

OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Hiring Of Defensive Boss Full Of Irony

By JEFF RAPP

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

In light of recent developments, it seems more than a little ironic that new Ohio State head football coach Jim Tressel went out and reeled in a South Carolina Gamecock to fill one of the most important spots on his new staff.

Even more ironic, Mark Dantonio, who was announced as OSU's new defensive coordinator Jan. 22, comes by way of East Lansing, Mich. Prior to holding the co-titles of defensive secondary coach and associate head coach on the Michigan State staff, he worked at Kansas under the man Tressel nosed out for the job, Glen Mason.

But the move makes sense on many levels. For one, Dantonio has built a reputation for fielding ultra-aggressive and stingy defensive backfields at MSU the last six years. For another, he served as both the defensive secondary coach and defensive coordinator under Tressel at Youngstown State from 1986-90.

Best of all, the 44-year-old Dantonio was reared in the Buckeye State and was a graduate assistant for OSU during the 1983 and '84 seasons.

"I think it's an opportunity of a lifetime to be back at Ohio State and be a coordinator here," he said. "If you're from Ohio, you basically bleed scarlet and gray. It's a great opportunity for me. My whole family's excited."

Dantonio met with the media Jan. 22 after getting to town the night before. Like new offensive coordinator Jim Bollman, new special teams coach Ken Conatser and new director of football operations Bob Tucker, he said working for Tressel was the main reason he accepted the job.

"I told Coach Tressel a couple years ago (at a coaching clinic) that I think he has the ability to really harness the human spirit," Dantonio said. "If you look at Youngstown State, they win close games. And that was developed over a period of time and by things he's addressed off the football field."

"So he's developed a player's attitude to win close games, to be good people off the field and to give back to their community and to be role models. I think that's very important in this time. Those are the type of things that brought me here because he's the type of guy you like to follow."

Dantonio was born March 9, 1956, in El Paso, Texas, but grew up in Zanesville, Ohio. He was an all-state performer at Zanesville High School and was selected to play in the Ohio North-South All-Star game. He went on to letter for three years as a defensive back for South Carolina, earning his bachelor's degree in education from USC in 1979.

After a brief stint as an assistant coach at a South Carolina high school, he earned a master's degree from Ohio U. in 1980 then began to ply his trade as a college coach with stops at Purdue (1981), Butler (Kan.) Junior College (1982) and OSU (1983-84). While in Columbus, Dantonio worked as a graduate assistant under head coach Earle Bruce, helped lead the Buckeyes to berths in the Fiesta Bowl and Rose Bowl, and struck up relationships with full-time assistants Tressel and Mason.

In 1985, he worked as the secondary

coach at Akron then jumped at the chance to join Tressel at Youngstown State.

Despite helping rebuild the program at Kansas and becoming a well-regarded coordinator at MSU since, Dantonio still looks back with great fondness on his five-year stay at YSU.

"I saw our players grow," he said. "I hear from players now from 15 years ago who talk about the impact Coach Tressel had on them as people. That's very impressive to me, because as a former athlete I remember the coaches that I played for. You can either remember them as positive people or negative people."

"I believe as a coach you should impact your players as people. I believe that's very important because I believe if you are able to do that then they will respond in critical situations and they also will respond to you off the field."

Defense Will Stay Aggressive

Dantonio will take over a defense that had been under the supervision of both assistant head coach Fred Pagac and defensive coordinator Jon Tenuta. Their tenure, which dated to the 1996 season, produced units that were nationally ranked in several categories and were anchored by future pros such as Andy Katzenmoyer, Shawn Springs, Antoine Winfield, Damon Moore and Na'il Diggs.

Last season, OSU was tops in the Big Ten against the run and No. 9 nationally.

"They've been excellent here," Dantonio said. "In the past couple years they've really stopped the run and in '98 they were tremendous. They've got good players here — or we've got good players here — and the coaches here, Coach Pagac and his staff, have done a great job. So the cupboards definitely are not bare here."

Dantonio will inherit a defense that will return six starters including captain Joe Cooper, who recently was awarded a fourth year of eligibility by the NCAA. Among the departed are cornerbacks Nate Clements and David Mitchell, but Dantonio expects to play an attacking style once again.

"We played a lot of press coverage with the corners up; we've had a lot of good corners (at MSU)," he said. "Our safeties have usually been two of our leading tacklers every year. (Free safety) Richard Newsome led the conference in tackles per game last year."

"So we're going to get our safeties involved, and they've got to be playmakers. I tell those guys they're either heroes or they're goats and they need to play with a lot of confidence back there. Part of the way that you play aggressively is you get those people involved — pressuring the quarterback themselves, bumping people, playing off coverage, more blitzing or whatever."

"But you need to be fundamentally sound back there, you need to be able to play the deep ball and use good deep-ball judgment, make open-field tackles."

In Michigan State's 1999 season that culminated with a win over Florida in the Citrus Bowl, the Spartans allowed one called running play of over 20 yards all season. Because of the influence of former MSU head coach Nick Saban, the Spartans have patterned their defense after that of the old Cleveland Browns — a pro 4-3.

"It's an attacking type defense,"

Dantonio said. "We want to make sure we pressure the quarterback, we want to make sure that we stop the run, defend the middle of the field, affect the quarterback — whether we knock him down or sack him we definitely want to affect him."

"We all want to win the critical situations in the game, you know, the turnover margin, no long runs or passes, the third-down conversions, playing well on the goal line and in the red area. Those are the types of things that make you a good defensive football team."

Intensity also helps, although the soft-spoken Dantonio isn't quite the yeller of a Pagac or a Tenuta.

"My style is whatever works," he said. "I just want my players to know that I'm there for them in their personal lives as well as a football coach. And whether they are the last guy on the totem pole or the best player, to me they should all be treated the same off the field and they should all have your respect. So I'm not going to be the kind of guy who rips into a kid unmercifully, but I'm going to get results and I'm going to make sure they do the right thing."

"And they will be disciplined or they won't play."

Coming Home

Dantonio said it was bittersweet to leave East Lansing, where his children began their schooling and he had a good rapport with MSU head coach Bobby Williams.

Behind All-Big Ten-caliber play from corners Renaldo Hill (first team), Newsome (second team) and Cedric Henry

(second team) under Dantonio, Michigan State edged OSU in total defense last season, allowing just 318.3 yards per game. All three of those players contributed mightily to the Spartans' 28-24 stunner of then-No. 1 Ohio State in 1998, another feather in Dantonio's cap.

His success against OSU and the rest of the league made him a perfect fit for the job.

"It is good that I've been in the conference for six years because I do know the Big Ten," he said.

He also knows Ohio. Dantonio has had a lot of success pulling players from Ohio in the last several years and recruited several current members of the Buckeyes, including defensive tackle Mike Collins and quarterback Scott McMullen.

"Ohio is a great state rich in tradition with great high school football players," he said. "I have great rapport with the high school coaches I have met throughout Ohio in the last six years or more."

And whether you're dressed in green and white, scarlet and gray or even maize and blue, the goal is the same — the Rose Bowl. Dantonio has coached in seven bowl games in his career but has made it to Pasadena just once, as a member of that famed '84 Ohio State staff.

"That was a tremendous experience for me, and I haven't been back since," he said. "So I'm looking forward to trying to get back there, and I'm fully expecting that will happen here."

Dantonio and his wife, Becky, have two daughters — Kristen (7) and Lauren (5).



STEVE HELWAG

NEW DEFENSIVE BOSS — Mark Dantonio (above center), who was recently hired as OSU's new defensive coordinator, comes by way of Michigan State, where he was an associate head coach and oversaw the secondary.

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OHIO STATE INSIDER

Dantonio Bids OSU Adieu To Take Head Job At UC

Usually steely-eyed and square-jawed during postgame interviews, Ohio State defensive coordinator Mark Dantonio allowed himself to drop his dispassionate veneer for a few moments following the Buckeyes' Fiesta Bowl win over Kansas State.

"I'm going to miss these guys," he said. "I really am. It's a great group of young men, and it's been my pleasure to work with them and get to know them."

Dantonio was working his final game with the Buckeyes after accepting an offer Dec. 23 to become the next head coach at the University of Cincinnati.

He succeeds Rick Minter, who was fired after 10 seasons with the Bearcats.

"Mark Dantonio has incredible coaching experience at the highest level and he is one of the top assistant coaches in major college football," said UC athletic director Bob Goins. "He has tremendous ties in the state of Ohio and we are excited about having Mark take leadership in the football program at the University of Cincinnati."

A native of Zanesville, Ohio, Dantonio has 23 years of college coaching experience, more than half of them in his home state.

Prior to coming to Ohio State, the South Carolina graduate spent 10 combined seasons at Michigan State and Kansas. But when Jim Tressel became head coach at Ohio State in 2001, Dantonio joined him as the Buckeyes' defensive coordinator. He had coached with Tressel for five seasons at Youngstown State.

"Mark is an outstanding football coach," Tressel said. "More importantly, he is an outstanding person and family man. Mark will serve the Cincinnati community and college community extremely well. He's the kind of coach and person who cares about his players and the people

around him. We hate to lose him, but I'm extremely proud that he has achieved this position and wish him the very best."

According to Dantonio, the job at UC was one of the few for which he would have left Tressel's staff.

"I always told Coach Tressel that if that job ever opened up, I would pursue it," he said. "I passed on some other jobs previously, but when I thought the University of Cincinnati — when you look at my family and what was important to us, staying in Ohio where I know the high school coaches, moving to the Big East, the new facilities that they're building — makes this the right place at the right time."

Dantonio said he is under no illusions that the glut of talent he enjoyed at OSU will carry over to his new position.

"But we have some good players," he said. "I've watched a little bit of film on them and they compete. That's the one thing you have to do. You have to step out of your comfort zone and compete, and the players at UC do that. I've watched the games against West Virginia and South Florida over the Christmas break, and I was impressed with the efforts they made. I think we've got some players."

Dantonio gets to show his old boss what he can do immediately. Cincinnati opens its 2004 season next September on the road against Ohio State.

"That will be a little strange since that will be the first game and everything," he admitted. "But it will also be exciting to see a lot of these players again. I'm going to miss those guys. I'll be excited about watching them play, and excited about what they do all year and



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OSU SPORTS INFORMATION DEPARTMENT

DESERT FAREWELL — Ohio State defensive coordinator Mark Dantonio, who will be head coach at Cincinnati next season, was coaching his final game for OSU at the Fiesta Bowl.

for the next couple of years. I'll only root against them one time."

Every defensive player acknowledged Dantonio and the impact that he has had on their play in the past three years.

"We love Coach Dantonio and wanted to send him off to Cincinnati on a good, positive note," said cornerback Dustin Fox. "We'll miss him."

Added linebacker A.J. Hawk: "Coach Dantonio has done everything for us. He's

such a great coach. He's made a great impression on me, both as a coach and as a man."

When told of that sentiment, Dantonio looked down, smiled and looked toward the floor.

"Well, I've always said that the only reason I coach is to have a positive impact on young people," he said softly. "I'd hope that I was able to do that here."

— Mark Rea

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Folks Of Zanesville Fete UC's Dantonio

By ERIC LOUGHRY
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Former Ohio State defensive coordinator and current University of Cincinnati head coach Mark Dantonio returned to his hometown May 13 as his alma mater, Zanesville (Ohio) High School, honored him.

The high school's Quarterback Club Past Presidents' Luncheon, billed as a salute to Dantonio, was attended by family members and colleagues, including Dantonio's former boss, OSU head coach Jim Tressel.

Dantonio directed OSU's defense — the unit largely responsible for the 14-0 national championship season of 2002 and for last year's 11-2 mark — for three seasons. Tressel said it was doubly difficult to lose his defensive architect and the opportunity to work with a longtime friend.

"The happiness for his opportunity is extraordinary, and that's an emotion that will be ongoing," the Ohio State coach said. "I'm excited for him because there's some great days ahead. There's some challenging days ahead, and as I told him, I'll be there for him through both."

"The emotion of losing the coach of our defense of our great teams is probably not as strong as the emotion of losing a friend who's in the war room with you every day working with you and for you and for the kids. That's the hardest part because Mark cares so much about people and Mark is very, very important to our program. Losing that is going to be tough."

Tressel and Dantonio have known each other for nearly 20 years. They coached together on Earle Bruce's staff at Ohio State in 1983 and '84, when Tressel coached the quarterbacks and

receivers and Dantonio was a graduate assistant.

When Tressel took over the Youngstown State program in 1986, he brought on Dantonio, who spent the '85 season as secondary coach at Akron, as his defensive coordinator.

"I was 32 years old, a head coach for the first time," Tressel said. "I had a little bit of an idea of what I wanted it to be like, and it was important that I had guys who felt the same way."

Dantonio obviously played a major part in the Buckeyes' first national title in 34 years, but Tressel said he also was vital to YSU's four Division I-AA national titles, even though all came after Dantonio left following the 1990 season to coach the secondary at Kansas.

"I know we wouldn't have won national championships at Youngstown State if it weren't for Mark Dantonio," Tressel said. "We wouldn't have won the national championship in 2002 at Ohio State if it weren't for Mark Dantonio."

Leaving OSU was a difficult decision for Dantonio, who spent five years at Kansas before moving on to Michigan State after the '94 campaign to oversee the Spartans' secondary for six years before joining Tressel at Ohio State prior to the 2001 season.

Ultimately, though, Dantonio wanted the opportunity to create an atmosphere similar to the one he said Tressel has created in Columbus.

"I took the job at Cincinnati basically for one reason — to try to do some of the things that Jim Tressel did at Youngstown State and then for the state of Ohio," he said. "It doesn't mean winning football games. It means impacting young people in the community, getting involved."

"That's really why I took the job, because I've seen him be able to change



CHRIS NIDA

BEST BUDDIES — University of Cincinnati head coach Mark Dantonio (left) and Ohio State head coach Jim Tressel remain good friends even though they will compete against one another in the 2004 season opener.

people's lives and make a significant impact with young people. I really felt like that's his ministry — that's got to be my ministry."

Emotional Departure

After accepting the Cincinnati position, Dantonio went back to work at Ohio State for Fiesta Bowl preparations. The week in Arizona also provided him an opportunity to say goodbye to players he had grown close to.

"I tried to say goodbye to all of them before I left, one at a time," he said. "The nice thing was that when I took the job at UC, I was able to go to the Fiesta Bowl and spend a week with our players — with my players — and spend a week with them so I could say goodbye to them

the right way.

"And it was an emotional time, but it was nice to spend a working week with them where I saw them every day and interacted with them every day, and that was one of the nicest weeks of my life."

With Dantonio's hectic schedule, opportunities to make it back to his hometown as he did for the day in his honor are few and far between, but it won't be long until he has another homecoming of sorts.

Dantonio's first test as a head coach will come at a familiar venue when his Bearcats take on his former team Sept. 4 in Ohio Stadium.

The Buckeyes haven't lost to another Ohio school in 83 years, a fact Dantonio knows all too well. Ironically, it was the Bearcats

who almost pulled off the feat in the 2002 season, nearly ending OSU's unbeaten run in September that year before the Buckeyes escaped Paul Brown Stadium with the first of seven narrow victories on their way to a national title.

"That Cincinnati game two years ago might have been a defining moment for us — the fact that they very well could have beat us — and I think maybe we grew from that," Tressel said.

Dantonio smiled with excitement at the thought of occupying the east sideline at the Horseshoe.

"I think it will be fun," he said. "First of all, I've got a great appreciation of Ohio State football and everything that it involves — the tradition, the players, the coaches, the administration, the people who come to the game. And it's going to be fun, I think, to sit on the other side of the field."

He'll be out to win his first game as coach at Cincinnati, but Dantonio did say it would be nice to again see the players he's worked with at OSU over the past few years, such as senior Dustin Fox, who came to Ohio State as a freshman the same year Dantonio joined Tressel in Columbus.

"I think it will be sort of fun because I'll be on the sideline," Dantonio said. "Dustin Fox will come running over to the sideline, and I'll probably say something to him, pat him on the back and see his smile."

"I'll know so many of the players and so many of the people there that I'll just feel blessed to be back there. It's almost like I would not want to go back to any other place than that because it was a special place for my family."

For his part, Tressel predicted Dantonio will grow into the role as the head coach quickly, but he quipped that he hoped not too quickly.

"He'll get better by the moment," the OSU coach said, "but hopefully not too good in September."

No Slim Pickings

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program and OSU.

He reasoned Tressel and his staff will almost always have first dibs but that Ohio has plenty of talent to go around.

Cincinnati's efforts should be bolstered with a move from Conference USA to the Big East, a Bowl Championship Series conference, for the 2005 season.

"We've got to take things step by step," Dantonio said. "We're going to go to the Big East, so hopefully that gives us a little bit more exposure and national significance, but there are certain places that are very difficult to ever beat, and I would say Ohio State is one of them."

"The thing that is exciting to us is that there are a lot of good football players in the state of Ohio. Sixty-five players last year signed BCS scholarships in this state. If we can just get some of those guys, those BCS-type players, we can make a difference and we can grow. But it's going to be a step-by-step process."

Vote of Confidence

Shortly after Tressel and Dantonio began fielding questions, Cincinnati athletics director Bob Goin joined them at the table sitting on the opposite side of Tressel.

"We've got Jim right where we want him, in between us," Goin said with a laugh.

It was Tressel who suggested to Goin that he consider Dantonio as a replacement for the fired Rick Minter.

"I had a chance to talk to Mr. Goin and talk about the fact that I thought it was a great fit," Tressel said.

"I think head coaching positions are a lot about fit. There are a lot of good coaches out there. The magic, I think, is trying to find the one that fits right, and I thought it was perfect timing. Mark brought a pedigree to Cincinnati based on what he had done on the field, specifically with our defenses."

It wasn't long before the difference between a coordinator's position and that of head coach were apparent to Dantonio.

Since he began coaching, his only focus has been football, and more particularly on defense. For the first time in his career, he had to deal with other issues that surround a program. Dantonio recalled what former Bowling Green and current Utah coach Urban Meyer said when describing the difference between being a coordinator and a head coach: When you're an assistant you make suggestions. When you're head coach you make decisions.

"I think that's the biggest difference in a nutshell," Dantonio said. "You're ultimately going to be making decisions on recruiting, on what kind of jerseys you're going to wear — just everything."

Dantonio was generally pleased with his first spring at UC. The Bearcats return 16 starters from a team that finished 5-7 last season, including four losses in the final minutes.

Dantonio knows firsthand he has a quarterback to build around. Senior Gino Guidugli, who enters his final season in '04 already entrenched as UC's career leader in virtually every passing category, nearly derailed OSU's national championship season in that game two years ago, throwing for 324 yards

against Dantonio's OSU defense in a narrow 23-19 Buckeye win.

Dantonio has plenty to work with on defense with the Bearcats as well. The unit finished last season ranked 27th in the nation in total defense. Among the returners are senior defensive ends Trent Cole and Andre Frazier, and senior linebacker Jamar Enzor, who led the 'Cats with 137 tackles in 2003.

As Tressel has done each year since taking over at OSU, Dantonio split his senior players into two teams the week of the spring game and had them draft players for the scrimmage.

"We tried to establish some things in the early workouts and it carried over," he said. "One thing we don't lack is toughness — we have toughness. We have work ethic, and that's been instilled in them. So we took good steps, I think, this spring."

"We started from scratch. Everybody was equal and everybody had to earn their positions. So we have a senior-dominated team with a lot of starters back who lost a lot of close games last year or I probably wouldn't even be there."

Public Homecoming

Just before the luncheon began, Dantonio, Tressel and OSU offensive coordinator Jim Bollman made their way to the stage as the Ohio State fight song blared and the gathering of nearly 1,000 applauded in unison.

The walls of the auditorium were adorned with OSU and Cincinnati paraphernalia, along with poster-size photographs of Dantonio from his playing days at Zanesville, where he was All-Ohio as a senior in 1973, and at South

Carolina, where he walked on and earned three letters (1976-78) as a defensive back.

"I have to admit, when I look on the wall and see those pictures — man, he looks like a player," Tressel said when addressing the audience.

In addition to the declaration of the day in his honor, Dantonio also received a framed replica jersey of the No. 32 he wore for the Blue Devils.

Following Tressel's remarks about him, Dantonio spoke, taking the opportunity to thank his wife, Becky, his daughters, Kristen and Lauren, his parents and longtime Zanesville coach Ron Apperson.

He also thanked his old and new bosses, Tressel and Goin. He addressed the former first.

"If I could tell you anything, it's that he's had a tremendous impact on me as a person, in terms of how to treat people, in terms of how to be patient with young men, and in terms of being able to handle adversity," Dantonio said of Tressel.

"All of the things that you hear about Coach Tressel, they're true. All the things that you hear that have become almost legendary in that state of Ohio is true. He is that man."

Addressing Goin, Dantonio thanked the man who hired him for taking a chance on him.






"I want to thank Bob for giving me this opportunity at the University of Cincinnati," Dantonio said. "He stepped out on a limb and has some faith in somebody who had no proven track record as head football coach. I can tell you that we're going to be successful at Cincinnati because of his leadership, because of the vision that he has."

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