I was the same way as a player. What makes me ready to play doesn't necessarily make you ready to play. So you get yourself ready to play individually. Whatever you have to do to be successful, but do that.

Q. I think the three players that Barrett Jones has primarily faced in practice are Marcell Dareus, Terrence Cody and Jesse Williams. Damion, what's it like to face him in practice? And Kirby, is Barrett at his best when he's facing bigger defensive linemen?

DAMION SQUARE: Barrett just has great technique. You can tell he's been coached by great guys previous, and had been coached by great coaches at the University of Alabama. He can adjust. He can be an aggressive guy and he can be a guy that's kind of passive and let you beat yourself, and that's what's so great about Barrett Jones. He plays the game with great technique. You can't really find a flaw in his game, and that's the reason why Coach can move him all around in front. You can put him at center, put him at guard, put him at tackle, is because he's been coached by great coaches. He knows how to change his game up. Some guys are one-dimensional, but Barrett is a guy whatever you need to bring to the table at that position, he can do that. You need him to be a great tackle, kick-stepping or you can be a hard guard on the line that's setting the D-linemen up front, being aggressive and moving the three technique, he's just a guy that can adjust to any situation, and that's what makes him so great, and so aggravating to go up against at practice.

KIRBY SMART: He does a good job. To me he knows what he has to do to win the down, and he executes that, whether it's a big, small, quick guy, he executes what he has to do to prevent his guy from making the play. At the end of the day, that's what you want your offensive linemen to do.

Q. For both of you two: The perception is these games, these championship games, are won in the trenches. How true is that? And how does this match-up set up for you guys?

KIRBY SMART: I certainly think they're won in the trenches, and I think that's where they're really dominant at. I know I haven't seen their defensive front much, but that's what everybody talks about, and I know their offensive line has several guys that are going to be playing in the NFL. And they do a really good job with the run game. That's what people don't give them enough credit for to me is their ability to double team up, run the power game, very similar to our guys.

Yeah, I think it's won in the trenches. I think it always is and it always will be because if you can make them one-dimensional, you've got a shot.

DAMION SQUARE: There's some games that you play and you feel like you have no control over and the trenches up front with guys running from sideline to sideline and things like that. Whenever you play a game that you've got a team that's coming downhill, and they're trying to play football the way it's supposed to be played with double teaming, the three technique, you feel like you have control over the game. And with me being a D-lineman I want the game to be played in the trenches. I want that pressure on me, because I feel like I can be big for my team in that situation.

Q. First as a player, how involved do you get in the recruiting process with a kid who everybody may like athletically, but you see him and go, you know what, he's not necessarily for us attitude-wise to what this program has kind of been built on? And Coach, do you see it and how often do you guys lose players or say, this guy is just not for us?

KIRBY SMART: Explain to me what you're asking again.

Q. In terms of just the character aspect of it, you've had running backs where guys end up maybe going someplace else and be the guy --

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, we certainly have player descriptions, player profiles that we want, and if guys don't fit that certain description, they may be a five-star great player, and there are examples of that this year all over the country where everybody is like, why aren't y'all recruiting him? Or he calls us and has great interest, we're just not interested because we recruit to a certain standard. We say we want the guy to be this tall, this big. Does that mean there's not exceptions? Sure, there's exceptions to the rule, but we don't want a team full of exceptions. So we're trying to get six corners that are all 5'11" or bigger, we want D-linemen that are all 6'2". There's criteria for those positions that we want to recruit to. If they don't fit those, we're not going to take a boat full of them. Will we take one every now and then? Sure. Or it may be a character reference, we are going to let this one ride. We've heard some things.

I think there's always that scenario you're talking about, and I think there's some talented players out there that we have not recruited that we may have been right on or wrong on, but you have conviction and you make a decision and you live with it.

DAMION SQUARE: I mean, you want the program to benefit the player and you want the player to benefit the program. I think Coach Smart, you look at a player and you see if this program is going to benefit him. There's a bunch of guys that come on recruiting visits that are great players, I've watched on rivals and different websites and watched in the film room and say this guy can contribute to our program in a major way, but then you meet them and you don't quite know if the program is going to benefit him.

So it's a two-way thing. The program has to benefit the player for him to develop, and then the player has to benefit the program for the program to develop. You've kind of got to meet on both ends.

Q. Damion and Kirby both: We assume because you've been here before that Alabama has an advantage, in your mind what is that advantage? As you look back to being here when you were younger, being here for the first time, now that you're back and you know the routine, what is it that is an advantage?

KIRBY SMART: I think you've got to be real careful with that because you assume nothing when you come to these games. You assume it may be your last time in your career, and every chance is independent of the previous. It's like the statistics class I had, when they flip the coin, every time you flip it, if it's been 10 heads, there's no greater probability the next one is going to be tails. It's 50/50 every time. So there's no guarantee that you're going to be back here, and you assume nothing.

You've got to be careful about complacency, and that's what we've tried to emphasize to this group is that, A, are they hungrier than you? Because if they're hungrier that's a competitive advantage. You better not let anybody be hungrier than you. You've got to want it more than they want it, and I think you see that in bowl games across the country, is hey, teams that play with a chip on their shoulder or have an edge, it always helps. We're hungry, we want this game, we want this for this group, the group that everybody said couldn't do it. It's probably why more teams don't repeat.

DAMION SQUARE: I think the only competitive advantage you get is on the practice field and in the film room, and that's week to week. This game is another game for us. We play and we practice to be in this game, and it's -- we're here, and we're going to come and play this game like we show up and play on every Saturday. We're going to come and we're going to take our coaches' plan and we're going to try to execute it to the best of our ability.

Competitive advantage, you can get that by practicing great and looking at film and taking advantage of this time that we had from the last game to this game to get some tendencies on our opponent.

Q. Damion, you told us the other day that you were recruited by Notre Dame. Tell us more about that. How seriously did you look at them? What did you like? And what did it come down to? Neither Alabama nor Notre Dame were world beaters at that time.

DAMION SQUARE: Well, I had a family member that went to Notre Dame, so I went up to experience the atmosphere. It's a great place with great tradition similar to Alabama. At the time Charlie Weis was the coach, and they had a great program going on at the university, I just felt like Alabama was a better fit for me. But Notre Dame is a great place. They have a lot of pride in what they're trying to do up there, and they've been trying to get to this point for a while, and they're here, and I'm pretty sure that they're going to try to come and take advantage of this opportunity.

Q. You touched on it, but do you think enough fans and we the media realize when you strip it all away, it is about that box, it's about controlling that A and B gap, and I wonder, Damion, if you could share a story with DJ? Is there any good anecdote from going up against him so often?

KIRBY SMART: Well, first of, I don't know how much the perception is that the game is won in the trenches. I do think that it is, but you could also argue that Texas A & M exploited us in a different fashion than that. At the end of the day, it was still their ability to run, whether it's quarterback runs or scrambles or busted plays. You've got to be careful that you don't make it all about one thing, but that's where we're going to start and that's where we start every game at is A to B gap.

DAMION SQUARE: Like I said, it's awful tough to simulate a guy with that much mass and that type of attitude. Just practicing against that guy, I'm almost positive that I'm not going to see a guy like him on Saturdays. He's going to bring it. He's going to bring it every day. That's the attitude that he has. He wants to win in everything that he does, and with me, I have to take advantage of practicing with that guy. I appreciate him coming and bringing that energy because it wakes me up some days. It makes me bring my best to the practice field.

DJ is a fantastic player.

KIRBY SMART: Very few guys I've been around like DJ that love practice. That guy loves to practice. He is fired up about hitting you.

Q. Can you give me a specific example of Nick Saban's attention to the smallest detail, maybe getting ready for this game? And also, do you think he's driven to be the greatest coach in the history of this game?

KIRBY SMART: Oh, there's no question. There is no question he is driven to be the greatest coach in the game.

You've got me on the specific detail. There are so many. He is very detail oriented. I mean, down to the minute of practice, down to the -- I mean, he wants every second of practice organized, every walk-through rep, it doesn't matter if you're in special teams and you're doing walkthrough, he wants it

organized, he wants to plan for it, he wants it on paper and he wants you to execute it. A specific one, you've got me on that, but there's a lot of them in the last seven, eight years that he's done and he's harped on. And in the end they make your overall program more successful because you don't leave any part of the program uncovered.

Q. You were asked earlier about the value of interviewing for other jobs. I know there are probably a lot of people back home who wondered about a month ago what was the value of you interviewing with Auburn, and did they ever actually offer you the job?

KIRBY SMART: Well, first thing, I respect the University of Auburn and the opportunity they gave me to interview and talk to them as far as all the other stuff, the most important thing to us here is to focus on this game and get it done. I thought the interview process went great. Found out things I needed to know, and I'm sure they found out things they needed to know. As far as any of the other stuff, I'll just leave that to us and them.

Q. A lot of people are drawing parallels between Johnny Manziel and Everett Golson and comparing how efficient they are at running the ball. Do you find those comparisons and parallels to be true?

KIRBY SMART: Sure. The guy is a very good athlete. He's got the ability to run the ball. He's got extremely great arm talent. He scrambles to throw, but is a willing runner we call it. So he will run if he has to, but he scrambles to throw the ball, find people open. He extends plays like we talked about earlier. But there are a lot of similarities between the two. Both of them are youthful, and sometimes youth is a good thing. He doesn't have a very long memory. He forgets it and he's right back to the next play and will make another big play. So there are a lot of similarities between the two.

Q. Could you talk about the development of Dee Milliner, a guy from the beginning when he first arrived to now, to now is being projected as a first-round pick in the NFL Draft?

KIRBY SMART: Yeah, Dee is another one of those kids that I was fortunate enough to be able to help recruit and I got to know his family well. His father played for my father in high school, and Dee has developed. He came early in the spring one year, he and John Fulton, and we knew right away both were going to be good players. Dee has gotten bigger, gotten stronger, gotten more physical. He's been a joy to watch grow, especially after I still have memories of the South Carolina game his freshman year when he was forced to start along with Dre, and South Carolina beat us up pretty good, and Dee was out there the whole game in foreign territory, tough environment to play in, and grew up a lot that day and became a special player for us.

Q. Nick seems to have created a system within the system, particularly when it comes to the mental side of things. What kind of edge, particularly in a game like this, does that provide? And how deep does he go into the mental side of things?

KIRBY SMART: He goes deep into the mental side. He spends as much time on that as he does defensively now, and I think that is where he's grown as a coach, because I can remember being at LSU, I didn't remember the mental side being so great. And now six, seven years later, it's extended so far. He really believes in that, he believes in what you tell the players, he believes in the angle of approach of each game being different and getting their mindset right for the game. To me that's where he has established himself as a coach ahead of the curve because of his ability mentally to create an advantage with his team. Whatever the mindset is, whether it's physicality, whether it's execution, whatever it is, he does a great job of conveying that to the kids. And he makes us realize as coaches, it's not going to be about what we call, it's not going to be about what we rep, it's going to be about the mindset in Damion Square's head that's going to make a difference in this game.

Q. The critical moments in the SEC title game when you came back against Georgia late in the game, was that an example of the mental toughness of Alabama?

KIRBY SMART: No question it was. I mean, I was questioning it. There was a point where I was looking on the defense on the sideline on the bench over there and we're down 11, and I guess it was right

after the field goal block, but you're sitting there going, well, here we go. This is another challenge of our competitive character. Are we going to be able to get the stops and get the scores necessary to bring it back? Those kids, we challenge them every day now, so it's not they hadn't been challenged when it comes up. They've got to be mentally tough.

Everybody is doing that. It's the ways we do it that makes us different, I think. Every coach will tell you, we mentally train our kids, too. I just think we take it a step further and have the capabilities to do that.

Q. Coach Saban has talked in the past about dealing with mobile quarterbacks and Denard Robinson is one that comes to mind. Talks about disciplined pass rush, pinch the pocket without giving up the run lane. When you see Golson, do you see a guy you might want to approach the same way?

KIRBY SMART: Sure. You can't give the guy the ability to run all around and make plays, yet that's what he's going to do, so it's who's got the greater will to contain and keep him in the pocket versus him, hey, aborting and going outside the pocket. So it's a tough thing.

The guy is going to scramble. He's going to be a better, quicker athlete than the people we have up front, if they can play with pass-rush discipline, they're going to give us an opportunity to affect him with coverage or affect him with pressure. That's what we are always trying to do, affect the quarterback in some kind of way. But he's good at breaking it.

DAMION SQUARE: Those type of players have always been unique at the quarterback position. It creates another dynamic for your offense. Like I said, the offensive coordinator doesn't have to think as much about the plays that he's calling. That guy is going to extend and make things happen. He's going to make a defensive back break coverage and things like that. Whenever you're playing against a guy that can do that with his feet, it's always detrimental to a defense. It's another aspect that you have to practice. You have to get a guy in practice that can simulate what that guy does on the field. You can't have regular practice like you're going against a prostyle quarterback, when you're going against a guy that can extend. Luckily we have a guy like Blake Sims that can simulate that in practice. Whenever you have a guy like that back there it's great for the offense, and it's something that we have to worry about as a defense.

Q. How much has it prepared you working under Nick down the road when you want to be a head coach versus having gone somewhere the way he positions and the way he challenges you?

KIRBY SMART: I think it's a great point. To me personally, my development to become a head coach will be much better working for Coach Saban than necessarily going somewhere else because you learn every day that you're in there. As a teacher, and I can tell you even back to the Georgia game, halftime, we screwed it up. Hey, he admitted we should have called timeout to create an advantage to score in the end, but he always uses that to teach us. He doesn't use it just for himself. Every day we do two-minute against each other, we come in, talk about clock management, what could we have done here? What should we have done there? He's questioning not only us why we did this in this situation, but he questions himself. He does a great job of quality control of the entire organization, what could we have done differently, and I think sometimes when you go other places that don't have the same support structure, you don't get those -- you don't get that same experience. The experience that I've been able to gain through being with Coach is hey, this is how you run a major program, this is the way you do it and this is the way you question every part of your organization, therefore making it better. So I think his ability to run that program is really good.

CB Dee Milliner

On Everett Golson

"He's a great quarterback. He makes plays last longer by using his legs. Any time you've got a dual-threat quarterback that can run and pass the ball like he does, they can be a challenge at any time because he can make plays last longer with his legs. If he gets flushed out of the pocket he can create plays by running or he can look down field to throw the ball."

On Kirby Smart

"It's just the different schemes and things that he does against other teams, the way he looks at film and the way he goes about picking out plays to stop whatever they are doing. Players on the team are buying in on what he's trying to teach us and just going out there and executing the plan that he has each week."

On how it feels to finally get back to football

"It seems like we haven't played football in a really long time. We're just happy to be in Miami, it's a great city. We're out of the cold in Alabama; it's kind of hot down here. We're just happy to be back in the championship and to compete and come out on top."

DB Robert Lester

On practicing in South Florida

"I think by being outside here – we actually haven't seen the sun in a while – that helps us get into the game environment and is good for our bodies to adjust to the weather."

On experience of playing in another BCS National Championship

"It is a great environment being in Miami to play for a national championship. It is a great opportunity to play against a great team, I don't think it gets any better than this."

On this being his last game

"Of course it is going to stink leaving Alabama, it's all that I have really known. I have been with these guys for five years, wearing crimson and white for five years. To get into any other color is going to be different."

On the weather in South Florida

"The humidity was a little bit of a shock, but we were ready for it and adjusted. I am glad we are able to get some practices down here and get used to the weather. However, we are used to the heat from the Tuscaloosa in the summer and the beginning of the season. We'll be able to adjust quickly playing here in this climate."

On the game plan

"We are going to go into this game with the same goals we have had all season – stop the run and defend the pass. They are very talented with a mobile quarterback, great receivers and running backs."

On Notre Dame QB Everett Golson

"[Everett] Golson is a very mobile quarterback and we have to be aware of that. He can extend plays and we definitely want to limit that since big plays can happen. We'll have to stay disciplined on defense."

On head coach Nick Saban

"You definitely have to have thick-skin, but it is all a part of his plan. He wants to make you into the best player you can be. We have faced a lot of adversity with other team's fans causing distractions, but he keeps us focused. He is hard on us, but it is all for the good. Coach basically turns boys into men. He is on us about being on-time, details and the little things. By paying attention to the little things, it can bring you a long way in life."

On facing the hurry-up offense

"We have faced that several times this year and we will be prepared for it. You have to stay disciplined and get the call and get ready to go quickly."

LB C.J. Mosley

On preparing for Notre Dame rather than LSU for the National Championship

"It is different. That is one of the main things; it's a team we haven't faced before so it will be a new atmosphere [and] a new team. It's obviously something we have to adjust to. We've been practicing in the cold and in the rain back in Tuscaloosa so it's important to get the weather down and [get used to] playing in the heat."

On Notre Dame QB Everett Golson

"He's a great scramble quarterback [and] he's a great athlete so we have to do our best to try and maintain him. We have to do [what we can to] stop him from making the plays that he can make. He's a great player so like Johnny [Manziel] he's going to make the plays that he's going to make, but we just have to do our best to contain him."

On how this defense compares to other ones he's been a part of

"Each defense had some great things that they had, but you can't really compare each defense as the same. But I think we're up there as far as this year."

On playing with some young guys on the defense

"They are just stepping up when they have to. They have been consistent throughout the whole year. Not only little things like not letting the outside clutter get in their head, but also playing to the Alabama standard."

On being the favorite heading into the National Championship

"It's a championship game so being the spread or being the underdog really doesn't matter. Both teams are going to give it all they got [and] it's the last game for some of these players so everybody is going to lay it all on the line."

LB Nico Johnson-Alabama

On third time in national championship...

"It's a little bit different, different team. The focus is so important for this team [more] than any other team I've been on. Right now we're just enjoying the time, having fun with what we're doing, and practicing hard every day."

On adjusting to Everett Golston...

"I don't think it puts pressure on us; he's a good player. But I think by playing the players we played throughout the year has prepared us for a player like him. We just know that we have to do our job as far as the front seven even more against a player like him. I think the last player we played similar was Manziel and everybody knows what happen in that game. We just have to try to keep him in the pocket more, try to make him less comfortable, and get at them the best we can."

Comparing Golston and Eifert...

Similar just running, and using is speed a lot. They're both good athletes. We're going to have to be on our P's and Q's even more. He's able to be a pocket passer and pull it out and run it and can hurt you in both ways we're just going to have to be on it.

On Tyler Eifert...

"I don't think we have [seen anyone like him]; he has size and speed at the same time. So we're going to have to be on our P's and Q's, technique, when we're guarding him, making sure we're not too high or too low on him. We're just going to have to play physical football throughout for 60 minutes."

On adjusting to Eifert's position switches...

"Just paying attention to detail and watching a lot of film because if you don't like you said yourself, they move him around a lot and if you don't watch a lot of film and pay attention to detail that's where he's at his best."

On Nick Saban...

"People think coach is an uptight person or something. When it's business time, it's business time, we respect that about him. When it's joking around time he jokes around a lot with us, all the time, especially in practice. We have fun doing what we do. He just expects a lot out of us. Coming here to 'Bama as a freshman, he's not going to coach you as a freshman or sophomore you are, he's going to coach you to the junior or senior you're going to be down the line. That's what makes us year in and year out be so good because we respect that and we understand that and we respond the right way to that. He's a laid back coach to me [and] this is my fourth year with him. [Coach Saban tells jokes] all the time."

On 2010 season lessons and focus of this season...

“That we cannot worry about all the external factors; the only thing we can worry about is what we do week in and week out. And we kind of understood that throughout the year, we’re not trying to repeat or anything like that. We’re just trying to go out and whoever we’re playing that week, we’re trying to dominate them for 60 minutes. I think this is the best we’ve done since I’ve been here. We’ve refocused ourselves and understand there’s room for improvement week in and week out and we just want to get better. We still feel like we haven’t played that complete 60 minute game where we’ve actually played well throughout the whole game. It comes down to that fourth quarter where we’ve got to push through and get that win. We’re still searching for that complete 60 minutes and hopefully it’s this game.”