11/08/2004 – Week #01 – Let The Games Begin

Welcome back to "Nothing But 'Net" for the 2004-2005 season. It's great to be back, for what is looking like another very promising season. On a personal note, I finally finished work on my Masters in Human-Computer Interaction at the School of Information last April, so now I don't have to juggle working on my homework with writing this column every Sunday evening.

I know that most of us are still focusing on football, especially with the Wolverines doing so well this season, but basketball season is already here. In fact, there have already been several preseason events, including an exhibition game on Sunday (11/07/2004) vs. Michigan Tech, which UM won 60-43. It was a pretty low-key game, with very little emotion, but the Wolverines did what they had to do to win the game. Everyone played, and the players who are expected to be the main contributors this season did fine.

One of the big stories over the summer was how sophomore Courtney Sims bulked up, with about 20-25 pounds of new muscle, and he looked very good out there on Sunday. He scored Michigan's first 6 points of the game, and had 8 points pretty early in the 1st half. He ended up with 13 points, to tie for team-high honors with junior Daniel Horton. Junior Lester Abram was right behind them, with 12 points. They were the only starters who hit double-figures, although sophomore Dion Harris got close (8 points), and junior Graham Brown had a solid game with 6 points. Sims was the only starter who shot really well (6-for-7), although Horton (4-for-8) and Harris (4-for-8) shot pretty well, and Abram (4-for-9) wasn't far behind. Even Brown (2-for-5) did OK. Sims was the leading rebounder, with 8, and Horton had 6 rebounds.

As I mentioned earlier, coach Tommy Amaker emptied his bench, but none of the subs did much out there. Freshman Ron Coleman (12 minutes), junior Chris Hunter (11 minutes), junior Sherrod Harrell (10 minutes), and sophomore Brent Petway (10 minutes) got most of the minutes, but they didn't do much scoring. Coleman (1-for-3 shooting) and Harrell (1-for-1) each had 2 points, and Hunter (0-for-6 shooting) had 1 point. Petway went 0-for-2 shooting. The other subs only got a minute or two each, but two of them scored: 5th-year senior J.C. Mathis went 1-for-1, for 2 points, and junior Ashtyn Bell hit a free throw, for 1 point. 4th-year junior Dani Wohl, sophomore John Andrews, and freshman Alex Brzozowicz all played, but didn't attempt a shot.

Besides the 5 starters, and 9 subs who played, there are still 2 other players on the team: 3rd-year sophomore Amadou Ba and senior Hayes Grooms. Ba was in street clothes on the bench, so I'm assuming that he has some sort of injury. Grooms is a walk-on transfer from Lamar University, so he's sitting out this year.

For the last couple of years, everyone has been saying that Michigan has a good, young team. That has been true, but now the "young" part doesn't make as much sense. True, there is only one senior among the active players (Mathis), but there are now 7 players with junior eligibility (Abram, Wohl, Horton, Bell, Harrell, Brown, and Hunter). Bell and Wohl are mostly practice players, but the other 5 juniors are all key players on this team. Of the 5 players with sophomore eligibility (Harris, Andrews, Petway, Sims, and Ba), 3 of them got significant experience last year: Harris, Petway, and Sims. That's a solid core of 8 players with lots of game experience, on a team that did pretty well last year, including winning the National Invitation Tournament (NIT) Championship. The only starter from last year's team that graduated was Bernard Robinson, Jr., and the only significant newcomer on the team is Ron Coleman, so this is essentially the same team as last year, just a year older and more experienced. Let's take a closer look at each player:

Freshmen

Ron Coleman (#24)
Height: 6' 6"
Weight: 210
Position: Wing
Comments: Coleman is the only scholarship recruit for this year, but he's a good one. He's a good shooter, and a good rebounder. He's got the potential to be another Lester Abram.

Alex Brzozowicz (#30)
Height: 6' 3"
Weight: 185
Position: Guard
Comments: I don't know much about Alex, except that he's got a very difficult last name to spell, and he might be the only player in Michigan basketball history with 3 "z"'s in his last name. He's a walk-on guard from Oak Park, Illinois, and I'm sure he'll help out in practice.

Sophomores

John Andrews (#11)
Height: 6' 5"
Weight: 205
Position: Wing
Comments: Andrews played sparingly last year, but I'm sure he helped out a lot in practice. Look for more of the same this year.

Amadou Ba (#50)
Height: 6' 10"
Weight: 250
Position: Center
Comments: Ba sat out his freshman year as a redshirt, and he played sparingly last year as a redshirt freshman. He played on the Big Ten Conference Foreign Team over the summer, and got some valuable experience. He's big and tall, and he'll provide some muscle underneath, coming off the bench.

Dion Harris (#5)
Height: 6' 3"
Weight: 205
Position: Guard
Comments: Harris had a wonderful freshman year, and made the Big Ten All-Freshman team, and the NIT All-Tournament team. He worked his way into the starting rotation towards the end of last season, and is projected as a starter again this year. He's a shooting guard who can also drive to the basketball. He has good ball-handling skills, and can fill in at point guard if necessary.

Brent Petway (#23)
Height: 6' 8"
Weight: 205
Position: Forward
Comments: Petway is a tall, powerful player, with great speed. He's also the most exciting dunker on the team, maybe in the nation. He had a good freshman year, but he needs to work more on his offense, especially his outside shots. He was a monster on defense last year, with many incredible blocked shots.

Courtney Sims (#44)
Height: 6' 11"
Weight: 245
Position: Center/Forward
Comments: Sims is another tall, powerful player, especially with an extra 25 pounds of muscle on him. He had an excellent freshman season, and started all 34 games. He was named to the Big Ten All-Freshman team. He's a great shot-blocker, and a tough defender. He gives Michigan some much-needed height and muscle underneath.

Juniors

Lester Abram (#2)
Height: 6' 6"
Weight: 200
Position: Wing
Comments: Abram had another great year last season, and he's back, ready to do it again as a junior. He's fast, he can jump, and he's got a great shot. He's turning into a leader on the team, and was selected as one of the 3 captains.

Graham Brown (#25)
Height: 6' 9"
Weight: 255
Position: Center/Forward
Comments: Brown had a very good year last season, although he still needs to work more on his offense. He's a leader on the team, and was also selected as a tri-captain this year. He's another player who provides much-needed height and power underneath. He's also a warrior, in the mold of Chris Young.

Sherrod Harrell (#22)
Height: 6' 3"
Weight: 200
Position: Guard
Comments: Harrell came off the bench a lot last season to give Daniel Horton a rest at point guard. He did pretty well when he was in there, and he even chipped in some points along the way. He's the third tri-captain.

Daniel Horton (#4)
Height: 6' 3"
Weight: 200
Position: Guard
Comments: After carrying the team as a freshman, Horton got a lot more help last year. As a result, his numbers were down a little for his sophomore season, but he was every bit as valuable as he had been as a freshman. He was the NIT Tournament MVP. He's an excellent player, and he can play both point and shooting guard, as needed. He and Harris play well together, and make up a formidable backcourt.

Chris Hunter (#31)
Height: 6' 11"
Weight: 215
Position: Center/Forward
Comments: Hunter started a few games last season, and played well in many games. He wasn't quite as consistent as Graham Brown, but he definitely chipped in. He needs to work a little more on his defense, but he can be a solid contributor on this team.

Dani Wohl (#3)
Height: 5' 11"
Weight: 180
Position: Guard
Comments: Wohl is a redshirt junior, after transferring to Michigan from Binghamton University in New York 2 years ago. He's mostly a practice player, but he gets in the game every now and then.

Seniors
J.C. Mathis (#32)
Height: 6' 8"
Weight: 235
Position: Forward
Comments: Mathis is a 5th year senior, after transferring to Michigan from Virginia. He's a strong, powerful player who plays "taller" than he is. He was a co-captain last season, and he had a big role for the first 60% of the season, then his minutes suddenly trailed off. By the end of the season, he didn't play at all. Hopefully, he'll be able to work his way back into the rotation off the bench. He can definitely help out underneath with his muscle.

Hayes Grooms (#34)
Height: 6' 2"
Weight: 175
Position: Guard
Comments: Grooms is sitting out this season as a transfer from Lamar University. Next year, he'll have one season of eligibility left.

As you can see, Michigan has it all this year. They have a lot of height: 2 players at 6' 11", 1 player at 6' 10", one at 6' 9", and 2 more at 6' 8". They also have some muscle, with 3 players weighing around 250 pounds. Equally important, they have talent in the backcourt, with several good ball-handlers, shooters, and scorers. They have good rebounding, good speed, and a couple of excellent point guards to run the show. They have lots of depth, and lots of experience. With just about everyone back from last year's team, and another year's worth of game experience and maturity, Michigan is ready to take the next step. Winning the NIT Championship last season was a nice consolation prize, but the team was good enough to have made it into the NCAA Tournament. This year, there can be no excuses. Michigan has the talent to play with anyone in the nation, including that other Big Ten team from the state of Michigan. If they can gel as a team, and avoid serious injuries, they can challenge for the Big Ten title, and make a solid run in the NCAA Tournament in the spring.

Finally, I'd like to say a few words about a couple of the new rules for this season. For the rest of the calendar year 2004, there will be experimental rules, to see how they affect the game. The most obvious rules are the new lines painted on the court. The 3-point arc has been moved out to 20' 6", the free-throw lane is 1' 6" wider on each side, and there is a funny-looking semi-circle under the basket. The reasoning behind change to the 3-point line is obvious: someone thinks that the current 3-pointers are too easy. The reasoning behind the wider free-throw lane is also pretty obvious: try to cut down on the congestion and rough play under the basket. The arc under the basket is the most interesting rule change: if the defensive player has a foot inside the arc, an offensive player won't be called for an offensive foul as easily. This will encourage the defensive players to move out from under the basket a little more.

Michigan's 2nd, and final, exhibition game of the year is this Wednesday (11/10/2004) at 7:00 p.m. vs. Wayne State. Come on out and cheer them on.

Go Blue!