

CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

Saturday, January 17, 2026

Miami, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Indiana Hoosiers

Fernando Mendoza

Pregame Press Conference

Q. As an alumni of Christopher Columbus High School, how much does it mean to you to represent Columbus on this stage, and what does that Columbus brotherhood mean to you?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: The Columbus brotherhood made me who I am, not only as a player, but also as a character and a teammate. The brotherhood really taught me how to grow close to one another. I think that's the super power of this Indiana team, the glue that we have together and the bond that we have together.

Columbus took a chance with me as a quarterback and also my younger brother Alberto, and the development I got football-wise from Dave Dunn and all the other fantastic coaching and also the kind of tough personality coaching that I got from Mr. McKeon, Pugh, and all the other teachers that I had there that really helped grow me to the man I am today.

I really can't thank Christopher Columbus enough. It's really special I get to play in Miami where Christopher Columbus is located in front of all my Columbus brothers.

Q. If you can answer in Spanish, please, the meaning to be here at this stage and playing in this city also, please.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say the meaning, it means so much to myself and my family, having grown up in Miami, having grown up a University of Miami fan, and basically the whole identity being a Cuban living in Miami whose grandparents, all four grandparents immigrated from Cuba to Miami, made their way, had the American dream, and I've been so thankful to them and thankful to God that I've been able to have a good childhood and them raising me by accomplishing the American dream.

I think it just means so much to my family, playing in Miami against the University of Miami, kind of the journey, it's kind



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of like a full circle moment. Also, it means a lot to a lot of my teammates and coaches and everybody in Hoosier Nation because it's a National Championship. I can't just say, oh, it means so much to me, but in reality, I do it for my teammates and my coaches because the National Championship, it's the big one, and I really do it for them.

Q. What were your emotions when you first stepped off the plane and you're like, I'm playing back at home? This is it. Now this is real.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say there was like a whole little like a band playing, and it was great to hear Hispanic music coming off the plane. It was a great feeling, and to feel the Miami weather. Being in Bloomington, it's a little bit colder over there, so having the Miami weather and the humidity slap you in the face, it was a great reminder of home.

I think that I'm really looking forward to playing in Miami, especially a lot of family and people who have helped pour into myself to get myself to this point in my journey. I'm really proud of it.

Q. You've been historically efficient right now, five games, more touchdowns than incompletions. What is it right now that you're seeing you can just trust your eyes and kind of let it rip? How much of that goes to the offensive line as well?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say it all goes to the offensive line. Without those guys, I wouldn't be able to do it. With them, I'm able to get through my entire progression. Read 1 through read 5 or 6, I'm able to get through it, have time to get through it, and just check it down.

I think that's why my completion percentage has been so high because I haven't really had to throw the ball away much just because they've been efficient up front. Also, I have such great teammates, such great receivers, tight ends, running backs, always talk about the offensive line, I just get to be a point guard. I get to dish it out to Elias Sarratt, over there to Omar Cooper Jr., Charlie Becker or hand the ball off or check it to a run.

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I just need to be the point guard of the offense and really facilitate it all, and the talent is really around me. I think that's how I've been so efficient.

Q. I probably know the answer, but do you think much about the future? Do you know anything about NFL draft picks? Do you at least look at it?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I'd be lying to you if I said I didn't see it. I see it places. People do -- friends and family do send it to me. However, I always tell them I'm really focused on the next game in that this is the National Championship. This is what we worked all year for.

People last January weren't talking about the Indiana Hoosiers in the National Championship. I owe it to my teammates and my coaches and the entire Hoosier Nation to give it my all. This is an important game in my life and my teammates' life that I'm really going to give it my all.

I'm not really focused on the future. My whole thing is staying in the present, in the present moment, in order to make the most of the present. That's how you make a great future for yourself.

Q. You transfer to Indiana, win the Heisman, lead the team to an undefeated season and now a chance to win a title in your hometown. First of all, how do you put into words how special this run has been, and also what's your message to the next generation, the youngsters out there who are chasing their dreams?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I would say that it's been such a special journey. Can't thank God enough and can't thank my teammates enough. It's been such a great year, not only on the field but also off the field with those guys and in the meeting rooms. Special is the word to describe it.

Then also, my message to the youngsters, I briefed it in my Heisman speech, but I would say no matter what star recruit you are -- if you're too big, too little, you're not high ranked enough -- you can do it. You've got to put the work in.

As a kid, I always heard these messages, like, okay, does it really mean that? A little bit of self-doubt. Now having lived that experience and lived that journey, it really has come full circle to me, and I want to share that same message to those youngsters.

Q. Fernando, you dream about this moment as a kid. Has it set in yet? Also, I mean, you mentioned you're playing in Miami also. How does that feel?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say it feels great. Tickets are definitely a problem because there's so many family members that want to come to the game. However, I've attempted to not let it sink in so I can stay in the present moment. I kind of stay in the football mindset that I want to stay in. Although that -- there's so many externalities to this game, playing Miami in Miami, that you can wrapped up in all the emotion. However, I want to keep it focused on football and really kind of force it to not sink in.

It can sink in next week or the week after, but I just want to focus on football right now to give my team the best chance, and that's the same with all my teammates.

Q. You talked about coming back and getting off the plane, but is it surreal to you, you go to Columbus, Mario Cristobal goes to Columbus, you guys are both cut from the same cloth. What does it all mean to you? Is it surreal for you?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, it's surreal, but I also think it's great for the Christopher Columbus community. We have so many great individuals in that community that really are built from the same cloth, are built from that gritty structure, whenever there's a battle, whenever there's trials and tribulations, they're always going to supersede that. Mario Cristobal has done a fantastic job with the Hurricanes, in his entire coaching career, coaching under Saban, then to Oregon and then to Miami, it's been a great football headlight for the Christopher Columbus community along so many others and really paved the path for a Christopher Columbus football player such as myself.

Q. You know the story, you know the history of Indiana football. What would it mean to you to be able to bring Hoosier Nation a chance here to win a national title? What would it mean to you?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: It would mean a lot. I know how much it would mean to people, and I know that the best way to accomplish this goal is to really just focus on the football and really just try and dial it in for this game and treat it as a normal game -- although it's not a normal game, to treat it as one.

Although you're going to prepare a little bit more, and although externalities are going to pressure it to be a little more than a normal game, to really, really keep it in that mindset, in that football mindset, and do my part. Do my 1/11 part on offense and 1 of 22 -- my one job out of 22 jobs on offense and defense to give us the best chance to win.

Just because I know myself focusing on the job and myself focusing on the present gives the Hoosiers the best chance to win, and I owe it to my teammates, my coaches, and also Hoosier Nation.

Q. It's an honor to meet you. I'm down in Miami now. Would it be a dream to play for the Dolphins or the Colts? Who would be your favorite team to play for?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: My favorite team to play for would be the Indiana Hoosiers, and especially on Monday night. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to play in the National Championship, and I'm really just focused on the present.

All that stuff about the NFL, it's a blessing, and the things that I see in articles. However, the task at hand is the National Championship. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I'm going to stay in the present and really just focus on this National Championship for now. Thank you so much. God bless.

Q. What's going on? UMTV, class of '22, from Columbus. You had five players playing in this game, players and coaches. How does it feel that a high school in South Florida and the talent level coming out of Columbus is on such a big stage like the National Championship?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say the talent, and Christopher Columbus has such a big stage because there's so many great people around the entire high school, such as yourself, Manny. I would say that it's really we're all cut from the same cloth of that grit, the hard work, and that brotherhood and know how to connect with each other in order to, instead of as individuals, combine each other's efforts to multiply instead of add, to multiply into getting that goal, into accomplishing that mission, or defeating that opponent.

I think it's a great honor to represent Christopher Columbus High School, and I know that the ones on University of Miami will most likely say the same. It's a great clash. I know many say it's a Cuban bowl, the Christopher Columbus bowl. It's a great opportunity that the Christopher Columbus community will get to experience.

Q. You played Miami last year at UC Berkeley. Obviously the roster makeup is a lot different on both sides. What have you noticed is the same? What's different in your preparation for this game? What did you learn from that game as well?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say the roster makeup is a lot different, especially because I'm on a new team, and

University of Miami did a great job reloading, if not getting better than last year, and they also have a new defensive coordinator too.

Preparing as a quarterback, you really try to prepare against the defensive coordinator or the defensive players, and there's a lot of turnover there. However, I really learned from that game is how much passion University of Miami Hurricanes play with. It's a real -- they have a real mentality going on on that defense, and they're going to hit you hard, they're going to try to get in your head, they're going to trash talk you, and they're going to give it their all.

We saw it last year. It came down to essentially the last play. It was a one-point game, 39-38. I still remember it that day. It was a great game. It was a great game especially for College GameDay, putting that on national television. I really learned a lot about the Miami defense. They're not quitters. They have a lot of passion with how they play, and I really respect that.

Q. We talked to Bryce Fitzgerald earlier. He said the day you guys punched your ticket to the game, you stopped all communication. What were the conversations like before that, and what does it mean to not just have you two, but so many home grown kids playing this game?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say that communication kind of went through my younger brother Alberto Mendoza. There's like a Christopher Columbus football group chat, it was always like, let's see if you guys beat Ohio State. They overcame that challenge. Oh, you guys aren't going to beat Alabama. Then we overcame that challenge.

No, deep down you're always rooting for your boys. There's so many players at the University of Miami that I know that I played with at Christopher Columbus High School and so many coaches that I know out of that tree. Deep down, you're essentially rooting for them because you know them personally. Now that we both overcame those challenges, those tough challenges to get to the National Championship, we want to win, they want to win, and so as competitors, communication is going to get cut off.

I would say it's going to be great sharing the field with those guys and with those other Christopher Columbus brothers that I have.

As much as I love them, I'm going to do everything possible to make sure the Hoosiers leave victorious on Monday. Thank you.

Q. I know you're proud to represent Indiana. Do you



remember as a kid the first time that you became a fan of Miami, threw up The U, look at the orange and green, the excitement around the program. Do you remember that and what that was like as a kid?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I do remember that. As a kid aspiring to be a quarterback, I always looked up to guys like Brad Kaaya and Malik Rosier and the way they played. I remember it like it was yesterday, I don't know what year it was exactly, but the year they came back against FSU and had that fantastic comeback.

I have pictures on my phone and I had green and orange paint on my face with a UM hat at Hard Rock Stadium. Before then, it wasn't Hard Rock Stadium, but Hard Rock Stadium. So I know how much it means to the community and how much the University of Miami community has been waiting for this moment and a resurgence.

They've always been a fantastic football program, but resurgence to the National Championship level, I know how much it means. However, as a kid being a University of Miami fan, I'm also right now, like my loyalty lies to the Hoosiers. So I know how much it means to both sides. It will be the first National Championship in Hoosier history, and it will be a little bit of a resurgence -- you see how much it means, especially the Legends like Ray Lewis, Michael Irvin, Ed Reed all being a part of this run here. It means a lot for both sides. Whoever becomes victorious is going to mean a lot to both communities, and I want to make sure I give the Hoosiers the best chance to win.

Q. I'm curious why you wanted to share the Heisman Trophy with the priests at St. Paul, particularly Father Patrick, I talked to him and what it meant for you to come over and take the trophy to them?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say there's a lot of people that have been on my journey that have enabled myself to get to this point. If I were to say it's a solo, do-lo cause, it's definitely not. The only reason I've gotten to this point is because there's so many different people in my journey, and they've been one. They've always provided mass. I'm a catholic. I'm a catholic man, and they've done so much to help me, whether it's confession or just being able to talk or mass every Sunday.

I really gave a lot that I have accomplished in this season and my life to the Lord. I really give thanks to God. For example, the Heisman, first thing I said in my Heisman speech is give all glory to God. Thank you so much to God. I think it's really important to take it over to those guys, especially those guys who have been great religious mentors to myself.

Q. Now, when people look back at this miraculous season that you had, how do you want people to remember Fernando Mendoza? And also do you think you'll see Lil Uzi Vert in the crowd tomorrow night?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I did that video a long time ago. I don't know exactly when it was in the season. I'm a fan of Lil Uzi Vert's music, always have been since the seventh grade. The whole thing is kill the external distractions. I love Lil Uzi Vert. I'm not saying he's a distraction, just saying trying to focus on the game.

Yeah, I would say it would be great to see him there.

Q. How do you want to be remembered?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Remembered, sorry about that.

Q. After the great season, how do you want to be remembered?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say everyone is going to remember this game. It's my duty to Hoosier football and my teammates to put my focus and preparation into this game because although it's great, won the Heisman, won the Rose and Peach Bowl, everyone is going to remember how I finished. It's going to leave -- remember the taste it left in everyone's mouth. Hopefully we leave with a good taste on Monday.

Q. Fernando, I think you're wonderful, but I want to talk about your brother Max. I think that he is adorable, and he must think he has the two coolest older brothers in the whole entire world. Does he like football? Does he have a future in that? What do you think is in store for Max?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, Max is a man. Whatever Max does or puts in his life, he's going to accomplish to great heights. Max, he does not play football at the moment, but he's a great musician, great water polo player, and even that, he's a great businessman and person. So whatever Max does, I fully support.

Max has done so much in my life to kind of give me that optimistic view and that joy. I really can't thank him enough. I have two fantastic younger brothers. It's really been a pleasure to be an older brother.

Q. I feel like this season for you all could be a movie. Which actor do you think should play as you?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say myself and Charlie Becker, our receiver, we're roommates and we watch a lot of movies together. We always go on movie marathons.

We watch so many movies that the actors' names get mixed up in my head. However, we watched -- what was I watching the other day? Wow, I can't believe I forgot this. It's a funny movie about North Korea with James Franco. Charlie and I, we think he's a funny actor and a good actor.

Honestly, I don't want to hype myself up by saying a fantastic actor like Brad Pitt but also don't want to sell myself short. There's a lot of great actors. I would say Fernando Mendoza.

Q. Fernando, we've talked about the Miami ties, the University of Miami ties, the Columbus ties. As a South Florida kid, what other staples in the area are like your favorite, I guess?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say there's a lot of good staples in the Miami area that have made me who I am. I'd say like South Miami Grey Ghosts and kind of growing up playing there as a part of football, also helped me grow my love of football and how to connect with teammates. None of the kids from my middle school and elementary school played for that team, and I was like the new kid on the block there.

Yeah, there's so many staples. Wow, I would say like my grandfather always took me to Casa Cuba. That was always something great that I can remember, having breakfast there. There's so many other different Miami staples. The one good thing -- not one good thing. One of the many good things about Miami is how it's a cultural melting pot, and there's so many things in Miami that matter deeply to Miamians. I can go on and on about all the great staples in Miami. How, I think it's a great city.

Whenever I'm done playing football, I'm definitely going to move back to Miami and live here.

Q. I've gone around the room to try to find out what your fatal flaw is because everyone thinks you're perfect, and nobody has one except for the fact that you don't discombobulate boxes fast enough in your apartment. If you had to criticize yourself a little bit -- I don't mean football-wise -- that you need to improve on?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: You mean character-wise?

Q. I mean like bad habits, like clean the dishes.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: No doubt. I would say that no one's perfect. The only person I believe is perfect is my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I have a lot of flaws in myself. For example, my roommates, we won't mess with the boxes. Boxes will come in when we order the package,

it's kind of there in the living room. I would say I'm a little messy in that way. But also my room is OCD and tidy. Living room, I feel bad for Charlie Becker because he lives on the middle floor, and I kind of just throw anything I don't want in my room kind of down there.

I would also say there's so many things I've got to work on. I would say as a person, I would say just I'm a little bit of a people pleaser and always want to please everybody. At some point a lot of my mentors have told me, sure, you want to please everybody, make a good impression on everybody, but you want to really focus on the right things, and sometimes you've got to say no. Sometimes you've got to say no to really focus on your goal, focus on your preparation.

Especially being here in Miami playing Miami, there's been a lot of asks of myself. I would say I've been growing to try to combat that people pleaser mentality in myself to say no and try to keep the task at hand. There's always time later for that stuff.

Q. Fernando, your favorite Columbus Explorer is here. Everybody's asked a lot of questions about the Columbus connection, but we know that yesterday was a huge day in the Mendoza house for the youngest Mendoza and his Columbus connection. What happened yesterday for Max?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, Max Mendoza, my younger brother, so proud of him, he got into Columbus. It was at 4:00 p.m. he was really awaiting that deadline. So proud of Max, and I'm really looking forward to see all the great things he does at Columbus.

Q. I was talking to Solomon Fulp, your old professor the other day. What can you tell me about the Mendoza burrito and how that all came together and that whole deal at Cal?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Sully Fulp, or as I know him, Professor Fulp has been a great inspiration in my sports business life. I took a class in sports and business with him. He works for LEARFIELD, he's a big shot in the sports business realm, and he's mentored myself and really given a lot of advice to myself on how to really thrive in that space.

In Berkeley I was able to, with one of my good friends, Beck Kelly, organically make the Mendoza burrito. Go to the burrito store, cold pitch, this is why you need it. It's going to go to charity. It's going to be great for yourself, going to make profits, going to be great for the community and great for the store.

At first there was a lot of back and forth, but with Sully's advice and help, they ended up taking the deal. It was a great thing for MS research but also for everybody, for the Berkeley community and also for myself and Beck to get great business experience.

Q. You got to extend it with BuffaLouie's with something similar?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Extended it with BuffaLouie's and Gable's Bagels there in Bloomington. Really appreciate everyone who bought the food item. Really appreciate it. I eat it all the time. Can't thank everybody enough for supporting MS research.

Q. Obviously you can take the player out of Miami, but we want to know if you can take the Miami out of the player. How much space in your heart do you still hold for South Florida and the community down here?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say I still have a lot of space in my heart for South Florida. At this point, I don't have a lot of love for the Hurricanes, especially on Monday night, but South Florida is a huge part of my heart. I want to live here after I'm done with all my football and business endeavors. It's really groomed myself into the man and character I am today.

There's been so many great moments of football in South Florida and the character testing moments in South Florida. Just like the entire South Florida community really showing how much the culture means to themselves, and how much Miami means and South Florida means to each other has really helped myself learn how to care more for one another rather than just the self.

I'm really just so proud to be a native South Florida resident -- at this point, not resident, but being a South Florida native.

Q. We'll welcome you home whenever that time comes.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Q. What inspires Fernando Mendoza?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say what inspires Fernando Mendoza is my mother. My mother is my light, my everything, and she's my why. A lot of football players talk about who's their why. My mother is my why. To see her fight and overcome the struggle with the optimism that she has, it means so much to myself, it means so much to my family, and she's been a great role model to myself.

I really just can't thank her enough. I'm so proud to be her son. I really wouldn't want any other mother in the world.

Q. You mentioned Cal, and you're obviously familiar with the Calgorithm. It's really unique this fan base has followed you and they root for you now. What does it mean from your time at Berkeley to have these people follow you and still be on your side?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: It means a lot. I've always respected the Calgorithm. The Calgorithm advantage, they're extremely witty. They're sometimes a little smarter than the Internet competition. To see their support -- I don't see their support because I deleted Twitter, but to hear about their support now throughout the season, it means a lot.

Obviously it's tough departing Berkeley. I graduated. I'm a proud Berkeley alumni. However departing Berkeley, it was very tough for myself, very tough for both parties.

They're in a great place now. They have a great quarterback in their realm, and they have a great football team now led by Coach Lupoi. I really can't thank the Calgorithm enough and look forward to hearing from them in the future.

Q. I was wondering if you could take me back to the moment you won the Heisman Trophy and the conversation you had with Coach Cignetti to come to Indiana to begin with and how it felt to be there standing in New York holding up a trophy after you made the commitment to Indiana?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: There's a lot of teams in the transfer portal that really sold me on, hey, we're going to be a great team. We're going to have great players around you. However, Coach Cignetti really sold me on we're going to develop you. I don't have a crystal ball. I can't tell if we're going to be top 25 in the nation, No. 1, or outside of that top 25. However, I know that I develop quarterbacks. It's what I do.

With the help of Coach Whitmer, who's been phenomenal, Coach Shanahan, and Coach Cignetti, I've been able to develop into that quarterback and made that exponential jump this year that I was aspiring to. I really am thankful that he sold me on developing Fernando as the quarterback. That's one of the things that made me decide on this school. I want to be the best quarterback that I can control.

It goes back to the concepts of controlling the controllables and staying in the present moment.



Q. To that end, staying with that, going back a year, you commit, what was your first impression of your head coach, and what did you realize here in short order whether that first impression was right and the more you got to know him?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say, when I first stepped on campus in Bloomington, I realized he's a great CEO, that he really runs the program the right way and the way that he wants to run it. I would also say that I really realize he's really about business. He's not -- there's not a lot of extra externalities.

A lot of the recruiting is kind of like loving you up a little bit, talking about -- he's just football. He's football, and he's all about being a CEO, which is running the Indiana Hoosiers Football program, which I really respect because at the end of the day that's what really matters.

Q. You may be a one-of-a-kind player when it comes to your LinkedIn and all the social media posts about your focus on finance. Can you talk about what your motivation is behind that?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I would say my journey's had a lot of bumps and bruises and a lot of trials and tribulations. I was a two-star recruit. When I got that full scholarship to Cal, I was like, wow, they made a mistake. Let's go. I'm going to try to milk the hell out of this. I'm going to update my LinkedIn profile. Also give my best on the football field, but business-wise, I'm going to update my LinkedIn profile, make as many network connections as I can, and really just expand myself for a prosperous future.

A lot of people say, oh, Fernando, you always talk like ChatGPT and AI. At that point, I was like, hey, I've got to fix my speaking. I took a lot of public speaking courses and also watched a lot of YouTube videos on how to public speak and how to make these connections.

From day one, I'm like, hey, stats say I won't make the NFL and probably won't ever play at Berkeley -- which I was wrong, thankfully, thank God. But at that point, I was really like I just want to maximize the opportunity I have at hand. Let me become a master networker. A part of that is having a great LinkedIn profile.

Q. Talk a little bit about your faith as well. I know you talk about that in press conferences often. But can you tell me what that has done for you going into this game?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say my family is a very Catholic family and to have them as role models and see

how they always circle back to their faith and how much God and Jesus has done in their lives and mine, especially this season. This season is the season I've gotten the closest, the most religious I've ever been, and I think it's also been reflected by the success.

Not success, but also just the platform to also praise God and to praise Jesus Christ. I would say that's a big part of myself and my identity. Really got to thank the Man upstairs.

Q. To follow back up on Coach Cignetti, you played for many coaches. How much joy do you have personally playing for him and what he's been able to get you to do on the field here?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I have a lot of joy for everybody in the program -- Coach Cignetti, my teammates, the other coaches, the entire support staff. It brings myself joy to see others have joy. I know the ultimate joy is going to be winning this game on Monday.

I'm just really proud I'm a part of the community that has so much joy for each other and is so highly connected to each other, whether it's Coach Cignetti, Coach Whitmer, Coach Shanahan, all my teammates in the locker room.

It's a tight-knit community, and we all know the goal we want to accomplish. Everyone wants to be a part of a bigger group. Them accepting me into this bigger group has brought me so much joy, and I hope I can bring them joy.

Q. Did you ever get Lil Uzi Vert tickets to the game?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I kind of passed that off to my marketing team. However, because I told them I want to be focused on the game. If I see him there, it would be fantastic. I love his music. I'm really just trying to focus on the game just so I could -- I owe it to my teammates, and I owe it to my coaches. This is a very important game for them. Although seeing Lil Uzi Vert there would be fantastic and a big plus for everybody. I know he's a very busy man.

Q. I had a chance to take a look over at Christopher Columbus the other day. You have a very personal connection to South Florida and to Mario Cristobal as well. What does it mean to you to be from this community, and what do you think it means to the Miami community to have such a personal connection to this game?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I think it's great. I think it's great for the Christopher Columbus community, and I think it's great for the Miami community in general. The Hurricanes

going to the National Championship, I know how much that means. Being a Hurricanes fan growing up, I know how much that means to the community, and I'm really glad the Christopher Columbus community can put a little piece of the puzzle together to the opposing team with myself and my younger brother Alberto.

I'm really glad I can give them joy, and that's what brings me joy. The Christopher Columbus community and the Miami community in general has done so much for myself. I wouldn't be here without them today. Just giving them props and want to try to represent Christopher Columbus High School to the best of my ability.

Q. Obviously still have the game to be played, but a lot of chatter about Raiders and Las Vegas. Just want to get your opinion on Las Vegas. Have you been there, and what do you think of the area?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Honestly, that's a fantastic question. I would love to answer that. However, I don't think it would be right by my teammates to focus on the future. So I'm giving all my focus on the present right now. To be drafted by any NFL team would be such an honor, and that would be fantastic.

Every kid wants to get drafted. However, I'm trying to focus on the National Championship Game right now and really give it my all for my teammates.

Q. What do you feel like has to happen for Indiana to sustain this? Maybe 10 years, 20 years from now, we're talking about Indiana like Alabama, Ohio State, Georgia?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say that, if I'm being completely honest with you, I don't really know. I don't really know what -- I know it's the great leadership and the great players on this team that helped us with this quick rise, but college football is so -- it's so evolving nowadays, that I can't tell you. There's going to be a new challenge, whether it's a new transfer portal restriction or something.

I think college football is about whoever can adapt the quickest and take advantage of the situation. So whatever team, hopefully Indiana, is able to adapt to the situation at hand, I think they're going to succeed.

Q. Do you think Curt will coach another 20 years?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I have no idea. You've got to ask him that question.

Q. You mentioned you took public speaking classes. Was that at Cal? And how has that helped your

communication?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: So I took one in high school, and I also took one at Cal, along with just always having a mentor who is a public speaker. Also just watching YouTube videos in my free time how to public speak, how to form responses, and kind of take them through the journey in a way but not have too long winded or too short winded.

I would say such an important part is communication. That's how you really get yourself across the line. That's how you really portray yourself and give a good impression to another person.

That's something I would recommend to anybody, especially any young sports athlete is the way that you represent yourself and the way that you're able to come across to your peers, to your coaches, and to later ownership, it's so important on your journey.

Q. Who is that mentor?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Mike Pawlawski. He was a former quarterback at Cal and a public speaker now. There's been a lot of people in my life who have been public speakers, and I've really learned to evolve my public speaking game through them.

Q. Can you just talk about your relationship with your offensive line, what that group means to you?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: The relationship with the offensive line is so integral and so important with those guys. I would die for those guys. Those guys protect -- those guys put their body on the line and protect myself and the running backs on every single play.

It means so much to have -- they're a great skill talent but also great characters. They're great characters. We'll watch football together at one of our teammates' house. We'll hang out outside of football and have that connection with those guys. Every quarterback tries to love up their offensive linemen in the NFL and give great Christmas gifts. So whatever chance I have, I try to hang out with those guys. It's not like I force myself to because they're such great people. It's just such a special connection we have with each other.

Q. How instrumental has Grant Wilson been in your development? I know he wants to become a coach one day, and he seemed to take a lot of pride in your season this year.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I think the mental part of being a



quarterback, my super power is not my athleticism, it's not the physical traits, it's really being efficient and having a great cerebral mind for playing quarterback. I would say he's been one of the great mentors to myself on how to really focus in on my mind and making sure I'm the best on every single play. Instead of thinking of a previous play or future play or future situation. I would give a lot of props to him.

I also worked with another mental coach, Graig Chow, and I give a lot of props to him as well. I really humble myself, stay sharp in my cerebral focus so I'm able to execute every single play like it's the most important play.

Q. You say we only got three and four stars. Let me tell you this. You've got a running back with 1,000 yards. You've got another running back with 900 yards. You've got a wide receiver with 800 yards. You've got another wide receiver with 800-plus yards. You said it doesn't matter, we only got three and four stars. I want to ask you this question. To a kid that's sitting back home that's probably been in your shoes, does it really matter about the stars?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: It does, and it doesn't because, like you said, no five stars on our team, but we have a lot of college five stars going into the NFL. We have a lot of college five stars. I think it's really like the stars are -- they place a mark on you at that point in your journey. At that point in my journey, I'm not going to lie and say I was a five star prospect. I was a two star prospect. I sucked, like I was not very good.

It's a part of the journey and a lot of kids get wrapped up in the identity, oh, that's who I am. At that point, you can still improve. I was a two star then, and now I hope I've been better than a two star playing there. It's only a little mark, a little identification, just because college recruiting is so tough nowadays.

However, it's your decision at that point on how you're going to have that work ethic and how you're going to develop as a player to get better and better every single day. A lot of our players that are three and four stars that have all those great stats that you mentioned have really put in the work ethic and changed their mindset and not fell let themselves fall into the trap of that's their identity.

They've let themselves believe in themselves, and through all the trials and tribulations through their career, such as myself, overcome those in order to become great college football players.

Q. We went to your high school yesterday, talked to Coach Dunn, he's awesome. He called you a stone

cold killer on the field, a football nerd off the field. He said your first TD pass as a sophomore, as you stepped in for your injured starter, what do you remember about that?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I remember -- actually, funny enough, that high school team when I was a sophomore was filled with a lot of University of Miami talent, a lot of players who played at University of Miami, so I would say that throwing that pass to Henry Parrish, who's a former player of Miami, it was a great feeling.

You have so many senior leaders and really just showing myself the way, whenever I get to that senior leadership part, I'm going to try to become the best and really help the younger players grow and develop because they've helped myself grow and develop.

I think that's really the special part of Columbus, and that's why Columbus football is so successful. It's not because of the talent, it's because of the coaches and the leadership on that team to really go as one and have that glue in order to accomplish a larger goal.

Q. Can I ask you two of your favorite Coach Cignetti sayings?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say "Google me." It's great. It comes off a certain way, but I would say it's really about production and resume. So it's really about, hey, it's not your potential, it's about what you've done and how you're going to put that into your future. I really respect that.

Q. My question is a two-parter. Do you have the LinkedIn post drafted for post-game? And if you had to choose a career outside of football, what would it be?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I do not have a LinkedIn post. I don't want to jinx anything. I'm big into that. I don't want to have a LinkedIn post. If we do win, I probably would post, the same anybody would on Instagram or Snapchat, hey, we won. Hopefully if God allows us to win, I most likely will post something on LinkedIn.

I would say I'm a very type A personality. So I would say I would want to get into investment banking or finance.

Q. You've talked about your faith after every game. That's the first thing you go to, you speak about God. You haven't been afraid to do that. Just what you can say about your faith, why it centers you, and why it's important for you to share it with other people.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: In today's day and age, it can be very discouraging to talk about your faith, especially on national television. However, I want to stay true to myself and true to my authentic self. I know God has gotten me to this point, and I owe so much to him. I can't thank him enough, and I give him all the glory because he's meant so much to myself and to my teammates throughout this journey.

Without him, I would not be here. I wouldn't have this opportunity that I have today without him. I always just try to give him thanks and inspire younger athletes, as I've been inspired by older athletes, such as Tim Tebow and such, if they're religious to always give the honor and glory to God, whether it's encouraged or discouraged.

Q. I wanted to talk to you about the Mendoza brother burger. I know that there's been a lot of fandom and people from Indiana and Miami, they've all rallied around this burger. What does that mean to you? How appreciative are you? I spoke to Ed Schwartzman, and he had nothing but kind things to say about you guys. Of the two, which one do you prefer? And just talk about the community and just what that impact has meant to you.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say they're both great food items. One's a breakfast item, and one's a lunch and dinner item. If I'm in the breakfast mood, I'm taking the bagel. If I'm in a lunch or dinner mood, I'm taking the burger.

I think it really means a lot to myself. NIL can be seen in such a negative light. Everyone is saying NIL, paying the players has gone overboard, it's not really for a good cause. However, my thought is, hey, I've been inspired by other college players, let's do it for a good cause.

My mother struggles with Multiple Sclerosis, so I think it's really important that all the proceeds of that burger that I would get goes to that research because I know how much it means to myself, Multiple Sclerosis, fighting that battle, and I also know how much it means to my mother.

And just putting Indiana and NIL in a positive light nowadays.

Q. I'm with House of Highlights, and when you interviewed with us a month ago, you said that, if you got to the National Championship, you'd like to formally invite Lil Uzi to the game. In a theoretical situation where he led you guys out of the tunnel, what song would you have him sing as he led you out, and also were you able to get in contact with him?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I don't know of the contact situation. Our marketing team handles that. That was a great interview with House of Highlights. I really enjoyed that interview. It would be so cool if he led us out, like Lil Wayne and the Packers. If you've ever seen that video, it's pretty funny, pretty cool.

There's so many different Lil Uzi songs I would say. Personally my favorite song because it's a little more of a low key song, I want a song that everybody knows. So I'm just trying to think of his most popular song. I would say like songs everybody knows like Money Longer or Erase Your Social. Those are kind of like old school songs they played in the weight room this week and everybody was singing along to.

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

FERNANDO MENDOZA: If I was a fan, I would say there's a lot of different performances I would want. However, as a player, personally I don't really like halftime performances because it usually gives a longer halftime and more anticipation going into the second half. You don't want to think yourself too much into the second half game plan. You want to make the adjustments, go out and execute.

There's so many different artists, especially in Miami. This is a cultural melting pot. There's so many different. I really give it up to the fans and whoever wants it from the fans. I don't know if there's going to be a halftime performance, but I like halftime short and sweet so you can get back to playing football.

Q. There could be a lot of things around and noise and family and all of the good things and positive things about playing here and being here. How are you trying to insulate yourself and enjoy it?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: First of all, thanks for the question. I would say it's a lot of distraction, a lot of externalities. However, myself, I'm always trying to take away those externalities because I know how much it means to my teammates, my coaches, and Hoosier Nation. I could be selfish, saying oh, it's Miami, it's a homecoming and stuff like that, but in reality all that matters is the football game.

Whether we win or lose the football game, I know I can rest and sleep at night knowing I did everything possible to prepare for this game and everything possible in order to help the Hoosiers win this game. I'm really doing this game -- although it means a lot to myself, being from Miami, growing up a University of Miami fan -- it's a National Championship. It means so much for

Bloomington. It means so much for my teammates, and it would just mean so much for everybody around.

I really want to put the spotlight on not myself, but everybody because the National Championship, is it like a normal, regular season game? Yeah, but it's a National Championship. Everybody wants to win this one.

Q. Fernando, I visited with you last March. You had just gotten to Indiana. It was all still fresh. You were learning the playbook. When did you realize that you could have this type of special season?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Back in March, I did not know I was going to have this type of special season. Especially during spring ball, I was like, wow, our defense is really good. I might not be as good as I think I am either.

However, growing and having those struggles against our defense, growing with the coaching staff, and growing with my players, it's been an exponential journey in order to grow and learn football. I've been so grateful to God and my teammates that have propelled me to this moment of having the opportunity to play in the National Championship. It's what every little kid dreams of. I'm so excited for the opportunity to play. I'm really just grateful to Hoosier Nation for embracing me.

Q. What's it like being in Miami around all your loved ones, playing basically a home game for the National Championship?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I remember the media before the end of the year mentioned Miami, and I thought, wow, that would be super cool. At that point, it was not unrealistic, but so far in the future, that let's see what happens. I've always been very in the present moment.

However, playing in Miami is the present moment. It means a lot to myself, means a lot to my team to play in Miami and also just play in the National Championship in general.

Q. What are the challenges with this Miami defense? You talked about how hard your defense was when you first started playing up against it? How has that helped you, and what are you expecting Monday night?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Both of our defensive coordinators came from the same defensive coordinator tree. They actually coached together at JMU. And Bain and Mesidor are both first-round picks, and there's draft picks all around this defense.

They have so much talent and play with so much passion, especially them playing in Miami, it's going to be a tough matchup for us and a challenge I look forward to trying to overcome.

Q. I know everyone is so excited to know about your success on the field, but I'm curious about your success off the field. I read that you had a 5.2 GPA in high school. What lessons have you learned in the classroom that can translate onto the field?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: For Bloomington or just in general? In general, I would say one of the great lessons I learned in the classroom was back at my time at Berkeley. I took a class called improv leadership. That was huge for my development.

As a quarterback, you need to learn about leadership and really learn how to lead on the fly. Whether it's a great drive and you guys score a touchdown or if it's not a great drive and you need to punt the ball, there's so many different scenarios in football that you can go so many different ways, the margins are so small, the improv leadership class has really helped me get outside of my leadership comfort zone and really helped me propel myself as a leader in order to thrive on the football field.

Not only just as a player, but also people -- being a quarterback as a leader is so important and can actually elevate your play and has elevated my play, learning from the great leaders on the Indiana football team as well.

Q. You sent me a LinkedIn message before it was cool back in September when you were watching the videos.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: All my boys on social media, it was a big conspiracy theory, oh, it's not Fernando. I kind of felt like an idiot because I spelled University of Indiana wrong, instead of Indiana University. I'm like, wow, can Jack please stop posting this? It looks really bad. I mixed it up. I appreciate that. I got that fixed.

That's probably why I wasn't getting so many connections. They thought it was a scam. Thankfully through your tip, I switched it around to the right portion.

Q. So what is your favorite video besides the one we're doing for Monday?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: You guys are doing one for Monday, oh. I would say -- I forgot exactly what the video was titled, but I remember you guys did one on Texas. That was my favorite video. I think it was earlier in the year? Because one of my best friends, Jack Endries, plays

for Texas. He's No. 87, starting tight end there. He's now declaring for the NFL draft. I was, like, I wonder what Texas is like. Let's see what it's like. I watched that video.

Just in passing a lot of shorts or reels. I remember the Nebraska one, too, I watched. It was good. Good time.

Q. When Indiana signed Josh Hoover, what did you say to Alberto? What did you guys talk about?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say that it's really easy to get mixed up, especially with the portal stuff. However those guys aren't -- props to them. I think they're all great players. However, they're not a part of this team right here. Coach Cignetti does a great job of putting the blinders on. Everyone is getting to compete. Whoever you are, you're going to compete, especially in this program. That's something that I learned, that I was not handed the job going into this program.

I think it answers a really big part of just always competing, always striving to be the best player you can be personally. And we all realize that transfer portal stuff is great. Indiana is reloading, as they're a great college football program. We're focused on the National Championship. You reload in the transfer portal to be in the National Football Championship. We know how much it means to Hoosier Nation and to my teammates. So we're really just focused on this team right now.

Q. Are you confident that Alberto Mendoza will win that job?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I am always confident that Alberto Mendoza is going to be the best college football quarterback. I know how good he is. However, right now all my prep is on the National Championship Game.

Q. What makes South Florida football different?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: The talent and the speed. When I was playing high school football, the speed going from high school to college, everyone says, hey, it's a huge jump. For me, it was a jump, but it wasn't like an astronomical jump.

The plethora of players that we have in South Florida, it's just incredible to even think about, but we have D'Angelo Ponds, who was also an unrecruited kid on our team. We have Amare Ferrell from Florida. Jamari Sharpe played at Northwestern.

So many different guys from Miami thrive in their college football careers in Indiana, in the University of Miami. And it's all around college football. It's such great competition,

and iron sharpens iron and makes us all better.

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