

**July 24, 2008**



An Interview With:

## **COACH MARK DANTONIO**

COACH DANTONIO: First of all it's great to be back here in Chicago. We look forward to the '08 season. Our guys have been working extremely hard this off-season.

When you look back at the last year a little bit at our season, it's a season that you could really point to and say the difference between winning and losing is that big. We won seven football games, lost six by a very, very small margin.

Had an outstanding group of seniors. I think one of the key ingredients to this year's season will be how our seniors display their leadership. Last year our guys were very, very good in that respect, and we need to continue that.

From looking back the last year, I think one of the other things that are very important in our program right now is we were able to keep our staff intact. Staff continuity is very, very critical to the opportunity to win in this conference and we were able to do that. We have a new facility. Bob Scandolera is a main contributor in that. We moved into that new facility actually Monday. Some boxes are still being unpacked. It's now a new facility and we're looking forward to being there.

With that being said, we understand that it's the work you do where you're at, not where you're at. So we need to continue to work in that direction we want to, and the bowl game was the first step forwards for our program.

Recruiting is going very, very well right now, an outstanding group that is committed. I don't think I've ever been in a program that has had this many commitments early in the process. I think it's probably nationwide right now the way it looks.

But we've got an outstanding group of young people coming. Probably highlighted by a quarterback, an outstanding quarterback, two outstanding running backs. Outstanding skilled receivers and a couple defensive backs, outstanding group of linebackers. So we're looking very much to the future in that regard.

I think it's important to note that our schedule is very difficult. I think last year when I stood here we had the No. 4 ranked schedule in terms of toughness in America. This year we're No. 13. We open at Cal. It will be a big test for us, come back and play Eastern Michigan, Florida Atlantic, then play a Notre Dame team which I'm sure will be looking to rebound.

Outstanding Big Ten Conference schedule. The Big Ten conference, as usual, is one of the premier conferences in America, and I know that we can all sit and talk about which conference is the best, but it's very, very difficult to measure that in terms of year to year, week to week on any given Saturday. And I'm very, very proud to be a part of the Big Ten Conference and everything that we stand for in terms of academics, integrity and performance on the football field.

We've had a great summer. We look forward to the challenges. Where we sit right now as a program, we're on first base. Went to a Tigers game so I guess we'll characterize it in baseball terms. We're on first base trying to get to second. First base was a bowl game for us. It's important to take a step forward, not a step back and move forward with a quest for a championship, and I do believe that that's where we're headed.

And again we've had a great summer so I want to thank everybody for coming. I'll just open it up for questions right now and try to be as quick as possible.

**Q. Coach, you've had a very dynamic one-two punch in the backfield with Caulcrick and Ringer the last few years. How do things change now that Caulcrick has moved on, and how much responsibility do you now put on Ringer's shoulders?**

COACH DANTONIO: Javon Ringer is one of the premier running backs in America in the Big Ten Conference. He's an outstanding young person, and many, many times you find the opportunities to talk about one particular player. I can't say enough about Javon as a person. In terms of how he'll handle the carries, he had over -- I think he had over 250 carries last year. Jehu had about the same.

I believe in this day and age there's got to be two-tailback system or three. We've used three at Cincinnati at one point in time, they've used two at Ohio State, wherever I've been, we've used two at Michigan State in the past. We'll look for some of the younger players to step up. I think we have great ability with those younger players, Andre Anderson right here from Chicago, Ashton Leggett, A.J. Jimmerson, we'll see how they progress. But Javon certainly will be a lead player for us. He's going to be instrumental in us having success this year.

**Q. Coach, you made the switch from the Big East to the Big Ten and now Rich Rodriguez is doing the same thing. What will he bring to the Big Ten and what should he expect?**

COACH DANTONIO: I think what he brings to the Big Ten is a great football awareness in terms of what he's been able to do. He's done outstanding things at West Virginia. He's taken a program at West Virginia and built it to a national contender. I think without question that will be his quest to do it at the University of Michigan now. So outstanding recruiter, worker, outstanding staff.

So the Big Ten Conference, very competitive. I guess comparing it to the Big East, I was only in the Big East for three years, but I see the Big Ten Conference as a conference where anybody sort of can rise up and play and win in any particular game and I think evidence to that is the success that Northwestern has had in the past and all the various teams. You've seen so many teams make it to the Rose Bowl, you've seen in Illinois last year come from wherever they came from in the bottom the year before right up to the top, so it can happen. I guess you'll have to ask him about that, though. Great coach, though.

**Q. Coach, you used the analogy of being on first base. How realistic is it to think that maybe you can make it all the way home and challenge for the championship this year?**

COACH DANTONIO: I think if you don't talk about championships within your football team and in your program, you're doing your players a disservice and selling them short. Last year every single game we went into, we expected to win. And I can honestly say we had a chance to win every single game going into the last three or four minutes of the game. So it's not as far a way as you might think, and then again, you know, it's not as close as you would imagine. So again, I believe that that's going to take place in terms of what kind of senior leadership you have, how you get through the tough times, how you handle adversity, how you're able to bounce back after a tough loss, how healthy can you stay, so there's a lot of things that really factor into that. But our goal will be to win a Big Ten Championship this year, and I have no problems standing up here staying that. I said last year our goal was to go to a bowl game, and we were able to accomplish that, so I think Spartan Nation is excited, and that's the way it should be.

**Q. You mentioned Illinois and just a lot of people were mentioning how well they did last year. You all are kind of the popular pick to be this year's Illinois, so to speak, to be the Big Ten team most likely to make that jump. What are your thoughts on that?**

COACH DANTONIO: They're factoring us up. My thoughts on that is everybody has an opportunity in this conference; you've seen that again and again. I've already alluded to that. How we play down the stretch will be important. We lost some games last year in the closing minutes of the game. We lost one double-overtime game. We lost a couple games where we had the lead. We lost a game where we almost came back and had a chance to win at the end. So we have to finish games at the end.

I think it's important to note, though, we have to get to the point where we're close at the end. You can't lose sight of just -- you have to get there, also. It's not just finishing the game. You have to play well enough to be in that situation at the end of the game. Last year we were.

As I said, we had some great senior leadership, and I would say if you're going to win a championship or have a great football season your seniors have to play their best football. Last year I think our seniors played their best football. We're going miss some of those guys. We've lost good players. We lost Devin Thomas, as well, wide

receiver. We have to replace some key people, but I do think our players are working extremely hard, and I think our spring is indicative for us being able to do that.

**Q. The previous Michigan State regime had a lot of focus on Jucos, Ervin Baldwin and Devin Thomas, and your recruiting has avoided that. Can you speak about the philosophy behind that?**

COACH DANTONIO: Junior college players are recruited usually to address a specific need. At times we will do that and at times other programs do that. I think at a place like Michigan State, with the past that we have and the history that we have, it's important that our players understand that history and understand that they're just -- I always talk about being just a piece of dust floating through. We have to make our own mark.

Sometimes it takes five or six year to understand what being at Michigan State is all about. I think it's difficult for a guy to come into our last few years of playing football. He's going to play one season getting his feet on the ground, next season he possibly could have a great year, Ervin did, Jehuu did, Devin did. And then they're gone. So do they really ever get the taste of what it means to be at Michigan State? I think that's what we're looking for. I think we're looking for that passion. They played with great passion but now they're gone and it's a little bit more of a quick-fix attitude in my mind.

So we're going to recruit to longevity in this program, and I think that most teams probably do that. But there are times when you need to address a specific need, and I'm sure that's what happened.

**Q. You mentioned losing Devin Thomas. Can you talk about some the guys you're counting on to step in to replace his production?**

COACH DANTONIO: Yeah, we've got -- Devin, first of all, caught almost 1,200 yards of passes last year, I think 73 passes. He had an outstanding junior season actually. I think that Mark Dell who was a starter last year, was a true freshman throughout the entire year, he's raising his game. He had a great spring. B.J. Cunningham is a guy who would have played last year. He's a guy that I think we can look for great things from. Fred Smith is an incoming receiver that's one of the top receivers in the state of

Michigan and in the Midwest last year. We expect great things from him, as well.

So we've got some guys. I think we bring in three freshmen we've graduated some other guys moving through the process. Deon Curry had a solid year last year, will be a senior. It will be important to have him step up. Sometimes it's what your quarterback can do, your ability to run the ball, if he's able to give the wide receivers opportunities, as well. It's a team game. We've got guys that catch the football, guys that make big plays, and we'll look to use them specifically. So can we get the same production out of one particular person? That's tough. But can we do it as a committee? We're going to look forward to doing that.

**Q. The top three in the preseason this year in the poll Ohio State, followed by Wisconsin, Illinois. Do you sense that the Big Ten is in a transition, or is this just one of those anomaly years before like Michigan and Penn State get back up there? What's your sense of it?**

COACH DANTONIO: Well, outside of being in the Big East for three years, I've been in the Big Ten since '95. So throughout that time what I've seen is people coming out of nowhere and playing very, very well. 1999 we were picked to be 9th, I believe, ended up 10-2. So, you know, I think it can happen for any football team in this conference. I think that's basically the case probably across the nation. We have these things and have these magazines that set forth the favorites and talk about all different people coming back, but the reality is Devin Thomas, to give you an example, didn't catch a pass last year in our spring football game. He caught six passes last year for 60 yards, so the transition that he made, the turnaround that he made, is just as indicative as the turnaround that Illinois made and that another team can make in 2008.

So as I said earlier, we'll prepare for every single game with the idea that we have an opportunity to win that football game. If we tackle well, if we catch the ball well, if we block effectively and don't turn the ball over, do the things that are necessary to win a football game. So I don't know if I'm answering that question, but if I'm not, I'm getting better.

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