

Indiana University Football Media Conference

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Curt Cignetti

Press Conference



Q. Curt, you haven't talked about your own history against Notre Dame. I think you as a coach have been five times against them, three times in South Bend. Any memories of those games or what stood out about your past history against the team?

CURT CIGNETTI: My first year as a graduate assistant coach at the University of Pittsburgh for Coach Fazio. We had a pretty good team, played Notre Dame at Notre Dame. We went to Fiesta Bowl that year and won.

It was a tight game, low scoring, maybe 14-9 or something like that. Great game, I think Gerry Faust may have been the coach at Notre Dame at the time. '

Second time would have been -- I was coaching at Rice, so the year Notre Dame won the National Championship. I believe Lou Holtz was the head coach, '86 maybe -- or '88. End of the year, cold. Our guys, Rice, the weather is warm, come out pregame, I mean, it was really cold, sweatshirts on, the whole deal.

Notre Dame comes out, short sleeves. Nobody had long sleeves on. We scored first, but that was it after that. We got waxed.

Went up there with Johnny majors, got beat pretty good. Then played Notre Dame the last game at Pitt stadium, old Pitt stadium. I was working for Walt Harris near the end of the season. We beat Notre Dame. That was a memorable night.

Then played them in the Gator Bowl in 2002 at North Carolina State, Philip Rivers' junior year, I believe it was. We won, I think it was 31-13 or something. It was a good win. We won 10 or 11 that year at NC State.

Yeah, played them a few times and looking forward to this match up against a really good football team. They're a really good football team.

Q. I asked Coach Haines this yesterday. I know it's not quite as extreme what Notre Dame does as kind of

a triple option team, but when you have a quarterback that can run and you have some of the option packages that they give him, is it a little bit like preparing for the option and people always say having extra time to simulate that, to drill that with your scout team and give your defense a more extended look -- basically does that help? Do you feel like having a little bit more prep time for what Notre Dame does with Riley Leonard in the run game helped you guys?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think the extra prep time is an advantage for both sides to learn their opponent, but sometimes you can have too much information. In my mind, what they do, I would call those plus one runs more so than option. We've seen those throughout the course of the season.

Now, who they're doing it with is the difference. They're good up front. Riley Leonard is a great competitor. He's got great mobility. He can throw the ball well also. Backs are good. There may be a little wrinkle that we haven't seen yet, but for the most part we've seen this kind of stuff and seen it through the years.

At the end of the day, it comes down to blocking, tackling, gap control, winning the line of scrimmage, and the fundamentals of football.

They've got a good offense. Riley Leonard is a big part of it. I've been watching him on tape for a few years, studying when he was at Duke. I think a lot of him as a player, and they did a nice job.

Q. Curt, Jailin Walker spoke with us yesterday, and one of the things that always comes across when we speak with him is kind of his joy in the moment and his joy in playing the game. He obviously backs it up on the field. What do you think has made him tick, and what's made him so instrumental to your defensive success, not only here, but at JMU?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, I love that guy, great guy to be around, always a smile on his face. Really good football player and a guy that really didn't come -- he came from a tough situation in Richmond, and football was like his way



out. I've heard him express that a few times. And he loves the game.

When we recruited him, he was a running back and a linebacker. He's about 195 pounds. Coach Haines, I give him a lot of credit, from the very beginning, he thought he was a terrific prospect. From the day he set foot on campus back at James Madison, those things showed up -- speed, quickness, twitch, love of the game, passion. Made a lot of big plays at James Madison, game changing plays, and has done so here too. He's a topnotch guy.

He's a guy I'll really miss when it's all over, and we don't plan on this being over for a while. I think an awful lot of him. He loves football, loves it.

Q. You've talked a lot this past week and in the lead-up to this game about different things that your team needs to do, whether it's stopping the run, limiting turnovers, keeping Kurtis protected, but if you could single out one thing, the most important thing for you guys entering Friday, what would that be?

CURT CIGNETTI: Play well from the first play to the last play.

Q. I guess with the potential for snow on Friday in South Bend, how do you approach preparing your team for that and also kind of managing that during the game?

CURT CIGNETTI: I hope it snows a foot and a half. We have a Canadian quarterback. Did you see him throw the ball against Purdue? This guy grew up like in the frigid north. He looked pretty good to me that night. So I don't think it's going to bother him very much.

So much revolves around that guy, right? Everybody else will find a way to stay warm, but it's not a concern. It's going to be cold. It's going to be windy. There could be snow on the ground. Both teams have to play on it.

We've been practicing outside in the cold for a long time. We played in it against Purdue. When we started the game, there was snow on the turf. It was cold. It was windy. So we've been through it.

Q. I know from a travel standpoint you've said you like to get in as late as possible. I'm just curious with the special situation here, are you still able to do that? Are you on a special travel schedule because of the CFP, or are there other distractions from the CFP that's kind of being pushed down that takes you out of your normal routine?

CURT CIGNETTI: No, not really. This first round is treated as more of an away game. We'll have the normal Friday routine tomorrow, leave about the same time we normally would. We will charter a plane up there, flying to South Bend, take a bus to Michigan City about fifty minutes away, hotel, team meal, team meetings in the evening, have meetings in the afternoon before the game.

So not much is going to change for this one here.

Q. I know you won Coach of the Year awards before, but you've basically swept almost all the awards so far, the national ones kind of especially stand out, what does it mean to you as a head coach? And just to this program who hasn't had this kind of recognition in the past?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, I've got to stand up for myself. I think I swept all the awards, not almost all. I'm not eligible for the Dodd because I haven't been here for a year.

No, it's a credit to our team and our coaches. You know, it's flattering. I haven't had a lot of time to think about it truthfully. I'm sure at some point it will register.

I think when you're young and you aspire to be good in any profession, these kinds of things are meaningful. But I've got to give a lot of credit, first of all, to our administration for providing the support and commitment that allowed us to have the means to be successful and then our staff who had a major role, Derek Owings, our strength and conditioning coordinator, the assistant coaches in developing these players.

Then the players themselves, who chose Indiana, bought into a vision and a dream. They had to dig deep. They had to do their research, and believed it was possible. A lot of them were looking for a bigger stage to prove themselves, and they've bought in. They received the message. They apply it daily. They've been very consistent. They've been a great group to coach.

It's never perfect, never always perfect. There's a hiccup here and there. But this team has really a lot of kids on it that are great leaders and a lot of character on this football team, a lot of experience, a lot of guys that have been two, three, four-year starters, have been very consistent through the years. You know, it all come together.

I hear a lot about our schedule, right? When the season started, we were playing the defending national champ, the runner-up, and Ohio State, and six or seven teams that have played in bowl games. We have the largest margin of victory in the country, and if you just look at P4 teams, it's the second largest margin of victory.

Then I hear we haven't beaten a top 25 team. When we played Nebraska, they were 25th in the coaches poll. We were 18th. We beat them 56-7. At the end of the day, those awards -- back to the awards, right? This is where all this started. I'm very appreciative. I'm humbled. But I've got to give credit where credit is due, and that's to everybody else in this organization.

Q. You talked the other day just about how you had everybody kind of put their phone away during the team meeting. I was just curious as this week has progressed and gone on, how have you seen the focus and the psyche of your team shift and get more locked in?

CURT CIGNETTI: That was the coaches meeting, staff meeting. They were to give the players the message also because nowadays everybody's got their phone, right? But turn the phones off in the meetings.

I've really seen the focus, the prep, the urgency on the practice field, the speed at which we practice, the execution level really ratchet up a notch or two. Not that it was not good in the off week, but this is game week, and it's different.

I like where we're at, and I hope I like where we're at when I walk off the practice field this evening, but I'm confident that I will.

Q. The building of this roster, as you look back a year ago, a lot was made of the 13 JMU guys and Kurtis and everything, but how would you characterize that overall? What did you learn from it? And how similar or different are things a year later for you in that regard?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, invention is the mother of necessity or vice versa. I may have that backwards.

We had a desperate roster situation when I came. Ten offensive starters in the portal, half the defense. Within a week or ten days, we were down to 40 guys. It wasn't like we were running guys off. It was just the times. The coach leaves, and we had a lot of guys from Texas and wherever and what have you.

Once the evaluation process started, there was familiarity with a lot of these guys. Most of the guys we recruited, somebody in the organization knew them well.

And the JMU thing, like I said a number of times, I never once even thought that that was a remote possibility because this process happened so quickly, I was making

the decision on what I was going to do. But then as soon as I got here, they started to jump in the portal. One guy came, and his buddy would come and led to what it was.

I knew these guys could play, and I knew they could help us, and I knew we needed them. Because we had to change the culture. We had to change what people think. We had to bring some people in here who were used to winning championships, used to going to bowl games. Then you bring guys in here like Myles Price, who Derek Owings knew real well; Trey Wedig, who Bob Bostad knew real well; Ellison, who we had recruited at JMU, Ke'Shawn Williams, both from Wake Forest. I know I'm going to forget people, but Shawn Asbury we had recruited twice, once out of high school when he went to BC, and once on the way back from BC when he went to ODU. Terry Jones his teammate.

Kurtis Rourke, who we really didn't have a tie to, but researched him, liked him on tape. This was a great opportunity for him based on our track record with quarterbacks and the guys we were adding to the portal. And obviously he has thrived. I know I'm forgetting some people.

I guess every coach is different in terms of their valuation when it comes to recruiting. My experience as a recruiting coordinator, when I went with Johnny Majors to Pitt in 1993 and I was -- technically had that title throughout -- until I left Alabama, left the staff at Alabama. So I was always very involved in the recruiting and evaluation process.

I got my mistakes out of me at a young age, unfortunately for Coach Majors, and learned a lot in terms of what I was looking -- what the prototypical prospect that came to a four-year school and was successful, what that looked like in high school or now in the transfer portal versus the guy that had potential, could be -- but hadn't quite put it together yet.

So production over potential, you've heard me say it a million times, it worked for us.

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