



now the ONOFRIO era

Al Onofrio holds his first press conference in the football practice field facility the day after being named the Tiger head coach.



It was appropriate that Al Onofrio's first recruiting trip as Missouri's new head coach was to Los Angeles. It's where he was born, the son of Italian immigrants, and it's where he first played football, thus starting his long, long trek toward becoming the head man of one of the country's premier college football programs.

But even though he had spent most of the past 25 years as an assistant, it quickly became apparent that Onofrio had done considerable head-man thinking. That's why he could honestly say upon his appointment that he felt "absolutely no apprehensions about handling" the head coaching duties at Mizzou.

In succeeding Dan Devine, who resigned to become general manager and head coach of the Green Bay Packers professional football club, Onofrio has a tough act to follow. Devine's 13-year tenure is second only to Don Faurot's in length, and his 93-37-7 record is the best of any Tiger coach. As Devine's No. 1 assistant, Onofrio, of course, had a key role in that achievement, and he believes in much of the Devine formula. He also has ideas of his own.

"For all those years," Al reflects, "I tried to do exactly as Dan wanted me to do. But I don't suppose there ever was a man, working in another man's program who didn't see some thing he'd like to do differently. Now, there are some things that I'll want to change."

For example Onofrio feels very strongly about the proper role of the head coach. He is convinced that he must stay extremely close to every facet of the football operation. He intends to attend every staff meeting. There will be no offensive or defensive coordinators. Al will not do the actual techniques' coaching on the practice field, but he wants to know what's going on in all areas — offense, defense, academics, recruiting. Onofrio thinks that in this day of two-platoon football, many coaches delegate too much and actually lose contact with some parts of the program. The staff, he says, must work as a unit. And it takes active supervision by the head coach to make it so.

As any good Tiger fan knows, Onofrio is credited with building the Missouri defense into one of the most solid and respected in the country. Last year there were some murmurings that the pro-style offenses had caught up with it. Does the new head coach plan to make changes there?

Al doesn't think so. "You have to judge a defense over the long haul," he explains, "not just one



At the athletes' attractive dining hall, Onofrio talks with Jim Harrison, Chicago's No. 2 draft choice, and goes through the line with John Cowan, regular defensive tackle in 1970.



At the Alumni Association Board of Directors meeting, the coach makes a well-received appearance. At right are John Schwada, former chancellor, Dr. Frank Williams, Kansas City.



At the regular Monday morning staff meeting, Al goes over recruiting plans with assistants. At right is Vince Tobin.

Onofrio will install a flexible "thinking man's" offense to go with his

season. And even last year, with all the injuries to the linebackers, the defense held up well except in the Air Force and Iowa State games."

The Missouri defense aligns in a 6-2-3. On passes the ends have the responsibility to rush the quarterback and the three deep backs generally play the receivers man-to-man, although there are some zone variations.

"We're going to have more passes thrown — and completed — against us," admits Onofrio. "But we're also giving the opposition only one way to go by taking away the run. There's nothing more demoralizing to a team than having the offense shove the ball down its throat."

The Missouri defense is very basic, but also very flexible. Tiger players are expected to read the offense and then react. Onofrio also wants to install a "thinking-man's" offense; that is, a very basic, but flexible, attack that will continually strike at the defense's weakness. The defensive alignment will dictate the offensive calls. The quarterback will be expected to call his own plays, receiving guidance from the bench between series. Linemen will be expected to block according to where the defense lines up.

Another word about quarterbacks: Onofrio views this position like any other. If he has two good quarterbacks, both will play. But his quarterback must be a complete player, able to both run and pass. It gives the defense too much advantage, the coach believes, to use one quarterback who's basically a runner, another who's primarily a passer.

Albert Joseph Onofrio knows what he wants. It's easy to see why he has no apprehensions about being a head coach.

If Al does have questions, they're in the area of squad discipline, something that is concerning coaches everywhere. Again, Al knows what he wants. He will ask 110 per cent from his players; he will make rules; and he will require that they be kept. But he also knows that youth styles change, that often the guidelines are few. And he will be fair.

Those who know Onofrio well don't share what misgivings he may have about discipline. They believe Al will have few, if any, problems in this area. These people point to three salient facts. One is the tremendous respect the Tiger squad has for the man. Another is the Onofrio family. It's difficult to find much fault with the way Al's six children are turning

out. It's obvious that mother and dad have done an outstanding job, and there's no reason to believe that he won't do an outstanding job with somebody else's boy, too. And, then, there's Al's own family background.

The father, Liberato Onofrio, came to America from the mountainous country around Naples, Italy, established himself and sent for his family — Al's mother, a son, and a daughter — in 1902. Al, three other sisters, and a brother, were born in Culver City, a Los Angeles suburb.

Liberato worked as a laborer and a knife sharpener, but he also had the immigrant's traditional desire to own his own land. When his first house was paid for, he added another. Then came an apartment building, and soon the family, while not wealthy, was well off.

As a 205-pound (that's more than calorie-conscious Al weighs now) fullback, blocking back, and tackle at Hamilton High, the young Onofrio received scholarship offers from both Southern Cal and UCLA. He wound up, though, at Alabama after being spotted playing in an all-star game between Los Angeles and Chicago high school seniors.

"Frank Thomas was head coach and Bryant was line coach. They pioneered the idea of recruiting fullbacks and turning them into linemen. I wound up as a guard-linebacker.

"They started spring practice in February and kept it going as long as they wanted to. There weren't any rules then. Kids dropped out right and left. Only one-third of my freshman squad of 75 stuck it out."

Al left 'Bama after his sophomore season (1940) to join the Navy's V-7 program. Assigned to Arizona State, he made All-Border Conference at halfback. His coach was Dixie Howell, former Alabama star who was the passing half of the legendary Howell-Don Hudson combination. (On the aforementioned trip to LA, Al visited Howell, who, although seriously ill, was extremely pleased by Al's promotion. Howell died of cancer on March 2.)

Next, it was Midshipman School at Notre Dame, gunnery officer on a rocket launcher ("I believe we were the first ship to fire on Omaha Beach in the D-Day landings"), and a couple of tours in Washington, D.C. There he met a pretty Canadian secretary at the Australian embassy, Joan Noble. They were married in 1947, after Al had returned to Arizona

read-and-react defense.

State to work on his master's degree and become an assistant coach on the staff of Ed Doherty. Although remaining at Arizona State, he left football for a three-year period after Doherty left, joining Devine's staff when Dan Took over in 1955.

Memories of the years with Devine and the years before must have been running through Onofrio's mind as he flew from the national coaches' meeting in Houston to St. Louis in mid-January to meet with the Columbia campus Athletic Committee concerning the Missouri vacancy. The University's Board of Curators also was meeting that weekend in St. Louis, and Onofrio's appointment was quickly confirmed. The salary for the 49-year-old head coach was announced as \$24,000 annually. The length of the contract was not disclosed, but it is believed to be for five years. Devine also carried the title of athletic director, and that position has been filled by Wilbur (Sparky) Stalcup (see page 22).

The staff is enthusiastic over the Onofrio promotion. One indication is that all nine members have chosen to remain at Missouri — and at least three could have accompanied Devine to Green Bay. The coaches feel they can keep building from the first-class base the Missouri program has established. Clay Cooper, who has been a Tiger assistant since 1947, was named the assistant head coach. Ron Snyder, a tackle on the 1965 Sugar Bowl team who served last year as an assistant at Duke, was brought in to coach the defensive guards and tackles. Other staff assignments remain essentially the same.

The coaches will get their first look at the 1971 Tigers on April 6, the date set for the opening of spring practice. From then until the intrasquad game on May 8, they will attempt to fit a good freshman team, four junior college transfers, and a couple of returning army veterans into the holdovers from last year's 5-6 squad, the only loser in Devine's 13 years. Onofrio has vowed not to talk about how good or how bad the Tigers will be until after the first game with Rose Bowl champion Stanford on September 11. But he does say that he isn't ashamed of the quality of his players.

"No coach ever has as many blue chippers as he would like," Al says, "but we have good material at Missouri."

And Missouri seems to have come up with another blue-chip coach, too. □



The Onofrio family: In the foreground is daughter Mary Ann, a swimmer and cheerleader. Sitting, from left, are Lou, Tommy, Mrs. Onofrio, and Al. Standing are Mike, Ed, and John. John now is in Medical School on the Columbia campus after captaining the Tulane football team in 1969. Eddie is a sophomore football player at Utah. Lou quarterbacked the Hickman High School gridders last season, while Mike was an end on the Kewpies' sophomore eleven.