SCOTT LEIGHTMAN: Good morning. Welcome everybody and thank you for joining us at the J.W. Marriott Camelback Inn here this morning for our head coaches press conference for the 2019 College Football Playoff Semifinal at the PlayStation Fiesta Bowl. We're excited about the matchup, No. 2 Ohio State, No. 3 Clemson, a combined 26-0 this season. To give us an official welcome this morning, I would like to welcome the mayor of the City of Glendale, Mayor Jerry Weiers.

MAYOR WEIERS: Good morning, everybody. Tradition for Glendale, we bring baskets for both the coaches. And this year's baskets are really the best of Glendale. We have the White Sox. We also have the Dodgers, the Coyotes, and we have the Cardinals. So a little bit of things from each one of those sports teams. And then probably the favorite for most is the Cerretta's chocolates, the hometown chocolatier that we have.

I wish you guys the very, very best. Good luck to both of you. And I think this is probably going to be the best game we've ever had. So I'm really looking forward to it. Thank you for being here. Good luck to both of you. Thank you.

SCOTT LEIGHTMAN: Thank you, Mayor. We're pleased to have the game out in Glendale. The two gentlemen to my left, you know very well. I'll give you a little bit of the tale of the tape for the game itself.

Clemson brings a 28-game winning streak into Saturday night, the longest in the nation, followed by No. 2. Ohio State with a 19-game win streak. We have the number one scoring offense in Ohio State, and the number four scoring offense in Clemson. Battling that is the number one scoring defense in Clemson, the number three scoring defense in Ohio State. And the top two teams in total defense, Clemson, number one, and Ohio State, number two.

So we're going to hear opening statements from these two coaches, then we'll get into some questions and answers, and then we'll take photos.

Coach Swinney, lead us off with an opening statement.

COACH SWINNEY: Ditto from everything I said yesterday. We're back. We've had a great week, first of all. It's been a good week for us. Our guys have been great at practice. The hotel has been awesome. The hospitality has been great. Everybody here associated with the Fiesta Bowl has been tremendous and just above and beyond in making sure that we have everything we need to be able to function just as we would back at home. So it's been a great week.

I think our guys have been able to have a good balance of really having some fun and enjoying the experience, but at the same time being locked in on what we've got to do to have a chance in this game. So we're excited about it. There's really not much else to say that hasn't been said.
This is two great teams, just tremendous amount of respect for Ohio State. As I said earlier, kind of mirror images of each other in so many ways. You can tell that both teams like each other, play for each other, believe in themselves and their teammates. I think that really resonates on film. So should be a heck of a game, and we're all looking forward to a great competition.

SCOTT LEIGHTMAN: Coach Day brings the Ohio State Buckeyes here for the ninth time. That's the most appearances by any school in Fiesta Bowl history. Coach Day.

COACH DAY: I echo what Coach Swinney said.

This has been a really great week for our guys. We've had a great week of practice. Everybody in the Fiesta Bowl has been wonderful just in terms of their hospitality and, again, being away for the holidays for some of our younger guys. The way that these guys have taken care of us this week has really made it great.

And then any time you get closer to the game, it's like let's bring the game on. I know our guys are getting ready. They're getting tired of practicing, even though this has been a unique preparation. It was almost like a bye week than it was preparation for a bowl game because of the quick turnaround. It is an honor to play a team like Clemson that has really set the standard here in the last couple of years, defending national champs, 28-game winning streak with the combination of talent and coaching is some of the best in the country. So our guys know that. They recognize that and had a great week of practice.

Again, looking forward to a great game on Saturday.

SCOTT LEIGHTMAN: Great. Thank you. We'll now open it up for questions. We have mic runners on either side. Please identify yourself and identify who the question is directed toward.

Q. For Dabo [Swinney], been here five straight times in the playoff. Because two 13-0 teams are dominating, does this almost feel like a national championship caliber game?

COACH SWINNEY: It is a national championship game, because if you don't win it, you aren't going to the national championship. That's just the way every game is, to be honest with you.

We really take that approach every week. We feel like we've been in playoff football all year. It's been the best of one every single week for us, every week, all year. So this is just -- this one is truly, if you win this one, you get to go to the national championship. So it's what it is.

And at this stage, you can put the names in a hat and throw them around. These are all great teams. Anybody could beat anybody. The margin of error is very small. So it just so happens that you've got two undefeated conference champions battling it out that have had special years. Again, built very similar. Both teams want to run the ball. Both teams have great dynamic, play-making quarterbacks.
and running backs and receivers, and built in the trenches. So complete teams in that they're really good on offense and defense. So this is a pretty special matchup. These type of games usually come down to a few plays.

Q. Ryan [Day], I think the availability report is going to be pretty clean for you later on today. Beyond the on-field impact, if you've got the full complement available, is there a mental boost for the coach or the players knowing that you have everybody out there?

COACH DAY: Sure. I think at this time of the year, coming off those three games at the end of the year, it was great to have a little bit of a break to catch our breath. It is great to have everybody healthy. That means a lot late in the season. It's been a unique year that way, where we were able to get the guys some rest early in the season, but then we had that tough run down the stretch. That's really where it became March Madness, kind of like Coach [Swinney] is talking about for us. Once that Penn State game hit, it was March Madness. You lose one of those games, you're going home. And here we are now, but it was great to get a rest and have those guys ready to go.

Q. Coach Day, you had a couple of Heisman finalists and Coach [Dabo] Swinney and Coach [Nick] Saban have both told me in the past that they would be all for moving the voting for the Heisman until after all of the games have been played. Just wondering if that's something you would advocate, and if so, why.

COACH DAY: Well, I just think the whole script hasn't been written yet. So in games, especially like this, it's about players; it's not about plays. These guys have an opportunity to put their best foot forward on the biggest stage there is. You're making a decision without a full compliment of what they've done and their body of work. So I would agree with that. I think it would be great to see what happens throughout the playoff, and then make the decision from there.

Q. Dabo [Swinney], two questions about Coach [Brent] Venables. One, can you give us a sense of just how much he needed to change the defense this year with the personnel you lost and kind of changed the identity installing some of the three-down stuff in the spring. Second part would be can you give us a window into him as a defensive play caller and what it's like on the headset and why he's become such a master at that?

COACH SWINNEY: Well, I wouldn't say we changed our identity. I think we're still true to who we are and have always been at our core. But I think every year as a coach, you have to evaluate and put what your strengths are, and then put your team in the best possible position to be successful. I think, especially early for us, we got a lot of guys that grew up up-front, very, very little experience in our defensive line coming back. But yet, as I said in August, I felt like this could be the best back seven that we've had. So that was our strength. So we just kind of tinkered with it a little bit and did some studying. And, really, the guys bought into it.
Then with a guy like Isaiah Simmons and being able to do multiple things with him -- because obviously he can cover, he can stop the run, he can rush the passer. He's just a very dynamic guy -- kind of gave us a little bit of flexibility. So it just gave us a little bit of time to develop those guys. But we're still true to our identity, but it's helped us to be a little more multiple and create some challenges from week to week. I think it was probably a little more difficult to prepare for this year with a little bit of unknown, whereas, last year, we were a pretty base team, although we changed our fronts up a lot. We were a pretty base personnel team with the type of guys that we had up-front. That's just the way we were built.

So I think that's kind of been what's behind it. You'll see us a little different next year, because we're going to be built a little differently next year. And then same thing as far as just play calling. He prepares very well. He's very detailed. If Brent [Venables] was sitting here, first thing he would say is he's got an incredible staff. We've got a great staff. These guys all work really, really hard together. There's great synergy in the room. You play the game through the week. I think he does probably as good a job as anybody I've ever been around at doing that. He truly plays the game throughout the week. And then, when we get into the game, he doesn't spend a lot of time on his call sheet. He's got a lot -- he's got a great feel and he's got great instincts for the game. At the end of the day, he trusts our players.

We put the work in during the week and, as Ryan [Day] just said, it is not about calls or plays; it's about players. And so he does a good job of putting them in position to have a chance to be successful. And then it's up to them to execute at a high level. We've got a great staff that do an awesome job of teaching every single day.

Q. Coach Swinney, you said a decade ago that Clemson was about to embark on the greatest decade in history at Clemson. So as this decade comes to a close and you get ready to embark on another one, do you have a prediction for the next decade? Or what would you say we need to be looking for?

COACH SWINNEY: Yeah, I would say my prediction is the best is yet to come, as I always say, because that's just what I believe. I believe the best is always yet to come. Just my mindset. It is kind of crazy, though, to think that today is our last Friday practice of this decade. We've had a lot of Friday practices since 2010, and a lot of guys have come and gone. I'm just glad I'm still here. There's been probably a lot of money bet on me not being here back in 2010, but we're here. And just grateful and blessed to see this decade come to an end. And next time we get out on the field, regardless of what happens in this game, it will be a new decade in 2020. Look forward to the next ten years. So ask me that question in ten years. It will be fun to review.

Q. Ryan Day, three quickies. Quick update on Justin Fields. How is he? Number two, Jonah Jackson, as you look back on it now, how key was his transfer to making that offensive line what it is? Number three, do you look forward to sort of this chess match with Brent Venables?
COACH DAY: First one was what? Justin? He’s doing great.

Second one? Jonah? Jonah has been great. Jonah was just the perfect guy at the right time for that room. He’s come in with a professionalism. It’s hard to walk into a room with such pride as the offensive line room at Ohio State. So to walk in as a fifth-year senior, the way he handled himself was really great. And the way that Coach Stud [Greg Studrawa] took him into that room and that whole room embraced him has been tremendous. I think our offensive line this year has come together stronger than an offensive line has had in a long time that I’ve seen. He’s been a big part of that, even in the short time here.

And then, yeah, Coach [Brent] Venables obviously has been one of the best play callers and big-game defensive coordinators in the last decade. So, yeah, it is going to be a challenge. But, again, if you want to win the national title, you have to go against the best. I know he’s going to have those guys ready. They’re coming over the walls in every single direction you can imagine. Again, we’ve had a great week of practice. We’ll have to adjust as the game goes on.

Q. Coach Day, this is your first time coaching in a game where Ohio State’s a rich history. How important is continuing that winning tradition for recruiting players or just the program in general?

COACH DAY: Everything’s at stake, so there’s a lot of reasons why. We try not to focus on any of those things. It is a one-game season right now, March Madness mentality. You just have to go. You can’t worry about those things because they don’t matter. What matters is today and preparing the best we can to get ready to play tomorrow. That’s all you can focus on is being in the moment right now, and then go from there.

Q. Dabo [Swinney], all four of these teams in the playoffs, they don’t punt the ball very often. I’m wondering if you think that that’s going to be a little bit more of a factor for you guys than it’s been at any point this season? And also Will Spiers has quite a bit of baseball history in his family and threw a real nice ball on a fake punt a couple of years ago. I wondering if he reminds you of his ability to throw a ball?

COACH SWINNEY: Yeah, I think we’re planning first punt will be a fake. We’ve been working the double, triple reverse pitchback to Will, throw down the field. Our timing has gotten better over the couple weeks so -- oh, sorry. Coach Day is right there.

You know what? Honestly, in a game like this, the punt is one of the best offensive plays in the game. There’s nothing wrong with a punt. The field position is critical in games like this. It’s the hidden yardage. It’s the game within a game. And our -- Will has done a great job for us this year.
I think sometimes people, they want us to have to flip -- we don't get an opportunity to flip the field a lot because most of the time we move the ball and get a first down or two. Most of our punts are going in. He does an amazing job of pinning people deep, really does. But in games like this, there are some times where you're asked to have to flip the field, and I think that's going to be a key part, creating some good field position for the team.

And offensively, truly, ending every drive with a kick. So take care of the ball. And let's not try to force things. And there's nothing wrong with, hey, it's not there. Listen, let's be smart. Let's punt the ball, and let's play good defense and try to win that battle, that field position battle. It is definitely, in games like this, critical when you have teams that aren't used to being stopped. I think that's -- I don't think both teams will go out there and score 60 points. It's probably going to be a big-time defensive battle. But, certainly, the punting game will be critical.

Q. Dabo [Swinney], you've always been great at college football history and the big perspective. Can you summarize how this year might have been made for the playoff, the 14th or 51-1, three 13-0 conference championship. And in the old days, they'd go to the Rose, Sugar, and Orange, but this is what the playoff was made for. Can you put that into words in?

COACH SWINNEY: Yep, and everybody would do all that, and then everybody would ooh and ahh, and they'd vote a champion. You don't vote for it anymore; you have to earn this one. So I think it's pretty cool.

If you think about it, you go back to -- there have been a lot of arguments over the years. As an Alabama guy, growing up in Alabama, I think it was -- might have been '66. I can't remember. Alabama people still mad about that. Notre Dame is probably mad about a couple, and some other teams are mad about some where they didn't get voted in. Back then, they even voted some national championships before bowl games, which is crazy.

But anyway, it would be pretty cool to be able to go back in time and take some of those teams, get the top four and kind of do the playoff. So that's what we have. We have a really cool setup in college football, in that -- me personally, I'm not for expansion of the playoffs. A lot of people will say, well, heck, that's because you're in there every year. If we can get in it in four, surely we can get in it with eight. It's not about that. It's not whether we get in or not. I just like the tradition of bowl games. I love seeing some of these teams get to celebrate the finish of their season, winning a bowl and getting the experience.

There's 130 teams. If there were 32 teams, it would be different, but you have 130 teams. Not everybody's going to win the national championship. But I think the committee has gotten it right since they've started this. I think they've gotten four great teams, and I think the best team has won every single year. And it's been played out on the field. I think it's been awesome.
So this particular year, four great teams that earned the opportunity to be here. It's fun, because, again, you don't vote on it. You vote on a lot of things. There's a lot of things that get voted on out there, but you have to earn this. You have to earn it on the field, and it all comes down to those four quarters.

Q. For both of you, you guys played your championship games on December 7th. And I assume that if they told you you were going to play this game on December 8th, you would have been there because it means so much. But just how difficult has this three-week turnaround been in your heart and in your mind? Don't you think that the Semifinals of a College Football Playoff should always be played on January 1st? Regardless, 1:00, 4:00, 8:00, whatever it is, isn't that when this should be played? What's your thought on that? And would this make life simpler for you guys trying to execute this turnaround?

COACH SWINNEY: Well, for me, I would say yes. I would much prefer it to be on January 1st and just have consistency in that. And I've done that. I think we played on the 1st one year. Maybe it was the 31st. I can't remember which one it was. But I personally like being able to be home for Christmas and head out on the 26th and have your bowl prep. That's, to me, preferable. But hey, as you said, whatever they say, we'll do whatever we need to do. But I would love that. I know that the schedule, the NFL or whatever, I don't know what all dictates all that stuff, but this year's been a little different because of the way it was laid out and the national championship. There's a bye week this year. That's another difference that the teams are going to have to manage in preparation for that because it is a little unique.

But the turnaround was the same for everybody. I think, had there been a team that didn't play in a championship game, that would have been a little different. But all of us played in these games, so we had the same amount of time. I think the bigger challenge was for the players because they didn't get as much time off. And then just usually in recruiting we've had a couple of weeks to go recruit, and we really only had a week. So it was compressed, for sure. But, as he said, almost like a little longer open date as opposed to bowl prep. If I had my vote, I would say play them on the 1st and adjust everything else from there.

COACH DAY: I would agree, same thing. I would like it to be on the January 1st and keep it consistent. This has been a unique preparation, but it's been the same for both teams. And I do think coming off of a long season, coming off of the championship game, it was a challenge to get our guys rested enough and then prepared to play this bowl game. But it was the same for both teams. It is what it is. Again, it is kind of over my pay grade in terms of making decisions on this. But I would say that playing the game on January 1st would be nice just to keep a tradition going.

Q. For Ryan [Day], we know how good the Ohio State football program has been for the last several years. Playing now the defending national championship, Ohio State has not won a playoff game since 2014. I know it's not what you're concerned about, but how do you think
the college football world looks at Ohio State right now and with an opportunity like this? You guys have reached this point to play a team like Clemson. What do you think it would do for Ohio State football to win a game like this?

**COACH DAY:** I know that we're always in the conversation year in and year out, and have been since it started. What everyone's opinion is right now doesn't matter. What matters is Saturday night when the game is over. There's a lot of things that lead up to a game like this. There is a lot of hype that comes into it. What matters is how we play. We've had one heck of a year. This team has done a great job. And some of the things that have happened in the past really have nothing to do with this team, with this coaching staff. So we just focus on doing everything we can to play a great game, and we go from there. We're going against great teams, and it's an honor to be a part of the Final Four and, again, the focus of just playing well on Saturday night.