

New kid on the block

JoePa steps nervously into a brave new world

By MICHAEL WEINREB
Collegian Sports Writer

You could spot the new kid from a mile away, a look of nervous anticipation glaring through his inch-thick glasses and an uncertain tone in his voice.

He is handling himself with modesty and quiet conciliation, a stranger in this strange world surrounded by unfamiliar faces and unfamiliar situations.

Here is Coach Joe Paterno, at age 66, after 27 seasons and 247 wins and 23 bowl games and one autobiography, starting from scratch.

"I feel like I've got a new job," Paterno said, Penn State's first Big Ten season looming perilously on the horizon. "I feel like when I first took over as a head coach."

There is no longer a tired, laboring quality to the coach's words — something that seemed to mark him for the past few years.

And the fear that he admits he feels is a good fear — the kind that is mixed with the excitement and anticipation of a brand new challenge.

"I wish I were that good, that I could stand up here and tell you what

to expect," Paterno said. "But I can tell you that we have worked harder for this season than we've worked for 20 years."

The lights in the coach's office have shined at all hours this summer, with Paterno staying late to watch and analyze and agonize over films. But that's just a part of the challenge when you know that eight new opponents will line up across from you.

And it's the only way he will silence the critics who scoff at Penn State's Big Ten chances.

"I've spent two years looking at Big Ten tapes until they're coming out my ears," Paterno said. "It's really very difficult — tapes don't give any answers."

The only answers will come on Sept. 4, when the Nittany Lions clash with Minnesota in Beaver Stadium. And the questions range from unfamiliar opponents to unmanned positions — take the muddled situations at quarterback and running back, for example, where three candidates are fighting for the starting job at each spot.

Yet it seems that the coach is even enjoying those puzzles. There is a newfound spring in his step that even

the veteran players have never seen.

"He's definitely had a better spring to his step, and I think he's become younger in a sense," defensive tackle Lou Benfatti said. "He's really increased the enthusiasm throughout the whole practice as well."

"He has a little more bounce in his step," nose tackle Eric Clair added.

That's not exactly what Minnesota Coach Jim Wacker wants to hear. He knows enough about what Paterno can do.

"I've known Joe a long, long time," Wacker said. "He's one of the best football coaches, obviously, in the history of the game. The only good thing about Joe is he's getting closer to that retirement age."

Michigan State Coach George Perles had a more humbling message for his long-time friend and colleague.

"Boy, oh, boy, (Perles) said, 'You're not going to be able to call all the shots anymore,'" Paterno recalled with a smile.

Beyond the ribbing and the joking, the initial resentment for the new kid in town is slowly waning. It is replaced by acceptance and, in most cases, the utmost respect.



AP LaserPhoto

Football Coach Joe Paterno jokes around with Tisen Thomas (1) and V.J. Muscillo (7). The Lions start off their first Big Ten season Sept. 4 against Minnesota. Please see related story on page 24.

"I think it will take us into a whole new marketplace on a regular basis," Big Ten Commissioner Jim Delany said. "We have the opportunity to do things in attendance that we sorely need to do."

But perhaps the highest praise for

the Nittany Lions came not from a coach, not from a player, not from an administrator.

"When you get to (Penn State), you've arrived at the epitome of a college town," said ABC-TV broadcaster Keith Jackson, the emcee

at the Big Ten Kickoff Luncheon. "You see 60,000 to 70,000 people tailgating, all friendly people. Penn State represents what I like to call the fabric of college football."

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