01/06/2003 - Week #10 – The End of the Non-Conference Season

The University of Michigan men's basketball team completed the non-conference portion of its 2002-2003 schedule last week, winning 2 more games, both at home. These latest wins give Michigan a 7-game winning streak, and raise their season record to 7-6. Yes, after an 0-6 start, UM is finally back over 0.500. They beat San Francisco (74-64) on Thursday (01/02/2003), and IUPUI (84-79) on Saturday (01/04/2003). While they were both important wins, the Wolverines didn't look very good in either of them. But, given the choice, I'd rather win ugly than lose pretty.

A sudden snowstorm, combined with the holiday, kept a lot of people away from the San Francisco game, and Michigan responded with a yawner. They didn't look sharp at all, but they did manage to keep their focus well enough to win the game. San Francisco is a team that they should beat, and they did. Michigan led most of the way, and pushed the lead as high as 13 points, although San Francisco got within 5 points with 2:38 left in the game. The Wolverines responded, and won going away.

The win against IUPUI was even more difficult. Even though they weren't very tall, IUPUI was scrappy, and they hustled all over the floor. Michigan played without Bernard Robinson, Jr., who missed a game for the first time in his career with a minor knee problem. Once again, UM didn't play particularly well, but they led for most of the game, and hung tough down the stretch.

Individually, things were a little different than they have been in the last few games. Of course, LaVell Blanchard got his points: 15 and 23, respectively. Daniel Horton continued his recent scoring success, with 17 points in each game. B-Rob had 14 in the one game he played in, so "the Big 3" did fine. It was the other players who made the difference. Against San Francisco, Chris Hunter tied his career high, with 12 points, and against IUPUI, it was Lester Abram with a new career high, 20 points. Chuck Bailey had 8 big points against San Francisco, and Gavin Groninger, starting for the injured B-Rob, had 7 points against IUPUI. Finally, Graham Brown had 8 points against IUPUI. These five players all contributed in one game, but not in both. For example, Brown had 0 points against San Francisco, and Bailey had 0 points against IUPUI.

Time to look back at the non-conference portion of the schedule, and look ahead to the Big Ten portion. As I mentioned in my New Year's Resolutions last week, UM's 0-6 start was ugly, but the team 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. Their 2-2 record against the MAC is disappointing, but a lot of that was the timing of the games. If Michigan had played Charleston Southern and IUPUI earlier, and the MAC teams later, they probably would have beaten them all.

As usual, the Big Ten looks tough again this year, top to bottom. Three of the teams are ranked (Illinois, MSU, and Indiana), and there aren't any obvious weaklings in the bunch. Here is Michigan's Big Ten schedule:

DATE	OPPONENT	SITE
Wed., Jan. 8	Wisconsin	Ann Arbor
Sat., Jan. 11	Penn State	Ann Arbor
Wed., Jan. 15	at Ohio State	Columbus, Ohio
Sat., Jan. 18	at Northwestern	Evanston, Ill.
Wed., Jan. 22	Minnesota	Ann Arbor

Sun., Jan. 26	Michigan State	Ann Arbor
Wed., Jan. 29	at Illinois	Champaign, Ill.
Sat., Feb. 1	at Minnesota	Minneapolis, Minn.
Sat., Feb. 8	Iowa	Ann Arbor
Wed., Feb. 12	at Indiana	Bloomington, Ind.
Sat., Feb. 15	Ohio State	Ann Arbor
Wed., Feb. 19	at Purdue	West Lafayette, Ind.
Wed., Feb. 26	at Wisconsin	Madison, Wis.
Sat., Mar. 1	Illinois	Ann Arbor
Wed., Mar. 5	at Penn State	State College, Pa.
Sat., Mar. 8	Purdue	Ann Arbor

Looking at it, there are some important things to note:

- Michigan only plays Northwestern once, and that's on the road. That might be one of only two road wins for UM in the Big Ten, the other being at Penn State.
- Michigan only plays MSU once, in Ann Arbor. While the Wolverines are improving, and MSU doesn't seem to be dominating this year, I don't think Michigan is ready to knock off the Spartans, yet. It'll happen again, just not this year.
- Michigan only plays Iowa once, in Ann Arbor. This will be a tough, but winnable, game.
- Michigan only plays Indiana once, on the road. This looks like a sure loss.
- Michigan plays the other 6 teams twice. If they're going to upset any of the "upper division" teams, it's probably going to be in Ann Arbor.
- Michigan never plays more than 2 games in a row at home or on the road. The toughest road trips are at Illinois and at Minnesota, and at Purdue and at Wisconsin. The toughest home stand is against Minnesota and MSU.

Taking all these points into account, I'd expect Michigan to go 7-9 in the Big Ten, with 2 wins on the road (Northwestern and Penn State), and 5 wins at home (Wisconsin, Penn State, Iowa, Ohio State, and Purdue). They might be able to sneak in a home win against Minnesota, but the home games against MSU and Illinois don't look very promising.

This upcoming week, Michigan plays their first 2 Big Ten games, both at home, against Wisconsin (Wednesday 01/08/2003, 8:00 p.m.) and Penn State (Saturday 01/11/2003, 2:00 p.m.). Both of these games are very winnable. Come on out and see if Michigan can start the Big Ten season off on the right foot. The students will finally be back in town, and some general public crowd support would sure help.