01/13/2003 - Week #11 – The Start of the Big Ten Conference Season

The University of Michigan men's basketball team started the Big Ten conference portion of its 2002-2003 schedule last week, winning their first 2 games, both at home. These latest wins give Michigan a 9-game winning streak, and raise their season record to 9-6. They beat Wisconsin (66-65) on Wednesday (01/08/2003), and Penn State (66-53) on Saturday (01/11/2003). The Wolverines looked pretty good against Wisconsin, but they didn't look as sharp against Penn State. However, it's encouraging to know that they can "win ugly" against Big Ten teams.

When I said that UM looked "pretty good" against Wisconsin, that doesn't tell the whole story. Michigan started out strong, and hung with the Badgers for most of the game, but it started to slip away in the second half. It was a classic case of the "disappearing offense". Michigan went for more than 9 minutes with only a pair of free throws. Wisconsin didn't score many points, but Michigan scored even fewer. With 5:36 left in the game, Wisconsin was up 59-44, and it looked like a loss. The normally dependable LaVell Blanchard was having a horrible game, shooting 2-for-13, for 5 points. Then, he caught fire. He hit three 3-pointers in a row, within 100 seconds, and he hit another 3-pointer with 1:13 to go in the game. That took him up to 17 points. Daniel Horton scored the other 10 points, and UM went on a 22-6 run down the stretch, to win by one point. It was all very exciting, and very improbable. Wisconsin (10-2 coming into the game) has been picked to finish at or near the top of the Big Ten this year, and they were certainly very talented. It was a very impressive upset win for UM.

The win against Penn State was a little more comfortable, although the 13 point margin at the end doesn't tell the whole story. The game was much closer than that, and although UM led for most of the game, PSU cut the margin to 5 points (52-47) with about 5 minutes left in the game. Once again, it was the infamous "disappearing offense", this time for 10 minutes without a field goal. Fortunately, Michigan was tough down the stretch again, and built the lead back up to 13 points at the end. The big story in this game was free-throws, both the number and the shooting percentage. UM got to the line a lot more often (37-8), and made a lot more (25-5). But, check out that percentage: 25-for-37 (68%). Ugh. The other big story was 3-point shooting: UM shot 1-for-9, with Blanchard going 1-for-3, and hitting the only 3-pointer for Michigan with 2:05 remaining in the game.

Individually, it was "the Big 3" again. Blanchard had 17 and 15 in the 2 games, Horton had 25 and 14, and Bernard Robinson, Jr. had 11 and 13. The other 2 starters had a mixed week: Graham Brown did OK with 8 and 7 points, but Lester Abram had an "off week", with only 3 and 5 points. The only other player to score in double-figures for the week was Chris Hunter, with 10 points against PSU. The bench didn't contribute much this week. In fact, Hunter was the only bench player to score (2 points) against Wisconsin, and he and Chuck Bailey (3 points) were the only bench players to score against Penn State. This is not good.

Speaking of the bench, it's looking shorter and shorter. With the losses of Avery Queen and Dommanic Ingerson, there are only 4 bench players who get in the game regularly: Hunter, Bailey, Gavin Groninger, and Sherrod Harrell. Colin Dill has rarely gotten into a game, and then it's only been in the last 2 minutes of a blow-out. Rotolu Adebiyi seems to have disappeared completely, since I don't see him in uniform on the bench any more. He's one of the tri-captains, but he doesn't seem to be around. Also, in years past, there have always been 3 or 4 more walk-ons sitting on the bench in uniform, but that doesn't seem to be the case this year. The roster lists Chris Aguwa as the only eligible walk-on, and maybe he sits on the bench, but I can't be sure since he never takes off his warm-up jacket. There are always 3 or 4 guys who look like basketball players sitting on the end of the bench in

street clothes. One of them is Amadou Ba, who is a freshman being redshirted this year, and I'm sure another one is J.C. Mathis, a junior who transferred to Michigan from the University of Virginia, and must sit out a year before he's eligible. Another one is probably Dani Wohl, a walk-on sophomore transfer from SUNY-Binghamton who's also sitting out a year, due to eligibility rules. So, there are all these guys in street clothes on the bench, but not many players in uniform. It's odd.

Finally, it's time for mid-term grades. Michigan plays at least 30 games this year, depending on how they do in the Big Ten Tournament, and they've now played 15 of them. Their 9-6 record is pretty good, especially considering the 0-6 start. Here are the grades for the players who have played so far this year:

Name	Grade	Comments
Freshmen		
Lester Abram	B-	Inconsistent scoring, decent rebounding. Needs to work on setting up his own shots.
Graham Brown	B+	Does well for his size, hustles, a winner. Inconsistent scoring, good defense.
Sherrod Harrell	C+	OK running the point, not much of a shooter. Pretty good for a walk-on.
Daniel Horton	A	Good scorer, good dribbler, good leadership, a winner. Needs to make better decisions about shoot vs. pass.
Chris Hunter	C+	Too thin, gets pushed around, can't handle opposing big men very well. Nice finesse, decent shooting touch.
Sophomores		
Chuck Bailey	B	Excellent sub off the bench, great shooting percentage. Sparks the team when he comes in.
Juniors		
Colin Dill	Inc.	Doesn't get much playing time.
Bernard Robinson, Jr.	B+	The most athletic player on the team, good scorer, not a very good shooter.
Seniors		
LaVell Blanchard	A-	Great scorer and rebounder, needs to be more consistent. Too quiet to be an effective leader.
Gavin Groninger	C-	The ultimate streak shooter. Could be an awesome 3-point shooting weapon, has trouble getting untracked.
Rotolu Adebiyi	Inc.	Where did he go?
Coach		
Tommy Amaker	B	Great recruiter, good practice coach, decent bench coach. Has done a great job molding a young team.

The Big Ten portion of UM's schedule continues next week. They play at Ohio State on Wednesday (01/15/2003), and at Northwestern on Saturday (01/18/2003). It's tough to win on the road in the Big Ten, and Columbus is one of the tougher places. I don't expect Michigan to beat OSU at their place, but they should be able to beat Northwestern, even on the road. Drop by again next week to see how it went, and why.