

the game

Football vs. Alabama

Kickoff at 1 p.m. Jan. 1, 2011

Follow the game
TV ESPN
Radio WJIM (1240-AM)
WMMQ (94.9-FM)

Forecast
High 72° | Low 51°

Extra point
Alabama head coach Nick Saban was the MSU head man from 1995-1999 before leaving the Spartans prior to the Citrus Bowl (now the Capital One Bowl).

CAPITAL MATCHUP

Spartans have BCS-type game against defending national champion Alabama



STATE NEWS FILE PHOTO

ABOVE: Senior wide receiver Mark Dell stiff-arms Wisconsin defensive back Niles Brinkley on Oct. 2 at Spartan Stadium. Dell recorded 91 receiving yards in the Spartans' 34-24 victory over the Badgers.

LEFT: Alabama running back Trent Richardson runs through a hole against LSU on Nov. 6. The Crimson Tide lost the game, 24-21. JERROD SEATON/CRIMSON WHITE

By Jeff Kanan
THE STATE NEWS

Defending national champion and preseason No. 1 Alabama still has plenty to prove in a season that hasn't met expectations. No. 7 MSU, which was left out of the BCS after having its 11-1 season that marked as its highest win total ever, would love nothing more than to defeat a power program.

When the Spartans and No. 15 Crimson Tide play in the Capital One Bowl, set for 1 p.m. on Jan. 1, 2011, in Orlando, Fla., plenty will be at stake, including conference bragging rights and the chance to ring in their new year with a victory.

The coaching matchup between Alabama head coach Nick Saban and MSU head coach Mark Dantonio, who was the defensive backs coach during Saban's time at MSU, figures to be a cause for excitement, but there are others as well.

Here are five matchups to watch in the game.

MSU junior quarterback Kirk Cousins vs. Alabama secondary

Cousins should be able to use the month-long layoff to rest his ankle and shoulder, both of which he's sprained this season, and prepare for the Alabama pass defense, which is ranked 12th in the nation.

Wide receivers senior Mark Dell and junior B.J. Cunningham have been steady with 761 yards and 611 yards this season, respectively, and junior wide receiver Keshawn Martin will need to have a big game to open up the Spartans' playbook with his versatility.

Alabama's secondary will be hurt by the loss of first-team All-SEC safety Mark Barron, who has a team-leading 75 tackles. Barron will miss the bowl game because of surgery he underwent last week. The Crimson Tide will look to second-team All-SEC players Dre Kirkpatrick, who has three interceptions, and Robert Lester, who leads the team with seven. Alabama's 21 team interceptions are third in the nation,

which means Cousins will have to contend to be efficient.

Edge: Push

Alabama running backs Mark Ingram and Trent Richardson vs. MSU rush defense

The Crimson Tide's two-horse running game will try to wear down the MSU defense, which ranks 21st against the rush. Last year's Heisman Trophy winner Ingram recovered from an early season injury to lead Alabama in rushing with 816 yards, while Richardson is an impressive sidekick who has 638 rushing yards this season. MSU allowed 84 rushing yards against Penn State and has tackled well in big wins against Wisconsin and Michigan.

The Spartans will need great tackling against the Crimson Tide's fierce combination of running backs, and this should be a close matchup.

Edge: Alabama

Alabama quarterback Greg McElroy vs. MSU secondary

McElroy has a completion percentage of 70.6 percent and leads an experienced Alabama passing attack that will test the Spartans' improved secondary. Alabama, however, has allowed 32 sacks this season, which could make a difference if the Spartans can defend Alabama's receivers and make McElroy keep the ball.

Julio Jones is Alabama's go-to receiver, earning first-team All-SEC honors in having 1,084 receiving yards. Jones is coming off a performance in which he received 199 yards against No. 1 Auburn and will challenge the Spartans with his size and athleticism. The

Spartans will counter with playmaking cornerbacks in senior Chris L. Rucker and sophomore Johnny Adams, both of whom were named second-team All-Big Ten by the coaches.

MSU ranks 1st in pass efficiency defense and had all four members of its secondary be named second-team All-Big Ten by the coaches or media.

Edge: Alabama

MSU special teams vs. Alabama special teams

Senior punter Aaron Bates has been Mr. Everything for MSU this year, and in his final game, there's no telling what the coaches might dial up. Sophomore kicker Dan Conroy was named first-team All-Big Ten with 14 for-15 on field goals, while Martin can make a difference in the punt return game.

Alabama kicker Jeremy Shelley is 12-for-16 on field goals this season, and Alabama has eight punt returns of 20-or-more yards this season, which should make for an interesting matchup.

Edge: MSU

MSU head coach Mark Dantonio vs. Alabama head coach Nick Saban

The pupil will try his hand against the mentor in what figures to be a memorable coaching matchup. Dantonio, who spent five seasons as a defensive backs coach under Saban, was unpredictable in last year's Valero Alamo Bowl game, drawing up trick plays and doing everything in his power to keep MSU in the game.

Saban will try to keep his Crimson Tide team focused after it fell short of expectations this season, but given his recent success at Alabama, he most likely will have Alabama ready.

Dantonio also will have to keep the Spartans concentrated on the task after being spurred by the BCS. But against Alabama, that shouldn't be a problem.

Edge: Push

By Jeremy Warnemuende
THE STATE NEWS

As expected, Mark Dantonio and his No. 7 MSU football team were denied a BCS bid in favor of fellow conference champions Ohio State and Wisconsin.

And yet, when the Spartans take on No. 15 Alabama in the Capital One Bowl on Jan. 1, 2011, in Orlando, Fla., Dantonio said he believes it will be MSU's bowl game that is the best matchup involving any Big Ten team, including the Rose and Sugar bowls.

"When I look at football teams across this country, and I talk about the greatest teams playing at this time of year, Alabama's name is going to come up," Dantonio said.

"This Capital One Bowl is as good as any bowl in America."

The game between the Spartans (11-1) and Crimson Tide (9-3) will mark the first-ever meeting between the two programs.

It also will be the second New Year's Day bowl in four years for MSU under Dantonio. However, MSU is 0-3 in bowls under Dantonio.

Senior linebacker Greg Jones

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BIG CHILL * ❄️

OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENT WILL BE MEMORABLE FOR PLAYERS

By Pat Evans
THE STATE NEWS

A hockey game never has seen a crowd of 110,000 people.

Following Saturday's highly anticipated hockey matchup between MSU and No. 12 Michigan (7-6-3 overall, 4-5-1 CCHA) in the "Big Chill at the Big House," that will be history. A little more than 10 years ago, the two teams — ranked

No. 1 and No. 4, respectively — met in the "Cold War" at Spartan Stadium in an epic 3-3 tie in front of a crowd of more than 74,000 people.

That game was a momentous one in the lives of those players, and the "Big Chill" has the prospect of being the moment of a lifetime for the teams' current players with more than 110,000 expected to be in attendance.

"If you're a player, how much

more perfect can it get?" MSU hockey head coach Rick Comley said. "I don't think anything will be difficult. I think the thrill, the experience, will be second to nothing. It's a combination of factors."

"The fact that it's outdoors, the fact that it's Michigan, the fact that it's going to have 100,000 people there. You don't get any better than that."

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A view from the bleachers during the Adrian College vs. Concordia University (Wyo.) D-III Frozen Faceoff on Dec. 4 at Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor. MSU will play U-M in the stadium Saturday. ANGELA J. CEESEY/ANNARBOR.COM