

Indiana University Football Media Conference

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Coach Curt Cignetti

Signing Day Press Conference



CURT CIGNETTI: All right, another recruiting season has come and gone. With what we got done, filling immediate needs in the portal, 19 portal guys; if you count E.J. Williams, who was in the portal and returned, it's almost 20. Along with 23 high school guys, 14 are enrolled mid-year, I feel like we addressed the needs that we needed to address for the '25 season. And the high school guys are developmental, our kind of guys. So, staff looking forward to taking a couple of days off because I don't think we really had a day off since we came back to work in July and get back at it.

Q. You obviously had the one staff change from last year, Coach Sunseri moving on and Coach Whitmer coming in. I'm sure it was an attractive position. What was it about Coach Whitmer that drew you to him? What did you like about his background and his resumé?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, really happy for Tino to get the opportunity to coordinate an offense. Did a great job for us.

Was very impressed with Chandler in our conversations -- came highly recommended, a lot of knowledge, been around a lot of great people, excellent teacher. Looking forward to having him join our offense.

Q. You guys did a real strong job with roster retention obviously compared to previous years -- I know last year was with a coaching change -- but years past here. What were those conversations like? Were they easier because of the success you guys had? How much did NIL play kind of a part? Can you just talk about your approach and the success you had with kind of keeping guys in the program?

CURT CIGNETTI: There really weren't many conversations. I think everybody was in a good place, excited about where we're going. Obviously had a good experience last fall. And really didn't lose anybody that was in our long-term plan, which is a real plus.

Now, your key guys, all-conference guys, the very visible players, you know, we handled those guys on the front end. And I like what's going on. We're off to a good start in the weight room. Derek likes what he sees. So the retention piece was not really an issue.

Q. I wanted to ask you about non-conference scheduling. Last year you kind of had the schedule you inherited, and obviously this year -- and schedules are obviously made way in advance. Are you satisfied with the future of non-conference schedules that you have? And what's kind of your own philosophy on scheduling out of conference?

CURT CIGNETTI: I like winning ball games. I think most coaches do. I mean, we play nine Big Ten Conference games, which is more than most the other conferences. So I'm going to play who's on the schedule. And I think we got Notre Dame coming up down the road. But I'm going to play who's on the schedule.

Q. You talked about Coach Whitmer a little bit. I remember months ago you talking about Tino. You said one of the things you felt he added was his experience with Steve Sarkisian at Alabama and some of the things he could sprinkle in or add to your offense. Especially with all the different high-level quarterbacks Coach Whitmer has worked with, what are maybe some of the things you think he can kind of bring in terms of his sort of coaching experiences that maybe are new to the room, new to the offense, et cetera?

CURT CIGNETTI: We're looking to bring in a guy to develop the quarterback, mainly. We've had great success with quarterbacks. Four straight players of the year offensively. And then Kurtis was number one in the country in quarterback rating, but made second-team all-conference. He had a great year.

That, first and foremost, quarterback developer. And you're always looking for ideas from every staff member. But his number one job is to develop the quarterback.

Q. When you're bringing in a new crop of incoming



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freshmen like you have now, what's the initial hurdle you have to get them over as a coaching staff?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think they just try to get up to speed with the standards, the day-in and day-out consistency, the routine. When they come in as freshmen they're behind the older guys. So they're just trying to get in the groove and make progress daily.

All we ask of anybody in this program is be accountable, be where you're supposed to be, and hopefully five minutes early, do your best, and rub off on others positively and the process will take care of itself.

So there's no pressure on anyone to be a starter in the fall or whatever. It's just do those things and you'll develop.

Q. Going through this now the second time at Indiana -- I know you're an old hat at going through the portal; you had success before at James Madison getting the guys you want -- but after having the success you had last season, did you find it a little easier to get the guys you wanted that are a little more talented? Were they more apt to want to come to Indiana?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, I think winning opens doors. There's no doubt about it. Now, whether they're more talented remains to be seen. We haven't had a practice yet.

We like who we got. They checked the boxes in terms of character, athletic ability. Almost all of them were starters where they came from. I think we had one guy that had started and played significant minutes but wasn't a full-time starter. So they fit what we're looking for and they fit our positions of need.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the tight end position. You added the two Power Four guys there, Staes and Nowakowski. Could you compare and contrast what you think they'll bring to the program? And do you think you'll have a vertical threat at that position this year?

CURT CIGNETTI: We'll find out in spring ball. But Nowakowski went to Wisconsin as a walk-on, a wrestler also. Played fullback. Coaching change, moved to tight end, excellent blocker, good hands, really a hardworking guy.

And Holden Staes has good movement skills. So we'll see what he can give us both in the run game and the pass game.

But I'm glad we got those two guys because it was a

position of need.

Q. On Fernando, what attracted you to him and how did his process unfold?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, obviously been aware of him for a while because we got Alberto, the younger brother, here. Two-year starter at Cal, did a lot of really good things on tape.

Was under duress quite a bit. I mean, the protection wasn't great out there. Not only did he show the ability to make all the throws from the pocket, but to extend plays and be able to make plays on the move with his arm and his legs. He's an extremely intelligent guy, and he's got two years.

He was a target. And that was a good day when he decided to come.

Q. When you look back at last season, just how important was it for you, how much of a priority was it to improve the offensive line? And what stands out to you about some of the players you've added there, the guys from Notre Dame, Ohio State, Colorado?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, we look to improve every position, and one of the many reasons that I retained Coach Bostad initially was what I had been told about the line's improvement in his one year at Indiana before I arrived. And I had known of Bob for about a dozen years.

I thought he did a great job with that line. I thought the line functioned well.

I'm excited about the guys we're able to bring in from the portal. Kahlil Benson did a really nice job here at offensive tackle the year before I came. Obviously Coogan started a lot of games at Notre Dame and played well. And Zen started and played meaningful minutes at Ohio State.

I'm excited about what that line can look like, but it's a day-to-day process. Like every other position, earned not given.

I try not to get too excited on the front end. I want to see it between the white lines.

But I thought the one telling thing about what we've accomplished in a short time we've been here is we had two starters from the year before that had gone to the portal and left -- one went to Ole Miss and one went to Colorado -- and wanted to return after they saw what was going on here at Indiana.



That would be Kahlil Benson and Louis Moore, who earned some All-Big Ten honors in '23. And E.J. Williams who had -- E.J. wanted to redshirt after his fourth game. And like I said to him, I decide who redshirts. If you can help the team, then that's what everybody is here to do. And he had dreams of playing in the league. It was his last year. So his only recourse was to go into the portal.

About mid-December we got together. We wanted him back; he wanted to come back. So that was another win for us as well, another guy that had started in '23, the year before I got here. So I think it says a lot about what went on last year that guys who had left on the front end and then returned.

Q. You talked about never being satisfied. Obviously a great year in '24. What does that look like -- you take 24 hours to enjoy a win -- but what does that look like never being satisfied on the coaching staff point? And then how does it trickle down to the players?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, I think you have high standards in everything you do, right? And if you prepare the right way, you expect success. You don't have a lot of time to enjoy it because the next challenge is coming up and you've got to get ready and you've got to prepare for that accordingly or you're not going to have success.

So I think that's part of being never satisfied. And that's the separator between good and great, is never being satisfied and resting on your laurels.

And I can promise you, this team is a hungry, humble team right now that's working really hard in the offseason program. And we've got to string together days, months, heading into the fall.

Q. Tyler Morris brings a lot of experience at the highest level, winning a national champion at Michigan. What does he bring to this very talented wide receiver room that you already have?

CURT CIGNETTI: Experience, like you said. He's a senior. He's played a lot football, started a lot of games, made some big plays in some big games. There's a real benefit in that, and I'm glad we got him.

Q. What are the top priorities for spring ball, heading into that?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think spring ball is always you want to develop players, practice habits, start to develop some intangibles on your football team -- consistency, toughness, resiliency, competitiveness. Get an idea of what your two-deep might look like heading into the fall.

And then you might look at a couple of things schematically -- offense, defense, special teams -- which is a continual process.

Q. I wanted to ask about Roman Hemby. You obviously saw him up close when Maryland came to town. Explosive guy, but one thing that's intriguing is his ability, I think he has over 100 catches out in the backfield. Just that ability he brings carrying the ball, but also using him as a receiver?

CURT CIGNETTI: Kind of fits the bill what we look for because our backs do catch a number of passes also.

Yeah, I was impressed with his game against us here in the fall and obviously been watching tape of him for a while. He's got a lot of experience. Got a lot of career total yards, whether it's rushing or receiving. And we lost our top two guys. So he was a perfect fit for what we were looking for.

Q. Double-barrel question about the offensive line. You talked about a couple of guys you added having flexibility, especially a guy like Kahlil who has played multiple positions. How helpful is it to bring in an experienced guy that also, depending on where you like him, where maybe there's some injuries, you can plug holes? And also kind of piggybacking off of that, are there some young guys that maybe you were able to kind of protect, not have to play too soon last year, but you hope might show some leaps forward in spring practice on the offensive line?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, you know, competition is a great thing; it makes everybody better. So we'll have increased competition on the offensive line.

Most of the guys up front can play multiple positions. They're smart guys. Maybe some of the interior guys wouldn't necessarily project real well at tackle, but there's a few who could and vice versa.

I think some of the young guys, this is their opportunity to take another step. There's a couple that we think could be ready to take meaningful snaps and play successful football in the fall.

And that's the bottom line. If you can play successful football, we're going to find a role for you. So we don't want to throw anybody out there before they're ready, that's for darned sure. And I think we're in a position right now as a football team where we shouldn't have to do that.

Q. There's been a lot of talk, kind of this last month or two, with revenue sharing coming up about teams

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restructuring their operations, going more to an NFL model. What conversations have you had and do you like your approach and don't see making kind of many changes with that stuff coming down the pipeline in the next six months?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think all coaches have had to adjust and the rules are changing all the time, the landscape. You've got to be light on your feet. You've got to do the best job with whatever resources you have to put together the best roster you can.

So we've always done a good job of that. And I think we did a pretty good job this past winter.

Q. I'm curious, you guys signed Bryant to an extension in December and then again in January. What was that process just like?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, you know, when you're successful and you win and you're a coordinator and your side of the ball excels -- I think we're number one in the country against the run, number two in total defense, we're number one in Big Ten in other categories -- he's done a great job for me. I think he just completed his third year as coordinator. He's been with me 11 or 12 years -- people are going to come after him.

The blue bloods were knocking at the door and we didn't want to lose him and we were proactive. I really appreciate President Whitten and Scott Dolson for the tremendous support that they've provided since I've become the head coach that enables us to keep a key person like Bryant Haines.

Q. At corner, obviously had a few guys leave. How do you currently feel about that spot, and is that maybe a spot you all may try to adhere in the spring portal period?

CURT CIGNETTI: No, I don't think -- we added some pieces in the portal, which probably expedited an exit or two. We didn't lose, you know, anyone that we were projecting to start in the fall, let me just put it that way. But everything is earned, not given, so you never know. I like who we have. Coach Ojong likes who we have. And I think we have an opportunity to have better depth than we did last season.

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