

### NCG Game PR

NEW ORLEANS -- Alabama had long since put away the game. The Tide were 4:36 away from a national championship whether or not they scored another point. But for their sake, and for college football's sake, Trent Richardson's 34-yard touchdown run to put the final clamps on LSU was absolutely, positively needed.

"That was definitely the most fun touchdown we've ever scored," Alabama tackle Barrett Jones said after his team finished demolishing the previously unblemished Tigers 21-0 to claim its second BCS championship in three years. "After two games of frustration kicking field goals, that's a moment I'll never forget."

There are probably some fans around the country who would like to forget that the 2011 season ever took place. An already frustrating and divisive year ended with a dud of a championship game. And making it all the worse was that for many, this was merely a rerun of the teams' Nov. 5 field-goal fest -- only this time Tide kicker Jeremy Shelley made more attempts (five) than he missed (two), and after 115 combined minutes against each other, someone finally reached the end zone.

But imagine if Alabama and LSU had never met a first time. Imagine if the 11-1 Tide had faced a 13-0 team from another conference on the season's final night, with the exact same result.

Imagine how dazzled we'd be by the clinic that took place.

The Tigers were 13-0. They'd beaten three teams that finished in the Top 10 of the final polls. They averaged 40.1 points against their 12 opponents not named Alabama. The Tide shut them out. LSU had averaged 215.2 rushing yards per game. Alabama held the Tigers to 39 yards on the ground and 92 total.

Meanwhile, Tide quarterback AJ McCarron finished 23-of-34 for 234 yards and no interceptions against a defense fielding a pair of All-America cornerbacks. Just for good measure, Alabama had no turnovers, one penalty and zero return yards allowed against a team that had scored nine defensive or special teams touchdowns.

"It's hard to get any better than that," said Tide safety Mark Barron.

Which leaves us with a very strange dichotomy: Alabama won a national championship in utterly convincing fashion, yet the result was utterly unsatisfying. The Tigers, not the Tide, won the SEC championship. The Tigers, not the Tide, remarkably beat three of the five BCS bowl champions (Oregon, West Virginia and Alabama). The Tigers, not the Tide, won the teams' first meeting, in a road game that at the time was a presumed elimination game.

A set of pollsters and voters afforded Alabama a second shot at LSU, and the Tide couldn't have avenged the previous result more convincingly. But instead of a coronation, doesn't it feel like there should be another step? Wouldn't it be nice to see the Tide move on to another round and, say, beat an elite team from another conference? Doesn't it feel just a little bit ... unfair?

"It's not unfair," said gracious LSU defensive tackle Michael Brockers. "We were second tonight. They were the better team."

Teammate Jordan Jefferson wasn't quite on the same page. Asked if his team deserved a share of the national title, the Tigers quarterback said: "I think we should. We beat Alabama before. We beat eight ranked teams. We accomplished all the things we did to get there."

The truth is Alabama probably was the best team in 2011. As dominant as its defense was Monday night, it was hardly an uncharacteristic showing. Alabama is the first team in 25 years to finish No. 1 nationally in all four major statistical defense categories (total, rushing, passing and scoring defense). It finished the season having allowed just

8.2 points per game. The Tide allowed as many touchdowns -- 10 -- in 13 games as ACC champion Clemson allowed in one night in the Orange Bowl.

Forget just 2011. This Crimson Tide defense will go down as one of the greatest ever fielded.

"I hope people look at us as the No. 1 defense of all time," said cornerback Dre Kirkpatrick, one of four Alabama defensive starters (along with Barron and linebackers Courtney Upshaw and Dont'a Hightower) projected to go in the first round of April's draft.

Yet we never got to see Kirkpatrick and his teammates face off against an explosive offense like Oklahoma State's -- and in the system we have, there was no scenario where we would have. Back on the night of Dec. 3 the debate centered around whether the Cowboys or Tide deserved to face LSU in this game. If the Cowboys (or Boise State, or Oregon) had made a last-second field goal, Alabama probably would not have played for the BCS championship.

But it did, and it delivered a resounding final argument that it -- not LSU, not Oklahoma State, not anyone else -- was the best team of this college football season all along.

The Tide's rub ever since that 9-6 loss was their offense. Specifically, in a sport littered with stars like Andrew Luck and Robert Griffin III, it was hard to envision the unspectacular McCarron leading his team to a national championship.

Monday night, he took home offensive MVP honors.

With the Tigers' own stout defense admirably slowing down Richardson (he had 62 yards on 19 carries before his late-game touchdown burst), McCarron assumed the burden of moving the chains. After top receiver Marquis Maze went out with an apparent leg injury on a first-quarter punt return, McCarron connected with three previously unheralded targets, receivers Kevin Norwood (four catches, 78 yards) and Darius Hanks (five catches, 58 yards) and tight end Brad Smelley (seven catches, 39 yards). He took advantage of his protection to stand in the pocket and wait for receivers to get open underneath, and he dared to pick on the Honey Badger, All-America corner Tyrann Mathieu, who allowed several long completions on the outsides of the field.

"The guy's unbelievable," center William Vlachos said of third-year sophomore McCarron. "He wasn't scared at all. He executed against one of the best defenses in the country."

McCarron certainly fared better than his counterpart, Jefferson. In an inglorious ending to a rocky career, the LSU senior was utterly ineffective, completing 11 passes for just 53 yards. The option pitches and keepers that met moderate success in the first Alabama game went nowhere this time. Alabama defenders Upshaw, Hightower, Kirkpatrick and Barron often met him in the backfield, sacking him four times. Any hope that the Tigers, down 9-0 at halftime, would mount a second-half rally went out the window shortly into the third quarter when a rattled Jefferson tossed a hurried shovel pass right into the hands of Alabama linebacker C.J. Mosley.

"Every game your offense is not perfect," Jefferson said. "Some defenses will have your number, and Alabama's defense had our number tonight."

LSU coach Les Miles earned national coach of the year honors for his team's 13-0 regular season run in part for his seamless handling of a potentially divisive quarterback rotation between Jefferson and fellow senior Jarrett Lee. Monday night, however, Miles faced understandable bewilderment over why he never replaced the hapless Jefferson with Lee, even as 'Bama kept upping its margin.

"We did consider Jarrett Lee," he said. "But we felt like with the pass rush that we were getting that we needed a guy that could move the seat and not sustain that pass rush."

Their teams' fans have pitted Saban, the former LSU coach, and Miles, as rivals. The Mad Hatter earned newfound respect with consecutive upsets in 2010 and '11, but on the second Monday of 2012, Saban hoisted the BCS trophy

for the third time in his past seven seasons as a college coach. He won the 2009 title at Alabama with a nearly identical approach, only this year's defense proved even more dominant.

"They are a hateful bunch," said Saban. "They are as competitive as you can imagine."

And yet, the 2011 team bares two notable differences from its 2009 predecessors: It didn't go undefeated, and it didn't win an SEC championship.

Thus, it will be hard for the college football world to unconditionally immortalize Alabama the way it normally does a national champion. The Tide will be remembered for an utterly dominant final game, but their season as a whole was fairly unmemorable. They beat an eventual 9-4 Penn State team the second week and 11-2 Arkansas a couple of weeks later.

And then they didn't beat another team with that many wins until ... Monday.

In a sport that champions the notion that "Every Game Counts," only the final one truly mattered this year. LSU had the better season. Alabama had the better team. The Tide could not have done anything more to prove that, but it sure would be nice if there was a way they could.

- Stewart Mandel, SI