01/29/2001 – Week #12 - Another "Split" Week In The Big Ten

The Michigan Wolverines men's basketball team continued their 0.500 play again this past week, losing at home on Thursday (01/25/2001) to Illinois, 55-51, then beating Northwestern on the road on Saturday (01/27/2001), 72-65. While 0.500 ball isn't great, it's better than expected. The win and the loss leave Michigan with a 9-9 overall record, 3-4 in the Big Ten.

UM looked much better against Illinois this time around than they did a couple of weeks ago at Illinois, and hung with the 7th ranked Illini until very late in the game. It's really a shame that they didn't hang on for the win, but they played so well for most of the game, it was one of those bothersome "moral victories". I know most people don't like them, and I'm not crazy about them, but they are a sign of improvement. The team is finally starting to put up some fight. They're starting to gel, if only a little. They showed that they have the talent to play with the big boys, just not always for the whole game.

You know what the difference was in this game? Poise. My favorite word this season. ;-) Michigan played with poise for most of the game, then they lost it, just a little, and Illinois found it, just in time. It's pretty impressive that UM had a 10 point lead deep into the second half, but it was pretty sad how quickly they let it slip away. Once Illinois went ahead, you could just see the momentum swing. To make it even worse, Ellerbe mis-coached the last 2:00 of the game, or they might have stood a better chance at winning it. UM needed to be shooting 3-pointers quickly, and Ellerbe didn't do anything about it when Avery Queen dribbled around the perimeter for 30 seconds. Sure, Queen is just a freshman, but Ellerbe should have called a timeout and told him to hoist up a 3-pointer, or pass to someone else who would. Sigh.

LaVell Blanchard was fabulous, as usual. 26 points and 13 rebounds. Amazing. He hit a terrific 3-pointer in the second half, with the shot clock winding down. He's really been on a tear lately, which is good. Josh Asselin had a bad game, for the first time in a while, but Bernard Robinson, Jr. did a good job. Then there's my "project": Josh Moore. He didn't foul out this time, for a change, and he did last 12 minutes, but he didn't do much. 1 point, 3 rebounds, and 1 turnover. He's got to get back in form.

Avery Queen, Maurice Searight, Chris Young, Gavin Groninger, and Leon Jones have got to help out a lot more, as well. They chipped in a grand total of 2 points for the 5 of them, which is terrible. UM can't count on Blanchard, Robinson Jr., and Asselin to do all the scoring.

The Northwestern game was much better. Check it out: another win on the road in the Big Ten! Of course, Northwestern isn't very good, so it isn't that much of an achievement, but it's better than nothing.

It sounds like a broken record, but LaVell Blanchard was the star, again. He is just a wonderful player. I'm so glad we've got him. The other star was Josh Asselin, who bounced back from an "off" game on Thursday. Check out his free throw shooting: 6-for-6. Check out his rebounding: 9. And here's the biggie: 40 minutes. Bernard Robinson Jr. had an "off" game, but that's to be expected, especially from a freshman. At least he had 8 rebounds.

You've gotta love the team's free throw shooting: 18-for-20 (90%). The 3-point shooting percentage was pretty good as well: 6-for-15 (40%). It was nice to see some balance to the scoring:

Chris Young	8 points (4-for-5)
Avery Queen	8 points (3-for-3)
Gavin Groninger	8 points
Leon Jones	3 points
Maurice Searight	4 points

So, now UM is 9-9, 3-4 in the Big Ten. Not a great record, but better than I expected at this point. If they can keep this up, and keep improving as they have in the last couple of weeks, they might be able to finish above 0.500, and get into the NIT. That would be a good stepping stone for next year, when they get another top-notch recruiting class in here. Things are looking up.

Keep your fingers crossed for the big game vs. #3 MSU, in Crisler, on Tuesday (01/30/2001). It could be a massive blow-out, or it could be one of the biggest upsets of the year. MSU has already lost 2 games in the Big Ten, so they've shown that they're beatable, especially on the road. After the MSU game, UM finally gets a short breather, with the next game at home on Saturday (02/03/2001) vs. #15 Wisconsin. That's going to be another tough game, but it's not unwinnable.

Check back next week to see what happened, and why.

Before I go, I'd like to say a few words about the whole "Fire Ellerbe" thing. It ain't gonna happen. Period. The guy who makes the decision is Bill Martin, the AD, and he's a Michigan Man(tm) through and through. He will not be pressured into firing Ellerbe to keep the talk show hosts and listeners happy. He will not fire Ellerbe for wins-and-losses. Never. Think about it: name one coach fired by UM in the last 100 years for wins-and-losses. Answer: none. Now, if there are any discipline problems on the team, Ellerbe's out of there. But as long as he runs a clean ship from now on, and doesn't do anything to embarrass himself (think Gary Moeller), he's the head coach. End of story.