01/26/2006 – A Huge Win Over Michigan State

Hail To The Victors Valiant! The University of Michigan men's basketball team defeated Michigan State ("The Evil Empire") last night (Wednesday, 01/25/2006) in Crisler Arena, 72-67. It was a huge win for the team and the program, and it was a fabulous experience being in the crowd for the game. Crisler was sold out (13,571) and rocking, and the Maize Rage was in fine form. It was a great atmosphere, and a great game. The win raises Michigan's record to 14-3, 4-2 in the Big Ten. MSU's record falls to 15-5, 3-3 in the Big Ten.

MSU came into the game ranked #12 in the Coaches' Top 25, and UM came in unranked. Even though Michigan has dominated the series with MSU throughout the years (90-68 actual / 83-65 after NCAA sanctions), the media made a big deal out of the fact that State had won 12 of the last 13 games in the series, but none of that mattered last night. Last night's game was a fresh start for Michigan, their first win over a ranked team this season, and the biggest win in coach Tommy Amaker's career at Michigan. It was fun to see Amaker outcoach Tom ("The Whiner") Izzo, especially in "crunch time", when Amaker stayed cool and calm, and Izzo melted down and called a timeout with 7.4 seconds left in the game to cost his team a game-tying 3-pointer.

The game itself was a classic battle. Michigan came out strong in the first minute, and Daniel Horton put UM up 5-0 before State could even get off a shot. That lead disappeared quickly, as State went on a 25-6 run. They were hot shooting, and Michigan couldn't buy a basket. When the score got up to 25-11 with 8:52 left in the 1st half, in favor of MSU, things started looking grim. Michigan was without the services of Lester Abram, who sprained his ankle in the win at Minnesota on Saturday (01/21/2006). Abram is a key part of this team, and his absence could have been big trouble for Michigan, but the rest of the team stepped up and covered for him very nicely. In particular, Ron Coleman, who started in place of Abram, and Chris Hunter, who helped out on shutting down MSU's Paul Davis, played great games. Coleman had 9 important points, including a huge 3-pointer, and Hunter added 13 big points, including a 3-pointer of his own. Before the game, I predicted that Michigan would win if they held Davis to less than 20 points, and they did. They held him to 10 points, on 4-for-11 shooting, and they won the game.

Starting from that 25-11 hole, the Wolverines slowly but surely dug their way out. They didn't panic, and they kept the tempo of the game the way they wanted it. MSU would have loved to have a game in the 80s, so they could get running in transition, but UM wanted a game in the 60s or 70s, and they got it. They managed to get the State lead down to 7 at the half (39-32), and they finally tied the game up at 45-45 with 11:50 left in the game. They went ahead (48-45) on Hunter's 3-pointer on their next possession, and they never looked back. The UM lead got as high as 8 (64-56 with 5:52 left), and as low as 2 (69-67 with 1:35 left), but once they got the lead, Michigan never surrendered it. The Wolverines played very well in crunch time, and won decisively. It was a very impressive win.

Once again, Horton was magnificent. He scored 23 points on 6-for-12 shooting, including 3-for-5 from 3-point range and 8-for-8 from the free-throw line. He also dished out 5 assists, had 4 rebounds, and a steal. Of course, he did have 7 turnovers, including a really dumb one with 8:05 left that almost cost Michigan the win, but he kept battling out there, and he was the reason Michigan won. Incidentally, with those 8 free throws, Horton is now a perfect 28-for-28 at the line in Big Ten play, which is amazing.

The rest of the team also played well, especially Graham Brown (10 points, 7 rebounds), Courtney Sims (4 points), Dion Harris (9 points, including 2 game-sealing free throws with 1.3 seconds left), and Brent Petway (4 points). Jerret Smith (0 points) had a tough time out there when he was matched up with Drew Neitzel, but Amaker corrected that by only using Smith to

spell Horton when Neitzel was also on the bench. It worked out perfectly. Jevohn Shepherd (0 points) also played a few minutes, and he did well on defense, but he couldn't shake the Spartan defenders to get open for the kind of shots he likes to take.

In summary, it was a great win. There are still a lot of games to be played, including a return date on Saturday 02/18/2006 when Michigan plays at MSU, but for now, take a moment to pause and savor the sweet victory.

Don't worry, I'll be back with my regular weekly column on Monday (01/30/2006), including descriptions of this game and the Wisconsin game (Saturday 01/28/2006), and all the stats, results, and standings. I just had to post this "extra" article to describe and celebrate the big victory.

Go Blue!