

Nothing But 'Net – Week #21 – 03/28/2011 – Season Wrap-up, Final Grades, And Looking Ahead

Season Wrap-up

There's so much to say about this season's Michigan men's basketball team, but the three biggest things are:

- They were fun to watch.
- They greatly exceeded all expectations.
- They came SO close to "shocking the world".

At the beginning of the season, no one was predicting that Michigan would finish in the top half of the Big Ten standings and go to the [NCAA Tournament](#), but that's what they did. Most "experts" (including me) predicted that UM would finish near the bottom of the Big Ten (10th place being the most common prediction), and that they would be lucky to sneak into the [National Invitation Tournament \(NIT\)](#). The team was just too young and inexperienced, and they had lost too much (54%) of their scoring from last season's team, which wasn't very good to start with. They had no seniors, only two juniors that played regularly, and a bunch of sophomores and freshmen. They had very little height, and the few tall players on the team had never played a minute in a college game. It looked like a big-time "rebuilding year".

And yet...

- The two juniors provided good, solid leadership, both on and off the court.
- Two of the sophomores displayed good to great improvement over their freshman seasons.
- The freshmen played (for the most part) with poise and skill beyond their years.
- The scoring was there, and it was balanced for a change.
- The (not so) big guys played bigger than their height.

Let's look at each of these factors:

The Juniors - [Stu Douglass](#) and [Zack Novak](#) led by example this season. They both played hard, and they did a great job of keeping the young players focused on and off the court. They also both had a few big scoring games, especially Novak, who found his 3-point stroke again after a shaky sophomore season.

The Sophomores – Only two of the sophomores on this season's team played much as freshmen, and they both improved from last season. One of them, [Matt Vogrich](#), showed solid improvement over his freshman campaign, but the other, [Darius Morris](#), was certainly the most improved player on the team, probably in the whole Big Ten, and one of the most improved players in the country.

The Freshmen – Between true freshmen (4) and redshirt freshmen (2), there were a lot of new faces this season. It's always a crapshoot with freshmen; they can look great in high school, playing against other high school kids, but when they start playing against college seniors in the Big Ten, they can look like boys out there. Fortunately, Michigan managed to get a few freshmen who (eventually) played like seasoned veterans. It just took a while. See "Bad Losses" (below) for more details on the string of games where the young players (especially the freshmen) panicked

at key moments, and turned a tight game into a runaway loss. When they played with poise, they were very good. When they panicked, they were a liability. As the season went on, they got better at keeping their poise.

The Scoring - Manny Harris and DeShawn Sims were very good players, and I loved watching them play here, but when they were in the lineup there wasn't a lot of scoring balance. Opposing teams knew that if they could shut down even one of them, Michigan would struggle. Not so this season. Michigan often had 3 or 4 players score in double figures, and it wasn't always the same players. That made it hard for opposing teams to prepare for playing Michigan, and it made it hard to adjust to playing Michigan during the game. If they put their best defender on whoever was doing most of the UM scoring, someone else would step up.

The Big Guys - That should be "The Not-So-Big Guys". Michigan just didn't have much height this season. They often started 4 guards and a forward (listed as a center). The tallest player on the team is (redshirt) freshman [Blake McLimans](#), at 6'10", but he's not a "power" player, he's a "finesse" player. He's much more comfortable floating around near the 3-point line than banging underneath, with his back to the basket. There are two players who are 6'9" tall: freshman [Jon Horford](#) and freshman [Evan Smotrycz](#). Horford is a true center, but he's also a "project". He doesn't have a complete game yet, and he only played sparingly once the Big Ten season started. Smotrycz can play either "power" or "finesse", but he's more comfortable playing "finesse". He was called on often this season to spell Michigan's starting center, [Jordan Morgan](#), when he needed a rest or got in foul trouble. Morgan is Michigan's best true center, but he's also the shortest, at 6'8". On most teams, he would be a forward, but on Michigan's team, he was the starting center. Michigan consistently lost the rebounding battle in almost every game, often by double digits, yet they won more games than they lost. So, how did they do it, with no real "power" height? They played good team defense, and everybody rebounded, not just the big guys. The leading rebounder on the team was Zack Novak, a 6'4" (really 6'2") guard who was often used as an undersized forward, guarding players 6-8 inches taller. They hustled, they scrapped, and they did whatever they had to do to neutralize the other team's height advantage. And it worked.

Good/Bad Wins/Losses

I say this every season: I know that (in theory) every win is a good win, and every loss is a bad loss, but in practice, there are bad wins and good losses. I also know that Michigan takes great pride in not believing in "moral victories", but they're real too. Let's look at the good and bad wins and losses:

Good Wins - There were several "good wins" this season:

- 11/30/2010 - At Clemson (69-61). This was Michigan's first true road game, after a couple neutral site games in the Legends Classic, and it was a very big, very impressive win against a team that made the NCAA Tournament. It also helped the Big Ten win the ACC/Big Ten Challenge again.
- 12/04/2010 - Home vs. Harvard (65-62). At the time, this win didn't look very impressive, but Harvard went on to have a very good season, and was a buzzer-beater by Princeton away from getting into the NCAA Tournament. It was also nice to beat former UM coach Tommy Amaker, who is doing a great job at Harvard.

- 12/10/2010 – Home vs. Utah (75-64). At the time, this win looked bigger than it did by the end of the season, but Utah is a quality team with 3 players 7 feet tall or taller, and Michigan handled them convincingly. This was the game where UM showed how they could handle a taller team.
- 12/18/2010 – Home vs. Oakland (69-51). Oakland made it to the NCAA Tournament, and almost upset #5 seed Texas. During the regular season, they beat Tennessee (Michigan's first opponent in the NCAA Tournament) on the road, and lost to Michigan State by one point at a neutral site. This was an important win, by a convincing margin.
- 02/02/2011 – Home vs. Penn State (76-69). Once again, at the time, this didn't look like a very impressive win, but PSU went on to beat some good Big Ten teams, tie for 4th place in the Big Ten, make it to the Big Ten Championship game, and make it to the NCAA Tournament.
- 01/27/2011 – At (#25) Michigan State (61-57). This was probably the biggest win of the season. It stopped a 6-game losing streak, and it started an 8-3 finish to the regular season. It also snapped a 13-year losing streak in Breslin, and made it possible for Michigan to sweep MSU.
- 02/06/2011 – At Penn State (65-62). Another road win, in a season where road wins were tough to come by for most of the Big Ten teams. At this point in the season, people were realizing that Penn State was for real, so sweeping them was a Big Deal.
- 02/26/2011 – At Minnesota (70-63). Yet another road win, in a very tough place to play. At the time, it wasn't apparent that Minnesota had completely fallen apart in the 2nd half of the Big Ten season.
- 03/05/2011 – Home vs. Michigan State (70-63). Even though the road win vs. MSU was probably bigger/more important, this one was the most fun, since we got to see it in person. It was fabulous to sweep the Spartans.
- 03/11/2011 – Big Ten Tournament vs. Illinois (60-55). Here's another NCAA Tournament team that Michigan beat. This win also avenged an earlier close loss at Illinois.
- 03/18/2011 – NCAA Tournament vs. Tennessee (75-45). It's always a big deal when you win an NCAA Tournament game. Winning by 30 points is just a bonus.

Bad Wins – There was only one “bad win” this season:

- 12/06/2010 – Home vs. Concordia (86-65). Looking at the final score, you would never know that this was a tense game for the first 30 minutes. The Concordia center ran wild, and no one from UM could slow him down. It was scary to watch.

Good Losses – There were several “good losses” this season. Michigan played several teams that were ranked in the Top 10 at the time, and they played them tough. They just couldn't quite beat them:

- 11/26/2010 – Legends Classic vs. (#9) Syracuse (53-50). This was Michigan's first loss of the season, and the first indication that they were good enough to play with the big boys.
- 01/09/2011 – Home vs. (#3) Kansas (67-60, overtime). UM hung with them the whole game, and had a decent chance to win it in regulation.
- 01/12/2011 – Home vs. (#2) Ohio State (68-64). This was the very next game after the Kansas game, and once again, UM hung in there the whole game. OSU picked it up a notch in the last 2 minutes to win, but it could have gone either way.
- 02/03/2011 – At (#1) Ohio State (62-53). This game was a lot closer than the final score would indicate. Michigan hung with them for most of the game, and just couldn't pull it out at the end.
- 02/16/2011 – At Illinois (54-52). This was another game that was decided in the final seconds.
- 02/23/2011 – Home vs. (#12) Wisconsin (53-52). Michigan should have won this game. Wisconsin banked in a last-second desperation 3-pointer at the buzzer to steal it.
- 03/12/2011 – Big Ten Tournament vs. (#1) Ohio State (68-61). This was the third time that Michigan played Ohio State this season, and it looked a lot like the other two games, including the final outcome.
- 03/20/2011 – NCAA Tournament vs. (#3) Duke (73-71). The one that got away. Michigan kept hanging around, and had a chance to win (with a 3-pointer) or tie the game at the buzzer, but alas...

Bad Losses – Unfortunately, there were more than a couple "bad losses" this season:

- 11/27/2010 – Legends Classic vs. UTEP (65-56). There was no shame in losing the game the previous day to (#9) Syracuse, but this was one that UM should have won. They were a much better team than UTEP, but they lost their poise and panicked, and that cost them the game.
- 12/28/2010 – Home vs. (#12) Purdue (80-57). This was UM's Big Ten opener, at 2:00 on a Tuesday afternoon. Odd time, odd game. It was one of UM's worst losses, and it started a 1-6 slide to start the Big Ten season. There's no shame in losing to a Top-15 team, even at home, but Purdue crushed Michigan in this one. Once again, the youngsters panicked at the wrong time, and Purdue took advantage of it.
- 01/15/2011 – At Indiana (80-61). As bad as the Purdue loss was, this one was MUCH worse. At the time, Indiana was winless (0-4) in the Big Ten, and Michigan had just played the #3 and #2 teams in the nation to a standstill. This may sound like a broken record, but the big problem again was poise; Indiana put together a minor run, and the young players panicked and started throwing up hasty 3-pointers. A couple misses, a few more baskets by IU, and the minor run is a full-blown rout. Sigh.

- 01/18/2011 – At Northwestern (74-60). Another road game against a lower-division Big Ten team, another panic, another rout.
- 01/22/2011 – Home vs. (#15) Minnesota (69-64). It's hard to remember that Minnesota was ranked in the Top 25 for much of the 1st half of the Big Ten season, since they collapsed so completely and spectacularly in the 2nd half of the Big Ten season. In hindsight, Michigan should have won this one, but at the time, it was just the 6th loss in a 6-game losing streak. This was the low point of the season. Fortunately, the next game was the big win at MSU (see "Good Wins", above).

Final Grades

Here are the final grades for each player:

True Freshmen

[Colton Christian](#): C+

Colton played in a lot of games (27), but he didn't play a lot of minutes (126), and he didn't score much (4 points on 2-for-11 shooting). He did get some rebounds (36), and he played some good defense. He's still looking for his place on the team.

[Tim Hardaway, Jr.](#): A-

Tim was the 2nd leading scorer on the team (13.9 pts/game). His shooting numbers were very good (42.0% and 36.7%), he got some rebounds (133), and he had more assists (59) than turnovers (45). He started the season with some pretty good games, but once the Big Ten season started, he really picked his game up. He became a force to be reckoned with in the Big Ten, and he single-handedly won a couple games.

[Jon Horford](#): B-

Jon started off slow, but improved during the whole month of December. Once the Big Ten season started, he kind of disappeared, due to a minor knee injury. It's a shame, because he was just starting to look much more comfortable out there. He played in 29 games, but only for 196 minutes, total. His scoring (2.0 pts/game) wasn't very exciting, but his shooting percentage (47.8%) was very good. He's developing into a capable backup at center.

[Evan Smotrycz](#): B

Evan was kind of inconsistent out there, with some good games and some bad games. Basically, if he hit his first shot of the game (usually a 3-pointer), he had a good game. If he missed his first attempt, he was likely to end up with 0 points that game. He was a starter for the first 24 games of the season, until he was replaced by Stu Douglass. His numbers dropped off when he switched to being a bench player. His shooting percentages (40.1% and 38.1%) were very good, but his rebounding total (81) was kind of low for a player his size.

Redshirt Freshmen

[Blake McLimans](#): C+

Blake has tons of potential, and he showed flashes of promise, but he never really broke through this season. It was a big relief when he finally hit his first (and only) 3-pointer, after missing his first 13 attempts. He ended the season 1-for-19 shooting 3-pointers. Ouch.

[Jordan Morgan](#): A-

After Darius Morris, Jordan was the biggest (pleasant) surprise of the season. Even though he wasn't as tall as many of the centers he was asked to guard, he used his strength and quickness to keep them in check. He also did very well offensively. He was the 3rd leading scorer on the team (9.2 pts/game), and he had a great shooting percentage (62.7%).

Transfer Player (Sophomore)

[Jordan Dumars](#): Incomplete.

Jordan didn't play this season. Even though he was eligible starting with the Bryant game, he was recovering from a minor knee injury he suffered earlier this season, and the coaching staff decided to redshirt him for the rest of the season. Next year, he'll still have sophomore eligibility (3 full years left).

Sophomores

[Eso Akunne](#): C

Eso didn't play much (16 games, 40 minutes), and he didn't score much (7 points).

[Josh Bartelstein](#): Incomplete

Josh only played in "mop up" action (11 games, 19 minutes), but he did score: a 3-pointer vs. Purdue. He wrote a very interesting and informative blog on MgoBlue.com.

[Darius Morris](#): A

Darius gets the only straight A, and he sure earned it. He was the leading scorer (15.0 pts/game), the leader in assists (235 – a new school single-season record), and the leader in steals (36). He shot good percentages (48.9% and 25.0%), and he even pulled down 139 rebounds. He ran the offense well, had good court vision, and was excellent at bringing the ball upcourt against heavy pressure. He's the fastest player on the team, and he has amazing body control.

[Corey Person](#): Incomplete

Corey is another player who only played in "garbage time" (5 games, 9 minutes). He scored 1 point.

[Matt Vogrich](#): B-

Matt came off the bench in all but one game this season, and he did a pretty good job. He only hit double figures once (vs. Tennessee), and he had a few scoreless games, but he shot pretty well (42.9% and 38.7%), and he pulled down a few rebounds (56).

Juniors

[Stu Douglass](#): B+

Stu started the season as "6th man", but he broke into the starting lineup for the home Northwestern game (02/09/2011), and he did a good job the rest of the season. He was the 5th leading scorer (7.1 pts/game) on the team, and he had good shooting percentages (40.8% and 35.8%). He did a pretty good job running the point when Darius Morris wasn't doing it. Most importantly, he was a leader out there.

[Zack Novak](#): A-

Zack was the 4th leading scorer (8.9 pts/game) on the team, but he was the leading rebounder (203). That's amazing when you consider that he is really a shooting guard who is occasionally asked to play small forward. He routinely guarded players 4-6 inches taller than he is, and he shut them down. But the one thing about Zack that doesn't necessarily show up on the stat sheet is his hustle. He never stops hustling out there, and he never gives up. He scraps and dives for loose balls, he chases down opposing players on breakaways, and he sets brutal picks. He is a fierce competitor, and a true leader.

[Darrick Ervin II](#): Incomplete.

Darrick is another "mop up time" player (3 games, 3 minutes). He hasn't taken a shot yet.

These are good grades, and the players earned them.

Awards

Most Valuable: Darius Morris

Most Improved: Darius Morris

Best Freshman: Tim Hardaway, Jr.

Best Defender: Zack Novak

Best Rebounder: Zack Novak

Best Hustler: Zack Novak

Looking Ahead

This section appears to be so easy to write: everyone's back for next season, and Michigan is adding a couple fast, hot-shooting incoming freshmen guards. What could go wrong? Michigan should contend for the Big Ten title, and make a deep run in the NCAA Tournament, right? It's all good, right?

Not so fast. While this season's team was very successful, there's a thin line between success and failure in college basketball. I'm not the first person to point back to the 2009-2010 team, which looked so promising after the successes of the 2008-2009 team, but fell flat. The 2009-2010 team did poorly because of poor team chemistry and lack of leadership. It doesn't look like leadership will be a problem next season, with Novak, Douglass, and Morris firmly in control, but team chemistry is another matter. Will next year's team be as hungry? Will they feel a sense of entitlement? Will the role players from this year want to be starters? Will there be enough minutes to go around? Will the incoming freshmen (along with Jordan Dumars) fit in?

I almost hate to mention it, but there's one other factor that made this season's team so successful: injuries, actually, the lack of them. This team was incredibly lucky that none of the key players missed a single game due to injury. In the last decade, there have been Michigan teams that were ravaged by serious injuries to key players. Imagine this season without Darius Morris for 10 games, or without Jordan Morgan for 15 games. They wouldn't have even made it to the NIT if that had happened. It won't be any different next season. Michigan isn't adding a couple 7-footers to back up Morgan, or a couple experienced point guards to back up Morris. If those guys go down, the team is hosed.

Enough "gloom and doom". Just keep in mind that just because this season's team was successful and everyone is coming back, that doesn't guarantee even greater success next season. A lot of any future success will depend on team attitude, team chemistry, and avoiding injuries.

Did someone mention two fast, hot-shooting incoming freshmen guards? Here they are:

Trey Burke – Point guard
6'1", 170 pounds
Columbus, OH

Recently named Mr. Basketball for the state of Ohio. He's a good shooter, and a pretty good point guard. Think of him as a slightly slower, slightly shorter version of Darius Morris, with a better outside shot.

Carlton Brundidge – Shooting guard
6'1", 205 pounds
Southfield, MI

He's a pretty good shooter, and he can play some point guard. He's more likely to drive to the basket than pull up and pop.

So, the future looks promising, but not guaranteed. It's been a fun season to write about, and it should be fun again next season. Be sure to check back in the fall.

Go Blue!

