

College Football Playoff

Media Conference

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Dabo Swinney

Trevor Lawrence

Austin Bryant

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COLLEGE FOOTBALL
PLAYOFF

GINA LEHE: On behalf of the College Football Playoff, we'd like to congratulate Clemson and look forward to welcoming them to the Bay Area. At this time please welcome head coach Dabo Swinney.

DABO SWINNEY: Thank you. Well, just kind of long day yesterday and traveling back, and quickly turning the page to this incredible opportunity that we have in front of us. But first of all, I just want to say thanks to all the CFP folks. Y'all know y'all do an amazing job working all year to make this a great experience, and the Cotton Bowl was just awesome for us. Everybody associated, our players had a great time, and it was just a really, really good week.

We played a tremendous opponent in Notre Dame, and we played a heck of a ballgame. Really proud of my guys. They've worked their tails off all year to put themselves in this situation, so we're excited about heading out to California later in the week.

You know, I think that this is clearly the two best teams in Alabama and Clemson, and it's going to be an exciting game. I mean, this is the way it should be, and we know we've got a huge challenge. Want to congratulate Alabama, as well, for just another amazing year, and Coach Saban and what he's done, it's just -- they're hard to beat.

But we're excited about the challenge, and we're off and running with our prep, and got a short week to kind of get ready to make the long flight out there on Friday. But we're so thankful to have the opportunity to be a part of it.

Q. I know you've used the Rocky movies going into this in the past, but now that you've seen Alabama for four years, what's the biggest thing mindset-wise that you emphasize with your players in preparation?

DABO SWINNEY: Well, I don't really have to emphasize it with this group, I mean, because they

know. Like you said, we've played them now four years in a row, and this is a veteran team that we have. They understand that this is a game where you just have so little margin for error. I mean, it's two or three plays, literally. You've got to have great preparation mentally and physically to get yourself ready.

I mean, these are two really good teams that are both hard to beat, and you've got to do the little things to give yourself a chance, whether it be that field position battle, it's where your guys are, it's your footwork, positioning, it's technique, because you just don't have a lot of room for error, either team. I think when you look at this game, I think both teams are kind of mirror images of each other to be honest with you, really good defenses, dynamic quarterbacks, very talented running backs, and explosive skill, and just kind of built in the trenches. We're so similar.

So it's going to come down to just execution and mentally being sharp and making those two or three plays that you don't know when they're coming. So you just have to truly play every play like it's the play.

But we love that challenge, and we know exactly what's coming for sure with the type of team that we're getting ready to play.

Q. I'm curious if there has been any more that you've been able to learn about the situation with Dexter or the two other players and if you anticipate any sort of an appeal process going through prior to the National Championship game?

DABO SWINNEY: I have not learned anything, like I say, since Thursday. Obviously we played and traveled all day yesterday, but Dan Radakovich is leading that front, and I know that they'll be having some meetings and stuff today and trying to figure out what the moving-forward process is going to look like. Obviously we don't have a lot of time for this game. I'm hopeful that maybe something positive will come out, but I don't know anything at all.

And then beyond this game, we've got -- there will be an appeal process that our players for sure will want to battle because there's consequences for next year. Dexter obviously has the ability to go pro, and with Zach and Braden, Zach has got a year left, and Braden is just going to be a sophomore. There's a longer

runway for dealing with that and the process that's in place and what they've all got to do, but I don't know anything at all as far as relevant to this game.

Q. The other thing I wanted to ask you, you've talked a lot in the past about how you can watch recruiting film of a guy and see the talent that they have, but you don't really ever know how that translates until they're actually doing it on that stage. At what point did you realize that Trevor was never going to be overwhelmed by the stage that he was on, that he's sort of the coolest guy in the room all the time?

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, well, you know, I don't think I can say I actually knew until I started coaching him last spring and just saw how quickly he processed things, how easy it was for him. I don't know about easy, but just his preparation, his focus, but his ability to absorb installation and then take it to the practice field and how quickly he adjusted to kind of the speed of everything. He just never really looked like a freshman.

That's probably the main thing, but the other thing is, to be honest with you, when he committed, you obviously could see greatness on tape, but as far as who he is, he's a little bit like Deshaun in that way. But he committed to me December of his junior year, and at that time we had two really talented high school senior quarterbacks that were getting ready to sign with us in the class ahead of him, and then we had a couple of really good ones on the team already, and to this day, he never asked me about another quarterback, ever, not one time. Never asked me one question about anybody that we were recruiting, anybody on our roster, and I just think that to me, that was one of the things that I knew early on, like this guy here is -- he's kind of got a -- he's got a rare confidence and focus. Just has always been really locked in on himself and who he is and not worried about things he doesn't control.

Q. I was hoping you could speak on the development of Nolan Turner and specifically the interception that he made in the Notre Dame game and certainly all the family -- well, since the passing of his father, as well.

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, well, he's really developed into a great player. He's just an amazing story. It's amazing how God orchestrates things. His senior year in high school -- and I had offered him an opportunity to walk on here at the time. We weren't recruiting any DB's, and after that first National Championship game in '15 out there in Arizona, all of a sudden I had four DB's leave early that decided that they were going to turn pro, because as a coach you're assuming these guys are back, and it's hard to go recruit when you don't have scholarships, so really had not recruited

hardly any DB's, and then all of a sudden those guys decided to go ahead and go pro. T.J. Green and Jayron Kearsse and Mackensie Alexander and Travis Blanks, they all left. Now we're going out and all of a sudden we've got about three weeks to recruit DB's, and we found K'Von Wallace, and I didn't know who K'Von Wallace was until a week before signing day. And he's a starter.

We found Isaiah Simmons out in Kansas. I had never heard of Isaiah Simmons until about eight days before signing day. We were able to get Trayvon Mullen, who we had recruited, but wasn't sure how it was all going to play out and if we'd have a spot, and then we were just kind of looking around, and I said, you know what, I'm going to go back and look at Nolan's film again, and I called his high school coach. I mean, I looked at his tape, and I'm like, man, this kid can play, and as -- I called Buddy Anderson, and when I called him, that's what he told me. He said, Dabo -- Buddy has been coaching like 50 years at Vestavia High School, and he said, Dabo, this guy is as good as any player I've ever had. He goes back to when I was playing high school ball, and he's seen so many guys come and go, and just for whatever reason, he was just kind of overlooked. And I think Alabama had offered him a walk-on spot.

So I showed Brent the tape without telling him who he was, and Brent was like, man, this guy can play, where is he at, who's he, kind of a deal, and I was like, that's the only confirmation I wanted right there.

So we took it from there, and we signed Nolan, and his genetics, just -- we knew he was talented. He can run. He's explosive. He's twitchy. But now he's just developed physically. He's a 212-pound kid, and the confidence, he knows the game. So he's a redshirt sophomore and has really had a great year for us.

You know, I knew last year, he tackled Lamar Jackson in the open field up at Louisville as a redshirt freshman, and I was like, okay, this kid here has got a chance. So it's just been a -- he's just one of those developing guys, and he's going to be a great player. He's already had a heck of a year for us, but the play the other night was a big play. He's made a bunch of them. He came back later and got a ball out on the sideline. So I'm just really, really proud of him, and he's a great example to his teammates, and he's a great example to us as coaches and a great reminder that you've got to trust your instincts. You can't get distracted because maybe a guy has got a million offers but you don't see it, or you see it and he's got no offers. You've got to be convicted in what you believe.

Q. If there is one other constant through all these four games with you, not only you and Coach

Saban, but it's also Hunter Renfrow, the development of Hunter Renfrow and what kind of asset has he been in your building of your program there at Clemson?

DABO SWINNEY: Well, I think he's a great representative of everything we want our program to be about: Grit, heart, toughness, perseverance, belief, just character and class in everything that you do. And that's exactly who Hunter Renfrow is. He's just an amazing young person. He just graduated. He's getting married in April. Just a wonderful story. I mean, he's what makes college football special, stories like Hunter Renfrow, and just really proud of him, and glad we've got him for one more game. So thankful.

Outside of getting a chance to go play for the National Championship, the best thing is I get one more week with my guys, this senior group, and just what a special group it is. I'm just so thankful I get one more week to prepare to go do something we all love to do.

Q. I know you compete against the ACC, you compete on a different level against South Carolina, your state rival. When you're sort of looking at your plan in the off-season, are you competing? Are you looking at Alabama as a way, as a team that you're competing with that you're sort of looking at their standard, and are we keeping up to their standard?

DABO SWINNEY: No, no. I think when you start comparing yourself to other groups, then you miss out on (indiscernible). We study everybody in the country, but more importantly, we've got our own standard here, and we want to be the best version of ourselves year in and year out. So that's what we focus on is what we did good, what we did bad, how do we continue to improve. But we don't try to be anything other than the best version of us.

I think if we try to be something that we're not or try to do things that aren't within our culture or structure or our beliefs, then you can get off track.

But we pay attention to everyone out there, not just Alabama, but everybody, whether it be schematics or anything that's new or cutting edge, whatever. We're always trying to get better. But at the end of the day, we just try to be the best version of us, and we're not trying to live up to anybody else's standard. We've got our own standard here. That's all we try to do year in and year out is stay true to our core values and the things that we believe in, and then we start over every year. But we learn and grow from each season. We learn from other people. But we don't sit around and try to compare ourselves or anything like that.

Q. Now that you're getting to be sort of an expert in

the playoffs, I'm wondering, what do you consider to be the ideal number of days between the semifinals and the championship game? And would the playoffs be better served if all of the semifinals -- the semifinals were played on January 1st every year instead of December 28th or 29th and having bowl games after that?

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, well, I guess -- I mean, if I had my preference, I would prefer to not have to manage Christmas at the bowl sites. I mean, ideally I would prefer to play the games on the 1st to allow everyone to have a little break for Christmas. That would be my personal preference. But it is what it is, and I understand why, because it's just they don't want to push the game back -- the National Championship game back, so they're trying to have it on that Monday, and so to -- for us to try to play a game on the 1st, obviously that's tomorrow, so that would be a really tight turnaround.

So I think they did the right thing, the CFP, because that was -- I know we all complained about that. I remember one year it was like the biggest -- it was the quickest turnaround. It was crazy, what you're trying to do, and moving a lot of people around and getting back and getting situated just to feel like you're prepared for that moment.

So I think this is a good amount of time. I would love to have maybe one more day, but I do think this is a very good time to be able to have yesterday to travel back and now we've got a full week, full eight days of prep. I think this is the right amount of time for sure.

I wish we didn't have to manage the Christmas process, but I would rather do that than to push the game later in January, number one, or have to have a shorter week of prep for the National Championship. I wouldn't want to do that. And that's why they made the adjustment that they did.

GINA LEHE: We are now joined by Trevor Lawrence and Austin Bryant.

Q. Trevor, I've wondered, Dabo said something a moment ago that you had committed to Clemson after your junior year or during your junior year or something like that of high school when they had tremendous talent at your position coming in, and you just didn't seem to care. You've never worried about someone else's ability, just your own. Why was Clemson the right choice for you?

TREVOR LAWRENCE: I think just kind of everything, not the depth chart, not that kind of stuff, just the culture and the coaches and just everyone on the team, the guys I wanted to be around and the type of people I wanted to surround myself with, and then

obviously a great team that's going to play for championships. So those were the big things that had me wanting to go here. And then I just knew that all this stuff will take care of itself and that this is the right place for me.

Q. What, if any, impact did another high school star from your state in Deshaun Watson having such a great career at Clemson have on your decision or your interest in Clemson?

TREVOR LAWRENCE: I mean, he kind of laid the path. I think just what he did here and what he was able to accomplish was something to look up to, and definitely seeing him do that, it was kind of like, you know what, why can't I do something like that. I think he just kind of laid the path and if anything gave me some confidence to be able to come in and kind of do similar things to what he did.

Q. Trevor, in speaking to Alabama tight end Miller Forristal, he talked about your friendship and being high school teammates and all, but he said you have discussed this match-up for a long time. Can you kind of go into when was the first time you even approached him, maybe even playfully, about meeting up in this kind of situation?

TREVOR LAWRENCE: I think we talked about it right as the season started or before, maybe even right when I got on campus. I can't remember when the first conversation was, but a few times kind of as the season has gone and we've seen how everything has progressed, we've kind of joked about it and talked about it, and it's cool that the first time we get to play each other and be on the same field since high school is for the National Championship. So it's going to be awesome. Me and him are good buddies, and I'm excited to see him, and it's going to be a lot of fun.

Q. Can you just kind of go into how -- obviously your relationship goes back to your freshman year there and that quarterback competition, just kind of go in deep about what his friendship with you and that relationship means to you?

TREVOR LAWRENCE: Yeah, it means a lot. I've been through a couple different quarterback situation as far as like in high school and then also here in college, but that was kind of the first one, and came in as a freshman, and he was a junior, and he was another quarterback, and he was trying to -- he had just transferred there the year before, and he was trying to get the starting spot his senior year. We were competing and working, and then I ended up starting a little bit into that season. It was tough on him, obviously, but then he ended up moving to tight end and was a really good player at tight end, so he got a bunch of offers and went to Alabama. I think since then, since he kind of accepted that role as tight end,

our friendship grew, and he still to this day is one of the hardest workers I've ever played with, and he's a good guy.

Q. This question is for Austin. This is the fourth time you'll get a chance to prepare for an Alabama team. I'm wondering if you've had a chance to dig into them much film-wise, and what is the difference between Alabama you've seen in the past and Alabama with Tua?

AUSTIN BRYANT: No, I haven't had much time to dig into them film-wise yet. Probably only seen like 13 plays. This morning I woke up and I couldn't sleep, so I watched a little bit. But they're a heck of a team. Everybody knows that. They're going to be well prepared. They have a great offensive line, great offense in general that plays lights out, have a bunch of plays, and then we all know that quarterback, as well as their backup quarterback, he can hurt you with the ball, too. It's going to be a tough challenge, but we've got a little time to put a plan together and prepare, go back to the drawing board and hopefully produce a different result than we did last time.

Q. Trevor, I know quarterbacks have a tendency to cross paths with one another. Have you crossed paths at all with Tua coming up through high school days and camps and things like that?

TREVOR LAWRENCE: Yeah, one time we were out in California for Steve Clarkson's camp thing, this past summer, and I saw him out there. We didn't talk a ton, but we introduced ourselves and just talked for a minute, and he seems like a really good guy, but I didn't really get to talk too much to him.

Q. Austin, your three linemates were all first-team all-ACC this year, all got named to All-American teams, and all of them appear in various first rounds of NFL mock drafts where we haven't quite seen your name. Do you ever feel a little underappreciated or slighted maybe from the outside that the other three seem to get a little bit more publicity or however you want to put it, although you kind are all kind of equals, and also was it a little bit of vindication in that regard that you had such a wonderful Cotton Bowl and earned the MVP honors?

AUSTIN BRYANT: It's easy for someone on the outside looking in to assume that I feel that way, but all of those things are things that I can't control. There's a way people perceive me or see other people, and I can't control that. All I can do is do what I can do, put the work in each day and prepare to play my best game. All year I felt like I've done that. I feel like I've played better than I have last year. That's really all the vindication that I needed is just to see my progression from last year until now. It doesn't really matter what

the media portrays or puts out there because I know what kind of player I am, and believe in myself and have full confidence in myself to play the best that I can each and every Saturday.

Q. And then a quick follow-up for Trevor, now that you've been through it for a week, what were maybe some of the challenges like or just give me your thoughts on your experiences for the first time in college being away for a game for an entire week, all of the extra media obligations and all the other stuff that comes into being one of the focal points of a semifinal game, all the hype and all that stuff.

TREVOR LAWRENCE: I thought it went well. I think definitely there could be some challenges as far as just not being focused if you don't really know what you're there for as far as getting caught up in all the other stuff. But I think our team did a great job of focusing. I think we had one of the best weeks of practice we've had all season, and we were really locked in and I knew what we were out there for, and we had a good time, and we enjoyed everything else, but ultimately we knew what we were there for, and I think the guys and the coaches did a great job of keeping us all locked in.

Q. Question for Trevor: I'm curious in the film study, especially secondary-wise from Alabama, how well do they disguise their coverages, and how hard is it to read from the pre-snap reads from that secondary at Alabama?

TREVOR LAWRENCE: I mean, well, we just got back yesterday evening, so I haven't really had much time to really break them down yet, but I watched a little bit. They're just a great defense all the way around. Alabama every year always has a good defense, and I think it's going to be a challenge, obviously. But I mean, I think the biggest thing is just they have great players. They have length in the secondary and speed, obviously. But every position they've got good players, so we'll get that broken down, and the coaches have already been working on that, I'm sure, so we'll get in there probably today and I'll get a look at that.

Q. From starting this year as a backup to taking over as the starter, how difficult was the transition for you personally, and at winning the team over, as well?

TREVOR LAWRENCE: I think it was just one of those things, you just have to earn respect and just kind of show what you can do and prove yourself a little bit, but coming in, I would say the biggest thing is not to be that guy that's cocky and comes in and thinks he's going to do all these things. You can be confident, but I think it's just got to show through how you play and all that stuff instead of what you say. So I think just coming in and kind of going to work and not really

worrying about anything else and just doing what -- just controlling what I can control and doing what I thought was best. Just gradually earning the respect of my teammates and just kind of showing what I can do I think has helped me earn their respect, and now to this point I feel like everyone on the team is really close and we're hitting our stride at the right time.

Q. Trevor, the hit that you took against Syracuse in your first start, what was the reaction like from the coaching staff after that, and what did you kind of learn from that whole experience?

TREVOR LAWRENCE: Well, I think we learned a lot of things as far as if one player goes down, it's not like -- it's not the whole team. We've got guys, and Chase stepped up and played great and brought us back, and that was awesome to see him do that. I think that's something that we learned is we've got depth and we've got guys that can play all around, so I think that was big for I think just the fans and the team to see, and for Chase to be able to do that was awesome.

And then also just being smarter about taking hits and stuff like that throughout the season, I've learned not to take a few hits, and still learning, obviously, but just being smarter about throwing the ball away and that kind of stuff.