

2013-14 Big Ten men's basketball previews: Michigan State (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

With the 2013-14 men's college basketball season kicking off Nov. 8, *HawkeyeDrive.com* will give you rundowns this week on all 12 Big Ten teams. Here, we'll showcase Michigan State. The Spartans enter this season ranked second nationally and will play Iowa twice this season – Jan. 28 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena and March 6 at the Breslin Center in East Lansing, Mich.

Maybe Michigan State isn't actually the second best team in the country at this moment in time. But the Spartans are certainly a top five team nationally and for good reason. In one of the toughest conferences in college basketball right now, Michigan State has the look of a team that should win the Big Ten in 2013-14.

The Spartans finished tied for second in the conference last season and came awfully close to being part of a four-way tie at the very top. They reached the semifinals of the Big Ten Tournament and earned a No. 3 seed in the NCAA Tournament, reaching the Sweet 16 before losing to a No. 2 seed in Duke. Derrick Nix is the lone player from last year's Michigan State squad that's no longer in East Lansing. Everyone else is back. Again, this was a team that nearly won a second consecutive Big Ten title last year.

Senior center Adreian Payne and sophomore guard Gary Harris both could have bolted for the NBA if they wanted to. They both decided to come back and play another season for Tom Izzo and the moment both announcements became official, Michigan

State became the team to beat in this conference.

Harris was injury-plagued throughout his entire freshman campaign, yet he still managed to start all but one game for the Spartans and went on to be named Big Ten Freshman of the Year after finishing with averages of 12.9 points and 2.5 rebounds per game and leading the team in 3-point field goal percentage. Harris was named the league's Preseason Player of the Year and Izzo believes he could go down as one of the best guards Michigan State has ever had, at least since he has been head coach.

As for Payne, all he did his junior season was lead the Spartans in field goal percentage shooting 54.6 percent from the floor and average a team-high 7.6 rebounds per contest (which was third in the Big Ten). In the process, he became an integral part to Michigan State's success and is entering this season considered as one of the best centers in the Big Ten, if not the best center in the league. Payne also shot a league-best 84.8 percent from the free-throw line last year.

In addition to those two players however, Michigan State also features three other players whom have significant starting experience. Keith Appling returns at the point guard spot for his senior season after leading the Spartans in scoring as a junior with an average of 13.4 points per game. Appling also recorded 120 assists, which led the team and tied for seventh in the Big Ten. Branden Dawson returns for his junior season after posting a team-high 57 steals and sophomore Denzel Valentine comes back after a freshman year where he was second to Appling in assists.

Of the freshmen brought in by Izzo, none of them are game-changers like Duke's Jabari Parker would've been had he gone to Michigan State instead. But the one name who's most likely to emerge this season is 6-9 forward Gavin Schilling, who is originally from Chicago, but spent his senior year of high school playing at Findlay Prep in Nevada. Schilling is

originally from Germany and represented his native land at the FIBA U18 European Championship in 2012. His presence should help bolster the Spartans' front-court.

Looking at Michigan State's schedule, it's as challenging as it typically is under Izzo. The non-conference portion is highlighted by a 1-2 match-up against top-ranked Kentucky in the Champions Classic, which takes place Nov. 12 at the United Center in Chicago. There's also a likely match-up with Oklahoma at the Coaches vs. Cancer Classic in Brooklyn, a home date with No. 12 North Carolina in the Big Ten/ACC Challenge, and a match-up against Georgetown at Madison Square Garden that takes place the weekend New York hosts Super Bowl XLVIII.

As for the Big Ten part, it's no less difficult. The road games as part of Michigan State's single-plays are Feb. 9 at No. 20 Wisconsin and Feb. 20 at Purdue. The Spartans also have to play No. 7 Michigan, No. 11 Ohio State, Indiana and Iowa all twice each. Two stretches will prove key for Michigan State. The first is in late January with back-to-back home games against Indiana and Michigan preceding its trip to Iowa. The second stretch consists of its last five games, starting with that trip to Purdue. Following that Mackey Arena visit are games at Michigan and Ohio State, with Illinois and Iowa visits to the Breslin Center sandwiched in-between.

Whether or not this team wins a national title remains to be seen, but if the Spartans live up to expectations, they will win the Big Ten, they should be a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament and a trip to Arlington, Texas for the 2014 Final Four is a realistic goal for Michigan State.