

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."