

Penn State not thinking lofty expectations just yet

By Alex Angert
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Coach Robbie Wine's preseason goal for the Penn State baseball team is an obvious one — win the national championship.

His preseason expectations are a little more realistic.

Coming off a season in which Penn State ended up going 25-26 and failed to make the Big Ten tournament, the Nittany Lions have focused on taking things slowly and haven't spoken about such lofty goals as Wine's.

"I think to just stay in the moment," Wine said Monday at Penn State Spring Sports Media Day. "You think about just staying healthy and getting better every day. That's really what I think the strength of this team has been this year. We're just taking it one step at a time."

While the team is taking it slowly, there are still the usual preseason goals such as winning the conference and making the NCAA tournament.

Those goals are nothing new for Wine and the baseball team.

"Obviously, we want to compete for the Big Ten championship," he said. "If that happens, that should get us an opportunity to go on the national scene and get into the tournament. That's been the goal since we got here on day one, five or six years ago."

Goals like that are in the back of the players' heads. With Penn State getting ready for its season opener this weekend, the team is worried about just that and nothing else.

And though Wine said he would like the team to make that 64-team

field and see what would happen, he knows the team's strength is in staying grounded.

His players feel the same way.

"This year we're taking it one pitch at a time," senior Louie Picconi said. "That will lead to one at-bat a time and then one inning at a time and then one game at a time."

During Picconi's freshman year, the team started off the season 2-12 before hitting its stride during Big Ten play, creating lofty expectations during Picconi's sophomore and junior seasons —

expectations that weren't necessarily reached.

For a team that plays more than 50 games throughout the season, Picconi said Penn State will need to pace itself this year to make the long run of the season a lot less stressful.

"Thinking about winning 40 games in a season is such a big deal and milestone to accomplish," he said. "But if you take it in baby steps, it's easier on everyone."

To e-mail reporter: ada147@psu.edu

Morse's Journey

A timeline of notable events in Mike Morse's life.

- 1980**
Morse is hit by a drunk driver
- 1986**
Morse becomes a volunteer assistant coach for the Penn State basketball team and begins teaching at Penn State
- 2002**
Morse is diagnosed with cancer
- 2005**
Morse and his son are struck by lightning
- 2009**
Underwent eighth major surgery of his life forcing him to take a medical leave

Source: Mike Morse

Megan Yanchitis/Collegian

Professor

From Page 1.

He lives to pass down life lessons to his students in narrative form.

One of those narratives is based on what happened Aug. 5, 2005 — the night Mike became a statistic and a survivor.

The Lightning Strike

Mike, along with his 21-year-old son Willie, his friend Eric Fabian and Fabian's 8-year-old son Tanner, was on a fishing trip at Vixen Lake in the Kawartha province of Ontario, Canada. It was a trip they had made numerous times without incident.

This time was different. A storm quickly blew in, and the group decided to play it safe and come off the lake. They huddled inside their tent, preparing to ride out the storm.

Then, at about 7:40 p.m., anywhere from 10 to 120 million volts of electricity coursed through the tent. They had been struck by lightning.

"The crazy thing about getting hit by lightning is that you don't even know it happened," Mike said.

"You don't see it and you don't hear it."

The bolt traveled through the side of the tent and into Willie's shoulder, passing through his heart and out through his right arm.

From there, it flowed into his father's hip, up his spine and out of his head.

"It felt as if somebody had a blood pressure cuff on my entire body and had squeezed it two or three times too many," Mike said.

"My skin felt like it was popping from the seams. I thought I was going to explode."

The lightning also shocked Eric, running through his hip and out of his toes. Tanner was the only person in the tent left untouched, albeit stunned from the strike's shock wave.

Willie had taken the worst of it. He lay unconscious, going in and out of seizures in front of his horrified father and friends. Bubbles frothed from his mouth.

It was a sign his father recognized. It typically preceded death.

Mike and Eric weren't much better. All of the ligaments in Eric's legs had ruptured, turning them black. Mike couldn't move the left side of his body, and his breathing was irregular. None of them could help themselves, let alone help Willie.

Horrible thoughts floated through Mike's mind. He couldn't stop thinking about his son, even though death was knocking on his own door.

The nearest hospital was in Peterborough, more than 30 miles away, with four lakes, a number of portages and mostly dirt roads in between. They didn't know if they could even contact help. Part of the reward of being at the lake

was the absence of communication. There was a certain attraction to being completely alone in nature.

Luckily, Mike remembered one of the few pieces of technology he had brought along: a military phone given to him by his brother-in-law, who was a Marine.

It could call any phone at any time, and Mike needed it then more than ever. He dialed 911 and reached Canadian Search and Rescue.

Help would arrive in 30 minutes, they said, but no one knew if Willie would make it.

Willie was only a few months away from basketball season and had recently transferred from St. Bonaventure University to play for Colgate University.

The coaches at Colgate were so impressed by Willie's talents that they decided to offer him the first basketball scholarship in the school's history.

Willie had led State College Area High School to an AAAA state basketball championship a few years earlier, ending up third overall in State College's career points list.

Without a doubt, Willie and his father are part of a sports family legacy, leading back to Mike's grandfathers.

One was a track and field runner, who Mike said turned down the chance to compete when Adolf Hitler hosted the 1936 Olympic Summer Games. Mike's other grandfather had played college baseball and was an avid golfer, hitting the links on Sundays with music legend Bing Crosby. But no amount of athletic prowess could help them now.

The group then decided to make the call to its families. None of them wanted their loved ones hearing about their death on the news, so they made one call to Eric's wife. They told her their situation and instructed her to alert the rest of their families. They also instructed her to refrain from calling them back in case the search and rescue team needed more information.

Back in State College, Mike's wife Karen received a call from Eric's wife Heidi. All they knew was that their husbands and kids had been struck by lightning. Karen said she didn't know if they were seriously injured, but she assumed the worst.

"I just didn't believe it," Karen said.

"It's hard to describe how I felt. It was just surreal."

The call affected Mike just as much as it did his wife. He said it was like issuing a press release announcing his own impending death.

"It was a lonely moment," Mike said.

Unbeknownst to Mike, it was about to get lonelier.

The Rescue

That day at Vixen Lake wasn't Mike's only brush with tragedy. In 1983, he was hit by a drunk driver in Massachusetts and fractured his skull.

He swallowed a great deal of glass in the crash and suffered severe damage to his throat, ruining a singing voice that had earned him an invitation to the Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour in the early '70s, a music and comedy variety show on CBS.

Mike's second skull fracture occurred when a portable basketball hoop collapsed on top of him in 1998, breaking his nose and giving him a severe concussion. The accident forced him to take a leave of absence from Penn State, even though he doesn't actually remember the basket falling on him.

Then there was his brush with cancer in 2002, the premetastatic

malignant melanoma that forced him to endure excruciating chemotherapy sessions. Despite the pain, he only missed three days of class.

But that was then. Now he had to survive again — far away from help.

The rescue team called the group to inform them that a helicopter rescue was too dangerous because of the storm.

Everyone would have to wait for a boat, which would take hours. The group was instructed to build a bonfire, despite the pouring rain. Their location was so hard to find that a smoke signal would be the quickest way to track them down.

Everyone who was able built up a pile of their belongings to burn. Everything aside from the clothes on their backs was tossed on the heap.

Somehow, the fire grew strong enough that even rain-soaked wood would burn. Sheets of rain and lightning cut through the sky while Mike and his fellow survivors built up the flames and waited.

"I've never seen anything like that storm," Mike said.

"Every five seconds, there was a bolt coming out of the sky, and thunder was just going crazy everywhere."

Mike and the group sustained the fire for seven hours in the pouring rain, burning everything they owned. Willie was still in critical condition. Mike and Eric were badly injured. But after nine hours of hell on earth, rescue boats finally approached the campsite.

It was 4:30 a.m. when the paramedics started defibrillating Willie. The rescuers put IVs in Mike and Eric, and the group quickly boarded the boats to make the trip back to civilization. Mike said he didn't remember a single second of that boat ride. Exhausted, his mind went blank.

Everyone was still alive when they emerged from the woods, where hundreds of people were waiting for them. The news of the lightning strike had reached the locals, and many had gathered to watch the real-life soap opera unfold in front of them. Based on what the news had reported, many of the onlookers were expecting lifeless bodies.

"This crowd was taking pictures and everything. It was really uncomfortable," Mike said. "It would be like seeing a wreck on I-80 and getting out with a camera and starting to take pictures. That's what I felt like."

They were rushed to a local hospital in Peterborough, where doctors helped save Willie's life. Each of them stayed one day and one night at the hospital. Doctors told the Morse family that Willie's heart rate had slowed to 30 beats a minute for more than 24 hours, but every beat it took was an improvement. At one point, Willie had clinically died.

Though he was granted a new lease on life, it was extremely doubtful that he would ever play basketball again. That fact crushed his father.

Mike could remember the first time Willie started playing basketball on a Fisher-Price hoop in their house. From those earliest years, Willie had developed a passion for the game Mike had never seen before. Now, he saw Willie was a shell of his former self.

Though Mike didn't know it at the time, Willie would return to the hardwood and play three seasons of Division I basketball.

And though Mike's injuries weren't as intense as his son's, they were still severe. He underwent surgery to replace vertebrae in his spine, with doctors inserting four metal rods, eight screws and three bolts.

Even if Mike doesn't show it, he

still faces daily pain from all of his surgeries, injuries and illnesses. But he won't slow down, even on his worst days. Mike was always this way, obeying a voice in his head that tells him to never slow down, never to give up and never show weakness.

Teaching Life Lessons

Mike has taught a variety of courses in his 23 years at Penn State, from fitness walking to bow hunting. He lectures for most of his classes without PowerPoint presentations and online assignments, preferring old-school overhead transparencies brought in a worn-out leather briefcase.

And he loves participation. Because he teaches so many classes involving physical activity, he enjoys playing basketball, walking or shooting a bow right alongside his students. Although he doesn't get to participate as much as he likes these days because of his health, he still gets in the action as much as possible because of his strong belief that he might be able to get through to his students.

"Physically, I've paid the piper, so to speak, for continuing to participate with the students in my classes," Mike said. "But I'm silently thinking maybe one kid out there thinks to himself, 'That son of a bitch is supposedly hurt a little bit, but he didn't look to me like he was doing too badly during our workout. If he can do it, why can't I?'"

Mike guides students with a myriad of stories and real-life examples to back up his main points. These stories range from his personal run-ins with injury and illness to conversations he has had with figures like Penn State football coach Joe Paterno and former Penn State linebacker LaVar Arrington. Many of his lessons are centered on setting goals, and he helps the students apply his methods to just about any area in their life. To him, goal setting is an essential part of life, especially when he has faced adversity.

"Prior to all the roadblocks with my physical goals, I ran a 10K in 30 minutes and 30 seconds, and I ran a half marathon in 78 minutes," Mike said. "I ate right and worked out — but you never plan on getting cancer, getting hit by a drunk driver and being struck by lightning."

Lectures with anecdotes from Mike's life have touched some students more than others. Mike Signora, the director of media relations and international communications for the National Football League, forged an especially strong relationship with the instructor. He met Mike through his Principles and Ethics of Coaching class and ended up volunteering to help coach Willie's Little League team. The former Penn State journalism major said he admires Mike for his dedication and devotion to students and coaching, calling him a tremendous mentor.

"Easily the best teacher I've ever had," Signora said. "He is passionate and is never afraid to challenge students' beliefs and traditional thinking."

Mike's passion hasn't been limited to kinesiology students at Penn State, either. From 1986 to 1988, Mike was a volunteer assistant coach for the Nittany Lions men's basketball team under former head coach Bruce Parkhill. During his time with the team, he also worked as color commentator alongside Steve Jones, the voice of Nittany Lions' basketball.

It was during this time that he developed friendships with countless Penn State basketball players, including former great Pete Lisicky. Players would frequently

eat dinner at his house or come over and relax in his hot tub. Former Penn State and NBA player John Amaechi was especially close to "Gumper," the nickname he uses to affectionately refer to Mike.

"I think that [Mike] availed himself to all his players — I just took full advantage of that offer," Amaechi said. "And I know from the pictures on his office wall and those he used to post in Rec Hall that many people have had the chance to get close. He makes it easy to do."

Mike has always had an affinity for teaching and coaching. When he attended Temple Law School, he also volunteered to coach for local church teams with inner city children. Once he got to know the kids and coached on a regular basis, he realized that law school wasn't for him.

Coaching and teaching were where his heart was, and it remains there to this day. He said he regrets not finishing law school, but coming to work every day to a job he loves is satisfaction enough for him.

Even though his love of teaching motivates him every day, Mike is looking forward to retiring in three years. But before he does, he plans to continue coaching farther away than ever before. Croatia's national basketball coach Damir Knazic has become close friends with Mike and has invited him to coach hoops overseas for a semester at the University of Zagreb and help with the Croatian national team.

Mike also plans on making a trip to Manchester, England, to help Amaechi, who runs the English national basketball program. Amaechi didn't invite Mike just because they are friends — he has a great amount of respect for Mike's knowledge of the game and said Mike is "brilliant with young people and well-versed in the skills they need."

But now, that may have to be put on hold.

The Latest Hurdle

During a routine checkup two weeks ago, Mike's doctor found a spot on his x-rays that could indicate his cancer has returned. The teacher was surprised, but given his past, the feeling was somewhat familiar.

He'll need back surgery, a procedure complicated by all his previous treatments. To reach the vertebrae, doctors will need to disassemble the hardware placed onto his spine after the lightning strike. Once the spot is reached and tested, a whole new "cage" will have to be rebuilt onto Mike's spine.

Other than his physical therapy, Mike will be confined to his bed for three months. He plans on handling it like all of his other accidents and illnesses — by taking it in stride and setting goals for recovery.

When it's all said and done, Mike admits he's had a bizarre life, one with more surprises than he ever could have imagined. But despite the tragedies he has suffered and the physical and psychological pain he has endured, the events of his past have made him the man he is today, a man that considers himself fortunate above all else.

"People look at me and say, 'You seem upset' and wonder how," Mike said.

"How could I not be? I've met some of the most fascinating people in my life through hoops and teaching. Watching my kids grow up and watching Willie play basketball has been one of the best rides of my life. It's been a great run, it really has."

To e-mail reporter: pjd5033@psu.edu

Practice

From Page 8.

"We need to keep guys loose and keep their spirits up to come out and compete every day," Jackson said. "Whether that be getting on guys or embracing guys, we just have to have guys playing their game in practice."

Coach Ed DeChellis said his role is to consistently shake things up in training to avoid falling into a lull.

Some of the things he noted were different drills and ones that focus less on contact, and a different weight lifting schedule.

On Monday, the Lion players were given a time frame between 7 a.m.

and noon to complete their workout, rather than the typical post-practice routine.

But DeChellis noted that not everything he has changed in practice is simply to shake up the monotony that comes with a team's fourth month of practice.

He pointed to constant lineup switches and varying the intensity of practices as methods the coaching staff has used to try to snap the losing skid.

When those methods don't work, he said his only option is to "just keep going" with new ideas.

"We've got to rise above it, push through it and persevere," DeChellis said. "There's no reason to feel sorry

for yourself. You've got to pull yourself up and get things done and figure out who you are."

Junior guard Talor Battle, the Lions' leading scorer at 19.5 points per game, said he has noticed a different sentiment in practice.

But he said that emotion was simply the understandable frustration that comes with a winless conference record. The goal, Battle said, is not to let that frustration negatively affect the team's routine.

"Everyone comes to practice to get better," he said. "No one comes in with a sore attitude, because that's not going to win any games."

To e-mail reporter: ajc5238@psu.edu



Abby Drey/Collegian

Ed DeChellis directs his team during Saturday's loss to MSU.