

Big Ten Conference Football Championship Game: Ohio State vs Indiana

Saturday, December 6, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Lucas Oil Stadium

Indiana Hoosiers

Coach Curt Cignetti

Fernando Mendoza

Elijah Sarratt

Isaiah Jones

Aiden Fisher

Postgame Press Conference

Indiana - 13, Ohio State - 10

CURT CIGNETTI: Great win; gutty game; hard-fought, physical football game. Wasn't perfect by either team. We found a way to survive it, made the plays when we had to.

And I thought, once again, when the game was on the line, you know, Fernando was throwing dimes and Charlie Becker was showing up making big plays and Sarratt with a big touchdown, our defense created a lot of issues.

Ohio State did start to scratch out a run game there in the second half and missed that field goal. Of course, we missed one, too, so, it's even.

So it's a great win for us, obviously, our first Big Ten title. Now I've got three and a half weeks to kind of humble this team again and get them ready for the playoffs.

Q. Your defense had eight tackles for loss, five sacks. What made them get after the quarterback? Stephen Daley had a big game. Rolijah Hardy had a big game as well, along with Aiden. What made you guys so successful on defense?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, I mean, that's been who we've been all year and really since 2019, I'm not going to lie to you. We've always been high on TFLs and sacks. So, we got a great effort from our front guys. And we're dialing up those blitzes, got the quarterback off rhythm, let him out of



the pocket a few times, which we can't do. But all in all, I thought we played pretty well.

Q. Isaiah, you were with this program for the previous regime. You've seen what this program was. You've seen what it's become. For somebody like you that's been along for that whole ride, what does this mean?

ISAIAH JONES: It means a lot. I know it means a lot to me, it means a lot to the guys that are maybe are holdovers. But it means a lot to the guys that came in, too.

It's the coaches buying in. They work all year long for us. It's the players buying in to the strength staff and the coaching scheme and for each other. We just want to play for each other and play our best.

Q. Coach and Fernando, you've been in some really tight situations in the fourth quarter and you've come through at Oregon, at Iowa, at Penn State. How did that help you prepare mentally for this kind of challenge here, because you had to come up with some big plays throughout the second half?

CURT CIGNETTI: No doubt about it. I mean, I think we probably all on the bench, as that clock started to tick down into the fourth quarter and it was game on the line, probably at some point felt like, wow, we've been here and we've won, and they've never been here.

So I think there's no question about it. When you've been through something one time, you're a lot better the second time. Gives you a lot of belief and confidence.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Throughout spring ball and fall camp, we practice a lot of two-minute drills and one-minute drills. Especially against a great defense, it primed us for the season. Whenever we got in high adversity situations we're always able to go out there and efficiently execute. And also the glue we had with our brotherhood, how much we care about the man beside us really makes us unshakeable.

So whenever we're in any adversity, we're always there sticking by each other and not finger pointing. I think that's



what elevates us to our competition and exceeds expectations in those high adversity moments.

Q. Curt and Isaiah, you said earlier this week, Curt, that you guys weren't at Ohio State's level in terms of recruiting yet, but you feel like you're closing that gap and a win this weekend could go a long way toward closing that gap. What can the future be? What can a win like this do for the future of your program?

CURT CIGNETTI: I didn't catch that whole question, I thought you were speaking to Isaiah.

Q. You said this week that you guys aren't quite at Ohio State's level recruiting-wise yet, but you feel like you're closing that gap and a win today could go a long way towards that. What can a win like this do for the future of your program, do you think?

CURT CIGNETTI: I don't know. Time will tell. It's hard to speculate. I think it gives us a lot more -- it's another step we need to take as a program. It's a great win, obviously. And we're going to go in the playoffs as the No. 1 seed. And a lot of people probably thought that wasn't possible.

But when you get the right people and you have a plan and they love one another and play for one another and they commit, anything's possible. And I think that's what you saw happen here.

ISAIAH JONES: I mean, this win, I mean, it kind of shows everybody, why not? Why would you not want to come to Indiana? I mean, for any of the doubters out there, I think this kind of was the final nail in the coffin for any of the Indiana doubters, Curt Cignetti doubters, the Hoosier doubters. I think this was the last thing that needed to be proved. And I think we did it.

Q. Elijah, what was your mood like when you had to sit out those couple of games? And as an aside, I see you've got another restaurant you're endorsing with Mother Bear's. Are you going to upgrade to now fancier places?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Being away from the game, I love the game, I've been playing it since I was 5, 6 years old. So just missing games I hate it, of course. It sucks being out there and not being able to contribute with my guys.

And Mother Bear's, shout-out Mother Bear's, best pizza in Bloomington. Y'all need to take a stop there and get that Sriracha special.

Q. Fernando, you had, I think, something like three dozen family members out there including your mom

and dad. What was it like to be able to share that with your family coming off the field?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I think what makes this moment so special tonight, just myself and my family, but for everybody, is just the community of Bloomington and how long they've waited for this and how much it means to everybody.

It means a ton to see all my family members travel out from Miami not knowing what the outcome's going to be, especially in an adverse situation. My mom, coming from Miami, making the tough trip over here to Indianapolis, always battling, struggling to go see my games. And my love for her is unconditional.

And I know a lot of our teammates had a lot of family members show out, and just Hoosier Nation showed out in general. And I think that that really helped us down the stretch. Whenever it was a third down they got loud. Whenever it was a fourth down, they got loud. And whenever we had a big play on offense, they really jolted that momentum forward.

So, seeing my family there means a ton to me, and it just shows unconditional love that my mom and I have for each other. But also it's just so great seeing Hoosier Nation, everybody else's family members out there supporting us.

Q. Fernando and Aiden, as Coach Cignetti emphasizes everything is earned, not given. Nothing good in life comes easy. So with a record-breaking season leading up to this very moment, and ultimately the win, how have you applied this message in your every practice, game and play?

AIDEN FISHER: For me, personally, I've been with Coach Cig a long time, and he's been preaching this a long time. For me, knowing how I could be the best version of myself as a player and a person, you have to apply that every day. You have to wake up with a mindset that you're going to give it your all and any aspect of your life to improve and make sure you're not staying complacent.

And I think a lot of the guys and our teammates now have really bought into that, and that's why this team in adverse situations really rises to the occasion. We've put ourselves in very stressful situations. And kind of the scenarios that have played out in these games, you know, final two minutes, a lot of times in practice.

You know, Coach Cig just does such a great job of bringing out the best in his players, and obviously his coaches as well, too.



But it's just, we were just talking about it. There's something about Coach Cig that just makes you want to play your heart out for him. And he does a great job getting the best out of everybody.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I think it's about being process-oriented, never being complacent. For example, when we Purdue last week, 56-3, Coach Cig came into the locker room and said, hey, it's like a great win. We're 12-0 for the first time in program history. However there's a lot, there's going to be a lot of you know things on film that we've got to clean up.

And I think it reverts back to the (indiscernible) philosophy of the never-ending journey of the process and not be complacent. And I think that Aiden said was beautiful, of you always want to push yourself every single day, every single play and every single rep, acting like it's the final play of the game, act like it's the most important play of the game, most important play of your life.

And I think that has helped motivate us propel us forward from games like Oregon, where, yeah, we won but we weren't complacent. We still had a lot of clean up on film and then next week we try to get better every single week.

And I think that our whole thing is not really competing against the component -- which it is, but it's really competing against ourselves to be the best version of ourselves. And I think that's why we were so effective.

Q. What was going through your mind when you saw your quarterback go down at the start of the game and he did not -- seemed like he was going to get up, but he did and obviously showed his toughness there, which I'm sure he showed you guys throughout the season?

CURT CIGNETTI: I missed it. I saw -- I was looking at the coverage. And then somebody on the headset said Fernando's down, and I saw him rolling around on the ground. And I was, like, oh, boy.

And then when I saw the replay before I got out to him, it looked to me like he had got hit not in the head but maybe had the wind knocked out of him. And that's what he confirmed.

You know, he's a tough guy. He takes some shots and he extends plays. And can't say enough about the way he competes. You got the heart of a champion, and played great tonight and when we needed him.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Although I got hit, I was never going to stay down. And that's one thing I know -- one

thing, I say it and I know it could be a little interpreted as a little criticism sometimes, but I will die for my brothers on that field. So, no matter where it's a gut punch, whether it's a head punch, whatever it is I'm always going to get back up.

And I was, I knew there was 100 percent confidence that I was going to play that game, play the rest of the game as we've worked so hard to get to this point that no hit, no knockout hit, knockout punch could take me out of that game because you know, because one thing about the Indiana Hoosiers football team is whenever they hit, we hit back harder.

Q. All the things that you accomplished tonight, whether it was the number one, getting into the playoffs, the Heisman, doing it here in Indianapolis, how do you think you'll remember this night when your career's over?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I think that's there's so many special moments, and it's so great to be -- perspective I assume the number one team in the nation. And I think it's just such a testament to everybody on the team. You know, I don't want to go in deep depth in with the Heisman, but I remember Coach Cignetti brought me in after, I think it was after UCLA, and he told me, he was like, hey, the Heisman's a team game. It's a team award. It's not a player award.

And if you win, then you can get nominated for it. And hopefully, you know, I would love the opportunity to get the invite to New York, which would be fantastic.

But I think it's just really a testament to the team. And it's not a player award. It's a team award. And I think it just speaks a testament to how much that this team has had that never-ending process of learning and getting better, and that has culminated at this point.

Q. Coach Cignetti, right now you find yourself winning your first Big Ten Championship, you are 13-0 right now. You're kind of the in the same spot as Oregon was last year. What steps do you take to not end up the same way they did last year, not let your season end early?

CURT CIGNETTI: I mean, two different teams, people. I mean, look, we get a bye. We're grateful to have a bye. We've accomplished a lot. You can't diminish what we've accomplished. And, you know, when we go to the next round it will be hard. Because every team left's a great team, you gotta play great football.

Q. Coach Cignetti, with Duke beating Virginia tonight

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and opening the door to James Madison getting into the playoff, would you like to get the opportunity to play your former school?

CURT CIGNETTI: So, Duke beat Virginia, which did what?

Q. Possibly opened up the opportunity for James Madison to be the fifth highest ranked conference champion and make their way into the playoff?

CURT CIGNETTI: No, I mean whoever we play, we play. I had five great years at James Madison. I love the people. I worked for a great AD and a great president. And it was a hard decision to come. Big reason I did was because I really felt strong about Scott and Pam Whitten.

And that's in the past. So I mean, whoever we play, we're going to have to have a plan, we're going to have to play well.

Q. Aiden and Isaiah, they get the ball back late in the fourth quarter, you guys are up 13-10. They drive down the field, but you guys obviously hold them. They missed a field goal. Aiden for you and Isaiah -- I mean you're the green dot guy -- what was your message, what were you telling the guys? And just finally that play by Rolijah in the end zone to knock that ball away, one-on-one, man coverage, just talk about that.

AIDEN FISHER: I would just say I told the defense continuously throughout the game, once we got the lead in that fourth quarter, if they don't score, they don't win. And we knew it was going to be on us. You know, hold them. Don't let them score.

And then obviously that play by Rolijah, he's a phenomenal player. He's taking steps every single week, every single week this year to get to where he's at now. I mean he just played an amazing game. He's worked so hard to earn to be in that position. And he took advantage of the opportunity he got.

And I think I can say that about our whole defense tonight. Isaiah Jones played an amazing game. The entire defense. And we knew it was going to come down to us. And as long as they didn't score, they didn't win. We are confident in our abilities when it came down to it.

Q. Aiden and Isaiah, possibility exists that you might have to see this team again down the road. What gives you guys confidence that this performance is repeatable against that offense?

AIDEN FISHER: I'm just confident what we do as a team

and a defense. If that opportunity arises again, we're going to be ready, we're going to game plan, strategize for it.

Right now, I think the focus is going to be on us watching the film, clean it up and moving forward and our improvements and how we can grow as a defense.

But if that opportunity arises, we'll be ready, we'll game plan it, and I'll be confident in my guys to go out there and do it again.

Q. Isaiah, I actually happened to meet your grandfather in the parking lot outside one of the games. How is he going to take tonight? I know he's a fan of yours more, but he said he was a Buckeyes fan for the last 25 years.

ISAIAH JONES: I think my family is just proud of me and proud of the steps I've taken. Hopefully he has a safe drive home, but I think he's going to be excited and happy for me.

Q. It's third and six, two minutes and 41 seconds to go. You elect to throw the ball and Fernando completes 33 yards down the field to Charlie Becker, what went into that decision to throw the ball there?

CURT CIGNETTI: I mean, they had -- when we started the drive, they had time and timeouts. They had enough time with their timeouts for about 16 plays at the start of our drive. And then they used their timeouts. And I wasn't going to play not to lose. We were playing to win. And the one thing, we do spend a lot of time on the clock, how many plays are left in the game, things of that nature. We kind of figured we had to get about three first downs. That's what I told the team.

You've got to get a first down. I wasn't going to punt the ball back to them with two minutes to go and no timeouts. We had to give our guys an opportunity to make plays. We were getting on top of them at certain points in that game, and Fernando was throwing great deep balls. And it was a great play.

Q. The middle eight where you stopped them, they got the ball back after the field goal with about two minutes to go in the first half and their first drive of the second half, how big was that to build momentum to say, hey, the offense could go now score and take the lead?

CURT CIGNETTI: We needed to stop them. I can't remember the exact sequence. They were moving the ball. We did stop them. I think the offense went down, put points. We've been really good at the end of the half,

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beginning of the third.

That's also where the game turned last year in their favor when we dropped the punt and then they had the punt return for a touchdown. So it was quite a reversal. But it was huge.

Q. Just the message you delivered at halftime, you know, you're in the game 10-6, you made some mistakes, but what was the general message at halftime?

CURT CIGNETTI: I kind of gathered them right at the beginning of the end of the half, which I usually don't do, and very calmly said, this is what we talked about, this is the kind of game we expected. They're going to make plays; we're going to make plays. And then it was a longer halftime, 25 minutes, because of the championship. And so finally, I gathered the team 20 minutes later, before we went out, it was more like, okay, do we have what it takes to win a gut-check, physical game like this? This is going to be a test of our toughness and our persistence. And we proved that we did.

Q. The game ends, the confetti is falling, you're able to watch your players celebrate this. Obviously you have more football to play, but what goes through your mind watching your players celebrate this, and just how special is it to see that for them?

CURT CIGNETTI: I mean, you celebrate. I'm proud of them. I'm proud of them and the coaches. And I'm kind of a "what's next" kind of guy. That's the way I'm wired. I'm thinking about where's Ryan Day. Where is Jeff Keag, how many interviews do I have to do? That kind of thing.

I liked our preparation coming into this game. I liked our mindset. And we had been here before. We hadn't been here before, but we'd been in a situation before against Oregon and prevailed.

Q. Can you take us through the 88-yard touchdown drive in the third quarter, just everything that went into that and how you guys were able to move down the field and take the lead there?

CURT CIGNETTI: I'm going to have to -- when you get my age, your memory isn't quite as good. 88 yards. How many first down conversions, is that the one right after them? Here we go. Seven plays, 88 yards. Okay.

One minute. This is them going 88 yards. 12 plays, 70 yards. I can't -- here's what I'm going to say, okay. We ran the ball effectively when we needed to. I thought our backs ran really hard.

The protection for the quarterback improved as the game went on. And we were able to get on top of them in some critical situations, whether it be inside or outside. And Fernando delivered dimes and the receivers made some nice catches, and there were a couple of PI calls.

There were some critical third and fourth down conversions made in that game. You know, it was a battle of attrition for a while there. We had guys going out left and right and we were trying to figure out, fill in personnel groupings and special teams at one point. It was that kind of game. I apologize, I don't remember every play.

Q. You talked about sort of your reaction of what it meant to watch your players in those moments kind of immediately postgame. But did you ever have a moment for yourself right after the game or when the confetti's falling or when you're holding the Silver Football, when you just think about that moment in the context of your journey in coaching?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think I'm going to have my moment when we finish this press conference.

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