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Preparing For The Big Dance



The No. 3 seed Purdue advances to the Sweet 16 for the fourth time in the past five years. Photo credit: Purdue Athletics

Purdue, Painter Preparing for the Big Dance

Press releases from college sports information offices are usually just the facts and figures with a little trivia thrown in for good measure.

For example, Matt Painter's 14 NCAA tournament appearances are the most for an active coach under the age of 55. Painter is 51.

I cannot recall the last time an item in a pre-game notes package made me laugh as much as this one from Chris Forman at Purdue:

"No one in the world was alive the first time Purdue and Yale played (1902)."

It was close, though. Kane Tanaka – according to our friend Google – was born on Jan. 2, 1903.

I was an infant when Purdue and Yale met for the second time, a 76-66 victory by the Boilermakers in December 1962.

Almost 60 years later, the Bulldogs await the Boilermakers on Friday afternoon in what may be the most pivotal NCAA tournament – perception-wise – for Purdue since Glenn Robinson's 1994 squad carried Final Four expectations.

Not too many fanbases would be disappointed by a 27-7 mark heading into the tournament but Purdue's ascent for the first time atop the national rankings in December also sent expectations soaring.

The usual Purdue luck (bad) denied this team the ability to match the school record for wins (30) before the tournament. A halfcourt shot here, two banked 3-pointers there and not only does Purdue enter March Madness without any championships but there's also a sense of dread and panic among fans if you believe social media and message boards.

Still, there are media members who still believe in Purdue's potential over the next hopefully three weeks.

Andy Katz of NCAA.com and Big Ten Network predicts the Boilermakers to reach the championship game in



KENNY THOMPSON
Columnist



Matt Painter

New Orleans after defeating UCLA in the Elite Eight and Gonzaga in the Final Four.

"I just don't think UCLA will force them to commit turnovers and if they don't turn over the ball, they win. It's that simple. Too much firepower for UCLA if they protect the basketball.

"Here's the problem for Gonzaga: This is a bad matchup because I don't think they can stop Jaden Ivey and Purdue has the two bigs that can meet Chet Holmgren and Drew Timme."

Katz likes Arizona ("I think they're playing the best basketball in the country") to defeat Iowa and Purdue for the title.

Pat Forde of Sports Illustrated also has Purdue going to the Final Four but losing to Gonzaga in the semifinals. The Boilermakers were ranked fourth in his listing of the 68 NCAA tournament teams in a separate story earlier this week.

"This is a leap of faith—that the Boilermakers can locate some defensive consistency, that they can find a third offensive option to go along with guard Jaden Ivey and the rotating post tandem of Zach Edey and Trevion Williams, and that they can overcome their own institutional history of Big Dance underachieving. Why believe? Because Ivey is that good, coach Matt Painter is that good, and sooner or later a program this successful has to break through in March. When Purdue has been at its best this season, it has been fairly breathtaking. Now it just

needs to relocate its best and showcase it for four games in a winnable East Region."

If that wasn't enough gold and black talk, one Sports Illustrated's daily cover stories on its website (si.com) was a Forde story with the headline

"Surely, This Is The Year Purdue Finally Breaks Through, Right?"

Here are some of the key nuggets from Forde's story:

"Here comes the Big Dance, and a big chance, but there is hope habitually tethered to heartbreaking fatalism. There is so much

scar tissue attached to Boilermaker limbs (a knee here, an elbow there) and psyches over the years. ...

"It would be a grand karmic twist if this team, of all teams, breaks through. In some important ways, it bears little resemblance to all that Boilermaker basketball was built upon for four decades. But maybe it takes a dramatic departure to have a cathartic arrival."

...
"A case can be made that Purdue is the college basketball version of Georgia football—a perennial winner possessing every necessary characteristic of a champion, yet somehow perpetually failing to take the last step. Before this past season, the Bulldogs' last moment of great glory on the gridiron was 1980. That's also the last year the Boilermakers reached the Final Four, the second of just two in program history." ...

"The gaps in the trophy case at a place this successful do not compute. Purdue has won or shared 24 Big Ten regular-season titles, more than any other school in the nation's oldest Division I conference. It has won 1,882 games, surpassed by only 12 other schools in history. Of those 12, only three others have not won an NCAA tourney title: Temple, Notre Dame and St. John's. Temple has faded from relevance; Notre Dame has historically focused on football; St. John's hasn't been a factor in more than two decades." ...

"Twists of fate, tears of ligament, an opponent's epic play or outright black-and-gold flops—all have been factors in this prolonged drought. "To get to the Final Four, you have to be lucky," says former star Robbie Hummel, he of the two torn ligaments described by Forde. "And Purdue has not been lucky."

"Jaden Ivey is, frankly, a Purdue outlier. He is the kind of free-flowing athlete this rough-and-tumble program has rarely had, an aerial artist amid bruising blacksmiths." ...

"You can compare Jaden Ivey to Ja Morant or Russell Westbrook, and it's not an insane comparison," Hummel says. "Glenn Robinson was special, but Jaden plays a more vertical game. He is a level of athlete Purdue never had. Ivey has probably had seven of the 10 best dunks in Purdue history this year."

Adds Painter: "He's the most talented guy I've coached. I didn't see Ja Morant or Russell Westbrook at 19, but they must have looked like that."

...
"I understand how good Purdue has been," Hummel says. "There's a reason Purdue has won so many Big Ten championships. We've had really good teams. This team could be in the Final Four. Hopefully they can atone for [the disappointments]. I know it eats at the fan base. It eats at me."

Speaking of Ivey, he became a first-team All-American on Wednesday with his selection by the National Association of Basketball Coaches. Ivey now needs the selection by the United States Basketball Writers Association to be considered a consensus All-American after earning second-team status from the Associated Press and Sporting News.

Ivey is Painter's third first-team All-American following JaJuan Johnson and Caleb Swanigan. Ivey is averaging 17.4 points, 4.9 rebounds and 3.2 assists per game. The sophomore guard also is a finalist for the Jerry West Award given to the nation's best shooting guard.

Ivey also was one of three Boilermakers selected All-Region by the

↓ KENNY *From Page 2*

National Association of Basketball Coaches. Ivey was a first-team pick while centers Zach Edey and Trevion Williams led the second team.

That trio also were part of an unusual mock draft of players participating in the NCAA tournament by ESPN's NBA Draft experts Jonathan Givony and Mike Schmitz.

Ivey was the fourth pick, with Givony calling him "the most electric guard in college."

"NBA teams will want to see how Ivey steps up the plate and delivers for Purdue in high-leverage moments in what will be the most important games he has played in his college career, especially with the ball in his hands, provided Purdue's coaches trust him enough to give him the keys," Givony writes.

Williams closed out the "first round" as pick No. 30. Edey was chosen 38th.

"Williams is one of the best passing bigs in the country and a true hub that you can run the offense through from both the post and the perimeter, at least in college," Schmitz writes. "Given Zach Edey's struggles staying on the floor late in games, Williams has a great opportunity to continue showcasing his passing, instincts and answering questions about his motor during what could be a lengthy Boilermakers run if Ivey is at his best."

Tilting at windmills

Bless former Purdue assistant coach Bruce Weber for saying out loud what many of his peers would not following what proved to be his final game at Kansas State this past weekend.

The usually well-coiffed Weber came to the press conference looking more like Albert Einstein, his gray hair disheveled and longer than Weber has worn it in decades.

"Guys, I'm on the NCAA Ethics Committee," Weber said. "I'm in meetings. I was told that they were going to take care of the people in the FBI stuff. So I told somebody I'm going to grow my hair until something happens. Obviously it's still growing. That's the sad part of our business."

"Lon Kruger (former Illinois and Oklahoma coach) told me the other day that all the guys in the FBI (case) but one are in the NCAA tournament."

Arizona is a No. 1 seed, less than a

year after school officials fired head coach Sean Miller for failure to promote an atmosphere of compliance. That move took four years after Miller was implicated in the FBI investigation of college basketball. Miller recruited most of that top-seeded roster.

Kansas, the bitter rival of Kansas State, is also a top seed. The Jayhawks face five major violations from the NCAA, including a "head coach responsibility" charge against Bill Self. Self, insulated by 550 career victories at Kansas, remains employed.

Auburn earned a No. 2 seed in the Midwest Region. Coach Bruce Pearl, fired at Tennessee in 2011 after being charged by the NCAA with unethical conduct, was suspended for two games this season for his role in the FBI investigation. Former associate head coach Chuck Person pled guilty in federal court for conspiracy to commit bribery. Person avoided prison time, but Auburn was placed on probation by the NCAA until 2025.

Ironically, Will Wade – caught on tape by the FBI implying that his school had made a "big ass offer" to a recruit – was fired by LSU three days after Weber's statement and 48 hours following Weber's resignation. The Tigers will be seeded sixth in the Midwest Region and playing for interim coach Kevin Nickelberry.

Kruger and Weber were wrong about one thing: the other two schools implicated by the FBI are not in this year's tournament.

Louisville fired head coach Chris Mack in January, sending him packing with \$4.8 million. He was suspended without pay for the first six games of

the 2021-22 season but Mack's downfall was not from the FBI investigation that preceded his arrival in Louisville.

The NCAA cited Mack and Louisville this past September, charging that Mack "either participated in, condoned, or negligently disregarded violations involving graduate assistants and others participation in practice as well as the creation and use of personalized recruiting videos and aids."

North Carolina State fired head coach Mark Gottfried a year before the FBI probe began. Only in 2019 did the FBI investigate Gottfried for making impermissible payments to players.

Purdue coaching tree news

Former Matt Painter assistant Steve Lutz coached Texas A&M Corpus Christi into its second NCAA tournament appearance.

Lutz was hired after Corpus Christi finished 5-19 in 2020-21. Leading the largest year-to-year turnaround in program history, Lutz guided Corpus Christi to a 23-12 record.

"Our success has nothing to do with me," Lutz said following the First Four loss to fellow No. 16 seed Texas Southern on Tuesday night. "Our success has to do with those 14 guys who sacrificed for one another and who believed in one another and put their individual goals aside for us to be able to achieve something that this university hasn't achieved since 2007. So I just happened to be the head coach, but these guys, they're going to enjoy this the rest of their lives."

Micah Shrewsbury's first season at Penn State ended with a quarterfinal loss to his old boss Painter and Purdue in the Big Ten tournament. The Nittany

Lions finished 14-17, a three-win improvement from the 2020-21 season.

One day after Weber's resignation at Kansas State, Missouri dismissed former Purdue star Cuonzo Martin.

Martin served as an assistant under Gene Keady and Painter before head coaching stops at Missouri State, Tennessee, California and Missouri. Martin was 78-77 in five seasons at Missouri, but the Tigers finished 12-21 this past season and 5-13 in SEC play.

Three in a row

Purdue signee Fletcher Loyer was chosen Gatorade's Player of the Year for Indiana on Wednesday.

Loyer is the third consecutive Boilermaker recruit to receive that honor after Trey Kaufman-Renn in 2020 and Mr. Basketball Caleb Furst last season.

Loyer set the Homestead High School single-season scoring record of 726 points, 179 coming on a record 179 free throws, to average 26.9 points a game.

And finally

Bruce Weber's final press conference at Kansas State ended with a humorous anecdote on how he was hired for his first job by Gene Keady at Western Kentucky in the late 1970s.

"I drove nine hours to Kentucky to interview with coach Keady, and he wasn't there," Weber said. "I never drove nine hours in my life. I had my leisure suit on. I was ready for the interview, and the secretary laughed at me."

"I said, 'where is he?' He's not here. 'Is he coming back?' No. He's out of the country."

"He forgot. I remember calling him on a pay phone. He said I'm sorry. Why don't you drive down again. I said I'm running a camp. I can't leave again. Either you hire me or ... I would never have said that but I didn't know how mean he was and how tough he was."

"He was quiet and he said, 'Okay, you're hired.' I was with him 19 years. Unbelievable years. Gave me ... lifetime experiences that I never dreamed of."

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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