

Cagers

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time for a postseason that begins Thursday with a first-round NCAA Tournament game against Arkansas. The victory also gave them an unblemished, 14-0 home record for the campaign and wrapped up a shocking second-place finish in the conference.

"We were in a slump, and when you're in a slump like that you really hope to not keep it going into the tournament," senior forward Glenn Sekunda said. "We stopped it."

For the first time since beating Iowa 95-87 on Feb. 3, Penn State (21-6, 12-6 Big Ten) hit better than 50 percent of its shots (53.7) and scored more than 80 points. The Lions rediscovered how to hit the three, nailing six of 14 shots from behind the arc.

And they got the balanced scoring so common the first half of the season but so lacking recently. With 21 points, a struggling Sekunda stopped hitting the snooze bar on his game and led four Lions in double figures.

Last Saturday at Minnesota, they came all the way back from 18 down only to come up short, 65-60. And Wednesday, Wisconsin beat the Lions 54-52 on a buzzer-beater by Sean Daugherty.

"It was frustrating," point guard Dan Earl said, "and we didn't quite know the answers."

They found those solutions Saturday, with a 16-point win and the kind of effort Dunn wanted to see from his team in its recovery from those late-season ills.

"This was a pretty good prescription," Dunn said of the 16-point win Saturday. "It got us smiling again."

"After two losses on the road like that in games you expect to win emotions get pretty low and you're looking bad," Sekunda said. "But today we stepped it up, and this team was more fired up before this game than I've seen them all season."

Despite the brimming motivation, the Lions were relaxed and

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had fun on the court for the first time in weeks. They played with a confidence offensively that belied their inability to put the ball in the basket over the last few games. They bottled up the Buckeyes (10-17, 3-15) on defense, holding them to 42.6 percent from the floor.

It was a new outlook sparked the day after the Wisconsin game.

Last Thursday, team leader Matt Gaudio, along with Earl and senior guard Donovan Williams, called a players-only meeting — just the second of the season.

The assembled Lions realized then what they had to do to get back on track. They had to play with some emotion, they had to rededicate themselves in practice, understanding they couldn't expect to play poorly between games then just turn it on when it mattered, and they had to stop searching for what was going awry.

"(The meeting) just set a tone for our work ethic," Gaudio said. "Instead of just trying to figure out what was wrong we had to just go out there (in practice), beat each other up and do the little things. Tonight, I think that showed. We have to continue with that."

They have to if they expect to contribute anything to March Madness. They were far less than perfect Saturday, with several blown fast breaks and 18 turnovers. But it was their best performance since the Iowa game, and it couldn't have come at a better time.

Whoops

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last, stepped off the bench and into Lady Lion fan's hearts when she hit two three-point jumpers in the first half.

"I got my scholarship money back in six points," Penn State coach Rene Portland joked.

After her second trey, Penn State had the largest lead of the game at eight, then settled on 37-32 at half-time. The Lady Lions carried the second half and had a five-point advantage for the rest of the game.

"They play a lot of switching defenses," Dunn said. "I think we

did a good job of putting the ball on the floor, penetrating and getting some good looks."

Two Boilers took advantage of those looks. Purdue rallied behind Lovelace's 12 and guard Stephanie White's nine second half points to close the gap to 62-60.

Purdue pulled no closer, as Lady Lion Jamie Parsons, hit her only jumper of the night with 4:12 left to place the lead back at three. Center Kim Calhoun hit from 15 feet next, before a Potthoff layup made it 68-61 with 2:08 remaining, setting up Nicholson's two foul shots.

Wrestle

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of the year along with Michigan State coach Tom Minkel. "To do so with the domination of the scoring makes it all the more worthwhile."

One of the ones that got away from the Hawkeyes was at 118 where Mike Mena was beaten by hometown hero David Morgan in the finals.

The 2-0 victory was the culmination of a weekend in which he did not surrender a point and was named outstanding wrestler of the tournament.

"All year it's been an inspiration

to wrestle in front of Michigan State fans," Morgan said. "It was nice to start off the tournament like that for the fans."

The excitement of Morgan's win carried over to the 190-pound bracket where Spartan Brian Picklo won the championship. The Michigan State 177-pounder, Erich Harvey, was not so fortunate, losing to Northwestern's Rohan Gardner 9-8 in the finals.

In the heavyweight division, Tony Vaughn of Purdue rode out Golden Gopher Billy Pierce in double overtime to capture the crown.

Wrestlers visit both sides of dreaded bubble

EAST LANSING, Mich. — You can't see it, touch or hear it, yet yesterday it became the biggest figure in the sports world. It is the bubble.

Arkansas, for example, was a bubble team that found its way into the NCAA basketball tournament. Minnesota, in the most popular cliché of selection Sunday, had its bubble burst.

The bubble was prominent at the 1996 Big Ten Wrestling Championship yesterday as well. Aside from being the crowning event of the toughest wrestling conference in the country, it is the qualifier for the NCAA tournament.

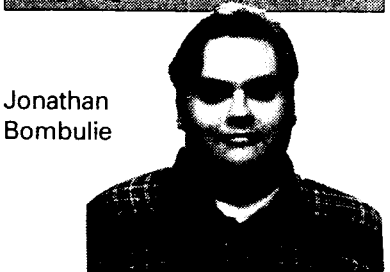
The top six finishers at each weight class earn automatic bids. Then the 11 conference coaches hold a brief meeting to select six lucky wrestlers who receive wild card bids.

Lower place winners can be selected, but in essence, this process leaves the seventh-place finisher sweating it out from the time they finish wrestling until nearly an hour after the tournament is complete.

That's where Penn State's John Lange and Matt Hardy come in.

Both finished seventh, knowing full well their fate rested in the

My opinion



Jonathan Bombulie

hands of the coaches of the Big Ten.

"I guess I'm nervous," Lange said before the decision came down. "If this was my last match, it will be a disappointment. All season, I wanted to go to nationals and be an All-American. I hope this wasn't my last match."

Hardy was not nearly as animated. He was disappointed in his finish, and it showed on his face and in his comments prior to the announcement of the wild card recipients.

"I'm not nervous. There's nothing I can do about it now," he said. "I had my chance (Saturday)."

While it is true that there was nothing Hardy could do, coach John Fritz was prepared to speak

on his behalf. At the post-tournament meeting, coaches get a chance to make a case for each of their seventh-place finishers.

"We try to be objective about it," Fritz said. "But it's hard for me not to stand up and fight for our guys because we get so emotionally attached."

This problem could easily be fixed. The NCAA could appoint a selection committee, like it has for basketball. But with the current system, Fritz had to walk the line between objectivity and loyalty to his wrestlers.

More than an hour before the meeting, Fritz had prepared an outline for the Matt Hardy sales pitch he would give his colleagues. Before suffering an injury at team duals in late January, Hardy was 11-2, Fritz explained. He finished the season 11-10, but had some quality wins and losses to top foes.

Fritz's pitch for Lange would be much simpler. Lange finished seventh in the toughest weight class in the conference. The No. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 12-ranked wrestlers in the nation are from the Big Ten.

"I'm sure (Fritz) is going to go in there and argue for me," Lange said. "I hope a couple other coaches who recruited me will remem-

ber me. There are no stupid coaches in the Big Ten."

After the tournament, Fritz went to the meeting, leaving Hardy and Lange to wait in the bleachers. Lange appeared restless, jawing with his teammates. Hardy sat expressionless next to John Hughes.

"He's nervous," John Hughes, seated next to Hardy, said. "He's just doesn't show it."

The meeting went smoothly, Fritz said.

He got the chance to make his case, then the coaches voted. No heated words, no more politics, just a simple vote.

Fritz emerged from the meeting and made the long walk across the gym floor to deliver the news. Lange was in. Hardy was not.

Lange was careful not to celebrate, keeping Hardy's disappointment in mind. "I feel relieved," he said.

Hardy's expression did not change. Fritz offered some words of comfort, but Hardy merely stared vacantly, a victim of the heartless bubble.

Jonathan Bombulie is a senior majoring in journalism and a Collegian assistant night sports editor.

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