

Casais strong as midfielder for Lions

By Andrew Robinson
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

To wear the captain's armband in soccer means to be a leader on and off the field, to put the team first, make sacrifices and do what's needed to get a win.

Andres Casais has done all of that for the Penn State men's soccer team this season. Against Akron, he proved again why he was chosen as a captain, coming off the bench to play a central midfielder role he has never played in his Penn State career.

"It was fun. Coach put me there. I don't know if the game required it or not but maybe he was trying to put me up higher," Casais said. "The guys said I did really well, they thought I was really composed, that's what I'm going to take from it."

Casais has not started a game since the 2-1 loss to Michigan on Oct. 3, having been replaced by Andy Parr.

Parr has played exceptionally well, earning Big Ten defensive player of the week honors after the Lions tallied two wins and

allowed just one goal last week.

Though the benching was tough to take, Casais didn't let it affect the way he worked in training or his attitude around his teammates. During games against Villanova and Michigan State, the co-captain stood next to coach Bob Warming as the two talked about the game in front of them.

"It's a great thing about doing some squad rotation," Warming said. "When you're not in the starting lineup the whole time because of the rotation and you get back in, you're doubly energetic to go prove yourself. I think that's where he was [Wednesday]."

When he entered the game, Casais took the place of Justin Lee, who was cramping up. At first, Casais said he was more in an attacking role, but he eventually settled in front of the back line.

Roughly halfway through the second half, Casais crashed Akron's net, putting a ball on net that forced Zips goalkeeper David Meyes to make an incredible diving save.

"It happened really quick and I didn't realize until after and it was

like 'Woah, I did have a shot,'" Casais said. "After that the play goes over and over in your head, 'what if that went in,' or if I just pushed it near post. But the keeper got big came out really well and confident but I got a corner kick out of it and I'm not even used to that."

While he tried to keep his emotions about being benched in check, his frustration did show. Senior midfielder Mathews Braga, Casais' roommate, said he could tell the demotion was wearing on Casais at times.

"Andres isn't the type of guy where even though he's sad and he's not happy with not playing, he's not going to show it to the team," Braga said. "He wants the team to do well instead of him. He puts the team in front of him all the time."

Braga said his friend did well in the midfield and Casais' technical ability served him well and defensive midfield seems like a natural fit.

For Casais, getting used to the short amount of time he has to play the ball and not being able to



Kelley King/Collegian

Andres Casais (6) heads the ball during a loss to Akron on Wednesday.

see the whole field are the biggest challenges of midfield play.

Always a competitor, Casais said he's looking at the move as a new challenge. The senior said he's taking his situation day by day and if his future is in the midfield, then he will embrace it.

"When someone asks you what sport you play, you don't answer,

'I'm a centre back,' you say, 'I'm a soccer player.'" Casais said. "Being a soccer player comes first, and the basics are the same for a defender as an attacker. If you're a soccer player you can adapt and learn different positions as long as you know how to kick a ball."

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Nairn's leadership growing in sophomore year

By Andrew Robinson
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There aren't many college soccer teams that rely on a sophomore to act as one of their main leaders on the field.

Most sophomores aren't Christine Nairn.

After being named the Big Ten Freshman of the Year last season, the midfielder on the Penn State women's soccer team has become a bigger leader on the field. But the sophomore had some initial reservations about having to give orders to her older teammates early in the year.

"Granted, we're all friends and they take it with a grain of salt but I just felt uneasy at the beginning of the season," Nairn said. "But coach [Erica Walsh] said it doesn't matter what age you or what class you are, she said they respect me well enough to hear what I have to say."

Nairn said she prefers to lead by

example and her teammates naturally look to her because of her position as a center midfielder.

And despite being an underclassman, Nairn has two appearances with the United States women's national team and captain the U.S. in the U-20 World Cup this past summer.

This year, the midfielder has shown more maturity on the field and currently leads the Nittany Lions with five goals and four assists. Senior co-captain Megan Monroig said when Nairn brings positive energy, it lifts the team's play and Monroig has seen Nairn grow as a leader from last year.

"She doesn't get in her own head as much, when she makes a mistake she's getting better at just blowing it off and keep playing," Monroig said. "She keeps playing,

keeps going at it and getting the ball, making the runs and making the passes and she does it well."

Last year, the Lions had seven seniors providing the majority of the leadership and Nairn didn't have to take on as big a role. But with just two seniors this year, more players provide that leadership to support Monroig and junior captain Emma Thomson.

Walsh has noticed a more consistent Nairn, and said the sophomore is working through her frustration better, while not responding with a bad mood. But soccer is a team game as well, and being a leader means helping the other players on the field.

So far, Nairn has provided that. "She's bringing the players along and that's what we've been talking to her about all the time," Walsh said.

"You're only going to be as good as the player next to you and your job is to make everybody else better."

Through 13 games, Nairn leads the team with 48 total shots and has provided a deep-lying threat to compliment the speed of strikers Dani Toney, Maya Hayes and Hayley Brock. Three of the sophomore's five goals have come on penalty kicks, and Nairn said she steps up to take PKs knowing her teammates are confident in her.

The penalty kick role also shows Nairn's maturity. After missing a PK against Nigeria in the quarterfinals of the U-20 World Cup and one in the home opener against Virginia, the sophomore shook off any demons and buried a penalty against then No. 4 Portland on Sept. 12.

And she hasn't missed a PK since.

Nairn said she didn't know she was leading the team in scoring and she doesn't feel added pressure to be the playmaker for Penn State.

"When I'm playing a game, I look to myself as to what I can do,

what's best for the team," Nairn said. "If that's scoring and creating goals, great but if it's a completely different aspect, like connecting passes and keeping us all together, I'm glad to do that too."

It's never a goal to score in every game. Instead Nairn said she just wants to be a part of the total threat in the attack. The midfielder said any one of the other center mids is just as capable of being a leader because of the position and as always, credited her teammates.

Monroig said Nairn taking on more leadership not only helps the team now, but in the future, no matter how much the sophomore tries to deflect credit.

"She maybe doesn't want the whole leadership role, but she does great at it," Monroig said. "Everybody can look up to her and we know she's going to be there to help us out."

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