

Can Basketball Bounce Back?

By DICK WADE

When a sports-minded University of Missouri graduate hears the word—basketball—a chain reaction triggers within him. First, his face takes on a look of pain; then, his hands fly skyward in a gesture of futility. Finally, he asks if you wouldn't rather discuss football.

This sums up the current thinking concerning MU basketball. Tiger fans believe there is something wrong, deeply wrong, with basketball at their school. They don't know the whats or whys, they just see the result—and they try to accept it with as much grace as possible.

The depth of the basketball dilemma came into focus last spring when gentlemanly, scholarly Bob Vanatta called it quits.

Vanatta, in the minds of many Missourians, was a basketball wonder-worker. When he came to MU in 1963, after Sparky Stalcup decided to devote his full time to the administration of the athletic department, his name was synonymous with success.

College basketball support is largely hometown support, and Vanatta was a home-town boy. No coach ever went into a job better accepted.

And when he went out, it was his decision; despite bad seasons two years running, there was no pressure. He may have alienated a highly vocal segment of the student body, but the administration and townspeople still stood solidly behind him. And students are transients.

Stepping into this setting, one that may be without precedent, is Norm Stewart, the 6-foot-5 ringleader of Stalcup's ask-no-quarter, give-no-quarter squads of the mid-50s.

He is only 32 years old, but he has been around the block. He has coached 11 years, seven of them as his own boss. He has won 70 per cent of the time. And he left what is, in his estimation, one of the five best small-college coaching jobs in the nation—at the University of Northern Iowa, known to most of us as the State College of Iowa.

He knows what it will take to freshen the atmosphere of futility that surrounds a loser. But he needs tools and, at this stage of the game, he doesn't know if they are available or if they have become too rusted for use.

He also knows he is being inspected, microscopically. Some people openly say, "If Vanatta

couldn't do it, it probably can't be done." With the players it's different. They wonder if they will fit into his system.

Stewart says, "The last thing I want to do is knock anybody. But it's difficult to stay away from it. Whatever I say can be translated into a knock. But if the previous man had been 100-0, I would have to change some things; I have to do things my way.

"I know this much: our staff is a selling point. We're all young, but we know how to take care of our people. I've been at it almost 12 years; Roy Dewitz has been at it 10 and left a head-coach job at Augustana (South Dakota) to come here. And Bob Price, who played for Vanatta, has coached three years.

"I can only judge by what I've seen on film, but I think there is talent on the squad. We're not naked. Gene Jones looks like a Big Eight player. Tom Johnson may be.

"But there isn't a big man. And I like a big man—because it's so easy for him to score 20. But it may be that we'll have some overall size, especially if Pete Helmbock (who stands 6-foot-4) can play outside."

He stopped, studied his large hands a moment and said, "I think all coaches like an even-sized squad, one that's quick." There was another pause, then he added, "But I don't know if we have any quickness—or any shooting ability.

"If you have some of these things, then you can get down to what really counts—consistency. Basketball reduces to this: each side brings the ball down court the same number of times. The team that gets the most per trip wins."

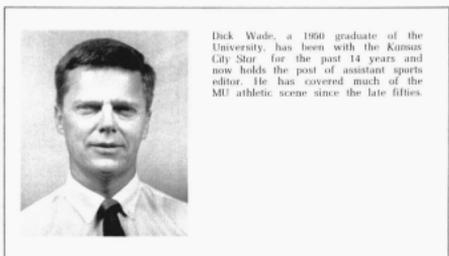
Now, Stewart heard the questions that had to be asked: How will you get this team on its feet, and how long will it take?

"We have to regain our respectability," he says flatly. "And I don't use the word critically. We have to establish competitive respectability quickly, and we have to establish a program of respectability for the athlete and what he represents."

He explained that mouthful this way: "With a break or two, we could get competitive respectability in a hurry. In every game, even a 40-pointer, there is a moment at which it breaks open. When the losers reach that moment, they play a scared stick. The winners know that is



Coach Norm Stewart, right, talks over practice films with his assistants, freshman coach Bob Price, left, and Roy Dewitz. Below, Stewart goes over blackboard offense with two top prospects, Charles Payne, 6-7 freshman, and sophomore Don Tomlinson, who stands 6-4.



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the time to execute. What we need is a game, an early game, in which we reach that point and gut it out—execute when it counts, win one that way.

"Then, we need the one that really helps, the game in which we draw blood—chase somebody out of town. When you do that, then you stop worrying about how much talent you have; you stop worrying about winning and losing; you concentrate on execution."

He waited to see how this soaked in. Then he played his big card: "But this is just the quick cure. You aren't on the road until there is respect for the athlete—and responsibility by the athlete.

"An athlete must be disciplined. He must know he has a responsibility; he is watched; he is recognized. He doesn't have to achieve his recognition by being the best beer drinker or by being the No. 1 man with Stephens girls. He is an athlete.

"If he doesn't want to accept this responsibility, he shouldn't be an athlete."

"We tell them we would rather they prove their sincerity than for us to force it. Appearance is part of it. We want short hair; we don't want beards. If they don't see that their hair is cut short, we'll take them to the barber shop. But we would rather spend the time coaching.

"We want them at meetings five minutes early, just as we want that hair a half-inch shorter than they think it should be. We want them in the habit of going a little farther. When they have to do it in a game, it will be second-nature."

He got up, stretched and said, "It's tough to restore pride once it's lost. But you have to have it before you can win. And I'll say this: Missouri basketball is nothing to be ashamed of. There have been only three disastrous years, two of them recently."

Then he thought a moment before saying, "But there hasn't been a championship for a long time."

He carefully chose his next words, "Do you know what we need to get all the job done? We must earn for the basketball program the same respect that surrounds the football program.

"Then, and only then, will we get most of

the best players in the state. You are going to lose a few, but you'll land a few outstanding ones from out-of-state.

"And I don't think this school is hard to sell. Its educational assets speak for themselves; you name any field, and there are outstanding graduates from Missouri in it.

"As far as players are concerned, we offer them a chance to play—and in a hurry. We're building a program. We'll give them 10 minutes to become veterans.

"And the facilities will be among the finest in the country. We go first-class; how many schools have their own plane?"

Now, we were coming to it, the factor many say shuttles top-notch talent away from M. U.—the field house, or lack of field house.

Stewart played in Brewer; it always was full then. It was a friendly place for an M. U. player, Siberia to a visitor. It became unfriendly to Bob Vanatta last year. He was booted, something no college coach expects at home. Stewart can't discuss this.

He thoughtfully says, "We're getting a new multipurpose auditorium—and that's great. The boys who come to us next year will play in it for two years. There will be few plants in the country that will compare with it, and none in the Big Eight. It is bound to help recruiting. You can bet we'll mention it.

"But a building won't restore pride. That has to come from our people. And it's not just the players; this is the student body's team, too. It's the alumni's team. They have to support us, or maybe we have to make them want to support us.

"I can remember when we had the best crowds in the league, maybe the best anywhere. We knew they were with us, and the other team knew they were against them. We didn't lose often with that kind of support."

But Norm Stewart isn't a look-back guy—except maybe to remember that day in 1955 when his wife, then Virginia Zimmerly of Kansas City, became homecoming queen. Wise husbands don't forget things like that.

His time now is spent looking ahead; he must resell a Missouri product to the Missourians. And he can do it only by showing them.

The ball bounces that way. □