

Clemson and LSU will go head-to-head in the National Championship in New Orleans

Escrito por Administrator
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This year's edition of the College Football Playoff was widely viewed as a four team tournament consisting of just three teams capable of hoisting the golden cylinder representing the national championship.

That was confirmed just minutes into the first of the two semifinals on Saturday night as No. 1 LSU blasted No. 4 Oklahoma in a lopsided Peach Bowl. In the second though, No. 2 Ohio State's meeting with No. 3 Clemson was more or less seen as a clash between two equally elite and evenly matched teams — one a reigning champion who lived up to their billing by turning into a buzzsaw down the stretch and the other labeled several times by the CFP Selection Committee as the most complete team in the country.

Thankfully for those watching on, the two heavyweights squared off in a Fiesta Bowl that more than lived up the hype as one of the most anticipated semifinals of the playoff era. And just like those nostalgia-inducing prize fights from decades ago, the end result of a bloody epic that featured devastating jabs, incredible counterpunches and enough momentum swings to result in a Disney movie. Only one could emerge victorious however and to the delight of thousands of orange-clad fans in attendance at State Farm Stadium late in the desert night, it was the Tigers who were eventually able to hold their hands high in the air to celebrate a 29-23 result that sets up another epic showdown next month.

Tigers QB Trevor Lawrence was phenomenal once again on the biggest stage the sport has to offer. While he was last seen in the Playoff slicing and dicing Alabama's secondary with his arm, this time around he used his legs to even better acclaim. The sophomore threw for 259 yards and a pair of scores (plus a final two-point conversion into the back of the end zone) but moonlighted as a silky smooth dual-threat with few peers in running for a team-high 107 yards. His best run came in the closing minutes of the first half as he dropped a few Allen Iverson-esque crossovers and zagged 67 yards past the OSU defense.

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Tailback Travis Etienne may have taken a back seat on offense to the youngster he normally lines up behind but still was a threat to house it on every touch he had, running for 36 and a score while also finding paydirt twice as a receiver (three catches, 98 yards). The pair were the focal point offensively as they had been all year but had to carry a bit more of the load given that the team's normally prolific receiving corps was either hurt or limited.

The biggest turning point of the game for Clemson came late in the second quarter. After appearing to stop Lawrence on a third down blitz, Buckeyes corner Shawn Wade was flagged for a controversial targeting penalty after review and ejected. The Tigers immediately picked on his backup, who drew a pass interference flag to further extend a drive that was capped off by the ACC champs' first points of the game on a short Etienne run. That led to an eventual 21-point outburst to take the lead and jump start the eventual victory celebrations.

Ohio State still had their chances to take this one home however and fought tooth and nail to pull it out. Running back J.K. Dobbins set a new single-season school rushing record in the first half (passing Eddie George) on his way to a 174 yard, one TD night despite picking up an ankle injury down the stretch. He combined with Blake Haubeil's opening drive 21 yard field goal to end the Big Ten's 1,811 day stretch without scoring a point in the College Football Playoff as the conference champions announced this would be no repeat of the 2016 version of the game by jumping out to a 16-0 lead.

Mistakes, however, prevented the Buckeyes from taking full advantage of the early margin. In addition to the key penalties, the failure to capitalize on drives in the red zone will certainly haunt Ryan Day (who lost his first game as head coach). QB Justin Fields threw for a normally impressive 320 yards and a touchdown but the highly touted transfer will likely only remember two critical mistakes as he doubled his interception total coming in (one) with two picks — the last of which was right to Nolan Turner in the end zone to seal the result and end what had been a dream season in Columbus.

While those pieces will have to be picked up as the team returns home proud of this run but disappointed in the final result, Dabo Swinney's crew can briefly celebrate their 29th consecutive win and turn their attention to fully defending their crown against another set of Tigers. Top seed LSU will have the advantage of both playing what amounts to a bye game on Saturday against the Sooners as well as enjoy the short trip down the highway to New Orleans for the final game of the season. While last year's title tilt between a pair of 15-0 programs was expected to be a rare occurrence, it will happen again as the calendar turns to 2020 and the

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battle of teams based in Death Valley will kick off.

Such a championship game will have a high bar to clear given what transpired in the College Football Playoff game immediately proceeding it but it certainly will try as the most impressive team the sport has seen this season faces off against a potential dynastic standard barer.