

# Spartans smack the fighting Illini, 51-41

By Ernie Boone

It sure wasn't pretty. The Spartans got punched in the mouth and they failed to punch right back.

But they bobbed and weaved and held on long enough to hand the Fighting Illini a 51-41 defeat in a classic Big Ten bruiser at Breslin January 30.

Coach Tom Izzo's Spartans battled down the stretch turning in a 20-9 run in the final 8 minutes to up their season record to 19-2, the best 21 game start in MSU history.

"The milestone will probably mean more to me tomorrow than it does right

now," said Izzo.

The Spartans' head man was clearly disappointed in what he hinted was an offensive performance that lacked the toughness needed to compete for a championship in the Big Ten or to make a run in the NCAA Tournament, both goals the Spartans have boldly staked out for the season.

"Scared isn't the right word," he said, "but we looked a little intimidated to me. It bothers me and takes the luster off it (the 19-2 start)."

They may have looked intimidated in the early

going, but when it got down to winning time, MSU's hard core veterans turned up the defensive pressure and nailed the shots needed to grind out a 17th straight victory at Breslin.

"Thank God for Travis Walton," Izzo said as he praised the junior co-captain for his defensive performance.

Walton drew the tough task of handling the Illini's Trent Meacham. Meacham entered the game averaging 10.7 points per game as the team's second leading scorer.

Walton and the Spartans held him to just 3 points and

limited his backcourt running mate, Chester Frazier, to 6.

Goran Suton, also drew praise from Izzo with a 10 point, 10 rebound outing and solid defense on Illinois' leading scorer, 6-10 center, Shaun Pruitt.

Suton and Drew Naymick combined to limit Pruitt to 5 points, all in the first half.

Mike Tisdale, the Illini's 7-1 freshman, led his team in scoring with 7 points, joined

by Calvin Brock who also had 7.

Tisdale had a 3-pointer in the as part of a 19-6 Illinois run that had MSU down, 24-20, at halftime.

Drew Neitzel erased that deficit not long after the intermission.

Fouled on a 3-point attempt, the Spartans' senior co-captain hit three straight free throws to open a string of 9 straight points to put MSU

up, 31-26 at 14:19.

Tisdale threatened to spark a second half rally, hitting two straight baskets to give Illinois a 32-31 lead at 12:19.

It was the last time the Spartans trailed.

MSU's veterans took over with Suton scoring six points, grabbing 3 rebounds and adding a steal and an assist to lead the final 20-9 run to the finish.

## Former Spartan Plaxico Burress prepares for Super Bowl show down

EAST LANSING, Mich. – Former Michigan State wide receiver Plaxico Burress, who set a franchise-postseason record with 11 receptions for 151 yards in New York's 23-20 overtime victory over Green Bay in the NFC Championship Game, will make his first Super Bowl appearance Sunday, Feb. 3 against New England in Glendale, Ariz. Burress, an eight-year NFL veteran, spent his first five seasons with the Pittsburgh Steelers and played in two AFC Championship Games, with both resulting in losses to the Patriots.

The 6-foot-5, 232-pound Burress caught 16 passes for 194 yards in New York's three postseason victories. He started all 16 regular-season games for the Giants and ranked among the NFC leaders in receptions (16th with 70) and receiving yards (10th with 1,025). His career-best 12 touchdown receptions ranked second in the NFC and fourth in the NFL. Burress had three 100-yard

receiving games in 2007, including eight catches for 144 yards and three TDs in the season opener at Dallas.

During his collegiate career, Burress became the first Spartan player ever to record back-to-back 1,000-yard receiving seasons (1998-99). Despite playing only two seasons, he still ranks among MSU's all-time Top 10 in receptions (eighth at 131), receiving yards (fifth at 2,155) and TD receptions (tied for third at 20). Burress had seven career 100-yard receiving games, including three in 1999.

A first-team All-Big Ten selection as a junior in 1999, Burress caught 66 passes for 1,142 yards and 12 TDs. In his final game in a Spartan uniform, he earned Florida Citrus Bowl MVP honors after catching 13 passes for 185 yards and three scores in MSU's 37-34 victory over Florida.

Burress, who elected to forego his senior season, was selected in the first round – No. 8 overall – by the

Pittsburgh Steelers in the 2000 NFL Draft.

Current Michigan State head coach Mark Dantonio served as secondary coach under Nick Saban during Burress' playing career in East Lansing.

"I remember Plaxico Burress as a great competitor," Dantonio said. "We had a couple of talented cornerbacks, in Amp Campbell and Renaldo Hill, who competed against Plaxico in practice every day, and those matchups were always pretty intense. Something I really learned to appreciate was his toughness, so I'm not at all surprised to see how productive he's been this season despite the ankle injury.

"Plaxico had a productive collegiate career, and he always played his best in the big games. As a big-bodied receiver, he created so many mismatch situations.

"Based upon what I saw in the NFC Championship Game, I have no doubt that Plaxico will be ready to go."

## First year Lady Spartan coach experience see-saw season

It's been an up and down, see-saw of a season for first-year Michigan State women's basketball coach, Suzy Merchant.

Her Spartans have posted impressive victories over such teams as Kansas State, 68-65, Delaware State, 65-62 and Ohio State, 60-53, and suffered painful losses, Old Dominion, 79-73, Oklahoma, 66-55 and Minnesota twice, 74-63, and 81-69.

That last loss came in Minneapolis where the Gophers toppled MSU, 81-69 January 27, on the heels of a thrilling, 65-62 come-from-behind victory at Illinois.

Allyssa DeHaan sank the game winning basket with just 11 seconds remaining,

enabling MSU to post a 65-62 Big Ten victory.

MSU entered its January 31 rematch with arch-rival Michigan with an overall 12-10 record and a 4-6 mark in the conference play.

The Wolverines, 12-7 overall and 5-4 in the conference, beat MSU 64-55 in Ann Arbor earlier this month to end a nine-game MSU winning streak in the series.

In the loss to Minnesota, the Spartans saw Mandy Piechowski shoot four 3-pointers and score a career high 14 points.

An aggressive Gopher team held MSU to 23 percent shooting in the first half to take a 38-24 lead at halftime.

Although MSU outscored the Gophers, 45-43, in the second half, it was far from enough to overcome the early Minnesota advantage.

"We got off to a poor start offensively," Merchant said. "To win on the road against a good team in a tough environment, you have to put the ball in the basket," Merchant said.

The Spartans had five players in double figures. Lauren Aitch had 12, Courtney Davidson and Kalisha Keane 11, and Allyssa DeHaan 10.

Minnesota was led by Emily Fox with 29 points. Fox hit 9 of 14 from the field. Katie Ohm had 17 points.

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