

"I think he brings a sense of camaraderie and helps unite our athletics department because he's been here not just as an athletics director, but people know him as a caring person."

Mark Dantonio, MSU football head coach



# Advancing Athletics

By Zack Colman  
THE STATE NEWS

By now, you've seen the Pure Michigan advertisements on TV. In the commercials, there usually are images of Michigan's Great Lakes, lighthouses and fresh harvests coming in. It shows all the openness, the nature of the state, the beauty that shines through the mere landscape and topography. But all the nature, as beautifully mesmerizing as it is, cannot hold the attention of the most free-wheeling minds. The innovator's and big dreamer's minds are not usually satiated by a picturesque waterfall.

So when MSU's Athletics Director Mark Hollis was growing up in less populated backwoods areas near Port Huron, he had little to turn to. An only child, Hollis was left to his own devices in the rural areas that Pure Michigan has made look so appealing.

And that's how the mind that put MSU athletics in the national spotlight was born.

"At times we lived in ... some rural areas, so your best friend was sometimes yourself," Hollis said. "It created situations where you had to think creatively in order to have a good day."

Hollis, the man behind the BasketBowl — a 2003 men's basketball game between Kentucky and MSU at Ford Field, which remains the most attended basketball game in history — and the Cold War — a 2001 hockey game between MSU and Michigan, the first outdoor and highest attended hockey game in history — is a little more than 18 months into his post as athletics director.

Known for his illustrious events, marketing success and spokespersonship for MSU, he has been called an innovator by his peers and earned considerable praise.

"I think I brought some of that into the workplace: of thinking to please, thinking to entertain, thinking to provide a good return to the university," he said. "And I think if you walk through each one of those, there's some who have compared me to the Ringling Bros. or a circus-type atmosphere."

But Hollis' role has shifted since he came back to MSU in 1995. The role of athletics director, despite all his accomplishments, is entirely new to Hollis.

"Once I got this job it was, 'What happened to the Ringling Bros.?' he said. "As a marketing person, you could step out of the box and make suggestions and recommendations, and now you're making decisions. A little of that creativity has been set aside in regards to becoming a better leader versus a manager. It's a part that I wrestle with a little bit because I really enjoyed that creative side."

## Leader of the pack

Hollis had worked his whole life to get to where he is today.

"It was sitting with President (Lou Anna K.) Simon ... there was about a two-second sense of relief, and (then) kind of a gratifying (feeling). You've worked your rear end off for these last 25-plus years and you have now achieved," Hollis said of the moment he first learned he would be athletics director in September 2007. "And it quickly went to responsibility and weight on shoulders and what you're accountable for. Every action that you take virtually impacts so many different people." As commissioner of the Big Ten Conference, Jim Delany has seen plenty of ath-

letics directors in action. He said Hollis has made one of the "smoothest transitions" to leader of the athletics program.

One of the factors that might have helped Hollis is that he was a student at MSU and worked for the university for more than a decade before taking the post, Delany said. He explained that many athletics directors come from other schools and are out of touch with the campus culture, but Hollis has been a part of East Lansing and MSU since he was a student.

"Being a leader is different (from) being a manager," Hollis said. "That's the transition that's very difficult for anybody that goes from assistant coach to head coach, from manager to president. That's a process (where you can't) just snap your fingers and it happens. It has to evolve."

If there has been a learning curve, though, Hollis' peers haven't noticed it. The possibility of Hollis succeeding Ron Mason as athletics director factored into MSU football head coach Mark Dantonio's decision to leave his post at Cincinnati to return to MSU. Dantonio has known Hollis since 1995, when Dantonio was second-year coach under Nick Saban. Hollis was a lead negotiator in contract talks with Dantonio before he was hired in November 2008.

"From my standpoint, it was everything I wanted in an AD," Dantonio said. "It was a very big component of our decision to come here as a family." Not only has Hollis been a key figure in negotiating with coaches — he also has helped bring in women's basketball head coach Suzy Merchant, who took MSU to the Sweet 16 in her second season, and baseball head coach Jake Ross Jr., who coached the Spartans to their first Big Ten Tournament appearance in five years — but Hollis also has been influential in securing funds for facility upgrades.

Dantonio said the construction of the Skandalaris Football Center — a \$15 million upgrade to the Duffy Daugherty Football Building — was "crucial" for MSU's football program. Since Hollis has taken his new position, Old College Field has undergone a transformation as well, as it is now home to the brand new McLane Baseball Stadium, and DeMartin Stadium for the soccer teams. "The soccer stadium which we have now here, I have talked to some past ADs about that, and they almost thought it was a pipe dream," said former men's soccer head coach Joe Baum. "I thought I would be in heaven before that stadium would be built."

But that's just Mark Hollis. It's not often that a school's athletics director will be able to push such bold proposals with as great a rate of success, but Hollis learned early on

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➔ For an interactive timeline of Hollis' career, visit [stateneews.com/multimedia](http://stateneews.com/multimedia).

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