12/17/2001 – Week #7 - An Early Season Status Report

The University of Michigan men's basketball team didn't play any games in the last week, as they finish up the school year, and get ready for the holidays. The Wolverines still have 2 more non-conference games left before they start the Big Ten season: home vs. Eastern Michigan next Saturday (12/22/2001), and at San Francisco the Saturday after that (12/29/2001). They should easily win the EMU game, but I know nothing about San Francisco, so we'll just have to see how that one goes. Given their record away from Crisler (0-2, all against MAC teams), I'm not optimistic.

Assuming UM splits these next 2 games, that would leave them with a record of 4-5, which is mediocre. So far, this year's team looks a little better than last year's, but not a lot. The frustrating part is that they have the raw talent to be much better, but they're not using it consistently. As you'll see below, in the early mid-term grades, many players are underachieving so far. In all but one game (Duke), UM has been in the game right up until the end, and has failed to seal up the win more often than not. The three games that they've won have been pretty obvious and straightforward, and two of the losses (Duke and Boston College) are very excusable, but the two losses on the road to the MAC teams (Western Michigan and Bowling Green) are inexcusable. They were both winnable games that just slipped away.

So, who's to blame for the early season disappointments? Coach Amaker? The players? Osama bin Laden? It's hard to tell. I don't think that it's any one thing, it's a combination of things. I suspect that the team is still learning to play the way Amaker wants them to play. I suspect that Amaker is still trying to figure out how to motivate the players. I suspect that Amaker is still trying to figure out which combinations of players should be out on the floor for which situations. It's a learning, growing experience. I'm willing to give them all more time to work the kinks out, but it would be nice to see a little more progress.

Now, on to the grades. I know that it's still early in the season, and not even close to mid-term (7 games played out of 27 total), but certain patterns are already becoming clear. Since it's so early, I'm assigning 2 grades:

current performance, and potential performance. As you can see, we've got some definite underachieving going on. I just hope that most of the team wakes up and starts playing hard, and maybe starts overachieving a little.

Note: These are just the players who average at least 5 minutes a game, with a few exceptions.

Class	Name	Grade	Potential	Comments
Fresh	Chuck Bailey	B-	B+	Playing well for a freshman. Solid.
Fresh	Marcus Bennett	Inc.	???	No idea why he hasn't played yet.
Fresh	Dommanic Ingerson	B	A	Fearless, a little reckless. Exciting.
Soph	Josh Moore	Inc.	B+	Back problems have limited his time.
Soph	Avery Queen	B-	B+	Good ball-handling, suspect defense.
Soph	Bernard Robinson, Jr.	C+	A+	Still hasn't gotten untracked.
Junior	LaVell Blanchard	B-	A+	Very disappointing. Needs to step up.
Junior	Gavin Groninger	C	A-	Good start, horrible next 5 games.

Senior	Rotolu Adebiyi	B	B	Does what he needs to do.
Senior	Mike Gotfredson	B	B	Helps out as best he can.
Senior	Leon Jones	C+	B+	Could be such a scorer.
Senior	Chris Young	A-	A	Slow start, fabulous last 3 games.
Coach	Tommy Amaker	B-	A	Needs to get some things worked out.

Look at those potential grades. If the Wolverines could get everyone playing at their maximum potential, for even 20 minutes apiece, they could beat anyone in the country. I mean that: anyone. Duke, Michigan State, Arizona, you name it. They've got the raw talent to play with anyone. That's what's so frustrating.

It's my opinion that this team needs a little more leadership. Chris Young is a leader out there, and he does a good job, but he can't do it all by himself. The team needs someone else to step up, consistently. Leon Jones tries, but he just can't pick the team up and carry them on his back the way a leader needs to some times. LaVell Blanchard has the talent to carry the team on his back, but he just doesn't have the fiery charisma that a leader needs to have. He's just too quiet and polite. He scores quiet points. He grabs quiet rebounds. He gets the stats, but doesn't fire the team and the home crowd up when they need it. Don't get me wrong: I like LaVell a lot, and I'm glad he's on the team, but I wish he could be more of a leader out there.

So, what does all this mean? It means that UM has the potential to go as far as they want, right now, this year. If they want to sleepwalk through most of their games, especially on the road, they'll end up with another mediocre record, and maybe miss out on post-season play altogether. If they can wake up a little bit, and play half as well as they're capable, they should be able to get into the NIT this year, and they might even win a game or two. If they manage to get some things worked out, and can get on a winning streak, they could even get to The Big Dance, this year. I said "if". It could happen, but they need to start playing like they're capable of playing.

Drop by again next week, to see how things went against Eastern Michigan. It could be the start of something big.

Go Blue!