Thursday • 4 p.m. • Sun Life Stadium • Miami Gardens, Fla. • College Football Playoff semifinal

No. 1 Clemson

Capital One Orange Bowl

No. 4 Oklahoma

Welcome to Miami



SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Clemson head coach Dabo Swinney is greeted by Orange Bowl officials as he leads the team off its plane Sunday after arriving in Miami ahead of the No. 1 Tigers' College Football Playoff semifinal matchup with Oklahoma on Thursday.

Special 24-page CFP preview section inside today's issue

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
THE JOURNAL

Clemson is making its first appearance in the College Football Playoff, but it doesn't mean Dabo Swinney feels his Tigers are treading on totally new ground this week.

Swinney's Tigers have beaten three of college football's elites in the postseason the last three years — Louisiana State in the 2012 Chick-fil-A Bowl, Ohio State in the Orange Bowl after the 2013 season and Oklahoma in the Russell Athletic Bowl last year. All three programs have won national championships since 2000.





SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Clemson sophomore quarterback Deshaun Watson works during practice Sunday in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.

"We've played three College Football Playoff-type teams in a row," Swinney told the media gathered at Nova Southeastern University on Sunday after Clemson wrapped up its first practice since arriving in south Florida. "Oklahoma is here; we played them last year. Ohio State won it last year — we played them — and we played LSU. So our guys understand (the level of competition)."

With the No. 1 Tigers set for a rematch with the No. 4 Sooners in the Orange Bowl, the winner will advance to meet the winner of No. 2 Alabama and No. 3 Michigan State in the National

MIAMI: Winner of Thursday's Orange Bowl showdown will play for national title

FROM PAGE A1

Championship on Jan. 11.

See our special 24-page College Football Playoff preview section in today's issue of The Journal for more on those matchups. Also be sure to check out all the coverage leading up to Thursday's game, as well as the game itself, from our team on site to cover the Tigers this week.

Clemson's clash with the Big 12 champion Sooners figures to be a shootout, as both teams possess high-powered offenses — the Tigers rank 11th nationally in total offense at 510.6 yards per game, while Oklahoma ranks sixth at 542.9.

But while the Tigers won last year's meeting 40-6 behind backup quarterback Cole Stoudt, the Sooners don't seem overly concerned about the additional challenge of facing Heisman Trophy finalist Deshaun Watson.

Oklahoma junior defensive back Zack Sanchez said, having faced TCU quarterback Trevone Boykin in 2014, the Sooners would be well prepared for Watson's dual-threat abilities.

"If you compare him to anybody, it would probably be Josh Dobbs from Tennessee — just the way that he can create with his feet, and he's a great passer, as well, kind of like Josh was," Sanchez said Sunday. "I think those two are probably the closest comparison. People want to bring up Trevone, but I think Trevone is just a different athlete — he's a different freak."

Tigers senior offensive lineman Eric Mac Lain, however, said those who wanted to compare Watson to other "mobile" quarterbacks are largely missing the point.

"I really think they undervalue him as a passer," he said. "When people talk about Deshaun, it's all about his running ability and how mobile he is, but at the end of the day, I think that when Deshaun needs a big play, he's going to rely on his arm; he's not going to rely on his legs.

"He's confident in the way he prepares for games, he's confident in his reads, and at the end of the day, he's the best deep-ball passer in college football. So I think that he's very confident in his arm, and people kind of overlook that."

But whereas the Sooners have been more prolific on offense, Clemson has done its work against tougher competition, at least statistically.

Oklahoma has played six games — half its season, basically — against teams that rank outside the top 100 nationally in total defense, while Clemson has not faced any.

The Sooners have played each of the country's three worst defenses statistically — Tulsa, Texas Tech and Kansas — while the highest-ranked defense they have faced is Akron (which ranks 18th nationally).

Thus, Clemson, which ranks seventh in the nation in total defense, allowing 295.7 yards per game, could present a new level of competition for OU.

But sophomore running back Samaje Perine indicated he believed this year's Tigers are not as talented as the group that held the Sooners to six points last season.

"They're a good defense, but they have areas we can expose," Perine told reporters Monday. "I'm not going to say anything in particular on camera because I don't want to be disrespectful, but the areas are there, and we're going to make sure we expose them."

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