

Of the six Final Four appearances the Spartans have made under his watch, Tom Izzo admits last season's was the most difficult.

The Spartans faced their share of hardships between personnel, free-throw shooting woes and seven games (including five losses) that got stretched to overtime. Yet, without reaching the greatness level Izzo felt was possible, the Spartans bounced back from a Big Ten Tournament championship game loss to eventual national runner-up Wisconsin and reached the Final Four before bowing out to national champion Duke.

While some fresh talent makes sure the Spartans are far more talented than last season's Final Four entry, whether they'll be as good remains to be seen. If Izzo can see the improvement he expects from several key contributors, the sky may be the limit for a team expected to contend for the Big Ten championship.

"If that (improvement) happens, I think we can go from a real good team to maybe a great team," Izzo said.

BACKCOURT

Anchored by Denzel Valentine, Bryn Forbes and West Virginia transfer Eron Harris, the Spartans may have the best shooting backcourt they've had in Izzo's 20-year tenure.

Valentine takes over the leadership reins following the graduation of guard Travis Trice and forward Branden Dawson and will thrive under the pressure that will come from being the Spartans' spotlight player.

Forbes added 15 pounds in the offseason, which figures to increase the toughness many questioned. Forbes could be the most improved player on the Spartans' roster, which, along with the addition of Harris, provides a wealth of perimeter shooting ability.

Harris was indefinitely suspended in July following a drunk driving arrest, but gives the Spartans another elite shooter while adding depth to a backcourt that also includes sophomore Lourawls "Tum Tum" Nairn, who gained plenty of experience as a freshman and who many see as the Spartans' heir apparent to Valentine when it comes to leadership.

Also added into the mix will be sophomore Javon Bess, who missed the majority of last season with a stress fracture in his foot, but who will certainly add to the backcourt talent already in place. Bess, along with freshman Matt McQuaid — who may well be the Spartans' top shooter — could factor into the backcourt plans.

FRONTCOURT

Gavin Schilling provides perhaps as much frontcourt athleticism as anyone on the Spartans roster, but needs to improve as a scoring threat. Despite having a wealth of post moves in his arsenal, Schilling has struggled with his ability to finish. His ability to do that



DENZEL VALENTINE

Photo by Joe Robbins

63.2 The Spartans' free-throw shooting percentage was the Big Ten's worst and caused perhaps the biggest angst for Izzo.

could go a long way in replacing what the Spartans lost with Dawson's departure.

Senior Matt Costello is one of the players from whom Izzo expects to see marked improvement to help anchor a post presence that will also get a significant boost from McDonald's All-American freshman Deyonta Davis, who has bulked up since he arrived. Izzo needs to see an increased effort level from Davis, but the star freshman is going to be a big part of any success Michigan State reaches.

OVERVIEW

Between the backcourt depth and the potential for greatness in the Spartans' frontcourt, there is plenty to like here.

If Izzo can get the leadership he expects from Valentine, the growth from those taking on bigger roles and some maturity from his newcomers aided by a summer trip to Italy, the good-to-great maturation Izzo believes is possible could lead to another deep March run.

— Jeff Arnold

TOP NEWCOMER

Eron Harris: His work ethic and propensity for big-stage performances while at West Virginia could make Harris one of the stars in what is already a talent-laden cradle of guards.

AT A GLANCE

COACH: Tom Izzo — At Michigan State and overall: 495-199, 20 years

LAST NCAA TOURNAMENT MISS: 1997

2015-16 HONORS CANDIDATE: Denzel Valentine was a third-team All-Big Ten selection last season, but is primed to be one of the league's top players as he moves into a featured role.

KEEP AN EYE ON: Bryn Forbes was one of the Big Ten's top 3-point shooters and could gain more attention league-wide now with an expanded role in the Spartans' backcourt.

ROSTER

(*Returning starter; 2014-15 averages)

0	Kyle Ahrens	G	6-5	195	Fr.	Shooting guard possesses plenty of playmaking potential
3	Javon Bess	F	6-5	215	So.	Hopes to stay healthy after stress fracture issues (2.7 ppg, 2.9 rpg)
3	Alvin Ellis III	G	6-4	210	Jr.	Ankle injury impacted his ability to contribute (1.7 ppg, 0.7 rpg)
5	Bryn Forbes	G	6-3	175	Sr.	Spartans' most improved player primed for big jump (8.5 ppg, 1.4 rpg)
10	Matt Costello	F	6-9	250	Sr.	Improved play could increase his value in post (7.0 ppg, 5.2 rpg)
11	Lourawls "Tum Tum" Nairn Jr.	G	5-10	170	So.	Showed flashes, but needs offensive improvement (2.2 ppg, 1.6 rpg)
14	Eron Harris	G	6-3	175	Jr.	Shooting ability, versatility make him a key backcourt asset
15	Marvin Clark Jr.	F	6-6	230	So.	Valuable freshman experience could pay off (4.5 ppg, 2.2 rpg)
20	Matt McQuaid	G	6-5	185	Fr.	Sharp-shooting freshman has bright future
23	Deyonta Davis	F	6-10	245	Fr.	The type of big-time recruit Izzo needed to hit on
30	Matt Van Dyk	F	6-5	210	Jr.	Walk-on could add to frontcourt depth
34	Gavin Schilling*	F	6-9	240	Jr.	Must assume leadership role to anchor frontcourt (5.1 ppg, 3.8 rpg)
41	Colby Wollenman	F	6-7	230	Sr.	Saw limited time in 29 games (1.2 ppg, 1.7 rpg)
45	Denzel Valentine*	G	6-5	220	Sr.	Star ready to put Spartans on his back (14.5 ppg, 6.3 rpg)

KEY LOSSES

Travis Trice, G, 6-0, 170 (15.3 ppg, 3.2 rpg);
Branden Dawson, F, 6-6, 225 (11.9 ppg, 9.1 rpg)

RANKINGS

Scoring: 71.1 ppg (5th Big Ten, 79thth NCAA)

Scoring defense: 63.6 ppg (7th, 94th)

Rebounding margin: plus-5.4 (2nd, 27th)

Turnovers: 11.3 tpg (6th, 61st)

Assists: 16.6 apg (1st, 5th)

Shooting percentage: 46.5 (3rd, 45th)

3-point percentage: 38.5 (2nd, 32nd)

Free-throw percentage: 63.2 (14th, 330th)