Eye on Sports

Women roll a seven

Win is just the tonic for long season

By the Lion's Eye staff

For three months and then some they'd worked, mostly alone and mostly unnoticed, and always without any tangible reward. Then, at about 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 29, the moment that seven very focused, almost stubborn, Penn State Delco students had been awaiting finally arrived.

A moment that made all of that work worth it.

On that evening and at that time, the Penn State Delco women's basketball team, all seven players and two coaches, watched the time clock dwindle to triple zeroes and began to celebrate what they'd wanted since practice started last Oct. 15.

A win.

The Lions wrapped up a 55-35 win over Penn State Scranton, realized they had something to enter in the left-hand side of the ledger along with the 11 "L's" in the right side, and started to, well ...

"They couldn't really do much celebrating," said first-year coach Joe DiAntonio, who took over the women's team late in the fall, welcomed back exactly one team member from the 2002-03 season and other from the season before, and tried to gather enough other volunteers to make it to and through a season. "They had to wait around for the men's game (that followed as the nightcap of a doubleheader). But they were all on their cell phones, calling their friends and parents.

"It was good to see them so happy. But it goes back to what I told the team in the beginning of the year: 'Let's play to win.'"

That could have been a tough sell for DiAntonio. His seven team members could easily scan the gym and see just the two players with college hoops experience — Jillian Reilly, who played in 2002-03 then spent last year interning as Mickey Mouse at Disney World; and Stacie Mann, who played last season but had played only volleyball and softball at Chichester High School. They would see two others — Florence Akuffo and Molly Hoffman — who'd never played the game on any level. And before too long they'd see opponents who were faster, taller, deeper and more experienced.

But these seven women decided to test the odds. Through 11 straight losses — one a heartbreaking overtime loss at Penn State York — they tested them.

"Oh, it got frustrating," said Reilly,

Lion's Eye staff photo
Penn State Delco women's basketball coach Joe DiAntonio goes over some strategy with five of his players during a recent game against Penn State Berks. The team has only two reserves at any given time.

UPCOMING WOMEN'S SCHEDULE

Tomorrow	at C.C. Philadelphia	6 p.m.
Thursday	Delaware CCC	6 p.m.
Saturday	at Manor	1 p.m.

at 5-foot-0 the smallest but perhaps the most determined of the Lions. "It's hard to not get mad. But everybody was doing their best, and trying so hard. We might not be the most talented team, but we always tried the hardest."

And then came Scranton. When all the stubbornness, all the teamwork, all the effort paid off; and all the frustration ended.

"We were relieved, excited," Reilly said. "We had something to be proud of. And, like always, we played as a team."

But neither DiAntonio, Reilly nor any of the other team members expect it to end in Scranton. The Lions came back Saturday, Jan. 31, and battled Penn State Berks, the top team in the EPCC and a team headed for NCAA Division III play next season, before falling short, 67-49.

Dana Johnson, a freshman out of Interboro, who'd swished eight 3-pointers and scored 36 points against Scranton, added 31 against Berks.

The Lions fell at Lehigh last Monday, settling the record at 1-13, and have three games this week before call-ing it a season. They don't expect the win over Scranton to stand alone.

"We're jelling right now," DiAntonio said. "We're playing as well as we have all season. And that says a lot about these kids' character, what kind of people they are. With all they've been through, we always get effort. We always get their best."

"These seven have been here since the beginning," Reilly said. "We're always here for each other. We always know, no matter what, we'll always be giving one another everything we've got."

And win or lose, everything they had, game in and game out, was plenty.