02/16/2004 – Week #15 – Goodbye NCAA, Hello NIT

The University of Michigan men's basketball team played two Big Ten games last week, on the road, and they lost both of them. On Wednesday (02/11/2004), they lost to Minnesota, 81-78, and on Saturday (02/14/2004), they lost to Iowa, 69-61. The two losses drop UM's Big Ten record to 4-6, and their overall record to 13-8. These losses also pretty much destroy Michigan's dreams of getting into the NCAA Tournament this year. Now, they need to concentrate on winning as many of their remaining games as possible, and hoping they can make some noise in the Big Ten Tournament and the NIT Tournament. The Big Dance will have to wait until next year.

The sad part is that Michigan is basically a good team, but they are massively underachieving on the road this year. Yeah, I know, it's tough to win on the road in the Big Ten, but they play well enough in the 1st halves of many of these road games to win, then they just fall apart. It's mental, not physical. It's just a shame.

It was also pretty embarrassing. There's no disgrace in losing at Iowa this year, since the Hawkeyes are pretty good, and they always play tough in their home arena, but the loss at Minnesota was terrible. Minnesota had lost all 9 of their Big Ten games before they beat Michigan. It's a disgrace.

Michigan has been terrible on the road this year, and these two games were no different. In both games, UM managed to build up a nice halftime lead (11 vs. Minnesota, 4 vs. Iowa), then they fell apart in the 2nd half of both games. They committed way too many turnovers in both games (19 vs. Minnesota, 21 vs. Iowa), and they shot terribly in the Iowa game (18-for-56, 32%). Their 3-point shooting was also miserable: 6-for-17 (35%) vs. Minnesota, and 4-for-20 (20%) vs. Iowa. The biggest problem was the turnovers. There are times when it makes sense to try to run a fast break, and there are times when it makes sense to just hold the ball and set up in a half-court offense. That's where UM has been losing these games on the road. It's just a matter of poor decision-making on the fly, in the heat of battle. If Amaker can get this worked out, things will start getting better.

Individually, only one of the starters hit double figures in both games. Lester Abram had 15 points in the Minnesota game, and 13 points in the Iowa game. He was the high-scorer for Michigan in both games, and he had a double-double against Iowa, with a team-high 10 rebounds. None of the other starters hit double figures in the Iowa game, but most of them did against Minnesota. Daniel Horton tied Abram for high-scorer honors in the Minnesota game with 15 points, but he only had 7 points vs. Iowa (on 1-for-7 shooting). Bernard Robinson, Jr. had 14 points against Minnesota, and almost hit double figures with 9 points against Iowa. Courtney Sims had 12 and 7 points, respectively. J.C. Mathis started the Minnesota game in place of Graham Brown, as a strategic move, but he only scored 2 points as a starter, and he only had 1 point against Iowa as a bench player. Brown scored 7 points off the bench against Minnesota, and 8 points as a starter in the Iowa game.

Dion Harris hit double figures in both games, coming off the bench, but he shot terribly. He had 11 points on 2-for-11 shooting against Minnesota, and 10 points on 3-for-13 shooting against Iowa. Brent Petway was the only other bench player to score against Minnesota, besides Brown and Harris, with 2 points. He also had 4 points against Iowa. Sherrod Harrell played in both games, and scored 2 points against Iowa. Chris Hunter finally got in a game again, with 4 minutes against Minnesota. He didn't score. John Andrews was the only other bench player to get into the Minnesota game, and he didn't score either. Colin Dill got into the Iowa game, and failed to score. Finally, a bench player I had never heard of, Ashtyn Bell, got into the Iowa game for the first action of his Michigan career, but didn't

score. Apparently, he's been on the roster all season, but I hadn't noticed him. He's a walk-on sophomore guard from Oak Park, Illinois. I double-checked the roster, and there are no other "surprises" on it.

Now that Michigan stands no chance in the Big Ten race, I'm not going to bother going over the current Big Ten standings any more. Michigan is going to finish in the bottom half of the standings, behind Northwestern, but ahead of Ohio State, Penn State, and Minnesota. Whoopee!

Let's look at Michigan's remaining schedule, and my (updated) predictions:

Date	Opponent	Site	Prediction	Record	
				Big Ten	Overall
Wed., Feb. 18	Penn State	Ann Arbor	W	5-6	14-8
Sun., Feb. 22	Wisconsin	Ann Arbor	L	5-7	14-9
Tue., Feb. 24	Michigan State	Ann Arbor	W	6-7	15-9
Sun., Feb. 29	Ohio State	Ann Arbor	W	7-7	16-9
Wed., Mar. 3	Indiana	Bloomington, Ind.	L	7-8	16-10
Mar. 6-7	Northwestern	Evanston, Ill.	W	8-8	17-10

As you can see, the next 4 games are in Crisler Arena, where Michigan has been pretty tough. They should be able to beat Penn State and Ohio State, but the other 2 games (Wisconsin and Michigan State) are going to be much tougher. I don't think UM's got the horses to beat Wisconsin, but they might be able to slip past MSU. That will be a key game for Michigan. Unfortunately, it's scheduled at the worst possible time: on a Tuesday night in the middle of Michigan's Spring Break, which means that the Maize Rage won't be there in full force. Sigh.

Michigan has 2 games this week, both at home. On Wednesday (02/18/2004) at 8:00 p.m., they play Penn State, then on Sunday (02/22/2004) at 2:00 p.m., they play Wisconsin. They're both important games, so if you get a chance, come on down to Crisler Arena and cheer on the Wolverines. They can use all the support they can get.

Go Blue!