02/04/2002 – Week #14 - "Who Are These Guys?"

That's the question of the season: who are these guys?

I went to the Saturday night (02/02/2002) UM men's basketball game in Crisler Arena against Wisconsin with the Editor-In-Chief of UMGoBlue.com, Phil Callihan. After UM stormed out to an 18-4 lead in the first few minutes, Phil looked at me and asked that very question. "Who Are These Guys?"

Is Michigan as good as they looked in beating Wisconsin (64-53), or are they as bad as they looked in the last 12 minutes of the loss to Michigan State (71-44) on Wednesday (01/30/2002) in East Lansing? The answer: both. They can be as good as they looked against Wisconsin, especially at home, and they can be as bad as they looked at MSU, especially on the road. They have a pretty good record at home so far this year (8-3, with 2 of those losses against Duke and Boston College), and a terrible record on the road (1-7, including 3 games where they scored less than 50 points). At home, they have portions of the game when they look like world-beaters, then they lose focus and look like they couldn't beat a junior high team. On the road, they hang with some tough teams for quite a while, then they lose focus, and let the game get away from them. I've said it before, but it's all about focus with this team. When they're into the game, make good decisions, and do what they've been taught to do, they show their true potential.

When they lose that focus, they just go through the motions, and get spanked. The MSU game was a microcosm of the season. UM started out strong, got an early lead, saw it disappear, hung in there for a while, then let the game get away from them. They made a couple tries to get back into it, but they were too far behind to have a decent chance. The last 11:53 of the game was very disappointing, as they only hit one field goal in that whole stretch. MSU is down this year, and UM has the players to beat them, but they have to play their "A" game, not their "C+" game. On the other hand, the Wisconsin game was one of the finer performances by a UM team in several years. They started strong, built an early lead, then held it for the rest of the game. It showed how well they can play, if they concentrate.

Only 2 Michigan players hit double figures in the MSU game, which isn't too surprising, since Michigan scored a season-low 44 points. LaVell Blanchard had 16 points, and Chris Young had 13 points. Young was the only Wolverine to shoot near 50%. He went 4-for-8. Blanchard was 6-for-16, and everyone else did even worse. That, and the 41-25 rebounding disadvantage, tell the story.

The stats are much nicer from the Wisconsin game. Bernard Robinson, Jr. was the leading scorer, with 18 points (on 7-for-11 shooting), Chris Young had 16 points, and LaVell Blanchard had 13 points. Once again, Young shot well (5-for-8), and Blanchard didn't (4-for-11). The real star of the Wisconsin game was former walk-on Herb Gibson, who started and played 27 minutes. He only scored 4 points, but 2 of them were on a fabulous steal and dunk that got the crowd and the rest of the team fired up, and pushed UM's early lead up to 18-4. He also had 3 very nice blocked shots, and hustled all over the floor. It was great to see a guy who's been warming the bench for so long make so much of his big chance.

I really hate to keep harping on these two points, but... There are two players who are wildly underachieving this year, and it's really frustrating and puzzling. LaVell Blanchard is a preseason All-American, but he's been a non-factor in most of UM's games so far. He gets his points, but a lot of them are during garbage time. He

seldom hits the big shot when the team needs it. The other player who has just vanished is Gavin Groninger. He had such a hot start, but he's been held scoreless in 4 of the last 6 games, and he only had 2 points in each of the games he wasn't shut-out. Besides those 6 games, he has 2 other games (Bowling Green and San Francisco) where he was held scoreless, and 2 others where he only scored 3 points. The frustrating part is how well he's played in the other 9 games, when he's scored 19, 15, 16, 8, 8, 10, 9, 13, and 12 points. That 12 point game was just 3 weeks ago, at Illinois. I sure hope he gets his stroke back, and soon.

One other minor note from the Wisconsin game: Dommanic Ingerson sat for the whole first half, and almost 7 minutes of the second half, before Amaker put him in. I don't know what that was about, but let's just hope it's all taken care of now.

Also, I should mention that the crowd was quite a bit bigger than usual on Saturday for the Wisconsin game, and they did a good job making some noise when the game was in the balance. The Maize Rage did a nice job, and is continuing to show some class. None of the ugliness we see from the IdiotZZone at MSU. Keep up the good work, guys!

So, what patterns are emerging, now that Michigan is 19 games into the season? Well, one of them is easy: UM is terrible on the road. They've only won one game. Another pattern is that they're pretty good at home, especially against Big Ten teams on Saturdays (3-0). Their overall record is now 9-10, 4-5 in the Big Ten. They continue to chase the 0.500 mark, with splits the last 3 weeks.

They have 8 regular season games left, and at least one round of the Big Ten Tournament, so they need to win 5 of them. Once again, I don't see 5 wins:

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

Even though Illinois is tied with UM at 4-5 in the Big Ten, they're going to be tough. Michigan should beat Penn State, but that's about it. Maybe they'll be able to sneak by Colorado State and Purdue on the road, but I don't see any more wins besides that. This is when the stupid losses to Western Michigan, Bowling Green, San Francisco, and Northwestern are coming back to haunt them. If they had won those games, as they should have, they would be 13-6, and in great shape for an NIT bid. As it is now, it's going to take a miracle to get in the NIT.

As you can see above, this week UM plays 2 home games: Thursday (02/07/2002) against Illinois, and Saturday (02/09/2002) against Penn State. Come on out to Crisler, and see if the Wolverines can sneak one away from Illinois, and beat up on Penn State.

Check back next week to see how things went, and why.

Go Blue!