

PINKEL'S PLAN



Story by Chris Blose
Illustration by Patrick Milbourn

How is Coach Gary Pinkel turning the Tigers into contenders? He's sticking with a plan that works.

WHEN MISSOURI FOOTBALL Head Coach Gary Pinkel sat his three kids down and told them he wanted three grandkids from each of them, he didn't quite get the reaction he'd hoped for. His daughter has since given birth to his first grandchild, but at the time of his speech, his kids just got up and left.

That's not such an easy thing to do for MU football players. For them, self-interest and individual goals must be secondary to Pinkel's vision for the program; if they want to be a part of this ever-improving team, they have to get with Pinkel's plan.

Pinkel's a detail man who knows and controls all things, large and small, associated with the program. "I use this word 'aware,'" says John Kadlec, the Tiger Radio Network color commentator who has seen his share of great Mizzou coaches over the past half century. "Pinkel is aware of everything that goes on around his football team, everything from how much weight you can bench press to what your grades are."

Pinkel also forbids excuses. No one is allowed to blame poor performance on injuries, bad weather, screaming fans or any other obstacles. Pinkel himself makes no excuses for the team's bad record on the road in 2003, with a loss to Arkansas at the Independence Bowl and four losses in the regular season, including a painful one to Kansas. "We weren't mature enough to focus and do what is necessary to win on the road," he says, and he takes the blame for that lack of maturity.

But maturity comes with time, and

Pinkel devotes his time to players. "He always pushes you," says quarterback Brad Smith. "He really sticks with you, and I'm glad he does that."

When Pinkel first arrived in 2001, he unveiled his "pyramid of objectives." At the top of that pyramid is an eventual national championship, and near the top are a Big 12 championship and consistent bowl victories. Going into his fourth season, his team includes players who have been here since that pyramid's conception. Add to those veteran players younger ones and top recruits, and Pinkel might just be building the talent necessary to reach his goals over time.

But everyone needs to stick to the plan. "When the toughest moments come, we don't deviate," Pinkel says. "We actually embrace what we do because we know what we do works."

Getting Off the Ground

Pinkel is quite fond of the description "high-level," particularly in wanting to mold high-level players and create a consistently high-level team. When you think of high-level players at MU, one name comes to mind immediately: Brad Smith.

The quarterback, a cover model for preseason football guides and the subject of Heisman speculation, was the 20th-best rusher nationally last year. Watching Smith run is a study in zen-like athleticism, what with his seemingly preternatural ability to pick holes and change direction.

Such gushing descriptions — and there's no lack of them — could seem like pressure, but not to Smith. "I don't

think about it," he says. "When I can be myself, when I'm on the field, that's when I get to have fun. It all works."

Of course, Pinkel knows that you can't build a national contender around one player. Without a strong offensive line, there would be no holes for Smith to pick, only angry defenders ready to put him on his back. The line lost top graduates in A.J. Ricker and Rob Droege, but Pinkel hopes to build on players with starting experience, including Tony Palmer and Joe Gianino at guard and Scott Paffrath at tackle. Redshirt freshman Adam Spieker likely will play center. These players have huge shoes to fill, literally — Ricker wore a size 17.

MU also lost its career rushing leader, Zack Abron, but Damien Nash showed big rushing potential in 2003 when he rushed for 462 yards and scored five touchdowns as a backup



MU ATHLETICS MEDIA RELATIONS PHOTO

Quarterback Brad Smith takes Heisman hype and high expectations in stride.

tailback. On his tail is Marcus Woods, a speedy redshirt freshman.

The Tigers have had success on the ground, but passing has been weaker. "We have to become a better passing team," Pinkel says. "That isn't just on [Smith], but certainly it starts with him."

It doesn't end with him, though, and Pinkel wants more consistency from his receivers, including Thomson Omboga, the team's top receiver with 52 catches, 466 yards and one touchdown last year; Sean Coffey, a big target for Smith; Brad Ekwerekwu, whose talent caused Pinkel to pull his redshirt in 2003; and redshirt freshmen Greg Bracey and Jason Ray. There is depth at tight end, with Victor Sesay returning from an injury and Clint Matthews battling for the job with three younger players.

As for backup quarterbacks, the likely candidate is sophomore Brandon Coleman. Top recruits Chase Patton and Darrell Jackson both could step up as well, but Pinkel likes to hold on to redshirts whenever possible. Both recruits are part of a quality class that represents the coach's increased recruiting success.

Crush the Rush

The one area in which Pinkel is changing his plan slightly is defense. He's hoping to better defend against the run in particular, an area of weakness in 2003, as seen in the Independence Bowl and in Kansas State's Darren Sproles' rushing dominance against the Tigers.

"We changed our defensive structure for significant reasons," Pinkel says. "I think what has happened is we've had to adjust, to become more multiple." That

change includes switching to a 4-3 defense and moving Dedrick Harrington from rover to inside linebacker to bolster athleticism at that position. *Athlon Sports* ranks MU's linebackers as the best in the conference, particularly James Kinney, who is credited with 322 tackles and needs 94 this season to become the University's all-time leader. Rounding out the top contenders is David Richard, a converted running back who returns to his home state after playing at Michigan State.

The defensive tackles are equally solid, if not as deep, with Atiyahh Ellison and C.J. Mosley, both coaches' all-conference picks last year. At defensive end, there are plenty of options, including the experienced Zach Ville and sophomore successes Xzavie Jackson, who started four games as a true freshman, and Brian Smith, who had the most sacks of any freshman in the country in 2003.

The defensive backfield, which lost two starters, is the youngest part of the defense, but youth doesn't mean inexperience. Nino Williams II, then a free safety, had 105 tackles in 2003, for example. Other strong performers include Jason Simpson, Calvin Washington and David Overstreet.

In addition to improving the rush defense, kicking is a concern. Redshirt freshman placekicker Alex Pettersen is untested. As for punting, a top-20 ranking in 2002 dropped to No. 114 in 2003, in part because of chronic problems with Brock Harvey's ankle. Harvey has had surgery since then, and Pinkel hopes to get him back to his 2002 form.



MU ATHLETICS MEDIA RELATIONS PHOTO

Linebacker James Kinney needs 94 tackles this season to become MU's all-time leader.

Welcoming the Hype

Mizzou fans seem constantly to wonder, "Is this the year?" The only real answer to that question will come soon when the team takes the field. In the meantime, fans can enjoy the hype of preseason rankings and predictions. *Athlon Sports* picked MU over Kansas State to win the Big 12 North and finish 11th nationally, and the ESPN/USA Today/AFCA Coaches Poll ranks the Tigers 17th.

Add to that a schedule including nonconference games that could get the Tigers off to a strong start, with the first three games against Arkansas State, Troy State and Ball State. Pivotal conference games likely will be two road battles against Texas and Nebraska and one at home against Kansas State. Then Kansas comes to Faurot Field on Nov. 20 for the biggest grudge match of the season.

As for all the preseason prognosticating, Pinkel welcomes it as a part of his plan rather than as unwanted pressure: "I wish people would predict that we'd win the national championship every year. To me all these rankings mean is that people are starting to respect our program." The coach doesn't give such predictions any undue weight, though. "We all know that the rankings next January are the important ones."

TIGER TRIVIA

#1 Legendary Coach Don Faurot introduced the Split-T offense in what year?

Answers on Page 51

TIGER TRIVIA

#2 In what year and under what coach were the football Tigers ranked No. 17

Answers on Page 51

RETURNING STARTERS

Offense:

Sean Coffey (12), wide receiver
Thomson Omboga (87), wide receiver
Tony Palmer (52), guard
Brad Smith (16), quarterback

Defense:

Atiyah Ellison (97), tackle
Dedrick Harrington (33), linebacker
James Kinney (24), linebacker
C.J. Mosley (99), tackle
Jason Simpson (6), free safety
Brian Smith (39), end
Zach Ville (96), end
Calvin Washington (17), cornerback
Nino Williams (22), strong safety

Special teams:

Brock Harvey (13), punter
Shirdonya Mitchell (45), kickoff returner

2004 FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

Sept. 4	Arkansas State
Sept. 9	at Troy State
Sept. 18	Ball State
Oct. 2	Colorado
Oct. 9	at Baylor
Oct. 16	at Texas
Oct. 23	Oklahoma State (Homecoming)
Oct. 30	at Nebraska
Nov. 6	Kansas State
Nov. 20	Kansas
Nov. 27	at Iowa State

For updated information on game times and television status, visit mutigers.collegesports.com.



MU ATHLETICS MEDIA RELATIONS PHOTO

A Season to Top

The Tigers' 8-5 season in 2003 was the best in years and provided several key points on which to build:

- The team was undefeated at home in 2003 but lost four regular season games on the road. It needs to win on the road, including at Texas and Nebraska, to be a national contender.
- The team had the fewest turnovers in the country with 13. During Coach Pinkel's three seasons, the team has turned the ball over only 41 times.
- The rushing offense was the best in the Big 12 and sixth best in the nation. Brad Smith returns, and Damien Nash will likely fill Zack Abron's slot at tailback.
- Smith was 23 yards short of being

the only player in Division I-A history to run for 1,000 yards and pass for 2,000 yards in two different years, as he did in 2002. Still, the passing offense ranked 102nd nationally.

- The defense finished fifth in the Big 12. That could improve with nine returning starters, including linebacker James Kinney and the tackle duo of C.J. Mosley and Atiyah Ellison.
- Punting, which ranked 114th in the country in 2003, remains an area of concern.

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