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UTEP chokes Michigan: Miners win Legends Classic consolation

by Bill Knight \ El Paso Times

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[Photo gallery: UTEP vs. Michigan](#)

UTEP 65, Michigan 56

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. -- UTEP put a collective clamp on Michigan in the final 20 minutes, seemingly squeezing every open shot off the Wolverine end of the floor -- over and over.

UTEP parlayed that defense and great ball movement on the offensive end of the floor into a 65-56 victory over Michigan on Saturday evening in the consolation game of the Legends Classic at Boardwalk Hall.

Was that as good as the Miners have defended this season?

"It probably was," UTEP coach Tim Floyd said.

Michigan coach John Beilein said, "Outstanding. They got up in

us and denied and denied and denied and denied. Their defense was outstanding, particularly in the second half. That's a heck of a basketball team. Very good. They've got great

length and speed and they've got seniors on a mission to get back to the NCAA Tournament."

UTEP improved to 4-2 on the young season, losing a second-half lead and falling to Georgia Tech Friday night and then playing like they were on fire in the second half against Michigan on Saturday. Michigan is now 3-2 after dropping a tough 53-50 decision to No. 9 Syracuse on Friday night and then falling to that UTEP squeeze on Saturday.

Randy Culpepper led UTEP with 24 points. Julyan Stone had 10 points, five rebounds, four assists. Jeremy Williams had just eight points,

but 10 big rebounds. Freshman post player John Bohannon had 10 points, seven rebounds and blocked three shots. Christian Polk had just two points, but had seven assists and six rebounds.

Darius Morris led Michigan with 20 points and, really, this looked as if it would be anyone's game at the half. The Miners led most of the first half, but the two teams went to the intermission all even, 29-29.

And then came the lockdown.

UTEP did not allow Michigan a field goal until Morris hit a short jumper with 8:39 to play in the game. The Miners had fought their way out to a 48-33 lead by that time.

Michigan put on some full-court pressure and a 1-3-1 and 2-3 half-court trap at times down the stretch, trying to pull UTEP out of its comfort

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zone, trying to force some easy buckets. But, in the end, the Miners kept their poise, moved the basketball and they were the ones getting the easy buckets.

"I'm just trying to get better," said Bohannon, the 6-foot-10 freshman from Lancaster, Texas. "I just try to listen to Coach Floyd. He's been doing this a long time (Floyd ducked his head and laughed). But it's a lot easier out there when the ball moves around. A lot easier. It's easier for everyone on the floor when the ball moves like it did tonight."

Culpepper said, "I thought we defended well tonight. And we all knew since day one that John Bohannon would be a key part of this team."

Michigan continued to battle, continued to pressure the Miners down the stretch. But the Miners held their composure and held onto that lead -- 52-40 with 7:18 to play, 59-45 at the last media time out with 2:20 to go. The Wolverines could never get quite enough pressure to get the Miners out of their comfort zone.

"I thought our team played smart," Floyd said. "I thought we got somewhat of an identity tonight. The ball moved. We had screens. I feel like that's the first time all year we've had an identity. Players were moving tonight, too. Not just the ball."

"They (the Miners) just came out in the second half and really defended very, very well," Beilein said. "We only had 12 turnovers, but it seemed

like they came at bad times. We had a couple of unforced turnovers early ... I shouldn't say unforced. They (the Miners) ran through some passing lanes. I was just trying to find an answer to what Coach Floyd was doing to us."

Beilein then added, "We just haven't seen that length, that speed yet this season. We would have seen it against Syracuse, but they don't play man-to-man like that. UTEP's defense was outstanding. I think our man-to-man was pretty good. A lot of people haven't had great man-to-man against Culpepper."

UTEP did not put together that kind of second-half defense -- or offense -- Friday night against Georgia Tech. The Miners did Saturday night. They travel home Sunday morning, have Monday to get ready for the rematch with rival New Mexico State on Tuesday night in Las Cruces.

For a moment or two, though, this team can take a deep breath and enjoy a second-half clampdown that was a little bit special.

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