

Purdue has the right fit for basketball success

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | March 29, 2015

For now, Purdue embraces a quiet basketball aftermath. There is no turmoil from players transferring, no drama building toward uncertainty, no non-stop speculation that you might find with other programs.

Honors continue for a team that made a huge turnaround this season. Junior center A.J. Hammons made the National Association of Basketball Coaches District 7 first-team after a season in which he led the Boilers in scoring (11.9 points), rebounds (6.6), blocked shots (96) and field goal percentage (54.0 percent).

That was after Hammons made the United States Basketball Writers Association All-District first team, which followed his selection to the All-Big Ten second team as well as a member of the Big Ten's all-defensive team.

Hammons and junior teammates Rapheal Davis, the Big Ten defensive player of the year, highlight coach Matt Painter's efforts to get not just good players, but the right players for Purdue and his style of coaching.

The 21-13 record and third-place conference finish reflected Painter's success in rebounding from consecutive losing seasons that stripped much of the luster from a six-year NCAA tourney run.

The simple reasons were improved defense and better overall play, big seasons from Davis (a former South Side standout) and Hammons, the late addition of guard Jon Octeus, a senior transfer from Colorado State, and solid contributions from freshmen such as Vince Edwards, Isaac Haas and Dakota Mathias.

But beyond that was Painter's success in getting his kind of players, which means most of all guys who buy into team over individual.

"It's huge," Painter says about the importance of getting good player fits. "Sometimes it can be a difference in a kid's career. He goes somewhere where he fits with that coach and that style, and he can have a lot of success.

"The No. 1 thing you have to have are people who are trying to do what you're asking them to do, save everything else. If you don't do that, you have to be really special to help a team win. That's what it comes down to a lot. Do you have guys who are doing those things? We feel for the most part we have that."

The result -- Purdue returned to its rock-your-world roots by playing physical defense and tough-minded offense to overcome a sub-par non-conference season.

"You have to get guys to understand what they need to do to help your team win," Painter says. "Sometimes that's a contrast between what they feel they need to do that's best for them. It takes time to understand that.

"Some guys never understand that. Some guys will fight that till they're 50 years old talking about some coach who did them wrong, when in reality it's a team sport. You have to be able to sacrifice to help your team win."

More than ever before, sacrifice has become a contest of wills with players pushing what's-in-it-for-me agendas driven by parents and guardians and coaches and so-called "advisers" who add to the coaching challenge.

"The majority of the people who are close to the kid don't look at what's best for the team," Painter says, "they look at what's best for the kid. Some of those guys will admit that -- I want him to go somewhere where this can happen for him.

"All coaches run plays for their best guys. Sometimes you have a kid who is third or fourth or fifth or sixth on the team. You don't run as many plays for those guys.

"You have to put things in perspective. You deal with a lot of people who don't understand basketball. They don't understand organized basketball. They're trying to make sense of what's going on and why it's not working for that person, that player, who is close to them."

Painter tells it simple -- "It's a team game. As a coach, you're going to do what's best for your team, not necessarily what's best for each individual. That's a part of organized team sports."

Painter continues to mine the recruiting trail for right-fit guys. He seems to have two with guards Ryan Cline of Carmel and Grant Weatherford of Hamilton Heights. Cline is a strong shooter set to add to the perimeter firepower provided by Mathias, Kendall Stephens and, more and more, Davis.

Weatherford is a point guard who thrives on defense and good decision making, with offense remaining a work in progress. "He gives us a guy who can guard either guard position," Painter says. "He brings a high level of energy. A toughness. That's what we were lacking. We'll lose that with Jon. Grant can fill that void for us.

"Grant could really help us on the defensive end. He brings energy at both guard spots. He played some point guard in the summer. That excited us. He's a combo guard, and a hard-playing kid. You can't have enough of that."

Purdue hopes it's back on an upward cycle with plenty of NCAA tourney success ahead. It's set to return four starters (losing only Octeus, with Hammons expected to make a draft decision in the next few weeks).

The sting from the disappointing Midwest Regional loss to Cincinnati, when the Boilers blew so many chances to win, will linger long enough to provide motivation for next season.

"We have great guys," Painter says. "We have a good year, but it's more than that. It's building on it, We've got a lot of the right guys in our locker room.

Purdue freshmen meet high expectations

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | March 18, 2015

Rapheal Davis and Jon McKeeman took pride in being Purdue's early risers.

Whichever roommate woke up first would wake the other. Then came the race to Mackey Arena, with one or the other claiming bragging rights for finding the best route across town.

Davis thought he had reason to gloat as the first to arrive for the Boilermakers' first workout last summer. Then he saw freshman Dakota Mathias in the weight room.

The workout was scheduled for 6 a.m. All five freshmen were there by 5:15.

"I think that was the first step to getting this culture back to being blue collar — being early to things, being ready to go early," Davis said. "They brought a different approach to the younger guys. It really shocked our sophomores and lit a fire under them as well."

Purdue coach Matt Painter took ownership of Purdue's slide to last place in the Big Ten Conference a year ago. He said his program needed an infusion of maturity and toughness. It was up to him to find those players.

But he believed those players were already on their way. While injuries dampened Jacquil Taylor's season, the other four freshmen — Vince Edwards, Dakota Mathias, Isaac Haas and P.J. Thompson — realized that expectation of playing with sophistication and savvy from Day 1.

"We all sat down one day in the summertime, before all of this started," Edwards said of a dorm-room meeting a few days after workouts began. "Coach Painter sold us the 'turning-the-program-around' dream, and that's what we all signed here for.

"To know we helped get us back to the NCAA tournament is a great feeling for all of us. We want to go dancing every year that we're all here. That's our long-term goal, and we accomplished one year already."

None of the freshmen experienced the frustration of the past two seasons. But all four showed resiliency this season, both in helping Purdue through a midseason skid and dealing with their own adversity individually.

Mathias came into the season a month or so behind schedule but worked his way into the starting lineup. Edwards missed time with illness and a concussion but is a three-time Big Ten Freshman of the Week.

Haas continues to adapt to physical play under the basket, but remains a rebounding force and a magnet for drawing fouls. Thompson has sat out back-to-back games at times, but keeps bouncing back to make an impact when he returns to the floor.

"Being more mature, tougher, and everything: They brought that," sophomore forward Basil Smotherman said. "They brought the pieces and it rubbed off on a lot of people this year."

The freshmen take some satisfaction in their contributions to Purdue's success and return to the NCAA tournament. But they also say they walked into a locker room ready to accept them as not only contributors but leaders and teachers when necessary.

"We may have created the spark, but the flames really came from everybody else taking what we brought and turning it into something special," Haas said.

None of the freshmen seems distracted by their approaching debut in the NCAA tournament. It's an experience Painter expects will benefit them in coming seasons. The baseline for success has again been set at tournament appearances and tournament success.

Senior guard Jon Octeus refers to the freshman as "my little brothers." He takes pride in the development he's seen in each during the past six months. But he's also excited to watch the next chapter unfold.

"I think they're going to be exceptional," Octeus said.

Purdue overjoyed with return to NCAA tourney

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | March 15, 2015

Purdue junior Rapheal Davis told senior Jon Octeus he might cry when the Boilermakers were announced in the NCAA tournament field on Sunday.

The captain shed no tears when he heard Purdue's name called, very early in the CBS selection program. But emotions were close to the surface for Davis and the rest of the Boilermakers who will experience March Madness for the first time.

"It was more joyful," Davis said. "It was happy. You stare at it a little bit, they say something about you, then you just realize you're going dancing.

"It's a great feeling. I can't really describe it. It's something that I hope to just enjoy and go out there and have a blast with my teammates."

Purdue's turnaround from last place in the Big Ten Conference to the NCAA tournament led the Boilermakers to Louisville. Purdue, the No. 9 seed in the Midwest Regional, plays No. 8 Cincinnati on Thursday at the KFC Yum! Center. Tipoff is scheduled for 7:10 p.m.

The winner of that game will play either undefeated Kentucky — the No. 1 overall and Midwest Regional seed — or the winner of the first-round game between Manhattan and Hampton. The Wildcats play that winner, from Dayton's first round games, on Thursday.

Purdue (21-12) makes its first NCAA tournament appearance since 2012. Prior to that, the Boilermakers had advanced to six straight tournaments.

"You're excited, you want to go play, but there's also part of it where, we've worked for this," coach Matt Painter said. "It's still business. We've got to stay in the same mode and get ourselves prepared."

Purdue's selection completes a turnaround from back-to-back losing seasons, including a last-place finish in the Big Ten Conference last season. The Boilermakers were 8-5 in non-conference play, including home losses to North Florida and Gardner-Webb that damaged Purdue's hopes for an at-large NCAA tournament bid

But the Boilermakers bounced back to go 12-6 in Big Ten play, finishing in a four-way tie for third. Along the way they picked up four victories against conference foes who are also in the NCAA tournament: two against Indiana, and home victories over Iowa and Ohio State.

Purdue's other victories over NCAA tournament teams came against BYU and N.C. State. It was listed 36th on the tournament seed list released by the selection committee. (Indiana was 37th.)

"I see this team and I'm saying, there's no way this team can't be an NCAA tournament team," Octeus, a transfer from Colorado State, said of his first impressions of Purdue in October. "Obviously it took us some ups and downs to get there, but it was worth it, well worth it."

Going into the regular season finale against Illinois, it appeared Purdue might face uncertainty on Selection Sunday. The Boilermakers beat the Illini and side-stepped Penn State in the Big Ten tournament quarterfinals to lock up their berth.

By the time of Sunday's announcement, any nerves the Boilermakers felt were from anticipation, not anxiety.

Davis remembers watching Purdue play NCAA tournament games in his dorm room at La Lumiere School. He watched Robbie Hummel, E'Twaun Moore, JaJuan Johnson and the rest of that nucleus win games and take eventual national champion Kansas down to the final seconds.

Some of those players came back for open gyms last summer. Davis said he talked with Hummel and Moore, now in the NBA, during the season.

Their message, according to Davis: "Keep playing. Keep pushing."

"It gives me goosebumps being able to get back to the tournament, not even for us but for those guys," Davis said. "Just knowing that you're making those guys proud, it's a huge feeling for me."

10 moments that led Purdue back to the NCAAs

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | March 15, 2015

For six straight years under Matt Painter, March in West Lafayette meant Purdue basketball in the NCAA tournament.

But after two straight losing seasons, coach Matt Painter took the blame for the program straying from that success. He said the Boilermakers needed to be tougher and more unselfish to win the games necessary to be on a March Madness bracket.

After the most dramatic turnaround in the Big Ten Conference, Purdue is back where it wants to be every March. Here are 10 moments that helped lead Purdue back to the NCAA tournament.

Edwards and Mathias headline recruiting class.

Painter wanted skill and maturity, and found both with the two recruits from Ohio. Edwards started from opening night and is one of the most versatile players on the roster. Mathias shook off early illness and injuries to become another lineup fixture in Big Ten play.

Isaac Haas decommits from Wake Forest.

When the 7-foot-2, 300-pound Alabama native re-opened his recruitment, Painter skipped practice to fly down for a conversation. At the time Haas added intriguing talent and post depth. Both turned out to be crucial due to the career-ending heart condition of Jay Simpson and the season-ending injury of freshman Jacquil Taylor. He also brought out the best in star center A.J. Hammons.

UCLA declines to admit Jon Ochteus.

It's tempting to choose Ronnie Johnson's departure as one of Purdue's steps back to the tournament. But due to his transfer, the Boilermakers had no proven options at point guard when practice opened. Ochteus dropped out of the sky and added offensive stability, defensive chops and a cool, even-keel demeanor.

Hammons beats the buzzer and BYU in Maui.

Hammons' tiebreaking hook shot floated in with 1.8 seconds left in overtime for an 87-85 victory. The win turned out to be even more important than expected: it stands up as the most impressive on the Boilermakers' tournament résumé in terms of RPI. Not to be forgotten: Kendall Stephens' two big defensive plays down the stretch.

Letdown avoided vs. N.C. State.

So how would a young team respond to that thrilling victory and the holiday travel? By knocking off a previously unbeaten team that also ended up in the NCAA tournament. P.J. Thompson helped lock it up with a big 3 with five minutes left.

Painter shortens the rotation.

Painter says Purdue might have beaten North Florida and Gardner-Webb if he had committed earlier to more minutes for Davis and Ochteus. Both were indispensable during Big Ten play due to their leadership and defensive presence.

Kendall Stephens' answered prayer.

The most improbable moment of the season. Purdue seemed destined for another disappointment at Penn State when Ochteus missed two free throws in the final seconds on Jan. 17. Instead Hammons tipped the rebound back. Stephens grabbed it, ran beyond the 3-point arc and snapped in the game-tying points. Purdue won in overtime and avoided a loss that would have hurt its NCAA candidacy.

Nnanna Egwu and Leron Black romp.

Those two Illinois frontcourt players had their way with the Boilermakers in Champaign on Jan. 21. Painter and Purdue's players later said that loss was a catalyst to the success that soon followed. Hammons in particular stepped up to the challenge and played with more consistency and fire.

Davis' 3 beats Iowa.

Davis came into his junior season known as a slasher who could be left open from the perimeter. His offseason work paid off, resulting in a 37.2 percent 3-point effort since Christmas. His go-ahead 3 against Iowa on Jan. 24 broke Purdue's 13-game losing streak against ranked opponents.

Taking the brooms out at IU.

Davis' other most memorable shot of the season traveled a shorter distance. His layup on a clear-out drawn up during a timeout pushed Purdue's lead at Indiana back to three points in the final 30 seconds. The Boilermakers swept their rival and more importantly grabbed an elusive quality road victory.

Davis finds satisfaction in Purdue's NCAA return

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | March 16, 2015

The NCAA tourney word came for Purdue and Rapheal Davis clapped.

A small clap.

No sense in losing it just because a basketball dream just came true.

The Boilers were a No. 9 seed in the Midwest Regional.

"It's huge for me," the junior guard said. "Being committed to Purdue since it feels like I was 7, to see all those great teams, those Sweet 16s, knowing how dominant Purdue was, and now to make it in my third year with me being a captain, it's great."

The Boilers had gathered Sunday night when, after months of speculation that they might have blown it with a poor non-conference, they got the program-restoring news -- as a No. 9 seed, Purdue (21-12) will open with No. 8 Cincinnati (22-10) Thursday in Louisville as part of the Midwest Regional.

"To see our name on the board on TV with teammates and coaches and their families, it's a moment to cherish forever.

This was why Davis, a former South Side standout, had signed with Purdue. But his first two seasons were the worst of coach Matt Painter's tenure, consecutive losing seasons that includes last year's last-place finish.

And then, after an 8-5 non-conference disappointment, more disappointment seemed likely.

Instead vindication.

"You think of all the work," Davis said, "and it's huge for our university, for our fans, for the Paint Crew, for the coaches, for (athletic director) Morgan Burke, to send them back to the NCAA Tournament ...

"It's been a rough two years, and now it's a great feeling to go dancing again."

When did Davis first think this was possible this season?

"Over the summer, when I saw all the freshmen show up to work at 5:15 a.m. and (freshman) Dakota Mathias showed up at 5. Once you see that dedication from the youngest players, it's huge for the entire team."

The Boilers have won their last 14 opening-round games, with the last loss coming against Rhode Island in 1993, when Painter was a senior guard. Painter has coached six of those victories. Gene Keady coached the rest.

"You try to get your guys ready," Painter said about the streak. "It's been a long time. Everybody you play is good. It comes down to being productive and playing hard. "It is something that's kind of neat. Hopefully, we can keep it going."

Cincinnati thrives with defense. It leads the American Athletic Conference, and ranks sixth nationally, in points allowed, at 55.3 points. It struggles offensively, ranking No. 132 in scoring (62.4 points).

The Bearcats have only one double figure scorer -- 6-10 forward Octavius Ellis, who averages 10.0 points. They have one real three-point threat -- guard Troy Caupain averages 43.1 percent beyond the arc. Cincinnati coach Mike Cronin has been sidelined since December with a brain aneurysm. Assistant coach Larry Davis has replaced him on an interim basis and led the Bearcats to a 15-7 record.

"It's like I told our guys, you don't slip on a banana peel and get into the NCAA tourney," Painter said. "You earn your way in. Every team is good.

"Cincinnati has always been a hard-charging, defensive-minded program. That's what you have to prepare for."

If Purdue beats Cincinnati, it almost certainly will play No. 1 Kentucky (34-0). It will help that the Boilers have already twice played another No. 1 seed -- Wisconsin. They lost by seven at Wisconsin and by 20 in Saturday's Big Ten tourney semifinals after leading 35-30 at halftime.

The Badgers, which won the Big Ten tourney title in overtime against Michigan State on Sunday, provided an example of what the Boilers hope to be.

"Everybody wants to be that team, that can make a big (postseason) run," freshman forward Vince Edwards said. "We've played with them. We know we can beat them.

"We're taking a lot of confidence out of this. We have to fix up some things. We know where we are as a team. We know where we stand. We know what we can do. We'll take a lot of positives, fix the negatives and get ready for the tournament."

Added freshman guard P.J. Thompson: "We played one of the best teams in the country in Wisconsin. I like their poise. When they fell behind, they stuck to what they were doing. They use their championship poise, defensively keep being solid and things will work out your way."

Long journey' brings Purdue back to tourney

Brian Neubert | GoldandBlack.com | March 15, 2015

Rapheal Davis is in just his third season wearing a Purdue uniform, but he's in at least his sixth associated with the program.

When he committed to the Boilermakers following his freshman season of high school, this was what he signed up for.

Little did Davis know that the program he committed to in the midst of its run of six consecutive NCAA Tournament seasons wouldn't get back to the Big Dance until his junior season as a Boilermaker.

Now that Purdue's back in the field - it plays Cincinnati at 7:10 p.m. Thursday night in Louisville as the Midwest Regional's No. 9 seed - the Boilermakers are back where their captain feels they belong.

"I clapped a little bit," Davis said, probably understating things somewhat. "That was big for me. Just to see your name on the board and on TV with your teammates and all your support staff and your coaches and your coaches' families, just being together and having that moment, it's a moment you'll cherish forever.

"It's my first NCAA Tournament, (A.J. Hammons') first, our whole team's first except for (Jon Octeus) and (Neal Beshears). There was excitement in the room and one of those things where you just had to be there."

Purdue got there by virtue of 13 Big Ten wins after an 8-5 non-conference season. The Boilermakers were widely viewed as a bubble team up until the Big Ten Tournament, when a win over Penn State removed all doubt. The Boilermakers wound up the tourney's No. 36 overall selection, a 9 seed back in the toss-up 8-9 game.

"It's been a long journey," said Octeus, the lone Boilermaker who's played in an NCAA Tournament game, his experience coming while playing for Colorado State in 2013. "And it's been a long journey for our guys that have been here, our juniors and our sophomores. They had a rough season last year.

"The amount of work they put in to put us in this position right now and the journey they had to go through, it just feels like it's only right. It's only right we get to the Tournament. It's only right that we play hard. It's only right we take the right approach to Cincinnati and hopefully get a win."

Sunday night, Hammons, Davis and Octeus playfully sprinted down the Mackey Arena tunnel to meet with assembled media on Keady Court.

Hammons might have been a bit winded, but it was more his giddiness over heading to his first NCAA Tournament that had him that made him lose focus a few times while answering questions.

"I'm just glad to be here," Hammons said after collecting himself. "We finished last in the Big Ten last year and put in so much work."

It was a little more than a year ago that Hammons elected to come back to Purdue for his junior season. After he made that decision, he was asked about his goals and said, "I just want to go to the NCAA Tournament."

Now he is.

"My goal was to get into the NCAA Tournament," Hammons said, "but now my next goal is pretty much to get enough wins to make it to at least the Sweet 16 or further, just to show everyone Purdue's getting back on track and back to where we need to be."

The selection committee did the Boilermakers no favors in terms of its path to the second weekend.

Should Purdue get past eighth-seeded Cincinnati, unbeaten Kentucky is almost certain to await.

In Louisville, no less.

Purdue's players were asked about Kentucky Sunday night, but wisely took the tact of focusing solely on the Bearcats.

Coach Matt Painter was asked about whether he had any concerns over eyes turning to a potential second-game matchup.

"Not for this team and not with where we are and where we've come from," Painter said. "We really had to battle to get to this point. To look past anyone in the NCAA Tournament would be a really immature way to handle things."

Where Purdue came from: The Boilermakers were 8-5 after a non-conference season that started with tremendous promise. They lost their last three games prior to the Big Ten season and looked then like they'd be bound for nowhere come March.

The turnaround happened on defense.

"When they came back from break, we really tried to (develop) a focus and let them know we had the pieces to be successful," Painter said. "I thought our guys did a good job really defending. It's really unheard of to see the numbers from non-conference to conference. Normally it takes you a year to get that, but our guys have been able to really lock in and defend."

Davis said he saw the makings of a tournament team long before the season.

"It knew it was possible once all our team showed up on campus and all our freshmen showed up at 5:15 (a.m.) for our first (6 a.m.) workout," he said. "... Once you see that dedication from your young guys, the youngest players on campus, it's huge for your whole entire team. It sets the bar, even for your older guys."

Midway through the season, however, doubt had to have crept in.

"Coach always told us, 'We need to go and we need to go now,'" Davis said. "It came to Big Ten and we took off from there."

Octeus to teammates: 'Let's enjoy this ride'

Stacy Clardie | GoldandBlack.com | March 15, 2015

Jon Octeus doesn't have a singular moment of awe.

Playing in the NCAA Tournament with Colorado State at the end of the 2012-13 season, Octeus did his best to soak in the entire experience. He listened to his senior teammates who told him simply "enjoy it."

So he did.

He loved the police escort of the team bus from the hotel to the arena.

He put on his best chatty self for the extra sessions with the media.

He showed off his skill set during the practices open to fans.

He cherished every minute he was on the court during games against Missouri - he had 12 points and six rebounds in 24 minutes in that first-game victory - and even in the next round loss to Louisville. The Cardinals, after all, went on to win the whole thing.

So as Octeus' current - and last - college team prepares for its first NCAA Tournament trip after a two-year hiatus and with the bulk of Purdue's roster never having experienced the "Dance," Octeus hardly could wait to share all his wisdom.

At the selection party, soon after the Boilermakers popped up on the screen as the No. 9 seed in the Midwest Region, Octeus already was pulling his teammates together.

"Guys immediately took to their phones, text messages started coming in. I said something. 'I was like, 'All right, put the distractions to the side. Let's enjoy this ride,' " he said. "That's the approach we have to take."

Purdue already has had quite the ride this season.

After a shaky non-conference season, the Boilermakers rallied to finish strong in the Big Ten, moving from a last-place finish a year ago to tie for third. Octeus had much to do with that success, providing the kind of point guard the program so desperately needed: A mature, savvy, unselfish leader.

It's exactly what he'll be for the next week.

"Once you get there, they always say it's a brand new season. Being able to come in with the right mindset into a situation like that is very important," he said. "I'm going to try to do the best that I can to help my teammates through this process and make sure they handle themselves the right way in terms of how they approach the game. I got to play in two NCAA Tournament games and lost to Louisville, who ended up being the national champions. Just that experience was even great, regardless of the loss. I took a lot from that experience.

"It's all about the mindset you bring into it. Anybody can beat anybody at this point. It's March. It's the approach we're going to have to take. It's going to have to be a mature approach from top to bottom."

Coach Matt Painter is counting on Octeus to rise to the occasion in preparing his teammates for the experience.

He's already seen Octeus' presence greatly impact the group, some with the way he's led vocally but more so by what he's done as a lead-by-example player.

"I just think his leadership has been great from just the way he carries himself and the way he goes out and practices hard every day and plays hard," Painter said.

"Anybody who has been there before, it helps. ... Hopefully he can use that experience to help our other guys."

Time is on Purdue's Edwards' side

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | March 15, 2015

Time is on Vince Edwards' side. He has, it seems, the best of all possible Boiler basketball worlds on his still-growing frame.

He is a Purdue freshman with a ton of potential, although not so much that he is a one-and-done guy in the manner of so many Kentucky Wildcats.

Instead, Edwards has multiple years left to show what he can do. More importantly, years to show he will be a catalyst -- and not the only one -- in what looms as the beginning of another long Boiler NCAA tourney run.

"This is everything I wanted to be here for," he says. "It's everything I signed up for. I signed for this. It's a great experience." Experience comes in every meaning of the word. Edwards has played in 31 games and started in 27. He gets a veteran's minutes because, in so many ways, he plays like one.

In truth, Edwards has to. For Purdue to maximize its postseason potential, he and fellow play-a-lot freshmen Dakota Mathias and Isaac Haas must play with maturity.

"We've played so much I don't feel like a freshman," Mathias said. "It's not time to play like a freshman now. My teammates have done a great job of helping me feel that way. They've done a great job of getting me confidence. We feed off each other."

Feeding contributed to Edwards winning three Big Ten freshman of the week awards this season. Only Ohio State's D'Angelo Russell, with six, won more.

Russell, by the way, figures to be a one-and-done guy. He projects as a lottery pick in this summer's NBA draft if he comes out. Edwards has a chance to become just the second Purdue freshman -- after Robbie Hummel in 2008 -- to total 300 points, 150 rebounds and 75 assists. He has 269 points, 144 rebounds and 81 assists.

Overall, Edwards averages 8.7 points and 4.3 rebounds. He shoots at a 48-percent clip and has basically twice as many assists as turnovers.

Imagine what he can do with another year or two of experience and weight-trained strength.

Coach Matt Painter does, which is why he often coaches Edwards hard. In this grow-up-fast world, the time for going easy on youth has long since passed.

"He plays a lot of minutes for us," Painter said. "He's a big part of our team. You've seen glimpses where he can dominate the game."

"He can pass. He can drive. He has a post-up game. He can shoot threes. We're trying to get him better in those areas, but more than anything, just have a sense of urgency and have it at all times."

"Any time you have a good player who is that versatile and cerebral, you want more from him. He understands the game. He gets it, so you hold him to a little higher standard."

"He has to know what's going on, and he has to perform."

In so many ways, Edwards has, but then, so have the Boilers.

Since late December, they have thrived with tough-minded play, sparked by tough-minded defense.

A lot of teams aspire to that. Why have they succeeded?

"It's everything that our coaches have put us through," Edwards said. "They've done a great job of prepping us for this."

"Nobody sees what we do in the off-season, the work that has got us where we are today."

"We have had some tough things, like the (off-season) Navy Seal workout when they pushed us to the breaking point. You can't break at this point of the season because we've already been there. No one saw that. "Now that we're here, composure is there because we've already been through every training possible."

Absolutely, senior guard Jon Octeus said, whose veteran experience comes with a one-and-done graduate student transfer status.

"Our freshmen aren't freshmen anymore. Our sophomores aren't sophomores anymore. (Veterans Rapheal Davis and A.J. Hammons) do a great job with helping with the composure."

"It shows we've grown. We've got to be able to grind it out. The rest of the season will probably be grind-it-out games. We have to make sure we're locked in and focused."

Edwards couldn't have said it any better.

Hammons vital to Purdue resurgence

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | March 13, 2015

How did this happen – and how'd it happen so quickly?

In December, Purdue looked like just another middling college basketball team, destined for a .500 finish and few accolades. With Selection Sunday two days away, there's no suspense on whether Purdue's name will be called – it will – what people are wondering is the Boilermakers' seed and destination.

Purdue's risen from the ashes for multiple reasons. Perhaps the biggest – literally and figuratively – is the play of 7-foot center A.J. Hammons. The enigmatic junior spent two seasons mired in inconsistency and frustration. This season traveled down the same path, with Hammons being benched for freshman Isaac Haas.

It all changed after Purdue's Jan. 21 loss at Illinois. Hammons began a stretch of play that's the best of his career and the Boilers responded with Ws. He sparked himself and his teammates again in Purdue's 64-59 win over Penn State in the Big Ten tournament quarterfinals Friday at the United Center.

Hammons recorded 23 points, nine rebounds and four blocks. And it came almost a year to the date when coach Matt Painter issued a decree to his star player, with the message centering on being consistent and becoming the player many expected.

"I think he's done it," Painter said. "He's been someone we could count on. The frustrations that the media had or our fans had or I had with him were the same. Now he's consistent.

"He's playing with some energy, and before it took back-to-back good plays to get him going. Now he kind of gets himself going, and he's ready to play and he's talking even if a shot doesn't go down."

Which isn't often. Hammons is shooting a robust 53.5 percent for the season and better than 60 percent the past month.

"I know my teammates have trust in me to do something," he said. "I put in the work, so I feel like the shots should fall. It's just confidence level. I'd say my confidence comes from hitting a jump shot around the basket. That brings my confidence up a lot."

Painter and Rapheal Davis were seated next to Hammons when he made that comment, and both couldn't help but chuckle. Laughter didn't exist the past two seasons as Purdue grappled with some of the program's darkest days.

Now – a year removed from a last-place finish in the Big Ten – the momentum-building Boilers are pointed toward the NCAA tournament.

How'd it happen so quickly?

When A.J. Hammons gets motivated – watch out

Gregg Doyel | Indianapolis Star | March 13, 2015

This is a compliment and an insult, and it's what people are saying about Purdue junior center A.J. Hammons. It's what they've been saying about Hammons for three years, since the 7-footer reported to Purdue with absurd athletic ability and shooting touch and defensive timing.

It's what teammate Rapheal Davis was saying after Hammons led Purdue past Penn State 64-59 on Friday in the Big Ten Tournament:

"Nobody can stop him," Davis was saying, "but himself."

Imagine that, being called unstoppable on the basketball court. Praise gets no higher. But the other side of that is hardly flattering.

A.J. Hammons knows what people are saying. He nods when I tell him. He's heard it before. And then he hears it again.

Coming out of his own mouth.

"I feel I can do whatever I need to do," he was telling me, "when I have the motivation."

Imagine that. Imagine being that good, that bad, and that self-aware. Imagine being that infuriating, and knowing it. It's the self-aware part that can save A.J. Hammons, because unlike so many athletes who never approach their potential – and that's where Hammons has been for most of his Purdue career – he knows he has more to give. And he wants to give it.

When he feels like giving it.

"It's really just me going out on my own," he said, after I asked him what he taps into when he produces a game like the one Friday – 23 points, nine rebounds, four blocked shots. "My own motivation, if you want to say that."

Nobody wants to say that. Nobody wants to hear it. For 2½ years Purdue coach Matt Painter has been frustrated by Hammons, but he noticed a change about six games into the Big Ten schedule. That's when Painter reinstalled Hammons in the starting lineup, replacing freshman Isaac Haas, and Hammons started to put it all together.

"He's been someone we could count on, and that was something (missing) before," Painter said Friday. "The frustrations that the media has or our fans have or I have with him (were) the same. Now he's consistent. He'll have some bad nights here and there, but who doesn't? He's been really consistent for us these last 12 games or so."

Purdue is going to him more and more. The platoon with Haas is gone. Haas still plays, but he's now a clear backup as opposed to a co-starter at center. And the data show that the more Hammons plays, the better Purdue is. He has played at least 28 minutes in 12 league games this season, most coming since Painter put him back into the starting lineup, and Purdue is 10-2 in those games. Hammons is averaging 13.6 points, 6.9 rebounds and 3.3 blocked shots in that stretch, including his masterpiece Friday against Penn State.

Boilermakers are probably safe for NCAA purposes, but has a lot left to strive for. From the Journal & Courier's Nathan Baird. Journal and Courier

Hammons carried the Boilermakers early, then sparked them late. He scored nearly half their points in the first half (14 of 32), keeping Purdue within range after Penn State hit 5-of-8 three-pointers, outrebounded Purdue and turned the ball over just once.

Hammons was quiet in the second half until Davis, who has known him since they were AAU teammates on the Spiece Indy Heat, told him to pull his head out of ... I mean, told Hammons it was time to play. In the Purdue locker room, with Hammons sitting within earshot, I asked Davis why Hammons doesn't have more games like this one, and stretches like the one in the second half when he blocked three shots in four minutes as Purdue was taking control of the game.

Davis didn't pretend to have an answer.

"I've been trying to figure that out since I was 15, and if I can't figure it out in six years, I don't think anyone can figure it out," David said. "It's just up to him. When he wants to play, he plays."

Hammons wanted it against Penn State, but he wasn't the only one. He had the game's biggest stat line, but arguably the game's biggest plays belonged to Jon Octeus, who grabbed two of his 11 rebounds on consecutive Purdue shots in the final minutes, extending a possession that began with 3:49 left and ate nearly half of that remaining time as the Boilermakers were clinging to a 55-50 lead.

Davis contributed 13 points, a trio of 3-pointers and a dive over press row to save a loose ball and run over a sports writer. (OK, it was me.)

Davis also did most of the defensive work on Penn State scoring leader D.J. Newbill – who needed 18 shots to score 19 inefficient points.

Big plays, big contributions, but this game hinged, like so many do – and like Purdue's semifinal Saturday against Wisconsin surely will – on A.J. Hammons.

And he knows it.

"Me stopping me," Hammons said. "I'm the only person who can stop me."

Purdue's Davis defies expectations -- again

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | March 13, 2015

Did you see this coming, Rapheal Davis winning Big Ten defensive player of the year?

Davis did, and if it seemed more like guy banter than reality, then you don't know Davis, Purdue's junior guard who makes up in resolve what he lacks in five-star potential.

"It was something last summer I told (assistant coach Brandon Brantley) I was going to get," Davis says about the Big Ten honor. "We laughed about it at the time, but it came true."

Davis became the sixth Boiler to win the award and the first since ex-Huntington North standout Chris Kramer did it in 2010, and he did it the old fashioned way -- he out-worked everybody else.

"I pride myself on being able to work as hard as I can. I don't like things being handed to me or feeling like I didn't earn it. I worked hard for it."

It was more than that, of course.

"We're telling him the same thing we're telling everybody else," coach Matt Painter says. "He's kept the focus, and has been very determined to help us on the defensive end."

At 6-5 and 217 pounds, Davis is not the quickest or most athletic defender, but he's relentless and tough minded and watches countless hours of film to learn opposing tendencies.

"I think it's following through all of Coach Painter's philosophies and his principles," Davis says. "It's just locking down on the defensive end and playing hard, and it came around."

"The coaches had faith in me. I had faith in myself as well as my teammates."

Davis embraces facing challenges that would buckle most players. Every game he faced the opposition's best offensive threat, guys such as Wisconsin's Sam Dekker, Nebraska's Terran Petteway and Michigan's Carris LeVert, and did the job. Ohio State freshman guard D'Angelo Russell, a first-team All-Big Ten choice and a likely NBA lottery pick this summer if he enters the draft, says Davis defended him better than anyone had all season.

Purdue teammates noticed.

"He puts a lot of work into it," center A.J. Hammons says. "He's been guarding a lot of tough people. Coach Painter wants him to guard the best player on the opposite team every night. He had to step up to the challenge."

Davis came out of high school (he played at South Side for three years, then as a senior switched to La Lumiere School, a private prep school in northwestern Indiana) with one big time offer -- from Purdue. He was a 6-5, 200-pound prospect who got teams such as Indiana, UCLA, Florida, Ohio State and Illinois to look at him, but no further. He was rated as the nation's No. 20 small forward, and the No. 96 prospect overall.

In other words, Davis projected as a good, but not great college player, certainly not someone with a Big Ten defensive award in his future.

Even Painter wasn't sure what he was getting.

"No, I did not (expect this). Give him credit for that. He put a lot of effort and energy into it. He really worked hard to put himself in this position."

That position helped Purdue lead the Big Ten in field goal percentage defense (39.3 percent) and three-point percentage defense (33.3 percent) during conference play en route to a third-place conference finish, a huge turnaround from last season's last-place disappointment.

"He didn't put much energy into it defense in high school," Painter says. "You see that a lot with high school kids. Their focus is on their scoring and points. They might try to get blocks and steals. They don't put out energy on the little things, like staying tight on screens or jumping to the ball or ball screen defense."

"He had four coaches in four years and I was his fifth coach in five years. He never really had that background where as freshman, these are the rules and how you go about it."

"The rules kept changing for him. He didn't really have any rules. It wasn't that he had bad habits -- he really had no habits. He played hard and competed."

In winning the award, Davis beat out the 7-foot Hammons, who led the Big Ten in blocked shots for the third straight season.

"You could argue that he's the best defensive player in the league," Painter says. "If you have the best defensive guard and the best defensive big ... he changes the game. A.J. erases (the guards') mistakes at times. There are times, when we're really good at the perimeter, he doesn't get a lot of (shot-blocking) opportunities down there because they're doing their job."

Adds Davis: "We've been joking about it the last couple of months. I thought he would get it. I always told him if he got it, I would take it (the award) from him and scribble his name out."

"We both were fighting for it. It probably came down to me and him. I'd have been just -as happy if he'd have got it as I am for myself."

Hammons admits he wanted to win the award, but was happy it wound up in gold-and-black hands.

"It's good that he got it. He's been doing great."

That includes setting career highs for scoring (11.0), rebounding (4.4), assists (85) and even three-pointers (his 15 this season are just four off his total from the previous two seasons).

Amid Big Ten tourney drama, the goal is to have a postseason to remember.

"We have to stay focused on what's ahead," Davis says.

Purdue's Rapheal Davis named Big Ten Defensive POY

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | March 10, 2015

Purdue junior Rapheal Davis said he arrived in West Lafayette as a "no defense" player.

A conversation prior to his freshman year with fellow Fort Wayne native and then-Ohio State star Deshaun Thomas hinted at the challenge to come.

"He said, 'Those boys play defense at Purdue. You ready for that?'" Davis said. "I looked at him like, 'What is defense? You know we don't play defense in Fort Wayne.'"

"He said 'You'd better be ready to play defense.' Now, those words stick with me."

Davis soon learned he was not ready for Purdue's defensive demands. Matt Painter said he "would have fought you" if you told him the freshman version of Davis would become the defender he is today.

That's why Davis considered it high praise when Painter recently called him one of Purdue's best defenders of the past decade. In voting announced Monday, the Big Ten coaches chose Davis as Defensive Player of the Year.

Davis did not have the counting stats of his teammate A.J. Hammons. The 7-foot center led the league in blocks (2.8) for the third straight season and joined Davis on the All-Defensive Team.

The 6-foot-5, 212-pound Davis' gritty, relentless presence and his success against some of the Big Ten's top perimeter threats swayed the opinion of league coaches. Depending on the opponent, Davis was asked to match up with points guards, power forwards and anyone in between.

Davis didn't arrive at Purdue as a polished defender, but Painter saw promise in the physical, big-bodied guard. He fulfilled it with offseason strength and conditioning and constant film study.

"He had four coaches in four years and I was his fifth coach in five years," Painter said. "He never really had that background where as freshman, these are the rules and how you go about it."

"The rules just kept changing for him. He didn't really have any rules. It wasn't that he had bad habits — he really had no habits. He played hard and competed."

Davis averages 0.8 steals per game, along with 11 points, 4.4 rebounds and 2.7 assists. But his ability to lock down on Wisconsin's Sam Dekker, Nebraska's Terran Petteway, Michigan's Caris LeVert and other top Big Ten scorers helped resurrect a defense that keyed Purdue's rise from last season's last-place finish to a tie for third place.

Purdue led the Big Ten during league play in both both field goal percentage defense (39.3) and 3-point percentage defense (33.3).

Ohio State's D'Angelo Russell, Big Ten Freshman of the Year and a first team All-Big Ten selection, recently credited Davis for the best defensive performance against him.

"It's the competitor in you," Davis said. "I love going out there guarding the best player, playing against the best player and competing, playing as hard as I can against their best guy."

"It's something that you live for to play basketball. If you shy away from it you're not a competitor."

Davis gave the Boilermakers their eighth Defensive Player of the Year award, joining Ricky Hall (1984), Porter Roberts (1996), Kenny Lowe (2003-04), Chris Kramer (2008, 2010) and JaJuan Johnson (2011).

Hammons, a repeat All-Defensive Team choice, was also named second team All-Big Ten. He leads the Boilermakers in scoring (11.5 points), rebounds (6.5) and blocks.

Hammons' defensive presence was as pivotal as Davis' to Purdue's improvement during Big Ten play. Prior to Monday's announcement, Painter felt he had two deserving candidates for top defender honors.

"A.J. Hammons is a guy who can change the game by the rim, not just blocking shots but altering shots," Painter said. "Especially after he gets a couple of early blocks in a game, he can change the course of a game."

"Rapheal Davis, he's done an excellent job defending on the perimeter and come so far and been a great leader for us."

Little-used senior emerges as leader

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | March 8, 2015

It was one of the loudest ovations of the day.

That's saying a lot considering what transpired moments before – Purdue's dramatic come-from-behind 63-58 win over Illinois.

Roars are not unusual on Senior Day, of course. But hearty cheers usually don't rain down on players who've appeared on the court for a grand total of 62 career minutes.

Neal Beshears isn't just any player, though.

He's a senior who spent three seasons as a walk-on knowing playing time would be nearly nonexistent. There would be financial constraints, rigorous academics and hours of basketball.

Undeterred, Beshears outlasted the scholarship players in his recruiting class – Donnie Hale and Jacob Lawson – despite the demands.

He was rewarded with a scholarship prior to his senior season.

"Neal has been very consistent," Purdue coach Matt Painter said. "He's worked hard. He's quiet so it's hard for him to speak up, but he has. Leadership sometimes is showing up every day, working hard and doing your best. People ultimately respect others who do things the right way and work hard, and he fits into that category."

Beshears, a Winchester native who graduated from Maine Central Institute, developed his newfound voice over the summer when, as the team's lone senior (fellow senior Jon Ochteus transferred in October), he organized team workouts with Purdue's five-man freshmen class.

Veteran status and experience lends Beshears the luxury of seeing plays from a different angle. He's an extension of the coaching staff, giving teammates pointers and offering information that's viewed from his perch near the end of the bench.

"I'm just trying to enjoy it," Beshears said. "It feels like the seasons are long when you're in the midst of it, and then when it gets near the end you wonder where the time has gone."

"It's been a great experience."

Playing time has been sparse for the 6-foot-7 forward.

An injury to his hand dissolved nonconference minutes – Beshears played one minute, in a home win against Indiana – but wins are what leave him satisfied.

He's the only member of the team who's been part of the NCAA tournament as a Boilermaker (Ochteus appeared in the tournament for Colorado State), and a return trip as a senior would act as a career-ending exclamation point.

"I just try to do the right thing and be there for the program and my teammates," Beshears said. "You understand ways you can help the team without playing, which is fine with me. As long as the team's winning, I'm happy."

Saturday night after a momentous win?

"It's gonna be a good night," Beshears said.

Purdue's Davis is Big Ten's top defensive player

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | March 10, 2015

Sometimes, a father just has to share the spotlight. So there was Rapheal Davis, the heart of Purdue's basketball resurgence, holding the young lady who had captured his heart:

His 1-year-old daughter, Kyndal.

She joined the junior guard in the celebration that followed Saturday's Illinois victory that earned the Boilers a Big Ten third-place tie and a No. 4 seed in this week's conference tournament in Chicago.

For Kyndal, at least, Davis has no defense. For the rest of the Big Ten, well, let's just say the former South Side standout can be defensively heartless when he wants to be, and that want was strong all season, earning him Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year honors.

Davis is the second Fort Wayne-area player to win the award for Purdue, joining Huntington North's Chris Kramer, who won it twice — in 2008 and 2010. He is the eighth Boilermaker to win the award and the first since JaJuan Johnson in 2011.

"Ray has done an excellent job defending on the perimeter," coach Matt Painter said. "He's come so far as a defender. He's a great leader for us."

The 6-foot-5 Davis was not a great defender when he arrived in West Lafayette. But hard work and resolve did what talent alone could not.

In late December, after three straight losses that showcased defense as bad as Purdue had played in a generation, Painter decided to play Davis and guard Jon Octeus more.

It paid off. The Boilers led the Big Ten in field-goal percentage defense in conference games, holding opponents to 39.3 percent. They also led in three-point percentage defense. Teams shot just 32.2 percent against them.

Davis guarded everybody from point guards to power forwards, basically getting opponents' best scorer. He held Minnesota's Andre Hollins and Michigan's Caris LeVert to a combined 4-for-18 shooting and 13 points. Despite giving up 4 inches to Wisconsin's Sam Dekker, he held the Badger to six points on 2-for-7 shooting. Davis also shut down Indiana's James

Blackmon Jr., who in two games was just 8 for 22 against him. He did the same to Illinois' Kendrick Nunn (4-of-15 shooting), Iowa's Jarrod Uthoff (2-of-14), Northwestern's Tre Demps (6-of-18) and Nebraska's Terran Petteway (5-of-12).

CBS announcer and columnist Seth Davis named Davis to his All-Glue team (as in, the glue of the defense).

"Rapheal has been unbelievable," Painter said. "Where he's at defensively, he's one of the best, if not the best, perimeter defenders out there. Look who he's guarded. "He's one of the best defenders we've had in the last 10 years."

Davis also has dramatically improved his offense. He averages career highs in scoring (11.0), rebounding (4.4) and steals (26). His 31.3 three-point shooting also is the best of his career. He led the team with 88 assists and averaged 35.7 minutes in Big Ten games, tied for the fifth most during conference play.

Overall, Davis made all-conference honorable mention. Add strong leadership and it's why Painter always says, "He's been great."

Davis had plenty of defensive help, and the biggest came from junior center A.J. Hammons, who made the Big Ten's all-defensive team for the second straight season as well as making all-conference second team.

"A.J. is a guy who can change the game by the rim," Painter said, "not just blocking shots, but altering shots and changing people, especially after he gets a couple of early blocks. It can change the course of the game."

The 7-foot Hammons led the Big Ten in blocks, with 88. He's also elevated his play the last two months, being a consistent difference maker as he wasn't during his first two seasons.

"Everybody has seen the potential in A.J.," Octeus said. "He had to see it in himself. We're playing off his energy. That makes it so much easier for everybody else."

Hammons led the conference in blocked shots for the third straight season. Only two other players have done that — Purdue's JaJuan Johnson and Penn State's Calvin Booth.

Hammons also became the third Big Ten player, and the first in 35 years, to have 1,000 points, 600 rebounds and 250 blocked shots by the end of his junior year. The others are Purdue's Joe Barry Carroll (1977-79) and Ohio State's Herb Williams (1978-80).

"I'm happy for AJ," Painter said. "He gotten a lot of the blame for some of our shortcomings, but he's proven he's part of the solution. He's grown as a person and as a player."

That growth, for Hammons and Davis, has been a catalyst for Purdue's strong Big Ten play. The Boilers were 12-6 and won nine of their last 12 games. That earned them a double bye. They won't play until Friday at the United Center.

It's a big turnaround from the last two seasons, when losing records kept Purdue out of postseason play after the previous six straight NCAA Tournament appearances.

"Rapheal and A.J. really benefited from the struggles we had when they were freshmen and sophomores," Painter said. "They saw the right way and the wrong way to lead. They learned from that."

Octeus made honorable mention all-conference. He had a big impact in what will be his only season with Purdue as a senior transfer from Colorado State. He had a team-leading 36 steals while averaging 9.6 points and 4.7 rebounds.

Not bad for a guy who didn't join the team until October. He had originally signed with UCLA after leaving Colorado State but had to scramble after the UCLA's graduate school rejected his admission.

"Jon is a leader," Painter said. "I think he's the best rebounding point guard in the country."

"He wasn't as aggressive when he first got here because he was trying to fit in. As time went on, he learned to pick his spots more, score more."

"He wasn't a point guard, but we needed him to play the point, he's done it well. He's helped our chemistry. He's been unbelievable."

Surprise package – Purdue, Thompson make a difference

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News Sentinel | March 8, 2015

Did you expect P.J. Thompson to assume a Purdue basketball savior role?

Did you?

The freshman point guard was an unlikely spark for a team that badly needed it Saturday at Mackey Arena. Stakes were high, performance was dismal and adversity seemed off-the-chart formidable.

Thompson delivered. You bet he did, and we'll get to that.

He had plenty of company in the Boilers' 63-58 victory over Illinois.

We'll get to that, as well.

First, consider Purdue (20-11) remains in the running for the No. 4 seed in next week's Big Ten tourney in Chicago. The Boilers actually are tied for third with Michigan State and Iowa, all at 12-6 in the conference. Ohio State can join them if it beats Big Ten champ Wisconsin Sunday. Michigan State beat Indiana on Saturday to clinch the No. 3 seed behind Wisconsin and Maryland. Purdue gets the No. 4 seed if Ohio State loses. If that happens, it gets a doubled bye (the top four seeds all do) and doesn't play until Friday. Because of tiebreakers, Iowa is out of the mix. If the Buckeyes win, they get the No. 4 seed, the Boilers drop to No. 5 and they would play on Thursday.

If that sounds complicated, welcome to the new Big Ten world of 14 teams and five-conference-tourney days.

Anyway, Thompson hadn't played in the past two games, barely played in the two before that. He and Bryson Scott had rotated the backup point guard job behind senior Jon Ochteus.

Thompson's recent production had been minimal. He had scored a total of 12 points in his previous 13 games. He had just three three-point baskets in Big Ten play.

On Saturday he hit a three-pointer and finished with a career-high-tying seven points, a career-high three steals, two rebounds, two assists and no turnovers. That got teammates' attention.

"P.J. gave us an amazing boost of energy," junior forward Rapheal Davis said. "An amazing boost. He played unbelievable."

Thompson had one of the game's biggest plays, generating one of the loudest cheers from the sell-out Mackey Arena crowd, with two minutes left in the first half and Purdue trailing 26-15. Thompson stole the ball from Jaylon Tate, then instantly scored. A minute later, he stripped the ball from Kendrick Nunn, which set up center A.J. Hammons' basket and a five-point halftime deficit.

"The guys on the team have been all over me, and so have the coaches, about just being ready to play when your name gets called, your number gets called," Thompson said. "You have to be ready to come in and do positive things for the team. I credit it to those guys, because without them, my confidence could have gone away. I might have been down on myself. But I tried to keep my head up, keep competing in practice and making these guys better. "My number got called and I was able to play well and give our team a boost of energy."

That's exactly what coach Matt Painter wanted to see. It's a team-above-self that has been ingrained in Purdue's basketball culture since Gene Keady was stomping his way to Big Ten championships in the 1980s and '90s.

"His attitude has been great," Painter said. "He's been waiting on his turn. I've flipped between him and Bryson. I've played both based on the other team's personnel.

"After watching us play Illinois the first time, I thought he did some good things in the half court. The way they play and defend, you have to have good movement. He does a good job passing and moving the ball. I thought he'd help us in those areas, and he did, and he also gave us a defensive spark."

Other sparks came from Davis (18 points, five rebounds, four assists) and Hammons (15 points, 10 rebounds).

Then there was Ochteus, who has made the most of his six months at Purdue. On Saturday, that meant 11 points, two rebounds, two assists and two steals in 29 minutes before fouling out.

It was a difference-making performance on Senior Night, and the fact it might have boosted Purdue into the NCAA tourney added to the satisfaction given that was one of the big reasons why Ochteus joined the Boilers after transferring from Colorado State.

"Out of high school I was not recruiting by any D-I schools. After two years at Colorado State, I landed at Purdue, and I can't be more grateful.

"I wish I had more years here. I'm an old guy, like my teammates say, but I will always be a Boilermaker, and that has to be one of the best feelings."

It was a welcome ending given Purdue couldn't have started worse. The Boilers couldn't shoot, couldn't take care of the ball and couldn't stop Illinois (19-12, 9-9). It took them nearly nine minutes to score five points, nearly 15 minutes to reach double digits. The deficit swelled to 13 points, and could easily have been more.

But somehow, they found a way. Their defense stiffened, their rebounding improved, and their resolve never wavered.

"We weren't going to get out-worked," Davis said. "We settled in. We're not going to out-flash you. We're not going to out-shine you or out-score you. We're going to grind you out. We're going to play together and play hard."

They did all of that on Saturday. And if they keep it up in Chicago, they might do there what they've done the entire conference season:

Be the surprise team of the Big Ten.

Thompson's energy sparked Purdue comeback

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | March 8, 2015

P.J. Thompson stood in Mackey Arena, soaking in a senior night victory celebration and the biggest game of his young career.

A few minutes later in the interview room, he was asked about his game-sealing 3-pointer and the ear-splitting ovation it coaxed from the home crowd. Perhaps it was all the excitement, but details were a bit fuzzy.

"It was good," Thompson said. "It was a big shot. I can't remember who passed it to me."

Rapheal Davis, seated next to him, did. "It's like that?"

"Oh my man Ray," Thompson said. "Mr. Shot Clock right here, he got double teamed and my man left me and Ray hit me with a great pass and I was able to knock it down."

Playing for the first time in three games, Thompson contributed seven points, two assists and three steals off the bench in a 63-58 victory over Illinois. The biggest spark in the Boilermakers' rally from a 13-point first-half deficit came from the 5-foot-10 freshman from Indianapolis.

A.J. Hammons hit a pair of free throws with 2:01 left to cut the Illinois lead to 26-15. Illini guard Jaylon Tate received the inbounds pass, but Thompson snuck up, took the ball from him and laid it into the basket.

Thompson also came in from behind to knock the ball loose from Illinois guard Kendrick Nunn. The resulting Hammons jump-hook capped Purdue's 8-0 run into halftime.

"I thought it shocked people more than anything," Purdue coach Matt Painter said of the first steal. "For him to steal the ball and score over him in the same movement was something that got us going a little bit.

"That's what you have to have. You have to have somebody step up and make a couple of plays to try to get a little bit of momentum."

Thompson did not play in losses at Ohio State and Michigan State after totaling six minutes in wins over Indiana and Rutgers. Painter has shifted between Thompson and Bryson Scott as the first option behind point guard Jon Ockers, depending on matchups and quality of play.

Thompson displayed no rust Saturday. He committed no turnovers in 14 minutes and contributed to a defense that held the Illini to 23.3 percent shooting in the second half.

Ockers said Purdue wouldn't have won without its young players. Davis said Thompson "gave us an amazing boost of energy."

Thompson, who sat for a two-game stretch earlier in Big Ten Conference play as well, thanked his teammates for making sure he was prepared for his moment.

"The guys on the team have been all over me, and the coaches and everyone else, about being ready to play when your name gets called," Thompson said. "You've got to be ready to come in and do positive things for the team.

"I credit it to those guys, because without them, my confidence could have gone away. I just tried to keep my head up and keep competing in practice and make these guys better. My number got called today and I was able to play well and give our team a boost of energy."

Octeus exactly what Purdue needed

Stacy Clardie | GoldandBlack.com | March 6, 2015

This isn't the first time Jon Octeus had to adapt.

He attended two middle schools, two high schools and two junior colleges before landing at Colorado State. Even there, he felt like he played on two teams because of the significant amount of turnover from Year 1 to Year 2 with the roster.

But it was never an issue for Octeus because of his makeup. He's always been a leader, always carried himself in a wiser-than-years way, always brought a sense of calm, always been able to manage and mingle with various personalities.

So when Octeus' plans to transfer to UCLA for his final season of college basketball dissolved at seemingly the last moment - he committed in July but didn't find out until Sept. 19 he wasn't going to be admitted - he stayed calm and positive.

Purdue found him.

And it was best-case scenario for a player looking to prove he can play at the next level and for a team in desperate need of a savvy, unselfish, mentally tough, defensive-minded, "professional" point guard.

"I think I've fit in perfectly with what they wanted me to do," Octeus said.

And though this is Octeus' only season in West Lafayette, he's quickly become a fan favorite, earning respect through his defensive approach, toughness and eye-popping athleticism, best displayed on acrobatic dunks. So expect a resounding roar for Octeus when he plays his final game Saturday in Mackey Arena.

The Boilermakers badly need to beat Illinois on senior day, not just for Octeus and fellow senior Neal Beshears but to keep their hopes alive for an NCAA Tournament berth. There's no doubt Octeus will do all he can to push Purdue into the postseason, just like he's done all year.

"Hopefully they say that it was a good year and I really helped this team accomplish goals that a lot of people didn't see us accomplishing," Octeus said when asked how he'd like the fans to remember him. "Hopefully they see that I was a factor in that.

"I'm glad this worked out (at Purdue). For sure."

It may be hard to pinpoint which trait has meant the most to the Boilermakers.

With a generally young roster that didn't include a senior who'd played significantly and only one real upperclassmen leader (Rapheal Davis), Octeus needed to bring a heady, polished approach that showed up in consistently competing and going hard in practices, showing maturity off the court and in the classroom and finding the right balance of being vocal while demanding more from teammates.

He's delivered in all of those areas, emerging as a true leader.

"At a point, everybody talks a good game, and the people who do what they're supposed to do, that carries a lot of weight," Coach Matt Painter said. "Any time you have that from people who play all the time, it gets contagious. The other part can get contagious, too, if people don't do what they're supposed to. So you have a responsibility as a guy who is older and a guy who plays all the time to do your job and not use that freedom as a player against anybody or against your team.

"He's a guy who just wants to win and you can't have enough of that."

Octeus said he's never really had to work at being a leader. It's just naturally been part of his personality.

He's the oldest of 10 grandchildren, was a class president and was a captain on all of his Pop Warner teams.

"I guess I was just kind of born with it and I just run with it," he said.

Though Octeus hasn't been raved about as much as Davis and shot-blocker A.J. Hammons, it's no coincidence that Purdue's defense picked up when he started playing more minutes.

In late December, Painter shifted his approach and kept Octeus as the team's primary point guard. His minutes skyrocketed, playing seven consecutive games with at least 32 minutes into January. In those games, the Boilermakers had a streak of four consecutive games in which opponents didn't score more than 70 points, a lock-down effort they continued through much of the Big Ten season.

It was Octeus' consistency on defense, following assignments and playing with energy, that helped in that surge. The Boilermakers moved from one of the worst defensive teams in the conference to one of the best, in terms of field goal percentage defense.

He's had defensive success because of his length, determination and instincts, Painter said.

But it hasn't just been in individual defensive matchups that Octeus has been key. He's also played a critical role in finishing possessions by crashing the boards. Eleven times this season, he had at least six rebounds in a game, including a three-game stretch of at least seven in early February. His 4.8 per game is second on the team.

"He's been very good on the defensive end. He's been very good with his effort. He's been very good rebounding. Those three areas he's really helped us," Painter said. "He's been a selective scorer. He kind of picks his spots, but he's done a really good job for us overall. Everybody I talked to before he came in said, 'You're going to get a big-time effort from him' and he takes pride in his defense. He's become a pretty good defender."

That's no accident.

Octeus' work ethic would allow nothing else.

A lightened class schedule because of grad school - at least in terms of the amount of days with classes - has allowed Octeus to focus even more on watching film and working on his game extra in the gym, he said.

So when he works with the rest of the team, it shows up.

Hammons has called Octeus "pretty much perfect" because of how he consistently delivers in the areas that coaches' value: Work, effort, listening, accountability and, simply, doing what is asked of him.

Octeus doesn't feel like that's something to be given kudos for.

"I kind have always been like that, so I don't notice it as much," he said.

Painter has.

"His work ethic and his seriousness about the game," Painter said when asked of Octeus' most important intangibles. "It's important to him. Us winning is really important to him. That trait can't get talked about enough. You can't have enough of it. That rubs off on people and then when you see a guy like that get rewarded and play all those minutes, if you're a guy who is maybe not playing as much, you have to be able to look at that. There's only so much a coach can say at times.

"There has to be somebody that a coach can hang your hat on. Him and Rapheal are guys who are experienced. They've helped us on the defensive end. They've given a good effort and they've been team guys. Those are the models that you need in this sport."

Jon Ochteus enjoying one 'special' season at Purdue

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | March 6, 2015

At first, Drew Quinn didn't know whether he could trust Jon Ochteus.

Quinn, in his first months as coach at Royal Palm Beach High School, knew Ochteus as a skinny junior from summer workouts. But while Ochteus spent the fall lining up living arrangements after moving, he kept texting Quinn to say he would be with the team that season.

Sure enough, Ochteus showed up on the first day of practice. He walked over to a friend who had been playing point guard, took the basketball, and moved that player over to the shooting guard position.

Quinn now trusts Ochteus enough that he welcomed him into his family's home last summer. He learned over the past seven years what Purdue learned over the past six months.

"He's got an uncanny ability to lead people, connect with people, communicate with people, listen to people," Quinn said. "I haven't spoken with coach (Matt) Painter and those guys, but I'm sure they'll tell you the kid is better than your right arm. He's with you all the way."

Technically, Ochteus wasn't with Purdue all the way. Official practices had already begun when the fifth-year senior transfer from Colorado State arrived.

Ochteus will go through senior night ceremonies at Mackey Arena after Saturday's game against Illinois. Victory may be essential to Purdue's NCAA tournament hopes, which might not have materialized had Ochteus not shown up, taken the ball, and buoyed a young roster with his skill and maturity.

"For him to do what he has done with us as far as bringing his leadership and defensive intensity, and to come in right away and match the Purdue point guard character ... it's unbelievable," freshman guard Vince Edwards said.

Ochteus came to basketball as many young athletes do in Florida. The former cornerback and receiver noticed a trend on the football field.

"Everybody was getting bigger, and I wasn't," Ochteus said.

By Quinn's estimation, Ochteus was only Royal Palm Beach's fourth-best player as a junior. An opponent agreed and didn't guard Ochteus during a big district game. He didn't take advantage of the opportunity and make shots.

Quinn said "something clicked inside of him." Ochteus brought the resulting work ethic to Purdue, where he quickly earned a reputation for finding more practice time, watching extra film and asking additional questions.

"He's very professional in his approach," Painter said. "He works very hard on his game. He does his job, does what he's supposed to do, and has fun playing. He's been a breath of fresh air."

Ochteus graduated high school as a 6-foot, 135-pound whisp of a player. No Division I schools showed interest. Hardly anyone did.

By the time Ochteus finished his freshman season at Wabash Valley College in Mt. Carmel, Ill., he'd grown to 6-3½, 165 pounds. Now, at 6-4, 175, his size at point guard is an asset.

Ochteus' defense, both off the ball and pressuring opponents on the perimeter, have helped restore Purdue's defensive reputation. He's also displayed a knack for offensive rebounding and will even post up in the right matchup.

Ochteus' body eventually caught up to the relentlessly competitive spirit Quinn noticed in those first practices.

"He's always in attack mode," Rutgers coach Eddie Jordan said. "He's very explosive on both ends of the floor. You can't say he's the main guy, but he almost seems to be in every play on each side of the floor. You can never count the team out with him on the floor."

Ochteus didn't have to leave Colorado State. He wanted more exposure and a chance at something bigger in his senior year.

At times, it looked like the biggest mistake of his life.

Ochteus completed the final test to complete his undergraduate degree on a Saturday afternoon in September. That afternoon, he learned he had not been accepted to UCLA's graduate school.

By then, most programs had filled their scholarships, including Colorado State. Others weren't sure they could get him into school right away and were talking about bringing him on for the second semester. But Purdue had an opening and a graduate program that was just getting underway.

At midseason, the Boilermakers were struggling with out-of-character non-conference losses while Colorado State thrived. Ochteus maintains he didn't regret his choice.

"I feel like there was a reason why I didn't get in to UCLA, so I could come to Purdue and be a part of something special," Ochteus said.

Would this Purdue season have been as special without Ochteus? Other Boilermakers diplomatically answered that hypothetical, not wanting to assume others wouldn't have risen to the challenge.

But Painter bluntly admits he was slow to decide that Ochteus should play the lion's share of minutes at point guard. Home losses to North Florida and Gardner-Webb convinced him.

"Our defense just wasn't very good when we subbed," Painter said. "Too many people not paying attention to detail. Too many people not putting enough energy into the defensive end. It cost us. If I play him 30-35 minutes in non-conference, I don't think we lose those two games."

Ochteus said the expanded role has helped him lock into the flow of games. He can find more angles to attack on offense, like when he soared in from the top of the key for a highlight reel dunk in the win at Indiana. The clip was an overnight viral sensation and will likely endure as the indelible moment of Ochteus' Purdue career.

He's played his best basketball during Purdue's unexpected rejuvenation in the Big Ten season, averaging 11.3 points, 5.2 rebounds and 2.8 assists.

"That kid has done an unbelievable job running that basketball team," Ohio State coach Thad Matta said. "I think he's kind of the piece of the puzzle that Purdue needed. He's a very dangerous player both offensively and defensively. He's 23 years old and you can really see his maturity out there and his understanding of what's going on."

Most of Purdue's players seek their first NCAA tournament experience. Ochteus has not only participated in March Madness, he's won there.

Ochteus had 12 points and six rebounds for No. 8 seed Colorado State in a victory over No. 9 Missouri in the Round of 64 in 2013. The Rams lost their next game to eventual national champion Louisville.

Ochteus brings it up every chance he gets. His first taste of the tournament only made him hungrier for return. He wants his teammates to remember this is his last chance.

"He even talks about it a couple of times a week, just saying, 'Do this man. It's my last go-around,' " sophomore guard Kendall Stephens said. "He means it when he says it, and we're all going to be in that position at one time or another."

"Of course you want to win for him. All the stuff he does for Purdue and what a great guy he is makes you dig down more."

In defeat, Stephens rids himself of shooting woe

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | March 5, 2015

The season hasn't gone according to plan for sophomore sharpshooter Kendall Stephens.

"He just needs to have back-to-back good games to feel good about himself to build some confidence," Painter said. "I think he'll be OK."

November yielded positive results and promise for the future. He scored 24 against IUPUI and 21 versus Kansas State in Maui. Both games featured good shooting percentages and a high volume of 3-pointers.

But a dislocated finger against BYU stymied Stephens' production. There's been little consistency to his game ever since and the Big Ten schedule has been unimpressive. The nagging pinkie injury and a sore ankle are the culprits.

Stephens, whose never missed a game, is averaging eight points in conference play and 34 percent shooting from long range.

"I always say everybody's OK," Purdue coach Matt Painter said. "If you can go out and play, you're fine. I also think if you handle things that way, it helps you as a player. You have to think about your assignment, not your ailment. That's easier said than done."

Entering Wednesday's game at Michigan State – a 72-66 loss to the Spartans – Stephens had scored in single figures in nine of 12 games. Three times finished with zero points, including Sunday at Ohio State.

There was a reprieve in East Lansing, as Stephens scored 16 points on 5-of-8 shooting from 3. It was the first time he'd made five 3s since he played the role of hero at Penn State on Jan. 17. Over the next 12 games, Stephens was 14 of 54 (26 percent) from beyond the arc.

"A little bit of confidence came back," Stephens said in the bowels of the Breslin Center. "But it's tough when you lose."

Freshman guard Dakota Mathias has started the past 11 games in place of Stephens. Purdue is 8-3 during that stretch, but the Boilers still need one more victory to feel comfortable about their NCAA tournament chances.

Who knows, maybe Stephens will conjure up more heroics.

March Madness on Boilers' minds

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | March 1, 2015

Two games remain in the regular season, at Michigan State and Illinois in a Mackey Arena senior sendoff.

After five months everything Purdue's worked toward will be decided in 80 minutes, plus the Big Ten tournament. Two NCAA tournaments have come and gone since the Boilermakers were last a part of the festivities.

They're hoping to change that in March.

According to Ohio State coach Thad Matta, whose Buckeyes overcame a 12-point deficit to beat Purdue 65-61 on Sunday night, the Boilers are already destined for March Madness.

Asked if Purdue is a tournament team, Matta said, emphatically, "Without a doubt."

Yes, the journey to March began in October, as it does for all 351 Division I college basketball teams. Tentacles also stretch to last spring, when Purdue banded together after a horrific last-place finish in the Big Ten.

But a mid-January afternoon in Central Pennsylvania is when Purdue's voyage began down a road to prosperity.

On Jan. 17, Purdue traveled to Penn State, a perennial Big Ten bottom feeder, riding a two-game losing streak and fashioning a 2-2 conference record. It looked like another season was slipping away in the final seconds.

The Boilers trailed by three and were about to lose for the sixth time in eight games. Once again, coach Matt Painter would face an unhappy fan base and a torrent of questions about his job status. For the third consecutive season, there would be no NCAA tournament for Purdue.

Then Kendall Stephens hit a corner 3.

In an instant Purdue's fortunes – and possibly Painter's future – changed dramatically. Painter went as far as to say it was a gift from the basketball Gods.

"It was probably the biggest shot of my career so far," Stephens said.

Penn State had no prayer in overtime as Purdue outscored the Nittany Lions 17-10. It was one of the most unlikely wins of the season when you consider Penn State fouled up 3, only to have Jon Octeus miss on purpose and set off a kinetic chain reaction.

A.J. Hammons tipped the ball to a streaking Stephens who turned and shot.

Swish.

Purdue is 8-3 since that day and on the cusp of returning to the bright lights of March Madness. You wouldn't have known it from the sour mood in the Purdue locker room after Sunday's loss. But it doesn't change the facts.

- Five wins over the RPI top 50
- Eight wins over the RPI top 100
- 11 wins in the Big Ten
- A top-60 RPI ranking

Losses to North Florida and Gardner-Webb are still ugly blemishes. However, one more conference win could erase any shortcomings from November and December.

Not that Purdue is looking ahead.

"We haven't really done anything yet," Stephens said. "Every game counts in the Big Ten. You can't take any nights off."

Rapheal Davis leads Purdue men down the stretch

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | Feb. 28, 2015

Seated at the postgame press conference after Purdue's 92-85 victory over Rutgers on Thursday, Rapheal Davis could barely contain his indignation.

Purdue had piled up a season high for points, maintained its second-place standing in the Big Ten Conference and moved one win closer to an NCAA tournament berth. But The Boilermakers' junior captain couldn't comprehend the lack of focus that allowed Rutgers to cut a one-time 20-point Purdue lead to six in the final minute.

"Excuse my language," Davis said, before suggesting the Boilermakers suffered from a metaphorical lack of bladder control.

Forgive Davis for wanting to get his point across. The first two seasons of his career featured more losses than wins and zero NCAA tournament appearances. That second goal remains in reach, but only if Purdue doesn't stumble in its final three regular season games.

Besides colorful language, Davis is finding new ways to push the Boilermakers back to success. He posted his second straight double-double in Thursday's victory and is averaging 11.5 points, 8.5 rebounds and 4.3 assists during Purdue's four-game winning streak.

"You can tell that he's hungry," senior guard Jon Octeus said. "He's experienced a rough couple of years in his college career. We have an opportunity to experience something special, and he's ready for that. He's hooked up."

Prior to the winning streak, Davis had just one double-digit rebounding performance all season. He grabbed nine against Nebraska on Feb. 15 and followed that with 10 against both Indiana and Rutgers. A quarter of his rebounds in that stretch came on offense.

Davis credited the increased boards presence to "just playing hard — doing whatever it took for my team to get more possessions, get more chances and take away chances for second-shot opportunities for other teams."

Purdue coach Matt Painter recently called Davis "one of the best defenders we've had here in the past 10 years." Davis initially balked at what he called a "bold" statement, but appreciated the confidence Painter has invested in him.

That should continue down the stretch, beginning with Sunday's game at Ohio State. Davis was a big reason why Buckeyes star freshman guard D'Angelo Russell had to work so hard for his 20 points in Purdue's 60-58 victory at Mackey Arena on Feb. 4.

Just about every other star guard in the Big Ten Conference has also struggled to break out against Davis — a self-described "non-defensive player" when he arrived in West Lafayette.

"He's one of the best, if not the best, perimeter defensive players out there," Painter said. "Every night, he takes that on as a challenge — and look who he's guarded. I think one guy all season in Big Ten play has gotten him: (Penn State guard) D.J. Newbill. Outside of that, I think he's gotten the upper hand on everybody he's guarded."

Davis said he loves those challenging defensive assignments. They fit his ultra-competitive nature.

So do the handful or fiery halftime or postgame locker room talks he's delivered this season. He understands that, due to his tenure and captaincy, the Boilermakers listen when he speaks.

"Sometimes I'm more cutthroat than I should be," Davis said. "At the time, I felt like everybody needed to know how I felt. I felt like we should have done a lot better. It wasn't a good game to watch. It wasn't a good game to play in towards the end. We should have been better than that and I just wanted everybody to know."

Painter mentioned Davis, along with Octeus and A.J. Hammons, as one of the players the rest of the Boilermakers are trying to win for this season. The past two weeks are evidence that Davis doesn't plan to just tag along.

"He's playing like a man," Octeus said. "We've got to just keep it going, keep him clicking. He's one of our leaders, so that's what we expect of him."

Davis is one of the best

Stacy Clardie | GoldandBlack.com | Feb. 28, 2015

Deshaun Thomas had only played against Purdue for a year, but it left an impression.

So when he saw then-recently committed Boilermaker Rapheal Davis at Spiece in their native Fort Wayne, he made sure to deliver a message.

"Those boys play defense at Purdue. You ready for that?" Thomas asked Davis about four years ago.

Davis' response: "What is defense? You know we don't play defense in Fort Wayne."

Davis described himself as a "non-defensive player" entering West Lafayette, partly because he had four coaches in four years in high school and never was taught consistent rules and, partly, because Davis was all about the scoring.

Didn't take long for Davis to realize he'd have to change once he got to Purdue.

About midway through his freshman season in West Lafayette, Davis said he knew that if he didn't play defense, he wouldn't play. So he started focusing in on it more.

And more.

And more.

And, now, in his third season with the Boilermakers, Davis has become one of the Big Ten's best defensive players. Coach Matt Painter thinks, maybe, even the best.

"Rapheal Davis has been unbelievable," Painter said. "He's one of the best, if not the best, perimeter defensive players out there. Every night, he takes that on as a challenge and look who he's guarded. I think one guy all season in Big Ten play has gotten him, (Penn State's) D.J. Newbill. Outside of that, I think he's gotten the upper hand on everybody he's guarded.

"He has been one of the best defenders we've had here in the past 10 years."

Davis isn't quite sure he'd go that far.

When told of Painter's statement, Davis' response first seemed to be shock - "that's pretty bold" - then a bit of embarrassment, then morphing into a bit of pride.

"He's been here the last 10 years, so I guess he would know. But I feel like I've been here the last 10 years as well," Davis said.

"That's a huge compliment from him, (that) he has confidence in me. I appreciate it. I've seen some great defenders walk through here, and if he feels I'm on that level, that's what I worked for."

And it was something Painter didn't necessarily think would happen. Painter said when Davis first arrived, he didn't understand defensive concepts. But Davis has grown into his new stopper role with not only because of physical traits but preparation, too.

He watches tons of film, especially honing in on his individual matchup. With extra time before playing Michigan this year, he said he got to know Caris LeVert so well, he felt like he knew all of his tendencies and moves, down to what does LeVert do when he drives right and jump stops? Or how to defend him on an up-and-under?

Davis had it down and helped limit LeVert to 2-of-8 shooting and six points.

It's just one in a list of big-time performances Davis has had this season. Though he doesn't exclusively stick on one player throughout a game - Purdue often switches on ball screens with everyone but its center - he's played major roles in holding Nebraska's Terran Petteway (5-of-12, 13 points), Wisconsin's Sam Dekker (2-of-7, 6 points) and Maryland's Melo Trimble (1-of-7, 11 points), among others.

Even though Davis doesn't have many individual statistics - he doesn't lead the team in steals or blocks - those efforts have been enough proof for Painter to say Davis should "without question" be on the Big Ten's All-Defensive Team this season.

"Any time you can have a guy who can take challenges on and have that pinpoint responsibility of shutting people down and consistently do it, it's important," Painter said.

Davis' success on the defensive end comes mostly by using his strength, so he can body-up on smaller guards and also keep banging with bigger players. And he has to do both.

"Just being versatile and being able to be so physical has really helped me a lot," Davis said. "I think getting physical guys on the perimeter and also guys knowing how I can guard pretty much 1-4, so littler guys, they know how physical I can be and bigger guys know how quick I can be on the block or physical as well.

"I always talked in the summertime with Coach (Brandon) Brantley about having defensive success and he would always ask me, 'Who's going to be the defensive stopper on the team?' I always said, 'me.' So I guess I spoke it into existence."

Purdue's new Hammons is a 'man of action'

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | February 26, 2015

So here's the new A.J. Hammons, the Big Ten player of the week, a consistent inside force for a Purdue team that is, in so many way, the conference's biggest surprise.

The previously focus-challenged 7-footer who alternated between invisibility and dominance for two and a half years is on a one-month tear that has pushed the Boilers near the top of the Big Ten, which leads to two questions entering tonight's home game against Rutgers:

What changed?

Is it permanent?

"I've been trying to show some maturity," Hammons says. "Somebody has to step up. If we lose, it's probably my fault. Nobody else has to hang his head down. I'll take the weight. The freshmen don't need to blame themselves. Neither do the other guys. It's on me."

Such strong words mean nothing unless you back them up.

Hammons is.

In a what-have-you-done-lately world, consider his last game, the 20-point (on 8-for-9 shooting), four-rebound, four-block hurting he put on IU last week capped by the victory clinching free throws with four seconds left. That earned him his first ever conference player of the week award. No Boiler has done that since Robbie Hummel won it in late February of 2012.

During Purdue's two-game sweep of IU, Hammons was 12-for-13 from the field for 31 points and 12 blocks.

"He's a grown man now," teammate Rapheal Davis says. "He's about his game. He doesn't talk about it much. He's about action now. I remember he was he was a little fat boy when he was 15. He's come so far. I'm proud of him. We play with him. We play behind him."

That wasn't the case early in the season, when freshman Isaac Haas moved ahead of Hammons in the starting lineup and criticism hit hard. Purdue's sins, such as the consecutive losing seasons, became his.

"He gotten a lot of the blame for some of our shortcomings," coach Matt Painter says, "but he's proven he's part of the solution. He's grown as a person and as a player."

Everything changed after last month's loss at Illinois. Hammons totaled eight points, seven rebounds and four blocks, which wasn't horrible, but far less than he was capable. The same was true of all the Boilers and Painter let them know it in one of those can-you-handle-the-truth moments.

"I told them you have to be more demanding of yourselves. You have more to give. Guys weren't giving that.

"I tried to give everybody what they need to do and have that pinpoint responsibility and take care of your business. Do what you can do. Control the controllables. Quit worrying about things you can't control. Grow up and handle your business. I gave them specific things they need to do to help us win.

"I was tired of fighting them. If they want to fight, I won't play them. You get to that point at times. We have to have everybody pulling the rope in the same direction. That's what we needed. It's too bad we had to take a loss to get to that point."

In the eight games since that talk, Purdue is 7-1 and Hammons has scored in double figures six times. Against Ohio State he only had seven points (on 3-for-3 shooting), but added seven rebounds and seven blocks. Against Nebraska he also had just seven points, but added a season-high-tying 12 rebounds.

"Everybody has seen the potential in AJ," guard Jon Octeus says. "He had to see it in himself. We're playing off his energy. That makes it so much easier for everybody else." Hammons isn't doing this alone, he insists.

"Everybody holds me accountable. They make sure I get in the gym. They make sure they stay on me. They need me to help win games."

For the season Hammons averages 11.2 points, 6.4 rebounds and 3.0 blocks. In Big Ten play, he's at 12.4 points, 7.5 rebounds and 3.0 blocks, and leads the conference in shooting (63.0 percent) and blocked shots. Those are all career highs.

Hammons is trying to become just the second player in Big Ten history to lead the league in field goal percentage and blocked shots in league games only during the same season (Ohio State's Greg Oden did it in 2007).

"I felt he was satisfied before," Haas says.

"Now he's hungry. He's doing everything he can to help the team win. It's like a switch got turned on. He's playing great and we're winning."

That it took the junior three years to reach this level, Painter says, isn't unusual for a big player.

"You have to be more patient with big guys. We've hung in there with him. He's had some tough days. He's been up and down. It's hard sometimes when you're 7-foot and 270 pounds. He has all the ability to really be special."

The numbers reflect that. Hammons needs three points for 1,000 and seven blocks for 250. He is poised to become the third player in Big Ten history with 1,000 points, 600 rebounds and 250 blocks by the end of his junior season. Ohio State's Herb Williams and Purdue's Joe Barry Carroll are the others.

"He's sustained this for a month," Painter says. "That's what everybody wants to see from him. This is longest time he's been able to sustain it. In the last month he's done a great job of piecing everything together. And it's not just in games. He's been really good in practice.

"He can score more. We have to shoot better from the perimeter to open things up more for him. We have to make better decisions on the break. When others are better, it opens up things for him scoring-wise. He needs to continue to talk and lead and be ready to go."

This bodes well for Hammons' NBA prospects. He considered entering the draft last spring, but NBA officials were blunt -- stay and get better. And so he did, which will lead to another draft decision this spring.

Purdue has Hammons' replacement in the 7-2, 290-pound Haas. Hammons has mentored him, sometimes telling him to do things that Hammons himself wasn't doing.

"He understands what's going on," Painter says. "He's an intelligent person and player. Sometimes he will over-think things. You're talking to him and he'll have the answer before you're finished talking. He'll have pre-determined thoughts. Now he's done a better job of understanding what he needs to do, and not out-think everything."

Boilermaker Chemistry

Brian Neubert | GoldandBlack.com | February 25, 2015

A key component in Purdue's marked turnaround the past six weeks or so has been its noticeable, and newfound, chemistry.

Its evident all over the floor, whether it be offensively or especially defensively, or simply in the anecdotal evidence that comes from just watching Boilermaker players interact.

It took time. Purdue is a much more connected team today than it was in November and certainly December.

"I think the ups and downs during the season sort of creates (chemistry), having those lows together and those highs together," guard Jon Octeus said, "and understanding we'd rather be at the high points than the low points. Everybody understanding that together, it's been crazy to see how close we've gotten off the court and I feel like we're getting closer. Winning helps a lot of that. Losing makes it hard to keep bonds as tight as you want them to be."

Whether that was a product of a team just growing into a comfort level, its freshmen continuing to acclimate or new point guard Octeus settling in, who knows?

Because Purdue didn't seem to hit the ground running from a camaraderie standpoint from Day 1, it might not be altogether fair to give the credit to its preseason Navy SEALs-style training.

But it certainly couldn't have hurt.

Coach Matt Painter said he thought the weekend of grueling physical and mental exercise "reinforced" many of the things he's wanted his program to stand for, unselfishness and teamwork among them.

"I like the togetherness more than anything: Not leaving your partner behind, always thinking about your partner, about your team and the values of your team and just thinking before there's action at all times about what might not be best for me," Painter said. "Guys get in trouble sometimes when they think about themselves too much, when it's, 'How does this fit me?' But in recruiting a lot of times, those are the questions that get asked. They want to know how it works for them, then they come play in an organized team setting and sometimes it's a tough adjustment for some guys. ... To have something of this nature where we can carry this on, I thought it was really beneficial for our guys."

No one was put in a more uncomfortable situation that weekend than Rapheal Davis, who confronted his lifelong fear of the water by diving into a bunch of it.

Compared to the terror he faced that day, what's defending D'Angelo Russell?

But the training seems to also have benefited Purdue's young players from the outset of their careers.

"That mental toughness, that ability to push through whatever happens," center Isaac Haas said. "Nothing can compare to how tough that was. The IU game is still just a basketball game. I can always say I went through SEAL training. Of course not the real SEAL training, but for three days, that was probably the worst training I've ever done. It really helps you push through and know that things aren't as bad as they seem."

Haas wasn't on last year's Purdue team, but knows the story.

The Boilermakers' chemistry was, shall we say, not so good.

"Last year that was kind of a problem," Haas said. "The Navy SEALs, they brought us together. You have to have that chemistry to succeed."

Purdue's Ochteus making a difference

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | February 24, 2015

Jon Ochteus hasn't found college basketball's mountaintop. There is too much left to do, too many games to win and goals to reach.

For instance, there is Big Ten bottom-feeder Rutgers to beat on Thursday night, and then trips to Ohio State and Michigan State in the next eight days that could, by winning, basically clinch an NCAA Tournament berth.

Still, Purdue's senior guard has a taste of the big time, from the exotic places he's been (can you say Maui?), to the hostile arenas he's faced (Assembly Hall tops the chart), to the games he's helped win (beating Ohio State and Iowa at home, sweeping Indiana) to the teammates he's watched grow (junior center A.J. Hammons won his first Big Ten Player of the Week award by totaling 20 points, four rebounds and four blocks in Thursday's IU win).

"It's a great feeling," Ochteus says. Ochteus is the latest one-and-done Boiler, a college graduate with one final season to make it all happen, and the peak -- for now -- comes with beating IU twice.

"Coming here, I understood how big this game is," he says. "To be able to sweep Indiana is amazing. It's something I've never experienced before."

Ochteus left a good situation at Colorado State -- the Rams are 23-5 with a No. 26 RPI this season -- to find a better one.

You'd better believe the Boilers (18-9 with a No. 59 RPI) are glad he did.

"Getting Jon was a great addition," guard Ropheal Davis says.

That addition includes equal doses of leadership and passion. During the closing minutes of last week's win at Indiana, Ochteus fouled out, but he was just as involved as if he was playing (he had 12 points and one Sportscenter dunking highlight).

"I felt he was out still there," Davis says. "Every time we came down on offense, he was talking. He was louder than Coach (Matt) Painter. He was giving us schemes. You thought he was the coach. On timeouts, he was coming out onto the court. It was like we had six guys out there."

Painter didn't know anything about Ochteus when unexpected opportunity came last fall. How could he? Ochteus was an unknown from Colorado State, set to transfer to UCLA until that school's graduate program slammed the academic door on him, forcing him to scramble to find another college.

Ochteus arrived with good numbers (career averages of 9.0 points and 4.0 rebounds) and better recommendations, but until Painter saw him in the Boiler system, he didn't know about the impact.

"I didn't expect anything from him," Painter says. "I didn't know him. I was learning in the non-conference.

"He got rave reviews from everybody around him and those who played against him. They said he was a hard-working guy, that he was competitive, tough, a winner. Everybody said those same things."

And so it has worked out. Ochteus is not a true point guard, has rarely played the point, but he has had to at Purdue. He averages 9.4 points and 5.0 rebounds. Beyond that, he shows poise while running the offense and relentlessness while leading the defense.

Ochteus already has set career highs for assists (68) and steals (32). His 50 percent shooting is the best of his career, as is his rebounding average.

"There's no doubt he has been a big part of our success," Painter says. "He's helped us defensively. He's helped us in rebounding. He's very professional in his approach. He works hard every day. He does his job. He does what he's supposed to do. He loves playing. He's been a breath of fresh air."

Before Ochteus' late-fall arrival, Bryson Scott and P.J. Thompson were poised to handle the point guard duties. Now they are reserves.

"Others would have had more of an opportunity if Jon hadn't come," Painter says. "You don't know how they would have played."

"At a certain point, everybody talks a good game. The people who do what they're supposed to do, that carries a lot of weight. Anytime you have that from people who play all the time, that gets contagious."

"The other part can get contagious, too, if you have guys who don't do what they're supposed to do. You have a responsibility as a guy who plays all the time to do your business. Be a guy who wants to win. You can't get enough of that. That's what Jon gives us."

Ochteus is a big reason why Purdue is defending the way Painter envisioned when the season began (the Boilers lead the Big Ten in field goal percentage defense in league games only). It's a major turnaround from non-conference misery that forced the coach to shorten his bench -- basically, play Ochteus and Davis more; play Scott, Thompson and Basil Smotherman less -- and look in the mirror.

"You try to build depth and try to bring guys along in the non-conference," Painter says, "and in the course of doing that, it hurt us. It cost us."

The Boilers' defense was at its worst in a December stretch in which it gave up 81, 94 and 89 points in consecutive losses to Vanderbilt, Notre Dame and Gardner-Webb. No Painter team had ever defended so poorly before. Add more breakdowns in a 73-70 home loss to North Florida, and you had an 8-5 Purdue team with seemingly little NCAA tourney hope.

Even the 10-4 Big Ten start, good enough for a second-place tie behind Wisconsin, still leaves the Boilers on a postseason edge they could have -- make that should have -- avoided.

"Our defense wasn't good when we subbed," Painter says. "We had too many people not paying attention to detail. We had too many people not putting enough energy into the defensive end."

"If I play Davis and Ochteus 30 to 35 minutes against North Florida and Gardner-Webb, we probably don't lose those games. They've both become better defenders because they're playing more."

And then Painter adds this buck-stops-here thought:

"We had some young guys I was trying to get experience and depth. I hurt us. It's my fault." Regardless of fault, Purdue is still positioned for NCAA tourney opportunity. All it needs to do is keep winning, which, by the way, is what it would be targeting even if it were, say, 25-2.

"Guys have to step up in certain situations, and they're doing that," Ochteus says. "This is a team that knows we can do it."

The mountaintop, it seems, is very much in sight.

Big men in synch at IU

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | February 21, 2015

Early this season, Isaac Haas was Purdue's new 7-foot sensation, and A.J. Hammons faced familiar lingering doubts.

Lately, Hammons has propelled toward the promise many have seen for years. Haas took a back seat.

Thursday at Indiana, the Boilermakers centers came together for their most dominant combination of the season. Hammons was the driving force, and Haas an impenetrable wall, in Purdue's 67-63 victory at Indiana.

"Coach (Matt) Painter wanted to win real bad. Our team wanted to win real bad," said Hammons, who will likely score his 1,000th career point Thursday against Rutgers.

"Being an upperclassman, I had to come out and bring energy. I was proud of my teammates and especially Isaac, just coming out and playing as hard as he can."

Hammons scored 20 points for only the second time this season – many of which came off of dunks and layups on barely-contested post feeds. Taking advantage of Indiana's lack of size, the Gary native improved his career line over five games against the Hoosiers to 14.4 points, 4.4 rebounds and four blocks.

Hammons blocked four Indiana shots — half as many as he swatted away in the season's first meeting at Mackey Arena. But he continued to provide the defensive presence in the lane Painter has seen since the Boilermakers lost at Illinois a month ago.

"He's been really good since then and done a better job of being patient and not getting frustrated when things don't go his way and continuing to make plays," Painter said. "He didn't rebound tonight, but he scored the basketball."

"Our field goal percentage defense is a reflection of our improvement with Jon Octeus and Rapheal Davis, but really (Hammons). He erases a lot of mistakes and changes shots."

Hammons averages 12.4 points, 7.5 rebounds and three blocks during Big Ten play. But it's the intangibles that have fueled his teammates during Purdue's second-half turnaround.

For the first time in his career he's displaying real emotion on the court. Take for example Thursday's post-dunk yell that drew a curious technical foul call.

"He doesn't talk about it much — he's just about action right now," said Davis, also Hammons' former AAU teammate. "He's grown up since being a little fat boy when he was 15. He came so far and I'm so proud of him."

"He's a grown man now. We're playing behind him."

As Hammons has elevated his game, Haas' playing time has dwindled. But the Alabama native made the most of his 12 minutes on Thursday, posting 12 points and nine rebounds. Haas nearly posted his first career double-double despite sitting for 70 percent of the game.

"Isaac was huge on the glass," Painter said. "They couldn't handle him."

Painter, as has often been the case recently, lamented that he couldn't play Haas more. This time he went so far as to suggest that, when both centers play this well, it made sense to consider playing them together.

Just as quickly, Painter admits defensive matchups make that a difficult proposition. It also potentially hampers Purdue's ability to exploit having a 7-foot true post presence, a rarity in the college game, on the floor for 40 minutes.

"It's a great problem to have," Painter said. "We don't have to change how we play. Before with A.J., when we subbed him out, we always had to change how we play."

Purdue puts Indiana through the grinder

Gregg Doyel | Indianapolis Star | February 20, 2015

A.J. Hammons was laughing as he walked off the court of Assembly Hall, laughing and dabbing at his eye for blood, laughing and wincing, and finally just laughing. Whatever was wrong with it, the eye could wait. Hammons plays for Purdue, and this was a 67-63 win at Indiana. That's more important than an eye.

Isaac Haas was glaring as he walked off the court, glaring and popping out the front of his jersey – Purdue, it says – as a bunch of kids in the Indiana student section, a group that had yelled vile things at Haas all game, gave him so many middle fingers. Haas was glaring and soaking in the hate, because this was a win at Assembly Hall. And you can stick those fingers up your ...

Well, anyway. This was a 67-63 win for Purdue on Thursday night, and it was probably the victory that will put them into the 2015 NCAA tournament – giving the state at least four NCAA tournament teams (Purdue, IU, Notre Dame, Butler) in what was said in the preseason to be a down year. The Boilermakers haven't finished their at-large resume, but Rutgers and Illinois come to Mackey Arena, and there's at least one game in the Big Ten tournament. Win two of those three and that's 20 wins, including a sweep of Indiana. That's an NCAA tournament resume.

And this win Thursday night, this win was so sweet for Purdue.

"This game is bigger than us," said junior guard Rapheal Davis. "This game is bigger than our team. It's for our university. It's for (school president) Mitch Daniels. It's for Morgan Burke our athletic director. It's for our alumni."

It was ugly and unwatchable at times – just the most typical Purdue win ever, the kind that defines the tenure of Boilermakers coach Matt Painter and destroys the morale of the losing opponent.

"At the end of the day," said IU junior guard Yogi Ferrell, "our fight didn't match theirs."

Purdue puts you through a grinder. Fans in the arena, people watching on television. The other team. It's a mental game of chicken, with the Boilermakers pretty sure they won't be the ones to blink first.

Indiana blinked. It took nearly 38 minutes of back-and-forth action, Indiana leading by eight midway through the first half and Purdue leading by eight midway through the second, before the blink. That came after the Hoosiers rallied from that 55-47 deficit behind Ferrell, with an assist from an unlikely place – Purdue's Hammons.

Hammons picked up a technical for taunting after a dunk that gave Purdue a 51-45 lead, and Painter replaced him with Haas. But Haas was exhausted, big and strong but still exhausted by the smaller Hoosiers tugging and pulling and clawing at him all game. When Painter removed Haas, he didn't replace him with Hammons. He replaced him with 6-7 Vince Edwards, and Ferrell attacked the unprotected rim for a three-point play.

Painter turned to his bench and called for a big man. It was Hammons' turn, so he hopped up and headed for the scorer's table.

Painter told Hammons to sit down.

Into the game went Haas, but Yogi and James Blackmon Jr. were feeling it for the Hoosiers, and they scored Indiana's final 11 points en route to a 61-60 lead with 1:40 left.

But then Indiana blinked. Nobody stopped the burly Davis, a poor shooter, from getting to the rim on three straight possessions. Two of them were buckets. One led to a free throw.

At the other end, Ferrell was forcing a wild drive against Hammons – whose eye seemed fine after the game, by the way – and then chucking a poorly chosen 3-pointer with 6 seconds left and the Hoosiers trailing by two, 65-63. A reporter asked if that was a planned play.

"Uh, that was a bad shot – that's what it was," Ferrell said.

Why so?

"Time and score," he said. "Down two. Had lots of time on the clock."

Those final 2 minutes, and that final shot, embody one glaring difference between Indiana and Purdue. The size differential is another, but Indiana was in this game despite the combined 32 points and 13 rebounds of Hammons and Haas. But Indiana can't do what Purdue does, which is grind. The Boilermakers don't take off plays at either end of the floor, which explains this remarkable statistic: Not one of their 14 Big Ten opponents has reached its season scoring average in regulation.

Purdue grinds you, wears you out. Indiana? It buries long shots, tough shots. Indiana throws alley-oops and has a great highlight reel that the players watch along with the fans before pregame introductions. But Indiana mails in too many possessions, like the time Troy Williams went one-on-five and lost the ball. And when Robert Johnson did the same. And the flurry of Ferrell forces that had IU coach Tom Crean calling timeout and yelling at him and lamenting afterward that he didn't take his best player out of the game.

"We could have played a little smarter," Crean said. "(But) we want to play with freedom, and that's part of it."

Purdue doesn't play with a lot of freedom. Purdue does what Painter tells them, which is defend and rebound on one end, shoot 3-pointers and attack the offensive glass on the other. Three of those four things worked fabulously on Thursday – Purdue was just 2-of-18 on 3-pointers – but when Purdue is doing three of those four things, Purdue has a great chance to beat you. Even if you're an NCAA tournament team like Indiana, and you're playing at home.

Purdue wins games like this because, regardless of how tough you are, Purdue is tougher. So take those middle fingers and stick them where the sun don't ...

Ugly December might not prevent Purdue from a March to glory

Mike DeCourcy | The Sporting News | February 20, 2015

They try to look ahead to March, and it works most of the time, but the ghosts of December always are chasing them. Gardner-Webb. North Florida. Vanderbilt. Notre Dame. Each represented a different sort of disaster adding up to one giant catastrophe for the Purdue Boilermakers.

"We want those wins, wish we could have them back," junior guard Rapheal Davis said. "But it's over with. It was a couple months ago. We know we slipped up. We're moving on now."

This is the way college basketball operates: Your team loses a game more or less designed for it to win — the opponent is paid to come to your gymnasium with no promise that you'll ever return the favor — and that is not going to be forgotten by the people who matter. The committee that selects and seeds the field for the NCAA Tournament acknowledges considering defeats such as Purdue's against Gardner-Webb and North Florida "bad losses." There clearly is no such thing as a good loss, so imagine what adding the modifier means about these games.

Following the Boilermakers' stirring 67-63 victory Thursday night at Indiana, which gave them a season sweep of their downstate rivals, they were asked if they believed they'd gotten the victory that put them into the 2015 NCAA field. One reporter asked this of the players, and another put the question to coach Matt Painter, so there seemed to be some consensus among the media of its legitimacy.

Say what now?

"I feel like you're in if you can lose every game from here on out and they still put you in," Painter said. "So if we did that, we wouldn't be in."

Purdue's current circumstance is as tricky to evaluate as any among the teams with a realistic shot at an NCAA at-large bid. The Boilers own an 18-9 record following the Indiana victory. That seems appealing enough. But the committee, as you may know, does not stop its examination so close to the surface.

Purdue ranks 58th in the Ratings Percentage Index standings published by CBSports.com. No team in last year's First Four was lower than 56th. That doesn't matter a ton, and certainly Purdue can do work that improves its standing, but it's something to consider.

The Boilermakers own four victories against RPI top-50 teams. None of those is against a team rated in the top 25, and they won't play any more unless they face Wisconsin or Maryland in the Big Ten Tournament. No team made the field as an at-large entrant in 2014 without an RPI top 25 victory.

Purdue has those five losses against teams rated 100 or below in the RPI. No team made the field in 2014 with so many 100-plus losses.

"We still have work to do. I believe that," Painter said. "That's how I've always tried to handle it, even though I haven't been in this position a lot. Just tell your guys: If you can lose the rest of them and you're in."

"But who are you if that's the way you go about it as a player? You want to go to that next game and stay locked in. For what we've been through the last two years, to go to another Big Ten game and not just give a great effort would really shock me."

So Purdue has not yet made it back to the NCAA Tournament after a two-year absence. But it has recovered its culture, its identity, its soul. Since Robbie Hummel finished his career in a second-round NCAA Tournament loss to Kansas in 2012, the last of member of that defining 2007 recruiting class to exit because of his knee injuries, the program has wandered away from the toughness that defined it since Gene Keady arrived on campus as head coach 35 years ago.

Some of the players who undermined that culture, whose performances and comportment led to consecutive losing seasons, are gone from the program. Getting the whole thing back on course was never going to be an immediate maneuver. But Painter promised at Big Ten media day back in October that Purdue would be Purdue again. He took the blame for bringing in players in recent years who had the talent but not enough "Purdue" in them.

But this team has been different. The Boilers are No. 52 in defensive efficiency according to KenPom.com. Last year's team was 100th. Junior center A.J. Hammons, a significant talent with an NBA body and impressive athleticism, at last has blossomed into a consistently productive big man at both ends of the court.

Sitting at 8-5 at Christmas, with the "bad" losses and a non-competitive visit to Vandy and an absolute debacle against Notre Dame on the record, Purdue's players were stuck on campus during the Christmas holidays practicing each day and decided to try something new. They became a team.

"We had tough practices, and we knew we were going to need each other to get through them," Davis told Sporting News. "We just spent a lot of time together. There was nobody on campus, it was really cold. I have my own apartment, so a lot of guys came over every day. We ate together, we watched TV together, we went to movies together, we bowled together."

You've heard this one before, of course, from so many players on so many successful teams.

Right, successful teams.

"Yeah," Davis said. "It was new for us."

Purdue has nearly a week off before a game Thursday against last-place Rutgers, then closes with this March gauntlet: at Ohio State, at Michigan State and home against Illinois. The Boilermakers' worthiness for NCAA Tournament inclusion will be defined in that stretch. Can they lose all of them and still make the field? They don't think that way, and don't play like it.

Purdue survives rocky December to land on bubble

Mike Lopresti | NCAA.com | February 20, 2015

First, let's do a little time travel.

It's Dec. 22, and Purdue is a mess. The Boilermakers have just lost to Gardner-Webb 89-84, two days after they had been blown away by Notre Dame 94-63, and two weeks after they had been upset by North Florida. The Purdue record is 8-5, and the defense is leaking like a bad roof.

Guard Bryson Scott sits before the media and shakes his head. "We've got to pull it together somehow, we've got to find it in ourselves." This is only nine months after the Boilermakers finished last in the Big Ten, so who thinks they will pull it together? Who thinks they even can?

Now return to the present. Purdue has just grabbed its seventh victory in eight games, out-gritting Indiana to the finish line 67-63 sweeping the Hoosiers this season by winning in Assembly Hall, where it had gone 9-31 in all recorded time. The 18-9 Boilermakers are no longer talking about a crisis, but rather their chance of getting to the NCAA tournament.

PURDUE 67, INDIANA 63

Recap | Box Score

And that's getting better every day. A.J. Hammons, who destroyed Indiana inside with 20 post points, is talking about getting over his mercurial days, when his focus would fade in and out.

"The guys are holding me accountable now for everything I do."

Guard Jon Octeus is explaining what has happened to Purdue.

"The signs of a growing team."

Guard Rapheal Davis, with an 11 point, 10 rebound double-double against the Hoosiers, part of a 38-21 Purdue rebound crunching of Indiana, is mentioning cohesion and what Thursday means.

"It's a family now, not just a team. We've been through so much ... we could have either all went separate ways or come together. We came together."

"I've been telling our guys since the first time we played them, that this game is bigger than us, this game's bigger than our team. This is for our university."

He goes on say this is for the Purdue president, the athletic director, alumni, past players. He sounds like someone accepting an Oscar.

He also recalls the infamous losses to North Florida and Gardner-Webb, at home, and how much this team wishes it could get those games back.

Marc LeBryk | USA TODAY Sports Images
Purdue's A.J. Hammons went 8-for-9 vs. Indiana."But it's over with. It was over months ago. We know we slipped up. We know we shouldn't have let those games slide from us, but we're moving on now." And, finally, coach Matt Painter is discussing the question about whether this late surge in general, and this game in particular, has the Boilermakers in the NCAA bracket.

"I feel like you're in if you could lose every game from here on out, and they would still put you in. If we did that, we wouldn't be in."

"We still have work to do. I believe that."

With an RPI in the high 50s, he's probably right. But who could have imagined Purdue this close last December? Back then, the Boilermakers gave up an average of 88 points in consecutive losses to Vanderbilt, Notre Dame and Gardner-Webb. Now, their last eight opponents have averaged 59.8.

It was Indiana's Yogi Ferrell who said, "At the end of the day, our fight didn't match theirs."

Ask Painter what has changed, and he mentions deciding to shorten his bench after December's dark days, to keep his best defenders on the court. "I was trying to get depth. It hurt us. It's my fault."

He also relates what he told his team in a heart-to-heart over the holidays. "Be more demanding of yourself. You have more to give. You have to defend and take pride and have that pin-point responsibility of guarding your man and doing what you're supposed to do."

"And I just thought guys weren't giving that."

He listed a big reason for the comeback as a locker room with the right stuff.

"I've always felt like our effort was there. I felt like everybody was pulling the rope in the same direction, whereas I was always fighting people the last couple of years."

All that has helped. So has the emergence of Hammons as a true and consistent force in the middle on both ends, rather than the 7-foot enigma of the past. That upgrade is something his teammates have deeply appreciated.

"He's a grown man," Davis said. "Now he's about his game. He doesn't talk about it much, he's just about action right now."

Hammons also now has 7-foot-2 freshman Isaac Haas backing him up. One of these days, Painter might use them at the same time.

The state of Indiana, whose beating heart is a basketball, did not have one team involved in the NCAA tournament in 2014. That sight is nearly as rare as Halley's Comet. But with Notre Dame, Butler, Purdue, Indiana and Horizon League leader Valparaiso, the state could land five invites this time.

Purdue's 203rd meeting with Indiana might end up a turning point for the Boilermakers, as the marquee road victory they've needed.

"You're on the bubble, you're fighting for a win, it's a road game, it's your rival, they're really good," Painter said. "Not too many people are going to win here."

But it's not enough. Not quite yet. Davis understands there is only one answer to any lingering questions about his rejuvenated team.

"Don't stop winning."

Edwards responding to Painter's demands

Stacy Clardie | GoldandBlack.com | February 17, 2015

Vince Edwards knew what he signed up for when he said "yes" to Matt Painter and Purdue.

Painter knew Edwards' basketball pedigree, that his mom and dad played, that his brother played, and how that shaped Edwards' knowledge of the game, how it boosted his basketball IQ.

Painter knew Edwards offered unique traits as a big guard, a 6-foot-7 guy who would play the 4 but could see the floor well, pass and shoot from the perimeter.

Painter knew Edwards had a high ceiling, an all-conference type of future.

So Painter has pushed. He's demanded. He's been harsh. He's been unrelenting.

Sometimes, it seems nothing is good enough. Even as Edwards has put together a solid freshman season, one that has landed him three times as the Big Ten's Freshman-of-the-Week, one that has seen him dominate games at points with his offensive versatility.

Edwards says the constant pushing to be better has been "rough" at points. But it's also exactly what he expected.

"I just have to accept the challenge," Edwards said Tuesday, two days before Purdue plays at Indiana. "It's what I wanted. It's what I signed up for. It's what I told me I was going to get. He didn't tell me it was going to come easy, just told me I was going to have to earn it. Now that I'm earning his trust, he's still pushing for more.

"It's always going to be more. There's nothing wrong with your coaches thinking you have potentially more to bring out for the team. He always tells me, 'Get more.' Get more oil in my engine, just always playing harder, just always trying to get me to step up to new heights and new levels of my game, which I know I can go as well."

Upperclassmen Jon Octeus, A.J. Hammons and Rapheal Davis have been crucial in Purdue's turnaround season, no doubt, but the Boilermakers likely wouldn't be battling for second place in the Big Ten and for a NCAA Tournament berth without Edwards.

He has given the Boilermakers a unique weapon, bringing a skill set that no one else on the team has with an ability offensively to play inside or out, the size to rebound efficiently and adaptability to switch and defend nearly every position.

The numbers have been good, too, with 50 percent shooting from the field, a team-best 77 percent from the line, nearly 10 points per game and nearly five rebounds. He leads the team in assists (69) and has a 1.64 assist-to-turnover ratio.

He's coming off one of his more complete games, too, getting 15 points, five rebounds, three assists and a block in 27 minutes in a victory over Nebraska. He also took a charge.

And yet, Painter thinks Edwards can be better.

"He's done a good job of us. Any time you have a good player who has that versatility and is cerebral, you want more for him," Painter said. "I think he can play better. He's had some lapses here the past two, three weeks at times where you want him to be sharper out there. He's a very cerebral player. He understands the game. ... He gets it. He knows what's going on, so sometimes you hold him at a little higher standard than maybe some other people who are young like that. But it's part of it. He has to know what's going on and he has got to perform.

"He plays a lot of minutes for us. He's a big part of our team. I think he can rebound more. You've seen some glimpses and stretches where at times, he can dominate the game. He can pass the ball. He can drive the ball. He's got a post-up game. He can shoot threes. So just trying to get him better in those areas, but more than anything just a sense of urgency, having that at all times. Not everything can be smooth. It's important at this time of the year that we're clicking on all cylinders and that he's ready to go at both ends."

Edwards rates his first season as OK.

He admits to having two or three games at the beginning of the year when he wasn't dialed in and didn't come ready to play, but he said he's matured since then and is trying to come to each game prepared and focused now.

He's liked some of what he's done, especially being able to attack the offensive glass and how he's responded even if his shot wasn't falling by settling in to being more of a facilitator on offense or crashing the boards.

But he, too, knows the ceiling.

And he, too, knows how crucial of a role he'll continue to play in Purdue's success.

So he, too, is still searching for consistency, for the next level that Painter so eagerly wants him to achieve.

"I feel like at times that I've had some pretty good games where I show what I can do, and then I feel like at times, I've let the team down and haven't performed to the best of my abilities," Edwards said. "You're not going to have a good game every game. But ... as a player, you just have to find the little things you can help do to win.

"I just had to learn really quick this is the position I signed up for and they're really putting me into the position, especially for the future of the program as well. I'm just trying to do the best of my abilities and make the best of it."

Purdue men focusing despite NCAA chatter

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | February 17, 2015

Sometimes, when Purdue's Isaac Haas has a free moment or needs a distraction at the trainer's table, out comes the smartphone.

Lately when the freshman scrolls through social media, he inevitably comes across one the latest NCAA tournament "Bracketology" predictions. They're growing in number and frequency of updates.

Most analysts have the Boilermakers among either the last four into the tournament or the first four out.

"For me it's a motivating factor," Haas said. "Seeing our name up there, that people are doubting us even being in, but it's still a possibility — it's still motivating, to have something to strive for."

The Boilermakers are encouraged by the NCAA tournament speculation. They know it won't mean much if it becomes a distraction from the five games remaining in the regular season.

"It's pretty natural," freshman guard Dakota Mathias said. "To play in the NCAA tournament, we've all watched that growing up and it's always been a dream. (The coaches) keep us pretty level-headed and focused one game at a time."

Purdue coach Matt Painter acknowledged the excitement of being back in the NCAA tournament conversation. After consecutive losing seasons, the Boilermakers put themselves in contention for a postseason return by, so far, posting a 9-4 record in Big Ten Conference play.

Yet that phrase — so far — is a key one. Purdue has a borderline case for NCAA inclusion. The resume includes nonconference home losses to North Florida and Gardner-Webb, no road victories over likely NCAA teams and a rising-but-mediocre RPI ranking of 66.

Those are the main reasons why, when asked Tuesday if the Boilermakers were an NCAA team right now, Painter said no.

"I think that's the best way at this point to set a tone for your team," Painter said. "If you lost every one of your games from here on out, would you be in the NCAA tournament? My answer is no.

"You've got to get it to where you can say that about your team. No matter what, we can lose the rest of them and we're in, then we're an NCAA tournament team."

Among Purdue's final five regular-season games are three chances to go on the road and get case-building victories: Thursday at Indiana (RPI 29), March 1 at Ohio State (30) and March 4 at Michigan State (36).

"We can't be satisfied with what we've done so far," said senior Jon Octeus, the only Purdue player who has played in an NCAA tournament game, when he was at Colorado State. "That's just not how good teams conduct themselves. That's not the mindset you go into games with.

"Where our minds are, where our heads are now, I think we'll be fine."

Purdue's Davis continues to shut down opponents

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | February 15, 2015

Yogi Ferrell and James Blackmon Jr. of Indiana will get a second chance to score against Purdue's defense on Thursday. So far, it hasn't come easy for opponents.

Nebraska's Terran Petteway – 13 points on 12 shots – was the latest victim in Purdue's 66-54 win on Sunday.

Rapheal Davis is Purdue's answer to Revis Island and Richard Sherman, except he carries none of the unwanted baggage. Ferrell (21 on 20), D'Angelo Russell (20 on 18), Jerian Grant (10 on 13), Melo Trimble (11 on seven), Sam Dekker (six on seven) and Tre Demps (18 on 18) are some of his targets.

"Rapheal's done a good job of having that pin-point responsibility of taking on the challenge to guard," Purdue coach Matt Painter said. "He's gone from somebody who didn't understand defensive concepts to somebody who's one of the best defenders in our league. He's been unbelievably successful outside of maybe a game or two. He's been real consistent, and that's what you have to have on the defensive end."

Painter's already campaigned for Davis to be part of the Big Ten's all-defensive team, a nod the junior guard from Fort Wayne will almost certainly receive. Davis has helped reestablish Purdue's toughness and grit, a throwback to the days of Brian Cardinal and Chris Kramer.

It's been missing from Painter's Boilermakers in recent seasons, when the on-court product looked nothing like Purdue's trademark blue-collar style.

"Ray has worked very hard," Painter said. "He has a level of toughness to him, both physically and mentally. He wants Purdue to win. He's proven he'll sacrifice for Purdue to win. Ultimately that's what a good player and a good teammate is."

"When you have guys who care, who struggle and fight through it, good things will happen. You have to handle adversity and success the same way by working hard. That's true for any of our guys."

Hammons taking lead for Purdue men's basketball

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | February 15, 2015

After three years, it's probably safe to say Purdue's A.J. Hammons will never be completely comfortable with attention.

But avoiding the spotlight hasn't meant shirking responsibility. The junior center, whose reputation for inconsistency lingered farther into this season than the Boilermakers had hoped, says he's ready to accept his share — and more.

"Somebody has to step up and be accountable for everything," Hammons said. "If we lose, I know it's usually my fault or I take the blame for it. It's things like that — taking the blame and making sure no one else puts their head down. I just hold the weight."

If you doubt Hammons' words, take note of his play. Purdue pushed itself onto the NCAA tournament bubble by winning five of its last six games. Hammons powered that resurgence with his dominant defensive presence in the paint and increasingly assertive offensive approach.

Senior guard Jon Octeus called Hammons "our bodyguard" for his ability to protect the rim and serve as the backbone of one of the Big Ten Conference's best defenses. Freshman forward Vince Edwards used a more divine nickname after Hammons collected 17 points, seven rebounds, four blocks, three steals and two assists in Thursday's 61-51 victory over Rutgers.

"A.J.'s been our guardian angel at the rim, you could say," Edwards said. "He's stepping up. He's been a leader. He's leading by example and he's showing the way for all of us. His performance this month has just been unbelievable."

Purdue's junior center had 17 points, seven rebounds and four blocks against Rutgers. Nathan Baird

Hammons began to turn the corner with an 11-point, eight-block performance against Indiana and 16 points and nine rebounds at Northwestern. Asked then about Hammons' emergence, Painter pumped the brakes. He'd seen brief flourishes from his 7-footer before and wasn't yet ready to consider those occurrences a trend.

Over his last five games, Hammons is averaging 12.4 points, 7.2 rebounds and 5 blocks. He didn't commit more than one turnover in any of those games while shooting 73.5 percent from the field.

Thursday at Rutgers he became the first player to lead the Boilermakers in points, rebounds, assists, steals and blocks since Robbie Hummel against Penn State on Feb. 19, 2012. Hammons had a career-high three steals by halftime.

"He has good instincts when he's engaged and ready to play," Painter said. "I thought he was ready to play again. That's kind of been the trend for him the past three weeks. He's been pretty hooked up."

Purdue junior captain Rapheal Davis, who previously was also Hammons' teammate in AAU competition, doesn't think the turnaround was a coincidence. Painter expressed his displeasure about getting out-worked, especially on rebounding, by Illinois and Iowa in late January.

"After the Illinois game, coach really ripped us apart, each guy," Davis said. "Watching film the next day, I saw it. A.J. came in with a totally different attitude."

"Ever since then, I think that flipped his switch. As long as that switch stays on, I think we can be really good. He's playing really well right now, making himself one of the best big men in the country."

That home game against the Hawkeyes also marked Hammons' return to the starting lineup. He had come off the bench behind Isaac Haas in the previous 11 games.

Hammons said during that stretch that it didn't matter who started. He later admitted family members and others encouraged him not to take a passive approach. Hammons now says he sees the additional responsibility that comes with setting a tone at the beginning of the game.

"When coach finally started him over me, I felt like he really got his confidence back up," Haas said. "He'd worked really hard. He came in and he was shooting before practice and stuff. It's really good to see him make such a turnaround."

Hammons said Purdue's NCAA tournament hopes aren't a motivation beyond trying to win the next game. Yet he's also clearly been considering his own future, mentioning "the next level" without being prompted in recent interviews.

Hammons passed on professional basketball to stay at Purdue last spring after receiving a lukewarm response from NBA evaluators. At the time he said he wanted to set a tone for the Boilermakers and bring winning back to the program.

It may be a couple of months behind schedule, but Hammons is fulfilling that goal.

"He got a big motor this year, especially the last couple of games," freshman guard Dakota Mathias said. "He's got a lot of energy, even in practices. He's talking and he's leading us. It's nice to see and it's huge for us."

Hammons taking lead for Purdue men's basketball

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | February 14, 2015

Vince Edwards understands the stakes. All the Purdue Boilermakers do. The margin for error is razor thin when it comes to making the NCAA tourney.

"Every game from here on out is a must have," the freshman forward said. "We have to be ready and on edge every game."

Purdue is 16-9 and very much on the NCAA tourney bubble (a NCAA-conducted media mock tourney draft this week left Purdue out). It has six games to make a case it belongs in the 68-team field. Three are at home -- starting with Sunday evening against Nebraska.

Beyond that, the goal is to finish second in the Big Ten behind Wisconsin, which is running away with the league race. The Boilers are in a three-way second-place tie with \ Ohio State and Maryland with 8-4 records. Michigan State is right behind at 7-4.

"Every game is important," Edwards said. "We want to get to second by ourselves. We just have to take care of our business so we don't have to worry about anybody else in the league."

Purdue is coming off Thursday night's 61-51 win at Rutgers. The Boilers built a 20-point lead, then held off a Scarlet Knights' rally that cut the lead to eight, by making 7 of 8 free throws down the stretch.

"We had to keep our composure," Edwards said. "We learned our lesson from Minnesota, that if we don't keep our composure, it will get worse. We pulled each other together. We matured in getting it back together to get the win."

The 6-7 Edwards has played a key part in that, including a Thursday night lay-up that put Purdue ahead 48-28 with 7:23 left.

"Coach (Matt) Painter was behind me and I heard him say, 'You've got to make a play and get us a bucket.' I had a smaller defender on me and I was able to drive and get the basket."

Edwards is the only freshman in the country to average 9.0 points, 5.0 rebounds and shoot 50 percent from the field. He has started 23 games and has scored as many as 26 points, grabbed as many as nine rebounds and totaled as many as six assists. It's been tougher in the Big Ten. Edwards has scored in double figures in just three of his last eight games. Against Rutgers, he failed to get a rebound for the first time all season.

The key for him, Painter said, is consistency.

"He has to hang his hat and his energy on rebounding and defense. He can be so good. He is such a cerebral player. He understands things. When he has defensive breakdowns, you know he knows what's going on. Some young players take a while to get things figured out. He knows what he's doing. When he has those breakdowns, it's just not paying attention to the details, and not really being engaged."

There is the thought that freshmen are prone to hitting the wall (as in mental and physical fatigue) because they are playing more games, against tougher competition, than ever before.

"I think everybody to some extent hits the wall," Painter said. "You have to keep the focus on the job at hand. Do what you're supposed to do to play at a high level. And there is always a good teaching moment when there are some struggles."

Purdue prospects would be boosted by better outside shooting. Other than the 11-for-26 three-point effort at Minnesota, when the Boilers were banking them in, they have struggled beyond the arc. In their last six games not counting Minnesota, they are 21-for-91 on three-pointers.

The problem is not, Painter said, because of bad shots.

"Our shot selection from three, outside of a couple each game, has been pretty good. We have guys taking shots who haven't shot a good percentage, but who are good shooters. I see them making them every day in practice."

The solution, he added, is not to pass up on good shots.

"I believe in keep taking good shots. Don't take early contested ones. We have to the have right of first refusal to get the ball inside and drive the ball. That's an important piece for our team and important part of our offensive balance."

Boilermakers encourage Stephens through slump

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | February 11, 2015

Purdue coach Matt Painter said he sees all-conference potential in sophomore guard Kendall Stephens.

Those expectations can serve as both encouragement and a challenge, especially when players hit the kind of slump Stephens has recently encountered.

"Of course I'm humbled," Stephens said. "He's been able to coach a lot of great players, and for him to say that, it means a lot.

"But I also know I've got a lot of work to do and I'm not there yet. I'm far from it."

Stephens' shooting ability and improved all-around play were a big reason why Purdue reversed its mid-season skid and started the Big Ten Conference season strong. Since suffering a finger injury against Illinois, Stephens hasn't returned to the starting lineup, and his output hasn't returned to prior levels.

Yet the rest of the Boilermakers say there's been no drop-off in their confidence in Stephens, a Big Ten All-Freshman selection last season. Painter said he has told his staff prior to every recent game that the next game would be Stephens' breakout.

"He knows offensively we can use his abilities," senior guard Jon Octeus said. "When it's not going down for him he needs to understand it's going to come.

"We still have seven games in the conference schedule. You can catch fire at any point in time. He just needs to keep that confidence and keep shooting the ball."

Stephens insists the subluxation of his left little finger, suffered in the first half at Illinois on Jan. 21, hasn't contributed to a decline in production. He says the injury, to his non-shooting hand, "isn't worth talking about," and would be more of an excuse than a reason.

Prior to Illinois, Stephens was shooting 42.9 percent from 3-point range. In the first five Big Ten games, he averaged 14 points, 3.6 rebounds and 2.6 assists while hitting 15 of 35 from behind the arc.

In the five games beginning with the Illinois injury, Stephens totaled 13 points and four rebounds and made 3 of 18 3s. Even if there was no lasting physical damage, did something else get interrupted?

"It's been kind of stressful for me," Stephens said. "But every player goes through it and it's part of the game, overcoming it.

"A lot of factors really came into it — it wasn't just the injury. It was a lot more mental than it was physical. Injuries can do that. I let it get the best of me a little more than what I should have. But it is what it is and I've got to learn from it."

Stephens said prior to the season that a big sophomore year goal was not to play as much through his shooting. He says that's still a work in progress. Other than free throw shooting (still a solid 72.7 percent), Stephens' numbers are up across the board, including rebounds, assists and steals.

Despite that, Stephens said the recent slump prompted him to "go back to the drawing board" and re-evaluate his game. His current priority is better focus and attention to detail.

"When his shot isn't falling he's like, 'Man, why aren't they falling?'" sophomore forward Basil Smotherman said. "He goes down on defense and fouls somebody. When they're falling, he's tuned in. When everybody's playing good or their shots are falling, they're tuned in.

"He's going to find his way through it. I believe in him, and he's going to get it going."

Stephens said his performance Saturday at Minnesota also "left a bad taste." But in addition to improved shooting — he made 3 of 8 from 3-point range, including two big ones in the final minutes — Stephens also had three rebounds and three assists against one turnover in 23 minutes.

The other Boilermakers see what Stephens sometimes can't: How much he can help the team if he never even attempts a 3-pointer.

"With his length and athleticism he can definitely help our team defensively, especially guarding the wings, guarding the guards we have in our conference," Octeus said. "And rebounding as well.

"He's going through a slump, so it's not the end of the world. He'll bounce back."

Injury ends Purdue freshman Taylor's season

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | February 10, 2015

A stress reaction in his left shin has kept Purdue freshman Jacquil Taylor out of games since December and out of practice for weeks.

But classmate P.J. Thompson is never surprised to see Taylor in the gym, doing what little he can to stay sharp.

"If there's one thing I know about Quil, it's that he's a worker," Thompson said. "It's really hard to keep him out of the gym now. Sometimes I've come in here and shot late, and he's just here dribbling around or shooting layups, because he can't really do too much.

"I really appreciate Quil's work ethic and the support he's been given us, and I know he's going to be ready when his time comes."

That time won't come this season. Purdue coach Matt Painter said last week Taylor, originally shifted to a lighter practice load, had been shut down completely.

Painter is confident that Taylor will receive a medical hardship waiver from the NCAA and have a season of eligibility restored. To qualify, athletes must have an incapacitating illness or injury that occurs in the first half of the season, and without them competing in 20 percent of scheduled games.

It's been a disappointing and frustrating turn for Taylor. Yet the 6-foot-9, 225-pound native of Cambridge, Mass., tries to look at the potential long-term benefits for himself and the Boilermakers.

"In the long run it's just helping me get better for next year, and being prepared and evaluating and studying more of the game," Taylor said. "I don't like watching from the sidelines — I want to play. We're just looking out for my future and trying to help me out in the long run."

Taylor played in Purdue's first five games, including seven points, three rebounds and two blocks in his debut against Samford. He sat out four games before his final action — five minutes against Arkansas State on Dec. 10.

All along, Taylor played through pain in his shin that he'd grown accustomed to in high school. Back then he assumed it was residual discomfort from a broken foot suffered as a junior.

But Taylor said he later learned he'd likely played through a stress fracture as a senior. Purdue's staff feared the same injury could develop if he didn't stop playing this season.

Taylor is currently in the middle of a fourth-month rest period. His physical therapy includes workouts meant to build up his leg muscles and increase strength and mobility in his ankles. Painter said they hope that course of treatment will avoid surgery.

"No doubt it's a setback, but it could be a blessing in disguise," Painter said.

Before the injury, Taylor had shown the Boilermakers more than they expected offensively. He impressed with his mid-range and perimeter shooting. Daily practice battles with 7-foot centers A.J. Hammons and Isaac Haas boosted Taylor's strength.

"Later down the road, he's going to be tough," Thompson said. "I think he'll surprise a lot of people."

Taylor's basketball body may be temporarily shut down, but his mind is not. He said he watches Hammons and Haas, both to follow their example and learn from their mistakes.

He wants to take advantage of a chance to restart his career next fall.

"I had a whole year to watch and learn and evaluate and get more physically and mentally stronger as a basketball player," Taylor said. "It really could help me in the long run."

Thompson handles fluctuating playing time

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | February 9, 2015

Purdue freshman P.J. Thompson spent back-to-back games on the bench prior to Saturday's trip to Minnesota.

Knowing the fluid situation of minutes on the Boilermakers bench, Thompson took the absence in stride.

"It's things that happen," Thompson said last week. "It's college basketball — they're not going to go your way all the time. You just have to be ready whenever your name is called."

Thompson took his advice when coach Matt Painter inserted him during the disastrous first start to Purdue's second half at Minnesota. His 7 minutes included a 3-pointer that ended the Golden Gophers' 21-2 run.

Painter said Monday that it's been difficult to find playing time for 10 players, and recently Thompson has lost out. Thompson played more when Bryson Scott was on the bench, and in recent games their roles had flipped.

Considering that time off, and the difficult game circumstances in which Thompson entered, Painter was pleased with the guard's offensive help.

"Both shots he took in the game were good shots," Painter said. "It's hard, when your minutes are down and you don't play much, to come in cold and do a good job."

"Any time you don't play you want to come in and do positive things help yourself and I thought he did that."

Thompson said last week he felt his absence had more to do with Scott's strong play — "I feel like he's one of the better defensive guards in the conference" — and recent matchups. But he's eager to prove he can handle a bigger role.

"I have to be more productive myself," Thompson said. "If it's a matchup thing I can prevent that if I get better at a few things."

Davis, Hammons showing the way for turnaround

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | February 7, 2015

Defense probably won't win Purdue a Big Ten championship – Wisconsin's two-game stranglehold on the conference is a steep climb – but if the Boilermakers end their two-year NCAA tournament drought, they can point to their defensive growth as Exhibit A.

The team's rise since suffering three straight losses to end non-conference play has been both surprising and timely. Purdue (15-8, 7-3 Big Ten) was reeling, out of sorts and out of place on defense. Coach Matt Painter, who preaches a defense-first mentality, searched for answers – and they were found during an extended holiday break.

"There was no doubt we had the potential to do it," Painter said. "You're dealing with some young guys, and you don't know when the light will click on, but you hope it's sooner rather than later."

In five weeks, Purdue has won seven of 10 games, surged to second place in the Big Ten and regained its toughness edge. The Boilers own the conference's best field goal percentage defense, and no league opponent has reached its season scoring average in regulation. Penn State is the only team to score 70, which it achieved in overtime.

Minnesota (14-9, 3-7) must reach 76 points today to eclipse its average.

"I'm surprised how well we've progressed from Dec. 22 to today," Painter said. "I thought we'd be in better position than we were, and we weren't. From our losses to Notre Dame and Gardner-Webb, you just wonder if they can make some of those strides. We had good practices over the break, and I think that helped us."

Contributions have come from Bryson Scott, Basil Smotherman and Isaac Haas off the bench, and point guard Jon Octeus is strengthening his reputation. But Rapheal Davis and A.J. Hammons have commanded the turnaround.

Davis draws the task of guarding each team's top guard or forward, and in the competitive Big Ten that's meant containing the likes of D'Angelo Russell, Caris LeVert, Melo Trimble, Sam Dekker and Jarrod Uthoff. The harassment and ball-hawking defense Davis displays leaves opponents bewildered.

"Ray deserves to be on the Big Ten all-defensive team," Painter said. "In my mind, that's not even a question. I'm biased, but he's done a good job. Any time you have a guy who can take challenges on and take that pinpoint responsibility of shutting people down and consistently do it, that's Ray."

The impact of Hammons' shot blocking is evident in the box scores from Purdue's current four-game win streak – he has 17 in that span – but he's also been a force by simply moving his feet and limiting penetration. Contesting shots was a downfall as Vanderbilt, Notre Dame and Gardner-Webb converted a high quantity from beyond the arc.

It doesn't seem to be a coincidence that during Hammons' increased production he's avoided foul trouble.

"I'm as surprised as you are," he said, laughing. "I've been trying to get in better position. The coaches have really been helping me in practice."

When practice commenced in October, Painter did the unthinkable and decided to install a zone defense. The experiment produced mixed results, with positive outcomes before it ebbed. The final straw was 264 points given up during a three-game stretch before Big Ten season.

"I didn't like where we were," Painter said. "I didn't think, as we got ready to go against the quality opponents we were going to face in the Big Ten, that we were good enough in a zone. We had a decision to make. We put in a lot of time into man-to-man and got locked into it."

As the tone encircling the program moves from monotonous to enthusiastic, Painter makes sure to remind people it's only early February.

"We've done some good things as a team, and we've gotten better," he said. "But we've been very fortunate to win a couple close games. We beat Iowa by a possession, and Aaron White doesn't play. We beat Ohio State by a possession, and Marc Loving doesn't play. We have to keep things in perspective and not rest on some things."

"Our guys need to understand we have to get better. We have a nice record after 10 games in the Big Ten. But there's a lot of basketball to play. Our best basketball has be ahead of us."

Purdue centers battle for starting spot

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | February 6, 2015

Purdue freshman Isaac Haas felt the exhilaration every night while making 11 straight starts.

He also felt the pressure. The 7-2, 300-pound center appreciated the trust coach Matt Painter demonstrated by having him on the floor at the start of games. But he soon realized "how much weight is on your shoulders" once pregame introductions end.

As junior center A.J. Hammons returned to his original starting spot and thrived over the past two weeks, Haas has embraced his backup role. He believes it's one in which he can still make an impact.

"I felt like I had earned it, but at the same time, I felt like it wasn't my place," Haas said of starting. "If I'm still learning, then that was a good stretch for me to get the feeling of what it's like to start.

"Now I'm starting to mature upon that. Being in second place behind him is really helping me move forward skills-wise and not having to worry about impressing people."

Hammons returned to the starting lineup on Jan. 24 against Iowa. Haas backed him up with 10 points and a career-high four blocks in a 67-63 victory that sparked Purdue's current four-game winning streak heading into Saturday's game at Minnesota.

Haas theorized that by out-playing Hammons for a stretch earlier in the season and earning the starting nod, he lit a fire under his elder teammate. Hammons confirmed.

"At first, it didn't," Hammons said. "But then I had people in my ear telling me, no, don't take it so lightly. Take it as motivation and fight for your position and get it back."

Haas scored 10 points in just 11 minutes at Northwestern, hitting 6-of-8 free throws in the process. But he only had one rebound, part of a five-game stretch in which he accumulated just eight boards over 59 minutes.

More is expected from the biggest man on the court on any given night. Painter wants Haas to be more assertive.

"He's got to do a better job of hitting his guy and getting him out of there, and picking up the basketball and seeing the flight and going and getting it," Painter said.

"He's got to get in a stance and do a better job keeping that guy on his backside, and when gets behind plays, going to get the basketball."

Hammons describes the method another way: "Putting your booty on him, pretty much."

Yet Haas struggled with the opposite problem just a few weeks ago. He kept getting called for offensive fouls — barreling through defenders and occasionally sending the refs to the monitor to double-check for flagrant.

Haas said the best advice he's received from Hammons this season is "Pick your battles," and he's trying to apply that philosophy.

Haas now believes he over-corrected on his aggressiveness. It's only a one-game sample, but five rebounds in just eight minutes against Ohio State — including four on offense — was a step forward. Painter said he thought Haas' effort was "great" against the Buckeyes, and said he needs to find him more minutes.

"I think I got too timid over a long period of time," Haas said. "Now I'm starting to get back in a rhythm of really hitting people and going to get the ball. It's part of it. I'm just trying to find that balance, and hopefully I'll be able to find it soon and help us win."

Purdue's Hammons no longer just another 'cat'

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | February 6, 2015

For Purdue's A.J. Hammons, ignorance is bliss, although it's predicated by hard work rather than officiating whim or blind luck. Still, a player who seemingly fouled just by breathing has suddenly morphed into a full-throttle beast who blocks shots, rebounds everything, passes sharply, scores efficiently and does everything, it seems, except foul.

"I'm as surprised as you are," the 7-foot junior center said with a laugh.

Consider Hammons' effort against No. 20 Ohio State Wednesday night. He had seven points, seven rebounds, seven blocks, two assists and two steals in 31 minutes.

Oh, he fouled twice.

"He was a difference maker," Buckeyes coach Thad Matta said in an understatement.

In his last three games, a span of 87 minutes, Hammons has five fouls.

That's a huge turnaround given he has 11 games of three or more fouls this season. He fouled out against North Florida in just 23 minutes. He had four fouls in just 10 minutes against Kansas State.

What's going on?

Hammons credits lots of extra work with assistant coach Brandon Brantley and plenty of chats with coach Matt Painter.

The overall message -- get in good position, move your feet, don't reach, play hard. "I'm just trying to get in better position," he said. "Coach has been working with me. It's the same thing with Isaac. Coach Brantley has been helping us out."

That would be freshman center Isaac Haas. He didn't commit a foul in eight minutes on Wednesday. That's the sixth game he's had three or fewer fouls, and if a cynic would say that's because he's playing less, that misses the point.

What is the point?

Hammons is finally playing to his enormous potential.

He's not doing it with scoreboard-busting numbers. He averages 10.6 points and 6.1 rebounds. During Purdue's four-game winning streak, it's 11.8 and 5.5.

But Hammons has 17 blocks in that stretch while making 19 of 22 shots. He hustles after rebounds and loose balls where as before he'd stand and watch. During Wednesday's decisive 10-0 second-half run, he grabbed four straight defensive rebounds to help keep the Buckeyes scoreless. He has become, to repeat Matta, a difference maker.

"It was pretty much after those losses to Wisconsin and Maryland -- they just got to me," Hammons said. "And then it was Coach (Painter) staying in my ear. I just have to do what the team needs me to do. That's what I've been doing."

Teammates have noticed.

"Seeing the big fellow fighting in the trenches, where they were grabbing and holding him the whole game, was big," guard Rapheal Davis said. "He was going up high for those rebounds. He was going out of his area to get them. That was huge."

Painter has pushed for this for three seasons, and gotten mostly inconsistency. Hammons has scored as many as 30 points, grabbed as many as 16 rebounds, blocked as many as eight shots. He flirted with leaving early last season to enter the NBA draft. But there are games in which he's committed seven turnovers, done little offensively and had defensive lapses to make you wonder what is he thinking -- which is why NBA officials told Hammons to stay in school.

And so, for now at least, the lapses have stopped, and if it becomes the norm, who knows what he and Purdue could achieve the rest of the season. The Boilers (15-8 overall, 7-3 in the Big Ten) play at Minnesota (14-9, 3-7) on Saturday.

"He's got to be engaged and focused all the time," Painter said. "When he's engaged and focused, he's really good."

"He says a lot of good things. He does a lot of good things. It's just getting that consistency from him. It's a big challenge. I've always talked about that with him. I've always talked about it publicly because it's not hard to see."

"When he's ready to play and he's hooked up and handles adversity, he's not one of the best guys in the Big Ten, he's one of the best big guys in the country. But when he's not, when he's not moving and not running and not in a stance, he's just another cat."

Purdue coach sees all-Big Ten D from Davis

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | January 31, 2015

Is Rapheal Davis the Big Ten's defensive player of the year?

Purdue coach Matt Painter won't go that far, not with the conference season only half over, but when it comes to naming who rates among the Big Ten's best defenders, Painter doesn't hesitate.

"Ray deserves to be on the Big Ten all-defensive team. In my mind, that's not even a question.

"I'm biased, but he's done a good job. Any time you have a guy who can take challenges on and take that pin-point responsibility of shutting people down, and consistently do it, that's Ray."

Davis, a former South Side standout, always defends the opposing team's best non-center scorer. The junior guard isn't perfect (Penn State's D.J. Newbill lit up the Boilers for 37 points a few weeks ago), but his success is a big reason why the Boilers lead the conference in effective field goal percentage defense according to KenPom.com.

Davis is set to guard Northwestern's Tre Demps tonight when the Boilers (13-8 overall, 5-3 in the Big Ten) hit the road to face the Wildcats (10-10, 1-6).

"Ray will have a big challenge," Painter said. "Demps is a good player. It's important for us not to let him get going. We've seen him when he gets going how tough he can be."

That toughness will be crucial given the Boilers are one of seven Big Ten teams with three losses. That basically puts them two games behind first-place Wisconsin.

"This is huge for us to go on the road and and try to get a win," Davis said. "To compete for the Big Ten, you have to get road wins. We understand that."

Davis is Purdue's second-leading scorer, at 10.6 points, and best leader. Over the last three games he's become a major three-point threat. He's 6-for-10 from beyond the arc in that span.

"Ray has worked very hard," Painter said. "He has a level of toughness to him, both physically and mentally. He wants Purdue to win. He's proven he'll sacrifice for Purdue to win. Ultimately that's what a good player and a good teammate is."

Davis reflects Purdue's tough-minded basketball image perhaps as well as any Boiler since Brian Cardinal. Stuggles haven't diminished his effort or competitiveness, a trait Painter wants from all his players.

"If things go your way or if they don't go your way, you still have to register on the give-a-(darn) meter," Painter said. "When you have guys who care, who struggle and fight through it, good things will happen. You have to handle adversity and success the same way by working hard. That's true for any of our guys."

That leads to Bryson Scott and Basil Smotherman, who have responded to recent benchings with some major performances. Scott, the former Northrop standout, had 11 points, six rebounds and two assists in 22 minutes against Indiana Wednesday. Smotherman had eight points and four rebounds against the Hoosiers to follow his break-out 13-point effort against Iowa.

"If you're honest with yourself, (the bench is) probably the best motivator," Painter said. "You figure it out. As a coach, you tell them, this is what we need to do. You tell them that, and if they don't do it, if they're not productive, then they don't play, or they don't play as much."

"It's simple what we need to do. They didn't do a good job of it. They've gotten more of an opportunity now, and they've made the most of it. They've done a better job. There's no question about it."

Painter said players' production determines their playing time, and that's true whether they start or come off the bench.

"If you've played a lot, it doesn't mean you're guaranteed to continue to do that. And if you haven't played very much, it doesn't mean you're stuck there. There is nothing in stone here. You have to keep producing, keep working hard, keep putting in extra time."

Because more players are playing well, Painter has expanded the rotation, just as he shrunk it a couple of weeks ago when some guys struggled. He said he doesn't know how many will play at Northwestern. "I know against Michigan and Minnesota we were pretty good with a smaller rotation. Against Indiana and Iowa, we played more people and we were pretty good there. So we'll see."

"When you go in the game, if you're locked in and you're doing what we're asking you to do, it helps me to go back to you. If you go in and you're supposed to stay tight on the screen and you go around it, even if your guy doesn't score, that sends a message to me that you're not paying attention. If you're not doing your ball-screen rules, not doing your post D rules, not doing your screen action rules, that sends me a message."

"If you stick to our rules and are playing hard, then I'll go back to you. If you don't do those things, it's hard for me to go back to you, especially if we have people doing it who are starting the game. Now, if they're not doing it either, then that puts me in a real dilemma on who to go to." Purdue out-ran Indiana by scoring 12 fast-break points, which was surprising given the Hoosiers' full-throttle reputation. It's not surprising to Painter, who doesn't want a plodding pace.

"We got in some transition opportunities," he said. "We've always wanted to push the ball and create offense. You can't get enough layups. (Indiana) gave so much attention to our bigs that it opened up things for our other guys."

"We put more speed and athleticism out there. When Basil gets in the open court, that's his strength. When Bryson can drive in the open court, that's his strength. The more opportunities for those guys in that type of a game, that helps us."

Painter rewarded as Scott paid off with huge game

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | January 31, 2015

The story has been written countless times. Player sees minutes disappear, becomes disgruntled and transfers. That's not the tale of Bryson Scott. Not even close.

Sure, his playing time decreased this season after seeing action in all 32 games as a freshman. But the sophomore guard, while irritated, didn't quit on his teammates or himself. Scott's patience was rewarded in the Boilermakers' biggest game to date.

The former Northrop standout had 11 points, six rebounds and two assists in a season-high 22 minutes against Indiana on Wednesday that not even Scott himself could have envisioned. After all, he played four irrelevant minutes the past six games, with three games marked DNP – Coach's Decision.

When the final buzzer sounded in Purdue's 83-67 thrashing of the 22nd-ranked Hoosiers, Scott jubilantly cheered, high-fiving coaches, teammates and fans.

The euphoria almost took on an air of relief, a confirmation to Scott that his skills are needed and dependable.

"I was down for a little while," he said. "I was trying to just feed off my teammates. I did a lot of praying and just tried to keep my head (right). It worked for me, and I'm happy.

"I'm really, really happy."

Scott's smile and jovial attitude were evident, so too was the warrior cry and muscle flex during the Boilers' celebration.

Said Rapheal Davis, a childhood friend of Scott: "I think he was the hero of the game.

"Seeing him keep his head and fight through this and come out like he did, I think I'm more proud than he is," Davis said.

The personal accomplishment blended with Purdue's team triumph, a second consecutive win over its nemesis from Bloomington and a victory that places them fourth in the Big Ten.

For a bubble team, it's a lease on life that elevates NCAA tournament hopes. Another positive step can be taken tonight at Northwestern (10-10, 1-6 Big Ten).

The Wildcats, still vying for the program's first tournament berth, have lost five straight games by a combined 17 points – one in overtime. Purdue has lost in three of its past four trips to Welsh-Ryan Arena.

With a lineup absent of superstars, Purdue (13-8, 5-3) wins with teamwork, the oldest strategy in the book. In back-to-back wins over ranked opponents – Iowa and Indiana – the Boilers have used productive outings from unlikely sources, Basil Smotherman and Scott.

"Since we haven't played him, he's had a good attitude, and he's done some good things in practice," Purdue coach Matt Painter said of Scott. "We thought this was a great opportunity for him to play and guard (IU's) quickness. We thought he could match it. But we knew they wouldn't guard him, and we really felt he could drive the ball and give us a punch."

The pre-game plan came to fruition as Scott confounded the Hoosiers at both ends of the floor. It was a far cry from the player who was kicked out of practice in early January for mouthing off to coaches.

"I haven't been in the best position with the coaches," said Scott, who doesn't hide his emotions. "But I've been waiting for my opportunity. They gave it to me (Wednesday) and, fortunately, I took advantage of it. Whenever they need me, I'm ready."

Arguing wasn't the sole cause of Scott's benching, according to Painter. He said defensive breakdowns and inefficient offense were bigger factors. Against the Hoosiers, Scott rendered Yogi Ferrell largely irrelevant and had only one turnover. That's the surest way to earn back your coach's trust.

Everyone in Mackey Arena – save for those clad in cream and crimson – seemed to feed off Scott's infectious energy. It was illustrated best by Scott's coast-to-coast layup to beat the first-half buzzer.

"That's what I brought," Scott said, "energy, defense and tried to get to the basket."

Purdue gets painful truth, not sugar coating, from Davis

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | January 21, 2015

Purdue's Rapheal Davis won't sugar coat the truth. His teammates get that, and if they forget, well, try messing up tonight's first half at Illinois and see what happens. Of course, if you've seen the Boilers play this season, you know the first half has been a season-long drama.

Anyway, Davis is the junior who leads by word as well as deed, and if you're not doing your job, if you're not hustling and paying attention to what needs to be done, you will hear about it.

Consider the Boilers' last game, when a lousy first half at Penn State put them in a nine-point halftime deficit. Davis had a few things to say, and if it wasn't all peace and love, well, those don't win Big Ten games.

"It was great," freshman guard Dakota Mathias said. "It was exactly what we needed to hear. He's our leader and some of the stuff he said hurt a little bit, but we needed to hear it."

The result was a second-half rally that led to an overtime victory, huge in Purdue's quest to stay Big Ten and NCAA tourney relevant. It is 11-7 overall and 3-2 in the Big Ten.

"He went off a little bit," freshman swingman Vince Edwards said. "He got some guys' eyes open."

"And then Coach Painter talked. He wasn't happy, either. It all lit the fuse in some guys."

Painter has had to do plenty of halftime fuse lighting, which suggests he should do it before games, although if it means going ballistic, the Boilers would rather pass.

"We don't want that," Edwards said. "You have to make sure you're ready. If you are, the team should feed off of that."

"For some reason, we're just not engaged (at the start of games). We keep shooting ourselves in the foot. We have to step up in that area. Instead of coming out and missing assignments, come out more alert."

"We have to communicate. If we don't talk, we cancel out a lot of things. We have some guys who do it, some who do it here and there, and some who don't do it at all." That explains the reduced rotation. At Penn State, seven players played at least 12 minutes, six at least 23.

"It comes down to trust," Painter said. "When you go in the game and have three breakdowns in a row, you're not ready to play. If you go in and do what we ask you to do, take care of the ball, know what's going on from the scouting report, you're going to help yourself."

"That's why we haven't been able to play as many people and do as many things, because we're not carrying out our assignments. The guys who are playing are doing a better job of that."

"We have to get guys coming in the game who play to their strengths, take care of the ball, take good shots, do what they're supposed to do on the defensive end. If that's not the case, we'll stay with guys who give us a better chance in those areas."

Case in point -- back-up point guards Bryson Scott and P.J. Thompson, who did little in their brief action on Saturday. Scott played three minutes and scored no points, committed two fouls, had one assist and one turnover. Thompson played one minute and had, no points two fouls and two turnovers.

Meanwhile, starting point guard Jon Octeus played 41 minutes and totaled 13 points, seven assists, four rebounds and four steals.

When asked who is now the backup point guard, Painter said, "It just depends. The guys who can play the position have to do a better job of understanding and taking care of the ball."

"Jon has done such a good job. He can defend. He can rebound. He does a pretty good job of taking care of the ball." Add forward Basil Smotherman's limited off-the-bench production at Penn State (0-for-2 from the field, one rebound in one minute) and you can sense Painter's frustration.

"We're having guys sub in and right away make a negative impact. Guys come in and are not concentrating. It's the Big Ten and we don't have time for that anymore."

As far as what Painter does have time for, consider freshman Dakota Mathias, who had been struggling lately. He totaled seven points, four assists, one block, one steal and zero turnovers in 23 minutes against Penn State.

"Dakota has done a good job the past couple weeks in just being solid," Painter said. "He let the game come to him. He knows what's going on. That's important."

Purdue will go for its second straight road win at Illinois (12-7, 2-4), which lost at home for the first time this season Sunday against Indiana.

Purdue freshman well-schooled

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | January 21, 2015

Growing up in the middle-of-nowhere northwestern Ohio town of Elida, distractions were minimal for Dakota Mathias. Basketball was his motivation, and he had a front-row seat to older brothers Dustin and Bo and their exploits.

A tireless work ethic was instilled at a young age, contributing to Mathias' now-legendary status in the town of 1,866. He left Elida – home of the Bulldogs – as the school's all-time leading scorer with 1,906 points, averaging 27.7 per game over four years. Mathias, a Purdue freshman, became known for his accurate long-range shooting, but it's his all-around game and an exquisite basketball IQ that separates him from other pure shooters.

"He's the third brother, so he watched two other very good players develop," Elida High School coach Denny Thompson said. "I think that's quite an advantage. He was able to watch them make mistakes and see what they did to get better. That really helped him understand the overall game of basketball. At the same time, I think he has a tremendous natural ability to see and understand things on the court."

The intangibles have appeared in recent weeks for Purdue, which plays tonight at Illinois (12-7, 2-4 Big Ten). As the Boiler-makers (11-7, 3-2) stammered, Mathias provided a pick-me-up. He's recorded 15 points, five rebounds, eight assists, two steals, a blocked shot and just two turnovers in five Big Ten games. On the season, Mathias is averaging 3.8 points, 1.5 rebounds and 1.3 assists.

The shining moment in Mathias' 18-game, two-start career came on Saturday at Penn State in Purdue's improbable 84-77 overtime win. He replaced foul-plagued Rapheal Davis, tallying seven crucial points, four steals and zero turnovers in a season-high 23 minutes. It satisfied coach Matt Painter, who covets a productive bench that limits turnovers.

"I thought Dakota was great. He didn't turn the basketball over, that is huge," Painter said. "If he can come into games as a guard and be solid and not turn the ball over, it really helps us, especially if he's getting the ball where it needs to be in our offensive scheme. That's the No. 1 thing for him – being solid."

"The more he can play and the more success he can have the more comfortable he'll feel out there. He's not in a position where he can play through mistakes. That's part of coming off of the bench."

The 6-foot-4, 197-pound Mathias displayed his knack for clutch shooting during a 9-0 Nittany Lion run. They extended their lead to 48-40 with just more than 12 minutes left when Mathias made a 3, jump-starting a late surge that resulted in a key victory.

"We needed a bucket," Mathias said. "(Penn State) went on a run, the crowd was getting into it. It was late in the second half. Looking back on it, that was a big 3."

"It was good to get out there and contribute to this team. I've wanted to expand my role a little bit each game. That's what you have to do when you come off the bench, just give it your all and give the team what it needs."

There was a time when Mathias' assistance appeared fleeting. After reporting to Purdue in July, he suffered through a stint of mono, an unrelated case of fatigue, an inner ear infection and two sprained ankles, which limited him during the preseason. This after imploring fellow freshmen over the summer to get better every day.

There were times in high school when Thompson would shut down Mathias because he was working too hard. But Mathias would sneak into the full-court gym at his house and continue working, even after telling his dad he obeyed his coach's orders. So when Mathias received diminished minutes, it wasn't easy.

Mathias admits that it affected his psyche early in the season before he embraced a new role that emphasizes his ability to make crisp passes, play mistake-free basketball and exhibit his on-court savvy.

"That's why I'm here, that's why coach Painter recruited me," Mathias said. "Hopefully it helps the team win games."

Added Painter: "We all want to play a role in college like we did in high school. I always try to say how do you think the seventh man on your high school team felt. Well, now you're our seventh man. Like it or not, you have to play a role – you have to take good shots, be selective and take care of the basketball. When you play limited minutes and come in and don't do anything wrong, it's huge. That's playing a role."

Boilers' SEAL training pays off

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | January 20, 2015

The sounds came quietly at first before increasing in decibel level and frequency. It was 4 a.m. and whistles, screaming and objects striking walls were clearly audible. Then the lights came on.

It was all done by Navy SEALs. The elite special forces were in West Lafayette in September to build camaraderie and leadership for the Purdue men's basketball team.

For four days, the Boilermakers were subjected to all manner of rigorous activities in harsh conditions. Players carried each other long distances on their backs, they lifted logs and truck tires, they crawled through mud, they had sand thrown in their faces and conquered phobias. The goal was to put them in uncomfortable situations as a group and to overcome those moments together.

"It's something you remember, especially as tough as it was and as close as we had to come together as a team to get it accomplished," junior guard Rapheal Davis said. "We talk about it in different situations, being a team like we were then with that closeness. After doing it, we were closer automatically just from sharing the experience. We think about it at times during the season."

As Purdue (11-7, 3-2 Big Ten) wrestled with a two-game conference losing streak last week, the Boilers harkened back to those September days when scenarios were more complex than solving a zone defense and more problematic than playing from behind.

It was the second rough patch Purdue faced. After closing nonconference play with three consecutive losses, the Boilers responded with consecutive Big Ten wins. On Saturday at Penn State, their reply was an improbable overtime victory.

"We were very fortunate," Purdue coach Matt Painter said.

Davis is the unquestioned team leader. He's spurred competition out of his teammates before and continues trying to strike the right chord. But he was put in the unenviable position of overcoming a paralyzing fear during the SEAL Leadership training. The former South Side standout can't swim, so when he found himself on a diving board stretched over 17-foot-deep water, a horrifying feeling came over him.

For several minutes, he stood frozen with anxiety. Everything was tuned out – sounds, sight, nothing else existed. A lifetime fear of water caused Davis to have a mini panic attack.

Finally, thanks to encouragement from teammates, Davis took the plunge.

"It was big for me overcoming that, doing something that I could never imagine myself doing," Davis said. "I was terrified. It was big for me personally, knowing I could push through any wall. Having my teammates jump in the pool with me and help me out brought us closer together, knowing they had my back and would do anything for me. That one thing really forced us to come together even more."

Painter saw the success other teams experienced with SEAL training – USC football, Texas basketball, among others – and it sparked an idea. After two years of losing and a deviation from previous tight-knit locker rooms, the time was right to instill a new brand of passion.

For years, Purdue's grit and blue-collar approach shone through on the court. But it was gradually more rare in recent seasons, absent during crucial moments that called into question the Boilers' resolve and determination. Pride disappeared.

A four-day stretch of unprecedented exhaustion and punishing physical exertion brought out the old-school toughness that's helped define Purdue basketball for decades.

"I think the camaraderie, the teamwork, a lot of what SEALs believe in is each other," Painter said. "They don't have a most valuable SEAL. It's always about the team. There's no individual acknowledgment. You don't leave a guy behind, you're always worried about your partner."

"Whether it's classroom sessions or physical sessions, it's about staying with something and fighting through it. I think it was great for our guys. It was good to get them out of their comfort level. When you get out of your comfort zone, you'd be surprised at the things you can achieve."

Painter and his staff took part in the classroom exercises but sat out the physical sessions, with a smiling Painter sighting old age as a deterrent.

To date, the 2014-15 season has been a microcosm of the SEAL workouts – highs, lows, comebacks and achievements many thought impossible. Memories remain fresh, but the most indelible mark left from the SEALs is heard every time the Boilers break a huddle: "NO BS." Bonding and overcoming prickly situations weren't the only objectives. Purdue also was instructed to determine a mantra for the season. There's an obvious meaning and an acronym that stands for "Never Operate Below Special."

It doesn't stray far from the team's collective mind.

Each name on the roster has accepted an increased leadership role. There's an understanding that advice will be given and received, a dose of toughness and trust dispensed.

"They threw challenges at us you're not used to," junior center A.J. Hammons said. "Can you push through being uncomfortable at every second? It's about pushing through it for your team when you're uncomfortable. I felt like it helped us a lot, to come together as a team."

"If we can push this, we can push through anything."

Physical exertion made mental impact

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | January 2, 2015

Prior to Purdue's Big Ten Conference opener, I talked to some of the Boilermakers about the focus of their workouts over the Christmas break.

The players talked about some earlier practices that consisted of a lot of drills — sprints, runs up the steps inside Mackey Arena, a stationary core/endurance tool known as “wall sits” — that had a mental impact as much as a physical one.

The question was whether or not that would translate onto the court against Minnesota. According to junior captain Rapheal Davis, it did.

“I don't know about the other guys, but being down like that coming into crunch time, I thought about those wall sits we were doing the other day in practice,” said Davis, who considered the exercises part of coach Matt Painter's lesson that “losing is not OK.”

“I just wanted to pull this win out and get this win, not only for us but for our fans and for our university. This is a big win for us but also a big win for our university, especially against a quality team like Minnesota.”

Kendall Stephens also asserted that Purdue benefited from the gritty, intense workouts.

But Painter, explaining the physical and strategic reason for wall sits, didn't think the lesson took hold soon enough.

“We've got to keep doing them -- they don't get in a stance,” Painter said after the 72-68 victory over Minnesota. “You saw it in the first half. I thought we were mentally slow. I think that's why you saw us foul a lot. We fouled jump shooters, we were high on close-outs, and it had nothing to do with our physical ability. You have to be mentally ready to play and be in a stance and stay compact.

“... I thought our guys did a better job of that in the second half. They still got some dribble penetration, but it wasn't as much and you didn't see as many fouls.”

Edwards feeling good, ready for Michigan

Brian Neubert | Gold & Black Illustrated | January 2, 2015

Vince Edwards, clearly, was sluggish in Purdue's Big Ten opener against Minnesota on Thursday.

He'd missed two practices because of flu-like symptoms and the one he did return for wasn't as intense because it was the day before the game. So when Edwards, the team's typical starting 4, came off the bench against the Gophers, he not surprisingly didn't last long.

Edwards played less than two minutes in his first rotation.

But after practicing fully on Friday, he's eager to get back on the Mackey court to play Michigan Saturday.

"At times I felt really weak. I felt like I didn't have my second wind," Edwards said of the Minnesota game in which he played 23 minutes. "I was really shaky, really rusty, made a couple turnovers that I usually wouldn't make. I just couldn't get into the speed of the game in time. I finally caught back up with it. ...

"It was really hard for me, but I gutted it out. But I feel 100 percent better now, so (Saturday) I should be back to my old self."

A healthy Edwards is important for the Boilermakers.

He's been one of the team's most consistent and efficient players, despite being a first-year one.

Though he hasn't hit double-digit scoring in a month - he had 16 against North Carolina State on Dec. 2 - he's still been selective in his shots and made them at a high clip.

He's shooting 56 percent from the floor, including 40 percent on threes, and also has made 81 percent of his free throws.

All of those percentages are up from his senior year at Middletown.

Perhaps that's been aided by Edwards' post-practice routine. He says he stays after each practice to shoot 100 free throws and 50 three-pointers.

"I just want to be good at those areas because those are some areas we've struggled on in the past couple years that I've noticed, and those are things I'm trying to help strengthen for this team," he said.

But it's likely Edwards will quickly need to add to his offensive repertoire. He noticed on one of his first touches against the Gophers that Richard Pitino yelled out to his players, "Shooter, shooter! Don't let him shoot!"

So Edwards expects fewer spot-up opportunities as Big Ten play progresses. But he thinks he has a way to handle that.

"I was like, 'OK, people are starting to pick up on it now,' I just have to find different ways to get myself going," he said. "Everybody knows I'm spotting up and shooting it, so now I have to create and dribble for myself, which I'm capable of. I just have to work at it.

"It's a challenge I like and I'm going to attack."

Edwards and Haas adjusting to attention

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | January 2, 2015

Vince Edwards heard it from the Minnesota bench as soon as a pass hit his hands on Wednesday night.

"Coach (Richard) Pitino was like, 'Hey, shooter! Shooter! Don't let him shoot,'" the freshman forward said.

Isaac Haas heard it from the Golden Gophers themselves — multiple voices shouting "double, double, double." They know extra bodies are often necessary to contend with Haas' 7-foot-2, 300-pound frame.

The two freshmen have at times looked like Purdue's most talented players. Word spread, and teams are more prepared for the multi-faceted forward from Ohio and the tall order from Alabama.

Now Edwards and Haas must adjust in turn.

"We kind of established ourselves as a threat playing against really big teams and NCAA tournament teams and being able to prove ourselves," Haas said. "People I'm assuming are putting us on the scouting report as threats, and I think they're starting to guard us different. That's always a big adjustment as a freshman because we don't always know what's going to come at us."

Edwards is the only player nationally averaging 10 points, five rebounds and two assists while shooting 55 percent from the field, 40 percent on 3-pointers and 80 percent at the free throw line. But he doesn't take that success for granted. After granting interviews following Friday's practice, Edwards returned to Keady Court for his regular regimen of 100 free throws and 50 3-pointers.

Pitino's attention reminded the 6-foot-7, 220-pound Edwards that you can never be too versatile.

"I've just got to find different ways to get myself going," said Edwards, who earned Big Ten Freshman of the Week honors after his first two games. "Everybody knows I'm a spot-up shooter, so now I've got to create off the dribble for myself, which I'm capable of. I've just got to work better at it."

The Purdue freshman forward on battling the flu over the break, beating Minnesota and preparing for Michigan. Nathan Baird

Edwards' pride in playing under control and taking shots within the rhythm of the offense are evidenced by those shooting percentages and a 1.6 assist-to-turnover ratio (2.57 over the last six games).

Purdue is 4-0 when Edwards scores in double figures and averages a team-high 5.9 rebounds. But he hasn't scored more than nine points since the Dec. 2 win over North Carolina State and hasn't had more than two offensive rebounds since the following game, against North Florida.

"When you play at a high level in a couple of games — I thought he was really good rebounding on the offensive glass against N.C. State, and I thought overall he was great against BYU — that's your level of expectation," Painter said.

"Playing's very similar to coaching. You're expected to do what you've done in your best game. When you play that well a couple of times, now when you don't, it's hard. But in reality you're not going to average 25 and nine, even though that's what he had at BYU."

Haas leads Purdue with 11.1 points per game in just 17.8 minutes, making him one of only eight players nationally averaging double digit points in under 20 minutes. He also ranks second in fouls drawn per game and is one of four freshmen averaging 10 points and five rebounds while shooting 60 percent from the field.

But he's also been exposed defensively at times, such as when he fouled out in 11 minutes in Purdue's home loss to Gardner-Webb. Two days earlier, he'd battled foul issues against Notre Dame.

Painter was caught in a conundrum: take one of his more consistent offensive weapons off the floor or risk not having him at the end of the game. He plainly said of Haas' foul problems: "It hurt us."

"Now I need to be fundamental and do what coach says — that way I can go in there and do my part to help us win," said Haas, who committed no fouls in 17 minutes against Minnesota.

Purdue makes going old school pay off

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | January 1, 2015

Sometimes, if you're Purdue coach Matt Painter, you have to go old school. You just do. All the politically correct niceties that resonate so strongly in the 21st Century clash with the competitive reality that will never change.

Sometimes you have to toughen up and win the darn game despite double-digit deficits, and that doesn't come from talking and gentle coaching.

So after three straight losses, shoddy defense and drifting focus, Painter tapped into his Gene Keady roots. He turned holiday break practice into warfare, at least as much as rules allow. He made the Boilers run a bunch of sprints, do wall squats and run Mackey Arena stairs. He made it clear, junior swingman Rapheal Davis said, "that losing isn't OK."

On Wednesday, it paid off. With Purdue on the verge of a familiar fade, with Minnesota dominating the hustle plays and threatening to blow out the Boilers in their own building, something Gold-and-Black wonderful happened.

They grew up.

Specifically, they attacked instead of submitted. They did what was necessary instead of hoping for a break. They made offensive and defensive plays while the Mackey Arena crowd roared, and maybe, just maybe, turned their season around.

Yes, Wednesday's 72-68 Big Ten-opening victory over Minnesota (11-3) was just one game in an 18-game Big Ten challenge, but after three straight losses and plenty of soul searching, it reeked of must-win pressure and Purdue (9-5) delivered.

"We wiped the little boy looks off our faces," Davis said. "I feel like our younger guys grew up. That's big for us."

Is it ever. The Boilers showed they are over any residue from the North Florida loss (blowing a seven-point lead at home in the final three minutes), and then smack downs by Vanderbilt, Notre Dame and Gardner-Webb. They can not only handle adversity, but thrive from it.

Does that make this a defining moment? Possibly.

"Hopefully it is," Painter said. "We have to be consistent. We have to be consistent with our effort and consistent on the glass. Hopefully we build on that."

Credit starts with practice. Painter took advantage of the nine-day break between games to get edgy, ratcheting up the intensity and physicality in ways he couldn't with Purdue playing seven games in 20 days, and the memory stretched into Wednesday.

"It helped us grit it out," guard Kendall Stephens said. "Coach really took the whole aspect of looking cool and playing cool. Practice was physical and intense. It sets you up for down the stretch and for this game. It paid off."

Davis, as the former South Side standout has been for most of the season, was the emotional catalyst.

"Being down like that, coming into crunch time, I was thinking about those wall squats we were doing the other day in practice."

Or, as center A.J. Hammons said, "We're still sore from it."

Davis didn't care.

"We wanted to get the win for us, for our fans, for our university. It's a big win, especially coming against a quality team like Minnesota."

Davis came up big with 18 points, 10-for-10 free throw shooting and four assists against one turnover. He had plenty of help from Stephens, who finally regained his shooting touch to total a game-high 19 points, Hammons (11 points, nine rebounds) and guard Jon Octeus (10 points, four rebounds, four assists).

Purdue rallied to win the rebound battle (32-31) after being dominated on the boards early on.

All this left a big impression on Minnesota coach Richard Pitino, whose team entered the game with an eight-game win streak behind fierce defensive pressure.

"Purdue is really physical. They're the most physical team in our conference by far. They have big, strong kids inside. When you think of the Big Ten and its physical play, Purdue is the prototype of that."

Purdue doesn't have long to enjoy the victory. It hosts Michigan (8-5) on Saturday and Painter said he has no intention of backing off the wall squats and overall practice intensity.

"We'll keep doing it. Our guys don't get in a (defensive) stance. You've got to be in a stance to play this game."

And then Painter really got into coach mode.

"In the first half, we were mentally slow. That's why fouled a lot. We were behind on jump shooters, behind on close outs. It has nothing to do with physical ability. You have to be mentally ready to play and be in a stance and stay compact. It's tough to do in a game. It's more mental."

"I told our guys at halftime I heard their guys say, 'Hey, we can get them every time.' I told our guys, they'll get you if you're that mentally slow. You have to be quick with it -- understand what's going on and understand personnel. Our guys did a better job in the second half."

On Wednesday, it produced a victory. And if it lasts for the rest of the season, well, old school, you see, has its advantages.

Purdue men's focus during break: Play hard

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | December 30, 2014

Reflecting on two particular days of practice over the break, Purdue men's basketball players used words you won't find on a Christmas card.

According to sophomore Kendall Stephens, the physical and mental exertion was "intense." Senior Jon Octeus remembered drills that resembled "chaos."

"They try to break you down," Stephens said. "They did a lot of drills that were non-basketball related. It was all conditioning and wall sits and things like that. They definitely tested us, and I think we responded really well."

The experience was not a punitive one, though coach Matt Painter had a lesson in mind. Purdue's players said they emerged with a better understanding of how success results from the nexus of effort and composure.

With Big Ten Conference play beginning Wednesday against Minnesota, the Boilermakers know that's the only way to restore their promising trend of one month ago.

"A lot of guys felt like we were being really comfortable out there, and we just explained we don't have that margin for error," senior guard Jon Octeus said. "We can't just go out there and think everything's going to work out. Those things were corrected with these last couple of practices."

"We've been practicing really hard. We'll see when time comes on Wednesday."

Painter said the break was about building habits — especially defensively — that had not taken hold in his young team. Moving from one scouting report to another didn't leave much time for the competitive drills that were a staple of the preseason. He wanted some of that juice back.

"We're not doing anything differently than we've been doing the whole season," Painter said. "The thing that happens when you get into games, you prepare for your next team, but you can't lose that competitive piece of it and you can't lose the fundamental piece of it. At times, that happens."

"... I think we had some slippage in there, but it's not something where we have juniors and seniors where they have that kind of habit. We still have freshmen and sophomores that don't have the habits you need to be successful, so you've got to continue to work on those things and understand them."

One way Painter and his staff incorporated both concepts was in preparation for Minnesota's multiple defensive looks. To simulate the Golden Gophers' pressure, players faced five-on-seven situations, running into traps and receiving no sympathy if they bothered to look for a foul call.

The Boilermakers said they encountered similar mismatches in their own defensive drills, where four players were required to match up with five potential scorers. It was a way to reinforce communication and attention to detail.

Now comes the part that has recently eluded Purdue: put those lessons into practice by containing dribble penetration from DeAndre Mathieu and Andre Hollins while matching up on Minnesota's shooters on the wing.

The effort must improve, but so must the execution.

"It's like the story about the lion and the gazelle," junior captain Rapheal Davis said. "When you wake up, everybody's got to start running; everybody's got to try to eat. The lion's trying to eat and the gazelle's trying not to get ate."

"You've got to go into games like that and try to stay the course the whole game and play as hard as you can."

Purdue's Scott figuring it out just in time

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | December 30, 2014

Purdue's Bryson Scott is figuring it out. Well, he's figuring out this come-off-the-bench role, and if at first he messes up, just wait.

Coach Matt Painter is willing to do just that, although he'd prefer Scott get it right the first time.

Confused?

Don't be. It's as easy as being loose and ready to make a difference, as opposed to rushing before your time.

"Bryson has done better the last couple of games when he subbed back in (the second time)," Painter said. "When he first subbed, he's struggled the last couple of games. Then when he subbed back in again, his focus was better and he played better."

Blame Scott's aggressive nature, which clashes with patience, but not with production.

In the last three games the former Northrop standout has averaged 11.3 points and 2.7 rebounds in 14.3 minutes. He's 14-for-15 from the line. He has four assists, four turnovers and four steals.

That's far better than his season averages of 6.2 points and 1.8 rebounds.

Here's the twist to all this added production -- it's coming in the second half. In other words, Scott starts slow and finishes fast, and Painter hopes it turns into a fast start and a strong finish on Wednesday when the Boilers (8-5) host Minnesota (10-2) in a Big Ten opener at Mackey Arena.

"He's done some really good things for us last three weeks," Painter said. "He has to have that focus when he subs in initially. Just be simple. You've got to get loose before you do something. You have to get up the court a couple of times before you try to make a play or make a shot. Guys warm up and stretch (before the game), then they've been sitting for 15 to 20 minutes and then you say, go in there. You've got to get loose."

Scott's recent minutes have come as an off guard rather than point guard, the role he'd prepared for during the off-season. This enables him to play with senior transfer Jon Octeus, who has made a major impact running the Purdue show in his first season.

"Bryson is learning some things and he's doing a better job with it," Painter said. "He's had a good week of practice. He's really competed. Hopefully he plays well against Minnesota."

Pairing Scott with Octeus can put maximum pressure on opponents on both ends of the court.

"Those are two guys who can really guard the ball," Painter said. "That helps us."

"Jon can drive it and he's more selective when he does. Bryson is more of a bulldog when he drives. It helps to have a guy like (forward Vince Edwards) who can shoot it. Then you've got Dakota Mathias. Kendall Stevens can shoot it. That balances things out. It makes for a good mix."

As for Minnesota, the Gophers are rolling with an eight-game winning streak and an average victory margin of 21.8 points. They are second nationally by forcing 12.4 steals a game, and lead the nation in assists at 20.2.

The catalyst is their fierce full-court pressure.

"They want turnovers and quick contested jumpers," Painter said. "You can't give it to them."

"I think that will be the game. That will be the backbone of the game -- us handling the pressure and our decision making and shot selection and if we take care of the ball. It's not about tempo or us slowing things down. We'll take what's there, and if it's not there, we have to have discipline and make them defend in the half-court. When you put them in the half court, it doesn't generate as many points as their press does in the full court."

Stride-making Scott's Purdue best makes impression

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | December 19, 2014

Do not dwell on the numbers. They do not tell the whole Bryson Scott Purdue basketball story.

"I think he's had his best two weeks at Purdue," coach Matt Painter says.

This is a big step for the former Northrop standout. He is a push-till-it-breaks guard in a role that demands nuance.

More and more, the sophomore guard is showing it.

"He's done some good things, like defending the ball, bringing energy," Painter says. "He's made some great plays, and tried to make some plays that weren't there, but he's made strides. He has to continue to build on that. He has to continue to help us."

Scott spent the off-season working to become the starting point guard after an inconsistent freshman season left Painter wondering if he could ever handle the position at a Big Ten level. And in a lot of ways, he showed he could. But the unexpected September arrival of veteran Jon Octeus changed the dynamic. So did the emergence of freshman P.J. Thompson. Suddenly, Scott was the third option and the results weren't inspiring. Painter understood, although not enough to provide minutes Scott hadn't earned.

"He was battling where he was with the minutes," Painter says. "It's hard, but once you start trying to do the things we ask you to do, you'll play better. He's doing a better job."

Despite averaging just 13.5 minutes a game, Scott leads Purdue in steals, with 12. He averages 5.0 points, 1.5 rebounds and 2.0 assists. His 20-11 assist-to-turnover ratio is a big jump from last season (44 to 46).

"He hasn't arrived, but no one on our team has," Painter says. "It's about doing those things that help us win, about playing to your strengths. When he plays to his strengths, he's a very good player."

Scott's aggressive nature occasionally creates trouble he doesn't need and Painter doesn't want, although it's decreasing. It typically involves attacking the basket when the smarter move is to pass.

"Against Vanderbilt he forced the issue a little bit," Painter says. "He was driving and there were too many people. In those situations, he has to pass. He didn't make the right decision."

Painter wants more from Scott, and all the Boilers (8-3), as they get ready for Saturday's Crossroads Classic matchup against No. 21 Notre Dame (10-1) at Indianapolis' Bankers Life Fieldhouse.

Painter jabbed the verbal needle at guard Kendall Stephens and center A.J. Hammons. He expects more than the combined 3-for-13 shooting, one assist and four turnovers they had in Saturday's loss at Vanderbilt.

"We're not going to win games on the road with Kendall and AJ playing like they did at Vanderbilt. It won't happen. They have to be better for us."

That will certainly be the case against a Notre Dame team that leads the nation in shooting (55.7 percent), ranks third in fewest turnovers (9.0 a game), eighth in scoring (84.9) and 12th in three-point baskets (94).

That offense can overshadow a solid defense.

"Their defense is not getting overlooked by us," Painter says. "They are tough on both ends. They are efficient offensively and put pressure on the ball defensively."

The Irish do everything except overwhelm opponents with depth. Only six players have played in every game, and only one reserve averages at least 16 minutes a game.

"There's no doubt it would be a big feather in our cap to win at a neutral site against a good team like Notre Dame," Painter says. "It would be huge for our confidence."

The Boilers need a confidence boost after the Vanderbilt loss. They only have one more non-conference game -- Monday against Gardner-Webb -- before opening Big Ten play Dec. 31 against Minnesota.

"Our guys understand what they need to do to be successful," Painter says. "We don't need to play somebody good to understand that. Brigham Young was a good team. Kansas State was a good team. Vanderbilt was a good team. North Florida was a good team. We've played good people, but this might be the best team we've played so far."

Octeus 'pretty much perfect' in Purdue role

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | December 18, 2014

Purdue's Jon Octeus is not a drama guy. He has no permanent room reserved in Matt Painter's doghouse. He doesn't gripe about roles or minutes or slights perceived. There is no half-throttle effort or off-court issues.

The senior transfer guard from Colorado State is, in so many ways, the gift that keeps on giving.

"He just wants to go in and play," Painter says. "That's refreshing. He doesn't have hang ups. Things don't bother him. He plays hard. He defends. He's a team guy. He just wants to win."

Case in point -- the Boilers have a pair of dominant big men in A.J. Hammons and Isaac Haas. Letting them at least touch the ball in every possession makes it easier on everybody, and nobody understands that better than Octeus.

"The more success our bigs have," he says, "the more success our guards will have. It's hard to stop those big guys. We have to make sure we take advantage of that. If we establish that inside game early on, it will be hard for teams to grind it out with us."

That could include No. 21 Notre Dame (10-1), which will take on Purdue (8-3) Saturday at Indianapolis' Bankers Life Fieldhouse as part of the Crossroads Classic.

Look for the Boilers to come out aggressive against the Irish guards, with Octeus being a tone setter, which is basically the strategy for every game.

"We don't want to gamble," he says, "but if there are opportunities where the ball draws loose, we have to get those balls. That's something in the back of our heads, to focus on that, make sure that teams don't out-hustle us."

Octeus has scored as many as 12 points (against Kansas State), grabbed as many as 10 rebounds (North Florida) and had as many as six assists (Kansas State). He averages 6.6 points and 4.4 rebounds in 22.7 minutes. As a primary point guard, he has 29 assists against 14 turnovers.

While these numbers are down from last year at Colorado State (13.4 points, 4.7 rebounds, 2.3 assists), that reflects a change in role and system rather than a reduction in the quality of his play.

"He's traditionally not been a point guard," Painter says. "He always played the 2 (shooting guard) or 3 (small forward) spot."

"Things aren't ideal for him, but he doesn't voice that. Last year he averaged 32 to 33 minutes. He doesn't average that for us. That's hard. He plays a lot of minutes for us, but it's still not as high as it was. When that happens, you don't have the same feel for the game."

Octeus was originally set to transfer to UCLA, but when its graduate school denied him admission in September, he switched to Purdue. That required a rapid transition and adjustment. He couldn't have handled it any better, Painter says.

"He's done a great job of meshing with the other players, but it's been hard for him. He's been very versatile in the past. We had an open mind when he came in, and he's strictly been a point guard for us. He's done a great job. He came in as a low turnover guy and that's stayed consistent. That's what we needed from that position -- a low turnover guy who gets us into the offense."

"He wanted to play at a high level, so you need to play where they need you. He's really helped us, especially defensively and taking care of the ball."

"I'd like to see him be a little more aggressive on offense. I think he will, but he hasn't finished as well as he's capable of the last few games."

As for Octeus's rebound ability, Painter says, "He just goes and gets the ball. He's guarded by a lot of point guards, and most point guards are terrible about boxing out. I told him to center himself, pick up the flight of the ball and be aggressive with it. It's worked for us."

Octeus has made a big impression on his teammates.

"He does everything Coach says," center A.J. Hammons says. "He doesn't talk back. He hustles. He does everything he needs to do. He sets an example for everybody. He's pretty much perfect."

Or, as fellow center Isaac Haas says, "It's nice to have a point guard that gets eight to nine rebounds in a game."

Purdue's Mathias getting comfortable, confident

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | December 16, 2014

Dakota Mathias' impressed his Purdue teammates by arriving on campus and tearing off long-distancé shots and pin-point passes.

Then came the ankle injury, then a bout with mono, then an inner-ear issue. For a long stretch of the preseason, Mathias spent more time watching practice from the sideline than participating.

Boilermakers coach Matt Painter last week said Mathias, in some ways, is still two months behind his teammates. But that same night he added the Elida, Ohio, product to the starting lineup, and both coach and player feel he could soon turn a corner.

"I feel like I made a huge amount of strides, just from the fact that I've been consistently practicing and playing in games," Mathias said. "In the fall, I was in-and-out, maybe not even practicing three or four days at a time. Consistently working out, lifting, practicing — yeah, I think I'm definitely getting there."

Mathias scored 10 points that night against Arkansas State — his first double-figure performance. He's shooting 37.1 percent from 3-point range and has made two or more from behind the arc in five games.

Painter feels there's room for more production on offense, where Mathias is still regaining confidence. Mathias said his comfort level hasn't held him back on 3-pointers, but may explain why he hasn't utilized pull-ups and step-backs the way he did in high school.

The challenge is tougher on defense, where Mathias is still adjusting to Purdue's philosophies and the tougher competition. It's one reason why Mathias played only 10 minutes in his second start, Saturday's loss at Vanderbilt.

"He just needs to offensively play like he's at Elida and defensively play like he's at Purdue," said Painter, who held extra study sessions with Mathias when the guard couldn't physically practice. "He has to feel good about himself.

"He knows what he's doing offensively. He needs to play off his instincts, take shots that are there — just play. Defensively, he's got to do a better job of locking in, concentrate on what's going on and do the little things."

Boilermakers head coach Matt Painter talks to guard Dakota Mathias (31) in the second half at Mackey Arena, Dec. 8, 2014. (Photo: Sandra Dukes-USA TODAY Sports) Purdue junior captain Rapheal Davis said the Arkansas State game was one of Mathias' best all-around efforts. Davis like the way he handled the Red Wolves' pressure, and Mathias also had three rebounds and two steals in 17 minutes.

"He looked like himself out there from this summer: Making good shots, making passes no one else can see," said Davis, who has the locker next to Mathias and said he tried to encourage him through the setbacks.

"A few of those turnovers, the pass was right there, but the guy just wasn't looking at the ball. Now people are going to be expecting that pass and those are going to be layups."

Before Mathias started proving himself in games, his teammates said revealed his character while battling adversity. When he wasn't allowed to practice, he tried to get permission to shoot free throws and stay sharp.

"Dakota wants to practice every single day," freshman guard P.J. Thompson said. "Even though he gets so mad when Chad (Young), our trainer, or coach Painter tells him he can't practice, he hates it and he'll complain to me about it later that day. He's a warrior and he someone we're going to need down the road. I'm glad he's finally getting healthy."

Regardless of whether it helped him in the eyes of his teammates, Mathias sees a positive outcome from a frustrating situation.

"You've got to go through some adversity at some point, and it shows what kind of character you have as a person, how you persevere through that," Mathias said. "If you let it define you and let it take you down, or if you fight through it, it makes you a stronger person. It's definitely helped me in the long run."

Scott Learning From Mistakes

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | December 13, 2014

It all changed so quickly for Bryson Scott. One day he's the starting point guard, tasked with returning Purdue to prominence; the next day, he's low man on the totem pole.

Swift and unexpected.

"It was a complete shock to me," said Scott, referencing Jon Ochteus' arrival from Colorado State.

Entering the season, the spotlight shined on Scott, with an emphasis on restoring the Boilermakers' winning ways. The previous two seasons yielded losing records and no NCAA tournament appearances. A return to normalcy would require efficient point guard play that cut down on turnovers.

Scott, a Northrop graduate who started twice and appeared in all 32 games as a freshman, was tabbed as the court general. But when Ochteus arrived, combined with true freshman P.J. Thompson's emergence, everything changed.

A difficult time came over Scott, which included off-court transgressions and lapses in judgment that included being late for meetings.

"I was expecting to be the starting point guard, but I didn't take care of business in October, which led to me falling back," Scott said. "I'm still working as hard as possible and being as positive as I can be."

Acknowledging his mistakes, Scott buckled down and rededicated himself to Purdue. He and coach Matt Painter discussed their issues, and Scott began to climb out of the coach's doghouse. He opted to help teammates rather than hindering them, choosing a lead-by-example style.

Even though Scott is a sophomore with only two career starts, he provides a veteran presence on a young team.

"I feel like I don't say enough; I'm not a very outspoken person," Scott said. "They see that I work hard and try to bring a good work ethic every day in practice. I think it's something that the freshmen look at. I feel like we have good chemistry and good guys here that are willing to work hard for Purdue."

There's an indication that Scott, after escaping a funk, falls into those categories. In the past three games, he's recorded 10 points, eight rebounds, 10 assists, three steals and a blocked shot in 46 minutes. Scott only has turned the ball over three times in that time frame.

"He's been really good," Painter said. "He's done some things for us in terms of breaking down the defense and driving the ball and finding people. That unselfishness has really helped our team. He's brought energy. He has that ability with his athleticism and explosiveness to give us a punch when he checks in."

Scott is a part of a three-headed monster that includes fellow point guards Ochteus and Thompson. Together the three, with help of a talented and self-sacrificing roster, has Purdue (8-2) aiming for the post-season. The first road test comes tonight at Vanderbilt (5-2).

Scott, Ochteus and Thompson average 6.8 assists against 3.0 turnovers per game. Scott's 1.8-to-1 assist-to-turnover ratio is improved from 1 to 1 last season.

"It's just me opinion, but I feel like we don't get enough credit," Scott said. "It's a good thing. It helps motivate me. Jon and P.J. help me become a better player, also. I'm just looking for ways to improve my game, and they're doing the same. Us three are trying to adapt to our roles for the better of the team."

Two months after Scott's basketball world took a blow, he's standing taller than ever.

"It's been kind of a weird ride for me," Scott said. "I know anything can happen. I had a rocky start, but I'm getting back on track. Hopefully it can lead to more minutes and helping this team win more – whatever the team needs."

Eye on the Ball

Brian Neubert | GoldandBlack.com | December 5, 2014

Having gotten through the Maui Invitational and ACC/Big Ten Challenge with a solid 6-1 record, Purdue's experienced some success.

Now that it faces North Florida, IPFW and Arkansas State all in the span of five days, it's a must for the Boilermakers to continue to conduct themselves like they're trying to achieve success.

That was the fairly obvious message around a team off to a very good start this week.

"It's a good test for us," sophomore Kendall Stephens said. "We're really go to see if we have the maturity to stay focused and take each game and prepare for it like it's a Final Four game.

"If we do that, it'll carry over, so once we start playing Vanderbilt (next weekend) and some more tougher teams, we're not going to miss a beat and we're still going to be able to stay focused and motivated."

There are no apparent red flags for Purdue.

When it played lower-caliber competition in its first three games of the season, it was businesslike and emphatic in dispatching Samford, IUPUI and Grambling State decisively.

But, generally speaking, there are pitfalls to be wary of, Coach Matt Painter said, when asked specifically about his team's stunning home loss to Wofford in 2007, a turning point in a season that turned out very well.

Recalling that loss, Painter said Purdue's underclassman-dominated team might have been set up to fail. It had just beaten Louisville in Indianapolis four days prior, then rolled over Texas Southern 48 hours earlier.

"We always talk about it. Sometimes we use that as a reference," Painter said. "The thing with Wofford was they were a really good team. I think it's hard for young players to understand it, because at times, especially if you're the assistant coach who did the scouting report, you would rather oversell than undersell your opponent's ability.

"Then when you win by 30 in those games and you do it two or three times, now when you go to that next opponent that doesn't quite have the name, but they have better guys but on film it doesn't appear that way, that's when you're primed for an upset."

Again, there are no signs of a forthcoming letdown for Purdue but if a letdown could be foreseen, then it wouldn't be a letdown, would it?

Purdue's a young team, playing four freshmen big minutes, some of those freshmen beginning to generate a great deal of attention, and for good reason.

They're aware that their minds must not wander for Purdue to not squander some of the early cache it's built up with a strong start.

"We can't overlook any opponent," said freshman Vince Edwards, Purdue's leading scorer and rebounder thus far. "When we step on the court, we have to play, but we can't play down to the level of competition. That game against Grambling State, some of us might have felt that way and our coaches got on us about it. We have to have the focus and intensity that we brought back from Maui and have built on since we got back."

Tuesday night's 66-61 win over North Carolina was a good test for Purdue, a quick turnaround against a "name" opponent after a successful trip off the mainland.

It was a test the Boilermakers passed, though more lie ahead. N.C. State was a high-profile opponent in a high-profile event.

North Florida - a team that very nearly won at Northwestern - and IPFW and Arkansas State, not so much.

"When you're a bubble team that people picked to finish last in the Big Ten, you always have to play with a chip on your shoulder," freshman guard P.J. Thompson said. "You always have to play with a sense of urgency. We haven't really done anything yet.

"Our ultimate goal is to always get better every game, no matter who we're playing against. No matter who you're playing, you always want to get better, always want to take a step forward. Especially with a young team like we have, I feel like it would be big for us to take a step forward and show maturity, even though we might be playing a lesser opponent, to ... when we're supposed to win by 20, maybe win by 30 and just get better each time."

Again, there have been no red flags.

But Painter and coaches in general are always conscious of what might be coming even if there's little reason to believe it is.

"We talk about it all the time ... that the people who play down or play up (to their competition), those guys aren't competitors," Painter said. "You should always play just as hard no matter who you're playing."

Purdue men's basketball establishing unselfish identity

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | December 5, 2014

Purdue men's basketball ranks eighth in the nation in assist percentage and, according to some metrics, is among the 25 most efficient offenses this season.

In the offseason, it was a theory.

Perhaps a better word is strategy. Purdue men's basketball's mix of team-first freshmen and returning leadership would result in an unselfish offensive approach.

Through a few games, it was a trend. The Boilermakers shared the ball well during lopsided victories void of true in-game adversity.

As we approach the quarter mark of the season, and with Purdue climbing in the offensive efficiency metrics, it's safe to ask: is unselfishness this team's identity?

"Guys just making extra passes and being a little bit more patient is probably the biggest gain," Painter said. "We take way too many contested jump shots, and have to do better job unless somebody is in rhythm or really hot. But for the most part, we're doing a better job of probing the defense, getting the ball inside, moving the basketball and making the extra pass."

It's a testimony bolstered by statistical evidence.

In analyst Ken Pomeroy's metrics, Purdue ranks eighth nationally with a 66.3 assist percentage (the number of assists per field goal). It's one reason why the Boilermakers rank 24th in Pomeroy's adjusted offensive efficiency — a prediction of points scored per 100 minutes that is adjusted based on a team's opponents.

Through the first seven games of last season, Purdue had assisted on just 48.5 percent of its field goals. That number rose only to 51 percent by season's end. Two seasons ago, the Boilermakers were at 56 percent.

Whether or not they see those numbers, the players have noticed a difference.

"Everyone is playing their roles and knows what's expected of them, and things just fall into place," said sophomore guard Kendall Stephens, who thinks Purdue's assist percentage can continue to climb. "When you're ready, the whole team clicks, so you've got to know what to feed off of, what the team needs at that moment. From there you just roll."

No Boilermaker is accumulating gaudy assist totals. Jon Octeus leads with 3.1 per game, followed by Rapheal Davis at 2.4. But seven other players average at least one per game, something only five Purdue players could boast at the end of last season.

Six players have led or shared the assists lead for Purdue in a game this season: Octeus, Davis, A.J. Hammons, Dakota Mathias, P.J. Thompson and Basil Smotherman. Both Hammons and Smotherman are more than halfway to last season's assist total.

Painter's insistence on returning to more ball movement and working for better shots have helped. But so has improved team chemistry, allowing unselfishness to manifest itself on the court more organically.

Both Edwards and Painter recently mentioned a weekend Navy SEALs workshop over the summer as helping reinforce those virtues.

"A lot of what the SEALs preach is that unselfishness and that teamwork and always being there for the next guy," Painter said. "A lot of it really confirmed the things we had already been teaching and talking about with teamwork. The key to that is the returning players are making some strides in that area, and also the newcomers."

Boilers' Davis a 'flat-out' leader

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | December 2, 2014

Hawaii is a tropical paradise where anger and uneasiness recede with the landing of each airplane. When you reach an oasis, bliss and relief flows over your shoulders.

Rapheal Davis had a slightly different experience in Maui.

The first days on the island offered the usual "wow factor" that most first-time visitors acknowledge. But following a feeble first game – Purdue lost to Kansas State, falling behind by 20 points – Davis, from Fort Wayne, sat confined in his picturesque room at the Sheraton Maui.

It wasn't a coach's order, just a team leader stewing over a ghastly first half. Davis also was perturbed about his own performance. He finished with zero points, two rebounds, three assists and two turnovers in 18 minutes.

Davis promised himself and teammates that a turnaround was in order. His urging spurred one of Purdue's most noteworthy two-game stretches in recent years. The Boilermakers (5-1) look to re-create their Maui magic tonight in Mackey Arena against undefeated North Carolina State (6-0) in the Big Ten/ACC Challenge.

"I learned that all the work we put in this summer didn't go to waste," Davis said. "Everybody says they had a good summer and they worked really hard. But the way we fought at the end (of the BYU game) and the way we came together like that and the way our bench was jumping up and down, screaming, helping us out and showing us different things, I think we came together.

"Everything we put in this summer, it showed toward the end."

Purdue followed Davis' lead in its final two games of the Maui Invitational, first by swatting away Missouri by 21 points and then dispatching BYU in an overtime classic. Freshman forward Vince Edwards, who's averaging a team-high 12.7 points, called Davis the team's "flat-out leader."

After his goose egg, Davis responded with a career-high 22 points against Missouri and 18 against BYU. He averaged 13.3 points for the tourney, making 24 of 29 free throws and adding nine rebounds, four assists and four steals. He proved to be the Boilers' most valuable player.

"He just did everything," sophomore forward Kendall Stephens said, "defended the best player, took great shots, got to the line when he needed to. He puts his heart out every time, and it's fun to play with him. I'm glad he's on my team."

And coach Matt Painter is glad Davis is in his locker room. Two years of dysfunction have given way to camaraderie and attentive players eager to learn. Davis became a captain during his sophomore season, a badge he wears with pride. His captaincy is evident in vocal speeches and doing dirty work.

"Rapheal Davis didn't give us anything the first day," Painter said. "He took that upon himself to get us going and give us energy. He was a real spark for us."

It was defensive effort by Davis that shifted momentum against the Cougars. He tied up a BYU player near the Purdue bench resulting in a jump ball and an energized group of Boilers.

Purdue proceeded to go on an 11-0 run and take control. Even though the game went into overtime, Davis' otherwise obscure effort was a game-changer. Not that his teammates were surprised.

"Ray took it upon himself that he was going to be one of the guys to step up, to get us back on track," Edwards said. "He played with intensity on defense and played hard every single possession."

For Purdue's Davis, good came from bad

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | December 2, 2014

For Rapheal Davis, sometimes you have to go bad before you go good.

So Purdue's junior swingman stunk up last week's Maui Invitational opener, then followed by playing the best ball of his career in the final two games, and enters tonight's Big Ten-ACC Challenge against North Carolina State as a guy to be reckoned with, as much for his leadership as his on-court production.

As a result, the Boilers (5-1) showed that maybe, just maybe, they're set to return to national relevance. Beating the athletic Wolfpack (6-0) in Mackey Arena would be a big step in that direction.

"We set a new bar for ourselves," Davis said. "We showed how hard we can play, how hard we can continue to play. Now we have to keep setting new bars for ourselves."

How bad was Davis against Kansas State in Maui? Painter was blunt -- "Ray didn't give us anything." Davis, a former South Side standout, was just as blunt about his zero-point effort -- "I played like an underclassmen. I played soft. I didn't play as hard as I could."

Rather than sulk, Davis went to work. He had a long film session with Painter. He did plenty of thinking. Then he scored 22 points against Missouri and 18 against Brigham Young. He was 24-for-29 from the line in the last two games, and wound up leading the Boilers in Maui scoring, at 13.3 points. Beyond that, he showed a tough-minded approach that has been missing these last two seasons, and that bodes well for the future.

"He took it on himself to get us going and bring us energy," Painter said. "He made good decisions. He was very aggressive, got fouled a lot and made his free throws. He was a real spark for us."

Davis found productivity in simplicity -- "Not worrying about anything else but the scouting report and playing as hard as I could. That got me to the free throw line and got me aggressive."

Davis has always been a guy who cared, and it might have weighed him down his first two seasons, and then again to start the Maui trip. Sometimes a player needs a eureka moment, a spark to ensure what he does matches what he can do.

"He took a lot of responsibility for how our team played (against Kansas State)," Painter said. "On the next two games, he was great. That's what you have to do. A lot of times, guys don't take responsibility. Anytime you hold yourself accountable and own your play, you make improvements."

Davis ranks fourth on the team in overall scoring at 10.7 points, trailing freshman swingman Vince Edwards (12.7), freshman center Isaac Haas (11.8) and sophomore guard Kendall Stephens (10.7). Edwards leads in rebounding (6.7), with Haas right behind (5.2).

The Boilers hope to use their 2-1 Maui showing as a springboard for a strong month, and beyond.

"We hope to gain confidence and build on it," Painter said. "We have to learn from our mistakes and build on our successes. That's what we're looking to do here."

It starts with Davis, and all the veterans. "It helps to have a guy like Ray who has been through it," Painter said. "All the veterans are focused. They want to get this turned around."

Tonight would be another indication they're getting it turned.

North Carolina State has cruised against lesser competition. It dominates rebounding, 45.3 to 33.0 behind 6-8, 250-pound power forward Lennard Freeman, who averages 8.8 points in 22 minutes. It has three high-scoring guards in Trevor Lacey (17.3 points, 6.5 rebounds), Ralston Turner (12.8 points) and Anthony Barber (12.5 points, 4.3 rebounds). Beejay Anya, a 6-9, 295-pound center, averages 3.8 blocks.

"We have a tough opponent," Painter said. "They pose an interesting dynamic -- they have three guys who can make plays, and they've got some great size and can beat you up on the glass."

North Carolina State has played all six of its game at home.

"They have as good as, if not better than, any guards we've faced," Painter said. "They have Anya, who had 10 blocks in one game. Lennard is one of the best rebounders in the country. He averages nine rebounds in a little over 20 minutes. That's very impressive. Lacey is a talented player. He's not a high-volume shooter, he's very selective in his shooting, but he scores."

"They pose some problems on the glass, in blocking shots and the ability to attack in transition. These guys will attack and drive. When they do that, they're really good. Our team defense has to be good."

Purdue is 7-6 in Big Ten/ACC Challenge games, with a five-game winning streak in the event. That's the longest current Challenge streak.

Big men looking for more

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | December 2, 2014

It was once the quickest way to bring a pall over Mackey Arena: A.J. Hammons picks up a second early foul and heads for the bench.

Except now when teams put Purdue's 7-foot starting center on the bench with foul trouble, his larger backup, Isaac Haas, bounds in to take his place.

Having such a capable backup takes the pressure off, right?

Hammons laughs at the notion.

"No, it's put more pressure on me," Hammons said. "It's like, 'Why aren't you up there with him, doing what he's doing?' It's not negative pressure, it's positive pressure. Like, 'Step your game up.'"

Hammons isn't the only one feeling challenged. Haas has started staying after practice to shoot free throws, trying to hit 10 in a row. He swears he typically gets to nine before his misses, losing track of time on his way to 100 shots.

Both Purdue big men had big moments at last week's EA Sports Maui Invitational. Both also see room for immediate improvement, beginning with Tuesday's ACC/Big Ten Challenge game against North Carolina State at Mackey Arena.

Purdue's freshman guard on how the Boilermakers can build on the momentum gained at the EA Sports Maui Invitational. (Journal & Courier)

Hammons averages 7.8 points, 4.3 rebounds and 2.8 blocks but due to foul issues is playing just 18.5 minutes per game. The junior picked up a quick foul against Kansas State — Painter called it "one of the worst calls I've ever seen" — and Haas was late getting to the scorer's bench to replace him. Hammons had a second foul less than 90 seconds into the game and did not play for the rest of the first half.

Haas also ran into foul issues in that game, and both centers played with four fouls in overtime against BYU. While the Boilermakers felt some of those whistles wouldn't have blown in physical Big Ten Conference games, Painter said his centers must put themselves in better defensive position and develop better habits.

"If they both can play and not get into foul trouble, now it poses the question to play them together," Painter said. "But they've yet to really do it over a consistent period of time. The last thing I'm going to do is play them together a lot and not have them at the end of the game. Right now I'm playing them separately, and in two games it's been real close to not having either one of them."

The 7-foot-2, 300-pound Haas averages 11.8 points and 5.2 rebounds, and he draws more fouls per 40 minutes (9.8) than any other player in the country.

That's why he's spending so much time at the Cardinal Court free-throw lines. So far the Alabama native converts those fouls into free-throw points only 56.1 percent of the time. Haas went 0-for-5 at the stripe against Missouri in Maui.

Painter made sure Haas was part of a group of players who went to a local high school to shoot 300 free throws after the Missouri game in Maui. While Haas opened some eyes while averaging 12.3 points and 5.3 rebounds on his first national stage, he said those other moments helped keep him hungry.

"I tried to keep myself humbled after the Kansas State game because I knew that everybody was going to be gunning for me," Haas said of his 19-point performance. "They knew this guy was coming off the bench and he's going to be a threat too, so they had to really focus on me as well."

"I was trying to realize in my head that I'm not all that yet. I'm just a freshman — I haven't really seen any competition yet."

On the court, senior guard Jon Octeus appreciates the flexibility in having the pair: "One goes out, one comes in. It's going to wear down on teams."

Boilers' Davis a 'flat-out' leader

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | December 2, 2014

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Davis may have turned a corner in Maui

Brian Neubert | GoldandBlack.com | December 1, 2014

Rapheal Davis prides himself on being a leader, fully embracing that role as one of Purdue's captains and one of its few upperclassmen this season.

After he was a non-factor in the Boilermakers' loss to Kansas State in Maui, Davis led his team in more ways than one in wins over Missouri and BYU.

"You have to show the guys they can (count) on you in times they need you, in tough games," he said. "It started with me playing as hard as I could, and it started with my defense. I wanted my teammates to feed off me, and I just fed off them."

The junior agreed that his performances in Purdue's two wins at the Maui Invitational constituted the finest basketball of his college career to date, the trigger being the responsibility he felt following the event's initial letdown.

Against Missouri and BYU, Davis averaged 20 points per game in the two contests, 19 of his 40 points coming off 24 free throw attempts, and may have played the best defense of his life, let alone career. In a one-on-one matchup, Davis held Missouri leading scorer Montaque Gill-Caesar to just two points on 1-of-6 shooting and was solid in the first half against BYU's Tyler Haws' before Haws went off in the second half.

"I just locked in on (defense) ... put all my focus on it coming into that game. I don't know if I did that the last couple years," Davis said. "I came into the game defensive-minded and just wanted to lock down on defense. That helped my offense, going in there and focusing on defense and playing hard. I wasn't really worried about offense in either game. It just came to me."

For his offensive success, Davis credited teammates for working offense in-depth enough to generate driving opportunities for him and big men A.J. Hammons and Isaac Haas for using their size in the lane to wall off help defenders.

For Davis' overall play, Coach Matt Painter credited the "responsibility" he took after the Kansas State game.

"That's what you have to do," Painter said.

"A lot of times when guys lose they don't have that pinpoint responsibility and they kind of look around. He just said, 'I've got to play like an upperclassman. I just played like an underclassman.' I think any time you own your behavior, you own your play, and you can make improvements in that area."

Davis has seen the past two years Purdue's seasons start trending southward after disappointing preseason tournaments.

After the Kansas State loss, it stood in the same position it did in past seasons after tournament-opening losses to Villanova in New York City and Oklahoma State in Florida.

"I put a lot of that first game on myself. I didn't want this season to go like it has the last couple years, the way we came out against Washington State last year and against Oregon State the year before," Davis said of past years' Game 2 tournament losses. "I just went out there, put a lot of that loss on me, talked to our guys, talked to (fellow senior Neal Beshears) and just saying, 'It's time to grow up.' I wanted to stop just leading with my voice and lead more with my play."

Boilermakers leave Hawaii tough, confident

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | November 28, 2014

Over two subpar seasons, Matt Painter dealt with a team that couldn't break through during hostile moments. When the intensity was dialed up, Purdue lacked the toughness gene and wilted. Some would say the Boilermakers were soft.

No more.

In the Maui Invitational, where Purdue notched two victories, a team that appears to have turned the corner on past deficiencies exhibited perseverance and fortitude. Purdue returns to the mainland a confident basketball team with a 5-1 record.

"We really did come together this summer and put a lot of hard work in," said freshman Vince Edwards, who scored 25 points against BYU in Wednesday's overtime victory. "We have to give credit to the coaches. They did a great job. They're in the offices every night on scouting reports. They get us ready. We know everything that's coming because our coaches do a tremendous job of scouting. Then we all come together, and the hard work pays off."

After a sloppy first half against Kansas State in the opener, the Boilers clamped down and made a furious second-half rally that came up just short. They stewed for 24 hours and then blew away Missouri, leading by as many as 34 points. Then came a 45-minute thriller against BYU. Purdue took control in the first half before the Cougars regained the lead after halftime. The seesaw affair was settled in overtime on an A.J. Hammons basket with 1.8 seconds left.

The trip to Hawaii was proof for Purdue that it can overcome adversity, rely on a stingy defense and spread the wealth on offense. Former South Side standout Raphael Davis stood tall as a leader, Edwards continued his coming out party and fellow freshman Isaac Haas, at 7-foot-2, showed he is a budding force.

"Coach Painter said when you get on the floor you have to be able to make plays for us," Edwards said. "Fortunately, my teammates found me and I was able to drive and get off the shots. We were playing great team ball."

Ever since Purdue lost Robbie Hummel, E'Twaun Moore, JaJuan Johnson and Chris Kramer, the program has had a tinge of softness. The 2014-15 group is on target to restore that old Purdue way, a hard-nosed style that Painter craves. Part of the evolution has come in recruiting while another factor is veteran players buying into the culture.

So far, in six career games, Painter sees Edwards' no-nonsense approach and is reminded of how Hummel affected games. The versatility Edwards displays has become a game-changer.

And then there is Kendall Stephens, who literally toughed it out Wednesday. In the second half, the sophomore forward caught his pinkie in a BYU player's jersey. When it came out, the finger was pointing the wrong direction – by 90 degrees.

It caused several audible gasps in the Lahaina Civic Center, but not from Stephens. He just laughed. And it didn't seem to bother his shooting stroke. Stephens made two crucial free throws in overtime.

"I'm just trying to be a complete player," he said. "When my offense isn't going I still want to be able to help the team and contribute. I was able to do that, and it was a great team win."

Stephens had the finger popped back in place and taped to his ring finger. He was a pest on defense, deflecting passes, blocking shots and diving on the floor for loose balls.

"To say Kendall Stephens isn't making defensive plays in senseless," Davis said. "It's huge for us. I know that block was huge. He got a tip at the end of the game and then ended up with it still. Knowing his finger was messed up, he fought through the pain, and he came out big for us. He fought through it. That was big time for us."

Purdue basketball player is a budding business mogul

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | November 26, 2014

The Purdue University men's basketball team was gathered for a midweek training table dinner, but Stephen Toyra's cellphone wouldn't stop ringing.

The freshmen sitting around Toyra didn't quite comprehend his half of the conversations, but they guessed the junior guard wasn't talking about basketball.

He wasn't. Between practice and training table, Toyra met clients at his office and made a bank deposit. After the meal, he had another business meeting, and the next day he saw a man about website design.

Toyra's no ordinary college student. He's a Purdue basketball walk-on who earned a scholarship. He's a budding real estate mogul working on a plan to franchise brokerages nationwide. And he's determined to earn his first million by the time he's 25.

He just turned 21.

"I don't look at it in a greedy way, or I'm trying to make so much money," said Toyra, who launched Family Realty Groups with two partners last summer. "It's not necessarily about a million dollars — that's just a number. It's just about me trying to get as many tools as I can, and the people with the most tools can generally do the most good."

In sixth grade, when asked to write a paper about his future, Toyra predicted he would play basketball for his hometown Boilermakers before his NBA career. The love of basketball endures, but now his role models work in boardrooms, not on the boards.

Established professionals in both Toyra's chosen fields admire his inherent qualities.

"He's an intelligent person, plus he has discipline," Purdue coach Matt Painter said. "Anytime you have discipline, you can do more things. It allows him to balance things a little bit better than just your regular student."

You'd have a hard time finding a friendlier or more down-to-earth person. Toyra's the guy who moved into his grandmother's home to look after it while she was ill. When she moved back home, he stayed to look after her. He finds time in an absurdly busy schedule to attend his youngest sister's freshman volleyball games.

But unless he's on a basketball court, Toyra's mind is probably crunching numbers or plotting his next acquisition.

"I thought to myself, this dude's going to make it," Michael Thomas, one of Toyra's business partners, said of

his first impression. "He's going to be one of those rare kids like 'Good Will Hunting.' The professor, he knew — this kid's got it. He's a natural." Jay and Karen Toyra noticed an entrepreneurial nature in their oldest child at a young age. Perhaps taking after his grandfather George Nize, who had his own background in sales and real estate, young Stephen went door-to-door, confidently selling candy bars for a Highland Christian School fundraiser. That competitive nature didn't dissipate when he returned home.

"I hated playing Monopoly with him, because he always won and he always knew what he was doing and never explained it to us, because he wanted to win," said Martha, the oldest of Toyra's three sisters.

But those weren't the seminal moments of Toyra's promising business career. Before he was a basketball star and real estate prodigy, he was a high school student dealing with a series of disappointments.

Nize was not just Toyra's grandfather. Stephen's parents say he was also their son's best friend. They see now how Stephen takes after the creative and aggressive personality of the man who used to take him to basketball practices.

In June 2008, as Toyra prepared to begin high school, Nize died.

"When Grandpa died, it really woke him up and made him think about life and death things more seriously," Jay Toyra said.

In one of their final conversations, Nize told Stephen not to make decisions based solely on basketball, and to seek wise counsel and surround himself with positive influences. That advice helped the Toyras decide to send Stephen to Faith Christian, a small school with a fledgling athletic program, rather than Lafayette Jeff, which boasts one of the state's proudest basketball traditions.

A few weeks before the start of his freshman basketball season, Toyra and another young member of his church were doing farm work for a fellow parishioner. While turning in loose gravel on a country road, the all-terrain vehicle the boys were riding flipped over.

"The phone rings and the guy says, 'I've got your worst nightmare. Your son's in an ambulance,'" Jay Toyra said.

The other boy was thrown clear, but the ATV landed on Toyra. He and his parents say he was fortunate to suffer only a broken pelvis, but it cost him all but the final few games of the basketball season.

Toyra suddenly found a new perspective on the fragility of life — and new priorities.

"He felt like he could do anything, and then you lose your best friend, and then you can't walk," Karen Toyra said. "It got his attention."

In a 2011 game against Trader's Point Christian and future Northwestern center Alex Olah, Toyra tore ligaments in his right hand. Another season ended prematurely.

Suddenly burdened with free time, Toyra looked through his father's book collection and found "Rich Dad, Poor Dad" by Robert Kiyosaki. A self-help phenomenon that has sold a reported 26 million copies, the book touts producing cash flow from accumulated assets, rather than a paycheck from an employer, as a means of building wealth.

That philosophy inspired Toyra, and he began reading other authors and furthering his interest in real estate. In Scott Grass' entrepreneurship class at Faith Christian, students participate in a business plan contest. Grass said typical plans involve lawn mowing or painting — ventures well within the intellectual and financial reach of the average high school student.

Toyra designed "SJT Investments," a real estate investment firm offering investors a rate of return better than stocks, bonds or savings accounts while holding those investments in real estate.

"When he presented it," Grass said, "one of the judges asked him, 'This is a really good plan, Stephen. Could you see yourself doing this one day?' Stephen said, 'As a matter of fact, I'm really considering doing this right now.'"

Toyra won the competition. On the day of Stephen's high school graduation, Jay bought a six-unit, multifamily property at a real estate auction. It was one of the properties his son had found for his entry in the business plan competition.

On March 12, Purdue's basketball team stayed at an Indianapolis hotel on the eve of a Big Ten Conference tournament game against Ohio State.

Most of the Boilermakers relaxed in their rooms. Toyra, trying to close a deal, sneaked out to the hallway for privacy.

Toyra had found Lafayette-area Realtor Michael Thomas through one of his favorite sources for investment leads: Craigslist. Toyra wanted to buy Thomas' properties and, after several calls to Thomas' secretary, made contact and began negotiations.

But Thomas hesitated. During that telephone conversation, he confessed he wasn't sure he wanted to sell all of his properties to "a 26-year-old kid."

An amused and validated Toyra told Thomas his guess was off by six years, and the future business partners shared a laugh. Thomas, now one of the co-founders of Family Realty Groups, wasn't the first — and likely won't be the last — to misfire on Toyra's age.

Mike Sandry, a Lafayette real estate investor and Toyra's mentor, said that maturity stems from a good upbringing and a drive uncommon among people of any age.

"Where a lot of young men are wrapped up in the latest video game or TV shows — or, at his age, girlfriends and spending all their time with them — he loves his family, he loves the Lord, and he is very passionate about those things," Sandry said.

"He is a very, very talented, unique individual. When I was at the open house for his real estate thing and talking to his dad, I said, 'I just get tired watching Stephen do all the things he does.'"

Toyra's financial role models include the aforementioned Kiyosaki, Dallas Mavericks owner and entrepreneur Mark Cuban and inventor Elon Musk, the CEO of companies such as SpaceX and Tesla. One of the mantras he borrowed from those magnates: "Fake it till you make it."

Perhaps unwittingly, Toyra applied the same strategy to basketball.

At Faith Christian, which had no affiliation with the Indiana High School Athletic Association until his senior year, Toyra struggled to draw college programs' attention. Thanks to a breakout senior season and Eagles coach Clayton Callan's connections in the Muncie area, Toyra had an opportunity to walk on at Ball State. But most college offers came from Division II or III or NAIA programs. As Toyra graduated, he was torn between attending college — his options included an academic scholarship to Purdue — or jumping into real estate full time.

Then came a networking lesson. Early in his senior season, Toyra's breakout performance led Faith Christian to the championship at Delphi's Indiana Kitchen Classic tournament. Dan Dawson, at the time Delphi's athletic director and a longtime area basketball coach, encouraged Painter to look at the skinny kid.

When Toyra's senior season ended early due to a stress fracture in his

foot, he thought he might have played his final game. Months later, one week after graduation, his phone rang. Painter was on the line.

Stephen playing for Purdue? That was “a pipe dream,” Jay Toyra said.

“We anticipated him going somewhere, to a smaller school — Grace, DePauw, Wabash. I was excited when he got the news — ‘Dad, I got a walk-on spot at Ball State’ — even though it was two hours away. Then for Matt Painter to call and say, ‘Can you come in and talk?’ We were just shocked.” Toyra walked on to a Purdue roster featuring top-100 national recruits and Indiana All-Stars. But he wasn’t content taking walk-on lumps in practice and wearing a uniform on the bench during games.

Purdue’s coaches noticed, and though Toyra’s playing time remains limited, he earns more minutes in Big Ten Conference play than his fellow walk-ons. In recognition of his effort and leadership, Painter put Toyra on scholarship for the 2014-15 season.

“Stephen’s by far one of the more mature and motivated students that I’ve been around,” said Tom Mitchell, assistant athletic director for compliance at Purdue. “Quite honestly, isn’t that what you want out of a Realtor?”

Toyra and Purdue teammate Neal Beshears spent part of their summer in Germany with News Release Basketball. The faith-based organization sends American players — usually recent college graduates — to hold youth camps and play exhibition games against European professional teams.

Toyra, making his second trip with the group, was tasked with leading the expedition. When he wasn’t organizing camps, setting up travel or other arrangements and playing games, he was scouting properties.

Even 4,000 miles from home, Toyra had real estate on the brain.

“He was kind of working on it over there, making contacts,” said Beshears, like Toyra a walk-on who worked his way to a scholarship. “I don’t know if he was actually trying to pick up places over there, but he obviously was interested in it. He was talking about dealing with people in other states and expanding his business.”

Toyra closed a couple of deals as a freshman using his salesperson’s license. He got his broker’s license last spring and began acquiring his personal portfolio — nine properties totaling 15 housing units.

By law, to practice as a broker, Toyra needed to place his license with a brokerage. However, he hadn’t enjoyed his early experiences working with Realtors, and he wasn’t keen on the conventional brokerage structure, in which agents often make low commissions.

“I said, ‘You know what, I can build a better toy, so to speak,’” Toyra said. “I can do a better brokerage.”

Toyra couldn’t persuade Thomas to sell him all his properties. (“Almost,” Thomas said.) But he definitely made an impression, and a partnership began to form.

“He was a hard baller,” Thomas said. “He reminded me a lot of myself. I’ve been doing this for over 12 years now. I thought, man, this guy’s got some fire in him. I meet a lot of people, and he just stuck in my mind.”

Over breakfast at Triple XXX, Toyra and Thomas discovered that while they didn’t have much in common in terms of age or interests — Thomas said his sport of choice was “debate” — their real estate philosophies meshed. As they began to envision their own brokerage, Thomas reached out to Eliseo Medrano, a Lafayette firefighter who also had recently obtained a real estate license.

Medrano and Toyra also clicked, and one week later the three signed an operating agreement for Family Realty Groups. While Toyra was in Germany, the other two signed a lease for offices near 10th and Main streets in Lafayette.

That site is considered FRG’s Lafayette branch. The plan is to franchise the business model, with a manual written mostly by Toyra. One branch has already opened in Monticello, and the company is talking with prospective franchisees in the Indianapolis area, Florida and California.

“One of the big things for me is empowering other people,” Toyra said. “A lot of times people go into real estate, and you’re really scared that those big brokerages make it look really hard and hey, you need a mentor, and hey, it’s really hard to get started, and you need our leads and you need us.

“The reality is, if you’re an entrepreneur, you’re going to get up early and go to bed late and work hard, and you’re going to make your own business successful. We just want to give you the platform and the opportunity to do that and encourage you and do what we can for that. That’s the reason for the brokerage. Yeah, I could do this stuff, but at heart I’m a people person. I want to empower people and lead people and help them be successful.”

But FRG’s foundation is built on more than striving for financial success.

The firm’s mission statement includes the Golden Rule — “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Verses of Scripture are posted around the office. Each franchise office must perform 40 hours of community service per year. The brokerage awarded a \$500 scholarship to a local student-athlete at its grand opening, and hopes to expand that program in the months ahead.

Medrano assumed Toyra was in his late 20s or 30s when they first met. He marvels at his young partner’s mathematical talents and the breadth of his real estate knowledge. But he said Toyra’s greatest asset is the passion he puts into every endeavor.

“With or without the company, I think he definitely has the potential to be a millionaire by the time he turns 25,” Medrano said. “He’s already talking about buying my Mercedes off of me.

“I don’t think he’s saying it in an arrogant manner. It’s more of a mindset. The more you say it, you start to believe it. Then you act on those beliefs.”

Toyra’s drive and tenacity fueled his rise from walk-on to scholarship player and from high school business student to 20-year-old businessman.

Early in his career as a student-athlete, however, it seemed he’d encountered an immovable force: the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s strict scrutiny regarding amateurism.

When Toyra first earned his Realtor’s license, he petitioned the NCAA — via Purdue’s compliance office — for a rules interpretation of the Division I bylaws governing student-athlete employment and the use of their name and likeness. While he knew he could not mention his affiliation with Purdue, Toyra wanted to use his name and photo on signs and advertisements, just like every other real estate agent.

The NCAA ruled that Toyra could use only his first name — no last name, and no photo. While that decision disappointed him, he initially did not realize how much it limited his real estate career.

Toyra later noticed a classmate and business partner, Courtney Waldon — a former Lafayette Jeff boys basketball player who now plays on the Purdue women’s basketball “RIP Squad” — pursuing his real estate career with no similar limitations.

“I’m thinking, ‘He can do whatever he wants and there’s nobody telling him he can’t do it,’” Toyra said. “That’s a huge competitive advantage for him.”

So in April, Toyra again petitioned the NCAA for a rules interpretation. The NCAA returned the same ruling as before. However, it also encouraged him to file for a waiver that would apply only to his special circumstances.

Two weeks prior to Family Realty Groups’ open house, the NCAA accepted Toyra’s argument for a waiver. As long as he doesn’t mention his affiliation with Purdue, Toyra is free to use his full name and photos of himself to publicize the business. On the FRG website, he and Medrano stand in front of a backdrop of downtown Lafayette and beside a row of the business partners’ family members.

The nature of Toyra’s business and its correlation to his management major — as well as the NCAA’s increasingly flexible stance on economic issues involving student-athletes — combined for a favorable ruling, according to Mitchell, the Purdue compliance director.

Mitchell is not sure it would have worked out in the player’s favor two years ago. He said Toyra’s characteristic persistence helped.

“He’s disciplined,” Karen Toyra said, “and he knows what it takes to get where he’s at. We were never ones to have to say, ‘Hey man, you have to get up and go for practice.’ He always wants to be there early, and he gets it. He thinks ahead and gets the things in place to do it.”

Jay and Karen Toyra still wonder if their son’s responsibilities will overwhelm him.

“We’re not sure when he sleeps or how much he sleeps,” dad said.

But his business partners say he’s fulfilling his end of the partnership, and his teammates have never questioned his commitment to Purdue. Over the summer, he and Davis organized open gyms and held the rest of the Boilermakers accountable to their offseason regimen.

If forced to choose today, Toyra would pick basketball. He knows his opportunity to compete in the Big Ten is finite, and he could always come back to real estate after graduation.

Yet rather than distracting him, Toyra says his business interactions heightened his appreciation of basketball.

“Going out and making business contacts and having these vague relationships, and then being able to go out and be with these guys every single day I guess bonds us together in my mind even more,” Toyra said.

“You come here and nothing gets in these walls. It’s just the 14 of us, and that makes it a lot of fun for me — to get here and it’s just us. I don’t necessarily have to worry about what’s going on that day because we’re here, playing a game. That makes it a lot of fun for me.”

Toyra returns to Faith Christian every spring to help with the business plan contest. He’s one of the toughest judges on the panel, Grass said.

During the season, Toyra backs off his real estate responsibilities somewhat, but not completely. He’s in the process of selling one property and buying another. When he can, he helps with a basketball practice at Faith Christian, or attends one of the junior varsity games of his youngest sister, Susanna.

Everyone wonders how he does it — and what he’ll be able to do next.

Purdue men take final test before business trip

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | November 20, 2014

Temperatures in Maui hovered in the low 80s today, but don't ask a Purdue basketball player for a weather report.

As anyone facing an Indiana winter would, the Boilermakers have eagerly awaited the Hawaiian climate at next week's EA Sports Maui Invitational. But they can prepare for that with smart packing decisions. Preparing for a talented Kansas State squad and what might come after requires more work.

That's the Boilermakers' mission Thursday night against Grambling. Purdue notched two comfortable wins out of the gate, but that doesn't mean they can't get better before the competition jumps up a level in Maui.

"When we get to Maui, it's not going to be how it was these past two games," said junior captain Rapheal Davis, referring to a 40-point victory over Samford and a 20-point win over IUPUI. "We're going to be facing great competition. That's why we need to lower the turnover rate right now and get all the casual play out now before we actually get out to Maui. These games right now are helping us."

Preventing turnovers moved to the top of Purdue's agenda after it committed 31 in two games. The Boilermakers say the problem has been part carelessness in lopsided games, and part a lack of precision.

"We had some very sloppy passes, but I feel like our turnovers mostly come from trying to force-feed into the post," said forward Vince Edwards, he reigning Big Ten Freshman of the Week. "We've just got to do a better job of getting angles with that, and just getting it into our big men. I don't feel like our turnovers are just giving the ball away. We're sharing the ball really well."

A.J. Hammons, who led the team in turnovers last season and committed four against IUPUI, says he can be more efficient by looking outside rather than up. Purdue is shooting 44.7 percent from 3-point range as a team, and five players have connected at least once behind the arc.

"It's better just to kick it out than trying to forcibly score over somebody if there's too many people," said Hammons, whose five assists put him one-third of the way to last season's total. "I'd rather kick it out; try and get better position from there. We can kick it out, see how they get in their rotations, and see if we can get better shots — not only 3s, because hopefully they can kick it back in."

Hammons has also made only 3 of 8 free throws, and the Boilermakers shot 61.3 percent at the line in both victories. Painter said Hammons and fellow center Isaac Haas (9 of 15) have hit free throws earlier in their careers, and it's up to them to follow through in games.

Two games provide a small sample size, but Purdue's players aren't taking anything for granted, since any game they play next week and in the conference season could come down to free throws.

"We're getting to the line a lot," Davis said. "You just have to get up there, do your routine, get in a rhythm and knock them down."

"When you miss free throws it kind of takes a little toll on you and starts messing with you mentally. Guys have been getting in the gym, getting up extra free throws, especially guys who have missed free throws. They're going to make those free throws. I'm confident in them and they're also confident in themselves."

Grambling State, led by wing A'Torri Shine, will also challenge the Boilermakers to sharpen one problem area on defense. Coach Matt Painter was disappointed in how often IUPUI's ballhandlers got behind Purdue defenders. That's a problem that can't linger when Purdue begins facing power conference opponents.

"Once people start driving and get deep on that penetration, sometimes it's hard to recover," Painter said. "We have to do a better job of having pride and keeping the ball in front of us."

Freshman making splash for Purdue

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | November 20, 2014

The state of Ohio is known to most as a football hotbed, but they also play basketball east of the Indiana state line.

If you need proof, look no further than Vince Edwards, Purdue's freshman forward who's quickly garnered national attention.

It took just two games for Edwards to earn Big Ten honors (freshman of the week) after a hot start that included 26 points and eight rebounds to go along with three blocks and a steal against IUPUI on Sunday. Through two games, he's averaging 19.5 points, 8 rebounds and 1.5 blocks.

An opportunity to add to those statistics comes at 7 p.m. today when Purdue (2-0) plays host to Grambling State (1-1) at Mackey Arena.

"He's a good all-around player," coach Matt Painter said. "He's very versatile. He lets the game come to him. He's not a high-volume shooter. If he's open for 3, he'll take it. If not, he'll move the ball or drive. He's crafty and can maneuver. Anytime guys can pass, they have a good feel of when to go and when not to go. Vince is a good decision-maker."

The biggest decision the Middletown, Ohio, native has made so far came off the court. Edwards committed to Purdue last fall during an on-campus visit, choosing the Boilermakers over Michigan, Dayton, Vanderbilt, West Virginia and Xavier, though the Wolverines were Purdue's chief competition.

A year later, Edwards is already authoring the beginnings of a storybook career. ESPN rated him as a four-star recruit, and he was the Division I player of the year in Ohio, where he was the state's second-ranked recruit. As a senior, Edwards averaged 22.3 points, 12.8 rebounds and 4.2 assists on a team that lost in the Sweet 16 to the state's No. 1 team.

Sure, Painter saw a scorer when he visited Middletown, which knows a thing or two about basketball – it's home to Jerry Lucas, one of the NBA's 50 greatest players. But the characteristic that really stuck out to Painter was rebounding and passing.

"Those two things are so important in basketball," he said.

Edwards' resourcefulness has shone bright – he can score, pass and rebound on offense, play point guard or post up, and guard every position on the floor. In short, he fits the Painter mold, a blend of throw-back hustle mixed with new-age skills and athleticism.

"Whatever I can do, whether it's rebound or make a shot or make an extra pass, I just want to win," Edwards said.

Edwards said he observes teammates' shots in practice, so he can better anticipate where the ball comes off the rim. It's contributed to his offensive rebounding. Those numbers, as much as his scoring, contributed to the impressive nature of his debut.

"He's always been a good rebounder. He just has a nose for the ball," Painter said. "We have a long way to go, but there have been some good signs."

Forget radar, Purdue's Edwards makes early impact

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | November 17, 2014

Purdue's Vince Edwards shouldn't be under the radar.

Really, you earn Ohio Division I player of the year honors, as he did as a high school senior, that should get you some fame. So should being the state's No. 2 prospect by ESPN.com

That it did not, that there were no Parade or McDonald's All-America accolades, that Edwards' name rarely surfaced when preseason talk came of the Big Ten's top freshmen, is of no relevance now. It certainly wasn't if you saw the way this 6-7, 220-pounder lit up IUPUI on Sunday.

He scored 26 points, then added eight rebounds for the second straight game. He hit a couple of three-pointers, blocked three shots and was a catalyst in the 77-57 victory

"When I see an opening, I'm going to attack it," he said. "My teammates did a good job of spreading out, moving the ball and finding me."

IMPORTANT HISTORICAL NOTE: This is NOT the same Vince Edwards who played Dr. Ben Casey in a 1960's TV show. For one thing, he'd be 86 years old now. For another, that Vince Edwards is dead. Anyway, this Vince Edwards showed he can thrive at the college level, and if it's early, if it isn't coming against elite teams, let's worry about that later.

"He's a good all-around player," coach Matt Painter said. "He's very versatile. He lets the game come to him."

Edwards plays hard. He hustles, defends and anticipates with a veteran's savvy. Yes, that matters.

He's also versatile enough to handle a limited point guard role, strong enough to post-up inside. And with a 7-foot wingspan, you don't want him defending you from mouthwash range.

Oh, yes. He can score.

"Even though he took 16 shots," Painter said, "he's not a high volume shooter. If he's open from three, he'll take threes. He moves the ball. He drives the ball. He's good in the open court, kind of crafty. He can play in the low and the high post.

"Any time guys can pass, they have a good feel of when to go and when not to go. He's a good decision maker. He knows what's going on."

That includes his Purdue role.

"It's to play hard and help the team win," he said. "Whatever I can do, whether it's rebound or make a shot or make an extra pass, I just want to win. All the coaches believe in me."

Edwards is from the same town -- Middletown, Ohio -- that produced Jerry Lucas. In fact, he's the school's second all-time leading scorer behind Lucas, who went on to thrive at Ohio State and in the NBA. He averaged 22.3 points, 12.8 rebounds and 4.2 assists as a senior.

Recruiting experts weren't wowed. All that got Edwards was a No. 124 national recruiting ranking by Rivals.com. In-state schools Dayton and Xavier offered him. Ohio State and Cincinnati did not.

In the end, Edwards passed on offers from Michigan, Vanderbilt and West Virginia to become a Boilermaker,

"His No. 1 thing when I recruited him was his ability to rebound," Painter said. "As I watched him, it was more about his passing. Those two things are very important in basketball."

It's early, but Edwards is Purdue's leading rebounder with that 8.0 average. While that likely won't last -- teammate A.J. Hammons is the Big Ten's top returning rebounder after averaging 7.4 last year -- it reflects the importance he puts on hitting the boards.

"Just play hard and the ball will come to you," he said. "(IUPUI) did a good job of sending three to four guys (to the glass), so we had to crash the boards."

The Boilers have crashed their way to a 2-0 start, and if it's not flawless -- the 15 turnovers and 61.3 percent free throw shooting must improve -- the potential is obvious. If it continues, nobody will have to worry about being under the radar.

Defense to play big role if Purdue bounces back

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | November 16, 2014

In the lead up to the basketball season, Purdue's downfalls from the previous two seasons were discussed at length. The Boilermakers have not appeared in the NCAA tournament since 2011-12 and ended last season on a seven-game losing streak.

Offense, especially the point guard position, became a popular subject after practice began. The arrival of Jon Octeus from Colorado State only heightened the conversation. But on the season's opening night, defense took a front-row seat.

In an 80-40 win over Samford, which yielded impressive offensive numbers for Purdue (1-0), the Boilermakers limited the Bulldogs to 22.7 percent shooting, the fourth-lowest total for a Purdue opponent.

"We have to be better on our ball screen defense," said Purdue coach Matt Painter, searching for grievances. "We had a couple breakdowns there in our zone. We have to fix those things before we play (today). But it was a good win for us. Everyone got to play, and I think that experience is good."

As Purdue eased its way to six consecutive NCAA tournament appearances, from 2007-2012, it did so with a brand of defense – and attitude – that Painter trademarked. The hardnosed, tough culture disappeared the past two seasons as the Boilers floundered below .500 with just 13 Big Ten wins.

Last season was rock bottom. Purdue was last in the conference in scoring defense and near the basement nationally in turnover margin (minus-2.5). During its yearly trips to the Big Dance, Purdue was near the top of the Big Ten in both categories. Its worst defensive scoring average was 66 points.

"Talking to other coaches about coach Painter and the Purdue program, I got the sense I would fit in because I had already played for a defensive coach (Larry Eustachy) and it was going to be instilled into the program," Octeus said. "Coming in, I knew Purdue was a good defensive program."

In his first game for the Boilers, Octeus played a role in a record-setting night on defense, securing one of their six steals. Purdue also blocked nine shots. A.J. Hammons, who led the Big Ten with 2.5 blocks per game last season, had four on Friday.

"I thought our guys weren't really used to playing against Purdue's height and that really affected the way they drove and shot the ball around the rim," Samford coach Scott Padgett said, referring to the Boilermakers' 7-foot Hammons and 7-2 Isaac Haas.

The ringleader of Purdue's newfound grit is Fort Wayne native Rapheal Davis. The junior still recalls an era led by Chris Kramer, who became an enemy to every fan base in the Big Ten for his tenacious, in-your-face defense.

This year's unit has a different flavor from what Painter previously perfected. The coach did something many believed unthinkable – he installed a 2-3 zone. But Purdue's players not only allow the Boilermakers to play zone but also to thrive in it.

Two 7-footers in the lane let long wing players to pressure shooters and disrupt passing lanes.

"I feel like everybody has to use defense to spark offense," Octeus said.

What they face today in IUPUI (0-1) is a team that shot 35 percent and turned the ball over 16 times in a season-opening overtime loss to Indiana State on Friday.

Said Purdue freshman guard P.J. Thompson: "Defense is going to win us games."

Purdue's Hammons remains great eraser

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | November 15, 2014

A.J. Hammons remains Purdue's great shot eraser. Attack the Boiler basket at your own risk.

Samford risked and paid a four-block price Friday night. Now IUPUI comes to Mackey Arena today and we'll see if it will challenge or back off.

Either way, coach Matt Painter likes what he's seen from his 7-foot junior center. Now it comes down to what matters most: Winning.

"He understands things better," Painter said. "He understands the seriousness of it. He's made strides. There's no doubt about it. He's always improved since he's been here. Being able to put that into wins is his next step."

On Friday, Hammons was more facilitator than scorer, which was fine given the way the Boilers (1-0) putting on a passing clinic in their 40-point victory. Still, he's a double-double threat every time he takes the court, although he's just as comfortable being the guy who sets up the guy who scores.

"He's unselfish," Painter said. "If they're doubling him, he'll pass. Our guys are doing a good job of getting him the ball."

Hammons only played 18 minutes and shared the team high with three assists. His four blocks gives him 167 for his career, good for fourth in Purdue history. He added five points and three rebounds, and if that's well off last season's averages (10.8 points, 7.4 rebounds), consider his impact goes way beyond numbers.

"For A.J., he has to be more productive," Painter said. "Run more. Be engaged more. Understand what you're supposed to do and be an efficient player."

"Every time the ball is going up the court, be on a dead sprint. Every rebound you should look at it as your rebound. When playing post defense, be in a stance. It's a lot of little things tied together and having that energy."

"You always hear coaches talk about just doing your job at a high level. That's what he needs to do. That's what everybody needs to do."

Painter got it from freshman Vince Edwards, who totaled 13 points and eight rebounds in his college debut. He only played 17 minutes.

Fellow freshman Isaac Haas, a 7-2 center, had 11 points, eight rebounds and two blocks in 20 minutes. Rapheal Davis, the former South Side standout, shared game-high scoring honors with Edwards by also scoring 13 points.

The Boilers had 21 assists and shot 55.3 percent from the field. Problems focused on the 16 turnovers and 61.3 percent free throw shooting.

Still, there's reason for optimism.

"Any time you get guys playing together and sharing the ball," Painter said, "it's fun for everybody."

Veteran newcomer buoys Purdue's hopes

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | November 14, 2014

The journey to Purdue for Jon Octeus is one that's taken him to three colleges in three states in four years. In his final season of college basketball, the graduate transfer – by way of Garden City Community College, Wabash Valley College and Colorado State – has arrived at the level he sought.

"My goal was to play in a bigger conference and challenge myself," said Octeus, who plays in his first game as a Boilermaker tonight against Samford. "I'm settling in pretty well. I feel like I'm one of the guys. It's been a good transition."

On a team rife with youth and memories of not so pleasant seasons, Octeus, a 6-foot-4 point guard, brings NCAA tournament experience and a career's worth of knowledge. Last season, he averaged 13.4 points, 4.7 rebounds, 2.3 assists, 0.9 steals and – Purdue coach Matt Painter's favorite stat – 1.2 turnovers per game.

In 67 career Division I games, Octeus has just 76 turnovers. For a coach driven nutty after two seasons of inconsistent point guard play, it's a time of optimism.

"He's only going to get better as he gets more comfortable," Painter said. "He's adjusted before. ... He's a hard-working guy and does a great time of retaining information and applying it the next day. He's very coachable, he can guard a lot of people, play a lot of different positions. He brings a blue-collar approach."

Octeus has been a West Lafayette resident for only a month, which has included finding a place to live, taking classes and practicing basketball. The whirlwind slowed after a couple of weeks, with Octeus catching up on his master's coursework in technology and leadership and deciphering Painter's brand of basketball.

Before arriving at Purdue, Octeus first landed at UCLA. But he was detoured when UCLA denied him admittance into its graduate school. The brief stopover in L.A. wasn't all for naught, though. Former IU star and current UCLA coach Steve Alford and his staff offered advice.

"The coaches at UCLA all praised coach Painter," Octeus said. "The decision (to come to Purdue) really wasn't that hard. They have a group of players that really wants to win. This group of guys is hungry because they went through a rough season last year. I wanted to be a part of something that's going to turn for the better."

In two exhibition games and one intra-squad scrimmage, Octeus recorded 18 points, 14 rebounds, 13 assists and one steal – and turned the ball over zero times. His steady play and superb off-ball defense is why Purdue has emerged as a popular surprise pick in the Big Ten.

"I've always had a defensive mindset," he said. "Over the years, I've seen defense win games in a majority of sports. I've always been taught defense fuels your offense. If you force turnovers, that's easy buckets in transition."

Said Painter: "You can argue he could be our best defender."

Some say Octeus is among the best in the country.

When Octeus glances around the Purdue locker room, the characteristics that stick out are ingrained in winning cultures.

"I see a lot of guys who are busting their behinds to get better every day," Octeus said. "That's going to be the key to the season. As long as we take everything one day at a time, our end goal, which is to make it to the NCAA tournament, should happen. Everyone knows how last season felt and I think that's our driving force this year."

Purdue's Painter pushes little-things-matter approach

Pete DiPrimio | Fort Wayne News-Sentinel | November 14, 2014

The quest to return Purdue to basketball glory is as simple as a Gene Keady foot stomp or a Matt Painter glare.

Do the little things and big things will happen.

"It's getting back to following the scouting report," junior swingman Rapheal Davis says. "Being more detail oriented. It's not just going out there and trying to do what you think will get the job done, but follow the scouting report and doing exactly what Coach Painter says to do on defense. Just follow through and do your job."

Davis gets it. So do, it seems, the Boilers, although nothing is sure until the regular season begins.

That's tonight against Samford, in case you missed it.

"It gets back to being tough," Davis says. "It's the toughness factor. Get the culture back of everybody following the details. If you've got two guys doing exactly what they're supposed to be doing, even if one guy messes up one assignment, it can mess up the whole play. It gets everybody out of sync."

"Everybody being on the same page has been a problem. It's locking in on the details and being engaged the whole 35 seconds."

For six straight NCAA tourney-making seasons, Purdue got it. Then came the recent 16-18 and 15-17 stretch that left fans grumbling what had gone wrong when they weren't pointing fingers at Painter. There were a variety of reasons for the fall, but the most obvious were crunch-time breakdowns, specifically turnovers and missed free throws.

Painter has focused on those areas since the start of practice. The free throws were fine during a pair of preseason scrimmages (82-for-110, 74.5 percent), a problem during two exhibitions (14-for-26, 52.8 percent).

And then there's good good decision making.

Davis gets that, as well.

"On offense, if you get a good shot, it sets your defense," he says. "If you don't turn the ball over, it sets your defense. But if you turn the ball over or take a rushed shot or a bad shot, then the rebound probably bounces bad and the other team gets on the break and your defense is scrambling."

A scrambling defense, so the theory goes, is a often no defense at all.

Few Boilers took the good-shot priority as seriously as Davis, Bryson Scott, Kendall Stephens and Basil Smotherman. They've looked good early, Painter says, but proof will only come during the season.

"It looks good, but stats aren't in practice, stats are in games," he says. "How you do it when the popcorn is turning? Do you keep working on you game and keep fighting when adversity sets in. You've got to keep putting in that time."

"The No. 1 thing is decision making. If you take better shots, you will shoot a higher percentage."

Painter uses Stephens as an example. Last year, as a freshman, he shot 35.6 percent overall, 37.0 percent from three-point range.

"I ask Kendall, think about how many bad shots you took last year and you still shot a pretty good percentage from three. Imagine if you shot more good shots and eliminated the bad shots, could you shoot 45 to 50 percent from three? I think so. He's that good of a shooter."

While not every Boiler has Stephens' shooting potential, every one can take better shots. Painter has made that point several times.

"You've got to take those type of good shots. Each guy is different. Shot selection is about getting it worked out. As a coach, you can't say, 'That's a bad shot,' enough. If they continue to do it, then you have an uncoachable guy, and you just don't play him."

Painter also is trying to restore tough-minded defense, and if that means throwing in some zone to his man preference, so be it.

"We can be a good defensive team," Davis says. "We want to get back to where we used to be around here -- play hard-nosed defense. We have good athleticism, good quickness at the point and the wings, some good length. Down low we have some 7 foot giants (A.J. Hammons, Isaac Haas), where if we do mess up on the perimeter and let a guy get past us, they've got our backs. They're blocking shots, getting rebounds and get play going in the opposite direction."

Purdue used 11 scholarship players in the two exhibition games. Painter said doing that in the regular season isn't likely. He also said he's not worrying about redshirting anybody right now.

"We talked about it, but I don't think we're at that point right now. We'll see, though."

"Like we've discussed, you can't play 11 people. That's not happening. Our guys have been really competitive and keep fighting. Somebody or a couple people will end up not playing as much or not playing at all at times, and that's a tough deal, but I'd rather them sort that out than me."

As for Samford, former coach (and one-time Indiana assistant) Bennie Selzer is out, ex-Kentucky standout Scott Padgett is in.

Padgett brings an uptempo attack to a team that went 13-20 last season. The top returning scorer is Tyler Hood (7.9 points). Center Michael Bradley leads returning players in rebounds (3.6).

The Bulldogs are set to start small, with a lineup that averages 6-4 to Purdue's 6-7,

Crucial year for A.J. Hammons awaits

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | November 13, 2014

In the hallway outside of Cardinal Court, a half hour before the Purdue men's basketball team's afternoon practice, A.J. Hammons sits for an interview.

The junior center is used to them by now, but he's not exactly comfortable, and not just because the folding chair awkwardly cradles his 7-foot frame.

Hammons tosses his smartphone and catches it as he talks, over and over. It's an old nervous habit — dating back at least to an interview about his NBA draft decision the previous spring.

Hammons admits this distracted vibe is part of his personality. He knows his outward expression — or lack thereof — feeds outside criticism of his perceived lack of passion or effort. A man who wants nothing to do with the spotlight can't escape it.

"Other people pump people's heads up about me, about our team," Hammons said. "That's more eyes on you, and I don't like getting embarrassed, or, 'Oh, you didn't show up.' I don't like it. It's like, the worst loss I've ever had. I'm going to try and give you my best, but people are going to have expectations."

But before long, Hammons stops to joke with two women's basketball players as they walk to their locker room. A shrill laugh echoes in the hall through his wide smile. This is the side of Hammons people don't see on the court — good natured, even goofy, and a respected teammate and friend in the locker room.

As he enters the most important season of his career, Hammons is more at ease with himself and the challenges in front of him. He says he has a lot to prove, beginning with something that won't show up in the box score: heart.

"He's trying to be that happy warrior, being that guy who plays hard, has a smile on his face," Purdue coach Matt Painter said. "I tell people he has that look like he's not engaged, but in reality he is."

Hammons won't try to convince anyone he was born with a burning love of basketball. Growing up in Gary, he was often a last-minute throw-in when his brother, Tyrone, played pickup games.

He says the light began to go off after his family moved to Carmel, where he first attended high school. All of a sudden, you're not just a basketball player. You're a magician on stilts, and everyone tells you so. Even then, Hammons could be hard to motivate. Purdue junior captain Rapheal Davis, an AAU teammate of Hammons' with Speice Indy Heat, remembers the difficulty of getting Hammons out of bed in the morning for summer tournaments.

But he also contrasts that with what he sees from Hammons now — the 7 a.m. weightlifting sessions, hustling down the floor a little more each day, even adapting to the diet that's helped him shed significant weight since his freshman season.

"It's a 500 percent change," Davis said. "I see it every day and I'm still shocked about it."

What hasn't changed is Hammons' reserved approach. He typically shuffles into Mackey Arena with headphones on and his head shrouded in a hoodie. A young man with so much size and ability admits he lacked confidence at times in the past and was too timid. Even now, there are times when he knows he should speak up at practice, but can't.

During his AAU years and his prep school stint at Oak Hill Academy, Hammons could defer to an All-Star list of teammates: Yogi Ferrell, D'Vauntes Smith-Rivera, Marquis Teague, Deshaun Thomas. At Purdue, the focus narrowed, and the expectations rose.

"I've always said this about him — he's the only 7-foot guy I can lose and I don't know where he's at," said Jared Quarles, Hammons' AAU coach throughout his high school years. "He's a great guy to be around, but when those guys come and everyone wants the limelight, he says, 'My teammates, not me.'"

Hammons says he's a Chicago Bears fan, though he only sort of recognizes Jay Cutler's name. But he and the quarterback often exhibit a similar emotionless demeanor during competition, which means they also share a dilemma: Blank expressions only seem to be a problem when you're winning.

Purdue hasn't won enough with Hammons. Last season's seven-game free fall capped a 15-17 campaign and last-place finish. Hammons' 2.5 turnovers per game and penchant for foul trouble stunted the full impact of his talents.

"Last year if I was producing and doing everything I was supposed to do, my outside features probably wouldn't matter more," Hammons said. "But I wasn't, so that played into it. That's why it's a problem for me right now. As long as I do what I'm supposed to do, I don't think it should matter what my face looks like."

Yet the scrutiny of Hammons' heart doesn't stem solely from blank stares. When Hammons was suspended for the first three games last season for violating team rules, questions about his commitment seemed justified. A few months later, when Big Ten Network analyst Seth Davis reported that Hammons told him he didn't love basketball, they seemed clarified.

Hammons references that comment — "That statement they always bring back up" — before being asked. He says his intended sentiment, that one needn't love basketball in order to be successful at it, was not conveyed. So what does he love about basketball?

"Just out there playing, really," Hammons said. "There's something about it, like game time. I'm just happy to be out there scoring buckets, hitting people. It feels good now for some reason."

"Last year it felt good, but it was just a lot of soreness and everything that went into it, and different other stuff. I think I took my anger and stuff I didn't like into basketball more. I displaced a lot of stuff." Former Purdue center Travis Carroll, a veteran role model for Hammons during the past two seasons, says accusations of laziness are unfair.

"I never had a lot of question about that," said Carroll, in his first year as a volunteer assistant at Indianapolis. "I've seen him in the locker room before games, after games, at practice, at dinner. He's always been about helping us win."

"There's a lot of weight on his shoulders, so if he has a bad game everybody's going to go right at him. Big guy, easy target."

Carroll said he could always tell Hammons had just been in Purdue's locker room because cartoons would be showing on the television.

"He's a kid in a 7-foot body," said Carroll, now a volunteer assistant coach at Indianapolis. "He likes to have fun, which is a good thing."

Perhaps that childlike enthusiasm explains the Purdue's freshman class's positive affect on Hammons' mood. The five-man group's maturity and unselfishness seem to have invigorated the 22-year-old.

Everyone is careful to avoid mentioning names, but the tension between Hammons and former teammates is apparent.

"Maybe some of the guys he played with in the past, it wasn't fun for him," said assistant coach Brandon Brantley, who works closely with Purdue's big men. "Now with this group, they had a really great offseason, and these guys bonded and learned to get along with each other."

"These guys, they understand A.J. They let him be A.J. They know how he is, but I think he's accepted them. When they're trying to get the ball in to him and they're encouraging him and guys are unselfish — that's really been big for him."

As Carroll once provided veteran wisdom to Hammons, he in turn has taken freshman center Isaac Haas under his wing. The 7-foot-2, 297-pound Alabama said things started out rough, as the two towers tussled throughout summer workouts.

Not now Haas said he and Hammons are "almost best buds."

"I hope that was part of the reason he stayed here as well," Haas said, referring to Hammons' decision to put a pro career on hold and return to Purdue. "He definitely takes it upon himself every day to help me develop."

"He's a great guy. He had slack times last year where people would get on him for not playing as hard as he can. Me coming in and pushing him and letting him know I'm going to here for him, it really has helped him move along. He's really been a great role model this year."

Painter says Hammons has made progress every year at Purdue. As Hammons enters his third season, that progress more than ever is measured in team success.

As with everything with Hammons, even his supporters take a wait-and-see approach. From the attitude the Boilermakers saw from Hammons as early as Maymester to his increasing leadership role, evidence suggests the big man better comprehends the challenge.

"I came to the first exhibition game and after the game, the first thing he said to me is, 'We're locked in,'" Quarles said. "We're going to win games this year. In years past, I've never really seen the focus that he has right now."

Ask Hammons about his own expectations, and the response is quick and brief: winning. How's this for irony? Hammons is tired of hearing the hype — now he wants to witness the real thing.

"The fans, they've been with us since I've been here," Hammons said. "They've been here through wins and losses. But to have a good winning season, I just want to see how it's going to change the campus."

"Everybody always talks about it, I just want to see it."

Twin towers could be what Boilers need

Kyle Rowland | Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette | November 13, 2014

Coming off a season doomed by ineffective play and locker room dysfunction, Purdue is primed to move forward and end a two-year absence from the NCAA tournament. And the Boilermakers' tonic could center on two 7-footers.

A.J. Hammons has been cast as Purdue's savior for two seasons. Now entering his junior year, he's been resourceful, but production levels have failed to reach expected heights. Hammons is seasoned as a third-year player and the possible emergence of fellow 7-footer Isaac Haas just might beckon a turnaround for Purdue.

"We'll see," coach Matt Painter said, cautiously. "We've played a little bit with them together. We'll see how things unfold. It makes sense for us to do it if they're two of our five best players. If they're both productive on their own, let's see them be productive together at times. It is something we've talked about and worked on. But I don't want to say something that doesn't end up happening."

The Boilermakers are one of three Division I programs with multiple 7-footers, joining Florida State and Oklahoma State. Hammons and Haas were teamed together for 10 minutes in Purdue's first intrasquad scrimmage, giving way to a surge in offense.

The two scored 12 points and were a perfect 6 of 6 from the free throw line. Hammons and Haas loaded up on dunks and overmatched shorter opponents. If the twin towers appear together in Big Ten games, a likely assumption is coaches will counter with quicker lineups to get Hammons and Haas out of position.

"It's a little easier going against our own guys," Hammons said. "I still want to see how we can do against another team, like Michigan State or someone who can really go up against us. Playing power forward is definitely the key. I've got to work on closing out guys in case they decide to drive and I have to be ready jab out at shooters."

Hammons, the Big Ten's leader in blocked shots a year ago, played exclusively at center in 2013-14. As he alluded to, that will change when he and the 7-foot-2 Haas, a top 100 recruit, share the court.

In the two preseason scrimmages and one exhibition game, Hammons and Haas combined for 99 points, 40 rebounds and shot 36 of 54 (66 percent) from the field.

"You just pick your poison," said junior guard Rapheal Davis, a native of Fort Wayne. "You either pressure A.J. at the top of the key and he dumps down to Isaac or you don't pressure A.J. at the top of the key and guard Isaac and A.J. just knocks a jump shot down. You basically pick how you want to get beat."

The zone defense that Painter's employed should benefit Purdue when Hammons and Haas are both on the court. With long arms and height, the Boilers can force opponents to stay on the perimeter and dare them to trek inside the paint.

Hammons recorded 96 blocks last year. He had eight in the preseason, while Haas tallied three.

"Anytime we go zone, A.J. has done a good job rebounding," Painter said. "It helps having him by the rim. I don't say this sarcastically, but he doesn't block out anyway. He's just that way. Some of the best rebounders who have ever played the game have been that way."

"We have to get him to get the ball all the time and stay by the rim more. He can get 10 rebounds a game. That's what we need from him."

'Play hard' not just words to Purdue men's basketball

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | November 11, 2014

Rapheal Davis walked into a sea of gold and black for his first game at Mackey Arena in 2009.

Five years later, the color burned into his memory from that night is red — from the bloody nose of Purdue guard Chris Kramer.

Kramer, the Boilermakers' defensive stopper, took an elbow to the face from Michigan's Manny Harris. Davis, then a Fort Wayne Northrop sophomore, watched as Kramer went to the locker room for treatment, returned to a roar from the crowd, and almost immediately produced a steal that led to a Purdue basket.

"I saw the 'Play Hard' chart with the Paint Crew," Davis said. "I was trying to figure it out all game. Then once I saw him get that steal and they turned it over, that's when I figured it out."

Purdue's student section still uses that chart. But Davis and other Boilermakers sensed a void between the reputation of those Purdue teams — which played in six straight NCAA tournaments and regularly competed for Big Ten Conference championships — and the ones that struggled to a 31-34 record over the past two seasons, including a last-place Big Ten finish last season.

With a roster still heavy in freshmen and sophomores, Davis and Purdue's other veterans are trying to re-establish that culture.

"I always looked at Purdue and I was like, 'These guys play hard,'" said forward Vince Edwards, one of the Boilermakers' five freshmen. "They played hard all the time, every possession. That's one identity you can never take away from us is playing hard. I always wondered what got them prepped and I got here and I'm like, 'It's real.'"

"I didn't truly know the definition of defense until I got here, that's for sure."

Between the 2006-07 season and 2011-12, Purdue's defensive scoring average never topped 66 points. It finished first or second in the Big Ten in turnover margin five times. In two seasons (2008-09 and 2009-10), they held opponents under 40 percent field goal shooting for the season.

"You've always known Purdue as a tough, physical, blue-collar defensive team," said senior forward Neal Beshears, the last active player who suited up for a Boilermaker NCAA tournament game. "They just got after people and you could tell, nobody else was playing like that."

By last season, that reputation had evaporated. Purdue ranked last among Big Ten teams in scoring defense at 71.7 points per game and forced fewer turnovers than any other Boilermaker team in history.

That drop-off came despite Big Ten All-Defensive Team center A.J. Hammons and his conference-leading 2.5 blocks per game.

Looking back, the Boilermakers say they suffered from a lack of effort and focus, not talent. Lapses on offense led to breakdowns on defense, and vice versa. That explains why Davis and players like junior guard Stephen Toyra took up coach Matt Painter's challenge to set a higher standard of accountability, both for Purdue's returning players and the freshmen they're expected to count on so much.

"They've been on us to pay attention to detail," freshman guard Dakota Mathias said. "The little things — tucking in your shirt, not screwing around when coach is talking. Just paying attention and really taking in everything — that's been a big emphasis."

The older Boilermakers say those freshmen didn't necessarily need much guidance. From the time they stepped on campus in July they've impressed with their willingness to listen and put in extra time in the gym and the film room.

It's no coincidence. Painter made it clear that, based on what he saw the past two seasons, he needed to recruit a different mindset.

"I've never really seen a bunch of guys that like to watch defense and ask so many questions about defense," Davis said of the freshmen. "My freshman year it was far from my mind. They're a good group. They're focused and they're willing to do whatever gets them on the court and they know that's playing hard and playing defense."

Hammons once again forms the Boilermakers' defensive spine, but he'll have help. Isaac Haas, a 7-foot-2, 297-pound freshman from Hokes Bluff, Ala., provides an even more imposing figure in the lane.

It's something Jon Octeus took note of just after transferring from Colorado State in October. The senior, considered a tremendous off-the-ball defender, says Purdue's perimeter players will benefit from a boost of confidence knowing those two trees are always behind them.

"If somebody gets by me, I can just throw my hands up and A.J. will clean him up," said Octeus, who said Purdue's defensive reputation is one reason he thought the program would be a good fit. "It allows you to play more aggressive up at the top. When you don't have those big guys down there, somebody gets past you and it's usually a bucket. When it comes to Isaac and A.J., it kind of relieves the pressure."

Haas is also one reason why Painter surprised many by installing a 2-3 zone defense in the offseason. Haas can anchor the zone while the Boilermakers' long wings — Edwards, Kendall Stephens, Basil Smotherman and others — cut off passing lanes and pressure shooters on the perimeter.

Through two exhibition games the zone remains a work in progress. But it's another example of Painter's insistence that change was necessary, both from the players and from himself, to reverse the program's momentum.

"We've got to get back to that mindset of coming out every night and saying nobody's going to beat us," Hammons said. "Nobody's going to get what they want. Just be that dog where people come in and be scared."

P.J. Thompson focusing on little things

Nathan Baird | Lafayette Journal & Courier | November 4, 2014

Purdue freshman P.J. Thompson knows the path to point guard minutes is a crowded one.

Senior transfer Jon Octeus started 32 games at point guard for Colorado State last season. Improving sophomore Bryson Scott twice earned Big Ten Freshman of the Week honors.

Instead of worrying about increasing his playing time, Thompson said he's trying to maximize the impact of his minutes. He led the Boilermakers with 11 first-half minutes in Sunday's exhibition victory over California (Pa.) and finished with team highs of five assists and four steals.

"My role is to come in the game and really just turn up the energy," said Thompson, who also hit a 3-pointer and scored seven points. "We have lot of depth, so a lot of people are going to get minutes. To stand out you have to do all the little things.

"Ever since high school, middle school, I've been pretty good at doing the little things and paying attention to detail. That's what I did tonight and why I was able to have some success."

At the time it seemed like insurance for the possible (and eventual) departure of two-year starting point guard Ronnie Johnson. But wherever the 5-foot-10, 188-pound Thompson ends up in the rotation, Painter said his court intelligence will make him a contributor.

"I thought he got a couple of steals when guys exposed weakness and showed the basketball," Painter said. "He did a good job of playing smart and making good decisions.

"He plays that way, and that's why we took him. He gives us a guy that can make shots, make decisions, be simple, move the basketball and just be opportunistic."

Thompson entered the exhibition game with California (Pa.) leading 7-2. Just six seconds later, he assisted on an A.J. Hammons 3-pointer, sparking an 11-0 run. Thompson later found Isaac Haas and Basil Smotherman for baskets in the paint.

When Haas was asked what he liked about the way Thompson plans, the 7-foot-2 freshman was only half-joking when he said: "I like how he passes the ball to me."

"It's always good as a big man to be able to bust your tail and get good post position and somebody actually give you the ball," Haas said. "That's what I like most about it, and being able to trust whenever I kick it out that I can either get a better post position and he can kick it back in or he can shoot it. He's an all-around good player."