



Photo: Brian Hennessy

Eye Of The Tigers

Clemson University head coach Dabo Swinney runs a disciplined program. From Day 1, everyone associated with the Clemson Tigers understands they must hold each other accountable and walk the talk of a championship-caliber team.

By Paul Markgraff

Clemson University is loaded with talent. During the 2015 season, quarterback Deshaun Watson rushed for more than 1,100 yards and 12 touchdowns. He passed for more than 4,100 yards and 35 touchdowns. Running back Wayne Gallman rushed for more than 1,500 yards and 13 touchdowns. The receiver corps spread its touchdowns around with 11 different players catching at least one touchdown and five receivers each catching at least five touchdowns.

On defense, Shaq Lawson and Kevin Dodd combined for 24.5 sacks and 49 tackles for loss, with B.J. Goodson adding an additional 14 tackles for loss. Defenders picked off 16 passes during the season, recovering 9 fumbles in the process. Just five different defenders accounted for 255 solo tackles, assisting on 154 more.

The team also competed for a National Championship in January 2016, losing a back-and-forth battle to Alabama 45-40.

But that's not all. Keep in mind that only 12 players on the entire roster are seniors (5) or redshirt seniors (7). In case you're not connecting the dots, this means that the Clemson Tigers are likely to come roaring back in 2016.

This is not a flash-in-the-pan football team, no one-hit wonder. Now entering his eighth season at the helm, head coach William Christopher "Dabo" Swinney has created a culture in Clemson, S.C., quite possibly unequalled in FBS football. It's a culture based on accountability, brotherhood and family, educational grooming, and serving the heart of the student-athlete, rather than his talent.

"If you are serving a guy's talent, and not his heart, then you are going to look the other way," says Swinney. "You may know that he's not doing the right things, but because you need him on the field to win – you need his talent – you are probably going to look the other way."

This will not stand in Clemson. Swinney and his staff believe that the person comes first, and that coaches must never, ever care more for the player than the person. It's a sacrifice that cannot be made.

"I've had several instances when I'd tell one of our guys, if it was just about winning and I only cared about you as a player, then I wouldn't make a particular decision," he says. "But I'm trying to serve your heart. I'm trying to help you become a better young man and have a better appreciation for the talent that you have. We just want our guys to be well-rounded people when they leave our program. I always tell our coaches that if all we've taught them is how to rush the passer or how to throw and catch or tackle, then we've failed. That's an important part of what they're here to do, but it has to have its correct place. I want our program to be so much more, and I think that's the key to being a good coach."

At the end of the day, Swinney says, football is a people business, and it's about relationships. The only way to have a relationship with someone is to really get to know him or her.

"You have to find out what's in their heart," he says. "What makes them tick? What motivates them? What's important to them? What inspires them? You have to serve that."



Swinney's football program at Clemson is based on a culture of community, family and accountability. His program focuses on developing the players to be better people before their talent. He teaches responsibility and gratitude over entitlement.

Team Draft Day

As the old saying goes, the only abilities that count are accountability, responsibility and reliability. Clemson coaches are big believers in that mantra. To bring student-athletes along for the ride, coaches help players develop small accountability groups within the team in an effort to spread the word.

"We have a big draft for what we call our Accountability Teams," says Swinney. "Our captains and seniors lead each group. It's a big draft board. Everybody's name is on the board, and if there are nine teams, everyone gets a first-round pick, a second-round pick, all the way down to the last name on the board."

Those captains and seniors build their teams and that's their team for the entire year from January through December. Those leaders are going to be held accountable for the guys on their team with them. Everything counts: class attendance, study hall attendance, tutors, training room, workouts. While it's a finite, points-based system, teams can also earn points too.

"What we're trying to do there is teach accountability," says Swinney. "When you don't do what you are supposed to do, other people suffer. Everybody pays the price. Accountability is a huge part of the game of football and it's a huge requirement to be successful in life. People have to be able to depend upon you to do whatever your job is."

The Accountability Teams help Swinney and his staff develop leadership throughout the team, not just with the seniors and captains.

"Those seniors are the captains, but they allow those freshmen and sophomores to insert themselves as leaders,

too," he says. "They earn points through community service. We create service opportunities throughout the year – six or seven times – then those student-athletes can volunteer for other opportunities, as well."

Swinney says this helps to teach not only leadership, but also the joy that comes from giving to others. Ultimately, he wants to create the proper perspective for his student-athletes, an "attitude of gratitude" rather than one of entitlement.

"The best way to teach them that is to show them how to serve others," he says. "You quickly see that there are a lot of people out there who are so much less fortunate. It has the added benefit of helping to build great team chemistry."

Carrying The Program Banner

Swinney not only wants to educate his players on the important aspects of becoming good citizens, he works diligently to coach up his staff.

It's important to Swinney that his staff be knowledgeable about every aspect of the program. There are no knowledge silos at Clemson.

"The first thing is you have to make sure everybody understands what everybody else's responsibilities are," says Swinney. "I want everybody in this room to know that they are going to be held accountable for what their responsibilities are, but I also want them to know everybody else's. It's a great way to educate these young guys."

Each summer, Swinney will spend about four days drilling down into every detail of the program with his staff. It's a program orientation and it goes from A to Z.

"I go through it like nobody in there has worked for me for even a single day," he says. "We don't want to assume



Photo: Dawson Powers

Transparency and honesty have been key to the growth and development of Swinney's staff and players. Balancing football and life helps them stay fresh and grow while having one of the top programs in both academics and athletics.

anything. It's one of the ways that I protect our culture here. For a young coach, it provides a great foundation and a broad perspective, an understanding of things that are outside of what they know right now. I believe in that wholeheartedly."

Then, Swinney empowers those coaches, giving them opportunities to grow and make sure they are challenged.

"I try to be very purposeful in developing our young staff," he says. "My two co-coordinators now, one was a GA for me and the other one played for me. We just nurtured them along the way. We made sure they had opportunities to grow and develop. They just became first-time coordinators and they are 15-1 since getting that promotion.

"I knew they were ready for those positions because of the process they had gone through and what they had been exposed to. I don't keep secrets. I meet with everybody. I want everybody in that staff meeting. I want them to hear all the problems of the program. I want them to understand administration, compliance, academics and recruiting. So I make all of those young coaches be a part of everything that we do."

Staying Fresh And Creative

After making sure his student-athletes are prepared for the game of football and the game of life, after helping to educate his staff and cultivate program leadership from within the program itself, Swinney still finds time to be purposeful about personal improvement.

"Sometimes, it's easy to think you've got it all figured out, especially when you've had success," he says. "But man, when you're through improving, you really are through. You have to keep the mentality of 'What's next? How can I get better?' We are always striving to get better, always challenging what we did last year and really studying other people. You don't change just to change, but you always challenge what you did before."

There are questions Swinney constantly asks about every aspect of the Clemson program, whether it's about how they are teaching in their meeting rooms, if they should look at changes in technology, and how the team practices. In every single area of the program, Swinney says he must get better, because if he doesn't, the team will get passed by others.

"It's also about keeping a good balance too," he says. "I think as coaches, we sometimes think it's all about us. It's not. At the end of the day, you only get 20 hours a week with your guys, and just eight hours a week in the off-season. I think it's important that you don't work just to work. You have to have a balance if you want to be a family. It's important to take a break and get away. Do something different."

Swinney tells his student-athletes and coaches to go read a book, hang around people outside of football.

"I try not to practice on the weekends during spring ball around here," he says. "I want our guys to have time off, and I want our coaches to be parents on the weekends and during the off-season. That balance in your life is what allows you to be fresh. We love what we do, but it's really difficult. I want guys coming in here with the right mindset, charged up and ready to go. So we are purposeful as far as how we take our breaks."

Fighting For The Tigers Culture

The proof of Swinney's success establishing a model culture at Clemson can be found – without doubt – in the astonishing numbers put up by the Tigers' offense, defense and special teams throughout last season.

Moreover, it can be found in other places that are not typically promoted to the general public, but which are nevertheless extremely important. While the team finished No. 2 in the nation athletically, it also finished in the top 10 academically.

"We just had a 14-win season, but we also had the highest football team GPA we've ever had," says Swinney. "Forty-eight guys made the honor roll with a GPA of 3.0 or better. That's culture. The biggest thing for me after seven years is nurturing that culture and continuing to fight for it, challenge it and reinforce it."

Swinney and his staff do this in a variety of ways, through discipline in the program, through intentional relationships with staff and players, through communication and articulation, and by establishing trust and respect.

"Everyone in the program needs to understand what the common purpose of the program is, what our vision is," he says. "Then, we reinforce the fact that we all must have a genuine appreciation for each other. All of those things are so important when you're trying to have the type of culture that we strive to have here at Clemson." 