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An Interview With:

COACH DABO SWINNEY

MIKE FINN: Thank you, and welcome to today's ACC Football Championship Game teleconference with Coach Dabo Swinney from Clemson and later Coach Paul Johnson from Georgia Tech. Let's get started with Coach Swinney, whose 25th-ranked Tigers will be the host team in this year's championship game in Tampa at Raymond James Stadium. We'll ask for a brief opening statement from Coach Swinney and then go to questions.

COACH SWINNEY: Good to be with you guys. We are excited about representing the Atlantic Division in the ACC Championship Game. This will be our first time here at Clemson participating in the game, so we're real excited about that, an opportunity to play for the outright title. So a lot of work to do to get ready.

But this is postseason play, and you only get the opportunity to be in these games based on what you've earned through the season. Real proud of our team for earning the right to be here and winning the division outright.

We did not play well yesterday in our season finale against South Carolina, so a lot to get corrected and coached up, so hopefully we can play better next week.

Like I said, just really looking forward to going down. This is a unique situation. It's only really the second time that I've ever been involved in a situation where you play the same team twice, so that's a little bit unique.

Georgia Tech has had a great, great year. I've got a lot of respect for Coach Johnson and his staff and what they've been able to accomplish. They're also coming off a tough loss, as well, so I know they'll be ready to bounce back, too. Should

be a great game for our conference, and I look forward to getting down to Tampa.

Q. I'm wondering when the other time was you played a team twice in one year and whether you equate it at all to the sentiment that it's always tougher to beat a basketball team for a third time in a year.

COACH SWINNEY: Well, the only other time I've been a part of it was in 1999 (when he was at Alabama). We had to play -- we had to go to Florida and play Florida down in The Swamp, and they won their division, we won our division, and we ended up having to play them again in the championship game. We beat them, twice actually, but it's a hard thing to do for sure, to beat somebody twice, especially two good teams. Obviously they're a good team, we're a good team or we wouldn't be in this game.

But again, it all comes down to just whatever you do on that particular day. But they'll be very familiar with us, and same on our part. But hopefully we can do a better job taking care of the football so we'll have a chance to win.

Q. Is there any difference preparation-wise, or when you say it'll be hard to beat them, obviously they're a formidable team and that would be why, but does it make it any harder or easier playing a team for a second time in a year?

COACH SWINNEY: Well, I think it's definitely a little bit of an advantage for both teams in that you have seen each other. I mean, you've actually played each other, so you have a little bit better feel for the personnel that you're facing. Obviously you're going to study the film and you're going to see the schemes now that you have a whole season.

This is a little different for them and for us in that I don't think either team really knew what we were getting into back second game of the season. Neither one of us really had a lot to go on from a

film standpoint, and there's a lot of new people playing on both sides. You know, our freshman quarterback and we've got some young linemen, and some freshmen playing in the secondary and things like that. So you know, now that you've got a lot of film to really study them throughout the season, and they'll have all of ours and we'll have all of theirs, from a scheme standpoint that's a good advantage this time around.

But more than that, you've played each other so you have a much better feel for just the actual people that are going to be in the game. As far as our players, they've actually blocked them already this year, so they'll have some recall, and they've gone against us. So that's a little bit different.

Q. Can you tell me, please, how your team has progressed since that week 2 game? What's been the biggest difference between then and now?

COACH SWINNEY: Well, we certainly have matured in a lot of areas. I mean, we were just a group of guys trying to figure it out at that time. But we've really developed into a close football team. I think that game in particular was a big step in the right direction. We didn't win the game, but I think that we really grew as a team. We learned a lot about ourselves in Atlanta that night.

I think that we have a quarterback that has proven himself now as opposed to that was just his second game of his career, and we've gotten much better up front on the offensive line. We didn't play particularly well yesterday, but over the course of the season we've really improved as an offense, and again, didn't play very well yesterday, but we've been solid on defense.

But I'd say the development of our quarterback has been the biggest thing that's changed from the second game of the season to now.

Q. And as a follow-up, as a former wide receiver yourself, I assume you saw the film and saw Thomas' drop at the end of the game against Georgia yesterday.

COACH SWINNEY: Yeah.

Q. From your experience as a player and as a coach, what would you tell a guy after something like that happens?

COACH SWINNEY: I'd go over and say, listen, big boy, we wouldn't be here if it weren't for

you. It's never one play, and that's unfortunately -- that's what people will remember because it was the last play, but what about that touchdown he took all the way earlier in the game when he broke a little screen on them, and I don't know how far he went, or what about the great catch he made on us earlier in the year on 3rd and 13 or whatever it was, just a tremendous play on his behalf. You know, that kid has made a lot of plays.

I remember -- it was a few years ago, I was coaching here at Clemson, but Calvin Johnson dropped a game-winner in the end zone against somebody. I don't remember who they were playing, but it was end of the game. Dadgum, he's not perfect, but I'd put my arm around him and tell him, hey, it happens, let's move on. Tiger Woods misses an easy putt every now and then, or Michael Jordan missed a free throw. You go on to the next catch and just realize that there's 65 other plays that count, as well.

Q. I was talking to one of your players, and he told me that I think it was in the spring you started bringing a sign to practice that said, "believe."

COACH SWINNEY: Yep.

Q. When did you sense, regardless of what your position was on the staff, that the team had stopped believing, and why do you think that that worked?

COACH SWINNEY: Well, I just think that in order to be successful in anything, you have to believe in yourself, and you have to believe in those that you're working with. Every great team that I've been on, they've always had a great attitude of belief and of expectancy. I mean, they expected to win the football game, and they really believed they were going to win the game every time they stepped on the field. That's a mentality that I just didn't think that we had really in place.

To me, when I had the very first meeting with the media last spring, that's the very first thing I said. I actually brought the sign in there, and I said, my number one job as the head coach here is I've got to get people to believe again. I've got to get these players to believe in something bigger than themselves, I've got to get them to believe in their team and that what we're doing is going to pay off for them. You know, every meeting I've had ever since then, I always come in with that sign.

And I have another sign, too, that says, "believe you can do it." I don't ever walk into the meeting room without either one of them. You know, I'm thankful for these players because somewhere along the line they've bought in, and they did believe. And when we were a 2-and-3 football team looking at a six-game stretch where we had to win to have a chance to win our division, I'm thankful that they chose to keep believing and not listen to so many other things.

You know, most people don't believe; most people, they want you to fail. They get excited to see you struggle. They get excited to see you not have success and things like that. That's the world we live in. It's really sad that people have so much joy in somebody not being successful.

But I've never been afraid to fail. I've never been afraid to put myself out there because I believe in myself, and that's what I've learned as a human, is that if I have my eyes on the right things and I believe in myself, I'm going to make it. That doesn't mean it's going to always go right, but I'm going to be successful. And that's what I want to instill in these players.

And again, that goes back to just my background and things that I learned as a player, from the best teams that I ever was on. We believed. It didn't necessarily mean that we were the best, but dadgum it, we believed we were the best. I probably wasn't a very good player, but I sure believed I was. And that is a huge part of this game. That's where I felt like we needed to start.

We're not all the way there yet. We've made a lot of progress in that area, but we've still got a ways to go as a program, but we've certainly taken a big step in the right direction this year.

Q. Dabo, you and Georgia Tech are both kind of in the same position having to come off a loss to a state rival. Does that make the job this week any harder, or does it diminish -- do you have to worry about your players coming in a little bit more down than they were during the six-game win streak, or do you think that the idea of a championship takes care of itself?

COACH SWINNEY: I probably worry about the coaches more than the players to be honest with you. When we get older we're not quite as resilient as those players. Our players will bounce back. They always do. You just hate to lose. I mean, it just makes you sick.

But you've got to look at the big picture. You've got to keep things in perspective. I know

it's always difficult to lose a rival game. I've been here seven years, and we're 5 and 2 against Carolina, and I'm not going to let the bitterness of the two losses outweigh the great feeling of the five wins. I think you've got to be careful with that and keep things in perspective.

But we'll do a good job with our players. One thing for us, we've got to turn the page quickly because we're really preparing for, again, the red gumball type of offense. It's so different from what we just faced defensively, we'll just turn the page and get on to Georgia Tech and move on as quickly as we can.

The season is over as far as the regular season. This is postseason play, and we have the opportunity to do something -- we've beaten Carolina around here many, many times. Many times. They haven't won many times over the last 15 years, so we've done that.

We haven't won a conference here in 18 years, so these kids have an opportunity to do something that hasn't been done here in a long time. And even then, I think it was probably about a nine-team league.

So it's something that I think our guys will be excited about. They know that there's two teams out of 12 that are playing for the championship and the right to be the conference champion, so we won't have a hard time getting them refocused. I'd be very surprised with that.

Same thing for Georgia Tech. I mean, you start the season, you go into it, your objective is to be the champion. You want to win this conference. If you win the conference you go to a BCS Bowl, and if you go to a BCS Bowl and you're winning your conference, then sooner or later you're going to have one of those special years where you have a chance to compete for the National Championship, but you've got to win your conference to have that opportunity.

That's where it starts for every team in this league, and it's down to two teams, and one team is going to be the champion Saturday night.

Q. Do you worry at all or are you even concerned that the perception nationally might be, well, these teams are coming off losses to the big bad SEC, and it may not be -- nationally they might not be able to compete as well as maybe some other teams out there?

COACH SWINNEY: (Laughing) No, I don't worry about that at all. Somebody asked me that

yesterday. The SEC is a great conference. So is the ACC. I can assure you if you line up to play an SEC team or an ACC team, you'd better bring your "A" game, because if you don't, you're going to get beat. It's two good leagues, and obviously it's year to year, kind of goes back and forth, but I don't worry about that at all.

Q. You said in Atlanta after that game that you probably would see this team again and that game would not make or break your season. What's made this season?

COACH SWINNEY: What's made this season? I think we've had excellent leadership on our team. I think that we've had a group of guys that have chosen to come together and respond to whatever circumstances come their way, to keep playing, to handle adversity. You know, and they are where they are.

That was a very, very disappointing loss that night in Atlanta. But again, I do think that was where our team really came together and realized, you know what, we've got a chance to be pretty good here.

I'm real proud of how they've handled the season. It hasn't been easy. You start the year and you've got a freshman quarterback and some other guys, some unknowns, other playmakers that have to develop, a guy like Michael Palmer who's not necessarily had the role that we were putting him into this year. You know, it's been a good season. We were a couple games away from a great season. But we still have the opportunity to really, really finish strong.

Q. A lot has been said and written obviously about C.J. Spiller, but from all the players you've been around in your career, how does he rate as just an impact player, and when somebody would ask you what do you remember most about him, what does come to your mind about the things he's been able to do for you at Clemson?

COACH SWINNEY: Well, he's by far the best player I've ever coached or been around. I mean, he's just -- he's unbelievable. The way he can impact a game, not just by rushing the ball but receiving the ball and then returning the ball, he can impact the defense, he can impact special teams and offense. He's amazing. He's just an amazing, amazing player, most explosive guy I've ever been around, player or coach.

But the thing that I will remember the most about C.J. is just his very, very genuine humility.

He's just as genuine a person and as sincere a young man as you'd ever want to be around. He's been a young man that has given everything that he's had to his university and to his team over his four-year career. As I like to say all the time, he's an uncommon person in a very common world. That's what I will remember most about C.J. outside of all his great plays and all of that. We could go on and on, just who he is as a person with all that's going on around him, he's a breath of fresh air.

Q. If I could follow up with one other thing, like you said earlier, when Clemson last won the league, it was a very different league, Florida State had dominated for a long time, Tech has come in. With Clemson and Georgia Tech, is it kind of like an old school match-up that adds a little more spice from some of the title games we've had in this league the last couple years?

COACH SWINNEY: Yeah, I think that it's a little different, definitely old school. Both teams have definitely been in this conference a while.

The other thing about Clemson-Georgia Tech is these games for whatever reason have been some humdingers. Before I came to Clemson and certainly since I've been here, most of these games have been nail-biters and down-to-the-wire-type games. And then you have obviously the clashing styles that we have from a team standpoint, and then you throw in the spice of the fact that, hey, we played each other in a shootout on a Thursday night and you're having to reload and do it again, there's a lot of good story lines going into this game.

Q. First of all, what does it mean for you to actually have a full week to prepare for these guys? You mentioned that's kind of a unique thing from your perspective.

COACH SWINNEY: Yeah, I think I'm going to suspend Thomas Austin from this game. I think that's going to be the next move just so we don't get a good holding call the last play of the game or something like that (laughing).

No, it's a little different. Last year obviously was a really strange week for me, and then this year we played a night game against Middle Tennessee, and not only do you have a short week but you're playing a four and five wide offense and you've got to turn the page.

But it's the same thing for them, too, they're getting -- and we had to go on the road, but they're getting more time to prepare for us, as well, than they did earlier in the year because they played on that Saturday, as well, against Jacksonville State. Both teams will have plenty of time to prepare. It's the 13th game of the year, so everybody is pretty familiar with who you are at this point and what you're doing. It's just -- championship game, it's all about taking care of the football and who can play good, solid defense.

Q. You mentioned a little bit about this, but what did you see that night in Atlanta that made you believe in this team after they came back from the 24-0 deficit?

COACH SWINNEY: Well, they didn't panic. They kept encouraging each other. It didn't matter what was going on. The offensive guys were encouraging the defensive guys, and the defensive guys were encouraging the offensive guys, and we went in there at halftime 24-7. They chose to -- because we really hadn't played bad. We had two touchdowns in the kicking game that were just bam-bam plays. Other than that, we were right there with them. We were playing pretty good on defense, and we were okay on offense.

So everybody was just like, listen, let's -- we felt like we had taken their best shot, and let's get some stops, offense, let's get some scores and get back in this thing.

But it was a great halftime, again, just looking at the players and how they reacted to each other and encouraged each other and just responded to the situation. There was no negativity at all. I told the coaches, I said, you know what, we've got a pretty special group right here. I even said that during the game, just from what I could see as an observer on the sideline just watching them react to one another.

Q. I'm a little off topic, but could you talk a little bit about Stanley Hunter and what he's been to the team this season?

COACH SWINNEY: Yeah, Stanley is -- he's a good microcosm of our team. That's one little small example of how close this group is, and that is here's one of their teammates that's worked really hard and has sweated alongside of them to play and had an opportunity to be a good player here, was a great player in high school and one of those guys that really worked hard, and the other players respected him for that.

Now all of a sudden just, bam, he's told he can't play anymore because of his medical issues. And really just those guys all to themselves, they just decided, hey, they came to see me and said, Coach, this is a way we'd like to honor our teammate by wearing No. 17, and they got a list together of who was going to wear it when and all this kind of stuff. I just felt that was a really good thing by this team, just showing that they care for each other.

It's offensive guys, defensive -- he played defense, but we've had guys from both sides of the ball that have taken part in wearing that number. So it's really been a good thing. And again, I think that's a good sign of the type of team that we have and the type of young men that we have on this team.

Q. And unrelated follow-up if I may, everyone locks in on some of the intriguing subplots to this championship game that you mentioned earlier. It also has maybe two of the most productive running backs in the league. What do you like about Jonathan Dwyer, or maybe when you're watching him play against somebody else rather than your team?

COACH SWINNEY: Yeah, I much prefer watching him against other people. Well, he's just a tough, hard-nosed, downhill type of runner. You know, he gets the tough yards. He's perfect for their system. He's niftier than you may think. He's a big guy. He's got a lot of weight that he carries well. He's very durable. This guy has carried the ball an awful lot in the last couple years and has just done a tremendous job for them. He averaged, I guess, over 100 yards a game last year. You've got to be a pretty durable guy to do that.

And then of course C.J. is just outstanding in all that he does. Obviously he's a little more versatile with what we ask him to do in our system. But C.J. had a big night against them. I think he had 200-something yards all-purpose and had a pretty good night rushing and receiving.

And I think we did a fairly decent job on Dwyer the first time around. Hopefully we can contain him because he's one of those guys that just scares you to death; every time he gets the ball, you just feel like he's going to bust one.

Q. If you could just talk a little bit more about C.J. Spiller. What was kind of the first

time you remember seeing him do something special, and you knew at that moment that your program had a special player?

COACH SWINNEY: Oh, man, his freshman year. I mean, just right out of the gate he was just dynamic. I can't remember if it was his first game or not, but he took a kick back. Every time I've seen him on the field, when he first got here and we got into practice that first fall camp, I can remember watching him over there on inside drill, I just remember going, wow, the way he could plant and cut and change direction and accelerate from 0 to 60, I knew we had something pretty, pretty special.

And then the other thing is what I didn't know, because he played in the Wing-T in high school, was how good his hands were. I remember that freshman year, I had no idea that he could catch the football like he catches the football. That's just made him even that much more of a threat, because again, he's hard to take away because he also has a great ability to catch the ball.

Q. And just as a follow-up, there's a lot of players getting talk for Heisman. He's kind of a dark horse, I guess. Do you think he should get more recognition? Do you think he's not getting enough for what he's doing, I guess?

COACH SWINNEY: Well, I definitely think he should get all the recognition. I think he's the best player in the country. If we were 12 and 0, I think everybody would say the same thing. Unfortunately a lot of times the votes go to the best player on the best team, so to speak. But he's the best player in the country. I would argue with anybody on that one.

What he's done is just amazing. He went over 7,000 yards yesterday; he set the all-time return record for a touchdown yesterday; 21 plays or so of 50 yards or more, 10 plays of 80 yards or more in his career. Nobody has ever done that. No other Heisman has ever done that. You know, he and Reggie Bush are the only two guys in the history of college football to do what they've done from a return standpoint, rushing standpoint and receiving standpoint.

He's in a pretty elite category when you sit down and look at the big picture, and he's done it his first three years as a part-time guy. He's just been tremendously versatile and explosive his whole career here, but this year in particular he

has just been awesome. And he's played with a bad toe.

Q. After the Maryland game you said one of the best things you did was set the team down in the film room and showed them that collection of kind of execution issues, and I was wondering if you had any similar plans this week to kind of refocus with visual aids or anything.

COACH SWINNEY: We'll talk about the good, the bad, the ugly with them. This is a different team, a different time of the season. Again, we've played 12 games. These guys know -- they know they didn't play well yesterday. We didn't play well yesterday. It's really that simple. Didn't play well at all on either side of the ball. You know, they understand that.

But we have to move on. Certainly we will correct the mistakes, but we've got to turn the page. Again, the season is over now, and we're in postseason play. Everybody else is at home. We're in postseason play because of what these guys earned on the field, so it's important that we refocus them on what got us here, and we will do that.

But again, a lot different than where we were at that point in the season.

Q. And just as a follow-up, you referred to this offense that you're going to face as sort of the red gumball. Getting a second look at them, is that more of an advantage than it would -- because most teams have only seen Georgia Tech once this season and had six days to prepare for them.

COACH SWINNEY: Well, it's a little bit of an advantage in that, yeah, you've played them so you do have some familiarity from a preparation standpoint because it is so different. I mean, our guys should have a little bit of recall. And they can see themselves on film doing good things and where they made mistakes. So they can learn from watching themselves on film.

But Georgia Tech has gotten better, too. I mean, this is going to be a -- so it's an advantage for them, as well, because now they can study us and how we played them. So it's an advantage for both teams. There's no doubt about that, because you can see each other and you see how they played you and how we played them and you see how your personnel matched up against each

other and where you feel like you might need to tweak some things.

That's an interesting dynamic going into this game, but I'm certain that both teams will have their guys -- both staffs will have their teams ready to play. And again, championship game, the team that takes care of the ball has probably got the best chance to win.

Q. I just wanted to ask you about Derrick Morgan. As a coach, strategy-wise, a lot of guys have been double-teaming obviously, but is that something you look at him and you think you have to do that? Just what makes him so good and so uncontainable?

COACH SWINNEY: Yeah, he's a great player. I voted him for All-American. He's outstanding. He can play the run. He's excellent versus the pass. I thought he was their best player last year. I mean, he's just a really, really good football player that you'd better know where he is and you'd better have a plan for him. You've got to do some -- you've got to slide the protection to him, you've got to chip him with a tight end, you've got to play action him, you've got to cut him with the back. I mean, there's different things that you have to do to try to keep him from just getting in a rhythm. If you just go in and you've just got one thought, he's going to have a big night on you. So you have to change up what you do from a protection standpoint.

But he's a hard guy to just take out of the game, kind of like C.J. He's probably going to make some plays somewhere along the way, but you just hope to minimize him as much as possible.

MIKE FINN: Coach, we'll have to cut you off here because we're about out of time. Thanks for being with us.

COACH SWINNEY: I appreciate you having me.

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