SKULL SESSION

MASTERING THE MENTAL GAME IN SPORTS, WORK, AND LIFE

SCOTT COCHRAN
with IVAN MAISEL

NEW YORK NASHVILLE

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SKULL SESSION

When I left the University of Alabama in January 2020 after thirteen seasons as head strength coach, conditioning coach, and motivational master for Crimson Tide football, I had six national championship rings, enough celebrity to be doing regional TV ads, and an alter ego: Coach Yeah! I went through conditioning work yelling "*Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!*" at epic decibel levels, cheering on my players, cheering up my players, getting them psyched enough to perform at skill levels they didn't know they could reach.

I also had a huge chemical dependency. I was hooked on oxycodone, *oxy* for short, and Adderall.

I had been hooked for almost eight years. I had hidden my addiction from everyone: head coach Nick Saban; trainer Jeff Allen, who was and is like a brother to me; the other coaches on the staff. I had hidden it from my wife, Cissy, whom I fell in love with pretty much the moment she walked into my weight room. I hid it from my friend Steve Sarkisian, now the head coach at Texas, when he worked at Alabama in 2016 and in 2019. Steve is in recovery himself, and he never suspected a thing.

I left Alabama to work for my close friend Kirby Smart, the head coach at Georgia. Kirby worked for Coach Saban for eleven years. Kirby and I were tight; our wives were tight; our children were close. Kirby didn't know about my addiction, either.

Three months after I changed jobs, it was just another Friday morning in Tuscaloosa. Well, not just another. For one thing, it was April 10, 2020—Good Friday, for those of you looking for greater meaning. For another, we were a month into the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, which is why I had returned to Tuscaloosa from my new job in Athens. Once the coaches couldn't go into the office, it made more sense for me and Cissy and our three kids to hunker down in the house we hadn't sold yet.

And, oh yeah, one more thing: That's the morning that my addiction tried to kill me and damn near did.

I left Alabama to go work for Kirby because I wanted to get out of the weight room. I wanted to be a coach on the field. At least, that's the story that got out in the public, and I didn't try to correct it. The real reason I left Alabama is that I thought a change of venue would help me stop taking oxy. I had all these people around me getting me the pills I needed. Maybe if I left, I wouldn't have access, and I could stop. That's called running from your addiction, and it's about as effective as it sounds. My addiction ran right alongside me. It turned out there are people in Georgia who have pills, too.

Like a lot of people suddenly working from home, I proclaimed the kids' upstairs playroom as my workspace. We had a computer in there, so I could have Zoom meetings with my Georgia coaching staff in there without being disrupted by whatever was going on in the house. I moved a big living room chair in there to make it feel more like an office, the girls' dolls notwithstanding. On this particular morning, our girls, Savannah and Lucy, were outside, and our son, Beau, was in the basement.

Toward the end of my time at Alabama, someone gave me an Opana, which is oxycodone mixed with morphine. When my body discovered Opana, my body no longer needed all those oxy pills. I was awesome all day long, until I wasn't. Then I wanted more Opana, too. I got a prescription for Opana. I filled it on the sixteenth of the month. Here it was, April 10, six days short of when I should have been out of pills, and I was out of pills.

I called one of the guys that I always got pills from—that sounds so much more innocent than "my dealer"—and he said, "I can't get you anything. The only thing I can get you is from a guy that I don't trust."

Like an addict is going to hear that.

"I don't give a damn," I said. "I'm sick. I need something. You've got to get this for me. I will pay double."

My guy tried again.

"I'm telling you, dude, I don't trust this guy," he said. "It's got to be something bad."

My addiction wouldn't take no for an answer. I went to the ATM, got some cash, met my guy, and got the pills, which were counterfeit oxycodone with a side order of fentanyl, a drug even more

dangerous than oxy. The next morning, Good Friday, I had a Zoom meeting with the Atlanta Falcons' special teams staff.

I prepared a speedball. I chopped up three 30-milligram pills of oxy, mixed in one Adderall, and snorted the four together. I remember the meeting. I killed it. We had a good meeting.

And then Cissy brought me back from the dead.

You could see into the playroom from the stairs, and how lucky that I had not closed the playroom door. Cissy happened to walk upstairs with a basket of laundry, looked in, and saw me slumped over in my big chair. She raced in and tried to straighten me up. I was sweating profusely and turning blue. She started yelling for Beau to help her, and she and I both thank God he didn't hear her. No thirteen-year-old should see a parent overdosing.

Cissy called 911, and as she talked to the operator, she lifted my head and kept trying to pull me back against the chair. I regained consciousness, sort of. Cissy described it as if I were coming out of surgery. I was conscious but in La-La Land, not making any sense, and my breathing was labored. I stood, still sweating up a storm, and made it to the shower. Cissy ended the 911 call and called James

Robinson, the Alabama team doctor. He couldn't make sense out of it. "He's blue, like he isn't breathing?" he asked.

Dr. Robinson wasn't in his office that day, but Brett Bentley was. Cissy got me dressed and drove me over to the student center. I got in there, and they could barely find a pulse, so they hooked me up to oxygen. Dr. Bentley showed Cissy some Narcan and said, "I think he's taken something. I don't know what it is."

Cissy called a neighbor and asked her to go upstairs to see if she could find any pill bottles. She went in there and found the pills and flushed them down the toilet. Dr. Bentley began to talk to Cissy about rehab facilities.

"I don't recommend you keeping him home over the weekend," Dr. Bentley told her. And then, almost as an aside, he said, "This is not going to be easy."

Dr. Bentley was right about that. It was hell. I mean, absolute hell.

You don't become the dominant program in the nation without drawing on resilience. Our teams at Alabama proved that they knew how to come back,

never more so than in the national championship game at the end of the 2017 season. That's the one where Georgia mauled us in the first half, jumping to a 13–0 lead. Coach Saban benched quarterback Jalen Hurts in the second half and put freshman Tua Tagovailoa on the field. Tua brought us back from two touchdowns behind and won in overtime with that iconic 41-yard touchdown pass to classmate DeVonta Smith.

I know something about comebacks. I have been to a rehab facility three times, one visit a hundred-day stay that really changed my life. Over and above the physical difficulty of withdrawal, I had to deal with being away from my family for such a long time. From the time our children were born, I had never been in a situation where I couldn't go home to them. I had that voice in my head, asking if I could really stay sober. I leaned on my experience of leading young people toward a goal. Under Coach Saban and under Kirby, we coached our players to perform their job, not to worry about the result. We taught them not to look at the scoreboard. Look at your opponent lined up in front of you. That is your task. That mindset is exactly what

you have to learn in rehab. You can't worry about never taking another pill for the rest of your life. You have to focus on not taking a pill today.

Every day is a fight, a choice. I choose to win. What I've learned is that success isn't about championships or money or accolades, all three of which I have chased. Success is about integrity. It's about the person you are when no one is watching. It's lifting that last rep, running that last set of stadium stairs. Every morning, I look in the mirror and ask myself, "Am I proud of me?" Most days, I am. But I have to earn that pride again in the day unfolding before me. And again the day after that.

Because I had trained players to think that way, I always have the belief, the faith, that my recovery is going to succeed. I just need to keep grinding. This is going to work. I'll be able to stay sober. I'll be able to live a life in recovery. Some of that is "fake it until you make it," although I prefer to say "fake it until you *become* it." That sounds more rooted, more permanent.

That thinking is an example of a Skull Session. It's a name I picked up from Gayle Hatch, the former Olympic weightlifting coach and a Louisiana legend. After workouts, we'd gather and reflect not

just on the physical work, but on the mental and emotional training, too—the why behind the work. When I got to Alabama, I made the name Skull Session my own. Coach Saban called it "mental development and education," but to the players, that sounded like eating kale. So I called it a Skull Session. I brought the same training to Georgia. Champions aren't built in the gym alone. They're built between the ears. They're built by asking yourself hard questions, deciding who you want to be.

We won two more national championships in my time at Georgia. I left the Dawgs' staff after the 2023 season, left big-time college football, content with the idea that I might not coach again. Let me put a finer point on that: might not coach *football* again. Coaching is what I do.

Helping people recover is coaching. I joined with Jeff Breedlove, a former Georgia state legislator who is also in recovery, to form the American Addiction Recovery Association. Our slogan is "Eliminate the Whisper." We want to shatter the stigma attached to addiction and help America understand that addiction is a disease.

Helping business leaders find methods to pull their teams in the right direction is coaching.

Teaching you the methods we used at Alabama and Georgia to attain our goals is coaching.

In *Skull Session*, I'll explain how an average high school athlete became an integral part of eight national champions, how I filled my motivational toolbox with the right gear to turn athletically gifted boys into high-achieving men, and how I beat back the disease of addiction and began coaching football again. After a year away from the game, I am the head coach at the University of West Alabama, a Division II school. I have hired a bunch of my former Alabama players to coach on my staff. They know how I think. They know how champions work.

I know it's a miracle that I'm alive. But when I describe it, it really smacks me upside the head. There are so many ways that I am lucky.

I am an addict who up until today has survived my addiction. I say that because I don't take tomorrow for granted.

I am an addict who has survived my addiction without harming anyone else, either my loved ones or a stranger who had the misfortune to drive near me when I was racing to get high. Thank God I never hurt anybody. That's why my relationship

with God is so close, because I easily could have been that guy. I remember driving to a leadership retreat at Sweet Apple Farms after I had ingested too many pills. It's a forty-five-minute drive from the Tuscaloosa campus, and I was freaked out because I was about to nod off and I had a colleague in the car. I pulled over and said, "Dude, why don't you drive? I need to get on the phone." That day scarred me.

I am an addict who would be high on fentanyl and have to drive my kids somewhere. I would start doing the math in my head—*I won't be back before I start to get withdrawal symptoms, so I need to take extra before I get in the car so that I don't get sick*. That's how crazy it is. That's how crazy I was.

I am an addict who has been able to return to my chosen profession, who has learned to delineate between what's important about my work and what isn't. I love the fact that I have been a part of eight national championship teams. I love the fact that I worked at the very top of my sport. But I am completely happy coaching Division II football because what's important to me is the connection I make with young athletes who want to compete and make themselves better.

I am an addict who emerged to do what I feel like God put me on earth to do.

Why did I survive? I like to think that God spared me for a purpose, which is a powerful incentive for me to remain clean. This book is called *Skull Session* because this training has helped me win my biggest game. The book reflects the essential components of a Skull Session—principles such as gratitude, purpose, resilience, and self-discipline. It's about bringing the same energy to your mental work that you do to the weight room. It's about facing yourself, building from the inside out. It's about building a team, a division, an entire corporation, with the traits that will lead you to achieve your goals. It's about doing the work every day, even when you're losing, even when you're in a rehab facility fighting to reclaim your life.

Honestly, I know how lucky I am. I feel as if I have been put here to coach. Everything I've learned—from coaching All-Americans, from my own failures, from my road back to coaching—is in this book. I've got eight rings, I've coached three Heisman Trophy winners and too many first-round draft picks to count, but my proudest moment didn't

happen on the field. It's being here, telling my story, helping people make today count. *Skull Session* has a whole lot of football, but my subject is making the best of what life hands you. I'm living proof that life is not about falling. It's about getting up.

KEEP READING

Order your copy of *Skull Session* today to continue reading. Click any logo below to purchase now.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

SCOTT COCHRAN is a force of nature. He redefined what it means to be a strength and conditioning coach and helped build two college football dynasties. For over two decades, he was the pulse behind the powerhouse programs of LSU, Alabama, and Georgia, collecting eight national championships and shaping the careers of many legends. Cochran is now the head football coach at West Alabama. He is also the leading voice behind Eliminate the Whisper, a movement by the American Addiction Recovery Association, which he co-founded, to combat the stigma of mental health and addiction struggles, and he's sharing his message far and wide.

IVAN MAISEL has covered college football for more than four decades, most prominently at ESPN from 2002 to 2021. He served as editor-at-large for *ESPN College Football 150*, the multiplatform

history project that in 2019 commemorated the sport's sesquicentennial. Maisel also covered college football for *Sports Illustrated*, *Newsday*, and *The Dallas Morning News*. He has written four books, including *I Keep Trying to Catch His Eye*, a memoir of dealing with grief after the death of his son in 2015. His latest book, *American Coach: The Triumph and Tragedy of Notre Dame Legend Frank Leahy*, will be published by Grand Central in September 2025.

Center Street
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New York, NY 10104
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First Edition: August 2025

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN: 978-1-546-00973-3 (hardcover); 978-0-316-59732-6 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

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