

Paradise Found

BY JONATHAN PITTS
PHOTOS BY SEAN MEYERS

THE SUN CLIMBS SILENT OVER THE SANTA CATALINAS, LIGHTING THEM TO COPPER IN THE EARLY-MORNING COLD. THE DESERT, BRISTLING WITH CACTI AS TALL AS TREES, COMES TO LIFE IN GOLD AND AMBER HUES. PALMS FLASH PAST THE CAR WINDOW. IT'S A SPECTACULAR SOUTHERN ARIZONA SUNRISE.

But your cabbie is crabby as a wagon-train mule. Here it is the heart of the tourist season—bowl weekend!—and, he says, business is down. "I got no fares," he hollers over his shoulder in a thick Bronx accent. "I'll tell you why. What's an Insight.com Bowl? I live here and I don't know. In a place like this, why would they pick a name like that, with no history?"

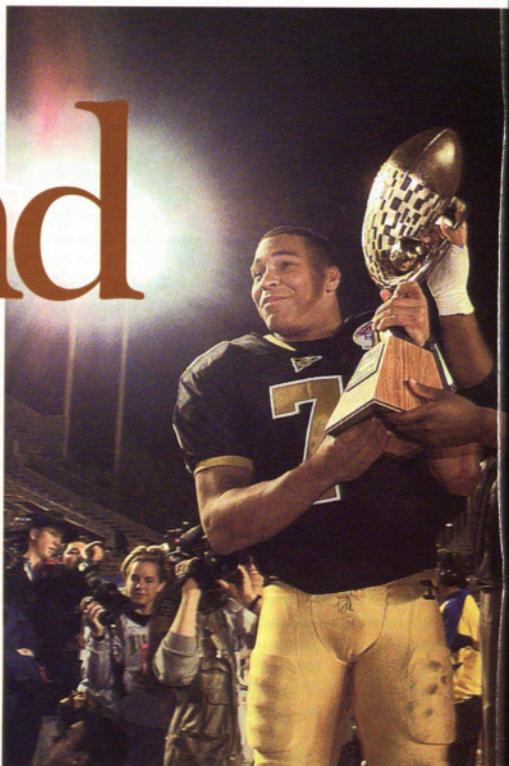
Mizzou's Tigers could relate to that sense of mixed paradise. Last Dec. 6, they'd just finished arguably their finest football season in a decade and a half with a 7-4 mark and a No. 23 ranking. Their toe-to-toe battles against powerhouses like Kansas State and Nebraska, and their best attendance mark in 17 years (344,010, or 57,335 a game), had affirmed the revival of Tiger football on a national scale. Yet they had led four Top 10 teams at halftime and lost.

When athletic director Mike Alden strode to a podium at Dan Devine Pavilion to announce Mizzou's bowl invitation, Tigers and fans alike must have wondered what kind of bowl bid they'd have gotten

if they'd pulled off that one major upset. New Orleans' Sugar Bowl? The historic Cotton? Instead, they would travel to Tucson and play West Virginia's Mountaineers in the Insight.com Bowl—an event with a sound about as hallowed as an e-mail address.

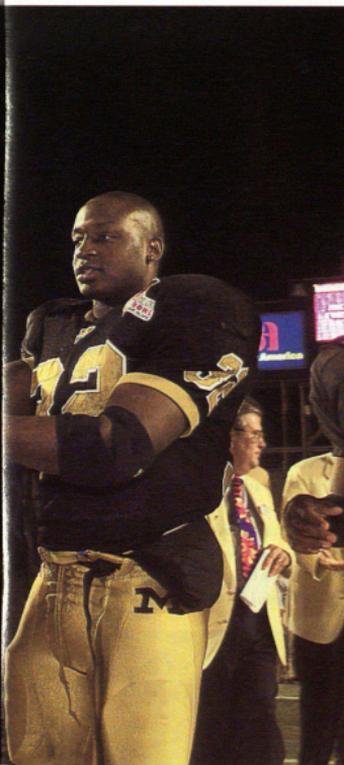
The Tigers have reached their first goal: a second straight bowl appearance. But like thousands who pull up stakes and move to the Arizona desert every year—New York cabbies, Minnesota salesmen, retirees—they'll borrow no consequence from history this year. They're going to have to write their own.

HOW DO YOU BUILD SOMETHING from nothing? Larry Smith seems to know. Under his watch, Tulane improved from 2-9 to 9-3 in four years (1976-79). Here in Tucson, he

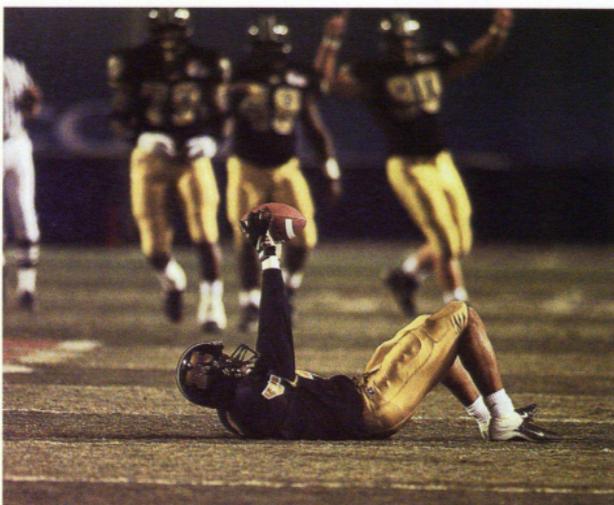


transformed the Wildcats from a 5-6 doormat into a 9-3 powerhouse (1980-86) and became a legend. But the Tiger head coach and rebuilder extraordinaire is more construction foreman than shaman. "My philosophy is balance," says the plain-spoken man whose Tiger teams have twice had four 500-yard rushers in the same season.

Balance includes a blend of passing and running. "If you can run the ball for 200 yards a game and throw the ball for 250," says Smith, "you're going to score 35 or 40 points a game." Balance means a solid mix of blocking, tackling and securing the football. Balance means equal parts offense and defense.



On Christmas Day, the eve of the bowl game, a national TV audience saw the first part. The two players riffing like comedians in an ESPN interview accounted for most of the Tigers' 1998 yards and points. Devin West's nine school records, including his 1,578 yards and 17 touchdowns on the ground, made him Mizzou's first All-America running back in half a century. Corby Jones's dangerous blend of passing (1,281 yards), rushing (536 yards, 11 touchdowns) and commando innovation drove the Tiger attack. When the two superstar roommates told the story of their four-year friendship, it was a glimpse of the *esprit*



de corps behind a Big 12 program in balance—and on the rise.

But in Smith's scheme, that's only half the story: This year, victory was bred on the other side of the ball. With Jones battling a toe sprain for most of the year, and as the offense sometimes sputtered, coach Moe Ankeny's unit kept the Tigers within striking distance every game. They nearly doubled their 1997 sack total, from 17 to 30. They cut their points allowed from 30.2 per game to 18.6. Big-play artists like cornerback Wade Perkins (a Big 12-best six interceptions) and safety Harold Piersey (four) forced 25 turnovers, which led to 108 points—nearly 10 per game.

Four-year roommates, best friends and offensive spear-carriers Corby Jones (7) and Devin West, who combined for 306 total yards, hoist Mizzou's first bowl-championship trophy since 1981. Top right: Big plays like this first-half interception turned sophomore cornerback Julian Jones from last-minute starter into game MVP. Bottom right: Larry Smith coached the University of Arizona Wildcats for five years, but no Arizona Stadium win was ever sweeter than this Tucson homecoming for him and his wife, Cheryl.

Behind West and Jones, the Tiger defense was the Tigers' prime attacker.

Tonight, on the Arizona Stadium turf Smith once ruled, balance becomes fusion. On the game's first drive, Mountaineer quarterback Marc Bulger lands four of five passes, carving 65 yards out of the Tiger secondary. But defensive end Justin Smith, the Big 12's defensive freshman of the year, sacks Bulger for an eight-yard loss. West Virginia tries a field goal. Tackle Jeff Marriott blocks the kick. And cornerback Carlos Posey, the team's fastest player, takes the loose ball 70 yards for a touchdown.

Before the half is over, cornerback



Above: All-American Devin West, who gained 125 yards, battles for real estate on the game's deciding drive. Below: Fleet widout John Dausman flirts with the sideline on one of his three catches.

Julian Jones, making his first start, picks off a wobbly Bulger pass; it's his first career interception. Corby Jones leads an 11-play drive and scores on an option carry. The defense attacks again when Julian Jones blocks an end-zone punt for a two-point safety. He returns the ensuing kickoff for 39 yards, setting up another TD march.

Offense and defense are one. At halftime, the Tigers lead, 24-3.

A CLEAR, CHILLY DAY IN LINCOLN, Neb., gave 1998 one of its lasting images: With seconds left on the clock, Corby Jones shucking Cornhusker tacklers, looking for an open man in the end zone. A high toss, spiraling skyward,

swatted out of bounds. The Tigers fall just one play short, 20-13, against the No. 7 team in the nation, in a game that would have snapped Nebraska's 46-game home unbeaten streak.

"That's a team we could have beat and probably should have beat," said West afterward.

"When you believe

you can do something, you should come out and do it."

It was one of four games in which the Tigers led a Top 10 team at halftime. In fact, as of this game in Arizona, they've led 18 straight games after 30 minutes. But tonight's desert setting is fitting: Mizzou must feel like the Sahara wanderer who sees that oasis on the horizon. The sight is wondrous, but get too close and it vanishes. "Those three losses, we came out of there angry and upset," said Larry Smith of the eventual losses to No. 7 Nebraska, No. 8 Texas A&M and top-ranked Kansas State, each by less than a single touchdown. "We knew we could play those people nose-to-nose. But one mistake here or there, and we get beat."

The Tigers have won every game they're supposed to have won this year. They've battered Bowling Green, clobbered Kansas, annihilated Iowa State and crushed Colorado. They've beaten Oklahoma for the first time since a 10-0 win in 1983, and they've toppled Texas Tech. But as the *Columbia Daily Tribune* wrote, "In '98, MU did everything it was supposed to do—and nothing it wasn't. Is that a curse or an accolade?"

The Tigers' losing streak to Top 10

Far from home the day after Christmas—1,450 miles, to be exact—some 4,000 Tiger fans' spirits never dampened as West Virginia's quarterback Marc Bulger mounted a frightening aerial assault late in the game.

teams reached 35. Perhaps they wondered if balance was enough to get them close to the peak, but never to the top.

It all raised the stakes for the Insight.com Bowl. "If we're to lose this game," says All-Big 12 offensive guard Craig Heimburger, "it's the season that could've been. We win this game, it's the season that was."

LAST YEAR THE TIGERS PLAYED THEIR first bowl game in 14 years. With trips to San Diego's Sea World and outings on aircraft carriers, they may have spent more time enjoying their winter holiday than planning how to win the game. Practices started late and ended sloppy. They fell short against Colorado State.

Maybe it's the date—the day after Christmas. Maybe it's the lack of a storied bowl tradition. But where 11,000-plus Missourians invaded San Diego for last year's Holiday Bowl, only about 4,000 have trekked the 1,450 miles to Tucson. But those on hand among the crowd of 36,147 are raising a ruckus.



Many braved the ghastly 41-98-5 record between 1983 and 1996; few remember the last Tiger postseason win, a 1981 Tangerine Bowl victory over Southern Mississippi. The south side of the stadium is a sea of yellow and black. "M-I-Z!" cries one half of the crowd; "Z-O-U!" echoes the other. Marching Mizzou's Spirit Squad blasts "Fight Tiger" from the end zone. The die-hards haven't come this far to see a mirage.

But West Virginia threatens to make one more Tiger lead disappear.

Mizzou snuffs Mountaineer halfback "Famous" Amos Zereoue, but in the second half, Bulger comes out flinging. He launches two touchdown passes in the third quarter. He lobbs another in the fourth. With 10-plus minutes left on the clock, Mizzou's 21-point lead has been carved to seven. It's 31-24. Another late-game meltdown in the making.

Perhaps he thinks of those second-half losses. Maybe he thinks of the increasingly bitter taste each "moral victory" brings. But Smith, the man of balance, takes command. "You've got to get ready,"



PHOTO BY SERGEY SHATEVICH

The Insight.com game may not have been the Tigers' first bowl choice, but after they'd buried the Mountaineers they were in no hurry to leave the scene at Arizona Stadium.

he barks on the sideline. "They've got momentum. They're going to come back and score." If Mizzou can pound its way downfield, he tells them, if they can kill the clock and put some points on the board first, it isn't going to matter. The game will already be out of reach. This time, the Tigers can control their fate.

It's only natural Smith turns to West and Jones. Over the past four years, the pair have combined for 66 rushing touchdowns and nearly 6,000 yards on the ground. They've racked up six miles of all-purpose yards and 558 points. And Heimburger and his mates up front—seniors Chris Meredith and Todd Neimeyer, junior Rob Riti and others—get to work. They batter holes for the two friends. Jones carries three times, gaining a big 15 yards when he forces a face-mask penalty. West lugs nine carries for 46 yards. Senior safety Caldrinoff Easter would later describe it to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* as "rock-'em, sock-'em, in-your-face, smash-mouth, Big 12 football." The drive consumes nearly seven minutes. Freshman Brian Long coolly steps in and strokes an 18-yard field goal. It's the margin of victory. Final score, 34-31. The Tigers, at last, are bowl winners.

Says Smith: "They're the most mentally tough football team I've ever been around." They've now bettered their record for four straight years: 3-8, 5-6, 7-5, 8-4. After the game, he tells his players to look at the trophy they've won. "See what it says?" he asks. "Not 'participants.' 'Champions.' That's what you've accomplished." Paradise found.

THE TIGERS' BUS WAITS OUTSIDE the locker room, engine purring in the desert night. But an hour after the game, the players linger on the field. Corby Jones, laughing, signs a row of No. 7 jerseys with the teen-age owners still inside. Inside a circle of reporters, Larry Smith talks himself hoarse. West, still in uniform, carries a child on his hip, chatting across a fence with fans. Julian Jones' mother tracks down her son, the game MVP, on the sidelines, and runs him down faster than an errant lateral. "That's my boy!" she cries, pinching his cheeks as hard as she can.

He doesn't run away. Making history affects you that way. For a place they may not have wanted to come to in the first place, the Tigers can't seem to tear themselves away. 🍷

