

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 Midwestern college town John Mellencamp 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 weekend 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 Sarratt 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."

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."

This is not a beginner class and will move right along at a somewhat accelerated rate. Therefore, all tyers considering this class should have some familiarity with general tying skills (whip finishing/half hitching, pinch wrap, use of dubbing, etc.) and have their own vise and tools.

The class will be limited to 12 individuals and anyone between the ages of 12-17 must be accompanied by an adult. All four classes will be provided at a cost of \$50 total.

Pre-registration is required along with a non-refundable deposit of \$20. Checks are to be made payable to: Keystone Fly Fishers. The deposit is required to confirm registration as the classes fill up very quickly. Once a deposit is received, confirmation about a participant's registration will be sent via email. For questions, contact the Keystone Fly Fishers by email at Keystoneflyfishers@gmail.com or check them out on Facebook at Keystone Fly Fishers or call 814-673-5478.

HOOP SHOOT CONTEST

The Franklin Elks Lodge #110 will hold its annual Elks Hoop Shoot free throw contest on Saturday at Franklin High School. The contest is for boys and girls ages 8-13 with the age group determined by the contestant's age as of April 1, 2026. Registration will begin at 1 p.m. For more information, contact Elks Hoop Shoot director Sam Lyons at 814-437-2204 or go to elks.org/hoopshoot.

SPORTS ON TV

Friday, Jan. 16

COLLEGE BASKETBALL (MEN'S)

6:30 p.m.

CBSSN — Toledo at Kent St.

FS1 — Creighton at Providence

8 p.m.

FOX — Baylor at Kansas

8:30 p.m.

CBSSN — Ohio at Ball St.

ESPN2 — Loyola of Chicago at Dayton

FS1 — Marquette at DePaul

10:30 p.m.

FS1 — Colorado St. at Boise St.

COLLEGE GYMNASTICS (WOMEN'S)

7 p.m.

ESPN2 — Alabama at Florida

SECN — LSU at Georgia

8:45 p.m.

SECN — Oklahoma at Missouri

7 p.m.

ESPN2 — Providence at Boston College

COLLEGE WRESTLING

7 p.m.

BTN — Penn St. at Iowa

9 p.m.

BTN — Nebraska at Minnesota

3 p.m.

E! — ISU: European Figure Skating Championships, Sheffield, England

GOLF

2 p.m.

ESPN2 — Latin America Amateur Championship: Second Round, Lima Golf Club, Lima, Peru

7 p.m.

GOLF — PGA Tour: The Sony Open, Second Round, Waialae Country Club, Honolulu

9 p.m.

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

9 p.m.

NFLN — 2026 Polynesian Bowl: Team Makai vs. Team Mauka, Honolulu

HORSE RACING

1:30 p.m.

FS2 — NYRA: America's Day at the Races

NBA BASKETBALL

7:30 p.m.

ESPN — Cleveland at Philadelphia

9:35 p.m.

ESPN — Minnesota at Houston

NHL HOCKEY

7 p.m.

NHLN — San Jose at Detroit

SAILING

Midnight

CBSSN — SailGP: Event 01 — Day 1, Perth, Australia (Taped)

TENNIS

8 p.m.

TENNIS — Auckland-ATP and Adelaide-WTA Singles Finals

11:30 p.m.

TENNIS — Adelaide-ATP Singles Final

7:30 p.m.

TNT — Laces vs. Phantom, Miami

TRUTV — Laces vs. Phantom, Miami

8:45 p.m.

TNT — Rose vs. Hive, Miami

TRUTV — Rose vs. Hive, Miami

THE DAILY SCOREBOARD

Hockey

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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 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