03/12/2007 – Week #20 – It's NIT Time, Again

The Week In Review

Once again, the University of Michigan men's basketball team failed to make "The Big Dance", the NCAA Tournament. They had to settle for another berth in "The Little Dance", the National Invitation Tournament (NIT). This is the 9th year in a row that Michigan has missed out on an NCAA Tournament invitation, and the 3rd time in the last 4 years that they have gone to the NIT.

This is a very frustrating turn of events. While the Wolverines didn't exactly have a great season, they had a good enough season to make the NCAA Tournament. They beat 7 teams that made the tournament (Central Connecticut State, Davidson, Miami (OH), Illinois, Purdue, Indiana, and Michigan State), and they lost to 4 other teams that made the tournament (UCLA, Georgetown, Wisconsin, and Ohio State). Their record against tournament teams was 7-10. They ended up with the same record in the Big Ten as Michigan State, who got into the tournament as a #9 seed. There had to be a #11 or #12 seed out there for Michigan. Oh well…

Let's look at what happened in the Big Ten Tournament. Michigan played two games last week in the tournament, and they won one and lost one. On Thursday (03/08/2007), they beat Minnesota (49-40), then on Friday (03/09/2007), they lost to (#1) Ohio State (72-62). The win and the loss brought Michigan's record to 21-12.

The Minnesota game was truly ugly, but at least it was another win. Both teams shot very poorly, and neither team played very well. Michigan just badly a little less poorly than Minnesota.

The Ohio State game wasn't bad, but it wasn't good either. Michigan played pretty well, but not as well as they did against Ohio State in Crisler Arena 6 days earlier (03/03/2007), when they controlled the tempo, and almost sprung the big upset. This time, OSU was in command for most of the game, although Michigan did get within striking distance (down 3 points) with just under 8 minutes to go. Ohio State closed the game out strong again, and Michigan was eliminated from the tournament.

Game Statistics

Let's look at the shooting statistics from the Minnesota game:

Team	Field goals	3-Pointers	Free throws
Michigan	13-48 (27.1%)	4-15 (26.7%)	19-28 (67.9%)
Minnesota	14-44 (31.8%)	3-9 (33.3%)	9-17 (52.9%)
Advantage	Minnesota	Minnesota	Michigan

Here's where Michigan won the game: free-throw shooting. Michigan made 10 more free throws than Minnesota. Those 10 extra points are huge in a 9-point win. However…

Look at those shooting percentages for both teams. They are just butt ugly.

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

Team	Rebounds	Assists	Turnovers	Blocks	Steals
Michigan	45	10	15	4	5
Minnesota	29	12	13	5	7

Advantage	Michigan	Minnesota	Minnesota	Minnesota	Minnesota

Most of these stats are too close to matter, except for Rebounds: a +16 rebounding edge is awesome. Those 16 extra possessions really helped.

Moving on to the Ohio State game, let's look at the shooting statistics:

Team	Field goals	3-Pointers	Free throws
Michigan	18-55 (32.7%)	7-19 (36.8%)	19-24 (79.2%)
Ohio State	26-52 (50.0%)	4-13 (30.8%)	16-22 (72.7%)
Advantage	Ohio State	Michigan	Michigan

Once again, Michigan shot pretty poorly, and this time it cost them. They did much better from the free-throw line, but their overall shooting percentage doomed them.

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

Team	Rebounds	Assists	Turnovers	Blocks	Steals
Michigan	47	15	16	1	2
Ohio State	25	12	5	7	7
Advantage	Michigan	Ohio State	Ohio State	Ohio State	Ohio State

There are some stunning numbers here: Michigan out-rebounded Ohio State by 22 rebounds, and still lost the game. Think about that for a minute. 22 extra possessions, and they still lost. That's how poorly they shot. On the other hand, other than Assists, which were close, the rest of the stats are lopsided the other way, especially Turnovers. I don't know when I last saw a team commit only 5 turnovers in 40 minutes.

Individual Statistics

Coach Amaker went with yet another starting lineup for the two Big Ten Tournament games. He started the 4 seniors (Lester Abram, Dion Harris, Brent Petway, and Courtney Sims), along with Jerret Smith. For most of the season, he started the 4 seniors and Ron Coleman, but the team seems to play better with Smith in there. Here's how the starters did this week:

	Field Goals		3-Pointers		Free Throws		Points	
Player	Minn	OSU	Minn	OSU	Minn	OSU	Minn	OSU
Lester Abram	1-10	4-7	0-5	3-4	1-1	2-3	3	13
Dion Harris	3-10	1-13	2-6	1-6	6-6	6-6	14	9
Brent Petway	2-5	3-5	0-0	0-0	4-6	2-2	8	8
Courtney Sims	2-5	2-9	0-0	0-0	0-0	3-5	4	7
Jerret Smith	1-5	4-10	1-1	2-5	4-6	2-2	7	12
Totals	9-35 25.7%	14-44 31.8%	3-12 25.0%	6-15 40.0%	15-19 78.9%	15-18 83.3%	36	49

As a group, the starters had a pretty good week. Their percentages are pretty good, and they scored a decent number of points.

Individually, no one hit double figures in both games this week, although Harris came close. There are some terrible numbers lurking in there: Abram going 1-for-10 against Minnesota, Harris going 3-for-10 against Minnesota, and Harris going 1-for-13 against Ohio State. Since the team counts on Harris for much of its offense, when he has a bad shooting game,

the team usually loses. They probably should have lost the Minnesota game, but Minnesota played even worse. They couldn't afford for Harris to shoot 1-for-13 against a good team like Ohio State, and Harris cost Michigan the game.

There have been a few games this season (Iowa, Illinois, and this OSU game) where I have said that Harris has cost Michigan the game with his poor shooting, and some might think that it isn't fair of me to put it that way. After all, it is a team sport, and Harris wasn't out there by himself. That's all true, but the fact is that Michigan tries to funnel most of its points through Harris, and if he has a lousy game shooting, he usually costs Michigan the game. Sometimes, someone else on the team will be hot, and Michigan will win the game despite Harris being cold. Sometimes, Harris will realize that he's cold, and think "pass" first and "shoot" second, and Michigan will win the game. But, in those games where Harris is cold, and he keeps firing away, Michigan usually loses.

Don't get me wrong: I really like Dion, and I'm always happy when he has a good game. He has won more games for Michigan than he has lost, but he has always shot a pretty poor percentage, and it occasionally costs Michigan the game. It's just a fact of life.

Back to the starters: Petway had a decent week, and so did Smith. Abram had a good game vs. OSU, but he was lousy against Minnesota. Sims wasn't much of a factor against Minnesota, and he was dominated by Greg Oden of Ohio State.

Here's how the bench players did this week:

	Field Goals		3-Pointers		Free Throws		Points	
Player	Minn	OSU	Minn	OSU	Minn	OSU	Minn	OSU
Reed Baker	0-0	1-2	0-0	1-2	1-2	0-0	1	3
Ron Coleman	1-3	0-2	1-2	0-2	0-1	0-0	3	0
Jevohn Shepherd	0-1	0-0	0-1	0-0	1-2	0-0	1	0
DeShawn Sims	3-6	2-2	0-0	0-0	2-4	2-4	8	6
Ekpe Udoh	0-3	1-5	0-0	0-0	0-0	2-2	0	4
Totals	4-13 30.8%	4-11 36.4%	1-3 33.3%	1-4 25.0%	4-9 44.4%	4-6 66.7%	13	13

As a group, the bench players didn't contribute much. They didn't shoot well, and they didn't chip in many points. Michigan needs much more production from their bench players to win consistently.

Individually, no one really stood out. DeShawn Sims was the only bench player to score more than 4 points in a game this week.

The Big Picture

Here's the 2006-2007 schedule/results:

Date	Opponent	Site	Result	Score	Record
11/02/2006 (Thu)	Wayne State (exh)	Ann Arbor	W	85-51	0-0
11/05/2006 (Sun)	Michigan Tech (exh)	Ann Arbor	W	85-50	0-0
John Thompson Challenge					
11/10/2006 (Fri)	Central Connecticut State	Ann Arbor	W	60-40	1-0
11/11/2006 (Sat)	Davidson	Ann Arbor	W	78-68	2-0
11/12/2006 (Sun)	Eastern Michigan	Ann Arbor	W	80-51	3-0
11/15/2006 (Wed)	Wisconsin-Milwaukee	Ann Arbor	W	66-59	4-0
11/17/2006 (Fri)	Harvard	Ann Arbor	W	82-50	5-0

Date	Opponent	Site	Result	Score	Record
11/22/2006 (Wed)	Youngstown State	Ann Arbor	W	65-56	6-0
11/25/2006 (Sat)	Maryland-Baltimore County	Ann Arbor	W	66-54	7-0
ACC/Big Ten Challenge					
11/27/2006 (Mon)	North Carolina State	Raleigh, NC	L	67-74	7-1
12/02/2006 (Sat)	Wofford	Ann Arbor	W	83-49	8-1
12/07/2006 (Thu)	Miami (OH)	Oxford, OH	W	62-56	9-1
12/09/2006 (Sat)	Delaware State	Ann Arbor	W	70-43	10-1
12/16/2006 (Sat)	Northern Illinois	Ann Arbor	W	67-52	11-1
12/23/2006 (Sat)	UCLA	Los Angeles, CA	L	92-55	11-2
12/28/2006 (Thu)	Army	Ann Arbor	W	62-50	12-2
12/30/2006 (Sat)	Georgetown	Ann Arbor	L	51-67	12-3
01/03/2007 (Wed)	Illinois	Ann Arbor	W	71-61	13-3 (1-0)
01/06/2007 (Sat)	Northwestern	Evanston, IL	W	58-46	14-3 (2-0)
01/13/2007 (Sat)	Purdue	West Lafayette, IN	L	53-67	14-4 (2-1)
01/17/2007 (Wed)	Penn State	Ann Arbor	W	77-57	15-4 (3-1)
01/20/2007 (Sat)	Purdue	Ann Arbor	W	71-55	16-4 (4-1)
01/24/2007 (Wed)	Wisconsin	Madison, WI	L	58-71	16-5 (4-2)
01/27/2007 (Sat)	Indiana	Bloomington, IN	L	61-76	16-6 (4-3)
01/31/2007 (Wed)	Iowa	Ann Arbor	L	62-69	16-7 (4-4)
02/06/2007 (Tue)	Ohio State	Columbus, OH	L	63-76	16-8 (4-5)
02/10/2007 (Sat)	Minnesota	Ann Arbor	W	82-80	17-8 (5-5)
02/13/2007 (Tue)	Michigan State	East Lansing, MI	L	44-59	17-9 (5-6)
02/17/2007 (Sat)	Indiana	Ann Arbor	W	58-55	18-9 (6-6)
02/21/2007 (Wed)	Illinois	Champaign, IL	L	42-54	18-10 (6-7)
02/24/2007 (Sat)	Minnesota	Minneapolis, MN	W	62-51	19-10 (7-7)
02/27/2007 (Tue)	Michigan State	Ann Arbor	W	67-56	20-10 (8-7)
03/03/2007 (Sat)	Ohio State	Ann Arbor	L	61-65	20-11 (8-8)
Big Ten Tournament					
03/08/2007 (Thu)	Round 1 – Minnesota	Chicago, IL	W	49-40	21-11
03/09/2007 (Fri)	Round 2 – Ohio State	Chicago, IL	L	62-72	21-12
National Invitation Tournament (NIT)					
03/13/2007 (Tue)	Round 1 – Utah State	Ann Arbor			

So, it's on to the NIT, yet again. Missing out on the NCAA Tournament isn't the end of the world, but I'm sure the Web and the airwaves will be buzzing over it for months to come. Everyone will be screaming for Tommy Amaker to be fired. I won't be one of them. Sure, I would really like Michigan to make it to the Big Dance one of these seasons, but I don't care if it takes a couple more years. I've been watching Michigan basketball for 33 seasons now, and I can be patient. Success in sports runs in cycles, and Michigan is in a "down" cycle right now. I'm not at all convinced that a coaching change will make much difference, and I like Amaker. I think he wins and loses with class, and he represents Michigan well. I've been writing this column since December 1999, and I used to routinely write about the off-court problems that the players had. These problems have dropped off considerably since Amaker took over. That's just as important as wins and losses.

Frankly, I'm sick of the whole "fire the coach" phenomenon. Fans and the media have very few "tools" when it comes to college sports. In pro sports, they can holler about trading players, or firing the president (Matt Millen anyone?), or building a new arena, but in college sports, all they can holler about is firing the coach. So, anytime things don't go exactly the way they expect them to, they start a drumbeat to fire the coach. Well, here's a newsflash: sometimes it isn't all the coach's fault. In some cases, it may not be the coach's fault at all. Regardless, hiring a new coach may not even have the desired effect. For every story like Ohio State hiring Thad Matta, there are dozens of stories like Minnesota hiring Don Monson.

Is it Amaker's fault that Michigan hasn't done as well as everyone expected? He certainly shares some of the blame, but it isn't all his fault. Besides, who's to say that the expectations are fair or reasonable? Should this season's team have been able to make it to The Big Dance? Probably, but they didn't have much room for error. In fact, I would argue that if they had played better in either the 4-minute stretch against Iowa when they gave up a 20-1 run, or in the last 4 minutes of the Ohio State game in Crisler, they would be in the tournament, and we wouldn't be having this discussion. So, out of a 33-game season, it all boiled down to 4 minutes in either of 2 games. If the difference between "yay, we made The Big Dance" and "fire Amaker" is just 4 minutes, I'd say that Amaker is pretty darn close to being the coach Michigan needs, and he just needs more time to get there. I know it's hard to be patient in this age of instant gratification, with ESPN always making everything seem so urgent and important, but college basketball is still about a bunch of teenagers playing a game. It's not life-and-death. If Michigan doesn't get in the NCAA Tournament this season, there's always next season, and another one after that. Patience.

Big Ten Tournament

Here are the final results from the Big Ten Tournament:

FIRST ROUND
Thursday, March 8
Game 1: No. 8 Michigan beat No. 9 Minnesota, 49-40
Game 2: No. 7 Michigan State beat No. 10 Northwestern, 62-57
Game 3: No. 6 Illinois beat No. 11 Penn State, 66-60

QUARTERFINALS
Friday, March 9
Game 4: No. 1 Ohio State beat No. 8 Michigan, 72-62
Game 5: No. 5 Purdue beat No. 4 Iowa, 74-55
Game 6: No. 2 Wisconsin beat No. 7 Michigan State, 70-57
Game 7: No. 6 Illinois beat No. 3 Indiana, 58-54 (OT)

SEMIFINALS
Saturday, March 10
Game 8: No. 1 Ohio State beat No. 5 Purdue, 63-52
Game 9: No. 2 Wisconsin beat No. 6 Illinois, 53-41

CHAMPIONSHIP
Sunday, March 11
Game 10: No. 1 Ohio State beat No. 2 Wisconsin, 66-49

There were no real upsets, and the higher seeds almost all won their games. It was a lot like the regular season, when there were very few surprises. Probably the closest thing to an upset was when the #6 seed (Illinois) beat the #3 seed (Indiana) by 4 points in overtime.

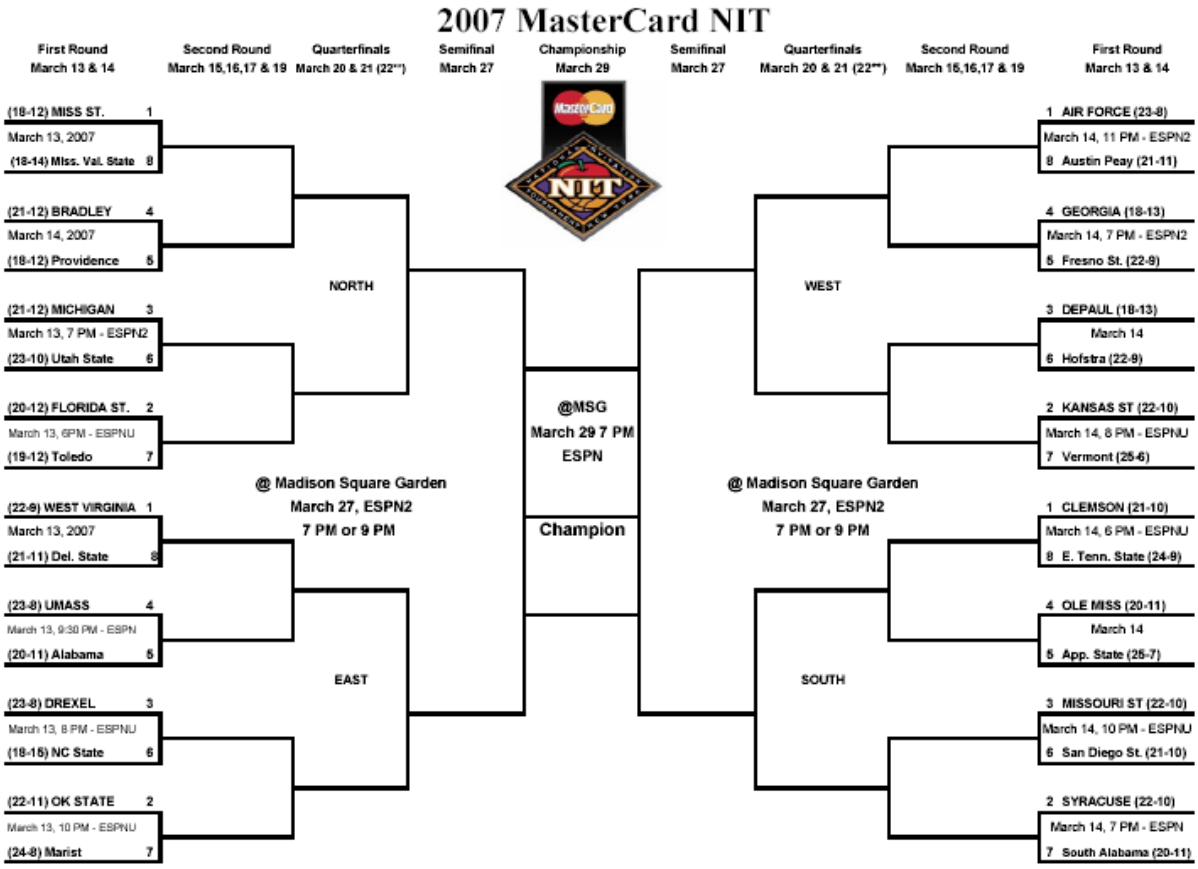
The National Invitation Tournament (NIT)

Michigan was awarded a #3 seed in the North Regional of the NIT. In the 1st round, they'll play the #6 seed, Utah State. The Utah State Aggies (23-11, 9-7) finished 4th in the Western Athletic Conference (WAC), and made it to the championship game of their conference tournament, where they lost 72-70 to New Mexico State.

Looking at their roster, they have a decent amount of height, plenty of senior leadership, and lots of depth. Looking at their stats, they have 3 players averaging double figures: Jaycee Carroll (21.3 ppg), Chaz Spicer (11.5 ppg), and Stephen DuCharme (10.3 ppg). Looking at their results, they've beaten some good teams (Oral Roberts and Nevada), and lost to some not-so-hot teams (Northwestern State, Santa Clara, and Louisiana Tech). It should be a good game.

If Michigan can get by Utah State, they'll play the winner of the (#2) Florida State vs. (#7) Toledo game. The date and location for that game hasn't been announced yet.

Here's the full NIT bracket:



There are several very good teams in the field, so the winner is going to really have to work for it this year. All 4 of the #1 seeds are very dangerous (Mississippi State, West Virginia, Air Force, and Clemson), and the #2 seeds aren't shabby either: Florida State, Oklahoma State, Kansas State, and Syracuse.

The Upcoming Week

As you can see in the schedule above, Michigan plays Utah State on Tuesday (03/13/2007, 7:00 p.m.) in Crisler Arena. The game is on ESPN2, so if you can't make to Crisler, tune in and root for the Wolverines.

Go Blue!