12/22/2003 – Week #07 – A Worrisome Win

The University of Michigan men's basketball team only played one non-conference game last week, beating Central Michigan on Saturday (12/20/2003) in Crisler Arena, 85-75. As Coach Amaker put it after the game, it was "a tale of two halves". In the first half, UM roared out to a 28-2 lead, and pushed the lead as high as 29 points. The lead had shrunk to "only" 18 points at halftime, 50-32, but it shrunk a lot more in the second half. Although Michigan never trailed in the game, CMU got within 3 points, 78-75, with 2:23 left in the game. Fortunately, Michigan scored the last 7 points of the game, all from the free throw line, and came out with a hard-fought victory.

The Wolverines shot well (19-for-30, 63%) in the 1st half, and not so well (12-for-29, 41%) in the 2nd half. The shooting numbers are even more striking for 3-point shooting: 6-for-10 (60%) in the 1st half, 1-for-8 (12%) in the 2nd half. Conversely, CMU shot poorly in the 1st half (11-for-29, 38%), but much better in the 2nd half (15-for-27, 56%). Probably the most important stat was the rebounding edge that UM held, 39-25. That's the way things should be, since CMU didn't have nearly as much height as UM.

The CMU game was a game that Michigan could have won easily, but they lost their focus once they got a big lead, and they let Central back into the game. Once the momentum swung to CMU, UM couldn't seem to get it back. They just kept backpedaling and trading points for time, trying to run the clock out. That may work against teams like Central, but it could be trouble once the Big Ten season starts. The win improves Michigan's season record to 6-1, which is great, but it's pretty obvious that the team has some work to do.

Amaker went back to an almost "normal" starting lineup, with Daniel Horton and Lester Abram back as starters. However, Chris Hunter did not play again, since he had knee surgery last week. Instead, Graham Brown started at center. Hunter could be out for several weeks, so the new "regular" starting lineup is Horton, Abram, Brown, Bernard Robinson, Jr., and Courtney Sims.

Three of the starters hit double figures against CMU. Abram was the high scorer, with a career-high 24 points, on 9-for-14 shooting, including 3-for-6 from 3-point range. Robinson had 22 points, on 9-for-16 shooting, and 7 rebounds. Horton had 12 points, but didn't shoot very well: 5-for-12, but only 1-for-5 from 3-point range. The other starters did OK, but not great. Brown had 8 points and 9 rebounds, and Sims only had 2 points, in just 8 minutes of action.

Two of the bench players made significant contributions to the win. J.C. Mathis had another solid game, scoring 8 points and grabbing 13 rebounds. Dion Harris scored 9 points, on three 3-pointers, and played well. Brent Petway and Sherrod Harrell played, but did not score.

So, what went wrong against Central? Was it overconfidence, once the got a 29-point lead? Probably. I don't think it had much to do with being rusty, after having the week off, and I don't think it had much to do with taking finals. It sure looked like a simple case of taking CMU too lightly, once the lead got so big. It's always dangerous to let an underdog back into a game, instead of putting them away, and this game was a great (terrible?) example of this. Hopefully, Amaker will be able to use this as a teaching tool for the rest of the season. Michigan is capable of playing very well, when everyone concentrates, so it's easy to forget what a young team this is. Of the regular players, only Robinson and Mathis are upperclassmen, and 3 of the freshmen (Sims, Harris, and Petway) are getting significant

playing time. They're learning quickly, but they're still going to make freshman mistakes. I just hope that they get them all worked out before the really hard games start up.

The next really hard game is next Saturday (12/27/2003) at 5:00 p.m. in Crisler Arena against UCLA. They beat Michigan State on Saturday (12/20/2003), but it was out in Los Angeles. Hopefully, the home floor advantage will help Michigan win this important game. I just wish the Maize Rage was going to be there in full force.

Speaking of MSU, I just can't resist taking an early peek at them this season. They're playing one of the most difficult non-conference schedules I can ever remember, but they're losing all their tough games. They're 4-5 at this point, and their wins have come against such powers as Bucknell, Pennsylvania, DePaul, and South Florida. Penn is the only team that they've beaten by more than 13 points. They've hung tough with Kansas (then #6), Oklahoma (then #14), Kentucky (then #8), and UCLA (unranked). They got their butts blown off by Duke (then #6). It's great that they're playing such a tough schedule, but it's not clear how much value they're going to get from it if they lose all the tough games. They have one more tough game left, in a few weeks at Syracuse (currently #19). If they can win that one, they might salvage something from their non-conference schedule, but if they end up 0-6 in tough games, what have they proven? All they've done is put more pressure on themselves to win enough games to get into the NCAA tournament.

Besides the UCLA game, Michigan has another non-conference game this week. It is also at home, tonight (Monday 12/22/2003) against Delaware State, at 7:00 p.m. Come on out for both games and cheer on the Wolverines. With the students out of town, and many people busy with holiday plans, the crowds may not be as big or as loud as usual, so every voice helps.

Go Blue!