

the game

NO SECONDARY ISSUES

MSU football team's secondary is ready to turn table in 2009 with 8 key returning players



GABRIELLE MOORE/THE STATE NEWS

Senior cornerback Ross Weaver watches a drill at football practice on Thursday.

By Alex Altman
THE STATE NEWS

For the better half of the decade, the secondary has been one of the MSU football team's primary concerns. The Spartans have finished in the lower half of the Big Ten in pass defense in five of the past six seasons. Perhaps not coincidentally, the Spartans also finished in the lower half of the Big Ten most of those seasons.

Seen as one of the catalysts for the team's struggles, MSU's

shaky secondary has often been the target of criticism. But this season, the players believe that's about to change.

"A couple years ago, we wasn't as together as we are now," junior cornerback Chris L. Rucker said. "Now, we've got guys who have been in this system for at least two years, so everybody is more adjusted to it."

It's been several years since

the Spartans ended spring camp feeling comfortable with their secondary. But with eight key players returning from last season — including three full-time starters — there's reason to believe the secondary will be one of the team's strongest units.

Led by Rucker, senior cornerback Ross Weaver and senior all-purpose defensive back Kendell Davis-

Clark, the Spartans have an array of players who have the ability to make life miserable for opposing receivers.

In addition to that trio, the Spartans return senior cornerback Jeremy Ware, junior safety Marcus Hyde and senior safety Dan Fortener.

Fortener is one of the early favorites to emerge as starting free safety, where he started several games

last season in place of the injured Davis-Clark.

MSU head coach Mark Dantonio said the multitude of options he has should breed healthy competition.

"We have a lot of depth back in the secondary," Dantonio said. "We played nine guys last year, we really lost only one guy out of

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FOOTBALL

Versatile Jones ready to take stab at middle

By Alex DiFillippo
THE STATE NEWS

Junior linebacker Greg Jones is willing to play anywhere to help benefit the MSU football team. Jones originally was recruited to MSU as an outside linebacker but played several positions last season including the MIKE, or middle linebacker position, where he had great success and is starting to get more comfortable.

"He's getting a full spring there and a full fall camp," MSU head coach Mark Dantonio said. "So there's great improvement, especially in his pass coverage. He's a great football player."

Jones led the Spartans in tackles his freshman year from the outside linebacker position and fol-

"As a MIKE you have to be that leader guy. Greg's making the calls and we all try to communicate out there. But he feels like it's a lot on him and he's doing a really good job."

Eric Gordon, junior linebacker

lowed suit his sophomore year — recording 127 tackles to again lead the team and finish third in the Big Ten and 17th in the nation. After playing both outside and middle linebacker last year, Dantonio plans to use Jones at the MIKE slot to start this season.

And Jones is more than willing to accommodate Dantonio's request to learn the new position.

"I think I'm getting more comfortable with it," Jones said. "(Defensive coordinator Pat Narduzzi) doesn't try to put a whole lot on me. We are relaxed about it and he keeps me under control when I'm getting frustrated. We are working together and making it happen."

Playing in the middle has also given Jones an opportunity to fine-tune his leadership skills and be the head communicator of the defense.

"As a MIKE you have to be that leader guy," junior linebacker Eric Gordon said.

"Greg's making the calls and we all try to communicate out there. But he feels

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Junior linebacker Greg Jones runs through blockers during a drill at football practice on Thursday.

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