11/05/2001 – Week #1 - New Beginnings

The University of Michigan men's basketball team opened their season on Sunday afternoon (11/04/2001) with an exhibition game against something called the EA Sports All-Stars. The only recognizable player on EA Sports was our own Josh Asselin. It was fun to see him again, even if he wasn't much of a force for his team.

UM won the game pretty easily, 94-68, and they looked good doing it. They started slowly, but once they got going, they played pretty well, especially for the first game. Gavin Groninger was the star, with 29 points. He hit 7-of-11 three-pointers, including several in a row in a short span, which helped break the game wide open. Several other players put up some nice scoring numbers as well, with 19 points by Leon Jones, 15 points for Chris Young, and 11 points for Dommanic Ingerson, one of the new freshmen. More about the freshmen, and the whole team, in a minute.

What made the win more impressive was that UM did it without some pretty important players. LaVell Blanchard, the heart and soul of the team, only played 6 minutes, and appeared to be bothered by a sore ankle. He didn't score any points. Also absent were Bernard Robinson, Jr. (mononucleosis), and Josh Moore (bad back). These three players weren't needed vs. EA Sports, but they'll be sorely missed against more talented opponents. Keep your fingers crossed for their recoveries.

Among the other players who saw action on Sunday, Chuck Bailey (another of the freshmen) and Rotolu Adebiyi looked pretty good. Bailey had 9 points, including a buzzer-beating 3-pointer, and Adebiyi had 5 points. They both supplied some needed muscle on the boards. Avery Queen ran the floor pretty well, but only scored 3 points, on 1-of-4 shooting, all 3-pointers. Marcus Bennett, the last of the three freshmen, played decently, but didn't take any shots, which makes it tough to score.

Besides the three freshmen, there was another new guy: coach Tommy Amaker. He did a fine job on Sunday, but it wasn't much of a test. He made sure that everyone got to play a reasonable amount, and tried lots of combinations.

He had a very calm demeanor on the bench, and mostly sat and watched. From everything I've seen and read about him, I think he's going to do a fine job this year, and in years to come, as long as the Michigan faithful are patient with him.

He has a nice collection of players to work with. The only legitimate "superstar" on the team is LaVell Blanchard, a junior who is a preseason Playboy All-American. Assuming his ankle is OK, LaVell can do it all: shoot, score, ball-handle, pass, block shots, rebound, hit the 3-pointer, drive the team bus. He's the real deal.

Beyond Blanchard, there are several other talented players on the team, and Amaker's job is to get the right combinations out there at the right time. As we saw on Sunday, junior Gavin Groninger can light it up, especially from 3-point range. He's a true streak-shooter, and when he gets his touch, it's a thing of beauty. When he's cold, it's painful. Senior Leon Jones can also score, with a decent 3-point shot, but he's not as much of a threat from out there as Groninger is. He's better at driving the lane and taking the ball hard to the hoop. Another key senior is Chris Young. Besides being the team leader, he's also a force under the basket. He can shoot and score, and he can run the floor pretty well, but his best asset is his presence on the glass. He plays several inches taller than his height, which I just love to watch. As you'll read as the season unfolds, he's my favorite player on the team.

We didn't get to see sophomore Bernard Robinson, Jr. on Sunday, and it's not clear when he'll be back to full strength, but if he can pick up where he left off last year, he'll be a force to be reckoned with. He's a left-hander, which always confuses the guys guarding him at first, and he's a marvelous shooter and scorer. He runs very well, and sees the court well. UM needs him back, soon. We also didn't get to see "mini Shaq", sophomore Josh Moore, a 7'2" mountain of a man. He's had back problems all summer, and he doesn't seem to be getting any better. Once again, if he can pick up where he left off last year, and (here's the big enchilada) cut down on his silly fouls, he'll be the big man that UM really needs in the middle. The last of the 3 sophomores is Avery Queen. No, he didn't get any taller over the summer, but he seems even faster. He isn't the most consistent scorer, but he can get the ball up the court quickly, and he has pretty good court vision. He has some trouble guarding guys that are bigger than he is, which is just about everyone, but he works hard.

Then there are the freshmen. We've only seen them play in one exhibition game, but it's already possible to see what they're like. Dommanic Ingerson is a good shooter, and he seems pretty fearless out there. He's got good size, and some nice moves. Chuck Bailey looked very good. He's got a nice big body, but he can still move well and shoot. I think he's really going to help right away. Marcus Bennett looked OK out there, but it's too early to tell how he's going to do.

Besides all those players above, there are a few more who need to be mentioned. Mike Gotfredson is a gutty little senior guard who's worked himself up to the point where he'll start some games. He's a good 3-point shooter, and he can sure hustle, but he's not quite as talented as some of his teammates.

Finally, there's Rotolu Adebiyi, the last senior on the team. He's worked himself from being a walk-on to being named one of the tri-captains. He works very hard on the court, and does his best to throw some muscle around out there. He's got a nice big body, and he knows how to use it under the boards. He gets his fair share of rebounds, and he's very good at locking them up and not letting them get knocked away from him. That's one of my big pet peeves, when we get a rebound, and lose it right away. Lock that baby up! Sure, we may not get as many flashy fast breaks, but it's better to have the ball than to give it up under the opponent's basket.

So, that's the team. There are a lot of good players, and a few great ones. There are a lot of combinations, and a lot of possibilities. This team has the raw talent to beat just about anyone on their schedule, and the ability to go into a shell and lose to just about anyone on their schedule. It will be up to Tommy Amaker to develop and nurture that talent, and avoid those deadly lulls, to keep UM in the game.

Come on out to Crisler and watch them play. They're playing a lot more up-tempo, fast-paced game this year. They still look a little sluggish in their half-court sets, but they should be able to do something about that. When they're running, they're lots of fun to watch. The next home game is next Sunday (11/11/2001) at 2:00, vs. the Nike Elite team. This is the 2nd, and last, exhibition game. I'll be back after that game to fill you in on what happened.

Go Blue!