

1937-55: High highs and low lows

Allen “Mal” Elward was an assistant with the Boilermakers for 10 years before taking over as interim head coach for the ailing Noble Kizer in August of 1937. Elward was regarded as a keen technician and credited with having a key role in the rise of Purdue football over the previous decade. He had head coaching experience – in high school, the armed services (he was a U.S. Navy pilot during World War I), and at Grinnell College and John Carroll University.

Elward’s unique nickname stemmed from his youth, when his French class teacher asked him what “mal” meant. Elward, apparently daydreaming about football, responded that he did not know, to which his teacher snapped, “It means bad, and you’re the limit.” His classmates were struck by the word, and he was known as “Mal” thereafter.

Like his two predecessors at Purdue, Elward played at Notre Dame. The native of New Brunswick, Canada, was an end from 1912 to 1915, backing up Knute Rockne for two years before becoming a starter his junior and senior seasons.

Purdue went 5-1-2 during the 1938 season and tied Michigan for second place in the Big Ten with a 3-1-1 mark. But, after achieving winning records for a stretch of 12 of 14 seasons (and breakeven marks the other two years), the Boilermakers dropped to 2-6 in 1940.

Elward, who assumed the role of athletics director upon Kizer’s death in July of 1940, resigned to enlist in the Navy following the 1941 season.

On Feb. 25, 1942, Purdue named Guy “Red” Mackey athletics director and Elmer Burnham football coach. Mackey played end for the Boilermakers from 1926 to 1928 and was an assistant football coach from 1931 to 1942, while Burnham had been the freshman football coach the previous seven years. Previously, Burnham was a successful prep coach at Central High School in South Bend, Indiana, posting a 118-30-8 record.

During World War II, many schools dropped football due to a lack of able bodies, and service teams emerged. Purdue stayed the course in 1942, despite a roster of 42 players, but

managed to win just one game.

The V-12 Navy College Training Program was initiated in 1943 to supplement commissioned officers’ duty in World War II. Between July 1, 1943, and June 30, 1946, more than 125,000 men enrolled in the program at 131 colleges and universities across the United States. V-12 participants were required to carry 17 credit hours and 9 1/2 hours of physical training each week. Purdue had such a program, and the football program benefitted from the addition of seven naval trainees and 26 marine trainees.

The 1943 Boilermakers finished 9-0, shared the Big Ten championship with Michigan (both 6-0) and were ranked fifth in the final AP poll.

In May of 1944, Burnham, a native of West Newbury, Mass., resigned to become head coach and associate professor of physical education at the University of Rochester.

Purdue tabbed Cecil Isbell as its next coach, and he became the second alum to guide the Boilermakers. Isbell played for the Boilermakers from 1935 to 1937 and the Green Bay Packers from 1937

to 1942 before returning to his alma mater as an assistant under Burnham in 1943.

In 1946, Purdue limped home with a 2-6-1 record. The Boilermakers did not win any of their six Big Ten games, going winless in conference play for the first time since 1925. Isbell resigned in February of 1947 to become head coach of the Baltimore Colts in the year-old All-American Football Conference that sought to challenge the National Football League.

Fifty years before Joe Tiller brought “basketball on grass” to Purdue football, the Boilermakers hired a basketball coach to be their football coach. Stu Holcomb, the head basketball coach at Army, was hired March 1, 1947. He also was a football assistant at West Point and previously had been the head coach at Findlay College,



Elmer Burnham



Stu Holcomb

Muskingum College, Washington & Jefferson College and Miami University. Holcomb was a fullback and halfback at Ohio State from 1929 to 1931, serving as team captain his senior season.

Holcomb stayed at Purdue for nine seasons – the most of any coach up to that point and still the third-most in school history – and his tenure has been described accurately as a “roller coaster ride.” The Boilermakers posted a 35-42-4 overall record, including a 25-26-2 mark in conference play. They had five winning campaigns but never won more than five games in a season. Twice Purdue managed merely two victories.

Holcomb’s high point was the 1952 campaign. Heading into the final day of the season, four teams were in the running for the Big Ten championship: Purdue, Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota. The Boilermakers defeated Indiana 21-16 at Ross-Ade Stadium, Wisconsin and Minnesota tied 21-21, and Michigan lost to Ohio State 27-7, leaving Purdue and Wisconsin as co-champions with 4-1-1 conference records.

The co-championship meant the conference athletics directors had to vote to determine “what team best would represent the Big Ten in the Rose Bowl.” Purdue’s overall record was 4-3-2, while Wisconsin was 6-2-1. The teams did not face one another during the season.

Wisconsin was the choice and, although the results were not made public, it was believed to be at least 7-3 in favor of the Badgers. The announcement came Nov. 24 on what was called “Blue Monday” around Purdue.

Speculation grew immediately after the 1955 season that Holcomb would leave Purdue to become athletics director at Northwestern. He did on Dec. 9, with four years left on his contract. Holcomb asked one of his assistant coaches at Purdue, Jack Mollenkopf, to accompany him to Northwestern as assistant athletics director. But Mollenkopf also was a candidate to replace Holcomb as head coach of the Boilermakers, and he was awarded that job on Dec. 12.

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