

Painter stands tall as Purdue's leader

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Steve Warden

WEST LAFAYETTE – Like a human sundial, quarterback Curtis Painter stood under the central Indiana sky, as straight as a cornstalk from the top of his dirty-blond head to the grassy souls of his black shoes 6 feet, 4 inches away. He stood there like that for what – 40 minutes, an hour maybe? Long enough that the shade from the stands which had protected him not long ago had moved 10 feet behind him, and now the early-morning sun was on him and his black jersey with shoulder pads underneath (for the team picture) like a blitzing cornerback. So he remained to stand in his No. 12 game-day jersey and answer the same old questions from a train of different guys with pads and pens and radio microphones and the less conspicuous TV cameras mounted to the shoulder like a rectangular parrot with one sinister black eye.

It is the nature of the Purdue media day beast. And while it's still the same August sun boring down within the same, confined Ross-Ade Stadium walls, and sadly many of the same media faces asking identical questions just in different ways, it is the young man who changes every two or three or four years. In the '60s, it was Bob Griese then (blink), it's Mark Herrmann in 1980 and (blink) it's Drew Brees and (blink) Kyle Orton and now it leads to August 2008 and it's Curtis Painter, for the very last time.

He's a fifth-year senior – another way to say it's time to pull up stakes and go elsewhere. He's generations removed from the early legends and a career away from a few others. Somebody asks him about the pressure of the most decorated position at Purdue and Painter, hands firmly clasped behind his shiny gold pants, flips through his mental Rolodex, pulls out Stock Answer No. 33 and drones something about "it's an honor to be mentioned with those guys."

Painter is not trying to be boring with such a stock answer. It's just that he's been through it all before and he's been asked about "pressure" more than Barack Obama, who suggested that we all check our tire pressure to ensure better gas mileage.

Since he stepped in as the starting quarterback his redshirt freshman year, Painter's statistics have climbed steadily enough to be compared with Brees and Orton. He needs 575 yards – roughly two games' worth – to surpass Orton for third place in career passing yards. By that time he'll be 578 yards away from second-place Herrmann, and then within striking distance of Brees' 11,792.

What Painter hasn't done, however, is win like those guys. Last year the Boilermakers finished with an 8-5 season and tied for seventh in the Big Ten standings. The year before – Painter's sophomore season – Purdue was 8-6 and tied for fourth in the conference. And had it not been for Painter salvaging 2005 with three consecutive wins in his last three games, that year's 5-6 record could have been dreadfully worse.

Three years and four games over .500 – good enough for first place in the National League West division but hardly the stuff of which legends are made.

And that's why Painter stands as rigid as a clothesline post and returns every reporter's serve with a safe, well-rehearsed answer.

"People can say whatever they want about me or have any expectations or whatever," he says with a touch of candor. "I'm not affected by that. I have my expectations and the team has their expectations, and that's kind of what I live by. The better you can do that the better you can play without any outside distractions."

"Outside distractions" meaning you (the fan) and me (the media) and the thousands of bloggers and Internet geeks who couldn't throw a football across the street if Randy Moss was standing wide open on their neighbor's porch.



Painter

His quarterback coach, Ed Zaunbrecher, went one step further in giving Painter his own survival guide.

"I don't know whether he follows my advice, but my advice is don't read, whether it's good or bad," Zaunbecher says. "I don't care if you threw six touchdown passes or three interceptions, it shouldn't affect it. It shouldn't change things. You've got to get ready for the next game. Have your mother save all that stuff and then after your career is over with, you can go back and laugh about it."

OK. So what is Curtis Painter's true definition of pressure?

"It was during finals week," he says. "That was the last time since we had spring semester. It was a paper for an online (political science) class that I had to get turned in by a certain time. That was probably the biggest crunch. It was a half-nighter (as opposed to an all-nighter); probably the longest I've stayed up in a while."

Here's the curious thing about Painter: The guy's been standing there for close to an hour now. The early-morning haze burned away under the hot sun. He is dressed in full football gear, even wearing black. And he's not sweating. Not a drop.

Who's got another question?

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