

CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

Saturday, January 17, 2026

Miami, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Indiana Hoosiers

Coach Curt Cignetti

Pregame Press Conference



NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

MIAMI 2026

Q. What is it about this collection of coaches and players that made this week possible?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, we're here because we prepared the right way and we have the right people in the staff and in the locker room, and we have tremendous support from our president and athletic director and we have a great fan base. We have a plan and a process, and we have great leadership and good players, and we've been very consistent in terms of our play in all three phases, so we've met every challenge.

So the novelty of being here, to us, isn't there. We're here. We've got a job to do and a challenge to meet, and we've got two more days of prep.

Q. You mentioned this fan base. They have showed up every step of the way. Anything you want to say to the fans in attendance here?

CURT CIGNETTI: If you're not sure you can make it down, find a ride. Yeah, the Big Ten Championship, last week against Oregon and the Rose Bowl. Indiana fans, largest alumni base in America. A lot of people didn't know that. It's been huge for us.

Q. You said up here that the novelty of being here isn't there for you guys and that you have a job to do. When you're doing something as a program for the first time in a century, how do you balance that we've got a job to do and how do you enjoy this?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, you know, we're still in our process, our preparation process. We all understand that.

Obviously, the last two years, it's been a great story. It's been fast progress, kind of surreal to some degree. It's a big story nationally. I get that.

But that's separate, sort of, from our team mindset right

now, in terms of us physically being here and what our intentions are today, what we've got to get done today.

It's been great. We've got a lot of momentum. But we're playing a great football team in Miami. Tenacious up front on the defensive line, really physical on the offensive line, big running back, athletes everywhere, playmakers at wide receiver. Special teams are very good. They're playing on their home field. They didn't have to travel.

It's a big mountain we have to climb.

Q. Coach, a lot has been talked about how you make the right pieces fit on your roster. When it comes to talent evaluation, what was a couple things you took from Coach Saban that have paid off for you here?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, when I was with Nick, there was an evaluation sheet, and supposedly when he was with Belichick at the Browns, he had sort of come up with a sheet, or had a large impact on that, ankle, knee, hip flexibility, toughness at every position. Ankle stiffness, hip stiffness, knee stiffness, fatal flaws, start-stop game, generate explosion from those three facets of your lower body. That would be the biggest things.

From a personal standpoint, I learn from my mistakes, and I think most of us that aspire to achieve at a high level either learn from our mistakes or we don't progress.

When I was young, we took some potential guys. We had to. When I was with Coach Majors at Pitt, we didn't have much, didn't have facilities, didn't have money. We weren't very attractive to recruits. We took a lot of guys that had certain qualities but hadn't quite put it all together. So I learned from that.

To me, there's a lot to be said about what the guy is made of, his intangibles and his moldability or coachability, what kind of teammate he's going to be. You still have to have a certain level, obviously, of athleticism to be successful at the P4 level and the Big Ten.

But you get the right group of guys together that combine as a team and they're good decision-makers, they're good



... when all is said, we're done.®

people, because you've got to make decisions on the football field, too, and you've got to play with discipline and you've got to play with poise and you've got to play with confidence and consistency and have day-in/day-out consistency to a high standard and expectation.

That's what this group of guys have done to this point. But there's a lot to be done yet, and they understand that.

Q. Curt, to that end, a year or so ago, you're looking for your quarterback. You land on Mendoza, obviously. What was it at the time, before you knew, that made this seem like a good fit?

CURT CIGNETTI: I was aware of Fernando because we had Alberto, the younger brother. He signed with us at JMU, Tino Sunseri signed him. He had won two state championships. Was a special family. They were all high achievers. The mom had gotten sick. I knew the dad a little bit.

I'm a tape junkie, and I would see Fernando on tape maybe from two years ago when I'm watching red area pass or something. And then when he went in the portal, I mean, he was a talented guy. Didn't take many plays. Had a lot of physical attributes. Knew what kind of family he came from. We had Alberto in the program.

So he got here, and he's done a great job of developing. Tremendous job. He's probably played better after he won the Heisman, which is a real credit to him. But we've got one more to go.

That was an easy decision.

Q. How has your team been able to handle the pressure of these high-stakes games, especially these last three or four, and how do you anticipate them handling Monday's pressure?

CURT CIGNETTI: To me it's noise and clutter. You stay focused on the here and now, control the controllables, be detailed in your preparation. That gives you the most confidence going in, gives you the best chance. Because we have so many guys on this team that are older and have started so many games, the moment has never been too big. We have not always been perfect, but we've been very consistent in all three phases.

I think as we went on the road and won tight ballgames, especially at the end of the game, like Iowa being the first one, that just gave us more and more belief and confidence and put us in a better position down the road for the same type games.

Q. We got a huge smile from you after the last game. You said you wanted to crack open a beer. Tell me, when did you crack open that beer, and what kind?

CURT CIGNETTI: It was Hoosier beer. You ever hear of Hoosier beer?

Q. I have not, and I live in Indiana, so I'll have to check it out.

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, it was shortly thereafter. Just one. At my age when you drink two you fall asleep.

Q. When you said "Google me, I win," did you think in two years -- you wanted to be successful, but did you envision being here on this podium to play this game on Monday?

CURT CIGNETTI: I don't think I ever thought that far away, honestly. It was such a quick hiring process, and then when I got here, I found out so many things I didn't know, 10 offensive starters in the transfer portal and some other things that -- like two universes colliding.

We had pretty much won championships year in and year out, and doom and gloom on the Indiana side, and that's kind of why I got out there a little bit the way I did. I knew I was out on a limb. I had to find out if the fan base was dead or on life support. The basketball game was the first thing, and then Google me was our press conference, signing day press conference when I was asked the same question for about the 14th time.

I had a lot of confidence in myself and the staff because we had had success. That's why I took the job. But I can't say I ever thought this far ahead.

Q. What do you buy into when they started paying players a lot, there was this idea that you just had to pay to get four- and five-star recruits and you had to bring in the very, very best. I think we know that Indiana doesn't have five-star recruits. Is that all, frankly, BS and just a matter of what you do once you get the players?

CURT CIGNETTI: This game is all about recruiting, development, retention. The development piece is huge. Derek Owings, our strength and conditioning coach, has been with me for six or seven years. He's always in high demand, does a tremendous job. And then the way you coach them in the meeting room, the way you practice, the things you put in their head.

There's a lot of guys out there that can play, and development and consistency are the two key factors.

I really honestly have never looked at a star in my life. I understand they're out there, four-stars, five-stars and all that good stuff. If a guy can play and he's got the right stuff in terms of intangibles and he's a worker and he loves the game, he loves football and the process and he's got enough physical ability, he'll develop.

Q. Mario was in here earlier talking about his early days at Miami and seeing that program come from a program nobody believed in to what Miami became. This is not a sport that welcomes new parties to the big-boy table very often. Do you see some similarities in maybe how Miami was built and became what it was to what you're trying to do now at Indiana?

CURT CIGNETTI: In terms of the result, probably. In terms of the product and what you're getting, probably not.

Q. Could you describe your sense of humor, and are there ways that you use it to make points with your players?

CURT CIGNETTI: Absolutely. It would be hard for me to describe my sense of humor. I see it all and I hear it all.

I make my points, and I have a way of getting it across to the kids in as few words as possible. I think Bryant Haines said it best. I read something two weeks ago, he had said: Get it across in as few words as possible with the most amount of impact.

That's been my philosophy for a long time. If I've got something, a point I need to make, I'm going to hit them right between the eyes.

Q. You mentioned when you got here you had to see what the level of fan support was. Fast-forward to today, you have Mark Cuban hopping in to support the program. A lot of schools seem to be doing that, as well. What's the experience been like to have that level of support from an alumni who's stepping in and saying I believe in exactly what you're doing and I'm going to contribute directly to it?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, well, Pete Yonkman runs our -- he used to run our -- now everything has changed, and Mark Cuban has gotten involved, too, at a level. If Mark Cuban wanted to give \$10 million, that would be like me donating \$10,000. But we're glad that he's involved.

If he keeps doubling his donation, it'll be big one day.

But it takes a village. It takes money. But it's not all about money. We've got a lot of alums, a lot of rich alums. But

Mark Cuban is a very visible guy, from western PA, born in the same hospital, him and I. We kind of hit it off right off the bat.

He's got instant recognition, which only helps.

Q. The practice before the Rose Bowl you were disappointed with the team's performance. Was that the last time that they failed to meet your standard, and what's the expectation with today's practice?

CURT CIGNETTI: No, I would not say that. We'll find out because I have a press conference tomorrow, and we'll see how today goes because first practice on-site is a challenge.

Q. A lot has been made of your sideline disposition. The cameras always seem to find you. Have you heard from friends and family on that? And internally so much to manage, what are you thinking about actually in those moments?

CURT CIGNETTI: I'm always just trying to anticipate, think ahead, because there's a lot of critical decisions you've got to make that can affect the game. Trying to take emotion out of the equation.

I see it, yeah. Everybody sees it, right?

Q. You mentioned the uphill battle of having to play Miami in their home stadium. But the Indiana fan base has really turned out for these bowl games. Do you have the expectation that we'll see a lot of red in the stadium again, and have you been surprised by how the fan base has responded to this team, mentioning the doom and gloom when you came in?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, I think we'll have a great showing. It probably won't be like the Peach Bowl, but we'll have a great showing. I have not been surprised the way they've traveled because once we got rolling year one, we were selling it out and they couldn't get in, and it's only grown and grown.

Q. There's sort of this high-stakes game that's gone on in the quarterback transfer portal that you've had to play. What's the period like where between you get a guy and then you know what he is on the field? How do you sort of deal with that interim --

CURT CIGNETTI: You mean in terms of developmental curve?

Q. Yeah, you have Fernando on campus, and you haven't seen him play for you for a while --



CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, but that's what recruiting is. Recruiting is evaluation. If you trust your evaluation and your history of evaluation has been successful and you have a lot of confidence in yourself and your process for evaluation, then you feel strong about a guy.

I felt extremely strong about Fernando. Extremely. Like I knew we had something.

Q. To come from James Madison and to take -- obviously when you look at your coaching staff, your student-athletes, to not just go yourself to Indiana but to bring them with you and to see the success, what does that say about the power moniker, the group of moniker, and when it comes down to just the fiber of who a person is?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah. We kind of create those categories artificially, right, Group of Five, just that, these games are televised, these ones aren't. I think the average fan probably doesn't understand sometimes that there are some really good teams at the Group of Five level and players.

Obviously we brought guys here that have been some of our better players, have been All-Americans. I do think the Group of Five level has probably been watered down a hair since I left JMU because the transfer portal every year takes and takes and takes.

Maybe some of those teams aren't quite as strong as they were when I left, so to speak.

But those guys all had a little chip on their shoulder. They had something to prove. They were really good players. We had had a lot of success. They're wondering why they weren't created by a P4 program, and this was their opportunity.

Truthfully, the process happened so fast, me taking the job, and I almost didn't take it because I loved JMU, once I got here and they started jumping in the portal, I was like, oh, yeah, we could use him. I had never entertained the notion that they may follow me. I had no idea what was at Indiana. What I knew about Indiana was just being a coach's kid and loving college football and following college football since 1970 on. Knew they had some good teams.

The one thing that did catch my attention, however, about three years ago when that TV contract was signed by the Big Ten making all that dough. That caught my eye.

Q. What stood out about D'Angelo Ponds when you recruited him, and did you anticipate this kind of

success from him?

CURT CIGNETTI: Ponds is a player, he's a great player. He might be the best player I've ever coached that was with me throughout his entire career in terms of consistency, production.

You saw it in camp right away. First week of camp, he's out there, he was holding a little bit, but he cleaned that up and became a starter. When he became my starter my last year at JMU, I think it was down at Troy, our third game of the year, they had won the Sun Belt the year before and we beat them at Troy, he started and he made plays right off the bat, first series that impacted the game, and he's been a great player ever since.

Q. I think there's this notion out there that you are like a magician who's figured out this magic trick to make Indiana become great all of a sudden. Do you view it as you've done something special here, or is this just you're repeating your process that you've done everywhere and it's working here?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, I'd say B. There's no magic wand. It's the fundamentals, and you've got to have the right people, number one. If you don't have the right people, it doesn't matter, on your staff or in the locker room. Then you have to have a plan for development, recruiting and retention. Then obviously how to practice, how to play the game.

So it helps that we've had coaches that have been together for a while. Every day you get better, you get worse, you never stay the same, and that includes me, every day. If you're not striving, someone else is, so you're getting worse.

I'm a film junkie. I mean, we're not way out there like, wow, what a scheme. But we're fundamentally sound and we find the right match-ups up to this point. No, there's no magic wand. I'm no wizard, that's for sure.

We do have a play called wizard that we put in for this game, however.

Q. I think the casual football fan would be surprised to hear you say that you almost didn't take this job, that you almost stayed at JMU. What flipped your thinking to decide IU was the place?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, it was Wednesday night, I had just got back from Indy talking to Scott and the president, and I had a pretty good idea they were going to offer me the job. And I'm laying in bed with my wife about 8:00 at night, and I said I think I'm just going to stay. I like this place.

Scott didn't give me a chance. He called me up and said, "Congratulations, you're the new head coach at Indiana, and we're going to kick some butt."

I said something, about five or six words I can't say here, hung up the phone, and that was it.

He didn't give me a chance to say no. He told me I'm the new head coach. My wife said, "You should have seen that look in your eye," like what did I do?

Q. (Indiscernible.)

CURT CIGNETTI: No, it didn't. Once I got here, there was so much that needed done.

Q. Obviously you and Mario both worked under Nick Saban at one point. Is there any relationship you have between you and Mario in the past?

CURT CIGNETTI: I don't think we've ever met.

Q. Everybody has a fatal flaw, something that's annoying or something they do wrong. People would think that Fernando does not do anything wrong, he cleans his room and he's this perfect person. What is his fatal flaw?

CURT CIGNETTI: I don't know what his fatal flaw is (laughing). I know he's a good quarterback that really developed a lot and has to play well this week. I think in life, all humans are flawed, but he's got great things ahead.

Q. Curt, Alberto told me when you told him you were recruiting another quarterback, he said, I'm not going anywhere. What's he like, and could you see him winning the job next year?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, I think his words were I'll stay a year, but he's got to go out early and then I'm the guy. We'll see what happens there with Alberto. I think he's got a good future. I like him a lot as a player. We'll see what the future holds.

Q. You just spoke about the transfer portal. Last year's National Championship had two quarterbacks that were -- it was their first year at that school, fresh transfers. Same situation this year. Can you talk about those changes in college football and maybe some of the success transfers have had?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, it is a little bit like free agency now. I'm not going to go too far down that road. But the quarterback position is the key position. It's hard to win

without a good quarterback, or at least win big.

Miami's quarterback has done a great job. Fernando has done a great job. Last year we had Ohio State and who, Notre Dame? Two really good quarterbacks.

That is a position, however, where the guys that play quarterback, they don't like to sit. Like if they know they've got the right stuff, they want to play.

Q. I was just listening to Pat Coogan talk about Miami's defensive front, how violent and twitchy they can be. How do you describe Miami's front guys, the Bains, the Mesidors, on that line?

CURT CIGNETTI: They're great players, both ends, all the inside guys, they play a lot of people. And I know how Corey coaches. Schematically it might be a little bit different, but I know the philosophy is not much different. He's got them creating havoc, TFLs, sacks, stop the run, playing with an edge, nasty edge.

Extremely impressive group. Those guys are going to play a lot of football when their college days are over.

Q. You mentioned Coach Hetherman, and obviously you worked together for a few years, and you said you know what he does and how he does it. What have you seen from him and how he's grown and how he's matured as a leader on the defensive side, and just what it's like to know that once you were on the same side, now you're on the opposite side?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, well, we actually don't communicate a ton anymore, but I loved him. I didn't want him to leave. We had a great relationship. I really thought a lot of him.

You're so busy. He's busy, I'm busy. It's hard to -- but we exchange texts occasionally. I've seen schematically a change. I can't talk to his growth as a leader because I'm not with him day-to-day. But I always thought he was a great football coach. Fortunately I had Bryant Haines, who I think is the best in the country.

They're different. They're different guys. Corey is a hard driver. You'll be shocked to know that Corey played quarterback in college. I used to joke with him all the time, I heard you had no touch when you threw the ball. You find that hard to imagine, knowing Corey, right, that he wouldn't have touch as a quarterback? But Corey is a great football coach. He's done a great job here.

Q. Your long kicker was a game-time decision last week, hasn't kicked in a while. Do you feel like he

could be back on Monday? Obviously that's a factor on kickoffs and potentially long field goals?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think he's listed as questionable or doubtful. Questionable? We'll know more probably after today's practice. Yeah, that was the big practice the last time we traveled to the Rose Bowl. We thought he would be ready, and he had a little setback. It was a huge factor. The guy kicked two 58-yarders back to back against Oregon when they called time, and I think the Iowa one was a 52-yarder. We're talking like three seconds to go in the half, which are huge points, and every kickoff through the end zone.

Q. Can you talk about Elijah and his importance, and also looking back, before he went to JMU, he played for an IUP grade, played for your father, as well, at Saint Francis. Did any of that factor in and get on your radar?

CURT CIGNETTI: I knew about Elijah when he was entering his junior year of high school. Then I took his older brother, who was a safety at VMI, and we played them in the playoffs the COVID year. I could tell he was a very instinctive player. His brother I'm talking about. So we took his brother as a safety.

Elijah then went to Saint Frances in Maryland for high school, ended up at Saint Francis in Loretto, PA. Yes, Chris Villarrial played for my dad at IUP and was a center for the Bears for about 10 or 12 years. And Elijah caught close to 50 balls and there was another receiver there, too. We needed receivers. And that's how we got Elijah.

He tweaked his knee a little bit that first spring. I think when the year started in the fall, first game of the year, he was third team, made a couple plays game 2 against Virginia that were big, and then started every game after that, made First-Team All-Sun Belt and caught I think over 80 balls that year.

Q. You've been known to say that you like to crack open a beer after a win. Might I suggest a cooperation between Belgian beer and an Indiana Brewery called Shark Pants to open after the game? Second, you guys have been blowing out teams lately, but people seem to forget that you had some close games like the Penn State game, Oregon game earlier in the season. What has changed since then?

CURT CIGNETTI: I mean, you're going to play close games, and you've got to find a way to win them. The one thing about this team is they have played like we want them to play. Certain things we preach on the opening kickoff to the end of the game, and they've tried to do that

pretty consistently. If you do those kind of things and you've got enough talent, you should win your share of those close games.

The Penn State two-minute drive was huge, obviously. Our backs were really against the wall.

I think one of the reasons that we have so many lopsided scores, and it's not that I throw the ball more, but we run the ball and our twos and threes are playing really, really hard so the point total goes up.

Q. Belgium is the country of beers. You made the remark that you like to crack open a beer after the game, so I thought why not have a good cooperation between a beer brewed in Belgium but in cooperation with a Indiana brewery. It's a fine India Pale Ale.

CURT CIGNETTI: You find our equipment guy and have one of those cold ones in the cooler for after the game, if we were fortunate enough to come out one point ahead.

Q. Coach, how do you actually teach discipline on the field? Is it as simple as we run sprints for penalties? What's the actual good-cop/bad-cop science to that?

CURT CIGNETTI: There are a lot of things that go into it, but in coaching you get what you demand, and if you're not coaching it, you're allowing it to happen when you see something you don't like. We want to do everything to a high standard, and there's got to be accountability when guys can't consistently meet the bar.

Discipline on the field is getting 11 guys to do their job because when you've got 11 guys that do their job consistently, play in, play out, it's not addition, it's multiplication.

The challenge is only not that play in its entirety; it's all the plays, not affected by success, not affected by failure, never satisfied.

There's a lot of things that go into that to get 11 guys to do their job. When you do have success, act like you've been there before. We also want to be -- we're one of the lowest penalized teams in America and always have been. Play smart, disciplined, poised. All those things are discipline.

We're No. 1 in the country in turnover ratio. That's discipline.

If you want to be good in anything in life, you've got to have a goal, and then you've got to be committed to it and have the discipline day in, day out to work toward your goal, the work ethic and the mental toughness to persevere. That all

goes into discipline.

Q. Coming from Ireland, I think there's a lot of coaches in any sport that can learn a lot by the mindset you instill in your players from day one. Is there anything specifically that you think you teach to your players that could come across through any sport, could transfer to anyone in any field in life?

CURT CIGNETTI: You take over a losing program you've got to change the way people think, and then you've got to get them to believe. If they do things the right way, prepare the right way, there's no self-imposed limitations to what you can accomplish. 95 percent of the game in season is right between the ears.

Q. Coach, what you, your staff, your players have done, what do you think what you've been able to accomplish even so far and what you might be able to accomplish Monday night stands among the great moments we've seen in American sports history?

CURT CIGNETTI: So now I'm a sports historian too, huh? That's for you guys to figure out.

Q. You've gone almost viral on social media for the way you keep your poise during games. How do you keep your composure so level during such high intense moments?

CURT CIGNETTI: Self-control, I guess. I'm just trying to anticipate, not be emotional, which is the best way to make good decisions, because you're going to make decisions during the course of the game that are going to be critical to the outcome of the game.

Q. I actually met you at family weekend at JMU. My older daughter graduated from there. Is there a coach or someone that has inspired you to become such a great coach?

CURT CIGNETTI: My dad. My dad was a great role model growing up. I was the oldest of four, and he led by example. He had a presence about him, and he had great work ethic, disciplined commitment.

Back then -- grew up western PA, everybody worked in the mill or the mines, and he went to college and became an assistant at Pitt, Princeton, West Virginia for Bobby Bowden, became the head coach, and then came down with cancer my senior year of high school and was given his last rites twice.

He didn't really get to finish what he started there. But yeah, he was my inspiration.

Q. You mentioned how Corey has evolved. How have you seen Mike and Bryant evolve since they joined you on the staff?

CURT CIGNETTI: Mike keeps maturing and I'm able to walk away more and more, which I need to do, in this day and age of college football, especially in the playoffs where you're juggling portal recruiting and retention, things like that. Mike is really good. He's got a great demeanor and disposition. He's one of the most trustworthy people I think I've ever met in my life.

Q. I feel like this season for y'all could be a movie. Which actor would you want to play you?

CURT CIGNETTI: Let's get through this game.

Q. You famously said, "Google me." So I did. I looked through your coaching history, 40 years. If you could go back to the very beginning now and give yourself a piece of advice, what would it be?

CURT CIGNETTI: I mean, I think I had to walk every path to become who I am today. I don't have any regrets.

Q. I wanted to ask you about recruiting players that left the program first and then came back, like Louis Moore and Kahlil Benson. What was that process like? Because they left when you got there. Was it more of a business approach at that point?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, absolutely it was a business decision. I didn't want them to leave. At the time I understood, based on critical factors, and then I think once they saw the success we had and heard from their teammates, they wanted to come back and be a part of it. For me, it was a business decision.

Q. James Madison, Utah, you have done an unbelievable job. Everybody keeps talking about the size of this Miami team. Is it the size or is it the fight in the dog?

CURT CIGNETTI: Miami? They're playing with an edge. They're a tough football team. Both lines are really good, and they get after it, and they've got athletes. They're tenacious. It's a start-stop game, twitch and explosion. Then you've got to have a little edge about you. They're impressive.

Q. I know you said you don't interact with him much during the week, but with how Fernando is playing at the level he's playing, what, if any, corrections do you make? And this might be a little weird, but have you

ever had a heated exchange with him?

CURT CIGNETTI: No matter how good he plays, there's always corrections on tape from the game before, which the process is we come in on Sunday as a staff, quick staff meeting, and then we break up offensive, defensive staffs and I watch the tape closely with the offensive staff.

There's always things that he could have done a little better. I've never really had a heated exchange. I can only think of one time early in the season, I think it was Indiana State, where he made a couple poor decisions in the red area, whether to pull the ball or give the ball off or maybe one time throw the bubble or give it to the back. I can't remember. But I remember making a point on the sideline, and I think that's the only time I ever had to really kind of make a point where I felt like my point needed to be made.

Q. One of the benefits of having an experienced graduate transfer quarterback is the experience, but the downside is they're probably only going to be with you for a year, maybe two. In this day and age, how do you go about building a roster and continuing to potentially build a dynasty, if that's what you're aiming for, when you have players that you're only getting them for a small amount of time?

CURT CIGNETTI: You started the question out the quarterback position, right? Well, every one of our quarterbacks since '19 has been Player of the Year in the league, so we're doing something right, and they've all been one-year transfers since the first two. I guess Kurtis Rourke was not, but he led the country in QBR, and we've already got one committed for next year and in school. That's part of it, I guess.

It would be nice to have a guy for a few years, but when you've got a chance to get a guy that can play winning football that's been through the wars, that's the way -- to me, it's an easy decision. You've got to win every year. Now, there's no, oh, in five years we'll be good. That was a long time ago.

It's not a perfect world, college football. A lot of issues, obviously. You've got to improvise, adjust, be light on your feet if you want to thrive and survive.

Q. I'm from Philadelphia; if the NFL coaching job ever opened up, would you consider taking an NFL job? I know you said you're loving the moment with everything.

CURT CIGNETTI: I mean, I'm not an NFL guy. I made that decision a long time ago when I went with Chuck Amato to NC State in 2000. I had a chance to go with the

Packers, Tom Rossley, Mike Sherman, Favre was in his heyday. I think Darrell Bevell got the job, ended up taking the job. I declined the opportunity. I almost took it.

That's when I made the final decision, and I've always been more of a college football guy.

Q. Obviously this has always been the goal for you guys, but to actually be in this position, have you taken any time to reflect on how far your program has come?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, I get asked that a lot. Not much time now because there's always something that needs done. Every week brings its challenges this time of year in college football. When the season is over, yes. But really the focus now -- I have said a number of times, it has been kind of a surreal thing, but our focus right now is what we've got to do today to put ourselves in a position better.

Q. I wonder, being an assistant for almost 30 years, how did that shape your ability to scout kids, to evaluate kids, develop -- I wonder, being in an assistant role that long, has it helped you along the way as you built rosters?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, I think as 28 years Division I assistant, I think, recruiting coordinator and a coach probably since '93 to 2010, and around a lot of really good people, assistant coaches, too, that I drew from and learned from. The recruiting coordinator thing helped me. It did help me. I was always trying to get out of that job. My dad told me down the road that thing is going to be valuable for you one day.

At the end of the day, I was hitting the big 5-0, I had a couple of daughters in high school that wanted to be doctors, Sam was a freshman at Alabama, and I didn't want to be a 60-year-old career assistant. I had grown up in the business. I had tracked assistant coaches and families and careers, and I didn't want to do that. So I bet on myself. But I didn't wake up every day at IUP like I've got to be a P4 head coach. I was trying to make the most out of life, and it brought me here.

Q. What do the JMU guys mean to you and that they followed you here and they've had so much success?

CURT CIGNETTI: You know, like I said, I never thought about the JMU guys coming here. It was such a quick process. Once they started jumping in the portal -- I think we were down to 40 scholarships here. We needed them. So I was glad.

They were instant impact guys, on and off the field. They



were, I think, critical to the acceleration of our development and success in year one.

Q. Why do you think they were so important?

CURT CIGNETTI: Because they could answer questions for the guys that decided to come back and the new guys, other new transfers, on how we do things, how I am, those kind of things. But they were players. Ponds was an All-American. Fisher was an All-American. Sarratt was on some All-American things his first year. A lot of them.

Q. With Fernando, different stories from the spring and the summer that a lot of people didn't necessarily see this coming. How do you explain just how far he's come?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, and I've been asked that question before. Every one of those quarterbacks, DiNucci, Cole Johnson, Centeio, McCloud, Kurtis Rourke, Mendoza, all Player of the Year in the league, except Rourke because Gabriel won the Heisman, but he won QBR. Not great the first half of spring, a lot better in the second half of spring, they have a good summer. Fall camp, different player. Better at the end of fall camp, and then they build on their success early in the season, and they just get better and better and better because with success comes belief, and with belief comes confidence.

Q. I know you're prepping for a game, but as you look at the structure of this college football thing and just roster building and things to that effect, whether it's contracts, the timeline of these things, I guess A, do you feel like these contracts are kind of enforceable right now, and B, just broad strokes, what do you want to see, if anything, change with the way that these things are going on right now?

CURT CIGNETTI: We're going to see a lot of things change, but I'm not going to go very far down that road right now. I'd like to see rules that are black and white in ink and that we all follow and there's consequences when you don't, and we don't have that. We've got a lot of gray area and ambiguity.

Q. We've learned a lot about the Mendoza family this week because of where we are. We always talk about high-character guys when you're recruiting. What have you learned from the Mendozas and the story we've seen about them this year?

CURT CIGNETTI: I knew where they came from, so I think the older one, Fernando in particular, I saw how one guy could kind of bring a team together. You can have close, tight teams, but this team here is extremely close. He was,

like, the glue sealing the open edges and cracks, which probably to a degree I had never seen before.

Q. Why was it important to bring Grant Wilson in even though you knew he probably wasn't going to start, and how has he added to this quarterback room as a future coach?

CURT CIGNETTI: I can't remember if I brought Grant in after Fernando or before. After? Okay, then I was probably thinking about the No. 2 or 3 job.

You know what, when he started for Indiana against West Virginia, he played pretty well that night and they had a high-powered offense. He's coming back for one more, too. He'll be back.

Q. How much did you rely on the players that you had brought from JMU to help deliver your message early? Were they an important part helping the holdovers understand what you were about and what your scheme and your system were about?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, I never asked them to do anything. Everything they did, they did on their own. But they were the kind of guys that were going to make the program better and bring the team closer together. That's why I think they were so critical to the year one success.

Q. What do you think of Fernando's public speaking skills and how he's able to represent the program?

CURT CIGNETTI: He's incredible. I take notes.

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