

Stanton hoping for his shot

Sophomore looking to replace record-setting Smoker

EAST LANSING (AP) — Drew Stanton didn't come to Michigan State to rush down the football field at break-neck speed and hurl his body at another guy doing the same thing.

But that's exactly what he did, and did well, on the Spartans' punt coverage team last season.

Now a sophomore, Stanton is considered the leading candidate to replace Jeff Smoker as the Spartans' starting quarterback in 2004. Coaches say Stanton's toughness — evidenced by his team-best 13 tackles on punt coverage last season — aids his quest.

"Drew just has a little moxie to him, a little cockiness, and I think you need that as a quarterback," offensive coordinator Dave Baldwin said. "He has leadership ability. He's tough, he showed that on our special teams last year. I think the offensive linemen like that."

Stanton has another memento from his punt coverage days — a brace on his right knee.

The 6-foot-3, 225-pounder damaged a knee ligament on punt coverage in the Alamo Bowl against Nebraska. Michigan State lost the game 17-3 and could have lost its quarterback of the future.

Stanton had reconstructive surgery and was limited to non-contact drills in the

spring.

Yet Stanton said he has no regrets playing on special teams. In fact, he believes the experience might help him beat out senior Damon Dowdell and redshirt freshman Stephen Reaves for the quarterback position.

"Being able to get out there and see what it's like on the field, that will help definitely," Stanton said. "You have to go in with the approach that you're fighting every second. You can't let any opportunity pass you up, or you will watch it pass you by."

Stanton was a Michigan prep sensation, winning back-to-back state championships at Farmington Hills Harrison High School. His 31 touchdowns and 2,822 passing yards as a senior were both fifth-best in state history.

"Drew is a playmaker," said Agim Shabaj, a Spartan receiver and Stanton's high school teammate. "He's unflappable. He gets back there and knows what he's doing."

But Shabaj, like the other Spartans, is quick to add that he will be happy with whomever the coaches pick as the starter at quarterback.

"Everyone is being supportive of all three," he said.

Dowdell, a mobile 222-pounder, has started six games and thrown for 12 TDs in his up-and-down Michigan State career.

The Detroit native completed 24 of 45 passes for 304 yards against Purdue in 2001, for example, but could-

n't move the Spartans after replacing an injured Smoker in the second half against Louisiana Tech last season.

Stanton and Dowdell split time with the first-string offense in mid-August.

Reaves, a Tampa, Fla., native, may have the most pure quarterback talent of the trio. But coaches say the left-handed quarterback must prove he can make the right decisions and lead a complex offense.

All three quarterbacks are politically correct, saying they want whatever is best for the team.

"We don't really talk about competing and the QB race like everybody else does," said Reaves, whose father, John Reaves, was a star at Florida and played 14 years in the NFL. "Right now we're really good friends."

"We get along real well. At the end, we'll leave it up to the coaches and see what they think."

Stanton, who played briefly in four games as a quarterback last season, said he isn't worried about the inevitable comparisons to Smoker, now with the NFL's St. Louis Rams.

Smoker is Michigan State's all-time leader in passing yards (8,932), completions (685), pass attempts (1,150) and TDs (61).

"We're not trying to go out there and be Jeff Smoker," Stanton said. "He was who he was and had his mark on the program. Hopefully whoever the quarterback is can have just as much success, if not more."



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MSU quarterback Drew Stanton missed spring practice after undergoing knee surgery.

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