02/23/2004 – Week #16 – Two Big Wins At Home

The University of Michigan men's basketball team played two Big Ten games last week at home, and they won both of them. On Wednesday (02/18/2004), they beat Penn State, 76-53, and on Sunday (02/22/2004), they beat (#12) Wisconsin, 71-59. The two wins raise UM's Big Ten record to 6-6, and their overall record to 15-8. After the two disappointing losses on the road during the previous week, it's great to have nothing but good news this week! The only bad news was that the officiating in the Wisconsin game was terrible, mostly against Michigan, but it's hard to complain too much after a big upset like that.

Both games were good games, but the Penn State win was predictable and workmanlike, while the Wisconsin win was a wonderful surprise. It was the first time since 1999 that Michigan has beaten a ranked opponent in Ann Arbor. In both games, Michigan had an 8-point lead at halftime (35-27 vs. PSU, 38-30 vs. Wisconsin), and in both games, they held the lead for the entire 2nd half, never letting either team get closer than 6 after the intermission. They pulled away from Penn State, and they managed to completely control Wisconsin. In the 2nd half of the Wisconsin game, they consistently kept the lead between 8 and 12 points, and didn't have any of those "disappearing offense" spells that have cost them some games. After the terrible 2nd halves that UM has had recently, this was very encouraging.

Let's look at the stats for the games, starting with the Penn State game. Michigan shot well from the floor (27-for-56, 48%), they shot pretty well from 3-point range (7-for-18, 39%), and they shot well from the free-throw line (15-for-21, 71%), including 9-for-10 in the 2nd half. They held PSU to 35% shooting (19-for-55), they out-rebounded PSU (37-32), they had fewer turnovers (16-11), they had more steals (9-3), and they had more blocked shots (5-2). In short, they out-played Penn State, which is why they won by 23 points.

The stats for the Wisconsin game were equally impressive. The Wolverines shot even better from the floor than they had against Penn State, hitting 58% (25-for-43), including a blazing 75% (15-for-20) in the 1st half. They hit a respectable 36% (4-for-11) from 3-point range, and a very impressive 85% (17-for-20) from the free-throw line. More importantly, they held Wisconsin to an anemic 38% (21-for-56) shooting from the floor, and an even more anemic 15% (3-for-20) shooting from 3-point range. In the 2nd half, UM held Wisconsin to 28% (9-for-32) shooting from the floor. Michigan out-rebounded Wisconsin (29-27), had more steals (5-3), and had more blocked shots (5-2). The only head-to-head stat that Wisconsin won was turnovers, 14-10.

Individually, 3 of the 5 starters hit double figures in both games. Lester Abram continued his recent tear, with 16 points in the PSU game, and 17 points in the Wisconsin game. He was the high-scorer for Michigan in both games, as he was in both games the week before. Courtney Sims had 2 great games this week. He scored 13 points against Penn State, and 14 points against Wisconsin, but the big news was his shooting percentages: he was 6-for-6 in the PSU game, and 5-for-7 in the Wisconsin game! Bernard Robinson, Jr. also hit double figures in both games, with 11 in each. He was the only starter who didn't shoot well vs. Penn State (2-for-8), but he did much better against Wisconsin (4-for-7). Of the 2 remaining starters, Graham Brown had 2 good games, and Daniel Horton had a good game against Penn State, but didn't do as well against Wisconsin. Brown almost had double figures in both games, with 8 against PSU, and 9 against Wisconsin, while Horton had 11 points against Penn State, but only 2 (on 0-for-5 shooting) against Wisconsin. It's great that Michigan can win a big game when Horton is having an "off" day. They're getting good scoring balance from all 5 of the starters, and pretty good support from the bench.

The bench players contributed again this week, although maybe not as much as in some other weeks. Dion Harris had a mediocre week scoring, after hitting double figures in 7 of the first 10 Big Ten games. He scored 5 points against Penn State, and 4 against Wisconsin. Brent Petway had a good week, with 5 and 8 points respectively. He was 2-for-2 shooting against PSU, and 2-for-3 shooting against Wisconsin, and he also shot 4-for-4 from the free-throw line in the Wisconsin game. Both of his baskets against PSU were impressive dunks, and he also grabbed 6 rebounds against Penn State. He was a great spark off the bench. J.C. Mathis played in both games, but he only had 1 point against PSU, and he failed to score in the Wisconsin game in only 2 minutes of action. Sherrod Harrell played 2 minutes in both games, but failed to score. John Andrews, Colin Dill, Ashtyn Bell, Dani Wohl, and Amadou Ba all got into the last 2 minutes of the Penn State game, but none of them scored.

There's one bench player who I haven't mentioned yet. He got into both games this week, and he was easily the biggest news on the team this week. Chris Hunter is back, and he's playing great! He scored 6 points in each game this week, on 2-for-4 shooting against PSU, and 3-for-4 shooting against Wisconsin. He also had 7 rebounds against the Badgers. He's playing with fire and determination out there, and his repaired knee and banged-up nose don't seem to be bothering him at all. When he and Sims are out there at the same time, it gives Michigan a true "Twin Towers" lineup that makes things tough for the opposing team.

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

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

Michigan stands no chance in the Big Ten race, but if they can win 3 of their last 4 games, and do well (win twice) in the Big Ten Tournament, they still stand a decent chance of getting into the NCAA Tournament. It all starts with the 7:00 p.m. game on Tuesday (02/24/2004) against Michigan State in Crisler Arena. This has turned into a huge game for both teams, since MSU is currently leading the Big Ten, and can't afford to lose again if they want to win the title. Unfortunately for Michigan, they only have one day to rest and prepare for the game, which is really unfair. The normal gap between games is 2 (Wednesday – Saturday) or 3 (Saturday – Wednesday) days, but the Sunday – Tuesday gap is the worst possible scheduling. On top of that, the game is 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.

The Ohio State game at noon on Sunday (02/29/2004) is the final home game of the year for Michigan, so this is your chance to say goodbye to the 2 seniors on the team: Bernard Robinson, Jr. and Colin Dill. Interestingly, it's also the first time Michigan has played on Leap Day since I've been a fan. The last time was in 1972, when Michigan played at Indiana.

If you get a chance, come on down to Crisler Arena and cheer on the Wolverines for both games. They can use all the support they can get, especially with many of the students out of town.

Go Blue!