11/25/2002 - Week #04 – Lost Weekend in Paradise

The University of Michigan men's basketball team started off the regular season on the wrong foot, losing their first 2 games at the Virgin Islands Paradise Jam tournament in St. Thomas, USVI. They lost to St. Bonaventure 89-68 on Saturday (11/23/2002), then came back and lost to Virginia Tech 65-53 on Sunday (11/24/2002). These were both games that UM could have and should have won, and it is very disappointing that they didn't get close in either of them. They will play one more game in the tournament, on Monday (11/25/2002) vs. Kansas State. Hopefully, they'll be able to salvage at least one win for the long (very long) weekend. They certainly don't want to come home 0-3.

The game against St. Bonaventure was a bad combination of a hot team (not Michigan) and a lot of turnovers (not St. Bonaventure). The Bonnies (great nickname) shot 48% from the field (47% from 3-point range), and UM turned the ball over 20 times, and that was the difference in the ball game. St. Bonaventure led by 20 at halftime, and Michigan never made it close in the second half. Individually, LaVell Blanchard had a good game (21 points and 8 rebounds), and Bernard Robinson, Jr. and Lester Abram had decent games (11 points each), and that was it for double figures. Daniel Horton had 9 points, and Chris Hunter had 8 points, so the 5 starters scored 60 of the team's 68 points. Only 8 points from the bench is not a good sign. Gavin Groninger had 5 of those points, Sherrod Harrell had 2 of them, and Graham Brown claimed the last 1. Avery Queen played 18 minutes and had 0 points on 0-for-3 shooting. Chuck Bailey also had 0 points, in 7 minutes of action. Michigan needs scoring from players like them.

The game against Virginia Tech was a little more competitive than the game against St. Bonaventure, and Michigan got within 1 point (45-44) with about 8 minutes to go, then the Hokies (another great nickname) slowly pushed their lead up to double digits, and never let it slip. The story in this game was poor shooting by Michigan. They shot 15-for-55 from the floor (27%), and 3-for-18 from 3-point range (17%). The player who had the roughest time was LaVell Blanchard. He shot 1-for-12 from the floor (0-for-6 from 3-point range), for 6 points. Lester Abram had his first sub-par game, shooting 0-for-5, and scoring 1 point. Bernard Robinson, Jr. and Daniel Horton each scored 12 points, but they also shot poorly: B-Rob was 2-for-9, and Horton was 4-for-12. Horton had all 3 of Michigan's 3-pointers, but he had to take 8 shots to hit them. The other starter was Chris Hunter, who chipped in 6 points on 3-for-7 shooting. That was the best shooting percentage among the starters. The leading scorer was Graham Brown, who scored 14 points on 4-for-7 shooting, and did a decent job on defense against the 305-pound center for Virginia Tech. Other than Brown, the only other bench player to score was Chuck Bailey, who scored 2 points on 1-for-1 shooting. For the second game in a row, Avery Queen played but did not score. Gavin Groninger played 15 minutes, and took and missed a pair of 3-pointers. Michigan needs a lot more bench scoring.

So, despite high hopes, Michigan is off to another disappointing start. Given the caliber of the competition at this tournament, they could have easily come home 3-0, with the championship. Now, they're going to be fighting to salvage a single victory. In both games, they sounded lethargic and uninspired. They didn't have the spark needed to win. They didn't seem particularly upset that they lost. This is a program that has learned how to lose, and forgotten how to win. It wasn't that long ago that victory was expected, and any loss was a big deal, with lots of questions and soul-searching. Now, the team, the media, and the fans all just shrug their shoulders and look ahead to the next game, or the next season. I'd feel a lot better if the players

or the coaches got upset when they lost. I understand that it's a long season, and that we have to be patient with the team. There are a lot of young players, and they're still learning the system. That's fine, but they can play with passion and spirit right now. Once again, I place part of the blame on LaVell Blanchard. As I've said for the last 3+ years, he's just too darned polite and quiet. For the good of the team, he needs to be more of a leader. He needs to help get the team fired up to play at their best. He needs to challenge the other players to step up and perform.

As I mentioned above, Michigan plays again today (Monday, 11/25/2002) vs. Kansas State, in the final game of the Virgin Islands Paradise Jam tournament in St. Thomas, USVI. After the game, they return home for their regular season home opener on Saturday (11/30/2002) against Western Michigan. The game is at 2:00 p.m. in Crisler Arena. Come on by and check out the team. I'll be back next Monday to tell you what happened, and why.