

Atlantic Coast Conference Football Kickoff

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Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Miami Hurricanes

Coach Mario Cristobal

Mark Fletcher, Jr.

Darian Mensah

Press Conference



I think we've had steady progress over the last four years. It's been due to the commitment and the level of just care of these players and their coaches. The fact that everything has been based on having a 1-0 attitude towards everything we do, every meeting, practice session, training session, just making sure we never deviate from that, never stray from that process.

That has also led to thankfully for us some consistency in our coaching staff. We retain both coordinators. Consistency in that case is good because they have had success. They're also very adaptable, knowing with whatever schemes we do run, they have to fit the skill set of our players.

We're really excited about that.

Q. Could you talk about your philosophy of looking in the portal for quarterbacks to add to the team. What you saw out of Darian when it was time to look for a quarterback?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: We were in the market for a quarterback. We felt the team was really set in so many areas. When Darian hit the portal, we felt this is a guy we would love to pursue. Watching crossover tape with so many opponents we faced, we saw his level of talent and play. What really took us by surprise in a great way is what an incredible young man he is. His levels of leadership, care factor, time invested in his craft, football IQ, just natural human IQ, just an elite person along with the guys beside him.

We found ourselves also in a situation like in previous years where it was time to take a portal quarterback. We feel going forward we are set in that room from a high school standpoint with what we have on the roster, what we have coming in.

I'll also say this: Every single year is different. Even though our foundation is the high school player, we're never going to deny ourselves the opportunity to get better as a program if there is a player that we can pick up in the portal that can help our program elevate.

THE MODERATOR: Back to back 10-win seasons for the regular season at Miami, including the National Championship run to the Finals a year ago. Now he's at the podium.

Questions.

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Looking forward to another season with the ACC. A lot of great coaches and teams that are poised to have, again, another fantastic season.

For us it's really simple. We've certainly got right back to work right away after last season, went in with a 1-0 mentality in everything we do.

Honored to be here today with our players. Trust these guys with my life. I think you'll enjoy speaking with them, share the questions that you ask, at least for the most part (smiling).

Again, we're here with the opportunity to present ourselves and answer anything that we possibly can for you.

Very grateful for that.

With that being said, questions, please.

Q. With the apparent goal of perpetual success lingering in your mind, in the same breath some key components differing from last season, how big of a role does consistency within the presence of this team matter?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Well, ironically that's something we were just talking about, the importance of consistency with everything that we do.



Q. You guys have FAMU, which is one of the biggest HBCUs in the nation. What is the importance of playing HBCUs? Especially with you having similar colors, how do you pick what color uniforms are going to wear? Most people want to know, are the FAMU marching 100 coming?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: Those are questions for others in this room. I'll get you that information to you best I can what I can.

I think historically they're an excellent program with a great coaching staff. It's challenging. We play across the country on a Friday night and they play on Sunday right down in south Florida as well. We'll both have short weeks. We will both be tested on that night.

So we're looking forward to the opportunity to compete against such a great program.

Q. In addition to replacing the quarterback, you're also having to replace a lot of production along the offensive and defensive lines. What have you seen of the growth in those rooms?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: First and foremost, I'd like to commend the entire conference on the fact that as a conference we had more players from the trenches drafted in the first round than any other conference in football.

Miami alone had three, which is as many or more than just about every conference.

I think it's important to note that this is college football. If you have really good players, they're going to be gone to the next level in three to four years, right?

So the process to replace those players began the day that they were signed with the next class. And those players haven't been waiting their turn, they've been preparing the entire time. These guys will be glad to attest to the way we practice is pretty intense and pretty challenging, so therefore, the rep count, we're rep intensive I would say.

From a competitive standpoint we work good-on-good every single day. We work block destruction all the way from week one till the end of the entire season. We feel that these guys are not only prepared to step in but prepared to excel.

I also think it's important to say this: In 2022, when we first recruited those guys, we didn't say much because we weren't winning many games. I think it's important to note that. You don't say much. Now that we are getting better and progressing, it's probably time to say less. Not time to

predict, prognostications, and all that stuff.

We would just like to keep our mouths shut and go outside and work, get better, represent our program to the best of our abilities.

Q. Alongside the portal you also have a lot of returning talent. What is an area that you really want your guys to improve on, especially following such a successful season?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: I think in football we do truly feel at the University of Miami that you never stay the same; you get better or you get worse. So elevating every aspect of the program starts with every individual. I'm talking about the importance of challenging your coaches. We're blessed to have an excellent coaching staff. But there's no value in coming back thinking that we're going to be good.

It's important that we self assess and that we find every possible advantage and edge to give to our players so they can go out and be the best players they can possibly be.

Mentality is everything for us. We like to get on edge and we like to stay on edge. The only way to do that is by conducting certain levels of intensity and urgency as it relates to practice and preparation.

If you speak with our players, I think they'll echo that. That's been what has really worked for us. We're nowhere near where we want to be yet, but we're certainly gaining ground there.

We're excited to get this process rolling once again in training camp here in a couple of weeks.

Q. Those pillars of the program that you wanted to bring in when you first came into Miami as the head coach, some of those things you wanted to implement, where they are right now, the evolution of the pillars of your program. And then secondly, involving the alumni the way you do, Ed Reed, Michael Irvin, everybody on the sideline, why that's important to you?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: It's important that Michael Irvin never kisses me again on national TV. I think that's really important to point out. Also important to point out, and actually Mark Fletcher mentioned it, one of the best things we do is our alumni reunion, which had 400-plus members show up this year.

You can imagine, we should have rolled the ball out there and scrimmaged. Such great teammates, players, guys that maybe weren't great players but were excellent friends



and brothers.

That's always been a big -- I mean, I can't emphasize enough what a major role that played. Once I got the opportunity, privilege to return to Miami, why it had to be done. I owe Miami. I do, I feel that way strongly.

As it relates to the pillars for us. We don't have any signs on the wall. For us, it's as simple as this. For us, our culture, this will sum it up, it everybody for everything every single day. There shouldn't be any misconception or misunderstanding as it relates to that.

All that means is nothing but your best will be good enough. So we feel strongly about it. It is led by them. They told themselves and their teammates to really, really high standards.

We're pretty simple. This press conference might be a little bit boring (smiling).

Q. You started your head coaching career at FIU, you were kind of the CFO of that program. Talk about all the work that goes into building that program and how it's helped mold you into the coach you are today focusing on Miami?

MARIO CRISTOBAL: How is that experience? When you walk into a place and you sign a contract, they tell you guys are about to go on a five-year probation. You're going to have 33 ineligible players, 17 plus on top of that. You're going to lose a scholarship for every player ineligible going forward to a contemporaneous penalty for the APR.

The good news is you play seven of the top teams in the country that's about to go Division I. By the way, you just lost 15 straight games before you got started.

Do you want that job (smiling)?

But you know what, we bet on our people, we bet on the south Florida community. They often ask me the questions. The credit goes to all the people that chose such a difficult and tough road because you're not just a coach there, you are the academic advisor, you're the chef, you are the travel coordinator, you're the fundraiser. That's been documented. We were supposed to go to play Alabama, and we got to the airport and they said, Where you guys going?

We're going to hop on our plane, we have a game tomorrow against Alabama.

They said, Well, you guys didn't play for a plane, so you're

not going anywhere. So give my credit card to the wife, go get 200 meatball and cheese subs at Subway, bring them back for the players, let me figure this out.

You are faced with obstacles you wouldn't normally face. Honestly, I'm grateful for that. I got to cut my teeth on some very difficult situations and circumstances. I thank God for that because it really helps me appreciate being at a place like Miami nowadays.

But yeah, we pay for our planes now (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time, coach. We'll start with questions for Mark.

Q. Mark, you were exceptional in the Playoffs. You had as many hundred-yard games in your four Playoff games as you did in the entire regular season. 127 yards per game, 6.7 yards per carry. What was it during that Playoff run that allowed you to elevate your play to a whole 'nother level?

MARK FLETCHER JR: Of course, the hard work. I guess I tapped back into having fun. Football is supposed to be a fun game. For a long time I guess, like, with a lot of adversity I faced, it was kind of hard to just find that happy medium of having fun, but I got to be locked in as well.

When I truly just tapped into how I used to play the game, have fun, man, I just reaped the benefits of that.

Q. Who's on your pennant? That looks really awesome.

MARK FLETCHER JR: This is my dad. Long live Big Mark, baby.

Q. What are some of the lessons you learned from that loss to Indiana that you want to bring into this season?

MARK FLETCHER JR: Definitely that all the little things matter. It takes an entire team to reach that end goal. It can't be just one side, it's got to be everybody. Everybody has a role and everybody has to do 110%, they have to give 110% effort in their role.

Man, all the things matter. Special teams matter. You got to be locked in on things like that.

Me and the leaders, we're going to continue to emphasize that message going into a great summer and finish it off in the fall camp going into the season.

Q. Some changes around you on Miami's offense this year. Talk about what Darian Mensah brings to this O



and some new offensive linemen?

MARK FLETCHER JR: Nah, Cristobal and big boss man D-Train did a good job getting him.

Darian is extremely intelligent. Great work ethic. He's a winner. He's a winner, competitor. He's my dog. I'm going to block my behind up front.

As far as the O-line, they seen what it's supposed to look like. Those guys are still the hardest working in the building. I have extreme confidence running behind them.

Q. What part of your offense were you focused on this off-season?

MARK FLETCHER JR: What part of the offense was I focused on this off-season? The entire offense.

Q. Improving.

MARK FLETCHER JR: Just staying consistent, staying consistent. We want to run the ball. We want to pass. We know what it takes to do that. We have great players to handle that, as well.

Like what Cristobal said, just staying consistent, that's the biggest thing right now.

Q. How is your mom doing? Has she already planned out those 12,000 miles she'll 12 this year?

MARK FLETCHER JR: She's definitely excited. She's ready. I'm surprised she ain't leave yet (laughter).

Q. Going into the season, how important was it being able to maintain Malachi Toney? What can you tell us that's improving even more?

MARK FLETCHER JR: I'll say definitely he's stepping up in that leadership role. He's definitely been a guy who's always led by example. Everybody see what he can do, the type of person he is.

Definitely just improving that leadership role, use that voice for these younger kids. He's only 18; doing amazing things that kids can only dream of.

He's just staying hard working, humble, consistent. You know I got his back always.

Q. You spoke on leadership previously. What is your leadership skills and tactics for your incoming freshmen to get them prepared back to the CFP?

MARK FLETCHER JR: Really my message to them is just stay where your feet are. We can't be complacent. We have a lot of great players. I know it's kind of hard not to think about last year. Oh, we were so close. Truly it cannot help us with anything we have this year.

But I can kind of take that back. We can take a lot of good things to help us. All the bad things, we got to continue to learn from them. I'm going to continue to emphasize that message: stay where our feet at, let's dominate this team tomorrow, let's dominate fall camp, things of that nature.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Mark.

First question for Darian.

Q. Third team in three years. You had your experience starting off in college at Tulane, then Duke, now Miami. What has that experience been like for you within the transfer portal, essentially being re-recruited multiple times?

DARIAN MENSAH: Yeah, it's been a special journey to say the least. Being at multiple stops, it's helped me within my own game. I've been through different OCs now, all different types of offenses. It only makes me a better player going through the transfer portal multiple times.

Q. We see Carson Beck, we see Cam Ward obviously have success. How much was that the drawing point for what you want your year at Miami to be like? Did you speak with some of them to see what it might look like?

DARIAN MENSAH: That was a huge factor as far as deciding to transfer, seeing what those two guys did last year. Made an attractive decision for me.

My OC, Coach Dawson, I think the way he will form the offense around the quarterback, around the stuff that he likes to do, also made it something that I wanted to be a part of.

Q. You did a ton of things very well at Duke last year. One consistent problem it seemed like was making every play seem like it had to be a bigger play. Is that something you've kind of worked on, especially with having a different level of talent around you?

DARIAN MENSAH: Yeah, I'd say ball security was something that I definitely took a personal note of as far as how I could get better. Going through the process of should I go to the NFL or come back, I think that was something in my game that stuck out. How can I get better?

But within this offense, I don't have to do much. I have great running backs, great receivers, great tight ends, everyone on the field are all expectational players. I think this year just going to let the game come to me and take it as it goes.

Q. Last time you were in this city you were winning an ACC championship. It comes out this morning they're changing the rules. It's strength of your body of work. That's probably something that would have kept you out of this game. I wanted your reaction to you being the reason the rules got changed for the ACC championship.

DARIAN MENSAH: I mean, yeah (smiling). I don't really know what to say about that. I was happy I got in it last year, snuck in there and won the thing. I don't know.

Q. Going into Miami, it seems like you've already developed great chemistry. How important was it to have Cooper Barkate follow you to Miami and already have established chemistry of one receiver?

DARIAN MENSAH: Yeah, it's great to go through a transition or something that's a little bit difficult with your best friend. So him and I are like two peas in a pod. We go together, do a lot of things off the field. I think that translates to our chemistry on the field, as well.

Yeah, just makes it that much easier when you're transitioning to a new school to have somebody there with you.

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