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Process, Not Results

Nick Saban and his staff help student athletes sustain a heightened level of excellence by teaching them to emphasize the process by which one becomes excellent, rather than the results one desires to achieve.

By Paul Markgraff

Nick Saban has been here before, hoisting the Crystal Ball, sharing that moment of connectedness with his players after working so hard to achieve the desired result: a national championship victory at the top level of college football.

Last season's championship victory was his fifth – he is the first coach to ever have won national championships at the FBS level with two different teams.

Saban will also be the first to tell you that results are not nearly as important as the process by which players achieve them.

“I know this is going to sound sort of contradictory, but rather than being outcome-oriented, it helps if you teach guys to be what I call process-oriented,” says Saban, who is in his tenth season as head coach at the University of Alabama. “Focus on the things that make you the best you can be. What sacrifices do you need to make? What habits do you need to develop? Who do you need to work with to be able to develop these habits?”

Saban says he does not believe it's human nature to want to be the best at any given thing.

“I think human nature is more about survival,” he says. “That's kind of the natural instincts we all have, so it really is a special expectation to get people to think about being committed to being as good as they can be.”

Exploring Excellence

Defining excellence is a fairly simple matter for Saban. It's about doing things the best one can and trying to apply all the technical skills one possesses to achieve that. It applies to everything in a student-athlete's life: his personal life, his choices, his academics, and football.

“As competitors, we try to do our best to dominate the competition, rather than focusing on winning a game,” Saban says, referring to a process-oriented approach as opposed to a results-oriented approach to winning. “If I

dominate the competition, then I'll give myself the best opportunity to win the game. If I can be the best I can be – one play at a time, like it has a history and a life of its own – then do that for the entire game, that is going to give me the best opportunity to get the result I want.”

There is no question that Alabama regularly secures many of the most excellent athletic specimens ever to set foot on a college football field. But becoming really excellent is about more than just God-given abilities.

“I talk a lot to our guys about how to set goals,” he says. “Let's define those things we have to do to accomplish those goals. The question is, do we have the discipline to execute it every single day?”

That word – discipline – means more to developing excellence than perhaps any other concept. Excellence demands discipline, and discipline demands consistency. Inconsistency is the sworn enemy of greatness.

“Say you want to lose 10 pounds; Slim Fast defines what you are supposed to do every day, how much you are supposed to eat, how many calories, this and that,” he says. “But where does the failure come? Do you have the discipline to execute? If on the third day, you're no longer doing what you're supposed to do, you don't have that discipline. We are trying to get people to make the right choices to do the things they need to accomplish their goals.”

Understanding Urgency

To make proper decisions that build process-oriented excellence, student-athletes must be always on guard. They must have a “sense of urgency,” something that all coaches aspire to inspire within their players.

However, urgency is one of those intangible qualities uniquely personal to individuals and not always easy to define for teams.



Discipline is about making the right choice at the right time, and excellence demands strength through discipline.

“There are three words that I always try to get the players to understand,” says Saban. “Intensity is sort of your mental energy, to be focused on what you’re supposed to do. Immediacy is the sense of urgency that is saying, you need to do it right now. It’s not something that you can wait until later or the next play or the next day. Then, there is intelligence. I’m going to be smart about how I go about this and use the resources that I have and apply them to what I need to do.”

For Saban, these three words are going to create a sense of urgency, but those are still just words. Specifically, Saban wants a heightened focus to give effort, responsibility among players that they are going to do what they are supposed to do – a sense of self-determination – and to finish strong.

“Effort, mental toughness and responsibility to know what to do are the basic things that – if you are going to accomplish anything – you have to be willing to do those things,” he says. “Effort means I’m going to do the best I can. Mental toughness means I’m going to be able to sustain that level of performance over time. None of these things really takes ability. The last part of that is knowing what to do. Be responsible and accountable, meaning that’s what I’m supposed to do. I’m aware of it and I know it. Let me be responsible for it.”

Making Sense Of The World

Even for student-athletes who are coached at this level, they still face pressures that seek to knock them off their desired path and distract them from the process of sustaining excellence. Headlines in the Twitter-verse say it all. Sexual assaults on America’s college campuses are on the rise. Civil rights protesters clash with police. Mass shootings occur every month, each somehow different and more terrible than the last. Election-year politics leave charged atmospheres with seemingly little accountability for divisive rhetoric.

Saban and his staff must also contend with these issues on a day-to-day basis, because it is important to help student-athletes ignore the impact of these distractions while also helping them personally work through the challenges they present and the questions they raise.

“It’s an ongoing process,” he says. “Every week, we define some of the educational things we can do relative to these issues. It could be teenage suicide or domestic violence. It could be drug or alcohol issues, marijuana or Xanax, things people do. We are constantly trying to educate players on the consequences of good and bad behavior.”

There are plenty of examples near to hand that Saban and his staff can use as teaching moments. Specifically,

they are trying to use those examples to demonstrate to players that the choices and decisions they make actually influence their future.

“We’ve all done the best around here when we’ve made the best choices and decisions,” he says. “Everybody has to make an individual commitment to do that, because each individual contributes to what the team is, not the other way around. The team doesn’t make the individual.”

Every individual behavior or misstep is a reflection on everyone else within the program, within the student-athlete’s family and of the student-athlete, himself. The staff and the football program go to extraordinary lengths to help students in their time of need, when the pressures of life bring them to the precipice of bad choices.

“We have a peer intervention program for drugs, alcohol, agents, gambling, domestic violence, how to treat the opposite sex, getting in fights, using guns, my gun is bigger than your gun, spiritual development, every sort of way we can develop a moral awareness of making good choices and decisions,” says Saban.

It all leads back to Saban’s fundamental description of discipline: Here is something that I’m supposed to do, but that I don’t really want to do. Can I make myself do it? On the other hand, here is something that I am not supposed to do and I want to do it. Can I keep myself from it?

“To me, we make a lot of those choices every day,” he says. “Most of the time, I think people know right from wrong. It’s just the choice they make as to whether they do it or not. So we are constantly trying to educate on the consequences of that. I think there’s an opportunity for everyone to learn from every mistake and from every player in terms of the consequences of good and bad behavior.”

Those daily, individual choices, both on and off the field, contribute substantially to the process of sustaining excellence. They form the foundation of choosing to be mentally focused and mentally tough, choosing to embrace immediacy, and choosing to accept responsibility for your purpose in the process. Those choices are the building blocks of “excellence.” **AFC**