

Nairn staying productive

By Andrew Robinson
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

If Christine Nairn taught the Big Ten anything during her freshman campaign last year, it was that letting a player with national team credentials run wild isn't the best way to win games.

After tearing through her first season with the Penn State women's soccer team while scoring seven goals and posting 10 assists, Nairn was named first team All-Big Ten and the conference's player of the year.

But this season, teams have put a greater emphasis on shutting down the crafty sophomore midfielder.

Despite the extra attention, Nairn has maintained a high level of play and has been one of the Nittany Lions' most consistent players this season.

"Every team's strategy is to zero in on Christine and she does a good job, she works hard," Lions coach Erica Walsh said after the 3-2 loss to Wisconsin on Oct. 17. "She picks and chooses her opportunities and I think she's playing well. I have no complaints about what she's doing right now."

WOMEN'S SOCCER



Nairn

The loss to the Badgers was one of just three Big Ten games where Nairn was held without a goal or assist.

As the Lions experimented with their lineups and formations early in the season, Nairn took on several roles and did not record a point until the team's fifth game.

In the game against Wisconsin, Nairn was shadowed by Badger defensive midfielder Erin Jacobsen as Wisconsin's strategy was to keep Nairn from connecting passes up to the forwards. Wisconsin coach Paula Wilkins said keeping Nairn contained prevented Penn State's arsenal of forwards from getting the ball from the midfielder's entry passes.

"We were just finding her, trying to make sure every time she got the ball she couldn't face forward or get an opportunity," Wilkins said. "She obviously got away a couple of times and had some brilliant shots and she was our main focus, to shut her down."

Nairn led the Lions in goals for most of the season, until conceding that edge to forward Tani Costa on Sunday. With the team's forwards scoring in bunches, Nairn laughed when she was asked if she's just trying to keep pace at this point.

"If we're winning, then I'm happy," Nairn said.

"It's never my stats or anything like that. If we continue to

win, I'll be happy whether I'm getting the points or not."

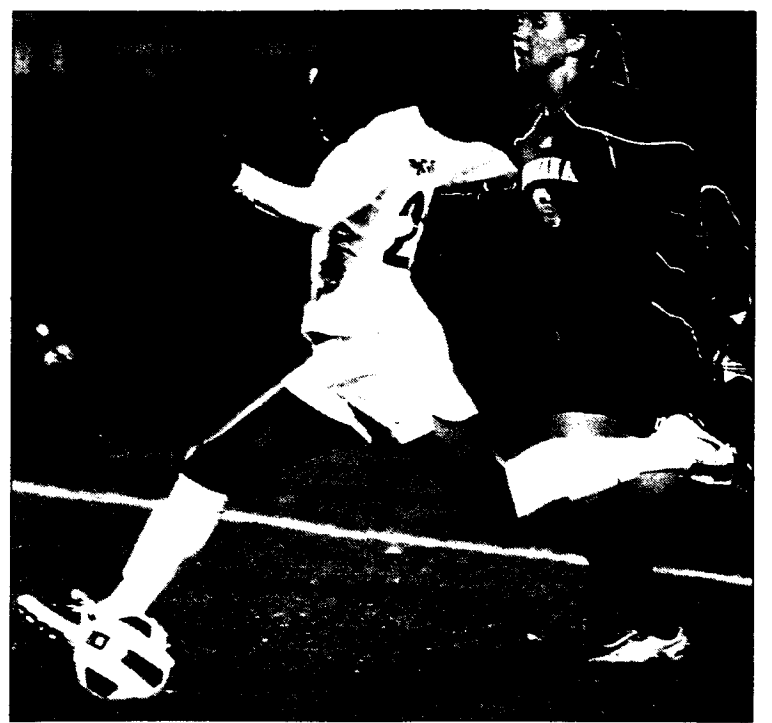
Despite being the focus of more defenses, Nairn has still provided moments of brilliance.

The midfielder carried the Lions to a 2-1 win over Northwestern when she scored both of Penn State's goals. After playing more of a central midfield role early this season, Nairn has moved back into an attacking midfield position, but has shown an increased drive on the defensive end, chasing down attackers across and up-and-down the field all game.

Sophomore midfielder Maddy Evans said during games the other players will look to Nairn to provide answers and the sophomore usually delivers. With Nairn's extended background in soccer — she served as a co-captain on the United States U-20 World Cup team this summer and has two appearances with the senior national team — Evans said her teammate is the type of player and person that can make the best of any situation.

"She's had all the experience in the world, pretty much literally," Evans said. "She's able to deal with anything at this level. She's someone that other teams focus on but she's one of those people that can handle that and take it on and she handles it. I think, really well."

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Dani Toney (left) prepares to shoot in a match against Indiana.

Offense getting back to old form

By Andrew Robinson
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Once Dani Toney scored in the eventual game-winning goal in a 2-0 win at then-No. 13 Illinois on Oct. 24, it opened a floodgate of scoring.

The senior forward said prior to that game she felt the offense just needed a few goals to get going again. Over the past three games, the Penn State women's soccer team has outscored its opponents 14-2 as it makes a late push for an NCAA Tournament bid.

"We're just trying to make a statement to the NCAA committee right now that this is a team that's coming on well and coming on strong," coach Erica Walsh said.

"Hopefully this weekend won't be our last weekend of competition and we're trying to make a strong statement right now."

Of the 14 goals the Lions have scored, 12 have come from the forward rotation of Toney, Maya Hayes, Hayley Brock and Big Ten Offensive Player of the Week Tani Costa. Midfielder Christine Nairn, tied with Toney for second place with seven goals, had the other two scores over the three-game run.

Costa has led the way, scoring five goals over the last two games and has started the last four. But the redshirt freshman isn't the only player on a hot streak, as Toney and Brock have both scored in three consecutive games.

"It's great for us because we were struggling in the beginning, but we've been really working hard in practice and trying to work with each other and talking through it, giving each other the confidence to put balls in the back of the net," Toney said. "It's finally coming through. We worked hard and we're going to continue to work hard."

In all three of the team's latest matches, Penn State controlled possession, dictating the pace of play in its favor. That control-style soccer has allowed the Lions to score early and keep pressure on for the entire match.

Though the team only got two goals against Illinois on Oct. 24, it still put 10 of its 23 shots on goal. In the 6-1 wins over Indiana and Purdue, the Lions got two goals after the 70th minute in each contest.

Penn State has plenty of speed on offense, but the team is best suited when it keeps the ball on the ground.

Nairn said Walsh has taken that fact to heart this season in the way the Lions train and prepare for games.

"Teams have always scouted us as 'Take the ball and run,' and we take that as a slap in the face that says we can't play soccer," Nairn said.

"Coach has taken a totally different approach and put a lot of emphasis on our strength, which is keeping the ball rather than kicking and running."

Costa said the forwards have been focusing on their efforts on the defensive end, which she thinks has helped the scoring. By being more alert and involved as defenders, the forwards can recover the ball deeper in an opponent's zone and create better scoring chances.

While the 14-2 scoring margin is a clear indicator of the offense's return, a telling sign came on Toney's romp through Purdue's defense that tied the game Sunday.

"I was calling for the ball and she just took it on herself to put it away," Nairn said.

"If she can do that every single time I call for the ball, that'd be great and I'd rather her not pass me the ball if she's just going to score like that."

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Lions focusing on beam work

By Matt Howland
FOR THE COLLEGIAN

The Penn State women's gymnastics team has been hitting routines in practice at the halfway point in the preseason and its first meet isn't for another two months.

Nevertheless, preparations are starting to ramp up in anticipation of the first meet Jan. 7 at Alabama.

The team held a balance beam intrasquad scrimmage Tuesday afternoon at practice with the goal of getting the gymnasts prepared for the intensity and format of a meet.

Danielle Hover, Stephanie Brock, Whitney Bencsko, Cassidy Stauder, Daryl Konsevick and Sharaya Musser performed their balance beam routines in a competition-style format. Brock, Stauder, Konsevick and Musser all hit their routines without falling.

Associate head coach Rachelle Thompson was satisfied with the results of the intrasquad, with four of the six gymnasts hitting their routines.

She identified the scrimmage as important to see how the gymnasts would perform without more time to warm up. Each of the six gymnasts had only 30 seconds to warm up on the beam

"I was just really focused and did what I had to do."

Stephanie Brock
gymnast

before they performed their routines, echoing the format of meets, where the team will have only three minutes on one beam in the two hours before their routines.

"We do a lot of different pressure sets during preseason to kind of get the girls ready for that," Thompson said.

Thompson said she would use the results of the intrasquad to figure out how comfortable the team was with the competition format, and base her practices accordingly.

"They all hit that, so the warm up doesn't matter to them, or if they all fell, then we'd structure in less and less warm up time over the next 34 workouts," Thompson said.

The gymnasts felt they were prepared for the scrimmage, but they also said the short warm up time was still a factor.

"It was a good wake up call 'cause it did remind me of how it would feel in a meet," senior Danielle Hover said.

The stakes were high, with the performance of the gymnasts on the beam determining the intensity of the rest of the practice, where the team worked on

vault, uneven bars and balance beam.

With Hover, Bencsko, Stauder, Konsevick and Musser looking like locks for five of the six balance beam competition spots, the pressure was also on Brock, a freshman, who is penciled in to the final spot but has to fight off competition. Senior Heather McElwee, and freshmen Lindsay Musgrove and Cassidy Bogar are also in competition for the sixth spot. Brock hit her routine well, and appears to be the favorite at the spot for now. After the countless hours of practicing her beam routine, she was unfazed by the short warm up time.

"I tried not to let it affect me because we've done hundreds of routines, so I know I could hit everything," Brock said. "I was just really focused and did what I had to do."

Thompson highlighted the importance of the competition for spots in keeping everyone sharp.

"It's still a lot of competition for that spot," Thompson said. "Seven and eight keep working, hoping to get in, and while they're working and getting better and better, they're also pushing one through six."

Icers players to represent U.S., play NCAA opponents

By Anthony Barton
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

The 2011 United States Men's National University hockey team will travel to Vermont in late December to play three exhibitions in order to prepare for the 2011 Winter World University Games Jan. 27 - Feb. 6 in Erzurum, Turkey.

Two Penn State Icers, senior forward Tim O'Brien and sophomore forward Eric Steinour, were selected to the team and coach Scott Balboni will serve as one of the team's assistant coaches.

The U.S. team is made up of the top players from the ACHA and

will take on three NCAA opponents, including Division III Castleton State College on Dec. 27, Division II Saint Michael's College on Dec. 28 and will wrap up with Division I University of Vermont on Dec. 29.

Balboni said the last time he went to the World University Games, he thought the team needed some more games to better prepare. He said the team has never skated together before, and adding more time to gel would give the coaching staff a chance to put together the best possible line combinations.

ACHA Commissioner Brian Moran and Balboni reached out to multiple NCAA schools before they were able to schedule the three teams.

"It's a situation where each time we've gone to the World University Games since 2001,

they've tried to make the experience better and tried to give us a better shot at getting into the medal round," Balboni said. "It's extremely important for our guys to play these games for A) to get used to the level of competition that we'll be facing and B) so they get together and have a chance to get to know one another and the coaching staff."

Both O'Brien and Steinour said winter break is usually spent taking some time off from the long ACHA season to spend time with their families. With the U.S. team leaving the day after Christmas for Vermont, how they approach the break will be different.

"Now that we have some games right after Christmas, I'm going to continue to workout and find some ice time somewhere to make sure I'm fresh," Steinour said.

"I definitely want to make sure

all my skills are toned in."

O'Brien said while he thinks creating chemistry with his new team will take some time, the high talent level of the players should expedite the process.

That said, he did say the team should be wary of falling into the same trap of some all-star teams of the past.

"It's always easier to play with guys that have decent talent," O'Brien said.

"Sometimes though when you see all-star teams they can struggle because all the guys want to be goal-scorers because they have the talent to be. Looking at the roster I think the coaching staff did a great job of selecting not all goal-scorers and some role players, so I don't think it will be hard for us to come together and be successful."

Balboni anticipates a raucous

atmosphere in the exhibition games. He said the first two fan bases will be excited at the prospects of having a world team in their building, and the final game against Vermont will be played in front of a sellout crowd of 8,000 people.

Overall, he thinks the trip will give the coaches a good basis on how to proceed forward.

"We were able to get the UVM game, which is obviously against a D-I team, which is kind of the pinnacle of the trip to play a very high-caliber team which will be equivalent to what we're going to play when we get overseas," Balboni said.

"I expect all three teams to come out hard against us and have us play well as we start building toward the games."

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Sixers drop nail-biter to Wall, Wizards in overtime game

By Joseph White
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON, D.C. — John Wall had 29 points, 13 assists, nine steals and eight turnovers in his home debut, outshining fellow rookie Evan Turner as the Washington Wizards beat the Philadelphia 76ers 116-115 in overtime Tuesday night in the first matchup of the top two picks in this year's draft.

No. 1 choice Wall's eventful game gave the Wizards their first win of the season. Cartier Martin

caught Wall's inbounds pass and hit a 3-pointer with 0.3 seconds remaining in regulation to send the game into overtime.

No. 2 pick Turner, who came off the bench and wasn't a factor until the second half, scored all of his nine points in the fourth quarter and finished with six rebounds for the 76ers, who are 0-4 for the first time since 2001-02. Lou Williams led the 76ers with

30 points, one shy of his career-high. He scored 20 points in the fourth quarter and went 6-for-6 from the free throw line in the final 17 seconds of regulation as the 76ers' lead fluctuated between one and three points — until Martin hit the 3-pointer that electrified the near-sellout Verizon Center crowd celebrating the home opener.

Andray Blatche added 23 points, eight rebounds and six turnovers for the Wizards.

Elton Brand finished with 21 points for the 76ers.

He fouled out in the final seconds of overtime.

In the extra period, Wall stole the ball from Turner and converted the play into two free throws to give the Wizards a one-point lead. Washington was up by three with one minute left, but Brand made consecutive jumpers to put the 76ers ahead 115-114.

Blatche then drew a foul driving to the basket with 7.1 remaining and put the Wizards back in front with two free throws. Andre Iguodala had the final chance to win it for the 76ers, but he missed his jumper just before time expired.

Although the game was the first matchup of Wall from Kentucky

and Turner from Ohio State, anyone anticipating an intense head-to-head dual had to wait a while. Wall is already a starting point guard, captain and arguably the most important player on the court for the Wizards, while Turner is a swingman coming off the bench as he seeks to find his niche for the 76ers.

When introduced in the starting lineup, Wall milked the spotlight, doing an extended version of "The Dougie" dance as he strutted out to his teammates — showing no signs of the sprained right ankle he suffered in Washington's last game on Saturday.



O'Brien

NBA

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Washington
115
Philadelphia