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A Quieter Cannon

**Ammunition shortage leaves ‘Little Joe’
transitioning to softer sound.**

Story by Brian Ransom

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“**L**ittle Joe,” the MU Army ROTC cannon that punctuates Missouri scores during home football games, is losing some of its punch.



Mizzou’s “Little Joe.” Photo by Rachel Coward.

The cannon tradition became a part of Missouri football culture after a home game against Nebraska in 1895, when ROTC cadets fired cannons for every point scored. MU’s ROTC

program introduced Little Joe in 1954, and the cannon's fiery outbursts, driven by 75 mm blanks, have some fans in the habit of covering their ears every time Missouri scores.

But the U.S. Army plans to stop manufacturing Little Joe's standard charges, and the supply of big blanks had dwindled to less than eight before the homecoming game against Kentucky — probably not enough to last the season.

Cadets started using smaller 10-gauge blanks for nonconference games this year, reserving the larger shells for games against SEC opponents.

Master Sgt. John Bissen, a noncommissioned officer in charge of the ROTC recruits who operates Little Joe, says the cannon crew will eventually have to start using the 10-gauge blanks, typically reserved for events such as golf tournaments and 5K runs, at all home football games.

Master Sgt. Steven Rogers, cadre for the cannon crew, says the 10-gauge blanks are still loud, but the sound isn't the same as the 75 mm blanks.

“It’s kind of like the difference between Big MO and a snare drum,” Rogers says. “It’s just a different resonance to the tone.”

Rogers says the explosion from a 75 mm blank is something you don’t just hear — you feel it, too, because it displaces more air.

Although the larger blanks are still in production, the Army has been scaling back the number it makes every year. Bissen says he anticipates the Army will stop manufacturing the 75 mm blanks in a year or two.

The Army’s primary reason for abandoning the 75 mm blanks is expense: One blank costs between \$75 and \$80 to make, Bissen says, compared to \$2 for the 10-gauge blanks.

Demand for the 75 mm rounds has been decreasing over the years, but not at the same rate as the decrease in production, making the remaining blanks a precious commodity.

For the Army’s 2013 fiscal year, which began Oct. 1, Bissen says he requested 75 of the 75 mm

blanks. MU's ROTC program received only nine of the standard cannon rounds.

Bissen says he doesn't have control over the shortage of 75 mm rounds, but he continues to search for other Army ROTC programs throughout the region that might have extra blanks.

Rogers expresses a similar sentiment.

"I mean, we like having the loud explosion that comes with the 75-millimeter," Rogers says, "but we're here to support the team, and if we have to support it with 10-gauge, we'll do that."

After the first home football game of the season, against nonconference team Southeastern Louisiana, fans commented that the cannon didn't seem as loud, Rogers said.

"Before the Georgia game, people were asking if it was going to be loud or not," Rogers says. "It's noticeable to fans."

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