

Michigan Writer Says Harbaugh Likely 'Not On The Immediate Hot Seat'



Michigan head coach Jim Harbaugh has enjoyed a lot of success in his five-year tenure for the Wolverines.

Taking over for Brady Hoke, who led Michigan to a 5-7 record in 2014, Harbaugh immediately righted the ship, going 10-3 in 2015, which included a dominant 41-7 Citrus Bowl victory over Florida.

In his five years, Harbaugh has hit 10 wins three times, and has never finished a year with less than eight wins.

But Harbaugh also has not fulfilled all the expectations that were expected from him, with the former San Francisco 49ers head coach yet to put together all the pieces to make a run to the College Football Playoff, or even a run to the Big Ten Championship Game, and has lost all four bowl games since the Citrus Bowl.

Much of that has to do with Ohio State, who Harbaugh's Wolverines have yet to beat in five attempts.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin reached out to Aria Gerson from The Michigan Daily to discuss this past season for Michigan, and how much it has impacted the fan opinion of Harbaugh, as well as if he is facing the potential of losing his job in the near future.

Heading into the season, Gerson said the expectations were high, but not through the roof, and depended mostly on the success of Michigan's biggest rival.

"The expectations at the beginning of the season, I would say was like a New Years Six bowl-level team. Like 10-2, 11-1 type thing. Some people picked them to win the Big Ten, I think that people who cover Michigan were a little bit more skeptical," Gerson said. "A lot of Michigan's expectations were tied to Ohio State's expectations because Ohio State had a new coach and people were thinking 'Well you know most teams, they get a new coach, they take a step back at first, so this is the year that there's a door open for Michigan to beat Ohio State,' so that was kind of where I think a lot of that was coming from.

"I think that if people had known that Ohio State was going to be that good, I don't know that Michigan would have been picked to win the Big Ten."

The opinion of what Harbaugh was doing ebbed and flowed with Michigan's season, starting with the lowest of lows, while also eventually hitting on some of the heights.

The Wolverines started out the season with two less-than-stellar victories — a 40-21 win over Middle Tennessee State and a 24-21 double-overtime nail biter against Army — and when that was followed by 35-14 beatdown to Wisconsin, Gerson said the expectations hit rock bottom.

"It was a pretty violent swing in the other direction," Gerson said. "After Army and Wisconsin, it was like 'Oh no, this is a disaster,' and I think people were barely expecting anything. They were like 'It would be a good season to go 8-4 at this point.'"

This bad start also reflected poorly on Harbaugh, who Gerson said was facing some of the most flack of his entire tenure following the loss to the Badgers.

"I'd heard more Harbaugh hot seat talk than I'd heard after most other games speculation wise, just because of how bad those couple of games were," she said.

Much of that talk, both following the Wisconsin and in the higher points of the season like the blowout victories against Notre Dame and Michigan State, came down to the success of newly hired offensive coordinator Josh Gattis.

The 36-year old Gattis, who came to the Wolverines from Alabama, was the major hire in the offseason for Michigan, and was expected to have immediate results within the offense.

"A lot of the opinions on Harbaugh this season in particular were tied to Josh Gattis because he was the splashy offseason hire and Harbaugh gave him the keys to the offense," Gerson said. "People were saying Harbaugh went and made this splashy hire, it was supposed to fix the offense and now it's terrible and all that stuff, but I think towards the end of the season, Gattis showed that he actually was a good hire and that the things that he wanted to do could work and they were showing positive signs.

"I think people came around on his hire and I think that reflected well on Harbaugh, too, to say like 'Oh, he was willing to make this hire and take this risk with this, and it actually did end up working, even though it didn't work right away.'"

Michigan ended the season with the No. 44 scoring offense (31.7 points per game) and No. 68 total offense (401.5 yards per game) in the country.

All of that led to yet another Ohio State win over Michigan, a 56-27 road victory to move Harbaugh to 0-5 in The Game, the only coach on either side of the rivalry to drop each of his first five matchups.

But Gerson said Michigan fans weren't truly expecting anything else this season, and it did not change the opinion on their head coach, despite the obvious desire to break the losing streak against the Buckeyes.

"Fans definitely care a lot about it, obviously there is a lot of fan complaints about it. I do sort of think that there's a sense of it kind of being like a rock and a hard place with how good Ohio State has been," she said. "If Ohio State is going to be playoff level or near-playoff level every year, it's hard to beat them. At the same time people are like 'You can't even have beaten them once in this entire time?'"

"Rich Rod and Brady Hoke also did not beat Ohio State, and neither did Lloyd Carr at the end of his

tenure, so you know obviously this problem spans before Harbaugh.”

Following the 29-point defeat to the Buckeyes, Michigan dropped to 9-4 on the season with a 35-16 loss to Alabama in this year’s rendition of the Citrus Bowl, another game that Gerson said Michigan fans did not have much hope for.

But nine wins, a consistent ranking in the polls and a display of growth in the back end of the season is more than enough to keep Harbaugh at the helm, at least for now.

“I think that he’s not on the immediate hot seat. I think if he continues to do what he’s been doing, then he’ll be fine,” Gerson said. “The (2020) schedule sets up pretty well to have that New Years Six bowl-level season, and if that’s the case, then he’s safe. I think the main issue would be if Michigan suddenly fell off a cliff. Like if they went 6-6 or something, then you might be talking about like ‘OK, what’s next here?’ I don’t really see any immediate indications that that will happen, but I think that would be when you’d be on the lookout for ‘What’s going to happen with Harbaugh?’”

Michigan’s schedule next year opens with a road matchup against Washington, who will be debuting a new head coach and offensive coordinator. The Wolverines also get two of their toughest matchups — Wisconsin and Penn State — at home, but in back-to-back weeks. Michigan also has to play Minnesota and Ohio State on the road.

As far as the yearly rumors of Harbaugh moving on from Michigan and taking a job at the NFL level, Gerson isn’t buying it much. She said that, if Harbaugh was to no longer be the head coach for the Wolverines, the more likely outcome would be with a firing.

“Given that there’s been these NFL rumors for several years now and they never end up being true, I’m kind of skeptical that that happens,” Gerson said. “I would say probably being fired is a little bit more likely. I don’t think that’s going to happen anytime soon, or particularly immediately, but the probability of both I think would be fairly low, but you never really know what might happen, and I think there’s more scenarios that I could see him getting fired for than leaving for the NFL.”

The Game is on Nov. 28, and is 307 days away at the time this story was published. Plan accordingly.

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