

Rose Bowl Game presented by Prudential: Alabama vs Indiana

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Indiana Hoosiers Fernando Mendoza Press Conference



PLAYOFF
QUARTERFINAL



Q. Fernando, what are some of the emotions that you're feeling playing in the Rose Bowl, it's in California, Latino, a huge Latino community out here that is not only supporting you but...

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I have a lot of family coming out to this game. It's going to be a huge game for myself and also my entire family and my community that's going to come out to this game. I have Hispanic family that lives in LA and so it's a little bit of an east coast Cuban heritage to a west coast with my Mexican relatives all coming together enjoying this moment, enjoying this time for the Rose Bowl.

The Rose Bowl is a magical place. LA I believe has the best weather on earth. To be able to play in this atmosphere in the Rose Bowl, it's a special moment for myself, for my family, and I would say just being able to play in front of an Hispanic and Latino crowd, it's what I do. I want to inspire young Latino kids and I want to always represent my culture to the highest.

So that's something I'm looking forward to doing on Thursday night -- Thursday morning.

Q. You being the Heisman Trophy winner, leader of this team, only undefeated team in college football, how do you detach as far as taking care of your own business, being the best person you can be on the field and off the field?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, there are a lot of things that go into that. I would say myself, I don't rely on myself. I rely on other trusted mentors, sports psychologists to keep my mental game at my peak.

I know that's my responsibility to my coaches, to my teammates, and to the entire team, to be able to be sharp mentally and not have outside influences, pressures, and

noise able to impact my game. I think one thing is just really just keeping the process on how I got here, how the entire team got to this place, which is, you know, keeping the process that I've kept for every single game. Don't change anything.

And in that sense, also realize it is a team game. The reason I won the Heisman, had the opportunity, is because we're 13-0 and at that point in the season we were the best team in college football.

Now we got to go prove it again and realize that the Heisman was a team award, and now we got to get the ultimate team award, which is first being in the Rose Bowl.

Q. How have you seen Coach Cignetti change this culture as far as Indiana football? It used to be known as a basketball school; now it's a football school as well. How have you seen him over the course of this season change that as far as having the stability and the culture?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I would say -- I wasn't here before the change, I was just here for the Cignetti era. However, the way that I see the entire culture and the trickle down effect from Coach Cignetti, and not just Coach Cignetti but all the assistant coaches, GAs, strength staff, just the whole support staff always pushing for the no-complacency mindset has really affected the locker room in a positive way.

Everybody has a common goal and knows what we got to get done and knows we got to get better every single day.

Although we're 13-0 there is a lot of praise from media and awards, I would say there is no huge egos in the locker room. We're all trying to get better and trying to make the best Indiana offense, the best Indiana defense, and best Indiana special teams possible.

Q. How excited are you to be playing in the Rose Bowl?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I'm extremely excited. I've had one other opportunity to play in the stadium, the



Rose Bowl, and it was the last Pac-12 After Dark game. That was a really special game for myself. Watched the Rose Bowl growing up. From my time spending here, living in California for the past three years, hearing everybody talk about the Rose Bowl has really helped it sink in for myself. It's really helped it sink in on how monumental this game is and how much this means to the west coast, how much this really means to the entire country.

I know a lot of people online say the national championship should be played at the Rose Bowl because it's a special event. I think that just speaks volumes on what a great venue this is and what a special game this is. I think the Rose Bowl is the epitome of college football, and I'm so blessed and honored to be able to play in it.

Q. It's been three and a half weeks since you won that championship game in Indianapolis, and of course the accolades you received after. What has Coach done to say, okay, this has all been well and good; let's forget about it and worry about the future?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, Coach gave us a little time of the bye weeks in which we're still working out, we're keeping our fundamentals sharp. However, it was three weeks ago. Although it was a great and a fantastic monument for IU football, I think one of the pro of having the first round by bye is we have such a long break and we're able to flip that page and get over that in a sense where we are very excited and happy that we did win it; however we're not satisfied. We want to go and first win the Rose Bowl.

Q. What did you learn from watching that Alabama-Oklahoma. For a while seemed like you were going to be playing the Sooners to realizing the playoffs every play matters and nothing is over until all it's zeroes on the clock.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Alabama's a resilient team and tough, and so is Oklahoma. I think it was a great SEC matchup, and I think they're both fantastic teams. I know both of them would've been tough fights and we got the draw and we're playing Alabama. Everyone knows Alabama. They're an SEC juggernaut. They have a great offense, great defense, great coach, and so really, really looking forward to playing them.

They're going to be a tough team. I think that Oklahoma game speaks testament on how resilient they are and they're a tough team to kill.

Q. Fernando, it's never happened college football until now. (No microphone.)

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, so my grandfather went to LSU; so did all of his brothers. They went from Cuba to Miami High School and went to LSU because they had good programs and they let them in. So he was always an LSU fan and always seen those Alabama-LSU clashes and always watched them as a family.

Alabama has been a juggernaut forever. They're historically the best college football program of all-time. And so to have Coach Cignetti have coached there before and take some of those attributes and implement them to Indiana football, it was a good opportunity for us. It was a great opportunity for us to play against SEC opponent which will be a fantastic opportunity for all our players. We're just so honored to do it. It's such a high conference of football. It's going to be a great matchup.

Q. You mentioned that you're part Mexican.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: So not through my own blood, through my uncle, Juan Carlos Berretta (phonetic), his family is Mexican. So my family married in Mexican, my mom's sister.

Q. What are your favorite foods from Cuba and Mexico?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Okay, I mean, you know, I think they're both great cuisines. I would say as far as Mexican food goes I would say I love enchiladas. They're so good. Those are just my favorite in that sense.

Then also quesa birrias. So good. I love those. And Cuban food I would say is more comfort food. I would say I always go good with a good croqueta. It's the best.

Q. (No microphone.)

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, Ty Simpson is an amazing player. I've seen him or heard about him for a long time now. You know, he was one of the top guys so I watched the whole entire 2022 elite class, and not only was he a great quarterback but seemed like he was a great guy. I think everyone he's rubbed off on, whether it's a Podcast, us with the boys or anybody, I've always seen his personality shine through. I think that's why he's such a great leader of that team in which people see he's authentic, genuine, and also one of the best quarterbacks in the nation no doubt about it.

We don't have many opponents, like similar opponents, but they did play Wisconsin this year and we got play Wisconsin. So able to dissect that game thoroughly, and that game showed why he's one of the best quarterbacks

in the nation. He is extremely efficient accurate, and I have nothing to say. From that game I've actually admired a lot from him game, and also taking a couple plays from that game against Wisconsin and I've taken a couple things in my own game watching him.

Q. Eight teams left in the playoffs. I know you are fortunate to be where you are. How are you embracing this moment knowing you're just three games away from winning a national title?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, that's a great question. Like you said there are eight teams left. I can't thank God enough for this opportunity.

However, we really got to focus on winning the Rose Bowl first. Alabama is such a great team. Although it's No. 1 against I believe No. 9th or 8th seed, I'm not 100% sure, but it's such a great team.

You know, last year we saw the all the first -- all the teams that had byes, they all lost. So we really got to take this opportunity day by day. The national championship is the ultimate goal. I think any team would to you lie if they said it wasn't the ultimate goal beginning of the season.

Everybody has a little bit of -- I would say a little futuristic vision where we want that national championship; however, the Rose Bowl is so important to us. Having the opportunity to play Alabama, an opportunity to rise to the occasion of the Rose Bowl, which is one the best venues in sports, such a great opportunity for us.

Q. (No microphone.)

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yep.

Q. You guys put any thought into why that was the case?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I mean, I wasn't in those locker rooms and wasn't in those programs so I can't tell you. However, it is an interesting statistic that all the teams with the bye lost. So I think if anything that's motivated us a little another more to not get complacent, out that Big10 Championship page behind us. We really got peak at the right time.

You know, Big10 Championship was amazing. Great for IU fans, great for IU football history. However, we want to make sure we're peaking at this moment in the Rose Bowl and then through the College Football Playoff.

Q. (Regarding complacency.)

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say although there has been a lot of attention throughout the entire program, there is really been no egos. It's really been I would say a little bit of the crushing of egos in the sense of like it's we've all held each other really accountable. We all realize, hey, right now is not a time to slack off. We dreamed our entire lives for this moment since kids.

Also as older men we're going to realize and look back at this moment. So this is a moment that really, really counts in our college football careers. Let's make the most of it.

Q. Have you had time to reflect on what the last few weeks meant for you? How do you process that?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I would say there is a couple things. I think having the month off is also a plus. Although it was a negative for some teams last year. I think that I've been able to see it personally as a plus. So just give myself time to reflect on and let that -- the Big10 Championship, the Heisman, all those other great things sink in in a way where, okay, that's cool, boom, now we got the new season.

Everyone is 0-0. We got the College Football Playoff and the best season to be a part of. Let's go rise to the occasion and act like, hey -- it's not like we have the Rose Bowl and we're trying to protect it from Alabama because we're a higher seed. No, no, no. We're both in this race and we got to go take it.

I think our team really has embraced that taker mental tee.

Q. Are you just kind of learning that?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I would say learning that on the fly. I mean, I'm not going to sit here and lie to you. I have not -- I've never won a conference championship before and never won a Heisman before. This being the first time, give all the glory to God. What a great opportunity.

However I think the great coaches, teammates, and then great mentors that I have myself have really propelled me to be ready for this moment.

Q. Your teammates all rave about you being great on the field but an excellent teammate. Give me your thoughts on why that's important to you to have that type of relationship with guys on your team.

FERNANDO MENDOZA: I think it's really important because I believe our superpower as a team is we have the glue. That helps our resiliency and also helped us play through gritty moments.

It's really caring about the guy next to you. If you have one of your best friends lining up next to you ready to go to war, ready to die for you, it makes you play a little bit harder.

In contrast, if you have another coworker or acquaintance, someone who you might know but you might not lay your life and body on the line for them. So I think all of us have a really, really strong genuine connection. It helps us play harder for each other and also helps us communicate more efficient with each other. We're able to talk to each other in different aspects. Being so close friendship-wise, we all know that, hey, if I got on -- if he gets on me or if I get on him, it's not that personal. We're still going to be best friends or really good friends. Just we want to achieve our goal.

Q. Fernando when you arrived in Indiana, how do you go about reaching out and creating those relationships?

FERNANDO MENDOZA: Yeah, I would say when I first got here they had a really great leadership system. I wanted to fit in and learn the most that I could and try to elevate it. So the first thing I did is made sure I knew everybody on the team's name. Made sure I cared about them. I studied the roster. Some people might thought I'm a stalker, it's creepy having the roster photographs. Some were tough. People had different hair cuts, some transferred out and there was new transfers in.

I tried to learn everybody's name. If I didn't get them the first try I for sure got them the second try. Really showed that, hey, I care about you. No matter if you're the star linebacker or you're a walk-on. No matter who you are I'm going to care about you because I want to help this team and be a leader of this team. I believe one of the best leaderships that I've been able to learn is servant leadership.

You know, I'm religious and Jesus Christ showed that servanthip, and that's something I look to follow.

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