

Midseason report on Lion football

By Collegian Sports Writers

Beginning with hopes for a return trip to Pasadena and renewed quest for a national title wrongly denied, 1995 was a season of expectations. Six games into the campaign, the aforementioned goals are buried in the background.

At this point a year ago Penn State was flying high — the class of America. But with three superstar players snagged by the NFL, Coach Joe Paterno claimed his current squad bore no resemblance to the record-setting group of last year. Clearly, Paterno was prophetic.

The Nittany Lions have five games to transform a subpar start into an exciting ending. If the team can run the table and avoid the vast wasteland of a Christmas-week bowl game, consider the season salvaged. Here is where the group stands at midseason.

QUARTERBACK:

Perhaps only Paterno's successor will have bigger shoes to fill. Although the clodhoppers Wally Richardson attempted to step into could have weighed down any first-year starter, the redshirt junior responded.

He has provided a poised presence in the huddle, leading his team to a pair of game-winning drives. Late in the fourth quarter against a pesky Texas Tech team, the Sumter, S.C., native, led the troops to a decisive field goal, turning back the monumental upset bid.

Then in windy conditions at West Lafayette, Ind., last weekend, Richardson drove the team 80 yards in four plays, capping the march with a 16-yard touchdown pass to provide the final margin of victory. What's happened in between has not always been encouraging.

At times, the signal caller has been locked on the primary receiver. By not spotting the second and third option when the go-to man is marked, potential big plays have slipped through the cracks. This is an area that will surely improve with increased repetitions and the difference has been evident in recent weeks.

One thing Richardson certainly cannot be accused of is "happy feet." Persistently remaining in the pocket until the last possible second, No. 14 has absorbed punishing hits and painful blows, exhibiting the courage that is crucial for a successful field general. To this point the quarterback has been solid, not spectacular. At this position, the only real measure of ability is victories. And for some, this collection of Lions has two fewer than expected.

Grade: B
RUNNING BACKS:

He has gone from anonymity, to linebacker, to running back to superstar-in-the-making. He is Curtis Enis, the whiz kid tailback from Union City, Ohio, and the main reason why the Nittany Lions are averaging 210 yards per game on the ground.

The true freshman has carried the ball 80 times for 530 yards, picking up almost seven yards every time he touches the ball. Enis has pretty much deposed senior Mike Archie as the Lions' feature back, as Coach Joe Paterno has put aside loyalty to his seniors and gone with the more talented player.

That's not to say Archie has been totally phased out of the offense. The No. 1 man in the backfield at the beginning of the season, Archie still sees a lot of snaps. He provides Paterno with a talented change of pace to Enis, and is the team's third-leading receiver with 13 catches. Although he has faced criticism as a result of overly high preseason expectations, Archie has done a good job with 352 yards on 66 carries.

Brian Milne and Jon Witman have proved once again to be a capable duo at fullback. They have combined for nine touchdowns, but on the downside, have not picked up some blitzes that ended up in sacks of quarterback Wally Richardson. Overall, the Lions have run the ball like Penn State teams of old — hard and often.

Grade: B+ WIDE RECEIVERS:

This is one area that has not disappointed. In fact, on the whole, it has been pretty good. But a closer look shows that outside of Bobby Engram, the Lion receiving corps has been unimpressive. Dropped passes, missed reads and blown routes have contributed to the receivers' incompetence.

Freddie Scott has dropped numerous passes and struggled to become a reliable partner with Engram. Chris Campbell and Justin Williams have proven they can catch the ball periodically, and that's the problem. They catch the ball periodically, although there have been some bad throws by Richardson.

Besides Engram, Joe Jurevicius has shown signs of producing for the Lions. Despite only limited playing time, the redshirt sophomore has come up big on third down and proven he can catch the ball at least on a relatively consistent basis.

Grade: A- OFFENSIVE LINE:

With much the same cast pound- ing pass rushers in 1994, the current edition has been a major disappointment. A monumental reason

for the decline is injuries. Untouched by the vicious bug throughout the perfect campaign, several starters have been tarnished by misfortune.

Tackle Keith Conlin injured his left knee against Wisconsin and guard Marco Rivera played hurt in the battle with Ohio State. This tested the unit's depth, an area that concerned Paterno from day one.

When Doug Ostrowski entered the lineup to compensate for Conlin's absence, he promptly sprained an ankle. The shuffling and substituting has not allowed the unit to practice together often, something that was not a problem for the Big Ten champions a year ago.

Pass protection has been the Achilles heel for the highly acclaimed group, having already surrendered twice as many sacks as in 1994. Were it not for breakdowns in the final moments against the Buckeyes, Penn State may have emerged victorious.

Penalties surfacing at inopportune times has been problematic as well, with a key false start whistled in the waning moments versus Ohio State. Last weekend against Purdue, the offensive line was penalized late again, but overcame the mistake to help the offense reach the promised land.

A seemingly opposite trend has developed in the running game, with linemen doing a splendid job of paving the way for Enis and Archie. Having a solid ground game will be an integral factor in returning Penn State to conference supremacy, and the unit appears ready for the challenge.

As their health continues to improve there is little reason to think performance will lag behind. The corps up front is still too talented to be victimized as they have been, and the trend must be reversed for success to follow.

Grade: C- DEFENSIVE LINE:

With several people adjusting to new positions and three new starters, preseason prognosticators might have thought the defensive front would be a weak spot on this Lion team. Nothing has been further from the truth.

With the play of Terry Killens at defensive end, Brandon Noble at defensive tackle and the gutsy performances by end Todd Atkins, the front four has been solid, if not consistent, all season long.

Killens has been spectacular since moving to the line from his native outside linebacker. Despite being outsized by the tackles and tight ends he faces on a regular basis, Killens has made six quarterback sacks, the fourth-best output among Big Ten players.

Noble has been tough on the pass

rush as well, with two sacks. He has played intensely on every down and been able to keep worries to a minimum about a lack of depth at tackle by staying healthy. The same cannot be said for Atkins, who has been sick over the last few weeks, losing a lot of weight. He has still compiled four sacks.

The least effective player on the defensive line would have to be Brad Scioli, but it seems hardly his fault. The sophomore came to Penn State as a linebacker, was moved to defensive end last season and then moved again this preseason to defensive tackle. His biggest asset is his speed, and he has not been able to use it effectively through six games. He has been outmuscled in the trenches and has made just 20 tackles and picked up one sack.

The entire line has struggled at times. Against Wisconsin, they were unable to generate any pressure on Badger quarterback Darrell Bevell, and as a result the senior picked apart the Penn State defense and handed the Lions their first loss in 20 games.

Grade: B LINEBACKERS:

Normally a legendary position at Penn State has turned into the circus of the not-really stars. Despite Gerald Filardi leading the team in tackles, the linebackers have had trouble covering running backs out of the backfield and tight ends on passing routes. And with hype of the team's speed this season, it appears the linebackers have their feet on the brakes at all times.

It seems like the only time Filardi or any other linebacker makes a stop is five or six yards downfield.

Considering Killens as part of the defensive line and not an outside linebacker, Jim Nelson is probably the team's most dynamic linebacker. He has some speed and a nose to swarm to the ball. Only a sophomore, Nelson has shown the potential to be Penn State's next great linebacker.

Despite a skeptical grade, the unit has been relatively steady against the run, especially after halftime adjustments.

Grade: C DEFENSIVE BACKS:

The pass defense is ranked ninth in the Big Ten. Opponents have thrown for 11 touchdowns and an average of 221.5 yards per game, while Lion defenders have managed only six interceptions. These have hardly been good times for Penn State's secondary.

In key situations the defense, specifically the defensive backs, have been victimized with deep passing. This is a disturbing trend considering the damage this inefficiency has wrought. Bevell was able to complete tons of short pass-

PSU football: pass or fail?

The following is a midseason report card for the Penn State football team.

Preseason grade	Position	Current standing
B	Quarterback	B
A	Running back	B+
A+	Wide receiver	A-
A+	Offensive line	C-
C	Defensive line	B
C	Linebacker	C
C	Defensive backs	C-
B	Special teams	B-
-	Coaching	C+

Collegian Graphic/Lori Kunkle

es, but his occasional long hook ups proved potent.

Ohio State field general Bobby Hoying spent the afternoon throwing all over the field as the secondary was unable to contain the talented Terry Glenn. The injury to Jason Collins did not help matters, but still the unit is not nearly as depleted as it was a year ago.

If the group can prevent powerful offenses from completing the big play, confidence can develop. With world-class wideouts from Michigan looming, the time to right things is disappearing.

Grade: C- SPECIAL TEAMS:

After a shaky start that saw him miss his first two field goal attempts of the season, kicker Brett Conway has come on strong in recent weeks. In the win over Purdue, Conway set a personal record by going four-for-four on field goals, earning Big Ten special teams player of the week honors. He did so in windy conditions, something he hopes he doesn't experience again anytime soon. "I hated it," the junior said.

Punter Darrell Kania has also improved as the year has gone on, raising his average to a respectable 37 yards and showing a soft touch with pooch punts.

The kick returning has been decent with guys like Enis, Archie and Stephen Pitts, and so has the punt returning with Engram — when he holds on to the ball. He has fumbled three punt returns through six games, and those three fumbles have resulted in scores for the opponent each time.

Both the punt and kick coverages

have been good, not giving up a game-breaking play to date.

**Grade: B-
COACHING:**

This area is perhaps the biggest reason the Lions are 4-2. Questionable calls and game plans have led the Lions to a mediocre season.

Take, for example, the decision to go for two against Wisconsin after the Lions scored to make it 17-9. It failed, and although it is easy to look back and wonder, that decision was obviously the wrong one. By not converting on the try, the best the Lions could do was tie, not win.

Other negatives from the coaching perspective include the Paterno-Doug Graber encounter after the Rutgers game, the confusion before several halftimes this season and the decision to abandon the game plan versus Wisconsin.

However, if it were not for a few other decisions, the team could be much worse off.

Paterno and staff produced a masterful game plan against Ohio State and kept with it for the entire game. It worked as the Lions hung close and probably should have won the game. But perhaps the biggest coaching decision involved the tailback situation.

Instead of sticking with a slumping Archie, Paterno saw Enis' potential and inserted the true freshman into the game plan. Letting Enis run wild adds a dimension to the offense that lacked with Archie — a serious rushing attack.

**Grade: C+
— Collegian Sports Writers Rob Amen, Michael Signora and Brad Young contributed to this report**

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