



# Allstate Sugar Bowl Clemson Head Coach Press Conference December 28, 2020



**COACH SWINNEY:** All right. Well, you know, it's getting close. This is kind of a Wednesday for us here in Clemson. I think it's a Monday, everywhere else. But it's like a Wednesday for us as far as our prep and routine. We've had a really good practice here. Really proud of our guys. Excited to be back in the playoffs. Excited to be back in New Orleans and a chance to do something we haven't done, and that's win a Sugar Bowl. We're looking forward to it. Congratulations to Ohio State and Ryan. Same thing, back in the playoffs, and it's going to be a great game. No doubt about that. Two really, really talented teams that I know both are going to do everything they can to win. So appreciate the opportunity to be with you.

**Q. As you can imagine, your voting Ohio State 11th on your final ballot and some of the comments about Ohio State's worthiness as a playoff team because they played only six games has not gone unnoticed up here. There are people who think it's gamesmanship or you don't have as much respect for Ohio State as people here would like. What would you like to say about that?**

**COACH SWINNEY:** Again, what I've already said. It's a big deal because, you know, we're having to play them. As I said earlier, there's no question Ohio State is good enough to beat us. They're good enough to beat anybody of these four. They're good enough to be the national champion. That's not a question at all.

I didn't rank anybody who didn't play nine games or more in the top ten. Nobody. And then after that, I said, okay, anybody who played at all, that's how I will rank that group. And that's why they were 11.

Nobody -- I didn't even consider anybody. It had nothing to do with whether or not -- I mean, I have all the respect in the world for Ohio State and for people not to think that, I can't do anything about that. I think the world of Ryan Day. We've talked many times. They're a wonderful program. We recruit against them because I think we have a lot of similarities in how we go about our business. So there's really nothing to it.

As I said, you can change the name to any other name, anybody. Southern Cal had been 6-0. I wouldn't have had them in there. So no disrespect. I mean, people can perceive and take things however they want, but for me, especially -- every year I take it seriously. But especially this year, I just don't think it's right. It's not that they're not good enough. I just don't think it's right that three teams have to play 13 games to be the champion and one team has to play eight.

So if people have a problem with that, I don't really care. It's my poll. And it doesn't matter who the person was. It has zero to do with Ohio State.

And, also, I will remind the Ohio State people, I voted them in 2017 for the same reason. I left Alabama out. And guess who was mad at me then? Alabama people. And they were good enough to win it. And it doesn't matter whether Alabama was good enough to win it; they won it. I just felt like Ohio State deserved it. I felt like they played more games. They were the Big Ten champ. And to me that mattered.

So that's why I put Ohio State in ahead of Alabama that year. I played Alabama. I went to Alabama. So, you know, I'm an equal opportunity guy here, I guess. So I love University of Alabama.



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There's no gamesmanship. I just didn't put anybody in there or consider anyone that didn't play nine games or more. It's really as simple as that. It just worked out we have got to play one of those teams. That's on the committee. that's what they decided to do. I think games matter.

I don't think it's right Texas A&M and Oklahoma, that Florida, that Cincinnati got punished because they played more games. These games matter. That game against LSU, that was a big deal for Florida.

And I know we can say, Well, yeah, but they should be one of the best teams. The game's not played on paper. You can go back and look at the top-ten preseason rankings every year for the last 20 years, there's a lot of those teams that finish the season not even ranked. The game's not played on paper.

And in this year -- Guys can get injured. You can get beat. There's a lot of games that we've won where we weren't supposed to win. And there's a few that we were supposed to win that we lost. That's football.

And so to just say, Oh, well, they would have won, I don't think that's right. That's nothing to do with Ohio State. Give me another 6-0 team, it would have been the same result.

So people take it personal, but it's nothing personal at all. So that's up to the committee.

**Q. Was there any part of you that kind of thought, Well, there's a reasonable chance we'll play Ohio State and maybe just to make it easier?**

**COACH SWINNEY:** Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. You don't think I know that's going to be public? But to me, right is right. It's not always easy to do the right thing.

I absolutely knew that I would be the poster child for whatever. I could probably run for governor in Michigan and might have a good chance, but probably not very popular in Ohio.

But, listen, I don't live my life that way. I'm not going to say, Well, let me put them here and do something that I absolutely don't believe in. Again, it's not that they're going to -- they could beat us by two touchdowns. They are plenty good enough to beat us. They are good enough to win it all.

I just have a problem with the fact that three teams got to play 13 games and one has to play -- I don't care what the name is. Change the name. Ohio State, whoever. Fill in the blank, Penn State, Michigan, Southern Cal, I don't really care.

That's just my standard that I put in place. And I wasn't going to change that because being politically correct, well, and trying to appease people. It is what it is.

**Q. Do you have an update on Xavier Thomas? Do you expect him to be available? Anything you can provide on why he missed the ACC championship?**



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**COACH SWINNEY:** He was unavailable. He was in a protocol situation.

But the biggest thing that we're going to do, we're not going to say anything about anything until game day. And we will put out an available/unavailable list just like we've done all year and leave it at that.

**Q. Playoffs in general haven't been very close. I know there's an exception. Maybe you guys had the greatest win in your history with a second to go against Alabama. The average point spread is 18 points in these games so far. I've wondered if you had a 35,000-foot view of why that is.**

**COACH SWINNEY:** We obviously had an incredibly close game with Alabama, as you alluded to.

But we had an unbelievable game with Ohio State last year. That was about as good a playoff game as you could be a part of. The others we had haven't been as close. I know it's a big stage, and it's a game of a few plays. It's a game of momentum. Those type of games, momentum is a huge, huge, thing.

Sometimes games can get away, turnovers, et cetera. I know when we played Alabama in the playoff -- the one time we played them in the playoff game in New Orleans there, we had two back-to-back turnovers. We're in the game, and we're driving with a chance to score and take the lead.

And we get a pick, runs it all the way back to the ten. They score. The very next play, they kick and we throw a pick six. And it's just a few plays. And, again, the momentum and sometimes it's just -- it's hard to turn it.

I think the best teams have won. That's my opinion. I think the better teams have won the games.

**Q. As you watch Justin Fields preparing for this game, what jumps out at you? Anything that you've seen that compares and contrasts with the quarterback you saw last year?**

**COACH SWINNEY:** He's very confident. I mean, he's a great football player. This guy, he's going to be a top-two pick, top-three pick. I can't imagine he wouldn't be. He can do it all. It's another year in the system. He's just a dangerous guy. He's got great confidence. He understands it. He creates a lot of conflict because of his ability to run the ball.

**COACH SWINNEY:** The heavy play action, the quarterback run. He's confident in his throws. He's very confident in his receivers. They have got three great, great wide-outs. Those guys are as good as you're going to see in [Chris] Olave and [Garrett] Wilson and that number six. He's just a dynamic player. There's nothing he can't do, and we know that. Just like last year, two elite, elite quarterbacks, mentally, physically, emotionally, skill set-wise taking the field in New Orleans on Friday night.



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**Q. Trevor Lawrence, after three full years, the individual accomplishments we're all familiar with. Heisman finalist, national champion, ACC player of the year, and so on down the line. If you could, could you describe the impact or legacy he's built at your program and is building and also maybe compare it to the way Deshaun Watson left and what Deshaun meant to the program.**

**COACH SWINNEY:** Well, I mean, they're both very similar as far as what they mean to the program. I mean, there have been just incredibly committed guys. Two great human beings, first of all. Great examples, great teammates, great leaders, great preparers. You name it. Both of them graduated in three years. Incredibly disciplined with their lives and, I mean, you just couldn't find two more committed guys to win it. Two great winners. That's what both of them bring to the table.

Obviously, Deshaun led us to our first National Championship. He kind of paved the way. And his will to win, I mean, that last drive against Alabama to win the National Championship with one second, that's the epitome of Deshaun Watson.

And then Trevor Lawrence coming in as a true freshman and winning a National Championship, that's the epitome of Trevor Lawrence because his moxie, his savviness, as a true freshman, his confidence to go win a game like that under that stage, a lot of people going to that game when he's a freshman and the moment is too big and all this stuff, there's not a moment too big for Trevor Lawrence. I mean, he's as good -- he's the first Trevor Lawrence, that's the way I would describe him. He's the first one. There will be a lot of people trying to live up to the standard that he set as a quarterback for a long time in this game.

**Q. You've been adamant that Trevor [Lawrence] should win the Heisman. Do you feel like maybe he hasn't gotten the type of consideration for that award because he has done what we've come to expect from him over the last three years? And the other guys maybe have had unexpected seasons, weren't really talked about before the year.**

**COACH SWINNEY:** Yeah, it's a stat, media-driven award. I felt the same way about Deshaun Watson. It just is what it is. To me, he's the epitome of the Heisman in every regard. You're talking about a guy that lost Joseph Ngata, Frank Ladson, and Justyn Ross for the whole year. And he's thrown for more yards than any team in the history of Clemson this year. Unbelievable what he's done.

People say well, he missed -- he played nine games. He was unbelievable. Played nine of the 11 games. And it's just amazing. If you really know what you're looking at, what he does and how he makes everybody else better, how equipped he is, his ability, his knowledge, I mean, it's just off the charts.

And, again, that's -- I know it's not a pro potential award. But he's lost one game. It's not a career award either. We all know that. But his season has been -- this has been the best he's been. And he's 34-1 or whatever as a starter. There's not a better -- and that is not a knock on anybody. There's some amazing, amazing young football players out there, college football players, that are very deserving of the Heisman. Absolutely. But the best player in the country is Trevor Lawrence. And to me, it's not close. But it's not up to me. It's not -- I don't get a vote in the Heisman. And obviously I'm biased, but for good reason.



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**Q. You've had a lot of teams here in the College Football Playoff. How do you feel like this year's team stacks up with the other teams you've gotten to this point?**

**COACH SWINNEY:** Similar. Every team's kind of had a different path and, I've never really had a team that's had the challenges of this team. Nobody has. There's nobody in the playoffs that have had to deal with what it took to get to this point. So this team's unique in that way.

But similar in -- I feel good about how we're built. I like our guys in the trenches on both sides. We've had great quarterback play. We've got some explosive skill. And we're starting to play our best football. And I still think our best football is still in front of us. So similar.

**Q. Just wanted to ask you about Coach [Kerry] Coombs. What have you seen from him this year? Ohio State's defense schematically, how is it different or similar from what you saw last year with Coach [Jeff] Hafley? And from a personnel standpoint, I know they lost a lot of talent on the back-end. What have you seen from their personnel this year?**

**COACH SWINNEY:** Very similar. And why would it not be? They're really, really good and not much has changed. A little bit more two-safety. Maybe just a hair more two-safety. But they believe in what they do, man. They're built to stop the run. And that's -- so more similar than not.

And personnel-wise, I mean, they're no different than we are. They lose good players every year, just like we do. But they replace them with good players every year, just like we do. And they do a good job of developing their guys.

I thought they -- we did not play well in the game last year. They did a great job. I didn't think we played great at wide-out. The best thing we did is we took care of the ball, and that was the difference in the game. But we got to play better than we did last year, that's for sure.

But they're built the same. Really good up front. Those deep tackles are really good players. They've got depth at end. A lot of experience at linebacker. They've moved [Shaun] Wade in the corner. That's different from last year. He's an elite player. Number 7, same thing. Those safeties. 5, [Baron] Browning, all those guys. They're a really, really good football team. Again, built in the trenches, built in the front seven, and built to stop the run. So we'll have our hands full.

**Q. Wonder if you can talk about what you've asked your players to sacrifice this year. Every team has done it, right? It's been a tough year, and you've asked more of them than ever before. If you can get into a little bit of what you've asked them to sacrifice and how difficult -- I shouldn't say difficult, but how challenging this probably has been for them.**

**COACH SWINNEY:** It's unprecedented. It's been incredibly challenging. I just tell them, don't give up what they want most for what they may want at a moment. It's just really that simple. And the teams that do this the



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best and manage this the best, that's who's going to finish the best. And I challenged them early on, this could be a competitive advantage. It doesn't have to be a competitive disadvantage. The glass is half full. It's not half empty. It's all about taking what we've got and making the best of it.

And it's been an unbelievably tough year on these kids. Incredible. People will never know. There will be books. There will be documentaries. There will be things. These kids 20 years from now will be telling stories that people won't believe. This is unprecedented times. We have never had a moment like this. And what these kids had to sacrifice to be able to play is incredible.

Again, that's why I'll go back to the way I did my poll. I mean, from isolation to virtual work to not seeing their families, post-game. Just the way we've had to meet. Just buying into not going places, not doing things. I mean, a lot of these kids have just done church online. You name it. Just the adjustments, very abnormal what they've had to do. But they have all sacrificed so that we would have a chance to get to this point. And I'm just really proud of them, really proud of them. Their commitment, their leadership, and how they bought in.

And not just the players, our staff. All of our medical people, our administration. I mean, it has been an unbelievable undertaking that we've all been a part of. And we're near the end here. And everybody's just got to stay committed. Every time -- we tested four times a week, and every time we would get that test again, but, again, just the discipline that they have had to apply to their lives has been incredible, you know? And I'm just super proud of them. And most people, I think, don't really understand what all has gone on this year.

But this team, this team in particular, really fought to play. I mean, they fought to play the game. And I'm so thankful that we have been able to play. This has been a year I'll never forget. This is one of the closest teams I've ever been a part of as a result because we've just had each other. So looking forward to seeing them finish well.