

2026 National Championship Retrospective

Michigan outlasted UConn in a muddy title game, 69-63. The Wolverines are the most modern prototype a new age, NIL era championship team

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INDIANAPOLIS, IN— When the confetti fell to the floor of Lucas Oil Stadium, cascading down in a shower of maize and blue, it was hard to be surprised.

Dusty May's Michigan Wolverines, champions of the Big Ten and the most dominant team all year, won a sixth straight game in March for the program's first national title since 1989. The Wolverines exercised their identity all season long. They were stronger, more versatile, and more athletic than anyone else in America. That cosmic cocktail of skill, along with some clutch shotmaking and some very tall basketball players, helped them assume position as the country's number one team on the first Monday night in April.

The game itself was not your typical Michigan basketball game. The Wolverines won each of their first five games in the NCAA tournament by an average margin of 21 points. They demolished opponents from all angles, punctuated by an 18-point thumping of fellow one seed Arizona in the national semifinal (trust me, it wasn't even that close).

This game against Connecticut went a little differently. The Huskies were no slouches this year. They won 34 games and had plenty of big game experience. They also seemed to be riding a wave of all waves following Braylon Mullins' miracle three pointer to lift them over Duke in the Elite Eight's final seconds. It felt that somehow, UConn had a "team of destiny" charm to them.

They also had the coaching advantage. Dna Hurley, the game's best coach, planned this game against Michigan perfectly. Their goals: remain physical, crash the glass, slow down the pace, and hit your threes. Connecticut nearly did it all to a tee. Michigan broke 90 points in all five games this March, but they were held to 69 in the title game. UConn outrebounded the Michigan behemoths down low 46-39, including a 22-12 offensive glass advantage. UConn went 9-33 from beyond the arc, which is not amazing by any stretch, However, Michigan hit just two threes the entire game, while

missing 15. Michigan scored just two fast break points, and scored just four points off of UConn turnovers. Their best player, Yaxel Lendeborg, was essentially on one leg the entire game.

If you told Dusty May all of these statistics prior to the game, he might have started sweating. However, no sweat was needed. Michigan did not play a perfect game, or even a game close to their standards. Despite this, and despite UConn's relentless pressure and work ethic, it never truly felt like the Wolverines would surrender.

The box score does not account for timely buckets and opportunistic plays. Aday Mara (8 pts, 4-7 FG, 1 block) came up with some key defensive stops and had a huge break away alley oop dunk in the late stages to keep UConn at bay. Michigan's two threes both were huge. Elliot Cadeau, in a Most Outstanding Player performance, hit a huge three to extend the lead to double digits midway through the second half.

Trey McKenney (9 pts, 2-9 FG, 8 rebs) hit the biggest three of the night. A Tarris Reed Jr. forced turnover led to a Solo Ball missed layup, which came back down on the other end into the hands of the freshman McKenney. He buried Michigan's second and final three pointer of the night, but it was enough. The five point swing put Michigan up nine points with less than two minutes to go. UConn was able to answer back somewhat with a Solo Ball banked three, but there was too much of a gap and not enough time to make it up.

Elliot Cadeau (19 pts, 5-11 FG, 3 rebs, 2 ast) was consistent in the backcourt. Morez Johnson Jr. went 12 and 10. The aforementioned McKenney and Roddy Gayle Jr. (4 pts, 25 min) put in valuable time off the bench to help carry the load for Michigan. Lendeborg had a somewhat quiet 13 points and 1 block, but his presence was enough, even on a hobbled lower body. The Wolverines were not perfect, but a team this good did not have to be perfect. They needed to be good enough collectively, which is what they had been all season long. There was no reason for it to change Monday night.

The Wolverines could beat you multiple ways, and they showcased it through the NCAA tournament. They could hit threes, work down low with their size, and run on the fast break. They had all of the weapons this year, and remarkably, none of those weapons began their careers at Michigan.

This season's Wolverine team is perhaps the most modern example of how to win a national championship in the NIL era. Elliot Cadeau was a five star recruit at North Carolina, but his shooting numbers were not stellar and he was essentially run out of Chapel Hill. Aday Mara somehow escaped the clutches of Mick Cronin at UCLA. Morez Johnson Jr. was at Illinois for his freshman season last year, and Nimari Burnett is on his

third school in his five year college career. Yaxel Lendeborg nearly spurned college for the NBA draft after a phenomenal season last year at UAB.

Michigan is the first team ever to win a national title with all five starters being transfers. The last few champions have had their share of transfers. UConn's back to back teams included the likes of Tristen Newtown and Cam Spencer, but there were also homegrown studs like Alex Karaban, Adama Sanogo, and Donovan Clingan. The three best players on last year's Florida team were transfers, but their frontcourt featured Alex Condon and Thomas Haugh, who earned their keep through their younger seasons in Gainesville. In 2026, Michigan knew the formula, and it is a new age recipe. If you have the budget to build essentially any roster you want (Michigan does), then it is all about fit. If you guards and big men fit perfectly into your scheme, then who cares what school they started at? The game is evolving, and if you want to win a championship, it's likely you have to evolve too.

Michigan's way is not the only way to build a roster, but it is certainly a viable way. They were able to carve up the competition with ease, despite the majority of the important pieces only knowing each other for less than a year. In the "old days," you typically recruited players based on geography, connections, or brand recognition. You got who you got, and they usually stuck around, for better or worse. It was difficult to predict how a player could evolve from a young, wide-eyed freshman to a sharp and seasoned senior. If you got the scope of that evolution just right, mixed in with some luck and hard work, you could build a championship team.

In the NIL and transfer portal era, you see what you want and you take it. In Michigan's case, with their funding, they can want pretty much anyone and get them in no time. It takes plenty of instinct to identify talent that isn't being utilized in the right way at one school or another. Dusty May saw the potential with a three big front court, even if others scoffed at the idea of such a tall lineup. He saw the potential in Elliot Cadeau, who Carolina fans were happy to see depart from Chapel Hill. It takes a keen eye to identify talent, and even a keener sense of strategy to coach and scheme your way to the title. There is no doubt building rosters is now based on mostly money, but there is still a skill to this kind of thing. Different method, same goal.

Michigan is the first edition of the modern age champion. They aren't homegrown, but they're together. They aren't developed over time, but they are poached when the time is right. This Michigan team won't be the last to be built this way, but they will be one of the best to ever be built this way. They were the best all season long, and they were the best when it mattered most— on Monday night.