

# The Roundball & The Tiger

By Ron Pemstein



**T**he tension was unbearable. For more than two minutes five Missouri players passed the basketball back and forth, in and out, as seconds ticked away. The taller, more imposing Kansas squad applied pressure but took care not to foul the Tigers.

Electricity shot through the overflow crowd sandwiched in ancient Brewer Field House. The drama of the three-two pitch, the last-second kick, and the stretch run was all there. Finally, with seven seconds left, lean Theo Franks shot from 20 feet out to the right of the basket and the ball swirled through to send Ol' Mizzou ahead, 47-46. A desperate Kansas comeback attempt failed, and fans swarmed like hornets to embrace the victorious challengers.

That was January 11, 1969. What can Tiger basketball do for an encore?

The five men who played in those waning moments against Kansas, in the other one-point upset at Lawrence, and in the 12 other victorious occasions during Missouri's best season since 1956 are returning this season.

So is the man who spends most of his waking hours thinking of the program. Blond, 34 year-old Norm Stewart took the reins of Tiger basketball and pulled it from the abyss it had fallen into in the two seasons before his arrival when Missouri won just six out of 49 games.

Stewart surprised most observers the first season with the team's 10-16 mark, including the first of three consecutive late-second conquests of Kansas. With virtually no seniors last season, Missouri finished 14-11 and 7-7 in the cutthroat Big Eight.

In a way it's ironic Stewart has been able to frustrate Kansas in his two seasons. The Lawrence school represents everything Stewart wants for Missouri basketball — a national reputation, top talent year after year, and a feeling that basketball is a major sport, not second-level.

To Norm Stewart the achievement of these objectives for Tiger basketball is his goal; the "program" is his cause.

"The main thing is to keep our program competitive," Stewart said emphatically. "We must keep improving in everything. We proved last year that we can play competitively with anyone. If we're going to continue to improve, we must have help this year from our freshmen and our junior college transfers."

Missouri did prove it could play with anyone last season. In the Big Eight, only Colorado and Nebraska were able to blow the Tigers off the floor, and those two losses came in two of the conference's toughest road courts.

Of course, 40-year old Brewer Field House was a boon to the Tigers, as well. Stewart's crew was 10-1 at home and 4-10 on the road. Six of Missouri's seven conference victories came in Brewer, with the only loss an 80-79 overtime defeat by conference champion Colorado.

The future base of operations for the Tigers is finally taking shape one-half mile from Brewer after years of unfulfilled promises. But a new multipurpose auditorium is not the millenium, and Stewart knows that better than anyone.

"The new auditorium could be a big boost for our program and we're real pleased to have it," Stewart said, choosing his words with care. "But we'd like to go into it in a competitive stage. Some people think you can build that house and it will solve our problems, but nothing could be further from the truth. It affects everything. It affects our scheduling, it affects our record, it affects our financial outlook, our recruiting, everything. We must be competitive to prepare for the changes which will happen when we move there."

Missouri has this season and at least part of next year to achieve the level of sophistication Stewart wants before the Tigers move. What does this season hold with every regular returning and a couple of promising sophomores adding depth?

"Any other time, you'd look for continued improvement in the won-loss record," Stewart said. "But under the circumstances, it doesn't work that way. Most of the teams in the Big Eight return almost all their personnel. We finished fifth in the conference with a 7-7 record. It's a cold hard fact.

"If we're going to improve or do the same, we've got to have help from our squad people and our junior college transfers. We should have more depth in any case."

The personnel Stewart has is a known quantity. In fact, there was more turnover on the coaching staff than there was on the team. Assistant coach Roy DeWitz and freshman coach Bob Price both resigned to enter non-coaching fields.

When Price left, Stewart hired Dan McCleary, head coach at Muscatine Junior College, and a former player and assistant to Stewart at the Uni-

versity of Northern Iowa. McCleary is 25, handsome, and single.

"He knew as a player and a coach what I try to accomplish," Stewart said. "He was the only person we considered."

When DeWitz left unexpectedly, McCleary was promoted to assistant coach after just two months on the job. For the vacant freshman post, Stewart pulled a remarkable coup. He garnered Walt Shublom, a nationally-recognized coach who compiled a 296-26 record at Wyandotte High School in Kansas City, Kansas. Shublom had refused head coaching offers at major universities before, but Stewart was able to attract him to his staff.

"I felt Missouri University was an excellent place to start in college coaching," Shublom said. "I have great respect for Norm Stewart, his style of coaching and what he is trying to accomplish here. I have had head coaching offers in the past, but the time was not right."

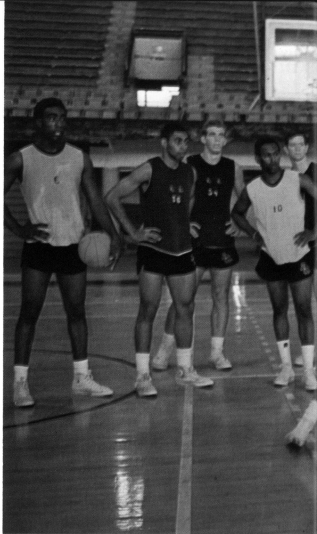
But is the time right for Missouri to make another, more serious challenge for the Big Eight throne?

Top man in Stewart's aggregation is all-Big Eight forward Don Tomlinson (6-3), who led Missouri in both scoring and assists last year. Tomlinson's drive to the basket is becoming legend around Brewer. His pinpoint passes defy all known laws of sight. Opponents will swear Tomlinson has a set of eyes hidden in back of his head. A well-placed feed beat Kansas State in the final seconds last year.

"As an overall basketball player who can play both ends of the floor, he is very good," Stewart said. "I suppose his basic weakness would be his outside shooting ability. He has the ability to hit a man with a pass and to hit him at the proper time. He has a feeling where people are, he has great peripheral vision. When he does something, he has electricity."

The other captain and forward, Doug Johnson (6-3), stirred the fans' memories of the rough-and-tumble days of Tiger basketball during the 1950s. Johnson's aggressiveness usually cost him fouls, but his rebounds were invaluable for a small team. He's the Tigers' strongest man on the boards.

"He steadies us, gives us leadership," Stewart said. "He's a little older than the others. Being an ex-Marine, he's seen life from a little different angle."



At guard, second team all-Big Eight Dave Pike (5-10), was the team's second leading scorer. In his first season with the Tigers after transferring from junior college, Pike was selected on the Big Eight Tournament's first team.

"That's quite an achievement for a man 5-10," Stewart said. "He runs our ballclub. He sets the tempo. He just does not take bad shots. In 25 games he didn't take but maybe five bad shots. We keep telling him to put the ball up more. He's so steady he doesn't make mistakes. He's so sound offensively, it seems to me he shouldn't make any. He'll be better defensively this year."

Franks (6-3), the other guard, made his reputation with that one daring shot against Kansas. He gives the Tigers strong defensive play and seems to have made the final adjustment to guard after being a forward in high school.

At center, Chuck Kundert (6-6) won a starting spot early last season and managed to have a good year despite his small size in relation to the other Big Eight centers. Kundert is quick, but he will have to be quicker to keep his job.

There's Pete Helmbock (6-5), a starter as a sophomore and a sixth man last season. Helmbock played every game last year, and Stewart promises Helmbock will do so again. He's versatile, starting



Coach Norm Stewart and senior guard Theo Franks demonstrate passing technique to rest of Tiger squad.

all his games as a sophomore at guard and playing up front most of last season.

Probably the best bet to dislodge Kundert, if it can be done, is sophomore Bob Allen (6-8) from Indianola, Iowa. Allen is the only non-senior with a chance to break into the starting five. Last season he led the freshmen in scoring.

"Allen has most outstanding credentials," Stewart said. "His chances for playing depend on his success fitting in the lineup and on how the team goes. Allen just needs to gain more strength."

Beyond these seven, the Tigers have some depth, a commodity missing last year. But the basic team weakness is still in height and consistent scoring threats. Missouri will again play ball-control and continue to play for the sure shot.

The best regarded prospects on the bench are sophomores Greg Flaker (6-2) from Cape Girardeau, Vaughn Colbert (6-5) from Chicago, and Steve Rea (6-4) from Thermopolis, Wyoming, as well as junior Barry Maurer (6-0).

The unknowns are junior college transfers Henry Smith (6-6) and Al Spearman (6-2). Both players add depth and Stewart is particularly enthusiastic about Smith's rebounding and shooting potential. But the jury will be out for awhile on the pair.

This season's non-conference schedule is, as

Stewart puts it, "attractive but demanding." However, almost all these games will be played within the confines of Brewer.

Arkansas, Indiana, St. Louis University, Northern Michigan, and Colorado State all visit Columbia, and the Tigers don't leave home until the Christmas holidays. Then, they leave town for the Sun Devil Classic in Tempe, Arizona, where they meet with Northwestern, Washington and Arizona State. The day after that tourney, Mizzou will be at it again in El Paso, hooking up with Texas A&M, Clemson and UTEP in the Sun Carnival.

The Tigers get three days off, and then the Big Eight Tournament gives them another workout. Finally, they will open their conference schedule January 5 — against Kansas.

Assistant coach McCleary pinpointed the reason why Missouri basketball will not put Tiger fans to sleep this year.

"There are some schools where winning is a tradition; it's expected. These are schools like UCLA, Kentucky, and the like. Then there are schools where basketball is zilch. Missouri is in the group where basketball is up and coming. This is where you have..." and he wrote the word in large capital letters... "EXCITEMENT."

That's what the Tigers will do for an encore. □