

CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

Monday, January 12, 2026

Miami, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Miami Hurricanes

Coach Mario Cristobal

Pregame Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by University of Miami coach, Mario Cristobal.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I'm proud of our football team for battling hard against an excellent Ole Miss squad. And certainly a lot of credit to them. But credit to our guys for finding a way to be 1-0 and earning ourselves another opportunity this coming -- a week from today, Monday.

Q. Curious, you've gotten into this routine the last few weeks knowing you're going to take a flight on the road and play a do-or-die game. How does it change what that game is at home, the routine of it, the pattern, the structure as you prepare for this game?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: The routine doesn't change at all. It's almost identical because you do have to check into a hotel, a specific hotel on a specific date.

The only thing that changes is that classes have started, and we have, I believe, 28 new members -- 28 of the 29, 29 of the 30 -- new members of our team here practicing with us, which is great for us. As the year goes on we've lost some guys to injury. And they've been able to get a glimpse of what preparation is like.

But aside from that and preparing for a game, nothing changes.

Q. Can you sort of update us on where you guys are from an injury standpoint? And, two, along the lines of the last question, how do you ensure that your team doesn't have an exhale. Like, okay, you're in the final, you're back at Hard Rock, how do you keep that edge?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, from an injury standpoint, I believe we're coming out a lot like we went into the last game. I know a couple of guys skimped out of the game. Mesidor is in great condition. He hurt his elbow for a second and he's already full throttle. Ahmad Moten was



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full throttle today. And O.J. came out. Lofton will be the one that's in question. That would be the one that's in question. Aside from that, I actually feel really good about the rest.

Q. I think you guys mentioned O.J. and potentially Damari Brown. I know he's been working his way back throughout playoffs.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I would say O.J. is good to go, and Damari Brown will still be day-by-day.

Q. We've talked so much about the alumni on the sideline and the support you get from there, but the university standpoint, Joe Echevarria being on the sideline, and him and Dan Radakovich being in lock step, how important is it in this day and age for the university side and athletic side to sort of being hand in hand with things? And what have you seen from that and how much has that helped the program develop?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: That's everything as it relates to putting together a program. Whether it's rebuilding one or sustaining one, vertical alignment is at the forefront of making a decision to go to a place or staying out of place.

Without that, it doesn't work because the investment from a people standpoint, a time standpoint, a money standpoint, is immense. Unless everybody is going in the same direction, it doesn't work no matter how much time and effort you put into it.

We're extremely blessed to have someone like Joe heading up the university, and of course Dan Radakovich has done a great job. And we grind. And, again, very appreciative of them and all they do.

Q. You guys coming home to play in this game, two-part question, there's a lot of family connections here, whether kids played at Central or Chaminade or whatever local high school, so maybe a lot of that family stuff around here. How special is it for the local kids on your team? And then, of course, for you as well, a lot of Columbus representation on both sides



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coming into this?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It's always special when you get to play with or against guys that you know or knew growing up, competed against, played on the same teams with.

At the end of the day, your preparation doesn't change, your intensity is always driven up the closer and closer you get to game time and as you go deeper into the season.

We all know the brand of football played down here in South Florida is special. It shows up year in, year out at every level, college and pro, certainly at the high school level. Certainly an exciting time at South Florida.

Q. Overall, playing a home game for a national championship is a good thing. But with that can come potential distractions, et cetera. I'm curious, how do you preach to your team about not allowing those distractions to creep in?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Sure. I mean, they aren't really distractions. You either create them or you don't. It's on people.

So we get out ahead of that. That's one of the stronger, I would say, points of emphasis as you begin the week. Distractions and things and people have never been a part of the journey; you can't let them become a part of it now.

From the simplicity of getting an email to parents, take care of tickets by tomorrow because we don't want your sons running around and trying to figure other things out. They already have school. We have to prepare for an awesome opportunity.

We preach it. We teach it, and then we go and we get away from everybody, just like we did a couple weeks ago, the last couple of weeks when we went on the road.

That's where I know the process was asked about earlier, it's no different. You've just got to shut out the outside world and go to work.

Q. Practices will still be here?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: They will. That's awesome for us again with the start of school, but we'll be practicing right here.

Q. Can you put in words why you think this team has been able to make a run to get to this point? Why do you think they've been able to accomplish what they've accomplished thus far?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I think it's a process and a recipe that has stood the test of time. I think hard work and great people, getting after it relentlessly, I think that's an undefeated combination, as it relates to progress and advancement and eventually success. So, I think it's a tribute to that, the people.

Again, I have the fortune, the privilege of being up here in front of you guys and addressing questions. But it's not me, just me, there's so many people that are involved.

I think the collaboration of like-minded people, high achievers that are really driven to push forward a program to help these young men develop at the highest level on and off the field. A care factor that's through the roof and a die-hard belief in the University of Miami, bleeding orange and green through all of us, I think that's what has really forged our progress forward as we continue to try to get better. And we certainly have a long ways to go.

Q. What was tough about building culture for every organization? Obviously you built a culture here, but it seems like a lot of players are always grasping (indiscernible) characteristic of very cool, calm and collected. Just talk about that a little bit, how your players are kind of embracing your mindset of being very cool and calm.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I think we're all very similar. We all love football. Absolutely love it. We also understand the importance of being a good person and really embrace the concept of gratitude.

In a day and age where things move fast, people move fast, then we found out early on, exactly it was a year to this day where this team first got together. And then a week from now we get to play one last time together.

I think early on in that process, a year ago, in January, this team started figuring out, you know, this is -- everyone has hope in January, right, when you start the initial process of a new season.

But it was more than hope. I think we recognized early on this is a unique group of individuals and that the work ethic was through the roof. The appetite for the grind was legit and real.

So, I think because we're like that, because we don't mind getting pushed, because we don't -- we're not easily offended -- correction, and confrontation in a positive way -- truth telling is a staple of our program and we appreciate that. We appreciate feedback and growth and development.

I think that's what drives us, whether we completely agree on something, whether it's a perfect day or whether it's a challenging day, we all know that we're in it for the right reasons.

Q. Seems like Mark Fletcher is playing his best football since he's been here. What have you seen click for him or really work for him over the last month or so since the playoffs started?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I think a couple things. Good question. I think the fact that he's healthy. I think development. I think everybody wants to see a freshman knock it out of the park right away. It's not always the way it's supposed to be or the way it ends up happening.

A guy that has been in the system in his third year that has seen similar schemes that has run behind certain guys, that has seen certain calls against certain fronts, certain pressures, a guy that has protected against every blitz known to man, like, day after day, year after year, there's nothing more valuable than the mother of all teaching and learning. That's the repetition.

And Mark Fletcher has had hundreds and thousands of repetitions. And when you do that, and when you've been through what he's been through, it just means that much more. And it shows in the way he approaches everything that he does. So I think it's a combination of all those things is what's showing up.

Q. All over social media I've been seeing a lot of the clips of the friendship that Malichi Toney and Mark Fletcher have. Can you talk about that friendship and how it influences the rest of the team?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It's a strong friendship and one that also brings out the best in each other. I think that you're looking at two individuals that are highly motivated, super talented, that were -- they were Hurricanes forever.

And they've brought their mentality, their level of play, their drive, their motivation, and a lot of that has permeated the rooms. And their teammates, they look up to their teammates and their teammates look up to them.

They are just great ambassadors for the program, for their families. I mean, they're awesome, and their impact is massive.

Q. What did you learn from your time as the head coach at FIU in terms of just being a head coach and what that entails and how it all played out there?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It's the ultimate experience in cutting

your teeth. You have to do everything when you take over a situation like that.

I don't know how much of it is documented, but when you take over a program that I think hadn't won a game in almost two years, was going to make the jump from a lower division to Division I, and then literally the schedule with games against Miami, Florida, Arkansas, you name it -- and also before even having a single practice, started with a five-year probation, 17 ineligible players and a contemporaneous penalty regarding the APR, which means any player that's not eligible per semester, you lose a scholarship.

So, I probably got more into this than you were hoping for. But it's the ultimate challenge. And you find out truly what you're made of and who has your back.

You start finding out everything that goes with college football. How the bursar's office works, how registration and academics and the department and supervision and RAs and recruiting budgets and travel.

And you have to do everything, every single part of it. You have to be a coach, you have to be a CFO, CEO, a provost. You have to do it all.

So, a tremendous blessing. And really the biggest blessing was the players and the people that we had there because they were able to take what was historically the worst program in the country in a short period of time and actually win their first conference championship. And it was super rewarding, the Little Caesars Pizza Bowl. It was pretty cool.

Q. When you got let go a lot of people disagreed with that. I'm sure you did as well. How did that kind of shape you as a coach as well?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: You know, I'm pretty stubborn. Always have been stubborn. In my mind, we were going to win a national championship there. And people would look at me like I was crazy.

Sometimes if you don't move and God wants you to move, he'll kick you so you can move. For whatever reason, that's the way it worked out. And it was a blessing because I had the opportunity to go learn under Coach Saban, and then eventually end up at the University of Oregon. Blessed to be there. And it all led back here to the University of Miami.

At the time, you can't see that. You can't see straight when something like that happens, especially when you invest every waking moment of your life into it. But I thank God



that it did.

Q. Doing a story on the fact that you played with Fernando's dad. Any recollections of playing with him? What was that like when you guys played together?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: We went 6-4. We won the district championship in a three-way tiebreaker. They used to have a Kansas City tiebreaker down here in Dade County where you put the ball on the 10-yard line and flip a coin.

It was us, Miami Beach, Coral Gables. Carlos Huerta, great Miami kicker, kicked the winning kick. We won the district title. We played number one Southridge in the state championship. They had a couple Hurricanes on there, Robert Bailey and Herbert James.

We punted. Robert Bailey fumbled the punt. He'll deny it, but he did. We recovered. Huerta kicked the field goal and we beat the number one team in the state.

And then we lost the next week in sectionals to Carol City, who was coached by Walt Frazier, one of the best of all time ever to do it. Players like Rudy Barber, who was a teammate here. Couple guys -- Cedric (indiscernible), may he rest in peace; Tim Paulk, Godfrey Myles -- just an awesome time for Dade County football. Just awesome memories.

Q. Did you guys stay in touch?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I mean not really. I think when you go to Columbus, that brotherhood is extremely strong. You know, I mean, everywhere you go, especially in town you run in -- but we have crossed paths before. Certainly he was an excellent football player and has become such a prominent member of the community down here in the medical field. And certainly all the respect in the world for him and his family.

Q. Coach Cignetti has talked a lot about the influence his father has had on him from a football perspective. I'm curious about the influence your father had on you, not from a football perspective, but just from a life perspective.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, mom and dad, that's pretty well -- they worked two jobs, went to night school, learned the language. They came from Cuba. Couldn't ask for anything better in terms of parents.

They were hard-nosed. They were tough. They made sure we understood the meaning of true work and to make absolutely zero excuses.

They were absolutely relentless in their pursuit of just doing everything they could to provide for us. I just couldn't ask for better parents. Then they handed us over to Dennis Lavelle, the head coach at Columbus, and Fred Foyo, who was the offensive line coach at Columbus. And they were the ones that helped to raise us and groom us into the people that we are today.

Forever grateful for them. I thought they were the best coaches and mentors ever.

That's why I coach today because of my high school coaches. Coach Lavelle, he's everything to me.

But my dad, Luis Sr., hard-nosed, tough-ass son of a gun. That's what I know. And I'm forever grateful for him being hard on us and never gifted us anything, made us work for everything. I thank God for that.

Q. Earlier you talked about having played with Fernando's dad. I want to talk about the irony of having his son not only win the Heisman but be the quarterback that you're going to face in a national championship, having not only him and Alberto being from Miami and the same high school that you and his father played at. The irony of playing against Fernando, the son of a guy you played high school ball with.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Yeah, football is awesome. It's almost that part of it coming full circle -- his son is a great football player. He's obviously the -- the Heisman was earned and well-deserved.

The type of season that Fernando has had, really they dominated just about every game. And anytime a game was close, he was a big reason why the outcome is or was what it was because of his level of play.

His younger brother is going to be as good or even better. And I think if you talk to the people over there at their university and at Columbus High School, they'll tell you that. Just really tough, smart, hardworking, awesome young men that represent their families and their university really well.

Q. I was talking about the irony as well of having to play against him.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Right. Yes, sir.

Q. If there wasn't such close ties and you didn't know him as well as you do, if you just flipped on the film for the first time, what would you think about Fernando?

Like why is he special as a player?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I think he combines everything that you would want in an elite quarterback. He's ahead of the defense all the time. He's two steps ahead. He understands the back end, the front. He's extremely accurate, poised. He can make you pay with his feet. He can make you pay with his arm.

He understands protections really well. He anticipates like no other. He really has distinguished himself as the best football player in the country this year, and it's not by accident. A lot of reps, a lot of hard work, a guy that's been a complete difference-maker for their program.

Q. I was hoping to ask you a bigger-picture question about the ACC, because a lot of people are throwing dirt on the conference earlier when they thought there was the potential to not get a team in, and with the postseason performance and your performance, I'm wondering if you think this might start changing narratives or perceptions about the ACC as a whole.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Yes, thank you. I believe the ACC is like 9-4 in postseason play this year, and I think a lot of the reasons why we have progressed is some of the teams that we have faced throughout the course of the season in our conference.

The level of play from a quarterback standpoint, line of scrimmage standpoint, I think, has proven itself in the postseason. And for us, it proved itself against us and made us a better team in terms of making adjustments, increasing our level of physicality. And it's been a really, really good year for the conference.

If you look at the coaches that have been hired, the way the rosters are shaping up, both from a transfer portal and a high school recruiting standpoint, the conference is only going to get better and better, and we're certainly appreciative of all of the support that we've gotten from the ACC and looking forward to more great years to come.

Q. In this new college football world, how valuable is the experience you have on this roster with 14 or 15 of your starters have four years or more? And then do you see this as the right blend of portal and recruits, particularly in-state recruits?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Yes, sir, appreciate the question. And I know we talked about irony earlier. Ironically, we're playing against a team that is very much a veteran group, right? You're looking at a lot of similarities in the sense of players that have experience -- experience is irreplaceable.

And for us, I think it's been a great blend because the portal pick-ups combined with the players that have been here for three and four years, it again, it comes down to the fact that they're like-minded individuals and the young talent we recruited they are, from a DNA standpoint, they're hard-working guys. They're high achievers.

And the way that we work here, the blueprint here, the regimen here, it's very demanding. If that's not your thing, it's not going to work.

The fact that we had all these like-minded individuals from all over the place, I mean, we're as national as Miami has ever been from a roster standpoint, all positions. But, again, it doesn't matter if you're from one mile away or 1,000 miles away, if you're made of the right stuff, you've got the right heart and the right mindset, it works.

And the team is very evenly made up of all three of those different buckets of talent. And the older guys have done a great job just doing, I would say, just bringing along, showing our younger guys what it's supposed to look like now, not later, but right now. And in terms of expediting their experience and their ability to contribute, they've been a huge part of that.

Q. You faced Fernando last year back at Cal, and I'm curious just what you remember about his performance in that game, and what you would say about maybe his growth since that time, to what he's doing now?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, you saw all the things that you see now, except the supporting cast right now is very different.

Certainly, the system is completely different. But you're looking at a massive, physical, tough, offensive line that is on point. They don't make mistakes. Their IDs are exactly what they need to be when they need to be that way.

Their receivers are big-time playmakers, and they do it with back shoulder, underthrown fades. They do it by running by you, underneath, finding soft spots in zone coverage. And they're complemented by a very physical downhill run game, one that could circle you as well.

A guy like that in that system, with that level of coaching, where, I mean, he has been coached to continue to progress at such a high level.

You see the player, you saw the talent last year. The supporting cast wasn't there yet and they were a really good team, we thought. But this year, obviously, it's a whole different level with where he's at.

Q. All season long, whether it be to the media, to your players, that 1-0 mentality has just been your theme. When the 1-0 now means a national championship, what does that message mean to you? How does that resonate to the players, like how does it change this week, the 1-0 mentality?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Yes, sir. Well, you know, I don't think that you make the game any heavier than what it is. I think it's really important that that 1-0, earning 1-0 and earning the opportunity to cut it loose on game day is still a process, right, and it started last January. And it carries over all the way through the course of the week. And you don't stray from that.

The only thing you change of that is you just make it better and better each and every week. Like, you really dig deep as a coach, hey, how can I make this process better?

But you don't go about-faced on a theme and a philosophy that has brought you to this point and you know, to come this far, you don't stray from it to go farther. So we stay along the lines of what we've been doing.

Q. You spoke a lot about Fernando, but their offensive guys, Indiana on defense, just your impressions of them, what you've seen from them defensively.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: They're the best overall team and best defense we have faced. I know that their rankings and anything statistically important are between 1 and 5. It starts with this. They're really fast, physical, explosive, talented and smart. They play with a lot of physicality, a lot of violence. They understand their scheme top to bottom.

They make it very challenging, and I'll tell you why. They're multiple up front and they're multiple on the back end. So the way that they understand what you're doing so well, they set up and line up in a manner where they challenge your IDs.

You know, they've done a great job confusing opponent offensive lines with how they line up and how they bluff and disguise what they're doing, not only in the front seven, but on the back end. That's the challenge with them.

You've got to understand, these guys, they've played a lot of game together. A lot of these guys came over from JMU. They went deep into the playoffs, right, a year ago. They've been in this system and have played a lot of ball together. And therefore that's why you see the instantaneous reactions. The physicality, the closing speed that they have on a-down-after down basis.

And on top of that, I think it's really important to point out from a technique and fundamental standpoint, that's what really stands out to me, because they play with their feet in the ground, with great pad level and with elite use of their hands. They understand how to leverage the ball and what to do when they get there.

From a turnover-margin standpoint, they're number one in the country, and they play great complementary football. You witnessed some of it in their last game. But if you looked throughout the course of the season, from the first series at Iowa, to this last weekend with the pick-6 and the forced fumble and whatnot, they do a great job playing complementary football.

Q. To continue with the experience theme. Carson started 40-something games in his career. Obviously, as we talk about the poise and the leadership he shows. Poise is one thing, poise when you have three minutes for your season is a very different animal. When you look back at the drive, where does that calmness, that inner resolve, whatever you want to call it, come from that he made every smart play he had to make to win the game with everything riding on it?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Tribute to him, testament to him and his teammates. So many different things on that drive that were executed at a high level. Handful of third downs that were not the easiest in the world. But elite protection. Elite route running. Contested catches. Being hard to tackle. Turning a third and 12 into a third and seven instead. All those things. Right, the margins, we always talk all year long, right, the margins get smaller and smaller and smaller as the year goes on. And the margins were three minutes to go and ball in hand were like this, and obviously we want to play a cleaner game.

There were some things that we know that we took a step back in pre-snap penalties, post-snap IQ decisions, some alignment decisions, which we feel great about correcting.

But when it comes down to it, the resilience, the toughness, the fact that we just felt that that game, it just meant more to our guys, and they were going to find a way to get it done.

But you have to execute, and they did. And I think all those Wednesdays, when we come out there and do two-minute, which we've done now for the year, I believe, 37 scenarios like that. And we go back and forth. Offense wins sometimes. Sometimes it's the defense. For them, it was routine.

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