11/24/2003 – Week #03 – An Encouraging Start

Hey, remember me? The basketball guy? I know that it's easy to forget about the basketball team, what with the big Michigan football win over Ohio State on Saturday (11/22/2003), but the men's basketball team played this weekend as well. They opened their regular season on Friday (11/21/2003) against Oakland University, and they won 84-58. That may not sound like much, but it's an important victory. The last few seasons, Michigan has not done well in their openers. In fact, last year UM lost their first 6 games before going on a 13-game winning streak. So, winning the first game is an important step in the right direction. Also, Oakland is a team that they should beat, and they did. There was a good-sized crowd, and the Maize Rage was there, and they made their presence known.

The game started out as a tight, see-saw battle. Both teams were playing tight defense, and neither team could pull very far ahead. Michigan built a 21-10 lead, but Oakland managed to tie the score at 31-31 with about 6 minutes left in the first half. From that point on, it was all Michigan. They pulled ahead for a 45-34 lead at halftime, then scored the first 8 points of the 2nd half, and it was all over. The lead got as high as 35, but never any lower than 16, the rest of the way. It was a good, solid performance, and several players had good games, including some tenacious defense. As a team, Michigan shot pretty well (31-for-63, 49%), and held Oakland to 34% (21-for-61) shooting. As they should, Michigan outrebounded the smaller Golden Grizzlies (really, that's their nickname), 46-32. They also blocked 10 Oakland shots.

Michigan had 4 players in double figures, including 3 of the starters. Bernard Robinson, Jr. led all scorers with 21 points, and Lester Abram was right behind him with 19. Courtney Sims was the 3rd starter in double figures, with 12 (and 6 blocked shots!), and Dion Harris scored 15 off the bench. Daniel Horton and Chris Hunter were the other 2 starters, and they had 4 and 6 points, respectively. Hunter shot pretty well (3-for-6), but Horton had another "off" shooting night, going 1-for-7. He needs to get his shooting touch back.

Besides Harris, the other players who scored off the bench were J.C. Mathis (4 points), and Sherrod Harrell (3 points, on a 3-pointer). Everyone else played, but didn't score. Even Graham Brown got in for 2 minutes, to test out his sore ankle. He looked OK out there, but it's hard to tell until he plays for a longer period.

In my first column, we looked at each of the Michigan players. Last week, we took a quick look at the entire schedule, including my (perhaps optimistic) predictions. This week, we'll look at the non-conference schedule in detail. Besides the opener against Oakland, UM has 10 more non-conference games in November, December, and January. Seven of those games are in Crisler Arena, with road games against Butler, Vanderbilt, and Fairfield. Last week, I predicted that Michigan would win all 11 of their non-conference games, but some of them are going to be a lot easier than others. Let's look at them in detail:

High Point – 11/26/2003 (Wednesday), Crisler Arena
High Point? Who's that? I have no idea, but since I've never heard of them, and the game is in Crisler Arena, I expect Michigan to win handily. Just looking at their roster, they don't have the height to stay with Michigan.

Butler – 11/30/2003 (Sunday), Indianapolis
Butler is a good mid-major team that regularly makes it to the NCAA Tournament. They've had some good teams in the past, and they'll present quite a challenge for a young Michigan

team making its first road trip. I expect a close game, with some sloppy play from UM, but in the end I expect Michigan to pull out the win.

North Carolina State – 11/02/2003 (Tuesday), Crisler Arena
This is the best non-conference opponent that UM will face, until the NCAA Tournament in March. This game is the 3rd-place game in the Big Ten-ACC Challenge, which means that N.C. State should be pretty evenly matched with UM. I expect a tough, hard-fought game, with a lot less sloppy play than the Butler game. Once again, I expect UM to win, but it'll be close again.

Vanderbilt – 12/06/2003 (Saturday), Nashville
This is another quality non-conference opponent, and another tough road trip. UM beat Vanderbilt last year in Crisler Arena, but they'll be a lot tougher in their building. They've got as much height and depth as Michigan, and they have a lot more experience, with 4 seniors and 4 juniors on the team. By this time, Michigan will be a bit more comfortable playing in a hostile arena, and I expect them to play a much crisper game than they did at Butler. For the 3rd game in a row, I expect it to be a tight game the whole way, with a close, exciting finish, and a UM win.

Bowling Green – 12/13/2003 (Saturday), Crisler Arena
After 3 tough games in a row, Bowling Green will be a slightly easier task. They're one of the better MAC teams, with decent height and depth, but they won't be able to hang with the Wolverines for the whole game. I expect something like the Oakland game, with a tight game at the beginning, and then Michigan building a decent lead and holding it.

Central Michigan – 12/20/2003 (Saturday), Crisler Arena
See Bowling Green, above, but without the height. I expect Bowling Green to be better than CMU, so this one could be a rout.

Delaware State – 12/22/2003 (Monday), Crisler Arena
After having one game a week for most of December, this will be the second game in 3 days. Fortunately, Delaware State won't be much of an opponent, although they look pretty good on paper. Consider it an early Christmas present for the team, as they play a sloppy game, but win anyway.

UCLA – 12/27/2003 (Saturday), Crisler Arena
This is the 2nd toughest non-conference opponent that UM will face this season. Michigan's improbable win against them last season in Los Angeles shows that UM can win this year's game, but they'll have to play really well to do it. UCLA has just as much height and depth as UM, and more experience. I expect another close game, like the Butler, N.C. State, and Vanderbilt games, with UM winning it.

Boston University – 12/30/2003 (Tuesday), Crisler Arena
No, not the Boston College team that came into Crisler a few years ago and beat up on the Wolverines. This is Boston University. I expect them to be pretty good, but not in the same league as N.C. State and UCLA. They may hang around for a while, but UM should win by 10 points or so.

Fairfield – 01/03/2004 (Saturday), New York City
If this game were in Crisler Arena, it might be a blowout, but it could be a lot tougher on the road, even though this game is at a neutral site. Fairfield has a fairly small team, and I expect UM to use their height advantage to wear them down, and win comfortably.

As you can see above, Michigan has 2 games this week. Their next game is on Wednesday (11/26/2003) at 7:00 p.m. in Crisler Arena, against High Point. Then, they head out on the road for the first time, at Butler on Sunday (11/30/2003). Come on out for the game on Wednesday, and cheer on the Wolverines. They're fun and exciting to watch.

Go Blue!