

Indiana Completes Its Fairy Tale Season With a National Championship

In their tightest game of the postseason, the Hoosiers held off Miami, 27-21, to cap college football's first 16-0 campaign since 1894

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Indiana quarterback Fernando Mendoza dives into the end zone for a touchdown in the fourth quarter.

- Curt Cignetti led the Indiana Hoosiers to a national championship in just two years, completing a 16-0 undefeated season.

Miami Gardens, Fla.: When Curt Cignetti was first hired to take over Indiana—the program with more losses than any other in college football—he didn't take long to make his intentions clear. The day after taking the job, he strode before a crowd of Hoosier fans and unleashed a bold proclamation.

"Purdue sucks!" [he belled](#) to thunderous applause, "So does Michigan and Ohio State!"

At the time, Cignetti seemed delusional. He was a 64-year-old coach who had only held the top job at schools in Division II and the lower reaches of Division I. But here he was, urging fans to Google his record, and threatening to take down the entire hierarchy of college football.

On Monday night, Cignetti did the unthinkable and delivered on his promise. He took just two years to complete one of the most stunning turnarounds in American sports.

And now, the Indiana Hoosiers are national champions.

Playing against Miami in their home stadium, Indiana defeated the Hurricanes 27-21. The Hoosiers also became the first team to finish a season 16-0 since Yale in 1894.

“We won the national championship at Indiana University,” Cignetti said after it was over. “It can be done!”



Indiana's Mikail Kamara blocks a punt by Miami punter Dylan Joyce. Rebecca Blackwell/Associated Press

Every single team to win a championship in the playoff era before Monday did it with at least one five-star recruit on the field. Not Cignetti. He took a roster of overlooked and undersized misfits and molded them into a wrecking machine. What the Hoosiers lacked in star power they more than made up for in experience. All but three of Indiana's starters have played at least three seasons of college football.

It took shrewd talent spotting and plenty of dealing in the transfer portal. His best acquisition, without question, was quarterback Fernando Mendoza of Cal. The kid who combined a 6-foot-5 frame with single-minded focus once watched film so late into the night that he accidentally locked himself in the football facility. But he rewarded Cignetti's faith in him. In Bloomington, Mendoza blossomed into a Heisman Trophy winner and likely first pick in the 2026 NFL draft.

“There's no secret, there's no magic pill,” said center Pat Coogan. “The secret is in the work.”

Mendoza was unshakable on Monday night, particularly a first-quarter helmet-to-helmet hit that left him sprawled on his stomach with a split lip. It hardly slowed him down. In the fourth quarter, Mendoza was locked in enough to deliver one of the drives of the season. The final highlight was a quarterback draw on fourth-and-4, featuring a frantic scramble, a spin move and a dive into the end zone to make it 24-14.

The Hurricanes responded immediately with a touchdown of their own—which would have tied the game had it not been for a missed field goal in the first half. But Indiana was able to answer with a clock-eating field goal drive and a game-sealing interception to end Miami's final drive.

It wasn't the most efficient performance for Mendoza, who finished 16 of 27 for 186 yards and zero passing touchdowns. But it was his grittiest—and that's all Indiana needed for its famously stony coach to drop the scowl.

The bruising evening made Indiana's coronation starkly different from its previous two rounds in the playoff, when the Hoosiers stomped heavyweights Alabama and Oregon. On Monday, Mendoza was pressured relentlessly by Miami's fearsome pass rush and Indiana's defense gave up an uncharacteristic 57-yard run that narrowed their lead to three early in the second half.

But the Hoosiers proved they would win another kind of game, just when they needed to most. Cignetti's monster offense won its first 15 games by an average of 31.5 points. But this was a tougher, grittier version of the Hoosiers.

Not even the man who hired Cignetti thought this would happen so soon.

"If I were to say, 'No, our plan was to be here in year two,' I would lose all credibility," Indiana athletic director Scott Dolson said.

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Even the Hoosiers own fan base can't quite believe this is happening. At one fraternity, the motto used to be "Game time is nap time." The crowds in Bloomington's Memorial Stadium were most notable for being nonexistent. But on Monday night, around 70% of the seats of Hard Rock Stadium—which normally hosts Hurricanes home games—were filled by the traveling Indiana support.

"To be here it's surreal," said linebacker Isaiah Jones, a Hoosier since 2022. "Every kid wants to make it to the pinnacle of the sport, and that's where we are right now."

Not only is it real, Indiana is the rare Cinderella whose carriage didn't turn back into a pumpkin. Even though it was a two-year process, the Hoosiers' out-of-nowhere rise immediately joins the ranks of the U.S. Olympic hockey team's "Miracle on Ice" in 1980, Leicester City's Premier League title in 2016 and the New York Mets' World Series in 1969.

But in college football, Cignetti's Indiana is without precedent.

"It shouldn't be surprising," Dolson said. "Because he said this from day one."