

# Lions' defense puts clamps on Bulldogs

BY BLAKE TOPPMEYER  
Staff Reporter

In a matchup of two teams' strengths, Missouri Southern State University's pass defense prevailed.

The Lions entered Saturday's contest against the Truman football team ranked No. 1 in the MIAA in pass defense and limited junior quarterback Matt Ticich to just 89 yards passing. It marked the first time this season that Ticich has been held to fewer than 100 passing yards.

Missouri Southern (6-4, 4-4) coupled its defensive showing with several big plays from its offense and special teams and defeated the Bulldogs (5-5, 3-5) 55-24.

Ticich entered the game second in the MIAA in passing yards and top in touchdown passes. But the Lions limited Ticich to just 16 of 34 passing and intercepted a total of four passes.

"We need to get our offense so it's not so much centered on [Ticich]," head coach Shannon Currier said. "Right now, our success offensively is really designed around him. And we need to get to the point where we have other guys able to step up and make other plays so we're not putting so much weight and burden on Matt Ticich."

Sophomore wide receiver Albert Coker said Missouri Southern's secondary made things difficult for the 'Dogs' passing attack.

"The secondary was communicating," said Coker, who led the Bulldogs with four receptions for 42 yards. "They were calling out a lot of plays. You could tell they were well-prepared, and they just flew around to the ball."



Jackson Groves/Index

Sophomore Vanness Emokpae lunges for a pass against Pittsburg State earlier this fall. Emokpae caught four passes for 32 yards in the football team's 55-24 defeat Saturday at Missouri Southern. The Bulldogs, now 5-5, conclude the season Saturday.

The Lions built a 21-3 lead in the first quarter behind big plays from its offense, defense and special teams.

On its first drive of the game, Missouri Southern marched 64 yards for a touchdown. Most of the yardage came via a 40-yard run by Renard Johnson, which placed the Lions inside the red zone.

The Lions' defense joined the act on the Bulldogs' following possession. Ticich threw his first of three interceptions and Missouri Southern's Elbert Johnson took the pick 30 yards the other way for a score.

Missouri Southern's special teams put the exclamation point

on the first quarter. Faced with a fourth and five from their own 33-yard line, the Lions ran a fake punt. Colin Bado, the personal protector, received the snap and raced 67 yards for the touchdown.

"We had an overload call, so we weren't necessarily in our fake punt mode by any means," Currier said. "... When you have them backed up, really, do teams go for it when they're at their own 30[-yard line] and fourth and five?"

The fake punt was one of many big plays for Missouri Southern. They had seven plays which went for at least 20 yards. In comparison, Tru-

man only had two plays gain 20 yards or more.

With the offense struggling, the Bulldogs turned to defense and special teams to keep the team within striking distance in the first half.

Freshman cornerback Luther Eta blocked a punt with Missouri Southern backed up deep in its own territory. This led to sophomore kicker Mickey Masucci's 27-yard field goal.

Eta struck again later in the first half when he intercepted Adam Hinspeter's pass and returned it 39 yards to the Missouri Southern 16-yard line.

"[Hinspeter] actually made

a bad throw," Eta said. "I just executed off of it. Next thing you know, I'm down the sideline, and I see my whole defense blocking for me."

Eta's interception, which was the first of his career, set up Ticich's 11-yard touchdown strike to sophomore wide receiver Vanness Emokpae, which brought the score to 21-10 in the second quarter.

Coker added another contribution from the special teams late in the first half. He returned a punt 60 yards for a touchdown.

But after halftime, behind its running game and defense, Missouri Southern put the Bulldogs

away. The Lions outscored the 'Dogs 24-7 in the second half.

Missouri Southern out-gained Truman by 300 yards in the rushing department, with the Lions posting 355 yards. It was the fourth time in as many weeks the Bulldogs' opponent rushed for at least 300 yards. The Lions' rushing attack helped them go five for five in fourth-down attempts.

"A lot of teams are definitely going to just try to run the ball down our throat," senior safety Jesse Cooper said. "They look at the stats [and see] we're the worst rushing defense [in the MIAA]."

Missouri Southern's Alley Broussard did the brunt of the damage rushing. Broussard, a transfer from Div. I Louisiana State University, ground out 125 yards on 22 carries.

"You could really see why he went to LSU," Eta said. "He's a really good back, really solid. Good leg drive. He doesn't come down easy on the first hit."

After facing the MIAA's top defensive team last Saturday, the Bulldogs will square off against the conference's best offensive team 2 p.m. this Saturday when Truman hosts Missouri Western State University (8-2, 6-2). The game is Senior Day for the Bulldogs.

Currier said the team will need to eliminate some mistakes to overcome the Griffons.

"We can't afford turnovers," Currier said. "We had too many turnovers [against Missouri Southern]. ... It's important that we don't allow the big play to happen for them. They're good enough the way it is."



Nathan Becker/Index

Senior safety Jesse Cooper (left) and senior cornerback James Thabuteau will take the field for the final time as Bulldogs on Saturday.

## Senior DBs leave mark on team

BY BLAKE TOPPMEYER  
Assistant Sports Editor

More than four years ago, seniors James Thabuteau and Jesse Cooper donned the Truman purple and white and stepped onto the field at Stokes Stadium, ready to compete in their first collegiate game.

For Cooper, a true freshman at the time, it was the first time he would see action in collegiate football after being recruited from Miami, Fla. For Thabuteau it marked his initial crack at playing for the Bulldogs after he redshirted in 2003.

Forty-two games have come and gone since that Aug. 28, 2004, contest against the University of South Dakota. Thabuteau and Cooper have appeared in every one of them.

Saturday, the two defensive backs will take part in their last college football game when the Bulldogs challenge Missouri Western State University. Their Truman football careers will come to a close right where they started — on the field of green at Stokes Stadium.

"Just thinking about that [makes] me cherish this week," Thabuteau said. "It's going to be the last week I'm going to be on the field out there with all those guys running through plays and everything. It's going to be, definitely, an emotional day for me."

Thabuteau and Cooper are two of only four seniors on the Bulldog roster. And they are the only two — senior running back Jake Cunningham and senior center Tim Bauman transferred into the program — to begin and end their careers wearing the Truman colors.

The duo was a part of the 2004 and 2005 teams that had a combined record of 4-18. But Cooper and Thabuteau have played key roles in turning the team around. They helped the Bulldogs post their first winning record in four seasons in 2006 and go 5-5 so far this season.

"It was rough those first two years,"

Cooper said. "But we just kept persevering and kept working hard. And it really paid off that third year when we turned it around. And this year we've improved so much as well."

Although they bring different styles of play to the field, both have had an impact on the program during the last four years.

Cooper is a team captain and the vocal leader of the defense from his safety position, a role that Thabuteau said Cooper excels at.

"I just let Jesse take over the vocal part of it," Thabuteau said. "I'm more of a laid-back type of guy, but I do talk to a lot of the younger players whenever they ask questions. But the vocal part of it, I let Jesse take care of that because he's been in that role for the past couple years, so he's pretty good at that."

Head coach Shannon Currier said that even when the team was getting thumped last week at Missouri Southern State University, Cooper was rallying the troops.

"When times are tough, he has stood strong and kept battling," Currier said. "Even last week, we're down a bunch late in the game, and he's out there encouraging guys on the kickoff return team."

Cooper's contributions haven't been limited to his role as a team leader. An honorable mention all-MIAA and the team leader in total tackles in 2006, Cooper leads the team with 83 total tackles again this season.

He's proved his durability by starting in 36 consecutive contests and compiling 269 total tackles for his career.

"I always want to be at the ball, whether it's making the tackle or just help getting there," Cooper said. "You never know what's going to happen if you're always sprinting around the field getting to the ball. Good things always happen when you're around the ball."

Thabuteau, a cornerback, is the physical specimen of athletic ability. With a 6-foot-1, 218-pound frame ac-

companied by speed, he has drawn interest from more than 20 NFL scouts, Currier said.

Although freshman cornerback Luther Eta said Thabuteau isn't the vocal leader that Cooper is, Thabuteau's performance speaks for itself.

"He just shows more through his work, through his skills," Eta said. "I've really been inspired by that."

Like Cooper, Thabuteau also has proved sturdy, starting in 26 consecutive games. Currier said both have been called upon even more frequently this year because of injuries to other members of the secondary.

In his four years of playing Bulldog football, Thabuteau has racked up five interceptions, 159 total tackles and 16 pass breakups.

As a fifth-year senior, Thabuteau is one of only two players on the Bulldog roster who were not recruited by the current coaching regime. Instead, he was recruited by John Ware, who left the program to coach Missouri Southern after the 2003 season and passed way in 2005.

Thabuteau said the adjustment to a new coaching staff was somewhat difficult but ultimately was a positive experience.

"It just gives you more experience to deal with adversity because it's a completely different coaching staff than before," Thabuteau said. "The whole philosophy, everything they do is completely different. It's been a good change for Truman from what I've seen so far."

It's been a change that Thabuteau and Cooper have been a part of every step of the way. Saturday, they will take the field one final time with the Bulldog letters across their chests, hoping to help the team achieve its second consecutive winning season.

"I think there's going to be something special in the air," Cooper said. "... I know my teammates are going to be playing as hard as they can for me."

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