Spartans were an elite warrior civilization from southern Greece. And in his preview of today's Buckeyes-Spartans game (3:30 on ABC), he admits, the football Spartans have little in common with the ancient civilization for which they are named. But Furls also says that this is a team on the rise with former Tressel assistant Mark Dantonio at the helm. And a team that can put some points on the board. Is he worried? See for yourself in his preview of today's game.

Spartans were an elite warrior civilization from southern Greece. They lived contemporaneously with their more famous, artsy-fartsy Athenian brothers in relative obscurity until somebody stirred up trouble. Well now that we have completed the abridged version of western civilization, we can clearly see that Michigan State's football Spartans have very little in common with the ancient civilization for which they are named. Their artsy-fartsy brothers largely overshadow them, but it sure has been a long time since there has been a team full of warriors in East Lansing.

Most experts agree that the Big Ten is not very good this year, and I would be hard pressed to make an argument to the contrary. Ohio State looks pretty good, but one team does not make a conference. The elite teams from all the conferences probably match up pretty well against each other, but the also ran conferences do not have the depth to produce relevant match ups on a week-to-week basis. Depth within the conference is what truly separates the SEC and the Pac-10 (to a lesser extent) from the other conferences.

The middle of the Big Ten pack, traditionally made up of teams like Purdue, Michigan State, and Iowa, has been horrible and there is no better sample for its

plight than the Michigan State Spartans. The recruiting has been adequate, but the coaching and development has been horrid. Remember Drew Stanton's freshman year? It sure did look like he was going to lead the Spartans to relevance, but under John L. Smith, he never developed. Smith's teams were always pretty talented, but they played unmotivated, inconsistent football.

First year coach Mark Dantonio has gone a long way in changing that; this Michigan State team is not one of the typical John L. Smith teams that Buckeyes fans have grown accustomed to overlooking. The overall talent is not quite there yet, but this is a team on the rise. Which is a good thing for the Big Ten.

Without further ado, Introducing the Spartans.

Welcome to Thermopylae .

The most surprising aspect of this year's version of the Michigan State Spartans has to be their resurgent offense. The fact that the Spartans have focused on a run based offense under first year head coach Mark Dantonio is not surprising, what is surprising is how well they are doing it. Right now the Spartans are averaging nearly 250 yards of offense per game on the ground, good enough for second in the Big Ten.

Michigan State's two pronged attack is led by Javon Ringer who has amassed nearly 1000 yards in Michigan States first seven games. Ringer, a junior out of Dayton, is quick, but even at a 5'9" 200lbs, he is just as comfortable running between the tackles as he is around the edge. Ringer is averaging an astonishing 7.1 yards per carry; he is obviously a threat every time he touches the ball and an even more remarkable 14 yards per carry in Big Ten play.

Brian Hoyer has been very efficient this year (currently ranked 3rd in efficiency), but he lacks big play receivers, the kind that defenses must game plan for. Hoyer's best receiver is probably Javon Ringer out of the backfield, and that is a play that has not worked particularly well against this very fast Ohio State defense this year.

Ringer is complimented by senior running back Jehuu Caulcrick. Caulcrick is a monstrous bruising back, tipping the scales at nearly 260lbs. He is a load, but he does not move that well laterally.

Defensively, the Spartans are active and physical. They are experienced upfront, solid in the middle, and while they are more experienced in the secondary last year's 102nd ranked pass defense is still vulnerable down the field. They are not world beaters on defense, but they are much better than people give them credit for. Make no mistake about it, this is the best defense that Ohio State has faced to date.

The Match Ups:

Ohio State's Defense vs. Michigan State's Offense:

Thus far, Ohio State has given up just 440 yards on the ground this year on 214 carries. That is good enough for an average of just over 2 yards per carry so far for the season. Things are not much easier for the Spartans through the air as the Buckeyes also rank second nationally in pass defense.

This truly will be a match up of strength against strength and surprisingly, Michigan State may have a slight advantage here. Last week Kent State was able to move the ball pretty well on the ground against the Buckeyes during the first quarter. Whether or not this is a by-product of playing yet another uninspired, overmatched Ohio team has yet to be seen, but the Spartans will be a load to handle on the ground. Complicating matters, Ohio State's best defensive tackle, Todd Denlinger, will likely miss another game with a deep thigh bruise. They really needed him today.

This is just one of those match ups where I think

Michigan State's offense works very well against Ohio State's defense. That said, if Hoyer is unable to perform well enough to make Ohio State respect Michigan State's aerial attack then all bets are off. Speaking of pass defense, Anderson Russell, one week removed from a significant ankle sprain, is expected to see play time this week.

Ohio State's Offense vs. Michigan State's Defense:

It is no secret that Mark Dantonio is defensively oriented coach, hell, he was Jim Tressel's defensive coordinator for the 2002 National Championship team. In his first season at Michigan State Dantonio's Spartans are playing decent defense. They are ranked 24th in the nation against the run, giving up just over 100 yards per game. They are very physical up front and given Ohio State's recent play in the interior line, well, running the ball between the tackles could be an adventure.

Michigan State is not as good in the secondary and Ohio State should be able to exploit the MSU them. Michigan State will bring pressure, but Boeckman has proven adept at reading blitzes and checking down to the correct receivers. Watch for some big plays down the field.

In the end, I think Ohio State is just too versatile for Michigan State offensively. The Buckeyes are just as comfortable in three wide as they are in the "I" and that will be the difference in this game. The Spartans will not be able to bring the eighth defender up into the box.

Don't Be Surprised if....

-Ohio State struggles to move the ball on the ground early. MSU's front seven is actually pretty good, better than they will get credit for. Now the back four? That is another story.

-Ohio State records three touchdowns in excess of 25 yards. Michigan State's defense takes a lot of chances and the safety play has been suspect.

-Gonna go out on a limb here. I am going to place the over/under on Beanie Wells in game ankle tapings at two. He is currently leading the conference in this category by a staggering margin.

-Big day for Ray Small and Brian Hartline. I look for the Spartans to do everything they can to keep Brian Robiskie from beating them, therefore, I expect lots of touches for Small and Hartline.

-Michigan State puts up 200 on the ground with big chunks between the tackles. Javon Ringer hits the hole hard and fast and will cause some problems. If he decides to get east-west, well things could go bad for him, but he should see daylight going north-south.

If I were a betting man:

I would take MSU +18.5. Ohio State is good that is true, but Michigan State is not that bad. I like the Buckeyes to win, but Michigan State will move the ball and score points. I am not sure that Ohio State will be able to dominate on the ground, as a matter of fact, I think they will have to set up the running game by passing first. MSU and the over.

Ohio State 34 Michigan State 24, in a game that is just close enough to keep the pollsters guessing about whether or not Ohio State really is the number one team in the country.

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