

# CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

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Miami, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

## Indiana Hoosiers

## Kaelon Black

### Pregame Press Conference

**Q. We asked Fernando, you guys have been historically efficient on offense right now. He gave credit to basically everybody else. What do you think it is right now? Your offensive line a lot of credit. He's giving you guys a lot of credit for check-downs. What do you think it is about your offense right now that's got you guys clicking?**

KAELOON BLACK: I feel like it's our camaraderie honestly. I feel like Coach Cignetti has done a great job bringing in the right guys that fit in the right system. When you have a great quarterback like Fernando, you got an offensive line like we do, great tight ends, great receivers everything, I feel like it comes together and everything gets flowing.

**Q. As a kid, I imagine you dreamed of playing in this game. Can you kind of talk about, has it sunk in yet? What does it mean to you even to be here right now?**

KAELOON BLACK: Man, I don't think it has sunk in yet. It all just feels real unreal, honestly. I feel like it just means a lot, especially to my people in my family back home, especially seeing me on this stage. I'm really just blessed to be here.

**Q. Any messages to the kids that are coming in up your town, I mean, looking up at you as kind of an example?**

KAELOON BLACK: Yeah, definitely just stay focused being a student-athlete, making sure that you stand on your P's and Q's and always being goal oriented. If you have goals you can achieve them and you can do anything to get there.

**Q. This has been an unbelievable resurgence. You guys have somehow managed to block out all the distractions. I mean the noise has been deafening outside. How have you guys been able to do that?**



# NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

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KAELOON BLACK: Definitely just being focused and paying attention to our in-house, making sure everyone is just paying attention to the details, being focused and not letting the outside noise get to our preparation, and making sure that we have this one goal that we all want to achieve, and we're going to do everything to get it.

**Q. You guys are probably the most disciplined team in college football. What do you attribute that to, that you guys rarely make mistakes?**

KAELOON BLACK: Definitely our culture. I feel like we do definitely make a lot of mistakes, but I feel like we just do it at a really high level and just playing fast and physical and relentless, and making sure that whatever mistakes we do make, we do it at 100 percent, and it kind makes up for it a little bit.

**Q. Everyone is so impressed that this turnaround that this program has. What do you attribute the turnaround to how are you able to go from a losing season to one of the best teams?**

KAELOON BLACK: Definitely bringing in the right guys, the ones that fit into our system. I feel like Coach Cignetti has done a great job of it, and I feel like we have guys that truly believe in the process and will also do anything to get to like our stage right here, the National Championship. And I feel like we're all just grateful to be even here and taking it one day at a time.

**Q. Lastly, what makes Mendoza such a great leader?**

KAELOON BLACK: Man, he's just vocal, and he wants all his teammates to succeed. He wants everyone to be on the same page. And it's very evident in practice and everyday life around the facility.

**Q. When you look at your relationship with Roman Hemby, what's it like on and off the field with him, growing with him, and just how you essentially help each other win day in and day out?**

KAELOON BLACK: Definitely. Roman is a great guy. Also a great running back. Great person off the field as well.



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He's really easy to get along with, and I feel like we've done a great job together.

Having someone like him in our running back room as a great leader. He's also vocal as well with our guys, and he does a great job just bringing everyone together and making sure everyone is on the same page. And I feel like being along with him in our running back room, man, us two together, man, it's just very fun to watch and also be a part of.

**Q. He told me that he likes to -- like you both want to see each other succeed and do well. He has a 1,000 yards. You could get there in this National Championship Game. So just your thoughts on that, having two 1,000-yard backs potentially at Indiana this year?**

KAELON BLACK: We have to give our thanks to the O line for that. We already have a 1,000-yard back and I could potentially be the next one, man. That's just the goal and that's just what we're aspiring to get. I feel like we have a great O line great tight ends great receivers to be able to do that.

**Q. What is it about Coach Cignetti that really speaks to this team, speaks to you just the way he goes about himself, his leadership? Why does it work for you?**

KAELON BLACK: His mind, he's honestly a freak. The way that he watches and loves football is just unreal. It's really unheard of these days. He spends all day watching film but he also wants to make sure that he takes care of his staff and his people and also the team.

He does a great job just making sure everyone is on the same page, and that's honestly something that I can get behind. I've been with him for so long to know the system, and it's never changed.

And I feel like everywhere and each and every year we've always won, regardless of the level we started at FCS. We go to FBS, a G5, and now we're here at the P4 level doing big things. It's just a testament to him and his system and his culture.

**Q. Why do you think that that works the way it does? Like you said, at every level you've been with Curt Cignetti and you've had success. Why do you think that is?**

KAELON BLACK: Definitely, he brings in the right people. He brings the right people in to fit into his system, and everyone gets acclimated to it and everyone gets better from it each and every year.

**Q. For you, I know you talked a little bit about Fernando Mendoza and just his leadership. What is it about his cadence, about him in the huddle, those things that not everybody sees when the game's close, you need a play, what is it about the way he does what he does that just makes sure that this team gets into the end zone, gets that victory and up to this point is undefeated?**

KAELON BLACK: He starts every drive pointing to the Lord, because without him we can't do anything. Then his calmness, his poise through every single play, whether it's the sack or whether it's a 10-, 15-, 20-yard game. Honestly, that's the big thing. You have to have those poise and those big moments.

And I feel like throughout the season we've had those big moments to live up to and step up to. And I feel like Fernando's done a great job of making sure everyone is calm and making sure everyone can think, regardless of the noise and everything like that.

**Q. You mentioned your faith and his faith. What does that mean to you, how does that drive you, how does that center you in those moments of adversity?**

KAELON BLACK: It means a lot to me, man. And knowing who our Lord is and who Jesus Christ is, you know through him you can do anything and you can serve up to any moment. There's nothing that you can't do without him. Those are one of the things we both believe in. We have a lot of guys on our team who believe in. And those are just one of the things that keep us going.

**Q. We know another physical match-up coming up here Monday night. You guys are no stranger to that. How do you embrace the physicality of each and every one of these games?**

KAELON BLACK: Those are the things that you take in, those are the things that you live for, especially in a moment like in in a National Championship. We know Miami's a physical team, but so with are. And we're going to do make sure that we do our best to bring that and show the world what we can do.

**Q. What are you sort of expecting from that defense on Monday?**

KAELON BLACK: They have a great defense. That front seven, they have great players on the back end as well. That D line is ferocious. They do a lot of movement. Linebackers are smart and disciplined. In the back end, they have a lot of speed.

We definitely are going to have our hands full, but we're going to make sure that we stick to our game plan and do what we do best. And taking one play at a time, I feel like we'll get our job done.

**Q. I'm curious, do you remember vividly of a National Championship in the past that you maybe grew up watching that stood out to you and what did stand out to you, if you can think about it?**

KAELON BLACK: That's a great question. The last one that really stuck out to me was when Oregon played Ohio State, when they had Ezekiel Elliott and I think Marcus Mariota was on the other side. At the time I was rooting for Oregon, honestly.

But what stood out to me was the way that Ohio State played. And like it just seemed like nothing could stop them in that moment. Ezekiel Elliott he was going crazy that game. And I feel like Cardale Jones also had a great game as well. So that was one of the things that you can really look up to, especially me being so young, one of the things that I paid attention to a lot.

**Q. There's been a handful of college football teams that have been looked at as the greatest of all time in college football. You guys have sort of implemented yourselves into that conversation, a chance to go 16-0. What's it mean to have that spotlight and have that opportunity to be in the conversation of being one of the greatest college football teams of all time?**

KAELON BLACK: We just do our best to just keep it all on the field. We can't let anything like that get to our heads, honestly, because we have a lot more work to do with this last game and we just want to make sure we stay focused on that one goal and that's to actually get the victory.

**Q. When you got to IU about two years ago, today, pretty much, you were a new guy, but you also knew the coaches, you knew the system, you knew the messaging. Did you feel when you got there, despite being new, that you had to take on a leadership role or a verbal role with the guys who were held over to help them learn the ropes? And if so, how did you feel about that? Was that a weird dynamic for you to be experiencing as a new guy?**

KAELON BLACK: That was one of the things that I knew was going to have to happen being as though like I knew the system and a lot of the guys that were already here didn't. We also have a lot of new guys that came in as well.

So just taking in that role and just making sure like, hey, guys, like this system works. I know a lot of the things aren't like what you did at your last school, but you got the short practices and the film sessions. And things like that are like what separates us from everyone else.

And I feel like being able to do that with the group of guys that we brought in allowed everyone to get better. And I feel like Coach Cig brought the right people and the right staff members with him to be able to succeed.

**Q. Did it take until you guys started to play and started to have success last season for the guys who hadn't been with these coaches before to completely buy in? Did they need to see results and then be, like, okay, now I get it? Or did you feel going into the year there was complete buy-in?**

KAELON BLACK: I feel like going into the year -- it was in the beginning it was, like, we'll see how this goes, but then as time went on you do spring ball and you do summer training and then it's like, oh, yeah, the results pretty much speak for itself. Like we see why this works.

He's taking care of our body. We have great strength coaches who put a lot of time and faith into us. And then as you get into the season it's, like, man, we can really do something here.

**Q. What's it like to be a part of this program that has come so far in just a couple of years from where IU football was previously? What's it like to be a part of this entire adventure this season?**

KAELON BLACK: Man, it's a blessing to be a part of. There's so much going on. I know last year we had a great year. But this year was a step up, honestly.

I feel like, regardless, we've had great buy-in from our fans and a great support system within our staff. And I feel like everyone is just on the same page in terms of wanting to get better each and every day.

And I feel that Coach Cig has pretty much instilled that into our fans and into our, pretty much our culture. Like I said, it's just been a blessing to be a part of.

**Q. What's it like to take the handoffs and screen passes from this guy right next to you, the Heisman winner?**

KAELON BLACK: This is great. He's a great player. He's always so focused, so calm and so poised. He's a great quarterback, and I love doing what I do for him. And I'm sure the whole team loves doing what they do for him.

**Q. How do you keep your focus this week in a game and an environment that's very different from even some of the other bowl games you've played so far?**

KAELON BLACK: Yeah, definitely just making sure, when all of this is over and we get back to the drawing board watching film, doing extra things that are going to make you better for this game.

And for someone like me, this is going to be my last college game. We have a couple more guys on the team who this is their last college game. But we all just want to make sure we seize the moment, not let the moment seize us, and just stay focused.

**Q. What's your message to all the fans who've come down here to Miami to root you guys on?**

KAELON BLACK: Thank you, Hoosier Nation. We appreciate you and everything that you have done for us. And we're going to do our best to make sure we come out victorious.

**Q. We only get to see bits and pieces of who your head coach really is, right, all the sideline shots. But what is he like? Is he funny? Obviously very serious, he's about business. But who is Curt Cignetti behind the scenes?**

KAELON BLACK: Man, Curt Cignetti, he's a mix of both. He's serious about his business, but at the same time, some of the things that he says is funny. Some of his mannerisms and facial expressions are funny. I feel he's a great mix of both.

But he loves his players, man. He's a great coach. He's about his business. And I feel like in the sense, he pretty much rubs off on us in terms of wanting to be disciplined in everyday life, always wanting to get better at something and never be complacent at anything you do.

**Q. To that end, the personality of your quarterback and your coach are obviously very different. But it works great. And now being as close as you are, how does that all mesh together in such the brilliant way that it does?**

KAELON BLACK: Man, we have a great quarterback like Fernando, man, you bring him in. Then everyone pretty much just fall in line. Our culture pretty much speaks for itself. And it's something that Coach Cig pretty much instills in everyone. And, like I said, it's a great process to be a part of.

**Q. You all have two running backs that is running the hell out of 1,000 yards, 900 yards. What's the key to this? How good is this offensive line that y'all got that don't get the credit like they should get?**

KAELON BLACK: It's all them, honestly. They've done a great job this year. And I feel like we've done a great job being efficient as well. When we're seeing the holes, just hitting it. And we can't waste any time, especially in the Big Ten.

And our O line, from our center to our right guard, left tackle, man, you name it, I feel like they've done a great job, especially also with our tight ends and our receivers as well, too.

**Q. You've gone against a good front right here this game. Rueben Bain, the other kid projected, both of them going first round. Is this the biggest challenge that you guys have faced as far as a (indiscernible) defensive line this year?**

KAELON BLACK: I would say it's definitely one of our biggest challenges. Those guys are fantastic players. You see them, they definitely stick out on film. You try to get chips on them. They swim-moving and still making plays. It's definitely one of our biggest challenges.

**Q. Everybody is talking about the size. Me, I'm a smaller guy. I played 14 years, All-Pro, Pro Bowl, all of that. Sometimes size doesn't matter. Do you think the size of the defensive line of Miami is a factor in this game?**

KAELON BLACK: Honestly, no, like size really doesn't matter in this situation. We have a great O line, great tight ends that can block. So I feel like, man, we just play our game, we can get the job done.

**Q. If you could shout out one athlete at any level any sport that you think is underrated, who would that be?**

KAELON BLACK: My boy, Bill -- Jacory, he plays for the Redskins, or the Commanders, Sorry.

**Q. If you could have one company sponsor you for NIL, which company would that be?**

KAELON BLACK: Nike.

**Q. What is one thing at the moment that you personally are obsessed with?**

KAELON BLACK: Sounds crazy to say, but my girlfriend.

**Q. Lastly, what has been the toughest place for you to play in your career?**

KAELON BLACK: That's a great question. I would say Iowa.

**Q. Talking to Roman, and we were talking about the physicality that you running backs play with. He said you set the tone every game. How and why?**

KAELON BLACK: I would just say, like, coming in after a great running back like Roman, I have to do my job or else I'm not going to play.

Then in that sense, we have a great O line, we have great tight ends, we have great receivers that can block. And I feel like if they're doing their job, then I could do my job as well. I feel like they also do a great job of just being focused and doing what they can for me.

**Q. It's kind of like an underdog mentality of, he went to Maryland, he's a high-level recruit. You've got to prove -- he's pushing you type of thing?**

KAELON BLACK: Yeah, Roman pushes me every day. We practice hard. And I feel like it's one of those things where you always want to get better, especially being in Coach Cignetti's system. He loves to see improvement, not just wanting to give the coach what he wants to see.

**Q. But how does that make you feel that he's the one saying you're the one pushing him?**

KAELON BLACK: I mean, honestly it's a blessing. We both are two go-getters. We just want to do whatever we can to prove our worth and show that we belong.

**Q. Have you practiced your first touchdown celebration? If so, what is it?**

KAELON BLACK: My touchdown celebration is always so basic. I'm doing different things, whether I'm screaming or I'm throwing up VA, where I'm from, or I just do some prayer hands and I give my thanks to the lord and savior.

**Q. Aiden Fisher, he mentioned he was talking to his mom; he was hoping someone didn't get complacent. He realized he's been with Cig a long time when he was saying that. Has that kind of happened for you at all?**

KAELON BLACK: Yeah, this definitely happened for me. I think I did some interviews probably a couple weeks ago, and I was saying the thought of being disciplined and getting things done and wanting to be better, kind of

translates to your everyday life, whether you're cooking or you're cleaning, just making sure you don't let things get too messy. That's just how it is, honestly.

**Q. With the dynamic between you and Roman both just being two dominant backs, how have you guys worked out your relationship to where you make each other better instead of, you know, kind of animosity, because I know you both want the carries?**

KAELON BLACK: Yeah, definitely, man. It's just one of those things that it starts in practice, honestly. You see how each other move around and do drills, and we honestly feed off each other's energy. We always start practice off by saying like, let's go, 1; let's go, KB. And from there it just trickles down.

And we always just want to see each other get better. And, honestly, it's just blessing to be with a guy like Roman in the running back room. He's a great person off the field as well.

I feel like we do a great job off the field even building that relationship and building that camaraderie. And now that it's getting so real, like, we have one game left, we want to make sure we make it count.

**Q. Is your relationship in that running back room the best you've had in your college career?**

KAELON BLACK: I would say it's definitely one of the best, in terms of just everyone's being funny, everyone's locked in at the same time. We know how to turn on that switch of when to lock in and when to play around. I feel it's just so fun to be a part of.

**Q. Could you describe the bond the JMU guys have?**

KAELON BLACK: We all just love each other. We still have a few guys that are left over. And it pretty much carried over from JMU. We all just want to make sure we go out with a bang.

**Q. What was your recruitment out of high school like?**

KAELON BLACK: I started off pretty hot. I had got offers from Virginia Tech, East Carolina and Wake Forest. Then after that it kind of slowed down, I started getting some FCS offers.

Then late in my recruitment round, around my senior year, around the October, November checkpoint, I got Toledo and James Madison. I was pretty much down to those two. But then, like, for me, I love to win. And I felt like James Madison was the perfect move for me, being as, though,

Coach Cig was the coach, and I feel like what he was doing at James Madison was just great. So I wanted to be a part of it.

**Q. What was he doing that you thought that was so appealing to you?**

KAELON BLACK: Man, just, honestly, like seeing how he spread the wealth amongst his running backs. It was one of the games I went to. I want to say like five running backs touched the ball that game. I was, like, that seems like a running back by committee type of thing, and whoever has the hot hand, of course, will get the most touches. But if everyone's getting the opportunity to play, then I feel like that's the system I want to be in.

**Q. When you went into the portal, did the JMU guys talk to each other about, hey, we should all go together? How did that work?**

KAELON BLACK: Honestly, no. It was just one of those things where we were, like, it doesn't even feel real that Coach Cig is leaving. But we still knew that we wanted to be a part of him and be with his system.

So we were reaching out, making sure, like, hey, Coach, you know what I'm saying, we in the portal now, so if you want to get us you can. And it's just one of those things where he said believe the faith and he believed in us and brought us over. And the rest is history.

**Q. Is there a special quality that you guys have that you're able to start at a lower level and then move up and nothing changed in terms of how well you played?**

KAELON BLACK: I would say definitely being resilient because regardless of the level, I feel like we had that same success.

And I feel like it's also a testament to Coach Cig's culture and the way that he coaches his players. And this is something that you can really get behind and always want to get better.

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