

# 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 it 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 near-by 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 another. 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 play-off 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 “Thiccerc Kicker,” 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 on 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 blow-out 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									
New England at Denver, TBD									
AFC									
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)									

EASTERN CONFERENCE									
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Atlantic									
Tampa Bay	47	30	13	4	64	166	120		
Detroit	50	30	16	4	64	157	153		
Montreal	49	27	15	7	61	168	164		
Boston	49	28	19	2	58	164	150		
Florida	47	26	16	5	57	157	148		
Toronto	48	24	16	8	56	162	158		
Buffalo	47	25	19	3	53	145	156		
Ottawa	48	22	19	7	51	159	163		
Metropolitan	GP <th>W</th> <th>L</th> <th>OT</th> <th>Pts</th> <th>GF</th> <th>GA</th> <th></th> <th></th>	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Carolina	49	30	15	4	64	171	144		
N.Y. Islanders	48	26	17	5	57	141	134		
Pittsburgh	47	22	14	11	55	150	144		
Washington	49	24	19	6	54	157	143		
Philadelphia	47	22	17	8	52	141	149		
Columbus	48	22	19	7	51	148	160		
New Jersey	48	24	22	2	50	127	149		
N.Y. Rangers	49	21	22	6	48	132	150		
WESTERN CONFERENCE									
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Central									
Colorado	46	33	5	8	74	185	110		
Dallas	49	27	13	9	63	163	139		
Minnesota	49	27	13	9	63	155	140		
Utah	49	25	20	4	54	153	135		
Nashville	48	23	21	4	50	138	161		
St. Louis	48	19	21	8	46	120	163		
Chicago	48	19	22	7	45	133	154		
Winnipeg	47	19	22	6	44	144	148		
Pacific	GP <th>W</th> <th>L</th> <th>OT</th> <th>Pts</th> <th>GF</th> <th>GA</th> <th></th> <th></th>	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Vegas	47	24	11	12	60	160	145		
Edmonton	49	24	17	8	56	165	158		
Seattle	47	21	17	9	51	130	141		
San Jose	47	24	20	3	51	148	168		
Anaheim	48	24	21	3	51	158	172		
Los Angeles	48	19	16	13	51	125	136		
Calgary	48	21	23	4	46	126	143		
Vancouver	48	16	27	5	37	126	176		
Saturday's Games									
Minnesota 5, Buffalo 4, OT									
N.Y. Rangers 6, Philadelphia 3									
Calgary 4, N.Y. Islanders 2									
Utah 6, Seattle 3									
Carolina 4, New Jersey 1									
Florida 5, Washington 2									
Toronto 4, Winnipeg 3, OT									
Columbus 4, Pittsburgh 3, SO									
Montreal 6, Ottawa 5, OT									
Boston 5, Chicago 2									
Edmonton 6, Vancouver 0									
Vegas 7, Nashville 2									
Anaheim 2, Los Angeles 1, OT									
Sunday's Games									
Tampa Bay 4, Dallas 1									
Detroit 4, Ottawa 3, OT									
St. Louis at Edmonton, late									
Monday's Games									
Buffalo at Carolina, 1:30 p.m.									
Washington at Colorado, 4 p.m.									
Pittsburgh at Seattle, 5 p.m.									
San Jose at Florida, 6 p.m.									
Minnesota at Toronto, 7:30 p.m.									
Philadelphia at Vegas, 8 p.m.									
Winnipeg at Chicago, 8:30 p.m.									
New Jersey at Calgary, 9 p.m.									
N.Y. Islanders at Vancouver, 10 p.m.									
N.Y. Rangers at Anaheim, 10 p.m.									