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Jersey Numbers Matter

Purdue Boilermakers at Michigan Wolverines. Photo credit: Maize & Blue Nation

Jersey numbers matter and Purdue hoops flying nationally high

KENNY THOMPSON
Columnist

Any sports fan who doesn't think the name on the front of the jersey matters, look no further than Purdue and the Indiana Pacers in the past couple of weeks.

The Pacers were hosting the Los Angeles Lakers and LeBron James. It appeared the Pacers were going to pull off a last-second victory when rookie Chris Duarte appeared to be fouled on a game-tying 3-pointer.

No whistle.

The Lakers went on to win 124-116 in overtime behind eight of James' season-high 39 points. A day later, the NBA confirmed to The Indianapolis Star that a foul should have been called.

Had it been James taking the game-tying shot, what are the odds a foul would have been called on the Pacers? The same odds as betting on the sun rising in the east every morning.

And then there's the Boilermakers, who looked primed to be No. 1 in the Associated Press college basketball poll for the first time when No. 5 Duke beat No. 1 Gonzaga. Earlier that week, Gonzaga had dominated No. 2 UCLA so one would think when Nos. 1 and 2 lose, No. 3 moves up?

Not in the ESPN-dominated world of college basketball, the network which promotes the Blue Devils like it does the New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox. The happy Duke players hadn't left the court when the drumbeat began. Duke deserves to be No. 1.

As it turns out, the pro-Duke bandwagon did Purdue a favor by putting the Blue Devils No. 1 and Purdue No. 2 going into the Big Ten/ACC Challenge.

Tuesday night's game at Mackey Arena with Florida State probably would have been a blowout anyway but an emphatic 93-65 victory sent a message that Purdue is for real.

Ohio State, no doubt motivated by playing the nation's top-ranked team on its home floor, overcame a terrible first half to upset Duke about two hours later.

Barring a letdown Friday in the Big Ten home opener against an Iowa team that either can't or won't play defense, Purdue will sit atop The Associated Press poll Monday.

No matter the ranking, the facts and figures coming from the Boilermakers are stunning.

- Purdue is one of three teams in the last 20 seasons to score 80 or more points on 50 percent or better field goal shooting and better than 35 percent from 3-point range in seven consecutive games. The others were the 2005 national champion North Carolina and the 2010 Syracuse team that climbed to the top of The Associated Press poll.
- The Boilermakers have trailed for a total of 22 minutes and 53 seconds in their first seven games.
- Purdue is the Big Ten's most successful team in the Challenge at 12-9. The Boilermakers have won seven straight home games in the event by a combined 114 points (16.3 ppg.)
- Over its last 100 games at Mackey Arena, the Boilermakers are 90-10.
- In the 97-40 victory against Omaha, Purdue went on a 29-0 run that Purdue Athletic Communications officials believe is the largest run in school history.
- The Boilermakers were called for no fouls during the first half against Omaha, a school record as well.
- Sophomore center Zach Edey, Purdue's leading scorer at 16.9 per game, has scored 118 points in 130 minutes. Extended to a full 40-minute game that's an average of 36.3 points.

Purdue coach earns Hall of Fame selection

Matt Painter likes to joke about how mediocre his playing career was at Purdue.

But as a guard at Delta High School and later the Boilermakers' choice to succeed Gene Keady, Painter's basketball life has been an unqualified success.

Painter is among the headliners in the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame's 60th class, which was announced Tuesday.

Painter set the Delta career scoring (1,497) and assists records, capped by a senior season that saw him set the single-game scoring record while averaging 27.7 points, 9.6 rebounds and

Matt Painter

7.4 assists per game. He was a 1989 Indiana All-Star.

In 17 seasons as Purdue's head coach, Painter already is the school's third-winningest coach behind Keady and Ward "Piggy" Lambert. As of Wednesday, Painter is 355-184 at Purdue with 12 NCAA Tournament berths, three Big Ten Conference regular season championships and a Big Ten Tournament title.

Painter was the 2019 NABC National Coach of the Year and leads his league peers with four Big Ten Coach of the Year awards.

Big Ten honors for Purdue duo

For the second time in four years, a Purdue athlete is the Big Ten's Richter-Howard Receiver of the Year.

David Bell, one of three finalists for the Biletnikoff Award as the nation's best receiver, joins former teammate Rondale Moore (2018) to earn that honor. Bell leads the Big Ten in catches per game (8.5) and receiving yards per game (116.9). With 1,286 yards, Bell is 21 shy of John Standeford's record for a single season. Bell already owns the record of 17 career 100-yard receiving games.

Junior defensive end George Karlaftis was selected first-team All-Big Ten by the conference coaches and media as well.

He is the first Boilermaker defender to earn first-team All-Big Ten honors since defensive tackle Kawann Short in 2012.

Karlaftis is a semifinalist for the Chuck Bednarik Award after leading Purdue in tackles for loss (11.5), sacks (5), forced fumbles (3), fumble recoveries (2) and quarterback hurries (8).

Quarterback Aidan O'Connell was selected second-team All-Big Ten by the coaches and media. O'Connell ranks third nationally with a 73.5 percent completion rate. He is on track to set both the Big Ten and Purdue single-season completion percentage records.

O'Connell has thrown for 3,177 yards and 23 touchdowns. During his past five games, O'Connell has completed 76.5 percent of his passes for 18 touchdowns and no interceptions. The last Purdue quarterback to earn either first- or second-team All-Big Ten honors was Kyle Orton in 2004.

Five Boilermakers on each side of the football earned honorable mention. Center Gus hartwig, guard Tyler Witt and tackle Greg Long are joined by tight end Payne Durham and wide receiver Milton Wright.

Purdue's much improved defensive unit is represented on the honorable mention list by linebackers Jaylan Alexander and Jalen Graham, tackle Branson Deen, safety Cam Allen and cornerback Dedrick Mackey. Kicker Mitchell Fineran also earned honorable mention status. The transfer from Samford became only the third Purdue kicker to make at least 20 field goals in a season.

Indiana senior linebacker Micah McFadden was a second-team selection by the coaches and media. McFadden recorded a team-leading 77 tackles. Tight end Peyton Hendershot was a third-team choice by the media.

Defensive end Ryder Anderson, cornerback Jaylin Williams and tackle Matthew Bedford received honorable mention.

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A week later than the historical moment should have taken place, Purdue ascended to the top of The Associated Press men's college basketball rankings for the first time Monday.

For 379 appearances in the AP Top 25, Purdue had been ranked no higher than No. 2. The mantle of "best" team never to be rated No. 1 now falls to Maryland, which has 423 weeks in The Associated Press poll without reaching the top.

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It's heady times in West Lafayette. Purdue was favored Thursday night at Rutgers to improve to 9-0 for only the fifth time since 1940, when Crawfordsville legend Piggy Lambert coached the Boilermakers to a Big Ten championship. With the history of Boilermaker sports in mind, it's usually never a good idea to look ahead. That said, the school record of 14 consecutive victories to start the season is in play. That's a mark shared by Glenn Robinson's 1993-94 Boilers and the 2009-10 Purdue team that will be forever remembered for what could have been if Robbie Hummel had not torn his ACL at Minnesota.

The next six games for Purdue are at Rutgers (4-4), vs. North Carolina State (6-2) at the Basketball Hall of Fame Invitational in Brooklyn, vs. Butler (6-3) in the Crossroads Classic, and home games with Incarnate Word (1-8), Nicholls (5-3) and Wisconsin (7-1).

How did the Boilermakers reach No. 1? Several reasons:

- Purdue has outscored its opponents by 77 points at the free throw line, best in the nation.
- The Boilermakers are just one of two teams nationally (Colorado State) to shoot at least 50 percent from the field, 40 percent from 3-point range and 75 percent at the free throw line.
- Opponents haven't been able to focus on stopping one player in Purdue's offense. Eight of Purdue's 10 regulars are making at least 40 percent of their 3-point attempts. The exceptions are senior Eric Hunter Jr. and Zach Edey, who provides other things to worry about at 7-foot-4.

Big Ten bowl forecast

Let's get the preliminary gripes out of the way before going into my Big Ten Conference bowl picks.

If you recall last week's column and how the name on the front of the jersey matters in college basketball? It's even more important in college football. Penn State, where a 7-5 record was good enough to earn coach James Franklin a guaranteed $75 million contract over the next 10 years, has no business being in the Outback Bowl on New Year's Day. Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota or Purdue were more deserving.

But thanks to the brand built up for decades under Joe Paterno, the Nittany Lions are the best known Big Ten school not named Ohio State or Michigan. Potential ticket sales and TV ratings drove this selection.

No tears will be shed for Iowa, which ended up with a nice consolation prize of facing Kentucky in the Citrus Bowl on New Year's Day. This is probably the Big Ten's best bet for a bowl victory against the SEC.

Which brings us to another Big Ten-SEC matchup. Why Purdue was sent back to the Music City Bowl in Nashville to play basically a road game against Tennessee comes down to Wisconsin having Barry Alvarez in the Big Ten front office.

Alvarez, the longtime football coach and athletic director in Madison, is still looking after his school. The Badgers got the Las Vegas Bowl berth against Arizona State, a beatable foe even for an offense that struggles to score points. Minnesota (8-4), which ended up in the next-to-lowest bowl game in the Big Ten pecking order despite beating Wisconsin in the regular season finale, should have been the next choice for the Music City Bowl.

Speaking of the Gophers, they are up first in the Big Ten bowl batting order. The Guaranteed Rate Bowl in Phoenix on Dec. 28 gives fans a first time matchup against West Virginia. Minnesota is 2-0 under coach P.J. Fleck in bowl games and this matchup is favorable to make it three in a row. West Virginia (6-6) is solid against the run but is in the lower half of the NCAA defensive rankings against the pass. Minnesota quarterback Tanner Morgan and receiver Chris Autman-Bell could have a big day.

Maryland (6-6) achieved bowl eligibility on the final day and were rewarded with a Pinstripe Bowl matchup with a Virginia Tech program that fired coach Justin Fuente with two weeks to go in the regular season. The Terrapins don't play defense, allowing a staggering 32 points a game. Virginia Tech is not a good offensive team, ranking 92nd nationally at just under 25 points a game. I'll go out on a limb and say Maryland gives the Big Ten bowl victory No. 2.

Purdue leads off a Big Ten tripleheader on Dec. 30. The good news is that Tennessee is vulnerable to the pass, even more so now that top cornerback Alontae Taylor has departed to prepare for the NFL Draft. That makes the Vols even with Purdue, since it is unlikely Big Ten Receiver of the Year David Bell will play after declaring his early departure for the NFL Draft.

The same goes for Purdue defensive end George Karlaftis, whose relentless pursuit of quarterbacks will be missed. First one to 40 might win this game.

No. 10 Michigan State rode the back of the nation's second-leading rusher, Kenneth Walker III, to a 10-2 record and a New Year's Six bowl berth against ACC champion Pittsburgh in the Peach Bowl.

The 12th-ranked Panthers (11-2) will be without offensive coordinator Brent Whipple, who resigned to take the same job at Nebraska. Pitt has the sixth-best rushing defense in the country. Michigan State has never lost to Pitt in seven meetings but that streak is in jeopardy due to its inability to defend the pass. Panthers quarterback Kenny Pickett has thrown for 4,319 yards and 42 touchdowns.

Wisconsin (8-4) should roll sevens in Las Vegas against Arizona State (8-4) thanks to the nation's top-ranked defense. The Sun Devils are no slouches defensively, either, but the Badgers have enough offensive firepower to make the difference in a low-scoring affair.

Don't look for many points in the Orange Bowl, where second-ranked Michigan (12-1) and third-ranked Georgia (12-1) face off on New Year's Eve for the right to lose to Alabama in the College Football Playoff title game. Will Georgia be able to bounce back from a crushing loss to the Crimson Tide in the SEC championship game? Will Michigan score against a defense that hadn't given up more than 17 points in a game until Alabama shredded it for 41? I see a nightmare ratings scenario in ESPN's future, when it has to sell a rematch of the SEC final.

Penn State will be playing an Arkansas team in Tampa that won eight regular season games for the first time since 2011, earning a No. 21 ranking and its first bowl appearance in five years. The Razorbacks have not beaten a Big Ten team in four bowl matchups.

Injuries limited Penn State quarterback Sean Clifford's effectiveness much of the season but when healthy he passed for 2,912 yards and 20 touchdowns. With all the talented defensive ends in the Big Ten, Arnold Ebiketie almost went unnoticed despite 9.5 sacks.

The day's second Big Ten-SEC matchup, at the Citrus Bowl in Orlando, will come down to a simple fact: can No. 15 Iowa (10-3) score points defensively against No. 22 Kentucky (9-3)? That's because quarterbacks Spencer Petras and Alex Padilla have been less than impressive all season. With a plus-13 turnover margin, only Middle Tennessee State has been better than the Hawkeyes.

A Kentucky victory will bring coach Mark Stoops within one win of tying Bear Bryant as the school's winningest football coach. It would be with great irony that victory No. 59 would come against the school for which Stoops starred from 1987-89.

The best non-playoff matchup has to be No. 6 Ohio State and No. 11 Utah in the Rose Bowl. Pasadena is a nice consolation prize for the Buckeyes (10-2), whose championship dreams went up in smoke with their first loss to Michigan in nine years.

Ohio State still possesses the nation's best offense at 551 yards and 45.5 points a game. Freshman quarterback C.J. Stroud has a pair of 1,000-yard receivers to choose from (Garrett Wilson and Jaxon Smith-Njigba) and a third in Chris Olave who needs 64 yards to reach 1,000. Another freshman, TreVeyon Henderson, has rushed for 1,165 yards and 15 touchdowns.

Utah (10-3) closed the regular season with a six-game winning streak and a 38-10 rout of Oregon for the Pac-12 championship. The Utes beat Oregon twice this season, while Ohio State's other defeat was a 35-28 loss to the Ducks in Columbus.

Time of possession could be the second-most important statistic next to the score. Utah has a solid running game led by Tavion Thomas (1,041 yards, 20 TDs) and Ohio State can't score if it doesn't have the football.

I'll project a 4-5 bowl record for the Big Ten, but won't be surprised if Purdue, Iowa and Michigan win to tilt that postseason mark well above .500.

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

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