

Why the 2016 Nittany Lions and the 2017-18 Sixers Are Absolutely Identical
By: Connor Griffin
Winter 2019

I'm a die-hard Penn Stater and a longtime 76ers fan, and a shocking parallel has come to my attention regarding these two teams. I watched every second of the 2016 Penn State football season, which was, of course, capped off with a Big Ten Championship for the Nittany Lions. I also have spent a great deal of time watching/evaluating the new-look 76ers, including every game of their 2017-18 postseason run. And I can't help but notice that the 2016 Penn State football team and the 2017-18 Sixers team are absolutely identical. Hear me out.

Both teams had relatively-inexperienced coaches who were asked to do the impossible

When Bill O'Brien was named Penn State's head football coach in 2012, he inherited a team in horrendous condition, to say the least. The most extensive sanctions in NCAA history had just been imposed on the program in wake of the Jerry Sandusky scandal. These sanctions included, but were not limited to, a massive reduction of scholarships, a four-year bowl ban, and a new rule that allowed Penn State players to forgo the one year without play typically associated with transfer athletes. If somebody wished to transfer, they could leave without penalty and play for any other school the very next day. This rule, in retrospect, created Bill O'Brien's most difficult challenge: To keep the team united and to keep the environment stable.

It was James Franklin whose most difficult challenge was to actually produce on the field. O'Brien had winning records in both of his two seasons, which was shocking to fans and to the college football world, as a whole. Nobody expected a guy in that situation to even come close to that level of success. Now, just two years removed from the sanctions being imposed, the pressure was on Franklin to raise the bar.

But people failed to acknowledge the very nature of the sanctions. They weren't meant to destroy the program on the first day of their enactment. If you could minimize the amount of players transferring and maintain the core of your team, you'd be fine at first. Why? Because you'd still have roughly 85 scholarship players in your junior and senior classes. You could still compete at a high level for a couple of years because you would have a fully-loaded group of skilled and experienced leaders on the depth chart. Penn State, luckily, attested to that.

The sanctions were intended to eat away at Penn State's program and destroy it over time. With every season that went by and with every recruiting class comprised of only 65 scholarship athletes, the difficulty of putting together a winning football team was heightened. James Franklin knew this firsthand, but the majority of the outside world didn't. Excellence was expected right off the bat, which, even aside from the sanctions, was absurd. It takes time to breed a winning culture in college football. Heck, Tom Herman is now heading into year three at Texas, the biggest college football brand in the country, and is still struggling to bring the program back to prominence amongst the country's elite.

Franklin's few inherited stars had to become acclimated to a brand new coaching staff and a brand new system. Some of these stars, like Christian Hackenberg, didn't fit the system at all. Then you add in the fact that this was only Franklin's second head coaching gig and his first at

an elite program with a rich history of success, and you can see how all the odds were stacked against him right from the jump.

Brett Brown didn't step into an environment nearly as hostile as James Franklin, but he, like Franklin, was given quite a tall task—to be the leader of arguably the worst team in Sixers franchise history. He, too, had little head coaching experience; his only time as a head coach was spent over in Australia. Sure, he had spent a lot of time learning from Gregg Popovich in San Antonio, but Philadelphia was a lot different than San Antonio at the time. A lot.

The Sixers' 2012-13 campaign ended with a 34-48 record, which was a fairly manageable foundation for Brett Brown to build upon when he stepped into the head coaching gig the following season. However, the most instrumental piece to that foundation had departed in the same offseason as Brown's arrival. Jrue Holiday was the Sixers' leader in points, assists, and minutes played, but the All-Star point guard was traded to the New Orleans Pelicans during the 2013 NBA Draft. The team had lost its warrior, its leader, and its glue.

Sure enough, Philadelphia was an abysmal 19-63 in Brett Brown's first year. Michael Carter-Williams was believed to be the savior of the franchise—the one who would ultimately bring the Sixers back to greatness. Just as a side note, this is the same Michael Carter-Williams who has been on five teams in his six-year career. The same Michael Carter-Williams who is currently scoring a mere 4.3 points a game. And the same Michael Carter-Williams who is the third person to pop up when you type in “Michael Car...” on Google (Michael Carbanaro, a magician, and Michael Carroll, a winner of the UK National Lottery, come before him).

The following season, things got even gloomier for Brown. He lost Evan Turner and Thaddeus Young, two additional pieces to whatever foundation Brown had left. With Turner's and Young's departure, the Sixers had officially lost every single component of their playoff team from a few years prior, and the message became quite clear. Philly was going to rebuild. It would be a rebuild unlike any that had come before it, and it would be categorized by one word: tank.

Both James Franklin and Brett Brown entered uncharted territory. Neither had a great deal of head coaching experience, yet both were asked to take over programs in disarray. Each of their respective programs wanted to get back to the top, but the journey to get there had never been traveled before. The struggles were unprecedented.

Both teams had two young stars leading the charge

In 2016, Penn State was the fifth-youngest team in all of college football. Between offense and defense, there were only four seniors (in terms of eligibility years) starting for the Lions. These four seniors were among just nine seniors on Penn State's entire depth chart. It was very clear that some of the younger players needed to take on the mantle of a leader in order for this team to function.

Fortunately for James Franklin and company, they had two of the greatest leaders Penn State would ever see in their backfield: Quarterback Trace McSorley and running back Saquon Barkley. Barkley had started as a freshman, having already burst onto the scene with a 194-yard performance against the #1 ranked Buckeyes in 2015. Coming into his sophomore season, people

knew what to expect from 26; the 230-pound running back was bound to succeed on any team he played for. What they didn't know is just how well he would gel with Trace McSorley.

Unlike Barkley, McSorley had never started a game. He had been Christian Hackenberg's understudy during his freshman season, and he rarely got to see the field. His most considerable amount of playing time came in the TaxSlayer Bowl when Hackenberg had to leave the game due to a shoulder injury. McSorley led Penn State, down 24-3 at one point, on a ferocious comeback that included 14 completions, 142 yards, and two touchdowns for the freshman QB. The ball was even in McSorley's hands late with a chance to tie the game, but the Lions fell short 24-17. Regardless, Trace McSorley was the story of the day.

How would he fare as the full-time starter? Well, in 2016, he threw for 3,614 yards and 29 touchdowns; both of those feats were Penn State single-season records. Saquon Barkley had an even better season than he did in his freshman year, rushing for 18 touchdowns and just under 1,500 yards. He also added in 402 yards receiving, including four receptions that led him to the endzone.

McSorley and Barkley took the college football world by storm. They were the ultimate one-two punch. They set the standard for the Penn State program, and they were the ones who put the Nittany Lions back on the map.

The Sixers had two young stars of their own, but this time around, they were actual stars (sorry again, Michael Carter-Williams). Ben Simmons sat out for the entirety of the Sixers' 2016-17 season due to a fracture in his right foot. Fans had high expectations for the LSU product when he was selected #1 in the draft, and these expectations rose after a full year of preparation and getting back to full strength. Simmons did not disappoint when he finally got onto the floor, as he averaged 15.8 points per game, 8.2 assists, and 8.1 rebounds. He also had 12 total triple-doubles, which placed him third in the league behind LeBron James and Russell Westbrook. His impressive stat-line and leadership ultimately earned him Rookie of the Year in a season filled with unbelievable first-year talent.

His co-star had also been bogged down by injuries during his initial time in the league. Drafted in 2014, Joel Embiid had to sit out for the following two seasons. He, too, had a severe foot problem, and, for a significant amount of time, it was questionable whether or not he would play at all. He was viewed by many as a bust—a worse version of Greg Oden. But the seven-foot center was able to showcase his superstar potential as soon as he laced it up for the Sixers in their 2016-17 campaign.

He only played 31 games in that season, and on top of that, he was on a heavy minutes-restriction. Heading into the following year, Philadelphia made it clear that Embiid was going to play throughout a larger portion of the season, but his minutes were still going to be limited. Embiid made the most of his time on the court, having only been allowed to play roughly 30 minutes a game. He averaged 22.9 points, which can also be expressed as 0.75 points per minute. If he maintained this scoring rate throughout the entirety of his career, he'd be the third-highest scorer per minute in NBA history (George Gervin had 0.78 and Michael Jordan had 0.787).

Embiid grabbed 11 rebounds a game, as well. He was so extraordinary in his limited time that he earned a bid as an All-Star starter in just his second NBA season.

Ben Simmons was a 6'10" point guard who could dish so effortlessly. Joel Embiid was a monster by the basket, as every NBA center should be, but he could also pull up from beyond the arc and hit consistently. They were both revolutionary for their respective positions, as were Trace McSorley and Saquon Barkley. More importantly, these two tandems turned their programs into must-watch television across the country. What they were doing was so unparalleled, which brings us to our third point...

Both teams were highly entertaining, mainly due to their increased explosiveness

In 2015, Penn State averaged 23.2 points per game; out of 128 FBS teams, they finished 101st in scoring. It was clear that a change needed to be made. James Franklin decided to bring in Fordham head coach Joe Moorhead to be the Nittany Lions' new offensive coordinator. Tasked with the challenge of ramping up production, Moorhead quickly found a way to utilize Penn State's key weapons and to reawaken this dormant offense.

Trace McSorley, in 2016, threw for an average of 9.3 yards per attempt, which, in that category, placed him sixth in the nation and second amongst Power Five QBs (Oklahoma's Baker Mayfield averaged 11.1 yards per attempt). Penn State elected to throw the ball downfield so consistently that the biggest critique of McSorley was "he only knew how to chuck up 50-50 balls". In total, the Penn State offense scored 63 touchdowns throughout the 2016 season, and 23 of those touchdowns (36.5%) came on plays of 25 yards or more. They were also electric in the second half, beating their opponents 326-130 in the third and fourth quarters throughout the season.

But aside from the second-half domination and the highlight-reel touchdowns, the bottom line was that Penn State was scoring at a rate beyond what anybody thought was possible. In the Big Ten Championship Game, they hung 38 on a top-five defense in Wisconsin. In the Rose Bowl, they hung 49 on USC, a team that had only given up 27+ points twice, with one of those times coming against Alabama. Those 63 total touchdowns were 28 more than what Penn State had garnered in 2015. Consequently, their average points per game in 2016 rose by 14.4 points—more than two touchdowns every game. Penn State was no longer a defensive team; they were no longer "Linebacker U". They were officially a force to be reckoned with on the offensive side of the ball.

The Sixers scored roughly 110 points a game in 2017-18, which was their highest average in 28 years. They were the 3rd best scoring team in the East, despite a non-reliance on the three-pointer. The two Eastern Conference teams ahead of Philly in scoring, Cleveland and Toronto, both ranked top-five in the league in three-point attempts. The Sixers were pretty middle-of-the-pack when it came to the trey ball; they were 12th in the league in both three-pointers made and three-pointers attempted. The art of the assist was, ultimately, what allowed the Sixers to find success on the offensive side of the floor.

Philadelphia placed second in the league in total assists. Ben Simmons set the tone for the offense in this regard, as his pass-first style of play was not only intriguing to watch, but also infectious for this young ball club. This was not Houston launching up 42 threes a game and hoping for the best; this was a group of guys endlessly working the ball around to try and get the

best shot possible. It was so refreshing to see in this age of the NBA—unselfish people working hard to create opportunities for their teammates.

This hardworking mentality translated over to the defensive end, as well; the Sixers were back to being a scrappy team again. They fought relentlessly on defense, holding their opponents to a shooting percentage of .434—the lowest opponent shooting percentage in the league. As a result of this, the Sixers also had more total rebounds than any other team, allowing them to limit their opponents' possessions and to create more scoring chances for themselves. There's an old saying in sports: Good defense leads to good offense. That was certainly the case for Philly during this season.

Because of their ability to play complementary basketball, the Sixers finished the season with the fourth-highest margin of victory in the league. This was despite the fact that Philadelphia was barely even a playoff team at the All-Star Break. They clutched onto 8th place in the East with a 30-25 record, which, for the Sixers' standards, was remarkable. But compared to the rest of the league, their record was fairly average, and it wasn't as if they were steamrolling teams in their relatively fewer wins. It was their performance after the All-Star Break that solidified the Sixers as a dominant force in the East. They won 22 of 27 games, including a 16-game win streak to end the regular season.

Philadelphia was the talk of the NBA. Penn State was the talk of college football. Both were making history in their own ways, but both were defined by a young, talented core with the potential to detonate at any second. It was unbelievable entertainment.

Both teams experienced premature success

The Nittany Lions went 7-6 in James Franklin's first two seasons. As stated earlier, they played in the TaxSlayer Bowl in 2015. In 2014, they played in the Pinstripe Bowl. Penn State lost to Northwestern, Maryland, Illinois, and Temple in those two years. And they also lost by 28 to Ohio State and by 39 to Michigan State. This was not the Penn State people were accustomed to, and this was not a program people had high expectations for.

To win eleven games after a pair of mediocre seasons like the Lions had was bizarre. Nobody could've anticipated the success that came Penn State's way in 2016. I mean, come on. A win over #2 Ohio State? A Big Ten East Championship over Meyer and Harbaugh? A Big Ten Championship over #6 Wisconsin? A spot away from being in the College Football Playoff? A trip to the Rose Bowl as the #5 team in the country? It was all so ludicrous.

There's a rhythm to rebuilding in college football. No team is expected to go from seven wins to eleven wins in the span of a year; that's just not how college football works. Penn State was far ahead of schedule, especially if you consider, again, just how young this team really was.

In 2017, the Sixers were one year removed from a 28-54 season, and they were two years removed from a 10-72 season—a season that will be remembered as one of the worst ever in the NBA (their win percentage in 2015-16 is currently the third-lowest in league history). Naturally, it should take some time to get back to being a contender after experiencing that level of dysfunction. But, for the Sixers, it didn't.

They won 52 games in 2017-18, which was a 24-game spike from the season prior. They went from being the 14th seed in the East to the 3rd. They had a better playoff seeding than LeBron and the Cavaliers. They clinched homecourt advantage for the first round of the playoffs. They won a playoff series in five games. All of this happened in Ben Simmons' rookie season. And Joel Embiid? He wasn't even fully healthy.

These two programs were relevant all of a sudden...*really* relevant. To put it in Wall Street terms, their stocks had skyrocketed in such a short period of time, and fans across the nation were buying like crazy. Why? Because they were the new, hot stock on the market. But one thing was certain: These stocks were no blue-chips; they were no Apple or Disney. Not even close.

Both teams dealt with unrealistic expectations moving forward

“Penn State returns all their starters next year. They're going to compete for a national championship.”

Really? Look, I'm a homer, but the fact that people were commenting along these lines was absurd. Penn State was still feeling the effects of the sanctions heading into the 2017 season. The inability to recruit had caused a multitude of problems for the program.

They didn't have a top-tier offensive line, and they certainly didn't have a top-tier defensive line. I never played competitive football, but I'm fairly confident that those are two very important things to have if you want to compete for a national championship.

Sure, the 2017 Penn State football team had a ton of capacity in their starting skill positions, but the roster, as a whole, had no depth. They couldn't even beat Ohio State in their own conference, so what made people think that they were built to take on Alabama? Or Georgia? Or Clemson?

This team was insanely talented—probably the most talented Penn State team I've seen take the field in my lifetime. Out of 1,807 total plays, they led for 1,523 of them; they were ahead on 84% of their snaps throughout the entire season. They came so close to making it in the Playoff—just four points away—but even if they did, would they have had a legitimate shot at a title? My answer would be no. Despite what the 2016 team showed us, Penn State was never going to compete for a national championship in 2017. The program just wasn't ready yet.

“From this point forward, the Sixers are coming out of the East, and they're gonna go toe-to-toe with Golden State in the Finals”

Now I hate the Warriors as much as the next guy, but this belief held by certain fans and even certain members of the media was ridiculous. The Warriors are a dynasty; they've won three titles in four years. This type of talk was insulting to everything that Golden State had built. More importantly, it put too much pressure on a team that was still trying to rise out of past chaos.

Very similar to how Penn State couldn't even make it past Ohio State, Philadelphia couldn't even make it past Boston. They lost to the Celtics in five games, and that was with Kyrie Irving on the bench. I also think it's significant to remind you of how that series actually panned out.

Game 1: No contest. 117-101 Celtics.

Game 2: Sixers blew a 22-point lead. 108-103 Celtics.

Game 3: Turnovers gave Boston the game. 101-98 Celtics.

Game 4: Philly finally won. 103-92 Sixers.

Game 5: The more disciplined team pulled it out in crunch time. 114-112 Celtics.

That wasn't even a series. Boston was the better team by a mile. They had better shooters, better depth, a better system, and a better head coach; Philly simply couldn't compete. And for the record, these teams have squared off twice since that playoff matchup—once on 2018 Opening Night, when the Sixers lost 105-87, and once on Christmas Day, when the Sixers lost 121-114. That's six losses in the last seven games against Boston. And people thought Philadelphia was going to contend for a title? Ben Simmons still doesn't have a jumpshot and Joel Embiid still gets gassed in fourth quarters. The Sixers have a ways to go, even with the acquisition of Jimmy Butler. But it's hard for people to see that, as it was hard for people to see with Penn State.

--

These two teams were carbon copies of one another—young, dynamic, star-driven teams that rose above peril to find themselves in a conversation they had no business being a part of. While it was absurd of fans and media to expect so much of young coaches and young players going forward, one thing is for sure: These programs aren't going anywhere. They will continue to build, and they will, one day, reach ultimate success. And when they do, they'll have these teams to thank for getting them there.