

CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

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Miami, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Indiana Hoosiers

Riley Nowakowski

Pregame Press Conference



NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

MIAMI 2026

Q. When you look at Miami's defense, they have some aggressive defensive ends. Just your thoughts on the defense and the fronts they present.

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: They're fast, they're physical, and they're violent. It's kind of what they pride themselves on, just being a violent, physical team, and it shows on the film and at all three levels. The D-lines, you got those two edges, those are good players, you know?

So they play really violent, and then linebackers are filling gaps, and you even got guys on the third level, safeties, cornerbacks, coming down, sticking people. That's one of their greatest strengths, how violent and fast they play.

They're not worried about making mistakes. They know their brothers are going to have their back. They're all rallying to the ball, all chasing it. That's their biggest advantage, just how violent and how fast they play.

Q. At Wisconsin last year, how aware were you of Curt's viral moments? Did any of them come across your timeline on social media? How aware were you of him before you got into the transfer portal and things like that?

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: The Google me one had come across my Instagram feed, but honestly, in season, you're in your own little bubble so you don't see a whole lot going on outside. I was aware of the standings of Big Ten and how Indiana was doing, but I wasn't super aware of Coach Cignetti and what he was doing. They weren't on our schedule, so it was not in my mind at the time.

Once I got into the transfer portal, I started looking at college football as a whole. And as you do at the end of the season, you look at where everybody ended up and how everything shook out, and I was like, Oh, wow. That's special to turn that team around like that.

After our last game of the season, checking everything out, see who made the bowl game and all that stuff, That's when I figured that out.

Q. We asked you before the Rose Bowl about losing that weekly rhythm of recover, prep, game. How much does it feel like you have that back? I understand it's a little bit more of a gap between the Peach Bowl and the national title game, but how much more does it feel like maybe from the Rose Bowl to the Peach Bowl to this game you have kind of that rhythm back at least in this confined space?

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, it definitely feels like we're right back in it, which I personally appreciate that rhythm both mentally and physically that your body gets in of prepping and getting back in playing shape. I appreciate it a lot.

And Cig really values his rhythm too and being in our normal schedule. I think it's been really good, and we're trying our best this week to continue that normal schedule and just kind of keep it rolling. That's the best way to do it, approach every game kind of the same way.

Q. When you came in here, I think it might have been after the playoff selection show, you said Cignetti has this mindset that he instills that he hasn't won a game, like, ever. How does he try to instill that and when you are the top team? You're playing a huge game this weekend. How much does it help you guys to have a chip like that instilled already when it's like this guy has won everywhere he's been, but he still works like he hasn't?

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: First of all, he does it by example, right? He comes in every day at 4:00, 5:00 a.m., and is watching film until everybody has left the stadium. That's the first thing.

Every single time he talks to us, he's going to hammer on the point that nothing we got before is going to earn us anything in the future. Every single game has to be approached the exact same way.



I think just having that hammered into your head every single time you see him and hear him talk, eventually it gets the message across. When I saw you here, that's kind of all you think about.

I think it's just always reminding us and, honestly, personally, from his point of view, never getting complacent. Complacency is easy when you're winning games and doing well. It's just kind of him not getting complacent, and we always just attach onto that and ride with it.

Q. Charlie Becker has really emerged. What has led to that? And you have seen it happen in practice. Help us understand a little more why he's gone where he was to an elite receiver now.

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, I think Charlie has always had the skill and the potential. I watched him through spring ball and fall camp, and I thought this guy is a phenomenal receiver. And obviously we had a loaded receivers room at the beginning of the year with Coop, E.J., and E.

So we started off with them, and I think E.J. got a little banged up one game, and so Charlie came in. I think Charlie always had that potential, but it was an older room that was in front of him. He got that opportunity and made the most of it.

If you asked anybody on the team, before he started getting as much attention and as much time as he's got, if he was able to do that stuff, I think everybody in the locker room would be fully confident that he had that skill. But it was just a matter of showing the rest of the world.

We got a lot of guys on our team that are like that. It's a very next-man-up mentality, and we don't feel like there's a lot of drop-off when we go to that next man. Charlie has that star potential. It just goes to show he had that opportunity and seized it.

Q. You guys talk a lot about filtering out all the noise and clutter. You turn on the TV, you see all this positive noise, all the promos for the game next week. How do you filter that out when you're watching TV or something like that in your house?

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, me personally, I switch the TV off. I don't watch a lot of TV during the week. Even in the training rooms, we have TVs in the training rooms on, just normal stuff, sports stuff. ESPN was talking about the national championship, and I just went over to the monitor and turned it off. We don't need to hear this.

We try to eliminate all that, whether it's good or bad. We don't need to hear the talk about us. I think that's the messaging throughout the team. You don't need to be going on social media, searching up your name or checking out what they have to say.

It's probably a little better stuff now than maybe at the beginning of the season. People may have a little more belief. But either way, good or bad, it doesn't help us out much. Everybody can say whatever they want about us. It's not going to help us win a game. We have to tune that stuff out, and I think the whole team is in on that.

Q. When you're chasing this common goal of a national championship and you have these high highs, like Big Ten Championship win, Rose Bowl, etc., Cignetti has talked about changing the way people think. How do you train your mind to stay so level-headed through this journey?

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Me personally, that's how I was raised. My parents told me never get too high, never get too low. That's something I have carried with me my whole life.

Cig brings in people who are like-minded in that way. He's not going to bring in a lot of big, flashy guys. He's big on character when he chooses who he wants here. That helps out a lot. If you have a big group of guys, all of good character and have a similar mindset, it kind of pulls some guys along that might not fully be there yet.

I think that's how he helps lead the team in that way. He brings in guys that collectively bring everybody along with him. I think that's part of it. They talk about our age a lot recently. I think that's part of one of the advantages that we have in our age, just a little bit more experience, a little bit more knowledge that winning a big game is exciting and great, but winning a big game just gives you an opportunity for another one so you have to refocus and get with that.

Hopefully the older guys are able to impart a little knowledge on the guys who haven't been there before. Hopefully that helps us out.

Q. Coach Cig called the last couple of years surreal from him. When you reflect as going from a walk-on in 2020 to five years later, preparing for a national championship, how do you describe this journey?

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, it's what I dreamed about when I started all that. It's definitely -- it's kind of like a dream come true. I thought -- I always believed in myself that I had the ability to do this, but to see it all play out, I got to thank the man upstairs. You can't do it yourself.

You can't do any of this yourself.

I have been lucky to have a good set of circumstances where I was not only able to get an opportunity to be on a scholarship but then able to play for a really good team here and compete for a national championship. It's just a lot of opportunities that you get. It's something special. It's a really cool thing to be part of.

I haven't really fully reflected on it yet. I'm kind of focused on this next game, but hopefully after this next game I will have a second to sit down and think about that.

Q. Obviously everything throughout prep and in game is very businesslike. Curt Cignetti asks you guys to play 1 to 150 the same. But have there been moments in which football has felt fun during this run, especially with the dominance it feels you guys have experienced during games?

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, definitely. Shoot, for me, every day football is fun. It's definitely a businesslike approach and you have to be intentional about everything you're doing. You have to be on top of your stuff.

But the day football isn't fun for me, I'm not going to play anymore. I love this sport. I enjoy it a lot. And I think that's a great balance you have to strike, enjoying yourself and having fun with the sport while also being able to approach it like it's a little bit of your job.

I think there's definitely every moment, every time we step out on that field, I'm having fun, I'm enjoying it, but it's that mentality that this is serious work and needs a lot of focus and attention.

Q. Riley, we get to this level, teams are so elite, and usually there are certain superstars that stand out. With this team, it's just a group across the board, especially the receivers are so deep. How fun is it to play in a situation where there's no true superstar, it's just a bunch of guys who are great and you're one of them?

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Shoot, it makes my life easier, and I like to say all the time, so much skill on offense, so many great players on defense, it really does make everybody's job easier. We have six different guys scored touchdowns last game. That's special. Having six guys score touchdowns in the semifinals is insane. It speaks to the depth that we have across the board.

It helps out all our receivers because you can't solo one guy out. We have two running backs that are both phenomenal. One guy gets tired, put the next guy in.

There's no drop-off. I think that's critical to how successful our team has been.

Obviously you have the defense, too. You have guys all over the place making plays. And we have had some guys go down, but next guy steps up and he's making plays too.

Daniel Ndukwe had two sacks and a blocked punt. That's huge. That's a guy that hasn't played much this season, but he comes in and he's played in the Rose Bowl and now the Peach Bowl, and he's had a big impact in those games.

It's huge. All the talent we have all around, it's a joy to be part of. It makes my job easier. You don't have to fight and scratch as much. It opens things up. I'm happy to be part of it.

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