

Indiana University Football Media Conference

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Coach Curt Cignetti

Press Conference



CURT CIGNETTI: Looking forward to getting back home Saturday after being on the road the last two weeks, 12:00 against Wisconsin. They're coming off a top-25 win at home against Washington. They're a tough, gritty football team. They've had a murderer's row schedule: Ohio State, Oregon, Michigan, Iowa, Washington, Alabama, you name it. I've got a lot of respect for Coach Fickell. He's a proven winner.

The guy has had a starting quarterback available about 30 percent of the time during his tenure at Wisconsin. That's tough duty.

I think we need to understand that we're going to get everybody's best shot. We're not sneaking up on anyone anymore. We got Iowa's best shot at Iowa. We got Penn State's best shot at Penn State. Oregon was obviously a big game on the road, and we'll get Wisconsin's best shot. So we've got to have a good week of preparation.

I'll open it up for questions.

Q. What went into starting Johnny over Zen on the offensive line, and do you have a timeline for Drew Evans' return?

CURT CIGNETTI: You know, Zen got dinged up in practice a little bit, so Johnny got more work. Zen was able to play in the game but didn't get the reps during the week. And Johnny played well.

Drew Evans will be a few weeks yet.

Q. More broadly, how did you evaluate particularly pass protection? I know that Penn State defensive front hasn't been as productive as it was expected to be, but there are NFL prospects there. Did you see some things that you want to get cleaned up in terms of pass pro in particular?

CURT CIGNETTI: Look, you always want a clean pocket when you throw the ball. That's not going to happen when you throw it 30 plus times, but they did put pressure on our

quarterback. They do have some NFL-type guys up front. There were a number of clean pockets, as well. Occasionally he got hit on a zero house blitz where they were bringing one more rusher and we could block, and that's going to happen.

But you're always looking to improve your protection.

Q. The performance you're getting from Hardy, obviously he's played well all year, but in particular Saturday's game and what you're getting from him?

CURT CIGNETTI: He's been a very consistent player. All three of those linebackers have been playmakers. Isaiah Jones has stepped up big time, Fisher was defensive player of the game, and Hardy has been very consistent and a good special teams guy, as well, so he's got a great future.

Q. Are there things that people missed with Mendoza? He was the No. 134 quarterback coming out of high school. Are there things that were there then that people didn't see? And how much was the progression when he got to college?

CURT CIGNETTI: I can't really answer that question because I didn't know who he even was in high school. I became aware of him when we signed his brother, Alberto, at JMU and then Alberto came with us when we came to Indiana. Being the film junkie I am and making all the different cutups, occasionally I'd see plays from Fernando at Cal, and then when he went in the portal, obviously watched a lot of game tape on him and just really liked his stuff, the physical -- all the stuff you see, the quick release, the arm, the mobility. He's a great person. He really prepares. He's really smart, and he's developed quite a bit since he's been here.

I've said this a number of times, but I'll say it again: As much as he has improved, he can still improve more, and he's probably taken his biggest step in the pocket in terms of staying calm, going through his progressions, his footwork. There's still times when you can see that he needs to clean some things up in the pocket.



But that final drive, we weren't getting much done on offense the previous few drives. He had been hit quite a bit. He got sacked on 1st down. 2nd and 17, running clock, minute 30, our own 13, no time-outs, right; wasn't looking real great at that point. Everybody responded, and it always does start with the quarterback.

He stuck a few balls in the seam, made some throws, our guys made some catches, and it all culminated in the last play. It was a great win and a real shot in the arm for our team, who was down and out in a lot of people's minds, refused to lose and got it done.

Q. For a guy from Miami who's been at Cal for three years, handling the snow outside right now, is he okay? For a guy who grew up in Miami who spent three years at Cal, can he handle the weather right now?

CURT CIGNETTI: I'd say he can handle about anything, Fernando. He climbed some tall mountains. But we'll get him a winter jacket. We're not allowed to do that, are we. He probably has a good one anyhow that says Indiana on it.

Q. You mentioned Wisconsin's win over Washington. They really shut them down, shut down Washington offensively, a good offense. The week prior, they gave Oregon fits. What are you seeing from them defensively that could present some problems and challenges for you guys?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, they play hard. They play a lot of people up front. They get hats to the ball. Bend don't break in the secondary. Keep the ball in front of you, do a good job against the run game. They created turnovers against Washington, and then they got Washington bottled up in the one end zone and it was very loud there, and they were having problems with the noise.

They did a great job. They lost another quarterback in that game, freshman stepped in, and to come away with that -- they blocked a punt. To come away with a win under those circumstances, that was a great win for them.

Q. It's potentially the final home game or final regular season home game for a lot of guys, but what have guys like Aiden Fisher and Mikail and some of the seniors meant to building the foundation of the culture that you wanted here?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, you're right. I mean, it's the last regular season home game. I really haven't had a chance to think about that very much.

I think all the guys really are focused in on today and what lies ahead. But those guys have been tremendous foundational pieces for the program back at JMU and here at Indiana. They're great players, great people, great leaders. There's a number of them.

I doubt that any of them are thinking about the end right now because everybody understands sort of where we're at and what's possible.

Q. To be a good quarterback and a leader, it takes great personality traits. I wonder if you have seen any of Fernando's TV postgame interviews in which he is able to answer and looks directly into the camera and hands out his gratitude to his teammates like a NASCAR veteran, and if you've seen that, your comments. Secondly, in yours on Saturday you seemed to get really emotional, very close, on the verge to crying almost. Was that the most emotional win you have ever experienced?

CURT CIGNETTI: Fernando never ceases to amaze me. He's so deep. He's so intelligent. He's such a good and caring, giving person. He's an A++ every single interview.

He'll be a huge success in anything he decides to do one day when football ends. He's just a special, unique person. And it's all real.

I did get a little choked up there at the end just because I was so proud of our guys. Our backs were against the wall there, and boy, it wasn't looking very good, and in that venue, 105,000 people, and Penn State was playing really well.

Let me tell you, Penn State got players. I give them a lot of credit. I've got a lot of respect for that program. That was a great place to play. Their fans were awesome. They had it cranked up, and we found a way to flip the switch and get the momentum back and make the plays.

It meant a lot. I guess part of it probably I was thinking about a little bit. My first time in that stadium was 1971 and every two years I was in that stadium for about 15, 16 years, and I can tell you there were a lot of long rides home. Not many happy rides home. That one meant a lot.

You think about my journey, 10, 15 years ago, did I ever think I'd lead a team into that stadium? No. Lead a team into that stadium victorious? But it mainly centered around how our guys responded and the challenge that they overcame to get it done.

Q. When you look back at the tape again from Omar's catch, does it still seem surreal how he was able to



come down with it? I know we've talked about him this season, but how you've seen him develop to become the player that he is for you guys in this offense?

CURT CIGNETTI: I mean, it was a tremendous play. To be able to catch the ball, look down and then get your feet in position, great job by Derek Owings developing this corps to allow him to do that in the air and Coop working like he has the whole off-season and in the fall. He has developed quite a bit.

He's another guy, he's like Fernando. He still has quite a bit of room for improvement because of his ability level, and he'd be the first to tell you that.

But that was a tremendous play. It was a great throw, too, because three straight plays, they're bringing house plus one. Now, we added a blocker to that final play, which meant they had to come a little wider and we had a little more time to get rid of it but still took the hit.

But Cooper can be as good as he wants to be.

Q. Do you expect Sarratt to play this week, and when you went back and watched Charlie, what impressed you about him?

CURT CIGNETTI: Yeah, Sarratt is day-to-day right now, and I'll know more every single day.

Becker has taken advantage of his opportunities before the Penn State game, and really proud of him to come up big the way he did in that game. I thought he just showed a lot right there. We knew he had skills. He was long. He's always done a great job on special teams. He made some good catches when he had a chance to play this season. But in that venue to make those plays -- he was the offensive player of the game. Really proud of him, and now let's stay humble and hungry and build on it.

Q. There's been so much that's happened this year, getting to 10-0 and tying the team mark for best starts. Sounds like you've already done some thinking about your time going into let's say Penn State. From a historical perspective, have you had a chance to think about or can you think about what this means from a historical perspective, this season so far with games to go has meant for IU football?

CURT CIGNETTI: Well, we went down -- we kind of went through that last year a little bit when we inherited a program that had not been very successful, had lost more games than any other program at the FBS or Division I level and got off to a 10-0 start. Fell short, really, at Ohio State and up at Notre Dame.

This team was put together, feel good about the pieces we added. You never know about your team really until you start playing the games and then you build off your successes and develop belief and confidence, a little more team unity and intangibles.

I really have not thought much about that. I think we're on a little bit of a mission here, and that's really been the focus. I think that's how the kids are thinking, too.

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