

Nothing But 'Net – Week #21 – 03/19/2018 – Sweet!

Quick Look

The (#7) University of Michigan men's basketball team played two games last week as the #3 seed in the West Region of the [NCAA Tournament](#), and they won both of them. [On Thursday \(03/15/2018\), they beat the #14 seed, Montana, 61-47](#), then [on Saturday \(03/17/2018\), they beat the #6 seed, Houston, 64-63](#). Both games were in Wichita, Kansas. The two wins raise Michigan's record to 30-7 (13-5 in the Big Ten). More importantly, Michigan now advances to the Sweet 16!

What Happened

Let's get one thing straight: in the Big Dance, there are no "style points". It doesn't matter if you win by one point on a buzzer-beater (more on that to come) or cruise to a 30-point blowout victory, the only thing that matters is "survive and advance". That said, Michigan played two of their least impressive games of the season last week, but still managed to win them both. They played good defense in both games, but the offense was "out of sync" most of the time. They bricked (and airballed) way too many open 3-point attempts, and they missed difficult-but-makeable layups that they have made all season. If they had played just average games on offense, they would have cruised to a 30-point win over Montana, and not had to rely on a 28-foot buzzer-beater to beat Houston.

By now, I'm sure that everyone reading this has already seen the replay of [Jordan Poole's](#) incredible 3-pointer to snatch victory from the very jaws of defeat a dozen times, but it's still almost too amazing to believe. That's the sort of thing that seems to happen **TO** Michigan, not **FOR** Michigan. We have been on the losing end of this script way too many times, it had to be our turn eventually. Was Poole's shot better than [Trey Burke's buzzer-beater against Kansas in the 2013 NCAA Tournament](#)? I think so. It was certainly more surprising. Burke was the National Player of the Year, and Poole is a lightly-used true freshman. In any case, we'll never forget Poole or his big shot.

We'd like to forget the Montana game. As the announcers said at the end of it, "burn the tape". It was a graceless, ugly game. As they have done many times this season, Michigan started out very slowly. With 15:43 left in the 1st half, Montana was up 10-0. Once UM finally got on the board, they played pretty well, and managed to tie the game up 17-17 with 6:40 to go in the half. They tied it again (19-19) at the 5:30 mark, then went ahead for the first time, 22-19 at the 3:59 mark. They got the lead up to 6 points (31-25) with 0:42 left in the half, and led by 3 points (31-28) at halftime. Michigan came out of the locker room with a burst of energy, and pushed the lead up to 14 points (44-30) with 9:53 to go in the game. They kept the lead in the 10-12 point range for the rest of the game, and made their free throws in the closing minutes to win the game. It was an ugly win, but it was a win, and that's what counts.

The Houston game was almost as ugly as the Montana game. Houston led for most of the game (20:48), while Michigan led for 10:54, and the score was tied for 8:18. There were 17 lead changes, and 12 ties. Neither team ever led by more than 6 points. It was close, and it was a defensive struggle. Once again, it took Michigan a while to get going. Houston led 6-1 with 14:53 to go in the 1st half. Once they got going, Michigan opened up a 6-point lead (17-11) with 10:07 to go, but they couldn't hold it. Houston tied it up (22-22) with 5:38 to go, then the teams traded baskets, and went to halftime tied 28-28. Houston led for much of the 2nd half, and got their biggest lead (49-43) with 10:52 to go. Michigan tied it up (51-51) at the 5:41 mark with a very rare 5-point play. The teams traded baskets and the lead, and it was still tied up (61-61) with 0:44 left. Houston hit a couple free throws to go up by 2 (63-61) with 0:24 left, but they missed a crucial front-end of a one-and-one with 3.9 seconds left. Michigan got the rebound, called timeout, and set up a desperate last-gasp play with 3.6 seconds left. [Isaiah Livers](#) threw a perfect pass to [Muhammad-Ali Abdur-Rahkman](#) at mid-court. MAAR dribbled a couple times, then found Poole for his now-famous 28-footer for the win as time expired. It was unbelievable. As my friend Tom M. said, and I quote: "Whooooooooooooooooooooooh!!!!"

The win over Houston was particularly gratifying because of all the pre-game hype about Houston and their point guard, Rob Gray. Now, don't get me wrong, Gray is a very good player, and he seems like a nice enough guy, but the CBS/TBS pre-game "Tournament Central" and game announcing crew could not stop talking about him. If you listened to the pre-game "analysis", you would have to wonder why Michigan even bothered showing up. They hardly even mentioned Michigan. It was "Gray this" and "Gray that". They loved his "man bun". To listen to them, he was the greatest player ever in college basketball, another Steph Curry and Michael Jordan combined. He played a pretty good game against Michigan (23 points on 22 shots), but every time he touched the ball, the announcers were just giddy speculating about what incredible thing he was going to do next. Every time he made a 3-pointer (he was 4-for-8 from 3-point range), they went wild. What a story! Look at his man bun! Go Houston! Sweet Sixteen! Final Four! National Championship! What a story! It was ridiculous. I'm just glad Michigan won to shut them up.

Stats

[The stats for the Montana game](#) are pretty weak. Michigan shot decently overall (21-for-47 = 44.7%), they shot 3-pointers pretty poorly (5-for-16 = 31.3%), and they shot free throws pretty poorly (14-for-22 = 63.6%). They won the rebounding battle (36-33), but they lost the turnover battle (14-12). They won this game with defense, holding Montana to 32.1% shooting, including a 10-minute scoreless stretch in the 2nd half.

[The stats for the Houston game](#) are even worse than the Montana stats. Michigan shot very poorly overall (21-for-59 = 35.6%), they shot 3-pointers very poorly (8-for-30 = 26.7%), but they shot free throws reasonably well (14-for-20 = 70.0%). They lost the rebounding battle (41-38), but they won the turnover battle (7-10). Looking at the stats, I don't know how UM won this game, they just did.

Who Looked Good

The starters were [Muhammad-Ali Abdur-Rahkman](#), [Isaiah Livers](#), [Charles Matthews](#), [Zavier Simpson](#), and [Moritz Wagner](#) for both games.

Matthews and MAAR were the only two Michigan players to hit double figures in both games. Matthews was the undisputed star of the Montana game, with 20 points and 11 rebounds (for a double-double), and he scored 11 points vs. Houston. Without Matthews, Michigan would have lost the Montana game.

MAAR had 11 and 12 points this week, but he was "off" offensively. He kept jacking up 3-pointers, but he only hit one; he was 1-for-6 vs. Montana, and 0-for-6 vs. Houston.

Wagner was the only other starter to hit double figures in one game, with 12 points vs. Houston. He had a miserable game (5 points in 32 minutes) vs. Montana.

The only other Michigan player to hit double figures in one game was [Duncan Robinson](#), with 11 points off the bench vs. Houston. He also had 7 points vs. Montana, and he played good defense in both games.

Even though he didn't score many points (3 and 8), Poole was the star of the Houston game, based solely on his amazing final 3-pointer. It was a shot for the ages.

Simpson did a great job on defense, especially against Man Bun (Rob Gray) for Houston. He didn't score many points (5 and 4), but he did a nice job running the offense.

[Jon Teske](#) also didn't score many points (2 and 6), but he was instrumental in both wins. He came in for Wagner when he needed a rest or had foul trouble, and he hit 6-for-8 free throws in the Houston game.

[Jaaron Simmons](#) played in both games, and scored 6 and 0 points. He hit 3 key baskets in the Montana game, and he was calm and steady out there when he came in for Simpson.

Who Looked Not-So-Good

Livers played in both games, and missed all 3 of his shots. He did have the crucial pin-point pass to MAAR to win the Houston game, but that was his only significant contribution.

Who Else Played

[Eli Brooks](#) played for 5 minutes in the Montana game, and made a basket!

[Ibi Watson](#) played for 3 minutes in the Houston game, but failed to score.

Who Didn't Play

[Austin Davis](#) and the practice squad players ([C.J. Baird](#), [Brent Hibbitts](#), [Naji Ozeir](#), [Rico Ozuna-Harrison](#), and [Luke Wilson](#)) didn't get into either of the games.

The Big Picture

Making it to the Sweet Sixteen is a Big Deal. Making it two years in a row is a bigger deal. Ask our Little Brothers in East Lansing: they've missed the Sweet Sixteen for 3 years in a row now, and they've gone 1-1 in their last 4 tournaments (2017 Big Ten Tournament, 2017 NCAA Tournament, 2018 Big Ten Tournament, and 2018 NCAA Tournament). Now who's the better team? Michigan has now won 11 games in a row. State? They're 2-2 in their last 4 games, including a loss in their virtual home game vs. Syracuse on Sunday. I'm sure glad Miles Bridges came back to win a National Championship! That Tom Izzo is indeed the best coach in college basketball!

Ahem. Back to the Big Picture. Even though Michigan is in the Sweet Sixteen, they're kind of lucky to be there. They didn't play particularly well in either game last week, and if they play like that in any of the remaining games, they'll be done for the season. They need to get back to the level of play that won them the Big Ten Tournament. They're running the offense correctly, and getting the open 3-pointers and difficult-but-makeable layups that have gotten them this far, they just missed the shots that they made regularly during the previous games.

What's Next

This week, Michigan will play in the Sweet Sixteen in Los Angeles, California, in the West Regional. They will play the #7 seed, [Texas A&M](#), on Thursday (03/22/2018, 7:30 p.m. EDT, TBS) in the Staples Center. If they win that one, they'll move on to the Elite Eight, and face the winner of the game between the #4 seed (Gonzaga) and the #9 seed (Florida State) on Saturday (03/24/2018).

Texas A&M is currently 22-12, with some pretty impressive wins (West Virginia, USC, Buffalo, Missouri, Arkansas, Auburn, Kentucky, Alabama, and North Carolina), and some surprising losses (Texas [exhibition], LSU [twice], and Mississippi State). They crushed (#2 seed) North Carolina (86-65) to advance to the Sweet Sixteen, so they're for real. They don't have any players taller than 6' 10", but they've got 4 of them, and 3 more at 6' 9". Michigan can certainly beat them, but they'll have to get back to the high level of play they showed in the last 3 games of the Big Ten Tournament. The way they played against Montana and Houston won't cut it.

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

Go Blue!