

PSU records season high, falls short of No. 1 'Bama

By Jake Kaplan
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

The nation's top-ranked team held a slim lead going into the final rotation.

With Penn State waiting to perform its final event, the gymnasts stood in a line next to the floor, anxious to start their routines. They were trying not to watch the action across the gym on the balance beam as the No. 1 Crimson Tide tried to hold onto their .300-point lead.

It was a role reversal from last year's meet when the Penn State women's gymnastics team upset Alabama. In that meet, the lower-ranked Nittany Lions held a mere lead of .250.

However, this year, the defending SEC champions proved to be too much for Penn State as the Tide lived up to their No. 1 billing, posting a 49.200 on the beam for a 196.600 overall. The Lions scored a 48.925 on the floor, just .575 short of first place. No. 23 Minnesota rounded out the tri-meet tallying a 192.850.

"It's always kind of hard." All-

America sophomore Whitney Bencsko said of staying focused and not watching Alabama. "We just try and stay within each other and keep cheering for each other. Kind of like cracking jokes just to keep their mind off of what they're doing because we can't control [Alabama], and we don't really care what they do."

Though Penn State didn't knock off the top team, it beat a conference foe and put up its best team score of the season with a 196.025. Only one gymnast fell during Saturday's meet.

"Our focus wasn't necessarily on beating Alabama per se," Penn State coach Steve Shephard said. "We wanted to hit 24-for-24, and we came close to that. And we definitely improved from what we've been doing so far, so I was pleased and proud of my team."

Following the meet, the Lions were full of smiles and were visibly happy with their season-high performance. After the balance beam plagued Penn State as its worst

event in the first three meets of the season, things finally turned around Saturday night. The 49.050 was the Lions' second-best score Saturday night behind only the vault.

Shephard said confidence on beam was a big focal point in practice leading up to this meet, and he thought his team may have been putting too much pressure on itself.

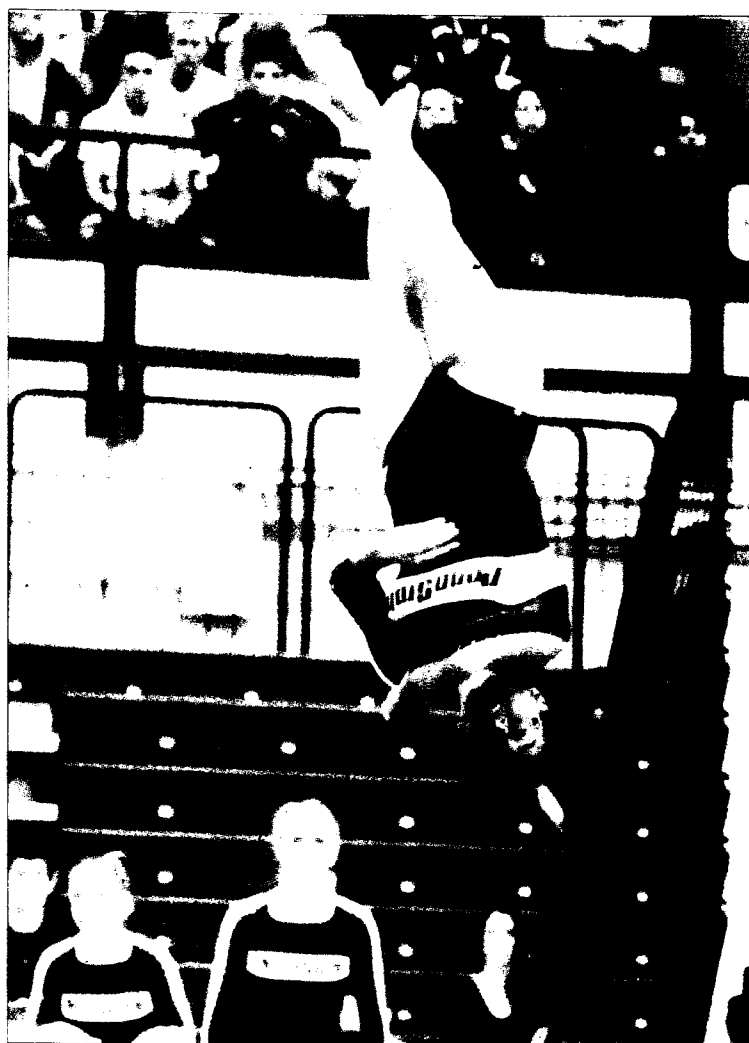
"It's almost like we're trying too hard," he said. "So I think [practice] helped, and I think they worked really hard this week in practice. And we did a lot of pressure routines, a lot of mental work with them and it paid off."

Penn State was led by Bencsko, who finished second in the all-around with a 39.200 but also received a huge contribution from freshman Sharaya Musser. Musser won the Ann Carr Award, given to the gymnast who provides the most inspirational performance.

"There's also room to improve like always," she said "but I felt like we came out here, did our job, did what we needed to do, and it was good."

The women's gymnastics team posted its highest beam score of the year.
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Casey Rohrbach twists in the air during her floor routine in Saturday's meet against No. 1 Alabama and No. 23 Minnesota at Rec Hall. Penn State finished second, 0.575 points behind the Crimson Tide.



Chloe Elmer Collegian

Miguel Pineda hangs on the parallel bars during Sunday's dual meet against William & Mary at Rec Hall. Pineda won the event with a 14.050, as he helped the Lions defeat the No. 15 Tribe.

Freshmen lead Lions to win

By Jim Mauro
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Nick Grant sprinted toward the vault, cartwheeled onto it and launched himself through the air, sticking the landing.

Grant's effort, along with strong performances from the freshmen, helped the No. 6 Penn State men's gymnastics team defeat No. 15 William & Mary 341.450-321.400 Sunday at Rec Hall.

The Nittany Lions led from start to finish, having a gymnast finish first in each event and winning each as a team.

Grant won the vault, scoring 15.800, while senior Nick Virbitsky brought the crowd to its feet by ending the meet with a win on high bar.

Freshman Parker Raque won his first two career events by winning the floor exercise and still rings. Raque set personal season highs in each event and won the Gene Wettstone Award as the meet's top gymnast.

Freshman Felix Aronovich shared the rings title with Raque, and fellow freshman Mackenzie Dow topped his second-place vault finish by winning on pommel horse.

"I'm just trying to work on consistency. It's obviously working," Dow said. "And after last week, I almost broke my leg on vault in warmups, so I went back to the pit and reworked everything."

Freshman Parker Raque won the Gene Wettstone Award for his win on Sunday.
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Penn State was without junior Matt Albrecht and seniors Allen Harris and Noam Shaham, who are dealing with injuries. Missing them made the performances by the freshmen much more vital to the Lions' success. Overall, 24 of the 36 routines for the Lions were done by freshmen.

Penn State coach Randy Jepson was happy many of his young gymnasts were able to gain valuable experience from the meet.

"Guys got an opportunity to go in and let it fly, and you need that early in the season with a young group," Jepson said. "Hopefully that will help us later on if those guys are called on. They'll be a little bit more prepared."

Even though they were victorious, the Lions did not perform as well as they wanted.

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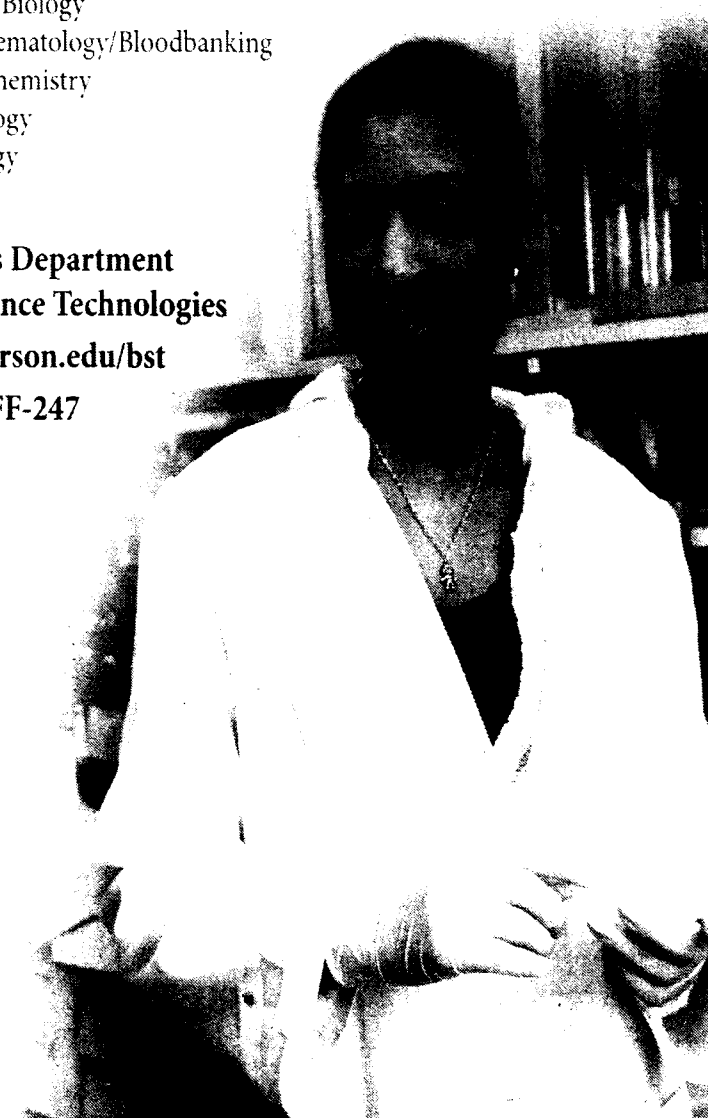
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