

Big Ten Football Media Days

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Michigan State Spartans

Mel Tucker

Press Conference



Thanks everyone for being here. Commissioner Warren, thank you for your leadership. Thank you for running this organization in a first class manner, and this event today is outstanding. It seems like we're finally getting back to normal and I really appreciate that. I'm looking forward to meeting some new folks today and I see some familiar faces out there and it just is a great feeling. This is my first Big Ten Media Day and so it's a dream come true for me. The Big Ten is an outstanding conference, a lot of history and tradition, a lot of great players, a lot of great coaches, and it is truly a privilege to be here.

I brought three great young men with us, with me today, Drew Beesley, Xavier Henderson, and Jalen Nailor. They're going to do a great job representing Michigan State University and our football program. They're just wonderful guys. They love football. They live football. But they're even better people off the field. I'm really excited about the season. And for a lot of reasons. I'm excited to finally be in Spartan Stadium with our fans. We have some of the most passionate fans in the country and there's a lot of pent up demand for Spartan football and I can't wait to get in there with the fans, the band, the cheer team, Sparty, and our players feel the same way. We have gained ground in our program. Since the end of the season our objective was to aggregate marginal gains across the board in our organization. Coaching, support staff, players, strength and conditioning, nutrition, training room, equipment room, everyone just get a little bit better. Everyone get a little bit better. Do your job a little bit better. You add that up and that's how you get better fast and that's what we have to do. I feel the momentum in our program in every aspect.

I believe that your team is built in the weight room. We've made tremendous strides in our strength and conditioning. We're bigger, faster, stronger. In recruiting we have momentum. We have 34 new players on our roster that we did not have at the end of last season. Some of those players came midyear. Some of those guys came this summer. 15 transfers. Our roster is stronger, it's more competitive, and it's going to lead to a better brand of football.

As a program, we believe in process. We believe in process. We're not focused on the outcome. The process of things that you have to do, the behaviors that you have to exhibit day-in and day-out to build a winning organization, to have consistency and performance, attention to detail, sense of urgency, teamwork, togetherness, a culture of accountability. We're moving in the right direction. We have got a lot of work to do and we're a work in progress, but the process of day-to-day cementing that culture of accountability is -- I feel the momentum. It's coming together. Our players can feel it. Our coaches can feel it. Our donors can feel it. They're excited and we can't wait to get going.

We stress competition at Michigan State, compete to play, compete to stay. Either like it, you love it, you live it. You're at Michigan State, as a player or coach, you better live it because that's what it takes to get to where we need to go. We need to gain ground. We're behind. We're playing catchup. The competitiveness of our roster, that has increased tremendously because of recruiting. Guys know that they're going to have to bring it each and every day in order to get on the field, and that's what we want. Guys are embracing that. They know they're getting better. They know they're going to have to compete. We're just going to keep our head down and continue to go to work. We do have a chip on our shoulder. We really do. We have got a lot to prove. People tell me, Coach, for you this is really like year one. No, it's not year one. It's year two. We got to get this thing moving. There's a sense of urgency in our program and our building and I'm excited about that. When you think about Michigan State, think about Michigan State football, you think of tough, hard-nosed, physical, meat and potatoes, not a lot of French pastries, all-weather football. That's what Michigan State football is all about. Rugged, lunch pail, it's a working program. It's for the people. It's for the fans. There's a certain brand of football that's expected at Michigan State. We recruit to it. We coach to it. That's our culture. That's what we have to look forward to this fall. Culture is a process. Infrastructure precedes culture. We have the pieces in place, the staff, the support staff. We have the resources. We have the infrastructure. We have created a winning culture, a winning mindset. Culture is



everything. When you step in our building, whether you're a recruit, you're a player, it feels different now. You can tell that we're moving in the right direction.

I want to thank all of the Spartans who have welcomed me with open arms since I began February 12th, 2020. It's been truly special. Michigan State is a family. It's a family atmosphere. It's always been that way. From day one I've been, it's been great. They have welcomed me in. Coach, we're glad you're here. We're looking forward to what you're going to bring. That's very special to me and I appreciate that. Michigan State is, has been my dream job since 1997. It's not, this is not just another opportunity for me and for us in East Lansing. This is a dream come true and we need to make it work. Our fans, our alums, 550,000-plus living alumni, our former players, the Spartan Dawgs, they deserve winning football, the brand of football that they expect, tough, physical, relentless. That's what our fans deserve. That's what Spartan football is all about and it's my job to get that done to get that done.

So we have had an off-season conditioning program which we didn't have a year ago. We had spring practice where we gained ground. We have had an excellent summer conditioning program to lead us up into camp which starts in a couple of weeks. So with that, I want to thank you for what you do, getting the word out for our players, our program, amplifying the message. Without you we cannot do what we do, so I really appreciate all of you here and I look forward to seeing you guys, seeing you all and meeting you at some point and with that we'll open it up for questions.

Q. What made you want to coach the Spartans?

MEL TUCKER: That's a great question. What made me want to coach the Spartans? Again, Michigan State gave me my first coaching opportunity in 1997. That's where I started my career. I started here as a graduate assistant in '97 to '98 making \$400 a month for two seasons. And it was, it was a transformative opportunity for me and for my family. And Michigan State has always been a special place to me.

So when the opportunity came for me to come back, it was the toughest decision that I ever had to make in my professional career, but it was the right decision. Michigan State is home for me. I want to give back. Michigan State gave me my start in coaching and I want to bring a National Championship to East Lansing.

Q. You started your career at Michigan State under a young coach named Nick Saban, but you also started your playing career with a young coach named Barry Alvarez. I wonder what lessons you learned from

those two great coaches that you now apply to your current position?

MEL TUCKER: Yeah. I was from Coach Alvarez's first recruiting class in 1990. We were 1-10, 5-6, 5-6 in the Rose Bowl. I learned from Coach Alvarez how to build a program from the ground up and be relentless in that pursuit and resiliency. Coach Alvarez gave us T-shirts after our first season, after our 1-10 season, that said, We Will Win. And he told us, You better wear them on campus. He made us wear those T-shirts. He had a process. He believed in it. He was resilient and relentless, and we were able to get it done and the rest is history. That's what I learned from Coach Alvarez.

Coach Saban, I've known him since I was 17. He recruited me when he was the head coach at Toledo where my dad played. I got a call from Coach Saban when I came home from, came home one day from high school, picked up the phone, said, Hey this is, Hey, boy, this is Coach Saban from the Houston Oilers. I'm, like, Houston Oilers? I'm still, I'm a senior in high school. He said, I just got the job at Toledo and, where your dad played, and you're one of my top recruits, and that's when I got to know Coach Saban. I knew at that time that he was very, very special. So what I learned from Coach Saban, I learned how to coach. I learned how to coach. I learned how to recruit. He told me the first day, he said, Listen, the best players don't necessarily make the best coaches. Oftentimes the best players are not the best coaches. You're going to have to learn how to coach. You're going to have to learn how to recruit. If you pay attention you'll do fine.

So I listened to everything that he said. I wrote everything down. I was a sponge. He's a great teacher, a great motivator. And a great developer of not just players but also of coaches. I've learned, he gave me my start and he laid the foundation for me and this is year 25 for me.

Q. In your opening statement you mentioned the importance of togetherness and teamwork. You also mentioned 33 new players on the roster plus some others. How difficult is it to get that type of togetherness and teamwork when you have that many new players, including players at important positions, like quarterback, linebacker, defensive back, running back, those guys I imagine are going to be on the field, togetherness, teamwork, challenges, with that aspect?

MEL TUCKER: That's a great question. We were very intentional in the very beginning when we arrived at East Lansing about building a winning culture, a culture of connection, connecting with our players, players connecting with each other and building trust and having real authentic relationships. Throughout the COVID



season we did that. We did that. We established the culture, the winning culture, that will allow us to have, to give us the ability to be successful. So that culture was in place by the end of the season. It really was. So when we signed the new guys and we had guys coming in midyear, we had guys coming in in the summer, they came, they came to Michigan State because of the culture because of what they saw, what they heard, what they felt. And then when they got to East Lansing they were welcomed with open arms with the current players, by the current players. There wasn't a lot of sharp elbows in that locker room. We knew we needed some more good players. We knew we needed to gain ground and it was just a matter of, come on in, let's show you how we do it here. And the new players embraced that. The existing players taught that. So because of that culture and because of that atmosphere, the environment and the expectations, we have been able to indoctrinate the new players to our program. Now, at this point in the summer we're all moving forward together, united and as a football team, not just, not just a collection of players.

Q. Coming off of a season of a 2-5 record how do you plan to improve the team?

MEL TUCKER: Thanks for reminding me about that rough season. (Laughing) You were paying attention. Yeah, it was a challenge. How do we plan to improve the team, the ago aggregation of marginal gains. Like I talked about before. Across the board. It's everyone in our organization every department every single day has to get a little bit better at what they do. And if everyone does that, and everyone knows that's important, that's what's required, okay, then you're going to improve. And then recruiting. Obviously good players make you a good coach. Great players make you a great coach. So we recruit every single day. Through the high school ranks and through the portal we have added a significant number of really good football players that have improved our roster, have improved the level of competition at every single position. And guys are having to compete in the weight room, compete in our strength and conditioning. And you practice a lot more than you play, you train a lot more than you play, and when you got a lot of good players, all competing and moving towards the same goal, knowing that they have to fight to get on the field, you can't help but to get better. It's steel sharpening steel and that's what we're doing. Thank you for that question.

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