

MSR: montgomerySPORTSreport

The Paper of Montgomery County

January 2022

TRANSFER PORTAL IMPORTANCE



Purdue Boilermakers vs IU. Photo credit: Purdue Athletics

Important transfer impacts and thoughts on Covid-19's impacts

If there was any doubt how important the transfer portal will be to college football, look no further than Michigan State.

The Spartans finished with 11 victories, nine more than the COVID-shortened 2020 season, and the foundation for that record-setting turnaround was 20 transfers. Kenneth Walker III led that transfer class and powered the Michigan State offense with a nation's best 1,636 yards and 18 touchdowns.

Purdue had a similar turnaround in 2021, and look no further than the 48-45 over-

time victory over Tennessee in the Music City Bowl to see the impact transfers had for the Boilermakers.

Bowl MVP Broc Thompson transferred in from Marshall. Mitchell Fineran, whose fourth field goal of the game was the difference, arrived in West Lafayette from Samford. Chris Jefferson, who filled in for veteran defensive back Dedrick Mackey, recorded 15 tackles against the Vols. He transferred in from NCAA Division II Findlay. In all, nine transfers played a role in the Boilermakers reaching nine victories for the first time since 2003. Let's rank them in order of impact.

1. Tyler Witt, guard: The graduate transfer from Western Kentucky started all 13 games and earned honorable mention All-Big Ten honors. Witt and center Gus Hartwig were the only constants on an offensive line that was affected at various times by injuries.
2. Mitchell Fineran, kicker: His 24 field goals were just one shy of the school record set by Ben Jones in 2003. He's expected to return for the 2022 season.
3. Jamari Brown, cornerback: The transfer from Kentucky almost seamlessly stepped in when No. 1 cornerback Corey Trice was lost to a torn ACL. He has two seasons of eligibility remaining.
4. Broc Thompson, wide receiver: Stepped up against Tennessee when Purdue was without All-American David Bell (NFL Draft) and Milton Wright (academics). His seven catches for a bowl record 217 yards and two touchdowns against the Vols were not only career highs but amazing considering he will have surgery on both knees in the offseason.
5. Chris Jefferson, safety: Jefferson spent



KENNY THOMPSON
Columnist



Aiden O'Connell

most of the season as the fifth defensive back in passing situations. His 15 tackles against Tennessee more than doubled his previous career high. Jefferson has one season of eligibility remaining.

6. Damarjhe Lewis, defensive tackle: The freshman transfer from Indiana saw extensive action in the bowl game with Branson Deen sidelined for "health and safety" reasons.

7. O.C. Brothers, linebacker: The transfer from Auburn missed the bowl game for "health and safety" reasons but was a reliable backup all season. Brothers has two seasons of eligibility remaining.

8. Joe Anderson, defensive end: The transfer from South Carolina saw extensive action against Tennessee as part of a rotation filling in for George Karlaftis (NFL Draft). Anderson has two seasons of eligibility left.

9. PrinceJames Boyd, defensive tackle: The transfer from Independence Community College made five tackles against Tennessee, his first significant playing time of the season. Boyd has three seasons of eligibility remaining.

Sampson James, the former four-star running back from Avon, transferred from Indiana to Purdue in the fall but was not eligible for the 2021 season.

A third transfer from Indiana, 2017 Indiana Mr. Football Reese Taylor, is among the seven known transfers who are expected to begin classes at Purdue on Monday. Taylor is expected to shore up a cornerback position that is thin behind Brown and Trice.

Also coming in are Murray State defensive end Scotty Humpich, who earned All-Ohio Valley honors in 2020; cornerbacks Tre

Denson of Kansas State and Bryce Hampton of Adams State, offensive lineman Sione Finau of Florida International and receivers Tyrone Tracy from Iowa and Elijah Canion of Auburn. Tracy starred at Decatur Central and caught 15 passes for 105 yards and a

touchdown in 2021.

Bowl wrapup

Notes and thoughts from a 6-4 bowl season for the Big Ten Conference, two more wins than I predicted:

Expectations will be high for Purdue in 2022, maybe even the school's second 10-win season ever. Fueling those expectations are the return of second-team All-Big Ten quarterback Aidan O'Connell.

O'Connell wasn't at his finest against Tennessee but still threw for a Music City Bowl record 534 yards and a record-tying five touchdowns. The only other Purdue quarterback with multiple 500-yard passing games is Drew Brees. While not comparing O'Connell to a future Pro Football Hall of Fame quarterback, it could be argued that O'Connell is just as valuable to his team's fortunes.

O'Connell ranks 10th with 5,728 career passing yards and if he can duplicate his 2021 total of 3,711, the former walkon will only trail Brees (11,792), Curtis Painter (11,163), Mark Herrmann (9,946) and David Blough (9,734) in Purdue history. ... Five of Purdue's nine victories were away from Ross-Ade Stadium, matching a feat last accomplished by the 1943 team that went 9-0. ...

Michigan State completed the biggest turnaround in school history by outscoring Pittsburgh 21-0 in the fourth quarter to win the Peach Bowl.

The Spartans (11-2) assured themselves of a Top 10 poll finish without Kenneth Walker III, who opted out of the game to prepare for the NFL Draft. Michigan State's nine-game improvement surpassed the school record of

seven games in 2017. ...

Taking a page from Purdue's bowl strategy, Ohio State also recorded a 48-45 victory against Utah in the Rose Bowl.

All-Big Ten quarterback C.J. Stroud threw for a school-record 573 yards and six touchdowns to lead the comeback from a 35-21 halftime deficit. Even with star wide receivers Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson opting to skip the Rose Bowl, the Buckeyes merely turned to Jaxon Smith-Njigba and Marvin Harrison Jr.

Njigba, a sophomore, set a school record with 347 receiving yards and three touchdowns. Harrison, a freshman and son of the former Indianapolis Colts star, also caught three TD passes. ...

Wisconsin may have found its next Jonathan Taylor in 17-year-old Braelon Allen. The freshman rushed for 159 yards and helped Wisconsin run off the final 9:57 in an 18-play drive that sealed the Badgers' 20-13 victory against Arizona State in the Las Vegas Bowl.

Allen's eighth 100-yard game of the season capped Wisconsin's turnaround from a 1-3 start. The Badgers (9-4) will take a streak of 20 consecutive bowl berths into the 2022 season.

Here are some thoughts while clearing out my holiday notebook:

COVID-19 has recorded its first significant impact of the 2021-22 Big Ten men's basketball season.

Michigan, probably the biggest disappointment in the league, called off games against arch rival Michigan State on Jan. 8 and preseason co-Big Ten favorite Purdue on Tuesday night because school officials declared the Wolverines fell below the Big Ten roster minimum of seven available scholarship players.

The Wolverines' game at Illinois on Friday remained in doubt as of press time. The Big Ten correctly revised its forfeiture policy, no longer automatically declaring a loss for the school unable to field a team. However, the cynic in me wonders about the timing of this mass infection in Ann Arbor. Avoiding the Spartans, Boilermakers and possibly the Fighting Illini at this time could mean the difference from Michigan remaining in title contention to possibly being 1-5 in the league and out of the race.

The same cynicism also wonders if com-

➤ KENNY *From Page 2*

missioner Kevin Warren and the Big Ten schedule makers will give Michigan a favorable break in rescheduling those games at the expense of Michigan State, Purdue and possibly Illinois. The folks in Champaign, Ill., are still seething about last year's decision to award the Big Ten title on the basis of winning percentage. Michigan (14-3), which didn't make up

three games lost to COVID, edged Illinois (16-4) – which played all 20 games scheduled – by .024 percentage points.

The Michigan postponement gave Purdue six days off following its victory at Penn State last Saturday to prepare for a terrible Nebraska team in Mackey Arena. ...

At least two national college football writers were impressed enough with Purdue's overtime victory against Tennessee in the Music City Bowl to include the Boilermakers in their first Top 25 rankings for 2022.

Pat Forde of Sports Illustrated ranks Purdue 24th, the lowest of six Big Ten teams in his Top 25. Ohio State is second behind Alabama. Michigan (7th), Michigan State (11th), Wisconsin (17th) and Iowa (22nd) also were ranked by Forde.

"We got a glimpse of what the Boilermakers will be without NFL talents David Bell and George Karlaftis in the Music City Bowl—and it was pretty good," Forde wrote. "QB Aidan O'Connell (more than 5,700 career passing yards) is coming back, and Jeff Brohm never runs out of receivers. Losing defensive coordinator Brad Lambert is a blow, but Brohm has gotten more involved on that side of the ball and should maintain the same style of play defensively." Lambert returned to Wake Forest, where he was an assistant from 2001-10, to be defensive coordinator.

RJ Young of FoxSports.com has Purdue 22nd, the lowest of five Big Ten teams in his rankings. Like Forde, Young has Alabama and Ohio State 1-2. Michigan is



ranked fifth, Michigan State 10th and Iowa 18th.

"Jeff Brohm has his quarterback, as former walk-on Aidan O'Connell, who threw for more than 500 yards in the Music City Bowl, will return in 2022," Young wrote. "Now, if Brohm finds a replacement for NFL-bound wideout David Bell, the Boilermakers can start faster in 2022 and finish as strong as they did in 2021." ...

Assuming Forde and Young are correct, Purdue may not be passed over for a higher-ranked Big Ten-affiliated bowl game in 2022. The Boilermakers' 48-45 overtime victory in the Music City Bowl was watched by 5.6 million viewers, according to Bill Shea of The Athletic.

That rating far surpassed regular season college football games on ESPN. Pretty strong for a game that was played on a Thursday afternoon in a less than optimal time slot (3 p.m.). Perhaps the rating was helped by the fact the game went well into the evening. Ratings like Purdue's and the 1.7 million viewers Ball State and Georgia State drew for the Camellia Bowl on Christmas Day is proof that college football fans could care less that 43 bowl games were originally set for the 2021 postseason.

Of the 37 bowls that were played, the Music City came in at No. 2 on the list of best games compiled by Tom Fornelli of CBSSports.com.

Purdue and Tennessee's back and forth offensive show was surpassed on Fornelli's list only by the Cure Bowl, another shootout that saw Coastal Carolina outduel Northern



Photos courtesy of Purdue Athletics

Illinois 47-41.

"... The game was incredibly entertaining for all neutral observers," Fornelli wrote. "The 1,293 yards of offense the teams combined for was the second-most overall in bowl history, behind only the 2011 Alamo Bowl (1,397 yards)." ...

An interesting investigation into pay for the Big Ten Conference's football coaches by Steve Rosen of HuskerOnline.com discovered that two of the league's head coaches are taking pay cuts for the 2022 season. One won't surprise you. Following his fourth consecutive losing season at Nebraska, Scott Frost saw his pay slashed by \$1 million by new athletic director Trev Alberts.

Don't set up a GoFundMe for Frost, though. The cut leaves Frost making \$4 million a year, ranking him 11th among the league's coaches.

Indiana's Tom Allen agreed to a \$200,000 pay cut, Rosen reports, following the disastrous 2021 season that saw the Hoosiers finish 2-10 and winless in Big Ten play. Rosen reports that part of that \$200,000 will go toward the cost of Allen firing offensive coordinator Nick Sheridan. Even with the reduction in pay, Allen is still reportedly set to make \$4.7 million in 2022. If Nebraska and Indiana are fortunate, those schools will enjoy the same results as Michigan's Jim Harbaugh in 2022.

Harbaugh, the former Indianapolis Colts quarterback, agreed to a \$4 million pay cut a year ago that dropped him to just over \$4 million. Harbaugh went from the

highest-paid head football coach in the conference to ranking among the lowest paid. Perhaps that's what inspired him to lead Michigan to a rare victory over Ohio State and his first Big Ten title in 2021. Thanks to an incredible 10-year, fully guar-

anteed \$95 million contract awarded him after Michigan State's outstanding 2021 season, Mel Tucker is now the Big Ten's highest paid coach.

Penn State coach James Franklin turned a 7-6 season into a guaranteed 10-year, \$70 million deal. That puts him second in coaching pay ahead of Ohio State's Ryan Day (\$6.61 million).

Purdue's Jeff Brohm is making \$4.8 million a year, according to Rosen. That puts him sixth in the Big Ten behind Northwestern's Pat Fitzgerald (\$5.75 million) and Iowa's Kirk Ferentz (\$5 million).

Allen is seventh, just ahead of Minnesota's P.J. Fleck (\$4.42 million) and Illinois' Bret Bielema (\$4.2 million) and Harbaugh (\$4.03 million). Frost is 11th with Wisconsin's Paul Chryst (\$3.98 million), Rutgers' Greg Schiano (\$3.76 million) and Maryland's Michael Locksley (\$2.47 million) bringing up the well-paid rear. ...

Purdue players comprise nearly one-eighth of the Wooden Award Midseason Top 25 Watch List.

Sophomore center Zach Edey joins Jaden Ivey and Trevion Williams, who were on the preseason Top 50 list. The Boilermakers are the lone school with three representatives on the watch list. Duke, Gonzaga and UCLA each have two representatives.

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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