

Kicking Off Women

STORY BY SHAWN DONNELLY

FOUR YEARS AFTER STARTING FROM NOTHING, THE MISSOURI WOMEN'S SOCCER TEAM IS ON THE DOORSTEP OF NATIONAL GLORY—OR AT LEAST THAT'S THE PLAN.

THE TWO STOOD BEHIND ALL OF it—the podium and the microphone and the blue-and-white banner saying this was a big deal, the NCAA Championships. The two women with more goals between them than any other pair in the conference, both with red noses and one with red eyes, leaned up against a wall and took it all in.

Four seasons after starting from nothing, the program was right there, on the map, almost exactly as the coach had drawn it up: The duo standing, moments after a first-round NCAA tournament soccer match, and smiling. Even laughing. They absorbed a reporter's question from the crowd, looked at each other, smiled proudly and giggled. The contest—a magnificently long, four-overtime, 3-2 epic—had run these players till their legs felt like anvils. The match had gradually been abandoned by all form of light, causing fans to scream, "Hey, ref, we can't see!" Surely, though, here was the last great signal of the game's craziness: It had left the losing side in chuckles.

YOU MIGHT START THE STORY OF Missouri women's soccer with 10 minutes left in a match Oct. 15, 1999, against Iowa State. The Tigers are tied 3-3 and threatening. They're rolling along with a 10-3 record and ranked 18th in the country. Winning just half their games from



en's Soccer



STEVE MORAN PHOTO

Heading in the Right Direction:

MU WOMEN'S SOCCER WIN/LOSS RECORDS

1996	6-14-0
1997	7-12-0
1998	11-9-1
1999	14-8-1

this point would send them coasting into their first NCAA tournament. It was finally coming this year—the rise that Coach Bryan Blitz had been rapping about since the program began three seasons ago.

They even have the ball at the magical feet of junior Nikki Thole, Big 12 goals leader and second-team All-American. Thole sends a pass to senior Erin Grimsley, perhaps the conference's most dangerous "second" striker, who stands with her back to the net, about 20 yards out. Even when Grimsley misplays it off her shin, the ball still splits the defense. It's been that type of year. Sophomore Sarah Sallee, the Tigers' smallest player—and their third weapon up front—is sprinting toward the ball. So is the much larger Cyclone goalkeeper. How much larger? "Three times," Grimsley would say later. "Seriously."

Sallee strikes the ball with her right foot just before the collision. The ball rolls into the left corner of the goal, but Sallee hits the ground and stays down. When Thole sees the askew left leg, bone pointing unnaturally diagonal, she flails her arms and screams for help.

Sallee calls out to Grimsley something between "Hold me" and "Help me." Sallee, Grimsley, Thole—they're all cry-

In her third season, Missouri striker Nikki Thole was the Tiger opposition's enemy No. 1. With 23 goals last fall, Thole led the Big 12 in scoring and made second-team All-America. At left she kicks in a crowd.

ing. As Sallee waits for the ambulance and endorphins to arrive, she asks Grimsley, "It's going to be OK, right?" Grimsley hugs Sallee's head: "Oh, yeah, it's gonna be fine." At some point Sallee raises a crooked left pinkie. "I think my finger's broken," she says. Grimsley looks at it: "Yeah, you're probably right." Minutes later Sallee waved from the stretcher with a fractured tibia, fibula and pinkie. Their spark plug. The one who made teams pay when they started keying on Thole and Grimsley ... the one perhaps most responsible for Missouri's breakout season—gone.

In their next four games, they were outscored 15-4, losing three and tying one. The team on the rise had stalled. It wasn't just Sallee's absence, says sophomore sweeper Mandy Waters: "It was that, but it wasn't just that, you know? It was a setback emotionally. We were just off rhythm. I don't know why. I don't think Coach Blitz knows why."

They got stomped 5-1 by Purdue, a team that didn't even make its conference tournament. With 10 minutes left, sweeper Waters tore the anterior cruciate ligament in her left knee, ending her season. Their high NCAA hopes had nearly come unraveled. They were 11-6-1 with one regular-season game and the Big 12 tournament left. And now their sweeper joined two other starters, Sallee and junior Kristin Boeker, on the disabled list. It occurred to Grimsley and others: If we don't win our next three games, we'll be spending the NCAAAs at the library.

BUT THAT'S THE THING ABOUT SOCCER. You can always pass the ball back, start from scratch. So let's play it way back to the construction of the gorgeous field and the \$3.8 million Walton Stadium where the Tiger women roam. Four years ago it's just muck and bulldozers, as Mizzou and 25 other schools nationwide (four in the Big 12) prepare to launch women's soccer. MU's athletic department is trying to sell Butler University's Coach Bryan Blitz on the new women's soccer program. Blitz is



After striker Sarah Sallee (on crutches) went down with three broken bones, Mandy Waters (in leg brace) tore a knee ligament, and Kristin Boeker (13) injured her foot. The Tigers suffered. Still, Tamisha Ellis (12), Jenny Kram (4) and Liz Passanise (18) had something to cheer about.

young, energetic, personable (lets his players call him Bryan), demanding (has them scrimmage against guys), successful (earned national rankings at Butler, a small Division I school from Indiana with no major football or basketball to support him). If Blitz took a chance on Missouri, he'd leap to a big school with three times the budget and soccer skill at the state's bookends, Kansas City and St. Louis. That's everything needed for his sole motive to leave Butler: a national championship. "That's the only reason I came here," he says. "Because I already had a top-25 program."

So, Blitz came to Mizzou and started beating the bushes for players, spinning tales of Big 12 championships and trips to the NCAA tournament. "Selling them on a dream, basically," he says. Pretty soon

he has some St. Louis-area talent, including Jennifer Kram, Liz LaTour and Heather Buchheit. But the early years are lean on wins.

Year One: Using 17 freshmen and about one-third of the team's 12 scholarships, Blitz's 1996 season ends at 5-13. Along the way, Nebraska ran them in, 8-2. They lost to SMSU, SLU and Division II Drury by a combined 6-1, with MU's scoring deficiency leading Blitz to lament, "We can't finish a sandwich." Another time, after practice, the coach could only sigh, "We knew it would be like this." They barely made the Big 12 tournament but won a game before bowing respectfully to Nebraska, 2-1.

Year Two: Some more good players join the squad—a do-it-all type from Olathe, Kan., in Waters; a *Soccer America* Super



STEVE MORSE PHOTO

Recruit in Boeker; and an unpolished but determined striker named Thole. Plus, they'd picked up goalkeeper Jackie Adamec, a University of Alabama-Birmingham transfer from St. Louis.

Blitz's expectations grew. Scolding his team during preseason, he would say, "Good teams don't do that—and you're a good team." Plenty of teams were better, though. MU trekked to second-ranked Notre Dame for a preseason exhibition and was demolished 11-0. During the regular schedule, the team lost to SLU again, inciting concern from the state's soccer community. The losses continued. Not only were they up against established Big 12 teams, but Blitz's scheduling also threw them to the Wolverines of Michigan and the Tigers of Clemson. "We played the hardest schedule possible," he says, "because we didn't want to be a fluke or have false confidence."

With a Year-Two final record of 7-12,

keeping any confidence at all would've been a feat. "Unbelievably humbling," Blitz called it. Julie Krisanic, former assistant coach, recalls the first two seasons more bluntly: "It was hell." Still, every game, there was Blitz on the sideline, overheating in a full suit, rooting for his players as much as coaching them: "Go on, Heather! ... Keep going, Nikki!"

Year Three: The Tigers turned the corner during the winter of 1997-98, when they added Grimsley, a slick Lenexa, Kan., forward who was homesick after two solid seasons at Florida State. Come fall 1998, she'd partner with Thole, who scored an impressive 20 goals in a sporadic season that ended in a frenetic run to the Big 12 tournament finals. Still, the NCAA committee didn't invite them to its post-season party, and the Tigers, 11-9-1, felt robbed.

Year Four: So, they came into the fall 1999 season with junior Thole, eight seniors and a chip on their shoulder. They rode that energy to a 6-1 start, past Colorado, Indiana, Kansas and Illinois. When they whipped No. 14 Michigan 4-1 on a hot September Sunday in Columbia, the team broke into *Soccer America's* Top 20. Next they beat Baylor, Oklahoma and Oklahoma State by a combined 9-2. After six weeks, the spunky 11-3 squad had chipped its way to No. 15. The 10 letters a week the coaching staff was used to getting back from America's high-school hot-shots had doubled, and work-study students were called in to help with the paperwork.

Then, as you already know, Sallee went down against Iowa State in mid-October, and so did the team. Now they've come to a final regular season game against Tulsa—Blitz's alma mater—in Columbia. Unsure if they'd even make the NCAAs now, the game

was billed as the seniors' last stand.

Says Blitz of the slump: "I think we were all feeling sorry for ourselves, coaches and players, because of all the injuries, and we forgot that we were in charge of our future." Something jogged their memory. Maybe it was seeing streamers in the locker room or knowing so many parents were in the stands. The Tigers roared, 4-1, and their confidence was back.

In San Antonio for the Big 12 tournament, they snatched their 13th win against Colorado. The next day Thole and Grimsley each slipped one past the huge goalie of Iowa State for another win, getting them into the championship game against No. 4 Nebraska, which pulled nearly half of its starters from Canada's national team. With local girls' club teams cheering for MU to pull an upset, the Tigers went at them. Lauren Gregg, assistant coach of the World Cup champion U.S. women's national team, scouted Grimsley and Thole. "They are one of the best attacking duos I've ever seen in the college game," she said during a Fox Sports Net broadcast. Of the team, she said, "They are fighters, and Bryan has them believing in themselves. ... In such a short time, they've really emerged as a top



ROB HELL PHOTO

After coming to Missouri from Butler University, Coach Bryan Blitz has his eyes on a national title. He says a realistic goal for the Tigers would be reaching the Final Four in the next three or four years.

program." MU lost 2-1, but coaches took their players' frustration as a good sign.

Back in Columbia the next day, the women gathered around a satellite-fed TV in the student lounge of MU's Taylor/Brookfield building. They exploded as their name came up as one of 48 NCAA tournament competitors. After three also-ran seasons, it was sweet to make the NCAA tourney. On Nov. 10, three days later, the 14-7-1 Tigers were to host a first-round match against 15-6-2 Marquette.

You hate to call gruesome injuries a blessing, but "In this case, it certainly has been—from a chemistry and character standpoint," Blitz said a day before the single-elimination event began. "I think the team is more confident now than any time in the year just because we went through some real adversity." How confident? "We want to get deep into the tournament," said Blitz. "We think we can be a first 16 team." They were two wins away.

WE PICK UP THE NCAA ACTION EARLY in the second half, with your Tigers in a 2-0 hole. So far it's been an ugly, one-

Missouri netted strength in 1999 from senior Mandy Pavlovits (10) and junior Amy Timmermann (3). Heading into the NCAA tournament, the Tigers were 8-2-1 at home.



MU SPORTS INFORMATION PHOTO BY MIKE MCNAMARA

sided battle. For 55 minutes, Missouri has been the less aggressive team, yet has committed more fouls (14-5 at half) than Marquette. Some violations were of plain desperation, as when sophomore defender Dyana Russell, with only the goalie behind her, stops a breakthrough by pulling down Marquette's Erin Morgan.

On offense it's Thole and Grimsley vs. Team Marquette. Nothing's working for the MU strikers. Thole has received a few passes in front of the box, but the ball just bounces off her.

Finally, 10 minutes into the second half, MU sends a ball down the left line in Marquette's end. It looks like the ball is going out of bounds, but Grimsley sprints to it anyway, and somehow keeps it in. Grimsley streaks down the line, driving a cross into the keeper's hands—which fail to hold it, and the ball pops right to Thole, whose head knows what to do. 2-1! "Our team amazes me," senior Kram would say later. "When we scored that first goal, I think everybody knew we were going to come back and make it a game."

Five minutes later, the big Marquette sweeper misjudges: She tries to dribble



The NCAA game between Missouri and Marquette was a battle, with the visiting Golden Eagles throwing their weight around early. Here, Missouri's Stephanie Brennan is challenged by Heather O'Neil.

past Thole, who steals the ball and breaks into the goal box, dragging with her the opponent tugging at her jersey. Foul! The referee springs to the penalty-kick circle. Thole will have a free shot—just her, 12 yards and a goalie. She nails it low into the left corner and raises a fist. Suddenly it's tied, and the crowd of 716 loses it.

With three minutes left in regulation play, MU's Buchheit dislocates her kneecap on a tackle, and the Tigers enter sudden-death overtime lacking yet another starter. Marquette surges, setting up a familiar scene: Opponents get many good chances to score, but, on counter attacks led by Thole and Grimsley, Missouri gets fewer but better opportunities.



ROB HILL PHOTO

Then a thing happened that no coach trains a team for: The game outlasted the sun. First shadows swallowed the field. Then the sky turned violet. Then darker and darker. Back and forth, the dimmer and dimmer game played on. Twice Thole broke through two tired defenders, coming one cutback or deflection away from the winning goal. MU's goalkeeper, Adamec, became the defense's crutch, saving one corner kick after another.

By the third overtime, fans were shouting for the teams to reconvene across the street under Faurot Field's lights. Flipping on the lights of the adjacent baseball field helped little. Behind the scenes, guys set up a goal on the ball diamond. If the teams were still tied after a fourth 15-minute overtime, they'd settle the match by taking penalty kicks out in left field.

About 24 hours earlier, also in the dark, Missouri was wrapping up practice. It had been a loose session, just a run-through. The women played team handball, passing the ball with their hands and scoring on headers. They laughed and joked. At one point Boeker, too injured to practice, called from the side, "Let's get serious!" But she was just kidding. Waters was already talking about playing in the next round against Clemson, wondering aloud which plane they might take.

That was yesterday. Now it was 5:15 on game day, and the teams were entering a fourth OT. It was flat-out dark when Grimsley broke away, losing the last defender with a razor cutback that seemed to make time stop. She had only 15 green yards and the keeper in front of her. She dribbled again—one too many times, probably—and time resumed. When her shot deflected wide, the fans groaned wearily, knowing this should've ended the drama.

It was so dark that, a couple of minutes later, when the scoreboard illuminated for another Golden Eagle corner kick—their 10th to Missouri's third—the field glowed. And when the cross wasn't fully cleared by a Mizzou defender, bouncing to Marquette midfielder Amy Hnatow, who just tried to hit the ball squarely and hope for the best, it was this rosy-cheeked gal who glowed. The gray ball floated over the MU defense, over Adamec, over everything but the upper left corner of the net, and Marquette celebrated in the dark. What a time for the first goal of Hnatow's career.

Amid the Marquette screams, Adamec crouched like a catcher on the goal line. Her teammates lay scattered around the box. Adamec, Kram, just about everyone—they all cried. They all hurt. (It's pain they'll use next year, Blitz thinks.)

And finally, some 20 minutes later, having already cried, Grimsley and Thole looked out at the cameras and pens and notepads. They struggled to field a reporter's question. They laughed. Laughed at how it no longer mattered

that Thole's shoulder was aching; at how she had watched the game winner soar right over her head. After 141 minutes of running, kicking and sliding, laughter seemed the only thing still on reserve.

Maybe comedy relieved the disappointment of a team whose longest game felt more like a stunted post season. This was no just-happy-to-be-here laughter. Right or wrong, this was a team that—despite all the injuries—did not expect to be talking about a first-round loss. There was Thole saying, "We knew this team wasn't as good as other teams we've played . . . We knew we could've taken it further." And Grimsley: "They're not a bad team, you know, and they won the game . . . I think we would've been a better matchup against Clemson, personally." And even Blitz, when asked about Marquette afterwards, conceding only that, "They fought hard. They were a worthy opponent. A worthy opponent."

And who knows? Perhaps an upstart team aspiring to win it all needs a little swagger in its repertoire. Ultimately it's not about getting deep into the tournament, Blitz said a few days after the Marquette loss. "It's really the first step, to be honest. It's almost like now the hard work starts." And, at the thought of this, he laughs. *



MU SPORTS INFORMATION PHOTO BY MIKE McNAMARA

Thole brought MU back against Marquette with two goals. With one season left, she has 61 career goals, a program best.