03/22/2004 – Week #20 – The NIT, Round 1

The University of Michigan men's basketball team played a 1st round game in the National Invitation Tournament (NIT) last week, and they won. On Tuesday (03/16/2004), they beat Missouri 65-64 in Crisler Arena. The win raises UM's overall record to 19-11, and allows them to move on to the 2nd round, with a game on Monday (03/22/2004) against Oklahoma, in Ann Arbor, at 9:00 p.m.

The Missouri game was very hard-fought, and very physical. Missouri played like it was a football game, not a basketball game. They had lots of big, powerful wide-bodies, and they threw their weight around underneath the basket a lot. They were very good at getting the ball down into the post, and they got a lot of easy layups, at least at first. As the game went on, the UM post players figured out their moves, and started contesting and blocking a lot more of the short-range layups, and the tide turned. Once Michigan stopped Missouri's inside game, it became a seesaw battle, and Michigan pulled out the victory in the last minute.

The crowd was a big factor in this game, and it wasn't just the Maize Rage this time. Even though the weather was lousy, and tickets had only been on sale for 36 hours, over 5500 fans showed up and made some noise. Unlike the normal season ticket holders, who have bought their tickets for 25 years, and don't always show up, everyone who bought a ticket for Tuesday night's game showed up, and wanted to be there. The Maize Rage did a great job of getting the crowd going, and the crowd did a great job of cheering on the team. It was a pleasure to be a part of it. Thanks to a friend (thanks, John!), I sat 4 rows up from the floor, directly behind the ESPN announcers. It was quite a treat.

The stats for the game show just how close it was: Missouri and Michigan both shot 43% from the floor, Missouri shot 35% from 3-point range, while UM shot 33%, and Missouri shot 67% from the free-throw line, while UM shot 52%. That last stat is a little disturbing, since Michigan should be able to do a lot better than 11-for-21 from the line. Michigan barely won the rebounding battle, 37-36, and they did win the turnover battle, 11-13. The big stat was blocked shots: 0 for Missouri, 5 for Michigan.

Once again, Dion Harris started in place of the injured Lester Abram. He played well, and scored 12 points. The high-scorer on the team was Daniel Horton, with 20 points, including 4-for-8 shooting from 3-point range, and a big basket in the last minute. The other starter in double-figures was Bernard Robinson, Jr., with 14 points. Courtney Sims almost hit double-figures, with 8 points, but he helped the team effort in other ways, including 10 rebounds (5 of them offensive), and a blocked shot. The final starter, Graham Brown, only had 3 points, but he played tough defense, and pulled down 5 rebounds.

Once again, Coach Amaker only played 3 bench players. Sherrod Harrell played 13 minutes, and didn't score. Brent Petway scored 4 points, 2 of them on a monster jam of an offensive rebound. Chris Hunter also had 4 points, but he contributed in other ways. He had 7 rebounds, and 3 of UM's 5 blocked shots.

This year, the Big Ten sent 6 teams to post-season tournaments: 3 to the NCAA Tournament (Illinois, Michigan State, and Wisconsin), and 3 to the NIT (Iowa, Michigan, and Purdue). Of those 6 teams, 3 of them lost in the 1st round (Michigan State, Iowa, and Purdue), and the other 3 won. In the 2nd round of the NCAA Tournament, Illinois won, and moved on to the Sweet 16, but Wisconsin lost. Michigan is hoping to stay alive in the NIT. Oklahoma is another good team, and I expect another close, physical game. Just for some perspective, Missouri beat Oklahoma at their place.

If Michigan can beat Oklahoma, they'll get the winner of the Nebraska at Hawaii game, which is also being played on Monday. The winner of the top half of the UM side of the bracket will be one of the following 4 teams: Notre Dame, St. Louis, Oregon, and George Mason. Notre Dame plays St. Louis on Monday, and George Mason plays at Oregon on Tuesday. Visit the NIT site for the complete bracket.

Come on out on Monday night and cheer on the Wolverines. When I bought my tickets on Friday, I heard that tickets were selling very well. It should be a much bigger, and louder, crowd than last Tuesday. If we get a big enough crowd, and win the game, we might get yet another home game for the 3rd round. Then, stop back again next week to see what happened, and why.

Go Blue!