01/31/2005 – Week #13 – Yet Another Season On The Brink

The Week In Review

This is starting to sound like a broken record. Every year, the University of Michigan men's basketball team has great potential, and it looks like they're going to finally break through and start winning the big games and get into the NCAA Tournament. Then, every year, they run into a tough stretch of their Big Ten schedule, and they fold up like a cheap suitcase. It happened again the last two weeks. Two weeks ago, they were 12-5 overall, and 3-0 in the Big Ten, just half a game out of first place. They had won 6 games in a row overall, and they were on a roll. Then they hit one of the rough spots in their schedule, and now they've lost 4 games in a row, to fall to 12-9 overall, 3-4 in the Big Ten. Unless they can turn things around, and quickly, they may not even get the dubious privilege of defending their NIT championship.

Granted, both of their games last week were on the road, and one of them was against a Top 25 team, but they should have won the other one. On Thursday (01/27/2005), they played at (#13) Michigan State, and they lost 64-53. Then, on Sunday (01/30/2005), they played at Purdue, and they got blown out, 84-55. Combined with last week's two losses (at Indiana, and at home vs. (#24) Wisconsin), they've now played 4 lousy games in a row. They've been "flat" in all 4 games, and they never really stood much chance of winning any of them.

Of these 4 games, 3 of them were on the road, where it's always tough to win, and 2 of them were against Top 25 teams, but they should have been able to win one of the two games against non-ranked teams. Coming into the UM game, Purdue was 4-13 overall, and 0-6 in the Big Ten. It was embarrassing to watch Michigan get manhandled by such a mediocre team. Once again, in all 4 games, all the other team had to do was crank up the tight man-to-man defense, and the UM players got all flustered, and that was the game.

We can't start to talk about what happened without talking about Domestic Violence. The big story this week was that starting point guard Daniel Horton was suspended indefinitely from the team, due to his arrest for domestic violence. Of course, there's no excuse for domestic violence, and if Horton is found guilty of what he's been accused of, he should face the consequences. In the meantime, I believe that Coach Tommy Amaker is doing the right thing by suspending him from practicing and playing, but he should make it clear to the public what he expects from Horton, and under what conditions the suspension will be lifted. At this point, the situation is creating a lot of unnecessary uncertainty. Like it or not, all the players and coaches on all the major college sports teams are public figures, and they are going to be under a lot more scrutiny than the normal college student or employee. While Amaker doesn't have to reveal or explain his decisions to the public, he should be aware that there is going to be a great deal of attention paid to this situation. If he has an "exit strategy", it would be nice if he would share it with the rest of us.

After all the injuries that this team has suffered this season, Horton's suspension is just another nail in the coffin. The team weathered the 6 games that he missed earlier in the season, and they'll survive the suspension as well. With Horton out, Dion Harris will play some point guard, along with Dani Wohl. When Harris plays point guard, his offensive production falls way off. Even with Wohl playing point, Harris will have a tougher time scoring, since the defense will be able to leave Wohl alone, and concentrate on Harris. Wohl just isn't the scoring threat that Horton is. Any way you look at it, Horton's suspension really hurts the team, and that's exactly what happened this week. For the most part,

Michigan played decent defense, but they were helpless on offense. Even the return of Chris Hunter from his sprained ankle wasn't enough of a lift.

The Big Picture

This team has lots of talent, and lots of weapons, but they just don't seem to play with enough fire and intensity, with a couple exceptions. Brent Petway and Graham Brown always play hard, and Petway tries to fire up the rest of the team and the Michigan crowd. Horton (when he's not suspended) and Harris occasionally get the fire in their eyes, but it usually translates into a lot of one-on-one offense and wild shots. Ron Coleman plays hard, and smart, but still with little fire or emotion. The real weak links are the big men who play "soft": Courtney Sims and Chris Hunter. Hunter occasionally plays with some emotion and desire, but Sims almost always has that "what, me worry?" look on his face. It's good that he doesn't get too rattled, and doesn't react when things go poorly, but he doesn't seem to get fired up when the team needs someone to throw some weight around underneath. Inch-for-inch, he has the least number of dunks on the team. When he gets an offensive rebound underneath, instead of going up strong and jamming it through, he tries a gentle 2-footer, or a soft layup. He's usually successful, but a good jam would fire up the team and the crowd (for home games). Not all 2 point baskets are created equal. He needs to be more aggressive.

The current 4-game losing streak has made it very hard for Michigan to make it to the NCAA Tournament. At 12-9, they still need to win at least 6 (probably 8) more games, with only 9 regular season games left before the Big Ten Tournament. Of those remaining games, 3 of them look like sure losers: home vs. Illinois, home vs. Michigan State, and at Wisconsin. That means that they pretty much need to win every other Big Ten game. If they lose the 3 hard ones, and win the 6 other games, that would give them an 18-12 record (9-7 in the Big Ten), which would put them solidly "on the bubble" for the NCAA Tournament. They would probably have to win 2 games in the Big Ten Tournament to get into The Big Dance.

This week, Michigan has a "breather" for a couple of games (home vs. Minnesota, and at Ohio State), then they hit the next rough stretch of 3 games, starting on 02/08/2005. Here's their remaining schedule:

Date	**Opponent**	**Site**
02/02 (Wed)	Minnesota	Ann Arbor
02/05 (Sat)	Ohio State	Columbus, Ohio
02/08 (Tue)	Illinois	Ann Arbor
02/12 (Sat)	Michigan State	Ann Arbor
02/16 (Wed)	Wisconsin	Madison, Wis.
02/20 (Sun)	Indiana	Ann Arbor
02/23 (Wed)	Penn State	Ann Arbor
02/26 (Sat)	Northwestern	Evanston, Ill.
03/05 or 03/06	Iowa	Ann Arbor
Big Ten Tournament		
03/10 (Thu)	First Round	Chicago, Ill.
03/11 (Fri)	Quarterfinals	Chicago, Ill.
03/12 (Sat)	Semifinals	Chicago, Ill.
03/13 (Sun)	Finals	Chicago, Ill.

Game Statistics

First, let's look at the shooting statistics from the Michigan State game:

Team	Field goals	3-Pointers	Free throws

Michigan	21-44 (47.7%)	4-12 (33.3%)	7-14 (50.0%)
Michigan State	24-51 (47.1%)	2-11 (18.2%)	14-20 (70.0%)
Advantage	MSU	UM	MSU

The shooting stats tell a lot of the story in this game. MSU got 7 more shots than UM, and made 3 more than UM did. Then you look at the free throw shooting, and that tells even more of the story. Michigan shot free throws terribly, and they just didn't get to the line that much. Michigan State made as many free throws as Michigan attempted. There's 7 more points right there. With all the size and strength Michigan has up front, they should have gotten to the line a lot more than that.

Now, let's look at the non-shooting statistics from the Michigan State game:

Team	Rebounds	Assists	Turnovers	Blocks	Steals
Michigan	25	13	23	3	5
Michigan State	35	18	17	1	11
Advantage	MSU	MSU	MSU	UM	MSU

These stats tell the rest of the story. If you wondered why MSU got 7 more shots than Michigan, just check out that rebounding edge. That's ugly. The assists don't matter that much, but the turnovers and steals are disgusting. Once again, when an opponent played a frantic, in-your-face defense, especially in the 2nd half, Michigan got flustered, and started making silly turnovers. That changed the momentum of the game, and it never changed back.

On to the shooting statistics from the Purdue game:

Team	Field goals	3-Pointers	Free throws
Michigan	21-53 (39.6%)	4-15 (26.7%)	9-18 (50.0%)
Purdue	25-48 (52.1%)	6-14 (42.9%)	28-36 (76.2%)
Advantage	PU	PU	PU

This is really ugly. Look at the free throws, again. Once again, Michigan's opponent made many more free throws than Michigan attempted. In this case, Purdue scored 19 more points than Michigan did from the free throw line. Also, for the 2nd game in a row, UM shot 50% from the free throw line. That's terrible.

Finally, let's look at the non-shooting statistics from the Purdue game:

Team	Rebounds	Assists	Turnovers	Blocks	Steals
Michigan	24	11	12	5	3
Purdue	36	20	12	3	5
Advantage	PU	PU	Even	UM	PU

Once again, Michigan lost the rebounding battle badly. There are 12 extra possessions for Purdue, right there. The rest of the stats don't matter much.

Individual Statistics

With Horton suspended indefinitely, Coach Amaker started Wohl at point guard in both games this week.

Here are the individual stats for the starters this week:

Player	Field Goals		3-Pointers		Free Throws		Points	
	MSU	PU	MSU	PU	MSU	PU	MSU	PU
Ron Coleman	4-8	2-4	2-6	0-1	0-0	0-0	10	4
Graham Brown	2-4	5-10	0-0	0-0	1-2	1-2	5	11
Courtney Sims	4-8	2-2	0-0	0-0	4-7	2-4	12	6
Dani Wohl	0-0	0-2	0-0	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0
Dion Harris	5-9	3-14	2-5	2-8	0-0	0-0	12	8
Totals	15-29	12-32	4-11	2-10	5-9	3-6	39	48

There are some ugly numbers lurking up there: while Harris shot well in the MSU game, he was back to his old tricks in the Purdue game, shooting 3-for-14. The other ugly numbers are all the zeroes for free throw attempts.

As you can see, none of the starters hit double figures in both games, although Harris got close. Coleman had a solid game against MSU, but he disappeared in the Purdue game. Same with Sims. Brown played hard in both games, but couldn't get many shots off underneath against State. Wohl did what he was in there to do, which was to take the pressure off Harris, and bring the ball upcourt and distribute it. Amaker doesn't count on him for any scoring, and he didn't get any from him. Since he can't/won't shoot, the opposing defenders can gang up on the other 4 UM players, and Michigan is essentially playing 4-on-5 on offense.

Here's how the bench players did this week:

Player	Field Goals		3-Pointers		Free Throws		Points	
	MSU	PU	MSU	PU	MSU	PU	MSU	PU
John Andrews	1-2	0-3	0-1	0-1	0-3	3-6	2	3
Ashtyn Bell	0-2	0-1	0-0	0-0	0-0	1-2	0	1
Sherrod Harrell	0-0	1-2	0-0	0-1	0-0	1-1	0	3
Brent Petway	1-3	3-6	0-0	0-0	0-0	0-1	2	6
Chris Hunter	4-7	4-8	0-0	2-3	2-2	1-2	10	11
J.C. Mathis	0-1	1-1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	2
Amadou Ba	DNP	0-0	DNP	0-0	DNP	0-0	DNP	0
Totals	5-10	5-9	0-0	1-2	4-4	2-3	14	26

Chris Hunter is back, and he's doing a good job out there. He was the only player on the team to hit double figures in both games. In fact, he tied for the team-high scorer in the Purdue game. He shot a good percentage in both games, and he even hit 2-of-3 three-pointers. Petway had a mediocre game against State, but he did a little better against Purdue. He played hard in both games. Other than that, the bench didn't contribute much this week.

The Upcoming Week

The Wolverines finally return home this week, after playing 3 of their last 4 games on the road. On Wednesday (02/02/2005, 8:00 p.m.) they play Minnesota in Crisler Arena. Then, they return to the road on Saturday (02/05/2005), when they play at Ohio State. Come on down to Crisler on Wednesday evening and help Michigan break out of this ugly losing streak.

Go Blue!