12/03/2001 – Week #5 - An Early Losing Streak

It was a tough week for the UM men's basketball team, as they dropped two more games. On Wednesday (11/28/2001) they lost on the road at Bowling Green, 59-65. On Saturday (12/01/2001), they lost at home to Boston College, 74-83. These two losses, tacked onto the disappointing loss on the Friday after Thanksgiving to Western Michigan, give the Wolverines a 3-game losing streak, and lower UM's season record to 2-3.

Of the two losses, the loss to Bowling Green was much harder to stomach. It was a game that UM should have won, and they failed to deliver in the clutch. They had a decent 5-point lead with 3:15 to go in the game, 58-53. Look at that final score again: 59-65. They got outscored 12-1 in the last 3:15. One lousy point in over 3 minutes? Disgusting.

The same thing happened on Saturday against Boston College. With 2:01 left in the game, UM pulled to within two points, 73-75. Look at that final score again: 74-83. They got outscored 8-1 in the last 2:01. One lousy point in over 2 minutes? Ridiculous.

To be fair, there were several factors that made both games tough. Bowling Green is much harder to beat at home than they are on the road, and Boston College came into the UM game ranked #15 in the nation. I could see why BC was ranked so high, and why they're now 5-0. They are very quick, and they play hard on both ends of the court. Michigan played a pretty good game against them, except for the last 2:01. True, the Wolverines had a hard time breaking the BC press, and they had too many turnovers (21), but they did a good job of controlling the game, and staying close to BC. The other big factor in the BC game was Ryan Sidney, a local boy who got away. He single-handedly beat UM on Saturday, to show them that they made a mistake by not recruiting him very hard at all. I'm convinced. I'd trade any player on UM's team to get him. He certainly showed up his local rival, LaVell Blanchard.

Here comes the less-than-fun part of the story: the gory details about the two losses. In the Bowling Green game, LaVell Blanchard had 17 points and Chris Young had 10 points, and they were the only 2 Wolverines in double figures. Bernard Robinson, Jr. had 9 points, but gets a couple bonus points for punching the glass out of a fire extinguisher box after the game, and cutting his right (non-shooting) hand. Smooth move. Avery Queen and Domminic Ingerson also got close to double figures, with 9 and 8 points each. Chuck Bailey had 4 points, and even Rotolu Adebiyi had 2 points. Now, who haven't I mentioned yet? Oh yeah, Gavin Groninger. He came into the game leading the team with an average of 16.7 points per game, and managed to score exactly zero points against Bowling Green, in 24 minutes of action, on 0-for-2 shooting. Two shots in 24 minutes? Wonderful.

Another significant stat jumps out from the Bowling Green game: UM only took (and missed) one 3-pointer in the entire second half. What's up with that? They managed to shoot 3-for-8 from 3-point range in the first half, then they couldn't get off more than one shot? Weird.

The individual stats for the Boston College game are pretty similar. Once again, LaVell Blanchard was one of the leading scorers for UM, with 15 points. Chris Young was the high scorer with 16, and Dommanic Ingerson had 15. Avery Queen had 9, and so did B-Rob, even with his right hand all taped up. Chuck Bailey had 6 points. Now, who did I forget to mention again? Oh yeah, Gavin Groninger. This time, he

didn't get shut out, but he only got 3 points, on a 3-pointer. He shot 1-for-6 for the game, in 24 minutes. Sigh. We need a lot more scoring from him. He's a good player, and a good shooter, and he could have made the difference in both losses. I sure hope he gets his game back, and soon.

So, what's up with this year's team? Are they any better than last year's dismal squad? Are they improving? Are they ever going to win on the road, or beat a tough team at home? I think the answer to the last 3 questions is "yes".

I just don't know how soon we're going to be able to see the improvement. The Western Michigan and Bowling Green games were both disappointing because they were MAC teams. The Boston College game wasn't very disappointing, because UM played well. After the Bowling Green loss, I was thinking that if they didn't look good against Boston College, the season was on the brink of disaster, again, but based on their showing against Boston College, I think they're still headed in the right direction. Losing close games in the last 3 minutes can turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy, and it takes a while to break that cycle of bad luck = negative thinking = more bad luck. That's one of the things that Tommy Amaker brought with him: some "honeymoon optimism". He hasn't used it all up, but he's getting close. He can still make this team (and the fans) believe that they can win the close games down the stretch, but he's got to actually do it, and soon, or the honeymoon will be over. Once everyone stops believing that UM can win the close games, the season's over. Amaker gets a new batch of optimism next year, but it won't be as big as this year's batch, and it will be slightly tainted by any nagging doubts carried over from a less-than-successful first season. So, he's got to grab this bull by the horns, and soon, before UM sinks back into the muddle of mediocrity they've been wallowing in for the last few years. There's still time, but not much of it.

Unfortunately, the schedule doesn't help much. The next 3 games are at home, which helps, but they're all "obvious" games. On Tuesday (12/04/2001), UM plays against IUPU-Fort Wayne, whoever they are. UM should trounce them handily. On Saturday (12/08/2001), #1 Duke comes to town, and they should throttle the Wolverines. I'm just hoping for some improvement over last year's massacre. Finally, two weeks after that game, on Saturday 12/22/2001, UM hosts Eastern Michigan. That's another game that UM should win handily. So, it will be hard to see if there's any improvement. Michigan should whip IUPU-FW and EMU pretty easily, and they might be able to stay within 15 points of Duke, but none of that will tell us much about how they're doing. Come on down to Crisler for any or all 3 of the games. They should be entertaining.

Finally, another note about the Maize Rage. They were excellent against Boston College on Saturday. They made the game fun to be at. They were loud and full of spirit, but not nasty and ugly, the way those thugs in the IdiotZZone get. I was proud to have them over there. I just hope they can keep up the spirit and the enthusiasm, even if the team doesn't produce right away.

Go Blue!