

NORM STEWART: TWO YEARS LATER

By CHARLIE PAULSELL



Coach Norm Stewart takes advantage of a time out to talk over the game strategy with the 1968-69 Tiger team.



Bill Daake of St. Louis Priory, third from left, one of the most highly sought-after high school basketball players in Missouri, and his family visit the Norm Stewarts.

After two years of a new regime, there appears little doubt that Missouri's basketball program is on the upswing.

And the force which is propelling Mizzou back to respectability and, hopefully, to eventual prominence in the sport is blond, boyish-looking Norm Stewart, himself an All-American in Tiger basketball toggerly just 13 years ago.

This season, lacking the big man at center so sorely needed in the Big Eight and with perilously thin bench help, Stewart buckled down to make the most of what he had — and succeeded. The best season since the mid-fifties, including two upsets of KU; anticipated help from the current freshman squad; and the start of construction on a long-awaited multi-purpose auditorium appreciably brighten the outlook for the future.

Still Stewart takes a view of cautious optimism. At a recent appearance before a Columbia civic club, he wound up his talk by quipping: "It will still be the end of the 1969-70 season before we'll know whether to build a home or keep on renting."

Norm and his wife, the former Virginia Zim-merly of Kansas City and an ex-Missouri home-coming queen, had just completed construction of a home in Cedar Falls, Iowa, when the opportunity to switch jobs came along.

This was in early March of 1967, and Mis-souri basketball fortunes had sagged to their lowest ebb in the school's history. In a two-season span, the Tigers had won only six times in 49 starts. Never before had Tiger basketball teams

won as few games or lost as many in back-to-back seasons. Morale was naturally at rock bottom and discipline was almost totally lacking.

The day of his appointment, Stewart headed south from the University of Northern Iowa where he had been a successful head coach for six years—97 wins and 42 losses, two conference championships, and a fourth-place finish in the NCAA College Division National Tournament.

He spent two days scouting high school talent in the State Class L semi-finals and finals in St. Louis, then hurried back to the campus of his Alma Mater, rolled up his sleeves and went to work.

In between recruiting trips he held individual talks with the players who were to return the following season, exchanging views and philoso-phies and spelling out his code of discipline. A few of the players didn't come back. Those with a genuine desire to compete did.

One of Stewart's first concrete moves was to hire capable Roy Dewitz, a former opponent as a player at Kansas State and a coaching foe at Augustana College, where he gave up the head mentor's job he had held for a year to become No. 1 assistant.

It soon became evident that things were looking up, although few if any of a diminished corps of Tiger followers expected the 10-16 season that followed. Attendance grew, enthusiasm swelled noticeably and a stunning 67-66 upset of Kansas at Lawrence brought a crowd of several hundred persons to the airport in the early

morning hours to greet the conquering heroes.

Why did he decide to leave a well-paying position in a winning atmosphere to shoulder the problems which obviously existed at Missouri?

His answer comes quickly. No deliberation.

"I came back because this is the University level, the top of competition. I was at a good school with a good job and a good salary but this is advancement because of the competition. That's strictly why I came. If I'm going to coach, I want to knock heads with the best."

Stewart emphasizes that when he accepted the job he set no year-by-year goals, no calendar of improvement.

"Where we started was at an easy point. We didn't have to do much to improve. We won 10 games, including key games with KU and with Nebraska at the end of the season.

"This was the year that I had worried about because our first recruiting hadn't been good. I felt that if this team won 10 games we would have done a good job. It was just their great effort and attitude."

Proper attitude and effort are the first and foremost demands Stewart makes upon his players. He's tough in practice and quick to take firm action when a player steps out of line off the court. At the same time the 34-year-old native of Northeast Missouri's farmlands has a relaxed, country wit that maintains a warm rapport with the squad.

He's lightning-quick with the quip and equally quick to laugh uproariously when he hears a good one. He's also outspoken and at times near-brutally blunt, but if he has his detractors among the students, townspeople and alumni, they're hard to find.

Stewart terms the area of general alumni support of the basketball program "difficult to evaluate."

"I realize that many of our alumni have been very good financially to the athletic department, but even that needs to improve. As far as the

Sports editor of the Columbia Tribune, Charlie Paulsell has been on the Missouri sports scene since he was a student in Journalism School. During this period, he has watched Tiger basketball teams play under four different coaches. He received his BJ in 1950.

basketball team goes, we had a couple of shows of enthusiasm at the Big Eight tournament in Kansas City.

"Our best support was at St. Louis. We've been down and it's hard to generate enthusiasm. But Mitch Murch and Jean Madden got about 250 people together there, and we played well and won and it turned out well.

"In recruiting, it's difficult to tell. An alumni can't make a specific offer to a boy. When we have asked alumni for recruiting help in other ways, we haven't always gotten 100 per cent, but there are certain situations where they've been very helpful."

The question posed most often to Stewart by alumni is "Do you think Missouri can ever have a really first-rate basketball program?"

"There's no real answer to that. How do you define a first-rate program? Everybody has problems, even John Wooden at UCLA, although naturally they're fewer than mine.

"To me, first rate means you do the best with what you have. You take what you have and get after 'em.

"There are a lot of things about our program that are first rate. For example, when we travel our accommodations are as good as anyone's."

Stewart declines to pinpoint the progress he feels he has made in upgrading Mizzou's program but neither does he shrug off the idea that it's there.

"When I first came back," he said with a good-natured grin, "everywhere I went around the state the reaction was 'You sure got yourself into a helluva situation. Good luck.' I could feel them looking at me as I walked out the door.

"Then I started getting letters from smaller schools outside the conference wanting to get on our schedule. They all saw a chance to beat a Big Eight team. The first year I must have gotten 95 letters saying 'You want to play?' I'm not getting that many any more."

With all but reserve Tom Thoenen due back from this season's surprising squad and help on the way from a solid freshman club, it's quite likely that in another year the letters will have stopped coming completely.

And Norm Stewart will be building instead of renting. □

