I think you find out what kind of ballclub you have when something like that happens. Will it lie down or will it stand up and fight?” junior guard Julian Winfield says about last year’s early-season loss to Arkansas. “I don’t think anybody knows what happened that night, but we just put it behind us and went on.”

“Comback after early loss

After struggling in a 69-66 victory at the Hearnes Center against Central Missouri State University, the Tigers suffered their most demoralizing loss of the season. While a national television audience watched, the eventual national champion Arkansas Razorbacks christened the opening of the Bud Walton Arena in Fayetteville, Ark., with a 120-68 drubbing of the Tigers.

Losses like that aren’t supposed to happen to teams that have a nucleus of eight seniors. But the loss might have
been the exact medicine the Tigers needed to cure their early ills.

The Tigers responded with what would become their signature mettle for the rest of the season. They reeled off nine straight victories, including a thrilling triple-overtime victory against Illinois in the two teams' annual tilt in St. Louis.

A convincing 20-point win against Kansas State was followed by a loss to Notre Dame, but thereafter the Tigers mounted a winning streak that has become a part of Big Eight lore. They streaked through their league schedule without a loss, beating ranked Kansas and Oklahoma State teams on their respective home floors. MU was the first team since the 1970-71 season to win all its conference games and only the third Big Eight team ever to accomplish the feat.

Nebraska ended the streak in the semifinals of the conference tournament, but the Tigers secured the No. 1 seed in the West region of the NCAA tournament and found their confidence intact.

“We knew all of the things we had done were paying off,” Frazier says. “It was what we had worked for all year, and we were out to prove the doubters wrong.”

They did. Victories against Navy and Wisconsin vaulted the Tigers into the Sweet 16 for the first time since the 1988-89 season. An overtime victory against Syracuse set the stage for the West region final against Arizona. The Tigers lost 92-72, ending the run but not the flow of memories.

Moving on

Eight seniors and a highly regarded recruiting class later, Stewart is focusing his full attention on the coming season. Per NCAA regulations, Stewart and the other Tiger coaches had limited access to the players until the start of practice on Oct. 15. All of the players underwent rigorous preseason workouts, and Stewart monitored their progress.

Physically, at least, the Tigers will measure up taller. The addition of junior-college transfers and twins Sammie and Simeon Haley, both at 7-0, and 6-11 freshman Monte Hardge gives MU an imposing front court.

On paper, at least.

“You know, everybody gets excited when someone is 7-feet tall,” Stewart says. “But our ballclub last year was a small ballclub, and we did very well. We’ve had big people, but unless those big people perform, it’s just like anything else. You just never know until you get going.”

The Haley twins proved their resolve at Connors State College in Warner, Okla. Connors State finished 31-5 last season with the Haleyz in the paint. Sammie, who shoots left-handed, scored 13.8 points and grabbed 10.8 rebounds per game. Simeon, a right-hander, averaged 14 points and 10.9 rebounds. Both are listed at forward/center.

Hardge, a center and Jefferson City native, was named Mr. Show-Me Basketball last season. He led Jefferson City to a state championship as a junior and averaged 14 points and 11 rebounds per game as a senior.

MU’s other junior-college transfer is 6-foot-4 guard Corey Tate. The sophomore transferred from Mineral Area Junior College in Park Hills, Mo., played in five games last season before suffering a broken leg. He averaged 28 points and 14.5 rebounds at Pattonville High.

Three other freshmen also join the Tigers this season. Scott Combs, a 6-7 forward from Paoli, Ind., 6-1 guard Troy Hudson from Carbondale, Ill., and 6-2 guard Kendrick Moore, a Hartford, Conn., native, will push for playing time. Part of Combs’ impressive basketball resume includes a spot on the Street & Smith’s high-school All America team; Hudson led Carbondale to the 1994 Class AA state finals in Illinois while averaging 25 points, five rebounds and two steals per game; and Moore averaged 27 points, eight rebounds and eight assists on his way to earning Gatorade Player of the Year honors in Connecticut last season and leading Hartford Public High to back-to-back state titles.

Oh, yes. Lost amid attention the recruiting class receives is a nucleus that should serve as a solid foundation on which to build the ’94-95 season.

And, yes, many of last season’s primary contributors — Big Eight Most Valuable player and All-American Melvin Booker, three-point specialist guard Mark Atkins, forward Jevon Crudup and guard Frazier — have completed their eligibility. But the returning players are paying close attention to what made last season, and that group of seniors, so special.

The Tigers suffered a significant setback just days before practice started. Sophomore forward Kelly Thames, whose impact last season helped him earn Big Eight Freshman of the Year and Honorable Mention Big Eight honors, tore the posterior cruciate ligament in his right knee during conditioning drills on Sept. 26. Thames will miss the entire season but will redshirt during his rehabilitation and have sophomore eligibility for the 1995-96 season.

Thames was the Tigers’ top-returning scorer (12.2 points) and rebounder (7.1 per game). Before Thames’ injury, Winfield said the things he and the other returning players learned from last year’s seniors will help them deal with the adversities, like injuries, that accompanies the season.

“As far as what we learned from them: Where do you start and where do you end?” says Winfield, who figures to play a prominent role this season. “Those guys were literally brothers. They were in it together on and off the court, and it’s difficult to get that kind of relationship overnight. It takes time.

“But being around those guys was definitely a plus for the guys who return.”

Winfield is joined by seniors Marlo Finner and Paul O’Liney, who both should fill valuable leadership roles. O’Liney made an immediate impact when he joined MU at the semester break last season. He averaged 10.3 points per game and shot more than 37 percent from the three-point line in 24 games. Finner’s presence in the middle is important to maintaining consistency.

Sophomores Derek Grimm, a forward, and Jason Sutherland, a guard, saw playing time last season, and Stewart says the experience will help them compete for more time this season. Sophomore guard Chip Walther also returns.

The Challenge Ahead

Though the memories of last season are still fresh in the Tigers’ minds, their preparation for the upcoming season is most important right now.

As Stewart looks ahead, he sees a tighter Big Eight race with teams like Iowa State, Kansas and Oklahoma State ready to contend. And the Tigers?

“We’ll probably be picked fourth or fifth in the league,” Stewart says. “But, we were picked fourth or fifth last season, too. And we did a little better than that.

“It’s hard to tell right now because everyone that you play has as much or maybe a little more talent than you do. We’ll have to get started to really be able to tell anything about our group.”