12/10/2001 – Week #6 - A Victory and a Moral Victory

I know; the University of Michigan doesn't believe in moral victories, but I do.

The UM men's basketball team played two games this week, and split them. On Tuesday (12/04/2001), they beat a badly outmanned team from IUPU-Fort Wayne (who?), 91-62. On Saturday (12/08/2001), they lost to (#1) Duke, 104-83. The win against IUPU-FW snapped a 3-game losing streak, but the Wolverines couldn't extend that winning streak to two games. Even though a 21-point loss doesn't sound very encouraging, it was. We're back to the concept of "moral victories".

The team will all say that they don't believe in them, and that a loss is a loss, but it just isn't true. Michigan played pretty well against Duke, and showed great improvement over last year's game. Duke took away any chances for a UM upset in the first 5 minutes of each half, but other than that, UM did a pretty good job against them. Actually, at one point, the score was 24-4. From that point on, UM basically played Duke even. If the Wolverines could have avoided the poor starts to both halves, they might have been in position to make a game of it.

First things first. The game Tuesday against the Mastodons (seriously) of IUPU-FW was a good chance for UM to get some of the kinks worked out in their game. They played well, and beat a team that they should have beaten, by about the margin one would expect. The big gun in the game was Chris Young, who had a career-high 22 points, to go with 10 rebounds. He was especially effective in the 2nd half, when he broke loose inside repeatedly for short jumpers and dunks, often resulting in 3-point play opportunities. Besides Young's 22 points, LaVell Blanchard had 18 points, Bernard Robinson, Jr. had 16 points, and Chuck Bailey had 13 points. That's nice scoring balance, and it was good to see Blanchard and B-Rob put some points up for a change. The rest of the team chipped in, but it wasn't an important factor in this game.

The IUPU-FW game was the second of four "obvious" games. The first was the loss to Boston College last Saturday (12/01/2001). The third was the loss to Duke. The last one is the game in 2 weeks (12/22/2001) against Eastern Michigan, which will be a lot like the IUPU-FW game.

Ah, the Duke game. It would have been such a big upset, like the time UM beat Duke in Cameron Indoor Stadium in 1996, 62-61. It could have been such a crushing loss, like last year's 104-61 whipping. Instead, it was neither. Duke got the win, and the Wolverines got some hard-earned experience. They didn't embarrass themselves, but they did find out how much harder they're going to have to work to be able to beat a team like that. Duke is #1 in the nation, and they deserve to be ranked there. They're very good, and they played very well against Michigan. Jason Williams put on a show, with 35 points, including 7-for-11 on 3-pointers, several from more than 25 feet.

Chris Young was the star again, bettering his 4-day old career high in points with a new high of 25 points. He played Carlos Boozer of Duke even, and was a real warrior out there. UM had three other players in double figures, with 16 points from LaVell Blanchard, 13 points from Dommanic Ingerson, and 11 from Leon Jones. Even though Blanchard had more points, Ingerson's were much bigger.

They came during a point in the game when UM was trying to get back into it, and he hit back-to-back 3-pointers to get the crowd back into the game. Jones played hard,

and earned his points. Then there's Blanchard. He had foul trouble in the first half, and was held scoreless, then he finally broke loose in the second half and scored 16 points in the last 16 minutes. If he could have dropped in a few in the first half, it might have been a different ball game. It's a shame he had to sit out so much of the first half.

Those are the players who did score, but what about the rest of the team? Well, the rest of the news is not good. B-Rob had a miserable game, scoring 4 points on 2-of-11 shooting. Avery Queen did all right running the point, and his scoring doesn't matter much, but he only chipped in 2 points. Gavin Groninger had another sub-par outing, with only 8 points. Finally, Chuck Bailey played hard and chipped in 4 points, and a team-high 6 rebounds.

So, where does this leave the Wolverines? Well, it lowers their record to 3-4, which isn't very good. But, it teaches them that they can play with the big boys, at least for parts of the game. It shows them how important it is to not let the game get away from them at the start of each half. It gives them some experience against a big, strong, fast team, which will certainly help them when the Big Ten schedule starts in a few weeks.

UM has the next 2 weeks off, to take care of finals, and rest up. Their next game is at home on Saturday (12/22/2001), against Eastern Michigan, and they should win it handily. Even though there aren't any games in the next week, I'll be back to talk about the team's progress to date, and maybe have some early mid-term grades.

Go Blue!