



Photo: Kent Gidley

University of Alabama Head Coach Nick Saban

# EXPECT THE BEST

**Nick Saban motivates his athletes by setting expectations and methodically pursuing them, with no regard for external factors, one moment at a time.**

*By Paul Markgraff*

What defines perfection in sport? Vince Lombardi once said: “Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence.”

The common denominator in the chase for perfection – our quest for excellence – is desire. But, desire is an abstraction. It is composed of slippery concepts such as hunger, passion, focus, commitment and work ethic. It’s a qualitative notion that escapes calculation in our game of inches.

But it cannot be ignored. Just the opposite, it must be cultivated within young athletes, so that when a need for perfection presents itself, players can call upon their skills and training to achieve new levels of performance.

University of Alabama head coach Nick Saban focuses heavily on these concepts. He takes a special approach to teaching and motivating his players internally to stay hungry and forget about external factors. Focus on yourself and what you can control to become the best.

“I think that is probably the biggest challenge,” says Saban. “We live in such a results-oriented world. People are so geared on trying to get results that sometimes they forget about the process of things that they need to do to get the results. The No. 1 goal is to be the best you can be

individually and collectively as a team.”

Sure. Be the best you can be. It’s a mantra that would well reward anyone in football, or in the game of life, for that matter.

But it’s more than that, says Saban. It goes deeper. Being the best they can be requires football players to re-examine themselves and think critically about their goals, desires, how they perceive themselves, and how they behave relative to those goals and desires. Achievement doesn’t come by accident.

“Being the best you can be doesn’t have anything to do with external factors,” he says. “It’s not what was done last year, not who you were playing, not what the score of the game is. Our guys have to lock on to the right things: passion, commitment and work ethic.”

## Change In Perspective

On top of being one of the great football minds in the game, with a certain dominance on both sides of the ball, Saban has succeeded in changing the way his players approach the mental side of the ball.

His focus on retooling players’ mental approach to the game has been particularly effective. Before his Crimson Tide systematically dismantled Louisiana State University’s offense to win the 2011 BCS National Championship, Saban won two other national championships in 2009 and 2003. He is the first coach in college football history to win national championships with two different Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) teams. The 2011 championship also made him the

## GIVING BACK

Nick Saban and his wife, Terry, established the non-profit Nick's Kids Fund over 13 years ago when Coach Saban was at Michigan State University. The organization's mission is to work together in the spirit of faith and giving in the community, and to promote and support children, family, teacher and student causes.

To date, Nick's Kids Fund has distributed more than \$2 million in donations.

"It's important for everybody to serve other people," says Saban. "I think it's part of being a good leader. Every leader has a vision of what he wants to accomplish and a plan of how he wants to accomplish it. Setting a good example is a big part of that."

So, when a devastating tornado swept through Tuscaloosa, Ala., on April 27, 2011, Saban's charitable organization leapt into action. He, his staff and the Crimson Tide team redirected their efforts from the football field onto the streets of Tuscaloosa.

"I told our team in a meeting the next day after that happened that it's now time for us to go support the people who have supported us," he said. "We have to be a good team in good times and in bad, and this was an opportunity for us to serve the people and help our community."

In association with Habitat For Humanity of Tuscaloosa, the Nick's Kids Fund committed to building 14 new homes for tornado victims whose homes were destroyed. Players and coaches donated their time and effort to rebuild parts of the community.

"I think it's important for us to give back to our community, to the people who support us," says Saban. "Sometimes, they need our support and I think it sets a great example for the players."

Crimson Tide players exerted as much effort in the rebuilding process as they do on the football field. The team won the 2011 Disney Spirit Award, given each year to college football's most inspirational player, team or figure, for their community-rebuilding projects.

first coach to win three BCS National Championships, and earned him the distinction of being the only currently active coach to win three such titles.

Despite the overwhelming athletic prowess displayed by his players week in and week out, success is not a matter of talent on the team, he says. It's about teaching players to embrace a sense of urgency and immediacy about what they do on and off the field.

"We have varying abilities on our team," he says. "It's all relative. Unless everybody makes a commitment and buys into the same values and principles of the organization, high achievers won't have much respect for mediocre attitudes and mediocre people don't really like high achievers. You won't have any team chemistry unless everybody buys into the same principles and values."

In order to create this high-achieving sensibility among his players, Saban specifically defines these principles and values for them.

"I think that first off, we use the approach with our players that they control their own destiny," he says. "Every game is important. Every play is important. Nothing happens by accident. You don't win a play by accident. You don't win a game by accident. You don't win a division by accident, and you don't win a championship by accident. You have to make it happen."

He teaches his players that they – first and foremost – control their actions. If they're not affected by external factors and are really trying to be as good as they can be, who they play shouldn't affect that. Win/loss records shouldn't affect it, and neither should the score of the game.

"It's not an emotional charge that we're trying to get from our players," he says. "It's more of a character or competitive charge that we're trying to build. They're going to compete at a high standard all the time, and it is defined for them. It's our expectation they do that."

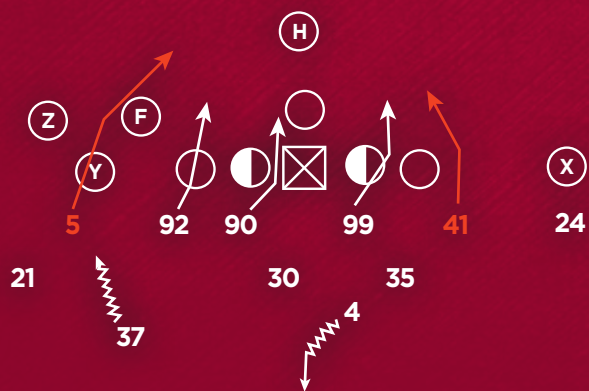
### Setting Expectations

Saban's approach to setting expectations for his football team is as methodical as the Crimson Tide's rushing attack. But he also gets his players to set expectations for themselves.

"Once you define the expectations, you can always point to them," he says. "One thing that we do with our players is, we ask every guy: What do you want to achieve? What do you want to do? So then, when his behavior is not becoming of what he wants to do, you point that out. Because it's been defined. You say you want to graduate from school, but yet you're not going to class. You say you want to be a great player or play in the NFL someday, but you're not giving the effort. You can make it about them. Show them that when they make commitments, what they do speaks so loud, you can't hear what they're saying."

### New Year, New Tests

The Crimson Tide utilizes something they call "The 24-Hour Rule." Above all else, it means that whether the team wins or loses, they will learn from the experience. But after 24 hours, that game is over, and the team will look to the next challenge, bringing with it lessons learned and a stiffer resolve among players to do their jobs right and get better.



## 40 Sword Oscar

The Crimson Tide ran this defensive play against the University of Tennessee during their matchup in the 2011 season. It resulted in a sack and forced fumble by All-American Courtney Upshaw from the Jack linebacker (#41) position, with #5 Jerrell Harris (Sam linebacker) adding pressure.

When this play occurred in the third quarter, the Crimson Tide were up 13-6 against the Volunteers. Alabama scored on the next drive, ultimately winning the game 37-6.


In keeping with this philosophy, the 2012 season is a blank slate for Saban and the Tide. Though fans will cheer and remember the heady days last January when it seemed like if you listened closely, you could hear “Roll Tide!” echo across the southeast, Saban and his players and coaches believe it will have no impact on this season.

“I don’t think we defend the title. I think that’s a misstatement,” says Saban. “Nobody’s going to take our title away. We’ve already got it from last year. This year’s team has its own mission statement for what it wants to accomplish, for what it wants to do, and even though there were some players on that team that made significant contributions to winning a championship last year, it doesn’t define this year’s team.”

This patient methodical approach to every drill, every

snap, play and series, every quarter of every game, is the real challenge, says Saban. Being the best you can be has a great ring to it, but if his players want a physical ring at the end of this season, rather than a metaphorical one, Saban and his assistants will need to make sure every person in the program buys in.

“I think our players understand that not being complacent, understanding the commitment, the passion, the work that they have to do to try to develop this team to be the best it can be is going to be the key to this team’s success,” he says.

Though historical performance is certainly no guarantor of future success, and perfection may be unattainable, Saban and the Crimson Tide’s persistent focus will no doubt deliver excellence, just as Coach Lombardi said. 

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