

# CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

Saturday, January 17, 2026

Miami, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

## Indiana Hoosiers

## Riley Nowakowski

### Pregame Press Conference

**Q. Riley, no pressure, but I think the matchup with you and the defensive ends of Miami is the whole ballgame. What are you looking forward to with the challenge of chipping, blocking Rueben Bain and Akheem Mesidor?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: They're great players so I'm just excited for this challenge. They play really physical. I try and pride myself on a physical brand of ball. I think it'll be a really exciting matchup. Hopefully we both give each other our best and the best man comes out.

**Q. What have you seen on film with those two that you've got to be mindful of?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Shoot, like I said, just the physicality. They're both quick, too. If you're off balance or something they'll swim you and get around you or double swipe and get inside.

So really got to be a good combination of both, having a good solid base and then also striking it and being physical.

**Q. During the Rose Bowl there was a couple plays against Alabama's defensive front that you were putting guys on their back. I was like, oh, my gosh, nobody is talking about what Riley does on the edge. What are you really proud of? What stands out to you?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Shoot, I just try and give 100% effort every single play and do everything I can to help the running backs and quarterbacks out and free holes up and do my 1/11th.

**Q. Riley, Coach mentioned it there, just the fan support taking over Atlanta last week and just the prospect of having so many Hoosiers fans here on Monday.**



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RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, it's super exciting, we want as many fans to show out as they can. Like Coach said, the past two games have been phenomenal, been home games. Other teams have to go on silent count, which is such an advantage. Any time you can get the other team to change their cadence it's an advantage.

So hoping we get another great crowd here, but we appreciate all the support we've gotten up to this point.

**Q. When you're looking into the eyes of your team mates, what are you seeing, what are you feeling from them before this game?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: A lot of tenacity, you know what I mean? These guys are ready to go get it. I think we been preparing all year for this game. We wanted to be in this spot from the very start, so everything that we want is two days ahead of us.

I think we're all just really excited and we get to play the best team in the nation and get that opportunity to do it one last time.

**Q. You were turning off TVs in the room to get the noise off. This team has been on full shutdown this week. How difficult has that been to get the whole team on board with that mindset, and what are some other things the team has done to shut out the noise leading up to this game?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: I think it's been a little bit easier than you think. A lot of these guys come from humble beginnings, so they have that mindset of outside noise doesn't really matter. A lot of it throughout their life has been negative or positive, so I think we're just kind of used to blocking out whatever is on the outside and focusing on ourselves and our belief that we have internally.

I think it starts from the top. Coach Cig, he helps out with that. Everybody is kind of fully bought in and just focused on this game ahead. We know we've done some good things in the past, but that doesn't help at all this next game. None of those wins before are going to help us any

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bit once that whistle blows.

We all recognize that and we're really brought into earning everything that we want.

**Q. Last week before the Peach Bowl Aiden called everybody robots just in the way they lead up to the game. Is that the same this week or does that change at all?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, we're creatures of habit, seriously. That's what you kind of have to be to be successful at this level. You have to figure out what works well for you and just do that week in and week out.

Even just travel-wise, you know, we try and travel as late as possible just to try and stay in our normal routine as much as possible, just like any other game week.

I mean, in my first year here obviously, but this game obviously is a bigger game and everything, but the way we prepared hasn't felt any different than the way we prepared for the first 15 games of the year.

So I think that's something that's really big and important for this team, is just to keep that consistency and keep doing what we know works.

**Q. Coach is pretty angry looking on the sideline. It's been going around. What do you do to get him to smile and laugh and can you give me an impersonation?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, so we always find that funny, too. Shoot, really can't do a whole lot to make him happy or smile or laugh other than make plays on the field, you know what I mean? After you make a play he'll come over and give you a little smirk and wink at you.

The faces are really funny. We always watch the games back at James Bomba's house. We all get together and watch the games back and really just look for Coach, talk about how he's aura farming and making that face.

I think it's funny to see that or a post on social media. He's just never satisfied. I think that's something that's crucial for our success, just not getting complacent. Whether we're up 30 points or we're down 7, he's got the same mentality. Like the game is not over yet so we got to keep working.

**Q. Coach said this has been his best team at executing his message. What is it about the experience and maturity on this unit that allows you guys to do that?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, I think the more experience you have playing college football and the more experience you have in this setting the better you are. I mean, there is a lot of statistics out that people that have started more college football games are more successful in the NFL. Because that's the nature of a lot of things in life; experience always helps.

So when you have guys that are able to lead and have been in situations before and know how to handle adversity and themselves when things are going well, too, it helps out a lot. Just you're allowed to eliminate a lot of the distractions and it's really easy to bring those young guys along because you have so much experience, so many people in each room leading.

We got great receivers leading, great lineman leading, quarterbacks, running backs. And so just every single position on both sides of the ball has leadership that they're able to hold everybody accountable. That's what you need to have a successful program.

**Q. I have a very hard-hitting question here. How important are full backs to an offense?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: That's a great question. I think full backs are vital. I think you see a lot of teams in the league, more pro style offenses where they'll utilize an H-back more. I like to be proud of my upcoming, and that's kind of how I came up was the fullback. That was my first offensive position I played in college. I'm definitely a proud fullback for sure.

I like to say I can dabble in a little bit of tight end, too. I like to try to be as versatile as possible. Yeah, I'm pro fullback all the way.

I always ride for my guys.

**Q. Who is your favorite fullback?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: That's a great question.

**Q. All-time.**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Oh, all time? Easy, John Kuhn, Packers. I'm from Wisconsin so every time he get the ball everybody shouts, Kuuuuuhn, so that was always electric seeing that growing up as a Packers fan. So that was really big thing for me.

I always idolized him. A gritty good and good guy all around too. Family oriented and giving back to the community.



**Q. What about currently? Is there a guy you watched?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, I like Juszczyk a lot, obviously. Yeah, he does so much and he's so versatile. That's definitely something I strive to be and look up to a little bit. So that's definitely the guy I look at most right now would be Juszczyk.

What's his name, Carter on the Patriots. I like him, too. He has more mass than me. I can't really emulate all the stuff he does. That's a big boy, 6'5" almost 300. Shoot I wish --

**Q. (Indiscernible.)**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, I wish I could go to 6'5" sometimes. I think I might be shy on that. Yeah, that's probably like more of a true fullback I look at. I just enjoy the way he plays the game. Downhill, like you said, that's the only way to do it.

**Q. ... position is going away in the modern offense?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: I don't know if they know ball too well, you know what I mean? I think people that know ball are starting to understand the importance of a guy like that. Every team is moving more and more towards it. If you have the opportunity and somebody you can utilize in that way, because a lot of teams will of a third tight end that will be a more compact guy and do a lot of that H-back and fullback stuff.

I think there are a lot of teams want to use it and I think it really expands your playbook and what you can do, but it's more about having the opportunity and skillset to do it.

**Q. Being a fullback or tight end you're an extension of the offensive line. What can you say about this year's offensive line at Indiana and what it's been like to be an extension of those guys?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Shoot, it's been awesome, man. There are some maulers up there, so it definitely makes my job easier. I just chip my guy on to them or combo up. They're doing most of the work. I'm just running alongside them.

It's been great. Coogan does a great job leading it and making all the calls. It's kind of the heartbeat of that O-line. So to have a center that that's smart is huge. And obviously Gars and Drew just come around and swabbing holes and making plays.

And then two tackles. We have had a few tackles play between Zen, Khalil, obviously Carter on the left and

Damola, too. Having those guys being able to give us time in the pass game, too, we chip every once in a while, but really they're good on their own, too.

It's been nice to be able to get out on a few routes and make a few plays. That's been exciting.

**Q. When you look back at your life up to this point and now having an opportunity to play for a national championship, do you go back to a moment or two where you felt like you were at a crossroad and you made that right choice for yourself?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, definitely when I was getting recruited. I didn't really have a whole ton of great offers. I ended up walking on at Wisconsin, and I think that was probably the best choice that I could have made at that time.

I knew it was going to be a lot of work and it was going to be a hard road because I wasn't getting my school paid for. I was paying to go play football somewhere. I was going to be on the bottom of the depth chart. That's what it was when I got there. It was a tough time.

I didn't play much. Didn't see the field almost at all. I just had to work my way up and pull myself up by my boot straps. I think that taught me a lot. Ultimately led me down this path of transition to offense and eventually to tight end and being able to realize success and then come here and realizing more success.

So I think that was probably one of the tougher decisions of my life, but probably one of the better ones I made because it led me to where I am today.

**Q. Going into that Alabama game at the Rose Bowl there was a lot people picking against you guys. Did you use that as motivation and what was the key to just dominating that game the way you did?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, I mean, people haven't really seemed to like us a whole ton this whole year, picking us a whole ton this year. I think that's definitely a chip we have on our shoulder. After last year it was like, oh, like can they do it again? Will they be able to continue this? Was it a one-year fluke?

I think that's definitely a chip we have on our shoulder. Every single time we go on the field we're trying to prove ourselves. I think we're trying to prove to the whole country that we belong here. We believe in ourselves, but every single time we go on the field we have to show everybody else, hey, we're here to stay.

That wasn't a fluke. This year isn't a fluke. We're a good team and we got good players and we can compete with the best. Obviously that's kind of our chip every single game, just like, hey, this isn't the old team. We turned over a new leaf. We're here for real.

**Q. What's it been like throughout this season just watching this Indiana football fan base come alive when you think back of where it was last couple years, just rallying around you guys? Every playoff game has been a home game and just the passion associated with that.**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, it's been awesome. So we started -- I actually played Indiana in 2023 before Coach Cig came. I was at Wisconsin at the time. Stands weren't as full as they are now, but I will say they were pretty loud. I was a little bit surprised. I would say I was thinking kind of football team that was struggling at the time, fans kind of quit on it. I was surprised by how loud they were. When I came here I was like, they got some spirit to them for sure. They're just waiting for us to reciprocate, to kind of get our act together.

So it's been awesome. I think this team, this whole city, all the alums, they been waiting for this moment. I think they just been sitting waiting for or time to kind of come.

Now that it's here, they been taking full advantage. Like you said, home game for the Rose Bowl, home game for the Peach. It's just been great. I mean, like it's awesome just to see and feel that support from the fan base and see them showing out and see how proud they are of us.

Ultimately that makes you feel good that you can be a part of something that other people are proud of being a part of, proud of joining, proud of supporting.

**Q. How has Coach Cignetti kept you guys focused as you go through this run here?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, so, I mean, say he's kind of big on just stick to the plan. Consistently week in and week out we don't deviate almost at all from week to week. Obviously when you have that little break from the Big10 Championship to Alabama you change things up just a little bit to take care of players.

He's so big on every week just the same thing over and over again. He preaches that mentality. We cannot get complacent and be satisfied because that's when you start to fall off.

I've always been taught that at the end of the year teams are going up or down. Nobody is staying the same. So I

think just the message that he preaches just ensures we continue going up. Every game we get back from he's, hey, yeah, we did some good things but there are still a lot of things to clean up. We're still not there yet.

I think that kind of messaging and mindset that every single time he talks to us he emphasizes that, I think it just kind of gets into our heads and we all just roll with it. Then that speaks to our leadership, too. We got a lot of guys that are older and bought in.

Obviously got Fernando, Coog's got a bunch of guys on defense. Got Fish and all those guys. So that messaging just kind of trickling down through everybody just kind of helps unite the team and bring us all together.

It's easy because we're all working towards one goal.

**Q. Riley, simply what excites you the most about this opportunity to play in the final game of the year?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: I mean, shoot, that's what you dream of as a kid so it's just great to be here. It's very exciting. You know, obviously going into college I had hoped I would have this opportunity. To really be here is a whole different thing. I feel like I haven't really gotten a chance to appreciate it as much. We just been consistently going.

You win the last game and start prepping for this game. Obviously Miami played before us so we knew who our opponent was going to be. You get right into the film.

So I'll say I probably didn't -- haven't appreciated as much as I need to yet. I'm just really -- I think as we all are -- focused on the game. Hopefully afterwards we get a chance to appreciate all we've done this year and enjoy it.

Right now, it's just kind of head down.

**Q. And then you're an extension of the offensive line. Coogan played in this game before. What has he talked to you guys about when it comes to playing in this game and everything that goes on this week?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, I think big thing they been harping on is we're going to treat it the same as every single game. When you start to make it bigger than what it is, that's when you start to lose focus and start to kind of zone in on the wrong things.

So that's been the biggest thing that he's preached, that all the coaches preached. Don't make this game bigger than it is. It's the same game we been playing our whole lives since we were five, six years old.

I think that's the biggest thing is just we're focused and we know this is a big opportunity, but it's the same opportunity we have gotten the past few Saturdays. Just stay focused and do what we need to do.

**Q. Does Coach Cignetti getting aggravated when stuff like this -- like I know he wasn't super thrilled about when the Rose Bowl travel had to happen. Stuff that interrupts the normal schedule, does that bother him?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: He's not a fan of travel, no. (Smiling.) He's not a fan of travel. He is not -- I don't know if aggravated is the right word, but it's definitely not something he enjoys; I can tell that you much.

But I understand it. It really does throw you off your schedule. It's kind of tough. You're in a new place, you're staying at a hotel, you're meeting in places that really aren't our meeting rooms, maybe not meant to be meeting rooms.

So it's just a little bit more complicated. It introduces a whole new set of distractions. Obviously we're in Miami so that's a distraction in itself. I understand it. I'm a little bit one of the older guys. All the young guys are probably like, let us go out and have fun.

I understand the kind of battles that you have to fight while trying to keep everybody locked in and prepared. I think it's more so just he understands that's going to be more work just focusing everybody up than anything else.

I think he handles it well.

**Q. A lot has been made about both coaches having coached for Nick Saban at Alabama. Does he mention any lessons that he may have taken from Coach Saban?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: I'm sure some stuff he's told us he took from Alabama. He doesn't talk about that too much. I mean, he's -- I'm sure he's very thankful for the opportunities he got there, but no, he's just kind of focused on us.

I think he does a good job. He doesn't talk about his past or anything too much. Obviously had a lot of success at JMU previously. Everywhere he's been previously. I think he does a good job of like he understands those teams aren't our team.

A lot of -- we got a few JMU players for sure that help us out a lot, but like it's a whole different set of players really. So we're a whole different team. I think he takes that into

consideration and just focuses on the place he's at. Stays where his feet are, which I think all of us appreciate a lot.

**Q. If you could pick one word to describe Fernando Mendoza, what would be the word?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Okay, I would say very considerate, a very genuine kid. I think everything that you see on TV, everything you see on social media, like that's exactly how Nando is 24/7, all the time. He's just a very cheery, happy kid and just he's a great friend. He's just a great guy all around.

Obviously got a great family. His mom and his dad and Max and Alberto are all great people. Just very kind-hearted. I can't say enough good things about his character and who he is as a person.

Obviously his ability to throw the ball is out of this world, too. I think that's probably something else I would say. He's a great competitor, and I mean, he's talented. Not everybody can throw the ball like that, so I think it's pretty awesome.

**Q. What do you think makes Mendoza such a great leader?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: I think what makes Fernando such a great leader is his ability to be honest, and like I said, genuine. You know he's not blowing smoke when you talk to him. He's not afraid to call people out and hold people accountable, but he takes accountability over what he has done and mistakes he's made, too.

That's huge. A lot of times you kind of see a quarterback and they got a little bit of a big head and they pass their mistakes on to other people. Receivers should have done this or that. Fernando always talks about, which I think is the most ridiculous thing ever, we always kind of laugh. He says sacks are a quarterback stat. It's like shoot, if I just got beat off the edge clean and like my guy is tackling you in two seconds, that's kind of my fault, not yours.

He always tries to take responsibility for the bad things himself first. I think it's just huge because it's easy to rally around a guy like that when you know he's got your back no matter what.

I think that's what makes him such a great leader. Everybody respects him, everybody loves him. He just inspires that confidence in everybody else.

**Q. Why do you think this team is so disciplined? You guys rarely, if ever, make mistakes. What do you attribute that to? Is it because of Coach Cignetti, how**

**he's been able to coach ya'll to be this like almost perfect team?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, I definitely think it -- I think Coach Cignetti is a big part of that. Also the media made a point of we're an older team. I don't know what they say our average age is, but apparently it's really old.

We got a lot of sixth and fifth and fourth year guys that are starters here. That's valuable just because you have guys that have been in college football for a while that just been in college for a while, they mature and understand how to go about stuff.

Also on the field they just understand football a little bit better. We've had a few more years at a higher level playing and learning football. So I think that's very helpful. We kind of eliminate some of the mental mistakes and then we can kind of eliminate some of the technique mistakes, because we been doing it for a little bit longer. We've had a little bit more practice.

I think a big part of that is definitely the experience, and then it's also just the leadership from Cig and all the leaders that we have on this team. That factors into the experience. Every room has a leader in it. There is no room where there isn't an older guy that's able to show people the way. I think that's a huge thing, too.

**Q. I wanted to ask about your role on special teams. Is that something you did in high school? When did you start playing on special teams?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, so when I got to college I was a walk-on at Wisconsin, so the only way I made the bus was special teams. The first year I traveled was as a strictly teamer; second year traveled strictly as a teamer; third year traveled mostly as a teamer, kind of like a backup.

So special teams been a big part of my college process. That was kind of how I made the bus, was going there and doing the dirty work.

**Q. Now that you're at IU and you have a bigger offensive role, you continue to be on special teams. Why is that?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: I mean, I think special teams are very valuable. I think a lot of people that are outside of the sport and maybe not in it all the time, they don't understand the value that special teams has. Like they say you block a punt in the game and your chances of winning are 90% or greater. Stuff like that, it's huge momentum swings that occur on special teams.

This is a game of momentum. In those tight games any type of momentum shift you can get is crucial. Whether you pin them inside the five yard line or flip the field or take the kickoff back for 40 yards or return a punt for 20 yards, any single bit that you can help out defense and offense in field position is huge.

It's critical to have good special teams. That's what's going to win you games. Special teams blunders can really hurt you.

**Q. You're someone who grew up in Big10 country, played in the Big10 before you got here. Can you put in perspective the growth of that program and how farfetched it might have seemed for Indiana to be playing in game maybe five years ago, not even, three?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Yeah, I mean, when I was committed to Wisconsin in 2019, obviously went to the Big10 Championship and then went to the Rose Bowl and lost both those games. I was like oh, shoot I'm going to go to Wisconsin and we're going to be competing for national championships, you know what I mean?

At the time Indiana obviously wasn't a huge factor in the Big10 football picture. I was like oh, I'm going to the good school. I'm going to a school that has a chance.

So it is insane. Obviously I played Indiana 2023 at Wisconsin before Coach Cig came over, and even then it was just like -- I mean, I just couldn't see -- I mean, frankly I couldn't see any of our teams at that point competing for a national championship.

To see the turnaround so quickly has been insane. That's something I wanted to be a part of. That's a big reason I came here. I saw what they did last year and I saw the opportunity they had this year and I was like, I would love to have the opportunity to be a part of this.

I'm forever grateful that they brought me in and gave me a shot. Just one of the best things that happened in my life.

**Q. Riley, with all the movement that you do up front, the different places you line up, how do you view your role on the offense, particularly with the run game and blocking for the running backs?**

RILEY NOWAKOWSKI: Got you. I mean, I like to try and be as versatile as possible. You know, I think that will definitely be something that helps me in the future. Just try and do whatever they ask me to do. I like to think that I have a unique skillset. I've played fullback before. I have the size and skills to play H-back. I can line up in line, too.

I have a good amount of experience doing that.

I try and do whatever the team asks me to do. I get excited when I get to catch a pass. They call a play for me, that's always awesome. I'm happy to do the dirty work and be in line, too.

I just enjoy how they use me and allowed me to expand my role.

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