

2024 ACC Football Championship Game: Clemson vs. SMU

Saturday, December 7, 2024

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Bank of America Stadium

SMU Mustangs

Coach Rhett Lashley

Postgame Press Conference



Clemson 34, SMU 31

RHETT LASHLEE: Want to congratulate Clemson and Coach Swinney on a great game and great finish and a championship tonight.

We're disappointed, obviously. Great comeback. We had a really bad first quarter. You have a bad first quarter and get down 21-7 because we had two turnovers and put the ball -- gave them the ball, I think, four times on the plus side of the field because I thought our defense played really well, but it was just tough.

Yeah, our guys are disappointed, but I'm really, really proud of them. I think they showed the championship makeup they have. I think they showed the kind of team they are the way they battled back second, third and fourth quarter tying the game with 16 seconds left.

I don't know what y'all think about this, but it's the truth.

We've had a great year. We've gone 11-2 now and we've had a lot of praise and we've had a lot of glory brought our way and it's real easy when you're winning to be feeling good and happy. When you lose, it's easy to blame and do other things. But we're still going to give praise and glory where it's deserved.

Jesus Christ deserves all the glory for this team this year and what we've been able to do, so we're going to return that glory and praise to him.

I'll answer questions.

Q. Going off of that sentiment of dealing with adversity, you guys haven't trailed in many games this year. How can it be a positive building block as you look forward?

RHETT LASHLEE: Yeah, I think it shows the makeup of our team. This was our 13th game. If you play 13 games you're going to have some bad quarters or a bad half. We had a really bad half our first game of the year and found ourselves down and came back and won.

We've played a lot of really good quarters lately. The first quarter we fumbled, I think, the third play of the game, gave them a cheap touchdown on a 30-yard field.

Then we, I think, punted and our player's helmet came off and he kept playing with his helmet off, which is a penalty, so then with a good return and 15 yards they get another short field.

We had a bad quarter. It's hard when you're in a championship game, a championship caliber game to get down 21-7 like that. And it was a lot of self-inflicted wounds and they took advantage of it, and I then think we were down, what 17 at half and 17 to start the fourth quarter and still tied the game up.

It told me everything I knew about this team, who they are, and everyone -- I'll just say they're really lucky it didn't go to overtime because we had it in control.

Q. There's going to be a lot of waiting over the next 24 hours. What's your message after tonight's game?

RHETT LASHLEE: I think it's like 11 hours, right? They don't care what I say. I don't have a message. It would be criminal if we're not in. It would be wrong. It would be wrong on so many levels, not just to our team. It would be wrong to what college football stands for, to what it is.

We just played a playoff game basically out there and played pretty dang good. That was a pretty good game. I think for the last three quarters everybody saw what they've seen all year.

Our team deserves a chance to be in. It doesn't matter what I say, but it would be incredibly wrong. I think it would be unprecedented. It would set a really bad precedent. It would break all the principles of what we've been told.

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If you're going to take a team that goes 8-0 in a power conference, one of the three best conferences, only two teams did that. We were in. We could have not showed up, and according to what we were told Tuesday night we'd be in. So we showed up and we competed our butts off.

I don't know what to say. They don't care what I say. But we should be in, and they know we should be in, so we'll see what happens.

Q. What are some of the positive things that you take from this performance tonight?

RHETT LASHLEE: I don't know. We lost. I mean, we lost. Losing is disappointing. The positive is that team in that locker room is exactly who I thought they were. There's a bunch of winners in that locker room. There's a bunch of champions. They won a championship last year. They went 8-0 in the ACC this year and they responded the way they should have and the way I knew they would.

You lose in life. That's part of it. You win, you lose, that's what's so great about our sport because it prepares you for life, prepares you for all the highs and the disappointments, and you can't control what happens to you in life but you can control how you respond to it.

I mean, to some degree we controlled the first quarter a little bit. We turned it over twice and did some poor things on our punt team, but the way we responded was special. We responded like a championship team. We responded like a team who could get into this 12-team playoff and win four in a row.

Would love the opportunity to do that.

Q. Can you just take us through your emotions from tying the game and then a minute later being on the losing end?

RHETT LASHLEE: Yeah. I'm in the middle of them right now. I'm hurting for our guys. It was a great game, great battle.

Like I say, we did some things that were uncharacteristic in the first quarter and put us in a hole, and it's hard, and we dug out of it. It looked like we were going to overtime, and we don't cover a kick well and they make a great 55-yarder or whatever it was.

And give them credit, they played well early and they finished on the last play, and here we are on the wrong end of 34-31. I'm just hurting for our guys.

I'm hurting because I think, for good reason, their faith in the system is shaken right now. I think they're all in there wondering are they going to be in tomorrow. Is the fix in? Or is the right thing going to be done? That's the truth.

They're hurting because they lost the game. They're hurting because they wanted to win a championship. They're hurting because they know they could have won.

And then they clawed their way all the way back, and at the last minute they made a great play. But I think the most important thing that I've noticed, they're hurting because -- yeah, there's not been a lot of confidence given to them that they did what they were supposed to do and it's been enough.

I'm hurting for them, and I hope in 11 hours I won't be.

Q. Roughing the passer penalty on y'all, that was pretty costly. They pick up the penalty on the big play. What were your thoughts on how this thing was officiated?

RHETT LASHLEE: I have no comment on how it was officiated. I have a lot of respect for that crew and all those guys and they're very respectful towards us.

There were two critical calls that didn't go our way that gave them 14 points. The roughing the passer which I thought was clean. But they explained it. They ended up scoring instead of us being off the field on that 3rd down. And then the OPI that got picked up.

Calls go your way; calls don't go your way. It happens. Those were two big ones that didn't go our way. We only had six penalties, but they had zero. Someone said 1952 was the last time they had a game with zero penalties. So credit them for being incredibly disciplined.

Q. What was said at halftime to the guys? I know hindsight is 20/20 but any thought on going for two at the end there?

RHETT LASHLEE: At halftime, no, it was business as usual. We've got a mature team. They know. They knew why we were in the hole we were in. Offensively we were moving the ball but we didn't finish and we had the two turnovers. Defensively we had the short fields and had a couple plays get away from us.

We didn't make any special adjustments, either. We got together and talked a few things out, got with our positions, called them up and I just said, hey, it's 24-7, I think. They did it in a half, we can do it in a half. Ironically, we did.

I just said, this could be our finest moment, let's go out and compete for 30 minutes, see what happens, more if it takes. But our team is more than capable of coming back and winning this game, and the best part is they knew it and they believed it and they went out and did it, and then we just fell short on the last play of the game.

It crossed my mind when we were down 7 and I knew we were getting the ball back, but I believed in our defense. If you look at the game, we won everything but the scoreboard and the penalty sheet. We had 28 1st downs; they had 20. We ran for 148; they ran for 64. We threw for 310; they threw for 260. We went 9 of 18 on 3rd down; they were 7 of 17. We were 4 for 4 in the red zone; they were 2 for 2.

I mean, the total yards we had well over 100 more than they did. We lost the scoreboard and lost the penalties, and we did lose the turnovers, but I just felt like we were clicking on offense. I felt like we would score and I definitely felt like we would stop them on defense. I didn't see any reason to go for two.

Especially when you come all the way back like that, you've got a lot of momentum. I'm sure we'll look at it and wish we'd have cover the kick a little bit better, and then they made great plays.

Q. You were talking about where the glory goes. For the great season, I think I've seen something really special with the team this year, not just you but the way the team responded to AJ's injury earlier this season and how they behaved before and after games. What's the edge or what does it tell you about the team that they act in this way?

RHETT LASHLEE: What has been so special about this team and the secret sauce of this team, we've got some guys that are going to play in the NFL, and we've got some guys that are hopefully going to come back and get back to this stage next year hopefully.

We have good players, but the secret sauce is they're a true team. I've said it. It's real. You feel it. That's why it hurts when they lose because they do everything the right way. They work hard. They trust each other. They love each other. They compete with each other. They have each other's back. They don't blame other people when they make a mistake. There's no finger pointing. They're just a true team. That's why I think they respond so well to everything.

They'll respond well to this. They're hurting right now, but they'll respond well to this just like they did tonight coming back. I just think it's a special group. I've said it all year,

it's been really, really fun to coach them, and I hope we're not done.

Q. What did you think of Kevin's response after the turnovers? Second, what did Bryant Wesco do for them with the receivers that was troubling for you guys tonight?

RHETT LASHLEE: I thought Kevin, two bad plays, you know. That's why you've got to keep two hands on the ball in pocket. Usually the guy you don't see on the first sick kind of fumble, and then obviously you've got to throw the ball away, which he did the rest of the night. But both of those hurt.

But I thought he played brilliantly. He was 32 of 51 for 310, three TDs, and he ran for 50 yards and a TD. He just brought a team back from? 17 down in the fourth quarter, made a lot of big time plays. Looked very cool, very calm. Looked like a playoff quarterback to me. Hopefully America gets to see him do that again in a few weeks.

With regards to Wesco, we knew he was a really good player. They're a good team. We have to -- when you play defense on somebody, you have to give up something, so we were in a lot of one-on-ones with him. It looked like they were running some choice routes. I'm not sure what they were, but we were off. They were playing catch. We were tight and getting by us. He's a really good player. Had a really good day. I don't know if there's anything special.

Q. You talk a lot about how important it is to keep metroplex guys at SMU, in Dallas. Can you talk about that moment, Kevin hitting Roderick for that touchdown? And then just expanding on Kevin, presents like a quiet guy, but where does his confidence and heart to come back in a game like this come from?

RHETT LASHLEE: You need to ask Kevin where it comes from, and I mean that respectfully. I think it's just who he is, so I don't know if he's going to credit his upbringing on his coaches in high school at South Oak Cliff, maybe all of the above. He's just got a special characteristic that all winners and elite players like him have. He believes in himself. He has the ability to go on to the next play.

He turned the ball over twice in the first two or three drives and still put a stat sheet together like this and led -- and played on that stage for the first time. Pretty cool.

With regards to Dallas guys, yeah, obviously this year moving into the ACC and then having a year like we had makes it a lot easier to keep those guys close to home

when you see Kevin Jennings to Roderick Daniels to tie the game up against Clemson in the last seconds of the ACC Championship game, that's pretty cool. Both those guys, they're warriors. They're winners.

Q. In the first couple minutes you guys were down 14-0. Were the guys just nervous because of the big atmosphere? It just looked like everything wasn't together until you guys got to the fourth quarter.

RHETT LASHLEE: Until the fourth quarter? First few drives of the fourth quarter -- they got together before the fourth quarter? Just understanding the question.

I don't think our guys were nervous at all. They were ready to play. The atmosphere was great. They loved it. We dropped the ball, got scrap sacked, they were in a QB draw, pop pass. We thought the entire offensive line was downfield. It wasn't apparently called, so they throw a touchdown, they're up 7-0.

Then we punt, our guy's helmet comes off, he runs like probably any kid would do but you can't do. We've got to make sure they know that, so we get an extra 15, they get two short fields, it's 14-0 like that. I don't think it had anything to do with we just made a few errors and mistakes. It didn't have anything to do with nerves. We responded right away, went right down and scored, 14-7, and then we just didn't finish drives in the first half offensively.

We still had more yards at halftime, I think, but we just -- we would move it and not finish a drive. We missed a field goal. But I thought we started finding ourselves well before the fourth quarter. We dug such a hole, it was just hard to get back until late.

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