

# Indiana University Football Media Conference

Friday, December 1, 2023

Bloomington, Indiana, USA

**Curt Cignetti**

**Pamela Whitten**

**Scott Dolson**

Press Conference



PAMELA WHITTEN: Good afternoon, everyone. This is a good day in Bloomington, Indiana. I am Pamela Whitten, the president of Indiana University, and I want to thank you all for joining us today as we embark on a new era of Indiana football.

It's with great enthusiasm and great optimism that we welcome to the IU family an individual whose passion for the game, commitment to excellent, and proven leadership have truly set him apart as the ideal candidate to join our Hoosier family as our football's 30th coach at Indiana University.

Now, I had the opportunity to spend a couple of hours with Coach Cignetti just this week, the other day, and learned a great deal about him and who he is and what he can bring to Indiana. Let me express it to you this way.

Everyone knows the game of Jeopardy, you know where I tell you the answer, and then you tell me the question. So let me tell you the answer first. The answer is wage a tenacious battle against complacency. That's the answer, wage a tenacious battle against complacency. And that was the answer the Coach gave me when I asked him what is the secret sauce to having a winning record every place you go? And he responded to me, I wage a tenacious battle against complacency.

When you look at what he's accomplished, I think those words actually ring true. He brings a distinguished coaching record marked by an unwavering commitment to the holistic development of student-athletes. He has never had a losing season as a head coach. He was 52-9 in five seasons with James Madison University, where his team went 11-1 this season, and he was named the 2023 Sun Belt Coach of the Year.

At his previous university, Elon, he went 14-9, and he began his head coaching career at Indiana University of

Pennsylvania, which had a 4-10 conference record prior to his arrival there, and where he finished 53-17 with three NCAA playoff appearances and two conference championships.

He's also had success in various offensive coaching roles and recruiting roles at the University of Alabama, NC State, Pittsburgh, Rice, Temple, and Davidson, dating all the way back to 1983. So those words ring true -- wage a tenacious battle against complacency. We're ready for that at Indiana University, Coach, as well.

I will also tell you from that experience it was very obvious the way he sat in his seat, the way he answered questions, that that was a nice experience, but he was ready to get up and coach some football. We're glad to have you actually here in town to get started as well.

I want to take just a second and thank some folks. I want to thank the chairman of our Board of Trustees, Quinn Buckner, as well as all of our trustees for their support and frankly great enthusiasm in this new hire for Indiana University.

I also want to thank our athletic director Scott Dolson. Scott ran an amazingly professional and tight search. I was so impressed with the way he ran this search.

His thoroughness was just really, truly extraordinary. And Scott, frankly, is an extraordinary athletic director. I'm so grateful to have the chance to work with him. He shares the values that we all hold, in particular that I hold, that winning is very important, but it's always about the student-athletes first at Indiana University, always.

Tied with that, of course, is the importance of integrity. We're going to always do the right thing at Indiana University. So I have to say, Coach Cignetti, after some time with you and bringing you to the university, you were born to be a Hoosier, sir. Born to be a Hoosier.

SCOTT DOLSON: Agreed.

PAMELA WHITTEN: With your passion for winning, with your obvious commitment to the student-athletes, and the



recognition that winning isn't anything unless you do it right, let me be the first to welcome you and your family to Indiana University as the Coach of our Hoosier football team. Welcome.

(Applause.)

SCOTT DOLSON: Thanks, Pam. Let me tell you I'm excited to be here. Many of you know I've been here a long time, and I've had many exciting days as IU, but I count this as one of the real, real exciting days.

I have several thank yous as well, but I first want to recognize and thank Tom Allen. I haven't had a chance to publicly do that, but I want to thank Tom for his tireless work on behalf of this university, and we want to wish Tom and Tracy all the best, and they'll always be part of the IU family.

Pam mentioned Quinn Buckner and the IU Board of Trustees. I want to thank them as well. Quinn has been a great leader for us for a long, long time. Quinn this week, searches like this are a grind. It's nonstop. It's interesting because I think he had intuition because there was a point in the day on Monday where it was kind of hitting me, and I felt like it was just a lot.

I got a phone call, and it's Quinn, and he said, hey, I don't want to talk anything about the search. I just want to make sure you breathe, take care of yourself. It's going to be good. You're going to do a great job. It's going to be good. He has no idea how much that meant to me, but that shows the leadership Quinn has, and that really meant a lot.

I want to thank President Whitten. President Whitten has been amazing. I can't tell you how many things we have going on at IU, across the university, and how many directions she's pulled at once, but any time I need anything, any time we need to get together -- and this search obviously was very intense and in a short period -- I had her absolute, full attention. There's absolutely no way we could have gotten this done without her, and I want to thank her for her full support.

I also want to thank the department staff. Again, when you turn something around this quickly, it takes a lot. I certainly won't take the time to mention all of them, but they know who they are. I just can't thank them enough.

I would like to singly point out Deputy Athletic Director Mattie White. She's also our football support administrator. She's been amazing, and again she's been with me every step of the way.

And also Deputy Athletic Director Stephen Harper, who I might add his wife had their third child six days before we started this search, and he was with us every step of the way and gave really that extra mile. I want to thank him so much. He said that his child was born three weeks early, he wanted to be here for this day. He wanted to make certain he was here for this historic moment.

I also want to mention one other thank you. I want to thank Pete Yonkman for Hoosiers Connect collective. It's a new day in college athletics and college football, and the donors that have stepped up for our collectives have been huge, and it's a big, big part of this. I want to make certain I thank them. Without Pete's leadership and certainly the collectives, we wouldn't be in the same position we are today. We appreciate them.

In terms of strategy, just real quick, how did this happen? What were we looking for, and how did we end up here? We put together a profile. We really put together what do we need right now? What is exactly what we're looking for? If this goes well, what would a coach look like? What would they be all about? We really had three things that I'll highlight now. I won't go through the entire list. It was pretty exhaustive.

But we really wanted an experienced, successful head coach. That was really important for us.

We really wanted a high level recruiter. We wanted someone who was a proven evaluator and developer of talent. And we really wanted someone also who had worked with quarterbacks. Quarterbacks was really important to us.

We also wanted to make certain someone really understands the modern era we're in right now with NIL and the transfer portal. That was really, really important.

Finally, we wanted a winner. We wanted someone with some swagger, with some confidence that can really bring that to our program and help establish the identity of IU football.

As Pam said, we did an exhaustive search. We really went quickly, but we scoured the country. And fairly quickly, Curt identified himself as someone who was really different. He really did. You may think, well, why? What stood out about him?

Again, just a few things. There were several things, but the main thing I would say is right away -- and this came out in the first conversation I had with him -- he's a winner. I remember hanging up after the first call with Curt, and I remember going into Mattie White's office and saying, hey,

this guy's different. I think he can win here. Just in a half hour, 40-minute conversation, I could feel it. It was one of those things you just know.

The second thing, he's just got an incredible depth of experience. I was amazed, and Pam was there for this part too, in terms of talking about his experience on Nick Saban's staff, and it was really an enlightening and great part of the conversation and how he's formed -- he is his own man, his own coach, but how that helped shape his career.

He is an excellent recruiter, player developer, certainly evaluator. And the final thing with Curt, which was really the final piece of this, is that he's the type of person that will fit here. He's a great person. He's got an incredible work ethic, and he's got high character. For us, he was a perfect fit for us.

I couldn't be more excited today. Just like Pam, on behalf of Hoosier Nation, I want to welcome Curt, his wife Manette, and the entire Cignetti family to our Hoosier family. We couldn't be more excited. Curt, welcome to IU.

(Applause.)

CURT CIGNETTI: Thank you, Scott, President Whitten. Appreciate your support, belief, and trust in me to lead this football program in the top conference in the country.

Looking forward to the challenge. It's a challenge that really got my juices flowing, and I left a great job that I could have retired in with a contract through 2030 and won a lot of football games. But sometimes you've got to make hard decisions in life, and this was a hard decision for me, because you've got to be uncomfortable to grow, and I'm too young to stop growing.

This is an exciting opportunity at a prestigious university in the top football conference in the country, and there is no reason why we can't be successful, pack the stadium, and be a source of pride to the entire university and town and state of Indiana -- town of Bloomington, state of Indiana.

We're going to change the culture, the mindset, the expectation level, and improve the brand of Indiana Hoosier football. There will be no self-imposed limitations on what we can accomplish. It will be a day-by-day process that is hinged on being focused on the present moment and improving as much daily as possible to put yourself in the best position tomorrow.

It's how we do everything as coaches, players, everybody in the organization, and there is one leader, and he's standing here -- I am standing, I believe, still standing. In

that building, and that's me, and everybody follows that lead. That's one of the keys to success is we have everybody thinking alike.

So we have a blueprint and a plan that's been successful, proven to be successful, and no reason it shouldn't be successful again. We're knocking all kinds of things out today. And looking forward to getting to work.

With that, questions.

**Q. Coach, we heard a lot from President Whitten and Scott Dolson about why you were the right choice for them. As you evaluated them, as you evaluated the job, why was this -- what were the factors that made this the right choice for you?**

CURT CIGNETTI: I thought it was a tremendous challenge in a great football conference and the type of challenge that I've already succeeded at once before.

Like when I went to Elon, their won-loss record before I went there was like 7-45 or something like that, right? Put the blueprint in, the plan. After nine games we were 8-1, played JMU for the conference championship.

The next year, went up and beat JMU at JMU, broke their 29-game winning streak, at 4-1 or 5-1 at that point, ranked in the top five in the country. Lost our running back, quarterback the first series the next game, won the first three but didn't finish well, thus 14-9. I don't like 14-9. That's not very good.

But we know how to do it. I've been around great people, great mentors. My father was a Hall of Fame coach. I had the opportunity to get on with Coach Nick Saban on the ground floor at Alabama when Alabama was a mediocre football program, and we went from 7-6 to 12-0 year two and recruited a class that had six first round draft choices.

Very instrumental in the recruitment process of a few of those guys that won Heisman trophies, All-American awards, et cetera, et cetera. Had the opportunity to coach Julio Jones. Coached Philip Rivers, who you guys remember came in here, threw a great touchdown pass to Koren Robinson in the year 2000, a dramatic comeback. So the opportunity to be around a couple of great players.

But great mentors, got a passion for the game. I'm a football guy. My hobby is football. It's football and family for me, and that's it.

I'm proud to announce my wife, recognize my wife, Manette. We've been married 33 years, still have the same La-Z-Boy. My son Curtis, the oldest at 32, who until

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

a couple days ago was making more than me. The other two, the girls are doctors, married to neurosurgeons, and they're all 4.0 students. Mom's got a little talent. I'm just kind of average.

**Q. You talked about working for Coach Saban. Obviously your dad was a great coach. What kind of things did you take from Coach Saban, from your father that worked for you in your coaching career?**

CURT CIGNETTI: I never worked for my dad and only played for him one year. When I went with Coach, I'd been coaching about 28 years at that point. Learned more from him in year one about how to lead and run a program than the previous 27, I would say.

Just everything from A to Z -- monthly calendar, how to lead and manage people, how to avoid complacency, which he was so good at on a day-to-day, minute-to-minute, second-to-second count. How to practice, how to play the game, plan for winning the game, how to recruit, how to evaluate, how to staff or restaff every year.

Look, the margin for victory, like President Whitten said, the margin for victory in this game is like this (indicating). Didn't you lose six one-score games last year? I think so, yeah. You're talking like a couple plays make the difference in a game.

So that's why finding the edge, having the edge, having the right mindset going into the game, making sure complacency isn't setting in on your organization on Sunday after a big win or Monday. You follow me? That by Wednesday you'd better know in your mind, my mind, I've got it right. I got everybody right where I want them.

Look, we start staff meetings at 7:00 in the morning, 7:30. I'm in at 5:00 preparing the day. And when I start talking about making sure we got the edge of winning complacency, everybody's mindset where it needs to be, it starts the second I walk in that staff room because it's a top-down approach. It starts with me, and I make sure those ten guys are thinking like we need them to think because it's going to filter down to players.

Look, those first two, three games, everybody's ready to play. Everybody. After that, it's who shows up ready to play. That's called coaching, and it counts.

**Q. I've spoken with a couple of your colleagues from Elon this morning. They said kind of what you're alluding to, that day one you tried to instill belief into the team. It rubbed off, and that was kind of the one of the keys to the run you guys made. How do you do**

**that day one? You talked about improving the brand. You said it starts from the top, but like what goes into that?**

CURT CIGNETTI: I don't have a magic wand that I'm going to wave right now and everybody's going to feel like a champion and a winner. I've just got to have the team ready the first game of the year. It's a process. It's a process, and it's a way you go about doing things. It's a standard. It's an expectation. High standard, high expectation. It's accountability. It's discipline, commitment, toughness, work ethic, pride. It's wanting to be great versus wanting to be normal.

Normal kind of equals average. Average is okay. There's no problem with average except in my business. My business, average is the enemy, and to be great, you've got to have special focus, special commitment, special preparation, and discipline and the ability to say no to some things.

You stack great days on top of each other. You play the game the way we want to play the game, one play at a time, six seconds a play. Every play has got a life and a history of its own. Play every play like it's 0-0. Don't be affected by success or failure. Be able to compartmentalize and go to the next play, playing it the same way.

Because what happens then? You get in the game, game's on the line, you're used to practicing that way, playing that way, our guys are just doing their thing. The other guy is looking at the scoreboard, and he's tightening up a little bit, you win those games. Like at Elon, we won those eight games in a row the first year, 8-45, whatever they were, every one of those games went to the last play of the game. It was the most unbelievable thing in the world, last play of the game.

This year at JMU, we won more one-score games than any year I've been there. We had a lot of pieces on offense that took us a while. I think we led the country in one-score wins. I know we did three-quarters of the way through the season and may have at the end of the year.

So it's a way that you do things, and it's a mindset.

**Q. The staff you're bringing with you, those guys have done a pretty good job. Can you take us through those guys who are coming with you and describe what they're about and how they help you with the process?**

CURT CIGNETTI: They're kind of like recruits right now that I can't comment on because they haven't gone through the background checks and the paperwork and stuff like



that. But I have a great group of guys on my staff, and a lot of them will be joining us here.

I will talk and evaluate every staff member from last year's staff as well, and we'll put together the best staff for Indiana University.

**Q. Curt, Scott mentioned an emphasis on developing quarterbacks. How were you successful in convincing him you were the right guy to do that? What's your own philosophy on making quarterbacks elite?**

CURT CIGNETTI: It didn't take much convincing. The proof's in the pudding. We had four quarterbacks at JMU in five years. They all had their major skeptics going into the season, and all four of them were conference Player of the Year on offense.

You tweak the offense depending on the strengths of the team, what the quarterback can do, how's the offensive line, what's your receiving corps like, et cetera.

We've also had two 1,000-yard receivers in the same season two out of the last three years. We led the conference in scoring every year I've been at JMU. We led the country in defense against the run this year, led the country in sacks, at least until the 11th or 12th game. I don't know if we finished first. I think we did.

TFLs have always been high. Points allowed have always been very low. Special teams have always been very good, and we've been the least penalized team in the conference the last two or three years, which was a dramatic change from what I first went there.

**Q. Scott said that they wanted a coach that was going to be able to utilize NIL and resources, and that is obviously a very powerful resource for college football now. What is your plan to utilize it here at Indiana?**

CURT CIGNETTI: Use it as smart and efficiently as possible. It's mathematics. Here's what you've got. You rank your team. Here are our best players. Here's what this guy should get and that guy should get. You lose a guy, okay, you've got a little more. You lose a guy, now you've got to go get a guy. It's really not that hard.

**Q. They talked about your recruiting acumen. I know you served as recruiting coordinator at Alabama. What's your approach to recruiting and philosophy for recruiting? Are there any characteristics you look for specifically? What to you makes a good recruiter?**

CURT CIGNETTI: I think from a sales standpoint it's presenting your brand and the opportunities created by

your brand, developing relationships. I think the evaluation component is really important.

From a physical standpoint there's a lot of good players out there. There's position specific criteria. Some of them are common to all positions. I'm more into production than potential. I'm a little old fashioned. I'll look at the high school transcript and see how many absences a guy has. We want good students who have strong habits because it's all about choices and decisions. Life, you got freedom of choice but not freedom of consequence. First you form your habits, then your habits form you.

Look, a lot of these guys are 17 years old, and our job is to mold them, make them the best person, student, and student-athlete they can be during their time at Indiana University so they can be successful in life. Just so happens with the COVID extra year, you're coaching a lot more sixth and seventh year guys, which from my standpoint is nice, you've got a lot less problems.

But you have to engage in the portal because everybody's turning over at least 30 percent of their roster right now. If you don't, you've got no chance, but you build it with high school guys. There's a lot of good players out there, a lot of guys that can be successful. Remember it's recruiting and development. You've got to develop them now.

The way you coach them, the things you put in their head, the habits they form in the weight room, on the practice field, and then retention as well.

**Q. You are joining a Big Ten Conference where half the teams in the league are continuously recruiting four star and five star type athletes. That has not happened here. When you are trying to compete at that level for recruiting, what do you need to do to make things different here to be more successful with that at a higher level?**

CURT CIGNETTI: I've never really looked at stars ever, honestly. It's kind of like I get so focused in on certain things, like in this particular case, evaluation. I guess these stars have been around for a long time. I have never, ever looked at a star.

I mean, do you really think that some guy that puts stars on kids knows what he's talking about? Compared to coaches who are watching hours and hours of tape on kids. No. If you want to get ratings and you want to go recruit the guys with the most stars, because there's always going to be somebody who shouldn't have four stars that's going to be available, you go ahead and do that. That's not how we operate.

**Q. With the move up to the Big Ten, you also move into a league that is fraught with the NIL portion of this, and there's a pledge of \$3 million to the football program. How are you going to develop that plan since that's not something you've had to really deal with before? And do it in a way that you can compete the best you can with the teams in the league.**

CURT CIGNETTI: I'm not sure what you're referencing not having to deal with. We've been dealing with NIL for three years now, and we had a collective at JMU. I guess your question is -- I thought I answered it already, to be honest with you.

There's going to be people in this conference that probably have more resources than we do, but that's not detrimental. You've got to take the right kind of guys. You've got to develop them and form the intangibles on your football team. That's what we plan on doing. There are a lot of good players out there.

The price tag on a guy and the correlation between his production on the field, I'd like to see the percentage of that. I know this, at JMU our best transfers were the ones from St. Frances, all these FCS schools.

I had two quarterbacks that came from G5 schools that were really unsuccessful at two different schools and the teams were unsuccessful. They came to our place, and they're Player of the Year on offense.

My worst transfers at James Madison were Power 5 guys. They were my worst.

**Q. You mentioned earlier today on Big Ten Network that you're approaching this in the same way you would if you had the Michigan job. Ultimately what is your vision for how this program can be?**

CURT CIGNETTI: We're going to work every day to be the best that we can be. We have no self-imposed limitations.

**Q. You met with the team earlier today. What was your message to them? For fans who don't know, what will a Coach Cignetti coached team look like on the field?**

CURT CIGNETTI: I introduced myself to the team, my background, my track record, what my expectation level was, how we do things. I told them I was excited and that we were going to change the brand, the culture, the mindset, the expectation level.

It doesn't happen in one day. We don't need to be ready to do that until we go out for the first game.

**Q. How would you describe -- and I recognize the roster is not really where it's going to be at come the season. How would you describe and how would you kind of grade what a successful season would look like this year for you guys?**

CURT CIGNETTI: I haven't thought that far in advance. It's pretty hypothetical. I think that's a hard question really to answer. I'd give you more of a process oriented answer, like a team that invested every day to be the best it could be and played very consistently Saturday.

That's what I was most proud of about my team last year at JMU. I had some great teams that won a lot of games. Last year's team listened to the message the best, applied it on the practice field daily the best, had consistency in performance in practice every day. Now, some were a little better than others, but there weren't the swings. And they competed hard every Saturday and laid it on the line.

That's what made that team special. Didn't always play great, right? So give me a team next year that listens, applies it, commits, plays it like we want them to play, process oriented, we're going to do okay.

**Q. I recognize there's probably not a perfect answer to this question, but between everything here and obviously still being part of the bowl preparation and everything with James Madison, what do these next few weeks look like for you in terms of maybe meeting with players, obviously getting your arms around recruiting, and of course everything in Harrisonburg?**

CURT CIGNETTI: My focus is Indiana University. I've got to get to know the roster, the players, last year's coaches. There's a lot of work that needs done. At JMU they're not even sure the bowl date, who the opponent is. They'll find out soon. We'll see what happens in terms of coaching that game. The athletic director back there would like me to.

Indiana's created a window of opportunity where I could, but they'll also hire a new football coach back there in about ten days, and depending how quickly he puts his staff together and when the bowl game is, we both agree we need to be nimble on our feet.

Regardless, 90 percent of my preparation or more will be here. I won't be involved much in preparation for the bowl game.

**Q. What do you see as the biggest challenge in elevating a program that finished with the worst record in the Big Ten this last year to where you want to be?**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

CURT CIGNETTI: Changing the way people think.

**Q. I understand with recruiting it's become national, especially with the portal, but you've been a lot of different places. Are there certain areas you feel you're going to be more focused on as far as high school recruiting, geographic areas, parts of the country, you feel you have more connections with? What's your plan with that?**

CURT CIGNETTI: I think most teams across the country, the plan is about the same. You've got to do a great job in your state and the border states, 4 1/2, 5-hour radius. What other pockets do you need to get into to have enough prospects so you can get what you need?

You've got to be in the Southern states, Georgia, Florida. Then you dabble in the areas where you have contacts, whether it's Pennsylvania or the Mid-Atlantic. We've got teams in California now in the Big Ten. There's players from California on the roster. There's players from Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Tennessee, which isn't that far from here, Kentucky.

Wherever they are, we'll find them. If we think they're a good fit and a good match, then we'll get them on campus.

**Q. Kind of a two-part but related. You mentioned your wife and your family. As you've kind of risen up the ranks, how have you leaned on her, and what was her reaction to you getting this opportunity? Has she pushed you, like you said, to be uncomfortable? Your father, obviously, you mentioned him, Hall of Fame coach, West Virginia. What would this moment be like for him to see you standing here in the Big Ten now?**

CURT CIGNETTI: I think he would have had a lot of proud moments. When you're at the crossroads, you think a lot about what would he say, but you're your own guy and you do your own thing.

With the kids out of the house and the dogs gone, my wife's had the opportunity to make more away games, be on the team plane, stuff like that, and get around the program a little bit more, which really to me I love that. I think it just enriches everything and makes it more meaningful.

We're excited about this opportunity. There's great people in this state. This is a tremendous institution that its time has come to make some noise and make a statement, and we're going to work every day to make that happen.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

