

CFP National Championship:

Miami vs Indiana

Monday, January 19, 2026

Miami, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Indiana Hoosiers

Coach Curt Cignetti

Fernando Mendoza

Mikail Kamara

Aiden Fisher

Postgame Press Conference

Indiana 27, Miami 21

THE MODERATOR: It's a pleasure to be joined by Indiana head coach Curt Cignetti, Aiden Fisher, Defensive Player of the Game Mikail Kamara and Offensive Player of the Game Fernando Mendoza. Coach, when you have a minute, please give an opening statement.

CURT CIGNETTI: Okay, hard-fought game. Give a lot of credit to Miami. It was a real gut check. We found a way. It's a credit to our guys' resiliency to find a way to get that done.

It's a great thing, Indiana winning the National Championship two years into our tenure. You do it with people and a plan. Can't say enough about our senior leadership and the people we have in the locker room and the people we have on our staff and our strength and conditioning staff, support staff and the commitment we receive from President Whitten and Scott Dolson.

I would like to say our NIL is nowhere near what people think it is, so you can throw that out (laughter), and this team really overcame a lot on the road in a lot of tight games and found a way to get it done, and we're 16-0, and I guess we're 27-2 since Indiana. But we're 16-0, national champions at Indiana University, which I know a lot of people thought was never possible. It probably is one of the greatest sports stories of all time. But it's all because of these guys and the staff.

Proud of them, and it's a great night.

Q. With that nine-minute-to-go-decision field goal, the



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field goal team went out, you brought them back. What was the thought process there in going for it and the play call?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think we had gone for it on 4th down maybe the series before, too, or maybe it was that series. We finally came up with some ways to give the quarterback a chance to get the ball out of his hand because we were having some protection issues.

That particular play didn't feel really good about kicking a field goal there. The play before they were in the coverage for the quarterback draw, which we put in specifically in the medium package in the low red against that look. We had to block a little different than we normally do, and that was about a 45-minute discussion in the staff room how we were going to call it and do it.

Line did a great job executing, so did the back, and Fernando trucked the linebacker, broke a few tackles.

Let me tell you, Fernando, I know he's great in interviews and comes off as the All-American guy, but he has the heart of a lion when it comes to competition. That guy competes like a warrior. He got really smacked a few times in this game. That one drive we kicked a field goal, there should have been two roughing the quarterbacks and one high hit to the head that weren't called. I'm all for letting them play, but when they cross the line you've got to call them.

Can't say enough about his effort on that play and our team finding a way to get it done.

Q. Fernando, if you could go through the quarterback draw as well, first of all, the time-out, and did you know you were going to go for it and that would be the play call and then the actual play itself?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, a big constant that we've really had on ourselves this year is always bet on ourselves, whether it's preseason no one thinks we can make it, whether it's figuring out in situations like Oregon, Penn State, and Iowa, we always figure it out. Whenever Coach Cignetti, Coach Shanahan, they called that play, we



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knew, hey, we're going to better ourselves one more time at the biggest stage of the game.

At that point I took the drop. It wasn't the perfect coverage for it, but I trust my linemen, and everybody in that entire offense, that entire team had a gritty performance today. And we were all putting our bodies on the line, so it was the least I could do for my brothers.

Q. Coach Cignetti, you're obviously going to follow your dad into the Hall of Fame one day, but this championship moment was the one thing that escaped both of you. I wonder how much you thought about him on a night like tonight.

CURT CIGNETTI: I thought about him after the game when I stuck my two fingers in the air and then the Big Ten Network asked me about him and I said, oh, you're wanting me to get all choked up, right.

When we went from FCS to FBS in Sun Belt, our first game he was in a coma, and we beat that FBS team 48-10 in the opener. My family told him in the hospital that we had won 48-10, and they said he smiled. And then we had a great win against Appalachian State the week after he died down there after they beat A&M. We were down 28-3 in the second quarter, and came back and won.

Hopefully he was watching today. He was a great role model. I was very blessed to have a father like that.

Q. For Mikail, you kind of epitomized this whole thing. It's been since 2020 if you could sort of -- what do you think about when you think about that path since then?

MIKAIL KAMARA: I mean, I've played pretty much every single level of football, FCS, G5, now here in the Big Ten. Just to really do this with guys like Fisher and all my other teammates that I've done this journey alongside of, I'm just -- I didn't think it was possible, I can't lie. But to be here today, it's surreal.

Q. For Coach and Mikail, you guys have had your starters, All-Americans make plays on punt block all year with D'Angelo. Take us through that play and how important it is to have those guys make plays on special teams?

CURT CIGNETTI: I'll start with a short answer. Ponds was a punt block and he blocked a punt. This was actually a return, and Mikail blocked the punt. We didn't have a punt block called. Ndukwe has done it a couple times as well.

MIKAIL KAMARA: Pretty much there's a punt before we

were in defensive safe, and I felt like I was kind of close. So the second time I'm just going to shoot my shot. And I just watched the ball, got off the ball as fast as I could and shot my shot, and I heard that double thud.

CURT CIGNETTI: Very fitting that Isaiah Jones would be on the recovery.

Q. Fernando, you dropped a curse word there at the end, something you don't do very often. Where did that come from?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I'd say overall my emotion and it's the pinnacle peak. All season -- sometimes I've had these cookie-cutter responses, media-trained responses, on to the next game, on to the next play, and now we did it. At that point I think it was only fitting to open the floodgates, per se, break my stereotype.

CURT CIGNETTI: He's been around Coach Cig too long. (Laughter.)

Q. In this sport for the past 25 years, it's been done a certain way to get to this point. You recruit top-5 classes, you get a bunch of five stars, you develop them, you win National Championships. What you guys did is something that really has never been done before. You said at the beginning yourself that no one really believed this could happen. What message did you send to the entire sport by doing what you did, and do you think what you guys did changed the way we should analyze this?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think we sent a message, first of all, to society that if you keep your nose to the grindstone and work hard and you've got the right people, anything's possible. In our particular situation in the athletic world, college football has changed quite a bit. The balance of power, also.

But we have the right people on our staff, in the weight room, in the locker room, and we have great senior leadership and togetherness, and we had a really good quarterback that played his best when the chips were down.

If you prepare the right way, which this team did week in, week out, and put it on the field, we met the challenge every single week, and we're 16-0.

Are there eight first-round draft choices on this team? Probably not, no, there aren't. But this team, the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

Q. Question for the defensive players. You mentioned

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statistics, they had 18 yards in the first quarter, I think. That start, what went into that, and what was your vantage point of the game-clinching interception?

AIDEN FISHER: Yeah, it's something we pride ourselves on is stopping the run first. Kind of got away from it in the second half, a couple miscues. Just a resilient group. We came into this game knowing that the more physical team was going to win, and credit to Miami. They're an extremely big and physical O-line with great running backs and a lot of weapons that can hurt you quickly.

Coach Haines is unbelievable at what he does. We have guys that just want to win. They're one-on-ones, and as a whole, we came down to the "bend, don't break" mentality on that last possession. We told ourselves on the sideline we're going to have a chance to go win this thing, and I feel like that was kind of fitting for our team. Put it on us one more time and kind of let the chips fall.

But I'm just so proud of our guys on defense and the staff we have is unbelievable, and you put guys on the field that just want an opportunity to prove themselves, I think they've done that to this point.

MIKAIL KAMARA: Pretty much to piggyback off what he said, we really pride ourselves on stopping the run and pinning our ears back and rushing the passer on 3rd down. Just to have a leader and an All-American linebacker like Fish behind me where he just makes the game so much easier for me, I'm happy to be playing with him and the rest of my group.

Q. Curt, as a follow-up to what you were just asked, how do you think winning a championship will change the way people view and talk about Indiana football?

CURT CIGNETTI: We're national champs. TCU had a great run a few years ago and fell short. I know Indiana's football history has been pretty poor with some good years sprinkled in there. It was because it wasn't an emphasis on football, plain and simple. Basketball school. Coach Knight had great teams.

The emphasis is on football. It's on basketball, too. But you've got to be good in football nowadays. We've got a president that comes from the South that loves football. We've got an AD that is a tremendous fundraiser, people person.

We've got a fan base, the largest alumni base in the country, Indiana University. They're all in. We've got a lot of momentum.

We've just got to keep working at getting better in all

phases that influence the program's success, including the things that happen within the program, stay humble and hungry, and work diligently toward improvement, buy into the process.

What the outside public thinks, we don't control. It's a great story, tremendous story. Most people would tell you that are in the know, it's probably one of the greatest stories of all time in terms of a team that most people -- we got it done.

We're going to enjoy this moment, take a day off tomorrow, get back at it Wednesday. A lot of these guys will be gone. I'll miss them. Hope I can stay connected to them throughout the rest of their lives and put the '26 team together.

Q. For Coach, there are seven players left who came with you from James Madison. I'm curious, what has that group meant, and how did it help set the culture? And for the two defensive players who obviously were both part of that group, what do you think you guys' legacy will be coming from JMU and having such success here?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think the JMU crew which started at 13 in our first season was very instrumental, especially the guys that came in mid-year. I think there were eight or nine of them, I can't remember for sure, maybe 10 or 11, because they understood the program, the culture, and they had that championship attitude. They were able to answer questions for the guys to decide to return and the right guys returned, and the new transfers, too, they could answer their questions and lead, and they were good players.

I think that accelerated our development as a program. There's no question about it. There were seven more left this year, and they all played a very key pivotal role. I'll miss them. Now I'll defer to you.

MIKAIL KAMARA: I first just want to shout out some of those key guys last year like James Carpenter and J. Walk, just some of the guys that really didn't get a lot of media attention, but those guys were dawgs, and they did a lot for this program, and they really set an example for the younger guys that came up behind them.

Like I said earlier, just to be able to do something this crazy, like this is something you write a book about, you write a movie about. To do this in real life and do it with these guys that I love, it's just amazing.

AIDEN FISHER: It's just been an unbelievable journey. You take those 13 guys, I don't think any of them had great

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offers coming out of high school. We had a coach that took a chance on us once, and then the opportunity arose to do it again.

I know for me, it changed my life. I'm here playing at the highest level with some guys that I was playing at a very small level at, and it's just been a crazy journey and one that I'm so glad that we got to do together. Those 13 guys that came in, we owe a big credit to the Indiana guys that took us in really quick. You put a group of guys together that just wanted to win and they were starving for wins at Indiana.

The biggest shout out is to Mike Katic. He brought us in and there was no cliques or anything with the JMU guys. We all were together with the Indiana guys from day one. But just special men that got brought on this journey. Guys just put their head down and worked, and it's just been special.

Q. You just talked about taking a day off and enjoying it that way and then getting back to work. But other than having a Coors Light in that teal chair, you just made history with a 16-0 national champion. How do you let yourself really enjoy this?

CURT CIGNETTI: Good question, because I'll be dealing with underclassmen going to the NFL tomorrow and who knows what else. And if I was smart, I'd probably retire. Then I'd really be a story. But we need the money. (Laughter.) What would I do? What would I do?

I don't know if I'll have a beer in the teal chair. I had one after the game. That's enough for me.

We'll be back at it. I love what I do. I love football. I'm a football guy. I don't have many other things that I do besides family, and in the summer go for a walk with my wife or go away, in February, the old signing date, first day after the old signing date. I'm a film junkie and I like putting a team together and we're going to have a lot of challenges next season.

But I will have a chance to look back at what we got done.

These guys made it happen. Let me tell you, we had some good senior leadership on this team. Nowakowski, Coogan, Fisher, Kamara, Sarratt. We got some underclassmen that are going to be going out, Fernando, could be another one or two.

But the seniors, this team was so close, so close. When you have this much success year in and year out, your teams are always close. But this team was exceptionally close. And I think Fernando had a big part of that, and I

think Coogan and Fisher and going on the road with some of those guys -- the Penn State game, what that did for this team, I can't measure, when we were down and out and all the odds were against us, 2nd and 17, running clock, minute 30, and all of a sudden we recomposed and found a way to get that done. That was incredible.

Q. Coach, this is obviously a little bit of a different blueprint from what we've seen in college football based on both your career arc and how this team was assembled. Do you think this opens the door for a different kind of coach to have an opportunity going forward, or maybe some non-traditional hires that we might see in the sport?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think it already has, and you see that in this year's hiring process, but there's a number of guys out there that kind of started out at D-II and worked their way to this position. My career path was certainly unusual, but I think it prepared me for this particular opportunity, and I guess my answer is yes.

Q. Fernando, tonight you had one of the runs that will probably live on in IU lore. But the other day I was talking to your brother and he was making fun of your running style. Does he do that to you? Does he tease you about that? I see these guys laughing. Does he, and have you had talks about that, and is this an answer to him, too?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I think everybody on the team including Coach makes fun of my running style. But as long as it gets the job done, it's 4th down, so no matter how you run, no matter what it is, you've got to put it all on the line, and that's something I was willing to do.

Any player on our team, if they had that opportunity, they would put their body on the line, too. And I wouldn't want to do it for any -- it's so great because Coach Cig has talked about how close we are, like that's just the epitome of how close we are. I'll have a big run, and Fish will be like, man, you looked so stupid, but you got it done. So you make fun of each other, joke, and in the end, we'll all still be really close.

Q. You said you had a beer after the game. What was the beer, and was it the best beer of your life?

CURT CIGNETTI: Hoosier beer from Upland Brewery, big brewery up in Indiana. Throw a little bouquet to them. Yeah, this was absolutely the best beer I've ever had in my life, and made me want to have another.

Q. For each of the student-athletes, you met Curt Cignetti at a different time in your path, but you all



believed in him, he believed in you. Now that you're sitting here 16-0, first time ever for the College Football Playoff era, for each of the student-athletes, what this moment means to you?

AIDEN FISHER: I've said it once, Coach changed my life. From a kid that felt like I was underrecruited, that I deserved more attention than I got, and I remember when Coach Cig offered me, he's like, Do you want to do anything with it? He was waiting for me to commit on the spot. Shortly after I did, and then he got another opportunity to come to Indiana, and it was a no-brainer for me.

The amount of confidence he built in me, the trust and belief he had in me, why would you leave that when a coach cares that much about you and sees so much for your future. He just talked about development and growth for me all the time. It was a no-brainer.

I owe a lot to him. He's an unbelievable coach, but he's an unbelievable person. Yeah, it's been special. I'm glad I made both decisions the right way.

MIKAIL KAMARA: For me, we started this journey as FCS players. Me and him definitely butted heads a lot when I was younger, and just knowing how much I've grown, how much we've grown, I've just known everything that he did was out of love. Even though in the moment I didn't feel it, but now I just understand as I get older, all the lessons he taught me, to stay humble, to stay poised, to stay ready, it's paying off, and I want to be able to take everything he's taught me into the NFL.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I'd say with myself, it's kind of a testament that everybody has had. Coach Cig betted on himself going from Alabama and going back to D-II and all these other guys really betting on themselves and started believing. It was a very tough decision to transfer myself.

However, when I got here -- or on the visit, he sold me on developing and that I could become the best Fernando Mendoza possible and with a great group of guys, and at that point I knew it was a no-brainer. I can't thank Coach Cig, Coach Shanahan, and Coach Whitmer enough, always sticking through it with me through the thick and thin of the entire season.

Q. 16 years ago I had the pleasure of asking a native son of West Virginia if he ever envisioned as a young boy winning championships. I ask you as a young boy growing up, did you ever envision winning championships at this level of college football?

CURT CIGNETTI: I knew in third grade I wanted to coach.

I've told that story many a time. I wanted to be like a Bear Bryant kind of coach. But when I was waxing staff tables at IUP when school was shut down for the playoffs, I never really thought this was possible. But I just kept working and things happened, and here we are.

Q. You were a successful football coach for 40-plus years before you got your shot at the, quote-unquote, big time. Was it hard not to be bitter about not getting that opportunity, and does it make a moment like this all the more sweeter? Are there lessons people can take away from this?

CURT CIGNETTI: I really wasn't a successful coach for 40-plus years. I got a great break at 23 years old at Rice University, which back then was in the Southwest Conference. We played SMU before they got the death penalty, and I was making good money.

It was one of the top two conferences in the country, but Rice didn't win, and Temple didn't win, and we didn't win at Pitt under Johnny Majors, and people want to hire people from winning programs. We won a little bit under Walt Harris, but we were .500. I learned a lot about quarterback play from him. He was a great quarterback coach. Went to NC State, we won. We had Philip Rivers. And then I spent seven years there.

But when Coach Saban hired me, we were 7-6 our first year at Alabama. We lost to Louisiana Monroe 11th game of the year at home. But the next year we had six first-round draft choices in that recruiting class, and we were 12-0 in the regular season. Lost the SEC game that was one versus two to Tebow and Urban. Next year we played them again, beat them, went 14-0 and won the National Championship.

I really thought after my one year with Nick, I had what I needed to go out -- that tied it together for me because I was a son of a coach who was a Hall-of-Fame head coach.

I was hitting the big 5-0. I didn't want to be a career assistant. I was not a coordinator. I was not on track to get a head coaching job, and I didn't want to be a 60-year-old assistant. I'd seen what those lives look like as a kid.

So I took a chance. Took an unprecedented chance in this business and ended up here. When I took that job, the goal wasn't to end up here, but I did.

The reason I'm sitting here today -- all those things prepared me for this, but the reason I'm sitting here today is because of guys like this, and there's a ton of them in that locker room, and a great coaching staff and a lot of us



have been together a long time, a great strength and conditioning staff, a commitment from the president and AD, and then the changing times of athletics. Some of my previous experiences really helped me be ready to manage NIL and transfer portal and those kind of things.

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