01/06/2002 – Week #10 - Back From The Brink

It was a good week for the University of Michigan men's basketball team. They won their first two Big Ten games, including a rare road win. On Wednesday (01/02/2002), they beat Penn State in State College, 67-63, then they came back home to Ann Arbor on Saturday (01/05/2002), and beat Purdue, 79-75. With their flashy 2-0 record in the Big Ten, they're in first place, tied with Ohio State and Indiana. The two wins raised their overall record above 0.500, to 6-5. They played well in both games, especially in the last two minutes, when both games were on the line. Even more encouraging, the veterans came through in the clutch in both games. In the Penn State game, the star was Bernard Robinson, Jr., who led the team in scoring with 16 points, including the game winning shot in the last 30 seconds of the game. LaVell Blanchard also had a good game, with 10 points, but, more importantly, 14 rebounds. Leon Jones also had a good game, scoring 13 points before he hurt his ankle in the second half. Gavin Groninger was the 4th UM player in double figures, with 10 points. That's good scoring balance. Other Wolverines who scored were Chris Young with 9 points, Avery Queen with 8 points, and Chuck Bailey with 1 point. Where was the recent star, Dommanic Ingerson? He only played 9 minutes, and went 0-for-4, for 0 points. It was just not his night.

The shooting in the Penn State game was nothing spectacular. Leon Jones had a great night, going 5-for-5, and Avery Queen went 3-for-4, but the rest of the team didn't do so well. Chris Young shot a respectable 4-for-7, but B-Rob was 5-for-12, LaVell Blanchard was 4-for-16, and Gavin Groninger was 3-for-8. However, they did manage to win on the road, so the details don't matter too much.

The Purdue game was very encouraging. Purdue jumped out to an early 7-0 lead, but the Wolverines shook that off, and played steady ball, gradually catching, then passing Purdue in the first half. They built a nice 9 point lead (39-30) at the half, and managed to keep the lead throughout the second half. Purdue did close to within 3 points with about 5:00 to go, and with 2 points in the last minute, but once again, the Wolverines played tough down the stretch, and pulled out the win. B-Rob was the star again, with 20 points, and a team-leading 7 rebounds. He also hit a crucial basket, and six big free throws in the last 1:17, to seal the win. LaVell Blanchard had another steady game, scoring 18 points, and Chris Young helped the cause with 14 points. Other scorers were Gavin Groninger, with 9 points, Avery Queen with 8 points, Dommanic Ingerson with 6 points, and Chuck Bailey with 4 points.

Once again, this is very nice scoring balance.

It was great to see UM play up to their potential, after seriously underachieving in the non-conference portion of the season. The veterans stepped up, and played good, solid basketball, and lots of players contributed. It was nice to see B-Rob have back-to-back good games, and even more encouraging to see LaVell Blanchard to the same. Gavin Groninger seems to be getting some of his game back, and Avery Queen is making some nice contributions out there.

Granted, Penn State and Purdue aren't the toughest teams in the Big Ten, and there's still a lot of basketball to be played, but it's nice to have a good start. I still think that 95% of the problems that they've had this season have been mental, and the other 5% have been physical. This is a pretty talented team, and they can go far, this season, if they have the right attitude and composure. That's where leadership comes in. Some of that leadership comes from the coach, but some of it has to come from 2 or 3 of the players. Chris Young is one of those leaders, and UM needs

another one, or two. As I've stressed repeatedly over the last 2+ years, LaVell Blanchard needs to be another of the leaders, and hopefully, he'll grow into that role. As a fan, I don't get to go to the press conferences (but I'm working on that), and I don't get to interview the players, so I don't know as much about these situations as I could. There was a very good column in the Sunday edition of "The Ann Arbor News" by Jim Carty, and he explained some of the difficulties that LaVell Blanchard has gone through this year, and how they're related to the change in systems. It made me appreciate how difficult it must be for him, and I'm now ready to give him a little more slack. If he can keep improving, he'll be a big part of Michigan's continued success.

The Big Ten schedule is going to get quite a bit more difficult, starting this week. On Wednesday (01/09/2002), Michigan plays at Minnesota, then they go to Illinois on Saturday (01/12/2002). They are both tough places to play, and Illinois in particular is very good this season. Even though Minnesota isn't as good as Illinois this year, it may be tougher to win there than at Illinois. Ask Michigan State, who lost their Big Ten opener on the road at Minnesota on Saturday. In any case, a win against either of these teams would be huge.

By the way, UM fans should probably enjoy the Big Ten standings while they're the way they are: not only is Michigan tied for first, but Illinois has already lost a game, and Michigan State is 1.5 games behind, tied for last place. That won't last for long, but it's fun for now.

Come on back again next week, and we'll see how the Wolverines did on the road in the Big Ten.

Go Blue!