



Alisha Glass, Arielle Wilson, and Nicole Fawcett attempt to block a spike from a Long Island University player during Friday night's season opener. The Nittany Lions' blocking talent is one of their strong points on the court.

Blocking frustrates opponents

By Nate Mink
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Christa Harmotto stands at the net, arms vertical waiting for the serve to cross into the opponent's court.

The pass is off the net, a signal to her to watch the ball, plant, turn and hop along the net to the outside.

Harmotto jumps and seals the block, her palms and forearms extend over the tape and penetrate the plane of the net. But something goes awry during this fundamentally sound block — the ball ricochets off her elbows and lands in her court because she jumps too high.

Even when their natural tendencies to jump too high lead to errors, the Penn State women's volleyball team still poses an intimidating block. During last weekend's home opening matches in Rec Hall, the No. 1 Nittany Lions squashed opponents' offensive continuity by typically having four hands challenge their hitters.

"It just comes with experience," Harmotto said after the Long Island match. "I don't think it's necessarily always based upon the setter. It all

depends how far the pass is off the net. I just stayed balanced and was able to close blocks."

Harmotto and sophomore middle hitter Arielle Wilson combined for 30 blocks in three matches last weekend. On Friday night, the Blackbirds managed only 14 kills the entire match — a number the Lions hit in two separate games.

The only setter listed on the Blackbirds' roster twisted her knee twice in practice the week leading up to the match with Penn State. Chelsey Stanton dished out just 10 assists in her place. The Emmaus High grad said she had never set in her life.

The Lions consistently had two blockers contest the Blackbirds' attack. No matter what Stanton threw to her hitters, Harmotto or Wilson was waiting for the ball, closing the initial block set up on the outside.

"We were talking about just sealing low over the net," Harmotto said. "We practice with a little bit higher net. We tend to jump higher and here we just try to make sure we don't jump as high as balls will ping-pong off of our elbows. You can be perfect, everything can be in line, but you still can't block a ball."

Coach Russ Rose has the luxury of having tall, physical play in the front row. Such height and natural finesse can win points against teams that are unable to take points on their own.

More importantly, it gives the Lions flexibility when they're struggling with hitting.

"We're a big blocking team," Rose said. "Even if those kids are hitting poorly — we overcame our left side hitters not playing well and still hit .280. You can't change reality. This is how we're playing. The positives: We had 15 blocks [against Villanova]."

The Lions' hitting woes have been well documented by Rose and senior outside hitter Nicole Fawcett. Rose said his club cannot afford to give opponents points.

However, he said a lot of teams don't have the athletes to swing over the block, meaning blocking could compensate for the Lions' hitting errors.

"It's always been something Coach has always stressed and hasn't been happy with us previous years," Fawcett said. "He says we have big girls, and we're not playing defense. It's always been said if you get past Penn State's block, you're gonna score."

WRs pave way for ground game

By Andrew Wible
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The Beaver Stadium crowd erupted as Evan Royster crossed the goal line early in the first quarter against Oregon State.

But instead of cheering for Royster, those cheers should have been directed at a pair of other skill players.

The key to Penn State's opening touchdown run against Oregon State wasn't exactly Royster.

It wasn't the gaping holes opened by the offensive line, either.

No, the play was made by two of the lightest guys on the field who manhandled their defenders like tackling dummies.

On that 15-yard run, Nittany Lion wide receivers Derrick Williams and Brett Brackett took out the Beavers' safeties, clearing a path to the endzone.

Head coach Joe Paterno said that downfield blocking is what can turn an average ground game into an explosive weapon.

"People don't appreciate how effective those open spots can make your running game go," Paterno said. "Those wideouts we have are really good football players. Every play they play all out. They hustle. When somebody else catches a football, they hustle to make a block for them that way."

But the receivers' blocking ability shone on more than just Royster's first scoring run.

The Lions had nine runs for more than 10 yards on the day, accounting for almost a quarter of their rushing plays.

That downfield success is a testament to the receivers.

Instead of taking plays off, the pass-catchers attack the secondary with recklessness and latch onto whatever defenders cross their paths.

Williams said he and his receiving mates take pride in blocking, especially when they see a Penn State back racing past them down the sideline.

"[Receivers coach] Mike

"Those wideouts we have are really good football players. Every play they play all out."

Joe Paterno
Head football coach

McQueary does a great job of hounding us about blocking. We have to be great blockers because it's going to come down to our blocks that spring the play," Williams said.

"The faster guys on defense are at the DB position. Once our running back hits the hole, the only people that can pretty much catch them are the secondary and we have to do our job making sure that our running backs can have that space to try to break a long run."

But just because they're able to block safeties and corners doesn't mean the receivers are ready to jump in the trenches and get down in a three-point stance on the line.

Left tackle Gerald Cadogan couldn't help but laugh when asked if he could see the receivers filling in on the line.

But if they want to switch, he said he'd love to try his hand at route running.

"You could put Jordan Norwood at left tackle if I could be a slot receiver," Cadogan said with a laugh.

But don't think for a second that Royster wants his blockers switching places.

He said he likes them just where they are, with the linemen opening holes and the receivers opening the second level.

He said he feels lucky to be running behind such a committed group of blockers and can't thank the receivers enough for allowing him to break off so many big runs.

"They really sell out and go 100 percent even when they're not getting the ball," Royster said. "It really shows a lot of character. You'll see some players take a play off when they know they're not gonna get it, but our receivers don't do that and our team doesn't do that."

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