

STATE OF PLAY

MSU men's basketball team represents all of Michigan when it competes on Saturday

By Jacob Carpenter
THE STATE NEWS

From the Upper Peninsula to the southeast corner, the Rust Belt to the western frontier, the MSU basketball program has Michigan covered. MSU head basketball coach Tom Izzo emphasizes building his program on local products, and perhaps no team represents the entire state better than his 2009 Final Four squad. When the team takes the court against Connecticut on Saturday evening, it will be playing for more than fans back in East Lansing. It will be for Saginaw, decimated by the auto industry's demise; Iron Mountain, a small-town Upper Peninsula community; and Detroit, suffering from an image meltdown. For at least two hours, the state's tribulations will take a backseat when Michigan and its best college basketball team are put on display. In cities across the state, from Ada and Addison to Zeeland and Zilwaukee, basketball fans will tune out their struggles and tune in to Detroit's Final Four.

To read about the team's Detroit natives and their thoughts of playing in their hometown, turn to page 8B.

1. Iron Mountain Tom Izzo



In what's known as the "banana belt" of Michigan's Upper Peninsula near the Wisconsin border, Iron Mountain is known as the home of beautiful forested landscapes, the Pine Mountain Ski Jump and MSU's most decorated basketball coach in history.

Residents of Iron Mountain, where Izzo was raised, have become accustomed to celebrating the success of the city's most famous local.

"We all especially hope he's seen as a representation of the values that we have in the peninsula," said Iron Mountain Mayor Jeff VanLaanen, a lifelong resident of the city who attended high school with Izzo.

While VanLaanen said the city's residents have become somewhat spoiled by Izzo's accomplishments, the eyes of the Upper Peninsula will be on Izzo Saturday.

"We're all proud of him," VanLaanen said. "He's a class act and just having him in the Final Four is an extra special treat for us."

2. Lansing Goran Suton



In 1999, Stephanie Sparks was a fifth-grader living in Michigan's capital when she discovered the MSU basketball team.

"No. 12 became my new favorite number after I knew who Mateen Cleaves was," said Sparks, a three-year Izzone member and telecommunication, information studies and media junior 10 years later.

After the dawn of Izzo's successful reign with the Spartans, Lansing returned to its basketball-loving roots and has yet to relent.

Lansing Everett High School alumnus and MSU senior center Goran Suton is carrying on the legacy of the city's most famous native, Magic Johnson, by playing college ball in East Lansing.

"I think with success like that ... people feel more bonded together by a common thing," Sparks said. "It definitely lifts the spirits of everybody, and March is a great time if you're a Spartan fan."

3. Sand Lake Austin Thornton



If you look close enough on a map of western Michigan, you might be able to find Sand Lake, about 25 miles north of Grand Rapids and home to redshirt freshman Austin Thornton.

It's a village of fewer than 500 people closely linked to nearby Cedar Springs, known best for its Red Flannel Festival, celebrating the town's history as a flannel pajama producer dating back to the 1930s.

"We're still kind of a distant suburb of the Grand Rapids area, so it's a small community and everybody kind of knows everybody," said Tom Holloway, an MSU gymnastics coach from 1999 to 2003 who has lived in Cedar Springs for six years.

Fans in Sand Lake, known as a University of Michigan hotbed, have followed Thornton from his days as a high school basketball star, despite his choice to attend MSU.

When Holloway, a youth pastor, offered a lighthearted prayer request for the Spartans boys on Sunday, "we got some boos from the Michigan fans," he said.

4. Saginaw Draymond Green



In the 1960s, Saginaw High School had nearly 2,000 students in a city booming with industry.

Forty years later, after General Motors skipped town and the population left, too, Saginaw High's enrollment has been cut in half as education funding plummeted.

So when Saginaw natives such as MSU freshman forward Draymond Green reach national prominence, it's a moment of city pride.

"For someone like Draymond to come out of our school district with the talent he has for the MSU team is really quite amazing," said Bill Scharffe, a 67-year-old lifelong Saginaw resident and MSU alumnus. With one of the state's largest concentrations of MSU alumni, Green has become a local celebrity in a city where good news is hard to find.

"He's just contributed beautifully and Saginaw sure is proud of him," Scharffe said.

5. Flint Marquise Gray, Tom Herzog



In a city known for losing manufacturing jobs and the auto industry, Flint has kept one tradition alive: sending basketball players to play for Tom Izzo.

Since Izzo's appointment as head coach, 11 Flint natives from six of the city's high schools have laced up for the Spartans, including famous Flintstones Mateen Cleaves, Morris Peterson, Charlie Bell and Antonio Smith.

While Flint has gained a reputation as a hardscrabble Michigan town, it's on the comeback trail.

Crime has dropped in recent years, Flint Powers Catholic High School won the area's first state boy's basketball title in 14 years last week and native sons Marquise Gray and Tom Herzog will represent the city in Detroit.

"Having MSU in the Final Four brings more of an optimistic attitude back to the residents of the state of Michigan and Genesee County," said Powers Catholic High head basketball coach Tim Herman, a 52-year-old lifelong Flint resident.

"We need all the good news we can get in an economic tsunami."