

Freshman impressing early

By Jared Shanker
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Watching from the side was a completely new experience for Madison Merriam.

She wasn't used to having to compete with her own teammates just for a chance to compete against the opposition.

The freshman gymnast has embraced it, though, and has worked her way into the lineup for No. 17 Penn State as it prepares to take on No. 23 Illinois at 7 Saturday night in Rec Hall.

Prior to last week's tri-meet against Alabama and Minnesota, coach Steve Shephard hinted at changes to the lineup as a way to spark the Nittany Lions. One of those changes was the insertion of Merriam on the uneven bars.

Competing on bars for the first time as a Lion at that meet, Merriam made Shephard's decision of replacing a senior for a

freshman look genius. Merriam scored a 9.800, tied for second highest among the Lions.

"I was really proud of my bar routine because I was definitely more nervous actually being in the lineup," said Merriam, who performed exhibition on bars previously.

"I know I can even score higher."

Before performing on bars and floor last weekend, Merriam competed in only two events total in the season's first three meets, both on floor. That was something she never dealt with before. She was used to competing all-around for her club team in Maryland, where she won a pair of state championships and finished second in two other events at the USAG 2009 state championships.

Now she's competing with equally skilled gymnasts with much more experience, and that is just on her team alone. Before Merriam can prove herself to the rest of the country, she has to prove herself to Shephard,

which is no easy task for a freshman.

"In club, you get to show what you can do on every event," she said, "and now it's just you only do the events that you're put on. ... As a freshman you have to prove yourself even more."

"I like it, though. It keeps me motivated and wanting to work hard. That's just my personality. I want to be an all-arounder."

Right now, vault is the only event holding Merriam up from competing in the all-around. Shephard, though, thinks that with a little consistency and confidence, vault can become one of her best events because of her height.

At 5-foot-8, Merriam is one of the tallest gymnasts in the Big Ten. It would seem her height would be a disadvantage for Merriam, and she admits it does hurt her when it comes to quickness and flipping. Overall, however, her length gives her an edge over the prototypical gymnast, she said.

"With my height, my line, the things that I do look better on me than someone that is 5-foot," Merriam said.

"Bars, especially, because the way I swing, my release move, it just looks good because I have really long legs."

Shephard points to Merriam's balance and use of her leverage as reasons why the normal restrictions height presents doesn't apply to her.

"Traditionally, as you can imagine, there is a mechanical disadvantage to have long leverage like she has," Shephard said. "But, she has managed her height and the leverage that she has extremely well."

Coming off a season-high 196.025, the Lions will continue to lean on Merriam this weekend against Illinois to provide a spark at the top of the lineup on bars. Merriam could even break into the beam lineup against Illinois. Along with floor, that would put Merriam in three events.

In contrast, Merriam didn't compete in a single event three weeks ago at the Denver Winterfest Classic. Merriam's quick rise into the Lions' lineups comes as no surprise to Shephard, though.

"We anticipated that she was gonna be a major-impact person for us all along," he said.

"That's why we recruited her. She's someone we were counting on."

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Shavon Greaves leads the pack of runners during the women's 4x400-meter relay at the 2008 Penn State Open.

Lineup in limbo

By Zack Feldman
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Coaches aren't always certain which runners will compete in certain events in upcoming meets.

Such is the case with the women's 4x400 relay team.

The team, comprised thus far in the season of Caitlin DeFusco,

Doris Anyanwu, Shavon Greaves and Fawn Dorr, has placed first in both of their races. The team provisionally qualified for March's NCAA national championships, with times of 3 minutes, 39.13 seconds and 3:37.57, respectively.

Now, two meets and two lineups deep in the 2010 indoor track season, the team may move runners around. Coach Beth Alford-Sullivan discussed the possibility of a new lineup this week with assistant coaches, saying it takes time to find the ideal mix and placement.

"I think we're running very well," Alford-Sullivan said. "But we want to get our time down a little more, and we may have some other players coming into the mix this weekend, and we'll test it out and see what we've got with people. We're going down to Arkansas next week, and we'll have the opportunity to run another good relay there. So these two weeks will be good for us."

Halfway through each of the past two races, however, Penn State found itself trailing in either third or fourth place. In each, Greaves and Dorr dug the team out of its hole, earning the first place finish.

Both Dorr and Greaves insist they are better runners trailing from behind because the competi-

tion pushes them. One of the secrets, Dorr said, is the order of the runners.

"We're really starting to get a feel for what we're doing. The key thing in the 4x4 is to get your order of who's running where," Dorr said. "The first person sets up the race, the second person secures your position, the third person runs like hell and the fourth person — everything comes down to the anchor."

The 4x400 relay is the last race at the meets and usually has more riding on it.

"There are tons and tons of people standing there screaming your name," Dorr said. "It sounds like you're standing on the highway, with cars just running by me. You just hear the erupting noise and you can feel the ground shaking with everybody screaming. If that isn't motivation, I don't know what's going to motivate you."

The team would have to break Penn State's record time of 3:33.39 to qualify for the NCAAs, which calls for a 3:33.00 finish.

One of the few events not to go Penn State's way in the 4x400 was the loss of Aleesha Barber, who remains eligible for the outdoor track season only. But when Barber makes her first appearance during outdoor, Dorr said to expect great things.

"The thing with Penn State is that we typically have five to six girls who are capable of running the 4x4, and we really don't know who's going to be on the relay until ten minutes before," Dorr said. "When Aleesha comes on, people are going to be fighting for that fourth spot. She's a 52 second 400 runner. She's very good."

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Sharaya Musser competes in the uneven bar competition Jan. 23 at Rec Hall. Musser's teammate, freshman Madison Merriam, has worked her way into the starting lineup.

Andrew Dunheimer/Collegian



Intercollegiate Athletics



THE GRID

		TIME	PLACE	TV	WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Men's Basketball	vs. Minnesota	2 p.m. Saturday	Bryce Jordan Center	BTN	The Lions don't throwback jerseys as they seek first Big Ten home win.
Lady Lions	vs. Ohio State	1 p.m. Sunday	Bryce Jordan Center		The Lady Lions will try and slow down the dynamic duo of Jantel Lavender and Samantha Prahalis.
Wrestling	vs. Northwestern, Michigan	7 p.m. Fri., 1 p.m. Sun.	Rec Hall		The Lions look to build on their 2-2 Big Ten record.
Men's Lacrosse	vs. Hobart	1 p.m. Saturday	Holuba Hall		The team starts its season with the first of two exhibitions before the regular season opener Feb. 20.
Women's Lacrosse	vs. La Salle	1 p.m. Sunday	Holuba Hall		A week before the 2010 regular season opener, Penn State takes on La Salle for a scrimmage.
Men's Volleyball	vs. Rutgers-Newark, Springfield College	7 p.m. Fri., 4 p.m. Sat.	Rec Hall		The No. 8 Lions look to bounce back from their loss last weekend at Loyola-Chicago.
Ice	vs. No. 10 Rhode Island	9 p.m. Fri., 3:30 p.m. Sat.	Greenberg Ice Pavilion		Penn State and Rhode Island meet in two huge games this weekend with the conference title on the line.
Men's Track	Sykes-Sabock Challenge Cup	Friday to Saturday	Multi-Sport Facility		Ryan Foster looks to continue his early dominance.
Women's Track	Sykes-Sabock Challenge Cup	Friday to Saturday	Multi-Sport Facility		Bridget Franek aims to lower her 3k time.
Men's Gymnastics	2010 Winter Cup Challenge	10 a.m. Saturday	Las Vegas		Three Penn State gymnasts and two assistant coaches compete individually in the prestigious tournament.
Women's Gymnastics	vs. No. 23 Illinois	7 p.m. Saturday	Rec Hall		No. 17 PSU looks to beat a Big Ten opponent for the third-consecutive week.
Men's Fencing	vs. MIT, Brandeis, Air Force, North Carolina	9 a.m. Sunday	Durham, N.C.		The men look to come back from their loss to No. 2 Notre Dame.
Women's Fencing	vs. MIT, Brandeis, Air Force, North Carolina	9 a.m. Sunday	Durham, N.C.		The women look to dominate the weekend against their unranked opponents.
Women's Golf	Lady Puerto Rico Classic	Sunday through Tuesday	San Juan, Puerto Rico		The Penn State women's golf team will kick off its spring season at the Lady Puerto Rico Classic.
Men's Tennis	vs. Maryland	Noon Sunday	Sami Tennis Center		Penn State returns to Happy Valley after splitting at the ITA Kickoff Weekend tournament.
Women's Tennis	at Purdue	2 p.m. Friday	West Lafayette, Ind.		Penn State needs to win the tournament in order to advance to the NCAA tournament next weekend.
Men's Swimming	vs. Buffalo and Lehigh	4 p.m. Fri., 1 p.m. Sat.	McCoy Natatorium		Penn State swims its last home meet and says goodbye to seniors on Saturday.
Women's Swimming	vs. Lehigh	1 p.m. Saturday	McCoy Natatorium		Shedding of tears from seniors in their last home meet as Nittany Lions.
Ice Lions	vs. UMBC, Montclair State	8 p.m. Fri., 10:15 p.m. Sat.	Baltimore, Greenberg Ice Pavilion		The Ice Lions take on former head coach Mike Brinton, who is now an assistant coach for UMBC.