

Coach confident in freshmen

By Bill Landis
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

It went unnoticed to everybody on the Lady Lions' bench and may have even gone unnoticed to most people in the Bryce Jordan Center.

But at one point in the Lions' 70-66 victory against Illinois on Sunday, coach Coquese Washington had all four of her freshmen on the floor.

It was for only about 30 seconds and little transpired. Penn State had an 11-point lead with six minutes left when the freshmen came on the court and had a 10-point lead when senior Meredith Monroe checked back in.

Despite the overall lack of impact, putting all four freshmen on the floor in a crucial game is a sign Washington is confident in them. After the game, she said she didn't realize she had the freshmen on the court. She was just playing matchups and trying to get a few players rest. Washington said the fact these players are in their first year of college basketball has no bearing on when they see time.

"I have the utmost confidence in them when they're out there," Washington said. "They're going to be able to do the things that we need

them to do."

In a close game, the Lions' freshmen were instrumental in keeping Penn State ahead late. Three of the freshmen scored at least six points.

But apart from filling up the stat sheet, the rookies impacted the game with their energy. Alex Bentley got it going early with a three-point play and scored the Lions' first five points. Marisa Wolfe was solid on defense, helping teammate Janessa Wolff double team Illinois center Jenna Smith on the low block. The result was a bad shot by Smith and a rebound by Bentley. Wolfe also went 2-for-3 on her first 3-point attempts this year.

"She got two big shots, and that kind of sparked the crowd a little," Nikki Greene said.

Greene joined her fellow freshmen by adding nine points and 11 rebounds. She was also strong inside, denying Illinois players from getting to the rim. While some may view the game as somewhat of a coming-out party for the freshmen, the team has come to expect certain things of its youngest players.

"I feel like even though they're freshmen, with the experience they're gaining over these couple games, they don't play like freshmen," senior guard Tyra Grant said. "That's a thing of the past. Just because that's what they are, does-



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n't mean they play like it. They're playing at another level right now." Grant, like Washington, wasn't aware all four freshmen were on the floor together. To her, they are now just a part of the team.

They might make freshman mistakes at times, like when Bentley threw an inbounds pass over Gizelle Studevent's head late in the second half Sunday.

Illinois took the ball on a fastbreak and scored, cutting the Lions' lead to five. Washington expects the mistakes because she understands the players are still learning.

But the mistakes aren't going to deter her from playing her freshmen. She is comfortable playing them in any situation and position.

"I tell them all the time, 'You have to understand the game from all five positions,'" Washington said. "You never know what the foul situation, the injury situation, what lineups we are going to have to have on the floor in order to be successful on any given night."

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Ryan Ullsh, Collegian

Freshman center Nikki Greene (right) goes up for a shot in Sunday's win against Illinois at the Bryce Jordan Center.

Lady Lions making significant moves in conference

By Alex Angert

WE'VE heard it all season. After Ohio State, the rest of the Big Ten is a big ol' mess.

And with one more month to play, that still holds true — to an extent.

Yes, Ohio State still appears to hold a firm grasp on the top spot. And yes, there are still a slew of teams chasing the Buckeyes while trying to separate from the pack.

The only difference now is one of those teams already has separated itself.

Thanks to a six-game winning streak and seven conference wins, the Lady Lions are no longer one lost in the crowd.

"This is a very tough conference to play in, so I can't even predict who's going to actually win the title," Illinois coach Jollette Law said. "Right now you could say Ohio State, but who knows? Who knows? Penn State is right there."

Even though Penn State is still looking up at the Buckeyes in the standings, it is now clearly a step ahead of the rest.

Just ask Law. Or Iowa coach Lisa Bluder. Or Wisconsin coach Lisa Stone. Or Michigan State coach Suzy Merchant.

But don't ask coach Coquese Washington.

"Every game is tough and the thing that our team needs to understand is that the stakes will get higher," she said after her team beat Michigan State last week. "The more games we win, the bigger the target becomes on our back."

Washington knows her team is now one of the hunted, but she also knows anything can happen.

As the Lady Lions continue their surprising success, the players need to listen to their coach and realize teams are going to be gunning for them.

Penn State may be ranked No. 23 in the Associated Press Top 25, but one loss can change all of that. One loss and everything can spiral downhill.

Why? Because this team is running on momentum and emotion right now.

The Lady Lions aren't blowing opponents out of the water, and they aren't dominating on the court. What they are is a scrappy, young team that is finding ways to win by getting to the free throw line and clawing back into games when down.

Just a week and a half ago — judg-

ing from the fans and players reactions — it seemed like a monumental upset against a better team when Penn State beat Michigan State. But the Lady Lions that defeated Illinois this weekend were a new team: a team that expects to win.

Although Penn State is currently a step ahead of the rest of the conference, it isn't on No. 4 Ohio State's level just yet.

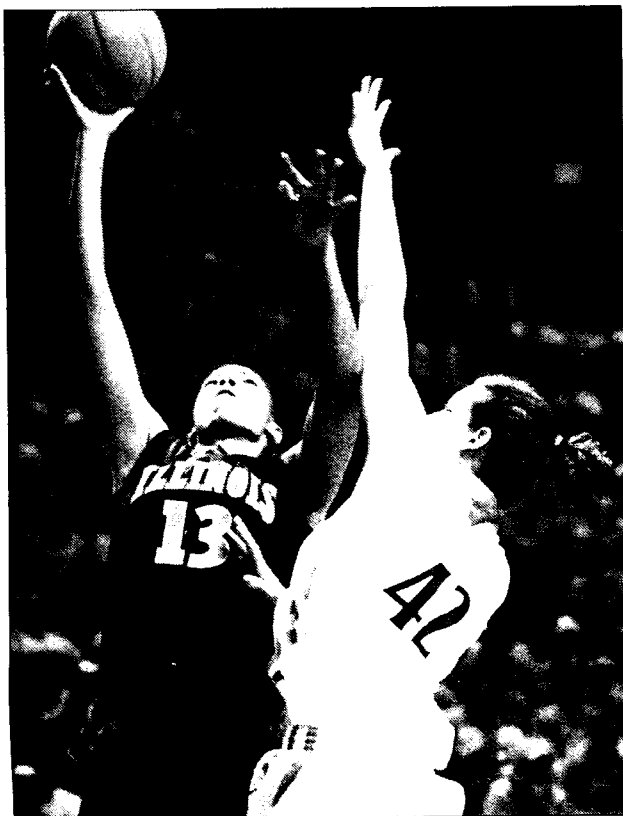
However, when Purdue upset the Buckeyes earlier this week, it showed anything can happen in this conference.

That same Purdue team travels to the Bryce Jordan Center this week. A Lady Lion win will set up a possible first-place clash in two weeks against Ohio State.

But Alex Bentley will need to continue playing like an upperclassman and not the freshman she actually is. Nikki Greene will need to continue to keep her hands to herself and not try to swat every ball in the air. Tyra Grant will need to continue finding ways to lead this team to victory and not settle for anything less than a tournament bid.

And then, just maybe, the Lady Lions won't be chasing anyone.

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Chloe Elmer, Collegian

Forward Janessa Wolff (42) defends Illinois center Jenna Smith in Penn State's win Sunday. Behind their six-game winning streak, the No. 23 Lady Lions are in second place in the Big Ten behind Ohio State.

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