

# Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

Wednesday, July 24, 2024  
Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

## Miami Hurricanes Coach Mario Cristobal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

**Q. Talk about your defense. How good is your defense this year?**

MARIO CRISTOBAL: We made a lot of progress last year from a total defense standpoint, really just about every statistical category.

Part of that was the caliber of player in the building had improved. We bolstered that even more this off-season.

I think when you have continuity at the defensive coordinator position, that bodes well also. A guy you're going to be speaking to in a little bit, Kiko Mauigoa, he's a big reason why, as a leader of that defense, being surrounded by people that are driven, hungry and want to be there.

We took a good step last year. We expect to take an even bigger one this year.

**Q. Talk about Cam Ward coming into the system. How has that adjustment been so far?**

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It's very well-documented his productivity as a player throughout his career. What really stands out in the short time we've been around him is he's an alpha leader, okay? On the way in, when we were watching him on film, the reason everybody wanted him was his play making ability. Accurate, great arm strength, ability to improvise, extend plays, a game changer.

Whenever there was a bad play, his ability to bounce back and make things right. His aggressive, I would say, competitive nature to come back and make things right, to go and make up for maybe a play that was negative, was really impressive. That has really stood out at his time at Miami throughout spring practice as he just built and gained the trust of his teammates.

**Q. Your first game is against the Florida Gators. They're a rival. How do you not only win that game, set that tone for the rest of the season the country knows?**

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It's a tremendous rivalry. I know our fan base and everybody is incredibly fired up about that. But we're not talking about the Florida Gators. We have training camp coming up. For us to be the best team we can be on August 31st, we have to have a great training camp, we have to improve our systems, our techniques, our fundamentals, our ability to communicate, execute. Without any of that, nothing else is really possible.

There will be a time we get to it. In no way, shape or form am I disrespecting your question. All focus is on Miami. In due time, we'll be addressing our first game.

**Q. Get your Cuban coffee this morning?**

MARIO CRISTOBAL: No, they failed me, man. Everybody talked about the great Cuban coffee places in Charlotte. I'm sure they're here. I'll call Greg about that.

Never happened, so there's some making up to do.

**Q. Cam Ward over the last two seasons has been sacked over 80 times. What conversations have you had with your O-line with protecting the quarterback?**

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Protecting the quarterback has always been the forefront of any and every place that we've been at. It starts with guys like Jalen Rivers over here. Complete pro from top to bottom. A mentor to the younger guys. His approach to his craft.

It starts with the guys up front, making sure there's complete alignment between the coordinator and the offensive line coach, right? Understanding what defenses do, what they do well. Where there personnel advantages and disadvantages might be, and scheming our plan as it relates to that.

To do that, you have to have good personnel up front, especially when you have a quarterback like we feel our



quarterback and quarterbacks are to give him the right amount of time, to allow them to at a very high level operate within the system. Sometimes improvise on their own.

We feel good about the personnel up front. We feel really good about the personnel outside on the perimeter, in the core, in the backfield. The combination of those things. Cam's football IQ, his knowledge of protections, understanding where he is and isn't protected, how to get to a protection to make sure he is, and everything built around it will allow him to be efficient, protected and allows us to keep him up right.

**Q. The transfer portal has been huge for Miami. Y'all have been busy in the transfer portal. Can you tell me how much of an impact and what role it has had for your program?**

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It's a great question.

We were talking about this earlier. The use of the portal and how you build your roster is all dependent upon what the starting point is in a program. At a previous program, there wasn't much use of a transfer portal by us because we were very junior and senior laden.

We have a handful of fourth and fifth-year guys that are awesome. They need to be complemented by guys that have had a significant amount of snap counts, maturity at certain positions.

You have guys that have been here, have been through a lot, are driven to compete and win. Then you have some transfer portal guys at some positions that needed bolstering that are driven, that want to win, want to be at Miami. Then they're sandwiched in there with some uber-talented freshmen classes.

You have them at all levels and different positions. That allows us for higher-level play, allows for a great mentorship and development for the younger guys. Now you build the right kind of depth. You're not staggered where it's more sustainable.

The coming years, it bodes well for Miami where it's layered with upperclassmen are complemented by younger guys. There are younger guys in starting roles as well. But overall the blend and mix is really well -- really good.

**Q. Cam Ward comes from an air raid style offense. Shannon Dawson has that history. Can you talk about how his skill set lines up with what Coach Dawson likes to do?**

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It's a perfect marriage because you're looking at very high football IQ guys that continue to evolve.

Sometimes it's unfair to pigeonhole a guy into being just an air raid guy. There are passing principles that relate to the air raid, but there's also five, six, seven man protection and play action, schematical stuff that is more towards a power spread team as well as a very efficient and powerful run game that we've also put together.

It's a great blend. The evolution, the morphing of our system allows a guy like Cam, a guy like Jalen to maximize their abilities, right? Whether it be in the run game, whether it be in the screen game, the passing game, we feel there's a lot of different ways we can attack opponents.

It starts with the guys up front and the guy behind center. We're super blessed to have guys we wouldn't trade for anybody in the country.

**Q. What does 'accomplish greatness' mean to you?**

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It would be a way of life. Relates to alignment, everything you do. At our place we say how you do anything is how you do everything. Whether it be the classroom, the community, how you are at home with your family, how you are in the community with people, how you are in a locker room, on the road, how you are when things are going well or when they're not going so well and you face adversity.

Greatness is being the absolute best you can be all the time. It's a way of life.

**Q. We've seen a lot of great Miami teams over the years. Can you tell us what's different about this year's Hurricane team?**

MARIO CRISTOBAL: What's different? I can tell you what's progressing. Back to what we were talking about earlier. There's a starting point for everything, right? Starting point at Miami for us was making sure that we enhance the caliber of talent in the locker room, that we increase the level and capabilities of the coaching staff, and that we blend in the strongest and most unbreakable culture that we can.

We've been at it for two years. Systems are growing. Players are developing. People are there for the right reasons, right? Growth and development, hard working, good people is a very strong combination. We feel awesome about the people in the building.

These guys, they run to the work. They run to the fight.



They're awesome to be around. It's awesome to sit back and watch them work. It lets you go home and feel good knowing that no matter what, these guys are ready and willing to show up because they're driven to win. They're team goal oriented.

What's different? I don't know if I've ever answered one of those questions well or to the point because there are kind of projections, almost like hopes and wishes. For us, we're about the work.

We've been lucky to have been around great coaches, great mentors in our profession as players and young coaches. We apply all those principles and values. We've been blessed enough to have a locker room full of guys that are all about it.

They're eager. I can't wait to have the opportunity to get to work with them.

**Q. Miami is traditionally a pro style offense. Maybe a more mobile quarterback like Cam, does that open up the playbook at all for you guys?**

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Miami, we got two different eras now, brother. We go back to Testaverde and Kosar. Miami has gone open spread, air raid, condensed, just about everything.

We believe in Cam Ward and we believe that Cam Ward will allow Miami to do things that Miami hasn't been able to do in a long, long time. We have complete trust and faith in him and the guys around him.

He's a dynamic player. Even more importantly, he's a dynamic human being. Strong leader. Raised the right way. Unbelievable parents. Like the guys beside him, those sets of parents are the reason why those guys are the way they are.

When you combine that with the talent he has and the guys around him, it's exciting. But we're not here to make any predictions or projections. We just want to get to work. We want to get to work, get at it, go prove ourselves.

**Q. In a fast casual business we have a saying of eliminating excuses. You've been able to eliminate excuses with the recruiting, with the roster construction. Now there's no excuses, it's that pressure to perform. Can you speak on that?**

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I'm not sure if I understand the question. I just know that football is process, right? People, systems and culture. That's what we're doing.

I guess I would answer in the way that we have been working really hard to get to a point where our expectations for ourselves continue to grow. We want those. We welcome those. That's what we're looking forward to as we enter training camp for 2024.

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