By LARRY LAGE

The Associated Press

EAST LANSING, Mich. — Tom Izzo put it best.

“It doesn’t get any better or bigger than this,” the Michigan State coach said.

Izzo’s fourth-ranked Spartans will host the No. 1 Indiana Hoosiers — led by his former assistant and good friend, Tom Crean. Tonight’s game marks the first time two top-5 teams have met at the Breslin Center.

It’s the third matchup of top-4 teams in college basketball this season, the second for Indiana, which beat then top-ranked Michigan. It’s just the fourth with a pair of Big Ten teams since 1997, according to STATS LLC.

First place in the Big Ten — and perhaps top seeding in next month’s NCAA tournament — will be at stake with four games remaining in the regular season after this matchup.

And to add to the hype, former Michigan State great Magic Johnson is scheduled to work the game as an ESPN analyst.

“What I’m going to preach to my guys is, these are opportunities that 99 percent of America never get to be a part of,” Izzo said.

While Izzo is embracing the significance of the showdown, Crean insisted he won't even mention what is on the line when he talks to his players.

"It's another very big game and right now at Indiana — and I'm sure it's this way at Michigan State — every game is a big game," Crean said. "Not just because it's a great league but because of where you sit in the league and where you sit nationally.

"Our guys have played in quite a few of these types of games and we've been in some tough environments. There's no question that the environments will be incredibly exciting."

Crean would know, because he was on Izzo's bench in East Lansing from the 1995-96 season — Izzo's first as a head coach — through 1998-99, when the Spartans went to their first of three straight Final Fours.

Izzo said coaching against his former colleague is a little like Crean's brothers-in-law — John and Jim Harbaugh — competing on opposite sidelines earlier this month in the Super Bowl.

"I don't like doing it," Izzo said. "They didn't like doing it. But I thought John Harbaugh had a great line, 'The only thing that could be worse than this is if one of us didn't make it'."

The Hoosiers were expected to be great — ranked No. 1 in the preseason — and they have been with center Cody Zeller, guard Victor Oladipo and forward Christian Watford leading the way. They've won three straight since losing by two points at Illinois and eight of their last nine games, including a closely contested victory over Michigan State last month.

"Indiana is playing at a level like no other," Izzo added. "They've sustained it the whole year, which, to me, is one of the most impressive things you can do."

The Spartans, without All-America forward Draymond Green, were expected to be in somewhat of a rebuilding mode. Ranked No. 14 in the preseason, they got their first quality victory by

beating Kansas and have steadily climbed in the poll by winning five straight and 11 of their last 12 games thanks to a balanced offense and stifling defense.

“Their team is good and they’ve been good for a long time,” Crean added. “To look at what they’re doing now and say, ‘Wow, they’re doing such a good job,’ would discredit what they did in November, December and January.”

On Jan. 27 at Assembly Hall, Oladipo had 21 points, seven rebounds, six steals and three blocks to help the Hoosiers hold off Michigan State in a 75-70 win.

Crean said he expects Oladipo to play today, three days after he limped off the court with a sprained left ankle in the first half of a win against Purdue and sat out the second half.

Michigan State freshman guard Gary Harris, an Indiana native, said the Spartans will try to stop Oladipo from doing what he does best.

“He guards on the defensive end and gets them going offensively in transition,” Harris added. “We just have to be smart, especially on the offensive end because he plays the passing lanes.”

The Spartans don’t anticipate Travis Trice playing for the first time since he suffered a head injury last month, taking away a backup point guard who played a career-high 30 minutes and matched a career-high with five assists when Keith Appling was limited by fouls at Indiana.

That will make it even more important for Appling to stay on the floor. Like Izzo, the junior point guard isn’t hiding how fired up he is about the game.

“That’s why we came here, to compete for Big Ten championships and potential No. 1 seeds in the tournament,” he added. “I definitely embrace it and I think that’s one of the things that will help us play harder.”

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