

Nothing But 'Net – Week #24 – 04/09/2018 – Season Wrap-up, Final Grades, and Looking Ahead

Season Wrap-up

It's over, and it was better than just about anyone (including me) expected. The 2017-2018 University of Michigan men's basketball team finished their season last week, and it was just 31 minutes from being fabulous. The team finished with a record of 33-8 (13-5 in the Big Ten), and made it to the Championship Game in the [NCAA Tournament](#) in San Antonio (TX) on Monday (04/02/2018). They were leading Villanova 21-14 with 10:59 to go in the 1st half, and if the game had just ended there, we'd be talking National Championship. However, there were still 31 minutes left to play, and [Villanova caught fire, and crushed Michigan 79-62](#). Oh well, it was still a great season.

In my Season Preview, way back in late October 2017, I predicted that this season's Michigan team would be "*not quite as good as last season.*" Wrong. This season's team was quite a bit better than last season's team, especially over the last 5 games of the regular season, the 4 games in the [Big Ten Tournament](#), and first 5 games of the NCAA Tournament. They strung together a 14-game winning streak, including winning the Big Ten Tournament for the second year in a row, and getting to the championship game in the NCAA Tournament. That's very good.

There were some bumps along the way. They opened the season with a few unimpressive wins in home "guarantee" games ([Grand Valley State](#) [exhibition], [North Florida](#), [Central Michigan](#), and [Southern Mississippi](#)), before going to Hawaii for the [Maui Jim Maui Invitational](#). They lost their first game there, to [LSU](#), which was a bad omen, but they did go on to win the loser's bracket with wins over [Chaminade](#) and [Virginia Commonwealth \(VCU\)](#). They came home for another win in a home "guarantee" game against [UC Riverside](#), then went on the road for their game in the [ACC/Big Ten Challenge](#): at (#13 and defending NCAA champs) [North Carolina](#). It didn't go well: UNC beat Michigan handily. At this point, things didn't look too encouraging. Michigan had only played 3 games against decent competition (LSU, VCU, and UNC), and they had lost 2 of them.

Thanks to the "compressed" Big Ten schedule, which was necessary so the Big Ten could play their tournament in Madison Square Garden, each Big Ten team played 2 league games in early December. Michigan beat [Indiana](#) in Ann Arbor, then went to Columbus and lost a miserable game to [Ohio State](#). The win over IU was encouraging, and UM got a big lead (20 points) in the 1st half of the OSU game, then collapsed in the 2nd half. At this point, all the "experts" were picking OSU to finish 13th or 14th in the league standings, so losing to them looked like a terrible omen. As it turned out, OSU was in 1st place for most of the season, before fading in the last few weeks, but in early December, it looked like Michigan was in really bad shape. At the time, the loss to OSU looked like the worst possible loss of the season.

After the brief 2-game Big Ten mini-season, Michigan finished up their non-conference schedule with 3 home games, 1 away game, and 1 neutral site game. The first home game was a good one, against (#23) [UCLA](#), and Michigan won it in overtime. The next game was the away game, at [Texas](#). It's a tough place to play, and it was impressive that Michigan managed to win. The neutral site game was next, vs. [Detroit-Mercy](#) in Little Caesars Arena in Detroit. Michigan looked great in that game, and won easily. Things were starting to look up. UM played 2 more home "guarantee" games ([Alabama A&M](#) and [Jacksonville](#)), and won both of them easily.

So, at the end of 2017, Michigan had a record of 12-3 (1-1 in the Big Ten), with a few impressive wins (VCU, Indiana, UCLA, and Texas), a few disappointing losses (LSU, UNC, and OSU), and a bunch of wins over lesser competition. The rest of the regular season games were all Big Ten games, and Michigan started 2018 with a pair of wins over lower-division teams (at [Iowa](#), and home vs. [Illinois](#)). Then came Michigan's biggest home game of the

season: (#5) [Purdue](#). Michigan should have won it, but the incompetent Big Ten refs stole the game for Purdue in the last 4 seconds. It was very frustrating.

Michigan didn't have much time to feel bad for themselves, because they had to play at (#4) [Michigan State](#) just 4 days later. It looked like a sure loss, but Michigan played their best game of the season, and won convincingly. It was Michigan's best win of the regular season.

No time to rest: just 2 days later, Michigan came home and beat a pretty good [Maryland](#) team in the final seconds. Just 3 days after that, UM went back on the road, and got pounded by [Nebraska](#). This was certainly Michigan's worst game of the regular season, and people were whispering "NIT". At this point, Michigan's record was 16-5 (5-3 in the Big Ten). Things were not going very well.

Michigan played their last game of the first half of the Big Ten schedule vs. [Rutgers](#) in Ann Arbor, and beat them handily, then they went on the road again for a rematch against (#3) [Purdue](#). Purdue won again, this time without any help from the refs, in a close, high-scoring, exciting game. Michigan returned to Ann Arbor for 2 home wins ([Northwestern](#) and [Minnesota](#)), although the Minnesota game was closer than it should have been, and Michigan had to go to overtime to win it. Things were starting to look up, a little. Michigan's record was now 19-6 (8-4), and they had mostly winnable games left on their schedule. They had a few too many league losses to have a reasonable chance of winning the Big Ten regular season title, but they stood a decent chance of finishing in the top 4, which would get them a double-bye in the Big Ten Tournament. Then came the second [Northwestern](#) game, on the road. It was a disaster. However, it may have been just the thing to wake Michigan up, because it was their last loss until the National Championship game. As an interesting coincidence, the last two teams to beat Michigan were both nicknamed "Wildcats" (Northwestern and Villanova).

Michigan has always had a very hard time winning in Madison, and even though [Wisconsin](#) was having a pretty bad season, UM's win in the Kohl Center was very impressive. [Iowa](#) came to Ann Arbor, and UM beat them handily. Even though it was only February 18th, the rematch vs. (#8) [Ohio State](#) was Senior Day, and Michigan won impressively. It was Michigan's best home game of the season. The Wolverines went on the road for the last 2 games of the regular season ([Penn State](#) and [Maryland](#)), and ruined 2 Senior Nights to finish the regular season 24-7 (13-5).

Michigan ended up tied for 4th place in the Big Ten with Nebraska, but since Nebraska won the regular season head-to-head matchup, they got the #4 seed (and the double-bye) in the Big Ten Tournament. Bummer. It didn't stop Michigan. They won 4 games in 4 days (#12 seed [Iowa](#), #4 seed [Nebraska](#), #1 seed [Michigan State](#), and #3 seed [Purdue](#)) to win the Big Ten Tournament for the second year in a row. The win over Iowa was an ugly overtime affair, but the wins over Nebraska, MSU, and Purdue were all gorgeous. The 19-point win over Nebraska was fitting revenge for the worst loss in the regular season, the win over MSU gave UM a nice season sweep of the Spartans, and the win over Purdue was wonderful revenge for the 2 regular season losses. More importantly, the strong showing in the last 5 games of the regular season, along with the 4 games in the tournament, got Michigan a #3 seed in the NCAA Tournament, in the West Region (Wichita, Kansas and Los Angeles, California).

Thanks to the unusual timing of the Big Ten Tournament, Michigan had almost 2 weeks off before their 1st round game in the NCAA Tournament, vs. [Montana](#). They were sluggish and rusty, but they still managed to win and advance. Their next game was against the #6 seed (#21) [Houston](#). Most of the experts picked Houston to win, and it sure looked like they were going to, but Michigan hit a desperation 28-footer at the buzzer to win the game. It was very exciting.

On to the Sweet Sixteen, in LA. Michigan pounded the #7 seed, [Texas A&M](#), in their only truly good game of the NCAA Tournament. They were raining 3-pointers, and if they could have done that against Villanova, they would have won easily. The Elite Eight game, also in LA,

was against the #9 seed, [Florida State](#). It was a tough, hard-fought game, but Michigan played well enough to win, and advance to the Final Four.

The Final Four this year was in San Antonio, Texas. My wife (Cindy) and I went to the games. It was a fun trip, despite the lopsided loss in the championship game. The semifinal game, vs. the Cinderella team (#11 seed from the South Region, [Loyola-Chicago](#)), was not very impressive, but it was a win. That brings us to the championship game vs. (#2) [Villanova](#). It started out OK, but once Villanova got going, Michigan couldn't keep up. Villanova was definitely the better team, and they deserved to win the game, but it didn't help that Michigan played one of their worst games of the season. If they had been hot, like the Texas A&M game, they could have beaten Villanova. Oh well...

Some bests and worsts for this season:

Best game overall: Winning 82-72 at Michigan State on 01/13/2018

Best home game: Beating Ohio State on Senior Day (02/18/2018), 74-62

Best post-season game: Beating Michigan State (again) in the Big Ten Tournament

Best finish: Beating Houston 64-63 in the NCAA Tournament on a buzzer-beater

Worst game: Losing 72-52 at Nebraska on 01/18/2018

Final Grades

Here are the final grades, with the mid-term grades listed first.

Freshman Eligibility

[C.J. Baird](#) (Inc./Inc.) – C.J. is a practice squad player. He played in 5 games, and scored 5 points, including an impressive 3-pointer in the Texas A&M game in the NCAA Tournament.

[Eli Brooks](#) (C+/C-) – Eli played in 31 of the 41 games this season, and started 12 of them, mostly non-conference. He scored 56 points (1.8 pts/game), and had 30 assists. He scored 52 of his 56 points in 2017, scored 2 points in the entire Big Ten season, and scored 2 points vs. Montana in the NCAA Tournament. When he got into the game, he often didn't do much. He really needs to have a good summer, and get his game going next season.

[Austin Davis](#) (C-/C-) – Austin played in 16 games, all off the bench, and scored 19 points (1.2 pts/game). He still looks slightly dazed when he's out there, like the game is still going too fast for him. He has plenty of potential, and good tools, he just needs to put it all together.

[Isaiah Livers](#) (C+/C-) – Isaiah played in 40 of the 41 games this season, and started 22 of them, although he was a starter in name only. Once Coach Beilein figured out that Duncan Robinson played better coming off the bench, he started Livers in every game, but gave most of the minutes (and points) to Robinson. Isaiah scored 137 points (3.4 pts/game), but only hit double figures 3 times, in the first 3 games of 2018. He injured his ankle early in the away Northwestern game on 02/06/2018, and wasn't really the same player for the rest of the season. He played hard when he was out there, and he showed flashes of why he was Mr. Basketball in Michigan last season, but he's still learning the college game. He should get special mention for throwing the "baseball passes" on the out-of-bounds plays that won the Maryland and Houston games. They were perfect.

[Naji Ozeir](#) (Inc./Inc.) – Naji is a practice squad player. He played in 2 games, and scored 2 points.

[Rico Ozuna-Harrison](#) (Inc./Inc.) – Rico is a practice squad player. He played in 1 game, and didn't score.

[Jordan Poole](#) (B-/B) – Jordan is easily the hardest player to grade. On the one hand, he can come into the game and give Michigan a big lift. He's a gifted 3-point shooter, and he's fearless. He plays good defense, and he can really give the team a "spark" of energy. On the

other hand, he's a streak shooter, and when he's "off", it can get ugly. He plays hard when he's out there, but he still makes some dumb freshman mistakes. He played in 39 of the 41 games this season, all off the bench. He scored 233 points (6.0 pts/game), and shot a pretty good percentage from 3-point range (40-for-108 = 37.0%). He gets special mention for hitting the desperation 28-foot 3-pointer at the buzzer against Houston in the NCAA Tournament. It was one of the all-time greatest shots in Michigan basketball history.

[Luke Wilson](#) (Inc./Inc.) – Luke is a practice squad player. He played in 2 games, and didn't score.

Sophomore Eligibility

[Brent Hibbitts](#) (Inc./Inc.) – Brent is a practice squad player. He played in 5 games, and scored 9 points. He didn't play at all in 2018. Brent was redshirted his freshman season, and is a redshirt sophomore.

[Charles Matthews](#) (A/A-) – Charles was very good this season, starting all 41 games. He was 2nd on the team in scoring (531 points, 13.0 pts/game), the 2nd leading rebounder (227), and 3rd on the team in assists (98) and is tied for 1st in blocked shots (26). He is very athletic and acrobatic, with excellent body control. It's fun to watch him play when he decides to take over a game. Charles was redshirted last season, due to transfer rules, and is a redshirt sophomore.

[Zavier Simpson](#) (B-/B+) – Zavier was the starting point guard for the first 4 games, before Coach Beilein switched to Eli Brooks for 12 games, then back to Zavier for the rest of the season. He played in all 41 games, and scored 301 points (7.3 pts/game). He shot a decent percentage from 3-point range (24-for-84 = 28.6%), and he led the team in assists (150) and steals (53).

[Jon Teske](#) (B-/B+) – Jon played in all 41 games this season, and started 2 of them, when Wagner was injured. He scored 141 points (3.4 pts/game), and tied for 1st in blocked shots (26). He did fine in his role as the backup center, and he looked a lot more confident out there compared to last season.

[Ibi Watson](#) (C-/C-) – Ibi played in 26 of the 41 games this season, all off the bench, and scored 58 points (2.2 pts/game). When he was in the game, his role was to shoot 3-pointers, and he did that pretty well (10-for-31 = 32.3%). He only made one 3-pointer in 2018, vs. Texas A&M, shooting 1-for-9 after a 9-for-22 start.

Junior Eligibility

[Moritz Wagner](#) (B/A) – This season started out slowly for Moe, especially compared to last season, but picked up at the end. He played in 39 of the 41 games, all as a starter, but he missed 2 games with a foot injury. He led the team in scoring (570 points, 14.6 pts/game) and rebounds (278), he was 3rd on the team in blocked shots (20), and 2nd on the team in steals (38). He really improved his rebounding and defense compared to last season. Several teams found him "unguardable" on offense.

Senior Eligibility

[Muhammad-Ali Abdur-Rahkman](#) (A-/A) – MAAR started all 41 games, and was the 3rd leading scorer (528 points, 12.9 pts/game), 2nd on the team in assists (132), 3rd on the team in rebounds (158), and 3rd on the team in steals (35). He contributed a little bit of everything, every game. He shot the ball well, and he played good defense. He was a quiet leader on the team. He will be missed.

[Duncan Robinson](#) (B/A-) – Duncan played in all 41 games, and started 19 of them. Even though he came off the bench in most of the last 22 games, he played more minutes and scored more points than the putative starter, Livers. He just played better coming off the

bench. In fact, he was voted 6th Man of the Year in the Big Ten. He was 4th on the team in scoring (379 points, 9.2 pts/game), and led the team in 3-pointers attempted (203) and 3-pointers made (78), for a 38.4% shooting percentage. He was also the best free-throw shooter on a team without many good free-throw shooters (57-for-64 = 89.1%). His defense improved 100% from the beginning of the season to the end, and he even pulled down 100 rebounds. He will also be missed.

[Jaaron Simmons](#) (D/C) – As a grad transfer with all kinds of experience, Jaaron was supposed to be the starting point guard on this team early in the season, while Simpson and Brooks got up to speed. That never worked out. He ended up playing in 33 games, all off the bench. He scored 50 points (1.5 pts/game), and dished out 35 assists. All these numbers are way down from his previous 3 seasons at Ohio University. Still, the experiment wasn't a complete failure. He did produce some key minutes and the occasional important basket, and he got to play in the NCAA Tournament for the first time, making it all the way to the championship game. With Simpson and Brooks coming back, and a hot new freshman point guard coming in (see below), his absence won't hurt next season's team.

Looking Ahead

Michigan is losing 3 seniors (MAAR, Robinson, and Simmons), and they will certainly be missed, but several key players are returning, and the incoming freshman class is loaded. The biggest question is: "What will Moe do?" At the end of last season, Wagner went through all the NBA evaluations, without hiring an agent, then decided to return for his junior season. Statistically, and using "the eye test", Wagner didn't play as well this season as he did last season, and his NBA stock has dropped a little. After last season, he was projected to be a borderline 1st round pick, but at this point, he's considered a borderline 2nd round pick. For selfish reasons, I would love to see him return for his senior season. He seems to love playing college basketball, he seems to love the college experience, and he's close to getting his degree. The Europeans take their education a little more seriously than many of the "student athletes" these days. We'll have to wait until late May to find out, but my hunch is that he'll be back for one more season, with a chance to improve his draft stock to become a solid 1st round pick.

Even if Moe decides to leave early for the NBA, Michigan will be fine at center. Teske will have to play more minutes, and Austin Davis will slide up to the backup center position. He'll improve as he gets more real game experience. The incoming freshman class also has another center candidate, as we'll see shortly.

Time to look at this exciting incoming freshman class. [There are 5 scholarship freshman signed](#) and ready to show up this summer:

- Ignas ("Iggy") Brazdeikis – 6' 8", 220 pounds, Forward
- Colin Castleton – 6' 11", 215 pounds, Center
- David DeJulius – 6' 1", 188 pounds, Point Guard
- Brandon Johns – 6' 8", 206 pounds, Forward
- Adrien Nunez – 6' 5", 175 pounds, Shooting Guard

This recruiting class has been ranked as high as #6 in the country, although now a few more schools have passed it, and it's now in the teens. Still, it's a complete class, with a good player at every position:

- Iggy (I'm going to cut-and-paste his last name for 4 years) Brazdeikis is the highest ranked player (47) in the class, and he's a 3-point sniper in the mold of Nick Stauskas. In fact, they're countrymen (Canadian) and [friends](#). Don't be surprised if he hits 3-pointers as well as or better than Stauskas or Duncan Robinson.

- Colin Castleton is the center of the future. Like Wagner, he can hit 3-pointers or drive to the basket. He might not have Wagner's ball handling skills, and he's much slighter than Wagner,

but he can develop into a hard-to-guard center in Wagner's image. He might redshirt his freshman year and hit the weight room hard.

- David DeJulius is a scoring-oriented point guard in the style of Derrick Walton, Jr. He can shoot 3-pointers very well, and he should be good at running the offense, once he has some time to learn it. He'll start the season behind Simpson and Brooks, but don't be surprised if he moves up during his freshman year.

- Brandon Johns played his high school ball in East Lansing, and took a lot of grief for choosing Michigan over Michigan State, but he's going to fit in nicely in the Michigan system. He's another good 3-point shooter, and he could easily be a starter by the time the Big Ten season rolls around his freshman year.

- Adrien Nunez is another pure shooter, and another big 3-point threat. That's been Michigan's not-so-secret weapon for the last 3-4 years: 5 guys out there who can all shoot 3-pointers, forcing the opposing defense to come out to the 3-point line, leaving the middle wide open for players slashing to the basket. Nunez will fit in nicely.

Check back in mid-October for next season's preview. It should be a good one.

Go Blue!