

# MSU hopes to climb standings

## Spartans coming off fourth-place finish

EAST LANSING (AP) — John L. Smith climbed to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro this summer.

Now he's trying to push Michigan State's football program to new heights.

Smith, entering his second season as the Spartans' coach, realizes his program is far from the Big Ten Conference summit, a lofty perch usually reserved for Michigan and Ohio State.

But Smith says Michigan State can continue its push to the top that started with last year's better-than-expected 8-5 record and a fourth-place finish in the Big Ten. The Spartans would have to prove their doubters wrong again because most preseason publications have picked them to slip to 6th, 7th or 8th place in the conference.

"Now we have a mountain to climb," said Smith, who ascended the 19,340-foot African peak in July. "(The players) talk about that. They say if the old man can respond to a challenge and climb a mountain, maybe we can too."

"We want to get this program to where we're picked to win it all."

Part of the forecasters' doubt stems from the program's recent history.

Michigan State hasn't had consecutive seasons with at least eight wins since 1990. The Spartans haven't been to a Rose Bowl since 1988.

The program was particularly troubled before Smith's arrival, with on-the-field and off-the-field problems that led to the firing of Bobby Williams late in the 2002 season.

Smith — former head coach at Louisville, Idaho and Utah State — got a six-year, \$9 million contract to turn around the program.

His solid and surprising start earned him Big Ten Coach of the Year honors.

Smith ranks 14th among active NCAA Division I-A coaches in victories with a

### 2004 Michigan St. schedule

Day	Date	Opponent	Time
Sat.	Sept. 4	at Rutgers	3:30 p.m.
Sat.	Sept. 11	vs. Central Michigan	Noon
Sat.	Sept. 18	vs. Notre Dame	7 p.m.
Sat.	Sept. 25	at Indiana	Noon
Sat.	Oct. 2	at Iowa	TBA
Sat.	Oct. 9	vs. Illinois	TBA
Sat.	Oct. 16	vs. Minnesota (Homecoming)	TBA
Sat.	Oct. 30	at Michigan	TBA
Sat.	Nov. 6	vs. Ohio State	TBA
Sat.	Nov. 13	vs. Wisconsin	TBA
Sat.	Nov. 20	at Penn State	TBA
Sat.	Dec. 4	at Hawaii	TBA

118-65 record in 15 seasons.

Players say they are more confident in Smith's spread offense and attacking defensive schemes.

"We're far ahead of where we were at this time last year," senior tight end Jason Randall said.

Senior safety Jason Harmon said the coach-player relations are much more comfortable.

"We know each other, we trust each other," Harmon said. "Players know what to expect from the coaches and the coaches know what to expect from the players."

The Spartans have key players to replace in 2004, especially at quarterback, where Jeff Smoker has moved on to play with the St. Louis Rams.

The favorite to get the job is Drew Stanton, a sophomore recovering from a knee injury suffered in last year's season-ending loss to Nebraska in the Alamo Bowl while playing special teams. Redshirt freshman Stephen Reaves and senior Damon Dowdell also are competing to start the Sept. 4 season opener at Rutgers.

"Leadership is always the key," offensive coordinator Dave Baldwin said of the factors involved in selecting a starting quarterback. "Who can understand this offense and make the right calls at the line of scrimmage? Who is going to be accurate? It's not so much who has the strongest arm, but who is hitting their target."

The quarterback will be surrounded with experienced receivers including juniors Kyle Brown, Matt Trannon, Agim Shabaj and Aaron

Alexander. At tight end, senior Eric Knott and Randall are talented veterans.

The offensive line lost three starters from last season, but returns Chris Morris at center and Stefon Wheeler at left tackle. They will block for inexperienced running backs.

DeAndra Cobb, one of the nation's top kick returners, brings speed to the backfield while redshirt freshman Jehuu Caulerick brings power. Jason Teague, last year's third-leading rusher, might be the starter.

Safeties Harmon and Eric Smith join corner Roderick Maples as returning starters in the defensive background. Jaren Hayes, last year's leading rusher, is now a defensive back.

The team's second leading rusher from a season ago, Tyrell Dortch, has been converted to play bandit — a combination defensive back and linebacker at Michigan State. The fifth-year senior has been an inspiration with his recovery from a broken leg suffered against Wisconsin in 2001.

"Dortch has been a very pleasant surprise at that position," defensive coordinator Chris Smeland said.

Ronald Stanley and Seth Mitchell return as starting linebackers.

The defensive line is anchored by Clifford Dukes at end, and should be helped with the return of 327-pound Brandon McKinney at tackle. McKinney missed 12 games last year with a foot injury.

The Spartans' kicking game should be solid with punter Brandon Fields and place-kicker Dave Rayner.



The Associated Press

John L. Smith is set to begin his second season as the Michigan State University coach.

### 2003 Stats

#### Returning players in all caps

##### RUSHING

Player	Att	Yards	TD
JAREN HAYES	145	609	5
T. DORTCH	65	279	3
JASON TEAGUE	47	244	3
DEANDRA COBB	38	172	0

##### RECEIVING

Player	Rec	Yds	TD
AGIM SHABAJ	57	692	5
JAREN HAYES	48	414	3
A. ALEXANDER	44	522	3
ERIC KNOTT	31	306	2

##### PASSING

Player	Att	Comp	Pct	Yds	TD	Int
Jeff Smoker	488	302	61.9	3,395	21	14
DAMON DOWDELL	12	7	58.3	54	0	0

##### DEFENSE

Player	Solo	Ast	Total	Sack	Fum	Int
JAMES HARMON	64	44	108	1	3	3
SETH MITCHELL	65	38	103	2	1	0
RONALD STANLEY	55	46	101	1	1	0
Mike Labinjo	58	36	94	5	2	3
RODRICK MAPLES	53	17	70	1	0	2
ERIC SMITH	41	28	69	3	0	2
Matthias Askew	52	17	69	6	0	0

### 2003 Results

Michigan St. 26, W. Michigan 21
Michigan St. 44, Rutgers 28
La. Tech 20, Michigan St. 19
Michigan St. 22, Notre Dame 16
Michigan St. 20, Iowa 10
Michigan St. 31, Indiana 3
Michigan St. 49, Illinois 14
Michigan St. 44, Minnesota 38
Michigan 27, Michigan St. 20
Ohio St. 33, Michigan St. 23
Wisconsin 56, Michigan St. 21
Michigan St. 41, Penn St. 10
Nebraska 17, Michigan St. 3*

\*=Alamo Bowl, San Antonio, Texas