03/04/2002 – Week #18 - The End, Part 1

The regular season is now over for the University of Michigan men's basketball team, and it ended on a sour note. The Wolverines lost twice this week, at Wisconsin on Wednesday (02/27/2002) by the score of 74-54, and again on Saturday (03/02/2002) in Crisler Arena to Ohio State, by the score of 84-75. The win by Wisconsin put them in 1st place in the final Big Ten standings, and the win by OSU tied them for 1st in the final Big Ten standings. It was so much fun to help two teams tie for 1st in the same week! It was especially fun to watch the obnoxious Buckeye fans dancing on our court after the game on Saturday. Between the absence of the Maize Rage, due to Spring Break, and all the OSU fans who came up for the game, it didn't feel like much of a home game. The only bright spot was John Wilkins and the Alumni Basketball Band.

The losses lowered Michigan's season record to 10-17, 5-11 in the Big Ten. That's essentially the same record as last year (10-18). If Michigan can win their first round game in the Big Ten Tournament on Thursday (03/07/2002), against Northwestern, they'll be able to show some improvement over last year. A loss in the first round would show no improvement.

Michigan has now lost 6 games in a row, most by at least 20 points, and 7 out of their last 8 games. Their last win was on 02/09/2002 in Crisler Arena against Penn State. At that point, things were looking promising.

Michigan had just beaten Wisconsin the week before, and there was still a small but real possibility of going to the NIT. Now, the only hope left for this season is an improbable run in the Big Ten Tournament, which would lead to the automatic NCAA Tournament berth. Given UM's sterling 1-11 record away from Crisler Arena, that doesn't look very possible.

In all fairness, when Coach Amaker showed up last year, he never made any specific promises or predictions about how well this year's team would do, so it isn't fair to say that they've been a disappointment. As can be expected, there were unrealistic hopes, and many people were hopeful for a quick turnaround. I think he did a pretty good job playing the hand that he was dealt, although I think there's still plenty of room for improvement.

For the masochists among us, here are the details of the two losses. The Wisconsin game got out of hand pretty early, and never really got close. The Badgers were playing for a share of their first Big Ten title in over 50 years, and they weren't about to get upset at home. Chris Young was the leading scorer for UM, with 19 points on 8-for-9 shooting. Very impressive. Bernard Robinson, Jr. had 17 points, on 8-for-12 shooting, which is also very good. LaVell Blanchard was the only other Wolverine in double figures, with 14 points on 5-for-11 shooting, which is respectable. The rest of the team chipped in exactly 4 points. One basket by Herb Gibson, and one by Chuck Bailey. Leon Jones, Avery Queen, Mike Gotfredson, and Gavin Groninger went a combined 0-for-13. That's why Wisconsin won by 20 points, instead of it being a close game.

Against Ohio State, Michigan hung around much better, and actually tied the game up in the second half. They also got within a couple possessions down the stretch, before OSU went on a late run, and put the game out of reach. Once again, Chris Young was a warrior, in his last home game. He wasn't the leading scorer, but he still scored 17 points, on 5-for-7 shooting, and 7-for7 shooting from the free-throw line.

The leading scorer was Dommanic Ingerson, with 21 points off the bench. He hit 4 of his 8 three-point attempts, and single-handedly kept Michigan in the game for long periods. B-Rob was right behind him in scoring, with 20 points on 8-for-15 shooting. LaVell Blanchard almost hit double figures, with 9 points, but he was sleepwalking out there for much of the game. Once again, the rest of the team didn't chip in very much. Leon Jones, another senior in his last game at Crisler, had 2 points, shooting 1-for-5. Avery Queen and Gavin Groninger both had 2 points each, all on free throws, and Chuck Bailey had a basket, for 2 points. That was it.

As I've mentioned before, UM's season isn't quite over yet, but it's hanging by a thread. Michigan (the #10 seed) plays Northwestern (the #7 seed) in the Big Ten Tournament on Thursday. They stand a reasonable chance of beating them, but then they'll have to face Ohio State (the #2 seed) on Friday, and that should be the end of the season. If they can't beat OSU in Crisler, they probably aren't going to be able to beat them on the road.

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

Go Blue!