11/11/2002 - Week #02 – Sanctions, and Season Outlook

There were no games this week for the Michigan basketball team, but that doesn't mean that nothing happened. In fact, it was one of the most eventful weeks in UM basketball history. It was also a very sad week, as the self-imposed sanctions against the basketball program were announced on Wednesday (11/06/2002).
I want to analyze the prospects for the upcoming season, and look at each of the key players in depth, but I feel like I should discuss the sanctions first, since they're on everyone's mind right now. These sanctions are a necessary step to make amends for the major rules violations in the 1992-1997 era, but they still hurt. The really sad part is that the only recourse that the NCAA has for punishing the program is to punish the current players and coaching staff, even though none of them had anything to do with the rules violations that are being punished.

The four players who are allegedly responsible for the rules violations (Chris Webber, Maurice Taylor, Robert Traylor, and Louis Bullock) are now beyond the reach of the NCAA, although it is certainly possible for UM to sue each of them individually for the damage they have done. I don't know if Michigan will take this step, but I sure hope they do. Former coach Steve Fisher has claimed repeatedly that he knew nothing about the cash payments that have been alleged, but that seems hard to believe. If it can be proved that he knew about them, the NCAA should go after him big-time, and UM should also sue him. It won't undo any of the damage that they collectively did, but at least some of the guilty parties will pay.

Something occurred to me the other day: what do you do with $280,000 when you're a high-profile college athlete? Where do you put it? You've gotten it in cash, probably in $100 bills, and it's a decent sized pile of paper. Where do you put it? Under your bed? In a safe? You can't put it in the bank, because banks have money-laundering rules that require good explanations for deposits over $10,000. You can't go out and buy a new car, because the NCAA wants to know where you got the money for any car, new or used, that you drive. You can't go out and buy a new house without arousing suspicions. You can't spend it at the bar or a nightclub in big chunks, because everyone knows who you are, and someone is going to talk if you start throwing around money. Realistically, you can't spend much of it until you're a highly paid NBA star, and then it's pocket change compared to the $11 million you make each year. It just doesn't make sense to take that much money when you can't enjoy it. It's a dumb thing to do.

Lawsuits, courtrooms, "allegedlies", sanctions, probation. It's all a big mess. I feel that Coach Amaker and the current players are doing the right things to make the best of a really bad situation. They're doing their best to shrug the whole thing off and concentrate on the upcoming season. They know that they don't have as much to play for as they would have hoped, but they also have a lot less pressure on them to make it to a post-season tournament. As so many other commentators have mentioned, it's a real shame for the three seniors, LaVell Blanchard, Gavin Groninger, and Rotolu Adebiyi. They now stand no chance of playing in an NCAA tournament game.

Is this year's team good enough to have made it to the NCAA tournament, if they were eligible to participate? I'm not sure. From what little I've seen (one exhibition game) and read (mostly in "The Ann Arbor News"), I'd guess that they'd have been a "bubble team" at best, but probably a pretty good bet for an NIT bid. This is a significant improvement over the last few years, and a sign that Coach Amaker has them pointed in the right direction. Even with the post-season ban in place, they can

still show the basketball world how much they've progressed. They have a solid nucleus of players, including some very promising freshmen. They lack proven height and muscle inside, but they have a nice selection of wings and guards. As I said last week, the big challenge for Coach Amaker this season is going to be getting the right combination of players out there for each situation. If he can do that, Michigan will be successful.

Let's look at the players:

Guards

This is a position of strength for the Wolverines this year. They have two good point guards in junior Avery Queen and freshman Daniel Horton, and two good shooting guards in senior Gavin Groninger and sophomore Dommanic Ingerson. Queen and Horton will do just fine bringing the ball up court, and running the offense. Groninger and Ingerson are both great 3-point shooters, but Groninger is a streak shooter, and when he's off, it is not pretty.

Forwards

This is another strong position for Michigan. Senior LaVell Blanchard has led the Wolverines in scoring and rebounding in each of his first 3 seasons, and there's no reason he can't make it 4 in a row. Bernard Robinson, Jr. is probably the most talented player on the team, with great speed, great moves, and a good shot. Sophomore Chuck Bailey is listed as a forward, but he will play at center more often than forward, even though he is only 6'7". Gavin Groninger is tall enough (6'5") to play some short forward, but he will be used mostly at shooting guard. Three of the five incoming freshmen are listed as forwards, although only one of them (Lester Abram) will play much at forward. The other two (Graham Brown and Chris Hunter) will play mostly at center. Finally, senior Rotolu Adebiyi is listed as a forward, but he will also play mostly at center, even though he is only 6'5". As you can see, Michigan has lots of options at forward. They will do a lot of the scoring, and a good share of the rebounding. They'll need to, because of the situation at the center position.

Centers

This position could be a problem for Michigan this year. The two tallest players on the team are both freshmen: Graham Brown (6'9") and Chris Hunter (6'11"). The only players with any experience at center are undersized: Chuck Bailey (6'7") and Rotolu Adebiyi (6'5"). All of these players are listed either as forwards, or forwards/centers. The only player on the roster who is listed as a pure center is freshman Amadou Ba (6'10"), who is being redshirted this season. I'm predicting that the Wolverines will go as far as their centers can carry them. If Chris Hunter or Graham Brown can learn the ropes quickly and contribute at center, Michigan will do fine. If they can't, UM will be in trouble. There are too many teams out there with good solid centers, and they will score at will against Michigan if there isn't anyone who can battle away under the basket.

Every year, I take a whack at predicting the scores for every game for the whole season. In general, I've done pretty well. I've been within 2 or 3 games of predicting the final record, and I usually get about 75% of the games right. My score predictions range from amazing to lousy, but I'm generally within 10 points for each team, which isn't bad. Here we go again:

DATE	OPPONENT	SITE	SCORE	RECORD (Big 10)
Fri., Nov. 1	Wayne State (exhibition)	Ann Arbor	79-68	0-0 (0-0)
Fri., Nov. 15	NIKE Elite (exhibition)	Ann Arbor	75-71	0-0 (0-0)
Sat., Nov. 23	vs. St. Bonaventure	St. Thomas, V.I.	81-77	1-0 (0-0)
Sun., Nov. 24	vs. Virginia Tech	St. Thomas, V.I.	73-70	2-0 (0-0)
Mon., Nov. 25	Championship Round	St. Thomas, V.I.	76-82	2-1 (0-0)
Sat., Nov. 30	Western Michigan	Ann Arbor	85-71	3-1 (0-0)
Tue., Dec. 3	Central Michigan	Ann Arbor	80-75	4-1 (0-0)
Sat., Dec. 7	at Duke	Durham, N.C.	65-97	4-2 (0-0)
Wed., Dec. 11	Bowling Green	Ann Arbor	77-72	5-2 (0-0)
Sat., Dec. 14	Charleston Southern	Ann Arbor	93-76	6-2 (0-0)
Sat., Dec. 21	Vanderbilt	Ann Arbor	67-76	6-3 (0-0)
Mon., Dec. 23	Eastern Michigan	Ann Arbor	91-72	7-3 (0-0)
Sat., Dec. 28	at UCLA	Los Angeles, Calif.	70-84	7-4 (0-0)
Thu., Jan. 2	San Francisco	Ann Arbor	82-75	8-4 (0-0)
Sat., Jan. 4	IUPUI	Ann Arbor	87-70	9-4 (0-0)
Wed., Jan. 8	Wisconsin	Ann Arbor	67-62	10-4 (1-0)
Sat., Jan. 11	Penn State	Ann Arbor	79-73	11-4 (2-0)
Wed., Jan. 15	at Ohio State	Columbus, Ohio	55-71	11-5 (2-1)
Sat., Jan. 18	at Northwestern	Evanston, Ill.	70-65	12-5 (3-1)
Wed., Jan. 22	Minnesota	Ann Arbor	75-69	13-5 (4-1)
Sun., Jan. 26	Michigan State	Ann Arbor	67-82	13-6 (4-2)
Wed., Jan. 29	at Illinois	Champaign, Ill.	59-76	13-7 (4-3)
Sat., Feb. 1	at Minnesota	Minneapolis, Minn.	66-77	13-8 (4-4)
Sat., Feb. 8	Iowa	Ann Arbor	81-78	14-8 (5-4)
Wed., Feb. 12	at Indiana	Bloomington, Ind.	65-79	14-9 (5-5)
Sat., Feb. 15	Ohio State	Ann Arbor	67-74	14-10 (5-6)
Wed., Feb. 19	at Purdue	West Lafayette, Ind.	71-77	14-11 (5-7)
Wed., Feb. 26	at Wisconsin	Madison, Wis.	61-60	15-11 (6-7)
Sat., Mar. 1	Illinois	Ann Arbor	69-73	15-12 (6-8)
Wed., Mar. 5	at Penn State	State College, Pa.	72-68	16-12 (7-8)
Sat., Mar. 8	Purdue	Ann Arbor	81-75	17-12 (8-8)
Thu., Mar. 13	Big Ten - First Round	Chicago, Ill.	80-75	18-12 (8-8)
Fri., Mar. 14	Big Ten - Quarterfinals	Chicago, Ill.	75-74	19-12 (8-8)
Sat., Mar. 15	Big Ten - Semifinals	Chicago, Ill.	67-74	19-13 (8-8)

Check out those nasty 3-game losing streaks at the end of January and the middle of February, resulting in 6 losses in 8 games. That's a tough stretch right there. The 19-13 record probably would have gotten UM into the NCAA tournament, and would certainly have earned an NIT bid. An 8-8 record in the Big Ten will probably be good enough for 6th place. I'll take a shot at predicting the order of finish in the Big Ten right before the Big Ten portion of the season starts.

As you can see from the above schedule, Michigan's 2nd and final exhibition game is this Friday (11/15/2002) at Crisler Arena vs. Nike Elite. Game time is 7:00 p.m. Come on by and check out the new Wolverines, and cheer them on. I'll be back next week to tell you how things went.