

Senior searching for championship

Penn State middle hitter Keith Kowal is hoping to help the Nittany Lions to an NCAA title in his last season.

By Scott Cooper
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While some students graduating at the end of this semester worry about finding a job, keeping up their grades or entering the real world, the biggest uncertainty in Keith Kowal's near future is whether or not the Penn State men's volleyball team will still be playing May 7 — the day of the NCAA Championship match.

Kowal, the Nittany Lions co-captain and middle hitter, is in his fifth year with the team. The 6-foot-7 Reading native sat out his first year, and completed all the requirements for his electrical engineering degree in his first four years.

Kowal is now taking business classes

during the day, as he will start a consulting job with Accenture in the summer. By mid-afternoon Kowal is on the practice courts in Rec Hall, working with the No. 4 Lions so that, perhaps, it will pay off if the team can pick up just one or two extra wins in May.

Last season Kowal was a first-team AVCA All-American as well as a first-team Academic All-American. He was named EIVA Player of the Year after leading the nation with a 0.574 hitting percentage. That hitting number shattered the previous Penn State record of 0.504, set by Kowal the year before.

Among the Lions with at least 50 kills this season, Kowal currently leads the team in hitting, sporting a 0.471 clip. It's become a frequent occurrence for Kowal's stat line at the end of a match to have a zero in the attack error column.

And even though his current attack percentage isn't where it has been the past two seasons, he has cut down on errors by 0.12 per game to 0.376, while still leading the team in blocks.

"All I concentrate on is going up and swinging high and hard, and whatever the outcome, I'm happy with it."

Keith Kowal
Penn State senior middle hitter

"I'd like to get back to where I was last year with my attack, but my blocking right now is the best it's been since I've been here," Kowal said.

Kowal is one of the more laid back members of a very laid back squad. When it comes to attacking the ball, Kowal sports an attitude much like Owen Wilson's Hansel character from the film *Zoolander* ("I just grip it and rip it").

"All I concentrate on is going up and swinging high and hard, and whatever the outcome, I'm happy with it."

Perhaps making the captain even more relaxed this season is his schedule — which to his delight does not include any engineering courses.

"[My classes now are] not as stressful as engineering courses," Kowal said.

"It's a lot nicer to be able to go to practice and not have to worry about doing homework later. I wouldn't mind having that the other four years I was here."

Kowal has experienced back pains this year, but has used his lighter course load to his advantage, making frequent trips to the trainer in his off time.

The back problems have not hampered Kowal's performance, as his statistics show. He has received AVCA National Player of the Week honors twice already this season.

Kowal hopes that he'll still be swinging high and hard come May 7. And if he needs something to swing for, he can think of that elusive national championship — the only thing Kowal has not accomplished in his collegiate career.



Jeremy Drey/Collegian

Penn State's Keith Kowal, 14, has received AVCA Player of the Week honors twice this season.

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