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TIGER KICKOFF: Can the new Henry Josey live up to expectations?

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COLUMBIA — An elephant follows the new Henry Josey into every room.

Every television camera has captured Josey's rebirth. Every reporter's notebook has been filled with his persistence. He has emptied his soul to everyone who asks.

But the elephant is still there.

It does not cast a large shadow. Most people don't even notice it. But that will change if the results don't come.

You see, there is a problem with an amazing medical recovery: it raises expectations.

So, although Josey is able to run at full speed again despite the giant earthworm scar on his left knee, and although he has developed a healthier life perspective among a host of other feel-good sidebars, the elephant remains.

Not until he pulls on the black No. 20 jersey and runs onto the turf in front of 67,000 fans will the question everyone has secretly wondered be answered: Just how good is this new Henry Josey?

The old Henry Josey was good.

That's how most Missouri fans remember his first two years of football in 2010 and 2011. He was so good, in fact, he racked up 1,149 rushing yards in nine games before a fateful date with Texas on Nov. 12, 2011.

That day was already a bad one: The All-Big 12 running back could only muster 21 yards on his first 10 carries of the game, and he was shaken up after a big hit in the first half.

But the toughest blow was yet to come.

Missouri's 17-5 win — its first over the Longhorns since 1997 — was marred by Josey's 11th and final carry.

He motioned left to take a first-down handoff from quarterback James Franklin and then was strung out to the sideline by the Texas defense. As he tried to turn the corner, Longhorns cornerback Carrington Byndom grabbed Josey's right side and tore him down violently.

Josey's left knee bent at an angle that nature never intended and then was mangled even further as he collapsed to the turf. The football — an afterthought — flew into the air as Josey focused on his injured limb, which felt as if it were dangling by a thread.

The damage was a laundry list of destruction: a torn patellar tendon, a torn anterior cruciate ligament (ACL), a torn medial collateral ligament (MCL) and two meniscal tears.

Pat Smith, the team physician, called it a “one-in-a-million” occurrence.

“A lot of people thought he wasn’t going to be able to walk right again, let alone run,” says fellow running back Miles Drummond.

The new Henry Josey watches church on the Internet.

He reevaluated his Christian faith after the injury and now counts God as his biggest ally. When fall practice keeps him from Sunday service, he watches Dallas pastor T.D. Jakes online.

“Before my injury, it was just football,” Josey says.

Sweat streams down his face after a mid-August scrimmage, and he is speaking in his customary soft tone.

“I relied on football to do everything,” he says. “This is my stress relief. This is where I brought all my problems, and then I just solved them out here on the field.

“After I got hurt, I had to find something else to do. It changed my whole life — changed the way I think about things, changed the way I took things for granted. I lost something I love so much.”

But God has been good to him lately. There is a focus to his lifestyle that he doesn’t think was there before. He tries to be a role model for his teammates in practice every day. They feel as if they can overcome any injury after seeing what he went through.

“I heard that he had blown out every ligament in his knee,” says Drummond, a redshirt freshman who was sitting on the Rock M as a high school senior at that Texas game. “He came back better than ever from an injury people thought he’d never recover from. He’s unbelievable. If you look at the dude’s calves, they’re huge.”

Drummond is right. Josey’s calf muscles are so strong that veins spider-web in every direction. Same with his forearms. That strength didn’t just materialize with a little bit of work.

The daily rehab between knee surgeries at Missouri’s athletic complex was enough to make most kids give up. Most days, Josey was there for 12 hours. Sometimes, he would take a nap in the middle and make it an 18-hour day.

But there was no quit in Josey. Not when he still had a team to play for. Not when he had a young son — Henry Jr., now 2 years old — who would one day understand the sacrifices his father made to repair a destroyed knee.

“Every day I wake up, I have pictures everywhere of him,” Josey says of Henry Jr. “I just look at him, and I’ve got to keep going.”

Some days, Josey does not want to tell his story.

When practice ends, there is inevitably a line of media members waiting to ask about his recovery. Usually, he obliges, smiles for the camera, and then hits the showers. Other days, he is simply a young man tired of talking and treks off alone.

This day, the Missouri football team is shut inside of the Devine Pavilion for practice. Josey makes himself available, and he’s talking about academics.

“I’m in the school of life,” he says, after noting that he will soon switch from Missouri’s business school to “whatever excites me, really.”

“I want to own some things,” Josey says. “I want to own some clubs. I want to own a hotel. I feel like I just need to be my own man. I like being my own manager, and I like controlling myself.”

He recently added golf to his list of off-field activities. Former roommate and Missouri linebacker Will Ebner, Josey’s best friend post-injury, took him out to the course last year.

“I just always wanted to play it,” Josey says. “I caught on pretty quick, so that was awesome. I’m getting my eagles, getting my pars.”

With that last line, he flashes a wide smile.

“I like to be crazy,” he continues. “I ride go-karts, go play miniature golf, hit baseballs. I’m never sitting down.”

Henry Josey would like you to know that he will not read this story.

“You gotta keep a mental focus,” he says. “I don’t let the stories bother me.”

But Missouri fans have read, watched and listened to his progress countless times in the 22 months since the Texas game. They will be the ones screaming his name when he takes the ball for the first time Saturday.

They will be full of cautious optimism, not unlike Missouri coach Gary Pinkel.

“I just want the story to continue to be a great story,” Pinkel says.

Yet, if Josey does not return to the level of play that destroyed Big 12 defenses in 2011, the elephant will remain. Weeks of awkward question-and-answer sessions will materialize, with reporters asking him what’s wrong when they know what is wrong: The new Henry Josey is not the old Henry Josey.

And in the game of football, the off-field victories are just temporary placeholders for the things fans remember: yards, touchdowns and victories.

Irrelevance is always waiting around the corner.

“Getting injured is a part of the game,” says Jimmie Hunt, Josey’s good friend and a Missouri receiver. “But you come back, you watch more film, and you get healthy again. You just know that there’s always somebody behind you to take your spot, so you’ve got to be ready.”

The Josey hypothetical has a flip side, and optimism is certainly deserved.

He has worked harder than anyone else in the program for nearly two full years and is stronger than ever. His 40-yard dash time is back under 4.5 seconds, and a year of frustrating scrimmages was quickly forgotten when he ripped off three runs of 10 or more yards on Aug. 22.

The old burst was there. The Josey you remember was there.

And this Saturday is elephant season.