

Michigan State Athletics Director Ron Mason knew what he wanted when he conducted a national search for a new football coach. Mason looked for a coach with a proven track record. He pursued a coach who not only consistently produced winning teams, but a coach who won championships. He also searched for a coach who had gained a reputation for turning around ailing programs.

Mason found the perfect fit for the Michigan State vacancy in veteran head coach John L. Smith, who ranks No. 14 among active NCAA I-A football coaches with 110 career wins. In 14 years as a head coach, Smith has produced six conference champions (two Conference USA, two Big West and two Big Sky) while 11 of his teams have participated in postseason play.

Smith takes over a Spartan football program at a crossroads. Michigan State has compiled a 7-17 record (.292) in Big Ten games over the last three seasons and the Spartans have made only one serious bid in the conference race (1999) since winning their last league championship in 1990.

He inherits a team that ranked No. 18 in the 2002 preseason polls but finished just 4-8 overall, 2-6 in Big Ten action.

Before taking a closer look at his 2003 Spartans, it's time to learn more about Michigan State's 23rd head football coach.

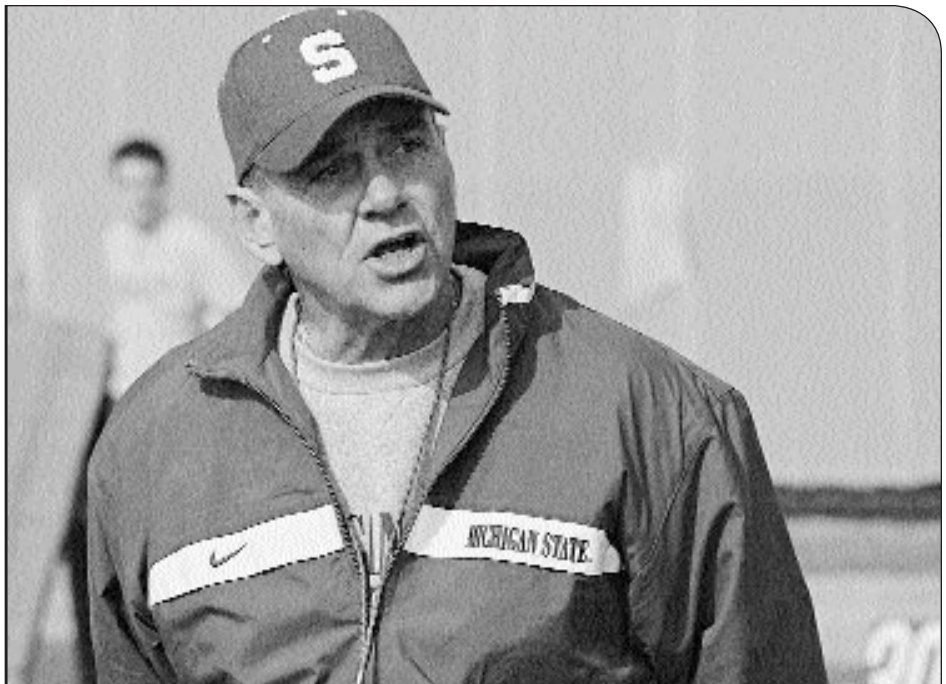
JOHN L. SMITH'S OFFENSIVE PHILOSOPHY:

"Our offense is perhaps best described as fast-break football. With the spread offense, our goal is to make our opponent defend the entire field. We want the opponent to be concerned about defending the width of the field and the vertical field. We accomplish that goal by taking a player out of the backfield and lining him up at another wide receiver position. We're going to look to throw the football first, then run it second. This approach is exactly opposite the way most coaches in the Big Ten approach things on the offensive side of the ball.

"When defenses begin to bump personnel out of the box to defend the width of the field, that's when our running game comes into play. There comes a point in every ballgame where we simply have to run it. When ahead late in the game, we're going to want to run the football to take time off the clock. If behind late in the game, we're going to need to run the football to convert the third-and-short or fourth-and-short plays. The running game helps decide the outcome of every game. We have to be able to run the football to win games. If we can't spread the defense out and do some damage running the football, then it's going to be a long day for our offense. Yes, we're going to throw the ball up and down the field, but there comes a time in every game when we're going to need to get the job done on the ground in order to win the game."

JOHN L. SMITH'S DEFENSIVE PHILOSOPHY:

"We don't subscribe to the rubber-band philosophy. We don't believe in the bend, but don't



▲ John L. Smith came to Michigan State following five seasons at Louisville (1998-2002) where he led the Cardinals to unprecedented success. Smith compiled a 41-21 record, including five-straight bowl appearances and back-to-back Conference USA titles in 2000-01.

break approach to defense. That's simply not our philosophy. Our goal is to make big plays on defense. We're going to create turnovers. With an aggressive approach, we also understand that we're going to give up some big plays. This is a high risk, high reward approach to the game. We have to win the battle of big plays. We're going to allow some big plays, but if we create more big plays on defense then we're still going to end up winning the game.

"We like to be aggressive on the defensive side of the ball, especially with what we do with the guys up front. We're 4-3 in nature, but we like disguising coverages from our two-deep look. We'll play man free more than any other coverage. We're going to line up and be aggressive, normally sending five guys. Our defensive makeup is 'get after people.' We actually end up running a lot of the old 'double eagle' and 'bear' stuff that the Chicago Bears used to run. We want to force teams to have to throw the football to try to win games."

ON CHANGING ATTITUDES:

"It's crucial that our players tear off the rearview mirror. If they continue to look back, it only creates a negative image because what they see in the rearview mirror is a losing team. The players must look out the windshield and focus on the road ahead. Some of our players need a complete attitude change. They must begin believing that this team is going to win. Each player also must understand his role in making this team a winner. Our players have to realize that they're going to be expected to do what's right not only on

the football field, but also in the classroom and in the community. If players do what they're supposed to do every day of the week then Saturday will take care of itself. Learning this approach will help change a lot of attitudes.

"We didn't spend a lot of time studying film from last year. We reviewed tape only to get an overview of what the team looked like offensively and defensively. We got some initial impressions of where some guys should line up, but we conducted open auditions in the spring. Every position was wide open, so every player had an opportunity to prove himself. The players have been given a clean slate, so we're finding out what they want to do with that slate.

"I really liked the attitude the team displayed in the spring. We're not going to win games this season because we're more talented than our opponents, but we're going to win games with our attitude. We have a foundation of belief that we're going to build upon."

HIS EXPECTATIONS:

"We want to challenge for the Big Ten championship every year. This year is no exception, but we have to start building a program.

"Our first goal is to send the seniors out as winners. Our second goal is to get to a bowl game. If you accomplish those two goals, then you're probably in the hunt for the league title.

"This senior class has a chance to leave its legacy by starting that tradition. The seniors have an opportunity to begin building the foundation for a championship football program."

POSITION-BY-POSITION BREAKDOWN

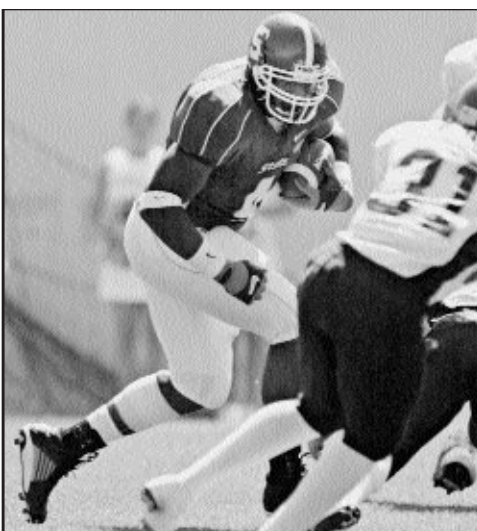
Michigan State returns 16 starters overall from last year's 4-8 team, including six on offense, eight on defense and two specialists. First-year head coach John L. Smith takes a position-by-position look at the 2003 Spartans.

OFFENSIVE SCOUTING REPORT

Despite the presence of Biletnikoff Award winner Charles Rogers in the lineup, Michigan State's offense struggled in 2002, primarily because it lacked a consistent running game. The Spartans ranked 10th in the Big Ten and No. 66 nationally in rushing, averaging 142.4 yards per game. Michigan State failed to rush for 100 yards in seven of 12 games last season. As a result, the Spartans finished near the bottom of the league in total offense (No. 8 at 317.0 yards per game) and scoring (No. 9 at 26.3 points per game).

OFFENSIVE LINE

Eight lettermen return on Michigan State's offensive line, including five players with starting experience. The returning starters are left guard Joe Tate (6-5, 295, Sr.), right guard Paul Harker (6-3, 302, Sr.) and right tackle Steve Stewart (6-5, 306, Sr.). Stefon Wheeler (6-5, 319, So.), who started the last three games of the 2002 season, takes over for two-year starter Ulish Booker at left tackle while Chris Morris (6-4, 291, So.) ranks as the heir apparent to the starting job at center following the retirement of Brian Ottney, who started 33-straight games for the Spartans from 2000-02. Back-up



▲ Junior Eric Knott should have plenty of opportunities to showcase his pass-catching ability in Michigan State's spread offense. Knott led the team in receptions four times in 2002.

right guard William Whitticker (6-6, 317, Jr.) has 19 career starts to his credit.

SMITH TALKS ABOUT THE OFFENSIVE LINE:

"The offensive line has to be considered the No. 1 strength of this football team. We have experienced players returning at each position and we're expecting a lot in return. When it comes to offensive line play, there's no substitute for experience. At most positions, athleticism is the key but not on the offensive line where technique is so important.

"We're certainly going to miss Brian Ottney's

leadership, experience and toughness but I like the nucleus provided by veterans Paul Harker, Joe Tate and Steve Stewart. Those guys add a great deal of stability and maturity to the offensive lineup. I honestly believe that a team is only as good as its seniors, so they are the perfect players to help lay the foundation for our football program.

"Harker and Tate are two blue-collar guys and they're exactly what we're looking for in a student-athlete. Stewart could be as good a tackle as there is in the Big Ten if he manages his weight because he has outstanding athleticism for a guy his size. And Stefon Wheeler is a promising young player."

TIGHT END

Veteran tight ends Eric Knott (6-3, 267, Jr.) and Jason Randall (6-5, 255, Jr.) figure to play major roles in Michigan State's offensive game plan.

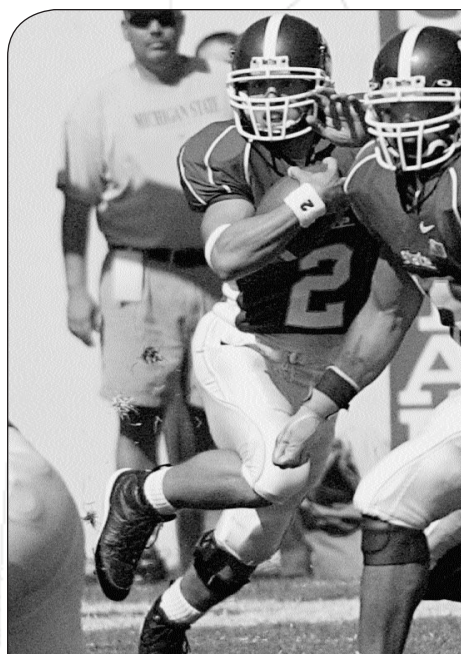
Knott, a top contender for the John Mackey Award, ranked second on the team in receptions, behind All-American Charles Rogers, with 35 for 349 yards (10.0 avg.) and four touchdowns. He paced the Spartans in catches four times.

Randall, known primarily for his blocking skills, has emerged as a pass-receiving threat. He finished fourth on the team in catches with 20 for 255 yards (12.8 avg.) and three scores.

Others who should figure prominently in the playing rotation at tight end are Matt Walters (6-3, 247, R-Jr.) and Ryan Woods (6-4, 259, So.).

SMITH TALKS ABOUT THE TIGHT ENDS:

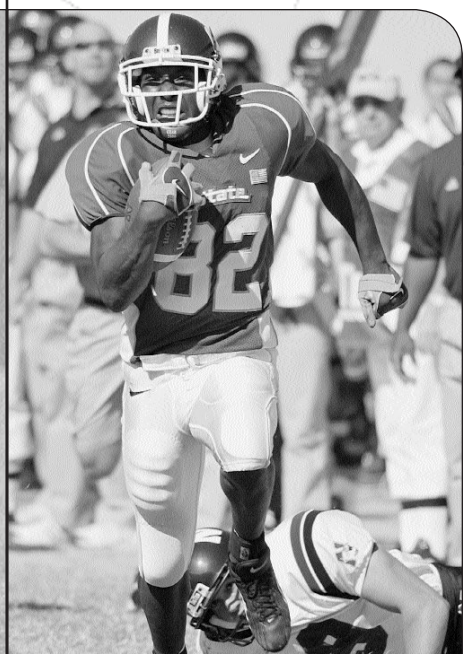
"We're blessed with both talent and depth at tight end, so we have the luxury of utilizing a lot of two tight-end sets in our offensive package.



▲ Sophomore Agim Shabaj should waste little time making his presence felt in Michigan State's spread offense. In 2002, Shabaj had six catches for 45 yards.



▲ Sophomore Kyle Brown adds big-play potential to the Spartan passing game. Brown saw limited action at receiver in 2002 but averaged a team-best 21.7 yards on kickoff returns.



▲ Senior Ziehl Kavanaght, who had 11 catches for 123 yards in 2002, will be expected to take on a greater role in the Spartan passing game.

"Both Eric Knott and Jason Randall have displayed the ability to go down field and become pass-receiving threats. They both can block and protect.

"For his size, Knott is extremely athletic. He's a big man that can run and catch the football. Knott's amazing to watch after the catch because he simply uses his brute strength to run over linebackers and defensive backs."

WIDE RECEIVER

The biggest challenge on offense is filling the shoes of 2002 Biletnikoff Award winner Charles Rogers, who caught a school-record 68 passes for 1,351 yards and 13 touchdowns. Rogers, selected No. 2 overall by Detroit in the 2003 NFL Draft, led the Big Ten in receiving yards (112.6 per game) and TD receptions while ranking third in receptions (5.67 per game). Also gone is starting flanker BJ Lovett, who had a career-best 33 catches for 383 yards and four TDs last season.

Ziehl Kavanaght (5-11, 180, Sr.) is penciled in the starting lineup at split end. Kavanaght caught 11 passes for 123 yards (11.2 avg.) in 2002.

Kyle Brown (6-1, 205, So.), who earned his rookie stripes as a special teams contributor in 2002, is the top candidate at the flanker position. Brown averaged a team-best 21.7 yards on nine kickoff returns.

SLOT receiver Agim Shabaj (5-10, 194, So.) figures to be a key weapon in Michigan State's offensive playbook. Shabaj, slowed most of the 2002 season by knee injuries, had six catches for 45 yards.

Matt Trannon (6-6, 228, So.), Aaron Alexander (6-5, 205, So.) and Ben Steckler (6-4, 219, So.) also should push for playing time at wide receiver.

SMITH TALKS ABOUT THE WIDE RECEIVERS:

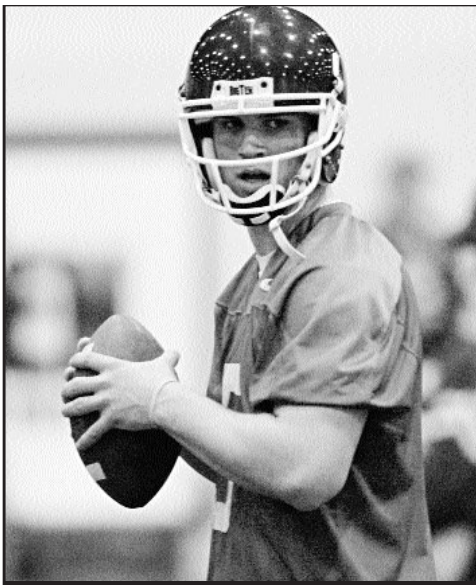
"We have some athletes at wide receiver but our numbers are limited. I've made a rule that receivers can't get hurt this fall. Seriously, we can't afford any injuries at this position.

"Some freshmen receivers will have to play immediately. With our throw first and run second philosophy, we can't wait for these guys to mature. We know they're going to make some mistakes early on but they're going to gain valuable experience.

"With an inexperienced receiving corps, Ziehl Kavanaght needs to step up and provide both production and leadership.

"Both Kyle Brown and Agim Shabaj made some plays during the spring. We got the ball in their hands and they made things happen. We must continue to put those guys in situations where they can turn modest gains into big plays.

"Aaron Alexander made great strides as a receiver over the last three weeks of spring ball. He's a big target with surprising quickness. Once he has the ball in his hands, he has shown the ability to make people miss. Aaron is a great competitor, so I also like what I see from him when he's in the hud-



▲ Red-shirt freshman Drew Stanton capped off a spectacular spring by completing nine-of-15 passes for 181 yards and a touchdown in the final scrimmage.

dle. He wants the football and I like that attitude a lot. If Aaron continues to work hard, he could become a big-play threat in this offense.

"Our ace in the hole is Matt Trannon, who could emerge as a bona fide playmaker. Trannon creates match-up problems because of his combination of size and speed. After being away from the game for a full year, the only question is how quickly will Trannon be ready to contribute."

QUARTERBACK

The most topical question for the coming year revolves around selecting the starting quarterback. Drew Stanton (6-3, 222, R-Fr.) heads into preseason camp ranked slightly ahead of Damon Dowdell (6-1, 225, Jr.) in the bid to run Michigan State's spread offense.

Stanton completed 39-of-58 throws (.672) for 469 yards and four touchdowns in four spring scrimmages. In five starting assignments in 2002, Dowdell connected on 82-of-144 passes (.569) for 989 yards (197.8 per game), eight TDs and three interceptions. He also finished seventh in the Big Ten in passing efficiency with his 126.8 rating.

Veteran quarterback Jeff Smoker (6-3, 224, Sr.) seeks full reinstatement to the active roster in 2003. Smoker started the first seven games of the 2002 season before being suspended for the final five games after admitting a substance abuse problem. He completed 114-of-203 throws (.562) for 1,593 yards, 13 TDs and 10 interceptions. Smoker has compiled a 13-11 record in 24 career starts.

SMITH TALKS ABOUT THE QUARTERBACKS:

"Drew Stanton and Damon Dowdell waged a great battle for the starting job in the spring and

it will resume when preseason camp opens. I thought the competition brought out the best in both players. We certainly have identified two players at the position who are capable of winning some football games.

"Stanton's arm is definitely his strength. He can really throw the football. Stanton is a young, talented quarterback who needs to get some playing time.

"Dowdell's greatest asset is his athleticism. He puts a lot of pressure on the defense because he's such a threat as both a runner and passer.

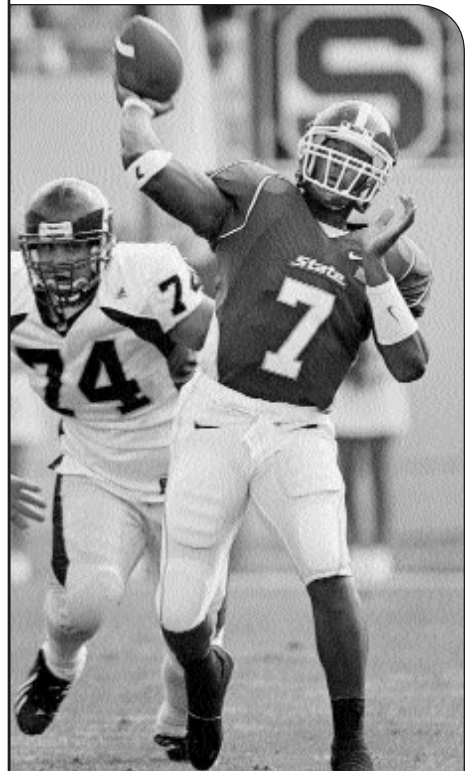
"We may tweak the offense a little depending upon the guy who lines up under center. We'll mold the offense to fit his talents.

"Jeff Smoker is the wild card at this position. In the spring, he wasn't allowed to compete for a spot on the first team. If he earns full reinstatement in August, then he'll be allowed to compete for the starting job."

"We're extremely fortunate to have three quality players at the quarterback position. Regardless of what league you're playing in — from Pee Wee to the National Football League — the kid pulling the trigger at quarterback can help win a lot of football games."

RUNNING BACK

The running back job belongs to Tyrell Dortch (5-10, 203, Jr.), who has completed a courageous comeback after breaking his right lower leg against



▲ In his five starting assignments last season, Damon Dowdell completed 57 percent of his passes for 989 yards, eight touchdowns and only three interceptions.

Wisconsin in the sixth game of the 2001 season. Dortch, who sat out the entire 2002 season rehabbing from the injury, ran with more abandon and confidence as spring practice progressed. In his first two seasons (2000-01), he rushed for 267 yards (5.9 avg.) while serving as (Atlanta Falcons) T.J. Duckett's understudy at tailback.

Jaren Hayes (5-9, 184, So.) also figures to earn his share of playing time at running back in 2003. Hayes finished third on the team in rushing in 2002, with 340 yards on 61 attempts (5.6 avg.). He recorded the first 100-yard game of his career in the season finale vs. Penn State, gaining 113 yards on 23 rushes.

SMITH TALKS ABOUT THE RUNNING BACKS:

"We may not have the prototype player for the one-back offense on our roster but that's okay because there's some talent there at running back. I'd prefer to line up with a 6-foot-3, 230-pound running back. At times in the spread offense, the running back acts like a tight end in terms of pass protection, so he'll be asked to step up and block. For this offense to thrive, it really needs a 1,000-yard rusher in the backfield. Time will tell if somebody's ready to step up and give us that kind of production.

"Tyrell Dortch is a quality running back who had a solid spring. Dortch runs with toughness and he's shown the ability to make people miss. I only wish that he was a little bigger, but I wouldn't trade him for anybody because I love his attitude. He gained

confidence with every hit he took on his leg in the spring. Dortch also has shown the ability to come out of the backfield and catch the football, which really puts a lot of pressure on the defense. The only question I have is whether he's physical enough to handle the pass-protection assignments.

"We're also going to need some consistent production from Jaren Hayes."

DEFENSIVE SCOUTING REPORT

Coach Smith takes over a Spartan defensive unit that ranked near the bottom of the Big Ten in rushing defense (No. 9 at 213.8 yards allowed per game), total defense (No. 8 at 402.7 ypg.) and scoring defense (No. 9 at 33.2 points per game). Michigan State surrendered 2,566 yards on the ground in 2002 – the fourth-highest total allowed in school history.

DEFENSIVE LINE

Michigan State's defensive front features eight returning lettermen, including all four starters from 2002.

The Spartans are set at defensive end with Greg Taplin (6-5, 259, Sr.) and Clifford Dukes (6-3, 264, Jr.). Taplin, who begins his third season as a starter along the defensive front, produced a career-best 38 tackles in 2002. Dukes led the Spartans in sacks (4 for 22 yards) and ranked second in tackles for losses (8.5 for 31).

The projected starters at defensive tackle include Brandon McKinney (6-3, 312, Jr.) and Matthias Askew (6-6, 294, Jr.). McKinney, who earned four starting assignments a year ago, recorded 26 tackles, including two sacks (7 yards). Askew ranked second among defensive linemen in tackles with 46.

Next in terms of experience at defensive tackle are Kyle Rasmussen (6-4, 303, Sr.), Kevin Vickerson (6-5, 298, Jr.) and Greg Yeaster (6-1, 269, Jr.). Rasmussen, who has 28 career starts under his belt, has paced the defensive line in tackles each of the last two seasons, registering 49 stops in 2002. Vickerson started six games and contributed 42 tackles. Yeaster broke into the starting lineup late last season, earning starts against Purdue and Penn State.

Clifton Ryan (6-2, 279, R-Fr.) has emerged as a strong candidate for playing time at defensive end.

SMITH TALKS ABOUT THE DEFENSIVE LINE:

"We're expecting big things from Greg Taplin and Clifford Dukes. They're athletic defensive ends that can run. I was really pleased with their development in the spring, especially when you consider that they had to learn a different technique. Now, Taplin and Dukes have an idea how to set the corner and stretch the corner.

"I really believe Dukes has an opportunity to become a special player. He has the ability to make big-time plays.



The Spartan coaching staff is expecting big things from junior defensive end Clifford Dukes in 2003. Last year, Dukes paced the team in sacks, with four for 22 yards. ▲

"The key will be if our inside guys (tackles) and inside linebackers can plug up the middle enough to bubble things to the edge because our ends do run well enough to make plays.

"Clifton Ryan had a productive spring and has put himself into a position to contribute at defensive end this fall."

LINEBACKER

Michigan State will build its 2003 defense around its linebacker corps, featuring Ronald Stanley (6-0, 234, Jr.), Mike Labinjo (6-1, 270, Sr.) and Seth Mitchell (6-2, 249, So.).

Stanley moves into his third season as a starting linebacker, his first year at the MIKE position. Last year, he more than doubled his 2001 production, ranking second on the Spartans in tackles with 99. Stanley posted a team-best nine tackles for losses (21 yards) and played as well as anyone during the second half of the 2002 season, averaging 12 tackles per game during a four-game stretch.

In 2003, Labinjo returns to the SAM position after playing MIKE linebacker most of last season. He hopes to regain the form that made him one of the Big Ten's top defensive playmakers in 2001. Last year, Labinjo finished fifth on the team in tackles with 62 stops.

Mitchell became a factor when he joined the starting lineup at MIKE linebacker during the second half of the 2002 season, producing 29 tackles in just six games. In 2003, he is the projected starter at the WHIP position.

Monquiz Wedlow (5-11, 199, Sr.), who finished third on the team in tackles with 90 in 2002, is the top candidate to play the BANDIT position. Wedlow also ranked second on the team in sacks with three for 18 yards.

SMITH TALKS ABOUT THE LINEBACKERS:

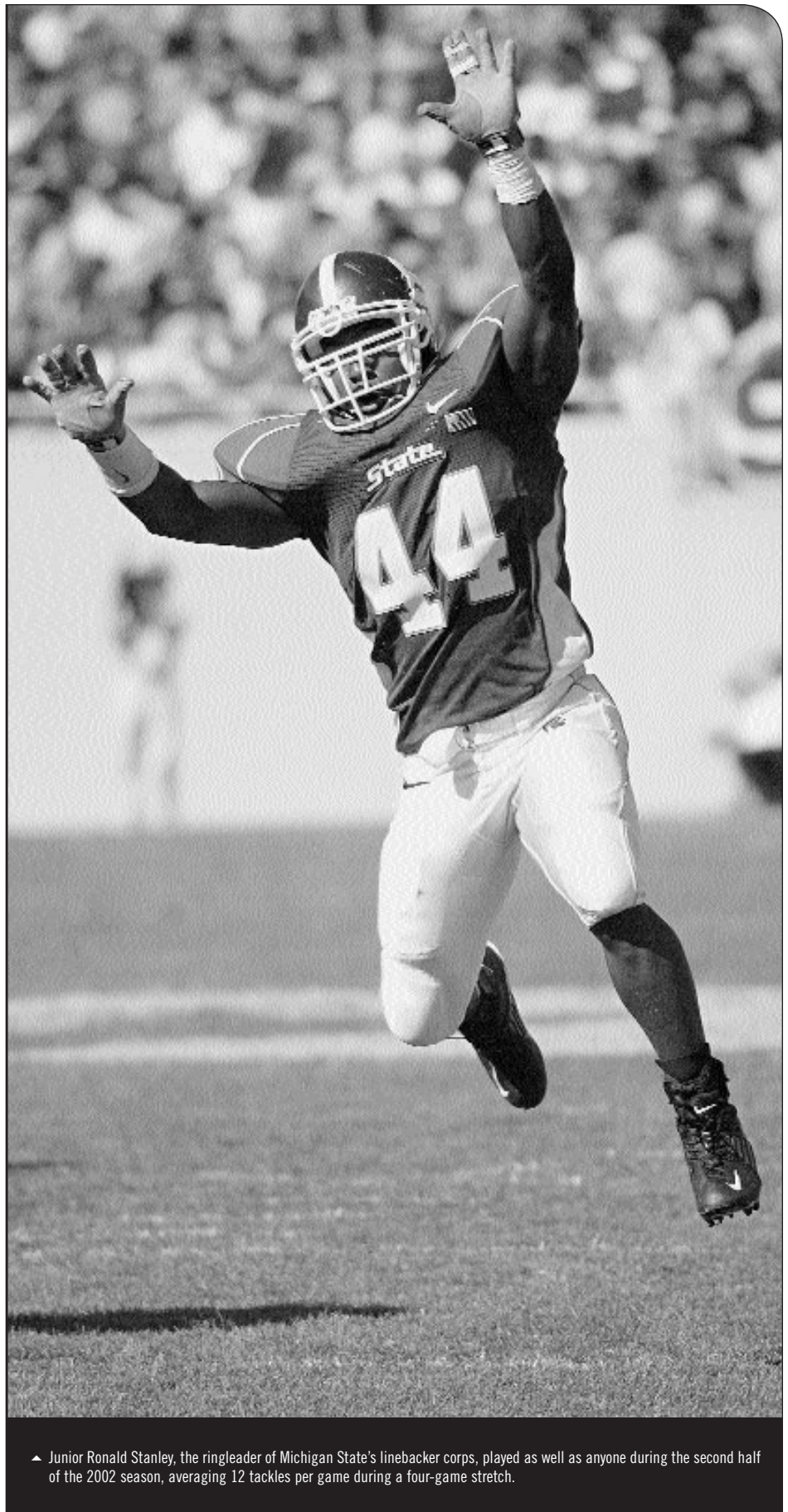
"There's no question that the starting linebackers are the strength of our defense.

"Ronald Stanley is a great football player and a remarkably consistent playmaker. Seth Mitchell adds a lot to the lineup if he can remain healthy. Mitchell's a capable playmaker, with some leadership ability. And Mike Labinjo is going to play a major factor in determining our level of success this fall. Labinjo's hungry, wanting to get back to playing well on a consistent basis.

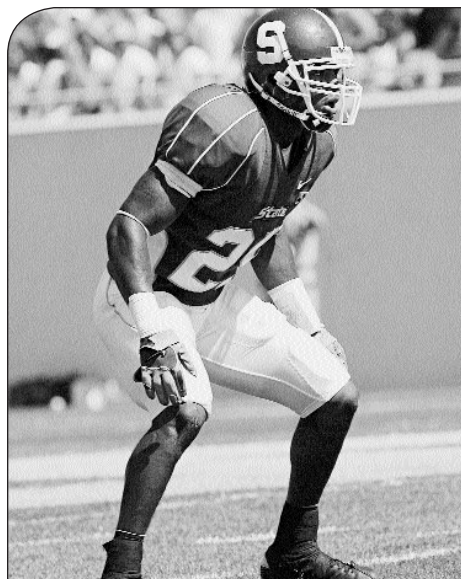
"Monquiz Wedlow is a versatile player who fits the BANDIT role perfectly. He's another guy who always seems to be around the football."

DEFENSIVE BACK

The toughest challenge on defense is retooling a defensive secondary that lost three starters, including the team's leading tackler in strong safety Thomas Wright (126 stops). Despite all the defensive breakdowns in 2002, the Spartans still managed to rank third in the Big Ten and No. 30 in the NCAA, allowing 188.8 passing yards per game.



▲ Junior Ronald Stanley, the ringleader of Michigan State's linebacker corps, played as well as anyone during the second half of the 2002 season, averaging 12 tackles per game during a four-game stretch.



▲ Junior Jason Harmon anchors the Spartan secondary from his free safety position. Harmon recorded 64 tackles and three interceptions in 2002.

Free safety Jason Harmon (5-11, 195, Jr.) ranks as Michigan State's most experienced player in the defensive backfield, with nine career starts. Harmon ranked second on the team in interceptions (three) and fourth in tackles (64).

Eric Smith (6-1, 196, So.) is the top candidate to replace Wright at strong safety. Smith, the Spartans' most improved defensive player in 2002, recorded 38 tackles.

The corner jobs belong to Ashton Watson (6-0, 177, So.) and Roderick Maples (5-10, 190, Jr.).

SMITH TALKS ABOUT THE DEFENSIVE BACKS:

"The secondary scares me. We lost three starters back there and we're terribly thin at cornerback. The secondary is another area where young guys will receive their baptisms by fire.

"On a positive note, Roderick Maples had as good a spring as I can remember a cornerback having in all my years of coaching. Maples has a good understanding of what to do and he's very athletic. He proved that he's ready to play out on the island.

"Ashton Watson got some valuable playing experience last year and he continues to improve.

"Our corners will determine how aggressively we play on defense. If our starting corners remain healthy and hold up when left on the island, then we will be aggressive, blitz and get after people up front. If they can't stay healthy or hold up when left on the island, then we'll be forced to play a vanilla package and not take chances. Secondary play is key in determining our style of play. Our personnel will dictate the defensive approach we take because we have to give our players an opportunity to have success.

"Jason Harmon and Eric Smith are capable safeties. They both can bump out and cover plus

they're physical enough to stop the run. Those guys will come up and deliver hits."

SPECIAL TEAMS SCOUTING REPORT

Dave Rayner (6-2, 203, Jr.) heads into his third season as Michigan State's starting placekicker. Rayner finished second on the team in scoring with 64 points in 2002. He converted 10-of-16 field-goal attempts (.625) and 34-of-35 extra-point tries (.971). Rayner ranked sixth in the Big Ten in field goals made at 0.83 per game.

Jason Daily (6-2, 179, Sr.) handles the punting chores for the second-straight year. Daily finished fifth in the Big Ten in punting with his 40.4-yard average overall. His consistency improved during the second half of the season, averaging 41.3 yards in Big Ten games to rank fourth among the league's punters.

Jaren Hayes (5-9, 184, So.) averaged 18.9 yards on 31 kickoff returns. His 585 kickoff return yards rank fifth on MSU's single-season chart. Kyle Brown (6-1, 205, So.) averaged a team-best 21.7 yards on nine kickoff returns.

Ziehl Kavanaght (5-11, 180, Sr.) ranked sixth in the Big Ten in punt returns with his 8.7-yard average. Kavanaght returned 33 punts for 287 yards, the eighth-best single-season total in Spartan history, including an 88-yarder for a score against Northwestern.

Agim Shabaj (5-10, 194, So.), who returned four punts for 35 yards in 2002, could take on an expanded role in the return game.

Andrew Petterson (6-0, 200, Jr.) ranks as the top candidate to handle duties as snapper in 2003.

During his tenure at Louisville, Smith's teams

gained a national reputation for outstanding special teams play. In 2002, the Cardinals produced six touchdowns from special teams, returning four punts and two kickoffs for scores, and blocking 11 kicks, including nine punts.

SMITH TALKS ABOUT SPECIAL TEAMS:

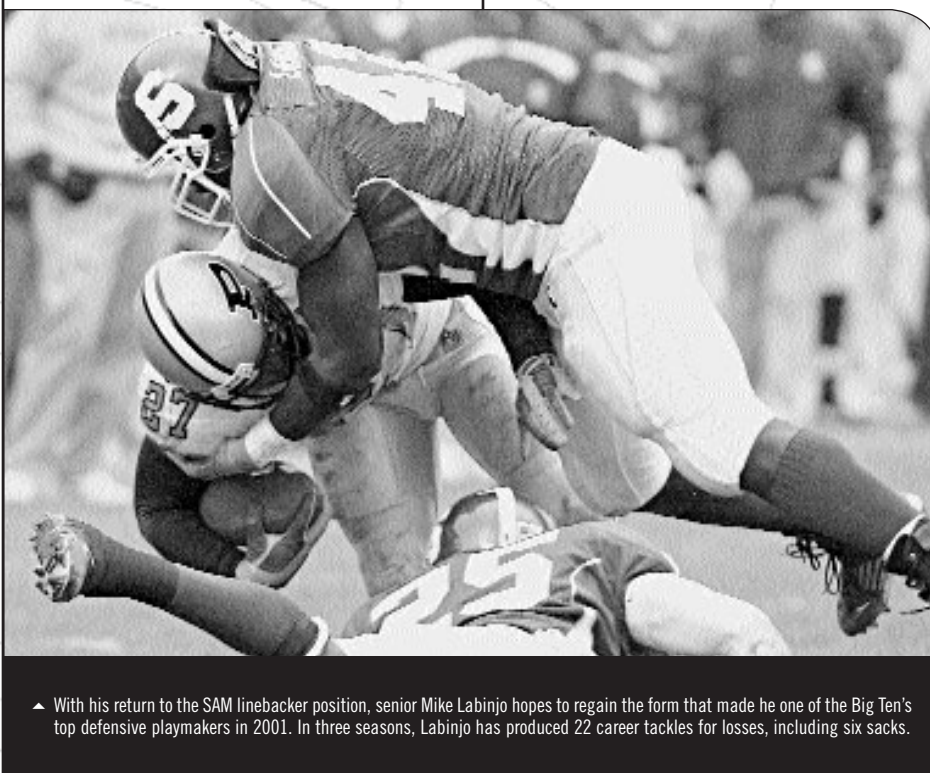
"Far too much attention is focused on the placekicker and punter when it comes to talking about special teams. Special teams success is determined by what the other 10 guys do on the field.

"We have to get some production from our special teams. We like to gamble, take chances because creating big plays on special teams can change the complexion of a game. Special teams can create such an advantage that perhaps we can steal another win or two during the course of a season.

"Dave Rayner is a capable placekicker. Rayner has a powerful leg and I was pleased with the improvement he made in his accuracy. What I want to see from him now is great competitive desire.

"Jason Daily is a solid punter. Daily showed marked improvement late last season and that carried over into the spring.

"We're going to take a look at a number of kick-off and punt return candidates. There are some familiar names like Agim Shabaj, Ziehl Kavanaght, Kyle Brown and Jaren Hayes that will get a close look, but we're also going to give guys like DeAndra Cobb (5-10, 186, Jr.) and Darren Barnett (6-0, 181, So.) an opportunity. This is another area where freshmen can contribute. Look at what Broderick Clark (red-shirt freshman) did for us last year at Louisville, averaging almost 30 yards per kick return while finishing second in the nation."



▲ With his return to the SAM linebacker position, senior Mike Labinjo hopes to regain the form that made him one of the Big Ten's top defensive playmakers in 2001. In three seasons, Labinjo has produced 22 career tackles for losses, including six sacks.