



Posted on Thu, Nov. 17, 2011

No. 24 Mizzou hammers Niagara

By MIKE DeARMOND
The Kansas City Star

COLUMBIA | In 25 seasons since the three-point shot revolutionized college basketball, Missouri has hit more than 39 percent of them in a season only once.

That was in 1987-'88, when the Tigers sank 103 of 245 for 42 percent.

In moving to 3-0 with an 83-52 victory over Niagara on Thursday night, the No. 24-ranked Tigers enjoyed a 12-of-22 night of long-range target practice. That boosted Missouri's three-point season stats to 29 of 60, or 48.4 percent.

And it all seemed so easy.

Marcus Denmon hit four of six and the team nine of 14 in a first half that ended with Missouri up 45-22. Denmon finished five of eight from three-point range on the way to 22 points. Kim English hit four of six on the way to 14 points. Matt Pressey hit two of three on the way to 12 points.

"Marcus had it really going in the first half," English said. "If they're going to leave him open, then we're going to continue to find him. He played an amazing game."

Denmon stressed that all those three-point shots were coming in the flow of the Missouri offense.

"Obviously, it wasn't easy," Denmon said. "But when you're moving the ball collectively as a team and when you have good shooters taking good shots, the percentages of making it go up."

If Missouri maintains its current pace it would set a school record and, in fact, be close to an NCAA Division I record 50.8 percent by Indiana (130 of 256) in 1986-'87, the first year the three-pointer was used.

It helps that the opposition has been Southeast Missouri, Mercer and Niagara and all in the friendly if not terribly well-attended confines of Mizzou Arena.

On Monday, Notre Dame — MU's opponent at 6:30 p.m. in the CBE Classic at the Sprint Center — will probably put a hand in the face (or something more physically intimidating) of the Tiger' shooters.

On Tuesday night, when Mizzou will advance to the CBE Classic's championship game or play in the consolation game against Georgia or California, the rims may not be quite so friendly. As the competition goes up, shooting percentages often go down.

Playing four guards and Ricardo Ratliffe, MU will have many of its plays wind up in jump shots.

"You want to start inside out," Denmon said, "and that was something we did, passing the ball inside and working it around."

Ratliffe got his touches and hit six of seven shots for 12 points. Michael Dixon also scored 12 points, giving Missouri five double-figure scorers, with Dixon also working inside and hitting six of seven free throws.

But Thursday's game, in front of another sparse crowd of 6,315 students and others who apparently came just to see Mizzou and not the overmatched opponent, was a three-point feast for the eyes.

Denmon now has hit eight of 16 threes in three games, English 13 of 21.

English admits he feels more like he did as a freshman and sophomore when the shots fell with greater ease than in a rough junior season.

"The system helps a lot," English said of the offensive and defensive philosophies brought in by new coach Frank Haith. "It makes the games fun."

Pressey said throwing up a zone defense on Missouri, as Niagara did much of the night, is almost like a dare.

“Coach harps on, just because they’re open, you don’t always have to take ‘em,” Pressey said. “But as long as they’re good shots, we’re going to take ‘em.”

The Purple Eagles missed all nine of their threes in the opening half and hit only five of 26 for the game.

Haith insists the Tigers have a set where they’ll play big men Ratliffe and Kadeem Green at the same time. But more often than not what is working is the four-guard and one forward lineup.

Missouri continues to play good half-court defense. Missouri had eight steals in the first half and finished with 13 as the Purple Eagles suffered through 16 turnovers.

“We’ve got to hang our hats on defending,” Haith said. “There are going to be games when we’re not going to make shots. That’s just the law of averages, it’s going to happen.

“But our guys’ focus is what it needs to be. You listen to ‘em. We’re going to continue to take open shots but we’re going to shoot a good percentage.”

© 2011 Kansas City Star and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kansascity.com>