

# CFP National Championship: Miami vs Indiana

Tuesday, January 20, 2026

Miami, Florida, USA

Hard Rock Stadium

Indiana Hoosiers

Coach Curt Cignetti

Fernando Mendoza

Pat Coogan

Aiden Fisher

Mikail Kamara

Champions Press Conference



# NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

MIAMI 2026

come together for a common purpose, and sometimes that belief has to be a little bit irrational, especially at a place that hasn't had the success like Indiana.

I haven't been here for long, but I've seen it, and I've seen the way that this place has been characterized, and when Coach Cig got here, he believed, and he got people to believe.

Sometimes people laughed at him and people thought he was crazy, but that was a little irrational belief. You've got to get people to buy in, and you've got to get people to think alike, and you've got to get people to believe in the mission, believe in what we're trying to do here.

It takes a village, and it takes all of us, and it takes a whole coaching staff, and it takes a whole players, just everybody to buy in and believe in a common goal, in a common purpose.

Like I said, it takes a village, and it really took all of us.

AIDEN FISHER: Just to piggyback off of what he said, from a program that is known for losing and a culture that was in a bad spot when Coach Cig got here, it was all about changing the way people think, and that's internal and external from the building. We described it as a sleeping giant when we got here. Indiana fans and just the culture around Indiana was just hungry for a winner, and they just needed the right coach and the right players to come in and flip this thing around.

It's been a special ride, and I think we had just the right staff, the right staff, the right players, and everybody that was right for the job to make this thing happen, and it's just unbelievable to be a part of, and doing it at Indiana makes it 10 times more special.

MIKAIL KAMARA: Kind of like what he said about the sleeping giant, I just knew last year when we played Maryland, that was kind of the turning point for the program, I think. Once we played them and then we beat Michigan at home, it kind of just started a trend going upward.

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Indiana head coach Curt Cignetti, Pat Coogan, Aiden Fisher, Defensive Player of the Game Mikail Kamara, Offensive Player of the Game Fernando Mendoza will join us in progress, and Coach, when you're ready, we'll take an opening statement and then we'll entertain questions.

CURT CIGNETTI: Okay, obviously a late night, 7:50 kickoff, and I'm sure some of these -- I heard one of them didn't even get to bed yet. Great day yesterday. Good to be here today at the winner's podium. Every day brings new things that need to be done and new challenges.

Proud of these guys. Proud of the leadership. Thankful for the leadership that they provided this year, in their last year, and just the way they conducted themselves throughout their career, and Pat, who was with us one year, who was such a tremendous add and leader for this football team.

**Q. For any of the players, give us a little bit of a sense of player's view of the scope of what you accomplished. You didn't just win a National Championship, you did it at Indiana, which at one point in time had the most losses in the history of the sport. You went from the bottom to the mountaintop. Give us a player's view of what is it like to go on that journey?**

PAT COOGAN: Yeah, well, I think it starts with belief, right? There's got to be a like-minded individuals who



... when all is said, we're done.®

Then just to kind of have the season that we had last year and then have it end the way that it did, it kind of fueled a lot of the guys that were part of that roster to come back and work even harder throughout the summer, work even harder throughout camp. Then really just take it to them throughout the entire season.

I think it brought us a lot of confidence in knowing that we could compete at this level, and we're 16-0, national champions, so there's just nothing else you could have dreamt of.

**Q. I think a lot of people are wondering now why it took so long for a Power Four school to hire you. I wonder, are there other Curt Cignettis out there undiscovered, and if so, where are they?**

CURT CIGNETTI: There have been a number of guys coach at the D-II or III level for that matter, get to P4 and been highly successful, and there's four or five of them still coaching.

It took me longer. I got a great break when I was young, 23, at probably the second-best conference in the country, the old Southwest Conference.

But for the first half of my career I was with teams that did not win. People don't hire assistants from schools that don't win.

When I was retained by Walt Harris, I learned a lot about quarterback play, was there three years, and when I went to NC State we had Philip Rivers and we had a nice ride there, seven years, and the one year with Nick felt like I was ready to rock and roll and took a big chance on myself.

I think my trajectory being with teams that weren't mega successful early on, but my journey led me to here, which is a great thing.

The other thing I'd like to add, I think, to the question the players just answered about Indiana, I think that's called a paradigm shift. It's kind of like people can cling to an old way of thinking, categorizing teams as this or that or conferences as this or that, or they can adjust to the new world, the shift of the power balance in the way college football is today.

I think to look back at what happened to Indiana previous to us coming, 10, 20, 50 years ago, strictly lacked a commitment from the top. That's it, plain and simple. Nothing else. And we have a commitment, okay.

The other thing I'd like to say, also, is this: This team went

all the way. This was chapter 2 in the book. A very close team, special team.

The first team never got the national credit it was due because of the controversy over the playoffs, the way we played the last two and a half quarters against Ohio State and Notre Dame. That team got it all started. Never trailed until the ninth game of the year, and when they did up at Michigan State 10-0 first quarter scored 47 straight. Started out 10-0.

But never really got its due. That was a special team.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about competing in the Big Ten. This is the third straight year a Big Ten team has won a national title. You went on the road, were battle tested at a lot of good teams. What does this say about the Big Ten and the conference you're competing in in the big picture, and where is the conference positioned going forward and how will that help your program continue to build its image on a national platform?**

CURT CIGNETTI: I think in answer to your question, results speak for themselves. Those are facts. No one can predict the future. The future is unpredictable.

I know that we have a huge TV contract and all the institutions make a lot of money, and there will be a lot of good teams next year in the league.

**Q. Coach, is 16-0 and a National Championship, therefore, the new level that Indiana should be looking to season after season?**

CURT CIGNETTI: From a schedule and record standpoint, I guess that would be the absolute definition of perfection, and perfection is impossible to attain on a consistent basis.

We'll continue to take it one day at a time, one meeting at a time, one practice at a time and just keep improving and committing to the process and showing up prepared, trying to put it on the field and see where it takes us.

**Q. Fernando, Coach or whoever wants to take it, what are you anticipating the celebration will be like in Bloomington this week as you return home as national champions in college football?**

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, there was videos after the game of Kirkwood and someone tried to show my teammates and myself, and you couldn't even see the street there was so many people. It was like a flood.

I think that just epitomizes the Hoosier spirit and



foreshadows the many long celebrations that there are going to be in Bloomington. I think like Coach said before, Bloomington has been a predominantly basketball town and basketball city for the longest time, and it's a great honor and privilege to be a part of the team that brings its first National Championship, and I can only imagine what all the Hoosiers are looking forward to celebrating this week.

**Q. For Pat and Coach, the offensive line doesn't get a lot of respect. Typically they only get talked about if they make mistakes. This offensive line doesn't make a lot of them. Pat, what you can say to this team and how it starts in the trenches, and Coach, the entire offensive line, what they meant to this 16-0 perfect season.**

PAT COOGAN: Yeah, well, certainly as an offensive lineman, it's our pride and duty to protect the quarterback and do everything possible to protect the guys behind us, protect the guys beside us.

It wasn't the cleanest day yesterday. I think everybody knows that. We accept that. We take that on. We know that.

We have personal pride in what we put on tape and what we put on the field. We know it wasn't our best.

But at the end of the day, we did just enough. We take great pride in protecting our Heisman quarterback, and I'm really proud of this group. It was a never-ending kind of journey of getting better, and it took all of us. It took the whole room, and it's a credit to Coach Bostad, it's a credit to Coach Leeds and everybody in that room who's just kept getting better, really.

We knew it was going to take all of us. It took everybody in that room. It was never just the five of us. It was a lot of us. It was everybody. It was Coach Bostad. It was Coach Leeds, it was Coach Higgins drawing up run game and everything like that.

I'm really just proud of the group. Last night we went to war. There's no doubt about it. It's a credit to Miami and their defensive line, really the most physical front I've ever played. I'm just really proud of the group and how we battled and continued to fight and solve problems because there was a lot of problems out there. Just continued to fight. Really just proud of the group.

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, we knew going in, we had a tremendous challenge in front of us. It all starts up front on both sides of the ball, offense and defense, with your football team. The strength of Miami's team was their

defensive line. We certainly got the quarterback hit more than we wanted to, there's no question about that.

But I give our line a lot of credit. We scratched out some tough yards in the run game when we needed to, some critical 3rd downs in the first half and some ball control 1st downs aided by some 3rd and 4th down conversions in the second half.

We got some real lunch pail-type guys up there, guys that don't get a lot of publicity, like Drew Evans, who probably doesn't say a word, he's a 4.0 student, and he'll fight you to the death, and Bray Lynch is the same way, the two guards.

Miami, they've got a couple guys there that are going to play a lot of football in their career, and it was a tough match-up. None of us have seen the tape. That's what I would say about that.

**Q. Coach Cignetti, from listening to you speak about your trajectory earlier this morning and now this morning, I was wondering if there had come a point along the way where you figured that Power Five or Power Four head coach probably wasn't going to happen for you and whether you were at peace with that, if you thought it wasn't?**

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, I can't say I woke up every day thinking about it, but even when I made the move I made from Alabama, I didn't make that move with this in mind. It was going to be a different kind of lifestyle, and I was going to get to be the head coach. I was going to take it as it came and make the most of it.

Then as we got more successful and I got more confidence and things just sort of happened.

The one year that I thought really helped me professionally was the first year when I went to Elon. I think their record was about 7-52 when we went in there, and we lost our opening game to Toledo up there who won the MAAC, and then we won eight in a row, and we were beating teams that had beaten them the year before by 50 or 40 points. That was a special team.

Then I felt like, okay, you've got this thing.

**Q. Coach, I know you're a film junkie. You said you haven't watched the film yet; you've been quite busy. When do you plan to watch the film, and is there any film out there you're really itching to see in the next few days?**

CURT CIGNETTI: Staff is off today. I've got to fly to



Houston tomorrow for the Bear Bryant, so I'll be back in the office on Thursday and then see what the checklist looks like then. I'm sure there's going to be more immediate things that need attended to.

Get through the month, take a little vacation in February, go down to some nice hot-weather island about a week, and then when I come back, I'll figure out a few film projects that I think might fit next year's team and help me grow.

**Q. Fernando, you just heard your teammates talk about how much of a battle that was last night. Curious how you're feeling after that. Are the wins that much sweeter when you go through something that tough?**

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I would agree with that statement. I think the wins are sweeter when you have to go through some adversity or some struggle. If it was just handed to you, then there would be no satisfaction at the end of it.

Because we all got some bumps and bruises, especially in such a hard-fought war up front and just all around, I think it makes it that much sweeter and just such a testament to everybody giving it their all. There was a lot of bumps and bruises on a lot of guys; however, it's the last game of the season. So at that point, there's plenty of time to rest. Those are good type of bumps and bruises because they're victorious bumps and bruises.

**Q. Curt, your special teams unit probably doesn't get the notoriety of the offense and defense, but they may have been just as dominant or even more. Grant Cain takes a lot of pride in that, but how important was it having a couple of the starters on stage buy into that on a daily basis and that's kind of defined the success? How important was that for Mikail to have that moment with the blocked punt as the first commitment for Curt's signing class in 2020, what did that full-circle moment mean for you, too?**

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, our special teams have improved every single year. We've been in the top 10 of the country the last, I think, three years composite-wise, very high this year.

Turnover ratio, I think we finished the season plus 21, but you add the blocked punts, which I do, we were plus 25. Mikail's play certainly was a huge play last night where they were punting the ball and we didn't have a block called, we had a return called, but he saw it, felt it and gave it great effort and turned it into a touchdown, a blocked punt touchdown.

We try to put people on those teams, and sometimes it changes week to week depending on what the opponent's strengths are, but we've got starters, backups, and some try-hard, walk-on type guys sometimes on teams.

But everybody has to buy in on teams because a special teams play, a big special teams play can change the momentum of a game more so than offense or defense.

Look, if you don't buy in on teams, then you're not going to be on this team because it's a play for our football team. But you're right, it doesn't quite get the media play that maybe offense or defense does.

MIKAIL KAMARA: Yeah, I pretty much feel like Coach Cain and then obviously coming from Coach Cig, they pretty much made it so you really care about playing special teams. I feel like special teams is all about effort, it's all about grit, and it's just about do you want to get it done or not.

I feel like special teams is a huge, huge, huge, huge backbone in winning football games, and I feel like you can have the best offense and the best defense, but if you have a poor special teams, you're not going to win games.

Coach Cain, I'm in the special teams meeting room every single day just watching Coach Cain's film, watching Daniel Ndukwe's blocks, watching technique, so when I went out there it wasn't something that I've never practiced before. I kind of just went out there and did stuff that I've been taught day in and day out, so it just all came natural.

**Q. For the players, we have heard about buying into Cignetti's program over and over and over again, but what is it about that that really got you to believe in it? What was that buy-in like?**

MIKAIL KAMARA: I think it kind of just starts with effort, starts in the weight room during the winters, the 6:00 a.m. workouts, and then the summer workouts in the hot, grueling sun. I think that's kind of when you start to realize what type of team you have, the guys that push each other to get one more extra rep, the guys who get on each other for missing the line. I think that's kind of when the buy-in starts.

Once camp hits, that's just playing football at that point, so everyone does camp. But it's not just getting through camp, it's about trying to improve throughout camp so you can hit the season running.

Then once you start to win, that momentum just carries and carries and carries. The result just kind of turns out to

what we have now.

AIDEN FISHER: Yeah, I would say as somebody who would kind of look at it as a choice of do you want to buy into something like this or not, it helps to look at the development Coach Cig and his staff have had with different players, the track record, the wins. Obviously it speaks for itself.

Just knowing that there is a plan in place that if you do buy in and kind of put your head down and work, you see the results, and that's resulted in us sitting on this stage right now.

It's not for everybody. I will say that. It's a lot of times where you kind of second-guess that decision when times get tough. But ultimately it's the best for you. I've said it, Coach Cig just finds a way to get the best out of his players. I think it's not only Coach Cig, but Coach Haines, Coach Shanahan, strength staff, anybody that has the attention of our players. They're all like-minded on our staff, and just kind of get the best out of all of us as long as you put your head down and work.

PAT COOGAN: I think it's a credit to Coach Cignetti and recruiting us all here. There's been a lot of talk about transfers and all of our different journeys that have all led us here to Indiana.

But at the same time, we've all been recruited here. Like we've all been recruited here. We're all like-minded individuals that have been recruited here by Coach Cignetti and brought to this place, brought to this place for a common goal and a common purpose.

We're all cut from the same cloth, and I think that showed on the field this year.

Just being in the spring, the summer, the fall with these guys, I think that showed, and I got to learn that firsthand when I got here in January. It was a blessing really. It's a blessing to be here, and it's a blessing to be a part of this group and this journey. I'm really just grateful to be a part of this brotherhood.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I think that belief is crucial, especially when the margins in college football are so small, as we've seen time and time throughout the season. I was blessed enough whenever I stepped into this program, and I think it's really a testament of the trickle-down effect.

And a lot of the senior leaders when I got to this program, leaders like Fisher, Kamara, Sarratt, Carter Smith, all those guys when I first stepped in the locker room, you could tell

that they believed, and if you didn't believe, you're kind of like outcasted. So in a way it was either our way or the highway.

At that point once you know and you see everybody truly believe, not just believe because they want more catches or more stats but because they truly believe in the goal, I think it's infectious, and it's infectious throughout the locker room, and I'm so blessed to be a part of it, like Pat said.

**Q. Aiden, when you look back at this, is there anything in particular that really stands out that you're going to remember in terms of maybe what's the most memorable part of this?**

AIDEN FISHER: I think last night will probably be number one. It's just been such a special journey for me, starting at James Madison and coming here, really betting on myself to be able to transform my game from the Group of Five level to here.

I feel like every game has a special little moment for me, but I think last night, just finally doing it with all the guys, the seven JMU guys left, the Indiana guys that we kind of had some hard times last year with the Ohio State, Notre Dame game, and finally kind of breaking down the wall, and every big game we had, just kind of kicking the door in to all of them.

It's a resilient group. It's the closest team I've ever been on in my life. Everybody cares about each other. Everybody loves each other.

I think last night when the confetti fell, it's something that I'll carry with me for the rest of my life. Just doing it with my guys, I'll carry that with me forever.

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