

Saturday could determine Big Ten champ

By Ryan Loy
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

There are three weeks of Big Ten play remaining, but for Illinois coach Kevin Hamby, Saturday's match at Rec Hall may mean the

championship for his team. The Illini and Penn State first met in each team's conference opener Sept. 24, and Illinois came away with a five-set victory. The victory gave them the Big Ten lead, which the Illini have held

or shared ever since. Now, the No. 8 Nittany Lions (24-1, 11-3 Big Ten) have a chance to get their first share of the conference lead when they host No. 9 Illinois (20-4, 12-2) at 6 p.m. Saturday at Rec Hall.

"If we lose another one, whether it's to [Penn State] or someone else, then we're tied for first place in the Big Ten or maybe worse."

Kevin Hamby
Illinois coach



McClendon (left) attempts a kill during a game earlier this season.

Kelsey Morris/Collegian

Each team must first play tonight, with the Lions hosting Wisconsin, while Illinois plays at Ohio State.

Hamby said Saturday's match may hold higher importance for both teams, but he wants his Illinois team to take it one match at a time.

"There are a lot of matches after that, and all the matches are important," Hamby said.

"If we lose another one, whether it's to [Penn State] or someone else, then we're tied for first place in the Big Ten or maybe worse."

With the Lions entering the weekend one game behind Illinois, freshman Deja McClendon said Saturday's match is a must-win for her team.

That's not saying McClendon and the Lions are placing extra importance on the match because, like Hamby, they know each conference match is as big as the next.

For now, McClendon said the Illini are just the next barrier blocking the Lions from their

eight straight conference championship.

Illinois' roadblock on the Lions' drive to a Big Ten championship may have been lessened with the loss of Illini senior Laura DeBruler, who suffered an anterior cruciate ligament tear in October.

Penn State coach Russ Rose said DeBruler is one of the marquee players in the conference, but he believes Illinois has done a great job of moving past the senior's injury.

"They've got a very deep team, and they've found a number of ways to win," Rose said. "They've really been able to get a lot of experience and use the depth they have at their program and haven't missed a beat."

In the teams' first meeting, DeBruler returned from a two-week absence with mononucleosis, and Rose said her offensive impact wasn't quite as strong as usual, but she provided good leadership.

Hamby said the Sept. 24 match

was "sloppy" and didn't showcase the highest level of play from either team.

Illinois was able to attain that victory for its home fans, and Penn State will look to do the same Saturday.

Penn State senior libero Alyssa D'Errico said the Lions want to do everything they can to defend their home court.

She said no matter who the opponent is, every match at Rec Hall is a big one.

Though Illinois currently leads the Big Ten, Hamby doesn't know if his team will even be the best in the gym Saturday.

"I think they're playing at a higher level, but a lot of the Big Ten is," Hamby said of Penn State.

"I do think that they've been playing at a higher level that's more consistent than anyone else in the Big Ten, and I think they're probably the best of anyone in the Big Ten right now."

To e-mail reporter: rml5138@psu.edu

Freshman Longo sees turning point in season

By Emily Kaplan
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

When she's on the sideline during matches, freshman Ali Longo keeps most of her focus on the court.

She'll always find herself glancing over down the bench - where the Penn State women's volleyball coaches are sitting.

As a defensive specialist, that's the nature of her position.

She never knows when she'll be called on to go in. And as a freshman, it was difficult at first to adjust.

"It's something I just had to get used to," Longo said.

"It's hard not knowing especially when you're going to go in. So it's kind of an on call basis and it was weird at first."

Last Friday, against then-No. 15 Michigan, Longo played what coach Russ Rose called the rook-

ie's best match to date.

Longo said that success gave her confidence.

And her teammates think that could mean one thing: This could be a turning point in the season for Longo.

"It's really tough, as a freshman, to come in at any position," senior co-captain Alyssa D'Errico said.

"Whether it be a full-time position, or a position like hers, so it's a good turning point for her to play well, especially against Michigan. That was a huge match for us, and to turn it on in that match, that's awesome. And we're looking for her to contribute further in the season for us."

Longo will get that opportunity

this weekend, with two matches against Wisconsin and No. 9 Illinois - starting at 7 p.m. tonight, then 6 p.m. Saturday.

Against the Wolverines - a nationally televised match in a hostile Ann Arbor environment - the Nittany Lions were down 13-9, in the second set when Rose subbed Longo into the match to serve.

The Colorado native served Penn State to seven straight points, giving the Lions a three-point cushion, and a lead they would never relinquish.

Penn State won the match in three sets, putting the seven-time defending conference champions in sole possession of second place in the Big Ten.

"I think any time you have a really good weekend, like Ali did, you can use that confidence moving forward," senior co-captain Blair Brown said.

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Blair Brown
senior co-captain

Rose pointed out that Longo had a mediocre match the next night, against unranked Michigan State.

She played in all four sets, but recorded two of the Lions' nine service errors.

"She didn't play as well on Saturday, but Friday, she came in and we scored [seven] points when she was serving and she served tough at a critical time against a great opponent on the road," Rose said.

"So that's a far cry from when I put her in against Illinois and she couldn't make enough errors before she was taken out."

Rose was referring to the Lions' early-season loss to the Fighting Illini - the match that snapped Penn State's 65-match conference winning streak.

"In the beginning of the season, I think I, and the other freshmen, were just trying to adjust to the college game which was hard," Longo said.

"But I haven't really looked back. Playing well last weekend...it definitely gives me confidence. There's not much else you can say, just that I feel more confident."

To e-mail reporter: exk5049@psu.edu