

# 1982-96: Fall from grace

Immediately after Jim Young announced his resignation in 1981, speculation started that defensive coordinator James “Leon” Burtnett would be the Boilermakers’ next head coach. Four days later – Nov. 22 – Burtnett, who sculpted the multi-faceted “Junk Defense” that made headlines the previous five years, was promoted.

Raised in Meade, Kan., and branded by his affection for cowboy hats and country music, Burtnett attended Southwestern College and earned honorable mention All-America honors as a fullback. He came to Purdue following stints as an assistant at Colorado State, Montana State, Washington State, Wyoming, San Jose State and Michigan State.

Prior to the 1983 season, Burtnett hired Joe Tiller as assistant head coach and defensive coordinator. The two had worked together at Montana State and Washington State.

Back-to-back three-win seasons in 1982 and 1983 had the Purdue faithful growing restless. But Burtnett never quit fighting and reaped the benefits with a memorable season in 1984. It began with a come-from-behind 23-21 victory over eighth-ranked Notre Dame on Sept. 8 in the dedication game of the Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis. A 28-23 upset of No. 2 Ohio State followed on Oct. 6. The win put the Boilermakers 4-1 overall, atop the Big Ten at 3-0 and into the Associated Press poll at No. 14.

Back-to-back losses stemmed the tide, but Purdue rebounded with a 49-7 victory at Northwestern on Oct. 27 and a 31-29 win over Michigan at Ross-Ade Stadium the following week. By beating Michigan, Notre Dame and Ohio State, the 1984 Boilermakers joined Michigan State, in 1951 and 1965, as the only teams to defeat those three traditional powerhouses in the same season.

The Boilermakers wrapped up the regular season with a 31-24 victory over Indiana at home on Nov. 17 – resulting in a 7-4 overall record and 6-3 Big Ten mark, good for a second-place tie with Illinois – and accepted their second invitation to the Peach Bowl in Atlanta on New Year’s Eve. Their opponent was Virginia, and



Leon Burtnett

Purdue raced to a 24-14 first-half advantage before the Cavaliers stormed back to win 27-24.

Burtnett, who removed himself from calling the offensive or defensive schemes and concentrated on the mood of the team and getting his players mentally ready to perform, was named the Big Ten Coach of the Year.

After a season-opening 20-3 win over Ball State on Sept. 13, 1986, the Boilermakers lost six in a

row, and alumni and fans called for Burtnett’s ouster. The verbal abuse got so bad that his wife, Cecilia (CeeWee), moved from the stands to the press box to watch games, and he no longer allowed his oldest son, Kyle, to be on the sidelines. On Nov. 6, Burtnett resigned, effective at the end of the season.

Burtnett, who compiled a 21-34-1 overall record (17-25-1 Big Ten) in five seasons at Purdue, moved on to the National Football League as an assistant coach with the Indianapolis Colts from 1987 to 1991. He later returned to the collegiate level as an assistant at Fresno State, Northeast Louisiana, Arkansas State, Washington State and Houston. At Houston, Burtnett is on the staff of head coach Kevin Sumlin, who played linebacker at Purdue from 1983 to 1986.

Meanwhile, athletics director George King pledged that Purdue would look for a coach “with a proven track record, who is successful and has a feel for what this university is all about.” The search culminated with the hiring of Fred Akers on Dec. 10.

Akers came from Texas, where he coached from 1977 to 1986, following the legendary Darrell Royal. The Longhorns went 11-1 in 1977 and 1983 – winning Southwest Conference championships along the way – and had a chance to win the national championship both seasons before losing their bowl game. Despite a

gaudy 86-31-2 record, Akers never endeared himself to Texas fans.

Akers’ four-year record at Purdue was just 12-31-1 (9-23 Big Ten) and on Nov. 29, 1990, under pressure from the administration, he announced his resignation. Akers returned to his 120-acre ranch near Austin, Texas, and did not coach again.

Besides the lack of winning, King cited dwindling attendance as well as academic and off-field problems as reasons a change needed to be made. Boilermaker football had bottomed out, and the next head coach faced a major rebuilding project.

On Dec. 6, Purdue hired Ohio State offensive coordinator Jim Colletto, an assistant under Burtnett from 1982 to 1984 and a candidate for the head job when Akers was hired in 1987. Colletto had head coaching experience at Cal State-Fullerton from 1975 to 1979 – during which time the Titans moved from NCAA Division II to I-A – and was offensive coordinator at Arizona State from 1985 to 1987.

A season-opening 41-14 victory over 17th-ranked California at Ross-Ade Stadium on Sept. 12, 1992, made headlines, but the Boilermakers proceeded to lose four of their next five games.

The Boilermakers went 1-10 and failed to win any of eight Big Ten games in 1993. Playing the nation’s toughest schedule with the Big Ten’s youngest and most injured team, Purdue endured the worst season, record-wise, in its history.

On the way home from a 33-25 loss at Wisconsin on Nov. 2, 1996, that dropped the Boilermakers to 2-6, Colletto decided he had had enough. Two days later, on his weekly radio show that doubled as a press conference, he announced his resignation effective as soon as a new coach was hired. Colletto’s six-year record was 21-42-3 overall and 13-32-3 in Big Ten games. He subsequently served as an assistant coach at Notre Dame and UCLA and in the NFL with the Baltimore Ravens, Oakland Raiders and Detroit Lions.

*Joe Tiller was hired as head coach Nov. 22, 1996.*



Jim Colletto