



Sunday's Ohio State - Michigan game was playing out a lot like many of the Wolverines' recent games -- a close, hotly contested battle that went down to the wire. A frustrated Jared Sullinger made sure it didn't stay that way as he scored on three straight possessions down the stretch, helping the Buckeyes finish strong in a 64-49 victory.

The Buckeyes captured sole possession of first place in the conference with a 7-2 league record (19-3 overall) -- and it was Ohio State's sixth straight victory over their arch rivals. In fact, Ohio State coach Thad Matta improved to 15-2 against Michigan on Sunday, and the 15 point victory had the home crowd in a frenzy.

Matta talked about recapturing the conference lead after the game, "It beats second. It's such a long season and we gotta keep the focus on us. Knowing we have six days off before we play again there's some things we gotta keep getting better at," Matta said. "Turning the halfway point at seven and two I like."

Lenzelle Smith Jr. had a huge game, scoring 17 points while grabbing 12 rebounds (his first career double-double), and eight of his rebounds came off the offensive glass. Smith's performance set the tone for the Buckeyes as Ohio State outrebounded the Wolverines 38-29. The extra possessions Smith Jr. created helped Ohio State notch 16 second chance points -- and with as physical as the game turned out, that was the key to Ohio State's success.

"I knew that was going to be our edge, rebounding and just doing the little things," Smith Jr. said. "I stuck to that early and just got myself in a position where I could get the rebounds. We weren't making many shots so it was a better chance on getting rebounds."

Three other Buckeyes scored in double digits -- Sullinger finished with 13 while Deshaun Thomas and William Buford both scored 12. While the team struggled shooting the ball, Ohio State had a huge advantage at the free throw line -- connecting on 15-18 (83%) from the charity stripe while Michigan went just 3-4. When you combine that with the edge Ohio State had on

the boards -- it would've been hard for Michigan to leave Columbus with a victory.

"We haven't been shooting free throws fairly well this year," Sullinger said after the game. "Every day when we practice we have to shoot 100 [free throws] so I guess it's paying off."

The first half was a slug-fest. Michigan won the tip and started the game with a near-turnover, but the Wolverines recovered and converted a low post bucket. A three on their next possession gave Michigan a 5-0 lead, but the Buckeyes marched out in front with seven unanswered.

The first half progressed into a physical grind and both teams struggled to find a rhythm. Sullinger picked up his first foul three minutes in, and the sophomore big-man played tentatively. With five minutes remaining in the half, Sullinger picked up his second foul and was forced to the bench after scoring just five points and one rebound.

Smith Jr. picked up the slack though, pacing the Buckeyes with nine points and seven rebounds through 20 minutes. Much of his best work came on the offensive glass, giving the Buckeyes more opportunities in a half where they struggled shooting the ball. Ohio State went 34% from the field and committed six turnovers while only connecting on two of their nine 3-pointers. But on the other end the Buckeyes were just as stingy, limiting Michigan to just 36% shooting and forcing seven turnovers. Ohio State ended the half on a 9-2 run and took a 24-21 lead into the locker room at halftime.

The Buckeyes started rolling in the second half, scoring 10 quick points in under three minutes. Michigan kept pace early -- going on a 7-0 run to bring the game within three -- but the Buckeyes kept their foot on the gas. William Buford picked off a lazy Trey Burke pass and took it the other way for a break-away dunk, which ignited the crowd and put the Buckeyes up by seven. The dunk swung all the momentum Ohio State's way and Michigan spent the remainder of the game trying to stay within 10 points of the Buckeyes.

Michigan cut the lead back down to seven with five minutes to go and looked to be gaining momentum. After Jordan Morgan snagged an offensive rebound, he was positioning himself to move in for a layup when Aaron Craft came out of nowhere and picked his pocket. Craft pushed the ball up the court and found Deshaun Thomas on the other end for an easy bucket. The next three possessions went through Jared Sullinger, and the big man converted and scored three straight buckets to put the game out of reach.

Smith Jr. talked about playing in a close game, "It feels good. It goes to show that even if we don't blow someone out, if we stay together and get through the adversity, we can still get a win. We ground it out and made things go our way and did the best we could."

The Buckeyes get five days off before traveling to Madison to take on the Wisconsin Badgers.

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