



Allstate Sugar Bowl Head Coaches Press Conference

No. 2 Clemson vs. No. 3 Ohio State

December 31, 2020



COACH SWINNEY: Thank you. Good morning. We are very appreciative of all the folks here at the Sugar Bowl. I know there's been a tremendous amount of work in trying to pull this thing off and just appreciative of everyone involved for providing us this opportunity.

And congratulations to Ryan [Day] and Ohio State for being here as well. I know it's going to be a great game.

Obviously wish we could have a lot of people there in person, but I know there will be a ton of people watching this game on TV and we're excited to be a part of it. Hopefully play a great game for everybody.

COACH DAY: I echo Coach [Dabo] Swinney's comments. We're very, very excited to get down to New Orleans. A very unique season and very unique year and bowl experience, not being able to spend time in such a great city, New Orleans, and the people down there.

Sugar Bowl, what a great bowl. So much respect for what they've done to make this work in a unique time.

Same thing with Dabo and the Clemson Tigers. Again, another great year, a great season. Looking forward to putting on a great show. And I think that's what's great about this season, is that there's been so many distractions and different things that have happened. This gives America an opportunity to watch a game, and hopefully it is a great game.

But it's been a fun week of preparation. Looking forward to getting down to New Orleans.

Q. Ryan, this is a little bit of a rare opportunity for you to be an underdog. I wonder how that strikes you, how that maybe motivates you, and what that will do maybe for your pregame message for the Buckeyes.

COACH DAY: When you get into a stage where you are playing against great competition, there's going to be a lot of conversation leading up to the game. That's what makes college football so great. I think our guys are excited to play in this game, regardless of the situation or what leads up to it. You are in the CFP and you are playing for the national championship.

I don't think you need any more motivation other than you're two games away from winning the whole thing. After this long journey we've been on, this is the stage we wanted to be on.

So I think we're highly motivated, but I'm sure all four teams are.

Q. Dabo, with Tony [Elliott] not being there, he obviously has such a good feel for calling games as they're going on. How much do you think your guys will miss that without him being there?

COACH SWINNEY: We're certainly going to miss Tony. He does a wonderful job for us, and always has. Been with me a long time. But, I mean, we're well-prepared. We've got a great staff. We're all part of it. We'll find out. Ask me that after the game (laughter).



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Q. It seems like you both sort of painted -- I think you probably do this to motivate your teams a little bit, or give your teams sort of a vision of a goal of this is sort of an "unfinished" type of game, both with Clemson losing in the Sugar Bowl last year, and obviously Ohio State losing to Clemson. Wonder if you can sort of talk a little bit about how that was used to sort of motivate the teams, or give the teams a vision of a goal to pursue as you're going into this game?

COACH SWINNEY: We're motivated by winning just as much as we are losing. We've won a national championship. That's pretty motivating. You want to go do it again.

And as you mentioned, we lost right here last year, and that's pretty motivating, too.

So I think that every year you start over, and the goal is to be the best you can be. Our goals are laid out and pretty simple, but allow us to compete at the highest level, and everything goes to winning our league. That's where it starts.

We're always motivated to be our best, and certainly we learn from our memories. As I always say, we just try to keep our dreams greater than our memories. Whether you had a tough loss or had a big, big win last year to finish your season, season is going to end one way or the other. You either win it all if you are in a playoff like this, or you get beat -- or you're in a bowl game and you win that bowl game, and you have momentum and excitement going in your off-season, whatever it is.

I think all those things provide motivation. That's it.

COACH DAY: I think after last year's game, it was fresh in our mind and something that was used as motivation. And then as the quarantine kind of hit, there just seemed to be more things that were front and center for a long period of time.

And then as the season went on and we were able to get the season going again, all those goals were right front and center for us. Obviously, our number one goal every year is to be the school up north and then win the conference and then win the championship. I think the biggest thing for us is just having an opportunity to tell a great story of all the adversity that this group has overcome.

That's really, at the end of the day, what we focus on because this is an amazing group -- what they've overcome, what they've gone through. Just like a lot of schools, everyone has had their own adversity they've gone through during the season, which has made this such an amazing year and inspiring for so many people.

I think for us, the highest motivating thing with that is just the fact that we'll have something to show for it in the end and be able to tell a great story of overcoming so much.

Q. Ryan, you've been shorthanded against Michigan State and obviously against Northwestern. I know the status report won't come out until tomorrow. But can you give a general assessment of how close to full strength you'll be?



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COACH DAY: "Full strength" is a floating target right now because there's guys who come off of the isolation, and then they have a protocol to get back on to the field. You don't just play football after not doing anything for ten days.

And so I think there's certain levels of return-to-play. And all those guys who were missing there for the last month are working their way back into it. So we are getting a lot of guys back. But to say 100%, it's different this year.

But the good news is they are working their way back and getting stronger every day.

Q. Dabo, I know we won't get that full report until tomorrow, but are you close to full strength? Is there anybody of note that maybe didn't make the trip, other than Coach [Tony] Elliott?

COACH SWINNEY: I think everybody is here except I think we had two guys that didn't make the trip; one walk-on and one scholarship player that are just unavailable. But everybody else is here, even our injured guys and things like that.

Q. Dabo, you have talked a lot about how proud you are of your guys this year for all the challenges that they've had to overcome in getting to this point. But I know you to be somebody who thrives from personal interaction, which has certainly been limited this year. You make your calendar out a year in advance, which doesn't, I'm sure, work well in a year like this. And certainly you've probably gotten more criticism this year than most years. How challenging has this year been for you? And what have you learned from or how have you grown the same way that your players might have from some of these challenges you've had to overcome, right up to Coach [Tony] Elliott being out for this important game?

COACH SWINNEY: Everybody has had to adapt. It's been a great year. I mean, it's been challenging for sure. But I always say "God never says oops." That's how I look at it. There are certain things we go through that we don't like. That's how you grow. That's how we get better. In a lot of weird ways, as challenging as it's been within our world and what we do, it's also been a blessing. It really has. I mean, it's just kind of been us. It's just been us. And this group has been amazing to be with every single day.

I'm thankful that we have the type of culture here. That's been awesome to see. It's not an accident that we're here. These guys are great, young people, first and foremost, and we've got a bunch of great leaders. We have a wonderful staff. And it's just been very different. We've had to make a million adjustments in the protocols, how you meet, how you eat, how you travel, how you practice -- you name it -- things you would have never thought of before, but we've made it work.

You go to games, and some games there's nobody there. Some games there's a few people there. But we found a way to still have joy in the journey. I love that. So these guys have been great. And seeing guys step up, I mean, we started more guys this year than at any time ever. We've had all kind of guys out here, there, even dealing with coaches out. And everybody just continues to step up.



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But for me, it's been a great year in a lot of ways, challenging. But again, we all grow through challenges. Learned a lot. Learned Zoom. Never heard of that before (laughter). Learned a lot of new technology. So, you know, that's something that's probably going to carry forward with us forever.

Recruiting was very, very different. We've got a couple of guys moving to campus on Sunday that I've never met, like, in person. So it's been unique. We've had to kind of learn our way a little bit. It's all good. It's all good.

Q. Ryan, you guys have obviously worked the two tailbacks this year. You leaned on Master Teague several games early. We saw what Trey [Sermon] did against Northwestern. How do you think that worked out for you this year with the two backs? And given what Trey did against Northwestern, what could Master's role be in this game Friday?

COACH DAY: It's been a different year than last year for sure, where J.K. [Dobbins] was kind of the bell cow for us and handled the majority of the snaps. This year was a little bit more. It was by committee early on. Both of those guys were coming off injuries. Master had his Achilles, and Trey was coming off of his knee from last year. We had two guys that had similar running styles, but both coming off injuries and finding their way.

When you don't have as many games to kind of get your rhythm of what you're doing in the run game, it just takes time. And when you're splitting carries, it's even harder. But I think both of them, in a short season for us, have kind of found that rhythm a little bit. I think you saw the best version of Trey. And it was great to see him because it didn't all come right away for him. He was a grad transfer that comes in, expecting to just come in and pick up where J.K. left off. And that didn't happen for him.

He kept working. He never came in my office one time and complained about carries. Just kept going to work, getting better every day. To see him run the way he did last game was awesome. Hopefully he keeps building from there.

Q. Coach Swinney, you mentioned C.J. Spiller working with the running backs. What will the quarterback situation look like on the sidelines with Brandon [Streeter] up in the box? How does that work on game days with Tony Elliott and the running backs, typically?

COACH SWINNEY: Typically myself or Street (Brandon Streeter) will rotate the backs when we need to. Streeter will go up where Tony was. As far as -- we won't have to rotate that. Spiller will handle that. He will do a good job of that on the field.

As far as quarterbacks, just like coming off the field after each series, typically street is right there. I will huddle up with Trevor [Lawrence] as well. So just the difference is Street will be on the phone. So Trevor will go get on the phone and still have the same conversations you would normally have. It will just be on the phone versus right there in person.



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Q. Ryan, you spoke earlier about you and your wife's friendship with Dabo Swinney and his wife. I'm just wondering, with that in mind, did you take offense to the fact that he voted you guys Number 11 in the coaches poll, even though he explained his reasoning? And/or are you just thankful he's not on the College Football Playoff Selection Committee?

COACH DAY: Yeah, I would say that, I'm happy that's not the case (smiling). I will say this, being at the bowl game last year, at the Fiesta Bowl, and then have the opportunity to go on a coaches trip this off-season with Dabo and his wife, they were very graceful to Nina (Christina Day) and I. Being a young coach, and Nina trying to find her way as wife of the head coach at Ohio State, there's only a few people in the country that really can share the same experiences. And they've been unbelievable to us just in terms of giving advice.

And it's a very highly competitive environment we live in. That's the way it goes. At the end of the day, we're all human, and appreciated the way that he really gave great counsel, and he's been nothing but a pro.

Q. Ryan, I believe you guys will be testing today and then again tomorrow. I'm wondering if PCR tests are available to you in New Orleans? Is it a possible competitive disadvantage to you guys? I believe Clemson is done testing for the week.

COACH DAY: I think that's a unique situation, that we don't have the same protocols going into the game. I'm not going to spend time thinking about that. I'm tired of that.

What it is, as long as the guys are healthy playing in the game, that's what matters. We're going to have the opportunity to PCR. We are testing this morning. If we do get a presumptive positive, we will have a chance to PCR before we get on the plane, and then we go from there. At the end of the day, what's the goal? The goal is to have a clean field, and so we will follow the protocol that's been set forth.

Q. Ryan, how important is it for you guys to control the line of scrimmage on both sides of the ball to have a chance to win this game?

COACH DAY: Very important. I mean, it's important for every game. But when you're playing in a close game like this, it comes down to just that, who's winning the line of scrimmage. It comes down to a few plays, as we learned last year. Any time you play in a matchup game, that's what you got. But the line of scrimmage is critical. That goes back to any big game that's been played probably in the history of college football. Something that's being emphasized, I'm sure, on their side, and it is on ours as well.

Q. Travis Etienne gets a chance to come back to New Orleans in his home state again. How good do you feel for him being back in Louisiana one more time?

COACH SWINNEY: Obviously he wants to finish well. What a season he's had. Unbelievable what he's done this year, just his development into a truly complete player, a complete football player; can do it all.



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So great opportunity. We started the year here. We started this 2020 year right here in New Orleans, and hopefully we can get a better result as we finish it. And I know that's something that he really wants. And I know he's going to put his best foot forward to play a great game.

Q. Ryan, if you had to look back on the last seven months or so since June, what has been the biggest challenge for navigating this whole season from a leadership perspective?

COACH DAY: I think in an industry that's all about routine, we've been out of a routine on a daily basis. And I think that's exhausting for a lot of people, not knowing what's coming next -- or having a plan, and then having to constantly change it. I think that's probably been the number one thing I would say.

And then talking about since June, the fact that we didn't have a season, that we did have a season, we have games, we don't have games, that wears on you. Not being able, as the head coach and the leader of the program, to look people in the eye and let them know what's coming next. Just that they have to keep putting one foot in front of another, that's the biggest challenge.

The thing I have learned the most is just perspective. That's what this is all about. You can't take anything for granted. Although it wasn't exactly the way we wanted the season to go, we're still very, very fortunate to be where we're at. We're right back where we started, and have an opportunity to play in this game, playing for a great university, playing against a great team in Clemson.

As hard as it's been, we still have a lot to be thankful for.

Q. Ryan, we talked to some of the defensive guys this week about the improvement from that Indiana performance until now, and we've only seen two games of that. But they seemed confident that within practice, they've really improved. I'm curious of your perspective on the development of the defense from that game until now.

COACH DAY: Yeah, I think it's a great question, because how do you really know when you've played six games? I think the only way you learn is by playing in games. and that's been one of the hardest things for us as the season has gone on, is we haven't had the opportunities to see.

But there are things that are being addressed. We have really high-level talent here, so we go against each other every day and compete. There's been a lot of padded practices where we've gone against each other to try to get better, because we had to.

So I think that there's been great improvement in that area, but the ultimate test will be tomorrow.

Q. Dabo, how do you feel that you're not seen as an underdog anymore due to your tremendous success?

COACH SWINNEY: We've been some underdogs along the way a couple of times in these playoffs. But it's really just more of the same.



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We've won a lot of games in the last six years, and there hadn't been many of those games that we had been the underdog. There's been a few but not many. In the great majority, we've been expected to win the game. And so that's just the norm.

We prepare to win. We expect to win, and we really don't get too distracted by any of the other stuff. It's really more about how we think. We, again, have been the so-called favorite most of the time the last six, seven years. So just really same focus that we've always had.

Q. Ryan, when you talk about all of the underdog card and all of those things that go into this game, and everybody's been asking about that, is there an aspect of kind of overdoing that? How do you balance not overdoing the underdog card and just telling your guys to go out and play football?

COACH DAY: That's what it is. That's what Dabo [Swinney] just mentioned, is that those are people's opinions. What really matters is how we execute on the field, how we play. That's what we focus on as we go into practice, go into meetings. We have our preparation for the game. That's what matters.

People have their opinions, but if you make the plays and you play well, then you're going to have a good day. If you don't, then you won't. That's really what it comes down to. Who's more prepared to play in the game when the foot hits the ball? That's where we spend all of our time.

When you get to this point in the season, both teams, I think, are highly motivated. That's what we focus on.

Q. Ryan, this question is specifically more for you than Dabo, but applicable either way. How do you balance your emotions, either as a player or a coach, in a game where the stakes are so high? The adrenaline is so high. You know what's in front of you and you want your players to play with that emotional edge, but you don't want to do things that are outside of your control. How do you try to balance staying within your control, but playing at your absolute max?

COACH DAY: I mean, there's going to be a certain level of electricity, especially early in the game. Both teams want to start fast. That's always the case.

But then as you get into the body of the game, you get hit once or twice, you get a little tired, I think you kind of find the rhythm of the game, and everything slows down. Early on, you want to have a great poise about you and not being overemotional and focus on it. But certainly early in the game, you're going to feel the emotion. That's just part of the game. That's the exciting part. That's why we all do this.

COACH SWINNEY: Again, the same things that won the other games, they win this game. It still comes down to execution and playing with precision. It's a game of emotion, but you don't want to be emotional. And I think you lose your focus there. So same things.



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Q. Coach Day, there was a statistic put up that all of Justin Fields' interceptions have come against ranked opponents. Just how important is it for him to play his best game, coming off what was maybe one of his not best games, the Northwestern game, just for him to kind of bounce back a little bit and really play his best game against a top opponent?

COACH DAY: I don't think that we've, as a team, played our best game yet. I don't think we played our best game on offense yet. We've done some good things passing. We've done some good things running. We still haven't put it all together. I'm not sure Justin has either. That's the challenge. We're going to have to play that way tomorrow.

But that's everybody. It's Justin. It's the O-line. It's the running backs. It's the receivers. It's the entire team. Yeah, he's going to have to play well, certainly. He knows that. There's a couple plays he wants back from last week. He's a competitor, and we have to play our best game.

Q. Dabo, if you guys are able to win the national championship, do you think this kind of puts Trevor Lawrence as the best quarterback that's ever played a college game?

COACH SWINNEY: There's been a lot of great college quarterbacks. I haven't obviously seen every college quarterback that's come through. But he's as good as there's ever been. I'll let other people argue if he's the best ever. But he's as good as there's ever been, that's for sure.

He's the greatest winner that I've been around. He's 34-1. He's been incredible.

Q. Dabo, can you just take us through a little bit of what it was like when you find out that Tony [Elliott] is not going to be able to be part of this game? And was it obvious what the next step was for you guys? How did you go through the decision-making process of how exactly you're going to handle this without such an important coach?

COACH SWINNEY: 2020 has forced all of us head coaches to have to think about things that we've never thought about before going into a season. We've never had a season where a virus can just take somebody out in a moment's notice. So we've all had to prepare for that.

So we've had a plan in place for myself being out to you name it, every single coach. I was just disappointed for Tony. He works his tail off. It's disappointing he couldn't be here with us.

But as far as thought going into it, there wasn't much thought, because that had already been decided a long time ago. Again, that's for every coach on our staff, have a plan for all of that because you have to.

Just like having a depth chart for your team, if Trevor's out, D.J.'s [Uiagalelei] going in. You have a depth chart. I kind of had to do a depth chart for my staff on how this guy's out, how would I adjust? So that thought process had already taken place a long time ago.



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So that's it. And, listen, Tony and I have always collaborated and kind of done it together. He's awesome to work with. And Jeff [Hafley] was a part of that before he left. And [Brandon] Streeter has been our passing game coordinator this year and has been a part of that on the field.

So we'll miss Tony. But Streeter will do a great job up top. And well-prepared as a staff to go play the game. Just the way it is. We will definitely miss Tony for sure.