

Bencsko on recovery track after injury

By Matt Howland
FOR THE COLLEGIAN

The frustration clearly shows on Whitney Bencsko's face with every slip or stumble.

Bencsko, a junior on the Penn State women's gymnastics team, is eight months removed from a season-ending posterior cruciate ligament tear.

WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS

The injury was resolved last season in a Feb. 27 meet at Ohio State. Bencsko suffered the injury when she hyperextended her knee on her dismount from the uneven bars.

She's now back training, with a knee brace providing a visible reminder of the injury.

Assistant coach Randy Monahan estimates Bencsko has recovered between 80-85 percent of her pre-injury form.

And while Bencsko's knee is

almost entirely healed, her endurance and timing are still slightly off, as she was only cleared to participate in training about a month ago.

"Right now it's not really like my leg's holding me back, it's more of just timing, things are a little bit off," Bencsko said.

"I'm tired because it was a lot really fast compared to what I was doing."

Bencsko's irritation with not yet being able to complete all of the skills she once could shows in her dedication to practice, as Bencsko seems determined to relentlessly practice each skill until she hits it.

The coaches are impressed with her work ethic and desire to return from the injury, but are concerned with how critical she is of herself as she recovers.

Bencsko prides herself on maintaining her fitness in the off-season and staying ahead of schedule, and as a result is particularly frus-

trated by finding herself behind the rest of the team.

"Whitney is much, much further [along in the process of her injury] than she gives herself credit," head coach Jeff Thompson said.

"She's doing incredible, and if there was one thing we would change, we would ask her to not be as hard as herself as she is."

Bencsko's hard work has meant that she's finally catching up to the other gymnasts.

Thompson estimated that she's only about a month behind the rest of the team in her preparation.

Unfortunately, with the team's first meet Jan. 7 at Alabama on the horizon, Bencsko may not be all the way back to the level that saw her named an All-American in her freshman year, at least physically.

However, Bencsko said she expects to be competing in every event in the first meet, although a

"She'll be 100 percent ready to compete. She may not be the same gymnast she was last year in January, but she'll get there before the season's over."

Jeff Thompson
women's gymnastics coach

few skills of hers will be altered in regards to where she is in her recovery.

"I don't know if she'll be completely 100 percent where she was before she was injured, but she'll be 100 percent ready to compete," Thompson said.

"She may not be the same gymnast she was last year in January, but she'll get there before the season's over."

But with just over two months remaining until the first meet, Bencsko still has some time to recover what she has lost to the injury.

Her competitive fire is sure to mean that she will once again be a force to be reckoned with for the team in the upcoming season, of course once Bencsko is fully healed.

The coaches certainly aren't counting her out.

In fact, Bencsko is now penciled in to be a starter in the Alabama meet.

"Between now and then, if she doesn't kill herself, she'll be ready," Thompson said.

"And we expect her to compete in the all-around and be a star for us."

NCAA

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of September, going just 2-6-1 in nonconference play.

But once the Big Ten season began, the team came together. Penn State went 8-2-0 during the conference run and got a few breaks along the way to split the conference crown with Ohio State.

The Buckeyes got the automatic bid due to a head-to-head win over Penn State, leaving the Lions hoping for an at-large bid. They got it, and the prospect of facing Penn is what has Walsh most excited about the draw.

"Penn's an opponent I'm familiar with having been in the Ivy League but I'm mostly excited that it's a new opponent," Walsh said. "It's somebody that we haven't faced and that's part of the excitement of the NCAA Tournament, it's something new and different."

Walsh said all of the focus is on Penn right now, and the players said despite plenty of experience with West Virginia, they can't afford to look ahead. Freshman defender Bri Hovington said she's excited for her first run through the NCAAs and the way the season unfolded has brought the team closer together.

After the brackets were announced, assistant coach Ann Cook addressed the team and said the tough September the Lions endured gives them an advantage. While the team didn't get results, Cook said it taught the players how to handle adversity and how to handle having their backs against the wall, something most other teams haven't experienced.

Junior midfielder Ali Schaefer, Sunday's hero, said she felt the tournament bid was a just result for the way the team fought through the season, a sentiment echoed by her teammates.

"Getting in is just huge for us, we're very excited about it."

"I've got a good feeling we're going to have a good run."

Taylor Schram
freshman forward

Monroig said. "Especially with the way the season did start when we thought 'We're not going to win the Big Ten, we're not going to make the tournament,' to know have done both, we're extremely excited about it and very happy."

The team knew it was going to have to travel, but Walsh said only having to go three and a half hours helps the tired players.

For the freshman, the bid is something they're looking forward to.

"I'm so excited, we got such a good draw," Schram said.

"I think this is going to be a great thing for us, I've got a good feeling we're going to have a good run."

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Seniors

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and two of my best friends," the junior said. "I'm so glad I could give them their full set and hopefully some freshman can give me mine next year."

Thanks to Schaefer's goal, Toney and Monroig have now been a part of four straight celebrations as Big Ten champions.

Likely playing their last ever game on Jeffrey Field, the seniors

made sure to go out on top as Monroig said this is their home turf and takes opposing teams' celebrations personally.

With the way this match ended, Monroig said it definitely ranks toward the top of the list in their Penn State careers.

"To win it my senior year when we were counted out by everybody probably except for our team, it means the world," she said. "As a senior captain, it means everything to me to win it with our backs up against the wall early on

in Big Ten season."

Just like winning Sunday, it was unlikely for the Lions to have even been in a situation where a Big Ten title was possible.

And what makes it even more unusual and improbable was the team had only two graduating seniors despite being a soccer powerhouse over the last decade and a half.

All but three players on the team have been a part of one of coach Erica Walsh's official recruiting classes, and 17 of the 25

players on the roster have freshman or sophomore eligibility.

Other than redshirt junior Meghan Gill, Toney and Monroig were the only two players here for Walsh's first year at Penn State.

"They were the group I got here with, the freshmen that were here when I arrived and these guys just dug in," Walsh said. "They certainly deserve it and I'm glad they got it."

Just like their first year together at Penn State, the seniors' last includes celebrating on the field donning Big Ten Champion hats

and t-shirts once again.

Monroig, a do-it-all team leader, and Toney, a relentless goal scorer, both solidified their collegiate legacy after Sunday's thrilling victory.

"It feels great," Toney said. "Now I'm up there with some of the girls who helped start the program and it just feels so great. I really feel like I'm part of Penn State and I'll never ever forget Penn State women's soccer."

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Redd

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defenders, and the right tackle also had said it's obvious that Redd can flat out play.

Redd is just 18 years old, and if he still was back in Norwalk, Conn. his high school season would be winding down.

But his teammates don't foresee him hitting any type of freshman wall any time soon.

Redd saw action in eight games and carried the ball 46 times, but his 7.13 yards per carry average makes him the most explosive back.

In a backfield that struggled to establish a productive ground game until the last couple weeks, Redd is a big reason why the Lions run game has a spark it hasn't seen in a while. Ogbu said.

With Redd continuing to climb the depth chart, as he now has four more carries and 174 more yards than Green, who entered the season ahead of him, Royster can't stop talking about what the future holds for the freshman.

"I can't wait to see him," Royster said.

"I'm going to come back and watch as many games as I can and catch them on TV because he's definitely got some exciting things coming."

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Oliver

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were tough on Oliver, who, with the exception of five games last season, has been forced to watch his teammates for two full seasons after taking a medical redshirt last year.

"It's like you go preseason, spring, summer, preseason, spring, summer and you don't get a real season in there," Oliver said.

Oliver will get that "real" season this year, and it's a good thing because the Nittany Lions will rely heavily on him off the bench this year. With the loss of center Sasa Borovnjak to a season-ending knee

injury, Oliver will be the first man off the bench for the frontcourt this year as was the case against East Stroudsburg.

By all accounts, Oliver has the chance to be a real contributor for the Lions, who are coming off a disappointing season and are trying to make it to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2001.

"He's looking good, Billy's looking good," senior forward Jeff Brooks said. "He's knocking down open jump shots, playing defense. He looks like he's finally ready."

Ready to play is an understatement to the third-year freshman Oliver.

"I'm extremely excited," he said. "I've been waiting since my true freshman year."

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Mauti

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D-linemen. Those guys get me fired up. When they start getting going, it just feeds."

On a team that lost big-name defensive playmakers — such as NaVorro Bowman, Sean Lee and Jared Odrick — this season's Nittany Lions haven't had a defensive mainstay whose job it was to set the standard.

Rumblings around Penn State say Mauti is the next linebacker to carry on the historic tradition at Linebacker U. The red-shirt sophomore showed a knack for hitting running gaps instinctively against Northwestern, and Still attributed Mauti as the player who picked up the defense in the win.

Mauti's father, Rich, said his son still has a long way to go, particularly in picking up pass plays. Rich said sometimes his son is seconds too late in realizing what the offense is trying to do through the air.

The linebackers as a whole, Rich said, still need improvement in realizing plays.

Mauti suffered a high ankle sprain Oct. 2 at Iowa, sidelining him the next week against Illinois, and the redshirt sophomore tore his ACL in the 2009 preseason. The major injury kept him from playing all of last season. Mauti is healthy now, but Rich said his son is just starting to feel comfortable.

"He's ready to go, but it's a subconscious thing," Rich said in a telephone interview Monday. "It takes a couple years to push that 100 percent behind you."

Linebackers coach Ron Vanderlinden, as well as Still, said Mauti's enthusiasm causes other defenders to play similarly. Mauti understands the influence a crowd can have on a game, and his emotion is something that comes naturally with football, his father said. That was most apparent with Mauti's 3rd-down sack of Northwestern quarterback Dan Persa on the Wildcats' final drive, when the linebacker threw up both arms in celebration.

"He knows that's one of the things that was lacking earlier in the season," Rich said.

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