

The special offseason workshops that made Alabama special

Alabama's football team has lived and played by the mantra "finish" this season, a reference to avoiding the kind of collapse it experienced against Ohio State in the inaugural College Football Playoff a year ago.

One of the keys to achieving that — greater understanding and communication not only among players but also among coaches — has its origins long before the season started.

Beginning last spring and continuing over several months, Alabama engaged in a series of workshops focused on four pillars of interpersonal relations and team dynamics: effective communication, relationship building, critical thinking and problem solving.

Many Alabama players and coaches credit the sessions with strengthening the bonds and teaching processes on the team, which faces No. 1 Clemson for the College Football Playoff championship on Jan. 11.

"It gave us information about our players and gave Coach (Nick Saban) information about his coaches that says, this is how these guys think, this is how they work," said Lane Kiffin, the Crimson Tide's offensive coordinator. "It helps you manage, work with them, motivate them better, because everybody's different."

Said Reggie Ragland, an All-America linebacker and senior captain for the Tide, "It taught me how I can talk to my teammates and how I can't. It was great, and we're definitely seeing the results."

The workshop, known as ILEAD (I Learn, Earn and Demonstrate) was created by Dr. Chenavis Evans, who holds a PhD in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from Auburn and is the mother of Alabama sophomore linebacker Rashaan Evans.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaaf/2016/01/06/alabama-football-personality-profile-workshops-ilead-chenavis-evans-nick-saban-college-football-playoff/78344398/>



(Photo: Marvin Gentry, USA TODAY Sports)

Dr. Evans and her partner have built their careers on group dynamics and problem solving, working with everyone from corporate CEOs to plant workers to delinquent individuals, but she created the ILEAD program within her company, Critical Insights Consulting, with college and professional athletes in mind.

Evans has worked one on one with NFL players and proposed her program to nine college football programs during the past offseason. A number of them brought her in, including Alabama, which constantly seeks ways to innovate and improve on what already is one of the most successful programs in the FBS.

“I think that any business — I think they call it quality control,” Saban said. “You sort of assess the things that you did well, the things that you need to improve, some area that may give you difficulty.

“And then you go into research mode to try to figure out how can we innovate, to use your term, something that will help us do these things better.

“So it’s sort of all a part of the process of what I think any successful organization tries to do in terms of evaluating where they are, what they need to do to improve.”

The football program cleared the engagement of Evans through university compliance, and Evans was compensated for her work. “If a school has hired a student-athlete’s parent using normal hiring procedures, the parent has a legitimate business and is compensated at the going rate, the scenario is not against NCAA rules,” NCAA spokesperson Michelle Hosick said in an email to USA TODAY Sports.

Evans had a number of fundamental requirements for the process: The first aspect of it had to focus on self-awareness; it couldn't be just for players, coaches had to be a part of it, too; and the workshop experience had to be positive in its nature. "A lot of companies focus on the negative," she said. "This focuses on their strengths."



Junior defensive lineman Jonathan Allen remembers sessions held in the Tide's wide receivers meeting room that included surveys, analysis and interaction to identify how players and coaches learn, communicate, are motivated and even carry themselves, and what is most effective for each person in the program. "She would get the results and tell you about yourself just like that," he said. "And she was right about 99% of the time."

Ragland's strongest suit was social. Allen and fellow lineman A'Shawn Robinson were "gentle giants." The offense-focused Kiffin had the same personality profile as linebacker Denzel Devall and defensive back Tony Brown.

"I thought it was really good feedback," Kiffin said. "When she went over the results as a staff, it was, That makes sense now. This player doesn't get motivated by getting on him in front of people. This kid is going to do much better in structure. This kid's going to *fight* structure. Some of it was stuff you already knew, but especially with our younger kids just coming in, it was helpful."

Wide receivers coach Billy Napier found the training helped him become a better teacher, which he considers the No. 1 strength of his boss, Saban. Between meeting

room sessions, photo and diagram reviews, video, field walkthroughs, individual periods, group periods and full team settings, Alabama has a seven-step process for teaching its players concepts and technique. The ILEAD workshops showed which players would respond best to each step of the process, information Napier has used to give extra attention to certain players at specific points of the instruction.



(Photo: AP)

“We’re all responsible for ways to improve, to make things better, and I think we found a little niche here that helped us,” he said.

“It may not be with every player, but there may be one or two or three individuals that you find something that makes them different. And we certainly were able to do that. And it’s helped me as a coach, and it’s certainly helped us as a unit — my unit — perform better this year.”

In addition to enlightening breakthroughs among Alabama’s veteran players, the workshops offered particularly valuable insights into the newcomers in the program while building bonds between players and coaches regardless of the length of their tenures in Tuscaloosa. Alabama has nine true or redshirt freshmen on its Playoff two-deep, and assistant head coach and secondary coach Mel Tucker is in his first year with Alabama following defensive coordinator roles with the Chicago Bears, Jacksonville Jaguars and Cleveland Browns.

“Coach Saban does a great job making sure our players are supported on and off the field, and we do everything as a team,” said Tucker, who was deeply involved in the ILEAD workshops. “The more you know, the more you can help them. The players, they don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

HIGHLIGHTS: ALABAMA'S PATH TO THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

