12/13/2004 – Week #06 – Welcome To The M*A*S*H Unit

The Week In Review

This week, the two games that the University of Michigan men's basketball team played were almost a sideline to the real story: the serious injury bug that has suddenly hit the team hard. It's starting to look like a M*A*S*H unit out there. Let's look at this situation, before we look at the two games:

First, there was Lester Abram, who re-injured his shoulder on 11/17/2004, in the game against Colorado. He missed 4 games, then he played 9 minutes in the big win over Notre Dame on 12/04/2004. The very next day, "Black Sunday" (12/05/2004), it was announced that he would have surgery on his shoulder, and that he was out for the rest of the season. That is the biggest, and the worst, of the injury news. Abram was the leading scorer on the team last year, and he's a key member of the team. He provides scoring, rebounding, ball-handling, assists, blocks, steals, and good defense. Losing him for the rest of the season is a big loss.

Next, there's the case of Graham Brown: he also got knocked out of the Colorado game, and he missed the next game, on 11/19/2004 against Sacramento State. He came back and played in the next four games, including the two Preseason National Invitation Tournament (NIT) games, the debacle at Georgia Tech, as part of the Big Ten-ACC Challenge, and the Notre Dame game. Once again, on Black Sunday, it was announced that he was going to have hernia surgery, and that he would miss the next 4-6 weeks. Brown doesn't do much of the scoring, but he is a very valuable member of the team. He grabs lots of rebounds, provides lots of muscle under the boards, and is one of the best defenders on the team. He will also be sorely missed for the time he is out.

Both of these injuries were described in last week's column, and I was hoping that would be the end of it, but that was wishful thinking. On "Black Sunday", the very same day that the team announced those two injuries, they suffered a third major injury: Daniel Horton, the team leader, sprained his knee in practice, and will be out for 4 weeks. He will not require surgery, just intensive rehabilitation. This is probably even a bigger loss than the other two, except that it's "only" for 4 weeks. With Horton out, UM doesn't have anyone with significant game experience to play the point guard position. The only starter who can play some point guard is Dion Harris, and he can do a reasonable job, but it really seems to affect his shooting performance. He's really a shooting guard. The other pure guards on the team (Sherrod Harrell, Dani Wohl, and Ashtyn Bell) all have very little game experience, and they're still pretty unconfident in their abilities.

The other two injuries are less severe, both in terms of the actual injuries, and in terms of their impact on the team. John Andrews suffered a deep muscle contusion in his thigh during the Arizona game on 11/24/2004, and it's been bothering him for the last 3-4 games. He has started the last 4 games, but his thigh has bothered him enough that he hasn't played much, if at all, in the 2nd half of the last 3 games.

Finally (I hope), Ashtyn Bell has a broken nose, and it kept him out of a couple games that he might have seen action in, but he did play 10 minutes in the game against South Florida on Saturday (12/11/2004). He is now available to play as needed, but he's wearing a mask to protect his nose.

To summarize:

- Abram – Lost for the rest of the season.
- Brown – Lost until around the beginning of the new year.
- Horton – Lost until around the beginning of the new year.
- Andrews – Available, but not for a full 40 minutes.
- Bell – Available, wearing a mask until around the beginning of the new year.

The exact timing is still up in the air, but things should start looking a lot better around the beginning of the new year, assuming there are no new injuries, and that Brown's recovery is on the quicker end of the 4-6 week estimate.

Enough talk about injuries, even though they played a big part in the two games that were played this week. Both games were in Crisler Arena, and with their normal starting lineup, Michigan would have had an easy time in both games. However, with 3 starters missing, both games were a lot more exciting than expected. On Tuesday (12/07/2004), Michigan beat High Point 67-53, then on Saturday (12/11/2004), they beat South Florida 71-62. The two wins raise UM's record to 6-3, which is respectable.

The Wolverines looked pretty good against High Point, especially in the 2nd half, and especially considering the makeshift lineup. A lot of the bench players got to play significant minutes, in real game situations, which is good. For the most part, they played pretty well. John Andrews is no Lester Abram, and Dani Wohl is no Daniel Horton, but they played within their abilities, and they didn't try to do more than they were able to do. The team played well as a unit, and kept the game under control.

They had a little more trouble against South Florida, mostly because South Florida had a player (Terrence Leather) who had a career day. He scored 28 points (on 11-for-15 shooting), and no one on the Michigan team could stop him. The only thing that kept him from scoring 50 points was foul trouble. He only played 25 minutes before fouling out. If he had stayed out of foul trouble, South Florida probably would have won the game. As it was, the team did what they had to do to win the game.

The Big Picture

The loss of Horton for 4 weeks doesn't really change things too much. As I mentioned last week, Michigan only has one really tough game (at UCLA, on Saturday 12/18/2004), so they might be able to "hold the fort" until Horton and Brown are back. All the games will be that much more difficult with 60% of the starters out, and the game against Boston University on Tuesday (12/14/2004) might end up as a loss instead of the predicted win, but the rest of the non-conference games look pretty winnable. If Horton and Brown are both available when the Big Ten schedule begins, at Iowa on Wednesday 01/05/2005, Michigan will stand a fighting chance. But, if either of them takes longer than expected to recover, the losses could start piling up.

Game Statistics

Now, let's look at the stats from the 2 games last week. The biggest difference in the High Point game was shooting percentage. UM shot very well (25-for-48 = 52.1%), and High Point didn't (19-for-53 = 35.8%). High Point did shoot a bit better than Michigan from 3-point range (UM: 4-for-15 = 26.7%, High Point: 9-for-23 = 39.1%), but not enough to make a difference in the final score. UM shot a better free-throw percentage as well: 76.5% (13-for-17) vs. 66.7% (6-for-9). In the non-shooting stats, Michigan won the all-important rebounding battle (31-29), had more assists (14-9), less turnovers (13-17), and more blocks (2-0). Steals were even at 6-6. Michigan had better stats, and deserved to win the game.

The stats from the South Florida game are much closer. USF had a better shooting percentage (46.4% [26-for-56]) than Michigan (42.3% [22-for-52]), but not from 3-point range (UM: 26.7% [4-for-15], USF: 15.4% [2-for-13]), and not from the free-throw line (UM: 79.3% [23-for-29], USF: 72.7% [8-for-11]). There's the difference in the game right there: Michigan shot 29 free throws, while South Florida shot 11. UM made 23 of them, and USF made 8. That's 15 points right there. The non-shooting stats were also close. Michigan again won the rebounding battle, 33-29, had less turnovers (12-14), more blocked shots (4-3), and more steals (6-5), but they had less assists (13-14). The big difference was the free-throw shooting.

Individual Statistics

Once again, due to injuries and a disciplinary action, Coach Amaker had to come up with two more different starting lineups this week. In both games, he started one of his two remaining regular starters, Dion Harris, along with John Andrews, Chris Hunter, and Ron Coleman. In the High Point game, he benched his other remaining regular starter, Courtney Sims, in favor of Brent Petway, to send a message to Sims about his effort. Sims played 17 minutes against High Point, and apparently the message was received, because he regained his starting spot in the South Florida game.

Of these starters, only Hunter hit double-figures in both games, and he looked very good doing it. He hasn't gotten a lot of extended playing time in since the beginning of last season, and he made the most of his current opportunity. He scored a career-high 22 points against High Point, then he followed it up with another strong game against South Florida, scoring 16 points. He shot very well from the floor against High Point (9-for-12), but not so well against South Florida (3-for-11). However, he did shoot very well from the free-throw line in both games: 3-for-4 vs. High Point, and a sizzling 10-for-10 vs. USF. On top of all that, he was the leading rebounder for Michigan in both games, with 6 and 8 rebounds, respectively. He was definitely my Player of the Week.

Harris played two strong games, although he only reached double-figures in one of them. He scored 8 points against High Point, and 22 against South Florida. In both games, however, he had pretty bad shooting percentages: 3-for-13 (23.1%) vs. High Point, and 6-for-17 (35.3%) vs. South Florida. His 3-point shooting was even worse: 0-for-7 vs. High Point, and 3-for-9 (33.3%) vs. South Florida.

The other starters had a mixed week. Andrews had 10 points against High Point, then 0 points against South Florida. Coleman had 5 points and 10 points, respectively. He's finally starting to find his shot, which is encouraging. In his one start, vs. High Point, Petway had 4 points, then he had 10 points coming off the bench against South Florida. Sims had 6 points in his one start, vs. South Florida, and 12 points coming off the bench against High Point.

Speaking of the bench, they have to contribute now, and they did a decent job last week. Of course, some of the "bench" points came from players who are starters (Sims) or occasional starters (Petway), but not all of them. Dani Wohl chipped in 4 points against High Point, J.C. Mathis had 2 points in the same game, and Sherrod Harrell had a big 7 points against South Florida. Harrell played, but did not score, in the High Point game, and Ashtyn Bell, and Mathis played in the South Florida game, but did not score.

The Upcoming Week

Once again, Michigan has two games this week, but only one of them is at home. On Tuesday (12/14/2004, 7:00 p.m. EST), they play Boston University in Crisler Arena, then on Saturday (12/18/2004, 5:00 p.m. EST), they play at UCLA. This could be a rough week. I don't think they stand a very good chance out at UCLA, and they'll have their hands full with Boston University. They could use some support on Tuesday night, so come on down to Crisler Arena to cheer on the Wolverines.

Go Blue!