

Oklahoma

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While the Lions defeated Niagara and Virginia Tech in straight sets at Rec Hall last weekend, the Sooners are coming off a first-round sweep of Wichita State and a second-round upset of No. 22 Tulsa in five sets last weekend.

Rose said earlier this week that Oklahoma is a unique team in that its roster includes multiple left-handed hitters who he described as "terrific attackers." He added the Sooners setter, junior Brienne Barker, "might be one of the most competitive kids that we've seen."

Penn State's senior libero Alyssa D'Errico said Oklahoma's speed is somewhat similar to Virginia Tech, which Penn State beat Saturday night and not many Big Ten offenses are as fast as the Sooners.

"Their setter is a great player that has the capability to run a fast offense even when they're somewhat out of system," D'Errico said.

"So that's something we're going to have to prepare for and hope that our block is set up in the right place."

"They're just a very fast-oriented team. They have fast arm swings, fast sets, so we have to control our side of the court and try not to play at their speed, play our tempo instead of theirs."



Rose

"We're trying to climb Mt. Everest."

Santiago Restrepo
Oklahoma coach

Barker said she thinks the fact her team has played tough teams on the road will help the Sooners when the play in front of the Rec Hall crowd tonight.

Another aspect of Oklahoma's team that is unique is its animated coach, Santiago Restrepo, who Rose described as "worth the price of admission." Lions senior middle hitter Arielle Wilson said her team hasn't faced anyone with quite the enthusiasm on the sideline as Restrepo.

"There's four teams that are playing in this regional and all of them are teams that have terrific players and great coaches," Rose said. "Everybody cares, everybody wants to win. There's nothing unique about what we're doing."

"Some of [the Penn State players] might have a history of some things, but having won the championship in the past doesn't start them with any sort of point advantage over the other team."

But Restrepo knows the Sooners will have their work cut out for them against Penn State, the three-time defending national championship who have won 92 straight matches at home.

"They are physical, they are strong, and they are tall and powerful," Restrepo said. "We're trying to climb Mount Everest. We are going to see if we can do it [tonight]."

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Long

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"We will honor his decision and support his efforts to address his personal issues."

Penn State coach Cael Sanderson recruited Long while he was the coach at Iowa State. When Sanderson took the role as Penn State's coach in 2009, he brought two of his assistants from Iowa State as well. Cody Sanderson, Cael's brother, is currently the associate head coach, while Casey Cunningham is the head assistant coach.

Long would be the third Iowa State wrestler to transfer to Penn State since Sanderson took over the program. Cylar Sanderson, an All-American last year, and redshirt freshman David Taylor, the No. 3 157-pound wrestler in the country, both transferred

"I needed a chance to start over somewhere else."

Andrew Long
Penn State transfer

to Penn State coach Cael Sanderson's arrival.

Although Long will no longer wrestle for Iowa State, he still had praise for the Cyclones' coach.

"I want to thank Coach Jackson for his support while I have been here," Long said. "We were working on a process through which I would be able to join the team for the second semester. As I worked through this process, I came to the conclusion that I needed a chance to start over somewhere else."

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Hokies

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Two seasons ago, a big non-conference win was the only thing keeping the Lions from an NCAA Tournament berth. They were sent to the NIT instead, which they won. Last season, the Lions suffered a two-point loss at home to the Hokies.

The Lions (7-2) aren't exactly coming off a confidence-building win as they ready for the Hokies. On Tuesday, the Lions needed a last-second, 28-foot basket from Talor Battle to beat Mount St. Mary's. Still, the Lions were able to pull out the win, something the Hokies haven't done in two weeks.

After recovering from an early-season loss to No. 5 Kansas State, the Hokies (4-4) have lost three straight. However, all of their losses have come against quality opponents.

The Hokies lost to No. 20 UNLV in Anaheim, Calif., No. 19 Purdue and Virginia (6-3), which also beat No. 22 Minnesota.

"They have a sour taste in their mouth with their loss to Virginia," assistant coach Preston said. "So at 1 o'clock on Sunday, we expect them to come out and try to throw — to put it in boxing terms — haymakers and knockout punches."

Those punches will come from the Hokies' senior guard Malcolm Delaney and senior forward Jeff Allen. One of the premier inside-out combinations in

the ACC, Delaney is averaging 20.4 points per game, which ranks 32nd in the country, and is shooting a career-high percentage from the field (44.8), the free throw line (88.9) and the 3-point line (43.8).

"If you're guarding Delaney and he throws it into Allen and we're trying to double the post," forward Jeff Brooks said, "you don't leave Delaney because he's such a great shooter."

The Lions will be getting some reinforcements in the frontcourt to help deal with Allen. Forwards DJ Jackson and Billy Oliver, who both missed the Mount St. Mary's game, are on pace to return against the Hokies.

Against Duquesne, Jackson had a player fall on his neck, causing the left side of his body to temporarily go numb. Jackson was taken to the hospital for precautionary reasons and placed in a neck brace for a few days.

A half after Jackson left, Oliver was knocked to the floor on a rebound and headed his head.

With his history of head injuries, the medical staff decided to hold Oliver out in the game against the Mountaineers.

"This is a big game for us. They're an ACC team that's very good, very talented," Jackson said. "We're gonna focus in hard these next couple of days in preparing for Virginia Tech, because we're gonna go down there and it's going to be a war."

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Brown

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"I think [Coach Russ Rose] knew what he was doing, and I was nowhere near ready to be on the court," Brown said.

"I needed that year to get better as a player, definitely, and get more mentally prepared for the game."

Now as a redshirt senior, Brown is showing the benefits of an extra season, as she was named the 2010 Big Ten Player of the Year. The 6-foot-5 opposite hitter has a team-high 451 kills on 318 hitting this season.

The same couldn't be said four years ago, when she was limited to the bench during the 2006 season. Though she wanted the chance to play, Brown had to instead become a cheerleader — something she dabbled in during her early years, so she had some experience.

It took some growing up over the years — and even this season

— for Brown to get to the point she's at today.

Senior libero Alyssa D'Errico stayed with Brown during her recruiting visit when Brown was redshirting. D'Errico said she actually knew Brown before that, as they both attended a holiday camp together.

"You think she's skinny now, she was a twig in club," D'Errico said of a younger Brown. "Like no muscle on her, just tiny. So, physically, she's obviously had to grow to catch up with the college-level game."

When she got to Penn State, that growing certainly didn't entail getting taller. The Purcellville, Va. native said her entire family is tall, with her mother, Jaima, being the diminutive one of the bunch at 6-foot-1.

This season, Brown's redshirt experience is still helping the Lions. D'Errico said Brown, like each of this year's seniors, has learned to lead on and off the court by vocally helping the younger players.

Brown said she's specifically talked to the players who are redshirting and told them about how positive of an experience her redshirt season turned out to be.

If not for that extra year, Brown wouldn't be here with this team. She said she has had a great experience with this season's group, and the senior hopes it ends with a win and a fourth title.

That would mean something special for Brown and this group she has become so close with during her time in Happy Valley.

"They've definitely accepted me into their class," Brown said of this year's seniors. "I'd say we've become much closer over the past four years."

Though she possesses size and strength, Brown displays a great deal of finesse on the court. If she spots an open area in the opponent's back row, the senior will opt to push the ball rather than spike it. More times than not, that decision results in a precise shot that falls to the court for a point.

Rose said it's Brown's versatility

that makes her such a good player.

"She's one of those rare individuals that can hit the ball from antenna to antenna," Rose said. "She can hit high and she can hit quick. She's been a major part of what we're doing."

Sitting 18th on Penn State's career kills list, Brown will need to add to her total if the Lions want to reach that goal of another championship.

Though Brown says any of her teammates can heat up in any match and carry the team, opponents know Brown is the Lion to key on.

When discussing what helped the Lions overpower their team last Saturday, Virginia Tech coach Chris Riley said one thing: "Blair." "She was pretty solid," Riley said of Brown. "Blair's ability not to make mistakes is what I thought was one of the differences in that match."

Brown had 11 kills to go along with six blocks against the Hokies. The senior understands she's the

go-to player this season and said that's part of being a veteran on the team.

That wasn't the case in past years, as Brown played alongside a pair of Division I National Player of the Year winners in Hodge and Nicole Fawcett.

Sophomore setter Kristin Carpenter said it took Brown a little while to adjust to her role on the team this season. She said Brown was surprised by the role at first, but the senior has since become accustomed to it.

Carpenter had no problem declaring Brown as the player she looks to most on the court.

The setter believes that's a good thing, saying Brown's career stats show she is "kind of a big deal."

"I do think she's handling it a whole lot better than at the beginning of the season," Carpenter said. "She's just realized that's her role, not only to be a leader, but to be that player who can put the ball away at crucial times."

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Oliver

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Luckily, Billy, his mom and Penn State can breathe a sigh of relief as it appears Oliver will be OK after a week of tests that came back negative.

Though he rested the forward against Mount St. Mary's on Tuesday, coach Ed DeChellis said Saturday's headache was nothing like the ones Oliver experienced in the past.

"They were completely different," DeChellis said. "He just got hit in the head, but it was a completely different feeling from what the other things were and that's a pretty good thing."

After hitting the floor, Oliver said he felt a little dazed.

"I checked myself. I was all there and I knew my name," Oliver said.

"When I had my first two concussions I couldn't say the months or I don't think I could say my name."

With her son on the floor, Mrs. Oliver watched from the opposite end of the court with her "heart in her mouth."

Another setback to Billy was the last thing she wanted to see after traveling more than 250 miles from New Jersey to watch her son play in his third year with the team.

Long road back

For the Oliver family, it's been a rare occurrence to watch Billy play in a meaningful game.

A successful player out of Chatham, N.J., Oliver came to Penn State with high hopes after averaging 18 points, 10 rebounds and six blocks per game his senior year at Chatham High School.

But then came the first concussion — at the very beginning of preseason workouts his freshman year.

Though he doesn't remember the actual moment it happened, Oliver remembers giggling for no reason, and being unable to verbalize to the doctors what day it was — even though he said he knew the answer in his head.

"I've seen it on film," Oliver said.

"I was pivoting one way and [Penn State forward] Drew Jones was sprinting the other. His should

der kind of clipped me in the head. I just crumbled, collapsed and went down."

After a few days of headaches, Oliver was fine and back at practice.

But before he knew it, Billy was back on the trainer's table with his second concussion in as many weeks after going against Brooks for a rebound in practice and hitting his head on the floor.

"Again, I don't actually remember getting hit," he said. "I didn't realize that first day what it meant. I was going to be out four months and there I was back to square one."

Then, on Dec. 15, after about 12 weeks of non-contact drills, he was cleared for contact.

But after suffering two concussions that close together, the only choice Oliver had was to redshirt the rest of his freshman year after missing so much time. During that period he put on about 20 pounds of muscle, and Oliver's mom said life was finally back to normal through the winter and summer months.

"Then, sometime in September the next year, the headaches started," Mrs. Oliver said. "He did everything he could to play through it but after awhile it just got difficult."

For some time, Mrs. Oliver said her son would wake up and go to practice the same way anybody else would go to work with a headache — he just dealt with the aggravation.

But after playing 24 minutes through five games that season, the team decided to give Oliver a medical redshirt after the headaches became more severe.

"It was tough," Oliver said. "Every day I tried to go practice and hope it was going to get better. But for some reason it wasn't. It was a pretty dismal time in my career."

Though many assumed the headaches that caused him to sit the season out were caused by the concussions, the Oliver family was assured by experts that the two were completely unrelated.

Since migraines are so difficult to monitor — unlike a broken leg that can come up in an X-ray — the team took the cautious approach with Oliver as soon as the headaches became unbearable.

"It's not about basketball," D.J. Jackson said after Oliver hit his head against Duquesne last week.

"It's about the kid's health. Concussions are very serious and there's nothing to play around with."

"You don't really want to have a kid's career ruined because he goes back out there too early."

The decision to redshirt Oliver has benefited the forward as he came into the 2010-11 season feeling completely healthy.

"The best thing in everybody's mind was just take a clean break," Mrs. Oliver said. "He hasn't had a headache since. The bigger concern was just getting him to feel better and that's what we focused on."

"He's fine."

Back for good?

"Really, he's been fine."

Laura Oliver couldn't reiterate it enough.

After two years of head problems, Mrs. Oliver is eagerly awaiting the day when people don't associate her son with migraines.

"He hasn't had a headache since last February. We're talking almost a year," she added. "Yet, it still seems like the first word of everyone's mouths when Billy is mentioned is, 'Oh, he had a lot of problems with concussions and headaches.'"

And while it is frustrating at times, Billy remained upbeat throughout the whole process.

Thanks to a tight circle of friends, he is able to laugh now about the things he can't control, showing he doesn't harp on his past injuries.

"They make fun of me when a ball comes by my head and misses me by a couple of inches," Oliver said. "They are like, 'Whoa Billy, don't get another concussion.' I think that's funny. Laughing about something helps a lot of the time."

Never upset or angry, Oliver's fellow forward Brooks said he always has a positive attitude.

But there have been times when he's been pushed to the limit.

For instance, coach DeChellis remembers times that Oliver had to lie down in the film room during practices because his head would hurt so badly.

"Billy's done a great job," the coach said.

He's hung in there. He hung in there last year when he had some dark days where he was just miserable."

Then there was the time in practice earlier this season when Brooks blocked the ball in Oliver's direction prompting play to stop.

"I hit it so hard and who did it hit in the face?" Brooks said smiling.

"It hit Billy Oliver. I didn't want to be the guy that really hurt Billy again."

"That's why I've been trying to calm down on my shot blocking, especially if Billy is in the game because I don't want to aim right at his head."

Though Brooks seems to always be around when Oliver gets hurt, he avoided a potentially devastating situation that the two can laugh about now.

With all of his injuries seemingly in the past, Billy and his family are hoping to move on as the Penn State forward tries to create a new name for himself this season.

Twelve minutes into Penn State's season opener vs. Lehigh, Oliver stepped up and drained a particularly memorable 3-pointer.

"It's over," he said he thought to himself after hitting the shot. "I know I can do it so I'm going to go out and hit another one."

It was his first basket in almost a year and marked a new era in the key reserve's career as he finished the game with 10 points.

Over the next month, Oliver continued to produce for the Lions coming off the bench as Penn State's sixth man.

"Every minute on the court is just icing on the cake," Mrs. Oliver said.

"He wanted to play, he came to play and he stuck with it. We think with the more experience he gets you're going to see what Billy can do."

With his 3-point shooting, strong passing ability and hustle, Oliver has started to mold himself a new name — one devoid of the word headache or concussion.

With the Lions so thin in the frontcourt, Oliver is going to be instrumental in the team's success this season.

"He can play a couple different positions for us," DeChellis said. "He's pretty good defensively. He can make a jumpshot and he just gives you another guy who can play quality minutes for you."

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