01/21/2002 – Week #12 - To The Edge...And Back

It was another mixed week for the University of Michigan men's basketball team. They lost a game that they should have won, and won a game that they could have lost. On Wednesday (01/16/2002), they lost at home to Northwestern, 58-54, then they beat Minnesota in Ann Arbor on Saturday (01/19/2002), 71-69. The loss to Northwestern was one of the most disheartening losses in recent memory, and the win against Minnesota had one of the more thrilling finishes. Hopefully, the win will give them new hope, and start them on some sort of winning streak. They need it. These two games brought their Big Ten record to 3-3, and their overall record to 7-8. Since they need to finish at or above 0.500 to qualify for the NIT, they don't have much breathing room. More about that later.

In both games, the Wolverines got off to their now-familiar slow starts. They managed to fight their way back into both games, but they made it much harder than it needs to be. Against Northwestern, they were down 7-2, then 29-15, before they got going and made things a little more respectable. Against Minnesota, they once again got down 7-2 early, but managed to tie the game up at 11-11. Once they got past the slow starts, they kept the games more or less within reach, and had a good chance to win both of them. The frustrating part is that they started off so slowly in the first place. In the Northwestern game, UM got within a point in the last minute or so, but they couldn't get "over the hump", and lost by 4 points. In the Minnesota game, they went ahead by 2 points with 17 seconds left, were tied up with 7 seconds left, and won the game on a Bernard Robinson, Jr. floater with 3 seconds left. As I mentioned above, it was a thrilling finish.

The Northwestern game was a travesty. Northwestern is not a very good team, and they have only won two Big Ten road games in the last 3 years: last year in Ann Arbor, and this year in Ann Arbor. They're a team that Michigan should have, and could have, beaten by 15 points this year. Instead, they played a very flat, aimless, careless brand of basketball for the first 10 minutes, and never could get going in the right direction for long enough to win. But, that's not the whole story of this game. Besides the Wolverines playing a mediocre game, there was another factor that was even bigger in this game: the officials. Before I go on, go back and look at all my articles over the last three seasons, and see how many times I've complained about the quality of Big Ten basketball officiating. Did you find any? I didn't think so. I may grumble about it under my breath, and yell at the bozos in striped shirts during the games, but I haven't written about it much, so far. Well, the time is now, and the officiating crew is the one that "worked" the game on Wednesday. Folks, they were bad. They were scary bad. The crew was made up of Tom O'Neill, Sam Lickliter, and Steve Olson, and all three of them were incompetent. However, one of those three, and I won't say which one, went way beyond simple incompetence, and crossed the line into outright favoritism. He couldn't have helped Northwestern and hurt Michigan more if he'd tried. It was one of the most biased officiating "jobs" I've ever seen, and I've been watching, and cringing at, Big Ten officiating for 28 years now. With fair and impartial officiating, UM would have won the Northwestern game by 10-12 points. This guy was killing us. The only good thing about it was that it really got the crowd going. I was holding my breath, waiting for someone to lose control and go out on the floor and attack the offending ref, it got that bad. I have to say that I'm proud of our crowd, and our team, for resisting the urge to throttle the bum. He deserved it.

Enough of that, on to the better news. It didn't look like better news for most of the game, but Michigan played tough down the stretch, and came from 10 points down

with about 6 minutes to go against Minnesota, to win the game in the last 3 seconds. By the way, the officiating in this one was also pretty shabby, with one ref who kept calling Michigan for traveling, when they weren't, and ignoring Minnesota when they were traveling. It got to be almost comical. Typical lousy Big Ten officiating.

As far as individual performances went, only a couple players had a decent game against Northwestern. The high scorers were LaVell Blanchard and Avery Queen, each with 11 points, but Queen was 4-for-4 from the field, while Blanchard was 4-for-10. The only other player in double figures against Northwestern was Bernard Robinson, Jr., with 10 points, on 5-for-14 shooting. Ugh. Chris Young (3-for-5 for 8 points) and Leon Jones (3-for-7 for 9 points) played pretty well, but Gavin Groninger (0-for-6, 0 points) and Dommanic Ingerson (1-4, 5 points) had lousy games. Ingerson had a good excuse though, since he was ill, and ran a 103 degree fever during the game.

In the Minnesota game, there were some better performances. Blanchard was the high scorer again, this time with 20 points on 8-for-10 shooting. That's more like it. Chris Young played a great game against the taller Gophers, and got 18 points, on 6-for-13 shooting. Dommanic Ingerson had 10 points, including a big 3-pointer near the end, but the real star was B-Rob, who only had 12 points, but had the big winning basket. Chuck Bailey made some important plays in the game, but only scored 4 points. Gavin Groninger had another tough game, with 2 points on 0-4 shooting. Avery Queen only got 5 points, but 3 of them were on another important 3-pointer near the end. Leon Jones went 0-for-2, with 0 points.

I mentioned above that the team doesn't have much breathing room in their bid to make it to the NIT tournament this year. The reason lies in their remaining schedule:

Thu., Jan. 24	at Ohio State
Sat., Jan. 26	Vermont
Wed., Jan. 30	at Michigan State
Sat., Feb. 2	Wisconsin
Thu., Feb. 7	Illinois
Sat., Feb. 9	Penn State
Mon., Feb. 11	at Colorado State
Wed., Feb. 13	at Purdue
Sun., Feb. 17	Indiana
Sat., Feb. 23	at Iowa
Wed., Feb. 27	at Wisconsin
Sat., Mar. 2	Ohio State
Thu., Mar. 7	Big Ten Tournament, 1st round

Michigan is now 7-8 overall, so they need to win 7 of those 13 games to finish at 0.500 (14-14). So, where are there 7 wins there? Maybe the Vermont game, maybe the home game against Wisconsin, probably the home game against Penn State, but that's about it. There are some pretty certain losers there: the game at MSU, the home games against Illinois and Indiana, and the games at Iowa and Wisconsin. That's 5 losses, and they can only afford 6 more losses. It doesn't look good.

As you can see from the schedule above, UM plays 2 games this week: at OSU on Thursday (01/24/2002), and at home against Vermont on Saturday (01/26/2002). I would expect them to lose at OSU, and I don't know what to expect from Vermont. On the one hand, they have a good record (14-4, 7-1 in their conference), but on the

other hand, they haven't played anybody good yet this year. They aren't very tall, so that won't be a problem. We'll just have to see how it goes.

Drop by again next week to see what happened, and why.

Go Blue!