

Winners Don't Whine

STORY BY JENNIFER WILFORD, BJ '93



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GARY PINKEL DEFINES SUCCESS IN LIFE BY MORE
THAN JUST VICTORIES ON A FOOTBALL FIELD, THOUGH
HE'S CERTAINLY HAD PLENTY OF THOSE.

MISSOURI FOOTBALL COACH GARY Pinkel is baffled by the whole "Show-Me State" concept.

Although he has yet to coach the Tigers in a single game, whenever he addresses fans who attend various events to show support for his program, the reception isn't merely warm—it's almost too hot for him to handle. Standing ovations aren't unusual, and while Pinkel appreciates the enthusiasm, he just doesn't feel totally comfortable with the rousing response. Particularly considering he has yet to show anyone anything.

"I can't be rude and say 'Sit down,'" says Pinkel, who came to MU after spending 10 seasons at the University of Toledo. "But I was always taught you have to accomplish something."

Pinkel has a strong track record. In a combined 22 years as head coach at Toledo and an assistant at the University of Washington, he experienced just one losing season. When he left Toledo in November, the Rockets were ranked in the top 25 with a record of 10-1.

The fans' fervor for Pinkel's arrival stems from the fact that MU has posted only two winning seasons in the past 17 years. Many thought the program had permanently reversed its fortunes under previous Coach Larry Smith, who led the team to bowl games in 1997 and 1998 before being dismissed after the Tigers finished 3-8 in 2000.

Pinkel shuns these early high approval ratings that most any politician would envy. He is more concerned with laying a foundation for the MU program built around discipline and a great deal of attention to detail. Pinkel believes once those components are in place, the chances to show the fans success will be better.

Pinkel's personal definition of success is not as simple as adding up his number of career victories. His responsibility as a husband and father of three children is also a major factor in that equation.

"To look back on my life and say that I had a remarkable family and one wife is more important to me than anything,"

Pinkel says. His wife, Vicki, says other coaches' wives marvel that in 22 years the Pinkels lived in just two places. While other families are frequently on a coaching carousel, the Pinkels stayed put, even though successful coaches in the Mid-American Conference frequently leave to join conferences with greater name recognition.

Pinkel liked being close to family while at Toledo and notes that had his youngest son, Blake, not been graduating from high school this year, he wouldn't have considered this move. Pinkel puts his philosophy in practice when he schedules time off during the season for himself and his assistants to be with their families.

Pinkel learned the value of family, as well as lessons such as hard work and respect for others, at an early age from his parents, George and Gay Pinkel. George worked as a tire salesman in Akron, Ohio, a blue-collar community that proudly proclaimed itself "The Rubber Capital of the World." In addition to tire sales, George also worked in a hardware store—often

'It is not a good thing to give excuses around me.'

putting in 12-hour days to support his three children.

Gary stayed at home and cared for the children before returning to school to become a nurse. Gary says his mother was a loving woman who helped provide moral direction for the family. Her main directive was to observe the golden rule—to treat others the way you would want to be treated. At age 6, young Gary found out how serious she was when he used unacceptable language. At the time he was too young to truly understand the meaning of his words, but that mattered little to his mother.

"She got a washcloth, lathered it up with soap and stuck the whole thing in my mouth and kept swishing it and swishing it and swishing it," Pinkel says, wincing at the memory. "I got sick, and

even though she knew I didn't know what I said, she wanted to make a profound statement on how her family would be. And I remembered it."

The familial influence on Pinkel's life also comes from two siblings: Kathy, the oldest, and Greg, the youngest. Both use wheelchairs because they have hereditary spastic paraplegia, a rare genetic disorder characterized by progressive weakness of the legs.

Gary was nearing high school when Kathy started showing signs of the disorder and in college when Greg became affected. Somehow, he was skipped. Kathy offers only that a "genetic roll of the dice" can explain how Gary was unaffected.

In her early teen-age years, Kathy started having problems walking, but she was not diagnosed until her 20s. Gary would be there for support as Kathy literally would need to lean on him sometimes. While his siblings combated the disorder, Gary was a standout wide receiver and tight end at Kenmore High School. He went on to earn honorable mention All-America honors in his senior year at Kent State University in 1973.

"He was there for me, and always was steady in being there," Kathy says of her brother. "He excelled physically, and was spared, so to speak. While I am no psychologist, I know this has profoundly affected him."

Pinkel says the attitude his siblings have displayed in facing adversity was a source of motivation for him as a player and continues to drive him as a coach. Through their experiences, he has developed heightened sensitivity toward others with disabilities as well as little tolerance for complainers.

"When anybody starts feeling sorry for themselves because of how tough things are, I can't comprehend that," Pinkel says. "I get to walk out that door," he says, gesturing toward the practice fields, "and I am the luckiest guy in the world. It is not a good thing to give excuses around me."

GROWING UP IN AKRON, PINKEL began playing football in pads at age 6; he and his father followed the Cleveland Browns; and he could get to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in just 20 minutes.

Football was a significant point of community pride. In 1969, Pinkel's senior year in high school, Kenmore played for the city championship, which at the time was comparable to a state championship. Even though it was Thanksgiving Day, 20,000 fans chose football over a turkey dinner and saw Kenmore win its first city championship.

Buoyed by his high school success, Pinkel went to Kent State, eager to succeed in his home state. At that time, college freshmen were ineligible in their first year, so Pinkel could only watch in disbelief at the lethargy displayed in Kent's program. The team finished 3-8 in 1970, but football fortunes were about to change drastically under a new coach, Don James.

Pinkel remembers the first day he saw James, a reddish-haired guy who stood only about 5-foot-8. The impact of his arrival, Pinkel says, was immediate.

"He didn't care who you were or how long you had been around," Pinkel says. "Either you are committed or you aren't. Obviously I have picked up a lot of his philosophies."

Pinkel says being part of the team under James that won the first-ever Mid-American Conference Championship in 1972 helped solidify his interest in coaching. He would later land with James at the University of Washington, where he spent 12 seasons as an offensive assistant with a record of 104-37-3. Ten of the players under his guidance at Washington played or are playing in the NFL.

It's a good thing Pinkel has been winning for the majority of his career, because he and many close to him will tell you he detests losing. His wife, Vicki, recalls that during his first stint as an assistant coach at Bowling Green State University, Pinkel coached receivers, and

he would be upset if his players did not perform well, regardless of the outcome of a game.

While at Washington, Pinkel remembers reading that the legendary Alabama Coach Bear Bryant would wake up in the middle of the night in a sweat because his mind was racing, filled with thoughts of the countless ways not to lose a game. While Pinkel might not experience quite the same level of sleeplessness, he relates to it.

"If you had to name my biggest fear as a coach, I hate and fear losing more than anything," Pinkel says.

So much does he despise losing, Vicki notes, "He always says he hates losing more than he loves winning."

In order to optimize the opportunity for success, Pinkel tries to leave nothing to chance. This means paying attention to a level of detail some might find mundane. At practice, players are dressed identically down to the same color of socks and undershirts because Pinkel detests individualism. Players will be quizzed every Friday before a game to determine their level of preparation because Pinkel thinks mental errors are "inexcusable." Practice drills are timed down to the second because seconds count mightily to Pinkel.

"With him you always want to be 15 minutes early," says Matt Eberflus, MU's defensive coordinator, who also played for Pinkel at Toledo.

Players learned of this in the first team meeting when starting senior linebacker Jamonte Robinson showed up a few minutes late because of a class obligation. At the time, Pinkel wasn't aware of the reason for tardiness (academics), and he quickly dismissed Robinson from the meeting.

"He just told me not even to come in, because in 10 years players didn't come late to his meetings, and I can definitely see why," Robinson says.

Pinkel has made a quick first impression on players as a no-nonsense coach who will shoot straight with them. He says he doesn't concern himself with tak-

ing "litmus tests" to determine his approval rating, because, quite frankly, he says, his is a "no-vote system."

Those closest to him say there is much more to Pinkel than just his demanding demeanor as a football coach, but don't expect to see that for a while.

"He is a real fun-loving guy, but he won't come across that way," says Mark Kruse of Toledo, who served as Pinkel's real estate agent and is one of his close friends. "He knows you didn't hire him to be a stand-up comedian, and I think he has learned that you earn the right to show additional attributes of your personality in time."

But at this time, Pinkel is concerned only with putting the most committed and athletic players on the field. During spring practices, Pinkel announced all positions were up for grabs, and there was a frenzy as about a dozen players found themselves reassigned to new positions.

Taurus Ferguson, a junior college transfer, is one of the players on the relocation plan. He is getting accustomed to playing safety after being recruited by Smith's staff to play running back. When Pinkel first approached him about the switch, Ferguson thought it was a request, but quickly learned it was a direct order.

"This is good, though, because we need someone to come in and take charge," Ferguson says. "In doing this, I really realize that no one person goes before the team."

Pinkel insists it is too early to tell if an enhanced focus on team dynamics and on the little things that matter so much to him will result in more victories. Fans will get their first indication when the Tigers open their season on Sept. 1 at home against Bowling Green.

At this point, Pinkel is taking a wait-and-see approach, recognizing that players are still adjusting to his system. When asked about preseason expectations, he politely but firmly replies he definitely has goals, but those are "personal" and he would prefer not to share them.

It's not surprising that the man who shuns early optimism and standing ovations wants his gauge of success to be something more concrete. Save the applause for touchdowns on the way to victories. 🌟

Tiger Tidbits:

Number of returning starters: 14 total—8 offense, 6 defense

Strengths: Look for inside linebackers Jamonte Robinson, a senior, and junior Sean Doyle to pack a powerful punch. Offensively, multisport athlete Justin Gage, a junior, returns as MU's top wide receiver. The offensive line returns four starters, one of the most experienced groups.

Concerns: Depth across the board is one of Pinkel's biggest worries, particularly at cornerback. In the spring, just one scholarship player returned at that position. Antoine Duncan. Duncan had off-season knee surgery but will be ready to go for fall. Junior Terrence Curry was expected to contribute, but he suffered a serious knee injury in the spring. He will rehabilitate over the summer, but his status is unclear. Junior college transfer R.J. Jones should provide help, though. Expect true freshmen to be pressed into action here.

Quarterbacks: After two injury-plagued seasons, junior quarterback Kirk Farmer opens 2001 with a broken bone in his throwing hand. Junior Darius Outlaw and senior Jim Dougherty will vie for the starting spot.



Kirk Farmer

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Justin Gage



Jamonte Robinson

2001 Schedule

Sept. 1	Bowling Green
Sept. 8	Southwest Texas
Sept. 15	at Michigan State
Sept. 29	Nebraska
Oct. 6	at Oklahoma State
Oct. 13	Iowa State
Oct. 20	at Kansas
Oct. 27	Texas
Nov. 3	at Colorado
Nov. 10	Baylor
Nov. 17	at Kansas State