

D-line struggling to stay healthy, compete

By Audrey Snyder
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Most of Penn State's defensive line was situated behind the row of players who stood on the sideline.

Junior defensive end Jack Crawford, his replacement, Eric Latimore and fellow defensive end Pete Massaro sat between two water coolers and a few benches while the Nittany Lions played without them.

While Crawford, Latimore and Massaro traded in their helmets and shoulder pads for crutches, ice and a trip to the trainer's table, true freshman DaQuan Jones and redshirt junior Kevin Latham stepped in.

With the defensive rotation depleted, the Lions faced the reoccurring problem of getting pressure on the quarterback. However, there are still more issues with this injury-riddled

defense that will only continue with a short-handed defensive line rotation.

Through six games, the Lions have allowed the opponents to be a perfect 13-for-13 in the red zone, surrendering nine touchdowns and four field goals. With Illinois capitalizing on all four red zone opportunities by scoring two touchdowns and kicking two field goals, the injuries can't be blamed for the lack of productivity.

But the depleted rotation could be an issue heading into the second half of the season as it could make it harder for the defense to avoid fatigue as it tries to turn its play around.

"Whenever you have injuries for a defense, on a defense that rotates a lot, it's kind of tough out there because we're used to flying around, being out every other series," defensive tackle Ollie Ogbu said. "But you've got to keep fighting."

Jones made his second appearance of the season against Illinois after he

played in Iowa. The 6-foot-3-inch, 309-pound freshman saw time at both tackle and end, and with the rotation still being up in the air with injuries, he could play a more prominent role in the second half of the season.

As for Latham, who had three tackles against the Illini, at 6-feet-2-inches and 252 pounds, his size makes him smaller than Massaro, Latimore and Crawford. Though defensive coordinator Tom Bradley said Latham played more against Illinois than he has the entire season, he didn't have a choice.

Without a deep rotation, which includes defensive Sean Stanley, who missed the last two games for undisclosed reasons, and defensive tackle Jordan Hill, who left Saturday's game with an ankle injury, Latham won't be able to rest.

As Big Ten offenses move the ball down the field on the conference's eighth-ranked run defense and worst red zone defense, the thin rotation along the line will only be magnified.

"When you're gonna be good on defense, you've got the same group of guys working together, seeing things over and over again," Bradley said after the game.

"[Today] you're constantly mixing and matching."

The defense's inability to keep a dominant and healthy unit on the field has been lacking all season. But Latham said the defensive line is still making it a matter of pride to try and improve the team's run defense, regardless of who is on the field.

As for Bradley's advice to try and develop some of his younger players while trying to better his defensive line, it may not happen as concise as he put it.

"We just have to figure out where we want to play them, simplify what we're doing and get them good," Bradley said.



Daniel Bott/Collegian

Crawford watches from the sideline on crutches Saturday.

SCUFFLED



Chloe Elmer/Collegian

Fullback Michael Zordich (9) comes to blows with Illinois wide receiver Jarred Fayson on the field in the Illini's win over the Lions on Saturday.

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