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Drills pay off for Tigers

Story by [Brandon Foster](#)

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COLUMBIA — When Maty Mauk threw his first interception of the season in the first quarter of Saturday's game at Toledo, he was lucky to have Bud Sasser, who ran down Jordan Haden and stripped the ball out and back into Missouri's possession.

Yet, maybe Mauk should be thanking someone else for the result of the play, which served as a turning point on the way to the Tigers' 49-24 victory: former Missouri quarterback Blaine Gabbert.

In the Insight Bowl in 2010, Gabbert threw a fourth-quarter pass into the hands of Iowa cornerback Micah Hyde, who returned the interception 72 yards for a touchdown. The Hawkeyes took a 27-24 lead, and Missouri was unable to answer with 5:32 left in the game.

Head coach Gary Pinkel said he mentioned the 2010 loss after Saturday's win in Toledo, and the result of that Insight Bowl changed the way Missouri defends interception returns. Offensive coordinator Josh Henson said the Missouri staff used Hyde's touchdown return as a launching pad for coaching offensive players to play defense after interceptions.

"Since that point in time, it's a situation that obviously doesn't come up all the time, where it's that type of game-winning or -losing situation, so that obviously puts a lot of emphasis on it." Henson said. "But yeah, since that time, it's been an emphasis for our staff."

Missouri coaches preach it in the film room and make sure it carries over to the practice field, Henson said.

"If we have an interception in practice, we're all yelling and screaming for everybody to get to the football and run and go tackle the ball," he said. "We practice that exact situation. Unfortunately, maybe too much."

The practice paid off Saturday. Sasser chased Haden on the sideline and caught him at the 12 yard line. Jimmie Hunt recovered the football, and suddenly it was as if the interception never happened.

Missouri's next drive stalled, and the Tigers punted. But instead of taking over inside Missouri's red zone, Toledo began near midfield. Two plays later, Aarion Penton picked off Phillip Ely for his second interception in as many games, and the Tigers were two plays away from taking a 21-7 lead.

"Once we got the ball, I was like, 'OK, it's over with. Let's go down,' and I think I do a pretty good job of bouncing back from stuff like that," Mauk said.

The Rockets would never come closer than two scores from the lead, and the Tigers were on their way to a 2-0 record.

Henson said Sasser's forced fumble was the turning point in the game.

"I think it's a huge play for our team," he said. "Obviously, you could maybe turn that whole game around on that series of plays. They get the ball there and go in 14-14, it's obviously a lot different football game. ... Bud did a great, I mean, he didn't quit. He saw the guy, he saw the interception, he gave a great effort getting back to the ballcarrier and just stripped it out. It's just a perfect example of why you always hustle and why you always finish plays."

Hunt, who recovered the fumble, said switching from an offensive mindset to a defensive one in the same play isn't too difficult.

"It's just being an athlete," he said. "Our instincts kick in, and you've got to make a play."

It would seem the Missouri coaches' urging has set in.

Then again, maybe Mauk's luck had less to do with Gabbert and more to do with another past Missouri quarterback. On Monday, Pinkel brought up the 2008 Cotton Bowl, when then-Tiger Chase Daniel threw an interception and forced a fumble to get it right back.

Mauk seems to have no qualms doing the same if needed.

"I'm going to go put my nose in there," he said. "I'm not going to let them return it, but obviously, I didn't have to (Saturday). I've got Bud helping me out."

"In that situation, if I've got to make a tackle or whatever, I'll put my nose in there."

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