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Gosh almighty: SEC's final hope for national championship rides with Rebels

COLUMN

Hoosiers, Rebels drive playoff madness

By Doug Segrest
For GameDay

You want more drama than a prime-time soap opera? Congrats. You've come to the right place.

Welcome to the 2026 CFP. Indiana looks like it's on an inevitable path to the national title, just two years removed from being the all-time losingest program in the sport. That's assuming the Hoosiers can beat Oregon a second time.

Down in South Florida, Mario Cristobal has awakened echoes of swagger past at Miami. The U plays terrific defense, occasionally flashes explosive offense and has proven through two games that the committee made the right call putting the Hurricanes in instead of ratings-grabber Notre Dame.

Of the semifinalists, only Miami has won a national title this century.

But the best story — from on-field performance to off-the-field drama — belongs to the final SEC team standing. Ole Miss hasn't been on this stage in 60-odd years. Now, it's good enough to win it all.

This is the program Lane Kiffin built, then abandoned. It's fueled by a transfer quarterback who has already played for national titles — just at the Division II level — and arrived in Oxford as a potential depth piece.

Instead, Trinidad Chambliss authored the best single-game quarterback performance in the CFP's brief history, rallying the Rebels to a stunning victory over Georgia.

It just means more.

The drama didn't end with Kiffin's departure for LSU. With each game of the CFP journey, we don't know who will be coaching the Rebels at the next stop. That it's even a debate underscores the chaos of college football's new world order. And if Charlie Weis Jr. and company did stay, would they spend half their time talking Ole Miss players into joining them in Baton Rouge?

Yet the Rebels have exceeded anything they accomplished under Kiffin, thanks to the steady hand of Pete Golding. Elevated to head coach, he's still calling the defensive shots — and the Rebels have actually gotten better. Much better.

SEC fans are supposed to shout the league's name from the rooftops in big



Ole Miss linebacker Sutarine Perkins and the Rebels carry the SEC's last chance at a national championship into the CFP semifinals. [MATTHEW HINTON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

games without really meaning it. How can you truly root for a rival?

Yet this feels different. The league fell flat this postseason. Five teams started the CFP; only Ole Miss remains. And in the battle of perception — the same perception that helped land five bids after earning just three a year ago — what Ole Miss does the rest of the way matters to everyone.

• **Miami vs. Ole Miss, Fiesta Bowl:** Miami has stymied explosive Texas A&M and Ohio State offenses so far. So why can't we shake the late-season losses to Louisville and SMU that kept the Hurricanes out of the ACC title game?

Meanwhile, Ole Miss has cranked it up several notches in wins over Tulane and Georgia, especially on defense. This one may be as simple as tempo control. If the game slows down, that favors Miami.

We're leaning Ole Miss because of its offensive balance and Golding's calm presence on the sideline.

• **Oregon vs. Indiana, Peach Bowl:** Do you think any of Nick Saban's golf buddies are still disrespecting the Hoosiers?

Other teams offer NIL. Indiana's roster is so seasoned it might qualify for mortgage assistance and child-tuition packages. OK, we kid. But this team is so fundamentally sound that an opponent

must be clearly superior to win.

Because of defensive shortcomings, Oregon may not fit that bill. Confidence won't be lacking, though. In the regular-season meeting, the teams were tied 20-20 in the fourth quarter before Indiana pulled away. Dante Moore threw two interceptions, had a subpar game and is capable of a complete reversal.

But we're not buying it. Indiana keeps cruising.

Doug Segrest, who covered college football for 28 years for numerous newspapers in Alabama and Tennessee, is a freelance columnist.

FIESTA BOWL

Ole Miss vs. Miami

When: 6:30 p.m. Thursday

Where: Glendale, Arizona

TV: ESPN

Records: No. 6 Ole Miss (13-1), No. 10 Miami (12-2)

The series: Ole Miss leads 2-1.

Four-down territory

1. It's been a while: Ole Miss and Miami matchups aren't unheard of — they have met three times — if you're of a certain age, that is. The last meeting took place 74 years ago. The Hurricanes bested the Rebels 20-7 on Oct. 26, 1951. That was the year the 22nd Amendment, limiting a president to two terms, was ratified. The Rosenberg espionage trial began. "I Love Lucy" first aired as well. Willie Mays was the National League rookie of the year. Ole Miss and Miami also met in 1940 (a 21-7 Rebels win) and 1936 (a 14-0 Ole Miss victory). All three previous meetings took place in Miami.

2. Those Saban ties: Nick Saban isn't coaching, but one of his former assistants will win the national title. It could be Oregon's Dan Lanning (at Alabama in 2015) or Indiana's Curt Cignetti (2007-11). Maybe Miami's Mario Cristobal (2013-16) or Ole Miss' Pete Golding (2018-22). Cristobal coached the offensive line during his tenure with the Tide. He left to become the co-offensive coordinator at Oregon in 2017. Golding was Saban's defensive coordinator and inside linebackers coach. He departed for Ole Miss ahead of the 2023 season. Cue some lame cliché about rat poison or the process.

3. Another title shot: Ole Miss quarterback Trinidad Chambliss is no stranger to national semifinal games. Chambliss led Division II Ferris State (Michigan) to a 48-38 win over Slippery Rock (Pennsylvania) last season. The QB completed 19 of 26 passes for 221 yards, a touchdown and an interception. He also rushed for 124 yards and three scores on 16 carries. Chambliss then led Ferris State to a 49-14 win over Valdosta State in the national title game. He was 11-for-20 passing for 153 yards and three touchdowns. He also rushed for 78 yards and two scores on 13 touches.

4. Aren't Fiestas supposed to be fun? One would think. One might also want



Ole Miss quarterback Trinidad Chambliss is 1-0 in national semifinal games. He led Ferris State to a win over Slippery Rock in 2024. [FERRIS STATE ATHLETICS]

to remind Miami. The Hurricanes have often caused their fans to seek out some siestas instead. Miami is 0-4 all-time in the Fiesta Bowl, two of which were national championship games. There was the 14-10 loss to Penn State — the camo game — to cap its 1986 season. There was also the 31-24 double-overtime loss to Ohio State to close the Hurricanes' 2002 season, which denied them a second straight national title. Miami also lost 39-37 to UCLA in the 1985-season edition and 29-0 to Arizona for the 1993 season.

Key matchup

Ole Miss QB Trinidad Chambliss vs. Miami DL Rueben Bain Jr.

Chambliss completed 30 of 46 passes for 362 yards and two touchdowns in the 39-34 quarterfinal win over Georgia. That included the 40-yard pass to

De'Zhaun Stribling in the final 30 seconds to set up Lucas Carnerio's go-ahead 47-yard field goal. Bain finished with a sack in the 24-14 win over Ohio State. It was one of five the Hurricanes recorded.

Player of the week

Carson Beck, Miami QB

Beck hasn't been remarkable in the Hurricanes' two playoff games, but he has been dependable. Beck was 14-for-20 passing for 103 yards and a touchdown in the 10-3 win against Texas A&M. He followed that by completing 19 of 26 throws for 138 yards and a score against Ohio State. He hasn't turned the ball over, either.

By the numbers

2002: Miami's most recent season to appear in a national title game.

N/A: Ole Miss has never appeared in a national championship game. The Rebels, however, lay claim to titles in 1959, '60 and '62.

2-0: Golding's bowl record. Cristobal is 5-5.

17: The number of points Miami has given up in its two playoff games. Of the teams that have played twice, Oregon is second with 34 points allowed thanks to its shutout of Texas Tech.

Prediction

Miami 28, Ole Miss 24

The Hurricanes haven't scored a lot of points in the playoff. The Rebels have — 81 total. Something has to give, right? Either way, expect a healthy dose of Michael Irvin on your TV.

— David Glovach

PEACH BOWL

Indiana vs. Oregon

When: 6:30 p.m. Friday

Where: Atlanta

TV: ESPN

Records: No. 1 Indiana (14-0), No. 5 Oregon (13-1)

The series: Tied 2-2.

Four-down territory

1. You, again: Indiana's 30-20 win at Oregon in mid-October signaled that the Hoosiers were to be taken seriously. The victory propelled Indiana to third in the AP rankings, the highest spot in school history. That day, Elijah Sarratt hauled in eight passes for 121 yards and a touchdown for IU, which left the Ducks stuck in the mud with 267 yards offense. "This shows that Indiana is a real football team," quarterback Fernando Mendoza said that day. The 10-point win is one of four that close for Indiana this season with all four away from home. Along with Oregon, the Hoosiers won 20-15 at Iowa, 27-24 at Penn State and 13-10 over Ohio State in the Big Ten championship game. Now, Indiana gets to try to beat the Ducks again. Oregon last played a team twice last season, beating Ohio State at home in the regular season and losing in the playoffs. Indiana last played a rematch in 1931 when it beat Chicago twice. As in the University of Chicago Maroons, who abolished their Division I football team in 1939. "It's hard to beat a great team twice, very difficult," IU coach Curt Cignetti said. "So, edge to Oregon there."

2. He's my brother: Indiana quarterbacks Fernando and Alberto Mendoza share the distinction of being the only brothers in the same position at the same school in the FBS. While older brother Fernando won the Heisman Trophy, Alberto has been more than a cheerleader. He's played in nine games, including some mop-up duty when the Hoosiers skinned Alabama, and has thrown for five touchdowns.

3. Church of Saban: All four CFP semifinal head coaches are disciples of former Alabama coach Nick Saban. Oregon's Dan Lanning was a full-time assistant at Sam Houston State in 2014 before taking a pay cut to become an Alabama graduate assistant. "When anybody asked me why, I said I'm going to get my doctorate



Indiana running back Kaelon Black and the Hoosiers hope to leave another team in their dust in the CFP semifinals, this time the Oregon Ducks. [MARK J. TERRILL/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

in football," Lanning said in a teleconference. "Things I thought I knew, I realized I didn't know anything about it." Cignetti was a college assistant for 24 years before joining Saban in 2007 for four seasons. "After one year with coach Saban, I'd learned more about how to run a program than in the previous 20 years as an assistant coach," he said.

4. Quack smack: Oregon's 23-0 win over Texas Tech in the Orange Bowl was the Ducks' first postseason shutout in quite a while. As in 1917. As in a 14-0 Rose Bowl victory over Penn. As in the Quakers, not the Penn State Nittany Lions.

Player of the week

Kaelon Black, Indiana RB

Black chopped up Alabama for 99 yards rushing and a touchdown in the Rose Bowl and has 897 yards and eight

TDs this season. He's cleared at least 89 yards three times, giving defenses something to consider besides Fernando Mendoza.

Key matchup

Oregon LB Teitum Tuioti vs. Indiana C Pat Coogan

Tuioti had two of the Ducks' four sacks in the Orange Bowl shutout of Texas Tech, while Coogan was the offensive MVP in the Rose Bowl when the Hoosiers cast aside the Crimson Tide.

By the numbers

3-10: Indiana's all-time record in bowl games. Last week's 38-3 trashing of Alabama in the Rose Bowl marked the Hoosiers' first postseason win since 1991.

3: Indiana is making its third appearance in the Peach Bowl. The Hoosiers

lost 27-23 to Auburn in December 1990 and 27-22 to Tennessee in January 1988 when the Peach had a lower-profile bowl status. Much lower.

6: Games where the Ducks have given up 215 yards or less after Texas Tech's 215-yard, zero-point Orange Bowl effort.

12: Season-high tackles made by Oregon LB Dillon Thieneman and by Bryce Boettcher, his third-highest total of the season, against Texas Tech.

Prediction

Indiana 27, Oregon 21

Indiana began the season with the most losses in FBS history (Northwestern has since taken over that honor) continues to make its case as the biggest turnaround in college history. Kansas State and Bill Snyder, consider yourself warned.

— A. Stacy Long

For Hoosiers, ground game also sound

By Michael Marot
The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Fernando Mendoza spent all season stealing headlines and collecting awards.

Indiana running backs Roman Hemby and Kaelon Black were content doing the dirty work in the shadows of their Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback, propelling the top-ranked Hoosiers into college football's version of the Final Four.

Now, less than a week after dominating Alabama on the ground, the Hoosiers dynamic duo hopes to replicate that performance against No. 5 Oregon in Friday night's Peach Bowl.

"You see the guys we have up front, they work really hard and they make my job and Kaelon's job really easy," Hemby said Monday. "We just try to out-physical our opponents. We really want to make it a four-quarter fight to where we kind of impose our will and, at some point in the game, we feel like we could potentially break the defense or make that play that helps us win."

The surprise, to some, has been just how much the Football Bowl Subdivision's third-highest scoring offense, 41.6 points per game, actually has relied on the running game.

While Mendoza and the passing attack certainly have driven this season's narrative, Indiana's ground game sometimes went unnoticed.

The Hoosiers rush for 220.7 yards per game — 10th nationally and No. 1 among the teams still fighting for a national championship. They've topped the 300-yard mark six times and had two more with more than 200 including the 215 it logged in last week's 38-3 rout over No. 9 Alabama.

It's also a big reason the undefeated Hoosiers have the nation's top third-down conversion percentage at 56.5%. Perhaps more important — Indiana has only one fumble all season.

"It just comes from wanting to be better," Black said, referring to the backfield's internal motivation. "Being around a great group of guys, a great group of teammates, you just have the want to be better in your life and also on the football field. And now that we're in this position, we have no choice but to be better."



Roman Hemby is part of an Indiana rushing attack that averages almost 221 yards per game. [MARK J. TERRILL/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Still, Hemby and Black are hardly household names.

Hemby played four seasons at Maryland, averaging 4.9 yards per carry while rushing for 2,347 yards. This year, he's at 5.2 yards and topped the 1,000-yard mark for the first time with an 8-yard game against the Crimson Tide. He earned a third team all-Big Ten selection from the media but not the coaches.

Black was solid, not spectacular, in four seasons at James Madison but blossomed after following coach Curt Cignetti to Bloomington. This season, he

has 157 carries, 898 yards and eight TDs — all career bests with the top-seeded Hoosiers (14-0). Yet he was left off the all-conference list.

The two backs already understand the challenge Oregon (13-1) poses. In their first meeting, Indiana ran 27 times for a paltry 111 yards or 3.0 yards per carry, their third-lowest single game average all season. And, on tape, they think Oregon looks even better now.

On the other hand, the Ducks recognize how difficult it will be to replicate that effort especially with Indiana's

secret weapon — Mendoza's ability to buy time and scramble for first downs — and against an offensive line that has proven to be one of the nation's best.

"They're smart, fast and physical," Oregon linebacker Bryce Boettcher said, describing Indiana's linemen. "In the run game, they play physical and they do their job. They don't have a lot of unblocked hats. I know in the screen game, they get out and they're elite at kind of retracing and blocking for the receiver in the screen game, which was present in our last game."

Beck, Chambliss take different paths

By John Marshall

The Associated Press

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Miami's Carson Beck is the prototypical power-program quarterback, a former four-star prospect with a massive NIL portfolio who knows what it's like to play on the big stage.

Mississippi's Trinidad Chambliss nearly gave up football, won a Division II national championship and has shined since being unexpectedly thrust into the spotlight.

Their paths will converge in the desert at Thursday's Fiesta Bowl, with a spot in the national championship game on the line.

"Only four teams have the opportunity to go play this week," Beck said. "I'm super grateful for that."

Beck has been building toward this since starring as a high schooler in Jacksonville, Florida.

The 6-foot-4, 225-pound pro-style passer won a national championship in 2022 — the Bulldogs' second straight — as a backup to Stetson Bennett IV, learning as he went. Beck took those lessons onto the field, throwing for more than 7,000 yards and 52 touchdowns in the next two seasons while leading Georgia to 24 wins.

A knee injury kept Beck out of the Bulldogs' College Football Playoff loss against Notre Dame in early 2025 and, after initially declaring for the NFL draft, he opted to transfer to Miami, a school with a potent offense and plenty of NIL cash to throw around.

He's been a perfect fit.

Poised and steady, Beck has thrown for 3,313 yards and 27 touchdowns on 74% passing with 10 interceptions. He led the Hurricanes (12-2, CFP No. 10 seed) to wins over Texas A&M and Ohio State in the playoffs and is 36-5 as a starter as he winds down his college career.

"He's very experienced, he's been successful everywhere he's been," Ole Miss coach Pete Golding said. "He's always had his teams competing at a championship level and being in the playoffs."

Chambliss' career took a different trajectory.

With no Division I offers out of high school, the quarterback from Grand Rapids, Michigan, opted to play at Ferris State, where he redshirted the first two seasons — the second due to respiratory issues. He considered transferring to a



Miami quarterback Carson Beck, who transferred from Georgia this year, has been a success for the Hurricanes and has a 36-5 career record as a starter. [MARTA LAVANDIER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Division III school to give college basketball a try, but chose to give football one more shot.

Good decision.

Chambliss led the Bulldogs to the Division II national championship in 2024, leading to offers from numerous Division I programs. He chose to play at Ole Miss, figuring he would be a backup but at least have the DI experience.

Chambliss' fate changed when starter Austin Simmons went down with an ankle injury during the second game of the season. Chambliss took off and kept

going, throwing for 353 yards against Arkansas in his first start and playing so well he kept the starting job once Simmons was healthy.

The dual-threat quarterback put pressure on defenses all season, rocketing passes into tight windows with his strong arm while extending plays with his legs.

Chambliss has thrown for 3,660 yards and 21 touchdowns with just three interceptions on 66% passing, adding 520 yards and eight more scores rushing. He led the Rebels (13-1, CFP No. 6 seed)

to a win over Tulane in the CFP opening round and picked apart Georgia in the quarterfinals with 362 yards and two touchdowns in a 39-34 win.

"He's a limitless football player," Miami coach Mario Cristobal said. "Certainly, you could see on the sideline and watching some of the stuff on TV, his leadership skills and the way people gravitate to him. He's had a tremendous impact on the program and plenty of respect for him."

So has Beck, setting up a showdown in the desert.

Echoes from past tend to inspire Canes

By **Tim Reynolds**
The Associated Press

CORAL GABLES, Fla. — Miami defensive lineman Rueben Bain Jr. doesn't say much. He just plays.

That's part of the reason why Bain giving a short, impromptu and unexpected halftime speech to teammates during of Miami's win over Ohio State in a College Football Playoff quarterfinal at the Cotton Bowl last week was a moment that went viral.

"They don't got the energy we got, bro," Bain said. "They don't want it how we want it."

And with that, Bain got his "Joaquin said dominate" moment that surely will go into Hurricane lore. Miami (12-2), with more than enough of the energy that Bain was speaking of, beat Ohio State 24-14 and moved into Thursday's CFP semifinal at the Fiesta Bowl against Ole Miss (13-1).

It was at a game in 2001 — Miami's last national championship season — when eventual Pro Football Hall of Fame safety Ed Reed gave a now-famous speech to teammates at halftime in Tallahassee, a game the Hurricanes were leading Florida State 21-13. Reed's shoulder was banged up, and the Seminoles seemed to have the momentum.

Reed turned and faced his teammates before they returned to the field, quoting offensive lineman Joaquin Gonzalez for emphasis.

"I'm hurt, dawg. Don't ask me if I'm all right. Hell, no," Reed shouted. "Joaquin said dominate and we're not doing it." He said a little more, turned and ran out of the tunnel. What happened over the next few minutes showed how much Reed's words mattered to teammates.

Miami scored four touchdowns in the third quarter, blowing out Florida State and eventually finishing the season as a 12-0 national champion. Reed didn't seek the spotlight in those days, much in the same way Bain doesn't seek it now.

"To come out and speak in front of the entire team, when that's not necessarily something that he does all the time, you know he means it," Miami quarterback Carson Beck said. "I think there's weight behind that. That's something that's coming from the heart, something that you know he needs to say to the team. Shoot, it had me juiced. I was ready to roll out there and go die for those boys. Obviously, I think it's an iconic moment



Ray Lewis and Michael Irvin, both Pro Football Hall of Famers, have been steadfast in their continuing support of their old college team, the Miami Hurricanes. [JULIO CORTEZ/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

that we'll always remember as a team."

At Miami, the names from the past — like Reed — still inspire.

Michael Irvin — another Hall of Famer — has been a regular on the Miami sideline for the past couple of seasons. When running back Mark Fletcher Jr. fumbled the ball away early in the Ohio State game, it was Edgerrin James — another Hall of Famer — who got into his ear and calmed him down. And when Beck was warming up for the game, he was starstruck when he saw Ray Lewis — another Hall of Famer — just a few feet away.

"I literally just looked at him and just shook his hand and he introduced himself," Beck said. "And then he's like, 'Yo, go win us the ball game.' And I was like: 'Well, now I have to. We literally have to go score. Like, I can't let this dude down.'"

Sometimes, the impact of those past Miami stars comes even when they're not physically there.

Keionte Scott, the standout from Miami's secondary who had a game-changing interception return for a touchdown against Ohio State, slept inside the indoor practice facility during

fall camp and found himself gazing at banners showing the names of all the Hurricanes' past All-Americans.

He was looking up at those same banners Sunday when he explained the story.

"It's a different feeling," Scott said. "It's a testimony to how much The U means to them. It just shows me how much The U was able to do for them. They could be doing anything in the world and they're supporting their team and they're supporting their college. It's just something that makes you want to go harder."



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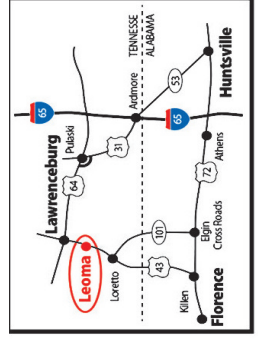
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