

Defense focus for Penn State

By Tom Copain
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

It's almost four days after Saturday's season opener for the Penn State men's lacrosse team, and the ugly statistics still linger: 24 goals on 40 shots.

MEN'S LACROSSE

It was the most goals Penn State's allowed in 17 years and the most goals the Nittany Lions have ever allowed in a season opener — one more than the 23 they allowed against Maryland in 1966, when coach Glenn Thiel was a team captain.

But now for Penn State, the focus is off the season opener and toward a meeting with No. 3 Notre Dame this weekend. And despite Thiel saying Saturday Penn State's defense didn't play that bad against Robert Morris, defender Matt Bernier said the team spent almost all of practice Monday working exclusively on defensive drills.

"After watching film, we would

get into different plays, and guys wouldn't really know where they were going, like middies and younger guys," Bernier said. "So the focus right now is 100 percent on defense."

The focus will need to be on defense against a Fighting Irish team that was ranked No. 9 in the preseason USILA Coaches Poll before beating then-No. 2 Duke on the road. That win included a hat trick from junior midfielder Zach Brennehan, who was named to the Big East honor roll for his performance last week.

The Irish also feature midfielder Grant Krebs, who was named to the Inside Lacrosse All-America second team.

"We're putting in a couple of different things," senior captain and midfielder Brian Shea said. "A lot of it is gonna be communication, just knowing where people are at all times, and that's pretty much all we can do."

Shea added the Lions could possibly play zone defense to take the pressure off the starting goaltender, whether that is junior John



The Lions are looking to connect on their offensive opportunities:
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Nichols or redshirt freshman Dave Baker. Thiel said last week the team wouldn't use zone much but also said the team might not be as aggressive early on as it was last year.

And while Bernier said the team will try to get the midfielders involved more so they can be informed if the team goes to zone, the defense does have its drawbacks.

"When you play zone, you have to realize you're going to be giving up a lot of outside shots," Bernier said.

"That's pressure on the goalie, too. That's pressure saving outside shots. So I think we are gonna focus a little more on zone."

But perhaps the best defensive strategy for the Lions this week might have come in the way the players felt just moments following last weekend's loss.



Dave Baker (32) attempts to block a shot Sunday at Holuba Hall.

Ryan Ullsh/Collegian

"This week, we gotta forget about it," Nichols said Saturday. "They're gonna be tough too. We can't start out bad like this and try to play catch-up. It's just not gonna happen against them."

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Covello

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Covello may never see regular playing time in his Penn State career — both he and Goas, last year's EIVA Newcomer of the Year, have sophomore eligibility. Despite this, Covello has made invaluable contributions to the Lions, though it won't be found in stat sheets or highlight films. The 6-foot-4 Covello — blonde hair, blue eyes and seldom seen without a smile — has embraced the role of second-teamer, dedicating himself to pushing Goas and the rest of the starters to reach their potential. And usually with a little fun along the way.

Despite his lack of playing time, Covello maintains a gung-ho attitude. He comes to practice early every day to work with Goas and assistant coach Jay Hosack on what Covello jokingly calls "the fundamentals of setting." In all seriousness, Covello said his work with Hosack has improved his game immensely, and the time the trio puts in together has benefited the setters in both technique and game sense. Covello keeps up the intensity at practice, where he animatedly challenges the starters to play stronger. Junior captain Jesse Wagner said every time Covello records a block, he has a genuinely unique celebration.

Assistant coach Colin McMillan said Covello will freeze his arms and hands after he makes a block. Then the sophomore will slowly back up and begin plodding around, almost zombie-like, arms still outstretched in the air.

"At first we thought he was just confused, like he didn't know what he was doing," McMillan said. "But then we realized that's just Tor. That's what he does."

Covello forever keeps a smile on his teammate's faces. On the 10-hour bus ride home from Loyola-Chicago earlier this month, he created a hammock out of a Snuggie and napped between the seats. When the team is together, Covello is often the center of attention, captivating the guys with one of his signature impersonations — he also has perfected a mimic of soft-spoken junior Thomas Pereira — or creating a new one on the fly.

"Everyone on the team has a different personality," Covello said. "I mean, I guess I'm funny if everyone says it. I just like to keep the mood lighthearted."

Pavlik doesn't take that lightheartedness lightly and appreciates Covello keeping the team in good humor. Yet the coach said Covello is mature enough to know when it's not appropriate to crack a joke. He is a presence, even without the punchline. Covello has a class once a week that forces him to leave practice 45 minutes early. On those nights, Price said the atmosphere is quieter and less competitive.

"He's probably good enough to start at a lot of schools," Price said. "But he's here, working hard for all of us and this program, which is a testament to his character. He just loves his life, loves volleyball, loves hanging out with us and being a part of the team."

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Spoiler

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2-12, Penn State still has a chance to impact the race for the regular season conference crown.

In their last four games, the Lions host No. 9 Ohio State Wednesday and Northwestern on Sunday, travel to No. 14 Michigan State on March 3 and finish at home against No. 3 Purdue on March 6. Purdue is currently first in the Big Ten but leads Ohio State and Michigan State by just a half game.

Junior forward D.J. Jackson said the challenge of playing the top teams in the conference is exciting. Having been in the race for a high tournament seed last season, the players can embrace taking on the role of spoiler this year.

By winning some of its remaining games, not only can Penn State impact its conference rivals, but its own place in the conference standings. Though in last place, the Lions trail Iowa and Indiana by one game

could change their seed going into the Big Ten tournament with a few wins.

"No one sees us as winning," forward Jeff Brooks said. "Everyone sees us as an underdog, and we don't mind taking that role. If everyone wants us to be the underdog, we just have to come in and get a win."

Stealing an upset win over a ranked opponent would only boost the team's confidence. Head coach Ed DeChellis thinks having that confidence could allow Penn State to enter the tournament with a chance to make a run.

For now, DeChellis will watch and see how his team handles its role as the underdog and potential spoiler.

"It's the first time we've had that [role] in a while, so we'll see how we relish the opportunity," DeChellis said. "I think for our kids, we just want to win more games and have some confidence and some consistency going into the Big Ten tournament."

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Pitching

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the past and should inject new life into Penn State's starting rotation this season. Despite not having a set role last season, Ignas was selected third-team All-Big Ten as a freshman coming out of the bullpen for late relief, middle relief and closing duties. Wanamaker — the team's ace before his injury — was named second-team All-Big Ten in 2008, leading the team in starts, wins, strikeouts and earned run average. Now, both pitchers are being called upon to lead Penn State's rotation, and each is excited about the possibility of doing something special after not playing together last season.

"It's going to be exciting," Wanamaker said. "We're going to be able to do a lot of good things. [Ignas] has been coming around real well."

The senior added that, watching from the outside, he has seen a lot of progress from Ignas from last year to now, and he is interested to see how the two of them do as the team's top two starters. Ignas has also seen similar improvement from his teammate as Wanamaker is working on coming back from his injury to regain his spot as the team's No. 1 pitcher. And now that Ignas and Wanamaker are in their set roles, Wine has the luxury of trotting out two pitchers with All-Big Ten accolades under their belts, and both pitchers are anxious to see what happens.

"With the one-two punch, I think it would be pretty good if he gets back and we can do that Friday, Saturday thing," Ignas said. "It will work out for us in the long run and take us deep into some ball games and take some pressure off of the freshmen and the younger guys."

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Wright

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interaction has helped Wright adjust to the new coaching staff and the different techniques they've introduced. Assistant coach Troy Letters said Wright is like a sponge in the wrestling room because he's always asking questions and taking in what the coaches tell him.

The coaches have worked with Wright on leg attacks and turning opponents while on the mat.

"He showed he's capable of doing what we've worked on in the open tournaments," Letters said. "Quentin is a guy we knew

would make jumps and improvements."

Dave Erwin, the Lions' current starter at 184 pounds, believes Wright is taking full advantage of his redshirt year and sees improvements in his teammate. Like Wright, Erwin redshirted his sophomore year, going 14-2 after a successful freshman campaign in which he went 23-8. Erwin, now a senior, said the redshirt season is a good time to grow up and mature as a wrestler.

Though Wright's year has been filled with victories, he still focuses on his lone defeat to Edinboro's Chris Honeycutt in the semifinals of the Nittany Lion Open on Dec. 6. His hopes

for another chance to wrestle Honeycutt never came, and the Lion redshirt now awaits his next opportunity to take the mat. Wright said he'll begin freestyle competitions following the national tournament. By then, he'll be a year removed from his freshman success at NCAAs, but Wright is excited to face the best competition next year. When that time comes, Erwin believes he'll be special to watch.

"There are big expectations for him next year," Erwin said. "I think he'll meet and succeed a lot of them. He's got good things in store for his future."

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