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## Missouri Tigers' impressive early tale

By John Hollinger  
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Greetings from what has been an altogether too brief sojourn through college basketball. As you may have heard, there appears to be [labor peace](#) in the NBA, which means I'll be returning to dissecting free agents, trades and whatnot.

But I'll make at least one final trek through the college hoops landscape. Since I'm trying to focus on the overlooked and undervalued, let's begin in Columbia, Mo. While everybody else was watching Duke win the Maui Invitational, Missouri was quietly beating the snot out of two very good teams to take the CBE Classic, thumping Notre Dame by 29 in the semifinals and crushing a ranked Cal team by 39 in the final.

The Tigers are 6-0 after Sunday's win over Binghamton, with all six wins by at least 15 points. Though ranked only 13th nationally, Jeff Sagarin's computer has the Tigers ranked sixth in the country.

The key has been guard [Marcus Denmon](#), who has gone from being a forgettable freshman to a so-so sophomore to a pretty good junior to an absolutely hellacious senior. Denmon is [sixth in PER](#) among major-conference players with at least 100 minutes played, and he's done it against some quality competition. The 6-foot-3 guard has a great stroke -- he's over 40 percent on 3s for a third straight season -- but it's his ballhandling stats that really amaze. So far this season, he has 111 points and just three turnovers.

Denmon's play against Notre Dame was a typically efficient performance, scoring 26 points on 11 shots with just one miscue. He's averaging 18.6 points per 30 minutes, so it's not as if he's some secondary player just playing conservatively; the dude is creating a ton of offense with nary a mistake. Symbolic of that efficiency is the fact he's shooting 51.4 percent from the floor even though half his shots have been 3s.

Amazingly, Denmon is second on the team in PER. [Ricardo Ratliffe](#) hasn't played as many minutes, but he has been even better in his time on the court. He's fifth in PER among major-conference players with at least 100 minutes. The 6-8 senior forward is shooting 70.2 percent and averaging 17 points and 8.9 boards per 30 minutes and, like Denmon, has remarkably few turnovers -- just five all season -- for a player with such a prominent role.

So how long can Mizzou keep rolling? It has a nationally televised test against Villanova a week from now, but if the Tigers survive that and four cupcakes (Northwestern St., Navy, Kennesaw St., William & Mary), they'll be 11-0 heading into the rivalry game against Illinois on Dec. 22. Win that one, and they're looking at entering Big 12 play unbeaten.

### Valley on the Rise

It's early, but I'm starting to think the Missouri Valley Conference is back to being a multibid

conference, as Creighton, Missouri State and Wichita State have all looked strong.

Most notable among the three is Creighton, which broke into the top 25 a week ago, and in particular sophomore [Doug McDermott](#), who is [leading the nation in PER](#) -- ahead of some guy named Sullinger on Ohio State -- and is fourth in scoring. The latter stat is particularly amazing because he's playing just 25.6 minutes per game. McDermott is averaging nearly a point a minute for the Bluejays -- 27.4 points per 30 minutes, to be exact -- while shooting 65.3 percent from the floor and yanking down nearly a rebound every three minutes.

Look closer, and you'll see a few warts. He has only six assists and nine free-throw attempts all season, which means he's both fairly one dimensional and highly dependent on his ridiculously high (and likely unsustainable) field-goal percentage. Nonetheless, he's been among the nation's most impressive players in the early going.

Creighton has played a few lightweights, but its 5-0 résumé includes a blowout win over Iowa -- one in which McDermott had 25 points on 15 shots and zero turnovers -- and a double-digit road win at UAB. The Jays have a challenging week ahead with a visit to San Diego State on Wednesday and an in-state battle against Nebraska on Sunday.

## Mountain West Magic

If UNLV's [Mike Moser](#) wasn't on the radar before, he sure as heck is now after his 16-point, 18-rebound effort in the Rebels' upset of North Carolina. Vegas is now 7-0, and the 6-foot-8 UCLA transfer has been a big reason why, yanking down 13.7 boards per game and [ranking third in the Mountain West in PER](#) despite weighing approximately four grains of rice.

Moser's 22.3 Rebound Rate is his standout stat -- that means he gathers nearly one missed shot in four -- but he's also filling the stat sheet with 3.3 assists and 2.7 steals a game and had six dimes against the Tar Heels.

Thanks to that giant W on its résumé, Vegas is already in good shape for an at-large tournament bid, but it has a challenging nonconference schedule upcoming, visiting Wichita State, Wisconsin and Illinois and hosting California this month. Before all that, it visits my favorite name for a college arena on Wednesday -- the UC-Santa Barbara Thunderdome. (While you're paging Mel Gibson and Tina Turner, an aside: Do they get much Thunder in Santa Barbara? Shouldn't it be the Silicondome or the Yachtdome or something?)

## Discoveries from Atlantis

For those of you who looked at Sunday's schedule and saw "Battle 4 Atlantis Tournament -- Championship: UCF vs. Harvard. Consolation game: Connecticut vs. Florida State," I just want to reassure you that it wasn't a typo.

Yes, Harvard ... *Harvard* ... won a tournament with two top-25 teams in it, beating UCF by 10 in the final. The Crimson are 6-0 and have held four opponents under 50 points, including a Utah team they routed by 28 and a not-so-shabby UCF squad upset Connecticut. While it's been more of an ensemble effort than the result of a single impressive individual display, the Crimson have to be considered overwhelming favorites to grab the Ivy League's automatic bid and could do it as a top-eight seed.

Don't sleep on UCF either. Remember, the Knights rallied from 17 down to stun UConn this weekend,

and while [Marcus Jordan](#) gets all the attention given his famous bloodlines, the real player to watch is forward [Keith Clanton](#). A 6-8, wide body with a 3-point stroke, Clanton nailed four triples in the upset of UConn and is firing much more willingly from beyond the arc (11-of-26 in six games), but he's still controlling the paint with nine boards and 2.3 blocks a game.

Clanton is [seventh in PER](#) in Conference USA despite not shooting particularly well from the floor or the stripe thus far; nobody will be shocked if he ends up first. Amazingly, no other Knight player is in the league's top 35. As with Harvard, UCF is getting it done mainly on the defensive end.

*John Hollinger, author of "Pro Basketball Forecast 2004-05," is a regular contributor to ESPN Insider. You can find his [archives here](#) and follow him on [Twitter here](#).*

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