



Tyler Sizemore/Collegian

Ariel Scott (1) hits the ball during a match against Indiana at Rec Hall.

Freshmen prepare for NCAA Tournament

By Jake Kaplan
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

For 11 players on the Penn State women's volleyball team, post-season volleyball is nothing new.

They all have at least one championship ring from one of the last three storied seasons, and the three senior co-captains, Blair Brown, Alyssa D'Errico and Arielle Wilson, each own three.

But for the nine Nittany Lion freshmen, in particular the four who have garnered significant playing time this season, NCAA tournament play is new. And with the freshman class forming an integral part of this year's team, its play could prove crucial in the three-time defending national champions' quest to make it an unprecedented fourth in a row.

The Lions begin their title defense at 7 Friday night when they host Niagara in the opening round of the NCAA tournament at Rec Hall. Russ Rose's squad is the No. 4 seed and won't have to leave Happy Valley until a potential trip to Kansas City, Mo. for the Final Four.

"This is the most excited I've ever been for playing volleyball ever," said the Lions' most productive freshman, outside hitter Deja McClendon. "I've never had something so big to play for."

McClendon, who was named the 2010 Big Ten Freshman of the Year on Tuesday, has started every match this season. She finished the regular season second on her team with 351 kills and 17 service aces and with a .329 hitting percentage.

Though McClendon's statistics stick out, she is by no means the only Penn State freshman whose play is important to the team.

Since being inserted into the starting lineup on Oct. 15, Ariel Scott has made an impact at the other outside hitter position. Though the Ridgewood, N.J. native has struggled at times, Scott finished the season fourth on Penn State with 107 kills (2.43 per set).

The other rookies who have played more than one third of Penn State's total sets are middle hitter Katie Slay and defensive specialist Ali Longo.

Though senior Fatima Balza

has played the majority of the time ahead of Slay, the freshman has contributed when she has played, especially on the block. Slay's 1.56 blocks per set led the Lions in the regular season.

Longo has seen an increased role in the back row, providing a lot of digs and a solid serve for Penn State. She recorded 1.17 digs per set, good for sixth on the team, and 14 service aces in the regular season, which was fifth on the team in less than half of the amount of sets played as the starters.

But the NCAA tournament has a different atmosphere — it's one and done.

"It's definitely a learning experience for them, but they're pretty tough, especially with Coach being our coach, we're prepared for a lot of things," said setter Kristin Carpenter, who was a freshman during last year's title run.

At this time last year, the current freshmen were most likely resting after the conclusions of their high school seasons before the start of their club seasons. They are not used to playing such a long season, let alone with a NCAA title on the line.

Scott said her older teammates have set a good example and have been informing the freshmen about the hard work the tournament entails.

"Being a freshman, it's not an excuse any more now that it's the end of the season," Scott said. "Because one loss and you're done. And so every person has to play their part."

The freshmen are certainly no exception.

"You hope that the younger kids can pick up what's important about being ready to play, and playing hard, and respecting the other team and not thinking they're going to win because the previous teams have won," Rose said. "Because they're two separate animals. You have to earn victory. No one is going to give it to you because last year's team won."

Ultimately, Scott said she and her fellow freshmen are ready to start tournament play.

"I'm so excited," Scott said. "This is what we've always dreamed of, so getting to actually be a part of it is great."

To e-mail reporter: jyk5142@psu.edu

Eagles present challenge

By Jake Kaplan
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Of the 14 teams the Penn State Lady Lions play in their non-conference slate this year, only three are currently ranked or received votes in one of the two polls.

Tonight, the Lady Lions (6-1), who are receiving votes in both polls, will take on one of those teams when they take on Boston College at 7 p.m. at the Conte Forum in Chestnut Hill, Mass. as part of the ACC/Big Ten Challenge.

The Eagles (6-0), which Coquese Washington described as a "really tough ACC opponent," have two starters who will provide a tough challenge in the post for the Lady Lions. At 6-foot-6, senior center Carolyn Swords leads Boston College, averaging 18.2 points and 11.3 rebounds, while her classmate, 6-foot-4 forward Stefanie Murphy is second on the team with 16.5 points and 6.3 rebounds per game.

Penn State sophomore forward Mia Nickson, who transferred from Boston College after her freshman year, said the Eagles' post players are physical, smart athletes.

"The biggest concern is probably their size," Washington said at her weekly press conference on Wednesday. "They start Swords at [6-foot-6] and Murphy at [6-foot-4]. And they're pretty

good. So we've got our work cut out for us defensively in the post to try to limit them, limit their touches and limit their effectiveness."

Washington said the Eagles present a different style of play than Penn State has been used to playing in its first seven games. However, she thinks her team will be able to adjust.

"The construction of this team is such that I think we can be competitive with a variety of different styles of play," the coach said. "We've seen that we can play small and be successful. And now we'll see if we can handle playing big, athletic teams and what kind of success we can have there."

Defensive woes

Though the Lady Lions' high-powered offense ranks them first among Big Ten teams, their defense still needs work. Penn State is allowing 66.7 points per game, which ranks 10th in the conference.

Nickson said defense is something Washington is always stressing in practice and it definitely could get better.

"We're constantly working on that," Nickson said. "There are some teams where you can't give up a certain amount of points in the Big Ten because you let them

do that, they're just gonna dominate you the rest of the game. So I think our defense could get better."

Gaining confidence

In Penn State's 71-65 win against Hartford last Saturday, freshman forward Ariel Edwards saw an increase in playing time, contributing 29 minutes, the second-most of any Lady Lion. In that time, the Elmont, N.Y. native tallied 13 points, the second double-digit performance of her young career. She also recorded a team-high eight rebounds.

"I think each game that comes she gets a little bit more confident, a little bit more used to the college game," Washington said. "She's a freshman so she's going to be up and down so who knows what's going to happen [tonight]. I do see her getting more confident, more sure about what she's doing every game as she's out there playing."

Notes: After sitting out of the Lady Lions' win against Hartford, junior guard Renee Womack is healthy, Washington said Tuesday.

"She's fine," Washington said. "During shoot around that day she kind of rolled her ankle and tweaked her knee a little bit. The knee is fine, the ankle's fine. She practiced, but we wanted to get her back in and have our doctors look at her before we let her play on Saturday."

To e-mail reporter: jyk5142@psu.edu

Icers get trio back from injury

By Anthony Barton
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Following Penn State Icers' practice Tuesday, head coach Scott Balboni tried rallying his team, giving a rousing motivational speech in an attempt to get his players to play to their potential.

While the players won't have their chance to respond until the weekend when the No. 11 Icers (11-4-0) face No. 4 Delaware (14-0-1) at the Penn State Ice Pavilion, the team will have some reinforcements.

The Icers have had injuries to key players all season long, but Balboni announced Tuesday the team should be at full strength for the first time all season.

Sophomore forward George Saad, out since Oct. 16 after suffering a deep thigh bruise against Central Oklahoma, and junior defenseman Dan Loucks, out since Oct. 29 after he took a puck to the throat against Liberty, will both play this weekend. Senior forward Taylor Cera will also return from injury.

"Right now we have everyone cleared from injuries for the first time all season," Balboni said. "I

probably could have played [Cera, Loucks and Saad] against Towson but I wanted to give them extra rest with the break. They all look good and they all look strong and will be in the lineup this weekend."

Balboni said the addition of Saad, who has five goals in five games played this year, will help the team in more ways than one.

"George adds a big physical presence to the lineup," Balboni said. "He plays at 110 percent all the time and I think his energy is something the guys can catch on to and run with."

Saad said while he is still trying to get back in the swing of things, his doctor told him as long as he keeps strengthening his leg and drains any fluid, he will be fine to play.

As for the defenseman, Loucks said the puck he took damaged his vocal cords, resulting in minor surgery Nov. 19. That said, he is feeling good and is ready to play.

"We're looking to play them physical so I'm looking to get

some big hits and play steady defense," Loucks said. "If the opportunity presents itself, I'll chip in on offense as well."

On top of those players' returns, junior Nick Seravalli is progressing in his return from reconstructive groin surgery. Balboni has eased the forward back into the lineup, playing him in one game a weekend before allowing him to play in both games against Towson.

Seravalli said he is feeling better each day, and is ready to get back in the scoring column after his breakout 20-goal season last year.

"This weekend, once I get out there and get going I'll feel pretty good," Seravalli said. "Hopefully I can bring some goals this weekend because that's my style of play."

Saad knows the return of himself and the others to the lineup doesn't guarantee wins, and said he will focus on setting the tone this weekend.

"I'm just going to come back and give it my all," Saad said. "I want to help win two tough games. We want to prove to everyone that we're more than they think we are."

To e-mail reporter: acb5152@psu.edu

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