

2014 Big Ten football previews: Michigan State (premium)

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After discussing [Penn State](#), [Rutgers](#), [Michigan](#) and [Ohio State](#), the next team I will spend time focusing on is last year's Big Ten and Rose Bowl champion, the Michigan State Spartans. Iowa does not play Michigan State in 2014.

Last season began with uncertainty in East Lansing. Michigan State won its opener over Western Michigan 26-13, but looked lackluster in doing so. It took four games for head coach Mark Dantonio to finally settle on a starting quarterback, but once he did, the Spartans began a historic 10-game run.

Michigan State won all nine of its games against Big Ten competition – including the championship game against Ohio State – by double-figures, the first team in conference history to do so. To top it off, the Spartans played in their first Rose Bowl in 26 years and defeated defending Rose Bowl champion Stanford in that game, 24-20. Last season might not have been the best in Michigan State history, but it was one where the most was accomplished.

As the Spartans prepare for 2014, there's still enough in place that winning a second consecutive Big Ten title is plausible.

At quarterback, Connor Cook returns for his junior year after he won the job outright and allowed the Michigan State offense to ignite. Cook completed 58.7 percent of his passes for 2,755 yards and had 22 touchdowns to only six interceptions. Against

Ohio State in the Big Ten Championship Game, he threw for 304 yards and three touchdowns. Given some of the playmakers he'll have at his disposal in 2014, his numbers should go up.

The Spartans return their top running back in senior Jeremy Langford, who led the Big Ten with 18 rushing touchdowns last season while also compiling 1,422 yards on 292 carries. They also return their No. 2 back in senior Nick Hill, who had 67 carries for 344 yards and one touchdown. Langford is the bell cow, but depth shouldn't be a major concern here.

One of the most encouraging signs for Michigan State in 2014 should be its receiving corps, as it just might be the best group of wideouts Dantonio has had as he enters his eighth season as head coach. This group did lose Bennie Fowler, who led the Spartans in receiving yards and touchdown catches. However, there are as many as five receivers opposing defenses will have to account for.

The best of the bunch is senior Tony Lippett, who led Michigan State with 44 catches and had just nine fewer receiving yards than Fowler with 613 of them. He also caught the winning touchdown in the Rose Bowl win over Stanford. Finishing one catch and 100 yards shy of Lippett was Macgarrett Kings, who will be a junior. Senior wideout Keith Mumphrey will likely have a bigger role in 2014 with Fowler gone and two other receivers to watch are juniors Aaron Burbridge and DeAnthony Arnett. Michigan State also brings back sophomore tight end Josiah Price, who had 17 catches for 210 yards and four touchdowns last season.

Up front is where the questions surrounding this offense lie. The only two starters returning are sophomore left tackle Jack Conklin and junior center Jack Allen. Senior Travis Jackson is currently projected to start at left guard, while senior guard Connor Kruse and junior tackle Donovan Clark make up the right side of the line.

Defensively, the Spartans lost six starters from what was by far the Big Ten's best defense in 2013. But they also managed to keep defensive coordinator Pat Narduzzi around after he was offered the head-coaching job at Connecticut last winter. Michigan State has consistently been one of the league's top defenses under his watch and there's no reason for that to change in 2014 with elite players on all three levels.

After being named the Big Ten's top defensive lineman last season, junior defensive end Shilique Calhoun returns this fall looking to build off a year where he recorded 37 tackles and team-highs of 7.5 sacks and four fumble recoveries. The Spartans also bring back senior defensive end Marcus Rush, but have voids to fill inside. Junior Damon Knox will likely start at one of the two spots after making two starts at defensive tackle last season.

The linebacking corps took the biggest hit with leading tackler Denicos Allen and Max Bullough no longer around. But returning is senior Taiwan Jones, who recorded 67 tackles in 2013 and is capable of playing any of the three linebacker spots. Juniors Darien Harris and Ed Davis are the likely candidates to replace Allen and Bullough to make up Michigan State's 2014 group.

In the secondary, the Spartans lost Jim Thorpe Award winner Darqueze Dennard, who was a first-round pick of the Cincinnati Bengals last spring. But this group has consistently reloaded under Dantonio and Narduzzi and will be led by senior free safety Kurtis Drummond, who tied Dennard for a team-high four interceptions last season and is also Michigan State's top returning tackler after recording 91 of them. Also returning is junior Trae Waynes, who had three interceptions in 2013.

On special teams, senior punter Mike Sadler and sophomore kicker Michael Geiger both return. Sadler is arguably the league's top punter entering 2014, while Geiger made all but one of his field goal attempts in 2013. The Spartans also

bring back Kings and sophomore R.J. Shelton as return men.

Looking at the schedule, one game sticks out from the rest – Sept. 6 at Oregon. With the Ducks considered the Pac-12 favorite and with this game being played at Autzen Stadium, this is the toughest non-conference game Michigan State has played in years and possibly the toughest under Dantonio. Regardless of whether or not the Spartans win the Big Ten, this game could have an enormous say as to whether or not Michigan State can realistically compete for a spot in the new College Football Playoff.

As for the Big Ten schedule, the Spartans have an incredible home slate. They open league play Oct. 4 against Nebraska and get Michigan at home for the second straight season on Oct. 25. There's also that rematch with Ohio State on Nov. 8 that should likely decide who wins the Big Ten East (and possibly even the Big Ten, period). Indiana, Maryland and Penn State will all be tough road challenges, but none that Michigan State shouldn't be favored in.

This is a different Spartan squad, but Michigan State remains the team to beat in this conference entering 2014. The Spartans aren't without flaws, but enough is in place for this to be the expectation among those in East Lansing.

AUDIO:

Michigan State defensive end Shilique Calhoun –

<http://hawkeyedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Shilique-Calhoun-2014-B1G-Media-Days.mp3>