

sports

Penn State 2008 football season recap

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Tucked deep in the shadow of Mount Nittany, the tradition of 120 years of excellence resided quietly. The Penn State football squad prepared for the upcoming season while earning minimal national respect. Preseason polls had the Blue and White at a mere 16, third in the conference, and predictions of another mediocre season. The poking and prodding from the national media continued up until August 30, 2008. Then the wrath of the sleeping Lion was awakened.

With questions surrounding the abilities of fourth year junior quarterback Daryl Clark, endurance concerns with running backs Evan Royster and Stephfon Green, combined with the off the field activities

of Maurice Evans, Abe Koroma, and Phil Taylor, many experts thought that Penn State was still a year away from being a contender for the Big Ten title.

Penn State was more concerned with the National title hunt.

A weak non-conference schedule didn't add to the Nittany Lion's cause, however. Despite outscoring Coastal Carolina, Oregon State, Syracuse, and Temple by a combined 211-40, Linebacker U was only sitting at number 12 nationally in the polls with the Big Ten season now upon them.

They began their quest for their second conference championship in four years with a test against then number 22 Illinois the following week. On a nationally televised prime time game, Penn State picked apart the Fighting Illinois 38-24.

Former top recruit Derrick Williams ran, received,

and returned a kickoff for touchdowns in the win, finally snapping a two-season slump. The win catapulted the Lions to number 6 and they never left the top ten the rest of the season.

After a key road win at Purdue 20-6 and a thrashing of pre-season top 10 Wisconsin 48-7, the Badgers worst home loss ever, the Nits were on track for a homecoming match-up with arch enemy Michigan. In front of a record setting crowd, the youthful Wolverines jumped out to a 17-7 lead. Many fans started doubting if the Lions could ever beat Michigan if they could not take down this year's 2-4 team.

Penn State had lost 9 straight to the Blue and Maize but Penn State came into the game with zero losses and they would exit that way after unleashing on a 39-0 run starting mid way through the second quarter. The

comeback was sparked by Evan Royster's 44-yard touchdown scamper before halftime that turned out to be the game changing play.

Despite deleting the streak against Michigan, the Lions had no time to celebrate. The much anticipated and monumental meeting with national powerhouse Ohio State the next Saturday in Columbus was on its way. The game dubbed "the Big Ten championship game" played out to the hype. A bitter cold evening in the Horseshoe, Columbus Stadium was the sight of one of the best games of the 2008 season. Nationally televised by ESPN, the hard-hitting battle proved to be more than just a football game, it was personal.

"Penn State is not beating Ohio State in the Horseshoe, it's not gonna happen" profoundly stated Mark May, an ESPN

college football analyst. The Nittany Lions had not won in Columbus in 30 years. On top of all the other plots, an underlying story line emerged when former Pennsylvania State Player of the Year Terrell Pryor, who chose the Buckeyes over Penn State, became the full time starter for the Bucks.

With a 6-3 lead and only minutes to play in the game, Ohio State tried salting the game away with a heavy dose of Chris "Beanie" Wells off the left tackle. A fourth and short at the Penn State 48 yard line changed the game and the season. The snap went to Pryor under center and instead of plunging straight ahead for the first down and possible game clincher, the freshman broke out to his right where he met Lion Safety Mark

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Super arrivals: Cardinals and Steelers in Tampa

By BARRY WILNER
AP FOOTBALL WRITER

The pilot of their airplane stuck a team flag out the cockpit window as the Arizona Cardinals landed in a place few could have imagined. Ever.

A team whose fans haven't touched ground since the start of a stunning postseason run in early January, arrived in the Super Bowl city Monday. With many players videotaping the proceedings — the walk across the tarmac, the bus ride to the team hotel, the first onslaught of media — it was clear that just being here meant something to a franchise long considered an NFL doormat.

"It's a great moment," said safety Adrian Wilson, the longest-tenured Cardinal. "To be here, to go through all the teams, to go through all the players, it's big for the whole organization. It's big for the players who are here right now.

"You never know the type of team you have and you never know the circumstances. This

team and this group of guys who you have right now, I think we are special."

Not that the Steelers, seeking an unprecedented sixth Super Bowl title, don't have a special feeling about their surroundings.

Even though a huge chunk of them have been this route before, the cameras were out, the smiles were wide, and the warm sun was welcoming.

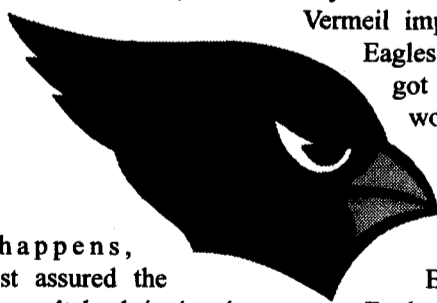
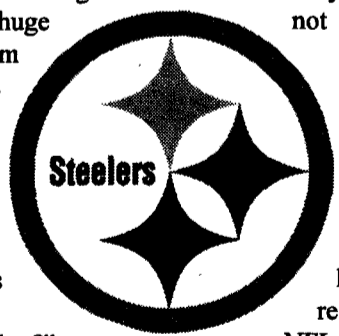
"Are you kidding?" said wide receiver Hines Ward, the MVP of the Steelers' 2006 Super Bowl win over Seattle. "It's very nice to be in Tampa; it was snowing on our way here. They had to defrost the plane there was so much snow on the ground.

"It's the Super Bowl and it's a great event to take part in and, personally, I love the South, everything about being down in the South," said Ward, who grew

up in Georgia. "Being in Florida, the weather is something. It definitely beats being back in Pittsburgh."

Ward and his teammates fully expect Tampa to resemble the Steel City by the weekend. No,

not weather-wise; if that



happens, rest assured the NFL won't be bringing its extravaganza back here. But in color, as in black and gold.

Quarterback Ben Roethlisberger envisions a tsunami of Terrible Towels.

"It's awesome," he said. "Every time we go to an away-city, in a way it feels like a home game because there are so many fans. We expect them to be out there and having fun."

For now, with no practice sessions until Wednesday, the players

actually can have some fun, too. Not too much, of course.

Neither coach is about to clamp down on his players this early in the week. They promise to keep things reasonable and as normal as possible, so don't look for any early curfews like the ones Dick Vermeil imposed on his 1980 Eagles. Philly's players got tighter as the week wore on, even as the Oakland Raiders were partying across New Orleans.

By game time, the Eagles could barely breathe, let alone play football, and they were routed by the loose Raiders.

"He hasn't put any handcuffs on us," James Harrison, the defensive player of the year, said, referring to coach Mike Tomlin. "We have the same freedoms as if we were staying in Pittsburgh for a week, as opposed to here."

Same thing for the Cardinals, whose coach, Ken Whisenhunt, was Pittsburgh's offensive

coordinator for that fifth Super Bowl win. Whisenhunt understands the importance of sticking to the norms, even if this is more than uncharted territory for the Cardinals.

He also believes the week the Cardinals spent in the East in September, with back-to-back games in Washington and the Meadowlands, will be beneficial now. Even if Arizona lost both games.

"This is a week of distractions," he said, "and this is one distraction that is not new to us. It helps us minimize that distraction."

Regardless, both coaches, as well as veterans who have gotten this far — yes, the Cardinals have some players who made Super Bowl teams elsewhere, including quarterback Kurt Warner — can't stress enough the importance of not stressing too much.

"I'm just going to have fun and enjoy it," Roethlisberger said. "I don't know if it's my last one, you never know. I hope not. I hope I can come back to five more of these, but you just never know."