

# TaxSlayer Gator Bowl: Clemson vs Kentucky

Friday, December 29, 2023

Jacksonville, Florida, USA

TIAA Bank Field

## Clemson Tigers

## Coach Dabo Swinney

### Press Conference

Clemson-38, Kentucky-35

DABO SWINNEY: This game reminded me of the 2012 Peach Bowl against LSU, kind of the craziness of it. Ironically, we got a belt in that game too. That's kind of weird. It's in my office.

Listen, first of all, just unbelievable game. You've got to give Kentucky a ton of credit. It's one of those games nobody really deserves to lose. Just a lot of fight and heart on both sides.

Just an awesome job by Coach Stoops and those kids battling. We just found a way to make one more play. I think it was, like, five lead changes. I think it's the biggest comeback maybe for us ever in a bowl game. 28 points. Maybe the most in a fourth quarter ever.

You saw who we are tonight, and these guys, they finished. They finished. The foundational things that we've built this program on were on full display tonight. These guys strained and put their heart into what they were doing. It was awesome to see.

Just really proud of them. Great preparation. Great preparation. I think we're 9-3 in our last 12 bowl games. It's how we prepare. These guys have to buy in, and they did. We set the tone early as we started kind of our bowl camp, and the guys bought in, and we had great energy, great preparation the whole time.

Kentucky is a tough team, man. Physical bunch. Again, made some plays, but that's back-to-back SEC wins for us. I think our guys deserve a little credit for the toughness that they displayed mentally and physically. Had to overcome a lot of adversity in that game, but that's a ninth win for us.

I know we didn't have the record that we wanted to have this year, but 13 years in a row with nine-plus wins, there's



only two people on that list, and that's us and Alabama.

We've had a level of consistency that is very uncommon, and these guys deserve the credit for that. A 13th year in a row with a postseason win, we're the only one to do that. These guys fought hard for that.

It's special to be able to finish the way we did. Five in a row and to finish up with some good momentum. At the end of the day, the story of this season has been the turnover margin. We're 7-0 when we won it, and we went 2-4 when we lost it.

Really proud of these guys for how they competed. Offensively, unbelievable fourth quarter. Just an incredible fourth quarter. Klubnik, he had a heck of a game, but that last drive, 8 for 8, 71 yards, game-winning drive, it was something special. Then to be able to run it in from the 3, I mean, Mafah was awesome. Four touchdowns. That's a Clemson record, a bowl record here at the Gator Bowl. Man, he was awesome tonight.

Will Shipley, 132 all-purpose yards. Huge kick return. We needed every inch of that kick return to get that field goal from Weitz. Unbelievable. All of our receivers made some big plays. Brinny was awesome. I think he tied a record for us with nine catches.

Adam Randall, that's who he is. I mean, he's a yards after contact guy. He made some really, really tough, gritty yards for us. Tyler Brown. Antonio came back and gave us four catches and kind of got some minutes in there. Stellato, five big grabs.

It was a complete effort by everyone involved. Just nothing bigger than that last drive.

Special teams, Swanson, 4 inside the 20. He has been awesome for us all year. Then what can you -- I mean, I don't know what to say about Weitz. Guy went 6 for 6 to finish this thing up, including a 52-yarder that he kicked 52 and 1 inch. It was amazing.

What a way for that guy to finish up his career. He was voted captain by his teammates. I'm really proud of those



guys. But the big kick return by Shipley was huge, and even Jay Haynes in there at the end giving us a good starting spot.

Defensively, four takeaways in the fourth quarter. Three in a row. Just incredible. I don't know that I've been a part of that in a quarter like that. Just awesome.

And it can be deflating because we get the turnover and go back and we turn it over. We get a quarterback hit, interception, but they go right back and get it again. Three in a row. It was incredible.

So just a great, great game. A lot of great individual performances. Barrett Carter was awesome. T.J. Parker set a freshman record for TFLs.

Man, what can you say about those seniors? Xavier Thomas, kind of got it all started with that first turnover. It would have been very easy for Xavier Thomas and Mascoll, two six-year guys, and Tyler Davis, Putnam and those guys to not play. Man, how awesome to see them finish. It was really special. I'm really, really proud of just what we've just got to experience in that locker room.

Very few people get to experience what I just experienced in that locker room. Very few people. I never take it for granted. You don't want it to end. You don't want that moment to end because you know you have to start over and you have to go back to work, but it was special.

These guys know that. Just an incredible moment with a group of people that have laid it on the line. To finish this season five wins in a row, just really proud of these players. I mean, they've just been awesome.

Appreciate our fans that showed up. Appreciate all the hospitality from the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl folks. It's been a great week here.

Again, congratulations to Kentucky for just a heck of a hard-fought game and another great season for Coach Stoops.

I'm sure you're going to ask me about Will Shipley too. Will, we'll do an MRI. I don't know if it will be tomorrow or the next day, but we'll wait and see. Initial reports seem to be encouraging, but you never know until you do the MRI.

THE MODERATOR: Questions?

**Q. Is that the craziest fourth quarter you have ever been a part of?**

DABO SWINNEY: I've been a part of some crazy ones.

I've been a part of some crazy ones for sure. Two of them against LSU, for whatever reason. I was a coach at Alabama, and I think we were down 13 points with -- I don't know if it was a 1:40 or something, and we won the game in Baton Rouge. That was a crazy one.

The LSU game in the Peach Bowl, that was one that was wild. Fourth and 16. Third and 18 down there at the stretch, and somehow we found a way to get it done. Was it five lead changes? I mean, it was just back and forth, and just some -- we did some dumb stuff now. I mean, we did some -- I mean, we had four guys out. Obviously we had four starters out on defense, but guys -- I mean, we had cover two, and we let a guy run right by us, one of our best players. We did some dumb stuff that we'll grow from and learn from.

Again, you hate to go through it, but the flip side of it to see your offense have to go win the game. The defense has been there all year. And we wouldn't even have had a chance today, even though they gave up those big plays, if we hadn't got the takeaways. We would have had no shot.

To see the offense go win it that way, that right there will be huge for the development of our guys -- our quarterback, our linemen, our skill, everybody.

The belief, the confidence, the grit, the heart. Those things, man, great stuff happens when you have all that stuff in place. A game like that, a win like that, a drive like that will put a lot of wind in your sails.

**Q. 20 years ago I mentioned I talked to you after the NC State loss. 20 years ago we made the finish that year, and 20 years later we repeated the finish, part two. Again, just what do you have to say about the team coming together to fight through so much adversity, the injuries and opt-outs, and the backs against the wall. What does that say? I know you have touched on it so far, but what are your thoughts on just how the season finished up for this crew, for this team?**

DABO SWINNEY: All I can say is that's just who we are. I mean, these guys have -- I mean, they've just -- they love who they're with. They love where they're at. We talk about it all the time. The foundation of this program is effort, attitude, belief, unshakeable belief. It's discipline, and it's mental and physical toughness. It's putting your heart into what you do. Again, it's believing no matter what.

They did that. I mean, they epitomized that. At 4-4 at a place like Clemson, that creates a lot of noise, a lot of narratives, a lot of doubt, leadership challenges, all those

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

things. These guys, they chose to continue to believe, chose to continue to kind of keep that windshield mentality to just stay in the moment and to stay together. That's what they chose to do. That's the decision they made, and that will be here -- it's very easy for them to buy into stuff, but they just kept working.

Man, these are the lessons that they carry with them for the rest of their life that come through this game of football.

**Q. Dabo, as well as Cade has played at times this season, that last drive was another level. You would probably agree. It looked like it was a faster, looser pace for him, and would you agree with that? B, is that a pace that could be carried over into next season for a more frequent strategy, if you will?**

DABO SWINNEY: Well, hope so. Obviously we've got to have a touchdown with two minutes to play, so we've got to play as fast as we can, but there's no question that tempo is good for him. It really is.

When he gets in rhythm, he sees it. I thought that we did a good job with that, and we had the three time-outs. You are trying to -- unfortunately, we had to give up one on the grounding, but it was awesome.

What a drive. Again, that is the type of game that a young quarterback -- as a coach, it's painful when you have to go through those things, but that's how a young quarterback grows for sure. He'll never forget that, and neither will anybody else. The players, the offensive line. It just fuels him moving forward.

It was well-orchestrated. Obviously you don't plan on getting a third and 18. Had a couple of groundings. Have to watch the film on that. We'll talk about that, Cade.

We overcame it. I mean, it was just an unbelievable play and effort to get the first down and then to finish it the way we did. Again, we had one left, and you are, like, all right, we're going to try to run one in here. If we don't get it, we'll call time-out, and Cade, you're going to have a couple of plays, and it's got to be in the end zone, touchdown, incomplete, whatever.

But, man, Mafah, man, he wasn't going to be denied, and neither was that offensive line. It was a great surge off the ball and a great push to finish that thing off for his fourth touchdown.

**Q. Offensive line (off microphone) eight sacks today. What do you see from that group going forward?**

DABO SWINNEY: We have to get better. We have to

re-establish our depth, and obviously we've been without Walker Parks, and this was a tough one. His dad played at Kentucky, so it was a tough one for him to miss. Marcus Tate. We'll have seven starters coming back, and we're excited about that. We're excited about what we've got.

I'm sure not all those sacks were on the OL. That's kind of the first thing everybody does, but we'll watch the tape and assess it. There's probably one or two that Cade might have taken. I don't know. We'll see when we watch the tape. There's a lot of things that go into it.

I'm really excited about the group that's coming back. Certainly excited about Coach Luke coming in and getting his first win. We're going to make it easy for him. Getting his first win, he and Coach Rumph. It's pretty cool.

**Q. What did you tell the players after that kick return (off microphone)?**

DABO SWINNEY: I'm not sure I can repeat that right here. (Laughter.) I was pissed. That was bad. We thought there was a hold, but it doesn't matter. You have 11 guys on the field, and I was really disappointed.

We knew going in, I think we're third in the country in kick return, and ironically we ended up having a big one ourselves that set up a difference in the game. You know, just that was very disappointing.

Sometimes when you have a kicker. You know, Robert Gunn made All-American this year as a kickoff guy, and sometimes when you have a guy like that and, I don't know, 90% of them are not returned, maybe more, sometimes guys can let off a little bit and not cover with quite the intensity they would if they know it's coming out. That's our job as coaches to instill that.

That was incredibly disappointing. It's amazing to win the game. You usually give up a kick return, and you usually get beat, and it's a tough way to start the third quarter. Really disappointed in that. We overcame it. We overcame it. There was a lot of adversity in that game.

These guys, you have to give the credit to the players because they still believed, they still kept battling. And, again, for our defense who has really been there all year -- our defense, geez, man, they've watched us fumble on the one, they've watched us just screw it up on offense a few times this year, getting ready to go up and give up a sack 70 yards. They've shut teams down.

They've been there all year. They deserved that one tonight, even though they had some things they would like to do better. But for them to see that offense go down and

win a game, our defense deserved that, and I'm happy for them that the offense was able to come through for them like that. Because, again, they've been in position and took some losses this year where they did everything they could to win.

**Q. I was going to follow that up with what does that say about the offense? Just every time they scored, you come back and scored.**

DABO SWINNEY: Just growth. It's growth. Growth follows belief; right? If you don't have the right beliefs, if you got doubt, that's before your growth is going to go, towards that direction.

These guys chose to believe in themselves, to believe in each other. Really proud of our staff. Man, Garrett did a great job. There's some frustrating things here or there, you just go holy cow.

Everybody just hung in there. And again, it just shows growth. It really does. I can't say enough about Mafah and how he finished this year. It's just awesome to watch. He just really has come into his own. His patience as a runner and the combination of him and Ship has been the difference for us down the stretch. They've been awesome.

**Q. Can you elaborate a little bit on Will? We saw him land on his head, obviously, but it's a knee?**

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, it was a knee. Again, you don't want to say anything other than all I can say is they felt like it was best-case scenario just on an observation, but they've got to do the MRI before you can have -- we've had that go both ways; right? We've had worst-case scenario news and do the MRI and get good news. Initially they said looks like best-case scenario, but we'll see what the MRI says.

**Q. You have a few guys still pending with NFL and comeback decisions. What are you expecting about roster management, and would you like to maybe have a team in place set for --**

DABO SWINNEY: I have a good feel where everybody is at and what our roster -- where it sits right now, we're in a good spot.

Thank you.

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