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Mr. Basketball an honor for Penn's Markus Burton, a win for South Bend-Mishawaka area



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This one is for the kid they still call “Fat Fat,” a nickname that stuck early in life because he loved to eat.

In some ways, in basketball ways, Penn High School senior Markus Burton started this season eating — filling his hoops plate in a way that no high school boys’ basketball player could — and never stopped.

He always was hungry; his plate always was full.

Night after night, game after game, Burton returned to the basketball court for more, more, more. On snowy Friday nights in the Northern Indiana Conference. On Saturday afternoon non-conference road trips. In this case, instead of meats and sweets and treats on Burton's plate, it was buckets and rebounds and assists and wins.

All of it allowed Burton to stand there Wednesday evening in an auditorium on the campus of Butler University and go where no boys’ basketball player from St. Joseph County had gone for 45 years. He stood alone and rightfully so as the best high school senior boys' basketball player in a basketball state.

He stood as Indiana Mr. Basketball.

IHSAA boys basketball: See who made 2023 Indiana All-Stars roster

As the announcement was made official over the theater sound system, all Burton heard was “*Markus.*” Everything else after became a blur. The ultimate adrenaline rush. Like hitting a game-winning shot. Only way better.

“My heart was beating so fast,” he said. “Once I heard my name, I was like, ‘Oh, yeah.’ I could stop being nervous. After that, I was so happy.”

Seeing one of our own on that stage in a suit and a tie and fresh sneakers holding that coveted No. 1 jersey seemed so surreal — except it wasn’t. It was special, but so normal. If you watched Burton play this season, it was obvious. It didn’t matter if it was the first quarter against Jimtown or the fourth quarter against Mishawaka Marian — nobody in the state was better. Nobody.

Nobody had a bigger year than the 6-foot-1, 170-pounder. He led the state in scoring (30.3 ppg.). He scored a school record 909 points. He finished his prep career as the leading scorer in St. Joseph County history (2,273), good for 20th in state history.

If there was a win to get, he’d get it. If there was a record to break, he’d break it. Yep, he was Indiana Mr. Basketball long before Wednesday’s pomp-and-circumstance down south. It was the final chapter in an unbelievable career that no one saw coming.

“I realized I could be Mr. Basketball during the season,” Burton said by cell on the car ride home from Indianapolis. “I realized it pretty early, but I never said anything. I wanted to stay humble and keep the team getting better.”

How did he get better?

“I was a competitor, a fighter, someone who didn’t like to lose,” Burton said. “I’d do anything for our team to win.”

He did a lot.

Funny that Burton admitted he was nervous heading into Wednesday's coronation. He had this one locked down even before he arrived. Burton was one of six Mr. Basketball finalists. Also considered were power forward Xavier Booker (Indianapolis Cathedral), swingman Myles Colvin (Heritage Christian), power forward Zane Doughty (Ben Davis), swingman Joey Hart (Linton-Stockton) and forward Mason Jones (Valparaiso).

Nothing against those five, who are all probably fine fellows, but they didn’t stand a chance. This was as over as over gets — and likely early. Somewhere before Penn’s 28-2 season ended with a semistate championship loss to Kokomo, sometime before Ben Davis won the Class 4-A title, Burton was the ridiculous favorite.

The votes showed it. Burton was No. 1 on 171 ballots. Booker was No. 1 on 20. What regional bias? Burton’s name and his game were too good to ignore, regardless of zip code. If Burton

hadn't won, they might have just done away with the award. It would've been a farce.

Been a long time for us up North

This one is for Burton and all the effort and energy he spilled to get here, but this one also was for us up here where Indiana Mr. Basketball time seemingly forgot. Nobody up this way had been crowned Indiana's best since former South Bend LaSalle standout Dave Magley earned the honor in 1978. Back before the 3-point line and class basketball. Back before Penn became **PENN**. Long before a thin, somewhat undersized kid came along and started doing basketball stuff that nobody around the area — around the state — could mirror.

Noie: Penn guard Markus Burton is the best in Indiana, and it shouldn't even be close

Ninety minutes after he heard his name called, Burton still couldn't quite comprehend Wednesday. Some 146 miles separate the Butler campus and Burton's home, where he was headed late Wednesday night. He'd need to traverse every mile of U.S. 31 to let everything that had just happen sink in.

"It's hit a little bit," he said. It's been great."

For a reminder, he could ask to see that coveted No. 1 jersey. He gave it to someone special to hold on the ride back.

"My mom wanted it," he said.

Maybe somewhere in Howard County or the restaurant/gas station at the top of the hill in Peru or Marshall County as home neared, it would feel real, and he'd understand what had happened back at Butler. He could look out into the open spaces of Indiana, out into the darkness with lightning in the distance and smile.

He's Mr. Basketball.

Nobody would believe it had it not been for the announcement, the pictures, the interviews, the accolades. For one night, the guard could let his down and soak it all in. For so long, it had been a concept too foreign to consider. Burton as the state's best? That little guy? Come on.

So many other basketball standouts had come before him who never even sniffed the honor. Guys like Cedric Moodie out at Washington and Jaraan Cornell up at Clay. Marian's Demetrius Jackson was a McDonald's All-American and a Top 30 college prospect. He didn't

earn Mr. Basketball his senior season. There were so many players from Michiana who scored a lot of points and won a lot of games and did basketball things that few could who never had the chance that Burton had Wednesday.

That's not lost on Burton.

"It means a lot that I'm one of the all-time greats in Indiana," he said. "It means a lot to us in Northern Indiana. We're a small area that always get overlooked."

Come June, it will be the next basketball step

Hours after Mike Brey announced in January that he would not coach Notre Dame next season, hours before one of Penn's biggest home games of the year against Marian, Burton fretted over his future. Would he have to reopen his college recruitment? Would the hometown school want the hometown kid? He was worried, but for no reason.

If new Irish coach Micah Shrewsberry would keep anyone who signed last fall, it would be Burton. It *had* to be Burton. It will be Burton. Eventually, basketball will take Burton to the Notre Dame campus and summer school. A college basketball career awaits.

"I can't wait to play for him," Burton said of Shrewsberry.

Burton will be the first Indiana Mr. Basketball to play at Notre Dame since 2009 when former Washington High School standout Luke Zeller closed his collegiate career. Zeller earned Indiana Mr. Basketball in 2005.

Burton will be the third Indiana Mr. Basketball to play at Notre Dame since 2000. The last point guard to do it was former Indianapolis Pike standout Chris Thomas. A four-year starter, Thomas ranks fourth in Notre Dame history for points (2,195), first in assists (833), steals (244) and minutes played (4,814). He started all 128 games of his collegiate career and has the only triple-double in Notre Dame history, recorded in his first collegiate game.

Tribune All-Area boys basketball: Markus Burton, Aaron Wolfe lauded for hardwood excellence

How might Burton's career unfold right down the road? Just the thought of what he *could* do should send a surge of electricity through a program that has long labored on generator power. Season tickets anyone?

For Burton, Wednesday was a long day. It would bring a short night of sleep. He might not even sleep. All the text messages and phone calls and DMs would keep him running like no can of Monster could. Another call to take here, another text there. Emojis and energy everywhere.

“My phone’s blitzing right now,” Burton said. “It’s so crazy.”

It’s so worth it.

Burton’s the best in Indiana. That’s not something he nor anybody in South Bend/Mishawaka will take for granted anytime soon. Maybe ever. It feels so right. It feels really good.

Fat Fat made sure of that.

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