

2011-12 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Michigan State (premium)

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The Big Ten kicks off its 2011-12 men's college basketball season next week, so this week, *HawkeyeDrive.com* will give you rundowns on all 12 conference teams. Today, we'll showcase Michigan State, [Northwestern](#) and [Penn State](#). The Spartans only play Iowa once this season, with the meeting taking place on Jan. 10 at the Breslin Center in East Lansing, Mich.

By Michigan State's standards, last season was a low point in the Tom Izzo era. The Spartans entered the season ranked second nationally preseason and were a popular pick to win the Big Ten when Purdue lost Robbie Hummel for the season with a torn ACL. Instead, Michigan State went 19-15, ended up drawing the seventh seed in last year's Big Ten Tournament, and ended up being a 10 seed in last season's NCAA tournament, where it was bounced out immediately by UCLA.

This year, the expectations aren't as great on Michigan State. While they were picked to finish third in the conference at Big Ten Media Day, the Spartans will be playing more of a hunter role this season as opposed to being the hunted like they so often have been.

Gone are the likes of Kalin Lucas, Durell Summers, Korie Lucious (who transferred to Iowa State), and Delvon Roe, who won't be playing this season after continuing to deal with lingering knee injuries. One player who is returning and that Izzo said he would be heavily leaning on to provide leadership is senior forward Draymond Green.

Last season, Green was second on Michigan State in scoring with 12.6 points per game and second in blocked shots with 38 of them. He also led the Spartans averaging 8.6 rebounds per game and also posted team-highs in assists (141) and steals (60). This is a 6-7, 230-pound forward doing all of this. Izzo compared his leadership traits to that of Michigan State icons Magic Johnson and Mateen Cleaves. While Green probably won't be leading the Spartans to a national title this year like each of those two did, this is lofty praise bestowed upon him by his coach, and it's a clear indicator of how important his role is.

The other player to keep an eye on this season is sophomore guard Keith Appling, who has made the transition from an off-guard to playing the point. Appling led Michigan State in 3-point field goal percentage as a freshman, shooting over 40 percent from behind the arc. He also was a 90 percent shooter from the foul line for the Spartans. If Appling can improve his assist-to-turnover ratio this season, then Michigan State will be in good hands with him at the point.

Three other players I expect to play bigger roles for the Spartans this year are sophomore center Adreian Payne, junior forward Derrick Nix and senior guard Austin Thornton. Both are players basically awaiting their opportunities, and given the lack of depth from last year's squad coming back, these are two experienced players that might prove vital to Michigan State's success.

The incoming freshman to watch is 6-6 guard Branden Dawson, who comes from Indiana and was a McDonald's all-American last year after averaging 29 points and 19 rebounds per game as a high school senior. Dawson gives the Spartans a scoring threat that could provide an immediate boost.

Michigan State's non-conference schedule is brutal. The Spartans play the Carrier Classic on Nov. 11 against top-ranked North Carolina, then follow that with a game against

Duke at Madison Square Garden. Florida State makes a trip to East Lansing, and the Spartans also visit Gonzaga. The Big Ten schedule starts with four of the first six contests away from the Breslin Center. Michigan State also plays Ohio State, Wisconsin, Michigan and Purdue twice each and the lone game against Illinois is in Champaign.

Again, Michigan State is a team that should be there in March. But the Spartans might not be as good as some are touting. How they adjust to their new role will dictate how much improved they'll be from last season to this season.