

Indiana University Football

Media Conference

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Curt Cignetti

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Let's start with an opening statement.

CURT CIGNETTI: All right, game week, it's exciting. But it's a total gear shift in terms of mental intensity, the preparation required, the urgency, staff and players. You know, stacking moments, meeting, practices, days to put ourselves in the best position to play as well as we can on Saturday against a team that I really respect, Old Dominion. A conference that I respect a lot.

Obviously we've talked about the history of the Sun Belt teams, current members of the Sun Belt and the blue bloods that they have defeated. It's a who's who in the top 15.

You know, last year Old Dominion opened the season at South Carolina. Final score was 23-19. South Carolina beat them by four. It's a hard place to play. I know that from being at Alabama.

Old Dominion got the lead with six minutes to go and has the ball, fumbles inside their own 10. Did it twice in the game. South Carolina's touchdown drives were six and two yards. I mean, they were extremely fortunate to beat Old Dominion.

All but one of Old Dominion's losses last year were by one score or less. Like I've told you in the past, they've beaten Virginia Tech twice in recent history, so we've got to be ready to go.

It's all about us and our preparation, having the right mindset, and going out there and playing our brand of ball with a bunch of new faces.

Questions?

Q. You talked about kind of each of your teams having a unique identity and personality. Now that you have had a full offseason with this group and got to know them in the locker room, what do you like about them? Anything that makes them unique to other teams you've coached?

CURT CIGNETTI: I like where we're at coming out of camp in terms of how we practice, how we compete, and the identity is sort of established throughout the season once you start playing the games. At the end of the year we'll be able to write the book, close the book on this football team.

Like I've said before, we've got a lot of nice pieces. We've got a lot of new guys that will be playing their first football for us. So anxious to see how we respond and react, but it's my job to get us to play the way we're supposed to play, my job and the assistants, play in, play out until the game is over from the first play to the last play.

Q. I guess it's a double-barrel question on just the health of your team. Do you feel good about where you are going into Week 1 health-wise, and do you feel like you also had what you needed health-wise through fall camp to get healthy competition, that you had guys competing for spots without injuries affecting that? You know, 11 on 11, those settings, were really productive?

CURT CIGNETTI: I feel really good about the health of our team right now going into the opener. During camp we did have some guys in and out defensively at times, and one offensive lineman missed a little time but is healthy now. So overall I'm pleased with where we're at.

Q. One thing that so many guys said about Kurtis Rourke last week was how even-keeled he was as a leader, not getting too high, not getting too low. I know you aren't able to see how Fernando is going to handle big moments on the field at this point because he hasn't been out there yet, but what sort of leadership qualities have you seen? You how have the guys rallied around him?

CURT CIGNETTI: He's played a lot of football, so I have a lot of confidence in him. I think what you saw last season, as Kurtis started to produce at a high level in the games, then his leadership and his status with his teammates -- I've never made it a point to try to make the new quarterback the leader of the team.



Our focus has always been on developing him, making him the best he can be, because you lead through your actions. There's nothing like positive performance to establish yourself as a leader.

Q. Can you assess the offensive line? In particular, what qualities, what attributes make a quality offensive line?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, you have to have a certain amount of size, and you've got to be tough. Ankle, knee, hip flexibility, explosive power, you know, initial quickness.

The ability to stay healthy really helps, and the smarter you are, the better, because there's a lot of variables up front and multiples. A lot of things happen where you've got to make quick adjustments.

We're fortunate to have a pretty experienced group, and I feel good about them.

Q. Quarterback Colton Joseph led the Sun Belt in total yards last year. What makes him so hard to defend? Then their defends returns an All-American at linebacker and a couple of other good players. What makes them a challenge to prepare for?

CURT CIGNETTI: Right. Offensively, it all begins with the structure and design of the offense. They're going to spread you out. Big, wide splits. Force you to defend the whole field and with the blocks count and the advantage throws and get the run game going. They've always been high in the conference in rushing, and they do a really nice job.

The quarterback can beat you with his legs and his arm. He missed a game and a half. He didn't take over as a starter until maybe Game 4 and missed a game or so. Him and the backup together rushed for about 900 and threw for about 2,000. Touchdown/interception ratio was good.

They try to create space through their alignments and take advantage to put themselves in the best play. They've got three or four offensive linemen returning, both quarterbacks, and then they lose their skill guys. They've got some new guys coming in.

Defensively, it's a three-three defense. A little different than what you see. Variety of blitzes and looks. It's a challenge.

Jason Henderson returns at middle linebacker. He got hurt last season early in the year, red-shirted. Had 170 tackles in 2023. I think he led the country in tackles.

Q. In terms of game day operation with the assistants, do you expect it to be the same as last year with Coach Shanahan in the booth and then Haines on the field? Then Coach Whitmer, is he going to take on the same responsibilities as Tino had last year?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yep.

Q. Last year over this year, what did you learn about going in? I know you've been doing this for a long time, but game preparation, Game 1, getting this team in order, anything different than you've done year-over-year?

CURT CIGNETTI: Not really. I think the core methods are about the same. It's just the sense of urgency during game week is so much different.

They're all excited to play, and now we've got to put the proper preparation in and understand that while they're excited to play, the game is going to be hard. You know, I expect a very tough challenge from Old Dominion, and we're going to have to play really well from the first play to the last play. We'll learn a lot about our team in Game 1 like we did last season.

Q. With the talent and depth in the running back room, how do you plan to rotate through those guys, at least the first couple of weeks of the season, to figure out who maybe can lead that back field going forward?

CURT CIGNETTI: We've always split the carries. Right now the top three backs are Hemby, Black, and Beebe, and I expect them all to carry the ball Saturday.

Q. You've talked highly about Strength Coach Derek Owings ever since you got here. What's the record card you've gotten through fall camp leading into this game week?

CURT CIGNETTI: What's sort of what?

Q. What's the report card on how the team is doing in the weight room from Derek Owings?

CURT CIGNETTI: Good. Good. I thought we handled practice as well, and we stayed relatively injury-free. Yeah, he does a good job.

Q. Corner opposite Ponds, how happy are you with how Jamari's last handful of weeks have been, and just how much did Ryland and -- is it Bell that's kind of also in there? How much has he kind of challenged them as well?



CURT CIGNETTI: I thought Sharpe came on at the end of last season. He started the last three or four games for us, and he's picked up where he left off. Got a lot of confidence in him.

Gandy has played a lot of football coming from Pitt as a starter, and Jaylen Belle is a good, young prospect.

Q. You talked after the first fall practice that you were focused on Old Dominion. How nice is it to have the sole focus and have the team's full attention on game week?

CURT CIGNETTI: Hopefully we have their full attention throughout the week and on Saturday, right? But yeah, you know, camp is important.

You're establishing the habits that they're going to carry you through the season, installing, developing players, learning about your team. Now it's time to go to war. It's serious business now.

Q. Louis Moore's court case is this week, and he could find out about his eligibility. Not asking about the case, but in terms of football prep, with his uncertainty, how have you handled it as you shift to game week and not knowing if you are going to have him or not? Is it like he got injured where you kind of have a backup plan in place? How have you balanced that with just not knowing yet?

CURT CIGNETTI: We're handling it the best way we see fit.

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