

MIZZOU

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Mapping Tiger country

Mizzou football preview, 2011

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During the past century, cartography in the Big 12 has been dynamic. Conference boundaries meandered like rivers as the original Missouri Valley Intercollegiate Athletic Association grew to the Big Six, Seven and Eight before two versions of its current “dozen.” Shootouts and showdowns moved to and from urban locations, and stakes shifted with changing divisional ramifications.



Extra point: De'Vion Moore points to his hometown, while Missourians, from left, Grant Ressel, Luke Lambert, Brad Madison and T.J. Moe pay attention in class.

Mizzou's current Big 12 compass rose lacks the North and South divisions. In the new round-robin schedule, the team that finishes on top will have played every opponent and earned the championship the old-fashioned way — with the best conference record.

That arrangement guarantees Mizzou an annual date with the conference's four teams from Texas, a fanatical football state where Missouri Coach Gary Pinkel has mined the talent from Amarillo to the Alamo. When he arrived in 2000, the roster listed 13 Texans. That number has nearly tripled to 37 in 2011, and combined with recruits from Missouri, 84 of 113 players hail from the two states.

And it's not just quantity; it's quality. Of the 19 NFL draft picks who played for Pinkel during his 11-year Tiger tenure, all but three called Missouri or Texas home.

The pipeline of Missouri-Texas talent is flowing, and Mizzou is landing blue-chip recruits at the national level, too. It's a route that has led to 40 wins in four seasons — 10th best in the nation since 2007.

Mizzou boasts athleticism, experience and depth in 2011.

With a top-notch defense and a veteran offense to help along a young quarterback, the road to the Big 12 championship could go through Columbia.



Texas Tigers From left: Michael Egnew, James Franklin and Jacquies Smith play pivotal roles for Mizzou in 2011.

The Big D

When the first Tiger taken in the 2011 NFL Draft went No. 7 to San Francisco, no one was surprised. But the fact that he was defensive end Aldon Smith (Raytown, Mo.) — not media darling Blaine Gabbert (Ballwin, Mo.) — punctuated a new reality: Mizzou's biggest strength is its defense, and it's a Show-Me/Lone-Star gang.

"We've had some impact players, and it starts up front," Pinkel says of the 2010 unit that led the Big 12 in scoring defense. "Your line gives you the foundation for your defense to mature. As long as I've been at Missouri, it was the best total defense we have ever had."

Another playmaking end from last season, senior Jacquies Smith (Dallas), will lead the defense in 2011. Smith started all 13 games in 2010 and earned second-team All-Big 12 honors. Look for junior Brad Madison (Bethany, Mo.) on the other end, who led the team with 7.5 sacks and 11 tackles for loss.

2011 Schedule

- Sept. 3 Miami (Ohio)
- Sept. 9 at Arizona State
- Sept. 17 Western Illinois
- Sept. 24 at Oklahoma

“I’m trying to be a leader to show these younger guys the ropes so they can carry on the tradition here at Mizzou,” Smith says. “We’ve got a lot of barriers we want to break down to make BCS bowl games.”

Senior Dominique Hamilton (El Paso, Texas), who broke his foot midway through last season, returns at nose tackle. Junior defensive tackle Jimmy Burge (Houston) and sophomore defensive end Michael Sam (Hitchcock, Texas) will contribute as starters. Sophomore defensive tackle Marvin Foster (Fort Worth, Texas) was the position’s most improved player after spring practices, and promising freshman Kony Ealy (New Madrid, Mo.) has added muscle to his speed in the offseason.

Missouri’s solid tradition at linebacker continues this year. Junior Zaviar Gooden (Pflugerville, Texas) led the team with 85 tackles, and sophomore Andrew Wilson (Peculiar, Mo.) — son of former Tiger linebacker Jay Wilson, BS Ag ’84 — brings a hard-hitting pedigree. Seniors Luke Lambert (Brookfield, Mo.) and Will Ebner (Friendswood, Texas) battled injuries in 2010, but they will be ready for the Sept. 3 opener against Miami (Ohio) University at Faurot Field.

In the secondary, the Tigers improved their national pass-defense ranking from 104th to 37th last season. Senior strong safety Kenji Jackson (Mansfield, Texas) is the only returning starter in the defensive backfield, but Kip Edwards (Arlington, Texas) is considered one of the top overall athletes on the team.

“I look at Edwards like a returning starter,” says Pinkel of the junior with 26 games of experience. “The key is for every player who played last year to play better than they did a year ago.”

BLACK AND GOLD, TEXAS TEA

Quarterback James Franklin threw his first career touchdown pass while filling in for Gabbert in the fourth quarter of Mizzou’s 26-0 win over Colorado last season. It was a 7-yard lob to Michael Egnew (Plainview, Texas), a senior and a preseason candidate for the 2011 John Mackey Award, which is given to the nation’s top tight end.

Franklin is surrounded in all directions by that kind of veteran starting talent — eight out of 10 offensive starters return from last year’s squad. Although directly in front of Franklin, junior Travis Ruth (Jefferson City, Mo.) will replace All-Big 12 center Tim Barnes (Longwood, Mo.).

“This is the most experienced team I have ever put around a new quarterback,” Pinkel says. “The transition to a new quarterback is always significant, and for the most part, I think we’ve done a good job through the years.”

Franklin held the top spot after the Black and Gold Game this spring, but any possible quarterback controversy disappeared when the team’s No. 2 — Blaine’s younger brother, Tyler Gabbert — announced in May that he would transfer from Mizzou.

Franklin is a dual-threat sophomore from Corinth, Texas (he was the district MVP at

- Oct. 8 at Kansas State
- Oct. 15 Iowa State — Homecoming
- Oct. 22 Oklahoma State
- Oct. 29 at Texas A&M
- Nov. 5 at Baylor
- Nov. 12 Texas
- Nov. 19 Texas Tech
- Nov. 26 Kansas — Arrowhead Stadium, Kansas City, Mo.

Lake Dallas High School). However, he has some history in Missouri — his family lived in Rolla when he was in elementary school.

I don't think you ever shut down borders. But the state of Missouri is our most important recruiting area. — *Gary Pinkel*.

“I moved to Texas my sixth-grade year, and I remember my coach saying, ‘You know, in Texas, everything’s supposed to be bigger and better. I guess not that much bigger.’” Franklin says. That coach still ribs the 6-foot-2-inch quarterback about his modest stature, but the signal caller will have plenty of big blockers to help keep him on his feet.

The offensive line was one of the most experienced in the nation, before senior left tackle Elvis Fisher (St. Petersburg, Fla.) ruptured the patellar tendon in his left knee during practice on Aug. 15. Fisher had made 40-consecutive starts, but he will miss the entire 2011 season. Right tackle Dan Hoch (Harlan, Iowa), left guard Jason Palmgren (Kansas City, Mo.) and right guard Austin Wuebbels (Troy, Ill.) — all seniors — will clear the way for the backfield.

“We have all the confidence in the world that James will do a good job for us,” Hoch says. “But it’s going to be his first start coming out, so we want to do everything we can for him. I think establishing the running game early is going to be important.”

Senior De’Vion Moore (St. Louis) led the Tigers with 517 rushing yards in 2010, followed by sophomore Henry Josey (Angleton, Texas) with 437 and junior Kendial Lawrence (Rockwall, Texas) with 422. Although Pinkel appreciates having a full stable of runners, he has challenged each tailback individually to separate from the pack.

But the Tigers’ best intrasquad competition may be at wide receiver, where every player

to catch a pass last season returns in 2011. Junior T.J. Moe (O'Fallon, Mo.) will long be remembered for juking a pair of Aztec defenders on a 68-yard touchdown run in Mizzou's come-from-behind win against San Diego State last season.

"The wide receivers have helped Franklin in the huddle," Moe says. "We don't have time to listen to a million people trying to talk. Sean Weatherspoon was here two years ago, and he talked more than anyone I have ever met, but Blaine was still leading the team as a sophomore."

Wes Kemp (St. Louis) brings 26 consecutive starts into his senior year, and senior Jerrell Jackson's (Houston) 656 receiving yards were second only to Moe's 1,045 among wide receivers. The Tigers also return senior Brandon Gerou (Columbia); sophomores Marcus Lucas (Liberty, Mo.) and L'Damian Washington (Shreveport, La.); and junior Rolandis Woodland (St. Louis).

On special teams, junior wideout Gahn McGaffie (Galena Park, Texas) starred in an all-time Tiger highlight when he returned the opening kickoff 86 yards against Oklahoma, but multiple Tigers will see action fielding kicks. Mizzou also has another kicking star in senior Grant Ressel (Jackson, Mo.), a preseason candidate for the Lou Groza Award as the nation's best placekicker.

SOUTHWEST TOPOGRAPHY

Opinions vary as to where a new coach should start when attempting to build a college football program. However, most pundits agree that a first step is making sure the best talent in the home state stays put.




"I don't think you ever shut down borders," Pinkel says. "But the state of Missouri is our most important recruiting area. [Assistant coach] Andy Hill has been in the Kansas City area, and [assistant coach] Cornell Ford has been in the St. Louis area for the entire time I've been here. That has been huge because it's all about building trust."

Top-tier Missouri recruits such as Blaine Gabbert, Aldon Smith and Jeremy Maclin (Kirkwood, Mo.), and stars of the future such as the coveted junior college transfer Sheldon Richardson (St. Louis), are proof of the progress.

But in today's climate, achieving national success means reaching beyond the home state. Pinkel borrowed his road map from mentor and former University of Washington Coach Don James, who won a national championship in 1991. The Huskies did a fine job of in-state recruiting, but they also focused on talent-rich California. "We decided that we would do the same thing here and stay in Big 12 country — just like at Washington where we stayed within the Pac-10 in California," says Pinkel, doing his best impression of Rand McNally. "Well, Texas is our California."

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