



Head Coaches News Conference

Clemson Coach Dabo Swinney
Notre Dame Coach Brian Kelly

Friday, December 28, 2018
Omni Dallas Hotel, Dallas, Texas

COACH KELLY: Certainly, I want to thank the Cotton Bowl for their incredible Texas hospitality. Dabo and I were just talking about the treatment that each team's staff and family receives here. It's been second to none. Certainly, our sponsors, Goodyear, and then everybody that that has just made this a really great week for everybody.

At the same time not putting us in a position where we can't focus on what's important, and that is the preparation leading up to this Playoff game.

So, on behalf of Notre Dame, we want to thank the Cotton Bowl again. And, certainly, we're looking forward to a great match-up tomorrow.

COACH SWINNEY: Good morning. And I would say the same thing. This has been a wonderful week. First time I've been to the Cotton Bowl and what an amazing experience for our staff, all of our players, our support staff. I mean, they have gone above and beyond to make this a great trip.

And it's been a little different this year with managing Christmas as a part of it as well. But I'll tell you, we have truly had a great experience. It's been an incredibly fast week. I cannot believe it's Friday. I think we're both glad that it's getting time to play. But great environment to practice, great hospitality, and a lot of good food, too.

So really appreciate the Cotton Bowl folks and everybody who works so hard to make this a great week. I mean, it's a well-oiled machine, that's for sure. So I think it took like a minute and a half to get over here from our hotel with the police. And everybody's just well-coordinated. We're very thankful and appreciative and excited to play in this game against an unbelievable opponent.

Q. What are you trying to accomplish here in the last 24 hours as we get closer here to the kickoff?

COACH SWINNEY: Just really our routine. Obviously, we had a lot of time to prepare for this opponent. But we love routine. And that's one of the things that's been kind of cool about this particular bowl, is a Monday is actually a Monday and a Friday is actually a Friday. So that's been a little easier.

But today is Friday, and so we have a very routine day, and I think that helps. So we just prepare for the game as we do for all of our games. Obviously, we've had a lot more time. But I think the routine, it's important that it's the same. So we'll go about our business today just like we would if we were back at home or on the road any other Friday.

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COACH KELLY: Yeah, I would agree. Again, the ability to now get into flipping that mindset from a practice to a competitive mindset, using Friday to do that. But I think it's much more about the routine and getting comfortable in that routine today. And our kids will feel as though today is really Friday and tomorrow they're ready to play.

Q. We all heard about the final ruling for Dexter [Lawrence] last night. How did he receive the news? How did he take it? And, as bad as it is for him, is this really an opportunity for Albert Huggins to shine when everybody's going to be watching him? And, also, Jordan Williams, is he at the point in his development, you think he might be able to play a significant role tomorrow?

COACH SWINNEY: Yeah. He was, obviously, disappointed. All three of those guys were disappointed but not surprised. I mean, it's not like it was a different test. It was the same urine. Sorry about that, but that's what it was. (Laughter.) Different tube, same urine.

So the test was the same. I don't think anybody was real surprised by that. So disappointed. But we've prepared for that the whole way, or at least since Monday. And our guys are ready to go.

But Albert Huggins is a great football player. And you've just got to treat it like an injury. The next guy has got to go play. They're not going to cancel the game. Nobody is going to sit around and have a pity party or feel sorry for you. You've got to go play. And we're fortunate, very fortunate, that we've got a guy like Albert that in our eyes is a co-starter for us that can step in.

But, I mean, I don't want to lessen the impact of Dexter. Obviously, he's a phenomenal player. And we're going to miss him. But it's opportunity for Albert and Nyles [Pinckney] and Jordan [Williams]. Those guys have played all year long. They have a ton of experience. They hurt for their teammate. But you best believe they're excited for a little more opportunity for themselves.

Q. It's been 78 years since Clemson was last in the Cotton Bowl, and this is only the fourth time going up against Notre Dame. What are your thoughts on that?

COACH SWINNEY: Well, it's pretty crazy. 1939, Clemson's first bowl, played Boston College. And they had a shoot-out, 6-3. So did they even throw the ball in '39? I don't know if Knute Rockne had invented the forward pass or not.

COACH KELLY: I think it may have been three safeties (laughter).

COACH SWINNEY: Three safeties. Being at Clemson for 16 years I've seen

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pictures of Banks McFadden and the one of him with the cowboy stuff on and all that. That's pretty neat. So I actually showed our team a little history video of the Cotton Bowl.

But for me, it's amazing. It's awesome for Clemson to come back to the place that we were in our very first bowl game. It's been so long. With all the bowl affiliations and all that stuff, I don't know that we would have gotten back here without this unique situation, the way it worked out.

So I think Clemson fans are really excited. Dallas is an amazing town with so much to offer. But for me personally, too, having been a part of college athletics since 1988, I've never been to the Cotton Bowl. And then you throw in the fact that you get to play in that stadium (AT&T Stadium) over there, I've never seen anything like that. It's unbelievable. What an environment. So it's special all the way around, and we're excited about it. That's what it's all about.

You get a chance to play an unbelievable opponent. And we hadn't played Notre Dame very much at all. And it seems like every time they have played they've been epic games. And we were very fortunate to win in a hurricane in '15 down to the last play literally.

The last time Notre Dame had come to Clemson, Joe Montana, I think, with about a minute to go, imagine that, took them down to win. So some really neat history, not a lot of history but pretty neat history with Clemson/Notre Dame. And Tim Bourret, as he sits right here in the front row, he is in his glory, 40 years as the SID at Clemson but the biggest Notre Dame fan ever (laughter).

Dad went to Notre Dame. Tim went to Notre Dame. And so trust me, I know way too much about Notre Dame and I have for years. And when that game got put on our schedule, I knew he wouldn't retire until we played them. So now he's semi-retired, but he gets to be a part of this.

And I don't think he can lose. He's one of the few people that can't lose in this ball game. So I know he's pulling for Clemson, but he's got a little -- he's got a little four-leaf clover somewhere in his pocket (laughter).

Q. Brian, if you stay through the term of this current contract, you would be the second-longest tenured coach at Notre Dame next to Knute Rockne. I've wondered if you've thought of that and what that would mean.

COACH KELLY: Well, I think if you can make it that long in this business, that's pretty good. That means you've won enough games to keep employed at the University of Notre Dame.

That's not something that really most coaches give too much thought to. It's really

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about, I think each year to a standard that Notre Dame has. You know about Knute Rockne's standard. You know about, certainly, [Frank] Leahy, [Ara] Parseghian, [Lou] Holtz. You try to live to that standard each and every year.

Trying to get back to that game is a standard. Dabo has been here four times. We understand a standard of excellence, and that's kind of what my focus is more so than longevity or trying to be part of a legacy.

Q. Dovetailing off that, you've been asked over and over about changing since '16, this epiphany, change, whatever. Give us bullet points that got you and the team here today since then.

COACH KELLY: Well, I think probably more than anything else, developing our football team, totally in all phases from the mental end of things, their mental preparation, their physical preparation, technically, tactically. I think overall development in all those areas without missing any of those. And maybe in '16 we weren't developing them in all of those areas to a level that we needed to.

Q. Coach Swinney, logistically, what are the next steps for Dexter [Lawrence] and those guys with the appeal process?

COACH SWINNEY: Well, Dan Radakovich is kind of running with that with our legal team. They have representation. And there is a process in place. And, obviously, the timing of it is not very good for this game. But if we were fortunate to be able to win the game, then they'll do everything they can to see if there's any opportunity for next week, if that were possible. So that's really it, you know.

And there's a longer runway, obviously, for the fall because there's other consequences other than just losing this opportunity. So they'll handle that and deal with that and that's where it is.

Q. Dabo, and maybe Brian can comment on this, too, you've reached the level of sustainability with Clemson that I guess only Alabama has matched lately. I'm sure there's no easy answer to this, but what are some of the key reasons you can keep this up?

COACH SWINNEY: We've got a bunch of good people, and I think that we've done a great job in evaluating. And I think that's the real key is being consistent in your evaluation. We have a way of doing things that we believe in when it comes to how we recruit, who we recruit, how we build our program year in and year out.



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I mean, we start over every January. It's a clean slate. I don't assume anything. I run the program as if nobody knows anything, as if we all just got there. And we literally start over. I think that's a fresh way to do things every year.

But at the end of the day, it always comes back to the people involved. And I think that we recruit people first. We hire people first. And then we really nurture our culture that's in place there.

And so, academically, we've been incredibly consistent over the last ten years. We just had 66 guys make a 3.0 or better. That's a school record. We had a guy win the Campbell Trophy.

We've got just an incredible group of people that buy in to what we do and how we do it. I've got an unbelievable staff. We have great continuity on our staff.

But, when we've had changes -- I've had some changes along the way. Two years ago I lost two great D-line coaches in Dan Brooks and Marion Hobby. We've had some changes along the way. But when we have, I think, again same thing, I've done a good job of evaluating and bringing in the right people that fit who we are. So there's a lot that goes into it.

But at the end of the day, it comes back to the young people involved and their belief in what we do. And that speaks to the culture that's in place and how we've been able to sustain it and developing leadership year in and year out, discipline, accountability, and so forth.

And so I'm thankful that we've had an opportunity to be a part of this and to be able to win at a high level. And we've won some ACC Championships and all that. But I'm most proud of the consistency that we've had.

When we won the league in '11 for the first time in 20 years, we won ten games for the first time in 20 years. And now we've done that eight years in a row. Consistency in performance is incredibly difficult, and I think it's very difficult to sustain. And so that's the thing I'm most proud of.

And it's not just what we've done on the field, but it's off the field. Eight out of ten years we've been top ten academically. And this year we won the AFCA Academic Award. It's what we're doing on and off the field, the type of young men that are coming out of our program heading out into the world.

So that's to me what, hopefully, we'll be judged by. I mean, we all want to win national championships and all that stuff. And that's great. Those are great little

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moments. But you're ultimately going to be defined by the type of program that you had in place and how you equipped and impacted the young people that are involved.

So we work really hard on that. Like Brian said, I mean, it's a holistic approach. It's academic. It's social. It's spiritual. It's life skills. It's career development. It's every area. And I think our commitment to that has been a big reason that we've been able to sustain our success because I think certain types of young people have bought into that.

Q. There's been a lot of chatter about postseason reform in college football and a lot of coaches talk about wanting to preserve the bowls. What can be done, what would you like to see done that makes sure that these two Semifinals and this national championship game don't dwarf the importance and prestige of the other bowls?

COACH KELLY: I think the Playoffs will continue to have a marquee look to them. I don't think that that's going to change. The New Year's Six games still carry a lot of weight in the eyes of coaches and players, the ability to play for those kinds of games. It means a lot. It certainly does.

Dabo and I were talking about -- as we continue to develop our football teams, we still had 13, 14 practices with our football team, and that matters.

So bowl games do, in fact, continue to develop your football teams. And those allow for what he talked about relative to development of your programs and long-standing success and longevity of football programs.

I think there's always going to be some tiering as it relates to the bowl games. But I don't believe that you're going to see -- some are going to play in the game and some are not. Those are individual decisions that I think the players are allowed to make. But I don't think you're going to see any pushback from coaches. These are still important opportunities to develop your programs.

COACH SWINNEY: Yeah, I agree. And there's always going to be tiering in the bowls, just like there's tiering in college football. You have 130 teams, and there's tiering. It's just simple as that.

But I think that we already have expanded playoffs. I mean, I really believe -- I say it every year. There's probably only 12 or 15 teams that really have a chance to get here at the beginning of every year. And so, to me, everybody wants to expand the playoffs. I think it's already expanded. I think that the regular season is the playoffs. It's critical.

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The post-season, I mean, if we lose to Pitt, we're not here. That was a playoff game. If we lost to South Carolina, we're probably not here. That was a playoff game. If we lost to Duke, we're not here. That was a playoff game.

So I think we have playoffs every week. If they had lost to Southern Cal, they're not here. It's a playoff game. If they'd lost to Pitt, they're not here. It's a playoff game.

And so I think that's what makes college football so unique and special and different from all the other sports out there. I think the more you expand, then the less the season matters. Certainly other bowls.

I watched Temple win last night. I can't remember who they played.

COACH KELLY: Duke?

COACH SWINNEY: Not Temple. Baylor. Yeah, Vanderbilt. I watched Baylor win last night. And Coach [Matt] Rhule, man, that's what it's all about. How pumped was Coach Rhule? How pumped was he? How excited were those kids after the game? What's wrong with that? What's wrong with about -- how many bowl teams do we have? How many bowl games do we have? 70-something? 80?

I don't know. Whatever. What's wrong with about -- how many have we got? 40. *** What's wrong with about 40 teams ending their season with a win and having a championship to celebrate in their own right? Because not everybody is going to have an opportunity to win the national championship. It's just not going to happen.

So I love the fact that I can turn on the TV and watch Baylor and Coach Rhule who's building his team, who just has had all this time to prep, extra practice, to go out and compete and to be able to celebrate a great moment. You know, as opposed to only one team walks away and is happy.

We have that in all the other sports. And I think the combination of what we have right now in college football is great. It's unique.

We're not going to make the playoff every year. I'm just going to go ahead and news flash everybody here. So there's going to be a time where we're at whatever bowl. And we're going to love that. And we're going to compete, and we're going to get our team better, and we're going to do the very best we can.

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And so I think it's great what we have. And I think there's awesome match-ups. And Duke beat Temple. I think that's who it was. Duke beat Temple. And I know Coach Cut [David Cutcliffe] was pumped up. His team was excited.

And I think that's awesome. I don't see anything wrong with that. I think there's always people pushing whatever agendas they want either way. But, as a guy who's been a part of it for a long time as a player and a coach, I love what we have and I love the bowls and all that stuff.

Q. I want you to paint a picture for us, Coach Swinney. At the end of 2010, you've lost to South Carolina. The future is looking a little bleak. You wonder if you're going to keep your job. Terry Don [Phillips] lets you keep that job. You go out and address the media and say the best ten years of Clemson football ever are coming. You were right. But why did you believe that?

COACH SWINNEY: Well, yeah. That's exactly what happened. 2010 was my second year. I was kind of on a one-year contract at that point (laughter).

So I made it through '09, my first year. We won the division. So they said all right, let's give him one more year. And we didn't have a great year in '10. But I tell you, that team, to me that was the year that I really felt like, you know what? Man, we've got a chance to really be successful here. Because I saw the buy-in on our team. We had six -- we had five losses by six points or less. We lost two in overtime. At Auburn in overtime who went on to win the national championship at Florida State kicked a 55-yard field goal to beat us at the buzzer. It was like every game was down to the wire.

We battled and competed. And I just saw our team coming together. And we just weren't quite good enough in some areas, but we had help on the way.

And so I knew that we were going to get there. I didn't have any doubt. Zero. I had no doubt when I got the job that we would get it done. But I knew I was probably not a very popular choice at the time. And then we lost in 2010 to our in-state rival there. And, when I walked in -- I did the press conference. And I walked out of my office. And my wife said Terry Don Phillips was in my office waiting on me.

I said, well, we did the best we could. It was a quick ride. We'll see if Brian Kelly will hire me wherever he was at the time (laughter). Back to work. I'm a pretty good wide-out coach. I can get a job.

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When I went to see Terry Don, he was sitting in the office. And I think it was important for him to articulate his belief in me. And that's what he did. I literally didn't know if he was going to say hey, we have to make a change or whatever.

He said, "Listen. Sit down." He said, "I'm going to tell you something. I believe in you more right now than I did when I hired you." He said, "I have no doubt. What I want you to do is understand there's going to be some criticism. There's going to be this and that. I don't want you to listen to anything." He said, "I have your back." And he said, "I believe in you, and I know that you'll do what you need to do."

And so he said, "If it doesn't work, you can come over and help pack me up and I'll come over and help pack you up. And we'll ride out of here together."

And so I was just very encouraged. But I did a postseason press conference. And that was my comment. But I believed that. What gave me that belief is my entire life. Why wouldn't I believe that? I mean, I just look back at my entire life. You know, my faith. I knew that I was where I was supposed to be. And just belief in myself and the people around me. And so yeah, I said I think we'll have the winningest decade -- I know everybody is not happy right now. But by the time 2020 gets here, it's going to be the winningest decade in Clemson history. So we did achieve that. That's the only reason I'm still here. So thankful for that.

Q. What do you admire most about the guy sitting next to you right now?

COACH KELLY: Well, I think for Dabo, his ability to create consistency in a time where inconsistency is everything around us. It's easy to get distracted. And to keep that within your culture in your program requires just to have an eye on it every single day. So his ability to continue to keep his program year in and year out at the top of college football requires more than just recruiting good players.

It's all what he talked about earlier. It's an understanding of the smallest of details that we could probably talk hours about. And, again, I admire people that can look at things from much more of a perspective of people first and the ability to motivate people, not just players but everybody around them. And he's done a great job with that.

COACH SWINNEY: Well, for me it is his golf swing. I don't know if you've seen his golf swing. Crap (laughter).

COACH KELLY: Which is a good thing to have in this business.

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COACH SWINNEY: He has got the sweetest golf swing and it is really frustrating. He's a very smooth golfer. I did not know that, but I had a chance to witness that first hand back in May.

But, no, for me it's just longevity. I mean, he's been incredibly successful at several places, which is really hard to do in this business. To win the amount of games that he's won, to be able to -- wherever he's been to take what's been there and make it better and to win.

Whether it be Central Michigan, the Chippewas -- Cincinnati. I remember watching him first time at Cincinnati. And, man, what they were doing there. And then come right to Notre Dame, obviously different standards at Notre Dame.

But to be able to win at the level that he's won at everywhere and have the type of longevity that he's had in his career, I think that's what every coach aspires for. Longevity is not a common thing in this business. So I really admire that about him.

And then just -- just how -- how well-coached his teams are. I mean, this team's a great example. They're disciplined. They're accountable. They're where they're supposed to be. They don't hardly give up any big plays. They take care of the ball. They just play very smart and intelligent football.

-- College Football Playoff Semifinal at the Goodyear Cotton Bowl Classic --