

Column: Coaching Battle At The Forefront Of Ohio State-Clemson Rematch



Here we are, back again at the College Football Playoff and back again with four of the same teams we always see here in the top four. Especially similar are Clemson and Ohio State, who are facing off for the third time in the last five playoffs, including for the second year in a row.

In 2016, it was a slaughter. Ohio State's offense had no answers and the defense could only do so much in a 31-0 rout. But last year, the two teams fought in one of the best playoff games to date, a back-and-forth battle of two powerhouse programs that was as evenly fought a game as you will see.

The Tigers came out the victors 29-23, but if any one of a variety of things go Ohio State's way - three red zone field goals, a targeting call, a roughing the kicker, an overturned fumble or a wide receiver miscommunication - there's a strong chance it's the Buckeyes who get the opportunity to lose to LSU in the championship, and yes, they almost certainly would have lost.

There were plenty of storylines to take from that game, including all the things said above, but also an exciting battle of five-star Georgia quarterbacks, a bout of star running backs with very different styles, and also an intriguing coaching matchup between an established great and an up-and-coming young mind.

While the Justin Fields-Trevor Lawrence matchup will be on display once again and should be fun to watch before both depart for the NFL, it is the second installment of the coaching battle between Ryan Day and Dabo Swinney that I am most excited to see on New Year's Day.

The first reason for that is obvious: they are two of the best coaches in the country and brought exciting, creative gameplans to the table the last time these two teams played. The second reason is because of the events of the past two weeks, both on the field and off, that have made this coaching matchup particularly exciting.

Let's start it off with Day, the less polarizing and much quieter figure on the headset between the two of them. He is coming off what was almost inarguably the worst head coaching performance of his career against Northwestern, a game in which he refused to turn to a run-first attack despite Trey Sermon putting up monstrous numbers almost as soon as he saw the field.

Sermon ended up breaking Eddie George's rushing record despite this, but Day was stingy in allowing the run game to take over, instead letting Justin Fields complete 44.4 percent of his passes for 114 yards and a pair of interceptions.

"We were always going to be aggressive, that's just the way we are, and just didn't execute great," Day said. "I think we'll probably look back and have a lot to coach off of and to fix, but the run game started to go, and to run for over 300-plus yards, we wanted to throw on them early, wear them down a little bit and then run it a little bit in the second half, and that's kind of what played out."

Trying to be aggressive is something I will never hate, but Day mistook aggressiveness for throwing the ball when the clear decision was to run, and I am curious just how much he will adjust his game plan heading into the Sugar Bowl. He has shown to be less stingy than someone like Urban Meyer in the past, and I expect a rebound for the Ohio State head coach on Jan. 1.

Then there's Swinney, who coached a phenomenal game during a 34-10 rout of Notre Dame in the ACC Championship to avenge Clemson's only loss of the season. He also placed his ballot for the final coaches poll, in which he placed Ohio State at No. 11, five spots below anybody else in the poll.

This discrepancy from the rest of the pack is due to Swinney's continued onslaught of comments about how the number of games matters, and that teams like Texas A&M and Oklahoma were punished for playing more games than Ohio State, who heads into the Sugar Bowl with a 6-0 record.

Swinney also made a comment that Ohio State is easier to study because of the minimal amount of film on the team, so I guess even he acknowledges the pros and the cons of the situation on his end.

Do I think the number of games matter? No, not really, and if anything I think Ohio State is in a worse place because it has had less time to figure out clear issues on both sides of the ball. But I understand where Swinney is at least coming from, and he has continued to double, and triple, and quadruple down at every opportunity he's had.

Day also found himself with some extra attention after a video by a certain Ohio State running back showed the head coach saying some certain choice words and that he believes his team can beat anybody in one game. I especially had no negative opinions toward these comments, but it all just added more fuel to the fire for both teams heading into this rematch.

Both coaches have something to prove in this game - Day that he can take down the powerhouse that is Clemson, and Swinney that Ohio State really didn't deserve to be here. Both of these coaches are very good at what they do, and I am hoping to see some more fireworks from them just as they have shown in the lead-up to this game.

Will Ohio State learn from last year's mistakes, as well as mistakes from the Big Ten Championship, or is Clemson just too talented of an opponent to overcome this year? I think those could be answered through the performances of the main guys on the sidelines more so than the players on the field come Jan. 1.

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