

Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl: Oregon vs Indiana

Friday, January 9, 2026

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Indiana Hoosiers

Coach Curt Cignetti

Fernando Mendoza

D'Angelo Ponds

Postgame Press Conference

CURT CIGNETTI: It's a great win against a really good football team. Really proud of our players, our staff. It all started with Ponds' pick six, and then they put a nice drive together. Had us off balance a little bit, but we responded with a score and then created some turnovers on defense. We capitalized on offense, and that was the story of the first half.

Scoring early in the second half and distancing ourselves helped. Got a couple guys nicked in some areas we were thin on defense, which was concerning, but it's a great win.

Q. Cignetti, your ability to keep finding guys to make plays and Tuioti tonight, the way he played and just the number of guys you're getting contributions from now?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think when you have good people and they buy in and they prepare the right way, we have a lot of those kind of guys. They're high-character, smart guys that can play and Coach Haines puts them in position to make plays and put the offense in conflict and attacks.

And on the other side of the ball, too, in special teams as well, we've been very consistent in all three phases.

Q. Coach, what were you trying to negate with their team and execute with your team? What were you trying to negate with their team and execute with your team?

CURT CIGNETTI: To me, every game is the same. You got line of scrimmage. You gotta win the line of scrimmage. You gotta be able to run the ball, stop the run, affect the quarterback, protect the quarterback. And then



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the turnover ratio, which was huge in this game.

We're number one in the country in that. And those turnovers in the first half led to 21 points, explosive plays, and then you gotta be good in critical situations, third and fourth down, two-minute. And special teams always needs to be a win, or at least a draw.

Q. Fernando, your thoughts on not only what you've accomplished, but what you've given to Hoosier Nation, this ride that now goes onto the National Championship game?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I think it is the other way around. Hoosier Nation has given myself and the coaching staff here has given myself so much great opportunity. Told me a year ago, I believe a year ago today or day before actually is the day I arrived on campus after transferring, so Hoosier Nation, the coaching staff and the entire sports staff has given myself so much opportunity here and so much belief in my character and my play, not only as a player, also as a leader. I'm forever in debt.

Q. Fernando, you'll be playing in the National Championship game in Miami. What does it mean for you to be able to play this game for the first time in your collegiate career in your hometown?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I think playing a National Championship would get anybody fired up and definitely stir up some emotions. However for myself, I believe it's going to be a great game. The Hurricanes are a fantastic team, led by a great coach in Coach Cristobal. I think it's really just playing our brand of football, playing the Indiana Hoosiers football, that even though it is the National Championship, we don't have to do anything that is out of character. We just gotta play our brand of football, and that's what has led us to this point in 50 wins this season.

Q. Fernando, in your first two playoff games here, you have eight touchdown passes and only five incompletions and tonight you threw touchdown passes to four different guys.

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What does it say about not only your accuracy throwing and finding guys, but also just how the plays have been getting schemed up, you get guys open?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I would say I've come a long way from being in game one. Game one, I threw zero touchdown passes. I was trying to be Superman, and then the coaching staff settled me down and was like, hey, you don't gotta be Superman. We have a great defense and a great superstars, playmakers and offense, so just do your job.

My job is to be effective with making really accurate balls and really great decisions, and that's what I pride myself on every single play, and so I'm glad those results came. However, none of that matters. All that matters right now is the National Championship.

Q. For both players, guys that are 21, 22 years old, they chase instant gratification and kind of ride with that. You two and then this whole team appreciate high highs, but you're able to reset.

How are you able to week in, week out as you approach a National Championship game?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I feel like it stems down from the coach's mindset. Coach Cig does a great job keeping us steady, keeping us moving one week at a time. We take things one week at a time, success or failure. We don't look back at it. We just keep moving forward.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say delayed gratification is a concept that was brought by stoicism. It's one of the greatest attributes. If you ever have delayed gratification, discipline in yourself and your discipline in your process and preparation, you're able to execute every single week this play or this game is the National Championship. Like this game is the most important thing.

So I think a lot of players and a lot of coaches and everybody in Bloomington has done a great job of upholding that concept of delayed gratification and discipline throughout all aspects of our lives when there's a lot of distractions especially with the BIG TEN Championship and the Heisman and all the other things, I think our team has done a great job of keeping that delayed gratification at the forefront.

Q. Coach Cig, I wanted to ask you about defensively obviously you've got players doing great things. How much does Coach Haines' ability to kind of create schematic confusion factor into what your defense is able to do?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think it's a huge part. It's hard to put a percentage on because the players make the plays, but they're well coached, and they've got a lot of repetition, stemming from spring ball fall camp.

But our philosophy is to attack, and we are moving a lot of pieces in the front seven. And we've always been Top 5 in the country against the run, TFLs and sacks and that's just our philosophy on how to play defense.

Q. Fernando, this did not sound like a neutral site game. What impact did the crowd have you on?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Shout out to Hoosier Nation for being here. We played an awesome stadium, week five. I believe I had five or six pre-snap penalties.

CURT CIGNETTI: Seven.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Seven. (Laughs). Seven pre-snap as Coach Cignetti just stated. That's huge. That's huge, especially that's one of the ways that you're able to lose a game.

And I think that not having to be able -- not having to go on Sally count because of Hoosier Nation being here and making them go on Sally count is a huge aspect of the game and offensive operation that's not talked about enough.

So shout out to Hoosier Nation because going on Sally count especially against the Ducks is always tough and making the other team go on Sally count, that might have as well counted for some points.

CURT CIGNETTI: No doubt.

Q. Curt, can you evaluate Fernando's performance?

And Fernando, what do you feel like went right tonight?

CURT CIGNETTI: I thought he was incredible. He was great. I also thought our receivers made some nice contested catches. I thought Sarratt was on fire. Charlie Becker made some big plays. EJ and Cooper got in the act as well. And when he wasn't there, Fernando used his legs. I mean, he was on top of the game, and it was a huge difference his performance in this football game.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah. I would say that it was a great team effort. There was a lot of contested catches. Charlie Becker's touchdown, Elijah Sarratt, you know, making catches all over the field. Omar Cooper and EJ, they were getting open all game and to be able to throw with those guys, I'm like a point guard out there. I'm

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throwing to the open guy, and they shoot the threes.

I got the glory and the fame, but those guys are the ones that make the shots, make the threes. And there was still a lot. Although the scoreboard does not show it, there is still a lot I have to improve on, like footwork. There was a protection check I missed, and there's a ball that I want to have back.

So there's always things to improve and especially for the National Championship game, I think it's important not to dwell on the past. That was a great performance. This is the National Championship. And for this next week like for myself, I don't think there's any time to celebrate because this is what everybody dreams of, and I'm going to put every ounce of my body into preparation going into the next game.

Q. D'Angelo, you talked about changing up your looks after watching the film. What did you see on the pick six and did you change the lookup?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Actually I did. We play a lot of cover three. So coming out, I kind of knew it was a RPO type of deal. I played off, so I could break on the ball. Kind of read his eyes and got a jump on it. It was an amazing feeling walking into the end zone.

Q. Coming off these two playoff performances you've had, what do the next 10 days look like to maintain the level of play you have had in the playoffs?

CURT CIGNETTI: We'll put the best preparation schedule together try to keep it as normal as possible. We'll have an extra day regardless of what we decide to do. And the reason we are where we are is because we're prepared the right way. That's why we've been able to meet the challenge and put it on the field.

We got ten days. Everybody will be off tomorrow. And then Sunday, I'm leaning toward players off Sunday as well. We'll have a couple of official visits on campus and be back at it on Monday.

Q. Dan, for the student-athletes, you believed in the mission for Coach Cig to come to Indiana and see this through and now you're going to the National Championship.

Coach, you believed in these gentlemen to come in and be a part of this movement. So what each of you can say about believing in each other to the point of getting to the National Championship.

D'ANGELO PONDS: I would say, from my perspective, I

feel like I believed since day one, trusted this guy. If I didn't believe, I wouldn't have come here, I feel like. I knew we were going to be successful. Honestly, couldn't have asked for this. Didn't think we were going to a National Championship, but I trusted in him and trusted his process, and I knew we were going to be successful.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah. It's been a great journey, I believe, for all of us. I still remember when I was in the transfer portal, Coach Cignetti said, hey, if you're going to come here, you're going to develop into a hell of a quarterback, and it wasn't about, at that point, hey, I'm going to promise you a National Championship. It was you're going to develop and have that belief.

Means a lot to myself, and I think I've been able to see myself, the offense, the entire team grow throughout. So I just think it means a lot that, although social media before the year was like, oh, Cinderella story, we all had the internal belief in the facility, behind closed doors, and I believe that's what helped us propel us to this moment.

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, I think without question, these are two key cogs in the machine. But we have great people upstairs and downstairs. The assistant coaches do a great job of preparing these guys for game day. And downstairs, we got a lot of veteran guys that have strong character, very intelligent, and they can play.

And the bottom line really in this business is you gotta get everybody to think alike. And if you can get everybody thinking alike, focused on the same thing, you can accomplish anything.

Q. Fernando, so you do have experience against your next opponent, Miami. You played them last year. What do you remember about that game and how do you think that could help you potentially next week?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, so they did switch defensive coordinators. And the last year, with a very different offensive schematic as well, however, it was a tight game that Cam Ward, who is fantastic, ended up being the number one overall pick, and that game came down to the wire.

I remember running on the third down, getting knocked out by Wesley Bissainthe. I hope I said the last name right. I apologize for that. But he's a great player. So I remember getting knocked out there, and we lost by one point. It was heartbreaking. So just looking forward to the opportunity to play them again.

Q. Coach, odds of Indiana winning the National Championship preseason were 100 to 1. What should . . . when all is said, we're done.®

they be going into this game against Miami?

CURT CIGNETTI: You all have a job to do, and a lot of times you'll piggyback off somebody else's story or belief, and there's pressure to get it nowadays with the internet, get the story out there. And a lot of those, people really don't know our team. They don't know what we're made of, what we got. And I get it.

There was a lot of skepticism after last year, that we were a fluke. That team did a lot of great things and got it all started. That team never trailed until the ninth game of the year, and when it did, 10-0 in the first quarter up at Michigan State, they scored 47 straight.

I think a lot of that negative stuff in the media fueled the guys returning from this team, and we added some real key pieces, the main ones sitting right here on my left, but other ones as well. Great leaders, great players.

And we've just built off our successes, and we've won some big games on the road, and it helps when you have a quarterback play his best football when the game is on the line in the fourth quarter. So here we are.

Q. Coach, do you mind touching on the decision to get D'Angelo the ball on the offensive end, and then Fernando, what was it like throwing it to a guy that you're typically playing against?

CURT CIGNETTI: I can actually take credit for that one. I still sit in in the offensive meetings, but I don't call the plays anymore and haven't for about nine years.

It was a play that matched up well against their defense on third and two. We thought we could also use it in medium. And D'Angelo is probably the best start/stop guy and he's got speed and thought it would be a nice little change up pitch.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah. I mean, especially against solid team, it's basically the same play Jeremiah Smith ran in the National Championship last year against Notre Dame. D'Angelo you saw him pick six. His start/stop is incredible, if not the best in the nation.

So to be able to have him run that and throw the man coverage, and it was man coverage. So at that point I needed to put the ball in the vicinity of D'Angelo because although he's a defensive back, he has fantastic ball skills. He has great hands. He could be a receiver, he has such great hands. It was kind of an extended hand off to him and not only is he a great change of direction, great hands, he is also the fastest player on our team, too. So that helps for the first down.

Q. Fernando, can you just talk about you've touched on it, but how much of a full circle moment this is for you going back to your hometown? Have you played in Hard Rock before? What does this mean to you?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I've actually not played in Hard Rock before, but I've been to a lot of games there. And it's a very full-circle moment for myself. If you open Google Maps and put my address, the University of Miami campus, it's under a mile away. And I walked there, biked there, played basketball rec games in the offseason there.

It means a lot to me, however, I think the National Championship means a lot to everybody. So I wouldn't want it any other way, on a great stage, that the Indiana Hoosiers are going to have to compete their butt off. They're a great team and really looking forward to the opportunity.

Q. Fernando, heading to the National Championship first time, as well as Mario Cristobal, the head coach of the Miami Hurricanes, two Latinos going at the national stage, what does this do for the Latino community?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah. It does a lot. I think it puts it in the forefront and the light, and I think we've seen Latinos in football. It's been growing, and every single year, you hear about more Latinos, like Jake Rodriguez, great Latino from Texas Tech, and I think it's just a really good path of just making football more adverse and inclusive. I think it's great.

I mean, Mario Cristobal played with my dad in high school, and so I do know him. I think it's going to be a great opportunity for both teams.

Q. Fernando, D'Angelo, you haven't played this completed game without a tremendous week of practice. Just curious if you could shine a light on a couple of your teammates that did a great job in getting you ready and what they did and what that meant to the output on the field.

D'ANGELO PONDS: I would say scout team did a great job giving us a good look all week during practice. I feel like they challenged us. We actually get better from going against the scout team.

I feel like our coaches also do a good job of putting together a game plan for us. Each week they put us in the right positions, and we kind of just buy into what they're saying and trust in what they're saying, and I feel like that's what makes us successful.

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FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I think that week of practice the scout team does a fantastic job with all of the GAs, getting all of those guys in the right positions and the right looks and a lot of the looks that we had on scout team showed up today. And I think that was great.

Scouting by the coaching staff and by the GAs to really put that in the pudding, so we were able to execute today. And also the guys -- the entire offensive line like Pat Coogan and Riley Nowakowski, the tight end, those guys really get us energy and juice because our practices are fast and they're short. So a lot of people can tend to be a little tired, but we need intense energy throughout the entire week of prep. And those are two guys and two captains of the offense that did a fantastic job of really motivating our guys whether it was the first play of scout team or the last play.

CURT CIGNETTI: And we have another Miami guy here returning to Miami, don't we, Ponds?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: D'Angelo actually picked me off in high school in a Miami game. (Laughs)

MODERATOR: Is there a story behind that that we need to hear?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: He's a really good player and he picked me off. I mean, it was starting off against man, but against this guy, it's tough. I'm thankful to be on his team now. It's a good full-circle moment for both of us to play on the same team now. Thanks, guys. God bless.

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