

Nothing But 'Net – Week #20 – 03/13/2017 – Big Ten Tournament Champions!

Quick Look

The University of Michigan men's basketball team played four games last week in [the Big Ten Tournament](#) in Washington (DC), and they won all four, and won the tournament championship. They were the #8 seed. [On Thursday \(03/09/2017\), Michigan beat the #9 seed, Illinois, 75-55](#); [on Friday \(03/10/2017\), they beat the #1 seed, \(#13\) Purdue, 74-70](#) in overtime; [on Saturday \(03/11/2017\), they beat the #4 seed, Minnesota, 84-77](#); then [on Sunday \(03/12/2017\), they beat the #2 seed, \(#23\) Wisconsin, 71-56](#). The four wins raise Michigan's record to 24-11 (10-8 in the Big Ten).

What Happened

Amazingly, the biggest story in Michigan basketball this week isn't that they won the Big Ten Tournament, but that they survived the plane ride to get to Washington. They tried to fly to DC on a charter jet on Wednesday morning, but there was a major clear-air windstorm at that time, and the plane never left the ground. Instead, [it skidded off the runway](#), through a fence, over an access road, and came to rest close to sliding into a ravine. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt, but it was close. If the plane had skidded another 100 yards or so, and gone into the ravine, it could have easily burst into flames, with serious injuries or even deaths.

Of course, everyone on board was shook up, and the team held a players-only meeting to vote on whether to try again the next day or just stay in Ann Arbor and forfeit. They voted to fly the next day, and that flight went smoothly. Still, they only got to the Verizon Center at 10:40 for a scheduled noon tip-off, which was moved back a whole 30 minutes to 12:30.

The fun didn't stop once the team got to the arena. Because the FAA had to investigate their aborted takeoff and accident, they couldn't retrieve their luggage from the wrecked charter plane, and all their game uniforms (white, blue, and maize) were in the hold. So, they had to play their first game, against Illinois, in their practice uniforms, with almost no warm up time. It was the worst possible situation, but it didn't appear to slow Michigan down at all.

The key to all four games this week was a fast, solid start, and the Illinois game was just the first example. They jumped out to a quick 11 point lead (15-4) at the 14:41 mark, built it up to 20 points (31-11) with 7:23 left in the 1st half, and kept Illinois at arms-length for the rest of the game. They did let Illinois creep within 7 points (33-26) with 3:26 to go, but they built the lead back up to 11 points (40-29) at halftime. The lead was still 11 points (45-34) with 16:18 to go, when Michigan pushed it up to 18 points (54-36) with 13:20 to go. The lead never got below 10 points the rest of the way, and Michigan finished the game with an 8-0 run to make it an even 20 points. It was a stirring victory, coming after so much adversity and distraction.

By the next day (Friday), Michigan finally had their game uniforms, and they got a good night's sleep in DC. They didn't start out as fast against Purdue as they had against Illinois, but they did a good job of managing the game. They kept the score close, and it was tied 20-20 with 8:59 left in the 1st half. Purdue went on a quick 7-0 run to lead 27-20 at the 6:16 mark. They pushed it up to 9 points (32-23) with 4:44 to go, and it was looking like they were getting ready to run away with the game. That's when [DJ Wilson](#) took over. He went on a personal 10-2 run, including two jumpers and two 3-pointers, to pull Michigan back within one point (34-33) with 2:15 left in the half. Michigan finally regained the lead, and they were up 4 points (38-34) with 0:01 left when a Purdue player hit a 55-foot shot at the buzzer to make it a one point game at halftime, 38-37.

The second half was close and tense, with neither team able to pull away. In the 2nd half alone, there were 8 ties and 7 lead changes. Purdue's biggest lead in the half was 3 points, and Michigan's biggest lead was 4. Purdue led by 3 points (66-63) with 0:33 left, but Michigan managed to tie it up 66-66, and force overtime.

Overtime has not been kind to Michigan this season, with losses at Iowa and Minnesota, but this time was different. Michigan never trailed in the overtime, built up a 5-point lead (72-67) with 0:20 left, and made enough free throws to win the game. This was a huge win over a Top-15 team, and it was the toughest of the 4 games Michigan played in the tournament.

The semifinal game on Saturday was against Minnesota, a team that beat Michigan in their only meeting of the regular season. That game, in Minneapolis, was an embarrassment of bad officiating and bad free throw shooting by Michigan. Michigan had something to prove, and they proved it. Once again, Michigan had a quick start, and opened up a 10 point lead (15-5) by the 16:17 mark. They pushed the lead up to 16 points (29-13) with 10:41 left in the half, and kept the lead around 8-10 points for the rest of the half, leading by 11 (47-36) at halftime. Minnesota came out strong in the 2nd half, and managed to tie the game up 55-55 with 13:11 to go. That was as close as they got. Minnesota never led in the 2nd half, and Michigan pushed the lead back up to a more comfortable 9 points (72-63) with 5:18 to go. Minnesota had one last run in them, and they got within 3 points (78-75) with 0:53 left, but Michigan closed the game on a 6-2 run to win by 7. The better team won, and they proved that they had been robbed in Minneapolis during the regular season.

It's tough to play 4 games in 4 days, and several of the Michigan players looked a step slower on Sunday in the championship game vs. Wisconsin. On top of the normal fatigue from playing so many games in a row, several of the Michigan players got bumped and bruised in the plane accident. This was their 2nd game against a ranked opponent in 3 days, but they dug deep and found a way to win. For the 3rd time in 4 games, they started out fast and strong, opening a 6-point lead (19-13) with 11:10 to go in the 1st half. They stretched the lead to 10 points (30-20) with 5:25 left in the half, and they looked ready to run away with the game, but Wisconsin had other ideas. They went on a 7-0 run to make it a close game again, 30-27, with 2:41 to go. Michigan built the lead back up to 6 points (33-27) with 1:27 left, but Wisconsin scored the last 5 points of the half, including (sigh) another long buzzer-beating 3-pointer, so Michigan only led by one point (33-32) at halftime.

Michigan played great defense to start the 2nd half, and held Wisconsin without a field goal for the first 8 minutes of the half. Wisconsin's only points during this stretch were a pair of free throws, while Michigan scored 11 points, to make it a 10 point lead, 44-34. Even once Wisconsin started scoring, Michigan answered each time, increasing their lead to 11 points (51-40) with 7:06 to go. Wisconsin got as close as 6 points (51-45) with 6:19 to go, and within 7 (59-52) with 2:59 left, but Michigan went wild in the last 3 minutes and outscored Wisconsin 12-4 with an assortment of steals, dunks, and layups. It was a decisive victory, and very satisfying.

Stats

[The stats for the Illinois game](#) are decent. Michigan shot pretty well overall (30-for-56 = 53.6%), they shot 3-pointers well enough (9-for-25 = 36.0%), and they shot free throws well, but not enough of them (6-for-7 = 85.7%). They won the rebounding battle (28-26) and the turnover battle (7-14). All those extra possessions really helped.

[The stats for the Purdue game](#) are probably the ugliest that Michigan has had in a win this season. They didn't shoot very well overall (25-for-60 = 41.7%), they didn't shoot 3-pointers very well (6-for-25 = 24.0%), but they did shoot free throws well (18-for-23 = 78.3%). They actually won the rebounding battle (38-37), despite the monster front line for Purdue, and they won the turnover battle (13-16). Winning the rebounding battle was the key to winning the game, instead of Michigan's usual winning formula of just outscoring the opponent.

[The stats for the Minnesota game](#) are much better. Michigan shot well overall (29-for-54 = 53.7%), they shot 3-pointers well (8-for-23 = 34.8%), and they shot free throws well (18-for-22 = 81.8%). They lost the rebounding battle badly (38-24), but they won the turnover battle (8-11). Michigan won the game by shooting 3-pointers better, holding Minnesota to 3-for-13 shooting.

Finally, [the stats for the Wisconsin game](#) are the best of the week. Michigan shot very well overall (27-for-48 = 56.3%), they shot 3-pointers well (10-for-23 = 43.5%), and they shot free throws well, but not enough again (7-for-9 = 77.8%). Once again, they got hammered on the boards (32-25), but they won the turnover battle (9-15). Michigan won the game by shooting 3-pointers better, again. Wisconsin only shot 6-for-15. Michigan's defense is getting very good at running opposing shooters off the 3-point line.

Who Looked Good

[Derrick Walton Jr.](#) was THE MAN this week. He was Michigan's leading scorer in 3 of the 4 games (all except the Purdue game), and he was voted the tournament MVP. He single-handedly kept Michigan in a couple of the games when he took over when momentum was starting to swing away from UM. He hit several big shots, many of them contested 3-pointers, and he was magnificent from the free throw line, hitting 22 of 23 attempts. He missed his first free throw attempt, then made 22 in a row, including 10-for-10 vs. Minnesota. He scored double figures in all 4 games (19, 12, 29, and 22 points), and he had 9 assists vs. Minnesota. His 29 points in the Minnesota game is a new career high. He was awesome. He got robbed when he was named 2nd team All Big Ten.

[Zak Irvin](#) was the only other player to hit double figures in all 4 games (18, 13, 13, and 15 points). He played good, solid defense, and he was Michigan's leading rebounder in the tournament (7, 7, 5, and 7 rebounds). He was also named to the All Tournament team. It was great to see him back in form.

[DJ Wilson](#) had a great tournament. He hit double figures in 3 of the 4 games (11, 26, 7, and 17 points), and was the leading scorer in the big Purdue win. He had lots of big rebounds (6, 8, 2, and 6 rebounds), and he played great defense, especially guarding the rim and helping on double teams against the multiple huge guys on Purdue and Wisconsin's front lines.

[Muhammad-Ali Abdur-Rahkman](#) had a good tournament. He only hit double figures in 2 of the 4 games (17, 10, 2, and 7 points), but he helped out in all 4 games with rebounds, assists, and steals. He played good, solid defense, and was the "glue" that held the team together.

[Moritz Wagner](#) had one very good game (17 points vs. Minnesota) and 3 so-so games (6, 5, and 7 points). He appeared to be dealing with a sore back, presumably from the plane accident.

Who Looked Not-So-Good

[Mark Donnal](#) had a quiet week. He scored 0, 3, 4, and 0 points, but he did give Wagner valuable rest periods to take care of his sore back.

[Duncan Robinson](#) wasn't much of a factor in 3 of the 4 games. He scored 2, 5, 10, and 3 points.

[Xavier Simpson](#) also didn't contribute much this week. He scored 2 points in the Illinois and Minnesota games, and was held scoreless in the other 2 games.

Who Else Played

[Jon Teske](#) played for 1 minute in the Purdue game, and got brutalized by the huge Purdue front line. That was it for him.

Who Didn't Play

[Brent Hibbitts](#), [Sean Lonergan](#), [Ibi Watson](#), and [Fred Wright-Jones](#) didn't play this week.

The Big Picture

Since they won the Big Ten Tournament title, Michigan got the league's automatic bid to [the NCAA Tournament](#). They also improved their seeding from 8 or 9 to 7. They're playing their best basketball of the season, and they have great momentum and confidence going into the tournament. If they can keep playing like they did in the Big Ten Tournament, they can make a nice deep run in the NCAA Tournament.

What's Next

On to the Big Dance! Michigan is the #7 seed in the Midwest Region in Indianapolis (IN), and they'll play their first game [on Friday \(03/17/2017, 12:15 p.m. EDT, CBS\) vs. the #10 seed, Oklahoma State](#).

Oklahoma State finished the regular season with a record of 20-12 (9-9 in the Big 12). They had a couple good wins (Georgetown, Wichita State, Arkansas, Oklahoma [twice], West Virginia), and no bad losses. They've got decent height, and a nice mix of youth and experience. Michigan can beat them, but they'll have to play their "A" game.

If they get by Oklahoma State, they'll face the winner of the game between the #2 seed (Louisville) and the #15 seed (Jacksonville State), presumably Louisville. That will be quite a challenge for Michigan, since Louisville is better than any of the teams that UM has played so far this season.

Here's [the complete bracket](#).

Check back next week to see what happened, and why.

Go Blue!