

PSU Plays Sloppily in Season Opener

Zach Mills and strong third quarter defense help Lions escape with a victory, 27-24

BY Pete Strella
Capital Times Assistant Layout Editor

Penn State's season opener against Central Florida was supposed to provide fans with a lot of answers. Instead, a 27-24 victory over the mediocre Golden Knights has the Penn State faithful asking more questions.

At times, PSU resembled the likes of a rag-tag arena league team from the backwoods of Schenectady. Kick returners Bryant Johnson and Tony Johnson each fumbled once, resulting in a turnover. Penn State's second play from scrimmage saw quarterback Zach Mills pitch a ball that landed five yards to the right of running back Larry Johnson. Equipment problems, another lost fumble, and a lack of continuity plagued the Nittany Lions in a game they could have easily lost.

But let's not jump the gun. After all, it was only the season opener. Mistakes like these are common the first time a team steps on the field. The bottom line is they won the game. That's better than the last two seasons when they began 0-4 and 1-4 respectively. And even though Penn State made about a half-dozen more mental errors than should be expected, they do have an off-week to tie up the loose ends. The bad news is that those ends could unravel against the powerhouse Nebraska Cornhuskers, the eighth-ranked team in the country. The blue and white will have to prove that they are worthy of their surprise twenty-third ranking, something they didn't do too well against Central Florida.

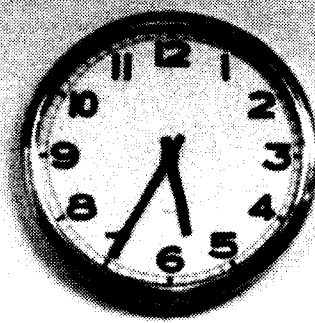
On the bright side, the UCF game showed that Zach Mills is maturing at a respectable pace. Although his numbers weren't spectacular (13-20 for 194 yards), they were solid enough to get the "W." Mills also displayed his knack for making big plays, especially in third and long situations. Playmaking is a characteristic that was sorely lacking during the 2000 season and the first half of last year, before Mills led the team to a 5-2 finish. In addition, Mills didn't turn the ball over.

The defense will need some work. They couldn't get to UCF's quarterback the entire first half. The Golden Knight's Ryan Schnieder was able to sit comfortably in the pocket and complete 15 of 21 passes in the first thirty minutes.

The third quarter showed that PSU's defense has the potential to be solid. Defensive end Michael Haynes recorded two sacks and the defense caused two turnovers. But then they did an about-face in the fourth quarter and allowed a 27-9 advantage to slip to 27-24. The young secondary and an average line-backing core will need to step up and be consistent.

The Nittany Lions didn't show me enough to forget the bad memories of the past two losing seasons. Images of Matt Seneca throwing the ball 10-yards over the intended receiver still loom in the back of our minds. It got so bad last year that Seneca became a scapegoat for everything that went wrong at Penn State campuses, even if it was unrelated to football. If a girl spilled her can of beast light at a frat party, she would blame it on Seneca and most likely get away with it. If a student went to a professor and said, "I don't have my paper that was due today because Matt Seneca stole my book," the professor would grant an extension in full confidence. Sometimes I feel bad for Seneca. The poor kid had to transfer across the country to avoid being ostracized by the student body.

While Matt Seneca is no Zach Mills, Penn State is no Nebraska. The Lions won't make as many mental errors as they did against UCF, but they'll lose another close one, 31-24. Then many questions will be answered. Mainly, that Penn State will be good, but not good enough to appease the high standards of the PSU faithful. However, some will be left unanswered, such as: Why did Seneca slash my tires so I couldn't make it to class on Wednesday?



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