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Selfless Missouri clicking on all cylinders

By Jason King

112211 Mizzou's Kim English

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- A few months before the start of the season, a poll in the Kansas City Star indicated that 78 percent of Missouri fans wanted first-year coach Frank Haith to be fired.

It might be time to take another vote.

Because if what happened at this week's CBE Classic is any indication, the Tigers could be poised for one of their most successful seasons in recent memory. A lofty perch in the national rankings, a Big 12 championship and a deep run in the NCAA tournament ... all of it seemed possible as the final horn sounded in Missouri's [92-53](#) title-game victory over 18th-ranked Cal at the Sprint Center.

"I'm surprised by that score," Haith said.

And he certainly wasn't alone.

Even with a veteran team that won 23 games last season, no one expected Haith's imprint to be this visible this fast. Most programs that endure coaching changes take a step back before they take a step forward. In Columbia, though, the Tigers have pressed a button and taken off like the Millennium Falcon -- at light speed.

After this week it may be time to catapult the No. 21 Tigers into the top 10. They were that good.

"This is the best I've felt in my four years here, because this is the most selfless team I've played on," said senior guard [Kim English](#), who led Mizzou with 19 points. "We're all buying into the process."

That's a credit to Haith, who wasn't exactly greeted with flowers and candy by Missouri fans when he was hired in March to replace Mike Anderson. Haith led Miami to just one NCAA tournament berth in seven seasons. And in August, his name was linked to former Miami booster Nevin Shapiro, who allegedly provided impermissible benefits to a number of Hurricanes athletes, including at least one basketball player.

But none of those things -- or the loss of standout forward [Laurence Bowers](#) to an ACL injury -- has had an effect on Haith, whose Tigers appear to be in midseason form after just five games, which included an [87-58](#) beatdown of Notre Dame on Monday night.

"Things just clicked," said Haith, whose team improved to 5-0. "We've got a veteran team with older guys, but it can go either way with older guys. They can be stubborn because they've been used to doing things a certain way for a long period of time. Or they can have the poise and understanding to buy in.

"Our guys have really bought in and shown great leadership."

Indeed.

On offense, especially in the half-court, Missouri is operating with a plan and structure that seemed missing at times in past seasons. The Tigers are getting outstanding shots because they're taking pride in making the extra pass, even if it means passing up a wide-open, 10-foot jumper for an assist to a teammate streaking toward the paint for an easy layup. Missouri shot 58.8 percent from the field Tuesday.

The Tigers are also using a menacing defense to generate points, which was a trademark under Anderson. Only now, instead of employing a full-court press for large chunks of the game, MU has stepped up its half-court defense. Any time an opponent coughs up the ball -- the Tigers scored 23 points off turnovers against Cal -- or misses a shot, the Tigers capitalize thanks to a four-guard lineup that beats everyone down the court for an easy bucket.

Not many teams in the country will boast as much speed and athleticism as Missouri, and there might not be any school that will have as many high-level ball-handlers on the court at the same time. The situation completely overwhelmed Notre Dame in the CBE semifinal. And against Cal ... well, at times it didn't even seem fair.

And remember, this wasn't just some run-of-the-mill Golden Bears squad. Mike Montgomery's team entered Tuesday's game with a national ranking and a reputation as the best team in the Pac-12.

"I'd be naive to think that's going to happen every night," Haith said of the lopsided score. "We just played really, really well."

As good as things went this week in Kansas City, the Tigers are far from satisfied. They know one of their main weaknesses is a lack of size, with [Ricardo Ratliffe](#) and [Steve Moore](#), who scored a career-high 10 points Tuesday, being the only true post players. Long, athletic teams could give Missouri more trouble than Notre Dame and Cal, who were physically overmatched.

Still, none of that seemed to matter as the Tigers paraded off the Sprint Center court carrying the CBE Classic championship trophy. Haith pumped his fist, fans dangled their hands over the railing for high-fives and players whooped and hollered as they trotted toward the tunnel to the locker room.

After a tumultuous offseason, things are looking good for Frank Haith and Mizzou.

Perhaps better than anyone -- even the Tigers themselves -- could've expected.
