

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

Thursday, July 24, 2025

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Clemson Tigers

Coach Dabo Swinney

Cade Klubnik

T.J. Parker

Peter Woods

Press Conference



blessed to have an opportunity to be a part of a team and have a chance to do something that I really love, and that's the game of football and competing and doing life with a bunch of great young people.

Q. Coach Swinney, there was a time a few years ago where people were having that conversation of had you fallen off at a 10, 11-win season. What does it say about your consistency as a program that there's a perennial expectation of National Championship or bust down there?

DABO SWINNEY: Well, I think we've earned that through consistency. We did something last year that only four teams in 160 years of college football have done. Nebraska did it with Coach Osborne. Coach Bowden at Florida State, Coach Saban at Alabama, and now Clemson. 14 straight nine-plus win seasons, 13 of those ten-plus win seasons. We've earned that through consistency.

That's really for us what it's always been about, just being incredibly consistent. We're not perfect, but we're incredibly consistent. That's because we're purpose driven and we're relationship driven. I think our program reflects that purpose in everything, in every aspect. We've got the highest graduation rate in America. 13 out of the last 14 years, we've been top 10 academically. We're the only school in America 14 years in a row, top 25 in football and academics. We're a place that really values education.

Again, that's the start of our purpose, and the kids that come there, they align with that. It's a holistic approach, and we've won, as well. In the craziest probably three years of college football, not only are we tops in the country in graduation, we're top in the country in retention. Fewest players leaving your program.

So we're purpose driven, we're relationship driven, and we've created a ton of consistency. Not just in winning, but we've been incredibly consistent with how we've won, and that's by fulfilling the purpose that drives our program and drives the habits within our program every day.

Q. Earlier this morning your quarterback was talking

DABO SWINNEY: Whoa. That is bright. Just super excited to be at this point in our 2025 journey. This is kind of what it all builds to, just getting to the season. You work all year for just a few days, and one of those days is coming up just a few weeks down the road. An opportunity to get back on the field with our team as a full staff and a complete team next week.

Excited about that. Got some great young men with me. Obviously -- I don't know where Antonio went. Where's he at? He's coming around. Antonio Williams is with us. He's somewhere around here. He's a great receiver, going to graduate in December. Cade Klubnik, also going to graduate in December. Then we've got two outstanding defensive players here in T.J. Parker and Peter Woods.

They're all great people. These two guys right here, three years, great players, but great leaders. Both of them will graduate in December in three years. Great representatives on the field, but also off the field for our program.

Just excited about getting going and look forward to getting on the field with them next week. It's been a good off-season. The guys have put the work in. We've been around a lot of good teams, and this team has the ingredients to be a really good team, but we've got to go do the work. We can't talk about it or predict our way into it. Y'all can't predict our way into it. We've got to go do it and do the work.

Excited about that next phase in our journey. Me personally, this is my 36th year in college football and my 23rd at Clemson. Three at Alabama and year 23 at Clemson. It's just special. Just incredibly grateful and



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about this year's team being a veteran team. With the amount of freshmen you played the last two years, obviously you have to be talented, but in this new era and landscape of college football, how big of a hand up do you feel like the veteran presence gives your team going into the season?

DABO SWINNEY: It's awesome. Experience, as they say, doesn't come at a discount. We've got a bunch of great young men. Our quarterback, especially, that's had to manage success well, and he's had to manage some failure well, too. He's grown into a great leader of our team.

The experienced guys, we have most of our team back. That, again, speaks to our retention. These guys can leave any time they want, but they -- so they have to choose, first of all, to come, and then they have to stay. I just think that says a lot about kind of how we put it together on the front end in recruiting guys that really align with our purpose, guys that really value education and want structure and family and accountability.

Also, they value the place that they're at. These guys, they could all go wherever they want to go, but it's a close group. They've done football life together for a few years now, and they've had some success. Certainly last year and getting a chance to maybe get a little glimpse at the top of the mountain, that's certainly given them a little fuel as they've gotten back to work since January.

Great leaders that really, truly care about each other, they care about the place, and they have a very clear vision of how they want to finish. Now they've got to go do the work.

Q. Came out, had an opportunity to tour the facility, and one of the things that stuck out was the P.A.W. Journey. You talk a lot about retention versus the rest of the country, what you guys were able to do. Can you speak to how P.A.W. Journey helps keep the players around that you recruited out of high school?

DABO SWINNEY: Again, our purpose is graduation, number one. Number two, it's to equip them as men through the game. Number three is to make sure they have a great college experience. Lastly is to win a championship. I want everybody who comes there to win a championship. That's how we started the program 16 years ago, and nothing has changed.

P.A.W. Journey is not something we just started doing. The day that I became an interim coach, October 13, 2008, I went next door, I lived next door to a guy named Jeff Davis, and he was just my neighbor for six years. I didn't really know him as this great player, and he wasn't working

in Clemson football. He was on campus doing development and working with, called me Mr. Program, and I just kind of laid out my vision. If I ever got to be a head coach, this is kind of what I want to do, and the AD said I get to be the head coach for seven weeks and I can do whatever I want.

I was like, so this might only be a seven-week job, but I want you to come, I want somebody who's not a coach, and I want somebody who can help me coach life every day because life is happening. Coaches are busy, we're in meetings. In those days, there were nine coaches, two GAs, and one ops guy. The coaches wore every hat.

I hired Jeff Davis, and I ended up getting the job. So he was a one-man shop creating this curriculum that we now call P.A.W. Journey. Now it's six people, and it's a living, breathing space. It's at the entrance of our building, but it is a curriculum. We have micro-internships all over the world. We've had 100 percent job placement seven years in a row. We are equipping them as men. They learn everything from how to tie a tie to how to have a nice dinner to doing a resume to how to do an interview.

We had a group go to Italy this summer. They went to South Africa last summer. They've been to Thailand, Costa Rica. We are creating life experiences. Financial literacy, tax education, we've been doing that for 16 years. Now with an actual true financial component to college, it just allows us to even further equip them as men.

81 percent of the guys who have gotten a shot at the NFL from Clemson have made the roster. That's incredible. P.A.W. Journey's been a huge part of that. It truly is an amazing program, and the players can speak even more to it. We're involved in the community. They learn how to serve. We like to say we're a leadership organization, and we just play football doing it. A lot of great leaders have developed.

That's how we equip them as men is through P.A.W. Journey, and then having a great college experience. Every summer I see all these pros back in Clemson, from Dexter Lawrence to Clelin Ferrell and Christian Wilkins and so on, training for four and five weeks. I've got 25 former players on my staff. They had a great experience. We are top retention in the country because we're living the purpose.

The last part is winning a championship. So 16 years later, if you say you're purpose driven, then you ought to have purpose driven results. We have the highest graduation in America. P.A.W. Journey is the model of player development organization in all of college football. Our kids are staying at a high level because they're having a



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great experience, and every player that I've ever signed since February of '09, my first signing class, has won a championship. When I first got the job, Clemson hadn't won the league in 20 years.

Every player that has signed at Clemson since February of '09, every player, has won a championship, but it's how you win that I think really separates places and people.

There's a lot of narratives, but that's the facts. It all goes back to how we put it together on the front end, getting the right people that really align with what you believe. You've got a group of young men right here that could have gone anywhere in the country out of high school, could have gone anywhere every year they've been here, they could have gone somewhere, but they've chosen to be a part of it because they are living that purpose.

Again, you've got two that are going to graduate in December in three years, and then Cade's going to graduate right on time in 3 1/2 years, and they're all developed as men. They're all having a great experience. And they've won championships. The only people in our building that haven't won a championship are the guys who just got there, so they're on the clock.

We've never put winning a championship first. It's always been about the purpose that I talked about. Again, P.A.W. Journey is an incredible aspect to that. Jeff Davis has been a huge partner, and every ounce of success that we've had at Clemson, Jeff Davis has been right there. I'm talking about from being the captain of the 1981 National Championship team to later in life coming back and buying into the vision that I really wanted to create in being a head coach and how I wanted to do it.

I told him, well, here's why. This is why I want it to be that way. Then, man, he's taken it and gone from what we originally called a player relations department to P.A.W. Journey. It's been awesome to watch.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you. You can switch spots with Cade, and we'll spend a few minutes with the quarterback.

Q. Cade, just to have the coach that you have here in college football, there's an ever changing climate, there's a lot of selfishness in college football now, but you hear about family, you hear about faith, and you hear about the journey of getting an education and taking care of a lot bigger things in football. What does it mean to you to be coached by Dabo?

CADE KLUBNIK: It's unbelievable. So, so thankful to Coach Swinney, gave me the opportunity to come to

Clemson. Looking back on the last 3 1/2 years and going into my last season, just kind of brings my heart a lot of joy.

My recruiting process was a little wild. Man, God is so good. The fact that He got to bring me to Clemson and take me through what He's brought me through, it's been so good. And to have a coach like Coach Swinney to lean on through everything, through the ups and the downs, has been unbelievable. To have somebody that believes in me. After my sophomore year, when everybody kind of told me I sucked and wasn't very good, a lot of people wanted me out of Clemson. Coach Swinney pulled me into his office and told me, Cade, I believe in you, and let's go to work.

For somebody that I look up to and believe in tell me that, that he believes in me, just filled me with confidence. When he could have gone and done what a lot of other coaches would do but didn't and pulled me in tight and said I believe in you, I'll never forget that moment. That conversation has fueled me for the last two years.

So thankful for my time at Clemson, and it's been really awesome.

Q. Heading into the season with a lot of expectation to you being one of the leaders on this Clemson football team, what's the type of mentality that you're instilling and helping to instill with this team? And then heading into the regular season, what are you most excited to showcase with this offense to take another step forward from a very successful 2024 season?

CADE KLUBNIK: I think our mentality is, man, we're keeping our head down, just kind of keeping it low. We're going to work every single day. We're not a loud team. We're not going to be shouting and yapping and hollering a whole lot about what we're doing or what we're going to do. We're just putting our head down and go to work.

I think it starts with the leadership we have. We have really good leadership all around. That's kind of our mentality, man. We've been through the fire. We've been through it, and we've stuck together. That's the biggest thing is we've stuck together and come out the other side and just continually trying to persevere and go be the best we can be.

In terms of our offense, we've got a lot coming back. That's really exciting. I know somebody hit on it earlier, but we've been a young team, I feel like, every year I've been here. We're a veteran team and very experienced, got a lot of guys that have played a lot of ball. That's really exciting, but we've got to go do it. We've got to go do it and take advantage of every opportunity we get.

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Q. Clemson hasn't had a home opener since 2019, so first one for you. How excited are you about opening against LSU in the original Death Valley?

CADE KLUBNIK: I'm very excited to open up at home. I've never been able to do that in my college career, so I'm excited to be in Death Valley for the first one. It's going to be awesome. Obviously excited for the first game. It's going to be a great opportunity for us. It's a great opportunity for us with a great opponent.

We're excited for every game this year. Every game has to be treated like it's the National Championship, whether it's Week 1, Week 5, Week 8. We have to take advantage of every single week because that's what college football, that's what it is, and you have to give the highest respect to every opponent that you have, and that's the type of mentality that I try to have, and that's the mentality that Coach Swinney gives us every single week. So excited to start at home.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks for the time. You can switch spots with T.J. We'll spend a little bit of time with our defensive end.

Q. T.J., this is -- Clemson has set such a standard, particularly in the front seven and with defensive line, that this is the longest drought that we've seen in terms of Clemson having a defender be named the ACC Defensive Player of the Year. Is that something you look at as, hey, obviously the championship is the main goal, but would it be great to break that streak and be the next now lineage of Da'Quan Bowers and company that have won that award at Clemson?

T.J. PARKER: To be honest with you, I never really put no thought into it. If I handle my season well and how I need to and get the team, and we consistently win it, it will take care of itself. I don't really get into too much of that. I just let the work show.

Q. There's obviously a lot of expectations and excitement with Tom Allen coming in and this defense. Coach Swinney told us last week, though, all he has to do is turn on the Texas tape to kind of bring everybody back down to earth. How much has last season kind of fueled what happened in the off-season and heading into this year?

T.J. PARKER: Obviously we didn't get the job done against Texas, and that kind of stunk right there. For me, I'm always big on getting better, and that was the first thing we talked about with Coach Allen when we sat down and had a conversation, what I did wrong in that game, what I

could have done better, and here's what we're going to do going forward.

For him, from day one, it's about passion. I need to be coached as hard as possible, and you can get in my face and tell me what it is and tell me what to do, and he's been that way since day one. For me, that builds a lot of confidence in my game and also looking forward. I'm just so happy to have him on the team, and it's going to be a great season.

Q. Kind of building off that, Tom Allen worked with Abdul Carter at Penn State last year and he put up great numbers. What's your excitement level going into this season, and what are your expectations?

T.J. PARKER: For me, I'm just excited for the new defense, play fast, free, and physical. I'm looking forward to having a better season than I did last year. Obviously, to see Coach Allen have a first round caliber defensive end, have the season he had, I can see myself recreating something like that, even better, but just being my own person. So I'm super excited about that.

Q. You spoke a little bit about new defensive coordinator, Tom Allen. What is it about his leadership style that speaks to you, and what can you say about just how he's already gotten a lot out of you even before we hit the fall?

T.J. PARKER: Man, I could rave on and on about Coach Allen, man. He demands excellence from us, you know what I'm saying? He demands a lot more accountability than we've ever seen before, whether that's in the classroom or on the field. If we don't reach our goals for every practice, we're doing up-downs and things like that, man. You just see that he really cares.

Obviously, with him having the head coaching experience and the coordinator experience that he's had for a long time, he knows and seen it all. Just that belief that we've had in him and the trust, we've seen a lot of change during spring ball and now transitioning into summer going into the season. I'm just super excited to see it all come together.

THE MODERATOR: T.J., thank you. You and Peter can switch spots. We'll round out our time with Clemson with our D-lineman.

Q. Peter, you moved outside last year out of a need to play defensive end, as Christian Wilkins did a few years before you. Moving back inside this year and underneath Tom Allen's tutelage, what do you see as far as your potential moving forward this year, and



how does it feel to move back inside?

PETER WOODS: I'm super excited. I just love the game. I'm just going to do whatever it takes to put my team in the best position to win. So if it's inside, it's outside, it's off the ball, if I'm throwing the ball, it don't really matter. Whatever Coach asks me to do, I'm going to get it done to the best of my ability. That's really all it is.

That's your job. You got that. (Laughter).

I'm going to get it done, though.

Q. Just a quick question: How does Coach Swinney and the staff prepare you guys this year for when there's media hype for you guys? And how does he keep you focused knowing that the games are decided on the field?

PETER WOODS: As you can see, we come up here, and we have a lot of the same answers, but I don't think it's getting us prepared for the media, it's just a cultural thing. We share a lot of the same core values and a lot of the same principles, and that's what makes us Clemson.

I think we're able and we're blessed to be in a position where we're able to voice that to you guys and all the other different outlets. I think it just starts with the culture. Coach Swinney sets the tone, and as leaders of the team, we come out and we enforce that. So I think that kind of comes out in the media, and that's why our answers are kind of similar.

Q. Nick Eason last week said after challenging you all off-season, you've had your best off-season yet. How do you feel, basically heading into the fall, and how does that relationship with Nick Eason continue to grow?

PETER WOODS: It's great. I feel the best I've ever felt. Coach Eason, at the least, he's been a great coach to me. He's been kind of a father figure in the facility for me, helping me develop holistically and as a man and just kind of teaching me the game. He's done it on every level and every way imaginable you can think of. On the college level, coached on the college level. Played in the NFL, coached on the NFL level.

So just being grateful to be able to learn from a guy like Coach Eason is something that I hold to a very high regard since I've been in high school.

Q. With you guys opening against LSU and the SEC bragging about being more physical than other conferences and the game starting in the trenches,

what's the mental preparation going into the game, and even during when you're going against an opponent that really tries to out-physical you and even out-psych you?

PETER WOODS: Just like Cade said, just put your head down and do the work. I mean, it's football. I don't think there's an opponent we're going against that's not going to try to out-physical us.

We just have to be confident in the work we put in in the off-season. I've said this probably 15 times, you only get to play 16 games. Maybe at max, you get to play 16. That's the National Championship at 16. So of the 349 days, you've got to figure out what it is that you need to do to get better and how to get the results you want. I believe our result is going to show based on how we work.

Q. About ten years ago, when I'm assuming you were still in grade school, Coach Swinney took his first team to the National Championship Game, lost it. In that ten-year period since then, they've won two national titles. When did you first become aware of Clemson as a national power and Coach Swinney as somebody that you wanted to play for?

PETER WOODS: This is actually, like, a funny question. I did not really know that I was coming to Clemson until the day that I committed, to be honest. It was just kind of, like, an overwhelming feeling that you just kind of get when you're in the building and around the people. It's just something that I always tell people, like, to even understand, you've got to go see it for yourself, to be honest. It's truly special.

I guess it's really no secret I grew up an Alabama fan, Alabama, Auburn, in Alabama my whole life. It was just something, a feeling on me that I couldn't pass up to come play for Coach Swinney. I believed in him. I believed in his vision. I believed in the guys that I came in with, and it's just been special from there.

I think that the biggest thing for me was just coming in and me and Cade and T.J., Cade's first year starting with me and T.J.'s first year playing. Now we're here looking at our third year being kind of like the starters, and we've been together this whole time. I think that kind of solidifies the decision I made, knowing that I came to a place that's about family and principles and just sticking together.

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