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March Madness and NCAA Tournaments



The Boilermaker X-tra Special VIII with Purdue Pete at the 2018 Music City Bowl.
Photo by PurdueReamerClub

Coaching carousels and Big Ten's big flat thud in this years NCAA

The first time I heard of Drew Brees, other than as a name on Joe Tiller's first recruiting class at Purdue, was in August 1997.

Tom Kubat, an Indiana Journalism Hall of Fame member and long-time Journal & Courier Purdue football writer, came back from a practice talking about this freshman named Brees and how accurate his passes were. Kubat was not a sports writer who handed out praise often so that stuck with me.

One year later, the nation got its first glimpse at Brees on a hot, muggy day in the Memorial Coliseum in Los Angeles when he nearly led Purdue past USC. The Boilermakers may have lost that day but Tiller became convinced that Brees was going to be special.

As he was on so many football matters, Tiller was right. Brees made sure Purdue's Rose Bowl drought ended in 2000 with a share of the Boilermakers' first Big Ten championship since 1967. Purdue and Big Ten passing records fell by the bushel to the quarterback whose other offer was from Kentucky.

Brees ended his 20-year NFL career Sunday afternoon, allowing his four children to announce his retirement via Instagram. That low-key exit pretty much sums up Brees, who wasn't as glamorous as Michael Vick in the 2001 NFL Draft nor as smug and arrogant as Tom Brady to this day.

On his first year of eligibility in 2026, Brees will be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame like the man whose records he broke, Peyton Manning.

Brees is beloved not just in Greater Lafayette but in New Orleans as well. The Saints were days from leaving the city for San Antonio following Hurricane Katrina. But fate had other plans for New Orleans, bringing together the combination of Brees and coach Sean Payton in 2006.

Thanks to those two, the Saints are no longer a laughing stock. Victory in Super Bowl XLIV changed the NFL and the public's view of the Saints. When my wife and I spent our honeymoon in New Orleans, there was plenty of Brees memorabilia on display and on sale. The people love him, too, for his efforts to rebuild New Orleans following Katrina.

Brees may have become a Super Bowl MVP but he didn't forget Purdue, where his football and family life began. Brees met his wife, Brittany, at Purdue and both have been generous financially.

The couple donated \$2 million in 2007 to enhance the renamed Drew and Brittany Brees Student-Athlete Academic Center.

In 2015, they donated \$1 million to aid the struggling Boilermaker football program.

"We care so much about Purdue University," Brees said at the time. "Purdue has meant so much to me, and it has provided so many things. From the education I received and playing for coach Joe Tiller, to winning a Big Ten championship and going to the Rose Bowl, to the relationships I was able to form with many of my teammates and meeting my beautiful wife ... we are so blessed and so thankful. We just want to show how much we believe in our university, in our football program, in our leadership and in the direction we are heading."

His generosity extended to the basketball program in 2018. Secretly, through West Lafayette restaurant owner Orlando Itin, Brees won an auction for a 1930s Purdue jersey believed to have been worn by the legendary John Wooden.

Cost: \$264,000. At the time that was the record for a college basketball jersey according to Heritage Auctions.

Technically the jersey is on loan to Purdue, but Brees said it "will reside in the halls of Mackey Arena forever."

Brees will be a Purdue icon forever, too.

NCAA Tourney Thoughts

Here's what's on my mind since Sunday's NCAA tournament draw:

The selection committee hasn't always been kind to Purdue but



KENNY THOMPSON
Columnist

like 2019, this appears to be a fair draw for the Boilermakers. Purdue was the 14th overall seed in the tournament, or the second No. 4 seed. North Texas, by the way, was the No. 52 seed as one of the automatic berths from a usually one-seed conference.

An injury-weakened Villanova or No. 12 seed Winthrop awaits if Purdue wins its opener. Standing in the way of another Elite Eight berth probably will be top-seeded Baylor, unless Wisconsin or North Carolina pull the upset. Even if it is Baylor and Purdue loses,

this young Boilermaker team would benefit from learning what it would take to be a national title contender.

Unlike many years when the Boilermakers are usually named as prime upset victims, it appears 2019's Elite Eight run has lingered among many national media members.

Mike DeCoursey of The Sporting News and Big Ten Network has Purdue in his Final Four along with Gonzaga, Illinois and Alabama.

"The last time we had a tournament, the Boilermakers were a single-made free throw away from their first Final Four appearance since 1980," DeCoursey said. "That free throw was not made, and they are still waiting. They might not for much longer. This is a young, developing team but appears to have landed in a bracket that can be conquered. The key will be whether young Jaden Ivey can continue his recent ascent toward stardom."

"To get to that stage of the tournament, the Boilers likely will have to face Big East champion Villanova, Big 12 champion Baylor and probably Arkansas, Texas Tech or Big Ten runner-up Ohio State. So, yeah, it will not be easy. They're young, deep and maybe a year away from fielding a true championship contender. They wouldn't have been the pick in any other bracket. But the lineup of opponents seems just right for them to get through the requisite four games."

Michael Wilbon, co-host of ESPN's "Pardon the Interruption," also has Purdue in the Final Four with Illinois, Gonzaga and Texas.

"I'm clearly biased and I didn't want to pick all No. 1 seeds," Wilbon said about his Purdue pick. Wilbon is a Northwestern graduate and a former intern at the Lafayette Journal & Courier.

Scott Van Pelt, the ESPN main Sports Center anchor whose kindness toward the late Tyler Trent will not be forgotten, has Purdue going one step further. He sees Gonzaga topping Purdue in the title game. Van Pelt has the Boilermakers topping Houston in one national semifinal and the Zags over Texas in the other semifinal.

"Trevion Williams (starring) in a league full of big men, I'll take him down low," Van Pelt said. "(Jaden) Ivey could be the next Ayo (Dosunmu)."

As is his wont, ESPN's Jay Bilas explained in detail his reasons for picking Purdue over North Texas and Winthrop.

"The Boilermakers have one of the toughest big men in the country in Trevion Williams. Very few teams have a 7-4 freshman to bring in off the bench like Zach Edey. Sasha Stefanovic and freshman Brandon Newman can both hit shots to loosen things up around Williams, but Purdue needs to get Williams the ball and let him go to work. He is an elite offensive rebounder. I admire Williams and the way he plays. And I admire Purdue. This team has outperformed outside expectations, but not its own." "The size and toughness of Purdue will end the Cinderella ride of Winthrop."

Seth Davis of The Athletic and CBS is also bullish on the Boilermakers.

"As much as I like Winthrop, I like Purdue even more," Davis said. "Between 6-10 junior Trevion Williams and 7-4 freshman Zach Edey, the Boilermakers are as deep at the center position as any team in the country. I'm concerned that their best 3-point shooter, 6-5 junior Sasha Stefanovic, hasn't been the same since he

got infected with COVID-19 in February, and I'm not crazy about teams that are so reliant on four freshmen. But if Purdue were not in a bracket with Baylor, I might have picked this team to go to the Final Four. All the pieces are there for a memorable March." ...

If you believe in omens, undefeated Gonzaga is destined to win the national championship. The last tournament played without Kentucky and Duke was in 1976. Bob Knight's undefeated IU team won the title and remains the last unbeaten NCAA champ. ...

How sad that in a year Indiana is hosting the entire NCAA tournament, Purdue is the only state team to make it. That fact didn't help Archie Miller keep his job at Indiana.

A double whammy for Hoosier fans has to be the sight of Kelvin Sampson back in Assembly Hall on Friday night for the first time since his firing in 2008, when his Houston team plays Cleveland State. Game time is 7:15 on TruTV. ...

Thursday's First Four game against Michigan State is only the third time UCLA has played in Mackey Arena. The Bruins won the dedication game in 1967 against Rick Mount and Purdue on a last-second shot. Former Gene Keady assistant Steve Lavin brought UCLA to West Lafayette in 2000 and left with an 87-82 victory.

On the other hand, Michigan State has not won in Mackey Arena since 2014 so one streak will end. ...

The NCAA Tournament Selection Committee rewarded the Big Ten Conference for its outstanding season by sending five of its nine tourney teams to Mackey Arena for their first games.

Ohio State, the sixth overall seed in the tournament, will play Oral Roberts at 3 p.m. Friday. Wisconsin, seeded 35th overall, plays North Carolina at 7:10 p.m. Friday.

Michigan, the fourth No. 1 seed in the field, plays either Mount St. Mary's or Texas Southern at 3 p.m. Saturday. Maryland, the No. 36 overall seed, faces Connecticut at 7:10 p.m. Friday and Saturday's games from Mackey will be on CBS.

The Wolverines are the only one of the five Big Ten tourney teams to have won in Mackey Arena this season. Maryland's only Mackey Arena win came on its first visit as a Big Ten member in 2015. Wisconsin is 4-42 at Mackey and hasn't won there since 2014. Ohio State beat Purdue on a last-second basket in 2018.

The NCAA missed a golden opportunity by not sending BYU and former Purdue center Matt Haarms to West Lafayette. That homecoming wasn't possible once Michigan State and UCLA were sent to Mackey for a First Four game. The NCAA is planning on changing sites for every round of the tournament until the Final Four. ...

In case you care, the Big Ten had four of the top seven overall seeds in the tournament with Illinois at No. 3 and Iowa at No. 7. Rutgers was 40th and Michigan State was at No. 43.

Coaching carousel

Even with a 0-7 record against Purdue, it's a surprise that Indiana found a booster to pay Archie Miller \$10 million to go away. After also giving football coach Tom Allen a big raise, administrators in Bloomington would be wise to not cry poverty or cut programs in the next few years.

Miller, who seemed like a sure thing when IU hired him away from Dayton four years ago, never had a plan for success. It's almost like he expected the name on the front of the jerseys to play the games and intimidate rivals. Those days have been gone for almost 30 years.

It also had to be galling to the Hoosier fan base to see Purdue lure Mr. Basketball candidate Trey Kaufman-Renn from Silver Creek High School in southern Indiana.

Purdue coach Matt Painter learned the hard way in 2013 and 2014 that chasing four and five stars who weren't a Boilermaker

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fit is a recipe for losing. Since changing his recruiting strategy in part to bring in a shooter every class (Dakota Mathias, Ryan Cline, Carsen Edwards, Sasha Stefanovic, Eric Hunter, Brandon Newman, Jaden Ivey), Purdue has compiled a 164-70 record (a .700 winning percentage).

That success opened the Penn State door on Monday for Painter's top assistant, Micah Shrewsberry.

"Micah was a name that immediately jumped to the top of our list with his experience in the Big Ten and the NBA," athletic director Sandy Barbour said in a statement. "He has had success at all levels and knows what it takes to develop a program into a consistent national contender. He has learned from and worked under some of the most respected coaches in the country in Brad Stevens and Matt Painter."

Shrewsberry had two stints at Purdue (2011-13, 2020-21) sandwiched by six seasons as an assistant to Brad Stevens with the Boston Celtics. Shrewsberry also worked four seasons under Stevens at Butler, reaching the national championship game twice.

Shrewsberry will stay with Purdue through the NCAA tournament.

When he arrives for good at State College, Shrewsberry likely faces a massive rebuilding project. The Athletic and SI.com reported Tuesday that six Nittany Lions players, including four starters, are seeking to transfer.

Miller wasn't the only Big Ten coach fired on Monday. Minnesota dismissed Richard Pitino, who was unemployed less than 24 hours before taking the New Mexico job.

Pitino, 38, went 141-123 in eight seasons with the Gophers with two NCAA tournament berths and an NIT championship. Only Jim Dutcher has more victories in Minneapolis than Pitino since 1948 (190-113 from 1975-86). Which raises an interesting question: Is it the coach or is it that winning big at Minnesota is difficult? Kevin McHale and Mychal Thompson aren't walking in the door at Williams Arena again.

Don't tell that to Minnesota athletic director Mark Coyle.

"Decisions like this are never easy, but after evaluating this season and the previous eight years of our program under Richard, it is clear to me that new leadership is needed," Coyle said. "We have one of the best practice facilities in the nation, a historic competition venue and a state that produces top-caliber talent. This is an extremely attractive job, and we will immediately start a nationwide search for our next head coach."

Monday wasn't all bad news for Big Ten basketball coaches. Iowa gave Fran McCaffery a four-year contract extension through 2027-28. The Associated Press reported his annual base salary of \$2.3 million for the next two seasons will remain unchanged. McCaffery took a 15 percent pay cut for this year to help the athletic department offset shortfalls caused by the COVID pandemic.

"He's built a strong foundation upon which we can continue to build for years to come," athletic director Gary Barta said in a statement.

That thud you heard a few days ago was the Big Ten Conference's basketball reputation crashing like the stock market in 1929.

It's not been a good first year in office for Big Ten commissioner Kevin Warren from a public relations point of view. Unlike the football fiasco, this isn't Warren's fault but in these times, hey, someone has to be blamed when things don't go right.

As upsetting as it was to watch Purdue bow out to North Texas, that defeat doesn't even rank in the top three of Big Ten disappointments in this NCAA tournament.

Maybe it wasn't a good idea to announce a contract extension before the tournament for Iowa coach Fran McCaffery, whose refusal to make the No. 2 seed Hawkeyes play defense caught up with him in their 95-80 second round loss to seventh-seeded Oregon on Monday.

The Hawkeyes gave up 80 or more points seven times in 2020-21 and in nine games during 2019-20. In contrast, Purdue surrendered 80 or more points just three times this season and twice in 2019-20.

But even Iowa's expectations with probable national player of the year Luka Garza were dwarfed by those in Champaign-Urbana, Ill.

There was national championship talk surrounding Illinois and its two future NBA Draft picks, Ayo Dosunmu and Kofi Cockburn. In this NCAA tournament of upsets, Loyola Chicago's 71-58 victory over top-seeded Illinois has to be the biggest shock.

Not far behind is Ohio State. The Buckeyes became just the ninth No. 2 seed to lose to a No. 15 in the men's NCAA tournament.

Oral Roberts had had just two NCAA tournament victories in its history before this past weekend, both coming in 1974.

Michigan State losing again in Mackey Arena, in overtime to UCLA, and Rutgers blowing its chance in the final minute to upset No. 2 seed Houston weren't huge surprises.

Wisconsin enjoyed a rare Mackey Arena victory, crushing storied North Carolina before finding South Regional No. 1 seed Baylor too much to overcome. Maryland ran into a similar buzzsaw in East No. 2 seed Alabama.

So the Big Ten's Sweet 16 hopes are down to East No. 1 seed Michigan, who fended off LSU on Monday night. This is the same Michigan team national experts were writing off because of Isaiah Livers' foot injury.

The Big 12, whose fans boasted that their league would prove it's better than the Big Ten, crashed and burned too. Abilene Christian over Texas? No. 11 seeds Syracuse and Oregon State over West Virginia and Oklahoma State? At least third-seeded Arkansas over No. 6 seed Texas Tech is nothing to be ashamed about. Neither is Oklahoma's second round loss to overall No. 1 seed Gonzaga.

The biggest surprise is the Pac-12, with four teams in the Sweet 16. Sixth-seed USC routed third-seed Kansas on Monday night to cap an impressive first week of the tournament. Either the Trojans or Oregon are guaranteed an Elite Eight berth since the two rivals play each other Sunday.

Somewhere, Bill Walton is chanting "the Pac-12 ... conference of champions."

Coaching carousel

Wouldn't you like to know why Porter Moser's name has never been associated with the Indiana basketball vacancy?

An unexpected Final Four in 2018 and a surprising run to the Sweet Sixteen this season at Loyola Chicago proves that Moser can coach. Sure, there's been some luck involved but I can't think of a single program outside of maybe Duke and North Carolina that wouldn't be satisfied with those two NCAA tourney performances.

There is the question of whether Moser can recruit at the Big Ten level, but Archie Miller brought in a pair of five-star players and all that got him was a \$10 million severance.

An even bigger mystery is why Minnesota didn't at least kick the tires on Moser before hiring one of Richard Pitino's former assistants Monday night.

Xavier assistant Ben Johnson, who played two seasons for the Gophers, has no college head coaching experience.

Perhaps Minnesota AD Mark Coyle, like Indiana athletic director Scott Dolson, kept hearing "no" from his coaching targets. One would hope Coyle at least made inquiries to representatives for Arkansas' Eric Musselman and Brian Dutcher of San Diego State, both of whom are sons of former Minnesota coaches.

Johnson was one of Pitino's assistants for five seasons and his claim to fame in Minneapolis was recruiting former standout Amir Coffey.

Help wanted?

It's a new era in college basketball thanks to the soon-to-be adopted transfer rule which will allow players to move to another

school one time without having to sit out a season.

To no one's surprise, Purdue forward Aaron Wheeler entered the transfer portal this week. Wheeler will leave with a Purdue degree but the combination of losing his starting job to freshman Mason Gillis plus the arrival of highly touted big men Caleb Furst and Trey Kaufman-Renn made it logical to move on.

Indiana's Armaan Franklin and Aljami Durham have also declared their intentions to transfer, but Franklin told state media that he is open to returning to Bloomington depending on who is replacing Archie Miller as coach.

The Athletic ranked the top 35 best available transfers and high school recruits earlier this week. Five Big Ten players made the transfer list, headed by Minnesota guard Marcus Carr at No. 4. Guard Myreon Jones (No. 18) and Seth Lundy (No. 27) of Penn State were joined by Franklin (No. 28) and Durham (No. 34).

Consolation prize

After enduring the worst season in Purdue women's basketball history (7-16) since 1983-84, Boilermaker fans had something to celebrate last week.

Jayla Smith of Lawrence North was selected Indiana Miss Basketball, becoming the 10th in Purdue women's history. Smith led Lawrence North to the Class 4A state championship, scoring 22 points. She averaged 19.5 points and 4.6 steals during her senior season.

"We're incredibly proud of Jayla," Purdue coach Sharon Versyp said. "She is an unbelievable talent. Athletic, versatile and an accurate 3-point shooter, she plays with a passion and will to win. In a close game late, she wants the ball in her hands and very little will stop her. We're excited to watch her game flourish and take the next step at Purdue."

Smith is the fourth Miss Basketball recruited by Versyp, who has not won a regular season Big Ten championship during her 14 seasons.

Smith headlines a four woman class ranked 22nd nationally by ESPNW.

The other Boilermakers to claim Indiana Miss Basketball honors are Versyp (1984), Jennifer Jacoby (1991), Stephanie White (1995), Kelly Komara (1998), Katie Gearlds (2003), Jodi Howell (2005), Brittany Rayburn (2008), Courtney Moses (2010) and Karissa McLaughlin (2017).

Honor roll

Two in-state Big Ten stars made Sports Illustrated's list of the Top 50 college basketball players of 2020-21.

Indiana sophomore Trayce Jackson-Davis is 15th on the list.

"The brilliance of Jackson-Davis has been overshadowed by an underwhelming season in Bloomington, but the sophomore big man is the first Hoosier in more than 25 years to average at least 19 points and nine rebounds per game. Jackson-Davis is one of the nation's most productive post players, an old-school big who hasn't attempted a three all season but wears you down with his ability to outwork you on the inside."

Purdue junior center Trevion Williams came in at No. 30. "The 6-10, 265-pound center took another step forward as a junior, maintaining his absurd rebounding rate while shouldering the offensive load for a young Boilermakers team and turning into one of the country's top big men. Only two players nationally take more of their team's shots when on the floor than Williams, and he leads all major conference players. While he still remains a liability at the free throw line (51%), Williams is a force inside that few teams can match, whether in the Big Ten or elsewhere."

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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