02/11/2002 – Week #15 - Steady Improvement

The University of Michigan men's basketball team split another pair of games this week, losing to Illinois 68-60 on Thursday (02/07/2002), and beating Penn State 65-58 on Saturday (02/09/2002). That leaves the Wolverines with a record of 5-6 in the Big Ten, and 10-11 overall. This is the 4th week in a row that UM has lost their weekday game, and won on Saturday.

The bad news is that Michigan lost another home game on Thursday, but the good news is that the team has been slowly but surely starting to look better, even when they lose. The game against #21 Illinois is a good example.

Michigan had a 13 point lead in the first half, and hung with the Illini throughout the second half, only to fade in the last few minutes. Against Penn State, they didn't look too good for parts of both halves, but they came on very strong at the end, and won the game going away. Once again, it looked like a matter of focus.

When they concentrated on what they were doing, they played well. Sure, they made several physical mistakes, but those are forgivable. The mental errors, and the lack of enthusiasm, those are tough to swallow. They seem to be getting better when it comes to this.

The Illinois game really was a shame. UM deserved to win the game, and they had several good chances to do so. Leon Jones was the leading scorer in the game, with 14 points, including a couple big 3-point shots. LaVell Blanchard and Dommanic Ingerson each chipped in 11 points, although neither of them shot very well (5-for-12 for Blanchard and 4-9 for Ingerson). Chris Young and Bernard Robinson, Jr. each scored 8 points, but B-Rob had a tough shooting night, going 3-for-11. Young was a much more reasonable 4-for-6.

The leading scorer against Penn State was Blanchard, with 18 points. He started slowly, but kicked his game up a notch in the last 10 minutes, when the team needed him. That's what he needs to do every game. Through the first 30 minutes, he didn't look like he'd make the 3rd team All Big Ten team, but for the last 10 minutes, he looked like an All American. Chris Young (14 points), B-Rob (13), and Leon Jones (10) all scored in double figures to help the cause. Once again, it was nice scoring balance. Penn State played tenacious defense, and UM did a good job of not folding in the face of it.

The season is coming down to the wire, and this week will make or break it. The Wolverines played on 02/07 and 02/09, and they play on 02/11 and 02/13 next week. That's 4 games in 6 days. The first two were at home, but the game on the 11th is in Colorado, and the game on the 13th is in Indiana. That's a lot of travel time, with not much time to rest in between. Here's the remaining schedule:

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

As I mentioned above, UM is now 10-11. They have 6 regular season games left, and at least one round of the Big Ten Tournament, so they need to win 4 of them. Once again, I don't see 4 wins. They might be able to beat Colorado State, and maybe Purdue, but the rest of them look tough. I suppose they could beat Indiana, and win at Iowa, but those seem very unlikely. 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 3 games, 2 of them on the road. Come on out to Crisler on Sunday (02/17/2002), and see if the Wolverines can sneak one away from Indiana. The games against the Hoosiers aren't as interesting as they used to be, when Bobby Knight was around, but they're still good.

Oh yeah: the crowd. The last few games, the crowds have been getting bigger, and louder. The Maize Rage has been doing a very nice job of keeping the energy level up, without being obnoxious. The rest of the crowd has been getting into the game more, which helps. I just hope things keep going in the right direction.

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

Go Blue!