

the game

WAITING FOR ANSWERS



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By Jacob Carpenter
THE STATE NEWS

With Bowl Championship Series bids still undecided and three major conference championship games this weekend, MSU's bowl challenger remains unknown. While there are favored locations for head coach Mark Dantonio and his Spartans, including the Capital One and Outback bowls, a final announcement for MSU's travel plans isn't expected to be made until Sunday. In the mean time, here are the scouting reports for MSU's most likely competitors along with the estimated odds MSU will see each team to end its season:

NO. 17 GEORGIA BULLDOGS

Record: 9-3 overall, 6-2 Southeastern Conference
Key wins: At Louisiana State, at South Carolina, Central Michigan
Key losses: No. 1 Alabama, No. 2 Florida, No. 15 Georgia Tech
Player to watch: Sophomore running back Knowshon Moreno — The breakout back from New Jersey averaged nearly six yards per carry while compiling more than 125 rushing yards in five big games, including 172 against Vanderbilt and 163 at LSU.

Team rankings (out of 119): Rushing offense — 54, Passing offense — 16, Rushing

defense — 42, Pass defense — 32

Key statistic: The Bulldogs might actually embrace playing at a neutral site. Georgia never lost on the road but dropped three games in Athens, Ga.

Chances of playing MSU: 65 percent

Bowl most likely to face MSU: Capital One — The SEC's third-best team should snatch the highest-paying non-BCS game instead of the lesser Cotton Bowl.

Matchup edge: Georgia — The Bulldogs are strong in the trenches and boast an impressive array of skill players, led by Moreno and senior wide receiver Mohamed Massaquoi.

NO. 22 MISSISSIPPI REBELS

Record: 8-4 overall, 5-3 SEC

Key wins: At Florida, at LSU, Auburn
Key losses: At Wake Forest, at Alabama, South Carolina

Player to watch: Sophomore quarterback Jevan Snead — The Texas transfer led Mississippi to its first winning season in five years and has been impressive down the stretch, throwing 11 touchdowns and one interception in the Rebels' final four games.

Team rankings: Rushing offense — 30, Passing offense — 58, Rushing defense — 5, Pass defense — 63

Key statistic: Mississippi is one of the hottest teams in the nation that will not play in a BCS bowl, having won its final five games against the likes of Arkansas, Auburn and LSU.

Chances of playing MSU: 5 percent

Bowl most likely to face MSU: Capital One — The

Rebels likely will be selected for the Cotton Bowl in Dallas but could fall if Georgia is taken to Texas instead.

Matchup edge: Even — Mississippi's run defense and ability to win the big game (see: a 31-30 upset of Florida on the road) match up well with MSU's ground game and strong defense.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Record: 7-5 overall, 4-4 SEC

Key wins: At Mississippi, Arkansas, North Carolina State

Key losses: At Clemson, at Vanderbilt, LSU

Player to watch: Redshirt freshman quarterback Stephen Garcia — The Gamecocks' game of musical chairs at quarterback has finished with Garcia, who has thrown 104 passes this season and been named the starter for South Carolina's bowl game.

Team rankings: Rushing offense — 108, Passing offense — 55, Rushing defense — 41, Pass defense — 4

Key statistic: It's a good thing for Gamecock fans that South Carolina's defense is so strong because the offense has turned the ball over 33 times, which is tied for third-worst in the nation.

Chances of playing MSU: 20 percent

Bowl most likely to face MSU: Outback — South Carolina is a sound pick for the Outback Bowl, so it would require MSU to fall out of the Capital One Bowl to see Dantonio's alma mater in January.

Matchup edge: MSU — The Gamecocks' offense is scary in its inefficiency and an opportunistic Spartans defense would take advantage.

See BOWL on page 2B

Dark Horses

No. 14 Oklahoma State in Alamo Bowl: MSU would need to be significantly snubbed from a Jan. 1 bowl game to go to the Alamo Bowl. For that to happen, Ohio State couldn't make a BCS bowl and the Outback Bowl would have to take Iowa despite having a worse record than MSU.

No. 19 Missouri in Alamo Bowl: The same situation would have to play out for MSU as with Oklahoma State, but the Alamo Bowl would have to take Missouri, which could happen with a very strong performance in a losing effort to Oklahoma this weekend.

Vanderbilt in Outback Bowl: Although the Commodores have been a great success story this season, don't expect them to jump South Carolina or LSU, which has a worse conference record but a much better fan base to travel than Vanderbilt.

Florida in Capital One Bowl: The Gators would have to get smoked in the SEC title game and lose a BCS berth to Boise State and Ohio State, thus falling to the Capital One Bowl. Don't bet on it.

BCS Selection Show

The 10 teams selected for Bowl Championship Series games will be announced at 8 p.m. Sunday on Fox. A press conference about MSU's bowl selection with head coach Mark Dantonio will follow the show at 8:30 p.m. For updates on MSU's bowl situation and Dantonio's press conference this weekend, visit www.stateneews.com.

MSU ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS

What to watch over break ...

MEN'S BASKETBALL

Three things to look for during break:

1. Health/rotation: After four games in seven days, the Spartans get a much-needed break during finals week. That time off should give freshman forward Delvon Roe time to recover, as the Spartans will look for him and fellow freshman forward Draymond Green to fill the void left by senior center Goran Suton's knee injury.

2. Texas: After MSU's 35-point blowout to North Carolina, the Spartans get three games against mid-majors to hone their game before they face No. 8 Texas on Dec. 20 in Houston. With a win against the Longhorns, the Spartans would give themselves a much-needed reputation boost following the losses against Maryland and North Carolina.

3. Big Ten: The Spartans open up the Big Ten regular season on New Year's Eve with a 6 p.m. game at Minnesota, before traveling to Evanston, Ill., on Jan. 3 to take on Northwestern. MSU will then play its conference home-opener Jan. 6 against Ohio State. Winning all three of those games would not only be key in MSU's hope for a Big Ten title, but would also give the Spartans momentum heading into their Jan. 10 game against the reigning national champion Kansas Jayhawks at Breslin Center.

CASH KRUTH

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

Three things to look for during break:

1. Balanced scoring: The No. 21 Spartans have been struggling with scoring against the last few opponents. It has been a few players taking the offensive burden with the rest trying to offer enough defense to change the game. The Spartans are going to need more production inside and better efficiency on the boards.

2. Xavier: Other than the home game against Old Dominion, MSU has struggled against top-ranked opponents. The No. 23 Musketeers aren't a pressing team like Notre Dame or Georgia Tech, but are scrappy enough to give MSU problems. The Spartans are going to have to limit its turnovers to pull out a needed nonconference victory, as it is averaging more than 23 giveaways a game.

3. Big Ten: As with the men's squad, the women's team is going to face some tough competition early in the conference season. Three of the first four Big Ten matches for the Spartans are on the road, including a two-game road swing that will bring MSU to conference heavyweights No. 17 Purdue and No. 18 Ohio State. The Spartans will need to be on top of their games if they want to be in good shape when classes resume in the spring.

JOSEPH TERRY

HOCKEY

Three things to look for during break:

1. Great Lakes Invitational: While most of us are enjoying time playing with our new presents during the weekend after the holidays, the Spartans hockey team will take the ice to compete in the 44th annual Great Lakes Invitational. MSU will face North Dakota on Dec. 27 in the first round for a chance to play the winner of the Michigan vs. Michigan Tech the following night. Last year, the Spartans finished the weekend tournament in last place.

2. Offensive resurgence: The Spartans offense has been struggling all season. In the current nine game winless streak that dates back to Nov. 1, MSU has only been able to score 12 goals. Clearly, the offense is going to have to pick up the slack if the Spartans plan on turning their season around in the second half.

3. Alaska: After going nearly a month without playing league games, the Spartans will play a weekend home series against Alaska on Jan. 2. Alaska currently sits in a surprising three-way tie for third, and the Spartans will desperately need to find momentum before they travel to Miami (Ohio) the following weekend for two road games against the CCHA's first place team.

ALEX DIFILIPPO