

CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

Saturday, January 17, 2026

Miami, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Indiana Hoosiers

D'Angelo Ponds

Pregame Press Conference

Q. D'Angelo you grew up a few minutes from Hard Rock Stadium. Do you have any specific memories or anything that stands out from your time going to Dolphins games or anything like that?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Definitely. I feel like I watched a lot of games get played in that stadium growing up. It's a full circle moment to be in my hometown. The stadium I grew up five minutes away from. I drove past it every day going to school. It's a full circle moment for me.

Q. Hey, D, the first play against Oregon, I can tell you were watching film. You're back home right now watching film. I'm quite sure you got a couple plays you're gonna jump. The people want to know, did you know the route was coming last game, or was that instinct?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I actually didn't know that route was coming. I do watch film. I know how to read quick game. My coaches talk about it all the time. The ball got to come out fast. I saw it and made a great break on the ball.

It's film study, knowing schemes, and knowing the quarterback we're going against. It's a blessing to take advantage of that opportunity. A lot of people would drop the ball or something like that. I'm blessed to even take advantage of the opportunity and have that effect on the game.

Q. D'Angelo, I know you talked a little bit about coming back home. How surreal is it to know that you are here and do you feel yourself having to hold back from getting too relaxed because this is what you're so familiar with?

D'ANGELO PONDS: No. I feel like I have a great mindset, great head on my shoulders to know that I can't relax in that situation. Just got to be prepared. It's going to be an important game, but not make it bigger than what it is.



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We've got to treat it like another game and keep the same standard each week.

Q. You had the pick-6 last week. The team has five first drive interceptions over the course of the year. As a group, what is the film study and preparation like to put you in a position to go and make that play in that first drive?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I would say it starts with our DC, Bryant Haines. He has a great scheme for us. As far as players, we do a great job on watching film, knowing concepts, and knowing tendencies as well and not feel like -- we do a great job of doing our job, and then the ball comes to us kind of like that's just a testament to our coaches and the positions they put us in.

Q. What's it like to play for Coach Cignetti?

D'ANGELO PONDS: It's great playing for a legendary coach like that. I feel he's one of the best in the game to learn from everything he goes by and his standard that he keeps and just how he moves you as a man. It's a blessing to be in his presence.

Q. What does Fernando Mendoza mean to this team?

D'ANGELO PONDS: He's the heart and soul of this team. We wouldn't be here without him. He keeps the team going. He's a leader of the team, and we wouldn't be here without him, honestly.

Q. D'Angelo, Malachi Toney was talking about neighborhood games here in Miami and how big they are to guys who played in them. Give us an example, those who didn't grow up here. Tell us about neighborhood games and what that's like in Miami.

D'ANGELO PONDS: Like you said, neighborhood games are big in South Florida. I feel like all kids growing up, that's all we know is football. So we got maybe a park that, like, another state probably won't have that many people there. Our games here in South Florida, for Little League, it's a lot of support. It's at least 5,000 people on the park supporting kids. I feel like it's a big thing in South Florida.



... when all is said, we're done.®

It definitely has the support of the community.

Q. You played quarterback when you were a kid?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Yeah, me and Malachi played quarterback on the same team.

Q. Why did you switch?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Had to make a decision between quarterback and defense. I played both. I always liked defense a little more.

Q. Everyone who plays football dreams about playing in big moment games like this. What does it mean to you personally to be playing at the National Championship game?

D'ANGELO PONDS: It's a moment everybody dreams of. I feel like it's a blessing to have the opportunity. I feel like everybody wants to be in this game. It's just a blessing, honestly, just to have the opportunity with a group of guys I'm with. I'm ready to take full advantage of it.

Q. D'Angelo, so how many of the current Hurricanes did you play with or against as you were growing up down here? How many do you actually know from youth football?

D'ANGELO PONDS: It's a good Grube. Josiah Trader I went to high school with. Malachi Toney I know. There's other guys like Robinson, I knew playing little league ball. There's a lot of them. I couldn't give you a count, but it's at least probably ten of them.

Q. D'Angelo, is it sort of surreal that you're coming back to Miami to play in Hard Rock Stadium, where I'm sure you've been to in games as a kid to see the Dolphins to play for the National Championship?

D'ANGELO PONDS: It's a full circle for me to play in this stadium. Like I said earlier, I drove past it every day to go to school. I watched Dolphins games in this stadium. It's going to a full circle moment, taking it all in. I have to treat it like another game as well.

Q. D'Angelo, Fletcher and Toney were talking about this. Do you remember the first Little League team you were on, the name of it?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Washington Park Buccaneers. So I actually played -- like Malachi Toney was three years under me, but we played in the same park and same position.

Q. Same team?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Yes.

Q. Can you put in perspective for people who aren't from South Florida what those games are like, what they mean to the community and the pride that you kids have, having come out of that system?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I mean, being in South Florida, literally games are like almost the same as high school games, honestly. It's a lot of people. They've got a lot of support from the community. Not just parents, but everybody goes to watch the games. It's a big thing in South Florida, unlike other states.

Q. D'Angelo, after the Peach Bowl, Fernando talked about the fact that in high school, you picked him off. Just go back to that moment and that interaction and just what it was like to go up against him.

D'ANGELO PONDS: Yeah. It's something we joke about all the time, how I picked him off. I baited him into throwing something. But we had a great D-line, got pressure in his face. He threw it right to me. We joke about it all the time. He tried to tackle me as well. He missed that. It's great to have a quarterback like that to go against in practice now.

It's something we joked about when we first got here.

Q. D'Angelo, when you look at Curt Cignetti, you believed in him once and believed in him again. What is it about his message, his style, his leadership that you feel like has brought success to James Madison and potentially a National Championship to Indiana. At worst, a National Championship appearance?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Curt Cignetti hasn't changed since I've met him. He's always had the same mindset and standard. His recruitment pitch from James Madison to Indiana is the same as on the interviews. He wins. That was the main thing he pitched to me. He didn't say the Google me part, but he said I win. That was enough to get me here.

He trusted me out of high school. It was a no-brainer to go with him out of the portal as well.

Q. Coach's sideline faces have become big on the internet. How do you get him to smile and make him happy?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Cignetti, just make plays. I would say that's the main way to get him to smile. Other than that, you're not going to get a smile out of him at all.

Probably at the end of the game. And to win. Make plays and win.

Q. Can you give me your best coach face?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I tried in the other interview and I looked crazy so I'm not going to do it.

Q. You've been asked a million times. You make the first play in Oregon, how loud is it, and what's going through your mind as you reach the end zone?

D'ANGELO PONDS: It was so loud, probably the loudest I've heard in a stadium, just being in a dorm and the noise being trapped in. It was all Indiana fans. They called it Indian-ta at that point. But they was going crazy. It was a tone-setting thing to do.

Q. D'Angelo, Coach Cignetti has talked about how this has been his best team at executing his message. What is it about the experience and maturity level of this unit that allows you to do that?

D'ANGELO PONDS: The experience of this team has made it what it is today. A lot of teams get comfortable with wins, like big games like that. We're the type of team that takes one game at a time and doesn't dwell on our successes, knowing the next game is the biggest game. Our experience helps with moving forward from success and not letting it get to our head.

Q. Things happen for a reason. I get that. Could you have been a Hurricane?

D'ANGELO PONDS: It was definitely a possibility out of the portal. I definitely was setting up a visit to the Hurricanes. But Indiana came in and grabbed me.

Q. We saw the viral moment after the Peach Bowl where an Oregon staffer gave you the ball from your pick-6. What did that moment mean to you?

D'ANGELO PONDS: It's something honestly the guy didn't have to do. I made sure to thank him as well personally. Not only did I thank him after he gave me the ball, but it was definitely a nice gesture that you don't see often. It's something he really didn't have to do. I appreciate him for that.

Q. Do you have a routine that you tell or do yourself as you step on the line of scrimmage? How are you going to adjust that or keep it the same as you face a record-setting Miami offense?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I do have a routine, especially in my

stance. I wouldn't change it. Even though we're going against great players, it's a lot of great players everywhere, and I feel like I have to keep the same mindset. If I change that, then it won't be the same. So, honestly, just going against top competition is something I always want to do, and it won't change what I do as well.

Q. D'Angelo, watching game film, when you see the Canes offense led by Carson Beck, what do you see? How do you contain them?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Watching Miami film, I would say I see an experienced quarterback, a point guard quarterback who knows how to get the ball to his playmakers. He likes to take shots as well. He has great receivers to get the ball to in space, guys like Malachi Toney who are versatile and things like that.

Other guys on the outside are great as well. But I just see a veteran quarterback who knows how to read coverages and has the experience to get the ball to his playmakers.

Q. D'Angelo your coaches have talked good how you instill confidence in Jamari and have made him better. Do you feel like you make each other better from Little League to now?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I would say definitely, me and Jamari make each other better with little things. We correct each other. When he sees something, he lets me know. I see something, I let him know. That makes each other better. We keep the same standard and are competing every day.

Q. I know you and Fernando on the podium after the Peach Bowl talked about how you had the prior connection in Miami. Fast-forward to being teammates, being in this moment. How special and surreal is this full circle moment for you? What is this like?

D'ANGELO PONDS: It's a special moment, something probably all kids dream of who play football. Just to be back in this position in our hometown, with this great of an opportunity, it's definitely a blessing, something you don't see often. I would say we're ready to take full advantage of it.

Q. Did you have to rub it in when you guys got here, hey, remember when I picked you off here?

D'ANGELO PONDS: No, I didn't rub it in. It's not something I'm thinking of now. We definitely joke about it all the time, but we're focused on the game right now.

Q. Simply what does it mean to get to this point and



be a part of this turnaround for Indiana?

D'ANGELO PONDS: It means a lot to have this effect on the community in Bloomington. Just to see the support grow throughout Bloomington as well. Just to have this, like, honestly, I didn't know how much we were affecting Bloomington until last game.

I had multiple fans come up to me just letting me know, like, you don't know what you're doing for the community. It's a blessing to have the turnaround.

Q. And going up against the wide receiving corps of Miami, what challenges they present and, in particular, Malachi Toney?

D'ANGELO PONDS: In particular, Malachi Toney, I would say he's a versatile guy. He has no weaknesses in his game. He's a guy who they get the ball in space and can make you miss at any time. He has great contact, balance. He's versatile. He can throw the ball as well. He poses that threat as a quarterback. But he's just a guy who has no weaknesses. That separates him.

They have a guy, Carson Beck, who gets the ball to the playmakers on the outside as well with great players who can make plays on the ball.

Q. Fellow Florida boy myself. Tell me, man, I got a chance to see you play in high school. You played for one of the premiere programs in Florida, Chaminade Madonna. Tell me, how is it that Coach Damien Jones continues year and year out to produce not only some of the best high school players but some of the best college ready players like yourself?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I would say coach Damien Jones is similar to Coach Cig. He keeps a standard to his players. He's going to push you. He doesn't care how successful you are. He doesn't let you get a big head. He's going to push you every day and try to get you better. That separates him from the other high school coaches. He'll get the best out of you and make you a better man as well.

Q. Can you talk about where that love for the film room has come from? I felt like in the last game, it almost seemed like you may have seen something ahead of time that nobody else was expecting in that first play.

D'ANGELO PONDS: Yeah, definitely I feel like as a cornerback, going in this good competition, you've got to be in the film room just to get a jump on the ball and things like that.

I would say that play particularly, I read quick game, read the quarterback eyes, knew the ball had to come out fast in that moment and made a great play on the ball. I would say I didn't know that route was coming, but I could say I knew the ball had to come out fast and ended up being a great play for me.

Q. So tell me again, being from Florida, you played against some of the best players in the state and nationwide. How do you feel being almost a two-way player? How do you feel like they need to level more of your playing abilities on the other side of the ball?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I feel like you definitely have to have a coach to trust in you to put you on the other side of the ball. That says a lot about what they think about me here. And Coach Cignetti trusted me to put the ball in a defensive player's hands, somebody who doesn't get reps at it that much. They have to have a trust in you. It's definitely something I want to do. It's fun to do as well.

Q. Have you allowed yourself at all a moment to think about what that might feel like on Monday night if things go the right way for you?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I haven't thought about it. I'm focused on winning the game. After the game, Lord knows.

Q. If you could add or change one rule in college football right now, what do you think you would add or change from the way it's currently set up?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Oh, that's a good one. I would add a rule to challenge penalties because a lot of penalties are, like, questionable. So I would say a rule to look over a penalty.

Q. You had an interception versus Oregon. Take us back to the play and before the play and what you saw. How did you make that happen?

D'ANGELO PONDS: On the first play of the game against Oregon, I read quick game. A lot of people think I knew the play. I didn't know the play. That's just me knowing the quarterback quick game, knowing the ball had to come out fast. They had five out receivers. The ball had to come out fast. Nobody was protecting.

I seen the quarterback eyes, read it, jumped it, and made a great play on the ball. To see the crowd going crazy, knowing it was all red in the stands, it was a great feeling just to have that effect on the game.

Q. Tell us a cool story about Coach Cignetti. We only

see the sound bites. Tell us a cool story about Coach Cignetti.

D'ANGELO PONDS: It's not going to be a lot of cool ones from him. He's a great guy. I would say cool story for me, I would say on my visit to Indiana, just his recruiting pitch to me was that he wins and this was possible right here.

I would say my dad kind of made a joke, was like, yeah, you know, you had a bad season last year, because Indiana had a bad season last year. He was like, you can make a bowl game this year. Cignetti was like, bowl game? We're not going for a bowl game.

That's something I laugh about all the time, knowing that guy's mindset and his belief in his system. I would say that's something that's always stuck out with me.

Q. You're from Chaminade, right?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Yeah.

Q. Name some of the guys you played with on your team at Chaminade.

D'ANGELO PONDS: Josiah Trader. Who else from Chaminade on the team?

Q. Some of them from anywhere.

D'ANGELO PONDS: Josiah Trader, J.J. Smith, Kenyatta Jackson, Dwayne Thomas, CJ Bailey. We had guys everywhere. Bullitt. Shoot, we had guys everywhere. I'm not gonna lie. I could keep going all day with that one.

Q. I've heard so often about how you never allow a catch in practice, whether it's spring camp and fall camp. Have you ever been on the bad end of a Sarratt mosing?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I've definitely been on the bad end of that one. That guy can make extremely good catches. We compete every day. I would say that's a guy who is going to make crazy catches on you. Definitely been on the bad side of that one before.

Q. Why do you think he's so good on that? He's got strong hands, late hands. What makes him so good at doing that?

D'ANGELO PONDS: He's just a strong-handed guy. I would say he's a sure-handed guy as well. Something he works on after practice every day. Every time I walk past, he's on the jugs machine. I don't know if you shook his hand, but his hand is huge. That's probably what makes

his hands so strong.

Q. Do you remember when you saw him mosing for the first time?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Yeah, I think it was my first year at JMU. Fall camp, I seen him go over somebody's head, and I was like oh, that's guy's different.

Q. D'Angelo, in the times when you go good-on-good in practice, do the back shoulder throws annoy you as much as they annoy opponents?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Definitely. It's something that helped me defend in the game, though. It's great to go against guys like Sarratt and Cooper and things like that, guys who are pros at doing that. It's definitely annoying as a DB to guard a back shoulder fade.

Q. D'Angelo, what does it mean to be back here? Have you dreamed about hoisting a trophy here in Miami in particular?

D'ANGELO PONDS: It's definitely something I dreamed of all the time. It's just a full circle moment to be in my hometown and have this great opportunity in front of me. Definitely dreamed about that, but I'm just trying to make it come to reality.

Q. Second, I know you've been asked this already. D'Angelo's Pond in Bloomington. Describe, when you found out about this, to have a pond named after you, at least temporarily.

D'ANGELO PONDS: It was a surreal moment, just to know I have a body of water named after me. I feel like that was a joke that was being made, but I never knew it was coming to reality. It's just a blessing to have the people of Bloomington behind me to have that type of support. Just shows is that we need to do it for them.

Q. You've made some amazing plays this season. Do you have a favorite one?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Yeah. I believe I was asked this before the Oregon game, and I said the Alabama play. But now I have a new one. The Oregon play was my favorite play. I would say Oregon pick-6 is my favorite play.

Q. D'Angelo, we know the Miami offense will try to grind the clock, have 15-play drives. What are the challenges to make sure it doesn't happen?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Just everybody do their job. Yeah, they're going to try to grind the clock. They have a great

O-line, great receivers on the outside, great quarterback as well. Everybody do their job and bend but don't break if we get to that point and just make plays.

Q. D'Angelo, I wanted to ask about your coach and his phone a little bit. So do you ever text with him? Is he a big texting guy?

D'ANGELO PONDS: No, he's not a texting guy or a calling guy. But I would say he's an old school guy. Like he probably doesn't even be on his phone like that. He'll text me now and then, but he's not a social guy.

Q. When you were getting recruited, how would he contact you?

D'ANGELO PONDS: To contact me during recruiting, he would call my phone. That's the simplest thing for him.

Q. Is he the type of person you've heard him listen to music or blow off steam or anything like that? What we see is so locked in and focused. Do you ever catch glimpses of him relaxing?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I caught glimpses of him relaxing. I've been in his house. I've seen him in his house. He's a normal guy. He got a legendary chair he lays in. It's a green chair. You'll see him kicked up in it.

Q. Like one of those La-Z-Boy recliners?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Yes. I heard he had it for a long time. You'll catch him laying in it. They've got memes going around about it as well.

Q. D'Angelo, with those James Madison guys that came over with him, is there that extra sense of pride, knowing that it worked and you've gotten here and you're one win away from the national title?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I would say it's definitely a pride thing with those group of guys. Knowing where we came from, we felt like we had something to prove. I feel like it's just another step for us. But just as a team as a whole, we've always kept that same standard all year. It's a blessing to have this opportunity and take advantage of it.

Q. Was there something when Curt was recruiting you, what do you remember about, like, his initial evaluation of you as a player?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Out of high school?

Q. Yes.

D'ANGELO PONDS: I would say out of high school, his evaluation of me was straight off of film. A lot of coaches looked at size. He was not a coach that did that. He was one of the coaches that wanted the best players and trusted me out of high school. He played me as a freshman. That showed that he was a guy who played the best players. That's what I wanted. I wanted an opportunity, and he gave me that.

Q. As you keep this run going, what do you hope the country is learning about the IU program? What do you want them to take away about the Hoosiers?

D'ANGELO PONDS: The country is learning that guys who are, quote unquote, misfits can do it. Anything you put your mind to, you can do it. Doesn't matter what people see you as or how talented people say you are. If you work hard and you pray on it and do your job, anything is possible, honestly.

Q. D'Angelo, I didn't know you were from Miami after the Peach Bowl. Now I'm going to ask the same question I asked Fernando. How full circle of a moment is this for you? What does it mean to be back home?

A. It's a full circle moment. I said earlier I drove past this stadium every day going to school. Playing in the stadium, I watched Dolphins games as a kid. It's definitely a full circle moment for me.

Q. Your coach said you're probably the best player he's been with from start to finish throughout your career. Can you tell me what it means to hear that from him and your relationship with him?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I can't say enough about Coach. He trusted me out of high school. For that type of trust from a coach to play you as a freshman as well, it just says -- can't say enough about him. Great coach. He gave me a great opportunity, and I wouldn't be here without him.

Q. D'Angelo, everybody's trying to find something to criticize about Fernando Mendoza in a joking way, obviously. As defensive guy, have you ever got into it with him on the field or at any point, or is there just seriously nothing wrong with this guy?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I would say there's nothing wrong with him. He's a competitive guy. People are going to always try to find little things. I would say he has no weaknesses in his game, in my opinion. It's coming from a guy who went against him every day in fall camp. I would say he has all the tools of a great quarterback and is probably going to be the best quarterback to ever come out

of Indiana.

Q. So just to clarify, you do go ones-on-ones in fall camp?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Yeah, we went ones-on-ones every day in fall camp. I would say that was the most competitive thing we did this year.

Q. D'Angelo, homecoming, obviously, for Miami and Fernando, but also for you. Just your thoughts on coming back here, South Florida, to play the biggest game?

D'ANGELO PONDS: Definitely a full circle moment for me just to play in my hometown for a National Championship. A great opportunity. I would say just ready to take full advantage of it.

Q. What is it about coach Curt Cignetti that makes success sustainable? You've been with him for a while now.

D'ANGELO PONDS: I would say the thing that makes him successful is him keeping the same standard each week. Even after we win a big game, he's the type of coach to go back to the drawing board and try to get better off of that. A lot of people would be fulfilled with that win. He's not satisfied at all. He's a coach always trying to get better. That's what separates him.

Q. When did it set in that not only were you coming to Miami, but to play Miami, and immediate thoughts and reaction then.

D'ANGELO PONDS: I would say my thoughts was a great opportunity just to play in front of home crowd. I was really thinking about all the tickets I might have to get for my family as well. But it's just a great opportunity and a blessing to be here.

Q. Before you and I did your first interview together, I'm a card collector, and I pulled from a box of cards a D'Angelo Ponds 205, and it's a autographed by you that says All First Team Big Ten. Should your card be worth more than Fernando Mendoza, and why did you like kind of put that special message? Because I've never seen something like that that said First Team All Big Ten.

D'ANGELO PONDS: I wouldn't say mine should be worth more than the Heisman. He got that one. But I would say I put that First Team All Big Ten, I believe -- did they announce that yet, or I just put that?

Q. I have it.

D'ANGELO PONDS: I was told to put that on there. I thought it was cool to have you draw that as well. I don't think it should be worth more than the Heisman. He deserves it.

Q. D'Angelo, obviously, everybody talks about how your team is legacy. The legacy of your team what is the legacy of your team, win or lose today?

D'ANGELO PONDS: I'm not really focused on the legacy of our team. That's the thing that's being said right now. We're focused on winning this game, honestly.

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