12/30/2002 - Week #09 – Another Big Week

The University of Michigan men's basketball team continued its winning ways again last week, winning 2 more games. These latest wins raise their season record to 5-6. They beat Eastern Michigan (85-57) in Crisler Arena on Monday (12/23/2002), then they went out to Los Angeles on Saturday (12/28/2002) and beat UCLA, 81-76. These were both impressive wins, especially the win at UCLA, and the Wolverines played very well in both games.

As I mentioned last week, the game against EMU could have gone either way. Eastern was off to one of their best starts in a long time, and they had just gotten JaQuan Hart eligible for them. I figured that he'd have a big chip on his shoulder about being snubbed by Michigan, and I wouldn't have been surprised if he had had a big game against the Wolverines, kind of like Ryan Sidney did for Boston College last year. That, combined with UM's less-than-stellar record vs. the Mid American Conference earlier in the year, made the game a toss-up. It didn't work out that way. EMU did jump out to an early 18-11 lead, but the rest of the game was all Michigan. Once UM got the lead, they never looked back. They had a strong finish at the end of the first half, then they put the game out of reach at the start of the second half. Hart was not a factor, with 5 points. It was a big win, by an unexpectedly large margin.

The win at UCLA was even bigger, and very unexpected. The series record was not encouraging, with UCLA leading 7-1 (8-0 with the 1993 tournament forfeit). It had been a couple years since Michigan had won a non-conference game on the road, and Pauley Pavilion is a tough place to play. And yet, despite at that adversity, UM won the game, and played very well. They lead the whole way, and withstood a vigorous UCLA rally in the last couple minutes. They shot well, rebounded well, and made their free throws. It was a very impressive win.

Individually, it was "The Big 3" again for Michigan in both games. LaVell Blanchard was the leading scorer in the Eastern game, with 19 points, and he was the second-leading scorer vs. UCLA with 18 points. Bernard Robinson, Jr. had 16 and 18 points, respectively, in the 2 games, but the big story was Daniel Horton. He had a good game (13 points) against EMU, but he had a monster game against UCLA, with 24 points, including 7-for-10 from 3-point range. I won't get into the details, but all 3 of them shot fairly well in both games, although Blanchard is still taking a lot of shots to get his points.

Besides the 3 starters in double-figures, the other 2 did OK in both games. Lester Abram had 8 and 6 points, respectively, and Graham Brown had 6 and 3 points. The exciting news was the bench scoring, in particular, Chris Hunter. He had the best game of his short career against EMU, with 12 points (on 5-for-7 shooting) and 7 rebounds. Every one of his baskets was an important one, and he played tough. He also had a pretty good game at UCLA, with 7 more points. Besides Hunter, there was other good news in the bench-scoring department: Gavin Groninger appears to have found his 3-point shooting touch. He hit a couple in a row against Eastern, and another one against UCLA. Those were his only points (6 and 3) in those games, but they were important points. Finally, there's Chuck Bailey. He had 5 points and 2 points in the 2 games, but there's more to the story. First of all, he shot, and made, the first 3-pointer of his career, against EMU. Then, there's his continued amazing shooting percentage. He was 2-for-3 vs. EMU, and 1-for-2 against UCLA, so he is now shooting 18-for-22 (81.8%) for the season.

This is my last article for 2002, so it's time for some New Year's Resolutions:

1. I will no longer worry about a point guard (Horton) taking too many shots. This kid is special. I've been studying college basketball for 28 years now, and I've never seen a team do well with a point guard who shoots as much as Horton does, but this is different. Somehow, Tommy Amaker has figured out how to take advantage of Horton's outside shooting, and still let him run the point. Sure, it's weird that the point guard is averaging so much more than the shooting guard (Abram), but who cares? They're just labels, right?
2. I will no longer worry about UM's slow start to this season. The 0-6 record was ugly, but Michigan seems to have put that behind them. It took them that many games to start meshing, and now that they've won a few games, they seem to have worked a lot of things out. That's one of the problems with starting 3 freshmen.
3. I will no longer worry about UM's lousy record vs. the MAC. They're up to 2-2 now, which is still not very good, but is certainly better than the 0-2 start. Now that they appear to have their act together, I'm sure they could beat Western Michigan and Central Michigan, and every other team in the MAC.

In the first week of the new year, Michigan will play their last 2 non-conference games, both at home, against San Francisco (Thursday 01/02/2003, 7:00 p.m.) and IUPUI (Saturday 01/04/2003, 2:00 p.m.). Both of these games are very winnable, which would leave Michigan's non-conference record at 7-6, which isn't that hot, but pretty good considering the 0-6 start.

Come on out and see if Michigan can extend their winning streak to 7. The students are out of town for the San Francisco game, and some general public crowd support would sure help.