01/20/2003 - Week #12 – Two Big Wins on the Road in the Big Ten

The University of Michigan men's basketball team played its first Big Ten road games of the 2002-2003 season last week, and won them both. These latest wins give Michigan an 11-game winning streak, and raise their season record to 11-6, 4-0 in the Big Ten. They beat Ohio State (61-50) on Wednesday (01/15/2003), and Northwestern (77-70) on Saturday (01/18/2003). The Wolverines looked very good against Ohio State, but they didn't look as sharp against Northwestern. Still, any road win in the Big Ten is a good win, and two road wins in a row is excellent. Michigan was expected to beat Northwestern, and they did, but the win at Ohio State was very unexpected, and very satisfying. UM had never beaten OSU in their new arena, and the Buckeyes have a very good record there. This loss to Michigan was their worst ever in their new arena. How sad.

The big story in the OSU game was the team defense. They held Ohio State to 50 points, which is pretty impressive, and only 18 points in the 2nd half, which is outstanding. Brent Darby is Ohio State's leader, and leading scorer, and Michigan shut him down. He managed to score 12 points, but he did it on 2-for-12 shooting, and 8-for-8 shooting from the free throw line. He missed all 6 of his 3-point attempts. As a team, OSU shot 2-for-17 (12%) from 3-point range, which is awful. They didn't do much better overall, shooting 16-for-45 (36%). The only thing that kept them in the game was free throw shooting: 16-for-16.

The win against Northwestern was a little more lethargic. The Big Ten schedule is a real grind, much more of a marathon than a sprint. The teams that do well are the teams that can pace themselves, and manage to summon up enough energy to keep winning, game after game. That's what Michigan has done so far this Big Ten season. They've played better against the good teams (Wisconsin and Ohio State), and well enough against the lesser teams (Penn State and Northwestern), to win all 4 of these games. That was the case against Northwestern. Michigan looked a little tired after the tough win at Ohio State, and perhaps they had a little bit of a letdown, but they came back from 10 points down in the 2nd half to beat the Wildcats. They showed some real mental toughness in the second half of the game, as they did vs. OSU. It's very encouraging.

Individually, it was "the Big 3" again. Daniel Horton was the leading scorer in both games, with 17 points against OSU, and 22 against Northwestern. LaVell Blanchard had 13 and 19 in the 2 games, and Bernard Robinson, Jr. had 12 and 11. The other 2 starters had a mixed week: Lester Abram did OK with 8 and 9 points, but Graham Brown had an "off week", with only 5 and 2 points. The only other player to score in double-figures for the week was Chris Hunter, with 10 points against Northwestern. The bench didn't contribute much this week. Against Ohio State, Hunter had 1 point, Chuck Bailey had 2 points, and Gavin Groninger had 3 points. Against Northwestern, Sherrod Harrell had 4 points, and Hunter had the 10 points mentioned above. That's it. This is not good. The team is depending too much on the 5 starters, especially "the Big 3", for scoring. If any of the starters gets in foul trouble, or gets injured, things could get pretty grim.

As an interesting footnote, due to foul trouble, at one point during the Ohio State game, Coach Amaker had all 5 freshmen (Horton, Abram, Brown, Hunter, and Harrell) in the game at the same time. They were only out there together for a couple of minutes, but they held the fort. Also, it should be mentioned that the Maize Rage showed up at this game, and had a big effect. There were only 70 of them, but they did a great job, and they sounded like 700.

Before we move on, let's take a moment to stop and appreciate Michigan's current situation. After the horrendous 0-6 start, they've ripped off 11 wins in a row, the longest winning

streak for a UM team in almost a decade, and the second longest streak in college basketball right now (Oklahoma State was won 12 in a row). It's still really early in the Big Ten season, but at 4-0, they're all alone in 1st place in the Big Ten. They've beaten 2 of the contenders for the Big Ten title, one of them on the road. Their 11 wins overall match their win total for all of last season. It's all very impressive, and encouraging.

Now for the bad news: the schedule gets even tougher. The next 6 games will tell a lot about how far this Michigan team has really come:

Wed., Jan. 22	Minnesota
Sun., Jan. 26	Michigan State
Wed., Jan. 29	at Illinois
Sat., Feb. 1	at Minnesota
Sat., Feb. 8	Iowa
Wed., Feb. 12	at Indiana

Those are 3 tough road games, and 3 quality opponents at home. If Michigan can win all 3 of the home games, and sneak away with at least one win on the road, that would be fabulous.

Fortunately, the next 2 games are at home, and they're both winnable. Yes, even the Michigan State game. After several years of getting kicked around by the Spartans, UM finally has a fighting chance against them. This is not a vintage MSU team this year, and they're in a real slump lately. They've lost 5 out of their last 6 games, giving them a 1-3 record in the Big Ten, and a 9-7 record overall. It's been quite a while since Michigan had a better overall record (11-6) than MSU, and it's been even longer since UM had a 3-game lead in the standings. Michigan's on a roll, and State's in a slump, so this could be the year. The game's at 1:00 on Sunday (01/26/2003), so show up and cheer on the Maize and Blue.

Oh yeah, don't forget the Minnesota game. Minnesota has only won 1 Big Ten game so far, on Saturday against Michigan State in Minneapolis, but they're very dangerous. They're taller than Michigan, which could be a problem, and they've got some very good athletes. The game is at 8:00 on Wednesday (01/22/2003), and some crowd support for a mid-week game would be appreciated.

Drop by again next week to see how it went, and why.