Inside 'Saban'

College football's most feared coach opens the playbook on his life

By ANTHONY ANGELILLO
Copy Editor

Moments before his introductory press conference at Louisiana State University (LSU) in 1999, football coach Nick Saban saw the crowd, ducked into the bathroom and called his wife, Terry. In the second episode of ESPN's "Saban," he remembers telling her he wanted to come home.

Terry Saban, known to Alabama fans as Miss Terry, shut that down.

"You can't come home," she said in the series. "Put your big boy panties on and get back in there."

The six-part series premiered Oct. 8 on ESPN, with every episode streaming on the ESPN app. The docuseries features more than 70 people and hundreds of hours of unseen footage. The premiere averaged 529,000 viewers, the most for an ESPN original debut since 2022, "The Captain" about New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter.

Saban won seven national championships, six with The University of Alabama Crimson Tide and one with the LSU Tigers, before retiring in January 2024. The series is best when it shows the different paths Saban could have taken, which could have reshaped football as we know it.

Back in January 1997, Saban interviewed with the New York Giants but stayed at Michigan State University after M. Peter McPherson, the school's president at the time, promised him a new contract. When Saban followed up, he said McPherson told him the deal would come in $100,000 short.

When LSU called in 1999, Saban asked Michigan State only for the missing money. The response, as he tells it: "Nobody cares about your $100,000."

Because he could not visit Baton Rouge without being spotted, Miss Terry went in his place. She found the facilities outdated, but the athletes in the weight room won her over.

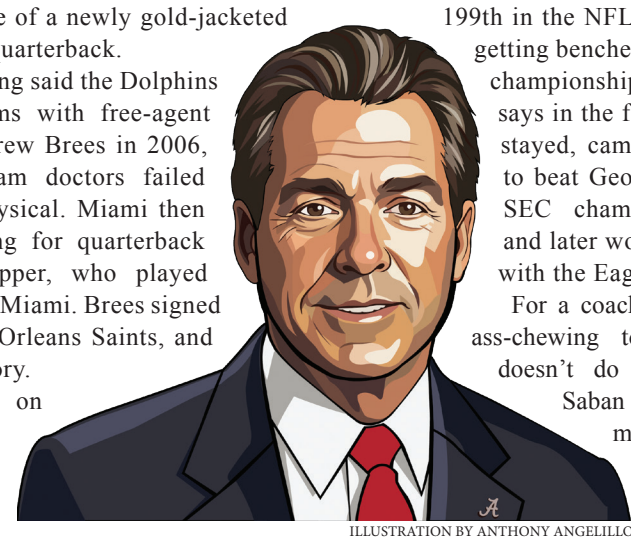
"This is a diamond in the rough," she told Saban. In Saban's fourth season, LSU won the national championship.

Dr. Lionel "Lonny" Rosen, a psychiatry professor whom Saban met at Michigan State, helped him develop "The Process," and in the series, Rosen compares him to a tiger driven by instinct.

Saban's two seasons with the Miami Dolphins became the biggest what-if, mainly because of a newly gold-jacketed Hall of Fame quarterback.

Saban has long said the Dolphins agreed to terms with free-agent quarterback Drew Brees in 2006, before the team doctors failed him on his physical. Miami then pivoted, trading for quarterback Daunte Culpepper, who played four games for Miami. Brees signed with the New Orleans Saints, and the rest is history.

Losing out on Brees pushed Saban back to college football. Saban would take the Crimson Tide job Jan. 3, 2007. Had the Dolphins cleared Brees, Alabama's second dynasty might never have happened.



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The most watched clip from the series comes 11 years later, in January 2018. With the Crimson Tide trailing the Georgia Bulldogs 13-0 at halftime of the College Football Playoff Championship, Saban told quarterback Jalen Hurts, who was 26-2 as the starter, that freshman quarterback Tua Tagovailoa would play the second half.

His assistants looked at him like he was crazy, Saban says. He didn't know cameras were rolling in the locker room when he announced the decision.

Hurts, now the Philadelphia Eagles quarterback, compares the benching to former quarterback Tom Brady going 199th in the NFL draft. "Mine is getting benched in the national championship game," Hurts says in the fifth episode. He stayed, came off the bench to beat Georgia in the next SEC championship game and later won a Super Bowl with the Eagles.

For a coach known for his ass-chewing to anyone who doesn't do what he asks, Saban fights back tears more than once in the series.

He talks about Miss Terry and his father, Nick Sr., who died as Saban was starting his coaching career. Saban's sister handed the ESPN crew a box of film reels from her basement in Monongah, West Virginia, including footage of Nick Sr. coaching the Black Diamonds youth football team.

Miss Terry's influence followed him to Tuscaloosa. Texas head coach Steve Sarkisian, a former Saban assistant, said no one joined Saban's staff without having dinner with the couple. She is also the executive producer on the series. ESPN senior supervising producer Torey Champagane said she "reminds us that his story was never his alone."

The series doesn't mention Saban's dislike of name, image and likeness (NIL) deals or the former Texas A&M head coach Jimbo Fisher and compliance concerns around his program.

The morning after his first national championship at Alabama, Saban called a 7:30 a.m. coaches meeting to start on the next season. Now an analyst on "College GameDay," he has room to look back. ESPN reporter Marty Smith said Saban "never let himself reflect before."

Saban's impact on college football will never be tested, and many are still getting used to football with him coaching. After decades of chasing the next title, "Saban" catches him doing something he never allowed himself as a coach: stopping long enough to see what he built.

'Team Moms Baseball': How parental ego is changing youth sports

By REX NAYLOR
Satff Writer

Thousands of kids show up to baseball diamonds across the nation each weekend to play America's pastime. So what better way to show how parents have taken it too far than a reality TV show about the parents?

Think of "Team Moms: Baseball" like the hit reality television show "Dance Moms." A group of parents with over-inflated egos who want what's best for their children at the end of the day, yet still manage to put their own needs and wants ahead of their kids'.

Even though "Dance Moms" didn't premiere until 2011, it's evident how the toxicity of parents has bled into youth athletics. The toxic culture still exists in youth sports and the show put it on full display.

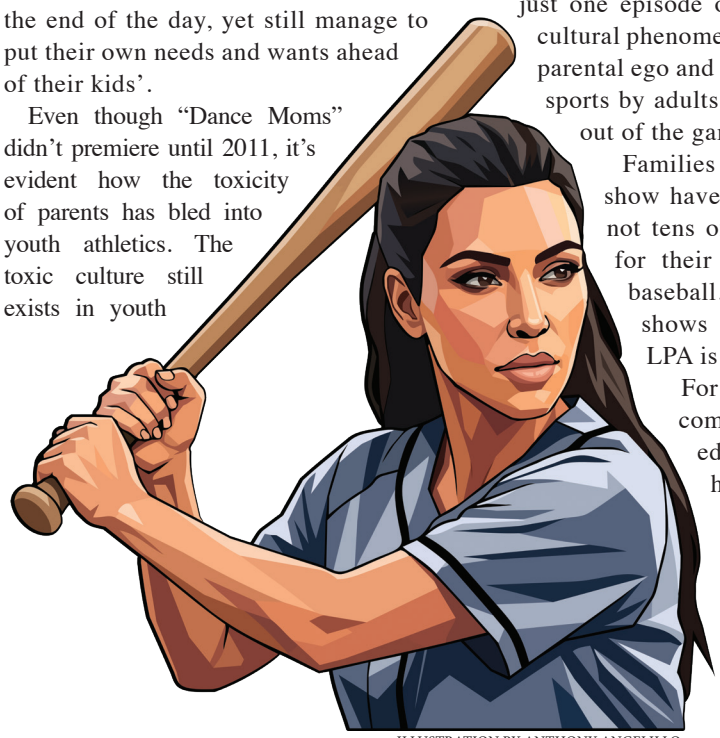

ILLUSTRATION BY ANTHONY ANGELILLO

The show is executive produced by media personality Kim Kardashian, as it follows seven families at the Legendary Player Academy in Scottsdale, Arizona. For all intents and purposes, the academy's goal is to produce baseball stars to play at collegiate and professional levels.

The show pulls the curtains back to the real stars — the parents. From watching just one episode on its own, a sobering cultural phenomenon shows how intense parental ego and the overtaking of youth sports by adults slowly sucks kids' joy out of the game.

Families like the ones in the show have invested thousands, if not tens of thousands of dollars, for their teenage sons to play baseball. A quick Google search shows the annual tuition of LPA is $30,000 per year.

For this, the academy completely neglects education, as only two hours are dedicated to school, while the rest of the day consists of strength workouts, hitting practice and fielding drills.

With the heavy price tag, the boundary between parent and child can become blurred. Instead of a place where a kid can cope with failure or letting their team down, the burden could shift to the parent. For some, a child's performance may become a source of personal validation.

A few moments from the first episode irked me, along with viewers sharing their opinions on Facebook and Reddit. Specifically, the Baldri family jumped out for two big reasons. When each family was being introduced, the Baldris were introduced during one of the daughter's birthday parties.

The mother, Rylee, wouldn't stop speaking about her son and praising him for existing, which there's nothing inherently wrong with. What snapped me back to reality was Rylee saying, "Let's celebrate your sister now."

Even within the reality television world, redirecting a daughter's birthday to celebrate your son highlights a striking dynamic of performative parenting.

Later on in the episode, before a game, Dallas Baldri is talking to his son, Sal. Sal mentions how much his arm hurts, but Dallas tells him not to speak about it to anyone else. For additional context, Sal is only 13 and has all of high school athletics ahead of him.

The show highlights concerns surrounding youth sports, including the pressure placed on young athletes and the expectations parents bring to the games. However, these issues extend beyond one show and are unlikely to disappear simply because they receive more attention. For some parents, their children's athletic careers may be an opportunity to achieve the success they never could.

Since the show has been released, cast members have come out saying they thought the project would be a docuseries highlighting the intensity and financial sacrifices that come with high-level travel ball.

When Rylee Baldri was asked about the show on the Now with Nadine podcast, she said, "When we were originally approached, it was supposed to be a docuseries about young kids playing baseball at a higher level. My son was all about it. What kid would not want to be filmed playing his favorite sport?"

Maybe it was a miscommunication, or the editing department had free range on what could be changed. Either way, the final product was significantly different from what it was thought to be.

The show is glossy, frustrating and inaccurate. Ultimately, similar issues may arise in other youth sports like football, basketball and even soccer. Youth sports continue to face challenges, and the show adds fuel to the fire.