

2012 Big Ten football previews: Michigan State (premium)

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We've written about [Penn State](#), [Ohio State](#), [Indiana](#), [Illinois](#), [Purdue](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Northwestern](#), [Minnesota](#) and [Nebraska](#). Now we set our sights on the No. 13 Michigan State Spartans, who won the Legends Division last season. Iowa will visit Spartan Stadium in East Lansing, Mich., on Oct. 13.

After winning a share of the Big Ten title two years ago, Michigan State proved its 2010 season wasn't an aberration by not only winning the Legends Division, but being able to bounce back from a heartbreaking 42-39 loss to Wisconsin in the Big Ten Championship Game by winning its first bowl game under head coach Mark Dantonio, defeating Georgia 27-24 in overtime to win the 2012 Outback Bowl.

Looking at the Spartans this season, there are key pieces from last year's squad gone and there are definite areas of concern. But there's no reason to think this team is going fade back into mediocrity anytime soon.

On the offensive side of the ball, Michigan State has two things going for it. One is at running back, where junior Le'Veon Bell is the clear No. 1 for the Spartans. Although Michigan State had its issues running the football in 2011 – it ranked 11th in the Big Ten in rushing – Bell emerged as a dependable back late in the season, starting six of the Spartans' final seven games and compiling 948 yards rushing and 13 touchdowns on 182 carries. He's the one known commodity at the skill positions that Michigan State will rely even more

on in 2012.

The other area of the Spartan offense that looks to be real good this fall is up front. Michigan State returns four of its five starters along the offensive line, and this year's group might be the Spartans' best since Dantonio first took over in 2007. The leader of this unit is senior Chris McDonald, who has started 26 straight games at right guard for Michigan State. Senior Fou Fonoti should be the right tackle again, while sophomore Travis Jackson handles reps at center.

If there is concern here, it'd be on the left side and having to replace Joel Foreman at left guard. If junior Dan France remains the team's left tackle, then junior Blake Treadwell is a likely candidate to start at left guard. However, Michigan State could also move France over to guard, letting sophomore Skyler Burkland take reps at tackle. Either way, this isn't a bad problem for the Spartans to have.

Now come the questions surrounding this offense, with the most obvious being who replaces Kirk Cousins at quarterback. Dantonio has fully invested in junior Andrew Maxwell as Cousins' heir apparent. Not only is Maxwell a lock to start behind center, but his experience in the system has been enough to convince the coaches he can be as successful as Cousins was.

With that being said though, Michigan State needs playmakers at the receiver and tight end positions to make up for all the productivity lost. The Spartans lost five guys – three wideouts and two tight ends – that were all integral parts of the offense in 2011. None of Michigan State's returning wideouts caught a single touchdown pass last season and the most TD catches of any returning Spartan is three from junior tight end Dion Sims, who will be the No. 1 tight end this fall.

The receiver most likely to become the focal point of Michigan

State's passing attack is junior Bennie Fowler, who only played in five games last season due to a foot injury. One name to keep an eye on though is sophomore DeAnthony Arnett, who transferred from Tennessee and has been ruled eligible to play this season by the NCAA. If Arnett can provide any sort of positive impact for this offense, that would be huge for Maxwell and the Spartans going forward.

Now, let's get to the defense, which is far and away the best in the entire Big Ten. This unit ranked at or near the top in most Big Ten categories in 2011, and this season, it returns eight starters.

The front four has one massive void to fill with Jerel Worthy opting to forego his senior season for the NFL (Worthy was a second-round pick of the Green Bay Packers). Worthy had 30 tackles and 3.5 sacks last year, with 10.5 of those tackles resulting in a loss of yardage. But Michigan State does bring back junior defensive end William Gholston, who for my money is the best defensive player in the entire conference. Gholston recorded 70 tackles and five sacks for the Spartans last year, and those are both numbers that are likely to go up in 2012.

Michigan State brings back its entire linebacking corps, which is what makes this defense as talented as it is. Juniors Max Bullough and Denicos Allen and senior Chris Norman were three of the Spartans' top four leading tacklers in 2011. Bullough led the team with 89 tackles while Allen had 83 tackles and a team-high 11 sacks, second in the Big Ten to Illinois' Whitney Mercilus. With this trio of guys, productivity shouldn't be that much different.

Last year, the Spartans' four defensive backs accounted for 14 interceptions. This year, three of those four return to the Michigan State secondary. The one loss is at free safety with Trenton Robinson, who was the team's third-leading tackler and had four interceptions his senior year. Junior strong safety

Isaiah Lewis tied Robinson with a team-high four interceptions last season, while senior cornerback Johnny Adams and junior cornerback Darqueze Dennard each had three picks. Adams was picked by the coaches as first-team all-Big Ten and is regarded as the conference's top corner entering 2012. This is a unit that looks to build off a stellar 2011 campaign.

On special teams, Michigan State brings back sophomore punter Mike Sadler and senior kicker Dan Conroy to handle those respective duties again. Sadler averaged 41.1 yards per punt as a freshman and pinned opponents inside their own 20-yard line on 25 occasions. Meanwhile, Conroy connected on 100 percent of his PATs and was 17-of-23 on field goal tries. Sophomore Nick Hill is expected to be the focal point of the Spartans' return game – both on punts and kickoffs.

I got to say, Michigan State has quite the home schedule in 2012. No. 24 Boise State, Notre Dame, No. 18 Ohio State, Iowa and No. 17 Nebraska all pay visits to Spartan Stadium this fall. There is one particular stretch during Big Ten play that will be grueling, however. Following their Homecoming game against Iowa, the Spartans make back-to-back trips to No. 8 Michigan on Oct. 20 and No. 12 Wisconsin on Oct. 27. Then after it plays both its biggest rival in Ann Arbor and the Big Ten title game grudge match in Madison, that home contest against Nebraska takes place the following week.

Michigan State has the defense to play with anyone in the country. Not just the Big Ten, but the entire country. It's that good. If the offense can click as it did in 2011, a return to Indianapolis on Dec. 1 is possible. But this schedule seems demanding, maybe even too demanding, for the Spartans to duplicate that sort of success. One thing is for sure though, people have taken notice and Michigan State is now in the rather unfamiliar role of being the team with a target on its back.

AUDIO: [Michigan State LB Max Bullough](#)