

Miami, Indiana to meet for title in surprise matchup

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. (AP) — One program long lived with the distinction of losing more games in the history of college football than anyone. The other has enjoyed its fair share of glory and contempt — albeit all of it old enough to be packaged in grainy documentaries, or retold among the tall tales of an era long gone by.

Indiana and Miami are playing for the national title Monday night, and if that has you scratching your head thinking "Who?" or "What?" then you are not alone.

Even though a new world of paying players and rapid-fire transfers from school to school has shuffled the deck in college sports, nobody thought it would get mixed up this much. And even though both schools have been trending upward of late, both were listed as 100-1 long shots to win the championship at some point this season.

"When I got here," explained Indiana's second-year coach and turnaround artist Curt Cignetti, "I was trying to figure out if the fan base was dead or just on life support."

Who could blame them?

Before Cignetti's arrival to start the 2024 season, the Hoosiers had compiled 713 losses over 130-plus years of football. For some, buying seats for football was a wal-

let-squeezing requirement to gain access to tickets for the basketball games coached by Bob Knight and a string of successors — a much better team and better draw.

Cignetti, whose resume looks like a Delta Airlines departures board, arrived with virtually zero fanfare, at least on a national level.

Asked different versions of the same question time and again at a signing-day news conference in his first season that surprised many for how good it was, Cignetti landed the punch that will end up on his tombstone: "It's pretty simple. I win. Google me."

In one way, the Indiana resurgence is a product of the new era of college football, in which players get paid and move freely between schools. Cignetti started this resurgence by bringing 13 players with him from his former job, at James Madison.

In another way, this is about a coach commandeering a program and rebuilding it the old-fashioned way.

Quarterback Fernando Mendoza moved from Cal to Indiana last year because "I felt like Coach Cignetti could help me get to where I thought I could be as a quarterback." A two-star recruit out of high school, he won the Heisman Trophy this season. The Hoosiers, who call them-

selves the "misfits," have, at most, two four-star recruits on their roster.

"I've never looked at a star in my life," Cignetti said of the imprecise ranking system that means nothing until those players put on pads. "If a guy can play hard and has the right stuff and the intangibles, we can work with him and he'll develop."

Indiana does claim the world's largest living alumni base, several thousand of whom are gobbling up what's turning out to be potentially the toughest ticket ever for a title game that will, ironically, be played on Miami's home field. They also have Mark Cuban, who has added multiple millions to the effort. Indiana's football budget has grown from \$24 million to \$61 million since 2021.

"It takes a village and there's money," Cignetti said. "But it's not all about money."

Same story, different blueprint at Miami

To some extent, Miami would agree with that.

This is a program with deep, colorful roots. The 2018 ESPN documentary about the Notre Dame-Miami rivalry is called "Catholics vs. Convicts." Notre Dame is the Catholic school.

Names from the '80s and '90s

— Michael Irvin, Jimmy Johnson, Bernie Kosar and infamous booster Nevin Shapiro — faded away to be replaced by essentially nothing.

Not until a product of that '80s and '90s heyday, Mario Cristobal, arrived in 2021 did things start looking up again for the 'Canes.

"I thought we were a group of guys who nobody believed in who changed history by playing with unbelievable effort," Cristobal said of his old teams. "It was a little wild, a little edgy, but no one could question the brotherhood."

Like Indiana, the 'Canes are a product of the new name-image-likeness era in college football, combined with some tough love from a coach who was around long before that started.

"Absolutely zero," Cristobal said when asked what he changed as a coach once the dollars started flowing and the players started moving.

"If you have to change the way you coach because you're afraid of the portal, you're not doing it right to begin with," he said. "You have to push people, be demanding but not demeaning, don't compromise. I don't believe that has to change."

The biggest portal stories involving Miami are about players who came, not left.

A year ago, in two episodes that

felt revolutionary at the time but are now more like business as usual, quarterback Carson Beck and defensive back Xavier Lucas left their old schools for Miami.

Beck raised eyebrows because he was leaving Georgia — a perennial contender — to play a fifth season at a school that hadn't sniffed a title in decades. The reported \$4 million in NIL probably helped.

Lucas became a litmus test of sorts when his old school, Wisconsin, sued Miami, alleging Cristobal's staff induced the freshman into breaching his NIL contract with the Badgers.

"I didn't pay attention to any of it," said Lucas, who grew up in nearby Pompano Beach. "I just wanted to come back and help the fellas win."

If this matchup from out of nowhere proves anything, it might be that in a new, more-expensive era of college football, anyone can win.

"Indiana is showing that if you have no history or tradition, you can still catch up to the Alabamas and Ohio States of the world," said Chris Fowler, who will call the game for ESPN and agreed it is the most unexpected title-game matchup he's been a part of. "Cignetti just showed you how."

As did Cristobal at Miami.

"There are no excuses anymore," Fowler said.

Patriots, Rams, Broncos, Seahawks advance to title games

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. (AP) — Mike Vrabel returned to New England on a mission to have the franchise playing again in meaningful games in January — as he did so often as a player.

In his first year as the head coach, he wanted to do it by building a culture of players that wanted to perform for each other. Their most complete team effort of the season has the Patriots one win from a trip to the Super Bowl.

Drake Maye threw three touchdown passes in the snow and rain, Marcus Jones returned one of C.J. Stroud's four interceptions for a score and the Patriots defeated the Houston Texans 28-16 on Sunday to advance to the AFC championship game for the first time in seven years.

The Patriots (16-3) will take on the Broncos (15-3) in Denver next Sunday, with the winner advancing to the NFL's title game in three weeks.

The Patriots — winners of 15 of their last 16 games — will make their 16th conference championship game appearance and first since their

run to their sixth Super Bowl title under Bill Belichick in the 2018 season. New England has won its last nine divisional round games.

Maye finished 16 of 27 for 179 yards, but had an interception and fumbled four times, losing two in cold conditions in which snow and rain fell throughout. One of Maye's fumbles set up Houston's first touchdown.

Carlton Davis III had two interceptions for New England. Craig Woodson added an interception and fumble recovery.

The eight combined turnovers — Woody Marks also lost a fumble for Houston — were the most in a playoff game since 2015 when the Cardinals and Panthers combined for eight in the NFC championship game.

The Texans (13-6) have lost in the divisional round in three straight seasons under coach DeMeco Ryans. The franchise fell to 0-7 in this round.

Stroud finished 20 of 47 with a TD pass. All of his interceptions came in the first half as he became the first player with five or more INTs and five or more fumbles in

a single postseason. Will Anderson forced two fumbles for the Texans.

Rams 20, Bears 17, OT

CHICAGO — Matthew Stafford and the Los Angeles Rams survived an incredible throw by Caleb Williams that forced overtime, beating the Chicago Bears 20-17 on Sunday night to advance to the NFC championship game.

Harrison Mevis kicked a 42-yard field goal in OT after Kam Curl intercepted a deep pass by Williams on the Bears' first possession of the extra period. Stafford completed a 16-yard pass to Puka Nacua to get the Rams into field-goal range and set up Mevis, known as the "Thicker Kicker," for the game-ending kick.

For the game-ending kick.

He was mobbed by teammates while a crowd that was rocking earlier watched in near silence.

The Rams (14-5) will visit NFC West rival Seattle next Sunday in their first trip to the conference championship game since the 2021 team won the Super Bowl. The Seahawks beat San Francisco 41-6 on Saturday.

Los Angeles led 17-10 in the final minute and the Bears faced fourth-and-4 from the 14-yard line when Williams backpedaled to avoid the pass rush and heaved the ball to Cole Kmet for the tying touchdown with 18 seconds left. Although officially a 14-yard pass, the ball traveled 51.2 yards in the air, according to the NFL's Next Gen Stats.

Williams threw for two touchdowns but was intercepted three times for the Bears (12-7), who pulled off a series of improbable wins under first-year coach Ben Johnson but came up short this time.

Saturday's Games

Broncos 33, Bills 30, OT

DENVER — The Denver Broncos wrangled their biggest win in a decade from Josh Allen and the Buffalo Bills but suffered an enormous loss in the process.

About an hour after second-year quarterback Bo Nix led the Broncos to a 33-30 win over Wil Lutz's 23-yard field goal in overtime Saturday, Denver coach Sean Payton returned

to the postgame lectern to deliver the stunning news.

He said Nix broke his right ankle a few plays before Lutz's kick sent the top-seeded Broncos (15-3) to the AFC championship game against New England.

Nix will have season-ending surgery Tuesday in Birmingham, Alabama.

Backup QB Jarrett Stidham takes over for Nix. He took just one snap this season, a kneel-down in a blowout win over Dallas in Week 8.

Seahawks 41, 49ers 6

SEATTLE — Rashid Shaheed returned the opening kickoff for a touchdown, Kenneth Walker III rushed for three scores and Seattle advanced to the NFC championship game with a dominant victory over San Francisco.

Sam Darnold threw a touchdown pass and got his first career playoff win in his first season with the Seahawks (15-3), who will host either the Los Angeles Rams next Sunday with a trip to the Super Bowl at stake.

THE DAILY SCOREBOARD

NFL PLAYOFFS

Wild-card Playoffs

Saturday, Jan. 10

L.A. Rams 34, Carolina 31
Chicago 31, Green Bay 27
Sunday, Jan. 11
Buffalo 27, Jacksonville 24
San Francisco 23, Philadelphia 19
New England 16, L.A. Chargers 3
Monday, Jan. 12
Houston 30, Pittsburgh 6
Divisional Playoffs
Saturday, Jan. 17
Denver 33, Buffalo 30, OT
Seattle 41, San Francisco 6
Sunday, Jan. 18
New England 28, Houston 16
L.A. Rams 20, Chicago 17, OT
Conference Championships
Sunday, Jan. 25
AFC
New England at Denver, TBD
NFC
L.A. Rams at Seattle, TBD
Super Bowl LIX
Sunday, Feb. 8
At Santa Clara.
Conference Championships winners, 6:30 p.m. (NBC/Peacock)

PENGUINS SUMMARY

Columbus 4, Pittsburgh 3

Columbus 1 2 0 1 — 4
Pittsburgh 2 0 1 0 — 3
Columbus won shootout 2-1
First Period—1, Columbus, Aston-Reese 1 (Werenski, Gaunce), 2:42. 2, Pittsburgh, Clifton 1 (Novak), 9:59. 3, Pittsburgh, Rakell 7 (Crosby), 17:52. Penalties—Aston-Reese, CBJ (High Sticking), 6:14.
Second Period—4, Columbus, Marchenko 18, 7:32. 5, Columbus, Heinen 2 (Gudbranson, Zamula), 17:38. Penalties—Provotor, CBJ (Interference), 2:03; Werenski, CBJ (Slashing), 8:43; Wotherspoon, PIT (Slashing), 8:43; Lizotte, PIT (High Sticking), 14:15; Kulak, PIT (Hooking), 19:21.
Third Period—6, Pittsburgh, Crosby 26 (Malkin, Letang), 18:59. Penalties—Fantilli, CBJ (Holding), 12:11.
Overtime—None. Penalties—None.
Shootout—Columbus 2 (Johnson G, Fantilli NG, Marchenko NG, Coyle G), Pittsburgh 1 (Rakell NG, Crosby NG, Chinakow G, Rust NG).
Shots on Goal—Columbus 4-13-6-2—25. Pittsburgh 10-8-8-6—32.

Power-play opportunities—Columbus 0 of 2; Pittsburgh 0 of 3.

Goalies—Columbus, Merzlikins 8-7-1 (32 shots-29 saves). Pittsburgh, Silovsky 8-6-8 (25-22). A—18,296 (18,387). T—2:43.

SCHOLASTIC SWIMMING

at Iroquois Invitational BOYS

Team standings — Fairview 444, Grove City 313, Harbor Creek 287, Titusville 228, General McLane 199, Franklin 157, Sharon 141, Iroquois 96, Corry 95, North East 50.
200 medley relay — 6. Titusville (Steinbuhler, Slocum, Hironimus, Patterson) 150:88. 9. Titusville (Lavery, Reynolds, LaLane, Decker) 2:00:67. 13. Franklin (P. Johnson, Miller, Hawks, T. Balsamo) 2:09:42.
200 free — 7. Ian Hironimus (T) 1:58:08. 14. Cash Lavery (T) 2:15:46. 17. Miller Hawks (F) 2:19:99. 20. Kieran Fullerton (T) 2:25:17.
200 IM — Jordan Stumpf (F) 2:06:55. 9. Grayson Steinbuhler (T) 2:14:63. 10. Jacksons Clark (F) 2:16:33. 12. Evan Slocum (T) 2:27:64. 14. Adam Reynolds (T) 2:22:84. 19. Landen Hosick (T) 2:54:47.
50 free — 5. Aiden Patterson (T) 24:13. 10. Jacob Balsamo (F) 25:40. 18. Milo Decker (T) 28:24. 21. Connor Johnson (F) 28:83. 27. Devin Ison (T) 29:77. 34. Lincoln Peterson (F) 31:16. 40. Lance Miller (F) 33:44. 48. Brennen Vroman (T) 1:01:91.
100 fly — 8. Parker Smith (F) 1:01:18. 12. Lincoln LaLane (T) 1:01:13. 14. Miller Hawks (F) 1:15:69. 16. Landen Hosick (T) 1:27:12.
100 free — 6. Aiden Patterson (T) 53:66. 14. Troy Balsamo (F) 1:02:60. 16. Padraig Johnson (F) 1:02:84. 23. Milo Decker (T) 1:05:38. 28. Devin Ison (T) 1:07:63. 32. Weston Wakefield (T) 1:09:41. 35. Lincoln Peterson (F) 1:10:35. 45. Ben Coyer (F) 1:22:43.
500 free — 3. Ian Hironimus (T) 5:07:50.
200 free relay — 2. Franklin J. Balsamo, Stumpf, Smith, Clark) 1:35:93. 11. Titusville (Steinbuhler, Hironimus, Slocum, Reynolds, Ison, Vroman) 2:32:94. 15. Franklin (Peterson, T. Balsamo, C. Johnson, Coyer) 2:11:72.
100 back — 2. Jordan Stumpf (F) 55:41. 6. Parker Smith (T) 1:02:69. 9. Lincoln LaLane (T) 1:04:84. 10. Cash Lavery (T) 1:08:45. 12. Padraig Johnson (F) 1:12:50. 23. Connor Johnson (F) 1:26:20. 29. Brennen Vroman (T) 2:21:21.
100 breast — 3. Jacksons Clark (F) 1:03:09. 6. Grayson Steinbuhler (T) 1:07:85. 7. Evan Slocum (T) 1:07:11. 10. Adam Reynolds (T) 1:09:32. 26. Kieran Fullerton (T) 1:29:97. 29. Lance Miller (F) 1:34:91. 30. Ben Coyer (F) 1:46:69.
400 free relay — 4. Titusville (Hironimus, Slocum, Steinbuhler, Patterson) 3:31:80. 8. Franklin (T. Balsamo, Hawks, P. Johnson, J. Balsamo, C. Johnson, Coyer) 5:04:46. 15. Titusville (Ison, Hosick, Fullerton, Vroman) 5:44:60.

BOYS SCENE

MONDAY, JAN. 19

BOYS BASKETBALL

Rocky Grove at Mercurytown Prep (6 p.m.)
Union at A-C Valley (6 p.m.)
Brookville at Clarion (6 p.m.)
Punxsutawney at Clarion-Limestone (6 p.m.)

GIRLS BASKETBALL

Franklin at Conneaut Area (6 p.m.)
Rocky Grove vs. Forest Area at Tionesta (6 p.m.)
Redbank Valley at Cranberry (6 p.m.)
Keystone at Union/A-C Valley (6 p.m.)
North Clarion at Cochranton (6 p.m.)
Clarion at Brookville (6 p.m.)
Grove City at Maplewood (6 p.m.)
Titusville at Girard (6 p.m.)

TUESDAY, JAN. 20