

Clemson Defensive Players Preview Ohio State's Offense Ahead Of CFP Semifinal Showdown



Several Clemson defensive players spoke to members of media via Zoom conference call on Dec. 28 ahead of the Tigers' Sugar Bowl showdown with Ohio State in a College Football Playoff semifinals game Jan. 1.

What follows is a rundown paraphrasing what fifth-year senior linebacker James Skalski, fifth-year senior safety Nolan Turner, fifth-year senior linebacker Baylon Spector, freshman defensive end Myles Murphy, third-year sophomore linebacker Mike Jones Jr., and sophomore defensive tackle Tyler Davis said Dec. 28:

Clemson fifth-year senior linebacker James Skalski:

Ohio State's offense?

- Whenever someone rushes for 300 yards you have to take note of that. Trey Sermon is a talented, physical back. Master Teague is a great back too. "Master Teague, what a football name."

Being back in playoffs?

- I've been fortunate enough to be in the playoff picture every year I've been here. We're just fortunate to be here. I'm 0-2 in New Orleans, so I'm trying to get redemption in that aspect.

Ohio State's passing game?

- It's going to be hard. They've got a Heisman Trophy-caliber quarterback in Justin Fields. They've got great skill, great receivers, great tight ends. Northwestern did a pretty good job, and Ohio State probably just didn't play their best.

Why did you choose Clemson?

- My dad played for Oklahoma, and I didn't really have a favorite. I was always a really focused kid, and when I met (defensive coordinator Brent Venables) that I wanted to play for him. And that

was even before I knew what kind of man Coach Swinney is.

Rivalry with OSU?

- I wouldn't call it a rivalry. There's blood in the water for both of us. I wouldn't say rivalry. For me, it's a playoff game, so you want to beat whoever you play to go to the national championship.

How tough was it for junior defensive end Xavier Thomas to miss ACC Championship Game?

- I don't want to speak on Xavier's behalf. I know he's got teammates that are supporting him.

Dabo receiving extra criticism this year?

- It's just a normal year for us. If you spend all your time trying to please everyone, it doesn't usually work out for you. I don't see anything different. I always support Dabo.

Did facing Notre Dame QB Ian Book help you prepare for OSU junior QB Justin Fields?

- One hundred percent. You could argue Fields is even more talented athletically. He's a Heisman-caliber player. He's a great player. We've got to be on our Ps and Qs and play at a high level.

How are you feeling physically?

- After the ACC Championship, I was sore, but the right type of sore. I wasn't actually hurt. I'm pretty much 100 percent now.

How to stop modern offenses?

- Nowadays these offenses do such a good job spreading you out and moving the ball around. I think the secret is 'bend, don't break.' Don't give up the big play and play good red zone defense.

Clemson fifth-year senior safety Nolan Turner:

Physical nature of OSU?

- They're a great football team obviously. That was one of the most physical games we've played for, and I assume it will be this year too. They've got a lot of great players back and we look forward to another fun matchup.

What you missed or had to give up to get through protocols?

- Definitely a crazy year. One of the biggest things is the social interaction that you normally have with people. Obviously, I missed the fans. Missed full stadiums and then playing in front of thousands of people. The challenge and the commitment it takes to stay COVID-free.

How tough is it to sit out the first half?

- It's frustrating. I really want to play in this game. It's an uncontrollable for me, and I can't control that. I've just got to coach guys up, bringing energy and I'm looking forward to playing in the second half.

Splitting up reps in practice?

- We've got to get the guys ready that are going to start the game. We've got to get those guys in at practice, and I've got to get my reps too because I'll be coming in in the second half. Great preparation by the guys.

OSU has a lot of motivation from last year. How do you match that?

- When you have an opportunity to play in a game like this, you shouldn't need any extra fuel or motivation. It's such a fun atmosphere to play in a big game against top competition, .It doesn't get any better than this. That's all the motivation I need.

How critical is fifth-year senior linebacker James Skalski to stopping the run?

- He's such a great leader and such a violent football player. He gets everybody on the front seven lined up and he does a great job leading up there. You know everything is going to go smoothly when he's playing. He brings so much to a defense. I think he's one of the most underrated players I've ever seen.

Experience from facing OSU last year?

- We really didn't play a great game. After they got up 16-0, we were fortunate enough to settle down and make some plays. I didn't play very well last year, and people kind of overlooked that because of the interception. I've been looking forward to playing a better game.

Tougher task to motivate yourself to be at the same level?

- Not with motivation. But overall, this year has been more important. I think the most important thing was the teams' cultures that were successful.

Who can step up in your absence?

- We got a lot of guys. I think (sophomore safety) Lannnden (Zanders) and (sophomore safety) Joe (Charleston) all year played a lot of football and did a good job. (Redshirt freshman safety) Ray Thornton, (freshman safety) Tyler Venerables, (freshman safety R.J. Mickens) have all had good weeks of practice and can all step up.

Ohio State's offense?

- They're a great team, they present a lot of challenges and they've been in this situation before. We're preparing this week like we have all year, and we'll be ready.

Clemson fifth-year senior linebacker Baylon Spector:

Does prep change when Sermon ran for 300 yards?

- You can't act like it didn't happen, have to pay attention. Both of their backs are good, with Master Teague too. And they're O-line is experienced and good.

Surprised by the physicality of OSU last year?

- It's the stage that we're in, and the stage we're going to be in the future. It's good on good, it's the best against the best. Notre Dame had a great offensive line too, and we were ready.

Postgame afternoons different this year?

It was different. You've just got to understand the situation that we're in. Be smart, wear a mask around your family. It's different, but I'm thankful for the position we're in given the circumstances.

How is fifth-year senior linebacker James Skalski underrated?

- People undervalue his athletic ability all the time. He just comes in here and grinds every day. He's probably the strongest guy on the team, among the linebackers for sure. And he runs as well as any of us.

Decision on returning next year?

- My plan right now is to come back. I've thought about my future and my goals for my career. I think the best thing for me right now is to come back, get another year of tape and prepare for my goals.

What do you remember from last year's matchup?

- Very physical and very long game. (Former Tiger LB) Chad (Smith) and James (Skalski) were exhausted at the end of the game, and they brought it.

Strange with COVID restrictions?

- It's the norm now. We've been doing it for so long.

How different is bowl experience?

- It's very different. Going to a bowl site is always what you work toward and get to do a lot of different things. It's different this year. Tonight we've got bingo night, and they're trying to do some stuff.

Feel like rivalry game to you?

- We know what's the stage. We'll be ready. It's definitely a rival. We've played them a lot and we're excited.

Running style and skillset of Trey Sermon?

- He's a talented player, runs very physical and gets downhill. We'll have to be ready for him in the run game, and everything they do off of that.

What is fifth-year senior LB James Skalski like away from the field?

- It depends what kind of mood Skalski's in. It depends on the day. Some days he's super intense and sometimes he's relaxed.

Clemson freshman defensive end Myles Murphy:

Weird rules impacting how you get to know teammates?

- If anything, I've spent all of my time with my teammates. I'm with them all the time. I made the best bonds with them.

Ohio State's offensive line?

- They're a pretty big offensive line and strong up front. They have a very good run game and very good structurally with their stretch plays and inside zone. We have to be strong inside to make sure the line doesn't get moved in the wrong direction.

Sunk in that you're a Freshman All-American and playing in the CFP?

- It's pretty surreal. It's funny to think that I was watching this exact game last year, and now I'm in it.

Criticism of Dabo?

- He always preaches that the ship doesn't sink unless the waters in the ship. We know Dabo, so what was said outside of the program did not affect us.

What did your older teammates tell you about facing Justin Fields?

- He's a very, very strong quarterback, very strong in the pocket. When we get to him, we have to bring him to the ground because he won't go to the ground unless we make him go to the ground.

How often will you hear from defensive coordinator Brent Venables to set the edge?

- It's very important. Coach V has preached it every day on multiple occasions. If I didn't know, I know now, that's for sure.

Performance in ACC Championship Game most complete?

- We had a good outing, and Coach Swinney always says we play our best games toward the end of the season. I have confidence that it will carry over, but we can't just hope that it will carry over, we have to put in the preparation.

How much were you looking forward to this game watching it last year?

- I am very excited, more so staying in the preparation. A lot of my teammates have been excited to go to the bowl site, and this year it will be different, but it's my first experience. It's something exciting to do.

How much tougher is a freshman year during COVID-19 pandemic?

- It's more to look out for because if you test positive, you have to sit out, and possibly miss games.

Clemson third-year sophomore linebacker Mike Jones Jr.:

What are sacrifices you've had to make?

- The regular college experience. It's weird not being able to hang out with your friends or see your family or not going home for the bye week or being with your buddies on the bus on the way to away games. Everybody has had to go through them, and we've managed to get through them and keep going.

Confidence in defense because of defensive coordinator Brent Venables?

- We always try to develop that energy throughout the week of practice. That depends on us, and Coach V holds us to a standard at practice. We go into the games confident, but that's just because we've done it all week throughout practice.

Difference in bowl experience?

- It's been very different. Usually we'd spend like a whole week at the bowl site, and that's fun. Now we're here and we go home every day, so it's just like the regular season.

What's planned besides bingo night?

- Practice and meeting, that's about it.

Rivalry with Clemson?

- I kind of think of it as nail-biting. Last year was a crazy game, and it's like, what's going to happen next?

What stands out about OSU film?

- Of course, if you watch the last game, the running back ran for like 300 yards so that was outstanding. They have a good O-line. Trey Sermon is a great player and Master Teague is a great player.

Criticism of Dabo during social protests? Misperception?

- Before anything was said publicly, he spoke to us and we felt comfortable to go out and speak up. We know who he is and what he stands for. It rubbed me the wrong way seeing people poking in from all types of different angles.

How is Clemson defense better with fifth-year senior LB James Skalski?

- I don't even know what I could say, but it's obvious we're on a different level with him out there. It's another level of knowledge when he's out there, and he brings great energy. Everybody is on their Ps and Qs with him out there.

Harder for players at other schools that were less successful having more difficulty staying focused with COVID?

- I've seen teams that have dealt badly with COVID. We take everything seriously, and we don't fold on the things we put in place and stay strong on the things we have to do.

Clemson sophomore defensive tackle Tyler Davis:

Young defensive linemen?

- They've grown a lot. They were pretty much beasts when they came in but they've grown a lot mentally.

Have the COVID restrictions been stressful?

- It's kind of been tough. You can't go home or go out and stuff, but that's the sacrifice we had to make to play this year.

Important for D-line to set tone?

- It's very important. They've got one of the top offensive lines in the country. Everybody on their offensive line is great. It's going to be very important to set the tone.

Advantage or disadvantage to play more or less games?

- There's no disadvantage or advantage. There's no excuses. When you're on the field, it doesn't matter how many games a team played.

Revenge on Notre Dame?

- It felt great to get the win and be ACC champs again.

Comparing Notre Dame QB Ian Book to OSU junior QB Justin Fields?

- They are very similar. They do a great job of moving in and out and making plays down field.

What impresses you most about OSU's offensive line?

- A nasty group. They get after it. They're very aggressive, they're very physical and they play through the whistle.

No fans, being able to communicate on field?

- It was different for away games, it was easier to hear. At home games, I couldn't tell no difference because the fans were going crazy.

Better prepared for Ohio State junior quarterback Justin Fields after playing him last year?

- It's always better to play somebody than just watching film on them. He's a physical quarterback and he can make every throw. I feel better prepared.

Much different season?

- It's different. Kind of tough, just different.

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