

It's BASIC

BY JONATHAN PITTS, MA '96

NORM STEWART SAYS TEAM FUNDAMENTALS ARE MAKE-OR-BREAK.

THIRTY-ONE YEARS, 711 TOTAL wins, and the status of coaching legend leaves a man with a lot of friends, and Norm Stewart, the winningest basketball mentor in Tiger history, still learns from his. Take Tex Winter, the longtime Chicago Bulls assistant. "You know what Tex says, don't you?" asks Stewart with a laugh. "The best day he and Phil Jackson ever had was when Michael Jordan finally bought into their team concept. When he and Scottie Pippen didn't try to score every time—when those two went with the flow of a game—they became virtually unbeatable."

Six NBA titles in the '90s support the point: However great the talent, team comes first. The tenet will be tested this MU basketball season, a transitional one for a young Tiger squad. "Every player is talented," says Stewart, a famously cautious prognosticator. "But they're kids, like all college guys. Time will tell how—and when—it'll come together."

An exceptional recruiting class, generally ranked among the nation's top five, boosts a team that can already score. Junior forward Albert White, who lit up No. 1 Kansas for 23 points in an upset win last year, flashed a high-impact style, averaging 10.9 points per game even on two gimpy ankles (since surgically repaired). Guard John Woods, the Tigers' top perimeter threat, buried a team-high 66 three-pointers and reached scoring double figures 18 times. Sophomore Johnnie Parker, a slashing attacker, dropped 10 second-half points on Illinois to key a 75-69 win in his hometown of St. Louis, flashing the speed and touch that made him a 1997 Top 25 recruit. Junior Jeff Hafer scraped the rafters for a team-

leading 14 dunks.

Unusual depth at the guard position has given Stewart a chance to retool. Sophomore point man Brian Grawler's heady passing (79 assists) will again blend the offense, but hotshot freshmen Keyon Dooling and Clarence Gilbert—friends and highly rated recruits from Florida—will challenge for minutes. Hafer (6-foot-5, 215) and Parker (6-foot-6, 220), guards last year, will move up to forward, where their skill and aggressiveness should offset smaller-than-average size. "With a smaller squad, we can change offenses and defenses," he says.

But 6-foot-11, 335-pound bulwark Monte Hargde, who should anchor the middle, could be the key. "If Monte can focus on the things within his control, like his weight and his studies," Stewart says, "and play his 26 minutes a game, he's going to be a major force." If not, 7-foot freshman Pat Schumacher, a St. Louis recruit, will be a willing understudy.

Because only Hafer and Hargde have played more than a year in Tiger stripes, leadership may settle the team's success. "You can't appoint leaders," Stewart cautions. But he hopes the self-imposed workaholicism of Grawler, Woods and Hafer will rub off. "Those three are such dependable people," he says. "They don't need coaches to work them out. If the others can join that group, we'll have a fine year."

For Stewart, that would include an NCAA Tournament bid—Mizzou's first in three years—and a few road wins. The team's away-from-home skid has now reached 22 straight games. But the up-and-down Tigers also clawed foes at Hearnese, finishing 14-2 there and 17-15 overall (8-8 in the Big 12) while vaulting

from tenth to fifth in the conference.

They were late contenders for an NCAA berth, a slot Stewart felt they deserved, "especially considering the caliber of the ballclubs we played"—including powerhouses Kentucky, Wake Forest, Maryland, Kansas, Iowa, Illinois and Duke.

The team concept even shaped Mizzou's recruiting. The Tigers bagged Dooling and Gilbert, two of the nation's most sought-after prep stars, by recruiting the lifelong friends as a tandem. "Nobody else did that as early as we did," Stewart says with a sly grin. "Everybody knows they can score, but they're good basketball players—sound defensively, good passers. We wanted both." Longtime fans might even flash back to the Detroit Connection years, when pals Doug Smith, Lee Coward and Lynn Hardy arrived from Motown in the late '80s to spark two league titles.

But for Stewart, now the third-winningest active coach in Division I, the challenge goes deeper—right into the heart of modern sports economics. "The players' personalities haven't changed a bit," says Stewart, who believes he has the pulse of the Generation X athlete. "They're still young guys, 18 to 22, eating hamburgers, doing what kids do." But the lure of NBA millions—often illusory, since so few get that far—has undermined winning habits. "On the recruiting trail, we see the 360-degree spins, the dunks—'showtime' basketball. The athletic ability is truly amazing today. It gets better every year.

"But some guys don't understand that those things don't win ballgames. There are more fundamental mistakes than ever. Our ballclub looks for the guy who knows the floor, makes the right pass, plays defense—who keeps his head when all around him are losing theirs."

Stewart's rule—stick with basics—is hardly new. The better the team, the more attention each player gets. Michael Jordan figured it out; so did Scottie Pippen. Will this year's Tigers? ❁

Coach Norm Stewart plans to push team basics this year—as always.

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