02/24/2003 - Week #17 – All Alone In First Place

The University of Michigan men's basketball team won its only game this week, at Purdue (78-67) on Wednesday (02/19/2003). This is a huge win. Purdue had been undefeated at home this year (13-0), and they had been tied with Michigan (and Wisconsin) for 1st place going into this game. Michigan won decisively, and Wisconsin lost that same evening at Penn State, so UM climbed into 1st place all alone. The Wisconsin loss was a huge upset, considering that Penn State came into the game with an 0-10 Big Ten record. It just goes to show how tough it can be to win on the road in the Big Ten, and how impressive Michigan's win at Purdue is. The win raises Michigan's overall record to 16-9, 9-3 in the Big Ten. For this team to be all alone in 1st place this far into the season is amazing. Incidentally, Purdue (#23) is the first ranked team that UM has beaten since they knocked off Iowa on 02/14/2001, back when Brian Ellerbe (who?) was the head coach.

The Wolverines looked very sharp against Purdue, and they played one of their better games. They opened a small lead early in the game, slowly built it up during the 1st half, then finished the half strong, to lead by 13, 42-29. They held the lead for the rest of the game, although they did let Purdue get close a couple times in the 2nd half, and they won by 11 points. Getting ahead and staying ahead is very important on the road, especially in a tough venue like Mackey Arena.

As far as individual performances for the week, it was the new "Big Three". Once again, Bernard Robinson, Jr. had an "off" night, with just 6 points, but Lester Abram picked up the scoring slack with 13. The real star was Daniel Horton, who had a career-high 31 points. He didn't shoot particularly well from the field (8-for-22), but he hit a respectable 3-for-9 from 3-point range, and a fabulous 12-for-13 from the free-throw line. LaVell Blanchard had a good game as well, with 20 points on 7-for-10 shooting. There have been several games this season where Blanchard has gotten 16-20 points, but he's shot poorly to get them. It was great to see him get 20 points with a good shooting percentage. The 5th starter, Graham Brown, had 2 points, and only 1 rebound, so it was not a big night for him.

As usual, the bench scoring was poor: Chris Hunter had 4 points, and Chuck Bailey had 2 points. That's all. If you had told me at the beginning of the season just how little the bench was going to score, I would have predicted that Michigan wouldn't win a game in the Big Ten. Normally, a team with this little bench support doesn't win much, but this team is different. All season long, Coach Amaker has managed to get a lot of minutes out of his starters, with some key minutes from the bench, and somehow win games that could easily be losses. I shouldn't say anything, but Michigan has been really lucky to have gone this far without any serious injuries to the key players. They've also been very good at keeping the key players from fouling out. With a bench this short, early foul trouble could be a big problem.

The key statistic from the Purdue game was 3-point shooting. Michigan shot 47% (8-for-17), while Purdue shot 13% (2-for-15). That's 18 points difference right there. UM also won the battle on the boards (32-25), and shot free-throws very well (18-for-19, 95%).

The Big Ten race is going right down to the wire. With only 2 weeks left, here are the current standings:

	Big Ten			Overall		
Teams	W	L	Pct.	W	L	Pct.
Michigan	9	3	0.750	16	9	0.640
Wisconsin	9	4	0.692	19	6	0.760

Illinois	8	4	0.667	18	5	0.783
Minnesota	8	4	0.667	16	7	0.696
Purdue	8	5	0.615	16	8	0.667
Indiana	6	6	0.500	16	9	0.640
Michigan State	6	6	0.500	14	11	0.560
Ohio State	6	7	0.462	13	11	0.542
Iowa	5	7	0.417	13	10	0.565
Northwestern	2	11	0.154	10	14	0.417
Penn State	1	11	0.083	6	17	0.261

Purdue lost twice this week, to Michigan on Wednesday and Ohio State on Saturday, so they're probably out of the race. They could still end up in 2nd place, but they don't stand a very good chance at 1st place. At this point, only the top 4 teams have a chance at the title. Here's an updated look at each of the contenders:

Michigan (9-3)

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

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

The game at Wisconsin will be another battle for 1st place, and the home game against Illinois could be just as big. If they can win both of them, they might lock up at least a tie for the Big Ten title. However, Wisconsin is very tough at home, and this game will be a lot like last week's game at Purdue.

Prediction: 3-1 (lose at Wisconsin, beat Illinois at home, Penn State on the road, and Purdue at home). Final record: 12-4 (1st place).

Wisconsin (9-4)

Wisconsin only has 3 Big Ten games left: 1 on the road, and 2 at home. Here's their schedule:

Wed., Feb. 26	Michigan
Sun., Mar. 2	at Minnesota
Wed., Mar. 5	Illinois

The home game against Michigan will be a battle for 1st place. 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: 1-2 (beat Michigan at home, lose to Minnesota on the road, lose to Illinois at home). Final record: 10-6 (3rd place).

Illinois (8-4)

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

Tue., Feb. 25	Indiana
Sat., Mar. 1	at Michigan
Wed., Mar. 5	at Wisconsin
Sat., Mar. 8	Minnesota

The game against Indiana will be tough, but their biggest test will be the 2-game stretch on the road against Michigan and Wisconsin. They shouldn't have much trouble with Minnesota at home.

Prediction: 3-1 (beat Indiana at home, lose to Michigan on the road, beat Wisconsin on the road, beat Minnesota at home). Final record: 11-5 (2nd place).

Minnesota (8-4)

Minnesota has 4 Big Ten games left: 3 on the road, and 1 at home. Here's their schedule:

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 should be able to beat Wisconsin at home, but the 3 road games don't look promising.

Prediction: 1-3 (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 (5th place).

If things play out the way I expect them to, Michigan should end up in 1st place at 12-4, Illinois in 2nd at 11-5, Wisconsin in 3rd at 10-6, and then the rest of the pack. Once again, we should know a lot more by this time next week.

As you can see above, Michigan plays 2 games this week, at Wisconsin on Wednesday (02/26/2003), and at home vs. Illinois on Saturday (03/01/2003). The Illinois game is at 12:15. Come on out and support the Wolverines. The crowds have been getting bigger and bigger, and better and better. Crisler Arena is finally getting some atmosphere back.

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