

Kenny Talks Boilermaker Basketball



Photo courtesy of Purdue Athletics

Kenny on The Strength of Big Ten Basketball Recruiting

My old colleague at the Lafayette Journal and Courier, Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame sportswriter Jeff Washburn, liked to say winning in college football and basketball is all about the “Jimmys and Joes, not the Xs and Os.”

It’s difficult to argue that premise. Just look at the familiar names that seem to make the College Football Playoff every year or are semi-annual participants in the NCAA Final Four in men’s basketball.

But there are exceptions.

Purdue junior center Zach Edey, the presumptive favorite to be college basketball’s national player of the year, was ranked 440th in the 2020 recruiting class by 247sports.com composite (an average of 247Sports, Rivals and ESPN ratings). Edey’s success story, plus the old chestnut pulled out by national sportswriters and broadcasters that Purdue coach Matt Painter “does more with less” prompted an examination of each Big Ten Conference basketball starting lineup.

Do the teams at the top have more Top 100 recruits? Or are college basketball recruiting rankings as unreliable as political pundits who were sure “a red wave” was coming in the 2022 elections?

We’ll look at each school based on the Big Ten standings as of Jan. 18.

Purdue: Zach Edey (440th in 2020), Caleb Furst (65th, 2021), Ethan Morton (103rd, 2020), Fletcher Loyer (96th, 2022), Brandon Smith (198th, 2022)

Edey wasn’t even the starting center at IMG Academy in Bradenton, Fla., where the Canadian native enrolled for his senior year. Future Duke star Mark Williams played ahead of Edey and later became a first-round draft pick by the Charlotte Hornets.

Furst, Indiana’s 2020 Mr. Basketball, was ranked second in Indiana behind future teammate Trey Kauffman-Renn (44th). Morton was Pennsylvania’s Mr. Basketball in 2020. Smith earned Indiana Mr. Basketball honors over Loyer, who was Indiana’s Gatorade Player of the Year and the national high school 3-point shooting champion.

Of note: Since 2000, only All-American forward Caleb Swanigan (19th) was ranked higher than Kauffman-Renn and Furst.

Rutgers: Cam Spencer (unranked, 2019), Caleb McConnell (344th, 2018), Clifford Omoruyi (51st, 2020), Mawot Mag (212th, 2020), Paul Mulcahy



KENNY THOMPSON
Columnist

(156th, 2019)

Like Purdue, the Scarlet Knights aren’t loaded with Top 100 prospects. Omoruyi is Rutgers’ fourth-best recruit since 2000.

Michigan: Hunter Dickenson (43rd, 2020), Kobe Bufkin (46th, 2021), Jett Howard (43rd, 2022), Terrance Williams II (101st, 2020), Dug McDaniel (87th, 2022)

Had Dickenson selected Purdue instead of Michigan three years ago, would Zach Edey have prospered elsewhere? There’s so much talent on the Wolverines’ roster that their bench includes Tarris Reed (35th, 2022) and Isaiah Barnes (117th, 2021).

Illinois: Terrence Shannon Jr. (Texas Tech transfer, 90th in 2019), Coleman Hawkins (168th, 2020), Matthew Mayer (Baylor transfer, 93rd in 2018), R.J. Melendez (94th, 2021), Sencire Harris (113th, 2022)

Shannon (17.6 ppg.) and Mayer (11.1) are the team’s top scorers in their first seasons at Champaign. Point guard Skyy Clark, who recently left the Fighting Illini, was ranked 33rd in 2022. Bench players Ty Rodgers (59th, 2022) and Jayden Epps (72nd, 2022) are Top 100 recruits.

Wisconsin: Steven Crawl (235th, 2020), Chucky Hepburn (127th, 2021), Max Klesmit (Unranked, 2020), Tyler Wahl (204th, 2019), Jordan Davis (476th, 2020)

Now, this is an example of doing more with less. Crawl, Wahl and Hepburn are all averaging nearly 13 points a game for the Badgers.



Braden Smith

Iowa: Kris Murray (333rd, 2020), Filip Rebraca (Unranked, 2018), Ahron Ullis (186th, 2020), Connor McCaffery (152nd, 2017), Tony Perkins (314th, 2020)

Murray is another big miss by the recruiting experts, who had his brother Keegan ranked 334th. Keegan Murray was taken fourth in the 2022 NBA Draft by Sacramento, one slot ahead of Purdue’s Jaden Ivey. The Hawkeyes’ second-best player, Patrick McCaffery (86th in 2019), is taking a mental health break from basketball.

Michigan State: Joey Hauser (Marquette transfer, 52nd in 2018), Tyson Walker (484th, 2019), Jaden Akins (54th, 2021), A.J. Hoggard (81st, 2020), Mady Sissoko (41st, 2020).

Sissoko, rated nearly 400 slots higher than Edey, started but did not take a shot against Purdue this past Monday. Starting forward Malik Hall, who missed the Purdue game with an injury, was rated 61st in 2019. He chose the Spartans over the Boilermakers.

Northwestern: Boo Buie (327th, 2019), Chase Audige (William & Mary transfer, unranked in 2018), Robbie Beran (110th, 2019), Ty Berry (153rd 2020), Matthew Nicholson (312th, 2020)

Audige and Buie would make an All-Big Ten underrated team, leading the Wildcats in scoring at 15.3 and 15.1 points per game, respectively.

Penn State: Jalen Pickett (Siena transfer, unranked, 2018), Seth Lundy (221st, 2019), Myles Dread (161st, 2018), Kebba Njie (118th, 2022), Andrew Funk (Bucknell transfer, unranked, 2018)

Averaging 17.7 points and 7.7 rebounds, Pickett is a contender for All-Big Ten honors. Otherwise, it’s a testament to former Purdue assistant Micah Shrewsbury’s coaching that the Nittany Lions



Zach Edey

are 12-6 overall.

Nebraska: Derrick Walker (Tennessee transfer, 270th in 2017), Juwan Gary (Alabama transfer, 93rd in 2019), Sam Griesel (North Dakota State transfer, unranked in 2018), Emmanuel Bandumel (SMU transfer, unranked in 2019), C.J. Wilcher (Xavier transfer, 113th in 2020).

Notice a trend? Even with today’s loose transfer rules, how does a coach build chemistry with a lineup of newcomers?

Indiana: Trayce Jackson-Davis (30th, 2019), Race Thompson (134th, 2017), Xavier Johnson (Pitt transfer, 236th in 2018), Miller Kopp (Northwestern transfer, 114th, 2018), Jalen Hood-Schifino (23rd, 2022)

Mike Woodson is the midseason favorite for getting the least out of the most talent, even with Johnson and Thompson out of the lineup with injuries. Replacements Jordan Geronimo (105th, 2020) and Trey Galloway (157th, 2020) are solid players.

Reserves Malik Reneau and Tamar Bates were ranked 30th in the 2022 and 2021 recruiting classes, respectively. Seldom-used Logan Dunscomb was 73rd in 2021.

Maryland: Jahmir Young (Charlotte transfer, 235th in 2019), Hakim Hart (467th, 2019), Donta Scott (145th, 2019), Don Carey (Georgetown transfer, unranked in 2019), Julian Reese (60th, 2021)

It’s not too surprising the Terrapins are in the lower half of the Big Ten.

Ohio State: Brice Sensabaugh (65th, 2022), Justice Sueing (California transfer, 171st in 2017), Bruce Thornton (51st, 2022), Sean McNeill (Sinclair Community College transfer, 24th in 2019), Zed

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Key (155th, 2020)

The Buckeyes may be struggling right now but Sensabaugh (16.9 ppg.) and Thornton (9.6 ppg.) could rank among the Big Ten's best backcourts in 2023-24.

Minnesota: Jamison Battle (George Washington transfer, unranked in 2019), Dawson Garcia (Marquette transfer, 37th in 2020), Ta'lon Cooper (Morehead State transfer, unranked in 2019), Joshua Ola-Joseph (223rd, 2022), Taurus Samuels (Dartmouth transfer, 405th in 2018)

There's a reason why the Gophers are the Big Ten's only team with a sub-.500 record. Garcia has lived up to his reputation (15.6 ppg., 6.6 reb.) but Minnesota has struggled to play as a team.

By the numbers

A victory at Minnesota on Thursday night would give Purdue an 18-1 record, the best start in school history.

A secret to that successful start is making 294 free throws this season, 168 more than opponents. ...

The 64-63 victory at Michigan State gave Matt Painter 200 Big Ten wins, making him the third Purdue coach to reach that milestone and the seventh overall. Gene Keady won 256 conference games, and Piggy Lambert claimed 228.

Bob Knight tops the list with 353 Big Ten victories at Indiana. Tom Izzo has 326 and counting at Michigan State. Indiana's Branch McCracken won 216 games, two more than Lou Henson at Illinois. ...

Much to Izzo's chagrin after Monday's loss, Purdue center Zach Edey continues to have more blocked shots (37) than personal fouls (27). ...

Keep this in mind on Selection Sunday: Purdue is the only team with seven quad-1 victories. Five came against teams ranked in the NCAA Net's top 30 (Gonzaga, Ohio State, West Virginia, Marquette, Duke). Six of the wins have come away from Mackey Arena, with Marquette the lone home victory. ...

Fletcher Loyer was chosen the Big Ten's Player and Freshman of the Week on Tuesday, becoming the first Purdue freshman since Robbie Hummel in February 2008 to win Player of the Week honors. Loyer also matched the school record with his third Freshman of the Week award, a mark shared by Vince Edwards and Caleb Swanigan.

Kenny Talks Boilermaker Hoops, NFL Draft

It's such an oft-used phrase, "defense wins championships," that it's almost become a sports cliché.

But part of Purdue's downfall in the NCAA basketball tournament a year ago was having a variety of offensive weapons who didn't always want to guard their man.

That is not the problem so far this season for the Boilermakers, whose improvement in the defensive rankings has at least one prominent college basketball writer liking their chances to win the national championship.

Borrowing a concept from the late Sports Illustrated writer Grant Wahl, Seth Davis issued his "Magic Eight" teams that have the best chance at a national title. Davis notes that in the seven years Wahl wrote his "Magic Eight" column, only the 2003 Syracuse national champions overcame his criteria.

Davis' main rule was a school had to be ranked in the top 30 in adjusted defensive efficiency on KenPom.com. Davis notes that no NCAA champion during the past 11 years was ranked lower than 22nd. Kansas was 17th on its way to the 2021-22 title.

Davis' "Magic Eight" for 2022-23 are Purdue, Alabama, Houston, Kansas, TCU, Texas, UCLA and Virginia.

"In mid-February last season, I wrote that the Boilermakers, who were No. 5 in the AP poll, had a fatal flaw: their defense," Davis wrote for TheAthletic.com. "At the time, they were ranked 102nd in defensive efficiency on KenPom. Now they are 16th. "The main reason, of course, is Zach Edey, but while the Big Maple is putting up monster numbers, his best asset may be his passing. You can't defend Edey with single coverage, and yet no team has two defenders big enough to keep him from passing out of double teams. Throw in his savvy decision-making, and you understand why Purdue is ranked No. 4 in the country in offensive efficiency and has lost just one game (by a single point) all season."

Davis doubled down on the Boilermakers Wednesday during a discussion among The Athletic's college basketball writers on their choice to win the national title.

"Sometimes we get too stuck to conventions and history, and in Purdue's case both those things make me feel like Charlie Brown trying to kick that field

goal with Lucy holding. (Or Brett Maher trying to kick a PAT. Too soon?) One of those conventions is that you need to have great guard play to win a national championship. Well guess what — Purdue has that. And I'm not just talking about those fearless freshmen Braden Smith and Fletcher Loyer. I'm talking about the Big Maple himself. He's not a playmaking point guard, but Zach Edey is expert at recognizing and passing out of double teams. You simply cannot guard this man one on one, but he's so good at reading the defensive help that he almost always makes the correct pass. And of course, it's easier for him because he's always passing over smaller defenders.

"As a team, Purdue is making just 32.6 percent from 3, and while that seems very low, Smith is a 44.6 percent 3-point shooter, and three other Boilermakers are 35 percent or higher. They don't need to be great at this part of the game. They just need to be good enough, which clearly they are."

Purdue's rise up the defensive rankings was aided by a rare performance on a Big Ten opponent's home court. Alan Karpick, publisher of GoldandBlack.com and a Purdue athletics historian, notes that the Boilermakers' 61-39 victory inside Williams Arena was the lowest point production by a conference rival on its home court since Jan. 7, 1944. That night, Purdue held Chicago to 27 points in a 43-point victory against the Maroons. Chicago withdrew from Big Ten athletic competition two years later.

The Journal and Courier noted in its Jan. 8, 1944 edition that the victory snapped a four-game losing streak for Purdue. It also was the 46th loss in 47 games for Chicago. At least the Maroons led 2-0. Purdue's Chuck Haag nearly outscored Chicago on his own, putting up 21 points.

Minnesota's 39 points was its lowest total since the 1950-51 season. The Gophers' 12 first-half points were the fewest allowed in any half by a Big Ten opponent in the league's 128-year history. The 12 points allowed matched the Purdue school record as well, last accomplished against UNC-Wilmington on Nov. 21, 2012.

Colts will get their QB?

Mel Kiper Jr.'s first mock NFL Draft of 2023 presents an interesting scenario for the Indianapolis Colts.

Kiper predicts the Chicago Bears keeping the No. 1 overall pick and selecting Georgia defensive tackle Jalen Carter. If so, that would assure the Colts would get probably the No. 2 quarterback in the draft.

That would be 2021 Heisman Trophy winner Bryce Young of Alabama, since Kiper projects Ohio State's C.J. Stroud going off the board to Houston at No. 2.

"There's a clear gap after the top three passers in this class, and the Colts don't necessarily have to trade up to get one of them," Kiper writes.

"In this scenario, they could take Young, a quick processor with an elite feel for the pocket and how to move around and locate his target. The 2021 Heisman Trophy doesn't have a big frame, which some NFL scouts will downgrade him for because there aren't many starting quarterbacks under 200 pounds. I love his tape, though, and I'd be willing to bet on his talent. Spread out the offense and watch him throw darts to Michael Pittman Jr. and Alec Pierce."

Noteworthy

Chris Forman, Purdue's associate strategic communications director for men's basketball, notes that Zach Edey is approaching single-season numbers posted by a Hall of Fame center.

Based on a 35-game schedule, Purdue's 7-4 junior center is on pace for 751 points, 460 rebounds and 82 blocked shots. In his research of the Sports-Reference database, Forman found only one player with 750 points, 450 rebounds and 75 blocks in a season: Navy's David Robinson (796-455-207). Since the 1992-93 season, no player has even reached 700-400-75. ...

Edey was selected to The Sporting News' midseason All-America first team last week. The Sporting News is one of four organizations used to determine consensus All-America status.

The front-runner for National Player of the Year, Edey is averaging 21.5 points and 13.2 rebounds. Notably, Edey has 43 blocked shots to just 29 fouls in 19 games. His 16 double-doubles are one behind St. John's Joel Soriano for the national lead.

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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