

After injury-plagued journey, Purdue's Taylor finally going 'home'

Mike DeFabo / CNHI Sports Indiana / March 19, 2018

he celebration rippled through Purdue's locker room Sunday afternoon following the Boilermakers' second-round victory.

Coach Brandon Brantley danced through the middle of the room. Injured center Isaac Haas placed a Purdue sticker on massive cardboard bracket. Vincent Edwards joked about the "blessing" he received on Twitter from rapper Lil B. Point guard P.J. Thompson stole a TV station's microphone and went around the locker room interviewing teammates.

Meanwhile, redshirt junior Jacquil Taylor sat in his locker calmly, with a smile stretched across his face. He looked so content. And he was. In the midst of March Madness, Taylor found peace.

"I'm going home," the Cambridge, Mass., native said.

Taylor scrolled through his phone. Already it was flooded with relatives from his hometown congratulating him ... and asking for tickets.

When the Boilermakers' NCAA Tournament continues in the Sweet 16 on Friday against Texas Tech, Taylor expects plenty of family members and friends to make the simple 15-minute trip just across the Charles River to see him play.

But Taylor's own route to the Sweet 16 has been a far more complicated and challenging journey.

Born on St. Patrick's Day, Taylor's Purdue career has been nagged by several bouts of bad luck. The 6-foot-10 center suffered three season-ending injuries in five years dating back to his junior year at Beaver County Day School.

In college, the injury woes — all related to the same left ankle and foot injury — started just six games into his career. The injury forced Purdue to shut down Taylor in his freshman year and then again in his third season.

Before this year began, it appeared a door had finally opened for Taylor. All-American big man Caleb Swanigan was gone. The frontcourt was not especially deep. Taylor was finally healthy and in a position to make an impact.

Then the nagging ankle injury flared again. Taylor spent October in a walking boot. By the time he got back on the court, redshirt freshman Matt Haarms had emerged and Taylor's minutes dwindled.

"It's not fair," Purdue coach Matt Painter said. "It just isn't. As a coach, you try to be transparent. But he's had a lot of bad luck."

The expectation going into this tournament was Taylor would play sparingly, maybe only at the very end of games. Then something ironic happened. During the Boilermakers' first-round game against Cal State-Fullerton, Purdue's dominant 7-2, 300-pound center Haas tumbled during a fight for a rebound. He fractured his elbow and in all likelihood is done for the season. Taylor, a player who has been plagued by injuries throughout his career, was thrust into an expanded role because of someone else's injury.

"I just told him, 'Any time can be your time.' Lo and behold, here we are," Haas said. "Something happened to me. He hates that for me. But I said, 'Hey, forget that. There's nothing you can do about that now. Be hyped up for yourself. This is your opportunity to get back on the court and show what you can do.'"

Taylor, who played just four minutes in the 13 games prior to the NCAA Tournament, responded with seven spirited minutes. He grabbed a rebound, scored two points and provided a defensive spark during the Boilermakers' second-round win over Butler.

"To not play all season and to have yourself ready to play in the biggest moment of the season is huge," Thompson said. "I'm happy for him. Now we get to go home for him and play in Boston."

In a backup role behind Haarms, Taylor will continue to provide critical minutes as the tournament continues and could even see his role expand as he becomes more comfortable. Every minute Taylor is on the floor is cherished.

When Purdue's NCAA Tournament began, the prevailing narrative was this would be the final ride for the Boilermakers' four seniors. Thompson, Edwards, Haas and Dakota Mathias have etched their names in Purdue's record books as the winningest class in school history. The group entered the program at its lowest point and elevated the team to the 2017 Big Ten Title and back-to-back Sweet 16 appearances.

But the thing that sometimes goes overlooked is Taylor was also part of that recruiting class. Injuries forced him to redshirt twice and kept him from playing alongside the rest of his 2014 recruiting class. Now, someone else's injury means he'll get the chance to be there when the other members of the class play their final game.

"It means so much that I was able to help the team and us as a whole for us to be able to pull out this win for the big fella," Taylor said. "To go home and potentially go to a Final Four and potentially win a national championship."

In one final workout, Dakota Mathias, sends Kelan Martin home

Gregg Doyel / Indy Star / March 18, 2018

They came together one last time in the handshake line. A physical battle between Purdue's Dakota Mathias and Butler's Kelan Martin, downright violent at times, is about to become physical again. Here comes Martin. And here comes Mathias. Closer, closer ...

Now they are hugging. Almost no words are spoken, because what is there to say? Purdue has just ended Butler's season with this 76-73 victory Sunday in the NCAA tournament, sending Mathias and his second-seeded Boilermakers to Boston later this week for the Sweet 16 — and closing out the college career of Kelan Martin.

Mathias and Martin are competitors and they are friends, and for both this game on Sunday was a little bit weird. They spent six weeks working out together this offseason at a gym in Pike Township, Mathias pushing Martin, and Martin pushing Mathias, never dreaming — I mean, can you imagine? — that one of them would have to end the other's career in the 2018 NCAA tournament.

Kelan Martin and Dakota Mathias worked out together

Kelan Martin and Dakota Mathias worked out together this summer in preparation for the 2017-18 season. (Photo: Courtesy of Jimmy Lafakis)

But there they were on Sunday at Little Caesars Arena, a small gym in Pike Township all over again, Martin with the ball in his hand and Mathias on his hip and the bigger, stronger Butler forward backing the Purdue guard down, backing him down ...

Mathias knows what is coming. The way Martin gets his body into Mathias, the Purdue guard leaning one way and then — poof! — Martin disappearing the other way as he spun into the lane for a little jumper? Hell, Mathias was there when Martin learned that move from skills guru Joey Burton of Champions Academy. Burton was the mad scientist, Martin the chemistry set — and Mathias the guinea pig.

Kelan Martin scored 29 points on Sunday, and he was magnificent: 9-for-18 from the floor, 8-for-8 from the line. He wasn't terribly efficient beyond the arc, going 3-for-10, but when he lowered that shoulder and used his 6-7, 220-pound body to muscle into the lane, well, there wasn't a damn thing 6-4, 200-pound Dakota Mathias could do to stop it.

"I knew what he was going to do the majority of the time," Mathias was telling me afterward, smiling at the helplessness of it all. "You've got to live with that sometimes against a good scorer. Good offense is going to beat good defense any day of the week. He had a great game. Got to the rim, made some tough shots. Great player. Unbelievable player."

And understand this: Mathias is one of the best defenders in the country. Has been for two seasons now, a pure shooter turning himself into a two-way player, a future NBA player. After this game on Sunday, walking Martin back to the Bulldogs' locker room for his final time in a Butler uniform, I asked Martin to put into words what it's like being defended by Mathias.

Martin didn't give me two sentences. He gave me two names:

"Khyri Thomas," he said. "Mikal Bridges."

Thomas, a guard at Creighton, and Bridges, a forward from Villanova, have won the last two Big East Defensive Player of the Year awards.

"He's one of the best defenders in the nation," Martin says of Mathias.

Mathias was picking up Martin 40 feet from the basket, whether he had the ball or not, invading Martin's space, leaning a forearm into his chest. Martin swipes the hand away. Mathias puts it right back. At one point Butler center Nate Fowler heads out to set a screen on Mathias, and Martin waves him away. This battle here, this was personal. Just Martin and Mathias. And Martin didn't want any help.

Martin rose on Mathias to bury an NBA-length 3-pointer in the first half, quick-triggered a catch-and-shoot 3 over Mathias another time, and took advantage of a four-on-three numerical advantage to hit an open 3 in transition in the second half. But his most effective play was to get the ball and start backing Mathias toward the lane for that medieval spin move.

"He probably knew what I was doing," Martin was telling me. "He saw it all summer."

Their summer together had a rhythm to it. Mathias was the first one to the gym in Pike Township, always first, driving the hour south on I-65 from West Lafayette and getting there early. Not five or 10 minutes early — a half-hour early. That's Dakota for you. Kelan Martin came to learn what Mathias' teammates at Purdue have known for years: Dakota is a little peculiar ...

"I wouldn't say that," Mathias is telling me, objecting to the word peculiar — OK, in our conversation I used the word weird — and trying out his own description instead. "I'd say: I like to get places early. I'd say: I like things a certain way."

Here's what's really weird about Mathias: He'd show up to the gym in Pike Township early, grab a ball and just start raining buckets. Most guys, they have to get warm before they can get hot. Mathias shows up and he's already smoking. Martin arrived on time, and took his time. His hips are tight, his body muscular, and he'd get warm at his own pace. Soon Joey Burton is putting Mathias and Martin through shooting drills, keeping track of makes and misses, knowing how much Mathias and Martin hated to lose.

After that, it was games of one-on-one. These would go on for an hour or more, and it wasn't just make-it, take-it. No, Burton had them playing with a purpose. First to five baskets, just to get the juices flowing, and then one-on-one from certain spots on the court: the elbow, the corner, the key. One-on-one coming off pin-down screens. One-on-one on defensive closeouts.

One day at the gym in Pike Township, Martin isn't scoring. Mathias gets three or four or five stops in a row — people there lose count — and Martin literally throws his hands into the air and screams: "He

knows everything I'm doing!"

Mathias doesn't answer. Not on the court. He'd say a few words maybe when they're getting water, but on the court he was quiet.

"It was all business," Mathias says.

Both guys say the competition was dead even, too close to call, and I'm asking Mathias: Was it really?

"Absolutely," he says. "Does that surprise you?"

"Well he's so much bigger than you," I'm saying, stammering, trying to remove the foot from my mouth. "I'd think he'd just back you down."

Mathias is staring at me. He's not letting me off the hook. I think he's enjoying this.

"Bigger guys," I'm trying now, "if they have any skill at all, they ought to beat the smaller guy."

Dakota is staring.

"Well," I say, giving up, "it seems like it."

"Yeah," Mathias says, smiling now, victorious. "But he's got to guard me too."

And there it is, the competitive streak that Joey Burton was tapping into this summer, a streak we saw Sunday when Mathias picked up his first foul. He was defending Martin 35 feet from the basket, hand-fighting away from the ball, neither giving an inch, friends or not, and now Martin is breaking toward the ball. He wants a hand-off from teammate Aaron Thompson, defended by Purdue's P.J. Thompson, but Mathias uses Martin's momentum to throw the Butler forward into P.J. Thompson. A whistle blows. Mathias is smiling, as he does for most of the game. I'm mentioning that to Mathias afterward: Season's on the line, and you're smiling?

"It was fun," Mathias says of one last workout with Kelan Martin. "He's a great competitor."

In the end, this game comes down to Mathias and Martin. Of course it does, right? Purdue has the ball with less than 30 seconds left. Painter calls a play for Mathias to curl off a screen, catch a pass from Ryan Cline and shoot a 3-pointer. The action unfolds just so, the shot is pure — the last three of Mathias' 11 points, along with five rebounds and four assists — and Purdue leads 76-71 with 13 seconds left.

At the other end Martin misses a 3-pointer, runs down the rebound and puts it in, drawing Butler within 76-73 with 2.1 seconds left. Purdue misses a free throw, giving Butler one last shot, but Kamar Baldwin's 40-footer at the buzzer bounces off the rim.

All that's left now is the handshake line, Martin and Mathias coming together one final time for a hug. And remember what I said earlier, how there were almost no words between them? Almost, I said. Almost. Because Kelan Martin did say the following as he let go:

"Good luck," Martin told Mathias. "Go win it all."

Haarms believes it will be business as usual for Boilermakers

Nicole Auerbach / The Fieldhouse / March 17, 2018

Matt Haarms does not want to hear you talking about how Matt Haarms now must step in to fill the admittedly large shoes of the injured Isaac Haas.

The reasoning behind this is simple: Haarms doesn't think anything will really change. Maybe his minutes, he guesses. But it's not like he's some scrub who never sees the floor.

"I've played in every game so far," Haarms said Saturday with a touch of defiance. "I play 16 minutes a game. I know what my role is within this team, and I'm going to continue to fill it. I've got a little more mobility (than Haas). I'm a little faster. I run the floor a little bit more. It's kind of exactly what you've been seeing. It's not like I haven't been playing. You're just going to see more of me and what I've been doing all year."

If that's the case Sunday when second-seeded Purdue takes on No. 10 Butler with a trip to the Sweet 16 on the line, then at the very least you can expect a whole lot of blocked shots and an imposing presence in the paint. Even coming off the bench, Haarms has blocked a team-high 75 shots this season; only 20 players in the country have had more. (Haas, by comparison, has 46 blocks.)

Haarms knows that he's a bit of a novelty, the 7-foot-3 center who will stand in for the 7-foot-2 Haas, who fractured his right elbow late in Purdue's win over Cal State Fullerton. But Haarms doesn't see it that way. He sees it as such: His roommate on the road is Haas, someone he considers "a great player, but an even better friend," and "it sucks" that Haas's college career had to end like this. And Haarms will stay focused, play to his strengths and help his team rally. Haarms' strengths differ from Haas', particularly on the offensive end. Haas was used like a traditional big man and carried a double-digit scoring load, while Haarms — who grew up in the Netherlands and has a distinctly European flavor to his game — thinks he can stretch defenses because of his comfort around the perimeter. He grew up learning a style of basketball that emphasized fluidity and passing and even frontcourt players focused on ball screens and various types of motion.

"When I came into high school here (at Sunrise Christian Academy in Bel Aire, Kan.), it's a lot more one-on-one, kill your man," says Haarms, a redshirt freshman. "In Europe, you definitely accentuate guard skills more. We are more focused on passing. I became a good passer when I was there — by necessity. You couldn't be on the court if you weren't at least a decent passer."

Haarms tried many sports as a kid, each serving as more of a chore than a passion. That changed when he was introduced to basketball at age 11 and nearing 6 feet tall. He looked forward to practices and always wanted to play more. He has always played as a power forward or a center. His major growth spurt — which he calls continuous, over a three-year period — came between age 14 and 17.

"I was the second-tallest kid in my grade and then I was the tallest by far," Haarms says. "I just kept going and going and going."

According to Purdue folk lore, he grew his final inch — the one that put him above Haas — after he arrived on campus at the semester break in late 2016. He also has gained 20 pounds, putting him up to 250. He speaks about the improvement he's made in his own game simply from facing Haas every day in practice. "Isaac is, I believe, the best center in the country," says Haarms, who also had the benefit of tangling with Caleb Swanigan during his redshirt semester. "Playing against him has prepared me for this."

Says senior forward Vince Edwards: "It's not that hard. We're not going in there going, 'Matt, you've got to go in there and do what Isaac did.' They're two totally different people. It's just, You've got to play the game the way you've been effective. We're not going to make you something you're not. Everybody just has to do a little more."

That is exactly what coach Matt Painter is telling Haarms. And all of it is what he's telling himself. No one is being overly emotional or dramatic. It's kind of like Haarms filling in for Haas when he's gotten into foul trouble. Now it'll be from the opening tip.

"Matt is long, he's athletic, he can run and he can block shots," Painter says. "He knows what's going on. The game matters to him. It's a great opportunity for him to be able to step up and stay in his role and be really good at being Matt Haarms."

Painter says Haas participated in part of Saturday's practice, running up and down the court, but he did not foresee him playing against Butler. "He can go out there and get in warmups and do things, but I don't think he's going to play," Painter says. "I'm obviously not a doctor. But I've been able to look at it and see — he just went through things today and just getting loose and everything. His legs aren't broken. You're allowed to still run when your elbow is fractured."

In the meantime, Haarms is preparing the way he always does. He's going to play the way he always does — not just like Haas did. Purdue is a program built on the backs of players who know exactly what their roles are and how to fill them.

"I'm not asked to go put the ball on the floor and score for us," says Haarms who is averaging 4.7 points and 3.1 rebounds per game. "We have some very capable scorers, of course. You can't have three basketballs at the same time, so we just share the ball. That's how we play. It all comes down to what we're about. We still believe we're a good team. We're just going to play the same basketball we've always played."

How All-American Carsen Edwards wound up at Purdue

Brian Neubert / GoldandBlack.com / March 15, 2018

Sometimes in recruiting, it's the players you don't get that matter more than the ones you do.

On Oct. 28 of 2014, Indianapolis Tech point guard C.J. Walker made an early commitment to Purdue, filling the Boilermaker coaching staff's need for a point guard in its 2016 recruiting class.

It was exactly five months later that all that time Walker had spent continuing to allow himself to be recruited by other schools while committed to Purdue culminated in him backing out of said commitment, sending Matt Painter and his staff back into a recruiting market they'd excused themselves from months earlier when Walker committed.

The first move was to offer a scholarship to Xavier (now Xavier) Simpson, a point guard out of Lima, Ohio, that Purdue had seriously recruited, but hadn't yet offered, prior to Walker's commitment.

Following the summer that followed, Purdue also offered Milwaukee's Te'Jon Lucas.

But somewhere in between, then-Boilermaker associate head coach Jack Owens found Texan Carsen Edwards through a tip from Lone Star State scout Blue Zertuche, who helps run the Great American Shootout events.

Owens tracked Edwards from there on out, but the combination of the coach's in-season game-preparation responsibilities and Atascocita's schedule kept him from making it to the Houston area for a game. But Owens spoke regularly with those around the player before visiting the school in the spring. Painter did, too.

Before long, Edwards was on Purdue's A-list.

On Aug. 11 of 2015, Edwards committed to the Boilermakers, as recruiting's game of musical chairs had taken effect.

He'd already officially visited West Lafayette at the end of June, a move Painter and staff don't employ often, normally reserving the fall for such visits, but did in this case.

Purdue had Simpson committed to make an official visit, though none was ever written in ink, and Lucas actually scheduled for one. At this point in August, Lucas' upcoming September visit resonated with Edwards, he said at the time, putting the thought in his mind that the Purdue opportunity could dry up.

Vanderbilt, one of Edwards' other primary considerations, took a commitment from Payton Willis, a top-25-ranked point guard out of Arkansas, putting an end to Edwards' plan to visit Nashville in September. Edwards doesn't recall whether he had a Kansas State visit lined up or not, but the Wildcats were involved. Owens believed Oklahoma to be involved on some level, but Purdue and

Vanderbilt were believed to be the two biggest players for him.

"Him and his mom wanted a really quality school academically," Owens said, "and that's why it was us and Vanderbilt."

And, in the end, Purdue.

"I came here and enjoyed the people, enjoyed Vince, who was my host," Carsen Edwards said of Vincent Edwards. "Coach Painter was honest with me. It came to a point where all the (other) coaches seemed to have the same pitch, but his was different. He kept it real."

Painter's pitch, per Edwards' recollection: "Kind of what I got from it was that if I came here and defended, he'd let me play the way he saw me play and recruited me to play, aggressive on offense, creating my own shot and finding different ways to score. He said he'd let me do that as long as I gave myself to the team on defense and just find ways to stay on the floor."

Today, Edwards enters the NCAA Tournament as the leading scorer on a Boilermaker team that takes a No. 2 seed into March Madness, after a surreal run of national honors came his way. In just his second year, Edwards is already an All-American, the second sophomore at Purdue to earn such acclaim in as many years. He was named a second-team All-American by USA Today, third-team by Sporting News, on top of being named a finalist for the Wooden Award for national player-of-the-year and the Jerry West Award, given to the nation's top shooting guard.

"It's crazy to be honored like that, whether it's first, second or third team, and it's a blessing," Edwards said. "But it's motivation, too, knowing that I can keep getting better. But the (first-team) Big Ten honor, as well. I remember coming in and I hadn't even played a game yet and Coach Owens said he believed I could get that honor."

Eventually.

This has all happened so quickly.

And now, what Purdue wound up getting in Edwards stands in stark contrast to who it had to beat out to get him, as often happens in recruiting, when rankings, reputations and such can go out the window as soon as a player sets foot on campus to stay.

Here's the thing, too: Circumstance and timing helped Purdue.

First off, Edwards played in the springs and summers for the loaded Houston Hoops grassroots program, which put him on the same team as prodigies De'Aaron Fox and Jarred Vanderbilt, each of them eventually to wind up at Kentucky. Fox is now a Sacramento King.

Both were eye-catching talents and high-usage players, Fox being particularly impactful to Edwards' role, since he played point guard, moving the smaller guard off the 1, at least primarily.

And that roster was loaded beyond its higher-end talents, as well.

"We thought (Edwards) could play both (guard spots)," Painter said, "but the issue was we had a tough time evaluating him (as a point guard) because De'Aaron Fox dominated the ball, and rightfully so. It can be difficult to evaluate when (a player is) in a different setting, but we knew his quality.

"We knew how well he could shoot the basketball. We knew of his explosiveness. We knew he liked basketball and that he was a worker. And education was very important to his family, so there were a lot of things that checked off."

Owens said Edwards might have been overlooked in the presence of his two elite teammates, because he didn't always have the ball in his hands. His size, and "baby" face, as Owens called it, probably didn't jump off the floor at recruiters, either.

And the market was naturally inhibited by circumstance.

Texas was hot and heavy for fellow Houstonian Jacob Young and landed him at the start of July. Texas A&M took J.J. Caldwell in Edwards' class. Neither recruited him all that heavily at any point in the process.

"I guess they didn't want me," Edwards said. "I don't really have too much else to say about it."

Baylor did recruit Edwards, but took Miami (Fla.) transfer Manu Lacombe in late April.

When Vanderbilt took Willis, it contributed to setting the wheels in motion.

When Edwards committed to Purdue — the only school he officially visited — in August of '15, it had its point guard, sort of.

Things changed.

The freshman arrived on campus in June in advance of Purdue's summer exhibition trip to Spain and immediately had a team full of veterans wondering whether the freshman would lead them in scoring, as in from Day 1. One of the very first things the 6-foot-give-or-take guard did on the summer-practice floor in West Lafayette was dunk on Isaac Haas, a fitting beginning to the origin story of a budding star.

Recognizing not only Edwards' prolific scoring ability but also his readiness to put it to good use, Painter essentially shelved his plans to use him as a traditional point guard, though there's no telling what the future could hold from here.

Edwards played a shooting guard's role in Spain, finished second in scoring to All-American-in-waiting Caleb Swanigan on that trip, then started virtually the entire season that followed as a freshman on a team full of well-established stalwarts.

Now, he's an All-American.

Already.

Meanwhile, C.J. Walker nears the end of his sophomore season at Florida State averaging 8.5 points on 42-percent shooting, the fourth-leading scorer on a .500 team in the ACC.

Simpson is emerging as a star at Michigan, but Lucas has played two relatively non-descript seasons at middling Illinois.

As for Willis, the player who served as Vanderbilt's opt-out on Edwards, he started four games this season and averaged five points for a team that won 12 games.

Continue reading below

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Carsen Edwards was trying to dunk on people in high school, too. This is from the 2015 Peach Jam. GoldandBlack.com

Sometimes, recruiting has a funny way of working out, as Purdue knows about as well as anyone.

"It's the old saying," Owens said, "that you get judged by who you get, not by who you don't get."

Now the head coach at Miami (Ohio), Owens doesn't seem all that surprised by the success his former recruit has experienced in two seasons at Purdue.

He remembers late July of 2015, when Houston Hoops were playing a tournament in Vegas, minus Fox and Jarred Vanderbilt, who were attending the Nike Global Challenge in Chicago.

Purdue already knew it wanted Edwards at that point. But on that day, it knew it wanted Edwards.

"Carsen had to be the guy there and that's when I said, 'Man, this dude has a chance to be special,'" Owens said. "It was like Damon Stoudamire-type stuff."

The evolution of Carsen Edwards

Mike DeFabo / CNHI Sports Indiana / March 14, 2018

You can hear Carsen Edwards before you see him.

The rat-a-tat beat of hip-hop music thumps through his iPhone, growing louder and louder as he approaches. Then, like a crashing cymbal, the Purdue sophomore bursts through the double doors. He bounces down the hall from Cardinal Court toward the locker room, with a ball in his hand. Each dribble and each footstep is perfectly on beat and in-rhythm. He is in the zone. His zone.

When Edwards was a kid, his dad gave him the nickname C-Boogie, because he was always dancing. Teammates usually just call him Boog. Everywhere Edwards goes, the music follows. J.Cole. Jay Z. The Lumineers. Ed Sheeran, even.

But most of the time, it's Drake.

"Anyone who knows me knows I love listening to Drake," Edwards said.

On this particular day, as Edwards walks through the hall and past Matt Painter, the coach gives him a smile. Alright, what's on today's playlist?

"Frank Ocean," Edwards replies.

Painter tilts his head sideways. It's not ringing any bells. A few moments later, Painter is talking with a few reporters about his own taste in music. He has one for Edwards.

"Carsen, do you know Bob Seger?" Painter asks.

This time Edwards is stumped.

Even when music isn't radiating from Edwards, there's a certain energy that pulses through him. His eclectic taste in music is matched only by his own unique sense of fashion. Purdue senior point guard P.J. Thompson likes to say Edwards has a little "Russell Westbrook swag." On the court, Edwards wears an arm band ... on his ankle. He wears brown sneakers Painter first mistook for Timberland boots. Short shorts in practice.

And then there's the beads. Yup, the beads.

His little sister, Aspen, put them in his hair this summer. Edwards promised to wear them for her. In a lot of ways, they say the most about Edwards.

"Who else do you know that can walk around as a grown man in college with beads in his hair?" senior forward Vincent Edwards said. "You can't wear something like that and not have confidence in it. But he has a certain confidence about himself, a certain aura and swagger about himself."

His game on the court mirrors his off-court persona. Flashy. Flamboyant. Fun. It seems almost every other dribble is between Edwards' legs. Before each free throw, he wraps the basketball around his back. The same way he can pull off styles others wouldn't dare, he can make shots others wouldn't attempt.

All of these things combine to form Edwards' brilliance. But it's also a double-edged sword.

"His confidence can't collide with reality," Painter said during Big Ten Media Day, before a single game was played this year. "Last year I'd tell him, Isaac Haas has got somebody buried to the concession stand and you shoot a pull-up 25-footer."

It takes a careful balance. How does a coach let Edwards be who he is, while also helping him to become the best version of himself? How do you add substance without sacrificing the style that makes it possible?

ONLY CARSEN

Sneakers squeak to a halt, and the drumroll of basketballs fades into the distance.

It's the summer of 2016, and Edwards is in the middle of one of his first college workouts. He stands with his hands on his hips, head down, as Painter pulls him to the side. The gym is silent.

"Be like a card player," Painter tells Edwards. "Just don't show your hand."

Edwards, who grew up about 25 miles north of Houston, arrived at Purdue as a heralded four-star prospect and a Max Preps All-American. He joked in a tweet that he graduated first in his class at Atascocita High School, was accepted into all eight Ivy League schools and was the second African-American to separate Siamese twins.

Not everyone got the joke. Close to 700 people retweeted it. More than 1.7 thousand liked it.

The true stories about Edwards sometimes sound even more like tall tales. The best of them is that he once set high school record with 50 points, shooting 13-of-15 from 3-point range during his final district playoff game.

Yet, because he stands just 6-foot-1, he was sometimes overlooked. His high school coach David Martinez remembers the time a coach from the University of Texas' previous staff came to see Edwards. The scout talked with Martinez before the game and admitted he didn't think Edwards was Big 12 talent. He was kind of small. He didn't really fit the mold.

"By halftime, he had 31," Martinez said.

"By halftime," Martinez said, repeating himself for emphasis.

Even Edwards' commitment to Purdue came through a curious twist of fate. The Boilermakers already had their point guard in C.J. Walker. But when Walker decommitted, the coaching staff jumped back into the market quickly. They lost Walker and found one of the most unique guards instead.

It took less than a week for Edwards to prove himself in West Lafayette.

In one of his first practices, the young guard came off a ball screen and in a flash rose up to dunk over Haas. Just in case you don't know, Haas is 7-foot-2. Practice practically shut down. Caleb Swanigan's adoptive father, Roosevelt Barnes, ran out of the gym screaming. Swanigan later immortalized the moment on Instagram.

"We knew he could jump," Vincent Edwards said. "That just showed how fearless he was going to the basket. He hasn't even played a single college game yet and he's dunking over people who are 7-2? I think that was a shocker to everybody."

But, like any freshman, that first year wasn't all highlights. It was filled with just as many of those silent moments with Painter using one of his sayings to relay a point.

What makes Edwards so unique is also what makes him a challenge to coach. Shots others don't think about taking, Edwards swishes. Plays others don't see, Edwards has already made before anyone can figure out how. When it works, it's as impressive as, well, as impressive as separating Siamese twins. But sometimes the margin for error in those plays is just as narrow as high-risk surgery.

Painter's challenge was to let Carsen be Carsen, but also help him to become the best version of himself.

The challenge was more difficult because Edwards was the only scholarship freshman. When the current senior class came in, there were five new pieces — Vincent Edwards, Isaac Haas, P.J. Thompson, Dakota Mathias and Jacquil Taylor (who redshirted). Painter would stop practices for a half-hour at a time to explain things.

That class eventually grew from those humble beginnings into a strong-willed group of leaders. But by the time Edwards arrived on campus, everyone was trying to lead him at the same time. The players. Painter. Assistant coaches. Everyone was in his ear.

As the only freshman, Edwards was like an only-child surrounded by helicopter parents. There were times when Painter and Edwards disagreed about more than just their tastes in music.

"I think that's one thing that kind of frustrated him his freshman year, especially during practice," Vincent Edwards said. "You feel like you're trying to do something right and you're doing it wrong. Somebody is always saying something. When you try to do something, it's always getting critiqued."

Sometimes Swanigan would take Carsen aside and talk to him. But more often than not, Vincent Edwards would wrap his arm around Carsen, tussle his hair and get a smile.

The two Edwardses aren't related. But since Vincent hosted Carsen during the recruiting process, their relationship has blossomed into almost like a big-brother, little-brother connection.

"Just coming in my freshman year, he was patient with me," Carsen Edwards said. "He talked to me. Even if it's not about basketball. I believe there's not much I don't feel comfortable talking to him about. That's my guy."

Still, even with Vincent Edwards by his side, Edwards' freshman season mirrored those practices. A jaw-dropping moment on one possession. A head-scratching play on the next. One possession, how the heck did he do that? The next, why the heck did he do that?

Edwards started 21 straight games, throughout the middle of the season. But after a 1-for-8 game at Penn State, Painter moved Edwards to the bench for the final seven games of the season.

"It's like dealing with your own kids," Painter said. "You've talked about something for a while. If they just keep doing it, whether you want to take their phone away or take the door off the hinges, you're going to do something. Those are your kids. You want to make them learn their lesson. If they keep locking the door and you tell them, don't lock your door. If they keep doing it, what are you going to do? Get the Black & Decker out."

TURNING A CORNER

Flash forward to this year. Around the midpoint of this season at Iowa, Edwards leaned against the white brick wall outside the visitors' locker room, with a pair of gold cross earrings dangling and a Jesus necklace pulled taut around his thick, muscular neck.

The Boilermakers had just dismantled Iowa in every definition of the word, setting a new Big Ten record with 20 3-pointers. Wearing those "combat boots" Edwards led the way with 22 points and 6-for-9 shooting from 3-point range. Aggressive. Confident. Efficient. Edwards was at his best.

But he was also something even more than that, something that wasn't there last year.

The Boilermakers director of basketball operations, Elliot Bloom, approached with a smile and a stat sheet. Bloom pointed to a line on the box score. Eight assists. Zero turnovers.

Games like this were why Painter was so tough on Edwards at times last year, why he pushed and prodded and always demanded more. Painter compares it to when he coached JaJuan Johnson and Ryne Smith. Smith was a great shooter. But Johnson was an All-American.

"At the end of the day, I'd have 20 things on a piece of paper that JaJuan needs to do better," Painter said. "I'd have two for Ryne. Because JaJuan can do them. He can do more. ... Nobody on our team should settle for being a good player. If you have the ability to be special, be special."

This season, Edwards became special. But the groundwork for it came in the offseason.

He played more basketball than probably any sophomore in the country. He was part of Kentucky coach John Calipari's U-19 USA Team that traveled to Egypt. He played with Purdue in the World University Games. Somewhere in between it all, Edwards sought out Joey Burton, an Indianapolis-based trainer, who refined Edwards' game even further.

By the time the season rolled around, Edwards started this season with plenty of Team USA gear, a bronze medal, a silver medal and plenty of new tricks in his bag.

Evidence of Edwards' evolution is clear across all of the stats, especially his decision-making, shot selection and ability to get to the rim. Last year, Edwards assist-to-turnover ratio was 1-to-1. This year, it's 1.7-to-1. His 2-point jumper percentage improved from 29.7 to 43.2. His 3-point shooting percentage improved from 34 percent to 41.3 percent.

Then there's the dunks. Like the beads, this is the part that tells something the other stats can't.

Throughout Edwards' career at Purdue, several dunks clanged off the back rim. It got to the point where Edwards' dad told him to stop dunking. Just lay it up. Take the two points. Call it a day.

But then an odd thing happened. Edwards stole a pass at Indiana and bolted down the court on a breakaway. With Hoosiers guard Josh Newkirk trying to chase him down, Edwards had no choice but to go up hard. It turned into one of the most memorable dunks of the entire season.

"I'm not playing," Edwards shouted over and over, with a throat slash for good measure.

More than a highlight, the play was poetic in some ways. Edwards had cleared so many hurdles this season. Now his growth had propelled him those final few centimeters to push him over the rim.

The second half of the Big Ten season, Purdue's fastest player found a new gear. The explosive, dynamic scorer also became an efficient one. It came to a head against Illinois. Edwards dropped 40 points, the first time a Boilermaker topped 40 since Glenn Robinson. The outburst included two more explosive, rim-rattling dunks.

In a rare move, Carsen Edwards joined Painter at the postgame press conference. They sat side-by-side: the coach and the future. This time, no one asked about Bob Seger or Frank Ocean. All Painter wanted to talk about was Carsen Edwards.

"To me, he's the best guard in the league," Painter said.

Before the season, just one single reporter in a media poll projected Edwards as an All-Big Ten player. By the end of the season? Everyone shared Painter's opinion. Accolades poured in. First-team All-Big Ten. NABC All-District. Wooden Award Finalist. Second-team All-American by USA Today. Third-team All-American by Sporting News.

The player who dances to the beat of his own drum set learned to play in unison with the rest of the band. But now, as his college career continues, there's more that looms ahead. Those four seniors who led him, the four seniors who play alongside him in the starting lineup will be gone. And then, it will be Edwards' turn to lead the band.

"They're going to need him to be a leader here in the future," P.J. Thompson said. "They're not going to have four seniors to look to when things are going bad. They're going to look to the best player, which is going to be Carsen. I want him to get that now. If he can get those qualities now, it will just make Purdue better in the future and it will make him a lot better player."

Already, you can see the transition to the forefront in ways big and small.

Sometimes at night, Edwards will turn the lights off and transform his campus apartment into "The Studio" with black lights glowing around him. Microphone in hand, he pulls a sheet over his head to keep the outside noise away, while he records his own rhymes. He's started to invite freshmen Nojel Eastern and Aaron Wheeler into The Studio, leading them in his own unique Carsen Edwards sort of way. (Word is Eastern can reallly rap.)

But that's the future. It can wait.

For now, there are more goals to achieve right now, this season.

Edwards has evolved from a flashy freshman with potential to a sophomore with style and substance. Now, as the NCAA Tournament begins, the player they call Boog will have his chance to make a statement in the Big Dance, with the whole country watching ... and listening.

Isaac Haas maximizing his effort over maximum minutes

Nathan Baird / Lafayette Journal & Courier / March 14, 2018

By this summer, Purdue associate director of strength & conditioning Josh Bonhotal had tired of the questions.

Reporters, pro scouts, people he encountered around campus — everyone had the same skeptical query.

Could senior center Isaac Haas really play more than 20 minutes per game and maintain his efficiency?

"It's something I came to him with — 'Isaac, I'm so sick of people asking me if you can play 20 minutes,'" Bonhotal said. "There's not a question in my mind. But it has to be an everyday thing for you."

That everyday thing — a summer and fall full of sprints up Slayter Hill, extra workouts outside of team activities and improved dietary discipline — allowed Haas to average a career-high 23.6 minutes per game this season.

In the most crucial final weeks of his crucial, final season, the 7-2, 290-pound center took his stamina to another level. He's played 27 or more minutes in nine of the last 12 games, peaking at a career-high 32 at Wisconsin. As his usage increased, Haas raised his field goal percentage, free throw shooting, rebounding and turnovers to career-best averages.

After averaging 17 points and eight rebounds in three Big Ten Tournament games, Haas admitted this season's transition to a bigger workload hadn't immediately been a smooth one. He recently emphasized the game he put into his minutes over the minutes he put into a game.

"I think sometimes this year I would try to pace myself, so that would result in me having lower rebound numbers, lower touches, having to create from 15 feet, dribbling in," Haas said. "It made my job harder. It's gotten to the point now where I'm going to go really hard until I've got nothing left."

That was an easier mentality to have as a freshman, when Haas could focus on all-out effort in shorter stints. A.J. Hammons carried the bulk of the load during Haas' freshman and sophomore years. Caleb Swanigan, generally considered a power forward, was the Boilermakers' primary option at center last season.

Bonhotal used to cringe at claims that Haas didn't play more minutes because of conditioning. He said Haas is probably the leanest player on Purdue's roster other than rail-like redshirt freshman forward Aaron Wheeler and compact sophomore guard Carsen Edwards.

Yet the extra weight Haas carries with each long stride meant his standards had to be higher.

On top of Haas' weightlifting regimen, he conditioned daily with Bonhotal in the offseason. From those Slayter Hill runs to 100 or 200-meter intervals on the track to sessions on LeBron James' cardio machine of choice, the Versaclimber, to full-court sprints capped by medicine-ball circuits, Haas took Swanigan's lead as a big man setting a team-wide work ethic.

"He couldn't have some of the same luxuries as his teammates at being able to take a day or two off," Bonhotal said. "He has to work harder than any player in college basketball to do what he does. That's something I don't think most people appreciate and even he at times didn't appreciate."

Haas' presence deep into games can be critical in the NCAA Tournament. Many opponents — including 15 seed Cal State Fullerton in Friday's opener — won't have an obvious straight-up answer for the third team All-Big Ten Conference selection. They'll have to design one, and that's easier said than done on one-day turnarounds if the Boilermakers advance.

Purdue coach Matt Painter joked recently that redshirt freshman post Matt Haarms may lead the nation in times subbed out per 15 minutes. Haarms, playing the backup role Haas once thrived in, said it's a no-brainer.

"Isaac is just such a force to be reckoned with out there that I want him to be out there more," said Haarms, speaking with a swollen lip from the stitches he got after Haas bumped him on the final play of Sunday's practice.

"Every single second he's out there he's a problem for the opposing coach. Every time he comes in he's like, 'I don't want to deal with this guy. I don't want to deal with this monster of a man I have to guard somehow.'"

Yet one stat did drop this season. While Haas' average of 6.8 fouls drawn per 40 minutes still ranks in the top 25 nationally, it's easily the lowest average of his career.

Haas goes to the free throw line 5.4 times per game this season and 4.5 over the course of his career. In five career NCAA Tournament games, however, he's attempted 12 total free throws.

Haas still takes a beating in the lane each game. He noticeably lumbered around postgame after Michigan's win in the Big Ten Tournament title game.

"I've got scratches and bruises all over my damn arms and legs to prove it," Haas said after Purdue's win over Penn State in the Big Ten Tournament semifinals. "I was pointing them out like, 'Dude, how are you not seeing this?'"

Painter has communicated with the Big Ten Conference extensively since Haas' freshman year in an attempt to have contact against his big man officiated correctly. He's heard them emphasize displacement or limiting defenders' ability to hook their opponents. He tries to hold them to their word.

It's possible that, like Fullerton, Purdue's opponents this weekend will be working with Haas for the first time. In some cases, that's an equalizer to the Boilermakers' physical advantage.

"At the end of the day, he's the only player that I coach that I think has been officiated wrongly," Painter said. "They don't have it out for him or anything. I just think they do a poor job officiating him. And I think they would agree he's probably the toughest guy they have to officiate."

"They want to call it like it's everybody else. It's not everybody else. He's 300 pounds. He can get deep position. He should be rewarded for that if they're pushing on him and they should call fouls. They don't like continuing to call fouls because then (the refs) are too much a part of the game."

Painter said he prefers Haas to stay in that 23-minute range, playing at his most efficient level. Haarms' presence off the bench has given Purdue some flexibility with minutes. Painter believes longer breaks during NCAA Tournament play could also allow Haas more opportunities to gather himself mentally and physically.

Even a school known for developing big men can't assume it will keep finding physical outliers such as Haas. After Purdue suffered its third straight loss at Wisconsin last month, Haas and the other seniors reminded their teammates the group's run would soon be over no matter how deep they played into the postseason.

Haas also committed to putting all of himself into whatever time he has left as a Boilermaker.

"I talked to the players and said there have been times I haven't given enough effort," Haas said. "I looked at every one of those guys and said, 'I'm going to give my best effort moving forward. So here I am.'"

Building a Haas

Mike DeFabo / CNHI Sports Indiana / March 9, 2018

It's 6 p.m. in Mackey Arena, almost three hours before Purdue will tip off against Maryland during a midseason Big Ten battle, and a few Boilermakers have begun to trickle onto the court.

Carsen Edwards and Nojel Eastern bounce up and down to the beat of the thumping music. Tommy Luce and Grady Eifert sit on the folding chairs alongside the court, in a competition to see which one can make a 3-pointer from the bench. (Luce wins). Somewhere Dakota Mathias is probably watching film or getting taped.

But if you're looking for Isaac Haas, you'll find the senior center in the weight room. Sweat has already begun to soak his yellow tank top, as he lowers his 7-foot-2, 295-pound frame under the squat rack. His knees bend. The weights rattle, almost as if even they fear the colossal human.

"Aaaahhhh," Haas shouts, punctuating each repetition with a grunt.

Next Haas is soaring through the air with green bungee cords strapped around his arms. Then he's powering through a set of incline bench presses. Later that night, Maryland coach Mark Turgeon will call Haas a "beast." He sure looks like it in the weight room.

Haas has always been a huge human being. But his journey to become more than that has been almost four years in the making. During his first three years at Purdue, Haas was an important piece of the Purdue basketball team. But he was also just that — a piece. He waited (somewhat patiently) for his turn while centers A.J. Hammons and Caleb Swanigan tore their way through the Big Ten.

Now, with those two big men in the NBA, Haas has become the center of attention. He's averaging a career high in virtually every statistical category — points (14.9), rebounds (5.6), assists (0.8) and blocks (1.4). His career field goal percentage of .590 ranks fourth in Purdue history.

But the stat that makes it all possible? The stat that sometimes goes overlooked? Minutes.

Haas is averaging a career-high 23.6 minutes per game. In some ways, for a 7-foot-2, 295-pound human, that may be the most remarkable stat.

Consider how different a 30-minute game is for Haas than it is for, say, 185-pound point guard P.J. Thompson. It's a two-fold challenge.

For one, just for Haas to keep up with the pace of a game, he has to work at 90 or 100 percent of his capacity just to get up and down the court. Thompson might only need 70 or 80 percent to jog back on defense. Then, consider Haas weighs about 100 pounds more than Thompson. Each step he takes, Haas has to overcome 100 more pounds.

The only player on Purdue's roster who looks remotely close to Haas is 7-3, 250-pound center Matt Haarms. But even he admits that's not a good comparison.

"I don't think anyone in the country can relate to what he has to go through at almost 300 pounds," Haarms said. "That's like if I wore three weighted vests. That's what it would be like to be

Isaac. But he's so strong, he just chugs through it. He's like a train."

This is the story of what fuels that train and what's keeping it chugging into the postseason.

Back in 2014, during his freshman season, Haas was standing around in the weight room during one of the Boilermakers' earliest offseason workouts. As the upperclassmen threw weights around, visions started to form in Haas' mind of what he could someday become.

The big man was already about 310 pounds and approached Purdue's Associate Director of Strength and Conditioning Josh Bonhotal with a request.

"Coach, can you get me to 330?" Bonhotal remembers Haas saying.

"I just looked at him," Bonhotal said. "I was like, 'Dude, do you want to play basketball or do you want to be in the WWE?'"

While the prospect of The Incredible Haas coming off the top rope of a professional wrestling match sounds intriguing, the reality is Haas was recruited to win battles in the paint, not on the wrestling mat.

Sure, Bonhotal could get Haas to 330. But there was no way he was going to. In fact, he set out to accomplish just the opposite, making Haas into the leanest, most efficient version of himself. That took a two-pronged approach: diet and exercise.

There was a point when Haas used to walk into Triple XXX and have a plate of pancakes sitting in front of him before he even ordered. That's how often he visited the West Lafayette diner. There's another infamous story around the Purdue basketball program about the time Haas ate 40 chicken tenders in one sitting. Bonhotal had to change that thinking.

"You don't put regular fuel in a Ferrari," Bonhotal used to tell Haas.

The analogy stuck. Today Haas might be one of the only Americans who can top 300 pounds on a scale and boast a six pack. He's one of the Boilermakers at less than 10 percent body fat.

"Isaac is our unofficial dietician," Haarms said. "If something is bad for you, you'll hear it from Isaac right away."

While Haas cleaned up his diet and remade his body, Bonhotal worked to redefine Haas' goals. Those earliest workouts, Haas couldn't resist the urge to pile weight on the bar.

"In his mind, that meant he was strong," Bonhotal said. "The reality was, he'd put a lot of weight on and move it like crap. Yeah, you had all this weight on the bar. But you're not very strong. You're very big. You have a lot of mass to you. You're difficult to move. But you're not actually strong yet."

Bonhotal brought Haas all the way back to the basics.

The first summer, it was largely just body weight type movements and isometric holds. Haas would hold the bottom of a squat with just his body weight, or maybe a light kettlebell at the most. The workouts challenged stability and positions more than raw power. The goal was to send Haas down the path of functional strength.

"No matter how strong you are, what it comes down to is: Can you get into the positions necessary to create those forces in the right manner or the right direction?" Bonhotal said. "Can you cut a guy off? Or can you come over and finish at the rim in time before that other big can get there and challenge your shot?"

Haas took the same approach for conditioning, as well. To this day, his conditioning centers around three main staples. There's an interval workout on a VersaClimber, an interval workout on the court and then a medicine ball circuit. If you watch the medicine ball circuit in person, it looks an awful lot like a big man battling for position on the block and then sprinting back in transition. That's by design.

"What that does is it really kind of simulates the extended nature of a game, especially for a big," Bonhotal said. "They're running the court to get down on the block. Now bang, receive and give contact. Take on load and kind of battle down there. Just to then release and run again."

Back in the weight room Haas is onto his next exercise.

He catches a medicine ball, slams it into the ground and jumps onto a box. If it looks like a power dribble and a dunk, good, that's the idea.

His pregame workouts are not designed to build strength, but rather to build confidence and prime his nervous system for the rigors of a physical Big Ten basketball game. The exercises are specific not only to sport but also to opponent. Against Maryland, when Haas will have to guard more ball screens, the exercises work his lateral agility and change of direction. Against a heftier opponent, he might work more on squats and power movements.

All of it is in an effort to get Haas to play at his best in the biggest moments — late-game situations when coach Matt Painter loves to play the percentages and get the ball to his most efficient player. In previous years, when fatigue set in, Haas would make mistakes in clusters. A travel on one side. A foul on the other. A turnover.

Now, in the critical moments, he's fresher and better than ever in his career. Moments like when he sunk a critical free throw to beat Michigan. Or moments like when he scored a career-high 26 points at Indiana while playing a career-high 30 minutes.

For three years, Haas worked to be ready for these moments. Now he's here.

"When you just work so hard all four years of your career and you're here, you're in the moment, you're comfortable with it," Haas said. "You're just like, OK, let me take the last shot. I got it. Let me have the crucial possession. Let me get the crucial rebound."

After coming up a win short in New York, the urgency of March looms

Dana O'Neil / The Fieldhouse / March 5, 2018

His pregame scout done, Matt Painter asked his assistant coaches if they had anything to add. Tucked into one of the spaces in the locker room usually inhabited by the New York Knicks, Brandon Brantley piped up. As a Boilermaker himself, Brantley once won the team's "Play Hard" award, so no surprise, his advice was more about oomph than Xs and Os. "Any 50/50 balls, we gotta dive on them like a f----- grenade." A few minutes later, after the pep talk had ended, sophomore guard Carsen Edwards weighed in: "I ain't diving on no grenade, man." Everyone got a good chuckle out of Edwards's quip, Brantley shaking his head that the young Boilers didn't understand war movies.

Alas, for Purdue fans, Edwards wasn't joking. For four days, Painter preached variations on the same sermon, imploring his players to essentially heed the words tattooed on their backsides. PLAY HARD, the Boilers' practice shorts read. "Empty your tank," Painter said. "The toughest team will win," he warned. "Take the f----- fight to them," he begged.

Instead, Michigan was the team that emptied its tank. Michigan was the toughest team and Michigan brought the f----- fight and then some, rolling over Purdue, 75-66, on Sunday to win the Big Ten Tournament and end any dreams the Boilers held of securing a top NCAA seed.

And when it was over, when the Boilers returned to the locker room and the grenade finally detonated, there was nowhere to hide. Painter lit into his players, questioning their maturity and calling out their body language. "We're better than that. We're better than that. Period. Period," he screamed. "We're not going to disrespect the game. You don't play hard? You sit. You don't want to defend? You're gonna sit. Rebound, defend, play hard. That's all it is. That team out there, that's not us, but if we don't fix it, it's going to happen again. We gotta make sure it doesn't happen again."

It is the last, of course, that is the most. If it happens again, if the Boilermakers defend ball-screens as they did against Michigan, if they let their energy and concentration ebb and flow, if they listen to the fans in the stands catcalling at Painter more than to Painter himself, it will be over.

Four years ago, four freshmen arrived on campus in West Lafayette, Ind., determined to change things at Purdue and by all accounts, it has been a magical ride. The Boilermakers have won one regular-season Big Ten title and earned three consecutive NCAA bids, rolling to the Sweet 16 last season. They have endeared themselves to Purdue fans and alumni, writing a once common tale, of a recruiting class growing into wise senior leaders who in today's hoops culture renders the nickname-less quartet of Isaac Haas, Dakota Mathias, Vince Edwards and P.J. Thompson the Four Unicorns.

But magical rides can also have a way of going poof, especially in March.

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Outside was chaos. Outside was Michigan against Michigan State, cussing coaches and a sold-out crowd at Madison Square Garden in full-throated glory. Painter didn't want the outside filtering in, not here and not now. Ten minutes earlier he walked into a typical pregame locker room, players scattered in various forms of prep. Carsen Edwards sat on a sofa, chatting quietly with Aaron Wheeler. Mathias and Vince Edwards were in their own zones, headphones canceling out the noise. Jacquil Taylor swung his long legs back and forth like a pendulum, teammates daring him to see if he could kick out a ceiling tile. Everyone casually watched the Wolverines and the Spartans, reacting to big plays with the occasional oohs and aahs.

The Boilers were so focused during their Friday shoot-around that Painter didn't talk for 30 minutes. (Photo by Dana O'Neil) But now the television was off and Painter had his Boilermakers' full attention, and as he finished his last detailed scout of Penn State, their Big Ten tournament semifinal opponent, the coach tossed out one last bit of advice. "Don't turn the f----- TV on," he said. "This time of year, a lot of people talk about the big picture. There is no big picture. This is it. This is the only game you need to worry about, a one-game tournament. Play your asses off, and you'll get to play one of those teams tomorrow."

This is the challenge of the March tap dance. What is — that's never enough. There is always what could be. Bubble watchers and bracketologists own the slots before Selection Sunday, and then come the blank lines on the bracket itself, begging to be filled with intriguing matchups. Who's got next, that age-old pickup question, turns into who could be next, a subtle but dangerous semantics shift.

It is why coaches are even more crazy than usual this time of year, desperately trying to sequester their teams from the outside world. Purdue spent five days at the Lotte New York Palace Hotel, an opulent spot at the corner of 50th and Madison once owned by the "Queen of Mean" Leona Helmsley and later sold to the Sultan of Brunei. It served as a lovely gilded prison for the Boilermakers, who walked through the revolving doors only to board a bus for a practice or a game or to walk down the street for Chipotle. Asked how many stares he had received on the streets of Manhattan, the 7-foot-2 Haas shrugged. "Well, I haven't really been out of the hotel all that much."

Purdue was not here to see the sights, or in Haas's case, be a sight to be seen. "Unfinished business? I guess you could say that," Vince Edwards said while sitting on a settee in the hotel lobby. Four years ago, in a story told so often it has become folklore around West Lafayette, Edwards, along with Haas, Mathias and Thompson arrived on campus intent on changing Purdue's fortunes. The year before, the Boilers had finished a dismal 15-17 and 5-13 in the Big Ten, and the freshman foursome, through group texts and impassioned talks, devised their plan. They'd make rules and design their own punishments for things such as showing up late to practice. They'd hold one another accountable through the tough times, force one another to avoid the temptation of a parachute transfer if things got too tough.

Their arrival was no accident. Over breakfast at the Holmes Ballroom, Painter sprinkled a little reality over the fairy tale. He explained that he had recently read an article detailing how Villanova coach Jay Wright deconstructed his lineup after the Wildcats fell apart following a Final Four appearance in 2009. "Exactly the same thing," Painter said. The coach found himself looking in the same mirror as Wright, equally disgusted with the reflection. He realized he had spent his time on the recruiting trail talking to players about what Purdue could do for them, as opposed to making them understand what he needed them to do for Purdue. He assumed too much, figured they'd understand what it meant to prioritize team goals over individual ones, recognize the need to be accountable and decent. "Go recruit me human beings," he instructed his assistants.

"Being coachable, doing what's necessary to win, wanting to win, that's an actual talent," Painter said. "We stopped giving a value to those things. Those things have the most value."

It is that value added that has brought Purdue this far, a value that manifests itself in little ways that pay huge dividends. Take, for example, the two practices the Boilers held in New York during tournament week. Twice the team trekked to the basement gym of Baruch College, the 30-block bus ride serving as the only field trip the players enjoyed from their hotel. Neither visit lasted much more than an hour, the practices moving efficiently because Painter barely had to do anything. He shouted a few instructions and the players did what was expected, the familiarity in part based on an extended season that began on June 12 thanks to a summer trip to Taipei for the World University Games, but also because the Boilers have been in the program so long they could do this stuff in their sleep. At a Friday morning shoot-around, Painter didn't speak for 30 minutes. "Is this the quietest shoot-around you've ever been to?" asked Elliott Bloom, the team's director of ops. In fact, it was.

But there is a fine line between efficient and complacent, when comfort bleeds into a lack of an edge.

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"You've got to be tougher," Painter yelled as Vince Edwards plopped himself on the bench, a missed offensive rebound earning the senior a quick yank. Michigan was flat out embarrassing the Boilers, leading by 16 and scoring at will. Painter was waffling between all-out resigned disgust and pantomiming fury. Edwards's crime maybe didn't fit the punishment, but it was the most recent affront Painter could cling to, so he went in full bore, player and coach exchanging words on the bench. "I hope we can sit down and talk it out," Edwards would say after.

Odds are they will. Painter had already cooled off by the game's end, writing the exchange off to in-game emotions. It is the bigger issue — the toughness — that won't be so easy to resolve.

Purdue has all the pieces to win a national title — experience in droves, a transcendent player in Carsen Edwards, size, shooting ability — and the Boilermakers are physical. Take five minutes and watch Isaac Haas in the paint. It's like an old-school Godzilla movie, where the big monster is constantly flicking pesky cars and airplanes off of his biceps. But talent and physicality don't necessarily equate to playing hard. Despite having two 7-footers on the roster, the Boilers struggled mightily on the boards, and rebounding, to most coaches, is all about work. Penn State was down a big-man starter, and two other guys were saddled with foul trouble. The Nittany Lions still out-rebounded Purdue.

Rutgers, essentially relying on Corey Sanders to put on a one-man ISO show, nearly pulled off the upset in the quarterfinals because the Boilers could neither contain Sanders nor grab a defensive rebound. "Do you know what that game looks like if we win the defensive boards?" Painter told his team on Saturday. "We win in a blowout."

And Michigan, a should-be gassed team playing its fourth game in four days, dished out 18 assists on 26 field goals, turned the ball over just five times and wove together a defensive and offensive masterpiece that made the Boilers look lost and slow-footed.

The quirky Big Ten schedule could, however, work in Purdue's favor. Thanks to commissioner Jim Delany's burning desire to play his tournament in New York, the Boilers now have a full week off until Selection Sunday and at least 11 days until their first game. Painter plans to split the time between off days and practices and will perhaps play the Michigan game tape on a loop. He is not one to shelve bad games, preferring to use bad examples to drive home his points.

As stinging as his Michigan postgame remarks were, he ended the evisceration with as close to a positive note as he could. "Let's find a silver lining in this," he told his team. "Let's remember this, and not let it happen again."

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The no-hitter rule is not applicable here. They talk about it a lot. "We want to win a national championship," Thompson said. "And for us, it's not just a dream. We can actually do it. We're good enough to do it."

Of course, they are. More than one team has been the recipient of a conference tournament smack in the head, only to right itself for six magical games in March and April. But as the Boilermakers exited Madison Square Garden, they took with them one important reminder about fairy-tale finishes: They can go poof if you're not careful.

'Bigger than basketball'

Stacy Clardie / GoldandBlack.com / March 5, 2018

The photo is a bit blurry, but the fuzziness does little to lessen the impact.

Isaac Haas, a 7-foot-2, nearly 300-pound man, is sitting in a chair in Purdue's basketball locker room.

Nolan Paschal isn't even quite up to Haas' sitting height.

Turned out to be nearly perfect hugging height, though.

So that's what Haas did, even if it meant still having to bend a bit, as he opened his massive wing span to only quickly close arms around Nolan, whose response was leaning his head on Haas' right shoulder.

Picture snapped.

"That's, like, peek-a-boo kittens cute," Nolan's youngest sister Adelynne said afterward, aptly describing the frozen-in-time gesture.

A gesture of comfort, of support, of gratitude in one simple action.

On a night full of "awesome" for the 9-year-old with Williams syndrome, a developmental disorder characterized by mild-to-moderate intellectual disability or learning problems, unique personality characteristics and distinctive facial features.

That's the word, at least, Nolan used to describe everything that happened Feb. 18.

How he watched the Boilermakers beat Penn State, specifically mentioning favorite moments of seeing Carsen Edwards stick deep three-pointers and Haas sink what Nolan would tell him later was a nice baseline shot. (To which Haas responded, "Thanks, buddy.")

How he stayed up late to attend the 8 p.m. tip and actually lasted well past the 11 p.m. or so postgame festivities — he's usually in bed by 7:30, but at least he didn't have school the next day.

How he had the entire team autograph a copy of Gold and Black Illustrated.

How he showcased the form on his shot for the players, using a gold, plastic basketball given out at the game that was perfectly sized for his little hand.

How he had bounced from locker room to player lounge to film room, a special behind-the-scenes treat because all those areas usually off limits to all but program personnel.

How he met his favorite player.

The mammoth of a man in Haas.

The man whose Size 22 shoe, fresh with an autograph, Nolan's parents carried out with them as one tangible souvenir from the night. The shoe that extended from Nolan's toe to knee, when held up to see how long it was. The shoe that prompted Nolan to say to that measurement, "Whoa! We need to cut this thing off!" The shoe that dad quickly promised would not be cut off.

The man who has, on occasion, flexed his muscles after dunks.

The man whose most impressive muscle isn't, technically, visible.

Until opportunities arise like Feb. 18.

When director of basketball operations Elliot Bloom approaches Haas and the rest of the Boilermakers and says he has a special guest popping by. Like Nolan. Or like 10-year-old Tyler, a pediatric cancer patient. Or 18-year-old Ian, who has cerebral palsy. Nolan's and Ian's visits were in conjunction with Boiler-Maker-Wish, a student-athlete-run organization headed by volleyball player Ashley Evans that caters to granting Purdue-specific wishes to special needs kids.

But Bloom makes sure the team's list of opportunities to impact members of the community is considerable and wide-ranging, whether it's shopping alongside as many as 15 families at Meijer near Christmastime or loading up and delivering boxes of food at Food Finders or inviting a group from Big Brothers Big Sisters to watch practice and shoot baskets afterward or chatting with the folks at the Cary Home for Children over dinner at Mackey.

All of it matters, not just for linking the program to the community but for linking the community to the people in the program.

Because they're people worth knowing.

"They've got a great deal of compassion for people," Bloom said of Purdue's players. "I guess the best way to sum it up is they're just not selfish guys. They're probably what our society could use a little bit more of, just that compassion and selflessness."

Every opportunity Bloom presents, player relish it.

That's not how it's always been.

Bloom has served in his current role for 10 years with the Boilermakers, so he's seen multiple classes roll through, and, at times, he's had to do some prodding with players. But that has not been the case, ever, with this group, firmly cemented by its high-integrity, high-character senior class of Vincent Edwards, Haas, Dakota

Mathias and P.J. Thompson.

They just "get it," Bloom said.

"Unless you get out in the community, you don't realize the plight of some people," Bloom said. "They go out and do that stuff, and it's not fake. It's not like, 'Oh, let's get through this.' It's genuine. Some of them, their backgrounds are like, 'This is like home or people I grew up with,' so they relate. But even the ones who maybe grew up with it maybe a little bit better than others, they still get enough that they know (the impact). They have a great deal of empathy for others."

And that shows up in every interaction they've been blessed to have.

A five-minute chat with Haas allows folks to see he's not only what his body says he is: A potentially imposing dude who can rock a scowl and a bruise. He's a big-hearted guy who loves people and admittedly has a specific affinity for kids with special needs. His sister, Erin, has suffered from seizures all of her life, and big brother always has served as a protector, and, lately, an advocate for epilepsy.

It may be no wonder, then, Nolan flocked to Haas.

The size, first, is a bit intriguing. But ultimately it was Haas' personality, his willingness to soften, his willingness to ask about Nolan's life and his willingness to listen that Nolan truly became infatuated with.

After autographs were secured from the entire team, Haas asked Nolan if he'd seen the entire space yet. Nolan hadn't. So Haas popped up out of his chair and said he'd give him a tour.

"I took him throughout the rest of the locker room, kind of showed him stuff, talked to him a little bit, messed around with him. At the end, gave him a hug and told him come back anytime," said Haas, smiling as he relayed the story. "We just had a good time with that kid. He's a great kid. He's going to have a pretty good upside with the family he's got."

Haas' willingness to spend one-on-one time allowed Nolan an opportunity to relax.

And feel comfortable.

"He didn't want to leave," said Brandon Paschal, Nolan's dad and a Purdue grad. "And not threw a fit and didn't want to leave, but, like, went out and picked out a seat in the lounge and sat down and wanted to watch TV."

Mom Megan Paschal was trying not to cry as she watched the entire experience unfold.

For one, she knew Nolan was a bit overwhelmed but was so happy to see him holding it together.

For another, she saw the joy on her son's face.

"When they finally started coming out and got in there and they were all sitting there talking to him, it was really neat to see him," said Megan, also a Purdue grad.

"If he could articulate a dream, that would be it, for sure."

And so much of that was because of the response by the players.

Brandon and Megan admitted they — and maybe all of Purdue's fans — can see the players as a bit "untouchable," even considering them "kind of celebrities," which daughters Adelynne and 13-year-old Aubrey, who got a selfie with Mathias, quickly confirmed.

But then getting in a room with them, having conversations with them, they all realized they're just guys.

"They were genuine," Brandon said.

And that's not a one-time thing.

Perhaps the biggest test, so to speak, of the players' character came only two weeks earlier.

Purdue had just lost on a buzzer-beater to Ohio State in what was the biggest game of the season up to that point, a pivotal one to determine the Big Ten's regular-season champion. But Bloom already had set up Tyler's visit for that game, and it couldn't be changed.

So Tyler was introduced in the locker room afterward, and the players' faces lit up and their voices piped up, welcoming the kiddo to their private space.

"It's bigger than us. It's bigger than basketball," Mathias said. "It was a devastating loss here, but to see a kid come in who has a lot bigger problems than losing a game by a couple points, really puts life in perspective. It really brings you back down to earth. I think it humbles you."

Bloom certainly builds perspective-giving service into the extensive list.

One of the players' favorite service opportunities has been the annual shopping trip in which the team serves people from Willowstone Family Services and pairs with Fastbreakers and Meijer to provide gift cards. Players even have chipped in part of their holiday per diem to the pool, allowing the total to continue to increase for what families can spend on the shopping spree. Players are paired with families and scour the aisles for toys, clothes or whatever the caregivers — and sometimes the kids, who are welcome to join — want to buy with those gift cards, which were \$500 per family this year.

"Just seeing people who don't have what we have and being able to help them and just to see their appreciation and the excitement on their faces, that's better than any win we've ever had here," Mathias said.

Not all the opportunities to give may be that grand in gesture and scope.

But each still leaves a tremendous impression.

Edwards received a letter this year in the mail from a young fan, whose father emailed Bloom nearly at the same time. Maya had missed an opportunity to meet Edwards, her favorite player, after a game earlier this season because of what her dad called "stage fright."

She left the game crying.

But her dad encouraged her to write.

So as soon as Edwards got the letter, he dropped it on Bloom's lap before film one day and said, "Get it done. I don't care how you get it done, just get it done."

Two days after Purdue lost to Wisconsin in mid-February, the pre-teen fan and her dad were meeting Edwards before practice. He'd come early. Maya told Edwards how she had watched every game and hung on every possession. A loss meant tears. A win meant massive celebration. Edwards took a couple pictures with her and gave her an autographed practice jersey.

But it wasn't about the stuff at all.

It was about Edwards being attentive and listening. About offering a smile and giving a hug.

It was so much more than a 15-minute meet-and-greet.

"She really just wanted to, honestly, just see me. That was the greatest part of it," Edwards said. "Seeing her, seeing how happy she was, how shy she was, how emotional she was, I thought it was neat."

The next day, Bloom got an email from Maya's father, relaying how Maya went to school and shared all the photos and showed the jersey with her friends. And the dad repeated what has become a common refrain to Bloom: Because of his daughter's interaction with Edwards, he is now forever a Boilermakers fan.

"He's like, 'I'm kind of a Purdue transplant, but you guys have become my team because of this,'" Bloom said. "That's something I hear a bunch. You've got to win games and everybody likes that, but so many people say these guys are my guys because of this kind of stuff, every bit as much as the wins they've had."

That's because it is clear from the people who interact with the players on a real level, not basing opinions off a good or bad night on the court, quickly see the most impressive muscle all of their bodies is the one that beats.

They see hearts bursting to love, to offer hope and to serve.

"I want to be that role model to kids," Edwards said. "Of course, I'm not going to get every kid, but if it's so sincere as (Maya) — he took the time to email and the daughter to write me a letter personally — it immediately hit me. I want to be that guy for kids. Whether I play professionally for 10 years, eight years, however long my body can hold up, I want to be that guy kids can look up to."

Haas has similar aspirations.

He said he appreciates LeBron James' approach to community efforts and being a mentor for kids, especially, and Haas is working to do everything he can right now, where he's at and with what he's been given, to do just that.

Maybe that's handing over a pair of shoes, which he does frequently (without asking permission).

Maybe it's pulling on a T-shirt and wearing it to a postgame press conference, so Tyler's name and #fightlikety hashtag could be on display for thousands of folks to see.

Maybe it's making sure to literally extend an arm in an effort to high-five a fan that seemingly is unreachable, stuck in the corner of Mackey Arena, after a game, finding any one whose hand is hoping for that pay-off.

Maybe it's allowing the kid who is shuttling you around Meijer on a shopping spree to hold your hand the entire time, like happened with Haas last year.

Maybe it's posing for a photo, like he and the seniors did over and over and over again hours after they'd beaten Minnesota on senior night.

"I try to help everybody have a good time because that's all that we're here for," Haas said. "I think it helps people realize that nobody is untouchable. It's all just a matter of how you present yourself to the public that allows kids to look up to you in a different way.

"I think (serving) definitely helps everyone just keep a positive outlook and realize we're blessed to be in the situation we're in. We're basically living the life. You lose sight of that, at times. When you have a bad practice, things like that. It just puts things in perspective and reminds you you're living pretty well."

How Technology Helped Purdue Become One Of Basketball's Best

SportsTechie / March 1, 2018

Purdue's Isaac Haas is a mountain of a man, a skilled 7-foot-2, 290-pound basketball player who can change the game on both ends of the floor. Behind all the big-time dunks and blocks, there's a small, lightweight device that Haas wears on his back during practice that is helping the team.

A national championship contender with a 26-5 record that opens Big Ten tournament play at Madison Square Garden on Friday, Purdue has used the STATSports Viper pod to provide performance monitoring of its players to collect training data. GPS speed and positional data, distance traveled, heart rate and sprints can be measured.

By monitoring how hard players are working in practice, the team can make adjustments that can help them improve performance and prevent overuse, perhaps lowering the risk of injury.

"I think it's pretty amazing," Haas, a senior from Hokes Bluff, Ala., said before the season at Big Ten media day. "I think sports technology has come a long way. Obviously just from high school to college, obviously the access to more resources and the access to different types of technology, I think it provides a lot of research opportunities.

"It provides a lot of information to the players on how much energy is being taken out of them, how much more you're working compared to everyone else. And more importantly, like, for me, how many calories you're burning and stuff like that, so I think it's pretty cool. It helps me out a lot."

Haas said that on days when he isn't feeling good after a high-intensity practice, he'll look at the data that's been uploaded into graphs so he can gain insight on how to improve his training regimen.

"Like trying to see, 'OK, what am I doing? What do I need to do extra? Do I need to get more sleep tonight? Do I need to eat better? Do I need to eat more?'"

"Especially if it's one of those practices where like everyone's wheezing and we're on our knees and stuff like that, and we're just like dying, we know that it's just going to be one of those (sleepless) nights."

Boilermakers guard P.J. Thompson said that a strength and conditioning coach provides players with feedback and can assist in adjusting workouts accordingly based on data from the GPS tracking.

"I never thought I'd be wearing a bra-type thing in basketball with a chip in the back that can tell me so much data," Thompson said, smiling. "I think that's kind of crazy, but it's also kind of amazing too."

Added Haas, smiling, "Our weight staff, they do a really good job of actually pushing us on that and understanding that our coaches don't really understand, but that they do and they're willing to step forward and kind of help us get better with that."

Purdue associate director of strength & conditioning Josh Bonhotal for five years has led the team's efforts with STATSports.

With Mathias closing in, Purdue's all-time great shooters weigh in

Stacy Clardie / GoldandBlack.com / March 1, 2018

Dakota Mathias has spent the better part of three years feverishly working to be defined as a basketball player.

So, really, anything other than a "shooter?"

And Purdue's senior captain has developed considerably toward that goal, molding himself into one of the league's best perimeter defenders — he's a two-time all-defensive team pick — and using his savvy and high basketball IQ to not only facilitate Purdue's offense but lead the team in assists in consecutive seasons.

But even with all that progress, it's likely Mathias can't shake the one label he admittedly hates.

Especially not now.

Mathias needs to make only six more three-pointers to become the program's solo all-time leader.

"I get offended when I hear, 'Oh, he's just a shooter,'" Mathias said at the beginning of the season. "Even in my sophomore year and all of last year, I think I did a good job of implementing more into my game, pull-ups, being able to pass the ball, defend. Just being an all-around complete player is what I want to be known as, rather than just a shooter."

Former players agree Mathias has made his mark in that regard.

Ryne Smith knows what it's like to be labeled a "specialist," but he said Mathias is not that.

"He's a really, really good basketball player overall," said Smith, a consistent shot-maker during his Purdue career. "He's a basketball guy. He's obviously a really good defender, and he can really pass. I would have loved to have played with him because if I was open, it would have been on my hands."

David Teague, who sits just ahead of Mathias on the three-point list, said he respects Mathias' multi-dimensional game and thinks Mathias is an underrated defender.

"Me being a player that took pride in being effective on both ends, similar to Dakota's role, I understand how tough it can be night in and night out (to do both)," Teague said.

But even with that self-imposed defensive responsibility, Mathias' shot rarely suffered. As the season has progressed, he has methodically moved up the three-point list.

He has passed names often associated with Purdue's program, players considered program greats, like Troy Lewis, Cuonzo Martin, Chad Austin and Robbie Hummel.

And, now, thanks to a career-best seven three-pointers on senior day against Minnesota, Mathias enters the Big Ten Tournament with 238 threes, fourth on the all-time list.

Ahead of him: Teague (239), Jaraan Cornell (242) and E'Twaun Moore (243).

"He's been just so consistent," Hummel said of Mathias, who made 38 threes as a freshman, 44 as a sophomore, 72 last season and 84 this year. "He really works at it. Just from seeing him put the work in and seeing how much he cares about it, it's really not surprising to me he's been a guy that's consistently made shots and had a lot of success for Purdue."

But it's not just about volume of made shots for Mathias.

He also has been one of the program's most efficient long-range shooters. He finished the regular season at a 47-percent clip on three-pointers, boosting his career percentage to 42 percent. That ranks fifth, just ahead of Smith (.408) and behind Martin (.451), Lewis (.447), Everette Stephens (.447) and Woody Austin (.439).

But Mathias' percentage is even more impressive considering he's attempted 569 career threes — no one ahead of him had more than 400 attempts. Smith's 414 are the closest among the top 10 all-time in percentage. Among the top 15, Hummel is the only other one with at least 500 (555).

Mathias joins only Martin and Smith as players who are on both top-10 all-time lists for makes and percentages.

"I've always prided myself on being efficient, especially with the guys we've had," Mathias said before leaving for New York Wednesday. "We've had a lot of great post players, a lot of great NBA players. So it wasn't my job to be a volume shooter and shoot 17, 20 times a game. So I'm just being efficient in that role, and being able to make that many is pretty special."

So what do some of the program's elite-level shooters think of Mathias' shot? We asked:

No. 1 all-time three-point shooter, E'Twaun Moore (243 threes): "He can shoot. He's good. He comes off pin downs, off the bounce. He can shoot it in multiple ways, which is what makes him dangerous."

No. 3 all-time, David Teague (239): "He has such a quick release. But most impressive is how he uses screens to get free and open and how he's able to use his skill set and body to create space. It's such a joy to watch him play. ... I had the pleasure of working a couple basketball camps a few summers ago. I scrimmaged a few times with the guys and watched them workout in front of the campers and fans. I'll never forget how effective Ryan (Cline) and Dakota were shooting the ball, especially Dakota. This guy barely missed. No matter if it were open gym or shooting drills, to see a guy moving and sprinting full speed and still shooting the ball at that level was beyond impressive to me."

No. 4 all-time Robbie Hummel (216), No. 14 percentage (.389): "It's a really pretty shot. Like with me, I always had issues when I would fade, and he doesn't seem to have that. He still makes shots, even though his footwork doesn't have to be perfect. Whereas with me, if I was really shooting well I could get away with stuff like that, but when it would go bad, that'd be the No. 1 thing, I'm fading or my footwork is not right. He seems to be a guy who can get away with not having perfect footwork, can shoot off-balance a little bit, which I wish I could do. It's a really pretty jump shot. When you see him shoot, you think it's going in. ... Since I've been at Purdue, Dakota definitely is one of the best shooters I've seen come through. He's kind of a total package. He can shoot off the move. He can shoot off the catch-and-shoot."

No. 12 all-time Troy Lewis (151), No. 2 all-time percentage (.447): "His form is really great. He gets a nice high release. Confidence is always the key. When I coach, I tell my kids, if you don't have confidence as a shooter, you're pretty much done. Even if you miss two or three in a row, you've got to block that out and think the next one is going in. I'm pretty sure that's how he approaches the game."

All-time leading scorer Rick Mount (2,323 points), who played before the three-point line was instituted or he likely would have been No. 1 on the list: "I thought he shot it the best he has in his career on Sunday against Minnesota. He has developed into a really smooth shooter. The two best things he has going for him is that he really gets his legs into his shot and he has great footwork. He has really improved on using his legs since his freshman year and you can tell he has worked on game a bunch since he was a freshman. ... I like the way he comes off the screen and shoots it off his inside foot. That takes really good footwork, and he has that. He did about as well as I have ever seen him do it on Sunday."

Hardest moment of Edwards' senior day was also the most important

Mike DeFabo / CNHI Sports Indiana / Feb. 26, 2018

Vincent Edwards knew the emotions would hit him. But that didn't make them any easier to avoid.

During his senior speech Sunday in Mackey Arena, the Purdue senior forward thanked God. He thanked the John Purdue Club, Coach Matt Painter, Boiler Nation.

Then came the part he knew would be hardest — his family.

Edwards buried his head in a towel. Tears welled in his eyes and fell onto his shirt. In front of more than 14,000 fans, Edwards opened his heart and let the emotion pour out. After a long pause, Edwards brought the microphone to his mouth. Nope. Again the words wouldn't come out. Tears did.

His mother, Glennetta Patton, wrapped her arms around her "baby." Her youngest boy had grown into a man.

Moments like this are what's beautiful about senior day. Sunday was meant to remember the winningest class in school history. But it was also something else. It was also a unique opportunity to meet the families who molded the Boilermakers into what they are now and those who inspire the players to achieve what they'll ultimately become.

This is the story of one of those families.

GLENNETTA

Edwards' mom, Glennetta, was there to lend a shoulder during the senior day ceremony. But when Vincent was a kid, she was also the first one to send him to the bench.

When Vincent was 4 years old, his mother was his first coach — and a strict one. She made a rule. No one shoots without making five passes. Vincent stole the ball and scored on a breakaway. Glennetta didn't hesitate to bench him.

"I wanted him to bench him to make him understand how to be a team player," Glennetta said. "We know you can make baskets. However, when you have that off night, what else can you do to help your team win?"

Glennetta was a basketball player herself all the way through school and onto Sinclair College in Dayton. She knew the right way to play and wanted to make sure her son learned it. But that wasn't her only lesson.

The woman who benched Vincent is the same one who refused to let him come off the field when he was 4 years old playing football. Vincent took a hit from an older kid. He wanted to quit. Mom said no.

"When we start something, we don't quit," Glen-

netta remembers saying. "You're going to finish this season out."

In some ways, maybe Vincent listened too well. When a stomach bug rocked Vincent this year, he threw up before and during games against Maryland and Rutgers. Glennetta called Vincent and begged him to sit out. Vincent agreed. Then, he'd hang up and think about the team. Game time came, and Glennetta saw her son's name in the starting lineup on Twitter.

When Vincent finally got over the virus, he sprained his ankle so badly he initially thought it might be broken. He missed back-to-back games last week. Before senior day, the training staff practically mummified the ankle with a thick tape job. But Vincent was out there — finishing what he started four years ago.

BILL

Vince, Vincent, Vino. That's what most people called Edwards. But perhaps the most creative nickname came from his grandmother.

"Mini Me" she used to call him, because he looked and acted just like his father, Bill.

"He was kind of a daddy's boy," Bill remembers.

Vincent grew up in gyms because of his father Bill. His dad is still Wright State's all-time leading scorer and rebounder and went on to play more than a dozen seasons of professional basketball in Europe. Vincent visited his father sometimes in France and Germany even when the rest of the family stayed home in the states.

Even from an early age, Bill could see some of himself in his son. Bill took over as Vincent's coach at the YMCA. The team didn't even have a name, just the "blue team," but Vincent had game.

One day when Vincent was in elementary school, Bill got to the game. No Vince. Glennetta said he was sleeping over at a friend's house. Bill looked up five minutes into the game. No Vince. Ten minutes into the game. No Vince.

"I kept thinking, if we can keep it under 20 by the time Vince gets here, we'll be alright," Bill said.

Vincent got to the game just before halftime. The blue team trailed by about 17. Vincent led them all the way back.

"After that, he never spent the night over at another friend's house the night before a game," Bill said.

As Vincent developed, his game began to grow into a version of his father. Both had the same long, athletic style and a tenacious rebounding attitude. Vincent always told his dad he wouldn't just follow in his footsteps, he'd surpass them. All

those records at Wright State? Vincent was going to beat them.

Instead, Vincent has written his own legacy at Purdue.

"It seemed like just the other day I was coaching him in high school," Bill said. "Now here he is about to graduate from Purdue four years later."

TRACE

As Vincent's speech continued, he thanked both of his brothers, who used to drag him out in the snow to play basketball. And his uncle, who went through school with him because they're close in age.

There was one person who wasn't on the court, but was surely in Vincent's heart on Sunday — his son, Trace.

During his freshman year, Vincent received a "blessing from above." Just one that came a little earlier than he expected. Trace lives back home with his mother. It eats at Vincent sometimes to go so long without seeing his son.

"There's certain things a mother can teach their kid and a father can teach their kid. I'm not around to do that sometimes. That kills me sometimes," Vincent said. "That was the best option instead of staying there, being 6-8 and working at Walmart."

Trace is almost 4 years old. He's already watching Michael Jordan clips on YouTube and dunking on his Fischer Price hoop. It's not hard to image what life might be like in the future. In about 18 years, maybe Vincent will be walking out onto a court, watching his son struggle to contain his emotions. Maybe he'll be the one bursting with pride when he thinks about what his son has accomplished.

Or maybe it will be something completely different.

"Of course, if he comes to me and says, dad I want to play basketball, I happy. I'm ecstatic," Vincent said. "But I'm going to feel the same way if he come up to me and says, dad, I want to play the piano. Dad, I want to be in the spelling bee contest."

Vincent took the lessons learned from his parents and used them to become a 1,000-point scorer, a teammate. Now, as a father, he's hoping to take those lessons and expand on them. Just as he made a goal to outscore his father, he trying to do the same thing off the court.

"My parents sacrificed for me," Vincent said. "They traveled the world. They did everything they could in their power to make sure that I have a better life than what they had. At this point for me, it's about trying to outdo my parents."

Purdue's seniors changed everything and still didn't get a nickname

Gregg Doyel / Indy Star / February 26, 2018

They never did get a nickname. Isaac Haas, Dakota Mathias, P.J. Thompson and Vincent Edwards said hello to Mackey Arena four years ago, they said goodbye on Sunday, and in between they won more games at Mackey than any recruiting class in Purdue history. Their record-setting 62nd home win came Sunday, an 84-60 mauling of Minnesota, and they've now won exactly 100 games at Purdue.

Never did get a nickname, though.

"It's not up to us," Mathias was saying after the game, sitting at a podium alongside the other three Purdue seniors.

Down the table, Vincent Edwards spoke up.

"People consider us one of (Purdue's) best recruiting classes," he said, staring at the media with a smile, "so guys, do your work."

Look, he's right. Transformative groups tend to get nicknamed around here. Troy Lewis, Todd Mitchell and Everette Stephens – the Three Amigos – led the 1988 Boilermakers back to the Sweet 16 and signaled the emergence of Purdue as a national power under Gene Keady.

Exactly 20 years later, it was a freshman class of Robbie Hummel, E'Twaun Moore, JaJuan Johnson and Scott Martin – the Baby Boilers – who led Matt Painter's third team to 25 wins overall and a 15-3 Big Ten record in 2008, and from there Purdue was flying: 129 wins over five years, including one Big Ten regular-season title, two Sweet 16s and five consecutive NCAA tournaments with at least one victory.

The wheels came off after that, which brings us to the present, exactly 30 years after the Three Amigos and 10 years after the Baby Boilers. It brings us to the four senior day headliners on Sunday. They arrived as freshmen four years ago with Boiler Ball at one of its lowest points in decades, coming off back-to-back losing seasons that had Painter questioning everything about his program, but Haas, Mathias, Thompson and Edwards won big as freshmen (21-13).

They won bigger as sophomores (26-9), bigger still as juniors (27-8), and here as seniors this foursome has helped Purdue to a 26-5 record, its highest national ranking in decades (No. 3 at one point) and the longest winning streak in program history (19 straight from Nov. 24 to Feb. 3).

Not done yet, either. Purdue will be the No. 3 seed in the 2018 Big Ten tournament starting this week in New York, and should be a No. 2 or No. 3 seed in the 2018 NCAA tournament. How far will the Boilermakers go? Michigan State's Tom Izzo, who knows a thing or two about the topic, said Purdue has Final Four ability.

Purdue's best and most talented player is a sophomore, Carsen Edwards, who followed his 40-point explosion Thursday at Illinois with 18 points, seven assists and three steals on Sunday as his late-season surge has moved the conversation about his postseason honors from all-conference to All-American. But it's the senior class that completes the starting lineup and gives Purdue an unmatched college basketball combination of size, skill and experience.

So what do we call a single recruiting class that has won at least once in every Big Ten arena, went 6-1 against Indiana, and set the standard by which Purdue basketball will be judged years from now? Keep in mind, these guys are adored by Purdue fans. So ... the Favorite Four? Nah. Too lame. Too generic. Let's look at these guys individually, see what they bring.

Isaac Haas is Purdue's 7-2, 295-pound nuclear option, a weapon unlike any in college basketball. Haas, who entered Sunday averaging 14.8 points in just 23.2 minutes, scored 13 against Minnesota on 6-for-9 shooting. He has spent four years as the biggest bull in college basketball's china shop, so huge and so strong that he often gets called for fouls simply by moving in traffic. He cannot create post space like other big men, by rocking into his defender off the dribble, because Haas hits like a landslide.

Haas receives punishment as well, so big and strong that officials allow the kind of contact that had Haas dabbing at his mouth on Sunday, checking the towel for blood and maybe a stray tooth. He never retaliates, this gentle giant, and after the game as he stood near his younger sister Erin and her service dog for seizures, the dog licking Haas' hand, he was the one Purdue senior bawling as he realized it was his last game at Mackey. If they were all like Haas, we could call them the Friendly Four.

But Dakota Mathias isn't like Haas. He's not a gentle giant, or a giant at all. He's the team's subtle superstar, a 6-4 guard other Big Ten coaches give the highest praise – "a pro," more than one has told me in reference to Mathias – though Mathias wasn't subtle on Sunday. He scored 25 points on just nine shots, going 7-for-9 on 3-pointers, and added seven rebounds, four assists, two steals and even two blocks.

The game was a summation of Mathias' four years at Purdue. He arrived out of high school as a shooter, and added elements every year. He became the team's perimeter defensive ace as a sophomore, its leading playmaker as a junior, and now as a senior has put it all together with exceptional efficiency. If they were all like Mathias, we could call them the Refined Four.

But P.J. Thompson isn't like Mathias, and he sure isn't like Haas. The 5-10 Thompson is so steady, so unremarkable, that this actually happened on Sunday: Purdue was beating Minnesota 61-36 midway through the second half, and P.J. Thompson hadn't scored a point. Hadn't even taken a shot. But he had played most of the game and Purdue led by 25, so he must have been doing something right. What exactly was it? Well, he moves the ball. He stretches the defense without taking a shot, a 45-percent shooter from 3-point range who cannot be left alone. He spends time defending Minnesota's best guard, Nate Mason.

Afterward, the least heralded member of this foursome – the only one who hasn't scored 1,000 career points, though Thompson does have 758 – told the crowd during the senior day ceremony that his philosophy is to "put others before yourself," prompting Painter to walk into his news conference room a few minutes later and marvel:

"Lots of times guys say the right things because they've heard their parents say it, and they know it sounds good," Painter was saying. "P.J. Thompson actually believes it."

If they were all like Thompson, we could call them the No-Frills Four.

But Vincent Edwards is a frilly, futuristic basketball player. He has had rotten luck of late, beset by an illness and then a sprained ankle that derailed what was a possible All-Big Ten season, but Edwards went into Sunday as one of five players in the country averaging at least 14 points (14.9), 7.5 rebounds (7.6) and three assists (3.0) and also with at least 40 made 3-pointers (42). Edwards is a lot like Mathias, a versatile, two-way player who can really shoot it, but he's 4 inches taller and plays another foot above the rim. If they were all like this guy, we could call this Purdue quartet the Fantastic Four.

Nah. Lame, all of it. Vincent Edwards is right, though: The media needs to get to work on this. Here's a foursome that is on track to reach 5,000 career points combined (4,891 after Sunday), 2,000 rebounds (1,988) and 1,000 assists (1,123). They're shooting a combined 40.5 percent on 3-pointers. They've won 100 games.

A group like this, it needs the proper goodbye. You ask me, that goodbye is in reach – and there's an obvious name for it.

The Final Four.

Purdue basketball seniors leaving behind legacy of accountability

Nathan Baird / Lafayette Journal & Courier / February 23, 2018

A week ago Saturday, two days after Purdue basketball's losing streak reached three games with the season's biggest dud in Wisconsin, the seniors called a meeting.

The four Boilermaker seniors, all of whom sacrificed to help lift the program from the Big Ten Conference basement into contention for a No. 1 NCAA Tournament seed, couldn't ignore the issue any longer.

Time had come to assign blame.

"We talked about it like, hey, this is what we've done wrong. This is how we have failed you as seniors," senior center Isaac Haas said of the message that afternoon. "Moving forward, how can we serve you better? How can we develop you guys to make the next generation that takes over?"

"Because you only have six more weeks with us, potentially."

Those four seniors will go public with their memories, their gratitude and most likely their emotions early Sunday evening.

Four players (and now-junior Jacquil Taylor) began trading text messages before the end of their senior year in high school. They ate dinner together at Scotty's Brewhouse their first night on campus, discussing goals and expectations and setting a foundation.

They will stand together Sunday night. Sometime in the coming weeks, they will walk off a court together for the final time.

The class accomplished much, including an outright Big Ten Conference championship and a trip to the Sweet 16. They aspire for more in the weeks ahead.

It's worth considering, however, what this group leaves behind. The best word for it is accountability, and it began before any of them moved in at Purdue.

It began on March 9, 2014. Purdue lost to Northwestern that day, ending the regular season with a sixth straight loss. In contrast to the customary celebration and reflection of senior day, a somber mood extended into the postgame press conference.

"We have to recruit a more unselfish player," Painter said that day. "We've got to recruit a tougher player. We have some of those guys in our program; some guys we don't. We've got to get that out of them, or maybe this isn't their place.

"That's my fault. This isn't a school district. I recruited these guys. So the position we're in, it's my fault."

P.J. Thompson was in the arena that day, but didn't hear the press conference. None of the other seniors specifically recalled Painter's brutal honesty that day, either.

But most of them had already heard it. Painter made sure they knew he needed them in West Lafayette for more than their basketball skills.

"Even when he was recruiting me, that was one of the things that really stuck out was his honesty of that," senior guard Dakota Mathias said.

"He took it all on himself as the leader of the program and said he'd made mistakes, didn't get the right guys. That really was something that I was impressed with. A guy that has done so much, and he put all the blame on himself."

That 2013-14 season was Purdue's second straight losing campaign. It finished last in the Big Ten Conference. Two-year starting point guard Ronnie Johnson transferred after the season.

The four teenagers tasked with turning the whole thing around had help. Rapheal Davis, named a captain earlier in that sophomore season, became a mentor in leadership and work ethic to the incoming class.

All four players also brought in personal motivations. Haas was the highest-ranking member of the class per the 24/7 Sports composite at 82nd nationally. Vincent Edwards (121) was the only other member to crack the top 200.

To some extent, all four will balance a chip on their shoulder when they address the Mackey Arena crowd on Sunday.

"That's what we really want to prove these next couple of weeks — that you don't have to be that big-time athlete or big-time recruit to impact your school or do something special," Mathias said.

Did Purdue's seniors deserve the blame they claimed in last week's meeting? That's arguable. Some, especially during the Wisconsin game, didn't play to their abilities during the long streak. When seniors comprise four-fifths of the starting lineup, the team largely goes where they go.

And yet, back to that accountability, which echoes in how other Boilermakers felt about that meeting.

"Of course they're going to take the ownership for the couple of losses we had," freshman guard Nojel Eastern said. "It's their last year here and they've been through this the longest, obviously."

"But it's a team effort. You don't play with four players out there. You play with five. You've got six, you've got seven. We could have done some things where we could have helped them get out of the stretch as well."

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Purdue needs some aspect of this senior group's presence to linger in West Lafayette next season. Outside of star guard Carsen Edwards, the entire starting lineup turns over. As of now, no Rapheal Davis has emerged as the charismatic influence that can inspire, cajole or demand another level of commitment from the underclassmen.

Those who will remain beyond this spring say they've taken notice of the examples. They've seen Mathias in the gym getting up shots. They know Haas' commitment to improving his stamina. They remember when, after back-to-back losses in the Battle 4 Atlantis, Thompson stepped forward and announced those efforts would not define the current team.

Vincent Edwards took Carsen Edwards under his wing, helping him deal with the expectations and praise and criticism that are part and parcel of young talent.

In the process, he also passed a baton.

"They believe in the team first," Carsen Edwards said. "That speaks of what they did to be good leaders. I'm just following that and trying to help my team win, but leading by example if I'm not going to lead vocally."

Don't expect to hear any apologies on Sunday. Haas and his classmates didn't really need to make one last Saturday, either.

As with Painter four years earlier, it's the gesture itself that sets a tone going forward.

"It all adds up as a legacy," Haas said. "I think these guys are going to look up to us one day and they're going to remember, hey, that meeting right there probably just turned everything around."

The Making of P.J. Thompson and What He Gave Up to Win

Dakota Crawford / Indy Star / February 23, 2018

To understand LaSalle Thompson IV — or P.J., as he's better known — look at the people who made him.

There's LaSalle Jr., (grandpa) in his black sweatshirt with a tiny notepad for keeping stats. And there's LaSalle III (dad), decked out in green from head to flashy neon Nikes. Tonja Thompson (mom), once a cheerleader at Pike High School, is here to keep her sons, and occasionally a referee, in check.

They've given P.J. more than the family's unusual first name and adorable nickname — short for "peewee junior." (His dad, born premature, was called "peewee" by family.)

The Thompson family is basketball. They made up a small cheer bloc for P.J.'s little brother, Isaiah Thompson, behind the Zionsville bench Feb. 13 at Tech. It was a comfortable win, so the game felt like more like a family reunion.

As grandpa kept stats, dad was stoic, a side of him rarely shown when he's coaching AAU games. Mom is always a little closer to the edge of her seat.

Even P.J. was there. He surprised his mom by strutting into the high school gym just three days after his then-No. 3 Purdue Boilermakers had lost a second straight game by buzzer beater.

"You've got two stars, huh?," someone said to LaSalle III.

"They're working," dad answered, like any good coach would.

"You did a good job, bro."

To really understand who P.J. is, first consider what he's given up to be a winner.

The three-year Purdue starter has averaged 6.8 points, 2.5 assists and a steal since he found a spot in Matt Painter's lineup. His high school coach, Noah Haynes, almost cringes, and then finally laughs, when he hears this description of P.J.: A solid, doesn't-force-anything, pass-first point guard.

Sometimes, Haynes wishes P.J. would attack and hit that pull-up elbow jumper he always had ready at Brebeuf Jesuit.

"He was everything for us," said Haynes, who coached the Braves during P.J.'s final two years, including his senior Indiana All-Star season. "He has scaled his game back to this level. It's strange for the people that were close to him to watch."

P.J. Thompson played all four seasons for Brebeuf. This picture is from 2010, when he played against Culver. Buy Photo P.J. Thompson played all four seasons for Brebeuf. This picture is from 2010, when he played against Culver. (Photo: Doug Mc-Schooler)

Back on Dec. 1, 2012, P.J.'s unranked Brebeuf squad took on No. 5 Tech. That team was full of Indiana All-Stars like Trey Lyles (a McDonald's All American who went to Kentucky, then the NBA), C.J. Walker (a highly-touted recruit who landed at Florida State) and Jeremie Tyler (a three-year player at Ball State).

Rick Pitino was in the building — P.J. knew someone from Louisville would be there, but not the head coach himself. P.J. was so aggressive, scoring 38 points and putting a 60-59 win on ice at the free-throw line, where he went 17-for-20.

"He was the best player on the court that day," Haynes said. "He was just unstoppable."

Today, P.J. insists that performance wasn't about impressing Pitino. No, he had a bigger incentive.

"I just wanted to beat Trey to be honest," he said before cracking a smile, "so I had the bragging rights."

Though he scored 24 a game over his final two years at Brebeuf to cap his career with more than 1,500 points, P.J. was a facilitator on an AAU team with Lyles, Trevon Bluiett (Xavier) and James Blackmon Jr. (IU).

That's how he started to become the player Purdue needed him to be: a solid, pass-first point with a 3.4-to-1 assist-to-turnover ratio over the past three years.

A clutch shooter who never forces anything and hits 45 percent of his 3-point attempts.

A dedicated defender who puts winning first.

He could have attended Indiana State, where Greg Lansing wanted him to follow in the footsteps of his father. He could've gone to Toledo or another mid-major and put up scoring totals more closely aligned with those he put up at Brebeuf.

But he so badly craved high-major basketball. The Big Ten had his heart, even if Purdue didn't offer until after his senior season.

Painter was coming off a 5-13 Big Ten season before he finally offered P.J.

"There's winning and there's misery," Painter said. "There just is. When you lose you're miserable. I felt like (P.J.) was the perfect fit for us with what we went through. He kind of gave us what we didn't have, in terms of a guy who understood the game, could make shots, take care of the basketball. ...

"At the end of the day, he's been more than that for us. So there's no doubt that was a good decision on our part."

P.J. has no regrets.

"I'd rather do what I do here than being at another school where I could average 15 (points) a game and five assists," P.J. said. "I love Purdue. I love the opportunity coach Painter gave me. I really wouldn't trade it for anything."

The Boilermaker senior on how he and his classmates must lead the solution to a three-game losing streak. Nathan Baird/Journal & Courier

To understand P.J.'s basketball smarts, look to his dad, LaSalle III.

He was an Indiana All-Star at Pike, where he met Tonja. He landed at Indiana State, but transferred to Ball State where he felt he'd have a better chance at making the NCAA tournament. The Cardinals did, in 1995.

Now, he spends six or sometimes seven days a week training clients through his Fundamentals First basketball program. Friends and family know where to find him if he's not at a Purdue or Zionsville game — on a modest court inside a metal-sided barn.

Cars fill the long blacktop driveway leading to this unassuming gym every night.

"For me, that's my life," LaSalle said. "It's been my life. That's all I've done, as far back as I can remember: Work hard, and basketball."

On Wednesday afternoon, LaSalle was shouting "I need this one!" as Josh Riley put up shot after shot between full-court sprints. The former Cathedral player was sweating through his white athletic shirt with hopes of finding a professional opportunity after Indiana University wouldn't take him as a walk-on.

Later, five girls from Tri-West's sixth grade travel team walked in. Their session began with dribbling one standard basketball and one that's so flat it barely bounces.

That'll make their left hand strong.

"I did this with Isaiah and P.J. growing up," LaSalle was saying as the girls got started. "It worked so well that they basically became left-handed players. From a scouting perspective, you want to make Isaiah and P.J. drive right."

From left to right: LaSalle III, Tonja, P.J. and Isaiah.

From left to right: LaSalle III, Tonja, P.J. and Isaiah. (Photo: Provided)

Some pick-up games and workouts in this gym have included guys like Ronnie Johnson (former North Central point guard), Lyles and IU stars Yogi Ferrell (now of the Dallas Mavericks) and Eric Gordon (Houston Rockets). It's a second home to Purdue players in the off-season.

When Dakota Mathias' stroke is off, he'll go see LaSalle. P.J. calls dad a "shot doctor."

"He's a great basketball mind," Mathias said. "He's a great guy, always wanting the best for us. Just like P.J., they're selfless people."

LaSalle let's players seek him out. He coached P.J. through middle school and critiqued his game growing up, but backed off in high school. And now? He's totally hands off.

Dad knows the work has been put in.

"It's enough pressure just being the point guard at Purdue University ... because people are hunting you," P.J. said. "If I had to go home to a hectic environment and my parents are saying, 'You need to do this and that, I don't care what coach Painter is saying,' it's a conflict of interest and it just puts more pressure on the kid.

"But my parents aren't like that. They sent me to Purdue for a reason, they trusted my decision, and they trust coach Painter. That's what you want from your parents."

Painter said it's easy to see why the Thompson sons — remember, Purdue has a commitment from Isaiah for 2019 — are so mature.

"P.J. is kind of an old soul," Painter said. "Very few people that are younger, are wise. ... He's one of those guys that you talk to at 16 or 17, you thought you were talking to a 35-year-old man on the phone."

Maybe the most important thing to understand about P.J. is despite all LaSalle has done for his game, he remains a mama's boy. That's why Tonja's face lit up when he surprised her at that Tech game

His shot had gone cold, and still is. Purdue fans were on edge after losing two straight following a record 19-game win streak. So P.J. figured a visit home couldn't hurt.

"As wonderfully as they're playing, after these two losses," Tonja said, "people are saying all kinds of things."

This fan base has seen so many promising Purdue seasons crumble when the pressure rises. Think back to three years ago, when this senior class was just getting started. They lost their first NCAA tournament game.

But they got better. The next year they entered the bracket as a five-seed, only to be upset by No. 12 Little Rock in the first round. "That sucked," P.J. said. "It was a low moment in my career."

The Boilermakers made it to the Sweet 16 in 2017, where they lost to Kansas. The Boilermakers made it to the Sweet 16 in 2017, where they lost to Kansas. (Photo: Jay Biggerstaff-USA TODAY Sports)

Some fans have taken to social media to pin recent losses on Painter, and to predict another early exit from the Big Dance. After four years with a 99-35 record overshadowed by doubt, the Thompson family is used to this.

So is the senior class of Isaac Haas, Vincent Edwards, Mathias and P.J.

"We're winners," P.J. says now. "We didn't listen to the outside people who said we couldn't do this, we couldn't do that."

Before every game, Tonja texts both of her boys an inspirational quote. And after, whether it's a win or a loss, she can always gauge their mood. She's become accustomed to giving pep talks to her sons, reminding them, "who they are as men of God, and that there's always another game."

That's a message P.J. clings to. Of course, Sunday's senior night game will be his last at Mackey Arena.

P.J. is sure he won't tear up during the ceremonies Sunday. He'll be too busy smiling. But mom, well, she may need an inspirational quote herself before the 4 p.m. game against Minnesota.

"Literally, I think I've been having heart palpitations," she said. "My goal is to not convulse when I'm crying. I'm trying to cry before, so I don't cry on the floor when we go down."

Purdue focuses on the little things and it has led to big things

Adam Rittenberg / ESPN.com / February 7, 2018

The signature image of Purdue's season, especially its record-setting 19-game winning streak, would be center Isaac Haas holding the ball, two defenders draped over his gargantuan frame.

The double-team, if executed properly, causes panic and poor choices: a turnover or a foul or a timeout spent too soon. But when opponents assign an extra defender to the 7-foot-2, 290-pound Haas, Purdue usually succeeds.

"We feel like you're creating offense for us when you double-team," Purdue coach Matt Painter told ESPN this week. "We're excited about you double-teaming us, to be frank. It makes our job easier."

A lot goes into a 19-game winning streak, the longest in Purdue history, the longest in the nation, and matching the 10th-longest in Big Ten history. There have been grinder games and shootouts, 3-point spectacles and clutch free throw shooting displays. The third-ranked Boilermakers have blitzed opponents and won when they're off. They've had some luck, essential for just the third 12-0 Big Ten start in more than 40 years.

But college basketball's hottest team got this way because of how it responds when the heat is cranked up. Double-team Haas, and he finds an open teammate. Dent a comfortable Boilers lead in the closing minutes, and they finish at the line. Match baskets with them until you miss and they don't (just ask Michigan).

The Boilers haven't changed their priorities. They still want defense to live at Mackey Arena, as the sign in the student section reads. They still play hard, as the sign above the arena tunnel commands players to do. But this season, they're also built on an offense that, even under pressure, is rarely slowed. During the streak, Purdue is shooting just a hair below 50 percent from the field, making 42.7 percent of its 3-point attempts with an assist-to-turnover ratio of 1.53.

"You're wired as a coach to get stops late in the game, and hopefully your defense can create a little offense," Painter said. "The last five minutes of the game hasn't been, 'OK, we're going to stop you.' We've more had to out-score teams late in games."

The Boilers are positioned to repeat as Big Ten champions and possibly make a deep NCAA tournament run under Painter, who hasn't made it past the Sweet 16 despite six (soon to be seven) seasons of 25 or more wins. Purdue aims to make it 20 straight Wednesday night against No. 14 Ohio State, before visiting No. 4 Michigan State on Saturday night.

"You can't get away from the fact that everybody's telling you that it's huge and something special," Haas said of the streak, "but we believe we're a special team, so special things happen to special teams."

Purdue had no idea something special was coming when its airplane touched down on U.S. soil in late November after the Battle 4 Atlantis event. The Boilers weren't better in the Bahamas, losing to unranked Tennessee and Western Kentucky before hammering then-No. 2 Arizona by 25, the second-most lopsided win over a ranked opponent in team history.

Painter blames himself for the two losses. Purdue played pop-a-shot rather than being patient, didn't handle the ball (31 turnovers combined) and lacked mental toughness.

"Just played way too cool," Painter said.

The Arizona win, while impressive, didn't put Painter at ease. His team needed to handle adversity. Four days later, Louisville provided it, as Purdue missed two-thirds of its shots and made just five 3-pointers in 23 attempts. The Boilers won by holding Louisville to 31.7 percent shooting, forcing 14 turnovers and making 23 free throws.

It was the type of win Purdue is known for, but not one that would typify the 2017-18 Boilers, or their streak. Painter counts the next two games -- five-point wins over Maryland and Northwestern -- as part of a season-defining, "grind-it-out" springboard, but Purdue hasn't approached its shooting futility from the Louisville slog. In the past 17 contests, the Boilers are shooting 50.5 percent from the field and 43.5 percent from 3-point distance. Their low marks for shooting and scoring: 44.3 percent against Nebraska and 70 points at Michigan.

Purdue's second meeting with Michigan illustrated its offensive strides. The Wolverines shot 60 percent from the field and 56.5 percent from 3, averaging 1.35 points per possession. Purdue won 92-88 thanks to 62 percent shooting, 19 made free throws and 1.42 points per possession.

"That was a big confidence boost for our team, just because there was frustration involved," Painter said. "We could not stop Michigan, but yet they couldn't stop us."

A proficient offense isn't new -- Purdue averaged a league-best 77.7 points in Big Ten games last season -- but it has been refined. Wooden Award finalist Caleb Swanigan is gone, but all five Boilers starters shoot at least 47 percent from the floor and better than 77 percent from the line. When Haas gets the ball in the post, he either draws a solo defender -- "Usually, it's a pretty good night," he says, smiling -- or two defenders, which means a high-percentage shooter is left unattended.

"A lot of times, it's Vince [Edwards], a lot of times, it's P.J. [Thompson]," Haas said. "They feel like they can double off the smallest guy. I can whip it all the way across, or I'll just throw it to the next open guy and they'll just rotate the ball easily and get an open shot in the corner."

"It's all just a matter of getting that hockey assist."

Haas, who boasts 20 traditional assists but has triggered many more buckets with his passes out of double-teams, turned to Purdue sports information chief Chris Forman.

"Yo, Chris," he said, "I may have to get you to start keeping track of my hockey assists."

Haas and the Boilers didn't used to handle double-teams so well. Years of practice against Swanigan, A.J. Hammons and now Matt Haarms improved the senior's comfort and decisions. The Boilers devote 10 minutes of every practice to double-teams, so when they come in games, they're still dictating rather than reacting.

"We play strategically in different sets to make not necessarily their double-team different, but their rotations different, and there's nothing they can do about it," Painter said. "They can do whatever they want, but they can't tell us where we can put our guys. Even though we have a lot of weapons, our right of first refusal when it gets into the half court is: Allow Isaac to touch it."

When Haas is doubled, his options can include five teammates -- Thompson (49 percent), Dakota Mathias (46.9 percent), Vincent Edwards (41.5 percent), Ryan Cline (40 percent) and Carsen Edwards (39.6 percent) -- who make 3s at above-average rates. In the past, Purdue had one or two weaker shooters who could be left alone. Not anymore.

"In today's game, people are more worried about giving up 3s than 2s, and that's where some of my easy buckets come in because I'm just sitting under the rim," Vincent Edwards said. "Then when teams figure that out and they come down low, you've got a 45 to 49 percent 3-point shooter sitting out at the arc."

Painter has seen Vincent Edwards diversify his game during the streak and fellow Wooden Award candidate Carsen Edwards improve his assist-to-turnover ratio (2.7 in Big Ten play) while maintaining dangerous dribble-drive ability. Mathias is one of the nation's most efficient shooters and passers. Thompson orchestrates Purdue's offensive sets and hits 3s when needed. Haarms, Cline and recently Nojel Eastern provide a bench boost.

The streak has included nine wins by 25 points or more, but also nine by single digits, including each of the past four.

"We've been in a lot of possession-type games where we've won in different ways," Painter said. "That's the thing as a coach: You don't want to be in them, but after you survive them, it makes you stronger."

The winning streak matters less than what Purdue extracts from it. The Boilers could enter the NCAA tournament on a 28-game roll, or they could stumble between now and then. Purdue's run includes only three wins over currently ranked opponents (Arizona and Michigan twice). The Big Ten lacks depth and Purdue has yet to face the league's top two teams. The Boilers know their defense must tighten up, starting this week.

Ultimately, they must start a new streak in March, when the hottest teams truly rise. Four wins would equal the program's first Final Four appearance since 1980; six would equal Purdue's first NCAA tournament title.

"We want to enjoy [the streak], but our season's not over yet," Vincent Edwards said. "It's like a blessing and a curse. It sucks because it's your senior year and you want to be able to soak everything in. If we're in San Antonio, Texas, and we're on the winning end, then I'll soak everything in."

Ohio product Dakota Mathias excelling for Purdue

Adam Jardy / Columbus Dispatch / February 6, 2018

Dakota Mathias didn't move the recruiting needle much despite an outstanding career at Elida, Ohio. After ending the regular season of his senior year averaging 27.7 points, 8.2 rebounds and 5.8 assists and already the school's all-time leading scorer in the always-tough Western Buckeye League, he wasn't a top-200 national recruit according to the 247Sports.com rankings for the class of 2014.

It didn't deter Purdue's Matt Painter, though. And four years later, the Boilermakers are reaping the benefits of a hidden gem from Ohio who had only seven total scholarship offers and little known interest from Ohio State. Entering Wednesday night's game between the No. 3 Boilermakers and No. 14 Buckeyes at Purdue's Mackey Arena, Mathias is averaging 12.4 points, 3.8 rebounds and a team-best 4.4 assists per game while shooting 46.9 percent from three-point range.

It's mostly what Painter said he saw in the Ohioan during his recruitment.

"Well, he was one of the best high school players I've watched for somebody who had those physical attributes," Painter said during a Big Ten teleconference in mid-December when asked by the Dispatch about Mathias. "He was just a dominant high school player with the way he could affect the game with his passing and his rebounding, his ability to score the ball and stretch the defense. The thing that I didn't see was his ability to defend. He's become a really good defender, and he works very hard at it. I did not see that."

In 2014, Ohio State signed the state's top overall prospect in Pickerington North's Jae'Sean Tate and the No. 4 prospect in Garfield Heights' David Bell. Mathias was a three-star prospect who also held offers from Akron, Boston College, Dayton, Ohio, West Virginia and Belmont.

Painter said there was some concern about Mathias' lateral movement but that it was his only misgiving about him. But after overcoming mononucleosis as a freshman and "some other things that plagued him a little bit to start his career," Painter said, Mathias has grown to the point where his coach has likened him to a program legend.

"He reminds me, even though they're different players here, of Robbie Hummel and the fact that he can get 20 for you and he's happy and he can get five for you and he's happy," Painter said. "He can affect the game in other ways. He guards, he passes, he's a good teammate, he's selfless. He's just one of those guys that just helps you win basketball games."

As a junior, Mathias was named to the All-Big Ten Defensive Team and also received honorable mention all-league honors. He's increased his production in every season.

Listen to the BuckeyeXtra Basketball podcast:

"He does everything," ESPN college basketball analyst and former Virginia Tech coach Seth Greenberg told The Dispatch. "He's a willing passer, he makes open shots, he's a great defender, he's a ball mover, he's got a high basketball IQ. He's great without the ball."

Painter said Mathias' national recruiting perception didn't affect his thoughts on the player.

"I just think when you're not as athletic you don't get ranked as high," he said. "You sign at Purdue, you don't get ranked as high. It's just one of those things. He goes and signs somewhere else, they'll rank him higher. If you actually pay attention to it, you'll see some trends with how guys rank. They rank more on the potential and the athleticism than the production and I recruit towards production. When I've got in trouble is when I've recruited like they've evaluated. You've got to get guys that take care of the basketball, make open shots, make their free throws, coachable."

Edwards and Haas thriving together with cohesive play

Nathan Baird / Lafayette Journal & Courier / February 2, 2018

Purdue senior Vincent Edwards thinks for about half a second before naming his favorite thing about playing with Isaac Haas.

"It's a lot of fun to see him get double-teamed and see my man leave me and I'm literally right there standing at the basket," Vincent Edwards said. That's the best part."

Edwards and Haas combine to average 30.2 points and 13.2 rebounds per game. Among Big Ten Conference programs, only Michigan State's combo of Miles Bridges, Nick Ward and Jaren Jackson Jr. can boast that level of consistent frontcourt production.

Both Edwards and Haas merit first team All-Big Ten consideration. On their current trajectory, both may end up in the Player of the Year conversation as well.

After three years as important but arguably complimentary players around A.J. Hammons and Caleb "Biggie" Swanigan, Edwards and Haas have seized the spotlight. As Purdue's nation-best winning streak reaches 18 games, its two frontcourt stars are thriving with a cohesive style of play.

"In the past, we've never really gotten the attention we've gotten now," Edwards said. "It's easier to see now than in the past."

Edwards and Haas are Purdue's leading scorers and rebounders in Big Ten play, and Edwards is tied for second in rebounds. Their combined impact has become increasingly apparent over Purdue's past three victories.

Edwards scored 30 points on only 11 shots against Michigan. He scored 19 despite failing to make any jump shots against Indiana. While Maryland finally held him to eight points, Edwards collected 11 rebounds and five assists despite vomiting before and during the game due to the flu.

"Man, has he gotten more athletic," Maryland coach Mark Turgeon asked rhetorically. "I don't remember him being that athletic."

Yet Turgeon's greatest frustration grew from trying to limit Haas, who posted 20 points and nine rebounds. As injuries and fouls depleted the Terrapins' big man options, each Haas post touch seemed more certain of success.

"We just couldn't guard Haas," Turgeon said. "He's a beast."

Double teams legitimately caused Haas and the Boilermakers problems in prior years. The Hokes Bluff, Alabama, native had seen double or even triple teams throughout his basketball upbringing. Early in his Purdue career, however, they came with more frequency, more intensity, and from better athletes.

Haas had to adapt. Even as recently as last season, when he began to better recognize those traps, he felt he was at times too eager to give the ball up.

"This year it's more understanding they're not going to take the ball from me, because as soon as I see it I'm just going to put the clamps on it and they're not going to take it from me," Haas said.

"They're either going to foul me, or I'm going to find the open guy or I'm going to dribble away from it and then find the open guy — drag them a little bit further away. It's understanding as long as I become patient and don't get rushed by the trap should be fine."

Haas and Purdue excelled in those situations against Indiana last Sunday. On eight occasions, Indiana defenders attempted to trap the post. On all but one, the Boilermakers scored.

Purdue has long welcomed double teams because it means leaving someone uncovered on the perimeter. That plays right into the hands of the best 3-point shooting team among all power conference.

However, Haas and Edwards are increasingly efficient at turning those double teams into even higher-percentage shots close to the basket. Once again, that's by design.

"It's hard for someone who's not doubling, who's worried about, say Carsen Edwards, to now worry about zoning off," Purdue coach Matt Painter said. "Once they do zone off, now they're late. By the time the ball pinballs and takes off, that puts it in a bad way for them."

"That's what a lot of people don't realize. The play just started when you double. How it ends is what is going to be to your efficiency."

Edwards dazzled as a high-post passer early in his career. Back then he'd get the ball near the top of the key and fire darts to A.J. Hammons for easy points at the rim.

The dynamic has changed, but the underlying productivity remains baked into the offense.

Of Vincent Edwards' five assists against Maryland, four went to either Haas or Matt Haarms for layups or dunks. Haas' only assist went back to Edwards. Of Haas' five assists against Michigan and Indiana last week, four went to Edwards.

Which brings us to Haas' favorite thing about Vincent Edwards.

"His versatility on the outside and inside makes them have to extend out and guard him," Haas said. "When they start to sink in and try to double me, it's easy to find him."

"He's a great player, and you can only hope he gets better moving forward, just as everybody hopes everybody gets better."

Overlook Purdue basketball's Dakota Mathias at your own risk

Dakota Crawford / Indy Star / February 1, 2018

It's easy to be overshadowed on a team like this.

Purdue has won 18 straight on the backs of monstrous Isaac Haas, springy Carsen Edwards and smooth-as-silk Vincent Edwards. Vincent stole the show Wednesday as he played sick and, despite having no legs to shoot on, still tallied team-highs with 11 rebounds and five assists.

Haas scored 20 and Carsen added 17. They all did what they had to in another ugly game — by Purdue's red-hot shooting standards — to win an 18th straight. But then there's Dakota Mathias, who doesn't seem to believe in ugly games.

The senior guard put up 11 points on 4-of-7 shooting (3-of-6 3-pointers) and added four assists. He's incapable of a bad shot attempt and always willing to make the extra pass. That kind of play is so important in the ugly ones.

"Any time you miss shots, it's tough," Mathias said. "That's part of the maturity thing I was talking about. That would have negatively affected us in the past. Got our heads down, they'd score, we'd be down 5 or 10 points.

"I think we matured and realized we've got to get stops on defense regardless of what's going to happen offensively."

So even as his team shot 31 percent from 3-point range and struggled to find rhythm, there he was, quietly keeping them afloat. Buckling down on defense, helping to reinforce what makes this Purdue team one of the nation's most intimidating. He helped limit Kevin Huerter, maybe Maryland's best player, to just 1-of-5 shooting for five points in the first half.

Games at Indiana over the weekend and at home against Maryland were contests Purdue easily could have lost, if the Boilermakers weren't poised and Mathias-like.

"Our guys ... we've been in some possession-type games," head coach Matt Painter said. "And we've been able to make plays on both ends."

Mathias is a coach's son who has long been known for a high basketball IQ. His offensive box plus-minus, an advanced stat that gauges players' efficiency, is 15th in the nation. He's Purdue's best 3-point shooter (49.2 percent during Big Ten play) and leads them, by a wide margin, in assists (4.6 per game).

He pulls defenders in so tightly with his hair-trigger release that passing lanes become vast. Take last night, when he could have pulled up from the corner, but instead kicked it to Haas in the post. Haas passed up the shot, too, leading to P.J. Thompson drawing a foul as the shot clock neared zero.

So unselfish. Too unselfish?

"I get mad, because he can score the crap out of the ball," P.J. Thompson recently told the Journal & Courier. "He'll make an extra pass and I'm like, 'You might not be loose, but I'm taking your not loose over (someone else's) loose!'"

Sometimes, it feels like Mathias should be putting up more shots. But the same could be said of Thompson, who has connected on 48.9 percent of his 3-pointers this season, but attempts two fewer per game than Mathias and Carsen Edwards.

That's what this team is all about. It's win first, stats later. They're not talking about the win streak or the No. 3 national ranking or who's getting shot attempts. Mathias says it's more about fixing mistakes and fine-tuning this machine than winning right now.

"Even when you win, you can learn on the stuff you mess up," he said. "We do a good job of watching film, correcting those things regardless of outside noise, what people are saying."

They'll overlook all that other stuff, even if it's not so easy.

Different formulas, same result for Purdue during 17-game streak

Mike DeFabo / CNHI Sports Indiana / January 30, 2018

The routine always starts the same way. At the end of shootaround, Purdue senior forward Vincent Edwards grabs a ball from assistant coach D.J. Byrd.

"It has to be from D.J.," senior center Isaac Haas said.

Edwards, who Haas described as the most superstitious person he knows, is at the center of all of it. He tosses a pass to Nojel Eastern for a layup first. Then a lob to Aaron Wheeler. Then to Jacquil Taylor for a dunk. Finally, it ends when Edwards passes to Eastern, who jump stops and hits a layup.

It's a complicated, carefully choreographed routine. But every time, it's the same. Same order. Same shots. Same everything.

"It's the dumbest thing I've ever seen," Haas said. "But those dudes do it. So whatever."

Athletes are notoriously superstitious. A winning streak like Purdue's current school-best 17-game run can only amplify routines. As the saying goes, if it works, don't fix it. However, as Purdue looks to extend its winning streak to 18 games Wednesday against Maryland (15-8, 4-6 Big Ten), it's really been the opposite on the court.

The Boilermakers (21-2, 10-0) sit atop the Big Ten standings for the second straight year not because they are following the same formula every game. Instead, they've continued to pile up wins because they're a malleable group that can find so many different routes to the same destination.

During this 17-game winning streak, Purdue has won shootouts and grind-it-outs. It's won with record-setting 3-point performances and on nights when it can hardly hit a shot. It's won games on replay review and games that the second half isn't even worth watching once.

It's been a changing, evolving process. The only constant has been the final result.

"We don't get comfortable with winning," Haas said. "We don't get bored with it. In the process of that, we keep getting better and keep staying consistent and keep grinding through tough situations."

Part of it has to do with personnel. Purdue lost arguably the most consistent player in college basketball when Caleb Swanigan chose to go pro after his sophomore year. Each night, Purdue could basically count on a double-double from Swanigan.

Yet, somehow Purdue is even more consistent because it's so well-rounded. Purdue has been led in scoring by Carsen Edwards eight times, Vincent Edwards six times, Haas six times and Dakota Mathias three times. On a given night, any one of them is capable of playing at a first-team All-Big Ten level.

But the Boilermakers can also win when Haas attempts just one field goal or when Vincent Edwards scores a season low or when Mathias is content to be a facilitator.

"That provides a lot of weapons," Haas said. "It shows the whole 'pick your poison' aspect of this team. I think it makes it tough for people to guard."

It's more than just the personnel, though. The Boilermakers are winning different styles of games against different types of opponents.

Take last week, for example. Thursday night, Purdue won an absolute shootout against Michigan. The Boilermakers gave up a season-high 88 points to the Wolverines. But the Boilermakers shot 62 percent from the field — including 55 percent from 3-point range — to outscore another potent offensive team.

Just days later in Bloomington, Purdue struggled to make outside shots. The Boilers shot just 5-for-18 from deep, their second-worst 3-point shooting performance. Only the 5-for-23 night from behind the arc against Louisville was worse. Yet, Purdue won both of those games.

"You can't control how the game unfolds sometimes," Purdue coach Matt Painter said. "If they're not making shots, they have a little bit of experience grinding it out. If they are making shots, they know, hey, just keep doing what we're supposed to be doing on the defensive end."

As the second half of the Big Ten seasons continues, Purdue will need to continue to play consistently with Ohio State nipping at the Boilers' heels. But when the real tests come in March, the Boilermakers will be able to lean on the lessons learned during this streak to find ways to win, no matter what those ways might be.

How Purdue, Arizona survived gruesome Bahamas trips

Matt Norlander / CBS Sports / January 31, 2018

Sean Miller at this point is the exact opposite of Jack in the season three finale of "Lost."

He wants no part of going back to the island.

On Wednesday night, Arizona easily beat Washington State 100-72. Additionally, Purdue took care of Maryland 75-67.

So what do these two teams, these two games have to do with each other? Not only have these schools continued to stay atop their conference standings, but they've kept on with a dominant trend over the past two-plus months.

And yet, nobody thought this was possible eight weeks ago.

Here's what's bonkers: A pair of Wednesday night wins will brought Arizona and Purdue to a combined, remarkable record of 34-1 since they met each other in the most unexpected tilt of the season: the seventh-place game at the Battle 4 Atlantis in the Bahamas. Yes, remember that? We're now more than two months removed from the Nov. 24 game that Purdue wound up winning, far too easily, 89-64 over Arizona. The win was big for a Purdue team that had slipped up against Tennessee and Western Kentucky the two days prior.

Combined, they're now 40-1 on American soil this season.

For Arizona, the loss to Purdue seemed to signal something profound. It was a program caught in the crosshairs of an FBI investigation; then and there, in paradise, it looked like Sean Miller's team was about to blow a season with Final Four expectations. Here's what our Reid Forgrave wrote at the time, as he was on the scene in the Bahamas: "Call it what you want: The Bahamian Bloodbath. The Caribbean CAT-astrophe. Braising Arizona. What second-ranked Arizona just did over the past 72 hours has to rank among the most devastating non-conference tournament showings in the history of non-conference tournaments."

It absolutely was. Arizona was universally seen as a top-five team heading into the 2017-18 season. Hell, plenty believed Arizona had the most talent and a right to preseason No. 1 status. In a matter of two weeks all of that was flip-turned upside down. The Wildcats were 3-3 and plunged from No. 2 to out of the rankings a few days later. It was an unprecedented poll dive in the modern history of the AP rankings.

But the Wildcats have responded by winning 16 of their next 17. Their only loss was a three-point margin at Colorado on Jan. 6, a defeat the Wildcats avenged last Thursday. Freshman power-center Deandre Ayton has blossomed into an All-America candidate and is a clear-cut top-three freshman in the sport. Miller has managed to not only course-correct the season, but he's also made November feel like another era. And as for the FBI stuff, I told you last week where we stand with that.

Arizona is a 4 seed in our latest Bracketology. But they're a 4 seed and climbing.

Now let's look at Purdue. The Boilermakers are undefeated on United States soil! They're a 1 seed, naturally, in our latest forecast. They've ripped off a school-record 18 straight W's and sit at 11-0 in the Big Ten. Purdue has the third-ranked offense and seventh-ranked defense in the country, according to KenPom. The Boilermakers are making 43.2 percent of their 3-point attempts. That's tops in the sport. Five players, all of whom have taken at least 76 3-point attempts, are shooting 40 percent or better.

Purdue doesn't foul much, either. Opponents' free-throw attempts account for 23 percent of their total shots, the fourth-lowest rate in college hoops. Purdue has knocked off Marquette, Louisville, Butler and Michigan -- twice. This is the most successful Boilermakers team ever under Matt Painter. That November slip-up was so aberrational, Purdue fans must be dreaming of what it would be like to be undefeated right about now.

After all, Purdue lost in overtime to a solid Tennessee team, then fell by four the next day to Western Kentucky. Painter told me earlier this season that the losses were because of a bad habit of poor shot selection. That's been erased at this point.

If you're looking for another reason why Purdue has been this good and turned itself into a national championship contender, consider its overseas trip to Taipei. Purdue won silver in the World University Games. The two-week-long trip actually provided competitive basketball and a tournament environment for a veteran team that was adapting to losing Caleb Swanigan, who was unquestionably one of the two or three most valuable players in college basketball last season.

November basketball is a tricky thing to evaluate, and these two teams are proving why. They combined to go 1-5 in a premier Thanksgiving week tournament, yet have established themselves as national title contenders since. They are not the same teams now that they were then. Barring the bracket breaking the right way, we won't see Purdue and Zona face off again this season. But it has been surprising to see these two get off the island and run game on the mainland.

Purdue's done it on both ends of the floor, but ultimately gotten to No. 3 in the rankings, thanks to its 3-point arsenal and a well-rounded cast of veterans. Arizona's managed to play together for Miller, pushed by the ascendant Ayton and underrated acumen of junior guard Allonzo Trier. They've managed to get to 18-4 despite only having 10 games from the habitually injured Rawle Alkins, making it even more noteworthy.

The runs serve as a reminder to ding or reward teams for how they play in the first few weeks of the non-conference but to always dodge drawing big-picture conclusions. In the pre-season Purdue and Arizona were predicted as teams that would compete if not outright win their conference titles. Both were ranked then too, and that's exactly where they are now -- and how they project to finish.

Purdue is National Championship Good

Gregg Doyel / Indy Star / January 25, 2018

Purdue has had some great teams, getting to the Final Four in 1969 with Rick Mount and again in 1980 with Joe Barry Carroll, but it's never had a team like this. Never had this many 7-footers, this many 3-point shooters, this much talent, this much depth, this much of a shot at a national championship.

That's the elephant in the room, right? That's out there for this Purdue team, a realistic goal for a team so good that 30 wins won't be enough, a Big Ten championship won't be enough, smacking Indiana in a few days won't be enough. Purdue beat Michigan 92-88 on Thursday night to extend its winning streak to 16 games, longest in the country, which is the kind of company the Boilermakers are keeping:

No company. No peers. No equals.

There is nobody in college basketball like No. 3 Purdue, and while that doesn't guarantee Purdue a damn thing, it will make for a fascinating March that could extend into April, what with the Final Four being played March 31-April 2 in San Antonio. Nobody in college basketball seems to have the depth and breadth of offensive weaponry of Purdue, and for damn sure nobody has a weapon like Isaac Haas, a blunt-force basketball instrument who scored 24 points in 20 minutes against Michigan, adding six rebounds, three blocked shots and three assists.

And this is how good Purdue is:

Michigan knew this, so Michigan played Haas straight up. The Wolverines let 6-11, 245-pound Moritz Wagner battle Haas one-on-one, and not because Michigan coach John Beilein is stupid. He's quite smart, actually. He was going to let Haas get his points, figuring two points (a Haas bucket at the rim) is less than three.

"They have jump shooters," Beilein said, and if his admiration wasn't clear enough, he repeated himself: "Jump shooters."

Indeed, Purdue has five players with at least 30 made 3-pointers this season – Dakota Mathias (55), Carsen Edwards (54), P.J. Thompson (42), Vincent Edwards (38) and Ryan Cline (30) – and all five are shooting at least 40.5-percent from long range. Beilein wasn't going to double-team Haas, because that meant leaving a 3-point sniper alone. It didn't work, not with Purdue scoring 92 points, but it was decent strategy in that Michigan is the only team to give the Boilermakers a game in nearly two months. Purdue came into Thursday leading

the country in scoring margin at 22.6 points per game, because it's what I've been telling you:

Purdue has no peers this season. None.

Again: That doesn't promise a national title or even a Final Four banner, and since we're keeping it 100, as the kids like to say, let's keep it 100: Purdue's past is the only thing IU fans are clinging to, because there is nothing about Purdue's present or future that looks all that palatable for Big Brother Basketball School in a state where Purdue has emerged in recent years as the most consistent program.

But Purdue under Matt Painter has never gotten out of the Sweet 16, and that is the comfort of IU fans, the chorus they sing whenever I write something about Purdue in the newspaper or on social media. Purdue beats the hell out of Minnesota, beats the Gophers 81-47 on the road, and I mention it and am immediately reminded that Purdue tends to underachieve in March.

Indeed, that is the bed Matt Painter has made here in West Lafayette, where his teams have won at least 25 games six times since 2008 but have never gotten past the Sweet 16, and have made it that far just three times. This team will rocket past 25 wins – the Boilermakers are 20-2 – and will be judged by how it plays in the 2018 NCAA tournament.

In that regard, Thursday was the latest bit of proof that Purdue has a team unlike any Painter has ever had, and a team unlike any coach, anywhere in the NCAA, has this season. Haas did his thing to Michigan, and nobody has an Isaac Haas, but the Boilermakers also were 11-for-20 on 3-pointers (55 percent), and while that's so good it sounds like a fluke ... it's not. In the previous four games, Purdue averaged 15 made 3-pointers per game, and shot 56.4 percent in that stretch (60-for-111).

What I'm saying: The Boilermakers were 11-for-20 on 3-pointers on Thursday night, shooting 55 percent – which means they're starting to cool.

Purdue is doing this the year after consensus All-American junior Caleb Swanigan turned pro, but in Vincent Edwards it has a player worthy of All-America honors. Edwards, who came into Thursday averaging 14.9 points, 7.8 rebounds and 2.8 assists and shooting 46.2 percent on 3-pointers, was spectacular: 30 points, five rebounds, five assists. He was 9-for-11 from the floor, 3-for-3 on 3-pointers, and 9-for-10 on free throws. He also put the clamps on Michigan's power forwards, going 39 minutes as the principal defender on Michigan's Isaiah Livers and Duncan Robinson, holding them to eight points, four rebounds and no assists in 40 minutes.

Edwards scored 20 points in the second half, and took just five shots from the floor to do it. Read that again. Purdue needed that efficiency in a second half where Michigan wasn't missing much (66.7 percent from the floor) and Muhammad-Ali Abdur-Rahkman wasn't missing any (19 of his 26 points in the second half). At one point in the second half, the two teams were a combined 24-for-30 from the floor (80 percent).

"This is what you come to a Big Ten school for," Vincent Edwards said. "This kind of environment. This kind of stage. It was huge. That second-half atmosphere was what you want to play in."

Midway through the second half, Michigan was playing the kind of game you'd hang in a basketball museum. The Wolverines were shooting 61.4 percent from the floor (27-for-44), and 57.9 percent on 3-pointers (11-for-19). They were outrebounding Purdue by two. They had committed just nine turnovers.

They trailed 79-70.

Purdue is so good, it raises the question: What are we watching here? Nobody asked Haas during his postgame interview, but he found a way to answer it anyway.

"I believe we're the best team in the nation," Haas said. "I just want to show everybody."

Isaac, I believe you have.

Replacing Biggie With Boogie

Rob Dauster / NBC Sports / January 25, 2018

P.J. Thompson knew.

It wasn't all that hard to figure out, really.

This C-Boogie kid?

He was going to be good. He shot it well. He was tough, athletic, "had a fire to him," as Thompson put it. He saw that on his recruiting visit. He saw that in captain's practices. He saw it in the way that this 6-foot kid from Texas worked, the way that he carried himself. Humble but confident. Unfazed by the hype machine, concerned with improving himself more than celebrating his successes.

He fit in the culture that Thompson and his teammates had built at Purdue. Thompson and the rest of this senior class committed to a program in the midst of their second straight losing season. They've been to three NCAA tournaments and look to be the favorite to win their second straight Big Ten regular season title as seniors.

Carsen Edwards?

The kid known as C-Boogie?

He fit.

But Thompson knew there was more there. He figured it out during one of Purdue's first practices in Edwards' freshman season, when, in a 4-on-4-on-4 drill, the right-handed Edwards drove the lane and threw down a left-handed dunk on Purdue's 7-foot-3, 290 pound center, Isaac Haas.

"It was nasty," Thompson said. "You can see on the camera, everyone going crazy. It was a pretty cool dunk. Well, Isaac probably didn't think it was cool."

"That's when we knew."

A season after winning the Big Ten regular season title and advancing to the Sweet 16, the Boilermakers were faced with the arduous task of trying to replace one of college basketball's best players: Caleb Swanigan. A first-team all-american and the only player that really challenged Frank Mason for National Player of the Year, Biggie's departure left Purdue devoid of 18.5 points, 12.5 boards, 3.1 assists and a low-post hoss that shot 44.7 percent from beyond the arc.

"Anytime you have a player of Caleb Swanigan's ability, everybody made a big deal in terms of where you ranked us and where you put us because we lost him," head coach Matt

Painter told NBC Sports. "But man. We had so much back."

And he's right.

Purdue returned four seniors that started at least 15 games last season, including Vincent Edwards, who was a third-team all-Big Ten performer as a junior. They also returned Carsen — the two are not related — who started 21 games. One of the problems that Purdue ran into last season was that they more or less had six players deserving of a starting spot.

Without Biggie, that issue goes away.

And, frankly, it allows those five remaining starters to play roles that they are better-suited for. Thompson, Carsen and Dakota Mathias can all play on the perimeter together while Vincent can slide into the small-ball four role that he is so well-suited to. Haas, who is impossible to stop one-on-one when he gets position on the block, and fellow 7-footer Matt Haarms can rotate through at the five, giving Purdue a dream scenario: four guys that shoot the cover off the ball around a center that has to be double-teamed.

"The thing that stuck out to me last season was that I didn't like our team when we were really big," Painter said. "When it was Isaac, Vince and Biggie all in the game. I thought we had to play two of those three guys," even if it meant that he couldn't get his five best players on the floor.

This year, that is not an issue.

And Carsen, who is averaging 17.0 points, 4.2 boards and 3.1 assists, may be the biggest reason why.

Given his size, Carsen is going to have to be a point guard if and when he gets to the NBA, but that hasn't always been the way that he's played. He's an attack-minded guy, not necessarily someone with a score-first mentality but certainly a kid whose biggest strength has always been finding a way to put the ball into the basket. When he is able to share the court with Thompson and Mathias, he is freed up to play that way. Thompson is the quintessential 'pure point guard,' a guy who facilitates offense, who knocks down open threes (51.2 percent on the season), who doesn't turn the ball over, who is a pest defensively.

Mathias plays that way as well. He leads the team in assists this season while essentially playing the three, shooting 45.8 percent from three as one of, if not the best perimeter de-

fender in the Big Ten. And to hear Painter tell, what Mathias does better than anything else is recognizing what the right play is. They can run actions for him because they know a shot is only going to go up if it is a good shot; he's more than willing, and capable, as a playmaker.

That frees up Carsen to ... well, to be himself.

"I think my teammates trust me," he said. "They trust my ability."

It creates an unusual dynamic within the locker room.

The hierarchy of many, if not most, college teams is simple: Seniority prevails. If you've spent two or three or four years paying your dues, by the time you get to be a senior, it is your turn to be the star. You get to take the shots. You get to be the leading scorer. You get to be the guy that is on the cover of gameday programs. With this Purdue team, the four senior starters have not only ceded the starring role to Carsen a year after they did the same for Swanigan, they've embraced the youngster and what he is capable of.

"We know how special of a player C-Boogie is," Thompson said. "Our senior class, we have no egos. We want to be stars in our roles. It's only a handful of stars in the world, but you can be a star in your role, perfect it and do it to the best of your ability. We have a lot of guys on our team that do that."

Painter took it a step further.

"They like it, he said." He has some things that we need. You try to piece your team together, and he's the final piece. You [look at our] four seniors, what do we lack? If we were playing four-on-four with those four seniors, what do we lack? All of Carsen's attributes would be the answer. He's fast, he's explosive, he can score, he can put pressure on the ball and use his quickness."

"We're driven by so many people that think they gotta do individual things to make themselves shine. We live in that basketball landscape. In reality, you've gotta win. There's way more individual attention getting shelled out to people that win than people that don't. I don't care what you score, how you do it. There's a leading scorer on every team. They're fighting to be the leading scorer, we're fighting to win."

The NCAA has a rule that allows college basketball programs to take one overseas trip every four years, and for the most part, these trips have less to do with the actual basketball than they do with taking a vacation.

The competition is rarely competitive, and the best part about the trip from a coach's perspective is the chance to get those 10 extra practices in and manufacturing the team-bonding experiences the players get while spending time in a place where they speak a different language and the cost of international data is enough that, hopefully, the kids spend more time communicating than they do scrolling.

Purdue went on one of those trips in the summer of 2016.

They also took a trip this past season, but it was very different than a typical foreign tour. The Boilermakers were Team USA's representative in the World University Games in Taipei. Not counting the two exhibitions that they played against Canada prior to leaving for Taiwan, Purdue spent two weeks abroad, playing a total of nine games in just 12 days.

"A lot of times you go on those trips it's more educational than it is about basketball," Painter said. "It was a basketball trip."

And the competition was really good as well. Notre Dame's Martinas Geben played for Lithuania. Florida's Egor Koulechov and Gorjok Gak played for Israel and Australia, respectively. These were 22 and 23 year olds playing in a national team structure that they've played in for a long time. Purdue came home with a silver medal and it wasn't all that big of a deal that they didn't win gold.

Put another way, the Boilermakers got an 11 game head start on trying to figure out how they were going to move on without Swain.

The other part of it, however, was that there were no excursions. They weren't visiting museums or going on group hikes or experiencing everything that the city of Taipei has to offer. It was a basketball trip, the by-product being a lot of downtime living in what amounted to an Olympic Village with mobs of athletes that didn't speak English and no TV or Netflix to binge on.

So what did Purdue do?

Well, they played a lot of cards.

"I didn't know how to play euchre," Thompson said, "but now I'm a stud and they can't beat me. Texas Hold'em. Tonk. All that."

Those are the moments where the real team-bonding happen. Those are the moments where friendships are started, where freshmen become teammates and teammates become brothers.

"Oh yeah," Carsen said, chuckling when asked if the trip helped him get to know his teammates better. "We stayed in a village apartment, and there was six of us in a room. And wherever you go you're with your teammates. You have no choice. Looking back on it now, I have a lot of memories from it, just small memories with my teammates."

What the younger guys learned about the seniors on this team was simple: They came to Purdue to turn the program around. That had already happened, but their story wasn't complete yet.

"We've done what we wanted to do here at Purdue," Thompson said, "and now we have to finish it."

Young for his age, Carsen was invited to try-outs for USA Basketball's U-19 team. He made it. He played for John Calipari and alongside the likes of Cameron Reddish and Brandon McCoy and Hamidou Diallo. He led the team in minutes and assists, finishing fifth in scoring at 10.4 points despite coming off the bench in all but one of the team's games.

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

That aggressiveness has never been an issue for Carsen. It's ingrained in him. What he needed to learn was to pick his spots, to develop the kind of decision-making that would allow him to be the go-to guy for a team with Final Four aspirations. As a freshman, Boogie took more shots-per-minute than Biggie, Purdue's All-American first round pick, and he did it while being the least-efficient player on the Purdue roster and while committing two more turnovers than assists on the season.

That wasn't going to work this year.

He understands, Painter says, that he can be the star for this team without needing to force shots anymore.

Purdue is unselfish. They make the right pass. They make the right play. Carsen knows that if he gives the ball up, he's either going to get it back with a cleaner look at the rim or one of his teammates will end up with a better shot. This group understands the roles they are being asked to play, and they understand the roles their teammates are being asked to play.

Carsen's role?

Go-to guy.

He's not intimidated by it, by the responsibility of shouldering the load offensively for a team ranked No. 3 in the nation. He's not intimidated by much, it seems. Not by trying out for Team USA. Not by leading his college team into an international competition. Not by trying to dunk over a 7-foot-3 center that is built like combination of Mr. Incredible and The Mountain.

It seems that the only thing he's scared of is ... riding a camel?

"I've ridden horses and it's not the same at all," he said. "You're so much higher off the ground and when it walks you're moving. It's a really scary experience."

Luckily for Purdue, that seems to be the last time that anything has intimidated C-Boogie.

Purdue shows you can shoot 3s and play defense

John Gasaway / ESPN.com / January 25, 2018

Our habits when talking about college basketball reveal assumptions we may not even realize we have. Take Kansas.

Bill Self frets about KU having to “go small” and needing to shoot a lot of 3s, because you just know what that’s going to do to your team’s defense. Sounds straightforward enough.

Or, at the other extreme, consider Virginia. The Cavaliers play phenomenal D, but of course Tony Bennett’s team is prone to “dry spells” on offense, ones that have cost the Hoos dearly in March. This stuff is all just common sense, right?

Matt Painter says nonsense. Purdue this season says it’s all nonsense.

Whether a Boilermaker lineup made up of a 7-footer (Isaac Haas or Matt Haarms), the 6-foot-8 Vincent Edwards and three guys ranging from normal-sized to somewhat diminutive for basketball (Dakota Mathias, Carsen Edwards and P.J. Thompson) rates as “going small” will be in the eye of the beholder. It is true, however, that such a rotation checks in as statistically identical to that being played by Self in terms of average height, according to kenpom.com.

Furthermore, the Boilers are nearly as perimeter-oriented as the Jayhawks. In Big Ten play, 42 percent of Purdue’s shot attempts have been launched from beyond the arc. That’s the highest degree of perimeter orientation in this program’s history.

More importantly, it’s a wise perimeter orientation. With Mathias, Thompson and Carsen and Vincent Edwards leading the way, Purdue has shot a borderline insane 47 percent on its 3s in conference play. When you can get 141 points from 100 tries launched from beyond the arc, you’d be crazy not to be a perimeter-oriented offense. Few if any teams nationally have a stronger incentive to shoot 3s than do the Boilermakers (8-0 Big Ten, 19-2).

In Purdue’s 87-64 win at Iowa last weekend, Mathias, the Edwardses and Thompson combined for 67 points powered by their collective 17-of-26 shooting on 3s. Painter’s big four isn’t always going to go 65 percent from outside, of course, but these Boilers have shown over the course of 21 games (and, for that matter, over the past two seasons) that they can win from deep.

That, in a nutshell, is the long and the short of this outstanding offense, one that’s tearing up the Big Ten to the tune of 1.19 points per possession. Yes, Painter’s team is pretty good at making 2s as well. Then again, Illinois, to take one example, has been more accurate than the Boilermakers inside the arc in Big Ten play, and no one’s tripping over themselves to learn the Illini’s secrets on offense.

Purdue’s point of difference isn’t necessarily that it can score in more ways than one. More like the Boilers can win in more ways than one. If there’s a special sauce in West Lafayette, it’s 3s plus defense. This is a team that spreads the floor with multiple shooters like Kansas, and then turns around and plays tough D like Virginia.

The Big Ten has scored just 0.92 points per possession against Painter’s team, making this the best defense in the league. Haas is a good rim defender (and, in his limited minutes, Haarms has been a great one), and, most crucially, the Boilermakers are able to clamp down on opposing offenses without fouling. Only Maryland has recorded a lower foul rate thus far in Big Ten play (and, in the case of a weak Terrapin defense, that may not be entirely a good thing).

In fact, on paper, this could be the best defense Painter has had in 13 seasons in West Lafayette. If he insists on looking for something to worry about, however, it could be opponents’ 3-point shooting. While the Boilers have limited opposing Big Ten offenses to 31.6 percent shooting beyond the arc, there’s likely some good fortune wrapped up in that number along with some demonstrably good defense.

On the two occasions when conference opponents made at least 10 shots from beyond the arc against Purdue, the game came down to the final minute both times (at Maryland and at Michigan). To be sure, the Boilermaker defense really is outstanding, and its low-foul rim defense will stand it in good stead when, inevitably, opponents again connect on their shots from deep.

This “3s plus defense” look sported by Painter’s men is fairly rare, but it’s not entirely without precedent. The last time we saw a perimeter-oriented team ranked among the national leaders for adjusted defensive efficiency, we were looking at the Villanova Wildcats in 2015-16. Needless to say, that turned out pretty well for Jay Wright’s guys that season.

Maybe Purdue can follow in those same footsteps. If the Boilers pull it off, mark it down as one more strike against some of our more questionable basketball assumptions.

How Purdue fine-tuned its high-octane offense

Mike DeFabo / CNHI Sports Indiana / January 23, 2018

The Purdue basketball season began with a homework assignment.

Each one of the Boilermakers was asked to read Baxter Holmes' ESPN article titled, "The charcuterie board that revolutionized basketball."

Most players didn't get far before questions started popping up in the team's group chat.

"A bunch of guys in the group chat were asking, 'What's a charcuterie board?'" redshirt freshman Matt Haarms said. "Thankfully, I knew. I watched a YouTube video about it."

While the headline may have been a lesson in fine dining, the point of the article was to explain how the Golden State Warriors created the most explosive offense in NBA history — a lethal 3-point shooting, offensive juggernaut that has fueled Golden State to a record-breaking 73-win season and two NBA titles.

If you're looking for the CliffsNotes version, you can boil the 3,500-plus word story down to one main subject: passing.

In 2013-14 under coach Mark Jackson, the Warriors averaged an NBA-low 247 passes per game in a stagnant, isolation-heavy system. When coach Steve Kerr took the reigns, he decided to create a new offensive style that combined elements of the triangle offense with high ball-screen action common in today's game. Kerr used almond and cranberries in the story to explain the new idea. (That's where the charcuterie board comes in.)

Passing the basketball to find the best shot is basic stuff. But the Warriors wanted a way to quantify their ball movement in this new system. So they set a goal of 300 passes per game.

When Purdue players read the article, it hit its mark.

"When you look at a team like that, the best team to ever play basketball, if they're that unselfish making those passes, why can't we?" senior guard Dakota Mathias said.

The Boilermakers decided to create their own pass goal. They scaled the number down to account for the differences in the college game and settled on a nice, round number: 200 passes. That's the goal.

Let's back up for a second.

The motivation to read the article and to adopt a pass goal came from Purdue's newest — and probably smartest — member of the staff, Andrew McClatchey.

Six months ago, he was using his master's degree in mechanical engineering at a normal desk job. Well, kind of normal. He was working as a real-time energy trader at a power marketing company in northern Indiana. If that sounds confusing to you, you're not alone.

"It's really complicated," McClatchey said. "Basically you're trading energy as a commodity."

McClatchey figured he'd stick to the 9-to-5 grind for the next 20-to-25 years. That is until he saw an ad that Purdue was looking for an analyst, or as coach Matt Painter termed it a "math guy."

The Boilermakers had used a variety of software to break down basketball beyond the box score. But they were looking to join the analytics revolution sparked by Billy Beane's "Moneyball" Oakland Athletics by adding a specialized position on their staff.

McClatchey fit the mold.

As a kid growing up in Indiana, McClatchey wasn't the best high school player. But he always saw the game a little bit differently. His skill with numbers intersected with his passion for basketball when he picked up Dean Oliver's groundbreaking book, "Basketball on Paper."

From there, he put the theories to the test during gigs at his alma maters, New Palestine High School and IUPUI, plus a stint at Anderson University. McClatchey eventually developed his own formulas and his own sports metrics company, BAM Analytics, LLC.

When McClatchey interviewed, he told Painter about his past, and the coach essentially gave him a blank slate.

Each game, McClatchey analyzes a range of advanced metrics — player efficiency ratings, rebounding percentages, turnover percentages. He tracks tempo and lineup combinations to help Purdue scout itself and the opponent. He measures how often Purdue gets the ball into the paint and the differences between playing center Isaac Haas vs. Haarms.

"It just kind of gives you much more of an insight into your game," Haarms said. "Before it was guess work. Now, he has the numbers."

McClatchey's work goes well beyond counting passes. His favorite metric is one he created himself, something the Boilers want to keep in-house.

But the pass goal is one of the few metrics he's willing to talk about.

"When we're in the half-court, we obviously want to make the defense work, just because we have so many weapons," McClatchey said. "If we pass the ball around the perimeter and play inside-out through Isaac (Haas), a lot of good stuff can happen. We don't necessarily want to take the first good shot. We want to get the first great shot."

It's not necessarily ground-breaking stuff. Probing the defense to find the best shot has been part of the game since they cut the bottoms out of the peach baskets. But it's one thing to talk in theory about good ball movement. It's another to objectively know whether it was achieved.

So how's Purdue responding to the goal?

So far this season the Boilermakers have lost just two games — back-to-back upsets in the Bahamas to Tennessee and Western Kentucky. There were plenty of reasons for the losses. Purdue got beat on the boards. It lacked energy. It played "entitled" in P.J. Thompson's words. Painter also saw some flaws on offense.

"They just shot the ball too quickly," Painter said. "I felt like they just dribbled and shot without passing or shot after just one pass too often."

The numbers backed it up. The Boilermakers averaged around 160 passes in those two losses, the lowest two-game average of the season.

After the losses, Painter began calling more plays instead of allowing the offense to flow freely. As a result, Purdue regrouped in time to upset then-No.3 Arizona for the highest quality win of the year, according to KenPom.

The pass total in that marquee was more than 210, the highest mark of the season.

Well, at least it was the highest total ...

Saturday afternoon in Iowa City, the Boilermakers went nuts from 3-point range. They hit 20 3-pointers, a new record for a Big Ten game. While everyone wanted to talk about the shooting, Painter couldn't stop praising his team's passing.

"In these type of environments, we talk about passing the ball more than you dribble," Painter said. "When it gets loud and you can't hear yourself think and you can't see the play call, you have to just move the basketball and play off your instincts."

The Boilermakers totaled more than 230 passes in a 40-minute game, by far the best total of the season. In one possession alone, the Boilers passed eight times after the ball got past half court and used every second of the shot clock before Carsen Edwards found Nojel Eastern for a wide-open dunk.

Whether its metrics, extra reading or just good, old-school coaching, there's no disputing the Boilermakers are sharing (and scoring) the basketball at an extremely high rate.

As the mid-point in the Big Ten season approaches, the Boilermakers feature five shooters who are making more than 40 percent of their 3-pointers. On a team where everyone is the go-to guy, it's impossible for a defense to focus all of its attention on just one player. All this is contributing to the highest-scoring and most-efficient offense Painter has ever coached.

If you squint real hard, they sometimes look like a certain NBA team. So sit back, grab your charcuterie board, and enjoy the show.

From Bambi to Pistol Pete to Purdue star; Haarms' Improbable Journey

Nathan Baird / Lafayette Journal & Courier / January 19, 2018

Across college basketball, Purdue coach Matt Painter and his staff get credit for discovering shot-blocking, fist-pumping windmill of energy Matt Haarms.

In the basketball community in Haarms' hometown of Amsterdam, they know better. The credit belongs to Wim Nieuwenhuizen, and if you think American college coaches are persistent in pursuit of prospects, they have nothing on Wim.

Nieuwenhuizen, a longtime youth basketball coach in The Netherlands, first noticed the tall classmate of his son, Dajo. When he realized the student was also left-handed, the veteran coach saw a frontcourt talent ripe for cultivating.

"If he can keep up with this, I don't know where it can end."

So Nieuwenhuizen approached Haarms' parents — and you better believe he noticed their heights as well — and asked if their 5-year-old wanted to play basketball.

He didn't stop until Matt Haarms said yes — six years later.

"He asked I think 100 times — 'Bring Matt, bring Matt,'" said Martine van Hoorn, Haarms' mother.

The 24/7 Sports composite of the national rankings for the 2017 recruiting class lists Haarms 354th. When Purdue landed the skinny prep school center from Sunrise Christian in Bel Aire, Kansas, he represented a project with uncertain upside. A power forward in need of a quicker first step, or more likely, a center in need of a sandwich.

Today, with the 7-3 Haarms' defensive presence galvanizing the Boilermakers' ascent to the No. 3 spot in the national polls, the commitment seems like a coup.

Only seven players nationally have blocked more shots than Haarms, and they've all played considerably more minutes. He'll likely break Purdue's freshman record for blocked shots — set 41 years ago by eventual consensus All-American Joe Barry Carroll. He'll contend for All-Freshman and All-Defensive Team honors in the Big Ten Conference.

And even if none of that were true, his exuberant outbursts — in which he punctuates defensive stops or emphatic dunks by pogo sticking through the lane and whipping a clenched fist through the air — made him an immediate favorite of the Boilermakers' Paint Crew student section.

The coaches back in The Netherlands — the ones who coaxed this talent out of a quiet boy who loved books and dinosaurs and video games — always believed in Haarms' basketball potential.

To a man, however, they admit they didn't expect this.

"If he can keep up with this," Nieuwenhuizen said, "I don't know where it can end."

Eventually, this will be a story about how basketball became the foremost passion in Matt Haarms' life.

But it begins almost two decades ago at Rotterdam's natural history museum, where Haarms' mother is a little spooked that her 2-year-old son can name every dinosaur in the place.

Haarms soon began devouring books about dinosaurs, the Ice Age, nature — anything educational. Many of his friends eventually drifted towards soccer or some other athletic club.

"I just hated sports," Haarms said.

Haarms' parents, however, had a rule: One activity per week outside the house. While both parents came from athletic backgrounds, their motivation extended beyond physical fitness. They believed their only child would benefit from competition with other kids.

"It's a gentle flow, what you got with Matt — like a ballet dancer versus an American football player."

FORMER COACH ERIC KROPF

Haarms began with soccer, where coaches noted his length and reach and made him a goalkeeper. An aversion to diving on the ground truncated that career.

Haarms tried some of his friends' activities. He spent about a year in the Dutch version of the Boy Scouts, learning to tie maritime knots and sailing.

Swimming. Ice skating. At age 10 he took up judo for a year but gave it up after obtaining his yellow belt.

Yet Haarms never picked up a basketball. Even though she had played the sport through high school, van Hoorn said she never pushed her son to accept Nieuwenhuizen's overtures. The parents believed Haarms should choose his own interests.

The breakthrough came around age 11. Haarms' school participated in a Christmas basketball tournament with others from around Amsterdam. He remembers becoming unexpectedly enthused about making the team, and very upset when he didn't.

Nieuwenhuizen, however, had enrolled his team — the Harlemlakers — in the event to raise awareness for the club. He invited Haarms to join them, and at long last the persistence paid off.

"I was absolutely horrible," Haarms said, "but I had a lot of fun and I joined the team."

Haarms recalls his fish-out-of-water introduction to the sport. Most of his peers had played since age 6 or younger. Haarms couldn't catch the ball cleanly, and when he did he certainly couldn't dribble it. Without knowing the proper way to grip a shot, he clumsily threw the ball at the basket.

"He was like Bambi in the Disney movie," said Brord Brugman, a Harlemlakers associate who would later play a significant role in furthering Haarms' career. "He was skinny, but you saw he had some coordination."

While Haarms speaks with self-deprecation about his basketball infancy, his coaches saw something else. Basketball players for decades have used the "Mikan Drill" — make a layup under the basket with one hand, rebound the ball and make a layup with the opposite hand, repeat indefinitely — to develop stamina and skills around the rim.

Another Harlemlakers coach, Eric Kropf, said that elementary exercise quickly exposed Haarms' potential. He and other coaches saw the motor skills and dexterity necessary to eventually develop basketball savvy.

"It's a gentle flow, what you got with Matt — like a ballet dancer versus an American football player," Kropf said.

Pistol Pete

As the video begins a basketball emerges from the shadows, then a wide, square backboard and hoop. A man unzips his warm-up jacket and begins dribbling the ball as a narrator speaks over '80s synth music straight out of "Fletch."

"The legend," the voice says, "is back."

The legend is former LSU great and NBA All-Star Pete Maravich. A generation of basketball coaches gave VHS copies of "Pistol Pete's Homework Basketball" to their students. Around 2009 Brugman gave the DVDs to Haarms — at the time still a novice in need of a crash course in the tools of the game.

"When you shoot, you've got to have a little man in your head, and when he shoots, every time the ball goes in," Haarms said, recounting one of Maravich's lessons.

"Whenever we were playing five-on-five, if you were not on Matt's team, you wouldn't win."

WIM NIEUWENHUIZEN

Cheesy, for sure, but Haarms watched every minute. Basketball for 12-year-old Haarms became what dinosaurs had been a decade before — an obsessive hobby.

The Orlando Magic went to the NBA Finals in 2009, and Haarms adopted them as his favorite team. He loved Dwight Howard — the big man in the middle setting ball screens and crushing dunks. Later he switched his allegiance to the Houston Rockets and their own international big man, Yao Ming.

Haarms played NBA 2K9 with his father. He begged for a delay on chores or other obligations to watch the NBA's Top 10 plays each night. He watched March Madness during VCU's memorable run, which is where he also saw Purdue for the first time.

Unlike all those aborted flirtations with other sports, Haarms enjoyed playing basketball. He practiced two days a week with the Harlemlakers, then three, then five. Eventually, the kid who didn't want to put his books down for even one extra-curricular activity was playing basketball every day.

"Before that I was like, 'No, I want to stay inside,'" Haarms said. "Now I was like, 'Let's go, let's go. Basketball practice starts in an hour. I want to get there early.'"

Haarms didn't put the books down, either. His Purdue teammates call him the "Human Computer" for his ability to quickly produce facts and figures. The political science major scored a 30 on his ACT. For a bio on the Boilermaker team website, he listed W.F. Hermans' World War II novel "The Darkroom of Damocles" as his favorite book.

Coaches say that intelligence carried onto the court. Haarms picked up drills and strategy quickly. By his second year with Harlemlakers' under-16 team, a star had begun to emerge. Where Haarms had previously topped out at a handful of points per game, he now scored 20 or more with regularity.

"Whenever we were playing five-on-five, if you were not on Matt's team, you wouldn't win." Nieuwenhuizen said.

Basketball remains a secondary, even minor, sport in The Netherlands. That's a source of frustration for Dutch basketball enthusiasts such as Gideon van der Hijden, considering the built-in advantage of the population.

In 1996, the science journal *eLife* updated its ongoing 82-year study of worldwide growth trends. Dutch men, with an average height of 6 feet (183 centimeters), ranked No. 1. (By contrast, men in basketball-mad America stand around 5-9 on average and ranked 37th).

Dutch women, with an average height over 5-6, ranked second only to Latvia.

"If I wasn't playing basketball right now, I probably wouldn't be very happy with my height."

MATT HAARMS

The extended families of Peter Haarms and Martine van Hoorn follow those trends. He stands around 6-7, while she's right at 6 feet. Their only child measured around 55 cm (almost 22 inches) at birth — on the long end of the normal range. Doctors monitored Haarms for years to make sure he developed without complications or pain.

"We knew Matt was going to be extremely tall," van Hoorn said.

Haarms isn't the tallest boy in his first team photos with Harlemlakers. Even when the growth spurt really kicked in, doctors predicted Haarms would top out around 6-10. Haarms, who liked the idea of growing taller than his father, embraced the basketball benefits and shrugged off the annoyances.

Then 6-10 came and went. Seven feet became the new boundary. Then 7-1. By the time Haarms took his official visit to Purdue in the fall of 2016, he turned heads on campus for doing the unthinkable

— outgrowing 7-2 Boilermaker center Isaac Haas.

As a teenager, Haas struggled to accept his outlier height and how people treated him. Haarms considers himself lucky to have found basketball before reaching his extremes.

"People in the states have such a positive response to it," Haarms said. "If I wasn't playing basketball right now, I probably wouldn't be very happy with my height."

According to fellow Purdue big man Jacquil Taylor, however, Haarms has the best of both worlds. Haas famously wears size 22 shoes. Those feet form the base of his muscular 290-pound frame.

Haarms laces up relatively modest size 15s.

Matt Haarms of Purdue reacts after blocking a shot by Evan Taylor of Nebraska Saturday, January 6, 2018, at Mackey Arena. (Photo: John Terhune/Journal & Courier)

"Guard feet," Taylor calls them.

"He's taller than Isaac, but he has smaller feet than me, which is not something you see every day," said the 6-10 Taylor. "I think that's what makes him special as a basketball player, because he's a 7-3 dude who can shoot, rebound, pass, dribble and runs like a guard."

Taylor's hypothesis may check out. However, Purdue coach Matt Painter said Haarms would still be a good basketball player if he were a foot shorter. Genetics can't take full credit for that.

Throughout his development, Haarms' coaches insisted he work on aspects of his game outside of a big man's comfort zone. Kropf says it's why Haarms has "such a good toolbox" for a player his height.

"It would be a waste to play Matt as a center," Kropf said. "We always had players that were tall enough to play center that did not have the skills Matt does."

The audition

When Haarms played for Harlemlakers' under-18 squad, Kropf organized a scrimmage against the club's under-24 group. That team featured a star center, Daan Joustra, whose offensive force under the basket had impressed a young Haarms.

Joustra boasted a solid 6-7 build, not to mention years of additional experience and savvy. Multiple coaches, however, say the young twig won the matchup that day.

"Every time I'd block his shot, you'd see it in his eyes, like, 'I don't want to do this anymore,'" Haarms said.

This is the point at which Haarms obtained perhaps the most valuable asset of his basketball identity — confidence. His skills developed faster than his belief in them.

His coaches, however, saw a brighter future. Unbeknownst to Haarms, they knew that meant leaving The Netherlands, where he wouldn't have access to the full-time training that could maximize his potential.

So Brugman asked Haarms to accompany a high school team he coached in Amsterdam on a trip to Spain. Haarms accepted, expecting only a fun trip and the opportunity to play new competition.

Actually, it was an audition. Brugman had briefly coached with Joventut Badalona, one of the oldest and most successful club teams in Spain. NBA star Ricky Rubio headlines the club's list of alums.

Brugman knew Joventut Badalona might be interested in a player with Haarms' combination of length and skill. Even after Haarms was told the club had set up a private workout, he didn't comprehend he was being evaluated for an invitation.

When he impressed in the workout and that invitation came, Haarms didn't hesitate.

"We didn't think it was a reality," said van Hoorn, who knew Brugman's plan but was skeptical the club team would share his enthusiasm. "Then they called and said, 'Yeah, we want to keep him here.' That was a big shock.

"He came back, and three months later he was living in Spain. Then we realized this sport I considered a hobby was something that had become much bigger than expected."

Culturally, the transition was difficult. Haarms, age 16, lived alone in Badalona. He didn't speak Spanish, and the home-grown members of the team typically expected newcomers to learn their language.

Terrence Bieshaar, another Dutch native who played one season with Haarms in Badalona, said the basketball transition also started out rough. Haarms lacked strength and could be pushed around on the court.

Gradually, Bieshaar said, the promise became production. Haarms played harder and tougher. He could put the ball on the floor or shoot from outside assertively. He piled up points and blocks as Joventut Badalona took on some of the best age-group competition in Spain.

Bieshaar remembers a performance against the Spanish national team in which Haarms was "the decisive player." Blocks, steals, put-back dunks, a handful of 3-pointers — Haarms' summoned an all-around performance six years in the making.

"He could adapt really quick to different situations," said Bieshaar, who now plays professionally in Spain for Club Baloncesto Clavijo. "Especially for a big guy, he saw things other guys didn't see. He passed the ball really good. Out on the court, he was also really smart."

Haarms called that season-ending league tournament "probably the best six or seven games of my life." Joventut Badalona reached the championship game after Haarms made 5 of 7 from 3-point range in the semifinals against Real Madrid.

Joventut Badalona drew up a professional contract with his name on it. Haarms could put youth basketball behind him and make a living at the game he'd grown to love.

Purdue's Edwards aren't brothers, but do form a great combo

Reid Forgrave / CBS Sports / January 19, 2018

Here's an important public service announcement for college basketball fans who are just now noticing that Purdue, currently on a 14-game winning streak and ranked No. 3 in the nation, is a really, really good team, and a team that absolutely ought to be considered a national title contender:

Their top two scorers are not brothers.

In fact, the bulldog sophomore combo guard Carsen Edwards and the versatile senior wing Vincent Edwards are not related in any way. At least not any way that they know of.

"People always think we're brothers – brothers, cousins, something," said Carsen Edwards.

"But honestly, we have family in Houston," Vincent Edwards said, "so when he told me he's from Houston, I was like, 'Somewhere down that line, we crossed.'"

Vincent Edwards, the pride of Middletown, Ohio, remembers the first time he met Carsen Edwards, the pride of Atascocita, Texas. It was when Purdue was recruiting the younger, shorter Carsen Edwards. "When he pulled up and came in the gym when he was getting recruited, I was like, 'What's up, fam?' " The relationship only became ever-so-slightly fraught when Vincent Edwards realized he was going to need a "V" on the back of his jersey now.

You can be forgiven for thinking Purdue's two Edwardses were related, even though they look or play nothing alike. Because this entire Purdue squad – pardon the cliché – feels like a family. That's what happens when four of your top five scorers have been playing together for four collegiate seasons, and the fifth player in that group, Carsen Edwards, is the type of mature leader who can adjust to whichever team he's put on.

"It's family – really, this team is like family," Vincent Edwards said. "Having someone like Carsen has shaped and changed so much about how we play. College basketball, the game is evolving. Carsen, in high school he got up and down, pressed all game. He really changed who we are as a team. Instead of him adapting to us, I think we needed to adapt to him. And we did. It ended up making us better."

The numbers on this Purdue team are remarkable, and lend credence to the connected nature of this group. The Boilermakers are the only team in college basketball ranked in the top 10 in both offensive and defensive efficiency (sixth in offensive efficiency, fifth in defensive efficiency, per KenPom.com). Since Carsen Edwards came a year ago, Purdue has been among the best 3-point shooting teams in the nation. This season they are hitting 3-pointers at a 42.6 percent rate, third in the nation. Their connected defense funnels ball-handlers toward their two seven-footers, senior Isaac Haas and freshman Matt Haarms, making scoring against Purdue close to the hoop one of the more difficult tasks in college basketball. Purdue is one of the nation's best shot-blocking and shot-altering teams; opponents only shoot 40.5 percent from 2-point range against Purdue, the fourth-best rate in the nation. And the defense excels at defending without foul-

ing; only five teams nationally have a lower defensive free-throw rate.

The familial nature of this Purdue team – the fact that these players have literally grown up together in West Lafayette, Indiana – is a good story, and is likely the key to this team's success. But great teams need star players, and Purdue has two of them in the Edwards brothe- ... er, in Vincent Edwards and Carsen Edwards, the two unrelated guys with the same last name.

Vincent Edwards, left and Carsen Edwards provide a good inside-outside combo for Purdue. USATSI
Carsen Edwards, who is averaging a team-high 17 points per game, is one of the most relentless players in all of college basketball. It may not surprise you that in his first sport, football, he was a running back and linebacker. He plays with the energy you'd expect from a guy who has found enormous collegiate success despite not being even a top-75 recruit; he led a star-studded USA team in assists and was one of six players scoring in double digits during the FIBA Under 19 tournament in Egypt last summer.

"I like to prove people wrong, and there's a lot of people I want to prove wrong," Carsen Edwards said. "Growing up, there was a lot of things said, a lot of things said coming out of high school. Not tall enough. My size. The level I'm playing at – they don't believe I can play at this level. So it's trying to prove people wrong."

Vincent Edwards, who is second on the team in points (14.7 per game) and first in rebounds (8.1 per game), is considered a versatile NBA wing prospect. He nearly put his name in the NBA Draft a year ago; it wasn't until the very last day when he decided to stay for a senior season. He wanted to make his parents proud by getting his degree, and he decided his game needed some refining before jumping to the next level. Thinking about the NBA is easier this year than it was a year before; when he was a junior, there was a choice to make, but this season he knows will be his final go-round in college. And he wants to leave the biggest legacy possible at Purdue: Make a Final Four, not gobble up the stats in pursuit of brightening his NBA profile.

"I just know I need to step up and help the team win in any way that may be, whether it's rebounding or making an extra pass, or playing defense, talking to the team, or trying to push them, trying to give them advice," Vincent Edwards said. "I don't think of this as my team. That's not really how I am. I'm all about my teammates."

That's one reason why I have believed in Purdue since before the season as a potential Final Four team: You don't frequently see elite high-major teams with this much experience together. And you don't always see teams with this much experience together who truly seem to enjoy being around each other. I know it's a cliché, but this Purdue team really does have the feeling of being a family.

Even if they're not actually related.

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 Isiah 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."