Nothing But 'Net – Week #21 – 03/18/2019 – Hey, 10 Out Of 11 Ain't Bad

The (#10) University of Michigan men's basketball team played three games last week as the 3-seed in the Big Ten Tournament in Chicago, and they won two and lost one. On Friday (03/15/2019), they beat (5-seed) Iowa 74-53 in the quarterfinals, on Saturday (03/16/2019), they beat (7-seed) Minnesota 76-49 in the semifinals, then on Sunday (03/17/2019), they lost to (1-seed) (#6) Michigan State 65-60 in the championship game. The two wins and one loss leave Michigan with a record of 28-6.

Time for more Questions & Answers:

Q: 10 out of 11?

A: Despite coming up short in the last minute of the championship game, Michigan set a new Big Ten record when they won their first two games of the tournament. Combined with a 4-0 record in 2017 and a 4-0 record in 2018, they are the only Big Ten team to ever win 10 Big Ten Tournament games in a row, which is quite an accomplishment. But, oh how that last one would have been sweet…

Q: So, what happened?

A: Michigan played two of their better games of the season in the wins over Iowa and Minnesota. In the Iowa game, they trailed early (6-4 with 18:35 to go in the 1st half), then went ahead for good, 7-6. The lead was in the 4-6 point range for most of the 1st half, with a quick 11-4 run in the last 4:37 to make it a comfortable 40-27 lead at halftime. Iowa got within 10 points (40-30) in the first minute of the 2nd half, then Michigan pulled away and got the lead as high as 26 points (72-46 with 4:25 to go) before clearing the bench. It was a fun, low-stress game.

Michigan did even better in the Minnesota game. Michigan never trailed, although Minnesota did tie the game twice (11-11 and 13-13) early in the 1st half. Once Michigan started pulling away, the game was over. They were doubling Minnesota (38-19) at halftime, and they pushed the lead as high as 35 points (74-39) before clearing the bench again. It was another fun, low-stress game.

The MSU game was anything but low-stress. It was close and tight for most of the 1st half, with MSU leading by 3-5 points. Michigan tied it up (17-17) with 7:01 left in the half, then went on a beautiful 14-6 run to end the half up 8 points (31-23). Michigan extended the lead to 13 points (39-26) with 17:12 to go, and still led by 12 points (41-29) with 15:40 to go, when they hit another dry spell. MSU went on a slow 15-5 run to cut the lead to 2 points (46-44) with 10:33 to go. They tied it up (48-48) with 7:15 left, but Michigan clung to a slim lead until the 1:19 mark, when MSU tied it up again (60-60). MSU went ahead for the first time in 26 minutes (62-60) with 28 seconds left. Michigan tried a shot with 13 seconds left, missed, and the ball went out of bounds. The original (correct) call was "Michigan ball", but the miserable refs looked at the replay for a while and gave the ball (and the game) to MSU. The last 3 points for MSU were inconsequential. The game was decided when the refs gave MSU the ball.

Now, I'm not saying that Michigan would have scored 2 (or 3) points in the last 13 seconds to tie it up or win it, but they stood no chance once the refs gave MSU the ball. It was a disgraceful way to end an exciting game.

Q: It sounds like you've got some complaints about the refs?

A: The refs didn't matter in the first two blowout wins, and they were mostly OK for most of the MSU game, but when the chips were down, they sucked. They blew that last call, and there's no other way to put it.

Q: How were the game stats?

A: Actually, the stats were good-to-very-good in all three games. Better in the two wins, of course.

Because there was extended "garbage time" in both of the wins, I've removed the parade of missed shots by the deep bench players in the two wins. Michigan had very good stats in those two games, and the garbage time numbers really make the final stats look way worse than they really were. If you want to see the official stats, follow the links.

In the Iowa game, Michigan shot well overall (27-for-56 = 48.2%), they shot 3-pointers pretty well (10-for-26 = 38.5%), and they shot free throws decently (8-for-12 = 66.7%). They won the rebounding battle (40-37) and the turnover battle (7-11). By the way, in this game, the garbage time players contributed 1-for-6 shooting overall, 0-for-4 from 3-point range.

In the Minnesota game, Michigan shot very well overall (32-for-55 = 58.2%), they shot 3-pointers very well (10-for-21 = 47.6%), and they shot free throws perfectly, if not very often (2-for-2 = 100%). They won the rebounding battle handily (37-27) and the turnover battle barely (7-8). The garbage time numbers for this game were even worse: 0-for-7 overall, 0-for-5 from deep.

In the MSU game, Michigan didn't shoot very well overall (21-for-51 = 41.2%), they didn't shoot 3-pointers very well (8-for-25 = 32.0%), but they did shoot free throws well (10-for-12 = 83.3%). As usual when they play MSU, Michigan got hammered on the boards (38-29), but they did win the turnover battle (6-9). Looking at the stats, this was an incredibly close game that was decided by the refs, not the players.

Q: Who looked good for Michigan?

A: A few players had a good tournament:

- Ignas Brazdeikis had a great tournament. He was the leading scorer in two games (Iowa and MSU), and the 3rd leading scorer in the other game (Minnesota), with 15, 13, and 19 points. He hit lots of big 3-pointers, and he played good defense.
- Isaiah Livers also had a great tournament. After starting the last three games of the regular season in place of the injured Charles Matthews, he came off the bench in these three games, and he delivered. He scored 13, 21, and 8 points, and was the high scorer in the Minnesota game. Those 21 points are a new career high for him. He shot very well in that game (8-for-10 overall, 4-for-6 from deep).
- Zavier Simpson had a good tournament, although he had a tough time against MSU. He hit double figures in the two wins (10 and 15 points), but he only had 6 points vs. MSU. Even more than his scoring, he set a new Big Ten Tournament record with 30 assists in three games (11, 9, and 10), against only 2 turnovers. He had a double-double in the Iowa game, with 10 points and 11 assists.
- Jordan Poole almost hit double figures in all three games: 11, 9, and 13 points. Unfortunately, his poor 3-point shooting in the MSU game (2-for-9) really hurt.
- Jon Teske also almost hit double figures in all three games: 12, 5, and 10 points. He had 10 rebounds each in the Iowa and MSU games, for two double-doubles. He played excellent defense.
- Eli Brooks contributed off the bench, with 6, 5, and 2 points. He also played some good defense, and ran the offense pretty well while Simpson was on the bench.

Q: Who looked not-so-good for Michigan?

A: Only one player had a rough tournament:

- Charles Matthews was back from his ankle injury, and it didn't seem to bother him, but he just didn't do much out there. He just kind of drifted around, and shot a mid-range jumper every now and then. He did play good defense, but he didn't score many points: 5, 8, and 2.

Q: Who else played in the tournament?

A: Coach Beilein emptied the bench in the closing minutes of the two blowout wins:

- C.J. Baird attempted two 3-pointers vs. Iowa, and one more vs. Minnesota. They all missed.
- Colin Castleton played in all three games, and attempted one shot vs. Minnesota. It missed.
- Austin Davis attempted one shot in the Iowa game, and made it. He attempted one shot in the Minnesota game, and missed it. He was the only "deep bench" player to score.
- David DeJulius attempted one 3-pointer vs. Iowa, and two 3-pointers vs. Minnesota. They all missed.
- Brandon Johns, Jr. attempted two shots against Iowa, one of them a 3-pointer. They both missed. He didn't attempt a shot vs. Minnesota.
- Adrien Nuñez didn't attempt a shot vs. Iowa. He attempted two 3-pointers vs. Minnesota. They both missed.
- Luke Wilson didn't attempt a shot vs. Iowa. He attempted one shot vs. Minnesota. It missed.

Q: What did we learn this week?

A: We learned that Michigan is as good as MSU, but can't overcome bad officiating.

Q: What's next for Michigan?

A: Michigan plays in the NCAA Tournament, starting this week. Despite coming in 3rd in the regular season Big Ten standings, and losing to MSU in the Big Ten Tournament championship game, Michigan is still a 2-seed, in the West Region. They open play on Thursday (03/21/2019, 9:20 p.m. EDT, TNT) vs. (15-seed) Montana in Des Moines, IA. If they win that game, they'll play the winner of the (7-seed) Nevada/(10-seed) Florida game on Saturday (03/23/2019, TBA, TBA) for a trip to the Sweet 16.

Montana is currently 26-8 (16-4 in the Big Sky). They won their conference tournament for the 2nd year in a row, and they're facing Michigan in the first round of the NCAA tournament for the 2nd year in a row. Last year, Michigan beat them 61-47 in a game that was a lot closer than the final score would indicate. They didn't beat anyone noteworthy in the regular season, and they lost to some not-too-impressive opponents: Georgia Southern, Creighton, UC-Irvine, Arizona, Portland State (twice), Eastern Washington, and Northern Colorado. They have a little height (a couple 6'10" guys) and no superstars. Michigan should be able to beat them, as long as they play a reasonable game.

Q: What do you think about Michigan's seed/placement in the NCAA Tournament?

A: I think that it's great! After losing to MSU three times in the last three weeks, I was expecting a 3-seed or even a 4-seed, so a 2-seed is very generous. It's the same seed that MSU got. It's obvious that the tournament committee realized that Michigan and MSU are dead even this season, despite the game results.

As far as placement, I'd much rather be a 2-seed in a region with Gonzaga than Duke. The other teams in Michigan's half of the West Region aren't particularly scary: (3-seed) Texas Tech, (6-seed) Buffalo, and (7-seed) Nevada.

That's it for this week. Check back next week to see how Michigan did.

Go Blue!