

B1G Coaches Teleconference: Michigan State's Mark Dantonio Embraces Meaningful Rivalry Game With Ohio State



After Michigan State's 24-3 win last weekend at Maryland, the Spartans (6-3, 4-2) turn the page to Saturday at Spartan Stadium with Ohio State. Ahead of the Big Ten matchup with the No. 10 Buckeyes (8-1, 5-1) at noon on FOX in East Lansing, Mich., MSU head coach Mark Dantonio fielded questions from reporters Tuesday on the Big Ten coaches teleconference and looked forward to the latest pivotal game against OSU.

Mark Dantonio

- Fueled by Connor Heyward's season-high two touchdowns 157 yards on 15 rushes (10.5 average), Michigan State's struggling offense came alive last Saturday against Maryland for its 21-point win. The 6-0, 229-pound sophomore running back broke out for the Spartans and poses a threat to Ohio State's leaky defense.
 - "He's just coming into his own as a tailback," Dantonio said. "He really didn't play too much of that at high school, so he's a second-year player. He played a little bit for us last year as well, so he's got a good foundation in terms of what to do and thought he had a great game on Saturday. But he's had a couple of moments where he's looked to be the real deal, so we need to have him continue to perform like that."
- Ohio State and Michigan State tend to get into recruiting battles every year — most recently with Oak Park, Mich., 2019 four-star quarterback Dwan Mathis (6-6, 205) who flipped from the Spartans to the Buckeyes on June 24 after an official visit to Columbus over the weekend of June 22-24. Asked about his no-visit policy for commitments, Dantonio said he thought the philosophy was simple in general.
 - "What I've always said to our guys is, 'Don't commit if you plan on going some place else to visit. That would be the general thought process as we go forward. And if you are taking another visit, then you probably aren't committed. So let's just call it what it is,'" Dantonio said. "It's a pretty simple process, really. I mean, it's really nothing. It doesn't take a great deal of thinking there. If you're not committed, you could take visits. If you're committed, you don't."
- Michigan State has struggled over the course of the campaign, entering its game against Ohio State with the No. 105 unit in total offense (360.3 per game) as well as the No. 110 group in scoring offense (23.4 points per game). Between mounting injuries, Dantonio explained how the

Spartans have tried to overcome the woes with the ball.

- “There’s a lot of different reasons, I think, when we sort of use the next-man-up mentality,” Dantonio said. “Over the course of time, when we’ve lost somebody, it’s given other players opportunities to step in and they play well. I think probably as much as anything, just inconsistency at times. Some of that’s due to injury, some of that’s due to scheme, some of that’s due to execution. There’s no certain thing that you’re going to say, ‘This is what happened. We’re done.’ I think that we’ve always found a way to succeed and that’s what we’re doing right now. We’ll get ourselves ready to play this next game. As I said in my press conference — really, every game right now in November is like a full season because it has so much meaning. So I think that’s not just for this football team, but every team in the conference.”
- With the exception of the 2017 season in which Ohio State blasted Michigan State for its 48-3 rout on Nov. 11 at Ohio Stadium, the annual meeting between the Buckeyes and the Spartans tends to deliver tight battles. Asked about OSU, Dantonio said MSU embraces the matchup because the stakes are usually high.
 - “I think that the magnitude of the meaning of the game has had so much to do with each team’s season,” Dantonio said. “In 2013, it was the (Big Ten) championship game. In 2014, the team that won — was I think maybe the 10th game of the year, later in the year — they went on to win the national championship and get to the (College Football) Playoff and we lost but still had a successful season. Then you go to ‘15 and we win and win the (conference) title. Then ‘16’s a down year. But even last year, going into November, if we win that game, maybe we win the (East Division) title because I think we won the rest of our games after that. So there’s so much meaning to that game that it takes on maybe a little bit bigger game of magnitude.”
- Among other areas for Michigan State’s intensity against Ohio State, Dantonio pointed to how many Spartans are from Ohio. With 28 players from south of Michigan’s state border, plus his own ties as the Buckeyes’ defensive coordinator (2001-03) and Cincinnati’s head coach (2004-06), he touched on those aspects as other reasons for why MSU gets up for its contests with OSU.
 - “We’ve got a lot of players from Ohio,” Dantonio said. “That feeds into it a little bit. I’m from Ohio. Just want to play well, you just want to do your very best and I was at Ohio State one time so I understand the meaning. Even going back to when I was here as an assistant, that game was an important game because even back then with Nick Saban (former Michigan State head coach from 1995-99), there was an Ohio-based background here in terms of our coaches and many of our players.”

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