



Denzel Valentine

Photo by Joe Robbins

**44.3** The number of points per game that need to be replaced with loss of three starters

Tom Izzo typically enters each season with a cautiously optimistic feeling about his Spartans.

But considering the combination of cohesiveness, depth and leadership the Spartans will display despite losing three starters and their two leading scorers, Izzo will instead go in feeling "optimistically optimistic."

Outside opinion might suggest the Spartans lost too much from last year's Elite Eight team, but Izzo sees tremendous upside. At times, last year's team lacked leadership. This year, Izzo appears to have players ready to take charge.

With what looked to be a more cohesive crew, Izzo believes he has all the makings of a team that may not be as naturally gifted as last year's 29-9 squad, but that has just enough in place to be more competitive than perhaps people think is possible.

"I think most people have not written us off like we're going to be awful, but have written us off as a title contender in any way, shape or form or a deep tournament run team," Izzo said. "I think that will fuel this team."

## BACKCOURT

Co-captains Denzel Valentine and Travis

Trice have the smarts to control the backcourt while filling the gap left by Gary Harris, who bolted for the NBA. Harris may have had a better shooting touch and penchant for scoring, but Izzo says Valentine and Trice are ready to take over.

The key for Trice will be staying healthy after battling a variety of maladies much of his career. If he can find a way to stay on the floor and Valentine — a vocal leader who reminds Izzo of former Spartans standout Draymond Green — can develop into an impact player, the Spartans will have a fine foundation. Add in sophomore Alvin Ellis III and highly regarded freshman Lourawls Nairn and the Spartans will have an impressive collection of backcourt talent.

## FRONTCOURT

Branden Dawson may have the most to prove of any of Izzo's players, but also could have the most to gain. Izzo said the injury-prone senior has to "become the star that he is," which for Dawson, means playing with more consistency. As big as that leap would be for Dawson, it would be bigger for the Spartans, who have been waiting for him to reach his potential since 2011, when he arrived as one of the nation's top-rated prep wings.

Matt Costello also has the potential to emerge into a major contributor after starting the first 10 games last year before coming down with mononucleosis. At 6-9, Costello must improve in the screen-and-roll game, but after improving his shooting, could be ready to settle in as a full-time starter in the frontcourt. That unit also gets some depth from Gavin Schilling and freshman Javon Bess, who has made a favorable first impression.

## OVERVIEW

Considering this program usually seems to overachieve, if the Spartans stars can take over and the rest of Izzo's roster can fill the needed roles, this could be a team that runs deeper into March than conventional wisdom suggests.

Being written off — relatively, at least — will provide motivation to prove naysayers wrong, making the Spartans perhaps more dangerous than normal.

Perhaps, Izzo's cautious optimism will be justified after all.

— Jeff Arnold

## TOP NEWCOMER

**Javon Bess:** The gifted forward has the traits to make him a potential contributor as a freshman. He possesses great court vision and game recognition that make him perfect for Izzo's system.

## AT A GLANCE

**COACH:** Tom Izzo — At Michigan State and overall: 468-187, 19 years

**LOCATION:** East Lansing, Mich.

**2013-14 RECORD:** 29-9 overall; 12-6 Big Ten (Tie/2nd)

**LAST NCAA TOURNAMENT MISS:** 1997

**2014-15 HONORS CANDIDATE:** If **Branden Dawson** improves at the rate Izzo believes he can and can avoid injury, becoming an all-league performer may be just the beginning.

**KEEP AN EYE ON:** **Denzel Valentine** was an All-Big Ten honorable mention selection last year, but is in prime position to develop into an upper-tier player in the league.

## ROSTER

(\*Returning starter: 2013-14 averages)

<b>0 Marvin Clark</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>6-7</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>Jr.</b>
With some development, could be a solid physical presence				
<b>2 Javon Bess</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>6-5</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>Fr.</b>
Was widely considered the most impressive newcomer over the summer				
<b>3 Alvin Ellis III</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>6-4</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>So.</b>
Improved from last year, has opportunity to add backcourt depth (1.9 ppg, 0.6 rpg)				
<b>5 Bryn Forbes</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>6-3</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>Jr.</b>
Cleveland State transfer has petitioned NCAA to play immediately				
<b>10 Matt Costello*</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>6-9</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>Jr.</b>
Has shown he is prepared to make an impact as a full-time starter (4.0 ppg, 3.3 rpg)				
<b>11 Lourawls Nairn Jr.</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>5-10</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>Fr.</b>
Has the skill-set to see playing time as a freshman				
<b>14 Eron Harris</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>6-3</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>Jr.</b>
West Virginia transfer will sit out this year due to NCAA transfer rules				
<b>20 Travis Trice</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>6-0</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>Sr.</b>
Could have major impact if he can find a way to remain healthy (7.3 rpg, 1.6 rpg)				
<b>22 Branden Dawson*</b>	<b>G/F</b>	<b>6-6</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>Sr.</b>
Could develop into first-round NBA Draft prospect with solid season (11.2 ppg, 8.3 rpg)				
<b>25 Kenny Goins</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>6-8</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>Fr.</b>
Preferred walk-on was solid all-around performer as a high school senior				
<b>34 Gavin Schilling</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>6-9</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>So.</b>
Showed promise as a freshman, but has a real chance to contribute (1.1 ppg, 1.0 rpg)				
<b>41 Colby Wollenman</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>6-7</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>Jr.</b>
Walk-on will continue to fill role as a reserve (0.4 ppg, 0.2 rpg)				
<b>45 Denzel Valentine</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>6-5</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>Jr.</b>
By assuming leadership role, could really help solidify the backcourt (8.0 ppg., 6.0 rpg)				

## KEY LOSSES

Gary Harris, G, 6-4, 210 (16.7 ppg, 4.0 rpg);  
Adreian Payne, F, 6-10, 245 (16.4 ppg, 7.3 rpg);  
Keith Appling, G, 6-1, 185 (11.2 ppg, 3.0 rpg);  
Alex Gauna, F, 6-9, 250 (1.6 ppg, 1.3 rpg);  
Kenny Kaminski, F, 6-8, 225 (4.9 ppg, 1.5 rpg)

## RANKINGS

**Scoring:** 75.5 ppg (2nd Big Ten, 57th NCAA)  
**Scoring defense:** 65.6 ppg (7th, 63rd)  
**Rebounding margin:** plus-5.1 (3rd, 27th)  
**Turnovers:** 11.6 tpg (8th, 103rd)  
**Assists:** 16.8 apg (1st, 6th)  
**Shooting percentage:** 47.4 (2nd, 30th)  
**3-point percentage:** 32.2 (2nd, 20th)  
**Free-throw percentage:** 70.7 (9th, 149th)