

CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

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Hard Rock Stadium

Indiana Hoosiers

ELIJAH SARRATT

Pregame Press Conference



**NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP**
MIAMI 2026

Q. Elijah, obviously, an unbelievable season with the 15 touchdowns. But I saw your post about missing three games earlier this week. Do you have some what-ifs in your head when it comes to touchdown records and stuff if you were health request for those three games?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Definitely. It sucked that I missed those three games. Some of the goals that I feel like I was close to getting, I wasn't able to get. But everything happens for a reason so I'm blessed just to be here right now.

Yeah, I wanted to play those three games, but I had a great season so I've got to take it that way.

Q. What are the goals?

ELIJAH SARRATT: I wanted to be Biletnikoff winner. I think shout out to the guy who won it. Great receiver. But that was one of my goals. Just some other ones I wasn't able to get, but it is are what it is. I'm glad I'm in the National Championship. That was my number one goal.

Q. Elijah, what can you say about working with Fernando Mendoza and what it's been like throughout the year and maybe some of those things beyond practice kind of where you and him had that opportunity to build a relationship to create that confidence in each other that you have?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Really started the first day I met him on his visit. They asked me to come up to dinner with him. We chopped it up at dinner. It was easy talking to him. We just clicked. As good as he is on the field, he's that good off the field too as a regular human being too. We have a lot of great conversations outside of football that translates onto the field and builds that trust and chemistry as a friend and not just as a teammate.

Q. This offense doesn't make a lot of mistakes. You know Miami's defense is the defense that creates mistakes and opportunities in the fourth quarter. What's it going to be like when those two things collide?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Miami is a great defense. They're rolling. It's going to be a great challenge for us. We're going to stick to the things I talked about. Staying

ahead of the sticks, executing when we have to execute and don't turn the ball over. As long as we do those three things, we'll put ourselves in a good position.

Q. Hoosier Nation has showed up the past month or so. Has that made its way into the locker room? How has that personally affect the you on and off the field?

ELIJAH SARRATT: I see it as soon as I go into the arena. Last week, seeing all the red, it makes a great impact on us. Our fans gives us confidence and wants us to go out and play our best for them. Without them, it would be tough being here right now. All season, they've shown up and shown out. I appreciate them lot for that.

Q. Coach is pretty stoic, pretty famous for looking mad on the sidelines. What do you do to get him to smile in can you give me your best impression?

ELIJAH SARRATT: I just try to crack some little jokes now and then. We got on bus, and he's in a suit. I say Dang, Coach, you looking fly right now. He gives me a smirk. I've known him for a while so I'm comfortable joking with him now, maybe more than others are. So it's not too hard for me to, like, try to make him laugh or something.

Impression, I don't even know if I got a too good of an impression. If you ever go into his office -- I wish I could kick up my feet right now. You're going to see him with his feet kicked up on his desk. He'll be leaning back on it. You walk in there, like, he's about business right now. I don't know what to say. Something like that.

Q. You've been on a tear in open space. You had two touchdowns in the Peach Bowl. What do you tell

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yourself to keep the momentum going offensively?

ELIJAH SARRATT: I tell myself keep going. No matter one touchdowns, two touchdowns, keep going. I have a lot of confidence in myself and the guys around me to allow me to go out and do what I do. A lot of prayer, a lot of talking to myself. Just want to keep going. I'm never satisfied. No matter what my stats are, I keep going.

Q. Going back to the connection with Mendoza, you two seem to be always on point, particularly on the back shoulder throws, the timing routes. What has built that connection throughout the year? What's it like playing with a quarterback who is going to place it perfectly outside?

ELIJAH SARRATT: A lot of reps and talk going into that. I sent him some clips of guys who ran back shoulders in the beginning of the year. He liked that. We've been working on it ever since then. Really just the reps.

I try to be easy as a receiver. I tell him try to let me get my hands on it. Fernando does a great job of putting it perfect. He throws a dime nine times out of ten. That guy's a dawg for real. If you have someone who can put the ball where he does, it makes it easy for me. I've got to be in the right spot at the right time.

Q. What gave you belief in Cignetti to follow him and be part of the journey?

ELIJAH SARRATT: The first time I met him at my visit at JMU, what he says, he stands on it. That means a lot to me. A lot of coaches say stuff and don't really do it. Everything he says, he really does. He has a plan to implement and we go off the plan. He stays on the plan.

Coming over to Indiana, I was comfortable with him and the staff. I knew he would get me the ball, which is a great thing. From there, it was easy. It was an easy decision.

Q. You mentioned coming to campus about two years ago. Though you were new, did you feel like you had to take on a leadership role because you knew the system, the coaches, the messaging? Was that something you took on early?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Definitely wanted to. That was a big goal for me to step into a bigger leadership role when I first got to Indiana. My big thing is I didn't want to come into a new spot and step on everybody's toes that were here. It was a good mix. I came in and talked about what our plan was, what the culture is, how we attack day-to-day things. Those guys made me feel welcome in the community, welcomed at the facilities and all that stuff. Both sides

played a factor into that.

Q. Was there any moment where a teammate came to you and was like, hey, is he for real? Is this for real? Where you had to reassure them, this works, stick with it?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Those first couple weeks when you're talking to them and then he's like -- when Coach is saying what he does, his demeanor and everything, they're like, is this really true? Is this how things are going to go? Is this how the day-by-day stuff goes? It was like yeah.

Big thing I told them, if you're not on your stuff, you're not doing what you supposed to do, Coach Cignetti will get you out of here and bring someone else in. That's business. That's the name of the game. The guys realized that quick and adjusted real quick.

Q. To follow up, was there any doubt when this opportunity came available that if you were going to leave JMU, it was going to be here? This was the place you wanted to be? You wanted to follow these coaches and be here?

ELIJAH SARRATT: I'll be honest, when I left JMU, I was like, I'm not going though come to Indiana. I want to go somewhere south warm. I had a visit to South Carolina. I like the receiver coach there who is now at Illinois.

Indiana was my first visit. I told Coach Cig about some other visits I wanted to go to. He said, that's not a good idea. Shook his hand, and I committed here. But I'm happy to be to be at Indiana. It's God's plan. It all worked out in my favor.

Q. Elijah, of course, still one more game. Have you given thought to the history that this team has already made?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Yeah. I mean, I have definitely gave it some thought. It really doesn't mean too much if you don't finish it with a championship. I'm big on winning championships. That's always what I want to do. It's not going to mean much to me unless we finish the job.

Q. Elijah, everybody is talking about Indiana. You made it clear you don't care what other people talk about. Do you see things online and ignore them, or do you try to avoid them altogether?

ELIJAH SARRATT: You always see things. You know social media. I do my best to ignore it whether it's good or bad. When we win, it's we're the best team ever. If it's a close game, we're overrated or didn't play anyone.

I don't care what people say. Win, lose, or draw, everyone's always going to say something. I'm happy with the guys we have in the locker room, and I like how we keep everything inside the locker room, and we're not too worried about the outside noise.

Q. Elijah, one of the things that stands out about you and your team is the moment never seems too big for you guys. Why is that?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Really just the work we put in in practice and workouts and all that. The coaches do a good job of keeping us on our toes. When it comes to the big moments, trust in your training, trust the stuff you've been doing all year.

It may be a big moment, may be a critical third down, but it's like any other down. Go out, run your route, execute when you have to execute. Keep things simple. I'm a big guy that in big moments, keeping things simple and doing what we've been doing all year.

Q. What is it about Coach Cignetti that system to make this success sustainable for Indiana?

ELIJAH SARRATT: I feel like his plan. We don't practice long. He gets us in and out. We're practicing an hour 30, an hour 40. We're working within those hour 30, hour 40, but he does a good job of not making you feel like you're overworked.

Coach Derek Owings, our strength coach, one of the best in the game, has a great plan for us. We're not doing unnecessary stuff, like bear crawls and all this stuff. Some people might do it, so no disrespect to those strength coaches.

Everything they do has a purpose, and we're not overworking. If they see our GPS numbers say they're super high, the next practice they may break things down so our bodies can adjust. That's the plan they have and how they go about things.

Q. Coach has a dry sense of humor. How funny is he away from us?

ELIJAH SARRATT: I'm not gonna lie. One thing I like about him is the way you see him on the podium talking to you guys is how he talks to us. He keeps things the same.

It will be a funny moment, he still has the dry personality or whatever. I try to crack jokes with him every now and then. But you know when to talk to him and when not to talk to him, for sure.

Q. Elijah, a lot has been made about how Coach Cignetti doesn't smile a lot. What would you say is the best way to get Coach to smile?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Just crack some type of joke with him. I said earlier I got on the bus and seen him in a suit. I said Dang, Coach, you looking clean right now. Something like that keep him on his toes. I try not to talk ball with him all the time. Just try to chop it up with him sometimes. I'm sure it gets annoying just talking about football all the time so I just try talking to him about life and just regular stuff every now and then.

You got to know when to talk to him and when not to talk to him for sure.

Q. This two-year run for you guys, I mean, one loss in two years, how magical is this for you? Has it hit you yet what you all are about to accomplish?

ELIJAH SARRATT: A little bit. I've been so in the moment the past few years trying to do the best for myself and my team. I haven't sat back and reflected yet. This is my last week of college football. This is going to be my last game having the Indiana brand on me. So I've done a little reflecting. I sat back a little bit now.

But I really am focused on finishing this game and finishing out my career how I want to finish it. But it's really been a blessing so far for sure.

Q. Tough question. One word to describe Fernando Mendoza. What would you say?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Great. Great. First person I said this about, I think he's going to be an all-time great in the game of football by the way he attacks his work, the way he is off the field.

The crazy thing I say is he's won the Heisman and has all these accolades, but he has so much room to get better, which is crazy to me. To be a Heisman winner, to be considered one of the best players in college football and have that much room to grow, the sky's the limit for my boy, and I can't wait to see him for years to come in this football league. I hope he plays 10, 15, 20 years. I hope he plays until he's 40 years old, which I really believe he has a chance to.

Q. How easy was it to buy into him when he first arrived on campus?

ELIJAH SARRATT: It was super easy. My first time meeting him was his first time on campus on his visit.

They had me, Coach Shanny, I think Coach D.O., our strength coach had went out with him to dinner just to chop it up with him. It was great. Easy talk, easy dinner.

And then first time throwing about him, catching his pass, it's like this boy can spin it. Going through spring, going through summer, seeing the way he's throwing the ball, the way he's putting it in tight windows and stuff. I'm like, okay, this boy can play.

Q. The accuracy stands out. Does it amaze you sometimes some of the windows he's able to get the ball in?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Sure. One throw, it wasn't even to me, it was against Iowa. It was a cover two shot ball, a fade. He was on the left hash. He threw it to the right hash on the sideline right before the safety could get there and stuff like that.

I'm in the game, and I'm like oh, my gosh, he just completed that? He amazes me almost every single game. Not even throws. The way he scrambles, gets out of the pocket, makes something out of nothing. Just the way he operates every single day amazes me.

Q. To follow up on that, did you have a moment early on with him, whether it was spring ball, whether it was winter workouts, whatever, where he did something that you just sort of thought, like, kind of to your point, a moment where you thought, okay. Was there a first moment that you can remember where you thought this guy's got real ability?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Yeah. Spring ball. It was a scramble. It wasn't even a throw. He got flushed out of the pocket. He was on the left side, and he ran down the sideline for about 60 yards. You don't see that much against our defense.

So I seen that, and it's one-on-one, starters-for-starters. I seen him do that. I'm saying, okay, this boy can run. This boy can run and he can throw.

Throughout the summer, we had 7-on-7s and stuff together. I remember I ran a slot fade, but I kind of changed it up because I seen open space. Me and him were on the same page. Not even talking about that or talking about that we could do that or something, he hit me, and it was a touchdown.

Seeing stuff like that, that he was on the same page as me, I consider myself having a pretty good football IQ. To see someone on the same page with me like that and us not communicating or something like that before, I'm like, okay,

he's official.

He's made so many throws, so many moments throughout workouts, practices and stuff that have amazed me. I could name a lot.

Q. The 7-on-7 was in the spring?

ELIJAH SARRATT: No. It was summer workouts. No coaches were around and stuff. It's just offense verse defense and stuff.

Q. Elijah, what is it about Coach Cignetti's talent evaluation that you think stands out? Obviously, he brought up the JMU guys. But even before that, what do you think he saw in you?

ELIJAH SARRATT: In me, I just think he seen someone who loves football. He knew my brother before. My brother was already playing football for him at JMU as a safety. My brother puts in his work, puts in his time every single day. I assume he thought the same of me and.

And then I had a pretty good freshman year. He knew I was a playmaker. Speaking off his talent evaluation, he does a good job of looking at guys' film, seeing who will fit into his system, who he feels like he can develop. He's not going to look at the four or five stars and be like I just need these four or five stars. He's going to look at everybody.

I saw not long ago, he signed an FCS corner who just transferred, I forget from what school. He goes through all levels. That's a big thing that I think a lot of coaches could do. Not just look at stars. Look at guys' tape. Tape speaks more to me than anything. Tape speaks more than your test numbers. Tape speaks more than a lot. If you're putting it on tape, that can translate to just anybody. They do a great job of watching tons of tape every single day and evaluating what can fit in their system and what can't.

Q. Elijah, you guys have obviously thought you would be here. At the start of the year, did you ever imagine this team was going to be able to make it to the National Championship?

ELIJAH SARRATT: I definitely knew we had a good chance because we had a great group that came back that played in the great games against Notre Dame and Ohio State. We brought in a great group of transfers that that have experienced a championship, win or loss, and guys that have just been playmakers at different other schools.

Throughout spring and summer, I knew we had a great chance the way we were gelling. It was really, I think, our first big game that we had against Illinois, I think fourth

game of the season, they were ranked number 9 at the time. We had a great game, kind of blew them out the water. They're a great team, but we played a great game as well.

From there, I'm like we got a good chance. From then, we went on the road a couple times, had some big games, and I was like, okay, we really got a chance this year.

It's amazing to be here playing in the National Championship. We want to finish it off the right way.

Q. Fernando also being at home, obviously, you know Fernando well. How has he handled himself, in your opinion, just throughout the whole thing, and now gets the chance to play in his hometown?

ELIJAH SARRATT: It's amazing to me how he's handled himself through the beginning of the year, winning the Heisman, the accolades he gets every single week. He's the same person I've met since day one. He hasn't changed. That's big respect.

I tip my hat off to somebody who has all the media coverage, all these sponsorships, everybody who wants to get with him. He's the same exact same guy, day in and day out. I applaud him for that. It's rare to be somebody do that. It means a lot being in Miami, having his family come to the game. I want to do my best to bring home a win for him.

Q. As you guys have gone through the season, not only beating people but beating them badly, Alabama, Oregon, do you sort of feel it on the field that you guys have earned these guys' respect? Guys who sort of won championships over and over again. Hey, these guys are legit. Can you feel it on the field, after the game, during the game?

ELIJAH SARRATT: After the game for sure. Before the game, no. No one gives us -- I don't want anyone before the game giving us their respect or something. That would be weird to me.

After the game, they come up to us. It's all love. It's never no ill-will after the game. Each game, Alabama, Ohio State, Oregon, all the teams we've been able to beat this year have showed respect after the game. They're great teams we've beat this year. We were able to win and execute the way we want to. It's been a good respect level from everybody all year.

Q. Along those lines, what do you guys make of some of the stuff that's out there? I know it's probably BS fodder about you guys are doing this or that. Is that

people looking for a reason, hey, this can't be real? Do you look at it that way as players?

ELIJAH SARRATT: I've seen a couple of it. I've seen people talk about our age and stuff like that. It is what it is. A fifth, sixth year, that's kind of normal now. If you redshirt and then you get hurt, you're a sixth year.

We have some guys like that on our team. People are always going to say something about us, win, lose, or draw, good or bad. We don't pay much attention to it. We're happy with the guys we've got in the locker room and understand what we want to do week in and week out.

Q. Elijah, what's it been like watching this IU football fan base come alive? It was always kind of been there, but now it's like a sleeping giant's been awakened. The last two playoff games have been virtual home games for you.

ELIJAH SARRATT: It's been crazy. Like you said, it's always been in there. I remember on my first year here, I'm in an Uber going to the airport. Uber driver is talking to me the whole entire way about how he's excited, how the whole town is excited, but we're kind of scared because we don't know if you're going to be good or not. Saying to him, I hope we can live up to it for you.

Since I've been here, they show nothing but love from the first to the second year. It's been crazy. These last couple weeks, seeing them fly over to the west coast, the Big Ten championship, seeing them pack out the Falcons stadium last week. It's been surreal, and I'm grateful for Hoosier nation, for the state of Indiana, Bloomington, and I can't thank them enough for what they've been doing for us.

Q. Elijah, is there a special quality that JMU guys have that led to them being under recruited and now excelling at this level?

ELIJAH SARRATT: I think we just love the game. We love the game. We started playing, a lot of us started playing the game for zero dollars for a couple years of our career. We just love ball, and we love winning.

And then nothing really changed from JMU to Indiana. Just love of the game was still there. Our desire to get better, our desire to keep winning was there. That just feeds off to everyone else. People see us working every single day and are like, all right, I want to do this too. I want to be part of something special. It's just guys that love the game and want to get better every single day.

Q. What was your recruitment like out of high school?



ELIJAH SARRATT: Pretty slow. So I started at a public school, Colonial Forge. Then I transferred to St. Francis Academy in Baltimore just because they're a national powerhouse. I wanted to take my time to the best level.

I racked double digit offers but lost all of those between transfer portal and COVID. So by the end of my senior year, I had about two D2 offers, and then St. Francis University came out like real late. I went up to spring ball, a little practice, and committed from there. St. Francis University, less than 5,000 kids there, FCS school.

It was slow coming out of high school, man. It's kind of crazy being here. I'm always grateful for it just because I know where I started.

Q. You guys all kind of have the same -- all the JMU guys have a similar story where you're under recruited and overlooked. Now you're playing for the National Championship game. Do you have to kind of pinch yourself at all?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Like I said, I'm glad that we're here. I'm glad all of the JMU guys are here. I'm not sure if my freshman year, their freshman year we were thinking we're going to be playing in the National Championship our senior year.

Like I said, we're blessed to be here. We understand what our goal is. We don't just want to be here. We want to be able to win the game and win a championship not only for Indiana, but the state, the town, ourselves, our families, everyone supporting us.

Q. Why did you lose all those scholarships? You said COVID wiped all those offers out.

ELIJAH SARRATT: COVID, transfer portal. I took long to commit, and my spots filled up. At one time, I wanted to commit to Liberty. I texted, called the head coach. No response. The next day, I seen a receiver ended up committing. I'm like my spot was over.

From there, I could show you hundreds of emails, Twitter, DMs of me emailing coaches, emailing JUCOs, getting no response. I joke around with the JMU coaches. I'm emailing them, and they're not responding. I joke around with them about that.

It happens. I'm glad my story is the way it is, and I hope it motivates younger kids to keep going, no matter if you have one scholarship, 20 scholarships, or whatever. Keep on going. All you need to do is put in the work every single day, and you'll have a chance.

Q. Did you make any money before you went to JMU in NIA world?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Zero dollars. I made zero dollars at JMU as well.

Q. The whole time?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Yeah. Well, you get a little stipend. It was about \$250. That was about it.

Q. The most you ever made at JMU was 250?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Yes.

Q. A stipend, is that once a month?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Once a month. Regular college stipend people have always got. That's all I got, about \$250 a month.

Q. Did the JMU guys talk to each other about, hey, we should all go to Indiana together? Did you talk about it?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Them boys committed before me. I had already transferred. I thought I would be stuck at JMU because they didn't release the two-time transfer rule yet. They ended up making the two-time transfer rule so I was like, okay, I want to be able to go somewhere.

But like I said, at first I didn't think I was going to come to Indiana. I went on my visit. A lot of guys had already committed. But that played a part in my decision as well, seeing my JMU guys going over there. I'm like, all right, this may be a good choice for me.

Q. Elijah, what do you hope this run and last year's run will do for the IU program for years to come?

ELIJAH SARRATT: I hope it does a lot. Seems like it's doing good already. They've done a great job in the transfer portal and in high school recruitment. I hope the success continues for years from now. I hope when I'm old, Indiana is considered a blue chip powerhouse. I think they will be. As long as Coach Cignetti and the coaching staff is here, I think great things will happen for the program.

Q. You've touched on it a little bit. Everyone dreams about playing in big moment games. What does it mean for you personally to be here at the National Championship game?

ELIJAH SARRATT: It's a blessing. I can't thank the man

above enough for allowing me to be in this position, starting where I was to be here now. It means a lot. I have my family coming out to the game so I want to be able to put on for them. They're my rock. They're my support. Everything I do is for them.

It's amazing to have my teammates there. It's my last week of college football. Fourth year senior, like, I've had a lot of great moments in my college career. Playing in this National Championship, winning a National Championship will be number one, no doubt.

So I'm blessed. I'm blessed to be where my feet are today. I'm blessed to be talking to you guys and am excited for the things to come.

Q. Elijah, Pat's played in a this game, played in it last year. What has he talked about regarding what this entire week is like?

ELIJAH SARRATT: I'm grateful we have someone like that, like Coog who has been there, Zen who won the National Championship last year. Just keep things the same. Don't make the moment too big. At the end of the day, you're still putting on your cleats and shoulder pads and helmet like you have every other week.

Go out there and let loose and have fun. That's all he's been talking about. No pressure against us. It's just football at the end of the day.

Q. What are you going to miss most about Bloomington?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Most about Bloomington? The people, man. Like the people are real genuine out there. Like real diverse culture out there. I love being there. Every time I go out, people are coming up to me, showing love, taking pictures and stuff.

It's a chill town. I got a nice little apartment out there. I just chill. I got my dog. Great town, great people. That's what I'm going to miss the most.

Q. What's your dog's name?

ELIJAH SARRATT: CC. They may not like it. She's named after Caitlin Clark. Indiana fans may not like it. She's an American bully. That's my daughter right there.

Q. I got to put bully to you. You playing against a good secondary, I shall say, with Miami. Coming from James Madison, coming to the big stage, have you watched them, and what do you think about the Miami secondary?

ELIJAH SARRATT: Definitely watched the film. Them boys fly around. The safeties will come down, hit you with the corners. They'll try to get hands on you, be physical. They're a little more zone than man. But they'll definitely line up on you man to man and say let's go to work.

We'll see what they do against us coming out. It's going to be a fun match-up for sure. Coach Hetherman was at JMU. My brother had played for him, speaks highly of him. I know he'll have them boys ready. It's going to be great.

Much love to you, man. You're a real legend.

Q. How would you compare Fernando from the spring and the summer to now?

ELIJAH SARRATT: He's just more comfortable. Of course, the first time a quarterback being in the offense, you'll have your mistakes. You'll have to learn some things. But he's going week in and week out. His footwork, being in the pocket, stepping in the pockets, understanding coverages, understanding his first read, second read, third read, where he needs to start is getting better every week. Coach Whitmer is a great quarterback coach. Done a great job. Fernando puts his time in week in, week out. That's really all it is.

Q. Did you think he would be the Heisman Trophy winner?

ELIJAH SARRATT: I knew he could spin it. I didn't know if he would be a Heisman. I knew he had a chance by the way he threw the ball. We had a great O-line, great playmakers behind him. I knew he would have a chance for sure.

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