

Safety Willis adapting to new role as starter

By Audrey Snyder
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

The past month has been like a whirlwind for redshirt freshman Malcolm Willis.

After junior safety Nicky Sukay went down with a season-ending pectoral injury Oct. 9 against Illinois, Penn State turned to Willis to fill in.

With Willis playing exclusively during the past four games and holding his own against the opposition, the Nittany Lions have been pleasantly surprised by the performance of their safety of the future.

"It's been crazy," Willis said. "It's been a heavier burden on me needing to know all my plays and all my checks and things like that. Guys like Nick Sukay and Drew Astorino have really been in my corner trying to help me understand the defense and be where I'm supposed to be on any given play."

Trying to fill in has tested Willis both physically and mentally, his former high school coach, Doug Lamb, said the safety's intelligence is one of his best assets. Willis didn't make the transition to safety until his junior year of high school, but the former linebacker fit the mold of a safety.

At 5-foot-11-inches, Willis changed positions because it was the best way for him to get recruited, Lamb said. As he adjusted to safety, he would often play in the box and cover the tight end, but he still brings a linebacker's mentality and physicality to the position.

"He definitely looked the part when we first met him," said Lamb, who became the head coach at Henry E. Lackey High School in Maryland at the end of Willis' freshman year. "He met the eye test but just him working in the weight room and him doing all the right things in the classroom has really been the most impressive thing about him."

Lamb described Willis as "a gym rat" and said he often had to tell the safety to stop working out and go home. But it was more than the big hits and the occasional interception that helped Willis land an offer from Penn State.

He led his team to the state semifinals his junior year and played quarterback up until the first few games of his senior year. His athleticism helped him get noticed, and when Willis was recruited by Larry Johnson, he didn't hesitate giving the Lions his verbal commitment.

Willis never second-guessed his decision and his progression

this season was described by Astorino as "absolutely incredible."

With not many people hearing Willis' name, it's been a good thing for him as he's recorded 31 tackles in the past four games and has looked comfortable in the starting role.

But don't expect Willis to go around bragging about his starting spot or his play during the past month.

"That's just not his way, Lamb said.

"He's just a real quiet kid," Lamb said.

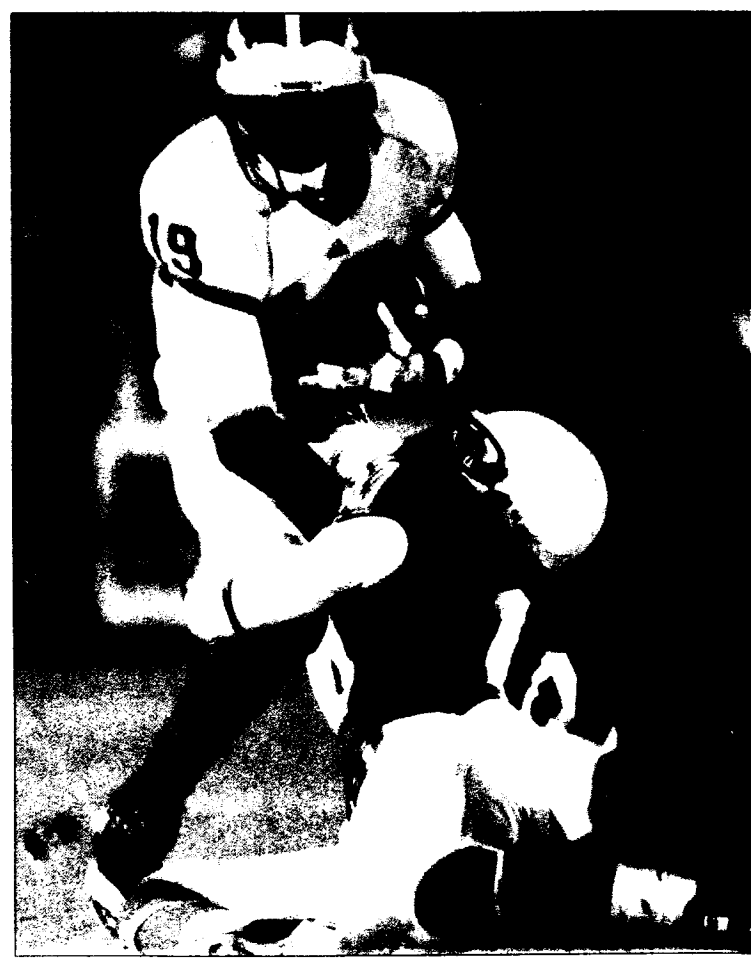
"Whenever he would say something the kids would always listen because he doesn't talk just to talk. He's just a real conservative kid and he thinks about what he wants to do first and then he does it."

The coach and player talk once a week, and Lamb is flying to Columbus to see Willis play for the Lions for the first time Saturday.

But there is still plenty of chatter from the Lions surrounding Willis' progression.

"He got shoved into a starting position, and he's played like a beast," Astorino said.

"He's been above all expectations."



Daniel Bott/Collegian

Malcolm Willis (10) makes a tackle in the Lions' win over Michigan on Oct. 30. Willis has taken on a new role as the starter at safety.

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Venkatesh Krishnan/Collegian

Christine Nairn (right) goes for a tackle against Michigan.

Lions nab awards

By Andrew Robinson
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

That late push that got the Penn State women's soccer team into the NCAA Tournament apparently caught the eye of some people within the Big Ten.

Five Nittany Lions were named All-Conference performers Wednesday, headlined by sophomore midfielder Christine Nairn's second straight First Team All-Big Ten nomination. While Lions coach Erica Walsh thought a few other players could have warranted consideration, she was happy to see her team rewarded.

"Overall, I'm pleased and I thought the players got the recognition they deserved," Walsh said. "I would have loved to have seen some of those guys (on the first team), but it all comes down to stats and you've got to put the ball in the back of the net to get on these teams."

One player who has been putting away goals is redshirt freshman Tani Costa, who made both Second-Team all conference and the Big Ten All-Freshman team after leading the team with eight goals this season. Strike partner Dani Toney, who was tied for second on the team with seven goals, joined Costa as Second Team All-Big Ten.

Toney echoed Walsh in saying she was happy for the players recognized, but that there were plenty of players who did just as much work getting the Lions to this point. The senior forward was happy to see Costa's strong season get recognized by the conference.

"Tani is a really big asset for our team, she's the replacement for a Katie Schoepfer," Toney said. "That's a really big deal, that's a great compliment and she's been doing really well and working hard."

Senior co-captain Megan Monroig, who Walsh said has done everything asked of her this season without complaint, won Penn State's Sportsmanship award. One player from each Big Ten team is selected for this award each year.

Penn State's defense, which has improved with every game got its due from the Big Ten as well. Junior co-captain Emma Thomson made the Second Team while right back Bri Hovington joined Costa as All-Freshman. Walsh said Hovington's inclusion was all but a given.

"She's been so solid in every match she's played," Walsh said.

"That would have been a real crime if she hadn't been on one of those teams."

Nairn led the Lions with six assists and tied Toney with seven goals despite being the target of most opponents' defenses.

Despite starting the year 2-6-1, Thomson said the fact the Lions got recognition from the Big Ten makes a point and puts Penn State right up with the other teams in the conference.

"It's a great accomplishment for everyone involved whether it was first or second team," Thomson said. "It shows the depth and talent we have on this team. Maybe at the beginning of the season, people may not have thought we'd be on there, but we got five on there."

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McCollum, Battle to provide sparks

By Jared Shanker
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

A preseason player of the year will be on the floor of the Bryce Jordan Center Friday when Lehigh travels to Penn State, but it won't be Talor Battle.

That title belongs to the Mountain Hawks' C.J. McCollum, the Patriot League Preseason Player of the Year and one of NCAA basketball's hidden gems, nestled away in the Lehigh Valley town of Bethlehem.

To stop at just preseason player of the year would be an insult to the sophomore McCollum, though. As a freshman, McCollum became the first player in Patriot League history to win both the player and rookie of the year awards in the same season.

"McCollum's a very good player," said Penn State coach Ed DeChellis, who called McCollum an NBA talent. "He can really score. He separates well, he has a knack of dipping into you and separating, makes tough shots."

Last season's NCAA Tournament was a bit of a coming out party for McCollum as the No. 16 Hawks faced No. 1 overall seed Kansas. Behind McCollum's team-high 26 points and seven rebounds, Lehigh gave the Jayhawks all they could handle before falling 90-74.

Many of the contributors from that team have graduated, though, and the Nittany Lions will be facing a team that vaguely resembles last year's Lehigh squad.

The conference champions a season ago, the Hawks were picked to finish fifth in the preseason poll after

"[McCollum] came in last year and performed very well but now has a year of experience at college level under his belt."

Brett Reed
Lehigh coach

graduating three starters.

To help make up for those losses, Hawks coach Brett Reed expects to rely even more on McCollum this year.

"I think to some degree, yes, because he is a very talented player," Reed said of leaning on McCollum.

"He came in last year and performed very well but now has a year of experience at college level under his belt."

"He's also gonna have a number of challenges. Opponents will game plan to slow him down and stop him."

Easier said than done. McCollum averaged 19.1 points per game last season, tops among all NCAA freshmen, and shot 42 percent from beyond the arc.

In the offseason, he worked on all aspects of his game and added muscle to his slender 6-foot-3, 180-pound frame.

"Coming in as a freshman, I was kind of trying to learn the game and pick up the offensive system and balancing everything out with academics," McCollum said, citing education as a major reason for selecting Lehigh. "I've been working on every part of my game. My game's a lot better, well-rounded and I'm in better shape."

"... I can find a lot of ways to score: free throw line, 3-point line, in the paint."

Defending McCollum will fall mainly on the shoulders of Battle, the Lions' unquestioned team leader. Battle, who DeChellis said was fighting a bit of a pelvic injury in Sunday's exhibition, could have some trouble dealing with McCollum's length, and a 46 percent shooter a season ago, the Lions

could be in trouble if McCollum finds his groove from the field.

To prepare, Battle spent some extra time in the film room Wednesday. Before practice, Battle watched about 200 clips of McCollum, breaking him down offensively and looking for any holes or tendencies.

"I'm excited for the challenge," Battle said. "A player as good as he is, it's going to take a lot of help defense."

"We're not going to stop him. We're just trying to make all his shots contested and if he hits them, he hits them. But that's the best you can do."

Battle can hang with the best of them on offense, too, though. At 18.5 points per game, Battle was second in the Big Ten in scoring last year, behind only Evan Turner, the No. 2 pick in June's NBA draft.

"He's a terrific guard," McCollum said of Battle. "He can finish, he's a leader, he's a key force on their team. He can score, distribute, rebound."

With both Battle and McCollum's ability to light up the scoreboard, Friday's match-up between two of the state's top guards will be one of the more entertaining bouts the Bryce Jordan Center will witness all season.


Reed said it will be "interesting" to see who comes out on top.

"They're two very talented players," Reed said.

"Both have the ability to score, both have the ability to be playmakers and both are unselfish and willing to set up teammates. ... Both teams will need to be aware of the other."


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