

2024 Football Preview

Issue 01

ROCK M

Fall 2024

EXCLUSIVE CONTENT

Q&A with Bill Connelly



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All photos courtesy of Rock M+ in house photographer Cal Tobias unless otherwise noted.



From the Publisher

By Sam Snelling

Welcome, Readers, to the inaugural edition of RockM+ Mizzou Football Almanac, version 2024. This season is one of the most anticipated seasons in recent memory, and it's why we couldn't be more excited to present this Almanac to you.

Four and a half years ago, the Mizzou Athletic department made the controversial decision to fire Barry Odom following a disappointing season despite the team still making a bowl game. What ensued was one of the more bizarre coaching searches that left many Mizzou fans wanting more. What resulted was the hiring of a lightly proven, up-and-coming coach with just one year of collegiate head coaching experience under his belt in Eliah Drinkwitz.

Despite a slow start to his tenure as head coach, Drinkwitz kept his nose to the grindstone, working to improve the talent level at Missouri. He recruited like nobody else has at Missouri, and parlayed his ability to recruit and acquire talent into one of the most unexpectedly memorable seasons last year. The Tigers went 11-2, won the Cotton Bowl and finished the season in the top 10. This year, expectations are sky high amongst fans and the experts. Mizzou Football could be in store for a very special season. Everything to expect can be found in this Almanac. From in-depth features to opponent previews to positional previews, recruiting, the transfer portal, and much, much more.

We look forward to this hitting the 'press' and making it into the hands of Mizzou fans everywhere!

2023 Retrospective

By Quentin Corpuel

Victor Robles knows it's gone.

Boy, he smoked that one. Jakob Junis tried him with an off-speed pitch inside, and Robles jumped on it harder than Sugarhill Gang. The ball soars so high, it disappears over the awning above me in the nosebleeds down the first base line. Robles shuffles eagerly down the first base line a-la Carlton Fisk, except he doesn't need to spiritually wave this ball inside the foul pole like Fisk did nearly half a century ago.

The Nationals fans peppered along the left field bleachers stand up and await the ball's descent. There hasn't been much offense thus far – Washington leads Kansas City 1-0 in the seventh inning – so there's a little extra excitement inside of Nationals Park as the ball flies through the air. Alex Gordon stops his pursuit just shy of the warning track; the eventual eight-time Gold Glove winner is helpless. The ball crash-lands into an empty seat halfway up the stands. Nationals 2, Royals 0.

After an obligatory standing applause of Robles' home run, I went back to festering in the mid-summer heat. The awning over me made July feel slightly closer to April, but not by much. It was a hot Sunday afternoon; like, really hot. Baseball game-hot is no joke; especially when summer rolls around, humidity and the sun turn into one of the most dominant nature-based tag teams ever assembled.

Earlier in the game, I looked down a few rows below me, and I saw a kid sipping on a strawberry lemonade. That might've been the optimal move instead of a vanilla milkshake from Shake Shack which, in retrospect, was a horrible idea. Instead of being happily hydrated, I felt weighed down by processed cream and sugar. Now, ice cream is one of life's greatest pleasures, but for someone

who'd been to plenty of summertime baseball games, I was disappointed in my rookie mistake.

Throughout the game, I had plenty of thoughts about, well, lots of things. When should I get food? Do I actually like this whole journalism thing? And seriously, why the hell did you not get a strawberry lemonade?

However, not once did I think about the Nationals competing for a World Series championship. For one, I grew up a Yankees fan; I was more concerned with their game against the Rays that was happening simultaneously, a game they'd end up losing 2-1.

The other reason the future wasn't on my mind was because the Nationals weren't exactly on top of the baseball world at this point in the season. Yes, they were arguably the hottest team in the league, having won 26 of their last 35 games entering today and, as a result, sat atop the National League Wild Card standings. Washington was also projected to be a top-15 team in the league before the season, so it's not like the hot streak was totally surprising. But the Dodgers looked like a Death Star and seemed to be in a class of their own. The Braves were six games ahead of the Nationals in the NL East standings. On the other side of baseball, eight American League teams had more wins than Washington at this point. There was promise, but the land filled with it looked awfully far away.

If you follow baseball, you likely know what happened after. The Nationals secured the top NL Wild Card spot and proceeded to exorcise the playoff demons that'd haunted them throughout the mid-2010s. They beat the Brewers, stunned the Dodgers, swept the Cardinals and shocked the Astros to complete one of the most improbable World Series runs in MLB history.

There were players that'd been there for years trying to break through, rising stars, journeymen, all trying to reach baseball's highest summit for the first time. And they did it. There were blowouts, improbable comebacks and everything in-between. There were several instances where the Nationals had their backs against the wall, but they always found ways to win. Along the way, postseason legends were made. Juan Soto's go-ahead hit against Milwaukee, Howie Kendrick's heroic homers against L.A. and Houston, Daniel Hudson's championship-clinching strikeout of Michael Brantley...each of them permanently etched their name into Nationals lore.

The main takeaway from this story is that I was there before a meteoric rise to the top. That July day, I was there before the Royals responded with two runs of their own, before Anthony Rendon doubled home the go-ahead run, before the Nationals went on to win 5-2. The circumstances were so...normal. I'd been to a ton of Nationals games growing up, been amidst the sweltering summer heat so many times, yet none of them yielded the glory of the 2019 Nats. By Halloween, I could say I was there before Washington stood alone atop the MLB universe for the first time in franchise history.

Fast forward four years. The steamy summer air has traveled with me to Columbia as I observe a Mizzou football practice in early August. I look at the other beat writers, most of whom are donning hats, sunglasses or both. That might've been the optimal move instead of not only leaving both of those things at home, but wearing pants, too. Once again, these circumstances were so...normal. Nothing truly special seemed to be in the air. The buzz around the team was as palpable as a broken beehive.

I had a lot of thoughts throughout the practice. Luther Burden is fast. Blake Baker is a ball of energy. And seriously, why the hell are you wearing pants?

However, not once did I think about the Missouri Tigers competing in a New Year's Six bowl. Yes, they were returning most of their defense that was nationally awesome in 2022, and a new offensive coordinator was in town with a fully healthy quarterback and an electric WR1. But the top of college football looked to be in a class of its own. Three SEC teams sat in the top 5 of the preseason AP poll. The unranked Tigers were set to play four ranked opponents and had a handful of swing games on its schedule. Head coach Eli Drinkwitz's seat wasn't exactly as hot as that August afternoon, but it was pretty toasty after three mediocre seasons at Missouri.

If you follow Missouri football, you likely know what happened after. 11 wins, a Cotton Bowl victory, countless comebacks and lifetime memories later, Mizzou walked out of AT&T Stadium amongst the greatest to ever don the black and gold.

Witnessing an entity before its rise to fame is always a cool experience. Think of a now-famous company in its infant stages, a well-known music band/artist before the fame, an eventual superstar athlete in their rookie season.

That's exactly what happened here.

Explaining every notable moment from the 2023 season would take an awfully long time. Instead, I'll ask why. Why was 2023 so memorable? Why will future generations of Tiger fans speak of that year with so much joy? Why is it in the pantheon of all-time great Mizzou seasons?

For one, the stats literally deem 2023 Mizzou as one of the best teams in program history. The Tigers ended the season with 11 wins for just the fourth time ever. Cody Schrader led the nation in rushing and was the first Tiger to receive Heisman Trophy votes since Chase Daniel finished 4th in 2007. Mizzou also had six players taken in the 2024 NFL Draft, the most since 2009.

But it's more so how everything happened that made 2023 one for the history books. The Tigers started the season unranked, so the greatness that unfolded was, to many, unexpected, which is always more fun than if it was expected. It's a big part of why 2007 and 2013 were legendary, too. Both teams started the season unranked and finished in the top 5 of the AP Poll.

Another part of what made 2023 special is that, in a way, so many of the players and coaches had, as Drake once so eloquently put it, started from the bottom. Many key contributors had been at Mizzou since 2020, with some signing with the Tigers in 2018 or 2019. Guys like Darius Robinson and Javon Foster had been at Mizzou for years, and they dealt with harsh mediocrity (MU went 23-25 from 2019-22), being buried on the depth chart or both.

Especially with the ability to transfer becoming easier than ever before, that was a very easy endeavor for a lot of Tigers. However, the only major contributor from 2022 that ventured elsewhere was Dominic Lovett, who transferred to Georgia after leading Mizzou in receiving that season.

Everyone else stayed, and they got some reinforcements with a few transfers and freshmen. Heading into the season, the Tigers created a motto: S.T.P., a.k.a. Something to Prove. Now, it wasn't like Nolan Smith saying that some people had Georgia going 7-5 before the 2022 season. That was just irrational in-house propaganda.

Mizzou, on the other hand, actually had something to prove in 2023. Preseason projections had Mizzou finishing around .500, which is where they'd finished in each of the past four seasons. Head coach Eli Drinkwitz, who was given a contract extension amidst his third underwhelming season in Columbia, needed to prove he was the right man for the job. Offensive coordinator Kirby Moore, who'd only had one season as OC at the collegiate level (Fresno State in 2022), needed to prove he could reinvigorate what was a dormant unit the season prior at a higher level of competition. Defensive coordinator Blake Baker needed to prove that he could help generate similar, if not greater success than he did the year before.

For several Tiger players, they needed to prove that they not only belonged, but that they could become amongst the

nation's elite....and they did exactly that.

The game that really opened the door to the idea of a New Year's Six bowl was their victory over Kentucky, especially because they cleared so many humps that'd plagued them in years past. The Tigers hadn't exited Kroger Field with a win since 2013 – until 2023 happened. UK had taken seven of the last eight in the matchup – 2023 made it seven in the last nine. Mizzou struggled mightily on the road under Drinkwitz, as MU was 1-10 in non-South Carolina road games from 2020-22, with its only win coming at Vanderbilt in 2021 – the win improved that record to 2-10. Mizzou also never really proved adept at digging themselves out of major holes, which they found themselves in down 14-0 in the first quarter. Their only 14+ point comeback victory over the past two seasons came against Arkansas in 2020, where the Tigers won 50-48 despite being down 40-26 in the second half. After falling behind by two touchdowns to the Wildcats, the Tigers finished the game on a 38-7 run.

Those games, along with many others, revealed a new Mizzou. Problems in 2022 turned into solutions in 2023. They were aggressive. They dominated the trenches. They overcame deficits. They were fun to watch. And when they looked down and out, Mizzou kept finding different ways to win. Whether it was a legendary kick, fake punt, 4th-and-17 prayer or a menacing defensive effort, the Tigers must've upgraded their calculator the way they kept coming up with answers.

By the time the dust settled, program

legends had been made. Those whose last season was 2023 – Schrader, Darius Robinson, Kris Abrams-Draine, Ennis Rakestraw, Harrison Mevis and others – went out on top after starting from the bottom, whether it was from the Division II level like Schrader or a major knee injury like Rakestraw had two seasons prior. Those who would return in 2024 also enjoyed rightful fame. Brady freakin’ Cook, who got booed by his own student section before MU’s game against Kansas State, went out and threw for almost 400 yards and three touchdowns in one of the greatest wins in program history. It paved the way for a spectacular season that put all doubts to rest and instilled confidence within the program heading into 2024. Luther Burden III became the shining

star that was promised, and along with Theo Wease, Mookie Cooper and Marquis Johnson, became the new-age N.W.O. – nasty wideouts, that is.

The intangibles were also incredibly strong. There was a sense of brotherhood within the team that hadn’t existed in a while. Players truly wanted to win for each other, which produced an eternal fighting spirit that many great teams possess. My favorite example of such is when Abrams-Draine separated his shoulder during the Cotton Bowl, and Drinkwitz told him he was coming out of the game. Abrams-Draine kindly told him “The hell I am!”.

As the confetti fell onto the turf at

AT&T Stadium, I thought back to that July day. I realized that it was filled with circumstances that might not be present in Columbia for a long, long time. 11 wins don’t seem nearly as far away as last offseason. Expectations are higher. The standard has been raised. Mizzou will be looking to capitalize on a new era of college football, as making the expanded 12-team playoff seems well within striking distance. When I go back to watch practice this summer, it’ll be a new pack of Tigers baking in the mid-Missouri sun.

I’ll make sure to wear shorts this time.



By Quentin Corpuel

Explaining the feelings behind the kick that changed everything.

Have you ever seen 60,000 people levitate?

What's likely just popped in your head is 60,000 people floating upwards in unison like gravity had suddenly disappeared from Earth. That's not exactly what happened, but in a physical and spiritual way, it absolutely did on Sept. 16, 2023 at Faurot Field in Columbia, Mo.

At approximately 2:27 p.m. CST, tens of thousands did in fact leave the ground, and I'm here to tell you all everything about the moment. What you are about to read is not an article. Rather, this is a letter to future generations, a relic of history explaining exactly what it felt like when Harrison Mevis made over 60,000 people get closer to the sun while also costing the University of Missouri \$100,000 for being really good at his job.

But before we delve beneath the surface, some context would probably be helpful. As golden as the 2023 season looks now for Missouri, it was far from it on Sept. 16 when The Unholy Alliance was put on pause for a day. The Tigers didn't look great in their first two games against South Dakota and Middle Tennessee, the latter of which saw the Blue Raiders come awfully close to pillaging MU on its home turf for the second time in seven seasons. After two uninspiring performances by the offense, starting quarterback Brady Cook got booed by Missouri's student section when he was introduced in the starting lineups before the Saturday morning contest.

On the other side, border rival Kansas State was ranked No. 15 in the nation and had run Missouri out of Manhattan the season prior. The 40-12 final score is misleading; Cody Schrader scored a garbage-time touchdown to make an epic smackdown look like a slightly less epic smackdown.

The 2023 contest started in favor of the Wildcats, who were playing classic



K-State football; methodically marching down the field, killing the opposition with 1,000 papercuts. The drive ended on a 3rd and goal from Missouri's 10-yard line; Will Howard got smashed by a blitzing Chuck Hicks, but was still able to get a throw off. He missed tight end Ben Sinott wide right, and safety Jaylon Carlies deflected the ball up in the air with his left paw...only for Phillip Brooks, who'd killed Missouri in last season's contest, to sneak behind him and corral the ball for a touchdown. The old Missouri Tigers – unlucky and defeated – had taken center stage early on.

But then, a new Mizzou appeared. On the ensuing drive, Cook dropped back to pass with both feet on the midfield logo. Luther Burden III, who was a big player with arms and legs, blazed past cornerback Jacob Parrish, and safety VJ Payne couldn't get over to help in time. Cook lofted a rainbow to the end zone, where Burden was streaking all alone. When Burden hauled in the touchdown, there was a collective "HOLY SH**" roar from the crowd. This kind of moment had been foreign for a while; it was only the second time Mizzou had completed a passing touchdown of 40 yards or longer since the start of the 2022 season – Dominic Lovett's 79-yarder against Abilene Christian the season prior was the only other.

The rest of the game was a back-and-forth duel, as neither team ever led by more than a touchdown. Most notably, Mizzou was out-Kansas State'ing Kansas State.

The Tigers were winning the war in the trenches, and several major problems from 2022 (blocking and creative play calling) suddenly looked like major solutions.

Fast forward to the fourth quarter, and the game is tied at 27. Mizzou forced K-State's fifth punt of the day, and the Tigers got the ball on their own 18-yard line with 85 seconds left in regulation and one timeout. Missouri didn't lay down; rather, Cook methodically led his troops down the battlefield, giving K-State a taste of its own medicine once again. A string of short completions got them all the way down to the KSU 39-yard line, well within Mevis's range.

Then, they almost screwed it up. Missouri was called for a delay of game, which moved a potential field goal from a very plausible 56 yards to a suddenly daunting 61 yards. On the ensuing play, Cook's howitzer to Burden on a short out route was deflected and nearly intercepted at the line of scrimmage by Brendan Mott. The old Missouri Tigers were desperately trying to take the moment again.



Drinkwitz didn't have much of a choice. Mevis and the rest of the field goal unit trotted out to midfield with history awaiting them 61 yards away.

Explaining a feeling is difficult, although it's not too tough in a literal sense. Oftentimes, feelings can be summed up in one word. In this case, that's true; the feeling that enveloped Faurot Field was euphoria.

Like many words, euphoria has a definition that features more words. According to Merriam-Webster, euphoria is "a feeling of well-being or elation". But even then, there are still more words buried further down that really, truly describe how it feels to feel that feeling.

Take the following as an example. On April 16, 2014, SB Nation's Jon Bois tweeted, "Why watch overtime playoff hockey when you can simply snort cocaine and ride a motorcycle out of a helicopter?". That's the pinnacle of describing a feeling or concept. While there are literal words and dictionary definitions at our disposal, that's boring. Moments like these deserve more, especially in a conference where it means just that.

Another important aspect of feelings is that there's almost always buildup; something or someone can be responsible for creating a foundation for that feeling to occur, and that's exactly what happened here. Prior to the Mevis kick, anticipation blanketed Faurot Field. The student section prepared themselves like they were about to launch into outer space. Nerves were present, but nothing sky-high, as the game was tied. A miss wouldn't be the worst possible outcome.

But, in another way, a miss could've been the worst possible outcome. This was a Herculean boot over a colossal ditch of history, a history where defeat has been snatched from the jaws of victory countless times – Alabama, Florida State and Ohio State, for example – know this ditch all too well. Mevis was also kicking towards the north end zone, which had seen its fair share of horrific Mizzou moments – Fifth Down, the Flea Kicker and The Doink all happened in the north end zone. Brooks was perched under the uprights, hoping to channel his inner Chris Davis if given the opportunity.

Speaking of opportunities, this was an obviously huge one for Mevis, whose legacy was slightly complicated at this point in time. The Thicker Kicker was an All-American in 2020 and 2021 who had numerous clutch kicks to his name, most notably his game-winner against Arkansas in 2020 and game-tyer from 56 yards out to force overtime at Boston College the following season. However, he took a slight step back in 2022; although he single-handedly kept Missouri within striking distance of top-ranked Georgia with five made field goals, he'd missed a chip shot the week prior against Auburn that would've won the game for the Tigers. Instead, the game went to overtime, and Missouri lost in tragic fashion when Nathaniel Peat fumbled away what would've been the game-winning touchdown at the one-inch line. This was a chance for Mevis to re-enter high status, especially after he missed a 53-yarder earlier in the game.

Even for the cannon-legged Mevis, the distance from salvation seemed at least somewhat improbable. Only one person had

ever made a game-winning kick from this far at the FBS level: Texas Tech's Jonathan Garibay, who drilled a 62-yarder to beat Iowa State in 2021. Even then, the stakes weren't nearly as high; the Red Raiders were 5-4, while the Cyclones were 6-3. The hopes and dreams for Texas Tech at that point in the season were, at most, a decent bowl game; for Missouri, its hopes and dreams in this moment were lightyears ahead of that.

The regular field goal proceedings were executed flawlessly; the snap was good, as was the hold. For a kick that was more of a line drive compared to most of Mevis' attempts, the ball soared; its apex cleared the Allstate net that was almost level with the top of the uprights. Garibay's kick cleared the Allstate sign, but so did Adam Griffith's against Auburn in 2013, and that ended less than ideal for the Tide. Heck, Chase McGrath's buzzer-beater to lift Tennessee over Alabama in 2022 was a sad waffler that barely cleared the crossbar. Game-winners come in all shapes and sizes, so there were no guarantees of success within the first couple seconds of the ball's flight.

But boy, Mevis crushed it. He sent the ball on a journey to the football gods high above, where it asked for salvation as a reward for Missouri's hard work: for building a winning roster, for bringing in a new offensive coordinator, for selling out Faurot for the first time since 2019. The immortals gave it a little smirk and sent it on its way. As the ball descended from its holy visit, hope amongst the Missouri faithful went the opposite way. The kick was accurate; the only thing in question was power. Brooks, the Missouri Killer, the potential dream smasher, wasn't moving. He'd been paralyzed by a sudden shooting star that was about to be Missouri football.

The ghosts of 1990, 1997 and 2013 tried impossibly hard to steer the ball away from victory. This moment, however, wouldn't go the way of the opposition. The ball landed just beyond the crossbar. When it slammed onto the turf, Faurot Field entered another universe. Missouri 30, Kansas State 27.

All of that emotional potential energy produced an explosion. It was a collective AAAAAAAHHHHHH followed by a melting pot of victory-fueled noises. SEC Network's Taylor Zanzour belted "IT'S GOOOOOD" from the deepest depths of his esophagus, and like many others, his voice cracked from the magnitude of excitement that'd just smashed into Faurot Field like the Kool-Aid man. Vocal cords were not built to handle these types of moments, yet so many involuntarily tested their limits on that Saturday.

Feeling euphoria is like getting hit with an emotional tsunami, then getting twisted around in an emotional tornado. People sparkle with an unexpected sense of immortality gained from people they've probably never met, because that's one of the many beauties of sport.

That's exactly what happened here. Humans forgot how to exist peacefully; many who were sitting in assigned seats for several hours were suddenly fueled by AAAAAAAHHHH and poured onto the field. Any semblance of civilization was lost, because that's the power euphoria holds. Limbs arise, voices crack, and people run without a destination. Think of Jim Valvano after NC State won the 1983 National Championship over Houston.

When Lorenzo Charles slammed home the game-winning dunk, Valvano ran forward, realized he wasn't running anywhere in particular, then went looking for someone to hug. The spirit of Valvano was ever-present in Columbia, especially with the actual Tigers. Mevis fist-pumped joyously to the opposite end zone, his teammates chasing him like a celebrity he'd instantly become with one swift kick of the pigskin.

I would argue that Homecoming is when Mizzou is the most Mizzou; MU prides itself on inventing the tradition (even if other universities make very credible claims of doing so), and Homecoming fever is a real thing that affects many Columbia residents every October. But as smoke from fireworks permeated the air, Marching Mizzou blasted "Every True Son" and a moshpit of elated Tiger fans formed at midfield, it felt like the black and gold had never been this black and gold.

It wasn't the first time Faurot Field had been drowned by a sea of people, but

it'd never happened like this. Take the previous five field storms: Arkansas 2014, Texas A&M 2013, Oklahoma 2010, Nebraska 2005 and Nebraska 2003. Those were, without a doubt, some of the greatest wins in program history. They vaulted Missouri closer to national titles, gave fans lifelong memories and, in the case of the 2003 corn conquering, broke a curse. But the outcome of each of those games had already been decided before the final snap. There'd never been a moment of happy hysteria...until now.

Not only did the Mevis kick blow the top off of the non-existent roof at Faurot Field, it blew the top off of what was possible for Missouri football. Before the season, the Tigers were projected to finish around .500. Now? With all due respect to Tampa Bay, potential destinations seemed a lot cooler than the Gasparilla Bowl. On that Saturday afternoon in mid-September, the clouds in the sky didn't look as gray. The gold that'd spilled onto the field looked more golden. Most of all, the future looked like it might require some sunglasses in

order to see it. The 2022 game against Kansas State set the tone for the rest of the season. The 2023 game did as well, except the ship was headed in a far more positive direction.

The following week, Mizzou traveled to St. Louis for a battle with Memphis; nine wins later, the Tigers were Cotton Bowl champions, cementing themselves in the pantheon of all-time great Mizzou teams along with the 2007 and 2013 squads. There were incredible comebacks against Kentucky and Florida, blowouts of Tennessee and Arkansas and a triumph over Ohio State in JerryWorld to cap off the season. Program legends were made, rising stars were formed, Drinkwitz's image did a complete 180, and Mizzou was suddenly amongst the nation's elite.

None of it would've been possible without Mevis.

Later that night, with many still riding the high of victory throughout town, my friends and I went to a concert at The Blue Note in downtown Columbia. For a



few hours, we sang and danced to country music, and both artists riled up the crowd with, "How 'bout them Tigers?!" Although I'd already been a student at MU for a full calendar year, being at a country concert just hours after an all-time Mizzou football win felt like a true indoctrination into the Midwest for me, an East Coaster whose playlist was as country as Washington DC.

When we got back to our apartment, I fell asleep on our brown, pillow-less living room couch with Colorado State-Colorado in my right periphery; when I woke up, there were Buffaloes all over the field celebrating a CU overtime victory. It capped off a wonky day of college football: top-ranked Georgia barely escaped South Carolina, No. 3 Florida State survived Boston College, No. 4 Texas outlasted Wyoming, No. 10 Alabama won disgustingly over South Florida, Florida beat No. 11 Tennessee and South Alabama smashed Oklahoma State.

The whirlwind of the past 24 hours partially contributed to the zombie walk I did to my bedroom, where I fell asleep for a second time. Before I hit the hay once more, I made a realization about the moment (as a preface, I thought something close to the first sentence, fell asleep, then thought about it more the next day): The chance to experience something like Mevis's kick was why people tether themselves so tightly to sports, why millions spend so many hours sitting their butts down watching these spectacles. Watching a sporting event is essentially a prayer for joy. Sports offer people a chance to share a moment with loved ones, experience something that could be talked about for generations, be a part of something that's bigger than themselves. The craziest part about it? None of that is ever guaranteed to happen.

It's a high that transcends most activities that people do in order to achieve joy. For example, if your average American quickly downed a few 12 oz. Busch Light cans, there's a really good chance that they'd become drunk. But if Joe from Kirkwood decides that he wants to watch the entirety of a St. Louis Cardinals game, there is absolutely zero guarantee that



he feels even a sliver of joy at any point in the game. Three hours could pass, and the anticipation he felt before the game could easily be his emotional pinnacle for the day.

Mevis gifted so many of those people an opportunity to do everything I just said they could do.

Sept. 17, 2023 and every day after that would be a new day. Mizzou football,

just like the rest of us, will have highs and lows. But they, like the rest of us, will always have the 2023 season. They'll always have the highs, the lows, the moments, the memories that made those few months some of the best in the program's 122-year history. When future generations ask about 2023, past generations might forget some things.

However, I can say with certainty that Sept. 16, 2023 will never be forgotten.

By Dan Keegan

Analytics

Q&A

with **Bill Connelly**

If you are reading this publication, you've likely heard of Bill Connelly. A Mizzou alum, he is the founder of Rock M Nation, the Bill James of college football, and a key analyst for ESPN. He continues to shape much of the analytics discussion in the sport, while still providing top-notch weekly content for the worldwide leader.

I had the pleasure of sitting down with Bill over Zoom earlier this summer. We chopped it up about Mizzou football — past, present, and future. We broke down the SEC, discussed analytics in college football, and oohed and aahed about Luther Burden III. (He's pretty good at football.)

Below is that conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity.

Dan

Let's start by taking a look back about Mizzou's 2023 season. In one of the pieces I did over the winter for Rock M Nation, I ranked all 11 Missouri wins from 2023. I think you can be all pretty equal at the top four, right? Ohio State, Florida, Tennessee, K-State any of those fair to be the top win. Which one was your favorite?

Bill

Being able to beat Ohio State in a major bowl is always going to be special. They are not going to remember who wasn't playing for Ohio State 20 years from now. You're only going to remember that you won that game. So much of Mizzou's history was based on beating big name teams in the 70s. So any time you get a chance to score another one of those and kind of connect the current history to the 70s, it's really cool. So I think that was easily the most meaningful win and made sure Missouri ended up in the top ten.

But I think as far as the most impactful win to me — that has to be Kansas State. That was the third game of the season, and the first two were dramatically unimpressive. You know, against my SP+ projections, they underachieved by ten points against South Dakota. They underachieved by like 28 points against



Middle Tennessee. They fell to 46th after the Middle Tennessee game! Watching them punt late in the game, not trusting their offense to gain whatever, two yards or something, and punting from inside Middle Tennessee territory when you could have just gone out and gotten a first down and won the game.

Dan

Oh man, I had forgotten about that cowardly punt against Middle Tennessee State. I guess they had not yet put in the fake-pitch-to-Luther, sneak Cook fourth down play that worked what, seven times that year?

Bill

You know, Drinkwitz is this kind of bold character in a lot of ways, but he is very, very old school in his fourth down tendencies. He'll tell you, trust your defense and field position if you're the better team, then make them score against you, that kind of stuff. And boy, that almost backfired right out of the gate last year.

So after that game, I thought it was just not an encouraging situation to be in. And it was hard to be an optimist. I mean, at that point, two games in, you're just hoping for a bowl. And it didn't necessarily feel like a bowl bid was there. So watching them come out and play really well against Kansas State and securing the win the way they did, it did feel like that was a prompt for what came next.

When I was talking about

underachieving versus projections from that point forward, they only underachieved twice all year after that. They overachieved by 20 points against Kentucky and 14 against South Carolina, six against Georgia and 31 against Tennessee. They overachieved dramatically against Arkansas and Ohio State too. But without the Kansas State win, it's really hard to see this season come anywhere close to where it ended up.

Dan

Yeah, that's what I said, too. And just the feeling of beating a rival, you know, and the revenge from the previous year.

Bill

It felt like a family reunion in the stadium. Everybody in purple and everybody in black just grinning at each other because they liked the fact that there was an actual buzz in the stadium. It's fun when you play teams that you've played a lot in your history. That's not necessarily something Missouri has done a lot of recently.

I'm in Columbia, so I'll go see friends



at the tailgate. I'll do that, I'll hop into the stadium for a little bit. My main job during the season is to write about all the games, so I get antsy and I tend to be the bad person who leaves in the second quarter. But I want to make sure to get the experience still, so I always try to head in for at least a little bit.

Dan

Okay, so what is SP+ projection for the 2024 Tigers?

Bill

I mean, pretty good things! (Laughs.) I mean, they're projected 11th overall, eighth on offense, 18th on defense. At first glance, 18th on defense feels aggressive. They don't have to replace a ton of guys in terms of raw volume. But Abrams-Draine and Carlies in the secondary were particularly good. Rakestraw obviously was hurt a little bit, but he had the mentality that they brought to the table. That was the most physical secondary I can remember Missouri having, and those three guys were a big piece of that. So you lose them and then you lose three of your top four defensive tackles...

Obviously, Drink has done good portal work, and obviously the linebacking corps especially is loaded now. But those two areas – the physicality in the secondary and just the pure depth of defensive tackles – new guys are going to have to step up. And I like Batoon, the coordinator hire, having Johnnie Walker Jr. come out of nowhere last year and being a disruptor, especially at the end of the year, that was very important. But they lost really important guys.

Offensively, of course they're eighth. As bad as they were the first two games, that was a ridiculously good offense by the end of the year. There's Burden not only carrying the offense early, but then embracing blocking late in the year, playing a different role, not catching many passes against Ohio State but still catching the most important pass. An absolute BB from Cook.

Dan

I thought it was picked! I was there, right behind the play, and I sat down in my seat! I was like, "Oh my God." I literally sat back and then I realized, oh wait, on that side of the stadium, everybody is sad. And on that side, everybody's cheering.

Bill

From the sideline cam, watching it live, it looked like Cook got him leaning, threw an easy touchdown pass. Then you see the end zone view, and you're like, "How did that go through?" It almost literally had to go through two defenders to reach Burden. There was no window for that pass. And they still connected. So it's the best Mizzou receiving corps since 2008. There's a lot to work with.

But with my stats guy hat on, not with my Missouri hat on... the simple fact that Missouri went 4-0 in one score games last year is a concern. They were 11-2, but it was kind of like a 9-4 team. On the other hand, most of those close wins happened in the first month of the season when they weren't very good. And so when they were good, they weren't leaving games to chance very much, except the Florida game. They were a legitimate top ten team at the end of the year, it wasn't just kind of a good team that got hot and won a bunch of close games.

This is a great year to have the easiest schedule you're ever going to have in the future. They do have the weakest schedule in the SEC by my numbers, and you still have to go 10-2 for a playoff run. That basically means not getting upset, winning all the games you're supposed to win, and going 1-2 at A&M and Alabama, and home against Oklahoma.

Dan

I want to credit Nate Edwards on this; he's pointed out that Drinkwitz has never once lost to an SP+ underdog at Missouri. He hasn't been like Odom, who didn't always handle business when favored.

Bill

Well, that would say good things because they're projected favorites in 11 games this year. The Drinkwitz era as a whole has been so hard to evaluate because that first year they were particularly fortunate in close games. That was really kind of a 3-7 team that went 5-5, so it set the bar a little too high. The next couple years they lost most of their close games, but they were clearly better in '21 and then clearly better again in '22. And they were still just going 6-7 both years. So yeah, it was such a tricky thing. I was pretty sure there was improvement going on, but the results just weren't happening. They're ready to rip off some good seasons here.

Dan

I've really been impressed with the culture, with the way he prepares the team. That 2021 team easily could have folded up and just quit in November. Easily. But they did the opposite; they rallied and played hard down the stretch.

Bill

Yeah, both years! That is a valid point. And then you could say the same thing last year. They had to win down the stretch to finish top ten. Yeah, I think last year, getting rid of the play calling, being just the "CEO" coach on the sideline, it felt like his connection with his players was really, really good. Maybe better because he wasn't calling plays. And obviously your reward for making good coordinator hires is you have to make more of them.

Dan

Switching gears here, let's talk about your numbers. Let's talk a little bit about transfers and returning production. How has the transfer portal changed your work? Your returning production metrics are tremendous, and put a lot of the baseline into preseason projections for a lot of other analysts. So how have you evolved in the past couple of years after the portal? It seems like it would be pretty easy for ten years to measure transfer production one way. And then all of a sudden, every year the sport is different now.

Bill

Heading into 2022 when USC signed Caleb Williams, Jordan Addison and 20 other transfers, my system previously was just to fold in a transfer's production: his production was your production. It goes into the numerator and the denominator and impacts returning production that way. And that worked really well when you were signing four transfers a year, or six at most. Six was a ton. To go from that to suddenly a team signing

20-something transfers to suddenly teams 40, 50-something transfers. I think last year's projections worked really well. Nailed Colorado, and that was the most important one. I think overall the weighting has changed and obviously transfers matter a ton. And having transfers who actually produced at their last goal matters a ton.

Now that we've had two transfer heavy seasons, I'm able to fiddle with the numbers a little bit. I've figured out, in the overall SP+ formula, that raw returning production carries more weight now than it used to. Because a five-year recruiting average doesn't mean as much if half those guys are leaving, and recent history doesn't matter as much if you can completely flip a roster in one year. So the weighting of everything has changed. And I feel a lot more confident now that I've got at least a couple of years in this new universe. A couple years ago, I was not confident at all in the projections, and now I'm a lot more.

Dan

So I would say Drinkwitz has a clear preference for Power school transfers, especially with multiple years of eligibility. How do you try to measure transfers up and down ranks, from G5 to P5, or FCS to FBS, in terms of returning production?

Bill

That has been tricky with FCS transfers. You can't just plug their stats in and have it be the same as a Power Five transfer. It was making the projections less accurate. So for a couple of years there, I just wasn't including the stats at all from FCS. But I knew that wasn't quite right, either, because there are a lot of FCS guys who become stars, so that was a tricky balance. So right now I count stats as half. If you rush for a thousand yards in FCS, you get credit for 500 for returning production at your FBS school.

Dan

What are some of your favorite metrics – individual or for teams – that you look at to understand the sport better?

Bill

There's so much great stuff available. When I'm scrolling through receivers, the first thing I look at is yards per route run. If you average two yards per route, you're pretty good; three, you're outstanding. Burden was at 3.3. Marquis Johnson kind of broke it – he ran 40 routes all year, so he averaged a cool 8.6 yards per route run. Again, three is elite. I don't know what to make of that, but yeah, they trusted him to go deep.

Dan

He was like a September call-up in baseball that comes up and hits, like, 12 home runs in a month.

Bill

Right! You can't just expect that going forward. When I'm looking at defense, the thing I'm looking at now is havoc plays per snap. Darius Robinson averaged 2.8%, and for a 280-pounder, that's very good. Khalil Jacobs at 2.5%, that's very good. Zion Young at 1.0% at defensive end...that's not great. Johnny Walker Jr. having a late career breakout like that completely changed the perceptions of him in every way. He ended up at 2.3%.

Dan

In the national scene, who and what are you excited about for this season?

Bill

I think one of the most interesting things about the season as a whole is the number of guys who we don't know are going to be stars because there's so many great quarterbacks and receivers gone to the NFL. When everybody is watching the games on Saturday this fall and discovering guys at the same time. Discovering who the next stars are. That's a lot of fun, and we're going to have quite a bit of that this season, I think.

Dan

If we were to break the SEC into tiers – contenders, good teams, sleepers, Vanderbilt – who do you think might be upwardly mobile this fall?

Bill

I'm not going to pretend to feel bad for Jimbo Fisher for leaving, but that team probably deserved a better record than they had, especially when they lost Weigman. And now Mike Elko, who immediately hit at Duke, gets to walk into a depth chart with top-10, top-15 talent. That feels like a very, very good situation to be in.

Ole Miss remains a really interesting experiment though, because Lane Kiffin really is just basically saying, "I don't need continuity. I don't need the culture that comes from having guys in the program for five years teaching the freshmen when we're not around. I'm just going to try to get the most talented 85 guys possible." And we know that brings good results, because Ole Miss is as good now as they've been in a very, very long time. But is there another step?

Dan

You're from Oklahoma, right? Is there real bitterness there, or is it just online stuff between the fans heavy into recruiting?

Bill

Oh man, I miss playing Oklahoma. Obviously, I miss Mizzou vs Kansas, but that OU game was special for me because of the ties, so I'm glad to have that game back. Whatever Eli Drinkwitz is doing in that regard, it's working, because the fan base has noticed him and does not like him very much. And yeah, he seems to get that from some fan bases.

Dan

Let's wrap up with some quick picks. Give me your top four conference champs, and national title pick.

Bill

Georgia is my SEC team. I like Ohio State, but obviously their offense wasn't what it once was a few years ago, but the simple fact that Missouri's offensive line held its own against Georgia but got destroyed by Ohio State, that made an impression. I think they'll have the best defense in the country. In the ACC, I like Florida State, and I trust what they did in the portal. The Big 12 is a mystery. I trust Kansas State, but then I remember Oklahoma State ranks third in returning production and Mike Gundy has a team he knows from the start, not figuring it out in September.

For Group of Five, I think Liberty has the easiest schedule, but Memphis is the best team from a physicality standpoint.

Dan
Heisman?

Bill
Ugh, I hate the Heisman list right now. It's just really funny right now. I hate Carson Beck and Quinn Ewers at +900 [Editor's

note: the betting favorites]. Longshots like Garrett Nussmeier on the board, Cam Ward could be fun. Dillon Gabriel is going to have a chance at the second-most career passing yards ever, so he's going to get a lot of attention, and they're going to be a top-five team.

Dan
Let's close with Mizzou record predictions.

Bill
My numbers say 5% chance at 12 wins, 23% chance of 11-1. 36% chance of 10-2, I think that's right. I think 10-2 is very conceivable. Back-to-back 10-2, sign me up!

Dan
That'd be great!





Pardon the dust...Mizzou Football is upgrading.

By Nathan Hurst

Haunted, cursed or just typical bad Mizzou luck, the north endzone of Faurot Field has seen its fair share of notable plays, misplays and downright football crimes. The Fifth Down? It occurred at the foot of the Rock M. The Flea Kicker? It bounced around on the north end of Faurot. Baggett's doink in overtime vs. South Carolina in 2013? North side. Georgia's virtual Hail Mary to Isaiah McKenzie on 4th and long in 2017? The north.

So, when the UM System Board of Curators announced in April that they would be releasing plans and renderings for the much-anticipated renovations and upgrades to the north endzone of Memorial Stadium without a permanent athletic director yet hired to lead the project, it's safe to say my confidence in the process was less than bullish.

It seemed like an omen to me, with rumor and innuendo running rampant following the sudden and surprising departure of former AD Desiree Reed-Francois, that the last task before her demise was an

intention to break ground on the most afflicted endzone of a stadium in college football. However, once the oft-maligned curators revealed the scope of the approved project, I was truly impressed by the vision laid out by the planners.

As a Mizzou football fan since I first stepped foot on campus in 2004, I've attended all but seven or eight home games over the last 20 years. A four-year member of Marching Mizzou and a 14-time season ticket holder, I've sat for entire seasons in every corner and end of Memorial Stadium. Rain and shine, hot and cold, I have seen my fair share of Tiger triumphs and defeats in-person over these last 20 years.

The 2007 41-6 shellacking of Nebraska by Chase Daniel and the boys? I watched it from the dead center of the pre-renovated south endzone grandstands. The heartbreaking 2008 loss to Oklahoma State? I had young alumni season tickets in the northeast corner where current students currently camp. The 2010 upset of #1 Oklahoma?

Southeast corner. Henry Josey's 2013 SEC East-clinching run vs. Texas A&M? Southwest corner. The horrific 2016 loss to Middle Tennessee State? Northwest corner.

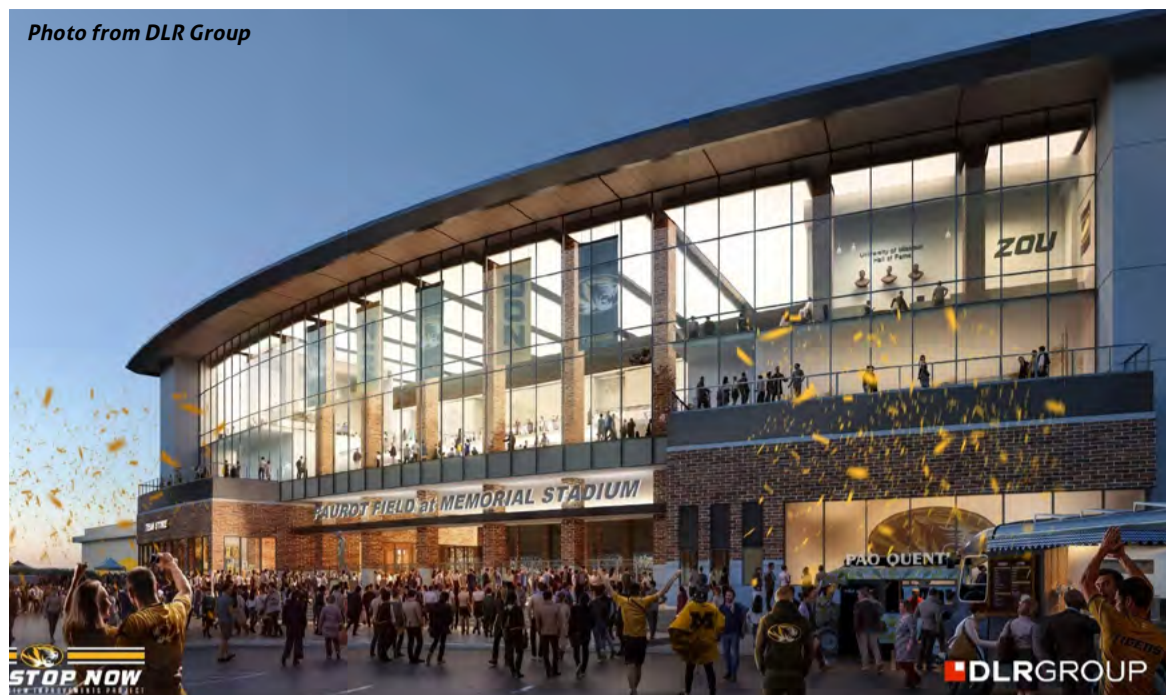
Since the pandemic-altered 2020 seating arrangements, I have purchased season tickets in the upper deck on the east side close to the 40-yard line. Even though I buy real seats, I have opted to perch along the railing above the hill in the north endzone for every game the last four years. I do this not to keep my butt from getting sore, but rather due to the proximity of a less-busy beer cart, a typically open pee trough spot and Tony, my favorite event staffer in the stadium, whose eagle eye keeps the inebriated among us from doing stupid things at the top of the Rock M retaining wall. From this vantage point dead-center between the uprights, I've seen Mizzou get housed by Tennessee in 2021, Daniel Parker Jr. catch a two-point conversion to beat Florida in overtime in 2022, and Harrison Mevis nail game-winning field goals vs. Kansas State and Florida in 2023.

It's due to enjoying this specific south-facing vantage point that makes me particularly interested in the plans for upgrading the north end of Memorial Stadium. My time betwixt the uprights may be limited, as I am assuredly not willing to shell out premium seat-level prices to watch the Tigers play. However, I am not embittered by the thought in the least. The north endzone is the last area of relatively untouched real estate in the stadium and is the obvious place to add more high-priced seats to bolster revenue in a conference where Mizzou is consistently toward the bottom financially.

The past has not been kind to Mizzou fans sitting in the north endzone of Faurot Field. It has played host to the legendary Fifth Down and Flea Kicker games of the 90s. More recently, we've seen Henry Josey's devastating knee injury on that end of the field. Mitchell Walters' false start there prior to a potential game-changing touchdown vs. eventual national champion Georgia in 2022 hurt. So did Brady Cook's clinching pick six vs. LSU just last year.

Thankfully for Mizzou fans, Eli Drinkwitz and company have been fighting hard against the curse, with game-winning plays vs.

Photo from DLR Group



South Carolina, Florida and Kansas State in the last three seasons. The new stadium renovation plans introduced in April aim to bury that sordid past for good.

Not everything must go, however. The most recognizable, and beloved (at least personally) feature of Faurot Field is this publication's namesake: the Rock M. Despite recent upgrades to the south and east sides of the stadium, many angles and aspects of Faurot Field are remarkably bland. Much of the same concrete and metal used to erect the stadium in 1926 remains in 2024. The one feature that makes Faurot Field stand out is our truly unique Rock M.

What impresses me the most about the proposed north endzone upgrades is how outstandingly well-incorporated the Rock M is into the design. While the number one priority is the addition of premium seats, of which there will be approximately 2,000, the designers managed to frame the Rock M around those seats and club seating areas where it still maintains its visual prominence throughout the stadium. Ultimately these upgrades excel at keeping the traditions we want while burying those memories we want to forget with shiny chrome, concrete, glass and a 100-foot-wide jumbotron.

Successfully combining tradition and novelty in a single, massive, quarter-billion-dollar project is something that can only be achieved with great thought and care. If the plans outlined by the curators in April are made real, Faurot Field will finally join its peers in the SEC as a premier football facility. Even if it means I will have to actually sit in a real seat in 2026. In 2024, however, you will still find me fist-bumping Tony, the Mizzou event staff all-star, in the north end zone every time Luther Burden scores another touchdown.





Coaching Staff

Replacements and Retention

By Nathan Hurst

When Eli Drinkwitz took the reins of Mizzou football in 2020, the program was coming off two full decades of coaching stability. Due in large part to Gary Pinkel's long tenure and his (in some cases commendable, in other cases frustrating) loyalty to his assistants, Mizzou fans grew accustomed to little to no turnover among coordinators and position coaches alike. Even when Barry Odom took over following Pinkel's retirement, the only significant change to the staff he made was replacing offensive coordinator Josh Henson with Josh Heupel and later Derek Dooley.

Drinkwitz arrived at Mizzou during a major upheaval in the college coaching landscape and brought with him a different leadership philosophy. Both have contributed to a much more volatile coaching staff in his four-plus years in Columbia than the previous 20 years. In fact, of the nine on-field assistant coaches Drinkwitz hired to begin his Mizzou tenure, only three (running backs coach Curtis Luper, linebackers coach DJ Smith and special teams coach Erik Link) are still on the staff. Despite the turnover, only one coach was terminated for job performance or disciplinary action when defensive line

coach Jethro Franklin was let go in early 2021. This led to the promotion of Al Davis to interior DL coach. Rather, the rest of the coaches have all left for promotions or a return to the NFL (Ryan Walters' lateral move to Illinois notwithstanding).

Despite a breakout season in 2023, or perhaps because of it, the Mizzou coaching staff was hit once again with turnover. While Drinkwitz was able to retain his entire offensive staff, the Tigers' defensive coordinator Blake Baker parlayed his success in 2022 and 2023 by taking a pay raise to move home to Louisiana and coach the LSU defense. Baker took with him Mizzou EDGE coach Kevin Peoples, who played a large role in turning Darius Robinson into a first-round draft pick and the breakout of Johnny Walker, Jr. in 2023.

A defensive change

After a three-plus week search for a replacement for Baker, Drinkwitz landed on South Alabama defensive coordinator Corey Batoon. A native Hawaiian, Batoon is an experienced coach who has worked at all levels of collegiate football. Starting his career at the high school level, Batoon then spent 13 years at the FCS level before

Eliah Drinkwitz - Head Coach

Offense

Kirby Moore - Coordinator/Quarterbacks
 Brandon Jones - Offensive Line
 Curtis Luper - Running Backs
 Erik Link - Tight Ends/Special Teams
 Jacob Peeler - Wide Receivers
 Cooper Williams - Grad Assistant
 Keyan Williams - Grad Assistant

Defense

Corey Batoon - Coordinator/Safeties
 D.J. Smith - Co-Coordinator/Linebackers
 Al Pogue - Cornerbacks
 Al Davis - Interior Defensive Line
 Brian Early - Edge Defensive Line

moving up to FBS at Arkansas State. While he has spent most of his FBS career coaching Group of 5 teams, he did spend five years at Ole Miss under Hugh Freeze as a recruiting coordinator and later a special teams and safeties coach.

Most recently, Batoon coordinated one of the better G5 defenses in the country at South Alabama, peaking in 2022 with the 31st best defense nationally according to SP+. While in

Mobile, Ala., Batoon tended to run multiple fronts, switching between a 3-3-5 and a 4-2-5 relatively interchangeably. Defenses under Eli Drinkwitz have historically run a four-man front (minus a short-lived and ill-advised experiment with a three-man front early in the Steve Wilks tenure) so expect to see Batoon drop the 3-3-5 unless he wants to throw a curveball on occasion to a pass-heavy team.

What perhaps attracted Drinkwitz the most to Batoon during the hiring process was his defenses' proclivity for creating havoc. A key tenet of Blake Baker's successful defenses in the last two years was heavy blitzes leading to sacks and tackles for loss. While that strategy also tended to open up the defense to big plays on the back end, the opportunities it created for turnovers and big plays made the strategy worthwhile. Batoon's defenses at South Alabama practiced a similar blitz-heavy and man-to-man-heavy defense which should be easily translated to a Mizzou roster already trained in that approach.

The biggest question for Mizzou in



2024 will be how well (and how quickly) Batoon can integrate his specific nuisances to the rest of the coaching staff and players. The Mizzou defensive roster is by far the most talented that he will have coordinated in his career, so hopefully that allows him room to be creative in find ways to produce the havoc Mizzou fans have become used to seeing.

Living on the EDGE

The second new face on the coaching staff is another seasoned veteran. Following the hire of Batoon, Drinkwitz was quick to add Houston defensive line coach Brian Early. Similar to Batoon, Early began his career in high school in the 90s before moving to the FCS level and then finally the FBS level at Arkansas State in 2013 (he was a quality control coach at Arkansas the year before).

During his time as a defensive line coach in FBS, Early has developed four players who have been drafted in the NFL. This includes a first rounder in Payton Turner and a second rounder in Logan Hall, both of whom Early coached at Houston. He also coached Ja'Von Rolland-Jones, who is second all-time in sacks in the NCAA. Rolland-Jones signed as a free agent with the Cincinnati Bengals in 2017. In total, Early has coached nine 1st Team All-Conference selections and had two additional players sign free agent contracts in the NFL.

Like Batoon, this season Early will coach the most talented set of players in his career, with returning star Johnny Walker Jr., incoming transfers Darris Smith and Zion Young, and five-star freshman Williams Nwaneri. His coaching will go a long way in determining how effective Corey Batoon's havoc-inducing

defense will truly be. He will be tasked with developing Nwaneri, the freshman phenom, as well as helping Smith transition from uber-athletic off-ball linebacker to a pass rushing defensive end. As a coach who has lived and worked primarily in Arkansas, he will also provide valuable connections to a state where Mizzou has increasingly gained a recruiting foothold.

Carry on, my offensive son

Eli Drinkwitz's most impactful 2023 hire came on the other side of the ball when he hired his first-ever offensive coordinator in Kirby Moore. At the time of the hire, it was unclear how much influence Moore would have over Drinkwitz's baby. However, the change to a more downfield passing scheme (and the overall success of the unit in 2023) proved that Drinkwitz was true to his word when he said he would be turning the reins over to Moore. Beyond the hire of Corey Batoon, perhaps Drinkwitz's most important staff move was to retain Moore for 2024. Moore's name was bandied about for several jobs, including the head coaching position at his alma mater, Boise State, as well as the coordinator position at Alabama when his former boss Kalen DeBoer took over after Nick Saban's retirement. Thankfully for Tiger fans, Moore felt comfortable enough (a healthy pay raise helps) in Columbia to return for 2024. Seeing what the Tigers have on the roster this year, including a senior quarterback and one of the top receiving corps in the nation must have made the decision a fairly easy one for Moore. If the Tigers experience similar levels of success offensively this year, chances are very good that Drinkwitz will be searching for a new offensive coordinator in early 2025.



Quarterbacks

By Dan Keegan

Despite Eli Drinkwitz's reputation as a quarterback guru, the early seasons of his tenure in Columbia were marred by poor play from the position. The Shawn Robinson experiment mercifully ended early, Connor Bazalak seemed to regress during his tenure, and Brady Cook's injury-addled 2022 left a lot to be desired. But this summer, for only the second time in Eli Drinkwitz's five seasons, Missouri has little questions around the quarterback position. Brady Cook's breakout 2023 campaign finally delivered on the promised offensive prowess. With Cook back in the fold for a final season, steady backup Drew Pyne in the building, and blue chipper Matt Zollers arriving next year, Missouri is built for success at the most important position on the field.

The beginning of the 2023 season looked to be another repeat of the frustrations of 2022. The open competition between Cook and Sam Horn seemed to have a predestined winner, despite another two games of mostly punchless, horizontal passing from Cook. And then one deep ball to Luther Burden III against Kansas State happened, and three months later, Cook had submitted the finest passing season in Columbia since Mizzou ran the Josh Heupel veer 'n' shoot.

His turnaround was swift, stunning, and storybook. The local kid who grew up attending games on the north side end zone hill was now winning games for a top ten team in that same spot. Fully healthy from a shoulder injury that derailed his 2021, Cook took major strides as a passer, letting the offense blossom under his watch while also cementing himself as one of the finest leaders and teammates in modern Mizzou history.

Cook completed 66% of his passes for 3,317 yards, with 21 touchdowns to only six interceptions. He passed for over 300 yards in a game five times, after never clearing that milestone in his career previously. He led game-winning scoring



drives against Kansas State, Florida and Ohio State. His passing progressed to the point that the offense was no longer reliant on his threat as a runner, like the second half of the '22 season. Instead of rushing for 585 yards and six scores as the only competent facet of a mediocre offense, he chipped in 319 rush yards and eight scores as an extra wrinkle of a good one. He upped his Big Time Throw rate from 4.2% to 5.9%, while cutting his Turnover-Worthy Play Rate from 3.8% to 2.3%, all while increasing his average depth of target a full yard, to 9.6.

All of that success in 2023 means Brady Cook now finds himself in a situation where he has never been before at Missouri: a clear-cut star, highly regarded both locally and nationally, and perhaps the most important player on Missouri's roster. Think about how far this True Son has come to earn this moment: recruited by Barry Odom, overlooked on his own team, thrown to the wolves at Georgia in 2021, beat up in the rain at Kansas State in 2022, doubted in the preseason in 2023, booed at home by his peers in the student section. From those lows to now a defending Cotton Bowl champion, a potential preseason all-conference pick and a bona fide national star in this game.

What can he do for an encore? This will be his second year in Kirby Moore's system, and he will return all of his past catchers, offering a supreme level of comfort with his schemes, coaches, and teammates that is a luxury at the college level. He has progressed every season as a player, and could get even better this season.

Cook has a reputation for being careless with the ball, but only because his disaster plays seem to come at the worst possible moments: two-interception losses at Florida and Kansas State in 2022 and late-game picks thrown to Georgia and LSU stand out in our collective memory. But Cook is actually quite secure with the ball, with only 13 career picks over two full seasons, and only 3.0% Turnover-Worthy Play rate. His picks "improved" in 2023, as well: five of his seven giveaways in 2022 were on passes within ten yards of the line of scrimmage, throws that should be low-risk. Last season, only one of his six picks were in that range, meaning his mistakes were made on aggressive throws while pushing the ball down the field... far more acceptable.

If we really want to pick at nits, he could cut back on taking sacks. He takes a sack on 21.1% of his pressured dropbacks, a number that is consistent across both of his seasons as a starter. That number is too high, and a veteran of his experience should improve at making decisions to protect the ball and move to the next play. This can help him cut back on his ten career fumbles and protect his body so that he doesn't have to play through so many injuries.

Keeping Cook healthy will be paramount. Sam Horn, the former backup, will miss the 2024 season after Tommy John surgery, as the golden-armed, golden-haired youngster balances his potential between football and baseball. After so much attention was given to Horn during his recruitment, Cook's glitchy 2022, and the following offseason, it's now entirely possible that he never makes any impactful plays for Missouri. Well, in football anyway.

The new understudy is Drew Pyne, a transfer from Notre Dame via Arizona State who will make a perfectly fine clipboard holder. Pyne posted a Cook-



esque 2,021 yards with 22 scores and six touchdowns for the Golden Domers in 2022 before a forgettable, injury-riddled campaign in Tempe in 2023. Pyne has been on a college campus for four years already, yet still has three seasons of eligibility remaining.

Harold Blood Jr. and true freshman Aidan Glover round out the room. Blood is a preferred walk-on transfer from Southern University and the brother of Mizzou wide receiver Daniel Blood. Glover is a 3-star prospect from Tennessee who enrolled this spring. If either of these guys are seeing meaningful action this fall, Missouri's season will have already

reached disastrous stages.

Glover is a raw but toolsy prospect, who played in a run-heavy scheme in high school. He will be better situated to compete next year, when Missouri will be looking to replace Cook with any of the above options. Class of 2025 commit Matt Zollers will also be in the mix; he was a 4-star when he committed to Drinkwitz this spring, and has elevated to a 5-star status since. With a talented quarterback room for the present and a high-ceiling mix of players for the future, the glitchiness at the position that plagued Drinkwitz's early seasons are in the rear view mirror.



Running Backs

By Dan Keegan

When Eli Drinkwitz arrived in Columbia, he brought with him a reputation as a quarterback whisperer. But in his four seasons at the helm of the Missouri program, his offenses have been defined by, say, inconsistent quarterback play and by workhorse running backs.

In four seasons, he has placed three different running backs at the top of the SEC rushing charts: Larry Rountree III (2020, fourth), Tyler Badie (2021, first) and Cody Schrader (2023, first). While this production has been incredible to watch, the first two seasons were ultimately disappointing. Often these impressive rushing numbers were all a mediocre Mizzou offense could muster, while Drinkwitz's trademark passing game stalled out.

That changed in 2023, as Schrader's powerhouse running was not just the only tool in a surprisingly empty chest, but instead the victory trademark that sealed eleven wins. Buoyed by a suddenly productive passing game and an offensive line that dominated in run blocking, Schrader submitted one of the finest seasons in the school's history. It is hard to overstate how good he was: in just the five games after the bye week alone, he ran for 810 yards and



one touchdown a week. That score was usually of the "icing the game" variety, capping off a long drive with a scoring gallop that put the game away.

Sadly, the Schredder's storybook college career has come to a close. While the Tigers passing game returns intact, they will need to replace all but one of last year's 354 running back carries. Despite Drinkwitz's history with dominant bellcow ball carriers, the Tigers will look to a more balanced approach in 2024, with a pair of veteran transfers leading the way ahead of three raw but talented youngsters.

The transfers arrive as complementary mirrors. Both are fifth-year graduate

transfers from the Sun Belt East, each with over 2,000 career yards at their respective programs. But the similarities end there.

Nate Noel, the lightning of this "thunder and lightning" archetype, contributed all four years at Appalachian State, with only nagging injuries occasionally limiting his production. When he toted the rock at The Rock, he was explosive: 5.7 yards per carry over his Mountaineer career.

Noel earned rave reviews during spring practice in Columbia. Upon finally graduating up to power conference ball, he will have a chance to make his impact felt in the SEC. Offensive coordinator Kirby Moore was certainly impressed, saying after one spring scrimmage, "Nate was making a few plays out in space, making guys miss, catching the ball in the open field...You think he's gonna get tackled, right? No. Puts the juke move on."

The thunder is Marcus Carroll, whose 2023 season at Georgia State was not far off from Schrader's stat line: 274 carries, 1,350 yards, 13 scores. Unlike Noel, Carroll was a non-factor during his first 2.5 years on campus, only cracking the rotation down the stretch in 2022 after

two other backs ahead of him went down with injuries. But like Schrader, once the mighty mite Carroll got his chance, he thrived.

Carroll runs like Cody, too. He has a similar build – the Missouri roster lists him at one inch taller and four pounds lighter – and in the spring game he even resembled the Schredder, with the short-arm pumping action while he ran. And both backs thrived as closers: the fourth quarter was each their most productive quarter on a per-carry basis, with 7.0 yards per carry for Carroll and 7.2 for Schrader.

Despite these differences as runners, Carroll and Noel do share one other important quality: both are experienced - and have thrived in - outside zone schemes similar to the one employed

by Drinkwitz and Moore. Noel comes from App State, where the outside zone is synonymous with success and where Drinkwitz cut his teeth as a young head coach. And Carroll thrived in Georgia State's similar prolific rushing attack, designed by Shawn Elliott. The two are actually even more dependent on zone running than Drinkwitz. According to PFF charting, exactly two-thirds (66%) of Schrader's 277 carries in 2023 were zone plays; for Noel, that number is 80%, and for Carroll, 81%.

One reason Stanford transfer Nathaniel Peat never fulfilled his potential in his hometown of Columbia was his discomfort in the zone scheme. He did not possess the vision and decisive running that zone schemes require, and his usage bears that out, as his career split was 59% zone carries. Noel and

Carroll have no such unfamiliarity, and should adapt easily to Drinkwitz's preferred run scheme.

Of course, all the past production in the Sun Belt won't matter for these veterans if the two cannot adapt to life in the SEC. Both had impressive offer lists as transfers and were sought after by other power programs, so the coaching industry believes they can play at this level. One important element will be pass protection. Noel is the better of the two according to PFF charting and metrics. Their "True Pass Set" metrics strip away pass protection snaps on things like screens and RPOs and focus only on performance on, well, true passing sets. Noel allowed only one pressure on 22 such plays; Carroll, three on 16. (Schrader: four on 39.)

Despite Noel's role as the explosive, greased lightning runner, he actually does very little work as a receiver out of the backfield, same as Carroll. Don't expect a new wrinkle for the Missouri offense in the form of pass-catching tailbacks.

These two veterans will receive the bulk of the work to replace Schrader in 2024, but a trio of youngsters will attempt to claw their way into playing time. Tavorus Jones, with two previous years on campus, and Jamal Roberts, with one, will look to get meaningful snaps for their first time as Tigers. Jones in particular is entering now-or-never territory, and if his outlook for playing time doesn't improve, could be a candidate for a down-transfer in the 2025 offseason. Roberts impressed the staff last year as a true freshman and earned some playing time in blowouts; he could show some proof of concept for the 2025 position.

And finally, true freshman Kewan Lacey will arrive over the summer. Lacey was a late-cycle win by Eli Drinkwitz, closing hard on the talented four-star and stealing him from Ole Miss. He has a dynamic highlight tape at a high level of Texas football, with game breaking speed and running instincts. If Lacey is a hit, he is the kind of naturally gifted runner who will force himself onto the field early and often. Discerning Missouri fans will follow his career with great interest, with hopes that he will follow in the footsteps of Rountree, Badie, and Schrader, and can be the next great Drinkwitz workhorse.





Passcatchers

By Quentin Corpuel

Storied iterations of Missouri football have all been synonymous with other things besides success. The defensive lines were dominant. The quarterbacks became program legends. Most of the time, the season ended with a conquest of Cotton in Dallas.

But one of those commonalities regarded the pass-catcher room. When the Tigers were roaring, they weren't just good; they totally kicked ass.

On the surface, it might seem obvious that good football teams have good pass-catchers. If a football team is better than most of its competition, their offense is probably good, because in order to win football games, you need to score more points than the other team. A big part of scoring in the modern game is through passing, so a good team probably has a good quarterback. But what's a good quarterback without good players catching the ball, you know? Alright, awesome. Thank you for attending my impromptu Football 101 class. My email is open with any further questions.

But in all seriousness, the best receivers in Missouri history have been actual superstars. Chase Coffman won the Mackey Award in 2007. Danario

Alexander led the nation in receiving yards in 2009. Jeremy Maclin was a first-round pick, Dorial Green-Beckham was a second-round pick, Michael Egnew was a third-round pick, and several others have gone on Day 3 of the NFL Draft.

What's also interesting with this position group is that many have been a part of the program's best teams; of Missouri's top-20 all-time receiving yards leaders, 13 of them played on at least one of the 2007, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2014 or 2023 teams. While many of the program's best memories don't actually involve someone catching a pass, some of its most revered and beloved players did that very well for several years, and most of them played at the same time. (Maclin-Rucker-Franklin-



Coffman, Washington-DGB-Lucas, etc.). On those historic squads, rarely was there ever a singularly dominant receiver (the only exceptions were Alexander in 2009 and Bud Sasser in 2014). Most of the time, the unit's collective strength outweighed that of the individual, and it helped produce some of the most electric offenses in the country.

2024 might surpass all of that.

Whoa! KABOOM! That is a really big thing to say. I just built up the past, only to destroy it with the future. But the reason for that is because, by the end of the season, there's a very good chance that it'll become reality.

There are a few main reasons for this. One is that every single Tiger who caught a pass last season is back, as the only departures are Dannis Jackson and Demariyon "Peanut" Houston, neither of whom could carve out much of a role. In an age where developing and retaining quality talent in college football is arguably the most difficult it's ever been, Missouri has done both. In just a short period of time, the Tigers have turned themselves into a destination rather than a launch pad to another premier program because Missouri is now one of

those premier programs.

Two is that the room is filled with different flavors of receiver. There's big, small, quick and powerful; no receiver is similar. Defenses have to account for a lot.

Three is that Missouri's offense is far more receiver-friendly than it's been in any year under Eli Drinkwitz. Arguably the biggest help to that was offensive coordinator Kirby Moore's arrival last season. Moore continuously found creative ways to get his playmakers the ball and molded the offense around the strengths of his personnel.

When breaking down individual players, it'd be foolish not to start with Luther Burden III, who might be the best receiver in the nation next season. College football is loaded with talent at the position – Arizona's Tetairoa McMillan, Ohio State's Emeka Egbuka and Oregon's Tez Johnson figure to be frontrunners for the Biletnikoff Award.

But there's a reason Burden is atop many preseason wide receiver ranking lists. He's a part of an exclusive club titled "Missouri Receivers That Made People Question if They Were Real". For example, when the very large and fast Alexander caught the ball, it was like, 'Oh boy, is he gonna break the universe?' When James Franklin lofted a rainbow to Green-Beckham, it was like, "Ok, how's he gonna viciously dunk on this defensive back?" At tight end, Chase Coffman destroyed societal norms of what a tight end should've been in the late 2000s by being an acrobat, hurdles champion and bulldozer who wore 45 every Saturday in the fall.

Burden is that club's newest member and could become the best out of everyone. When he moves, it's like someone turned all of the video game sliders up to 99. Sports have a tendency to make mortals (humans) seem like immortals; Burden seems to blur that line at least once a game.

What helps his image is how he got to Missouri. The St. Louis native chose MU over a litany of other powerhouse programs when the Tigers were as close to a powerhouse as I am to becoming a mechanical engineer. But Drinkwitz's



crew got that degree quickly, and Burden is one of the faces of a new Mizzou. In his wake is a trail of hometown love that, especially for Missourians, makes him easy to root for.

Also in Burden's wake were lots of defensive backs who tried (and failed) to contain him. Arguably the most impactful strategy change in the offense was Moore giving Burden more opportunities to cook after the catch, which is what he did with many of Fresno State's receivers during his lone OC stint there in 2022 (and it worked!).

For those who didn't start following MU until 2023, Burden didn't blossom like this in his freshman season, but the

flashes were almost blinding. As the first five-star wide receiver recruit to commit to Missouri since DGB did a decade prior, Burden entered Columbia with sky-high expectations...and he surpassed them. In his first collegiate game against Louisiana Tech, he turned likely losses of yardage into huge gains, broke a bunch of tackles and scored two touchdowns. It was clear that the Tigers had something special with LB3, but the offense's ineptitude held him back.

Like the entire offense, Burden's star turned into a supernova the following season. In part due to Moore's adjustment, Luther became an unprecedented Burden on opposing defenses because, well, he is everything.

He is an epic creator out of nothingness, a converter of peril into possibility (so basically, God). Several instances in 2023 saw Burden weave through armies of defenders who probably would've dropped at least 99 percent of all other receivers for a far less significant gain. He could probably open a separate bank account with the amount of dimes he's stopped on. Whether he was zig-zagging, shaking off would-be tacklers or doing both on the same play, it became clear that Burden could be on his way to becoming the most esteemed wide receiver in program history.

What also helps that case is Burden being associated with some of 2023's most memorable moments. Against Kansas State, his first touchdown ushered in a new era of offense for Missouri. Against Georgia, the rainbow touchdown he caught early in the first quarter gave the Tigers early hope of repeating 2013 and vaulting themselves into the College Football Playoff conversation. Against Florida, his reception on 4th-and-17 saved a New Year's Six bid, and his touchdown against Ohio State a little over a month later sealed a glorious season.

But what makes Burden even more valuable is that the receivers behind him prevent defenses from keying in on just him. Theo Wease Jr., who transferred from Oklahoma, quickly established himself as one of the best No. 2 receiving options in the country opposite of Burden. He spent most of the season on the Green-Beckham/L'Damian Washington path of "just throw it somewhere in the area code and he'll probably catch it".

His most notable play came against Kentucky. While that moniker had already been established after he dunked on Vanderbilt and LSU in the two weeks prior, it showed the most in Lexington as the Tigers were mounting a massive end-of-half comeback. With Missouri near Kentucky's doorstep, Cook didn't seem to think twice about where to throw the knockout punch, as all the 6'2" Wease needed to do was run straight and catch a lob, which he did with ease.

But the best part was that Wease is way more than just a jump-ball guy. He's able to create separation in one-on-one coverage, and he's got some serious wheels, too. Last season, only four schools – Washington, Oregon, LSU and James Madison – had a pair of 1,000 yard receivers. With Wease and Burden, Missouri could join that exclusive group in 2024.

However, the main reason that might not happen is because there are two elite slot receivers sandwiched in-between Burden and Wease: Mookie Cooper and Marquis Johnson. Cooper, another St. Louis native, is a blue-collar receiver: he's got reliable hands and gets open often. Although he's got plenty of lightning rod in him (that's how he was used in 2021 and 2022), he was incredibly effective on non-vertical routes.

Most of those vertical routes went to Johnson, whose explosiveness rivals an average Michael Bay movie. He only caught 13 passes last season, but he averaged an absolutely bonkers 29.5 yards per catch. Johnson's speed isn't just a weapon for himself; it's created gravity, which has freed up his teammates numerous times. That included a 56-yard reception by Burden against Memphis that happened in large part due to Johnson's vertical presence.

"Marquis cleared that side out," Drinkwitz said after the game. "They have so much respect for him."

Behind Johnson sits a handful of guys who would likely see a lot more action on most other Power Four teams. Mekhi Miller battled injuries for most of 2023, yet still caught a touchdown and racked up almost 150 receiving yards. A few blue-chip prospects from the past two recruiting classes – Daniel Blood, Joshua Manning, Courtney Crutchfield and James Madison II – represent the future at the position, although they likely won't contribute too much in 2024.

Last, but certainly not least, is the tight end position, which looks the most promising since Albert Okwuegbunam's last season in 2019. That's because the TE1, Brett Norfleet, is one of the best underclassmen at his position in the country. Like Coffman, Norfleet is big (6'7"), has strong hands and enjoys jumping over people. He also crushed as a blocker, something that shined often on tape while he was at Francis Howell High School. Under Drinkwitz, tight ends weren't utilized very much at all; under Moore, Norfleet was running all over the place, whether he was hurdling defenders or putting them in the ground.

Behind Norfleet are returners Jordon Harris and Tyler Stephens, plus freshmen in Whit Hafer and Jude James. Harris will likely be the TE2 of the bunch, as his blocking abilities got him an awful lot of playing time last season. Hafer is almost the same size as Norfleet and projects as another excavator.

The best part about all of this? It's back for one more year. Wease and Cooper's eligibility is up after 2024, Burden projects to be a top pick in the upcoming NFL Draft, and if Missouri's offense has another great season, Moore could be one of the hottest head coaching candidates by year's end. But for one more go-around, the Nasty Wideouts (and tight ends) are set to light the world ablaze with the same quarterback and offensive coordinator.

So much of Missouri's greatest successes have been unexpected. The pass-catcher group's prospective success will be the complete opposite.





By Quentin Corpuel

In 1869, the College of New Jersey (which eventually became Princeton) and Rutgers played the first ever game of college football. Rutgers, then known as the Queensmen, won 6-4.

Over 150 years later, college football looks almost unrecognizable compared to the inaugural contest in New Brunswick, N.J.. However, one aspect has mostly remained the same: large and athletic men jostling for physical authority in trench-style warfare.

This idea brings us on the long journey from Reconstruction-era New Jersey to present-day Missouri, where the 2024 Tigers have a strong set of giants who are replete with strength and can punish the opposition like few other units in the nation can.

But why speak like it's still 1869? Why refer to the group in a folklore-ian tone as if Ulysses S. Grant is the current president? Simply put, the offensive line is the backbone of the offense. The success of quarterbacks, running backs and pass-catchers are largely dependent on if the big boys up front can stave off opposing rushers. Should a team's offensive line prove to be a collection of turnstiles, the rest of the unit will



be hamstrung. On the other hand, if an offensive line mimics a brick wall, a world of possibilities opens up for everyone else. Great teams at all levels of football have plenty in common; one of the most shared traits, however, is a reliable offensive line.

Missouri absolutely falls into this category, although its best offenses have been more known for glitz and glam: electric pass-catchers, never-say-die running backs and quarterbacks who could distribute the ball effectively. The offensive line is never usually the first thing an average football fan thinks of when they remember a good offense. Part of that is the nature of the position; a sweet block probably won't make front-

page headlines. But the efforts of the best are never forgotten. 2013 is a great example. Justin Britt, Max Copeland, Evan Boehm, Connor McGovern and Mitch Morse, a tantalizing group who dominated with a combination of power, chemistry and a dash of insanity. Are they the first thing an average Missouri football fan thinks of regarding the 2013 team? Probably not. But James Franklin, Henry Josey, Dorial Green-Beckham and the rest of the offense wouldn't have functioned nearly as well if not for the efforts of the ferocious five up front.

Unfortunately, the 2022 Tigers weren't very reliable at all. There were a litany of issues on the offensive side of the ball that season – Brady Cook battled through a torn labrum in his throwing shoulder for almost the entire season, and the pass-catching corps didn't have much size nor could they get open consistently. But the issues along the offensive line proved detrimental to the entire unit. Cook seldom had enough time to throw, and running lanes were often clogged like I-70 at rush hour. The offensive line's destructive combination of ineptitude and attrition (10 guys played at least 70 snaps in part due to injuries) catalyzed a negative domino effect that made moving the ball extremely difficult.

Then, the offseason happened, and everything changed for the offensive line. Drinkwitz brought in Brandon Jones, who'd coached Houston's offensive line group from 2019-22 that was one of the best amongst the Group of 5 programs. Almost instantly, the unit coalesced into something that was almost unrecognizable – in a good way.

"I can say without reservation that the offensive line has been the most improved unit within our football program," Drinkwitz said in August. "I think what Coach Jones has done has been remarkable. His ability to connect with our players, have those guys playing for each other in a way that I haven't seen since maybe my first year, has been tremendous."

Combined with a new injection of play calling creativity from new offensive coordinator Kirby Moore, the unit took a step forward in 2023. It wasn't just a marginal jump from bad to average; Missouri made a quantum leap from the ocean floor to a mountain's ridge. Led by Javon Foster, a lynchpin of consistency and leadership at left tackle since 2020, the Tigers established themselves as one of the best offensive lines in the country. They were semifinalists for the Joe Moore Award, which is given at the end of the season to the best offensive line in the nation. The unit's national recognition was similar to the rest of their team's surprising ascent to the top of college football. Also at the pinnacle were regularly dominant schools like Michigan, Georgia, Oregon, LSU, and then it's like, surprise! Here's Missouri!

Now, the unit enters this upcoming season with a solid chance of contending for the Joe Moore Award once again, although they had to deal with some turnover this past offseason. Foster was selected by the Jacksonville Jaguars in the 2024 NFL Draft, becoming the first offensive tackle from MU to hear their name called since Justin Britt in 2014. Xavier Delgado, another veteran who was Foster's running mate at left guard over the past few seasons, exhausted his eligibility. The only other major loss was utility man Marcellus Johnson, who took on a backup/swing tackle role in his lone season with the Tigers after transferring from Eastern Michigan. His college eligibility also expired, and he signed

with the New York Giants as an undrafted free agent.

In short, the Tigers had some replacing to do. Luckily for them, they were in a good position to fill those shoes with equally, if not better, offensive linemen, because a) they'd established themselves as a College Football Playoff contender, and b) they had the NIL money to reel in big fish from the transfer portal, and that's exactly what they did.

The reload started with them coaxing star guard Cayden Green away from border rival Oklahoma. Green, another Lee's Summit North product, was a surprise transfer after showing signs of greatness in his freshman season at OU. In 293 pass blocking snaps, he allowed just one QB hit, and he also dominated in the run game (he was far better than his 49.8 PFF

grade in that department). It's rare for a blue-chip offensive lineman at top-tier programs like Oklahoma to transfer after just one season, but when Green departed Norman, Drinkwitz & Co. were quick to scoop him up.

Considering Green's experience at left tackle in high school, it seemed that he would slot into that position with Missouri. That was until the Tigers made an unexpectedly awesome acquisition when former SMU left tackle Marcus Bryant committed to the Tigers in April. Bryant played over 2,000 snaps at left tackle in four seasons for the Mustangs and was very reliable. Listed at a gargantuan 6'8" and 318 pounds, Bryant possesses a lethal combination of strength and nimbleness. Rock M's Josh Matejka called him a ballet dancer who's also a 300-pound left tackle, and



I couldn't agree more. This move felt like Marcus Denmon's halfcourt shot against Memphis in the 2009 NCAA Tournament. No one seemed to expect it, but it was a cash money moment that put Missouri in a better position to succeed.

The other two projected starters are both returners. Center Connor Tollison stepped in for Michael Maietti and performed admirably, recording a run blocking grade just north of 80 and a pass blocking grade just south of 65 according to PFF. The only major hiccup that popped up every so often was snapping the ball, as Tollison's inexperience at center was causing mistakes as early as last spring. A snapper, whether it's the center or long snapper, is like grammar. When it's good, you don't really notice it. Unfortunately for Tollison, his "grammar" cost Missouri a handful of plays last season, but one would like to think that Tollison's snapping will be a lot better in 2024. Backing him up will likely be fifth-year Drake Heismeyer.

Locking down the right tackle spot will be Armand Membou, who will look to improve upon a delightful 2023 season that saw him take a big jump from the prior season, when he was mainly used as the first lineman off the bench. He made Bruce Feldman's "Freaks List" before the season for good reason, and he figures to be a part of that list once again this time around. Only a few inches shorter than Bryant, the freakishly athletic technician that is Membou is well on his way to becoming an NFL Draft pick in 2025. Behind him will be a pair of gigantic human beings in Mitchell Walters and Brandon Solis, both of whom could fill in nicely in a backup role.

Unlike most positions on the offense, the other guard spot is up for grabs. Cam'Ron Johnson is the incumbent; he started the 2023 season amidst a rough patch, as he led the nation in penalties by an offensive lineman with nine through the first seven games. However, he was able to bounce back in

the second half of the season, and the hope will be that final stretch can translate into 2024. Jayven Richardson was a force at Hutchinson Community College in Kansas and had a ton of Power Five offers. Rising sophomore Logan Reichert has seemingly impressed the most thus far, as he even received some first-team reps during spring ball last year. Although the season isn't super close as of this writing, the competition feels open.

There are some spots of uncertainty along the line, but the main point is this: Missouri has an embarrassment of riches here. In fact, the Tigers have arguably surpassed Alabama. Yes, Ala-freakin'-bama, whose offensive lines over the past decade-plus have resembled the Monstars from Space Jam. It's yet another reminder that times are a-changin' in college football, where Missouri is a part of the elites within the college football-verse.

Now, the hardest part will be figuring out where everyone will play. Green offers positional flexibility, Johnson was an All-Conference left guard at Houston, and Reichert can play tackle as well as guard. My best guess would be that Bryant starts the season at left tackle and Green plays alongside him at left guard. Bryant only has one year of eligibility remaining, and considering the experience gap between him and Green, it might make the most sense to keep Bryant where he's most comfortable and let Green develop on the interior, where he's shown he can thrive. That would leave Tollison at center, Membou at right tackle and one of Johnson/Richardson/Reichert at right guard.

It'll be very interesting to see how this all shakes out, as there are a ton of different combinations that Jones and the rest of the staff could conceivably go with. But if they're able to make this work, Missouri's offensive backbone could contend to be the strongest it's ever been.





Defensive Line

D-Line Zou with a question mark

By Nathan Hurst

“D-line Zou” is a nickname Mizzou fans have prided themselves and the program on for the better part of two decades. Since the turn of the century, few college programs can say they have produced more top-end NFL draft picks along the defensive line than the Tigers.

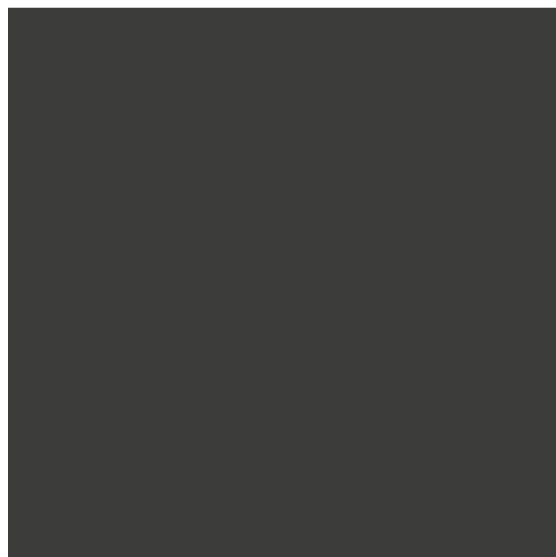
Ever since future NFL Hall of Famer Justin Smith donned the black and gold in the late 90s, Mizzou has enjoyed a steady stream of excellent college and professional players. From “The Smiths” (Justin, Brian, Aldon and Jacquies) to Michael Sam, Kony Ealy, Markus Golden, Shane Ray, Charles Harris, and the latest, Darius Robinson, the EDGE production at Mizzou has been elite.

While a little less heralded, the number of Mizzou interior defensive linemen who moved on to the NFL in the same period is just as long. From CJ Mosley and Atiyah Ellison to Ziggy Hood, to Sheldon Richardson, Terry Beckner Jr., Jordan Elliott and Isaiah McGuire, Mizzou has had no shortage of top-end athletes in the trenches defensively. However, to maintain its excellent tradition, the 2024 version of D-line Zou will have much to replace from the steady-if-not-spectacular unit in 2023.

Big shoes to fill

Featuring a first-round draft pick in Darius Robinson as well as three NFL free agent signees, the 2023 Mizzou defensive line was steady as they come. Ranking 10th in the nation in team sacks with 39 and 30th in rushing yards allowed per game at 122.8, the defensive line as a unit was about as good as Mizzou has ever fielded top-to-bottom. On top of talent, the defensive line could contribute much of its success to the extreme levels of experience, especially on the interior.

Of the four defensive tackles who played the majority of the snaps, Kristian Williams, Realus George, Jayden Jernigan and Josh Landry combined to play a total of 185 career games through the end of



the 2023 season. Add 47 games played by Darius Robinson to that mix and you are left with a staggering 232 games of experience. Not only were those five players bringing experience to the table, but production as well. In 2023, they combined for 142 tackles, 15 sacks, four forced fumbles and three recovered fumbles.

Fast forward to 2024, however, and four of those five defensive line stalwarts have graduated and moved on to the NFL as draft picks or free agent signees. Sixth-year senior Kristian Williams is the only one of the five who is returning for the Tigers this upcoming year. Add a new defensive coordinator in Corey Batton and new EDGE coach in Brian Early to the mix and the Tigers have a lot of questions to answer along the front of their defense.

Scheme questions

When Eli Drinkwitz replaced departed defensive coordinator Blake Baker with South Alabama’s defensive coordinator Corey Batton, the most-asked question was whether or not the defensive scheme would change. While Blake Baker preferred to remain in a four-down front consistently throughout his time at Mizzou, Batton seemed to

enjoy alternating between a 4-2-5 (four linemen and two linebackers) and a 3-3-5 defense (three down linemen and three linebackers.) If press conference answers can be believed, it seems like Batoon will stick with a 4-2-5 as the base defense. Based on the type of players Drinkwitz and his staff has recruited, the 4-2-5 is probably the best way to maximize the talent Mizzou has along the defensive front.

One change that Tiger fans will see this year is the use of a new position: the Joker. The Joker is a hybrid EDGE/linebacker who will often be tasked with responsibilities other than rushing the passer, such as playing some pass coverage and setting the edge against the run. The Joker lines up on the boundary side of the defense, or the side closest to the sideline when the ball is snapped.

Exactly how Corey Batoon chooses to use this position versus using two traditional EDGE rushers remains to be seen, but it should allow the defense to do more things to surprise opposing quarterbacks and perhaps generate a few additional turnovers.

Returning answers

Kristian Williams returns to anchor the interior of the defensive line for the Tigers and will assuredly be a starter from day one barring injury. Williams has played in all 26 games for the Tigers since he transferred from Oregon prior to the 2022 season and started 11 of the Tigers' 13 games in 2023.

Mizzou also returns a second starter along the front in 2023 breakout star Johnny Walker Jr.. Prior to 2023, Walker had played in 14 games with 16 tackles

and four sacks in three years. In 2023 alone, he started 12 games, making 43 tackles and five sacks, capping off his year by earning the Cotton Bowl Defensive MVP trophy. With two of the four starting spots nailed down, coaches Al Davis and Brian Early have their work cut out for them this summer to develop a bevy of transfers, returning backups and incoming freshmen into a unit worthy of the D-line Zou name.

In the interior, the Tiger roster also returns inexperienced players like Marquis Gracial, Jalen Marshall and Sam Williams who will do their best to compete for playing time this fall. Gracial and Marshall have played very sparingly (three games combined) while Williams redshirted as a freshman last year. If the Tigers are going to have anywhere near the level of depth and stability in the interior of their defense in 2024, at least one of those three will have to take a step forward in their development. Gracial has the size and pedigree to do so, but he has yet to put it all together after his first two years in the program.

The EDGE position was one of the spots hit hardest by attrition this spring, as Serigne Tounkara transferred to Cal-Berkeley and former Northwestern transfer Austin Firestone retired from football. Joe Moore III returns as an experienced, albeit relatively unproductive pass rusher. He played for three seasons at Arizona State before transferring to Mizzou last year. He played in 12 games in 2023 with 13 tackles and one sack. Freshman Jakhai Lang redshirted last year and will continue his development in a backup role this year as well.

Transfer answers

Knowing full well that he was losing such a massive amount of experience and production along his defensive front, Eli Drinkwitz hit the portal hard this offseason to bring in talent and experience. Along the interior of the line, Drinkwitz recruited rising juniors Chris McClellan from Florida (46 tackles and 2 sacks in two years) and Sterling Webb from New Mexico State (47 tackles and 6 sacks in two years).

On the EDGE, the hyper athletic Darris Smith arrives from Georgia after two years with the Bulldogs. Smith played



primarily as an off-ball linebacker for Georgia and didn't see much playing time for that incredibly talented defense. Mizzou will move his 6'5" 240 lbs. frame to the defensive line, which should be a much better position for his size. Additionally, the Tigers landed Zion Young from Michigan State to serve as a third steady pass rusher. Young played more than Smith in his first two years of college ball, racking up 47 tackles and 2.5 sacks in the Big 10. Young is bigger than Smith at 6-foot-6, 265 pounds, so look for Smith to take more reps at the Joker position based on his history as an off-ball linebacker while Young should play primarily with his hand in the turf on the field side of the defense. Drinkwitz finalized the Tigers' transfer season by grabbing EDGE rusher Eddie Kelly from Georgia Tech in the spring portal. Like Smith and Young, Kelly has two years of eligibility remaining and had 23 tackles and half a sack last year and should serve as an important depth piece for the Tigers.

Freshmen answers

The star of the incoming freshman class for Mizzou is Williams Nwaneri, the five-star EDGE player from Lee's Summit. Four-star Elias Williams rounds out the 2024 EDGE class for Mizzou. Both players are incredibly talented, with Nwaneri looking to see the field on day one. The defensive tackle class is almost as impressive, with four-star Alabaman Jaylen Brown and three-star Floridian Justin Bodford moving to Columbia this summer. Brown sits at 260 lbs. and has some weight to gain before he can lock down an inside spot, so expect both tackles to redshirt this year barring injury.

Ultimate answers

While Corey Batoon, Al Davis and Brian Early have their work cut out for them this summer, they have a talented, albeit inexperienced (relative to 2023 anyway) pool of players to work with. Kristian Williams and Johnny Walker Jr. will lock down starting roles from day one, especially since reports say Walker Jr. has stepped up in recent months as a vocal leader of the defense. Based on playing time in the Black & Gold game, a best estimate would be that Darris Smith will start on the EDGE opposite Walker, while Chris McClellan will start lined up next to Williams at tackle. This will allow for both players to play the Joker role interchangeably. Among the reserve EDGE players, freshman Williams Nwaneri didn't commit to Mizzou to come and sit on the bench, so expect him to see a decent amount of playing time along with more veteran players Joe Moore, Zion Young and Eddie Kelly.

At defensive tackle, Sterling Webb should get regular work along with Williams and McClellan to create a tight, three-man rotation. To keep that rotation rested, it will be vital for coach Al Davis to find a fourth man among Gracial, Marshall and freshman Justin Bodford whom he can trust to eat about 25 snaps a game without getting blown off the ball. All things considered, based on the tremendous losses this unit suffered in the off-season, D-Line Zou appears to have the talent and depth to continue its tradition into 2024.





Linebackers

By Nathan Hurst

Lining up the linebackers

The Mizzou football Tigers entered the summer prior to the 2023 season with absolutely no questions about their linebackers. The position seemed in hand for linebackers coach DJ Smith as the Tigers were anchored by returning seniors Ty'ron Hopper and Chad Bailey, both of whom experienced breakout junior campaigns in 2022. In fact, their excellence in 2022 was perhaps the largest single factor for the amazing defensive turnaround Mizzou enjoyed that year following an abysmal 2021 campaign.

Hopper, the transfer from Florida, wreaked havoc all season, finishing 2022 with 78 tackles, 14 tackles for loss and 2.5 sacks. Chad Bailey finally clicked in 2022 himself after four years on the roster, garnering 57 tackles and 2.5 sacks. Unfortunately, Bailey experienced several setbacks following 2022, including a self-inflicted one when he was arrested for DUI last summer. After dealing with those legal issues, Bailey suffered a core muscle injury in August which required surgery. This injury immediately tested the Tigers' 2023 linebacking depth as Bailey was forced to miss several games to start the season and was never fully healthy all year.



Enter Chuck Hicks, the Wyoming transfer who played sparingly in 2021 before redshirting in 2022 due to injury. Hicks played in all 13 games for the Tigers, including nine starts where he made 53 tackles and two sacks. Hicks played alongside Hopper for most of the season while Bailey missed all but five games. Hopper played well, but ultimately an ankle injury sidelined him for the last three games. Now enter Triston Newson. The JUCO transfer was a godsend for the Tigers. A relative unknown to Mizzou fans prior to his first start against Florida in November, Newson finished the year with 51 tackles and seven tackles for loss despite little playing time early in the season. He filled in brilliantly for Hopper in his havoc-creating role, especially in

the Cotton Bowl where he had 10 tackles and 2.5 tackles for loss.

Losing linebackers

Following the 2023 season, the Tigers linebacking corps took several losses. Chad Bailey exhausted his eligibility after six years. Hopper did have another year of eligibility remaining, but he chose (wisely) to enter the NFL draft and was picked in the third round by the Green Bay Packers.

While those losses were expected, Mizzou lost a couple other players, perhaps also expectedly, to the transfer portal. Dameon Wilson, a rising junior who mainly saw the field on special teams, departed before the Cotton Bowl and landed back home in the Carolinas at East Carolina University. Carmycha Glass also transferred prior to the Cotton Bowl. He redshirted in 2022 and didn't see the field in 2023.

The final loss at the position was perhaps a more recognizable name in DJ Wesolak. The mid-Missouri native was a four-star recruit for Eli Drinkwitz in 2022. He played five games in 2022 before redshirting but didn't see the field in 2023. He bounced around between EDGE and off-ball linebacker during his time at

Mizzou and was listed as a linebacker in 2023 before he announced his transfer to Oregon State this winter.

Returning linebackers

While starting Chuck Hicks and Triston Newson for the final three games of the season may not have been DJ Smith's first choice entering 2023, it turns out that the silver lining could pay dividends in 2024. Both Hicks and Newson are returning for their final years of eligibility, and while they have been around the block for a while, neither had much, if any, SEC experience before last year. Beyond that, not many Mizzou fans (or coaches, if they are honest) would have expected that those two players could produce at the level they proved capable of to close out the Tigers' 11-2 season. The experience and confidence Hicks and Newson gained last year will go a long way in helping bolster the linebacking position. Both should be slated to start, or at the very least play significant snaps in a three-man rotation in 2024.

Beyond Hicks and Newson, the list of returning linebackers on the roster is short. Brayshawn Littlejohn redshirted last year as a true freshman, but he did play in four games in a special teams role. He is the only returning scholarship player other than Hicks and Newson so he is really the only bet of any other returning players to see the field.

Adding linebackers

Due to the massive loss of experience and production at linebacker with the graduation of Bailey and Hopper, Eli Drinkwitz hit the portal early for linebacking help and quickly landed Corey Flagg from Miami. Flagg is very experienced, playing games in all four of his years at Miami. However, he played less his fourth year at Miami, probably due in part to a change in scheme. He had most productive season as a sophomore with 60 tackles and three sacks and totaled 179 tackles and 5.5 sacks in his Miami career. He comes to Mizzou with one year of eligibility left and can be expected to play significant snaps for Mizzou this fall.

The Tigers hit the portal again late in the spring when they landed four-star freshman Jeremiah Beasley from Michigan. Mizzou was very close to landing Beasley's commitment out of

high school before he chose to stay home and go to Michigan. He enrolled early in Ann Arbor for spring practice, but after Jim Harbaugh left to coach in the NFL, Beasley chose to leave as well. While he's technically considered a transfer, he will enter 2024 as a true freshman.

The Tigers rounded out the transfer class by bringing in Khalil Jacobs, a rising junior from South Alabama. Last year, Jacobs played in 13 games with 56 tackles, 8.5 tackles for loss, an interception and three forced fumbles. He played the last two years for new Mizzou DC Corey Batoon and should bring valuable knowledge of the new system to the linebacker room. Jacobs was a coveted transfer as Mizzou beat out Alabama, Ole Miss and several other top-tier schools for his services.

Mizzou also brings in two more talented freshmen to the linebacking corps in four-star Arkansas native Brian Huff and three-star linebacker Nicholas Rodriguez from Florida. Both are excellent athletes and could see time playing special teams as freshmen. Rodriguez is undersized coming out of high school at 6-foot-1, 190 pounds, so he may need to redshirt a year to put on weight. However, if he

stays small he may end up as a safety rather than a linebacker before his career is done.

2024 predictions

Based on the experience of the front-line players Mizzou will field in 2024, the linebackers should be a solid and sound unit. Not necessarily the most talented position on the field for the Tiger defense, the coaching staff was able to add a good athlete in Corey Flagg and an experienced playmaker in Khalil Jacobs to help round out a four-man linebacking rotation. If 2023 taught Mizzou fans and coaches anything, it's that having depth at linebacker is vital and Mizzou has achieved that by winning in the transfer portal.

Beyond the four-man rotation, the reserve who is the best bet to see the field is redshirt freshman Brayshawn Littlejohn, as he has spent a year at Mizzou and will have a leg up on the incoming freshmen. Jeremiah Beasley is the most likely true freshman to see playing time as his athleticism should allow him to play special teams early in his career.





By Quentin Corpuel

On the surface, losing the amount of production Missouri did in the secondary this past offseason wouldn't bode well for most schools.

Unless it happens to a football factory where departing production can likely be replaced quickly with a blue-chip recruit (think Alabama or Georgia), everyone else is usually left with multiple voids when quality players leave.

For example, this is what a couple of Big Ten teams experienced last season. Maryland lost its top two cornerbacks to the NFL Draft (Deonte Banks in the first round and Jakorian Bennett in the fourth round), while Illinois lost its top two corners (Devon Witherspoon in the first round and Sydney Brown in the third round) plus its best safety (Jartavius Martin in the second round) to the draft as well. While both teams actually did find solid replacements from both within their own teams and the transfer portal, they were inevitable downgrades. Neither school currently possess the pull to rely on either an elite transfer or an awesome recruit to immediately fill the voids left by guys like Banks and Witherspoon.

Missouri is somewhere between

Maryland/Illinois and Alabama/Georgia, although the Tigers are probably closer to the latter than the former. While they aren't quite a football factory, they've become a lot more like one in recent years than ever before.

But the substantial amount of production they're losing can't be overstated, especially at outside cornerback. Kris Abrams-Draine and Ennis Rakestraw Jr. were one of the best outside cornerback duos in the nation over the past couple of seasons, and both were rewarded with employment in the NFL. One of the most valuable assets a team can have is a cornerback who can not only survive on an island with a team's top receiver, but thrive. Missouri had two of them in



Abrams-Draine and Rakestraw, who both overcame smaller physiques in different ways. Abrams-Draine, a converted wide receiver, was a ballhawk (25 pass breakups over the past two seasons) with the tracking skills of an MLB outfielder. Rakestraw was a fearless, physical pest who didn't have gaudy counting stats because opposing quarterbacks never really threw his way.

Something that also must be considered is the departure of defensive coordinator Blake Baker, who vaulted Missouri into one of the nation's premier defenses on the back of a havoc-centric scheme that was incredibly fun to watch. Something multiple players and coaches talked about last season was how great it was having the same coordinator and personnel for consecutive seasons. While talent had a good bit to do with MU's defensive success in 2022 and 2023, it was also clear that chemistry on the sideline and on the field helped a lot, too.

Luckily, Baker's replacement, Corey Batoon, centers his defensive scheme around the same concept: AAAAAHHHHHH. In better words, havoc. Batoon loves to get everyone downhill frequently, and while his formations might differ from Baker's, the shared

style of play should make the transition process a little less drastic.

Personnel-wise, the only certainty at this point in time seems to be Dreyden Norwood taking the No. 1 spot at outside corner. Entering his third season in Columbia, Norwood doesn't just have the most experience in the cornerback room; he's also undoubtedly the best.

Serving as the CB3 in 2022 and 2023, Norwood proved to possess the "it" factor. Most reps he took showed a level of skill and confidence of a starting Power Four cornerback. Nothing about his game will consistently make highlight reels; after all, cornerback isn't a naturally flashy position. But he was always just... there. Wide receivers seldom created separation against him, and when the ball was in the air, his tracking skills looked

eerily similar to Abrams-Draine's. That showed in arguably the best game of his collegiate career last season against Memphis, when he stepped up in the wake of a beaten up secondary (Jaylon Carlies played outside corner) and broke up two go balls.

It also helps when your teammates publicly praise you, especially the ones who are going up against you in practice every day.

"Norwood's a dog. He's been a dog since last year when I would go against him," wide receiver Theo Wease said in March. "I think he's definitely emerged as the top guy in the room."

What also helps is the head coach being explicit on where things stood on the depth chart.

"I think we would all be kidding ourselves," Drinkwitz said, "if we didn't believe that Dreyden Norwood was ahead of everybody else."

The starting spot across from Norwood appears to have a strong candidate in Toriano Pride Jr., another East St. Louis product who transferred in after two seasons with Clemson. Pride carries a ton of prestige, as he was a former four-star recruit and was rated as the top cornerback in the transfer portal once he entered in December. He also brings experience (26 games) and a promising skillset, as his coverage numbers last season were pretty comparable to Rakestraw's. He's also made an immediate impression this offseason, which included an interception in the spring game where he beat Josh Manning on a go ball.

The other candidate is Marcus Clarke, who transferred from Miami (FL) before the 2022 season and was the only other cornerback besides Abrams-Draine to register an interception in 2023 (Clarke had two of them). With the Hurricanes, Clarke was a role player amidst a crowded secondary that featured four future pros. He's shown flashes of anticipation and solid ball skills, so he could definitely see more playing time in 2024.

In regards to the backup underclassmen, redshirt freshman Shemar McNeil and true freshman Cameron Keys could factor into the rotation. True freshman Trajan Greco and Jaren Sensabaugh could also see some playing time early in the season.

The safeties, on the other hand, provide a lot more on-paper stability, as all major contributors are back except for Jaylon Carlies, who was taken by the Indianapolis Colts in the 2024 NFL Draft. His services will be missed, as Carlies was a supersized defensive back who, like many members of the secondary under Blake Baker, was extremely versatile and could get downhill effectively.

Surviving Carlies' void is a plethora of talent that's both young and old. Joseph Charleston has played strong safety over the past couple of seasons and has been rock solid, racking up a career-high 61 tackles in 2023.



At free safety, a pair of high-energy players will contend for the starting spot. Marvin Burks Jr., Missouri's highest-rated signee in the Class of 2023, has a pretty good shot after a promising freshman season. Like many others in this group, Burks is a walking stick of dynamite, unafraid to lay down a huge hit on whoever has the ball. His sack on an all-out fourth down blitz against South Dakota last season is the epitome of Burks; he ran in a straight line, crashed into USD quarterback Aidan Bouman at 100 miles per hour and celebrated by jumping joyously alongside fellow havoc master Daylan Carnell.

The other is Tre'Vez Johnson, the veteran Florida transfer who flashed in a backup role last season as well. He recorded a career-high 43 tackles in 2023, one of which included a booming hit on Florida wide receiver Ricky Pearsall.

Finally, there's the STAR, a position which should remain under Batoon. He'll probably have a lot of fun using Carnell, who's starred at the position (no pun intended) over the past two seasons. If Burks is a dynamite stick, Carnell is an active volcano. Since 2022, the Indianapolis native has become a fan favorite by flying all over the field and destroying everything that crosses his path. Last season, his 18 pressures were most amongst Power Five defensive backs, and he was one of two Tigers with a defensive touchdown in 2023. His play style is reminiscent of

legendary Colts safety Bob Sanders, who also made a living by flying all over the field and destroying everything that crossed his path. Fellow returner Sidney Williams, who enjoyed a solid 2024 campaign, could back up Carnell.

So, what does this all mean? A couple of things. One is that, despite the cornerback room being projected to take a step back in 2024, this year's group should continue an unprecedented run of success in the secondary for Missouri. For as good as some Tiger defenses have been over the past few decades, rarely have they ever had awesome individual corners, let alone an entire unit. From 1990-2021, only one MU cornerback was taken in the NFL Draft (E.J. Gaines in 2014). Since 2022, that number has tripled with the selection of Rakestraw, Abrams-Draine and Akayleb Evans a couple of years ago. By season's end, Norwood and Pride could absolutely vault themselves into draft consideration, too.

The other is that the projected success should turn into results not just for NFL hopes, but for Missouri's defense this season. Should Norwood continue his success from last season and one of Pride/Clarke takes a leap, the Tigers can pick up right where they left off on the outside. With the amount of talent and experience at safety, the secondary should be a primary source of production in 2024.





By Quentin Corpuel

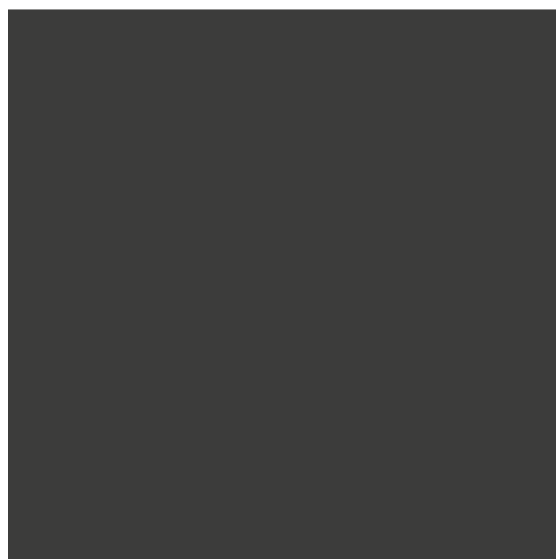
Special Teams

Special teams aren't a primary part of American football, but like the other two units on a team, they can have special players who can make special plays.

Let's start with kicking and a brief history lesson. American football evolved from rugby, which evolved from soccer, which evolved from various other games like harpastum (Rome) and cuju (China). In each of American football's preceding sports, kicking was an essential part of the game.

As American football evolved, however, the role of kicking lessened. It became a mere ancillary part of the game; it's used to set up another aspect of the game (offense) or as a backup option when the offense failed to succeed (kicking/punting).

But despite its diminished role, kickers and punters were still able to develop themselves into weapons. Throughout the last handful of decades, the best kickers and punters have given their teams unique opportunities to succeed when the offense can't score touchdowns. A great punter can act as an extra defender making life for the opposing offense more difficult. A great kicker gives their offense a larger safety



net, one that's saved teams (including Missouri) countless times throughout American football's lengthy history.

Missouri had one of those weapons. His name was Harrison Mevis.

The Thicker Kicker ended his career in black and gold as one of the most decorated kickers in program history. To his name were three game-winners, with two of them whooshing through the uprights at the buzzer. A Herculean 5/5 performance that single-handedly kept Missouri ahead against the big bad Bulldogs of Georgia in 2022. 12 field goals of 50 yards or longer, double the number of second place. He fist-pumped, gator-chomped and strutted his way

into the hearts of Tiger fans far and wide, even if he wrenched them with his missed gimme against Auburn in 2022 that would've won the game. He might not hold the title of greatest kicker in Missouri football history – that would go to either diver-turned-kicker Jeff Wolfert or Grant Ressel – but there will never be another Harrison Mevis.

Now, Mevis is at the next level, as he signed with the Carolina Panthers as an undrafted free agent. The next man up is redshirt freshman Blake Craig, whose football career is pretty decorated for someone who hasn't attempted a field goal in a collegiate game yet.

Hailing from Liberty, Mo., Craig was a weapon for Liberty North, as he ended his high school career holding the MSHSAA records for field goals in a season (17), career field goals (45) and career points by a kicker (335). He's also kicked field goals from 56 and 53 yards, the fifth and seventh-longest in Missouri high school history, respectively. He was ranked the No. 2 kicker in the country by Kohl's Kicking behind Peyton Woodring, who enjoyed a rock solid season as Georgia's kicker in 2023.

While Craig wasn't nearly as productive

while sitting behind Mevis, he wasn't completely absent, as made a handful of appearances on kickoffs. His six kickoffs averaged 62.2 yards per boot, which was around the average mark for all college kickers last season (Mevis averaged 62.7 yards per kickoff).

Now, Craig steps into a position that has seen heroes and anti-heroes be created in Columbia. But the recent history of top-rated kickers according to Kohl's has been very positive. Since 2019, that group has included Anders Carlson, Will Reichard, Cade York, Joshua Karty and Cam Little. Craig's body of work suggests that he could join that group by the time his collegiate career is complete. "Craig hits a ball that generally has no movement and is a very explosive and coordinated kicker," Kohl's Kicking said on their website. "He has gotten noticeably stronger since the winter of 2021. Craig is a Power Five kicker!"

The punter spot, on the other hand, is far from decided. 2023 featured a season-long position battle between Riley Williams and Luke Bauer, with Bauer punting 22 times and Williams punting 20 times. With a couple of new challengers on the horizon, 2024 might be even more back-and-forth. Although being the incumbent likely doesn't mean much, Bauer is the only returning punter from last season, and he performed decently as a freshman. His 42.1 yards per punt ranked just below the 50th percentile in college football, with his best kick being a 73-yard bomb against LSU that was the longest by a Tiger since Trey Barrow smashed a 73-yarder of his own against Arizona State in 2011.

However, the punt against LSU wasn't the highlight of Bauer's season. Rather, it was a 39-yard passing touchdown to Marquis Johnson on a fake punt against Kentucky that not only saved the game, but arguably saved the season. Missouri was down 14-0 in the second quarter, and it looked like Kroger Field was going to swallow up the Tigers once again. That was until special teams coordinator Erik Link told Bauer, a former baseball player, to let one fly in the direction of a streaking Marquis Johnson.

The main threat to Bauer's starting punter candidacy is Orion Phillips who,

like Williams, arrives at Missouri from the transfer portal (Murray State) as a product of Pro Kick Academy in Australia, which has churned out quality kickers and punters for years. According to a January article from Forbes, Pro Kick said it's helped 190 Australians obtain full-time scholarships in the United States.

While Phillips actually kicks using a traditional American punting style... averaged just over 43 yards per punt on 54 attempts, with his longest being a 71-yard boomstick against Missouri State. He also possesses a spiritual advantage over his competition; Orion was the Greek god of hunting who was blessed by his dad, Poseidon, to walk on water. Orion is also a well-known constellation that's most visible in the Northern Hemisphere during the winter. Whether that means anything at all is uncertain, but if Phillips starts sending punts into orbit during the College Football Playoff, just know that the stars will have literally aligned for him to do so.

Finally, who's going to be returning the kicks and punts for Missouri? It's been a quiet problem area for the Tigers in recent years, as they haven't had a kick-butt punt returner since Marcus Murphy, who returned seven total touchdowns (three kickoff, four punt return) in his final three seasons with Missouri. Since joining the SEC in 2012, the Tigers finished 9th in kick return yardage and 9th in punt return yardage.

Kickoff and punt returns are slightly more difficult to quantify, especially considering that the sample size of kickoff returns has decreased with the percentage of touchbacks increasing over the years. But Missouri's return units have done little to help their offense, and last year was particularly poor; the Tigers finished 10th in the SEC in kickoff return yardage and dead last in punt return yardage.

On punts, the hope was that Luther Burden III, who had eight punt return touchdowns

on just 21 returns in his senior year of high school, could translate that prowess to the collegiate level. He electrified Faurot Field with a 79-yard to the house call against Abilene Christian in his third career game, but that was his only major contribution in both 2022 and 2023. He was eventually replaced by Kris Abrams-Draine, who was the only other Tiger with any kind of return touchdown since 2020.

As noted by the numbers, kickoffs were a slightly less dire situation, as those duties were split between a handful of guys. Marquis Johnson proved to be the best of the bunch statistically, averaging about 21 yards per return.

The big question entering 2024 is this: can the return plague be remedied? Kickoffs seem to have a slightly brighter future, as the speedy Johnson will likely lead that charge. Standing beside him could very well be Marvin Burks Jr., who returned a few kickoffs of his own last season, and maybe Josh Manning, who flashed kick return prowess in high school.

Punt returns, like the ball on a punt, are up in the air. With Abrams-Draine gone, the only other player on the roster with punt return experience with Missouri is Burden. Should he be tabbed the lead man in that department this season, returning to his high school self would be the ideal outcome. When Burden has the ball in his hands on offense, limits tend to evaporate; the hope will be that he can make it rain this season on special teams, too.





Quarterback

Brady Cook
Drew Pyne

Running Back

Nate Noel
-OR- Marcus Carroll

Wide Receiver

Theo Wease,
Luther Burden,
Mookie Cooper

Marquis Johnson,
Mekhi Miller,
Joshua Manning

Tight End

Brett Norfleet
Tyler Stephens

Offensive Line *(left to right)*

Marcus Bryant,
Cayden Green,
Connor Tollison,
Cam'Ron Johnson,
Armand Membou

Jayven Richardson,
Logan Reichart,
Tristan Wilson,
Curtis Peagler,
Mitchell Walters

Field End

Zion Young,
Joe Moore

Joker

Johnny Walker Jr.,
Darris Smith

Defensive Tackle

Kristian Williams,
Chris McClellan

Stering Webb,
Marquis Gracial

Linebacker

Chuck Hicks,
Triston Newsom

Corey Flagg,
Khalil Jacobs

STAR

Daylan Carnell,
Sidney Williams

Safety

Joseph Charleston,
Tre'Vez Johnson

Marvin Burks,
Phillip Roche

Cornerback

Toriano Pride,
Dreyden Norwood

Marcus Clarke,
Ja'Marion Wayne

Kicker

Blake Craig

Punter

Luke Bauer

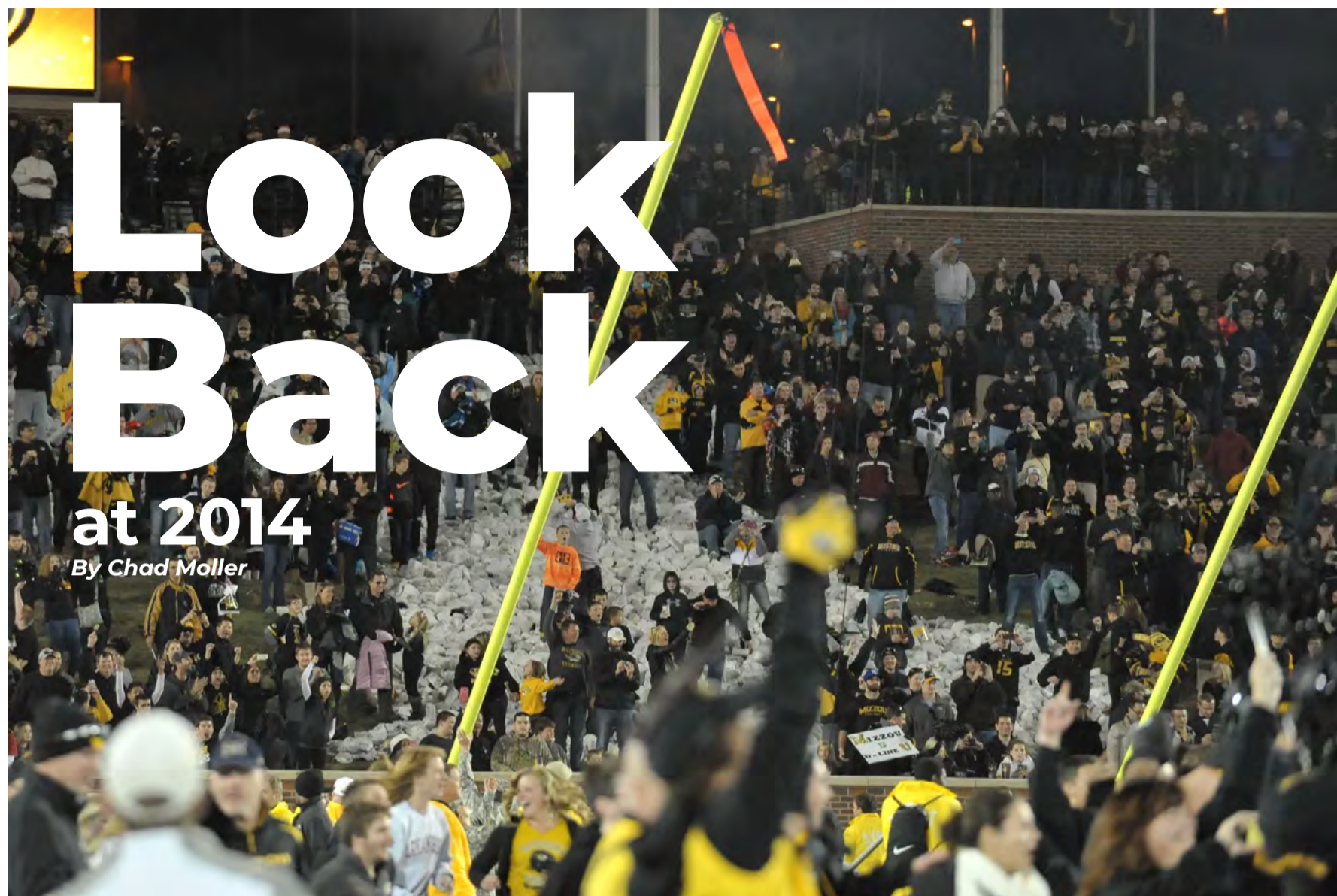
Kick Returner

Marquis Johnson

Punt Returner

Luther Burden





Look Back

at 2014

By Chad Moller

Ten Year Rewind: The 2014 Tigers Turned in an Underappreciated Season.

It's hard to believe 10 years have passed since the Missouri Tigers closed a stellar 2014 season with a resounding win over Minnesota in the Citrus Bowl to finish an 11-win campaign. The Citrus Bowl triumph capped a second-straight double-digit win season for the Tigers, and gave Head Coach Gary Pinkel his fifth 10-win season in eight years. Pinkel's program had clearly become one of the nation's elite.

The season was anything from a cakewalk, as an early-season swoon pre-empted a crucial six-game win streak with five of the victories coming by 10 points or fewer that revived the season and gave the Tigers their second-consecutive SEC Eastern Division title. So how did they get there? Let's take a look back at the 2014 Missouri Tigers season.

Expectations were all over the spectrum for Mizzou heading into the year. Coming off a 2013 season that included 12 wins,

an SEC Eastern Division title, a Cotton Bowl win and a top 5 final ranking, there was a lot to be excited about. However, the SEC media picked MU to finish fourth in the East despite being the defending division champs.

The Tigers would need to overcome talent losses from the year before, as the '14 team returned only nine positional starters from the year before – including five on defense and four on offense. Four of those returning starters included team captains DE Markus Golden, OL Mitch Morse, WR Bud Sasser and S Braylon Webb.

It was now Maty Mauk time on offense, as the sophomore QB won the starting job in fall camp and looked to direct an offense built around a line featuring three eventual NFL talents in Morse, Connor McGovern and Evan Boehm. A one-two backfield punch of Russell Hansbrough and the dynamic Marcus Murphy returned, and expected to be a large part

of the fireworks.

On defense, in addition to Golden, junior DE Shane Ray returned on the other side of the line to give the Tiger defense a formidable front line to go with a solid middle level highlighted by linebackers Kentrell Brothers and Michael Scherer. The secondary was a mix of young talent and experienced veterans, highlighted by Webb, CB Aarion Maxey-Penton and FS Ian Simon.

The season opened against South Dakota State and a 38-18 win which felt a little closer than the score indicated. But a phrase that Pinkel often repeated fit the bill here – “Just win, baby.”

The Tigers then hit the road to face Toledo in a Homecoming of sorts for both Mauk, who grew up in Kenton, Ohio, and for Coach Pinkel, who spent 10 years as Toledo's head coach where he set a school record for most wins in Rocket program history.

The Tigers scored first on a Hansbrough rush and accelerated from there. Mauk would throw 5 TD passes and personally accounted for 42 of Mizzou's 49 points on the day.

Returning home to face pesky Central Florida, the Tigers found themselves in a dogfight, even trailing in the 2nd quarter. But Mauk (who would end with four more TD passes) and Company righted the ship while the Tiger defense pitched a shutout the rest of the way to allow Mizzou to pull away for a 38-10 win.

Having cracked the national rankings, the Tigers entered a home game against as considerable favorites over Indiana to close out the non-conference schedule. With Markus Golden out nursing an injured hamstring, Indiana outplayed the Tigers and left with a stunning 31-27 win. The loss dropped MU to 3-1 and left some lingering questions heading into the rugged SEC season.

The next task would be a tall one, as Mizzou headed to the other Columbia to take on the 13th-ranked South Carolina Gamecocks.

The Gamecocks seized control after Mizzou took an early 7-0 lead and held a commanding 20-7 lead with just 7:25 left

in the game. Having punted on 10 straight possessions, the Tigers offense seemed feckless and the deficit insurmountable. But a bolt of lightning struck in Mizzou's favor when Mauk hit Sasser on a 41-yard bomb. The catch breathed life into the Tiger sideline, and the buzz was palpable as Hansbrough scored from one yard out two plays later to cut the Gamecock lead to 20-14 with 6:49 to play. The Tiger defense forced a quick three-and-out, and suddenly the Tigers had the ball at midfield with 4:40 to play after a punt.

Needing a gutsy drive, Mizzou converted a pair of fourth downs, including Hansbrough's third TD that gave the Tigers an improbable 21-20 lead with just 1:36 to play. Needing one more stop from the defense, the Tigers got exactly that, as South Carolina QB Dylan Thompson threw four straight incomplete passes to effectively end the game. Somehow, some way, Mizzou found a way to escape with a crucial win on the road to improve to 4-1.

"It was a crazy day out there and I just am very proud of our team and how we battled," said Head Coach Gary Pinkel after the game. "When things got tough, we just stayed positive. The defense kept us in it, but stayed totally positive about the offense the whole time, which

I thought was really crucial for us to have the mindset to get back. Big win for us, it was the opposite a year ago, when South Carolina had a great comeback win at our place," he said.

The next week saw a 34-0 home shutout loss to a revenge-minded Georgia team. Standing at 4-2 overall and 1-1 in the SEC, the Tigers had no more margin for error if they were to repeat as East Division champs.

"Half the season is left so there's a lot out there,

but we've got to get some things fixed. There's an urgency to get things fixed and playing better and I think that's without question," Pinkel said.

The redemption tour would begin the following week at The Swamp in Gainesville, Fla., where the Tigers would stun the host Gators in the most unconventional 42-13 blowout win. How irregular? Mizzou scored four non-offensive touchdowns on the night (two on Marcus Murphy returns, two on defense), while the offense managed only one 19 yard touchdown drive thanks to one of six Florida turnovers.

All told, Mizzou's offense managed only seven first downs in the game and gained 119 yards of total offense, including 20 through the air. But Murphy essentially took his teammates off the hook on the opening kickoff when he ran by and through the Gator coverage for a 96 yard lightning strike. It was his sixth career return score, which broke Jeremy Maclin's school record.

Murphy wasn't done torturing the Gators special teams returning a punt 82 yards for a score in the 3rd quarter. The run made him the first Tiger in history to score in the same game via a kickoff return, rushing touchdown and punt return. His score made it 28-0 and essentially ended the game. The hapless Gator offense was forced into a trio of second-half turnovers by the relentless Tiger defense, with Golden returning a fumble 21 yards for a score, while LB Darvin Ruise (a Florida native) added insult to injury with a 46-yard pick six late in the third quarter that made it 42-0 in what was Florida's Homecoming game.

"I just wanted to come out and make plays," Murphy said after the game. "We got the ball first and I knew we had to focus on starting fast and I just wanted to come out and get the momentum on our side. They opened up the lanes for me so I was able to make it to the end zone. Tyler Hunt had a kick out block and everything just opened up from there," he said.

A workmanlike two-game homestand followed with wins over Vanderbilt (24-14 on Homecoming) and Kentucky (20-10) as the Tigers leaned on their dynamic dual rushing attack of Murphy



Photo from Getty Images

and Hansbrough while the defense was picking up steam as well.

The UK game started after a moment of silence was held in honor of Tiger legend John Kadlec, the longtime athletic department fixture who passed away at the age of 86 earlier in the week. His nickname, "Mr. Mizzou" was painted on the grass berms surrounding Faurot Field in tribute, and Pinkel dedicated the win to his honor afterward.

Despite its 7-2 record, the Tigers were unranked as they entered a crucial two-game road swing after a bye week against Texas A&M and Tennessee.

Drawing a night game first at 24th-ranked A&M, the Tigers earned a rugged 34-27 win thanks to a career-high 199-yard rushing game and a pair of touchdowns by Hansbrough. Mizzou ended the night with 587 yards of offense and owned a 15-minute advantage in time of possession thanks to the running attack that averaged 6.8 yards per attempt (335 yards on 49 carries).

"You're always proud of your team when you get a fourth down stop inside the 3-yard line," said Pinkel after the game. "The offense comes out and gets that one first down that we needed in a really tough situation, so you're proud as a football coach to see your team play like that, to make those plays in the fourth quarter," he said.

Mizzou would close its road swing against a middling Tennessee team that entered the game just 5-5 overall and 2-4 in SEC play. The Volunteers would hang tough but a pair of Maty Mauk fourth-quarter touchdown tosses to receivers Jimmie Hunt and Bud Sasser would be the difference in Mizzou's hardfought 29-21 win.

The Arkansas Razorbacks entered the Black Friday game at Faurot Field with only a 6-5 season mark, but in a spirited rivalry game, you knew it was going to be a tight ballgame. Tension was tangible among the sellout crowd of 71,168 as the Tiger faithful endured an all-night nailbiter.

Mizzou entered ranked 17th but appeared to feel the tension, as they were outplayed early, and trailed 14-6 heading

Photo from Getty Images



into the fourth quarter, with MU's sole points coming on Andrew Baggett's long-distance field goals of 52 and 50 yards in the second quarter.

It was a 98 yard drive which started in the last moments of the 3rd quarter which changed the game. On a crucial 3rd-and-7 from their own 19, Mauk found Hunt for 44 yards down to the Arkansas 37. Faurot Field came to life and five plays later Mizzou finally found the endzone. With 12:41 left in the game and the Tigers trailing 14-12, Pinkel went for two. WR Bud Sasser faked an end around and tossed a successful two-point pass to fellow wideout Darius White to tie the game at 14-apiece.

With the crowd now at full throat, the Tiger defense quickly forced an Arkansas punt, regaining possession at the MU 15 with just 10:42 to play, leaving eighty-five yards to cover for the lead and a second-straight division title.

Knowing their bread and butter was on the ground, the Tigers rushed the ball on 11 of the next 12 plays. Hansbrough carried five times for 47 yards, and Murphy covered 37 more on five totes of the rock. His final one hit paydirt from 12 yards out and gave Mizzou a 21-14 lead with 4:38 to play.

The officials missed Golden recovering a forced fumble from LB Kentrell Brothers, but video review overturned the call and gave MU the ball at the Tiger 37 yard line and the offense successfully killed the final 2:12 off the clock to salt away the SEC East title.

Thousands of Tiger fans rushed the field amid fireworks with the dulcet tones of Ray Charles's "Georgia On My Mind" playing over the stadium sound system, as the Tigers had punched their ticket to the SEC Championship game.

The hard fought win meant the world to Tiger fans, as it did their head coach. "It means an awful lot to me," Pinkel said post-game. "I love my team. This has not been an easy year, but we battled and competed. I feel thankful for all the people around me. Mizzou Athletic Director Mike Alden has been tremendously important to me and our fans too. We sold Faurot out tonight and this place was rocking. There are a lot of things to be thankful for. It's our second time down there [Atlanta, Ga.] in a row and I'll tell you this, that's hard to do," he added.

At 10-2 and ranked 14th nationally, Mizzou faced quite a stiff test in Atlanta

as the 11-1 and #1-ranked Alabama Crimson Tide loomed large.

Alabama came in as prohibitive favorites, and they played like it early, dominating all sides in the first half en route to a 21-3 halftime lead. Despite the rough start, Mizzou hung in and took the opening possession of the second half for a 10-play, 75-yard touchdown drive capped by a Mauk-to-Sasser score from one yard out to cut into the deficit. After a defensive stop Mizzou's drive settled for a field goal. With 4:37 left in the third, it was a one-score game at 21-13.

The underdog Tigers could get no closer, as the Tide responded with 21 unanswered points to pull away for a 42-13 win that earned them the #1 seed in the College Football Playoffs.

At 10-3 overall and coming off a lopsided SEC Championship Game result, Mizzou fans were worried about getting passed over for a lesser bowl bid, but spirits were buoyed when the Tigers received an invitation to play in the prestigious Citrus Bowl in Orlando, Fla., where they would face the 25th-ranked Minnesota Golden Gophers on New Year's Day.

Minnesota struck first to take a 7-0 lead and that's the way the score stayed until

late in the second quarter when a 21-yard Baggett field goal cut the lead to 7-3 with 6:39 left in the half. Minnesota had the lead but Mizzou was finding its rhythm. Mauk found Sasser for a 25-yard touchdown pass with 1:04 before half to give Mizzou a 10-7 halftime lead.

Kicking off to start the second half, Pinkel called for a surprise onside kick hoping to catch the Gophers off guard. It worked to perfection, as Baggett dribbled the kick the requisite 10 yards, with safety Ian Simon falling on the ball.

Another Baggett field goal made it 13-7 in favor of the Tigers, but Minnesota answered quickly with a 54-yard touchdown pass to regain the lead. The Tigers offense stalled again when Tiger punter Christian Brinser's kick couldn't be handled cleanly and Tyler Hunt recovered the muff at the Minnesota 34 yard line to give MU new life.

Three plays later, Mauk plowed into the endzone from 18 yards out on a QB keeper, with the signature play (perhaps of the season) giving Mizzou a 19-14 lead with 9:16 left in the quarter. Another field goal would be as close as Minnesota would get, as the Tiger defense pitched a shutout the rest of the way. The Mizzou offense scored twice in the final quarter

and Gary Pinkel's squad would end their season the right way with a challenging, yet satisfying, 33-17 win.

Markus Golden, who ended the game with four tackles for loss, three QB pressures, 1.5 sacks and a forced fumble, was named the Citrus Bowl Most Valuable Player, closing out his prestigious career in style. Meanwhile the Tigers ground game gained 337 yards, with Murphy gaining 157 and Hansbrough accounting for 114 more including his backbreaking 78-yard score in the fourth quarter giving Mizzou its 11th win of the year.

"How 'bout them Tigers!" said Pinkel to a raucous post-game celebratory crowd. "Nothing came easy today and hats off to Minnesota, they're a heck of a team, but this game seemed to follow the script for a lot of our season. We came out a little slow maybe but everyone hung tight and believed that we'd make the plays in the end that would be the difference in the game, and that's exactly what happened. I'm so proud of our team and our seniors to be able to send them off this way," he said.

Ray would go on to win SEC Defensive Player of the Year and consensus first-team All-American honors for his mammoth junior season that included a Mizzou-record 14.5 quarterback sacks. He parlayed that breakout season into eventually becoming a first-round NFL draft pick (No. 23 overall) by the Denver Broncos in the 2015 draft after choosing to forego his senior year of eligibility. Murphy also earned SEC Special Teams Player of the Year honors as well as first-team All-American honors for his special teams play, as he ranked 6th nationally in kickoff returns and 11th nationally in punt returns (while leading the SEC in both categories). He was the only player in the country in 2014 to score a TD via kickoff return, punt return, rushing and receiving.

Pinkel earned enough respect from his SEC counterparts for the job he did following the magical 2013 season that he was voted SEC Coach of the Year by league coaches. It was a masterful job of Pinkel and staff getting the most out of a team that wasn't quite as talented across the board as the year before and getting them to coalesce as a unit to overcome early-season adversity and post 11 wins.



Photo from Getty Images

Transfers

By Chad Moller

Mizzou brought in some talent this offseason.

Mentally travel back in time just a few short years. College football was undergoing a severe shift, with the legalization of N.I.L. marketing rights for athletes and the loosening of transfer eligibility rules. It was easy for doom-and-gloom Missouri fans to imagine how blue blood programs could navigate these shifting seas, and the Tiger program could sink in the deepening waters.

But the opposite happened. The Missouri athletic department has shown tremendous alignment in the NIL arena, something that has tripped up far more moneyed and supported programs. The football coaching staff has proven to be aggressive and creative in player acquisition. They have also embraced the portal, restocking positions of need and skillfully augmenting the roster, while largely preventing the predicted exodus of talent up to the premiere programs.

For the third offseason in a row, Eli Drinkwitz has brought in a wave of talent, with a clear preference to signing transfers from other Power Five (now Four) programs, especially players with multiple years of eligibility remaining. These players were more highly regarded as prep prospects and are easier to evaluate as transfers, as they have game and practice tape against high level competition.

Two offseasons ago was the first year of the full portal experience with NIL. The staff attacked their biggest weakness, bringing in a crew of defensive tackles and front seven players to bolster what had been one of the worst run defenses in the country in 2021. Ty’Ron Hopper, Kristian Williams, Jayden Jernigan and others were excellent additions. The 2023 class again showed the same pattern, augmenting a struggling offense with Theo Wease Jr. and Cam’Ron Johnson, and more defensive depth like Joe Moore II, Tre’Vez Johnson, and more.

This season, the staff was looking to replace a historic running back and refill a defense that lost five star-level draft picks to the NFL, plus other contributors. Luckily, Mizzou had added newfound winning ways to their mix of strong clubhouse culture, elevated high school recruiting, and previous portal additions. The team was now able to shop at the top of the transfer market, and be choosy with their selections. Yes, stars are departing, but stars are arriving, too. Unlike some other peer programs in the SEC like South Carolina and Arkansas, the Tigers use the offseason to augment a roster, not rebuild it from scratch each year. The Tigers are adding depth and plug-and-play starters, not just signing all comers from all levels of the sport.

The additions on offense are limited but critical to the team’s success in 2024. Nate Noel and Marcus Carroll are both fifth-year senior tailbacks from zone-running schemes from the Sun Belt East; together they will be tasked with replacing Cody



Schrader’s production in the aggregate. This staff’s ability to create superstar running backs was certainly a major reason for their decision to finish their amateur careers in Columbia. Marcus Bryant and Cayden Green arrive to shore up an offensive line, replacing both starters on the left side. Bryant, like the two ball carriers he will be blocking for, has chosen to play his fifth and final year of football with the Tigers, almost certainly wooed by position coach Brandon Jones and his ability to send linemen to the NFL. And Lee’s Summit native Cayden Green, perhaps the biggest transfer Drinkwitz has signed both figuratively and literally, comes home in a move that unleashed a firestorm on Oklahoma and Missouri social media.

There is a world of difference between what Missouri needs for offense and what it needs for defense. The Tigers rank 10th on offense in Bill Connelly’s returning production metric, and 64th in the nation on defense. Stars are departing at every single level. To replace them, the staff has signed a wide variety of players. Cornerback Toriano Pride, linebacker Corey Flagg and defensive tackle Chris McClellan are proven plug-and-play starters. Darris Smith and Khalil Jacobs are younger, high-ceiling players who could play immediately and continue to develop into stars. And Zion Young, Eddie Kelly, and Sterling Webb are the reach players, guys who have shown enough to provide valuable depth and could reach another level with a change of scenery. The staff has cast a wide net in order to rebuild their defense.

The portal works both ways, however, and a lot of the early doomsaying was a fear that Missouri – and other programs at that level – would develop stars only to see them snatched away by the blue bloods. While that has happened twice to the Tigers, it has not kneecapped the program. (Both the Mekhi Wingo and Dominic Lovett transfers stung, but both were positions of strength for the Tigers in the coming seasons. The losses were hardly crippling.)

Missouri’s 2024 transfer portal losses are mostly depth chart casualties. Other than Valen Erickson, who landed at NC State,

most have ended up at Group of Five homes or zombie Pac-12 programs. While some of these players might blossom in their new homes, and it always stings as a fan to see potential leave the program, none of these losses will negatively impact the 2024 depth chart.

With 14 new players in town, a few of them project to be immediate impact stars, and many others should see significant playing time. Drinkwitz and staff again show flexibility and savvy in navigating college football's free agency market. The Tigers are set up for success.

Cayden Green

By Adeen Rao

Out of Lee's Summit, Mo., Cayden Green is one of the most polished and arguably one of the most important assets acquired in Eliah Drinkwitz's first transfer portal class since finishing in the postseason AP Top 10. Green's recruitment was a very publicized one and came with a bit of controversy over some animosity from the Oklahoma faithful as to whether Oregon or Missouri tampered with Green before he entered the portal.

Nonetheless, let's take a look at what Green is about and what he can bring to this football team. Pass blocking-wise, Pro Football Focus had Green graded 71.4 on pass blocking with just five penalties, zero sacks, and just one hit allowed all season. In the run blocking sector, Green wasn't graded as nicely with a 49.8 grade and five penalties to his name. Former Oklahoma Offensive lineman Gabe Ikard described the loss of Green in another article.

"From a football standpoint, this is a huge loss for Oklahoma," Ikard said. "This is a guy I thought was going to be an All-American level player, and now he's going somewhere else."

Words like that are definitely something you want to hear about a player you just acquired, as Green did a number to stabilize the left guard position for Oklahoma in the latter half of its season. With the losses of guys like Javon Foster and Xavier Delgado, Green is a huge get to fill in on the offensive line, and some have said that acquisitions like Green have raised the ceiling and could allow the Tigers' front to be even stronger than last year.

Green earned Freshman All-America honors despite only starting five games for the Sooners all season as he was thrust into the lineup against Texas in the middle of the game. Green came into the game at left guard with the Sooners down, and helped his team build momentum en route to a classic 34-30 victory over the Longhorns. Leadership-wise, Green was actually named as a captain for the Sooners game against BYU.

As far as what scouts have said about Green, one of his best qualities is that in pass blocking he won't lunge at rushers and will typically let them come to him. Additionally, he utilizes his athleticism to curtail guys before they even have a chance at the signal caller. One of Green's biggest pluses in his game is his reach, and at 6-foot-5, 311 pounds, Green can overpower just about any opponent. In run blocking, Green has the strength to take any defender where he wants them to, but where he excels is being able to usher guys in a way that creates the most optimal hole for the running back.

With the loss of Foster, Green reportedly came to Missouri to play the left tackle position and looks in pretty good shape to do so. When it comes to big shoes to fill, I don't think many get bigger than Foster's, but Green has something that most players at his age and position usually don't have—experience.

One of the pros that doesn't get talked about enough is how much this move takes away from an in-conference rival, as Green was a guy Oklahoma was excited to build their offensive line around in the coming years. Not to mention that Missouri will be hosting Oklahoma next season in a game that will certainly be personal not only for Green but definitely for the Sooners. Reportedly, the news that Green was leaving came as a shock to most members of the Sooner team and coaching staff.

We got to see a snippet of what Green can do in the black and gold when he played left tackle on Brady Cook's squad in the spring game, and Cook had little to no problems coming from that side and looked comfortable making his progressions for most of the half that he played in.

All in all, Green should be a formidable addition to the lineup and I wouldn't be surprised if he has a monster year for the Tigers. He possesses excellent leadership qualities for a guy his age and has the size and athleticism to be not only an amazing college lineman, but a lineman who could play on Sundays.



Drew Pyne

By Jaden Lewis

A quarterback is the most important position not only in football but in all sports, and its significance has increased throughout the game's history. A team is going to go as far as its quarterback takes them. Last season, a significant step forward by Brady Cook led Missouri to a New Year's Six bowl victory and a top-10 finish. But, in a violent gladiator sport like football, anything can happen in the blink of an eye, and no position is safe from injury. If the starter goes down, it eases the angst and worries if you have a proven commodity behind your No. 1. Missouri landed that insurance in the second week of March with Drew Pyne committing to the Tigers with three years of remaining eligibility.

Pyne comes to Columbia with four years of collegiate experience between Notre Dame (2020-2022) and Arizona State (2023). A 3-star recruit and top-200 player in his recruiting class, the Connecticut native waited a bit before truly getting his opportunity as a full-time starter. He sat behind Ian Book during his freshman year. In 2021, he again waited in the wings as Brian Kelly found another veteran to lead the offense in Wisconsin's Jack Coan, who beat out Pyne and Tyler Buchner for the starting position.

In Marcus Freeman's first full season as Notre Dame's head coach in 2022, Buchner entered the campaign as the team's starter but suffered a severe shoulder injury in a shocking loss to Marshall. This gave Pyne the starting role, which came with positive results.

With Pyne as QB1, Notre Dame went 8-2 after opening the season with losses to the Marshall and Ohio State. Pyne led the Fighting Irish to victories over top-20 teams in BYU and Syracuse away from home at Allegiant Stadium and the JMA Wireless Dome. He also helped lead Notre Dame to a victory over then-No. 4 Clemson. While he didn't have the best day through the air, only tossing for 85 yards against Clemson, Pyne's five-yard touchdown run put Notre Dame up by double digits for good in a 35-14 victory. While Notre Dame lost to Southern Cal in 2022, Pyne notched the second most accurate game in Fighting Irish history, going 23-26.'

Pyne hopped in the transfer portal before Notre Dame's Gator Bowl appearance against South Carolina. He finished the 2022 season going 164-254 (64.4%), 2,021 yards, and 22 touchdowns to just six interceptions while running the ball 47 yards for 108 times and two more scores.

He joined Arizona State for the 2023 season, filling a spot that had previously featured Jayden Daniels and Emory Jones. Unfortunately for Pyne, the injury bug caught up to him, limiting him to just two games. He entered the transfer portal once again while finishing his degree at Notre Dame and committed to Eli Drinkwitz and the Tigers on March 10.



Finding a another quarterback this offseason was crucial for Missouri both in the short and long run. Prior to committing to Mizzou, the only healthy scholarship quarterbacks on the roster were Cook and true freshman Aidan Glover. Gabarri Johnson transferred to Oregon State, Jake Garcia to Eastern Carolina, and Sam Horn, a talented thrower of the pigskin, is out for the entire 2024 season with Tommy John surgery.

Pyne isn't the biggest quarterback— he's listed at only 6-foot, 190 pounds, making him the smallest on the Tigers 2024 roster. But when it comes to what he brings, Pyne isn't a statue pocket passer and can utilize his legs despite his rushing totals suggesting otherwise. He doesn't have a cannon for an arm but knows how to place it in the hands of his playmakers with accuracy. Most importantly for the Tigers, he brings veteran depth experience to the team.

Not to mention, he should fit in well in the quarterback room as Pyne and Cook have a relationship going back to when they were at the Manning Passing Academy together.

The best-case scenario is that we rarely see Pyne during the 2024 season unless the Tigers are blowing out an opponent in the second half of games. But, let's say there is an unfortunate circumstance in which Cook goes down; it's more comforting having Pyne in the shotgun than having Glover. This is no offense to the freshman, but in a year where the expectation is College Football Playoff, it's best not to throw a freshman into the fire. With Cook out of eligibility after this season, Pyne will have the opportunity to enter 2025 as QB1.

Marcus Carroll

By Dan Keegan

Marcus Carroll arrives from Georgia State with an unenviable task: replacing a program legend in Cody Schrader, whose departure leaves a significant leadership and statistical void. Carroll, along with fellow fifth-year Sun Belt East transfer Nate Noel, will be called upon to do both.

Carroll is a chip off the old Shredder block. With his small but stout, strong frame, with his strong short-arm pumping action as he runs, with his single digit jersey number, and tireless downhill running with impeccable zone scheme rushing instincts, Carroll is as close to an on-field Schrader clone as was available. His story is even similar to Cody's: he had to fight every day to get his opportunity, was productive as hell at a lower level when finally given a chance, and has earned a shot to be a workhorse in the mighty SEC as a veteran college player.

Carroll arrives from Georgia State, where he accumulated only 557 during his first two-and-a-half seasons. But injuries to lead backs Tucker Gregg and Jamyest Williams gave Carroll his first real shot in November 2022, and he ripped off a pair of 100-yard games. He entered the 2023 with the first chair all to himself, and in Shawn Elliott's run-heavy, outside-zone scheme, similar to Eli Drinkwitz's, Carroll flourished. He carried the ball 247 times for 1,350 yards and 13 scores, and pitched in another 234 yards as a receiver.

Carroll will likely be the thunder portion of the archetypical thunder-and-lightning duo, with Nate Noel's explosive speed creating a different sort of headache for defensive coordinators. Schrader's statistical dominance was earned because he stood tall among an otherwise unreliable position group, and because of his stamina and ability to close out games. While Carroll's workload is still TBD – I predict a more balanced backfield in Columbia this fall – he has all of Schrader's capabilities as a tough runner and a closer: Schrader finished 10th in the country in yards after contact according to PFF charting with 850; Carroll was right behind at 20th with 757. Schrader averaged 7.2 yards on his 73 fourth quarter carries; Carroll averaged 7.0 on his 53.

While the Schrader comparisons are obvious and easy, running backs coach Curtis Luper chose a different recent ultra-productive Missouri Tiger. He compared Carroll to Larry Rountree in a press conference after spring ball, specifically comparing Carroll to Rountree and Noel to Tyler Badie in 2020, the most productive combo backfield of the Drinkwitz years.

Carroll will look the Schrader part this fall to Missouri fans, and he will serve a similar role. The only question will be what fraction of Schrader's workload will Carroll replicate. While fans will look back at Schrader's late fall and think fondly on his statistical dominance, the team will be well-served to utilize a more balanced attack. Carroll's work ethic and maturity, his strong running, and his abilities as a zone-scheme runner set him up for a big season for his final year in college.



Nate Noel

By Quentin Corpuel

When an important player on any sports team departs for another destination, a question that's often asked is, "How will the (team) replace (player)?"

That's the case for Missouri regarding its running back room, as program icon Cody Schrader exhausted his eligibility and is now a member of the San Francisco 49ers.

However, the problem with trying to "replace" a player is that there's only one of that player. There is only one Cody Schrader, a tireless, productive workhorse whose football journey is

straight out of a Mike Lupica novel.

On the other hand, there's also only one Marcus Carroll Jr., the Georgia State transfer that Missouri scored in the portal earlier in the offseason. For the purpose of this article, there's only one Nate Noel, too. The Miami, Fla. native strengthened the Appalachian State-Missouri pipeline when he announced his commitment to the Tigers on Jan. 7.

In four seasons at App State, Noel compiled 3,074 yards and 18 touchdowns on the ground along with 272 yards over the air (231 of them came in the last two seasons). Despite being slightly hampered by injuries in 2022 and 2023, Noel is set to have an instant impact for the Tigers in 2024.

Noel's potential role with Missouri is a little difficult to figure out. His slender-ish frame (5-foot-10, 195 pounds) might have some thinking he'll be best suited as a lightning next to a thunder (which, in theory, would be Carroll Jr., who is about 15 pounds heavier and registered just two fewer carries than Schrader last season).

There's also a path for Noel to claim the RB1 spot in 2024. Despite his thinner frame in comparison to many "workhorse" running backs, Noel carried the ball 199 times in 2021 and 173 times in 2023. Even better, Noel is an explosive runner, as he has a career yards per carry average of 5.7.

Not only does Noel possess all the traits of a smaller running back – speed, quickness and versatility as a receiving threat – he’s also a surprisingly awesome tackle-breaker for someone who’s less than 200 pounds. He shook 140 of them in four collegiate seasons.

However, there’s a good chance that neither Carroll nor Noel takes a lion’s share of the carries, especially because that’s not as much of a thing in college football as it used to be. For context, just 30 FBS running backs carried the ball at least 200 times last season; for most of the 2000s and 2010s, that number hovered around 40-50, with its peak being 53 in 2012 and 2015.

That could easily create a two-man backfield with Carroll and Noel, and it wouldn’t be the first time the Tigers have had that in recent memory. Back in early March, Missouri running backs coach Curtis Luper said that Noel and Carroll reminded him of a recent Tiger running back duo.

“(They) remind me of Tyler Badie and Larry Rountree in 2020,” Luper said. “When Larry played, and Larry was 218 pounds and Tyler was 195-ish, and they were a good complement. So physically, (Carroll and Noel) would remind you of those two.”

In 2020, the thicker Rountree III carried the ball 209 times, while the thinner Badie carried the ball just 48 times. Under Eli Drinkwitz, a backfield committee hasn’t been too common, but that could easily change this season.

Offensive coordinator Kirby Moore has shown he can get creative with how he uses skill position players. While Schrader wasn’t used much in the receiving game, there’s only one Cody Schrader, just as there’s only one Nate Noel. The Miami native’s exact impact is still TBD, but there’s a solid chance Noel can be a hurricane for Missouri’s offense in 2024.

Chris McClellan

By Parker Gillam

When Drinkwitz and this staff went portal shopping this winter/spring, they knew that they needed some added beef in the middle of the D-line given the losses of three major contributors from that group. Well, you’d be hard-pressed to find a bigger body than McClellan, who is 6-foot-3 and 230 pounds.

The block-eating junior mauler at the University of Florida opted to enter the portal this offseason after two mirroring seasons in Gainesville. McClellan posted 23 tackles in each of his two campaigns with the Gators as a rotational piece within a talented defensive line group. But after coming out of high school as a highly-touted four-star prospect with offers from virtually every blue blood program, the Owasso, Okla. native knew he had more in the tank given he could find the right fit through the transfer portal.

If Mizzou’s history of top-tier defensive linemen is any indication, CoMo should be the place McClellan was looking for.

He’s going to be ready to contribute right away thanks to his SEC experience and size, and with the losses of Josh Landry, Realus George Jr. and Jayden Jernigan, there is plenty of room to compete for significant snaps at defensive tackle. Veteran Kristian Williams figures to slide into one of the starting spots in the four-man front, but while freshman Williams Nwaneri may be able to contend for some of the starting snaps, the other spot will be largely up for grabs. McClellan certainly has the chance to claim that role, and he’s already been mainly running with the No. 1 unit throughout spring ball.

The quartet of veteran tackles from the past two seasons were great in every way. Jernigan, George, Williams and Landry had great chemistry, rarely missed assignments and were all-in on

winning. But, McClellan brings with him some real intimidating “beef” that just can’t be replicated. His stature alone is enough to take people off-guard, and his power and violence in his run-stuffing is top-notch.

McClellan could be a true “difference maker” at defensive tackle, something Mizzou hasn’t necessarily had in a while. He does have a ways to go in terms of overall technique and his explosion at the line of scrimmage, but luckily for McClellan, Mizzou has one of the best in the business in Al Davis that will be guiding his development.

The staff raved about this incoming class of transfer defensive linemen during the spring, and McClellan’s name was tossed around plenty in that conversation. He recorded a couple of key sacks and tackles during the spring game and was overall just a dominant, imposing presence throughout the scrimmage. Seriously, pictures don’t do McClellan’s size justice. He is a unit in every sense of the word when you see him in person, and SEC offensive linemen that line up across from him will rarely have a size advantage.

Given his SEC experience and skillset, McClellan should be an immediate contributor on this roster and carry on the vaunted legacy of D-Line Zou. If everything pans out, I could even see McClellan potentially being a one-and-done transfer that departs for the NFL following this season.



Sterling Webb

By Quentin Corpuel

When home calls, it's hard not to pick up.

That was the case for Sterling Webb, the St. Louis native who is taking his talents from Las Cruces, N.M. to Columbia as the first player to ever transfer from New Mexico State to Missouri (wide receiver Dominic Gicinto did the opposite trip in 2021).

Webb's addition is huge for a few major reasons. One is that it fills a need that opened up over this past offseason. A big reason why Missouri's defense was so successful over the past couple of seasons was the depth along the defensive line, especially on the interior. The Tigers had a boatload of powerful human beings that would eat up space on the interior and wear down opposing offensive lineman. Kristian Williams, Realus George Jr., Jayden Jernigan and Josh Landry were oftentimes too much to handle on the inside.

Unfortunately for the Tigers, the latter of the three exhausted their eligibility after 2023. Fortunately for the Tigers, Drinkwitz & Co. went to work in the portal, scoring Florida's Chris McClellan in December and Georgia Tech's Eddie Kelly in



May. Sandwiched in-between the two signings was Webb, who had two productive seasons at New Mexico State with 47 total tackles, 8.5 TFL and six total sacks.

Webb also fits the profile of the defensive tackles who have come through Missouri over the past couple of seasons. Williams (Oregon), Landry (Baylor), George (Miami) and Jernigan (Oklahoma State) were all transfers. The latter two were also undersized, as is Webb, who is listed at 6-foot-2, 295 pounds on NMSU's team site. For reference, Jernigan was listed at 6-foot, 297 pounds and George was listed at 6-foot-1, 287.

Webb should pine for playing time right away. He's played in 25 games over the past two seasons for a defense that was one of the best at the mid-major level, so at the very least, he should become a part of the rotation, whether that's in a starting or an ancillary role.

The biggest thing that stands out on Webb's film is his power. He often drove back offensive guards with sheer force, and once he got a hand on a ball-carrier, the play was usually over. Webb might also be an early favorite for "Best Sack Celebration" in the SEC; at NMSU he did a somersault, then raised both arms above his head while sitting down. However, he did get flagged for it against Florida International, so the future of the victory flip is TBD.

In recent years, D-line Zou was built from players who started their collegiate careers elsewhere. It paralleled college football's vastly changing landscape, and Webb is one of its many potential beneficiaries. He was just a two-star recruit out of high school whose only Division I offer was New Mexico State; now, he has the chance to develop into an impact player at the high-major level under Al Davis, who's helped develop this new era of D-line Zou.

Zion Young

By Parker Gillam

Given the losses of a plethora of major contributors from the 2023 Missouri defensive line, Drinkwitz and this staff knew that they had to re-bolster the DL room through the transfer portal if they wanted to field another stout SEC defense in 2024.

Well, they landed a high-upside prospect in Zion Young earlier this year. The former 3-star recruit signed with Mel Tucker to join what seemed to be a program on the rise as a member of the Spartans' 2022 recruiting class. Instead, the Michigan State defense took Young had a fairly productive two years as a rotational piece in the MSU front seven, primarily sliding into a defensive end role although he did step back and play as a hybrid outside linebacker at times. After starting in two games during the '22 campaign, Young earned nine starts in '23 and became one of the more prominent figures within the defensive line room.

The first thing that jumps off the film is Young's frame. At 6-foot-

6 with plenty of reach, Young gets his hands on the opposing offensive lineman before they even have a chance to do so. He's a very active presence that excels at hunting down ball carriers and quarterbacks alike, and Young is generally a sure-tackler when he gets his hands on one of them. Kevin Peoples and the coaching staff may try to get Young up to the 280-290 pound range over the course of this offseason so he can better handle life in the trenches of the SEC, and he certainly can improve his arsenal of pass rush moves as well. But, there's plenty of upside here for a player who still has two years of eligibility remaining.

Young has a great chance to slide in as the starting defensive end opposite Johnny Walker Jr., a spot he'll likely compete for with the likes of Joe Moore, Darris Smith, Austin Firestone and others. He played in the spring game, and while he didn't necessarily record any "sacks" or "TFL," Young looked the part as a rangy, quick pass-rusher who can win at the point of attack.

Young figures to be a quality rotational piece who Corey Batoon brings in for certain packages, and Drinkwitz recruited him during that 2022 cycle, so there's already some familiarity

between Young and the coaching staff. He should seamlessly step in and join a more "by-committee" approach at defensive end this season, and Drink has already shouted Young out for his stellar play during the spring.

Peoples has generally been a fan of the longer, quicker defensive ends, and Young fits that mold perfectly. Once he

and Batoon can really get to work on indoctrinating Young into the system and refining his technique, the sky's the limit for the Atlanta native. Expect to see Young making plenty of big plays as an edge rusher in 2024 as D-Line Zou continues to expand its brotherhood.

Darris Smith

By Dan Keegan

For the second straight offseason, Missouri found a thin group of edge rushers and needed to bolster the room. Entering 2023, the team brought in a trio of transfers, moved Darius Robinson from tackle to the outside, and prayed for a Johnny Walker Jr breakout. The plan worked, and Robinson was one of the best defenders in the SEC and an eventual first round NFL draft pick. Without a D-Rob waiting in the wings this year, the staff nabbed a pair of transfers to join in the early portal window: one steady option and one high-upside player.

Darris Smith has all the physical tools in the world, and it is time for him to meet his potential in his second stop in the SEC. He was rated as a four-star recruit out of Appling County, Ga. by 247Sports in the class of 2022. Smith got a cup of coffee as a freshman, and Bulldog prognosticators were high on his breakout potential entering 2023, a consensus choice among beat reporters and fansites.

But things did not work out in Athens, as his campaign was derailed by injuries and personal matters. He briefly left the team in October 2023, rejoined a few weeks later, and then entered the portal in November after the regular season. Kirby Smart, famously tight-lipped even about the best things in his successful program, offered only this cryptic quote to the assembled media, according to DawgVent of the Rivals Network:

"Darris is still dealing with some issues with some things, that right now I'm not sure if he will be able to play or not for this

week,' said Smart, who did not elaborate on any specifics of Smith's absence."

He will be given a chance to restart his career in CoMo under new defensive coordinator Corey Batoon and EDGE coach Brian Early. The room has one quality starter in Johnny Walker, experienced players in Joe Moore and Zion Young, and Smith's full toolbox ready to put it all together. Smith is the lottery ticket. He is a long and rangy 6-foot-5 and 240 pounds, and he showcased his athleticism by also playing receiver in high school, as well as basketball and running track.

At Georgia, he played the JACK linebacker position, the outside linebacker role in Kirby Smart's 3-4 defense with more responsibilities to play the run and at the line of scrimmage. In Missouri's 4-2-5 defense, Smith will play at defensive end and is one of the candidates for the JOKER role. In Batoon's defense, the JOKER is the boundary defensive end – the ends will travel from field to boundary, like how many schemes use cornerbacks – and will have some responsibilities covering routes, especially against modern RPO games.

If Smith can stay focused and healthy, he has the physical tools to be a star in this league. His athleticism and experience in a defense like Smart's has prepared him to be an impact player. His addition was a savvy, under-the-radar move while names like Cayden Green and Toriano Pride grabbed the limelight for Mizzou's free agency splash. Missouri has a lot of all-conference level production to replace on defense; Smith's high upside gives it a chance to do so in style.

Corey Flagg

By Quentin Corpuel

The Batoon Platoon will have plenty of new troops in 2024, and transfer linebacker Corey Flagg Jr. is one of them. Despite this upcoming season being his first with Mizzou, Flagg is actually one of the most experienced members of the platoon, as he's taken over 1,500 snaps in four seasons at The U. He has a good chance to see significant playing time in 2024, especially with the departures of previous program stalwarts/linchpins in Ty'Ron Hopper and Chad Bailey.

On Miami (FL) football's website, Flagg is listed at 6-foot, 230 pounds which, for comparison, is around the same as Bailey.

Although he sports a stockier build for a linebacker, the Houston native should contend for the starting middle linebacker spot in Batoon's defense, although it would've been cool to see Flagg under former Mizzou defensive coordinator and havoc-enjoyer Blake Baker. Baker was the DC in Columbia for the past two seasons and was Miami's DC in 2020 and 2021 (the latter of which saw Flagg put together his best statistical season to date), but he took the LSU DC job not even three weeks after Flagg committed to the Tigers.

Like Ty'Ron Hopper, Flagg was at his best charging downhill. He adequately flanked solid Miami defensive lines in Miami, especially in the run game. Unlike Hopper, Flagg is far from a sideline-to-sideline sonic-speed traveler. Lateral quickness is not a strong suit of his, which is funny considering that his most

memorable play last season was Flagg showing off serious lateral range. On the last play of the game against Clemson, Corey flagged down Cade Klubnik at the goal-line to clinch Miami's first win over the Tigers since 2010 (the victory was even sweeter considering that Clemson had outscored the Hurricanes 178-30 in their last four meetings).

However, there are plenty of reps where Flagg isn't very adept at covering space side-to-side. He's best on a straight line of train tracks; when he has to leave the tracks, that's where trouble arises. It showed up in a handful of Miami's extensive collection of catastrophic defensive performances over the past few seasons. Poor tackling angles, getting caught up in blocks, looking a little lost in coverage...all of these things pop up on Flagg's tape. It was emblematic of

Miami's consistent failure to meet expectations in recent years; poor fundamentals leading to things like getting dunked on by Middle Tennessee, which the Hurricanes did in 2022.

Now, there's no guarantee that Flagg will be the LB1 in Columbia this upcoming season. There's a good chance Triston Newson and/or Chuck Hicks take a bulk of the linebacking reps, especially considering how admirably they filled in for Hopper and Bailey in wake of their injuries last season. But Flagg brings experience and a bowling ball-like mentality to the linebacking corps that could prove valuable in Batoon's havoc-heavy scheme.

Toriano Pride

By Adeen Rao

Coming out of East St. Louis, Ill., Toriano Pride Jr. is a standout player from Eli Drinkwitz's incoming class of transfers. Pride started three career games for Clemson, picking up 37 tackles (two for loss), nine pass breakups, a sack, an interception and a safety.

As a high school recruit, Pride was the 40th ranked player nationally and the sixth best corner in the country. Pride's recruiting profile praised him as a coverage man with excellent hip movement, but said there were some issues with his open-field tackling. Pride played both sides in high school, dueling as a wide receiver and a running back (his dad was a running back in college as well).

Analytically speaking, Pride allowed 25 receptions on 37 targets this past season for 294 yards, three touchdowns, one interception and four pass breakups. The majority of Pride's snaps at Clemson had him lined up in the box, which allowed him to have a better run defense grade at 78.0 than his coverage grade which was on the poorer side at 58.2. Tackling-wise, he picked up 19 tackles this season and only missed 12 percent of them with four of those tackles being stops.

Pride can do a number of good things to this Missouri corner room, and I see him taking on the role that Kris Abrams-Draine had last season as a coverage specialist. While his coverage numbers weren't as good at Clemson, I think most of those issues were schematic as Abrams-Draine got a lot more chances to shine in the slot compared to Pride which is where I think he could excel. Additionally, Pride showed he can excel in coverage as he picked up a beautiful interception off of Brady Cook in the Spring Game in his first action in the black and gold.

Realistically, the only person in the corner group that his position basically set in stone is Dreyden Norwood, who impressed filling in for Ennis Rakestraw Jr. all of last season

and has continued to impress all of spring practices. Drinkwitz essentially said that Norwood is ahead of all the rest, so that leaves just about everyone competing for the other spots but I would bet that Pride gets one of them from the jump.

Pride's going to have a tough time with the quality of wideouts that the SEC can bring but he has elite athleticism that fits into the SEC, and Missouri's schedule is set up in a way that can allow him to adapt to any scheme they want him to fit in to without him potentially costing them big games. Realistically though, I wouldn't be surprised if someone else can show out and get that spot over him since recruiting rankings aren't everything, but getting starts at a program like Clemson has to be a plus for this kid.



Pride has a swagger about him that you look for in a corner, as he was often having some friendly banter and jawing with the wideouts at the Spring Game after each snap, and his quotes after his first start at Clemson show it as well.

"I wasn't really surprised by my performance because I know what I can do and I know what type of athlete I am," Pride said after the game. "I just have to be me and just play."

When looking at Pride, you also have to look at the program that put its faith in him. Clemson has been notorious for having good scouting and recruiting that was the primary reason they were able to be a national championship winning program. Also you just have to love the transfer portal. Pride was considered a big miss for Missouri when he committed to Clemson back in high school, but the transfer portal allows Drinkwitz and Co. a second crack at players of his quality.

Pride should be a day one starter this season for the Tigers and while he might lack some needed experience at the corner position if he can be prepped up the right way by this coaching staff, Pride is going to be a definite difference maker on the side of the ball that has the most questions for the Tigers this upcoming season.

Marcus Bryant

By Quentin Corpuel

As the April showers were preparing to produce May flowers, it felt like Mizzou might've completed the big-game hunting portion of its transfer portal acquisitions.

Nope!

During the spring period, one where most of the top portal talent is off the market, Eli Drinkwitz & Co. scored a (literally) huge commitment from Marcus Bryant, the behemoth offensive tackle from SMU who was the top-rated OT in the portal at the time.

One other reason why this move seemed a little surprising from the outside is that Missouri's offensive line already looked a-ok, especially at left tackle, where the Tigers had poached Cayden Green from Oklahoma to replace Javon Foster. While Green only took 35 snaps at left tackle with the Sooners, it felt like he was going to be the easy choice to replace Foster, who'd exhausted his eligibility and wound up getting taken by the Jacksonville Jaguars in the fourth round of the NFL Draft.

But then, that certainty washed away upon Bryant's commitment. In his 2,240 collegiate snaps, Bryant had taken every single one at left tackle.

There are some things in life that one can have too much of; having too many quality offensive linemen will never be an issue at any level of football. Mizzou is a shining example of that. The unit's leap from 2022 to 2023 was one of the several big reasons why the Tigers had so much success on offense last season. The offensive line turning rock solid was a force multiplier: the threat of both the run and pass game increased,

as Brady Cook had more time to throw and Cody Schrader had bigger running lanes to hit.

This move echoes a sentiment that was laid out by Jim Harbaugh at the 2024 Annual League meeting in March. His offensive lines at Michigan helped pave the way to a run of immense success, which included a national championship this past season.

"If I asked you the question like, 'What position group depends on no other position group to be good, but every other position group depends on them to be good. What position group is that?'. Offensive line," Harbaugh said. "They're not relying on any other position group to be good. They go out, yet every other position group relies on the offensive line to be good."

Now, what kind of player is Mizzou getting in Bryant? Listed at 6-foot-8, 318 pounds, the 2023 1st Team All-AAC selection moves quite well for a guy his size. He'll occasionally find himself hunched over and imbalanced trying to block a smaller edge rusher, but that's natural for an offensive tackle who's substantially bigger than most of the people he blocks. For the most part, Bryant is a brick wall who really shines in the run game. If Kirby Moore wants to continue running outside zone with Marcus Carroll Jr. and Nate Noel (the latter of which comes from a zone scheme at Appalachian State), Bryant absolutely has the tools to equate, if not surpass, the impact Foster had on that play and, more generally, at left tackle.

It'll be interesting to see how the unit gels, especially with a new left side of the offensive line. Successful units all live on one heartbeat, and the Tigers will have two new players on the left side of the line. But the additions of Green and Bryant should spell even more success for Brandon Jones' unit. The Joe Moore Award now seems like an even more achievable goal.

Eddie Kelly

By Quentin Corpuel

Does Eddie Kelly really like college football history?

I'm not sure, but his collegiate career path up to this point certainly begs the question. He played his first season at South Florida, his second season at Georgia Tech and is now at Missouri. Those three schools have little to do with each other except the fact that, during the upside-down 2007 season, they were all unexpectedly in the AP Top-15 at some point. If this trend follows, the Winter Garden, Fla. native will be transferring to one of the following schools after this season: Arizona State, Boston College, BYU, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Oregon or South Carolina.

In all seriousness, Kelly joins a loaded defensive line room that has rectified a lot of the depth it lost over the offseason. Many of college football's top teams on a year-by-year basis are not only able to win up front, but have a stocked rotation of quality defensive linemen they can lean on to keep legs fresh without experiencing a major plummet in impact. It's a big part of why

Missouri has enjoyed so much success on defense over the past couple of seasons, and that could easily be the case again in 2024.

Kelly's career path up to this point is unique. He was a three-star recruit coming out of high school and committed to an FBS program that wasn't thought of very highly at the time (South Florida) over a mix of mostly middling Power 5 and Group of 5 programs. He's also a bit of a tweener; at 6-foot-4, 278 pounds, Kelly is larger than the average defensive end, but smaller than the average defensive tackle. However, he's played both in college, and he's proven adept at both.

Does any of that sound familiar? If you thought about Darius Robinson at any point in that paragraph, congratulations! That's what was supposed to happen. Now, this isn't to say that Kelly will follow the same path that Robinson did towards collegiate stardom and eventual employment in the NFL as a first-round pick. But Robinson offered a fine blueprint that Kelly can absolutely follow in Columbia.

Another player who comes to mind in regards to White's development is Keion White, who starred for Georgia Tech in

2022 as both a G5 transfer (Old Dominion) and tweener along the defensive line. Like Robinson in 2023, Kelly exploded in his final collegiate season the year prior, racking up 14 tackles for loss and 7.5 sacks as a supersized defensive end, where Kelly could find himself this upcoming season for Missouri.

Again, I'm unsure if Kelly can replicate the success Robinson and White achieved in their final collegiate seasons, especially considering how crowded Brian Early's room is with high-quality players. Expect Kelly to take on a role closer to what Robinson had in 2022 as an ancillary defensive line piece, except that Kelly can kick outside this season as opposed to Robinson doing so the season after.

Jeremiah Beasley

By Parker Gillam

Jeremiah Beasley took a winding and interesting path to end up in Columbia. Mizzou was neck-and-neck with Michigan during the summer of 2023 in pursuit of Mr. Beasley's signature, hosting him on a visit in late June after the Wolverines had done so. However, the eventual national champions ended up landing his services shortly after.

But, after enrolling early in the spring of 2024 only to find out that Jim Harbaugh would be departing for the Los Angeles Chargers coaching job, Beasley opted to enter the transfer portal. Luckily, the Tiger coaching staff (primarily DJ Smith) had maintained contact with the former 4-star linebacker and pounced when they learned of his decision. Beasley quickly committed to Mizzou, and the former Under Armour All-American will now look to truly begin his collegiate career in COMO.

Beasley played at both running back and linebacker in high school, displaying an eye-popping combination of quickness and physicality that stems from his track background. His ability to quickly diagnose a play and find an open lane to burst through jumps out when watching film, and he is anything but soft at the point of attack. Run support is his strength, although he does display solid instincts when it comes to dropping into a zone in pass coverage and taking down receivers in open space. And, if Mizzou does ever opt to utilize Beasley at running back, he's a bruiser with some sneaky burst that could be a great

short-yardage/goal line option.

Beasley was brought to Ann Arbor to play LB and figures to do the same at Mizzou, although the starting linebacker rotation of Chuck Hicks, Triston Newson and Corey Flagg will likely handle the bulk of the duties this season. But Beasley's speed and strong instincts will make him hard to keep off the field, and with how frequently the Tigers like to send LBs on blitzes (Batoon's scheme should follow suit), we may see Beasley come in for some pass-rush speciality packages where he can pin his ears back and really show off his athletic ability.

Down the line, the sky's the limit for the former blue-chipper. Beasley's frame is conducive to playing linebacker in the SEC, and that is before he's had offseasons to work within a collegiate strength and conditioning program. With Hicks, Newson and potentially Flagg set to depart after this upcoming season, a starting role will be there for the taking should Beasley be ready for it in 2025.

In the long run, this may end up being another prime example of a school missing on a kid out of high school but utilizing the transfer portal to still find a perfect marriage later down the line. Such is the current state of college football. The fact that Mizzou went outside of its normal recruiting footprint in order to pursue and eventually land Beasley is yet another sign that the improving national brand of this program is continuing to pay major dividends. Coast to coast, border to border, there is nowhere that this coaching staff can't compete at a high level in the recruiting game.

Khalil Jacobs

By Josh Matejka

What's the main question we've been asking since Corey Batoon took over for Blake Baker at the end of the 2023 season?

OK, there probably isn't a stock answer. But definitely one of the first options on the multiple choice list would be this: How much adapting will the defense have to do to Batoon's schemes?

We've covered this ad nauseam at Rock M Nation, but in case you're looking for a TL;DR answer: Things probably won't look all that different. We know Batoon tends to run a different base set (3-3-5) than Baker, but the core tenets are the same. Get to the quarterback, create havoc, force turnovers, profit.

Many of the personnel decisions the Tigers have made this offseason have been with that end goal. Need a havoc-y EDGE with untapped athletic potential? Dannis Smith, here's a seat for you, sir. A ball-hawking corner with a chip on his shoulder? Toriano Pride, could I interest you in this NIL bag?

Still, it never hurts to have a level of continuity amongst your player group. You know, someone with the foundational knowledge who can ease the adjustment curve. And since no one on Mizzou's roster boasted that level of familiarity with Batoon, Drinkwitz went out and did himself a favor, adding former Batoon disciple Khalil Jacobs to the linebacking room.

Jacobs exploded in a big way under Batoon at South Alabama last season. After a mostly anonymous 11 games as a true freshman, Jacobs turned into a havoc monster for the 7-6 Jaguars, totaling 56 tackles, 8.5 TFL, 3 sacks, 3 forced fumbles and 1 interception. It wasn't enough for Jacobs to win any

postseason awards, but such a leap in productivity was enough to earn him a step up in the conference pecking order. And, hey, it doesn't hurt that your former coach is there, does it?

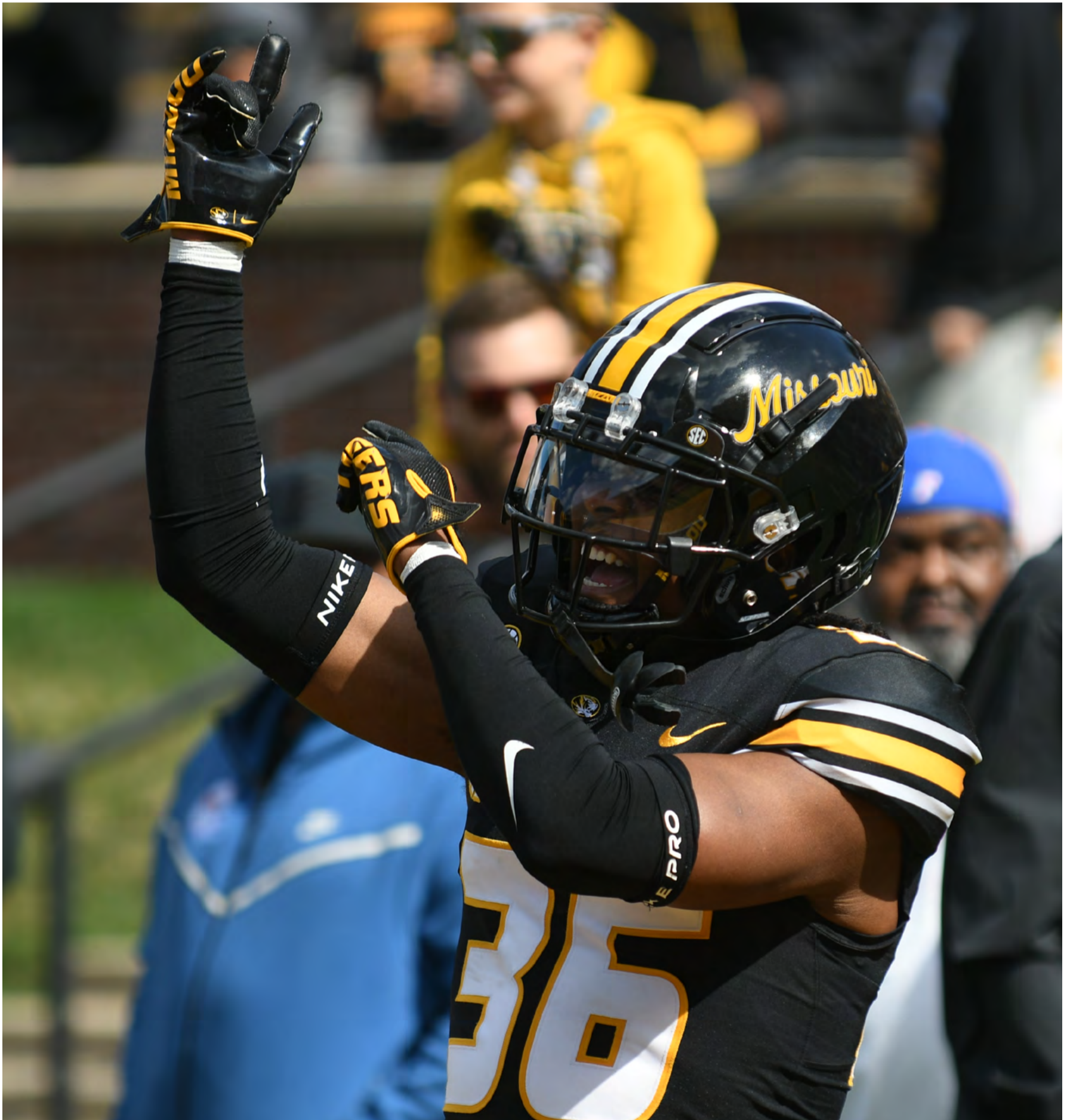
Jacobs is what Mizzou wants from their linebackers to a tee: he's fast, he's strong and he likes to hit the QB. Jacobs wasn't an especially prolific rusher in his sophomore season, at least in terms of quantity. But he generated a 27.5 percent pressure rate, which would've been one of the better rates on last year's team. His 6.3% sack rate would

be a welcome addition too, assuming he can't better it playing for a defense with more weapons around him.

And if you have doubts about Jacobs' ability to translate to the SEC, his time in the portal should ease your anxieties. Before committing to play for the Tigers, Jacobs was heavily courted by both Ole Miss and Alabama, the latter of whom were especially keen to secure his commitment after getting him on campus early in the spring.

Jacobs won't be a penned-in name on

the depth chart, though. The Tigers return a lot of depth pieces ready to step into starter's roles, and that's before you count up the amount of linebacking transfers who have been added to the unit through the portal prior to Jacobs. But Jacobs offers the Tigers an upperclassman voice who knows Batton and can establish some familiar communications and rhythm with the rest of the roster. Add in the fact that he'll be an efficient, opportunistic pass rusher? Seems like a good fit.





Recruiting

Taking a look at the class of 2024.

By Nathan Hurst

Let me take you back to a simpler time when NIL meant “zero” and “Pandemic” was only a board game.

When Eli Drinkwitz was hired in December 2019 following four very mediocre years of Barry Odom, “mediocre” was the state of Tigers recruiting as well. Odom’s four recruiting classes came in an average 247sports composite ranking of 42 (Oddly enough, three of the four years were ranked 43 on the dot so Odom was consistent, if nothing else.)

Drinkwitz’s first task at hand was to spend the next week locking down the commitments Odom had already secured for the 2020 class. This he did and then some, also landing Ennis Rakestraw Jr. away from Texas and Alabama. That 2020 class ended up with a 247sports composite ranking of 51, which was low even by Mizzou’s standards. Those low rankings didn’t last long as Drinkwitz’s average recruiting class rankings skyrocketed once he was able to spend full cycles recruiting his guys. His four classes since 2020 have averaged a ranking of 24, including a Mizzou-record 15th in 2022.

By tackling recruiting from multiple angles, including robust NIL fundraising, first-of-its-kind state legislation and good old-fashioned glad-handing, Drinkwitz has turned Mizzou into a major player on the national recruiting scene in a way it has never been before. The Missouri NIL legislation signed into law in August 2023 has been well-documented, but its impact, along with generous NIL donors,

cannot be overstated when discussing Mizzou’s recruiting success.

In modern college football (and let’s be honest, in all of college football history), recruiting battles are won with the wallet. Mizzou’s wallet is currently fat and now that they can spend that money over the table, Drinkwitz has been able to open new doors that previous Tiger coaches could only dream about.

Following his record-setting 2022 class which included five-star Luther Burden III and seven four-star athletes like Sam Horn and Armand Membou, Drinkwitz seemingly took a step back in 2023 with a meager 34th ranked class. After back-to-back seasons of 6-7 records and seemingly in danger of falling back to the pack recruiting-wise, Drinkwitz needed some big wins on and off the field this past season. He certainly got them on the field, and with a composite class ranking back up to 20th according to 247sports, he managed to do it off the field as well.

The 2024 class didn’t always look like it was going to finish in the top 20. The class was kickstarted in February 2023, as most Drinkwitz-era classes are, with a tight end in the form of three-star Joplin, Mo. product Whit Hafer. His commitment was followed up three weeks later with three-star tackle Ryan Jostes from Washington, Mo., but then the momentum nosedived. In fact, it took until mid-June before the class gained its third commitment in Collierville, Tenn. quarterback Aiden Glover. Once Glover was on board, though, momentum picked up as the Tigers nailed seven more

commitments in June and July, including three players from Fort Lauderdale, Fla. in WR James Madison, LB Nick Rodriguez and DT Justin Bodford.

This 2023 summer run peaked in August when the top player in Missouri and one of the top five recruits in the entire country, EDGE Williams Nwaneri, pledged his name to the Tigers. Nwaneri’s commitment was a major coup for Drinkwitz, showing that his message to elite in-state recruits of staying home and becoming legends at Mizzou was being received by more than just Burden. Drinkwitz and his staff closed the recruiting period out strong, grabbing four more four-star players in Floridian EDGE Elias Williams, WR Courtney Crutchfield, the top-rated player from Arkansas (and a hog decommit), a signing day steal in RB Kewan Lacy from Lancaster, Tex. and a post-signing day commitment in Georgia DB Trajen Greco.

As the second-best recruiting class in the era of online recruiting services, the class of 2024 has a little bit of everything. Elite five-star monster? Check. Multiple four-stars at diverse position groups like DL, WR and RB? Check. Multiple solid offensive linemen to build depth in the trenches? Check. Last minute signing day steals? Dark horse three-star players that will turn into good SEC starters? Check. After a slight backstep in 2023, Eli Drinkwitz is back on track, and it looks like the momentum is heading for the moon.

Williams Nwaneri

By Dan Keegan

For three years, fans in the Show-Me State were begging for Eli Drinkwitz's team to "show me" the wins on the field. His program was treading water in the win-loss column, while compiling major wins off of it. When Williams Nwaneri, a blue-chip defensive lineman from Lee's Summit, Mo. committed in August of 2023, it was another roster-building win for Drink while still a month away from the breakthrough Kansas State game.

Now, of course, Nwaneri will bring his prodigious talents to an outfit that just achieved a New Year's Six bowl victory and is in everyone's preseason top 10. Unlike Luther Burden III, a fellow all-galaxy recruit from the opposite side of the state, Nwaneri does not arrive as a Great New Hope. The on-field breakthrough has already happened. He joins a team ready to utilize his tools to leap to even greater achievements.

And yes, that toolbox is overflowing. Nwaneri is a consensus top prospect; his lowest evaluation of the four major services was from 247sports, who had him as the 8th best player in the country – and he was still their top defensive line prospect. You cannot find a scout who doesn't gush about his long-term NFL first-round potential, let alone his ability to step onto the field in Columbia and help the team win as a teenager.

At 6-foot-6 and 257 pounds, he has elite height and wingspan to win on the edge as a pass rusher, but still enough mass – and potential to add more during his time in college – to be an impact interior player. Nwaneri began his high school career as an edge rusher, and played inside more as he grew. His college career will likely follow the same pattern: working in an edge rusher rotation, while getting cups of coffee on the inside, especially in pass rush situations.

Success on the inside will come over time as he adds weight to his frame, and he will need to learn to play with a lower pad level at his height to win consistently at the point of attack. As he adds weight, strength, experience and skills over the coming seasons, he will likely leave town to play on Sundays as an interior player.

Nwaneri joins the recent parade of Lee's Summit North prospects to spur blue blood programs and high-level recruiters to build something in the home state. He chose Missouri over other finalists Georgia, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Oregon, and remained steadfast in his decision. Adam Gorney, national recruiting writer at Rivals.com, wrote, "Georgia and Oklahoma tried to stay involved with Nwaneri for about a month after his Missouri commitment but then things fizzled out. It was clear he was set for the Tigers." He follows in the footsteps of Armand Membou, and was joined this winter by Cayden Green, who arrived from Lee's Summit via Oklahoma. For the Tigers, the battle to win in the trenches in the SEC begins in this Kansas City suburb.



Nwaneri was not a mid-year enrollee, instead spending his spring finishing his high school semester, so the upcoming summer practice will be his first action on campus. Unlike Burden, who was the talk of spring ball at the time of his senior prom, Nwaneri will not be the primary focus of coverage and fan interest. He will have a chance to ease into the limelight and leadership if he chooses, and let his play do his talking for him in a veteran, accomplished locker room.

That said, discerning Tiger fans will wait for practice reports with bated breath; Mizzou will need to replace a lot of production on the front line and Nwaneri will immediately factor into that equation. He brings the rare combination of elite athleticism, ready-to-play skills, and high-level potential to grow further. He is one of the best recruits in Missouri history, and this hometown hero will be a star as he blossoms as a player and helps the ballclub win over the coming seasons.

Aidan Glover

By Jaden Lewis

Missouri's quarterback for 2024 is set in stone, barring any unfortunate circumstances, and his name is Brady Cook. After this upcoming season, though, there will for sure be a battle worth watching, and Aidan Glover's name will be in the mix to start on Sep. 6, 2025 against the Kansas Jayhawks at Faurot Field.

Glover, a three-star recruit, comes from a town called Collierville, located in the southwest corner of Tennessee. He received offers from 29 programs, and he's ranked No. 29 by On3 and 33rd in 247sports. Joining Mizzou in a long list of institutions with interest was Boston College, Houston and Oklahoma State, but also academic powerhouses Dartmouth, Northwestern, Stanford and Yale. Going into his senior season, Glover maintained a 4.25 GPA and a 29 ACT per his X account, showcasing his academic acumen. To pair with his intelligence, he exhibits strong leadership qualities. Per Wynston Wilcox, formerly of the Memphis Commercial Appeal, Collierville head coach Joe Rocconi said after a 28-21 victory over Beech High School in

2023, "He's a heck of a leader...He's a heck of a competitor. I think those are the two main things that drive him and it's contagious with everybody else." Rocconi went on to add, "More and more every day, I'm impressed with his leadership and work ethic."

On the field, Glover stands at 6-foot-1, 191 pounds. He started his final two seasons at Collierville, going 221-366 for 3,223 yards with a 42-14 touchdown-to-interception ratio. In his junior and senior seasons, he also carried the ball 127 times for 787 yards and ten more scores.

When operating an offense, Glover displays excellent short to intermediate accuracy. One thing that seemingly improved from his junior to senior year was his deep ball and accuracy in that department, which is something you want to see as he develops as a quarterback.

Glover fits the bill of modern-day quarterbacks, meaning he's athletic, can create out of structure, and can operate out of the pocket. Glover

doesn't always look to bail and scramble, but when the pocket breaks down, he can escape and still throw off the platform. He's a fast athlete with breakaway speed and knows how to shift his way through traffic when carrying the ball. This almost resembles what Brady Cook and Drew Pyne bring to the table.

Glover committed to the Tigers on June 15, 2023, and enrolled at the University in January of this year. According to the Commercial Appeal, he chose Mizzou because his close friend, Dion Stutts, passed away. Stutts was committed to Arkansas and wanted to play against Glover in the rivalry matchup. Glover told the Commercial Appeal: "It's my responsibility to make it happen for the both of us!"

As mentioned above, Cook will start in 2024 with Pyne as his No. 2, so we shouldn't expect anything from Glover but to grow and develop behind the scenes. But come 2025, it will likely be a battle between him, Pyne, and Matt Zollers.

By Josh Matejka **Austyn Dendy**

When writers talk about high school prospects, they'll often use the word "raw" while referencing a player with unique physical abilities and not a lot of refinement. Personally, I like the idea of these young players being uncarved blocks of marble. They're waiting for someone to chisel away the imperfections and mold them into something no one else could've seen.

If the 2024 recruiting class has a block of marble with a masterpiece waiting inside of it, it's Austyn Dendy.

Dendy comes to Mizzou by the way of Pine Bluff, Arkansas — imagine that, pulling a hyper-talented youngster out of The Natural State -- where he mostly existed on the periphery of high major schools. Sure, he sported a few other SEC offers, but Dendy's overall profile doesn't exactly scream "surefire star" to fanbases who are used to winning signing day.

Measuring 6-foot-1 and 200 pounds by Mizzou's official roster page, Dendy has the sort of attributes you'd expect to see out of a multi-sport high school star. His afternoons in track and field practice are evident when you watch him bound away from defenders on his highlight reel. His nights

cutting on the hardwood can be felt in his burst off the line of scrimmage. Dendy, like many athletes of yesteryear, didn't specialize in one competition; he excelled at many.

Of course, that means there's about as much to scrutinize in his game as there is to like. While he boasts speed you can't coach and a physicality honed through basketball prowess, he doesn't yet possess the route-running ability or the coverage skills that you'd like to see from a Division I level receiver or defensive back. And while he possesses plenty of straight line speed, he'll struggle to break through initial contact or weave out of collapsing pockets of space when the defenders are bigger, faster and stronger than at his current level.

It's difficult to offer a comp in this case, but it's noteworthy that another player of Dendy's profile already exists on Missouri's roster - Parkway West's own Ja'Marion Wayne. Wayne came to Mizzou with a similar physical and tactical profile, and the staff has switched him to-and-fro in his two years as a Tiger. The idea? Don't box him in, allow his versatility to shine, and either let him excel at one position or offer depth at multiple. That type of player can be extremely

valuable to a staff , especially as it looks to fill multiple holes year over year.

Don't expect to see a lot of Dendy in 2024 as he's got a lot of growing to do before he can match the physical level of SEC ball. But he has the physical tools that only stars possess. Now it's a matter of refining them.

Bryan Huff *By Dan Keegan*

When linebacker Brian Huff committed in the middle of summer 2023, he joined a few different patterns of recruiting under Eli Drinkwitz. Firstly, a clear preference for tall, rangy and athletic linebackers. Secondly, his commitment followed a now-familiar pattern of a slow start in building a class, followed by a burst of action in the summer. Thirdly, he was yet another prospect plucked out of neighboring Arkansas.

Huff arrives from Jonesboro with UCF and Arkansas as the other main suitors for his talents, and with UNLV, Notre Dame, LSU and Arkansas State also involved. He was ranked as a four-star by both On3 and Rivals, coming in at around the 30th best linebacker recruit in the country for the class of 2024. (247sports is far more bearish, as a three-star and 60th ranked LB.)

He enrolled midyear, joining spring ball for a linebacker room that started empty and filled up quickly. After the

departure of starters Ty'Ron Hopper and Chad Bailey, transfers of depth pieces/prospects Carmychah Glass, Xavier Simmons, and Dameon Wilson to Group of 5 programs, suddenly the linebacker group was very thin. Huff got the chance to work alongside returners Triston Newson, Chuck Higgs, and Miami transfer Corey Flagg.

Huff, who stands 6-foot-2 and 225 pounds, profiles as a future middle linebacker for the Tigers. He was a box-score stuffer at Valley View high school. After committing, he told Cole Patterson, a Rivals.com national recruiting reporter, "They want me to play middle linebacker, but I'm going to get to rush (the passer). That's the plan that they have for me."

Missouri's 4-2-5 base nickel defense under Blake Baker utilized two archetypal LBs: Bailey (then Hicks) as a middle of the field, run-stuffing presence, and Hopper (later Newson) as the movable chess piece, creating

havoc, rushing the passer, and playing sideline-to-sideline. New defensive coordinator Corey Batton often used a 3-3-5 set at his previous stop, South Alabama. He likely won't overhaul the way Drinkwitz and LB coach DJ Smith use their young charges, but it's also possible he brings a bit more flexibility and versatility to the group. This would fit Huff's skillset, using his size and strength in the middle, while also deploying him to add numbers to the pass rush, a responsibility that was rarely asked of Bailey or Hicks.

With entrenched veterans Flagg, Hicks, and Newson, Huff's work this fall will likely be rotational, if any – a redshirt is a possibility. Linebacker is a tough position to step into as a true freshman, and a year bulking up and learning reads, protections, and fakes will serve him well long-term. After that wave leaves, Huff is projected near the top of the "next man up" for the 2025 defense and beyond.

By Parker Gillam Caleb Pyfrom

Caleb Pyfrom was a physical problem in high school. Going against some of the nation's finest farm-grown high school linemen in the great state of Nebraska, Pyfrom made quick work of most players who lined up across from him at Central High School. His 6-foot-5 frame comes with a freakish wingspan, and when he was able to get his hands on an opposing lineman, the battle was generally over. That battle generally ended with some poor kid being driven five yards back before being planted into the turf by the 315-pounder.

On top of that intimidating frame, Pyfrom boasts plenty of athletic ability. His father, Livan, played basketball at Creighton from 1999-2001 and recorded 76 blocks over two seasons as a 6-foot-11 center. Caleb followed suit and played basketball in high school, and he even competed in track and field as well. Thus, foot speed and lateral quickness are areas of strength for the Omaha product, which are great attributes

for linemen to have within Mizzou's stretch zone scheme that requires blockers to work in space. He did generally line up in wide splits in high school, which is something that Brandon Jones will mix in from time-to-time as well.

In terms of how he fits into the current lineup, the Tiger offensive line is set up well for the 2024 season. With the likes of Cayden Green, Armand Membou, Marcus Bryant and others competing for snaps at tackle, Pyfrom likely won't see the field too much as a freshman. But, plenty of those veterans will move on following the upcoming campaign, leaving the door open for players like Pyfrom to earn snaps. To do so, he'll need to show that he can tread water at this level in his first season.

Cameron Keys *By Josh Matejka*

One of the great pleasures about watching the Missouri defense over the past few years was the presence of Kris Abrams-Draine.

KAD, now making his living with the Denver Broncos, embodied the type of players fans have come to embrace from the Show Me State's flagship program. Was he undersized? Sure. Did he have the strength you see from the sport's flashiest corners? Not really. But Abrams-Draine's work ethic and craft saw him develop into an NFL corner all the same, a "show me" attitude only developed in the Show Me state.

It's only fitting that his heir apparent joins the program just as KAD steps out. Cameron Keys, a four-star cornerback prospect out of Lynn Haven, Florida, is one of the most exciting young players in the 2024 class, a traditionally undersized corner who comes to

Columbia with a significant amount of development already under his belt.

Apart from being gifted with high-end speed, Keys is already a fairly polished defender in the secondary. He moves smoothly and efficiently for a player of his age, giving him the ability to stick on receivers who are bigger, faster, or both. He's also an exceptionally smart coverage player who displays great instincts in both man and zone coverage. If you track down his tape, you'll see multiple examples of him reading QBs and jumping the pass for pass breakups, interceptions or, at the very least, sticky tackles that limit the damage that could otherwise be done.

The only thing that might hold Keys back as a true freshman is his size. Like KAD, Keys is a shorter cornerback at just 6-foot and, as of the time of writing, measures south of 170 pounds.

He has a frame that can carry more weight, but it'll be a matter of how much of his speed the staff wants to sacrifice. Keys is a physical tackler, so another 10 to 15 pounds might serve him well from a health perspective. Otherwise, more physical receivers might be able to bounce or simply outmuscle him at the point of contact.

Keys, more than most players in this high school class, has an opportunity to play early in Columbia. With the departure of KAD and Ennis Rakestraw Jr., there are snaps to be covered in Mizzou's secondary. If Keys isn't able to parlay that availability into a rotational spot in the secondary, he may at least get enough practice run to earn him a special teams spot. Assuming that's the case, we may not have to wait too long until we're talking about Keys the same way we talked about KAD for the past several years.

By Brandon Haynes **Courtney Crutchfield**

Missouri's wide receiver room already looked like one of the nation's best before the Tigers secured the commitment of a consensus four-star prospect from rival territory. But the addition of Courtney Crutchfield only added fuel to the Tigers' fire.

Crutchfield, the top-ranked recruit from the state of Arkansas, will immediately join a wide receiver room that will return its top seven contributors, including Heisman Trophy hopeful Luther Burden III.

The dynamic 6-foot-2 wideout torched opposing defenses in his senior season, totaling 42 receptions for 930 yards and 13 touchdowns. Crutchfield also handled kick return duties at Pine Bluff High School.

He showed out on the basketball court as well with 24 points, seven rebounds and six steals in Pine Bluff's state championship victory against Benton. Crutchfield had a game-tying 3-pointer in the state semifinal the week before, showing a knack for making big-time plays in big-time moments—something Missouri fans will look forward to in the years to come.

A top-20 wideout nationally per 247Sports, Crutchfield earned an invite to the 2024 All-American Bowl. He flashes high-end speed and even caught a one-handed touchdown in his senior season, constantly showcasing an ability to take

the top off a defense and find holes.

Crutchfield originally committed to in-state Arkansas but backed out of the commitment during the Razorbacks' turbulent season. His decision to flip to Missouri gave the Tigers their second-highest rated recruit of the class, behind only five-star defensive end Williams Nwaneri.

In Crutchfield, Missouri gains a high-upside receiver with potential to make an impact on the outside, either at the X or Z position. Crutchfield boasts similar size to Theo Wease Jr. and Joshua Manning, making him a lanky option that could become a pivotal part of the offense in the coming years. However, his impact will likely remain limited in the 2024 season.

The raw talent and athleticism of Crutchfield bodes well in a wide receiver room coached by Jacob Peeler, who is becoming quite the wideout developer (A.J. Brown, D.K. Metcalf, Burden and Wease). Crutchfield will also join fellow signee Austyn Dendy and sophomore Jordon Harris at Mizzou, both of whom attended Pine Bluff.

As Rock M Nation's own Nate Edwards pointed out in a recruiting analysis of Crutchfield: "He has a lot of raw talent and ability to be great, but he needs a year of seasoning to expand his route competencies, acclimate to the faster speed, and get used to running routes through legitimate

contact and aggression.”

Most of Crutchfield’s experience has come against defensive backs who don’t boast the talent that the Southeastern Conference will bring. So, with a year to adapt and learn against a dynamic Missouri defense in practice, Crutchfield should be a contributor in the 2025 season.

For Mizzou coach Eli Drinkwitz and the future of recruiting, Crutchfield’s commitment also represented yet another sign in the changing of the tides. For the staff to earn a commitment from not only a highly-ranked prospect in another state but one from a rival like Arkansas emphasizes how Crutchfield could be an example of what’s to come in Columbia.

Elias Williams *By Quentin Corpuel*

In life, people have types. Food. Drinks. Cars. Other people. When it comes to specific categories of stuff, people have a tendency to prefer a certain type of that stuff.

When it comes to edge rushers, Eli Drinkwitz definitely has a type: he wants athletes. Big, long, strong, fast people who look like the Incredible Hulk chasing after the quarterback. In Elias Williams, Missouri is getting a four-star edge rusher who fits that description perfectly.

The Hudson, Fla. native has been bigger than his competition for most of his life. According to Hudson High School football head coach Tim Hicks, Williams was around six feet tall and between 170-180 pounds in seventh grade. He

continued to grow physically, as he’s now listed at 6-foot-4, 268 pounds on 247 Sports.

More importantly, however, Williams blossomed into a premier two-way player for Hudson, as he lined up all across the defensive line and at tight end as well. On tape, Williams doesn’t show off much finesse in his pass-rush moves, but like many future collegiate players in high school, he didn’t really need much pizzazz. He was a bulldozer, as he often plowed straight through offensive linemen.

Arguably the most impressive part is what he does after the bulldozing. Williams isn’t just the construction vehicle; he’s a one-man cleanup crew as well. His pursuit is relentless, and his

tackling technique is sound. It’s likely a part of why he was bumped to a four-star during the 2023 season.

Along with Missouri, Williams visited Alabama, Indiana, Kansas, Tennessee and UCF. He also had offers from Florida State, Kansas State, LSU, Miami (FL) and USC; however, he ultimately signed his letter of intent in December after committing to the Tigers in September.

Missouri’s defensive end room is fairly crowded at the moment, but there’s certainly a path for Williams to be a big-time contributor by year two or three, similarly to Johnny Walker Jr.

By Parker Gillam

Jackson Hancock

Hancock was listed as an "athlete" out of Sequoyah High School, following a mind-boggling high school career. I believe that's a perfect description for the 2024 All-American Bowl participant, who measures 6-foot, 185 pounds.

Over his high school years, Hancock recorded 116 tackles, five interceptions, 1,122 receiving yards and 1,110 rushing yards. He also returned kicks for three seasons and even served as Sequoyah's punter during his junior year. It goes without saying that Hancock’s name was featured prominently in every opponent’s scouting report. But, the number one thing I draw from all of this? Hancock just wanted to do whatever it took to win.

Simply put, he MADE PLAYS in high school. The members of this staff saw that and more, and as a result they ventured into Canton, Ga. to pursue his commitment. Hancock was largely under-recruited, with App State and Coastal Carolina being his other two main suitors, and thus Mizzou was a shiny option.

It remains to be seen what position he’ll settle into as a Tiger. Safety may be the most likely choice given the presumed losses at that spot following the 2024 season and the depth at receiver, but Hancock may truly love playing wide out more. Or, perhaps he becomes a top-tier special teams player given his knowledge from playing on both sides of the ball and prior work within that aspect of the game.

Martez Manuel also played on both sides of the ball at local Rock Bridge High School and was similarly an under-valued prospect, partially due to a lack of size. Therefore, much like Manuel, Hancock has the ability to find his niche on this roster and become a pivotal piece in the future. Much like most of this freshman class, Hancock will also benefit from being able to learn behind a plethora of veterans in both the WR and DB rooms this season.

James Madison III By Quentin Corpuel

“The advice nearest to my heart and deepest in my convictions is that the Union of the States be cherished and perpetuated.” – Former president James Madison from a note opened after his death in 1836

If there’s anyone that can cherish and perpetuate Mizzou’s group of receivers (nicknamed Nasty Wideouts, or N.W.O), James Madison II is a pretty solid candidate.

The first thing one might notice about Madison is his size, as The Prez is listed at 6-foot-3 with a 6-foot-8 wingspan (unlike the former president, who’s the shortest one out of the 47 at 5-foot-4). His addition is contributing to a big receiver renaissance within Mizzou’s wide receiver room. In 2022, all of MU’s top four receivers (Luther Burden III, Dominic Lovett, Mookie Cooper, Barrett Banister) stood under six feet tall. Now, Madison joins a receiver room that features a pair of 6-foot-2 guys in Theo Wease Jr. and Joshua Manning.

With highly-touted high school football recruits (especially pass-catchers), their tape often looks like they’re playing

on easy mode, and Madison certainly fits that description, as did his team. St. Thomas Aquinas has been a Florida football powerhouse for a long time, and in Madison’s two seasons as a top receiving option, the Raiders went 28-1 with a point differential of +912.

On paper, Madison’s stats aren’t as gaudy as one might think for a player of his caliber. Last season, Madison caught 47 passes for 637 yards and 10 touchdowns. The season prior, he caught just 19 passes for 407 yards and six touchdowns. However, this is more a product of St. Thomas Aquinas bulldozing almost every team they played early on, thus lessening the need to pass. In both 2022 and 2023, the Raiders ended the season with more rushing yards than passing yards.

But when Madison did catch the ball, awesomeness usually happened. The Raiders lined him up everywhere, and he did seemingly everything. His tape is filled like the House of Representatives; there are layout catches, massive YAC runs and plenty of stops on a dime. Simply put, the three-star prospect (per

247) looked like a complete package.

Along with Courtney Crutchfield, Madison won’t enroll at Mizzou until the summer. The Kansas City, Mo. native also enters a receiver room that’s not only crowded, but crowded with talent. It’s the only position group on either side of the ball that returns every major producer from 2023; in fact, every receiver who caught at least one pass last season is back for 2024.

While he might not get much run in 2024, Madison’s future likely brightens in 2025. Wease and Mookie Cooper will both see their eligibility expire after this season, and in all likelihood, Luther Burden III will be headed to the NFL Draft. That should open up opportunities for Madison and several other promising underclassmen.

When he does get that opportunity, expect Madison to be used as a Swiss Army knife whether offensive coordinator Kirby Moore is still in town or not. Don’t be surprised if Madison II becomes president of N.W.O. sometime in the next four years.

By Brandon Haynes Jaren Sensabaugh

On the eve of national signing day, Jaren Sensabaugh made it an even 20.

The four-star cornerback, a product of Nashville, surprised many when he committed to Mizzou over in-state Tennessee and Vanderbilt on Dec. 19, 2023. Sensabaugh’s commitment capped a jam-packed day for Eli Drinkwitz and Co., who added Courtney Crutchfield and Cayden Green earlier in the day, and pushed the Tigers to 20-commitment plateau.

A standout defensive back in high school, Sensabaugh bounced around between three different Tennessee schools in his prep career — Dobyns-Bennett, Knoxville Catholic and Ensworth. The 6-foot-1, 173-pound cornerback missed his junior season with a broken collarbone.

Sensabaugh, who decommitted from Vanderbilt in November 2023, burst onto the scene in his senior season with two interceptions, five pass breakups and 23½ (21 solo) tackles. He added 38 receptions for 520 yards and five touchdowns offensively, flashing his strong hands.

One look at Sensabaugh’s film shows exactly why Missouri was intrigued. Sensabaugh jumps out with his above-average speed and physicality, evidenced by his ability to impact the passing game. Few receivers were able to work past him in man coverage, and Sensabaugh displayed high-end agility and lateral quickness that made him a dynamic defensive threat.

As the son of former Dallas Cowboys and Jacksonville Jaguars safety Gerald Sensabaugh, the future Missouri cornerback is looking to become a second generation NFL athlete. Sensabaugh was listed as the seventh-best prospect in Tennessee at the time of his commitment.

Of note, Sensabaugh also stood out as a hurdler on the track and field team, and he clocked a 4.61 time in the 40-yard dash. His elite speed could serve as a difference-making attribute both on special teams and in a cornerback room that lost both Ennis Rakestraw Jr. and Kris Abrams-Draine to the NFL draft.

Jaylen Brown

By Matthew Gustafson

Brown is one of three edge rushers in the 2024 class for the Tigers. A late riser in the recruiting cycle, he didn't have the prestige and big name recognition of Williams Nwaneri, and therefore the hoopla surrounding his commitment was much more muted. The Madison, Ala. native committed to Mizzou initially as a three-star recruit before becoming a near-consensus top-300 player this year. He chose the Tigers over reported offers from Houston, LSU and Maryland. 247Sports is the highest on Brown, ranking him 129th in the Class of 2024 while their composite rating places him at 282nd.

Brown recorded 62 tackles, nine TFLs and seven sacks in his final season at

James Clemens High School, leading to Alabama 7A Region 4 first-team all-region honors. He was also named the Huntsville QB Club Defensive Player of the Year and represented his state in the Alabama-Mississippi All-Star Game. His late rise in the rankings makes sense, given that he has played football for only two years.

Brown has SEC size and length at 6-foot-6, 250 pounds according to the Mizzou football roster, with a reported 82-inch wingspan. Strength training and conditioning in an SEC weight room will only make those measurables more impressive and useful. Brown is a tantalizing but raw recruit who will need plenty of seasoning, meaning

he is unlikely to see the field in his freshman year and will instead spend most of his time bulking up and working with coaches to develop his game.

If you're looking for a prototype of what Brown could become for the Tigers, look no further than Johnny Walker Jr. He was an underappreciated recruit in the Class of 2020 who needed time and development to make use of his talent and skills against SEC competition. After a strong 2023 season, Walker will look to make a run at All-SEC this year. Brown has similar potential and could become a gem of this recruiting class for Eli Drinkwitz.

By Matthew Gustafson **Jayven Richardson**

Richardson is a highly-touted JUCO offensive tackle out of the Sunflower State's Hutchinson Community College. Other names you may recognize who hail from Hutchinson CC include Markus Golden, Demariyon "Peanut" Houston and Dylan Laible.

Richardson is a three-star prospect, but rated as the 21st overall recruit in the 247Sports composite JUCO rankings and the second-ranked offensive tackle in the group. He chose Mizzou over a bevy of Power Four offers including Arkansas, Auburn, NC State and Ole Miss. The Gonzales, La., native joins the Tigers as a sophomore with plenty of potential and a massive frame to boot. He stands at 6-foot-6, 303 pounds according to the Mizzou football roster. One of the first tasks he is given by the coaching staff will likely be adding on some more weight, specifically muscle mass, to ensure he's ready for the trench war that is SEC football.

However, don't expect him to ride the bench this year for the Tigers. Richardson is unlikely to crack the starting lineup over transfers Cayden Green and Marcus Bryant or budding star Armand Membou, but he looks poised to play the role of swing tackle this season. Depending on how the offensive

line shakes out (especially if the three names above all start), Richardson could be one of the first two linemen off the bench. He would also be a top option to replace one of the tackles in case of an injury.

This role would see him spell offensive tackles for a snap or two when they need a breather or enter as an extra lineman in short yardage, running situations. Eastern Michigan transfer Marcellus Johnson took on a similar role last season for the Tigers. Richardson will be a top name to watch during camp, and a strong performance could even make him a dark horse to crack the lineup.

While the JUCO transplant forcing his way into a starting tackle role would be welcomed by the coaching staff, it seems highly unlikely given that Drinkwitz often favors experience and seniority in tight starting races. Tracking his development this year will actually be more important for the following two seasons. With Bryant only having one year of eligibility remaining and Membou a possibility to enter the NFL draft at the end of the season, Richardson could be a favorite to start as soon as next year.

Jude James By Quentin Corpuel

Jude James committed to Missouri last June, and his tape is awfully hot.

The main thing that stands out about James is his versatility. At Francis Howell High School in St. Charles, Mo., James was an everything man for the Vikings, who captured a state championship in 2022 and won nine games this past season.

On offense, James brings a lot to the table. At a towering 6-foot-4, 215 pounds, he's wicked fast with a keen eye for the ball

once it's in the air, as his tape is littered with contested catches.

James is also a very willing blocker, which can turn him into a really valuable weapon considering how big he is. There's one play at the 2:46 mark of his Hudl highlights from last year where, against Christian Brothers College (CBC), his helmet pops off in the middle of a blocking rep. But despite his dome being exposed, James keeps blocking his defender 10 yards further down the field, ultimately pancaking him en route to a touchdown.

Defensively, James was a rover in

Francis Howell's secondary who was at his best charging downhill. He'd likely be best slotted into the role of STAR in Corey Batoon's defense, as James' aggressiveness is slightly Daylan Carnell-ian.

He experienced the perils of being better than most players on the field. As a receiver, there wasn't a whole lot of nuance in his route-running. Most of the time, he'd just run past people because, well, he could. It was similar to fellow 2024 commit Williams Nwaneri, who oftentimes didn't have to do much other than run forward to get into the opposing team's backfield.

The other side of the ball saw a similar lack of refined technique. His tackling looks a-ok, but James had a tendency to hit with his shoulder. That's fine at the high school level, as James was bigger than most people he was playing against. However, that might need to go away in college.

James likely won't see immediate playing time, but his two-way abilities are unique and give the coaching staff plenty to work with.

By Parker Gillam **Justin Bodford**

Another member of that trio of St. Thomas Aquinas commitments, Justin Bodford is an intriguing prospect on the defensive line. With a bowling ball-like frame — he's 6-foot, 295 pounds — and a pair of state titles (Florida 3M State and Sunshine 7A State) under his belt, Bodford is a tested and powerful presence up front. His other power conference offers came from West Virginia, Syracuse, Pittsburgh, Maryland, Louisville and Georgia Tech, but Kevin Peoples (since departed for LSU) and Al Davis were able to land his pledge last June and Bodford never wavered.

To start, I'd like to emphasize the benefits that come from playing within a high school football program such as St. Thomas Aquinas (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.). Bodford has been going head-to-head with some of the top high school talent in the country for years now as Florida consistently breeds quality football players, evidenced by the state being home to five of the top 20 recruits in the Class of 2024 (most of any

state). Led by renowned coach Roger Harriot, the St. Thomas Aquinas football program is heralded as one of the best in the nation and has produced the likes of Michael Irvin and Major Wright, among other former CFB stars. Thus, Bodford has been trained and coached at a higher level than most other high school athletes.

On top of that, Bodford's frame and skill set matches well with the type of defensive tackles that have had success under Al Davis. Working behind the likes of Chris McClellan and Kristian Williams this season, he also has the opportunity to learn from some proven veterans as a freshman.

Long-term, I can see Bodford becoming a quality rotational piece up front. And, if these St. Thomas Aquinas products can have success in CoMo, more Florida recruits will take notice and potentially follow suit.

Kewan Lacey By Dan Keegan

The running back position has been something of an enigma for Eli Drinkwitz at Missouri. On the one hand, Larry Rountree III, Tyler Badie and Cody Schrader have all submitted fantastic seasons, finishing near the top of the league — or even country — in rushing yards. Yet, two of them were Barry Odom recruits, and the other was a once-in-a-lifetime underdog story. You need to show a repeatable process, and in the SEC, that comes by identifying, recruiting and developing high school recruits. And that part has been lacking

at running back for Eli Drinkwitz.

Prior to Lacey, this staff brought in five high school backs: Elijah Young, BJ Harris, Taj Butts, Tavorus Jones, and Jamal Roberts. Three of those five were four-star recruits; three of the five are also no longer Tigers. They have combined for 384 rushing yards as Tigers. It is still early for Roberts, but red flags are up for Jones. Simply put, despite the development wins from the holdovers and the happy accident of Cody Schrader, Drinkwitz and staff

have not identified and developed high school ball carriers well at all.

That is the legacy Kewan Lacey steps into at Missouri. This season, the team will give the majority of the carries to a pair of fifth-year senior transfers, Marcus Carroll and Nate Noel, who were very productive at their previous stops in the Sun Belt. Lacey will battle Roberts and Jones for position for mop-up duty and for 2025 action.

The good news is Lacey is arguably

is arguably the most talented recruit at this position yet. Originally a Nebraska commit, Missouri beat out Ole Miss at the gun to earn his commitment. He held offers from Alabama, Florida, Michigan, Oregon, and other football-mad schools. His high school tape is immaculate, showing an explosive player with the ability to create big plays from any touch. He compiled these jaw-dropping plays at Lancaster, Texas, playing 6A ball in a talent-rich state, where he also ran as a sprinter on the track & field team.

The talented Texan was a late-cycle recruiting win for Drinkwitz, especially to land him over fellow SEC rivals. But while this staff has had success developing bellcow backs before, Lacey has a chance to be the first of his kind: a blockbuster tailback, signed from high school by Drinkwitz, and starring for his ballclub. Check back in 2025 to see if he fulfills his destiny.

By Josh Matejka **Nicholas Rodriguez**

What is it you love most about football? Is it the flight of the ball on a 70-yard post route? A last-second, game-winning field goal? A running back diving over the goal line?

If you answered “when one guy hits another guy so hard,” then I’ve got someone I’d like you to meet.

Nick Rodriguez, a four-star linebacker out of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., is primed to be the guy who makes you go, “Ooooooh,” because of the sound his pads make upon contact. Rodriguez is a no-frills, no-mess downhill bulldozer. His highlight reel is hit after hit after hit where you sort of wonder how the other guy got up afterward.

Rodriguez accomplishes this astonishing ability with a tried-and-true blend of speed and strength. He

measures 6-foot-1 and 215 pounds out of high school, and he looks every bit of that on tape. He plays with the physicality of a player who also wrestled in high school, and he arrives in Columbia with a more developed physical profile than we might be used to seeing in other freshmen. And while strength may be the attribute you’d list as 1A on his resume, his speed is a close 1B. Rodriguez has active feet that allow him to build up a head of steam when he’s got his sights on a target. He won’t explode past anyone, but he’s damn hard to stop or break away from.

The main question a prospect like Rodriguez carries into his career as a Tiger: Where does he fit? Using Corey Batoon’s preferred 3-3-5 as a measuring stick, there’s not a clean fit in the middle three... at least not right now. I’m not sure he has the lateral

speed to fit as a middle linebacker and he’s not big enough (yet) to truly be an extra edge rusher in the Sting position. I haven’t seen enough of him in coverage to say if he could fit as a Wolf linebacker, but that might be the best spot for him.

When Rodriguez committed to the Tigers in July 2023, former Rock M’er Brandon “BK” Kiley called him “one of the best Mizzou defensive commits in the Eli Drinkwitz era.” Those are big words, and it’s a lot to expect from a guy whom recruiting services seem to be mixed on. But the physical tools are there, and he’s a step ahead of the development curve. With some tactical training and early exposure, there’s a path for Rodriguez to be far more than just a big hitter.

Ryan Jostes By Parker Gillam

Elijah Drinkwitz and his staff managed to land another in-state mammoth on the offensive line. Ryan Jostes stands at an imposing 6-foot-6, 298 lbs. with a long wingspan to boot, and plenty of schools took notice. Not counting Mizzou, Jostes received 17 offers from a variety of programs, most notably Kansas, Kentucky, Louisville, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa State and Vanderbilt.

Despite the likes of Kansas, Iowa State, Louisville and Kentucky offering him first, the Washington, Mo. product opted to remain home and play for the black and gold. He verbally committed to Mizzou in early March of 2023, roughly two months after he was offered by Drinkwitz and Co. From there, Jostes signed his letter of intent in December and opted to enroll early in January 2024, giving him a chance to begin getting used to life in the trenches at this level.

With his mix of size and athleticism, Jostes projects as a high-upside prospect down the line. While the exact starting five for the 2024 Tiger O-line has yet to be determined, the likes of Marcus Bryant, Armand Membou, Mitchell Walters and potentially Cayden Green figure to hold down the tackle spots. Thus, playing time will likely be hard for Jostes to come by in year one.

And that’s not the end of the world. One could argue that the steepest learning curves in college football occur in the trenches, and having a year to learn behind some veterans and take in the week-to-week grind of the SEC could pay major dividends for Jostes’ future. In the end, Jostes will likely begin challenging for snaps in 2025, as he and fellow in-state monster lineman Logan Reichert will be charged with leading a new era along the Mizzou offensive line.

By Brandon Haynes

Talen Chandler

Originally committed to Deion Sanders and Colorado, three-star offensive lineman Talan Chandler needed just nine days to reconsider his options.

Missouri offered the then-Buffaloes' commit on Nov. 10, 2023. Nine days later, Chandler flipped his commitment to the Tigers, saying that the reason for his change of heart came down to the fact that Mizzou was a dream destination.

A Nevada, Mo. product, Chandler also held offers from Eastern Michigan and Lindenwood. He earned a spot in the 2023 U.S. Army Bowl and the 2020 FBU Freshman All-American Bowl, and he will join an offensive line unit that was named as a semifinalist for the Joe Moore Award in 2023.

Chandler helped Nevada High School to its first district championship in team history during his senior season, anchoring the offensive line for an offense that averaged over 36 points per game. He mainly played on the interior, primarily at guard, consistently showing an ability to overpower opponents.

The 6-foot-3, 297-pound offensive lineman is the 12th-ranked player in the state. Chandler profiles as a versatile offensive lineman who could be a physical presence up front, although his contributions will likely be limited early with the lack of holes along the offensive line.

One of the traits that pops off the film when watching Chandler compete is his explosiveness and athleticism, both of which allow him to be a force in the run-blocking game. He flashes a strong first step, which usually gives him the upper hand against opposing interior defensive linemen.

Chandler will enter on the smaller size of offensive lineman on the Tigers' roster, but he does possess a similar build to Missouri center Connor Tollison (6-foot-4, 286 pounds). However, the late push by the coaching staff to flip him from Colorado suggests that they see him as a potential impact player with an ability to utilize his athleticism and versatility effectively.

Trajan Greco

By Parker Gillam

Greco, a 6-foot, 180-pound prospect out of Buford, Ga. powerhouse Mill Creek, was sought after by plenty of other notable schools (Georgia Tech, USC, Boston College, Kansas, North Carolina, etc.) coming out of high school. While football was his main sport, Greco was also a star basketball player at Mill Creek and posted an absurd junior year stat line of 16.1 PPG, 6.5 RPG, 6.1 APG and 3.3 SPG. The guy can hoop, but he chose the pigskin in college.

In line with that versatility, Greco played on both sides of the ball during his senior season at Mill Creek, working as a receiver that racked up 462 yards while also recording five pass breakups as a DB. Thus, he could be used in a variety of ways in Columbia.

Offensively, Greco is a smooth runner who seems to glide in the open-field, but he can beat you in a phone booth, too, as he touched the ball in a variety of ways (sweeps, screens, go-routes, etc) during his high school years. He's got a great burst off the line of scrimmage and can pull down contested catches despite his slighter frame, making him an effective all-around receiver.

Another thing that really stands out about the four-star prospect (via 247) is his improvisational skills. Greco excels in helping out a scrambling quarterback, something that is undervalued by the masses but is a great skill to have, especially given the frequency with which Brady Cook (and modern-day QBs in general) likes to extend plays.

Those above-average hands translate well to the other side of the ball, as Greco was a noted ball hawk in high school. He's got some solid defensive instincts to work with, shoots gaps like a missile and can get sideline-to-sideline in a hurry. And those improv skills I talked about means that he has a great read on what QBs and WRs will attempt to do when a play breaks down. There's something to be said about the benefits of having knowledge of playing on both sides of the ball.

Given the embarrassment of riches that Mizzou features in the receiver room right now, Greco worked in the secondary during spring camp and figures to at least begin his collegiate career in that role. However, we've seen plenty of Tigers transition to the other side of the ball during their careers, so I would not necessarily rule out him getting some time as a WR later down the line.

With coaches and players such as Theo Wease Jr. pointing out the frequency with which Greco was around the ball during spring ball, it's safe to assume that there's a bright future ahead for the Georgia native. He played plenty during the spring game and held his own out there, and with Joseph Charleston, Daylan Carnell and Tre'Vez Johnson returning at safety, Greco has the opportunity to learn behind some true veterans of the game during his first season on campus. I wouldn't be entirely surprised to see him earn significant snaps at some point during the year, and he figures to slide right into a starting role once those aforementioned veterans depart.

By Brandon Haynes **Whit Hafer**

The first commit of the 2024 recruiting cycle for Eli Drinkwitz and Co., three-star Whit Hafer has an opportunity to build upon a family legacy at Mizzou.

Hafer's father, Jeff Hafer, played for the Missouri men's basketball team from 1996-2000, averaging 6.3 points, 3.6 rebounds, 2.0 assists and 1.5 blocks per game. Now, a little over 24 years since his father donned the Tigers' jersey, Whit Hafer will do the same in August.

A 6-foot-7, 255-pound tight end, Hafer committed to Missouri on Feb. 25, 2023. He joins the Tigers out of Joplin High School, making him one of five in-state pickups during the cycle.

Hafer, who held offers from Kansas, Kansas State and Iowa State, immediately brings added size to the position. He joins sophomore star 6-foot-7 tight end Brett Norfleet as not only one of the tallest players at his position but on the team as a whole.

The 13th-ranked player in the state, Hafer earned Class 6 All-State second-team honors in his senior year. He projects as a player whose strongest asset will be his strength, primarily as a blocker who can create opportunities for the offense.

Hafer didn't flash the most dynamic statistics (21 receptions, 294 yards and three touchdowns) for a Joplin offense that finished as a district runner-up. However, his role in a tight end room that also includes Norfleet, sophomores Jordon Harris and Tucker Miller, as well as senior Tyler Stephens, could make him a difference maker in pass- and run-game protection.

Hafer's pride for Missouri's program is worth noting, especially in terms of cultivating a culture of success and comfort in Columbia. He is a prototypical in-state recruit who truly believes Mizzou is home, and that's a belief that could impact many others throughout the roster.



Luther Burden

By Dan Keegan

What is the best moment in modern Mizzou football history?

Henry Josey breaks clear to clinch the SEC East in the regular season finale against Texas A&M? Maybe a host of Tigers burying Todd Reesing in the Arrowhead sod for a game-sealing safety? What about Harrison Mevis drilling his walk-off 61-yard field goal to complete the revenge against Kansas State, and set the wheels in motion for 2023's magic run?

There are a number of possible choices, and any could be the right answer for you. For me, give me Josey's head-tilted, full-throated triumphant yell as he broke the goal line.

A better question that I'm trying to get at: What is the most impactful moment in modern Mizzou football history? Mike Alden sticking to his guns and hiring a head coach out of Toledo? Accepting a bid to join the SEC? Hosting ESPN's College Gameday in 2010, the school's passion at the forefront of the sport's biggest stage?

There have been many critical "butterfly effect" moments that have guided the program to where it is now. For my money, there is no bigger moment than October 19th, 2021 at the Herbert Hoover Boys & Girls Club in East St Louis – when Luther Burden committed to the University of Missouri.

Much like Chase Daniel took the foundation laid by Brad Smith for Gary Pinkel's nascent program and raised it to a new height, Burden has taken Eli Drinkwitz's program and led it to a ten-win season.

Missouri has won big-time recruiting battles for the services of a prospect of Burden's caliber before. Unlike the Ohio States and Georgias that enroll all-



galaxy recruits five times a year, Missouri has recruited a national top-ten player only three other times before: Dorial Green-Beckham, Sheldon Richardson and Terry Beckner Jr.. (Williams Nwaneri, class of 2024, rounded out this group for a full five this spring.) All three had big moments as Tigers, but ultimately left behind underwhelming careers in Columbia.

There has been no such disappointment for Burden. He has made a tremendous impact for the program off the field and has been a dynamite player, arguably Missouri's best over the course of the

2023 campaign. He is as important as anyone in the Tigers' rise to the top. His long touchdown in the first quarter against Kansas State in Week 3 was the first sign of things to come. His clutch catch on 4th & 17 set up the senior night win over Florida. His fourth quarter touchdown in Dallas gave the Tigers a postseason win over a blueblood. From the beginning of the season to the end, and week in and week out in between, Luther Burden was a top producer, with 1,212 yards and nine touchdowns as a true sophomore, a statline so impressive that it alone already makes him one of the best players in program history.

But much like his presence on the field creates gravity in the defense that allows his teammates softer coverages and open running lanes, so he has left an impact off the field: in recruiting, in NIL, and in buzz.

Mizzou football has been one of the best in the country at utilizing NIL to accrue talent, and Luther Burden embodies proof of concept for their success. The coaching staff, athletic department, and the collectives were aligned early at Missouri. Luther's signature line of Old Vienna potato chips debuted on the shelves at Schnucks before he even took the field at Faurot. Name, Image, and Likeness would redefine college football roster building, and Mizzou would prove to be at the forefront of innovation of this new tool. As Chris Bailey, Burden's NIL representative, told 247sports.com last year, "The reality is with the collectives out there that there is money for superstar players. They're going to get their deals. However, if you want the situation where you become the face on a bag of chips or the face on a billboard, you're a lot more likely to do it at home where the company feels like it's getting something for its dollar."

Burden has made it cool for St Louis star athletes to look two hours to their west for a collegiate option for once. The state's talent drain — to Nebraska, to Notre Dame, to Texas and Oklahoma and Ohio State — has been so pervasive over the decades that "lock up the borders" is a painful cliché in Missouri fandom circles. Luther would be a star in Austin or Athens, but in his hometown St. Louis he can be an icon.

Coach Carl Reed of 247Sports and a St Louis football lifer told us, "Luther made going to Mizzou a very cool thing to do. When you add in the way he has been marketed through both NIL and the University, it has to make a kid stop and say,

'Hey, that could be me.'"

His celebrity is not just local, of course. Burden is at the top of 2024 preseason award watch lists; he is favored to win the Biletnikoff Trophy, a consensus All-American projection, a Heisman sleeper and will certainly hear his name called early in the NFL draft. He brings buzz and attention to the Missouri program in a way that few have over the past two decades. His presence as a national figure in the sport will be matched only by the names Daniel, Maclin, and Sam.

Michael Bratton, co-host of "That SEC Podcast," agrees, as he said on his Cotton Bowl preview podcast: "Burden would have had success at Ohio State. He would have had success at Georgia. He would have had success wherever he went. But would he have been an in-state, hometown legend? The answer is no, because he would have just been next in a long line of great players to go to these other schools. Luther Burden is one of the best storylines out there."

So after an ascendant 2023 season — for the team, for Burden, and for the Eli Drinkwitz era in general — Missouri enters the 2024 with great opportunities ahead of them. Missouri's talent accumulation has never been better, with a roster full of more blue-chip players than ever during the modern recruiting era. A manageable schedule, a veteran lineup, and a proven winning culture give the Tigers a rare opportunity for this program: a chance to earn a spot in the national title tournament.

Burden has a chance to further cement his legacy. He is already one of the best players in school history, thanks to his celebrity, his production, his clutch moments, and how he has helped usher in a new era for the program. If he delivers another dominant season on the field this fall, it will be impossible to find a Missouri Tiger who meant more to this program.





There's a long way until signing day, but the recruiting class for Missouri in 2025 is trending in a very good direction. They've addressed needs at almost all positions, but have also found a way to elevate the overall talent of the roster.

Missouri has done a good job in every cycle finding a QB and bringing him into the program to compete. Since Eli Drinkwitz was hired, they've signed a high school quarterback in every cycle. Brady Cook, Tyler Macon, Sam Horn, Aidan Glover and now, this class has Matt Zollers who is now rated as a composite five star player. Zollers as the QB was a great get for this class and has been a great recruiter in his own right. He's been extremely active on social media recruiting other players and representing the Mizzou brand on social media.

What's a high level QB without some high level protection? At this point, Missouri has gotten commitments from a couple of tackles in the Top 175 in Jack Lange and Lamont Rodgers. They've also gotten a commitment from a couple of underrated linemen in Henry Funuku and Keiton Jones. There are still a few high

level targets on the board, so they could certainly add to this already impressive haul. They've done a great job solidifying the future at offensive line.

To this point, Missouri only has one commitment at running back and it's Jamarion Morrow from Germantown, Tenn.. He's a shifty back with great vision and it's easy to envision him running the wide zone in this offense.

When we talk about combinations, Brady Cook to Luther Burden gets a lot of love and deservedly so. One of, if not the most underrated combinations at Mizzou, though, is Eli Drinkwitz and Jacob Peeler. Year after year, they find ways to fill the receiver room with high end talent and this year has been no different. They brought in a couple of receivers who have some unique talents in Donovan Olugbode, Shaun Terry and Jayvan Boggs, a former Ohio State commitment. Both are top 150 recruits, depending on your recruiting service. Both figure to be in the mix in 2025 to see the field in some capacity.

On the defensive side of the ball, they've

started addressing needs at all three levels to his point. On the defensive line, they've gotten Daeden Hopkins, a 4-star from Hermann, Mo. to commit. Hopkins has had a fast rise and figures to be a big part of their future. They've also brought Jason Dowell and Joshua Lewis into the fold. Both are solid three star talents but seem to have a higher upside and potential to elevate their rankings throughout their senior seasons.

At that linebacker level, they've secured commitments from Dante McClellan of Canton, Ohio and Jason King of DeSmet in St. Louis. Both are twitchy athletes who may need some development, but certainly fit the profile of the linebackers that Missouri has had in the past. Quick, physical and good tacklers.

In the secondary, there have already been three commitments and two have been at the safety position. Both Charles Bass from East St. Louis, Ill. and Dyllon Williams from Demopolis, Ala. have verbally committed and will enter in 2025 with a lot of opportunity. There's also the corner from Marietta, Ga, in Mark Manfred who is a long, rangy corner

'25 Missouri Prospects

By Aaron Dryden

The state of Missouri has really blossomed into an under the radar state where Power 4 schools can come in and find quality players. Over the past five cycles (from 2020-2024), the ShowMe State has produced 40 four- or five-star prospects. To contrast that with the previous five years (2015-2019), there were only 20 four- or five-star prospects.

The depth of the state has dramatically increased and it has

been a huge boon for Missouri's recruiting. They've signed 10 of those 40 out of high school to boost their sign rate from 20% to 25%. This is a nice percentage bump aside from the raw increase. The other point to note is that they've circled back with several of the misses in this period like Mookie Cooper, Toriano Pride and Cayden Green and brought them back into the fold via the transfer portal.

The 2025 class has a lot to like about it. There is no bona fide five-star talent like there was with Williams Nwaneri and Ryan Wingo, or even going back a couple years to the class with Luther Burden. There is, however, a Missouri class with a lot of high-level depth, a few under ranked guys and plenty of guys who have intriguing futures ahead of them.

The Crème de la Crème

At least at this point in the cycle, there seems to be a definitive number one player in the state. Jack Lange, a four-star OT out of Eureka, is the number one player in the state with three of the four major recruiting services giving him the nod. He checks a lot of the boxes Missouri is looking for from their tackles. They like long, athletic and agile guys who can move. He has good feet and it's easy to see why he was the number one player in this cycle.

Committed to: Mizzou

The second guy in the state is more debatable. In my opinion, it comes down to more of a preference. WR's Isaiah Mozee and Corey Simms really have two different styles of play. Mozee profiles as a guy out of the slot who is extremely slithery. He really personifies the phrase, "make something out of nothing".

Committed to: Oregon

Middle Tier

By the aggregate scores of multiple recruiting services, these guys are just a tick below the first group. In some services, they may carry a four-star rating by one service but the overall aggregate determined they are a three-star prospect. This is the tier of guys where you see some who are underranked and a few who will likely make some jumps in their rankings over the course of their senior seasons.

- Daeden Hopkins, an EDGE from Hermann, is an interesting prospect. He has a super long and slight frame at this point. He stands out on film for his get-off and quickness but is being overlooked by evaluators due to his frame as well as the level of competition in high school. Hopkins has a chance to exceed his ranking based on those factors.
Committed to: Mizzou
- DeJerrian Miller, a wide receiver from Cardinal Ritter College Preparatory in St. Louis, is a long, rangy pass catcher. Standing at 6-foot-3 and 190 pounds, he is one of the more intriguing prospects in his class. He is a candidate for a rankings bump with a good showing this season. Miller is a teammate of the previously mentioned Jamarion Parker.
Uncommitted
- Lucas Allgeyer, of MICDS in St. Louis, is an offensive tackle who has a bit of a mixed evaluation from some. On3 rates him as the second best prospect in the state, while Rivals and 247 both have him as the 10th best player. He's a tough player, an efficient puller and moves well for his size.
Uncommitted
- Carson Boyd, the third player to be mentioned on that stacked Cardinal Ritter offense, is an interesting quarterback prospect. He's somewhat slight of frame but that is not an issue when it comes to arm strength. Boyd is able to throw 50-60 yards accurately and shows an ability to stay in the pocket and elude pressure. He throws off platform pretty well, too.
Committed to: Illinois

Simms, on the other hand, is an outside receiver who wins more by physically dominating. He has plus speed and does have after the catch ability, but standing at 6-foot-3, he's able to use his frame to high point the ball and box defenders out.

Committed to: Mizzou

The best running back from this class would be Jamarion Parker. He has nice positional size and decent speed but his best trait might be his vision. He does a fantastic job of cutting the ball upfield and finding holes to run through. At one point, he was committed to Arkansas.

Committed to: Nebraska

Worth paying attention to

Jason King, LB from DeSmet Jesuit HS in St. Louis
Committed to: Mizzou

Will Kemna, OT from Helias Catholic HS in Jefferson City
Committed to: Kansas State

Ryver Peppers, RB from Fort Osage HS in Independence
Committed to: Iowa State

Landon Pace, TE from St. Louis University HS in St. Louis
Uncommitted

Mekhi Mixon, S, from Cardinal Ritter HS in St. Louis
Uncommitted

Drew Clemens, TE from Oak Park HS in Kansas City
Committed to: Utah

Antonio Parker, S, from Cardinal Ritter HS in St. Louis
Uncommitted

Gabe Fields, RB, from Central HS in St. Joseph
Committed to: Vanderbilt

- Dillon Duff, of DeSmet Jesuit in St. Louis, is a quality quarterback prospect who has a good chance to elevate himself with a good senior season. He has a lot of tools that pop up on film, including pocket presence, good size and is an accurate passer. However, he only has one year of starting experience at this point. If I had to choose a guy most likely to make a jump into the next group over the next six months, Duff would likely be my pick.
Committed to: Kansas State
- Ka'Mori Moore, a defensive tackle out of Lee's Summit, does a really good job of creating interior pressure and shutting down gaps. He has nice hand usage and pursues the ball well. He also has a high motor and is a good candidate to receive a ratings bump with a good season as the guy along his defensive line. Moore is a former teammate of Mizzou freshman Williams Nwaneri and a current teammate of Oregon commit Isaiah Mozee.
Committed to: Oklahoma



Pregamin' 2024

It feels strange to say but here goes: We're entering a new era of the SEC, one where Mizzou is the grizzled, successful veteran. As we prepare to kick off the 16-team version of the Southeastern Conference, it's worth asking: What's your single favorite memory from Mizzou's first 12 years in the conference?

Josh Matejka, Deputy Site Manager: This is a very personal memory, so bear with me: it's the first game of the 2012 season, the 62-10 win over Southeastern Louisiana.

It was within the first few weeks of my time as a Mizzou student. I'll let you in on a little secret about those days, which is that I had an intensely difficult time making friends. The fact that I - a pretty staunch introvert - made it out to this game at all was mainly credit to my two Zou Crew friends who talked me into waiting in line to be painted up on the front row.

I don't remember much about the game, but I do remember this: things felt different. No, Mizzou wasn't very good in 2012, but the feeling of having an SEC program in town was tangible from the jump, even playing a blood donor like SELU. And while Mizzou poured it on in front of an adoring crowd, the rain also poured it on us. Is it my fondest football memory of Mizzou's first 12 SEC seasons? Not at all. But it's one that stands in my memory, something I can hold onto until my dying days.

Sammy Stava, Staff Writer: It was definitely the SEC East clincher over Texas A&M. Being there in a primetime environment with so much at stake was an awesome experience. Fans rushing the field after the win is just one of those moments where you love College Football - especially in this conference.

Parker Gillam, Staff Writer: Henry Josey's 57-yard touchdown run through the heart of Texas A&M is the first thing that comes to mind, and I had a hard time choosing between that overall two-year run of surprise success vs. this past year. Both are instances of the Tigers stunning the vaunted SEC with miraculous seasons, and both highlight the brightest moments Mizzou has had in the league thus far.

To choose a specific moment, after so many years of losing in heartbreaking fashion to the Wildcats, I look at when the Tigers waltzed into Kroger Field and, after some early struggles, dismantled Kentucky to the tune of 38-21 in 2023. After the days of fourth-and-goal conversions and single-score defeats at the hands of Mark Stoops and Co., seeing the UK faithful leaving the stadium with over 10 minutes left in the game brought a smile to my face, I have to admit. In my eyes, this was also the moment in which the 2023 Missouri Tigers announced that they were going to be a factor in the SEC.

Dan Keegan, Staff Writer: Josey's run - and the other standout moments that made it possible, like Colt 45 in Athens, or Harold Brantley's fake punt first down in Oxford - is an easy pick, but for me, personally, the best moment came one week later. Yes, even though the Tigers lost to Auburn thanks to a fourth quarter avalanche named Tre Mason, that was an exhilarating week. I bought tickets and flew to the game, taking it in with the same group of friends with whom I attended my first game as a freshman, 2002 Brad Smith upsetting Illinois. From one dome to another, across conferences, across a decade, graduations, marriages, life changes. To be with those guys as our Tigers played on the sport's biggest stage was sheer joy.

Quentin Corpuel, Football and Men's Basketball Beat Writer: Harrison Mevis' 61-yard kick to beat Kansas State. My personal rolodex isn't very large having only paid attention to Mizzou since 2022, and I don't want to completely discount everything that happened before 2023. I understand that cool stuff happened before I got to college! But in terms of the moment's magnitude, only Josey's electrifying escape rivals the kick mostly due to the stakes.

Mevis' moment is a little odd for two reasons: it didn't even happen against an SEC team, and it was very early in the season. But the kick was emblematic of this seemingly new era of Mizzou football: this version of the Tigers could both conquer low odds and knock off high-quality competition.

Chad Moller, Staff Slappy: Parker stole my single moment, as anytime I watch that clip of Brent Musberger calling Henry's TD run to this day, I still get goosebumps. I was on the sidelines when that happened, still working my old job at Mizzou, and I may or may not have been leaking from my eyes once Henry hit paydirt. Everything that kid had to overcome was a million times over validated right then, and for such a good dude, it was so rewarding for him. And all of us who were part of the team, to have him be the one to push us over the top for the first time in the SEC. If I had to pick a different moment, I'll go from the "WTF" category and pick the 2014 team's comeback win at South Carolina. Never have I ever seen a team so completely out of a game somehow come back and find a way to pull a rabbit out of a hat like that. Mizzou was dead in the water, had no shot and somehow got it done. I remember talking with GP after he'd done his media session, and we're both saying to each other, "How in the world did we win that game?"

With two new teams joining the conference, let's take a moment to dole out some advice: What's your inside scoop on being an SEC program that you'd like to share with OU and Texas fans?

Josh Matejka: The inside scoop is this; don't worry about it. The SEC is different, but only in the way that we've all collectively decided that it's different. It's all branding, baby.

But if you're looking for an answer that more fully buys into the marketing... I'd say lean into camaraderie, both the positive and the negative. There's a fun give-and-take to being a part of the SEC, a dynamic that almost reminds me of being an English football fan. It's almost as fun to revel in your opponents' failures as it is to celebrate your own successes. If you take it in stride, it ends up being quite a bit of fun, especially when you find other like-minded fans across the sport.

Sammy Stava: I understand why people don't like the "It Just Means More" quote, but it's absolutely true in this conference. The SEC has overwhelming success in just about every sport. Oklahoma and Texas joining this league is just going to make it that much stronger – and it'll be fun to have the conference rivalries back with the Sooners and Longhorns.

Parker Gillam: Never be satisfied. The moment you are, you've lost. There's a reason Nick Saban was able to create the machine that he did in T-Town: he never rested on his laurels. Right after he won a national title, he was thinking about how he could win the next one. It's not a fun way of going about things, but this isn't always a fun league.

The Sooners and Longhorns could afford to sleepwalk their way through the Big 12 conference schedule, maybe suffering an upset or two, and still appear in the conference title game. That

will no longer be the case, and replicating the cultural edge that the great SEC programs have will not happen overnight for these newcomers.

Dan Keegan: Y'all aren't the only big swinging... um... y'all aren't the only sheriffs in town anymore. To Texas, especially: you can't just bully everyone else anymore. This league, unlike your last one, has about six programs that won't take that crap. Also, everyone hates each other, so if you find yourself in a tense moment in another school's hometown, just make fun of a third party rival, and you'll get along. If you're stuck in Athens, just make fun of Auburn. Stuck in LSU? Just talk trash about Bama. Also, make sure you go to The Grove.

Quentin Corpuel: You're still big fishes, but you're in a way bigger and more dangerous pond. The expanded CFP has given you (and every other top team) a greater margin for error, but as Parker noted, the amount of big-time games will increase dramatically for both Oklahoma and Texas. Just ask Florida, who's set to face seven teams that have a reasonable shot at making the 12-team CFP (UCF, Tennessee, Georgia, Texas, LSU, Ole Miss, Florida State). Yowza!

Chad Moller: Don't let the quirks of this league mess with your head; just accept them. For example, Ole Miss begins with an M, that's why you see every alphabetical listing of league teams with Ole Miss ahead of Mississippi State and Missouri. Oh, and the most annoying one? Cow bells AREN'T noisemakers.

Twelve years ago, Mizzou was also in a conference with OU, Texas and Texas A&M... and here we are again! If you had to power rank the four Big 12-to-SEC programs based on growth in the past 12 years, how would you?

Josh Matejka: I'll betray my hand and say that I wrote this question with a very specific order in mind. And that order is this: 1. Mizzou 2. Oklahoma 3. Texas 4. Texas A&M. I think the difference between 1 and 2 is slight and the difference between 2 and 3 is wider than anyone in Austin would like to admit. Mizzou entered the SEC as a secondary contender in the Big 12, with Oklahoma and Texas as the true blue blood forces. Now that they're following along, Mizzou has elevated its status. I wouldn't necessarily call it a contender in the SEC, but Mizzou is on the brink of being a perennial top 15/20 national program. Should they deliver on that promise this season, the potential to take yet another step up exists. Oklahoma and Texas are at or slightly below where they were 12 years ago. Only Mizzou has taken a notable step forward in terms of growth.

Sammy Stava: 1. Oklahoma 2. Texas 3. Missouri 4. Texas A&M. It's close for 1 and 2 between Oklahoma and Texas, but the Sooners have been a little more consistent and had the upper

hand lately in the Red River Rivalry. Mizzou is number three here because they have had success in this league, but just not nearly enough. And A&M is number four because they simply can't live up to high expectations year-in and year-out.

Parker Gillam: 1. Oklahoma, 2. Texas, 3. Missouri, 4. Texas A&M. The Sooners have been one of the most consistent teams in college football in the 21st century, and despite their struggles in the CFP, you still have to respect the dominance they have displayed year in and year out.

Texas and Mizzou was a close call, as the Longhorns have largely underachieved yet have still put forth some quality seasons. UT's Sugar Bowl run in 2018 and Playoff appearance this past season carry its recent résumé, but the Tigers have similarly only had a handful of seasons ('13, '14, '23) where they were nationally relevant as well. In the end, both programs appear to be approaching their full potential right now, but I'll give

the Longhorns the edge over the past dozen years, given their greater number of notable victories (OU upsets, USC, TCU, ND, Sugar Bowl, Big 12 title).

If you take Johnny Manziel away from Texas A&M, the Aggies have been perhaps the most underwhelming team of the past decade. Given the talent and resources available in College Station, more consistent success than just those flashy years with Johnny Football should have occurred.

Dan Keegan: Ranking by “growth” is tricky. Oklahoma is first, because they have stayed a premiere program and were one of the defining teams of the 4-team CFP era. Missouri dipped, but last season was a beautiful rebound; the last decade has been peaks and valleys. The Texas programs have mirrored each other: the Longhorns were underachievers for a long time, but Sarkisian has them aligned, and they are title favorites. A&M basically did that in reverse, peaking in 2012 and becoming a punchline by 2022.

Quentin Corpuel: 1. Oklahoma, 2. Texas, 3. Missouri, 4. Texas A&M. While the Longhorns are in a better present-day position than the Sooners, OU clears if we widen the scope even just a little bit. 2023 was Texas’ second 10-win season since 2012, while Oklahoma has registered just three seasons without getting to 10 wins in that same time span (one of those

was 2020, when the Sooners went 9-2). And even with Texas ahead of Oklahoma now, it’s not like the Sooners have taken a nosedive; although their schedule is arguably the most difficult in the nation, they certainly have the personnel to make the 12-team College Football Playoff.

Now, Missouri over Texas A&M might be a more controversial pick, as the Aggies have more wins since 2012 and had arguably a higher peak during the Johnny Football Era. But if we’re talking about growth, the Tigers have had more of it than the Aggies. Over the past 12 years, the Aggies have registered seven seasons where they were in the AP poll at some point during the season, but finished unranked. They’ve consistently recruited well, and expectations have always been high, but they’ve greatly disappointed more times than not.

Chad Moller: I’m gonna come across as a homer here, but if the measuring stick is growth, then I don’t see how you can argue against Mizzou as being tops in this group. The annual budgets for the other three schools were always astronomically bigger than Mizzou, and while the Tigers still play second fiddle overall to these programs from a monetary standpoint, they’ve made up a lot of ground and can’t be lapped anymore.

What has been your favorite thing about the success Mizzou has enjoyed over the past year? Is it the gloating? The recruiting wins? The actual wins?

Josh Matejka: Wins! I love to win! I hate to lose! Win on the ‘crootin trail, the football field, the message board. Doesn’t matter to me. I’ll never get sick of winning!

Sammy Stava: It was just the actual winning. Each win last season set up another big game to look forward to next week. After the win over Kansas State – every game the rest of the season felt like there was something important to play for whether it was staying in the Top 25 or keeping their NY6 bowl hopes alive. Nationally televised games and primetime windows regularly meant Mizzou Football was back to relevancy.

Winning also sets up high-level recruiting in the transfer portal and this is now why Mizzou is poised for this season with College Football Playoff expectations.

Parker Gillam: The play style. This is a bona fide fun team to watch on the gridiron, and it’s both the offense and the defense that provide entertainment. From the gifted athletes at the skill positions to the freaks of nature lining up defensively for the Black and Gold, there are a plethora of Tigers that can change a game with highlight-caliber plays at a moment’s notice. This team finally has the look of a true SEC program when it comes to both physical attributes and depth, and combined with unique and well-tailored schemes on both sides of the ball, an efficient machine is produced. The Missouri football program is now a destination spot for athletes that want to be put in a position

where they can just simply make plays, and it’s become must-watch TV for CFB fans across the country.

Dan Keegan: The brilliant play, and the human storylines, of the three offensive stars from last year. Cody Schrader becoming a college football cult hero down the stretch, while Luther Burden became a truly national superstar, made our Tigers fun and relevant. And Brady Cook, beloved in the locker room, yet trashed on the internet, booed by his student body, standing on the berm at Faurot to lead a senior night celebration. What a story, with a chance to become an all-time great Tiger this fall.

Quentin Corpuel: There’s a new standard. Rarely has Mizzou ever entered a season expecting to finish the season as one of the ten best teams in college football, which is where the Tigers find themselves now. At any place of work, the standard is the foundation for future success; a low one will likely mean consistent mediocrity. A high standard, which Mizzou has set, pushes a group of people beyond most of its competition, which is what many (including myself) expect from Eli Drinkwitz & Co. in 2024.

Chad Moller: I just like the fact that Mizzou is drawing so much respect from national pundits going into the year. I try my best to not care about what outsiders are saying about my team, but I’m human and fall prey to it at times, so it’s just really rewarding to see the national types paying attention now.

Quick temp check on our feelings towards other SEC programs: Rank them in order from “I root for them when they aren’t playing Mizzou” to “I’m actively praying for the downfall of their university.”

Josh Matejka: Let’s do this in tiers, ranked from Tier I (good!) to Tier VIII (oof!):

Tier I: I’ll Root For Them When They Aren’t Playing Mizzou:
None. Are you kidding me?

Tier II: A Single Shoulder Shrug:
Mississippi State
Ole Miss
Vanderbilt

Tier III: Uber Successful, but I Don’t Hate Them?:
Alabama
Georgia

Tier IV: Funny To See Them Lose, But I’d Go To Battle With Them If Necessary:
Florida
Texas A&M

Tier V: Fire Your Coach, and Then We’ll Talk:
Auburn
LSU

Tier VI: HIS HAIR? WACK. HIS GEAR? WACK. HIS JEWELRY? WACK. HIS FOOT STANCE? WACK. THE WAY HE TALKS? WACK. THE WAY HE DOESN’T EVEN LIKE TO SMILE? WACK:
Kentucky
Oklahoma
South Carolina

Tier VII: Give Me but a Sword and I Will Lay Waste To the Plains on Which Their Foundations Stand:
Arkansas
Texas

Tier VIII: Asteroid:
Tennessee

Sammy Stava: I really enjoy watching Ole Miss and Georgia and have a ton of respect for Lane Kiffin and obviously Kirby Smart. Don’t care much for Kentucky, Florida, Arkansas, LSU or Texas A&M. Vanderbilt and Mississippi State? Whatever. However, Tennessee and Josh Heupel can go kick some rocks.

Parker Gillam: Regarding teams who I wish absolutely zero well wishes towards, Florida is at the top of my list. This largely stems from my youthful days as a Tennessee fan watching the Gators win 16-straight in that series while also dominating on the basketball court. I had too many friends that were UF fans, and thus I grew sick of that ugly blue and orange rather quickly. I like Billy Napier, but I think he accepted a job that was doomed from the start given UF’s schedule and personnel. But, that university has had enough athletic success to last it a lifetime. It can afford to have some dark years.

Growing up in Atlanta, UGA was also a team I was not fond of, and considering how cocky their fans have gotten in recent years, I’ll be actively cheering against them in most games. Alabama, despite their dominance, I’ve rarely had a true issue with, and I’m actually eager to see how the Kalen DeBoer era works out.

Elsewhere, I’d consider myself impartial to the likes of South Carolina, Vanderbilt, LSU, Texas A&M and Mississippi State. I like Lane Kiffin, but I also don’t want him to win a national title. Instead, I just want Ole Miss to linger in that “good not great” territory where they win 8-9 games a year but nothing more. Feelings on Arkansas are obvious.

I’ll always cheer for Tennessee as a second team given my upbringing (both parents graduated from UT), and an SEC title between the Vols and Mizzou would be a dream come true (it’ll never happen). I cheer for Auburn mainly because they are that chaos team in college football that just makes the sport more fun when they are nationally relevant. For the newcomers, I’ll actually be cheering for both OU and UT to have solid inaugural seasons, although I don’t want them to make the SEC title game. We’d never hear the end of that from either fan base.

Dan Keegan: I don’t root against great teams in college sports; the same hater gene that activates against the Yankees, Patriots, etc doesn’t get me going against Alabama, Georgia, or LSU. I actually kinda DIG LSU football - they’re usually a ton of fun! I save my hate for where it matters, not punching up, but in the dogpile of the middle of the conference. You hear that, Arkansas? Yeah Mark Stoops, I’m talking about you. (That 2022 game still burns me up.) I got no love for Shane Beamer and his skits and TikToks.

Quentin Corpuel: Growing up as a Miami (FL) fan, I was conditioned to despise Florida State and, like most non-Duke ACC fans, the Blue Devils as well. I don’t really have any strong ties to any non-Mizzou SEC school except one: Florida, the only SEC team the ‘Canes have had anything substantial to do with and the only one I’ve actually disliked for most of my life. I was told early on in my life about the Gators and Hurricanes matching up annually until 1987, then meeting again in the 2001 Sugar Bowl, which Miami shouldn’t have been in because UM should’ve been playing for a national championship.

I remember watching “The U: Part 2” 30 for 30 on ESPN that featured UM players explaining their disdain for having to play in the game because a) the BCS put 11-1 Florida State in the national title game (who 11-1 Miami beat earlier in the season), b) Miami’s only loss was a five-point defeat at Washington, who finished third in the AP poll that season, c) the No. 1 team in the country, Oklahoma, probably would’ve lost to Miami, and d) them and Florida players had gotten into a scuffle on Bourbon Street the night before the game, adding a little more fuel to the fire. I remember watching the highlights of that game and being filled with joy as the ‘Canes dominated the Gators in the second

half en route to a 37-20 victory.

In my lifetime, one of my earliest college football memories was watching Miami knock off the Jeff Driskel-led Florida squad that was ranked No. 12 at the time amidst a packed SunLife Stadium (yes, believe it or not, Miami games used to be well-attended). I also vividly remember the two teams' last matchup in 2019, when an unranked 'Canes quad almost knocked off then-No. 8 Florida in what was one of the drunkest games I'd ever watched. In the span of about three hours, I thought DeeJay Dallas was going to be the next Frank Gore, Brevin Jordan was going to be the next Jeremy Shockey and that freshman starting quarterback Jarren Williams was going to retire Andrew Luck-style (which had happened earlier that evening) from getting sacked so much. Miami lost an extremely winnable game 24-20, which paved the way for another disappointing season that ended with losses to

Florida International, Duke and Louisiana Tech. I truly believe it all would've been different if the 'Canes had conquered the stinkin' Gators.

Chad Moller: I don't know that I hate any program the way I was taught to hate that alleged "university" to the west during our previous conference affiliations, but the ones that come the closest in the SEC for me are Florida and Tennessee. I know that Florida has the track record, but they still act like they're entitled to greatness and that attitude is really condescending. Tennessee's fans are just batshit crazy with their expectations, reminds me of Nebraska's fans in general. I really don't find myself rooting against anyone else in the league, but now that OU and Texas have joined, I may have to revise that statement down the road.



Summer is a silly season, so let's end things on a silly note: Give us one crazy prediction for the 2024 season that you're only half-kidding about.

Josh Matejka: Mizzou will have a Heisman finalist on their roster... and it won't be Luther Burden.

I've eaten crow on how much I doubted Brady Cook in the past, so it's time for me to turn the table. Cook is returning all of his top weapons, will have an offensive line that is arguably better than the one he had last year, has another year of familiarity with Kirby Moore's play calling and adds two transfer running backs who each have the potential of 1,000+ yard rushing seasons. I think there's a real chance Cook ends up with north of 35 touchdowns (passing and rushing) with a low turnover rate.

Sammy Stava: Luther Burden will win the Heisman and Mizzou will win the National Championship (OK, not quite). But Burden will be named a Hesiman finalist and Mizzou will make the College Football Playoff as a No. 10 seed. And for the third time in the last four seasons, Mizzou will produce the SEC's rusher as Marcus Carroll will join Tyler Badie and Cody Schrader in that

category.

Parker Gillam: The SEC lands five teams in the College Football Playoff while the Big Ten lands just two.

While these two leagues have been in an arms race for years, the SEC is going to prove that this new era of the CFP is its to own in 2024. Alabama, Georgia, Texas, Missouri and Ole Miss are all bona fide playoff-caliber teams, and the likes of Oklahoma, LSU and Tennessee have the potential to be in contention as well. The committee will respect the brutal schedules that each of these SEC teams will face, and thus a pair of losses will likely do little to harm any of their résumés. I see those initial five all making the CFP, each of them finishing with two losses or less and all residing within the top 10 of the final rankings.

Now let's look at the Big Ten. Oregon, with Dillon Gabriel joining an experienced and uber-talented roster, should be able to tread

water in its new league and avoid losing more than one game (OSU is at home, Michigan on the road). But, in examining the other two major contenders, they each have flaws. OSU may be the most complete team in the league, but is Will Howard, who ran a traditional, run-first offense at Kansas State, the answer at QB? Will he work well with new OC Chip Kelly, who has a very different offensive mindset? Michigan has QB concerns of its own and is charged with replacing a plethora of quality starters from a year ago. One of those two will make the CFP, but I just don't think both will.

To break down the numbers, that's seven teams. The remaining five spots would see the ACC take two (FSU, Clemson), the Big 12 take two (Arizona, Utah/K-State) and then the GO5 (I'll pick Boise) take the final spot. The era of the SEC is beginning, buckle up.

Dan Keegan: In three out of the four Eli Drinkwitz seasons, a Mizzou tailback has finished top five in the SEC in rushing yards. Nate Noel will join that group.

Quentin Corpuel: Luther Burden III won't win the Heisman Trophy, but he'll be the No. 1 overall pick in the 2025 NFL Draft. It's only happened four times since the first draft in 1936, with the most recent being the New York Jets taking USC's Keyshawn Johnson in 1996. The factors needed to make this happen are actually not that far-fetched.

The first step is Burden playing extremely well once again which, barring something drastic like injury (knocks aggressively on wood), should happen. The second step is the 2025 quarterback class not being great, which looks possible as of now; the current top projections are Georgia's Carson Beck, Texas' Quinn Ewers, Colorado's Shadeur Sanders, Alabama's Jalen Milroe, Miami's

Cam Ward, Texas A&M's Connor Weigman and Penn State's Drew Allar, none of whom have been tabbed as potential franchise quarterbacks (yet). While at least one of those guys could easily make the leap into top-pick consideration, the 2025 draft could also easily emulate the 2022 draft, where the first quarterback wasn't taken until No. 20 overall (Pittsburgh's Kenny Pickett to the Pittsburgh Steelers).

The third step is the team picking first needing a star wide receiver more than a quarterback, which is likely as well. The Carolina Panthers, New England Patriots and Denver Broncos have all taken a quarterback in the top 12 within the past two drafts, don't have a star wide receiver and are set to pick high again in 2025.

It might sound a little odd that Burden could be the top overall pick considering some of the history he's up against. But Johnson finished 7th in Heisman voting the year he was picked first by the Jets, and although some NFL teams have a tendency to reach for a quarterback in the early part of the first round (I am staring directly at Denver, CO), they've also shown a willingness to not reach if they believe the potential isn't there (I now stare at the 2022 draft once more).

I know that the question asked for a silly prediction that pertains to the 2024 college football season, and I might've gone 0/2. But considering the lack of national attention Burden was getting after the 2022 season and the NFL Draft's history of not seeing receivers taking No. 1 overall, this one feels silly enough for me.

Chad Moller: Mizzou will not only make the first-ever 12-team CFP playoff, they'll host a first-round game, then go to the designated neutral site and pull an upset to reach the semi-finals.



2024 MIZZOU SCHEDULE

08.31
VS. Murray St.

10.19
VS. Auburn

09.07
VS. Buffalo

10.26
AT. Alabama

09.14
VS. Boston
College

11.09
VS. Oklahoma

09.21
VS. Vanderbilt

11.16
AT. South
Carolina

10.05
AT. Texas A&M

11.23
AT. Mississippi
State

10.12
AT. UMass

11.31
VS. Arkansas

August 31, 2024 | Columbia, MO

Murray St.

TEAM PREVIEW

By Dan Keegan

When Missouri kicks off the 2024 season the evening of Thursday, August 29th, they will welcome to town a Murray State program that will be perhaps the most unknowable team and roster in Division 1 football. The Racers have never been a football power and are now in a time of transition, as they changed to a new conference in 2023 and added a new head coach in 2024, along with all of the roster turnover that comes with a new coaching staff in today's sport. Other than the result, which will be a decisive Missouri victory, there is very little to know about this matchup ahead of time.

The 2024 season is the centennial celebration for the Murray State football program. In 1948, the young program joined the Ohio Valley Conference as founding members, which would be their home up until the 2023 season. Last fall they competed in the much more difficult Missouri Valley Conference, arguably the toughest league in FCS. The step up in

competition was not kind to the Racers, and although they lost a few games that could have gone the other way in the ledger, they lost their last seven games in a row to end the season, including laughs at the hands of Illinois State, South Dakota, and North Dakota State. The losing was too much for leadership, and they parted ways with head coach Dean Hood after a 15-25 record over his four seasons.

With a lackluster roster depleted even further in the winter portal window – an exodus that included FCS All-American tight end Cole Rusk, starting quarterback DJ Williams, and many others – the program was in need of a jolt of energy. It found just the man in Jody Wright, South Carolina's tight ends coach. Wright has little play-calling or coordinating experience, instead making his mark as a CEO-type and program shaper. He served as Nick Saban's Director of Player Personnel at Alabama from 2015 to 2017, as well as various analyst roles in the NFL.

The difference for the Murray State

program has been immediate and electric. Wright is connecting with the community, the school, and the talent base in ways that align with exciting, winning programs in this modern era of the sport. True, he has yet to win a game, but he won the press conference, is winning over the hearts of his fanbase and is winning transfer battles.

The transfer portal will be critical for Wright to build a roster that has any hopes of not getting blasted off the field in Missouri Valley play again. The Racers finished 92nd in SP+ for FCS, lacking in both offense (83rd) and defense (93rd). Wright has landed a swarm of FBS down-transfers, mostly from Sun Belt and Conference USA schools, but also some depth chart casualties from Power Five programs.

Quarterback is a massive unknown: all three quarterbacks who attempted a pass last year have left. Joe Humphreys, a big-armed Kentucky native, or Jim Ogle, a ULM transfer and the son of new offensive coordinator Jimmy Ogle, will

likely be the starter when the Racers take the field to kick off the season. Jawaun Northington, the team's leading rusher last year, also returns, and he will be joined by Jordan Washington, a true freshman runner who chose Murray over a dozen FBS offers.

Not only is the Murray State roster hard to project in this offseason, it's hard to ascertain how the Racers will look schematically. Wright, due to his mentorship largely in personnel and administrative aspects of coaching, has little schematic footprint. This isn't like the Murray State team that visited Faurot a decade ago, with then-head coach Chris Hatcher running a wide-open "Hatch Attack" pass-happy scheme. Or even Hood's run-first, run-second, run-even-when-you-can't-run scheme. From the players, to the coaches, to the league competition, even down to

the playbooks, this is truly a new – and unknown – era of Murray State football that will begin in Columbia, Missouri.

Mizzou Matchup

Missouri will handle the Racers with ease. Since DI-AA restructured into the FCS subdivision in 2006, the Tigers have played one opponent from that level each season and remain undefeated. The closest game was two years ago against Abilene Christian, a game that finished 34-17 and featured the worst Missouri offensive line in two decades and a quarterback with a badly injured throwing shoulder.

Eli Drinkwitz doesn't tend to run up the score on overmatched opponents, so don't expect the gaudy scores in the 60s and 70s that Mizzou has hung on FCS

opponents before. The Tigers will play safe and vanilla, conserving their good players and their good plays for more high leverage situations.

This will be a good chance to see some new Tigers. Drew Pyne should see a healthy chunk of action in the second half. The young wide receivers – Joshua Manning and Daniel Blood – blocked by talented veterans, should see some action under the lights. We will get our first look at the new defensive transfers, as well as the new-look running back options. And for new Mizzou punter Orion Phillips, who just arrived in town this offseason from Murray, it will be a nice chance to reunite with his old teammates. Handshakes for everyone.



September 07, 2024 | Columbia, MO

Buffalo

Photo from Buffalo Athletics

TEAM PREVIEW

By Chad Moller

The Buffalo Bulls of the Mid-American Conference travel to Columbia, Mo. to take on the Missouri Tigers Sept. 7th at Faurot Field, with kickoff scheduled for 7 p.m. CST in a designated White Out game.

Whichever Mizzou assistant coach draws the scouting report for Buffalo, he'll be glad that they play a game before coming to CoMo – they play Lafayette in Week 1 – because the Bulls will be a completely new-look team from previous years at virtually all levels.

Buffalo has a brand new head coach and returns less than half of their starters from the 2023 team that ended 3-9 overall and 3-5 in the MAC. Pete Lembo, a longtime head coach in the FCS ranks and a former assistant coach with SEC ties, takes over for Maurice Linguist, who left unexpectedly after just two years at the helm to become co-defensive coordinator with the new staff at Alabama.

Lembo has 15 years of head coaching experience, including 10 at the FCS level where he went 79-36 combined at Lehigh (2001-05) and Elon (2006-10) before getting his first shot at the FBS level in 2011 at Ball State, where he went a respectable 33-29 in five seasons with a pair of bowl game appearances. His career path then diverged as he chose to jump to bigger programs as assistant head coach and special teams guru with Maryland, Rice and Memphis, before

spending the the last three seasons (2021-23) at South Carolina.

Losing Linguist was a bit of a shock to the Bulls and to Director of Athletics Mark Alnutt - a former Mizzou football player and longtime staff assistant to Hall of Fame Coach Gary Pinkel. But Alnutt made a nice hire in luring Lembo back into the head coaching role, and is looking for that move to pay off by bringing the Bulls back to MAC prominence.

It might take some time, however, as the Bulls have a dearth of experience to draw on. According to ESPN (and Rock M alumni) Bill Connelly, Buffalo ranks 132nd out of 134 FBS programs in returning just 29% of its production on both sides of the ball from a year ago. That breakdown includes just 31% of offensive production (ranking 128th nationally) and 28% on defense (131st).

Making the offensive numbers perhaps a little misleading is the fact that all four returning starters come on the offensive line where All-MAC guard Tyler Doty leads the way. He'll be joined by center Isaiah Wright, guard Trevor Brock and tackle Caelan Shepard as the offense's sole returning starters. If an offense ever had a chance to overcome youth and inexperience, it would help to have a veteran offensive line there to lead the way.

Skill-wise, senior CJ Ogonna is the only quarterback on the roster with previous game experience, and his stats are

limited to 21 pass attempts for 87 yards and 51 rushes for 222 yards and three touchdowns. The leading returning rusher on the team is RB Jacqez Barksdale, who carried 52 times in 2023 for 248 yards and a pair of scores. They hope to get JUCO All-American RB Dylan Kedzior in the mix, as he missed all of 2023 with an injury after rushing for 1,000 yards at Hutchinson Community College in 2022.

The Bulls' leading returning receiver from a year ago is sophomore WR Nik McMillan (13 catches, 180 yards, 1 TD), while only two others had as many as four catches in 2023.

Defensively, the Bulls list six returning starters on defense, with the standout being sixth-year graduate safety Marcus Fuqua, who has 33 career starts and who earned All-America honors in 2022 when he led the nation with seven interceptions.

Buffalo's leading returning tackler from a year ago is sophomore LB Red Murdock. He played in all 12 games in 2023 and finished third on the team with 60 tackles, including 9.5 TFLs, two sacks and four forced fumbles. Fellow sophomore LB Dion Crawford made a couple of starts as a true freshman in 2023 and had 31 total tackles.

DE CJ Bazile is the most experienced lineman to return after starting 12 games a year ago, and contributing with 11 TFLs and 4.5 sacks over his 41-game career to date. Other veterans returning on the line

include graduate tackles George Wolo (44 career games, 18 starts) and Daishon Folsom (33 career games).

The secondary has some experience in the fold, featuring four different cornerbacks with at least four career starts. The group is expected to be led by sophomore CB Charles McCartherens, who started the final nine games as a true freshman in 2023 when he ranked second on the team with three interceptions while adding 34 tackles and a forced fumble.

The only returner on special teams is a dude that Tiger fans hope to see a lot of on Sept. 7th - punter Anthony Venneri, who averaged a school-record 43.9 yards per punt in 2023.

Mizzou Matchup

The matchup with Mizzou should be one-sided, as the Tigers will likely be heavy favorites heading into the game. Eli Drinkwitz's squad should be well-rested from a long week and what will hopefully be a walk-over win against Murray State. It's hard to know what frame of mind the Bulls will bring with them to Columbia, as they should be favored in their season opener against Lafayette. However, the Bulls did drop their FCS game in 2023 when they fell at home in week No. 2 to Fordham by a score of 40-37.

The most interesting aspect of this game is likely to be how close to the vest that Drinkwitz and staff play things. Looking back to the 2023 non-conference season, the Tigers were very vanilla by design early on, which caused the obligatory

consternation within Tiger Nation. Of course, we all witnessed the hounds being released against Kansas State and for the rest of the season.

Drink isn't one to embarrass a fellow coach (unless he has a chance to get a dig in on Josh Heupel at Tennessee!), so don't look for the Tigers to put up a ridiculous margin here— unless the inexperienced Bulls come in so disheveled that Mizzou just can't help but roll up a big number.

Look for the Tigers to establish themselves early, perhaps with a few chunk plays, then put things on cruise control while emptying the bench in the second half. A big game looms the following week when Boston College comes to town for game three of the season-opening home stand.



Photo from Buffalo Athletics

September 07, 2024 | Columbia, MO

Boston College

TEAM PREVIEW

By Dan Keegan

The Missouri Tigers will host the Boston College Eagles in Week 3, the second leg of a home-and-home, and a revenge opportunity after the Tigers dropped an overtime thriller at Chestnut Hill back in September 2021.

That game was an archetypal pre-2023 Drinkwitz road loss. Productive but glitchy offense, seemingly predestined to make catastrophic mistakes at the worst possible time. Poor defense, especially on third downs or finishing drives. Some bizarrely conservative game management. Add it up, and you have an afternoon the fanbase would like to forget... or avenge.

Mizzou will catch Boston College at a crossroads. Former head coach Jeff Hafley skipped town to take the defensive coordinator job with the Green Bay Packers, using his exit to badmouth NIL, the portal and college athletics as a whole. Hafley's words from the bully pulpit were certainly exaggerated; the young head coach might have been burnt out but he was also motivated to beat the posse out of town. His previous brilliant work as a defensive coordinator at Ohio State did not translate to the head role, and his Eagles were only 22-26 in a mediocre ACC during his tenure.

There are structural problems for the Eagles program. They are a niche presence in a pro sports town, and NIL

alignment has yet to take flight. Schools like BC that heavily prioritize academics over athletics have to make tough choices in the transfer portal era, and make even bigger decisions regarding revenue sharing as the sport evolves in the coming years.

To navigate these waters, the school tabbed former NFL head coach and Alabama offensive coordinator Bill O'Brien to be the head coach. O'Brien is known as a quarterback whisperer, an honorific bestowed on a lot of men who had the good fortune to coach Tom Brady. The Eagles thrived last season when they were able to establish the running game, and returning quarterback Thomas Castellanos is a reckless, wild man.

It seems likely the early transition on offense will be difficult. The Eagles play two of their first three games on the road at top ten opponents, and the offensive pieces are a bit mismatched. Castellanos is an exciting scrambler, a diminutive gunslinger who is one of the best in the sport at extending plays with his legs. But he is also careless with the ball to an extreme extent, tabbed for an astonishing 5.6% Turnover-Worthy Play Rate by PFF charting. He is a talented but mistake-prone player; O'Brien was famously critical of Jalen Milroe at Alabama, an elevated version of this skillset.

Perhaps the most important question of BC's immediate on-field future is how this imperfect marriage works out. Will O'Brien and his handpicked OC

Will Downing, his longtime lieutenant, transform and elevate Castellanos's game, and bring discipline and structure to it? Or will Castellanos fail to grow as a passer, and his dynamic athleticism go to waste?

The top receiver will be Lewis Bond, who caught 52 passes for 646 yards and seven scores last year. He is a fine player, but the program has struggled to produce high-end pass catchers not named Zay Flowers in recent years. Jerand Bradley, a behemoth of a target at 6-foot-5, arrives in the portal from Texas Tech, where he caught 87 passes for 1,175 yards over the past two seasons. Old friend Jayden McGowan from Vanderbilt rounds out the room.

The Eagles were quite successful rushing the ball last season, averaging 198.3 yards per game on the ground, good for 16th in the country. Program mainstay Pat Garwo is gone, transferring to Nevada. (One wonders if he realized he could not improve on his 175-yard day against Mizzou's Steve Wilks-led defense, and decided to go out on top.) But Kye Robicheaux is back after compiling 780 yards last season, and he will be joined by Kansas State transfer Treshaun Ward. This is an underrated backfield duo to pair with Castellanos, who rushed for 1,113 yards himself last fall.

Last season's offensive line was quite good, led by a pair of NFL-bound guards Christian Mahogany and Kyle Hergel. This unit's arc actually resembles Missouri's:

cratered in 2022 with injuries and attrition, rebuilt in 2023 with returning veterans and development, and a talented transfer guard (Hergel, Cam'ron Johnson). And a young center, forced into action and struggles in '22, improved by leaps and bounds in Year 2, and now leading the charge into the 2024 season: Connor Tollison and Drew Kendall. However, while Missouri restocked with a pair of high-caliber transfers, BC had no such veteran infusion, and will be looking for in-house options to replace their departed stars.

There are some interesting pieces here on offense – this crew ranks 21st in Bill Connelly's returning production metric on offense. But even with those pieces last year, it still only amounted to the 87th best SP+ offense. Will O'Brien's tutelage be enough to overcome the loss of a pair of NFL guards?

Hafley's defenses never took flight, despite his reputation on that side of the ball. His Eagles finished 63rd, 102nd, then 77th in SP+ in his three full seasons at the helm. O'Brien made an interesting hire to run the show: Tim Lewis, who wrapped up a two-decade NFL assistant career in 2015, and has spent his time since then in high school or minor league football. He has not coached big-time football in

almost a decade, and has not coached in college in almost three (Pittsburgh Panthers, defensive backs coach, 1993).

Lewis will have to develop some new contributors, as the Eagles defense returns only 62% of production, good for 59th in the country, according to Connelly's accounting. Standout corner Elijah Jones is gone, off to the Arizona Cardinals in the third round, as is longtime linebacker Vinny DePalma. O'Brien has been publicly less than enthused about using the transfer portal to restock his roster, and the team will rely mostly on developing and returning talent. The good news, then, is that the front should be good: interior Cam Horsley and edges Donovan Ezeiruaku and Kam Arnold all return after productive 2023 campaigns.

O'Brien will have a few major questions to answer in the coming years. Will his experience and knowledge elevate the young passers that come through The Heights? Did he discover two diamonds in the rough with his first two coordinator hires, off the beaten path as they were, or were they old crony hires who put a ceiling on his program's schematic future? Will his – and the school's – reluctance to take big swings in the portal kneecap their ability to build a

roster in the modern era?

This is the team that will arrive in Columbia in Week 3. One with some nice players for 2024, like Arnold, Ward, Castellanos, and Ezeiruaku, but overall with more questions than answers. Missouri will likely give the Eagles the second of two early top ten baptisms; how the Eagles regroup in conference play, and how O'Brien molds this program, remains to be seen.

Mizzou Matchup

Last season's Missouri team gave the Tiger faithful a fright in Week 2 against Middle Tennessee State. One week before the Tigers unveiled their newly dominant passing game, they played it safe and close to the vest against Rick Stockstill's upset-minded outfit and almost paid the price. The Blue Raiders' identity was built around a playmaking quarterback who extended plays with his legs, testing the Tigers' ability to defend sideline-to-sideline, and a veteran defensive front that was able to create a surprising amount of negative plays.

Enter Boston College in 2024. The Eagles are in the first year of a new coaching staff, so perhaps the identity is going to shift this summer. But on paper, the Eagles are built around a playmaking quarterback who extends plays with his legs, which will test the Tigers' ability to defend sideline-to-sideline, and a veteran defensive front that could be able to create a surprising amount of negative plays.

If the Tigers decide to play it safe in a game where they should be sizable favorites, things might get dicey on Faurot Field. But perhaps Eli Drinkwitz is still annoyed by the way the 2021 game played out: his awkward quote about recruiting the northeast spun out of context, the miserable defensive showing, and the careless ball control of the offense leading to an overtime loss. If he still stings from that game, his staff will not take this game lightly, and they shouldn't.

A healthy, prepared, fully operational Missouri should win this game by a comfortable 14-17 point margin, earning a win over a Power Four bowl team.



Photo from Boston College Athletics

September 21, 2024 | Columbia, MO

Vanderbilt

TEAM PREVIEW

By Nathan Hurst

When Clark Lea took the head coaching job of his alma mater following the 2020 season, he along with the entire college football world, knew that his first head coaching gig might be the hardest in Power 5 football. A brief flirtation with success under James Franklin in 2012 and 2013 saw the Commodores go a remarkable 18-8. However, following Franklin's departure to Penn State, Vanderbilt failed to tally a winning season during his replacement Derek Mason's time on the job. From 2014-2020, the Commodores did make two bowl games, losing both to finish 6-7 both years. Mason's tenure was capped off with a 3-9 season in 2019 and a winless 2020 campaign, which led to his firing.

Lea hasn't fared any better than Mason in his three years as head coach, going a combined 9-27 with a miserable 2-22 record in SEC play. Entering his fourth year, the most exciting thing about Lea's term for Commodore fans has been an ongoing \$300 million facilities upgrade, including the addition of premium seats and rebuilt endzone seating on both ends of their World War II-era stadium. That construction was the subject of much mockery among SEC fans in 2023 as the Vanderbilt stadium often resembled a hypothetical venue from the old "NFL Street" video game (the real ones will know) where the teams played in an abandoned construction site on a dirt field.

OK, it wasn't that bad, but SEC fans will always pick the lowest hanging fruit, and in the last decade Vanderbilt has been the lowest hanging fruit. The stadium construction will be ongoing throughout the 2024 season, much like Lea's attempts at building his program. His current endeavor appears to be recreating the success of a fellow perennial doormat by establishing Nashville as Las Cruces East.

Vanderbilt might be the only school in the FBS, or at least in the Power 4, who can look at the New Mexico State program with some level of jealousy. While the Aggies historically have been even worse than Vanderbilt, they experienced a recent renaissance under now-retired head coach Jerry Kill. In the last two years, NMSU made just their fifth and sixth bowl games in their history and topped off the 2023 season with a win at Auburn.

In an attempt to suck up some of those good vibes, it looks like Clark Lea showed up in Las Cruces in January with one-way tickets to Nashville and just tossed them in the air like dollar bills in a gentlemen's club. This offseason, the Commodores gained the services of the Aggies' offensive coordinator, safeties coach, quarterback, back-up quarterback, running back, tight end and their retired head coach, who will serve in a consulting role for Lea.

For an offense that finished dead last in the SEC in yards per game and second-

to-last in rushing per game and points per game in 2023, transplanting a significantly better offense by numbers might make some sense. Last year, NMSU finished 45th nationally in total offense (Vanderbilt was 116th) and 63rd in points per game (Vanderbilt was 102nd).

Tim Beck comes over as the new Commodore offensive coordinator. Beck spent almost his entire 30-plus year career in Division II as an offensive coach and head coach for Pittsburg State before taking an analyst job at TCU in 2021 and then coordinating the NMSU offense for the last two years. It will be interesting to see if his offense, which was good against CUSA teams (and Auburn), can translate full-time to the SEC. He will have the benefit of bringing his signal caller with him, as quarterback Diego Pavia (and back-up quarterback and all-name team member Blaze Berlowitz) transferred to Vanderbilt this winter. True die-hard college football sickos –and let's be honest, if you're reading a Vanderbilt football preview as a Mizzou fan, you're an absolutely certifiable sicko– will remember Pavia as an incredibly tough and fun player who is as likely to try - and sometimes succeed - at running over a linebacker as he is to throw a 40-yard pass downfield.

Pavia is likely to earn the starting quarterback job, which was vacated when both of Vanderbilt's 2023 starters, AJ Swann (LSU) and Ken Seals (TCU), transferred out in December. He will bring a level of excitement and

athleticism to the Vanderbilt offense that Swann and Seals never could. While Pavia might be an upgrade, the rest of the offensive talent looks fairly bleak. The Commodores lost five receivers to the transfer portal this offseason including star Will Sheppard, who will play for Deion Sanders at Colorado in 2024. They also lost second-leading receiver London Humphreys to Georgia and second-leading rusher Patrick Smith, who transferred down to FCS.

Vanderbilt does return their leading rusher in Sedrick Alexander, though Alexander only tallied 371 yards and four touchdowns for the worst rushing team in the SEC. He'll be joined in the backfield by another NMSU transfer, Makhilyn Young, who rushed for nearly 200 yards last year for the Aggies. The receiving corps is picked over as well, as Pavia will have to rely on Louisiana-Monroe transfer Dariyan Wiley and Ole Miss transfer Jeremiah Dillon, along with a host of unproven returning receivers.

The Vanderbilt defense looks to be even worse off, as the SEC's worst unit in yards per game and points per game in 2023 doesn't appear to have gotten much stronger in the offseason. They are adding several defensive backs via the transfer portal, including Notre Dame cornerback Micah Bell, and they return leading tackler in linebacker Langston Patterson and third leading tackler CJ

Taylor. However, Vanderbilt loses second-leading tackler Jaylen Mahoney to the NFL and starting safety Savion Riley and fourth leading tackler Ethan Barr to the portal.

For a team that went winless in the SEC in 2023, Vanderbilt's 2024 schedule doesn't get much easier. They open the season at home against Virginia Tech and play six ranked SEC teams including Alabama, Texas and LSU. The Commodores should win more than the two games they secured last year, as they have non-conference games against Alcorn State, Georgia State and Ball State, however their chances of winning any SEC games are slim again in 2024. Their best bet is to steal a game at home in November against a South Carolina team that could be reeling (or potentially coach-less by that point). However, Clark Lea could do the funniest thing possible and beat Hugh Freeze and Auburn with the same NMSU coaches and players who beat Freeze last year.

Despite the paltry record in his first three seasons, it doesn't appear that Lea enters the 2024 season on the hot seat. He seems generally well-liked in Nashville and Athletic Director Candice Storey Lee appears to be taking the patient approach to Lea's rebuilding plan. However, never say never in modern college football. If the Commodores repeat last year's winless SEC schedule, which is quite

likely, it would be defensible to move on from a coach with 30 conference losses in four years. With an ongoing massive construction project and firmly cemented in ever-rebuilding roster mode, the program is covered in dust from top to bottom. Minus a major surprise, that should continue to accumulate in 2024.

Mizzou Matchup

Since their "rivalry" began in 2012, the Vanderbilt-Mizzou matchup often serves as a bellwether for the state of each program. Mizzou holds a 9-3 edge in the series since joining the conference, with the three losses marking distinct low points in the program's SEC history. In 2012, injuries riddled the Mizzou roster and the Tigers lost their first conference matchup with Vanderbilt, 19-15, in Columbia.

The Tigers' second loss came in a similarly cursed 2015 season when they fell 10-3 in perhaps the worst game I've ever seen a Mizzou offense play. Finally, Mizzou lost 21-14 in 2019 in what was perhaps the final straw for Barry Odom's career at Mizzou. On the other hand, the largest margin of victory for the Tigers came in 2020 when Mizzou defeated Vandy 41-0, spelling the doom of Derek Mason's tenure in Nashville.

Thankfully for Tiger fans, Eli Drinkwitz is undefeated against Vanderbilt and is likely to push his record to 5-0 this season. The matchup occurs in Columbia early in the year, which hopefully means the Tigers will have yet to experience any major injury attrition. As the first SEC game of the season, the Tigers should be focused and ready to kickstart their conference season with a bang.

With the Tigers building towards a playoff push in 2024 and Vanderbilt in perennial rebuild mode, expect Mizzou to dispatch the Commodores with relative ease. The Brady Cook-led offense should move up and down the field easily against the returning worst defense in the SEC, much as they did last year. Diego Pavia may make a few plays for Vanderbilt to keep things close in the first half, but like last season, Mizzou should pull away with big plays in the third quarter to win by three or four touchdowns.



Photo from Vanderbilt Athletics



Week 5

October 05, 2024 | College Station, TX

Texas A&M

Photo from Texas A&M Athletics

TEAM PREVIEW

By Parker Gillam

A new era begins in College Station as former Duke head coach and Aggie defensive coordinator Mike Elko steps in for the much-maligned Jimbo Fisher.

The initial marriage between Fisher and Texas A&M appeared to be a beautiful one, with the program even ensuring that the former Florida State coach would win a national title with the Aggies by going as far as to carve out a spot on a mock College Football Playoff Trophy. Six years, 45 wins and 25 losses later, the divorce occurred. Fisher, while successful in bringing major talent to play for him, struggled to keep those same players in College Station while also never appearing to win over the favor of the Aggie faithful and athletes.

As a result, the athletic department looked back to when Elko led four top 50 defenses as the defensive coordinator at TAMU from 2018-2021. His units improved year-to-year, and thus the 2022 ACC Coach of the Year seemed like a prime suspect to take over the head coaching vacancy following two strong seasons with the Duke Blue Devils. An agreement was reached in turn, and from there the new head man got to work. Elko brings with him a hard-nosed mindset and a high-level background in coaching the defensive side of the ball. He's already reportedly been making major changes to the program's culture as well, holding more players accountable

and promoting a stronger sense of team pride.

Under Fisher, Texas A&M was as talented as virtually any team in the country but appeared to lack the necessary discipline and team chemistry to take that step into the upper echelon of the SEC. As a result, streaky offensive play paired with solid defense and off-field issues led to mediocrity and general unrest around the program. This Aggie fanbase is as hungry as ever to see its team reclaim a spot among college football's elite, and the initial momentum under Elko has been positive.

Of course, like any program undergoing drastic staff changes, the transfer portal also defined much of the offseason headlines for TAMU. Former highly touted recruits Walter Nolen, Evan Stewart, LT Overton, Jake Johnson and a host of others departed in search of greener pastures. But, with the resources that the Texas A&M football program has at its disposal, attracting top-tier transfer targets is rarely an issue, either. Linebacker Scooby Williams (Florida), cornerback Will Lee III (Kansas State), defensive end Nic Scourton (Purdue) and offensive lineman Ar'maj Reed-Adams (Kansas) all joined the Aggies this offseason. Scourton specifically was a key win for Elko, as the former Boilermaker led the Big Ten in sacks last season with 10.

So, the theme around College Station is one of change. Elko and his star-studded

staff, highlighted by former Kansas State star QB Collin Klein at OC and the well-traveled Jay Bateman at DC, have brought with them a new energy. Recruiting, both in the high school and transfer portal ranks, has been strong thus far, and the fan base appears to be onboard with what Elko and Co. are selling.

But in this new era of SEC football, a new head coach only has a limited amount of time to produce the desired results. And while the '24 expectations aren't "SEC title or bust," the fan base does expect to see a much-improved squad from top to bottom that can contend with the top teams in this league. Opportunities to do so are plentiful, with Notre Dame, LSU, Texas and Mizzou visiting raucous Kyle Field. Anything less than eight wins would likely be considered a disappointment, but the roster needs to answer some key questions in order to achieve and potentially eclipse that win mark.

The defense, as has been the case for years, figures to be a strength yet again. Despite the portal losses and staff changes, the unit will rank among the best in the SEC thanks to Elko's influence and an experienced cast. The front four, led by Scourton, returning tackles Shemar Turner and DJ Hicks and end Shemar Stewart, will wreak havoc up front. The depth behind those four needs to be worked out, but the potential is there. The loss of All-American Edgerrin Cooper to the NFL draft leaves a massive void at linebacker, but Taurean York was a

freshman All-American in his own right and Wright should provide a strong presence as well.

In the secondary, junior Bryce Anderson returns poised for a breakout season at free safety. But, cornerback play has been the real concern in recent years. Lee should provide some stability, and fourth-year starter Tyreek Chappel is back to hold down the opposite side.

Offensively, there is tentative excitement. Connor Weigman, a former two-sport star in baseball, suffered a foot injury in the fourth game of the 2023 campaign against Auburn. The former 5-star recruit out of Texas threw for 979 yards, eight touchdowns and two interceptions prior to the injury, emerging as one of the hottest quarterbacks in the sport at the time. After approaching 100% health during the spring, Weigman expects to be a full-go come fall camp. Standing at 6-foot-3, Weigman is a great decision maker in the pocket with a live arm and just enough mobility to make defenses respect his legs. He still has a ways to go in terms of consistency and defensive recognition, but the sky appears to be the limit for the redshirt sophomore provided he remains healthy.

The supporting cast, despite losing the services of leading-receiver Stewart and a pair of offensive linemen, has potential. Moose Muhammad III is an experienced target out wide, and he'll join returning

starters Jahdae Walker and Noah Thomas to form a veteran group. The running back room struggled last season, but coaches believe that former prized recruit Rueben Owens is poised for a breakout campaign.

In the end, the key to this offense's success will come down to how the front five performs. The Aggie offensive line struggled last season, giving up 30 sacks and only averaging 136.2 yards per game on the ground. Despite returning three starters, there is plenty to figure out in the rotation. Junior Trey Zuhn III should retain his place at tackle, but the other four spots are up for grabs. Reed-Adams may slide into a starting role in his first season with TAMU.

The Aggies' special teams units struggled under Fisher, and kicker Randy Bond needs to be more consistent after converting just 26/35 attempts in 2023. Punter remains a question mark at this point, and the loss of explosive receiver Ainius Smith means that a new return man must step up as well.

Elko's staff has already made a major impact on this program, and he knows how to both recruit the Texas area and field high-caliber defenses in the rugged SEC. That alone makes him a strong hire at TAMU, but how his offenses fare in the league may determine how successful his tenure with the Aggies is. Weigman has the keys to the proverbial Ferrari in '24, and there is plenty of promising talent

around him to support that defense.

This team hosts Notre Dame, travels to The Swamp to face Florida and meets Arkansas in Dallas before September comes to a close. We'll know a lot about the identity of Elko's squad by then. Regardless, it's a safe bet that the Aggies will be a physical, tough bunch that fights every team through the fourth quarter.

Mizzou Matchup

An old Big 12 rivalry returns as these two programs attempt to make their mark in the new-look SEC. The Aggies will be battle-tested up to this point, while Mizzou will truly be in the national spotlight for the first time in 2024. Kyle Field is as imposing an environment as you can find in the sport, and it will surely be electric for this matchup, adding another level of difficulty to an already challenging game for the Tigers. Elko will be desperate for a signature win in his first season at the helm, and welcoming the Tigers to meet the 12th man seems like a great shot to do so.

Coming off a bye week, Drinkwitz's bunch should be well-rested and hitting its midseason stride. But, TAMU's athleticism and talent level will pose problems, and the ability of Weigman may allow the Aggies to score enough points to hang around. And, of course, that home crowd will more than carry its weight, even during the morning time slot that this game occupies. Cook and Co. will be pushed to the limit in more ways than one and will need to be sharp at all levels in order to emerge victorious. In a road environment like Kyle Field, a balanced offensive attack could be key to help take some of the pressure off the passing attack and force TAMU's defense to play on its heels.

This will also be the first true test for the new-look Missouri offensive line, as the likes of Scourton and Turner will be eager to pin their ears back at home. If Green and Membou can hold up, and the revamped Tiger secondary can prevent Weigman from getting into a rhythm, then Mizzou should be able to escape College Station with a victory. If not, then the Aggies are fully capable of pulling off an upset.



Photo from Texas A&M Athletics

October 12, 2024 | Hadley, MA

UMass

Photo from UMass Athletics

TEAM PREVIEW

By Quentin Corpuel

If there's any game that can win the "Fever Dream Game of the Year" award, Missouri-UMass is a pretty good candidate.

There are a few reasons why. For one, ranked power conference schools don't usually schedule road games at unranked mid-major schools. Each year, there will be a few of those games at most. Last season, for example, Alabama played at South Florida, Oregon State visited San Jose State, Oklahoma battled Tulsa and Texas Tech actually lost at Wyoming, an infamous accomplishment MU fans know all too well.

Missouri has also had a small, yet slightly checkered history with road games against unranked mid-major opponents as a ranked team. They almost had an oh-no in Jonesboro when they escaped Arkansas State with a 27-20 win in 2015; before that, the Tigers went to Toledo in 2014, trouncing Gary Pinkel's former school 49-24. The time before that was a nationally-televised contest at Troy in 2004 that, in short, ended terribly for the Tigers. The Trojans scored 24 unanswered points, and the voices of Mike Tirico, Kirk Herbstreit and Lee Corso narrated one of the lowest points in MU's 21st century football history amidst a 24-14 defeat.

Missouri also hasn't made many ventures to the Northeast in its 122-year history. Its last visit was in 2021, when the Tigers

fell in overtime to Boston College. Before that, Missouri blasted UConn by 40 in 2017, and before that, the Tigers got blasted by Syracuse 41-9 in 1986.

The final reason this game might not feel real is that the Minutemen are, to put it nicely, awful at football. Even when the big, bad Power 5 schools made the trek to mid-major stadiums, they rarely took on teams that were terrible. Since they moved back up to the FBS level in 2012, UMass has cemented itself as the worst program in the nation. They've won 24 games over the past 12 seasons, and just three of them have come against teams who eventually finished above .500 (one of those teams was FCS-level Duquesne in 2018).

It's a shame that UMass doesn't live up to its mascot name. The Minutemen were a group of organized militia in New England during the Colonial Era who were known for arriving first at battles, hence the "minute" part of their name. They were a phenomenally-trained group of young men who were ready to battle at a moment's notice, and they played an important part in the Revolutionary War. For over a decade, the American football team that holds their same nickname has looked poorly trained whose place in the college football universe has been in the basement.

However, despite its recent futility, UMass wasn't a total U-mess last season. The Minutemen won three games for the first time since 2018, when they won...

four games, which is the most they've won in a season since moving back up to the FBS 12 years ago. Their offense wasn't completely terrible, with its engine being running back Kay'Ron Lynch-Adams, who became one of the most decorated offensive players in program history. UMass also beat eventual 10-win New Mexico State, who beat Auburn, who beat Mississippi State, who beat Arizona, who beat Oklahoma, who beat Texas, who beat Alabama, who beat Georgia. So by transitive property, UMass was the number one team in the country that no one ever seemed to acknowledge.

In all seriousness, the level of promise within the program seems to be the highest it's been in a long time, especially with UMass set to enter the MAC starting next season. This move comes over a decade after the school declined an offer from the conference, which the Minutemen had been a part of since they moved up to the FBS level.

From the outside, the football team's move to the Independents from the MAC was because they wanted to keep its other sports, especially men's basketball, in the Atlantic-10 conference, which all other UM sports had been a part of since its genesis in 1975. At the time, this decision was smart. Men's basketball was part of an awesome mid-major conference that had six teams (including UMass) in the NCAA Tournament. Meanwhile, the MAC hadn't sent multiple teams to the Big Dance since 1999.

Now, that's not the case anymore. The A-10 hasn't had more than two teams in March Madness since 2018, and several tournament-goers wouldn't have gone dancing if they hadn't won the conference tournament, including this past year's champion, Duquesne. UMass also hasn't made the tournament since 2014, so the prestige in the sport has waned heavily. This re-entry into the MAC sort of feels like a last chance opportunity for the program to prove that it's worthy of staying at the FBS level.

Mizzou Matchup

Looking at UMass, there's not a whole lot to get excited about, although there are a few positive glimmers. Starting quarterback Taisun Phommachahn finally found some footing after transferring from Clemson and Georgia Tech. He was an ok passer, and while he didn't run often, he was pretty effective when he

did. In UM's win over New Mexico State, Phommachahn ran for 96 yards and a touchdown.

The skill positions feature a handful of promising transfers. Clemson/Miami (FL) transfer Frank Ladson Jr. is a jump ball winner who might present matchup problems on the outside at 6'4", 205 pounds. Texas Tech/Jacksonville State transfer Sterling Galban is a versatile slot receiver that did a little bit of everything for the Gamecocks, which included punt returns. Returning redshirt junior Jalen John should lead the way out of the backfield, and redshirt freshman Cookie Desiderio, who had an awfully solid performance in the Minutemen's spring game, should follow.

However, despite having a player named Cookie, there isn't a whole lot of sweetness throughout the roster. As I potentially foreshadowed two sentences ago, Lynch-Adams is gone, as he

transferred to Michigan State in April. The offense also wasn't very good despite its improved numbers comparative to past UMass teams, and a sudden leap seems unlikely.

Defensively, UMass has been an absolute U-mess (that's it for that joke) for its entire FBS existence. UM has never finished better than 92nd in points per game allowed, and they've ranked dead last in the nation three times, including last season. The Minutemen return most of their personnel under the same defensive coordinator, so an improvement on that side of the ball will likely be marginal at best.

Against Penn State last season (a team similar to Missouri), UMass looked overmatched in a 63-0 defeat. College sports are often ripe for the unexpected becoming reality, but Missouri should exit The Bay State with a blowout victory.

Photo from UMass Athletics



October 19, 2024 | Columbia, MO

Auburn

TEAM PREVIEW

By *Quentin Corpuel*

Hey, all. Sorry to start off this preview on a low note, but I'm pretty sure Mizzou didn't invent Homecoming.

Yeah, yeah, I know. The idea is shoved down the throats of prospective, current and former students, and most (understandably) swallow the pride, which fills them up with school spirit that's released in large quantities every October. I get it! It's a unique honor that holds a lot of prestige, especially considering how much the tradition has become ingrained in the lives of American students across the country.

But while The NCAA, Jeopardy! and Trivial Pursuit all say that MU was the first, there are too many other schools that make fairly credible claims of doing Homecoming before 1911 (the year Mizzou claims to have started the tradition) for me to think that Chester Brewer was actually the catalyst of this great American event. Auburn, Baylor, Southwestern University and Texas all have tangible claims that they were the first in 1909, and Illinois says they did it in 1910. But the school that actually might have all of them beat is Northern Illinois, whose football team apparently held a Homecoming game against NIU alumni in 1903 that the actual team took 6-0.

Regardless, even if they weren't the first, the Tigers rest firmly at the pinnacle of

how Homecoming should go about. Think about it like this: Michael Jordan didn't invent the fadeaway, but he perfected it. Missouri has done the same with Homecoming; whether it's the parade, the competitions between student organizations or Greek life getting sucked into a black hole of festivities, no one does it like the University of Missouri.

What makes Homecoming rule even harder for Columbians is when Missouri wins the Homecoming football game, which has happened quite a bit over the past century-plus. The Tigers are 67-40-5 on Homecoming and haven't lost on the special day since the 2016 debacle against Middle Tennessee State. Even better for the Tigers, they have a good shot of keeping that winning streak alive when Auburn comes to town on Oct. 19.

Like many SEC programs, Auburn has a long track record of winning that dates all the way back to the 1950s. But while the other Tigers have experienced occasional stretches of ineptitude, they've rarely been as extensive as the one they're amidst right now. Auburn has registered three consecutive losing seasons – that's only happened three other times in the program's 121-year history (1975-77, 1946-50, 1927-30). AU hasn't been completely devoid of disastrous seasons (Tommy Tuberville and Gene Chizik's final seasons are good examples), but they've never really been consistently mediocre... until now.

On the field, one of Auburn's biggest

issues has been the offense, specifically the aerial attack. The ground game has been just fine – Jarquez Hunter has been AU's Cody Schrader since 2021, another product of a program who's been known for having a strong run in recent memory. But when the ball has been thrown, that's where major problems have arisen.

There are plenty of stats that entail Auburn's ineptitude throwing the ball over the past couple of seasons, but one stands out in particular. In 2022 and 2023, the SEC had 52 different 500-yard receivers. That includes pass-catchers from Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi State, Missouri and Texas A&M, each of whom have had desolate passing games in 2022 and/or 2023. Auburn didn't have a single 500-yard receiver. Again, Auburn has prided itself on the run game in recent memory, and balanced attacks are cool to an extent, but gosh, this was a tad harrowing to read.

Thankfully, the airplane should reach a higher altitude in 2024. After all, Auburn hired Hugh Freeze in part because of this very reason; while his time at Ole Miss was mostly defined by the Rebels' "Landshark" defense in 2014, he helped develop some stellar offenses, which peaked in 2015 with Chad Kelly eclipsing 4,000 passing yards en route to a 10-win season. Freeze was then able to emulate that success at Liberty, where he helped the Flames develop into an Independents powerhouse by lighting opponents on fire through the air.

The Tigers should also experience a reinvigoration within the pass-catcher room which, as noted previously, was one of the worst in the Power 5 over the past two seasons. Yes, the quarterback play hasn't helped. AU's starting snaps in 2022 were split between TJ Finley, who transferred to Texas State after the season (where he actually enjoyed a productive 2023 campaign), and Robby Ashford, a run-first QB who departed after this past season to South Carolina, where he lost the position battle to redshirt freshman LaNorris Sellers in May. Auburn's 2023 starter, Payton Thorne, couldn't carry over the same success he had at Michigan State in 2021 (more on this soon).

Thorne, however, wasn't helped by a receiver room that was both injured and, for lack of a better word, bad. Ja'Varrius Johnson, who led Auburn in receiving two seasons ago, was injured, didn't catch a pass for over a month and had one game with over 70 receiving yards, so naturally, he led AU's wideouts in receiving again. Behind him were a slew of guys that could never establish much consistency, which led to tight end Rivaldo Fairweather, a transfer from Florida International, leading the team with 394 receiving yards. That made Auburn one of four teams in the entire FBS to have its leading receiver finish the season with less than 400 receiving yards (the others were Ball State, Iowa and Nebraska, all of whom had bottom-10 offenses in 2023).

This offseason, Auburn decided to understandably overhaul the entire room.

When the dust from recruiting and the transfer portal settled, only two receivers from last year's team remained.

One reason for the optimism is AU signing the best freshman receiving class in the nation. The Tigers flipped five-star Cam Coleman from Texas A&M and also scored a commitment from five-star Perry Thompson. They'll be joined by two four-stars in Bryce Cain and Malcolm Simmons. Their two gifts from the transfer portal came in Keandre Lambert-Smith, who led Penn State in receiving last season, and Robert Lewis, who led Georgia State in receiving last season.

The biggest wild card is Thorne, who's slated to start at QB once again. He had solid games against Auburn's worst opponents in 2023, but he melted in most appearances against quality defenses. Overall, the offense should take a step forward in 2024, but the length of that step is largely dependent on how close Thorne can look to his Spartan self.

Defensively, Auburn was below-average last season, and it's slightly difficult to tell which direction they'll go in 2024. After defensive coordinator Ron Roberts took the same position at Florida this past offseason, Auburn hired DJ Durkin to take his place. Putting his tainted tenure at Maryland aside, Durkin has yielded nationally awesome results as DC at Florida (2013-14), Michigan (2015), Ole Miss (2020-21) and Texas A&M (2022-23).

Personnel-wise, they've got a handful of returners in the front seven, which will

be led by linebacker Eugene Asante. He took a massive leap in 2023 after only appearing in four games the season prior, and it'll be interesting to see how Kirby Moore mitigates his impact as an explosive weak-side linebacker.

Behind Asante sits a secondary that lost a ton of players to the NFL. DJ James, Jaylin Simpson, Zion Puckett and Nehemiah Pritchett all made the leap to the pros, leaving Keionte Scott and Kayin Lee as the only returning players who were major contributors a season ago. While Scott and Lee are solid, there's a good chance Missouri's receivers pick on them all game long.

Mizzou Matchup

In each of Auburn's 21st century contests against Missouri, they've established themselves as the superior Tigers. The first was the 2013 SEC Championship, where Nick Marshall and Tre Mason literally ran over MU for a berth in the final BCS title game. The second was in 2017, when Auburn demolished Missouri in Columbia en route to almost becoming the first two-loss program to make the four-team College Football Playoff. The last meeting between these two teams was in 2022 on AU's Homecoming, which saw Harrison Mevis [redacted] and Nathaniel Peat [redacted] for one of the most gut-wrenching losses in recent Missouri football history.

This time around, Auburn probably won't light up the scoreboard like the first two times they played Missouri. They could easily put up a good fight, especially if Auburn's receivers are as advertised and Asante can wreak havoc on Missouri's offense. There's also a good shot of the Tigers starting the season 4-0, as they open with four straight home games against Alabama A&M, California, New Mexico and Arkansas.

But when the Tigers come up to Columbia (after games against Oklahoma and Georgia), it's difficult to envision AU winning even a few positional matchups. While MU's secondary will face a quality test, the Tigers from the Midwest should be able to finally conquer its nickname brothers from down south and should head into Tuscaloosa on a high note.



Photo from Auburn Athletics

October 26, 2024 | Tuscaloosa, AL

Alabama

TEAM PREVIEW

By Chad Moller

The world of Alabama football got rocked to its core this past offseason when legendary coach Nick Saban surprised the world with his retirement. A lightning-quick coaching search led to pulling Kalen DeBoer out of Washington to be the man to follow in the unspeakably huge footsteps of the man most consider far and away the best college coach to ever hold a whistle and clipboard.

No pressure there, right?

Just how the program will acquit itself in its new post-Saban reality will be one of the more interesting dynamics to follow in the upcoming 2024 season, whether you're a Bama fan or not. You always knew that Alabama would contend for the national title each year no matter what they had coming back from the previous team.

Now, it's a little harder to automatically get to the point where Alabama should be a foregone conclusion to make a deep postseason run. But, it would be careless to assume they won't be in that position, as well.

After all, DeBoer brings a quite salty resume with him to Tuscaloosa, having gone 25-3 the last two years at Washington, preceded by a 12-6 tenure in two years prior at Fresno State (2020-21). He got his first taste of head coaching at NAIA power Sioux Falls, where his

teams went 67-3 over five years (2005-09) and won three national titles. On paper it seems like a no-brainer homerun hire.

But history has shown that it can be quite daunting to be the guy who follows the guy. The last time that Alabama replaced their previous legend (i.e. - Bear Bryant), things didn't go so well overall - at least according to their lofty expectations.

So just what are the expectations for Alabama in year one of its new era? It might depend on where you ask, but most preseason publications have the Tide squarely in the mix for a CFP spot, so there's not much dropoff expected. If you polled random Alabama fans, it's likely their expectations are nothing short of national title or bust, thanks to what Saban built.

DeBoer and his new coaching staff will have to navigate a very different-looking roster, as the Tide lost around 40 players from the 2023 team either to the NFL or to the transfer portal. Of course, just when you're starting to feel a little bad for Bama, don't. They pulled in a transfer class of 15 standouts (including one former five-star and seven former four-star talents) that ranked as high as No. 3 nationally in the portal rankings.

There's plenty of talent still in the cupboard to mix the influx of transfers, and it all starts with the face of the program, junior QB Jalen Milroe. An imposing physical 6-foot-2, 220-pound

specimen, Milroe developed a reputation as a lethal downfield passer who had some struggles with the mid-range game, but his ability to scramble and beat opponents with his feet made him tough to defend. Just how he will adapt to a new offensive scheme that saw Michael Penix Jr. blossom remains to be seen.

Alabama never seems to be short on running backs, and it appears that highly-touted sophomore Justice Haynes will get the first shot at carrying the bulk of the load. Question marks at receiver and along the offensive line give the Tide offense some intrigue heading into the year.

Defensively, DeBoer brought in Kane Wommack as his coordinator, and the former South Alabama head coach brings with him a new scheme called the 4-2-5 "swarm" defense. Saban made his living for the most part with a base 4-3 scheme, but part of his success was being flexible and adapting to his roster, and that's the challenge facing Wommack and the defensive staff in 2024.

Alabama returns proven individuals at each level on defense, including lineman Tim Keenan, linebackers Deontae Lawson and Jihaad Campbell and safety Malachi Moore. Building around them with unproven talent or transfers will be the name of the game this season, especially given the fact that the secondary - minus Moore - will be completely rebuilt and quite inexperienced.

The Tide benefit from returning veteran punter James Burnip when the time comes to flip the field, but they will miss the production of placekicker Will Reichard, who set numerous records in what seemed like a 12-year career at Alabama. Don't feel too sorry for the Tide, however, as they got Graham Nicholson to transfer in from Miami (Ohio), where he went 27-of-28 on field goals in 2023.

Mizzou Matchup

Let's be real, there won't be a soul in the national media likely giving Mizzou anything more than a puncher's chance in this game. Even with all of the changeover at Alabama and all that Mizzou returns, the fact remains that people still see the programs on different levels. And while it can be annoying to Tiger fans, they're used to their team being overlooked and counted out. Heck, Mizzou's unofficial 2024 season mantra of "Why stop now" somewhat addresses the mindset the Tigers hope to carry through the year. They took that big step in 2023; why stop there?

Let's put it another way— shy of winning the SEC or reaching the CFP final four, what result in 2024 would resonate most nationally for Mizzou? Yup. Winning in Tuscaloosa. Remember how big Johnny Manziel's win at Alabama was in 2012? That launched him and his Aggies onto the national scene, and likely played a big factor in Manziel winning the Heisman that season.

There's a lot of reasons why a Tiger win might seem unlikely, yet there's plenty to line up in Mizzou's favor that makes the concept seem plausible. On the schedule, Mizzou comes as the sandwich game in between two of Bama's more fierce rivalries, so the fact that they play at Tennessee the week before and at LSU the next game, perhaps that will allow the Tigers to be unexpected snipers?

Either way, it's not out of the question to project that the game will be a huge one on the national landscape. If things break right for Eli Drinkwitz and Co., the Tigers could enter the game in Tuscaloosa at 7-0, or hopefully no worse than 6-1.

Similarly, the Crimson Tide shouldn't have more than one, maybe two blemishes on their record coming in.

Eight games into the season, it's impossible to know what the injury situation will be, what momentum or lack thereof that each team will be riding with. If the Tigers are to go into Bryant-Denny Stadium and come out with a win, they'll likely need to win the battle of the trenches. Which is always easier said than done when facing Alabama.

Will Mizzou's secondary be vulnerable after losing both starting cornerbacks to the NFL? Will Alabama's passing game with Heisman hopeful QB Jalen Milroe become more effective? How will Mizzou's offensive skill position dudes match up? With an experienced offense coming back for the Tigers, you kind of wish they'd get Alabama and its inexperienced defense earlier in the season while the kinks were still being worked out.

Either way, come Oct. 26, we'll be on the edge of our seats waiting to find out.



Photo from Alabama Athletics

November 06, 2024 | Columbia, MO

Oklahoma

TEAM PREVIEW

By Quentin Corpuel

"Hello, Mizzou, we're talkin' to you! It is time for your Tigers to show me, to show you, show the world they're ready to stand up finally to Oklahoma and step forward as a serious contender and earn the respect you've been denied for decades! Will the number one upset pattern three-peat tonight and shake up the championship chase again? Can these fans inspire their team the way we saw at South Carolina and Wisconsin?"

A pair of collisions of unbeaten dotting the landscape today. Down at Auburn, on The Plains, no chance of rain when the two Tigers collide. Can Heisman front-runner Cam Newton conquer LSU's rugged defense? Which SEC heavyweight stays unbeaten?

A crucial day in the beloved Big Ten. Sparty on upset alert. And when the Hawkeyes and Badgers match muscle, who will have the edge in the trenches?

The state-of-the-art computers of the BCS dislike the Ducks and the Broncos and the Horned Frogs, but the hard drives are excited about the Sooners and the Spartans and the Tigers! Who's getting it right: computers or pollsters?

College GameDay on Show-Me Saturday, for the Tigers, the Tigers, the Tigers and the Sooners, comes to Columbia for the first time."

9 a.m. CST on Oct. 23, 2010. As cameras panned over elated Missouri students on Francis Quadrangle, Rece Davis opened that week's edition of College GameDay by essentially narrating an era of college football. The BCS system. Cam Newton's rising stardom. A loaded top of the Big Ten. Mid-majors that felt slighted by the computers. But most of all, Missouri was shining in the national spotlight like never before.

While College GameDay had been to an MU football game before (Missouri-Oklahoma 2007, Missouri-Kansas 2007, Oklahoma-Missouri 2007, Missouri-Texas 2008), the crew had never ventured to Columbia. For the first time ever, the center of college football was in mid-Missouri. Later that night, the Tigers gave their fans a night they'd never forget and making that era Davis entailed remembered a little more fondly. When Oklahoma visits on Nov. 9, could that spotlight return? Can this new era of college football be remembered with an extra dash of sweetness by the black and gold? There's a really good shot, although it might be tough.

For one, Oklahoma has arguably the most difficult schedule in college football. Their matchups before Week 11 include hosting Tennessee while traveling to Auburn, Ole Miss and Dallas for Red River against Texas. Missouri will also travel to Texas A&M, and in the two weeks before Nov. 9, host Auburn and travel to Alabama. If the Sooner Schooner wagon tumbles multiple times before then, the

spotlight might go somewhere else.

But this year's OU squad is set to be legit despite a gauntlet of opponents in their first year as a part of the SEC. On paper, the Sooners look complete; their offense is exhilarating, their defense is opportunistic, and stability within the coaching staff has the Sooners in line to make the expanded 12-team College Football Playoff.

The top of that stability within the coaching staff is head man Brent Venables, who's entering his third season at OU, where he coached from 1999-2011. He started as co-defensive coordinator, but he took full DC responsibilities until 2004, when other co-DC Mike Stoops took the head coaching job at Arizona. After eight seasons in Norman, Venables accepted the DC job at Clemson, where he ultimately became one of the best and highest-paid assistants in college football. In December 2021, he accepted the head coaching job at Oklahoma, replacing the USC-bound Lincoln Riley.

In his first season at the helm, Venables had to navigate unusually rocky waters in Norman, as the Sooners registered their first losing season since 1998. That included a 49-0 loss to Texas, their largest margin of defeat in the rivalry's 124-year history. The Riley Era strategy of a Herculean offense uplifting a mediocre defense didn't work, as the wagon-load of blown coverages and missed tackles were oftentimes too much

for Dillon Gabriel & Co. to overcome.

The defense's troubles were slightly surprising considering Venables' successful defensive background, but the unit rebounded in a big way the following season, albeit against an easier schedule. They allowed almost 72 yards and a touchdown less per game in 2023; those efforts were led by Danny Stutsman, a havoc-inducer at middle linebacker, and Billy Bowman, a ballhawking strong safety who tallied six interceptions last season, which tied for second in the nation.

The good news for the unit is that most everyone returns, and they also got a major addition to the defensive line in TCU transfer Damonic Williams. The defensive line was a major area of weakness under Riley, but it's turned into

a strength as of late. Williams will team up with Ethan Downs, Da'Jon Terry, Jacob Lacey and five-star wrecking ball David Stone to form a defensive line that might look as strong as Missouri's over the past couple of seasons.

When the Sooners are on offense, Corey Batoon will probably have his hands full with OU starting quarterback Jackson Arnold, a sophomore who won 2022 National Gatorade Player of the Year at Guyer High School in Texas who was OU's highest-rated recruit in the ESPN 300 era (since 2006). Playing backup to Dillon Gabriel last season, Arnold only threw a pass in four games during the regular season, but the small sample size saw big-time plays from the freshman.

Like many rookie quarterbacks at a big-name school, however, Arnold made a

few porous mistakes. In his one start against Arizona in the Alamo Bowl, Arnold completed just 58 percent of his passes and was intercepted three times. One of those interceptions was especially odd; Arnold had Drake Stoops wide open for a first down, but he inexplicably hesitated for a whole second. Although he eventually tried to hit Stoops, his hesitation proved costly, as Arizona's Martell Irby intercepted the pass.

But for the most part, Arnold looked the part of a future star, which is what was promised out of high school. If there's one word to describe his game, it's electric. He's got a live arm to pair with elite mobility, a lethal combination that'll likely get more deadly with time.

Most of all, however, Arnold looked extremely comfortable, a rarity in freshman quarterbacks in both college and the NFL. He's tranquil in the pocket, undeterred by pressure; there was one throw against Tulsa where he got bulldozed by a defensive lineman, yet still threw a perfect deep shot nearly 40 yards down the right sideline to Nic Anderson for a touchdown. He also made a few huge throws in a tight game against BYU, and although he threw mostly short passes against Arkansas State earlier in the season, Arnold went 11/11.

What makes OU's offense even scarier is that Arnold's electricity is accentuated by a wildly skilled receiver room. The only major loss is Drake Stoops, the son of legendary OU head coach Bob Stoops who was Oklahoma's leading receiver last season. He was a classic slot receiver: small, quick, strong hands, willing to take a hit.

Although the loss of Stoops will hurt, everyone else is back. Andrel Anthony, a Michigan transfer who was one of Gabriel's top targets before tearing his ACL against Texas in Week ?, is back in full capacity. Anderson returns after a season that saw him average a ridiculous 21 yards per catch while also having 10 of his 38 receptions go for touchdowns. The oh-so-shifty Jalil Farooq is back, and the Sooners also landed former Purdue star Deion Burks in the transfer portal, who led the Boilermakers in receiving last season.

It's a mix of seemingly all possible elite



aspects of a receiver. There's a ton of size; flanking the 6-foot-4 Anderson are a pair of 6-foot-1 guys in Anthony and Farooq as well as 6-foot-5 Jayden Gibson, whose catch radius is shockingly big. With Farooq and Burks, there's plenty of speed and quickness, especially Burks, who racked up 223 yards after the catch last season. Oh, and next to Arnold in the backfield is Gavin Sawchuk, one of the best freshman running backs in the nation last season. This could easily be the football version of an Oklahoma Smokeshow.

The same-look personnel will have a new leader, as former offensive coordinator Jeff Leiby took the Mississippi State head coaching job over the offseason. His replacement is Seth Littrell, who arrives in Norman after seven years as head coach of North Texas. His background is quite adventurous: Littrell was a fullback at OU in the late '90's, and he was a captain on the 200 national championship team. He then coached under Mark Mangino at Kansas, Mike Leach at Mississippi State at Texas Tech, Stoops at Arizona, Kevin Wilson at Indiana and Larry Fedora at North Carolina before becoming the head coach at UNT .

In each role, offenses under Littrell experienced immediate success under schemes that were defined by toughness and flexibility; according to former North Texas quarterback Mason Fine, Littrell's philosophies are a melting pot of what he's learned from all the coaches he's been under.

"He kind of molds and adapts from year to year," Fine told AllSooners. "He uses his players' strengths really well — 'What offense is best for my players?' Not necessarily 'Hey, this is my scheme, this is how I'm gonna do things, this is how I'm gonna run it.' I think he really adapts well to his players and their talents and really hides a lot of weaknesses, wherever that may be on a team."

Mizzou Matchup

With that in mind, expect Arnold to be on the move often. Whenever Littrell had a running quarterback at his disposal, whether it was Fine or Jason Bean (who



played QB at UNT before transferring to Kansas), they'd be running a lot. This might not bode well for Missouri, who struggled defending mobile quarterbacks in 2023. Jayden Daniels, Avery Johnson and Max Brown all ran wild against the Tigers last season; with a similar defensive structure in place, it'll be interesting to see how Batoon defends QB running plays.

One area Missouri could exploit, however, is Oklahoma's offensive line, which underwent heavy turnover during the offseason. All five starters from an awesome 2023 unit who combined for 11,037 career collegiate snaps and 157 career starts are gone. They were replaced with some quality, experienced starters from the transfer portal, but there's a lot of uncertainty at a position that's heavily reliant on chemistry.

On paper, this should be a clash of titans. After all, Oklahoma isn't used to losing. They're tied with Georgia for the third-most wins in college football since 2003 behind Alabama and Ohio State. Most years since the end of World War II have seen the Sooners at or near the top of college football, and 2024 shouldn't be much different.

Then again, OU was perched even higher

in 2010. Perhaps this time around, Rece Davis will narrate this era of college football as MU students wave joyously at a camera up above. That week will feature seven power conference matchups where at least one of the teams weren't in that conference the season prior. The SEC slate will likely see powerhouses clash; LSU hosts Alabama while Georgia travels to Ole Miss. The two weeks prior could also see big upsets; along with Missouri and Oklahoma, preseason Playoff contenders Penn State, Florida State, Utah, Ole Miss, Oregon, Arizona and Ohio State all have road tilts over that span.

This could easily be a game where Missouri fans talk about it like the last OU-MU contest at Faurot. You remember when Gahn McGaffie turned your anticipation into elation, when Aldon Smith picked off the screen, when Jerrell Jackson stayed on his feet, when Zaviar Gooden jumped the pass, when Kendial Lawrence pitched it to Michael Egnew, when James Franklin kept pushing the pile, when DeMarco Murray ran around frantically as the game clock expired despite a Sooner win being impossible.

Can the magic of 2010 reappear 14 years later? It's absolutely possible, but it's going to be a tough plain to cross.

November 16, 2024 | Columbia, SC

South Carolina

TEAM PREVIEW

By Dan Keegan

The South Carolina football program finds itself entering the fall of 2024 in a similar position to the one the Missouri program was in this time last year. The head coach's seat is not hot, exactly, but the results could be better. The promise of recruiting wins has not paid serious dividends, and despite a splashy win or two, there is no week-in and week-out consistency. Of course, we now know that Missouri was laying a foundation, building a veteran culture and talented roster that broke through. Has Shane Beamer been following a similar blueprint in the other Columbia, or will his Gamecocks spin their wheels for another 6-6 type season?

There is an argument that South Carolina is the hardest program in the SEC to win at; at least, the hardest of the 15 out of 16 that actually try to compete in football. You can go back to World War II and not find a coach who was "promoted" out of South Carolina; everyone else either died on the job, retired or was fired. Beamer looked like he might break that streak after a magical 2022 season that saw his team score two top-ten upsets, of Tennessee and Clemson, to close out the season. His program was trendy, high school recruiting was on the way up, and two impressive showings had people buying back their Spencer Rattler stock.

But things went south in 2023. The line

play was some of the worst in the league on both sides of the ball. The run game was anemic, and the team stumbled to a 5-7 record without scoring any of their signature big upset wins. Looking under the hood of the program shows a clear trend. The special teams are consistently excellent, finishing top 12 in SP+ in all three of Beamer's seasons. The defense is consistently mediocre, finishing 49th, 55th, and 56th in SP+ each year. And the offense fluctuates wildly: in Beamer's first year the team was 86th in SP+ for offense, up to 25th in the great 2022 season, and back down to 58th last year.

Will the offense be the good, the bad, or the ugly this season? In what has been a theme for the Gamecocks, the team will be rebuilding their depth chart as they go through another offseason with major roster turnover in the transfer portal. The biggest change will be at quarterback, as Rattler heads to the NFL, and redshirt freshman LaNorris Sellers will step into the role. Sellers was a four-star prospect in the 247Sports composite, the 17th overall quarterback in the class of 2023. He is a completely different player than Rattler; Sellers is a dynamic athlete who will add a serious running threat to the South Carolina ground game.

They will need it. The Gamecocks had one of the worst rush attacks in Power Five last year. They finished dead last in the SEC – even behind Vanderbilt – in total rush yards (1,021), yards per carry (2.9) and yards per game (85.1). Advanced metrics are similarly cruel: they finished

124th in FBS in rushing success rate and 99th in rushing explosives. Mario Anderson led this team in rushing with 707 yards, but transferred to Memphis. Old friend Rocket Sanders arrives from Arkansas to try to resurrect his college career. Sanders is no stranger to running behind mediocre offensive lines, something that has been the norm in Columbia in recent years.

The line is again under construction. Injuries plagued this unit last year, forcing two true freshmen into serious playing time. Both (Tree Balade and Trovon Baugh) are likely starters this year, as is veteran utility man Voshon Lee. 5-star true freshman Josiah Thompson also adds to the mix, but as Balade and Baugh showed last year, freshmen, even talented ones, often struggle when pressed into early action on the lines in the SEC.

One secret ingredient that could make all these unknowns into a working run game is new assistant coach Shawn Elliott. The former Georgia State head coach (and interim head man for these Gamecocks when Steve Spurrier retired midseason) left Atlanta to take a role in Columbia as tight ends coach and run game coordinator. Elliott is a run game savant and has coordinated quality ground attacks wherever he goes. Sellers and Sanders are good runners, and if the line can stay healthy and make strides, Elliott is the right chef to make these ingredients into a tasty dish.

The passing game is a mystery. Spencer Rattler is gone, and the best receiver of 2022 (Juice Wells, transfer to Ole Miss) and the best receiver of 2023 (Xavier Legette, NFL draft) additionally are gone. But the revamped receiver room is interesting with a high ceiling, at least. Nyck Harbor is as raw as they come, but he looks like an NFL tight end and runs like an Olympic sprinter, literally. Gage Laverdain (Miami of Ohio) and Jared Brown (Coastal Carolina) transfer in and were both electric, big play threats at their previous stops. If all three are ready for SEC football, this could be a sneakily dangerous corps. But will the inexperienced Sellers be able to get them the ball, and will these raw but inexperienced receivers be ready to elevate their quarterback in turn?

Unlike the offense, which has been strikes or gutters during Beamer's tenure, the defense has been consistently poor over all three seasons. Last season, the Gamecocks were 24th in the country in preventing explosives – a fine number, except that it was paired with the 95th ranked success rate. They were far too willing to allow you to march up and down the field all day. Despite the sole brilliance of defensive tackle Tonka Hemingway, a first-team all-SEC candidate this year, the line play was consistently mediocre. The Gamecocks only recorded 21 sacks as a team, 105th in the country, and ranked 75th overall in Havoc rate.

The good news is that this mediocre unit returns a ton of starters, ranking 11th in Bill Connelly's returning production metric on defense. Hemingway is back, as is linebacker Debo Williams, and safety Jalon Kilgore, a freshman All-American last year. The anemic pass rush should be improved by the arrival of Kyle Kennard from Georgia Tech, rated as a four-star transfer, and Dylan Stewart, a blue-chip, consensus five-star edge rusher from the Washington, DC area. While coordinator Clayton White's track record has not been good at putting quality defenses on the field in Columbia, this is perhaps the best set of pieces he has had to work with. And there is continuity on this side of the ball, something that has lacked in Beamer's transfer-heavy program so far.

Outside of Columbia, expectations are low for the Gamecocks. That is exactly where the scrappy Beamer wants his team – in a position to overachieve. There are pieces in place to surprise people this fall: a veteran defense with a few star-level contributors and breakout candidates. An offense that figures out how to build a scary, multi-faceted rushing attack to complement gamebreaking speed at wide receiver. But in this league, nothing is taken for granted. Perhaps the defense continues to languish in the middle of the pack nationally. Perhaps Sellers is too raw of a passer, and the offense is too one-dimensional. Perhaps a transient roster never gels, or perhaps the brutal schedule – the Gamecocks play seven top-15 SP+ teams – is too punishing.

is too punishing.

It is not quite a make-or-break, hot-seat season for Shane Beamer, more of a "fork in the road" kind of season. Because the petulant act, the mediocre defenses, and the overmatched line play could start to get stale. The program punched above its weight during his first two years before failing to meet high expectations in

2023. There is a path to overachieving again this fall, and the Gamecocks would be wise to take it.

Mizzou Matchup

The two teams will meet in mid-November in Williams-Brice Stadium for South Carolina's conference finale. The Tigers will be coming off what will surely be an emotional game against Oklahoma, while the Gamecocks will be playing their final league game after returning from a trip to Vanderbilt.

Missouri has owned this series in recent years, running a five-game winning streak, and the last two victories were of the dominant fashion. Blake Baker had the Spencer Rattler offense figured out, holding them to 489 total yards and only two touchdowns combined in two comfortable Missouri wins. Baker's physical defensive backfield and aggressive pressure schemes were a particularly bad matchup for the chuck-and-duck Gamecocks.

If South Carolina is able to reach their roster's ceiling this year, they will be a tough matchup for Missouri. We will know late in the season if the LaNorris Sellers experiment is working, and the South Carolina rushing attack could be a well-oiled machine under Elliott's tutelage by that stage. Mizzou has thrived against the run in recent years, but will be replacing many key pieces in the front seven – there is no guarantee of the same level of play.

Missouri's offense will be able to score on Clayton's White defense. Even a "best case" scenario for South Carolina sees them rising to, say, 20th or so in defensive SP+, with a deep secondary and a dominant Hemingway leading a rejuvenated defensive line. Missouri projects to be strong up front and excellent at receiver, so they will be able to attack Carolina.

If both teams arrive in this late-season matchup healthy, and South Carolina's offense is submitting a good campaign based on a run-game turnaround, this one could be pointsy, a fun shootout reminiscent of some of the Pinkel vs. Spurrier era classics.



Photo from South Carolina Athletics



Week 11

November 23, 2024 | Mississippi St., MS

Mississippi St.

Photo from Mississippi State Athletics

TEAM PREVIEW

By Dan Keegan

The college football world was rocked when the legendary Mike Leach tragically passed away in December 2022. He was head coach of the Mississippi State Bulldogs at the time, and preparing for an upcoming bowl game against Illinois. Leach's death was emotional for the sport, a colorful figure who brought us delight for two decades with his humorous ramblings, innovative playbooks, cutting one-liners, devotion to Four Verticals and his ability to build underdog programs. Of course, his loss was more acutely felt by his family and friends, and in the communities he shaped in Lubbock, Pullman, Starkville, Valdosta and more.

In Starkville, where Leach was active head coach, the loss altered the course of the program. Leach's wide-open Air Raid system was silencing the doubters, delivering wins and overstuffed box scores in a conference famous for ground and pound offense and stifling defense. His young hotshot defensive coordinator Zach Arnett had built a quality stop unit to complement all that offense, giving the Bulldogs AD a clear lineage when the head seat shockingly needed to be filled.

But Arnett only managed one season in the role. Scuttlebutt around the program implied he clashed with leadership and he had scrapped Leach's offense to hire Kevin Barbay, a run-game connoisseur with previous stops at Appalachian State

and Central Michigan. The team cratered almost 50 spots in SP+, and while an offensive regression was unsurprising, Arnett's defensive charges dropped from 20th in 2022 to 51st in 2023. The decision to part ways with Arnett and start with a brand new regime was made easy for new athletic director Zac Selmon.

Enter Jeff Leiby. Selmon eschewed some obvious candidates with winning programs at the Group of Five level in the southeast like Kane Wommack, Jamey Chadwell, Jon Sumrall, or Willie Fritz instead targeting a first-time head coach from the Art Briles tree – and family. Leiby will install his father-in-law's veer and shoot offense, bringing back a wide-open spread aerial attack to Starkville after a one-year hiatus. He coached for Art during the entire Baylor run, including the regretful, harmful, criminal demise of that tenure. Leiby then moved on to coach two seasons apiece alongside Josh Heupel at UCF, Lane Kiffin at Ole Miss, and running the offense for Brent Venables in Oklahoma.

Leiby will be tasked with rebuilding a program that resides at the bottom of the SEC for revenue and recruiting rankings. The roster attrition was heavy, and things might get dire this season as the staff rebuilds the personnel.

At least the offensive side of the ball has a shortcut to respectability: The veer and shoot playbook is a cheat code to good production when operated by

talented receivers and a sharp, accurate quarterback. If the receivers can win 1 v 1 battles and the quarterback makes good decisions and throws a catchable ball, the offense will run up numbers against most defenses. It is like the old triple-option attack, designed to make you wrong every single time. But it does not always punch up: if a defense can cover the receivers with single man matchups or own the line of scrimmage without committing extra numbers, the veer and shoot can be shut down. This used to happen to the Heupel/Lock teams against upper echelon SEC opponents; only Georgia was able to replicate it against the Hendon Hooker-led Volunteers.

Baylor transfer Blake Shapen arrives to lead the way; his 2023 campaign went south in Waco a year after quarterbacking the Bears to the Big XII title. His career numbers after two years of starting: 5,548 pass yards, with 36 touchdowns and 13 interceptions.

Shapen should be a good fit for the passing portion of the offense, but Leiby loves to run his quarterbacks, which means quarterback depth could become an issue. Remember, Oklahoma's 2022 season bottomed out with blowout losses to TCU and Texas with Dillon Gabriel sidelined after an injury sustained while carrying the ball. If Shapen can't handle the pounding he will sustain in this league as a runner, the results could be catastrophic. Two SEC-seasoned quarterbacks transferred out this offseason – Will Rogers and Michael

Wright – leaving only redshirt freshman Chris Parson behind Shapen. Parson is raw and got a three-interception, five-sack baptism last year when pressed into emergency duty.

Surrounding Shapen is a hodgepodge mix of inexperienced returnees and mostly Group of Five transfers. Kevin Coleman, a St. Louis native, arrives from Louisville after a 362-yard season and is expected to hold down the slot position, a critical piece for the veer and shoot. A name to watch is UTEP's Kelly Akharaiyi, a downfield threat who averaged 21.5 yards per catch last year in racking up a 1,033 yard campaign. The upgrade in physicality could be an issue for the speedster, however, as he managed only a 12% contested catch rate last season, one of the worst marks in the country.

The offensive line is also a total rebuild, with pieces like Power Five depth chart casualties (Marlon Martinez, LSU and Jacoby Jackson, Texas Tech) mixed with Group of Five starters looking to prove their worth at a higher level (Ethan Miner, North Texas, and Makalyan Pounders, Memphis). This doesn't portend a high-upside group in the SEC; in fact, it might end up being the worst non-Vanderbilt unit in the league.

The total overhaul theme continues on defense. While recent Mississippi State head coaches Dan Mullen, Joe Moorhead

and Mike Leach were all known as offensive wizards, the competency and underrated stars on this side of the ball has carried this program's recent run of success. Leby will need to match that formula, and has tabbed Coleman Hutzler as his defensive coordinator. This is a new frontier for Hutzler, whose itinerant career has mostly seen him coach linebackers and special teams in his two decades in college football. This will be his fifth stop in the SEC. He has carved out a successful role coordinating good special teams units, but he is unproven and an unknown coordinating his own defense.

Talent drain hit this side of the ball hard. Cornerbacks Decarlos Nicholson transferred to USC and Decamarion Richarsson is an Oakland Raider. Linebackers Nathaniel Watson and Jett Johnson staked a claim as the SEC's best, but both exhausted eligibility. The Bulldogs do have one returning star in safety Corey Ellington. He broke out in a major way last year as a junior and should be one of the best defenders in the SEC this fall. At 6-foot-3, 200 pounds, he is long and rangy in coverage, but also isn't afraid to come up in the box and thump, tallying 11 stops while playing against the run.

Cornerback Bryan Lanier and linebacker Branden Jennings were once blue chip recruits who washed out of Alabama and

Maryland, respectively, and have arrived after stints in junior college. Transfers like Stone Blanton (LB, South Carolina) and Sulaiman Kpeka (DL, Purdue) are expected to start, after being rotational players at their past stops.

While Shapen and Ellington are stars, they are surrounded by a roster that is the weakest in the league outside of Nashville. Leby is the latest in a lineage of offensive innovators to come through Starkville, but the cupboard has been left barren. The team will take its lumps this season, but after a decade of winning football, this program has established its recipe for punching above its weight class. If Leby can remain on the sport's innovative razor and scouting and development can rebuild the defensive tradition, the Bulldogs can reclaim their upstart underdog role.

Mizzou Matchup

Missouri will face these rebuilding Bulldogs in the penultimate game of the season. For Mississippi State, it's possible they will be at five wins and needing to claim an upset victory over Mizzou to reach the postseason.

The Tigers have struggled with high level versions of the veer and shoot before; most fans probably remember the outsized numbers posted by the Hendon Hooker Tennessee offenses. But fans also probably remember when the Tigers ran this system; Drew Lock's teams looked unstoppable with a talent advantage, but were usually shut down in SEC matchups where they were outclassed in roster strength.

The Tigers have become the hunters in this matchup. Mississippi State's offense has some intriguing players, like Shapen, Akharaiyi, and Pounders, but Leby has not yet acquired the high-end pieces to challenge the top of the league. If Shapen misses time with injury, this offense might really bottom out.

Missouri's projected top ten offense should have its way with a rebuilding Mississippi State defense. While the spot is a little tricky – a late-season road game in conference, with rivalry games on deck – Missouri should be comfortable favorites in Starkville.

Photo from Mississippi State Athletics



November 31, 2024 | Columbia, MO

Arkansas

TEAM PREVIEW

By Chad Moller

Arkansas Head Coach Sam Pittman is a guy that Razorback supporters seem to want to see succeed. His personality meshes with the fan base, he's affable, funny and comes across as a likable guy.

That being said, for all intents and purposes, he's coaching for his job in 2024, and it will be fascinating to see how his program handles the pressure. Just two years ago Arkansas finished Pittman's second season in Fayetteville by winning nine games and appeared to be one of the up-and-coming programs in the SEC. However, 2022 saw a backslide to 7-6 overall, which was followed by a disastrous 4-8 mark in 2023 that included a 1-7 SEC record that firmly set the Arkansas fan base in panic mode.

According to www.coacheshotseat.com, Pittman is the No. 1 ranked coach on the hot seat entering 2024. Unsurprisingly, his 23-25 career record over four years doesn't exactly align with the expectations of his massive \$6.35 million salary. In an eyebrow-raising off-season move, disgraced former Arkansas coach Bobby Petrino was brought back as the offensive coordinator to breathe life into that side of the ball. Pundits viewed this as one extreme or the other— either it's an evil genius move that will pay tremendous dividends or it will tailspin into a comedy of errors that will provide soap-opera style drama for observers all season long.

The Razorbacks are staring at the nation's ninth-toughest schedule according to one outlet, and they rank just 109th out of 134 FBS teams in total returning production (46%). Broken down, the offense ranks 99th nationally with 50% of its 2023 production returning while the defense is worse off at 115th with 41% returning.

Accordingly, Vegas prognosticators have set Arkansas' season over/under win total at 4.5, so that is either a good investment or it's a sign of impending doom, depending upon one's viewpoint.

But we won't know that result until November, so let's take a look at what there is to hope about for Razorback fans heading into this make-or-break season.

Arkansas got hit heavy in the transfer portal, with 30 players opting to leave, including former starting QB K.J. Jefferson (UCF) and RB Raheim Sanders (South Carolina). Maybe that could be looked at as addition by subtraction however, as the pair flashed promise but never consistently lived up to the hype. Pittman and staff did bring in 22 portal transfers to replace the outgoing talent, and they're expecting to rely on transfer QB Taylen Green (Boise State) and RB Ja'Quinden Jackson (Utah) to pick up the slack. And in what was viewed as a big recruiting win, they also landed four-star transfer LB Xavian Sorey, Jr. (Georgia) to shore up the middle of the defense.

One outlet ranked the incoming trio of transfers as three of Arkansas' five best players heading into the season. Again, that points to feast or famine this fall, most likely.

What does return on offense is largely built around hopes of an improved offensive line. Guard Joshua Braun is the mainstay here, but portal additions of tackle Fernando Carmona (San Jose State), center Addison Nichols (Tennessee) and guard/tackle Keyshawn Blackstock (Michigan State) are being looked at to make an immediate impact.

According to spring practice reports, Pittman has stated that he would prefer to identify a primary ball carrier and re-establish the offensive identity around a stout run game. In addition to Jackson (797 rushing yards and 4 touchdowns for Utah in 2023), candidates for the job include junior Rashod Dubinion (553 yards and 6 TDs combined the last two years) and four-star Benton, Ark. freshman Braylen Russell.

Green was a dual-threat standout at Boise, where he threw for 1,752 yards and 11 TDs in 2023, while adding 436 yards and nine more scores on the ground.

Senior WR Andrew Armstrong (a better name for a QB than a wideout) gives the offense a proven commodity on the edges, as he caught 56 balls in 2023 for 764 yards and five touchdowns - all team bests. The rest of the receiving crew is up for grabs, although whispers are to

be on the lookout for redshirt freshman WR Davion Dozier as a potential impact player. Hopes are also high for sophomore TE Luke Hasz who was on his way to a big season in 2023 before suffering a season-ending injury midway through the season. Prior to that, Hasz caught an impressive 16 balls for 253 yards and three touchdowns in just five games.

There will be a lot of questions to be answered by the Arkansas defense in 2024. The unit that ranked 46th nationally in 2023 (357.2 yards allowed per game) lost a lot of production but will be anchored by a disruptive front. Leading the way will be senior DE Landon Jackson who led the team a year ago with 13.5 TFLs and 6.5 sacks in 12 games.

More questions arise at the second level of the defense, as the Razorbacks return only 41 career tackles on the entire roster from the linebacker position. They'll hope to counterbalance that inexperience with a veteran secondary. Leading the last line of defense for the Hogs will be junior safety Jayden Johnson, who was third on the team in 2023 with 62 tackles, while adding three pass break ups and one interception. Both starting cornerbacks also return in the form of senior Lorando Johnson, who had 29 tackles, five pass

break ups and one pick-six a year ago, in addition to sophomore Jaylon Braxton, who made 20 tackles in nine games with one interception and a team-best eight pass break ups.

On special teams, Arkansas will return junior punter Max Fletcher, who averaged a salty 46.9 yards per punt a year ago, but they will be breaking in a new placekicker.

Mizzou Matchup

The outcome of a rivalry game that takes place at the end of a grueling 12-game season is rather difficult to predict. Who knows what type of shape either team will be in physically and/or mentally by that time? Who knows if Arkansas will still have Pittman on the sidelines by then, or if the conjecture of a potential Petrino insurrection will be in full force when the Razorbacks visit Columbia? Will Mizou be looking to wrap up a spot in the first-ever College Football Playoff 12-team bracket, or will they be fighting the doldrums of a season that didn't go the way everyone had hoped?

All we know is that Arkansas' primary goal should be to have Sam Pittman still roaming the sidelines when the

Razorbacks hit Faurot Field on Nov. 30th. If he reaches that game, surely that means the Pigs' season has been a success to that point and that the hot seat has been cooled. If Petrino is in charge then all bets are off and you can imagine the Mizou student section will be seen in neck braces, fake facial scars and countless signs poking fun at his past missteps.

In either scenario, the Mizou offense will hope to exploit a Razorback defense that allowed 48 points to the Tigers a year ago in Fayetteville. On paper, this one should be a mismatch in the Tigers' favor, but it is a rivalry game in theory that can result in head-scratching outcomes on occasion.

That being said, Mizou - perennially seen as unworthy of registering as a legitimate rival by many haughty Arkansas fans - has owned the rivalry since joining the SEC. Mizou has won 8 of 10 contests between the border rivals since 2014 when the game was set as a yearly occurrence. The Tigers have won two in a row and seven of the last eight as well. The last two games in Columbia have been nail-biters, with Mizou pulling off dramatic wins in 2022 (29-27) and 2020 (50-48).



Photo from Arkansas Athletics

Rock M All-SEC

The Rock M staff predicts the All-SEC teams.

We wanted to take a stab at predicting who some of the top individual players in college football would be this coming season.

To start, we took a look at the best conference in college football. Following a season in which Mizzou landed five players on the All-SEC First Team, our staff predicted what the squad would look like following the conclusion of the 2024 campaign.

Then, I tasked everybody with selecting who they believe will win each individual college football award as well, covering everything from the Heisman to the Butkus.

After polling everyone involved with the site, here's what the Rock M Nation All-SEC First Team and national awards selections look like:

Offense	Defense/ST
<p><u>Quarterback</u> Carson Beck - Georgia (4 votes)</p>	<p><u>Defensive Line</u> James Pearce Jr. - Tennessee (6 votes) Deone Walker - Kentucky (3) Walter Nolen - Ole Miss (3) Johnny Walker Jr. - Mizzou (4)</p>
<p><u>Running Backs</u> Trevor Etienne - Georgia (7) Jarquez Hunter - Auburn (2)</p>	<p><u>Linebackers</u> Nic Scourton - Texas A&M (6) Danny Stutsman - Oklahoma (4) Harold Perkins - LSU (6)</p>
<p><u>Wide Receivers</u> Luther Burden III - Mizzou (7) Tre Harris - Ole Miss (6)</p>	<p><u>Cornerbacks</u> Trey Amos - Ole Miss (4) Maxwell Hairston - Kentucky (3) Domani Jackson - Alabama (3)</p>
<p><u>Tight End</u> Benjamin Yurosek - Georgia (4)</p>	<p><u>Safeties</u> Malaki Starks - Georgia (5) Keon Sabb - Alabama (3)</p>
<p><u>Offensive Line</u> Will Campbell - LSU (7) Tate Ratledge - Georgia (7) Armand Membou - Mizzou (5) Kelvin Banks Jr. - Kentucky (7)</p>	<p><u>Kicker</u> Graham Nicholson - Alabama (4)</p>
<p><u>Center</u> Cooper Mays - Tennessee (3)</p>	<p><u>Punter</u> James Burnip - Alabama (4)</p>
<p><u>All-Purpose</u> Isaiah Bond - Texas (3)</p>	<p><u>Return Specialist</u> Isaiah Satagna - Arkansas (3)</p>

2024 SEC Preview

Taking a look at this coming SEC Football season.

By Chad Moller

Change is seemingly the name of the game in college football these days, so it's no shock to say that the Southeastern Conference will be entering new territory when it kicks off the 2024 season this fall.

However, the SEC isn't just looking at some minor changes this season. There's so much change to deal with in 2024 that it may give traditionalist fans the hives.

Where do we even start to digest how different things are for the SEC in 2024?

We'll begin with the obvious, and welcome new league members Oklahoma and Texas to the fold (since we have to). While the move to ingest these two traditional powers had its share of detractors, it was likely the right move to further strengthen the staying power and political clout of the league for the future, which brings a lot of uncertainty in the college football landscape overall.

Another huge change is a move away from divisional scheduling, meaning that the new 16-team league will have its standings reflect No. 1 through No. 16, with the top two finishers qualifying for the SEC Championship Game in Atlanta. Oddly enough, as of press time for this publication in early-July, the league hadn't yet announced tiebreaker plans. It was undoubtedly a topic of much discussion at the league's annual meetings in Destin, Fla. at the end of May.

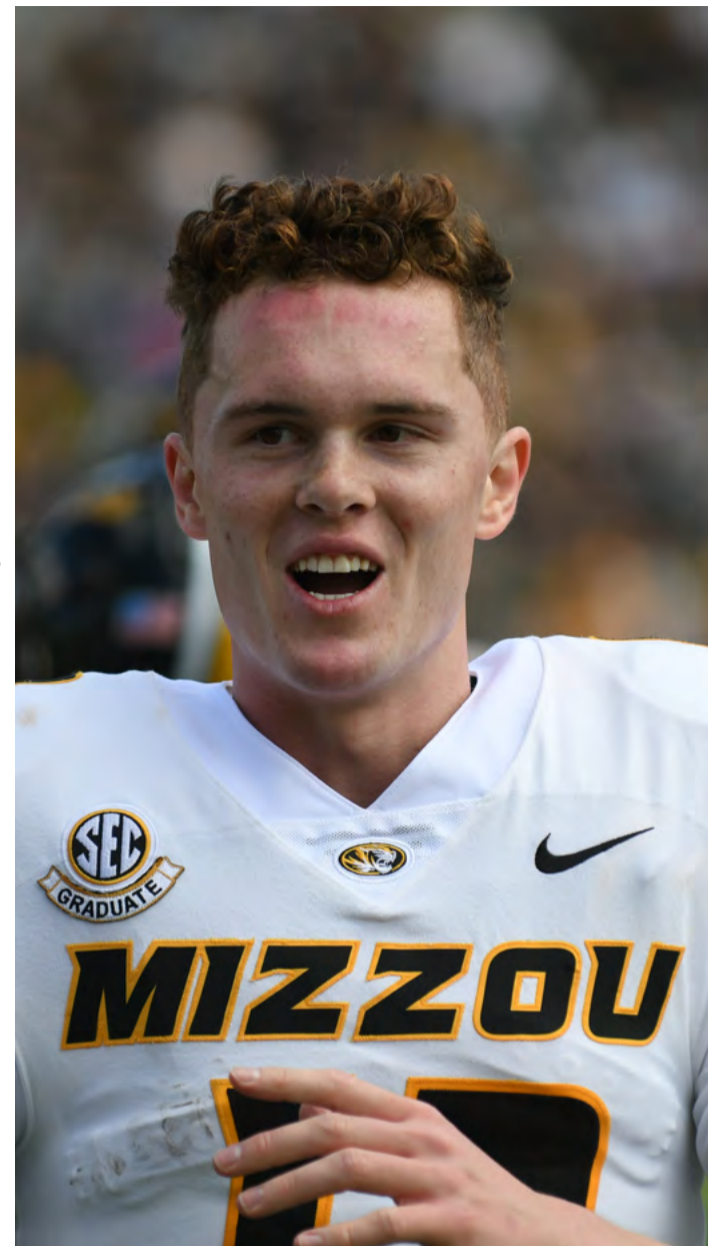
Surely, if there's a tie for first or second in the standings, head-to-head results will be used as the first tiebreaker when possible. In the event the tied teams didn't play in the regular season, or if there are three or more teams tied, then

all bets are off currently as to how the league will settle the dispute, so stay tuned during the summer.

An interesting dynamic we'll experience this year and beyond will be how teams choose to jockey for positioning in the league standings near the top of the heap. It's not crazy to project that the SEC will get 4-5 teams into the CFP this year, so it will be curious to see if coaches go all out and exhaust all resources to get that second spot in Atlanta, or if they feel they have a CFP spot locked up already, do they rest some starters late in the season to protect them for the playoffs? And on the other end of the spectrum, for teams who reach bowl eligibility, but don't make the playoff, what percentage of players will choose to opt out of the more minor bowl games? It's an all-new postseason world with much to be determined.

Another long standing SEC tradition will go by the wayside in 2024, as the league will no longer partner with CBS for its weekly Saturday afternoon telecast, ending an iconic partnership that lasted just shy of 30 years. All league-controlled games going forward will be seen on the Disney family of networks consisting of ABC/ESPN/SEC Network, with start time windows consisting of 11 am-12 pm CST for the early window, followed by 2:30-3:30 pm CST for afternoon kick times, and capped in the evening with start times ranging from 5-7 pm CST.

A wonderful new change that might be one of the most fan-friendly moves ever made by the league is to pre-set a vast majority of the kick times prior to the season. The old system of identifying kick times for the first few games, with the



rest of the season on a 12-day advance notice was quite challenging for fans all the way around. This should be one of the more celebrated aspects of the new-look SEC!

So let's get to what really matters - on the field results. What's to be expected once the pads go on and the bullets are flying in real time?

This magazine has provided some nice in-depth team previews of all of Mizzou's 2024 opponents, so you can find the breakdowns on all eight of the Tigers' SEC foes there. Who does Mizzou miss in 2024? It's frankly a pretty impressive list, which has given pundits some ammunition that the Tigers got a break in scheduling this season. If that ends up being true, then let's all hope that Drink and Co. can take full advantage and turn it into a huge season!

A quick rundown of the teams that Mizzou will not see in the 2024 regular season (presented in order by Vegas projected win totals):

Georgia and Texas (10.5 o/u projected win total)

We all know how tough the Bulldogs have been to all opponents in recent years, but it will be nice for the Tigers to miss them in the regular season after playing UGA every year since joining the SEC (and going just 1-11 in that span). The Bulldogs are the betting favorite to win the first expanded CFP, but they'll have to navigate a challenging schedule of top-end foes to get the job done. They start the season with a "neutral" site game in Atlanta versus Clemson, and later have SEC road games at both Alabama and Texas, so expecting UGA to go unscathed through the regular season might be asking a bit much. Rest assured, all Kirby Smart's team is looking to do is get into the 12-team playoff and let the chips fall where they may from there. The hopes rest on the shoulders of QB Carson Beck, who is one of the pre-season favorites for the Heisman trophy, and he's joined by Texas QB Quinn Ewers who will guide the Longhorns through their first foray as an SEC member. The Longhorns are also expected to have a big year, with a 10.5 win total projected. Texas faces an early-season test in week No. 2 at defending national champion Michigan before hosting Georgia in October. Outside of that, they drew a pretty favorable SEC schedule, missing Ole Miss, Alabama, Tennessee, LSU and Mizzou.

Ole Miss (9.5 o/u projected win total)

The Rebels have ramped up their national profile under Lane Kiffin both on the field with impressive results, and also off the field particularly with recruiting portal success. The Rebels also have appeared to draw a favorable league schedule in 2024, as they do not face Texas, Alabama, Tennessee or Mizzou. Their toughest league road game is an October affair at LSU, while they do have big home tests against Georgia and Oklahoma that will show where they stack up among the league's elite. Make no mistake, the Rebels have gone "all-in" in 2024 and their fan base fully expects their team to challenge for the SEC Championship and a prominent spot in the CFP this fall.

LSU (9.0 o/u projected win total)

The Bayou Bengals lose Heisman Trophy winning QB Jayden Daniels, but hopes are still high as Garrett Nussmeier flashed nicely late last year when Daniels didn't play in LSU's bowl game. All Nussmeier did in the ReliaQuest Bowl against Wisconsin was throw for 395 yards and three touchdowns to win MVP honors. Credit Brian Kelly for scheduling tough non-conference games, as they will begin the year in Las Vegas against USC, and later host UCLA. The SEC schedule is about middle of the pack in terms of difficulty, with home games against Ole Miss, Alabama and Oklahoma, while the toughest road game comes at Texas A&M.

Tennessee (8.5 o/u projected win total)

Former Mizzou staffer Josh Heupel has the Volunteers back among the league's upper echelon, but the fan base is itching for them to take the next step into elite status. That may be a tall order in 2024, as the Vols will hand over the offense to young QB Nico Iamaleava, who flashed potential in UT's 35-0 bowl win over Iowa to end last year. But with questions on the offensive line and in the secondary, Tennessee isn't expected to make that big jump just yet. An early non-conference test at North Carolina State looms in week No. 2, while tough SEC road tests await at Georgia and Oklahoma. A home game with Alabama is the highlight of a nondescript home league slate for the Vols. It

is a bit of a shame that the budding rivalry between Mizzou's Eli Drinkwitz and Heupel will be put on ice due to the new league scheduling matrix.

Kentucky (6.5 o/u projected win total)

The Wildcats are pegged as a middling-SEC team with their projected win total of 6.5, and they'll be looking to a new signal caller to get the job done. Brock Vandagriff transferred from Georgia and will likely be the one hopes are pinned to. Mark Stoops' squad could be much improved in 2024 even if the record doesn't show it, thanks to a very tough draw with the SEC schedule. Road games in league play include Ole Miss, Tennessee and Texas, and they also face home dates against Georgia and Auburn.

Florida (4.5 o/u projected win total)

One of the nation's hottest coaching seats to being 2024 probably belongs to Gator Coach Billy Napier, who is entering his third season looking for his first winning year in Gainesville. The Gator fan base won't stomach another sub-.500 season, and Napier has his work cut out for him with a schedule that many prognosticators have pegged as the nation's toughest. Judge for yourself. They face non-conference games against Florida State, Miami (Fla.) and UCF, and will see SEC road games against Tennessee, Georgia and Texas while playing host to Texas A&M, LSU and Ole Miss. The Gators' last five games of the 2024 season read like this: at Georgia, at Texas, home vs. LSU, home vs. Ole Miss and at Florida State. If you've ever seen the movie *The Green Mile*, the line "dead man walkin'" seems to fit here.

As the countdown to kickoff ticks away, anticipation mounts for another exhilarating season of SEC football. With storied rivalries renewed, up-and-coming teams hungry for glory, and perennial powerhouses poised for battle, the stage is set for what should be a very compelling season. So, buckle up SEC fans, because the road to the title will likely take some unexpected twists and turns. But no matter how new-look the league might appear in 2024, one thing will remain a constant - the SEC will be front and center once again.

Stat

The eight SEC opponents that Mizzou faces in 2024 have a combined average projected win total of 6.5. The seven SEC opponents that Mizzou will miss in 2024 have a combined average projected win total of 8.5.

Rock M SEC Standings

The Rock M staff predicts the SEC standings.

In typical preview magazine fashion, we also wanted to throw our hats into the ring to make some college football picks on a more national scale. Thus, I tasked each of the staff members at Rock M Nation to project what the final standings in the SEC would look like in 2024 as well as who the conference champion would be. Then, I asked them all to look at an even bigger picture and choose the programs that they believe will make up the first ever 12-team College Football Playoff this season.

With points values assigned to each selection slot, I recorded everybody's picks and then tallied up the rankings based on overall points.

Here is how our staff believes the 2024-25 college football campaign will play out:

2024 SEC Standings

1. Georgia (144 pts)
2. Texas (117 pts)
3. Alabama (109 pts)
4. Mizzou (108 pts)
5. Ole Miss (99 pts)
6. LSU (83 pts)
7. Tennessee (76 pts)
8. Oklahoma (75 pts)
9. Texas A&M (68 pts)
10. Auburn (54 pts)
11. Kentucky (51 pts)
12. Florida (41 pts)
13. South Carolina (27 pts)
14. Mississippi St. (23 pts)
15. Arkansas (19 pts)
16. Vanderbilt (10 pts)

SEC Champion
Georgia (7 votes)



2024 National College Football Preview

By Dan Keegan

Have you gotten used to saying “Power Four” conferences yet? No? It’s okay, me neither.

The tragic and totally avoidable loss of an entire power conference is one of the major changes coming to the college football season. Some of them are good things for the sport that will boost interest and entertainment and fairness, like the expanded playoff. Others are unquestionably bad, like cross-country conferences and ruthless competition. And still other facets remain to be seen, like the soon-to-be-opened Pandora’s boxes of player employment and private equity.

While the structure — and literal existence — of the NCAA will be determined in the next few months and years, we have a football season to play this fall. This campaign will look radically different from the ones that came before it in every facet: postseason structure, conference alignments, quarterback play, coaching staffs and media rights. Heck, this year is so monumental, EA Sports brought back its beloved NCAA Football video game title after a hiatus spanning a decade, and that might be about the fifth-most interesting thing about the season.

This magazine and the game are scheduled to come out at around the same time, so maybe you haven’t played it yet, or maybe you have already hoisted five national title trophies with virtual Drinkwitz already. I’m excited to play with Luther Burden III, with the veer-and-shoot Heupel playbook, with NIL in recruiting. I’m definitely winning at least one Sun Belt title with Texas State.



Actually, that is something that might happen in real life this year. Texas State, with Jordan McCloud taking over at quarterback after winning Sun Belt POY at another school, has a shot to be one of the most prolific offenses in the country. Remember, head coach GJ Kinne guided former Mizzou Tiger Lindsey Scott to a 71-touchdown season two years ago. The Bobcats top my “teams I’m most intrigued by” rankings, a totally real list that exists and I didn’t just make up. They beat out:

- UCF, with KJ Jefferson and two great tailbacks, is about to run the purest version of the Gus Malzahn offense yet.
- Indiana, with basically all of the best James Madison players and coaches — except the aforementioned McCloud, for some reason. Can a mediocre power roster and a great mid major one blend into something competitive?
- Ohio State with Chip Kelly, one of the great run-game schemers of our era,

and two of the best ball carriers in the country.

Some of these teams will be jockeying for spots in the first ever 12-team playoff at this level. While a large bracket is old news for lower levels, the expanded field will create waves of new excitement for FBS teams. Some argue the larger playoff weakens the regular season, because of the loss of do-or-die regular season games between elite teams. However, this kind of titanic helmet collision is not going extinct, it will just be pushed into December and January. And far more teams will be playing games with postseason stakes through November and even into rivalry weekend.

A larger playoff is good for the game, but the sport’s other new bloat — conferences — is not. Conference realignment is hardly new, but these supersized, coast-to-coast leagues are, and they don’t seem to be the way this sport was meant to be played.

Regionality has ruled for over a century, yet now we will have matchups like SMU-Stanford as an ACC game and Rutgers-UCLA as a Big Ten matchup. (Yes, Missouri is in a new conference that also just gobbled up some new/old foes, but the league still has some semblance of geographic cohesion — for now, at least.)

It's hard to see who this benefits, other than the conference coffers and their television partners. Long-standing rivalries and competitions are tossed aside as network executives chase marquee, brand-name matchups in every week of the schedule, and the rest of the sport must adapt or die as the conference offices bend to their will. The very fabric of the game will be tested as the teams fuse into some kind of super league, forming a massive football Pangea instead of the unique, diverse continents we once had. Remember what was sacrificed when you're enjoying Michigan-Oregon and Texas-Georgia.

In addition to the new structure of the sport, another factor contributing to the wide-open feel of this season is the turnover at the quarterback position and head coach ranks. The coaching carousel was busy as usual, but this offseason felt historic. Three coaches who have won national titles exited the college ranks. Nick Saban, the G.O.A.T., retired, although he will still be a mainstay in your televisions this fall as a feature on ESPN College Gameday. (It will be a lot more fun to see him exasperated with Pat McAfee than exasperated with a 20-year old sophomore linebacker, though.) Jim Harbaugh snagged the ever-elusive ring, then bolted for the Bolts; Jimbo Fisher shuffled off to...hey, what is Jimbo Fisher doing? The fallout of these moves affected staffs from Washington, Arizona, Duke, Penn State, and more. At the Group of Five level, Willie Fritz, Jon Sumrall, Curt Cignetti, Kane Wommack, and others have moved on from consistent winning programs they built.

The lack of sure-thing, surefire superstar quarterbacks will also shape the upcoming season. There are some good signal callers returning this fall – Quinn Ewers, Shedeur Sanders, Dillon Gabriel, Carson Beck, Brady Cook and Noah Fifita – but no dominant ones. Recent years have been defined by returning, accomplished passers like CJ Stroud, Bryce Young, Trevor Lawrence and Caleb Williams, but this season, on paper anyway, lacks those high-end, elite players. Certainly some of the returnees could elevate their game further; Ewers and Beck, in particular, are surrounded by incredible skill position talent on teams with title aspirations. And the page is turning at the Group of Five level, too, where mainstays like Grayson McCall, Austin Reed, Frank Harris, Michael Pratt and Kurtis Rourke have moved on. The door is open for exciting young talents to seize the attention and define the 2024 season: Oklahoma's Jackson Arnold, Tennessee's Nico Iamaleava, LSU's Garret Nussmeier, K-State's Avery Johnson, Duke's Maalik Murphy, Michigan State's Aiden Chiles and Boise's Malachi Nelson were all blue-chippers from recent cycles and will be breaking fall camp in starting roles. Many of these players are getting their shot in a plug-and-play scenario for contending, talent-rich ball clubs, and it should be no surprise if these precocious playmakers surpass their veteran counterparts.

It's a season of change in college football, and the Missouri Tigers will have their chance to leave their mark. A manageable schedule, even in the sport's premiere conference, gives the Tigers a chance to be one of the darling "outsider" teams making a run into the game's first oversized playoff bracket. A returning veteran quarterback and a superstar wide receiver position the Tigers well for preseason hype and postseason awards. It's a new and evolving landscape, and the Tiger fans should be thrilled about the season outlook.



National Awards & Rankings

Predicting the final rankings and major awards with the Rock M team.

Playoff Field

Georgia	(82 pts)
Ohio State	(70 pts)
Utah	(55 pts)
Florida State	(54 pts)
Oregon	(48 pts)
Texas	(37 pts)
Missouri	(30 pts)
Michigan	(29 pts)
Alabama	(29 pts)
Notre Dame	(29 pts)
Ole Miss	(19 pts)
Memphis	(2 pts)



Award | Winner

Heisman	Quinn Ewers - Texas (3 votes)
Biletnikoff (WR)	Luther Burden III - Mizzou (6)
Butkus (LB)	Jay Higgins - Iowa (2)
Davey O'Brien (QB)	Carson Beck - Georgia (4)
Doak (RB)	Ollie Gordon II - Ohio St. (4)
John Mackey (TE)	Benjamin Yurosek - Georgia (3)
Lou Groza (K)	Bert Auburn - Texas (3)
Ray Guy (P)	James Burnip - Alabama (2)
Rimington (C)	Cooper Mays - Tennessee (3)

2024 Gambling

Taking a look at the coming college football season's bets.

By Chad Moller

Endowed with the full benefit of hindsight, it's quite clear that the Missouri Tigers snuck up on the gambling community in 2023. The wise guys in Vegas, after all, set the Tigers' season win total at just 6.5 heading into last year - a number Mizzou had surpassed by Oct. 21st with a win over South Carolina to move to 7-1 in what would turn into a magical 11-win season.

We'll choose to forgive the gambling intelligentsia for being late to the Mizzou party a year ago. If the 2024 pre-season odds are any indication, Vegas has come around on the Tigers, and thinks highly of MU's chances at being a fixture on the national scene this fall.

For starters, Mizzou's over/under win total for the regular season has been set quite high at 9.5. Only two SEC teams have higher pre-season win totals, and those include national darlings Georgia and Texas, both set at 10.5. Mizzou is slotted in the next wave at 9.5 along with Alabama and Ole Miss, with Tennessee and Texas A&M one notch below at 8.5. Playing season totals can be a fun way to "invest" in your favorite team's season, with the big downside being that your "investment" is tied up for three months or longer.

While Vegas seems high on Mizzou heading into the year, digging further into the numbers tells you that the odds makers are leaning toward the Tigers not

quite getting to 10 regular-season wins. As of mid-June, the payout line for going over 9.5 was at +110, while the under was listed at -140. That's a pretty big margin between the two payouts, and indicates that Vegas is hedging their liabilities toward Mizzou coming in at nine wins or less.

middle of the desert!

If the season win total isn't of interest, then never fear, the odds makers have plenty of different ways you can test your luck on the Tigers this season.

Let's say you're fired up about Mizzou's chances at making the 12-team playoff. You're in luck, the Tigers would earn you plus money on that wager if it hit. Mizzou is listed at +250 to make the playoff, meaning a \$100 wager would win you \$250 once the Tigers made the cut. You have to think that if Mizzou makes the playoff, then surely they would have surpassed the 9.5 season win total, so this play could make more sense given that it's a much more lucrative payout. Something to keep in mind.

Want to plunk down some of your hard-earned money on

Georgia to make the playoff? It's likely a bet that's sure to hit, but the downside is the payout is so bad it's hardly worth it. The Bulldogs are the betting favorite in this category and come in at a -900 payout (\$100 bet pays a measly \$11.11, so you'd have to scale way up on the wager to make it worthwhile, which of course, brings in much greater risk).

The other top favorites to make the CFP field include Ohio State (-800), Texas (-500), Oregon (-500), Notre Dame (-250), Clemson (-225), Florida State (-225) and Kansas State (-200). Other SEC teams



Note - For the uninitiated, what this means is if you wagered \$100 on the Tigers to go over 9.5 regular season wins, at a +110 payout, you'd win \$110. If you played the under and won that wager, your \$100 stake would return just \$71.43 due to the -140 payout. In layman's terms, a negative payout generally means that Vegas feels that is the more likely scenario, which of course, means they want to lose the least amount of money so they set the line at a negative payout to protect their assets. That's why they can build those unreal palaces in the

come in as follows: Ole Miss (-150), Alabama (+100), Tennessee (+200), LSU (+225), Texas A&M (+450), Oklahoma (+800), Auburn (+900) and Florida (+1600).

Another popular play is often betting on the national champion, which always pays out plus money to begin the year. Even Georgia, the odds-on favorite to win it all in 2024, pays +300 if you take them now (\$100 wins \$300). Among the SEC, Texas is currently +700 to win it all, with Alabama and LSU each sitting at +1400 with Ole Miss right behind at +1500. Feeling saucy and want to play Mizzou to win the natty in 2024? Right on! At +3000 currently, the Tigers would return \$3,000 for your \$100 stake. Feeling stupid? Okay, then how about a \$100 bet on Vanderbilt? The Commodores are listed at +200000, which would bring home \$200,000 on your \$100 wager.

Please know I'm NOT advocating that anyone make that Vanderbilt wager, for crying out loud! I guess now is the time where I cover my tail and make a clear public service message to implore everyone to wager responsibly, only risk what you can afford to lose, and if you have gambling issues, please seek assistance from numerous available counseling resources.

With that, another SEC-related play that could make some sense is a wager on the SEC champion. Georgia, of course, is the big favorite, but they're still paying plus money at this point, at +200 (\$100 wager would win you \$200), with Texas right behind at

+250. The next teams, in order of payout are Ole Miss (+650), Alabama (+900), LSU (+950), Tennessee (+1000) and then Mizzou (+1200). What some people might consider is putting the biggest wager on Georgia, and then adding a sprinkle with smaller amounts on Texas or anyone of the next handful of teams as a hedge in case the Bulldogs don't live up to expectations.

Yet another way to have a financial stake in the upcoming 2024 season is to wager on the Heisman Trophy winner. It's no surprise to see that in this category, the SEC has the two favorites in Georgia QB Carson Beck (+800), but he's got company from Texas QB Quinn Ewers, who is also at +800. Former Oklahoma QB Dillon Gabriel - now at Oregon after transferring this past off-season - is next up at +1000. Alabama QB Jalen Milroe comes in at +1400 in the next level of candidates.

It's fun to see that Mizzou's dynamic duo of QB Brady Cook and WR Luther Burden are also getting pre-season Heisman attention, giving Tiger fans the opportunity to get a nice return should one of the two have a magical season that ends with hardware. The chances are certainly much less realistic for either to win the trophy, but the payouts are much more lucrative, with Cook at +3500 and Burden at +8000.

So whether it's a team play or an individual bet, there's always something that a college football fan can wager on to make fall Saturdays even more interesting than they already are.

Some Odds

SEC CHAMPION

Georgia	+200
Texas	+250
Ole Miss	+650
Alabama	+900
LSU	+950
Tennessee	+1000
Mizzou	+1200
Texas A&M	+2000
Oklahoma	+3500
Auburn	+5000
Kentucky	+8000
S. Carolina	+10000
Florida	+10000
Arkansas	+12000
Miss. State	+20000
Vanderbilt	+25000

Heisman

Quinn Ewers	+800
Carson Beck	+800
Jalen Milroe	+1400
Dillon Gabriel	+1000
Will Howard	+1400
Jaxson Dart	+1600
Brady Cook	+3500
Luther Burden	+8000

CFP Champion

Georgia	+330
Alabama	+1400
Texas	+700
LSU	+1400
Ole Miss	+1500
Oklahoma	+4000
Texas A&M	+3500
Tennessee	+3500
Mizzou	+3000
Auburn	+10000
Florida	+15000
Arkansas	+30000
Kentucky	+30000
S. Carolina	+40000
Miss. State	+50000
Vanderbilt	+200000

Teams to make 12-team playoff

Georgia	-900
Ohio State	-800
Texas	-500
Oregon	-500
Florida State	-225
Clemson	-225
Notre Dame	-250
Kansas State	-200
Michigan	-140
Ole Miss	-150
Miami, Fla.	+100
Utah	-110
Alabama	+100
Penn State	-110
Tennessee	+200
Arizona	+200
LSU	+225
Mizzou	+250
kansas	+250
Louisville	+275
<i>Others</i>	
Texas A&M	+450
Oklahoma	+800
Auburn	+900
Florida	+1600

Tigers in the NFL

By Jaden Lewis

Missouri saw six players selected in the 2024 NFL Draft, tying the most selections from the program since 2009. The Tigers also saw five members from its 2023 team sign as undrafted free agents within the league. Here's a breakdown of the 2024 picks and UDFAs, their fits and outlook on their new teams, and a peak of who could be selected in the 2025 draft.



Defensive lineman Darius Robinson Round 1, Pick 27 to the Arizona Cardinals

In his hometown of Detroit, MI, Darius Robinson made history by becoming the 20th player from the University of Missouri selected in the first round of the NFL Draft and the first since Charles Harris in 2017. No one on Missouri's roster last season elevated their draft status more than Robinson, and he turned heads at the Senior Bowl, solidifying himself in the first-round mix. After playing defensive tackle, Robinson switched to the edge position and enjoyed a career year racking up 43 tackles, 14 tackles for loss, and 8.5 sacks, earning First-team All-SEC honors.

His versatility is an excellent place to start when examining what he brings to the NFL. He has the knowledge and size to be a chess piece and play all over the defensive line. He's not your typical 300-pound plus interior defender, and he's heavier than some of the more productive edge rushers in the league at 6-foot-5, 285 pounds. But with his arm length and mighty strength, he can contribute to the run game, and with his quickness, can provide a pass rush in long down and distance scenarios.

The Arizona Cardinals defense was among the worst in the NFL last season in terms of points scored and yards allowed in 2023, and the organization is in the process of retooling itself in an attempt to rise in the NFC West. Robinson, the Cardinals' second first-round selection along with Marvin Harrison Jr., should be content for a starting job right away at the 5-technique position within Jonathan Gannon's defense. The Cardinals brought in Bilal Nichols through free agency who will plug in at nose tackle and Justin Jones, a free agent defensive tackle from the Chicago Bears. Robinson will have the opportunity to make a name for himself within the Cardinals organization, much like former Missouri players Paul Christman, Johnny Roland, Mel Gray, Roger Wherli, and Markus Golden did. The humbleness and leadership qualities that Robinson possesses are not quantifiable on a stat sheet or any measurements, but they are massive traits that he will add to the locker room in Arizona.



Cornerback Ennis Rakestraw Jr. Round 2, Pick 61 to the Detroit Lions

Ennis Rakestraw Jr. may have waited a little bit longer than projected to hear his name called, but he didn't fall out of the top 100 as the Detroit Lions snagged him in the second round. After a season-ending injury in 2021, Rakestraw bounced back over the next two seasons, collecting 70 tackles, six for a loss, to go with 16 passes defended and an interception. It's also worth pointing out that he was part of an academic honor roll in some capacity in all four years as a Tiger.

Like Robinson, Rakestraw possesses the ability to play anywhere within his position group. He primarily played on the outside but during the 2022 and 23 seasons he collected over 100 snaps a piece in the slot positions. At 5-foot-11, 183 pounds, he's not the biggest cornerback, but he's a feisty cornerback when it comes to being physical as well as being a sensational tackler.

The Detroit Lions secondary was atrocious in 2023, giving up 300-plus passing yards eight times, including five in its last six. This warranted that GM Brad Holmes double-dip in the cornerback class twice in the first two rounds of the draft, with Terrion Arnold as the 24th overall pick and Rakestraw going 37 picks later. As of now, the Lions are slated to start Arnold and Carlton Davis as the outside cornerbacks, with Brian Branch serving as the nickel option. Rakestraw will start off as a depth piece for the Lions. Carlton Davis and Emmanuel Mosley are both in their late 20's and in the last year of their contracts. Rakestraw's role now might be limited to a backup position, but there's an opportunity to rise as a starter in the future. He battled injuries throughout college, so health is an important factor for him, as he has been in this league for a long time.



Linebacker Ty'Ron Hopper **Round 3, Pick 91 to the Green Bay Packers**

In 2022, Missouri's defense transformed to a whole new level from where it was in 2021. Blake Baker played the most pivotal role in that transformation. A key piece on the field was Ty'Ron Hopper, who came to Columbia after three seasons at Florida. His time with the Tigers concluded with 132 tackles, 19.5 for a loss, and 5.5 sacks, and he was a Butkus Award finalist and a second-team All-SEC coach selection.

Hopper possesses the size of where modern day NFL linebackers are in the NFL at 6-foot-2, 232 pounds. He had the speed and explosiveness to scrape from sideline to sideline and thump opposing offensive players. The Green Bay Packers also selected linebacker Edgerrin Cooper out of Texas A&M with its second-round pick. Cooper will likely start alongside Quay Walker, who is under contract through 2025 with cap hits between \$3.5-\$4.5 million. Hopper's ceiling is a starter in the NFL, but for now, he'll spend time contributing on special teams under former Las Vegas interim head coach Rich Bisaccia.



Offensive tackle Javon Foster **Round 4, Pick 114 to the Jacksonville Jaguars**

Javon Foster solidified himself as one of the great offensive tackles in program history, finishing his collegiate career with numerous accolades: Third-team All-American and First-team All-SEC among AP and coaches voting.

This year's offensive line class was rich with talent, and while he was the 27th lineman on the offensive side, he was taken. Foster was still a fourth-round selection for the Sunshine State with the Jacksonville Jaguars. As for where he will slot in with the team, the Jaguars starting five is seemingly set with 2023 first-round pick Anton Harrison, veterans Brandon Scherff and Ezra Cleveland, former Tiger Mitch Morse, and 2017 second-round pick Cam Robinson. This doesn't mean that Foster doesn't add value to the Jaguars front. In the game of football, the offensive line is a grueling position group. Injuries happen, starters go down throughout a 17-game season and if you do not have the depth, a team's season can derail. When it comes to Foster, he provides that depth for the Jaguars, and early on in his career, if he projects positively, he can be a solid swing tackle who could develop into a starter within the league.



Cornerback Kris Abrams-Draine **Round 5, Pick 145 to the Denver Broncos**

The switch from wide receiver to cornerback early in his collegiate career paid off for Kris Abram-Draine as he transformed himself into a fifth-round pick for the Denver Broncos. He earned second-team All-American honors and First-team All-SEC honors in 2023. Over the past two seasons, he collected 27 passes defended with four interceptions in

2023, displaying his impressive ball skills. He has the height of 5-foot-11, but like Rakestraw, he's a bit on the lighter side at 179 pounds. Nevertheless, he proved that he could compete among the best in the SEC, and throughout his career, he played mainly on the outside in the secondary. The Broncos starters are Patrick Surtain II, Ja'Quan McMillian, and Levi Wallace. He'll likely contribute to special teams in 2024, with a chance to become a starter in the future.



Linebacker Jaylon Carlies

Round 5, Pick 151 to the Indianapolis Colts

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Running Back Cody Schrader

UDFA to the San Francisco 49ers

He's always had a chip on his shoulder, and it hasn't disappeared as he's headed to the San Francisco 49ers as an undrafted free agent. Cody Schrader amassed the most productive season in Missouri history as he led the SEC with 1,627 rushing yards. He joins a crowded running back room with Christian McCaffrey, Elijah Mitchell, 2024 fourth-round selection Isaac Guerendo, and a couple of other veterans. He'll have to work his tail off to make the roster where a special teams role might be cut out for him.

Running Back Nathaniel Peat

UDFA to the Dallas Cowboys

Nathaniel Peat was the only rookie running back the Dallas Cowboys added this offseason. There's no doubting Peat's speed

and ability when in the open field. He could add value to the Cowboys as a returner. Keep in mind, prior to coming to Missouri; Peat notched 663 kick return yards at Stanford. The NFL has established new rules for kickoffs, and it'll be interesting to see if he could possibly compete with KaVontae Turpin and Deuce Vaughn for a return spot.

Offensive linemen Xavier Delgado (Tampa Bay) and Marcellus Johnson (NY Giants)

UDFAs

Xavier Delgado was key for the Tigers in 2023 and the left side of the offensive line, while Marcellus Johnson served as a quality depth piece. Both are long shots to making the final 53-man roster for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and New York Giants, respectively, but could both serve as depth pieces to a squad if they end up on an NFL regular season roster or practice squad.

Harrison Mevis

UDFA to the Carolina Panthers

No kicker made more big-time kicks for Mizzou than Harrison Mevis. Now, he'll compete with Eddie Pineiro to be the Carolina Panthers kicker for week 1. He signed a 3-year, \$2.8 million deal with the organization, and his big leg is appealing. Pineiro went just 12-16 from beyond 40 yards last season.

Five draft prospects for 2025

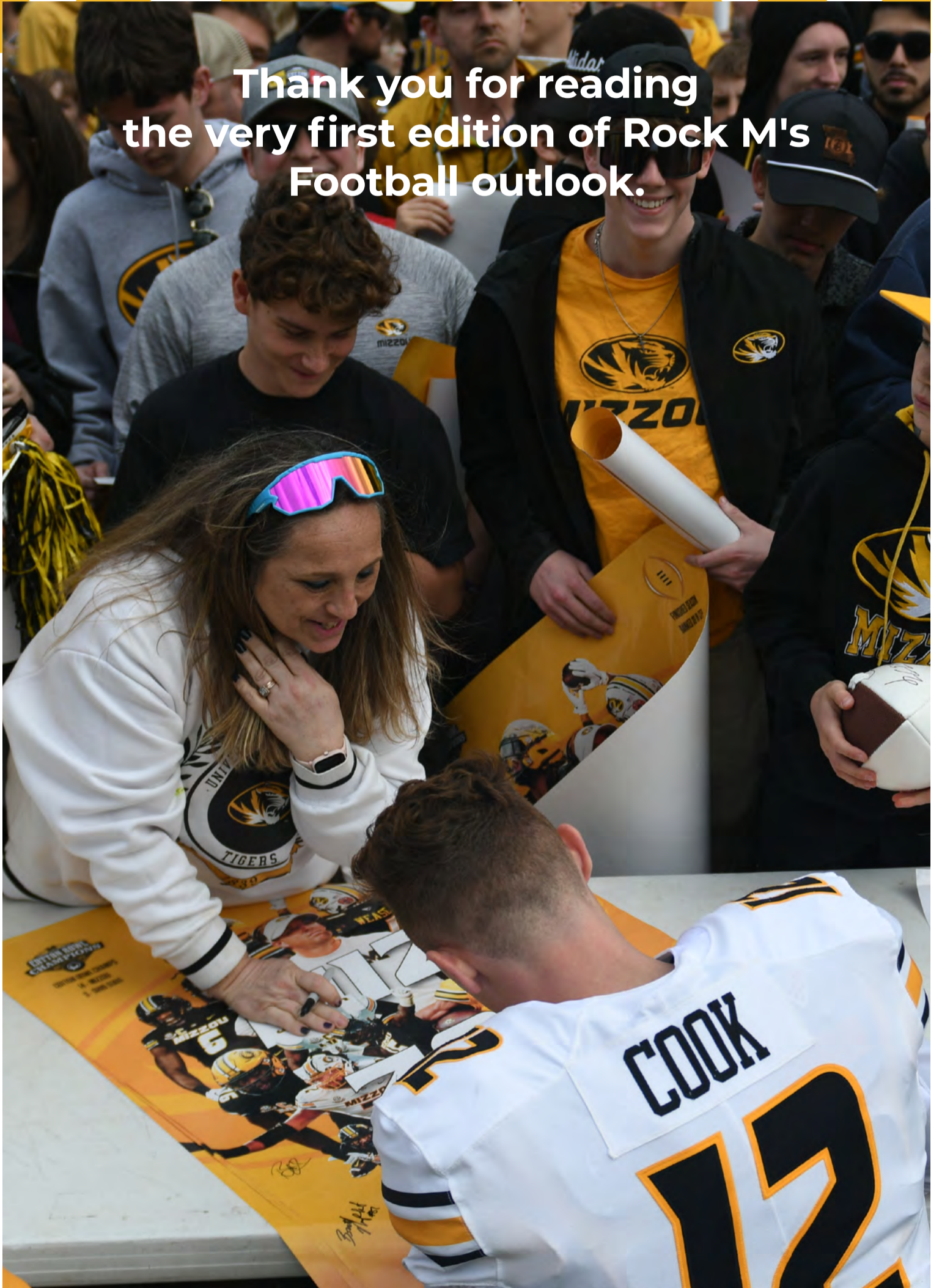
Missouri is on track to having a repeat of 2023 or even better, with playoff aspirations high in Columbia. This means that with the level of roster talent, there are certain players that will be looked at to compete at the next level. To start with, Luther Burden III has perhaps the best case to be a top two wide receiver in the 2025 NFL Draft Class and not two. Player comparisons aren't always fair to college athletes, but if we can say this player is similar to Deebo Samuel of the San Francisco 49ers, it is Burden. He's a big and strong wide receiver at 5-foot-11 and 208 pounds. His yards-after-catch ability and the way he bounces off of defenders are amazing. He'll thrive in the slot position in the NFL, wherever that will be.

The Tigers have seen two of their last three leading rushers, Larry Rountree III and Tyler Badie, be drafted into the NFL, while Schrader had the best season by a Mizzou running back. Marcus Carroll comes to Columbia from Georgia State after rushing for 1,300-plus yards and 13 scores. Missouri doesn't shy away from the run, and if another running back steps in and performs at the SEC level, Carroll could put himself in the mix to be a late-round pick.

It's also worth looking at both Brady Cook and Theo Wease Jr.. Cook may not have the rocket arm, but his ball placement, accuracy, athleticism, and leadership will get him some consideration to go in the later rounds of next year's draft. As for Wease, his game inside the red zone, combined with his height, provides intrigue with teams. Armand Membou and Toriano Pride are only juniors, but impressive seasons could see them consider leaving college earlier, much like what Burden is going to do next offseason.

ROCK

Thank you for reading
the very first edition of Rock M's
Football outlook.



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