

# **better than a layup**

*Challenging Basketball's Conventional Wisdom*



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## **Sr. Jean's Scouting Report**

Defeating the Michigan Wolverines

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*The following document may prove to be apocryphal, reconstructed by our staff at **betterthanalayup.com** from note fragments discovered in two Chicago north side watering holes near Loyola University's lakeshore campus. The first bits were uncovered by Loyola undergraduates at **Bar 63**, formerly known as **Hamilton's Bar and Grill**; the second, more intact set found in a corner booth at **Bruno's Lounge**. Both sites are a close walk from campus and have been frequented by students and professors going all the way back to Loyola's 1963 national championship days.*

*Are these fragments the work of Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt, the 98-year-old nun who has been the Ramblers' team chaplain since 1994?*

*Impossible to know. On one hand, it's hard to believe that a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary would find herself in a neighborhood tavern, yet alone leave her work product behind. On the other, the fragments betray a certain level of scholarly discipline one would expect of a woman religious working at a university, and though largely conversational, the writing tone occasionally reveals a tendency toward "Latinisms" in its rhetorical structure, a style often exhibited at Jesuit institutions.*

*In any event, regardless of their authenticity, the fragments are incomplete. Many of the critical elements comprising a comprehensive scouting report are either missing altogether or treated in a helplessly cursory manner. Michigan's out of bounds plays, press attack, occasional use of zone defense as well as its full-court pressure tactics, and the like are not revealed in the fragments. More importantly, only five of Michigan's players are profiled and the author's recommended match-ups do not appear. Thankfully, a quick Google search will uncover details about Michigan coach John Beilein's offensive attack for an interested reader.*

*Despite these limitations our staff is proud to offer this reconstruction and regardless of Sister Jean's role in its creation, we join her in shouting, "**Go Ramblers!**"*

## **Scouting Report on the University of Michigan**

### **General Observations**

#### **1. Record: 32-7**

.821 W-L% 10<sup>th</sup> of 351 D-1 teams; 13-5 in Big Ten, finishing 4<sup>th</sup> but won the conference tournament, defeating conference leaders Purdue and Michigan State.

#### **2. Peaking at the right moment**

Unranked through the first ten weeks of the season; hovered between 20<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> for the next five weeks and then during the final four weeks of the season moved up the rankings from 17<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> as the NCAA tournament began. They've won 13 in a row and are playing with confidence and swagger.

### 3. Highly efficient and patient offense (Kenpom ranking: 31<sup>st</sup>)

Deliberate pace (ranked 326<sup>th</sup> in adjusted tempo) utilizing Coach Beilein's celebrated 2-Guard Offense. Spread court in a 2-3 high post formation with forwards initially aligned deep and wide but moving up the sideline to receive entry passes, thus opening the floor from the free throw line extended to the baseline. This creates space for driving. The attack emphasizes frequent ball screens set by ball handling guards on dribble handoffs and, most importantly, from the high post who pulls to the perimeter to set screens for dribblers. This, of course, sets up opportunities for pick and roll action and dribble drives but more frequently finds the dribbler making a return pass to the screener who, rather than rolling to the basket, pops the screen for a three-point attempt.

### 4. The three-pointer is Michigan's offensive bread and butter... and Achilles Heel.

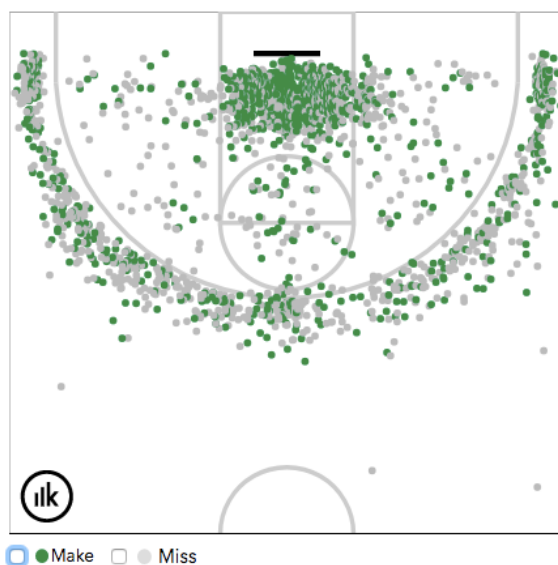
Over the course of 39 games, they averaged 57 field goal attempts per game, converting 27 of them. The distribution of these attempts is important:

30.5% attempts "at the rim" (71.2% makes)

26.2% attempts from two-point range (45.8% makes)

43.2% attempts beyond the arc (36.6% makes)

Of the 2,437 points they've generated from fields goal this season, 1,053 or 43% of them result from three-pointers. On a per-game average, they score 62 points from field goals. (Another 12 from free throws.) But three-pointers account for 27 of those points -- on average, 9 three-pointers per game. Michigan's margin of victory during the 2017-18 season is 11 points. Eliminate the extremes -- victories by more than 30 points against totally outmatched competitors and all of the team's losses -- and the margin of victory drops to roughly 9 points per victory. Shave a couple of those three-pointers off the scoreboard and Michigan's victories tighten up considerably. They become vulnerable. (The following shot chart courtesy of Krossover.com)



### 5. Michigan's field goal production runs through three players.

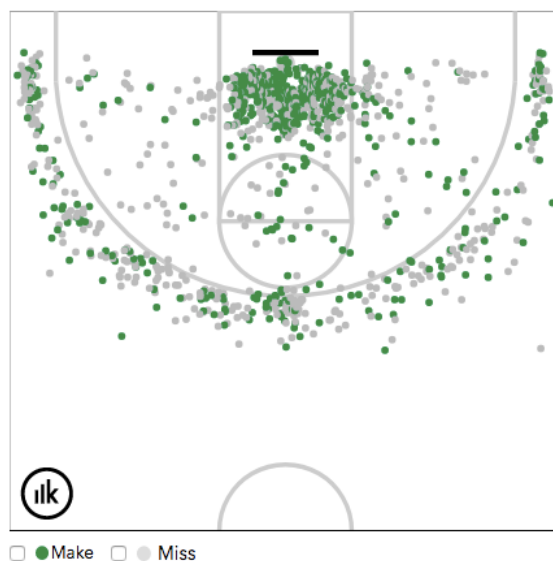
Nine members of Michigan's roster play 10 or more minutes per game. But on a per-game basis three of these players – Wagner, Matthews, and Abdur-Rahkman – account for 30 or 53% of Michigan's per game 57 field goal attempts and 15 or 56% of the team's 27 makes. Together they account for:

55% of the team's attempts "at the rim" (57% of the makes)

61% of the team's attempts from two-point range (61% of the makes)

47% of the team's attempts beyond the arc (48% of the makes)

Additionally, they account for 54% of Michigan's rebounds.



### 6. Beware of Simpson and Robinson.

While Wagner, Matthews, and Abdur-Rahkman's collective offensive volume demand attention, Xavier Simpson and Duncan Robinson are stealthy and lethal. Simpson is the team's play-making orchestrator. He sees the floor well, leading the team in assists and picking his spots to attack the rim; on defense he has extremely quick hands and anticipation; he leads the team in steals. Duncan is rangy and mobile, and especially dangerous from beyond the arc, firing 72% of his attempts and converting 39% of them from three-point land. Together Simpson and Duncan seem to pick their spots, impacting a game's outcome at just "the right time." Duncan with long-range threes, Simpson with a timely steal or drive to the basket. Their impact is psychological and momentum changing.

### **7. Though not a running team, Michigan takes advantage of transition opportunities.**

Only about a fifth of Michigan's field goal attempts come within the first 10 seconds of possession but when they do, they are very effective. Nearly one-third of all of Michigan's "at rim" attempts and makes occur in transition. Most importantly, they are deadly from beyond the arc in these situations, attempting threes 45% of the time and converting 38.5% of them. They will look to create an advantage when the opponent is slow in converting after a miss, a steal, or turnover. Even after a basket or when the opponent has successfully retreated after a miss, playmaker Simpson will look to pass the ball up the sideline for a quick three if the defenders relax.

### **8. Michigan plays outstanding defense.**

Currently they rank 4<sup>th</sup> in defensive efficiency. So far they've allowed no more than 72 points in a tournament game, and that came in a 27-point blowout against Texas A&M when the pace of play created more possessions and shot attempts for both squads. They are very good at close outs on three-point shooters, hedge and recover well on pick and roll situations, and rotate effectively from the help side to protect the basket.

### **9. Michigan's effectiveness declines once the shot clock passes 20 seconds.**

In the last ten seconds of the shot clock they end up with a greater percentage of attempts from two-point range, converting only 30% of them, and from beyond the arc, their shooting percentage declines to 32.2%. In the last five seconds of the clock when Michigan takes nearly 22% of its field goal attempts, the decline is more dramatic. With the clock winding down, they often hurry 44% of their attempts from beyond the arc and the conversion rate falls to 30.5%. Opponents who can force Michigan deeper into the shot clock will be rewarded because like so many contemporary teams they have no effective midrange game and are forced to survive on the basis of three-point attempts.

### **10. Free throws and rebounds win games.**

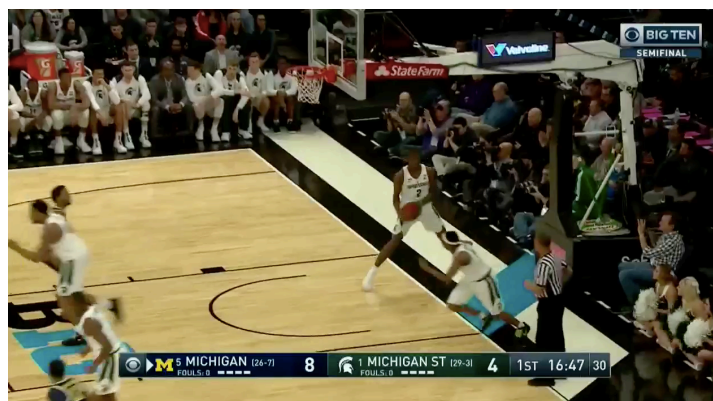
Michigan is a poor free throw shooting team, ranking 321<sup>st</sup> in the country, converting only 66% of their attempts. At the defensive end, they rank a very respectable 21<sup>st</sup> in nation in rebounding but a mediocre 201<sup>st</sup> on the offensive glass.

## **Player Profiles**

**#12 Muhammad-Ali Abdur-Rahkman**, Guard, 6'4" 190 LBS, Senior, 12.8 PPG, 3.9 Reb, 3.3 Ast

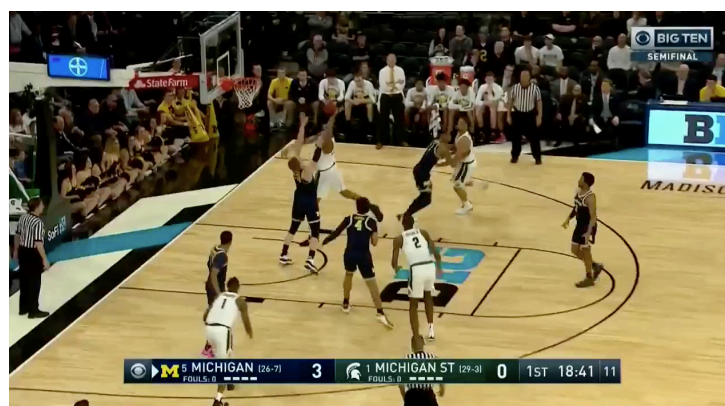
Quick, strong to basket but relies heavily on three-point shooting. Tends to hover along the 3-point arc looking for ball; more likely to shoot the three and if denied, to fake shot and slide left or right to maintain a 3-point threat rather than drive the lane. Generally aligns at the left guard position opposite Simpson and prefers moving from left to right to set up jumper on the right side of the arc. May penetrate the lane after passing the ball but generally returns to the perimeter. Likes circling around his teammates to rub off his defender and get space at top of circle. Occasionally will fill the high post when Wagner leaves it, but from there looks immediately to set a back screen for a teammate on the perimeter. He will then continue to perimeter hoping to receive a return pass for a

three-pointer. He is a very willing shooter from deep, sometimes recklessly so. In two games I only saw him shot fake and take a pull-up jumper in the midrange once. Nearly 47% of his shots are 3-pointers and he makes 38.8% of them. [View the clip.](#)



**#13 Moritz Wagner**, Center-Forward, 6'11" 245 LBS, Junior, 14.3 Pts, 6.9 Reb, 0.8 Ast

Critical to the team's offensive efficiency. 39% of his shots are 3-pointers and he makes 39.2% of them, most of them on assists by teammates. In Big Ten this season he was 6<sup>th</sup> in rebounding, 9<sup>th</sup> in total points, 9<sup>th</sup> in FG%. He is a graceful bull, adequately quick for a big man and always balanced and under control; quite capable of sprinting the floor, catching the ball on the run and laying it up under control. Seldom posts low or rolls to the basket on a pick and roll action. Instead, his bread and butter is setting ball screens as well as off-ball screens on the perimeter and then slipping the screen or fading to one side or the other opposite the dribbler to receive a pass for a three-pointer. He will occasionally pullout from his initial high post alignment to receive a pass for an immediate three-pointer. Only once did I see him shot fake and drive the lane. Don't let him get started; force him to drive or give up the ball. Effective on defense; sufficiently mobile; when on help side has a tendency to relax – a quicker player can flash by him to the rim. [View the clip.](#)





**#1 Charles Matthews**, Guard, 6'6" 200 LBS, Junior, 13.0 Pts, 5.6 Reb, 2.5 Ast

The team's most frequent shooter and its second highest scorer. A slasher. Very quick and opportunistic. Plays most of his game inside the arc, constantly prowling for drives to the rim. 74% of his shot attempts occur at the rim or in the midrange. Coming off ball screens he drives hard hoping to turn the corner and get into the lane. He will take the ball off a dribble handoff or ball screen and immediately challenge the arc; may get one step across, be denied, back out and try again. Always keeps his dribble; his instinct is to maintain initiative and find an opening; his second and more reluctant option is to shoot the three which he buries 32% of the time. If he catches and shoots a three immediately it will most likely occur on the left side of the floor. [View the clip.](#)



**#22 Duncan Robinson**, Guard-Forward, 6'8" 215 LBS, Fifth Year, 9.5 Pts, 2.5 Reb, 1.1 Ast

Dangerous. Despite playing an average of just 26 minutes per game, Robinson ranks 9<sup>th</sup> in the Big Ten in three-point attempts and 8<sup>th</sup> in makes. As noted above, 72% of his field goal attempts are taken from beyond the arc. He is steady, mature, and unperturbed in his approach to the game. Squares up and shoots quickly... but never seems to rush; always measured and under control; used in the backcourt against full-court pressure. On the surface he appears to be a "standing shooter" who hovers on the perimeter from NBA three-point range; frequently involved in "catch and shoot" situations as opposed to screening action, especially on the right side of the floor, but if contested is quite capable of making a shot fake and driving the basket. At 6'8" he takes a big first step. Effective on defense. Be very wary of him. [View the clip.](#)



**#3 Xavier Simpson**, Guard, 6'0" 185 LBS, Sophomore, 7.5 Pts, 3.3 Reb, 3.7 Ast

Sneaky quick hands and feet; gets to the rim better and more often than his teammates; knows how to finish. Leads the team in assists and steals, ranking 7<sup>th</sup> in the Big Ten for assists and 3<sup>rd</sup> in steals. The team's quarterback; brings the ball up generally on the right side and initiates the subsequent traffic. Head is always up searching for driving and passing opportunities. The one player who most frequently "drives and pitches" to others for three-point shots. [View the clip.](#)



## Keys for Victory

### **1. Play with confidence.**

They play nine players; you play nine. They're bigger but you're quicker and more balanced offensively with five starters averaging ten or more points. On top of that, you rank 11th in the country in three-point shooting percentage and ninth in two-point percentage. Your range of attack from the rim through the midrange to beyond the arc is greater than the Wolverines, gives you more offensive flexibility. Thanks to your prowess from behind the arc, you rank fifth in effective field goal percentage while Michigan's 47<sup>th</sup> rank places last among the Final Four teams.

### **2. Keep it close and shoot free throws.**

Your pack line defense in combination with aggressive switching will frustrate Michigan. Rest assured, though, they will go on several three-point runs. Don't panic; stay in your game; each Michigan run will be followed by an offensive lull. Your constancy and methodical rhythm will carry the day.

### **3. Push Michigan deeper into the shot clock.**

Michigan's possessions average about 18 seconds in duration. We need to increase that to 20 seconds or more.

First, prevent Michigan run-outs. Your tournament turnovers have marred your overall performance. In a game of this import you must take better care of the ball to prevent Michigan fast break for easy layups. Correspondingly, after missed shots, quickly retreat and do not relax. Challenge long passes



up the sideline and close out on Michigan shooters in the early seconds of the possession. As noted above, only about 20% of their offense occurs in the first 10 seconds and they are highly effective in these brief periods. You won't stop it entirely but aim to reduce it by 5%. In simple terms, that means reducing the number of short possessions from 11 to 8.

Secondly, switch aggressively on their screening action and do not permit standing three-pointers. Make them put the ball on the floor and expend time. The deeper they move into the shot clock the more their shooting percentages will decline. Missed shots leads to self-doubt and more missed shots.

#### **4. Run Mo Wagner off the three-point arc.**

Do not permit him to take relaxed, uncontested three-point shots. Don't let him "pick and pop." Force him to roll and navigate the long distance to the basket, or if he pops, to put the ball on the floor. Take him out of the Michigan offense.

#### **5. Remember Johnny Egan.**

In the season following Loyola's 1963 national title, the Ramblers returned to the NCAA tournament and squared off with Big Ten champs, Michigan. Standing only 5'10" Loyola's Egan was assigned to guard All-American, 6'5" Cazzie Russell, the NBA's first draft choice in 1996. Egan held Russell to four points in the first half. The following morning the Chicago Tribune featured a photo of Russell leaving his feet for a jump shot and below him, tugging down Cazzie's shorts, was little Johnny Egan.

Don't back down from anyone. Play for keeps.