

# 2024 ACC Football Championship Game: Clemson vs. SMU

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Bank of America Stadium

## Clemson Tigers Dabo Swinney Press Conference



DABO SWINNEY: Good afternoon, everybody. Just a couple quick comments. First of all, just excited to be here and be a part of this great game at this great venue. What an awesome opportunity to come up here and play in this stadium.

Just thankful for the blessing to be in the game. It's one of the things I told our team, just I have a great appreciation for the experience that not everybody gets. To be able to experience being in a game like this is a real blessing, and I'm thankful for it.

It's something when I was a player I dreamed about, and I got a chance to experience that as a player, played in the first ever championship game, in the SEC Championship in '92, and to win a National Championship as a player.

As a young assistant coach, this is what you dream about, to be in championship games. So to have an opportunity to do this, I just really appreciate it. Again, I'm just thankful for it.

I probably have probably more appreciation now than I ever have just because there's 17 teams in this league, and to be one of two, I just know how hard it is to get to this podium. So I just greatly appreciate the opportunity, and I'm proud of our team to be one of two teams to get here outright is awesome.

It's been just a fun time getting a chance to prepare. This is two great teams that are going to battle it out for one trophy. Congratulations to Rhett and SMU. We actually have the same agent, so we've had some fun with that this week. Those guys have been kind of quiet, but I got a lot of respect for him. What an awesome job that he has done this year.

Just ready to get to work. I don't think we've played our

best football yet. I think we're still a team that's improving, and I think that's a good thing as we head into postseason. So excited about the opportunity, and again look forward to a great environment. I appreciate all the work that everybody puts in to getting this venue set for this great game.

**Q. Dabo, could you just recap the season that you guys have had, what led to you guys getting here, and how excited you are to kind of finish this season off or maybe have another game going after this one.**

DABO SWINNEY: This is where everybody wants to be when you start your season. You go play it out and you count them all up at the end. There were no tiebreakers, which is unusual for a 17-team league.

But the way we got here is just one day at a time. The guys handled some success. They handled some adversity, and they just kept going. We went undefeated on the road and went 7-1 in the league.

We didn't accomplish all of our goals that we had in the regular season, but it's really all about this: Whether we're 12-0 or 9-3 right now, we've got the same goal and the same opportunity, and that's win your league. I think we're much more battle tested. I think we've gotten better.

Again, we've been close. I thought we were really close last week to playing maybe our best football. Again, we're not a team that has reached its potential yet. So having said that and to be in this game, I'm proud of them.

I know it's not easy to get here. So they've just put in a lot of work. We've overcome some challenges along the way, just like all teams. I think SMU has been the best team in this league this year. Again, when you play all your games, we all get eight of them, we were the second best.

We'll get a chance tomorrow night to see who's the best.

**Q. I remember after the Georgia game there was a lot of people sort of frustrated with the result, and you very pointedly said I actually thought we should have come away confident from that and that we matched**



**up well with them and we weren't out talented. I'm wondering how you feel this team today is different from the team week 1 and how that talent has shown up and grown and developed since then.**

DABO SWINNEY: Just more battle tested. Again, that one we got for free because these schedules are done way in advance. It's not often -- usually when you play the No. 1 team in the country, you've got to earn your way there, on that stage, a neutral game, a playoff environment

6-0 game, we missed some real opportunity. We hit the first big play in the game, and we got a guy covered up on the line. We had another big play with a penalty. We had some drops. Then really in the third quarter, it was like three plays, busted plays, missed tackle, and next thing you know a game like that -- momentum in games like that are huge, especially early.

I thought we matched up physically, and I think as we have grown throughout the season, games can get away in moments like that. Sometimes people just look at a score. It's more than that. Our last National Championship was 44-16. Check those two rosters. We weren't 44-16 better than Alabama. We were on that day, but we weren't in totality.

Momentum, early momentum, and they just weren't able to turn it, and that's the same thing. Although I like how we finished that game, and I was encouraged physically how we matched up.

We've played it out. Again, I thought we played last week a team that might be the hottest team in the SEC, and we led the entire game until 1:08. We never trailed, led the whole game, and a third and 15 away from getting a stop and winning and then maybe just one play at the end from going to overtime or winning it.

I just think we've grown. They understand that games like that can be two or three plays, and so hopefully they'll take that into this game and play their best football in the postseason.

Again, we just know more about our team. We've got young talent that's really developed since that first game. We have an offensive line that has really played well all year. So it's just been -- we've overcome some things and found out a lot. Our quarterback has gone from that game to having one of the best years in Clemson history.

I know he had to finish with a bad play, but man, he's made a lot of great plays. He's gotten better and better and better. There's a lot to be excited about. Again, it's not luck that you got here. Everybody gets the same amount

of games. When you've got 17 teams, you've got to earn it.

So we earned it to get here, and now we've got to earn it tomorrow night against a great team.

**Q. What have you noticed about this particular group's response to losses this season, and how does that inform you as their coach heading into this game tomorrow night?**

DABO SWINNEY: The opener was tough, but it's a long season ahead. They know at that point -- again, we schedule games. We could have scheduled XYZ university, and everybody would have been real happy on the bus ride back and whatever. So I think they had good perspective in that game, and it still controlled all your goals.

We had a bad day against a good Louisville team who finished 8-4 and probably two plays away from 10-2. We went and beat -- handled Kentucky very well. They're a good team. We had a bad day, and now you've got to go on the road back-to-back weeks to Virginia Tech, to Pitt, and they responded, as has the staff.

You wish you could win every game and go undefeated. Everybody wants to do that. I've had one undefeated team. How many -- I think there's one in the country. So the teams that end up here are the teams that can respond, teams that can block out noise, because especially when you're in a place like Clemson and you lose a game, people can lose their minds. So you have to be able to stay focused on what you control and get back to work.

Again, to go to Virginia Tech and then to go to Pitt, that's not easy. Then to see how we won and just their resiliency, I'm really proud of them. They've just kept going and have grown throughout the season and have earned their right to be here.

**Q. With the run defense maybe being a little bit more inconsistent than you would like, how important is that to see more consistent performance against a team that runs the ball the way that SMU does?**

DABO SWINNEY: It's going to be as important as you can -- I can't raise my hand high enough of importance because they're really good. They've got -- between the quarterback and the back, they're incredibly explosive, like rocket ships, two rockets sitting back there that can launch at any time.

I think tackling is a premium. Obviously we couldn't tackle



that quarterback last week. It's not that we weren't there. You've just got to give him a lot of credit. So tackling will be at an all time premium because you have to -- and then just doing the little things we need to do to stop the run.

They do a great job. They're creative. They'll play with some tempo. They've got, like I said, both of those guys can take it the distance. It's a huge challenge.

**Q. Dabo, two years ago this was kind of Cade's coming out game. How has he grown since that game against North Carolina here in Charlotte two years ago, and what have you seen from him that gives him that extra confidence to pull out another ACC Championship for you guys tomorrow night?**

DABO SWINNEY: Night and day, not anywhere near the same guy. He was just a young kid running around out there. First of all, he's just physically totally transformed from when he was here at that time. He's become a leader of the team. He was just trying to get the respect of the offensive guys. Now he's a leader, a clear-cut leader of this team.

He's battle tested. He's got a lot of experience under his belt. He's had some failure, which has made him better. He's faced some adversity. At that time, he really hadn't faced any in his whole football life really, and now he's just a smarter, more experienced guy, and he's coming off a great season.

Still a lot of room for him to improve. Last year as a first year starter, he got better the second half of the season, but just too many negative plays and trying to do too much and things like that, and he's just really taken a huge step forward this year in all areas. Really proud of him.

Then he's used his legs, something that wasn't as natural for him last year, and this year he's made some huge, huge plays. He's been a big difference maker for us, both throwing the ball, making decisions at the line of scrimmage, and also with his legs, both designed run and creating.

**Q. With the inaugural season of the College Football Playoffs and the committee rankings and a lot of what-if scenarios, what are you telling your team specifically to keep them focused?**

DABO SWINNEY: Honestly, I think having this opportunity is all they needed to be focused. They know what their opportunity is to win this game. We have to win the game for sure to have an opportunity. I think SMU should be in no matter what, but we have to win it.

So this is the first round of the playoff for us. That's how we have to look at it. This is a goal. The season is over. Now you're into the postseason, and you're where you wanted to be. Doesn't really matter what's happened behind you. It's all about this opportunity.

It's been pretty easy to get them focused on what they're trying to do because this is what they've worked for since January.

**Q. Just talk about the news that you probably heard about Bill Belichick has applied to become the next head coach of the North Carolina Tar Heels.**

DABO SWINNEY: I don't know. I don't know much about it. That would be quite a story. That's about all I know. I don't have any other comment on that.

**Q. You're facing once again another potent pass rush with SMU. Just how important was it last week to get that starting five back and for them to get the reps against what was an NFL defensive line against South Carolina?**

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, the only sack they had was they were offside. They didn't call it, but they were offside up the middle there. I thought we did a great job. They really held up well, as they have all year.

We've seen some great -- I'm going to tell you, all the way back to that Stanford D-line, that may be as good a group as I've seen. We've seen a bunch of great D-line. We go up to Virginia Tech, that guy is leading the nation in sacks or second in the nation in sacks. Obviously South Carolina, they are, they're as good as there are out there in the country.

Man, our guys have held up all year. So certainly getting those guys back has been huge. I think that's a great side note and story to this group, to this team is how they overcame some crazy adversity, especially when you -- thankfully we came into the season with some depth, and we're only losing one lineman. We've got a lot of guys back on this team.

But a young Elyjah Thurmon going to go play the whole game for Virginia Tech. Then you go into the Pitt game, and the first play of the game, he's done for the year. You've got guys playing positions that they haven't played. That's been a really neat story within our team this year is how that group has performed.

Then to come back, Marcus Tate has been out a couple of games, and to come back and play like he played against a really tough D-line last week, I was really proud of him.

Tristan Leigh getting back. Those guys, he and Blake did an awesome job for us last week.

**Q. Just a few injury questions. DeMonte Capehart, Tyler brown, R.J. Mickens, anything you can share on those three and how much they've been able to go?**

DABO SWINNEY: They all made the trip. They're all on the bus. They'll be getting off doing a walk-through here soon. So we'll see.

**Q. You've been in this league a long time. This is the first year for Rhett Lashlee at SMU. What about SMU's program do you think has made it so seamless a transition from the American Athletic Conference to the ACC?**

DABO SWINNEY: A bunch of good players. Good coaches, but they've got dudes. I mean, they've got a great quarterback. They made the change at the quarterback, and obvious that's been a game changer for them.

They have elite skill. All these guys that they're going to put out on the field offensively can fly. All those receivers, they've got about four guys that they spread the ball out to. They can all really, really run. The quarterback's dynamic. He's the youngest guy they've got is the quarterback. The back is a rocket ship. We saw him at Miami last year.

Then defensively, this might be the biggest D-line we've played. These guys are massive. They are huge, and they're all graduates. We were talking last week, just because you're graduates and seniors, you can have a bunch of graduates and seniors, and they stink. These guys are really talented players. So that's why.

And Rhett's done a heck of a job, good coach. They've got all the things that you need to be a good football team, and they've got great support. SMU and the enthusiasm that I think they brought into this league, I'm sure it will be a great crowd tomorrow night. They're incredibly excited about the opportunity.

The weird thing is Chad Morris left here in '14 to go, and I think he got them back to their first bowl game before he left and took another job. Now that program, you look at where they are, Sonny Dykes came in there, and now Rhett come in, he's been awesome. He really has. I've known him a long time. He's a very good coach. He's put a good staff together.

He'd be the first one to tell you that they've got good players that have bought into what they're asking them to do.

**Q. You've coached in a bunch of these games and you have players who were here two years ago in this. Has the experience of having done it before a significant advantage for you, a small advantage for you? Obviously for SMU this will be the first time at this level playing in a game like this.**

DABO SWINNEY: If you look at Rhett's career, he's been in big games and stuff like that. It really is all about how you play on the day you play. It really is. I don't think it's a negative that Cade has played here. He's got good memories here. I don't think that's a negative, but it really is about how you play these four quarters.

This is my tenth time in this game in 16 years, and our eighth time in 10 years, our second in 3 years. I love the fact that I know the routine and I can have a visual of it. I understand the magnitude of the moment. Again, as I said earlier, I have probably more appreciation now than I ever have because I know how hard it is to get here.

It's just -- it's about how the two teams play on that day. Again, I don't think it's a negative, but does that make a difference when the game kicks off? I don't think so. I think you've got to go perform and execute at a championship level and you have to earn it on the field.

**Q. Talk about your game against Louisville. You lost that home game against Louisville. How did you get the team so focused on possibly being here? And you had a very lucky Syracuse team that beat Miami last week. Are you going to give him a free meal? That's the question.**

DABO SWINNEY: You just go to the next game. You go to the next game. That's just what we do. Sunday is still Sunday. Monday is still Monday. Tuesday is Tuesday. You just go to the next game. As a competitor, I'd like to say, again, you don't want to ever lose a game, and these are young people.

We're not perfect as coaches. You pick yourself up. You take ownership. You learn from it. You put your eyes forward and get back to work and go win the next one. That's what you do. That's how you get here. I don't think it's any luck with Syracuse. They're a good team. They earned it. That's why you play all the games. Everybody gets eight.

Miami lost two games. They lost to a really good Georgia Tech team that went eight overtimes in Athens. Then they lost to a 9-3 Syracuse team at Syracuse, and both games were like a touchdown or less. So they've had a great year. It's just hard. It's just hard. They had a great year. I



think they were deserving to be in the playoff. I really do.

**Q. Phil Mafah, excluding the Citadel game, has struggled offensively. What are the ways you guys will try to get him going tomorrow against SMU?**

DABO SWINNEY: He's just got to be healthy. He's been battling with a little injury, and hopefully we can get him through that.

**Q. You mentioned on several occasions just today being battle tested. How has that helped the identity of this team? Do you think the battle tested moments that you guys have had has allowed you to be in this place right now?**

DABO SWINNEY: No doubt, no question. You grow together through the course of the season, and you do football life together. It's a lot. A lot of practice, a lot of meetings, a lot of hours, and the team has really grown.

This is a close group, and they've hung in there together. They've not made any excuses along the way, and they've always showed up and gone back to work. The leadership of this team has been -- we don't have a ton of seniors. Starter-wise we've got R.J. Mickens and Barrett Carter and Payton Page, and then we've got Mafah, Brinny, and Marcus Tate. And Aidan Swanson, our punter.

Those guys, and then we've got a really good support group of seniors that maybe aren't starters or have huge roles, but the leadership has been tremendous. We've got great leadership in our young guys, like T.J. Parker, Peter Woods. They're just sophomores, but they are big time voices within our program. Antonio Williams and the year that he's had, just great leadership, and it's been fun to see him grow closer as they've gone.

When you go through stuff together, you get stronger. They're a mentally tough group that knows what they've got to do, and they're thankful for the opportunity. They're thankful to have a chance to go play.

Again, we had a tough moment last week, and then a few hours later, you're resetting your mind because those are things you didn't control. Now you're in control of your destiny. We've got two goals left, win the ACC and win the closer. That's it. If we hit them -- and nobody can do anything about that. We hit those two goals, we'll be a National Champion.

That's exciting. Got a chance, chip and a chair. That's it. Got a shot. Here we are. It starts with winning tomorrow night.

**Q. You talked about your need to win to get into the playoffs. You talked about SMU should be in no matter what. You've advocated for Miami, which is kind of on the fringe right now once they put a Big 12 champion in. Are you ready to go to 14 or 16 teams sooner rather than later?**

DABO SWINNEY: It doesn't matter what I'm ready for. It's going to happen for sure. Then we'll be arguing about the 20th team and the 21st team. It's the same old deal.

Hey, whatever. I don't really worry about it. I just focus on my team and trying to get my guys ready to play and trying to build great men through the process. That's really what we try to do, and we've been very consistent at that.

**Q. On behalf of one of my correspondents, he was wondering when you faced a dual threat to quarterback like Mr. Sellers last week, how has that prepared you for facing Mr. Kevin Jennings this week?**

DABO SWINNEY: We've seen a bunch of them this year if you go back to -- Beck runs better than people give him credit. He actually hurt us a time or two on a scramble. But that quarterback from Stanford -- I think he got hurt. I don't think he finished the year. Is that right? But he was really, really good. So we've seen several guys throughout the year.

The Virginia Tech quarterback, we were really concerned about him and the back that they had. You just, you learn from each and every game. Sellers was probably -- he made two just unbelievable individual plays and was the difference in that game, but you learn from all of that.

Your rush techniques, all those type of things, but the bottom line is you've got to tackle. We had three sacks last week, and if you really watch the tape, we had seven if we could tackle. We didn't get the guy on the ground when we had our hands on him.

Again, I give him all the credit for that. He just made a great individual plays. But I think the more you see that, the better you get. It's hard. It's hard. These guys are special. I've seen a bunch of them come through here all the way back to Lamar Jackson. Every time he had the ball, I just held my breath. Thank God we got him down again because he could score any time he had the ball in his hands, or thank God he handed it to somebody else.

So we've seen a bunch of those guys, but this is -- this is a really complete offense. It really is. They do a nice job. They've got a lot of precision in their passing game. These are really good receivers. Tight end is a good player.

Then the way they use their back, they haven't had to run the quarterback as much. They get him out of -- he's not a tall guy, so they get him out of the pocket quite a bit to create time in their routes, scramble opportunity in their routes, and opportunity for him to run.

They present a really tough challenge. That's why they're 8-0 in the league and have had the year that they've had.

**Q. Two questions. One, now that you've got three new teams in the conference and you went to 17 teams, do you like it better without divisions? And the second question is like you talked about before, you hit a low at the end of the South Carolina game and then minutes later you hit a high knowing you're going to be in this game. How do you feel like your preparation has been this week changing that drastically?**

DABO SWINNEY: Well, as far as the division -- I mean, I was always kind of a division guy, but with 17 teams, it's hard. So I just think it's the right thing to try to -- because you don't play everybody. So I think it just gives you the best chance maybe to try to get the two best teams.

Now you run into a million different tiebreakers potentially. Thankfully that didn't happen this year. So it is what it is.

Then as far as the turnaround, I mean, we've had great preparation because, again, you go -- sometimes in life you really need to experience pain and the sting of defeat to really, truly grow or fulfill your purpose, right? It made me feel like 2016. We lost to Pittsburgh in '16 at home. It was like we were devastated. I'll never forget that because we thought we were out.

Then all of a sudden as the night went on, man, all of a sudden we still had a shot. And I just remember as we got back to work, that pain that was in that locker room after that Pittsburgh game, I really think that fueled our team to go on. We obviously went on to win the National Championship.

I saw a lot of pain last week. So the flip of that emotion there, all of a sudden there's a lot of wind at our back, and we've had a great week of preparation. These guys have worked. They couldn't wait to get in there.

And I could feel it because I was just actually by myself watching the game on my phone. Then as soon as that guy jumped offsides, my phone started blowing up, and I got 20, 30 players texting me. You could just feel the energy and the enthusiasm. I went from what I was with in the locker room to now it was like let's go, Coach.

Now I'm thinking about my staff meeting on tomorrow that

we weren't having. Now I'm thinking about my staff meeting. I'm thinking about practice plan. It's been a good week. It's been a lot of fun to be in this game.

Again, there's eight Power Four teams that got a chance to practice this week. We had Signing Day. I got to be at practice on a Signing Day. That was cool. It's been a great week. Signed up a bunch of great new Tigers, and to be able to practice football during championship week, that's a good thing.

**Q. How do you personally handle the pressure of championship games?**

DABO SWINNEY: I just stand on my faith. I just know that God never says oops, God never says my bad. I live my life that way. I'm not defined by a scoreboard. Other people may define me by that, but I'm not. I'm defined by who I am, and my identity is in Christ. So I have strong faith in that.

I look at these moments as just great experiences. I always tell our players, man, don't let the pressure of the moment be greater than the pleasure of the moment. Like this is a blessing. Make sure that you really enjoy this.

Again, as I said, I have a great appreciation for just the opportunity and the privilege that a lot of people don't get. There's a lot of people that coach football and play football and they never ever get a chance to experience what it's like to be in an environment like this, what it's like to ready yourself for a moment like this, what it's like to be in a locker room with a group of people that have been together and done life and they've grinded and they've worked, and now here you are, and what it's like to win it.

I've lost the National Championship too. I know what that's like. I would never give any of that up. It's all good. And I just love having the opportunity to compete at the highest level, and I love having the opportunity to teach and to be able to use this platform, this game, because I think ultimately that's what I am, that's what we all are is teachers.

I've got a bunch of great young people. So I just stand on my faith in everything that I do. When I fail, when I succeed, I just try to keep my eyes on Jesus. If you keep your eyes on Jesus, you'll do what you need to do in the moment. You're going to have some hard times. You're going to have some failures. And it helps you to continue to keep on keeping on.

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