



Allstate Sugar Bowl Clemson Defensive Coordinator Press Conference December 28, 2020



DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR VENABLES: Just incredibly excited. Thankful for the opportunity to be able to play back in the Sugar Bowl. So proud of our guys.

Started the year with nine first-time starters. First game back at Wake Forest, and it's been a lot of fun. I'm really proud of our guys, how much they've grown up, certainly improved, but just developing an identity and going through some struggles along the way, and they're just getting better.

It's been a fun year and a fulfilling year. There's nothing better for a coach to just watch your guys get better from the beginning to the end. Watch leaders develop. Watch freshmen really get their feet wet and learn how to play the game at a high level and just coming together. Just the chemistry and those types of things are developed throughout the course of the season.

And overcome a lot of adversity, everybody in college football. What a crazy year it's been. But just thankful for our players, their families, the sacrifices that have been made, certainly for our fans and our administration, our coaching staff, and our families.

And just got a great perspective on the opportunity that we have. And, again, just thankful more than anything else for our players and all of their hard work and their investment in Clemson and trying to make this a special, historic year.

Q. You just talked about your leaders, and I want to ask you something about particularly your senior guys. How important have the parents of those guys been that you've had in developing that sort of character and leadership? And in particularly Nyles Pinckney's mom and dad and their impact on the program.

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR VENABLES: Yeah, I mean, without their support -- our players, they're going to get support from the people in this building certainly. And we've also got to be the same ones that demand more and to demand their best every day.

Without the support of the families -- not everybody has the same support system, so wherever that source -- that resource is coming from. Sometimes it's a coach. Sometimes it's somebody in the hometown. Sometimes it's an aunt and uncle. Certainly for Nyles, it's his family and they live just down the road, having moved from Wells Branch to right down the road here in Pendleton. It's been a great source of support from again not only him but also nourishing the things that we're all about as a program, as a football family.

So their leadership, there's no question, we wouldn't be here without those leaders, Nyles included. Seeing him grow up, even as a fifth-year guy, to see him grow up has been really satisfying. And thankful for, again, him just sticking in there because there's been a lot of things that have happened with Nyles injury-wise, in particular, and then playing behind a bunch of other great players.



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But he's always been a guy that's always been ready. When given his opportunity a couple of years ago in the national championship, he's in there making a critical tackle, a critical stop on a fake field goal in the national championship. And so just very, very proud of him.

And, again, just thankful for again, like you said, the support system from our players' parents, second to none. We're incredibly fortunate.

Q. How is Justin Fields a different kind of player from the guy you played against last year?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR VENABLES: I don't see a whole lot different. He's a terrific player. Can do it all. Can run. Can throw with precision. Run with strength and play with great poise. He's a great leader, very natural. Got an incredible skill set. Great presence in the pocket. And he's, without question, their leader on offense, so everything goes through him.

He's a great game manager, as well. But poised and experienced and just incredibly, incredibly talented. I see more similarities than differences.

Q. Could you describe for me, if you can, the impact and legacy you think Trevor Lawrence is leaving and will leave behind when he does end his career at Clemson?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR VENABLES: Yeah, I mean, all the great quarterbacks are defined by how they win. And nobody has done it better. What I love about Trevor, he's a fierce competitor, really hard on himself, always demands more from himself, but he's got this steadiness that the great ones have. And he's got a unique quality; makes everybody around him better.

He's the first to shoulder the blame. He's one to be in the back of the line as a leader and serve and just has tremendous humility and has since the day he's gotten here.

He comes from, again, talking about parents, just wonderful people. And he's been a joy to be around.

But legacy, I mean, we've been fortunate to have some great ones here. And nobody's done it better than Trevor and just done it in a very first-class way.

Q. Chris Olave is a great receiver. Missed the Big Ten championship game. How much of a difference maker will he be, and how difficult will he be to prepare for?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR VENABLES: He's a great player. Can take the top off the defense, very savvy. Really understands the ball and can make all the competitive plays. He's got speed, length, size, toughness, savviness. This will be the best group of receivers that we've played against this year. So we'll be challenged for sure. But Chris is a terrific player.



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Q. Obviously, Dabo's [Swinney] comments about Ohio State and where he ranked them got a lot of attention. Maybe some people have taken it one way or another. How much of that is just Coach Swinney and his frankness that you've probably gotten used to over the years?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR VENABLES: Yeah, he's going to speak from, again, his heart. And he's going the stand on his beliefs. And he's certainly not going to be politically correct.

And I'll be honest, certainly I'm paying attention, but it doesn't really affect us at all. Again, this is just another great opportunity.

And so whether or not he upset the apple cart or what not, Ohio State is going to be excited to play just because it's a great opportunity. You get in the playoffs, that's what it's all about, is making the most of your opportunity.

And, certainly, this year everybody's worked hard. Everybody's had a lot of struggle. Everybody has made a lot of sacrifice. Whether or not you're able to play games or not, whether you start or not. There's been anxiety for everybody. There's been unsuredness, a lack of security, a lot of unknown, a lot of pain, a lot of hurt.

And, certainly, again, the commitment to a team is hard and demanding on everybody. So to say who's had more or less is certainly not for me to judge. But I know it's been tough on everybody.

As a matter of fact, I remember -- maybe it was the day that the Big Ten announced they weren't playing and Kevin Wilson and I, who we coached together at Oklahoma -- and our families are close. But we're on the phone just trying to see what each other's heard and what's going on. Just how disheartening it was for us as coaches to think, Man, they're really going to cancel this college football season.

To fast forward to what seems like three years later -- it's been one of those kind of years for everybody -- how could you not just be so, again, appreciative and thankful for everybody that's had a hand in getting to this point.

You don't need any extra motivation playing these games. You kidding me? It doesn't matter who you're playing. It's what you're playing for, and that's what our focus has been on here.

Q. This is a little bit of a follow-up on that. Dabo's [Swinney] reputation has been kind of this "awe shucks" guy. And can you speak to the evolution you've seen, how comfortable he is in his skin now?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR VENABLES: I think he's always been comfortable in his skin since I've known him. He's the same exact guy. He's the guy that I thought he was when I saw him from afar. He's just very genuine, real, authentic, raw, emotional, speaks from the heart, true to himself, true to his values.

When you're in the spotlight, people are going to -- they can manipulate it any way they want. And he's not ever tried to claim to be a perfect person or have an opinion that everybody can agree with. When you're in the spotlight and people put a mic in front of you, you can choose to be somebody you're not or, again, just be true to yourself.



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So I know he's a fierce leader, somebody that is an incredible man, husband, father, Christian, leader, coach. Know he cares deeply for his players and his program and the former players, and every one of the members of our families.

And he loves this sport. And he loves the sport, what it stands for, how it's changed lives, the generational change that you gain through your experience as both a player and a coach. And he's somebody that's benefited greatly from coaches and the opportunity to play this game, and he's impacted and changed for the better so many lives.

So there's nobody on this earth that I have more respect for. I know who he is and what he stands for. And I know how he's made me a better husband and a father and a Christian and a coach. And just very, very thankful for him. And that doesn't mean we have to agree with everything, he doesn't expect that, with everything that he thinks. But we certainly are there to support him in every way, and he's as real as it gets.

Q. There's a reason that teams don't run the wishbone anymore, don't run the veer. Is there ever going to be a magic bullet defensively for what's going on offensively with the spread, do you think?

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR VENABLES: Oh, man, I don't know. Down in our staff room, you hear all of our complaints. Woe is me. It's hard. It's harder than it's ever been to coach defense. But I love it. It's a challenge. I don't know, it's tough.

But again, hey, man, you try to do the best you can and try to help your players, a lot of rules. Again, they decide when they snap the ball, they get to decide when -- if things don't work, they get to punt. On defense, you've got to stay on the field and you've got to stop people. That's the name of the game.

So I love it. I love the challenge of it. There's been different things. In the, whatever, 27, 28 years that I've coached, there's been a variety of things that have changed. Like you mentioned, you go from the option to the spread and all the different intricacies. There's still more that's the same than not.

The fundamentals of the game don't change. The physicality of the game doesn't change. The precision, the timing of things, a boxer's punch, the great ones, that's always been the same, their ability to time it up and the strategy that goes behind it. Certainly there's some of that.

But there are option principles in a lot of what you see just from different presentations. So we kind of attack it with a "everybody's against us" kind of a mindset. And so it's a lot of fun. I'll be very honest.

But it is more challenging now than ever because a lot of the rules, there's some gray area. And I just use the RPOs, for example. The NFL, you don't watch an NFL game and watch there be any gray area whatsoever. If that lineman is down the field, he's down the field. If the mark is three yards, if they're beyond three, then they just call it when it happens at three.



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And I think people that have actually been out there that have expressed concern about some of the rules and just pushing the envelope, so to speak, is because of their experience in some things that I'm talking about. Whatever those rules are is harder than ever for officiating crews to manage the game now more than ever, too.

But anyway, it's -- I'm not complaining. You just asked the question. I love what I do. I love the challenge of being a defensive coach. But things that stay the same, your fundamentals, technique, physicality, mindset, that hasn't changed.