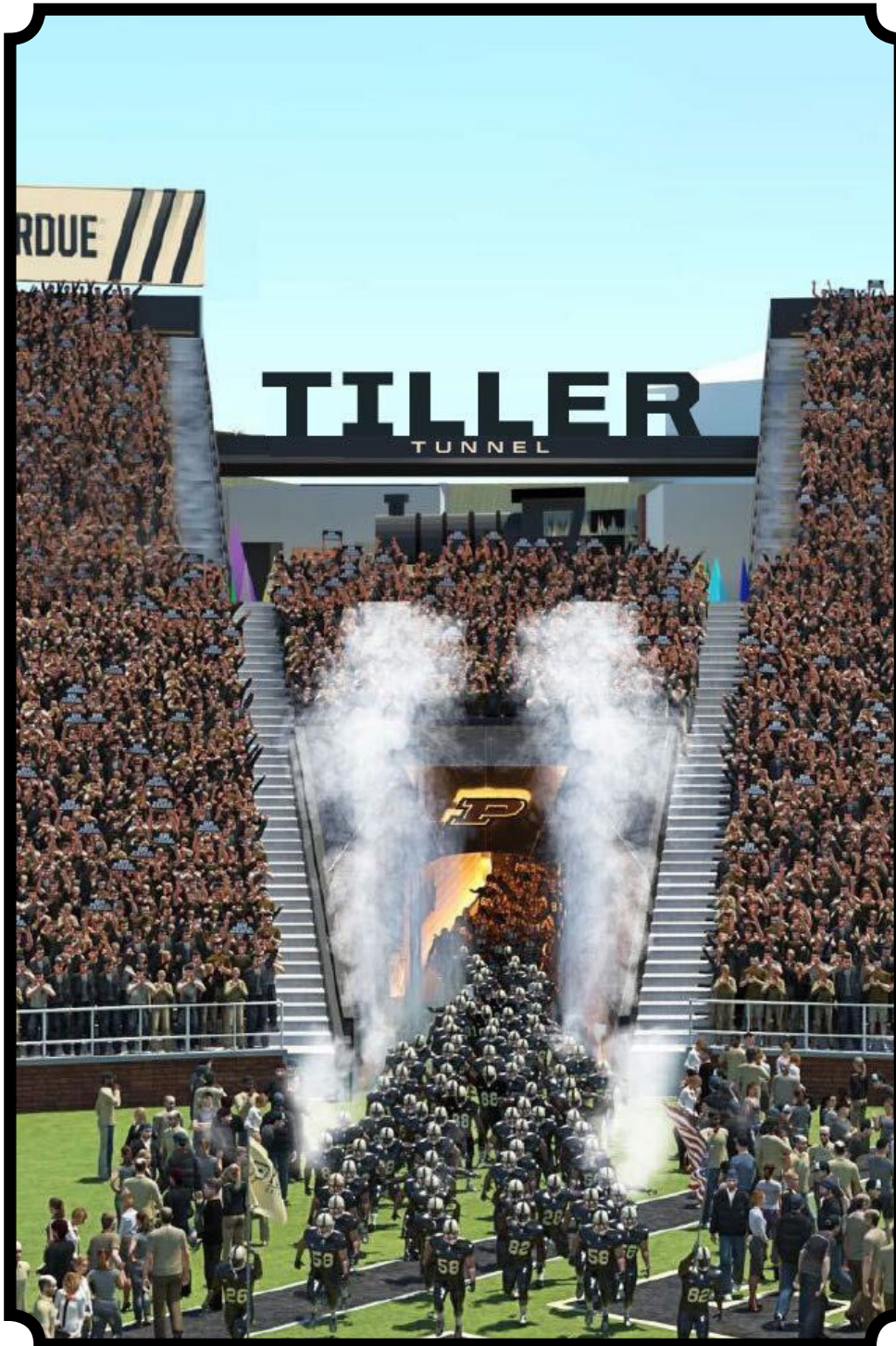


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## Big Ten Pits Conference Opener Against Friday Night Lights

*Photo courtesy of Purdue Athletics*



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Columnist

Once upon a time, Friday nights in the fall were set aside for students and alumni to gather at their high school's football game.

Bonfires, fish fries and post-game

dances helped form lifelong memories for teen-agers.

Like many good things, money comes along and spoils everything.

Case in point, Wednesday's announcement by the Big Ten that Purdue football would host Wisconsin in the conference opener on Friday, Sept. 22 in Ross-Ade Stadium.

In the previous 135 seasons of Boilermaker football, Purdue had never hosted a Big Ten opponent on a Friday. The last time Purdue played a home game on a Friday night, beating Ohio 44-21 to give Jeff Brohm his first victory as head coach, the athletic department made amends by offering to host a high school football doubleheader the following day.

Lafayette Jeff beat Harrison 49-39, while West Lafayette fell to Crete-Monee (Ill.) 44-29. Neither story in the Lafayette Journal & Courier mentioned attendance figures, but it's likely every young man who played that day will be bragging for years that they played in Ross-Ade Stadium.

Purdue-Wisconsin is just a down payment on what's coming down the road with the Big Ten partnering with Fox, CBS and NBC. Once USC and UCLA join in 2024, don't be surprised if the Big Ten will agree to a Thursday night game, a Friday doubleheader and Saturday kickoffs ranging from noon to 10 p.m.

Thanks to John Harrell's website, here's some of the high school football games competing for attendance:

- Just five miles down the road from Ross-Ade Stadium, Harrison welcomes Lafayette Jeff. On the other end of Tippecanoe County, McCutcheon is at home against Kokomo.

- The annual Crawfordsville-North Montgomery rivalry will be hosted by the Athenians.

The Purdue-Wisconsin storyline will be an interesting one for viewers. It will be the Big Ten coaching debut for Purdue's Ryan Walters and Wisconsin's Luke Fickell. With both offenses shifting to a

variation of the late Mike Leach's Air Raid attack, it probably won't be a dull game.

For Walters and the Boilermakers, the Wisconsin game comes in the midst of a potentially favorable schedule. Four of the first five Purdue games this fall will be at home, including the Sept. 16 matchup against Syracuse. Fresno State comes to West Lafayette for the Sept. 2 opener and the month closes with Walters' former employer, Illinois, coming to town Sept. 30.

Tiller Tunnel

This September 30th will mark the sixth anniversary of Joe Tiller's death. Almost from the moment of his passing, his family and players have been working with Purdue officials for a suitable tribute to the winningest football coach in school history.

Thanks to another gift from Drew and Brittany Brees, the new tunnel linking the locker room inside Kozuch Football Performance Complex to the Ross-Ade Stadium field will be named in Tiller's honor.

The Boilermaker football legend and his wife matched donations to the Tiller Tunnel campaign during Purdue's Day of Giving on April 26. Three giving levels - \$5,000, \$25,000 and \$100,000-plus - will also be publicly recognized on the entrance wall to Tiller Tunnel.

Under Tiller, Purdue went to 10 bowl games, including the 2001 Rose Bowl as Big Ten champions. Tiller sent 53 players to the National Football League and coached three major award winners (Brees, Maxwell Award as college football's best player; tight end Tim Stratton as the first John Mackey Award winner and punter Travis Dorsch, Ray Guy Award).

"Coach Tiller was an important person in my life and to so many other guys who played for him. He did so much more than teach us how to win," Drew Brees said in a statement announcing the Tiller Tunnel initiative. "He taught us life lessons and how to be great leaders and men. We hope to inspire others to join us in donating to Tiller Tunnel to honor a man who did so much for so many Boilermakers." Big Ten basketball schedules

It will seem like déjà vu for Purdue basketball when it starts Big Ten play in December.

Tuesday's announcement of the single-play and home-and-away conference opponents revealed the Boilermakers will play the same schedule it had in 2019-20. That season will be remembered for Purdue's struggles (16-15) and its sudden halt due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

In addition to its protected rivalry with Indiana, Purdue will have home-and-away games with Illinois, Iowa, Michigan,

Northwestern, Rutgers and Wisconsin. The Boilermakers' lone contests with Michigan State, Minnesota and Penn State will take place in Mackey Arena. Purdue drew Maryland, Nebraska and Ohio State for road-only games.

Indiana will have to travel to Illinois, Michigan and Rutgers for its single-play road games. The Hoosiers went 2-1 away from Assembly Hall against that trio in 2022-23, falling to the Scarlet Knights in one of their worst performances of the season.

Iowa, Michigan State and Northwestern come to Bloomington for IU's home single-play games.

A quick glance at schedules for possible contenders for the Big Ten title seems to favor Ohio State. In addition to Purdue, the Buckeyes get Illinois and Maryland as home single-plays. Iowa, Michigan State and Northwestern are their road single-plays.

Michigan State drew the double-whammy of only playing Indiana and Purdue on the road. At least the Big Ten threw the Spartans a bone by making the third road single-play a trip to Nebraska.

\*\*\*\*\*

Current projections have four Purdue players being selected in the NFL Draft, which begins Thursday in Kansas City.

Cornerback Cory Trice is forecast by The Athletic's Dane Brugler to go 101st overall in Round 3 to San Francisco.

Brugler has quarterback Aidan O'Connell going 109th overall in the fourth round to the Las Vegas Raiders. "Arguably the most popular non-first-round quarterback among teams this year, O'Connell is far above average in three key areas that NFL coaches covet: accuracy, intelligence and intangibles," Brugler writes.

Wide receiver Charles Jones is projected to be drafted shortly afterward by the Pittsburgh Steelers with the 120th overall pick in Round 4. Lastly, tight end Payne Durham is slotted in the fifth round, 165th overall, to New Orleans.

Unlike today's seven round draft, the NFL used to have 32-round marathon "selection meetings," as Hall of Fame commissioner Pete Rozelle used to call the draft. Here's a look at the best Purdue players to be taken in each round.

1

There's just no way to choose between three members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Len Dawson had the rockiest road to Canton despite being the fifth overall selection of the 1957 NFL Draft by Pittsburgh.

Seldom used by the Steelers or the Cleveland Browns, Dawson reunited with his quarterback coach at Purdue - Hank Stram - with the Dallas Texans in 1962. Three AFL championships and an MVP performance in Super Bowl IV propelled Dawson to the Hall of Fame in 1987.

Bob Griese was taken one pick after Heisman Trophy winner Steve Spurrier by the Miami Dolphins, fourth overall in 1967. Griese directed Miami to three consecutive Super Bowls in the early 1970s, winning two. He was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1990.

Rod Woodson was a sure thing from the moment Pittsburgh took him 10th overall in the 1987 draft. The cornerback/safety was one of five active players named to the NFL's 75th Anniversary team in 1994. Woodson also was selected to the 100th anniversary team after retiring with 71 interceptions, including an NFL record 12 for touchdowns, and an NFL record 1,483 interception return yards.

2

Drew Brees just didn't measure up, physically, to NFL scouts' quarterback prototype. At 6 feet, Brees "does not possess the ideal height you look for in a pro passer," one scouting report read.

Even the San Diego Chargers, who took him 32nd overall in the 2001 NFL Draft, didn't really believe in Brees. When the shiny new quarterback model, 6-5 Philip Rivers, came along in 2004, Brees' days were numbered.

The Chargers' loss was the New Orleans Saints' gain. Brees transformed the Saints from perennial losers to Super Bowl champions in the 2009 season. The certain first-ballot Pro Football Hall of Famer retired with 80,358 passing yards, 571 touchdown passes and NFL records for most TD passes in a game (7) and consecutive games with a TD pass (54).

3

Chike Okefor's 11-year NFL career began with his selection with the 89th overall pick by the San Francisco 49ers in 1999.

The West Lafayette High School graduate also played for Seattle and Arizona, compiling 53 sacks among his 383 career tackles.

4

At 6-7, 245 pounds, Lamar Lundy put the fear in the Los Angeles Rams' fabled "Fearsome Foursome" in the 1960s.

The Rams took Lundy 47th overall in the 1957 NFL Draft as a tight end. After making the conversion to defensive end, Lundy compiled 68.5 sacks and three interception

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returns for touchdowns between 1957 and 1969.

5

Ed Flanagan was a 10-year starter at center for Detroit, which chose him with the 64th overall selection in 1965. Flanagan earned four Pro Bowl berths representing the Lions.

6

Once upon a time, there was an NFL team called the Brooklyn Tigers, which made Purdue guard Dick Barwegan the 44th overall choice in the 1945 draft. The Tigers were extinct by the time Barwegan left the Air Force in 1946.

Barwegan played eight years in the NFL, three with the Chicago Bears. The Chicago Tribune ranked Barwegan 51st in its 2019 countdown of the top 100 Bears in team history. Barwegan also was selected to the NFL's All-Decade Team of the 1950s.

7

Defensive tackle Jeff Zgonina was one of the rare personnel mistakes by the Pittsburgh Steelers in the 1990s, lasting just two seasons after being selected 185th overall in the 1993 NFL Draft.

The next four seasons were one-year stops (Carolina, Atlanta, St. Louis Rams, Indianapolis) before Zgonina found a home with his second Rams stint. He earned a Super Bowl ring in 2000 before leaving for Miami in 2003. Zgonina wrapped up his 17-year career with the Houston Texans in 2009, having compiled 448 tackles, 26 sacks and 13 fumble recoveries.

8

Ralph Perretta had been a three-year starting center and Purdue co-captain when the San Diego Chargers called his name with the 206th pick of the 1975 NFL Draft. Perretta started 25 games during his six-year career.

9

The 1983 NFL Draft was a legendary one for Miami, which stole Hall of Fame quarterback Dan Marino with the 27th pick of the first round. The Dolphins got another steal in Purdue linebacker Mark Brown.

Brown went on to a nine-year NFL career, including his final three with Detroit. Brown amassed 10.5 sacks, four interceptions and eight fumble recoveries.

10

Roosevelt Barnes came to Purdue on a basketball scholarship in 1977 but the lone season he played football for the Boilermakers led to his selection by Detroit in the 1982 NFL Draft. Barnes would play four seasons for the Lions as a linebacker.

11

Leo Sugar was the eldest member of Purdue's Den of Defensive Ends, playing for the Boilermakers from 1949-51.

Going 123rd overall to the Chicago Cardinals in the 1952 NFL Draft, Sugar made the All-Pro team twice during his seven seasons with the Cardinals. Including stops with Philadelphia in 1961 and Detroit in 1962, Sugar started 87 of his 104 career NFL games. Three of his 13 fumble recoveries were returned for touchdowns.

12

Punter Shawn McCarthy didn't make the Atlanta Falcons' roster in 1990 but surfaced in 1991 with the New England Patriots. On Nov. 3 that year, he booted a 93-yard punt that was downed inside the Buffalo Bills 1-yard line. At the time, it was the third-longest punt in NFL history and a Patriots record.

13

Bob Hadrick's knee injury kept him out of professional football, having been drafted by the Baltimore Colts and the AFL Denver Broncos in 1966. But the three-time first-team All-Big Ten end went on to have a 27-year career with the FBI.

14

Running back Norb Adams didn't think \$10,000 a year was worth the physical punishment, so he said no thanks to the New York Giants who took him with the 135th overall selection in the 1949 NFL Draft.

In today's money, that's \$126,000. But Adams figured a pharmacy career would be better for his long-term health. "A lot of my teammates played in the NFL and the physical punishment they absorbed for that money, to me, just didn't add up," Adams said in 2003.

15

Guard Joe Skibinski was the 183rd overall selection by the Cleveland Browns in the 1951 NFL Draft. After spending the 1952 season in Cleveland, Skibinski was out of the NFL for two seasons before playing for Green Bay in 1955 and 1956.

16

Running back Joe Kulbacki was an original member of the Buffalo Bills in 1960, choosing the American Football League over the Washington Redskins. Kulbacki was the 184th overall selection in a draft that saw 10 Boilermakers taken.

17

Willie Jones was one of the first draft choices (225th overall) of the expansion Minnesota Vikings. But the running back's lone professional season came with Buffalo in 1962.

18

Walt Cudzik went 212th overall to the Washington Redskins in 1954 but it wasn't until six years later he found a home as the center for the original Boston (now New England) Patriots. Cudzik earned an AFC championship ring in 1964 as the starting center for Buffalo.

19

When the Chicago Bears selected tackle Barry French with the 194th overall selection in 1944, George Halas was taking a low risk since French was serving in the U.S. Army during World War II.

French resumed his football career at Purdue in 1946 and then joined the original Baltimore Colts of the All-American Football Conference. In between two forearm fractures, French started 29 games for the Colts between 1947 and 1950 before winding up his career with the Detroit Lions in 1951.

20

Randy Minniear spent four seasons as a running back/return specialist for the New York Giants, which took him 301st overall in 1966.

21

Football was child's play to Ned Maloney after serving in the Marine Corps during World War II, taking part in battles at Bougainville, Guam, Emarou and Tarawa.

Taken with the 198th overall pick in 1946 while still eligible at Purdue, Maloney never played for the Detroit Lions. Instead, the end chose the renegade All-American Football Conference and the San Francisco 49ers.

Maloney played two seasons for the 49ers before starting a 36-year career at Purdue as an assistant coach (1951-72) and equipment manager (1972-87).

22

Bob DeMoss, the father of Purdue's Cradle of Quarterbacks, was actually drafted twice, chosen by the New York Giants 280th overall in 1950 after playing one season for the New York Bulldogs. DeMoss chose to begin a long coaching career with the Boilermakers instead.

23

None

24

Tackle Wayne Farmer was the 283rd overall selection in 1959 by the Pittsburgh Steelers.

25

In the business world, former Boilermaker end Forest Farmer was a first-round pick. Farmer, selected by Denver in the 1963 AFL Draft, was a former president

of Chrysler's automotive parts subsidiary, Acustar. Farmer later served as president and CEO of Bing Manufacturing Inc., LLC.

26

Walt Houston beat long odds when he made the Washington Redskins roster in 1955 as the 303rd overall pick. The 6-foot, 217-pound guard was a member of Purdue's 1952 Big Ten co-championship team.

27

Three-year starting center Neil Habig chose to play in the Canadian Football League after being selected 315th overall by the Green Bay Packers in 1958.

Habig played seven seasons with Saskatchewan, for whom he was a West All-Star six times and the CFL's first All-Star center in 1962. Habig also played linebacker and collected seven of his 10 career interceptions in 1963.

28

None

29

Abe Gibron still had a year of eligibility when he was chosen by the Pittsburgh Steelers with the 274th overall pick in 1948.

Gibron played professionally from 1949 to 1959, earning four Pro Bowl appearances as a guard for Cleveland.

30

None

31

Ed Ehlers was the Dave Winfield of his time. Like the Hall of Fame baseball player, Ehlers was drafted by the Boston Celtics and the Chicago Bears. In the pre-draft era of Major League Baseball, Ehlers played for the Yankees and Cubs organizations.

Ehlers played all three sports at Purdue after being coached by John Wooden at South Bend Central. He ended up choosing basketball as his No. 1 sport after the Celtics made him their first ever pick, No. 3 overall, in 1947.

32

Bob Plevy never played for the Washington Redskins, which selected him in 1947 as the 295th overall selection out of 300. Plevy, however, had his greatest role during World War II. A tackle for the undefeated 1943 Boilermakers, Plevy received the Purple Heart after being wounded during the Battle of the Bulge.

*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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