03/03/2003 - Week #18 – A Tough Week

The University of Michigan men's basketball team lost both games they played this week, at Wisconsin (73-42) on Wednesday (02/26/2003), and at home against Illinois (82-79) on Saturday (03/01/2003). These were both tough losses, even though the Wisconsin game turned into a rout. The 31 point loss at Wisconsin was the worst by UM this season, but the game was still within reach in the 2nd half, until it got away. In contrast, the Illinois game was close the whole way, with neither team getting more than 7 points ahead. It was tied in the last 2:00, and Michigan had a shot to tie it up in the last minute. The losses drop Michigan's overall record to 16-11, 9-5 in the Big Ten. After a 6-0 start in the Big Ten, UM has gone 3-5. Granted, the last 8 games have been against tougher opponents than the first 6 games, but the team has definitely lost some of the magic they had during the 13-game winning streak. The Wolverines are now in 3rd place in the Big Ten standings, with 2 games left. If they win both of these games, and Illinois beats Wisconsin in Madison, then loses at home to Minnesota, Michigan would tie for 1st in the Big Ten, but that doesn't look very likely.

Before we look at the two losses, let's try to put them into perspective. Wisconsin is almost unbeatable at home this season (15-1), with their only loss coming to Wake Forest in the Big Ten-ACC Challenge. They're undefeated in Big Ten play at home. Illinois came into the game at Crisler Arena ranked #18, and they were definitely better than Michigan. For UM to hang in there, and be within striking distance at the end, is an encouraging sign. Yeah, I know, a loss is a loss, but these losses were very forgivable, they just came at a bad time. Incidentally, the loss to Illinois ended a 12-game home winning streak. Bummer.

I know I've said it before, but the Big Ten schedule is a marathon, not a sprint. It looks like the long season and the short bench have conspired to wear down the Wolverines, especially the freshmen. Other than the Fab Five, the 3 freshman starters (Daniel Horton, Graham Brown, and Lester Abram) have played more minutes than most freshman classes do at major schools. There are a handful of major teams starting 2 freshmen this year, but very few starting 3. It's a lot to expect from kids that were playing in high school 12 months ago.

Now for the sad part: looking back at a pair of losses. Michigan never really got untracked against Wisconsin. They shot poorly the whole game, and were behind almost the whole time. After they tied the game at 7-7, Wisconsin went on an 11-0 run, and that was the ball game. UM cut the lead down to 9 a couple times in the 2nd half, but that was as close as they got, then Wisconsin pulled away. There were a couple stats that tell the whole story:

- Michigan shot 31% (16-for-51) from the floor, while Wisconsin shot 53% (28-for-43).
- Michigan shot 7% (1-for-14) from 3-point range, Wisconsin shot 50% (10-for-20).
- Michigan had 12 turnovers, Wisconsin only had 6.

The Wolverines looked much better against Illinois, and they played them to a standstill. The game was fast-paced and exciting, with many runs and lead-changes. Unfortunately, Illinois had the last run, and won the game. The game was close the whole way, and the statistics are nearly identical. Once again, the big difference was Brian Cook, who was too much for Michigan, just as he had been in the game at Illinois.

As far as individual performances for the week, only Lester Abram had a good week. He had 14 points at Wisconsin, and 16 points vs. Illinois. Unfortunately, he was shutout in the 2nd half of the Illinois game, when UM needed every point they could get. Bernard

Robinson, Jr. had a decent week, with 14 points at Wisconsin, and 9 points against Illinois. The other 3 starters played well in the Illinois game, but had a tough time in the game at Wisconsin. LaVell Blanchard had 5 points (on 1-for-8 shooting) at Wisconsin, but came back with 25 points against Illinois. Graham Brown actually did pretty well in both games, with 7 points at Wisconsin and 10 points against Illinois. The big story this week was Daniel Horton. He struggled mightily in the Wisconsin game, scoring 2 points on 1-for-11 shooting, including 0-for-8 from 3-point range. He did score 12 points against Illinois, but he shot miserably again: 4-for-17. That's a combined 5-for-28 on the week. Ugh.

As usual, the bench scoring was poor: none of the bench players scored in the Wisconsin game, and only Chris Hunter scored in the Illinois game, with 7 points. In the Illinois game, Chuck Bailey never even got in the game, for the first time in his career. I'm not sure if there's any more to that story, but I'll try to find out.

As I mentioned above, Michigan is probably out of the race for the Big Ten title, but there's still a glimmer of hope. First of all, the Wolverines have to win both of their remaining games: at Penn State on Wednesday (03/05/2003), and at home against Purdue on Saturday (03/08/2003). Those are both winnable games. In addition, Wisconsin only has one game left, at home against Illinois on Wednesday. If they lose that game, Michigan could end up tied with them, but there's still Illinois ahead of Michigan in the standings. Illinois must beat Wisconsin in Madison, which will not be easy, then they need to lose to Minnesota at home on Saturday, which is not likely. In that case, there would be a 3-way tie for 1st place. Don't hold your breath.

Here are the current Big Ten standings:

	Big Ten			Overall		
Teams	W	L	Pct.	W	L	Pct.
Wisconsin	11	4	0.733	21	6	0.778
Illinois	10	4	0.714	20	5	0.800
Michigan	9	5	0.643	16	11	0.593
Purdue	9	6	0.600	17	9	0.654
Minnesota	8	6	0.571	16	9	0.640
Michigan State	8	6	0.571	16	11	0.593
Indiana	7	7	0.500	17	10	0.630
Iowa	6	8	0.429	14	11	0.560
Ohio State	6	8	0.429	13	12	0.520
Northwestern	3	11	0.214	11	14	0.440
Penn State	1	13	0.071	6	19	0.240

As I mentioned above, Michigan plays 2 games this week, at Penn State on Wednesday, and at home vs. Purdue on Saturday. The Purdue game is at 4:37. Come on out and support the Wolverines for their final home game. There are 3 seniors on the team, LaVell Blanchard, Gavin Groninger, and Rotulu Adebiyi, and this is your chance to say farewell to them.

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