

Getting Ready For Boilermaker Football 2022



Photo courtesy of Purdue Athletics

Ranking the Best Purdue Football Players for the Upcoming Season

Where has the summer gone? By the time some of you read this column, Big Ten football media days will be less than 10 days away.

Before Jeff Brohm steps to the podium inside Lucas Oil Stadium, here's one man's ranking of Purdue's top 10 players for the 2022 season.

10. Gus Hartwig

The third-year starting center from Zionsville was an honorable mention All-Big Ten selection as a sophomore. He will anchor an offensive line that will probably make the difference between one of Brohm's best offenses and just an ordinary attack.

9. T.J. Sheffield

With the departure of David Bell to the Cleveland Browns, Sheffield will be counted upon to help fill the void. His spectacular touchdown grab against Tennessee in the Music City Bowl capped a breakout 2021 season that saw him make 36 catches for 325 yards and five touchdowns.

8. Cam Allen

The hard-hitting safety enjoyed a career season in 2021 with four interceptions and 65 tackles.

7. Charlie Jones

Bringing in the reigning Big Ten Rodgers-Dwight Return Specialist of the Year from Iowa will be a big boost to an area that has been unspectacular since Raheem Mostert's final game in 2014. Jones ranked second nationally for Iowa in 2021 with 920 return yards. That total included a 100-yard kickoff return for a touchdown. If Jones can provide some contributions to a mostly unproven Purdue receiving corps, all the better.

6. Branson Deen

The defensive tackle will be a third-year starter coming off his best season as a Boilermaker. Deen recorded three sacks among his 26 tackles, keeping opposing linemen busy while George Karlaftis and Kydran Jenkins pressured the quarterback.

5. Broc Thompson

The Music City Bowl most valuable player stepped up big for Purdue, which played Tennessee without David Bell and No. 2 wide receiver Milton Wright. On two bad knees, which were surgically repaired during the offseason, Thompson caught seven pass for 217 yards and a pair of touchdowns. He will be Purdue's No. 1 receiver this



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Columnist

fall.

4. Kydran Jenkins

Maybe the biggest surprise from an improved defense a year ago, Jenkins recorded five sacks among his 35 tackles. Not bad for a freshman. The Boilermakers will need his pass rushing skills in the wake of Karlaftis' departure to the Kansas City Chiefs.

3. Jalen Graham

The senior linebacker/safety is entering his fourth year as a starter and is probably Purdue's top NFL prospect. Graham recorded 64 tackles and an interception a year ago.

2. Payne Durham

A possible candidate for the John Mackey Award as the nation's best tight end, Durham put on a show for NFL scouts in the Music City Bowl with his refusal to go down during what turned out to be a 62-yard touchdown reception late in the fourth quarter. He caught 45 balls for 467 yards and six touchdowns. Look for that production to go up in 2022.

1. Aidan O'Connell

Once upon a time, the former walk-on from Waukegan, Ill., was ninth on Purdue's quarterback depth chart. The sixth-year senior now is regarded as the Big Ten's second-best QB behind Ohio State's C.J. Stroud. O'Connell outdueled the more heralded Hendon Hooker of Tennessee with 534 yards passing and five touchdowns.

O'Connell has come up big in important games for the Boilermakers. In a 24-7 victory at No. 2 Iowa,

O'Connell threw for 375 yards and two touchdowns. Against No. 3 Michigan State, a 40-29 victory in Ross-Ade Stadium, O'Connell tossed for 536 yards and three touchdowns. Even in defeat at Ohio State, O'Connell threw for five touchdowns and 390 yards.

If he can remain healthy and approach last season's numbers of 3,712 yards and 28 touchdowns, O'Connell will enter a lofty place in Purdue's passing record book. Only Drew Brees (11,792 passing yards), Curtis Painter (11,163) and Mark Herrmann (9,946) seem out of reach for O'Connell. As for touchdown passes, only Brees' career total of 90 seems safe. Another 28 TD passes from O'Connell would match Herrmann for second at Purdue with 71.

Noteworthy

Stephanie White and Brittany (Rayburn) Bertsch, Indiana Miss Basketball winners who also starred at Purdue, are among the inaugural class of the Greater Illiana Sports Hall of Fame. The pair of Boilermakers join the newly created honor which will be housed in the David Palmer Arena in Danville, Ill.

The Greater Illiana Sports Hall of Fame was created to honor the outstanding athletic achievement by athletes, coaches, teams and others from 50 high schools and Danville Area Community College in eastern Illinois and western Indiana.

Other notables inducted include Butler basketball coach Thad Matta and the late Jim Hellwig, a Fountain Central graduate better known as pro wrestling star "The Ultimate Warrior."

White, the 1995 Miss Basketball from Seeger, was instrumental in guiding Purdue to the 1999 NCAA National Championship, the only one ever won by a team from the Big Ten. She also joins the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame this year.

Rayburn attended Attica prior to her time in West Lafayette. A lethal sharpshooter, Rayburn was named the 2008 Indiana Miss Basketball. She guided the Boilermakers to a 2012 Big Ten Tournament title and garnered a trio of All-Big Ten honors. She is fourth in Purdue history with 201 career 3-pointers. ...

In addition to once again playing at Florida State (Nov. 30) in the ACC/Big Ten Challenge and against Marquette (Nov. 15) in the Gavitt Games, the Purdue men's basketball team will

face another NCAA tournament team in Davidson on Dec. 17 in Indianapolis. That game is part of the new Indy Classic, which replaces the Crossroads Classic that ended after the 2021 edition.

Purdue is still awaiting its draw in the Phil Knight Legacy (Nov. 24-27) but it seems likely that the Boilermakers will have to face two of the combination Duke/Gonzaga/Florida/West Virginia on its side of the bracket.

The season opener will be Milwaukee on Nov. 8 in Mackey Arena. Three days later, Austin Peay pays a visit. New Orleans (Dec. 21) and Florida A&M (Dec. 29) close out the non-conference slate.

Purdue has sold out season tickets for the 2022-23 season.

Kenny Talks Strong Predictions for Boilermaker Football

The 2022 Big Ten football media days are officially over and the hours of coach speak will be sifted for any nuggets of real information by fans and news organizations alike until the season opener Aug. 27 in Dublin, Ireland when Northwestern faces Nebraska.

Illinois also hosts Wyoming that day but the focus will be on the Cornhuskers, who are likely playing for coach Scott Frost's future at his alma mater. The Wildcats are hoping to prove last season's dismal 1-8 conference record was a fluke.

Expectations are higher for Purdue, which is coming off its first nine-win season since 2003. Athlon Sports' Steve Lissan has the Boilermakers finishing second to Wisconsin in the Big Ten West Division.

"In a balanced Big Ten West, Purdue has enough talent, depth and experience to contend for a division title again this season," he writes.

To the shock of no one outside Ann Arbor, Mich., Ohio State is Athlon's favorite to win the East title.

"The Boilermakers have a few concerns to address, namely how the defense improves under a new coordinator, but contending for the Big Ten's West Division title is within reach," Lissan writes. "A favorable schedule sees Purdue miss Ohio State, Michigan State and Michigan in crossover play, and Penn State visits West Lafayette in the season opener."

🔁 KENNY From Page 2

Not surprisingly, Lasso ranks O'Connell among the Big Ten's best quarterbacks. The questions once again are will Purdue have a decent running game to support O'Connell and will a more experienced offensive line make that possible?

"Iowa transfer Charlie Jones and Broc Thompson are likely to be the go-to options on the outside," Lasso writes, overlooking probably the No. 1 target in senior tight end Payne Durham.

Defensively, Lasso is wondering who will step up for coordinator Ron English after the departures of George Karlaftis, DaMarcus Mitchell, linebacker Jaylan Alexander and safety Marvin Grant (a puzzling transfer to Big 12 bottom feeder Kansas).

Lasso is far less optimistic about Indiana, picked to finish last in the East.

"New offensive coordinator Walt Bell inherits a group that averaged only 10.4 points a contest in Big Ten action last year," Lasso writes. "Former Missouri signal-caller Connor Bazalak should provide much-needed stability under center, with fellow transfers Shaun Shivers and Josh Henderson (RB) and Emery Simmons (WR) helping to add options at the skill talent spots."

Lasso also notes IU will be hard pressed to improve from giving up 35 points a game in conference play, especially with the departure of its best player, linebacker Micah McFadden.

ESPN.com writer Bill Connelly figures there will be a four-way battle for the West Division title among Wisconsin, Purdue, Iowa and Minnesota. "Quarterback Aidan O'Connell returns after throwing for 3,712 yards, both lines return a large majority of contributors, and the secondary is loaded with seniors. But (David) Bell is gone, as are (defensive coordinator Brad) Lambert and end George Karlaftis. Does that hurt a little or a lot?"

"The Music City Bowl provided hope. Without Bell ... Purdue beat Tennessee in overtime, 48-45, thanks to 534 yards from O'Connell. Broc Thompson caught seven balls for 217 yards, and tight end Payne Durham caught a pair of touchdowns. And they're both back. If defensive co-coordinators Ron English and Mark Hagen can keep the ship steady, and



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O'Connell can produce greatness with Thompson, Wright, Durham, slot man TJ Sheffield, among others, this is a West contender."

As for Indiana, Connelly wonders if 13 transfers plus new offensive (Walt Bell) and defensive coordinators (Chad Wilt) is going to be enough to improve significantly from 2021.

"It's hard to be particularly confident about whether all this change will have the desired effect. (Among other things, Bell's recent track record is terribly uninspiring.)," Connelly writes. "Last year's collapse was comprehensive, and as is generally the case in the Big Ten East -- especially for schools crazy enough to schedule Cincinnati in nonconference play -- the schedule is unforgiving. Tom Allen created something impressive at IU, but it all fell apart almost overnight."

CollegeFootballNews.com writer Pete Fiutak expects another bowl season for Purdue but not to contend for the West crown.

"Purdue football has always been a little bit of a Little Engine That Could sort of program without the next-level star power of the biggest of Big Ten teams, but when it was rolling back in

the day under the late, great Joe Tiller it had a scheme and style that made everyone worry," Fiutak writes.

"... It would take something amazing to break through to an even higher level and be deep in the hunt for a Big Ten Championship appearance -- in other words, the rest of the Big Ten West has to be down -- but after what the team did last year, it's not crazy.

"The special teams have to be better, more takeaways would be good, a better running game would be great, and ... forget about what Purdue won't be and probably can't do. It's going to give everyone a fight again."

Fiutak's keys to Purdue's season include a more effective running game and stopping the run defensively. A victory against Penn State in the season opener would be welcomed, too.

"Purdue is coming off a terrific year, but nothing would crank up 2022 like taking care of Penn State at home in the Big Ten opener. Beat Penn State, and all of a sudden the toughest games on the slate won't seem so rough. Even better, win, and there's chance for a 4-0 September with a win at Syracuse.

"As long as the passing game is clicking and the team can own West

Lafayette, there's a solid shot at another nine-win season."

Fiutak isn't as bearish about Indiana's 2022 potential but improving the Big Ten's worst offense (290 yards a game) is a must.

So is Missouri transfer Connor Bazalak giving the Hoosiers a passing threat that an injured Michael Penix, Jack Tuttle and Donaven McCulley couldn't do last season.

Defensively, create turnovers and developing a pass rush will be the challenges for new coordinator Chad Wilt.

It also would help if Indiana could beat good teams. Fiutak notes that of the Hoosiers' 42 victories over the last eight seasons, 36 came against FCS teams or schools with losing records.

"Indiana will be better," Fiutak writes. "It's not going to win the Big Ten East, and it's going to take a whole lot of big breaks to get bowling, but it's going to be stronger, sharper, and it's actually going to start scoring again."

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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