

Alabama set for Oklahoma, with a title-game berth at stake

By **TIM REYNOLDS**
Associated Press

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Nick Saban knows Alabama cannot win every game. The Crimson Tide merely come close.



Saban This is the fifth year of the College Football Playoff, and the fifth Alabama appearance in the four-team tournament to decide the national champion. The latest quest toward another title, which would be the school's third in the last four years, resumes Saturday when the top-ranked Crimson Tide (13-0) take on fourth-ranked Oklahoma (12-1) in the semifinals at the Orange Bowl.

"It's a good problem to have," said Oklahoma quarterback **Kyler Murray**, the Heisman Trophy winner. "They win a lot. We win a lot. ... I've heard a lot of people say 'beat Alabama' just because they don't like Alabama or whatever. But I'm not really too much into that."

The game is a matchup between the two highest-scoring offenses in the country, with Oklahoma



Oklahoma head coach **Lincoln Riley**, right, talks with Oklahoma offensive lineman **Ben Powers** during an NCAA college football practice on Thursday in Davie, Fla.

slightly outpacing Alabama there. It's also a matchup of arguably the two best players in the country; **Murray** and Alabama quarterback **Tua Tagovailoa** were first and second, respectively, in the Heisman voting.

At stake is a berth in the CFP title game on Jan. 7 against either Clemson or Notre Dame. And Alabama has four players who will be appearing in their sev-

enth CFP game — which is absurd, especially when considering that there have been only 12 games total in the event since it was put into place starting with the 2014 season.

"We know we can't be perfect," Saban said. "But we're certainly trying to work every day to close the gap on how good can we be, and are we reaching our full potential in how we improve and work every day."

The edge for the Crimson Tide, on paper anyway, is on defense. Alabama comes into this game ranked fourth nationally in points allowed per game, while Oklahoma is ranked 96th.

"We've prepared well," said Oklahoma coach **Lincoln Riley**, the 35-year-old offensive mastermind who will be coaching in his 15th bowl game already. "Confident in the way our team has approached this entire

month. We've had a great week here so far. Can't wait for Saturday night."

Here's some other things to know going into the Orange Bowl:

Record seekers
Alabama and Clemson (which plays Notre Dame in the Cotton Bowl on Saturday) both enter the CFP with a chance to go 15-0 — should either claim the national championship. And that would be truly rare air. The NCAA defines the "modern era" as starting in 1937, and no team has won more than 14 games in a season during that span. The last team to go 15-0 at the top level of college football was Penn, back in 1897.

Rare meeting
For a couple of storied programs, Alabama and Oklahoma haven't faced off very often. The Sooners lead the all-time series 3-1-1, and three of those matchups have been in bowl games — starting with the Orange Bowl on Jan. 1, 1963, a 17-0 Alabama victory. Their most recent matchup was on Jan. 2, 2014 in the Sugar Bowl, when the Sooners prevailed 45-31. Alabama is 66-5 since.

Saban milestone
The NCAA record books might not necessarily agree, but Saturday will mark the 300th game for Alabama's

Nick Saban as a collegiate head coach. His teams went 236-62-1 in the first 299 games, though five of those wins from the 2007 season — his first with the Crimson Tide — were later vacated by the NCAA.

Happy homecomings
The best receiver on each team is a South Florida kid who just happens to be a first-team All-American. Oklahoma's **Marquise Brown** — he goes by "Hollywood," the nod to his Hollywood, Florida hometown — averages 101.4 receiving yards per game. Alabama's **Jerry Jeudy** averages 84.8 yards per game; the Biletnikoff Award winner as the nation's top receiver hails from nearby Deerfield Beach, Florida.

Orange Bowl history
It's the 20th appearance in the Orange Bowl for Oklahoma, extending the Sooners' record in that department. Alabama will be playing in the Orange Bowl for the ninth time. And it's the second time the game has been part of the CFP — Clemson beat Oklahoma at the Orange Bowl in 2015, a CFP semifinal. The CFP returns to the Orange Bowl in 2021, when Hard Rock Stadium will be the site of the national championship game.

Cotton Bowl: Can Notre Dame measure up to No. 2 Clemson?

By **RALPH D. RUSSO**
AP College Football Writer

DALLAS — The question was about sustaining high-level success in college football and Dabo Swinney's answer lasted 3 minutes, 40 seconds. Brevity is not the Clemson coach's strong suit.

Swinney talked about how people make the program, continuity leads to consistency, and how it can't just be about the results on the scoreboard.

"It's a holistic approach. It's social. It's spiritual. It's life skills. It's career development. It's every area,"

Swinney said Friday during the final Cotton Bowl news conference. "And I think our commitment to that has been a big reason that we've been able to sustain our success because I think certain types of young people have bought into that."

As Swinney talked, Notre Dame coach **Brian Kelly** listened — a joint news conference with Swinney involves a lot of listening — occasionally nodding his head in agreement. Swinney has built the Tigers into what Notre Dame used to be and what Kelly is trying to recreate in South Bend, Indiana.

The second-ranked

Tigers (13-0) face the third-ranked Fighting Irish (12-0) on Saturday in Notre Dame's first College Football Playoff appearance. It is Clemson's fourth straight. The winner will play for the national championship on Jan. 7 in Santa Clara, California. Clemson has played for the title twice in the past three seasons.

Kelly marveled at Clemson's consistency under Swinney.

"It's easy to get distracted," Kelly said. "And to keep that within your culture in your program requires just to have an eye on it every single day. So his

ability to continue to keep his program year in and year out at the top of college football requires more than just recruiting good players."

Kelly has been at Notre Dame for nine years and had the most successful run for a Fighting Irish coach since **Lou Holtz**, who won the school's last national title in 1988. The only coaches who have won more games at Notre Dame than Kelly (81-34) are Hall of Famers **Knute Rockne** (105), **Holtz** (100), **Ara Parseghian** (95)

and **Frank Leahy** (87).

Kelly has only once been this close to a national championship and after Alabama beat the Irish 42-14 in the 2012 BCS championship game, Notre Dame really didn't seem all that close in retrospect. Just two seasons ago, the Irish went 4-8 and Kelly overhauled his staff and his approach to leading a team. The result was a huge turnaround to 10-3 last year. The foundation appears to be in place for the Irish to regularly contend for

the playoff.

Still, Kelly and his team have downplayed any talk of the Cotton Bowl being a barometer for the program. Sure, the Irish are here again on the big stage, but do they really belong?

"When you go through and win week after week, you're past measuring sticks," Kelly said earlier this week.

If Alabama is the current standard in college football, Clemson has been the only program that comes close.

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