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EDITOR'S PICK

'A TERRIBLE EXAMPLE'

Tigers' Swinney lashes out, accuses Ole Miss of tampering

By Ian Taylor

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CLEMSON — When former California linebacker Luke Ferrelli transferred to Clemson on Jan. 6, the reigning ACC Defensive Freshman of the Year appeared to be a ready-made replacement for Wade Woodaz on the Tigers' defense.

And yet, on Friday, Clemson head coach Dabo Swinney's discussion of Ferrelli's transfer wasn't about how the Tigers landed a top defensive prospect, but how he had already skipped town and gone to Ole Miss, committing to the Rebels the day before.

And Swinney didn't hold back.



Clemson head football coach Dabo Swinney, left, speaks alongside Clemson athletic director Graham Neff during a news conference on Friday afternoon in Clemson.

Photo by Sean Smith

“First of all, we did everything right,” he said while flanked by athletic director Graham Neff. “Kid goes in the (transfer) portal, we reach out, he’s interested, comes and visits Clemson, says this is where he wants to go and sign him. He moves to Clemson, rents an apartment, buys a car, goes to class for a week, trains, goes to team meetings, position meetings, writes out his goals for the semester.

“All of a sudden, not here anymore.”

Over the course of 17 minutes, Swinney went day-by-day — sometimes even minute-by-minute — detailing accusations of Ole Miss tampering with Ferrelli, calling out head coach Pete Golding and Ferrelli’s agent, Ryan Williams, and criticizing the lack of oversight in the current landscape of college football.

“We turned everything in to the NCAA,” Swinney said. “And I’m just going to just say this, there’s tampering, and then there’s blatant tampering.

“If you tamper with my players, I’m going to turn you in.”

The timeline

Swinney said that on Jan. 14 — three days after Ferrelli had arrived at Clemson — Williams called Clemson general manager Jordan Sorrells and claimed that Ole Miss was “coming hard” after Ferrelli, but assured Sorrells that the player had no intention of leaving. The next day, Swinney said that he told Sorrells to reach out to Ole Miss general manager Austin Thomas and warn him that if the Rebels did not leave Ferrelli alone, Swinney would report the Rebels for tampering.

“At 12:14 (p.m.), they both connected on the phone, and Jordan reiterated our stance one more time,” Swinney said. “(Thomas) assured Jordan that he had communicated to the agent that he wanted no part of this and that his relationship with Jordan was more important to him than Luke Ferrelli, but that Pete Golding ‘just does what he does.’”

An hour later, Ferrelli allegedly told Sorrells and linebackers coach Ben Boulware in a meeting that Golding had texted him personally that morning, asking Ferrelli what the buyout was for his contract with Clemson and sending a picture of a \$1 million contract, according to Swinney. Ferrelli also said that Golding had Rebels quarterback Trinidad Chambliss call him to push him to transfer and that current New York Giants quarterback Jaxson Dart had also reached out on behalf of Ole Miss, his alma mater.

“On Friday morning, January the 16th, the last day of the portal, at 11:20, Luke called Ben Boulware and told him that Mississippi had reached out again, even though I had kind of let them know the day before,” Swinney said. “They had not only reached out, but they had upped and doubled their offer. But Luke told Ben, ‘Hey, it’s all good.’”

Swinney said that Ferrelli’s agent had also confirmed to Sorrells that Ole Miss had reached out again and increased the offer, and according to Swinney, started to play both sides.

“Jordan asked to have Luke to give us the text messages that he had received from coach Golding, but the agent was hesitant to do that because he didn’t want to burn any bridges with Ole Miss,” Swinney said. “However, the agent communicated that if we were to add a second year at a million dollars to the already agreed-upon deal with Luke, then they would gladly give us whatever we need in order to turn in Ole Miss.”

Swinney said that a half hour after that communication, Ferrelli told Sorrells personally to reassure Swinney that he was staying, but when Swinney called Ferrelli, he got no answer. Four hours after that, Sorrells received a call from the Clemson compliance office that Ferrelli had requested to re-enter the transfer portal.

Swinney said that when Sorrells contacted Williams, the agent claimed to not know anything about it, but when Sorrells and defensive coordinator Tom Allen went to see Ferrelli at his apartment, the linebacker’s immediate response was “I’m going to Ole Miss,” which he reaffirmed in calls to Allen, Boulware and Swinney later that night.

“Once I got word of all this at 4:15 that he was trying to go in the portal, I immediately called our AD Graham Neff,” Swinney said. “I also called (ACC commissioner Jim Phillips), and he called the SEC commissioner and others.”

‘Total hypocrisy’

Swinney was quick to note that Ole Miss is less than a week removed from its own experience with teams tampering.

After announcing on Jan. 6 that he would be returning to Ole Miss for the 2026 season, defensive end Princewill Umanmielen attempted to enter the transfer portal last Thursday, and Ole Miss refused to file the paperwork as he had only just signed a new deal. On Wednesday, news emerged that Umanmielen would indeed follow former Rebels head coach Lane Kiffin to LSU, and in return, LSU would pay Ole Miss \$550,000 in compensation.

The fact that Golding’s program had fought against what it perceived as tampering was not lost on Swinney.

“It’s total hypocrisy, because all this is going on while they are trying to fight their defensive end from going in the portal,” Swinney said. “They have accused — publicly — others of tampering with their roster and their players while they are over here tampering.”

Throughout his detailing of the tampering accusations, Swinney never criticized Ferrelli but was quick to blame the adults involved.

“I feel sorry for the young man, to be honest with you,” he said. “I blame the adults. And if you want to have adult world, then there needs to be adult consequences.”

As for what those consequences would be, Swinney and Neff didn’t say, although Swinney believes it should not be a drawn-out process.

“This shouldn’t be a three-year or three-month investigation. This might take three days. They’re either going to tell the truth, or they’re going to lie. It’s one of the two. All you’ve got to do is get the phone. This is not complicated. This is very simple,” Swinney said. “Let me make this clear, too, I’m not out to get anybody fired. That’s not my objective in this, but there has to be accountability and consequences for this type of behavior and total disregard for the rules.

“It’s a terrible example for young coaches in this profession.”

And while Golding was the only coach who Swinney called out by name, he noted that other coaches have reached out to him in recent days about the situation. He said that they have told him about other instances of alleged tampering, and that they have been in the same situation he finds himself in.

He even said that one of the responses that Clemson has had from Ole Miss was that its own players were being tampered with, with Swinney saying it wasn't an excuse.

"I want to challenge all of those coaches that have reached out to me. You need to step up and call it out. Otherwise, don't complain," he said. "You either step up and you be an example to young coaches in this profession and be people of integrity, or just shut your mouth and don't complain again."

No pain, no gain

Swinney said that without any consequences for tampering, it was going to continue in college football, but Neff was quick to point out that there's not much of a framework for anything in college sports right now.

Even when there is, there's still not much of an attempt made to reinforce it, as he said the NCAA was "surprised" by Clemson actually filing a claim of tampering against Ole Miss.

"There's a lot of complaints in the media, hearsay amongst the industry, etc. Very little actually gets reported — that's coming from the NCAA directly," Neff said. "We're very eager and resolute to do so, to support them in the process."

He added that Clemson was looking into legal options aside from the NCAA but refrained from going into detail.

Aside from a lawsuit, any punishment would have to come from the NCAA and the College Sports Commission, which was created in July as part of the settlement in the House vs. NCAA lawsuit, which led to revenue sharing between schools and student-athletes.

Schools have to agree to be overseen by the CSC, and not doing so would see the school become liable for potential NIL violations even by third parties. If they join, the CSC oversees the entire revenue sharing operation but still relies on the NCAA for enforcement.

Neff said Clemson is "eager" for the oversight from the CSC, but he admitted the organization was still building.

And as the world of college sports waits for things to settle down and frameworks to be strengthened, Neff said it's easy for fans — and those involved — to become disillusioned with what some would see as a complete breakdown.

"In today's environment, it's easy to get sucked into the news cycle and hyperventilate when a student-athlete breaks a contract, or a school allegedly tampers with a player, a state judge makes a ruling to impact a specific player and then we have legal or media or coach analysis of what it means and what happens, and sound bites

of what happens to college sports,” Neff said. “I’m willing to do my part — meaningful group work towards solutions.”

At least part of that work, Neff said, was having Friday’s news conference itself.

“We think that sharing experience is elevating issues,” he said. “Seeking accountability adds voice and urgency to the future state from a solution-focused standpoint, and that’s the opportunity that we have here to create and frame together.”

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