

Mendoza hopes to cap an incredible journey with title

Fernando Mendoza arrived on Indiana’s campus last January carrying huge expectations for himself and the program.

Outsiders almost immediately dubbed the new, highly touted transfer as the quarterback who could lead Indiana’s football program to unprecedented heights. Some even suggested Mendoza could be a Heisman Trophy candidate and possibly the top prospect in the 2026 NFL draft.

But the grounded grandson of Cuban immigrants ignored the chatter and focused instead on proving himself all over again.

Mendoza wasted no time earning the respect of his new teammates thanks to a relentless work ethic. He quickly impressed coaches with his unflappable poise, uncanny natural instincts and unconventional study habits. The Miami native and former Cal star found his exuberant, humble personality fit perfectly in this Mid-western college town John Mellen-camp depicted in his hit song “Small Town.” And eventually Mendoza’s penchant for making clutch plays put him on the big stage, winning college football’s most prestigious individual award in a landslide.

Now as the 22-year-old tries to etch one final chapter into this seemingly made-for-television Hollywood script — leading what had been major college football’s losingest program to its first national championship in front of a throng of family and friends just about a 40-minute drive from his parents’ home — Mendoza continues to insist he’s just along for the ride.

“I think it’s the other way around,” he said last Friday when asked about the impact he’s had on

Indiana’s program. “If you told me (this would happen) a year ago — I believe a year ago today or the day before actually is the day I arrived on campus — Hoosier Nation, the coaching staff and the entire sports staff has given me so much opportunity here and (shown) so much belief in my character and my play, not only as a player, also as a leader that I’m forever in debt.”

Mendoza’s skill set

By now, Mendoza’s tools on the field should be obvious to even casual football observers.

His arm is strong enough to make any throw and his accuracy is almost unmatched. He’s also capable of extending plays with his legs and when the top-ranked Hoosiers (15-0, No. 1 CFP) need a key play, Mendoza seems to deliver on cue. Miami coach Mario Cristobal has seen all of it on film.

And while Mendoza graciously shares credit with those around him, coaches and teammates recognize they’re heading to Miami this week-end largely because of Mendoza’s ability to make a game-changing play on any snap.

“The throws he makes, they just wow you every time,” All-American linebacker Aiden Fisher said. “The job he’s done this year has been nothing short of remarkable. He’s the best football player in the country, and I don’t think it’s close. He’s done such a phenomenal job being a leader for us, somebody we can depend on, we can count on every single time. He’s fantastic at everything he does.”

That includes the part most fans never see.

Teammates watched Mendoza spend countless hours studying film,

dissecting defenses and preparing for every potential game-day contingency. In the rare moments Mendoza isn’t working, he’s probably watching other games searching for something he can add to his repertoire.

That example helped Mendoza not only win over the locker room but also become a beloved figure inside of it.

“He’s just the ultimate professional, a wonderful teammate,” starting center Pat Coogan said. “He prepares like no one I’ve ever seen. He works his butt off like no one I’ve ever seen and he’s just an awesome locker room guy on top of that.”

But Mendoza’s reach goes far beyond football.

He often explains how the daily battle his mother, Elsa, wages against Multiple Sclerosis helped him learn to cherish every precious moment of this incredible journey. Mendoza also talks openly about how his faith has helped him excel as a person and a player and that he relies on prayer, meditation and Bible study sessions to navigate the highs and lows of life and football.

And his ability to balance so many things has come at such a young age that he has turned even the most hardened football people into true believers.

“He’s a special guy. I mean, he’s extremely intelligent, and people recognize that,” blunt-talking Indiana coach Curt Cignetti said recently. “He’s got a great relationship with the guys, and it’s mainly the older guys, obviously. Those guys hang together. But I think what he’s done behind the scenes to bring the offensive unit even closer together — and those are a lot of things I’m

not aware of at the time, I find out later — he’s just done a tremendous job in every single area you could impact team success.”

Mendoza’s results

Mendoza was hardly a household name coming out of powerhouse Christopher Columbus High School in Miami.

His first scholarship offer came from Yale. His only Football Bowl Subdivision offer came from California. But it was there, in Berkeley, where Mendoza’s career trajectory changed.

After redshirting in 2022, he won the starting job in 2023 and threw for 1,728 yards, 14 touchdowns and 10 interceptions. In 2023, his completion percentage improved from 63.0% to 68.7% as he finished with 3,004 yards, 16 TDs and six interceptions.

The problem: He was sacked a staggering 41 times.

So when the opportunity came to play behind a better offensive line, chase a national title and join his younger brother, Alberto, in Bloomington, Fernando Mendoza was sold. Naturally, Mendoza started cramming even before Indiana’s winter semester started.

“Having that playbook at home already, because Alberto was in my parent’s house, I definitely started diving into it during Christmas break in the off time,” Fernando Mendoza said, referring to 2024. “Ever since I’ve been trying to be consistent in the film room, in the playbook in order to gain a mastery (of the offense).”

By then, though, he’d already been turning heads in Bloomington.

While Cignetti liked the commitment, the passion and the drive for

perfection he saw during Mendoza’s recruiting visit, other people noticed different things.

Receiver Elijah Sarraatt remembers Mendoza “trolling” his future teammates with inside jokes that typically take players months or years to get and athletic director Scott Dolson found Mendoza to be uniquely genuine.

“All the stuff you hear him say, it’s all authentic and real,” Dolson said. “He cares more about winning and his teammates than he does about himself, and I think that’s a good lesson for other student-athletes to see or the next generation around the country — that it’s not all about you.”

Still, it’s hard to ignore the results. Mendoza leads the nation with 41 TD passes, a school record. He’s the first Indiana player to win the Heisman and just the third quarterback to lead the Hoosiers to a Big Ten crown. He’s now the favorite to be the first draft pick in April, and he finds himself squarely in the middle of perhaps the most astounding two-year turnarounds in sports history.

Yet here Mendoza stands, one win away from delivering the first 16-0 season in major college football since the 1890s, and all he wants to do is share the spotlight with everyone around him.

“It’s been a great journey, I believe, for all of us,” Mendoza said. “I still remember when I was in the transfer portal, coach Cignetti said, ‘Hey, if you’re going to come here, you’re going to develop into a hell of a quarterback, and it wasn’t about, at that point, hey, I’m going to promise you a national championship.’ It was you’re going to develop and have that belief.”

Hockey

Continued from Page B1

Werenski, who last spring helped the U.S. win the world championship for the first time since 1933, knows it would be foolish to overlook teams like Czechia, Switzerland, Slovakia and Germany. But he agrees with Guerin that such a strong

showing in games against Canada, Sweden and Finland in a meaningful tournament will carry over to Milan.

“Those are three teams and they’re great measuring sticks on where you’re at, and I just really like the way we played and how hard we played and how close we were,” Werenski said. “That tournament gave us a lot of confidence still in terms of knowing that we can beat anyone on any given night.”

The U.S. plays against Latvia on Feb. 12, Denmark on Feb. 14 and Germany on Feb. 15 before, barring upsets, moving into the single-elimination quarterfinals Feb. 18. There is not much time to acclimate after they arrive Feb. 8.

Guerin brought back the vast majority of players from 4 Nations because he liked the chemistry of the group, and that did not just materialize over a couple of weeks in Mon-

treal and Boston. This generation of Americans grew up playing together, many at the U.S. National Team Development Program, and at tournaments worldwide along the way.

“In a weird way, everyone’s just buddies,” Werenski said. “We’re all just good friends and good hockey players and I think that’s what really helps us.”

Friendship won’t by itself overcome a multigoal deficit or crack a hot

goalie threatening medal contenders at the Olympics. But players think setting the standard at gold is the right place to start because the U.S. has been building for this for a long time.

“The biggest thing we need to do now is just get over the hump of winning at the biggest stage,” Jack Hughes said. “Winning the Olympics, that’d be massive and completely put us over the hump. And that’s the expectation.”

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									
Buffalo at Denver, 4:30 p.m.									
San Francisco at Seattle, 8:00 p.m.									
Sunday, Jan. 18									
Houston at New England, 3:00 p.m.									
L.A. Rams at Chicago, 6:30 p.m.									
Conference Championships									
Sunday, Jan. 25									
AFC									
AFC lowest remaining seed at AFC highest remaining seed									
NFC									
NFC lowest remaining seed at NFC highest remaining seed									
Super Bowl LIX									
Sunday, Feb. 8									
At Santa Clara.									
Conference Championships winners, 6:30 p.m. (NBC/Peacock)									

NHL STANDINGS									
EASTERN CONFERENCE									
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Atlantic									
Tampa Bay	45	29	13	3	61	160	116		
Detroit	48	28	16	4	60	149	148		
Montreal	48	26	15	7	59	162	159		
Buffalo	46	26	16	4	56	153	143		
Boston	48	27	19	2	56	159	148		
Toronto	46	23	16	7	53	153	149		
Florida	45	24	18	3	51	139	145		
Ottawa	46	22	19	5	49	151	153		
Metropolitan	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Carolina	47	28	15	4	60	158	142		
N.Y. Islanders	46	25	16	5	55	138	130		
Pittsburgh	46	22	14	10	54	147	140		
Washington	48	24	18	6	54	155	138		
Philadelphia	46	22	16	8	52	138	143		
New Jersey	47	24	21	2	50	126	145		
Columbus	47	21	19	7	49	144	157		
N.Y. Rangers	48	20	22	6	46	126	147		
WESTERN CONFERENCE									
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Central									
Colorado	45	33	4	8	74	182	103		
Dallas	47	27	11	9	63	161	133		
Minnesota	48	26	13	9	61	150	136		
Utah	47	23	20	4	50	145	131		
Nashville	46	22	20	4	48	129	151		
Chicago	46	19	20	7	45	130	146		
St. Louis	47	18	21	8	44	117	161		
Winnipeg	46	19	22	5	43	141	144		
Pacific	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Vegas	45	22	11	12	56	147	138		
Edmonton	47	23	16	8	54	159	157		
Seattle	46	21	16	9	51	127	135		
San Jose	46	24	19	3	51	146	164		
Los Angeles	46	19	16	11	49	122	131		
Anaheim	46	22	21	3	47	153	169		
Calgary	46	19	23	4	42	119	140		
Vancouver	47	16	26	5	37	126	170		

NOTE: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

New Jersey 3, Seattle 2, OT
Ottawa 8, N.Y. Rangers 4
Buffalo 5, Philadelphia 2
Vegas 3, Los Angeles 2, OT

Thursday's Games

Columbus 4, Vancouver 1
San Jose 3, Washington 2
Pittsburgh 6, Philadelphia 3
Buffalo 5, Montreal 3
Winnipeg 6, Minnesota 2
Boston 4, Seattle 2
Calgary at Chicago, late
Dallas at Utah, late
N.Y. Islanders at Edmonton, late
Toronto at Vegas, late

Friday's Games

Florida at Carolina, 7 p.m.
San Jose at Detroit, 7 p.m.
Tampa Bay at St. Louis, 8 p.m.
Nashville at Colorado, 9 p.m.
Anaheim at Los Angeles, 10:30 p.m.

Saturday's Games

Minnesota at Buffalo, 12:30 p.m.
N.Y. Rangers at Philadelphia, 1 p.m.
N.Y. Islanders at Calgary, 3 p.m.
Seattle at Utah, 5 p.m.
Carolina at New Jersey, 7 p.m.

Columbus at Pittsburgh, 7 p.m.

Florida at Washington, 7 p.m.
Montreal at Ottawa, 7 p.m.
Toronto at Winnipeg, 7 p.m.
Boston at Chicago, 8 p.m.
Edmonton at Vancouver, 10 p.m.
Los Angeles at Anaheim, 10 p.m.
Nashville at Vegas, 10 p.m.