**Molly Fletcher:** Welcome to Game Changers with Molly Fletcher, where we take you behind the scenes with peak performers to learn what makes them tick and discover how you can apply their lessons to your life. I'm your host, Molly Fletcher.

[00:00:30] Bloom where you're planted is a favorite expression of Clemson football coach, Dabo Swinney. Since taking over the program in 2008, Dabo has flourished. Establishing Clemson as a top program and leading the Tigers to the 2016 National Championship. In our conversation today, Dabo shares his inside out approach to leadership, the defining moments in his own journey, and how he built the culture of Clemson football. If you are [00:01:00] a leader at any level, you are going to get a ton out of this episode, so keep listening. Here's my conversation with Dabo Swinney.

Coach, if you had to sum up your leadership philosophy in just a few sentences, how would you describe it?

**Dabo Swinney:** Oh, man. Sum up my leadership philosophy in a few sentences. I would just say for [00:01:30] me, the core philosophy of our program when it comes to our players, is we always say, in fact it's in our staff room, it says, "Serve their heart, not their talent." That's a daily reminder of why I got into coaching and what my priorities should be each and every day. Then I'll take that a step further. In my role, it's to serve my [00:02:00] staff and to really just love and serve my staff and my team every, single day. It's easier said than done, but when it comes from just a Clemson football standpoint, core leadership philosophy that I try to instill in our coaches is serve their heart, not their talent.

Meaning that listen, we've got to love these guys and to serve someone's heart, you've got to have a relationship with them. [00:02:30] You got to be connected to them. If you're serving their talent, then that means that that relationship's just based on that talent or your decision making is just based on that talent. You got a guy that's not going to class and you know it and you don't do anything about it. Or a guy that's failing a drug test or whatever, and you continue to play him. That's serving his talent because he can help you win. That's probably just the core leadership philosophy [00:03:00] to me, is just serve and love and care for the people that I'm not necessarily in charge of, but that I'm trying to lead and guide. That's really my focus and I try to stay locked in on that all the time. We're together.

I always tell people, sometimes I go speak and talk to different companies or whatever and we'll talk about recruiting. Obviously, that's a lifeline [00:03:30] of our program and for any business the customers is the lifeline for that business. I think so many people, they have an outside in focus and I've always been an inside out guy. Just bloom where you're planted. Nine years ago, that was one of my very first messages to the team. I listed all these walls that had built around Clemson football, if you will, all these barriers. I said, "How we change it, from the inside out. We can't [00:04:00] worry about all these things, but if we will just focus from the inside, then eventually we'll blossom on the outside." I've had that same approach going on 10 years now and what I mean by that is, so many people focus on the recruits. Or so many companies focus on the customers and they don't do a great job of loving and caring and serving their staff or their employees, if you're a business [00:04:30] person.

What I've experienced, is if you do a great job, for me with my players, with my staff, the recruiting takes care of itself. It's the same thing with any business. I mean, I think the good ones, the great companies, they get that. If you do an unbelievable job with your employees, they'll do a great job with the customers. They'll be excited to go and sell that product or promote your brand or whatever it [00:05:00] is you're doing. That's been my core philosophy, I guess from day one. Is just create that buy-in into who we are and what we do and how we do things through just relationship. I'm very much relationship driven.

**Molly Fletcher:** No, you sure are. It's evident and I obviously had the opportunity to listen and read a lot of our stuff, Dabo. I always say when a guy wins a national championship and all the guys on the field around you that were there when you did, my [00:05:30] hope always is that's not the best moment in those kids' lives.

**Dabo Swinney:** That's right.

**Molly Fletcher:** And that it only gets better and it sounds like you're instrumental obviously, in instilling that in them to make sure that isn't the best moment in their lives.

**Dabo Swinney:** Oh, absolutely. It's one thing I told them after national championship. I mean, this is what an unbelievable moment. It's just amazing and we're going to have lots of great moments in our life. Where you get married, or you have children or graduate from college. Yeah, you had a great moment, you won a national championship. Those are all great moments, [00:06:00] but we're really defined by how we live between those moments. It's who we are on that journey. How we love and respect other people, our daily commitments. I mean, that's ultimately what we're going to be defined by. And use those great moments as great motivation and inspiration. Sometimes some of your greatest moments are when you failed. [00:06:30] You look back on your life, you're like, "Guy, that stunk at the time, but that's one of the greatest [inaudible 00:06:34] ever happened to me." It's all about how you live between those moments and respond. Again, just your daily focus.

**Molly Fletcher:** Can you give me some examples of some defining moments in your life?

**Dabo Swinney:** Oh, yeah, many. I mean, I've had obviously a lot of sporting moments, but probably February 3, 1986 was probably [00:07:00] the biggest. Because that was when I was saved and affirmed my faith and started to figure out what a relationship with Christ was all about. That's been the driving force in my life. I've grown and matured, I've always come back to that relationship and that hope and that peace that comes from knowing my creator. [00:07:30] Just having a faith that you know what man, God never says oops. Sometimes bad things happen and I don't like them and I don't understand, but I just know as a person of faith, that you know what, God's ordering my steps somehow, some way and I just got to keep moving forward. I don't like this moment, I don't like where I am, I don't like my circumstances, but as a person of faith, God's going to give me a hope and a peace to dream and think and believe beyond the circumstances. That's [00:08:00] just how I've lived my life. Without that moment-

**Molly Fletcher:** That changed the trajectory of your life, for sure.

**Dabo Swinney:** It changed my perspective. My life was a complete disaster at that time, 16 years old, and a mess. A lot of chaos and a lot of uncertainty and doubt and questions and fear and disappointment and embarrassment. And all kinds of different things for a young person. But just all the sudden, like I said, I [00:08:30] just had this peace and this hope that you know what, hey, one day I'm going to... But it's all based on the decisions I make, you know what, I don't control what color I am, who my parents are, what house I live in, none of that. But here's what I do control. I quit focusing on all those things that I had no control over, all those things that created problems for me and stress and strain. Even though those things didn't go away, [00:09:00] I started to change my focus on a future and a hope and the things that I did control. And that was my actions, my decisions, who I surrounded myself, what I chose to believe, attitude. That put me on a different path. Even though maybe it didn't make sense to believe, I believed anyway.

That's a powerful thing when a young person learns how to think the right [00:09:30] way and learns that they control what gets between their ears. And that other people don't define me, maybe something's been a certain way in my family for a long time, but that doesn't mean it's got to be that way for me. I'm going to be an agent of change. I'm going to do something about it. I'm not going to use all those things as excuses for me to fail. I'm going to use those as reasons for me to go be successful.

**Molly Fletcher:** Well, coach, I mean, you're saying you tell yourself the story you want [00:10:00] to tell yourself. You don't let other people write your story.

**Dabo Swinney:** That's exactly right. I learned to speak things to life, if you will. I mean, nobody in my family had been to college, graduated from college or anything like that. I'm like, "Well, I'm going to college because I'm smart and I can do this and this is what I'm going to do. Here's how I'm going to do it. Okay, yeah, it's going to be hard and I'm going to have to work. I'm going to do a lot of things, but I'm going to do this. I'm going to chase my dream and I'm not going to let anybody define me or anything. [00:10:30] I'm going to go." I just accepted the fact that this is the path that was given to me for whatever reason.

That's one of the main reasons I got into coaching. Coaching gave me clarity for my life, it turned my liabilities into my greatest assets and it allowed me to give back to all the people who had given to me. That was a huge moment for me, obviously. Graduating high school was a big moment, going to Alabama. The counselor [00:11:00] called me in and said, "Hey," because I wanted to go to Alabama. Like I said, I didn't have a background of education so I didn't really understand that whole world. I had opportunities to maybe go to some junior colleges, a couple small schools, but for me I was like, "Well, I can't get the education that I need if I don't go to a big school." I had a counselor say, "Well, you can get a Pell Grant, you can get student loans and you can go." I said, "Well, that's what I'm doing."

I went to Alabama and I moved to [00:11:30] Tuscaloosa when I was 18 and I left when I was 31. I spent 13 years there. I walked on the team and great moment just being introduced at the team meeting spring of '89. As a team member in that first [inaudible 00:11:46]. Great moment of playing in my first game as a red shirt freshman that fall of '89, getting in the game. I mean, I could have died right there.

**Molly Fletcher:** You would have been good.

**Dabo Swinney:** Then a moment my sophomore year [00:12:00] when Coach McCorvey said, "Hey, I'm going to give you a shot today. If you do good, you're going to play this weekend." Making that travel squad. I stole the travel list off the board that Thursday. I stole it. It was an unbelievable moment. Just more fuel for my fire, if you will because I put all this work in. Then getting a scholarship, winning a national championship, being hired as a graduate assistant. Then February 2, 1996, Coach Stallings called [00:12:30] me in his office to hire me as a full time coach at 26. These are great moments.

My children being born, my marriage to my wife in 1994. There's so many moments along the way. Most of our life is not great moments. Most of our life is just a daily journey. That's what you have to enjoy because the moments are great, but they're so fleeting. You [00:13:00] have to learn to enjoy just the daily journey to whatever it is that you're focused on, whatever it is that you're doing, wherever you are in your life. That's what I try to do. We always say we got to have a windshield mentality here. That's what we always try to live with. I mean, hey, it's nice to look back from time to time. But man, it's always about what's next. That keeps you hungry, that keeps you focused, that keeps [00:13:30] you driven and keeps you from getting complacent.

I mean, a lot of great moments. Coming to Clemson was a great moment.

**Molly Fletcher:** You get the head job at Clemson and you talk about self-talk and moments. I mean, what did you tell yourself when that happened? And how did you make sure you were telling yourself the right things? I'm sure there was moments when you thought, "Man, can I do this?" You go home to your wife and go, "Man, this is big, honey. I've worked all my life for this. Can I do this?" Tell me how you did that.

**Dabo Swinney:** No doubt. Well, [00:14:00] yeah, I tell coaches all the time when I go speak, there's two things that I try to really hammer home with them. And I had this happen to me twice in my life, where it was reinforced. One is man, you got to prepare for your opportunity. When I was a player, I wasn't sure I was ever going to get an opportunity, but man, I was preparing. I knew my stuff, I studied every week, I knew the offense inside and out. I did everything. I paid attention [00:14:30] even when I wasn't getting reps. I was always preparing just in case. Who knows? Even though it didn't look like it was going to happen. Then all a sudden my sophomore year, Woody says, "Hey, I'm going to give you a shot today," on a Tuesday practice. "If you do good, you're going to play Saturday," just like that, out of the blue. You know what, but I was ready. I had a great practice and the rest is history.

Never went back to scout team, lettered three years, the whole deal. Then fast forward to '08, [00:15:00] when I'm a coach here and come to work on October 13th, '08 and the head coach and the AD walk in they're like, "Hey, making a change." Head coach says his peace and he'll be talking to us. He steps out, AD says, "Look, this is where we are," and he said he was sorry, but this is what he felt like needed to do. He said, "Hey, Dabo, you're now the head coach, need to see you in my office in five minutes." [00:15:30] This is also a lesson for how you speak to people and how you can create a different mindset. But I go into his office, I'm walking down there and I'm thinking this is fixing to be the most miserable seven weeks of my life. We're all fired, and now I've got to go and be out front of this train wreck. That was my mindset going in.

[00:16:00] But here's the thing. Since 1993, when I got into coaching, I had been preparing to be a head coach. I had been working on my philosophy, all the things that I thought were good, were bad, learning from everybody. Learning from the bad, learning from the good. I had been putting a book together for when that day came. I mean, I had been preparing. That's the first part. The second thing is you got to bloom where [00:16:30] you're planted. Just be great where you are. Go back to Alabama as a player, I'm just, "Hey, don't look like I'm going to play, but you know what, I'm going to be prepared. But here's the thing I am going to do, I'm going to be the best scout team wide out they've had here. Man, I'm going to bring it every day, I'm going to bloom right where I'm planted." You know what, that was my mindset. The reason it's important to do that is, people are paying attention. So out of the blue, Woody calls me over. I didn't even think he knew my [00:17:00] name. And now he's telling me he's going to play me.

Then fast forward to back to '08, hey, my focus was being the best receiver coach in America. Doing my job, I was so focused on just being great where I was. I'd just turned down the year before in '07, the opportunity to go join Coach Saban at Alabama. It was bad timing for me and I was like, "You know what, God called me here. I'm just going to [00:17:30] continue to be great here." Next thing I know a year later, I'm in this situation. I go in this AD's office thinking that he's going to say, "Hey, just do the best you can and maybe I'll get the next guy to keep you," or something like that.

He sits me down and he says, "Dabo," he said, "I just want you to know something. I've watched you for five and a half years." He goes, "And son, you're ready for this job." He said, "And I want you to know, here's what I want you to do for the next seven weeks. I don't want you to be the interim head coach. I want you to be the head coach. [00:18:00] And whatever you need to do to fix this, I'm going to support you. If you need to fire the whole staff, I don't care. Whatever you think you need, I want you to be the head coach." He goes, "No matter what happens, when the season's over, I'm going to give you an interview for this job." He said, "Because I've watched you for five and a half years, how you've coached your position, how you've recruited, how you handle yourself in the community, how you handle your family, how you handle discipline. Your relationships with the players."

Here's a guy that I don't know very well and he's observed this. [00:18:30] That's such a reinforcement to what I was saying. Man, just be great where you are. People are so caught up in climbing the ladder, this next step or this job. They forget, let's just be great right here. My mindset completely changed because of how he spoke to me. All the sudden, I walk out of there I'm like, "Well, dang. I've got a chance." I was so empowered. I knew I didn't have a great chance, but hey, I had a shot. He empowered me [00:19:00] to go be me. That's the biggest thing he did. He empowered me and I did. I told my wife, I said, "Hey, I got seven weeks to be the head coach and I'm going to do things the way I've always to do them. I'm going to have fun doing it. You know what, no matter what, this is going to be a great experience for me."

I just embraced it and so did the players. We went 4-2, I got the job [00:19:30] and I ended up making the Gator Bowl. But I was ready.

**Molly Fletcher:** Well, it sounds like you had something fall back on, both in your head, in your heart, and even physically you captured things so you were ready.

**Dabo Swinney:** No doubt, no doubt.

**Molly Fletcher:** But coach, tell me this. You walk out of the AD's office and you walk down the hall. Tell me a little bit about what you did next as it relates to your staff and your players. Get me inside of that meeting with the players and the coaches to get everybody on board with your new mindset and philosophy in leading from the heart.

**Dabo Swinney:** Yeah, it was hard. [00:20:00] Well, the first thing I did was I went and got by myself for about 45 minutes. Nobody knew where I was, because like I said, I walked out of there like, "Wow! This is not what I was expecting here." I just had literally a flood of thoughts coming into my head and I just had a notepad. I just started writing stuff down. I mean, it was just random. Just anything that was coming, I was writing it down and writing down. But then I [00:20:30] was like, "Ah, if I'm going to really be the head coach, then I'm going to have to make some very difficult changes and decisions." This is not an easy thing. I mean, when you become a leader, sometimes you get in situations where you have to make difficult decisions and you can't be emotional and personal about it. That's sometimes really hard to do, especially when you just get thrust into a situation. It's not like you had [00:21:00] three months to prepare, you got 45 minutes.

I just sat down and started writing out all these things that I felt like okay, I got to change, I got to implement. Then my mind turned to my staff. I was like, "All right, I know I'm going to have a team that's hurting, but I got a staff that's hurting too." First of all, I said, "You know what, I need to articulate to the staff what this AD told me." Even though none of these guys came to work for me, [00:21:30] I wanted to create hope in all of them. Maybe we get it done and I got a shot to get this job and some of you will have a chance to stay, but I can't promise anybody anything. But you know what, the best thing for all of us is to go do a great job.

I met with each coach individually. I made a change on offense because I just knew that the situation that we were in at the time we were struggling. There was a lot of negativity and I just knew [00:22:00] that I needed to change the voice and I needed a different dynamic there. I needed to be hands on in that situation to create hope in our players. I let a coach go and then I started shuffling the staff. I made GA's full time and sport guy full time. It was a crazy situation, but you know what, sometimes when you get in a situation like that, you just react [00:22:30] and respond and you go because you don't have a lot of time to think about it. I just met with every coach. I laid out to them what my expectations were and I made it clear, listen, here's the way it's going to be. If you can't operate this way then, hey, we can move on now. But those guys were great. That staff did an unbelievable job. Obviously, again, they didn't come to work for me, but they did an amazing job for our players and for me.

Then I met with the team [00:23:00] that afternoon after Coach Bowden met with the team. It was just me and the team. I wanted them to know the same thing. I articulated what the AD had told me because I wanted to create some hope in there and hey, listen. Then I challenged the seniors. Listen, it's not about what's happened, it's always about what's in front. You guys have a chance to change. It doesn't have to end the way it started. You can leave here [00:23:30] with some momentum, you can leave here with a good taste in your mouth, you can leave here feeling good about the direction of this program. You're either going to be part of the solution or be part of the problem. I laid out to them what the expectations were and I told them, "I don't have a very good chance at this job, there's not doubt. But I do have a chance and the next seven weeks, I'm all in."

That's where all in came from here. I said, "Here's the deal. We're going to practice at 6:00. [00:24:00] You guys don't owe me anything. You can clean your locker out, your scholarships are good. You guys can come back when the new coach is hired, but if you choose to come to practice tonight, here's the way it's going to be. Here's some things that we're going to do differently. We're going to go get this thing right." Man, they all showed up that night and we started the journey.

I'll always be thankful for that '08 senior group. Those guys didn't owe me anything, [00:24:30] but that group, without them, we're not sitting here today. Because they had to buy-in and take pride and belief in a future greater than our circumstance at the time. That's what they did and I'm really proud of them. The first game, we lost that week. But man, it was a totally different team. I was so proud of them. Then we went up to Boston and won for the first time. Like I said, finished four and two [00:25:00] and beat South Carolina. That gave me the opportunity to get the job.

**Molly Fletcher:** Okay, real quick. I want to tell you a little bit about our negotiation workshop, Game Changer Negotiation Training. After over a year of design and pilots all over the country, it's finally here. It's a one day, in-house transformational negotiation experience. The methodology is centered around building better relationships with people that we negotiate with, in order to connect, do more deals, [00:25:30] and do them faster. Visit gamechanger360.com or just email us at info@mollyfletcher.com if you're interested in learning more. All right, now back to the show.

You lead from the heart, as you've talked about. But you get inside, what I'm hearing you say, inside of the heads and the hearts of the people that you want to lead so that you can connect to them. So that you can help them be the best version of themselves.

**Dabo Swinney:** [00:26:00] Absolutely. That's one of my gifts that God has given me, is the ability to do just that. I think God's given me a unique ability to connect, to challenge, to discipline, to nurture, to serve, to love. Like I said, to just have unique relationships with those that I'm around. I've always said that's one [00:26:30] of my gifts. I knew God was going to put me in some type of profession where I was going to be involved with people on a daily basis. I did not know I was going to end up being a coach. But like I said, when I became a coach it was just like an instant light went off for me. Just total clarity of what my purpose is.

**Molly Fletcher:** Mm-hmm (affirmative), what your why is. Tell me about a player maybe, that was hard to connect with. That didn't maybe believe, that [00:27:00] you felt was not connected to your heart and your head and wasn't totally buying in. How did you get him to buy-in? How did you build that connection and trust?

**Dabo Swinney:** I mean, Dwayne Allen would be one that would jump right out at me and I love him like a son at this day. But man, I tried to get rid of him early. I told him to leave because I couldn't connect with him. I couldn't get him to buy-in. He was entitled, he was one of the worst [00:27:30] young people I've ever been around. You couldn't coach him, he was mean and bad attitude. Sooner or later there comes a point where you just got to move on. You try and you try, but I've got to always stay focused on the bigger picture of the team. Team always supersedes individual. You work really hard to connect with each individual, but sometimes guys, they just don't get it and they're not going to. [00:28:00] You try and you try, but he was one that eventually I kicked him out of practice. He storms in, he's going to tell me he's going to transfer. I couldn't get into the lady's office fast enough to get his papers signed.

But you know what, that changed him because that wasn't what he was expecting. I think just staying true to who you are and not compromising. So that you are consistent and sometimes you're going to lose a guy, [00:28:30] sometimes you're not. But you know what, they're all paying attention. You do everything you can to meet them right where they are. But sometimes you got to be willing to have some tough discipline in order to have a consistent culture and a consistent discipline. Dwayne, it was like, "Hey, look. We're not going to exist together." That really challenged him [00:29:00] because of my response. He thought I guess, I was going to beg him to stay. I guess this was his mode of operation in the past or something. I don't know.

I've never seen a guy transform like him. He became one of the best leaders I've ever had in this program. Some guys it just takes different buttons to push. I think that's the true art of coaching, is finding [00:29:30] how to connect and how to motivate that individual player to buy-in to the bigger picture of team and to sometimes see a future that they don't see.

**Molly Fletcher:** Mm-hmm (affirmative), for themselves, sure. That you see, but they don't see, yeah.

**Dabo Swinney:** To change how they think and teach them and empower them, not entitle them, through the disciplines of your program. I mean, I've had some certainly. [00:30:00] I've been a head coach now, it's going to be my tenth year coming up and I've had guys along the way that they're distracted. Young people sometimes are distracted and they get caught up in the wrong things, or they listen to the wrong people. Sometimes it just doesn't work. I've had guys that I've had to let go, that have called me later down the road to say thank you, because that's what they needed. [00:30:30] I loved them enough to do that. It takes a lot for me to get to that point, but sooner or later you've got to get in.

Again, I'm very patient, I'm very patient. I tell my coaches all the time, "Listen, they don't all develop the same. They're all different, we got to meet them where they are. But they're all good bamboo." The old story of the bamboo. Sometimes you [inaudible 00:30:58] water that bamboo seed for three years [00:31:00] and see nothing. Then all the sudden the fifth year, if you keep watering it, it'll grow 90 feet in six weeks. I say, "Hey, they're good bamboo, man. Just keep watering the bamboo."

**Molly Fletcher:** Yeah, it sounds like parenting, Dabo.

**Dabo Swinney:** Yeah, just stay patient. I've seen guys like Vic Beasley, that didn't get on the field till their fourth year, become an All American their fourth and fifth year and be eighth pick in the draft. Their red shirt freshman year, after their sophomore year, they are just lost sheep. [00:31:30] But we kept watering the bamboo. I've seen that time and time again. I've seen guys transform. I've seen Jordan Leggett, we called him Lazy Leggett as a freshman and sophomore because he just would not... We didn't widen the plate, if you will, for him. I love that [inaudible 00:31:52] football coach talking about a plate's 17 inches. What's happened now in society, everybody wants to widen the plate [00:32:00] for little Johnny because he can't throw it over 17 inches. Say, "Well, that's okay. We'll just widen the plate." That's just not what we do here.

Sometimes it takes some guys a little longer to transform. I've seen a Deon Cain who came in here as a freshman and man, you talk about a kid that had to change habits, had to learn to think different. He had to make a decision whether or not he was going to stay here. To see him transform his life, [00:32:30] that's special. Again, sometimes it's hard, but if you're really serving their heart and you're loving them, you'll continue to stay true and not widen that plate for them. Don't entitle them, empower them. Hopefully that transformation will take place. The other thing is surround them with a lot of good people, surround them with great resources because it can't just be me. It might be somebody else that makes that connection [00:33:00] that then leads to transformation and buy-in and maybe thinking a little differently or changing their work ethic. Whatever it is that's holding them back.

**Molly Fletcher:** That's good stuff, coach. There's so many Dabo-isms, I call them. One of the things you say is doing common things in an uncommon way. What do you mean by that? Can you give me some examples of that?

**Dabo Swinney:** Yeah, yeah, that's one of our foundational principles, if you will. When I got the job. I said, "Here's how we're going to change it." [00:33:30] It's not the big things, it's the little things. It's just doing the little things better then everyone else. It's being intentional in those little things. George Washington Carver, that famous quote of, "When you do the common things in an uncommon way, you will command the attention of the world." I put that quote up in two or three places when I first got this job and it's still in our new building here. It's the [00:34:00] little things, guys. It's how you get on and off the field. It's your body language, it's how you practice, it's how you think. Little things lead to big things.

So many people get so distracted on the big things, the talent, the whatever. I'm like, "Listen, if you're looking to create change, it's the trust and respect that you show others. Especially people who can't do anything for you. It's what you do when no one's looking. It's [00:34:30] your diet, it's how you clean up your locker room. It's the fact that we don't allow cups to be thrown on the ground. We put them in the trash can. It's how you leave the movie theater on Friday night when we go take the team to a movie." When our team leaves, they don't need to clean the theater because we got a blower, we blow it out. I mean, it's the cleanest theater. But our players, all the sudden now they start to buy-in to these little things and the importance of these little things.

Again, [00:35:00] let's do the common things in an uncommon way. I carry that to our staff and social [inaudible 00:35:06]. That's how we've gotten here. That's one of the things I told them the night before we won the national championship. I said, "You know how we got here? You know how we're going to win? Same way we've gotten here. Just by doing common things in an uncommon way." It's our effort, it's our focus, it's our love for one another, it's the enthusiasm, it's our body language, it's our belief. [00:35:30] It's not well, we got better players than everybody or a bigger budget than everybody, all these things. Certainly nine years ago, we weren't even close to any of that. But we just one step at a time and every success, every failure, just continuing to learn and grow and stay focused on the overall vision of the program.

**Molly Fletcher:** Another one I love, Dabo, is BYOG, bring your own guts. Can you [00:36:00] give me a story behind that one?

**Dabo Swinney:** That just came that Notre Dame game. It was a crazy time. We hadn't played Notre Dame since 1978 or '79 or something at Clemson. Joe Montana had brought them back to win at the last minute. Clemson hadn't played Notre Dame since the '70s. It was this long awaited game that everybody had been waiting for for five years when it got put on the schedule. Then all the sudden the [00:36:30] year is here that we're finally going to play Notre Dame. It's this hype. Well, then it turns out they're number three in the country, we're tenth in the country. Then oh, by the way, we had a 16 day layoff between our last game and this game. Oh, and by the way, we got a hurricane and it's game day and it's all these things. There was just this ton of hype.

It's the 2015 season and [00:37:00] we knew we had a chance to have a good team. We ended up going 14 and 0, got beat in the national championship. But it was such a huge, huge moment. Just the weight of the world type of a moment, getting ready for. Then oh, by the way, I mean, it's going to be a torrential downpour the whole game. You got all this stuff. My message before the game, that's where that came from because I told our players [00:37:30] in the locker room, I'm like, "Hey, guys. You know what, listen, I know there's a lot of emotion. It's pouring down rain, it's got all this and that. We're playing Notre Dame, they're the number three team. It's all this and that."

I was like, "But hey, listen. Here's then what I'm going to tell you guys. We give you everything possible known to man to help you be successful. I mean, we give you a great place to live, we give you training, we give you great food. We give you strength conditioning, we give you good coaching. You're getting [00:38:00] an education. We give you scholarships, we give you all these things, all right. But I can't give you guts, all right. I can't give you heart. Let me tell you, it takes guts to walk out into what we're fixing to walk out into. Now, you got to bring that yourself. I can't give you that. You got to bring that. That's on you and tonight, it's going to take a lot of guts. It's going to take a lot of heart. [00:38:30] That's what it's going to take."

It was an unbelievable game, emotional game. It came down to the two point conversion, last play. We tackled a guy on the goal line. I mean, it was unbelievable and it was an absolute hurricane. The place was packed. There was nowhere to stand, nowhere to sit. It's one of the most magical moments I've ever been a part of. You could just cut the tension with [00:39:00] a knife. And all the sudden we win and they stick a microphone in front of you. Like, "What'd you tell?" I'm like, "Well, hey, you got to bring your guts."

**Molly Fletcher:** That's where it came from.

**Dabo Swinney:** Came from and holy cow, did that take one a life of its own.

**Molly Fletcher:** Well, it's a good one. It's a good one, man and it worked. You won a national championship as a player at Alabama, of course, and then as the head coach of Clemson. I don't think you could have written a better ending to the national championship victory, right? Tell me this, walk me through the final drive [00:39:30] of how your guys were prepared to execute in a moment with such intense pressure.

**Dabo Swinney:** Well, we lost out there at Arizona the year before. That's one of those moments where I always say, "God never says oops." I don't like that. I remember walking across the field and I'm devastated because that just wasn't the way it was supposed to be. We're supposed to win, this is the end of the story. This is how it's supposed to go. I mean, we're 14 and 0. Are [00:40:00] you kidding me? We're playing Alabama in the national championship in Arizona. We're going to win this game. I mean, this is the way it's supposed to be, 15 and 0 and national champs. Obviously, it didn't go our way and it was just some very painful moments because I thought we had the better team. I really did and I thought we outplayed them. But literally, there was just a few plays that cost us.

I just remember like, " [00:40:30] Man, God. I know you never say oops, but man, this isn't how I saw it going right here." I mean, this is like the end of the movie or something. It was devastating, it really was. That locker room was unbelievable. But I just told our guys, "That's the game. Hey, I love you." I told them that, I said, "Hey and listen, all I can tell you is you learn from the good, you learn from the bad. You know what, we're going [00:41:00] to get better from this. It's in Tampa next year. You know what," I spoke it into life right there in that locker room. I said, "Hey, we'll be back. We're going to finish this."

So when we started over that Spring, my whole message was because we had Deshaun, we had all those guys back. I said, "First of all, everybody's going to be putting hype on. We're going to embrace that. Hey, let's embrace it and our whole thing this year is let's just finish with no regrets. I think when we walked off the field we had some regret. So what a great lesson for all of us, [00:41:30] especially young people. Let's make sure that when it ends, regardless, let's finish with no regrets and here's how we're going do that."

I put up a little tape, five or six plays and I said, "You know what, it just comes down to the little things. The things we always talk about. The things that we control, not the things we don't control. Listen, you're going to play good teams, they're going to make plays. I'm talking about the things that we control. It's our ball handling, it's not jumping off side. It's [00:42:00] knowing what the play call is. It's having your eyes on the right things. It's the discipline. This is how we finish with no regrets. Here's what we got to do. Everybody's got to just do a little extra."

That was our mindset going into the year. As it all works out, here we are. I'll never forget going into it. I used Secretariat all year with the team in '16. I was just talking about what a great champion he was and once he got out front, [00:42:30] he just accelerated. He just stayed so focused. He didn't look to his left, didn't look to his right. He just had this unbelievable focus and belief. We're getting ready to go to Tampa and we killed Ohio State out in the Fiesta Bowl, played great. We're getting ready to go to Tampa. Lo and behold, playing Alabama again. I just felt this confidence with these guys. But Tim Bourret, my SID, comes up to me. He goes, "You know how many career wins [00:43:00] you got?" I'm like, "No." He goes, "You got 88 career wins." I'm like, "What?" That was my number in college. I'm like, "Wow!"

Then we get there, I never went to the lobby, but I had a few of my players texting me like, "Coach, you ain't going to believe what's in the lobby." They think I set it up or something, but they were auctioning off a picture of Secretariat. We just had this belief, but we knew what we were getting into. It's one thing to think you're good enough, it's another thing to know [00:43:30] you are. We knew, we were prepared for it to come down to the last play. We were disappointed with the fact that they scored, but Deshaun Watson was just such an unbelievably committed leader and so confident. That's what the great ones, they make everybody else better. They make everybody else calmer. His word for the year was legendary. They all choose a word. His word for the year was legendary. [00:44:00] That's what he told his players. He gathered them up, it was two minutes and one second left. He's like, "Let's go be legendary, boys."

That last drive, I don't even know how to describe it other than it was just a unbelievable confidence. There's no way they're going to stop us. We're four down, we had this unbelievable belief. Right out of the gate, first play, boom! We hit a little quick out. Next thing [00:44:30] we get man to man and Mike Williams makes a great catch, Deshaun makes a great throw. It was just this belief and this poise. Clock's ticking down, but total calmness on our sideline. The communication with me and the coaches, it was magical. It was beautiful.

That's how I look at things. I mean, God never says oops. I think the fact that I mean, we hadn't won a national championship in 35 [00:45:00] years and that we end up beating Alabama with one second on the clock. It was this incredibly powerful moment and it would have been great no matter what. But I think it was even more so because of what had happened the year before. What a great lesson for all of those players. We would have finished 15 and 0. Listen, that'd been great, but I think the fact that we failed on that huge stage and these young [00:45:30] people had to stand up, all of us, and go back to work and do something that was going to be incredibly hard and it comes down to this and we get it done. What a lesson for the rest of their lives. That failure doesn't have to define you.

That's what happens. A lot of people, when they have failure or adversity in life, it either destroys them or defines them. With God, he'll use that failure to develop you. That's what that game [00:46:00] out in Arizona did. It just developed us even better. It was just like I said, a magical year. Unbelievable moment, we were at our best when we had to be. Just something I'll never forget. Can't wait to do it again.

**Molly Fletcher:** Right. Well, and you recovered quickly. It sounds like you got rid of that rear view mirror fast. You were looking out the windshield. You had a group of guys that loved each other, so it allowed you to recover.

**Dabo Swinney:** That was our culture. We've got an established [00:46:30] culture and that's just ingrained in them from the time they get here. Even though other people are going to talk about it and try to define it, hey, we're going to develop through it. We're going to keep getting better. Even when you win. I mean, last year. That's one of the things I love about last year's team, is last year's team to me, their legacy will always be that hey, they proved Clemson was built to last. Because we weren't even picked to win [00:47:00] our division. We had so many people gone and starting over on offense. But yet we end up making the playoff and winning the league for the third year in a row. There's a lot of confidence that comes with that.

Whereas the year before, everybody's telling us we're going to win it all and they didn't. This past year, everybody's telling us we can't win the league, we can't win the division. We're a year away, but yet we're a few plays away from playing for another national championship. [00:47:30] I think that that's what I'll always appreciate about last year's team. Same thing though because all year, all everybody talked about was who wasn't here anymore. But these guys continued to look forward and have a belief. That's how we've created the consistency.

**Molly Fletcher:** Sure, sure. Do you do goal setting with your guys? Or is it more of a mission, vision?

**Dabo Swinney:** Yeah, we got goals. Our goals are the same every year as far as our team goals. But then we do do goals with [00:48:00] them individually. Like, "Hey, here's where you are." I'll meet with them, do an exit interview every year. Each coach will do the same thing with their position group. Every Spring I make them write down goals for a position group. I make them meet with them, talk about it. Hey, what do we want to get done as a position group? What do we want to get done as an offense and a defense? Special teams, big picture there. But as far as our team goals, they're always the same. [00:48:30] They don't ever change.

I think the biggest thing though, what I've learned along the way, is the goals are great, it's the daily commitment that matters the most. If your daily commitment's not greater than your goal, then it's just something hanging on the wall.

**Molly Fletcher:** Do the guys do individual goals too?

**Dabo Swinney:** They do, mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Molly Fletcher:** Okay. I know you love sharing ideas, resources that you lean on. What are some of the ways that you stay curious as a leader and continue to grow each and every moment? Which is clear that you do.

**Dabo Swinney:** [00:49:00] Oh, I just love being around other people. I learn from other people. I love going on the Nike coach's trip every year, with about 18 to 20 other head coaches and picking people's brains. I like to listen. Not just coaches, but anybody and everybody. Not just football coaches. I like to read. We have different speakers come in from time to time that sharpen all of us. My staff, we have a [00:49:30] daily devotional here every day. It could be anything, it could be motivational, inspirational, personal, spiritual. It could be whatever you want it to be. The people around me keep me sharp, my family. But I'm just always trying to get better. Like I said, sometimes it's just confirmation. Bring in a lot of people. I got the Oklahoma State staff here today, I [00:50:00] got the Troy head coach here today. We had Boise State here last week, that I invited in here.

I try to just find all the opportunities I can just to talk. Again, sometimes it's confirmation, sometimes oh, ooh, I like that. I'm always trying to just get better.

**Molly Fletcher:** You know what's so cool, is I mean, there aren't a lot of football coaches that win national championships that talk about love and vulnerability and heart and you do. It's clear that's part [00:50:30] of what makes you you and so special.

**Dabo Swinney:** Oh, yeah. Listen, I couldn't do it any other way. I wouldn't be successful. I think everybody's got to be who they are and be genuine that way. Because then everybody knows what they're getting into and what they're signing up for. I always hate the term be de-recruiting. I'm like, "If I've got to de-recruit somebody, that means I wasn't genuine and authentic in the recruiting process." Just for me, that's just [00:51:00] how I'm wired and for me to try to be somebody else or do it another way, I probably wouldn't be successful.

I think at the end of the day, you got to be who you are. There's lots of different ways to win, lots of different ways to motivate, et cetera. But for me, this is just what I believe. I think that the key to coaching is love. Love isn't always warm and fuzzy, it's [00:51:30] just not.

**Molly Fletcher:** Right. It's discipline at times, sure.

**Dabo Swinney:** It's a lot. Like my three boys, that's what I tell all the players. "Hey, sometimes I ain't going to like you, but I'll always love you." Sometimes that's how you grow, that's how you get better. To be honest with you, I don't coach this team any different than I coached my receivers for years. The way I ran my position group, I just run the whole team that way now. I really haven't changed much [00:52:00] from that.

**Molly Fletcher:** Coach, we end with a rapid fire segment. So I'm going to fire off some questions and you just tell me what comes up for you. Does that sound good?

**Dabo Swinney:** Okay.

**Molly Fletcher:** All right, your favorite book.

**Dabo Swinney:** Man, favorite book probably would be Lead for God's Sake.

**Molly Fletcher:** I love that book, I read that too. That's a great book. The biggest influence on your career?

**Dabo Swinney:** Gene Stallings, [00:52:30] Woody McCorvey.

**Molly Fletcher:** Got it. What's your biggest pet peeve?

**Dabo Swinney:** In what area of life? I got a lot of pet peeves.

**Molly Fletcher:** You got a laundry list? What about let's just go professional.

**Dabo Swinney:** On the football field, one of my biggest pet peeves is guys not getting off the field. The guy's walking off the field. That's one of my pet peeves. Or guys trying to create their own uniform. That's another pet peeve.

**Molly Fletcher:** [00:53:00] What about in the office with your staff?

**Dabo Swinney:** Pet peeve, just a lack of attention to detail. Not being detailed in what you're doing.

**Molly Fletcher:** What's the best advice you've ever received?

**Dabo Swinney:** Best advice I've ever received. I mean, I've had so many people pour into me over the years, it's hard for me to just say, "Oh, man. That was the greatest advice." I mean, if I just had to say one thing, it would be to trust the Lord [00:53:30] with my life. That's the best advice that I could give anyone. Put your eyes on the Lord in all you do, believe in yourself and don't ever quit. That's probably the greatest advice that I've ever received.

Professionally, Coach Curry told me one time when I saw him, he said, "Just be Dabo. That's what got you here." He also told me, he said, "No job is worth your family. Make sure when it's all over, you don't look back with regret. [00:54:00] But you make balance and you make time for your family. Then make sure you manage your money because it's a volatile profession."

**Molly Fletcher:** Boy, that's good advice right there.

**Dabo Swinney:** Yeah.

**Molly Fletcher:** That's good stuff. And you've done that and you have a really low turnover on your staff because you've made balance a priority. I know that your family is well intact because you've made it a priority.

**Dabo Swinney:** No doubt, no doubt.

**Molly Fletcher:** It's a lesson. The show's called Game Changers. One last question for you. Who's a game changer [00:54:30] that inspires you and why?

**Dabo Swinney:** Game changer that inspires me and why? Well, my wife is a game changer and she's always inspired me. I met her in the first grade and started going together in middle school and dated in high school and college and so forth. But she just inspires me by how genuine she is, how she's just such a servant and how she just [00:55:00] genuinely loves people and is always giving. She truly is. God knew what I needed. She's been an unbelievable inspiration for me.

My mom, because she spent the first 10 years of her life pretty much in the Cook Children's Hospital. But yet, all these things that people said she would never do, she'd never have children, but yet she had three boys. [00:55:30] She didn't have a lot of education, but yet she's a very wise lady. She became a majorette, she ended up going to high school and became a majorette. But then just her toughness. I mean, she never had life easy, but yet she always found a way to love her kids, help, sacrifice. Her willingness to go work. I was able to witness [00:56:00] that toughness. She gave me a lot of motivation because I think without that, I mean, who knows? But I definitely think that watching her was part of God's way of creating a drive and a work ethic in me and a belief in a better future. I was so driven to make a difference for my mom and for my future family and kids, wife. She's been a game changer for me for sure.

And Woody McCorvey, [00:56:30] who was my position coach at Alabama. Just his grace. He's the first African American offensive coordinator, I think in the SEC. But just his grace, his consistency, his demeanor, his discipline, his wisdom. He's been an unbelievable role model, father figure, inspiration to me [00:57:00] in my life.

And Coach Stallings. Coach Stallings showed me that you could have balance. He was tough, man, was he tough. He was hard on me, he was tough. But yet he was this great father. His relationship that I witnessed with Johnny, a Down Syndrome son, and his four daughters and the type of husband he was to Ruth Ann. I mean, he was a great inspiration to me as a young player and a young, married coach [00:57:30] on his staff. To witness his consistency, his discipline, the way he served other people and used his platform to make a difference.

**Molly Fletcher:** Well, and coach, you're a game changer to so many. The world of sports needs more Dabos, so thank you for what you do and who you are.

**Dabo Swinney:** I appreciate it. Good to be with [00:58:00] you.

**Molly Fletcher:** Thanks, as always, for listening to Game Changers with Molly Fletcher. If you liked the show, be sure to subscribe on Apple Podcasts. There you can listen to previous episodes and leave us a review, which helps other people find out about the show.

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