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Generosity Breeds Success

University of Alabama head coach Nick Saban won his fifth championship with the Crimson Tide in January 2018 (his sixth overall). A key ingredient in his process for success is giving back to the community and teaching players the value of selflessness.

By Paul Markgraff

When Nick Saban's father died at the young age of 44, Nick returned home to the small coal-mining town of Monongah, W. Va., and visited his father's Gulf service station. There, in five garages, Saban found stacks of other people's belongings.

Over time, he learned that these items – old tires and the like — belonged to other people. Tags hung on each of these items, complete with names and dollar figures. Saban eventually figured out that his father had been taking in people's old and used belongings and giving them cash.

In a town fraught with the boom-and-bust cycles of late-20th-century coal mining, Saban's father was keeping people afloat by literally handing them cash.

Saban's father — Nick Saban Sr. — was a lifeline to countless individuals in Monongah and a role model to so many more. He started the local Pop Warner team — the Black Diamonds — going as far as paying for equipment, uniforms, shoes, footballs, travel and food.

Saban's love for his father, and the role his father played in teaching his son values and principles, are well-documented. They have manifested themselves in the Nick's Kids Foundation, a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to raising awareness and resources for deserving organizations throughout the state of Alabama and the southeastern U.S. Nick and Terry Saban established the foundation while at Michigan State University to honor the late Nick Saban Sr. in 1998.

The Nick's Kids Foundation is responsible for donations of almost \$8 million, including:

- The 17 for 17 Home Building Project with Habitat for Humanity, which is the construction of 17 homes in honor of the Crimson Tide's 17 national champions.
- Contributions to the Welding & Multi-Purpose Classroom Facility at the Tuscaloosa Juvenile Detention Center.
- Contributions to the Nick's Kids Playground along the Tuscaloosa Riverwalk.
- Contributions to the Annual Teachers Excellence Awards Luncheon.
- Renovating the short-term treatment and evaluation building of Brewer Porch Children's Center.
- Rebuilding the playground for the Aberta School of Performing Arts following a 2015 tornado that ravaged Tuscaloosa.
- Outside of the foundation, Saban and his wife — Miss Terry — announced they would personally donate \$1 million to The Crimson Standard initiative, a 10-year, \$600 million plan to rejuvenate all of Alabama's athletic facilities.

The foundation is also responsible for contributions of money and labor to countless other organizations and projects across Alabama and the southeast.

"It's an organization, really in honor of my father, who started Pop Warner football in West Virginia, in our area, way back when I was a 9- or 10-year-old kid," says Saban, who won his fifth national championship with Alabama in January (sixth overall). "He bought a small bus, and picked up all the

kids. We lived in a coal mining town so they couldn't get transportation. Many guys went on to college because of that. He was always helping young people. He never went anywhere to college, but he really coached, whether that was American League baseball or Pop Warner football, whatever it was.

"He passed away when I was just out of college, and my mom always said, 'If you're going to have an opportunity to do what your dad always wanted to do, I'd love to see you do it.'"

Saban says since he and Miss Terry established the foundation 20 years ago, it has grown into a pretty large organization. Certainly, he continues to create a legacy for himself and his father, but these days, his goal is to set a good example for people in the community and for Alabama players to give back to the community, to help people who are less fortunate and maybe give them a better quality of life, or to help people become more successful in life.

"Miss Terry does a fantastic job of running this program," he says. "We have very little administrative cost and give away about 99 cents on the dollar, I think."

Team Brain Chemistry

Part of growing into a championship-caliber football player is learning that the team comes before the individual. It's a selflessness that doesn't come built-in to most modern student-athletes — and really just individuals in general — in today's world. It must be taught.

This is unfortunate, because research shows that the mental and physical benefit of giving and generosity produce concrete positive outcomes:

- Risks and symptoms of depression and day-to-day stress decline.
- Volunteerism reduces mortality rates more than exercising four times weekly.
- Philanthropy releases several happiness chemicals in the brain, including dopamine, endorphins that elicit feelings of euphoria, and oxytocin, which is associated with tranquility, serenity and inner-peace.

The pleasure and reward systems of the brain associated with generosity and giving are thought to be quite ancient, and feeding them only strengthens them.

These positive outcomes are not lost on Saban or the Crimson Tide, and the Alabama program makes these opportunities to help available to players across the board.

"The players are actively involved in Nick's Kids," says Saban. "They've been involved in a lot of the projects. For example, when we were building the 17th house we've sponsored through Habitat for Humanity, 30 players came and worked with us, with me, with Terry, with all the workers. We built a shed in the back of the house, the guys were putting up soffits. I don't think anybody really gets a better feeling than when they help somebody else."

Commitment And Progress

More than the short-term benefits provided by giving back are long-term benefits associated with doing one's job the right way. Any coach, any player, who's been around the

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game long enough knows that it teaches values and principles in a way that is unique unto sport.

However, today more than ever, we live in a society that looks askance at virtue, especially when it's crowded within the context of success. The pessimists and naysayers tear down values and principles looking for what they're certain must be a hidden agenda.

Saban and Alabama just shrug them off, producing high quality football teams composed of individuals who do their jobs the right way, respecting the process. It's the program's way of giving back to the individuals who comprise it.

"I think the game has given me a tremendous amount, great opportunities to work with young people, great opportunities to influence young people," he says. "The challenge of the process of building a successful organization year-in and year-out, it's always a new challenge because you lose a significant amount of your team every year. I've learned so much in terms of competitive character, work ethic, how to overcome adversity, pride in performance, discipline. I mean, it takes the same things to be successful whatever you're trying to do.

"I think athletics give people the opportunity to learn those things because it's something they enjoy doing, so they're more willing to commit to it, and I think we all need to use that as an opportunity to take advantage of helping people in other areas."

Lasting Legacy

Certainly, the Nick's Kids Foundation is as much a reflection of the values of Nick Saban Sr. as the Alabama


football program reflects Nick Saban Jr. Of course, Coach Saban will be remembered as one of the best head coaches — arguably the best coach — in all of college football.

But he will also be remembered as a compassionate soul and generous philanthropist, two character traits that often go unsung in the ballads of our game. Surely, Saban will value his national championship wins highly. After all, they are proof he has reached the pinnacle of his chosen profession many times over.

At the same time, he will value the mark he's left on individuals, on organizations, on rebuilding projects, on renovations and other philanthropic efforts, just as much, because as his father said many times, "No one stands as tall as when they stoop to help a child."

"We're not going to be here someday, and everybody's going to ask, 'What did you do while you were here?'" says Saban. "What kind of person were you? What were you able to accomplish? How did you treat other people? How did you influence the people around you?"

"I think my No. 1 thing is when people ask what kind of person I was, that it's not just important for me to win. I've got to win the right way, and I need to help players understand what that means. It's about the process of doing what you have to do to be the best you can be, and that will give you every opportunity to be successful when it's time to play the game."

That's just plain truth from a consummate champion, whether we're talking about the game of football, or the game of life. 



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