01/28/2002 – Week #13 - Another Week, Another Split

This is starting to sound like a broken record: the University of Michigan men's basketball team had another "split" week. They lost on Thursday (01/24/2002) at Ohio State, 69-47, and they beat Vermont in Ann Arbor on Saturday (01/26/2002) by the score of 75-62. Once again, they looked terrible in the middle of the week, then they looked much better on Saturday. It was the same thing last week, when they looked pathetic against Northwestern on Wednesday, then played much better against Minnesota on Saturday. The split leaved Michigan with a 8-9 record overall, 3-4 in the Big Ten.

Coach Amaker said that the game against Ohio State was the worst that UM has played all year, and I can't disagree. Personally, I thought the San Francisco game was just as bad, but let's not quibble. Michigan actually was ahead of OSU late in the first half, but the Buckeyes got hot in the last 2:00 of the first half, and kept it going for the first 10:00 of the second half, and that was the ball game. Against Vermont, UM had a decent start, especially compared to some of their awful starts lately, and they toyed with the outmanned Catamounts (seriously) for a while. Vermont actually led for a few minutes, before Michigan got focused, and started pulling away. UM led by 8 at halftime (39-31), then came out and played very well to start the second half, and put the game comfortably out of reach. Of course, once the game seemed to be in hand, they lost their focus again, and let Vermont get a little close, but they regained their focus, and slammed the door.

That actually seems to be the main problem that the team has this year: focus. When they have it, they play well, and they show that they have the talent to beat almost anyone on their schedule. When they lose it, they look like they couldn't beat a decent high school team.

Now for the highlights. There were no highlights in the OSU game, unless you count that no one got hurt. Chris Young (3-for-6, 8 points) and Chuck Bailey (2-for-2, 5 points) were the only Wolverines who shot anywhere near 50%. LaVell Blanchard was the leading scorer, with 11 points on 4-for-15 shooting. Ugh.

In the Vermont game, UM got very nice scoring balance, with all 5 starters hitting double-figures, and the leading scorer coming off the bench. Everyone shot a lot better, except Bernard Robinson, Jr., who went 5-for-12. The leading scorer was Dommanic Ingerson, with 13 points, but the starters were right behind him: B-Rob and LaVell Blanchard with 12 each, and Chris Young, Leon Jones,and Avery Queen, all with 10 points each.

On the negative side, there's Gavin Groninger. He has been in a terrible slump for weeks now, and it continued this week. He was 1-for-5, for 2 points against OSU, and 0-for-1, for 0 points against Vermont. Considering how well he played in the exhibition games, and the first few non-conference games, it's a real mystery why he's struggling so much. He's just lost his shot, and he can't find it. It's kind of like the John Navarre mystery in football this year. He was cruising along, then he had one bad game, and that was it. He got it in his head that he couldn't play well, and it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. It's sad, and frustrating. I sure hope Gavin can snap out of it. He could really help the team if he could get his 3-point shot going again.

So, where does this leave UM, with respect to their hopes for an NIT bid? Right where they were last week. No one expected them to beat OSU in Columbus, and

they didn't. Most people expected them to beat Vermont in Ann Arbor, and they did. In fact, can anyone remember the last game that UM won that they weren't supposed to? There have been a few "toss up" games that they've won, like the game at Penn State earlier this month, or the Minnesota game in Ann Arbor last week, but in general, they've lost when they've been expected to lose, won most of the games they were expected to win, and lost more of the "toss up" games than they've won.

Once again, we need to look at the remaining schedule.

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 8-9 overall, so they need to win 6 of those 11 games to finish at 0.500 (14-14). So, where are there 6 wins there? 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 Illinios and Indiana, and the games at Iowa and Wisconsin. That's 5 losses, and they can only afford 5 more losses. It doesn't look good.

As you can see from the schedule above, UM plays 2 games this week: at MSU on Wednesday (01/30/2002), and at home against Wisconsin on Saturday (02/02/2002). I would expect them to lose at MSU, but I don't know about the Wisconsin game. Wisconsin was expected to finish near the bottom of the Big Ten, but they've played much better than expected, and are now in 3rd place, at 5-3. It's going to be a tough game, and if Michigan can win it, some of the other games will suddenly look a little more winnable. If they lose it, the season is pretty much over.

I haven't said much about the MSU game, but it's not as hopeless as it's been in the last few years. MSU is down this year, and they finally lost a game at home, but they'll be sky-high for the Michigan game, since it's the only thing that they have to cling to, as they feebly try to justify their existence. They know that they don't stand a chance of matching up to UM on academics or reputation, so they've latched on to their recent anomalous success in athletics as a rallying point. When that fades away again, as it inevitably will, they'll have to fall back on their last line of defense: they are indeed a better party school. They must be so proud.

Is the game at MSU a guaranteed loss? I don't think so. Michigan will have to play at their best, and MSU will have to make some mistakes, but that could happen, especially if they're overconfident from their recent successes against Michigan. I think that the biggest thing that UM has to worry about is that crooked timekeeper in East Lansing. He stole the football game this year, and he tried to steal the MSU-Wisconsin basketball game earlier this year, so he should be watched carefully. I

don't know if it was indeed the same guy in both cases, but I'd hate to think that there were two of them at one school.

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

Go Blue!