03/16/2002 – Week #20 - Final Wrap Up

2001-2002 was an interesting season for the University of Michigan men's basketball team. On the positive side, they improved slightly on their 2000-2001 record, and they won a post-season game in the Big Ten Tournament. On the down side, they lost several games to lesser opponents, and set a new school record for most losses in a row by 20 or more points. There were times when they played like a well-oiled machine, and there were times when they looked like they were in a fog out there. Unfortunately, they played more bad ball than good, and it shows in their 11-18 final record. As I've mentioned before, even that final record could have been a lot better, if UM had won the 5 games that they lost to teams they should have beaten: at Western Michigan, at Bowling Green, at San Francisco, home vs. Northwestern, and at Colorado State. Switch those 5 games over into the win column, and the final record is 16-12.

There were probably more lowlights than highlights, but I'm mostly interested in the positives. The lowlights would have to include UM's dismal 2-12 record away from Crisler Arena, and the loss at home to Northwestern. The highlights would have to include the 2 road wins (at Penn State, and in the Big Ten Tournament vs. Northwestern), and home wins against Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Here are the final grades for the team, with comments in the following sections. As you can see, most of the players did a little better in the second half of the season, but almost all of them underachieved.

Class	Name	Mid-term Grade	Final Grade	Potential Grade
Fresh	Chuck Bailey	B-	B-	B+
Fresh	Dommanic Ingerson	B	B	A
Soph	Colin Dill	(None)	Inc.	Unknown
Soph	Avery Queen	B-	B	B+
Soph	Bernard Robinson, Jr.	C+	B	A+
Junior	LaVell Blanchard	B-	B	A+
Junior	Gavin Groninger	C	C+	A-
Senior	Rotolu Adebiyi	B	B	B
Senior	Leon Jones	C+	B-	B+
Senior	Ron Garber	(None)	Inc.	Unknown
Senior	Herb Gibson	(None)	B	B
Senior	Mike Gotfredson	B	B	B
Senior	Chris Young	A-	A	A
Coach	Tommy Amaker	B-	B	A

Looking at the individual players, it looked like a promising season back in October. First and foremost, there was LaVell Blanchard, who was coming off a very productive sophomore season, and who had been selected as a pre-season All American, and a Wooden Trophy candidate. He looked like the go-to player on the team, and a natural talent to build the team around. Things didn't work out that way. He had very few good, solid games all season, until the Big Ten Tournament. There were games when he'd end up with respectable numbers, but the numbers didn't tell the story. Often, he got his points during the "garbage time" when the game had

already been decided, and the opponent was just trying to run the clock out for the win. There were way too many games where he didn't get his first points until 4:00 into the second half. The worst part was that he didn't seem to care. He showed no fire, no leadership, just a thin, fixed smile. It was very frustrating.

The next disappointment in the personnel department was Bernard Robinson, Jr. Once again, he was coming off a very exciting freshman campaign, and everyone had high hopes for him. He had shown a nice touch from the outside, and a great ability to drive to the basket and score. He has good speed, good hands, and a nice vertical leap. He's very athletic, and it was reasonable to expect him to pick up where he'd left off. Wrong again. First, he came down with mono before the season started, and missed a few games, then, once he was back on the floor, he lost his 3-point touch. As the season went on, he regained a little of his magic, but he was never quite the player he should have been.

Perhaps the biggest enigma on the team was Gavin Groninger. Once again, he had shown signs of true potential in his first 2 years at Michigan, and a lot was expected from him. He started off with several strong games, including some brilliant 3-point shooting, then he lost it. He just plain and simple lost it. It got to the point where I'm not sure he could have thrown a basketball into the Pacific Ocean. Fortunately, he got his touch back again for a few games in the middle of the season, and then again at the end of the season. He showed us what he's capable of, and he can still be a key contributor during his upcoming senior season.

Another player who was expected to step up and contribute this season was Avery Queen. He had a promising freshman season, and the team really needed a solid point guard to run the offense. Like almost everyone on the team, Avery had an inconsistent season. There were times when he ran the show pretty well, and even chipped in some points, but there were other times when he was obviously in trouble out there. He'll be pressed hard next year by incoming freshman Daniel Horton. More about that later.

There were two seniors on the team who were regular starters, and they had pretty good senior years. Leon Jones came into the season with reasonable expectations, and, for the most part, he met them. He played about as well as could be expected, and contributed where he could. He hit some important 3-pointers, played good defense, hustled for loose balls, and even played some point guard when he had to. He's not a great ball-handler, and he's a little slow making decisions some times, but in general he did a nice job.

The other regularly starting senior on the team was Chris Young. If you've read any of my columns in the last few years, you know that I think that Chris is one of the best players that Michigan has had in the last 25 years. Not necessarily in terms of talent, but in terms of leadership, effort, attitude, determination, and sportsmanship. He was a warrior out there. It's players like Chris that make me proud to call myself a Michigan fan. He always made Michigan fans proud. He always tried as hard as he could, and often played "over his head". He is a true Michigan Man (tm). I'm really going to miss him.

There were two freshmen who contributed to the team this year. Chuck Bailey is a medium-sized forward who played taller than he was. That really helped, since UM was short on height this year (more about that later as well). Chuck came into this season with reasonable expectations, and I think he met them. He looks like a good solid player who'll be able to contribute in the future.

The other freshman was Dommanic Ingerson. Talk about exciting! The guy can sure shoot, and score. He hit many important 3-pointer during the season, and single-handedly kept Michigan in several games when everyone else went into a scoring shell. There were times when he played like a freshman, but there were other times when he was spectacular. He has amazing range on his 3-point shots, and there were many times when I said "No, don't shoot it! Oh, nice shot!" He has a lot to learn about playing big-time college ball, like defense and shot selection, but he's definitely a "diamond in the rough".

There were a few players who weren't regular starters but who contributed on and off during the season: Mike Gotfredson, Rotolu Adebiyi, and Herb Gibson. They each played about as well as they could be expected to, and each of them occasionally exceeded our expectations. Gotfredson doesn't quite have a Big Ten body, or Big Ten speed, but he did his best out there running the point, and he even tossed in a few timely 3-pointers. As an interesting side note, he managed to go for 4 years without attempting a free throw. Adebiyi provided some needed heft and muscle inside, and scored a few buckets underneath. Herb Gibson provided some much-needed spark in a couple of games, and was probably the best shot-blocker on the team.

There were also 2 players who didn't see much action at all, but should be mentioned: Ron Garber, and Colin Dill. Every team has to have players like them, to show up every day for practice, and do whatever they can to help the team and the program. I just wish we could have seen them play more often.

I can't resist mentioning the 2 players who left the program around Christmas time: Marcus Bennett and Josh Moore. We never got to see what Bennett was capable of, since he only played for about 4 minutes in the first exhibition game, but we saw enough of Josh Moore in his 1.1 seasons to know something about him. He was a great big (7'2", 240 lbs.) bear of a man, and IF he had been healthy, and IF he had stayed on the team, I believe that he would have made a significant contribution. If nothing else, it would have given UM one more big body to put in the game when Chris Young needed a break, or was in foul trouble. As it was, the Wolverines were very thin underneath, and it hurt them in several games.

Then there's the coach. Tommy Amaker had a good, but not great, first season at Michigan. I think that he accomplished a lot of what he privately hoped to accomplish this year. He did a good job of not making any public statements about his expectations, so nothing can be held against him. It wasn't too unreasonable to expect this team to make the NIT this year, but they didn't. If Amaker had predicted it, and it hadn't happened, he'd have problems, but since he made no predictions, he's OK. I thought he did a nice job on the bench this season, with reasonable timeouts and substitution patterns. He did a very good job of keeping his cool on the bench, and not over-reacting to the ebb and flow of the game, the way Brian Ellerbe used to. His calm seemed to rub off on the team, and they kept their cool a lot more than they have in recent years. Of course, the down side of that is that they often acted like they didn't care if they won or lost, and looked like they were sleepwalking out there.

One area where Coach Amaker seems to have excelled is in recruiting. He signed up a Top 10 class for this upcoming season, with 5 quality players. If UM is going to turn things around, the lifeblood of that turnaround will have to be recruiting. If Amaker can do a good job teaching these 5 new guys, and get them to play as a unit with the returning players, he'll have a much better team next year. If he can follow up this

year's recruiting class with another one that's close to as good, Michigan will be back in the upper division of the Big Ten again, and soon. Let's take a quick look at the incoming freshmen:

Lester Abram, a 6-5 wing from Pontiac, Mich.
Amadou Ba, a 6-10 center from Bridgton, Maine
Graham Brown, a 6-9 forward from Mio, Mich.
Daniel Horton, a 6-2 point guard from Cedar Hill, Texas
Chris Hunter, a 6-11 center from Gary, Ind.

Daniel Horton is the top recruit in the class, and he fills a big need for UM. He's won just about every award that a high school player can win, and I think he's going to really have an immediate impact next year. He should be a starter from day one.

Chris Hunter is a big man, which Michigan needs desperately. With Chris Young graduating, Chuck Bailey is the biggest man on the roster. Hunter needs to learn the ropes quickly, since he'll be UM's main weapon in the paint. He has the size and the talent to play in the Big Ten, but it's a lot to ask freshmen to start.

Amadou Ba is almost as big as Chris Hunter, but he isn't quite ready to play Big Ten basketball yet. He's a project, but he has the potential to be a major contributor at Michigan. It just may take a year or two. It might not be a bad idea to redshirt him.

Graham Brown is another big man, although not as big as Hunter or Ba. He'll be the other guy that Michigan will need to call on next season, to fill the big hole in the middle. Like Hunter, he needs to be a quick learner, and help out as much as he can, as soon as he can. He has the tools to do the job, but he'll need to be coached.

Lester Abram, like Brown, is from the state of Michigan, which is important. A certain whiny coach in East Lansing has gotten lots of praise for his ability to recruit in the state, and he probably even deserves some of it. It's really important for Tommy Amaker to make some inroads, and establish some relationships with the high school programs around the state. As far as Abram is concerned, he's a ballplayer, and he'll be able to help out immediately. Michigan needs height, but it also needs shooters and scorers, and Abram is a scorer.

So, the prospects look good for next year. Michigan is losing a few quality players to graduation, but the incoming freshmen should help fill some of the gaps. By next season, all the returning players will have a full year of playing under Amaker's system, which will help, and they should be able to pick up where they left off. The key to next season is LaVell Blanchard. If he can continue to play the way he did in the Big Ten Tournament, UM will do just fine. He can carry this team as far as he wants to. The other senior-to-be, Gavin Groninger, could really help the cause if he could get some consistency in his game. Combined with B-Rob and Dommanic Ingerson, all UM needs is a good point guard (Horton) and a solid big man (Hunter). The bench looks good, with Avery Queen, Chuck Bailey, and the other 3 freshmen. It should be an exciting season, so please remember to check back in the fall, when I continue writing these columns.

Go Blue!