

CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

Saturday, January 17, 2026

Miami, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Miami Hurricanes

Jakobe Thomas

Pregame Press Conference

Q. What would you say is your non-football superpower?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I'm really good at Apex.

Q. If you could add or change one rule in college football right now, what do you think that would be?

JAKOBE THOMAS: Probably targeting -- the targeting rule. That would probably be the one that I would change.

Q. I think you got some attention after the Fiesta Bowl for your nickname for the guy sitting next to you, Vanilla Vick. How did that come about?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I was on the sideline after he ran it in and one of the offensive coaches came by and was like -- he said "Vanilla Vick" and it kind of just stuck with me because you don't ever see Carson run like that, so when he does, it's a special moment.

Q. It's like when you call a really big dude "Tiny." Like, it's meant to be a little bit of a surprise.

JAKOBE THOMAS: Yeah, it's supposed to be a little funny. But, no, that's my guy right there.

Q. What has he meant to this team throughout the course of this year as you guys have made this run and obviously some ups and downs as season went along? What has his sort of leadership meant in terms of the overall team?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I said it a couple days ago. He works hard, dude. There's not anybody else that I would want to be playing behind and letting lead this team. But he's a guy that just works. He's in here just as much as coaches, just as much as everybody else, and just studying learning and doing everything he possibly can, so when he gets out to the practice field, he's probably the most competitive guy



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out there. So to see how he competes and how he works, it's easy for me to say, all right, that's my quarterback. I'm behind anything he does.

Q. How did you get to know Coach Hetherman when he came in? What was the initial meet things like, getting to know him and his system?

JAKOBE THOMAS: He constantly talked about being violent and it clicked in my head that I really like this guy. But no, we had a lot of great conversations when I first came in. It was a lot of long days where we were studying together trying to get the playbook installed in my head. But he's a great coach.

Q. Do you have any memories from those long days, like, any moment that stood out to you?

JAKOBE THOMAS: No, it was all good memories. Those are things I can look back on and say I really appreciate those. Those weren't days where I felt like I was working. I felt like I was just having fun and it was a relaxing situation for me to be in. But I remember all those long summer days.

Q. Playing Pop Warner growing up kids dream about this moment. Can you talk about not only playing in the National Championship, but playing a National Championship here in Miami?

JAKOBE THOMAS: You know, I think it's every kid's dream to be in this position, especially it was one of mine. I never thought I would be in Miami doing it, but to be here and be a part of something as great as this is, it's just a dream come true. I'm extremely excited. Especially with it being in Miami, I'm just extremely excited for the opportunity.

Q. Being in your home stadium for it, I mean, Sisi was telling us you guys made a promise at the end, at the last home game, that that wouldn't be the last home game. Can you talk a little bit about?

JAKOBE THOMAS: Yeah, absolutely. After Senior Night, we came in the locker room after playing NC State, and we



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just talked about that that wasn't going to be the last time that we came in here. To look back now and that we really said that and we really believed it at that moment and to be here now, it's just a great feeling.

Q. Being on the sideline seeing Carson run that touchdown in, what's going through your head? Obviously, there's 18 seconds left. You have to get focused to get back out there. But what's going through your head as he's running in there?

JAKOBE THOMAS: When the offense got the ball back and I knew that they had some time, I wasn't stressed at all because we practice situations like that, two-minute all the time. I believe in everything that God gave me, so when they went out, I just put my head down on the bench and got back into the team because I knew that we were going to be back in and go back out and defend a great quarterback for those last six seconds.

Q. Throughout the season, this defense has been challenged in terms of guys having to deal with injuries. It could happen again this week. Talk about everyone stepping up throughout season to get to this point.

JAKOBE THOMAS: Specifically in my room, I give all the credit to our coaches, Coach Edwards and Coach Harris. They always talk about the next-man-up mentality. You never know when your moment could come. And Ja'Boree is a great example. He never knew that he was going to play this year, but he stepped up when we needed him the most in that Ole Miss game. That's just the way that we approach everything. It's the next-man-up mentality. You never know what could happen, so you always got to stay ready so you don't have to get ready.

Q. You mentioned the pact after the NC State game, but not even knowing at the time that you would have the opportunity to be in the playoff and then to get here, just kind of the mentality of being able to see that through, even though it wasn't a guarantee that you would even have the opportunity to be in the field.

JAKOBE THOMAS: This team, we're very gritty. Each person here from the staff to the bottom works as hard as possible. When we made that pact, everyone bonded into it and said, all right, this is what it's going to be, and we're not going the other way. So just locking in, putting our head down, working every day. Coach Cristobal, they push us as hard as possible every day so we can be in moments look this. So, yeah, making that pact was very vital.

Q. Are you all leaning into the underdog role at all for

the game?

JAKOBE THOMAS: Not particularly, no. We're not too worried about what people think about us. We know who the identity of our team is and we know who we are and we know how we play, and so whatever people want to say about us, we just let 'em say it and we just go out and play football.

Q. From the moment that Coach Cristobal stepped in in 2022, he talked about the vision that he wanted to set at Miami, the culture. In your one season here, how have you seen the Miami way and the Miami culture really take place?

JAKOBE THOMAS: It's been great. I've always wanted to play for a guy like Coach Cristobal. The way he cares about his players individually, it's different. He pushes us to work as hard as we possibly can, but I don't think a lot of people see the happy side of him and how much he loves each and every one of us.

So his culture, the culture here is -- it's what you want to play for. These are lessons that I'm learning a lot that are going to be with me much, much longer after football is.

Q. What was it like for you before all this when you were watching the show and people got you guys bunched in with Notre Dame and Alabama and them and just waiting to see if you would get in?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I'm not a guy that leans on stuff like that, but that was a stressful moment because I knew how much work we had put in and I wasn't really sure. Coach Cristobal just said whatever happens happens and we're just going to continue to be us and who we are and we're going to finish the season the right way, and then they put us in.

Q. Coach Cristobal had a great run working for Nick Saban at Alabama. Does he ever tell any lessons that he learned from Coach Saban or anything like that?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I think you can just see with how he goes about coaching, he's very, very particular about how things are supposed to be done. If it's not done that way, he's going to rip you a new one. So I think that's -- I don't know if that's something he gets from him. But, no, I don't know, I think he's just his own type of coach.

Q. Just going up against IU and matching up against Mendoza, what makes him, in your eyes, a tough opponent? How do you strategize against a guy like that that has some mobility as well, a little sneaky on that side?

JAKOBE THOMAS: No, he's -- I admire his game. He plays very composed. There's no ups, there's no downs. He's willing to get hit if he needs to get hit. But I think he's a very accurate quarterback. Like you said, he's very sneakily mobile at the same time. I think he has a great deep ball. I think he has, any level throw he can make at a high level. So a lot of respect for him. I'm excited to play against on a Heisman Trophy winner.

Q. With their running game, obviously a two-headed monster there. How do you guys go up against an approach where Hemby kind of has those longer carries, and then you get the bull rush with Black? What does that look like for you guys on the defensive end?

JAKOBE THOMAS: We've faced some great backs this year. These two, they play very complementary to each other. They're pretty good, man. It's going to be a hard challenge for us, but we're willing to face it. But the biggest thing is we just have to be who we are and continue to do what we do.

Q. Corey Hetherman always talks about the ESV and the way that you guys play. Since you've gotten here, you've kind of embodied that. How has that mentality helped you be that person throughout the entire season?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I've always lived by his motto before I got here. It's just play this game as hard as you can, swarm the ball, because you never know what can happen, and play violent.

No, since I've been here, it's the motto. That's what we live by, and we talk about our swarm all the time. That's who we are as a defense, that's our identity.

Q. You mentioned that you play defense very violently. Where does that violent play style come from?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I just want to win, dude. That's my biggest thing. I'm a competitor first. But, no, I think being physical is part of this game, and my dad taught me that at a very young age. If you don't deliver the hit, you're going to get hit, and it hurts way worse to get hit. But, no, that's just how I play man. I just want to win.

Q. How has Coach Harris and Coach Etheridge helped you take your game to the next level this year?

JAKOBE THOMAS: The mental part of it. Coming from Tennessee and Middle Tennessee, I struggled mentally

with believing what people were going to tell me was going to happen, and Coach Harris really taught me how to slow things down and really process and see and visualize what I'm seeing.

Coach Etheridge helps me with my keys in terms of see ball, get ball. But they helped me technically with tackling. They helped me a lot, every aspect of the game.

Q. I wanted to ask you, how many people do you think you're going to lay out this game?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I can't predict it, but if it needs to happen, it needs to happen. It's one of those things.

Q. You come in and made a big impact right away. At what point did you realize that this group can be something special?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I think my first week here is when I knew. But I sat down with my dad one night -- my dad lives down here with me. So I sat down with my dad after the first PLP that I got a chance to be a part of, and I said, This team's special. There's talent everywhere. But bigger than talent, these guys work hard. And I remember being in the first PLP and seeing guys like Matt Lee, JoJo, Keelan, Sisi, and Mark and Smarty, and I'm like, we got some guys.

Q. What would you say you added to this group that really took it to this next level that is at now?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I would just say leadership. In my room specifically, we have a lot of young guys that haven't really experienced playing a lot. So when the opportunity to come in and share some of my knowledge with them and just be a leader and someone that can instill a culture into a room before I leave, and those guys know that. But yeah, I think that's what I brought.

Q. I wanted to you ask about Indiana's wide receivers, and how do they compare to some of the best teams that you've played in the ACC? Are they on that level? And what makes them as good as they are?

JAKOBE THOMAS: No, I would say those guys are probably some of the best that we played. Sarratt does a really good job. He's a great, great body receiver. He's a deep threat. They got some guys out there, Decker's a really vertical guy, he's a lot sneaky faster than you would think he is. Cooper is the Swiss Army knife for them. So those guys, I don't think they get as much credit as they deserve because they probably got overshadowed by the run game. But, no, those guys do a really great job on the perimeter, blocking as well.

Q. On another note, do you guys feel a sense of responsibility for the ACC, knowing that you guys are the last team in and your champion didn't get in. Do you feel like you kind of have a responsibility for the ACC to show up?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I don't think so. I think our conference looks at us and just it's happy that we're in the position that we're in. But at the end of the day we're just here to represent the U, the conference, and just do what we have to do.

Q. You're highly regarded for playing a very physical brand of football. On the flip side, Indiana's DBs also play a very similar way, very good open field tackler like you are. Can you offer some perspective to your teammates on how they play to kind of give you an edge, like the wide receiver room?

JAKOBE THOMAS: You guys know our receivers. You know how they play. I don't worry about the physicality part with our receivers. Matt Lee will come in and give you some too. I think our guys are more than ready for them. I think they're going to do what they got to do.

Q. What are you listening to on Monday in the locker room?

JAKOBE THOMAS: Game days I always start with Testimony by Yak. And then I usually go to hustle music by Lil Wayne and calm out a little bit. I keep on repeat Fireman too.

Q. It's been pretty well documented that one of your football idols is Sean Taylor. What kind of mindset or inspiration are you taking from him going into this National Championship game?

JAKOBE THOMAS: The physicality part of the game, but just flying around. He played with no fear. And that's the part I want to play with, because he put his body on the line for his teammates each and every time. That's how I want to play and let these guys know that I'm going to give you everything I got. He played with a swag that brought a lot of odds to the position, so I think that's what I'm trying to do.

Q. A couple missed opportunities on defense last week, turned the ball over. Has there been chats about that in the group to make take advantage of those opportunities against an Indiana team that doesn't make mistakes that often?

JAKOBE THOMAS: Absolutely. Obviously four drops and

an interception was not okay. That was addressed right after the game. That's been something that all the DBs have been working on all week is making sure we're catching the ball and capitalizing on those opportunities. But like you said, those guys don't make mistakes, and they will capitalize on those mistakes. So we have to get the ball.

Q. Speaking with Akheem Mesidor about this team and how you kind of improved from day one to right now, he gave a lot of credit to the defensive back unit. Just what can you say about growing as a unit and what it means to you to have a guy like Akheem seeing so much, and have so much faith in what you do in the back line?

JAKOBE THOMAS: First of all, Akheem is a great teammate. That's probably it. He leads at an exceptional way. My group of guys, me and Akheem came in late, but we were older guys and some of these guys haven't played a lot of snaps, valuable snaps. So come in, we just knew that we had a lot of talent in the room. We just had to create an identity for who we are as a defensive back unit. We're going to play hard and we're going to play violent. And Akheem and them guys do a great job of constantly keeping everyone accountable. And I can't thank him enough for -- we've had long talks about what we're supposed to do, and how we're going to do things and how we're going to approach everything to keep our defense together. It's easy to say, but it was a lot of long nights that we had.

Q. What is it about working with a guy like Keionte Scott that you guys just playing off of each other, on the field, off the field. What it's like to be with him and learn from each other?

JAKOBE THOMAS: It's great. Keionte is one of my best friends outside of the facility. But, you know, when I have a teammate like that that I can lean on when I'm going through it, that's someone I can call and he'll come to the house and sit down and talk with me, it's easy for me to be on the field and say I'm going to give him everything that I got.

Q. What is the mentality of the team walking into the last game with all the noise around at home?

JAKOBE THOMAS: There is no tomorrow. We didn't get this far to get this far. I think my teammates embody that. But there is no tomorrow. There is the last time that the 2025 Miami Hurricanes will play with each other. This is the last time a lot of us play with each other. It might be the last time some guys put on pads. So going into the game it's all or nothing.

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Q. When you look at where you were last year compared to where you are now and the process of getting to this point, how gratifying and satisfying is it to you that you're going to play for a National Championship on Monday night?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I still don't understand the feeling of it. It doesn't feel real to me. But to be where I was last year and to be where I am now, I'm more than blessed. I thank God every day for just the opportunity to wake up and be a part of the University of Miami. Yeah, it's a great feeling.

Q. When you look at Mendoza on tape what stands out about him?

JAKOBE THOMAS: He's an extremely accurate quarterback. He plays with a great composure that you got to have as a quarterback. I think he moves the ball really, really well for them offensively, and he's sneaky mobile. So just playing against a guy like that is going to be a great challenge.

Q. How sweet was it to hold that MVP trophy last week?

JAKOBE THOMAS: It was good, man. A lot of work went into it. I don't think that trophy happens without Coach Harris. We started that game off pretty slow personally, and he kind of got me back into my zone. He just -- my coach believed in me, and when you verbally hear that from your coach it's something that it lights a fire in you.

Q. If you could give the DB room a nickname what would it be?

JAKOBE THOMAS: The Chat Boys that's what we call ourselves, the Chat Boys.

Q. Now that you guys made it to the title game, especially after being the last at-bid team to make it to the CIP, what do you think it's going to take to beat Indiana?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I think the biggest thing is being who we are. We got here for a reason and we got here being who we are. I think they're a great team. They're a phenomenal team. I think we're a phenomenal team as well and I think it's going to be a great matchup. But it's going to come down to the nitty gritty on both sides.

Q. First time you saw Baby Jesus on the field what was it like?

JAKOBE THOMAS: Oh, that was in June, it was during a

PLP, and I watched him run a seam route. And I looked and I was like, is he really a freshman? Like he didn't move like one. Then just watching who he is as a person and how he works every day, you kind of just realize that this was destined for him, this was supposed to happen. But no I was definitely shocked I was a little caught off guard.

Q. Have you ever seen a 17 year old like that?

JAKOBE THOMAS: No. Not like that.

Q. What's it like? Who was the closest person you could compare him to?

JAKOBE THOMAS: I don't think you can, man. There's nothing he can't do. At all.

Q. When he pushed that pile in the semifinal game into the end zone, I mean that was impressive, man.

JAKOBE THOMAS: I think it just is a true testament to who he is as a person. I think I can say that about all 140 guys on this team. If it comes down to it, I think anyone out here is willing to give their life to make sure that, you know, put it on the line to get that win. But he's a great person, he's a great kid.

Q. Can I get a game pick from you, Texans or Patriots?

JAKOBE THOMAS: Texans.

Q. You guys have had a chance to look at their collection of wide receivers, they have obviously had like four different guys who have done a good bit this year. What's the biggest challenge of facing a group like that where they can do a lot of different things.

AIDEN FISHER: Yeah, no, those guys, they do a good job. I think a lot of people don't overshadow the fact that they do really well in blocking as well. They contribute to the run game a lot. It's going to be a big challenge to face guys like that. I think the biggest thing is just us being us. We have to match their physicality if not out physical them, but that's a great group of guys they have over there.

Q. Obviously Fernando Mendoza's been a pretty accurate thrower all year long. When you look at film on that and try to see where you might have opportunities for picks and things like that, when you're looking at that, how does that all come into play?

JAKOBE THOMAS: We have to cash in on those. We



dropped a couple last week, but if we get the opportunity with this quarterback, we have got to take the ball away. He's very accurate and he doesn't put the ball in a lot of positions to be jeopardized, but, no, it's a great opportunity.

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