



Andrew Dunheimer/Colegian

Rising junior goalkeeper Warren Gross prepares to make a save in practice Monday.

Gross looking to improve

By Andrew Robinson
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Despite his 6-foot-3, 207-pound build and presence in the net, Warren Gross is still a bit of a kid at heart.

Jumping up and down with his arms out at his sides with the rest of his teammates after a drill, Gross got everyone's attention by shouting, "Hey look at me. I'm a star. I'm a star."

"He's hilarious," defender Justin Lee said. "He's honestly one of the funniest kids I know. He's just a goofy guy. Listening to him talk, he says some ridiculous stuff."

For all of his jokes and antics, Gross is just as serious about continuing his improvement as the men's soccer team's starting goalkeeper. After posting nine shutouts in the fall, Gross is using the spring to improve his fitness and get back to full health.

A redshirt junior next fall, Gross's first two seasons in net have been marred by small injuries that have stunted his development and kept him out of games. Last fall, a quad injury cost Gross two games, and he said he is still dealing with a nagging shoulder injury and has to get his thumb taped up before games and practice.

Putting so much effort into getting back into game shape and adjusting to the college game wore down the keeper at first.

"It took a lot out of my body to get there, and I feel like doing so put me at risk for a lot of injuries, which was an issue this fall," Gross said. "So for the first time I've been working hard in the gym to make sure that going forward and looking ahead to the fall, I'm not as susceptible to injury as I was last year."

While his size allows Gross to cut off crosses and corners in the air and fill the space between the posts, his footwork is still an area that needs some tuning. Assistant coach Ryan Defibaugh, who works mainly with the goalkeepers, said footwork will be a major component of the keepers' training this spring.

Monday, Gross and backup Brendan Birmingham went through two different warmups in which they had to navigate over three low hurdles before facing a close-range shot. Goalkeeping is all about reacting, and Gross said any advantage he can get helps.

With nine returning starters including himself, Gross said having consistency and experience in front of him is an advantage for the rest of the spring and next season.

"It makes a huge difference. This is the most excited I've been looking forward to a season," Gross said. "We've got a ton of potential so hopefully all the pieces can click together, and we do what we need to do this year."

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Lions need intensity to contend for title

By Emily Kaplan

ONE could hardly blame the Penn State men's volleyball team if it already booked tickets to this May's NCAA championships in Stanford, Calif.

Because for the Nittany Lions, the road to the Final Four is pretty much paved.

In four weeks, they'll host the EIVA tournament, where they can clinch the league's automatic semifinal berth.

The No. 9 Lions — who for the 12th-straight season have earned a No. 1 seed and home-court advantage — will face teams like Princeton (which can't offer athletic scholarships), Springfield (a Division III institution) and St. Francis (student body: 2,210).

And the Lions should advance — as they've done 21 times, including the last 11 seasons — because those schools can hardly compete with the resources and tradition of a national powerhouse like Penn State.

"I'm sure they're going to the Final Four, and I'm sure they are going to be a handful in the semis," said John Speraw, coach of UC Irvine, the defending national champion. "That's what seems to happen every year Penn State has a great team."

But Penn State wants to be more than just a handful in the semis. They want a national title.

Yet after 25 matches, the Lions have been too inconsistent to think that will happen. Not to mention too many questions have risen about their mental toughness.

They've shown flashes of offensive brilliance (five players tallying double-digit kills in a win over Laval, Canada's top-ranked team), then stretches without emotion (an embarrassing home loss to Ohio State in front of a national television audience).

They've had moments when they look like one of the country's elite programs (a road victory over then-No. 6 Long Beach State), then periods when it doesn't even look like they show up (a



ON THE BLOG

Penn State coach Mark Pavlik discusses the Lions' next West Coast trip and the lineup on the Above the Net blog: psucollegian.com

MEN'S VOLLEYBALL



MY OPINION

program-worst loss to Rutgers-Newark of the EIVA's Hay Division).

That's right, a branch campus of Rutgers.

Penn State surely has the talent — two returning All-Americans, an experienced setter and perhaps the country's most dynamic libero — but the team's intensity wavers.

A championship team should be peaking this late in the regular season. Penn State isn't.

Luckily for Mark Pavlik's crew, it's not too late. And they can look right across Rec Hall for inspiration — the other Penn State volleyball team.

The Penn State women are a blueprint for mental toughness leading to success.

The Lions have an NCAA-best 102-match winning streak, during which they had to play clearly inferior teams and in hostile environments (hello, Big Ten road schedule).

And they competed hard every time.

And when they won that 102nd match — when they stormed back from a 0-2 deficit to edge Texas in the NCAA finals — they didn't even have the best player on the court.

The Longhorns' Destinee Hooker notched 34 kills, ripping nearly every ball past Penn State's block.

But the women fought. And fought hard. And as a team, they achieved something amazing — their third consecutive NCAA championship.

The Penn State men's volleyball team clearly has the potential. But to win a national championship, the Lions will need to up their intensity.

They need to work hard from whistle to whistle and make every point seem like it's their last, no matter who the opponent.

Otherwise, they'll be looking for deals on an early return ticket from Stanford. And they'll have themselves to blame.

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