

Men's swimming shows improvement in Georgia

By James Nicol
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Penn State swimmers set several season-best and career-best times in the Georgia Invitational, a three-day meet in Athens, Ga., this past weekend.

Penn State finished in fifth place out of the five teams competing at the meet. No. 7 Auburn won the meet, followed by Georgia, Minnesota and Virginia, all of which are ranked in the top 15 by the College Swimming Coaches Association of America.



Hargis

finish, coach John Hargis was impressed with the performance of many individual swimmers.

"I think we did pretty well," Hargis said. "We did better as the meet went on, I think each day we did a little bit better and competed pretty well."

The best finish of any of the Penn State swimmers was the third-place finishes of the 200-medley team and freshman Matt Salig in the 200 butterfly.

Penn State's 200-medley team of Luke Bushman, Mitch Scherer, Sean Grier and Brian Alden combined to post a time of 1:28.99. The time was good enough to make the NCAA's "B" cut-off time — putting the group among the best swimmers in the country — and

was a season-best time for Penn State.

Alden was impressed with how the team swam at the tournament.

"I think everybody for the most part had a great meet," Alden said. "We had a lot of people swim to their potential."

In the 200-freestyle relay, Alden, Grier, Shane Austyn and John Austin recorded the team's fastest time of the season with a 1:21.99. The result earned them a sixth-place finish and was only .42 seconds from the "B" cut-off.

Alden, Penn State's lone NCAA qualifier from last year, finished fourth in the 200 freestyle and made the "B" cut with his time of 1:37.49. In the 50 freestyle, Alden's qualifying time of 20.30 was good

enough for a "B" time, but his time of 20.54 in the finals earned him 12th place.

Scott Marino swam the fastest time in the 200 IM preliminaries but came away with a fourth-place finish in the finals with a time of 1:47.94.

"That was a great morning for him," Hargis said.

"He went a little bit slower at night but still did very well and, for him, swimming that fast right now was good to see."

In the 400 IM, Bushman bested his 2010 Big Ten best time, 3:58.18, at the 2010 Big Ten Championships, by almost four seconds. His time of 3:54.75 gave him a sixth-place finish.

Bushman attributed the improvement to coaching and the

talented young swimmers on the team.

"Last year was a big change for me, it was a hard year and a rough year and a lot of that work has now paid off," Bushman said. "We've been working real hard and we have a lot of great freshmen and they've been pushing me in practice."

Alden, Marino, Bushman and freshman standout Shane Austin set a season-best time of 6:38.50 in the 800-freestyle relay and finished in sixth place.

"This time of year the kids are really excited," Hargis said. "They were racing in a very good competition, they just got very excited and did very well."

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Women's soccer's "bittersweet" season teaches lessons

By Andrew Robinson
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Erica Walsh, the coach, Megan Monroig, the emotional senior captain, and Christine Nairn, the star midfielder, all agreed on one word to describe the Penn State women's soccer team's 2010 season.

Bittersweet.

"We had a ton of youth and now that I'm sitting and doing player meetings and I see the young players learned, I'm thankful for those opportunities and thankful that we went through that together," Walsh said. "That's tough when you're dealing with special players like Megan Monroig and Dani Toney, knowing that was their senior year and they had to go through some of those challenges."

A look at the end result, a second-round exit in the NCAA tournament and the record-setting 13th straight Big Ten title, and it shows a team that achieved a degree of success this year.

But go back to Sept. 20 and this same team was 2-6-1, with uncharacteristic losses to Yale, William & Mary and Dartmouth and the continuation of any kind of streak looking bleak.

But instead of calling it quits, the Nittany Lions kept fighting and benefited from the right amount of luck, allowing them to celebrate in Walsh's basement when Penn State's name appeared in the NCAA bracket.

A year after losing seven impact seniors, Walsh anticipated her young team struggling at times in 2010.

But the coach was also fair in her assessment, saying she felt the team underachieved during the beginning of the year.

At the same time, the Lions were playing their best soccer over the season's last month and the pieces started coming together.

That surge, and the fact the team outplayed West Virginia for the last 70 minutes of its 2-1 loss in the second round of the tournament, made the loss that much worse for the Lions.

"We did want to go to the College Cup, and 25 players believed in our team and what we had and despite going 2-6-1 in our first [nine] games, we still believe we could have made it," Monroig said.

"That's good to have throughout the entire season, regardless of how your season's going and we did keep that hope and dream alive. It just says a lot about our character."

Penn State's year began on the same field it ended on, with a 2-1 overtime win against West Virginia on Aug. 20. After that, the then-No. 12 Lions returned to University Park for an emotional game against then-No. 15 Virginia, the team that knocked them out of the NAACAs a year before in an unexpected 6-2 loss.

After freshman forward Hayley Brock scored in the home opener, the Lions looked on their way to a win before Virginia tied the game with a little more than three minutes left. The teams ended up tying, 1-1, and the Lions then went on a five-game losing streak that tested the makeup of the team.



Venkatesh Krishnan/Collegian

Senior Dani Toney (left) pushes the ball upfield. Toney and Megan Monroig are the team's lone graduating seniors.

"There were two parts to that time period," Walsh said. "The first part was, 'We're going to get through it,' and the second was, 'We're going to have to really work to get through it.' And when the team transitioned into that second part, then my confidence started to grow, but we had to hit that bottom piece first."

While Walsh wishes her team had never been in that spot, she said she was proud of how her players responded. As much as it showed in the team's record — an 8-2 run through the Big Ten — it showed in practice, as well.

The Lions played a philosophy of playing for each other, and every day, each player would take a shirt adorned with a teammate's number and wear it through training that day, then repeat the process the next day. Next season, the Lions return all of their main contributors, except seniors Monroig and Toney.

With so many key players returning, and with a year of experience to build on, Nairn said the next step is advancing past the second round. For Penn State, that work starts in the spring season and the sophomore said she and her teammates are ready to get back to work.

"This was kind of a building year," Nairn said. "It made us take steps in the right direction for us to be even more successful this spring and fall."

Walsh's coaching philosophy is built on a tough nonconference slate that not only tests her teams, but gets them in the right form come Big Ten season. After four years, Walsh owns a 58-27-5 record at Penn State with a 33-6-1 mark in the Big Ten. The coach said in order for her team to have the impact it wants to have in November on the national scale, it has to face adversity early on and if that means taking one or two early losses, so be it.

Though the team has had some trouble in that early stretch the last two seasons, Walsh did stop to think when asked if she has considered easing the team into the more challenging nonconference games with a couple easier ones to start.

"Yeah, we've decided to scale back a little bit, we decided to start next year at [2010 national runner up] Stanford," Walsh said with a laugh. "That's our scaling back."

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The Daily Collegian

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