

2/20/2012: State of the Big Ten, Volume 56 (premium)

Every Monday, we will be running a weekly series titled "State of the Big Ten," which will be made available to all members of HawkeyeDrive.com. This series of columns will focus on one major headline regarding the conference and go in-depth on the subject at hand.

By Brendan Stiles

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After further examination of what transpired over the past weekend in West Lafayette, Ind., Purdue head coach Matt Painter made a pair of wise decisions regarding player personnel and he deserves credit for making such decisions at such a crucial point in the season.

Purdue guard D.J. Byrd was arrested by Indiana State Police on charges of public intoxication following an incident that took place at a West Lafayette bar. As a result, Byrd was suspended from playing in Purdue's 76-62 loss to Michigan State over the weekend at Mackey Arena.

But the suspension wasn't the only punishment handed down by Painter. With Byrd at the time of his arrest was forward Kelsey Barlow, a player who had prior baggage since becoming a Boilermaker. While Barlow wasn't arrested, his involvement was enough for Painter to dismiss him from the program altogether.

Now there could be ongoing debate as to why both Byrd and Barlow were out at bars late night as they were in-season, but that's another story for another time. No, here's what ought to be considered.

Painter could've left Purdue last spring when Missouri came

offering with its then-vacant head coaching position, and he chose to stay in charge of the Boilermakers. He made the commitment to his players. Some of his players, evidently, didn't reciprocate the favor back.

Also consider Purdue's standing as a bubble team. On one hand, the Boilermakers have separated themselves enough from the Big Ten's middle pack that they ought to be a safe bet as far as making the NCAA tournament is concerned. But with that said, it's also not as though Purdue has really stood apart from others on a national level.

With that in mind, Painter needed to exert himself and use this incident as a reminder that he's in charge. Purdue has lost games this season that have left some of its fans in a state of disbelief. The last thing he needs right now is anything suggesting to those on the outside that Purdue might be unstable.

Byrd will get a chance to redeem himself, and the Boilermakers have a chance to grow from this episode. Given Painter's background and track record since becoming head coach, there's no reason to think they can't build off this and gain momentum entering the NCAA tournament.

Right now, Purdue's in a favorable spot as the No. 6 seed in the Big Ten tournament. It's favorable in the sense that the No. 6 seed has reached the championship game each of the last two seasons. Any sort of run two weeks from now in nearby Indianapolis, and the Boilermakers would be a lock for March Madness.

This is a situation that could have gotten uglier than it did. If Barlow's dismissal and Byrd's suspension from a game Purdue probably wouldn't have won with him is the worst, then it's not all bad in West Lafayette.

There are situations around the country where coaches in similar predicaments as a bubble team are seeing their seasons

spiral out of control (see Illinois for Exhibit A). Painter's hard-line stance during this time ought to resonate within that locker room going forward, and with players like Robbie Hummel leading the way, there's no reason to think Purdue won't have a run in them assuming everyone's on the same page again.

Not every coach would do what Painter did with three weeks left before the NCAA tournament. That's why he ought to be commended for what he did.