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MARK MONTIETH  
SPORTS

The first football game played by a football team representing **Indiana University** was in 1887, and it resulted in a 10-8 loss to Franklin College. The easy joke is that it's been downhill ever since, but that would not be true.

It only feels that way sometimes.

IU is nothing less than the most consistently downtrodden team in college football history. It has lost more games (706, according to the university's count) than any other Division I program and has the third-worst win percentage (.417) among those that have played at least 1,000 games. It has played in only 13 bowl games, including only one Rose Bowl, and won only three of them—none since 1991.

It's an "only" kind of program—lacking, wanting, deficient, sometimes starving.

It goes without saying then that Bloomington has been a graveyard for the coaches who have dared try to dig the program out of its endless rut. Not a single one of the 15 men who have tried their luck since Bo McMillin departed in 1947 has managed a winning overall record. And only one has left on his own terms. That would be Sam Wyche, who coached the 1983 team to a 3-8 record, then left to take the job he really wanted all along, with the Cincinnati Bengals.

So, why should anyone think it will be different for the 30th coach in school history, Curt Cignetti?

Short answer: Because *he* appears to be different.

The Cignetti Era will be unveiled on Aug. 31, when IU plays Florida International at Memorial Stadium. Every new coach gets the courtesy of a honeymoon period before the first game, and no coach, new or otherwise, wallows in pessimism before the first kickoff. Cignetti, however, has left a distinct impression among those close to the program.

IU athletic directors have tried just about every kind of coach to capture some magic. Nice guy, hard-nosed, innovator, old-fashioned, personable, grumpy, whatever. They have brought back an alum. They have pulled from the NFL. They have hired from within. They have taken some who succeeded at lower levels.

The only one since World War II who managed anything resembling sustained success was Bill Mallory, who coached six winning seasons over eight years from 1987 to 1994 before slipping to a 5-17 record over the final two.

Mallory would be the former IU coach who most resembles Cignetti, although Cignetti is, shall we say, more outspoken. Quirker, even. Mallory, for example, would never have introduced himself to the IU fan base, as Cignetti did last December, by taking a microphone to center court at an IU basketball game in Assembly Hall and saying, “I’ve never taken a back seat to anybody, and I don’t plan on starting now.”

And then adding in a mic-drop moment:

“Purdue sucks!”

Then, after a pause to let the fans howl:

“So do Michigan and Ohio State!”

## All winning seasons

Bold words can boomerang. Imagine the level of mass ecstasy the Purdue fan base will experience if the Boilermakers beat IU for a fourth consecutive time next season. But, seriously, what does an IU football coach have to lose besides more games? Cignetti has earned the right to make a headline-grabbing statement or two as he begins this overhaul. He’s taking over a program that has had only 14 winning seasons since 1947 and only three this century, but he’s never had one losing season in 13 years as a head coach at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Elon and James Madison.



*Cignetti introduced himself to IU fans at a Dec. 1 basketball game in Assembly Hall the day after he was hired with bold statements about himself and trash-talk about other Big Ten teams. (AP photo)*

He's directed about-faces before. IU Pennsylvania had gone 4-10 in conference play over the previous two seasons before he took over. His first two teams combined to go 11-3. Elon had gone 2-9 prior to his arrival. His first team went 8-4.

Most recently, he coached James Madison to three conference championships in the Colonial Athletic Association, from 2019 to 2021. The school then moved up to the Sun Belt Conference, but no break-in period was required. It won two more conference titles and, last season, went 11-1. It lost in the Armed Forces Bowl, no doubt in part because Cignetti and some of his assistants had already begun working at IU.

How does he do it?

Focus, efficiency and continuity come to mind.

Cignetti, 63, says he is in bed by 10:30 p.m. and in his office by 5 a.m. If a problem wakes him up at 3, he goes in. He is said to be nearly obsessed with studying video, but the long hours are for himself. His practices are highly organized and relatively brief—less than two hours and closed to all who haven't been given permission to attend.

"He believes less is more," says Don Fischer, the Hoosiers' radio voice who has seen the vast majority of Cignetti's practices.

A high level of organization is required to pull that off. Cignetti makes out practice schedules for each of his assistants to follow, then stands back and lets them coach. He also insists they be home for dinner with their families each night, whether he is or not.

The result has been continuity. Defensive coordinator Bryant Haines, a former Ball State linebacker, has been with Cignetti

since 2014. Offensive coordinator Mike Shanahan was with him the past four seasons at James Madison. Five of IU's other full-time assistants came with Cignetti from that staff.

"I'm telling you, they revere him," Fischer said. "They think this guy is really good. They have time with their families every night. That's a whole different ballgame than what you hear about former coaches at Indiana."

## **No idle chitchat**

Terry Tallen, a linebacker under Lee Corso, has spoken with every IU team since he graduated in 1981. He hasn't gotten around to the current team yet but has met at length with Cignetti.

"I think he's got a very measured approach," Tallen said. "You can see the loyalty in his assistants, which is unusual. The family relationship between these coaches is very strong. I did not see that closeness with [previous staffs]."

Glenn Scolnik, an all-Big Ten receiver in 1972 and member of IU's Athletic Hall of Fame, has regularly attended practices over the years. He hasn't done so yet this year but likes what he's hearing.

"I hear they're in constant motion," said Scolnik, who played a season for the Pittsburgh Steelers. "When he says he doesn't want alumni on the practice field and watches film all day, I like that. He doesn't know his team yet.

"He started off a little cockier than I would have liked, but I like the choice. I think he's a winner."

Cignetti's serious-minded efficiency is on display with the media, too. His interview sessions are short and

straightforward, void of idle chitchat or any attempt to establish a rapport. He met with reporters in the football complex on Monday, for example. The session lasted 13 minutes. Jeff Keag, IU's associate athletic director for strategic communications and media, stood throughout and called out who was to ask the next question, as well as the person who would follow. Cignetti answered each question directly, and then it was called to a halt.

"All the beat writers have learned, don't ask stupid [questions]," said Jeff Rabjohns, veteran reporter for Peegs.com. "He doesn't waste time. It's eliminated some of the stupid questions and some of the rambling questions."

Fans, of course, don't care about practice schedules or media policies. Especially IU fans, who have long grown accustomed to a new coach coming in to try to light a fire to the previous coach's damp ashes. Player talent is by far the major factor in a program's success, and Cignetti displays no bravado when evaluating his first team.

He said earlier this week they all were "plugging along" and that progress was being made in establishing high standards and a consistent mindset, "but we're not there yet."

"You never arrive," he added.

### **Can he pull it off?**

It remains to be seen whether the modern college athletics world in which players can be paid and transfer without sitting out a season will make it easier or more difficult for Cignetti to build a program at IU. He lost a few players from last year's team he would have liked to keep but also lost several he didn't want back. He brought in 22 new players—nine from his last

team at James Madison as well as a fifth-year quarterback from Ohio University: Kurtis Rourke, the projected starter.

“You lose an all-American, you’re cursing the portal, but when you’re able to bring in ... new guys, you like the portal,” he said.

“You look at this team, with 31 or 32 seniors this year—we will have to do this again in December. You’d like to get to the point [where] the roster balances out by class ... so you don’t have huge gaps like we have right now between our junior and sophomore class.”



*In Curt Cignetti's most recent job (2019-2023), he coached the James Madison University Dukes through five winning seasons and five conference championships. (AP photo)*

Cignetti's greatest asset in his debut season will be the schedule. Eight of the 12 games will be played at home, including three nonconference games that are highly winnable even for a freshly unwrapped team. His greatest asset long term, though, will be the factors that contributed to his track

record. Cignetti has coached 13 winning seasons so far. The only IU coach who had a resume in the same stadium as that one was Mallory, who had led 11 winning seasons at three stops when he took over in 1984.

Fischer sees a resemblance.

“I’m just intrigued by him; I really am,” he said. “I think the guy’s going to win. I always felt like Bill Mallory thought they were going to win. His first season, they went 0-11, but you could tell there was a different vibe. I have the same exact feeling about that aspect with this coach.”

IU’s beleaguered football program has had good vibes before. Corso’s team won the Holiday Bowl in 1979, his seventh season, but he lasted just three more years. Mallory had more success than any IU coach in the modern era but lost his grip the final two seasons. Terry Hoepfner brought a solid resume and injected optimism in two losing seasons but died of brain cancer in 2007. Tom Allen was voted Big Ten Coach of the Year after the shortened COVID season of 2020, when IU finished 6-1 in conference play, but his teams were 3-24 over the following three seasons.

It’s like Cignetti said, you never arrive. Coming from a coach who knows nothing but winning seasons, that seems to bode well for IU fans who rarely experience them. •

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Montieth, an Indianapolis native, is a longtime newspaper reporter and freelance writer. He is the author of three books: “Passion Play: Coach Gene Keady and the Purdue Boilermakers,” “Reborn: The Pacers and the Return of Pro Basketball to Indianapolis,” and “Extra Innings: My Life in



# Baseball,” with former Indianapolis Indians President Max Schumacher.

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