01/14/2002 – Week #11 - A Tough Week on the Road and in the Big Ten

It was a tough week for the University of Michigan men's basketball team. They lost both games, badly. On Wednesday (01/09/2002), they lost at Minnesota, 90-82, then they lost at Illinois on Saturday (01/12/2002), 94-70. These two losses lowered their Big Ten record to 2-2, and their overall record to 6-7.

That's not good news, but it could be worse: they could be 0-3 in the Big Ten, like a certain overrated team 60 miles northwest of Ann Arbor.

Both losses were predictable, perhaps even inevitable. It's tough to win on the road in the Big Ten, and Williams Arena in Minneapolis is one of the toughest places of all. Assembly Hall in Champaign isn't nearly as hostile, but Illinois is very good this year, so it was just as tough.

The details of the games are tedious, so I'll just run through them quickly, and get it over with. In the Minnesota game, UM hung with them most of the way, and got within 4 points with 1:15 to go. From that point on, it was all Minnesota, and the upset just didn't happen. The Wolverines showed pretty good desire in the game, and didn't give up. They have nothing to be ashamed of. The Illinois game was over early, and the Illini just toyed with Michigan for most of the game. The end result was never in doubt. Once again, they played hard, even though they were outmanned.

As far as individual stats, Bernard Robinson, Jr. and LaVell Blanchard continued their improved play in both games, and carried the scoring load. They had 19 and 17 points against Minnesota, and 10 and 17 points against Illinois, respectively. The other UM players who scored in double figures were Chris Young (10 points against Illinois), and Gavin Groninger (13 points against Minnesota, and 12 points against Illinois). The rest of the team didn't contribute much, and it's hardly worth mentioning.

Something that is worth mentioning is the apparent disciplining of 3 of the UM players in the second half of the Illinois game. Avery Queen, Dommanic Ingerson, and Chuck Bailey all sat on the bench for the entire second half of the blowout loss, persumably for disciplinary reasons. Coach Amaker wouldn't comment on the situation, which is standard operating procedure. We'll have to keep an eye on this one.

Looking at the scores in the two games, it's obvious that the story was defense, or lack of it, not offense. 90 and 94 are a lot of points to give up, and it's hard to win with that kind of defense. Both Minnesota (69%) and Illinois (68%) shot the lights out, and many of those shots were poorly contested, if at all. Particularly troubling were the numerous back-door cuts that Illinois got, all for easy lay-ins or dunks.

The best thing to do with these two games is to forget about them. They were fairly predictable losses, and they're over with. Despite the losses, and their record, UM is actually playing pretty well these days. They return home this week for a Wednesday (01/16/2002) night game against lowly Northwestern. The game time for this one has bounced all over the place. It was originally set for 6:00 p.m., which is pretty unusual, but now it has been moved to a more traditional 7:00 start. The "Ann Arbor News" erroneously reported it as an 8:00 game in an article last week. On Saturday (01/19/2002), Michigan plays at home again, this time against Minnesota. That game is at 4:37 p.m. Another odd starting time.

The Wolverines should beat Northwestern handily, but the Minnesota game is one of the "toss up" games for them this year. If they can win it, there is reason for continued optimism, and the rest of the season looks much more promising. If they lose it, you've got to start wondering if there is any progress at all.

Drop back in next week to see how it went. It should be an interesting week.

Go Blue!