

Alabama's DeVonta Smith, Patrick Surtain II Preview CFP National Title Showdown With Ohio State



Following their 49-28 victory over Clemson in the College Football Playoff semifinals, the Buckeyes are amid preparation for a national championship showdown with the Crimson Tide, who defeated Notre Dame 31-14 in their semifinal game.

Alabama standout senior wide receiver DeVonta Smith and standout junior cornerback Patrick Surtain II spoke to members of the media via Zoom video conference Jan. 4, previewing the highly anticipated title game. What follows is a rundown of what Smith and Surtain II said:

Alabama senior wide receiver DeVonta Smith:

Will you talk about what it would mean to you and your family for you to win the Heisman Trophy tomorrow?

Right now I'm not really worried about the Heisman Trophy. I'm just trying to come in with the team this weekend, just look forward to getting on to the game plan for Ohio State.

Do you look at yourself as sort of like representing all receivers? In other words, receivers don't usually win this award; they often don't even get to be a finalist. Amari Cooper did but it's not that often. Do you take some pride representing yourself but also receivers?

I guess you could say that, just showing that it really just — the person that goes out and just puts in the work, they're going to get the things that they deserve. So if you work for things you're going to get the things that you deserve.

Seems like you're very familiar with playing in Hard Rock Stadium. Could you explain, I guess, having your last game here at the Orange Bowl and how you plan on utilizing that to your advantage this week?

It really don't matter where we play at. Just spot the ball; I'm ready.

I'm curious just what you've seen from Ohio State's secondary, specifically Shaun Wade. He came back this year to kind of prove himself, and I'm curious your perspective on what he's done and the match-up that you guys will have with that secondary.

I really haven't watched film yet. I haven't got the chance to watch film yet. I'm going to kind of dig into it today. Hopefully I'll get into it today and I can see some things that are interesting for us.

I can't help but want to ask really where you got that team-before-me kind of mentality, because we obviously hear it in these answers. So tell me a little bit of your background and why the team mentality kind of is engrained in you.

Just because you're not out there playing by yourself. With team success comes individual success. If the team is doing good, then everybody is doing good, and that's what it all comes down to.

You've always been a big part of the offense going back to your freshman year, but with Jaylen Waddle getting hurt earlier this year, how did that change your role or change your attitude in feeling like I have to be more of a contributor to this offense or a leader in this offense?

Well, just me being the competitor I am I wanted to just do whatever I can to help the team, and that's what it came down to. Just everybody on the offense felt like they could do more to help the team, and that's what we've all been trying to do.

You remember that 2018 team that was undefeated to this point in the season and didn't finish the way you wanted in California. How is that a motivating factor this week to keep this legacy of this team undefeated as opposed to a team that came this close and almost got there?

The past is the past. Nothing we can do about it now. We're just focusing on this week and how we can prepare for this game and just making sure that it doesn't happen again.

I was hoping you could talk to me a little bit about how the power of believing in yourself has shaped your life, and also I wanted you to kind of clue me in to when you got your last growth spurt. You went from 125 at some age when you were in high school — is this right? I was reading back through some stories.

I don't remember, but it was probably somewhere around that.

How has the power of believing in yourself then shaped your life?

Just you've got to believe in the things that you do. If you don't believe in it, then why are you doing it? You just can't be out here doing something that you don't believe in. You put your mind to some things and eventually it's going to happen.

How many people told you you couldn't be a football player?

I heard it a lot, all my life.

Coming into the College Football Playoff, Ohio State had some disrespect to the program with people saying they do not deserve to get in. Were you all looking ahead to Clemson playing in the National Championship, and was it a shock to you that Clemson lost and you now have to face Ryan Day's Ohio State?

I mean, I'm not part of the committee, so I have no say-so in who they put in and who they wanted to put in. At the end of the day, we just show up here, practice, and get ready for whoever the next

opponent is.

Last year's Citrus Bowl, how important do you think that game was in terms of a launching-off point for this 2020 team?

I think it was very important, just to give everyone something to think about, how like the season went, and it wasn't where we wanted to be, but just to end everything on a good note to kind of be like, Okay, we see what next year is going to look like and we know what we have to do to get things right.

How did Sark break the news that he was going to Texas, and what was the reaction among players?

We had a meeting. Coach Saban told us about it. Everyone is happy for Coach Sark. That's part of the business. But he's going to be here with us throughout this last game, and we're trying to finish things the right way.

The Nick Saban you see is not the Nick Saban we see. If you had to describe him to somebody on the outside, how would you do that?

He's very funny. May not seem like it to y'all, but he has a sense of humor.

Do you have any example of that, and how often do you see it?

Every day at practice. It's always every day at practice.

Alabama junior cornerback Patrick Surtain II:

When you watched Ohio State's offensive performance on Friday, whether it was live or on video, what were your impressions, and how much of a challenge is that going to be for you guys?

They were very dominant in the passing game, in the run game, very balanced, very efficient. We know it's going to be a challenge. We're just going to have to go in the film room and prepare like we need to.

I just wanted to ask you about Mac Jones and DeVonta "Smitty" Smith. How happy are you guys for them to be Heisman finalists, and what's it been like for you as a defensive player to go up against those two this year?

They're probably not as excited as we are, but as a team we're very excited for them. They deserve it. A very prestigious award. They worked hard for it. We're just excited for it tomorrow. Whoever wins it, we're going to be happy for him.

But just going against them guys every day, it makes me better as a football player, but it also taught me going against guys like that when you go on the field, it makes you 100 times better on game day.

It was a great opportunity for me, and with that individual success comes team success, as well. Without the team we never would have known about those awards like that.

How does it help you as a defensive player to play for a team with an offense that can put up 50 or more against anybody?

It's very helpful. I'd say our offense helps us sometimes. You know, we just go in and prepare like we need to, but knowing the type of offense we have, we're not anxious or very upright at all, knowing what they can do and what they're capable of.

Patrick, where is this team at if standout tailback Najee Harris turns pro last year instead of coming back?

You know, when he came back we were all very excited. He's a very good player. But if he wasn't here we'd have had to look to the drawing board, and I'm sure whoever steps in would do great, as well.

I'm curious how much you've watched of Ohio State's receiving corps, specifically Chris Olave who had the big game against Clemson and what you've seen out of that group.

They're very finesse type of receivers. They've got speed, vertical threats, but they also run great routes. It's going to be a challenge for us as a secondary and as a unit, so we go and watch film on them and prepare like we need to to focus on their concepts and what they like to do.

I was wondering as you watched Justin Fields, I would think you watched a little bit of that game the other night, maybe you didn't, but he got hit in the back, came back in that game, and threw for over 300 yards for those guys. What's your impression of Justin Fields both from what you've heard of him over the years and then coming out of that game on Friday night?

He's a high competitor. He leads the team the right way. They go off of him, and for him to come back in the game, like I said, that just shows what type of competitor he is and what type of toughness he has.

That team success builds around him. He's a great player all in all.

Pre-injury, how did going against Jaylen Waddle and Devonta Smith in practice every day, that combination of a slot receiver and outside receiver, prepare you for what you're going to see against Ohio State with Garrett Wilson and Chris Olave?

You know, going against those guys every day in practice is like a game-day type of situation. So every time I go against them I treat it like a game situation, like I said.

It helps me prepare for the game because you're going to see talent like that in the game. But it just doesn't get any better than that, what you go against in practice, so it helps me get better and see what I can improve on and stuff like that.

I know you probably are thinking about this, but playing at home, how much does that mean to you, and where does it fall in your mind? Does it stay in the back of your mind, or where does that fall in importance?

It's pretty exciting, you know, to play back at home. But it doesn't matter where we play at. We've still got to play 60 minutes of the football game and focus on what we need to do and control what we need to control.

I'd say it's another game, and just no matter the setting or no matter where it's at, we've still got to play.

You guys have had a couple games against Ole Miss and Florida where your defense gave up a lot of points. What do you think went wrong for your defense in those games, and does that concern you going to play against an offense like Ohio State?

Going into those games I felt like we wasn't as communicative as we needed to be, wasn't flying around. We gave up big plays due to like mental errors and stuff like that, things that we can improve on in the film room and in practice.

And, you know, we just focus on and control on what we need to do to improve each week. Looking forward to this game. Nothing has changed. We've just got to focus and prepare the right way.

What stands out to you the most about Justin Fields?

His arm. He's got a tremendous arm. He's very accurate, as well. He can put the ball wherever he needs to, and he's very mobile in the pocket. He's a virtual threat. He can beat teams in multiple ways with his arm and his legs, so he's a good player.

Talk about coming back home; what's the feeling of knowing that family and friends are going to be there to watch you play at Hard Rock?

It's going to be a tremendous feeling having them come and support me back at home. It will be a great feeling. I've just got to show out and make them happy, make them proud, you know.

How does it feel to give any advice to anybody from South Florida to be in the position that you are today?

I'd just say work hard. South Florida, there's talent everywhere. Your name will get called and you will be on a bright stage like this, so just keep working and keep striving to perfection.

A lot of questions about the secondary heading into the season, and certainly you've elevated your game, there's no doubt about that. I'm curious to get your thoughts on freshman defensive back Brian Branch and really what you've seen development-wise out of him.

Brian, you know, he grew each week and he's gotten better. He's more confident out there. He's not a freshman anymore. Like going into the season like this, he's a sophomore, a vet, and he's playing like it, too. The more and more you see each week of him he gains more confidence, and you can see it in his play.

The sky's the limit for him, and he's a hard worker, so you can't take that away from him. So he's going to keep on striving for greatness, you know.

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