

Missouri — Wishing on Wishbone

by Jim Johnston

It takes longer than a year to turn a humpback donkey into a grand champion. Or even a blue ribbon winner for that matter.

The football coaches at Missouri realized the odds against such noted improvements. That's why they didn't make any far-fetched promises when the Tigers switched from their grab bag offense of 1971 to the Wishbone in 1972.

Missouri had the worst offense in the Big Eight last year . . . averaging just 129 yards rushing per game. The Tigers didn't win a conference game and finished the season with a 1-10 showing . . . their worst record since 1934.

So first year coach Al Onofrio, who was second-guessed all season, made a popular change. He switched to the Wishbone.

Now, the Wishbone offense has turned some football fortunes completely around. Oklahoma, Alabama and UCLA testify to that. But Missouri needed more than a new formation. The Tigers needed new personnel.

So Missouri stepped-up its recruiting last year and landed a pair of two-time junior college all-American running backs—Tommy Reamon of Ft. Scott, Kan., and Jimmy Smith of Mesa, Ariz. This pair totaled more than 6,000 rushing yards and scored 70 touchdowns in two junior college seasons.

They also obtained Leroy Moss from Centerville (Ia.) Community College and sophomore Bill Ziegler was already on the scene to bolster Mizzou's running backs.

This enabled Onofrio to move two former running backs to other positions—Mike Fink to the defensive secondary and Jack Bastable to split end.

Another junior college transfer—John Cherry from Northeastern Oklahoma A&M—replaced letterman Ed Johndrow at quarterback. The Missouri staff then hired former Oklahoma quarterback Bobby Warmack, who coached the freshman backfield at Oklahoma last year, to help install the Wishbone at Missouri.

The results? About what you would expect. The Missouri offense is better than last year, but then it couldn't be much worse.

The Tigers are 2-2 on the season and are averaging 246 yards rushing per game. But the offense hasn't been consistent.



Saturday at Memorial Stadium—like nearly every other Saturday at Memorial Stadium—may turn into Johnny Rodgers Day.

Now that the Nebraska flanker has etched his name into every Cornhusker receiving and kick return record and is quickly closing in on Big Eight marks, he's also nearing NCAA records.

If Rodgers scores one more touchdown on a punt return he will tie an NCAA record of seven touchdown punt returns established by Oklahoma's Jack Mitchell in 1946-48. Rodgers has returned seven punts for touchdowns, but one was in the 1972 Orange Bowl and post season bowl games do not count in the NCAA record book.

"The players have been receptive to the change in offensive thinking," Warmack said. "We're not completely pleased by any means, but we realize that the Wishbone is not something you pick up overnight."

Against California—when Missouri won 34-27—the Tigers scored three of the first five times they had the football. But against Baylor, Missouri had eight turnovers and lost 27-0. Missouri lost two fumbles at Oklahoma State last week and dropped a 17-16 decision in the last two minutes.

"We're a different type of Wishbone than what Nebraska has faced," Warmack said. "Oklahoma is big and strong up front and has great speed in the backfield and can break away with the long one at anytime."

"We feel we're more in the category of Texas' Wishbone. We have strong running

backs and can break away for gains of 15 and 20 yards, but we're not going to break many long ones."

The Tigers may have trouble breaking anything against Nebraska at Memorial Stadium Saturday afternoon. Three of the Tigers top running backs probably won't even make the trip because of injuries.

Fullback Ray Bybee, the leading Tiger rusher, and starting halfback Bill Ziegler were both injured against Oklahoma State.

Nebraska hasn't changed its defensive philosophy against Wishbone teams. The Cornhuskers still try to take away the wide game first.

"Most defenses try to do that," Warmack said, "but none have been as successful as Nebraska. Nebraska can afford to go with a lot of people outside because they figure (Rich) Glover can