01/05/2004 – Week #09 – The End of the Non-Conference Schedule, and More

Happy New Year!

It was a mixed week for the University of Michigan men's basketball team. They played two non-conference games last week, and they lost the first one and won the second. On Tuesday (12/30/2003), they lost to Boston University 61-60, in a miserable game in Crisler Arena. This is their first (and hopefully, last) loss at home this season. However, they came back strong on Saturday (01/03/2004), beating Fairfield 66-43 in Madison Square Garden, in New York City. The loss and the win leave UM with a final non-conference record of 9-2, which is very good. Sure, I predicted that Michigan would win all 11 non-conference games, and they should have won 10 of them, but 9-2 is still very good. The only game they deserved to lose was at Vanderbilt. Although they weren't ranked at the time (12/06/2003), Vanderbilt is now in the Top 25 (#24). Michigan was on the verge of cracking the Top 25 (they were at #30 last week), but the loss to Boston University will delay that for a while.

Once again, it was like watching two completely different teams this week. As bad as Michigan looked in losing to Boston U, that's how good they looked against Fairfield. This is the second week in a row where Michigan has played poorly during the week, then played well on Saturday. In the Boston University game, UM looked OK in the 1st half, but they fell apart in the 2nd half. They had a slim 38-34 lead at halftime, but BU took care of that in the first 2 minutes of the 2nd half. The teams traded the lead back and forth, and the game was tied at 58-58 with 4:20 left, but Michigan only scored 2 more points the rest of the way. Yuck. The stats tell the story in this one: UM shot 47% (15-for-32) in the 1st half, but only 33% (9-for-27) in the 2nd half. The 3-point shooting is even worse: 27% (3-for-11) in the 1st half, and an even worse 20% (3-for-15) in the 2nd half. Even the free-throw shooting was off: 63% (5-for-8) in the 1st half, then 20% (1-for-5) in the 2nd half. Michigan out-rebounded BU, 42-30, but they had a lot more turnovers (21-14). UM played poorly, and they deserved to lose. They're a much better team than BU, but they didn't play like it.

In the Fairfield game, Michigan couldn't pull away until the last 4:00 of the 1st half, when they went on a 10-0 run to lead 30-19 at halftime. Unlike some of their recent games, Michigan pulled away from Fairfield in the 2nd half, instead of letting them creep back into the game. This was very encouraging, regardless of the opponent. The stats are also much more encouraging, especially the turnovers, where UM only had 13, compared to 23 for Fairfield.

Among the starters, Daniel Horton and Lester Abram both had good weeks. Horton was the high-scorer in the loss to BU, with 15 points (on 5-for-15 shooting), and he had 17 points against Fairfield. Abram also hit double-figures in both games, with 14 and 11 points, respectively. Bernard Robinson, Jr. had a lousy game against BU, scoring 6 points on 3-for-10 shooting, but he came back strong against Fairfield, scoring a team-high 19 points on 9-for-13 shooting. Courtney Sims had 10 points against Boston University, but only 4 in the Fairfield game. The final starter, Graham Brown, only had 4 points against BU, and didn't score against Fairfield, but he did have a team-high 10 rebounds in the BU game.

The bench only chipped in 11 points against Boston University, which is one of the reasons UM lost the game. J.C. Mathis did his best, and scored 6 points, but Brent Petway only scored 3 points, and Dion Harris only scored 2. Things weren't much better in the Fairfield game, although Harris did hit double-figures, with 13 points. Unfortunately, Mathis was the only other bench player to score, and he only got 2 points. Coach Amaker put almost the

entire bench in at the end of the Fairfield game: Petway, Sherrod Harrell, Dani Wohl, Amadou Ba, and Colin Dill all got in, but didn't score.

It's time to look at the Big Ten for this season. Once again, the conference looks very strong, with 3 teams currently ranked in the Top 25: Wisconsin (#15), Illinois (#19), and Purdue (#21). Michigan State started the season ranked #3, but they lost all 6 of the tough non-conference games they played, and have been out of the Top 25 for several weeks. Interestingly, MSU is the media's choice to win the Big Ten title this season. I have a different prediction, which I'll get to in a minute.

First, let's look at Michigan's Big Ten schedule, along with my predictions:

DATE	OPPONENT	SITE	WIN/LOSS	RECORD
Wed., Jan. 7	Northwestern	Ann Arbor	W	10-2
Sun., Jan. 11	Indiana	Ann Arbor	W	11-2
Sat., Jan. 17	Michigan State	East Lansing, Mich.	L	11-3
Wed., Jan. 21	Wisconsin	Madison, Wis.	L	11-4
Sat., Jan. 24	Penn State	State College, Pa.	W	12-4
Wed., Jan. 28	Iowa	Ann Arbor	W	13-4
Sat., Jan. 31	Illinois	Champaign, Ill.	L	13-5
Sat., Feb. 7	Purdue	Ann Arbor	W	14-5
Wed., Feb. 11	Minnesota	Minneapolis, Minn.	L	14-6
Sat., Feb. 14	Iowa	Iowa City, Iowa	W	15-6
Wed., Feb. 18	Penn State	Ann Arbor	W	16-6
Sun., Feb. 22	Wisconsin	Ann Arbor	W	17-6
Tue., Feb. 24	Michigan State	Ann Arbor	W	18-6
Sun., Feb. 29	Ohio State	Ann Arbor	W	19-6
Mar. 2-3	Indiana	Bloomington, Ind.	L	19-7
Mar. 6-7	Northwestern	Evanston, Ill.	W	20-7

Other than the back-to-back games on the road against MSU and Wisconsin, the rest of the schedule looks pretty reasonable.

Next, let's take a look at how the Big Ten teams did in non-conference play:

Teams	Wins	Losses	Percentage
Michigan	9	2	0.818
Illinois	9	2	0.818
Wisconsin	9	2	0.818
Purdue	10	3	0.769
Iowa	7	3	0.700
Minnesota	7	4	0.636
Ohio State	8	5	0.615
Indiana	6	5	0.545
Penn State	6	5	0.545
Michigan State	5	6	0.455
Northwestern	5	6	0.455

As you can see, Michigan tied with Illinois and Wisconsin for the best non-conference record, at 9-2. Purdue was right behind, at 10-3. All 4 of these teams played similar non-conference schedules, although Illinois and Purdue had it a little tougher. Illinois lost at (#9) North Carolina, and Purdue lost at (#8) Oklahoma. However, Purdue had the biggest win of the year so far, when they beat #2 Duke at Cameron. That's a big win.

Here's a quick look at each of the teams, in alphabetical order:

Illinois (Ranked #19)
Losses: At (#9) North Carolina (88-81)
At Providence (70-51)
Big wins: None.
Michigan games: At Champaign (Saturday 01/31/2004)
Notes: Illinois is tall, deep, and experienced. Their loss at UNC is forgivable, but the loss at Providence is a little odd. I expect them to beat Michigan in their one game against the Wolverines, since the game is in Champaign, which is a tough place to play.

Indiana
Losses: At (#24) Vanderbilt (73-60)
At (#5) Wake Forest (100-67)
At home vs. (#22) Missouri (63-58)
At neutral site vs. (#6) Kentucky (80-41)
At home vs. Temple (59-50)
Big wins: None.
Michigan games: In Ann Arbor (Sunday 01/11/2004)
At Bloomington (Tuesday 03/02/2004 or Wednesday 03/03/2004)
Notes: This is not your typical IU team. They have good talent, decent height, and pretty good experience, but they're not playing well together. 4 of their 5 losses have been to Top 25 teams, but some of them are blowouts, especially to Wake Forest. I expect Michigan to beat them in Ann Arbor, but to lose to them in Bloomington.

Iowa
Losses: At Northern Iowa (77-66)
At neutral site vs. Texas Tech (65-59)
At (#22) Missouri (76-56)
Big wins: At (#14) Louisville (70-69)
Michigan games: In Ann Arbor (Wednesday 01/28/2004)
At Iowa City (Saturday 02/14/2004)
Notes: Iowa doesn't have much height this year, but they do have a lot of experience and leadership. Their loss at Northern Iowa is embarrassing, but their win at Louisville is impressive. I think Michigan can beat them twice, but the game at Iowa City is going to be tough.

Michigan State
Losses: At (#13) Kansas (81-74)
At home vs. (#2) Duke (72-50)
At neutral site vs. (#8) Oklahoma (80-77)
At neutral site vs. (#6) Kentucky (79-74)
At UCLA (64-58)
At (#20) Syracuse (96-83)
Big wins: None.
Michigan games: At East Lansing (Saturday 01/17/2004)
In Ann Arbor (Tuesday 02/24/2004)
Notes: MSU played one of the most challenging non-conference schedules I've ever seen, but they failed to win any of their tough games. They have a solid team, with good height, good depth, and plenty of experience. I expect Michigan to split their games with MSU, winning in Ann Arbor, and losing in East Lansing.

Minnesota
Losses: At Utah (66-54)
At Virginia (86-78)
At home vs. Nebraska (77-60)
At Texas Tech (90-73)
Big wins: None.
Michigan games: At Minneapolis (Wednesday 02/11/2004)
Notes: Minnesota isn't as tall as usual, but they have plenty of depth and experience. Their losses are all explainable except for a rare home loss to Nebraska. Minnesota is almost unbeatable in their weird old gym, and I expect the young Michigan team to fall apart there and lose badly.

Northwestern
Losses: At home vs. Colorado (67-56)
At DePaul (65-53)
At (#25) Florida State (71-53)
At Illinois-Chicago (90-71)
At neutral site vs. Rutgers (80-75)
At neutral site vs. Mississippi Valley State (49-47)
Big wins: None.
Michigan games: In Ann Arbor (Wednesday 01/07/2004)
At Evanston (Saturday 03/06/2004 or Sunday 03/07/2004)
Notes: They're short, they're young, and they don't have much depth. As usual, Northwestern is one of the doormats of the Big Ten. I expect Michigan to beat them easily in Ann Arbor and Evanston.

Ohio State
Losses: At San Francisco (76-65)
At neutral site vs. San Diego State (83-61)
At home vs. (#3) Georgia Tech (73-53)
At Seton Hall (75-59)
At home vs. Texas Tech (80-72)
Big wins: None.
Michigan games: In Ann Arbor (Sunday 02/29/2004)
Notes: After a couple seasons near the top of the Big Ten, OSU has slipped back a notch. They have good height, good depth, and decent experience, but they don't play very well together. I expect Michigan to beat them in their one game, which is in Ann Arbor.

Penn State
Losses: At home vs. Georgetown (79-78)
At (#16) Pittsburgh (64-37)
At home vs. Rutgers (60-47)
At Temple (67-56)
At New Mexico (82-63)
Big wins: None.
Michigan games: At State College (Saturday 01/24/2004)
In Ann Arbor (Wednesday 02/18/2004)
Notes: PSU has a tall team this year, but not much depth, and not much experience. They are another perennial Big Ten doormat, and this year should be more of the same. I expect Michigan to win both games against them.

Purdue (Ranked #21)
Losses: At (#8) Oklahoma (47-45)
At home vs. SMU (60-59)
At Colorado State (71-69)
Big wins: At (#2) Duke (78-68)
At home vs. Clemson (76-64)
Michigan games: In Ann Arbor (Saturday 02/07/2004)
Notes: Purdue is tall, talented, deep, and experienced. Look at their losses: two by 2 points, and one by 1 point. Look at their wins: any team that can beat Duke by 10 points in Cameron is damn good. That said, I'm still predicting that UM will beat Purdue in their one matchup, since it's in Ann Arbor. The outcome of this game could well determine the Big Ten championship.

Wisconsin (Ranked #15)
Losses: At Maryland (73-67)
At Alabama (71-56)
Big wins: At home vs. (#23) Marquette (63-59)
Michigan games: At Madison (Wednesday 01/21/2004)
In Ann Arbor (Sunday 02/22/2004)
Notes: Wisconsin has good height, good depth, and good experience. They're the highest ranked Big Ten team for a reason. Their loss at Maryland is explainable, but the loss at Alabama is a little puzzling. They have a quality win at home against Marquette. Once again, I expect Michigan to beat them in Ann Arbor, and lose to them on the road.

Here's my prediction for how the Big Ten standings will look at the end of the year:

Teams	Wins	Losses
Purdue	13	3
Illinois	12	4
Michigan	11	5
Michigan State	11	5
Wisconsin	11	5
Iowa	8	8
Minnesota	7	9
Indiana	6	10
Ohio State	5	11
Penn State	3	13
Northwestern	1	15

As you can see, I expect big things from Michigan this season. They're not quite ready to win the Big Ten title, but I expect them to be in the thick of the race for most of the season, just like last year.

Finally, it's time for midterm grades for the team. I know, they've only played 11 games, with 16 more to go, so it isn't quite "midterm" time, but the transition from non-conference to Big Ten play is a good time to evaluate them:

Name	**Grade**	**Comments**
Freshmen		
John Andrews	Inc	Hasn't played much at all.
Amadou Ba	Inc	Hasn't played much at all.

Dion Harris	B	Nice shooting touch, good job running the point when he needs to. Still makes freshman mistakes.
Brent Petway	B	Not much shooting range (12 dunks and 1 layup so far), decent defense, good hustle.
Courtney Sims	B+	Great shot-blocking ability, good rebounding, good scoring. Will only get better.
Sophomores		
Lester Abram	B	Inconsistent scoring, decent rebounding, good speed, nice shooting touch.
Graham Brown	B+	Does well for his size, hustles, a winner. Inconsistent scoring, good defense.
Sherrod Harrell	C+	OK running the point, not much of a shooter. Pretty good for a walk-on.
Daniel Horton	B+	Good scorer, good dribbler, good leadership, a winner. Poor shooting percentage, too many turnovers.
Chris Hunter	B	Nice improvement over last year, until knee surgery slowed him down.
Dani Wohl	Inc	Hasn't played much at all.
Juniors		
J. C. Mathis	B	A great addition to the team! Great rebounding, good scoring, great leadership.
Seniors		
Colin Dill	Inc.	Hasn't played much at all.
Bernard Robinson, Jr.	B+	The most athletic player on the team, good scorer, not a very good shooter.
Coach		
Tommy Amaker	B+	Great recruiter, good practice coach, decent bench coach. Has done a great job molding a young team.

This is the first time I haven't given any "A"s, yet Michigan has one of its best starts in years. What's up with that? The team has underachieved, but managed to squeak out some wins against teams they should have crushed. There's plenty of room for improvement, and every player on the team has the potential to get an "A" for his final grade.

As you can see in the schedule above, there are 2 home Big Ten games this week: Wednesday (01/07/2004) vs. Northwestern at 7:00 p.m., and Sunday (01/11/2004) vs. Indiana at 4:30 p.m. Come on out to one or both, and cheer on the Wolverines.

Go Blue!