

Kenny Thompson Talking Boilermakers Basketball





KENNY THOMPSON
Columnist

Recognizing Greatness That is Purdue Basketball This Season

Purdue University is very selective when it comes to erecting statues. John Purdue. He only founded the place in 1869.

Neil Armstrong. First man on the moon. The Hall of Engineering bears his name.

Amelia Earhart. Legendary aviator and former career counselor in Purdue's Office of the Dean of Women. Earhart Hall, a residential complex, is named in her honor.

John Wooden. All-American guard at Purdue from 1930-32. Coached UCLA to 10 national championships. You'll find his likeness outside Mackey Arena, located on John R. Wooden Drive.

And of course, The Boilermaker. Larger than life at 18 feet tall (not including the base) and appropriately located outside Ross-Ade Stadium on Wooden Drive between the Drew and Brittany Brees Academic Performance Center and the (Jack) Mollenkopf Athletic Center.

Five statues among 2,468 acres in West Lafayette is modest, even by Purdue's conservative standards. No matter what happens this weekend, serious consideration should be given to erecting a statue of Zach Edey. The sculptor could make it life sized (7-4) to fit in one of the handful of entrances to Mackey Arena if outdoor space won't allow.

Humorously, I'd like to see a statue recreating a 1930 photograph of the college basketball giant of his day, Charles

“Stretch” Murphy, and legendary Purdue coach Ward “Piggy” Lambert portraying Edey and coach Matt Painter.

Murphy stood a foot taller than Lambert at 6-6. Edey only has a 10-inch advantage on Painter but you get the idea.

As a now two-time National Player of the Year winner, it's time to anoint Edey as the greatest basketball player in Purdue history. That's a sentence I didn't think I'd be writing a year ago. To me, Glenn Robinson and Rick Mount have been the standards for Boilermaker greatness. Robinson for his all-around skills and Mount's status as the greatest shooter I've ever seen and Purdue's career scoring leader for 54 years.

None of this would have happened if then assistant coach Steve Lutz and Painter hadn't taken a chance on someone who didn't start playing basketball until he was 15.

“For me to have payback for Coach Paint for really believing in me, it's amazing,” Edey said following Purdue's 72-66 victory against Tennessee for the Midwest Regional championship in Detroit. “There were so many coaches that looked over me. It's kind of been the story of my life. People have doubted me. People looked past me. Can't do that anymore.”

It didn't go unnoticed that Edey also honored Purdue Hall of Fame coach Gene Keady, who made the trip to Detroit with the team. After eschewing a ladder to cut a piece of the net, Edey handed a piece to Keady. Reading Keady's lips, he uttered “wow!” before doffing his cap to the cheering crowd.

“You've always got to pay respect to those that came first,” Edey said when asked what it meant to have Keady there. “He built this. It doesn't go over our heads. He helped set this all up. To be able to pay him back and give him a little piece of net, it's the least I can do.”

Larry Bird. Elvin Hayes. Rick Barry. Oscar Robertson.

Edey's performance this season has elevated him alongside those basketball legends. No one since Bird in 1979 has recorded at least 900 points (926) and 450 rebounds (452) in a season. Hayes, Barry and Robertson are the only other players in NCAA history with those numbers.

Edey also is the first since Robertson in 1960 to lead the country in scoring (25.0 ppg.) and advance to the Final Four.

Until Edey's career-high 40-point performance against the Vols, no one in NCAA Regional finals history had

posted a double-double effort of 40 and 16 rebounds. Those 16 rebounds boosted Edey's season total to 452, breaking his own school record of 438 set a year ago. It's also the first 40-15 game for a Boilermaker since Dave Schellhase on Jan. 21, 1964 against Notre Dame.

Another record within Edey's reach is the single season free throw attempts of 440 set by Furman's Frank Selvy in 1954. Edey has 424 heading into the matchup with North Carolina State.

Edey is the fourth Boilermaker to put up 40 points in an NCAA tournament game. Robinson had 44 against Kansas in the 1994 Southeast Regional semifinal. Carsen Edwards had 42 against Villanova and Virginia in the 2019 South Regional second round and final, respectively.

Painter believes Edey is capable of even greater scoring accomplishments. “He should have got 50 tonight, if he makes his free throws,” Painter said after the Tennessee game, slightly exaggerating Edey's 14 of 22 effort at the line. “I know the season is not over, but I thought he'd get 50 in a game this year.”

Westfield graduate Braden Smith joined Most Outstanding Player Edey on the Midwest Region All-Tournament team after posting nine points, seven rebounds and seven assists against the Vols. Smith just missed recording Purdue's second triple double with 14 points, 15 assists and eight rebounds in the 80-68 semifinal victory against Gonzaga.

Smith is 13 assists away from the Big Ten single season record, set by Michigan State's Cassius Winston with 291 during the 2018-19 season. “He's evolved as one of the best point guards in the country, if not the best point guard in the country,” Painter said. “Just his ability to pass and see things. He's very knowledgeable, very instinctive, makes good decisions but somebody you want the ball in his hands . . . Keeping the ball in his hands helps everybody, especially Zach. Now they've got to deal with him and stop him, and know they've got to deal with Zach coming into the post.”

Future Looks Bright for Painter, Purdue Boilermakers

Once the disappointment subsides from Monday's loss to two-time national champion Connecticut, this will be remembered as arguably the best season in Purdue men's basketball history.

The Boilermakers' 34 victories blew

past the previous record of 30 set during the 2017-18 season. Zach Edey, Mason Gillis, Ethan Morton, Lance Jones, Chase Martin and Carson Barrett depart with a 110-29 record, the most wins by a senior class in school history.

Westfield's Braden Smith set the Big Ten record for most assists in a season with 292, one more than Michigan State's Cassius Winston in 2019.

Edey's 37 points against Connecticut were the most scored in a national championship game in 46 years. Only UCLA's Bill Walton and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar have also had at least 37 points and 10 rebounds in national championship game history.

Space does not permit listing every record the 7-4 center set this season but here are some highlights:

- Edey finished his career with 90 consecutive double-figure scoring games and 116 double-figure games in his career, tying E'Twaun Moore.

- Edey and Shaquille O'Neal are the only players in NCAA history to average at least 25.0 points, 12.0 rebounds and shoot 60.0 percent from the field in a single season.

- Edey leaves Purdue with 2,516 points and 1,321 rebounds in 138 games. Rick Mount's 54-year scoring record was 2,323 points in 72 games. Joe Barry Carroll's 44-year-old rebounding standard was 1,148 in 123 games.

- With Wednesday's Wooden Award announcement, Edey is the first player to sweep the National Player of the Year honors in consecutive seasons since Walton in 1972 and 1973. Edey also was named the Kareem Abdul-Jabbar Center of the Year for the second season in a row.

- Edey joins Dave Schellhase (1966) and Glenn Robinson (1994) as national scoring champions from Purdue. Edey averaged 25.2 points along with 12.2 rebounds, which was second-best in the nation.

After the Connecticut loss, Purdue coach Matt Painter was asked if Edey should be remembered as one of college basketball's greatest centers.

“When you look at his numbers against the greats, there's no question he's in the conversation,” Painter said. “But he's also the winningest player at Purdue.”

“Everybody wants to have the argument about . . . who is the greatest. That's the ultimate separator because every person in that conversation is great. I think

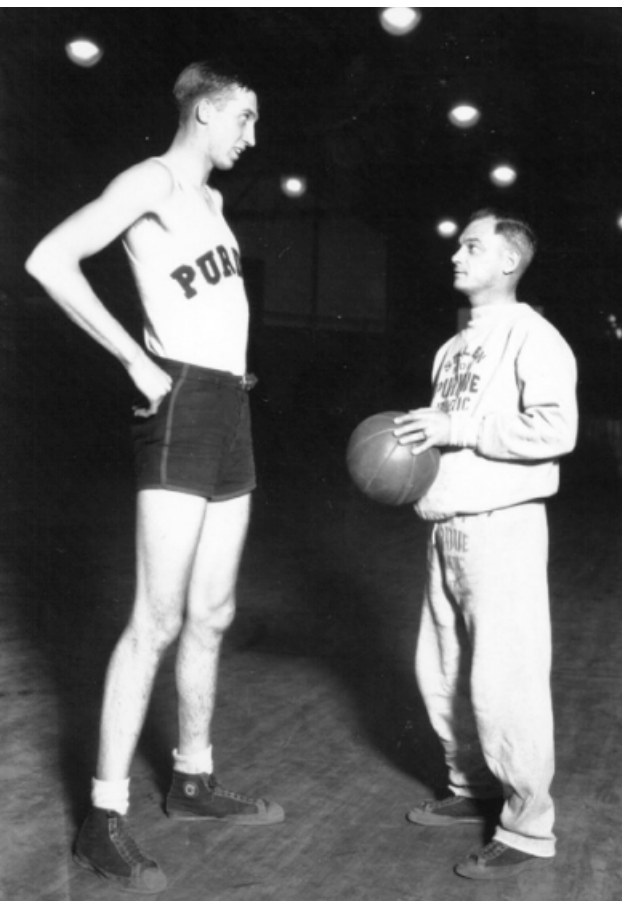


Photo courtesy of Purdue Athletics

Charles "Stretch" Murphy and Piggy Lambert

he was great in how he did it, too. People have no idea the burden you carry when you're as good as he is, produce like he does going into opposing arenas.

"A lot of those old-timers, they didn't have to hear it on social media. For young people that are successful, they have to go through a lot of stuff. But in a way you kind of like it 'cause it toughens you up, allows you to focus, allows you to push through things.

"I just told him in the locker room, 'You're not going to go on in life and push past here and not deal with adversity. In the workforce, in relationships, everything. You're going to deal with adversity. He was superior dealing with adversity. He was a guy that didn't get recruited, then all of a sudden he started to get recruited, then that picked up. That got him on edge. All the great ones stay on edge.

"He's going to be a terrific NBA player. We're really proud of him."

Smith, whose deliveries to Edey helped

him set the Big Ten assists record, also praised his teammate.

"He taught me so much. I went from 6-4 center (in high school) to a 7-4 center. Definitely a huge change," Smith said.

"The most unselfish person you'll ever meet. Like coach Paint said, he gets more hate for no reason. For what? He's out there dominating everybody?"

Now the ceiling has been raised for Purdue basketball. Early predictions have the Boilermakers favored to three-peat as Big Ten champions for the first time since 1994-96. Of course, those expectations could change after their rivals shop from the transfer portal. Indiana, Illinois and Michigan are expected to heavily invest in filling major holes in their rosters.

Painter welcomes the pressure, which is nothing compared to being reminded for 12 months about losing to Farleigh Dickinson as a No. 1 seed.

"I told our guys in the locker room, like, when you have the most wins in school history, you're the first team to win back-to-back championships by multiple games since 1976, which was the last undefeated team in college basketball, and you get an eyelash away from winning it all, that's the standard," Painter said.

So, like, now just like any other year we're going to take two to three weeks off, then get back to work. We like our young guys that are coming in next year, so we're excited."

The class of 6-8 forward Kanon Catchings of Brownsburg via Overtime Elite, 6-4 guard Gicarrri Harris of Loganville, Ga., 6-6 guard Jack Benter of Brownstown, 7-3 center Daniel Jacobsen of Brewster Academy, 6-10 forward/center Raleigh Burgess of Cincinnati and 6-2 guard CJ Cox of Milton Academy is ranked second in the Big Ten and 11th nationally by 24/7 Sports composite rankings.

Catchings, the nephew of University of Tennessee and Indiana Fever great Tamika Catchings, is ranked 34th in the nation by 24/7. Harris, the son of Glenn Robinson, is 90th.

Here's a sample of the early expectations awaiting Purdue.

ESPN's Jeff Borzello has Purdue ranked sixth behind the Worldwide Leader in Sports' unofficial favorite school, Duke, Gonzaga, Kansas, Connecticut and Iowa State. Maryland is the second Big Ten school in Borzello's rankings at No. 20. Rutgers is 21st and Wisconsin 24th.

"The post-Zach Edey era in West Lafayette has officially begun but don't expect Matt Painter's team to fall too far in the national discussion," Borzello writes. "The Boilermakers will still bring back one of the best backcourts in the country in Braden Smith and Fletcher Loyer, and Trey Kaufman-Renn is ready for a bigger role in the frontcourt. The questions will be whether Smith and Loyer can take the jump from being complimentary players to go-to guys and which reserve or freshman breaks out. A good bet would be Camden Heide.

Yahoo Sports' Ryan Young is the most bullish on the Boilermakers, ranking them second behind Duke. His reasoning, though, may be flawed unless Young knows something the rest of us don't. "Zach Edey is off to the NBA, but head coach Matt Painter won't have to adjust much with freshman Will Berg, his 7-foot-2 Swedish center," Young writes. "Fletcher Loyer and Braden Smith will be back, too, so Purdue should return atop the expanded Big Ten next season. It might finally be time for the conference (national title) drought to end."

Young has Rutgers ranked 16th and Maryland 19th.

At the opposite end of the optimism spectrum are The Athletic's CJ Moore and Sam Vecenie, who have Purdue 12th behind Duke, Gonzaga, Houston, Iowa State, Connecticut, Alabama, Kansas, Tennessee, North Carolina, Auburn and Arizona.

Moore and Vecenie project a starting lineup of Smith, Loyer, Kaufman-Renn, Heide and Caleb Furst.

"It will now be time for Kaufman-Renn to become the featured low-post scorer. The Boilermakers got a preview of that last summer when Edey was off with

Team Canada and Kaufman-Renn led the Boilers in scoring during a foreign tour. Smith is already one of the best point guards in college hoops and could elevate himself to All-America status when he takes on more of a scoring role.

"It's rare to have so much experience and production returning. It's going to be difficult to replace Edey, but Matt Painter has two giants lined up to possibly be next. Berg, a 7-2 freshman this season, shot 75 percent from the field in limited minutes, and Painter signed a 7-foot-3 center in Jacobsen. He's got a type!"

Moore and Vecenie have Rutgers 16th, Maryland 20th and Michigan State 22nd.

Like his peers, Sports Illustrated's Kevin Sweeney has Duke No. 1 ahead of Iowa State, Kansas, Gonzaga, Connecticut, Arizona and Houston. Purdue comes in at No. 8.

"The end of the Zach Edey era in West Lafayette will take some getting used to, but that shouldn't bring an end to Purdue as a national contender," Sweeney writes. "Braden Smith is an easy projection as one of the nation's best floor generals after a massive season in 2023-24, and Purdue has quietly stockpiled athletic, versatile wings with the likes of Cam Heide, Kanon Catchings and Myles Colvin. Don't expect a big drop-off from the Boilermakers."

Sweeney has five Big Ten teams in his Top 25: Maryland (18), Ohio State (19), UCLA (20) and Rutgers (23).

CBS Sports' Gary Parrish, who was one of the few national pundits to predict a Purdue national championship before the 2023-24 season, has Purdue ninth in his Top 25 Plus 1 rankings. Parrish deviates from group think, ranking Houston No. 1 over North Carolina, Iowa State, Kansas, Duke, Connecticut, Gonzaga and Auburn.

"The Boilermakers have finished in the top 25 at KenPom.com nine straight years, and there's no reason to think that streak won't continue next season even without the two-time National Player of the Year," Parrish writes.

Parrish ranked Wisconsin 21st, Rutgers 23rd and Ohio State 26th.

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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