03/17/2003 - Week #20 – Season Over

It's over. The University of Michigan men's basketball team ended their 2002-2003 season on Friday (03/14/2003), losing in the quarterfinals of the Big Ten Tournament in Chicago to Indiana, 63-56. Due to the self-imposed sanctions, Michigan cannot go to the NIT or NCAA tournaments, so their season is over. The Wolverines ended up with an overall record of 17-13, 10-6 in the Big Ten. It was a disappointing way to end the season, after so much promise in the middle. With the #3 seed in the Big Ten Tournament, it was reasonable to expect UM to win 1 or 2 games, perhaps all 3. Maybe next year. More about that below.

Jim Carty, of "The Ann Arbor News", said it best: Michigan just ran out of gas against Indiana. After going the whole season without any significant injuries, Daniel Horton sprained his ankle in practice on Thursday, and was hobbled against IU. He played, but he wasn't nearly as effective as usual. LaVell Blanchard also had a sore ankle that he's been dealing with for more than a week, but he played over it, and almost carried the team past Indiana. The biggest problem in the game was the short bench. Another point guard would have helped. Michigan led for most of the game, but once Indiana went ahead with about 6:00 left to go in the game, it was over. The Wolverines just didn't have enough gas left in the tank to keep up with them.

As far as individual performances for the game, LaVell Blanchard was the high scorer, with 21 points. Bernard Robinson, Jr. was the only other Wolverine to score in double figures, with 15 points. B-Rob also had a career-high 11 rebounds, for a double-double. Lester Abram had 9 points, and Graham Brown had 6. The big story was Daniel Horton. He had a tough time, scoring 3 points on 1-for-6 shooting.

As usual, the bench scoring was poor: only Chris Hunter scored, with 2 points. Gavin Groninger played 20 minutes, but didn't score, and Chuck Bailey never even got in the game, for the second time in his career. It appears that Bailey may be thinking about transferring, which is a shame. He could be an integral part of Michigan's continued success in the next few years. I sure hope he stays.

Now that the season is over, it's time to look back on it. In general, it was a successful season, but it could have been even better. Michigan had a weak start (0-6), a strong middle portion (16-3), and a weak finish (1-4). Let's break the season down that way, starting with the 1st portion: the start-up.

Michigan came into the season with lots of unknowns, especially at center and point guard. With 3 freshmen starting (Horton, Abram, and Brown), it took a while for the team to "mesh". They won both of their exhibition games, but looked really out of sync in their first 5 non-conference games. As it has been for the last few years, the problem seemed to be a matter of focus and leadership, not talent. They expected to lose the close games, and they did. Blanchard didn't step up as a leader, and Horton hadn't proven himself (yet) enough to start leading. Once it became clear that Horton could be a leader, even as a freshman, the tide started to turn. They finally started looking good in the game at Duke, even though they lost. That loss left them at 0-6, and set the stage for the 2nd portion of their season: the comeback.

The second portion of the season included an impressive 13-game winning streak, highlighted by a glorious victory over Michigan State. Horton and Blanchard shared the leadership role nicely, and the team expected to win the close games, not lose them. After the 13-0 run, they split their next 6 games, but they still were in 1st place in the Big Ten,

with 4 games to go. Then they ran out of gas, which led to the final portion of the season: the letdown.

Michigan just couldn't finish the deal down the stretch. The short bench and the nagging injuries finally caught up with them, and they lost 3 out of the last 4 regular season games, and their only game in the Big Ten Tournament. In their defense, they played a tough schedule, and they didn't lose to anyone that they shouldn't have lost to, but they still lost. By this point in the season, it wasn't a question of focus or leadership, it was a question of stamina and strength. The team just got worn down, and they couldn't quite get over the hump in any of the losses.

As far as individual contributions, here are the final grades:

Name	Grade	Comments
Freshmen		
Lester Abram	B+	Improved scoring, decent rebounding. Improved as the season went on.
Graham Brown	B+	Does well for his size, hustles, a winner. Inconsistent scoring, good defense.
Sherrod Harrell	C+	OK running the point, not much of a shooter. Pretty good for a walk-on.
Daniel Horton	A	Good scorer, good dribbler, good leadership, a winner. Needs to make better decisions about shoot vs. pass.
Chris Hunter	B-	Too thin, gets pushed around, can't handle opposing big men very well. Nice finesse, decent shooting touch. Will do much better next year at power forward.
Sophomores		
Chuck Bailey	B	Excellent sub off the bench, great shooting percentage. Sparks the team when he comes in. Didn't play enough.
Juniors		
Bernard Robinson, Jr.	B+	The most athletic player on the team, good scorer, not a very good shooter.
Seniors		
LaVell Blanchard	A-	Great scorer and rebounder. He'll be missed.
Gavin Groninger	C-	Went downhill each season after his promising freshman campaign.
Rotolu Adebiyi	Inc.	Didn't play enough.
Coach		
Tommy Amaker	B	Great recruiter, good practice coach, decent bench coach. Has done a great job molding a young team.

Blanchard ended up leading the team in scoring (16.2 points/game) and rebounding (6.8 per game), for the 4th time in a row. He's the first Michigan player to do this for all 4 years. He also ended up 6th all-time in scoring (1818 points) and 7th all-time in rebounding (845).

Horton was the 2nd leading scorer on the team (15.2 points/game). He led the team in minutes played (1082), 3-pointers (74), assists (134) and steals (41).

B-Rob was the 3rd leading scorer (11.7 points/game). He was 2nd on the team in assists (100), steals (38), and blocked shots (19).

Abram was the 4th leading scorer (10.6 points/game). 4 of the 5 starters averaged in double-figures, which is very impressive. Only Brown (5.8 points/game) didn't average in double figures, but he played very good defense, and did his part.

The official awards will be given out at the Basketball Banquet in April, but here are my votes:

Most Valuable Player: Daniel Horton. Blanchard may have scored more points, but Horton made the offense tick, both with his scoring and his work at point guard.

Best Defensive Player: Bernard Robinson, Jr. He shut down some of the best players in the country.

Most Improved Player: Bernard Robinson, Jr. He started slowly this season, but as the year went on, he kicked his game up a notch. Blanchard also improved a lot from last year, but not as much as B-Rob.

Hustler: Graham Brown. He's another Chris Young; ready to do whatever it takes to help the team, and he always plays hard.

Enough about this season, it's time to move on to even better news: the future. This year's team was a big improvement over last year's team, and next year's team is going to be even better than this year's. The only significant loss to graduation is Blanchard, although we'll certainly miss Groninger and Rotolu Adebiyi as well. Here's a look at the returning and incoming players. Between transfers and red-shirts, this all gets pretty confusing, so I'll group the players by their class year.

Seniors (Class of 2004)

Another small senior class, with only 1 starter and 1 walk-on.

- Bernard Robinson, Jr. (6' 6" forward) – B-Rob will be a capable leader, sharing the role with Horton. He can take over a game, but he occasionally disappears.
- Colin Dill (6' 7" forward) – A walk-on who contributes in practice, but plays little.

Juniors (Class of 2005)

The upcoming junior class is also quite small, with no starters.

- Chuck Bailey (6' 7" forward) – If he doesn't transfer, Bailey can contribute next year. I don't know what he did to get in Amaker's doghouse, but if he can get that worked out, he can be a solid contributor off the bench. He's got good size, good moves, and a great shooting touch.
- Chris Aguwa (6' 7" forward) - A walk-on who contributes in practice, but plays little.
- J.C. Mathis (6' 8" forward) – Mathis transferred from Virginia last year, and sat out this year due to NCAA eligibility rules. He'll have 2 years of eligibility left. He's a powerful forward/center, and he'll definitely help the team next year. He's not particularly tall, but he's big and strong.

Sophomores (Class of 2006)

The upcoming sophomore class is loaded. 3 of the starters on this year's team were freshmen, and we hope they'll all be back, battle-tested and ready to play even better next year. They all got significant playing experience, and they'll be much better off for it.

- Daniel Horton (6' 3" guard) – Horton was one of the team leaders this year, and I'm sure he'll continue in that role next year. He learned a lot this year, and he proved how well he can play in the clutch. Now that the team has accepted him as a leader, he'll be able to start fast next year.
- Lester Abram (6' 6" guard) - Abram came on strong in the 2nd half of the season, and showed what he can do. If he picks up where he left off, he'll be a real force next year.
- Graham Brown (6' 9" forward/center) - Brown had a solid freshman season, and also learned a lot. He's still undersized for a Big Ten center, but he did his best. He'll be helped by all the new big men coming in next year (see below).
- Chris Hunter (6' 11" forward/center) - With the addition of the new big men, Hunter will get to move to his natural position of power forward. He did a very nice job as the backup center, and as the 6th man.
- Sherrod Harrell (6' 3" guard) – Harrell did a good job spelling Horton at point guard this season. He ran the team pretty well, and didn't make many mistakes. He'll be able to make a solid contribution next year.
- Dani Wohl (5' 11" guard) – Wohl transferred from SUNY-Binghamton last year, and sat out this year due to NCAA eligibility rules. He'll have 3 years of eligibility left.

Freshmen (Class of 2007)

This is another strong recruiting class, including a red-shirt freshman.

- Brent Petway (6' 9" forward/center) – Petway is from Griffin, Georgia, and he'll provide a lot more height and muscle inside. He's also a good scorer.
- Courtney Sims (6' 11" center) – Sims is from Dedham, Massachusetts, and he's a lot like Petway, but taller.
- Dion Harris (6' 4" guard) – Harris is from Detroit, and he's a shooting guard, but he can play some point guard if needed.
- Amadou Ba (6' 10" forward/center) - Ba is from Mauritania, Africa. He was red-shirted this year, but he'll play next year, and have 4 years of eligibility. He's tall, but a little rough around the edges. He hasn't been playing basketball that long, and it'll take a while for him to get comfortable out there.

So, you can see that Michigan will have the personnel next season to be very competitive. Look at the heights: 2 players at 6' 11" (Hunter and Sims), 1 player at 6' 10" (Ba), 2 players at 6' 9" (Brown and Petway), and 1 player at 6' 8" (Mathis). In addition to a lot more height, there will also be a lot more depth on the bench. There will be 9 legitimate players who can start: 3 guards (Horton, Abram, and Harris), 3 forwards (Mathis, Hunter, and B-Rob), and 3 centers (Brown, Petway, and Sims). Probably all 3 of the centers will also play some forward as well, except maybe Sims. If Amaker can mold this collection of talent into a team, they'll be a major force to be reckoned with.

One of the things that Michigan has to improve on is their performance in tournaments. Since the Fab Five years, they are 22-23 in tournament games. Here's a rundown of their performance over the last 9 seasons:

1994-1995
Maui Classic: 2-1* (beat Tulane, lost to Arizona State, beat Utah)
US West Cellular Air Time Tournament: 1-1* (beat Portland, lost to Washington)
NCAA Tournament: 0-1 (lost to Western Kentucky)

1995-1996
Preseason NIT: 2-2* (beat DePaul, beat Weber State, lost to Arizona, lost to Georgia Tech)
Las Vegas Holiday Classic: 1-1* (lost to UNLV, beat Davidson)
NCAA Tournament: 0-1 (lost to Texas)

1996-1997
Rainbow Classic: 1-2* (lost to Memphis, beat Washington State, lost to Pittsburgh)
NIT: 5-0* (beat Miami (FL), Oklahoma State, Notre Dame, Arkansas, Florida State)

1997-1998
Puerto Rico Holiday Classic: 3-0* (beat Murray State, American PR, Syracuse)
Big Ten Tournament: 3-0* (beat Iowa, Minnesota, Purdue)
NCAA Tournament: 1-1* (beat Davidson, lost to UCLA)

1998-1999
Maui Invitational: 1-2* (beat Clemson, lost to Syracuse, lost to Utah)
Big Ten Tournament: 1-1* (beat Purdue, lost to Ohio State)

1999-2000
Big Ten Tournament: 0-1 (lost to Penn State)
NIT: 0-1 (lost to Notre Dame)

2000-2001
BB&T Classic: 0-2 (lost to Maryland, St. John's)
Big Ten Tournament: 0-1 (lost to Penn State)

2001-2002
Big Ten Tournament: 1-1 (beat Northwestern, lost to Ohio State)

2002-2003
Virgin Islands Paradise Jam: 0-3 (lost to St. Bonaventure, Virginia Tech, Kansas State)
Big Ten Tournament: 0-1 (lost to Indiana)

* Note: These victories were all forfeited as part of the self-imposed sanctions.

Overall: 22-23 (1-43 with sanctions)
Preseason: 5-8
Holiday: 6-6
Big Ten Tournament: 5-5
NIT: 5-1
NCAA: 1-3

That's it for this season. It's been quite a ride, and I'm glad you all came along for it. See you next season. It should be pretty exciting.