01/27/2003 - Week #13 – A Baker's Dozen

Yes! They finally did it! The good guys finally won, for a change. After 8 straight losses to Darth Izzo and the Evil Empire, the Wolverines finally beat the Spartans on Sunday (01/26/2003), 60-58. It was a huge win, and something I've been waiting for more than 5 years. The last UM win over MSU was back on 01/10/1998. I've been writing this damn column more than 3 years now, since the win over Tennessee-Chattanooga on 12/04/1999, and the whole time all I've wanted was another win over MSU. It's like an obsession. Actually, I guess it is an obsession. It's the only game that really matters to me, and I've had to watch it go south for the last 5 years. No more. The tide has turned. The sun is shining. The birds can sing again. All is right in the world. The good guys won. Finally.

It was a great game, and UM deserved to win it. They outplayed MSU, and showed more heart and mental toughness. It was a see-saw game, with many runs and lead changes, but the better team won. Crisler Arena was full, mostly with UM fans, and the few Spartan fans who managed to find a ticket didn't get much chance to make some noise. The few times that MSU led, UM came right back and went on top. When the rabble did make some noise, they were quickly drowned out by the loud and enthusiastic Michigan crowd, led by the Maize Rage. It was a great atmosphere for a great college basketball game, and I'm sure glad that a national TV audience got to see it.

Oh yeah, Michigan also beat Minnesota in Crisler Arena on Wednesday (01/22/2003), 75-63. Back to the big news.

The year was 2000, the date was February 1st, the place was Crisler Arena. Michigan had a great freshman class (LaVell Blanchard, Gavin Groninger, Jamal Crawford, Kevin Gaines, and Leland Anderson), and the game that evening against Michigan State was a toss-up. The hype was swirling, and everyone was watching. Then, 20 minutes before game time, Crawford was declared ineligible, due to "extra benefits" he received while he was in high school. The Wolverines were blindsided, and they never stood a chance against the evil Spartans. They gave it a valiant effort, but they lost 82-62. The program has been in a tailspin ever since. Then, after an 0-6 start, this season's team did the improbable, bordering on the impossible: they won 13 games in a row, including 6 in a row in the Big Ten. They're all alone in 1st place, and they're playing some of the best ball I've seen in years. They have confidence without being cocky. They have mental toughness beyond their years. They start 3 freshmen, yet they play like seniors. It's truly amazing.

These last 3+ years, I've had to keep my enthusiasm under wraps. It's been hard for me, but I just couldn't gush about a team that couldn't beat the ultimate enemy, MSU. Now that they've proven that they can win the biggest game of the season, I feel free to speak my mind openly, and show some spirit. If you want an objective, unbiased view, go read the Detroit Free Press. Actually, since they're State sympathizers, you may want to look elsewhere, but you get my point. I'm a Michigan fan, and I'm damn tired of having to apologize for the basketball team. They're back, and I couldn't be happier. They may not be all the way back, and they may not set the basketball world on fire right away, but they're headed in the right direction, and much faster than anyone would have dared guess. They've still got a lot of basketball left to play this year, and they can't make any noise beyond the Big Ten Tournament, due to the self-imposed sanctions, but they can lay the groundwork for the future. They can, and already have, gotten us used to seeing them win, instead of lose. They've gotten used to winning, at home and on the road, in close games and blowouts. They're learning what it takes to win the big games, to win in the Big Ten, to win on the road, and to put a solid winning streak together. This year's freshman class is getting lots of valuable playing time, and they're improving every week. Coach Amaker (the

new #1 Tom in the state of Michigan!) has another great recruiting class coming in next year, and things are looking up. The balance of power has switched, and the future is rosy.

I know, these things are cyclical. It wasn't that long ago that UM owned the series against MSU, and routinely won by 20-30 points. The gap started shrinking, then MSU actually won a game, then 2 in a row, then 8. It was ugly, but it's over. It won't stay over forever. No team stays on top forever. Even the perennial powerhouses, like Duke, North Carolina, Kentucky, and UCLA have off years, sometimes several of them in a row. It doesn't take much for a program to start slipping, and sometimes the smallest slip can turn into a large fall. I have no illusions that Michigan is back up to "powerhouse" status, or that they'll stay on top forever once they get back on top. That just doesn't happen. But that doesn't mean that we can't enjoy the ride at the top. That's my biggest complaint about the hordes of clueless obnoxious MSU fans: they had no sense of perspective. Once they got on top, they acted like there was no way they could ever be anywhere else. They tried to forget that they had been at the bottom just 5 years before, and woofed about how they were always going to be on top. It just doesn't work that way. I know there isn't much chance that it will happen, but I just hope that this season will teach them a little humility, and give them a little perspective. They started out ranked in the top 25, and now they're 10-8 (2-4 in the Big Ten), headed for a sub-.500 season. It was so much fun watching the grumpy Spartan fans file out of Crisler Arena, just like they did after the 49-3 ass-whipping in football. Maybe they should try firing their head coach; that's what the football team did. I wish they would; I'm getting tired of watching Darth Izzo whine about every little call that doesn't go their way. He's the biggest cry-baby in college basketball, and he should be ashamed of himself.

Let's talk about the games this past week, shall we? I know that I blew past the Minnesota win above, but I'm still very excited about the win over MSU. That doesn't mean that the win over Minnesota wasn't important, and it doesn't mean that it wasn't impressive. It was. Minnesota is a tall, talented basketball team, and they gave Michigan all they could handle. It may have been a 12-point victory for UM, but the game was much closer than that. With just under 8 minutes left in the game, Minnesota was up 59-57. Michigan took charge at that point, and outscored Minnesota 18-4 down the stretch.

The story in the Minnesota game was the way 2 different players stepped up, one in each half. In the 1st half, Bernard Robinson, Jr. played like his life depended on it, and he single-handedly kept UM in the game. In the 2nd half, it was LaVell Blanchard's turn. He didn't play with the almost manic intensity that B-Rob showed us in the 1st half, but he caught fire with his shooting, and he single-handedly won the game. B-Rob ended up with 13 points (11 in the 1st half) and 11 rebounds, and Blanchard had 28 points (24 in the 2nd half). Daniel Horton chipped in 14 points to round out the "Big Three". The other 2 starters did OK: Lester Abram had 8 points, and Graham Brown had 2 points. The bench didn't help out much: Chris Hunter had 8 points, and Chuck Bailey had 2 points.

The MSU game was really strange. It was a real defense battle, and no one from either team was really hot. Chris Hill ended up with 20 points for MSU, but it took him 17 shots to score them. Horton scored 17 points for UM, but it took him 17 shots to do it. B-Rob scored 13 points, but the 3rd member of the "Big Three", Blanchard, was held to 2 points, on 2 free throws in the last minute. Otherwise, he was 0-for-5. It's very encouraging to know that UM can win a huge game without any significant scoring from their captain and leading scorer.

Stepping up to take up the scoring slack in the MSU game was Les Abram. He had 14 points and 4 rebounds, despite playing much of the 2nd half with 4 fouls. The other starter,

Brown, chipped in 4 points. Hunter had 7 points off the bench, and Groninger hit a big 3-pointer for his only points.

Michigan is on a roll, and there's no denying it. 13 wins in a row is very impressive, and it's something to be proud of. Their 6-0 start in the Big Ten is also very impressive, and very encouraging. As I mentioned last week, the rest of the schedule is even tougher than the part they've already completed. This week, Michigan plays in 2 of the toughest venues in all of college basketball, not just in the Big Ten. On Wednesday (01/29/2003), UM plays at Illinois, and on Saturday (02/01/2003), they play at Minnesota. Michigan hasn't won at Illinois since 01/17/1995, and they haven't won at Minnesota since 01/20/1993. If they can win either of these games, they will have exceeded any expectations anyone could have possibly had for them before the season started. If they win them both, they are truly a team of destiny.

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