01/26/2004 – Week #12 – On The Road In The Big Ten

It was a mixed week for the University of Michigan men's basketball team. They played two Big Ten games last week, and they lost the first and won the second. On Wednesday (01/21/2004), they lost to (#19) Wisconsin, 74-63, in Madison. On Saturday (01/24/2004), the beat Penn State, 69-59, in State College. These two games were the end of a brutal 3-game road trip, where UM went 1-2. Thanks to a new rule, the Big Ten won't schedule any more 3-game road trips in the future, but Michigan had to suffer through this one this season.

Any win on the road is big in the Big Ten, but it would have been nice to steal a second win. Wisconsin is way better than Michigan this year, so that game was a pretty certain loss, but Michigan could have won the game at MSU last week. Oh well…

The loss and the win leave UM with a 2-3 record in the Big Ten, and an overall record of 11-5. Once again, these are pretty good numbers, although I expected Michigan to win the Indiana game a couple weeks ago, and be 3-2 (12-4 overall). Michigan had lost 3 games in a row going into the PSU game, and 4 out of their last 6, so it was good to stop those slides. They still have 5 more tough games in a row coming up: home vs. Iowa, at Illinois, home vs. Purdue, at Minnesota, and at Iowa. They certainly need to win the 2 home games, and try to steal another win or two on the road. The game at Illinois looks as unpromising as the game at Wisconsin, but they could sneak out a win at Minnesota or Iowa, maybe both. Michigan has had terrible luck playing at Minnesota, but Minnesota is down this year, so it might happen.

The Wisconsin game was wasn't nearly as bad as the MSU game had been. Even though Wisconsin ended up winning by 11, it was close for all of the 1st half, and even a good portion of the 2nd half. Michigan just seemed to run out of steam late in the game, and the rabid crowd didn't help any. When Wisconsin beat Michigan, it was their 23rd win in a row at home. It's tough for a young team like Michigan to play in a hostile arena, and it showed. The young players will eventually get more poised in these situations, and start finding ways to win these games.

The stats for the Wisconsin game are actually pretty encouraging. Michigan shot fairly well in the 1st half (15-for-32, 47%), and respectably in the 2nd half (11-for-27, 41%), for a combined percentage of 44% (26-for-59). Once again, they didn't shoot very well from 3-point range (4-for-14, 29%), and they didn't shoot free throws very well (7-for-12, 58%), but they did take care of the ball quite well (only 9 turnovers). They did get out-rebounded pretty badly (37-29), which hurt.

Michigan was expected to beat Penn State, even on the road, and they did. It was a workmanlike performance, but it was still an important win. The Wolverines played well in the 1st half, and built up a 10-point lead (32-22) at halftime. They managed to expand on that lead in the 2nd half, although it ended up as a 10-point win.

The statistics for the Penn State game are a lot like the Wisconsin game, except for the free-throw shooting. UM shot 40% overall (25-for-62), and 35% (6-for-17) from 3-point range. However, they were 13-for-14 (93%) shooting free throws, which helped a lot. They only committed 9 turnovers again, which is great, but they were out-rebounded again (36-34), which is surprising.

Individually, none of the starters hit double-figures in both games this week. In fact, only one starter (Bernard Robinson, Jr.) hit double-figures against Wisconsin, with 13 points. He

followed it up with a mediocre game against Penn State: 8 points, on 3-for-15 (20%) shooting. Dion Harris hit double-figures in both games, with 11 against Wisconsin and 15 against Penn State, but he wasn't a starter against Wisconsin. He did start the PSU game, in place of Daniel Horton, who was held out of the starting lineup for disciplinary reasons. Horton had another sub-par game vs. Wisconsin (8 points, on 3-for-11 shooting), but he did a little better coming off the bench against Penn State (13 points, on 4-for-11 shooting). The other starters couldn't put back-to-back good games together, scoring-wise. Lester Abram was the leading scorer for UM in the Penn State game, with 19 points (on 6-for-8 shooting), but he had a lousy game at Wisconsin: 4 points, on 2-for-6 shooting. Courtney Sims had a decent game (9 points) against Wisconsin, but wasn't much of a factor against Penn State (2 points). The 5th starter, Graham Brown, had 7 and 4 points, respectively. His big contribution was 7 rebounds in the PSU game.

The bench players made big contributions in both games. I've already mentioned the 11 points Harris tossed in vs. Wisconsin, and the 13 points that Horton scored vs. Penn State. Besides them, J.C. Mathis and Brent Petway both had 4 points in both games, and they both made other contributions in the PSU game. Mathis tied Brown for team-high in rebounds, with 7, and Petway's two monster jams took the last life out of the Penn State crowd.

Only 3 bench players (Horton, Mathis, and Petway) got in the PSU game, but Chris Hunter, Sherrod Harrell, Dani Wohl, and John Andrews all played in the Wisconsin game. Andrews was the only one who scored, getting the first points of his UM career on his only shot, which was a 3-pointer.

Once again, Michigan has 2 games this week: home vs. Iowa on Wednesday (01/28/2004), and at Illinois on Saturday (01/31/2004). They stand a good chance of beating Iowa in Crisler Arena, but I'm afraid that the Illinois game isn't very promising. Iowa has a similar record to UM: 3-2 in the Big Ten, 10-6 overall, and the two teams match up fairly evenly, but I expect the home crowd to make the difference. Illinois isn't playing as well as they were expected to before the season began, with a 3-3 record in the Big Ten, 12-5 overall. They've dropped out of the Top 25, but they're tall, they're deep, they're experienced, and they're very tough at home.

Let's take a look at the current Big Ten standings, after 3 full weeks:

	Big Ten			Overall		
Teams	Wins	Losses	Percentage	Wins	Losses	Percentage
Wisconsin	4	1	0.800	13	3	0.813
Purdue	4	1	0.800	13	4	0.765
Indiana	4	1	0.800	10	6	0.625
Iowa	3	2	0.600	10	6	0.625
Michigan State	3	2	0.600	8	8	0.500
Illinois	3	3	0.500	12	5	0.706
Michigan	2	3	0.400	11	5	0.688
Penn State	2	3	0.400	8	8	0.500
Northwestern	2	3	0.400	7	9	0.438
Ohio State	1	4	0.200	9	9	0.500
Minnesota	0	5	0.000	8	9	0.471

There were a few more surprises this week in the Big Ten:

- Indiana continues to win, and stay in a tie for 1st place in the league. They managed to beat Minnesota in Minneapolis, which is quite an accomplishment, even though Minnesota is down this year.
- Minnesota and Ohio State continue to do poorly, with 2 more losses each. I expected both of them to be middle-of-the-pack teams this season, not bottom-feeders.
- Illinois is having a tougher time than I would have expected. It wasn't surprising that they lost at Wisconsin this week, since Wisconsin is so tough in Madison, but they lost by 20 points, 76-56.

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

Date	Opponent	Site	Prediction	Record	
				Big Ten	Overall
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 4 of their next 5 games to stay in it. The game at Illinois looks like a sure loss, which means that they need to win the rest. If they can do that, 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.

Come on down to Crisler Arena on Wednesday evening (7:00 p.m.) to cheer Michigan on against Iowa. The crowds have been getting better and better as the season has gone on, and every voice helps.

Go Blue!