

Vincennes graduate Curtis Painter has joined a long line of successful QBs in West Lafayette

By Gordon Engelhardt
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Every time Curtis Painter fades back to pass for the Purdue Boilermakers, the quarterback from Vincennes Lincoln High School takes another shot at greatness.

With alumni such as Len Dawson, Bob Griese, Drew Brees and Kyle Orton, Purdue is regarded as the "Cradle of Quarterbacks." Yet by the time Painter is finished, he may be the biggest record-setter of them all.

The fifth-year senior will renew his assault on the record books on Saturday when the Boilermakers host Northern Colorado in their opener.

Painter's performances are being documented on a highlight DVD entitled "Painting A Masterpiece." Purdue's sports information office has also launched CurtisPainter12.com to promote his Heisman Trophy candidacy.

"It certainly is a great honor to be in this position, I guess, to even be considered, whether it's around the nation or around Purdue," said Painter, who needs 3,030 yards to surpass Brees' Big Ten passing yardage record of 11,792.

"That kind of stuff comes as the result of a great season," he said. "I have a lot of work ahead of me. Hopefully it brings a lot of attention to our team."

When Painter's father, Jeff Painter, moved from Washington Court House, Ohio, to Vincennes to run one of the Cargill grain elevators before Curtis' freshman year in high school, he and his wife sat down with the football coach.

A skeptical Mike Hidde had heard it all before. "As a coach, you always have to take with a grain of salt what parents say, how big and good and fast their son is," said Hidde, who resigned as Alices' coach after the 2006 season. "They're not bragging, but you're thinking 'Oh yeah, sure. he's this great athlete.'"

What truly opened Hidde's eyes was receiving a letter from Painter's junior high principal. "I had never had that before — how sorry they were that he was leaving and he's the best athlete they've ever had," Hidde said.

From the first moment Painter took the field, Hidde realized he was everything his parents said and more.

"He's an even better person," Hidde said. "He's just a humble kid who worked hard. I just had a feeling about this kid that he would be a big-time player. We all knew he had all the tools: size (6-foot-4, 230 pounds), speed and he was very intelligent, He's got the work ethic and he has just a phenomenal arm."

But he had to master to art of throwing a touch pass, not just a fastball.

"Most high school kids really had a hard time catching the ball because he threw it so hard," Hidde said.

"Even in college they still had a problem a little bit his first a couple of years at Purdue."

Born to be a Boilermaker



Curtis' uncle, Jay Venzin, lettered at offensive guard in 1975 and '76 at Purdue and his grandfather, Donald Beck, played basketball for the Boilers from 1953 to '55.



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Painter got a chance to start his redshirt freshman year.

"Would I have thought I would be doing that? It's been a great experience getting thrown into the fire," said Painter, whose parents now live in Muncie. "It has been a great time here. I couldn't see myself going anywhere else."

As a sophomore in 2006, Painter set a Big Ten record of 3,985 yards passing, but threw a national-high 19 interceptions. As a junior last season, he passed for nearly as many yards (3,846) while trimming his interception total to 11.

"Being a sponge in the film room, you learn as much as you can," Painter said, "You learn situations on the field, maybe coverage. You really can't be satisfied in the mental approach you're going to take."

He isn't really surprised by what he's accomplished, considering he has the keys to coach Joe Tiller's pass-happy spread offense. "In our system you're going to put up the numbers," Painter said.

Yet there's still skepticism — especially from Tiller.

"We'd like to see him win some big games," Tiller said. "Until he does that, I don't think you can put him in the same category with Orton and Brees."

Dawson and Griese, an Evansville native, led the Kansas City Chiefs and Miami Dolphins to Super Bowl titles. Griese also led the Boilers to victory in the 1967 Rose Bowl. Now the quarterback of the New Orleans Saints, Brees talks with Painter when he's in West Lafayette. Orton, recently named the Chicago Bears' starter, is Painter's predecessor at Purdue.

Playing for Vincennes Lincoln, Painter watched Brees and Orton turn the Boilers into a perennial bowl team and occasional conference contender.

"To even be considered to be with those guys, in the same sentence, is a tremendous honor," Painter said. "Going all the way back to Griese and guys in between who have done great things — they've won some big games. That's something I'm really focused on this year — to be in those close games and to have a chance to win at the end."

Bonding with the coach

Painter describes Tiller as a man who doesn't show an overabundance of emotion, the kind of guy who doesn't change much.

"For the most part I think it will be a pretty normal season," Painter said. "Obviously the last game, 'Senior Day' (against visiting Indiana on Nov. 22) will be pretty emotional for our seniors. Hopefully there won't be too much emotion that it's going to hurt us."

Painter and Tiller's relationship has grown. "He's taught me a lot about leadership," Painter said. "I'm not a naturally loud or outspoken kind of guy. I lead by example and at times it works great. I've learned from him how to get out of a shell."

"When all is said and done he's the kind of guy who is really laid back and easy to talk to and easy to get to know. We've developed a friendship. A lot of times I will stop by his office and sit down and we won't even talk one sentence about football."

Tiller, who will tie Jack Mollenkopf as the winningest coach in school history with his next victory, has guided the Boilers to 10 bowl appearances in 11 seasons. Painter hopes to respond to Tiller's criticism that he wins games he's supposed to win, but not big ones.

"Obviously it's a huge goal and a big inspiration," Painter said. "I want that extra push, that extra motivation, It helps out and that's something

I'm really looking for this year."

Calm before the storm

Painter tries not to get caught up in the hype labeling him one of the top quarterbacks in the 2009 NFL Draft.

"There's obviously a lot that has to happen before that," he said. "Things go up and down. When the draft comes, I will sit back and wait for things to happen. Things can change so rapidly; it's such a crazy process."

Talking to Painter, you'd never know he's on the verge of becoming the Big Ten's career passing leader.

On the other hand, maybe he needs a little swagger in his step, Hidde said.

"That's something I was concerned about, if he would develop a little of that," Hidde said. "In high school he was tremendously humble. If you ran into him on the street he never mentioned football. He would talk about art or music or a lot of other things.

"He's a very good football player, but I don't know if the sun sets and rises on football for him."