

NITTANY LIONS CREAM CORNHUSKERS & PUT THE BULLDOGS ON A LEASH

By Pete stella
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As my friends and I watched the game against Nebraska, jumping through the air after every score, we spontaneously started blurting out one-word questions. "Championship?" asked my one friend, a die-hard Penn State fan since birth. "Heisman?" asked another friend, a huge fan of Penn State Quarterback Zack Mills. "Pizza?" asked another friend, who doesn't like football so much, but loves just about anything with pepperoni and mushrooms on it.

We eventually decided to order some food. But deciding whether the Nittany Lions are a championship-caliber team with Heisman-worthy players proved to be more difficult than calling the local pizza joint.

The reason for our debate? The Nittany Lions absolutely crushed Nebraska 40-7 and proceeded to beat Louisiana Tech in a 49-17 rout the following week. Both games were solid all-around performances that have the PSU faithful as excited as they've been in two years.

The success has revolved around the versatile play of Quarterback Zack Mills. Whether he's running the option, throwing deep, or taking the snap and running up the middle, the red-shirt junior is making the big plays to give his team scoring opportunities. True, he's not putting up Heisman-like numbers, going an unspectacular 14-21 for 163 yards and a touchdown against Louisiana Tech. He has, however, become the leader that PSU needed to get off the ground.

Then there's Marcus "all I do is score touchdowns" Robinson. He's become the offense's most feared weapon, scoring two touchdowns against the Cornhuskers and three against La. Tech. Penn State Coach Joe Paterno has used his freshman back-up QB consistently in the red zone, often as the wingman for Mills' option. Robinson has run the ball only 13 times for 104 yards, yet is tied for the team lead in touchdowns with 5. His solid sowings are proving JoPa's assessment that Marcus is too athletic to be kept on the bench.

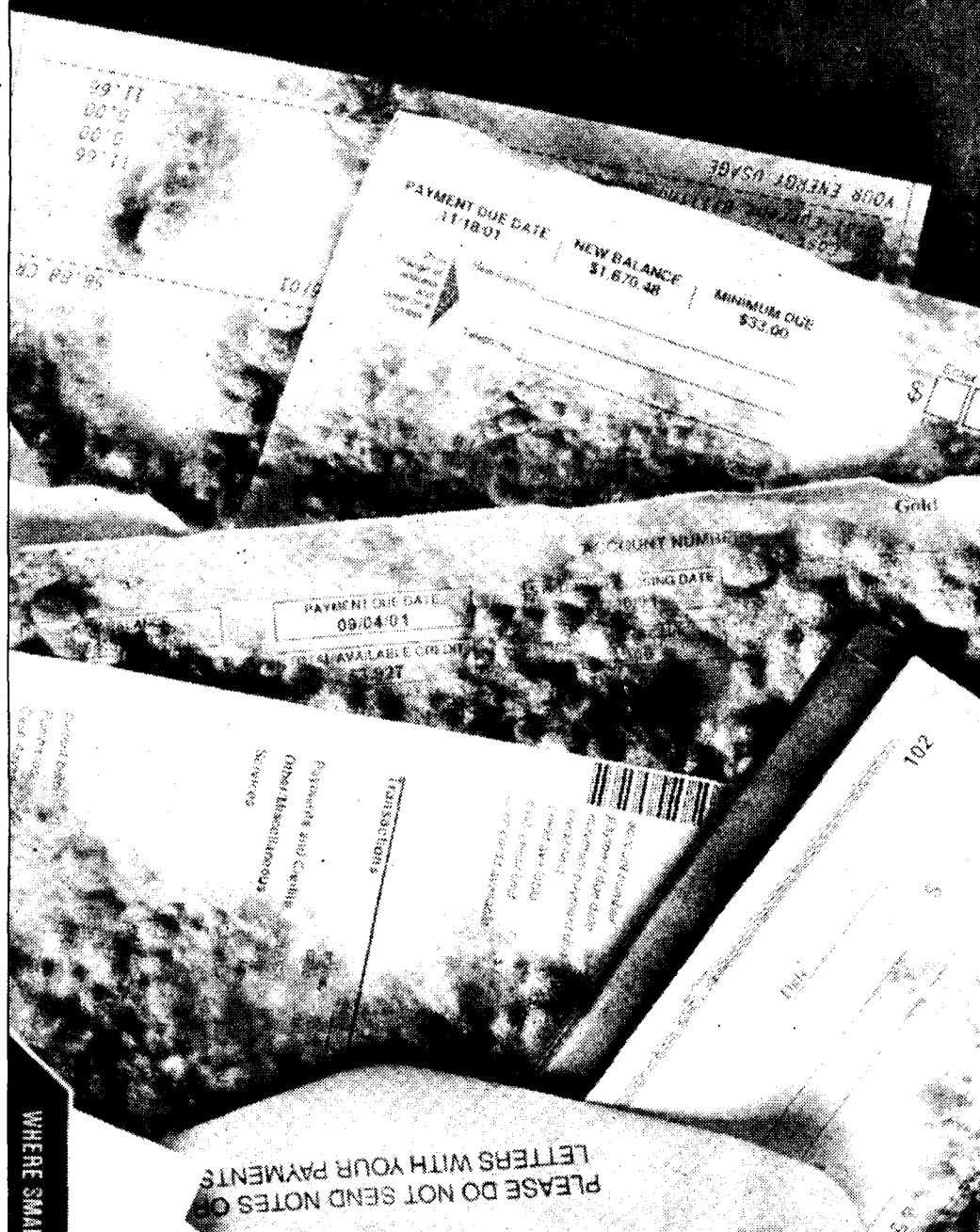
Rounding out the offense is Johnson, Johnson, and Johnson. That is Larry, Tony, and Bryant Johnson. Running back Larry "don't call me grand ma-ma" Johnson has gained 374 yards rushing with four TD's, already eclipsing Penn State's top rusher for last year. Wide receivers Tony and Bryant Johnson are the two favorite targets of Zack Mills and are always a threat to go deep.

The offense has resembled a well-oiled machine in the previous two games, executing plays almost perfectly and not turning the ball over once. The only thing scarier to opposing defenses is perhaps the new Penn State Nittany Lion bobblehead doll. (Parents, don't buy this one for the kids, it will most likely give them nightmares).

The main obstacle for Penn State is that defense wins championships. Though they have shown a knack for getting the timely turnover, allowing 367 yards per game will not get the job done, even if your offense is averaging over 400. To their credit, they have scored two touchdowns that were key turning points in the last two games.

With nine games remaining, PSU will need to win a few more times convincingly before being labeled a serious contender for the national title. Upcoming away games at Ohio State, Michigan, and Wisconsin, all ranked in the top 20, will prove if they're worthy. If they get past these games, the Lions will be rewarded with mostly home games to finish the year.

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