

2012-13 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Michigan State (premium)

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HawkeyeDrive.com

The Big Ten kicks off its 2012-13 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 and [Minnesota](#). The Spartans come into this season ranked 14th nationally and will only play Iowa once on Jan. 10 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

Last season proved to a memorable one in East Lansing. Michigan State went 13-5 in the Big Ten, winning a share of the conference along with Ohio State and Michigan. Thanks to tiebreakers, the Spartans had the top seed in the Big Ten Tournament and beat Iowa, Wisconsin and Ohio State over a 3-day span in Indianapolis to win that.

Michigan State was among the four No. 1 seeds in the NCAA Tournament, but found itself being knocked out by Final Four-bound Louisville in the Sweet 16.

Kind of like last season, the Spartans have drawn high expectations from the outside, but not to the extent where pundits have them winning the conference again. Michigan State shouldn't have any trouble reaching the NCAA Tournament again this season, but it also has a few questions to settle.

The most significant question facing this team is who takes over the leadership role held by Draymond Green last year. Just before the 2011-12 campaign began, head coach Tom Izzo likened Green's leadership to that of Spartan greats Magic

Johnson and Mateen Cleaves. Green backed up his coach's words with his play, en route to being named the Big Ten's Player of the Year.

He led Michigan State in scoring, rebounding and steals and was second on the team in both blocked shots and assists.

The key to the Spartans' success in 2012-13 will be their backcourt, which is led by junior guard Keith Appling. The Detroit native was the only other player along with Green to average double-figures scoring and he led Michigan State with 144 assists. Now as an upperclassman, his role becomes much more prominent and he'll be the focal point of the Spartans' attack.

Joining Appling in the group of backcourt players who could have huge roles this season for Michigan State are sophomore Branden Dawson and incoming freshman guard Gary Harris. Dawson was a fixture in the starting lineup as a freshman up until he tore his ACL in the Spartans' final regular-season game against Ohio State. Izzo said he has fully recovered and Dawson will have a chance to provide even more a spark as a sophomore.

Meanwhile, Harris was the gem of Michigan State's recruiting class and might be the most explosive freshman in the Big Ten this season. Hailing from Indianapolis, Harris, whose mother played in the WNBA, was a McDonald's All-American and named "Mr. Basketball" in his home state. He averaged 25.4 points and 7.4 boards per game.

As for the Spartan front court, two guys will be counted on to fill part of the void left by Green. Junior center Adreian Payne started 36 of the 37 games he played in last season and led Michigan State in blocked shots. Then there's center Derrick Nix, the only senior on this year's squad. His role will increase primarily because he managed to keep his weight in check and because he was named one of the team captains.

Three other players to keep an eye on in reserve roles this season are sophomore guards Russell Byrd and Travis Trice and forward Alex Gauna.

Looking at the Spartans' schedule, they test themselves once again in non-conference. The season begins for the second straight year at an armed forces base, playing Connecticut Nov. 9 at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. Once back on the mainland, Michigan State then plays last year's runner-up, No. 7 Kansas, in the Champions Classic on Nov. 13 in Atlanta, the site of this season's Final Four. Also featured are a game at Miami (Fla.) as part of the Big Ten/ACC Challenge and a game Dec. 22 against Texas at the Breslin Center.

The Spartans begin league play with a trip to Minnesota on New Year's Eve. In addition to Iowa, Michigan State's single-plays feature a road game at Penn State and home games against Illinois and Northwestern, with the contest against the Wildcats being its regular-season finale.

This team might not win the Big Ten, but it'll be a player in the season's final weeks. Five of the Spartans' final seven Big Ten games come against teams ranked in the preseason top 25, including the two showdowns with in-state foe Michigan. This is the stretch where a lot will be learned about Michigan State and just how far its season can go.