12/29/2003 – Week #08 – More Worries, Then Reassurance

The University of Michigan men's basketball team played two non-conference games last week, and won them both. On Monday (12/22/2003), they beat Delaware State 55-50, in a miserable game where they almost threw away a 19-point lead. However, they came back strong on Saturday (12/28/2003), beating UCLA 70-66 on national TV. It was like watching two completely different teams. As bad as Michigan looked in sneaking by Delaware State, that's how good they looked against UCLA. Coming on the heels of the embarrassing collapse against Central Michigan (almost blowing a 29-point lead, but hanging on to win) on the previous Saturday (12/20/2003), the Delaware State game was very worrisome. That made two games in a row in which the Wolverines had opened up a big lead against a team that they were expected to beat handily, then sleepwalked through most of the 2nd half, and had to claw their way to victory in the last 2 minutes. Things did not look good for the game against a quality opponent like UCLA, but Michigan responded very well to the challenge, and pulled off the big victory in Crisler Arena. These two wins raise Michigan's record to 8-1, which is very good.

In the Delaware State game, UM looked pretty good in the 1st half, pulling ahead 30-14 at halftime. Take another look at that score; Michigan held Delaware State to 14 points in 20 minutes of play. It was excellent defense, and there was no reason to suspect that Michigan wouldn't continue to pour it on, and win going away. In fact, the lead got up to 19 points (35-16) early in the 2nd half, before Michigan went on a 5-minute "vacation" on offense. Before they finally scored again, the lead was down to single-digits, 35-26. Even once UM started scoring again, Delaware State kept creeping closer and closer, and got within 1 point (50-49) with 1:24 left in the game. Fortunately, Michigan weathered the storm, and scored 5 out of the last 6 points to win the game.

So, what happened in the 2nd half? How did Michigan go from good to miserable during halftime? Once again, I think the answer is "focus". When the players are "into" the game, they play well. Once they get a big lead, they start to think the game is all wrapped up, and they lose focus. As we saw in 2 straight games, once the momentum turns, it's very hard to get it back. Both the CMU game and the Delaware State game proved this very convincingly. In both games, once the visitors got some momentum going, they started to believe, and once they started to believe, they started to achieve. (I'm starting to sound like Johnnie Cochran here, but stick with me.) The trick is to truly put the game out of reach before you let up, so it doesn't matter if your opponent gets the momentum at the end. If Michigan had built up at 50-point lead against CMU, no one would have noticed much if the final margin of victory had been "only" 25 points. But, since the lead went from 29 points down to 10, it's worrisome. Same thing with the Delaware State game. The lead went from 19 points down to 1, then back up to 5 at the end. Of course, another option is to never let your opponent get any momentum, which is the best outcome, but if you get a big enough lead, momentum doesn't matter.

In the Delaware State game, it's not very obvious what happened from the statistics. The shooting percentages were very similar for both halves: 10-for-26 (38%) in the 1st half, and 7-for-18 (39%) in the 2nd half. Of course, 39% isn't very good. The 3-point shooting percentages are a little more indicative: 4-for-11 (36%) in the 1st half, but only 1-for-9 (11%) in the 2nd half. The same thing is true for the free-throw shooting percentages: 6-for-8 (75%) in the 1st half, but only 10-for-17 (59%) in the 2nd half. Michigan out-rebounded DSU by a wide margin (37-20), and the turnovers were pretty close (12 for DSU, 16 for UM), so it's hard to see from the statistics what happened.

Enough about the Delaware State game. Let's move on to the exciting win over UCLA. Even though they weren't ranked, UCLA came in with a good record (4-2), and a recent win over a good team (Michigan State). Given Michigan's recent problems against lesser opponents, there were plenty of reasons to be worried about the UCLA game. That made the win even more impressive. The game started out great, with UM taking an early 8-0 lead, but UCLA came back with their own 12-0 run to go ahead, 12-8. The teams traded the lead back and forth, until Michigan grabbed the lead for good with about 7 minutes to go before halftime. While UCLA got as close as 3 points in the last 2 minutes, they never got the lead back, and UM managed to close the game out and win by 4. It was a big win, and it came at a very good time. It should help restore the team's confidence, which had to be shaken a little by the close calls in the previous 2 games.

Against UCLA, Michigan shot pretty poorly in the 1st half (12-for-30, 40%), but they did much better in the 2nd half: 13-for-24 (54%). UCLA won the rebounding battle, 39-30, but UM won the turnover battle, 20-17. The stats point to a pretty evenly-matched game, and it was.

Coach Amaker continued to juggle the starting lineup, with Dion Harris starting in place of Bernard Robinson, Jr. against Delaware State, although Robinson was back as a starter vs. UCLA. Once again, while Chris Hunter is recovering from knee surgery, Graham Brown started at center. The rest of the starting lineup was the usual group: Daniel Horton, Lester Abram, and Courtney Sims. Due to the shuffling of the lineup, none of the starters hit double figures in both games this week. Robinson had 10 points coming off the bench against Delaware State, and 17 points as a starter vs. UCLA, but that's about it. Each of the other starters did well at times, but none of them had 2 games in double figures. Harris had 11 points as a starter in the Delaware State game, and 9 points off the bench vs. UCLA, which is very good. Abram had a team-high 12 points vs. DSU, then went scoreless against UCLA. Brown had 8 and 10 points, respectively, and 5 and 7 rebounds, all of which really helped. Sims only had 4 points against DSU, but he had 12 big points in the UCLA game. Finally, there was Horton. He was held scoreless through much of the Delaware State game, then he scored 6 of Michigan's last 10 points to preserve the victory. He went wild against UCLA, scoring a team-high 19 points, including three big 3-pointers.

The bench players contributed in both games. As I already mentioned, Robinson had 10 points coming off the bench vs. DSU, and J.C. Mathis chipped in 4 more, along with a team-high 7 rebounds. Against UCLA, Harris had 9 points, Brent Petway had 2, on another great dunk, and Mathis had 1. 14 and 12 points off the bench isn't great, but it was good enough to win both games. Michigan will need more bench scoring once the Big Ten season starts next Wednesday (01/17/2004) vs. Northwestern.

Before we get into the Big Ten season, there are still 2 more non-conference games left. On Tuesday (12/30/2003), Michigan plays Boston University in Crisler Arena, at 7:00 p.m. The final non-conference game is at a neutral site (Madison Square Garden, in New York City) vs. Fairfield, on Saturday (01/03/2004) at 4:00 p.m. I expect Michigan to win both of these games handily, but they both hold traps for this young team. There are 2 dangers in the Boston University game: overconfidence, and a letdown after the big win over UCLA. There are several dangers in the Fairfield game: overconfidence, playing on the road, the distractions of being in New York City, and looking ahead to the Big Ten schedule. If UM can avoid these pitfalls, they should be able to win both games, and finish the non-conference season with a 10-1 record.

Come on out for the Boston University game on Tuesday, 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.

Also, be sure to check back here next week for a preview of the Big Ten season, and midterm grades for the team.

Go Blue!