03/15/2004 – Week #19 – The Big Ten Tournament

The University of Michigan men's basketball team played two games in the Big Ten Tournament in Indianapolis this week, and they won the first and lost the second. On Friday (03/12/2004), they beat Iowa 79-70, then on Saturday (03/13/2004), the lost to (#13) Illinois 74-60. The win and the loss give UM an overall record of 18-11.

Remember a few weeks ago (02/16/2004) when I said "Goodbye NCAA, Hello NIT"? Well, that's exactly what happened. Maybe if Michigan could have found a way to beat Illinois and get into the Big Ten Tournament championship game, they might have gotten one of the precious at-large bids to The Big Dance, but they couldn't get by Illinois, so we'll never know. Instead, the Wolverines are in a tournament that they stand a much better chance of winning, the NIT.

Michigan looked very good for most of the game against Iowa, although they did let a 15-point lead late in the game dwindle down to just 4 points with 2:37 left, but they fought back nicely, and put the game away. They didn't look very good at all against Illinois, but they still managed to hang in there with them, and had a decent chance of pulling off the upset until there were about 8 minutes left, when Illinois pulled away for good. It really hurt Michigan's chances that they had to play Illinois without their leading scorer, Lester Abram, who injured his shoulder in the Iowa game.

The stats for both games are remarkably similar. In both games, the shooting percentages for both teams were about the same (41% vs. 45% in the Iowa game, 42% vs. 45% in the Illinois game), UM hit a better percentage from 3-point range (41% vs. 30% against Iowa, 41% vs. 33% against Illinois), UM shot free throws better (80% vs. 52%, 83% vs. 77%), and UM out-rebounded their opponents (39-25, 39-29). The losing stat in the Illinois game? Turnovers, again. Michigan had 15 of them, Illinois only had 6. That was the difference in the game. Once again, the young UM team had trouble against a more experienced team.

Coach Amaker started Dion Harris in place of Abram again in both games, and Harris responded with a career-high 23 points against Iowa, and another 11 points in the Illinois game. Abram also had a great game against Iowa, scoring 19 points, but he didn't play against Illinois. Daniel Horton had a good tournament, scoring 14 and 16 points, respectively. Courtney Sims had a miserable game against Iowa, scoring 1 point, but he came back with a solid game against Illinois, with 10 points and 12 rebounds. Bernard Robinson, Jr. almost hit double-figures in both games, with 9 and 15 points. The only starter who had two sub-par games was Graham Brown, who had 1 point against Iowa, and was scoreless in the Illinois game.

Other than Abram in the Iowa game, the only other players to get into the games were Chris Hunter, Brent Petway, and Sherrod Harrell. Hunter responded with 9 and 6 points, Petway scored 3 and 2 points, and Harrell was scoreless in both games.

On to the NIT. Michigan's first round opponent is Missouri. The game is at 9:00 p.m. tomorrow evening, Tuesday 03/16/2004, in Crisler Arena. Missouri finished the season 16-13 overall (9-7 in league play), in 5th place in the Big 12. They beat Indiana in Bloomington, Iowa at home, and Oklahoma on the road. They have some height on their roster, but no one over 6' 10". They have some good experience, with 4 seniors and 3 juniors. It should be a good, competitive game, a lot like the games against Iowa and Purdue.

If Michigan can beat Missouri, they will face the winner of the game between LSU (18-10) at Oklahoma (19-10), at a site to be determined. Besides Michigan, 2 other Big Ten teams ended up in the NIT this year: Purdue (17-13) plays at Notre Dame (17-12) tomorrow night, and Iowa (16-12) plays at St. Louis (18-12) tomorrow night.

This year, the NIT has 40 teams, instead of the normal 32. 16 of the teams have to play an extra "play-in" round, but not Michigan. Michigan is one of the 24 teams that got a first-round bye. Interestingly, Boston University (23-5), who beat UM in Ann Arbor at the end of the non-conference season, is one of the "play-in" teams. They play at Rhode Island (19-13) tomorrow night. Visit the NIT site for the complete bracket.

Come on out and cheer on the Wolverines. If we get a big enough crowd, and win the game, we might get another home game for the next round. Then, stop back again next week to see what happened, and why.

Go Blue!