04/12/2004 – Week #23 – Season Wrap-Up

The 2003-2004 season is over for the University of Michigan men's basketball team, and in general, it was a success. The good news is that they won the 2004 National Invitation Tournament (NIT). The bad news is that they had a good enough team to have played in, and done pretty well in, the NCAA Tournament. The best news is that almost everyone on this year's team will be back next year, and all the young players will be a year older and better. They finished with a final record of 23-11 (8-8 in the Big Ten), and next year should be even better.

Predictions

Before the season started, I took a shot at predicting how the Wolverines would do this year, and I was pretty optimistic. I predicted that they would end up with a final record of 28-7 (11-5 in the Big Ten). I predicted that they would win all 11 of their non-conference games, make it to the championship game in the Big Ten Tournament, and make it to the Regional Finals in the NCAA Tournament.

Season Wrap-Up (Non-Conference)

Obviously, the team didn't do quite as well as I predicted, but they came close. They won 9 of their 11 non-conference games, and they should have won 10 of them. The only one that really got away from them was the 12/06/2003 game at Vanderbilt. They lost by 20 (83-63), and they were definitely outplayed. Their other non-conference loss was one of the games that they should have and could have won, but they let it slip away. On 12/30/2003, they lost to Boston University 61-60, in Ann Arbor. It was a costly loss, since Michigan probably only missed getting invited to the NCAA Tournament by a single game. Of course, there were a couple other losses that fell into the same category, and we'll get to those. On the positive side, they did win a couple of big games against quality opponents: on 12/02/2003 (right before the Vanderbilt loss), they beat North Carolina State, 68-61, in Ann Arbor. Then, on 12/27/2003 (right before the Boston University loss), the beat UCLA, 70-66, in Ann Arbor. I'm sure that it was more than just a coincidence that both of Michigan's non-conference losses came right after big, emotional victories.

Season Wrap-Up (Big Ten)

Michigan entered the Big Ten season with a very respectable 9-2 record, and they started the Big Ten campaign well, with a convincing 78-53 win over Northwestern in Ann Arbor on 01/07/2004. Things were looking good, then the second "loss that should have been a win" game happened. This time, it was against Indiana, in Crisler Arena, on 01/11/2004, by a score of 59-57. Just like in the Boston University game, Michigan was clearly the better team, but they just couldn't make the key plays down the stretch, and they lost another game that they should have won. The next 2 games were both on the road, against tough teams, and they lost them both. On 01/17/2004, they lost to Michigan State, 71-54, in East Lansing, then on 01/21/2004, they lost to (#19) Wisconsin, 74-63, in Madison. Michigan didn't look very good in either of these games, and they found themselves looking at a 3-game losing streak. It's tough to win on the road in the Big Ten, and some venues are tougher than others. Michigan State and Wisconsin are two of the toughest.

Fortunately, Michigan bounced back and finally won a Big Ten road game. On 01/24/2004, they beat Penn State, 69-59, in State College. Even though it was only against Penn State, it was still a big win, since it was on the road, and it stopped the losing streak at 3 games. The Wolverines returned home, and beat a decent Iowa team, 90-84, on 01/28/2004.

Unfortunately, they had to go back on the road for 3 of their next 4 games, and they lost all 3 of them, sandwiched around a home win: on 01/31/2004, they lost at Illinois, 67-52, then on 02/07/2004, they beat Purdue, 64-63, in Ann Arbor. On 02/11/2004, they lost at Minnesota, 81-78, then on 02/14/2004, they lost at Iowa, 69-61. The last 2 losses were both of the "losses that should have been wins" type, especially the one at Minnesota. To that point, Minnesota was 0-8 in the Big Ten, including several uncharacteristic losses at home. They got healthy against Michigan.

After playing 3 out of 4 on the road, Michigan had 4 home games in a row, and they won 3 of them: on 02/18/2004, they beat Penn State, 76-53, then on 02/22/2004, they beat (#12) Wisconsin, 71-59. The Wisconsin win was huge, and as usual, Michigan followed it up with another loss, this time to Michigan State. On 02/24/2004, they lost to MSU, 72-69. This is the 4th of the "should have been wins" losses. Finally, UM won the last game of the 4-game homestand, against Ohio State. On 02/29/2004, they beat OSU, 75-64, on Senior Night. It was the last regular season home game, and it was very satisfying to win it. Michigan closed out the regular season on the road, and they lost one and won one. On 03/03/2004, they lost at Indiana, 61-56, then on 03/05/2004, they beat Northwestern, 63-56. The Indiana game was the 5th and final "loss that should have been a win".

Season Wrap-Up (Big Ten Tournament)

Michigan went into the Big Ten Tournament as the 5th seed, and they played very well in their opening game against the 4th seed, Iowa. On 03/12/2004, they beat Iowa 79-70, but they lost their top scorer, Lester Abram, to a shoulder injury during that win. Without Abram, they played hard, but they didn't stand much chance the next day (03/13/2004), when they lost to (#13) Illinois 74-60.

Season Wrap-Up (NIT)

Michigan's overall record of 18-11 wasn't good enough to get into the NCAA Tournament, even though Michigan State got in with an identical record. So, UM accepted an invitation to the National Invitation Tournament (NIT), and they won it all. They got to play the first 3 games in Crisler Arena, and they played well. On 03/16/2004, they beat Missouri 65-64, then on 03/22/2004, they beat Oklahoma 63-52, and finally, on 03/24/2004, they beat Hawaii 88-73. The crowds were fabulous for all 3 of these games.

Michigan advanced to the NIT Final Four, played in Madison Square Garden (MSG), in New York City. On 03/30/2004, Michigan crushed Oregon 78-53, then on 04/01/2004), they beat Rutgers 62-55, to win the championship. 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 those 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.

Individual Performance

Over the last few years, Michigan has usually had one player that was a "star", with a supporting cast, for example, LaVell Blanchard. This year's team was different. It was truly a team. Looking at the final individual statistics, that becomes obvious. Four players averaged double-figures in scoring, led by Lester Abram (13.1 points per game). Daniel Horton (12.2 ppg), Bernard Robinson, Jr. (12.1 ppg), and Dion Harris (10.1 ppg) were all right up there. Besides those 4 players, there were 5 more who averaged 3.8 ppg or more:

Courtney Sims (7.7 ppg), Chris Hunter (5.0 ppg), Graham Brown (4.6 ppg), Brent Petway (3.9 ppg), and J.C. Mathis (3.8 ppg).

Similarly, lots of players contributed in rebounding. Robinson led the team with 5.7 rebounds per game, but Sims (4.7), Abram (4.2), Brown (4.1), Mathis (3.8), Petway (3.4), and Hunter (3.4) all chipped in.

Sims did a great job blocking shots this year, with 68 swats. To give you some context, the next best player on the team was Petway, with 28.

Robinson led the team with 130 assists, and Horton was right behind him with 122. No one else was close. Robinson and Horton also led the team in steals, with 64 and 60, respectively.

Team Honors

Regardless of the awards announced at the Basketball Bust, here are my awards for this year's team:

Most Valuable Player: Lester Abram

Best Defensive Player: Bernard Robinson, Jr.

Most Hustle: Graham Brown

Most Improved: Chris Hunter

Best Dunker (ever): Brent Petway

Final Grades

It's time for final grades for the team, and Coach Amaker:

Name	Midterm Grade	Final Grade	Comments
Freshmen			
John Andrews	Inc	Inc	Didn't play much.
Amadou Ba	Inc	Inc	Didn't play much.
Ashtyn Bell	None	Inc	Didn't play much. I didn't even realize that he was on the team until the game at Iowa (02/14/2004).
Dion Harris	B	B+	Nice shooting touch, good job running the point when he needs to. Came on strong once he moved into the starting lineup.
Brent Petway	B	B+	He improved as the season went on. He shot well, played good defense, and showed good hustle.
Courtney Sims	B+	B+	Great shot-blocking ability, good rebounding, good scoring. Will only get better.
Sophomores			
Lester Abram	B	A-	Improved scoring, good rebounding, good speed, nice shooting touch. He became a team leader as the season went on.

Graham Brown	B+	B+	Does well for his size, hustles, a winner. Inconsistent scoring, good defense.
Sherrod Harrell	C+	C+	OK running the point, not much of a shooter. Pretty good for a walk-on.
Daniel Horton	B+	B+	Good scorer, good dribbler, good leadership, a winner. Poor shooting percentage, too many turnovers. Had a minor slump at midseason, came back strong at the end, including the MVP of the NIT Final Four.
Chris Hunter	B	B+	Nice improvement over last year, until knee surgery slowed him down. Came back strong, and contributed nicely down the stretch.
Dani Wohl	Inc	Inc	Didn't play much.
Juniors			
J.C. Mathis	B	B-	He disappeared at the end of the season. When he was playing regularly, he contributed, but it's not clear what the problem is.
Seniors			
Colin Dill	Inc	Inc	Didn't play much.
Bernard Robinson, Jr.	B+	B+	The most athletic player on the team, good scorer, not a very good shooter. Played great defense, provided good leadership.
Coach			
Tommy Amaker	B+	B+	Great recruiter, good practice coach, decent bench coach. Has done a great job molding a young team.

As you can see, almost all the grades went up. Almost everyone on the team improved as the season went on. With only one senior on the team (Robinson) who played any significant minutes, and 12 freshmen and sophomores, this is a very young team, and just about everyone will be back next year. If Mathis can return to his midseason form, he can be a leader, as the lone senior on the team.

Next Year

Unfortunately, there is only one incoming freshman currently signed for next season. His name is Ronald Coleman, and he's a 6' 6", 205 pound, wing/forward from Romulus (MI). He's a Top 100 player, and he'll be able to contribute right away. The only other potential recruit for next year is Malik Hairston, a 6' 6", 190 pound, small forward/shooting guard from Detroit (MI) Renaissance. UM is just one of six schools he's considering, so he's a long shot (no pun intended). Watch the news to see where he decides to go.

Wrap-Up

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.

This is my last column of the season, and my last column as a Michigan student. Yes, I'm finally going to graduate in 2 weeks with my Masters in Human-Computer Interaction, from the School of Information. I'm very excited about it.

Even though I won't be a UM student any more, I'll always be a UM fan. I'll be back next season, writing my column every week, and I should even have more time and energy to put into it, since I won't be trying to work on it when I should be working on my school work. Be sure to check back in October, to follow the Wolverines for another exciting season.

Go Blue!