

Deconstructing the perfect Purdue offense

Brian Neubert / GoldandBlack.com / January 18, 2018

It was one of the few instances on Tuesday night that Wisconsin really made Purdue work.

During the first half of the Boilermakers' eventual 28-point win, the Badgers stymied a Purdue transition look, forced it into settling into the halfcourt and passing it around until the shot clock grew impatient, hitting 10, which by Purdue standards is slow.

Vincent Edwards curled around P.J. Thompson's screen a few feet from their coach, Matt Painter, then took Carsen Edwards' pass and drove to the middle of the lane, where Alex Illikainen blocked his path, a win for the Badgers, or so it seemed, a rare answer for the visitors defensively.

Nope.

Edwards planted two feet around the Big Ten logo just inside the foul line, a hard stop, then pivoted, seemingly shooting classmate Thompson a look. As Khalil Iverson scrambled to Thompson in anticipation of Edwards kicking it out for a three, Thompson darted past him to the rim.

As if running Princeton offense instead of the Boilermakers' free-flowing but strictly principled motion, Edwards threw a single bounce pass to the streaking Thompson for one of the easiest baskets of the night on a night full of easy ones. And it was a clear reflection of the value of experience and chemistry between two players who've played three-and-a-half years worth of basketball together, equipped with the sort of basketball sense that across the board has risen Purdue to its current level.

It was another of those possessions, those instances of Purdue's synergy and skill combining for symphonic offensive basketball.

"That was just us playing basketball together," said Edwards, one of Purdue's four senior starters who've combined for 491 game appearances as Boilermakers. "Of course it's in the motion offense that has us moving around, but that was just us playing basketball, playing over a hundred games together, knowing where each other's going to be."

It was classic Purdue this season, a team that seemingly has an answer for everything — a foul-holding, physically dominant big man who's the Boilermakers starting point — and making the best decisions of his career, and his free throws — surrounded by dead-eye shooters and cunning passers on all sides, with a pair of Edwardses — Vincent and Carsen — capable of compromising defensive sets off the dribble or spear-heading transition opportunities.

And, they're all experienced. Not just experienced, but experienced together.

"It's our chemistry," Mathias said. "The way we know each other, the way we move and the way we're unselfish. That says a lot about teams. There's a lot of teams out there with a lot of highly talented recruits who go get theirs. We find the open guy regardless of who you are. We know each other's strengths and weaknesses, we move the ball well and we trust each other."

It was expected that this Purdue team in 2017-18 would be defined by offense, as the Boilermakers returned all the makings of an outstanding scoring team.

What it's been, though, through 19 games — the last 14 of them victories for the nation's third-ranked team — has been nothing short of elite.

The numbers are exceptional.

The Boilermakers are 23rd nationally in scoring at just under 85 points per game, but 17th nationally in field-goal percentage, fourth in three-point shooting at 42.6 percent and shooting just under 75 percent at the foul line, which, if the season ended today, would represent a top-five season all-time at Purdue.

The advanced metrics are even more impressive than the results.

KenPom.com shows Purdue sixth nationally in adjusted offensive efficiency, which takes into account not just productivity per 100 possessions, but a variety of other factors.

Purdue's averaging 1.165 points per possession, per TeamRankings.com, good for sixth nationally and up from last season's 1.106.

It's not mattered what opponents have done. Play man-to-man and the Boilermakers get 1.031 points per possession, per Synergy Sports. That falls in the 99th percentile nationally.

Run zone and the Boilermakers operate at 1.14 points per possession. That's only in the 97th percentile.

The shooting percentages — both raw and adjusted — are nearly even.

And they're all very good.

As is Purdue's assist-to-turnover ratio of 1.52, which ranks 12th nationally.

And the Boilermakers' turnover percentage of 18.4 is actually up from last season's 17.7, which can reasonably be viewed as the trade-off between Caleb Swanigan's heavy-usage-driven turnover totals and this season's more empowered ensemble, with more players seeking out, well, plays, and thus committing slightly more turnovers than they might have a year ago.

Purdue's been excellent defensively this season, as well, probably better than anyone could reasonably have expected.

But its offense has lived up to preseason expectations, and then some.

Here's at least some reasons why.

CONCENTRATED SKILL

This is nothing new, but has reached its greatest value now that Purdue's most skilled offensive players are all veterans.

Vincent Edwards, Dakota Mathias, Thompson and Ryan Cline are all high-level shooters and passers and now all upperclassmen whose experience levels have now amplified their savvy.

"Being able to shoot, that changes the whole dynamic of any offense," Vincent Edwards said. "When your whole perimeter can shoot, that makes it tough. When you've got a load like Isaac down low, it makes it even harder to decide what you want to do."

Purdue's shooting 42.6 percent from three-point range, tops among all high-major programs and only trailing Wofford and William & Mary overall.

And the threes come from everywhere.

Carsen Edwards is shooting 38.5 percent from long range, and he's Purdue's fifth-leading shooter by percentage. It is very possible the Boilermakers have five players shoot 40 percent or better for the season.

BALANCE

Let's say hypothetically that two of Purdue's best players don't enjoy their finest hours on a given night. We'll say hypothetically that Isaac Haas is held with a field goal and Dakota Mathias without a three and the two combine for just four points.

Then the possibility is still there that, hypothetically, Carsen Edwards could get 21 and Vincent Edwards 20 and the Boilermakers collectively could still shoot 50-plus percent from long range on high volume even without Mathias connecting.

Purdue's balance is deadly, and it's not just balance on paper, but balance in practice. And it's not just balance in numbers but balance in elements. Purdue has prolific scorers who shoot, who post up, who drive, who get to the foul line. Every base is covered.

And it's empowered balance.

Prior to this season, Caleb Swanigan was Purdue's go-to player, and certainly earned that role. He was a Player-of-the-Year finalist nationally and a great college player.

Without him, though, Purdue's emphasis is decentralized, and now the Boilermakers essentially have four go-to players. Carsen Edwards has led Purdue in scoring in seven games this season, Isaac Haas and Vincent Edwards five times and Dakota Mathias three.

Vincent Edwards cited a media report that said, Purdue's "go-to guy is the open guy."

"I think that perfectly describes us," he said. "Anybody can get going on any given night on this team."

And up until just recently, Carsen Edwards was Purdue's overall leading scorer but its fourth-leading scorer in Big Ten games. (He's since moved up to third.) Haas is Purdue's leading conference-play scorer, but its third-leading scorer overall.

THE EMERGENCE OF CARSEN EDWARDS

The sophomore was good as a freshman.

Now, it all seems to be coming together.

Though he can be reasonably categorized as a volume-type scorer, his efficiency has come a long way.

He's shooting 48.2 percent from the floor, mostly on jump shots and contested shots at the basket, and just under 39-percent from three.

Last season, he committed more turnovers than he handed out assists.

Now, through 19 games he sits with 57 assists — five fewer than all of last season — 38 turnovers. The past three games, he's handed out 11 assists to one turnover.

"Coach Painter's been talking to him a lot about that," said assistant coach Greg Gary, who's heavily involved in Purdue's offense, "how that's part of his development, letting it come to him, and then when they do, go get 'em."

The look of Purdue's offense seems to show its budding-standout sophomore coexisting increasingly well with all the seniors around him, within the framework of the Boilermakers' offensive scheme.

"(The seniors) have been together so long and Carsen's picking things up," Gary said. "Sometimes, he says, 'Man, this is the hardest class I have here.' We do run a lot of sets, but the other guys are helping him and they do a good job on their own coming in and watching film.

"We're doing a much better job (collectively) staying in constant motion, especially Carsen now. He's doing a really good job of that. He's so hard to guard. When he cuts hard, he's so fast and so athletic, it puts people behind plays and if he has the ball in his hands, someone else may need to help."

DEFENSE MATTERS, TOO

It's difficult to quantify, but Purdue's defensive playmaking has increased considerably, from 5.17 steals last season to 6.7 thus far and 2.48 blocks last season to a whopping six per game now, thanks to Matt Haarms.

Last season, Purdue opponents turned the ball over 11.7 times per game.

Thus far in 2017-18, Purdue's forcing, or at least benefiting from, 13.8 turnovers per game, and has scored 247 points off them, almost seven points per game.

DISCIPLINE

Coach Matt Painter has assumed some blame for Purdue's failures in the Bahamas against Tennessee and Western Kentucky, suggesting he afforded his team "too much freedom."

He says now that free-wheeling offensive play — too many quick shots or one- or two-passes possessions — contributed to those upset losses and that they bailed opponents out of having to defend for extended periods, "time of possession" being an under-appreciated element of basketball, Painter believes

"That was on me as much as it was on anybody else," Painter said.

Since, Purdue's run significantly more scripted offense called from the sideline, to at least ensure that every effort is made to get the most desirable shot possible — often on the interior — before the ball goes up.

That doesn't mean the shot schemed toward always happens, but it at least guarantees that it's pursued.

Since those two losses, Purdue hasn't lost, and its offense has had so much to do with it.

"That was our own lesson we had to learn the hard way," Mathias said.

Dakota Mathias strikes all the right notes

Brian Hamilton / The Fieldhouse / January 16, 2018

It is early in the last and most important season of his college basketball career, and Dakota Mathias cannot find his notebook. This is a problem. He believes in order, in habits, in the consistent sequence of things. He gets taped before practice at the same time every day. He always puts his socks on the same way — left, then right. The Purdue senior also keeps a notebook that contains handwritten scouting reports of opposing players, meticulous jottings on sets and tendencies and his plans to disrupt them. Mathias reviews the notebook regularly. The process has helped him develop into one of the most irreplaceable parts on a team equipped to challenge for a Big Ten title, and maybe more.

So the notebook is kind of important. He'd really like to find it.

P.J. Thompson says he can help. He knows where the notebook is, because he is the one who hid it when Mathias went to the bathroom. Delighted that he has once again unraveled his high-strung friend and teammate, Thompson offers to play a game of Hot and Cold. The closer Mathias gets to the notebook in their house near Mackey Arena, the hotter he will be. When Mathias wanders into Thompson's room, he's very cold. As he heads toward his own room, he gets warmer. He opens his door and is very hot, and he's practically on fire when he walks past his dresser. Soon enough Mathias finds the notebook, in a drawer underneath a pile of socks. "P.J. does that a lot," Mathias grumbles. "He thinks he's a funny guy."

By now, no one worries about the 6-foot-4 guard's capacity to recover, even when his own alleged friends ignore all the signs that strongly suggest do not disturb. If Mathias is not the best player on the nation's third-ranked team, he is in the running for the most valuable, tying together Purdue's efforts on and off the floor, an organizing principal for a national contender. He's likewise the figure most emblematic of a program revitalized by a batch of hard-boiled recruits who arrived four years ago. Mathias's freshman year was at times a literal blur, wracked by vertigo and other ailments even as he became a regular contributor. He's evolved into much more — the Boilermakers' clear-minded fourth-leading scorer but also its leader in Win Shares and minutes played.

Purdue has gone from two straight losing seasons before the arrival of this senior class to, almost assuredly, four straight NCAA Tournament appearances. On a day-to-day level, Mathias holds it together through this fairly maniacal obsession with routine. It turns out he may hold the Boilermakers together as a result. "He makes sure everybody communicates, he makes sure everybody knows what's going on, he kind of helps set that structure with the team rules," senior center Isaac Haas says. "And then he comes in and does his job every day. That's how he rolls."

It's worth revisiting how difficult it was for Mathias to get to this point. He is the son of a basketball coach and the youngest of three brothers, all of whom played hoops, roller hockey, Wiffle ball, dodgeball and everything else in a gym attached to the family's house in Elida, Ohio. His father, Dan, recruited a general contracting friend to lay down a concrete slab, throw up some two-by-sixes and install a SportCourt to create a 26 x 48-foot thunderdome. When Dakota walked through the sliding glass doors from the main residence, he received the standard little-brother treatment from older siblings Bo and Dustin, with only occasional blood cleanup required. He concedes he asked for some of it. "I was really cocky as a kid," Dakota says. "They'd just pin me down and start hitting me. Pretty simple."

He got the standard dad-as-coach treatment from Dan, an old-school soul who pumped tunes from Journey, Boston and Earth Wind & Fire into the gym. His only rule was no country music. (It is the reason Dakota has a taste for rock and why, to his everlasting credit, he lists "Sweet Child O'Mine" by Guns N' Roses as his favorite song). Dan always preached that skill could compensate for any limitations athletically, that adroit passing and precise shooting could take a player a long way. As Dakota went on to set the Elida High School career scoring record, he became a three-star recruit and the first of the current seniors to pledge to Purdue. You couldn't imagine a more quintessential character to help recharge a program that had suffered 35 losses over the previous two seasons.

Then, as has been well-documented, Mathias was forced to revitalize himself. He battled mononucleosis in the spring of his senior year at Elida High, and after arriving at Purdue he began suffering maddening and inexplicable dizzy spells. Headaches and disorientation limited him to one or two practices a week, and he couldn't always complete those, at least not without diverting to the sideline to vomit in a garbage can. "Some days he was great, some days he just wasn't there," Thompson says. "You could be talking to him for five minutes and he would have no idea what you just said." Blood and equilibrium tests led to the vertigo diagnosis, but as the medical staff worked to alleviate that, Mathias sprained one ankle and then the other. He played in 34 games and started the last 15, but only as a faintly recognizable version of himself. "I wasn't very aggressive, I wasn't talking much, I wasn't doing much, and that just wasn't who I am," Mathias says. "That was my most disappointing part. [Before] I was a confident guy, aggressive guy, helping teammates out, and I wasn't any of those things."

Before every season, Purdue players must meet a time in a one-mile run. The run sapped Mathias of energy for weeks after he completed it before his freshman season — not surprising, given the diagnoses that followed. When the same thing happened before his sophomore year, the puzzle grew. "It's like if he had to empty his tank to give everything he had, he was just out of commission from two weeks to four or five weeks," coach Matt Painter says. Mathias appeared in another 35 games that year but averaging 5.1 points and starting just 22 games over his first two seasons represented a gutting disappointment. "Absolutely depressed," Mathias says. "This is what I've worked for my whole life. To play college basketball in the Big Ten like this, and it's finally here, and to struggle like I did, it was tough for me mentally."

Between improved luck, surgery to correct a deviated septum and skipping that mile run before his junior season, Mathias started to become what he thought he could be. He began by making his most significant impact on the defensive end, following the lead of former Boilermaker Rapheal Davis — sort of a patron saint for this senior class — with meticulous preparation for his assignments. This began with the notebook. It's a simple Five-Star brand, virtually indistinguishable from any other you might see a college student tote around, and its contents are similarly crucial for passing tests.

As Purdue begins its prep for an opponent, Mathias learns the identity of his primary defensive assignment. Then the detective work begins. He logs into a Synergy Sports Tech account to scour video clips, calculating strengths and weaknesses, identifying what sets a team runs for the player he's marking and how that player sets himself up for those actions. He then jots all of his notes on college-ruled lines, a means of organizing his thoughts and his game plan while also ensuring he doesn't forget anything as he reviews his discoveries before tipoff. Each player takes up about a page or a page and a half in the notebook; Mathias is still working with the original, as he had the foresight to buy a thick one. "I don't know what it is, but I've always been that way — a perfectionist with organization and preparing," he says. "It's a sense of comfort for me."

After years of roadblocks, Mathias at last did all the stopping as a junior, earning Big Ten All-Defensive honors and ranking second on the team to Caleb Swanigan with 1.8 Defensive Win Shares. Improved health meant he had the physical capacity to chase people down more effectively, yes. But he was also able to implement that thorough, painstaking routine and preparation in full. Mathias does not like to divulge too many trade secrets, but he cites former Iowa guard Peter Jok as one of his toughest studies. The Hawkeyes ran everything through their top scorer a year ago, sending screen after screen his way. Mathias noted how Jok changed his routes depending on the pick, varying his approach to keep a defender off-balance. "A lot of guys don't do that," Mathias says. Mathias noted where the screening action was, a double-side or a single-side, and whether Jok was prone to curl or fade out. The result was more or less a draw in two meetings between an all-conference scorer and an all-conference defender: Jok had 13 points on 4 of 13 shooting in West Lafayette and exploded for 29 in the rematch in Iowa City.

That Mathias is so compulsively ready surprises no one who knows him well. "You cannot mess up Dakota Mathias's routine," fellow senior Vince Edwards says. "It's to a T." He was not that way growing up, but he did post (and then follow) a weekly workout schedule on a massive white board in the home gym, scribbling down his shooting numbers as he went. The obsession with structure mushroomed at Purdue. Mathias has that appointed time to get his ankles taped before practices, and the appointed order in which the work must be done, and woe unto those who interrupt it. When trainer Chad Young couldn't be located before Purdue hosted Louisville in a Big Ten/ACC Challenge game in November, Mathias grew frantic. "It was getting close to 6 and he wasn't on the court yet," Thompson says.

"So he's freaking out and he's telling [graduate student manager] D.J. Byrd, 'Yo, text Chad where's he at. I've looked all over for him.'"

His pregame process is similarly regimented: Mathias takes the floor at the same time for ball-handling drills — a variety that includes low- and high-bounce dribbles, two-ball exercises and combo moves — and passing warmups with Byrd, a former Purdue guard. He ducks out of layup lines as the clock counts down to about 27 or 28 minutes to get stretched by Young. Aside from occasional mischief from Thompson, he receives little blowback from bemused teammates or staffers. "They understand I'm a little crazy, I guess," Mathias says.

Much to Purdue's benefit, Mathias has broken with one pattern: After three seasons of meager offensive play, his production has spiked. The offense is less deliberate than it had been — Purdue isn't playing two bigs at the same time, and its top frontcourt reserve, 7-foot-3 freshman Matt Haarms, is not a traditional on-the-block scorer — so Mathias gets more opportunities in a more free-flowing scheme. He has not quite maintained his scoring pace from early in the season (16.2 points on average in the first nine games), and his usage rate of 18.9 percent ranks just fourth among Purdue's rotation players. But his true shooting percentage (.650) combined with a team-best assist rate (25.2) and a 3-to-1 assist-to-turnover ratio (4.5-to-1.5) supports the idea that Mathias is an invaluable offensive conductor when he has the ball in his hands.

Not coincidentally, no Boilermaker has been on the floor more, and Mathias's Win Shares total (3.6) leads a team on which he's not always the first scoring option. "The one thing about Dakota that separates him from anybody else, really, that I've coached — you can always run things for him and then if he doesn't have it, he's going to make the pass," Painter says. "You want to be able to run something for somebody, but then when that shot's not there for that person, does he make the right decision? Some guys can do that, some guys can't. Dakota is terrific at it. And it really sets the tone for our team. Anytime you have a guy that shoots in the mid 50s and shoots at such a high rate and doesn't turn it over and gets a lot of assists, he can't have the ball enough."

As such, Purdue is grateful one of its senior keystones isn't easily idled anymore. During that Louisville game, Mathias caught an elbow between the bridge of his nose and his right eye and played on while it was bleeding, waiting until halftime to get stitched up. He played 38 minutes in an early statement win for his team. "I'm like, Wipe it off so we don't got to stop the game and you come out," Thompson says. "But he was like, There's nothing I can do about it." Mathias reprised the act at Michigan on Jan. 9, though the pain was mostly self-inflicted: He dove for a loose ball in the second half and collided forehead-first with the Crisler Arena floor, opening a gash above his right eye that required four stitches to close. He logged 35 minutes in a one-point win.

Just last week, Mathias sent his father a text message that included an image of goals he had written down for himself as a freshman. Among the aspirations: ESPN analyst Jay Bilas calling him "tough." Mathias couldn't help but alert his father when he finally got the word, so to speak, as a senior. One of them came true, he wrote proudly. In the end, for all of his idiosyncrasies, Mathias says he'd simply like to be remembered as a Purdue Guy more than anything. And, he believes, a Purdue Guy considers toughness the highest form of praise. "These fans know what to cheer for," Mathias says, "and they'd rather see you dive on the floor or go into the scoreboard, working your ass off."

Present and future basketball participants in West Lafayette, take note.

Edwards delivering best season at best time for Purdue

Stacy Clardie / GoldandBlack.com / January 15, 2018

When Vincent Edwards knew he was returning for his senior season, he stood in front of his Purdue teammates and delivered the news.

And then offered a guarantee, of sorts.

"Don't worry about rebounding," he told them then when seemingly everybody was worrying about where Purdue's rebounding would come from minus Caleb Swanigan.

Edwards may as well have kept adding to the list.

In his final season, he has delivered on his promise about rebounding — he's averaging a career-best, and a team-high, 8.2 per game — but he's also raised the rest of his game another notch. In every major category, Edwards is having a career-type season, with personal bests in points (14.4 ppg), three-point shooting (44 percent), free throw shooting (85 percent) and steals (27).

He's had consistent effort, too. Consistent presence in big-game moments. Consistent leadership. Consistent maturity. Consistent groundedness for a program that's reached heights — the Boilermakers moved up to No. 3 in the country Monday — it hasn't seen since 2010.

Purdue (17-2, 6-0 Big Ten) wouldn't be riding a 13-game winning streak and sitting atop the Big Ten standings in its push to repeat as league champs if Edwards wasn't the Edwards he's become for this team this season.

An Edwards that's being mentioned as a league Player of the Year candidate nationally.

"I think he's an underrated player," teammate P.J. Thompson said. "He's a really good player. He's fit a role, too, at Purdue. He could average more points if he was somewhere else. But he's averaging the right amount of points for us, and that's what makes us so hard to guard. We're all able to put the ball in the basket. We're all playing at a high level defensively. He's done a great job of filling his role.

"He's gotten better each year he's been here. He's gotten better this year. Now, he's playing like an All-Big Ten player."

And, to be clear, Thompson doesn't mean a third-team all-Big Ten player, like Edwards was last season.

He's talking legit, best-player-in-the-conference type.

Edwards says he isn't consumed with that kind of talk. It's only surfacing now, he says, because Purdue is winning. And he also knows the only way it'd actually have a chance to materialize is if Purdue keeps doing just that.

And, for that to happen, he needs to keep reaching greater and greater heights.

He's coming off a victory over Minnesota in which he dropped 20 first-half points en route to scoring 25, which may have been one off his career high but he still scored that many by making a career-high five three-pointers.

He's had seven double-doubles this season, including a new career-best 15 rebounds in late December.

"You always want to play the way your coaches expect you to play and the way they know you can play. Of course, the way the guys know I can play," Edwards said. "It's good that I have confidence in my teammates that they know when they come out, that I'm going to give them a consistent effort every night. So that just makes everyone else boost up and go even higher. It helps.

"It's a pride thing. As an individual, you want to take pride in your play. So, of course, I take pride in my play every night I step out on the court, whether it's the matchup I'm against, going to get a rebound or making a shot, making an extra pass, helping a teammate out on defense (by) talking. Whatever it can be."

Certainly Coach Matt Painter likes to hear the importance Edwards places on each area of his game — and not just scoring, which is a development every player seems to make as he matures. Edwards said he first understood he couldn't live through offense last season — mired in a slump that had Painter even benching him — and that helped him transform his mentality, and boosted his game to another level.

Painter was happy to see the shift, too, knowing that Edwards had so much more to offer if he just approached the game with the right mindset.

And that's ultimately come to fruition this season.

"He's grown as a player in terms of other things. To become a complete player, you have to be able to do everything pretty good. You can't have an area of the game where you really struggle. I think that's where he's at," Painter said. "He's really improved defensively. He's obviously rebounded for us also this year. Just his ability to pass the basketball, make good decisions. Any time you take somebody of that size who can rebound and improve as a defender that just makes good decisions (it's good).

"Any time you have that and you have older guys who really sacrifice for your team, I think that's probably what you appreciate the most."

Purdue seniors lay foundation for the future

Mike DeFabo / CNHI Indiana / January 15, 2018

After Purdue pounded Minnesota on Saturday, handing the Gophers the second-most lopsided loss in Williams Arena's storied 90-year history, coach Matt Painter was asked how his team continued to build on the momentum of last year's Big Ten championship.

It's sometimes hard to comprehend. The Boilermakers lost All-American Caleb Swanigan, a player as tenacious as he was talented. But somehow the Boilers are — dare we say it — even better than last year's team that won the Big Ten title and reached the Sweet 16. They're riding a 13-game winning streak and have climbed all the way to third in the latest AP Poll.

Painter's answer? Experience.

"You don't see a lot of experience," Painter said. "You see more experience with four seniors at a little bit of a lower level. That's the reason when you get in the tournament and you talk about the upsets, the mid-major upsets. Those are the teams with more juniors and seniors. You don't see as many senior-laden teams, especially guys that are seniors that have been with you for four years."

The Boilermakers (17-2, 6-0 Big Ten) start four seniors — Vincent Edwards, Isaac Haas, Dakota Mathias and P.J. Thompson. In a given game, any one of them is capable of becoming the go-to weapon.

But as Purdue piles up wins and climbs its way up the polls, a tough reality lurches closer with each passing game. As good as these seniors are, in a year they're all gone.

Then what?

If Purdue is looking for a cautionary tale of the pitfalls a program can fall into when it doesn't handle a major transition smoothly, the Boilermakers need to look no further than their next opponent. The challenge Purdue faces next year is the same one Wisconsin deals with right now.

A year ago, Wisconsin was the team riding four seniors and a sophomore stud. But graduation left the Badgers searching to replace almost 40 points per game from established seniors Nigel Hayes (14 ppg), Bronson Koenig (14.5), Vitto Brown (6.8) and Zak Showalter (8.3). More than just the points, the Badgers lost the experience and leadership of a group that played in 17 NCAA Tournament games, including four Sweet 16s, two Final Fours and one national championship final.

The Badgers have become one of the most inexperienced rosters in college basketball. The average experience level is 1.01 years. Only 20 of the 351 Div. I basketball teams are younger.

It shows in the standings. The Badgers (9-9, 2-3 Big Ten) have fallen to .500 with back-to-back losses to Rutgers and Nebraska.

To some degree, lulls like the one Wisconsin is in are unavoidable. It's just part of the cyclical nature of college sports. In some ways, it's the byproduct of success.

"When you have an older team, they've meant so much to you, that you ride them," Painter said. "With that, you're not going to develop your guys as much when they don't play as much."

Purdue weathered similar adversity when the so-called Baby Boilers grew up and graduated. For four straight years from the 2008-09 season to 2011-12, the Boilers never finished worse than second in the Big Ten. Faced with a clear leadership void in the era that followed, the team plummeted all the way to the bottom of the Big Ten by 2014.

Who can help avoid the same slump? Let Painter answer this one the same way he did the first question: The seniors.

"That's a good program when you have older guys that are bringing those guys along and you don't have to worry about them," Painter said. "Who is selling your stuff when you're not around? That's any company. That's any business. If they're not selling it and they're badmouthing it and saying, 'Don't listen to him.' Oh, man, you're in trouble."

While Vincent Edwards, Haas, Mathias and Thompson write the last chapter of their legacy, they're also laying the foundation for the future.

It's there when Vincent Edwards spends extra time working with freshman point guard Nojel Eastern on a floater. It's there when Mathias pulls redshirt freshman Matt Haarms to the side to give him tips on defense.

It's also there in small ways, like when the seniors tell the newcomers they have to sign into breakfast and treatment. It's even there when Haas tells redshirting freshman Sasha Stefanovic to go to Chipotle and Subway back-to-back to get dinner for one night and lunch for the next day.

"We get to learn and develop and transition this year because we have veteran players who have been here multiple years," Eastern said. "We don't have to get thrown into the water with everything new on a rush. We can build. Keep getting better. Keep asking questions. All of those things help us become better players."

The senior class started its journey from the bottom, climbing every single step one at a time on the way to the top. They're better for it. But the challenge now is making sure the group they leave behind doesn't have to go through the same thing.

"It's not as hard when you have younger guys who want to get in the gym," Vincent Edwards said. "I think that's what's different about them."

"We tell them to get in the gym. I look at Snapchat. They're already in the gym. Snapchat tells you everything now days. They'll be here 11:30, 12:30 at night getting shots in. That's something you want to see as an older guy. This is in good hands now. They see what we do, and they can follow it."

Nojel Eastern 'starting to click' at perfect time

Nathan Baird / Lafayette Journal & Courier / January 12, 2018

Believe it or not, Purdue freshman Nojel Eastern doesn't wear a smile on his face 24 hours a day.

The combo guard knowingly joined a program with established starters at three guard spots and veteran help on the bench. He's a jubilant, vocal supporter of those teammates when he's not playing backup minutes.

Don't let Eastern's infectious smile on the bench fool you — he wants to be on the court as badly as anyone else.

"Of course you feel down — 'Aw, I'm not playing as many minutes as I expected,'" Eastern said. "But you have to stay positive. When the opportunity comes, you have to be ready."

Opportunity came Tuesday night at Michigan.

Twice in a 57-second span of the second half, Eastern out-hustled and outmuscled for an offensive rebound basket. Both put-backs answered Michigan scores that had cut Purdue's vanishing lead to one point. The Boilermakers eventually won by one.

Purdue has generally cruised during its current 12-game winning streak. Eastern piled up low-leverage minutes late in games in which the outcome had already been decided.

Until Tuesday, that is, when Purdue might not have won at Crisler Arena for the first time since 2012 without Eastern's contribution. After grinding throughout the summer and the first half of the season, the value of such positive reinforcement can't be overstated.

"Everything's starting to click," Eastern said.

"When you know you did something that affected or helped the team win, it always feels great. Even those games where they're getting blown out and I get more minutes, I'm going to continue to build off that as well, so I can continue to gain confidence, continue to become better as a player."

Eastern's 12 minutes Tuesday represented his greatest participation in a game that doesn't qualify as an easy Purdue victory. He entered with 13:03 remaining in the game, when P.J. Thompson picked up his third foul, and didn't leave for over six minutes.

Those two put-backs among his five rebounds gave Eastern 14 points and 14 boards in 35 minutes over his last three games. That surge coincided with the resumption of Big Ten Conference play.

In other words, when defending league champion Purdue needed him the most.

"It's tough for point guards to keep somebody who's 6-6, 220 pounds off the glass," Purdue coach Matt Painter said of Eastern's effort against Michigan. "He just pursued the basketball and did a good job."

"In those situations, you build off of that. Have quality minutes the next game and keep getting better."

Eastern also didn't commit a turnover against a solid Wolverines team in a hostile environment. Compare that to Nov. 12 at Mackey Arena, when he committed six turnovers in 17 minutes against Chicago State.

In other words, Eastern is on schedule. Painter has emphasized bringing Eastern's decision-making in line with his exceptional passing skills. Yet like any freshman he needed a period of adjustment. By mid-season, the game had started to "slow down."

"It's tough coming in at this level being a freshman — especially as a point guard, when the ball's always in your hands and you have to make decisions," senior guard Dakota Mathias said.

"Early he was a little sped up, which is natural. Everybody goes through that. He's really matured and he's in a good spot right now. He lets things come to him and makes good decisions."

While Purdue works on developing Eastern's point guard skills — for both the immediate and long-term future — his natural gifts allow him to contribute in ways other point guards might not.

His three offensive rebounds at Michigan gave him 20 for the season. Only frontcourt starters Vincent Edwards and Isaac Haas have more.

Purdue can post Eastern up on offense, and that length helps him shoot over opponents at any range and spread the floor more.

Defensively, his size can take a toll on opponents, as Purdue's point guards typically jam their counterparts as the opponents bring the ball up the court.

"Whenever P.J. needs a rest, Nojel knows his role," junior guard Ryan Cline said. "He's going to go up there and jam the ball and obviously work as hard as he can to pressure the point guard and make it tough for him."

"Especially in the Michigan game, he was wearing the point guards down. Against Nebraska, he was wearing those point guards down."

Eastern's size-related contributions offset the fact that he doesn't yet possess the shooting skills associated with guard play.

Purdue has plenty of shooters right now. What it needed from Eastern on Tuesday was the will and effort to grab two rebounds and put them right back in the basket.

"Coming off the bench being ready to jam, guard rebound and run offense and take care of the ball — those are the qualities he has to have for his minutes to go up," senior forward Vincent Edwards said. "His productivity for us in those areas will help us win."

Haarms has changed Purdue in multitude of ways this season

Brian Neubert / GoldandBlack.com / January 8, 2018

If there's been any one moment that's summed up Matt Haarms' stunning debut season at Purdue, it occurred in the Bahamas around Thanksgiving, as part of the game that might have changed the Boilermakers' season.

Coming off back-to-back unexpected losses at the Battle 4 Atlantis, Purdue was playing in an even-more-unexpected last-place game against then-No. 2 Arizona, pitting the Boilermaker frontcourt against Wildcat prodigy Deandre Ayton, who's a few months from being the first or second pick in the NBA draft and probably a few years away from earning more than the GDP of some small countries to play basketball.

He's one of the most talented players and influential presences in college basketball and will be for a couple more months at least.

In this particular instance, Ayton sized up Purdue's skinny-looking young big man who no one had ever heard of at that early juncture of the season, dribbled into a post-up, faked inside, then spun outside to shoot a baseline turnaround over Haarms.

Ayton is 7-foot-1, by the way.

But Haarms is actually two inches taller and not one to back down from anyone, as shown time and again during this, his redshirt freshman season for the Boilermakers.

Ayton turned, faded and shot.

Haarms rose, closed and swatted the shot out of bounds.

Then, he clapped his hands together and yelped in celebration, as he's known to do.

It was all there in the span of just a few seconds, Haarms flashing the game-changing defense that's transformed Purdue at that end of the floor and helped make it one of the better teams in college basketball to this point, and showing the sort of exuberance and competitiveness Purdue has come to love and crowds at traditional Big Ten snakepits in Bloomington and East Lansing and Madison will inevitably come to loathe.

Haarms is a towering 20-year-old who could pass for 17, a 250-pounder who could pass for 210.

He looks young and he looks skinny, but his impact has belied those optics and then some for a Boilermaker team that as of the first week of January was riding an 11-game winning

streak and surging toward the top 10 nationally, a run that began with that Arizona game.

It wouldn't be overstatement to call Haarms one of the most impactful newcomers in college basketball. Maybe not the one with the best numbers or the greatest name recognition, but one who's been of the most value to his team, for certain.

Purdue came into 2017-18 with uncertainty at center behind Isaac Haas, exacerbated by veteran Jacquil Taylor idling in October over injury concerns.

Haarms has erased that question, turned it into an exclamation point actually.

Additionally, he's almost single-handedly taken Purdue from one level to another defensively.

He's averaging better than three blocked shots per game, and because of it, it took Purdue just a dozen games to exceed its blocked shots total from all of last season.

"It's the A.J. effect," point guard P.J. Thompson said, referring to former Big Ten Defensive Player-of-the-Year A.J. Hammons. "I don't know if he's quite as good defensively as (Hammons) was yet, but he's pretty freaking close."

Meanwhile, Haarms' mobility and activity and length have served as ideal counterbalances to areas defensively where the enormous Haas struggles due to the realities of his dimensions. Haarms runs and slides laterally like a player a foot shorter, to the point that Purdue will use him to switch screens, with length enough to envelope opposing ball-handlers if they're not careful. When Purdue closed out a narrow win over Northwestern in Mackey Arena in December, Thompson funneled point guard Bryant McIntosh baseline, into Haarms, who swallowed up the play and forced one of the Big Ten's premiere guards into a crucial turnover.

In effect, Haarms has completed Purdue, covering up a question mark on the depth chart and a vulnerability on defense. Purdue might be fine on defense without Haarms playing at this level; it would not rank in the top 10 nationally in efficiency, a development that couldn't have been expected but has certainly been welcomed, the same way Haarms' impact couldn't have been expected, but has certainly been welcomed.

He enrolled mid-year last January after his career at Sunrise Christian Academy in Kansas was cut short by eligibility issues stemming from his age. When Purdue learned his eligibility clock had been set off, he sat out the first half or so of Sunrise's season, then shipped off to West Lafayette in January to redshirt, spending the next few months getting abused in practice by All-American Caleb Swanigan, an unreasonably physical player and never one to pull punches upon detection of weakness.

"My bruises have bruises," Haarms once told Coach Matt Painter last season.

He took more from Swanigan than just welts, however.

Haarms says his defining memory from last season was this: Happening by the weight room the night of Purdue's overtime loss to Minnesota in Game 2 of the Big Ten season, finding Swanigan on the StairMaster a few hours after scoring 28 points and grabbing 22 rebounds against the Gophers.

"It was about 10 p.m. at night," Haarms said. "That just showed me how much work it takes. You might see him on TV and think it comes naturally, but I have never seen a guy work that hard. It was such an eye-opening experience for me. If I want to be great like him, then I need to put in the work like he does."

That lesson might have crystalized in that moment, but the seeds were sewn earlier, during Haarms' stint at Sunrise Christian, near Wichita.

The native of the Netherlands came to the U.S. after a spell playing for a club team in Spain — the organization that refused to allow him to play center despite his height, forcing him to cultivate his uncommon versatility — in order to pursue American college basketball.

That path took him to Sunrise, which has seen numerous international players thrive in its program, Buddy Hield among them.

It was there, Haarms has said, that he began to grasp the work ethic that's served him well to this point for Purdue.

"I think he's said that he grew a lot with his toughness and how hard he had to play when he was with us and with me, and I knew that's who he was, and that that would follow him," Sunrise Christian coach Luke Barnwell said.

“He’s a kid who really wants to be a great player, so when he started seeing that growth during his time here, it was, ‘All right, let’s go.’ That really sunk in him with him. I knew that’s who he’d be (at Purdue).”

At Purdue, Haarms’ work ethic during his redshirt season drew comparisons in the same breath to that of Swanigan, he of the obsessive, almost robotic drive. Haarms flashed in practice the effort that has made him successful this season, doing so in impossible situations against Swanigan or Haas, knowing for absolute certain he would not be playing alongside them in the games he was helping them prepare for.

In training, Haarms was known to smile and dub grueling workouts “fun” in the moment and now fondly remembers sports performance coach Josh Bonhotal’s redshirt-season message of, “You might tell me you don’t feel well, but I won’t care,” as he remembers it.

Off the court, he spent last season hoarding in his locker scouting reports for games he wouldn’t be playing in. He still has them, and the stack gets thicker with every game that passes. He has a “nice little shelf for them,” though, so they’re well taken care of, however unneeded they may be.

“I knew that we played some teams twice,” Haarms said, “so I didn’t want to be that guy who threw his away when it was time to bring them back out.”

That sort of sums up Haarms, beyond the height and length and surprising offensive skill, stifling defense and unexpectedly physical rebounding, but rather the conscientiousness, effort and zeal, the player who always seems to be smiling, who throws fists in celebration with such authority you wonder if he might be jeopardizing a labrum.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever played with anyone who’s so positive,” Thompson said. “I’ve had a lot of great teammates in my life, but he might be the most positive one I’ve ever played with. He’s such a good teammate and those are the kinds of guys you need and the kinds of guys I want to play with.”

Purdue found a good one, a good one who might be turning himself into a great one, the next in the line of outstanding big men to come through the program.

And it found him basically by sheer luck.

Painter and his coaches cast a wide net in their search for a post player for the 2017 recruiting class, a field that came to include Texan Isaiah Jasey, who played at Sunrise Christian, too.

There, Painter and then-assistant coach Jack Owens noticed Haarms. He was hard to miss, being 7-3 — but barely physically developed enough to qualify as multi-dimensional at that time — and all.

At the time, though, he was particularly unproven, having played just a single season in America, producing modest numbers.

“It took him a little bit of time (to adjust to American basketball), to be honest, and that’s not uncommon for European kids, especially bigs,” Barnwell said, “because there’s less space in our game than the European game. It’s more physical in some aspects, and it took him a while to adjust to that — the speed, the space, the athleticism, the physicality. And he had to gain some weight, which he did here and has even more (at Purdue).”

“But I also had to adjust to his ability and the things he could do that were different than the other bigs we had. We kind of figured out ways to incorporate what he could do offensively, along with his length and versatility and the way he moved, and once that sort of meshed, he was really good for us. It was probably after Christmas he made a really big jump for us.”

Haarms was a reserve, playing behind Jasey, who wound up at Texas A&M, though he’d done enough in Year 1 at Sunrise and in sparse opportunities for the Chauncey Billups Elite summer program to draw offers from Washington State, Colorado, Vanderbilt and others.

During a September trip to Kansas to check in on Jasey, Purdue visited with Haarms.

There was an immediate and unexpected connection, as Haarms told Purdue about, well, Purdue.

While Haarms was growing up in Amsterdam, a television package then known as Sport1 broadcast American college basketball games in March on one of its channels, NCAA Tournament games. It was around 2010 — Purdue’s Big Ten championship season — that he saw E’Twaun Moore, JaJuan Johnson, etc., play.

“I just remember them being a really good team,” Haarms says now. “The name ‘Boilermaker’ stuck with me, because in sports it’s always just a ‘Bulldog’ or ‘Bobcat’ or something like that. I asked my dad what a Boilermaker was. It struck me as being interesting.”

The brand resonated with Haarms when he moved to the U.S. and with it eventually came an understanding of Purdue’s reputation for developing big men. Haarms mentioned Hammons to Painter in that first meeting, too.

He didn’t quite recruit Purdue when its coaches visited his school, but he definitely put out a vibe, one way or another.

“He just thought that was the ideal place for him, because of our development of big guys,” Painter said. “He’s an intelligent person, a very, very intelligent person, and sometimes intelligent people, coaching them, they know a lot, think a lot and process things. It really came out in that first meeting.”

“He was impressed with us, but we walked away impressed with him.”

This was September. Soon after, he was in West Lafayette for a football weekend official visit. On Oct. 4, he was committed.

To hear Painter tell it, it sounds as if Purdue’s coach is almost remorseful to have pulled in a recruit that other schools dedicated more time and effort into pursuing. He’s been on the other end of it, he’ll tell you, and he’s too respectful of other coaches to not feel for them, to some extent.

But he’ll get over it.

With every shot Haarms turns away, with every jaw-dropping, NBA-résumé step-back jumper the towering big man sticks, with every contested rebound he grabs and every two-handed dunk he finishes rolling to the rim — and most importantly, with every game he helps those Boilermakers win — Purdue’s coach’s conscience needles him less and less.

Only the referees can stop Purdue's Isaac Haas

Gregg Doyel / Indy Star / December 16, 2017

Isaac Haas is trying to be more gentle. Gentler? Not sure the grammar there, or the practicality here, but 7-2, 290-pound Purdue center Isaac Haas is trying to be, um, delicate.

It'll never work all the way, obviously, because Haas isn't just 7-2 and 290 pounds. He's built like a battleship, hard in places where most people don't have places, and he wears size-22 shoes that tend to be good for at least one foul a game – because in the case of feet that large, they really can be two places at once ... one of them occasionally being the wrong place at the wrong time.

But Haas is trying, and I swear he was trying Saturday in No. 17 Purdue's 82-67 bullying of Butler, when Haas scored 15 points in 16 minutes. He would have scored more, but he couldn't play more, given that he was called for four fouls. So Purdue went to its, ahem, less imposing center and gave 7-3 freshman Matt Haarms a career-high 27 minutes, minutes he used to torment Butler by blocking three shots.

Haas might not be the tallest player on his own team, but he's a unique weapon in a changing basketball landscape, and he was unique even before it changed to a dramatically perimeter-oriented game. Haas is stronger than everybody on the court, but he has impeccable shooting touch. Get him the ball, and he's usually going to score. And when he doesn't, I assure you, it's not because the defense did something special. There is no defense for a 7-2, 290-pound battleship with a sniper's aim. When he doesn't score, it's because he missed the shot.

Or committed a foul.

So this is where Haas is trying to get better, and actually has gotten better. No, Saturday didn't look better. Sixteen minutes, four fouls? That's not obvious progress. But within the framework of those 16 minutes, he showed some of the tricks he has learned in four years.

One, when he defends shots, he goes straight up and throws his hands straight up and hopes officials let him play as vertically as they let almost everyone else. Haas did that on a driving basket by Butler's Aaron Thompson in the second half, their bodies colliding and Thompson going to the deck, but an official responding only by mimicking what Haas had done: throwing his own hands straight up, to show the Butler bench why he didn't call a foul.

Also, when Haas has the ball on the low block and turns to create space, he doesn't turn hard. Most post players, maybe every NCAA post player but Isaac Haas, can receive the ball and turn at the waist and throw their shoulder into the sternum of the defender and hit the guy as hard as they want. The defender might budge a few inches, the few inches a college player needs to get off his shot.

And Haas is getting called for the foul.

So this is what I saw him do against 6-8, 240-pound Tyler Wideman, and 6-10, 240-pound Nate Fowler, and 6-11, 240-pound Joey Brunk: He received the ball, turned at the waist and used his shoulder to give their sternum a love tap. He held something back, the difference between creating 3 inches of space – and 3 feet.

I tell Haas what I'd seen – actually I showed him, trying to bang my shoulder into his sternum but settling for his abdomen because he's 7-2. Haas is nodding. And smiling at the little sports writer trying to clear some space.

"I'm learning to play physical without fouling," is how Haas explained it. "I'm adapting."

He's not the only one. Purdue coaches, who have stressed out for years over their enormous center's inability to stay on the court – and also have stressed to officials just how unique Isaac Haas is – are convinced officials have adapted to Haas. And don't give me any sideways glances, fans of other teams. Purdue fans don't think referees are giving Haas a break. Again, let me repeat: Haas played 16 minutes on Saturday and was called for four fouls. But the Purdue staff does recognize that officials are calling Haas with more awareness of his unique size and strength, and also aware that opposing teams are feeding into the foul frenzy by trying to draw fouls on Haas.

Because opposing teams know what I've been trying to tell you: Isaac Haas is a problem.

Haas is one of just two active college basketball players with more than 1,200 points in less than 2,000 minutes.

Read that stat again.

Haas remains a bull in a china shop, but he's the gentlest damn bull you ever saw. As a freshman he was drawing a foul every 6.8 minutes, but he has improved every year: one foul every 8.6 minutes as a sophomore, 9.3 minutes as a junior and 10.2 minutes this season, entering Saturday's game.

Devastatingly, Haas has increased his points-per-minute pace while decreasing his foul rate. As a freshman he scored one point every 1.92 minutes. This season his efficiency is at a career best, one point every 1.43 minutes, aided by career-best shooting percentages from the floor (63.7 percent this season) and foul line (81.7 percent).

Only the officials can stop him.

Thompson carved his own legacy among Indianapolis' best

Nathan Baird / Lafayette Journal & Courier / December 14, 2017

The text messages poured in — P.J. Thompson estimates about 50 — from family, friends and acquaintances seeking a seat in Bankers Life Fieldhouse on Saturday.

Players, however, only receive four tickets for Saturday's Crossroads Classic game against Butler. A few Boilermakers don't need their full allotment. Thanks to their generosity, Thompson will have his parents, brother, grandparents and a few additional family members in attendance.

"They always make fun of me because I've got a lot support," Thompson said of his teammates.

Thompson, an Indianapolis native and Brebeuf graduate, will play college basketball in his hometown for the last time. The Big Ten Conference tournament does not return to the city until 2020. Other than the "First Four" games in Dayton, Ohio, no NCAA Tournament games will be played within a four-hour drive of Indianapolis this season.

Thompson embraces his identity as an Indianapolis-bred basketball player. It both motivates and humbles him. As an Indiana All-Star and the son of an Indiana All-Star, Thompson grew up admiring the city's basketball history and striving for his place among the abundance of talented players produced there.

Saturday's game provides one final moment in the hometown spotlight for a player who has thrived on succeeding outside of it.

"I feel like there's a lot more pressure, growing up in an Indiana high school," Purdue senior guard Dakota Mathias said. "There's so many good players, so much exposure — especially in the AAU circuit and all the hype going around.

"P.J. was one of those guys and he's obviously lived up to it."

At one point in his high school career, Thompson thought he might be answering questions about the opposite perspective of Saturday's matchup. Former Butler assistant Michael Lewis, now an assistant at Nebraska, recruited Thompson for then-head coach Brad Stevens.

Thompson admired the Bulldogs' ideals and winning culture, but a scholarship offer never came. He waited until March of his senior year for the Purdue scholarship offer that eventually brought him to West Lafayette.

Players such as Tech's Trey Lyles, Marion's James Blackmon, Jr. and Park Tudor's Trevon Bluiett grabbed the most attention among the state's Class of 2014 recruits. Thompson won with and against some of those same stars on the AAU circuit and in high school. The 24/7 Sports composite rankings ranked him 18th in the state.

Thompson admits he compared himself to his contemporaries — "You definitely don't want to fall behind," he said — while also serving as a catalyst to Purdue's team success over the past three years.

"I was normally considered one of the better players in Indiana and Indianapolis in high school and growing up," said Thompson, whose father, LaSalle, starred at Pike and played at Ball State. "I've always wanted to live up to that.

"And some people thought P.J. wasn't very good. So if I played them or they were watching me play, I wanted to make them remember, 'Man, he's a good player.'"

Purdue's team success during Thompson's tenure — including a Big Ten championship and a Sweet 16 appearance — speaks for itself. Statistically, Thompson has begun to set himself apart in new ways.

Thompson currently ranks 15th nationally in Ken Pomeroy's adjusted offensive efficiency. (He's the only player under 6-foot in the top 40.) Only Illinois' Aaron Jordan ranks higher among Big Ten players.

Thompson's 49 percent 3-point shooting leads all Big Ten players with 50 or more attempts. His 3-1 assist-to-turnover ratio is a slight drop from his career average — easily the best in Boilermaker history.

Yet when asked to name his favorite thing about his senior point guard, Purdue coach Matt Painter skips all the statistics. He instead speaks of selflessness and authenticity uncommon among people of Thompson's age.

The Boilermaker senior guard on the importance of the Crossroads Classic and the challenge presented by Butler. Nathan Baird/Journal & Courier

"It makes this team better because he tries to keep everybody on the same page, and he's authentic," Painter said. "A lot of times guys say the right thing because they want the end result. They want to win. He means it.

"He wants the end result, too, but he genuinely cares about people and wants them to do the right things."

Purdue's come-from-behind victory over Notre Dame last season broke its 0-for-5 streak in the state's showcase event. Thompson has distributed 13 assists against one turnover in the last two Crossroads Classic games.

Yet a 74-68 loss to Butler from his sophomore season still irks Thompson. Purdue had a chance to complete an undefeated non-conference season. A sloppy performance against the Bulldogs prevented that.

Thompson and his fellow seniors spent the past three years reversing negative trends into positive ones for Purdue. They consider Saturday's game another opportunity.

"When we made our goals for the season, the Crossroads was definitely on there, and it was big," Thompson said. "It's something about when you play the hometown teams, you want to beat them."

Senior citizens came to Purdue with a vision

Brian Hamilton / The Fieldhouse / December 13, 2017

Isaac Haas arrives at Mackey Arena in a suit and tie, the right jacket sleeve sheathing a bulky black brace on his arm and hand. He has just completed a late November competition in which he hawked a satellite television service to customers theoretically dissatisfied with their current provider, using a bit of old-fashioned salesmanship. Haas succeeded in getting in the door. Which was less of a challenge than getting in the suit.

The brace on his arm is for a bruised nerve he suffered one night earlier in a rock-fight of a win over Louisville. He has no feeling in his right hand. It is, the Boilermakers' senior center says, like the worst funny bone hit of your life. He looks down at his fingers. He says his brain is sending them signals to move. The thumb wiggles. The other digits don't. Which brings us back to the concept of a 7-foot, 2-inch human being trying to dress himself in a button-up shirt and tie and pants and a coat for a pre-practice sales contest and a post-practice banquet.

"It took me an hour and a half to get in this suit," Haas says. "A legitimate hour and a half to do this one-handed."

He smiles. Long ago, Haas and the rest of a transformative senior class grew comfortable accomplishing things the hard way. They committed to play for Purdue with the fairly audacious idea of recalibrating the program's culture, which before their arrival had endured 35 losses over two years and a spot in the Big Ten cellar. To date, they have helped account for 84 wins and a conference championship in three-plus seasons, proof their ambitions were not boiled-over. The latest and last task at hand — immobilized or not — is slinging a league's reputation on their backs and helping to carry it along. And to do that, the Boilermakers must continue to understand the distinction between building a culture and maintaining it.

While Purdue dropped two games to inferior teams in the Battle 4 Atlantis over Thanksgiving, it followed those missteps with four wins that showcased experience, balance, emerging depth and resolve. All of those things are more in line with the Boilermakers' identity, and the wins launched the squad into the national top 15 for both offensive efficiency (10th) and defensive efficiency (14th), per Ken Pomeroy's ranking. As we approach another signpost on Saturday, a Crossroads Classic meeting with Butler in Indianapolis, we'll see how well the Boilermakers are remembering how they got here.

"I don't feel like we're the hunted," senior forward Vince Edwards says. "I feel like once again we're doing the hunting. We're out here trying to prove something."

By now we know the story of the Purdue seniors well, a quintet of recruits who never merited a nickname like, say, the "Baby Boilers." First on board was Dakota Mathias, the high-scoring, hardscrabble son of a coach from Ohio. Next came Edwards, sold by coach Matt Painter mailing him a list of all his AAU games Painter had attended, stats included. Next was forward Jacquil Taylor, who has been the truly hard-luck player in the bunch, limited to 27 career games due to various injuries. Then came Haas, the lone top 100 player in the bunch, who had backed out of a commitment to Wake Forest. Finally, the class got its point guard in the spring of 2014, when personality-plus point guard P.J. Thompson signed on. They made their pledges while the program was at its lowest point since Painter's first year on the job, finishing 15-17 and a miserable 5-13 in conference play. During the group's various recruiting visits, the internal problems were clear. "The vibe in the locker room was not about winning," Haas says. "It was about getting yours. Guys were just relaxed with the fact that they were losing. That didn't sit well with me. But it sat well in a way that I felt I could make a difference."

The players gathered in a dorm room after their arrival and asked why they shouldn't be the group to turn the program around. Three straight 20-win seasons and three straight NCAA Tournament bids followed, capped by a 27-victory campaign last year that included a Big Ten title and a trip to the Sweet 16. They certainly had help along the way — to a man, they credit former Boilermakers standout Rapheal Davis for being an example-setter, and having future first-round NBA pick Caleb Swanigan on the roster the last two years didn't hurt. But generally this group gets a large piece of the credit for steadying a program in duress, for assuming a sizable burden and dragging Purdue back to relevance.

"It's hard to find really, really good players who walk in from Day 1 that are coachable, and about winning," Painter says. "And those guys were. We kind of took it from there and said, 'We need to continue to get guys like them.' That is something that allowed us to shape our team."

Once the standards were established, the next job was ensuring they did not erode. Some of this, especially over the last two seasons, has been a matter of simply staying within character. Mathias, a top-flight defender now enjoying a breakout season with a career-best 14.8 points per game, is maniacally punctual and organized. Thompson likewise says he arrives early and purposefully shoots late at night to set an example for the younger players in the program. "We had a lot of guys who like basketball, like to work, and they weren't gonna settle for mediocrity," Mathias says. Seeing this, Painter took an unprecedented step in his coaching career: Starting two years ago, he let his players draft their own rules. He believed they were mature enough to handle it, and giving the Boilermakers ownership was an important step in binding them together. "If you do that when you first start up and you don't know the players in your program, and you got some guys that aren't about winning and they're about themselves, that could be a mess," Painter says. "They obviously earned the right."

Painter retained veto power but says he hasn't had to use it. The rules extend beyond the gym; there's no going out after a loss, for example, as it sends the wrong message to the campus community about the value the team puts on winning. And positioning veterans as the first line of enforcement is perhaps just as significant as the rule-setting itself.

A small infraction, for example, incurs a penalty of 5,000 VersaClimber steps, to be completed in an hour. "Trust me — 5,000 of them, it is hard," Haas says. Show up late to a practice? This is a more grievous offense, and the tardy party will be required to complete 100 "Mackey" — 100 times up and down the Mackey Arena stairs — before he can return to active duty. Everyone is keenly aware of what happens when the roster diverts from best practices.

They don't even need to look back four years to see that. They can look back three weeks.

In the Battle 4 Atlantis event during Thanksgiving week, the Boilermakers learned — or relearned, anyway — that they have not immunized themselves from slippage. First came a loss to Tennessee. The next day, another defeat, this time to Western Kentucky. Purdue's red-hot shooting efficiency faltered in those outings — the Boilermakers shot a combined 39 percent from the field — but the diagnosis of what ailed them extended beyond the floor. "They know that we win, so you have to step on the court and play the same way whether you're playing a Duke or Arizona, or you're playing Western Kentucky or Ball State," Thompson says. "It doesn't matter. And I thought that hurt us a little bit in the Bahamas."

If the loss to Western Kentucky was particularly startling, it had little to do with talent: As Thompson suggested, Purdue should have known better. It should have known how the Hilltoppers would approach a game against the reigning Big Ten champions. Because the Boilermakers themselves had to conjure their own righteous angst long before. Thompson, sitting in a lounge across from the locker room more than a week after that defeat, still shakes his head and grits his teeth at the thought. He should have done something. He should have said something. "I know how it is to be one of those kids," says Thompson, who was a three-star prospect coming out of Brebeuf Jesuit Prep High School in Indianapolis. "If I was them, I would have loved to play Purdue. I would have been waiting for that for forever. So I knew how it was. I know how it is to feel like that. And you can't have a sense of entitlement just because you're a big school. You have to come out and play the same way every time."

While such failures are fatal in March, they can be instructive in November. The Boilermakers reset with four wins in a fairly trying four-game stretch — Arizona in the Atlantis finale, Louisville in the Big Ten/ACC Challenge, then a two-game-in-three-day swing against Maryland and Northwestern — and emerged once more appearing to merit consideration as a contender. Two things were especially significant about that stretch: One, the Big Ten was blistered by the ACC as a whole; only Michigan State, Nebraska and Purdue emerged with wins in the 14-game matchup. Two, the Boilermakers reestablished a capacity to win ruggedly, outlasting Louisville and then notching the two early Big Ten wins by a total of 10 points. "It really saved us," Painter says. "We obviously took a step back, and then we had quality games right afterward, to help pull us back up."

It's not a stretch to consider Purdue one of the Big Ten's best hopes for elite-level play this season. This is in some ways the last stage of evolution for a reshaped program — from the basement to a title to Big Ten standard-bearer. For seniors who did a lot of the reshaping, it is the extension of that task. The game against Butler is another cross-sectional litmus test. "Especially in today's college basketball, a lot of guys are really athletic, they can run and jump really fast, and I mean, we're not all like that," Mathias says. "I think we beat teams with our mind, and our skill, more than anything. I think that gets overlooked, but our resume says a lot for itself."

What they helped build appears to have a chance to last. It's worth mentioning that Purdue's leading scorer, 6-1 guard Carsen Edwards, is a sophomore, suggesting both that the veterans will welcome anyone who can help and that there is no underclassman revolt against the standards they set. Indeed, when Haas walked into Mackey Arena the day of the Louisville game, geared for an early afternoon shootaround, he noted that the day's competition already had begun. Sasha Stefanovic and Aaron Wheeler, a pair of redshirting freshmen, were on the floor with graduate student manager Joey Brooks, running through drills, playing one-on-one, working up a lather before the rest of the team began its workout. When the Boilermakers gathered for stretching, Stefanovic and Wheeler merged in, going from a voluntary practice session to the obligatory one. Just another pair of Boilermakers falling in line.

"It's just all a matter of how you view things," Haas says, "and who you bring into the program."

There's something larger at stake for Purdue this season, something the bellwether seniors most likely never envisioned. The Big Ten has scuffled a bit, and days like Saturday are among the few remaining chances to buff out the blemishes on its image. The Boilermakers took their own early lumps, yes. But they look ready to do this the hard way, again.

Purdue won because Louisville got in Haarms' way

Gregg Doyel / Indianapolis Star / November 29, 2017

Purdue was ugly Tuesday night.

"Thank you," Matt Painter says when I tell him that outside the Boilermakers' locker room, congratulating him on his team's ugly win — a 66-57 slugfest with No. 17 Louisville. Painter is smiling, because he loves the description. He's a coach, and coaches know: A good team wins when shots are falling.

A great team wins when they're not.

Purdue took a step toward greatness Tuesday by beating a likely 2018 NCAA tournament team on a night the Boilermakers shot poorly — 19-for-57 from the floor (33.3 percent), 5-for-23 on 3-pointers (21.7 percent) — and had more turnovers (11) than assists (nine). They lost the rebounding battle as well, 41-39.

Very little went right for Purdue. So how did Purdue win this game? By embracing its ugly side, an attitude embodied by the most unlikely Boilermaker on roster to be such a brute: redshirt freshman Matt Haarms, a prototypical Euro-big who is 7-3 and insists on being listed as a forward, for crying out loud. When he arrived at Purdue in January of last season at 220 pounds, Haarms was so skinny that assistant Brandon Brantley gave him a nickname: Popsicle.

Haarms redshirted the semester, banging in practice with 6-9, 250-pound All-American Biggie Swanigan and 7-2, 290-pound Isaac Haas. He also grew an inch — from 7-2 to 7-3 — and added 30 pounds. When Haarms' indoctrination was complete into Purdue basketball, where the slogan "Time to Play Hard" is painted above the tunnel leading from the Mackey Arena floor to the locker room, the Popsicle had earned a new nickname:

Razor.

"Coach Brantley said I needed a new one," Haarms was telling me after the game, sitting in a chair so he could look the 5-9 IndyStar sports writer in the eye. "He said 'Razor' because it's skinny — but has an edge."

Oh, Haarms has an edge. You'll read a lot about him this season, a lot of cliched gobble-dygook about the finesse big man from the Netherlands — you know, kind of like what I wrote above, when I called him "a prototypical Euro-big" — but don't believe it. Haarms may well have been that guy when he came to America for his senior year of high school in Kansas, but the transformation started there. And it has continued at Purdue, continued so much that it is Haarms, not Isaac Haas, who did the dirty work that beat Louisville on Tuesday.

"Without him," Painter said of Haarms, "we don't win this game."

Everything about Matt Haarms' story is weird, and I'll get there in a minute, but nothing beats this: Last season, when he was the redshirt practice player taking on Haas and Swanigan, Haarms wasn't a shot-blocker. The Purdue coaching staff had no idea — none — that he would become the dominant shot-blocker he is today.

Haarms blocked four Louisville shots Tuesday night, a typical night for a guy averaging 3.1 blocks through eight games. Haarms' most important block came with 34 seconds left and Purdue leading 61-55. Louisville guard Quentin Snider used a ball screen to launch a 3, but Haarms was too long (he's 7-3 for heaven's sake) and too agile. And so: Too bad, Quentin Snider. Your shot is going nowhere but the hands of Dakota Mathias, who hit two free throws to seal the win.

Haarms celebrated the block by screaming happiness toward the Mackey rafters, then punching holes in the air all the way to the Purdue bench. When the game ended and the Boilermakers took their customary lap around the arena, high-fiving with the Paint Crew and other fans in the first few rows, Haarms was still screaming and punching his fist.

You're reading an awful lot about a guy who scored four points, I realize that, but Haarms is the ugly yin to this team's beautiful yang, the spindly tough guy who is afraid of spiders and started playing basketball at age 11 — but only after quitting judo, because he kept getting thrown all over the mat. And he was in judo only because his mom insisted. He's a smart young man, a bookworm who eventually scored a 29 on the ACT, but as a kid he just wanted to stay in his room and read. Mom insisted: Once a week, do something athletic. He tried judo and is pretty sure he got a yellow belt before quitting for basketball.

Within a few years he had spurted toward 7 feet and was a promising up-and-coming Dutch basketball player who left to better himself by playing in Spain, then Kansas, and now at Purdue. He's still a bookworm and an intellectual, citing English billionaire Richard Branson as the person he'd like most to meet and the 1958 Dutch novel "The Darkroom of Damocles" as his favorite book.

He's not like most of us. Plus he's 7-3. His importance this season will rise and fall with the foul trouble of Haas, who came into the game averaging 14.4 points in 20.9 minutes, but who will never be able to play without fouling. He's a half-step slower than most everyone else, and 4 inches and 60 pounds bigger, and the combination means he's always banging into someone. And when Isaac Haas bangs into someone, someone goes flying. He played just six minutes of the first half because he drew two fouls, then picked up his third foul less than 70 seconds into the second half.

Enter Haarms, blocking four shots and grabbing five rebounds and freaking out Louisville's players when they approached the rim, altering a half-dozen or more shots.

Afterward, Haarms emerged from the Purdue locker room to find me waiting for him in the hall. He was holding a box of pizza. His right eye was black, and I'm swooning. How perfect can my story be? I ask him about the eye, ready to write a story of toughness and brutality.

"P.J. Thompson banged into me," he says, and he's talking about a teammate — a 5-10 teammate at that. Haarms sees the look on my face and knows this isn't what I wanted to hear.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I need a better story."

Nah, I'm thinking. Your story's just fine.

Purdue players make a uniform statement

Adam Rittenberg / ESPN.com / November 28, 2017

The fans packing Mackey Arena on Tuesday night are coming to watch Purdue play high-level basketball against nationally ranked Louisville (8 ET on ESPN).

But when the Boilermakers take the court for warm-ups, the crowd will notice something else, something the players believe ought to be seen, something that goes beyond ball.

Each of Purdue's 14 players will wear a shirt containing a word, selected by either himself or a teammate, that they hope will help to mend a splintering country. It's not as divisive as an anthem protest, but the Boilermakers are choosing not to stick to sports, while using their sporting platform to push values they believe make the world a bit better.

Compassion. Empathy. Equality. Forgiveness. Friendship. Humility. Justice. Love. Loyalty. Peace. Respect. Togetherness. Tolerance. Unity. Those words will be displayed on shooting shirts before Purdue games this season.

"The shirts pretty much stand for everything we need in this world right now," senior forward Vincent Edwards said. "We just wanted to give the message. All the words make you think when you see 14 different players run out with 14 different words on their chest. We don't want to be people that just keep the world going in this cycle because right now, it seems like we're reverting back.

"Our generation wants to change the world, and I think it starts with us."

The idea started with Elliot Bloom, the team's director of basketball administration and operations. Bloom occasionally leads player discussions (without coaches present) about topics beyond college basketball. They've talked about everything from the Las Vegas shootings to protests by athletes during the national anthem. As Purdue boarded a bus to Columbus, Ohio, to face West Virginia in a Nov. 5 scrimmage, Bloom suggested to senior guard P.J. Thompson that the players brainstorm words to go on their warm-up shirts for the upcoming season.

Thompson loved the idea and immediately summoned Edwards to start a group text. They asked each player to submit two possible words before the bus reached Columbus. The instructions were simple: "Come up with the words you believe in," guard Carsen Edwards said.

Edwards explains message behind team's shooting shirtsPurdue guard Carsen Edwards says the Boilermakers came up with 14 words to place on warm-up shirts in order to make a social statement.

The best 14 -- one from each player -- were selected for the shirts. Thompson picked tolerance after exchanging texts with his mother, Tonja. Vincent Edwards also thought of his parents, who always told him, "Be humble. Always be respectful." So he picked humility.

"It's such a huge, inspirational word," he said. "When you think about humility, you think about the stronger-willed people in the world who can see past color or don't see color or can think outside the box and not judge people. That was one word that stuck out to me because that's the type of person I am."

As Purdue's bus traveled along Interstate 70, a roster representing seven states, two countries and multiple ethnicities tried to find the right words to apply to all people.

"It's pretty cool because there's a lot of diversity among our team," guard Dakota Mathias said. "It shows how we come together and the chemistry and loyalty we have for one another."

Loyalty, not surprisingly, is one of the words Mathias submitted and the one displayed on his warm-up shirt. Mathias was raised under the golden rule. His parents, Daniel and Tracy, encouraged Mathias and his two brothers to help others and value allegiances. Loyalty was the obvious choice.

"I've always been a loyal guy," Mathias said. "In today's society, there's a lot of stuff going on, a lot of hatred, a lot of disloyalty. It's all about how you treat people."

After collecting all the nominations, the players started choosing the 14 words for the shirts. There was some overlap -- several players submitted respect, love and loyalty -- but it didn't take long to finalize the list.

On the morning of Nov. 6, Brad Andrews, the team's equipment manager, received an email from Bloom with all the words for the shirts. Purdue's season opener against SIU-Edwardsville was four days away. Andrews had blank shirts available from Nike, so he simply had to have the words printed at a local screen printer for about \$140.

"We actually didn't assign them [to players]," Andrews said. "I was just like, 'Get one of each, and we'll figure it out from there.' It's based off sizing. Dakota and P.J. wear the same sized shirts, so I literally tossed it up in the air and the first one grabbed it."

Mathias made sure he got loyalty. Carsen Edwards fought to wear love, his submission. Isaac Haas, Purdue's 7-foot-2 center, received empathy, as that was the only shirt that came in his size (XX-tall). Vincent Edwards' submission, humility, is worn by teammate Tommy Luce before games, while Edwards dons tolerance and usually leads the team onto the court.

"The shirts pretty much stand for everything we need in this world right now," said Vincent

Togetherness, worn by Grady Eifert before games, is the word coach Matt Painter would've picked if he still played for the Boilers. But Painter likes all the words on the shooting shirts because they come from players, not coaches.

When some NFL players began kneeling for the national anthem last season, Painter asked his players what they wanted to do. If they wanted to kneel, he wouldn't stop them. He just didn't want any surprises.

"We never talked about doing it as a team," Edwards said. "If we were to do it, guys weren't against it, but we saw this as another way we can do it, and it turned out better."

The Boilers weren't interested in a protest during the anthem, but Painter thinks the fact that more professional athletes are sharing the reasons for their demonstrations has given athletes such as Purdue's an opportunity to think about how they want to express themselves on a unique platform.

"It shows that Purdue knows what's going on in our world," Thompson said. "We're not just caught up in the basketball bubble. We realize what's going on in our world. It shows a maturity about us and that we want to help."

Purdue didn't publicize the shooting shirts before its season opener. It only posted a tweet shortly before tipoff, showing the shirts and a message: These are traits and qualities that we as humans need more of and need to show to others on a daily basis. Players weren't exactly sure how the crowd would react.

The verdict? All positive. Some fans want to buy the shirts, which aren't for sale. (Andrews made only one for each player, so he guards them with his life and likely will make duplicates soon.) Thompson's younger brother, Isaiah, who has a Purdue scholarship offer, wants one, and several of P.J.'s professors have complimented him and the team.

"It's an educated fan base, so a lot of people made comments about they think it's pretty neat," Painter said. "The thing that people like the most is they did this on their own. It's their thoughts. So many things are framed today in sports: 'What's the right thing for us to do or the right thing for us to say?' When in reality, say how you feel."

Painter hopes the demonstration humanizes his players. Fans will always come to watch them dunk and shoot and rebound and defend. That will never change. But this season, the Boilers are offering something more.

"We don't want to use our four years here just to play basketball and help Purdue win games," Thompson said. "We want to use our four years to try and make a difference. It could be someone in Idaho or Wisconsin who loves Purdue, and [the words on the shirts] actually meant something to them. They might think, 'I need to spread more love, show more respect, be more loyal!'"

"I don't know, it might change someone's life."

Mathias still a role model, but more than a role player

Nathan Baird / Lafayette Journal & Courier / November 22, 2017

Four years ago, at a basketball camp hidden in the woods of eastern Ohio, Harrison boys basketball coach Mark Rinehart first heard the legend of Dakota Mathias.

"Legend" might be a bit dramatic. Yet so were the reactions of coaches from across Ohio when they learned Rinehart coached a few miles up the road from Mackey Arena.

Mathias, already exhibiting the quiet confidence and commitment to craft coaches love, would soon transition from Elida High School star to Boilermaker.

"The high school coaches were in awe of him," Rinehart said. "'This kid from Elida's going to be so good.'"

Considered one of the Big Ten Conference's best defensive players, Mathias remains one of the league's most underrated offensive players. That will change if he maintains his early performance. The 6-4, 200-pound senior guard is shooting 81.3 percent from 3-point range while distributing 17 assists against one turnover.

Big Ten coaches came around to what Ohio high school coaches have known since Mathias forced his way into Elida's starting lineup as a freshman. Iowa coach Fran McCaffery called him "a primary concern." Penn State coach Patrick Chambers, citing Mathias's all-around performance, said "I think the kid is their MVP on both sides of the floor."

Mathias grew into an identity as the unselfish complimentary player who sacrifices personal glory for team success. Yet that sells short his full value to the Big Ten's defending outright champion and a team some believe should push for top-10 status.

"He's right," Purdue coach Matt Painter said of Chambers' comment. "If you go look at the numbers, he affects winning and losing."

Two images of Mathias hang in the Elida High School boys locker room.

One, from his high school days, features a picture of him taking the shot that resulted in his 1,000th point and commemorates his Elida scoring records. The other is a new Purdue poster, including a quote from Painter about how Mathias will rarely leave the floor because he makes both the offense and defense better.

Skyler Smith sees them every day. He served as a ballboy for Elida during Mathias' high school days, just as Mathias had served as a Bulldogs ballboy growing up. In the same way Mathias once tried to emulate his older brothers and their peers, Smith tried to emulate Mathias.

"He'd tell me ball handling drills to do and help me through them when I messed up," Smith said. "Even if I messed up he would encourage me to keep going because that meant I was getting better."

Mathias said Smith's story gives him "goose-bumps." Some athletes are uncomfortable with role model status. Mathias embraces it.

Perhaps it helps that Mathias so eagerly followed in the footsteps of his own role models. His father, Dan, coached in Elida's system. Older brothers Bo and Dustin starred for the Bulldogs.

By the time Mathias reached high school, Elida already had a star guard. Reggie McAdams set the Elida scoring record Mathias would eventually break.

"Handling adversity was a big thing with him," Mathias said of McAdams. "When you get to high school you get double-teamed, box-and-ones, all this stuff. He got eaten up night after night, but the way he handled it, he was so poised and he just kept playing."

McAdams moved on to Akron, and Mathias headed for Purdue. During his freshman season, he took note of the fiercely competitive junior guard who had established himself as a team captain a year before.

Rapeal Davis became a new kind of role model for Mathias. His work ethic, commitment to team and diligence with film study opened the door to Mathias' eventual breakthrough as a defender.

Mathias' young Purdue career overflowed with lessons in mental toughness. He spent the summer prior to his freshman season enduring one frustration after another. While an exact diagnosis was never reached, Mathias described conditions consistent with mononucleosis, leading to what he believed was a bout of vertigo.

Most days, Mathias simply didn't have the strength or coordination to practice.

"He was throwing up before every practice," said senior point guard P.J. Thompson, who was Mathias' roommate at the time. "He couldn't hold down food, couldn't eat. He was always in a bad mood because he felt terrible all the time.

"They're coming off last in the Big Ten and we're getting killed in workouts trying to prepare and get ready and he couldn't take it because his body wasn't ready for it."

When he finally could practice prior to the season, Mathias suffered injuries to both of his ankles. The experience would have frustrated any player. For Mathias, who spent countless hours practicing in the gym attached to his house before and after his formal high school workouts, it was devastating.

Mathias never missed a game, but he also was never fully healthy. He said he became depressed at times. Not until late in the season did he begin to elevate in the rotation, earning more minutes and responding with consistent production.

Prior to his sophomore season he underwent a procedure to correct sinus issues and a deviated septum. The physical ailments that almost ruined the start of his career only strengthened his love for basketball.

"You just don't take it for granted — all the opportunities; each practice, each day," Mathias said. "Back then I didn't practice a lot, and that was tough, because I wanted to get out there and compete with my teammates.

"Now every day I have the privilege and am lucky enough to practice and go out and enjoy the game of basketball. That's why I came here."

Teammates from Elida to Purdue joke about the ferocity of Mathias' competitive nature. Two-on-two games in the family's home gym were "like the state championship," according to McAdams.

Yet teammates also describe another side of Mathias. Considerate and patient, he's someone younger players and newcomers seek out for advice in practice or during games.

"Dakota's IQ is unbelievable," said junior forward Eden Ewing, recounting a day last week when he went to Mathias with a question about defense. "It's up there with the coaches. When most of us don't understand, we go to Dakota. We don't go to a coach."

Painter understands why Mathias remains an under-the-radar player even within the league. Purdue's big men have commanded the spotlight over the past three years. First came A.J. Hammons -- "Probable the most talented player I've coached," Painter said. Last year Caleb Swanigan dominated the post en route to Big Ten Player of the Year honors.

Other players around the conference have taken notice. Ohio State's Jae'Sean Tate used a common phrase -- "glue guy" -- to describe Mathias' integral yet underappreciated role.

As a rule, glue guys aren't typically stars. Can Mathias break through into a higher status? He knows he must accept a larger, more assertive scoring role on offense.

After scoring 23 points in 22 minutes against Fairfield last Saturday -- boosting his average through four games to 17.3 -- a breakthrough seems within reach.

"I get mad, because he can score the crap out of the ball," P.J. Thompson said. "He'll make an extra pass and I'm like, 'You might not be loose, but I'm taking your not loose over his loose.'"

Glue guys also typically aren't known for their athleticism. Mathias has lived with that knock since he first picked up a ball. Run down a list of players he grew up admiring -- Dirk Nowitzki, J.D. Reddick, Jimmer Fredette -- and a common theme emerges.

McAdams, with the sadistic glee only a close friend can enjoy, requests that Mathias be asked why he still can't dunk a basketball. (Mathias denies the charge, but has yet to offer evidence to the contrary.)

However, gyms across the country are full of players whose drive and passion for the game outweigh their natural talent.

"It's a great teaching point," said Rinehart, who knows most of his players watch or attend Purdue games. "'You guys know he's not the best athlete in the Big Ten. How in the world is he the best defender?'"

Skyler Smith doesn't need a poster to remind him of his favorite Dakota Mathias memory. It came in Mathias' senior year, when Toldeo Central Catholic visited the Elida Fieldhouse. He remembers Mathias "torturing" Central Catholic's star player -- current Cleveland Browns quarterback DeShone Kizer.

One moment in particular stands out -- Mathias pulling up from the volleyball service line to hit a 3-pointer over Kizer.

"The expression Kiser gave out was like there was nothing he could do about it," Smith said. "It rolled around the rim like three times, and the whole gym was saying 'Ooooh, ooooh, ooooh.'"

Smith and the rest of Elida's team came to Mackey Arena on Nov. 12 to watch the Boilermakers' victory over Chicago State. Mathias painted a picture of efficiency -- 18 points on 6 of 8 shooting, six assists, two steals, no turnovers -- before meeting with the team.

Mathias' tenure as a role model in Elida is permanent. He says his Purdue legacy, however, remains incomplete. Glue guys only earn that designation when they win. Mathias hasn't crossed off every goal on the list he brought with him from Elida.

Painter recently referred to Mathias as someone who has sacrificed to help Purdue win.

Mathias looks at it another way.

"I wouldn't even use the word sacrifice," Mathias said. "When it's winning, I wouldn't call it sacrifice."

Eifert has worked himself into a role with Purdue

Tom Davis / Fort Wayne News-Sentinel / November 17, 2017

Purdue men's basketball coach Matt Painter doesn't want to go into games worried about one of his best players missing a lot of time. However, the Boilermaker coach does have the luxury of now knowing that he has a viable option when senior forward Vince Edwards finds himself in foul trouble.

That exact circumstance unfolded earlier this week – with the Boilermakers on the road, no less – but Painter's team ultimately proved to be perfectly fine as it turned out in the 86-71 win at Marquette.

Painter turned to junior forward Grady Eifert to play the most significant role of his career and the Bishop Dwenger High graduate did more than just OK.

No. 19-ranked Purdue (3-0) will host Fairfield (2-0) today at 7 p.m. (BTN Plus).

Less than seven minutes into the Boilermakers' game against the Golden Eagles Tuesday, Edwards picked up his second foul with the game tied at 10, so Painter had to turn to Eifert.

The 6-foot-6 forward responded with an eight point, four rebound, two assist performance in 24 minutes, which was far and away the highest total of his career.

"It was good for us to have to play some other guys," Painter said in a postgame press conference. "I thought Grady had a really good game."

This is starting to be a trend for Eifert.

After walking on with Purdue two years ago, Eifert had totaled 28 minutes as a freshman and just 44 last season. He had been nothing more than an end-of-the-bench guy that played when Purdue was really ahead or really behind.

But that seemingly won't be the case this year. He already has played 53 minutes in three games, and Tuesday was his third consecutive game of reaching double figure minutes.

"He's been the best rebounder for us in practice," Painter said of Eifert's preseason. "Grady plays hard."

Eifert began to make his presence felt, most notably at the defensive end of the floor, during the summer trip that Purdue had, as it represented the United States in the World University Games in Taiwan.

In eight games against international competition, Eifert averaged over 11 minutes per game, which was 10th most on the Boilers, but his rebounding totals were much stronger.

He grabbed 32 rebounds in 92 minutes of action, which was just one shy of being the fourth most for Purdue.

"For the most part," Painter said of Eifert's play Tuesday, "I thought Grady did a really good job. He was efficient offensively."

Eifert made both of his shots at Marquette, and over the course of the past two seasons, he has made 16 of 19 shots (84.2 percent).

"He's just in the right place at the right time and plays hard," Painter said. "Having 'glue' guys like that, with the personnel that we have, those guys are so important."

In the past, Eifert's job should become somewhat easier, even though the expectations are most assuredly going to rise.

Painter said that you have to temper expectations for players that only come off the bench sporadically, as Eifert has in the past two seasons.

"When you play those (type of) minutes, it's hard to get into the flow and be a positive player," Painter explained, "it just is. When you play 8 to 12 minutes. People always look at you like 'What's wrong with this guy?' It's hard."

"You sit there for 30 minutes, and then you sub in for four. You sit for another 30, and then you sub in for four, and that is your game. But if you can get guys to play that role, and come in and play good defense, rebound, and do little things, and know what is going on, that really helps."

A glance at the early box scores have probably caught Purdue fans by surprise when tracking players' impact, but Painter said Eifert's evolution as a player hasn't been a shock to the Boilermaker coaches in any way.

"He's not a surprise to us," Painter said. "He's probably a surprise to fans, but he's also been in a logjam of (Caleb Swanigan, Isaac Haas, A.J. Hammonds, and Vince Edwards) pretty good players."

As it turns out, Eifert is becoming one in his own right.

Purdue freshman Matt Haarms refuses to be pushed around

Ken Thompson / Lafayette Journal & Courier / October 21, 2017

Purdue redshirt freshman Matt Haarms may look easy to push around on the basketball court, but that's an illusion according to coach Matt Painter.

"Sometimes when you see slender players, people take that for like a sign of weakness when it really isn't," Painter said Saturday following a Fan Day scrimmage in Mackey Arena. "Matt's approach is very professional, he's a tough kid and he's really going to help us."

The 7-3, 245-pound redshirt freshman was the unofficial third-leading scorer on the day with 20 points. Sophomore guard Carsen Edwards, who was paired with Haarms throughout the Gold and Black scrimmage, had 30 points in leading his team to victory during each of the three, 10-minute periods.

Isaac Haas, who was matched up against Haarms, had 21 points.

"I really liked the way Matt played," Edwards said. "He does everything Isaac doesn't do. He shoots jumpers; Isaac doesn't shoot jumpers."

"He protects the rim well just like Isaac. He can guard well on the perimeter too."

For those who are concerned about his slender build, Haarms isn't. He believes his jump shot is the great equalizer.

"I feel like giving up so much weight is not that big a deal," Haarms said. "Isaac is probably one of the biggest guys in college basketball, and I feel like at my current weight - 245 pounds - I can easily hang. The jump shot is just a bonus."

That jump shot was borne out of necessity when Haarms went to Spain to play at age 17.

"They refused to play me at center," he said. "They said you are going to shoot jump shots. We have centers. They were guys who were 6-8, 6-9 and weighed 260 pounds."

Haarms picked up his work ethic at Sunrise Christian Academy in Kansas. There wasn't going to be much playing time until he adopted that mentality.

"I had to play harder than the next guy to get in," Haarms said. "That really helped me."

So did practicing against Haas and All-American Caleb Swanigan after joining the Boiler-makers at the semester break last year.

"That was great for him," Painter said. "He had some really tough days."

"He's gotten a lot better, He's put in time. He's stronger. He really competes and plays hard so he doesn't give in to people who are bigger. He's very smart, plays hard, is skilled and can run out there. I think he's really going to help us along our front line."

Haarms sees his role as stepping in behind Haas and providing quality minutes. But he is aiming higher.

"Being out here every single day with guys like Isaac Haas helps," Haarms said. "I feel like being able to play against Isaac Haas, there's nobody in the Big Ten I won't be able to play against."

"It's easy to get better if you're mediocre but if you're better it's hard to be great. I have to work hard to be great every single day. It's tougher now to get better but I still work as hard as I can to get to that point."

The next step for Carsen Edwards lies in 'little things,'

Brian Neubert / GoldandBlack.com / October 17, 2017

Carsen Edwards' talent is evident, plain as day to see, as the Boilermaker sophomore guard clearly possesses the ability to become one of the Big Ten's most potent backcourt scorers and one of the best Purdue's had in its modern basketball era.

That ability alone made him a particularly impactful player as a freshman.

There's "no ceiling" on where things go from here, Matt Painter said.

The key now, Painter says: Details, little things.

Edwards agrees.

"It's little things like staying focused," he said. "(Painter) always talks to me about being in the moment. Sometimes if I mess up, I'll step out and I'm out of it, but at the same time that's when I need to be there mentally.

"That's one thing that I think can help me: Mentally being in the moment, staying in the moment and letting things go and also making better decisions. I believe personally that it is all mental for me and that is one thing that I need to work on, as well as my skill set."

When things work for Edwards, when he's riding those brilliant runs of shot-making he's prone to, he makes basketball look easy.

But success for him this season and into the future may not be defined by the moments where he's raining pull-up jumpers and contested three-pointers, but rather when he's not, or when something else isn't going as planned.

"I think sometimes when he gets on the court and things aren't going his way he can get down and frustrated," senior P.J. Thompson said. "He shows it sometimes, but I think that's part of growing up, you know you're a guard and you can't act like that on the court. He knows that, because you'll talk to him and he says, 'I know I have to be better,' and he may go do it again next week, but it's all coming from the best. He wants to be a really good player and he is, and he brings a different dynamic to our team that no one else can."

That's indisputable.

Edwards' speed and quickness and ability to create shots for himself, and make them, make him one of a kind on Purdue's roster and a profoundly valuable complement to the Boilermakers' other assets.

But that experienced team will hope to see the value of experience shown in the sophomore, too.

Last season, amidst a freshman season that by any objective measure was a very good one, Edwards did grapple with some hurdles of youth, as he admits. Frustration sometimes affected him, as reflected in body language older teammates went so far as to discuss with him.

Today, if practices are any indication, Edwards seems to have turned a corner, looking more engaged, more vocal, more positive than he might have been a year ago, when he found himself in the position of being the team's only freshman (at least in the rotation) and thus the player who drew a disproportionate amount of coaches' attention, for better and worse.

Today, things have changed significantly.

Still a young player by designation — just a 19-year-old second-year sophomore — Edwards' experience level now belies his age.

He now has 35 games, 21 starts and 814 minutes of college basketball experience behind him, but also Purdue's half-season worth of World University Games competition and the summer's worth of practices that led up to them. And he played a key role this summer for USA Basketball's bronze-winning 19-and-Under World Championships team.

Experience has punctuated to Edwards the importance of things that have little to do with talent.

"I believe for me it's about focusing on going into a game trying to understand that when I am at my best mentally, and am in the moment mentally, that we play best as a team," he said. "That's one thing you try to remember and focus on, plus the fact that I really want to win, and for us to win I need to do this or do that, so I try to think about things that way. To give my team the best chance, I need to do things a certain way."

Newcomers change practice dynamic with athleticism

Nathan Baird / Lafayette Journal & Courier / October 2, 2017

Vincent Edwards has seen a lot over four-plus years in college basketball.

Earlier this summer, Purdue's senior forward saw something he'd never seen before on Cardinal Court. Freshman forward Aaron Wheeler took the basketball between his legs before slamming a drop-step dunk during warm-ups before practice.

"For him to be 6-9 and hanging in the air was pretty amazing," Edwards said.

When discussing such Boilermakers with similar athleticism, Edwards reaches back to Kelsey Barlow and JaJuan Johnson. Those players pre-date Edwards' Purdue career.

As a result, Wheeler and incoming players such as Nojel Eastern and Eden Ewing have already injected a missing ingredient into Purdue's offseason. As official practices began last Friday, those physical skills could alter how the reigning Big Ten Conference champions prepare for the season ahead.

When was the last time a Purdue player referred to one of his teammates as "a kangaroo?" That's the term junior guard Ryan Cline used when referencing Wheeler's leaping ability.

"They definitely bring something Purdue hasn't had for a while," Edwards said. "We've had some athleticism here and there, but their athleticism is kind of freaky."

Purdue coach Matt Painter reiterated his previously stated first goal in recruiting — to find players whose approach and personality best fit the program. After that, however, one typically tries to fill real or perceived deficiencies.

Eastern, Wheeler and Ewing, in particular, did not arrive this season by coincidence. For all of the Boilermakers' success last season, one of the lasting images was of a team with no real answer for the high-flying skill of a team such as Kansas.

"I think that's one thing we really lacked last year," Painter said of the newcomers' athleticism.

That's not to say the incoming class alone fills that gap. Rather, Painter believes they could be one element of a roster that challenges itself from all angles.

Painter has brought in big guards in the past, and he's brought in fast guards. In Eastern he brought in both. Associate director of strength and conditioning Josh Bonhotal said the freshman from Evanston, Illinois, ran a 20-meter sprint in 2.82 seconds this summer. The average NBA point guard runs in the 2.90-2.92 range.

Listed at 6-6, 220 pounds, Eastern more resembles a linebacker or strong safety than a point guard. As such he can affect practice scenarios with either finesse or brute strength.

"For him there's no need to go east and west," Bonhotal said. "He's bigger than whoever's in front of him and faster than just about anybody on the court. I think that's the scary thing that people don't realize."

Eastern isn't the only newcomer who can help at multiple positions — or at least give Purdue a serviceable look at more than one spot in practice scenarios.

That's especially useful when preparing for opponents with switching defenses. Purdue hasn't always switched one through five with its own defenders. It hasn't done so with center Isaac Haas, for example.

Yet while neither Matt Haarms nor Eden Ewing are natural centers, they can mimic that role enough to challenge the top of the rotation in scout scenarios. An increased role for a healthy Jacquil Taylor helps in the same regard.

At the other end of the floor, those same players can augment their growing understanding of the game with natural ability. That means a different defensive challenge — or perhaps a more consistent one — for even the more veteran Boilermakers.

"In the Big Ten it's day in and day out," Cline said. "Having them on the court and being able to go up against them is really good for me, because that's probably the one thing I'm trying to expand the most."

Occasional flashes of freak athleticism remain only one part of the puzzle Purdue hopes to assemble over the next six months.

Wheeler said it's a challenge to keep a stronger player like Edwards in front of him when defending. Haarms spoke of trying to keep up with Dakota Mathias and Cline on the perimeter — not an easy task for 7-3 post players.

"Just bringing energy to the floor is a big part of what we do," Wheeler said. "There are little things each and every one of us do that makes all of us better."

New Leaders at Purdue

Jeff Washburn / Fort Wayne Journal Gazette / September 20, 2017

During Purdue senior forward Vince Edwards' first three collegiate seasons, either Miami Heat center A.J. Hammons or Portland Trail Blazers rookie forward and Homestead graduate Caleb Swanigan were the focal points of the Boilermakers' identity.

After a silver-medal-winning performance in the World University Games in August in Taipei, Taiwan – where Purdue was 7-1, losing only to Lithuania (85-74) in the championship game – it is evident that Edwards, along with sophomore guard Carsen Edwards, will be at the core of the reigning regular-season Big Ten Conference champions' 2017-18 season identity.

The Edwards are not related. Vince is from Ohio, and Carsen is from Texas.

During the World University Games, Vince Edwards averaged a team-leading 19.3 points, and Carsen Edwards averaged 17.4 points, helping the Boilermakers average 102.8 points. Vince Edwards also averaged 6.9 rebounds and made 57 percent of his field goal attempts (56 of 98) and 84 percent of his free throws (27 of 32).

Senior guard Dakota Mathias averaged 11.9 points, and senior center Isaac Haas averaged 9.9 points and 6.1 rebounds, but Edwards and Edwards established themselves as the primary scoring options for a team coming off a 27-8 season, including NCAA Tournament victories against Vermont and Iowa State before falling to Kansas in the Sweet Sixteen.

In the World University Games' 93-61 semifinal victory over Serbia, Vince Edwards had 31 points and five rebounds, making 12 of 15 field goal attempts. Carsen Edwards had a team-best 23 points in the title-game loss to Lithuania.

Coach Matt Painter believes Vince Edwards is ready to step into the identity-setting role held by Hammons and Swanigan.

"He was really good in Taipei," Painter said. "He is such a versatile player that he puts other teams in a bind with the way he can play. Your senior year is supposed to be your best year of basketball, and it's trending that way for him. He has played great and has done a lot of things to help our team win."

Vince Edwards, who averaged 12.6 points as a junior, said the World University Games experience, which also included three exhibition victories, will be huge as the Boilermakers redefine themselves after losing Swanigan, the Big Ten Player of the Year and first-team All-American, to the NBA draft after two seasons in West Lafayette.

"We learned that a lot of guys are willing to step up, contribute and help carry the load," Vince Edwards said of the overseas opportunity. "It wasn't a one-man show. Different guys were strong on different days. We moved the ball, shared the ball, and while it was competitive, we had a lot of fun."

"Coming out of this experience, we have to be one of the best teams in the country. That has to give us a push and a jump on the regular season. Coach Painter preaches that. We can't come out sluggish. We have no excuses going into the season."

Vince Edwards said the experience especially was important for the Boilermakers' five new players, including four freshmen. He said playing different opponents is much more beneficial than playing summer pickup games against teammates in an open-gym setting.

"If everyone brings what they can bring to the table, I think we have all the pieces to do some special things again this season," he said.

One of those pieces certainly will be the other Edwards – Carsen – who won a bronze medal earlier in the summer playing for USA Basketball's FIBA U19 World Cup team in Cairo, Egypt.

He scored a team-best 13 points in the 96-72 bronze-medal win over Spain. Team USA finished 6-1 in Egypt.

Purdue's younger Edwards is eager for the 2017-18 season, which begins Nov. 10 against SIU-Edwardsville in Mackey Arena.

"I hope those two international experiences enhanced my game a lot, but we will have to wait and see," Carsen Edwards said. "I got to play a lot of games against a lot of different styles of play. I played different roles in different games."

Carsen Edwards averaged 10.3 points as a Boilermaker freshman.

Following tradition of hard work

Jeff Washburn / Fort Wayne Journal Gazette / September 20, 2017

Grady Eifert is keenly aware of his family's rich Allen County athletic tradition and is happy to be a part of it.

The Purdue basketball team's junior forward is the son of former Bishop Dwenger stand-out basketball player Greg Eifert, who helped Gene Keady's 1983-84 Boilermakers win the Big Ten Conference championship.

Grady's older brother, Tyler, now 27, was a football star at Dwenger and an All-American tight end at Notre Dame. Tyler, who is scheduled to earn \$4.78 million this season – his fifth with the NFL's Cincinnati Bengals – was the 21st pick in the first round of the 2013 NFL draft.

Younger brother Griffin plays football and basketball at Dwenger, and older sister Morgan is a Purdue graduate.

Grady, 6-foot-6 and 220 pounds, led Dwenger to Class 3A sectional and regional basketball championships in 2014 before losing to Bowman Academy in the Huntington North Semistate.

He averaged 15.8 points and eight rebounds for the Saints that season and accepted Purdue coach Matt Painter's offer to walk on with the Boilermakers after earning All-Northeast Indiana and All-SAC honors.

While he averaged only one point and 0.5 rebounds during Purdue's 27-8 Big Ten title-winning 2016-17 season, he has blossomed this summer, averaging 3.5 points and 4 rebounds during the Boilermakers' silver-medal-winning effort (7-1) in the World University Games in August in Taipei, Taiwan. Eifert averaged 11:36 minutes per game, shooting 57 percent from the field (12 of 21).

Growing up in a Boilermakers family – season tickets for football and men's basketball from the time he can remember – Grady Eifert wanted to play at Purdue, although he said he never felt pressure from his father or sister to make this decision.

"There's always been a competitive spirit within myself, but they never put any pressure on me," Eifert said. "They said, 'You can play football, basketball, baseball or soccer.' After my sophomore year, I gave up football to concentrate on basketball. I was smaller then, and I ended up growing."

Giving up football in order to focus on basketball was, according to Eifert, the correct decision.

Now, with former Homestead star Caleb "Biggie" Swanigan off to the NBA's Portland Trail Blazers, Eifert's playing time during Purdue's 2017-18 season should increase.

"The biggest thing is paying attention in practice, just knowing where you need to go on offense and on defense," Eifert said. "Coach Painter always says that if you can play defense, rebound and not turn the ball over, you are going to have a chance. I always stick those three things in my mind."

"If I keep playing hard, I will find myself on the court. Obviously, I have learned from Biggie – one of the greatest to come through here – and Vince Edwards as well. I have picked things up. When coach Painter puts me out there, it helps my confidence and shows my hard work is paying off."

Painter, who put Eifert on scholarship for the 2016-17 season, has been thrilled with the Bishop Dwenger grad's contributions.

"You want to bring guys into your program who get it, who play hard, who do what they're supposed to do, who go to class and get good grades," Painter said. "But they also have to bring you something every day to make you better. Grady does that."

Senior forward Vince Edwards, who averaged a team-leading 19.3 points a game during the World University Games, admires Eifert and what he brings to the program.

"Grady has been impressive since the day he got here," Edwards said. "Walk-ons don't complain about anything. They don't get the same benefits as guys who are on scholarship, but they still come in every day and do their part. Grady works hard, is always pushing and never takes a day off."

"He pushes me to get better because he always is attacking the basket. He was deserving of the playing time he got in Taiwan. I joke with Grady to stay out of my bag of tricks because I see him doing a couple of moves that look very familiar. He just smiles."

"Grady is a good kid, a physical kid. I tell him every day he is playing the wrong sport. He should be playing football."

Eifert does not know yet if he will be on scholarship for the 2017-18 season but says he will have the same mindset and will play with the same passion either way.

A selling and sales major at Purdue, Eifert has a 3.2 grade-point average through four semesters on the school's 4.0 scale.

He learned part of that passion for academics from brother Tyler, with whom he lived for a month this summer in Cincinnati, working out and gaining knowledge about the proper way to compete.

"It's great how humble Tyler is and how hard he has worked to get to where he is," Eifert said.

And now, Grady is following the same course.

Haarms eager to make his presence known again

Nathan Baird / Lafayette Journal & Courier / September 18, 2017

Matt Haarms' basketball carried him from his birthplace in the Netherlands to Spain and eventually to the United States.

West Lafayette has been home since last January, when the 7-3 Haarms arrived from Sunrise Christian Academy in Bel Aire, Kansas.

Yet not until two weeks ago, at Purdue's first practice following a post-World University Games break, did Haarms begin to really settle in. For the first time since his arrival, no red-shirt restrictions or citizenship technicalities stand between Haarms and playing in a real basketball game.

"I finally felt I was a real part of everything," Haarms said. "I was finally getting ready for something that wasn't extremely far away. I'm super excited."

Haarms practiced throughout the second semester of last season. Matt Painter, however, made it clear almost no circumstances existed that would have led him to put Haarms in a game and burn his redshirt.

The rest of the Boilermakers practiced beyond the standard NCAA allowances this summer in preparation for their stint as Team USA. Yet since Haarms was not a U.S. citizen, he could not play in the games or utilize the extra workouts. He rooted his teammates on from the bench in Taipei.

Throughout the past nine months, Haarms has grown physically and sharpened his skills. When Purdue officially opens practice on Sept. 29, he'll be fighting for minutes along with the rest of the roster.

"He needs to get out there and play," Painter said earlier this summer.

Dropped into West Lafayette prior to the second semester, Haarms spent practices alternating between physical punishment from either 7-2, 290 Isaac Haas or 6-9, 250 Caleb "Biggie" Swanigan.

Such a task, with no immediate reward of playing time, could lead to discouragement. Painter said he and his staff explained to Haarms those weren't the kind of opponents he would typically see in games.

As he toughened against the physical challenge, Haarms hardened mentally as well.

"I used to be kind of scared of the contact and now it's like hey, I've had Isaac Haas. I've had Caleb Swanigan," Haarms said. "Why should I be scared of you?"

While Haas stands like a redwood in the paint, Haarms still resembles a beanstalk. He's working on it, though. Working with associate director of strength and conditioning Josh Bonhotal, Haarms has added about 25 pounds since his arrival. He's at 246 "on my way to 250," he said.

"He used to not be able to move us," Haas said. "Now he can move us a little bit and you can actually feel him. It's a big difference from before. I look forward to seeing how he handles the bigger guys in our conference."

Most exciting to Haarms is that, while his body has changed, his ability to run the floor and move have not. Haarms' skill set more naturally fits at power forward, and if he can prove he can defend 4s in the Big Ten Conference, he may be able to earn minutes there.

In one memorable practice last season, Painter instructed Haarms to defend shooting guard Dakota Mathias. Imagine the flip side of the usual daily challenge of facing those punishing big men. Haarms now had to chase an elite shooter around the perimeter as Mathias bounced off of screens.

"I thought I was going to be some lumbering monster in the first couple of months of adjusting," Haarms said. "But it's coming on very naturally. Going from 220-245, I can still move, I can still jump. I can still run."

"Now when I hit Isaac it's still 45 pounds of difference — like, oh, there's a lot coming there. But it's not 70 anymore. There's progress there."

Haarms last played a non-intrasquad game last July, in his final AAU competition. Almost 16 months will have passed since that game when Purdue plays its closed scrimmage against West Virginia in late October.

Haarms' eagerness to take the floor is palpable. Yet simply being able to play doesn't mean he will. While Jacquil Taylor, Grady Eifert and others proved themselves in summer competition, Haarms could only watch.

His opportunity has arrived, but the hard work isn't over.

"I haven't been able to show anything in games," Haarms said. "I need to work harder than those guys and show I can contribute to this team and be out there. I need to step up and get out there."

There's a silver lining in Purdue's second-place finish

Mike DeFabo / CNHI News Service / September 14, 2017

The Purdue basketball team tried to do it, but the smiles just wouldn't come out as the Boilermakers posed for a team photo after their final competition at World University Games.

The Boilers had just won a silver medal on a world stage while representing their country in Taipei. But they didn't see it like that. They couldn't help but view it through the lens that they had just lost gold. Senior forward Vincent Edwards called it a "sickening" feeling moments after the 85-74 loss to Lithuania.

The Boilermakers had left the states with what they called a "gold medal mentality." Speaking about the event for the first time since returning the states, they discussed their silver medal reality.

"Our team is a little different when it comes to competing and wanting to win," senior point guard P.J. Thompson said. "We got a silver medal in the World University Games, and we were disappointed. The third-place team was cheering. You see us in the picture, and we're just sitting there. We're not sore losers. Lithuania earned it. But we wanted to win a gold medal. That's what we came there for and we didn't."

Win or lose, the experience was going to be invaluable in a number of ways. It got the newcomers (three true freshmen, a redshirt freshman and a junior college transfer) acclimated to major college basketball. It gave the team 11 real games to forge a new identity in the post-Caleb Swanigan era. Purdue got to showcase its basketball program to possible recruits on a big stage. Players 18 to 22 years old got to see a part of the world they otherwise would have never visited. Heck, the team even got some sweet USA swag.

But look right now specifically at the medal. Thompson said in 10 years, he's sure his feelings about the medal will change. It might not take even that long. In six months, the team may realize there was a bit of a silver lining in second place.

One of the hallmarks of this team has been its ability to bounce back from losses. Over the past two seasons, the Boilermakers have never lost back-to-back games. Coach Matt Painter likes to say that losing puts a team on edge. It highlights its weaknesses and forces the team to confront them head on.

That's exactly what's happened in the time since the World University games.

"Guys looked at each other and said, 'What plays could we have made? How could we have played better?'" Vincent Edwards said. "I know I did for sure."

Win the gold and maybe Purdue is thinking about how utterly dominant Isaac Haas looked on the low block during the tournament. It's focused on how efficient the team played offensively and how well it shot the ball from 3-point range, including a game in which they made 20 3s. It's looking at how Vincent Edwards was arguably the tournament's best player (if not the toughest by playing through an ankle injury) and Carsen Edwards may not have been far behind.

Instead, winning silver has forced the Boilermakers to focus on the shortcoming. Not just for a couple days like during the season, but for two whole months while they make their final preparations for the season.

Take it from Thompson: "We still got a ways to go, especially the last game. They out-toughed us a little bit."

Take it from Vincent Edwards: "We have to emphasize dribble containment when we're out in open space and just keep tightening on our ball-screen D."

Take it from Dakota Mathias: "Rebounding. I think that was one that definitely stuck out in the gold-medal game."

If Purdue wants to repeat as Big Ten champion, it will need to play to the strengths listed above. But more than that, it's going to need to develop those weaknesses. There's still plenty of time to do that. And Purdue is already a couple steps ahead of just about every other team in the nation because it got to practice so frequently and play real competitive games over the summer.

"Coming off the season we had, you don't want to be complacent," Thompson said. "You don't want to ever have a sense of complacency in your locker room. As a leader, that's one of the things I'm going to stress. There's still room to get better. We can get a lot better throughout the year."

If those things happen, there may be a few more smiles in the end of the year photo.

Now comes the real benefit of the World University Games

Brian Neubert / GoldandBlack.com / September 14, 2017

Day 1 of formal practice for Purdue this coming October will, in effect, be Day 60.

That, the Boilermakers hope, should give them a distinct advantage heading into a promising season, that edge being the perspective teams generally need weeks, if not months, to gain.

Purdue formally practiced — as a full team — generally twice a week through the bulk of the summer, the luxury that came with its participation in the World University Games, where it won silver in August.

Normally, teams would be allowed just two hours per week of “official” practice time, to use however they see fit.

Purdue could do, basically, whatever it wanted.

That practice experience, in addition to the eight games and one scrimmage played in Taipei and the two exhibitions played against Team Canada in the U.S., should matter considerably come the season.

“We had our preseason all summer and played a third of our schedule, playing 10-11 games,” guard Dakota Mathias said. “... I think it puts us ahead of teams, because we get into practice and there’s no rules, per se. The young guys learned how we do things, our principles, things like that. A lot of teams are doing that right now and it might take a little longer. Our guys already have that edge.”

Beyond those practicalities, Purdue should have some self-awareness to it, a working knowledge of what it should be good at it and what needs work.

The competition overseas was strong, players say, the better teams comparable to high-major college competition and the stakes NCAA Tournament-like.

Purdue played well, mowing through pool play before winning a close game against Israel — one of the best teams in the event — and beating Estonia to reach the final. There, Lithuania prevailed.

“I think our team’s a little different,” point guard P.J. Thompson said. “We’re really good about competing and wanting to win. We got a silver medal at the World University Games and we were disappointed. I think the third-place team was cheering; they were excited and you see in the picture and we’re all just sitting there. We’re not sore losers. Lithuania earned it. But we wanted to win a gold medal and didn’t.

“But second place is going to look good down the road when we look back and see what we did and how we were blessed and fortunate to get a chance to do something not a lot of people do, to represent the United State. Right now it might not look as good but in 10 years, it’s going to look pretty good.”

The short-term value of the gold medal-game loss is clear, as it highlighted Purdue’s needed emphases in advance of the season.

“Dribble containment when we’re out in open space and to keep tightening up our ball-screen D,” forward Vincent Edwards said. “Those are two things that have been getting us in the past.”

And rebounding.

Purdue doesn’t have Caleb Swanigan anymore. College basketball’s pre-eminent rebounder from a year ago is in Portland now and the Boilermakers must do whatever they can to prevent their consistent strength from recent seasons from becoming a consistent issue.

Lithuania gauged Purdue on the glass, grabbing a game-deciding 17 offensive rebounds.

“And rebounding, that definitely stuck out in the gold medal game obviously,” Mathias said. “We have to be able to rebound and be a little tougher on the glass.”

It was disappointing for Purdue, that it fell short of winning the event, but in the short term that exposure in those areas of the game might prove beneficial.

So will the successes that far outnumbered the failures.

“We’re going to take this, run with the momentum and try to jump-start the season from here,” Edwards said.

Growing pains worth it for Purdue's new point guard Nojel Eastern

Gregg Doyel / Indy Star / August 11, 2017

When he was good Friday night, Purdue freshman Nojel Eastern was great. A Euro-step past a Canadian defender for a finish at the rim. Next time down, a crossover to the rim for another layup. A few possessions later, another crossover to the rim. This time he was fouled. Made a free throw.

Took over this game, is what he did. For three whole minutes.

But when he was not good? Well. Same thing, just in reverse.

"He made some mistakes," Purdue coach Matt Painter was saying of Eastern's unofficial college debut Friday night at Carmel High, where the Boilermakers — also known as Team USA — defeated Team Canada 94-86 in a tune-up for the World University Games later this month. "But a guy like that, with that kind of talent, you've got to give him freedom to play."

So Purdue has another one, is what Painter's saying. Another uniquely talented guard, the 6-6 Nojel Eastern joining 6-1 Carsen Edwards (14 points Friday, 4-for-7 on 3-pointers), a player Painter is willing to live and die with, even if there are times Edwards makes mistakes that are just killing him. But Painter gives Edwards that freedom because the high-scoring sophomore is like a gourmet out there, making a fancy omelet. He's going to break a few eggs, you know?

More Doyel: No Biggie, Carsen Edwards ready to be Purdue's alpha male

Same with Eastern, apparently. He's going to break a few eggs, as he did in the third quarter against Canada. Here, look. All of this happened in a span of 90 seconds:

First, the defense. At the top of the key, Eastern was defending Canada's persistently optimistic Kaza Kajami-Keane, who took 26 shots and made seven. From the sideline, Painter was yelling.

"Stay with him, Nojel!"

Eastern turned his head and Kajami-Keane was gone, cutting to the rim. Painter was yelling again.

"Stay with him, Nojel!"

At the rim, Vincent Edwards was fouling Kajami-Keane to prevent a layup.

Moments later Eastern had the ball at mid-court and used a crossover to get past Kajami-Keane. The crowd was gasping at the sight of the 6-6, 220-pound Eastern crossing over Kajami-Keane — ahhhhhhh — but there was a problem: The ball was moving faster than Eastern, who couldn't catch up to his dribble and had it stolen.

Next time down the court, Eastern crossed over Kajami-Keane again near midcourt — another ahhhhhhh — but lost control in the lane. Another turnover.

"I was trying to make the home-run play," Eastern was telling me in a hallway at Carmel. "I have to keep it simple. I'll go watch film, learn from my mistakes, and I promise you it won't happen again."

Saturday at Lafayette Jeff, the second of two exhibitions between Canada and Team USA, is another chance for Eastern to get acclimated to the college game. And that's what these exhibitions with Canada are, ultimately: Tests against college competition, this one an All-Star group from up north led by a 6-9 forward, Conor Morgan, who had 21 points, 12 rebounds, three assists and three 3-pointers. Afterward I was asking Matt Painter if it would be gauche to recruit a kid from the other team.

"Best question you've asked tonight," Painter said.

He was teasing, or maybe he was just mistaken, because earlier I'd asked Painter a much better question, one where I disagreed with his answer and told him he was wrong. No, he told me — you're wrong. We were talking about Eastern, and about how soon he'll be a big-time player for Purdue.

And my question to Painter was more of a statement:

He's going to be really good, I was telling the Purdue coach. Just not in November.

"Well," Painter said, "I don't know."

Could I be wrong?

"Yeah," he said. "You could be wrong. He's had some really good days for us. Today wasn't one of his better days, but to his defense he got in foul trouble and wasn't able to play as much. He's definitely a guy — if we had a so-called 'rotation' right now, he'd be in it. There's no doubt about it. I love the different look he gives us."

When Eastern played Friday night — and Purdue fans, you'll see this when the 2017-18 Boilermakers play at Mackey Arena — he commanded and even demanded attention. My attention, for sure, but more than that. He had Canada's attention, and he had his teammates' attention. Teammates playing with Eastern had better not take their eyes off him, or they risk being hit between the eyes with a basketball. He plays with a slowly developing, deceptively quick flair, getting that big body into the lane and making no-look passes to whoever's open.

Afterward, I'm arguing with anyone who'll listen about just how big that body is. Eastern is listed at 6-6, but he looks bigger. At one point he was one of three Boilermakers checking in at the scorer's table, standing between the 6-8 Edwards and 6-6 Ryan Cline, and Eastern looked much closer to Edwards' height than Cline's. Painter told me a few weeks ago that Eastern is 6-7, and at 220 pounds he's ginormous for a college point guard.

Eastern assured me he's only 6-6. Well, first he said he "liked" being 6-6. Then he affirmed, yes, he's 6-6. Vincent Edwards is standing with us, standing next to Eastern — they are seeing eye to eye — and I ask Vincent: How tall do you think he is?

"You look 6-7 or 6-8 to me," Edwards is telling the freshman, then looks down and realizes Eastern is still in his sneakers while Edwards is wearing flip-flops. "OK — definitely 6-7."

We can settle that later, but we're going to need to agree on one thing right now: Nojel Eastern is going to be a big player this season for Purdue.

Carsen Edwards ready to be Purdue's new alpha male

Gregg Doyel / Indy Star / August 2, 2017

Carsen Edwards was having a lousy practice. He wasn't shooting it great in drills, he wasn't running fast in sprints — "C'mon, Carsen, you're the slowest guy out there," Purdue coach Matt Painter was yelling at one point — and he wasn't getting the better of freshman Nojel Eastern, who smacked away one of his jumpers during a half-court drill.

What Carsen Edwards needed was some game action.

And then Painter had the Boilermakers — who represent the USA in the World University Games Aug. 19-30 at Taiwan — finish practice Tuesday with a scrimmage.

So now Purdue players are scrimmaging in white and blue USA practice jerseys, and the blue team is losing 20-3. Carsen Edwards is wearing blue. His four teammates in blue are huddled up, talking and laughing. Edwards is glowering off to the side, staring daggers at his team, the other team, the walls, everywhere.

Now he's hitting a 3-pointer. And another. And another. And another. Edwards is pulling up from 25 feet and running Dakota Mathias off screens and now, now that it's competitive and he's angry, everything he's shooting is going in. After his fourth-straight 3-pointer, Edwards backpedals off into the distance as Mathias mutters, "I fouled him, too."

The blue rally falls short, 20-17, when 6-9 junior college transfer Eden Ewing misses a long jumper. Edwards goes to the baseline to run his wind sprints, and he's grumbling at Ewing. Something about "get me the ball." Maybe not quite those words.

Afterward I'm asking Edwards about the practice, about what happened. Not so much what happened late — pretty clear what happened; the best player on the court took over — but what happened earlier. I believe what I asked him was this:

Where did you go? He's sheepish.

"That's one thing I need to work on," Edwards says, "is trying to make myself better at all times. I enjoy competing. That's one thing I feed off. I enjoy it."

He needs his buttons pushed, is all, and in a short conversation on Tuesday I pushed two of them.

The camel didn't scare him. Carsen Edwards wants you to know that.

Maybe that's not what he was saying a few minutes ago, but a few minutes ago he didn't realize you were paying close attention when he was describing how he spent some down time this summer in Egypt, where he had a breakout performance for Team USA's FIBA U19 World Cup team. He was talking about trying to ride a camel, about how tall it was when it rose to its full height, how ornery it was, and he said these words, and I need Carsen to know I have them

on tape:

"I was slightly scared because you feel like you've got no control," he was saying. "You've got no control."

You don't get scared much, is my guess. That's what I tell him.

"Nah," he says. Big smile.

When was the last time you were scared, I pry, before that camel started ...

Edwards cuts me off.

"I wouldn't say I was scared," he says. "I would say nervous."

He's not about showing weakness, this guy. College basketball at the highest level is an alpha-male sport, almost every player having been the best of the best back home, but Edwards is a little more alpha than most. He scored 360 points last season, No. 6 all time among Purdue freshman, and averaged 10.3 ppg. He's going to lead the Boilermakers in scoring this season and, if he stays healthy and plays three more years, I'm pretty sure he'll become the sixth player in Purdue history to reach 2,000 points.

But it's more than that. Even last season, playing alongside consensus All-American Biggie Swainigan, Edwards was trying to be the alpha. Swainigan led the team in points, rebounds, blocks ...

But nobody shot the ball as often as Carsen Edwards.

With 335 field-goal attempts in 814 minutes, Edwards was shooting it every 2.4 minutes. Biggie (421 shots in 1,139 minutes) was shooting it every 2.7 minutes.

"And at the end of the season," Painter says, "Carsen wasn't even starting."

Carsen doesn't take a backseat to anyone, anywhere. Not Biggie, not the camel, not his teammates on the U19 World Cup team that won bronze this summer. Edwards led the team in minutes (140) and assists (23) and averaged 10.4 points and was singled out afterward by Team USA coach John Calipari of Kentucky.

"Carsen Edwards was the one guy that went in and changed the game because of his intensity," Calipari said last month, "and he was dragging people with him."

Well, sure. Those were games. That was competition. Carsen Edwards is a competitive guy.

Which is how I managed to push another button. No, not another question about the camel. This time I asked him about the big freshman point guard, Nojel Eastern.

What you need to know about Eastern: He's a huge point guard — he's listed at 6-6 and 220 pounds, but Painter called him 6-7 — and he will

make an impact this season at both ends of the court.

Eastern isn't a terribly good shooter, but he's strong and explosive and gets into traffic and dribbles between his legs and disappears until he's reappearing near the rim, where he's throwing a no-look pass to Vincent Edwards or Eden Ewing or Isaac Haas. On defense, Eastern is going to make a mess of things for opposing offenses. He's just so big, so fast, so aggressive.

And on Tuesday, he and Carsen Edwards were going at it good. Eastern got the better of it for most of practice, including a sideswipe block earlier in the day. But at the end Edwards is defending Eastern and Painter is urging him to get physical and Edwards is complying and bumping Eastern and finally knocking the ball away.

And so I'm asking Edwards about that, saying that he was getting into Eastern, and Eastern was getting into him, and how they were pushing each other.

"That's the environment you want to be in, trying to make everybody better," Edwards says. "That's all we do is compete."

Now that he's answered my question, Edwards has one for me:

"Do you think he was getting into me?"

A little, I say. He was trying.

By now, we have an audience. Ewing and Vincent Edwards and Jacquil Taylor are waiting in the hall at Mackey Arena. They're all going to the cold tub together, and Carsen's holding things up. I'm about to let them go, but realize I need to ask Carsen, who weighed 190 pounds last season, something that seems obvious:

Are you any bigger?

Carsen's eyes light up. Big smile. Huge.

"Yeahhhhh," he says. "You think I got bigger?"

I do. What do you weigh now?

"I'm 200," he says, and the number sounds like this: two HUN-nid.

Now Vincent Edwards is asking him: "You weigh how much?"

"Two HUN-nid!" Carsen says.

Eden Ewing is flexing his biceps and Jacquil Taylor is chanting "big body, big body" and Vincent Edwards is making like Ric Flair and screaming "Woooo!"

And now Carsen Edwards is walking down the hall with the three Purdue forwards. He is the youngest of the group, and the smallest, and he's walking first.

Stefanovic following family's example

Nathan Baird / Lafayette Journal & Courier / June 9, 2017

They come from across the greater Midwest — Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, Detroit, Cleveland — and up into Canada and farther.

A 3 year old Sasha Stefanovic first played real basketball at this intersection of faith, family and heritage known as the Serb National Federation tournament. He dribbled up the court in his yellow St. Elijah jersey and headband. During timeouts he ran to the bench and drank from his milk bottle.

Stefanovic can't play in this weekend's 78th annual event in Merrillville. The commitments of a rising basketball career intervened with tradition. The recent Crown Point graduate's absence will continue for a few more years as he focuses on the next chapter of his basketball life at Purdue.

Yet so much of the person and player Stefanovic became traces back to those first tournaments. Actually, you can go back even further, to two Yugoslavian immigrants who grabbed a suitcase with one hand and a baby with the other and came to America in 1970.

Stefanovic doesn't forget. He can't forget. Tuesday night he posed for a post-graduation photo with Zoran and Ljiljana Stefanovic, then posted an instagram message that concluded: "I will not let them down."

"Imagine coming over with \$20 in your pocket to a country where you don't speak the language and you don't know anybody and you go and work in a steel mill," Stefanovic said after the All-Stars' exhibition win over the Junior All-Stars on Tuesday.

"I appreciate their struggles and I realize that what they did was for me and my brother and their future family to succeed. Me and my brother, all my cousins — we work hard because we know we can't let them down."

A carpenter by trade, Zoran Stefanovic crafted a comfortable life for his young family in the Serbian city of Aleksinac. (Serbia and the other Yugoslavian provinces did not split into their own countries until the early 1990s).

A big piece of Zoran's own life, however, remained thousands of miles away. His father, Bronko Stefanovic, left his young son at home to serve in World War II and kept moving after it ended.

Bronko became one of many Yugoslavian immigrants who settled in northwest Indiana to work in Gary's steel mills. In 1970, Zoran received a visa to visit his father after a nearly 30-year absence. Ljiljana and their 6-year-old son, Lou, came with him.

That visit never ended. Zoran began working at U.S. Steel. Lou enrolled in kindergarten. The Stefanovics established a work ethic Lou later saw in his own sons, Dejan and Aleksandar — who goes by his nickname, Sasha.

"They're both retired now, but there was no such thing as a job above you or a job below you," said Lou Stefanovic, a production manager for Ford Motor Company plants in the Chicago area. "They did whatever they had to do to keep the family with all the things they needed.

"He sees that and picks that up. It's what drives him also. You always have to ask yourself, 'Why did they have to give up their life for you to do better?'"

The Stefanovic family story is special, but it isn't unique. Evansville native Clint Swan didn't appreciate the region's ethnic identity until he began coaching at Crown Point. More than once he's seen a Serbian flag flying in the crowd at Bulldogs basketball games.

It's a community that loves basketball — and, according to Swan, loves Sasha.

"They see Sasha doing well and they feel like he's a part of them," Swan said. "If we have a game at Michigan City or LaPorte or someplace far away, they want to come out and watch because they feel like he belongs to them."

Lou Stefanovic loved playing pickup basketball games in the parks and concrete lots around northwest Indiana. Yet he didn't play organized basketball until, on a dare from a friend, he tried out and made the Gary Wallace freshman team. He moved to Merrillville, where his standout career earned him a scholarship to Illinois State.

A 6-7, 220-pound forward, Lou Stefanovic starred for Redbird teams that advanced to three NCAA Tournaments. He averaged 17.5 points and eight rebounds as a senior, capping a career that later put him in the Illinois State Athletics Hall of Fame.

The Seattle Supersonics selected Lou in the fifth round of the 1985 NBA Draft. His six-year European pro career included a stint with Red Star, a top club in the Serbian capital of Belgrade.

Sasha, the 6-4 shooting guard, doesn't physically resemble his father from the neck down. According to one source, height isn't the only difference.

"Sasha's definitely more of a playmaker," said Dejan, who also played for Swan at Crown Point. "My dad, if he catches the ball, he's shooting it every time. He's not looking around. He's looking at the basket."

What they have in common is a quiet yet intense approach to basketball. Dejan too. Their mother, Helen, listened for the slam of the front door to identify who lost the latest pickup game.

As a sophomore, Sasha Stefanovic helped Crown Point go 19-9 and win its first Class 4A sectional championship in seven years. Then he went to Swan and asked him to make the next season harder. He wanted to play more of the state's top teams.

That's how Warren Central, Lawrence North, Pike and others ended up on the Bulldogs' schedule. Not coincidentally, those were some of Stefanovic's best games.

"That little extra work that (Helen) and Lou have always required from Sasha, it's paid huge dividends for him now that he's in high school and ready to go to college," Swan said. "It's been a part of his makeup that he's never backed down."

Indianapolis hosted the 2002 FIBA World Championships. Dejan and Sasha Stefanovic weren't rooting for Paul Pierce, Reggie Miller and Team USA in the Conseco Fieldhouse crowd. They cheered as Vlade Divac, Peja Stojakovic and Yugoslavia took home the gold medal.

The Stefanovic boys posed for pictures with those stars, who also played for their favorite NBA team, the Sacramento Kings.

"Kobe and Shaq ruined our childhood," Dejan Stefanovic said of the Los Angeles Lakers stars who ruled the Western Conference at the time.

In 1983 Lou Stefanovic tried out for Yugoslavia's U20 team that would compete at the World University Games. Jumping ahead 34 years, Sasha recently attended a similar tryout for the Serbian federation.

He's already committed to a busy summer with Purdue, which will represent the United States at the World University Games in August. Stefanovic hopes to pursue competition with the Serbian national team in the future.

He'll keep his heritage close to his heart at this weekend's All-Star series. Zoran, in his Purdue cap, and Ljiljana Stefanovic sat right up front at Thursday's exhibition at Plainfield.

"They haven't missed a game my whole life," Stefanovic said. "It's part of who I am, and I'm glad to be Serbian."

Newcomers change Purdue's look

Brian Neubert / GoldandBlack.com / July 12, 2017

It remains to be seen how much Purdue's newcomers will be impact this coming season, as the Boilermakers are clearly a team set up to go as far as their veterans can take them.

But the immediate impact the fresh blood has made has been to change their team's look overnight.

The freshmen, notably combo forward Aaron Wheeler, versatile guard Nojel Eastern and 7-foot-3 redshirt freshman Matt Haarms, have brought new dynamics to the Boilermaker roster with their athleticism, length, speed and height relative to their positions.

Junior college transfer Eden Ewing arrived this week, but as of Tuesday had not yet been cleared administratively to officially participate, almost certainly a formality. Once he is green-lighted, the forward might quickly prove to be the team's most dynamic athlete, if that's not Wheeler.

Even guard Sasha Stefanovic, a player who'll be categorized primarily as a shooter like Dakota Mathias and Ryan Cline before him, has brought more size, length and athleticism than those who've come before him in that niche.

"Jon Octeus came in the locker room (Monday) and said, 'How did these freshmen get so bleeping big?'" Cline said. "I was like, 'Yeah, they're pretty big compared to us.'

"Their dynamic really fills us out, especially athletically."

Nobody on Purdue's roster — mountainous Isaac Haas aside — passes the eyeball test quite like Wheeler and Eastern.

Listed at 6-8, 200 pounds but appearing even bigger, Wheeler has been one of the most physically impressive rookies Purdue's seen walk in the door, given his length, height and explosiveness.

"When he catches balls 12 feet in the air," senior Dakota Mathias said, "it's pretty impressive."

That athleticism, coupled with Wheeler's dimensions, have been one of the biggest eye-openers of summer practices for Purdue thus far as it prepares for August's World University Games.

"He's a freak," Cline said. "I feel like he has springs on the bottom of his shoes. He gets up in the air so quick and so high, you don't really expect it."

Eastern has brought similar dimensions to a position you don't often see such things.

Though the 6-6, 210-pounder will likely play varying roles for Purdue, he's going to log important minutes at point guard behind senior P.J. Thompson.

During Tuesday's practice, as Purdue implemented press offense, Eastern's size and quick hands proved problematic on at least two occasions for Thompson, leading to back-to-back steals for the freshman, the second producing a one-handed breakaway dunk.

That defensive potential will also be put to use off the ball, as well, as Eastern provides the sort of physical presence defensively it could have used more of last season, even as Mathias emerged as one of the premier wing defenders in the Big Ten.

Haarms remains a work in progress physically, though assistant coach Brandon Brantley says the big man isn't far off some others who've played in the Big Ten lately.

But as is, he's a player who runs very well for his uncommon dimensions, moves well laterally and can't help but affect things with his height and endless wingspan.

"We led the Big Ten in scoring last season," Thompson said, "but I think we can be even faster, just because Isaac can't play 40 minutes, so we can't pound it inside for 40 minutes."

Purdue will rely heavily this season on its seniors in Vincent Edwards, Mathias, Haas and Thompson, with sophomore guard Carsen Edwards also clearly due to move into an even more prominent role.

That could afford Matt Painter and his staff the luxury to bring the newcomers along slowly if so desired.

But an early takeaway — and not a surprising one — from this summer thus far has been that the new faces have done just as was expected and completed Purdue from a physical perspective, balanced out some areas where the Boilermakers might not have otherwise been stacked and provided a potentially valuable complement to existing personnel.

"Athleticism is their strong suit," Mathias said. "... The more athleticism, the better, especially in this league."

Wheeler hopes to impress in other ways, too

Nathan Baird / Lafayette Journal & Courier / July 12, 2017

For Purdue guard Ryan Cline, the real eye-opener regarding Aaron Wheeler's talents came Monday, when the freshman nearly launched himself over Isaac Haas.

That's 7-2 Isaac Haas.

Multiple Boilermakers said the Wheeler who arrived on campus this summer seemed taller than the one who had visited over the winter. While the 6-8 forward from New England hadn't grown, the heights Wheeler has achieved in his first weeks on campus have impressed all over again.

"He's a freak," Cline said. "I feel like he's got springs on the bottom of his shoes. He gets up in the air so quick and so high that you don't really expect it. It comes out of nowhere."

That athleticism is welcome injection into a Purdue roster already stocked with skill and length. It's an identity that comes naturally to the Connecticut native and product of Brewster Academy in Wolfeboro, New Hampshire.

However, Wheeler also worked hard to overcome another identity — one he and his prep school coach believe was unwarranted. Skinny for his height, Wheeler was considered soft by some coaches. After beginning his senior year at around 180 pounds, Wheeler nearly achieved his goal of reaching 200 by the time he arrived at Purdue.

The best compliment Wheeler's teammates have paid him so far is the growing belief that he has already begun to resemble senior Vincent Edwards — considered one of the most versatile forwards in the Big Ten Conference.

"I personally didn't think I was playing soft," Wheeler said prior to arriving at Purdue this summer. "I was just a skinny kid. As time went on I would try to keep that in mind and not shy away from contact. As I got a little stronger it became a little easier.

"I don't want to be the biggest guy on the court. I just want to be wiry strong so I don't get pushed around and I can finish through contact."

Brewster Academy coach Jason Smith said Wheeler's soft reputation came from his lack of mass, not a lack of toughness. However, he also credit Wheeler's mature approach to those criticisms and the work he put in to reverse them.

Smith said college coaches considered Wheeler the most improved player on a talented Brewster roster last season. One reason: the confident way he began dunking in traffic and more aggressively attacking the basket.

"He's not soft by any means," Purdue senior guard Dakota Mathias said. "He's battling down low, getting rebounds, put-backs, dunks. I think he shut that up pretty quick."

Like Edwards, Wheeler should help both around the basket and on the perimeter. He hit five 3-pointers while scoring 22 points and earning MVP honors in Brewster's National Prep Championship victory over Northfield Mount Herman last March.

Wheeler said he considers 205-210 pounds his ideal playing weight. While his legs are still a bit on the skinny side, it's obvious they're spring-loaded.

Over time the influence of Purdue assistant director of sports performance Josh Bonhotal could do for Wheeler's upper body what it's done for junior center Jacquil Taylor and others.

"Those skinny legs have some hops in them," said Edwards, who echoed Cline's opinion in calling Wheeler a "freak" athlete.

"He's springy. Hopefully we don't kill him and his legs don't go away and hit that freshman wall like everyone does."

Taylor finally healthy after three injuries in five years

Mike DeFabo / CNHI Sports Indiana / June 28, 2017

While the Purdue basketball team enjoyed its best season in recent memory, Jacquil Taylor was dealing with one his most challenging.

A stress fracture in Taylor's ankle forced the 6-foot-10 junior to undergo surgery, which again ended his season. Taylor was relegated to the bench, usually with crutches nearby and a brace on his ankle, as the Boilermakers were winning a Big Ten Title and making a run through the NCAA Tournament.

"It was frustrating because I'm a competitor," Taylor said. "I always want to play if I can help the team out. Sometimes you just can't control injuries. People say things happen for a reason. I never planned getting hurt. But I feel like it made me stronger mentally."

Now, as Purdue gears up for the World University Games, Taylor is finally back on the court and fully healthy.

The World University Games from Aug. 19 to 30 in Chinese Taipei, along with the 25 to 30 practices for the event, will give all of the Purdue players an opportunity to develop and mesh with new teammates. But it will be especially valuable for Taylor, who will look to regain his form after enduring three season-ending injuries in five years dating back to a lisfranc injury his junior year of high school.

Getting back on the court after all that time missed is a process. During a practice last week, Taylor fired up an ill-advised 3-pointer during a drill and was met with puzzled looks from coaches. Soon after, he passed up a mid-range jumper. Vincent Edwards pulled him aside, telling him, "That's your shot."

Taylor isn't afraid to admit he's still getting back in the swing of things.

"I'm absolutely rusty," he said. "I won't deny it. But it's just a matter of keep playing and get back into it. One thing my dad always said is simplify my game. Coaches stress that, too. Simplify the game and everything will work itself out."

Taylor, a native of Cambridge, Mass., came to Purdue as a part of a pivotal recruiting class that included Edwards, P.J. Thompson, Dakota Mathias and Isaac Haas. However, injuries have robbed Taylor of virtually two entire seasons.

Though he's played just 102 minutes at Purdue, Taylor could see his workload significantly increase next season. Now that All-American forward Caleb Swanigan has moved on to the NBA, the Boilermakers will need to add some depth to their front court.

Newcomers in the form of redshirt freshman Matt Haarms, junior college transfer Eden Ewing and freshman Aaron Wheeler will be among those competing with Taylor for playing time behind seniors Haas and Edwards.

"I feel like my role is going to be to rebound, run, defend, score when I get the chance," Taylor said.

Playing time certainly won't be guaranteed. But after the injuries that Taylor endured, he's thankful for the opportunity to compete for it.

"After having three injuries in five years, it's very frustrating. You feel like you can compete with those guys," Taylor said. "But in a sense, it shows your true character. Is it going to bring you down? Or is it going to build you back up again? I feel like it's going to build me back up again. My mentality is to never quit. Even when things look bad, never quit."

Haas, Edwards set to make a name for themselves

Mike DeFabo / CNHI Sports Indiana / June 20, 2017

Purdue's Isaac Haas went through the NBA Draft process with some questions about how a 7-foot-2, 290-pound center fits into the modern NBA. He found that, yes, there is a place for him in the pros — and that place is on the low block.

"They told me the same thing. Just be good at what you're good at," Haas said Wednesday, speaking publically about his decision to return to school for the first time. "That's the only reason we brought you in. What you're good at is good enough to get you there. When you try to get outside of yourself and make yourself look stupid is when you lower your stock"

During most workouts, players are asked to shoot 3-pointers "around the world." Haas has never even attempted a college 3-pointer. Instead, they asked him to just shoot from where he was comfortable.

"I went right to the 15-foot line and like, nope, this is about it," Haas said. "That's as far as I'm going."

Instead of seeing this as a shortcoming, the NBA teams appreciated that Haas understood what made him one of the most efficient players in college basketball the past two seasons.

The rising senior worked out for the Oklahoma City Thunder, Boston Celtics and Minnesota Timberwolves. Haas said he "barraged" coaches and scouts with questions.

"They said that you do fit in with a lot of teams because a lot of teams need one true big," Haas said. "There are not a lot of true bigs in the NBA right now. There are a lot of skilled bigs that are more stretch 4 or 5s. But true bigs are the ones that set hard ball screens, rebound, they score when they're given the ball in the low block ... and they get their teammates open."

Meanwhile, Haas' classmate Vincent Edwards had a better sense going into the predraft process what to expect, since he was entering his name for the second time. He said the three teams he worked out for — the New Orleans Pelicans, Oklahoma City Thunder and Indiana Pacers — liked his long frame and versatility.

Edwards said he met with coach Matt Painter before making a final decision, which helped solidify that he should return to school. He said he's coming back for a variety of reasons.

"To come back and get my degree in college, which I know my mom will love, because that's something she preached from Day 1," Edwards said. "Then to be able to possibly rise my stock for the next up and coming draft, that's a bonus. Then to come back here and try to win the Big Ten, repeat as Big Ten champions and make that Final Four run."

For what it's worth, Draft Express currently projects Vincent Edwards will be selected 36th in the 2018 Draft and Haas will be taken 48th. Over the next season, as they try to defend their Big Ten Title and make another run in the NCAA Tournament, the two seniors will also be looking to bolster that stock.

"The thing with Vince and Isaac is they put their names in a very, very competitive and deep draft," Painter said. "It really wasn't fair to them because in a normal draft, I think you could have seen both of those guys keep their name in there. We've very fortunate, but both of those guys will come back and get their degrees. Hopefully, they'll be all-conference type guys."

Purdue's Isaac Haas out to maximize talents after NBA Draft feedback

Nathan Baird / Lafayette Journal & Courier / June 19, 2017

When Isaac Haas' NBA workouts split into shooting drills, the teams commonly told him to shoot from where he was comfortable.

Many big men trying to impress NBA scouts head for the 3-point line. Many end up hurting their evaluation in the process.

Haas, who has attempted a total of zero 3-pointers in his three-year Purdue career, knew his lane. He said he squared up about 15 feet from the basket — an honest assessment of his own range.

"I was like, 'Nope, this is about it. This is as far as I'm going,'" Haas said.

Haas worked out for Boston, Minnesota and Oklahoma City before deciding to withdraw from the NBA Draft and return to Purdue for his senior season. There isn't much question of Haas' impact on the college game. He's one of the most efficient post scorers in the country — a 7-2, 290-pound magnet for the desperation fouls of overwhelmed defenders.

However, with an offensive game limited to the paint and a defensive profile short on shot-blocking acumen and lateral quickness, Haas' NBA future wasn't certain. He said this week he came out of the process confident he can play at that level — if, and only if, he maximizes talents he already possesses.

"They told me the same thing — be good at what you're good at," Haas said. "That's the only reason we brought you in. What you're good at it is good enough to get you there. When you try to get outside of yourself and make yourself look stupid is when you lower your stock."

Haas goes into his senior season ranked sixth in Purdue history in field goal percentage (.576). A year ago at this time everyone anticipated him taking on a larger role as the starting center with Caleb "Biggie" Swanigan at power forward. The team's best on-floor dynamics, however, eventually dictated that Swanigan play a lot of center.

Swanigan stayed in the draft, and Haas again said he's ready for his minutes to expand. He's taken a page from Swanigan's book to reach the conditioning level he'll need to maintain his efficiency in longer stretches.

Prior to Wednesday's practice, Haas spent 20 minutes on the StairMaster — one of Swanigan's favorite base conditioning workouts.

"That was pretty awesome, seeing the kind of effect it had on him," Haas said. "Once I get used to it my legs will be fine, but now they're kind of dead."

NBA teams told Haas he needs to be quicker vertically. While he's not a rim protector, he can be a defensive presence when he's contesting straight up with his wingspan, rather than coming down with his arms and causing fouls. Offensively, he was told even the increasingly small-ball NBA has room for huge bodies who set hard ball screens, rebound and score on the block.

Those are also the things Haas wants to do in his final season at Purdue. This summer he must find the focus to follow through for an entire season.

"I've always see the success and stopped doing the things I was really good at and started reaching away from it and tried to prove things to people," Haas said.

"After going to the NBA and seeing these guys, they told me I don't have to prove anything, You have to keep doing what you're doing. That was kind of like a light flicker right there."