**04/05/2004 – Week #22 – NIT Champions!**

They did it! The University of Michigan men's basketball team won the 2004 National Invitation Tournament (NIT). Sure, it's not the NCAA Tournament, but it's still a big deal. They played a lot of tough teams along the way, and they played very well. They deserved to win it all, and they were thrilled with the victory. It's a big step for a young team like this, and it's a big step for a program on its way back to prominence. They grew up a lot in the last 3 weeks, and they learned how to win. They ended the season on a 5-game winning streak (the current longest in the Big Ten), and they won 7 of their last 9 games. It's a great way to head into next year. More about that next week; let's look at the Final Four.

As always, the NIT Final Four was played in Madison Square Garden (MSG), in New York City. On Tuesday (03/30/2004), Michigan crushed Oregon 78-53, then on Thursday (04/01/2004), they beat Rutgers 62-55. The Oregon game was a true "neutral site" game, but the Rutgers game was basically a home game for Rutgers. There were 16,064 fans in MSG, and at least 80% of them were rowdy Rutgers fans. Despite the hostile environment, UM played tough, and held off a determined charge by Rutgers at the end. It was very impressive. The 2 wins give Michigan a final overall record of 23-11, which is excellent.

The Oregon game was the best game I've seen a Michigan team play in 4 or 5 years. They played like the (now-disgraced) Fab Five teams. They played with speed and power and style and grace. They played with poise and focus and determination. If they had played like that during the regular season, there wasn't a team on their schedule that could have beaten them. They were that good on Tuesday night.

They shot very well in the 1st half (59%), then they took care of the ball very well in the 2nd half (only 1 turnover), and it added up to a 25 point win against a very good Oregon team. The game was close for the first 10 minutes, then the Wolverines started to pull away. They had a nice 46-32 lead at halftime, and they did a great job expanding the lead in the 2nd half. They never let Oregon get any closer than 15 points, and the 25-point lead was big enough that Coach Amaker could put in the scrubs for the last 2 minutes.

The stats for the Oregon game show how dominating Michigan was. UM shot 53% (29-for-55) from the floor, compared to only 35% (20-for-58) for Oregon. Michigan hit 47% (9-for-19) of their 3-pointers, including an amazing 8-for-12 (67%) in the first half, compared to only 21% (4-for-19) for Oregon. The only stat that Oregon won was free-throw shooting. Oregon hit 100% (9-for-9), and UM only hit 52% (11-for-21), but notice that Michigan still made more free-throws than Oregon attempted. UM won the rebounding battle (39-33), had more assists (18-8), had fewer turnovers (11-16), and had more steals (11-7). It was an impressive, complete game effort.

Unfortunately, Michigan couldn't maintain that high level of intensity for Thursday's championship game. They played pretty well against Rutgers, but not nearly as well as they had against Oregon. The 1st half was close, with Michigan grabbing a 32-25 lead at halftime. In the 2nd half, Michigan pushed the lead up to 12 (41-29), and it looked like they might cruise to another comfortable win. Then, the roof fell in. Rutgers went on a 15-2 run, and erased the entire 12-point deficit, 44-43. From that point on, the game was a seesaw battle. It was tied up at 48-48 with about 5 minutes left, then Michigan slowly pulled away. The lead was 4 (52-48), then 8 (56-48), before Rutgers cut it to 5 (58-53). UM weathered the storm, and won by 7 (62-55).

The stats for the Rutgers game show how close it was. Neither team shot well; the shooting percentages were an identical 36% for both teams. Michigan was 21-for-59, and Rutgers was 24-for-67. The 3-point shooting was also lousy: Michigan shot 25% (4-for-16), and Rutgers did even worse (3-for-19, 16%). Even the free-throw shooting was terrible: UM shot 59% (16-for-27), and Rutgers shot 44% (4-for-9). Once again, Michigan made a lot more free throws than Rutgers attempted. Michigan had more assists (13-7), but they lost the turnover battle, 15-13. The big stat for the game was rebounds: Rutgers had 42, which is impressive, but UM had an amazing 50 rebounds, including 20 offensive rebounds. That's awesome.

Individually, it was the 2 "DH" players again. Daniel Horton was the leading scorer for Michigan in both games, with 15 points against Oregon, and 14 points against Rutgers. For his efforts, he was named the Tournament MVP, and he certainly deserved it. The other "DH" player, Dion Harris, was one point behind Horton in both games, with 14 and 13 points. He was named to the All-Tournament Team, along with Horton. None of the other starters hit double figures in both games. In fact, Bernard Robinson, Jr. was the only other starter to hit double figures in either game, with 13 against Oregon. He came close against Rutgers, with 9 points. However, those 9 points were enough to push him over 1500 points (1505) for his career. Courtney Sims had a quiet game against Oregon, with only 4 points, but he almost hit double figures against Rutgers, with 9 points. The final starter, Graham Brown, had 9 and 6 points, respectively.

The bench players contributed more against Oregon than in the Rutgers game. In the Oregon game, the 3 main subs did pretty well. Chris Hunter had 10 points, Lester Abram had 9 points, and Brent Petway had 4 points. The rest of the team except for Dani Wohl (John Andrews, Ashtyn Bell, Sherrod Harrell, J.C. Mathis, Colin Dill, and Amadou Ba) all got in for the last 2 minutes of the Oregon game, but none of them scored. Only the 3 main subs played in the Rutgers game, and they didn't score much. Abram had 5 points, Hunter had 4 points, and Petway had 2 points. Up until the Rutgers game, Petway had been shooting a perfect 100% (10-for-10), but he was 1-for-6 in the Rutgers game.

The 2003-2004 season is now history, and it will go down as a successful one. The team didn't always play up to its potential, and they let a few crucial games slip away in the middle of the season, which cost them a bid to the NCAA Tournament. However, they responded very well, and played their best basketball of the season during their 5-game run to the NIT title. It's great that they finished strong, and it's even better that they brought home a new banner for Crisler Arena.

Even though the season is over, I'll be back one more time to wrap things up. I'll go over my (slightly over-optimistic) pre-season predictions, hand out final grades, and look ahead to next season. Be sure to stop back next week, to look back and look ahead.

Go Blue!