

Nothing But 'Net – Week #01 – 11/23/2020 – Season Preview

Wow. Just, wow.

Here we are, at the start of another college basketball season, but what a ride it's been. So much has changed and so much has happened since my last column, eight months ago (03/23/2020). Of course, the big news is COVID-19. It changed everything.

Eight months ago, the whole world shut down, including college basketball. On the day the Big Ten (along with many, many other organizations) [shut things down](#) (03/12/2020), Michigan was just minutes away from tipping off against Rutgers in [the Big Ten Tournament](#). Since then, the world has been turned upside down, including sports. After a pause, some sports finished up their seasons (NBA and NHL), some shortened their seasons (MLB), and some delayed starting up (NFL and NCAA). It wasn't clear if there would even be any NCAA fall sports, and the startup of college football has been ... ragged ... to say the least. Each conference was left to decide on if/when they would start up, how many games they would play, and how they would handle COVID-19 outbreaks. There was no central authority. The NCAA just sat back and watched. By contrast, the NCAA took a firm leadership role in the startup of college basketball. They pushed the starting date back a few weeks, to 11/25/2020, and they announced other changes. They did leave the scheduling up to the individual conferences, as usual.

So, that's why the season is starting about 3 weeks later than expected, and has 6 fewer games than usual. The University of Michigan men's basketball team's first game is this Wednesday (11/25/2020) in Crisler Arena at 4:00 p.m., against Bowling Green. There are no exhibition games this season, and there is no open practice, like there usually is. In fact, there are no fans allowed in the building for any of the games this season, only families of the players and coaches. The games will be televised, but no fans will be present. That also means that I won't be ushering this season. Sigh.

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, it was a very busy off-season, with lots of surprises and changes. Let's get to it.

Executive Summary

The big question: how good is Michigan going to be this season?

The big answer: it's hard to guess, with all the changes (see below), but I'm going to say "about the same as last year".

What's New?

There are lots of changes to the roster from last season:

- 2 graduating seniors
- 3 player departures
- 4 incoming freshmen
- 3 incoming transfer players

Graduating Seniors

Graduating seniors are a natural part of the college sports experience. In the current environment of players leaving early for the NBA, or transferring to other schools, it is getting to be a rare event when a player stays all 4 years at the same school and graduates. While it is sad to see players leave after having watched them for 4 years, it is really something to be celebrated and appreciated. Michigan was blessed to have had Jon Teske and Xavier Simpson in their basketball program for the last 4 years, and we wish them well.

Player Departures

I can understand that sometimes a player commits to a school, plays there for a year or two, and just doesn't feel like he's fitting in. I can understand that sometimes players get homesick, and want to transfer to a school closer to their hometown, so their families and friends can watch them play and visit with them. I understand why the transfer rules are in place, and they seem fair and fine to me. I just don't like the recent trend in the last 3-4 years for players to transfer for frivolous reasons. It has become a disturbing trend.

At the end of last season, 3 players transferred out of the Michigan program:

- Cole Bajema – Cole played for just 37 minutes as a freshman, and [transferred to Washington](#). He had plenty of potential, but didn't really show much in his limited appearances. He is from the Washington area, and I'm sure he wants to play closer to home. He will be missed, but he is replaceable.
- David DeJulius – This transfer makes the least sense of the 3 of them. [David transferred to Cincinnati](#), even though he is from the Detroit area. He just finished his sophomore year, and he did very well. With Xavier Simpson graduating, he was the obvious heir apparent to the starting point guard position. He will be missed very much, and I'm afraid that the point guard position is going to be a problem this season.
- Colin Castleton – This is the transfer than makes the most sense. [Colin transferred to Florida](#), which is his home state. He played very poorly for 2 seasons at Michigan, and he could see that he wasn't going to play very much going forward. He won't be missed.

Incoming Freshmen

Michigan has 4 incoming freshman players this season:

- [Hunter Dickinson](#) #1 (7'1", 255 pounds, C) – Hunter is a 4-star center, the #6 center in his class. He's a big, tough kid, a traditional "back to the basket" center. I can't wait to see him play. He'll be part of the "center by committee" plan this season, so he'll need to grow up quickly.
- [Jace Howard](#) #25 (6'7", 210 pounds, G) – Jace is [Coach Howard's](#) older son, and he's a 3-star forward. He's good enough to be a scholarship player, but [he's on the team as a preferred walk-on](#), due to the big scholarship crunch. [UPDATE: Apparently, a week later, [Jace was given a scholarship](#)] I think it's great that he's wearing his father's number from his UM days.
- [Zeb Jackson](#) #3 (6'5", 180 pounds, G) – Zeb is a 4-star point guard, the #10 point guard in his class. He'll be part of the "point guard by committee" plan this season.
- [Terrance Williams II](#) #5 (6'7", 240 pounds, F) – Terrance is good friends with Hunter Dickinson (above), and the two of them were a "package deal". He's a 4-star forward, the #15 power forward in his class.

This is the #1 recruiting class in the Big Ten this season. If they can grow up quickly, Michigan will be much better than predicted.

At the end of last season, there was a 5th player committed to Michigan (Isaiah Todd), but [he decided to skip college and go right to the G league of the NBA](#). If he had come to Michigan, he would have been the highest ranked recruit in years. Instead, he's playing pro ball. Sigh.

Besides the Isaiah Todd drama, there were a couple other highly-ranked incoming freshmen that considered coming to Michigan, but ultimately decided to go elsewhere: Josh Christopher ([eventually chose Arizona State](#)), and Greg Brown ([eventually chose Texas](#)).

Incoming Transfer Players

The incoming freshmen look very promising, but there were still some gaps in the roster, and Coach Howard filled them with some transfer players:

- [Chaundee Brown Jr.](#) #15 (6'5", 215 pounds, G) – Chaundee transferred to Michigan from Wake Forest, and was [granted a waiver for immediate eligibility](#), without having to sit out a full year. He'll have senior eligibility, with one season left to play.
- [Mike Smith](#) #12 (5'11", 185 pounds, G) – [Mike transferred to Michigan from Columbia as a grad transfer](#), so he'll have one year of immediate eligibility. He is the most likely candidate to start at point guard this season.
- [Brandon Wade](#) #4 (6'1", 185 pounds, G) – [Brandon transferred to Michigan from Duquesne](#) at the end of the first semester last season. He had to sit out a full year, so he'll be eligible to play in January 2021, with sophomore eligibility. He's a preferred walk-on, not a scholarship player. He played his high school ball at Ann Arbor Skyline, so this is a homecoming for him.

Who's Coming Back?

After all the talk about who left, it's time to talk about who's coming back. Michigan has the core of a very good team, but much will depend on the development of the returning role players.

Let's look at the returning players on the team:

Sophomore Eligibility

- [Franz Wagner](#) #21 (6'9", 220 pounds, G) – Franz was one of the stars on last season's team, and he toyed with the idea of entering the NBA draft, but eventually decided to return to Michigan for his sophomore season. Unless something crazy happens, he will certainly enter the NBA draft after this season, so enjoy him while you can. He will undoubtedly be one of the top players in the Big Ten.

Junior Eligibility

- [Brandon Johns, Jr.](#) #23 (6'8", 240 pounds, F) – Brandon filled in nicely for Livers when he was injured, but he still had too many games where he didn't contribute much. He is very good at offensive rebounding. He's a good option at center when Michigan plays "small ball", so he's part of the "center by committee" plan.
- [Adrien Nuñez](#) #0 (6'6", 210 pounds, G) – Adrien had another "lost season" last year, and it's time for him to step up and contribute. Note that he changed his number from #5 to #0.

Senior Eligibility

- [C.J. Baird](#) #24 (6'5", 225 pounds, F) – C.J. only played in 7 games, and scored 8 points last season. He's on the practice squad, and only plays in "garbage time".
- [Eli Brooks](#) #55 (6'1", 185 pounds, G) – Eli did a good job at shooting guard, and even played some point guard when needed last season. He led the team in 3-point attempts and makes, and shot a nice percentage (52-for-143 = 36.4%). He is a very important player on this season's team. He'll be part of the "point guard by committee" plan.
- [Austin Davis](#) #51 (6'10", 250 pounds, F/C) – Austin really improved last season, especially during the second half of the season. It took 2.5 seasons, but he finally started playing with smoothness and confidence. He shot a nice percentage (52-for-75 = 69.3%), and he cut way down on his silly fouls. He'll be part of the "center by committee" plan. Note that Austin is a rare 5th year senior, after voluntarily redshirting his freshman year.
- [Isaiah Livers](#) #2 (6'7", 230 pounds, F) – Isaiah is the most versatile player on the team, and arguably the most valuable. Before he went out with a groin injury last season near the end of the non-conference season, he was leading the team in scoring (13.6 points/game) and 3-point shooting percentage (29-for-58 = 50.0%). When he came back, he was good-but-not-great. He is the undisputed leader of this team, and he needs to have a strong senior season. He also toyed with the idea of leaving at the end of last season for the NBA draft, but decided to return for his final year.
- [Rico Ozuna-Harrison](#) #14 (5'11", 175 pounds, G) – Rico only played in 4 games, and scored 2 points. He's on the practice squad, and only plays in "garbage time".
- [Luke Wilson](#) #32 (6'0", 175 pounds, G) – Luke only played in 6 games, and scored 3 points. He's on the practice squad, and only plays in "garbage time".

Starting Lineup/Depth Chart

This is really tricky this season, with all the new players. My guess:

Point guard: Smith (backups: Brooks and Jackson)
 Shooting guard: Wagner (backups: Brooks, Brown, Howard, and Nuñez)
 Small forward: Johns (backups: Livers, Williams, and Brown)
 Power forward: Livers (backups: Johns and Williams)
 Center: Dickinson (backups: Davis and Johns)

Last Season

From last season's Wrap-Up article:

The 2019-2020 season was a rollercoaster for Michigan. The ride to the top of the biggest hill started with wins over three "cupcakes", along with an impressive win over a team that finished the season ranked #7 ([Creighton](#)), for a 4-0 start. The top of the biggest hill was the [Battle 4 Atlantis tournament](#) in the Bahamas. Michigan wasn't picked to do much in the tournament, but they won three games in three days, beating a good [Iowa State](#) team and two Top-10 teams [([#6](#)) [North Carolina](#) and ([#8](#)) [Gonzaga](#)], winning the championship, and moving to 7-0 and a #4 ranking in the AP poll. The championship game was on 11/29/2019, and that was the top of the hill, the high water mark, the best moment of the whole season. It didn't last long. From that point on, Michigan was a 0.500 team: 12-12 (10-10 in the Big Ten).

The very next game was four days later, [at \(#1\) Louisville](#), and it didn't go well. In fact, Michigan lost three of the next four games after the Battle 4 Atlantis tournament: the loss to Louisville, [a home win over Iowa](#), [a loss at Illinois](#), and [a home loss to \(#10\) Oregon](#). None of these losses were particularly surprising, but none of these teams were any better than Creighton, North Carolina, or Gonzaga.

Michigan finished up their non-conference schedule with a couple more “cupcakes”, then they resumed Big Ten play, and it was a disaster: [a lopsided loss at \(#14\) Michigan State](#), [a home win over Purdue](#), [an embarrassing loss at Minnesota](#), [a so-so loss at Iowa](#), [a home loss to Penn State](#), and [a home loss to \(#21\) Illinois](#). That’s a 1-5 stretch, and it knocked Michigan out of any chance of contending for the Big Ten title. This was the bottom of the biggest hill, the lowest point, the worst moment of the season. A closer look at the season at this point will show a couple disturbing trends:

- An 0-5 record at this point in true road games (Louisville, Illinois, MSU, Minnesota, and Iowa). Sure, it’s tough to win on the road, but Michigan probably should have won two or three of those games (Illinois, Minnesota, and Iowa).
- Three home losses at this point (Oregon, Penn State, and Illinois). Michigan went 17-1 at home in the 2018-2019 season and 15-1 in the 2017-2018 season. Having three home losses at this point in the season was not a good sign.

Michigan finally won a true road game in their next game, [at Nebraska](#), and they followed it up with a very impressive win on a (not so) neutral court (Madison Square Garden) [over \(#25\) Rutgers](#). They were robbed by the officials in the next game, another home loss, this time [to Ohio State](#), but they bounced back with five wins in a row: [home vs. \(#16\) Michigan State](#), [at Northwestern](#), [home vs. Indiana](#), [at Rutgers](#), and [at Purdue](#). Things were looking better, but this was just the top of another hill on the rollercoaster.

The last four games of the season were another disaster. [Michigan lost badly at home vs. Wisconsin](#), [lost badly at \(#23\) Ohio State](#), [beat lowly Nebraska at home](#) for Senior Night, and [lost badly at \(#9\) Maryland](#). This was the bottom of the final hill on the rollercoaster, and that’s where we get off.

Looking back on the season, there were some high points and some low points:

High Points

- The Battle 4 Atlantis championship was definitely the highest point of the season. At the time, the win over (#6) North Carolina looked huge, although UNC ended up with their worst season in years. The win over (#8) Gonzaga ended up being much more impressive, since Gonzaga ended up 31-2 and ranked #2 in the final AP poll.
- Wins over a few other teams that ended up ranked in the final AP poll: (#7) Creighton, (#9) Michigan State, and (#25) Iowa.
- An emotional Senior Night win, sending [Zavier Simpson](#) and [Jon Teske](#) off in style.

Low Points

- The lowest point of the season was the loss at Minnesota. Sure, Minnesota can be tough to beat in The Barn, but they ended up with a 15-16 record, including 5 home losses. Michigan should have won that one.
- The home loss to Penn State really stung. This was one of the better teams that PSU has had in the last 20 years, but they didn’t end up with a record much better than Michigan’s (21-10, 11-9 in the Big Ten). Michigan should have won that one as well.
- The home loss to Ohio State was a travesty. The officials called a ridiculous “flagrant 1” foul on Simpson in the last minute, and it was just enough to hand the game to OSU.
- The home loss to Illinois was very depressing. Once again, this was one of the better Illinois teams in a while, but they weren’t any better than teams Michigan beat earlier and later in the season. They just caught Michigan in a slump.

This Season

As I mentioned above, because of COVID-19, this season is a little different. Instead of 31 games, there are only 25 (5 non-conference and 20 Big Ten), with no exhibition games and no holiday tournament.

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

Date	Opponent	Location	Time (ET)
11/25/2020 (Wed)	Bowling Green	Ann Arbor, MI	4:00 p.m.
11/29/2020 (Sun)	Oakland	Ann Arbor, MI	6:00 p.m.
12/02/2020 (Wed)	Ball State	Ann Arbor, MI	7:00 p.m.
12/06/2020 (Sun)	Central Florida	Ann Arbor, MI	4:00 p.m.
ACC/Big Ten Challenge			
12/09/2020 (Wed)	North Carolina State	Ann Arbor, MI	TBA
12/13/2020 (Sun)	Penn State	Ann Arbor, MI	TBA
12/25/2020 (Fri)	Nebraska	Lincoln, NE	TBA
12/31/2020 (Thu)	Maryland	College Park, MD	TBA
01/03/2021 (Sun)	Northwestern	Ann Arbor, MI	TBA
01/06/2021 (Wed)	Minnesota	Ann Arbor, MI	TBA
01/09/2021 (Sat)	Penn State	State College, PA	TBA
01/12/2021 (Tue)	Wisconsin	Ann Arbor, MI	TBA
01/16/2021 (Sat)	Minnesota	Minneapolis, MN	TBA
01/19/2021 (Tue)	Maryland	Ann Arbor, MI	TBA
01/22/2021 (Fri)	Purdue	West Lafayette, IN	TBA
01/30/2021 (Sat)	Indiana	Ann Arbor, MI	TBA
02/03/2021 (Wed)	Northwestern	Evanston, IL	TBA
02/06/2021 (Sat)	Michigan State	Ann Arbor, MI	TBA
02/11/2021 (Thu)	Illinois	Ann Arbor, MI	TBA
02/14/2021 (Sun)	Wisconsin	Madison, WI	TBA
02/18/2021 (Thu)	Rutgers	Ann Arbor, MI	TBA
02/21/2021 (Sun)	Ohio State	Columbus, OH	TBA
02/27/2021 (Sat)	Indiana	Bloomington, IN	TBA
03/04/2021 (Thu)	Iowa	Ann Arbor, MI	TBA
03/07/2021 (Sun)	Michigan State	East Lansing, MI	TBA
Big Ten Tournament			
03/10/2021 (Wed)	1 st Round	Chicago, IL	TBA
03/11/2021 (Thu)	2 nd Round	Chicago, IL	TBA
03/12/2021 (Fri)	Quarterfinals	Chicago, IL	TBA
03/13/2021 (Sat)	Semifinals	Chicago, IL	TBA
03/14/2021 (Sun)	Championship	Chicago, IL	TBA

Some comments on the schedule:

- The first four non-conference games are all winnable, and should be good preparation for the Big Ten schedule.
- The ACC/Big Ten Challenge game vs. NC State is going to be challenging.
- Based on the predicted order of finish in the Big Ten, eight of the first nine Big Ten games should all be winnable.
- The last eight games of the Big Ten schedule are all going to be tough, especially the two MSU games and Iowa.
- Each Big Ten team plays 6 teams once (3 home/3 away) and 7 teams twice, for a total of 20 games. This season, Michigan plays:
 - Once: Nebraska (away), Purdue (away), Illinois (home), Rutgers (home), Ohio State (away), Iowa (home).
 - Twice: Penn State, Maryland, Northwestern, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Indiana, Michigan State.

Expectations

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

- Should Win (11) – Oakland, Ball State, Central Florida, Northwestern (twice), Nebraska, Penn State (twice), Maryland (twice), Minnesota (home).
- Should Lose (4) – Wisconsin (away), Michigan State (away), Ohio State, Indiana (away).
- Toss Up (10) – Bowling Green, NC State, Purdue, Minnesota (away), Indiana (home), Michigan State (home), Illinois, Iowa, Rutgers, Wisconsin (home).

If UM can win all 11 of the “Should Win” games, and half (5) of the 10 “Toss Up” games, that would give them a record of 16-9 (12-8 in the Big Ten). That should be good enough to get UM into the NCAA Tournament, depending on how they do in the Big Ten Tournament.

This Week

This week, Michigan plays two games, both in Crisler Arena. On Wednesday (11/25/2020, 4:00 p.m., ESPN2) they play [Bowling Green](#), then on Sunday (11/29/2020, 6:00 p.m., BTN) they play [Oakland](#).

Bowling Green was 21-10 (12-6 in the MAC) last season, and they’re picked to win the MAC this season. They have a few good players, although they don’t have much height. This will not be your typical “cupcake” game for Michigan, especially for an opener with no exhibition game to try things out.

Oakland was 14-19 (8-10 in the Horizon League) last season, and they’re picked to finish 6th this season in the Horizon. They have a couple good players, and they even have some height. This game should be a little easier than the Bowling Green game, but a lot harder than the typical “cupcake” games that Michigan normally starts with.

Go Blue!