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## *Remembering some of Boilermaker's Greats*



Leroy Keyes

# Remembering the legacies Leroy Keyes and Bobby Leonard left behind

You could make the argument that without the efforts of Bobby and Nancy Leonard in 1977 to save the Indiana Pacers from extinction, the city of Indianapolis would remain “India-no-place” to those outside the state.

Without the Pacers remaining in the NBA, the city would not have built the Hoosier Dome hoping to lure an NFL team. That goal was accomplished in 1984 when Indianapolis mayor William Hudnut led the effort to bring the Colts from Baltimore.

Indianapolis probably also would not be the home base for the NCAA and eight Final Four men’s basketball tournaments since 1980. Indianapolis wouldn’t have been the choice, either, to stage the entire 2021 tournament when the NCAA was looking to keep its biggest moneymaker in one city due to the COVID pandemic.

Bobby Leonard died Tuesday at age 88. Most today remember him for his colorful analysis on Pacers radio games. “Boom baby!” was his signature call when Pacers such as Reggie Miller would knock down a big 3-pointer.

Before that though, Leonard was the face of the Pacers in the American Basketball Association days. The red, white and blue basketball and the 3-point rule was meant to separate the ABA from the stodgy NBA, which was a far less athletic game in the 1960s.

Leonard needed only two seasons after taking over the Pacers job in 1968 to bring the first of three ABA championships to Indianapolis. I was in grade school back then but thanks to games on WTHR with Don Hein, the names remain young while the men themselves have passed retirement age or gone to their reward.

Roger Brown. Mel Daniels. Freddie Lewis. Bob Netolicky. Billy Keller. Rick Mount. Darnell Hillman and his afro. And maybe the best Pacer of them all, George McGinnis.

“He personified Pacers basketball for generations of Hoosier families,” Pacers owners Herb and Steve Simon said in a statement honoring Bobby Leonard. “With a charisma, intensity and wit to match his nickname, Slick made us champions.”

Leonard was part of the Pacers organization for more than 50 years, winning 529 games from 1968 to 1980. Leonard was voted the ABA’s All-Time coach by a group of national sportswriters and broadcasters.

He received the ultimate basketball honor in 2014, election to the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame. Leonard is joined there by three of his players: Brown, Daniels and McGinnis.

Leonard was already a basketball hero in Indiana, captain of the 1953 Indiana national championship team and before that a standout guard for Terre Haute Gerstmeyer High School.

But July 4, 1977, cemented his legacy.

One of four ABA teams that merged with the NBA a year earlier, the Pacers were having financial difficulties. Ownership set a goal of selling 8,000 season tickets or else the Pacers would fold or be sold and moved to another city.

Nancy Leonard spearheaded the telethon, which was organized in less than two weeks and held at the Convention Center. Local TV sports personality Chet Coppock shared hosting duties with the Leonards and with minutes to go



**KENNY THOMPSON**  
Columnist

before the telethon was scheduled to end, a tearful Nancy Leonard made the announcement that the season ticket goal had been reached.

The Pacers were saved. So was Indianapolis’ future.

Hoosier Hysteria’s finest

In case anyone doubts Leonard’s playing credentials, he was selected 53rd on a list of the top 68 men’s college basketball players of all-time from Indiana.

VisitIndiana.com and the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame put together the list in conjunction with the 2021 NCAA tournament. To qualify for selection, a player had to have been born, raised and/or attended high school in the state.

Rankings were based on statistics, honors, historical significance and importance to their school’s program.

At No. 58, Don Buse of Holland, Ind., and the University of Evansville was one of three players on the list to have been coached by Leonard in professional basketball. The others were George McGinnis and Rick Mount.

To give you an idea of how deep the top 68 goes, high school legend Bobby Plump came in at No. 61.

Former Carmel great Billy Shepherd is 56th on the list. Shepherd still owns Butler’s season scoring average record of 27.8 points per game as well as the career mark of 24.1.

Montgomery County legend Homer Stonebraker was voted 21st on the list. Stonebraker not only led Wingate High School to two state basketball championships in 1913 and 1914, he was a three-time All-American at Wabash College.

Purdue has 10 players in the top 68: Rick Mount (5th), Glenn Robinson (7th), Charles “Stretch” Murphy (11th), Kyle Macy (12th), Terry Dischinger (18th), Dave Schellhase (19th), John Wooden (22nd), Troy Lewis (30th), JaJuan Johnson (35th) and E’Twaun Moore (51st).

More than 50 years after his final collegiate basketball game, Mount remains the gold standard for Indiana-born shooters. In just three varsity seasons, Mount scored 2,323 points – a Purdue record that still stands. With Mount, Purdue reached the NCAA title game in 1969 against Lew Alcindor (now Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) and UCLA.

Robinson was the unanimous winner of the John R. Wooden and Naismith awards as national player of the year in 1994. That season, Robinson averaged 30.3 points and 11.2 rebounds while carrying Purdue to the Elite Eight.

Murphy was one of the game’s first great big men, standing 6-6 when he starred for Purdue and Piggy Lambert from 1928-30. Murphy was a three-time All-American and helped lead the Boilermakers to an undisputed Big Ten title in 1930 with a 10-0 record.

Macy only played one season for the Boilermakers, averaging 13.8 points a game before transferring to Kentucky. He helped the Wildcats win the national championship in 1978.

Dischinger was a standout on the 1960 United States Olympic basketball team and concluded his Purdue career in 1962 with career averages of 28.3 points and 13.7 rebounds. Dischinger was a two-time consensus All-American.

Schellhase followed Dischinger in the Purdue lineup and led the nation in scoring as a senior in 1966 at 32.5 points a game and was a consensus All-American

Wooden was the first college basketball player ever to be selected a three-time consensus All-American (1930-32). Lewis scored 2,038 points while leading the Boilermakers to back-to-back Big Ten championships in 1987 and 1988.

Moore scored 2,136 points for Matt Painter at Purdue before embarking on a long NBA career. Johnson starred alongside Moore, earning consensus All-American honors as a senior in 2011 to go with Big Ten Player of the Year and Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year honors. Johnson also was Purdue’s first winner of the Pete Newell National Big Man of the Year Award.

As with any list proclaiming the best ever to do something, there are quibbles with the VisitIndiana/Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame’s Top 10.

No arguments here with the two best ever: Oscar Robertson and Larry Bird. Clyde Lovellette at No. 3 was well before my time but his credentials at Kansas after graduating from Terre Haute Garfield are impeccable.

But Steve Alford at No. 4? No way is Alford a better player than Mount, Robinson and George McGinnis, who is too low at No. 10 on the list. I might even argue that Calbert Cheaney (No. 6) and Kent Benson (No. 8) were better players than Alford. Another former IU great, Don Schlundt, was voted ninth.

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When I think of the greatest athletes in my lifetime, three names come quickly to mind: Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan and Leroy Keyes.

Ali promoted himself as “The Greatest” boxer of all time and like someone once said, it’s not boasting if it’s true.

Jordan’s competitive nature and his ability to carry two different eras of Chicago Bulls basketball to six NBA championships didn’t require him to brag about his greatness.

Anyone under 40 who lives outside of central Indiana wouldn’t rank Keyes in the same class of greatness. But as spectacular as Keyes was on the football field for Purdue from 1966 to 1968, he was a greater man.

All you need to know about Keyes was summed up in this brief comment he made in 1998, when he reflected on his playing philosophy.

“When I was on the football field, my job was to be the best player on the field,” Keyes said. “It became a will game to me. Who had the greater will to get the job done? I willed myself not to get beat.”

He wasn’t beaten often at Purdue, willing the Boilermakers alongside fellow College Football Hall of Fame members Bob Griese and Mike Phipps to a 25-6 record, a Rose Bowl championship and a share of the 1967 Big Ten Conference title.

Keyes died April 15 at the age of 74.

“Leroy was a two-way player in the way that matters most — a great athlete and a great person,” Purdue President Mitch Daniels said. “You never saw him without a smile on his face, or left him without a smile on your own. Every Boilermaker lost a good friend today.”



## KENNY From Page 2

Voted the greatest player in the first 100 years of Purdue football in 1987, Keyes is the only two-time consensus All-American in school history. Keyes finished second to O.J. Simpson in the 1968 Heisman Trophy balloting but well ahead of the disgraced Pro Football Hall of Famer in character.

His numbers in the Purdue football media guide are staggering. When he walked off the field a winner for the final time in the 1968 Old Oaken Bucket game against Indiana, Keyes had set Purdue records for career touchdowns (37), points (222) and all-purpose yards (3,757).

While leading Purdue to a share of that Big Ten title as a junior, Keyes set a single-season Purdue record with 19 touchdowns (13 rushing, six receiving) and led the nation with a school record 114 points.

Even playing alongside Griese and Phipps, two members of Purdue's Cradle of Quarterbacks, Keyes managed to become the Boilermakers' first 1,000-yard rusher in 1968 with 1,003.

Keyes could do it all. He played a stifling cornerback as a sophomore before coach Jack Mollenkopf decided to, as Purdue fans cheered, "give the ball to Leroy," over the next two seasons.

Keyes rushed for 2,094 yards, caught 80 passes, intercepted four passes and averaged 25.8 yards on kickoff returns. Of his 12 career pass completions, eight went for touchdowns. Keyes handled kickoff duties, too.

The College Football Hall of Fame inducted him in 1990, and Keyes was part of the first Purdue Intercollegiate Athletics Hall of Fame class in 1994.

Keyes had a flair for the dramatic, which would have made him a favorite at ESPN.

With 6:57 remaining in his college career, Keyes sparked a comeback from a 35-24 deficit against Indiana. Somehow, he was wide open on a 56-yard touchdown pass from Mike Phipps. Then with 95 seconds to go, Keyes scored from the 1 to win the Bucket.

Keyes received a standing ovation when he walked off the field that day. He blitzed Indiana for 140 yards rushing, 149 yards receiving and four touchdowns.

"What a way to finish," Keyes said.

While Keyes had a friendly, outgoing nature to everyone he met, there was one time when Keyes believed he and Purdue had something to prove.

Prior to the 1968 matchup in South Bend between Associated Press No. 1 Purdue and United Press International No. 1 Notre Dame, some Irish fans were putting up Most Wanted posters of Keyes on campus.

Keyes was none too pleased about that.

"I wondered, 'what did I do to these guys,'" Keyes recalled on the 30th anniversary of that showdown.

It bothered Keyes more than the general consensus outside of Tippecanoe County that Purdue was not in Notre Dame's class.

"The sad thing about it, we were the kids on the block who got no respect," Keyes said. "Sure, Bob Griese, John Charles and George Catavalos graduated but we still had Perry Williams, Chuck Kyle, Clanton King back. But Anson Mount of Playboy magazine was the only one who thought we could win something."

"Most of them wrote, 'If Leroy Keyes stays healthy and matches his junior season when he won the national scoring title, Purdue can win.' We believed to a man when we came to spring ball that we could win the national championship."

Just like Ali when he stunned the boxing world by defeating Sonny Liston in 1964 for the heavyweight boxing title or Jordan when anyone dared disrespect him, Keyes demanded respect not just for himself but his teammates.

That September day, Keyes scored two touchdowns and threw a 17-yard touchdown pass to Bob Dillingham in a convincing 37-22 victory. Keyes also returned to defensive back to keep star ND receiver Jim Seymour out of the end zone for the second consecutive season.

"I enjoyed the challenge of going against the Jim Seymours," Keyes said. "I wanted my teammates to think if Leroy can handle that guy one on one, we can make things happen."

Purdue has had once in a generation football players since 1968, notably Rod Woodson and Drew Brees. But there will always be just one Leroy Keyes.

### **Brees out, Rondale in?**

With the NFL Draft less than a week away, two sites are predicting that Purdue All-American wide receiver Rondale Moore could be taken by the New Orleans Saints in the second round with the 60th overall pick.

It's just a shame that if this would happen, Moore won't have the good fortune to catch passes from another former Purdue star, Drew Brees, who retired following the 2021 season.

"With Emmanuel Sanders gone in free agency, I have to believe the Saints will use one of their first two picks on a receiver," ESPN draft expert Mel Kiper Jr. writes. "Purdue ran its entire offense through Moore, who's . . . extremely explosive with the ball in his hands. (Saints coach Sean) Payton will be able to get the most out of Moore, using him on jet sweeps and screens and getting him the ball in creative ways."

Dane Brugler of The Athletic also has Moore at No. 60 to the Saints. While Kiper Jr. kept his analysis to the first two rounds, Brugler made picks for all seven rounds.

Brugler has former Purdue linebacker Derrick Barnes going to the Minnesota Vikings in the fourth round.

The only former Indiana player on Brugler's draft board is defensive back Jamar Johnson, a projected third round pick by Minnesota.

Kiper Jr.'s fellow draft expert at ESPN, Todd McShay, has Moore on his All-Satellite team, which lists the top NFL prospects with speed and elusiveness.

"I really like Moore's burst and second gear, as he can make defenders miss and then pull away when he gets the ball in space," McShay writes. "He will track the deep ball well, but like many others on this list, he really excels in the after-the-catch field. His 5-foot-7 frame will cause some pause for NFL evaluators, but his 4.29 speed will get him plenty of attention."

"It's clear that he is dangerous if you find a way to get him the ball, and he averaged 7.6 yards after the catch per reception over his career."

### **Will history repeat itself?**

The last time Purdue recruited both the Indiana Mr. and Miss Basketball award winners in the same year (1991), Glenn Robinson and Jennifer Jacoby would play key roles in the Boilermakers' Big Ten and NCAA tournament success.

Robinson would lead Purdue to the Elite Eight in 1994 and sweep the national player of the year awards. Jacoby was a starting guard on the first Final Four team in Purdue women's basketball history that same season.

Matt Painter and Katie Gearlds, who will succeed Sharon Versyp as Purdue women's coach following the 2021-22 season, can only hope for similar results from Caleb Furst and Jayla Smith, respectively.

Furst topped future Purdue teammate Trey Kaufman-Renn to become the Boilermakers' first Indiana Mr. Basketball since Caleb Swanigan in 2015. That same year, Purdue also signed the No. 2 player in the state, Ryan Cline, who played a key role in the 2019 Elite Eight run.

Furst, a 6-10, 230-pound post player, led Fort Wayne Blackhawk Christian (28-3) to the last two Class 2A state championships, averaging 21.4 points, 14.1 rebounds, 3.0 assists and 2.2 blocks per game as a senior. He also was named the recipient of the Class 2A Trester Mental Attitude Award.

Furst knows how to win, leading Blackhawk Christian to 105 victories in his four years and becoming the school's career scoring leader with 2,087.

Carmel guard Brian Waddell was selected to the Indiana All-Star team and followed in his father's footsteps by committing Wednesday to play at Purdue. Matt Waddell was a starting guard alongside Glenn Robinson on the 1994 Boilermaker Elite Eight team.

The Indiana All-Star games will take place June 11 at Owensboro, Ky., and June 12 at Southport High School.

Furst and Kaufman-Renn were the top vote-getters on The Associated Press All-State boys basketball team, which was announced Tuesday. Furst and Kaufman-Renn finished tied in voting by a panel of sportswriters, broadcasters and coaches around the state. The team is chosen regardless of grade level or the four classes of play.

The All-State first team was rounded out by Lafayette Jeff guard Brooks Barnhizer and Homestead's Luke Goode, who are bound for Northwestern and Illinois, respectively, and Blackford guard Luke Brown (Stetson).

Waddell was voted to the second team alongside Notre Dame recruits Blake Wesley of South Bend Riley and J.R. Konieczny of South Bend St. Joseph. Marion's Jalen Blackmon and Shamar Avance of Lawrence North complete the second team.

Homestead junior Fletcher Loyer, who also has verbally committed to Purdue, headlines the third team. He's joined by two Butler recruits — Pierce Thomas of Brownsburg and Jayden Taylor of Perry Meridian. Evansville-bound Blake Sisley, from Heritage Hills, and Kooper Jacobi, Kaufman-Renn's teammate at Silver Creek, complete the third team.

*Kenny Thompson is the former sports editor for the Lafayette Journal & Courier and an award-winning journalist. He has covered Purdue athletics for many years.*



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