

CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

Saturday, January 17, 2026

Miami, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Miami Hurricanes

Coach Mario Cristobal

Pregame Press Conference

Q. What's it been like to see the fans buzzing the way they have this week?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: We're very humbled by the support of our community, the fans, the Miami Hurricanes family. They've been that way the entire season.

For us the focus is entirely on the task at hand. For our players to experience this type of buzz and support has been awesome.

Q. I know that has been the mentality. You've just got to go 1-0 one more week. How built for the moment and that opportunity is this group of guys?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, this group first got together last January, and that process is relentless. It's something that you've got to pour your entire existence into, and they've done that. It's important to stay focused on that, not let the outside noise and distraction be part of that. They've done a great job of that, been resilient, been tough, and they're looking forward to getting back to practice this week.

Q. Coach, each one of your playoff games has come down to the last possession, late fourth quarter. How has your team's experience helped and paid off in those late-game situations?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, you know, it's been great to watch the resilience of our team get better and better throughout these games. Obviously all the teams that are in the postseason certainly have earned their way there. They have some really dominant traits, and for the most part are complete teams. Knowing that these -- you just have to keep playing and understanding that mentality, the mindset that comes with that.

At the end of the day, certainly proves to be the difference. Our guys are getting better at it. We had a lot of things to



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correct from last game, feel like we've had a great week of practice and still have 48 hours, so we're looking forward to this next opportunity.

Q. Looking at Carson Beck and what he's done, that decision to bring him in through the transfer portal, what his leadership has meant to getting to this moment.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Sure, it's been a difference maker, a mutual decision. Certainly he had to make one, and so did we. What we've all witnessed is a guy who when he has the right supporting cast and the right type of regimen, structure, scheme, play calling, everything that goes with it, and the right type of support, surrounded by the right people, high achievers, the type of people that want to be great and do right by each other, the sky's the limit for him, and I think he's just getting started.

I think his best football is still ahead of him, and certainly looking forward to watching him play his best game on Monday night.

Q. To follow up on Carson, after the surgery, what makes him different that when he was going through that he was still doing the right things to prepare for the season, and what stuck out to you during that time?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: First and foremost, what he's always been. You like to look at someone's entire body of work. A lot of times books are judged before the last chapter is read off.

His story, especially in 2023, statistically and from a performance standpoint, is as good as you'll find in college football.

Then you know what, the following year it was still good, but not all the same pieces were in place. The structure was different, schematically things changed. Maybe there was some dropoff due to injuries or whatnot, and then again, the injuries that come with it. Was pressured a lot, took a lot of hits, took a lot of sacks.

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Upon examination we had determined through our medical people and certainly his working in conjunction -- which, mind you, that's a big part of why this has worked out. All parties worked together in lockstep the entire way. Everything point towards him being able to recover fully, but throughout that process, his engagement with his new teammates was going to be critical.

That's why I think this thing, the foundation of it, because it is a difficult foundation to set when you can't actually participate, that's when the foundation was set in a strong fashion, and that's where I think players and teammates started to understand and believe in him as a person, as a teammate, as a player. And when he was able to start practicing, I think everything else took care of itself.

Q. I know you've got 48 hours left, but has there been a moment this week where during practice or preparation you said, okay, these guys, their headspace, they're in the right place despite everything that's going on?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I think our headspace has been good since the day after November 1, that Tuesday practice. It wasn't all the way there, but it was headed in the right direction.

I do feel that we have been building it stronger and stronger as the weeks have gone by and through action, not just through just a speech, words, inspiration, motivation, but through daily action. These guys have taken their role as being men of action, and I feel like it gets stronger and stronger, and I think we fully understand that. This thing isn't won with the outside stuff. It's won with the 11 versus 11 on the field, and execution is at a premium.

Q. As you look at Indiana, what's sort of the biggest challenge you see as you study them?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, they're a complete team. They are smart, physical, tough, fast, relentless. Schematically they're challenging because of what they do to stop the run. Their back end, their entire team has elite talent, very experienced team. I think 27 players are in their last year of eligibility. Several others are near three or four, as well.

You're looking at a team that's extremely talented, coached really well and plays really hard. We could get into for hours on what they do schematically, but those are some of the key components of them being such a great team.

Q. As a Columbus alumnus, how did your experience at Christopher Columbus High School help shape you as a football player, both as a coach and as a player?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Columbus, just like the University of Miami, is everything to me. Took a couple of young knuckleheads like my brother and myself and really was regimented, structured. Our position coach, Fred Foyo, may he rest in peace, absolutely off the charts. Coach Lynskey, who coached linebackers, but the overlap with us was awesome. Coach Zorzy, may he rest in peace. Coach Lavelle, our head football coach, is such a key components in our lives still to this day. They took over our guidance and leadership and mentorship, having parents that were always working and could never be around.

Columbus is and always has been the foundation of everything that we have -- we're still not where we want to be yet, but certainly we owe everything, so much to Columbus High School.

Q. What are some of the things that you guys have done well that you'll have to do well to beat this team on Monday?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I mean, this thing is about execution. We could get into a bunch of stuff, obviously strategically won't get into any specifics as it relates to that, but I don't think this game is about flash.

This is going to be substance, blocking and tackling, throwing and catching and running and covering and all the things that go with play high-level football at this time of year deep into the season when everybody is banged up. Your best has to show, and what the foundation of football is, and that's technique, fundamentals, scheme and execution.

Q. You've had some close games in the CFP, specifically Ole Miss game. IU has had some blowout wins. If it gets to the last possession or two in the fourth quarter, how comfortable is your team in those moments?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I think our team is one that operates without worrying about the clock or the scoreboard. I know that sounds generic and it's often spit out there, but it's just the way we operate.

It's all about being where your feet are and having a "one play at a time" mentality, playing fast, playing physical, being relentless, having pre-snap discipline, post-snap IQ and securing that football and creating ball disruption and being able to cut it loose by practicing that way.

Come game day you can put your best on the field and irregardless of the previous play, being able to move forward and doing your absolute best the next play.

Q. You touched on the Columbus connection. We're here from Indianapolis, we did a story with the Mendozas at your high school. Talk about the uniqueness of having Columbus on both sides and your relationship with the Mendoza.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I think what's evident is Columbus High School, you're taught a certain way. You are pushed and challenged a certain way. You are groomed and developed a certain way. I think year in and year out what you see come out of Columbus High School is not only elite talent but you see elite human beings that are driven, hungry, humble, understand the importance of impacting others in a positive way.

It's a credit and it's a testament to the leadership in that school, from way -- I don't know how many years ago I graduated from there. I stopped counting. But all the way from modern day. I think it's awesome because we need more people that are good for young people, and I think Columbus High School is a great example of that.

Q. And your relationship with the Mendozas.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, the father and I played together. As the years go by obviously you can't stay in touch with everybody, but a tremendous amount of respect for the entire family.

Q. When you look at Mendoza and that offense on film, what stands out to you?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Everything. High-level execution, high-level talent, execution, discipline, toughness. They chase and finish, which I think is really important. The ball doesn't get turned over. If a ball does come out, there's 10 hats there, 11 hats there ready to jump on it. You're looking at an operation that's seasoned, that's disciplined, that executes at a high level.

Q. I'm going to take you back in time. We are from Europe. The World Bowl 1995 in Amsterdam, I think that's about the last title game that you were in as a player or as a head coach. That was also a game where you played at home in your own stadium. Do you have any recollection of that game or lessons that you have playing in your own stadium, the pressure that comes with that, for a home crowd?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: In terms of pressure, I don't think. But in terms of playing in that game, I do remember vividly Coach Luginbill was our coach. We had a great football team. We were 9-1. We played against the Frankfurt Galaxy at Olympisch Stadium. A little bit rainy early, but

then things settled down. We weren't able to pull out the victory, but overall a great experience.

And certainly when you go away and you realize how much you love football and your back is up against the wall and say, hey, is this going to continue for me as a player and how am I going to have to fulfill this dream of playing and how much does it mean to me, and if it doesn't, if I can't get there, do I want to somehow transition into the coaching world.

All in all, extremely grateful for the opportunity. I thought it was an unbelievable experience for everyone involved in it and provided some great memories for us.

Q. When you look at the success that Cignetti has had in such a short time at Indiana, what impresses you about what he's done so far?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: He's done a great job top to bottom and have proven themselves as the No. 1 team in the country.

Q. I wanted to ask you, you're preparing for the biggest game in 23 years. At the same time you have to look to next year with the transfer portal. Has that balancing act been difficult, sort of the first time a championship team has had to deal with this sort of new system?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I think we all know there's no balance, you've just got to go, you've got to count on just going, load up on your coffee or whatever helps you put in extra hours, and you just go.

Can't complain about it. It is what it is. The calendar, we all know, needs work. We need a remedy that works for everybody and makes sense for everybody and allows for both student-athletes to pursue their best opportunities while somehow, somehow maintaining their principles and values that come with college football, which I think we all know we've lost that a little bit. We have.

Then obviously we're up against a different clock, being that we're still playing, and all the focus for us is on playing, and then all the extra time, which you have to make, you have to cut into your own time, to continue to build your team for the future.

We feel we've done the best that we can thus far, and we're going to keep going.

Q. Mark has worked with a lot of kids from this area who are back. You obviously have that background. Could you put into words what that means for kids

who grew up here? He was talking about all the Little League teams he played on and been back here and playing for it all, what that means for kids in this area?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: A lot of these guys, like myself, you grew up watching the University of Miami and you wanted to wear that U on the side of your helmet. You wanted to play in front of family and friends and the community.

And the community has watched these guys play for a long, long time. Youth football, high school football here is so big. The community is always engaged, always involved. They're always out there, so they know these guys. Naturally their support and their fan base grows bigger and bigger. It's almost like fan bases within fan bases.

For them, I think it means everything like it does to all of us. But at the same time, they've been in our processes for so long that they understand that it's still a "one game at a time" mentality and that every single rep, every single practice, every single meeting has to have a 1-0 mentality to it. Stay grounded, stay where your feet are, don't allow yourself to start getting caught up in all the other stuff outside so you don't skip any steps.

Q. Do you remember the names of your first few youth teams here in this area?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I never played youth football. I was a baseball player. I got cut as a freshman in high school. I was walking the hallway, and the coach said, You're kind of tall, come out and play football.

That's how it ended up happening. I went out there and I wanted to play quarterback, but I threw the ball sideways. And I wanted to play tight end, and I didn't run fast enough. They kept moving me closer and closer to the football, and I ended up a couple spots down from it at tackle.

And thank God I did because I learned so much as it relates to this sport but also what it is to be part of a team by, again, the most elite coaches that I've ever been around, are my high school coaches. And to this day, any major decision that I have to make, I still call Dennis Lavelle, my high school football coach.

Q. How much of this week have you had to look just at the quarterback position for the future and put time into figuring out what you guys are going to do there?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Anything related to the future, we choose respectfully not to comment on because, for us, all that matters right now is this team and this opportunity.

So we'll leave it at that, if that's okay. Respectfully.

Q. The SMU loss was a low point in the season where you went to two losses. What changed after that that you went on this incredible run?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: We were close in the two losses, and the things that needed to change needed more fixing and just overhaul. If that makes sense.

I think you really find out everything you're about and what your people are all about in those moments, and as you look across the country, several teams, after a loss or two, pack their bags and that's it, it was over.

For us, it was one of those we know who we are, and it's got to show because we have really good people and we work really, really hard, but we're not getting the result that we want. Why? It's in the margins. In college football the margins become smaller and smaller and smaller.

So the investment in discipline, the investment in detail continue to grow, the enthusiasm was extremely high every single day we walked in the building, and that game by game, more so day by day, changed the building inside out.

That's all that mattered. The outside stuff, the outside noise, let's call it what it is; everyone was throwing dirt on our grave already and buried us, and that's good. It's good for the soul. It's good for you from a mentality standpoint so you understand and recognize more than ever that all that matters are the people inside the building.

Q. We've heard the stories about Coach Ferras and the special teams unit, the cafecito. And just curious who makes the best coffee on staff? Is it Coach Ferras? And what is a good cafecito to you?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Yeah, Ferras makes the best coffee on the staff. It's part of his obligations and duties as an assistant coach. And he does, he makes the best one. In terms of the other ones, I don't want to get into a competitive warfare in Miami as to who makes the best coffee, but it's certainly an off-season project that I look forward to delving into.

Q. Specific to Mendoza and what he does well, what have you seen that really jumps off the page and what kind of challenge is it for your defense?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Decisive, accurate, athletic, presence, pocket presence, extending plays, can throw it on the run, in the pocket, quick game, can negotiate throws, can get in and out of trouble really tough. It's a guy

that sometimes you hit quarterbacks and they get fazed, they get knocked around a little bit. There's no fazing him. The more he gets hit, the tougher he gets, and it's something that's very admirable because a lot of quarterbacks can't do that. So he's the total package.

Q. Just curious what the game week preparation has been like compared to a normal home game, and what's your expectation for the environment on Monday compared to a normal Miami home game?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Yeah, the preparation remains the same. It's a little bit of a road game mentality because we come and check into the hotel out here and then we travel back and forth. We just don't have to get on a plane to do so. I don't think that ever changes.

I do think that each and every week since the SMU loss our preparation standards have been elevated from within the building driven by the players and whatnot. Your other question was?

Q. What your expectation is for the environment on Monday compared to a Miami home game.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It's hard to say. We're in different uniforms and we're on the other side. It still matters. It's still 120 yards long and 53 wide, and I expect what we all expect. We're home, and we expect home to show as strongly as humanly possible and make it as much of our atmosphere as possible.

Q. Just the calendar, the fact that you have free agency in the middle of trying to go through this playoff run, the challenge that that presented for you guys, how you handled that, and how you hope maybe the calendar changes going forward?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, I think a lot of it is handled on what you are 24/7, 365. I do believe that. Therefore, I think what has shown is that time, good people and hard work has led Miami to continue progress and an opportunity to play in a game like this.

I think those two things, it motivates people to be here, and it attracts others to come here. For us, it hasn't been a distraction. We have a very open and honest relationship with our players. You know what, if it's not for someone, it's not for someone. I never take things personally. This is a place where we work really hard and it's a place for people that are really serious about football, really serious about an elite education and want to live in the best city in the world.

Those are things that I think play into our favor all the time

as it relates to the work going on behind that. There's no balancing act. It's full throttle football, taking care of business and taking care of these guys. They deserve all our attention. We handle the other stuff as it comes.

Q. What did you learn as a head coach at FIU, and how did the way that ended motivate you, kind of impact the rest of your career?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: What you learn in a place like that is that you really have no assistance. You have to do everything. You have to be the -- name it. You have to be the athletic director. You have to be the fundraiser. You have to be the director of anything regarding campus. You have no resources. You're going to have to find a way to overcome anything and everything and still do the best by your players.

Really proud of not myself, I'm really proud of the staff and all the players that were part of that because we walked into a place that hadn't won a game in I think almost two years, and four years later won its first and only conference title. That's a testament to them, the Brad Serinis, the Toronto Smiths, the T.Y. Hiltons, the Jonathan Cypriens, so many great players, Tourek Williams, I hate to leave any -- Anthony Gaitor, who's coaching there right now.

Then you learn the hard facts that you have one season that wasn't up to par and you think that -- I could go on and on about it, but I choose not to because I said it before, I think if God wants you to move and you're stubborn, and I am stubborn, and you're not moving, He'll kick you in the butt and make you move, and it was the absolute best thing that happened to me.

I'm grateful for the experience, the core people there, they were awesome through thick and thin, and you know what, you press on and got me the opportunity to go to Alabama, then Oregon, then back to Miami.

Q. You've dealt with adversity injury-wise in the secondary, pretty consistently guys shuffling in and out. Without Xavier for the first half, the challenge that poses, and the challenge of cycling a guy like Damari back in after not playing for six weeks on a stage like this. Just give me a general sense of the secondary right now.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I think it's December and January football. I think we're in a good place from a health standpoint. The Xavier thing is unfortunate. I'll refrain from comment on that. I think we all saw it, and it was really, really clear as what it should be. But it is what it is. I think our guys that we have played, we have a lot of trust and confidence in them, and they have showed up big. We're

playing against a great football team, and we understand that, so we have to be focused on what we do.

Q. You're confident Damari Brown is going to be available?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: He's day-to-day. We won't know until game time.

Q. Everyone knows what the reputation of the U was back in the day. If I was to ask you today to define what your program is, how would you answer that?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, tell me about what your thought is on the reputation of the U back in the day. There's so many different interpretations, and I respectfully ask that because I want to make sure I answer your question.

Q. I think there was this image of sort of rebels, sort of they had a swagger, they had an attitude, there was questions about whether or not that was --

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Can I say this? I'll say this. Miami's reputation, if that's the way it was perceived, Miami was made up of a group of guys that nobody believed in and outworked the world and played the No. 1, No. 2, No. 3 team in the country and had -- they changed history by playing with unbelievable effort. A little bit over the top, some edge, and half of us -- those were great players.

I was part of some of those teams. I was a very average player surrounded by some Hall-of-Famers, and some of them were a little bit wild, a little bit edgy, but what can never be questioned in any way, shape or form was that brotherhood because that team, those teams went from city to city to city against very storied programs and had some dominant performances and changed the perception. So the extra celebrating was all of a sudden viewed as, okay -- and those guys were very much okay with that. We totally get that. That's how we viewed them.

I'll listen to the rest of the question so I can answer it.

Q. I appreciate that. How would you define what your program is now or what you would like it to be known as.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, we keep our mouths shut and we go to work. It's a different day and age. Back then, it was the newspaper, right? There was print, and the next day there's another column. But here, if you burp, it's 2.75 million comments on how you are this and how you are not that.

We're very, I would say, not introverted but we're very confidential in our approach to anything and everything at the University of Miami, and I'll say why. It's because I respect these guys more than anything I've ever been around in terms of as an organization, these coaches, these players. They are awesome. What they have is very sacred. It means the world to them. To protect that and to keep the integrity of that, we've gone a route where it's different than some of the traditional Miami teams, and that's okay. This is 2025 -- well, '26, sorry. It shows you the type of schedules we have. We don't even know.

But there was never any lean towards going back. You go back to take the principles and values and bring them forward, but to go forward, that's in my opinion as a head coach the best way to do it. Be hungry, be humble, be driven, have a positive impact on others and make sure every ounce of focus, as difficult as this game is, the game of football modern day, everything with the student-athletes, pour it all into our student-athletes and keep it that way.

It's a little bit boring. I've said it repeatedly. I'm not an exciting interview. But it works for us, and I appreciate the question. I hope that answers it.

Q. I would say throughout the course of a game, you may be the most animated coach on the sideline. It seems like you get so fired up that you could go out there and play. My question is how much caffeine do you intake before a game, or is that just all natural?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: No, I don't -- it's a regular coffee stuff. One thing I don't want to do is draw attention to myself. I'm the least important component in the whole thing. My job is to make sure that myself and all the assistant coaches do everything we possibly can to put the players in the best position to be successful, to make any and all adjustments and provide information that settles them down so they can play fast and relentless.

Man, I wish I had a better answer for you, man. Am I doing anything wrong? Am I offending anybody? Okay. I just don't get to watch all that stuff. But no, there's no -- the only caffeine I have is what I've been having since I was four years old when my mom would pour that cafe con leche. I was a hyper kid at school. I had issues behaviorally, but they blamed my mom for that and not me.

Q. You guys are heading to the championship with two losses under your belt. What changed in the locker room that let you know that this team was a championship-bound team?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, I think we were always on a

course of steady progress. If you look at it statistically, turning the ball over is the difference in a one-possession and a one-play game. That tilts it one way or the other, a W or an L.

But I also think that you've got to get the best out of people because this is now game 16. It's a long season. Somewhere along the line, whether it be through adversity, whether it be a moment of whatever it may be, you have to get the absolute best out of yourself and everyone.

Just so happens in this case, the wake-up call was like, hey, we are doing a lot of the right things. We're working really hard. We've got awesome people, but we're getting in our own way. So if these margins are so small and so tight, we know that -- yeah, some mistakes, some errors come with football, but we certainly can't create our own issues, or to the best of our abilities we have to avoid those, right?

I think it's a conscious decision to just take another step, to elevate culture, to elevate standards, to elevate energy and enthusiasm, but it all starts with energy, and it all ends with discipline.

So I think all those things combine through the choice of these players and the coaching staff, all the credit to them and all the credit to the big guy upstairs always, first and foremost, that we've been able to progress week by week and get better all the way down the stretch and into December and January.

Q. I guess as you look at -- I know you're getting ready for a game now, but as you look at college football and the way it's structured right now, obviously kids signing contracts, things like that, what, if anything, do you think there needs to be any kind of standardization around the way some of this operates? Do you feel like these contracts are enforceable? What do you see from the ecosystem as a head coach?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It's a long meeting, a long conversation. There's a lot. I feel like every year we patchwork this side and then next year we have to have another three adjustments. There's a lot that needs to -- I think everyone is working hard at it. There's the dynamics. The things that come with this are incredibly complicated.

I don't know, let's block off 12, 14 hours and we'll jump right into it. I apologize I don't have a set answer, but certainly there needs to be a lot of work done.

Q. What did you see in James Brockermeier when you signed him out of the portal, and do you just always have a special, not just appreciation but an

understanding of what makes a good lineman, given your background?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Yeah, James, when he got in the portal, you always want to watch film right away on a guy, but what we saw was a very physical, tough, quick twitch, great balance and body control individual that had heavy hands and had a really good feel for the game. Had great knowledge. He had a great feel for leverage, hat position, understood schematically what they were trying to do.

Because you want to see that from a player. How is he establishing hat position. What's he doing with his hands. Is he advanced technically. Is he playing with his heels in the ground or is he on his toes and playing off balance. We take a deep dive into everybody we look at, and he checked off all the boxes.

The one question we had, okay, how much more can we pack on him, and he's packed on 12, 15 pounds of muscle, and he can sink his hips and just dig people out of there. But he is an elite human being and an elite competitor, and he has been awesome all year long. I know he was selected by at least one entity as an All-American, and deservedly so, and he's been invaluable to our program.

Q. Talking about the transfer portal, the fact that players can make money and things like that, over the last 10 or 15 years, how have you had to change your approach to coaching and team building? It's kind of a different game now.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I'll be honest with you, absolutely zero. I want to say this, and I hope I don't offend anybody. But if you have to change the way you coach because you're afraid of a portal, you weren't doing it right to begin with.

The principles and values of the guys that actually Coach Mirabal and I got to play for at Christopher Columbus in Dennis Lavelle, we believe in that. And that means you challenge people, you push people, you're good to people, you're demanding but never demeaning, you get the best out of them, you're there for them like their very own parents would be, but you certainly don't compromise what comes with betterment. You have to push people.

This is not for everybody. So I don't believe that that has to change. We're never going to change. By that, when I say change, let me pull that back. We have to always get better, and we're committed to that, and we're always diving deep into -- there's no one on our staff and says, hey, we have all the answers. That's not the case. We're always trying to get better.

But I think I have a feel for the question that you're asking in terms of do you tiptoe around it, absolutely not. You're doing a disservice to a player. This is their last pit stop before they go into real life, and if you don't continue to develop them and continue to enhance their principles and values of their own household, if they were the right ones, if you shy away from that and turn a blind eye on that to make a guy feel warm and fuzzy just to not rock the boat, I believe that that's criminal and I believe that that's letting down a player.

It's our job, and we need more people to do this, we need more people that are good for young people because at the end of the day they are our future. When they make a poor decision or mistake, I don't blame them, I blame the adults because look at the adults -- look at the examples that we're setting. They are following suit.

It's on us to hold them to a standard but to also teach and -- I'm a big fan of that process because our coach, he hammered us, and he was awesome. Jimmy Johnson, Dennis -- they hammered us. Coach Kehoe, Coach Wise, Coach Greg Smith, they hammered us, and with the right stuff, never in a derogatory or demeaning way.

Q. You were talking about recruiting earlier, and I guess a similar question. How has your staff's recruiting approach evolved over the years as you've gotten the on-field results but also as you've learned what approaches do and don't work for you?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: The approach has to get better and better. We're still not at optimal level like we want to be, but it is a relentless approach, but first and foremost it has to be genuine. The foundation of the relationship built has to be honesty and transparency because, to your question earlier, there's a transfer portal. If there's any fake, nonsense, BS along the way, that's going to be a one-year transactional relationship. That's the foundation of everything.

I don't think it's very complicated. And I think if you have a passion for the people you work for and the place you work for, I think that oozes out of you.

But I do think that you have to be relentless and show genuinely how you feel about someone and how much you do want to coach them and have them as part of your organization.

Q. Two things: One, the role of people like a Jessica Lopez, the people behind the scenes that fans probably will never see on the field, their role in getting this thing where you want it to get? To, and two, flipping to your coaching staff, to Corey, what was it

that you said that's the guy I want?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Yeah, two incredibly important people, two MVPs. Jessica Lopez, Ms. Jessica, was an absolute difference maker for us because she is like a ball coach. She took our academic status and for nine successive semesters we've had a new team GPA record. She's had guys graduate from as little as two and a half years to having everyone on course to graduate or already has graduated.

The culture she establishes, the relationship and the demands that come with her and her leadership style have been absolutely incredible for our program, and we're blessed and thankful for her -- every single day I thank God that she's with our program.

Coach Hetherman, everything that comes with great Miami coaches. Detailed, intense, elite teaching progression, on-field presence, in-room teaching progression and presence, being able to connect, communicate with players, establish relationships, and then game day adjustments.

He has great answers. He knows the system inside and out, he knows the strengths, he knows what errors are going to be attacked and to be able to communicate that and get that done with the football players, absolute difference maker for us.

Q. I wanted to ask about Carson mainly because he had a very rough transition to Miami. Just a lot going on off the field. That would be hard for anyone to go through, let alone someone who was in the spotlight like he was. What have you seen from how he's handled that and kind of settled in and grown in the last nine months?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Yes, ma'am. Maturity is what you've seen, professionalism. At the end of the day, he made a personal and professional choice, and when he did, yes, there's a lot that surrounds him, but I think he treats his mind and his mentality like a really nice expensive car. He's not going to take it to crappy places. He's not going to put it around questionable people. He's going to keep it in a safe place, and that safe place is us. We're his biggest fans. We're his biggest supporters. We're his best family.

Carson, his experience, both good and bad, has allowed him to come in and establish himself very quickly as a leader and one that has helped groom leadership within the team itself. It starts with the fact that he's an unselfish person. Tons of gratitude to him. He wants to win and he wants to see people around him do really, really well.

He has absolutely zero interest in personal accolades and all that attention. He wants to do right by people.

Q. Throughout the playoffs, you've made an emphasis on giving glory to God for your wins. Tell me why that's so important to you personally.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I was born and raised Catholic, man. That's what I was. They had me over at St. Theresa, Sister Michael Joseph chasing me around, making sure I did the right thing all the time, over to Columbus High School. My parents, they were very adamant about us being raised a certain way.

I don't push it upon anybody, and that's everybody's choice. But Catholic raised to the bone, man. All glory to God always first and foremost. That's what I believe in and will continue always believing in Him, and very proud to do so.

Q. They talk about having vertical alignment at institutions between the president and the athletic director, the head coach, everyone. It seems like where the University of Miami is now is as great as it's always been from that aspect. Talk about how important that is and how great the University of Miami is doing in that aspect.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Yeah, that's everything. I would recommend that anybody looking for a head coaching job never take it unless those things are in place. I have gone through something like that. In a sense it's good. The best training ground I ever had was to be part of a process where things weren't aligned. You learn a lot, and sometimes there's casualties that come with that from an employment standpoint.

But you learn a ton.

Coming to Miami, that had to be in place because I believe that Miami in the '80s was so good, I think people fell asleep at the wheel. It's like, Oh, we don't need new facilities. We don't need a budget. We don't need increased staff. We're just going to win. You blink an eye and 20 years go by and it's like, where's Miami?

So what you have, you have elite leadership with Joe Echevarria and you have Rudy Fernandez, elite leadership, and you have guys like Manny Kadre, elite leadership. These guys are strong-minded, hungry, driven people that understand the importance of everything and how it's supposed to work. You have community leaders like José Moss.

The involvement of awesome people with the level of

passion that they have, the way they work, the impact they've already had on the community and what they're willing to do for the University of Miami, that's what we want to be aligned with. That's what I want to be aligned with, so every day I'm extremely grateful for the fact that we're in lockstep and looking forward to continue to progress.

Q. Three quick unusual questions: Are you happy that you changed the routine from the team staying in Coral Gables to staying at the Fontainebleau? Was that more of a distraction, or are you happy to get them away from the campus?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: You know, we've been in this process for three weeks, so I think we're in routine right now. For us it's what we expected. The Fontainebleau is awesome and where we're at, we're in isolation. If you go over there, it looks like Fort Knox. We have people stationed everywhere.

But I want to say this: I trust this group of guys because you have the right people or you don't. We have the right people. They know that it's important for us to be locked in, and we came to the right spot to get locked in on what's important, and that's our 1-0 opportunity.

Q. When is the next time you and the Mendoza family are going to have lunch or dinner together?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, we haven't had lunch or dinner in a long, long time, so to your question, I have all the respect in the world for the Mendoza family. We've known each other for a long time.

Q. Can you explain the structural differences and the differences in the environment when it comes to when you played at the University of Miami and now?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: There's no comparison. There's none. I think our facilities were a mom-and-pop shop, but I think our caliber of athlete was -- it's a very storied program. It's probably the best maybe in the history of college football. Not myself; I'm talking about the other players.

It didn't quite match up. That's what I learned when I went away. I went away knowing, okay, Miami was so far ahead back then, everybody else invested heavily in facilities and staffing and other things. I think that's where the separation occurred.

Watching that from afar for all these years was very troubling and upsetting. I thank God for the opportunity to be able to come back and be part of the organization now

and we continue to move forward and get better.

Q. Throughout your tenure, we've seen the community, whether that's on campus or in South Florida as a whole, kind of rally around the Hurricanes again. To see the U back at the forefront of culture in South Florida, tell me what that means, the feeling of it, and what it means for the program as a whole.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, it's always been the galvanizing agent for the South Florida community. Always has. I remember seeing it as a kid before I got here and I remember seeing it as a player, and it's awesome because these guys, not only are they great players, they're future community leaders. They're going to be in the medical field, business field, they're going to be in the sports field, they're going to be in different facets to continue to push this community and elevate it.

To be able to have our players experience that type of support, it's awesome. Again, it always means that much more.

Q. You've mentioned 1-0. That's been a big mantra for you. This feels different. This is the closest thing I've felt toward a Super Bowl, the ticket prices, the energy, the excitement with two new teams in the last 20 years. What from your experience as a player and a coach been able to get the message to your team about trying to keep this as normal as possible even with all the ticket requests and the magnitude of this game?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: We've been so regimented and structured for a long time, and we've had the benefit of -- we've been on the road for five weeks before coming back home for this one. Technically we're the away team.

So it's actually a road process week for us, leaving after the Wednesday practice and just bunkering down and getting to work and locking in on what we do.

We did message -- got with the parents early to say, hey, we're leaving on this day, two days before this, we want all this stuff settled, we don't want to be in any way, shape or form distracted. Because you can only create your own distractions; they don't exist. I think our players understand that. They've taken a lead role in making sure everyone understands that.

We're a focused team that's looking forward to practice today.

Q. Everybody wants to go undefeated but losses are really how you deal with them and how you respond to them. How did your team grow from the regular

season when you went through a couple rough patches against Louisville and SMU?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I learned watching them -- they made me a better coach, first and foremost. I think that often gets lost out there in transition in coaching. Coaches should learn as much as they teach.

What I learned, and I felt that early in February of this past year, that these guys truly have love and respect for each other. Forged in work and invested in time. We all learned the importance of -- college football, the margins are minimal now, and if you choose to give it away with a lack of detail, a lack of execution, then on any Saturday, Friday, Thursday, whatever you're playing, your butt can get beat.

We learned that the hard way twice. Turned the ball over, unforced penalties, pre-snap discipline, post-snap football IQ, ball security, ball disruption, and all of a sudden we weren't cutting it loose like we're used to.

We learned that. Let me say this. We realized that what we put on the field the first five weeks was not showing up consistently enough in those two losses. So the energy and enthusiasm was elevated, and it's brought to work on a daily basis, and we spoke it into existence, but we worked it into reality, and it gave us the best opportunity to be here today.

Q. It feels like it was 10 years ago, but it wasn't that long ago where you guys almost didn't get in. You almost didn't have the opportunity to show yourselves as the best team in college football. What does that say about the system that's in place?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I mean, to me it screams what -- kind of something we talked about seven, eight weeks ago, that this needs to be settled on the field. As much as we can get it to the field, we have to do so. Because on November 1st, and I showed our team that graphic that said Miami's chances at a playoff berth, 5 percent. But I want to go back two years. Miami at Georgia Tech in '24, Miami's chances were at 96 percent, and Clemson's were at 6 percent.

What does that mean? You're never all the way in, and you're never all the way out. You've just got to keep playing.

Q. Mario, with college football now being considered one of the two most popular sports in the entire world, what does it mean for the Cuban culture, yourself, Fernando, Coach Mirabal, several players on the roster, this game being on a national stage on Monday night?

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MARIO CRISTOBAL: I mean, I'm super proud to be a Cuban American. I was born here in Miami and my parents are Cuban. We never spoke English in the house. I had two parents that -- I don't even know where to start in terms of the level of work, effort and commitment. That's our base. That's our foundation. That's everything.

Very proud to be that.

Now, I think when it comes to the game, I don't incorporate any of that stuff. I've never used my heritage to try to get a job or posture myself. Because I believe in people, and I believe we come in all different shapes, sizes, skin colors, ethnicities, languages, and that's the way it should be.

And that's why I love the experience our players have at Miami because the diversity they get to experience. They could be from Birmingham, Alabama, and go to Pleasant Grove High School and be a decent player back in the day, or you could go to Cardinal Gibbons High School right up the road, even though Coach D has got his issues with a certain D-tackle back in the day, but that being said, no, I believe in person that are willing to work and do it the right way.

Q. You've got the Orgeron twins on your staff. How did that come about, and where do you think they're at in their learning process as young coaches?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Those guys are going to be excellent high-level coaches and head coaches one day. Coach Orgeron to me was very special. He was the D-line coach when I was a player at Miami. He always used to annihilate us. I was on the scout team as an offensive lineman, and he was hard on us. He was tough on us. Learned a lot from him.

His sons have that DNA, as well. They're high-level workers. They're high-IQ guys. Those guys are going to be great coaches. They do a great job for us.

Q. Obviously you have Cuban heritage. You have a punter who's Australian. You have Akheem who's from Canada. You have all these international players. You have games being played internationally from other teams, as well. What do you think about the growth of the game, not just American football but college football internationally?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: For us, we think it's the greatest sport on earth and the fact that different guys -- again, we come in all different shapes, sizes, skin colors and ethnicities, and anytime someone gets a chance to participate and earn themselves a scholarship and an

opportunity to play football, I think it's awesome.

It's great for their people back home to witness that and certainly support them in their journey.

Q. What has most impressed you about Carson Beck this postseason and his ability to lead, and what do you think makes him a great leader?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Consistency and resiliency. He's the same guy every single day. He's unaffected by anything outside. There's absolutely nothing selfish about him. He wants to do right by his teammates.

He has absolutely zero interest in any personal accolades or whatnot. He just wants to win. I think a guy that's been through what he's been through both physically and some of the other outside stuff, I think he's a great example for all of us, young and old, on how you're supposed to handle yourself and your business throughout adversity.

Q. Talk to me about throughout the season your relationships, how they have changed with the players and what are the intentional messages that you bring to the culture that you set in the locker room and on the field?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Could you be a little bit more specific?

Q. I want to know about the relationships between yourself and the players and how intentional you are with creating those relationships and what they look like.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: For us, it's always genuine and real. It never changes. We're the same person every single day, and I think that's important so players know what they're getting. Our players know that every single day we're going to outwork everybody in the country to provide them with the best opportunity to be the best they can be individually, collectively as a team and then as a program.

That doesn't change. Then we also have -- we dive into their personal business, as well, into their personal lives, making sure they understand, look, they might be big and strong and roped-up, 290-pound monsters, but they're still 17-, 18-, 19-, 20-year-old men that are still growing and developing into fully grown men, and it's our job, it's our obligation to make sure that we mentor them to the best of our ability and create the right principles and values that they can take forward with them.

Q. You mentioned earlier you're a Miami native, went to Christopher Columbus High School. You have a



very personal connection not just to Miami but also to Indiana. What does it mean to have this game here?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, I think when this game was announced that it was going to be here in Miami in 2026, I think everybody perked up and said, okay, that's year four of the journey. Historically we've had some really good success in our third and fourth years at our respective programs that we've been a part of.

For this city, again, I've watched it from afar for 25 years. It's want. It's yearning to be in this particular and have this particular opportunity, and not just to get here but to be successful in this opportunity.

It's been a cry that's been loud and strong across the country in the hearts and minds of all Miami Hurricane faithful, the entire city of south Florida and the state of Florida, for that matter.

For us, it's process. It's practice. It's preparation. For the outside, it's awesome to see how much this galvanizes, how much it creates the enthusiasm for this community to come together, galvanize and support the Miami Hurricanes and really support each other.

Q. I know you were young at the time, but the '84 Orange Bowl, the '83 season that kind of launched Miami's run, do you remember that game when they beat Nebraska?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I do. I do.

Q. What are your recollections of that?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I was watching it at my grandfather's -- he had a black-and-white TV, antenna was all screwy so it was coming in and out, but I remember every bit of it. I remember every bit of it, all the way down to Calhoun, Kenny Calhoun deflecting that two-point conversion.

It started it, right. People don't realize the extent that Howard Schnellenberger went to to change the image of the University of Miami, both in attracting great players and then to the outside world. He's like the godfather of it and was able to pass it down to some unbelievable coaches.

But I remember it vividly, and certainly -- and for us the focus is, of course, 2026.

Q. Given your run and being the last team in, is there any part of you that could call this a Cinderella-like run?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: You know, I don't ever delve in

terms like that. I stay away from creating narratives, storylines, subplots. It's never been part of process.

I believe that there's a substance to what we do, and it's completely rooted in reality and hard work, and we like to stay that route.

Q. Coach, back in 2022 following the game against Florida State, you mentioned about building, building a program. Fast forward to now, what's your message to the team heading into the championship game at Hard Rock Stadium?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Sure, well, our messaging is very private and very intense and whatnot, but I do -- someone actually sent me a 2022 press conference after that game.

Look, on that flight coming from Oregon and looking at the iPad and what was here and what had to be done, it's a simple decision. You have to get to work, and there's a lot of work to be done, and those first couple years, you're going to get your teeth kicked in.

I think that people have shied away from coming to Miami and creating change because maybe they were afraid of the steps that come with that. Maybe they -- I don't know, just didn't want to deal with what comes, those painful steps that you cannot skip to get Miami on track to what it needs to be, and to me -- I've had awesome parents, and I credit them for everything, as well as my coaches, and they always taught myself and my brother to run into the fight.

This was a fight that had to be had. This was a journey with painful steps that could not be skipped, irregardless of what came with it.

We've always been about the work. We've always been about the fight. Anything outside of that is, like, irrelevant to me so I'm lucky because it's not me. It's not. It's everybody. It's the entire organization making a conscious decision on a daily basis and getting people out of the way that couldn't sustain or withstand what it took to allow us to progress and go forward and continue progressing to the opportunity we have now and the progress we have to take to continue going forward.

This journey is just beginning, and certainly, again, you've got to be a tough you-know-what to make sure you dive into this fight.

Q. Mario, this isn't my question, but you mentioned your grandfather. I'm curious what he did here in Miami. To get here, could you crystallize what you had to learn as a coach to take a team to this level? Is there anything you can sort of crystallize it all down

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into?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I would say hard work and good people is an undefeated combination. It has to be a given, talent and smart and good decision makers, but I believe that good people, hardworking resilient people, that combination together, working for a common goal, I think that's undefeated, and that's what it takes.

It has to serve as an example for those that you coach and also be willing to learn from those that you are coaching because I tell these guys all the time, I learn as much from them as hopefully I've been able to teach.

Very, very simple. This football game, football is not complicated. Blocking, tackling, angles, numbers, leverage. People are complicated, and people complicate things surrounding people.

The right people with the right intentions working the right way, undefeated.

Q. Your grandfather, what did he do?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: My grandfather, man, every day at home was a reckoning. It's different every single day because my parents were working those two jobs and learning the language and doing whatever they could to make it work. I never remember being short of anything. Like they found a way to make it work, whether it be judo, baseball, football, it was just a reckoning. It had to be done at the highest level, academically, athletically, duties and obligations at home, respect for the family, respect for outside people. That's what it was.

I know it sounds like the Army, and maybe it was, but I'm grateful for it. I like it. I know it's boring and I know it's not exciting. But I'm grateful for it.

Q. How would you compare Malachi as a freshman? Have you ever had a receiver that advanced at his age, and what makes him so unique?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I mean, as a head coach, we've been very fortunate. We had T.Y. Hilton way back in the day at FIU and he was incredible. Malachi continues to raise the bar week after week. He's different. He's different. He was raised the right way, awesome parents, awesome upbringing, means a ton to the community, and the community means a ton to him, so the sky's the limit.

I think when you start comparing athletes, you almost -- I would never disrespect. That story is not yet completed.

Q. You played with my uncle, Darren Handy. I've

asked him, what were you listening to in the locker room back then, and what are you listening to in the locker room now?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I can't say that publicly. You know that. Darren knows that. Darren was an elite teammate, an elite human being, he's gone on to do so many things in the police force and the community. Man, he was fun to be around, brought so much energy, physical, tough, biggest bench press ever. He's got a chest from me to you. But Darren -- I still see him every now and then at the reunions. Love and appreciate Darren Handy, No. 66.

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