

2013 Big Ten football previews: Michigan State (premium)

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After examining [Penn State](#), [Illinois](#), [Purdue](#), [Indiana](#), [No. 23 Wisconsin](#), [No. 2 Ohio State](#) and [Minnesota](#), we now shift our attention to the Michigan State Spartans. Iowa plays its Homecoming Game against Michigan State at Kinnick Stadium on Oct. 5.

Following a pair of double-digit win seasons that featured a co-Big Ten championship, an appearance in the inaugural Big Ten championship game and a victory in the 2012 Outback Bowl, Michigan State took a gigantic step backwards last season. Instead of continuing to build off recent success, the Spartans found themselves losing heartbreaker after heartbreaker in 2012 and while they did beat TCU 17-16 in last year's Buffalo Wild Wings Bowl, 7-6 wasn't what Mark Dantonio and his program had in mind.

When I look at Michigan State here in 2013, I see a team that should be better than it was a year ago. Maybe not substantially better to where it wins the Legends Division like it did in 2011, but better. While I don't see the Spartans actually winning the division this fall, there going to be hanging around long enough that they have to be viewed as a contender.

Right now, the two biggest questions surrounding Michigan State both lie in the backfield with quarterback and running back. As far as signal-callers go, Andrew Maxwell returns for his senior season, but his production in 2012 paled in

comparison to that of his predecessor, Kirk Cousins. Starting all 13 games last season, Maxwell completed just 52.5 percent of his passes and while he did manage to throw for 2,606 yards, he only tossed 13 touchdowns to nine interceptions.

Not only that, but he actually got benched during the Buffalo Wild Wings Bowl in favor of Connor Cook, who led the Spartans to a comeback win and returns this year for his sophomore campaign. Maxwell will get the nod to start this season, but it's safe to say his leash is short, especially with Michigan State bringing on Jim Bollman as its new offensive coordinator replacing Dan Roushar.

Then there's running back, where the Spartans lost by far their best offensive weapon last season in Le'Veon Bell, who opted to forego his senior season and got drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers last spring. All Bell did in 2012 was lead the Big Ten in rushing with an average of 137.9 yards per game. In total, he compiled 1,793 yards and 12 touchdowns on the ground. Redshirt freshman running back Riley Bullough was listed atop Michigan State's preseason depth chart and assuming he wins the starting job, he's going to have huge shoes to fill here.

As a result of Maxwell's struggles, the Spartans had a virtually non-existent passing game last year. With senior Bennie Fowler and junior Keith Mumphery both returning though, it should at least improve in 2013. Mumphery hauled in a team-high 42 catches and compiled 515 yards receiving, but only had one touchdown last season. Fowler had 41 receptions for team-highs of 524 yards and four touchdown catches. Another name that began to emerge and might only elevate his game more is sophomore wideout Anthony Burbridge, who had 29 catches for 364 yards and two scores. The most likely tight end to replace Dion Sims is junior Andrew Gleichert.

Injuries absolutely depleted Michigan State up front throughout 2012 and the Spartans recently got hit with news of

right tackle Skyler Burkland deciding to end his football career entirely days before fall camp started due to ongoing issues from an ankle injury suffered in 2011. Senior Fou Fonoti, who was going to be at left tackle this season, is now back at right tackle after only starting two games before suffering a season-ending foot injury. Junior Travis Jackson returns at center after breaking his leg against Ohio State. Senior Blake Treadwell, who is probably the Spartans' best lineman, is back at left guard. Senior Dan France now returns to left tackle and sophomore Jack Allen will start at right guard.

Now the bright spot with Michigan State in 2012 was that it had the best defense in the entire Big Ten. No team gave up fewer yards rushing, fewer yards of total offense, fewer touchdowns and had more interceptions than the Spartans. This is a group that returns seven starters in 2013.

Along the D-line, the big loss is defensive end William Gholston, who led Michigan State with 4.5 sacks and 10 pass break ups. However, Marcus Rush returns after starting all 13 games last season at the opposite end spot and even more importantly for the Spartans, Tyler Hoover is fully back at defensive tackle after injuries over the past two seasons haven't allowed him to build off a solid freshman campaign back in 2010.

The linebacking corps returns a pair of seniors who started every game in 2012 and are the heart and soul of this entire defense. Max Bullough returns at middle linebacker after a junior year where he recorded a team-high 111 tackles and Denicos Allen is coming off a season where he had 79 tackles and three sacks. Junior Taiwan Jones started four games for Michigan State in 2012 and will start at the STAR backer spot this fall.

There was no better Big Ten secondary last season and this year's group of defensive backs features three guys who were

Spartan regulars on the field a year ago. Johnny Adams is gone at corner, but returning at one corner spot is senior Darqueze Dennard, who like Adams was all-Big Ten in 2012 after recording 52 tackles, seven pass break ups and a team-high three interceptions. Also back is senior strong safety Isaiah Lewis, who is arguably the best at his position in the entire conference after finishing second on the team with 80 tackles while also recording six pass break ups and two picks. Junior Kurtis Drummond is the name to watch at free safety, while sophomore Trae Waynes is getting the first crack replacing Adams at corner.

On special teams, Michigan State returns one of the league's top punters in junior Mike Sadler, who punted 79 times in 2012 and possessed a net average of 43.3 yards per punt (second in the Big Ten). The Spartans lose Dan Conroy as their kicker and look like they'll be relying on a freshman to handle their field goals, extra points and kickoffs. Junior running back Nick Hill will most likely be used as a returner for Michigan State again in 2013.

Looking at the Spartans' schedule, they should be 3-0 entering South Bend on Sept. 21 for their annual (for now) showdown with Notre Dame. After having Ohio State and Wisconsin as crossovers the last two seasons, Michigan State catches a break with Purdue and Illinois on the schedule this season. Add in contests at Iowa and against Indiana at home, and the Spartans have a manageable October to navigate.

That being said, this team's true identity will show come November when it faces a trio of preseason top 25 teams from within its own division – Michigan at home and back-to-back road games against Nebraska and Northwestern. How Michigan State fares in these three games will determine whether or not the Spartans find themselves in Indianapolis on Dec. 7 for the Big Ten title game.

Michigan State should be better in 2013 and you'll definitely

see the Spartans playing in a bowl game sometime around the holidays. I just don't know if this team gets back to that same level it was at in 2010 or 2011.

AUDIO:

Michigan State head coach Mark Dantonio – <http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Mark-Dantonio-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>

Michigan State linebacker Max Bullough – <http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Max-Bullough-2013-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>