

Big Ten Football Media Days

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Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Michigan State Spartans

Coach Mel Tucker

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Our next speaker at the podium is Michigan State head coach Mel Tucker. He's entering his fourth season at the helm at East Lansing. Now, the Spartans, they begin their season on Labor Day Friday and are returning four All-Conference performers from just a season ago.

MEL TUCKER: Thanks, everyone, for being here today. It's great to see everyone again as we begin this season.

We have a hungry, determined, and very, very focused football team heading into preseason camp. Our players have worked extremely hard in this out of season and are very, very well prepared to start camp next week.

We have competition at every single position, and probably no doubt the most talent that we've had top to bottom on our roster. We needed more quality depth on our roster, and we addressed that this out of season. I believe competition forces you to be at your best each and every day, and that's how we'll reach our full potential.

I believe we have more team chemistry going into this season, which is very important. We've done more team-building activities and events than we've ever done. It's really brought our team close together, not just the players, but the coaches and the support staff as well.

Last season was a tremendous learning experience for us, not just for the players, but for the coaches and the support staff. Again, we're really, really hungry and excited to get going.

I know one thing about this group of players and this group of coaches, we're going to roll our sleeves up and come to work every single day with a relentless mindset. We have three core values at Michigan State, three core values: tough, disciplined, and selfless. That's what we're all about.

With that, I'm excited to get going next week, and I'll open it up for questions.

Q. Just talking about players, first of all, Noah Kim, what do you see about him that leads you to believe he's ready to compete for a starting quarterback job at this point? What do you like about him as a player?

MEL TUCKER: Noah is a tremendously talented young man. He's a winner. He's got a lot of arm talent. He's very poised. He's very athletic. He's one of the fastest players on our team. He's one of the fastest players on our team. He's got some experience.

When he went in games last season, as you remember, he made it look easy. He's got the demeanor we're looking for. He's a guy that knows our offense, and he's going to do what we ask him to do. He's going to execute.

Q. Given what's happened at Northwestern with the hazing allegations, has that motivated you to take a deeper look at the culture within your own program? And what conversations have you had with the university administration and the conference about hazing?

MEL TUCKER: Our culture is very strong, and our culture starts with connection and authentic relationships and mutual respect. We have that. We do have an anti-hazing policy at the university and on our football team. Our players know that. I talked to our athletics director, Alan Haller, and that's going to be one of the topics we cover when we report to camp next Wednesday.

Q. You mentioned about the lessons that you and your staff learned. I'm wondering if you could expand on that a little bit. What things do you feel like as a coaching staff you picked up that you can do better or differently in year four than year three?

MEL TUCKER: Football is a game of attrition, and injury is a part of the game. We had to modify the way we practice. We wanted to make sure we can get our players to the game, to the games. So we changed the way we did some things in spring ball, which was very effective -- how we hit, when we hit, how often we hit. We did a much better job of staying up and staying off the ground.



The studies that we did with our team in the out of season showed that, when players are on the ground in practice, that's when they get hurt the most. So we just modified the way we did some things in spring ball, which really helped us be more productive, keep guys more healthy, staying on the field getting better. We're going to carry that into fall camp. I think that's going to be a huge benefit for us moving forward.

Q. When Matt Ishbia purchased the Phoenix Suns, he said he was going to step away from some of those NIL deals due to conflict of interest. How does the school and the donor base try to step up when a billionaire has to step away from NIL deals?

MEL TUCKER: We have tremendous support at Michigan State with our supporters, our donors. We're strong in the NIL space, and we're going to continue to be strong. We have a lot of our supporters, our donors that are willing to step up and help our young men. So that's not going to be an issue for us.

Q. Mel, do you feel like Deion Sanders kind of took your template for turning a team around and ran with it? And what are the pluses and minuses of the transfer portal and going heavily into it?

MEL TUCKER: Prime has done a great job so far, and I'm pulling for him and the Buffs to get that thing going again. He's got his own process that he's following, obviously, and I think he's going to be wildly successful there.

The portal has been a benefit for us. We've used it to help upgrade our roster. We can fill some needs immediately. Some of the downside that we all know, there's hundreds, if not thousands, of players who have entered the portal and haven't found a home. And that is disturbing. But for us, the portal is here, and we're going to use it to benefit our program any way that we can.

Q. Relinquishing the Penn State home game to Ford Field, talking to Michigan State alumni, there's pros and cons to that. Do you think every time Penn State comes to Michigan State this will be a good option? What are the pluses and minuses of giving up a home game at Spartan Stadium?

MEL TUCKER: This season is going to be a tremendous opportunity for our players, great exposure for our program, a national audience in a pro football arena, which I think is going to be great for our team. It's going to be a great game. We'll be in the Detroit area where we recruit. We have a lot of fans there.

I think that it's a great opportunity. We'll see how it goes,

but I'm looking forward to it.

Q. You mentioned in your opening statement that you and your team went through some team-building exercises in the off-season. Could you expand upon some of those activities and how you think that will impact the season this fall.

MEL TUCKER: Just whether they're dinners or dodgeball tournaments or kickball games or going to movies and things, just activities, just getting our guys together along with the staff, getting to know each other, especially when you have so many newcomers every year, whether it's the freshmen or the transfer guys. It's important that we connect. We want the players to get to know each other outside of football, which is very important.

We've organized more of those activities than we've ever done, and in addition to that, the players have done things on their own, which is even more significant, I think.

We've also brought in, used outside firms that come in and work with our players on team building and leadership and team cohesiveness. With all those things, I feel like our team is closer than we've ever been.

Q. Your first away game for the season is in Iowa City at Kinnick Stadium. That's also Iowa's first home Big Ten game for the season. With new faces on the roster, how do you prepare them for that sort of environment?

MEL TUCKER: That's a tough place to play, we all know that, even when I played for Coach Alvarez at Wisconsin, you always knew you had to strap it up when you went there.

That game is a ways away, and right now we're focused on camp. We start up on Wednesday, and we're going to take it one game at a time.

Our guys will be prepared, and they're going to play hard.

Q. One more question about the team as a whole. The defense, what leads you to believe the defense is ready to take a step and improve over the last two years? I know injuries were a big part of last year. But what did you see this spring and off-season about the defense?

MEL TUCKER: We're a lot healthier now, and we're at full strength. We really addressed some issues with our front seven. We needed to get bigger. We've added three 6'5", 300-plus defensive tackles that have all played major college football. We added four defensive ends, three of



them are four stars, and one, Tunmise Adeleye, a transfer from Texas A&M, who walked in the door at 280.

Then Aaron Brule decided to come back, Jacoby Windmon decided to come back for another year, along with Cal Haladay. And then Jordan Hall you saw in the spring had a really good spring. And Ma'a Gaoteote is still there.

I think our front seven is more stout, which is going to help us stop the run and make things more one dimensional, and it's going to help us on the back end.

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