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An interview with:

MICHIGAN STATE HEAD COACH MARK DANTONIO

MARK DANTONIO: Thank you very much. First of all, it's my third time here, so we're coming off two bowl games the last two years. As we move forward, we're very, very excited about the 2009 season.

You know, going back and looking at last year a little bit, coming off a 9 and 4 season, the things that we stress to our players constantly on a consistent basis, the positives, I guess, is that as we went through the season, we were a top 25 team pretty much throughout the season once we had gotten into the Big Ten Conference, ended up No. 24.

We were 9 and 2 going into our last game, had an opportunity to play for a championship the last game even though it was a co-championship. We made strides and showed some consistency in being able to move in that direction.

Made it to a New Year's Day bowl game, which I thought was very critical. I remember sitting here last year, and a lot of you asked what would be Michigan State's goals? I remember mentioning that, and people gave me a little bit of a look. But you know, we made it there.

The thing that I think we have to continue to do is consistently recruit. We have returning starters back. We have an outstanding freshman class, and I think the thing to remember in terms of where we're at as a program right now is we have 32 upperclassmen right now in our roster, only 13 juniors, 19 scholarship seniors, and 53 underclassmen. So we are a relatively young football team. I think that that bodes well for the future.

The success that we've had, I think, is a direct result of three things. One, we've got stability. When I talk about stability, I talk about not

just the coaching staff. We've not lost coaches; we've maintained our staff. In some cases, I've been a head coach for six years, and I would say two thirds to three quarters of our staff has been with us as a group for six entire years. We have not lost one coach on our defensive staff.

What that gives us is an opportunity to critique rather than really reinvent things and have to have our players re-learn because we have a different coordinator. We've maintained both coordinators, so our terminology and the things that we do has been consistent.

I think the other thing, when I look at stability, we've had very low attrition in terms of the players that we've had. We have not lost many players. We've been able to keep those players in the program, and because of that, they continue to grow and mature not just as football players, but also as students and also as people, which are our goals.

The second thing I would point to are our resources, the Bob Skandalaris Center opened last July 24th, and we've had so many things happen in terms of just the facility part of who we are as a program right now. We have outstanding leadership. Mark Hollis, our athletic director, is a lifelong Spartan; as is our president, Lou Anna Simon; as is one of our board of trustees members, George Perles; as is our president of the trustees, Joel Ferguson. All of those people show us consistency in terms of where we're going.

I said when I first got the job I thought it was very, very important that we all go in one direction as a program. We've been able to do that, and our fan support obviously is very, very good, as well. We've all gone in the same direction, which is key for our success.

The third thing I think that we point to in terms of why we've been able to be successful is our tradition. We've had great players come through. This is the tenth anniversary actually of the 10-2 team that finished seventh in the nation. Beat Florida in the Citrus Bowl in 1999, and I think it's important to recognize that a lot of our players have come back to be a part of that program.



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The people that have come back to be honorary captains, the people that -- the former players that really have reached out to our players, our current players, make a definite impact on them in terms of what they have to uphold and the things they have to do.

So those three things I think are critical to our success. Our concerns naturally would be, I guess, our quarterback situation I think is very strong, but it's inexperienced. Kirk Cousins had some limited experience last year. We played him in the bowl game by design to put pressure on him in those situations. He's played against some other teams throughout the year, but his experience is limited.

Keith Nichol is another young player. Both are sophomores. While that is a concern, the thing that I point to constantly when talking to our staff and really to those two quarterbacks in general is they're only sophomores, so they have really a lot of room to grow as players. They're outstanding athletes. They're outstanding players already. Both of them performed very, very well in the spring, particularly in the spring game, and it'll be interesting to watch as they continue on.

We also have another quarterback, Andrew Maxwell, who is on campus now and is showing some great things, as well.

But we lost star power in losing Javon Ringer. I think that's obvious, great player, great person, great leader for us. So we'll have to fill that void. Senior leadership will be key. It always is. I think one of the reasons that we've been able to go to these two Bowl games the last two years is because our seniors had their best years ever. I think when they do that, you have a chance of accomplishing something very, very special.

So our seniors this year will have to respond.

You know, they picked us third this year, I guess, sports writers. I think it's very, very important to recognize that we've been in this situation before at times where the Spartans have sort of raised up a little bit on very high expectations and fell a little bit flat. We've won very, very few games just going away.

Our program is such that we've been involved in a lot of close games, a lot of close games. So we'll play game to game, one at a time, that old cliché. I do think we have an opportunity to win every game that we play. We always have. And that will remain true.

Goals for us, then I'll take some questions, basically is to play up, win our last game. We've

gone to the bowl games. We need to win our last game, which would hopefully be a bowl game this year. We need to play well and win our last game against Penn State. We need to play up when we play these marquee games where more than just winning and losing is riding on that. A little bit more of the national attention may be riding on it, whether it be the Penn State game the last game or the Ohio State game.

We need to continue to mature as a program, and again, as I mentioned before, it's not just about football. It's got to be about how we handle ourselves as students and how we handle ourselves as people, and hopefully our players understand that and will continue to move in that direction.

And finally, our goal, as every year goes on, is to be Big Ten champs. I think if you come to Chicago, you sit in front of your teams and you don't have that goal and really believe it, then you're selling your players short. So our goals will be a Big Ten Championship, a BCS game, and we'll move from there. We'll hope to continue with our consistency. Good things are happening, and I'm very, very excited about this year.

With that I'll just take some questions and we'll move from there.

Q. Just a question about Greg Jones. He actually played defensive end most of high school, and then switched to linebacker kind of in his senior season. I was just wondering if you could talk about his progress and why he's been so successful, and then how you'll use him this year and kind of what he means to the defense as a whole.

MARK DANTONIO: We first noticed Greg Jones when I was at the University of Cincinnati and he was a defensive end his junior career. Bob Crable, the coach of Moeller, made him a linebacker. Bob played in the NFL a long time, great coach. And then we were able to recruit him to here. He played a little bit of outside backer, a lot of outside backer the first year, and then made the change to middle linebacker probably middle of the year last year, three, four, five games in.

What I see in Greg is a tremendous work ethic. He's an excellent leader. What you see on game field is what you see in practice. The great ones that I've been around, that's what happens. They practice just like they play, so it becomes a habit to play at that level of competitiveness. He

will only get better.

I think right now what you're seeing from Greg Jones is he's beginning to attract attention. I think he was a first-team All-Big Ten player last year, but he's beginning to attract more attention, and that's good for not only Michigan State, Greg Jones, our defense, the type of defense we run. Mike Tressel has done an outstanding with him. Pat Narduzzi, our coordinator, Mike Tressel is our linebacker coach. He will continue to improve, and that's the beauty of it. He's only going to be a junior, so again, he's a younger player, as well.

Q. You mentioned the expectations this year and kind of the history at Michigan State not meeting those. Is that something you share with the players, or are they kind of too focused on the now to remember some of those years where it didn't really happen for you guys?

MARK DANTONIO: I think that our older players hopefully pass along some of that wisdom to our younger players. I say sometimes to our younger players that they haven't experienced the pain. I think one of the things that you have to do before you can grow is experience a little bit of pain.

When we first came we fought to get respect back, and we were able to do that somewhat in '07. In '08 we took another step forward. We need to continue to take those steps. That's important for our program. But again, it goes back to what I talked about, the senior leadership and the things that we were able to accomplish the last two years. We had great senior leadership.

We still have some players that remember certain things that have happened on the playing field prior to. I think it's also important to recognize that as we move forward, and I talk about those big games. You know, last year not a lot of our players had been in those games before. They had not been in a game where they had played for a Conference Championship at the end of the year.

I think the more times you're able to have those type of situations, the more experience you're able to draw from those. That's going to prove -- that'll be very good for our players to understand that as we move forward.

Q. You talked about how your team enters the season with high expectations. Can you talk about how that affects your rivalry with

the University of Michigan and how it feels to be favored maybe in that rivalry?

MARK DANTONIO: I think that every -- I guess my answer to that would be every college football team in the Big Ten Conference I'm sure puts their hands in a group right now and they break and say, one, two, three, Big Ten champs. Most of us do. I would think everybody has those same aspirations as they move into this year.

As far as the University of Michigan, great rivalry. It's what makes college football great. It's what makes living in Michigan fun. But it's intense. It should be intense. If it wasn't intense, people wouldn't look forward to it. We're just excited to have the opportunity to play.

Q. You talked about your quarterback competition. I was wondering, with two very athletic options at quarterback, are you going to tailor your offense more towards their athleticism, such as implementing an option?

MARK DANTONIO: Well, I said that sort of tongue-in-cheek one time, and I can't believe -- I even saw it in a publication we were going to the option. I sort of said it walking away. But our players will continue to use what's been good for us. We will always add little wrinkles as we move forward, whether it's defensively or offensively. I think you have to continue to do that to stay on the cutting edge.

But our quarterbacks, they need to be able to create plays when things break down for 'em. Sometimes people make it with their quick decision making. Other guys make it with their wheels, with their legs. Other guys make it with a little bit of the offenses tailored to them.

But we'll run the same offense for both quarterbacks. Obviously we look for something a guy does a little bit better than the others, but I don't see any big wrinkles that we would change for one or the other. They're both excellent athletes. They both have size. They've both been in the system. I mentioned Kirk before. Keith has transferred from Oklahoma last year and was on our scout team did an outstanding job running all the different offenses that we had faced and very athletic. So I think both those guys have a tremendous upside.

Q. You guys beat everybody in the conference last year except Ohio State and Penn State. They've won the last four titles.

They're picked one-two this year. How close is Michigan State to that level, and how close is the rest of the conference to those teams that have been the top two?

MARK DANTONIO: When you look at the score last year, not very close. Again, I think we could have played better in both of those games. But as I said earlier, one of the biggest goals is we need to play up, play to the best of our ability, and overachieve when we play those people. That's what it's going to take. We have to develop a certain amount of confidence to play at that level. They're both outstanding programs, and we got handled in both cases.

Q. Kind of staying in that vein, when you walked off the field of the bowl game with Georgia, did you feel like you were walking off the field with a team from an inferior league to the SEC? And what was your feeling about where you guys were, where the SEC was and maybe what's coming up in the next couple of years as far as Big Ten versus SEC?

MARK DANTONIO: When you watch that game and evaluate that game and break it down and everything, we had opportunities to really pretty much put ourselves out in the lead pretty thoroughly really in the first half. I didn't think there was a speed factor. I think it was more a matter of us not being able to run the ball as effectively as we needed to.

I think we did stop the run. We played an outstanding quarterback. Most of his throws were underneath ten yards. He didn't throw it over the top of us.

So the plays that they did make in the second half were two MAs by a safety. When you look at that, you come away walking away feeling like you had an opportunity to win the football game. Games are about matchups. Really everybody I think plays the conferences against each other, and it would be great if you had the All-Conference team from the Big Ten play the All-Conference team from the SEC or the Pac-10.

Maybe they can think of that next. I think unless they do that you'll really never know, because there's so many different matchups. The game really is played with a lot of fumbles, interceptions, things of that nature, that sometimes happen by chance and sometimes are created. There are mistakes made on both sides that create those things.

I don't see that big of a difference between the conferences. You know, when you get into a

game, a championship-type game, many, many things can happen. But that's where I sit. We have guys that can run and play at that level, and I'm sure the rest of our conference does, as well.

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