

CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

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Miami Hurricanes

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Pregame Press Conference



NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

MIAMI 2026

Q. Coach, good morning. You guys held A&M to three points, Iowa State to 14 points. It seemed like Ole Miss could move the ball between the 20s. Indiana is a highly-efficient red zone team. Do you operate like a bend-but-not-break system on your defense? How does that influence your game plan for Monday?

COREY HETHERMAN: I think they do a really good job moving the football. I think they do a really good job executing in the red zone. Obviously for us I would say bend but not break. We're an attacking style defense. We try to dictate tempo.

Last week I think we gave up a couple of big plays. A couple of explosives in there. Have to clean up some of the details. I think earlier the A&M game we did a really good job of staying ahead of mistakes a little bit and getting more stops. There were a couple of plays in there. I thought that was a really explosive offense. So I thought our guys did a really good job of creating the takeaways early in the game and later in the game had a couple of red zone stops and blocking the field goal, the interception late.

Obviously the goal is to get stops. Get three and outs, get the ball back to the offense. They do a really good job staying ahead of the sticks. We have to make sure we stay ahead. If we do get in a red zone situation, we have to take away the four-point play.

Q. Got to cut your teeth a little bit underneath Cig. What was your time at JMU with Curt like, and what did you learn from that experience with him?

COREY HETHERMAN: I think it was a great experience. Obviously we had a lot of success on the field when we were together at James Madison. I learned a lot. I learned a lot of football.

One thing I've been very lucky in my career, a lot of the people I've worked for, I've been blessed to learn from

people, different details, fundamentals, techniques, different situations, and had a lot of really good experiences there.

Had a chance to be very successful in the postseason, get to a national championship when we were together at the FCS level. And learn his approach to the game, game management, the style, different situations, what the expectations were in those situations. Then just the day-to-day, the detail in how we were recruiting and the detail of how we approach practice and player management, player load.

I learned a ton of football from him, and I learned a ton of situational football. It was a great opportunity to be a part of.

Q. A lot of people are like, how is he doing this at Indiana? Do you have any insight into his secret formula?

COREY HETHERMAN: I think they're very detailed. They do a really good job with how they work. I think it's very specific what they do in recruiting. I think they go one play at a time. They're very detailed in how they go about the process. I think the process in how they practice and how they train is exactly why they're in the situation they're in.

Q. Getting to this stage is a big achievement for any coach, and everyone knows your relationship with Coach Cignetti. I'll ask you about Coach Cristobal and what's impressed you about the way he's been able to manage the season as a head coach? What have you learned and taken from him in that regard in getting to this stage?

COREY HETHERMAN: I think it's the same thing. It's been about the process, the attention to detail. It's about the team, and it's all about us. It's about the focus is on us as a team every single day, starting from last January when I joined the program, all the way through to this morning's meeting.

It's always about the players. It's always about putting what's first right. It's always about what do we have to do

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with details, what do we have to do with fundamentals, how do we go about the organization of every single little thing we do in the program.

For today it's going to be how we come down here, how do we handle media day, how do we do practice? It's a normal Thursday practice for us today. The speed and tempo, the detail in the different situations, the players, the reps they're getting, you know, who is in different situations, how we handle end of game, how we're handling red zone, goal line, normal downs, third downs.

It's the details of how we go about everything. Then after, okay, how do we clean it up and do it better the next time that situation comes up? That's where as our season has gone, I thought we started out really strong going into Notre Dame, some of those teams early. ACC play started off against with Florida State, where we played well for three quarters. Now we figure out, how do we clean up that fourth quarter? How do we get better in that situation? How do we put different guys in situations?

I think as the season has gone on, last week we had a situation that was very similar to the SMU game. Now that we had been there and learned from that situation, now we're able to win the game in that situation, where before we went to overtime or had a different situation.

Q. Your relationship with Coach Haines is well-documented at this point. How similar do you feel like your defensive philosophies are?

COREY HETHERMAN: I think I've been very lucky to work with a lot of really good coaches. The defensive staff here is unbelievable. The amount of football that I have learned from the assistant coaches here, from Zac or Will or D-Lew or JT, and even the assistants outside of that, the amount of knowledge that is in that room, I'm always trying to learn. I'm always trying to take different things.

That was one thing when I was with Bryant and I was really lucky. Everyone that we had, different guys on that staff, I was able to learn from different things that they had learned, different details they like to do, different stunts or line games or coverages.

We were always working together as a group. Some people have a title, but to me it's all about the team. I had a system.

I had structure that we took to JMU when I got hired there, but our defense in 2019 was not what we had in 2018. It's very similar to what we are now - defense last year at Minnesota 2024 is not the defense you're going to see on film in 2025 with Miami.

I learned a lot of football from him. He's unbelievably smart. He does a really good job and works really hard. I do think we're different. When you turn the film on, you're going to see a very similar concept, similar schemes, but I think the way we attack different offenses is different.

Q. I wanted to ask about Carson. He had sort of a crazy transition to Miami with dealing with injury, getting his car stolen, moving. That's a lot for anyone to handle, let alone when they're in the spotlight like he was. What did you see from him in terms of how he handled that and how he sort of has grown and gotten past that as the last nine months have unfolded?

COREY HETHERMAN: Yeah, I think that defines who he is. He comes in, and it's coming off an injury, all those different situations, but that's exactly how he is on the field. How do you handle a takeaway? How do you handle a tough situation? How do you handle being backed up?

He's done an unbelievable job on and off the field of how he handles the day-to-day, how he handles the situations, how he handles where the situation that he's put in.

My first time meeting him, we did a team kind of bonding. Went down to Miami Beach and did a workout on the beach, and we happened to be sitting next to each other on the bus.

At that point I didn't know how much of the defense that he knows, what is he kind of seeing. He's not really involved in practice or workouts at that point. He's still coming back from rehab. The first question is, hey, when you are doing this with the shell or are in this coverage, what are you trying to do? It just showed me how locked in and how detailed he is. He is constantly becoming better at his craft. Wanting to understand, when I do get to practice and on the field, how am I going to deal with beat, what you guys are doing right here.

Then I asked about the details with Georgia and SEC, different teams he had seen, what was similar and what was different? He had very detailed answers. Hey, this is kind of like team A or this is very different than what we did in practice, but this one was similar. But just how smart he is, how thorough he is in his details, his preparation and how he handles situations on and off the field.

I think it speaks for who he is.

Q. When you came in, you talked about wanting to get the defense to kind of have to think less and play faster, play looser. How did you instill that mentality with them? How was the transition to get them to play

like that?

COREY HETHERMAN: Yeah, so the first thing that we focus on is always -- it's what our swarm is, how physical we are as a team and then how well we play together. Every unit meeting we've had since really day one last year, it's been about are we communicating as a defense, are we talking, is know on the same page? And then are we flying around and having fun? Are guys enjoying practice, enjoying the game? You make a big play, do you celebrate with your teammates or you go off? How connected are we as a defense? That's been a major emphasis.

Then how fast do we get to the football. You have a back side corner, are you on the home run angle? You have a back side DM, are you a chase player? Are you swarming to the football to be the second guy or third guy in to finish the tackle?

What are we at the line of scrimmage or the point of attack? Are we knocking it back or creating separation? Are we redefining the line of scrimmage or are we knocking ball carriers back or are we getting knocked off the ball?

That's been the emphasis from day one. After that it's all fundamentals and technique. There's only so many techniques you can play, only many fundamentals you have. Even the freshmen that have joined our team here to start the next semester, right away they want to learn Xs and Os and plays. To me, don't worry about any of that. Learn about flat technique, skiff technique, quarter push, quarter curls, where your hands are, do you start on the cuff?

It's the little fundamentals of details. If you are going to learn how to play football, you can play football. But if it's just an X and an O or a line on a piece of paper, that's where we start having struggles and confusion.

We talk about being a little bit more positionless where you'll see a lot of guys playing different roles. Some guys are buzzing to the flat and a D-line, and some guys are playing different roles. It might be a linebacker. That's where we teach them the fundamentals. We might have a couple of more calls, but you are doing the same thing over and over again. It's only four or five different things. Then when it does become too much, I tell the guys, today is the day. Any concern, any hesitation, we're not sure, it's out.

We're going to go line up and play fast. We are going to be connected, and all 11 guys are going to be doing the same job, the same detail rather than a bunch of scheme and guys are not sure what the fit is or the coverage check is. That's as we go through the process, we make sure our

guys are very comfortable. If they're comfortable and confident, they play fast. That's kind of how the whole process goes from the start all the way through when we kick off.

Q. Dealing with injuries the past few weeks, how have you seen some of the younger players in your secondary step up throughout this playoff run?

COREY HETHERMAN: That's a tribute to Coach and how we go about in practice and do the reps. We put our guys constantly in different situations. It's one of those things where the way that we detail out different packages, different special teams, different situations, all of our guys get reps. Even when we call it in scrimmages, some people call a base call over and over again, we're going to call our normal calls. We're going to attack with our blitzes and our simulators. We're going to call our red zone calls or end-of-game calls no matter who is in the game, one, twos, threes, doesn't matter.

We'll put guys a lot of times in different spots where it's not always the same two corners or the same two linebackers playing together. A lot of times that allows a younger guy to learn from an older guy. He can kind of pick them up.

From my room, you get a young linebacker in there, he's trying to figure what the fit is, the older guy is picking him up. "Hey, this is going to be this fit, this coverage, you have to have your eyes here. Be alert for this play."

Now that younger guy starts getting wired into it and starts thinking that way. When he's on the field and playing with another guy, now he can start communicating that same way.

That's where early in the season before you have injuries, you don't see those guys, but they're constantly training and constantly getting better. Going against our offense every day, I always feel like it's the best thing to go against. Having that opportunity to go against our quarterbacks and having the opportunities to go against our backs or offensive line or wide receivers, our guys are constantly getting better.

Now you get thrown into a situation where your first rep is last week against Ole Miss's No. 1 wide receiver or Virginia Tech, they're running the ball at you, and you're a young D lineman and figuring out how to set the edge, am I boxing this, what's my technique? You've been in that situation and moment.

We try to always talk about Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, it's the same exact situation as Saturday. You have the bright lights and crowd, and it's still 120 x 53 1/3.



Block out the noise, you are focused on the details and control what you can control. That way we've had guys every week a different guy stepped up in a situation, whether it's a D lineman that's been down or a linebacker that's been down or a DB is down.

Every week you see guys step up and close roles and they don't flinch and they don't blink and they step up and play really well.

Q. Your defense has had no problems getting to opposing quarterbacks this year. Can you talk about what challenges Indiana's offensive line might present and what you are seeing from that group?

COREY HETHERMAN: I think they do a really good job. It's a lot of off-track situations we were missing close, or the third downs, there's not as many third down off-tracks. They do a really good job getting a third and one to two or a third and three and four.

For us we got to stop the run. They do a really good job of running the football and staying on track. They do a really good job of keeping the pocket clean for the quarterback, because they put themselves ahead of the sticks in a lot of these situations. We got to do a good job early in the game and stop the run. Then they do a really good job mixing it up. RPOs, quake game or shots early in the down. We have to try to make sure our guys are detailed in and they do some seven-man protection and work some slots. Our guys have to be able to handle slots and understand the motions are and how to counter back through it, understand how to handle it out with our simulators and our pressures.

We have to stay on track and stay ahead of the sticks and force them to be in situations where they have to drop back pass. We have to change it up. Last week we may have done a couple of things too many times later in the game, so we have to make sure we're mixing up the pictures and changing up the style of attack we have so that our four man, three man or if we're bringing an extra can get to the quarterback.

Q. What challenges does the Indiana offensive line present? How do you prepare for this?

COREY HETHERMAN: I think they're a really good unit. I think when you watch them, overall the amount of experience they have. It's a veteran group. They work together. I know at this point you can see some guys transferred in or some guys. At this point in the season these guys have worked together for so long now, that I think you can see their signals, their communication, how well they work together in the zone scheme, dual play, how

well they work together in pass protection and passing things off and sorting. It's just a veteran group.

I think the backs do a really good job. They don't take negative plays. They're always falling forward and pressing the line of scrimmage.

The quarterback does a really good job moving around the pocket. He's a really good athlete. There are times you think, all right, here it comes, he's going to take the sack. All of a sudden he slides out of the pocket and extends the play. Moving the pocket, keeping his eyes down the field or extending the play with his feet and breaking the play and getting a run. We have to be really detailed and win up front. We have to do a good job attacking those guys.

But no, I think it's a veteran group. They're very well-coached and do a really good job handling different situations.

Q. I can't find another instance of coordinators being in a wedding together going against each other in a title game. I know you're locked in on 1-0. I respect that, but the human element to this, what does that add to this moment for you?

COREY HETHERMAN: It's probably the same for both of us. I think we're both competitors. Both of us, it's all about being 1-0.

For us there's nothing that changes. It's block out the distractions, block out the noise, and focus on what you can control. As long as we can control the controllables and focus on pulling 1-0 and the normal process we have every week, that's what it's all about for us. It's no different than any other game the way we look at it.

Q. (Off microphone).

COREY HETHERMAN: We met in 2019. I was at the University of Maine. At the end of the '18 season they were at Elon. Coach Cignetti hired me right about Christmas 2018. 2019 we went into that fall, I met them in Harrisonburg. It was kind of a different situation. A lot of the staff from Elon went to JMU. They were pretty tight. On defense Bryant Smith and Bryant Haines were two guys that had come from Elon. Both unbelievable football coaches, really smart. Both have been very successful.

Then I was one of the guys that kind of joined them in that group. We started working together that spring. We threw up the defense that we had at Maine, and I started looking at what they were doing at Elon, what they had done at different spots or different plays they had been. We started piecing together how we were going to attack people and

how we were going to try to create stops on defense. That's when the relationship began.

One thing I've always felt like, just like a team, the staff has to be close. We were very close at JMU. Harrisonburg was a place that was awesome because there wasn't a lot of distractions or a lot of things outside of football. We were on and off the field always together as a staff. We hung out a lot. Constantly pushing us to become better coaches.

As when I left with Rutgers it's been a relationship that obviously we've kept together. We constantly talk. It's almost weird because during the season it's, hey, we're seeing this. What are the things that you have or what are you doing? They do the same thing with me. If we have a common opponent that maybe we've played in the past, especially from us both being in the Big Ten, I had been there for three years, "Hey, when you guys saw these guys, what was something you did?" I asked him last year when I was at Minnesota.

We both have daughters now, so the conversations have shifted a little bit. Now it's, you know, how is it going with Ada or with Gracie? What goes on there? How did you handle this stage? They're a little bit further ahead.

The conversation has changed a little bit, but that's kind of how it all started, and that's where it began. Obviously we're pretty close.

Q. How does it feel that the relationship between yourself and Bryant has really come full circle coaching on the same sidelines, learning from each other? He's in your wedding, and now you're opposite sidelines looking for a national championship?

COREY HETHERMAN: I think, you know, we're both very similar. We both love football. We're both very, very competitive. Staff meetings when we were together, I think this is the call, I think that's the call. I want to do it this way. How do we meet in the middle? What's the best call? What's the best situation? How do we want to handle this? What are we going to do on game day? We worked very well together as a group, that entire staff. All the other guys there.

As a collective group, the five, six of us that were on the staff at JMU.

As we've continued, as we've gone separate ways, Indiana, Rutgers, Minnesota, and now Miami, we've stayed very close because I think we are very similar in our beliefs in football and life and everything else that we handle. We'll remain close. Obviously this week it's one of those

things. He's on the other sideline.

It's been a situation before, there's been times this year, last year I coached against close friends. You just don't pick up the phone that way. You block out the noise and focus on what you can control. It's all about going 1-0 this week.

Q. When you turn on the film for Indiana, what do you see? How do they use their tight ends, specifically No. 37? How do they use their tight ends?

COREY HETHERMAN: I think they do a really good job. I think they're physical at the point of attack, and I think the run game does find them in certain ways. I think they do a good job moving the tight end around. They do a really good job schematically of using him in different positions to block, to create extra gaps, to move the line of scrimmage.

Then the pass game, they do a really good job of hiding him, doing different things, getting him out on checkdowns, working some high-lows. We definitely have to be aware of him all game. More recently it's been he's been an extra offensive tackle as a tight end also, to get some bigger surfaces and create different things in the run game. We have to be aware of that all day.

Q. What has Mohamed meant to you guys on defense? I mean, any thought of everything he's been through. Two torn ACLs, the Texas A&M game. People didn't know if he was going to be okay. Here he is from Rutgers to playing in the national championship.

COREY HETHERMAN: Mo has been awesome. We've had a lot of different people, both from within the program and people that have come join the family since January that have had an unbelievable impact on why we're here right now. Mo is a guy that when he came in in the summer, walk-throughs that the players kind of organize, players do, the way that you practice, how physical it is, the speed, the tempo, how fast you play, having awareness of the defense, being able to communicate with the other guys. "Hey, in this situation this is why we're going to do this," maybe when we're not there.

I'm very big on a lot of what we do becoming player-led on defense, and different guys that have done it. Akheem Mesidor, Kelonte Scott, different guys, Rueben Bain, his work ethic, how he goes about things. All those guys have set the tempo and built this where the defense has become what it is and really the team. You watch the way different guys, Mark Fletcher, how he goes about getting ready for a game, the way he practices and the way he goes about practice, how he went about spring football.

Mo is a guy that how fast we practice, how physical we practice, how you come in and watch film. Even when I was at Rutgers, every night -- and my wife is unbelievable. She understands I'm not going to go home. A lot of times Mo is going to come in at night and want to watch an extra hour of film or an hour and a half of film. He's going to want to watch game clips and practice clips. He's very detailed in his preparation.

That way the situations that we've been in really all season long, he's got the right fit. His eyes are in the right spot and playing top-down and doing what he needs to do in the blitz. That's something that started back in 2022. He had the ACL in '22. He had the ACL, and I left in '24. Now I just think his ability to overcome that. He's gone through all the different adversity on the field, off the field. I think that has just made him a stronger person and a better person off the field. He's been a better person on the field.

You love seeing the result, how well he's playing right now.

Q. When he was in the portal, he obviously is coming off the torn ACL, what did you talk to the staff or Mario about saying we should go get this guy? Do you remember?

COREY HETHERMAN: That was one of those ones, and it's always hard when -- like I talked about before, I've been close with a lot of members of the staffs that I have been on. That's why we had taken a linebacker in the portal at that point. We felt like we had a really good room and a lot of really talented players here at the University of Miami. We added one piece at that point to help make the group a little bit stronger with Bonner. He's going to be a very good football player here.

When he got to the portal, it was one of those things, are we going to look at him, go after him? Obviously we knew he would be a good fit in the room. I thought he would be a go something maker with what we were doing on defense to help the culture of defense and how we want to practice and how we want to play. It's also coming from a program with a guy that I think does an unbelievable job of developing players, running the program. I learned a ton of football from him.

I know he took some different visits. He visited Indiana. He visited Penn State. He went on different Big Ten teams. Ultimately, he ended up wanting to come to come down to Miami. That was one of those things we had to figure out what was best for the football team, what was best for the program, and it worked out where we had an unbelievable fit join the group to get this defense out.

Q. For a lot of America Curt Cignetti kind of came out of nowhere when he got hired at Indiana. From your existing relationship with him and working with him at JMU, what was your reaction when he got hired at Indiana? What has it been like to watch this rise?

COREY HETHERMAN: I think for me I was on the other side at the start. We were at the University of Maine. We had kind of been building. In 2018 we finally got to a point where we were a playoff team, and we were able to make a run in the postseason, but while being in that conference in 2017 and 2018 you could see what he was building at Elon.

That program got better and better in his years there. They did an unbelievable job with the product they put on the field every week, the culture that they created, and the environment for those guys.

Having an opportunity to coach against them in 2018, and we played a game where they didn't have a quarterback. The quarterback got hurt. Second quarterback got hurt. How are they going to manage the game and go about it? It's still an unbelievable game plan that we had to defend and try to create stops and try to create different explosives on special teams and different ways to win the game.

Then the opportunity to work for him, seeing how detailed he was, see how he went about the process, see how the day-to-day was. Then the vision of, okay, this is where we are right now, and this is where we have to be as a program to get to ultimately the result that we want down the end, how the process goes, and the detail that went into every step of it.

To me, it's not a surprise to see what happened, because it's very process-driven, very detailed. They stick with exactly what it is every day that you have to get accomplished, what you have to get done. There's not a lot of outside factors. They block out the outside noise on things.

That's why I think he was successful at Elon, he was successful before that at IUP and James Madison, the success that we had there. After I left, the way that they built that thing through the G5 and Sun Belt and what he has done at Indiana.

When you look at what it was at Elon and what it was at James Madison and now what it is at Indiana, it's the same thing you have seen in film over and over again.

Q. Lastly, you mentioned that you still talk to Bryant Haines a lot. When was the last time you talked to him?

COREY HETHERMAN: I think he texted me "Good Luck" before the Fiesta Bowl. I texted him "Good Luck" before they played in the Peach Bowl I think, and after that "Congrats." That's been it.

It's one of those things where during the season, we connect a lot, we talk a lot, different things, situationally questions and just check in. Obviously this week we're on different sidelines, and it's all about going 1-on for both of us.

Q. I talked to a couple of different assistants that worked with you both, Bryant and you. They all said that one similarity you guys have is that you make it a collaborative process. They said it's a true roundtable. Everyone is valued. Can you talk about why has that helped you kind of get to the point where you're at and been a key to your success, your approach?

COREY HETHERMAN: I said it earlier, the thing that I've been very lucky, I've been blessed to be surrounded by awesome people, great people that are very smart football, but also the way that they take care of the players, the way they help the kids, the way they are always getting the program better in every aspect.

I think that's made me a better football coach from every step of the way, from when I was first at intern working for Rich Mannello to the process at Springfield College, and the guys that helped me out there with Mike Delon and Jack. You go all the way through.

The staffs that I've had -- when I've had the opportunity to be a coordinator, I've always involved, okay, what do you think in this situation, what do you like in the back end, what do we like up front, what line games do we like? What do we want the rush game to be this week? What pressures do we like to get them off track against the pass game?

I'm always learning. When I was with those guys at JMU, I learned a lot from the different guys that were on the staff. Same thing at Minnesota and same thing now at the University of Miami, where I'm constantly learning from D-Lew and from JT and constantly learning from Zac and Will, okay, what coverage do we want to play here and do with the front right now?

I think when everyone is involved, it just makes everyone closer. It just means a little bit more. When I'm asking on the headset, hey, the next series I think this is what we're going to do on third and medium or to start the series or if they get in the red zone, and this is the call right now. Everyone is very involved. It's not one person. It's not,

hey, this is what he's going to do. The back end is involved and the front is involved. Everyone involved with the program is hey, I think we're they're going to try to hit this and try and we want to be in this coverage.

I think that's where everyone is constantly working together and everyone believes in what we're doing. I think that's where we become better coaches because I might see it differently than another coach, and we put it on the table, and I see it a different way. Okay, now we need help. We need to get another guy and play this a little bit differently.

Same thing with the front. Okay, we need to fit this differently because the RPO or how they're attacking us.

I think that's what brings staffs close. I also think I've been lucky everywhere I've been when I left the University of Maine, one of the guys on our staff became the defensive coordinator. Same thing, when I left JMU, Bryant became the defensive coordinator. When I left Minnesota, Danny became the defensive -- you don't need to go outside, because everyone is doing it together as an effort. Everyone is becoming better as a coaching staff. Me included. I learned probably way more than everyone else. When I sit up there, I'm getting different ideas from them.

Q. What has Zech Poyser brought to the program since his arrival?

COREY HETHERMAN: Different intangibles he brings. He's a veteran player. He had played a lot of snaps last year. Being in different situations. Just his versatility - he covers very well. He tackles very well. He makes plays in space. He's physical. He can do a lot of different things. You can blitz him and play him in man, play him in D path. Just his versatility.

We've moved him around to different positions. There's times he's been the boundary safety, there's times he's been the field safety. There's times we've rotated him down, he played the nickel spot. He has so much versatility. He has experience.

He has an awareness to him where it happens once in practice and now he's kind of very comfortable where a lot of guys you got to give them the look on the screen and give them the look in a meeting, you have to hit them with walk-through and a practice rep. He's a guy that can handle those things. You can tell him once on the sideline. You tell them, they're attacking us this way, this is what we want to do with that look, he can go execute that on the field immediately.

I think that's some of his experience. He also loves football. He's a very good football player. He's detailed.

He's constantly watching film. He's constantly working with his teammates. I think he's brought a little bit of leadership just in that regard to a back end and to our secondary where he has that experience, he has that confidence.

And the way he practices. He practices exactly how he plays. That's why I think the result you see every weekend, it's because of what he does Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. I think that's helped get our team better and lift everyone up with him.

Q. I wanted to ask about Mo Toure. He had some pretty heavy adversity at Rutgers. He was obviously a leader there, one of the better players, but had two ACLs. When you brought him in, how did you feel like he would fit? When did he get up to full speed based off recovery from those injuries and able to fit what you wanted him to do on defense?

COREY HETHERMAN: Yeah, I think just him as a person, who he is and how he is around his teammates, how he is around the staff, to me he's a no-brainer in any department. He's a guy, I want him around my family. I want him around the players. I want him in the locker room, because he pulls everyone up. He gets everyone better around him.

I kind of have been there where in 2022 he's battling for a starting job. He had been the starting defensive end the year before at that R position. We move him back to linebacker, and it was a smooth transition.

He picked up the Xs and Os pretty fast. He understood what was going on. He worked very well with Deion and Tyrique, the other two linebackers at that point that were starting. It was like a three-man rotation, because they worked well together.

Then he has the injury, and what taught me a lot about him was a lot of guys when they have an injury, it's easy to get away from football. It's easy to not come in the building as much or not work as hard. He was in the building all the time, whether it was rehab or treatment or trying to work on flexibility or trying to do whatever he could to get ahead so he could get back on the field as soon as he could.

Then at night he's constantly in the meetings, in the game plan. He knew the checks better than half the guys that were going to play, because he's always paying attention. He was locked in. He was detailed. He was working at it, even though he wasn't going to play that week and he wasn't going to play that season.

When he came back the next year, he responded really well, and I think he was a Second-Team All-Big Ten player.

He played really well early in the season. We limited a little bit of what he did. After that, he was in a three-man rotation starting with two guys that have been on NFL rosters. That taught me so much about him.

He was very selfless. They were in a rotation. They were playing different reps. He understood. He knew how to play fast. The way that he bounced back and attacked rehab and attacked treatment to get back to be full strength early put him in that situation to be very successful. It was awesome to see.

I was crushed. I wasn't there, but when I heard the news that he did it again, I was probably hurt probably as much as him. I love him. I love what he does with and who he is as a person.

To see him bounce back now and have another year just like he did when he was a Second-Team All-Big Ten player, when he was a really good player, I thought really good defense at Rutgers, it was awesome.

Just the way he goes about the process, the way he takes care of his body, the way he goes through treatment. Every night he's back in the office. We have a player meeting, and he's back in there for an hour, hour and a half after that going through the short yardage clips, going through the third down clips, going through the presnap pictures on first, second down, trying to figure out what's going to happen in different situations, what they're doing in background, trying to go through the checks one more time. Why do you see we are going to do this on this play? Why are you going to call this in this situation?

You can see his football IQ has consistently gotten better, and he's become a better player. As the season has gone on, he's gotten more and more comfortable with the players around him. He's become more comfortable with his teammates. The way he has played probably after that point through the season, I think he's playing as good as anyone in the country.

Q. Obviously without Xavier for the first half. Demari just did Demari's day-to-day. Walk me through the challenges at that position you face, especially in the first half?

COREY HETHERMAN: I think it's something we're not going to flinch. We're not going to blink. You look across. We've played some very good players. You watch these guys, I mean, they have a really good group of wide receivers. They have some backs that are really good players.

They do some things where the corners has got to be in

the (indiscernible). The corner has got to tackle. The corner is going to be out in one-on-ones, they're going to throw that back shoulder, they're going to throw that slot fade.

We're going to have our guys in different situations and we're going to have to compete. I think the way we practice and prepare has our guys ready.

Last week I think when you see Ja'Boree, that first clip, I ended up watching the TV copy the other day. We're like, Oh, here they go, they're going to go after. He steps you up and plays with really good technique, plays with good fundamentals. He goes up chest-to-chest, plays through the hands, and it's second and ten.

Our trust factor and the level of trust in our guys in those situations, it's high. We're not going to change what we're going to do. We're going to continue to play our style of defense, and it's next man up.

We've had it all season. We've had a lot of different guys step up. Through the season it's been a defensive tackle, it's been a linebacker in different situations. Right now maybe it's more corner, but there's different guys when you go through the year, like Josh and the D-line, you see what he has done or (indiscernible) or Popo and guys constantly step up and meet the pass.

We're excited to see how our guys play this week.

Q. As you look at Mendoza on tape and what he can do, what are you seeing? What is the challenge for your group specifically with him?

COREY HETHERMAN: Yeah, I mean, there's a reason why he won the Heisman. There's a reason why he's going to go where he is going to go in the draft right now.

He is an unbelievable football player. He's a really good competitor. You watch him, how he responds to different situations, I always go back. He gets hit that first play of the game against Ohio State and gets knocked out of the game, and then right now he bounces right back in there and is playing at an unbelievably high level the rest of the game. You watch some of the hits he took in the Iowa game or Penn State. They struggled a little bit early in the game. They get to him and get a sack, he had a couple of hits on him, and the way he responds in those situations.

The pick he throws at Oregon, pull that game a little bit tighter. Then to have the composure and the amount of detail to respond from that and go right back out and put the ball in his hands and make some of the throws that he makes, I think he's a complete player. He does a really

good job.

You can see he runs what they're trying to do very well. He keeps them on track. He understands when to check the RPOs and when to take the access throws and when just to hand the ball off and stay ahead the sticks.

I think he's a complete player. I think he's very good. He's going to be a hard challenge for us. He's the best quarterback we've seen this season.

Q. One of the interesting things of teams, coming from different backgrounds, and the coaching staffs too. You and Jason Taylor, for instance, your football background is completely different.

COREY HETHERMAN: We're not the same?

Q. Both of you have been successful in different ways. I'm just curious, do you ever joke with him about Hall of Fame or ask him a question about his pro career or anything? Just personalize your relationship a little.

COREY HETHERMAN: A little bit here and there, but maybe not as much. I will say this, last night it was kind of cool, they have footballs and they're getting the autographs from everyone. Someone gives me a football, and I go to sign it and be a part of the team, and I see JT's autograph. I don't want to ruin that. I'll put mine over here. A little different.

It's been awesome working with him, and I've learned a lot of football from him. That's one thing I love about this profession is it's -- as a player, we have guys that have won national championships at USC and Auburn. We have guys in the Hall of Fame. We have guys that were first round draft picks on our D-line. Everyone comes from a different background. Everyone comes from something different.

I love Pittsburg State, but not quite the same level as a lot of the guys I'm in the room with, but what I learned there and what my coaches taught me and what my teammates taught me and my learning experience, I still think prepared me for all these different situations.

Getting in a room where it's football, I think why we do what we do is we love coach and building players. We love developing young men to become what they need to be on the field and off the field. That's where working together with him, hey, what do you think we need to do in this situation? What's the line game you want to do or the rush games we want to play? How do we want to attack the quarterback today or what do we want to do in the run game? What technique do we want to play versus pitcher?

Are we a nine technique or a six high? Who is he keying in? I have my ideas and I say what I think, and then I hear out what he's going to say. It's been awesome working with him because I've learned a lot of different things.

You know what, maybe this is better than what we did last year or two years ago or in the past. So it's helped make us a better defense.

Then there were times where I think he made a comment yesterday. We were trying to get the ball out, and he had 50 strip attempts and took the ball out of someone, no problem. Okay, let me see that again. How did you do that?

We're always learning from his experiences and some of it's from his coaching past. There are different stories, especially in recruiting. He'll tell a story to someone, and it's almost, like, I'm the recruit, okay, what happened there? Can we go through that again?

I enjoy some of that stuff as you go through the process and different experiences and different stories. It's been awesome, and I think as a group on defense, the relationships that we have and how close we are as a group, it's helped me a ton just becoming a part of the team and being welcomed to the family down here.

For us some of the guys have been here and been a part of the staff. Other guys, we were brand new this January and February when we were hired. It's been awesome. Those guys welcomed us in and then having us be part of the family.

Q. When you look at the fact that Curt Cignetti came from James Madison, you also spent some time there as well, what does it say about the roads you both have taken and to put something on the map like a James Madison, when those conferences and those teams don't always get that credit?

COREY HETHERMAN: Yeah, I think you look at especially different places he's been and what's kind of defined him as a coach and what's built him or prepared him for where he is right now. Same thing, the different places that I've been.

I think you go through so many different things as a coach. There's the ups, the downs. You go out, and you learn from your experiences all the time... the good, the bad, the ugly.

I think that's where my opportunity to work with him, I learned a ton of football. He had been in different situations. His experiences at NC State and his

experiences back to Rice or at Alabama that he would talk about or different situations that they had at IUP that he learned from, that he wanted to learn from. It put us in a better situation.

For me, it was awesome learning and seeing all those details. Then the same thing for me. When I was young, I was in a Division III room where you didn't have the support staff, you didn't have the amount of people that you have here.

Even when we were at JMU, I look back at our staff now or Indiana's staff, and you look back where some of those people were when we were at JMU, we had six guys on defense. I think we had the full-time coaches, and I think Ben who is at Indiana right now was one of the -- the GA the first year. I think the second year he became an analyst, and we had a second GA, so we had seven guys.

You look at how everything grows and how we developed and how we grow as people and as coaches. It's awesome to see the success that he's had.

You can kind of tell my first meeting how organized it was, how detailed it was, how process-driven it was, and what the plan was. You don't really talk about the ultimate goal. How do we get better today? How do we improve from what happened yesterday, or how do we develop this area?

I think that's why he's been so successful, and I was lucky to be a part of that and get an opportunity to learn from him. I've been lucky in a lot of different situations all the way back to where I started in Division III, to the guys I was coached by in high school and college, and then being in different situations with Harasymiak and Coach Fleck and Coach Schiano and now Coach Cristobal.

The amount I've learned just this year of different details, of different practice situations of putting guys in different -- seeing things differently game management-wise, and I've learned a ton from all these different people, and I've been blessed from it.

Q. What are some of the things that you guys do well as a defense that have to happen on Monday for you to be successful?

COREY HETHERMAN: I think we have to play with confidence. I think we have to play fast. We always talk, the No. 1 thing for us is our communication.

I always tell the defense, I don't care if you are in the right call or the wrong call, as long as all 11 guys are on the same call and we're playing fast and we're playing

physical, we feel good about it.

We want to make sure we communicate, we play fast, and we play physical. Then we just have to make sure we tackle. They do a really good job of knocking the line of scrimmage back. We have to play with really good fundamentals and detail.

We have to win early in the down. We have to stop the run and try to make them -- make it so they're one-dimensional on offense.

Q. Is there anything specifically things you've learned from people to get here? Anything specifically had you to learn when you look back to get to this level of success?

COREY HETHERMAN: Yeah, I mean, my first day coaching at King's College, I realized I had no idea what was going on. You know, you get put in a room, and it was nice early in my career, because I worked with the wide receivers, and spring ball I helped out with the running backs.

The guy that worked with the quarterbacks, he was a full-time high school teacher. He would be teaching during the day, and then he would come. I was the intern, so I was there all day long. Hey, can you get this done, or can you watch this cut-up or get this ready for me, or can you have this guy ready for these clips?

It taught me a lot in that regard, and I kind of leaned on some of it being a quarterback playing on offense where, okay, I know what the rules are for this or know what the progression is on this.

Then some of the protections in the run game, the blocking schemes, a lot of that was details I had to learn better, because I didn't have to deal with that as a player as much.

My second year when I went to defense, I was the worst coach. The guys still joke around. I have guys that played for me. Some of them I've talked to all the way through. Tom Caporale was one of my first linebackers. He's at Syracuse now. He'll still send me texts... Hey, remember when we tried to fit this this way, or remember you coached that drill?

It's one of those things where I had to learn how to tackle or what block destruction was, how to beat a block, what swarm was, what the angles you wanted to take to pursue the football, what happens when they motion, what happens when they come out empty, what checks are we going to be in, what happens when they line up NFIB.

There were so many different things when I got put on the defensive side of the ball. Where I'm a GA, and where I was at Springfield there's nine GAs. Some guys are going out. Some guys are hanging out. Some guys are working on the class work.

I'm sitting there in the office looking at the picture one more time still trying to figure out how to draw the card. How are we fitting this? Who is going to go where? Why are we getting lined up in this? Why are we in a 9 technique here? It was a hard two years.

Coach Hallock, the amount of times I drew a card and it was completely wrong. We used to have to draw them in pencil, and he would put a big X with a black marker through it. I would have to redraw it in pencil and retrace it to make sure it was right. The amount of times I would have to learn to coach my guys up to put them in different situations or get them in a better situation or to learn the fundamentals, to coach it better on the field, different tackling, different being block destruction, or just the way we flow to the ball, we leverage the ball.

There I was lucky enough to work with edges and outside linebackers and then inside linebackers, so I was forced to learn coverage, and I was forced to learn fronts.

Then when I went to Northeastern, it was the same thing. We were 3-4. I basically coached in that defense what would be the equivalent of Mes on one side and Key on the other side. I'm coaching a guy how to play scooch technique or catch technique, and then on the other side I'm basically coaching a DM.

I have these guys in the same room. It taught me a lot of football. I felt like I was never right. I remember seeing Coach Forcucci every day. I would be like, What did I get wrong today? I just knew. I was like, here's the list, I have to get my notebook out. I have to get more detailed. I have to get better at coaching the fundamentals. My indy has to be better designed or better organized. When we go through the walk-throughs, my coaching points off the video, I have to have it lined up different, because I have to make sure these clips get shown to my guys so we know exactly what we're doing.

I've been lucky where all these people have helped defined my career. They've helped so much. All these players, their ability to learn and adapt and push me as a coach.

When I was at Maine, Joe Harasymiak was one of the guys that was a senior on the team to help me become a better coach. These different guys that are off coaching, and some of them are in high school, some of them are in college, some of them are Division III coaches right now at

Wesleyan and these different places. When I need help, I still call them. Hey, when you guys are seeing this, or some of the guys are offensive coordinators or head coaches. Hey, when you see this, how are you handling it, or what are you doing in that situation?

Just everything all the way around has helped me become a better coach and really a better person in all these areas of how I handle situations with players on and off the field.

Q. Correct me if I'm wrong, you and Bryant were each other's best men, is that accurate?

COREY HETHERMAN: So he was one of the best men in my wedding, yes.

Q. How weird is this week?

COREY HETHERMAN: To me it's no different than any other week in college football. When I was a younger coach, I didn't know anyone. One of the weirdest games of my career is I'm at Springfield. I'm a GA. Like I said, I still have no idea what I'm doing. I'm just trying to learn and hold on.

We go play at Pittsburg where my backup is the starting quarterback. My head coach is on the other sideline. My roommates are GAs over there or playing. It's weird.

One of them was at the Fiesta Bowl last week. He was their linebacker coach, and I'm the other team's linebacker coach. After the game it's, like, hey, man, just trying to learn. What did you see out there? Try to help me out.

He's a guy, obviously we're very close. We talk all the time. I've learned a ton of football from him. I was very lucky to get the opportunity to work with those guys and be able to learn from them. It's helped make me a much better football coach.

I think I said it earlier, now in life it's football, but now it's family. Now we both have children. Now it's, hey, how did you handle that? What are you doing on this? There's a lot of different things. My daughter is a little bit older, but we're kind of going through the same things.

It's awesome to see the success that he's had and what they do on the field. Every week I think he's probably the same way. I'm always, hey, what are they doing? There are different defenses I watch Thursday night or Friday or if we get a bye week. Hey, I want to go study what these guys are doing.

We've changed a little bit on the field, but obviously to me it's a normal game, though. As you go through your

career, there's been guys on the other sideline that have been close or I've worked with or I've worked with. This week it's all about going 1-0 for us.

Q. Have you talked to him at all this week?

COREY HETHERMAN: We texted "good luck" before the Peach Bowl and "good luck" before the Fiesta Bowl. That's kind of where it stopped. "Congratulations on the win," and well see each other after the game.

Q. Indiana's offense relies heavily on the RPO. I was wondering how that changes your approach?

COREY HETHERMAN: Yeah, I think in college football that's something that we see every week. We always have to have a plan. How do you stop the run? How do you stop the RPO? How do you stop the quick game, the shots?

The structure of our defense and the foundation of it, we have things built in for, how do you handle the RPOs, handle the same-side RPOs and the side eyes, certain routes, certain concepts, whether it's a quick game or the bubble is in the screen or the slants or the bangs that they run, the different levels that they have.

We have different things, and we have a structure built to take away some of the windows or discourage some of the throws. It's something we've seen right in the opener. I think Notre Dame attacked us a lot with perimeter RPOs and quick-game screens and different things from the start.

As the playoffs have gone, as the season has gone on, we've seen a lot of that stuff early in the game. I think our guys have stepped up and made some good plays and tackled in space and challenged some throws. I think our guys have had a good week of practice, and we'll continue to see it today and have a plan prepared for it when we see it.

Q. With how prevalent RPOs are and have been and are in college football, especially with how Indiana implements them, what are some of the key fundamentals for your defense and just kind of stopping them or slowing down?

COREY HETHERMAN: We have to communicate as a defense. We have to make sure our guys all see the picture the same way every snap. We have to make sure our guys are communicating very well so we're in the same defense.

Then our guys have to play with really good technique and really good fundamentals. One of the biggest things and it

goes all the way back to the opener with the bright lights and who we played against, Florida State and our ACC opener, to where we are in a tough road game in a good environment to responding after the SMU game and Louisville game to playing on the road at College Station. For us it's always been about, okay, we have to focus on us? We have to focus on our details. What's my alignment? What's my job? Where are my eyes? Am I playing with good technique?

Then on the perimeter, am I holding my disguise? Up front, am I aligned and ready to go? What's my presnap procedure? Am I going through everything presnap with my checklist? Our guys, we have to make sure we focus on that. We have to control the controllables and play one play at a time. They have some very good players.

Every week we see some teams that have some very good players. The quarterback last week, running back last week.

We knew we didn't expect to give up the long touchdown run like that. I think that's the first time we've done that this year. Hey, we need to respond. How are we going to respond to this? I thought our guys stepped up and responded really well. That's kind of the way we practice. That's the way we prepare. That's what our offense presents us in practice. That's where our guys have to control the controllables. They have to play one play at a time, and they have to control the details every snap.

Q. As a defense guy, first time you saw Malachi Toney, what was that like?

COREY HETHERMAN: It's one of those things where in practice, you know, you get beat and get beat again. It just keeps happening.

The big one to me was you don't ever want to scheme up practice, because spring ball is about, okay, let's start learning our techniques, start learning our fundamentals, let's start getting used to the foundation of our defense. I'm not going to lie, there are times in the spring game or other times I'm, like, all right, we're playing this call, but we have to know where this guy is.

The hard thing on our offense is there's multiple guys. You focus on him. You got to stop Mark. You focus on him, you have CJ on the other side, different players all over the field that you have to worry about.

The way that he competes, the way he goes about the process, he's in the building first thing in the morning. He's one of the last guys out of the building at night.

He's always catching footballs and watching the tapes. Different guys are preparing him. He's studying different guys in the NFL or different guys in college football.

The player that he was day one of spring football to what he is right now is completely different. I'm excited to see how he continues to get better.

Q. You say he's completely different. How has he changed?

COREY HETHERMAN: His awareness, his technique. How he is aware in the cuts and zones are and how he stems different routes.

He just continues to get better. Every time the ball is in his hands, he's just such a dangerous player.

Q. For people like us that aren't football coaches, what do you tell DBs about defending back shoulder throws, the principles, the core tenets, how to do it?

COREY HETHERMAN: Our guys have to play through their details. We want to win in the first five and have press and have really good technique whether we're scooch or catch off the ball. Are we in phase or out of phase? How are we going to play them that week? What are the details we're going to play, chest to chest, play through the inside? We love different techniques and coach up differently every week.

Certain guys are different depending on their strengths and weaknesses and what size they are. Every guy we handle a little differently. For our guys it's about trusting their technique and fundamentals. Our guys have done a good job of not panicking in the situation, not panicking in the moment and trusting the process and trusting the way that they were coached and the way that they did it in practice and really in the drills every single day and trusting it through the game.

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