

# 2011 Big Ten football previews: Michigan State (premium)

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We've written about [Ohio State](#), [Illinois](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Indiana](#), [Purdue](#), [Penn State](#), [Minnesota](#), [Northwestern](#) and [Michigan](#). Now we set our sights on the 17th-ranked Michigan State Spartans. Iowa will play Michigan State at Kinnick Stadium for the second straight season on Nov. 12.

Last season, Michigan State had the look of an ideal "dark horse" candidate that could compete for a Big Ten title. It turns out Mark Dantonio's squad went beyond even the highest of expectations some may have had. The Spartans went 11-2 and won a share of the Big Ten crown. However, a three-way tiebreaker resulted in Michigan State drawing the shortest end and the Spartans went to the 2011 Capital One Bowl, where they got crushed by Alabama, 49-7.

This year, expectations are higher with the talent Dantonio has coming back. But it's also going to be a more difficult grind between being in the Legends Division and given some of the opponents on Michigan State's schedule. Not to mention the Spartans have a new offensive coordinator after Don Treadwell, who filled in as head coach for two games while Dantonio was dealing with a heart attack suffered hours after Michigan State defeated Notre Dame, accepted the head coaching vacancy at Miami (Ohio).

The strength of this offense is at the skill positions, particularly at quarterback with senior Kirk Cousins. After

establishing himself as the Spartans' No. 1 signal-caller, Cousins had a productive junior season throwing for 2,825 yards and 20 touchdowns to just 10 interceptions. Of all returning Big Ten quarterbacks, only Northwestern's Dan Persa averaged more passing yards per game last season than Cousins. With the other playmakers Michigan State returns, there's little doubt that Cousins could have another big year as a senior.

In the backfield, all three running backs utilized by the Spartans last season are back. Junior Edwin Baker is the leader of this group after rushing for a team-high 1,201 yards on 207 carries and 13 touchdowns. There's also junior Larry Caper and sophomore Le'Veon Bell. Caper had 144 yards rushing and two touchdowns, while Bell is coming off a freshman campaign where he was Michigan State's leading rusher with 605 yards and eight touchdowns on the ground. With all three returning, the Spartans might be prone to running a little more this season.

Michigan State's biggest loss from its receiving corps was Mark Dell, who had a team-high 51 catches for 788 yards receiving and six touchdowns. However, just about everyone else is back in 2011. This group will be led by senior wideout B.J. Cunningham, who had 50 receptions for 611 yards and led the Spartans with nine touchdown catches last year. Also coming back is senior Keith Nichol, who made the switch to receiver after Cousins beat him out to be the starting quarterback in 2009. Nichol had 22 catches for 262 yards and a touchdown.

But that's not all Michigan State has back. Senior wide receiver Keshawn Martin had a productive 2010 with 32 catches for 394 yards, and sophomore Bennie Fowler had 14 receptions for 175 yards. Both had one touchdown each. At tight end, the Spartans lose Charlie Gantt, who had 24 catches for 301 yards and three touchdowns. However, they also have a pair of seniors in Brian Linthicum and Garrett Celek that will be

utilized this season.

The biggest area of concern offensively for Michigan State has to be up front. The Spartans lost both starting tackles and their center from a year ago, and their preseason depth chart had redshirt freshmen at both tackle spots. Whether it stays that way remains to be seen, but it's worth noting. Senior left guard Joel Foreman is the big name returning, as he'll become the first Michigan State offensive lineman since Tony Mandarich to be a four-year starter for the Spartans. Also returning is junior right guard Chris McDonald.

Switching over to defense, the good news for Michigan State is that three of the front four from 2010 is back this year, and it's easily the strength of the defense. Leading the way are a pair of juniors – defensive tackle Jerel Worthy and defensive end Tyler Hoover. Worthy is coming off a season where he recorded 40 tackles and led the Spartans with four sacks, while Hoover had 36 tackles and three sacks.

The linebacking corps took a massive hit. Junior Chris Norman returns after coming off a season with 59 tackles, but he'll need help in 2011. Michigan State lost its top two tacklers in linebackers Greg Jones and Eric Gordon. Jones, who was highly heralded as one of the Big Ten's best, had 106 tackles and three forced fumbles, while Gordon had 92 tackles and a pair of sacks. These are huge voids the Spartans need to have filled in 2011.

Michigan State also took a slight hit in the secondary, losing safety Marcus Hyde and cornerback Chris L. Rucker. Returning in 2011 are senior free safety Trenton Robinson and junior cornerback Johnny Adams. Robinson had 76 tackles and tied Hyde for a team-high in pass break ups with eight of them. Adams had 50 tackles and seven pass break ups in 2010.

Special teams was a huge factor in the Spartans' success last season, but they have a significant void at punter. Aaron

Bates led the Big Ten averaging 45 yards per punt, and also threw two passes that changed the course of Michigan State's season – the game-winning touchdown on the fake field goal to beat Notre Dame, and a pass to Fowler on a fake punt against Northwestern that helped the Spartans overcome a double-digit deficit to defeat the Wildcats. Junior Dan Conroy returns as the kicker after connecting on 14-of-15 field goal attempts and 45-of-46 PAT tries.

I mentioned the schedule earlier. Last year, it played to Michigan State's benefit. This year, it doesn't. The road slate has to be one of the most brutal among any college football team, as the Spartans play Notre Dame, Ohio State, Nebraska, Iowa and Northwestern all away from East Lansing. Then the home slate features back-to-back games against Michigan and Wisconsin, both of whom will come in seeking payback after last season.

Michigan State might be more talented than Notre Dame, but going into South Bend won't be an easy task, especially considering how the Spartans beat the Fighting Irish last year on the fake field goal in overtime. But to me, the game that could be what defines 2011 for Michigan State is on Oct. 1 at Ohio State.

The Buckeyes will still be without the services of players such as Dan Herron and DeVier Posey in light of the five-game suspensions being served, so this will easily be the best opportunity the Spartans have of getting a win at the Horseshoe since their monumental upset of Ohio State back in 1998. Not to mention it's the type of game that if Michigan State were to win, it would enter road games against its division rivals with a lot more confidence.

I don't expect the Spartans to go 11-2 again, but the potential is there for another solid season if a few breaks go their way again like they did in 2010.

[Michigan State QB Kirk Cousins](#)