

Clemson OC Tony Elliott, Players Preview Ohio State's Defense Ahead Of Showdown In College Football Playoff Semifinal



Clemson offensive coordinator Tony Elliott and several Tiger offensive players spoke to members of media via Zoom conference call on Dec. 29 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 Elliott, junior quarterback Trevor Lawrence, fourth-year junior guard Matt Bockhorst, junior tight end Braden Galloway, senior wide receiver Amari Rodgers, senior running back tailback Travis Etienne, and fifth-year senior wide receiver Cornell Powell said Dec. 29:

Clemson offensive coordinator Tony Elliott:

Q. Can you tell us what you did exactly for Michelin? Maybe where you were based, what your job duties were, and how and why you returned to coaching.

- Elliott: When I started, I was hired on as an industrial engineer. That's what I graduated from Clemson with, a degree in industrial engineering. Part of my job was just trying to figure out how to optimize some of the systems and the processes they had in place. In particular, I was working with a production unit. The plant I was at was actually manufacturing all the rubber that you ship off to the tire plants where they actually build the tires. So we were just trying to optimize the weight per palette of the fabricated rubber so we can maximize the weight on a shipping truck so that we can cut down the cost. That's where I started. From there, that was my first — when you go to work for Michelin as an industrial engineer, they put you in a program. So I had a six-month study. That was my project there. Once I finished that, then I just integrated into working with a couple of business units within the plant and just trying to help them figure out how to optimize everything from the raw materials, the machinery, and then also the human input.

Q. I was just wondering, with Taisun [Phommachanh] and the situation his family went through, how did you all try to help him? And what's it been like for you guys on offense trying to help?

- Elliott: It's a really tough situation. I remember just thinking back, I know Grady [Jarrett] went through a similar situation. But as it relates to Taisun, biggest thing is we were able to get a waiver to be able to contribute to the GoFundMe page for him and his family. You think about all the immediate needs that you would have in a situation when your house burns down, things we take for granted. The biggest thing is just trying to support him emotionally as he goes through that difficult time, and then those who were able to contribute, just trying to help them reach their goal on their GoFundMe page.

Q. Some of the names and faces on Ohio State's defense are the same from last year but they've moved around a little bit. One in particular, Pete Werner, who was their Sam linebacker this year moving over to Will. Anything that jumps out at you on film about him in that new role and what he means to this defense?

- Elliott: Pete was a guy that, going into the game, you don't realize just how good of an athlete he is. Watching him on tape is — when you play him in person, you see that he's a guy that's got a big body, but he can move like a safety. He can cover. Then what you see now with him playing inside the box, he has natural instincts. He can find the ball.
- Obviously with his movement skills, he moves quickly so he can get around blocks. Then he's also big enough to be able to set the edge, too, if he's ever in that situation. So just he's a guy from last year that, after the game, you had a lot of respect for him and then some of the other faces, too. It's been tough too. I understand it. They've been battling issues with COVID. He's been asked to play a lot of different positions, such as Brown has been asked to play a lot of different positions. All those guys are doing what it takes to be successful. And the structure looks very, very similar. As you said, some of the names and faces are new, but the product looked very, very similar. Q. Piggybacking off of that, obviously, the personnel has changed. They were so good in the middle of the last year, so good on the edge. Do you see a lot of similarities there with how they try to attack and the success they've been having?
- Elliott: They were very good in the middle, on the edges, and on the backend last year. And they are very, very similar. Again, a lot of the faces and names may be new, but the structure, the tenacity they play with, they're very, very well-coordinated. Everybody understands what their role is, how they fit. They're not out of position much. They fit their gaps. If you are lucky to be able to make the step up in pass protection, they know exactly where they need to go. Once they diagnose, they know their drop spots, their reading routes. A lot of this stuff is very similar to last year, with a difference. Only difference is just the names and the faces. But what you can tell, they understand structurally, offensively, what you're trying to do. They have their guys very, very well prepared. You can tell Number 32 (Tuf Borland), tough in the middle, very, very smart linebacker helps those guys get lined up. They have had to play some different guys inside and on the defensive line throughout the course of the year. You can't really tell a difference between those guys. 11 (Tyreke Smith) and 0 (Jonathon Cooper), I mean, they pretty much were spitting images of each other. Then you have got the length of Number 9 (Zach Harrison) on the edge. They know how to play the zone read. Again, I know the coordinator may be different but the product is very, very similar.

Q. As a Clemson lifer and a guy who knows the program and knows the history, I don't want to read too much into sort of what fans think about things. But for a long time, as this level of success continued to grow, you guys were the good guys, fighting against the Alabama evil empire in a lot of fans' minds outside of Clemson fans. It feels like maybe this year more than ever you guys have sort of been in that cachet of the bad guys, too, because of all the success you've had. Is that something that anybody takes notice of inside the program? I know Dabo [Swinney] always likes playing the little old Clemson underdog card as a way of motivating things. Does being the bad guys be its own motivation a little bit?

- Elliott: I don't think we look at it from that perspective. Coach always says that right is right; wrong is wrong. So when Coach Swinney believes in something, he's going to say what he believes and he's going to act accordingly with what he believes. I know there's been a lot of back-and-forth with some comments from last year and then some of the things with Coach's ranking. He believes it was the right thing to do. It wasn't anything in disrespect to Ohio State, but it was just based off the totality of the season and the sacrifices that a lot of teams had to make. For us, several years back we adopted the mantra "embrace the target." We were no longer going to be little old Clemson that would sneak up on people, that whenever we stepped on the field, we were going to get everybody's best. For us, it's about embracing the target, staying true to our fundamentals on the field, but also our fundamentals and core values off the field. And then understand that, with success, comes scrutiny but always resetting every single year back to what the foundation of the program is and then building off of that as each team creates their own identity throughout the season.

Q. I'm wondering if you feel like you know more about the Ohio State defense based on the game last year or based on the film you've seen this year.

- Elliott: As I said earlier, in response to some of the questions, the structure is very, very similar. Obviously, I know there's two different coordinators between the last time we played them and this season. But they still have the similar structure. They play the same coverages, very similar pressures. I anticipate they're going to have some things that we've got to adjust to throughout the course of the game. But it's the combination of getting ready for this one, making sure that we understood from last year's take where we needed to improve because, obviously, it's professional courtesy. They're going to try and attack some of the things they had some success attacking last year. And we've got to make sure we fix those. And then they're going to build upon the strengths of this team. Even though the structure is similar, each team, just like us on offense, each unit will have its own identity. They are going to play to the strengths of their identity. They are going to test and make sure that we corrected the issues from last year. But I think it's just going to come down — at the end of the day, you get to this point doing what you do. You're not going to get away from what your base offense is. You're going to have a couple of game-plan wrinkles. But at the end of the day in this one, on the biggest stage, when the lights are bright, there's going to be a lot of emotion in this game. You got to make sure that you put your players in a position to be successful. And the best way to do that is to just do what you do and do what has gotten you to the point to be in this game.

Q. If Deshaun [Watson] is remembered as the guy who helps orchestrate the program's next step from 2014 through 2016, what do you believe Trevor Lawrence's legacy or long-standing impact will be when his time ends at Clemson?

- Elliott: That's a tough question because Deshaun was great, and he took us to the promised land.

It's not a situation where Deshaun didn't win a national championship and then Trevor has won one and having an opportunity to play in another. I think the biggest thing for Trevor, his legacy will be his record, being all-time winningest quarterback in school history. More important, I think it's going to be the impact he made on the game of college football with some of the stances that he took, in particular, this season. Most importantly, he's just like Deshaun. They're humble young men. They love to win. They love to compete. They love to do it the right way. And they are about service to their teammates and their community. I think the legacies will be similar. As time goes by, you know how it is, the legends is always going to grow. I'm actually looking forward to what that legacy is down the road.

Q. Dabo [Swinney] mentioned yesterday that the wide receivers didn't exactly play their best game versus Ohio State last year. I know it's largely a different group this year. Is that something that you can point to just kind of to challenge them going into this game?

- Elliott: No doubt. Really, the wide receivers, the interior of the offensive line, Travis [Etienne] in pass protection, we put a couple of balls in jeopardy in the passing game. Fortunately, we were able to put enough plays in the end to win the game. Everybody will be challenged to play better because we know they're going to come in and they want it just as bad as we do, and we're going to have to execute. The wide receivers were challenged last year. I made reference to that in a previous question. They are probably going to try to attack us the same way, I would imagine. Get up there and press our guys and see if they can have more success. Who's going to have more success? Their corners or our receivers in terms of winning the matchup at the line of scrimmage. Biggest thing for us is making sure that we don't try and do too much, but we're well aware of the things we need to improve upon, and then have the right state of mind. Because last year, I think going into it, they came out and they punched us in the mouth. It's been a while since we've been in a heavyweight fight. In reference to last season, it bloodied our nose. It took us a little while to rebound and then really kick it in gear. This game right here, we are not going to be fortunate enough to be able to have that mind-set. We have to come in and set the tempo early with what we're doing on offense. We have to match their physicality and their intensity in the trenches, and then guys have got to go make competitive plays.

Q. There's a reason the wishbone isn't run anymore, the veer isn't run anymore. Will there be a day that defenses sort of, quote/unquote, catch up with to the spread in RPO? Because, you know, guys like Brent Venables are game-planning against it every day.

- Elliott: Right. I'd say in reference to this question here, it may not be the wishbone, but there's a lot of option principles still floating around, even at the college level, and it's even trickling back up to the NFL level. I think it's always a cat-and-mouse. Just as they're going to try and find ways to stop the new trends, we're always going to be looking for new trends. Then we'll recycle things. I even think the (Kansas City) Chiefs put a bone formation out there a couple of times this season. So I think that it's just — it's a revolving cycle. Things come and go, and it's cat-and-mouse, and everybody is trying to stay one step ahead. But just as tempo — you know, tempo was a new thing. Defense has figured out how to be able to call their game even with the element of tempo. So then you have to transition there. I think it's just constantly going to be cat-and-mouse going forward. And, offensively, we're trying to stay ahead of the curve, just like defensively they want to see if they can get the advantage as well. At the end of the day, football is always going to be about angles and numbers, when you boil it down, and winning one-on-one matchups. Schemes are great. But when you get to this point in the season, schemes, you're going to have to have them.

But at the end of the day, it's going to be the Jimmies and the Joes that are going to make things go.

Clemson junior quarterback Trevor Lawrence:

On his legacy at Clemson and in college football:

- Lawrence: "I haven't necessarily thought about what my legacy would be. I have been trying to live in the moment these past three years and trying to be the best I can be whatever moment I'm in. So, that has been my mindset and I think that helps you leave a legacy if you just try to live and be your best in every moment. At the end of the day, I just want people to say, I want people to speak to my character more than the type of player I am or was. I want to just be a good person, and I think that's the number one goal for me. Obviously, the play and all that stuff, all the accolades, kind of will eventually speak for itself. But, that is really not the main thing for me. It's just being a good person and being a good teammate. I hope that is what people say about me when whenever I leave here [Clemson]."

On his role in and impact of the 'We Want to Play' movement:

- Lawrence: "It's cool to be a part of something like that. It wasn't just me. My name just kind of gets thrown on the label and headline, and everything but it definitely was not just me. I probably didn't even do most of the work. It's cool to be a part of it and I think we'll [the players] look back on that as a pretty cool moment and kind of a turning point. Honestly, I think it gave a lot of people some opportunities which was kind of the goal. This game [football] means a lot to a lot of people, and I think that playing this year helped a lot of people. You think about one of our receivers, Cornell Powell, a fifth-year senior who hadn't played a ton up until this point, and this was kind of his year. He had a really good spring and fall camp. He was expecting this year to be the year to prove himself and without a season he's in a whole different situation. He just got invited to the Senior Bowl. He has had a great year, been a great teammate, and again, without a season, that changes a lot for him. That is just one example. So, hopefully, playing this year has helped a lot of people and it's been worth it. I think it's been a success if you look at how 2020 has gone. I think this [season] has been a success."

On how much his one college loss sticks in his mind:

- Lawrence: "What could have been. It would have been cool to have the opportunity to not lose a game in college but I think some things are necessary for you to grow. You've got to face a little bit of adversity and sometimes you're a little bit blinded by success if you don't have any hiccups along the way. I think for us [Clemson] and for me personally, it was good for us to not win that [CFP National Championship] game in a lot of ways. Obviously, you want to win a National Championship and it's definitely devastating in the moment. After that, I think we have gotten a lot better. I learned a lot about myself. There's a lot of things I needed to work on to be a better player. I think leading in times when things are harder, when you lose a game is definitely harder than when you're winning. So, it taught me a little about how to lead better. Just all those things. I think we kind of needed that [loss] and at the end of the day we don't want to take winning for granted. We win a lot around here, and it's easy to forget how hard it is to win when you win so much. I think it taught us a lot and I think we [Clemson] took that next step as a program and team because of that. Obviously, you don't choose losing going forward but sometimes it's better for you."

On his time knowing and competing against Ohio State's Justin Fields:

- Lawrence: "It's cool. As I've said before, it's a small world. He's from right down the road from me, probably 20-30 minutes and just to be playing each other for the second time. We have kind of been matched up for years going back to high school. I haven't really seen it as that [a competition]. We're just out here [on the field]. We're friends and we have a good relationship. People like to pin it as that; just me against him. At the end of the day, it's just fun getting the opportunity to play a team like Ohio State. Obviously, a huge brand, great team year in and year out and to get the opportunity to play them is what you'd expect in a [College Football Playoff] semifinal. We're playing the best of the best so we're excited for that opportunity. It does make it cooler that the guy on the other sideline is from right down the road from me. It's pretty cool. We played them last year, and it was a crazy game. I'm definitely looking forward to it [the Sugar Bowl]."

On what he's learned about himself from past mistakes:

- Lawrence: "That's part of every week. The process is evaluating the game and regardless of how well I played, there's always something I can get better at or there's something that I missed. Whatever it may be. That's the thing I love about Coach [Brandon] Streeter, quarterback coach, is that he's pretty hard on me but in a good way. He wants me to be my best and he's not going to let anything slide. So, he holds me accountable and I also expect a lot from myself. I go in there [my mind] and those are the main things I'm looking at. What I can get better at. Obviously, the good stuff is expected to a certain degree but I'm just looking at what I can get better at. I have obviously had a few turnovers this year and definitely made an improvement from last year. That was one of my main goals. I'm just realizing that nobody's perfect and it's [struggles] going to happen. I'm just focused on playing my game, to play comfortably, and if there's going to be a few turnovers then it's just part of the [quarterback] position. I'm just staying confident and not letting that get in my head and I'll keep playing my game and not really changing. But, learning for sure from some of those ill-advised throws and throws that could've been picked off and ones that were then just learning how do I get better from that. Every week I can do that."

Clemson fourth-year junior guard Matt Bockhorst:

Getting the opportunity to start this year?

- Bockhorst: It means a lot. I didn't have as big of a role. Being a starter now, there's more motivation for sure. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity, and you can't take it for granted.

Going against Tommy Togiai?

- Bockhorst: Just strong, explosive. Really going to anchor down there in the morning. Their inside guys as a whole, they're very talented and very well-coached. Haskell Garrett is a real plugger and can get a nice bull-rush as well.

Trevor making your job easier?

- Bockhorst: It's amazing to be able to block for two guys like that who are so special in their own ways. Trevor is just as great as a guy. Travis, to be the leading rusher in the history of the ACC is something we can't even wrap our heads around until maybe a couple years down the line.

Found groove running the ball? Key to success?

- Bockhorst: The biggest thing following the loss to Notre Dame is it was a huge emphasis. It's something we take pride in. Just getting back to the basics in individual drills. Ohio State has a very good run defense, and it's going to be a challenge. It's all in the details. To play a team as talented as this, we need to be focused on the details.

State of rivalry being an Ohio kid?

- Bockhorst: When I committed to Clemson, a lot of people were kind of shocked. There were some weird reactions. The people close to me have always supported me. I also have a ton of friends who go to Ohio State. It's a passionate rivalry. It's two of the historic programs in college football.

Justin Hilliard?

- Bockhorst: Justin and I were teammates at St. Xavier for two years. What an incredible athlete, he was a five-star and heavily recruited. He had such a tough time with injuries, but now he's finally healthy and getting an opportunity. You can see it on film, he's a special, world-class athlete. You just watch the tape and you see it.

Where does motivation come from?

- Bockhorst: Something Coach Swinney has done a good job instilling in us is an intrinsic motivation. It's not based on external factors. It's an intrinsic motivation to say how good can I be and how good can we be as a team?

Clemson junior tight end Braden Galloway:

Embrace haters?

- Galloway: We don't focus on anything that's outside of the program. We focus on being the best version of Clemson that we can be. It's Clemson family for a reason.

More involvement of tight ends?

- Galloway: Looking at it like it's any other game. We'll have a great plan, and whatever happens, happens. I'm just trying to be the best version of myself to help the team win.

Playing with more Travis Etienne?

- Galloway: My opinion of his speed, I like to think of myself as kind of fast, and when you're running besides him, it's not the same. It's a different type of speed when you're down there with him. We trust we've been running and we're going to keep doing what we do.

Watching OSU on film?

- Galloway: Their linebackers are very athletic, they're good in space, they're good in coverage and they also play the run very well. All of them are very capable of being successful in the run and in the pass game.

Clemson senior wide receiver Amari Rodgers:

Becoming top dawgs?

- Rodgers: Of course we're not going to look at it and dwell on it too much. We use it as motivation but at the end of the day, we're playing for each other.

Rivalry with OSU?

- Rodgers: It feels nothing like the South Carolina rivalry. I feel like they have more beef with us than we do with them. It's just one of those teams we've happened to play a lot.

Describe Trevor Lawrence as a runner?

- Rodgers: Trevor is low-key a dual-threat quarterback. If you have the wrong angle, he can definitely run by you.

Heisman for Trevor?

- Rodgers: Trevor's been performing at this high level since he got here. They expect it but they're missing out on the consistency of him performing well and leading us to victory. He's the best player in the country.

What was it like once Justyn Ross got hurt and the responsibility you took on?

- Rodgers: Just coming into the season, with it being my last year, I put everything into my preparation. I wanted to give it my all.

Improving this year?

- Rodgers: In the slot, my route-running ability is good. I try to work on moving people and getting open. I took the next level in my preparation in the offseason, studying break points and route running.

WRs struggled off the line last year against OSU a talking point?

- Rodgers: For sure. We didn't play up to the standard last year against Ohio State. We didn't make the plays we felt like we needed to win last year. And we've been using that as motivation this year. We've been working all week to make those competitive plays in practice.

Shaun Wade?

- Rodgers: His length, he's very long. He can cover a lot of space. You've got to play real smart in space, making sure he doesn't get attached to you with his long arms.

What will you remember most about Trevor?

- Rodgers: The type of competitor he is. He only has one loss as a starter. It's not just because he's been on great teams, he's a great winner and expects the best out of everyone, including himself.

Struggling in New Orleans, 0-2?

- Rodgers: I don't know why we haven't played our best. I like New Orleans, it's a nice city. With COVID, we won't be able to see anything, for real. We will just be there a few days before the game, almost like an away game.

Clemson senior running back Travis Etienne:

What did you learn from losing to ND?

- Etienne: We learned so much from that game. The heart that we have, the competitors that we have. We never got down on ourselves. We definitely feel like we have the heart of a champion. It gave us that focus we need to recalibrate our minds and get back to who we are.

Claim win in home state?

- Etienne: At this point, I'm just ready to get to that point to try and make it right.

Tight restrictions on game?

- Etienne: I have pretty much the same, I have close to 20 tickets. It's going to be a great opportunity . I'm very grateful that they will be able to see me play in the Superdome.

Tough OSU run defense?

- Etienne: Eight-man front they present every time. They are structured to stop the run. We just have to come out and take it. They're not going to give us the yards, we have to go out and take them.

Strange bowl week?

- Etienne: This bowl week has been kind of weird because it's not just the same. I'm kind of mad that I didn't win Bingo night.

Trying to find other ways to get you the ball against OSU's defense?

- Etienne: I haven't thought about it much at all. Ohio State stresses stopping the run, so we were just trying to find other ways to get be the ball and make plays. We're just hitting our stride at the right time. This is what we thought it could be.

When did you know this offense could be special?

- Etienne: For me, versus Georgia Tech and just seeing it firsthand. I think we had 72 I think . It was crazy, like playing Madden or NCAA again. That game clocked and gave us the validation we needed that if we stuck with it, we could be a very good offense.

Ohio State's defense?

- Etienne: Preparation, just come in day in and day out and game-planning for that. It's championship time. Everyone's good, we wouldn't have it any other way.

Trevor Lawrence?

- Etienne: He's sneaking up on anyone. He's a great quarterback, great leader. He might be a little faster than you would expect. Ain't nothing sneaky about Trev, he's the best player in the country.

Clemson fifth-year senior wide receiver Cornell Powell:

OSU's DBs?

- Powell: The wide receivers here at Clemson we've been challenged to really make a statement. The game is going to come down to us making one-on-one plays. We have a ton of respect for their DBs, and we've got to make sure we make plays.

Having a bigger role this year?

- Powell: It means a lot to be able to go out there and be there with my brothers. This is why you go to Clemson. It's all about the preparation. As far as the future, I'm just focused on Ohio State and winning this game.

Studying OSU secondary?

- Powell: It's really not a drop-off. Those guys are great. On this stage in the CFP, you play the best of the best. Those guys are D-I, NFL-rated guys as well, you've just got to go out, execute and dominate.

What could this year do for you?

- Powell: This year has been crazy and also been amazing. I want to give all the glory to god for just allowing it to happen. When we didn't know if there would be a season or not, it helped push me more and helped me appreciate everything more.
- Being able to get a senior bowl invite is a blessing. I'm just grateful for the opportunity, and I want to make the most of the opportunity.

Social justice movement?

- Powell: First of all, Me, Trevor (Lawrence), Mike Jones, we all wanted to do something, it was really Mike who sparked it off, so kudos to him. We really just learned that it's better to listen to all aspects and all sides and make sure you get everyone's takes. You can't tell someone how to react to someone. It was sad with what happened to George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and all those countless names. We had a senior meeting with Coach Swinney, and we all gained knowledge from that sit-down conversation. And that helped for the protest as well.

OC Tony Elliott's versatility?

- He's been around a lot so he's learned a lot, seen a lot and he's given us little nuggets. And a lot of times it's not even about football, but it's about life. He's a huge part of our success. He always tries to put us in the right positions to be successful.

Greater appreciation for Travis Etienne?

- Powell: Since his freshman year, since his first run in camp. I said, I thank god he's on our team. From his freshman year to now, he's just improved, he's a better leader now, he's a leader by example. He's always on time, just puts his head down and works. Him being so great opens up opportunities for guys like myself in the passing game.

How does Dabo challenge the WRs?

- Powell: Throughout the whole process, how we practice, watch film, take notes, take care of our bodies. Last year, we didn't make enough plays, and this year we need to make a bigger impact.

Photo Credit: Courtesy of Dept. of Clemson Athletics.

For four free issues of the print edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, no card required, sign up at the link here: <http://www.buckeyesports.com/subscribe-4issue-trial/>