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Missouri football coordinator Dave Steckel and his defense are under scrutiny

By [Alexander Smith](#)

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DALLAS — Dave Steckel will take your questions now.

One rule: You must refer to him as “Stec” (no K). He has finished his opening monologue, and his hands lay on the table as he stares into a portable television camera light.

STEC: “Is that light going to be on me the whole time?”

REPORTER: “The lighting makes you look better.”

STEC: “Oh, it does? You’re saying I’m ugly without the lighting?”

REPORTER: “Well, I’m just saying we want to be able to see all the beautiful features.”

STEC: “Good rebound.”

REPORTER: “Just trying to keep up with ya.”

At first glance, Steckel exudes his Marine Corps background. His eyes flare with intensity. His jaw sets his mouth into an intimidating scowl. His smile is like a rarely used party trick.

All these things lend a “no funny business” aura to Missouri’s defensive coordinator, but that’s not the complete truth. If you judge Stec by his cover, you’re not paying enough attention.

Take, for instance, his defensive unit. Most of its best players were not highly touted recruits. Michael Sam an All-American and Southeastern Conference Defensive Player of the Year, was a two-star prospect (out of five). So was starting safety Matt White. Three-star recruits pepper the rest of a starting D that has forced at least one turnover in each of 43 straight games, an NCAA best.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” Steckel says. “We have a certain system at Missouri that we go through, our little checklist, you know?”

“To me, my wife is the most beautiful person in the world. You might not think she is, but I do.”

He can be funny. He can be elegant in his own way. But the mean streak is in full effect when he so chooses.

REPORTER: “I’ve heard a lot of kids say this week that the game’s going to be won in the trenches, which is probably true of a lot of games.”

STEC: “Yes, sir.”

(silence)

REPORTER: “I don’t know if you feel the same way they do.”

STEC: “The game’s going to be won by the team that scores the most points.”

The last time Steckel’s defense took the field, it flopped. Auburn (545 rushing yards) ran over Missouri with unprecedented ease in its 59-42 SEC Championship win. There were simply no answers from the black and gold.

In the weeks since, Steckel and his players have mostly opted not to speak about the debacle in the Georgia Dome. Selective memory could be beneficial for a squad that didn’t have much trouble before early December.

“We’ve been stopping the run all season,” Sam said. “We had one (bad) game. So don’t think teams are going to run on us after what happened last game.”

The wounds are still fresh, though.

REPORTER: “You mentioned the misdirection and some of the things Oklahoma State does in the run game. Are there any similarities to what Auburn ... ”

STEC: “You’re really gonna come there with that?”

REPORTER: “I mean, Auburn ...”

STEC: “Yes.”

REPORTER: “It’s a big part of their game, too.”

STEC: “Yes. I’ve learned.”

The Oklahoma State Cowboys are impressive on offense. They’re not quite on Auburn’s level of proficiency, but a balanced pass-and-run attack led by senior quarterback Clint Chelf has kept Steckel up late most nights.

“I worry about everything,” he says. “That’s why I can’t wait until Saturday night, so I can finally sleep.”

Missouri’s offense hasn’t had much trouble all year, so many expect the defense to be the deciding factor. Steckel introduced his once-unknown group of stars during Wednesday’s news conference in Dallas as the “Misfit Toys.”

Some assumed the remark was made in jest.

REPORTER: “You called them the Misfit Toys.”

STEC: “There’s no question about that. Everybody laughed.”

It's not a joke."

REPORTER: "Why?"

STEC: "They're all broken somehow. Including their coaches, by the way. We're just as broke as they are. But somehow, together, we're getting it all done."

The 56-year-old is in his 12th season at Missouri. His older brother, Les, was also a Marine — "He was an officer," Steckel says, "so he went the easy route" — and a football coach who spent several seasons in the NFL, including one as the head coach of the Minnesota Vikings in 1984.

The younger Steckel's path was determined before he got to high school.

"Where I grew up in Pennsylvania, in the steel mills, you played football," Steckel says. "And then I went to the Marine Corps. The only things I knew in my life were the Marine Corps and football, so I said, 'I might as well give coaching a crack.'"

His players will tell you he's a natural.

"He's pretty easy to talk to," defensive tackle Matt Hoch says. "He's a great guy all the way around, and he wants to talk to you. He wants to make you a better person and a better athlete."

Steckel loves his guys this year. He often quotes the Bible, and today he spits out a verse from the Book of Matthew — build your house on rock, not on sand — to describe the program head coach Gary Pinkel has constructed, the type of family-oriented program that has allowed this season's defense to forge a unique bond.

"You know what I think is really special about them?" Steckel asks. "I think they really love each other. It's kinda cool. They have this chemistry with each other where they're like brothers. One minute they're beating the crap out of each other and yelling at each other. Next minute they're, like, singing songs together."

Friday night's Cotton Bowl will put this brotherhood to the test.

Oklahoma State likes to pull its linemen to the opposite side of its run plays. Its misdirection tactics work well against teams that don't pay close attention to their keys, and the Cowboys throttled the Tigers 45-24 in Columbia two seasons ago.

This game will be a tough one for Steckel.

Don't expect him to overthink it.

STEC: "I've got to call better plays."

REPORTER: "Is it that simple?"

STEC: "Sometimes it is."