

Andrew Dunheimer/Collegian

Sophomore gymnast Whitney Bencsko competes on the uneven bars in Saturday's dual meet against West Virginia at Rec Hall.

New routines aid Bencsko

By Jake Kaplan
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Whitney Bencsko didn't give her coach an option. After posting a 38.375 in the all-around against Pittsburgh on Feb. 13, she came into practice the next Monday and told Penn State coach Steve Shephard she was going to try something different.

It was evident to the sophomore and her coach that her routines on the uneven bars in the floor exercise were not scoring high enough. Through six meets, the sophomore averaged a 9.546 on the bars and a 9.563 on the floor. She knew she was capable of better.

Leading up to last Saturday's home meet against West Virginia, Bencsko worked hard to prepare new routines for both events. Though Shephard said he hates changing gymnasts' routines this late in the season, he agreed it needed to be done. Her floor routine was too "hit or miss" and also posed too much of an injury risk.

On the bars, Shephard said Bencsko's old routine was too conservative, so they added a more difficult dismount, which he joked gives him more gray hair.

"I have nightmares, but it's gymnastics," the coach said.

"Everything is dangerous, so you gotta just roll the dice and hope for the best."

The sophomore knew she could handle the challenge even though aspects of both routines were brand new.

In fact, Bencsko said concentrating on the new routines kept her more focused and on her game.

"It kind of keeps you sharp, kind of keeps you on

WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS

Sophomore Natalie Ettl has been under the weather all week. Are shake-ups to Penn State's lineup in the mix? The Beam Me Up blog investigates: psucollegian.com

edge and paying attention to what you're doing," Bencsko said. "So, I don't think it's always a bad thing."

Bencsko admitted she was bit nervous entering last Saturday's meet at Rec Hall. However, she realized she had no reason to worry as she had hit nearly every repetition of her new routines in practice.

The practice routines paid off. With her new routines, Bencsko posted a 9.825 on the bars and a 9.900 on the floor, both of which either set or tied season highs. She scored a 39.300 in the all-around, which was her best score since last season's meet with the Mountaineers on March 8.

Senior co-captain Allie Southard said Bencsko's ability to adapt to a new routine mid-season impressed her, and she loves how Bencsko did anything to improve the team's score.

Normally, Bencsko is one of two Lions who compete on all four events, the other being senior Brandi Personett. Shephard referred to Personett and Bencsko as two of his "big guns" who are extremely valuable to the team's success.

Shephard's "big guns" hope to lead the Lions to a road victory against Ohio State on Saturday.

"To be able to be 100-percent confident in them every time just gives the whole team confidence," Southard said.

"I think it's just a nice thing to have at the end of the lineup for sure."

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Fernandez's offensive skills making impact

By Kurt Bopp
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Molly Fernandez didn't have a clear lane to the net. So she made one.

The freshman attacker charged forward and spun around a Maryland defender — who fell instantly from being disoriented by the spin — and kept moving.

Another defender stood in her way, prompting another spin and another fallen Terrapin.

Fernandez took her shot, but was stifled by a quick save by goalie Brittany Dipper.

Though she didn't score on that run, the No. 2 team in the country, announcing to the lacrosse world that she has arrived.

"She doesn't look like a freshman at all," senior attacker Mary LeNoir said. "She's fearless."

"She's not afraid to try anything, but at the same time she's smart at what she does."

LeNoir gave Fernandez advice prior to the opening game against No. 14 Loyola.

The veteran told the rookie she was starting because everybody believed in her, and there is no class distinction on the field.

She started the game and recorded her first collegiate assist. Two days later at Bucknell, she tacked on another assist in addition to her first career goal and first hat trick.

"She's really stepped up her game," junior midfielder Laura Lesnick said.

"She has adapted well to the collegiate game. She's a crafty attacker."

With fifth-year senior attacker Marisa Lozano out for the season, Lesnick said the team needed somebody to step up, and Fernandez has.

The freshman said Lozano critiques her shots and offers advice and all of the upperclassmen have been supportive and inclusive of their young teammate.

"They've done a really good job incorporating me in the attack," Fernandez said.

"That's made it a lot easier coming into play as a freshman."

"It makes it easier when you have that support on the field and the sideline."

Head coach Suzanne Isidor wanted Fernandez when she first saw her play in high school. Isidor called assistant coach Tara Hohensheit and simply told her, "I have to have this kid."

"She has that something I feel like was missing from our team," Isidor said.

"She definitely adds a big spark to our team. She plays with a lot of emotion and plays hard and makes a lot of things happen."

Fernandez called starting the season opener "mind-boggling" and a "total honor."

She played a crucial role as she recorded an assist in the 9-8 upset win.

Through three games, Fernandez is tied for the season's lead in points (8) and is second in goals (6). Though she weaves through defenders and even makes the best defenses in the country slip up, she admits her gameplan isn't planned.

"When I'm out there, I don't know what I'm going to do with the ball. I just know I want to go to the goal," she said.

"I think I'm quick enough to go past the defenders. I never know what I'm going to do with the ball. I'll do what it takes to get there."

Her first three games have been memorable, Fernandez said, and she has been learning every step of the way.

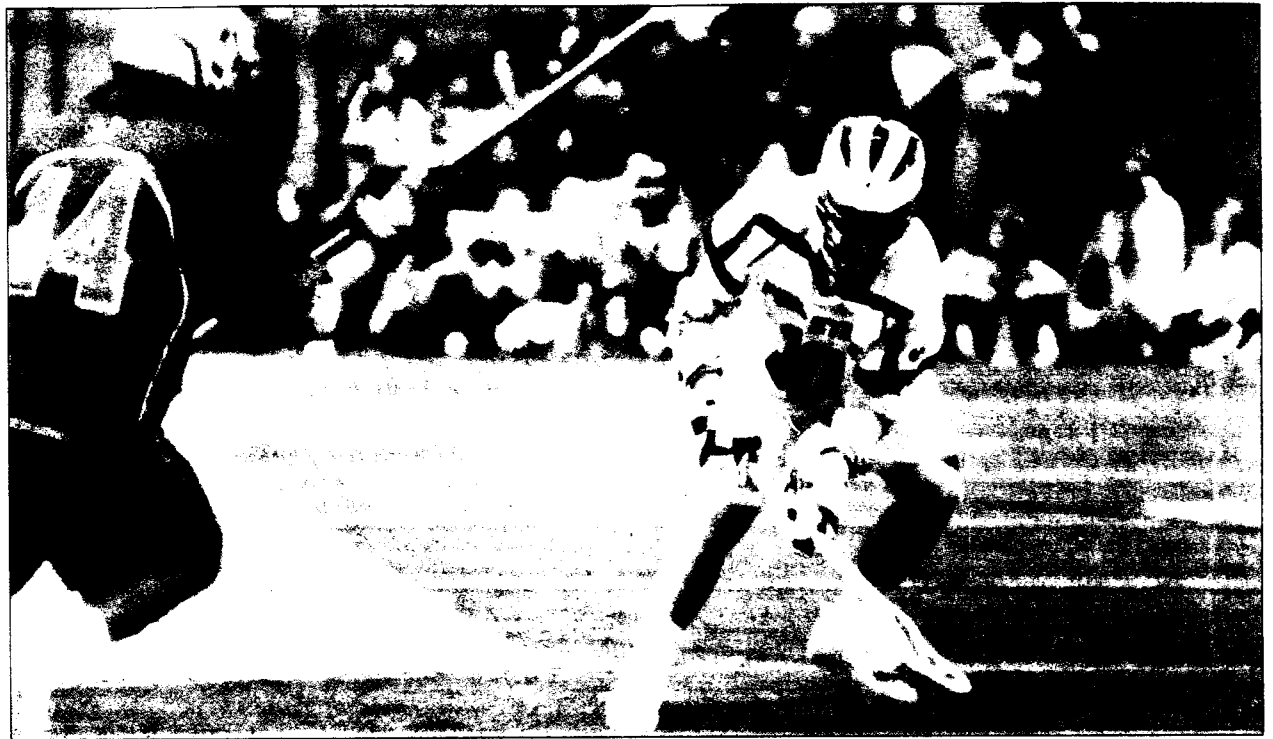
After the loss to Maryland last weekend, the freshman said she is learning to bounce back.

Luckily for Penn State, Fernandez has more than three more years to learn and gain experience as a Nittany Lion.

"As well as she's played, she's just going to get better and better," Isidor said. "As she adjusts more to the college game and her teammates, her potential is just limitless."

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The Crosse Fire blog has more on Molly Fernandez's quick start, as well as Penn State's latest move up the IWLCA rankings, even after losing last weekend to Maryland: psucollegian.com



Amanda August/Collegian

Sophomore attackman Matt Mackrides (10) scoops up a ground ball against Robert Morris on Saturday.

Young attackers impress coaches

By Mike Still
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Glenn Thiel knows what it takes to be successful in college lacrosse.

A North/South All-Star selection his senior season at Penn State in 1966, Thiel knows it takes natural, athletic ability, extra work in practice and the drive to be best player one can be.

Having that knowledge, the men's lacrosse coach is pleased so far this season with his group of young attackmen.

Against Robert Morris on Feb. 20, Thiel started three underclassmen at attack.

Freshmen Nick Dolik and Billy Gribbin, who got the start in their first collegiate appearances, joined sophomore standout Matt Mackrides to combine for 13 of the Lions' 17 goals in the game.

Mackrides put in a team-high five, Gribbin netted four and Dolik finished with two. Each of the three also added an assist of his own in the effort.

"They're a pretty darn good unit," he said. "They're very athletic and have great speed."

Though Thiel could sense a bit of nervous energy in the two freshmen who were thrown into the fast-paced game so soon, he was ultimately impressed with their performances.

"They looked a little bit like deer in the headlights," the coach said. "But they were still able to produce. They did a pretty good job reacting Saturday with a pretty good shot

selection and some good takes to the goal."

For the two freshmen, the transition from the high school game has been a challenge, but they're learning to adjust.

"In the fall it was an adjustment," Dolik said. "But we've both gotten used to it and love the pace. It's a lot of fun."

The freshmen have overcome the learning curve quickly, and first-year assistant offensive coach Byron Collins credits the group's early successes to its work ethic. The three have been working far beyond what is just required of them.

"You have to come in and do extra work and watch yourself on film, do some extra shooting, just basically put in more time than your average two hour practice entails," Collins said. "They've done a great job of doing that, they're willing to learn and to put in the time is paying off."

He also acknowledged Mackrides' efforts to push Dolik and Gribbin harder in practice.

Mackrides' encouragement and leadership is something the freshmen have appreciated, absorbing his advice and using his tips, Dolik said.

Although his young attackmen have only played one game together, Thiel is excited to see what his talented three can achieve as the season progresses.

"They're just athletic enough," Thiel said. "It's been a while since we've had those kind of attackmen that run as well as those guys do and be as aggressive as they are. It's a pleasurable group, that's for sure."

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