

The Best Team You May Have Never Seen

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Sitting Atop the Conference

Nikki Greene drained a foul shot to give Penn State a 41-26 lead over Ohio State. It was her 16th point of the first half, en route to a double-double performance of 25 points and 15 rebounds on the night. The Lady Lions would go into the locker room at half up 45-30 and didn't look back as they steamrolled the Buckeyes in an 84-66 win. Greene was just one of three Lady Lions to record a double-double in that 2012 Big Ten regular season title-clinching game.

Fast-forward past the NCAA Tournament, through which the team advanced to the Sweet Sixteen. Fast-forward past coach Coquese Washington being named the Big Ten Coach of the Year. Fast-forward past junior Maggie Lucas's recognition as First Team All-Big Ten by both coaches and the media. Fast-forward past senior Alex Bentley being named the 2012 coaches' preseason Co-Player of the Year and her appointment to preseason All-Big Ten First Team. Ultimately you arrive at the 2012-2013 season where the Lady Lions are ranked no. 9 nationally and favored to win the Big Ten.

"We have the target on our backs now," said senior forward Marissa Wolfe at Lady Lions Media Day. "We are not so much the chasing team, they are chasing us."

The Lady Lions have been on the rise for the past few years. Every year Washington has been at the helm the

Lady Lions have improved in Big Ten standings, working their way from 10th place in '07-'08 to 1st this past season. Most of the key players on the squad are returning from last year and a lot of hype is surrounding one of the team's newest additions, 6'6" freshman center Candice Agee. The pieces for success are all in place, yet one thing remains somewhat weak in this dominant program: the student fan section. While the Lady Lions may be poised to be Penn State's next dominant team, much of the student body has been absent from watching it occur.

Attendance by the Numbers

The Bryce Jordan Center has a seating capacity of 15,261. The average Lady Lions attendance at home last season was 4,128. To put that number in perspective, this puts a team that finished last season ranked 1st in the Big Ten out on the court in front of an average crowd that ranks 6th in the conference.

But the team's marketing department is optimistic. Kathy Dreysdale, marketing manager for the Lady Lions, said overall ticket sales for the program have risen this year. Season tickets are up from 751 accounts in 2011-2012 to 847 for the current season.

However student ticket sales are still not quite where she would like them to be.

“We’ve struggled a bit with the students,” said Dreysdale. “On a typical night our student numbers are hard to say, we could range anywhere between two hundred and three hundred a game, but we really want more.”

For the Penn State men’s basketball team, the student section is filled largely thanks to a collection of fans known as Nittany Nation. Nittany Nation lines the sideline opposite the teams’ benches to create a home court advantage for the Nittany Lions and traditionally has a strong turnout for games.

“When it comes to Penn State athletics, it’s not too much of a mystery that the football team is the focal point...men’s basketball at best plays second fiddle,” said Matt Trabold (senior, journalism), a four-year member of Nittany Nation. “We’re just trying to get the word out there that there is another team that deserves fandom.”

According to Trabold the men’s team student section works pretty exclusively with the men’s team. Though there may be the occasional Nittany Nation turnout at a Lady Lions game, those games are not common.

“Here and there, there will be a couple of pockets of games where Nittany Nation goes to the women’s games,” said Trabold. “But primarily we deal with the men’s team.”

The Lady Lions have also had a cheering section over the years, but not one that is on par with Nittany Nation. Dreysdale and the Lady Lions’ marketing team are still working to

make it a stronger presence at games, perhaps one more comparable to their Nittany Nation counterparts.

Marketing is in the process of naming the student section and even held a competition last summer to help name this Lady Lion cheering brigade.

“The men’s [student section setup] is that whole lower section across from the benches. We’re only two sections,” said Dreysdale. “I would love to put five hundred students in the [Lady Lions’] student section at this point in time, which I don’t think is a whole lot compared to how many people are on campus. Five hundred would be phenomenal, one thousand would be fantastic.”

The Lady Lions have tried to bring more students into the Bryce Jordan Center with some other incentives. For example, the first twelve students in attendance for each home game are upgraded to courtside seats. Marketing expects that this upgrade could be in particularly high demand on February 4th when Purdue comes to Happy Valley for a televised matchup that will air on ESPN2.

And of course, there’s also the added incentive that Lady Lions student tickets are free.

Reaching the Crowd’s Potential

Dreysdale, a former Lady Lion 1000-point scorer herself, understands the impact a crowd can have on a team.

“When [the] seats are full, the energy that goes through you as a student athlete is amazing,” said Dreysdale. “It’s just something different when you have a full arena making as much

noise as possible, it makes a huge difference.”

The Lady Lions program has seen the potential crowds it can attract to home games over the years. In the '02-'03 and '03-04 seasons, future two-time WNBA champion Kelly Mazzante led the Lady Lions to two consecutive Big Ten regular season titles, the team's most recent first place Big Ten finishes prior to the 2011-2012 season.

In the 2003-2004 season, when the team made a run to the Elite Eight of the NCAA tournament, the Lady Lions averaged 9,670 fans per home game. After Mazzante graduated the team began to fall from Big Ten prominence and attendance for the Lady Lions gradually declined as well.

In the season following the run to the Elite Eight, average home attendance dropped over one thousand fans per game to 8,865. The following year attendance fell to 6,493, then 5,777, then 5,139 and ultimately down below 5,000 fans per game ever since.

But as the Lady Lions have revamped their program in recent years and regained national attention they have shown they are still capable of drawing a sizeable crowd, even if it's not on a nightly basis.

On February 26, 2012 the Lady Lions took on Minnesota at home for the sixth annual Women's Basketball Coaches Association Pink Zone game. The Lady Lions trounced Minnesota, winning 74-51 in front of a crowd of 13,849 fans, more than twice the attendance of the Big Ten regular

season championship game against Ohio State.

The Pink Zone, a fundraiser for breast cancer charities, raised \$203,000, but also brought in a crowd more than three times the team's average season attendance. The Bryce Jordan Center was filled to just two thousand under capacity.

The Right Conditions?

Be it the 5,209 fans in attendance to watch Penn State beat Ohio State for the Big Ten regular season title or the 13,849 who came out to the Pink Zone game, Lady Lion fans have proven they can come out in force.

“There is so much out there for the students [to do] these days, they just get swamped,” said Dreysdale. “But they're there when we need them.”

The Lady Lions' first place finish in the Big Ten last season was their first since the 2003-2004 season. This is the best the team has been since Mazzante led the program to back-to-back Big Ten regular season titles almost a decade ago and it is the best the Lady Lions have looked since the days when they averaged over nine thousand fans per game.

“We think we can take on the challenge [of being the team that everyone is hunting] and get better,” said Greene at Lady Lions Media day. “We can show everyone that we are Penn State and we have high standards here.”

Penn State has always been a proud school but this has been particularly true of late, following the

developments in Happy Valley last year. The mantra “One Team” has spread throughout the university, binding all Penn State athletics together as one school and one team, and this doesn’t end with athletes. Students all across campus can be seen wearing “One Team” tee shirts or sweatshirts as well.

The school spirit is throughout Happy Valley. The talent is at the Bryce Jordan Center. Perhaps this is the year for the Lady Lions, and perhaps the conditions are right to see another surge in their attendance.