

# 2024 ACC Football Championship Game: Clemson vs. SMU

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Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Bank of America Stadium

## SMU Mustangs Rhett Lashlee

### Press Conference

RHETT LASHLEE: I want to thank Commissioner Phillips and Michael Strickland, everybody from the ACC just for how incredible they've been our entire first year here in the league, but obviously this week leading up to tomorrow.

On behalf of our president, Dr. R. Gerald Turner, our board chair David Miller, our athletics director Rick Hart. We're extremely excited to be here, to be playing in this game tomorrow, to be sharing the field with someone as worthy as Clemson for an opponent, and just kind of cool in our first year in the league to get through the league undefeated and be one of the last two teams standing.

We're excited to live in this moment tomorrow and not worry about all the other things going on outside and compete against a really, really good opponent and see what happens.

Questions?

#### **Q. Did you expect to get Coach of the Year, and how did you celebrate?**

RHETT LASHLEE: Thanks for the question. I didn't expect it. I didn't think about it. I'm being honest.

But they don't give out a team of the year award, so I get to represent the team and our staff. Our staff has been incredible. Our team has been incredible. Humbled by it.

I think it just is an acknowledgment of all the work of really everybody at SMU, our president, our athletic administration, our alumni. Our fan base was incredible this year, to share in the success we've had. Humbled and honored to represent SMU and represent our team.

#### **Q. Being in this position facing Clemson, being the new team in the conference, them being the**



**winningest team in this game, what is the David versus Goliath part of this, and being favored in that, how do you look at that piece of this game?**

RHETT LASHLEE: Well, we weren't favored initially when the lines came out. Everybody needs to remember that. It swung quickly. It's pretty even, and probably should be. It should be a really good game.

I don't look at the David-versus-Goliath stuff. We're the new kid. We're the new kid at school that everybody just thought would just kind of hang around, I guess, and we decided to crash the party and show up.

It's pretty cool when you look at our journey. Our first conference game was against Florida State at home, who won the league and went undefeated last year, and now we're bookending it at the end of the year with Clemson. What Coach Swinney has done, just the consistency of success there in his tenure over the last decade and a half, they've been the class of our league for the last decade.

I think they're going for his ninth tomorrow maybe or something like that, and we're just showing up for the first time. It is cool. This is the stage. This is the arena we wanted to be in, so we're humbled to be on it.

#### **Q. When you look at Clemson's defensive front, wondering if this is the biggest group or the best group that you've faced and what kind of challenge that's going to present for you offensively?**

RHETT LASHLEE: They're a problem. We're fortunate to be in a league where there's a lot of defensive fronts. You look at we played Boston College, we played Cal last week. The Florida State front is incredible and there's some teams we didn't even play; you start talking about Virginia Tech and others, the Duke front.

But what they have, they have four guys up front that are probably going to play in the NFL. They've got great size at the D-tackle spots, which really makes it hard to move and run the football, especially between the tackles, and then you've got two guys on the edge that are really athletic and can really rush the passer, too. It's a complete



unit.

I don't know until we play them, but we expect them to be as good or better than anybody else we've played so far.

**Q. My question is two-tiered. You had a couple of close games at the beginning of the season and even in October. What did those close games teach you and teach the guys on your team and your staff, because you have a really diverse staff.**

RHETT LASHLEE: Yeah, you learn a lot about your team throughout the season. There's different moments here or there where you learn a whole lot about your team. Our first game of the year, we're on the road in Reno, Nevada, and we're down 11 points with eight minutes to go on the clock. That's not exactly where we thought we would be. But our guys found a way to win and overcome in that moment.

Then a few weeks later, we lost a close game to BYU and did a lot of things to contribute to that loss, so we learned a lot from there. I think from that point on, really our guys kind of came together and figured it out. We went to Louisville, won a close game on the road by a touchdown. We won at Duke in an incredibly close game.

We've been fortunate enough to have enough of those moments where our guys have found a way to win more than not, so it helps you. You think of tomorrow night, game is probably going to be close in the fourth quarter, and it's not like we're new to that moment.

What was the second tier of your question?

**Q. How has it felt for you to get to the ACC Championship in your freshman year within the ACC? I know you and the previous coach had a lot of rebuilding to do.**

RHETT LASHLEE: Yeah, we're excited. This is the vision. This is what we thought our program could do. That's why we felt like very confidently we belonged at this level is we felt like, man, if we got at this level, we could build a program that could expect to compete for conference championships year in and year out in the ACC and compete to be in the College Football Playoff, mainly because our school has done it before. It's been a while, but we have a history of competing on the national stage. To do it in year one, it's exciting, it's humbling. It's been a great ride.

I told our guys Thursday, we're going to live in the moment for the next 48 hours. Let's live in the moment. You guys have earned the right to be here. We've earned the right to

share the field with a great opponent like Clemson. This is what college football is all about.

So any other narratives that are out there swirling around, we're going to focus on living in this moment. We're going to do the best we can. We're going to compete our tail off to try to win and then we'll see what happens.

Those guys in that locker room, it's a special group. They're 22-4 in their last two seasons. I think that's the fourth highest winning percentage in the country in the last two years.

It's a special group of seniors that won 11 games and a conference championship last year, went up in weight class, has won 11 games again, put themselves in position to compete for another conference championship. We're humbled and we're excited about the opportunity to go compete tomorrow night.

**Q. Maybe not the easiest thing to analyze right at this moment, but with this being the second conference championship for yourself as head coach and for your coaching staff, how do you feel you've grown in being able to come into a big game like this and be able to accomplish what you want to accomplish as a staff?**

RHETT LASHLEE: No, good question. I don't want to say it's just another week because it's not; it's a championship game. But the way it rolls, it goes right into game week on Sunday just like you do every other game in the season, and it's basically a road game for both teams. Both teams have to travel. I think the fact that we did it last year helps. We played our last game of the year last year at home and then had to go on the road at Tulane and play in a championship game.

It helps our staff know how to prepare late in the year, how to get our guys ready, but it helps our guys because they've kind of been in this situation before.

You know, in a year with a lot of firsts, I'm not going to say everything about this week is the exact same as last year, but there's enough things there that I think our guys have done a good job of understanding it's a big game but it's the next game, and really for us the last six weeks have all been big games.

So we've done our best to approach it like we have every other one and tried to not get bored with the routine that works for us.

**Q. Talking to you before the season, you talked about how you took a very strategic view of how do I build a team to play at this level in a Power 4 conference.**



**When did the actual building this idea of we've got to get ready for this start, and has the experience met what your expectations were?**

RHETT LASHLEE: Yeah, it was weird because we officially were announced we were coming to the league the day before our first game last year, so didn't have really a lot of time to start playing and then we had to worry about last year's season. But every now and then you'd have maybe a moment where your mind could wander, and you'd start thinking about the future.

But it really started last year January, 1st of January, right after our season ended and we lost the Fenway Bowl, and just knowing that a lot of schools get two or three years to prepare to make this kind of jump. They find out, oh, we're going to this league or that year and it's going to be a year or two, and our administration had six months to get ready. We had six, seven months to get ready.

But we knew -- the formula that we knew would work had just worked. We went out and we bulked up our defense last year, and we were able to win a conference championship because we continued to play good offense but we developed a championship defense at the level we were at.

We felt like we knew what the blueprint was for us and for us at SMU, but we had to now translate it to this level, which was different.

So we had to go out and replace some guys off that unit but we had a lot returning but we just knew we needed that depth in the O- and D-line because it's a line-of-scrimmage league when you get to the top two or three conferences. It just is. It's not only the starters you put out there, it's the depth of that.

That's when we started in January. We just said, we've got to get depth in the trenches. Yeah, we knew we needed to plug a hole here at receiver or running back or DB or linebacker, but we have to have this because we won our conference last year because we had the best D-line in the league. We could stop the run and rush the passer.

We know going into this league we had really good linebackers returning, we had good safeties. We needed to have the depth to go along with the Elijah Roberts of the world, the Isaiah Smiths, the Cam Robertsons that were returning, and then the depth on the O-line, too.

We've been fortunate to stay pretty healthy. We've had a game here or there in the last six or seven weeks where we've lost one or two D-linemen for a game but not for longer periods of time.

Same thing on the O-line. Last week Logan Parr didn't go, Ben Sparks popped right in at guard and we didn't miss a beat.

But our top seven or eight have stayed relatively healthy on the D-line all year, and our top six to seven or eight or so on the O-line. Sometimes you've got to be fortunate, too.

But that's when it started, about last January, and our staff worked their tail off from about January to August to just try to build the deepest roster we could.

**Q. Just talk about how your quarterback has been so good during this stretch leading up to the ACC Championship game.**

RHETT LASHLEE: Yeah, thanks for the question. Yeah, Kevin, he's -- what's cool for us is the whole country got introduced to Kevin this year. A little bit last year when he won the championship game for us, but we kind of knew he was special his freshman year. He played against Tulsa and Memphis in some critical moments because of injuries as a true freshman and showed that the moment wouldn't be too big for him. Again, what he did last year against Tulane.

I just think it's been really impressive how his first start this year was at home against our rival, TCU, and he just played incredibly efficient. He played within himself. He trusted his teammates. He didn't go out there and try to win the game by himself.

His second start was against Florida State in our first conference game, and I think that game you saw him really start to take the next step. He had some big throws to RJ Maryland and Brashard Smith, and then he goes on the road against Louisville and played what was arguably maybe his best game of the year still and just played really, really well.

So he's just proven that the moment is not too big for him. He'll make mistakes. See the Duke game; he'll make mistakes and he just keeps playing. But even more importantly after the Duke game, see the Pitt game of how he responded.

He believes in himself. He believes in the guys around him. We felt like he was the right answer for this year's team but also for the future because we felt like he would just get better and better and better each week, and he would allow us to build an identity around him on our offense, and fortunately for us, all those things have been true.

**Q. You were a quarterback at Arkansas and then you were a coach in the SEC. Is that helping you in your pedigree as a coach having played and coached in the SEC, to come here to the ACC and make your team just like an SEC school?**

RHETT LASHLEE: I think we've got a pretty good league, so I like our league. I'd love to play any of them anytime, anywhere. We're not trying to be an SEC school. We're trying to be a really good ACC school because that's good enough. But I do appreciate the question.

What did help me is being at Arkansas as a player and then being at Arkansas as a GA in 2006. We had like Darren McFadden, Felix Jones. We went and played for a conference championship that year as a young coach, then a few years later, 2010, we win a National Championship at Auburn with a guy like Cam Newton.

I've been on those big stages. I've been blessed to coach in three conference championship games in the SEC, one in the American, one in the Sun Belt. Been blessed to coach in two National Championship games.

When you get those experiences, everything with experience you gain a little bit of confidence and knowledge for the future. So being on that stage and in those moments surely has helped. It didn't really have anything to do with the league we were in, it just happened to be the league I was in.

And then being in a league like that I think probably even more to your question is where every week you've got to play well or you're going to get beat. It doesn't matter who you're playing, top of the league, bottom of the league. Every week you've got to play well and you've got to expect to win one-possession games, which happens in our league here in the ACC quite a bit.

All of those things and your experiences over time come together and definitely help.

**Q. Dabo Swinney earlier talked about the season that Cade Klubnik has had and comparing him to who he was in his first ACC Championship appearance. Just in your week of evaluation on him, what have you seen and what challenges does he present to your defense?**

RHETT LASHLEE: He presents a lot of challenges, and good or bad, I've been evaluating Cade since like 2020 because when I got the OC job at Miami, I just remember sitting on my back porch during COVID talking on the phone to him and his head coach at the time, Coach Dodge who was at his high school, really trying to get him to come to Miami without allowing him to visit because I

thought he was arguably one of the best quarterbacks in the entire country coming out, which he was.

I've had a lot of respect for him for a long time. We liked him on his high school film. I knew when he went to Clemson, I remember I probably told somebody, he's going to be really, really good just because we tried to get him at Miami and couldn't do it.

But then to see his growth has been pretty cool. You can tell a big difference watching from afar, like last year, but now watching this year a lot more up close. You can just tell he's really confident. He's really comfortable in what they do. Second year in the system, second year kind of being the guy, right.

That always is good for a quarterback. So you can just tell he's comfortable when things are there. He hits it on time, hits it on rhythm, gives his guys chances. He's comfortable when things are off schedule. He obviously is a problem for us tomorrow night because he can hurt you with his feet, which he's done a lot lately. He's big. He's strong. He's got confidence. He's a leader. He's what you want in a quarterback.

I think he's the reason Clemson is in this game and had such a successful season. So we've got a lot of respect for him, and we've got our work cut out for him, especially up front trying to keep him contained for four quarters.

**Q. We saw this a lot with your 2023 AAC championship team, but what's the ingredient to building a program with as much balance as you have where not a single receiver has 600 yards, not a single player has seven sacks, but at those position groups you see a lot of guys contributing in those areas?**

RHETT LASHLEE: Well, the secret is get a really, really great staff with no egos that will develop great relationships with their guys to where they trust them and then they can coach them and play a lot of guys.

Then the second secret is have a team full of guys who love each other and love playing together and don't care who gets the credit and don't play for the names on the back of the jerseys, which is really hard to do no matter who you are. It's really hard to do in 2024 with the transfer portal, NIL and all that and my catches and this. You'd better win if you're doing it that way.

But the same thing happened to us last year as this year. We had the best defense in our league last year, had very few people make all-conference. Very similar this year; we had one of the top defenses in the league; very few of those defensive guys made all-conference on the three



teams, because, to your point, everything is spread out. We don't have a guy with 16 sacks but we also lead the country in quarterback pressures because we have like six guys who can get there. A lot of guys with tackles instead of one or two guys carrying the load.

Same thing on offense, to your point. We may not have a guy with 60, 70, 100 catches, which we've had before, but we have several guys with 30 plus catches and a bunch of other guys in the 20s, and same thing running the football.

It's hard. You've got to win. Those guys got to buy into it and they've got to love playing for each other and together. They don't do it for us. They do it for each other.

I think that's why I keep referencing it's a special group. No matter how hard you try, every coach would love that. It takes a special group. It takes special leadership from the older guys in the room. But it takes a really good staff to be able to lead guys in a way that they trust that vision.

**Q. Back at the end of July at ACC media days, you guys didn't get a lot of love from the media in the polling for where you were going to finish in the conference. Were you always confident that your team could compete at the highest level in the ACC from the start?**

RHETT LASHLEE: Man, I believe we've got more love than I wanted preseason. I think they picked us seventh. I was hoping for like 10th or 12th.

Here's what I thought: To the question earlier about being in a power conference a long time before, you know what it's going to take. I knew the makeup of our guys and I knew the ingredients that we had added.

So I felt like we had a team that would compete and prove we belonged. That was really our goal. Like hey, let's show we belong. We felt very confident in that.

Now, we didn't know how the games would go. Anybody can tell you, you can have a really good football team and go 8-4 if the ball just kind of bounces your way or not your way or you have a few injuries here or there and vice versa. It takes some good fortune, too, even when you have good teams.

Could we win close games; I got that question earlier. We've had three close games in the league, or two or three in the league, and we were able to win those games. If those two or three games go the other way, you're not 11-1, you're 8-4.

I was very confident we could compete, and our goal all

along -- we kind of broke the season into four quarters because it's just kind of weird; we played week 0 for the first time, so we had three games, an off week, three games, an off week, three games, an off week, three games. So we broke it into four quarters, and our goal was to win each quarter. We wanted to win the first quarter of our season. We did; we went 2-1. We wanted to win the second quarter. We did; we went 3-0. And so on and so on and so on, and our guys did a great job of buying into that.

We just said, hey, if we'll focus on this mentality one at a time, which is kind of what we had done in a different way the year before, then we'll look up and we'll get to November and we'll be playing games that matter and we'll have a chance. We'll be in contention. That was really our goal; let's get in contention in November. We did that, and then our guys were able to finish. So credit to them.

**Q. You kind of mentioned earlier Clemson's defense and the struggles that they will present to you guys tomorrow. Looking at the team as a whole as y'all have prepared this week, what kind of issues are you guys expecting to face on the field tomorrow night?**

RHETT LASHLEE: Well, so whether you're an offensive coach looking at a defense or defensive looking at offense, the first thing you try to do is find the weaknesses, and I've always thought the best coaches can do two things. One, if they're a defensive coach they take away what you do best and they attack your weakness. If you're an offensive coach you attack their weakness and eliminate what they do best, and vice versa.

The problem with preparing for someone like Clemson is -- now, don't get me wrong; they're elite in some areas. They can rake the ball out at an elite level. I think their secondary is probably going to be the best we've played. They've got some edge pass rushers that they don't have to blitz to get pressure.

I don't know if they're elite everywhere, but they're not weak anywhere. They are solid at all three levels. They have NFL players on the D-line, they have NFL players at the linebacker level, and they have NFL players in the back end, and they play extremely hard. They run to the football, which is the sign of a great defense, which is also how they're able to force turnovers. They're really good on 3rd down. They're good in the red zone.

So they're good in the critical moments, but they just don't have that area where you say, man, they've got a weakness there and we can just poke at it. We're going to have to earn everything we get offensively for four quarters, and that's what makes it hard on an offense.

So that's where our challenge is. They're so solid, we have to go beat them. There's not a, say, we've got such an advantage here we can just focus on this and they don't have a chance like maybe some weeks you do. They're good everywhere. They're very, very solid.

**Q. LaNorris Sellers had a big week last week against Clemson. Do you feel like that's something Kevin can take advantage of, as well?**

RHETT LASHLEE: Yeah, maybe. Every game is different. I guarantee you they've been focused on fixing that this week. It was kind of weird; it wasn't -- I'm sure there's frustration on their end because it wasn't like he was running around with nobody around him. They had him like four or five different times on those big runs. The two touchdown runs that everybody knows about, a couple other long runs, it should have been a negative 8, and everybody has had those games where you're like, you've sacked him three times and next thing you know he's running down the sidelines.

He's a really talented player, but I would expect we'll get them tackling a lot better and finishing than they did last week because they've done that most of the year.

But there's no question, to win a game like this, Kevin is going to have to make some plays. He's going to have to make some off-schedule plays. There's going to be some moments where they maybe beat us on a pass rush and they've got us and he can escape, or they've got everything covered and he can extend plays and make it happen.

That's the way it is in every game, particularly big games. Your quarterback, there's usually five, six plays a game that outside of just him doing his job at a high level that he's going to have to do some stuff. He's going to have to make some plays.

Sometimes in games like this, it's which quarterback can make those five or six plays go their way or not in the end.

I don't know if there's one thing to exploit with how it went last week because a lot of it was busted plays that they just weren't able to get him on the ground.

**Q. Dabo Swinney was in here earlier and he said a few times he thinks SMU should be in the playoff no matter what happens tomorrow. How have you kept the team focused and what do you think Sunday will hold either way?**

RHETT LASHLEE: I do want to focus on this game, but I

appreciate the question because it's fair and it does matter. So I'll answer it.

I appreciate Dabo saying that. I think, look, we're in this league so we know how good the league is. We're all disappointed at the ranking for Miami even.

But the one thing I'll say is the reason that I know we should be in is the committee has ranked us in. They've said we're good enough. The regular season is complete. All 134, whatever, teams have played their regular season. It is over. The case is closed on that.

They said you're the eighth best team in the country. They said you're better than two other teams that are currently in the field for an at-large. They said you're better than them. Like you are better than them; we've said that. And those teams didn't earn the right to play in a conference championship game, we did.

So I don't get how you could punish anybody for that. I just don't.

So if the team ranked No. 9 can't jump the team ranked No. 7 because neither one of them play this week, then there's no way a team ranked 9th or 11th should be able to jump the team ranked eighth or fifth or whatever because they are playing this week because they were able to do something they couldn't do.

So we're going to choose to believe we did the right thing and we showed up. We value playing in a championship game. We value the opportunity to compete with Dabo and Clemson for an ACC Championship game. That is a big deal. That is a big deal, to have a chance to win our league's championship game.

It's a bigger deal than just playing for seeding, although that's part of it, too. But that's the right thing to do. To me, that's integrity. We're going to show up and do the right thing. We're not going to find a way to bounce out because we were told on Tuesday night if you don't play you're in at 8.

But we also know that the committee has a tough job, and so we believe and trust that they're going to do the right thing, as well, and reward our guys who have earned the right not only to play here tomorrow night but to be one of the 12 best teams in America because they've ranked them there.

**Q. Have you decided if Romello is going to be available tomorrow?**

RHETT LASHLEE: We anticipate him being available,



yep.

**Q. Do you have any surprises in store for tomorrow night that you're willing to share?**

RHETT LASHLEE: You want me to give the game plan?

**Q. We promise not to post it until after the game tomorrow.**

RHETT LASHLEE: Right, I think there's other problems with that. I think we're going to do exactly what Dabo is going to do. We're going to run 11 out on offense, defense, special teams. We're going to throw it a little bit, we're going to run it a little bit, we'll play a little man, a little zone. We'll blitz, we won't blitz some.

No, look, I think when you get to this point in the season, and I'm sure they would say the same, you're going to trust your guys. You're going to trust what got you here. That's the challenge, right. That's the challenge for individuals and for teams in big moments, big championship-level quality games like this is, okay, you've done it for 12 straight weeks and now really nothing has changed other than we've been told the stakes are different.

So that's the challenge is how do we go through our routine. We're going to do the same stuff tonight for the most part that we do on a Friday night before any road game, and tomorrow leading up to a game that doesn't start until 8:00 we're going to do the same thing we'd normally do. We're going to get here and do warmups the same and so on and so forth. We've prepared the same way.

As far as surprises go, there wouldn't be a surprise if I told you, so that's why you've got to come to the game.

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