

Michigan State 2013 Spring Preview

Written by Sean Stires
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Michigan State was not supposed to have quarterback questions heading into the 2013 season. The 2012 campaign was supposed to have taken care of that. Head coach Mark Dantonio had to replace record-setting quarterback Kirk Cousins last year and Andrew Maxwell was supposed to be the long-term answer.

Turns out, there are quarterback questions as the Spartans get set to open spring camp this week in East Lansing.

The questions began on Dec. 30 when Dantonio replaced a struggling Maxwell with little used Connor Cook to lead the game-winning drive in a 17-16 Buffalo Wild Wings Bowl win over TCU.

"At the end of the day they turned to their backup," said Stephen Brooks, who covers Michigan State for The State News. "(It happened in) the last two possessions of the game to try and win the bowl game. I think that says a lot."

Dantonio did his best spin control afterward, telling the media that Maxwell would be MSU's No. 1 quarterback this spring, but the damage had been done. Cook was just 4-of-11 for 47 yards, but he threw a touchdown pass and his last drive ended with Dan Conroy's game-winning 47-yard field goal.

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Maxwell was a meager 6-of-15 for 28 yards passing against the Horned Frogs. The first-year starter had spent two years as Cousins' understudy before completing 52% of his 446 pass attempts in 2012 for 2,606 yards with 13 touchdowns and nine interceptions.

"I don't think it can be lost by Maxwell in the spring," Brooks said of the starting job behind center. "But I think it's an opportunity for the other two guys that'll be there."

The other two guys are Cook, who will be a sophomore next fall, and Tyler O'Connor, who redshirted last season and still has four years of remaining eligibility.

"They're really putting a premium on mobility," Brooks said of the ingredient the Spartan coaching staff is looking for from the QB. "The coaching staff likes to have the ability to make plays or create when things break down; create outside the pocket and move outside the pocket. Those are phrases they use a lot when describing what they want to see from the quarterback position."

Quarterback mobility may or may not be on the Michigan State roster this spring, but it is on the way. Four-star recruit Damion Terry from Pennsylvania stands 6'4 and has more of the tools the Spartans appear to be searching for.

The Michigan State offense's biggest literal and figurative loss is that of running back Le'Veon Bell. The 6'2, 237 pound back declared for the NFL Draft after his junior season. Bell, who was held to just 77 yards on 19 carries in Notre Dame's 20-3 win last season, led the nation with 382 carries while churning out 1,793 yards on the ground.

The three current options to replace Bell in the backfield are 5'8 Nick Hill, 6'0 Jeremy Langford, who goes 205 pounds, and 5'9 Nick Tompkins. All three are smaller than the typical running back mold in the physical Michigan State offensive philosophy.

Three freshmen running backs, including 6'0 - 215 pound Flint, Mich. native Gerald Holmes, will arrive on campus over the summer, and Brooks expects Holmes to have early opportunities at carries next fall.

"That's who I personally think will take it," Brooks opined. "The coaching staff has said openly a lot of times this offseason that they think running back is a position that a true freshman can come in and get a lot of carries and playing time."

The other top offensive concern is at tight end where, like Bell, Dion Simms declared for the NFL with a year of eligibility remaining. Simms had 36 catches for 475 yards and two touchdowns last season.

Andrew Gleichert, who had just one reception for eight yards last year after spending two redshirt seasons on the bench, is one of the leading candidates to move into the spot. Converted receiver Juwan Caesar, who weighs just 212 pounds, is another possibility.

Right guard Chris McDonald is Michigan State's only offensive line loss. The depth on MSU's line appears to be solid as well.

"For them it's just about keeping them healthy," Brooks said of Michigan State's linemen. "Like last year, they have a lot of depth. Because they've had a lot of injuries the last two years a lot of guys are getting starting experience. I think that bodes well for them, but at the same time you don't really want to be shuffling guys around all the time."

Defense

Cornerback Johnny Adams is the Spartans' biggest defensive loss. Adams played in 54 career games from 2008-2012 (he redshirted in 2009 after suffering a season-ending shoulder injury three games into the season). Adams had finished his career with 11 interceptions.

"The way they play defense, they put a lot of pressure on their corners. They end up in a lot of one-one-one situations" Brooks said. "So that's (the loss of Adams) tough for them. They base a lot of their defensive schemes around the ability of those corners to handle people one-one-one."

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Nearly the entire linebacking corps is back, with the exception of captain Chris Norman, who finished 2012 with 52 tackles and was replaced in the lineup by season's end by junior to be Taiwan Jones.

Defensive end William Gholston is headed for the NFL. Gholston led the Spartans with 13 tackles for loss and 4.5 sacks last fall. Redshirt freshman Shilique Calhoun is the front-runner to win that spot this spring.

"He's a lankier type of defensive end," Brooks said of the 240 pound Calhoun. "He showed a lot of pass-rushing skills on third downs last year. He came in a lot on third downs in passing situations and made a couple big plays."

Calhoun finished with six tackles, 2.5 tackles for loss and one sack in 2012. Defensive tackle Anthony Rashad-White, all 320 pounds of him, must be replaced as well.

"Linebacker and defensive line are where they have a lot of young talent waiting in the wings," Brooks commented of Michigan State's potential depth in the front seven. "That will be a multi-person position race."

Coaching Staff

There has been some coaching staff turnover in East Lansing since the Dec. 30 bowl game in Tempe, AZ. For starters, the contract of defensive line coach Ted Gill was not renewed after the season. The move was considered somewhat surprising, especially considering the Spartans ranked eighth in the nation in run defense last fall.

"He has been a contributing member of my coaching staff for nine years, including the last six seasons here at Michigan State," Dantonio said in a statement announcing the non-renewal. "I wish Ted the best in his future endeavors."

Ron Burton was hired from Air Force to take Gill's spot on the staff. Burton once coached under Brian Kelly at Grand Valley State, helping the Lakers win the 2002 national championship. He spent the next decade at the Air Force Academy. He played at North Carolina and spent four seasons in the NFL.

Dan Roushar also left his job as Michigan State's offensive coordinator to become the running backs coach for the New Orleans Saints. Former Ohio State offensive coordinator Jim Bollman will be the co-offensive coordinator along with former MSU quarterbacks coach Steve Warner, who is expected to have play-calling duties on game day.

Special Teams

Three-year kicker Dan Conroy is Michigan State's most formidable special teams loss. Conroy finished his career with the fourth-most points (283) in school history. He made 23-of-32 (71%) of his field goals last year and kicked 43 in his career. Conroy also missed just one of 119 career extra points, making all 73 in 2011 and 2012.

The Spartans had two freshman kickers on the roster last season, and highly touted freshman Michael Geiger is expected to compete for the job next fall as well.

Hill handled both kickoff and punt return duties for MSU for most of last season, but the jobs look to be open for competition this spring.

"That was kind of a revolving door at a point last year," Brooks commented. "It started being Nick Hill, but then he wasn't running aggressively. On punts he wasn't even returning them. He was just fair catching or not even catching them at all, so the coaching staff got mad about that. They threw Bell back there at times."

Brooks expects a variety of players, including wide receiver Tony Lippett, to compete at the return spots this spring.