

**Tough,
yet feminine**



Guided by Coach Jay Miller, the 1995 softball Tigers are winners on and off the field.

By TERRY JORDAN
PHOTOS BY ROB HILL

Walk into the office of MU Softball Coach Jay Miller, and you'll see on the walls an assortment of photographs of former players, along with two signs. One sign shows water crashing against the rocks on a beach, and reads:

"Things Take Time."

That's been especially true of the MU softball team. A decade ago, the Tigers were struggling to break even. During 1986 and 1987, the team posted a combined record of 39-41, and finished sixth in the Big Eight both years. Miller came on the scene in 1988, and gradually the situation began to improve. MU finished third in the conference that year, second the year after, and won the Big Eight in 1991.

These days, the Tigers have long passed the point of breaking even. Now they're breaking records. Miller has taken the

team to the NCAA College World Series (composed of the top eight teams in the country) twice in the past four years, and the 1995 squad spent the entire season in the nation's top 20. The team's winning percentage in the 1990s is 73 percent, highest of any MU program. Since 1991, all the seniors on Miller's teams have graduated from the University, a feat unmatched by other MU programs.

Although the 1995 squad hit a late-season slump that ended the year on a disappointing note, it nevertheless was a banner year for Miller and his team. The Tigers set school records for most wins in a season, 47; most home runs, 25; most hits, 540; most doubles, 100 (also a Big Eight record); and most runs scored, 365. First baseman Tiffany Heick (pronounced HIKE) hit 23 home runs in her career, most in Tiger history, while shortstop Mary Babb set new MU single-season

marks with 81 hits, 19 doubles and 64 runs batted in. And instead of boasting one or two top pitchers as in the past, the 1995 club had the three best pitchers in the Big Eight: Kacey Marshall (20-7), Christie Boen (17-4) and Barb Wright (10-6), who combined for an incredible 1.52 earned-run average.

"By any definition you'd care to use, our softball program has been a success," says Associate Athletic Director Gene McArtor, BS Ed '63, M Ed '64, PhD '72. "The women are good athletes, good

students and good role models, and Jay has built a solid program here. He's also an excellent ambassador for the University."

"Ambassador" is an apt term, since Miller is known in softball circles worldwide. A member of the selection committee for the 1996 U.S. Olympic Softball Team, he has conducted clinics in Holland, Czechoslovakia, Italy and Malaysia, and coached the U.S. Pan Am qualifying team to a gold medal in Guatemala last December.

"Jay is a good coach, but he's an excellent teacher, too," says Cindy Cohen, softball coach at Princeton University and chairwoman of the NCAA softball committee. "Watch his players

on the field. They have a quiet confidence, which really is a reflection of the coach.

"He has done a terrific job rebuilding the program at Missouri," adds Cohen, who has known

Miller for 10 years. "He makes it look so easy. But then, the best coaches always do."

What's his secret? "When we go out to recruit, I look for players who have a sense of family," says Miller, 38, who holds degrees in psychology and counseling psychology from Illinois State and Purdue. "We're all in this together, and I want players with strong family values.

"We look for good kids. Lately we've been able to attract most of the top high-school players in the state."

And occasionally, some of the best players from other states — and other countries — as well. Pitcher Barb Wright is from Ontario, Canada, and came here on the recommendation of former Tiger pitcher Karen Snelgrove, BS BA '93, another Canadian. Babb, the daughter of former Miami Dolphin safety Charlie Babb and Leslie Ashby Babb, Arts '71, and the great-niece of UM System President George Russell, was born and raised in Florida. "I came up here for a



visit, liked the atmosphere on the softball team, and thought, "Yeah, this is for me," says Babb, who was named Softball Freshman of the Year in the Big Eight last season.

"We study together, have cookouts together, go to the movies together. Most of us are dating someone, but we still have the team to come back to — sort of like a family. I like that."

Another reason Babb came to Mizzou is the softball program's emphasis on femininity. Posters and programs proclaim the group as "A Class Act," with team members wearing long, colorful dresses in a garden setting. "Sure, we play hard and slide into bases and get dirty like everyone else," Babb says. "But during my initial visit here, I was drawn by the fact that these were classy young women. People will come up and say they're surprised that, in such a rough-and-tumble sport,

we're all so feminine. I always thank them for the compliment."

The players sometimes become frustrated by the fact that MU softball, which draws an average of 200 fans to home games, does not receive the level of publicity as football or men's basketball. "We always joke that we're the best-kept secret on campus," says Boen with a laugh. Adds Heick: "I'll run into people who will say, 'Softball? I didn't know MU had a softball team.' Or they think we play slow-pitch softball. I think they're all surprised when they come to the park and see how competitive a sport it really is."

Other frustrations are facilities and finances. The Tigers play on University Field, which has no lights and no restrooms. The team's travel budget is \$17,000, compared with a Big Eight average of about \$50,000. McArtor acknowledges there is room for improvement, and says the athletic department is working on the matter. "It is a credit to Jay that he has been able to accomplish all that he has, given the circumstances," McArtor says. "The program will receive more money next year. We're confident that there will be improvements down the road."

Part of the reason for the team's success is the dominant role played by the

four seniors: Boen, a pre-med major from Ballwin, Mo.; Heick, a family studies major from Chesterfield, Mo.; catcher Brandi Jones, an education major from Belton, Mo.; and Marshall, a family studies major from New Franklin, Mo. They meet each week to discuss team operations and developments. "It's the players' team, not mine," Miller says. "I want everyone to have a say. The seniors are the leaders, the role models for the younger players. They also help formulate policy."

For instance, when the seniors believed that they needed more time to practice before games, they took their concern to Miller, who changed the schedule accordingly. When a decision was needed on new uniforms, it was the players — not Miller — who determined the colors and styles. When Miller was looking over plans for a new locker room, he brought in the players to help make a decision. "Coach Miller treats us with respect," Heick says.

And he does so in a calm, quiet way. "When you make a mistake, Coach Miller will call you over in private and talk about it," Babb says. "He doesn't rant and rave, or embarrass you in front of others." Adds Boen with a laugh: "Coach never loses his cool."

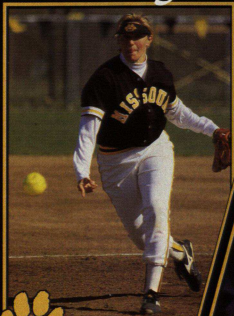
Is that true? Miller chuckles. "We need to do well on the field and in the classroom, but we should be having fun, too. If I blow up, it doesn't do me or the players any good.

"I have only three rules for the players: One, treat your teammates as you want to be treated; two, don't embarrass the University; and three, act with class. Those rules should go for the coaches, too."

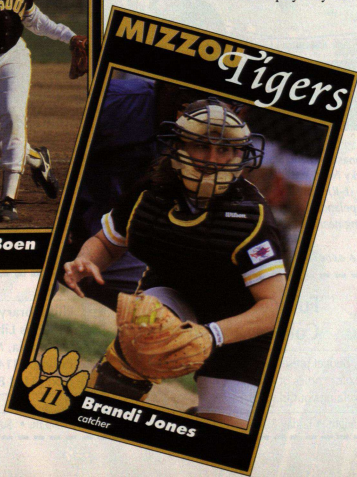
Now, how about that second sign in Miller's office? It reads: "He who is only an athlete is too crude, too vulgar, too much a savage. He who is only a scholar is too soft. The ideal citizen is the scholar athlete, the man of thought and the man of action — Plato."

Change the "he" to "she" and the "man" to "woman," and you've got the philosophy behind the MU softball program. "Sure, we have fun out there," Heick says. "But more than anything, the softball team has taught me how to deal with people. I've learned never to give up — that when you have a bad day, you have to come right back with the best you have. Those are lessons for life." ☐

MIZZOU Tigers



Christe Boen
pitcher



Brandi Jones
catcher