

Clemson HC Dabo Swinney, DC Brent Venables Preview Sugar Bowl Showdown With Ohio State



Clemson head coach Dabo Swinney and defensive coordinator Brent Venables spoke about the Tigers' upcoming matchup with the Buckeyes in the Sugar Bowl, which will serve as a CFP semifinal game Jan. 1.

Here's a rundown of what Swinney and Venables said Dec. 28: **Clemson head coach Dabo Swinney**

Opening statement:

- "All right. Well, you know, it's getting close. This is kind of a Wednesday for us here in Clemson. I think it's a Monday, everywhere else. But it's like a Wednesday for us as far as our prep and routine. We've had a really good practice here. Really proud of our guys. Excited to be back in the playoffs. Excited to be back in New Orleans. And, you know, a chance to do something we haven't done - and that's win a Sugar Bowl. We're looking forward to it. Congratulations to Ohio State - same thing, back in the playoffs, and [it's] going to be a great game, no doubt about that. Two really, really talented teams that I know both are going to do everything they can to win."

The first question to Dabo Swinney is about his poll ranking Ohio State No. 11:

- "I will remind the Ohio State people that I voted them (over Alabama in 2017). I just felt like Ohio State deserved it. I played at Alabama. I went to Alabama. I'm an equal opportunity guy." - Gave the Buckeyes credit for being Big Ten Champions that year.
- "I knew that I would be the poster child. I could probably run for governor in Michigan and have a good chance."

On Ohio State junior quarterback Justin Fields:

- "He's very confident. He's a great football player. He can do it all. It's another year in the system

- he's a dangerous guy. He understands his progressions. He creates a lot of conflict because of his ability to run the ball."

On comparing Trevor Lawrence and Deshaun Watson:

- "Well, I mean, they're both very similar as far as what they mean to the program. I mean, there have been just incredibly committed guys. Two great human beings, first of all. Great examples, great teammates, great leaders, great preparers. You name it. Both of them graduated in three years. Incredibly disciplined with their lives and, I mean, you just couldn't find two more committed guys to win it. Two great winners. That's what both of them bring to the table.
- Obviously, Deshaun led us to our first National Championship. He kind of paved the way. And his will to win, I mean, that last drive against Alabama to win the National Championship with one second, that's the epitome of Deshaun Watson.
- And then Trevor Lawrence coming in as a true freshman and winning a National Championship, that's the epitome of Trevor Lawrence because his moxie, his savviness, as a true freshman, his confidence to go win a game like that under that stage, a lot of people going to that game when he's a freshman and the moment is too big and all this stuff, there's not a moment too big for Trevor Lawrence. I mean, he's as good - he's the first Trevor Lawrence, that's the way I would describe him. He's the first one. There will be a lot of people trying to live up to the standard that he set as a quarterback for a long time in this game."

On Lawrence's Heisman hype or lack thereof:

- "Yeah, it's a stat-, media-driven award. I felt the same way about Deshaun Watson. It just is what it is. To me, he's the epitome of the Heisman in every regard. You're talking about a guy that lost Joseph Ngata, Frank Ladson, and Justyn Ross for the whole year. And he's thrown for more yards than any team in the history of Clemson this year. Unbelievable what he's done.
- People say well, he missed - he played nine games. He was unbelievable. Played nine of the 11 games. And it's just amazing. If you really know what you're looking at, what he does and how he makes everybody else better, how equipped he is, his ability, his knowledge, I mean, it's just off the charts.
- And, again, that's - I know it's not a pro potential award. But he's lost one game. It's not a career award either. We all know that. But his season has been - this has been the best he's been. And he's 34-1 or whatever as a starter. There's not a better - and that is not a knock on anybody. There's some amazing, amazing young football players out there, college football players, that are very deserving of the Heisman. Absolutely. But the best player in the country is Trevor Lawrence. And to me, it's not close. But it's not up to me. It's not - I don't get a vote in the Heisman. And obviously, I'm biased, but for good reason."

On Clemson junior defensive end Xavier Thomas:

- "Yeah, he was unavailable (for the ACC Championship). He was in a protocol situation. But the biggest thing that we're gonna do is we're not gonna say anything about anybody until game day.

We will put out an available-unavailable list just like we've done all year - leave it at that."

On how this team stacks up against previous Clemson teams:

- "Similar. Every team's kind of had a different path and, I've never really had a team that's had the challenges of this team. Nobody has. There's nobody in the playoffs that have had to deal with what it took to get to this point. So this team's unique in that way.
- But similar in - I feel good about how we're built. I like our guys in the trenches on both sides. We've had great quarterback play. We've got some explosive skill. And we're starting to play our best football. And I still think our best football is still in front of us. So, similar."

On Ohio State's secondary compared to last year's group:

- Described fourth-year junior cornerback Shaun Wade as an "elite player." Said he thinks Ohio State's defense is still "really, really good."
- "Very similar. And why would it not be? They're really, really good and not much has changed. A little bit more two-safety. Maybe just a hair more two-safety. But they believe in what they do, man. They're built to stop the run. And that's - so more similar than not.
- And personnel-wise, I mean, they're no different than we are. They lose good players every year, just like we do. But they replace them with good players every year, just like we do. And they do a good job of developing their guys.
- I thought they - we did not play well in the game last year. They did a great job. I didn't think we played great at wide-out. The best thing we did is we took care of the ball, and that was the difference in the game. But we got to play better than we did last year, that's for sure.
- But they're built the same. Really good up front. Those deep tackles are really good players. They've got depth at end. A lot of experience at linebacker. They've moved [Shaun] Wade in the corner. That's different from last year. He's an elite player. No. 7 [junior corner Sevyn Banks], same thing. Those safeties. 5, [senior linebacker Baron] Browning, all those guys. They're a really, really good football team. Again, built in the trenches, built in the front seven, and built to stop the run. So we'll have our hands full."

On what he's told Clemson's players during the COVID-19 season:

- "Don't give up what you want most for what you want in a moment."
- "It's unprecedented. It's been incredibly challenging. I just tell them, don't give up what they want most for what they may want at a moment. It's just really that simple. And the teams that do this the best and manage this the best, that's who's going to finish the best. And I challenged them early on, this could be a competitive advantage. It doesn't have to be a competitive

disadvantage. The glass is half full. It's not half empty. It's all about taking what we've got and making the best of it.

- And it's been an unbelievably tough year on these kids. Incredible. People will never know. There will be books. There will be documentaries. There will be things. These kids 20 years from now will be telling stories that people won't believe. This is unprecedented times. We have never had a moment like this. And what these kids had to sacrifice to be able to play is incredible.
- Again, that's why I'll go back to the way I did my poll. I mean, from isolation to virtual work to not seeing their families, post-game. Just the way we've had to meet. Just buying into not going places, not doing things. I mean, a lot of these kids have just done church online. You name it. Just the adjustments, very abnormal what they've had to do. But they have all sacrificed so that we would have a chance to get to this point. And I'm just really proud of them, really proud of them. Their commitment, their leadership, and how they bought in.
- And not just the players, our staff. All of our medical people, our administration. I mean, it has been an unbelievable undertaking that we've all been a part of. And we're near the end here. And everybody's just got to stay committed. Every time - we tested four times a week, and every time we would get that test again, but, again, just the discipline that they have had to apply to their lives has been incredible, you know? And I'm just super proud of them. And most people, I think, don't really understand what all has gone on this year.
- But this team, this team in particular, really fought to play. I mean, they fought to play the game. And I'm so thankful that we have been able to play. This has been a year I'll never forget. This is one of the closest teams I've ever been a part of as a result because we've just had each other. So looking forward to seeing them finish well."

Clemson defensive coordinator Brent Venables

Opening statement:

- Just incredibly excited and thankful to be back in the Sugar Bowl. It's been a lot of fun, and I've been really proud of our guys. It's been a fun and fulfilling year. There's nothing better than to watch your players develop from the beginning to the end.

How is Justin Fields different from last year?

- I don't see a whole lot different. He's a terrific player. He can throw the ball with precision, run with strength. He's got poise, an incredible skillset and great presence in the pocket.

Legacy of Trevor Lawrence?

- The great quarterbacks are defined by how they win, and nobody has done better than Trevor. What I like the most about Trevor is that he works to be the best he can be. He has a steadiness that the elite players have.

How much of a difference does Ohio State junior wide receiver Chris Olave make?

- He's a great player, really savvy, really understands ball and he can make plays. He can take the top off a defense. This will be the best group of receivers we've played against this year, and we will be challenged.

Criticism of Dabo Swinney for ranking Ohio State No. 11?

- He's going to speak from his heart and stand on his beliefs. And he's certainly not going to be politically correct. It doesn't really affect us at all. Ohio State's going to be excited to play just because it's a great opportunity. Everybody has had a lot of struggles and made a lot of sacrifices.
- [Ohio State offensive coordinator] Kevin Wilson and I were on the phone just trying to see what each other have heard and what's going on and what was disheartening for us as coaches to think that this college football season was going to be canceled. You don't need any extra motivation playing these games. How could you not be appreciative.

Does Dabo look more comfortable in his skin?

- He's always been comfortable in his skin. He's the guy that I thought he was when I saw him from afar. He's genuine, raw and authentic.

Magic bullet for stopping spread offenses?

- Not in our staff room. It's hard. It's harder than it's ever been to coach defense, but I love it. It's a challenge. You try to do the best you can. A lot of rules, they get to decide when to snap the ball, and when it doesn't work, they get to punt. The fundamentals of the game doesn't change. We attack it with an everybody is against us mentality. The RPOs are an example where there is some grey area. In the NFL, when a lineman is down field, he's down field. I'm not complaining, I'm just answering the question.

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