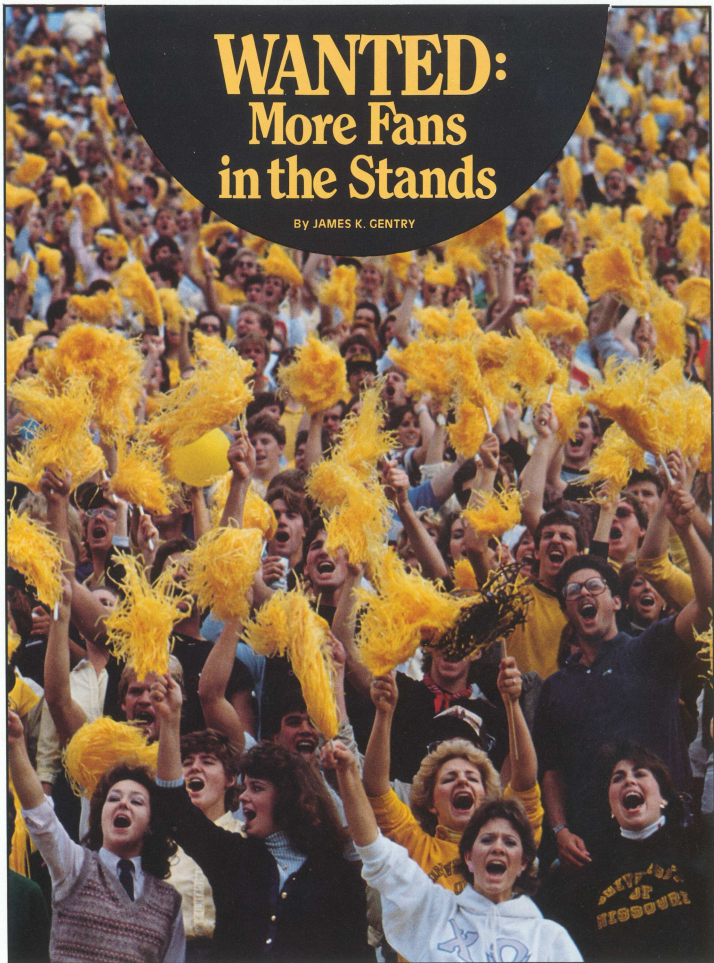


WANTED: More Fans in the Stands

By JAMES K. GENTRY



SATURDAY'S AMERICA. A bright fall afternoon. Trees alive in brilliant hues. Alumni striding proudly past the Columns. Tailgaters unpacking a moveable feast. Traffic snaking slowly past Memorial Stadium.

Inside, down on the grass of Faurot Field, the Tigers warming up for another contest. Marching Mizzou and the Golden Girls streaming into the stadium past knots of enthusiastic fans.

Game day. In fall 1979, Mizzou football was Saturday's America. The Tigers averaged 69,867 fans for six home games and attracted four of Mizzou's 10 largest crowds in history, led by the 75,136 who elbowed into the stands and jammed onto the hill to watch the Tigers lose to Texas.

By fall 1983, interest in Mizzou football had waned. Four straight seasons of declining attendance bottomed out at an average of 52,029, reaching a season low of 41,459 in the snow against Oklahoma State. From '79 to '83, average attendance dropped 17,838 per game, a decline of nearly 26 percent.

"This is obviously of great concern to us," Athletic Director Dave Hart says. "We've got to fund ourselves. This hits us right in the pocketbook since we get no state appropriations or student fees."

At 1983 ticket prices, the missing fans are costing the athletic department more than \$1 million a year in gross revenue. The 1983-84 budget is \$8.3 million.

The Tigers aren't the only ones having problems. College football attendance in 1983 fell for the first time in nine years and television ratings for college football games slipped to an all-time low. Professional football's television ratings also declined in the '83 season.

Missouri athletic officials have met frequently in the past several

months to develop a strategy to reverse the slide. Their plans appear logical and well thought out. To appreciate what they will do, however, requires an understanding of what has happened.

First, the numbers. In 1979, the Tigers sold 47,052 season tickets as part of their 69,867 average. The remaining 22,815 attendance came from single game sales and operating personnel (vendors, ticket takers, etc.) in the stadium. By 1983, season ticket sales were 31,724 of the 52,029 average.

The defections have occurred in all areas: general public, faculty and staff, and students. In terms of raw numbers, students show the biggest loss. A total of 6,885 fewer student tickets were sold in 1983 than in 1979, a decline of almost 33 percent. At '83 prices, the student loss is worth some \$300,000.

In terms of percentages, faculty-staff has suffered the biggest loss. Since a high in 1978, faculty-staff season ticket purchases have dropped 3,042, or almost 51 percent, a loss worth nearly \$200,000.

Among the public, sales are down 6,113 since 1979, a decline of about 24 percent. Since the public pays more for season tickets, the loss is in the range of \$500,000. Single game sales are down 2,510 since '79, or 11 percent.

Universities in neighboring states like Iowa and Illinois are drawing capacity crowds. Why have fans deserted Missouri? Talk to students, fans, alumni. They offer no shortage of reasons.

Despite its size, the student erosion occurred so quietly as to go almost unnoticed. It has steadily wasted away, even though student enrollment actually has increased since 1979, moving from 23,246 then to 24,059 this year.

"They say it's the economy, tuition increases, the schedule," Hart says. "They say they don't think our style of football is exciting, that there's a lack of superstars, a lack of skilled people. We took a survey and that's what we heard."

The economic factors can't be denied. Since '79, tuition (termed incidental and student activity fees) rose 70 percent to \$626 for the fall 1983 semester for in-state students. The impact has been noted on Campus. "You've got the decline in student participation in football and other activities because they just don't have the capital," says Rich-

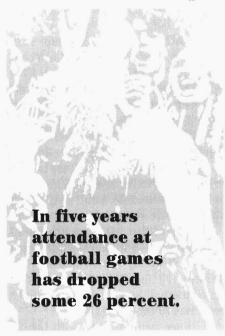
ard Dozier, coordinator of student services and minority student programs in the Office for Student Development. "I'm hearing this from all students, not just minority students."

Other Campus administrators have noted a shift to more flexible and cheaper forms of entertainment. Participation in intramurals has remained steady for the last several years, but unstructured "free play" at Brewer Field House and Rothwell Gymnasium has increased almost 100 percent since '79. And student support for some entertainment activities requiring season tickets is down, whereas single-event purchases are up. At the same time, Greek membership has risen steadily since 1979.

AT NEIGHBORING SCHOOLS, which have felt a similar economic pinch, student support of athletics continues strong. And, notes Margy Harris, Greek life coordinator in the Office of Residential Life, "It seems like the students I know manage to come up with the money for things they really want to do."

Senior Joe Blake, president of the Student Athletic Board, believes student fans haven't been lost, they've just become more selective. "I see a lot of guys who, instead of buying a season ticket, have opted to buy a hillside ticket and then cram into the blocks when they want to see a particular game."

Bob Dixon, a 1956 graduate who drives from his home in Chicago for



**In five years
attendance at
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several games a year, notes, "I've been appalled to see the number of students even with season tickets who do something else. One Saturday before a game I was having lunch at my son's fraternity house. Several of the guys were getting ready to go to St. Louis for the races. I couldn't believe it."

IN PERCENTAGE TERMS, faculty-staff has sustained the largest loss. This erosion also has come about rather quietly.

"The main problem, from what I hear, seems to be economic," Hart says. "Pay hasn't kept up with inflation, with the salary freezes and other financial problems at the University."

UMC faculty-staff salaries certainly have not increased with inflation. For example, the average salary of all faculty rankings was \$21,889 in 1978-79. For 1983-84 that average is \$29,004, an increase of a bit more than 32 percent. In the same period, however, the Consumer Price Index has risen more than 50 percent.

Economics doesn't explain the entire loss. "I quit buying season tickets because of the poor home schedule," says Daryl Moen, a professor in the School of Journalism. Moen bought season tickets when he first joined the UMC faculty in 1974 and did not renew for the 1983 season.

Despite the fact that he's "a fairly committed Missouri football fan," Moen's interest began to wane in 1982. "We only went to three of the six home games, even though we came to the stadium before every game to have lunch with our tailgating group. Then we went golfing." Last season the Moens "tailgated" at the golf course.

The most vocal group of defectors has been the public, including Mizzou alumni, where the Tigers are down almost 24 percent. The dropoff of 6,113 is just short of the student decline.

The complaints are a litany by now. Critics point to the season ticket donor policy, the schedule, a dull style of play and mediocre records.

Some alumni use terms like betrayal and bad faith when they talk about the ticket policy established in 1979, despite the fact that for years other major football schools have used such programs to raise revenues.

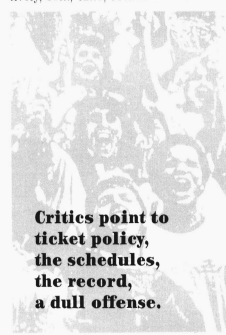
"I see two problems with the '79

policy," said Columbia attorney Carlyle Foley, who received a BS degree in business administration in 1967 and a JD degree in 1973. "One is purely economic. The cost of good seats together, especially for two or more, became prohibitive for many fans, and rather than move to less desirable seats, they just chose to stay away. And, second, little if any input was sought from the people who were affected most. As a result, there was little sense of identity with the policy."

Other alumni, however, endorse the donor program. "People don't seem to understand that you can't support a first-class program on ticket revenue only," says Dixon. "I think what the athletic department did was the only thing it could do."

A SCHEDULE that has featured Louisville, Utah State, Rice and even East Carolina, a top 20 team, has its critics, too. "The caliber of opponents has dropped," says Kelley Curbow, a '74 graduate who was a lineman for former Coach Al Onofrio. "The caliber of opponents was one of the main reasons I went to school there. We played one of the toughest schedules in the country. People want to see two good teams."

The schedule has been softened significantly. According to *Kickoff* magazine, Mizzou played the nation's toughest slates in 1975 through 1977. The next year the schedule was the 13th toughest, and since has ranked, respectively, 30th, 42nd, 36th and 44th. It was



Critics point to ticket policy, the schedules, the record, a dull offense.

sixth in 1973. Interestingly, many fans and alumni who criticize Hart for the ticket policy don't blame him for the schedule, apparently aware that most games are arranged five to 10 years in advance.

COMPLICATING MATTERS is a feeling by many that the Tigers play a "dull" brand of football, although several say they were encouraged by 1983's offense. "A lot of people I know don't think Missouri football has been interesting to watch," Curbow says. "It's pretty blah stuff. You can sit in the stands and call almost every play."

Another area of frustration is the Tigers' record. "Mizzou in the Dan Devine era was one of the most successful and exciting times Missouri has had," says Joe McGuff, longtime sports editor of the *Kansas City Star*. "Since then, there's been a long run of teams that were reasonably good, but not exceptionally good or exceptionally exciting." The Tigers were 93-37-7 in the Devine era and went to three Orange Bowls, one Sugar Bowl and the Gator Bowl. Under Devine's successor, Onofrio, Mizzou was 38-41 and went to two bowls—the Sun and the Fiesta. In Powers' six years, the Tigers are 43-26-2 and have been to five "minor" bowls.

Adds Dixon, "People want a return to the glory days of the 1960s. They got spoiled. They should realize that an awful lot of schools would be happy with a Holiday Bowl or Liberty Bowl appearance. But Missouri fans are looking for those old days. I wonder if they'll be satisfied with less."

They might be more satisfied if the Tigers could do better in the Big Eight. Starting in 1979, Mizzou has finished fourth, third, fifth, fifth, and tied for second in the conference.

Two observers believe the problem is not with Mizzou's program but with its fans. Kirk Wessler, former sports editor, now managing editor of the *Columbia Daily Tribune*, wrote in October that "the majority of fans seem content to sit on their hands and complain—about ticket policies, uninspired offenses, poor schedules, not enough victories . . . Missourians are wrapped up in the 'Show-Me' mentality: Show me a better way, and I'll consider it; or, more exactly, show me I'm wrong, then I'll think about changing."

Dave Dorr, a sportswriter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and a 1962 Mizzou graduate, says, "The overriding reason for the attendance problems is the basic conservatism and apathy that seem to be prevalent in Missouri. You don't find it in Iowa, Indiana or even Illinois. This Show-Me mentality is nothing but an excuse not to support the athletic programs at the state's major university."

Hart doesn't think he has all the answers, but he has developed a strategy designed to address most of the concerns outlined above.

For the students, Powers and his staff are visiting virtually every fraternity, sorority, residence hall and any other Campus group that will have them. "We'll have a coach, a coach and administrator, or a coach and player visit, talk about the program and show the highlight film," Hart says.

"We'd also like to dispel some misconceptions they may have. For example, some students have resentments because they think we control use of the Hearnes Building and they're paying a student activity fee for it. They think their money is going to support the athletic department. But we get no financial support from student fees."

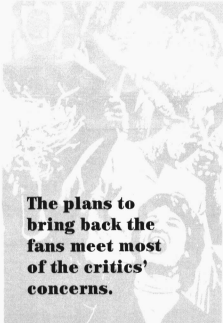
The visits are a continuation of Powers' efforts begun last spring to make a more concerted effort to sell Tiger football to the press and public. He's doing a good job in the new role and seems to enjoy it.

Adds Blake, "We've got to be sure students know Coach Powers and the team and athletic department value their support and need their support." Blake says a better effort will be made to "coordinate the cheerleaders and Marching Mizzou toward a combined effort with the fans."

To improve communication with the faculty, the athletic department hosted a reception at the Alumni Center in February. "No hard sell," says Hart. "It was just to let them know we value what they do for us and our athletes."

Probably the most publicized new program is the revised ticket policy. Hart and his aides have traveled the state to seek suggestions about making the policy as fair and non-controversial as possible.

The new policy differs from the former plan in that it utilizes a point



The plans to bring back the fans meet most of the critics' concerns.

system to determine eligibility for priority seating in football and basketball instead of requiring a straight per-seat contribution. Although giving money is the quickest way to acquire a lot of points, other factors—such as loyalty as a season ticket holder and membership in the Alumni Association and Jefferson Club—also accrue points.

The former policy provided that a person could "protect" two seats in the priority area without making a contribution to the athletic program. Under the new policy, two football seats can be retained with a minimum contribution of \$100 a year regardless of the person's point total. A person 65 or older can retain his priority-area seats without making any contribution.

"I think that one year from now people will see that we have a good ticket policy, and people don't have to have big bucks to keep good seats," says Paul Miller, associate director of athletics for external relations.

Officials also plan to contact every former season ticket holder for the past five years to learn why tickets were not renewed.

UPCOMING SCHEDULES should have more appeal, too. This fall the Tigers have Illinois, Wisconsin, Mississippi State and Notre Dame as non-conference foes. But Nebraska and Oklahoma are road games. Even this schedule has its problems. "After opening with Illinois on the road, we come back for four straight home games," notes

Stanley Souders, a St. Louisian who graduated from Mizzou in 1941. "For people who attend only home games, they'll have to leave home four weekends in a row in the fall when they might paint the house or such. Then at the back half of the season when you want to see football, you've got mostly road games."

For 1985 Texas, Northwestern, Indiana and California are non-conference foes, with the latter three here. And Nebraska and Oklahoma are here. The '86 schedule features non-conference home games with Utah State, Texas and Indiana.

THE KEY SCHEDULING year will be 1987 when the traditional Nebraska-Oklahoma block will be broken up. That year the Huskers will come to Columbia but Mizzou will visit Norman, Okla., for the second straight year. In '87 Baylor, Northwestern and Syracuse also will play here. Oklahoma returns to Faurot Field in '88.

The Tigers also should benefit from another strong recruiting season this spring. "As a whole, perhaps with the exception of Oklahoma, Missouri got the best recruiting class in the Big Eight," says John Hadley, an associate editor of *The Sporting News*, who specializes in college football. "It'll take a couple of years to tell for sure but in all likelihood this is Warren Powers' best recruiting class."

The department has done a good job of promoting Tiger football in recent years, highlighted by a 66-station radio network. Mizzou also has used billboards, television, direct mail and other techniques. The Tigers also may advertise with a statewide theater chain and hope to work with major businesses in the state to distribute promotional materials. This year's campaign will spin off the theme "Catch the Tiger Feeling—Be There," and a toll-free 800 number again will be available for ticket orders.

But beyond the schedule and promotions is the reality of performance on the field. "The only thing that will reverse the decline is to have an awfully good football team," McGuff says. "And fans must perceive that they will be good at the beginning of the season. I simply don't think things will change until they put a big winner on the field." □