





MEET THE PRESIDENT

A Tiger at the Goal Line

APRO President Tiger John Cleek always picks Mizzou to win. And this year, he's betting on a winning season for APRO as well.

By Neil Ferguson

APRO's new president, Tiger John Cleek, has fostered a winning attitude for a very long time. Since 1973, he has projected the scores of his hometown college football team and, without exception, he's forecasted the University of Missouri Tigers to win. Sometimes, the seasons have been bleak, but Cleek has never stopped thinking about winning. Cleek's enthusiasm for Mizzou football is so fierce that it has given him his moniker—and he's passed it on to his son, Tiger Jr., as well.

This August, Cleek was elected president by the APRO Board of Directors at the Rent-to-Own Convention and Buying Show in St. Louis and, just as he's always set his sites high for Mizzou football, he also wants to help APRO score a winning season. He plans to do so with four plays: incorporate the "new guys," keep the "old-timers" active, continue to nurture APRO's grassroots approach in Washington and make the most of the association's communications.

FIRST DOWN: "I want to give new members ownership in APRO," Cleek says. "We can never have too much brainpower." He notes that the APRO Board of Directors is a talented team with committees headed by top-notch talent. But Cleek wants to expand committee participation beyond members of the board and he's pushing to enlist other association members—perhaps those new to APRO or those who haven't considered participating before—to tackle industry issues on various committees: membership, communications, government relations, public relations and state associations, among others. If you're thinking, "Well, maybe I want

to get involved on an APRO committee," visit the association's Web site at www.rtohq.org/apro-committees.html, where you'll find a complete list of committees, contact information for the chairman of each committee, APRO members currently participating and how you, too, can get involved.

SECOND DOWN: Recognize those who have been longtime participants in the game. "We need to let our past board members and officers know that we haven't forgotten them," Cleek says. "There is a wealth of talent—people who have served APRO well over the years—who are still willing to help out." He notes former President Gary McDougal as a shining example. McDougal retired from the industry four years ago, but subsequently was enlisted to nurture RTO's legislative connections. To that end, McDougal helped forge a relationship between the rent-to-own industry and the Congressional Black Caucus, an alliance that has developed to the point where, this year, for the first time, APRO and a number of its member companies were a \$50,000 sponsor of the CBC's scholarship efforts. "Without the support of the CBC, our mission in Washington would fail," Cleek says. "Gary McDougal opened that door." Cleek also cites Kevin Quinn and Wayne Chambers as other APRO legends who continue to aid the industry. "Let's not forget the knowledge and connections of the old-timers," Cleek admonishes, adding, "I can call them that because I *am* one, too!"

THIRD DOWN: Grassroots. "The November 4 election is crucial to our country and to this industry," Cleek says. "We've worked hard with Congressman William Lacy Clay on H.R. 1767 [the *Consumer Rental Purchase*

“Networking with fellow APRO members is more important than ever. Our members’ willingness to share ideas is beyond anything you’ll see in any other industry—and you can share those ideas without fear of retaliation.”

Agreement Act]. All 99 of that bill’s co-sponsors are up for re-election this year and we need to make sure our friends remain in office.” Cleek is planning a state association conference call in late September to devise an action plan for the fall elections. The call to all state presidents will include an update from APRO’s lobbyists and key strategists. “We’ve learned over the past 15 to 20 years of grassroots efforts that a few people *can* make a big difference—and we want to have a big impact on the November 4 elections.”

TOUCHDOWN: Spread the word. Cleek wants to use communications tools to help with the other three goals listed above: enlist the “new guys” via APRO’s daily e-newsletter, *RTO Today*, keep the “old-timers” in the loop by publishing the *Legends* e-newsletter to inform past board members of the association’s latest activities and, as always, lubricate the lines of legislative communication to keep the grassroots efforts healthy.

Beyond that, he also envisions communication on an even broader scale. Cleek, APRO Executive Director Bill Keese and APRO’s Legal Counsel Ed Winn III have been invited by ColorTyme CEO Bob Bloom to offer a presentation at that company’s January meeting. Keese will talk about the benefits of APRO; Winn will give a preview of the 2009 Legislative Conference; and Cleek will talk about his lifeblood, state rental-dealer associations. “This presentation at the ColorTyme show gives us a great opportunity to spread the word about APRO,” Cleek says. “It’s a great source for acquiring new members.”

Cleek observes that communication within the rent-to-own industry has a unique slant: “Networking with fellow APRO members is more important than ever. Our members’ willingness to share ideas is beyond anything you’ll see in any other industry—and you can share those ideas without fear of retaliation.”

What Cleek wants for APRO echoes themes to which he’s been committed for a long time. He’s lived his entire life in the heart of Missouri, Columbia (population: 100,000), and is an avid supporter of that

community—and, of course, its football team. He’s a major donor to the University of Missouri’s Tiger Scholarship Fund and Extra-Point Club, supports the Central Missouri Food Bank, sponsors three Little League teams and has implemented Tiger John’s Family Land, a program where 50 disadvantaged youth are able to attend each Mizzou men’s basketball home game. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Cleek furnished 40 homes in central Missouri for displaced victims of that disaster.

Cleek, who operates nine stores in eight central Missouri communities, is something of a celebrity in that part of the state, due to his charitable contributions and the plentiful television advertising that features him, his son (and business partner) Tiger Jr. and, twice a year, his grandchildren—the fourth generation of Cleeks in the business.

Cleek worked for his father—whose given name was Clifton Elmo, but everyone knew him as “Missouri Mo”—in the family’s mostly retail store until tragedy struck in 1973, when Elmo died in a plane crash returning from a Missouri vs. Iowa State football game. His father meant the world to Cleek; he was Tiger’s mentor and inspiration. In addition to the business acumen he acquired from Elmo, Cleek also inherited his father’s love of football. He attended Mizzou games with his dad regularly starting in 1958 and, over the past 50 years, he’s missed only three home games. Cleek’s father so loved the sport that, on game days, the store was closed for the duration of the game. Elmo also publicized his predictions for each game with the precision of the most avid sports enthusiast. His weekly prescient passion was deemed “Missouri Mo Says...”

Upon his father’s passing, Tiger picked up the tradition and continues it to this day with his “Tiger John Says...” column, which runs in the local newspaper and is posted on Cleek’s Lease or Own storefront window. Good season or bad, Cleek always predicts a Tigers victory. He’s predicting a winning season for APRO, as well. Membership in the association is the highest it’s been in a decade and the new president hopes to energize *all* who care about the rent-to-own industry. He’s definitely a team player. *