

College Football

Key matchups will decide national championship

Clemson meets Alabama for title on Monday

By RALPH D. RUSSO
Associated Press

No. 1 Clemson and No. 2 Alabama only have one loss between them this season. So asking opposing coaches how to beat the Tigers and Crimson Tide is a difficult question.

There are two things everyone can agree upon about the College Football Playoff national championship on Monday night in Glendale, Arizona:

— Beating Alabama’s defense will take a special performance.

— Clemson’s Deshaun Watson is capable of such a performance.

Here’s a look at some of the key matchups that will help determine which team wins the national championship.

MATCHUP: Clemson QB Deshaun Watson vs. Alabama OLB/DEs Dillon Lee, Denzel Devall, Ryan Anderson, Tim Williams.

The Heisman Trophy finalist is the type of dual threat that can flummox even the best defenses, and his mobility will be crucial to breaking down the seemingly impenetrable wall that is Alabama’s front seven. Trying to move Alabama’s big and sturdy linemen such as All-America A’Shawn Robinson, Jarran Reed and Jonathan Allen off the line scrimmage consistently is just not happening.

“The more you can spread them out the better opportunity you have of creating a seam in the defense to run the ball,” Mississippi State coach Dan Mullen said.

Don’t expect a ton of north-south power running by Clemson. The Tigers



are more likely to attack at the edges of Alabama’s defense.

“You’ve got to have some imagination and some smoke-and-mirror mentality for sure,” said Ole Miss coach Hugh Freeze, whose team handed Alabama its only loss this season.

There are two ways to do that: Before the snap with receivers and backs going in motion and formations that draw defenders away from the ball and toward the sideline. Or, after the snap with option or packaged plays that allow the quarterback to react to a defense and either run, hand off, or pass.

“Anything that maybe can distract a defensive end or one of those linebackers just for a moment, because the reality is double-teams, their down front guys are

so good, the double-teams very seldom even get off of them and get to another guy unless there is something that freezes them for a second,” Freeze said.

As the games have become more important for Clemson, Watson has been used as a ball carrier more. He has surpassed 20 carries in each of the last three games, including a season-high 24 for a season-best 145 yards in the Orange Bowl victory against Oklahoma.

“Most defenses out there are not designed to stop a guy like Deshaun Watson and what he can do on his own,” said Cole Cubelic, former Auburn offensive lineman who now works as an analyst for ESPN and hosts a radio show in Huntsville, Alabama. “(Clemson) cannot be afraid to let that

kid get hit. You need him to be dynamic.”

Clemson will also need Watson’s wheels to escape an Alabama pass rush that has registered 50 sacks.

MATCHUP: Alabama WR Calvin Ridley vs. Clemson CB Mackensie Alexander.

The freshman Ridley is Alabama’s next great receiver, following Julio Jones and Amari Cooper. Against Michigan State, the Tide took advantage of a secondary that had no match for Ridley (eight catches for 138 yards and two touchdowns).

Alexander doesn’t get quite as much publicity as some of the nation’s other shutdown corners, but make no mistake: He is as talented as any of them.

“He’s good enough to say let’s not mess with it on that side,” said former Syracuse coach Scott Shafer, who is now the defensive coordinator at Maryland.

That explains why Alexander had no interceptions this season. The other corner, Cordrea Tankersley, led the team with five picks and is no slouch, either. Tigers defensive coordinator Brent Venables leans on his cover guys.

“You’re going to have to win against man coverage,” Wake Forest coach Dave Clawson said.

Alabama offensive coordinator Lane Kiffin is excellent at creating advantageous matchups for play-makers. It will be interesting to see if Kiffin attempts to get Ridley away from Alexander.

MATCHUP: Alabama RB Derrick Henry vs. Clemson LBs Ben Boulware and B.J. Goodson and S Jayron Kearse.

After going away from its Heisman Trophy winner to beat Michigan State, expect Kiffin to lean on Henry in the national championship game.

Clemson would be better off in a high-scoring game, with lots of possessions for its up-tempo offense. Alabama wants to avoid that.

“Ball control. Manage field position. Put your defense in as many good spots as you can,” Cubelic said.

The Tigers also have a talented and tough defensive line, led by defensive end Shaq Lawson. Plus, their top-notch corners allow Venables to get safeties, like the 220-pound Kearse, involved in stopping the run.

“The traditional running game against them is very hard,” Clawson said. “They give you very few run-friendly boxes.”

Clemson has been susceptible to long runs. The Tigers have allowed 22 runs of 20-plus yards, tied for 83rd in FBS. Those are often the result of over pursuing, sloppy tackling and taking bad angles. The Tigers can’t let a 5-yard run by Henry turn into a 35-yarder.

MATCHUP: Clemson TE Jordan Leggett vs. Alabama DBs Eddie Jackson and Geno Mattias-Smith.

Defensive coordinator Kirby Smart moved Jackson and Smith, smaller defensive backs with cornerback skills, to safety so the Tide it could better matchup with spread offenses. Basically, Alabama will be in a nickel defense with five defensive backs most of the game against Clemson.

Leggett, at 6-foot-5, 255-pounds, is a matchup problem and Clemson likes to send him down the middle on run-pass option plays. He caught 35 passes and led the team with seven touchdown receptions.

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Former Coug named to Hall of Fame

By RALPH D. RUSSO
Associated Press

SCOTTSDALE, Arizona — Former Washington State offensive lineman Mike Utley, who suffered a spinal cord injury during an NFL game and was paralyzed, is one of 14 players to be selected for induction for the College Football Hall of Fame.

Florida State’s Derrick Brooks, Iowa State’s Troy Davis and Purdue’s Rod Woodson also join this year’s class.

The latest group, which will be inducted in December, was announced Friday by the National Football Foundation.

The rest of the class includes LSU’s Bert Jones, UNLV’s Randall Cunningham, Ohio State’s Tom Cousineau, North Carolina’s William Fuller, Wisconsin’s Tim Krumrie, Harvard’s Pat McInally, Colorado’s Herb Orvis, Georgia’s Scott Woerner, Ashland’s Bill Royce and Nebraska Omaha’s Marlin Briscoe.

Utley was a three-time All-Pac-10 selection and an All-American in 1988 with the Cougars, when he was named team MVP. He was drafted by the Detroit Lions in 1989. On Nov. 17, 1991, he fractured three vertebrae during a game against the Los Angeles Rams at the Silverdome. As he was taken off the field on a stretcher, he famously flashed a thumbs-up to the crowd. The injury left him paralyzed and he remains in a wheelchair.

“This is very overwhelming,” Utley said in a statement released by the school. “Washington State University and head coach Jim Walden gave me an opportunity and I told him I would give 100 percent of myself. Playing for the Cougars was a wonderful experience and hopefully I’ve been able to pay it forward.”

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