

# Indiana University Football Media Conference

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## Curt Cignetti

### Signing Day Press Conference



CURT CIGNETTI: It's been a whirlwind really. I would call this 20 days of fourth and one. I'm living in a university house a couple blocks from town. I have not seen town during the daylight yet. I leave in the dark. I get home in the dark. It's been a lot of 4:30, 5:00 a.m. mornings till 10:30, 11:30 at night. Was even in the office 12:30 one night. Haven't done that since 1986.

But it was crunch time. It had to be done. Caught flack from my wife for working too late, made her kind of understand the importance of this time period, which I think is a hugely important time period for determining what kind of team we have in the fall because you've got players in the portal. You've got to get some of those guys back, and then you've got to bring players in from the portal. And that was the priority because of the timing of when you were hired.

So pretty good that a 60-year-old guy can still go at it like that although I do think I fell asleep for a half second this morning on the way to work, hit a curb, and blew my tire. My car dealer is not going to be real happy with me.

I think we got a lot done. We started building some momentum about seven, eight days ago, and that momentum has continued to build. I'm never pleased, but I want to compliment the staff, everybody involved in the recruiting process inside the building, at the university, for their effort.

This roster is going to look a lot different in January when the players come back. We signed 31 players. We're going to announce all but seven. Seven are playing in bowl games. They're all transfers. We'll announce them after their bowl game.

We've got, I think, the right guys off the bus, right guys on the bus, adding to the bus, and it's going to change the complexion of this football team.

**Q. You mentioned portal guys. You recruited Kurtis Rourke from Ohio. You're a quarterback guy. When you watched him, when you evaluated him, what stood**

**out about him as a quarterback, and why did you feel comfortable bringing him in as possibly your starter next year?**

CURT CIGNETTI: He'll compete for it, but he's got a body of work. And that's what I look for in the portal, I look for guys that have a body of work, guys that have started, played the entire season without getting injured and have production.

And multiple years of production is even better because I firmly believe this: Like there are some intangible qualities that it takes to be a starter and make it through a season. You've got to be able to handle adversity, success, have consistency in performance. There's just some characteristics and traits.

So I'd much rather have a guy that's put it on the field and has statistical numbers than a guy that's maybe second or third team at the No. 1 team in the country and has great potential but he was sitting behind two really good guys. I don't buy that. Good players find a way to get on the field.

Rourke was Player of the Year in the league. He knows how to play quarterback. It's very evident to me. Tom Brady knew how to play quarterback. Philip Rivers, who I coached, knew how to play quarterback.

Knowing how to play quarterback is a lot more than just having an arm and accuracy and making a few outstanding plays. A lot of their greatest plays go unnoticed. A guy gets in a jam on first and ten, he gets you back to second and ten. He doesn't take a sack, doesn't fumble, doesn't throw an interception.

But you're looking at a guy who's thrown almost 1,000 passes, has completed 67 percent, has 55 career touchdown passes, about 13 interceptions, about 8,000 yards. Won ten games and nine games the last two years. He's 6'5", 231 pounds, and his brother was a quarterback before him, and he's in the league with the Jags. It really came down to him declaring for the NFL draft or coming here.

Right now quarterbacks are attracted to us because, when



you put -- take four different guys in five years and they're all Player of the Year in the conference and they all have different styles, they recognize that you do a great job of developing quarterbacks. That's a credit to Tino Sunseri, our quarterback coach, and Mike Shanahan, offensive coordinator, and I'm involved in that a little bit too.

**Q. I guess a similar question, but you guys took some receivers obviously with some really good career numbers, a lot of snaps, a lot of yards, a lot of catches. I guess between them and getting Donaven McCulley back in the field, just how much was -- maybe again speaking to that idea of sort of proven production, not just potential, but guys that have put it on the field, put it on tape, how important was that in this short space and time for you?**

CURT CIGNETTI: Again, that's what I look for at all positions. I'm not trying to be tough to deal with, but I'm going to give you the same answer to every position. Those guys did it on the field over a number of years.

There was a period of time we looked like we would have to rebuild our entire receiving corps because McCulley was in the portal, a couple of other guys had gone in, and we had very little production returning. So we were dealing with a number of guys. Spent a lot of time looking at a lot of different guys.

Those three guys really, I think, are our kind of guys. I was extremely excited when Donaven came back. We got the quarterback commitment, and about two hours later Donaven called me. That was a great day. I truly was not expecting that because the word on the street was Florida State.

But I think he saw -- I think a lot of the guys that went in the portal, a lot of them have reached out wanting to come back. I haven't taken them all back. I think they all feel the excitement and they all believe what's going to happen here.

And I think Donaven saw that, and being close to home too and having a brother here and the receiver development that we've put in the record books speak for itself. We've had two 1,000-yard receivers two of the last three years. We freed guys up in the pass game. We're cutting edge offensively. And we're going to find ways to free him up. But he can make contested catches too. We can take his game to another level. I know what he wants, but he's a team guy. So I think it's a great marriage.

**Q. Curt, was three always the number for quarterbacks that you wanted to bring in, or did that kind of develop as you kind of recruited guys? What**

**was kind of your -- I don't know, did you have a Magic number going in that three was always what you wanted?**

CURT CIGNETTI: No, no number. I was looking for a guy that could come in and be the guy, compete to be the guy. Tayven Jackson has started games. I was excited to see how far Tino Sunseri could take him. All these quarterbacks really, with the same guy tutoring them from day one until the end of the season, which they didn't have last year.

In our offense, which last year's offense was pretty fundamental and basic, fairly simple. I think ours will probably have a lot more pass concept volume and other things, which I think will put the defense in conflict more. Now we've got to execute it.

But definitely the emphasis was finding the quarterback. We thought he was a great candidate. Now, he's got to come in and earn it because Tyler Cherry is a great candidate, and guess what, he's going to be here for spring ball. I've had two freshmen in my coaching career that were here for spring ball that were the quarterback in the fall, and they were Newcomer of the Year, and we had great seasons both years.

We also did not have another quarterback with a body of work that Kurtis Rourke has, and Kurtis Rourke knows how to play quarterback. While he's got to do it between the white lines at Indiana, I fully expect him to do it. I think he's going to be a great player for us.

But everything's earned, not given. Nobody's promised anything. Like I do have guys -- you know, am I going to be able to do this, do that? Once in a while, a guy wants you to promise them something. What am I, nuts? I'm going to promise you something so that goes around the locker room? Nobody has anything. Everything's earned. That's how we run our program.

**Q. You mentioned Tyler enrolling early. Do you know how many of your high school recruits are going to be able to enroll early yet?**

CURT CIGNETTI: Six.

**Q. What was the process like to re-evaluate, re-recruit both the commits who were committed to the previous staff and then the players who went into the portal and are looking to come back?**

CURT CIGNETTI: You know what I always do when I take -- this is my fourth head coaching job. The first two were major rebuilds, and we won big year one, and I fully expect

to win big this year.

But the first thing I do the day before I get there is I have the previous staff rank the returning team 1 to 50. Every coach does his own rating. Somebody in the office blends the ratings together, comes up with an average.

They put it on my desk so the minute I walk in my office, I sit there, and this guy is the No. 1 rated guy on the team and this guy is the No. 50 rated guy on the team. I get a good feel for the roster right there. Now, some of those guys are in the portal. Some of them aren't.

The next day I interview the old staff, every one of them. I sit down 20 minutes to an hour. We talk. I respect those guys. I've been fired before as an assistant coach when I was young. It's part of the business. I get it. They aren't bad coaches. There are a lot of damn good coaches that were on that staff last year.

But we talk about the kids. I'll make a few notes. So I have a little bit more of a feel. Not only for what they were ranked in the top 50, but is he a good teammate? Is he consistent? Does he work hard? Is he committed? Is he a pain in the ass?

So a lot of those guys in the portal that you don't get great reports about, it's easy nowadays, if a guy goes in the portal, non-renew him. You don't have to call him in your office, have a talk with him, call his parents, explain the situation. They chose to leave the program.

Some of the guys in the portal, you're trying to retain. Well, you're just recruiting them now. It's no different than recruiting a portal guy somewhere else. The difference is you're selling your vision and how it's going to change and exactly what it's going to feel like when you've been invested in the program and now begin to have this success.

A lot of them buy into it. Most of them do. But some of them are just ready for a change.

**Q. I heard you mention you're selling a vision to recruits, particularly with the JMU guys, either that came to you now in Bloomington through the portal or who are following you who are previous JMU commits now at Indiana. Was it more of a challenge to sell Bloomington on these guys, or is it still a lot of your staff is coming over, you're still selling them the same method you were selling at JMU?**

CURT CIGNETTI: The JMU guys that went in the portal, that's college football nowadays. Head coach gets fired. Head coach leaves. Kids jump in the portal. I do feel sort

of bad for the program, the people that built that program, but they'll be okay. I have tremendous respect for the leadership at that place.

I know I'm a villain back there right now. Everybody thinks I've tampered with their players, blah, blah, blah, hasn't happened.

I did a tweet. There was a JMU manual in my desk. I caught flack for that. I always keep the coaches manual front and center of my desk. Anybody that's ever been in my office will tell you that. Every time I take a new job, I don't change the cover until July right before we're getting to go to training camp. That manual, guess what? That's not JMU's. That's my philosophy on how we run a program. That's what that manual is.

The JMU guys, it was just a matter of them coming out and seeing the place. I didn't have to sell them. They believe that they're going to win. They think like champions. They believe in the coaches. They believe in the program. They believe they're going to step on foot and make a difference. Guess what? I believe that too. All they had to do was like the place.

Now, do we have to change the way some people think? Yeah, we do. But here's the deal. When you go through three poor seasons like what's happened here, you have a certain group of guys on this football team that have a chip on their shoulder, and they got something to prove. Those are the guys you want.

Then you've got a certain group that's succumbed to the negativity, blame others, have given up. Those are guys you don't want.

We're bringing a bunch of really good football players in here that are used to being successful from all different schools, a lot of Power 5 schools, adding them to the guys that we have retained to create a new roster, which is going to -- when everybody comes here in January, this is where we're going. This is how we're going to get there.

There will be a new culture, identity here and expectation level in the way we play the game, and we're not done recruiting yet. We've signed 31 new ones today. We have 21 mid-year transfers coming in, and I expect to add 3 to 5 more transfers before classes start.

**Q. When it comes to that culture you were just talking about, meshing the recruits here you're getting and some of the guys you kept, where does that process start?**

CURT CIGNETTI: What do you mean? I don't get the

question.

**Q. Well, when you recruit them, how do you sell your vision of your culture?**

CURT CIGNETTI: Who are you talking about? The high school guys? The transfers? Who?

**Q. All of the above.**

CURT CIGNETTI: It's pretty simple. I win. Google me.

**Q. Curt, this obviously is the first time we talked to you since your introductory press conference a few weeks ago. The staff that you put together, back then you said that you couldn't talk about them specifically because they were like recruits. Obviously now everything's official. Just wondering if you could take us through the process of how you assembled the staff you put together here. You brought some coaches with you from JMU. You brought some people from outside. How did that all come together?**

CURT CIGNETTI: It came together pretty fast. I borrowed a good nucleus from JMU. Part of my success has been staff continuity. Bryant Haines has been with me ten years. Mike Shanahan nine, my teams guy six, my weight guy five. Not always in the same position they're in today.

I've got guys on my staff that I hired for \$6,000 ten years ago, and now they're coordinators at the P-5 level. They know how I am, how I run the program. They know how to manage me a little bit, some of my little moods.

You're looking to put the best staff together for Indiana. We brought some new coaches in that we're excited about. There's a lot of good coaches out there. Whoever you bring in that's new, you've got to mold them a little bit into your way of doing things and how you do things. That's what's going on right now.

**Q. A lot of people have heard really good things about your offensive coordinator Shanahan and Tino Sunseri. What do you like about them, and what makes them successful running an offense, developing quarterbacks, developing receivers?**

CURT CIGNETTI: They have a good mentor. No. I think Tino is an excellent -- Tino's an excellent quarterback coach. I've known him a long time. Worked with his dad twice as a GA in '83 and for Saban for three years. My brother coached Tino in college. Tino was the quarterback at Pitt. Mike was the receiver. So they were really close.

When Mike came to me and wanted to be the coordinator, I

had made a change the COVID year, my initial reaction was I always believed that the quarterback guy needed to coordinate. But I had spent that whole COVID fall -- because SCS didn't play that year. We played in the spring, right? I spent that whole COVID fall studying Alabama when Sarkisian was there with Matt Jones and those receivers. That was, what, three, four years ago.

I really liked what they were doing. I was looking for new ideas in the pass game. Tino was Sark's right hand man. I knew Tino. Mike and Tino were really close. Being able to hire Tino kind of made that work. And Mike was really progressed as a coach and a coordinator and calls the plays. Every once in a while, I'll have a recommendation, but I kind of run the offensive meetings and steer the offense.

Part of that is every year -- look, we have our offense, and then we figure out who our players are and how we need to branch out from there. More than anything else, I'm a head coach. I've got to make sure that offensively -- because these young guys, they score a lot of points, you know what I'm saying? Hear their name on ESPN and read about how they're a candidate for the Nebraska job.

Part of my job is to make sure that we're not taking unnecessary chances offensively, putting the defense in the hole, or getting the quarterback hit too much, things like that, because the offense, defense, special teams all have to complement one another.

Now, you mentioned two of my coaches. I've got ten great coaches, and I've got the best strength and conditioning coach in America. So people like offense, so they hear about the quarterback coach and the offensive coordinator, but I've got a great line coach. I've got a great defensive coordinator.

But you know what, we'll see how great we are in the fall. I guess we win a lot of games at JMU so we're great coaches. At the end of the year, we'll see how great we are, but I expect us to be really good.

**Q. Coach, I'm curious, the two quarterbacks that you've signed, Cherry and Mendoza, in this class, what were some of the skills or traits that attracted you to them that made you think they'd be a good fit here?**

CURT CIGNETTI: They're very similar in a lot of areas, but in the quarterback, what makes them special, the ability to process information quickly and make good decisions on the field. They're both real quick thinkers.

I think it's really important a quarterback be able to sort of extend plays, like when he gets in a bind, whether it's with



his legs or up and out in the pocket, eyes down the field, make a throw. Guys that can't operate outside the pocket, move their feet, forget it nowadays with all the stuff you see.

The one guy's got really, really great arm talent. The other guy's got really, really good arm talent. The one guy's got really, really good movement. The other guy's got good movement. They're both winners. Their teams win, and they win big, and they're both really smart. Excited about both of them.

One guy will be here for spring ball. One guy won't.

**Q. You mentioned some of the early mornings and late nights you've had so far on the job. Pretty simply, what drives you? Maybe what's your reason for your continued passion at this stage in your career?**

CURT CIGNETTI: I knew in third grade I wanted to coach, oldest kid. Dad went with Bobby Bowden to West Virginia. I was that guy that was on the sideline, in the locker room listening to Bobby talk to the team at halftime. Always wanted to have a legacy as a head coach.

What drives me is winning, to be honest with you, but we win the right way. I had a legacy at JMU, could have stayed there and won a lot of games. I think I'm one of the top winningest active coaches right now in college football. I think I'm in the top seven, if I'm not mistaken. I don't plan on that changing here at Indiana.

What really drives me these last 20 days is the time period that I was hired and what needed done with the signing date coming up. The number of guys we had in the portal, the number of guys we were going to have to replace because I knew that these 20 days were going to play a big, big part in our success in the fall and that we had to get it done.

I'll tell you what, we got some momentum going, and we have a lot of people to buy in. Look, the administration here, they want football to win. So I probably have some things that the other coaches didn't, and they got a guy that knows what they're doing. So it's really pretty simple.

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