

## This Saturday in autumn yields wild excitement

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By late Saturday morning on the streets of downtown St. Louis, this September day was starting off just the way it should, with the aromatic pleasure of smoky grilled meats floating in the air. All over the country, the college football season was opening in spectacular fashion: a historic upset in Michigan's Big House, an inexplicable disaster at Notre Dame, a heart-tugging, emotional victory at Virginia Tech and a 49-3 joyride by defending national champion Florida.

But on this one rare afternoon, Mizzou and Illinois — two traditionally lukewarm programs begging for some authentic flavor of their own and aching to ascend to a higher place in college football — gave us something that felt very much like, well, the Big Time.

Before high noon, the Edward Jones Dome was in the eye of a perfect college football storm, full of tailgating bacchanals, impromptu pep rallies and a genuine bowl-game atmosphere. A near-sellout crowd filled the Dome to the rafters, along with colorful marching bands, shimmering dancers and cheerleaders, and all this pomp and pageantry turned out to be the perfect prelude to a delightful, if totally inartistic football game.

No one will remember the revival of the Missouri-Illinois Arch Rivalry as a flawlessly played football game, because Mizzou's 40-34 victory was mistake-filled and error-prone. But this revival is memorable because of how the game felt.

This was not your usual opening-game laughter in a safe and secure home environment. It was on national television (ESPN2) and in a loud and large stadium on neutral ground. "It felt exactly like a bowl-game atmosphere to us," Mizzou offensive tackle Tyler Luellen said. "It was a bit nerve wracking, but it was also a lot of fun, too."

Yeah, it was fun all right, in a trip to the haunted house sort of way. The Tigers, fresh off a trip to the Sun Bowl and preseason picks to win the Big 12 North, ended up flirting with disaster against the Illini, fresh off a 2-10 season, and picked to finish near the bottom of the Big Ten.

The Tigers were on the verge of walloping Illinois when they took a 37-13 third-quarter lead, only to see that blowout turn into a down-to-the-wire thriller. It was a wonderful way to spend the first football Saturday of the fall. In the end, the atmosphere made me feel like this could turn into an annual rivalry that has legs. So this is what the start of something big felt like:

With 58 seconds remaining in a tight, six-point battle, 62,352 people on their feet, and the entire Dome waited to exhale. Illinois freshman Eddie McGee had flung a high spiral toward the endzone, and if his teammate Brian Gamble came down with the ball, all hell was going to break loose. ...

Then all eyes shifted from the flight of the ball to the goal line where Mizzou safety Pig Brown reached just a bit higher than Gamble and Tiger defensive back Darnell Terrell in a wild jump ball at the goal line ...

Now half the Dome groaned and the other half rejoiced because Brown had the ball in his hands, landed on the turf and gleefully bounced up ...

Just as soon as he reached the sidelines, Pig paused to admire the replay. "I thought about it for a second and I said, 'Hey, I wanna see myself on the JumboTron,'" Brown cackled.

Even in slow motion, Brown's interception looked more like a midair trainwreck than an elegant midair ballet. But the play that won the game was a lot like

the game itself: slightly awkward, but incredibly exciting. And in this case, beauty was in the eye of the beholder.

"Looked pretty good to me," said Pig Brown with a sly grin.

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