

CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

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Hard Rock Stadium

Indiana Hoosiers

Mike Shanahan

Pregame Press Conference

Q. With Elijah, how do you develop late hands? He's got late hands, he's got strong hands. How do you develop that?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Just a lot of ball skills, drills in practice.

But I feel like that's kind of a natural thing that especially a guy like Elijah has. Good quality, good feel and a lot of reps put into it.

But, yeah, we just try to drill as much we can and try to put those guys in position in practice that will translate to the game.

Q. Is that a trait you saw on tape when he transferred over back in '23 at JMU?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah, absolutely. He was a guy that had a ton of production at St. Francis, and that was a big thing that really stuck out to us. He caught everything. So it was pretty easy for us to see he had great ball skills.

Q. Fernando has obviously always been a capable runner, but it seems like in the playoff he's had even more like really dynamic scrambles for first downs, big plays. Did you guys work on that during the break or is there any particular reason for that?

MIKE SHANAHAN: No. No particular reason. I think the couple of plays that you're referring to, I remember specifically in the Alabama game, they dropped eight in the coverage, and usually he has time back there to try to make something happen, extend the play. But he's done a great job all year, if it's not there, tucking it in and running it. And he has no problem going to get a first down, going to get a touchdown. And I feel like his athleticism has kind of highlighted in that way throughout the whole year. He's been a big weapon for us, though, for sure.

Q. (Inaudible)?



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MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. There was a few times, especially whenever we had the lead and a comfortable lead, that we were just telling him to be smart. But that's a hard switch for him to turn off at times; he's such a competitor. But, no, he's done a good job getting out of bounds when he can, and we know that he's gotta stay on the field. So we're in his ear about that a little bit.

Q. When you guys arrived here as a staff and bringing over the program and the system that you had run at JMU, as you came here almost two years ago, what was like the initial core messaging that you guys provided to really the holdovers, to help translate what you had achieved and helped them see the big picture?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah, for those guys, first of all, it was just getting to know them as people. But after that, it was a lot about here's what we can do, here's how we see you fitting into our offense. And then the production that we were able to have, especially on our side of the ball and obviously the defensive side of the ball, I feel like that excited some of the guys. And the system has been proven throughout the last few years, and I feel like that was able to keep some guys around.

And then as far as the actual messaging, though, it was all just about the day-to-day process, and that's something that Coach Cignetti has spoke about a long time since the day really I started working with him. If you put the work in, if you make the sacrifices, if you're consistent, you're going to reap the benefits on game day. And we had a lot of talented guys that did stay through that previous staff and through the coaching change, and we're pretty fortunate for that because a lot of them are still making big contributions for us.

Q. Coach is pretty stoic (inaudible)?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. That definitely helped. Not only are these guys great on the field, but they're great locker room guys. They were great in the weight room. I feel like that's where it really all started back in that first January, February, in the training sessions. I feel like they just kind of set the tone, the expectations, and I feel like the



guys that were part of the previous team did a great job of assimilating into that in some regard, and then we had a lot of good guys that were hard workers there as well.

But there's no question about it, the guys that we were able to bring with us helped smooth that transition over and probably made it happen a lot quicker than maybe some other situations.

Q. When you look at Roman Hemby, as well as Kaelon Black and the rest of the rushing attack that you have here on the offensive side of the ball, what can you say about having that stable and so many strong players there? We have a 1,000-yard back already, and there could be a second one after this game. What's it like to kind of delegate who's getting the ball?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah, it makes it very easy for me when we're calling plays. It's not -- I don't care which one of those guys are in there, and then you put Khobie Martin in the mix. They're all very similar. They can obviously get you the tough yards. They can catch the ball in the back field, and we've been really solid in protection with those guys.

They've been the benefactor of some of the great blocking that we have up front. Our O-line is doing a great job.

Those guys, I feel like, really since the playoffs started, they're running with an edge. They're doing a good job keeping the ball moving forward, not trying to get too cute. They're getting yards after contact. It's been really fun to watch those guys run these last few weeks.

Q. So much focus has been on team building with you guys just how over two years you've developed this mix of people you brought from JMU and other places. How much of it really just comes down to picking the right quarterback in the portal at this point?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Well, obviously that's a huge part of it. That's the guy who touches the ball every play, him and, again, a guy like Pat Coogan at center. Those two guys touch the ball every single play.

It was definitely a huge addition adding those two guys for this year. However, I do feel like there's a little bit of sense of camaraderie, things that you can't really quantify that this team has. I feel like they really do love each other. They do a great job of putting the work in throughout the week, and I feel like everybody just kind of feeds off of one another, and it's led to a lot of positive outcomes for us.

Q. When you're doing the portal speed dating kind of thing, how much do you attribute to the work you guys

did and how much of it is unknown? Obviously with Fernando.

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. That's definitely the trickiest situation. And I take it a step further, even goes down to the high school level. Obviously the portal guys, it happens a lot quicker. But I feel like you can get a pretty good sense of who a guy is in a short period of time, I mean, and the production that these guys have on the field is usually something that we look for.

So usually if they're productive, you can probably bank on them having some of the other traits that you're looking for, good character, sacrifice, commitment. And Coach Cignetti has a really good feel for bringing the right guys in in a short period of time, like you're referring to. But he's just kind of got maybe that sixth sense feel to it.

Q. When you look at Curt Cignetti and him taking a chance on you, you taking a chance on him, from that first day that you started working together to now, being here at the National Championship, what has that road been like to give and take from each other and learn from each other?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah, early on it was definitely me just taking it all in, learning from him, his experience throughout his career up to that point at IUP, not only as a head coach, but also as an offensive-minded coach. And I feel like over the years, probably whenever I got to JMU, I took another step in the game plan process. But also whenever I became an offensive coordinator there is whenever I feel like our collaboration really started to go.

It's just a constant thing every single day. I feel like that's the one thing I love about Coach Cignetti, working with him, is he's always hungry, always looking for the edge, always trying to get better, and it just feeds onto us as coaches, but also down to the players.

Q. And when you look to the fact that it worked at JMU and now it's working at Indiana, what is part of that secret sauce that it doesn't matter where you are with Coach Cignetti, it works nationally?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Well, number one, I would attribute it to the players that we have. Obviously you can see that some of the guys that we brought from JMU are having great success here at the BIG TEN level and nationally.

But aside from that, I just feel like over the years it's been a system that has been built to have answers. When you go against Coach Haines's defense every single day in spring ball and fall camp, you have to give answers to the O-line, the quarterback, the receivers. You gotta have



adjustments. You gotta have obviously a plan to have answers for every coverage in the pass game, so on and so forth.

So it's been an evolution over the years, and I would give Coach Haines a lot of credit for that as well because it's made us evolve and get better.

Q. I spoke with Alberto. He says he's not going anywhere. He's competing. What's he been like the last couple years developing?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Oh, he's been amazing. He's a guy that has a lot of confidence. He's a proven winner at the high school level. He's continued to get bigger, stronger. His body has really developed over these last couple of years with Coach Owings and his staff in the weight room, and I feel like he has a really good feel for the offense, too. Some of the things that he can do, not only throwing the ball -- what maybe surprised us a little bit was his ability to make plays with his legs in some of the games that he played in this year, which was really encouraging to see also. That's such a huge factor at the quarterback position now.

He's very cerebral. He puts the time in. He's got good rapport with his teammates. So it's been really fun to watch him grow over these last two years.

Q. Would it shock you at all if he just went out?

MIKE SHANAHAN: No, not at all. He's a guy that's very capable, and I feel like that's the one thing about us is just at every position you gotta go out there and earn it every single day. He's done a great job competing, and he pushes Fernando also every single day throughout the year. It's been fun to watch.

Q. Best guy wins?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Oh, absolutely. At the end of the day, we want to win games, and we'll always put the best players out there at every position.

Q. What's changed scheme wise with Corey's defense that you've seen since you first went up against him?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Not a ton. He does a great job mixing it up, keeping you off balance. He'll play his three- deep zone coverages. I would say maybe the one thing that showed up a little bit more this year was his cover two variations that he has. I'm sure he had it whenever we were together. Maybe I wasn't as in tune to it as I am now.

But the one thing that's very consistent with him is he's

always going to get his players to play hard as heck, and it all starts up front with those D-linemen. He's got a good group up front this year. So that gives them a lot of flexibility to do some different things on the back end.

Q. How intense is he just to go up against him in practice?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Corey, he is a super intense guy. He loves ball. He sets the tone for his guys every single day.

But, yeah, it was a competition every single day with him, and it's been great to see his success ever since he left JMU a couple years back. But not shocked at all that he has these guys playing the way they're playing right now.

Q. As a former receiver, is there a particular joy to a well-executed back shoulder throw? And walk me through how that's become part of your wheelhouse and why it's so successful, please.

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. It's definitely a beautiful thing, for sure. That's a throw that we feel like if a corner comes up and presses us, play man-to-man, it's really hard to stop, if you're good at it, and two out of the three things that can happen on that play are usually positive for the offense.

So we invest the time. It definitely takes guys being on the same page, Fernando giving them a chance to get their hands on the ball. And then we got some big guys on the outside, Elijah, Charlie, EJ, Cooper when he's out there, guys that can really go get the ball and have great ball skills. It's been a weapon for us, and it needs to be another weapon for us Monday night.

Q. (Inaudible)?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Just his body control, his ball skills, his ability to hold the ball away from guys on the catch, just little things like that I feel like he's learned over the years that has helped him. Him being a senior now, I feel like he just has that mindset that the confidence that he can go win those one-on-one matchups, but other than that, just a credit to him really and Fernando giving him a good pass.

Q. Coach, how much have you seen your offensive line gel over this year? They seem to be close-knit on and off the field.

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. Very close group. And they always have been, I guess since we got here last year. But they are on the same page. Coach Bostad and Coach Leads, who helps out with the O-line, they put more work in probably than any position group throughout the week just

doing constant walk-throughs, giving them different looks, picking up pressures, blitzes in the run game, pass game. And I feel like that leads to the ultimate success and being on the same page during the games. It all starts up front with those guys, and we're going to need them to have a big game for us on Monday night.

Q. How important is it to talk about Pat just getting him over the hump of finally winning that National Championship after last year?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. Would love to. He's been an amazing addition to this team. Obviously his play on the field has been outstanding. But his leadership, I feel like, has kind of got the whole group together, got everybody on the same page. And I don't think you can put a number on what that's meant to us as a unit. So I would love to get it for him and the other guys. It's good to know that your center has had that experience and he was in these shoes last year going into this game.

Q. Coach, how important is it for you to stay in front of the chains in this matchup?

MIKE SHANAHAN: It is huge. And I feel like that's the one thing these last two games we've been able to do. For instance, against Oregon we had 10 third-and-medium plays. When we get in those third down situations, we want to be, ideally, six or less. So that way the run threat is still there.

And we were trying to kind of eliminate the D-linemen in those exotic packages that Coach Hetherman has on defense there to just make it a little bit easier for us to identify the pressures, identify the alignments up front.

But efficiency is the number one thing that we need to do, like you had said. So we gotta be balanced. We gotta be able to establish the run. And then whenever we do drop back and throw the ball, we gotta have great protection, and guys gotta get open on the perimeter.

Q. Can you elaborate a little bit about Fernando Mendoza, and have you spoken to him about coming back to Miami and playing at his hometown?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I have not spoken with him about that. It's just been so great to see how this whole thing developed. I remember around this time last year he was just getting on campus. We went out to dinner. We talked about being in a position like this.

So credit to him for all the work that he's put in; his ability to get to know everybody on the team, his work ethic, just the human that he is. I feel like everybody now sees it across

the country. So it's been really fun to watch that and have this all come to fruition for him. And I know he's going to be excited to play here, but also at the same time, we're trying not to make it bigger than what it is.

Q. We talked a little bit in LA about getting ready for the portal and now it's through the portal and you have like a whole group of a dozen or so guys on offense and defense back at Indiana. What's it like to have like the next team starting while this team is finishing?

MIKE SHANAHAN: It's been a little bit unique. It's good to hear what you said about them, those guys getting after it. I know they're getting in the weight room now.

We've tried to just focus on this team for right now. But it is exciting, some of the additions we've been able to bring in, guys that have a lot of experience, a lot of talent. So whenever we get back next week, we'll be able to get started with those guys and really get them going with the offense and get them accustomed to what we would like to do.

Q. I'm sure you've been asked about this. Corey said you were best man in his wedding, if I have that right.

MIKE SHANAHAN: I was not. I was at his wedding.

Q. Oh, maybe it was you were at his wedding.

MIKE SHANAHAN: Maybe it was Coach Haines.

Q. What do you remember about the wedding? Anything in particular?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I saw Corey smile, maybe for one of the first times ever. (Laughs). No. It was a lot of fun. I mean, it was a great venue up in Maine. And yeah, just beautiful event.

Q. One of your successes or secrets seems to be the high turnover margin of your team, which also means that you don't turn the ball over that often. Can you talk a little bit how you teach discipline or how you adapt your game plan to have low-risk situations?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. Ball security is the number one thing we talk about every year. Going into spring ball and fall camp we do a little meeting on how to hold the football, the expectations when guys are running with the football. And then we also talk about finishing plays and running to the ball and creating good luck that way.

And I think you saw that last week with Pat Coogan falling on that fumble there. It was a big play in the game, led to a

touchdown later that drive.

So it is a huge point of emphasis. So all the ball carriers know what we expect out of them. And then it comes down to Fernando making good decisions in the pass game. I know he's thrown a couple of picks throughout the year, which is going to happen at times, but that means we gotta have good protection. We gotta make sure that he can hit his back foot and deliver a good accurate ball, and he's obviously gotta throw it to the right guy and also cut his losses. He's done a good job tucking the ball and running whenever he needs to or also just throwing the ball away and getting us to the next play.

So all those things, situational football, ball security is stuff that we coach and talk about every single day.

Q. A little bit of a followup. You guys have been blowing out teams recently. But people tend to forget that you had some close games, Penn State, Oregon earlier. Blowouts tend to make people slack. How do you try to avoid that going into this game?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I'm not too worried about it just because of all the older guys, the experience we have in our group. They're going to be ready to play a full four-quarter game or more if we need it.

We've been fortunate to maybe play some other guys in these last couple games, but we're expecting a full quarter 15-round fight against a great Miami defense, and I know our guys will be prepared and go in with that mindset.

Q. With the secondary from Miami banged up a little bit, they lose Lucas for the first half of that game. Knowing they're going to be down a man in the first half coming back in the second half will be a little different?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. We're going to throw the ball every single play early on. (Laughs).

No. I mean, they're very capable. They play a lot of guys back there. Throughout the whole year you've seen different lineups and different starters. The safeties have been consistent, the nickel Scott, great player. But they do enough to keep you guessing, whether it's going to be press, off, cover two, cover three, that it is hard to dial it all up.

But we also know that -- I mean, just in general going in, we got a lot of confidence in our guys. But we're going to have to have great protection, give Fernando the time to throw the ball early.

But, no, we'll keep a close eye on who they're playing -- where each guy is playing on the back end, especially at the corner spot. Just seems like that's where they've had some guys in and out these last few weeks.

Q. There's been a lot of stories written about how Curt and his eye for talent development and evaluating talent. Is there an instance where you've seen him do that like in live action where you even were like taken aback by it?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I'm trying to think of a good story. But, no, there's not one that jumps out of my mind right now.

The one thing I will mention, though, is like watching a recruit for him is like getting ready to play a game. You're not just going to watch the red zone one time. You're going to go back, you're going to watch it again and again, see if there's anything you can pick up on, and that's how I feel like his approach to recruiting as well, whether it's high school or portal. He likes to go back and really evaluate two, three, sometimes five or six times. And that leads to an educated decision.

I feel like that may be an instance. But there's not one particular thing that sticks out to me right now. Sorry about that.

Q. I gotta ask you a question. You're playing against a good defensive front. I know SEC ball is a lot better than ACC ball. Would it be any difference or any game plan difference placing this front that you're facing with Miami?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I just think it's going to be really critical that we establish the run game, have success on first, second down running the football, staying out of second-and-long and then obviously third-and-long situations where those guys up front are at their very best getting after the quarterback.

So we gotta be judicious, I feel like, and timely whenever we take some shots down the field and really -- I feel like that's been what we've been able to do all year long, though. But whenever you can establish the run it's going to relieve some of the pressure off the O-line.

We know that they got a big challenge ahead of them. Miami's D-line, it all starts with them. They got a lot of really talented guys, guys also play really hard, and they can be very disruptive as we all know. So keeping them off balance with the run pass, but also the scheme, what they're seeing play in and play out. It all goes into it. And then moving the pocket, changing loss points, quick game, RPOs, just trying to keep them off balance, keep them

guessing throughout the game.

Q. Coach, you and Coach Haines have been with Cignetti for a long time, I think dating back to IUP for you. Is that correct?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yep.

Q. What is it about Coach Cignetti that you want to stay with him? Players are rotating quite a bit on all these rosters, but your staff has had a tremendous amount of retention. What's up with that?

MIKE SHANAHAN: For me personally, it's been, number one, the way he treats us. He kind of gives us ownership of our position rooms, and I appreciate that. Our schedules plays a little bit into that as well. He allows us to get our work done and get out of there if we need to.

But I feel like, even though we've been together for so long, the changes that we've had from school to school, even at JMU, starting at the FCS going to the Sunbelt, I felt like we were always just being able to level up.

What I really appreciate, though, and I feel like for me what it comes down to is every day you want to be better because of the work that he puts in. It's just kind of that constant challenge of having that growth mindset, if you want to call it that, never satisfied, always trying to find ways to gain an edge. And I feel like just he kind of embodies that and makes you want to do that, and I feel like for me that's made me be better.

Q. Coach, everybody is getting a lot of, I would say, respect, running back. What about this offensive line that you have? They're pretty damn good, I will say.

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. Yeah. It all starts with them up front. They've done a great job for us all year long. They've got really good camaraderie. They're always on the same page. It starts with Pat Coogan making all the right calls, getting everybody ID'd to the right people. They just play with a physical, kind of maybe blue collar, lunch pail kind of unit, guys that have a little bit of a chip on their shoulder.

They're going to give it their all, and it may not always be pretty, but we know that they're going to play their butts off every single play for the rest of the offense.

And they're always on the same page. I've been so impressed with them whenever they can come off the ball, roll people, get knocked back, but also whenever they need to pass off, twist, pick up blitzes in the run game. They're always super prepared, and I gotta give a lot of

credit to Coach Bostad our O-line coach, been doing it a long time, does a great job getting those guys ready to go on game day.

Q. A year ago, right, Fernando commits. Miami makes a late push for him. What do you remember from that?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I don't remember a ton. No. We knew there was a lot of suiters out there for him. We were very fortunate that he ended up with us.

But recruiting is always never over until they sign on the dotted line. So we were just fortunate that he chose Indiana and wanted to come be a part of what we were building.

Q. What's impressed you the most about him that you didn't know beforehand?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Probably just his work ethic, his love for football, his competitiveness. And then, lastly, whenever he got kind of the crap knocked out of him a few times this year, his ability to bounce back and not let that affect him. There was a couple plays, Iowa stands out to me, Penn State he got hit a little bit and then that first play against Ohio State, obviously everybody was holding their breath a little bit on that one. But just his willingness to lay it on the line every single week for his teammates, I've been very impressed with.

Q. When you're building player-coach relationships, what is the dynamic that Coach Cignetti expects of you and kind of puts onto you and the other coaches to make with those players?

MIKE SHANAHAN: It always starts with just getting to know who that person is outside of football, just knowing the background, knowing the family. Just trying to know them on a personal level. That way whenever you're coaching them hard on the practice field, they know that it's their best interest as a player and it's never personal.

But I just feel like keeping the main thing the main thing, always respecting their time. Knowing you have their best interest at their heart, always being honest with them, I feel like, is something that he's always taught me, and I feel like that's what players want. They want honest feedback and things to get better at, things they're doing well. At the end of the day, they know exactly what it is. It's very black and white and they can go out there and make those proper adjustments.

Q. What about the tone that he sets for the rest of the team and the coaches?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I mean, he sets a tone every single day, just his -- and for us it's been a lot of like eliminating distractions, understanding that what we've done up to this point is not going to earn us anything moving forward, whether that's after the third game of the year or right now.

Just day to day, keeping the blinders on, just focusing on practice or meetings and stacking those throughout the week as it leads into game day.

Q. How happy are you that you don't have to throw the ball towards D'Angelo Ponds on Monday?

MIKE SHANAHAN: (Laughs). Yeah, I've seen enough of that during practice. I'm tired of watching him get PBUs and wearing us out a little bit on the perimeter. But, no, he's a great player, super competitive guy, and it's been fun -- he's made every single receiver in our room a lot better going against him every single day.

Q. Mike, I think people look at your path to get here, obviously Coach Cignetti's path to get here, the fact you don't have a ton of four and five stars, Indiana's history. They think this is some great magic trick you guys have done in order to have this level of success. Does it feel this way to you or is it just like showing up to work and doing it the right way?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I would say for the most part, it's showing up to work, being consistent, putting the time in, and making those sacrifices, just like we ask the players to do, to be the best that they can be. There's a little bit of that.

I do feel like the guys that we've been able to bring in specifically here to IU, it definitely helped the transition when we brought the guys from JMU with us whenever they were in the portal. That definitely helped bridge the gap a little bit faster.

But then from there, it's all about bringing the right people, because there's a lot of really good players out there. But having guys that have a team-first mindset, guys that are willing to commit, guys that really love football. I feel like we have a group of guys that kind of check all those boxes, and I feel like you combine that with the talent that they do have, maybe they were just underrated as recruits, mentioning the four or five star thing. Maybe they just flew under the radar, which happens quite a bit, and everybody is just kind of seeing their growth and development throughout the year. So that's brought this whole team together.

Q. You guys have so many players on your roster with incredible stories, pathways to get here. To me, in a

lot of ways, Elijah epitomizes, he goes to St. Francis, he changes high schools, comes to JMU. He said he was like emailing coaches, trying to get any kind of hit, and now here he is one of the best receivers in college football.

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. I'm so happy for him. I remember recruiting him when he was in high school. It was, I think, during the COVID year, and we were FCS at the time. We didn't have quite as many scholarships. He made a good move to go to St. Francis, which got him the scholarship to St. Francis university in PA. And actually from there he worked with one of my former college teammates and roommates, Marco Pecora, who was offensive coordinator there.

So when Sarratt went into the portal, I called him and he gave us a glowing recommendation, and everything that he told us was spot on and became true.

But, yeah, I feel like we do have quite a few of those guys that were under-recruited, had to take the path less traveled to get to this point. And it's definitely a little bit of a chip on their shoulder mindset, but now they also have the confidence that they belong and that not only that do they belong, but they are some of the best at what they do across the country.

Q. Maybe to follow up on that and my previous question, the ability and maybe of some guys that get overlooked from some other folks?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I think there's a little bit of that. We don't get too enthralled with -- obviously it's important. But we know that being a football player is different than running a 40 time or jumping 40 inches on your vertical or being able to squat 550 pounds. You gotta have functional strength. You gotta have kind of a knack. You gotta be smart. You gotta have a good IQ, the work ethic, all these other little things that go into being a good football player. Obviously we've been able to hit on some of those with guys like Elijah and maybe Aiden Fisher, D'Angelo Ponds, but then we also have highly recruited guys like Omar Cooper, who was a four star. And he has done a good job of developing in the weight room and putting the work in outside the building, things that maybe these other guys have rubbed off on him, too. So it's a little bit of both.

But, yeah, I feel like there is a little bit of a special thing that this team has that is harder to put your thumb on exactly how it got to this point other than that they love playing ball. They care about one another, and the focus in the week-to-week mental intensity that it's taken to get to this point, they've been able to live up to that and meet every challenge.

Q. Cig said that you have a play called wizard that was installed for this week. Is that like an inside joke or was that just the name of the play?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I guess if he mentioned it, I guess I can talk about it. No. It's really just kind of a word association with another play that we have.

Q. Got ya. Okay.

MIKE SHANAHAN: Just so these guys can remember it a little bit easier. But it is funny that you mention that with some of the things that I've seen on social media over these last couple days.

Q. Coach, I'm sure you've been asked things like this all week, but with guys like Bain and Mesidor pass rushing, how are you hoping to kind of take them out of the game early?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Well, you gotta run the football. You gotta be able to kind of wear them down in that area of the game. They don't come off the field too much, but there are times where maybe some of their backups will get in there, and that could be an opportunity.

But, shoot, whenever we do throw the ball, it's going to be a huge challenge for us. They've made a living off of sacks. I know Coach Hetherman's philosophy on defense is to get after the quarterback, affect the quarterback, and they've done a great job week in and week out.

Changing up the launch points, changing up the timing of when the ball is getting out the quarterback's hand, obviously Fernando -- and the receivers are going to have to have that clock in their head, too. We know we're not going to have all day back there. We gotta have a sense of urgency to separate on the outside, and then we gotta be accurate with the ball and a lot of those guys to make plays.

Q. There have been stories about from the spring and even early fall that the Fernando Mendoza we see now is very different from the Fernando Mendoza back then. What's the biggest difference you've seen in him the last six months or so?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I feel like I've really seen his personality come to light. I feel like he took the right approach when he got here. Even though he was an established quarterback, he came in with his head down. He worked. He just got to know everybody, wasn't trying to be a rah-rah kind of guy. He understood that we had some really good leaders on the team prior to him getting here,

and I feel like he let everything kind of just happen naturally.

But the one thing that I've been very impressed with and I feel like his teammates really learned about him was just his competitiveness, his toughness, his ability to shake off a bad play, come right back, shake off a good play, still be the same guy the very next series, his ability to kind of get the whole group together, too. And his work ethic is off the charts. Those are things that you didn't really know until you got to the season.

Q. What about any like in-game stuff that you think he's taken big leaps in?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Definitely his footwork, his timing in the pass game, his willingness to keep the football in the run game whenever those opportunities present themselves. Coach Whitmer, gotta give a lot of credit to him getting him ready and prepared every single day.

But you can definitely see his comfortability in the pocket. Whenever you're 3rd and 8, you gotta have a 15-yard throw, he'll stand in there. He's got good feel, and he'll deliver a great accurate ball down the field also, trust the protection around him and stay in the pocket.

That was one of the point of emphasis that we had for him coming out of previous years with him, and he's really took that to heart. I would say he's really good at it now compared to where he was in the spring.

Q. In terms of like he would take off and run too much?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah, just get a little panicked, maybe rush through his reads, not do his footwork. Those were things that were happening in spring ball going against Coach Haines's defense. But it took maybe two or three games early on in the year, but then once he got that rhythm going, I feel like he's been spot on. And he saw the benefits of it on the game film after those first couple games early in the season.

Q. When you saw him in the portal, are you thinking -- I mean you couldn't have envisioned this, right?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Well, I don't know if anybody could have envisioned where we're at now. We knew we had a good team. We knew that if we stayed healthy, which we've been able to do for the most part, that we were going to have a chance to be a really good team. But we also knew that throughout the year there were some ebbs and flows; keeping guys off social media, keeping them focused on what they need to do week in week out is just

as important as the Xs and Os throughout the year, just going in with the right mindset. And I feel like that's the one thing that separated this team, the majority of them, their ability to take every week as a new challenge has got us up to this point, and it's kind of been a 1 and 0 mentality.

Q. I want to ask about Fernando. We've asked you this in different ways, but like do you remember specific moments like in kind of your early impressions working with him in particular when you sort of thought, I knew he was good, I saw him on the film but maybe I didn't know the tools were this advanced or I didn't know he could do that? Were there things early in spring practice or the winter that you sort of maybe discovered about him that maybe changed him in your perception of what he could do in your offense?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. I would say there's two things there. Number one, what really stood out was just his arm strength, his ability to throw the ball 35 yards on a rope from one hash to the other sideline like you saw last week against Oregon a couple of times. That really jumped out. Obviously you see his arm strength on film, but whenever you see it firsthand and that ball pop off his hand, it's kind of like, wow!

But then, secondly, this is a little bit more intangible things, like just how committed he was to being the best that he can be, his work ethic, his study habits.

He's a guy that really loves football. All this stuff that he's been able to accomplish throughout this year, I feel like he would do it all over again just because like he loves football that much.

So those were the two things that really stuck out early on in the process. And it was just no secret, those two things combined, his talent and his work ethic led him to where he's at today.

Q. It seems like everyone has a story about finding him in the facility, like long after dark. Have you ever, like you're kind of walking through and like there's one light left on?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. Usually he's there as late, or sometimes even later than I am throughout the week. I'll walk out of my office and he'll be in kind of the quality control room, staff room there watching film, watching practice, going through the scripts. He'll be out there on the practice field on Thursdays. When everybody is showering and getting out of there, he'll be out there running through the plays again, mentally on air, just him or his brother, some of our managers out there working with

him. Those are the two things that really stuck out to me, just because, again, I've just never been around a guy who was willing to do those things. And it's pretty special to see.

Q. How do you balance, I guess, with a player like that the moments when you sort of tell him, hey, you know, give yourself a break, don't go too hard, don't maybe fill your head too much, but also maybe recognizing that's a player that you can hand a little bit more, you can give him more to study, you can give him more responsibility. What's that balance?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah, there's definitely a balance there, and that's where I feel like Coach Whitmer is very detailed and very organized throughout the week. So anything on top of what we're doing with them from a schedule standpoint, I feel like Fernando is a guy who, number one, can handle all that; number two, he kind of likes it black and white to a degree. He's going to be able to study it; he's going to be able to see it. That way on game day he's going to be able to diagnose things really quick.

But I feel like he's a guy who can never really get enough, and you never want to kind of pull the reins back too, too much on that.

Q. If you guys pull it off on Monday, Curt would be the oldest coach to win his first title in quite a while. He was getting his first power conference 20, 30 years after some other guys. What do you think that experience has brought him and how do you think he might see the game differently given be all the levels of football and all the years of football he's spent before now?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. I don't think it's really changed him at all, to be honest with you. I feel like he's really approaching this thing just like the next game that we have to go attack. And I feel like his experience -- we were able to play the National Championship game in 2019 at JMU. So he's already sort of been here. He's won one at Alabama.

So I feel like at this point he has kind of already had those reps and put himself in position to treat it like that, which is just another game for us on the schedule.

Obviously it's going to be a huge challenge. We know sort of the implications of it. But I feel like he's done a good job just keeping it like a normal week for us.

Q. What do you think are the attributes that let him stay so cutting edge, so current with the game this

long in his career?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Definitely his experience, just his years coaching, whether it's at the FPS level, DII, FCS, he's been able to just kind of keep everything compartmentalized for himself and us as a staff and players.

But other than that, I mean, I feel like he's just trusting his daily process, the things that got us here to this point, just falling back on those things and just taking it one day at a time.

Q. And just kind of a fun one for you and I'll let you go. Aside from the football side, is there any generation gap in how you all like to spend your down time? Is there anything that he does that younger members of his staff aren't into when it's not football time?

MIKE SHANAHAN: No. Occasionally we'll go out to eat together. Occasionally he'll have us over to his house and maybe have some pizza and a couple drinks or something. But, no, I feel like as you guys know, we're together a lot, all day long, pretty much all year. So whenever we have some down time, I feel like he likes to get away and he allows us to get away, too, which it's all good. It's worked for us.

Q. When you take a look at the University of Miami's defense, other than Mesidor, when you put in the film tell me something that stuck out to you?

MIKE SHANAHAN: The thing that sticks out to me is not only do they have all the physical attributes, the talent, things you can kind of see I'm sure whenever they walk in the room, but these guys play super hard. They play with great technique. They're physical. Run game, pass game, they're going to be able to get the job done. I feel like they just play with super high motors, which sometimes you see out of guys, but I feel like this really sticks out with those two. They have all the right stuff to really be great players at this level and obviously at the next level, I would imagine. So it's been impressive just to watch how hard they play more so than anything.

Q. When you guys went after Mendoza in the portal, I'm sure you looked at other quarterbacks and then you decided to get Mendoza to bring him in. When you decided to bring Mendoza in, were you thinking Heisman? Did you think it would go this well?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Well, Coach Cignetti, one of the things he always says is there's never any self-imposed limitations. So I'm not going to say I could never imagine this happening. We knew that there was going to be a lot

of steps to take for him to get to this point. And credit to him, Coach Whitmer, just kind of everybody in the building that has helped him get better with his footwork, going through his reads, being comfortable in the pocket. On 3rd and 8 when we need a first down, he's been able to stay in there, go through his reads, deliver the ball. Those were some areas of improvement that we saw whenever he came to us.

And then you combine those things with just his competitiveness, his ability to kind of get the whole group rallied together. And his play early on in the year really spoke for himself, and I feel like his leadership and his personality started to shine as well with all those talented things that you see on the field.

Q. If you were to describe Fernando Mendoza in one word, what would be the word?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Tough. Tough. I mean, I don't know if you heard some of that right there, but just his ability to be mentally tough, put good plays behind him, bad plays behind him, move on to the next one, physically tough, take hits. He'll stand in there and kind of stare down the gun barrel a little bit, deliver the ball, knowing he's going to take a hit. None of those things fazed him, and that's the one thing I've been super impressed with him throughout the year.

Q. With Coach Cig, do you know like what kind of music he listens to or what movies he watches, TV shows, anything like that?

MIKE SHANAHAN: No, I don't. I'll give you an example. He said it a couple of times throughout this week that whenever he went home at whatever time, 8, 9, 10:00 at night he was watching TV copies of Miami's games as of late. So I think that's just who he is. He eats, sleeps and breathes football.

I know there was one time he was watching Game of Thrones. That may have been when we were at Elon. Other than that, I can't help you out.

Q. No music or anything? Like favorite?

MIKE SHANAHAN: No. He's all ball.

Q. Have these memes come across your desk, the Cignetti memes?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I've seen a few, yeah.

Q. Is there one that you like or one that's circulated more than others?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Maybe my favorite one, it wasn't from the game. I think it was the two characters from up.

Q. With Fernando?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Fernando and him. I think that sums that up pretty good. But, no, I mean, I know Coach, all those other ones I've been seeing those for years now. So none of them surprise me.

Q. Is he like that during practice, too, same expression?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Pretty much. We'll look over there, whether it's during a walk-through or red zone period or third down, blitz pickup, he's kind of always got that look on his face, just taking it all in, evaluating the good, the bad and always kind of keeping that face on, yeah.

Q. I know you've had a lot of veteran offensive linemen come in, but one in particular I'm curious about, Kahlil Benson and kind of what he's added to that group?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah, Kahlil is a very talented guy, very strong, physical. He's done a really good job just kind of relearning the offense, because a lot of things that Coach Bostad taught him two years prior have stayed the same. Our scheme has changed a little bit. But has soaked all that in.

One thing you really love about Kahlil is the way he can come off the ball, move defensive linemen in the run game. He's been solid in protection. He's been a good teammate. There's been a shuffle there. He played hurt for a couple weeks and gave some other guys some opportunity. But he's a guy that's always been ready to go and a guy who we're going to need to have a big game from on Monday night.

Q. I'm curious as well, with Elijah at wide receiver, it's hard to imagine being here without him. In terms of just his overall impact over the last few years, can you talk about what he's kind of meant to you as a player to coach?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. I love Elijah because of, first of all, he's a great person. He works his butt off. He's earned everything he's gotten. He's worked for it. He went the road less traveled. So you're always kind of pulling for a guy like that.

But his impact on the field is really why he's in the position where he is. He's super smart. He knows what coverages

he's getting. He knows how to attack and win his one-on-ones, and he's been probably over the years the guy with the most consistent hands. You throw it in his vicinity, I feel like us as coaches, the quarterback, Fernando has got a lot of confidence that he's going to make a play, and he's proven that time and time again.

So super happy for him, and he knows more than anybody that we're going to have a huge challenge for us on Monday night. But I feel like the one thing that's really switched with his mindset this year compared to last year is that he belongs, he's super confident and that he knows he has the ability to make plays against anybody in the country.

Q. Cig would be one of the oldest coaches, really the oldest coach in recent memory, to win a title for the first time. Why do you think it took so long for him to be hired at a major conference?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah. That's a good question. He's always been very successful. He's been around a lot of great coaches, as we know. I feel like maybe some of that was him being selective in what schools he went to. I'm sure he had some other opportunities he declined throughout the years that ultimately allowed him to be where we are today. And I feel like he's always been very smart and strategic and no different than whenever we go to game plan.

But, yeah, I can't say why. I mean, sounds like maybe a lot of people missed out on hiring a great coach, a great leader, a great person. And I'm glad Scott Dolson and President Whitten took a chance on him. I'm sure they're pretty happy right now.

Q. Is Coach Cignetti a coaching lifer? Could you see him doing this for another 20 years?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I don't see how he could give it up. I know he loves football too much. He's such a competitor. So I wouldn't be shocked at all if this thing went well beyond another 8, 9, 10, 15 years, like you said.

Q. Wow. Another thing, what do you think the biggest reason maybe besides Curt that Indiana can sustain this for the future?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Well, I just feel like probably from what I read and see and hear on campus more than anything, just the commitment from the top down. Scott Dolson and President Whitten, it seems like they're all in on football and giving Coach the resources and the athletic department and just giving everything that we need.

From my perspective that's at least what I read and see and what I know. But I feel like that's the number one thing. Everybody's in really good alignment here.

And obviously our success on the field has allowed us to continue to recruit at a high level. I feel like there's a lot of good players that want to play, whether it's offense, defense, be a part of our special teams as well. So hopefully it just continues to build off of each and every year like it's done up to this point.

Q. When did you know exactly what you had with Fernando? Like how long did it take? Was it in camp? Was it before then?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Well, obviously seeing what he did at Cal. Just his raw talent, his ability to make plays, his ability to win some game-winning drives, some of those intangible things that you love in a quarterback.

In spring ball whenever you saw it in person in front of you, his ability to throw the football was very special. His athleticism got better, even the short amount of time that he's been here at IU with Coach Owings and his staff.

And then I felt like after the very first game against ODU, there were some things that he reverted back to, kind of old habits I guess you would call it. Once he made those adjustments, saw it on tape and we came back, we played Kennesaw, who ended up being a really good team, having a really good year for themselves, he was on point. And I feel like from there, his confidence in the coaching, his confidence in the personnel, his teammates around him really increased. And that allowed him just to take off and build every single week after that.

Q. In terms of personality, obviously a lot being made, I think, of both the personality of your quarterback and your head coach. In the end it all comes together beautifully. How does it all work behind the scenes to have the kind of season you guys have had?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Everybody has the ability to be themselves. I feel like Coach never made it a point to make Fernando the only leader of the team, knowing that we had a lot of good guys. I felt like maybe that took a little pressure off of him, just allowed his focus to be on his play and getting to know his teammates and getting to know the offense and that whole deal, just the way we do things.

But other than that, I mean, Coach Cig, he's a little bit more -- there's a little bit more to him than maybe what you see on TV at times.

And then Fernando, I feel like that's been what's really cool

about his year is you really saw him kind of come out of his shell, once he got that respect of his teammates, on the field, in the season. I'm just saying he didn't have it in the offseason when he got there. But whenever he started having success, you saw his personality really start to shine, and it's been pretty cool to see definitely kind of the differences, but how it all has come together.

Q. Do you think there's anything in the Indiana blueprint that we're going to see other programs try to copy?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Potentially, yeah. I mean, I feel like maybe -- well, actually, I don't know. I can't speak on that, just because every school has their own unique challenges, differences.

I feel like Coach Cig, his ability just to identify things and have a feel for things that you can't really quantify or put a number on. I feel like just his experience over the years doing it has allowed him to maybe make some decisions that other people wouldn't. But I'm sure there are some schools that want to try to replicate it.

Q. Are there about 50 schools that want to come to spring practice to see you all this year?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Man, I guess that's not too far away at this point now. Yeah, I'm sure there will be a few that want to come by.

But, no, we always welcome that. At the end of the day, we're all trying to get better, and I'm still learning from a lot of people across the country. So I always welcome it. It's hard to believe that spring ball is only about a month and a half away.

Q. When you guys were at JMU with Corey, did you guys play like staff games or hoops or anything together?

MIKE SHANAHAN: I played basketball a couple times, but we would maybe do a golf day every once in a while. But, no, nothing other than that. I guess maybe have some cookouts, low-key stuff, yeah.

Q. Any misperceptions about Coach Cignetti that the world doesn't see?

MIKE SHANAHAN: It's no secret now, I saw in one of his interviews after the game in the Peach Bowl. But he does smile. He does joke. He'll laugh every once in a while, probably more than people would think.

But, no, other than that, I feel like he is a guy who is very



routine driven, and I'm sure you guys can see that from the outside perspective.

But he likes to have a good time in the office and kind of keep people on their feet, or on their toes, I should say. Yeah, just keeps it interesting, just enough to be like, hmm, where did that come from kind of thing.

Q. Crack a beer once in a while?

MIKE SHANAHAN: Yeah.

Q. Has he mellowed at all these last couple years?

MIKE SHANAHAN: No, not really. He's always been like this, and that's the one thing I obviously admire about him.

Every step of the way he's always been the same person, always kept it pretty consistent, and obviously we've made slight tweaks maybe to our practice schedule or routine throughout the week on how we study film, but for the most part, him himself he's always been all about football, all about what's important, and he's kept it pretty consistent.

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