



# NICK SABAN

THE  
INTERVIEW

...SITS DOWN WITH **CAR BIZ TODAY**  
AND SHARES THE DETAILS TO  
DRIVING SUCCESS ON THE FIELD  
AND AT HIS DEALERSHIPS

Written By **MARK WALLACE MAGUIRE**

## NICK SABAN'S ATTENTION TO DETAIL is legendary.

Whether it's anecdotes of him challenging his team to get better within days of clinching a national title or how he possesses a laser-like precision in scheming and planning for opponents, the man has earned the reputation of a winner's winner.

He's won six national titles - one at LSU and five at Alabama. His coaching tree numbers over a dozen assistants who have landed prominent head coaching roles at colleges such as Georgia, Florida State, Oregon and The Atlanta Falcons.

And his proclivity for placing players into the NFL is unparalleled.

On and off-the-record, coaches and critics have provided different assessments of Saban's management style, opinions on player transfers and dedication to his profession. But, there's one thing they agree on:

He's not a good coach.

He's a great coach.

Talk to Saban about success and the chances are high that within minutes he will cite his oft-mentioned 'The Process,' a noted coaching philosophy he developed with psychology professor Dr. Lonny Rosen when he coached at Michigan State in the late 1990s.

Saban's 'The Process' has been a point of interest for coaches and fans alike and has been written about in several books, featured on a 60 Minutes episode and often provides fodder for the broadcast booth as announcers work to decipher the formula behind his consistent winning.

The philosophy focuses on several key factors including ownership, accountability and partnership. It also emphasizes focusing on the moment and demanding perfection from yourself and others. Through time and repetition, these actions result in building a winning program.

Saban brings those same fundamentals of 'The Process' which guided his teams to national titles to the Mercedes-Benz dealerships he co-owns with wife, Terry, and business partner Joe Agresti. The dealerships are located in Birmingham and Nashville.

While he may not be in the dealerships on a daily basis, employees note his impact.

Luke Elder, who serves as general manager of the Birmingham dealership, summed it up succinctly.

"[Saban's] influence is felt every day and it's exciting to be a part of the team that embodies those same values and passion for excellence," he said.

Saban's passion for his dealership was evident when we sat down with him for an interview in August. Throughout the interview, he cited the importance of, "the right

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AND MERCEDES BENZ OF BIRMINGHAM





While Coach Saban isn't in the dealership on a daily basis, employees say his passion for excellence is an integral part of the dealership's culture.

culture," "having the right mindset" and "accountability." He also emphasized how his involvement with Mercedes-Benz is not just a fad. He has been in love with the brand since he first saw a model glide into his father's filling station when he was a child. In interviews, he's confessed he was interested in becoming a GM at a dealership before he was lured into a coaching career as a graduate assistant at Kent State in the 1980s. As a further testament, Saban bought his first Mercedes in 1981. He hasn't driven any other brand since.

Saban doesn't have any plans from retiring as a gridiron general in the near future, but if he does, you can bet he will be as comfortable driving success in the dealership as on the field.

### What are the similarities in creating a successful culture in football and at the dealership?

Establishing a culture ... be it Xs and Os or corporate America ... requires an organization to start with the right mindset. Everyone in the organization has to be committed to the same goals, principles, values, and standards of excellence. As a head coach/CEO/supervisor, it's important to define exactly what it will take to accomplish these goals ... this is what I refer to as "The Process". Everyone must clearly understand the expectations and what is necessary ... individually and collectively ... to accomplish the goals set. From top to bottom, ALL have to develop the mindset and discipline to execute, on a daily basis, the 'little' things that will eventually lead to

## WE CONSIDER OURSELVES A LUXURY RETAILER, NOT A CAR DEALER ... AND WE MEASURE OURSELVES IN THAT LIGHT.

accomplishing bigger results. Believe it or not, it's difficult for a lot of people to do what you're supposed to do, when you're supposed to do it, the way it's supposed to be done. It boils down to choices versus feelings. A person needs to choose to make the right decision versus what they feel like doing [i.e., whether the choice is to lift weights vs. watch TV for a football player ... or ... call a customer for a sales manager; it's human nature to want to choose the easy way]. There are three components to The Process: ownership, accountability, and partnership. These three practices make it possible to work together to build mutual respect and trust. Lastly and, perhaps even more important, every person in the organization must have a clear understanding of the 'cause and effect' of their actions. You can have 99.9% of your team heading in the right direction, however, one person's bad decision can have far-reaching consequences on the organization as a whole. I believe all of the above are crucial in order to set the tone and culture of a successful organization.

### How important is the customer experience at a car dealership in 2018?

In an age of increasing price transparency and competition, there is only one meaningful way to differentiate yourself versus your peers ... and that is putting forth a stellar customer experience. Our ability to provide the highest level of customer experience is the result of our deep-rooted culture. We recruit, hire, train, and promote based on our team's ability to thrive within and add to our culture. We have cultural pillars that are measured, inspected, and reinforced every single day at all stores within the Dream Motor Group. We're unique because we didn't just decide who we are, put it on paper, and call it a culture. Instead, we put 30 measurable items in place to ensure our culture thrives and we monitor them conscientiously.

### What is your Mercedes Benz dealership doing in customer service to win against your competitors?

We consider ourselves a luxury retailer, not a car dealer ... and we measure ourselves in that light. This mentality keeps us focused on both the blocking and tackling of great customer service from state-of-the-art facilities ... one of which has a bakery-cafe inside ... and basic but continuous customer service training including

phone and internet skills that are continually recorded, secret-shopped, and reviewed with our teams to improve basic customer service/handling efforts. Our higher level customer experience is possible because of our cultural pillars and our strategy. Each employee has the power to fix any problem a customer might have without regard to financial order of magnitude. Every employee has a list of principles on lanyards which hang around their necks that they can refer to daily so no one forgets who we are and how to treat people ... from internal teammates, valuable customers, and even the communities in which we serve. We even allow our employees additional paid time off to work our local charities to ensure we are always providing them with all of the tools and experiences they need to be better people. Our most recent strategic advancement is the introduction of a highline subscription service called 'Dream Garage' which gives our customers the ability to switch from vehicle-to-vehicle, dependent on their needs, with a touch of a button and subsequent visit from one of our Dream Garage concierges.

### With retail shifting to a digital format, how is your dealership getting ahead and staying ahead of that trend?

We have always understood that the digital side of our business was key to our current and future success, so we feel the shift for us was minor compared to many other retailers. Other than when we opened our new facilities in Nashville and Birmingham, our marketing has been 90% focused on the digital space. We have strong e-Commerce teams that monitor every digital lead source and the engagement of the digital shopper. Our stores have access to the very best analytic tools to learn where our digital customers shop, what they like, and how to engage them in a way that makes the digital experience equal, if not better, than what they experience when they walk into our stores.

### How are you able to customize and personalize the customer experience?

Our teams fully understand that no one has to buy a Mercedes-Benz, it is a choice ... and we work diligently to ensure that their experience, from the time they first contact us to the time they leave, is what a luxury buyer would experience at the best hotels and finest

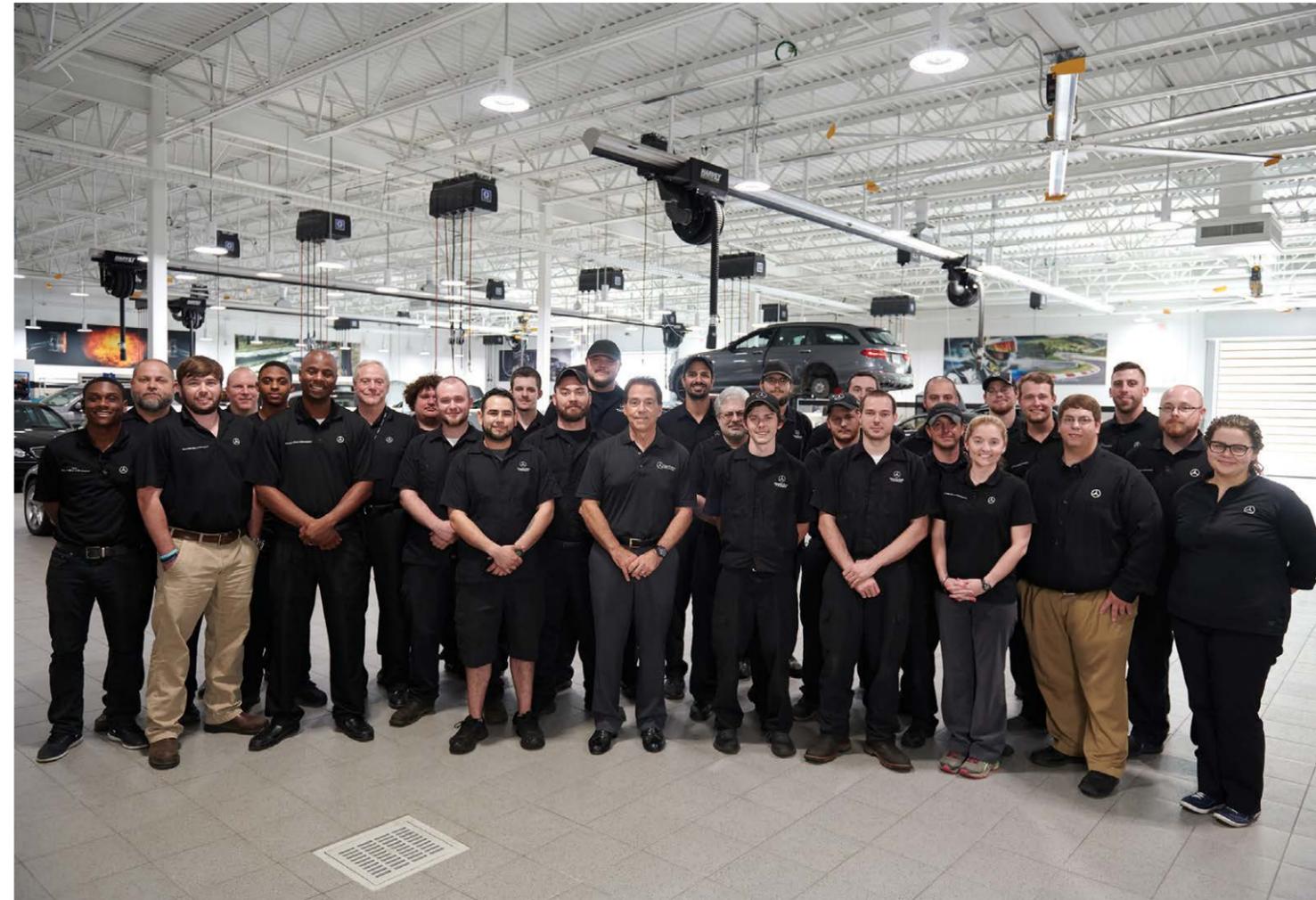


**Above:** Saban takes great pride in his dealerships. The interior of the Birmingham dealership features an Edgar's Bakery-Cafe, a popular cafe which features a variety of confections and breakfast and lunch items. This is one of the aspects that is aimed toward providing prime service while customers wait to get their automobile serviced or want to take a break from shopping.

**Above and Right:** The exterior features pristine landscaping. But, Saban also prides himself on the interior workings, especially customer service. For example, the dealership has live phone receptionists. Saban bought his first Mercedes in 1981. He hasn't driven any other brand since



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restaurants. We have live phone receptionists ... we never do a cold transfer on the phones. When customers come to our dealerships, they are greeted by product concierges who know each car we sell as thoroughly as our highly-trained sales consultants. We offer amenities ... like Edgar's Bakery-Cafe at our Birmingham store ... so it becomes a place they are comfortable with just coming to have lunch, even when they are not shopping for a car or having their vehicle serviced. When a customer buys a car, we go to their home as often as needed to readdress the features of their car [i.e., pairing a phone or programming a garage door]. Even football programs are being impacted by the IT explosion and a trend toward a digital format in marketing and recruiting through the use of social media. We are hiring more people in this field for better exposure and branding.

**If or when you are ever done with your football career, do you plan on expanding your ownership or involvement in your current dealerships?**

**M**y biggest fear in ending my football career is no longer being a part of a team. After 45 years spent in the coaching ranks ... and nearly my whole life if counting Pee Wee, elementary, high school, and college playing days ... I would sorely miss the camaraderie, the positive energy in accomplishing something special, and providing leadership to help people be responsible and successful. I love coaching ... and have lots of passion to continue ... however, if and when I feel that I am no longer able to contribute to our team's success, I hope I can find a team within our business that I could impact.

## NICK SABAN

### You've said that one thing about championship teams is they are resilient. How important is teaching resilience to your staff at your dealerships? How do you teach resilience?

The car business is interesting in that you basically have 12 periods within a game/year. Each month represents an opportunity to shine and perform. Each month, like a quarter in football, has a score that clearly defines your success during that period. There are good months and not so good months, however, every month is followed by the next, which represents yet another opportunity to learn and improve from the previous. We believe that we never lose ... we either win or we learn. Our dealership teams are actually at their best when the previous month was tough; there's a lot of self-satisfaction in rebounding and outperforming the market. The Mercedes-Benz dealerships within the Dream Motor Group have won the prestigious "Best of the Best" award for every store and in every year they were eligible since it was founded. This is an unrivaled accomplishment ... a championship of sorts. With the addition of a fourth M-B store in 2017, we know we have yet another store eligible for the award.

### We've heard you've owned a Mercedes since 1981. What model are you driving now?

This is a harder question than you might think... Since my son, Nicholas, is a sales manager at our Birmingham store, he keeps selling me new ones ... he, being of the better and more improved ideology! At this point, I think I've owned them all, however, currently, I have an S550 Sedan, which is my go-to car ... and ... an AMG GT convertible, which is my fun, rocket ship! However, if Nicholas has it his way, these cars will be different by the time this article goes to print! The brand is amazing. Mercedes-Benz means it when they say, "The best or nothing" **CBT**



#### THE DEALERSHIPS

**Mercedes-Benz of Birmingham** is actually one dealership with two campuses with one in Hoover and one at Irondale in Birmingham.

<https://www.mbbhm.com/>

**Mercedes Benz of Music City**

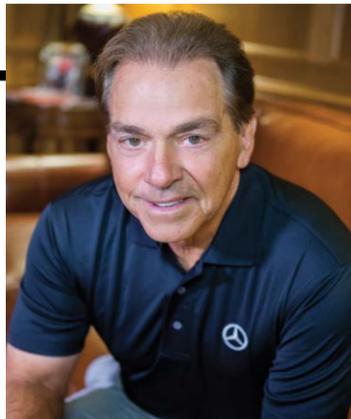
This dealership opened in July 2017. Coach Saban dedicated it to his late father, Nick Saban, Sr.

<https://www.mbofmc.com/>



#### RIDING IN STYLE

The Nick Saban Signature Series is a customized Mercedes-Benz Sprinter Van. These vans, which have an array of exclusive features, are available via order only. Features include embroidered leather seats, exclusive interior layout, heated and cooled leather seats with power massaging, two Samsung 40-inch HD LED SmartTVs and a retractable side awning.



Saban grew up in the mountains of West Virginia in coal miner country. When he received a college scholarship, it was on merit. Saban wasn't a legacy kid who got into the college of his choice on his last name. He didn't have the social media pomp of today where he relentlessly promoted his highlights on YouTube. He didn't place four hats on a table and play, "Guess where I am going?" on national signing day.

Instead, he played defensive back at Kent State, roughly 90 miles from home. While Kent State experienced some success during Saban's career there - including a trip to the 1972 Tangerine Bowl - they weren't up there with the titans of that era like Oklahoma or Nebraska.

After graduation, Saban planned on becoming a general manager at a car dealership. Instead, he was talked into staying on as a graduate assistant under head coach Don James while his wife finished her degree.

Saban has never divulged the exact details of that year spent with James, but one thing appears to be certain: Saban caught the coaching bug. Dozens of teams and roles later, Saban landed his first championship with LSU and a few years later began a dynastic run at Alabama.

And for fans and foes alike, one thing appears to be as certain every fall as death and taxes: Saban will have the Crimson Tide in talks for a national title.

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