

# TaxSlayer Gator Bowl: Clemson vs Kentucky

Thursday, December 28, 2023

Jacksonville, Florida, USA

TIAA Bank Field

## Clemson Tigers

## Coach Dabo Swinney

## Will Shipley

## Will Putnam

## Tyler Davis

### Press Conference



of work done. We've had great practices. Appreciate Fernandina Beach and their access to practice there. Had to come over here one day to the Jags on Christmas Day.

It's been really good preparation back at home and also down here. Now it's time to play. Got a lot of respect for this team we're getting ready to play. Know it's going to be a very competitive game. But just really appreciate the opportunity to be here and excited that the time to play has finally come.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

**Q. Coach, did you think you had seen the last of Devin Leary?**

DABO SWINNEY: You never know in today's world, that's for sure. Good football player. We've seen him several times. Got a lot of respect for him. He's a guy that's going to have a chance to play at the next level for sure.

You never know. We've seen a couple quarterbacks this year that we thought we were done with. You see 'em again. But he's a good one.

**Q. Your first bowl game as a head coach was in this game. Awful lot has happened over the years. Can you reflect about thinking about your bowl preparation that week compared to now.**

DABO SWINNEY: It was my first bowl game as a coach, period, in '93 as a GA, then obviously as a head coach.

It's night and day. Literally I was an interim. Just become the full-time head coach a couple weeks prior to coming down here.

My first bowl prep as a head coach, but I think we've learned a lot over the years. We've been in a lot of post-season games. So I would say things are very different from that first bowl prep. You kind of learn as you go in that situation.

I think we've had outstanding preparation for this game. Again, looking forward to competing.

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the Clemson portion of the final press conferences for the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl. With us here on the stage, head coach Dabo Swinney, running back Will Shipley, center Will Putnam, and defensive tackle, Tyler Davis.

Coach, some opening comments.

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, again on these guys, really excited to have them up on the stage, starts with TD. I think he's played the most defensive snaps of anybody at Clemson, most defensive starts as well. Putnam has played I think the second most career snaps of anybody ever at Clemson. And then my man Shipley here just graduated in three years. He's the first scholarship player to graduate in three years with a perfect 4.0. Pretty amazing what he's able to do.

Three great players, but also great men off the field. That's why they were voted captain by their teammates, so...

Just been a great week. It's been fast. I mean, we play in 24 hours. It's unbelievable how fast this week's gone. We've had a really great experience down here. Really appreciate everybody with the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl for just all the effort that goes into making it happen and making it a fun week.

There's a lot of moving parts. I know there's a lot of volunteers, a lot of people that work all year really to make this a great experience for everyone. I know there's a lot that goes into the community, as well.

It's been a really good week. Had some fun. We got a lot



**Q. Dabo, almost to the day, it will be a year since Cade Klubnik made his first career start for Clemson. Talked to him yesterday about the growth that he's had and the journey that this year has been. Your thoughts on his growth, how much he has grown.**

DABO SWINNEY: It's been tremendous. I think if you really watched us all year, it's easy to see that. I mean, the game has slowed down for him. Especially the last month or so, he's really settled in.

He's just got good poise in the pocket. He's making good decisions. He's really -- the biggest thing, he's used his legs in a timely fashion for us. Made big plays there. Extended drives. Created some big plays with his legs, as well.

He's still got a whole 'nother level. There's another level of physical development he has to have between now and next year. For a first-year starter, he did a lot of good things. We were in position to win every game. He's battle-tested. Much different than he was this time last year. Got a little thicker skin, more water under the bridge.

It's a developmental game and certainly a developmental position. If you're made of the right stuff, you have the right type of character and work ethic, obviously got to have the talent to go with it, then you're going to get better. That's exactly what I see with this kid.

I'm excited about how he's finished the year. He's had really, really good preparation. I was just telling him two days ago, just standing behind him, you can see that things have settled down for him a little bit as a young player.

He's got a lot of opportunity to grow in front of him. He'll work to get there. I think when it's all said and done, he's going to be a really great winner for us. I'm proud of him. Hopefully he'll have his best game.

**Q. Will and Tyler, knowing this is going to be your last game, what are some of the emotions you felt this week?**

TYLER DAVIS: I would say just a great appreciation for everybody that played a part in my life, my time here at Clemson. Just thankful. Kind of bittersweet closing this chapter out, but can't wait for the next chapter. I would say that.

WILL PUTNAM: For me, I would go with Tyler on that. Appreciative for this opportunity given to me by Coach Swinney. Thankful for all the memories, all the relationships made.

Really overall it hasn't really hit me yet because we still have one more game to play. It hasn't hit me in that regard yet.

I think just really excited to finish. Coach Swinney always talking about finishing. We're all guys that graduated, came back for a fifth-year, I wanted to finish. Really excited for this last opportunity to play tomorrow.

**Q. Dabo, Coach Stoops got up here and gave you guys a lot of praise for this program. What is it about the product that you put out this season that has earned that level of respect?**

DABO SWINNEY: We've played tough. I think we've been a very physical football team every single game. We've been in position every single game. We've had tough breaks in a couple games. Ball hadn't quite bounced our way. The guys have responded, showed a lot of resiliency. They just kept coming.

We finished well. We have a talented football team that, again, if you really pay attention, they've improved, gotten better. We've cut out some of the costly mistakes that have really, really hurt us early part of the year.

I mean, I think there's a lot to like about our team, for sure.

**Q. We've heard you talk a little bit about it, but what is lost from this defense when you lose some key guys? How much different should we expect this defense to look?**

DABO SWINNEY: Well, yeah, it's kind of like if you have an injury, some of those guys have had to miss games for whatever reasons. Next guy has to go play.

I think one of the reasons we've been a top 10 defense this year is because we've had really good functional depth. That's what you'll see in this game.

I mean, yeah, we're going to miss Jeremiah, he's a great player, but Woodaz has played a lot of football. He has a lot of experience. This is game 13 of his sophomore year. Those guys have to step up, just like any other position. Certainly tough to not have a great linebacker like that. Nate is not there. Next guy's got to step up. Just like he missed a game earlier this year, next guy had to step up.

AV and Shelton have gotten some good experience throughout the experience. They're confident. Those guys got to be ready to roll. I think Shelton, I think it's his first start, but he's played a good bit. Really like where he is from a confidence standpoint. He's had great preparation.

Then D tackle is a position we've had great depth at all year. Just means Peter Woods, instead of being listed as a co-starter, he gets to run out there first. You miss those guys, but we're thankful that we've got some guys that have played a lot of winning football for us and have good experience to lean on, on that side of the ball.

The development of Khalil Barnes, what he's been able to do throughout the year, Kylon Griffin, we're getting Jalyn Phillips back. He's a guy that has been out for several games now. Hopefully that will help us fill that void a little bit with Mukuba.

**Q. Dabo, the idea that a bowl game's a key part of momentum going into the off-season or the next season, is that a thing, or is it just a good way to end a single season?**

DABO SWINNEY: Well, I mean, I think it's a thing. I think anytime you can finish something on a positive note, it's good momentum.

You still have to start over regardless, whether you win or get beat. It's still a new team, a new challenge, a new journey every single year.

I think it's an opportunity to develop some confidence. Confidence leads to belief. Belief leads to great things. So it certainly is a positive in that regard.

**Q. Dabo, what do you see out of this Kentucky football team? What are you going to look to try to neutralize?**

DABO SWINNEY: They're tough. They're physical. Listen, talk about any of the Stoops guys, they're all defensive guys. They're all tough guys. I think their teams take on that personality. Coach Stoops was a great defensive coordinator, as well.

They're built to stop the run and they're built to run the ball. When you watch them, that's really what it comes down to. There are a lot of motions, a lot of different things they try to create offensively. At the end of the day they want to run the ball, they want to play-action you.

I think they've got good players at every single position. They've got some guys outside that really spread the ball out, pretty balanced. That daggum back, you don't get lucky and lead the SEC in touchdowns. That's not something you just luck into. A tough, physical dude. Big guys up front. Obviously Leary is a very experienced quarterback.

Defensively same thing. They're one of the best run

defenses in the country. They're stout. They're stout all three levels. Active physical safety, linebackers downhill, big, strong dudes up front. That zero is one of the biggest guys that we've seen.

Just well-coached. Again, pride themselves on being a team that stops the run, and that you don't run on 'em. That's kind of how they're built. That's the challenge in this game, trying to win that matchup up front.

**Q. Dabo, anything you wanted to add or clarify about the Kinard situation?**

DABO SWINNEY: No, no. I've spoken on all that already. Nothing to add.

**Q. Will Shipley, you've had a little bit of time since the last game, now getting for this next game, what goes into your decision? Where are you on that right now? What goes into it?**

WILL SHIPLEY: I think for me, the most important thing is finishing this season on a strong note, not for me and whatever decision I make, but for guys like Tyler and guys like Put. They've put their life and everything they have into this program.

My number one priority is sending them off on the right note.

In terms of my decision, kind of where I'm at, I think finishing this game, being able to go home with family, just discuss with them, talk through everything. Look at all the components and all the factors and be able to make a smart, thorough decision.

As I said, the number one important thing to me right now is this game tomorrow at noon, sending these boys off to my left on the right note.

**Q. Tomorrow you're playing in the home of the Jaguars. How proud of you are Trevor Lawrence and Travis Etienne's careers here with the Jaguars?**

DABO SWINNEY: And Tyler Shatley. Don't forget the Shat. He always gets left out.

Man, super proud of those guys. Really proud of 'em. Got a chance to see Shatley the other day, a couple of his kids.

Tyler was in my first signing class. He was part of the Dandy Dozen. All 12 of those guys graduated, doing really good in life. He's still playing. He's the last man standing of that group. I guess this is, I don't know, year 10 or something like that for him. Captain. Pretty good for a free

agent guy, to stay with the same team. Really proud of him. I think he's been a good big brother to those guys as they've come into the fold here.

Trevor, I mean, he's Trevor. The guy's a great winner. I know they've lost a couple games here. I talked to Coach Pederson the other day, as a matter of fact. I know they've had a couple tough games. They're right there in the hunt. Just need to find a way to win one and go from there.

He's been beat up and banged up. He's just one of those guys that keeps coming. That's what you love about Trevor. I've always said that about him. He looks like Hollywood, but he's the most un-Hollywood guy you'd ever come across. The kid loves to play. He loves to play, loves to prepare. He's a grinder. He's got a long, long, long career ahead of him.

Etienne, I mean, he's one of the most explosive players at this level, just like he was at our level. Really proud of him. Obviously he missed his first year. Seeing what he did last year, he's had some big moments this year, as well. Same thing. As long as he's healthy, he touches the ball, good things usually happen with that guy.

Three really great guys. Hopefully they'll be able to come over. It's a workday. It's game day for us, but a workday for them tomorrow. I'm sure they'll have practice, but I think they're probably going to come over when their practice is over, whatever point that is in the game.

Really proud of 'em, how they've instilled a lot of life into Jacksonville. The Jags got a bright future with that group, for sure.

**Q. Dabo, bowl games have changed quite a bit from the start of your career. What are your thoughts on the meaning of bowl season in the current college football landscape?**

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, it's kind of sad to see, honestly. It's my 29th bowl game as a player and a coach. I've got a pretty good perspective on just a lot of different bowls, a lot of different experiences. Some of my greatest memories are being a part of bowls. The best ones are the ones we won. I told them that (smiling).

It's a great opportunity. That hasn't changed. Regardless of who's playing, not playing, I mean, to me the story's about who's playing. It's an opportunity to finish your season.

One of our goals is to win the closer. This is the closer for us. It's a huge goal. It's a great opportunity for this team to finish well, to play on a stage like this, to come to the Gator

Bowl, play a really good team in Kentucky. That part hasn't changed.

I know the landscape has changed, but that part hasn't.

**Q. Dabo, last week what was your reaction when you heard Florida State would be suing the ACC?**

DABO SWINNEY: What was my reaction? What was my reaction (smiling)? I don't think I really had a reaction. It wasn't like a, Wow. I didn't really have a reaction other than just, Okay, all right, let's see what happens.

I don't know. Just like everybody else. Read the article, one of the articles, and just informed myself. I didn't really have a reaction. Went to practice (smiling).

**Q. Tyler, why was it important for you to play in this game? You didn't have to come back for this game. It was important for you to play. Why is that?**

TYLER DAVIS: I just think it's something that's been instilled in me to always finish, maximize everything I do. I think it's important for me to finish and show the younger guys around that it's important to finish and it means a lot.

**Q. Antonio Williams, his highly anticipated return, from your perspective, you've seen him grow in certain ways through his non-participation, what we've seen behind the scenes, but what have you seen from his lack of play time?**

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, so I guess he's played three and a half games. Cole played a game and a quarter. Two of our best players have really been out all year. When you're injured, it challenges you.

These guys love to play. That's what they love to do. Especially for him, coming off Freshman All-American year, you get hurt rolling your ankle, then you come back and get hurt the very next game with a different type of injury, it's frustrating.

But it's also an opportunity to grow in other ways. I think he's done that. He's attacked his rehab. I think he's matured throughout this year. He's got I think a really good perspective to himself. He's excited to get back.

You know, we don't need him to play 60 snaps or anything like that. But to have him available is a great thing for us. It's a big shot in the arm.

But he's physically more mature, as well. I think he's just in the process. And he was able to save the year. He's got three years left if he needs it.



But a really good player. Got a bright future ahead.

**Q. Just wondering about your observations and opinion of the bowl game experience. Did you observe things differently knowing it could be your last? What was this experience like with that thought in your head?**

WILL PUTNAM: Not necessarily for me, I've really approached this whole year like that. Not only for it being my last, but really through COVID, this being my COVID year, I almost felt like going into the season I'm on borrowed time.

In a normal world, I wouldn't be here, wouldn't play this season with me on this podium. I really kind of attacked this whole season with that mindset; that without a doubt, no matter what's to come, this is the last of not just playing football but being with the guys I call my brothers, being with my best friends, playing the game I love.

I think just this whole week has been an accumulation of all that, just putting in the week.

It's been a great experience. The TaxSlayer Gator Bowl has been awesome to us. We stayed at a beautiful hotel, had a great week of practice. It's been a really good kind of accumulation so far. Again, just looking forward to winning the closer and finishing this bowl game the right way.

TYLER DAVIS: I would say I had a great experience. Thankful for all the teammates. I'm having a lot of fun out here, being in my home state, just enjoying myself. It's been a great experience. Thank you for the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl for all the experience and the hotel and stuff like that. So yeah...

WILL SHIPLEY: For me it's been amazing, too, just being down in Florida, having a great practice facility, getting to come out here on Christmas Day and practice in the indoor. It's been tremendous.

They've put on great entertainment for us. Just being around with the guys. After every practice I've gone up to TD, we've got a big bear hug because that's how we feel about one another. Every one of our teammates, they're just like brothers to us. Just appreciating the moment and just living in the now, like Coach Swinney says. You never know what God's plan is for you. Appreciating every moment. It's easy to appreciate this one because of the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl and everyone, for what they've done for us.

**Q. Dabo, Kentucky's players heading into this, they've been very open about the fact that there's more excitement around this bowl game, they didn't out-and-out say this, but there's an implication that maybe guys wouldn't have played in this bowl game if they weren't facing you. What does that say about where your program is and how much of a target there still is on your back?**

DABO SWINNEY: Just another week. It's that way every week. Every time we line up to play, that's what comes with coming to Clemson. You come to Clemson, that's every single game. You're going to get everybody's best every single week. We talk about that all the time.

It doesn't matter who we play or where we play or what time we play. Whoever we play, we're going to get their best. Again, Clemson is a place, when the schedule comes out, people look and they say, When are we playing Clemson? That's just part of being at this great university.

So we understand that. That's why we talk about playing to a standard all the time. We got to do our best each and every week. Our preparation has to be great each and every week. Doesn't matter who you play, what the record is, none of that.

We know we're going to get everybody's best. If you have that mindset, then you'll prepare the right way for every single game, whether you're in your opener, whether you're playing a non-conference team in the middle of the season, or you're finishing in the post-season.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you so much for taking some time this morning. Best of luck in the game tomorrow.

DABO SWINNEY: Thank you.

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