

Women gymnasts preparing for Alabama meet



Members of the Penn State women's gymnastics team look on during a meet last season. The Lions will open with No. 2 Alabama on Jan. 7.

By Matt Howland
FOR THE COLLEGIAN

Penn State women's gymnastics coach Jeff Thompson is preparing to lead his team against some familiar foes when the team opens its season Jan. 7 at No. 2-ranked Alabama.

Thompson, in his first year as coach of the No. 14-ranked Nittany Lions, spent 11 seasons coaching Auburn, Alabama's in-state and SEC rival, and is very familiar with the Crimson Tide program.

Thompson's Auburn squad started its season each of the last two years against Alabama, just as the Nittany Lions will do in 2011.

For the gymnasts, on the other hand, the atmosphere and intensity of the Alabama crowd will be something new.

Thompson expects a crowd of 14,000 at Alabama, and for the several freshmen on the squad expected to contribute, it will be

an entirely new challenge.

"The first meet is just gonna be a matter of handling the jitters, handling the crowd," Thompson said.

"And we'll do our best to limit our mistakes."

Thompson is looking to use this first meet as a way to see who on the team will be able to excel under the pressure of a big meet, as he hasn't coached any of the gymnasts through a season yet.

"This year we have 14 kids and they're all freshmen [to me]," Thompson said.

Training is intensifying with the first meet less than a month away, and Thompson is happy with the team's progress.

"We're right where we need to be, maybe a little ahead," Thompson said.

In practice Thursday, the team had to hit six attempts in a row on each of their three passes on floor routine in order to advance, and it was the first day that they landed without padding on their third pass.

Partially as a result of the intensified training, some minor injuries have begun to mount.

Freshman Cassidy Bogar landed badly on a floor routine pass last week and sustained a concussion, and is still out of training.

Sophomore Madison Merriam injured her foot on balance beam and is only able to do some work on uneven bars as she recovers.

Thompson said he has an idea of which gymnasts he plans to start on each event in the meet, but it will depend on who is healthy.

Thompson is hoping his team will be able to go in and perform well, but most importantly, react to adversity.

"It's possible we could go in there and have a meet where we don't fall, but what's more important is if we do have a bad day, we do in the next routine and we rebound from the mistakes," Thompson said.

"That's what's gonna be the best indicator of how well we're gonna be this year."

WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS

Men looking to establish identity in Army opener

By Dan Norton
FOR THE COLLEGIAN

With three weeks of winter break separating No. 7 Penn State from its first meet against No. 15 Army, head coach Randy Jepson is concerned.

"You take a week off in gymnastics, it's like taking a whole season in other sports," he said. "All the work they do can go down the drain if they don't stay at it."

The Nittany Lions are expected to check into their home gyms to stay physically fit during their brief time off. Practice resumes Dec. 27, leaving them some time to shake off any rust picked up over break.

But the rust may span further back than that.

The last time many of the gymnasts competed was at the NCAA championships last year. Senior Warren Yang and sophomore Felix Aronovich are exceptions, competing over the summer at the Canadian National Championships and the World

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Randy Jepson
men's gymnastics coach

Championships, respectively. Nonetheless, Penn State seems confident going into its meet against Army. Since their annual matchups began in 2004, the Lions have never lost to the Black Knights.

"We usually don't have a lot of trouble against them," junior Miguel Pineda said. "It's more just getting into the mindset of going against another team and getting the team prize going."

The opening meet of any team's season doesn't hold much influence over its standing in the conference. The biggest meets for Penn State will be against Big Ten rivals. However, gymnastics is a sport fought on two fronts — for the gymnast and for the team — and this is the biggest opportunity for freshmen to prove themselves.

"I know Randy looks at putting in a lot of new people into the early meets to try and get them experi-

ence," sophomore Matt Chelberg said.

For aspiring underclassmen, the window of opportunity couldn't be more open.

This Saturday marks Penn State's last intrasquad meet, and its lineup for Army is anything but set. After graduating several key contributors from last season, there are holes to fill in the floor routine and in the vault. Furthermore, most of the gymnasts have been badgered by poor dismounts of late.

Before the Lions take on another school, they'll have to take on themselves.

"They're going to split us up into two groups this year," Pineda said. "It's kind of a little more competition in between the team."

Jepson hopes this competition will bring out the best in his gymnasts. By pinning them against each other, he seeks to light a fire

underneath his team and see what its capable of under the spotlight. He has been the team's greatest critic throughout the offseason, and hopes it proves him wrong.

But if the Lions' results don't reach his expectations, he is prepared to act accordingly.

"The thing I worry about is guys coming back and really not being in good shape and trying to go in a meet. And we're just not going to do that," Jepson said. "We're going to put guys in there ready. I'm not going to jeopardize our season because someone didn't do their job. If they're not ready, they won't compete, and we'll go with fewer guys in the lineup."

Jepson said one gymnast has mononucleosis, but declined to specify which one of his gymnasts is sick. Penn State's quest to prove that last season's losing record was a fluke begins in less than a month.

Jepson may be worried about winter break, but he can only train them so hard. The off-time may be beneficial.

"Physically, we're prepared," Pineda said. "Mentally, we're getting there."



Felix Aronovich performs on the pommel horse last season.

Congratulations, Graduates

from The Daily Collegian Staff



"The roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet."

-Aristotle

Ben Gasbarre

Daniel Bott

Steph Witt

Jenna Ekdahl

The Daily Collegian



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