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Kenny Talks Boilermaker Football



Photo courtesy of Purdue Athletics

Did Purdue Make A Mistake Hiring Ryan Walter?

This football coaching search was an opportunity for Purdue to be bold and reach for the stars like their Big Ten peers Nebraska and Wisconsin did a few weeks ago.

The hire of Illinois defensive coordinator Ryan Walters was disappointing upon first reaction, mostly because of the raised expectations for replacing Jeff Brohm that came from athletic director Mike Bobinski.

"I think we'll be able to attract a deeper and higher-quality pool than perhaps we were able to get in 2016," Bobinski said the day after Brohm took most of his coaching staff and a handful of recruits to Louisville. "We had really good people there, and we hired a really good coach. But I think we may have more of that to be able to select from this time around and that's a result of where we've come."

Talk about overpromising and under-delivering.

The reported coaching pool in 2016 included Air Force coach Troy Calhoun and Skip Holtz, Brohm's Conference USA rival at Louisiana Tech. Bobinski did an admirable job keeping this search quiet, but I would have remained mum too if I was going to foist a 36-year-old first-time head coach on a skeptical Purdue fan base.

Walters did make a good first impression Tuesday with at least one member of his new team. In a widely circulated video on social media, Walters awarded a scholarship to redshirt freshman running back Devin Mockobee. This was a wise move because a report circulated last week that Brohm tried to convince Mockobee to follow him to Louisville, technically an NCAA violation since Mockobee is not in the transfer portal.

Walters also won the press conference Wednesday afternoon but press conference victories don't count in the Big Ten standings in September. There will not be a more important hire for Walters than his choice for offensive coordinator.

The hire was greeted positively by Adam Rittenberg, a longtime Big Ten beat writer for ESPN.com who gave Purdue a B-plus.

"Walters is ready to lead a program," Rittenberg wrote. "Walters likely would have been the choice at Colorado if not for Deion Sanders, and



KENNY THOMPSON
Columnist

had impressed several schools in interviews this cycle. He should energize Purdue's recruiting efforts, although his staff -- both on the field and in support roles -- will be very important to keep the program's momentum after its first Big Ten West Division title.

"After the Jeff Brohm era, Purdue fans will want the excitement on offense, and specifically with the quarterback position, to continue under Walters. Like all defensive assistants getting their first opportunities as head coaches, Walters will need a detailed plan for how he's going to approach the offense. Although the Big Ten is a league where defenses often carry the day, especially in the West Division, Purdue has stood out because of its quarterback tradition. How Walters addresses those areas will be essential to the early part of his tenure."

Walters is Purdue's first defensive-oriented hire since Leon Burtnett in 1982, when he replaced a College Football Hall of Fame coach in Jim Young. As head coach, Burtnett shifted his focus to offense and leaned heavily on quarterbacks Scott Campbell, Jim Everett and Jeff George during his five-year tenure.

History suggests Walters will continue the nearly century-long Purdue tradition of a losing hire following a winning head coach. Examples include Jack Mollenkopf to Bob DeMoss in 1970, Young to Burtnett and Joe Tiller to Danny Hope in 2009.

The last winning transition came in

1930, when Noble Kizer was promoted to replace Jim Phelan. All Phelan did was go 8-0 in 1929 and win Purdue's most recent undisputed Big Ten championship. Kizer would go 42-13-3 before a fatal kidney disease forced him to resign before the 1937 season. It would be nearly 20 years before Purdue found another consistently winning coach in Mollenkopf.

On paper, the 2023 Purdue schedule is not easy. Fresno State (9-4 in 2022) comes to West Lafayette for the Sept. 2 opener. A trip to Virginia Tech (3-7) and a rematch with Syracuse (7-5) in Ross-Ade Stadium wraps up the non-conference slate. September concludes with home games against Wisconsin (6-6) and Illinois (8-4).

Trips to Iowa (7-5) and Nebraska (4-8) sandwich a home game with Ohio State (11-1) in October. A trip to Michigan (13-0) and a home game with Minnesota (8-4) open November before the Boilermakers once again close the season with Northwestern (1-11) in Evanston and Senior Day against Indiana (4-8).

Walters is the youngest Purdue head coach since Stu Holcomb, who was 36 when he came to West Lafayette from an assistant coach's role at Army in 1947. The only younger head coaches in Boilermaker football history are Phelan (1922), Kizer and Isbell (1944). Each were 29 at the time.

Rapid, record rise for No. 1 Purdue Monday's ascension of Matt Painter's Boilermakers to the top of The Associated Press college basketball poll for the second consecutive season is unprecedented.

Never has a school unranked in the preseason AP poll reached No. 1 faster than Purdue, according to Dave Worlock, the NCAA's director of media coordination/statistics. The Associated Press college basketball poll debuted in 1950.

Purdue is also No. 1 atop Joe Lunardi's latest NCAA tournament bracket for ESPN.

"Purdue's resume in replacing Houston as the No. 1 overall seed is awfully impressive for mid-December," Lunardi writes. "The Boilermakers have a best-in-the-nation five Quadrant 1 wins (only Kansas and Wisconsin have as many as three), and four of them have come away from home.

"For all the talk about the chip on Kentucky's shoulder after losing to St. Peter's in the NCAA tournament,

perhaps we were shortchanging the team that lost to the Peacocks two rounds later. This Boilermaker team is clearly on a path to surpass that Sweet 16 showing from a year ago, and it will take a lot more than a St. Peter's to knock them out."

Junior center Zach Edey claimed his third consecutive Big Ten Player of the Week award. It matches the school record set by Carl Landry during the 2006-07 season. Wisconsin's Ethan Happ was the most recent player to accomplish the feat in November 2018.

Edey leads the nation at 13.7 rebounds per game and seventh in scoring at 22 points a game.

The 7-4 Canadian is also starting to look like a national player of the year favorite among college basketball media. Edey ranks first in analyst Ken Pomeroy's Player of the Year standings, and veteran analyst Andy Katz also favors Edey for the award last won by a Boilermaker in 1994 when Glenn Robinson swept the postseason honors.

Noteworthy

Leading the nation in receptions and receiving yards was only worth a second-team All-America honor from The Associated Press for Purdue's Charlie Jones.

Jones has 110 receptions for 1,361 yards. His 12 receiving touchdowns rank fourth nationally. The transfer from Iowa broke John Standeford's 20-year-old school record for yards in a season.

Jones is the third Purdue wide receiver in four years to earn AP All-America honors, following Ron-dale Moore in 2018 and David Bell last season.

The Athletic also honored Jones as a member of its All-Portal team. The site noted that Jones outperformed his former school's group of receivers for the 2022 season. Iowa's receivers combined for 72 catches for 752 yards and two touchdowns. ...

Jones' childhood friend, Purdue quarterback Aidan O'Connell, is ranked 12th in ESPN.com's list of top NFL quarterback prospects. That projects to a mid-to-late Day 3 draft pick. ESPN.com projects O'Connell to be a good fit for the Los Angeles Chargers.

"The Chargers are an ideal fit because of their propensity to rely on getting the ball out quickly. O'Con-

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nell's at his best when he can make quick decisions and keep pass-rushers from bearing down on him." ...

Purdue guard Marcus Mbow was selected to The Athletic's Freshman All-America team. Mbow was credited for giving up no sacks on 671 snaps.

Running back Devin Mockobee was a second-team selection.

Kenny Takes A Look at Purdue Football's Young Coaches

Purdue football is undergoing a youth movement with its coaching staff that Boilermaker fans haven't witnessed in 45 years.

If those fans are lucky, the results will be similar.

Jim Young was early in his eventual College Football Hall of Fame coaching career when he left Arizona to return to the Big Ten Conference at Purdue on Dec. 6, 1976. Young had been defensive coordinator under Bo Schembechler for four seasons at Michigan before taking the head coaching job at Arizona in 1973.

Young was 41 when he was the unanimous choice to replace Alex Agase at Purdue. Instead of hiring veteran assistant coaches, Young turned to men he believed were on the rise in the coaching profession. None were older than 34 at the time.

The headline in the Jan. 11, 1977 edition of the Lafayette Journal and Courier stated "Young's staff averages 30 years of age." Not the greatest headline ever written but at the time it was unheard of to have a pair of 33-year-olds as your top assistants. As it turned out, both were future head coaches.

Defensive coordinator Leon Burtnett was hired away from Michigan State, where he served as linebackers coach under Darryl Rogers. Rogers had brought along Burtnett from San Jose State, where he was linebackers coach in 1974 and 1975

Making the most of his talent – including future four-time Super Bowl champion Keena Turner and Purdue's all-time tackles leader Kevin Motts – Burtnett's "Junk Defense" was the foundation of three consecutive bowl victories and the only 10-win season in school history. When Young went into

a brief retirement following the 1981 season, Burtnett was the obvious choice to take over. He went 21-34-1 before being forced to resign following the 1986 season.

Assistant head coach/offensive coordinator John Mackovic stayed just one season in West Lafayette but he helped groom future College Football Hall of Fame quarterback Mark Herrmann into a starting quarterback as a freshman.

Like Young, Mackovic was a protégé of Bo Schembechler as a graduate assistant at Miami (Ohio) following his playing career at Wake Forest. Mackovic returned to his alma mater in 1978 and led the Demon Deacons to their first bowl game in 30 years. The Dallas Cowboys hired Mackovic as quarterbacks coach, leading to a four-year stint as the Kansas City Chiefs' head coach. Mackovic would later serve as head coach for Illinois, Texas and Arizona, finishing with a 95-82-3 collegiate record.

The "old man" of Young's first coaching staff was 34-year-old offensive line coach Bob Bockrath. Another graduate assistant for Schembechler at Miami, Bockrath was offensive line coach during Young's four seasons at Arizona. Bockrath turned to administration in his post-Purdue days, serving as athletic director at California, Texas Tech and Alabama.

Another assistant with a connection to Schembechler was 29-year-old defensive ends coach Mike Hankwitz. Having played for Schembechler's 1969 Big Ten championship team, Hankwitz became a defensive coordinator for the first time in 1976 for Young at Arizona.

With the exception of two stints as an interim head coach for Arizona and Colorado, Hankwitz spent 25 years as a defensive coordinator before retiring from Northwestern in 2020. Fourteen of his defenses were ranked in the nation's top 25, and Hankwitz coached 14 first-team All-Americans.

Another long-time assistant coach, Ed Zaunbrecher, was 26 when he came to Purdue as running backs coach. He would go on to serve as offensive coordinator for Wake Forest (1980-83), LSU (1984-90), Marshall (2000-01), Florida (2002-03), Purdue (2006-08) and Rice (2009).

Randy Hart was 28 but had three years' experience as Iowa State's defensive line coach before coming to West Lafayette. Hart, a three-year letterman for Woody Hayes at Ohio State, remained for Young's five years in West Lafayette. Hart then spent five seasons at his alma mater before settling in at Washington from 1988 to 2008. Hart also coached defensive linemen at Notre Dame (2009) and Stanford (2010-15).

Former Illinois linebacker Doug Redmann was a graduate assistant under Young for two seasons at Arizona before becoming Purdue's linebackers coach at age 28. He remained with Young for all five seasons but I was unable to find any information about Redmann's post-Purdue career.

Larry Thompson was 29 when he joined Young's Purdue staff as interior offensive line coach. Another member of the Schembechler coaching fraternity, Thompson also played for Bill Mallory at Miami (Ohio). Like Redmann, I was unable to find any information on Thompson after he left Purdue in 1979.

While Walters is unlikely to have a staff more youthful than Jim Young's 1977 group, he will enter the 2023 as the Big Ten's youngest head coach. Minnesota's P.J. Fleck, 42, surrenders that title to his division rival.

The hiring of four assistant coaches have been announced so far, ranging in age from 26 to 39. The biggest name belongs to Graham Harrell, 37, the former star quarterback for the late Mike Leach at Texas Tech.

Harrell's West Virginia offense in 2022 averaged 30.6 points, 227.5 passing yards and 171.5 rushing yards per game. Harrell also was offensive coordinator at USC from 2019-21, and his 2019 team set school records for passing yards (4,365), completion percentage (71.0), completions (365) and attempts (514).

Defensive coordinator Kevin Kane, 39, follows Walters from Illinois. Kane earned All-Big 12 Conference honors as a linebacker at Kansas (2002-05). His coaching stops have included Wisconsin, Northern Illinois, Kansas and SMU.

Two other imports from Illinois are linebackers coach Joe Dineen and secondary coach Grant O'Brien. The

26-year-old Dineen was a defensive graduate assistant in 2002. Dineen was a consensus All-American linebacker for Kansas in 2018.

O'Brien, 32, was a defensive analyst for the Fighting Illini for two seasons and at Missouri for three seasons.

Noteworthy

Just how deep is the top-ranked Purdue men's basketball team?

Zach Edey, the favorite to win National Player of the Year awards, sat out Wednesday's 74-53 victory against New Orleans with the flu. No problem, thanks to redshirt freshman Trey Kaufman-Renn.

Kaufman-Renn scored a career-high 24 points in 26 minutes, the highest output off the bench in the Big Ten this season. It was an efficient 24 points, too, coming of 8 of 10 shooting from the field and 8 of 10 at the free throw line.

That was the highlight of the first home game in Purdue history with the Boilermakers ranked No. 1. The 12-0 start is just the fourth time the Boilermakers have accomplished that record. The 2009-10 team started 14-0 only to have that season ruined by Robbie Hummel's ACL injury at Minnesota. Glenn Robinson's 1993-94 Boilermakers also started 14-0 and reached the Elite Eight before Robinson's back injury affected the National Player of the Year in a loss to Duke.

There was no NCAA tournament in 1911-12 when Purdue went 12-0 for the season under coach Ralph Jones. Twenty years later, Jones coached the Chicago Bears to the 1932 NFL championship but lost his job when the Great Depression forced owner George Halas to return to the sideline to save paying a head coach.

The Boilermakers enter the holiday break one of three remaining undefeated teams (No. 2 Connecticut, New Mexico).

One more bit of trivia: Purdue is the first Big Ten program since Indiana in 1974-75 and 1975-76 to be ranked No. 1 in consecutive seasons.

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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