

Roaring towards a championship run

Led by All-American Kelly Mazzante, the confident Lady Lions are poised to make a serious charge in March.

By **ERIC THOMAS**
Staff Reporter

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa.—The final horn sounded and the 15,000 strong in attendance noticed a familiar site. The faithful saw their Penn State Lady Lions crush another Big Ten opponent, this time the helpless Michigan Wolverines 73-44.

Just another win, no big deal, right?

Wrong.

This victory, as the history books will dictate, could look minor, but to those who have seen the program on countless occasions, and to anyone who knows basketball, they understand this one is a trendsetter, a benchmark, the possible beginning of a long run.

There is something about this Lady Lions team, good looks aside, that makes them utterly attractive. They have restored a roar on a campus that has had little to smile about in the way of athletics in the past year.

"We sat back and watched a great team play a great game," said Michigan head coach Cheryl Burnett. "As an opposing coach, I feel bad that we couldn't be more

competitive in such an incredible environment."

The environment was the largest crowd ever to witness a women's college basketball game at Penn State, and there is no reason to think that those 15,389 fans won't show up next week, the week after or next season.

The bottom line, this team is damn sharp, and it is safe to assume you will see them in the final four this year, and possibly a handful of times in the next decade.

"I have so much respect for what Penn State's done. Their level of success, and again their fan base here [is tremendous]," Burnett said.

There is a feeling that soon a lot more coaches and teams will begin respecting the Lady Lions on a whole new level in the very near future.

But what makes them so lethal? What makes them the top dog in the Big Ten and one of the top 10 teams in the country?

First you have to look at Kelly Mazzante, the all-world star from nearby Montoursville Pennsylvania, who carved up defenses in high school lead-

Lady Lions remaining games

- 2/19 WISCONSIN
8 p.m.

- 2/22 @ Iowa
2 p.m.

- 2/26 @ Mich. St.
7 p.m.

- 2/29 PURDUE
1:30 p.m.

Big Ten Tournament
Mar. 4-8

NCAA Tournament
Mar. 20 - Apr. 6

ing her team all the way to the state finals two years in a row. All Mazzante has done since then is amass 2,729 points to become not only the school's all-time leading scorer, but the Big Ten's all-time leading scorer.

In a word, she is dominant, more so than most anyone else that has played the college game. So much so that she has drawn the comparisons of the all-time women's NCAA scoring leader Jackie Stiles from Southwest Missouri State.

"Players like [Kelly] make all of our jobs easier," joked Burnett, who coached Stiles at SWMS. "I think they're similar with their ability to score. I think the major difference between the two situations is that we really had to have Jackie, on every single possession be a scorer. Kelly's surrounding cast is so incredibly talented because Penn State can go to other people."

And that is what separates this Lady Lions team from all of the rest in their conference, and what could separate them from the rest of the pack come NCAA tournament time. They have the 1-2-3 punch of Mazzante, senior Jess Strom, and junior Tanishia Wright that can match up with anyone in the country.

In 24 years as the boss of the Lady Lions, Rene Portland has led her team to 19 NCAA tournament appearances, reaching the Sweet 16 three times and the final four once. That blowout loss to eventual National Champion Connecticut served as a benchmark for what it would take to get back to the highest level.

Portland has taken the program and built it from the ground up to become the most dominate winning program on the campus at this point in time.

"I don't want to get lost in the whole thing," Portland said with her trademark

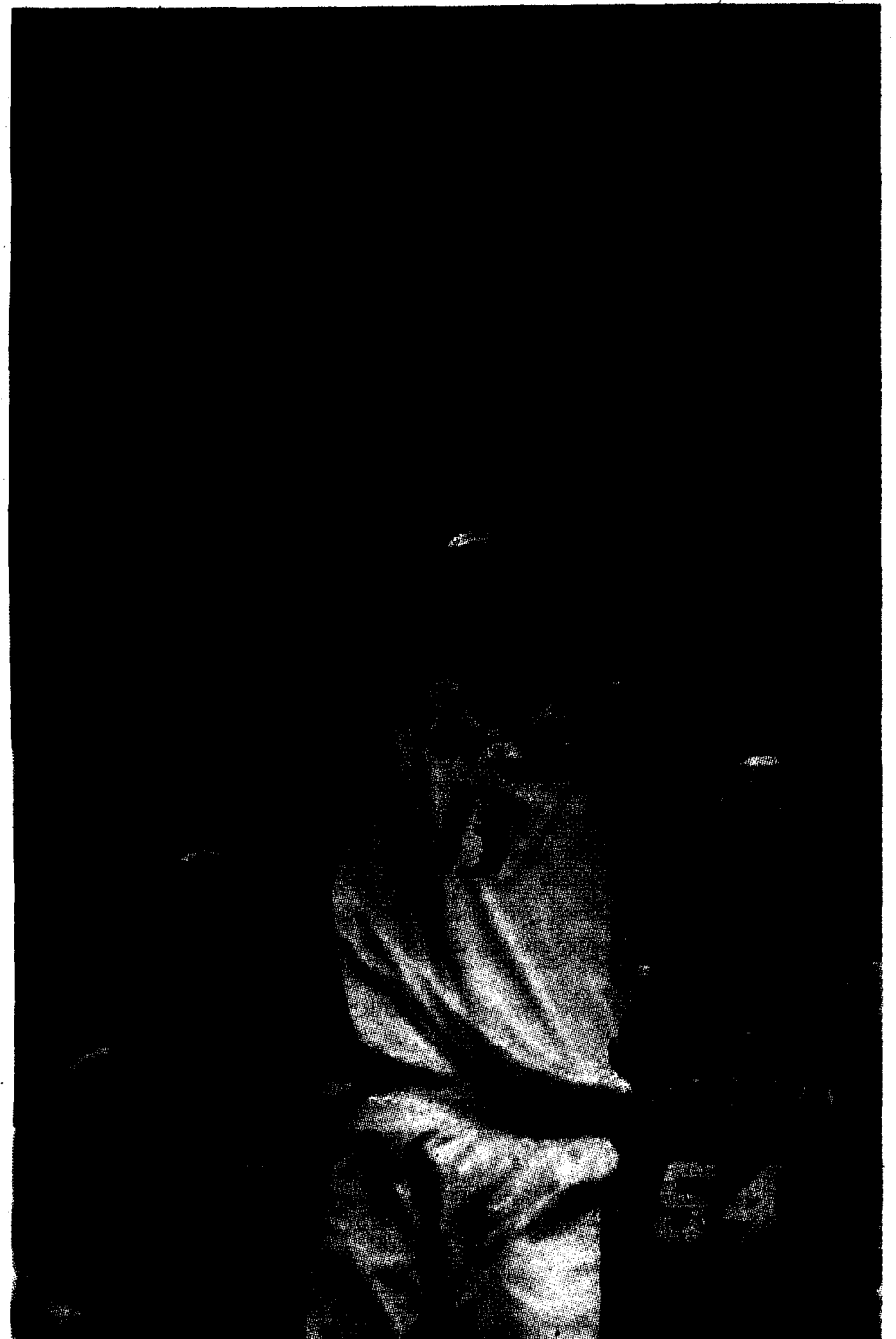


photo by Pat Little/Associated Press

All-American Kelly Mazzante splits the Michigan defense for two. Mazzante is a major reason why the Lady Lions could go deep into the NCAA Tournament this March.

smile after the game. "It's exciting to have this happen and it shows that it's truly about the girls and that there is some excitement about this team."

But one of the key elements that Portland has installed in her team is confidence. The kind winning teams, traditions and dynasties show off during games and during post game press conferences.

"We know we can pretty much run with any team we play," said Mazzante, who dropped in a team 16 points against Michigan. "Lots of times we play teams and the final score should be lopsided."

And that right there is the exact reason why this team is a force to be reckon with as March Madness approaches.

They can light it up at any time. They have the proverbial "switch" that they can turn on whenever they want to. They can score from anywhere, anytime, any place, just look at what Mazzante and her running mates have done this season and over the last four seasons.

"Anybody on this team has the green light to shoot," said Portland.

But aside from that, they are young, extremely talented and most important hungry.

"This win just gets our momentum going again," said Wright.

The rest of college basketball should beware.