02/21/2005 – Week #16 – A Season In Disarray

The Week In Review

A few years ago, when I started writing this column, one of my readers sent me an E-Mail message. At that point, Michigan was in the middle of a bad season, and they had recently lost a few games that they probably should have won. My reader said something in his E-Mail message that has always stuck with me: "you must have the worst job in the world". I wrote right back to him, and I told him a few things:

- Writing this column isn't a job, it's a pleasure. I do it because I really enjoy doing it. My job is writing radar control software for one of the largest defense contractors in the world, and I'm fortunate that I enjoy doing that as well, but I write these columns for UMGoBlue.com because I really care about Michigan basketball, and I want to help others keep in touch with the program.
- I go to (almost) all the home basketball games to see the team play, not to see them win. Of course, I'd be very happy if they won all their games, and won Big Ten and National Championships, but that's not why I go to the games. I go to see them play. They're not professionals (the Eddie Martin scandal notwithstanding), they're college student-athletes. Sure, some of them are more "athlete" than "student", but that's true to a certain extent in most of the "revenue" sports at most of the major universities. It doesn't take away from the spirit and enthusiasm that the players show on the court. The game isn't about matchups, or scoring runs, or X's and O's, or defensive schemes, it's about people. I enjoy watching the players play the game, and seeing their reactions and emotions. I enjoy the raw energy of the Maize Rage. I enjoy watching the arc of each player as he goes through the program, hopefully for 4 years. I enjoy seeing them grow, physically, mentally, and emotionally.
- How the team is doing doesn't make it any easier or harder to write this column. Once again, I would certainly like it if UM won every game, but that's not what these columns are about. They're about the people, and the progression of the season, and the development of the program. They're about history and tradition. They're about all the ingredients that make up Michigan Basketball, including wins and losses. Sure, some of the losses hurt, but it's all a matter of expectations. If Michigan is playing a Top-25 team, and UM has a couple starters missing, it's hard to get too upset when they lose. I like to look at the long view, and try to keep some perspective. It wasn't that long ago that Michigan was on the top of the basketball world, and there's no reason they can't get there again. It's just a matter of time.

I was thinking about all of this again because things are looking pretty bad for this year's Michigan basketball team. They lost two more games this week, which brings their current losing streak to 10 games. This is only one game short of tying the longest losing streak in school history. On Wednesday (02/16/2005), they lost at (#20) Wisconsin, 76-50, then on Sunday (02/20/2005), they lost at home to Indiana, 70-63. The loss at Wisconsin was very predictable, but the home loss to Indiana was very disappointing (we're back to expectations). Michigan should have beaten Indiana on the road back on January 19th, and they should have beaten them in Crisler on Sunday. In fact, the loss at Indiana was the start of the current 10-game losing streak.

The Wisconsin game is hardly worth talking about. Michigan hung around for the first few minutes, but once Wisconsin pulled away to a double-digit lead, the game was all but decided. The halftime score (37-17) was pretty embarrassing, and the final total (50 points) is pretty discouraging, but a loss is a loss, whether it's by one point or 26 points.

The Indiana game was a lot more exciting, with lots of scoring runs and lead changes. Unfortunately, the last lead change, at the 3:37 mark, gave IU a lead that they never gave up. Indiana was hot from 3-point range, and UM just couldn't keep up. This game was a little like the Illinois game, back on February 8th, where Michigan played well for most of the game, but couldn't pull out the win down the home stretch.

The other news this week was mixed: Daniel Horton pleaded guilty to the Domestic Assault charges against him, and will be sentenced next month. That's actually good news, because it helps to put this whole ugly incident behind him. Based on the change in the status of the situation, Coach Tommy Amaker allowed Horton to return to practice with the team this week, which is also good news. The bad news is that he won't be allowed to play in any more games this season. That brings the total number of games he will have missed this season up to at least 18 games (6 due to his knee injury, 11 regular season games, and at least one game in the Big Ten Tournament). It has become painfully obvious during this long, ugly losing streak that Horton is the glue that holds this team together, and the team will really miss him.

The Big Picture

With the two losses, Michigan's record has now fallen to 12-15 overall, and 3-10 in the Big Ten. With only 3 regular season games left, Michigan has to win all 3, and at least one game in the Big Ten Tournament, just to finish at or above 0.500 and be eligible for the NIT. Unfortunately, only one of those three games (Penn State) looks winnable, the way the team is playing.

Here's Michigan's remaining schedule:

Date	**Opponent**	**Site**
02/23 (Wed)	Penn State	Ann Arbor
02/26 (Sat)	Northwestern	Evanston, Ill.
03/05 (Sat)	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.

Normally, UM would be favored against Northwestern, but not the way they've been playing, and not on the road. The Iowa game will be really tough to win, even though it's in Ann Arbor. So, Michigan will probably finish the regular season at 13-17 overall, 4-12 in the Big Ten. Yuck.

It's really a shame how the season has turned out, given how promising it looked just 6 weeks ago. Between the incredible rash of injuries that slowed them down in December, and the suspension of Horton in mid-January, everything that could go wrong this season has gone wrong. Even the games that Michigan should have won easily, they've underachieved in, and managed to find a way to lose them. It's very disappointing.

So, what's going on here? Why is Michigan losing all these games that they should win? Is it just the absence of Horton, and the season-ending injury to Lester Abram, or is something else going on here? I suspect that the loss of Horton and Abram is a big part of it, and that the rest of it is just mental. This year's team has been battered and beaten up by all the unexpected events, and they just don't have that "killer instinct" that a good team needs to win the close games. Instead, they have a "loser instinct" that whispers in their

ears "you're going to find a way to lose this close game". Just as winning inspires confidence, losing inspires fear. UM is playing scared right now, and they're playing "not to lose", instead of playing to win.

When it comes to actual game mechanics (the X's and O's), part of the problem is that UM usually has at least one walk-on player on the court at all times, including at least one starter who is a walk-on. While the walk-ons are fine players, they aren't quite at the same level as the scholarship players, and that presents problems for Michigan, especially on offense. The opposing teams quickly figured out that if they played tight, "in your face" defense, it would disrupt Michigan's offense, and either cause turnovers or poor shot selection. If you look at the stats during the losing streak, you'll see that Michigan has had way too many turnovers in most of the games, and that they've been out-rebounded (often badly) in most of the games. That's why they've been averaging right around 50 points per game during the losing streak: too many turnovers, poor shots, and weak rebounding.

Game Statistics

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

Team	Field goals	3-Pointers	Free throws
Michigan	18-49 (36.7%)	5-18 (27.8%)	9-12 (75.0%)
Wisconsin	27-56 (48.2%)	8-17 (47.1%)	14-24 (58.3%)
Advantage	Wisconsin	Wisconsin	Michigan

Is there any good news here? Only that Michigan shot free throws pretty well, but they still aren't getting to the line enough. Other than that, Wisconsin crushed them.

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

Team	Rebounds	Assists	Turnovers	Blocks	Steals
Michigan	28	10	14	4	3
Wisconsin	39	20	7	2	8
Advantage	UW	UW	UW	Mich	UW

Nothing but bad news here, with the minor exception of the blocked shots stats. At least Michigan kept their turnovers down, but they still got pounded on the boards.

On to the shooting statistics from the Indiana game:

Team	Field goals	3-Pointers	Free throws
Michigan	23-47 (48.9%)	6-17 (35.3%)	11-12 (91.7%)
Indiana	21-46 (45.7%)	14-23 (60.9%)	14-20 (70.0%)
Advantage	UM	IU	UM

Michigan shot well from the field, and they had 2 more field goals than Indiana did. Unfortunately, IU had 8 more 3-pointers, which more than explains the margin of defeat for Michigan. Indiana's 3-point shooting percentage is truly amazing: 60.9%. I can't remember the last time I saw 3-point shooting like that. Actually, I can: Loyola Marymount thrashing Michigan in the NCAA Tournament in 1990.

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

Team	Rebounds	Assists	Turnovers	Blocks	Steals

Michigan	26	11	12	1	4
Indiana	25	14	9	2	6
Advantage	UM	IU	IU	IU	IU

Michigan actually won the rebounding battle, for a change. Unfortunately, that's the only non-shooting stat that they won, although the others are all close. These stats show how close the game was, most of the way, but the shooting stats show where the game was won.

Individual Statistics

Coach Amaker used two different starting lineups this week. In both games he started Ron Coleman, Graham Brown, Dion Harris, and Sherrod Harrell, and he started Chris Hunter in the Wisconsin game, and Courtney Sims against Indiana. Here's how they did:

	Field Goals		3-Pointers		Free Throws		Points	
Player	UW	IU	UW	IU	UW	IU	UW	IU
Ron Coleman	3-8	4-11	1-5	4-9	0-0	0-0	7	12
Graham Brown	2-4	3-5	0-0	0-0	2-3	3-4	6	9
Chris Hunter	1-3	Bench	0-2	Bench	0-0	Bench	2	Bench
Courtney Sims	Bench	6-8	Bench	0-1	Bench	0-0	Bench	12
Dion Harris	5-17	5-11	3-8	2-4	2-2	3-3	15	15
Sherrod Harrell	0-2	0-1	0-1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0
Totals	11-24 45.8%	18-36 50.0%	4-16 25.0%	6-14 42.9%	4-5 80.0%	6-7 85.7%	30	48

As a group, the starters did OK this week. The 3-point shooting against Wisconsin is pretty poor, but other than that, they did OK.

Individually, only Harris had a good week, although he had to take a lot of shots to get those 15 points per game. Sims also had a good week, but he was a starter in only one of the games. Coleman played well against IU, but wasn't much of a factor against Wisconsin. Brown turned in his normal solid games, and Harrell did what he was out there to do: play some point guard. Unfortunately, when Harrell is on the floor, the defense can "cheat" a little and double-team Harris, since Harrell isn't much of a scoring threat.

Here's how the bench players did this week:

	Field Goals		3-Pointers		Free Throws		Points	
Player	UW	IU	UW	IU	UW	IU	UW	IU
Dani Wohl	0-0	0-0	0-0	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0
John Andrews	0-0	2-4	0-0	0-2	0-0	3-3	0	7
Ashtyn Bell	0-0	DNP	0-0	DNP	0-0	DNP	0	DNP
Brent Petway	1-4	3-5	0-1	0-0	0-0	0-0	2	6
J.C. Mathis	0-1	DNP	0-0	DNP	2-2	DNP	2	DNP
Courtney Sims	6-10	Starter	1-1	Starter	3-5	Starter	16	Starter
Chris Hunter	Starter	0-2	Starter	0-1	Starter	2-2	Starter	2
Totals	7-15 46.7%	5-11 45.4%	1-2 50.0%	0-3 0%	5-7 71.4%	5-5 100%	20	15

Other than Sims, it wasn't a very big week for the bench players. Andrews and Petway had nice games against Indiana, but that was about it.

The Upcoming Week

Michigan's best chance to end the long losing streak comes this Wednesday (02/23/2005), when they play Penn State in Crisler Arena. The game is at 8:00 p.m. Come on down, and cheer on the Wolverines. Every voice helps.

On Saturday (02/26/2005), Michigan travels to Northwestern for their final Big Ten road game. As I mentioned above, normally, this would look like a pretty certain win for UM, but not this year.

Go Blue!