

CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

Saturday, January 17, 2026

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Hard Rock Stadium

Miami Hurricanes

Malachi Toney

Pregame Press Conference



NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

MIAMI 2026

Q. Malachi, you guys are a heavy underdog. You've kind of been an underdog throughout the playoffs. Do you guys thrive on that? Is that something you've become used to? How do you guys feel about the fact that everyone thinks, seems to think Indiana is going to win?

MALACHI TONEY: I would say with that, we really don't pay too much attention to it. We just stay focused on the main goal and know we've got business to take care of.

Q. What have you seen out of Ponds on film? Are you expecting to see him a lot? That's obviously a match-up people are looking forward to?

MALACHI TONEY: He's a great player, great, technically sound player. He's a great match-up we'll be looking forward to. It's an opportunity to get better.

Q. With you being a young guy, clearly, and all these upper classmen, these old guys who have been through it before, how did you assimilate?

MALACHI TONEY: I just really followed their lead C.J. Daniels, Keelan Marion, those guys kind of took me under their wings, showing me the game. They've been around football a long time. I soaked it all in and went out and did what they told me to do and did it.

Q. Was it intimidating for you?

MALACHI TONEY: No.

Q. Not at all?

MALACHI TONEY: No.

Q. Who gave you the nickname Baby Jesus?

MALACHI TONEY: I was gave that nickname by

somebody on Facebook when I was 8 years old.

Q. 8 years old?

MALACHI TONEY: Mm-hmm.

Q. Playing ball?

MALACHI TONEY: Yeah.

Q. Where were you playing?

MALACHI TONEY: Washington Park. I was playing quarterback.

Q. Do you like the name?

MALACHI TONEY: I don't feed into it.

Q. Your recruitment, what was your recruitment like? What made you want to stay home? Was there anything specific? Jeremiah Smith from Ohio State said if Miami had won this much when he was coming out, he might have stayed home. They hadn't really won before you decided.

MALACHI TONEY: What made me stay home is me trusting the process, trusting what Coach Cristobal was telling me that he was going to make happen with this program, how he was going to change it around and the opportunity that was presented. Coach Kevin Beard and Coach Dawson told me I'd have an opportunity to come in and showcase my talent early as long as I do what I have to do.

I came in, kept my head down, and kept grinding and executed.

Q. Malachi, you talked about why you wanted to stay home. Has it sunk in yet that you're playing for your hometown team in the National Championship game?

MALACHI TONEY: I would say know, that's something me and C.J. Daniels was talking about this morning. As I got up, it was like, dang, it ain't hit me yet that we're playing in

... when all is said, we're done.®



the National Championship.

Q. Can you talk to me about the gabbles mentality and how it applies to game?

MALACHI TONEY: I wouldn't say gabbles is a mentality. It's a lifestyle. With everything you do, you've just got to know nobody will have sympathy for you.

Q. When do you think it will set in that you're here at the National Championship?

MALACHI TONEY: Probably when I run out the tunnel.

Q. For you, do you take extra pride? You have a few guys from Miami. Is there extra pride for you, the fact that you're here representing your hometown and your hometown school?

MALACHI TONEY: Of course. No matter where the game was played, if I was playing in it, I'd have pride going into it because this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Everyone don't get a chance to come to the National Championship so it's a blessing.

Q. What's it been like this season, the ups, the downs. Number 2 in the country, losing two games in late October, now a chance to win a National Championship? Feels like it's been three seasons in one. How has it been for the team going through the ebbs and flows and finding yourselves where you are now?

MALACHI TONEY: It's great. We've had an opportunity to be on both sides, winning and losing. We found our identity going through adversity. We grow closer together, just blot out all the noise and stay focused. It's been great.

Q. Malachi, this week we've seen a lot of pictures when you were a kid, your mom talking about you wanting to be a Cane since a young age. Do you remember the first you threw up the U and said I want to be a Cane, I want to wear orange and green? What are your memories as a kid about Miami?

MALACHI TONEY: How much fun they had on the field. The first time throwing up the U was probably at that camp.

Q. Previous Miami stars have been very supportive of you guys. Michael Irvin is always running up and down the sidelines, celebrating when you win. How is it to have the support of former Miami legends?

MALACHI TONEY: It feels great having people like that support us throughout the journey. He's one of the greats,

if not the greatest, to do what he did. It's just been great.

Q. Has he given you any pointers? Do you guys have a relationship at all, you and Irvin?

MALACHI TONEY: No, not really.

Q. Malachi, what would it mean to win a national title at home and for the city of Miami?

MALACHI TONEY: It would mean a lot. It's everything you could ask for in a year.

Q. Taking you back to fourth quarter touchdown against Ole Miss, can you take us through what you were experiencing or seeing when you see space closing but you're also able to burst through it and what that feeling is like to make that play for your team in that moment?

MALACHI TONEY: To me, that play was great. We needed a touchdown and Coach Dawson was giving me the opportunity to go out there and make a play. With my play-making abilities and mentality, he just let me go out there and let my instincts take over.

Q. Malachi, to be here at your age so fast, has it hit you yet how great this freshman season has been for you?

MALACHI TONEY: I would say no because I do a good job of staying focused, not letting the hype get to me, staying humble. I would say no. Probably after the season, it will soak in.

Q. Are there any NFL wide receivers you try to emulate your game off of or build your game off of?

MALACHI TONEY: Jackson. Jackson from Seattle.

Q. How often do you, as you prep for a game, do you visualize the things you want to do? Like the other day, fourth down, ball in my hands, score a touchdown. What thoughts do you go through as you prepare for a big game like this?

MALACHI TONEY: There's a lot of things go through your head in a big game. I visualize myself days before the game happen. I sit in the bed when I don't have nothing to do. I don't even have to be sitting in the bed. I could be in practice just visualizing myself making plays.

Q. D'Angelo Ponds from Indiana told us that you guys played peewee together. Do you remember him?

MALACHI TONEY: Yeah.

Q. What's it going to be like for you guys? He's going to have to cover you in the game.

MALACHI TONEY: It's going to be great. I played with him in the park. It's an opportunity of a lifetime. We both can get better.

Q. Do you have any pictures together of the time on the peewee team? I've been searching everywhere.

MALACHI TONEY: I probably do. I can ask my mom for it.

Q. Will you text it to Cam?

MALACHI TONEY: Mm-hmm.

Q. After you had those two losses earlier in the season, your backs were against the wall, what gave you belief that you could still make it here?

MALACHI TONEY: Just knowing what we have in the room, everyone we have. Just knowing ourselves, knowing what we have in the room, trusting what Coach Cristobal has said to us from day one. I'd say our belief got us this far, our faith.

Q. How does it feel playing in the National Championship game at your home, having the city behind you, supporting you throughout the endeavor?

MALACHI TONEY: It feels great. That's everything you could ask for as a hometown, growing up here, born and raised. That's everything you could ask for.

Q. So you're from South Florida. Full circle moment here. What does it mean, getting to play back here at home for a National Championship?

MALACHI TONEY: It means a lot. It hasn't hit me yet. It's a blessing that we've earned the opportunity of a team. It's opportunity of a lifetime. Not a lot of people get this chance. It's a blessing. Got to take advantage of it.

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

MALACHI TONEY: YTB Fatt, Calm It Down, Part 2.

Q. Ball out on Monday, bro.

MALACHI TONEY: Yeah.

Q. Malachi, you guys have been in late game

situations each of these playoffs. I mean, with the offense, whether it was bleeding out Ohio State, the clock, or going down and getting the game-winning touchdown, what allows you to stay so composed in the fourth quarter?

MALACHI TONEY: Just knowing what we have in the room. Knowing what we've been through, all the adversity we've been through. Knowing that we're going to do whatever it takes for us to win.

Q. How does this team compare now to what it was like when you showed up and started the season at the end of August in terms of its growth? How much better is this team now at the end of the season than when you first showed up in August and you as a player also?

MALACHI TONEY: This team has gotten better because we've been through adversity. We know what it's like to be on both sides, winning and losing. Our edge is we know how it feels to lose. We know how it feels to win. So this team has gotten a lot better.

Q. Malachi, I'm a big fan here. Talk about being from Liberty City down here in Miami, going to American Heritage. You've been a winner all your life. Talk about how you win a National Championship right now.

MALACHI TONEY: It feels good to be in the National Championship. Born and raised in Liberty City, it feels great. Not too many kids out of that area get to witness this opportunity, and I haven't been a winner my whole life either.

Q. You mentioned the kids in the area. How do you feel about having the kids, they love you, praise you. You're Baby Jesus. How do you handle the interactions with the kids every time you go somewhere?

MALACHI TONEY: I don't feed into it too much. I try not to because I want to stay humble. I love the kids, whatever. If they ask for an autograph or a picture, I do whatever for them. But I handle it by not feeding into it, staying focused.

Q. Malachi, so that old photo that resurfaced of you standing next to Coach Rick, playing junior football, is that when your love for Miami started? How big did that visit play into you attending the U?

MALACHI TONEY: It played a big role now that I reflect on it. Who would have thought I'd be at the University of Miami as of right now, looking back at that picture? It's one



of them crazy, wild moments you never would have thought would happen.

Q. Malachi, you're so young compared to a lot of players in the college football scene. How do you keep a good head on your shoulders and stay focused without letting things get to your head?

MALACHI TONEY: My Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I have a great relationship with God. Whenever I'm feeling down, happy, sad, or alone, I go and pray. That's what I say is my edge. Jesus Christ.

Q. Have there been any challenges to that in your time at Miami? Have you faced any challenges?

MALACHI TONEY: Of course. My fumble against Texas A&M, that was a great chance to get closer with God because of adversity. Knowing what you did wrong and just going back out there and capitalizing on the situation, finishing.

Q. Malachi, can you give me your Mt. Rushmore of Miami Hurricanes?

MALACHI TONEY: That's four, right?

Q. Yes.

MALACHI TONEY: Michael Irvin, Ray Lewis -- I can't do that. I don't want to disrespect nobody. There's too many greats. I can't do it.

Q. Sean Taylor?

MALACHI TONEY: I can't do it. Don't want to disrespect nobody. The whole '01 team.

Q. Malachi, you obviously make plays with your feet, but how much do you enjoy blocking people? Because you seem to love sticking your helmet in there and lighting people up, leading the way. I mean, you make these big blocks for Mark Fletcher and everybody. Just blocking, how much do you enjoy blocking? A lot of guys don't want to block like that, not from the wide receiver position. You seem to put your head into it.

MALACHI TONEY: I enjoy it a lot. That's something I want to take pride in. Not too many want to or are willing to do it. I consider that my edge. Not too many receivers my size want to stick their head in and block a linebacker. I take pride in it.

Q. Malachi, what would it mean to win the National

Championship in your home stadium?

MALACHI TONEY: It would mean a lot. It's everything you can ask for.

Q. Malachi, Carson Beck was saying that you have this, for your age, advanced understanding of the game. Like you understand what he's thinking. He's only played with one other receiver who has had that. Where do you think that comes from?

MALACHI TONEY: I think that comes from playing quarterback, understanding what he's seeing from a defensive perspective. So I think that comes from playing quarterback.

Q. How old were you when you played quarterback?

MALACHI TONEY: I played quarterback up until high school.

Q. Why did you stop?

MALACHI TONEY: Because I wanted to play receiver.

Q. Was there something you liked more about receiver than quarterback?

MALACHI TONEY: Scoring touchdowns and wearing gloves.

Q. Malachi, when you think about all the Nat Moore kids and the homegrown kids who are playing in this game, what do you think it says about South Florida and what you're able to produce here?

MALACHI TONEY: It says a lot about South Florida, about how much talent we produce. We've got a lot of South Florida kids playing in this game, and I wish the best of luck to all the South Florida kids that's playing in this game.

Q. Malachi, Keionte talked to us about fall camp, staying there. Can you share some of your memories? Why did you do that with him?

MALACHI TONEY: As a freshman coming there, I just wanted to experience fall camp. The first day, he told me he stayed in, and I was like, all right, I'm gonna stay with you for the rest of fall camp. That's what he did. It was me, him, Daylyn Upshaw. Anez Cooper stopped by.

It was a great experience, waking up early. You're already there. You don't have to wake up no earlier. Getting in the hot tub, cold tub. Daylyn Upshaw use to run sprints so he could go to sleep. It was a great opportunity. It was a

great experience, I'll say, great experience.

Q. What has Keionte meant to you? How has he helped you on the other side of the ball?

MALACHI TONEY: Keionte means a lot to me. Like an older brother. He got me better in so many ways. When he first got here, it was like I couldn't block him because every time I run up to block him, he'll chop me. So I'd say he got me better from a lot of different things, bettered my game in many different ways.

Q. What do you think the biggest factor has been in y'all's success, knowing that you faced all the adversity and people doubting you?

MALACHI TONEY: Just staying focused. Not letting any outsiders affect us.

Q. What do you know about D'Angelo Ponds and give me your take on him as a player, if you would.

MALACHI TONEY: D'Angelo Ponds is a great player. He is a great player. It's going to be a great opportunity to play better.

Q. Did you know about each other at all?

MALACHI TONEY: Yeah. I played Little League with him. I played with him when I was younger. We played in the same park. He always was older than me.

Q. You actually played together when you were little?

MALACHI TONEY: Yeah, we played in the same park.

Q. What do you remember about him?

MALACHI TONEY: He was an athlete. He did what I did. He played quarterback and cornerback.

Q. Malachi, if you could add or change one rule in college football, what do you think you would add or change?

MALACHI TONEY: I don't know. I love it. We could dive in the end zone with no penalty, that's what I'd say.

Q. Malachi, your mom told us --

MALACHI TONEY: Wait, no. To go back, that toe heel rule, the inbounds rule.

Q. Your mom told us how crazy and wild she's gotten watching the past few games in the stands cheering

you on. Do you look for her in the stands, and will you on Monday?

MALACHI TONEY: No, I don't look for her. I look for my uncles and my brothers.

Q. She also mentioned you haven't celebrated your 18th birthday yet. She said you guys might as well just do another parade.

MALACHI TONEY: Oh, yeah. I haven't.

Q. Have you thought about what you're going to do after the season is over?

MALACHI TONEY: No.

: Just focused on football right now?

MALACHI TONEY: Yes.

Q. Keep the main thing the main thing is what she says.

MALACHI TONEY: Yes.

Q. Why haven't you celebrated your birthday yet?

MALACHI TONEY: We was midseason when I turned 18 so I really didn't pay too much attention to it. I just wanted to stay focused on the season.

Q. Malachi, being a big top prospect, staying home, was there any pressure? People have high expectations.

MALACHI TONEY: No, it wasn't no pressure at all.

Q. Why not?

MALACHI TONEY: Because I just had a great support system. So I didn't feel no any type of pressure.

Q. Lastly, Carson is saying they almost have to kick you out of the practice field because you're in there all the time watching film. He says you're about all ball. You don't really go out. You don't do other stuff. Where does that come from? Why are you so singularly focused on football?

MALACHI TONEY: You got to do what you got to do to live how you want to live, I'll say.

Q. Malachi, working with somebody like Carson Beck, what has it been about his leadership, his style, the

way he commands the offense and the huddle that you feel like has brought out the best in you?

MALACHI TONEY: It means a lot because a person like that, he's a vet. He's been around football for a long time. He has done the things I want to do in life. So just soaking in the game from him means a lot. He helped me a lot when I'm at running back and I got an option route. He tells me what coverage it is so I ain't even gotta read the defense. It's stuff like that that helps me a lot.

Q. And then as far as you and C.J. Daniels, if you had to pick between the two of you, and I know you'd probably pick yourself and he'd pick himself, what can you say about who makes the best catch of the season so far, and have we not seen the best catch yet?

MALACHI TONEY: Oh, y'all ain't seen the best catch. His best catch was in practice. I give that to him hands down. He got some hands. His best catch was in practice. He went behind his head with one hand.

Q. Is yours still to come on Monday night?

MALACHI TONEY: We'll see.

Q. Malachi, you just celebrated your 18th birthday in September. A lot of these Indiana defensive backs have been playing college football since 2020, they're 25-year-old dudes who started college football when you were still in middle school. Do you feel in any way intimidated by that or extra pressure or doesn't matter to you?

MALACHI TONEY: No.

Q. You've had great catches this year. What would you say is your best of the season?

MALACHI TONEY: Like in high school and everything? Probably my catch versus Chaminade.

Q. How about college?

MALACHI TONEY: The one I just made last week.

Q. Malachi, on the Mt. Rushmore of Canes, one of your teammates put you on it already.

MALACHI TONEY: Who?

Q. Wesley. When all is said and done, do you think you'll be up there with the greats?

MALACHI TONEY: Whatever God has in store for me.

I've got to stay focused, stay home, keep being myself. It will all work out.

Q. How many friends and family have asked for a ticket or congratulated you? How much has your phone gone off?

MALACHI TONEY: I'm not looking at my phone usually.

Q. Your big play ability, do you feel like in a championship setting, it's a big play opportunity for you?

MALACHI TONEY: Yes, sir.

Q. Malachi, as a local guy, not only are you contributing to the rise of the program now, but you saw some lows in the Miami program growing up. Were you always going to help turn Miami around, or did you look elsewhere? If you did, what turned you toward Miami?

MALACHI TONEY: What turned me to Miami was Nick Saban stepping down. I used to love Nick Saban. Yeah. So it was Nick Saban.

Q. So you wound up going with a Nick Saban disciple and staying home?

MALACHI TONEY: Yes.

Q. If you could have any artist perform at the halftime show, who would it be?

MALACHI TONEY: Lil Baby or YTB Fatt.

Q. Malachi, you are a true freshman setting records. If you could go back to high school and the moment you decided to reclass, what would you tell yourself?

MALACHI TONEY: I wouldn't tell him nothing. I would let him experience it. I would tell him something. God got great things in store for you so just stay the course.

Q. Malachi, kind of regarding the college football calendar, in the regular season, you're playing games every week. Now you get to the postseason and you've got two weeks between the end of the regular season and the Texas A&M game or I guess maybe three weeks. Then you've got another ten days after. Then another days after that. Do you feel like the rest is something that actually benefits you, or is this kind of one of these instances where maybe, like, it's actually a little bit more rust and it takes you a little longer to get back into a rhythm? Basically, it's the

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**rest versus rust question but for the college football
playoff.**

MALACHI TONEY: I don't have any problem with how they do things. The time that they give us off is an opportunity for us to take the time and get some treatment and get back healthy. So I really don't got no say-so about that.

Q. Malachi, there's a picture of you at a camp when you were younger in Miami holding up the U. Can you talk about how much of a full circle moment this is for you to play at home?

MALACHI TONEY: Yeah. When I was looking at it, that was one of the moments just like that was crazy. You would never think that would happen. So all glory to God. I'm thankful and blessed to be here.

Q. Malachi, what do you think this means to the Miami community, being from Miami yourself, to have the game here and with the Miami Hurricanes?

MALACHI TONEY: It means a lot. We earned this opportunity. It's a blessing. Like I said before, not too many kids growing up, not too many people get to experience this opportunity so we've got to take advantage of it.

Q. Malachi, we know you're from Liberty City, man. We know you representing. I got a chance to see you actually play and win the state championship last year. That meant a lot. I saw you since a freshman. How do you feel like Liberty City and South Florida prepared you for this type of high expectation of football?

MALACHI TONEY: For me, I would say my family got me prepared for this opportunity just like how to carry myself. For South Florida, we have got so much talent coming out of here. It's just our mentality. That's what separates us.

For me, my family, uncles, mom, cousins, they help me get to the moment to where I'm at now. They instilled in me to stay focused, don't be a follower.

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