



# STREET TOUGH

STORY BY TERRY JORDAN • PHOTO BY ROB HILL

**T**HE CONTEST WAS ONE MEAN street. People who were there swear it was the greatest college basketball game they had ever seen.

Missouri vs. Illinois, Dec. 22, 1993, the Arena in St. Louis. The Tigers were down by nine points with one minute left to play. But they miraculously fought back to tie the score, sending the game into overtime. Then there was a second overtime. And a third.

When it was all over, Mizzou had come out on top, 108-107, and everyone was buzzing about the play of the team's freshmen. Derek Grimm, a tall, lanky forward from Morton, Ill., hit two key free throws that sent the game into its third overtime. Then Jason Sutherland, a spunky little guard from Watertown, S.D., notched a three-pointer that gave MU a lead it never relinquished. The spark from that game lit a huge fire under the 1993-94 squad, which went on to post a 14-0 record in the Big Eight. "It was an amazing game that led to an incredible year," Grimm says today.

Now, following a somewhat disappointing season—MU was 18-15 last year—Sutherland and Grimm are seniors and ready to take on leadership roles that fans have seen coming ever since that first burst of brilliance in St. Louis three years ago. "They're each leaders in their own way," says Norm Stewart, who is entering

his 30th year as head coach of the Tigers. "Derek does it quietly. Jason is, well, a little more forward about it."

Stewart is referring to Sutherland's aggressive style of play, which has earned him both praise and criticism over the years. Whether he's driving through the lane, guarding a ball carrier or diving after loose balls, Sutherland leaves no doubt that he means business. Some opposing coaches and players have even called him "dirty," a moniker he disputes. "I play hard," he says simply. "Whether it's basketball or anything else, you have to give it all you've got." Adds Grimm: "The truth is, those other teams would love to have a guy like Jason. They just don't like to play against him."

While the 6-foot-1-inch Sutherland will definitely play outside, 6-foot-10-inch Grimm will generally play closer to the basket—but not always. Sutherland led the Big Eight in three-point percentage (.466) last season, and Grimm, oddly enough, led the league in that category the year before. "I like to get out around the perimeter when I can," Grimm says.

The two will be joined by junior Kelly Thames, another standout freshman from the 1993-94 squad who sat out his second season with a knee injury. Thames returned to action last year and averaged 12 points and five rebounds a game, but he tired as the season went on. "We think Kelly will be a little stronger this year," Stewart says.

The team's top candidate for point guard appears to be newcomer Dibi Ray, a transfer from Cowley County (Texas)

Community College, though senior Corey Tate could also see duty at the position. Another important transfer player is 6-foot-6-inch junior Tyron Lee, who averaged more than 20 points for Wabash Valley (Ill.) Junior College last season.

"I think we'll be a quick team," Stewart says, "but not necessarily a tall one." The 7-foot Haley twins have graduated, leaving Grimm; 6-foot-9-inch sophomore L. Dee Murdock; and 6-foot-11-inch freshman Tate Decker to hold down the forecourt. "One or two of those guys, along with Dibi Ray and Tyron Lee, will need to step up if we're going to be competitive," Grimm says. Adds Sutherland: "We need to work together as a team to find the right combinations."

This will be the first year for Big 12 play, and Stewart notes that two of the four Texas schools—Texas and Texas Tech—joined four Big Eight teams in receiving bids to the NCAA Tournament last year. Kansas appears to be the preseason favorite in 1996-97, as the Jayhawks return all five starters from an Elite Eight squad that finished 29-5. Likewise, Iowa State will have all its starters back, and the Cyclones finished 24-9 last season.

"If we perform to our potential, we can be contenders," says Stewart, whose contract has been extended through 2001. Grimm goes further than that. "Some of Coach Stewart's most successful teams—and the 1993-94 team is a good example—weren't expected to do much," he says. "We're not ranked in the preseason polls. That's OK. It will give us a great chance to sneak up on people." \*

*Jason Sutherland, left, and Derek Grimm don't mess around. Sutherland's Rottweiler, Bo, makes sure nobody messes with them.*