

Hoff: Is Mizzou's offense 'predictable?' I calculated playcalling tendencies to find out.

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Behind the story: As the 2025 college football season wore on for Missouri, complaints of a predictable offense became a theme from both fans and the program's coach. To add something new, insightful and productive to the discourse, I created a database of playcalls from eight of Mizzou's games. Using that data, I wrote a unique story that melded data, anecdotes and reporting from an entire season of bland offense. This story placed in the top 10 of the recent APSE contest in the explanatory reporting category.

Full story: COLUMBIA, Mo. — You're a defensive coordinator, calling plays against the Missouri offense. The Tigers want to move the ball and score. You need to stop them.

Mizzou has a first-and-10 to start its drive, backed up inside its own 20-yard line, so you like your chances. You have a very good idea of what's coming. The Tigers run the ball 83.3% of the time in this situation, so you call a play that packs the area around the line of scrimmage with defenders. MU's Ahmad Hardy is very good, but your play call — your research — was better.

It works, and you stuff him at the line. No gain.

Now it's second-and-10 for Missouri. Again, you have a good guess at what's coming. Mizzou passes the ball 84.6% of the time in this situation. You drop back in zone. Maybe your coverage is sound and the Tigers can't complete a pass. Maybe you allow a shorter completion.

Either way, you also feel good about third down. In this part of the field, MU throws the ball 87.5% of the time on third down, so you'll emphasize coverage again. Your job isn't easy, but it's a lot easier when you know what your opponent is going to do.

Lately, a lot of Missouri's opponents seem to know what it's going to do. The Tigers' offense has struggled this season, thrusting playcalling into the spotlight.

Playcalling is a tricky blend between art, science and execution and thereby hard to evaluate. But there's an undeniable trend of predictability with Mizzou's offense that is holding it back.

After beating Auburn last month, coach Eli Drinkwitz pointed it out regarding MU's pass game: "We're way too predictable, right now, on some of that stuff."

A few weeks later, Texas A&M's defensive players were calling out Missouri's plays on the line of scrimmage.

"We've got to go back and check our tendencies," Drinkwitz said after that one. "... We run a lot of outside zone. That's probably pretty predictable."

Then, after last Saturday's loss to Oklahoma, Drinkwitz suggested "we're running stuff that they anticipate is coming, and they have an advantage to it."

So how easy is it to figure out what's coming? The Post-Dispatch sifted through plays from Mizzou's eight games against power conference opponents this season — the seven Southeastern Conference matchups and nonconference meet-up with Kansas — to calculate the offense's tendencies to run or pass in different situations.

Those situations include downs, distance to the line to gain, field position and score — all factors that influence decisions to run or pass on a given play. There are certainly more variables, but these seemed like the most obvious ones to use. Play calls are also not as simple as just "run" or "pass," but defenses do base their calls on which they expect the offense to do.

A longer note on methodology is at the bottom of this story.

Exploring the passing problem

Ask an observer of Mizzou football what their biggest frustrations with the offense this season have been, and there's a good chance — after all, this is all about calculating probabilities — that it'll boil down to wanting the Tigers to run the ball more and throw the ball better.

The coaching staff may not disagree.

"There's a lot of room for improvement in our passing game, obviously at critical moments," Drinkwitz said Tuesday. "I shouldn't say 'critical moments' — during the moments in the game where we need to be able to rely on that."

The moments in which MU needs an aerial attack tend to be while it's trailing. One of the most basic tenets of football is that an offense looking to move quickly while saving clock turns to the pass.

And Mizzou has been trailing an awful lot this season. Of the 624 offensive plays the Post-Dispatch tracked across the Tigers' power conference games, they've been leading their opponent for just 20% of them, tied in 26.1% and coming from behind on a whopping 53.8%.

Missouri has spent almost as many of its offensive plays trailing by two scores (90 plays) as it has leading by one score (94 plays).

That, expectedly, affects playcalling.

For example: When the game is tied, Mizzou runs the ball 69.9% of the time on first down. When the Tigers are ahead by one score, that rises to 71.4% of the time. When they're up by two or more scores, it goes all the way up to 83.3% of the time.

But as soon as Missouri falls behind by one score, it runs on first down only 53.1% of the time. When down by two scores, that dips to 45.7%.

Just about every team capable of throwing the ball will do so more when behind, and every team capable of running the ball will do so more while ahead, so that's not a kind of predictability that is inherently problematic. But the offense so often operating from behind, which requires it to pass, doesn't seem to be helpful.

'Run-pass-pass' dilemma

After losing to the Sooners, Drinkwitz had an interesting critique of his offense, which he said had "zero rhythm, zero creativity."

"We were run-pass-pass," he said, making that pattern sound like a bad thing.

Depending on where the Tigers are on the field and how far they have to go on a given down, that pattern does play out often.

Missouri runs the ball 61.2% of the time on first down. That tendency goes up when the offense is backed up inside its own 25-yard line or in the red zone, inside the opponent's 20. It dips a little bit around the middle part of the field.

On second down, Mizzou is closer to 50-50, running on 51.3% of second downs. It largely depends on how many yards are needed for a first down. If it's second-and-10 or more, MU throws 68.4% of the time. If it's second-and- 4 or less, MU runs 74.3% of the time.

The Tigers are likely to throw the ball on third down, doing so 69.7% of the time. If it's third-and-4 or less, they become more likely to run, but there are still a lot of third-down throws.

And that's where passing concerns rear their head again, limiting the degree to which Missouri can run the ball.

"You can't give Ahmad Hardy the ball enough if on third down, you can't convert," Drinkwitz said.

'What I judge it on'

How much does it matter at this point in the season? The Tigers have one regular-season game to potentially sort out their offense. Even then, it won't significantly alter the fact that struggles with offense and special teams didn't match the success of an elite defense this year.

After Saturday's game against Arkansas, most minds will turn toward 2026 and what players Mizzou targets to improve its offense.

But among the coaches, there will be a post-mortem analysis of what's gone wrong. If Drinkwitz's public comments are any indication, run-pass tendencies like the percentages outlined here will get their time under the microscope.

The sign those coaches can't ignore is other defenses. Whether they're identifying and correctly predicting plays like Texas A&M or just packing the box — the area between the tackles and

close to the line of scrimmage — their basic strategy is clear: They want to stop Hardy and dare the Tigers to throw.

And Mizzou's inability to find a counter-punch is the lack of creativity Drinkwitz sees.

“There's a style of defense that has been played against us the last four games that has carried over,” he said. “And if somebody's going to play an extra hat in the box and play man to man, and you can't figure out how to get people open or create explosive plays, then that lacks what we need to do in order to be successful. Ultimately, that's what I judge it on.”

Methodology

After hearing Drinkwitz's laments about predictability and a lack of creativity — and seeing fans' consistent complaints about playcalling this season — I calculated run-pass tendencies for Mizzou's eight games against power conference opponents.

I did not include plays from the Tigers' blowout wins against Central Arkansas, Louisiana or UMass because those games were lopsided, MU used backups for long stretches and the full playbook was almost certainly not used in those games.

In total, this produced 561 plays as data points.

I assembled the data by revisiting the StatBroadcast play-by-play feed, which is the live stats service provided to media, for each game, noting the factors in the article above. There's always a chance of that feed including some minor errors, though I double-checked any sequences that looked odd by rewatching those drives. Any errors would have a minimal impact on these tendency numbers.

I counted sacks and quarterback scrambles as pass plays, not run plays, since the play call was a pass even though the result was a run.

It's worth repeating that there's more to a play call than just pass or run, and more variables than just field position and score. There were only so many things that I could pragmatically account for here, so this analysis runs a little simplistic.