

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Missouri football has one hurdle left in dream regular season

By [Alexander Smith](#)

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OXFORD, Miss. — This was not part of the deal.

Missouri joined the Southeastern Conference for a number reasons: budget bumps, Big 12 unrest and the prestige jump among them. If the football team was going to flounder as expected, at least the mediocrity would be scenic.

But for the fourth time this season, Missouri came away from an SEC town with more than a postcard. Saturday night, the Tigers entrenched themselves as one of

the conference's elite in 2013 with yet another dominating victory away from Columbia.

Oxford, Miss., was the final stop. The details of Missouri's 24-10 win will largely be forgotten. But the lasting memory came after the clock hit 0:00. The only specks of Mississippi blue and red left in the stands were members of the band, while thousands of Missouri supporters encased the east side of Vaught-Hemingway Stadium, their familiar six-letter chant echoing.

"We're in the SEC just like everybody else," defensive end Kony Ealy said. "I guess you can say we want it more."

The sellout home crowd of 61,168 rested its lungs early as Missouri quarterback James Franklin conducted an eight-play touchdown drive at breakneck speed (2:45) to open the game.

Saturday night was Franklin's first time in the starting lineup since suffering a right shoulder injury at Georgia Oct. 12. His return boosted a potent running game that totaled 260 yards on the night.

"We're so great at communicating with each other," running back Henry Josey said of Franklin. "It was a good feeling having him back and I felt stronger having him back there, too."

When home fans recovered from the early setback, the Missouri defense shushed the Ole Miss offense.

The Rebels went on an 18-play, 85-yard drive that included a first-down-and-goal from the 1-yard-line. But penalties and a goal line stand by the Tigers forced the Rebels to try a short field goal, which freshman Josh Augusta blocked to preserve the 7-0 lead.

"We're fighting more so for the seniors than for ourselves," Ealy said. "It all comes down to focus. It's about how you come back from adversity. I think we've done a good job facing that this season."

As coach Gary Pinkel promised during the week, backup quarterback Maty Mauk got first-half playing time.

"Make sure you're warmed up," the coaches told him in the second quarter. "Be ready to go."

The redshirt freshman — who accounted for 11 total touchdowns while starting the past four games in Franklin's absence — was more than ready. He threw a 60-yard strike to Bud Sasser en route to a 33-yard Andrew Baggett field goal on his

only drive of the day.

Minutes later, Marcus Murphy picked up a three-yard rushing touchdown on the speed option and the Tigers took a comfortable 17-3 lead into halftime.

But that lull didn't last long. In the two teams' first matchup since a 38-25 Missouri victory at Vaught-Hemingway in 2007, things got raucous in third quarter.

The Rebels struck immediately with a mesmerizing 45-yard touchdown run. I'Tavius Mathers started right, but cut back behind his blockers to find a gaping hole and cut the Tigers' lead to seven points.

On the ensuing Missouri drive, the Tigers faced a 4th-and-2 from their own 20-yard-line. Punter Christian Brinser leaped in the air as if the ball had sailed past him, but the snap went straight to defensive tackle Harold Brantley, who picked up twenty-six yards on the fake. First down.

"We should play him in short-yardage offense," Pinkel said.

The Tigers took a two-touchdown lead into the fourth quarter, but the Rebels threatened again when Bo Wallace hit Ja-Mes Logan for a 12-yard touchdown.

However, replays showed that Logan stepped out at the 7-yard-line, and Donte Moncrief later dropped a touchdown pass to turn the ball over on downs.

From there on out, the Tigers' offense put on a clock-bleeding clinic.

"We have to do a great job," Josey said. "This is on us every time. And our offensive line loves running the ball, so when we do get our chances, we have to go ahead and plow the ball down the field."

Ole Miss had one more shot to make it a game when Missouri faced 3rd-and-8 from its own 37, but Franklin danced away from several tacklers for a 13-yard gain and a Rebel red cherry on top of his comeback.

With the win, the Tigers ran their record to 10-1 and completed their road schedule without blemish.

"We've got a share of the championship now," Pinkel said. "This is what you do it for."

The last time Missouri accomplished a perfect season on the road was 34 years ago. The 1979 Tigers won all five of their away games — Illinois, Ole Miss, Colorado, Iowa State and Kansas — but dropped five of six at home and lost to

South Carolina in the postseason Hall of Fame Classic.

Now, only one hurdle stands between the Tigers and a date with Alabama in the SEC Championship Game on Dec. 7.

“You dream about it,” Josey said. “You talk about it, and you just have to show up and play. We could’ve been here last year. We could’ve been here the year before that. It’s just putting it all together and coming together as a team.”

Heisman winner Johnny Manziel will lead Texas A&M into Columbia next Saturday night. Missouri’s dream season hinges on a victory over a fellow Big 12 ex-pat.

“It says a lot about Coach Pinkel and how much he believed we could turn around the program like we have,” Josey said. “It’s a blessing to be in this position. We don’t take it for granted. We’re not done yet.

“That’s the biggest thing. We’re not finished.”