

Gymnasts set season highs in victory



Casey Rohrbaugh competes on the beam Jan. 30 at Rec Hall.

By Jake Kaplan
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Entering the final rotation, the No. 17 Penn State women's gymnastics team knew the dual-meet was going to come down to the wire.

WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS

The Nittany Lions moved to the floor exercise trailing No. 23 Illinois by a mere .075, as the Fighting Illini were set to finish their meet on the balance beam.

Even though the floor has been their third-best event this season, the Lions were confident in their ability to nail their routines in front of the Rec Hall crowd.

"We knew that if we hit an awesome floor, even if they hit a great beam, that we should come out ahead," senior Brandi Personett said.

Three different Lions set or tied

season-bests on the floor exercise Saturday night, as Penn State tallied its best floor exercise total of the season and left Illinois in the dust.

A 49.150 on the floor exercise gave the Lions a 196.425, their best team score of the season. Illinois, which closed the meet with a 48.925 on the beam, also totaled a season-best score of 196.275. However, it was not enough to top Penn State, which has improved its score in each of its five meets this season.

"Every meet I feel is a confidence builder," senior Casey Rohrbaugh said. "Our score goes up whether it's by a few tenths or by a lot. So that's definitely helping us really believe and be aggressive."

Aside from the floor exercise, the Lions also set season highs on the uneven bars and the balance beam with scores of 49.350 and 49.100, respectively. On the bars,

all six Lions scored higher than a 9.825, contributing to a score better than any last season on that event.

Through the first four meets, the vault had been Penn State's best event and though Saturday's vault performance was the worst of the season, Rohrbaugh said the fact the Lions still got their season-best overall score is encouraging.

"We're finally using what we do on vault, and our confidence and team energy, and applying it to other events, and obviously that really helps and its working," she said.

Leading the team in the all-around were two reigning All-Americans, Personett and sophomore Whitney Bencsko. Personett tied her career high in the all-around with a 39.600 and Bencsko set a season high of 39.225.

Penn State coach Steve Shephard said part of the plan is for his team to gradually get better

each week, and peak in time for the national championship.

Last year, the Lions followed that plan, but fell short of the national championship. "We were not one gymnast fell. So for this season, the Lions have been following that trend and continue to gain confidence and improve."

"If you start too fast, and demand too much, and push too hard and demand too much in the beginning, you end up running out of gas at the end, and that's the last thing we want," Shephard said. "We want to try and just get a little bit better and a little bit better and then peak at the end for our championship season."

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Whitney Bencsko and Brandi Personett led the Lions this past weekend: psu.collegian.com

Size creates issues for PSU

By Bill Landis
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Coquese Washington had two choices.

She could focus her defense on shutting down the outside looks for the best 3-point shooting team in the Big Ten or she could focus her defense on the paint, where the reigning Big Ten Player of the Year would be setting up shop.

Washington chose the latter, and for the first 30 minutes of the Lady Lions' game against No. 8 Ohio State, it worked.

In the second half, the Buckeye shooters made sure the defensive strategy didn't succeed. Ohio State hit a Big Ten-record 17 3-pointers to turn a 15-point deficit into a 86-73 victory Sunday. The Lions used a 2-3 zone that at times looked like a tweaked version of a

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

box-and-one defense to try to thwart the impact of Buckeye center Jantel Lavender.

In what looked like a variation of the normally guard-oriented defense, Penn State center Nikki Greene often guarded Lavender while her teammates stayed in zone defense. The tactic seemed to pay off in the first half as Greene used her 6-foot-4 frame to clog the lane and take away

At one point, Buckeye guard Shavelle Little tried to drive on the left side. Greene came over from the right elbow and swatted the guard's lay-up attempt back into the unsuspecting hands of the shooter, who landed out of bounds.

But foul trouble led to Greene spending a few key stretches on the bench and allowed Lavender to get into rhythm.

The junior center finished with 18 points.

"It was tough," Greene said of guarding Lavender.

"She's different than any other post I've played against."

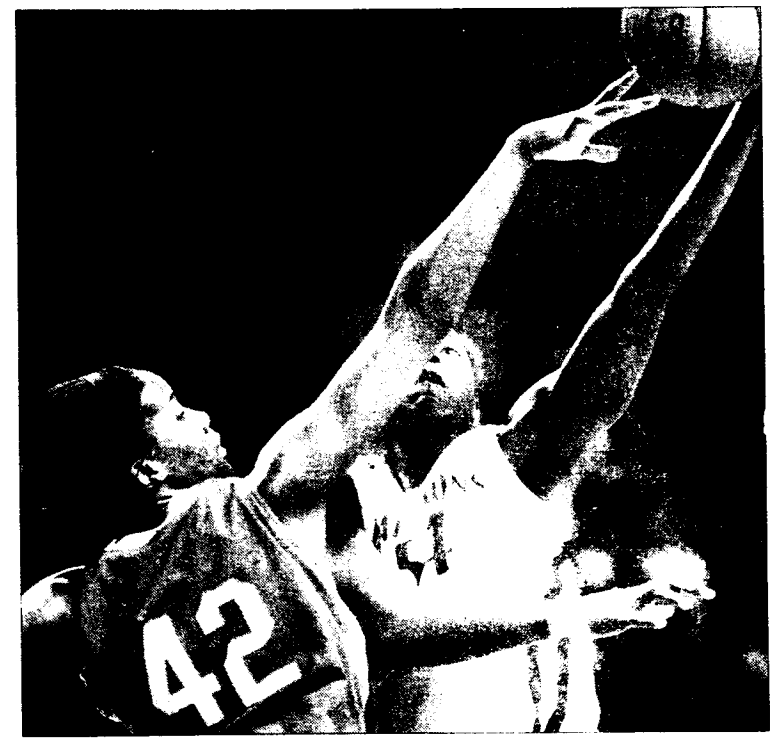
While the 18-point effort was a few shy of Lavender's season average, her mere presence in the lane proved to be favorable for the Buckeyes. Ohio State eventually picked up on the Lions' zone defense sagging a bit into the lane, and that opened up the corners for the Buckeyes' shooters.

When Lavender wasn't scoring, she and 6-foot-5 teammate Andrea Walker were screening in the low post and making sure Penn State's baseline defenders couldn't get out on the shooters in the corner.

Ohio State hit five-straight 3-pointers down the stretch to take the lead away from Penn State.

"When you play against us, you sort of have to pick your poison with Lavender on the court," Ohio State coach Jim Foster said.

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Penn State center Nikki Greene (right) attempts a shot over Ohio State's Jantel Lavender in the Lady Lions' 86-73 loss Sunday.

Penn State adjusts to South Gym against Springfield

By Eddie Gentile
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

On the scorecards, the No. 8 Nittany Lions were the home team Saturday, but Springfield coach Charlie Sullivan thought otherwise.

MEN'S VOLLEYBALL

Because this weekend's matches were held in Rec Hall's South Gym, the same gym the Lions practice in, being slated as the home team became simply a technicality for the Penn State men's volleyball team.

"We thought it was better for us," Sullivan said following Saturday's match. "I was guessing [Penn State didn't] wanna go back there, and less of a crowd is like a

gym more typical for a small school.

"We told our guys, 'Home court advantage.'"

While the Pride felt at home on the South Gym floor Saturday, the Lions were forced to adapt to playing in the smaller of the two Rec Hall gymnasiums. Replacing the stacks of blue bleachers surrounding the entire court in Rec Hall's main gym, South Gym has just two partial bleacher sections on only one side of the floor. The last time the Lions played a weekend home game — against St. Francis on Jan. 15 — nearly 900 fans attended the match in Rec Hall's main gym. This past Friday against Rutgers-Newark, the Lions played in front of a standing-room-only crowd. But in South Gym, standing-room-

only is an audience of just 411.

What shouts and cheers from the Penn State home crowd offered were often overpowered by the chants and celebrations of the opposing team on the floor. Though the Lions mostly refused to blame the venue on any shortcomings in the team's play, the squad did acknowledge finding and keeping any sort of momentum over the weekend was challenging.

"Today seemed more like a practice," coach Mark Pavlik said Friday. "Yesterday in practice these guys sided out 10 times in row, 11 times in a row ... with about the same type of emotional attachment as tonight."

And while the change in venues forced a mental adjustment for the

Penn State squad, South Gym also demanded physical changes in the Lions' play. During the third set of Saturday's match, a Penn State block attempt flew into the Lions' bench. Libero Dennis Del Valle sprinted toward the seats, but screeched to a halt on his toes to avoid crashing into his teammates. Later, in the fourth set, captain Max Lipsitz lunged for a ball behind the Lions' half of the court but found himself within inches of colliding into a promotions table. More concretely, the Lions' service game took a hit over the course of the weekend. Penn State captain Will Price struggled the most behind the serving line. The senior outside hitter committed 11 service errors on Friday and Saturday combined.

On the opening serve of the fourth set, Price's serve caught the middle of the net. The captain promptly placed both of his hands on his hips and looked to the white ceiling of South Gym for answers. Price offered no explanation of his failed service efforts but did say the South Gym probably had something to do with the drop-off.

"It's a lot harder to serve in South Gym," Price said Friday, half-jokingly with a smile. "Usually it's not, but I don't remember the last time I had five service errors. Something just wasn't clicking."

Price and the Lions will have to adjust to competing in South Gym. Penn State plays three of its final seven home games in it.

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