Nothing But 'Net – Week #15 – 02/05/2018 – Two Ugly Wins

Quick Look

The (#24) University of Michigan men's basketball team played two games last week, and they won both of them. On Monday (01/29/2018), they beat Northwestern 58-47 in Crisler Arena, then on Saturday (02/03/2018), they beat Minnesota 76-73 (in overtime) in Crisler Arena. The two wins raise Michigan's record to 19-6 (8-4 in the Big Ten).

What Happened

These were two of the ugliest wins of the season for Michigan. Both Northwestern and Minnesota are going to finish in the bottom half of the Big Ten standings, and both games were at home with a decent amount of rest. In both games, Michigan started out shooting terribly, and had to claw their way back into the games. They managed to avoid the upset, twice, but slow starts like that are very dangerous in a lose-and-go-home environment like the Big Ten and NCAA Tournaments.

So, how bad were the beginnings of both games? Really bad. Against Northwestern, Michigan immediately fell behind 4-0 in the first 90 seconds, pulled within one point (4-3), fell behind by 4 again (7-3), pulled back within 2 points (7-5), then went for almost 6 minutes without a point. With 9:15 left in the first half, they still only had 5 points, in 10:45 of "action". During that almost 6 minute scoreless stretch, they missed 5 shots (4 of them 3-point attempts) and had 2 turnovers. Fortunately, Northwestern also went cold at the same time, and only led by 9 points (14-5). At that point Michigan finally woke up, and ended the half on a 16-5 run to lead 21-19 at the break. UM opened the 2nd half with some decent offense, and pushed their lead up to 8 points (32-24) with 16:21 to go. They went cold again, and let Northwestern back into the game with a 6-0 run, to make it just a 2-point UM lead (32-30) with 14:33 to go. UM pushed the lead back up to 7 points (39-32 at the 11:34 mark), let it slip back to 3 points (41-38 with 10:12 left), then pushed up to 10 points (48-38 with 5:24 to go). Once they got the lead up to double digits, they never let it slip below 7 points (52-45 at the 2:58 mark), and won by 11 points. Michigan never trailed in the 2nd half, but they also never really put Northwestern away. They just kept the lead in the 8-10 point range for the last 5 minutes and ran out the clock.

The start of the Minnesota game was almost as bad as the Northwestern game. With 15:53 to go in the 1st half, Michigan was down 8-2, shooting 1-for-6. They trailed the entire 1st half, but they never let Minnesota get more than 6 points ahead. They were only down 2 points (34-32) at halftime, and they finally got their first lead (38-37) with 16:15 to go. It didn't last long, and Minnesota used a 13-2 run to go up by 10 points (50-40) with 11:15 left in the game. Michigan inched closer, but Minnesota was still up by 7 points (56-49) at the 6:34 mark. Michigan went on an 8-0 run to take the lead again (57-56) with 3:13 to go, and it looked like they had enough of a lead (63-58) with 0:28 to go, when the lousy Big Ten refs took over. Michigan got the ball in cleanly, and while the Minnesota players were chopping away at the Michigan player, trying to commit an intentional foul, the refs called traveling! It was easily the worst call I've seen this season, and it gave Minnesota a chance to try a long 3-pointer to tie the game, which they did. Overtime was just as tense, but Michigan led most of the time, and scored the game-winning "and-one" basket with 0:04 to go.

It seems weird to say this about a losing opponent, but Minnesota has got to be the luckiest team I've seen in years. They hit very low percentage shots time after time in this game: spinning, out-of-control, just-throw-it-up prayers that banked in off the glass or spun around the rim 3-4 times before dropping. Michigan played pretty good defense, and forced Minnesota into long, contested, low-percentage 2-point shots, just as they hoped to, but Minnesota kept hitting them. Overall, Minnesota had exactly the same shooting percentage as Michigan (28-for-63 = 44.4%), but they hit about 80% of their "circus shots".

Stats

The stats for the Northwestern game are miserable. Michigan shot poorly overall (21-for-50 = 42.0%), they shot 3-pointers very poorly (7-for-25 = 28.0%), and they shot free throws decently (9-for-14 = 64.3%). They were out-rebounded by Northwestern (34-28), but made up for it in the turnover battle (5-16). That's how Michigan won the game: forcing Northwestern turnovers.

The stats for the Minnesota game are even worse than the Northwestern stats. Michigan shot a little better overall (28-for-63 = 44.4%), but they shot 3-pointers terribly (8-for-32 = 25.0%), and they shot free throws like they were blindfolded (12-for-28 = 42.9%). They did win the rebounding battle (43-36), and they tied in the turnover department (6-6). They should have lost this game with free throw shooting like that, but all those extra rebounds saved them.

Who Looked Good

The starters were Muhammad-Ali Abdur-Rahkman, Isaiah Livers, Charles Matthews, Zavier Simpson, and Moritz Wagner.

MAAR was the hero of the Minnesota game, hitting the game-winning basket (and one) with 0:04 left, and he had double figures in both games (11 and 17). He was Michigan's high scorer in the Minnesota game.

Matthews was the only other player to hit double figures in both games (14 and 13). He was Michigan's high scorer in the Northwestern game, and he had 11 rebounds in the Minnesota game, for a double-double.

Wagner almost hit double figures in both games (8 and 16), and he had 10 rebounds vs. Minnesota for another double-double. He might have shot a few too many 3-pointers vs. Minnesota (3-for-9), but he's a streak shooter, so he needs to keep shooting.

Duncan Robinson also almost hit double figures in both games (8 and 10). He had a rough time shooting 3-pointers (0-for-6 and 1-for-3), but he was 3-for-3 and 2-for-3 shooting 2-pointers. He was also the only Michigan player who didn't miss a free throw (1-for-1) vs. Minnesota.

Simpson had a mediocre game vs. Northwestern (4 points), but a much better game vs. Minnesota (15 points). He had a terrible time shooting 3-pointers in the Minnesota game (1-for-8), but that one that he made was huge.

Jordan Poole came out firing in both games, with mixed results. He was 3-for-10 (2-for-6 from 3-point range) for 8 points vs. Northwestern, then 0-for-4 (all from 3-point range) for 0 points vs. Minnesota. It's a shame he laid an egg in the Minnesota game, since the Maize Rage showed up in beachwear for a "Poole Party". He tried, and he played hard, but he just couldn't get anything going.

Who Looked Not-So-Good

Livers had a quiet week: 3 and 5 points.

Jon Teske also had a quiet week: 2 and 0 points.

Eli Brooks played in both games, but didn't take a shot in either, at least officially. He did put up a layup in the Minnesota game, but Teske interfered with it so it didn't count.

Who Else Played

No one else played.

Who Didn't Play

Just when it looked like Jaaron Simmons was established as the backup point guard, Coach Beilein switched back to Brooks. Simmons didn't play at all this week.

Austin Davis, Ibi Watson, and the practice squad players (C.J. Baird, Brent Hibbitts, Naji Ozeir, Rico Ozuna-Harrison, and Luke Wilson) didn't get into either game.

The Big Picture

Sure, Michigan won two more games, but it was very worrisome the way they did it. These were teams that Michigan should have dominated and beaten easily, but they didn't. Four of Michigan's last six games are on the road, and if they play like they did last week, they could easily lose all four of them. The slow starts have to go. So does the lousy free-throw shooting. Robinson has to start hitting 3-pointers again. If Michigan can get back to the form they showed when they beat Michigan State (in East Lansing!), they can beat everyone remaining on their schedule.

Predicted Win Total

Both games last week were "toss up" games, and Michigan won both of them, so I'm going to move the Predicted Win Total up one game. Wait, they've already won 19 games, and they've got 6 games left. Am I saying that they're going to go 2-4 down the stretch? Yeah, I guess so, since four of those games are on the road.

This week's Predicted Win Total is: **21**

Here's a chart of the Predicted Win Totals for each week:

Week	Date	Predicted Win Total
1	10/30/2017	19
3	11/13/2017	19
4	11/20/2017	16
5	11/27/2017	16
6	12/04/2017	16
7	12/11/2017	16
8	12/18/2017	18
9	12/25/2017	18
10	01/01/2018	18
11	01/08/2018	19
12	01/15/2018	20
13	01/22/2018	20
14	01/29/2018	20
15	02/05/2018	21

What's Next

Michigan plays 2 games this week, both on the road. On Tuesday (02/06/2018, 7:00 p.m. EST, BTN), Michigan plays at Northwestern, then on Sunday (02/11/2018, 1:00 p.m. EST, CBS), they play at Wisconsin.

Didn't we just play Northwestern? Yup, and we beat them, but not very convincingly. They won their next game (at Wisconsin), so they're now 14-10 (5-6 in the Big Ten). Michigan can win in Evanston, but they have to clean up some of their bad habits: slow starts and poor free-throw shooting.

Wisconsin is currently 10-15 (3-9 in the Big Ten), with no impressive wins, and no embarrassing losses. They are WAY down from the last few years, but they are still dangerous. The Kohl Center has been a House of Horrors for Michigan recently, which is why I listed this game as a "Should Lose" game before the season. Considering who they have already lost to at home (Ohio State [83-58], Nebraska, and Northwestern), they are no longer unbeatable at home. Michigan stands a decent chance, if they can play a solid game.

Remember that stretch where Michigan played 4 games in 8 days? Well, it's Wisconsin's turn to do something like that. They play 4 games in 10 days. They already lost to Northwestern at home last Thursday (02/01/2018) and lost to Maryland on the road last Sunday (02/04/2018), then they play at Illinois on Thursday (02/08/2018) before playing Michigan at home on Sunday (02/11/2018). They should be good and tired when they play Michigan.

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

Go Blue!