

# 2010 Big Ten football previews: Michigan State (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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After examining [Minnesota](#), [Illinois](#), [Indiana](#), [Michigan](#), [Purdue](#), and [Northwestern](#), we now shift our attention to the Michigan State Spartans. Iowa will play Michigan State on Oct. 30 at Kinnick Stadium.

I'm not one that likes to use the label "dark horse." But if there is a Big Ten team this season best fitting that label, then I believe it's Michigan State.

Now look, I get it. The Spartans went 6-6 last season and lost in the Alamo Bowl to Texas Tech. I get that it's Michigan State, a team that traditionally has a moment in its season when havoc comes in.

However, here's what I see when I look at the Spartans: I see a team with a head coach in Mark Dantonio that simply gets it. I see an offense loaded with experienced playmakers at the skill positions. I see arguably the best defensive player in the entire Big Ten on the other side of the football.

I also see quite a few winnable games this season for Michigan State, and while I think the Spartans only go 5-3 in conference play, I'm predicting they go 9-3 in 2010.

I'll start with the coaching. Dantonio might be the most underrated head coach in the Big Ten. All he has done is guide Michigan State to bowl appearances every year at the helm. Considering the train wreck it was when he first took over in 2007, the turnaround in East Lansing, Mich., has been

impressive.

As long as Dantonio is the Spartans' head man, Michigan State will consistently be competing for Big Ten titles. He is a no-nonsense coach, and it shows in his demeanor on the sidelines.

On offense, this team brings back lots of experience. Junior quarterback Kirk Cousins ultimately won the starting battle with Keith Nichol last year, and returns as the guy in 2010. Cousins threw for 2,680 yards and had 19 touchdown passes to only nine interceptions during his sophomore campaign.

This year could be even bigger for Cousins with the receivers he has at his disposal. One of those wideouts, ironically, is Nichol, who made the switch from quarterback to receiver prior to the Spartans' Alamo Bowl contest against Texas Tech. In fact, Nichol started that game at wide receiver for the Spartans, hauling in two catches for 11 yards and scoring a 7-yard touchdown run out of the Wildcat formation.

Behind Nichol on the depth chart for Michigan State is senior Mark Dell, who caught 26 passes for 449 yards and had one touchdown, which came against Wisconsin.

The other receiver spot features a pair of juniors, with Keshawn Martin listed first-string and B.J. Cunningham right behind him. Martin had 18 receptions for 411 yards and five touchdowns last season, two of which came against the Badgers. Meanwhile, Cunningham finished 2009 with 48 catches for 641 receiving yards and four touchdowns.

Also, Michigan State has some depth at the tight end spot with senior Charlie Gantt and junior Brian Linthicum.

The Spartans' backfield features a pair of running backs in sophomores Larry Caper and Edwin Baker. Caper is listed first-string coming off a season where he rushed for 468 yards on 120 carries and scored six touchdowns. Baker was not too far behind with 85 carries for 427 yards rushing and one

touchdown.

As for Michigan State's defense, it was lackluster in 2009. However, it returns the reigning Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year in senior linebacker Greg Jones. The 6-1 inside linebacker lived up to preseason hype last season by recording 154 tackles (67 solo) and nine sacks, and was chosen as the conference's Preseason Defensive Player for the Year for the second consecutive time.

To put Jones' 154 tackles into perspective, the closest to him in that category was fellow inside linebacker Eric Gordon, who had 92 tackles. Like Jones, Gordon returns to the Michigan State's linebacking corps this season.

The Spartans also return two starters on the D-Line and two from the secondary this season, as they make the switch from a 4-3 defense to a 3-4 defense, where there are four linebackers on the field.

All this talent on both sides of the ball is something I like with Michigan State this season. Then there's the schedule.

The first game the Spartans play outside the state of Michigan isn't until Oct. 23 when they travel to Northwestern, the eighth game of the season. I think Michigan State runs the table in non-conference play, which includes the annual game with Notre Dame at Spartan Stadium on Sept. 18.

In fact, there are only three definite games I don't see Michigan State winning. They just happen to all be in conference play. The lone home contest I think the Spartans are a definite underdog is against Wisconsin on Oct. 2, while the two challenging road games are Oct. 30 at Iowa and the season finale at Penn State on Nov. 27.

Otherwise, there's no Ohio State on the schedule. Illinois, Minnesota and Purdue all have to visit Spartan Stadium. The game against Michigan is at the Big House, but I just think

the Spartans are superior to their in-state rivals at this moment.

All in all, the pieces are in place for Michigan State to compete for a Big Ten crown this year and possibly be 7-1 when it visits Kinnick Stadium in late October. Whether it sheds its traditional moniker as a middle-of-the-pack Big Ten squad, however, remains to be seen.

[Michigan State LB Greg Jones](#)