12/02/2002 - Week #05 – Season On The Brink, Already

The University of Michigan men's basketball team lost 2 more games this week, dropping their season record to a miserable 0-4. This matches Michigan's worst start ever. The only other time UM started the season 0-4 was back in the 1933-1934 season. That team finished the season 4-16.

The two losses this week were to Kansas State (82-71) on Monday (11/25/2002) in the 6th-place game of the Virgin Islands Paradise Jam, and to Western Michigan University (56-52) on Saturday (11/30/2002) in Michigan's home opener. Once again, both losses were to teams that UM could and should beat. Michigan should never lose to a MAC school in basketball. In both games, poor shooting was the biggest problem. Against KSU, Michigan shot 25-for-64 (39%), and they did even worse against WMU, shooting 19-for-52 (36%). They shot an acceptable 35% (7-for-20) from 3-point range against KSU, but they were horrible against WMU from 3-point range: 2-for-13 (15%). Turnovers and rebounds weren't a factor in the KSU game, but they sure were against Western: UM had 21 turnovers (WMU had 16), and Michigan got out-rebounded by a shorter WMU team (41-36).

Individually, some of the Wolverines had a decent week. Daniel Horton had a career-high 17 points against Kansas State, and scored 11 more against Western. Unfortunately, he shot pretty poorly getting those points: 5-for-15 vs. KSU, and 5-for-16 vs. WMU. LaVell Blanchard also had 17 points in the KSU game, and 14 against Western. He also shot poorly against WMU: 5-for-16. Bernard Robinson, Jr. had 14 and 10 points in the 2 games, and had a bad shooting day vs. WMU (3-for-11). Lester Abram had 13 points against KSU, although he had a tougher time in the WMU game, scoring only 5 points on 2-for-7 shooting. The other starter, Chris Hunter, only had 3 points in each game, shooting 1-for-6 against Kansas State. Michigan needs more production from Hunter in order to be successful.

Once again, the bench didn't help out much in either game. In the KSU game, Gavin Groninger had 3 points, and Graham Brown had 4 points (1-for-5 shooting), and that was it. It wasn't much better against Western: Groninger had 3 points again, Brown had 4 points again, and Chuck Bailey had 2 points. Michigan needs much better bench scoring than 7 and 9 points to be successful.

The bad news for the week didn't end with the 2 losses. In the middle of the week, Avery Queen was dismissed from the team, for unspecified disciplinary reasons. That leaves Michigan with only one point guard on scholarship: Daniel Horton, a true freshman. Sherrod Harrell, a freshman walk-on, is also a point guard, and he did a pretty good job of running the team against Western, but he's not much of a scoring threat. Apart from the effect this move has on the depth and experience of the team, it is also upsetting that yet another player has left the program. Besides Queen, Coach Amaker has also dismissed Maurice Searight, and Josh Moore voluntarily left the team. These losses hurt the team and the program, and are very worrisome. I'm sure that there were good reasons for the moves in each case, but this has got to stop. Michigan has got to get good, quality players, and keep them on the team and contributing for 4 years. The lack of continuity in this program has been a killer in the last 10 years. I wrote about this topic last year when Moore left the team, and this latest dismissal just adds to the problem.

Speaking of Horton and the point guard position, that was one of the big problems in the WMU game on Saturday. Instead of running the offense and distributing the ball, Horton was thinking "shot" first, and "pass" second. He took way too many quick

shots, sometimes before the offense was even set up. He took the most shots (16) on the team, and only had 2 assists, to go with 4 turnovers. While it's true that he's a good scorer, and he can be a good shooter, Michigan needs him more as a floor general, running the offense and hitting the open man for easy baskets.

Next, speaking of shooting guards, where are they for Michigan? Abram had a decent game against KSU, but he was non-existent against Western Michigan. Groninger played 13 minutes against KSU, and 16 minutes against WMU, and managed to take only 2 shots in each game. He passed up several open 3-point shots vs. Western. Dommanic Ingerson is probably the best 3-point shooter on the team, but he didn't even travel with the team to the Virgin Islands, due to an Achilles heel injury, and he didn't play against Western on Saturday. Again, in order to be successful, Michigan needs better play from their shooting guards.

Finally, there's the "L" word: leadership. I've said it a couple of times already this season, but this team needs a leader, and that leader needs to be LaVell Blanchard. He may already be the quiet leader of this team, but he needs to step up and be the vocal leader of this team.

Looking at what I've written above, you'll notice that I've identified 5 areas where Michigan needs to improve:

- Better play from the center position, especially Hunter.
- More bench scoring.
- More assists from Horton.
- Better play from the shooting guard position.
- Better leadership from Blanchard.

If the coaching staff can correct these problems, Michigan can start winning. If not, the young season on the brink will end up in the dumpster.

The beat goes on for the Wolverines. They play 2 games in the next week. On Tuesday (12/03/2002), they play at home against Central Michigan (another MAC school), and on Saturday (12/07/2002), they play at #7 Duke. They'll get slaughtered by Duke, but they should beat CMU. The game on Tuesday is at 7:00 p.m. Come on out and see if Michigan can break into the win column.