

MIZZOU

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Sports speak

As the 2008 season approaches, Gary Pinkel talks football

They say he's a lighter-hearted coach these days. He's coming off of a record year with a new five-year contract in hand. He's having fun with the team's success, but he's careful not to let himself or his players get complacent.

Coach Gary Pinkel gave MIZZOU a few minutes out of his busy recruiting and practice schedule to talk football.

MIZZOU: What was your message to the team going into spring practice this year?

Gary Pinkel: We went back to all the things that we learned last year. The lessons are: We played consistently because we prepared consistently. We learned that if you want to win a championship, you've got to win in November. If you want to win a championship, you've got to win league games away from "The Zou."

I told our players that if you think you can work as hard as you did a year ago and be successful, guess what? It's not going to happen. You have to find a way to work harder. That's the premise of everything we're doing.

Senior leadership and chemistry were crucial last year. How are you feeling about the team's chemistry?

People think, "We've got a lot of players coming back; the chemistry will be the same." Wrong.



Coach Gary Pinkel is enjoying the team's recent success and says that if the team wants to repeat that success it will have to work and prepare even harder this year.
Photo by Rob Hill.

I don't know what the chemistry will be like. We started building it again the first of February. I think it's getting there.

You look at any returning starter, and I think that's a leader. Obviously William Moore has stepped it up as a leader. [Sean] Weatherspoon, too. I think all of our defensive linemen, Ziggy [Hood], Stryker [Sulak], [Tommy] Chavis, they're all doing a great job. Brock Christopher has probably done as good a job of leading as he's ever done. On the offensive side, Chase Daniel, Chase Coffman, Tommy Saunders, all those guys are doing good things, so we'll see what happens.

The defense seems to have more swagger than in the past. What about their confidence?

Well, I think confidence comes with success. The defense finished the season with one of the best games that they played, and some great ones in the Big 12. Holding two of the best rushers in the country [Arkansas' Darren McFadden and Felix Jones] to the yards that they held them to was absolutely outstanding. They came out of that with a tremendous amount of confidence. With 10 returning starters, we can have a really outstanding defense.

What do you think of as your biggest strengths now?

I think one thing that will determine the kind of success we'll have is: Will all those returning starters play better than they did a year ago? Not as good, but better. That's not easy to do, but that's the challenge. December 1, when I'm talking to you at a press conference and you raise your hand and say, "Coach, did your starters have the best year they ever had?" If I can say, "Yes," we'll win a lot of games, I guarantee it. And they'll bring all the other guys along.

What about your newer players? Tailback Derrick Washington, for example, turned a lot of heads this spring.

No question he did. We have a lot of good things happening. (Justin) Garrett is playing better at safety. Del Howard is playing better at safety. Elvis Fisher is playing great at offensive line as a redshirt freshman. A lot of things are falling into place. Bottom line, though, is that your veteran players still have to play their best. At the end of the season, if Chase Daniel had an OK year, or Chase Coffman had an OK year, well guess what, you start adding those things up, you're just going to have an OK football team.

How do you feel about the talk that you might have not just one but two Heisman-caliber players this year?

Well obviously Chase is, because he was a finalist a year ago. Jeremy Maclin's name keeps coming up, and if he puts his play together in a real good run, it will be exciting to see what happens. That'll be up to Jeremy. And it'll be up to Chase, too, to see how he stacks up this year.

Talk a little bit about your recruiting efforts. I know you're having more and more success keeping Missouri stars in-state.

The first couple of years I was here, we got Dedrick Harrington and some other real good players to stay here. We got Martin Rucker. We could go through some names, Tony Temple and others. But the first couple of years, when people would go somewhere else, it didn't surprise me.

Our facilities were average. Other teams were winning at a higher level. It didn't surprise me when some of these kids would say, "Listen, I don't believe in what's happening there yet." Well, it's changed. We certainly haven't "arrived." I don't want to imply that in any way, but our facilities are as good as any in the country. We're winning an average of eight a year in the last five seasons. Last year, the evidence was out there that we can win at the highest level, win our first divisional championship, end up top five in the United States of America.

Now, I say to a young man in this state, "Why would you go anywhere else?"

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