

All About Ryan Walters

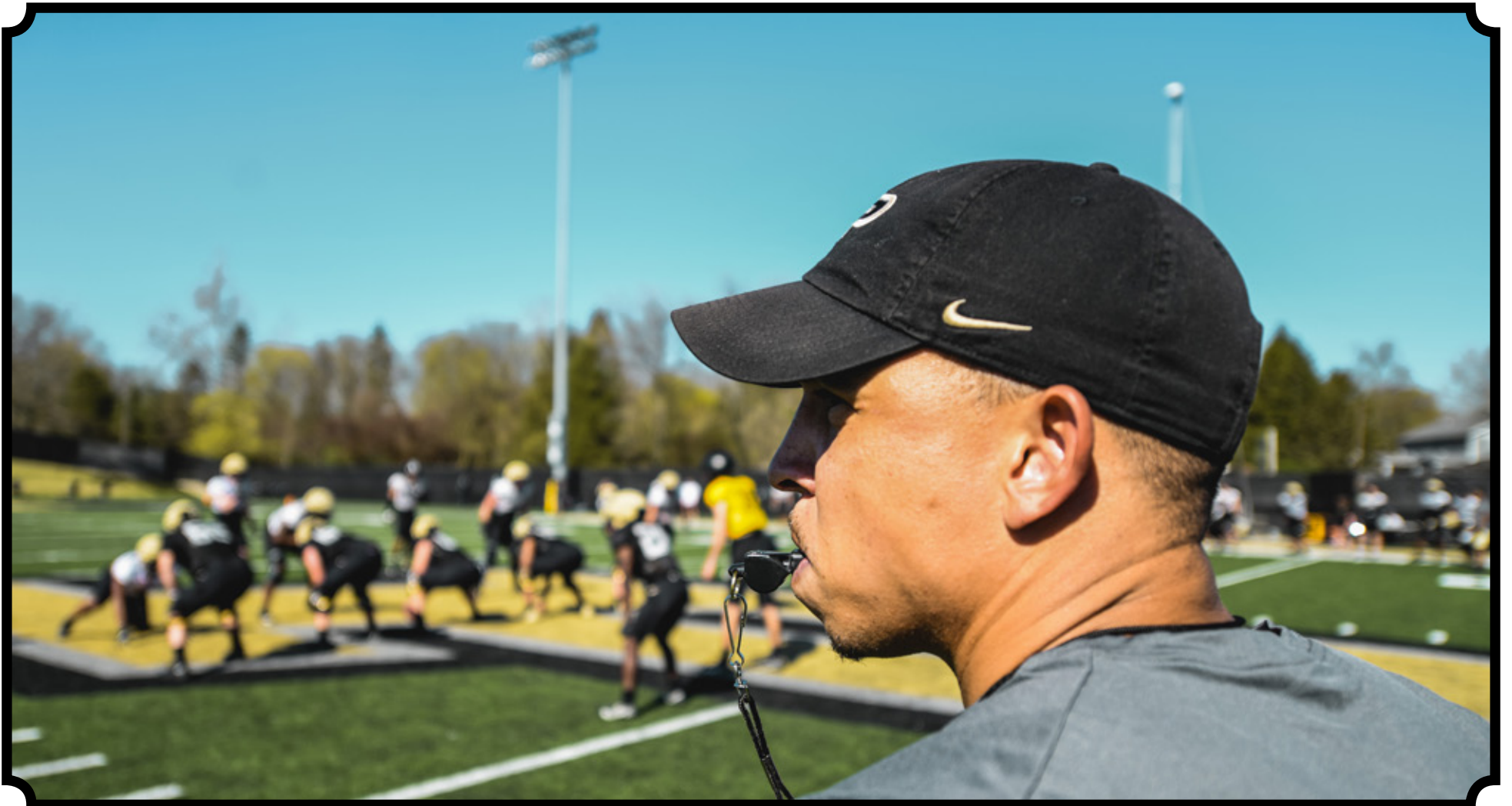


Photo courtesy of Purdue Athletics



KENNY THOMPSON
Columnist

Walters Determined To Bring Change To Purdue Football

Nearly 100 years ago, these were the excuses given as to why Purdue football wasn't on par with Big Ten brothers Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio State and Wisconsin.

1. The enrollment at Purdue is one-third to one-half of the enrollment of the big state universities like Illinois, Michigan, Ohio State, Minnesota and Wisconsin. "That is a huge handicap to Purdue in athletics. To have only one man eligible for varsity competition against schools that have two or three is a ratio that makes Purdue's hope of many conference championships slim."

2. Purdue has only two classes of students, those in the college of agriculture and those in the college of engineering. "Purdue has no liberal arts department, no school of commerce or business, which is one of the biggest departments in most of the middle west universities, no law school or school of medicine."

3. The male students are nearly all from small rural centers where they have had little or no high school competition and have never had the opportunity of having good coaching in even the fundamentals of sports. (For example, my wife's grandfather and starting end at Purdue - R.C. (Cooper) Kerr - attended Richland Township in Fountain County and the high school did not have a football team.)

4. The engineering scholastic sched-

ule is an unusually heavy one. It is not uncommon for students to be in the shops, laboratories and class rooms from eight in the morning until four or five in the afternoon. Getting the football team together for the necessary amount of practice is a difficult thing to accomplish.

5. Almost none of the high schools in the state of Indiana have played football for any length of time. (Lafayette Jeff resumed its football program in 1921 after a long hiatus).

"The troubles of an athletic director and football coach at Purdue are almost too obvious for comment but these facts are known to very few people outside of the state of Indiana."

These "woe are us" laments were published two days before the dedication game at Ross-Ade Stadium by the hometown Lafayette Journal and Courier on Nov. 20, 1924. Even more peculiar, this story was part of a 32-page edition celebrating the event.

Since 1924, Purdue has had 17 head coaches - excluding interims. Seven compiled winning records but not since James Phelan (1922-29) and Noble Kizer (1930-36) has Purdue had back-to-back successful coaches.

Ryan Walters is determined to change that.

"When I got here and got to see the facilities, got to see campus and got to go out in the community ... every day I've been blown away by the support, by the family atmosphere," Walters said. "It really does feel like a brotherhood here. The campus is beautiful.

"What I've found is there's no excuse why this place can't have sustained success and compete and win championships at the highest level. It is nice to be at my age (37) and where I'm at in this profession and feel like I landed a destination job."

Purdue was never the destination job for Jeff Brohm. To his everlasting credit, Brohm rejected the first overture from his dream job - Louisville - to rebuild the Boilermaker program to the point where it won the Big Ten West Division championship in 2022.

When Scott Satterfield unexpectedly bolted Louisville for the University of Cincinnati last December, there was little doubt Brohm would get the call to come home to the city where his family is as regarded as the Mannings are in New Orleans.

The search was not a long one for Purdue athletic director Mike Bobinski,

with the support of former school president Mitch Daniels and Board of Trustees chairman Mike Berghoff. Less than a week after Brohm departed, Bobinski chose Walters.

For a school known for its offensive-minded hires, Walters is a 180-degree departure. As Illinois' defensive coordinator, his unit ranked first in the nation in scoring defense (12.3) and second in yards allowed per game (263.8).

Three Illinois defensive backs were taken in the first three rounds of the 2023 NFL Draft: Devon Witherspoon (5th overall to Seattle), Jartavius Martin (2nd round to Washington) and Sydney Brown (3rd round to Philadelphia).

"From an early point in the search process, coach Walters stood out because of the energy, passion and intelligence he displayed as a defensive coordinator in both the Big Ten Conference and Southeastern Conference (Missouri)," Bobinski said. "His meteoric rise in the coaching profession is in large part due to his unique ability to connect with his student-athletes as both a coach and mentor."

Before looking into the job, Walters knew little about Purdue other than it played in the same division as Illinois, was a good academic institution and that Drew Brees was a Boilermaker.

"The opportunity to interview for this job, what attracted me to it was the conversations with Mike Bobinski and (deputy athletic director) Tiffani Grimes throughout the interview process," Walters said. "The way their vision aligned with mine and how passionate they were about this place excited me."

Upon meeting Walters, two impressions immediately were formed. One, he is a young-looking 37. Second, he is a confident person. Not arrogantly so but Walters' belief in himself is why he has a large office in the Kozuch Football Performance Complex.

This is what Walters said when asked why he will break the long Purdue string of successful coaches followed by losing ones:

"I know this place is not a rebuild job. They've had success. So my job is to find areas where we can improve and do whatever I can to improve those areas. The areas that have been successful, make sure those stay successful and try to elevate that standard.

"I've always operated with a chip

on my shoulder because of my age and my football background. My dad is not a coach. I didn't have a long career in the NFL. I didn't play at a "logo school" per se. So I've prided myself on my work ethic, my ability to enhance my talent in this profession. I think that my competitive spirit will continue to influence this building and the people that are coaching and playing, the support staff and all those areas to continue the success that Purdue has seen in recent years."

Next week, more from Ryan Walters and his path from a converted quarterback at the University of Colorado to the fourth-youngest head coach in major college football.

Walters Says That Purdue Football Will Be Competitive This Season

For years, Purdue Hall of Famer Gene Keady has told the story of how he knew Matt Painter would be a basketball coach someday.

"Ever since he was a player here, Matt has had one of the sharpest basketball minds I've ever been around," Keady said in 2004, when it was announced that Painter would be his replacement on the Boilermaker bench.

"He eats it, sleeps it and wakes up in the middle of the night thinking about it."

Similar compliments have been paid by former colleagues of first-year Purdue football head coach Ryan Walters.

"The coaches I had in college would always say you should think about getting into coaching when your playing days are done," Walters said. "It was natural for me. For whatever reason, as a player the Xs and Os made sense to me. I don't know if it was because I had the quarterback background prior to playing defense.

"I've always sort of been the youngest guy on the staff and have had a quick rise in this profession because one, I enjoy it. I enjoy the relationships. I enjoy the creativity and I enjoy the challenge and the pressure and the nature of this job. I feel like I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing."

The 37-year-old first-year Purdue coach, the fourth-youngest in major college football entering the 2023 season, worked for six schools in seven

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Photo courtesy of Purdue Athletics

years once his playing days at Colorado concluded. Graduate assistant for his alma mater in 2009 and one year later at Arizona. Promoted to defensive backs coach for the Wildcats in 2011, Walters' journey to Purdue also saw stops at Oklahoma, North Texas, Memphis and Missouri.

Success as defensive coordinator in the SEC with the Tigers brought Walters to Bret Bielema's attention when he was forming a staff at Illinois in 2021.

"Ryan is a talented coach with a bright future," Bielema said at the time of Walters' hire at Purdue. "This is something I had seen coming for a while."

At Missouri in 2019, Walters' defense ranked 14th nationally and third in the SEC. The Tigers' pass defense that season ranked eighth in passing yards allowed (179.3 per game) and 17th in scoring defense (19.4).

At Illinois, Walters groomed cornerback Devon Witherspoon into the school's first Jim Thorpe Award (top defensive back in college football) finalist. The numbers put up by Walters' defense in 2022, most notably first in the country in scoring defense (12.3) and second in yards allowed per game (263.8), haven't been approached at Purdue since 1978.

"The Junk Defense" created by Leon

Burnett and featuring Keena Turner, Kevin Motts, Rock Supan and Wayne Smith, gave up 282 yards and 10.8 points a game (including three shutouts) on its way to a 9-2-1 record. That Boilermaker team missed a share of the Big Ten championship by virtue of a 24-24 tie at Wisconsin.

Even the best defense of the Joe Tiller era, the 2003 squad under coordinator Brock Spack, gave up 302 yards per game while allowing an average of 17.4 points. That Boilermaker defense had 11 future NFL players on the roster.

With a nod to Purdue's tradition of passing offenses, Walters also promises a similar defensive approach when asked what fans should expect to see from his first Boilermaker team.

"You're going to see a team that is going to be playing fanatically, playing fast, a team that loves to play the game and plays it the right way," Walters said. "We're going to be competitive, we're going to be tough, we're going to be disciplined."

"Offensively, we're going to score points. We're going to throw the football around. (Offensive coordinator) Graham Harrell and his track record with developing quarterbacks and skill players speaks for itself. I'm going to piggyback what the new Colts

coach said. We're going to throw the ball to score points and we're going to run the ball to win games. He put that in terms that definitely speaks to the way we think about offensive football here.

"Defensively, we're going to confuse and harass the quarterback. We're going to generate turnovers and limit explosive plays. We're going to play smart football. More games are lost than they are won and so we are going to play attention to the things that can potentially get you

beat like penalties, mental errors and turnovers."

On paper, Purdue's defense returns five starters: safeties Cam Allen and Sanoussi Kane, cornerback Jamari Brown, linebacker O.C. Brothers and defensive end Kydran Jenkins from a defense that gave up 367 yards and 27.3 points a game.

Those statistics are skewed by giving up 63 points and 589 yards to LSU in a Citrus Bowl game played without NFL draft picks Jalen Graham and Cory Trice.

Filling those vacancies, as well as finding a replacement for quarterback Aidan O'Connell (now with the Las Vegas Raiders), was a priority for Walters upon taking the job. The latter problem seems to be filled by signing former Texas quarterback Hudson Card out of the transfer portal. Promising underclassmen such as outside linebacker Nic Scourton (formerly Caraway), inside linebacker Yanni Karlaftis and a handful of transfers may be the solution to the former.

One of the advantages of being a young, first-time head coach is being open to different ideas. One of them is the balance between family life and coaching. Walters leads by example in the time he spends with wife Tara and

their sons Aaron and Cason.

"This job requires a lot of your time," he said. "I think time is the most valuable commodity on this planet. So I've got time to get away. I like to spend that time with my family on vacation. We usually go to Hawaii every year for an extended period of time. As a result, we've got two dogs whose names are Maui and Kona."

Walters notes that changing technology makes coaching clichés like spending 12-18 hour days in the office no longer applicable.

"I think sometimes people get stuck in 'this is how we've always done it so this is how we have to do it' instead of changing with the technology and the times," Walters said. "Obviously it takes what it takes to get the job done but there are different seasons within the calendar year for the football program. For me it's important to give myself and my staff time to be fathers and be husbands, be available to your family."

"I think balance keeps you hungry, keeps you energized and can give you a better perspective on what is required and what is conducive to having a healthy environment in your program."

Walters has yet to coach his first game at Purdue and a few fans on social media are already worrying he will abandon the Boilermakers for a return to Colorado when Deion Sanders leaves for a bigger job or is dismissed. Never mind that Colorado doesn't hold the same affection for Walters that Louisville does for former coach Jeff Brohm.

"I'm over the moon appreciative over the opportunity to lead this program," Walters said. "I want my kids, who are 9 and 7, when they grow up I want them to say they're from West Lafayette. I plan on being here a long time, as long as they'll have me."

"There will be adversity at times. That is guaranteed in life, right? But I'll promise you we'll do everything we can to attack that and overcome that adversity with great attitude and with maximum effort to win championships here."

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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