

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."