02/03/2003 - Week #14 – Back Down To Earth

The University of Michigan men's basketball team lost a pair of road games in the Big Ten last week, to end their 13 game winning streak and drop them out of 1st place in the conference standings. The two losses drop UM's record to 13-8 overall, 6-2 in the Big Ten. Both losses were by 7 points: 67-60 at Illinois on Wednesday (01/29/2003), and 87-80 at Minnesota on Saturday (02/01/2003). Michigan was in both games all the way into the final minute, and they could have won both games just as easily as they lost them. That's an important point; think back to the last 3 or 4 seasons: these were the games that Michigan used to lose by 20-25 points. Now, they're cliffhangers. Next year, they'll be victories.

As I pointed out last week, Michigan hasn't won a game at Illinois since 1995, and at Minnesota since 1993. They're both tough places to play, and UM needed their best effort to win either game. They played well in both games, but not quite well enough to win. They had a 10-point lead with about 12 minutes to go against Illinois, but they couldn't hold off the Illinois surge at the end. They got within 3 points in the final minute against Minnesota, but Lester Abram missed an open 3-pointer to tie the game, and that was it.

Individually, the scoring was a little different this week. Instead of the normal "Big Three", there were other players who stepped up. The 2 freshman centers, Graham Brown and Chris Hunter, were the only players to hit double-figures in both games. Brown had 10 points against Illinois and 12 points against Minnesota, and Hunter had 11 and 10. The "Big Three" didn't fare as well: LaVell Blanchard had a team-high 18 points against Illinois, but only 9 points against Minnesota. Daniel Horton had 7 and 20, and Bernard Robinson, Jr. had 7 and 8. The other starter, Abram, had 5 and 18. As you can see, only the centers had a consistent week.

Besides Hunter, the rest of the bench didn't contribute much: Sherrod Harrell had 2 and 3 points, and that was it. Chuck Bailey and Gavin Groninger both played in both games, but between them they only took (and missed) 1 shot in each game. This is an ongoing problem with the bench this season.

The story in the Illinois game was free throws, and shooting percentage, particularly from 3-point range. Michigan shot 39% (22-for-58) from the floor, but only 19% (4-for-21) from behind the 3-point line. Illinois didn't shoot much better, but they did get to the free-throw line a lot more often (30 vs. 16), and they outscored UM by 11 points there (23 vs. 12). Individually, only Brown (4-for-4) shot well against Illinois. Horton had the toughest time, shooting 3-for-17, and B-Rob (3-for-8) and Blanchard (6-for-16) didn't do much better.

Michigan shot an identical 39% (25-for-66) against Minnesota, but the Gophers were hot, and shot 50% (28-for-56). Individually, Brown (3-for-4) and Abram (6-for10) were the only players to shoot better than 50%. Blanchard had a miserable game, shooting 2-for-13, and B-Rob (3-for-9) and Horton (8-for-21) weren't much better.

Michigan has now completed the first half of their Big Ten schedule. Their record (6-2) is much better than most people expected or predicted. They have 8 games left; 4 at home, and 4 on the road. They should be able to win all 4 of the home games, and at least 1 of the road games. Here's the schedule:

Sat., Feb. 8	Iowa
Wed., Feb. 12	at Indiana
Sat., Feb. 15	Ohio State
Wed., Feb. 19	at Purdue

Wed., Feb. 26	at Wisconsin
Sat., Mar. 1	Illinois
Wed., Mar. 5	at Penn State
Sat., Mar. 8	Purdue

It's interesting to note that all 4 home games are on Saturdays, and all 4 away games are on Wednesdays.

The home games are all toughies, but they're all winnable. Iowa is a lot like Michigan, and the teams match up well. UM beat Ohio State in Columbus last month, so it's not unreasonable to expect them to beat OSU in Ann Arbor. Michigan hung with Illinois on the road a lot better than anyone expected, and they could beat them at home. The final home game of the season against Purdue could be very exciting, since Purdue and UM are 1st and 2nd in the standings at this point.

The games at Indiana and Purdue are a lot like the games this past week. Michigan could win them, but they'll have to play their best games. UM hasn't won at Indiana since 01/24/1995, but they did win at Purdue back 01/08/2000. The other 2 road games will be tough, but not as tough as the games at Indiana and Purdue. Their last win at Wisconsin was on 02/27/1999, and their last win at Penn State was on 02/25/1998. Penn State is struggling through an 0-7 start in the Big Ten, and Michigan should be able to win the game in State College, but the other 3 games will be tough.

As you can see above, the only game for Michigan this week is at home on Saturday (02/08/2003), when they play Iowa. The game is at 12:15. Come on out to Crisler and cheer them on. The crowd support has been growing each game, and it really helps the team get fired up to play their best.

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