

Chick-fil-A Kickoff Game: Clemson vs. Georgia Tech

Tuesday, September 6, 2022

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Clemson Tigers Head Coach Dabo Swinney Press Conference



Clemson 41, Georgia Tech 10

DABO SWINNEY: Well, first of all, appreciate the opportunity to be here tonight. Thankful for that. Appreciate Chick-fil-a and just the awesome job that they do with everything. Gary Stokan, man, just a class act and everything about the whole organization.

It was a fun night. I literally did forget there was a trophy. That didn't even enter my equation, but thankful that we got it.

Last time we were in this game, we were able to, I think, beat Auburn in '12. And then we came back later on in December, and we won. If we can win again in December, good things are probably happening for the Tigers.

Fun night. Proud of our guys. Knew that it was going to be a little bit of a feeling-out process with them. They had a lot of new people. A lot of new personnel. A lot of new coaches.

Defense really set the tone for us and allowed us to settle in. Honestly, it was probably kind of best case scenario. We had a couple of patches where we struggled a little bit.

The first drive is really good. We need a foot, and I think Putnam was just amped up. First game in that environment, and he throws a little high and a heater, and we were lucky that we got our hand on it, and we were able to at least punt the ball away.

Then the second drive is a great drive. We get down. It was close. They told me wrong. I thought they called him down. So when they said "stands," we thought we had the ball. We had some miscommunication there.

They called him a fumble, so as it stands, they got the ball. That was a costly turnover. We were almost in the Red Zone there.

Then we had a couple of bad field positions, and then all of a sudden, man, I just love how we responded. I think you saw DJ do things tonight that we needed to see and that he didn't do last year.

Man, he made a lot of plays with his legs. He showed great leadership, great moxie. Like I said, probably best case scenario that it didn't just all go perfect because it's good to see him. There's nobody in America that had more eyes on him tonight than our quarterback. I love how he responded.

He led. He made some huge plays for us. We left a little out there. We dropped a huge slant-and-go. It was right on the money. Probably missed one other throw that needed to be just a little more outside to the back shoulder to E.J., and that probably was a touchdown.

He made good decisions. We had some communication things we have to clean up. I was really disappointed on the third down and three. We were all jacked up. The line went one way, and our skill went the other way, and bad stuff happens. That was a TFL for us.

We were 7 of 15 on third down and 60% completion and made some big plays. Again, just proud of what I saw offensively there in the second half in particular. I thought we settled in.

When it was 14-10 and you could kind of feel a little tension, 12-play drive, 9-play drive. I think we scored four out of the next five possessions I think we scored. I'm just really proud of how we respond and how the guys competed and played.

We got the tempo going. I thought we warmed down in the fourth quarter. It was really good to see. A lot of guys making plays. Bryn, he had a huge third down. It was a targeting as well. I thought that was a big momentum play.

Davis Allen, a couple of huge plays. Beaux Collins. Antonio Williams had some huge plays and some runs after the catch that I thought were crucial for us. All the backs.



We had some short fields because of the blocked punts and stop on downs. There's probably more yardage out there that we could have, but I'll take short yardage -- short fields any game. I'll give up 515 yards for 378 or 379 every single game if we can get short field position like that any game.

Again, offensively, putting Cade in. We weren't trying to run the score up, but we just needed him to play. I needed him to go out there and hand the ball off. I needed him to have to play.

Man, our backup receivers did a great job. He did an awesome job and sparked us. It was a lot of fun to see Will Taylor. Drew made a couple of big plays. Will Taylor gets the touchdown. Domonique Thomas got in there. Our whole second offensive line, and we go right down the field.

It was good to see. It's really good for those guys. It's good experience that we can build on, and then defensively, man, again, they set the tone. Only ten points. Name of the game is points.

We need to be a better pass defense this year. We need to be a better pass offense and passion defense, and I saw both of those things tonight.

First play of the game, great position by Fred and Mukuba to set the tone for that. 2 of 16 on third down. That's just outstanding.

I thought we were active up front. We played a ton of people. We had a couple of sacks, stop on downs. I thought the quarterback did some good things. They only had one big play. It was 21 yards.

I'm just really proud of our D and how they stood up. We got some things. Same thing, communication. We've got a fourth and six, we're playing cover zero, and we line up outside. You can't get beat inside. That's the easiest throw in the book.

You've got to take away the leverage, so some things like that. I thought we did a very average job at times on some of the perimeter tackling that we can clean up where they got some yards after contact, made some guys miss.

Again, first game. You've had two scrimmages, and that's it. Those are controlled and limited. A lot of things that we can build on defensively. Just really proud of how they responded and then how the offense came alongside them, and we played really great complimentary football in the second half.

Carson Donnelly, has been here five years. What a grinder. What a huge play. It's the first time since '07 that we blocked two punts, and I was at the game. I had two wideouts. My two wideouts at South Carolina, Nelson Faerber and Donte Harris, blocked two punts in that game. I'll never forget it, and set the tone. I'm really happy for Carson Donnelly, and I'm glad we were able to punch that in to get the points.

Then Wade Woodaz, true freshman. He comes out there and gets another one. B.T., it's great to know you got a weapon like B.T.

But to me the story for me special teams-wise was Aidan Swanson. You media that were at that first practice, I know y'all were probably pretty shocked. Y'all probably thought I was blowing smoke, but he really only had one bad day. Unfortunately, y'all were there. Maybe I should move the punt until the end of practice when y'all are gone.

It was awful for sure. After that first day, Aidan has been great. And to be able to see him come out there tonight and have a game like he did, that's going to be a great confidence-builder for him.

Really, really proud of the special teams and what we were able to do. Again, it's just a good start. The goal was to win the opener and create some momentum. Something we didn't do last year. Every championship team I've had we won the opener, so it's a big game. And, again, a lot we can build on and correct.

Good teams keep getting better, and I think that's what we'll do. We have a quick turnaround on a short week. It's Sunday for us tomorrow, but it's Tuesday in the rest of the world, and we play again on Saturday. We have a good plan, and I'm glad we were able to play a lot of guys there in the fourth quarter.

Really appreciate our fans. I thought it was a good environment, and, again, a lot of fun and a good start for us.

With that I'll take your questions.

Q. Coach, two questions: First, talk a little bit about the flow with two new coordinators, and then also, you're mentioning your son. Just the dad in you being able to see him out there, realize his dream. Just talk a little bit about that as well as being a dad as well as a coach.

DABO SWINNEY: Drew is a good little player, man. He really is. You ask anybody on the team, they'll tell you that.

He has worked really hard.

He has had some injuries. He broke his collarbone. He has a plate and nine screws in his collarbone. He missed a little time. He probably had as good a spring as anybody. He is a kid we trust. He is gritty. He has played some special teams.

Really happy for him, proud of him. It was fun. Cade put the ball on the money and finished the plays and then great execution on the little bunch route with he and Will Taylor for the touchdown.

What was the other question?

Q. Coordinators.

DABO SWINNEY: Yeah, well, thankful that we had kind of a trial run, if you will, in the Cheez-It Bowl. Probably shouldn't say Cheez-It Bowl. We're in Chick-fil-a here. Chick-fil-a and Cheez-Its, they all go good together (laughing).

We had a little trial run, and I think that was helpful for all of us, but those guys have done a great job. We've got an awesome staff. It's a lot of fun.

Gave a game ball to Graham Neff in there. He is off to a better start than me because my first-ever game I lost to Georgia Tech. Tyler Grisham threw a pick-6 in that game, and Thomas Austin got a real bad holding call in that game, and now they're on my staff.

Graham is a Georgia Tech grad, so I know this was a big night for him. His first game as the A.D. Then gave one to Nick Eason as well. First game back in 20 years for Nick Eason. Proud of him.

We have a lot of new guys, a lot of new people on the staff, so it's fun to get off to a good start. The coordinators, I thought they did a great job.

Again, it's frustrating at times when you know you've got a really good play-call, but maybe you don't quite execute as well or you have something a little off or communication or whatever, but I thought Street hung in there and really, again, got the rhythm going, got the tempo going, and we wore them down late.

Q. Miles Williams of the three-point conversion. Now, I heard you talking about being active on the line. Was it something that you saw in Georgia Tech maybe in the past or on film that you felt on defense, specifically moving on the line because it seemed like they kept getting false starts after false starts with the

movement. Was that strategic?

DABO SWINNEY: We do a lot of stemming defensively. We always have. We're in and out of even fronts and odd fronts and bear fronts and Okie fronts. We don't line up a lot and just sit there. We try to move around and create some disruption, but, I don't know, I can't speak to that.

We've been there too (laughing). We've jumped offsides a lot in critical times as well. I thought for the most part we were pretty clean tonight. I don't know what the penalties were, but --

Q. I think it was three.

DABO SWINNEY: Three? We did a pretty good job for the most part. Just some of the stuff that you see on -- I saw a lot of stuff. Man, I don't know that I have ever watched more football since last Thursday.

It's been crazy because, you know, you're so far ahead. You're ready to play. We got to watch a lot of ball. It was, like, Coaching 101 the last five days. Just so many situations and just special teams stuff and sloppy play here or there and just some issues.

I thought for the most part our team, outside of a few spots here and there, we played a pretty clean game for an opener. You know? Midseason I would be a little disappointed in some areas, but for an opener we were pretty clean.

Q. DJ was just asked about Cade's final drive and kind of lit up talking about it. How have you seen the relationship between those two guys grow over the course of the offseason?

DABO SWINNEY: Well, they're, first of all, great kids. They're both just incredible young men. They're both very humble. They're both great leaders. They're both really, really talented they support each other.

It's been awesome, and, again, kind of best case scenario tonight that, again, DJ had to kind of fight through some adversity and just really show the grit and moxie, and he made some big plays, man, with his feet, extended plays, made some beautiful throws.

I thought our guys made some plays. I would have liked to see Davis make that play down on the goal line. We have to make that play.

E.J. had one that we ended up having to punt right there. Scott punted at the end because we had a drop right on the money there.

We missed a few, but we made some big plays that we didn't make last year to support him. I'm just proud of him.

Again, and then for Cade to be able to get in there and really the moment not be too big, just poised, accurate, and made some great plays.

Very good decisionmaker. He showed his aptitude, how he can process things. I was hoping we would get one more shot, and I could get Hunter in there, but it's a good situation for us for sure. That's the most important position in football. We've got guys that can go win.

Q. That spin move by DJ where he broke the tackles and the lateral to Shipley, that seemed to maybe change everything at that point in time, and you guys went on from there. What does that say to you about him and just the way you talked about him being able to keep plays alive and make things happen, but is that the kind of things you believe about him?

DABO SWINNEY: That's a play we didn't make last year. We didn't make that play. I think about the NC State game. Clemson fans remember that. You remember that? He kind of ran and flipped that thing to Shipley, and Shipley dropped it. He probably would have gone 60 yards.

We didn't make some of those plays. Then, again, just I think just his strength, his grit, and just where he is physically. Just finding a way, man. He has some creativity to him. That was a big play. I thought that was a huge, huge play. Downhill run by Shipley to go get it.

Those are the plays you got to make. That's football. I mean, that's the type of ball plays that you have to make to be a good offense. It's not always going to go according to the script. You've got to make plays. Sometimes when maybe it's not as clean or it's not there. I loved how we were able to do that down the stretch.

Q. Outside of QB run, would you have liked to have seen more production from the run game tonight?

DABO SWINNEY: Again, we had short fields. We had several. That's one thing I'm not worried about. We need to be to be a better pass offense.

Y'all wrote all about how terrible we were at pass offense, and rightfully so. We were God-awful. We need to get better, and I thought we got better. We're 60% completion. We're 7 of 15 on third down. Made some big plays, and we left some stuff out there.

Again, we had some very short fields, but we did some

good things in the run game. But yeah, you would like to have more rushing yards, and I think I don't think we're going to have every game where we have some starting field position the way we did. I'll take it, and y'all can ask me that question every week: Where is the running game? I don't know. We scored 41 points. It's definitely an area we can improve.

The third and one. We're going to get that, but you get a snap right there. You get that, and then that leads to another possession. Here you go.

Just a lot of things we can clean up. It's never perfect, but we've got good players, and I thought they all did some good things.

Q. You talked a little bit about some of the plays that got made that you wouldn't have made last year, didn't make last year. I'm curious for DJ if particular, what did you see from him in this game that maybe you didn't see consistently last year in terms of growth or things that he was able to do out there?

DABO SWINNEY: He didn't make a bad play worse. Took care of the ball outside the one play and put the ball on the money, and I thought he pushed through the adversity.

Q. You mentioned the pass game. What's it like to have a guy like Antonio Williams show up on campus in July and perform like he has to get where he is? As well, with Brandon coming back and Will coming back from injury, having the true slot guys there this year.

DABO SWINNEY: He is a great player, and he will play the slot, and he will play the outside spot too. He will play a couple of spots for us as we go through the year.

He is a really good player, and we've seen that all camp. Will is coming. As I've said, Will -- they're very similar in their ability, to be honest with you.

Antonio just is a more polished true receiver. That's all he has played, whereas Will Taylor is a quarterback. We never really got to transition him because he spent all year rehabbing an ACL and didn't get the fall, and he didn't get any work in the spring. He is literally like a true freshman and a new position. He just took the brace off.

So they're very similar, but Antonio is just a more polished, savvy route runner and all that because he just has played, but Will is coming.

It's good to have those guys for sure. Speck is a baller. We've got a good group. E.J. can play in and out. Beaux. We've got a lot of guys there that are all having

opportunities to make plays for us. I thought Decari drawing the PI was a big play for us on third down. Big body. It was a good throw by DJ to give him a chance to make a play, and we got the PI there.

Just, again, a lot of guys had opportunities to play and touch it, and we just trust those guys. Listen, y'all wait until you see Adam Randall. Don't forget about him. He is pretty good. Honestly, he could have played tonight. Just kind of holding him back.

He had a full week and a half of practice all scout team, and he is going to do scout team this week. We're going to get him back real soon, and that's going to be a nice -- that's a nice guy to add to the equation for sure.

That little Antonio is off to a great start tonight.

Q. Coach, I know DJ is your starter, but do you want to get Cade more involved in games these next couple of weeks, and what do you foresee for Cade these next

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DABO SWINNEY: Just like we said, no different than when DJ came in here and Trevor was the starter. We wanted to get DJ as much opportunity as we can. We definitely want to get Cade as much opportunity assist we can within the flow of the game and within the flow of the season.

Really proud of him and how he started, and that's going to be huge for his confidence. I'm really glad it worked out that he was able to get in because as opposed to waiting another week to get your first snap because now he has a taste of it. Not only that, but on the road.

Definitely want to get him as much opportunity as we can just to develop some confidence and get him some experience. Because as we saw with DJ, right, a couple of years ago, boom, next thing you know, you've got to be able to go in. DJ was, I think, was MVP of the Boston College game, and then goes up to Notre Dame and throws for almost 500 yards. We didn't win the game in double overtime there, but you just never know. As much experience as we can get, we definitely would love to do that.

Q. How would you describe the overall play of the offense tonight?

DABO SWINNEY: Not midseason form. Again, we had some communication things that got to be cleaned up. Critical third and three. Total miscommunication. We had the one snap. We had the fumble not quite in the Red Zone.

We were 7 for 7 in the Red Zone scoring. That's really good. We were 7 for 7, and that's an area we need to be great. We'll watch the tape, and I'm sure there's some other things.

We missed a couple of plays. We had a couple of drops. One big one by Beaux, but he made some big plays. And then we had one missed throw I thought would have been a touchdown to E.J. if we just put the ball a little bit more outside.

Good. They showed some poise, some resiliency. They, again, scored 4 out of the last 5 I think drives and did a good job on third down. 7 of 15, third down, 60% completion. 7 of 7 in the Red Zone. A lot of good things.

The good news is there will be a bunch we've got to correct to keep getting better, but it's a good start, and we can build on it. Good teams get better. If we're going to be a great team, that's what we'll have to do.

Q. You've talked a lot about needing to be better around DJ this year. Wide receiver and offensive line in particular, did you see what you were hoping to today?

DABO SWINNEY: Absolutely. Blake Miller, he had a couple of miscues. He got beat inside one time. Just footwork. Some things, but man, true freshman out there getting his first snaps in college.

I saw what I needed to see. Again, Brynny, critical play. Big plays by 84. We're a lot better around him for sure, and that makes him better. Then if he'll continue to improve on the things that he needs to improve on from last year, then we'll be better overall.

Q. You already spoke about the offense and the defense and the fact that you all had three penalties for 10 yards, but also special teams. The two blocked punts. Can you say this is maybe not a complete game, but the closest you can get to a complete game as far as the overall team?

DABO SWINNEY: Well, we can improve. Again, we'll watch this tape, and I'm sure there's things in all three phases, but we played a lot of complimentary football, and that's what you want to see.

I mean, the defense set the tone and kind of carried us for a little bit, and then when the defense kind of got on their heels a little bit, the offense responded and really picked that defense up, put some wind back in their sails. Then, bam, bam.

I thought you saw a really good complimentary football down the stretch. Field goals, punting, blocked punts, you name it. Offense, defense, it was just kind of overwhelming there in the fourth quarter, and when you compliment each other like that and you are talented like we are, then you can get it rolling.

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