**02/13/2001 – Week #14 - Another Tough Week On The Road**

So much for this season. Put a fork in 'em, they're done.

The Michigan basketball team went on the road last week, and came home with two double-digit losses. These losses were the 3rd and 4th in a row, and lower UM's record to 9-13 (3-8 in the Big Ten).

On Wednesday (02/07/2001), UM lost at Penn State, 77-66. On Sunday (02/11/2001), UM lost at Indiana, 72-59. The Indiana game was on national TV, so the whole country got to see just how poorly UM can play. They also got to see how well they can play, in spurts.

The Penn State game was very disappointing, since UM and Penn State had identical Big Ten records (3-6) going into the game. Michigan played well for the first 30 minutes, then fell apart in the last 10 minutes and lost by 11. The turning point was a technical foul called against Josh Moore, with about 12 minutes left. It turned a close game into a sizable PSU lead, and that was the end of the game. Once the momentum swung to Penn State, there was no stopping them. And that's the problem with this year's UM team: once things head south, they don't have the mental toughness, focus (there's that word again), and intensity to do anything about it. They fold up their tents and say "maybe next game". Because of that, the only games they're going to win are games where they get ahead early, and stay ahead the whole game. Josh Moore's technical was just enough of a problem to push them over the edge. They can't make silly mistakes like that. They have to be very careful for 40 minutes, every game.

On the positive side, for a change UM got some scoring balance. It was nice to see Chris Young (17 points) have a good game again, and LaVell Blanchard (12 points) played hard, as usual. Bernard Robinson Jr. (8 points) was "off", and that hurt the team a lot. It was nice to get some scoring out of Avery Queen (8 points) and Leon Jones (8 points). Josh Asselin (9 points) played a decent game, but Josh Moore hurt the team more than he helped. Once again, Gavin Groninger (0 points) was a disappointment.

The Indiana game was another stinker. That dandy little 16-0 run by IU in the first half decided the outcome, even though UM did make it close in the second half. When Josh Asselin picked up his 4th foul in the first half, it was over. It's pretty impressive that he made it the rest of the game without fouling out.

It was nice to see Gavin Groninger (11 points) contribute for a change, along with Leon Jones (14 points). It would have been nicer if UM had gotten some scoring from the usual guys as well. As usual, LaVell Blanchard (17 points) did his job, but Bernard Robinson Jr. (4 points) and Josh Asselin (5 points) didn't. Of course, Bernard sat out the whole first half, so he has an excuse.

Why did Bernard, and Avery Queen, sit out the whole first half? According to the TV announcers, they were both late for the shoot-around before the game, so Ellerbe benched them to teach them a lesson. It's a shame it had to happen, but the coach did the right thing. Hopefully, they'll learn the lesson, and be more responsible.

There's one more personnel problem that showed up during the IU game: Maurice Searight wasn't even dressed. Apparently, he's being disciplined for an unspecified violation of team rules. Once again, Ellerbe's got to keep control of his players, but

these sorts of problems are often a sign of something wrong inside the program. I'd hate to see UM lose one (or more) of our talented freshmen, but things aren't looking good.

Enough looking back, let's look at the future. The next 4 games are all at home, and UM should be able to win 3 of them. If they win all 4, and lose the predictable massacre at MSU, they'll still be 13-14, so they'll have to win 2 games in the Big Ten Tournament to get into the NIT. That's not very likely. I'm afraid we're looking at a lost season. Here's how I think it will go:

| Date | Game | Result | Score | Big Ten Record |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Wed 02/14 | Iowa | Win | 77-76 | 4-8 |
| Sat 02/17 | Minnesota | Win | 81-75 | 5-8 |
| Sat 02/24 | Purdue | Loss | 83-79 | 5-9 |
| Wed 02/28 | Northwestern | Win | 80-72 | 6-9 |
| Sat 03/03 | at Michigan State | Loss | 97-72 | 6-10 |
| Thu 03/08 | Big Ten Tourney 1st Round | Loss | 88-80 | 6-11 |

Combined with their 6-5 non-conference record, that'll give them an overall record of 12-16, which means no NIT. Bummer.

Remember a couple weeks ago when I said that I thought that Ellerbe's job was safe? My thinking was that Bill Martin (the UM AD) will keep him out of loyalty, and the fact that no UM coach has ever been fired for wins and losses. Well, I've changed my mind. I think he's gone after the season, for the classic "we need to make a change in direction" reasons. I think it's wrong, and I think it's a terrible shame, and I think it's a bad idea, but I think it's going to happen.

Here's what I think UM should do instead: hire a real "X's and O's" guy to be the Assistant Head Coach. Let him run the practices and devise the game strategies. Let him do the "real" bench coaching during the games, with Ellerbe giving the orders. Let Ellerbe continue to be the official Head Coach, and one of the best recruiters in the country.

I've seen this done before. When I was a student (the first time), I had season tickets right behind the UM bench, back when Johnny Orr was the Head Coach, and Bill Frieder was one of his assistants. During the game, Orr would stand up and yell encouraging words or general orders to the team, and Frieder was yell specific directions. It was even more obvious during timeouts (which I could listen in on). Orr would say a few general words, then Frieder would get down on a knee with a clipboard and give very specific directions to each player ("CJ, you've got to back up about 2 steps further when your guys starts fronting you on the low blocks"). It worked. Orr talked to the press, and managed the staff, and Frieder ran the team. So, that's my suggestion. Get a good practice/bench coach, and let him run the team. Keep Ellerbe. He's a nice guy, and he's trying hard, but he doesn't seem to be able to motivate the team very well, and he doesn't make very good decisions in the heat of the battle. He gets too emotional. Let someone else coach the games, and Ellerbe can continue to bring in Top 10 classes. A coaching change is very disruptive, and the last thing that this program needs is more disruptions.

I'm off my soapbox, for now. Check back next week for "As The Wolverines Turn", or "The Last Days Of Brian Ellerbe".