01/19/2004 – Week #11 – The Empire Strikes Back

It was a bad week for the University of Michigan men's basketball team. They only played one Big Ten game last week, and they lost. They lost to Michigan State (aka "The Evil Empire") on Saturday (01/17/2004) 71-54, in East Lansing. When I wrote about the upcoming game last week, I predicted that MSU would win if Paul Davis scored more than 20 points, and he did. He was the leading scorer, with 22 points. He was the only Spartan in double figures. He was also selected as the Big Ten Player of the Week this week.

The loss drops UM's Big Ten record to 1-2, and their overall record to 10-4. It also means that Michigan has lost 2 games in a row, and 3 out of the last 5. They need to get back on the winning track, and quickly. Unfortunately, the next 7 games are all tough, and things could get ugly. They play at Wisconsin, at Penn State, home vs. Iowa, at Illinois, home vs. Purdue, at Minnesota, and at Iowa, before they finally get a "break", with a home game vs. Penn State. They could easily lose all 7 of those games, if they don't start playing up to their potential.

The MSU game was very disappointing. It appears that the teams are pretty evenly matched this year, but Michigan just didn't execute well. The Wolverines kept the game under control for much of the first half, then they let it start slipping away in the last 5 minutes of the half. MSU had a 9-point lead (32-23) at halftime, and they managed to maintain that lead for most of the 2nd half, and increased it at the end. The key point in the game came about halfway through the 1st half, when UM stopped MSU several times on defense, then threw the ball away on offense. They were clinging to a 1-point lead, which they held for about 5 minutes, but they kept blowing opportunity after opportunity to build on that lead. If they had taken advantage of the MSU scoring drought, they could have built up a nice lead, and played their game the rest of the way, instead of letting MSU have their way. Many of the turnovers were a result of sloppy ball-handling and poor passing, not due to MSU's defense. They were mostly unforced errors.

The stats from the game are very discouraging. Michigan shot 8-for-24 (33%) in the 1st half, and 9-for-23 (39%) in the 2nd half, for an overall average of 36% (17-for-47). They had a good 1st half shooting 3-pointers (5-for-10), but they only shot 29% (2-for-7) in the 2nd half, which works out to 41% (7-for-17) for the game. Even the free-throw shooting was lousy: 40% (2-for-5) in the 1st half, 69% (11-for-16) in the 2nd half, 62% (13-for-21) overall. They got outrebounded (32-26), and they committed more turnovers (22-18). It was not a good showing.

Only one Michigan player had a good game against MSU; Daniel Horton scored 20 points, including 5-for-9 shooting from 3-point range. However, he missed all 6 of his 2-point attempts, to end up shooting 5-for-15, which is not so good. Lester Abram almost hit double-figures, with 9 points, but the rest of the starters did very poorly. Bernard Robinson, Jr. had 5 points (on 2-for-8 shooting), Courtney Sims had 4 points, and Graham Brown had 3 points. The bench didn't help out much either: J.C. Mathis had 6 points, Dion Harris had 5, and Chris Hunter had 2. They were the only bench players who got in. Brent Petway didn't play, and Sherrod Harrell is nursing a minor injury.

Losing to Michigan State is never fun, and this game was no exception. It was great that UM finally beat MSU last year in Ann Arbor, and I've enjoyed that victory for the last 12 months, but it's in the past now. I hadn't expected Michigan to be able to beat MSU in East Lansing, but I had hoped they'd play better than they did. Looking at the two teams, I still can't see any reason why UM can't beat MSU in Ann Arbor, on 2/24. The only bad omen is that the game is being played while most of the students, including the Maize Rage, are

away on Spring Break. Still, I believe that Michigan can beat Michigan State in Crisler Arena next month.

As I mentioned above, the beat goes on for Michigan. They have 2 games this week: at Wisconsin on Wednesday (01/21/2004), and at Penn State on Saturday (01/24/2004). They stand a decent chance of beating Penn State, but I'm afraid that the Wisconsin game isn't very promising. Wisconsin is the highest-ranked team in the Big Ten (#18), and they beat MSU during the first week of the season, in Madison, 77-64. They're tall, they're deep, they're experienced, and they're very tough at home.

Let's take a quick look at the current Big Ten standings:

Teams	Big Ten			Overall		
	Wins	Losses	Percentage	Wins	Losses	Percentage
Wisconsin	2	1	0.667	11	3	0.786
Purdue	2	1	0.667	12	4	0.750
Indiana	2	1	0.667	8	6	0.571
Penn State	2	1	0.667	8	6	0.571
Michigan State	2	1	0.667	7	7	0.500
Illinois	2	2	0.500	11	4	0.733
Iowa	2	2	0.500	9	5	0.643
Northwestern	2	2	0.500	7	8	0.467
Michigan	1	2	0.333	10	4	0.714
Ohio State	1	2	0.333	9	7	0.563
Minnesota	0	3	0.000	8	7	0.533

There are already a few surprises, after just 2 weeks:

- I didn't expect Penn State to win more than 3 games total, and they're tied for 1st in the league at 2-1. Of course, both of their wins have been at home, against the bottom-feeders of the Big Ten (Ohio State and Minnesota), but still…
- I didn't expect Indiana to do very well in Big Ten play, but they're also tied for 1st, and they beat Michigan in Ann Arbor.
- I only expected Northwestern to win 1 game in the Big Ten, yet they've already won 2 games. They're tied for 5th place with Illinois and Iowa, they beat Iowa on the road, and they beat #25 Illinois in Evanston. That's the biggest surprise so far in the Big Ten.
- I expected Minnesota to do much better than they have so far. They lost at Penn State, which is kind of surprising, and they lost at Ohio State, which isn't too bad, but they lost at home to Iowa, which is a big shock. Minnesota just doesn't lose many home games, with that funky old gym and that weird floor of their's.

Now, let's look at Michigan's remaining schedule, and my predictions:

Date	**Opponent**	**Site**	**Prediction**	**Record**	
				Big Ten	**Overall**
Wed., Jan. 21	Wisconsin	Madison, Wis.	L	1-3	10-5
Sat., Jan. 24	Penn State	State College, Pa.	W	2-3	11-5
Wed., Jan. 28	Iowa	Ann Arbor	W	3-3	12-5
Sat., Jan. 31	Illinois	Champaign, Ill.	L	3-4	12-6
Sat., Feb. 7	Purdue	Ann Arbor	W	4-4	13-6
Wed., Feb. 11	Minnesota	Minneapolis, Minn.	L	4-5	13-7
Sat., Feb. 14	Iowa	Iowa City, Iowa	W	5-5	14-7
Wed., Feb. 18	Penn State	Ann Arbor	W	6-5	15-7

Sun., Feb. 22	Wisconsin	Ann Arbor	W	7-5	16-7
Tue., Feb. 24	Michigan State	Ann Arbor	W	8-5	17-7
Sun., Feb. 29	Ohio State	Ann Arbor	W	9-5	18-7
Mar. 2-3	Indiana	Bloomington, Ind.	L	9-6	18-8
Mar. 6-7	Northwestern	Evanston, Ill.	W	10-6	19-8

Michigan isn't out of the Big Ten race, but they need to win at least 5 of their next 7 games to stay in it. The game at Wisconsin looks like a sure loss, and the game at Illinois looks just as tough, so that means that they need to win the others, including the game this Saturday at Penn State. If they can win 5 out of the next 7, they'll be at 6-4, which should be good enough for 3rd or 4th place. The key game is on 2/11, at Minnesota. If they can win that one, they'll be in much better shape in the Big Ten race.

Check back again next week to see how Michigan did, and why.

Go Blue!