

BIG 12 SPOTLIGHT

6B

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A weekly look inside the conference

Debatable division



Nick Krug/Journal-World File Photo

KANSAS QUARTERBACK TODD REESING SLINGS a pass against Texas A&M in this Oct. 27, 2007 file photo in College Station, Texas. Reesing will lead KU into battle Aug. 30 against Florida International to start the year.



L.G. Patterson/AP File Photo

MU QUARTERBACK CHASE DANIEL THROWS a pass in this Sept. 22, 2007 file photo in Columbia, Mo. Daniel will be under pressure to lead Mizzou to its second straight Big 12 title-game appearance.

Kansas, Mizzou front-runners in Big 12 North

By Eric Sorrentino

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❖ **Next week:** The Big 12 Spotlight will preview the South division. Stay tuned.

Kansas and Missouri didn't do anything to alleviate the tension of the oldest rivalry west of the Mississippi River last fall. The football success of the Jayhawks and Tigers brought into focus a not-so-surprising newsflash on the national radar: These teams don't like each other.

The heated tension was magnified even more last fall when Missouri won the head-to-head matchup, then went to a less prominent bowl game than Kansas.

The KU argument: Missouri was pummeled in the Big 12 Conference championship game by Oklahoma, 38-17. It doesn't take a math major to see that MU's two losses surpassed the Jayhawks' one.

The MU argument: KU could have played in it, but lost to the Tigers for the right to face Oklahoma.

Either way, Kansas and Missouri took the Big 12 North division out of the trenches of

disrespect last year and into a land of eminency. Look no further than the bowl season, when Kansas won a 24-21 triumph against Virginia Tech in the Orange Bowl, while Missouri crushed Arkansas, 38-7, in the Cotton Bowl.

The two teams finished the year in the Top 10 of the Associated Press Poll (MU No. 4, KU No. 7) and should start the 2008 season in similar positions.

Does any other team in the North have a chance to finish ahead of KU or MU? Tradition-rich Nebraska, with new defensive-minded coach Bo Pelini and its 80,000 fans that turned out for the Huskers' spring game, always have zenith-like expectations. Has Cody Hawkins matured enough for Colorado to make a run?

Let's get to the 2008 Big 12 North fall preview:

Kansas

2007 record: 12-1.

Bowl: Orange, def. Virginia Tech, 24-21.

Key players lost: CB Aqib Talib, OT Anthony Collins, WR Marcus Henry, TE Derek Fine, RB Brandon McAnderson, DT James McClinton.

2008 outlook: This is the

first time in Mark Mangino's seven years the Jayhawks will have lofty, BCS-level expectations.

The thunder-and-lightning combination of McAnderson and Jake Sharp produced 1,946 yards and 23 touchdowns on the ground for KU last fall. Can Sharp, who will be a junior, handle being an every-down back? It's probable junior Angus Quigley and Jacques Crawford, a junior college transfer who led the nation with 1,935 rushing yards last year, will share carries with Sharp.

The receiving corps for returning quarterback Todd Reesing should be scary with senior Dexton Fields (63 catches, 834 yards, six TDs), sophomore Dezmon Briscoe (43-496-7) and junior Kerry Meier (26-274-2) returning.

Missouri

2007 record: 12-2.

Bowl: Cotton, def. Arkansas, 38-7.

Key players lost: RB Tony Temple, WR William Franklin, TE Martin Rucker, S William Moore.

2008 outlook: The Tigers return loaded with talent, including quarterback Chase Daniel, wide receiver/special

teams threat Jeremy Maclin and running back Derrick Washington. Daniel passed for 4,306 yards and 33 touchdowns last year and should have somewhat similar numbers in 2008.

Colorado

2007 record: 6-7.

Bowl: Independence, lost to Alabama, 30-24.

Key players lost: LB Jordon Dizon, CB Terrence Wheatley, RB Hugh Charles.

2008 outlook: This could be the year for sophomore quarterback Cody Hawkins to break out. He's showed flashes lately, completing 15-of-22 passes for 185 yards and two touchdowns in the spring game, when most players are still rusty, particularly on offense.

Replacing Dizon, who led the nation with 173 tackles last season, will be difficult.

The schedule also is tough: away games at KU and MU.

Kansas State

2007 record: 5-7.

Key players lost: WR Jordy Nelson, DE Rob Jackson, DB Justin McKinney.

2008 outlook: Junior quarterback Josh Freeman set a Wildcats record with 3,353

yards passing last season, but 48 percent of those yards went the way of Nelson, who was drafted by Green Bay. Senior Deon Murphy (57 catches, 605 yards, five TDs) is the most likely replacement for Nelson.

Nebraska

2007 record: 5-7.

Key players lost: CB Zack Bowman, OL Carl Nicks, LB Bo Ruud.

2008 outlook: Bo Pelini enters his first season in Lincoln, a year after helping LSU win the national championship as its defensive coordinator.

This figures to be a decent fit, considering the Huskers gave up 379 points per game last season.

Iowa State

2007 record: 3-9.

Key players lost: LB Alvin Bowen, DL Athyba Rubin.

2008 outlook: With Bret Meyer graduated, ISU has a quarterback battle between Austen Arnaud and Phillip Bates.

Arnaud completed 20-of-37 passes with an interception last season. Bates played his freshman season as a wide receiver, catching five passes for 73 yards.

What Keegan says



Looking at the previous season's standings generally doesn't pay when trying to project the coming season's race for the title. Yet, in the Big 12 North, nothing suggests Missouri and Kansas, in that order, won't be the teams to beat in 2008.

What Missouri needs to do to win the North: Stay healthy and defeat Kansas at Arrowhead Stadium. Big things are expected from multi-purpose freshman running back Derrick Washington.

What Kansas needs to do to win the North: Score a victory over either UT at home or OU on the road. Doing so would enable the Jayhawks to head into Arrowhead Stadium with enough confidence to take on the New England Patriots. As for what KU needs to do to be able to knock off UT or OU, overachieving on the defensive line would be a nice start. It shapes up as the team's least proven unit.

What Colorado needs to do to win the North: Move the clock forward a few years. Dan Hawkins is upgrading recruiting and instilling discipline that has resulted in better work habits in the classroom.

What Nebraska needs to do to win the North: Nebraska will win the North if first-year coach Bo Pelini proves to be the fastest teacher in the history of sports. Recruiting under Bill Callahan might have slipped a little, but the bigger issue was he and his staff didn't teach enough and took more of a professional approach. As a result, the talent didn't improve as much as at other programs. The most important aspect of coaching college football is developing the talent that's recruited. It will take more than one year for Pelini.

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Wood's take



Think of what all went right for the KU football team in 2007: Minimal injuries, favorable schedule, an offensive scheme few teams were ready for, and several NFL draft picks roaming the field. It was a dream season for Jayhawk fans, one that will be tough to match in 2008 in terms of win-loss record. But even a step back, after how high KU soared in '07, still could be a noticeably successful season.

Kansas is here to stay. It's

evident when watching the defensive depth at the spring game, and expected when knowing that coaches like Mark Mangino and Ed Warinner always keep their goals just barely out of reach.

The Jayhawks have a lot of good parts returning for 2008, especially on defense. They return quarterback Todd Reesing to lead an exciting offense. A team coming off a 12-1 season has developed swagger that can provide an edge on a given Saturday.

But it's a cruel world in the Big 12 Conference, where teams never get complacent and never let an opponent's reputation mean squat in any given week. As defensive end

John Larson said, "They're not going to lay down just because we have an Orange Bowl ring."

Kick out a nonconference cupcake and enter a road game at South Florida. Show Baylor, Texas A&M and Oklahoma State the door and add Texas, Oklahoma and Texas Tech. Brace for a little less luck on the injury front and perhaps a few less balls bouncing KU's way.

What you get is a similar gritty team sawing wood — with a little thicker board to attack. Still, 8-4 should be expected and 9-3 could be attained.

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