

Senior pair proves vital to season's finish

By Andrew Robinson
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Shortly after her final season with the Penn State women's soccer team had ended, Megan Monroig was talking with former teammate Katie Schoepfer about the year Monroig had just gone through.

WOMEN'S SOCCER

While Monroig and forward Dani Toney were the only seniors, the co-captain realized they had accomplished something this past year. And as Schoepfer put it, it wasn't bad for what was supposed to be a rebuilding year.

"[Schoepfer] said, 'When you think about it, you guys had a good season,' " Monroig said. " 'Yeah you had that skid where you lost five games, but you had two seniors, you had how many freshmen in your starting lineup sometimes, how many sophomores?' She said, 'This is technically a rebuilding year for you so the fact you guys could still come out and win the Big Ten was huge.' "

Though they were a small senior class, Toney and Monroig were instrumental in the late-season surge that led the Lions to their record 13th straight Big Ten title. Despite being housemates and the closest of friends, the seniors brought drastically different styles of leadership to the field.

Teammates called Toney more of a lead-by-example type of player, someone who let their play on the field make their statements. While Monroig also played with that mentality, the senior was also

the vocal leader of the team, one of the loudest voices on the field and in practice.

"If you combine them together, which we were able to do this season, you get a great leader with the emotional side and the side that's going to say, 'I'm going to put the team on my back and score a crucial goal,' " sophomore Christine Nairn said. "Dani was able to do that at the end of the season and Mons is just a workhorse so we're definitely going to miss Dani's scoring and Mons' emotional Penn State mentality of working hard until you can't work anymore.' "

Even though the season had its share of low points, none of it mattered on Nov. 7 when Ali Schaefer's double-overtime goal ensured the seniors would leave Penn State with a full set of four conference championship rings.

Once the junior midfielder scored, the team rushed the field and the stadium erupted in celebration, except for Monroig who was trying to clear the field, not realizing the 17 seconds left on the clock were moot. Once the realization set in, Monroig joined in the celebration.

"It was absolutely fantastic once I realized what had happened and everyone was rushing the field," Monroig said. "It's one of those feelings you can't put into words. It's not one of those things where we were like, 'We can't let the streak end.' It was, 'We're a new team, we're a new set of 25 players, let's win ourselves a Big Ten championship.' "

While they had to lead a young team, Toney and Monroig had

their own play to worry about as well. With such a youthful lineup at times, Toney wasn't able to replicate the scoring she had put up as a junior, but still caught fire late in the year.

For Monroig, the season saw her lose her role as the starting left back in September, but instead of wallowing in it, she embraced her new position as an outside midfielder and her crosses became a dangerous weapon over the last month of the season.

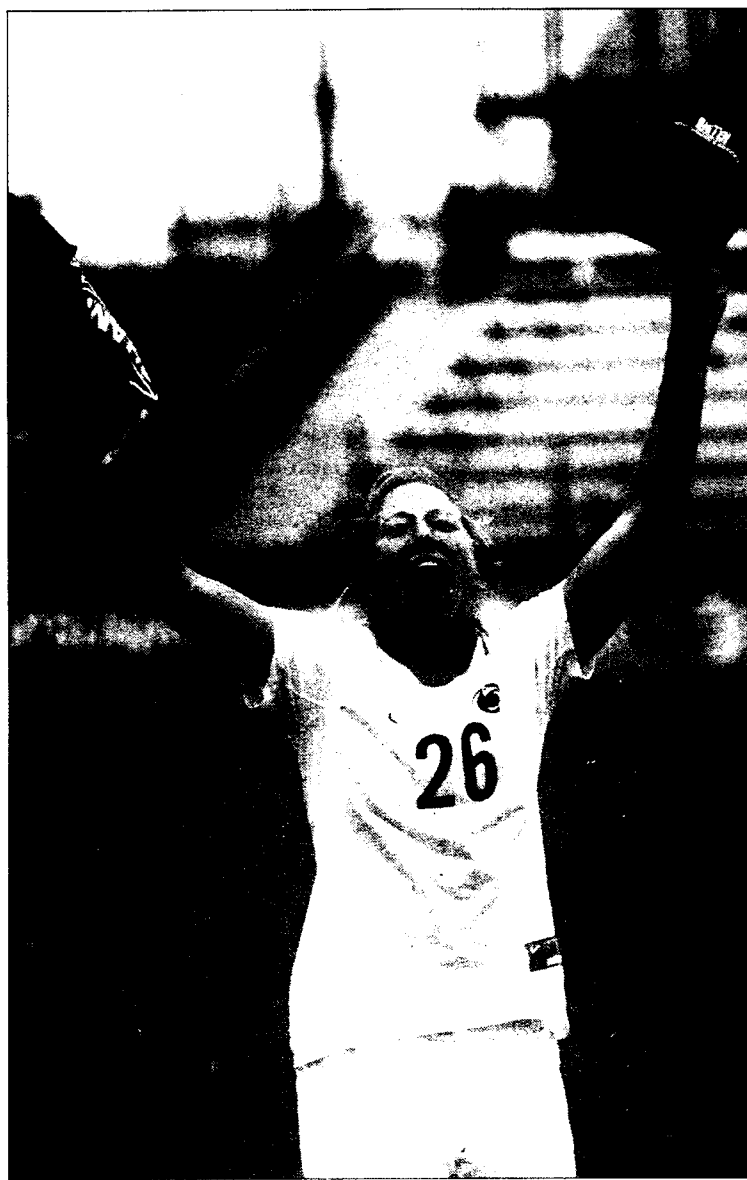
To Lions coach Erica Walsh, it was an easy answer to the question of which players caught her attention in the closing weeks of the season.

"Down the stretch, undoubtedly Dani and Mons. No question they were the two that put us on their backs," Walsh said.

"They were going to make sure that we gave the program a chance to continue its successful streak. There were games where both of them played the best games of their careers down the stretch."

Nairn said there's no way to replace players such as Toney and Monroig, but the midfielder added the team's freshmen were able to learn plenty of lessons from the seniors. While Monroig didn't look at this team as an extension of last year's, the senior said getting that last ring still meant a lot.

"Just to have completed my full set, it's absolutely fantastic," Monroig said. "This is definitely my favorite just because of the turnaround season that we did have."



Megan Monroig celebrates Penn State's Big Ten title.

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Veteran safety Polamalu serves as Steelers' closer

By Alan Robinson
ASSOCIATED PRESS

PITTSBURGH — The Atlanta Braves once prized Oregon high school athlete Troy Polamalu as a prospect, even though they knew his heart was in football.

NFL

They loved his speed and, of all, how he played with enthusiasm, passion and a determination to win.

Polamalu has long since established himself as one of the NFL's premier defensive players, but it seems as if he hasn't totally forgotten his baseball roots.

What Mariano Rivera is to the Yankees, Polamalu is to the Steelers. When a game needs to

be won, Polamalu is their closer. Give him a situation to save a game, and Polamalu often does it.

The five-time Pro Bowl safety made one of the NFL's biggest defensive plays of the season Sunday in Baltimore, surging in on quarterback Joe Flacco late in the fourth quarter to tomahawk chop the ball away and cause a fumble that led to the Steelers' decisive touchdown and a 13-10 victory.

It might have been the play of a career for a normal player, but Polamalu certainly isn't that. He made a similar game-altering play the week before in Buffalo and another earlier this season at Tennessee.

"You've been seeing that from him for years," safety Ryan Clark

said. "We try to put him in position to where he can do that. You want him to be comfortable, and he just makes great plays."

The kind that can change the course of a season.

If the Ravens (8-4) had held on to their 10-6 lead, they would have effectively led the Steelers (9-3) by two games with four to play in the AFC North. The Steelers would be staring at the likelihood of no home playoff games, and a difficult to-traverse, three-game road trip to the Super Bowl.

Instead, the Steelers lead the division, own the tiebreaker and, with a three-game homestand about to begin Sunday against the reeling Bengals (2-10), are in position to secure the No. 2 seed in the AFC playoffs and a first-round bye.

In the last 18 seasons, under coaches Mike Tomlin and Bill Cowher, they've never once blown a division lead this late in a season.

No wonder: with a closer like Polamalu. He finished the Ravens game with five tackles, a sack and a forced fumble, and twice caused hurried throws by Flacco.

"He's capable of doing that any week against any opponent and all season long, every week," said Carson Palmer, the Bengals' quarterback who once was Polamalu's roommate at Southern Cal. "He's really made some very significant plays in games."

The week before, with Buffalo attempting to complete a potential game-winning drive late in the

fourth quarter, Polamalu stretched out to make an interception near the goal line that eventually sent the game into overtime, where the Steelers won 19-16. It was his fourth interception this season.

In Tennessee, he timed a Titans' snap so perfectly on a goal-line play with barely a minute remaining that he leaped over the offensive line and sacked Kerry Collins before Collins had taken a half-step.

To Tomlin, it wasn't just that Polamalu turned the ball over with Baltimore trying to run down the clock, it was how he did it.

"A lot of guys would go in there and sack the quarterback," Tomlin said. "He sees the game a little differently."

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