

Indiana University Football Media Conference

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Coach Curt Cignetti

Press Conference



CURT CIGNETTI: A 3:30 homecoming game. Good football team. Coach Locksley and his staff have done a great job recruiting the DMV. Excellent young talent. A lot of it is showing up on the field, especially on defense, as true freshmen.

They got off to a 4-0 start, and they had Washington 20-0 with three minutes to go in the third quarter for win five and went into the fourth 20-3, and it kind of came apart on them and lost by four, and then lost to Nebraska by three who is a 6-2 football team, as is Washington.

And UCLA is a tie game with 33 seconds to go and UCLA hits a couple of big plays, kicks a field goal with 2 seconds to go in the game to win. So three tough losses.

They're open this week, but really impressed with them as a football team.

I mean, they're in the top 10 in the country in turnover ratio. They've got a new defensive coordinator who has been in the NFL for 16 years, was a linebacker coach for the Ravens, two Super Bowls there. They had 14 interceptions. 22 sacks. They're giving up 17 points a game.

Their offense is only giving up two sacks. And they're outscoring people the first three quarters, 175-50. Got an excellent punter, excellent field goal kicker, short snapper, long snapper. And they're doing a lot of good things. A freshman quarterback, 6'5", 230 pounds. Really has a strong arm and can run.

And wide receivers are very talented, so is the tight end. The line's huge. Good running backs that also catch the ball out of the backfield.

So they fly around on defense. They create turnovers. They sack the quarterback. And offensively they're protecting the quarterback, protecting the ball, making explosive plays and have a good kicking game.

So it's homecoming, we're going to have to be at our best

and have a great week of prep starting today.

Couple things about the UCLA game. Got off to a fast start like we wanted to. Aiden Fisher with the interception on the second, a sack on the first play we had -- 7-0 out the gate.

And defense really won the line of scrimmage. Created three turnovers, which resulted in net 14 points for us. Held them to 200 yards, the last drive they gained some yards. They were probably in the 150s or 160s for the most part. And 1-of-11 on third down.

Offense scored seven out of eight drives, drive two through the midway to fourth quarter, I think, or early fourth quarter, and on third and fourth was 14-of-16. That's probably the story of the game was third down and the turnovers.

And we ran the ball for 262 yards, and our special teams were solid. We had a couple of undisciplined penalties I wasn't real pleased with, but, so, it was a good afternoon. But Maryland is going to be quite a challenge.

Q. I know Aiden Fisher is going through some tests. Did you get an update and do you anticipate him being available for Saturday or out long term?

CURT CIGNETTI: I would list Aiden Fisher as probable.

Q. With Fernando, have you offered him any advice kind of dealing with the national spotlight he's under? I know you say eliminate the noise and clutter. He's deleted his social media. He's a thoughtful kid. But this is different. He admitted Saturday he's never faced the spotlight he's under. Have you had a conversation with him at all?

CURT CIGNETTI: Up to this point we haven't had a one-on-one regarding that. I know he's got a lot of support off the field.

My messages to the team are always about staying focused on the here and now and things that affect preparation and positive performance and eliminating the noise and clutter. And he's always tuned into those



messages as well. But as we move further down the road on a daily basis, the antenna is always up.

But I think he's handled it great. He improves every week, makes plays. And I thought he made a lot of really nice plays Saturday.

Q. We've asked you the last couple of years a lot about experienced quarterbacks, especially here. How do you evaluate a guy that is, at Maryland, very raw to the position, has a lot of physical tools, has put good stuff on film? Obviously still growing. What do you see in Malik Washington?

CURT CIGNETTI: He's got great size. They're doing a really good job protecting him, which is huge. They've only given up two sacks. But he's also got the ability to extend plays, avoid the rush, which he's done, and throw it down the field or run, tuck it and run.

But he can make all the throws down the field, and he's learning as he goes. But he's very impressive.

Q. I did a quick count. I think my math is right. You guys have 11 Big Ten wins in your tenure by double figures. Past decade I think it was 10. What do you think has led to not only you guys playing well, but having dominance in the Big Ten?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, I really haven't thought about that very much. I think at home our fans are the best, and playing at home is a huge advantage for us. Once they get going, I mean, it's just so loud and crazy, and our players feed off of that.

And on the road we've been successful as well. And the thing we ask our guys to do is play every play like it's 0-0, game on the line and from beginning to end, regardless of the competitive circumstances. And I think they've bought into that message.

Q. You had a good game from Devan Boykin. What do you need for him to continue that the rest of the year?

CURT CIGNETTI: He played really well on special teams too and had a big interception. Had some nice plays, defensive player of the game.

And I've seen that whole safety position, the more snaps they get, the more familiarity they have playing together. A lot of interceptions in the back end. Good ball skills back there -- Boykin, Lewis, Moore and Ferrell all have good skills.

Boykin is a really smart player. He can play all three safety

positions. He's a good tackler, good cover guy. He made a really nice play on that interception Saturday, but had some big special teams tackles, too.

Q. How would you describe the importance of Bob Bostad with what you guys have been able to do on the ground so far this season?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think it's huge, which is why I felt so fortunate to be able to retain him. Fired up that, when I saw he was on the roster the year before -- because had been kind of aware of his name but had never met him -- probably 10, 12 years ago. And everybody sang his praises about the improvement of the offensive line in 2023.

Bob's an excellent line coach. He's a football guy. And he's a great fundamental teacher. He makes them tough. And those guys respond to him.

But like everything else, it's a team game. It starts up front and then at tight end and wide receiver, down field blocking. And our backs run really hard, do a good job protecting the ball too. And Fernando chips in with his yards now and then.

Q. The looks Haines throws are just really cool, really unique. What's the process look like of trying to craft those kind of looks? And how early on after you hired him did you kind of tell that his mind was just really advanced?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, I felt -- I got that sense about him pretty quickly when I hired him. Now, you've got to remember, I hired him back in, I think it was 2013 or so. He was -- coming off '14, coming off a graduate assistantship at Ohio State under Urban Meyer, and had been a graduate assistant at Indiana and had a Division III job also -- I actually hired him to coach the defensive line. That's a position I had available. It's a part-time position but full time hours, full time coach, for maybe 8,000 bucks.

And I thought he did a great job with the defensive line. At that point, I always kind of viewed him as a D-line guy. But he always expressed he wanted to be more of a linebacker guy. I always thought he would be coordinator material.

When I got the Elon job, he had gone to Cal-Davis and they got released as a staff. So I was fortunate enough to bring him back to Elon. And he did a tremendous job. He was Tony Trisciani's right-hand man, who is now the head coach at Elon.

And then when I went to JMU, I hired Corey Hetherman to be the defensive coordinator, who is now at Miami. He did

a great job, was with me three years.

But the day that about 20 minutes before Corey was to arrive for his interview, Bryant came walking into my office and said that Tony, down at Elon, had offered him the defensive coordinator job at Elon.

I said, what do you want to do? He said, I want to stay with you. I said, okay, well, look I'll talk to Corey, see about you being a co-coordinator. But understand that Corey's the coordinator. And Corey was cool with that.

When Corey left to go to Rutgers, right after the '21 season, I think, I elevated Bryant. And he just did a tremendous job. And now you see it. And every year, the package continues to build, the production numbers are great. We're always in the top three of the country against the run. We're normally in the top 10 in TFLs and sacks, the least amount of yards given up.

And he's a football guy. So, not only is he good at the Xs and Os -- and his philosophy is to attack. He wants to attack offenses. So the X and O part of it is his strength, but he's a great teacher. He's a great teacher for the linebacker, very detailed.

And I can't say enough good things about Bryant Haines. And I'm glad that he decided to stay last year when he had some opportunities because he's a super key guy in the organization.

Q. (Inaudible) entered this year with some lofty ambitions and goals. He was talking about aiming for a program sack record. Obviously he's still been productive out there, but maybe quieter than expected, just one sack. What's been different for him? What's this year been like for him?

CURT CIGNETTI: I think production numbers speak for themselves. I think he's got another level he can play at. And I'm waiting to see it.

Q. You mentioned that Maryland is very good at taking the ball away. Last year I think they turned you guys over four or five times but the defense responded. What lessons can you take from last year to show the team this year how to respond to that adversity?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, it's a different set of characters on their defenses and a new coordinator. I remember two early ones and then maybe a late fumble. I thought once we got our feet on the ground offensively after the first two series, we played fairly well. I've not gone back and looked at that tape because it's a completely different scheme this year.

So, look, no matter who you play, you've got to win the line of scrimmage. You've got to be able to run the ball, stop the run, put pressure on the quarterback. You've got to win the turnover ratio. Turnover ratio equals points.

UCLA, we're plus three, equaled 14 points. We have, almost every year since I've been a head coach but one, been in the top 10 in the country in turnover ratio. And maybe there's two or three, but we're normally there. And then it's a battle of explosive plays. Runs plus 12 passes, plus 15. Critical situations in special teams.

So, we've done a really good job of protecting the football. We haven't turned it over hardly at all. We've been getting takeaways. I just expect us to practice up to the standard and stack meetings and days, have a great week of preparation, and put it on the field, play 1 to 150.

Q. You talked about how good the defense is doing, but if you look at the numbers, you guys are giving up about three points per game in the second half of each game. And you're averaging about 20 points scoring-wise each game. So the team says -- defensively you're getting stronger in the second half, which, of course, is what you want but not always what is seen.

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, I mean, I think ODU had some big plays on us. Other than that, not much. Kennesaw got us on a couple of shift in motions, some funky formations.

Aside from that, it's been tough going for opponents against our defense. It's been that way for a while. That's what I'm used to seeing.

Our guys play with a lot of pride. There's a tradition on that side of the ball. They've got a great leader. The other assistant coaches do a tremendous job as well. We've got a lot of veterans back there that play a lot of football.

Offensively, we try not to put them in a bad spot. That's one thing about me still being involved offensively is it's not about scoring points; it's about winning the game. So I make sure that we don't put the defense in a bad position where we're turning the ball over in minus territory. And when people have moved the ball a little bit against our defense, we've done a good job to holding them to field goals.

Q. Something a little lighter, if you didn't mind, to finish today. I know you probably won't have time to celebrate with travel and everything. I'm curious, Halloween weekend, do you have a favorite Halloween costume from your past, your kids' past, anything like



that, one that you think back, that that was a really good one?

CURT CIGNETTI: That's a hard question for me. My wife loves Halloween. She's really disappointed that she's going to miss it this week.

But I can remember, as a young kid, my mother making me a homemade Superman or Batman costume because back then we didn't have a lot of money. (Indiscernible) it was Superman, Batman. I was a Snickers bar/Reese's cup guy. The costume wasn't as important to as getting all the candy.

Q. Have you seen the impersonator that they show on TV, all dressed up?

CURT CIGNETTI: He's pretty good.

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