

Nothing But 'Net – Week #01 – 10/30/2017 – Season Preview

Well, the college football season isn't going as well as we would have hoped, but there's always college basketball! Yes, it's that time already. The first game is this Friday (11/03/2017) in Crisler Arena at 7:00. It's an exhibition vs. Grand Valley State. In fact, the team has already had an open practice this past week (Tuesday, 10/24/2017) in Crisler. That went pretty well, and gave us a quick look at this season's team.

Here's my standard description of this weekly column:

Yeah, it's time for University of Michigan men's basketball, and this is the place to read all about it: "Nothing But 'Net" on UMGoBlue.com. Check back every Monday morning between now and the end of the season for a quick, concise wrap-up of the previous week, and a look ahead at the upcoming week, all in one easy-to-read article.

As always here at UMGoBlue.com, the perspective is "by fans, for fans". I'm a fan (since 1974), and I go to all the home games, and watch/listen to all the away games. I don't have any special access (other than being an usher in Sections 209-210), I don't go to the press conferences, and I don't interview high school recruits. I see the same things you do, and write about them as a fan.

Once again, let's get right to the big question:

How good is the 2017-2018 team going to be? The quick answer: not quite as good as last season.

So, how was last season? In my preseason preview last year, I predicted "pretty good", and that was a little off. Last season's team was better than predicted, winning the Big Ten Tournament, and advancing to the Sweet Sixteen in the NCAA Tournament. I expect this season's team to be OK, but not as good as last season's team. They're not ranked in the Coaches Poll, and they're picked to finish anywhere from 5th to 8th in the Big Ten.

Read on for more details.

Last Season

Michigan ended last season with a record of 26-12 (10-8 in the Big Ten). They went 10-3 in pre-conference play, with some good wins ([Marquette](#) and [SMU](#) in the 2K Classic, and [Texas](#) at home), some understandable losses (at [South Carolina](#), and at [#2] [UCLA](#)), one bad loss ([Virginia Tech](#), at home), and a bunch of unsurprising wins against cupcakes. They did win the 2K Classic in Madison Square Garden, in convincing fashion, but they were manhandled in the losses to South Carolina and UCLA.

In Big Ten play, Michigan won a couple games that they weren't supposed to win (at home vs. [#11] [Wisconsin](#), and at home vs. [#14] [Purdue](#)), lost a couple games that they were expected to lose (at [#17] [Wisconsin](#), and at [Michigan State](#)), and lost a few games that they really should have won (at [Iowa](#), at home vs. [Maryland](#), at [Illinois](#), at home vs. [Ohio State](#), at [Minnesota](#), and at [Northwestern](#)). The Ohio State loss was particularly depressing. Still, they finished above 0.500 in the Big Ten, which was better than expected.

In the Big Ten Tournament, things really got interesting. Before they even got to Washington (DC) for the tournament, they had a big scare when [the team plane slid off the runway on \(aborted\) takeoff](#). They flew to DC the next morning, and they got to the Verizon Center for their game less than 2 hours before tipoff. Michigan's game uniforms were trapped on the damaged plane, so they had to play their first game in their practice uniforms. Michigan was the #8 seed, and they beat the #9 seed ([Illinois](#)) handily in the 2nd round game, which earned them a shot at the #1 seed ([Purdue](#)) the next day. Michigan beat Purdue in an overtime thriller, and advanced to the semifinal game vs. the #4 seed ([Minnesota](#)). Michigan won that game convincingly, and earned the right to play the #2 seed ([Wisconsin](#)) for the Big Ten

Tournament Championship. They beat Wisconsin soundly, and won the title. It was very exciting.

In the NCAA Tournament, Michigan was a #7 seed in the Midwest Regional in Indianapolis (IN), and barely beat the #10 seed ([Oklahoma State](#)). Two days later, they played the #2 seed ([#10] [Louisville](#)), and won another tight game to advance to the Sweet Sixteen, in Kansas City (MO). They played the #3 seed ([Oregon](#)), and lost by one point. Still, it was a successful and thrilling tournament run.

Players Lost

Michigan lost 7 players from last season's roster:

[Andrew Dakich](#) – Andrew redshirted last season (his senior season), so he could graduate and use the "graduate transfer rule" to transfer to a school where he might get more playing time. At first, [it looked like he was going to Quinnipiac](#), but he suddenly changed his mind, and [went to Ohio State instead](#). He played a small but important role on the team 2 seasons ago, when Michigan suffered a rash of injuries to key players, but he never really got much playing time besides that period. We all wish him well, except when Ohio State is playing Michigan.

[Mark Donnal](#) – Mark graduated, but has one year of eligibility left, and [is using the "graduate transfer rule" to transfer to Clemson](#). In his career at Michigan, he had some monster games, and a whole bunch of really quiet games. With all the depth at center/strong forward, he wouldn't have played much at Michigan this season, so he went some place where he'll get more playing time. We probably won't miss him, and we all wish him well.

[Zak Irvin](#) – Zak graduated. He was one of the most polarizing players at Michigan in recent memory. He had some huge games and big moments, but almost as often, fans were upset with him. We'll miss him, but we won't miss the drama.

[Sean Lonergan](#) – Sean graduated, although he still has one year of eligibility left. He is no longer on the team, and he doesn't appear to have transferred anywhere to use the "graduate transfer rule". He never played much, and we all wish him well.

[Derrick Walton, Jr.](#) – Derrick graduated. He was a key player on several successful teams. We'll definitely miss him.

[DJ Wilson](#) – DJ had a breakout season last season, and decided to enter the NBA Draft. Good choice: [he was drafted 17th by the Milwaukee Bucks](#). He's the player who could have come back that we're going to miss the most this season.

[Fred Wright-Jones](#) – [Fred left the basketball team to concentrate on his studies](#). He never played much, and we all wish him well.

Once again, an alarming number of players are voluntarily leaving the Michigan team. While none of them were projected to be key players on this season's team, it is still a disturbing trend. Of course, it's not limited to Michigan: the "graduate transfer rule" is getting more popular every season, and I expect the NCAA to make some modifications to the rule soon.

Players Returning

This is a very young team. Irvin, Walton, and Wilson were all starters and key players on last season's team, and they're all gone. Only two starters return. Subs from last season and new players will have to step up. Here's a look at the returning players, by class year (eligibility):

Freshman Eligibility

[Austin Davis](#) #51 (6'10", 245 pounds, F) – Austin was voluntarily redshirted last season, due to the logjam at center/power forward. The coaching staff had to pick one of the two

freshman "big man" players to redshirt, and they chose to redshirt Austin and play Jon Teske. Later in the season, they questioned their decision, and said that Austin was really blossoming on the scout team. This season, we'll get to see what we missed last season. Austin is reported to be a good scorer, a beast on the boards, and a good defender. He's an old-fashioned, back-to-the-basket, physical center.

Sophomore Eligibility

[Brent Hibbitts](#) #0 (6'8", 220 pounds, F) – Brent voluntarily redshirted his freshman season, and played sparingly last season, so he's a redshirt sophomore. He will probably play sparingly again this season, mostly in "garbage time".

[Charles Matthews](#) #1 (6'6", 200 pounds, G) – [Charles is a transfer from Kentucky, where he did pretty well as a true freshman](#). He sat out last season, due to NCAA transfer rules, so he'll have redshirt sophomore eligibility. He has the potential to be one of the most exciting players in recent memory, if [Coach Beilein](#) can get his shooting stroke fixed.

[Zavier Simpson](#) #3 (6'0", 185 pounds, G) – No, your eyes aren't playing tricks on you, Zavier changed the spelling of his first name from "Xavier". He's back for his sophomore season, after a pretty low-key freshman year. He had a few moments of brilliance, but most of the time he was out there, he didn't seem very comfortable. He is still "the point guard of the future", but maybe not the point guard of the present. Coach Beilein brought in a graduate transfer point guard (see below) as the main point guard for this season, to give Zavier another season to get up to speed. I expect him to play more than last season, and to be encouraged to play a little more fearlessly. We'll see how that works out.

[Jon Teske](#) #15 (7'1", 255 pounds, C) – Jon was the freshman "big man" that Coach Beilein and the coaching staff chose to play last season, while Austin Davis was redshirted. It didn't work out very well. Jon had a very unimpressive freshman season, and often looked lost out there. He's got all the tools he needs to be successful, he just needs to get his mental game in order. Just like Simpson, I expect him to play more than last season, and to be encouraged to play a lot more fearlessly.

[Ibi Watson](#) #23 (6'5", 200 pounds, G/F) – The third member of last season's freshman scholarship class that got to play, and the third member that needs to work on his mental game. As with Simpson and Teske, he has all the tools he needs to be successful, he just needs to go out there and play smoothly and fearlessly. He had a horrible freshman season, and there's nowhere to go but up for him.

Junior Eligibility

[Moritz Wagner](#) #13 (6'11", 245 pounds, F) – Moe is the undisputed star of this team, and the centerpiece that the whole team is built around. He was awesome last season, and big things are expected of him this season. He flirted with the NBA Draft after last season, but chose to come back. He won't be coming back after this season, so Michigan needs to get the most out of him while they can. He presents a matchup nightmare for opposing teams. If the opposing center comes out to guard him on the 3-point line, where he's deadly, he has the moves to blow right past him for the dunk. If the opposing center gives him a couple feet to keep him from driving, he can easily pop in a 3-pointer. Just ask Louisville and Purdue. He schooled them.

Senior Eligibility

[Muhammad-Ali Abdur-Rahkman](#) #12 (6'4", 190 pounds, G) – MAAR is the quiet senior leader on the team this season. He's a steady player, and a very good on-ball defender. He's the best player at slashing to the rim, and he has shown great athleticism against bigger players. He doesn't have the court vision of a point guard, and he doesn't have the 3-point touch of a shooting guard, but he is fast and fearless.

[Duncan Robinson](#) #22 (6'8", 215 pounds, G/F) - Duncan proved that he belongs in Division I basketball, after transferring from a Division III school. He can be a deadly 3-point shooter, but his shot has a bad habit of abandoning him at inopportune moments. He has worked hard on the rest of his game, and while he will never be a great defender, he has steadily improved on the defensive end. If he can consistently hit his shots, the team can withstand any defensive liabilities he brings to the table. If his shot cools off, his playing time could go down.

New Players

Coach Beilein brought in another great recruiting class this season, with three scholarship players, one "graduate transfer rule" player, and two preferred walk-on players:

Scholarship Players

[Eli Brooks](#) #55 (6'0", 170 pounds, G) – You've gotta love a 6-foot freshman point guard wearing a center's number (#55). Eli is another "point guard of the future" on this team, which now has 3 point guards (along with Simpson and Simmons).

[Isaiah Livers](#) #4 (6'7", 230 pounds, F) – Isaiah is a solid small forward/wing, with good rebounding and defensive skills. [He was Michigan's Mr. Basketball last year.](#)

[Jordan Poole](#) #2 (6'4", 190 pounds, G) – Jordan is a good-sized shooting guard with a nice 3-point stroke. [His high school team won the national championship.](#)

Graduate Transfer Rule Players

[Jaaron Simmons](#) #5 (6'1", 185 pounds, G) – Jaaron is the first "graduate transfer rule" player to play for Coach Beilein. He graduated from Ohio University with one year of eligibility remaining, and he is an experienced point guard. As opposed to the two "point guards of the future" (Simpson and Poole), he is the "point guard of the present". He will play the most minutes at point guard, while Simpson and Poole get up to speed.

Preferred Walk-On Players

[Naji Ozeir](#) #25 (6'8", 225 pounds, F) – Naji is a freshman scout team player.

[Luke Wilson](#) #11 (6'0", 165 pounds, G) – Luke is a freshman scout team player.

This Season

Let's take a look at Michigan's schedule for this season:

Date	Opponent	Location	Time (ET)
11/03/2017 (Fri)	Grand Valley State (exh)	Ann Arbor, MI	7:00 p.m.
Maui Jim Maui Invitational – Maui On The Mainland			
11/11/2017 (Sat)	North Florida	Ann Arbor, MI	7:30 p.m.
11/13/2017 (Mon)	Central Michigan	Ann Arbor, MI	7:00 p.m.
11/16/2017 (Thu)	Southern Mississippi	Ann Arbor, MI	7:00 p.m.
Maui Jim Maui Invitational – Championship Games			
11/20/2017 (Mon)	LSU	Lahaina, HI	12:30 a.m. (Tue)
11/21/2017 (Tue)	Notre Dame/Chaminade	Lahaina, HI	9:00/11:30 p.m.
11/22/2017 (Wed)	Finals/Consolation	Lahaina, HI	TBA
11/26/2017 (Sun)	UC Riverside	Ann Arbor, MI	4:00 p.m.
ACC/Big Ten Challenge			
11/29/2017 (Wed)	North Carolina	Chapel Hill, NC	7:30 p.m.
12/02/2017 (Sat)	Indiana	Ann Arbor, MI	12:30 p.m.
12/04/2017 (Mon)	Ohio State	Columbus, OH	6:30 p.m.

12/09/2017 (Sat)	UCLA	Ann Arbor, MI	12:00 p.m.
12/12/2017 (Tue)	Texas	Austin, TX	9:00 p.m.
12/16/2017 (Sat)	Detroit-Mercy	Detroit, MI	12:00 p.m.
12/21/2017 (Thu)	Alabama A&M	Ann Arbor, MI	9:00 p.m.
12/30/2017 (Sat)	Jacksonville	Ann Arbor, MI	6:00 p.m.
01/02/2018 (Tue)	Iowa	Iowa City, IA	7:00 p.m.
01/06/2018 (Sat)	Illinois	Ann Arbor, MI	12:00 p.m.
01/09/2018 (Tue)	Purdue	Ann Arbor, MI	9:00 p.m.
01/13/2018 (Sat)	Michigan State	East Lansing, MI	12:00 p.m.
01/15/2018 (Mon)	Maryland	Ann Arbor, MI	6:30 p.m.
01/18/2018 (Thu)	Nebraska	Lincoln, NE	9:00 p.m.
01/21/2018 (Sun)	Rutgers	Ann Arbor, MI	12:00 p.m.
01/25/2018 (Thu)	Purdue	West Lafayette, IN	7:00 p.m.
01/29/2018 (Mon)	Northwestern	Ann Arbor, MI	7:00 p.m.
02/03/2018 (Sat)	Minnesota	Ann Arbor, MI	2:30 p.m.
02/06/2018 (Tue)	Northwestern	Evanston, IL	7:00 p.m.
02/11/2018 (Sun)	Wisconsin	Madison, WI	1:00 p.m.
02/14/2018 (Wed)	Iowa	Ann Arbor, MI	6:30 p.m.
02/18/2018 (Sun)	Ohio State	Ann Arbor, MI	1:00 p.m.
02/21/2018 (Wed)	Penn State	State College, PA	7:00 p.m.
02/24/2018 (Sat)	Maryland	College Park, MD	12:00 p.m.
Big Ten Tournament			
02/28/2018 (Wed)	Opening Round	New York, NY	TBA
03/01/2018 (Thu)	1 st Round	New York, NY	TBA
03/02/2018 (Fri)	2 nd Round	New York, NY	TBA
03/03/2018 (Sat)	Semifinals	New York, NY	TBA
03/04/2018 (Sun)	Championship	New York, NY	TBA

Some comments on the schedule:

- There are several good teams in the Maui Invitational: LSU, Notre Dame, Marquette, VCU, Wichita State, and California. It will be a challenging tournament.
- Playing at North Carolina in the ACC/Big Ten Challenge is going to be extremely challenging. Extremely.
- The two Big Ten games (Indiana and Ohio State) early in December are a result of moving the Big Ten Tournament up a week, to get into Madison Square Garden.
- The home game against UCLA is the best home non-conference opponent. It will also be very challenging.
- The game at Texas will be a big challenge.
- The rest of the non-conference opponents are cupcakes.
- The toughest stretch in the Big Ten schedule is the Purdue (home), Michigan State (away), Maryland (home) section. If Michigan can win 2 of those 3 games, they should be in good shape.
- There's a second tough stretch of Big Ten games: Purdue (away), Northwestern (home), Minnesota (home), Northwestern (away), and Wisconsin (away). If Michigan can win 3 of those 5 games, they'll finish in the top half of the Big Ten standings.
- Each Big Ten team plays 8 teams once (4 home/4 away) and 5 teams twice, for a total of 18 games. This season, Michigan plays:
 - Once: Indiana (home), Illinois (home), Michigan State (away), Nebraska (away), Rutgers (home), Minnesota (home), Wisconsin (away), Penn State (away).
 - Twice: Ohio State, Iowa, Purdue, Maryland, Northwestern.

Expectations

I like to divide the games up into 3 categories ("Should Win", "Should Lose", and "Toss Up"):

- Should Win (13) – North Florida, Central Michigan, Southern Mississippi, UC Riverside, Ohio State (twice), Detroit, Alabama A&M, Jacksonville, Illinois, Nebraska, Rutgers, Penn State.
- Should Lose (7) – North Carolina, UCLA, Iowa (away), Michigan State, Purdue (away), Wisconsin (away), Maryland (away).
- Toss Up (11) – LSU, 2nd round Maui Invitational, 3rd round Maui Invitational, Indiana, Texas, Purdue (home), Maryland (home), Northwestern (both), Minnesota, Iowa (home).

If UM can win all 13 of the “Should Win” games, and just over half (6) of the 11 “Toss Up” games, that would give them a record of 19-12 (10-8 in the Big Ten). That might be good enough to get UM into the NCAA Tournament, depending on how they do in the Big Ten Tournament.

This Week

As you can see in the schedule above, Michigan’s first (exhibition) game is Friday (11/03/2017, 7:00 p.m., BTN Plus) vs. Grand Valley State. Of course, UM will win handily and get to try all kinds of combinations of players out there. Come on down to Crisler Arena to check out this season’s edition of Michigan Basketball, and stop by sections 209/210 to say hi.

Go Blue!