

Skid

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coach Coquese Washington said. "Nikki [Greene], Alex [Bentley] and even Zhaque [Gray] and Emily [Phillips] were kind of getting their feet wet. They've played a lot more basketball now, so I think they'll be ready for what Minnesota has to throw at us."

At that point in the season, Minnesota was a Big Ten contender that had made the NCAA tournament all but once in the past eight years.

As for the Lady Lions, they

were coming off yet another season in the bottom half of the Big Ten standings.

Immediately after the 56-48 loss to Minnesota, Penn State became a new team — winning 10 of its next 11 games.

In that span, Washington watched her team ascend up the Big Ten standings and solidify itself among the conference's top teams.

With Washington relying on so many freshmen and younger players, the growing pains she expected at the beginning of the season weren't too much of a problem as the players matured each night on

the court since they lost to Minnesota.

"That was earlier in the season, and I think not only me, but all of us, have gotten a lot better since then," Bentley said. "I think I've grown a lot."

Bentley and her teammates have grown.

The point guard walks up the court with a sense of confidence she didn't have earlier this season, pointing things out to her teammates and relaying her coach's orders to the rest of the team.

Greene, the freshman center, has been standing taller in the paint on defense, using her 6-foot-

4 frame to her advantage instead of swatting at every ball that comes her way like she did at the beginning of the year.

And despite Penn State's recent four-game slide, the players have been playing with much more poise as of late — even in the losses.

"We're a much different team in a lot of ways," Washington said. "I think we have a lot of confidence and certainly more experience."

However, just as Penn State is a new team, so is Minnesota.

But while the Lady Lions have gone 10-5 since losing to the Golden Gophers, their Thursday

night opponent has gone only 5-9.

Though Penn State has had much better results in the past two months, Washington said Minnesota still has something going for it on Thursday — that win on Dec. 6.

"It has to give Minnesota confidence that they know they can beat us," she said.

"It does mean a lot. However, at the same time, there are some things we know we're doing better now. We just have to be attentive to those things and not let them slip."

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Confident

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little losing streak here doesn't mean our confidence is gonna go down."

Instead, coach Coquese Washington said, the Lions are starting to get a bit angry.

Angry because in those four straight losses, the team feels it had ample opportunity to come away with a win. The Lions aren't viewing the skid as a four-game streak during which they were beaten by better teams. They're viewing the skid as a four-game stretch during which they have found ways to beat themselves.

The first loss came in overtime

against Purdue when the Lions battled back only to let the Boilermakers re-take control of the game via the free throw line. The second came on the road at Michigan when the Lions blew a 15-point first-half lead.

After a rather lopsided loss at Michigan State, the Lions returned home and blew yet another lead against then-No. 8 Ohio State.

But despite being angry at the way they have been losing games as of late, the Lions are learning from their losses.

"We have to keep battling," Bentley said. "We need to start finishing stronger. We need to start going into games not taking them for granted so much. We have to go

in with more energy and intensity."

A major factor in the Lions maintaining their confidence through adversity is the presence of senior guard Tyra Grant. Grant has been through this sort of situation before.

In her sophomore season, and Washington's first season as coach of the Lions, Grant and her teammates ended the season with 11 consecutive losses. During that stretch, Washington said she never felt her team lost confidence, and she is seeing the same thing play out with this year's team.

"Ty is a very confident player," Washington said. "She has a lot of confidence in her team and her teammates. That confidence rubs

off on the rest of the team."

Washington said she sees a lot of similarities between this year's team and the team that lost 11 straight. She said both have the will to win; it just didn't pan out two years ago.

One major difference for this year's team, though, is the presence of freshman center Nikki Greene.

Greene brings an aspect to the team that has been lost in recent years and is one of the reasons Washington doesn't foresee this season ending the same way her first one did.

"Nikki gives us a presence inside that sometimes we just didn't have our first year," Washington said of her freshman.

"Even though we competed and were in games sometimes, we just didn't have the matchups in our favor to execute the way we wanted to execute."

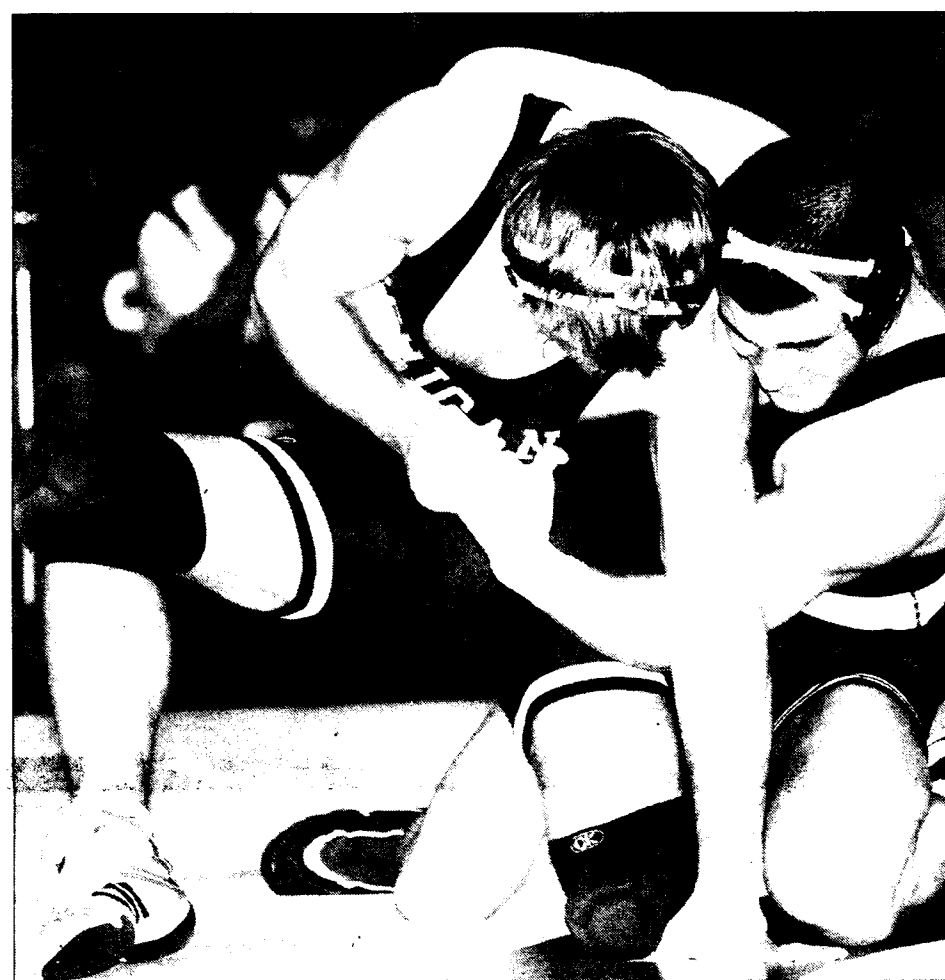
Bentley feels the remedy for this losing streak is simple.

The Lions simply need to play stronger toward the end of the game.

That means a bit of a change in the team's mental approach needs to happen.

"In our minds we can't think we're tired," Bentley said. "We can't think that our bodies are sore. That's the mindset we need to get so we can start putting some W's on the board."

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Dan Vallimont (right) wraps up Michigan's Aaron Hynes in their bout at 165 pounds.

Peter Tesonero/Collegian

Vallimont

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Cael Sanderson said the 100 wins are a mark of Vallimont's consistency. The head coach stressed the difficulty in piling up 100 wins but also looked ahead.

"He has the chance to get well over 100," Cael Sanderson said. "Hopefully, that is what he's shooting for."

Vallimont said the task wasn't an easy one, especially when he lost confidence in himself during a stretch last year. Vallimont's wins dropped from 32 in 2007-08 to 24 in 2008-09. He lost in the Round of 12 at the 2009 NCAA tournament after a third-place All-America finish in 2008.

As a wrestler, 133-pounder Bryan Pearsall knows tallying 100 wins is a daunting task.

Not only does a wrestler have to win the matches, but, as Pearsall said, a wrestler needs to start all four years and compete in almost every match.

"That puts you on the list to be associated with the Penn State greats," Pearsall said. "That is a huge accomplishment for an overall career goal."

But to Vallimont, winning 100 matches was never a goal. The senior felt as long as he geared his mind toward winning the NCAA championship, the wins would pile up on their own.

"I'd be much happier winning a national title over 100 wins any day," Vallimont said, "but both of them would be nice, too."

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Attitude

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The Lions try to simulate the meets in practice by creating pressure situations to build confidence.

The pressure sets, along with three consecutive meets at Rec Hall, have led to a more confident team, especially on the balance beam.

Sophomore Whitney Bencsko said the beam, considering it is only about four inches wide, is the event where mental toughness is the most crucial.

"There's no room for error when you're on a beam," Bencsko said.

"If you're crooked, then you're off the beam. On floor, you can kind of finesse things a little bit and make them look like they were OK whereas on beam, you're on or you're off."

After starting the season with a 9.000 on the beam, Bencsko said she has become more confident each week, leading to an average of 9.600.

Bencsko's score on the all-around has also improved each week, emulating the team's average, which has the potential to climb even higher on Saturday when Penn State travels to Pittsburgh.

"I definitely think that going 196,000 two weeks in a row will definitely up our confidence level," sophomore Natalie Ettl said. "Everybody now seems that they're going in and just thinking of it as a practice."

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Sidelined

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waste any time, went right to the (emergency room), and I got a CAT scan, and through the CAT scan they said it was appendicitis and they wanted to operate right away."

Morrone was discharged from the hospital Tuesday after the surgery.

Though Penn State assistant

coach Bill Downey confirmed Morrone's operation after practice Tuesday, he did not say when Morrone could join his teammates back on the ice.

"I've heard some people say they know people who had it and played the next week, and I've heard other people say four weeks, five weeks," Downey said.

"So we'll wait to hear from the doctors and go from there."

Morrone also said there is no timetable for his return but added

he has a doctor's appointment set for next week and that he can't participate in any physical activity for 10 days.

The Icercs play a home-and-home series this weekend with Drexel.

A win would clinch the ESCHL regular season title.

Morrone's absence is tough loss for the Icercs, who already have three players out of the lineup because of injury: George Saad, Chris Pronchik and Dan Loucks.

But the loss of Morrone looms large, especially, because of his offensive contributions to the team.

Morrone is currently fourth on the team in goals (13) and second on the team in assists (20) in 30 games this season.

Tim O'Brien said after practice Tuesday guys on the team will have to step up again and be ready to play.

If there has been a continuing theme throughout this season for

the Icercs, it has been having guys ready to play at any moment during the season because of injury.

But it's still tough for Morrone to take.

"It's just disappointing for this to happen at this part of the season," Morrone said of his appendectomy operation.

"Worked hard all year for this, and for it to happen right now, it just kind of sucks."

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