



AP Photo

Michigan State coach John L. Smith, center, with team captains Drew Stanton (5), Chris Morris (51), Eric Smith (36), and Clifton Ryan (92) in East Lansing.

Searching for stability

After second losing season of career, Coach Smith solidifies offense

EAST LANSING (AP) — It isn't easy to forecast the fortunes of Michigan State's football program in its third season under John L. Smith.

On paper, the Spartans have the offensive firepower to play with any team in the Big Ten. But of concern is a lack of depth at key positions and a defense that could be susceptible to the big play.

It sounds a lot like last season, when Michigan State suffered through a maddeningly inconsistent 5-7 campaign.

The Spartans were good enough to pound highly touted Wisconsin and Minnesota and lead perennial powerhouses Michigan and Ohio State into the fourth quarter. But they also blew those leads against the Wolverines and Buckeyes and lost to lightly regarded Rutgers, Penn State and Hawaii.

"We should have, could have, and all those things last year," Smith said. "(We could have) been better than we were. I think our kids want to prove that."

Smith is coming off just the second losing season in his 16 years as a head coach. Last season's performance also snapped Smith's personal streak of seven straight bowl appearances compiled at Utah State, Louisville and Michigan State.

To get back in the bowl hunt, the Spartans will look to a prolific spread offense led by quarterback Drew Stanton, who accounted for 2,288 total yards in 10 games last season. Michigan State returns eight starters from a unit that averaged 29.4 points per game last season and ranked 10th in the nation in total offense.

Stanton completed 64 percent of his passes last season and had two 100-yard rushing games.

The junior said he is healthy, which is important because both quarterbacks behind him — Brian Hoyer and Domenic Natale — have no experience.

"If we keep working at it and become more consistent, we should be dynamite," tackle Stefon Wheeler said.

Wheeler is part of a solid offensive line that returns three starters and four players with plenty of experience, including center Chris Morris, whom the Spartans tout as an All-America candidate.

The line is expected to open holes for Jason Teague and Jehuu Caulerick, who combined for 1,307 yards last season.

Freshman Javon Ringer could provide the explosive speed neither returning back possessors. Last year's speedster, DeAndra Cobb, has used up his eligibility.

Stanton's receivers are among the most experienced in the nation, but they've been inconsistent throughout their careers.

Matt Trannon, a 6-foot-6 target

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2005 Michigan State schedule

Date	Opponent	Time
Sept. 3	Kent State	Noon
Sept. 10	Hawaii	3:30 p.m.
Sept. 17	at Notre Dame	3:30 p.m.
Sept. 24	at Illinois	TBA
Oct. 1	Michigan	TBA
Oct. 15	at Ohio State	TBA
Oct. 22	Northwestern (homecoming)	TBA
Oct. 29	Indiana	TBA
Nov. 5	at Purdue	TBA
Nov. 12	at Minnesota	TBA
Nov. 19	Penn State	TBA

Looking to avoid trouble

(AP) — Drew Stanton's natural instinct for self-preservation seemed to disappear when he was on the football field last season.

Michigan State's quarterback would run into hostile defenders when a comforting, empty patch of turf awaited his safe landing. Stanton had the rushing yardage — and the injuries — to show for it. He missed two games and parts of three others with damage done by his reckless style. But Stanton said he will do more to protect himself and his team in 2005.

"With the schedule we play, you will always be banged up a little," Stanton said. "But I definitely need to be smarter knowing when to get down."

Michigan State ranked 10th in the nation in total offense last season



and averaged 29.4 points per game in large part due to the scrambling, 6-foot-3, 222-pound quarterback.

But he missed the first game of last season and parts of the next two recovering from surgery on his right knee.

Michigan State coach John L. Smith appreciates Stanton's swashbuckling attitude, but wants his prize quarterback to stay in one piece.

"It's OK to avoid a hit," Smith said. "When you have to take a hit, make sure it's a crucial situation."

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