

2024 ACC Football Championship Game: Clemson vs. SMU

Sunday, December 8, 2024

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Bank of America Stadium

Clemson Tigers Coach Dabo Swinney Cade Klubnik

Postgame Press Conference

Clemson 34, SMU 31

DABO SWINNEY: At halftime, I said, guys, these guys, this game is a long way from being over, and they showed who they were and how they fought back.

We had some critical mistakes in the second half that didn't help us, but at the end of the day we found a way. Unbelievable return by Adam Randall, and then a great play. We didn't finish last week on the little drive, and great play by Antonio, and then an unbelievable kick by Hauser.

Proud of our team. Happy for our fans. Congratulations to SMU. I said on the field, just thankful that the good Lord just blessed us with a moment like that. It's pretty special when you experience something like we just experienced on the field and in the locker room. It's amazing and special.

Thankful, and look forward to going to our seventh playoff. It's our eighth championship in 10 years and our seventh CFP, and the highest graduation rate in the country to go along with it. I'm really happy. I'm proud of our program consistency, who these guys are, how they believe in all things Clemson.

It's just awesome, just awesome to be a part of it, and just to be able to do life with these guys day in and day out -- this ol' boy from Texas I think is still undefeated in championship games against some Texas teams. Just a great, great moment.

And SMU, I can't say enough good things about them. That's a playoff team. There's no way they can't be in. They should not be punished for that moment right there. They should be in the playoff, and obviously we're going,



and we look forward to having a pizza party tomorrow and figuring out where we're going to go.

I'm really, really happy for our players. They deserve it and they earned it. Nobody gave them anything; they earned it.

Q. Cade, Nolan hits that 56-yard field goal to win the game. You see your coach running around. What's your first emotion after that kick went in?

CADE KLUBNIK: Yeah, we got him down there, and everybody is on the sideline just watching. I'm honestly sitting on the bench by myself. I'm just trying to visualize and see how overtime is going to go because you're hoping that he makes it, but you don't want to put all your hope into it.

So I'm over there and I'm visualizing how I want overtime to go and just thinking about visualizing it until the moment he kicks it.

At that point I really just kind of put my head down, or maybe up, and just kind of listened to the crowd and heard the crowd roaring behind us, and I knew we made it.

I couldn't believe it. I could not believe it. It was unbelievable. It was unbelievable.

Q. Cade, can you talk about the last eight days? It didn't really look like you were going to even get here, and then to get here, win it the way you did, and then possibly get a first-round bye, as well, what's this roller coaster of eight days been?

CADE KLUBNIK: Yeah. Man, I think that -- I'll start with this: Part of the reason that I came to Clemson -- the main reason I came to Clemson was because I love Coach Swinney, but most of that reason was because of his walk and his faith, and that's something that I lean on a lot is my walk and my walk with Jesus. And through these times and through the hard times I get to lean on Jesus because he's consistent and he's the person that I put all my faith and trust in.

I sat in my car for close to an hour in the parking lot last

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week after the game, truthfully just pretty much crying because you work all year for something, literally you wake up every single morning and you chase something, and to be that close, and in the moment you're thinking, something we're chasing just got taken away from us.

Then I finally decided to go home and I didn't really want to see anybody. I get to my house and my roommates are all watching the game and I go up in my room, and there's like four minutes left. Miami is about to go down a drive, and I get to my room and I'm like, I'll turn on the game, and I turn on the game and there's two minutes left and Syracuse wins, and I literally sprint downstairs and I tackle Ronan Hanafin, my roommate, and I'm just screaming with joy.

I'm like, just when you think that God is closing the door, he's opening one up. We just had to trust in Him, and I just trusted in Jesus that he was going to make a way through it all. That's something the coach has been preaching to us, and that's something that I truly believe is God is going to go and do things that we don't quite understand, but in the end he's always going to get the glory and it's always going to be for a purpose.

I really just had to lean on my foundation, and then that's what I kind of carried throughout the week. It was definitely a weird Sunday and Monday because you're grieving from the Saturday loss, but you've got to transition and go be excited. Because I kind of said out there, it's like, you're playing outside with some of your friends and your mom tells you you've got to come inside and she tells you you've got five more minutes.

We got five more minutes to go play some football, and that was tonight, and it was really exciting.

Q. Just big scores at big moments, the big pass to Wesco started off on that rollout, and then you add in the Wesco score on the deep pass to the right late in the first, the burning stool score late in the third. Just those key scores kind of kept pulling the chain, pulling the rope away from the SMU grasp and y'all kind of maintained. It looked like it was going to be a shade of last week with these three-and-out and long drives ending in punts but you found a way to win. Describe the momentum and just the mindset as the drives just went on throughout the night.

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, we get up whatever we were up in the fourth quarter. As an offense we've got to just keep doing what we're doing. We've got to finish the game and put it away, truly put it away and make it unreachable because that's what our job is. We'd be playing really well all night and been playing just really efficiently and doing our job, all 11 guys doing our job, and we just got to go

finish. We've got to go just put the game away, go win the championship. When it came down to the last drive, we went and did it, and it was definitely an exciting one.

Q. The first two series you scored a quick touchdown. Have you ever had that in a game before after the first two and you're up 14-0? Have you ever had that start before?

CADE KLUBNIK: Oh, yeah, we've had it a couple times this year. App State we had that; NC State we had that. I feel like we've had it one other time. Citadel. We've had it a couple times.

We had great field position to start off. That's something that is also really big is we were in plus territory right out of the gate and had a relatively short field to play with. That was huge.

Defense getting us stops, turnover. It was awesome. Just complementary football.

Q. You guys had three touchdowns in the first quarter, just one in the last three. What kind of adjustments do you see from SMU's defense which made it harder to score later in the game?

CADE KLUBNIK: I'll probably have a better answer after I really go back and watch it because you're just kind of in the moment sometimes and you're just kind of playing throughout the game. I mean, that's a really good football team.

Don't take that away from them. They're the No. 8 team in the country and they were 11-1 coming into this game. They're not just going to bow down to you. You've got to give credit to them. They're a team that just fought until the very end, literally the very, very end. Really well-coached team.

You can tell they definitely made some adjustments throughout the game kind of taking away some stuff, but definitely some stuff that I'll learn from and we'll all learn from, and we'll continue to make us better throughout the year.

Q. Cade, on that very last completion to Antonio, take us through the play call, what you were looking for and how that specific play got executed to set up the field goal.

CADE KLUBNIK: Yeah, we kind of knew -- we had a time-out, so we knew that they were going to be dropping out of there and they're not going to let up a touchdown. Try to go get something, and Tone ran a great route and

just got to find him, really once he caught the ball -- coach was saying before, you can't go score a touchdown. You're going to run out of time. Get what you can and then get down and he'll call a time-out and give ourselves the best chance, and that's what he did.

Adam got us down there and that kickoff team got us down there and it was unbelievable. I'm thinking we're about to get the ball on the 25 with 16 seconds left and we get it on the, whatever, 40, 45 or where were we? 45 with nine seconds left. So that was huge.

I mean, that's just massive, and also just a burst of energy almost. Hey, it's right there, let's go get it. Just had to go get it. Tone made a good catch, got what he could after, and really strained to go get a few more yards and then got down, called a time-out, and gave Nolan the best shot.

Q. Coach, what do you think was the defining moment? The second question is what do you contribute to your ability to continue to win at the highest level?

DABO SWINNEY: Well, I think the defining moment was probably winning the turnover margin. We had a couple big turnovers that was a huge difference in the game for sure. It came down to a couple plays. Those two turnovers were big. Gave us field position, and we capitalized on them.

I was thinking that missed field goal was going to haunt us, but it's kind of crazy how it ended that way.

As far as just when I got this job, we were here in 2011 and won it for the first time in 20 years, and we hadn't won 10 games in 20 years. We just had our 10th win for the 13th time in 14 years and our ninth championship in the past 14 years and our seventh CFP.

Even with all that, people still want me to be like everybody else. I guess to answer your question is it's just following my purpose, not compromising on what I believe and just letting God lead my steps and order my steps. That's just really the bottom line. Being purpose driven as a man, being purpose driven as a program.

I know everybody wants me to be like everybody else, but I don't know how to be like everybody else. We're a very unique and uncommon program. I think we've won more games than anybody other than Alabama the past 16 years, and we certainly won more championships I think now and conference championships in the past 10 years than anybody and second most CFPs. Not only have we gotten to these CFPs, we've won. We've won on the highest stage against the best of the best.

We're at a point now where we don't win a championship and we've got to fire everybody and it's just -- same ol' tired narratives that come up every single year when we lose a game. You can check our record versus the SEC. You can check it versus the Big Ten. You can check it versus Notre Dame because that's really who runs college football. I'm just really proud of our guys. That's the only thing I can tell you is again, being purpose driven.

It's just God's plan. It's certainly not me. It's a bunch of great young men that come to Clemson and they buy in to who we are and what we do. It's not just winning, it's how you win. Two years in a row we've got the highest graduation rate in America. It's a program that we try to serve their heart and not their talent.

This is our 14th year in a row with a postseason win. Nobody ever has done anything like that in college football. But all we hear is how bad we are and how terrible we are and how stupid I am and how whatever. We just keep winning. We just keep winning.

We're not perfect. I am far from perfect. But we have great players who believe in who we are and what we do and we have great coaches, and we're family. That's the best answer I can give you. It's a blessing to be a part of it. I don't take that for granted. I told the team coming in, there's so many great coaches that never get a chance to coach in a game like this, prepare for a game like this, win a game like this, and there's very few players that get a chance to experience it.

I played in the first championship game in '92, you know, played on a National Championship team and I've had an amazing career coaching and being a part of these things, but the credit goes to the good Lord and to a bunch of great young men that have just bought in to our purpose and just staying focused on that purpose.

Q. Thoughts on your 10th win, I think, what, 13 out of 14 years. I hate what happened to Jay Haynes, but it's crazy to think that Adam Randall doesn't have that opportunity if that didn't happen. Adam didn't have a catch tonight but made one of the biggest plays of the night. How great of a moment is that for Adam?

DABO SWINNEY: Oh, man, it was unbelievable. And again, who he is. Tough situation, and Wesco had kind of gotten the majority of those reps and Adam is still showing up and preparing to be the guy every single day. He's one of the best leaders on this team.

We were supposed to fair catch that ball; unfortunately that Jay came out. It was supposed to be a fair catch. Then



we tried to fair catch the other one, and that was the Keystone Cops out there. It was a mess. So we got back to back self-inflicted field position issues, and it really hurt us.

Just disappointed with that. But at the end of the game there we were going to fair catch it and I said, no, let's return this thing. I said, hey, anything can happen. Let's try to return it and bring it out and let's just see if we can pop one, and we did.

It was amazing. I think Keith Adams had a great block. I can't wait to watch that on tape. Just an incredible run by Adam, and I'm really happy for him, just to set us up. And then you sit there and you go, okay, I think it was nine seconds, got a couple time-outs, let's think about this thing, and you're trying to coach everybody up on the situation.

We practice that. We practice that in fall camp every single year. It's usually 10 seconds. That was nine. We usually practice 10 seconds in a time-out, 10 seconds, no time-out, and that exact situation. We script that and practice it, and we actually have a play that we want to run, but it's usually when you're a little closer already in field goal range.

So we couldn't really run that play, but we anticipated them being soft coverage, so we just basically ran what we call a pack or a little curl type of concept. It was a great quick throw. Antonio -- hey, it's nine seconds, we've got plenty of time, but you can't go score.

That's not going to happen. So don't think you're wide open and you're going to go score here. Get what you can, let's get down, let's get the time-out called.

You know, and then it was, okay, let's kick it. Garrett was looking at me like we're going to do a Hail Mary, and I said, no, we're going to kick it. And Coach Luke goes, you think he's got that kind of leg? And I went, we're about to find out.

I mean, what a kick. I think it's the longest game-winning kick in Clemson history. I've been a part of some big ones, obviously the Catanzaro kick against LSU with two seconds on the clock and then this kick right here, I've been a part of some big ones.

But that was huge, the protection, the snap, the hold, everything. And when he hit it, I went, oh, man. We were talking about overtime, trying to get our overtime plan ready to go, what we were going to do there, but as soon as he hit it and it cleared the line, I went, this thing has got a chance, and it just goes through.

I'm just so happy for Nolan, right here, Charlotte kid, a

freshman, and those are the type of things that -- those are the type of wins that really propel you.

I think over my career, I think about so many moments like that, beating Notre Dame on a two-point conversion and stopping them, beating Lamar Jackson on the goal line one time, beating him on a 4th down play, punching a ball out at Texas A&M, 4th and 6 against Syracuse.

I think about so many moments like that, and obviously winning a National Championship with one second on the clock. Those are the type of moments that when your kids experience that, man, it just propels you to bigger and greater things.

You hate games like that. They age you. But when you win them -- and we had a heartbreaker last -- we've experienced -- you can't have two different emotions in two weeks from what we've experienced.

But you know, the resiliency, the resolve, the lessons that you learn from all that is pretty special. It was an awesome moment.

Q. You said that SMU is a College Football Playoff team. What did you see from SMU this year and what did you see from them tonight that led you to believe that?

DABO SWINNEY: Well-coached, very tough, hard to run the ball on, probably the biggest defensive line we've seen. Those guys are huge, really, really big up front, explosive on offense.

That quarterback and that back -- we saw that back at Miami last year. He went 80 on us. That's a very dynamic group and outstanding receivers. They've got some explosive playmakers that just challenge you in all phases, horizontally and vertically in what they can do and then they've got two rockets in the backfield. They just put a lot of stress on you. They can score quick, as y'all saw, but we were fortunate to turn them over. That was the key.

We stopped them a few times. We got enough stops in the plus territory, especially in that first half, that was huge for us. So I'm just really proud of our team for that. But that's a good football team. That's a really, really good football team.

Again, they've got one loss to BYU, who's a really good team, and that was before they made the quarterback change. That's that kid's first loss, and it came on -- I don't even know, what was it, 56-yard kick with no time on the clock?



That's a team that's come from behind. They've won every kind of way, and that's what playoff teams do. No way should they be punished. They were every bit of the eighth team in the country tonight, every bit of it.

We made a couple more plays than they did.

Q. Cade touched on it a little bit, but can you walk us through the emotional swing of these last seven days, and now that you're playoff bound, how you feel like you stack up?

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, amazing. Again, very disappointing last week, a game that you lead the entire game until one minute and eight seconds and then you go right down the field and you're in position to win it or at least send it to overtime and we have a mistake right there. You felt like you let one get away.

Then it's a rivalry game and all that stuff, so it was just a really, really tough time, and you think that you're probably out of it because we felt like that with a win we kind of -- we had a chance, a real shot to be in this thing.

Then three hours later or whatever, I walked into the press conference last week, it was 21-0 Miami, and then about -- I quit -- I didn't even watch it. I turned it back on and it was 35-28. I couldn't believe it. You go from that emotion, then all of a sudden that game is over and all the players are texting me, you could just feel the energy through the messaging on my phone of like, how excited they were. Like we got this opportunity.

So it was a fun week of preparation, first of all, to practice in this past week when you know nobody else is. It was a lot of fun to prepare for this team and for this game, and then you could just feel it. It's just different. When you're playing on this stage -- I always tell them, this is what we're built for. When you play on this stage, we showed up here yesterday, you could just feel it.

I knew we were going to play our tails off, but I also knew we were going to have to probably win the turnover margin and just get enough stops because they are a really, really -- I don't know, what are they, the third or fourth scoring offense in the country? Top 4, there you go. The guys are good.

I think if we could have gotten out of our own way in the second half, I can answer the question whoever asked it, we quit doing the routine stuff well. We had the two poor decisions on the kick return. Those were supposed to be fair catches. Then we dropped a wide open ball. We missed a touchdown call. We just all of a sudden went in this little funk where we're not doing the routine stuff, just

the basic stuff.

But we kind of worked our way out of it, and then that affected our defense, and next thing you know they're putting a few plays together, and then all of a sudden you feel kind of the anxiety of the moment.

You've got to give them a lot of credit. But it's been unbelievable. Again, grace to be in our seventh playoff. I think Georgia has been in three, and I think they're the best team in the country. Who won that game? I think they're the best team in the country until somebody proves otherwise, honestly.

I mean, it's just hard. I think Alabama, Coach Saban, I think they went to nine, so this is our seventh one. Again, we've got the second most playoff wins.

What it means is you've got a chance. You get in the tournament, anything can happen. We're a dangerous team. We've not played our best football yet but yet we're in the playoff. I think that's frustrating but it's also exciting because we are capable. I just wish I could get us to put this thing all together for four quarters because if we do, we'll have a real shot.

Q. What does it mean for you to win another ACC Championship at Clemson?

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, I just am humbled by it. I don't ever take it for granted. Again, I vividly remember being here in 2011, I think Virginia Tech was No. 3 in the country coming into that game and Andre Ellington and Tajh Boyd and Sammy Watkins and DeAndre Hopkins and Andre Branch and all those guys, that was such a fun, fun time, and it was special to be a part of it.

Again, we hadn't won a championship in 20 years. I'm just incredibly blessed and thankful. Again, I know not everybody gets the opportunity, and it never gets old, but I probably have more appreciation now than I ever have just because -- I mean, there's 17 teams in your league. It's just hard.

I'm just really thankful that we earned our way here and we found a way to make one more play tonight to win the championship and to be ACC champions. I'm happy for our fans, but I'm really happy for the staff and for those players. It's been a lot of work since January. To get into this environment and to be able to find a way to do it, it's not easy. I'm just thankful to the good Lord for giving me the opportunity.

Q. Tim Bourret told us that you just passed Frank Howard for the most championships with nine. You've



talked about how much this means for you but you also talked a lot this week about those players and every class has won a championship. For two classes now to be able to join those ranks, you talk about being happy for them, but that's a stat, that's a number that's real important to you.

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, so I talked about being purpose driven a little bit earlier. When I got the job 16 years ago, my first staff meeting I walked in and I said this is what we're about. We're going to graduate our players, we're going to equip them as men, we're going to have some fun, we're going to have a good experience, and then I want them all to win a championship.

Again, walking in, we hadn't won games in 10 years, we hadn't won a championship in 20 years. Now, so 16 years later if you're purpose driven shouldn't the results reflect the purpose. So 16 years later we have a 98 percent graduation rate. We have the highest graduation rate in America. I'm really proud of that. That's because we've kept the main thing the main thing. Equipping them as men, there's nobody in college football that has a player development program like Paul Journey. Nobody. It's unbelievable what these kids -- how they're equipped as men through our Paul Journey program. It's a curriculum, what they do as freshmen and sophomores and juniors and seniors. They have a great experience.

I've got 20 something former players on this staff that have been there, done that, gone on, done life, can't wait to come back. We had 13 former players come and spend five weeks in Clemson training this summer. I'm talking with Christian Wilkins, Dexter Lawrence, Clelin Ferrell, all these guys coming back to Clemson. We're second or third, whatever, in retention, meaning fewest players leaving. That means they're having a great experience.

But winning a championship is also a part of that purpose, and I just believe if you do a great job with those three things that the winning will happen. That's what I've always believed.

The problem is a lot of people compromise and they put winning first and they compromise what's best for the long-term health of the organization or the team for maybe what's best in the moment. I've always just stayed focused on the purpose. I've always stayed focused on what's best for the long-term, whether it be for our program or for this young person's heart. When he's 30, when he thinks differently will he come and hug my neck or will he turn the other way. When he's going to have a different perspective than he does when he's an 18, 19, 20-year old.

Yeah, so my first class was in February of '09, we signed

12 guys. So as of tonight, because the class of '23 Peter woods and T.J. Parker since we didn't win last year, they were on the clock.

We haven't gone back to back years not being in this game since '13 or '14. We've been in this game every year, every other year for a long time. So now that class of '23, they got a championship, and then the class -- the freshmen this year, Ashton Hampton, that crew, they got their championship, Sammy Brown. This is what Sammy told me, I'm one for one, in the locker room.

I'm happy for them. But again, that's our purpose. So 16 years of work, if you're truly purpose driven, the results should reflect that. It shouldn't just be something that hangs on the wall or something that you talk about.

So there you go. We don't just talk it, we live it. That's what we recruit to every single day. I always say it's not winning, it's how you win that I think ultimately defines who you are as a person because at the end when it's all said and done, I know for me, when we all get to -- it's just you and you. You've got to be happy with you.

Man, I'm just thankful I've had -- that God brought me to Clemson 22 years ago, and I'm thankful that this has been his journey for me, his plan for me. It's just a blessing, and it's all good. Even the bad. It's all good. Even such a painful, painful, just horrible situation when this is what you do for a living and this is what these kids do that we felt in that locker room last week, it's all good. It's all good. It's all good.

Hopefully we can be a good example to a lot of people out there, and hopefully create hope for everybody. A lot of times people want you to compromise, they want you to be like everybody else. But God doesn't create you to be like everybody else. He creates you to be you. We're one of one. There's 6 billion people, however many, 7 billion. I don't know how many billion. But we're one of one.

It's fun to be a part of it, and it never gets old. But really happy for all those guys, all the way back, every single one, from the Dandy Dozen to this year's freshmen. They've all won a championship. But we've done it, again, by fulfilling the purpose that we've set out to do.

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