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Gophers lose heartbreaker to Badgers in overtime

By [Heather Rule](https://web.archive.org/web/20170701194310/http://www.1500espn.com/author/heather-rule/) | [@hlrule](https://web.archive.org/web/20170701194310/https://twitter.com/hlrule)

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The Gophers looked like they might pull it off. Eric Curry made a baseline jumper for a 76-74 lead with about a minute left in overtime. Then Wisconsin's Bronson Koenig sunk a 3-pointer that also sunk the Gophers' hopes for a victory.

The No. 17 Badgers won another round of the Border Battle, 78-76 in overtime, in front of a sellout crowd Saturday at Williams Arena. Wisconsin (16-3, 5-1) has won the last six meetings with Minnesota (15-5, 3-4).

So, just more of the same in this Gophers-Badgers rivalry? Not exactly. It's easy to see the final result and just write this off as another typical Minnesota defeat. Yes, it's their third Big Ten loss in a row. Yes, they're now 1-2 with a couple of heartbreaking losses in overtime this season. Yes, at the end of the day it's still an L on the scoresheet that affects rankings and NCAA tourney hopes.

Forget the result for a minute though. This game was entertaining.

"Obviously a tough one, but I thought it was a great college basketball game," head coach Richard Pitino said.

He added that he doesn't typically enjoy coaching during the games, but he kind of enjoyed this one. Both teams were good, and it was a game of players making plays, Pitino said.

"I thought they just made one more than we did," he said. "I thought if you don't see where this team can go, probably not paying attention."

No team held a lead bigger than 5 points, and the game was tied 18 times with 16 lead changes. That's pretty significant in itself. There weren't any notable scoring runs to speak of for either side. The Gophers led at the half by just a basket, setting up a anybody's-game second half before the overtime. The transition game was solid, giving the Gophers 14 fast break points while Wisconsin had none.

The Gophers struggled a bit in the final 5:25 of regulation, a time that marked their last points until the final seconds. If anything, this might be the stretch of the game that got away from the Gophers. They turned the ball over four times, and Nate Mason couldn't connect on a couple jumpers. He's hit a bit of a slump with his shooting recently; he shot 3-for-14 but had 10 assists in the game.

The Badgers were up 67-64 with 22 seconds left. No problem. Akeem Springs hit a clutch 3-pointer with 12 seconds left to force overtime. Unfortunately, his shot at the buzzer in overtime wasn't quite on the mark, but it was also hurried and a bit of a desperation shot.

Springs had another great game for the Gophers with 16 points, going 3-for-6 from beyond the arc and shooting 50 percent. He continues to hit the clutch shots, even hitting the first two baskets out of the break to get the Gophers started and make sure Wisconsin didn't grab the early momentum in the second half. He even went over teammate Bakary Konate in overtime to block a shot.

Pitino strayed from his typical starting lineup and put Springs in over Dupree McBrayer. The switch seemed to agree with both players. McBrayer scored 14 and had 4 assists. They combined for back-to-back threes early in the first half.

Freshman Amir Coffey scored a team-high 19 points, including a trio of 3-pointers plus five boards, 3 assists, a block and a steal.

For the Badgers, the Gophers had trouble containing Ethan Happ and Nigel Hayes. Happ scored 28 points – 23 of them in the second half and overtime – plus 12 rebounds and six assists. He was nearly unstoppable underneath the hoop. Hayes scored 21 points. The Badgers' leading scorer coming into the game, Koenig, only had 11, but he made them count with three 3-pointers, including the clutch shot in overtime.

Still, they're a good team.

After the game, it wasn't like Pitino came in and picked apart the loss, playing the 'what-if' game and singling out guys players. It didn't seem like a game where he needed to, either.

"There's not a lot that I could gripe about with these guys," Pitino said. "I'm sure they're disappointed with the outcome."

Coffey agreed that yes, they were disappointed, but they "battled with them until the end." He echoed the sentiment that the Badgers just made that one extra big play.

Springs talked about how tough Happ and Hayes are to play against, as two of the tougher guards in the Big Ten. Plus, Wisconsin is a good team that's ranked No. 17 for a reason.

"They're an older team, and that's what you see in games like this," Springs said. "You see guys that have been in this situation a lot. You've got to take you hate off to them."

No doubt, a victory would have been a huge boost for the program, especially after a couple tough road losses. Losing 52-50 to Penn State last weekend wasn't exactly their finest moment, when the offense stalled out in the second half of that winnable game. That wasn't a game the Gophers should have left feeling encouraged, according to Pitino.

After the border battle, they should be encouraged. They need to feel like they can be a really good team in the Big Team and one that will only continue to get better, he said.

So yes, it stings. But it was still a great game. Add this to the archive of entertaining college basketball games.

"They need to be positive," Pitino said of his team. "You never know how people respond. I don't see a whole lot of negative to look at from tonight besides the fact that we lost."

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- *Sid*
Well-fought game for the Gophers, but you just knew Wisconsin would take the win in the end. It's time for us to finally turn it around against the Wisconsin program. Hoops team is 5-22 against them since 2001. Football team is 0-13 against them since 2004.
- *fritzdahmus*