11/10/2003 – Week #01 – A New Era

Welcome back to "Nothing But 'Net" for the 2003-2004 season. It's great to be back, for what is looking like a very promising season. Now that the dark cloud of NCAA sanctions is finally lifted from the basketball program, I see this as the beginning of a new era in Michigan basketball. Coach Tommy Amaker has a very good team, a very young team, and the future is looking very bright.

Once again, it seems too early for basketball season, but the season has already started. In fact, it started almost a month ago. The 2003-2004 UM men's basketball team played a 3-game "foreign tour" in Toronto, Canada on October 11-13. This was a very clever use of the NCAA rules governing foreign tours. A team is allowed to go on a foreign tour every four years, while their school is out of session. Well, it's been four years since UM last went on a foreign tour, Canada is a foreign country, and UM was on their new (last 2 years) "Fall Study Break", so they met all the requirements. Normally, this rule is used to take a team on an extended tour of Europe over the summer, but Coach Amaker came up with a very clever application of the rule to get an early jump on the basketball season. Not only did the team get to start practicing more than a month before any of the other teams, they got to play 3 extra exhibition games as well. The Wolverines made the most of their tour by winning all 3 games, and getting to play all 14 of their players. On Saturday (10/11/2003), they beat G.T. Express, 95-52. The next day, Sunday (10/12/2003), they beat the University of Guelph, 88-52. On Monday (10/13/2003), they wrapped up their tour by beating G.T. Express again, 100-74. I didn't go to Toronto, and the games weren't on the radio or TV, so all I know about them is what I read in "The Ann Arbor News" and on MGoBlue.com. Basically, it sounds like UM played well on their exhibition tour, and everyone played well at some point.

Since the Canadian tour, Michigan has practiced some more, including a couple open practices, and held their annual Maize and Blue Scrimmage on 10/25/2003, right after the big football win over Purdue. I did make it to the scrimmage, and it was fun.

Finally, the main part of the season started on Saturday (11/07/2003) afternoon, when Michigan played an exhibition game against Michigan Tech. It was a game that they should have won, and they did, by the score of 73-61. UM let MTU hang around for the first half, but a couple of minutes into the 2nd half, the Wolverines started to pull away. They did it with improved defense.

The big guns for Michigan were the two "DH" guards, sophomore Daniel Horton and freshman Dion Harris. Horton had 23 points, on 8-for-14 shooting, and Harris had 17 points, on 6-for-10 shooting. Both DH's went 3-for-6 from 3-point range. Sophomore Lester Abram (11 points) and freshman Courtney Sims (10 points) were the other 2 UM players in double figures for the game. Abram had a rough time getting his 11 points, shooting 5-for-15 (1-for-4 from 3-point range), and Sims got most of his points at the free throw line, shooting 8-for-12 there. Besides Horton, Harris, and Abram, the other 2 starters were sophomore Chris Hunter and junior J.C. Mathis. Hunter was 2-for-2 shooting, with a free throw, for 5 points, and Mathis was 1-for-5 shooting, with 2 free throws, for 4 points. The only other player to score for Michigan was sophomore Sherrod Harrell, with 3 points on 1-for-1 shooting from 3-point range. Sophomore Dani Wohl and freshman Amadou Ba both played, but did not score. Only Wohl (4 minutes) played less than 10 minutes.

Note that this starting lineup (Horton, Harris, Abram, Hunter, and Mathis) is not going to be the normal starting lineup. Three of Michigan's big guns did not play in this game, due to minor injuries. Senior Bernard Robinson, Jr. has blisters, sophomore Graham Brown has a

sore ankle, and freshman Brent Petway has a sore shoulder. They are not expected to miss any of the regular season games.

Go back and re-read the description of the game, above. I mentioned 12 of the 14 players on the team, missing only senior Colin Dill, and freshman John Andrews. That's kind of unusual, but read it more carefully. How many juniors did I mention? One, Mathis. He's the junior class. How about seniors? One, B-Rob. He and Dill are the senior class. This is a very young, very tall, very talented squad, with 5 freshmen and 6 sophomores. Let's take a look at them:

Freshmen

John Andrews (#11)
Height: 6' 5"
Weight: 200
Position: Wing
Comments: I don't know much about Andrews, but I've read that he was 2nd team All-State Class B last year, and that he's at UM on an academic scholarship. I'm guessing that he'll be mostly a practice player this season.

Amadou Ba (#50)
Height: 6' 10"
Weight: 250
Position: Center
Comments: Ba sat out last year as a redshirt, which is sure to help him this year, since he knows the program, and he's gotten lots of practice. He's big and tall, and he'll provide some muscle underneath, coming off the bench.

Dion Harris (#5)
Height: 6' 3"
Weight: 200
Position: Guard
Comments: Harris comes in with excellent credentials, including 2003 Mr. Basketball in the state of Michigan. He's a shooting guard who can also drive to the basketball. He has good ball-handling skills, and can fill in at point guard if necessary.

Brent Petway (#23)
Height: 6' 9"
Weight: 200
Position: Forward
Comments: Petway is a tall, powerful player, with great speed. He's also probably the most exciting dunker on the team. He's considered a "small forward", but he can fill in at power forward if necessary.

Courtney Sims (#44)
Height: 6' 11"
Weight: 220
Position: Center/Forward
Comments: Sims is another tall, powerful player. He's a great shot-blocker, and a tough defender. He gives Michigan some much-needed height and muscle underneath. When he isn't playing center, he'll play power forward.

Sophomores

Lester Abram (#2)

Height: 6’ 6”
Weight: 200
Position: Wing
Comments: We all saw how exciting Abram can be last season, and he’s back, better than ever. He’s fast, he can jump, and he’s got a great shot. He’s probably better suited to play guard than forward, but he can do both.

Graham Brown (#25)
Height: 6’ 9”
Weight: 250
Position: Center/Forward
Comments: Brown had a solid freshman campaign, and he’s back, bigger and better than before. He played on the 2003 USA Men's Junior World Championship Team this summer, and did very well. He’s another player who provides much-needed height and power underneath. He’s also a warrior, in the mold of Chris Young.

Sherrod Harrell (#22)
Height: 6’ 3”
Weight: 205
Position: Guard
Comments: Harrell came off the bench a lot last season to give Daniel Horton a rest at point guard. He did pretty well when he was in there, and he even chipped in some points along the way. I’d expect him to contribute even more this season, now that’s he’s been with the program for a year.

Daniel Horton (#4)
Height: 6’ 3”
Weight: 200
Position: Guard
Comments: Horton was the backbone of the team last season. When UM needed points, he got them. When they needed someone to run the offense, he did it. When they needed a defensive stop, he made it. He’s back, a year older, and a year better. Now that he has more help in the backcourt, from Dion Harris, teams won’t be able to key on him as much, which will help his game. Also, now that Michigan has a deep and talented frontcourt, teams won’t be able to concentrate on the perimeter as much. All of this will help Horton out a lot.

Chris Hunter (#31)
Height: 6’ 11”
Weight: 215
Position: Center/Forward
Comments: Hunter started a few games last season, and played well in many games. He wasn’t quite as consistent as Graham Brown, but he definitely chipped in. He needs to work a little more on his defense, but he can be a solid contributor on this team.

Dani Wohl (#3)
Height: 5’ 11”
Weight: 175
Position: Guard
Comments: Wohl is a transfer student from Binghamton University in New York. He sat out last year, due to NCAA transfer rules, so he’s got 3 years of eligibility left. He did get to practice with the team, so he’s got a full year’s worth of experience with the program. He’s not very tall, but he can help out.

Juniors
J.C. Mathis (#32)
Height: 6' 8"
Weight: 235
Position: Forward
Comments: Mathis is another transfer student, in this case, from the University of Virginia. He's got 2 years of eligibility left. He's a strong, powerful player who plays "taller" than he is. He's also a leader, having been elected co-captain. He'll help out underneath with his muscle.

Seniors
Colin Dill (#40)
Height: 6' 7"
Weight: 240
Position: Forward
Comments: Colin has been on the team as a bench player for 4 years, and he was rewarded this year by being elected do-captain. He doesn't get in the game very often, but when he does, he makes the best of it.

Bernard Robinson, Jr. (#21)
Height: 6' 6"
Weight: 210
Position: Wing
Comments: B-Rob is back for his senior year, and we're all expecting big things from him. He's a very fast, athletic player, with great jumping ability. He can shoot the 3-pointer, and he can play pretty good defense. Due to some off-court legal problems, Coach Amaker took away his co-captaincy, and we'll have to see how he responds to this.

As you can see, Michigan has it all this year. They have a lot of height: 2 players at 6' 11", 1 player at 6' 10", 2 more at 6' 9", and one at 6' 8". They also have some muscle, with a couple of players at 250 pounds. Equally important, they have talent in the backcourt, with several good ball-handlers, shooters, and scorers. They have good rebounding, good speed, and a couple of excellent point guards to run the show. They have lots of depth, and lots of experience for such a young team. In short, they should be able to easily surpass last years 17-13 record, and make a good showing in the NCAA tournament this year.

Also, for those of you looking at the recruiting wars, it should be noted that UM now has 7 players (out of 14) on the team from the state of Michigan: Abram (Pontiac), Wohl (West Bloomfield), Harris (Detroit), Andrews (West Bloomfield), Harrell (Kalamazoo), Brown (Mio), and Dill (Saginaw). Granted, they aren't all starters, but it's good to see some local guys on the team.

Michigan's next game is an exhibition this Friday (11/14/2003) at 7:00 p.m. in Crisler Arena, against the Fayetteville team from the NBDL (NBA Development League). This will be a good test for the young Wolverines, and a good chance for fans to check them out. Come on out and cheer them on.

Go Blue!