

Michigan State dominates Kentucky in Champions Classic, 83-66

Written by Sean Murawski // SM Sports

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NEW YORK, NY— In a game that many believed would be a lot more competitive than the late night slot at the Champions Classic, Michigan State absolutely routed Kentucky, 83-66.

Kentucky, who entered the night as the tenth ranked team in the SM 25 Hard, had high expectations this season. A lot of the burden was placed on the price tag of the roster— rumored to be around \$22 million. Additionally, Jayden Quaintance was in line to be a focal point of this year's Kentucky frontcourt after transferring in from Arizona State. Jaland Lowe, a transfer from Pittsburgh, was in line to be the starting point guard.

Without Quaintance (ACL) and Lowe (shoulder) to injury, the \$22 million was not able to translate— Kentucky looked exposed. The rebound battle was won by Michigan State 48-28. Specifically, the Spartans grabbed 32 defensive rebounds. It was this determination on the defensive glass that prevented Kentucky from garnering any second chance buckets. Those second chance buckets would have helped, as Kentucky shot 35% from the field and 7-30 from three.

Aside from Kentucky's shortcomings, last night was a lot more about the brilliance of Michigan State. As per the Tom Izzo way, any player in green could have been described as the hardest working player on the floor. Jaxon Kohler led the way for Michigan State, scoring 20 points on 8-12 shooting. He also hit two threes (we will get to that later) and corralled five rebounds. Elsewhere, point guard Jeremy Fears Jr. made quite a leap from last year. Fears (13 ast) did his best to command the Spartan offense while not necessarily being the main scoring threat.

Off the bench, Kur Teng (15 pts in 18 min) and freshman Cam Ward (8 pts in 18 min) contributed admirably. The game truly never felt close from the midway point of the second half all the way until the final buzzer. Michigan State led 42-27 with under two minutes left in the first half, and jumped out to a 50-31 lead by the first media timeout in the second half.

Kentucky was able to cut it to a ten point lead with about 11 minutes to go, but the Spartans kept it at arm's length the rest of the way. Perimeter prowess and determination down low won this game for Michigan State, who has now beaten a second ranked SEC team in as many matchups.

Michigan State's main positive note from last night revolves around their three point shooting. Under Tom Izzo, the Spartans have never been a real force from beyond the arc. Although it has never been their true identity, you would not know it from last night. Michigan State shot 11-22 from beyond the arc. Jaxon Kohler, Coen Carr, Trey Fort, Jesse McCulloch, and Kur Teng all found the basket from distance at least once. That is a lot of players, both starters and bench pieces, that are able to shoot from three. In a modern game where three point shooting is king, Michigan State may have unlocked a strength they do not usually put all of their focus on with this year's squad.

For Kentucky, there will likely be alarm bells sounding. Two losses— even ranked losses— are still losses. Last season under Mark Pope felt positive and hopeful, but this season was more about business. So far, Pope has hit a bit of a wall. Yes, injuries have been a bug for Kentucky, but the standards are sky high in Lexington. This game was not a shining example of those standards.

Michigan State has been passing tests with flying colors so far, and they look a lot better than what their preseason rankings made them to be. Kentucky, on the other hand, looks like a team in need of a refresh. It is only November, but the time to hit the reset button may be closing.

Sean Murawski is a writer for his own personal sports website, smsports.net. He publishes weekly columns and rankings on men's college basketball, as well as coverage columns for the MLB.