12/08/2003 – Week #05 – A Big Win, A First Loss

The University of Michigan men's basketball team played two tough non-conference games last week, winning one, and losing the other. On Tuesday (12/02/2003), they beat a very good North Carolina State team, 68-61, in Crisler Arena, then on Saturday (12/06/2003), they got thumped at Vanderbilt, 83-63. Their season record is now 4-1, which is pretty good. UM was one of only two Big Ten teams to win their game in the Big Ten/ACC Challenge, the other being Purdue.

The N.C. State game was very exciting. UM got out to an early 7-0 lead, then went stone cold. After trading baskets, N.C. State went on a 15-0 run to go up 18-9. Michigan came back to take the lead about 2 minutes before halftime, and once they got the lead, they never gave it up. They led by 6 (33-27) at halftime, let it slip down to 1 point a couple times early in the 2nd half, then they pulled away, and sealed the win at the free throw line down the stretch.

The Vanderbilt game was pretty disappointing, but not totally surprising. This is a very young UM team, and this was only their 2nd road trip. Vanderbilt has a good team, and they match up well with Michigan, with just as much height and talent. The game started fairly well, with UM going up 4-0, then the roof fell in. Vandy went on an 11-0 run to take the lead, and never looked back. Michigan cut it to 3 points a couple times in the 1st half, but never caught up. UM got within 3 points about 3 minutes before halftime, then they fell apart, and let Vanderbilt go up 40-33 at the half. The 2nd half was a disaster. Michigan couldn't get free for an open shot, and they were ice cold when they finally did shoot. They shot fairly well in the 1st half (13-for-28, 46%), but the 2nd half was lousy (9-for-25, 36%). They were also badly out-rebounded by Vanderbilt, 24 to 42.

For the week, only Bernard Robinson, Jr. scored in double figures for both games. He had 10 points against N.C. State, and was the high scorer for Michigan against Vanderbilt, with 14 points. Daniel Horton was the high scorer for UM in the N.C. State game, with 16 points, but he had a terrible shooting game at Vanderbilt, getting only 5 points, on 2-for-11 shooting. Actually, he didn't shoot that much better against N.C. State: 6-for-16. He had trouble with his 3-pointers in both games: 1-for-7 vs. N.C. State, and 1-for-6 vs. Vanderbilt. That hurts.

Of the other 3 starters, 2 of them did pretty well. Lester Abram had 10 points against N.C. State, and 9 in the Vanderbilt game. However, he didn't shoot well in either game: 0-for-4 in the N.C. State game (he got all 10 points from the free-throw line) and 2-for-5 vs. Vandy. Courtney Sims had 7 and 6 points, respectively, and he did shoot pretty well: 4-for-7 and 3-for-4, respectively. The 5th starter, Chris Hunter, had a pair of quiet games, scoring 3 and 2 points, respectively, on 1-for-2 shooting in each game. He needs to get (and make) a lot more than 2 shots per game.

The bench players contributed in both games this week. Dion Harris had 14 points against N.C. State, and 5 in the Butler game. He continues to play well, and seems capable of running the team when Horton needs a rest, or gets hurt, like he did in the 1st half of the Vanderbilt game. Horton was OK, and he played in the 2nd half. J.C. Mathis had a great game against N.C. State, even though he only scored 6 points. He had a team-high 9 rebounds, and he was all over the court, diving for loose balls and hustling. He also had a good game at Vanderbilt, scoring a season-high 13 points. He and B-Rob were the only 2 Michigan players in double figures in the Vanderbilt mess.

Brent Petway played in both games, and scored 4 points against Vanderbilt. Graham Brown also played in both games, and scored 3 points against Vanderbilt. Sherrod Harrell and Colin Dill both played in the Vanderbilt game, but didn't score.

I know, I predicted that Michigan would go undefeated (11-0) in the non-conference portion of their schedule. I was wrong. They didn't just lose at Vanderbilt, they were thumped. I still think that they can win the rest of their non-conference games, as long as they work on the problems that were exposed by the Vanderbilt debacle. The toughest non-conference game left on their schedule is UCLA, and that game is in Ann Arbor. The rest of their non-conference games should be easier: Bowling Green, Central Michigan, Delaware State, Boston University, and Fairfield. It's really a shame that UM couldn't find a way to sneak past Vanderbilt, since the rest of their non-conference schedule is so winnable.

So, what went wrong against Vanderbilt? What can Michigan do better in the future? Here's what I saw:

The number one problem is ball movement in the half-court offense. Michigan got most of their points against Vanderbilt in transition, and they had a hard time getting open shots in their half-court set. They need to work on setting more ball screens, to get Horton, Harris, and Abram open for more 3-pointers.

Another big problem exposed by the Vanderbilt game was the poor shot selection when the open shots weren't there. Too many players were forcing up bad shots as the shot clock wound down. When the defense is tight, as in the Vanderbilt game, they need to start running the offense a little earlier and a little faster, so that the shot clock doesn't catch up with them.

Finally, Michigan needs to pound the ball down underneath more, and let the big guys do their thing. They didn't get enough quality "post touches". Even if a post-touch doesn't result in a shot in the paint, it tends to collapse the defense a little, opening up more perimeter shots.

After playing 3 tough games in 6 days, 2 of them on the road, Michigan gets a breather this week. They only have one game, and it's at home against Bowling Green on Saturday (12/13/2003), at 2:00 p.m. It will be interesting to see how this young team responds to the disheartening loss at Vanderbilt. Will they be down, or eager to get back on the winning track? Come on out for the game, and cheer on the Wolverines.

Go Blue!