



Team Selection Press Conference

No. 2 Clemson vs. No. 3 Ohio State

December 20, 2020



JOHN SUDSBURY: Welcome and looking forward to having you back here in New Orleans. If you can start out with a brief opening statement, then we'll go to Q&A.

COACH SWINNEY: We're super excited to be coming back that way. To have a chance to be in the Playoffs is a very special opportunity for our team.

It's an incredible opportunity any year, but especially this year, all that has transpired and what all of these guys have had to do to get to this point. So just really happy for them.

We had an amazing game in the ACC championship game, which has given us this opportunity that we had to win the game. I'm just really proud of them. We look forward to competing against a great Ohio State team. We all know how talented they are, how well-coached they are. Got a lot of respect for Ryan Day and Ohio State.

But this is really just a great opportunity. Again, unusual circumstances for everyone, for sure. Not a typical bowl type of deal. Usually we've got lots of time to prep. But it is really like an open date. We play in 12 days, so we've got a lot of work to do. But we're excited about the challenge and opportunity.

Q. Coach [Dabo] Swinney, does this have the sense -- Alabama, Clemson, Ohio State, Notre Dame -- sort of a clash of royalty in college football -- major college football at this point? What's your take on that?

COACH SWINNEY: I think the committee works hard to try to select who they think is the four best teams. So this is what they came up with. And obviously, you got really, really talented players on all four of these teams. If you're going to pick the four best year in and year out, you're probably going to have -- there's probably six or seven teams out there that really have a shot every year.

Most given years, certainly Ohio State, Notre Dame, and Alabama and what they've done historically. But our program over the last decade, we've been able to elevate into that status as well.

Q. Hey, Coach. A similar question. You guys have obviously played Alabama a couple of times in this. Played Ohio State, now, I think this will be the third time. Do you like the fact that this has -- the College Football Playoff has allowed for these type of games to occur more frequently, these big games against kind of historic programs? Whereas maybe before, you scheduled these every once in a while, maybe meet in a bowl game, but now you've seen these teams more frequently.



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COACH SWINNEY: Yeah, I think the Playoff's been good, and I think it's created a lot of opportunity for, again, these type of games.

I didn't have a problem with the BCS, even though it was just two teams. I still was okay with that, but this has kind of taken that and made it better. It kind of never ends. Everybody wants more and more and more.

But it's unique. It's hard -- college football is really -- it's 130 teams. It's very difficult to get to this point, especially having consistency to be in the conversation. So I think it's great, and it's been fun to be a part of those type games. That's been one of the biggest things in helping us build our program, is going and competing against the best.

Q. Hey, Dabo. This is obviously the third meeting in five times. A lot of the matchups between Clemson and Ohio State have been big games. Do you look at that program as a rival for you guys?

COACH SWINNEY: Ohio State? Absolutely. If we're playing Ohio State, it's a playoff. Or it was a BCS bowl, back in 2013 in the Orange Bowl. Any time we play Ohio State, it's probably some type of meeting. We don't have them on our regular schedule anytime in the near future. So you know it is a big, big postseason game when you play those guys.

I think Ryan [Day] does things the right way. I think he believes in a lot of similar things, as far as how they try to run their program. We recruit a lot of the same guys. So just a lot of respect for their program.

And getting to know Ryan over the last few years, he does an awesome job. Got a great staff. It's definitely a team that we compete with, not just on the field, but also in recruiting.

Q. You always talk about trying to play your best football at the end of the year. Do you feel like yesterday was your best football game so far this year? And do you feel like there's still more out there for this group now that you're finally getting healthy?

COACH SWINNEY: Oh, yeah, no question. Definitely our best game, our most complete game. All three phases really complement each other. We had a big kick return, made a couple of field goals. Kickoff coverage was very good. We punted the ball inside the 20, I think, three times.

And then offensively, we had great balance. Was able to really run the ball efficiently like we wanted to. And then defensively, we held up against the run much better. Then that led to great third-down production on both sides. So I was really proud of our team. There's still plenty to do. We were in there watching the film just a little while ago. Still have plenty of mistakes. We turned the ball over one time.



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Plenty of things that we can do to improve. But really proud of our team and definitely played our best game. But we're at our best right now. This is the healthiest we've been by far. We still don't have a lot of people.

And again, if you go back to March, if you had told me back in March that we wouldn't have Xavier Thomas, Justin Foster, [Frank] Ladson, [Joseph] Ngata, and Justyn Ross for most of the year -- and all for some of those guys, of the year -- I mean, to be where we are is amazing. And especially those three receivers, throwing for more yards than any team ever at Clemson.

I'm just really proud of this team and how they've just worked and found -- and our staff, just found a way each and every week to get better and to stay the course. It is good to see them now after 11 games just battle-tested.

We've been forced to develop a lot of depth, placing guys maybe before they were really ready, but I felt like that paid off for us in Charlotte.

Q. Hey, Dabo. You talked about the number of games you guys have played versus Ohio State. I'm curious from your perspective, do you think it is an advantage for a team to be fresher in having played less games? Or is it an advantage to have played more games and have more reps under your belt?

COACH SWINNEY: I think the games matter. The mental and physical toll of a season -- there's nobody out there that would say that somebody who's played 11 games versus somebody who's played six is better physically or something like that because it's a long season. We've -- we're going on Week 21. These guys have had no break. It's been a grind, not just football-wise, but the mental challenge and the personal sacrifice and commitment that everybody's had to make to be able to play and continue to play. It's been incredible. Our guys have been so committed in that regard.

So yeah, anytime you step in between the lines in the game of football, that's a lot of practices. That's a lot of physicality. So I definitely think that it matters.

But at the end of the day, none of that matters in New Orleans. What matters is who plays the best in those four quarters.

Q. Good afternoon, Dabo. Congratulations on getting back.

COACH SWINNEY: Thank you.

Q. Big-picture question. I know you've got a game in 12 days, so it might be hard to think about this. I anticipate you're going to be around college football for a few more years. Do you think it is inevitable that we'll end up with something bigger at some point; that they will have eight teams, six teams, something like that?



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COACH SWINNEY: Nothing would surprise me with college football. That's the best way -- I don't have any definitive opinion one way or the other than nothing would surprise me as we move forward.

Again, I think one of the reasons that college football is so popular is because every game matters. That game we played at VTech (Virginia Tech), it mattered. That game Florida played against LSU, it mattered.

Is there a fine line? The more you expand, the less important the games become. All of a sudden, to me, it gets watered down and teams that know they're going to be in, next thing you know, you're resting guys, you're not playing guys. It all becomes about that.

So I think there's a -- what's the perfect number? Is it four? I don't -- people say, "Well, yeah, four and you're in it." But if you go to eight, I would think we would still have a chance to be in it, if we can get in it at four. I'm a little bit more of a traditional guy.

Again, as I said, I was fine with the BCS, even though it was hard to be in just two teams and so subjective. I was fine with that. I like the bowls. I like the pageantry of college football. And I think more and more it goes, the less and less the games matter. I don't know. Nothing would surprise me.

Q. Certainly an unusual year when you're only coming in for your bowl game two days before. I know when you all were here against Alabama a few years ago, you wanted the team to enjoy the experience. And also, you'll have only a couple of weeks less practice for preparation time. How is that going to be an adjustment? Do you regret that it has worked out that way, and your fans won't be able to be there -- or not many of them?

COACH SWINNEY: First of all, I'm grateful that we have the opportunity to play, regardless of whatever circumstances are. Because it's been awesome for our team and our players and these guys to have some sense of normalcy, and it has also been great, I think for our country and for people in general to -- because I know football brings a lot of joy to a lot of folks.

Our guys have been awesome. They've done things the right way all year. Really proud of them, what they've done academically. And I don't think that happens if they weren't able to be together. The type of discipline that they've lived with, it has been pretty special to be a part of it.

Absolutely, I wish, like we all do, that this was all behind us, and I'm hopeful that it will be next year. But there's nothing -- as a player, as a coach, I love the bowl experience. I love it. I just think it's awesome to be able to go and embrace a new city and to have that time together, practice in different venues. I always love that. I really do.



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I love bowl prep. I love the opportunity to develop your team during that time. We always have JV practices and things for next year's team, and it's always fun. We have some fun things that we do. So that's going to be different, for sure. Absolutely, I wish it was different. It is what it is and we embrace that. Can't control it.

So this is just basically an open date. Actually, we have less time to get ready for this game than we did for Notre Dame. So it's basically an open date. That's how we have to look at it. You've got Christmas sandwiched in there as well. So it's a unique dynamic that we've not dealt with in the past. But it is what it is. And yeah, we'll come in, I guess, sometime the night of the 30th and kind of have our Friday-type routine on the 31st, play the game on the 1st, and come home right after the game.

It's all good. We're just thankful and grateful to have the opportunity.

JOHN SUDSBURY: Thank you very much for the time today, Coach. Look forward to seeing you in about 12 days.

COACH SWINNEY: All right. Appreciate it.

JOHN SUDSBURY: Coach Day, thank you very much for joining us. If you could start off with a brief opening statement, we'll go ahead to the questions.

COACH DAY: Yeah, thank you, John. Certainly excited. Everyone here is very, very excited about the opportunity to play in the Sugar Bowl. It's been a unique season in so many different ways. To get an opportunity to get back into the playoff and play against Clemson is very, very exciting. Certainly have an unbelievable amount of respect for Dabo [Swinney] and his program and what they've done, but how they do it. He and his wife, Kathleen, have been really good to Christine and I. Looking forward to the opportunity to play.

It will be a quick turnaround. We only have 12 days here to really get ready for this thing and Christmas is in between. So unique challenge. But looking forward to it.

Q. Hi, Coach. Congratulations on making the playoff. Wanted to ask you just point blank: Do you think it should be a requirement that a team wins its conference championship in order to be included in the playoff?

COACH DAY: I think it's a two-part question, because the way it is right now, I don't think that that makes any sense. The only way that would work is if you expanded the playoff system. I do think that's the fairest way to get that accomplished, is you win your conference, and then you go play for the whole thing.

But the way it is set up right now, that obviously doesn't matter. But I do think winning your conference is very significant.



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Q. Hi, Coach. Congratulations. I don't know how much you've been able to see of Clemson this year, but obviously the thriller that you made against them in the Semifinal last year, how much of it do you think of that team applies to their team this year? And I remember Coach [Jeff] Hafley saying after that game that he was surprised at how athletic Trevor Lawrence was in the running game. Did that surprise you as well? And how well do you think he's running the ball right now compared to last year?

COACH DAY: I think he and [Travis] Etienne are two of the most dynamic players in college football, and probably in the history of college football. Do I think that experience matters? Absolutely. I think the fact that a lot of those guys played in that game and having the experience of playing in that game is critical. I think that's why these Clemson teams have won so many games, because they've played in this environment before, which hopefully also plays in our favor, is that we were there last year. We didn't come home with a win, but we gained some experience there and hopefully that pays off dividends.

In terms of [Trevor] Lawrence's ability to run, he's very athletic. When they need him to run, they're smart about how they do it. And, no, it didn't really surprise me all that much. I know that he had a great day against us and opened up and ran away from some of our guys. That was very impressive as well. Very, very dynamic offense.

Q. Hi, Ryan. First of all, any update on Justyn [Ross] since yesterday? And then also, how do you, in general, balance things like rest and rehab with such a short turnaround, especially considering all of the other absences you have right now?

COACH DAY: Good thing for us is we've -- we haven't played in that many games, so we've been fairly healthy in terms of the physicality of it all. What we've had a hard time is with people testing positive. That's what's made things difficult for us. Hopefully we can get some of those guys back. And Justyn will be fine.

Q. Ryan, I know Mick [Marotti] was talking in January about putting up the score from last year's game in the Fiesta Bowl, get through workouts and motivation. How much did that continue and how much did you guys -- how much were you hoping that this matchup would work out?

COACH DAY: Fresh off of that game, it was right on our minds, and something that when we got back to work and winter workouts, January, February, it was right there for us. Coming off of that game, we just didn't get over it in one day. It took time.

As we got into spring ball, we started to move forward, and then the quarantine happened. The goal was to get back into the situation. So we were in the same situation a year ago. And we wanted -- once that game was over, we wanted to get back here.



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How we got back here is just amazing. The journey we've gone on as a program to get back right here, to have another chance to play Clemson in this game is like -- you couldn't even make it up. Some of the best storytellers of all time couldn't have come up with this story.

But here we are. All of that being said, here we are. So really just excited to get about preparing and doing a great job over the next, I guess it's 11 or 12 days to go play our best game of the season, which we're going to need. We'll have to play our best game to beat these guys.

Q. Hi, Ryan. Normally, six games into a season, you would be in mid-October. You would only now be getting a real sense of what your team is. Now you've got to play a team that's played twice that many games, knows who they are. How much of a concern is that for you right now?

COACH DAY: I mean, it's a great question. I don't know, because it's never really been done before. So what does it really mean? I don't really know. I think at the end of the day, it's who executes better and plays tougher in the end.

When you play in big games, you have to execute at a high level. That's really what it comes down to. Both teams are going to play hard. Everything is on the line. It is who executes better is going to pull it out. We have to do that. Whether we played six, eight, ten, or they played 12, I don't really know. I don't know what that really means. So we'll try not to focus on that. We'll try to execute the best game we could possibly -- do the best job we can on Saturday.

Q. Hey, Ryan. We all heard about the Big Ten making adjustments today to the COVID protocol. When did you find that out and point-blank, will Chris Olave be back for this game? Does the time frame work?

COACH DAY: I think we have guys, based on when exactly that number is decided and put public, I don't know exactly where that is in terms of being announced. I know it is something that the Big Ten, it is a protocol that is across all sports. I know that it is something for the entire Big Ten, not just for us. So we'll just wait to hear when that goes public. I don't know if it has yet or not. But I know that they've made a decision to move it.

We have some guys that are really close. Guys like Chris [Olave] and Baron [Browning] and some guys, we'll find out once we get the final word on it.

Q. Ryan, so much is talked about Ohio State being at an advantage of only playing six games. What about it has been a disadvantage? Would you rather have more games obviously under your belt?



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COACH DAY: Everyone is on a different journey this year. That's what makes this season so unique. I just think it has been -- as a football coach and someone who loves college football, to see all of these different teams and all of these different young men who have overcome so much adversity -- and everyone has a different story.

Our story, to me, is just simply amazing. We weren't even playing the season for a month, and then here we are right now. I think we have an opportunity to write one of the greatest stories in the history of college football.

I don't know what it all means. We certainly don't have the game reps, especially for the younger guys, to find out what they can do. And we haven't had our best game yet this year. Played some good games, but we haven't played our best game this year, and we're going to have to play our best game again to beat Clemson.

Q. Thank you very much. Ryan. You dealt with COVID-19 yourself. Josh Myers was talking yesterday after the game about just almost the agony of sitting there for ten days not being able to do anything, work out, et cetera.

What was the challenge of bringing those, for example, offensive linemen, back from that? And what will be the challenge facing these guys, if indeed you do get them back, like Chris [Olave] and Baron [Browning], of getting back into what you call "game shape" in these ensuing days?

COACH DAY: Well, yeah, Josh [Myers], Nick [Petit-Frere] and Thayer [Munford], the three of them going into the game yesterday had really played one game, I think, in about a month. The challenge is, they just hadn't played a lot of games during that time. But then they played excellent. They graded out really high. Played well.

It will be the same for those guys, Chris and Baron and a few of the other guys that are on that list. We were down over 20 guys yesterday and two coaches. Again, I think back on how our guys will overcome this. It will just be another example of that. We have to clear cardiac testing and make sure they clear all of those protocols.

We have a pretty good system in place for the skill guys, for the linemen. It's very different. The skill guys, after that quarantine, they have to really make sure that their soft tissue injuries are minimized, and all of those types of things. Where with the big guys, it is a little bit more pushing and pulling and different things. The specialists have their own set of stuff.

We put together a pretty good system that Shaun Barnhouse and Dr. [James] Borchers and Mick Marotti have all done an excellent job of keeping an eye on, so that you limit it. We have a percentage that once they get back to work, they're allowed to do for that day, then we shut them down until they build back in to 100%.



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JOHN SUDSBURY: Thank you very much, Coach, for your time here today. We'll be seeing you in about 12 days. Good luck with your preparation and hope everyone stays healthy.

COACH DAY: Thanks so much.