

Quick Response Keys Michigan's Big Ten Championship



by **Heather Rule**/Special to CHN

MINNEAPOLIS — The biggest part of the game happened in the first two minutes of the Big Ten Championship. At least according to Michigan freshman winger Dylan Duke.

His team was already down 1-0 only 32 seconds in, on a backhanded-shot goal from Minnesota's Jaxon Nelson. First shift, first shot on goal, first tally on the scoreboard. If Michigan wanted to take the thousands of maroon-and-gold fans out of it, they needed to act fast.

“I just remember thinking on the bench, when (Matty) Beniers, Kent (Johnson) and (Brendan) Brisson went out, I was thinking, ‘That’d be huge if they scored right here,’” Duke said.

Indeed, that top line for the Wolverines marched right out on the ice and tied the game only 45 seconds later. It appeared to be all the momentum that No. 4 Michigan needed on the way to its 4-3 victory over host Minnesota in the Big Ten Championship on Saturday night at 3M Arena at Mariucci on the University of

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Minnesota campus. Without a couple of late Minnesota goals, the Wolverines had a multi-goal lead for nearly the final two periods.

The game lived up to the expectations for Michigan coach Mel Pearson, even if his team didn't start the way they wanted to.

“We talked about getting through the first five minutes trying to take the crowd out of it,” Pearson said. “That goal was so big, our first goal to just come back right after they got the crowd going. That was huge.”

The game was in Minneapolis only because Michigan was swept at the end of the regular season by Notre Dame. So instead of playing in a madhouse at Yost Arena, it was up to Gophers fans to provide the energy, and they didn't disappoint.

Before the puck dropped, the arena was filled to the brim with plenty of Gophers fans vocally sharing their enthusiasm, hoping for a victory and a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament. Gold pom-poms waved throughout multiple sections filled with University of Minnesota students as part of an announced crowd of 10,774 – an all-time record for the venue.

Naturally, the crowd went crazy for the 1-0 lead, then had to settle in when Brisson scored his 19th goal of the season.

“Quiets the crowd,” Duke said. “Momentum went on our bench. The guys really fed off that.”

Giving up the lead only seconds later can easily deflate a team or its building of fans. The good news was there's obviously a lot of game remaining.

“But I thought we could've responded a little bit better,” said Gophers junior defenseman Jackson LaCombe.

Though the rest of the first period looked pretty even in terms of play and the 10 shots on goal apiece, the Wolverines really fed off their early goal and found a little bit of good fortune near the end of the period throwing the puck toward the net.

Mackie Samoskevich benefitted from a bit of an own-goal by the Gophers when the puck deflected into the net off of Mike Koster's stick with 2:09 to play in the first period to take a 2-1 lead into the first intermission.

If the Wolverines grabbed momentum early in the game with that tying goal, they really took it with a stranglehold early in the second period and didn't give it back for most of the game. Michigan cashed in on a 2-on-1 opportunity early in the second. This time, Duke wasn't on the bench waiting for his shift. He was right in the thick of it, ready to accept the feed from his linemate, Samoskevich, to increase the lead to two goals at the 2:07 mark of the second period.

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It was another “huge point in the game,” Duke said, when Samokevich found Duke on his backhand. The significance of the two-goal deficit was not lost on Gophers coach Bob Motzko.

“Once it was 2-1, we needed to clamp down,” Motzko said. “And we turned that one over, and that was not a good turnover by us.”

The trajectory of play changed throughout the second period, for the better for Michigan and perhaps for the worse for the Gophers. They weren’t getting enough pucks to the net, LaCombe said, and they were also playing a lot in the defensive zone trying to keep the Wolverines from increasing the lead.

While Motzko saw the opposition play “on their toes” and loose with the lead, his Gophers were tight, got nervous and ultimately tried to hard to pop another goal. Getting a second goal earlier in the game would have helped not only on the scoreboard for the Gophers but also to get the crowd back in the game, according to Motzko.

“We were trying to hit home runs to get back into the game,” Motzko said. “We just needed to hit singles.”

Michigan outshot Minnesota 13-6 and outscored them 2-0 in the second period, the second goal a power-play tally from Johnson for the three-goal lead at the second intermission. In the third period, Michigan played “just good enough” to hold the lead until the final buzzer, Pearson said.

The loss for Minnesota snapped a nine-game winning streak. Its last regulation loss? Jan. 22, a 4-1 decision at home to... Michigan. Motzko said he hopes this serves as a bit of a reset before the NCAA Tournament. The Gophers will be a No. 2 seed.

Meanwhile, Michigan, which came into the season with all the hype in the world, goes into the NCAA Tournament having lived up to it so far, earning the No. 1 overall seed. Now it has four more tough wins ahead to finish the job.

For all the talent, Pearson referred to goalie Erik Portillo, who made 25 saves, as the MVP of the team. Pearson added that he felt bad for the netminder about the last two goals in the final minute of regulation, a pair for Gophers freshman forward Matthew Knies on the power play during a 6-on-3 advantage with Minnesota’s goalie Justen Close pulled.

But Portillo backstopped his team to a championship, keeping his team in the game when he needed to, coach said. Even when Portillo surrendered the first goal standing in his crease directly in front of the raucous Gophers’ student sections, he didn’t bat an eye about that early hole his team found itself in to start the game.

“I trust my teammates’ ability to score goals,” Portillo said. “I know how good they are. I wasn’t really worried at all. I think we as a team and as a group are good enough to come back from that.

“We did.”
