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Purdue

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Expectations are high for Purdue basketball

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Great Expectations

In his senior season, Chris Kramer hopes to lead Purdue basketball to new heights.

By William Meiners

On the eve of the Big Ten season, with expectations as high as they've been in years, the Purdue men's basketball team is hoping a strong-armed senior guard will help make 2009–10 a season to remember. Chris Kramer, the player in question, brings a football-like intensity to his play on the hardwood. Just a couple of years removed from their nicknamed "Baby Boilers" status, where, as a sophomore, he played alongside a group of talented freshmen, Kramer and company are looking to come of age in the national spotlight.

For Coach Matt Painter, now in his fifth year at the helm of the Purdue program after winning the school's first Big Ten Tournament championship last spring, there's a certain guarded optimism about the conference season and the looming March Madness of the NCAA Tournament. He's looking to his senior backcourt of Kramer and Keaton Grant to help the team stay grounded, focused, and hungry.

"Chris will do a lot of little things to help us win," Painter says. "He's a very good defensive player. He'll dive on the floor for loose balls, he takes charges, and he defers to others. He's just a selfless guy, and when you have all those attributes, it's going to lead to more wins."

Part of helping the team win for Kramer is putting his body on the line. Fans will recall an elbow in the Michigan game last year that broke Kramer's

nose, but hardly slowed him down. He donned a face mask for the remainder of the season and routinely put himself into harm's way.

"Coming in my freshman year, I knew the only way I could play was to be that lockdown defender," Kramer says. "David Teague and Coach [Cuonzo] Martin really pushed me in that direction and it's become part of the defensive player I am today."

Gridiron toughness

A three-sport athlete who also played quarterback in football and pitched and played shortstop in baseball, Kramer says basketball has always been his first love. When a football coach in high school tried to get him to decide and focus on one sport, Susan Kramer, his mother, recalls telling the coach that he wouldn't be happy with her son's decision. "He always liked basketball since he was little," she says. "He would have chosen basketball over football back then if he had to."

Still, he had the chops to be a successful quarterback at Huntington North High School, passing for 1,336 yards and rushing for another 997 yards in his senior season. But with so much at stake during his final year on the hardwood, Kramer hesitates to talk of any football beyond his basketball days (such as suiting up in a fifth football year at Purdue).





On the subject of high basketball expectations, Kramer remains confident, but is perhaps as guarded as his head coach would like him to be. “We have a lot of experience returning,” he says. “We’ve been through the hype. We just have to stay grounded and play every game like it’s our last.”

Painter is hoping for more of the same from his senior backcourt duo. “They just need to continue doing the same things they’ve done before,” he says. “Both of those guys have been great leaders for us, and we’re looking for them to continue with that same leadership. They lead by example. We want them to be vocal and help out younger guys, but the best thing they can do for our program is to lead by example.”

For Kramer that example starts on the defensive end, complete with his gridiron mentality. “When the ball is on the floor it’s like a fumble and you have to go get it,” he says.

Named the Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year as a sophomore, Kramer has been on the conference’s All-Defensive team in each of his first three years. He shattered Purdue’s freshman record with 64 steals, 13 better than the previous record. And while personal goals do not supersede the team’s goals, he is motivated by the chance to be named the league’s top defender again.

Backcourt duo

Though both Kramer and Grant claim to be “non-vocal” leaders, the pair is excited about finishing their senior year on a winning note. “I came in here as a freshman with Keaton and two other guys and now it’s just me and KG,” Kramer says. “Having him back there with me is great. We both know what each other are going to do defensively.”

As a junior it was more of the same for Kramer defensively. He led the Big Ten in steals per game for the second straight season with an average of 2.14. He recorded 75 total steals in the 2008–2009 season — the third best single season total in Boilermaker history. He had at least one steal in 34 of 35 games, extending his mark to 64 of his last 68 outings. And he became the number two man on Purdue’s all-time theft chart with 214 steals. He needs just 45 steals in his senior season to catch Brian Cardinal, the Purdue record-holder.

Junior scorers like Robbie Hummel, JaJuan Johnson, and E’Twaun Moore may fill the basket, but Grant points to Kramer as their true emotional leader. “Chris is just such a presence on defense, getting into those passing lanes. He’s an animated and emotional type person,” says Grant, who likens his friend’s style of play to that of Tim Tebow, the fiery quarterback who has led the University of Florida to a couple of national championships.

“This is our last go-round,” Grant says of their senior campaign. “Each and every day we have to come at each other and make each other better. We have to make sure we take each and every game seriously.”

The “no pain, no gain” philosophy has long been part of Kramer’s approach to basketball, even though sometimes the pain has been almost unbearable. His freshman year, he suffered through compartment syndrome, a painful condition that impairs the blood supply in the lining of muscles. In Kramer’s case, he says it was the most pain he’s felt on a basketball court, literally waiting for his muscles to go numb so he could get back into games.



It is not unusual to see No. 3 Chris Kramer sprawled out on the floor a few times during a Purdue basketball game. His hustle and effort up close is what has landed him a place on the Big Ten's All-Defensive Team for three straight years.

Beyond the hardwood

Just prior to the beginning of the season, Kramer was selected as just one of 30 men's candidates from across the nation for the 2009–10 Lowe's Senior CLASS Award. To be eligible for the award, a student-athlete must be classified as an NCAA Division I senior and have notable achievements in four areas of excellence: classroom, character, community, and competition. An acronym for "Celebrating Loyalty and Achievement for Staying in School," the Lowe's Senior CLASS Award focuses on the total student-athlete and encourages students to use their platform in athletics to make a positive impact as leaders in their communities.

The list of candidates will be narrowed to 10 finalists midway through the regular season, with those names comprising the official ballot. Ballots will be distributed through a nationwide voting system to media, coaches, and fans, who will select one finalist who best exemplifies the award's criteria. Lowe's will announce the Senior CLASS Award winner at the 2010 NCAA Final Four in Indianapolis.

The potential Lowe's honor bodes well for the organizational leadership and supervision major who wants to make a difference beyond the basketball court. Also a two-time Academic All-Big Ten (2008, 2009) member, Kramer appears to personify the ideal student-athlete.

Still a nice guy by day and a lockdown defender on game days, Kramer will undoubtedly spend at least part of his senior season sidestepping questions about a future in football. But both his coach and his father are optimistic that basketball will still win out.

"I think there's a place for him in professional basketball," Painter says. "What level, I don't know. He's helped us win at the Big Ten level, and we were the only Big Ten school to make an offer to him. When you put doubt on guys that are that competitive, they normally prove you wrong. Who wouldn't want somebody who can defend like him, who's tough, hard-nosed, and can bring all those intangibles to your team?"

"I'm sure he would love to go to the NBA and he's talked about playing overseas," says Jon Kramer, who likes his son's chances when so many experts and media outlets are touting him as one of the top college defenders in the land.

"He'd make a great defensive back in football," Painter says of his player's move to the other sport. "I'm not a football guy, but I would question his speed in comparison to guys who play at that level. He's fast in the open court basketball-wise, but to see him do a shuttle run or a 40 in cleats, on turf, I think there would be a difference. I know he would not shy away from contact. He'd be a great kickoff return guy. Whether he's a linebacker or a defensive back would depend on his speed. He really enjoyed playing football, and I know he'd entertain the thought."

And though he may not entertain thoughts of football until sometime beyond next March, perhaps Purdue football head coach Danny Hope might have a short walk on a recruiting trip to see about the possibilities of a hard-nosed defender strapping on a helmet. Until then, at least through the remaining Big Ten season and whatever awaits in the post season, Kramer will continue to draw comparisons between basketball and football.

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