

# Big Ten Basketball Media Days

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Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

## Michigan State Spartans

Men's Head Coach

### Tom Izzo

KEVIN WARREN: Our next coach to the podium is synonymous with Big Ten men's basketball. Coach Tom Izzo, he's been involved with the greater Lansing community for nearly 40 years. He and his wife started the Izzo Legacy to help support a wide variety of organizations in Michigan, including the House of Promise, which is a residential program to help address the needs for post-trauma survivors.

Coach Izzo, as you all are aware, is the all-time winningest coach in Big Ten basketball. He's the dean of our Big Ten coaches. Truly, truly he lives the game of basketball not only in the Big Ten but around the world.

I'd like to welcome to the podium the head basketball coach at Michigan State University, Coach Tom Izzo.

TOM IZZO: Well, what a great introduction. I think it just means you're getting old (smiling). That's the only way you accomplish things that last a lifetime.

It's been an interesting time for all of us in college sports, college basketball in general. I've had a pretty good summer. I've kind of enjoyed my team, maybe because there's not as many players as I've had. Got a little smaller roster. At the same time we needed improvement, we needed a little togetherness. We did a lot of team-building things. We did a lot of workouts. Stayed pretty injury-free all summer. Then had a couple of injuries, including Jaden Akins, who was out for a couple weeks. But his was the only one of any serious nature that would last two months.

I think our biggest improvement, we needed to get better guard play. We felt like last year we just did not handle the ball, take care of the ball, and push the ball like we'd like to.

There will be times this year where we'll have two and even three point guards in the lineup. Maybe the weakness would be we're going to be very young and inexperienced at center, and every other position I think we're going to be much more experienced.

Joey Hauser had a phenomenal summer. I think he was one of those kids that COVID really hit hard. Did not have



as good a year his first two. But has had a great spring, summer and fall.

Malik Hall has done the same. Those are our two staples.

The other guy that might have had as good a summer as anybody was Tyson Walker and Jaden Akins. Those guys I think have all made big steps. As big a step as anybody was probably A.J. Hoggard losing some more weight, getting to where I think is the spot he should be. He's played very well, shooting it better. But played very well.

Hopefully our defense improves a little bit. I'm a little worried about our rebounding, yet I'm excited for what will be the greatest non-conference schedule in Michigan State history, and maybe one of the greater ones that anybody's played if you ask me.

Questions.

**Q. Obviously Coach K retires, Roy, Jay Wright, I think a lot of people look to the next generation, wonder how much longer you want to do this. How much longer do you want to coach at this level?**

TOM IZZO: I'm going to stand as long as you're here working so you and I can have some talks (smiling).

I look at it, I got a lot of years to go to catch Coach K, a lot of years to go to catch Jim Boeheim. Friends of mine like Tubby and Roy decided, but I've got some years to catch them yet, too. I'm not quite as old as those guys.

I definitely have passed by Jay Wright, one of my good friends, great guys in our profession. I'm going to do it like Jay did. When it's time that I don't enjoy it, when it's time I can't take a redeye from Vegas to Orlando, it will be time to get out.

That is not where I'm at right now in any way, shape or form. In fact, going through what we went through at Michigan State, some issues a couple years ago, the COVID, I'm looking at it just the opposite. I've got some things I'd like to accomplish as a coach, for Michigan State, I think our league.



We have to win another Big Ten championship. 'We' meaning Michigan State, but 'we' meaning the Big Ten. I think there's some exciting things that are happening with our league on campus. Our new athletic director, Alan Haller, and Mel Tucker, I think we got some great things there to build on.

I'd like to make our university better, my program better. I've been in this league so long that I'd like to continue to grow the Big Ten into what could be the greatest, I think is the greatest basketball, but I think could be the greatest conference in the country in all sports.

I got a while yet. You got to put up with me for a little while longer, or maybe better I got to put up with you a little while longer (smiling).

**Q. When we talked a little over a month ago, you talked about the leadership aspect for this team, how that's a bit of a process to figure out. Where is that process at the moment? You spoke a little bit about how A.J. had as strong of a summer as anyone. How important is he in that department?**

TOM IZZO: He is because he's got a voice. Sometimes good, sometimes he's got a voice.

A.J. is going to be my leader. I think he's going to be the guy. Number one, the position mandates it. Your quarterback's got to be the guy that kind of runs your team.

I've been blessed to be at a place -- I didn't Coach Magic Johnson, but you could argue where he's one of the top five best players. Of course, we think he is. I think nobody would argue that he might be the best leader that ever played the sport.

Then I had the kid Mateen Cleaves, who in my era, was the best leader I ever had, I still think one of the best leaders that ever played the sport also.

What is a leader? A leader is the guy that has the ability to make other players around him better than they actually are. It's not just leading by "I do this." That thing about lead by example, I hate that phrase. That's such a cop-out phrase. It means you're only taking care of yourself.

I'm looking for guys that want to bring other people with them. That is still a work in progress for us right now. But we took serious strides this summer. That's why I got all five of my guys here. I thought all five of those guys made some strides. Jaden Akins has become a better leader. Unfortunately out now for six weeks. I do see that still being a work in progress but making big progress on it.

**Q. You alluded to only having 10 guys this year on scholarship. I've heard from some coaches who say you're inevitably going to have 10 to 13 upset because they're not playing as many minutes as they would like. Is that something you can strategize with going forward, or just that the guys that were available this spring and what you felt comfortable with was 10?**

TOM IZZO: Hell, this day and age, from six on they're upset if they're not playing. You don't have to go from 10 to 13.

But there is some truth that it seems like more people are more unhappy, there's more people talking and more people -- I always say we have to keep the distractions and dirtbags away from our guys because there's getting to be a lot more of that.

At the same time I've studied Jay Wright a little bit. I remember when I went to the first Final Four with him, not mine, but his, in '09, and we talked after about what it takes to sustain that. I think he went a little different route, as I did at one point in time. So then he gathered back who and what he is. So have we.

I think what that is is still have a culture, still have some chemistry. I think at the end last year Jay was playing six guys. Turned out okay for him.

I don't know what's going to happen. Practice is a little different. But you're right, you never have 13 guys anymore. It seems like everybody is holding scholarships for whoever knows who or what, where or why.

I didn't do it for that reason. I decided to stick with the people I have. I'm happy I have them.

**Q. The Big Ten has always been known for its dominant centers in the league. How important is it specifically this season for teams to have a dominant big man?**

TOM IZZO: There are some really good ones in this league this year. Purdue, Michigan have guys right off the bat. Indiana, Trayce has been very good. But I still think to win championships you need good guard play. That's kind of been the way it is. We won a championship with 6'8", 6'7".

What you need is good, tough players. What you need that's getting harder to find is mentally tough people. To go on any switch, winning the Big Ten tournament, which means you got to win three or four games in a row, to win an NCAA tournament, get to a Final Four, you got to win

four, five or six games in a row. You got to be mentally tough.

Centers are going to be important. If you talk to the NBA, they seem to be disappearing. Draymond, my guy, is 6'6.5", playing center half the time in the league.

I think players are important. I think toughness is important. You guys have guys that are smart on rebound. I still think to win championships your guard play has got to be really.

Centers are important, they can score it down there. We have a couple in our league that I think are phenomenal. But guard play is going to be really important when it comes down to it.

Thank you, guys. Appreciate it.

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