

# The State News

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## **Spartans undeserving of No. 9 ranking**

*MADISON, Wis.* — There's a difference between potential and performance.

In the case of the No. 9 MSU men's basketball team, the potential is there, but the performance has been lacking.

The Spartans are overrated. A No. 9 ranking is way too high for a team that has played some of its worst basketball in the last six games.

I love rankings. They're a necessary gauge of the current state of college basketball.

But when MSU has two starters out for an extended period of time, another coming back from a serious foot injury and a fourth finishing 3-for-20 from the floor in one of the most intimidating arenas in the Big Ten, they're not deserving of a top-10 spot.

There's no doubt MSU is one of the most talented teams in the nation if it's healthy.

But that's a pretty big "if."

With five losses, Duke doesn't seem like a top-10 team, but the No. 8 Blue Devils have won seven of their last eight games — with that lone loss in an overtime game on the road against the now-No. 1 team in the country.

Jabari Parker, probably Duke's best player, scored a career-high 29 points against Boston College on the weekend.

That's pretty deserving of their ranking, if you ask me.

Sophomore guard Gary Harris was supposed to be the player who can carry this team to the promised land with both Keith Appling and Branden Dawson sidelined.

He shot 3-for-20 Sunday afternoon, and still can't seem to hit a free throw to save his life.

At 68.9 percent, MSU is tied for 202nd in the country in free-throw percentage, the same mark as Houston Baptist and Yale.

Free throws can't make a team, but they can break a team — especially in the NCAA Tournament.

Head coach Tom Izzo knows that, which is precisely why he's made his team come in early in the morning just to practice from the charity stripe.

Sunday against Wisconsin was the 14th different starting lineup for MSU, and the 13th different starting group in the last 19 games. That's a problem for consistency.

Every top-10 team has some sort of low-post game to rely on, except the Spartans.

It's going to be hard to lean on senior forward Adreian Payne and his recovering foot, and sophomore forward Matt Costello has shown flashes of greatness this season, but nothing that would convince anybody he's the anchor MSU can count on.

Payne was dominant against the Badgers, scoring 24 and having success under the basket.

The other forwards, Costello, freshman Gavin Schilling, redshirt freshman Kenny Kaminski and junior Alex Gauna, played 42 minutes and combined for five points, three rebounds and 11 fouls.

Again, not the make-up of a top-10 team.

It's easy to be critical from the sidelines and talk about how good this team could be.

Izzo will tell you that he doesn't look at the rankings and he's got to play with the players at his disposal.

But right now, they're just not up to snuff.