

## **Nothing But 'Net – Week #20 – 03/23/2015 – Season Wrap-Up, Final Grades, Looking Ahead**

The 2014-2015 University of Michigan men's basketball team is done for the season, so it's time to wrap things up. The Executive Summary: it was a disappointing season.

UM ended the season with a record of 16-16 (8-10 in the Big Ten). After several seasons of Top-25 finishes, Big Ten championships, and deep NCAA Tournament runs, this was not what we're used to. We've gotten used to young teams, and teams with losses to the NBA Draft, but those teams have managed to overcome those losses and play beyond their years. Not this team. UM just lost too many good players in the last 2 NBA Drafts, and had too many significant injuries, to ever really recover.

Let's start with the NBA Draft. [Two years ago \(04/08/2013\), Michigan played in the National Championship Game in Atlanta.](#) Their starting lineup was (National Player of the Year) Trey Burke, Tim Hardaway Jr., Mitch McGary, Glenn Robinson III, and Nik Stauskas. All 5 of those players are now in the NBA, although all but one of them would have had eligibility to play this season. That is a LOT of talent lost. Burke and Hardaway left after the 2012-2013 season, with Burke giving up his junior and senior seasons, and Hardaway giving up his senior season. After last season (2013-2014), McGary, GRIII, and Stauskas all left for the NBA, each giving up their junior and senior seasons.

Still, things looked promising coming into this season. Michigan still had three promising returning players (the "Big 3": sophomore [Zak Irvin](#), junior [Caris LeVert](#), and sophomore [Derrick Walton Jr.](#)), some upperclass leadership (junior [Spike Albrecht](#) and senior [Max Bielfeldt](#)), and a large crop of promising freshmen ([Muhammad-Ali Abdur-Rahkman](#), [Kameron Chatman](#), [Aubrey Dawkins](#), redshirt freshman [Mark Donnal](#), [Ricky Doyle](#), and [DJ Wilson](#)). [Coach Beilein](#) had proven that he could take a young, inexperienced team and get the most out of them. What could go wrong?

Well, the biggest thing that went wrong was injuries and illnesses. The biggest injury was to Caris LeVert, when [he broke a bone in his foot](#) in the last second of the [home win against Northwestern on 01/17/2015](#). He was done for the season. At the time of his injury, he led the team in scoring, rebounding, assists, steals, and minutes. He's projected as a 1<sup>st</sup> round pick in this year's NBA Draft, so, yeah, it was a big loss.

Still, Michigan buckled down and overachieved, and did their best without LeVert. Just when they were starting to adjust to "the new normal", they suffered another big injury, to another member of the Big 3: Derrick Walton Jr. He had stubbed his toe way back in [the Villanova game on 11/26/2014](#), and he played with "turf toe" for 15 more games. The toe injury slowed him down a bit, and limited his explosiveness at driving to the basket and jumping. As he continued to play through the injury, he changed the way he ran, and that injured his foot, even after his toe finally healed. He played his last game of the season on [01/24/2015 vs. Wisconsin](#), just a week after LeVert suffered his season-ending injury.

It wasn't just the Big 3 that suffered injuries: Spike Albrecht played the whole season with a hip injury that slowed him down and made every step painful. He'll have surgery, and be back for his senior season, hopefully in better shape.

It wasn't just upperclassmen who got injured: DJ Wilson sprained his knee in the same Villanova game, and missed 4 weeks of practice. He could have played again starting in January, but he and the coaching staff agreed that he would be better off voluntarily staying on the bench, so he could get a medical redshirt for this season.

It wasn't just injuries either: a wave of flu swept through the team, starting around the time Walton went out after the Wisconsin game. So, on top of the injuries to the starters, the backups who were supposed to step up and replace them were sick. It was pretty grim for a while.

Enough about injuries and illnesses. They explain a lot about the disappointing season, but not all of it. Some of it was mental, specifically a lack of confidence. You can never predict how a team will react to adversity, and this team had a bad stretch where they hung their heads and let adversity crush them. I'm speaking of course about the single most embarrassing and depressing loss in Michigan basketball history: [12/06/2014 to NJIT](#) (New Jersey Institute of Technology). UM took them way too lightly, and when NJIT refused to just lay down and die like most of the other "cupcake" non-conference opponents, Michigan panicked, then caved. It was ugly to watch, and even uglier because of the "upset hangover": 3 days later, UM played an aroused EMU team that smelled blood in the water, [and they lost to them as well](#). This was not even a particularly good EMU squad, but they managed to play UM at the perfect time to beat them, when UM's confidence was shot, and a good high school team could have beaten them. Those two games ruined Michigan's season. Period.

Still, it wasn't all injuries, illnesses, and bad losses. Michigan did win 16 games, and some of them were pretty impressive. Certainly, the most impressive was a [home win \(64-57\) against \(#24\) Ohio State on 02/22/2015](#). Other big wins:

- [11/24/2014: Michigan 70 - Oregon 63 \(Brooklyn, NY\)](#) - Oregon is in the NCAA Tournament.
- [12/02/2014: Michigan 68 - Syracuse 65 \(Ann Arbor\)](#) - In the ACC/Big Ten Challenge.
- [01/27/2015: Michigan 58 - Nebraska 44 \(Ann Arbor\)](#) - The first game without both LeVert and Walton.
- [03/07/2015: Michigan 79 - Rutgers 69 \(Ann Arbor\)](#) - Senior Day, and UM could have won by 30.
- [03/12/2015: Michigan 73 - Illinois 55 \(Chicago, IL\)](#) - In the Big Ten Tournament. Illinois was a "bubble" team.

There were also some encouraging losses, where Michigan played much better than expected, and almost pulled off an upset:

- [11/25/2014: \(#12\) Villanova 60 - Michigan 55 \(Brooklyn, NY\)](#) - Villanova is a #1 seed in the NCAA Tournament, and UM played them even.
- [01/24/2015: \(#6\) Wisconsin 69 - Michigan 64 \(overtime - Ann Arbor\)](#) - UM took them to overtime, then ran out of gas.
- [02/01/2015: Michigan State 76 - Michigan 66 \(overtime - East Lansing\)](#) - It's tough to win in East Lansing, but UM almost did it. Once again, they fought their way to overtime, then ran out of gas.
- [02/08/2015: Indiana 70 - Michigan 67 \(Bloomington, IN\)](#) - It's also tough to win in Bloomington, but UM just missed forcing another overtime.
- [02/12/2015: Illinois 64 - Michigan 52 \(overtime - Champaign, IL\)](#) - Another road loss in overtime.

Besides the horrible losses to NJIT and EMU, there was one more loss that ruined any hope of an NIT bid: a gut-wrenching double-overtime loss at Northwestern on 03/03/2015. What was so frustrating about this loss was that it didn't have to happen. Instead of letting NW fire up not one, not two, but three desperation 3-pointers in the closing seconds, all of which went in, just FOUL SOMEONE, and make them shoot 2 free throws. They can't score 3 points on 2 free throws. Sigh.

Oh well. If Michigan had stayed healthy for the whole season, they certainly would have gotten an invitation to the NIT, and maybe to the Big Dance, but that's not what happened. This season was the perfect storm of bad luck, and there's no reason to be worried for the future. In fact, due to all the injuries, lots of young players got lots of game experience this season, which should help in the future.

## **Final Grades**

### Freshman Eligibility

[Muhammad-Ali Abdur-Rahkman](#) - B (Midterm = C)

Wow, what a difference! Once he was thrust into the starting lineup by injuries, MAAR responded admirably. He's fast, he's fearless at driving to the basket, and he finishes well. He has a decent outside shot, and he plays good defense. He needs to work on shooting a better percentage, getting to the line a little more, and his court vision.

[Kameron Chatman](#) - C (Midterm = C)

Kameron started the season as a starter, but failed to impress. He was replaced in the starting lineup by Spike Albrecht. As the season went on, he showed some improvement, and the game started "slowing down" for him. He had impressive stretches in a few games, but consistency was still a problem. As the highest-ranked recruit in his class, a lot more was expected from him.

[Aubrey Dawkins](#) - B+ (Midterm = B-)

Aubrey is another player who improved dramatically once he was forced into the starting lineup by injuries. He was Michigan's main offensive weapon in a few games, and he showed tons of potential for the future. His defense is just OK, and he needs to work on getting a few more assists, but he's going to be a key contributor next season and beyond.

[Mark Donnal](#) - D (Midterm = C-)

Mark also started the season as a starter, but played his way onto the bench. He was expected to be the starting center, but he has proven to be too "soft" for banging underneath. He's more of a finesse player, with a nice 3-point stroke. He needs to play tougher, especially on post defense and going to the rim on offense.

[Ricky Doyle](#) - B+ (Midterm = B)

Ricky improved steadily as the season went along. He started as an out-of-shape reserve, and worked his way into condition and a starting spot. He's good at banging underneath with the big guys, and he's gotten better and better at finishing under the basket. He gets fouled a lot, so he needs to work on his free throws.

[Austin Hatch](#) - Inc. (Midterm = Inc.)

Austin only played in a couple of games, and only for a few minutes, scoring one point. He's still recovering from his plane crash, and may never get to the point where he can play significant minutes. In the meantime, everyone is rooting for him, and cherishing every minute and point that he earns.

[DJ Wilson](#) - Inc. (Midterm = Inc.)

DJ only played a little bit in a few games before he injured his knee, ending his freshman season. He is eligible for a medical redshirt, so he'll be back next year with freshman eligibility. In the brief glimpses we had of him before his injury, he looked athletic but raw. He's too thin/wiry to play center, but he can be a successful shooting forward. He showed us great "bounce" and hustle.

#### Sophomore Eligibility

[Andrew Dakich](#) - C- (Midterm = Inc.)

Andrew was being voluntarily redshirted this season, until LeVert and Walton went out with injuries. Andrew volunteered to "burn his shirt" and play this season, even though it cost him a year's eligibility. He played in 13 games, and scored 5 points, including a 3-pointer, but he was never much of an offensive threat, so Michigan was essentially playing 4-on-5 when he was out there on offense. He did his best, but he was hopelessly outmanned trying to guard some of the elite players in the Big Ten.

[Zak Irvin](#) - B+ (Midterm = B)

Zak was one of the 3 main players (along with Caris LeVert and Derrick Walton Jr.) on this team, and a lot was expected of him. When the other 2 went down with injuries, Zak was forced to try to carry the team by himself, and he had a tough time. He disappeared in several games, and didn't get the job done. Then, in the last month of the season, he

suddenly woke up. His play became much more consistent, and he started shooting and scoring the way he was expected to. By the end of the season, he was the leader that Michigan needed. It's just a shame that he didn't get to show off his improved game in a postseason tournament. Oh yeah, he went the whole season (32 games) making at least one 3-pointer in every game. That's quite an accomplishment.

[Sean Lonergan](#) - Inc. (Midterm = Inc.)

Sean has only played a few minutes in a few games, so we don't know what he's capable of.

[Derrick Walton Jr.](#) - B (Midterm = B)

Derrick was playing pretty well before he injured his foot, due to the toe injury that slowed him down for most of the season. He was missed out there.

### Junior Eligibility

[Spike Albrecht](#) - B+ (Midterm = B)

Spike was another player who stepped up when injuries to the rest of the team forced him into a more important role. He really improved his scoring, and he did a very good job running the offense. He's not the quickest player out there, and he has trouble keeping up with some of the bigger, faster opposing players on defense, but he's a steadying influence on the rest of the (young) team when he's out there, and he usually hits his 3-pointers when he decides to shoot them. He has a great assist/turnover ratio, and he's great at the sneaky steal on the other team's inbounds play after a made basket.

[Caris LeVert](#) - B+ (Midterm = B+)

Caris was the best player on the team, until he broke his foot. He's very athletic, and he uses his athleticism to score well in transition. He has a nice 3-point stroke, and he can play good defense. Sometimes he tries to do too much.

### Senior Eligibility

[Max Bielfeldt](#) - B (Midterm = C)

Max is yet another player who improved his game dramatically when injuries turned him into a mainstream player. He's a couple inches too short to play center, but that's his position. He has a very nice 3-point shot, and he can be a matchup problem for the other team when he drifts out to the top of the key and hits a few 3-pointers. He's a smart ballplayer, and he's strong and powerful underneath, but he's just a little too short to play with the big boys.

### **Looking Ahead**

The bad news is: Michigan had a disappointing season. The good news is: lots of players got lots of great game experience, and almost all of them will be back. The only "senior" on the team is redshirt junior Max Bielfeldt. As of now, it isn't clear if he will be invited back for his 5<sup>th</sup> year. The way he played in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the season would certainly suggest that he'd be a valuable component on next season's team, but there's a scholarship shortage. A lot of it depends on whether or not Caris LeVert decides to return for his senior year, or enter the NBA Draft. The latest projections have him as a 1<sup>st</sup> round pick, but he seems to be enjoying his college experience, and his decision could go either way. If he decides to come back for his senior year, there may not be a scholarship open for Bielfeldt, and he may go elsewhere as a "graduate transfer" player.

Besides the Bielfeldt/LeVert situation, everyone else is back next year, including DJ Wilson, who will still have freshmen eligibility, and a transfer player who sat out this season, [Duncan Robinson](#). He's a 6'8", 190 pound wing, and he's a transfer from (Division III) Williams College. He sat out this season, and he'll have sophomore eligibility next season. He was a great scorer at Williams, and the word from practice this season is that he's perhaps a better shooter than Nik Stauskas. He broke Stauskas' shooting records in practice. After bringing in a huge freshman class this season, Beilein doesn't have a single commitment for next season. The only offer he has extended so far is to a German player, Moritz Wagner.

Wagner is trying to decide between playing pro ball in Germany or studying in the United States. The word is that if he decides to come to the U.S., he'll probably choose Michigan. Beilein is also chasing a couple other players for next season, but he probably only has one scholarship to work with, so he can't make a lot of offers.

So, the future looks bright, and there's no reason to expect another season like this one next year. Michigan might not contend for the Big Ten title, but it is reasonable to expect them to finish near the top of the standings, and get back to the Big Dance.

Check back here in early November, a week before the first game, for another season of Nothing But 'Net.

Go Blue!