

Spartans open spring football practice ready for action

A group of 95 anxious athletes greeted Michigan State University head football coach, Mark Dantonio, April 20 when the Spartans opened spring practice at the Duffy Daugherty Building.

The players, ready for live action after weeks of conditioning, went through a two and one half hour workout Dantonio and his staff calling the shots.

Major emphasis was on defense during the opening week, with special focus on defensive backs that are expected to employ a totally different approach this season.

There won't be many of those six to 10-yard cushions the Spartans have been used to in the soft man-to-man coverage played by corners under John L. Smith.

Dantonio prefers the press zone tactic which places cornerbacks in the face of receivers at the line of scrimmage and has them bumping before dropping back into zone coverage as receivers get off the line.

The tactic disrupts pass routes, but forces secondary defenders to focus more on pass coverage than stopping the run. Filling the gaps to

stop the run will fall more to the linebackers.

Safety Otis Wiley, who led Spartan tacklers last season, isn't likely to record as many tackles this season, and that suits him just fine.

"I like the style because I have faith in my linebackers," Wiley said. "They can make a play before I get up there. I can just worry about my pass and make slow reads."

The Spartans must replace both cornerbacks this season due to the loss of senior starters from last year's team.

Taking most of the repetitions have been junior Kendall Davis-Clark and sophomore Ross Weaver. Davis-Clark got experience as a nickel back and as a part-time starter filling in due to injuries last season.

Weaver sat out the year with

a broken ankle.

Dantonio is emphasizing toughness, and the Spartans are determined to be tough, especially on defense.

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Ernie Sez

By Ernie Boone

A pair of former Tom Izzo assistants were in one door and out the other recently as major colleges continued their musical chairs game with head coaches during March Madness.

Arkansas shuffled out former MSU assistant, Stan Heath, despite a 21-14 season and NCAA tournament berth, while Utah hired Jim Boylen as its new head coach.

Boylen just completed his second as an Izzo aide following 13 years as an assistant in the NBA.

Izzo anticipated the possibility of a Boylen move and spoke briefly about it in his season ending press conference.

He is genuinely happy about Boylen's opportunity, even though it leaves a tremendous hole in the Spartan staff.

Vacationing in Florida, Izzo was unavailable for comment on the Heath dismissal.

Tubby Smith started all major coach shuffling, saying goodbye to

the University of Kentucky and hello to Minnesota.

The move was clearly voluntary, although Wildcat fans have been restless in recent years, condemning Smith for his inability to get back to the Final Four after winning it all in 1998.

Iowa's Steve Alford then left the Hawkeyes for New Mexico, creating a second Big 10 opening. Michigan had entered the search party earlier, firing Tommy Amaker following the Wolverine's quick second round exit from the NIT.

Smith's surprising exit leaves what many call one of the three best jobs in college basketball open, fueling speculation throughout the land.

Even MSU fans, who've felt smug lately with Izzo having turned down NBA overtures and displayed a pretty strong preference for East Lansing, are sweating these days as rumors have the Spartan mentor on the Wildcat's "short list."

It's been his often stated goal to lift the MSU program to the Kentucky, Duke, North Carolina

level, but offered a chance to restore the Wildcat roar and make a tidy profit in the process, I, for one, could not blame him for accepting.

Were it to happen, there'd be a lot of finger pointing and cries of disloyalty and foul play. The Sabin outcry would be mild in comparison.

But despite being a loyal Spartan fan for more than half a century, placing a great deal of value on keeping one's word and honoring contracts, and wanting Izzo to stay until we've reached the stature needed to sustain elite program status, I'd have to say God bless him and wish him well.

There'd be no ill feeling, no sense of betrayal, just thanks for the success he's given us, and for being an open, honest, forthright class act.

Given the state of college athletics and the expectations placed on elite programs and programs seeking to join the elite, any coach, even Izzo here in East Lansing, is just two or three seasons from the unemployment line.

Spartans opens 2007 schedule with three home games

EAST LANSING, Mich. - Michigan State's 2007 12-game football schedule features seven home games, including three straight to open the season under first-year Spartan head coach Mark Dantonio. The Spartans open the 2007 campaign with a three-game homestand: Sept. 1 vs. UAB, Sept. 8 vs. Bowling Green and Sept. 15 vs. Pittsburgh.

It marks the first-ever meeting between Michigan State and UAB. The Spartans have posted a 4-1 record (.800) against current members of Conference USA (0-1 vs. Houston, 1-0 vs. Marshall, 1-0 vs. Memphis, 1-0 vs. Rice and 1-0 vs. SMU). Bowling Green replaces Western Michigan on the Spartans' 2007 schedule. The change was made at the

request of the Big Ten and to assist conference officials in resolving other scheduling issues between league institutions and other Mid-American Conference opponents. The home game originally scheduled with Western Michigan will be rescheduled in either 2009 or 2010. The Falcons will be making their first trip to Spartan Stadium since 1981.

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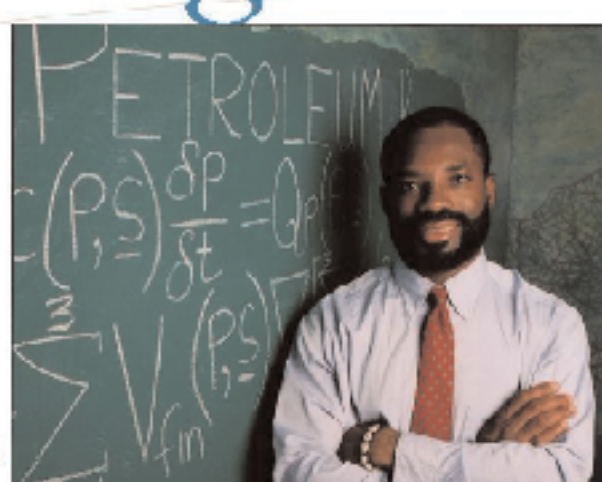
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