

# The Man, The Mentor

Gary Pinkel has amassed more wins than any head football coach in Mizzou history, but for him, coaching is about relationships.

Story by Marcus Wilkins \* Photos by Shane Epping

**G**ary Pinkel, a man who always will be known for his meticulous evaluation and planning, never sought to become the winningest football coach in Mizzou history. Even now, after a lymphoma diagnosis precipitated his retirement at the conclusion of his 15th Missouri season in December 2015, he sees the accumulation of wins as a means to an end.

His MU-record 118 victories — 191 career total, including another program-leading 73 at Toledo — not only stand as a testament to his institutional loyalty but also function as the core of his mechanism for molding young men.

“You’ve got to win enough games so that you can continue to help kids,” Pinkel says. “But when I meet my maker, it’s going to be about how many people I’ve influenced in a positive way. I always say to parents, ‘You’re turning your son over to me, and I understand that responsibility.’”

## Becoming a Kind Coach

Although dedicated to that calling from his earliest days in Ohio, Pinkel wasn’t always the affable, approachable coach we’ve recently seen embracing his players, welling with tears on senior day and dancing in locker rooms. In his first few years in Columbia, he had a reputation for being a no-nonsense disciplinarian.

“The old GP wasn’t quite as personable,” says former Mizzou wide receiver Brad Ekwerewu, BS BA ’06, M Ed ’10, PhD ’12. “You didn’t hear him say ‘We’re a family. I love my guys. These are all my sons.’ He started to see that life, and the guys in the locker room, were worth more than wins and losses.”

Pinkel says the decision to change his approach with players was a conscious one, and not brought about by any one thing. But the profound events that have sometimes shaken and often galvanized Pinkel’s teams are impossible to ignore.

He gets emotional when discussing Aaron O’Neal, the linebacker who died in 2005 following a voluntary workout

with his teammates. As Mizzou grieved, the coach says, the tragedy united his players and coaching staff and inspired self-reflection.

To help encourage team bonding, Pinkel instituted “cross-over dinners,” during which combinations of units — offensive linemen and defensive backs, for example — dine together and open up about their personal lives. It was during one such dinner in 2013 that defensive end Michael Sam came out as gay to his teammates. At the end of the season, Sam told the national media and lauded his supportive coaches and teammates.

“What a special group,” Pinkel says. “The lesson was that some people might have said, ‘I don’t agree with this, but I’m still going to respect the guy as a man.’ I would like to think that was significant all over the country.”

Mizzou football again made national news for a stance on social-justice issues in November 2015 when the team protested racism alongside the Concerned Student 1950 group. Along with his staff, Pinkel, who tweeted a team photo taken in the Mizzou Athletic Training Complex dining hall, again stood in solidarity with “his kids.” Later that week, Pinkel announced his then-impending retirement, and the Tigers defeated BYU 20-16 at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Missouri, for his final victory as Mizzou’s head football coach.

## On-the-Field Highlights

Despite the social impact of the off-the-field events during his career, Pinkel will be remembered most as the football coach who led Mizzou back to national prominence. The Tigers had suffered 15 losing seasons in 17 years when he arrived in 2001. His 118 wins in the next 15 seasons were more than Mizzou had won in the previous 25.

His most significant game, however, is hard to argue. In a regular season game Nov. 24, 2007, the No. 4 Missouri Tigers (10-1) met the No. 2 Kansas Jayhawks (11-0), also at Arrowhead Stadium. The archrivals were competing for a shot at the Big 12 championship and, with No. 1 LSU having lost earlier that



week, the top spot in the Bowl Championship Series standings.

"I knew it was going to be the greatest game in the history of that rivalry, and I just *really* wanted to win it," says Pinkel, whose Tigers claimed a 36-28 thriller and earned Mizzou's first No. 1 ranking since 1960. "When (the rivalry) starts up again — and it *will* start up again eventually, and they'll play it for another 100 years — they'll look back and there will have never been No. 2 versus No. 4. That environment was like being at the Rose Bowl."

Former Heisman Trophy candidate Chase Daniel, BS BA '09, threw for 361 yards and three touchdowns that day, but Pinkel has trouble distilling his players' best performances over the years.

"Fortunately there have been a lot of them," says Pinkel, citing big games from Brad Smith, BS BA '05; Blaine Gabbert,

Bus '10; Chase Coffman, BS '08; Jeremy Maclin, A&S '08; and Tony Temple, AFNR '08; among others.

Numerous defensive stars, such as Ziggy Hood, BS '08; Markus Golden, BGS '14; Kony Ealy, AFNR '13; Shane Ray, AFNR '14; and Sean Weatherspoon, AFNR '10, also made their way to the NFL under Pinkel's watch. In fact, 32 players have been drafted during his tenure, and only 19 players were taken in the preceding 14 drafts prior to Pinkel's arrival at Mizzou.

"Coach Pinkel is going to help you become the kind of man you want to be," says Weatherspoon, linebacker for the Arizona Cardinals and a shining example of Pinkel's "Mizzou Made" method of player development. "We loved him because he treated everyone the same. It didn't matter if you were Jeremy Maclin, the No. 1 recruit in the state of Missouri, or Sean Weatherspoon, two-star recruit."

## GARY PINKEL



† Clockwise from top left: Pinkel hoists the Big 12 North championship trophy in November 2008. Coach gets an icy Gatorade bath at the end of the 2015 Citrus Bowl victory in Orlando, Florida. The Tigers took home the 2014 AT&T Cotton Bowl trophy in Arlington, Texas. A smiling Pinkel greets the media before the 2014 SEC Championship in Atlanta. Missouri edged BYU at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Missouri, for Pinkel's final Mizou victory.

### The Handoff

Pinkel's successor, Barry Odom, BS '99, M Ed '04, is also Mizou Made. A linebacker at MU from 1996 to 1999, Odom has coached as an assistant and defensive coordinator under Pinkel during the past decade. Like the rest of the athletic department, Pinkel is confident in Odom's ability to lead the program.

"When Barry took the job, I was excited not because he is a Mizou guy but because he is the *best* guy," Pinkel says. "He's remarkably driven, he's remarkably competitive, and he has great relationships with players."

Pinkel laments not playing for a national championship yet takes pride in knocking "on the door about as loudly as you can," a reference to his division-champion teams of 2007 and 2013, which fell one game short of the BCS national championship game.

"It was a great run," says Pinkel. Former Director of Athletics "Mike Alden sent me an article about what I had said at the press conference when I was hired. He said, 'Everything you [promised] has happened.' I wanted to build a program with integrity and honesty, and I wanted to build a nationally respected program, at the time in the Big 12 and now in the SEC.

"I think we did, and now I'll pass the baton." **M**

### Barry Happy to be Here



On Dec. 4, 2015, at Mizou Arena, MU Director of Athletics Mack Rhoades introduced Barry Odom, BS '99, M Ed '04, as the Tigers' 32nd head football coach and Gary Pinkel's successor.

Odom, a standout linebacker at Mizou from 1996 to 1999, ascended to head coach after just one season as Missouri's defensive coordinator. Prior to that, he spent three seasons at the University of Memphis as defensive coordinator and linebackers coach, and most of the previous decade as an administrator and assistant under Pinkel.

Fans might recall Odom's grit in 1999 when he played — and played well — despite a cast and torn ligaments in his right wrist. He graduated with 362 tackles, seventh-most in team history.

"I believe in the values of working hard, out-working your opponent and having great toughness — all things that will give us a competitive edge," Odom says. "This is a place where I expect to win championships."

### BRAD COMPANY

PINKEL'S FIRST SUPERSTAR, QUARTERBACK BRAD SMITH, LEFT MIZZOU IN 2005 HOLDING 69 SCHOOL, CONFERENCE AND NCAA RECORDS. HE WAS THE FIRST PLAYER IN DIVISION 1A HISTORY TO POST 8,000 YARDS PASSING AND 4,000 YARDS RUSHING IN A CAREER.

### TOUGH TURF

PINKEL'S BIGGEST CAREER VICTORY WAS AN EPIC 36-28 DEFEAT OF KANSAS NOV. 24, 2007, AT ARROWHEAD STADIUM IN KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI. PUNCTUATED BY MIZZOU'S LORENZO WILLIAMS SACKING JAYHAWK QUARTERBACK TODD REESING, THE WIN EARNED THE TIGERS A NO. 1 RANKING AND A BIG 12 NORTH CHAMPIONSHIP.

### DO THE PINKEL DANCE

AFTER THE TIGERS BEAT OKLAHOMA STATE 41-31 IN THE 2014 AT&T COTTON BOWL, PINKEL TREATED HIS PLAYERS - AND THE INTERNET - TO A LOCKER ROOM DANCE FOR THE AGES.

### MIZZOU MAKEOVER

PINKEL AND HIS STAFF INSTITUTED MIZZOU MADE, A STUDENT-ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT THAT HELPS PLAYERS PROGRESS ATHLETICALLY, ACADEMICALLY AND SOCIALLY.

### VISOR VICTORIES

PINKEL'S 118 WINS AT MIZZOU ARE THE MOST IN SCHOOL HISTORY. HE ALSO HOLDS THE RECORD AT TOLEDO WITH 73 VICTORIES, AND HIS 191-WIN TOTAL IS GOOD ENOUGH FOR 21<sup>ST</sup> IN FOOTBALL BOWL SUBDIVISION HISTORY.

# PINKEL'S PEAKS

RETIRED MIZZOU FOOTBALL COACH GARY PINKEL TOOK OVER A DOWNTRODDEN PROGRAM IN 2001 AND TURNED IT INTO ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL IN THE NATION.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOSH NICHOLS

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