

CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

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Hard Rock Stadium

Miami Hurricanes

Akheem Mesidor

Pregame Press Conference



**NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP**

MIAMI 2026

Q. Akheem, talk about the emotions coming into this game. You're two days out. What are the emotions like for you guys getting ready, two days away. As it gets closer and closer, the adrenaline, the feeling. You'll be in your home building. What does it feel like?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: For our team, it's important to stay calm, not let the nerves get up or get affected by these things. For me personally, it doesn't really feel real yet. It will probably feel real once I run out to the field for warmups.

Right now, we're calm, preparing, getting ready for the game.

Q. Akheem, you said remain calm. What was practice like this week for you guys?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: It's been the same as every other week. Again, it's a game where we're facing another opponent. Obviously, it's the most important game of the year, but we're going to prepare like they're anybody else. Practice has been the same as it has for the last 16 weeks. It's not really different. Just practice, preparation, and getting ready for the game.

Q. No details on preparations, but how do you deal with a quarterback like Fernando Mendoza? What you have seen, I'm sure, on game film throughout the season and the last two playoff games? The last one, he threw for five touchdowns.

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Obviously, he's an amazing player, Heisman Trophy winner. It's pretty simple. They don't play complicated football. They're a very simple team but a very disciplined team. They want to run the ball. And when they have to or need to, switch it up and have Mendoza throw it. He can throw the ball, obviously. Very talented, smart player.

Our goal is stop the run and rush the passer and get him uncomfortable and make him make silly decisions while affecting him.

Q. I know you guys are the visiting team, but you get to use your home locker room. So is that a benefit for you guys, just like the comforts of being familiar with things?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: I think it could be a benefit. We're in our home locker room. We're comfortable, somewhere we've been before. We're familiar with the atmosphere. It could be a benefit.

Q. You've been here a number of years. This journey as a player and to culminate your final season in college winning a National Championship, what is that like for you, that journey, because it's been a long one, right?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Yeah. It means the world. I've had a long journey. I've been in college longer than most. I've dealt with a bunch of different things. But finally getting this far and being able to compete for a National Championship means the world, and I'm able to do it with guys I've been around for four years. And even the new guys coming in, we've built a brotherhood, and it's awesome to be able to compete for a National Championship.

Q. Akheem, could you talk about your relationship with Jason Taylor; when you met him, when you were thinking of coming here. And what, specifically, has he worked with you on?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: When I first got here, I didn't really know much about Coach Taylor, but everybody told me he was a Hall-of-Famer and he was an amazing player. So I did the research myself and, yeah, he was awesome.

He's our coach, but he's also like a big brother to me, I feel like. He's hard on us when he needs to be. I go to his office almost every day and just sit there and hang out with him. We'll watch football or we'll watch the news, whatever it is. I can hang out around him. I can go to his house if I

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want to. Like he's really like an older brother to me. I have a ton of respect for him, and he respects us as well. It's mutual.

He's taught me a bunch of things. I'd say mainly mental, like the way he sees the game, the way he sees different formation fronts, the way he would attack or approach different blocks. Football is 80 percent mental, and I think he's really impacted me mentally on how I see the game.

Q. Hi. How are you?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Good.

Q. Against Ole Miss, you had the elbow. Tell me what's going on with your elbow. What kind of rehab, recovery have you done this week?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Rehab and treatment, I got fitted for a custom brace. I have that now. You'll see me on the field with a huge brace on my arm. It's really to stop the movement from happening, overextending my elbow. I'm game day ready. I've just got to protect it.

Q. You guys didn't give up in the game against Ole Miss when it was frustrating, you couldn't quite get to the quarterback. How do you see the game with Indiana playing out? Can you get home? Can you get to the quarterback?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: I think we'll be able to get to the quarterback, because Indiana is a simple team, but they play very hard and they're very disciplined. They want to run the ball, pound the ball, and then mix it up and have the ball in the air.

But, really, our goal is to stop the run and rush the passer and affect Mendoza. It's really that simple.

Q. What's been the biggest change with Coach Hetherman coming in and with the defense from last year.

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Coach Hetherman has been huge. We've added a whole bunch of new guys, guys on the D-line, the O-line DBs. Obviously, Hetherman is a leader of that and, you know, he put in his playbook, his defensive scheme and stuff. It's huge.

I feel like we're a D-line oriented defense so that's good for me, great for us, really. His mentality of violence and his approach to swarm and all that stuff has been huge for us, and we've been practicing it since January last year, a whole year ago. He just emphasizes violence, swarm, and excitement to be on the field every single day. I think that's

the approach we play with.

Q. How intense is he off the field?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: He's pretty intense. Even when he tries to joke around, it's intense joking around. He doesn't make dad jokes. He, like, pushes you around, asks if you're going to be violent today. Yeah, he's different.

Q. Akheem, what is the key to getting to Mendoza? I mean, it's actually crucial for you to win this game. Do you need to do it better than you did Mississippi? Mississippi, you had far less sacks than you had the first two playoff games.

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Ole Miss, they're a quick game team. They wanted to get the ball out of the quarterback's hands very fast. They're a tempo team. When it comes to Indiana, they're a slower team. They don't go tempo. They'll huddle up. The goal is to stop the run on first and second down, force him to third and long, rush the passer, and make Mendoza uncomfortable.

Q. Talk about your relationship with Reuben. You're probably the best end rushers in the country. How did it develop, and how did you get to where you are?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: In the off season, we compete in everything. In workouts, conditioning, all these different things, we're competing. We get to spring ball, we're competing about who has the most sacks, who has the most productive day.

In the film room, we're competing on who ran to the ball, who finished the play.

On game day, it's always about who's going to get to the quarterback first. It's always a competition. Reuben is my roommate in the hotel room. We're always together, always around each other. Just that, itself, just makes us better.

Q. He's your roommate in your hotel, and you stay with him on the road?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: He's my on-the-road-roommate. At home, I live by myself. Hotels and all that, we're always together. Hotel room, meeting room, all these different things, we're always together. We're always pushing each other.

Q. Akheem, I know the mentality with the Hurricanes is always 1-0. You're always focused on task at hand. Have you guys allowed yourself to enjoy the moment and be in the moment this week?



AKHEEM MESIDOR: I have briefly, like, when I see the guys in the EQ, in EQ stitching on the 2026 patch on their jersey, I look at that like, man, we're in it. I try not to do it too much. My family and my girlfriend will tell me embrace the moment, soak it in.

I don't like doing that. I like to focus on the next game and act like a regular game, like any other game. I don't like to get in my feelings or think about how big the moment is. You want to focus on 1-0. If I think too much, it will affect me throughout the week. I don't like that. I like to stay cool, calm, collected, and focus on the game plan and attack it.

Q. Akheem, everybody has their own opinion on PFF grades. You've been one of the highest graded players in college football this year. Is it nice to get that boost of recognition?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Yeah, it's cool. It's nice to look at. At the end of the day, if I don't play the way I need to, those grades go away, and nobody's talking about me. I'm not really focused on what people say. As long as I play good football, quality football, and I'm dominant on the field, that's all that really matters to me.

Q. Akheem, curious to know, what would be your Mt. Rushmore for Miami football players all time. Four players.

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Four players. I'll start with Ed Reed, Ray Lewis. I'll go with Warren Sapp. Got to get a D-lineman, and I'll do Michael Irvin.

Q. Akheem, there's so much talk about you guys pressuring the quarterback and the success you've had. When you watch the film, what is the key for you guys to try to make Mendoza uncomfortable, to get to him as you prep for this game?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Stop the run on first and second down, force third and long. Once we're in the pass rush down, I think me, Reuben, Justin Scott, Ahmad, Blay, whoever it is will be able to get after him. We've got to force third and long and let our D-line eat.

Q. Akheem, the opportunity to end the season where it started, what did you learn about the team since August, and how have you all changed since then?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: I learned we're a relentless team. Our team loves football. We're always together. You hang around the facility, you see a bunch of guys hanging around after practice, catching jugs. Me and Reuben doing

D-line work. Ahmad hitting the bag. Ahmad and J Scott or Blay hitting the bag, DBs working on their steps, coverage, whatever it is.

We're a team that loves football, we're a relentless team, and we all want to win.

Q. Akheem, at what point did you kind of feel like you got to know Coach Hetherman? Like were you curious about him when he came in? What were some of the early moments that led you to say, okay, this guy's a good fit for us?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Yeah. When he first came in the building, I think it was the first day when he introduced himself, I wanted to get to know him. I wanted to know his defense. Me and Ahmad met with him for an hour half, two hours the first day he came in. I didn't know about him personally, but I wanted to learn about his scheme.

As we went on and he started running meetings during summer workout or winter workouts and stuff like that, leading into spring ball, he always talked about physicality, swarm, and excitement to be on the field. Even his energy out there, he's a crazy guy who is always jumping around, screaming.

Personality matches his culture and what he tries to instill in us.

Q. What would it mean to win a title at home here for Miami?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: It would mean the world. Not only for me. It would mean a lot for me, obviously to win a title in Miami. But I'm more excited for the guys who grew up here, guys like Reuben, Ahmad, Coach Cristobal who was a Cane from birth, really.

It means a lot to me, but I'm mainly more excited for the fans, people who grew up here and our players who grew up around Miami football.

Q. Miami's produced a lot of legends over the years. What's it like when you see Michael Irvin or Ray Lewis right next to sue along this journey with this team?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: It's awesome. It's always good to have those guys in your corner cheering on for you.

Q. Akheem, you guys have won some close games in the playoff run. Indiana's had some blow-out wins. When it comes down to a one-possession win late, what makes you guys so comfortable in the moments down the stretch?



AKHEEM MESIDOR: We practice those moments every day in practice. Every day on Greentree, we're doing a two-minute drill, all those different things. We're ready for the moment. It's a matter of who's going to be on the field, offense or defense.

Q. How interesting is it traveling here or to where the team hotel is from ten miles away or so, whereas Indiana has to come down? Have the logistics been a benefit to you guys this week for all this sort of stuff?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Definitely. I'm not going to say the hotel, but being able to practice in our practice facility like we do every other day, I think it's a huge benefit to us. We're not practicing in a random high school where we don't have a lot of equipment. We have all of our equipment. The stuff I like to use pregame I'm able to use and stuff like that. Being able to stay home and practice on Greentree is huge.

Q. How is this week for you? We talk about the distractions and the different stuff. At what point during the week did you say this feels normal. None of this stuff is really getting to us. You feel comfortable, you're focused on the game, and not all the stuff around it?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: For me, it started the day after Ole Miss. And then for the team, I can't speak for everybody, but once we got into the team meeting. The Monday of football week, I'm not sure what day it was, and I don't even know what day it is today.

But the Monday of the football week, so two days after the game, we had a team meeting, and Coach Cristobal explained to us that ignore the media. Ignore everybody praising you. Ignore all that stuff because it's really nobody outside of whoever's in this room is going to make a play for you. The 150 people in this building are the ones who have been with you from day one to now. So focus on us, ignore the exterior noise, and get this 1-0.

Q. How has sleep been the last few days?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Sleep?

Q. Yeah.

AKHEEM MESIDOR: It's been good. Yesterday, we slept at the hotel. The day before, I slept at home. Sleep is a huge thing for me. This year, that's one of the main things I changed is what time I go to bed at. Before, I used to go to bed pretty late, 11:00, 12:00. Now I try to get in bed by 9:00 and be asleep by 9:30. So sleep is great.

Q. What's in your headphones on Monday? What are you listening to in the locker room?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Oh, my headphones on Monday? A little of cheap Keith, a little bit of Drake, a little bit of Gunna.

Q. Okay, okay. We'll see. Ball out Monday, baby.

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Thank you.

Q. Are you feeling good today?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Yes, sir.

Q. I want to ask you, the last couple rounds, Indiana's done a great job protecting Fernando Mendoza. But if you look back this season, Penn State game, a lot of blitzes, a lot of pressure, how important is it for you to get to Fernando and your team to get him off his spot to create the pressure to make him make mistakes and put a lot of pressure on the offense?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: It's extremely important. I think that's what's going to decide the game, our ability to stop the run and then to rush the passer on third and long.

You want to hit the quarterback early, right? You want to hit Mendoza early, make him feel you so he remembers that every time he throws the ball, maybe he won't go through his full progression or he won't take his full step or he'll step back as he's throwing the ball.

You want to get him uncomfortable early in the game and force him to make maybe bad decisions throughout the game. Getting to him is going to be super important.

Q. Thanks. Good luck.

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Thank you.

Q. Akheem, you spoke about getting to Fernando Mendoza early. Indiana doesn't make a lot of mistakes offensively. With a what can you say what it's like to have the collision of an offense that doesn't make a lot of mistakes with your defense that obviously has provided a lot of opportunities to get to this national championship?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Well, they're a very disciplined, as you say. We have to be disciplined. We have to stop the run on and first and second down, force the run on third down. We have to be able to rush the passer. They're a great offensive line. We're a great defensive line. Should be a great matchup. We want to affect Mendoza and make

him uncomfortable.

Q. What is it about the team that you think got you to this moment. When you look at the road that started a year ago, if not longer than a year ago, what are some of the things people don't see that got you here?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: There have been a bunch of huge changes. Defensively is obviously the biggest changes we made to the team. The offense, their ability to run the ball, control the clock. And not only run the ball, but throw the ball. We've got playmakers like C.J., Malachi, and we've got an explosive offense. We're able to run the ball and control the clock if we want to.

And then defensively, the biggest change, our D-line is fairly similar to last year, pretty much the same, a lot of guys coming back. The biggest thing is our DBs. We've got a bunch of new additions at corner and safety. With Coach Hetherman as well putting in his defense, I think we're a complete team. We're strong in the trenches, and we've got physical guys on the perimeter, receivers, DBs, and that helped us get this far.

Q. Miami has always been a place where you've got a lot of former players coming through, ex NFL guys, he ex-All America guys. When you see guys like Ray Lewis, Michael Irvin, what's the takeaway for you? What are you learning from them that has helped translate onto the field for you or the team?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Is awesome. It's always good to not only have alumni but legends in your corner supporting you. At the end of the day, they're not making the play. They'll motivate you, talk to you, give you hints, pointers, whatever it is.

But you've got to remember, they're not the ones making the plays today. This is the 2025 Miami Hurricane team. It's not 2001, it's not the '90s. It's always awesome to have them in our corner. You've got to remember, we're the ones on the field.

Q. So it's less help me get better on Saturday. It's more big picture stuff, you feel like, you're getting from these guys? Big picture of how to be successful as an athlete and as a team, but not so much how to be better as a player?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: It depends. Ray Lewis came and spoke to us. Michael Irvin came and spoke to us. They'll give us their opinion on what a winning team looks like, what their team looked like, the brotherhood. You always hear the guys, like the legends talk about brotherhood, how they're always together. So they'll talk to us about what

their winning team looked like so we can apply it to our team.

And then, like I said, they'll give you pointers and stuff if you ask. But, yeah, they make it seem better because we take what they say and we try to apply to ourselves.

But individually, unless you meet with them personally, try to watch film with them and ask them questions, you probably won't get better individually. I can ask Michael Irvin whatever I want. If I see Ray Lewis on the sideline, I can ask him questions. All they can do is talk to us and give us pointers. At the end of the day, we're the ones on the field playing the game.

Q. Akheem, is there any more sense of urgency this week, knowing that the defensive back room is a little banged up? You have Lucas obviously out for the first half. Do you as a group, talking to each other, talk about how to get home to Mendoza, especially with what's going on behind you?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: I don't think there's a different sense of urgency this week as there is for any other week. We're playing a great team, yes, but we've played a great team the last few weeks. There's no different approach to this game. It's going to be the same approach as every other week.

Yes, our DBs are banged up, but we've got a deep DB room so it's always going to be next man up mentality. D-line wise, we're going to try to stop the run. Once we get to third and long, affect the passer by rushing. It's a simple game plan. Stop the run, force him to a third and long passing situation, and make Mendoza uncomfortable.

Q. How do you feel? You got banged up in the second half of Ole Miss. Feeling good?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Yeah, I'll be all right.

Q. You touched on this a little bit. So much is made of the passing game. The running game is strong too. How do you defend against that? Hemby has had a good season.

AKHEEM MESIDOR: We have to be technically sound up front, and our linebacker has to fill in the gaps and the safety has to help at the third level.

If we're physical up front, play technically sound, good technique, gap integrity, I think we'll be able to stop the run. Once we get to third and long, I think our pass rush speaks for itself.

Q. It feels like this season, the way teams have attacked your pass rush is to get the ball out fast. How do you defend against that, for lack of a better term?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Really, just for us as a D-line, there's nothing you can do if the ball comes out fast. All you've got to do is continue to win your one on one.

Eventually, he'll have to hold the ball for 2.9, 3 seconds plus. When those situations do come, you've got to take advantage of it.

Q. Regardless of how Monday goes, this is how the season ends. What does it mean to you?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: It's crazy. It's my last college football game of my life. That's really it. It's just being able to compete for a National Championship as the last game of my college career is awesome. I'm going to give it my all.

Q. What's it like to play the college football playoff National Championship game and also play it in Miami?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: It's huge. I'm extremely excited. I've been here for four years. But I'm even happier for my teammates guys who grew up here, Ahmad, Reuben, Wesley, all those guys. I'm happy for those guys and their families and the fans, the people who have been diehard Miami fans since they were babies.

It's cool for me, but it's even better for them. I'm excited for everybody else who has been here and grew up here because this is all they've known. This is all they've been around.

Q. You've probably answered like ten questions about this already, but can you just talk about Indiana's offensive line? You've been extremely effective in getting to opposing quarterbacks this year. What's it going to take to get past that group?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: We need to stop the run on first and second down. They're a team that can run the ball effectively. Their two starting running backs, number 1 and number 8, each have a thousand yards rushing. They're very capable of running the ball. We have to stop them on first and second down, force third and long a passing situation, and I think our pass rush speaks for itself. We have to make Mendoza uncomfortable.

Q. This is the way you go out of your college career. I just want to know your game day process and if it's any different in a game of this stature, like a

championship game.

AKHEEM MESIDOR: My game day process is pretty simple. I wake up. I don't listen to fast-paced music. I'll probably listen to a little bit of slow Drake, a little Cesar, start off the morning slow. Once I get to the stadium, I'll roll out my hamstrings, my lower body and my back. And then once it's time to start warming up, I'm start listening to faster music. It's pretty similar.

Q. I'm from Louisville, shout out Bryson Tiller. What changed for you guys? Your guys were against the wall after the Louisville loss and the SMU loss. How did you believe you could get her?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Coach Cristobal told us it wasn't over with. That's our leader. That's the leader of this team. Anything he says goes. We're ready to do whatever when it comes to Cristobal. He told us it wasn't over. He told us if we win out, there's a high probability we'll make it into the playoffs. Once we make it into the playoffs, we've got to take advantage of it. That's what we did.

Q. How much motivation do you guys take from being the underdog in your own stadium this time?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: I can't speak for everybody else. But for me, I've been an underdog my whole life. So being an underdog in this last game, being an underdog in every game we played in the playoffs really doesn't mean anything to me.

It might fuel me a little bit, but at the end of the day I just want to play football and show that we are the best team in the nation.

Q. How different will it be to be on the other sideline? Will that play mental games with you at all?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: It won't play any mental games because we've practiced at the Hard Rock when there's nobody there, and we've used both sidelines. So it might look weird. But at the end of the day, a football field is a football field.

Q. Akheem, you got your teammate right next to you in Reuben Bain. You've been a powerful force on the defense. What can be the key in order to stopping Mendoza and for the Hoosiers to keep plays alive, making sure you get to him?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Fairly simple. Stop the run on first and second down and force third and long, an obvious passing situation, and our pass rush speaks for itself. We just get after him to make them uncomfortable, force him.

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Hit him early and make him feel our presence and force him to make bad decisions.

Q. When you think back of what this means, what's the excitement like? I know you're staying focused, 1-0, 1-0. This might be the biggest 1-0 you have right now, getting ready for the championship game. What's the energy like? How are guys staying calm? What's been the process in all that?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: Guys are super excited in the locker room. Yeah, guys are super excited. For me personally, I'm calm. Obviously, it's a big moment. I'm super grateful to be in it, but I just want to focus on my preparation. Then once we get to game day, dominate.

Q. Akheem, when it comes to keys to the game on Monday, a lot of people are talking about it's going to be about you and your brother Reuben there on the line to make stops, to get them off the field.

Do you notice of that extra pressure, or is this just another game for you?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: For me, it's another game. It doesn't even feel real yet. I'm not gonna lie. It's going to feel real once I step on the field for warmups. But I just need to approach it like another game. Our D-line needs to play dominant, physical, technically sound. We need to stop the run and force the third down and rush the passer.

Q. Akheem, when it comes to this offensive line, what is the challenge that they present, and what is the key to getting pressure on Fernando Mendoza?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: They're a big, strong group, very disciplined, play very well together. They can run the ball, like you've seen all year. They have two running backs with a thousand yards. They're an O-line that can pound the ball. We're a D-line that can also stop the run. I think our trenches match well. We need to stop the run, force a passing down third and long and get to the fullback.

Q. When it comes to Mendoza, what makes him such a good quarterback and the difficulty of trying to get pressure?

AKHEEM MESIDOR: He's a smart quarterback. He can throw the ball, obviously. Heisman Trophy winner. But he's also able to extend the play with his legs. If he doesn't get his first read, second read and there's a hole in the pass rush, he'll step up and take off. He'll take off, Cs, As, Bs. It doesn't matter. He's not the fastest guy, but he can make plays and extend the play.

He's a Heisman Trophy winner. If we're able to rush the passer and affect him, I think we'll be able to force him to make bad decisions.

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