03/08/2004 – Week #18 – The End Of The Regular Season

The University of Michigan men's basketball team played their final two Big Ten games of the regular season last week, on the road, and they lost the first and won the second. On Wednesday (03/03/2004), they lost to Indiana, 61-56, then on Saturday (03/05/2004), they beat Northwestern, 63-56. The loss and the win give UM a final Big Ten record of 8-8, and an overall record of 17-10. For the Big Ten season, Michigan ended up with a 6-2 record at home, and a matching 2-6 record on the road. The only Big Ten road games that Michigan won were against lowly Penn State, and a decent Northwestern team. They should have won the road games at Minnesota, Iowa, and Indiana, and the home games against Indiana and Michigan State, but they didn't. If they had, their record would have been a much more impressive 13-3 in the Big Ten, good enough for 1st place. As it is, they ended up tied with Northwestern for 5th place in the final conference standings.

The loss at Indiana was a shame, because it was a game that Michigan could have and should have won. Indiana is down this year, and they were very beatable, even in Assembly Hall. Michigan tied the game up with 1:46 left, but couldn't finish it off.

On the other hand, the win at Northwestern was more impressive than it might seem. Northwestern is much better than anyone expected at the start of conference play, and they beat some very good teams at home. They hung with Michigan for the whole game, which made it even more encouraging when the Wolverines played well in the last minutes of the game.

The stats tell the story in both games. Against IU, Michigan shot an anemic 37% (19-for-51) from the floor, compared to a healthy 50% (21-for-42) against Northwestern. They shot OK from 3-point range against Indiana (4-for-11, 36%), but they did much better against Northwestern (6-for-10, 60%). The free-throw shooting was about the same in both games (74% vs. IU, 79% vs. Northwestern). The taller Wolverines got badly out-rebounded by Indiana, 37-29, and they lost the shot-blocking stat as well, 9-6. UM turned things around on Saturday, and out-rebounded Northwestern handily, 37-23. The most surprising statistic was turnovers: Michigan had 21 turnovers in one game, but only 7 in the other. The surprising part was that they had the 21 turnovers in the win over Northwestern, and only 7 in the loss at Indiana.

Individually, it was a big week for 2 of the regular starters. Daniel Horton started both games, and scored in double-figures in both of them, with 12 points against IU, and 16 points against Northwestern. He was the high-scorer for Michigan in the Northwestern game. Lester Abram also scored in double-figures in both games, but he only started one of them. He voluntarily gave up his starting spot to Dion Harris in the Northwestern game, hoping to boost Harris's confidence, and it worked. Abram tied for team-high honors in the IU game, with 13 points, and he chipped in 14 points against Northwestern. Harris made the most of his starting assignment in the Northwestern game, scoring 10 points, which was a big improvement over the zero points he scored in the Indiana game.

The other 3 regular starters didn't fare as well. Courtney Sims had a nice game against Indiana, with 13 points, but he only scored 6 against Northwestern. Graham Brown had a tough game against IU, scoring only 2 points, but he bounced back nicely against Northwestern, with 7. Bernard Robinson, Jr. had a truly awful game at Indiana, scoring only 2 points (on 1-for-9 shooting), but he also bounced back against Northwestern, scoring 8 points.

The bench didn't help out much in the Indiana game. As already noted, Harris had zero points in that game, and Chris Hunter and Brent Petway were the only other bench players to get in. Hunter continued his strong play, with 8 points, and Petway dropped in 6. Unfortunately, neither of them did well in the Northwestern game: Hunter had 2 points, and Petway failed to score. Sherrod Harrell played 14 minutes in the Northwestern game, but he also failed to score. I have no idea what has happened to J.C. Mathis, who has all but disappeared recently. He has only played in one of the last four games, and then for only 2 minutes.

So, the regular season is over, and in general, UM did fairly well, but not nearly as well as they could have and should have done. I'm sure that no one on the team would disagree with me when I say that they underachieved. Michigan has enough talent to have finished 1st or 2nd in the Big Ten this year, but they melted down at key moments in a handful of games, and managed to let 5 or 6 key victories get away. My pre-season predictions of 22-5 overall (11-5 in the Big Ten) look pretty optimistic now, but I still maintain that Michigan could have done even better than 11-5 in the Big Ten, if they could have just gotten one more key basket or defensive stop in the 5 games I mentioned above.

The Big Ten Tournament is up next for Michigan. Obviously, if they win the tournament, they get the Big Ten's automatic berth in the NCAA Tournament, but they might still get an at-large bid if they can win twice. That would give them an overall record of 19-11, which is right in line with most of the usual at-large bids. If they only win once, or lose in their first tournament game, they're headed for the NIT. Since UM finished 5th in the final conference standings, and won the tie-breaker with Northwestern, they get the #5 seed in the tournament, which means that they get a 1st-round bye. They play at 2:30 in the afternoon on Friday (03/12/2004) against the #4 seed, Iowa. This is a tough matchup. Michigan split the regular season series with Iowa, with each team winning at home. I expect a very close game, with the results decided in the last 30 seconds.

If Michigan can beat Iowa, they'll play the winner of the game between the #1 seed, Illinois, and the winner of the Thursday game between the #8 seed, Indiana, and the #9 seed, Ohio State. I'm guessing that Indiana will beat Ohio State on Thursday, and Illinois will beat Indiana on Friday. Michigan will have their hands full against Illinois on Saturday, if they get by Iowa. If MIchigan can beat Illinois, they're in the tournament championship game. The other side of the tournament bracket has both Wisconsin and Michigan State. Presumably, one of those two teams will be in the championship game. Michigan has beaten Wisconsin this year, but not MSU. Either matchup would be very interesting.

Stop back again next week to see what happened, and why.

Go Blue!