

Cignetti vs. Kiffin: Comparing Two of College Football's Biggest Coaching Contracts

By Martin J. Greenberg and Dalton Hein

I. Introduction

After Curt Cignetti (Cignetti) led Indiana University (Indiana) to a historic College Football Playoff (CFP) run resulting in its first National Championship,¹ and Lane Kiffin (Kiffin) moved from the University of Mississippi to Louisiana State University (LSU),² two of college football's highest-profile coaches have recently finalized lucrative new contracts. Cignetti's original Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) dated October 16, 2025,³ was later enhanced following the contract's good-faith market review provision after Indiana's CFP semifinal appearance.⁴ The enhanced deal now carries an average annual value of \$13.2 million through November 30, 2033.⁵ Kiffin's term sheet, dated November 29, 2025, provides \$13 million per year through December 31, 2032.⁶ Both agreements reflect the intense financial arms race in Power 4 Football while differing meaningfully in structure, protections, and incentives.

A. Term

Cignetti's MOU provides for an eight-year term, began in December 2025 and ends in November 2033. The term was not changed by the later market review.⁷ Kiffin's term sheet provides for a seven-year term that began in November 2025 and ends in December 2032.⁸

¹ John Talty, *Indiana Rules College Football as Curt Cignetti, Hoosiers Cap Improbable CFP Title Run*, CBS Sports, Jan. 20, 2026, <https://www.cbssports.com/college-football/news/indiana-wins-national-championship-curt-cignetti-rule-college-football/> (last visited May 8, 2026).

² Michael Bonnette, *Lane Kiffin Named LSU Football Head Coach*, *LSU Sports*, Nov. 30, 2025, <https://lsusports.net/news/2025/11/30/lane-kiffin-named-lsu-football-head-coach/> (last visited May 8, 2026).

³ Offer Letter/MOU from Scott Dolson to Curt Cignetti (Oct. 16, 2025), p. 1.

⁴ Adam Rittenberg, *Cignetti's salary now averages \$13.2M through 2033*, ESPN (Feb. 20, 2026), https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/47986787/source-cignetti-deal-indiana-now-132m-2033 (last visited April 8, 2026).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Term Sheet Between Louisiana State University and Lane Kiffin (Nov. 29, 2025), p. 1.

⁷ Offer Letter/MOU from Scott Dolson to Curt Cignetti (Oct. 16, 2025), p. 1.

⁸ Term Sheet Between Louisiana State University and Lane Kiffin (Nov. 29, 2025), p. 1.

B. Compensation

Cignetti's original MOU from October 16, 2025, featured a base salary paired with substantial marketing and promotional income and retention bonuses, plus a one-time signing bonus:

1. Annual base salary: Cignetti receives a fixed annual base salary of \$500,000.⁹
2. Annual outside, marketing, and promotional income: Cignetti receives escalating income that begins at \$9,650,000 in Year 1 and increases each year to \$10,350,000 in Year 8.¹⁰
3. Annual retention bonus: Cignetti receives an annual retention bonus of \$1,000,000 payable each November 30 through 2029. Beginning in 2030, the retention bonus increases to \$1,250,000 each November 30.¹¹
4. Signing bonus: Cignetti receives a one-time signing bonus of \$250,000 payable within thirty (30) days of executing the offer letter.¹²

The marketing and promotional income compensates for public appearances, media cooperation, and exclusive sponsorship activities coordinated by the University.¹³ Pursuant to the original MOU's good-faith market review clause, triggered after Indiana's CFP semifinal appearance, the parties later adjusted compensation, resulting in the enhanced average annual value of \$13.2 million through 2033.¹⁴

Kiffin's compensation under the term sheet features a base salary paired with substantial supplemental compensation:

⁹ Offer Letter/MOU from Scott Dolson to Curt Cignetti (Oct. 16, 2025), p. 1.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*, p. 2.

¹³ *Id.*, p. 1.

¹⁴ Offer Letter/MOU from Scott Dolson to Curt Cignetti (Oct. 16, 2025), p. 3; Rittenberg, *supra* note 4.

1. Base salary (annualized): Kiffin receives a fixed annualized base salary of \$400,000.¹⁵
2. Supplemental compensation (annualized): Kiffin receives annualized supplemental compensation of \$12,600,000.¹⁶

Both components are payable pro-rata on an equal monthly basis.¹⁷ Notably, if LSU wins the CFP National Championship, Kiffin's total annual compensation will be increased, for the remainder of the term, using average total compensation per year as the benchmark, so that it exceeds the highest-paid active FBS head coach.¹⁸

C. Bonuses and Incentives

Cignetti's incentives (from the original MOU) have no overall annual cap. However, certain categories are expressly not cumulative. For example, the two Big Ten-related bonuses are not cumulative, the highest finish or win total in each category will apply. Also, CFP bonuses are expressly not cumulative, only the highest finish payment is made. The Non-CFP Bowl Game bonus and the two Coach of the Year bonuses are separate categories and can be earned in addition to the above. The amounts are as follows:

- Big Ten Wins: \$100,000 for the 5th Big Ten win or \$150,000 for the 6th Big Ten win; and
- Conference finish: \$250,000 for a top six finish (6th or higher out of 18 teams), \$500,000 second place (including ties), or \$1,000,000 for winning the Big Ten Championship game.¹⁹
- Non-CFP Bowl Game: For any bowl game not part of the CFP format, an amount of \$200,000 is paid for an appearance, and an extra \$50,000 is added if the game is won.²⁰
- CFP: For making it to the First Round, \$500,000 is paid. For making it to the Quarterfinal, \$600,000 is paid. For making it to the Semifinal, \$700,000 is paid. For making the National Championship, \$1,000,000 is paid. Finally, for winning the National Championship, \$2,000,000 is paid.²¹

¹⁵ Term Sheet Between Louisiana State University and Lane Kiffin (Nov. 29, 2025), p. 1.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Offer Letter/MOU from Scott Dolson to Curt Cignetti (Oct. 16, 2025), p. 2.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

- Coach of the Year: If Cignetti wins coach of the year in the Big Ten, he can be paid up to \$50,000, and if Cignetti wins coach of the year at the National level, then he is paid up to \$100,000.²²

By contrast, Kiffin’s incentives are more lucrative but are subject to a \$4 million annual cap on postseason incentive compensation and a separate \$125,000 cap on coaching recognition awards.²³ Kiffin’s term sheet does not contain an express “not cumulative” provision like Cignetti’s. Instead, the term sheet uses “OR” between tiers within each category, meaning only the highest tier in each category is paid.²⁴ The amounts are as follows:

- SEC Championship: Participation earns \$500,000, or a win earns \$1,000,000.²⁵
- Post-Season: Non-CFP Bowl Appearance earns \$100,000, CFP First-Round earns \$750,000, Quarterfinal earns \$1,000,000, Semifinal earns \$1,500,000, National Championship Game appearance earns \$2,000,000, or Winning National Championship Game earns \$3,000,000.²⁶
- Coaching Recognition: SEC Coach of the Year, \$50,000, and National Coach of the Year, \$75,000.²⁷

Although Cignetti’s incentives have no overall annual cap, the theoretical maximum he could earn in any single year is approximately \$3.3 million.

D. Perquisites

Cignetti receives the following perquisites under the original MOU:

- Seventy-five hours of annual private plane use (including deadhead legs);
- Season tickets and parking for football and basketball;
- Unlimited family golf course access;
- Athletic dining;
- Sole ownership of youth camps;
- A \$10,000 adidas product allowance; and
- A \$25,000 annual courtesy car allowance.²⁸

²² *Id.*

²³ Term Sheet Between Louisiana State University and Lane Kiffin (Nov. 29, 2025), p. 2.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ Offer Letter/MOU from Scott Dolson to Curt Cignetti (Oct. 16, 2025), p. 2-4.

Kiffin receives the following perquisites and ancillary benefits under the term sheet:

- Up to sixty-five in-flight private air hours per year (rollover of unused hours).
- Courtesy vehicle(s);
- Private suite and priority-level tickets for home, away, and post-season football games (including parking passes);
- Club membership;
- Family and guest travel;
- Private air transportation or first-class air travel for recruiting/program-related activities;
- TBD relocation incentive payable within thirty (30) days of the Effective Date;
- Temporary housing for up to ninety (90) days;
- Reimbursement of financial consequences resulting from voluntary termination of his Ole Miss contract (including buyout payment);
- Up to \$500,000 to cover any loss on the sale of his Oxford primary residence, subject to best-efforts marketing and foundation approval; and
- Ancillary payment equal to what Kiffin would have earned from Ole Miss for the 2025-26 CFP performance (up to \$1,000,000 if Ole Miss won the national title).²⁹

E. Termination Not for Cause by the University

Under Cignetti's original MOU, if Indiana terminates him without cause, the University will pay him 100 percent of the remaining base salary, marketing/promotional income, and retention bonuses through the normal expiration date.³⁰ Payments are made in equal monthly installments and are offset dollar-for-dollar by any new collegiate or professional coaching salary earned during the period.³¹

Under Kiffin's term sheet, if LSU terminates him without cause, the University will pay liquidated damages equal to 80 percent of the remaining base and supplemental compensation.³² Payments are made in equal monthly installments over the remaining term.³³ Kiffin has no obligation to mitigate, and LSU has no right to offset for new earnings.³⁴

F. Termination for Cause

²⁹ Term Sheet Between Louisiana State University and Lane Kiffin (Nov. 29, 2025), p. 2-3.

³⁰ Offer Letter/MOU from Scott Dolson to Curt Cignetti (Oct. 16, 2025), p. 4.

³¹ *Id.*

³² Term Sheet Between Louisiana State University and Lane Kiffin (Nov. 29, 2025), p. 1.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

Under Cignetti’s original MOU, if Indiana terminates him for cause or if he resigns, the University will not be liable for any compensation or benefits after the date of termination or resignation.³⁵ “Cause” will be defined consistent with the University’s past practices and as provided in the final Employment Agreement.³⁶ The University has warranted that as of the date of the MOU, it is not aware of any act, omission, or occurrence sufficient to support termination for cause.³⁷

Under Kiffin’s term sheet, if LSU terminates him for cause, the University will have no obligation to pay any further amounts beyond the end of the month in which Coach is terminated.³⁸ The term sheet contains detailed, coach-friendly guidelines for what constitutes “cause.” Minor, technical, or immaterial violations do not qualify as a cause.³⁹ For NCAA violations, LSU must consider mitigating and aggravating factors under NCAA Bylaw 19.⁴⁰ Kiffin is entitled to a seven-day cure period for any default that is capable of being cured.⁴¹ The term sheet also excludes certain acts, such as Level I violations or failures to report Title IX matters, from being considered minor.⁴²

G. Early Termination by Coach

Cignetti’s buyout schedule from the original MOU decreases annually. For Year 1 the buyout is \$15 million and all the way to \$0 in the final year.⁴³ Amounts over \$2 million are paid 50

³⁵ Offer Letter/MOU from Scott Dolson to Curt Cignetti (Oct. 16, 2025), p. 4.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ Term Sheet Between Louisiana State University and Lane Kiffin (Nov. 29, 2025), p. 1.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Offer Letter/MOU from Scott Dolson to Curt Cignetti (Oct. 16, 2025), p. 4.

percent within 30 days and 50 percent within 365 days.⁴⁴ The buyout is reduced by 50 percent if President Whitten or AD Dolson is no longer in position.⁴⁵

Kiffin's buyout schedule is \$7 million in the first period, down to \$1.5 million in 2031, with no buyout in 2032, the final year.⁴⁶ Fifty percent is due within 30 days, and the remainder is due within one year.⁴⁷ The buyout is reduced by 50 percent if AD Verge Ausberry is no longer in the role.⁴⁸ Kiffin must provide notice prior to substantive negotiations for new employment.⁴⁹

H. Other Interesting Provisions

Cignetti's original MOU includes strong commitments to competitive staff-pool funding (with market reviews) and to annual program support reviews for player retention/revenue sharing.⁵⁰ It also contains a market review clause after the CFP semifinals that can waive Cignetti's future buyout if Indiana fails to adjust compensation to at least third among CFP-eligible coaches.⁵¹ Kiffin receives explicit authority to hire, manage, and terminate assistant coaches (subject to AD approval and budget) and protection against reassignment.⁵²

II. Conclusion

Cignetti's and Kiffin's contracts illustrate current market dynamics. Both feature high guaranteed compensation, performance escalators or reviews tied to CFP success, and buyouts calibrated to decline over time. Cignetti's deal provides Indiana with full mitigation/offset protection for school buyouts, robust program support guarantees, and a potential waiver of the buyout requirement. Kiffin's agreement is more protective for the coach in the event of

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ Term Sheet Between Louisiana State University and Lane Kiffin (Nov. 29, 2025), p. 2.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ Offer Letter/MOU from Scott Dolson to Curt Cignetti (Oct. 16, 2025), p. 3-4.

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² Term Sheet Between Louisiana State University and Lane Kiffin (Nov. 29, 2025), p. 3.

termination and includes a powerful national championship escalator. Attorneys drafting these agreements should carefully consider mitigation language, key-personnel reductions in buyouts, detailed incentive tiers, cumulation rules, comprehensive perquisites, ancillary benefits, and market-adjustment mechanisms to balance institutional risk with coach mobility and retention.

III. Opinion

In the post-House v. NCAA settlement environment, Indiana University has set the example for programs seeking sustainable success. The House settlement reshaped college athletics by authorizing direct revenue sharing with student-athletes, heightening institutional financial exposure. In this new landscape, universities must make long-term commitments to leadership and program infrastructure or risk falling behind.⁵³

Indiana's eight-year contract with Curt Cignetti through November 30, 2033, paired with a good-faith market review clause guaranteeing he will rank among the three highest-paid active CFP-eligible head coaches with annual retention bonuses,⁵⁴ delivers the stability all College programs are looking for. The retention bonus serves as an anti-jumping deterrent, while the market adjustment ensures the deal remains competitive without requiring renegotiation.⁵⁵

Indiana's investment is both earned and strategic. Cignetti inherited one of college football's most historically unsuccessful programs and transformed it from rags to riches, culminating in a perfect 16-0 season and national championship contention in 2026.⁵⁶ The University has backed

⁵³ Kevin LaCroix, *Guest Post: What Does the House Settlement Mean for University Liability?*, The D&O Diary (June 9, 2025), <https://www.dandodiary.com/2025/06/articles/director-and-officer-liability/guest-post-what-does-the-house-settlement-mean-for-university-liability/> (last visited Apr. 14, 2026).

⁵⁴ Alex Schiffer, *Cignetti Triggers 'Good Faith Market Review' With Rose Bowl Win*, *Front Office Sports*, Jan. 2, 2026, <https://frontofficesports.com/indiana-rose-bowl-win-cignetti-contract/> (last visited May 8, 2026).

⁵⁵ Offer Letter/MOU from Scott Dolson to Curt Cignetti (Oct. 16, 2025), p. 1-2.

⁵⁶ Brandon Marcello, *Indiana Blueprint: Curt Cignetti, College Football Playoff & National Championship*, CBS Sports, Jan. 15, 2026, <https://www.cbssports.com/college-football/news/indiana-blueprint-curt-cignetti-college-football-playoff-national-championship/> (last visited Apr. 14, 2026); Matt Hayes, *Indiana Football: National Championship Could Save College Football*, USA Today, Jan. 20, 2026,

Cignetti with contractual assurances of competitive staff-pool funding and annual program-support evaluations for player retention and acquisition, signaling a genuine long-term commitment to program stability and financial competitiveness.⁵⁷

The future at Indiana University has been accomplished not on the traditional high school recruiting pipeline but through the transfer portal and the aggressive use of NIL resources, positioning Indiana as one of the top beneficiaries of the transfer portal under the House settlement system.⁵⁸ Specifically, Indiana has effectively channeled through the official collectives Hoosier Connect and Hoosiers For Good, enhanced by \$1 million matching campaigns, telethons, and substantial private donations, including those facilitated by alumni like Mark Cuban.⁵⁹

Indiana has demonstrated a replicable blueprint for turning around a program in record time. By combining visionary coaching, a coach-friendly yet institutionally protective contract, and a creative system to provide financial support in the post-House settlement era, Indiana has built a sustainable winner almost overnight. College sports will be stronger if more programs follow their lead.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaaf/2026/01/20/indiana-national-championship-save-college-football-curt-cignetti-cfp/88258339007/> (last visited Apr. 14, 2026).

⁵⁷ Offer Letter/MOU from Scott Dolson to Curt Cignetti (Oct. 16, 2025), p. 3.

⁵⁸ Richard Johnson, *Indiana Football: Mark Cuban, Curt Cignetti & NIL/Revenue Sharing Success*, CBS Sports, Oct. 10, 2025, <https://www.cbssports.com/college-football/news/indiana-football-mark-cuban-curt-cignetti-success-nil-revenue-sharing/> (last visited Apr. 14, 2026).

⁵⁹ Mike Schumann, *Name, Image, Likeness: Hoosiers Connect and Hoosiers For Good Announce \$1 Million in Matching Funds for a Second Year*, IU Hoosiers (Nov. 14, 2023), <https://iuhoosiers.com/news/2023/11/14/name-image-likeness-hoosiers-connect-and-hoosiers-for-good-announce-1-million-in-matching-funds-for-a-second-year-and-hoosier-connect-launches-in-for-indiana-campaign> (last visited Apr. 14, 2026); Mike Schumann, *Official IU Collectives Announce \$1 Million Matching Campaign Along with NIL Telethon*, The Daily Hoosier (Nov. 14, 2023), <https://www.thedailyhoosier.com/official-iu-collectives-announce-1-million-matching-campaign-along-with-nil-telethon/> (last visited Apr. 14, 2026); Cate Charron, *IU NIL Collectives Raise \$2M in Two-Month Fundraiser*, Inside Indiana Business (Jan. 4, 2024), <https://www.insideindianabusiness.com/articles/iu-nil-collectives-raise-2m-in-two-month-fundraiser> (last visited Apr. 14, 2026).

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