

“ARE WE GOOD?”



PSU looking for answers at season's midpoint

By Audrey Snyder
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

With questions mounting after Penn State's 3-2 start to the season, the Nittany Lions took it upon themselves to refocus.

In a players-only meeting called before Monday's practice by captains Brett Brackett and Ollie Ogbu, the Lions discussed what they need to do after opening the Big Ten season with a loss to Iowa.

Overcoming a tough road schedule, working through key injuries and teaching inexperienced players how to excel is all part of the job, Joe Paterno said.

And this year is no exception.

With a freshman quarterback, two road losses and an offense that's

already been held without a touchdown twice, questions are being raised about how good the 2010 Nittany Lions are.

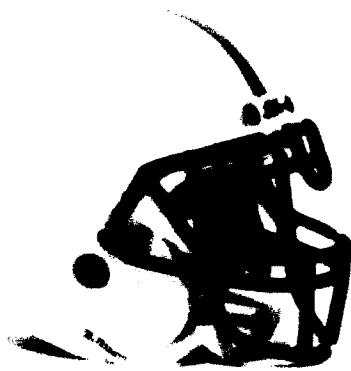
Add in a defense that's struggled to play well during the first half of games and hasn't found a playmaker, with a coaching staff that couldn't precisely communicate at the end of the first half against Iowa, and the questions continue.

After entering the season ranked No. 19, road losses to

Alabama and Iowa bounced the team out of the Associated Press Top-25 poll for the first time in 38 weeks.

"It's a challenge," Paterno said of the inexperience and injuries his team is dealing with. "But nobody said it was going to be easy all the time."

With seven conference games remaining, there are plenty of opportunities for the Lions to fix their mistakes and make a push for a New Year's Day bowl game. But that improvement can't wait another week,



linebacker

M i c h a e l

Mauti said.

"We could either pack up the tent and let these guys come in here and run through us or we can have some pride and put up a fight and actually make the most out of this season,"

Mauti said.

"Which I think we're very capable of doing."

That's why several players are calling Saturday's homecoming game against Illinois a "must win" and a test to see if the team's work in practice will pay off in the game.

But what will the Lions gain with a win against the Illini?

"There's not a whole lot to gain," said ESPN Big Ten Blogger, Adam Rittenberg. "Other than getting confidence

Illinois vs. Penn State

Time: Noon
Place: Beaver Stadium
TV: ESPN2

among the team, among the fans in State College, you're not going to gain national respect by beating Illinois at home. But you certainly can lose it."

Having all the Lions buy into the idea there can't be any more losses is something wide receiver Devon Smith took upon himself after the loss to Iowa.

Though Smith questioned how good the team was shortly after the loss, he said this week's "intense" practices helped him conclude the team is inexperienced but still focused on getting back on track.

"I can say we're a decent team," Smith said. "In practice we show intensity, we show that we don't wanna lose no more and that's what we've shown the last few days and that's something we're going to bring to the table on Saturday."

With a team that has just three seniors starting on defense and an offense that is the worst in the Big Ten in the red zone, the coach isn't bothered by his players trying to figure out where the team stands.

In fact, Paterno is glad it's thinking about what it needs to do to improve and said the team still needs to learn how to handle a back-and-forth game.

"I think they want to find out

some things about themselves, particularly the younger kids," Paterno said. "The younger kids have not gone out there and walked off the field, 'Hey, we showed them.' We've got a ways to go. But I'm glad to hear them say that."

The reality is Paterno has a lot of young players on the field and in key positions, too.

Though the offense hasn't gotten off to a fast start this season and has struggled to establish the tempo of the game during the first half, Smith said the offense's

mentality leads him to believe it's close to turning the corner.

"Basically we don't have another choice but to turn it around," Smith said. "That's what I think. I think everybody's got that

mentality in their head like we've got to do it."

But the offense's identity has yet to take form. With running back Evan Royster rushing for just 353 yards, Rittenberg said he would've expected the Lions' ground attack to be well established by this point. However, he said the team's potential is still good, but it needs to figure out if it's a run first or pass first team.

The defense also had its share of injuries and shakeups, as the

linebackers altered their rotation and are still waiting for Gerald Hodges to return to the field.

With the status of nickel back Derrick Thomas and defensive end Sean Stanley unknown for "undisclosed reasons" after neither made the trip to Iowa, it could limit the team's depth. But Mauti doesn't think the defense is missing too many pieces.

"I don't see us as lacking or deficient in talent or guys that can make plays and do the job," Mauti said. "It's just really just getting things done at the right time and with the right person in the right situation."

And while the players may ask themselves how good they are and what they need to do to get back on track,

Mauti said the team isn't oblivious to what some fans may be thinking.

"It's not like people aren't watching the games," Mauti said. "We really got to just get better and that's really our main focus. If we want to be successful and make the most of this season that's what needs to happen for us as a team."



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Daily Collegian Predictions

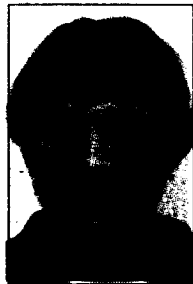
Andrew J. Cassavell

Score: PSU 20, Illinois 10

What's good: No Adrian Clayborn or Broderick Binns to block this week.

What's bad: Mikel Leshoure causes problems for front seven.

What to look for: Illini CB Travon Bellamy blocking his cousin, Stephon Morris, on kickoffs.



Audrey Snyder

Score: PSU 20, Illinois 13

What's good: A few touchdowns in the red zone get Bolden and the offense going.

What's bad: Royster won't get the rushing record in front of the homecoming crowd.

What to look for: Lions playing with intensity from the get go.



Brendan Monahan

Score: PSU 17, Illinois 10

What's good: A first half touchdown.

What's bad: Short-yardage trouble.

What to look for: LBs Glenn Carson and Khairi Fortt get more experience.



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