02/17/2003 - Week #16 – Road Woes, Home Cooking

The University of Michigan men's basketball team had a mixed week, losing badly at Indiana (63-49) on Wednesday (02/12/2003), then beating Ohio State (70-54) in Ann Arbor on Saturday (02/15/2003). The two games leave Michigan with a 15-9 record overall, 8-3 in the Big Ten. Michigan is still tied for 1st place in the conference standings, but now it's a 3-way tie with Purdue and Wisconsin. For this team to still be in 1st place this far into the season is truly a miracle, and it's something for all UM fans to be proud of. The Wolverines have already exceeded all expectations, and they're not done yet. Incidentally, the win against OSU was the 12th win in a row at home for Michigan.

Remember the MSU game on 01/26/2003? Remember how well Michigan played? Well, they looked as bad at Indiana as they had looked good vs. MSU. They played their worst game since the ill-fated Virgin Islands Paradise Jam, back in November. They didn't hustle, they didn't fight for the loose balls, and they didn't play smart. That's a good recipe for getting blown out in Assembly Hall. The 49 points they scored is their low for the season, and their 18 points in the first half is embarrassing. They also shot poorly: 38% (21-for-56) from the floor, 39% (5-for-13) from 3-point range, and 40% (2-for-5) from the free-throw line. Check out that last stat: 2-for-5. It's not unusual for Michigan to shoot less free-throws than IU on the road, but 5? Unbelievable. IU shot 13-for-18, which is more like it. That accounts for 11 of the 14 points that UM lost by.

Fortunately, Michigan bounced back on Saturday against the Buckeyes. Granted, this is not a very good OSU team this year, but they can be dangerous. The game started out as a back-and-forth, see-saw contest, until Daniel Horton led a 18-5 Michigan run in the last 5:40 of the 1st half. That took the lead up to 14 (38-24), and made the 2nd half a lot more comfortable. Michigan pushed the lead up to as high as 27 points, and just ran the clock out. OSU made the score a little more respectable, but they were meaningless points. Michigan had the game firmly in hand.

As far as individual performances for the week, it wasn't the usual "Big Three". Instead, we're starting to see the rise of Lester Abram. He had a good game against Iowa last Saturday (02/08/2003), and he had another good game against OSU, with 17 points and 8 rebounds. He had a lousy game at Indiana (3 points, on 1-for-7 shooting), but so did almost everyone else. The "Big Three" did OK at Indiana, as Daniel Horton led all Michigan scorers with 16 points, and Bernard Robinson, Jr. had 10 points. They were the only UM players to reach double figures. LaVell Blanchard got close, with 8 points, and so did Graham Brown, also with 8 points. I already mentioned Abram's 3 points, and Chris Hunter and Chuck Bailey each had 2 points. That's it. The shooting percentages were not very good: I already mentioned Abram's 1-for-7 shooting, and Blanchard was 3-for-13. B-Rob did OK (5-for-11), Graham Brown did OK (4-for-9), and Horton did OK (6-for-12). Michigan also got out-rebounded (40-31), and had 9 shots blocked, versus only 2 that they blocked.

Against OSU, Horton was the high scorer again, this time with 21 points. Blanchard scored a lot of points when the game was already decided, and ended up with 19, on 5-for-16 shooting. I already mentioned Abram's 17 points. The big surprise was B-Rob: he had 0 points, on 0-for-4 shooting. That's the first time he's been shutout in his Michigan career. Brown had 2 points, Hunter had 2 points, and Bailey had 9 points, to round out the scoring.

The Big Ten race is heating up. Here are the current standings:

	Big Ten			Overall		
Teams	W	L	Pct.	W	L	Pct.

Wisconsin	8	3	0.727	18	5	0.783
Purdue	8	3	0.727	16	6	0.727
Michigan	8	3	0.727	15	9	0.625
Illinois	6	4	0.600	16	5	0.762
Minnesota	6	4	0.600	14	7	0.667
Michigan State	6	5	0.545	14	9	0.609
Iowa	5	5	0.500	13	8	0.619
Indiana	5	6	0.455	15	9	0.625
Ohio State	5	7	0.417	12	11	0.522
Northwestern	2	9	0.182	10	12	0.455
Penn State	0	10	0.000	5	16	0.238

Realistically, only the top 5 teams have a chance at the title. The teams with 5 or more losses can't hope to pass the teams with only 3 or 4 losses. Let's look at each of the contenders:

Michigan (8-3)

Michigan has 5 Big Ten games left: 3 on the road, and 2 at home. Here's their schedule:

Wed., Feb. 19	at Purdue
Wed., Feb. 26	at Wisconsin
Sat., Mar. 1	Illinois
Wed., Mar. 5	at Penn State
Sat., Mar. 8	Purdue

The game at Purdue will be a battle for 1st place, and the game a week later at Wisconsin could also be for 1st place. It's great that Michigan plays both of the teams that are tied with them for 1st, along with Illinois, since they're in 2nd place. If they can beat them, no one else can catch them. The hard part is going to be beating them. Michigan won their first two Big Ten road games, but they've lost their last 3 road games, and West Lafayette is a tough place to play. If they can pull off a win at Purdue, they will have a legitimate chance at winning the Big Ten title.

Prediction: 3-2 (lose at Purdue and at Wisconsin, beat Illinois at home, Penn State on the road, and Purdue at home). Final record: 11-5 (tied for 1st).

Purdue (8-3)

Purdue has 5 Big Ten games left: 3 on the road, and 2 at home. Here's their schedule:

Wed., Feb. 19	Michigan
Sat., Feb. 22	at Ohio State
Wed., Feb. 26	Penn State
Sat., Mar. 1	at Michigan State
Sat., Mar. 8	at Michigan

The home game against Michigan will be a battle for 1st place. They shouldn't have much trouble beating OSU on the road, or Penn State at home. Michigan State has been unbeatable in East Lansing, so they'll probably lose that one. The final game, against Michigan in Ann Arbor, could be for all the marbles.

Prediction: 3-2 (beat Michigan at home, OSU on the road, Penn State at home, lose to Michigan State and Michigan on the road). Final record: 11-5 (tied for 1st).

Wisconsin (8-3)

Wisconsin has 5 Big Ten games left: 3 on the road, and 2 at home. Here's their schedule:

Wed., Feb. 19	at Penn State
Sat., Feb. 22	at Iowa
Wed., Feb. 26	Michigan
Sun., Mar. 2	at Minnesota
Wed., Mar. 5	Illinois

The home game against Michigan will probably be a battle for 1st place. They shouldn't have much trouble beating Penn State on the road, but the game at Iowa could be tricky. Minnesota has been unbeatable in Minneapolis, so they'll probably lose that one. The final game, at home against Illinois, could be for all the marbles.

Prediction: 3-2 (beat Penn State and Iowa on the road, beat Michigan at home, lose to Minnesota on the road, lose to Illinois at home). Final record: 11-5 (tied for 1st).

Illinois (6-4)

Illinois has 6 Big Ten games left: 2 on the road, 3 at home, and 1 at a neutral site. Here's their schedule:

Tue., Feb. 18	Michigan State
Sat., Feb. 22	Northwestern (in Chicago)
Tue., Feb. 25	Indiana
Sat., Mar. 1	at Michigan
Wed., Mar. 5	at Wisconsin
Sat., Mar. 8	Minnesota

The only easy game they have is against Northwestern, although Minnesota isn't too tough away from Minneapolis. Their biggest test will be the 2-game stretch on the road against Michigan and Wisconsin.

Prediction: 4-2 (lose to Michigan State at home, beat Northwestern in Chicago, beat Indiana at home, lose to Michigan on the road, beat Wisconsin on the road, beat Minnesota at home). Final record: 10-6 (2nd place).

Minnesota (6-4)

Minnesota has 6 Big Ten games left: 4 on the road, and 2 at home. Here's their schedule:

Wed., Feb. 19	at Northwestern
Sat., Feb. 22	Penn State
Wed., Feb. 26	at Michigan State
Sun., Mar. 2	Wisconsin
Tue., Mar. 4	at Indiana
Sat., Mar. 8	at Illinois

Minnesota is unbeatable at home and mediocre on the road. They will certainly beat Penn State at home, and they should be able to beat Wisconsin as well. They should win their road game at Northwestern, but the other 3 road games don't look promising.

Prediction: 3-3 (beat Northwestern on the road, beat Penn State at home, lose at MSU, beat Wisconsin at home, lose at Indiana and at Illinois). Final record: 9-7 (3rd place).

If things play out the way I expect them to, Michigan should end up in a 3-way tie for 1st place in the Big Ten, with Purdue and Wisconsin, at 11-5. I expect Illinois and Michigan State to be tied for 2nd place at 10-6, and Minnesota and Iowa to be tied for 3rd place at 9-7. Maybe Indiana will sneak up there into 2nd or 3rd. We should know a lot more by this time next week. Drop by to see how it went, and why.