

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN  
**TIGER KICKOFF: L'Damian  
Washington was raised on  
the bright side**



Associated Press/L.G. Patterson

By [Alexander Smith](#)

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COLUMBIA — Missouri fans will remember last Saturday's overtime loss to South Carolina for the heartbreak. For fourth-and-goal from the 15-yard-line. For a game-tying 23-yard field goal that bounced off the left upright.

L'Damian Washington will remember it for his mother, Sonya.

Last Wednesday was her birthday, but for the seventh time, Washington could not celebrate with her. She passed away at the age of 38 after falling ill at her son's basketball game in December 2006.

So on Saturday, when Washington caught a second-quarter pass from Missouri quarterback Maty Mauk, split two defenders and sprinted 96 yards for a touchdown, he drowned out the crowd noise and got down on a knee in the end zone.

He thought about the woman he calls his guardian angel.

“The touchdown was my message to her,” Washington said. “I just want to thank God for giving me the ability to be here and represent something so powerful, which is her.”

Washington’s father was shot to death a decade before Sonya died. The single mother left four boys behind. L’Damian, the third son, was 15 years old at the time. LaCourtney, the oldest, was 19. Tobias was 17. And little Tomarious was just 9 years old.

The brothers had some community support but mostly had to fend for themselves. Sometimes, they failed to pay the electric bill on time. Money for the rent was a tougher prospect.

But so far, they’ve made it. Washington and his two older brothers are proud high school graduates, and Tomarious will graduate from Green Oaks High in Shreveport, La., in the spring.

“It’s just important that people know I was raised the right way,” Washington said. “For me to make it here, my mother never left my side. What she taught me was still instilled in me. It carried a long way.”

**"I came too far to stop now. Not that I would ever stop anyway."  
— L’Damian Washington (@over\_DOS\_2) on Sept. 4**

Offensive coordinator Josh Henson remembers a string bean walking into the cafeteria at the Mizzou Athletics Training Complex.

“He was just real thin,” Henson said. “Real skinny.”

Washington stood 6 feet 4 inches tall, but he only weighed 150 pounds as a high school senior. Henson was the offensive line coach at the time. He showed Washington around the facilities, and when it was time to eat, he led Washington to the all-you-can-eat style lunchroom.

“Go eat,” Henson said.

The young athlete was shocked.

“Anything I want?” Washington asked.

Henson nodded. Five years later, the moment is still lodged in his memory.

“That struck me,” Henson said. “Just the blessings that we have. Most of us in this country take for granted the blessings we have and the things we grow up with. It kept things in perspective about what’s important in life.”

As a redshirt, Washington struggled on the practice field during his first season. He didn’t seem to fit into then-offensive coordinator David Yost’s scheme.

He thought about leaving the program.

“I wasn’t sure if I fit Mizzou’s system,” Washington said. “We didn’t stretch the field much.”

But he stuck with it, learned the playbook and hit the weight room. As a redshirt sophomore, he caught 20 passes for 364 yards and three touchdowns in 2011. Last year, he bumped up his receptions (25) and yards (443) to go along with two scores.

Now, the former string bean is up to 205 pounds and leads the team with 635 yards and eight touchdowns in eight games. He produced the season’s signature play — a reception touchdown on a trick play toss from fellow wideout Bud Sasser to beat Georgia in Athens — and his 96-yard scamper against South Carolina would’ve been one for the ages if Missouri had been able to pull off the win.

Basically, he’s one of the best players in the SEC — if not the entire nation — and is a safe bet to make the highlight reel every week.

“It’s a beautiful thing,” defensive end Shane Ray said. “L’Damian has been through a whole lot in his life. For him to be able to do what he’s doing now, I feel like he’s putting his family on his back and doing everything possible. You see something like that and you can’t help but show your support for what he’s doing.”

Washington’s teammates paid him the ultimate compliment in August when they named him one of the team’s four senior captains, and he has

yet to fail them.

“We’re all behind him 100 percent,” Ray said. “Whatever he decides to do or say, we’re down for him.”

Before overtime began on Saturday night, Washington circled the Tigers up and let loose with an emotional outburst caught on ESPN cameras.

“If you want to be great, this is the time,” Washington yelled. “You came to Mizzou for great games like this.”

The eventual loss came in heartbreaking fashion. Kicker Andrew Baggett knocked his game-tying 23-yard-field goal off the left post in double overtime, and Missouri’s perfect season was no more.

But Washington couldn’t let his teammates lose sight of the ultimate goal: finishing the year ranked No. 1 in the country.

“The outcome isn’t always in your favor, but I think that this group will learn from it,” Washington said. “And I’m sure it’s going to help us down the road.

“You learn from wins, but you have to learn from losses a little bit more. All of our goals are still reachable. The last two years that Alabama won the national championship, they lost a regular season game.”

Less than 12 hours after the loss, he let the world know via his #HappySunday tweet that he was over the loss and ready to move on.

**"Woke up with a thousand reasons to smile! #HappySunday" — L’Damian Washington (@over\_DOS\_2) on Oct. 27**

"I understand we’re football players,” Washington said on Monday afternoon. “But at the end of the day, we’ve all got a life outside of football. Just because you have a bad Saturday or things don’t go your way doesn’t mean you don’t have a thousand other reasons to smile.”

“I’d be lying if I said it didn’t hurt. It stung a little bit,” he said. “But I had to come in here with a positive attitude and a smile on my face just to let my teammates know that life goes on.”

**"Not too many options when you coming from the projects!" —**

## **L'Damian Washington (@over\_DOS\_2) on Sept. 12**

Like so many other young athletes from at-risk situations, Washington sees football as a fixer.

He's on the radar of several NFL Draft analysts and knows that playing on Sunday next year means earning a big paycheck. But he will also leave Missouri with a degree in psychology after years of standout academic work in high school and college.

"I remember the first conversation I had with him when he got here was about going to school and graduating," Henson said. "How important that was to his future, and to help the next generation of Washingtons live a better life than he had. He's put himself in a position to do that."

Right now, though, football seems to be the likeliest path. It pays handsomely, and Washington is rather good at it.

Plus, he knows his siblings could use the financial support.

"My brothers are doing really good right now," Washington said. "I wouldn't say the best, but in the near future I think it's definitely going to brighten up a whole lot. Hopefully I can get a better-paying job and support my family more than I can right now in college."

"They're definitely my backbone," he said. "They're the reason I do what I do when things get hard. I look to them for motivation whenever I need to dig deep within myself to keep fighting."

Then, there's Sonya Washington. This December will mark seven years since she was taken from her boys.

L'Damian Washington never forgets to thank her, even after 96-yard touchdowns.

"She's my guardian angel," Washington said. "Without her, I wouldn't be here right now."