12/20/2004 – Week #07 – The Losses Are Starting To Pile Up

The Week In Review

The University of Michigan men's basketball team lost two games this week, and they were both games that they could have won, despite the ever-growing injury problem. On Tuesday (12/14/2004), they lost at home to Boston University, 63-52. Then, on Saturday (12/18/2004), they lost on the road at UCLA, 81-79. The two losses leave Michigan with a season record of 6-5, which is starting to look more like an NIT kind of season than an NCAA kind of season.

The Boston University loss was very disappointing. Sure, UM was missing 60% of their normal starting lineup (Lester Abram, Graham Brown, and Daniel Horton), but the players who took their places can play better than they did, and have in the past. BU controlled the tempo of the game, and led most of the way. Still, with just under 4 minutes left in the game, Michigan crept back to within one point, at 50-49, but BU ripped off a 13-3 run to end the game, and UM lost at home for the first time this season, ending a 10-game home winning streak dating back to last season. It isn't often that I feel that I can blame a loss on one player, but this was one of those rare games. Dion Harris had a terrible game, shooting 1-for-11 (including 0-for-6 from 3-point range), and only scoring 4 points. Many of those misses were easy layups, or wide-open 3-pointers. As I mentioned in last week's column, having to play point guard seems to really mess up his shooting, but he missed shots that no one should miss at this level. He was just off that night. Don't get me wrong: I really like Dion. He's a great guy, and a great player. He tried hard, and he really wants his team to win, but his poor performance against BU doomed the team to a loss. That's just the way it went.

In contrast, Michigan hung with UCLA throughout the game, and even enjoyed a 6-point lead (75-69), once again with just under 4 minutes left to play. Once again, they couldn't seal the deal, and UCLA went on a 12-4 run to end the game. The UCLA game was a lot like the Arizona game in the Preseason National Invitation Tournament (NIT) semifinals: Michigan played well enough to win, only to melt down at the end. It's a real shame, because it would have been a big win for this team to fly out to Los Angeles on Friday afternoon, play with subs starting for 3 of the regular starters, and escape with a victory in Pauley Pavilion. They came so close, it just doesn't seem fair.

In the first sentence, I mentioned the "ever-growing injury problem." The latest injuries aren't as severe as the injuries to the three regular starters, but it still makes it that much harder for UM to win. Dani Wohl injured his left elbow in practice last Thursday (12/09/2004), and is out for 6 weeks. Sherrod Harrell broke his nose in the Boston University game on Tuesday, and he had to wear a mask in the UCLA game. It was pretty sad watching the game at one point when both he and Ashtyn Bell were out there at the same time, since Bell is wearing a mask for his broken nose as well. That brings the number of injured Wolverines up to 8:

- Lester Abram – Shoulder surgery. He's lost for the rest of the season.
- Graham Brown – Hernia surgery. He's lost until around the beginning of the new year.
- Daniel Horton – Sprained knee. He's lost until around the beginning of the new year.
- John Andrews – Deep contusion of his thigh, and a sore knee. He's available, but hobbled.
- Ashtyn Bell – Broken nose. He's available, but wearing a mask until around the beginning of the new year.
- Dani Wohl – Injured elbow. He's lost until around the middle of January.

- Sherrod Harrell – Broken nose. He's available, but wearing a mask until around the middle of January.

Of course, the most significant injuries are the ones to the regular starters, Abram, Brown and Horton. Abram is done for the season, and that's not going to change, but other than Wohl, everyone else is at least able to play. When Brown and Horton return to the lineup, near the beginning of the year, things should start getting better.

The Big Picture

It's hard to tell what to make of these two losses. On the one hand, it's easy to blame them on the loss of three starters, and it certainly is fair to say that UCLA is a strong opponent, especially on their fabled home court. On the other hand, the reserves who filled in as starters played pretty well, especially in the UCLA game, and both games were winnable with less than 4 minutes to go, and in the last 10 seconds in the UCLA game. These losses bring up several questions:

- Is Michigan in trouble this year? It's still too early to tell. We'll know a lot more after the two starters return.
- Will they still make it to the NCAA Tournament? These two losses certainly hurt their chances, but there's still a lot of basketball left to be played. Unfortunately, for the rest of the season, they're a "bubble" team.
- Will things start getting better once two of the three regular starters return? Sure, but it might not be enough. The loss of Abram is significant, and it could cost UM several games that they might have just barely squeaked out a win.

Game Statistics

Now, let's look at the stats from the 2 games last week. The biggest difference in the Boston University game was 3-point shooting percentage. UM shot poorly (3-for-17 = 17.6%), and BU shot very well (7-for-14 = 50%). Those 4 extra 3-pointers were the difference in the final score. The other shooting percentages were pretty close: UM shot 20-for-46 (43.5%) from the floor, while BU shot 20-for-48 (41.7%) from the floor. The free-throw shooting percentages were also close, but BU shot and made more: UM: 9-for-11 (81.8%), BU: 16-for-19 (84.2%). The non-shooting stats tell more of the story. BU had more rebounds (30-27), less turnovers (15-19), more steals (8-7), and more blocked shots (4-1). Assists were even (12-12). As you can see, the big difference was 3-point shooting.

The stats from the UCLA game were a little closer. Even though Michigan shot a very respectable 46.7% (28-for-60) from the floor, UCLA shot a blistering 58.7% (27-for-46). Note that UM made more baskets (28-27). Michigan also had a very respectable shooting percentage from 3-point range (7-for-20 = 35%), but UCLA shot even better (6-for-15 = 40%). Note once again that UM made more 3-point shots. So, how did UCLA win? At the free-throw line: they made more free-throws (21) than UM attempted (20). The numbers were 21-for-30 (70%) for UCLA, and 16-for-20 (80%) for UM. That was the difference in the game. The non-shooting stats are pretty close. UM won the rebounding battle (31-28), had less turnovers (14-16), and more blocked shots (2-1). On the other hand, UCLA had more assists (16-11), and more steals (4-2). It all worked out to be a 2-point UCLA win.

Individual Statistics

Once again, due to injuries, Coach Amaker had to come up with two more different starting lineups this week. In both games, he started both of his two remaining regular starters, Dion Harris and Courtney Sims, along Chris Hunter and Ron Coleman. In the Boston

University game, he started Sherrod Harrell, but in the UCLA game he started John Andrews instead, due to Harrell's broken nose. Harrell still played in the UCLA game, but it was clear that the mask bothered him. Of these starters, only one player had two good games: Chris Hunter. He was the leading scorer for UM in the UCLA game, with 21 points (on 8-for-15 shooting), and he tied for team-high honors in the BU game, with 13 points (on 4-for-7 shooting). Hunter has now started four games in a row, and he's scored in double figures in all four of them, and he's been the team-high scorer in three of those four games. He has been excellent at the free-throw line (3-for-4 against BU, 4-for-4 against UCLA), which, combined with his 13-for-14 the previous week, makes him 20-for-22 as a starter. He has also turned into a pretty good 3-point shooter, which is amazing for a 6'11" guy. He hit 2-for-3 against Boston University, and 1-for-4 against UCLA. The only knock on him this week was his rebounding. After being the leading rebounder in both games the previous week, he only had three against BU, and none (zero, zippo, zilch) against UCLA.

Sims had a big game against UCLA, scoring 17 points (on 7-for-12 shooting), but he was pretty quiet against BU, scoring 6 points. He also did a much better job rebounding in the UCLA game, with 7, which tied for the team lead. He only had 4 against Boston University.

Coleman is getting better with each game. At the start of the season, it didn't look like he was going to be ready to make much of a contribution this season, but he has really blossomed these last few games, now that he's getting some serious minutes out there. He had 7 points against Boston University, and 13 against UCLA. The only trouble with his play against BU was his shooting percentage: 3-for-11 (27.3%), including 0-for-7 from 3-point range. He improved his shooting significantly against UCLA: 5-for-7 (71.4%), including 3-for-5 from 3-point range. He also did a good job rebounding at UCLA, tying for the team lead with 7.

Harrell didn't do much this week, either as a starter (5 points) against BU, or coming off the bench (0 points) at UCLA. Andrews did a little better, scoring 7 points as a starter against UCLA, and 4 points coming off the bench against BU.

The only starter I haven't mentioned so far is Dion Harris, although I did mention him above. As I said before, he had a truly miserable game against Boston University, but he bounced back strong with a good, solid game against UCLA. He scored 17 points, although he shot a pretty poor percentage: 5-for-16 (31.2%). He did finally hit a few 3-pointers, going 3-for-7. The biggest knock against him in the UCLA game was that he only had one assist, against three turnovers.

The bench didn't contribute much against UCLA (4 points), but they helped a lot against Boston University. All of the bench points against UCLA came from Brent Petway, and most of the bench points in the BU game came from him as well (13 points). In fact, Petway tied for team-high scoring honors against BU with those 13 points, and he had a double-double, with 11 rebounds. I've already mentioned how Andrews and Harrell did when they came off the bench (4 and 0 points, respectively), and the only other bench players to play this week were Ashtyn Bell and J.C. Mathis. Neither of them took a shot in either game.

The Upcoming Week

Michigan has 11 days off between the UCLA game and their next game, which is against Delaware State on Wednesday (12/29/2004, 7:00 p.m.) in Crisler Arena. So, there are no games next week, due to the Christmas holidays. However, I'll be back next Monday, with the 1st trimester grades for the team, and some comments on the season to date.

Go Blue!