12/31/2007 – Week #10 – Mid-Term Grades, And The Big Ten Season

The Week In Review

First of all, Happy New Year, even though the new year doesn't start until tomorrow.

The good news is: the University of Michigan men's basketball team didn't lose last week. Of course, they didn't play any games…

So, this week's article isn't about wins and losses or stats and analysis of any particular game, it's a mid-season look at the Wolverines. It's a look back at the first 12 games, and a look forward at the next 18. It's also time for mid-term grades, and a look at the rest of the Big Ten.

Looking Back

After 12 games, all non-conference, UM is 4-8. This is not good. There were 4 games that they were certainly expected to lose, all against Top-25 teams: at (#5) Georgetown, in Alaska against (#22) Butler, at (#8) Duke, and at home against (#7) UCLA. There were 6 more games that they were certainly expected to win: at home vs. Radford and Brown, in Alaska against Eastern Washington, at Harvard, and at home vs. Oakland and Central Michigan. That left 2 "toss up" games: in Alaska against Western Kentucky, and home vs. Boston College. Well, they lost all 4 of the "should lose" games, they only won 4 of the 6 "should win" games, and they lost both "toss up" games. The two lost "should win" games (Harvard and CMU) were among the most embarrassing losses in recent Michigan basketball history.

So, what happened? Why did Michigan do so poorly in the non-conference portion of their schedule? There are three main reasons/excuses/theories:

- This is a young team – This is certainly true. Among the players who have been here since they were freshmen, there is only 1 senior (Ron Coleman) and only 2 juniors (Jevohn Shepherd and Jerret Smith), and Smith has missed most of the non-conference schedule with injury and academic problems, and has since been dismissed from the team. The other senior on the team (David Merritt) is a walk-on, and the other junior (C.J. Lee) is a transfer student, who didn't play on the team last year. There were 6 players with freshman eligibility on the team, including 2 redshirt freshmen (K'Len Morris and Anthony Wright) and 2 walk-ons (Adam Block and Eric Puls), to go with 2 true scholarship freshmen (Kelvin Grady and Manny Harris), but Morris has since left the team for personal reasons. Finally, there are 3 players on the team with sophomore eligibility (Zach Gibson, DeShawn Sims, and Ekpe Udoh), but Gibson is another transfer student who sat out last year. That all adds up to 10 (now 9) "mainstream" players (Coleman, Shepherd, Smith [now gone], Lee, Wright, Grady, Harris, Gibson, Sims, and Udoh), with only 5 (now 4) of them with game experience from last season. So, yes, this is a young team, and that's contributing to some of the inconsistency that we've seen so far.
- New coach, new offense, new defense - This is also certainly true. This is coach John Beilein's first season at Michigan, and he brought along an intricate new motion offense and a more conventional 1-3-1 zone defense. Watching Michigan run the offense, it is obvious that it still isn't second nature to any of them yet. At times, they run it well, then against a different defense they look very "out of sync" out there. The same thing happens on defense: sometimes, they run it very well, and other times they get way out of position, and the zone breaks down.

- Not enough height – True, again. Gibson and Udoh are the only reasonably tall players on the team, and they do their best out there, but against strong big men (Roy Hibbert of Georgetown and Kevin Love of UCLA, for example), they have a tough time. As the old saying goes, "it's hard to coach height". Beilein is doing the best with the players he inherited.

I believe that Michigan's troubles so far are a combination of all three of these reasons, with the youth factor being the most damaging. As the season goes on, the youngsters will get a little older and more experienced, and the team will be a little less young. They will also get better at running Beilein's offense and defense. The only thing that won't get better as the season goes on is the lack of height. However, Beilein does have a 7-footer recruited for next season, which should help, eventually.

Looking Forward

Based on their disappointing performance in the non-conference portion of their schedule, I'm not expecting too much from the Wolverines in the Big Ten portion. In my pre-season article, I said:

> This season, the Big Ten switched from 16 conference games to 18 games, 9 at home and 9 on the road. Even with 18 games, the schedule is "unbalanced", since not every team plays every other team twice, playing two teams only once. This season, Michigan only plays Indiana (in Ann Arbor) and Michigan State (in East Lansing) once. It will be weird to only play MSU once.
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> Of the 9 home Big Ten games, they should be able to win 5 of them (Iowa, Minnesota, Penn State, Northwestern, and Purdue). Things look pretty grim on the road: I can only see 3 wins (Northwestern, Minnesota, and Penn State), although they stand an outside chance at Purdue and Iowa. The home games vs. Wisconsin and Ohio State are almost certain losses, and the road games at Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan State, and Ohio State also look pretty hopeless. That leaves only a couple of "toss up" games: the home games vs. Wisconsin and Indiana. That all works out to a Big Ten record of anywhere from 8-10 to 11-7. Figure on 9-9. Add that to the 7-5 non-conference record, and we're looking at 16-14, which sure sounds like another trip to the NIT. On the optimistic end, if Michigan can do a game better in the non-conference schedule (8-4), and finish 11-7 in the Big Ten, that would give them a 19-11 record. If they did that, and won a couple games in the Big Ten Tournament, maybe they could sneak into the NCAA Tournament. It's not impossible, just unlikely.

I'm afraid that I'm going to have to lower those expectations some. Based on what I've seen so far, and how the rest of the Big Ten has done (see below), I think UM will win 3 games at home (Minnesota, Penn State, and Northwestern), and 3 games on the road (Northwestern, Minnesota, and Penn State). There are a few "toss up" games (home and away vs. Iowa and Purdue), but that's about it. That translates into a Big Ten record of anywhere from 4-14 to 8-10, which added to their non-conference record of 4-8, results in a final record of between 8-22 and 12-18. It all adds up to no tournament (NIT or NCAA) this season.

Mid-Term Grades

We're not quite halfway through the season (12 games down, 19 left to go), but it's still time for mid-term grades. It's hard to grade some of the players, since it's not clear if it's the player or the new offense and defense. When in doubt, I gave the benefit of the doubt to the player.

Here are the grades:

Player	Grade	Comments
Freshmen		
Adam Block	Inc.	Adam hasn't played in enough games to see what he can do. He's on the team as a practice player.
Kelvin Grady	B	Kelvin has played very well for a true freshman. He runs the offense pretty well, and he's shot 3-pointers well. He just needs more game experience.
Manny Harris	A-	Manny has been everything he was expected to be. He shoots well, he can drive the lane, and he plays good defense.
K'Len Morris	C+	K'Len did OK out there, but he only showed flashes of what he was capable of doing. Since he has left the team, we'll never know.
Eric Puls	Inc.	Eric hasn't played in enough games to see what he can do. He's on the team as a practice player.
Anthony Wright	C+	After redshirting last season, we were eager to see how well Anthony could play. He's got a nice 3-point shot, but he needs to work on some other aspects of his game, including ballhandling, footwork, and help defense.
Sophomores		
Zack Gibson	B-	Zack is another redshirt player, and he's done pretty well out there. He plays good, solid defense, and he's got a nice shooting touch. He needs to work on his footwork and his ballhandling a little.
DeShawn Sims	B+	DeShawn has been a real leader on the court, with good offense and defense. He needs to work on his consistency a little, and he needs more game experience.
Ekpe Udoh	B-	Ekpe is a great shot-blocker, and a rugged defender, but he needs to work on his ballhandling and his shot a little.
Juniors		
C.J. Lee	B-	C.J. is yet another redshirt player, and he has also done pretty well out there. He's fast, and he runs the offense pretty well. He's got a pretty good shot, but he seems afraid to take it sometimes. Once again, he mostly needs more game experience.
Jevohn Shepherd	C+	Jevohn is very energetic and athletic, and he's a tenacious defender, but he doesn't have a good complete game yet. He needs to work on his ballhandling and shooting.
Jerret Smith	B-	Jerret only got to play in 5 games, and now he's gone.
Seniors		
Ron Coleman	B-	Ron is a good solid player, but he tends to disappear out there. He's a good defender, but he's a really streaky shooter.
David Merritt	C-	David is playing a lot more than expected, due to the absence of Jerret Smith. So far, he's doing pretty well, but he still needs a lot more game experience.
Coach		
John Beilein	B-	Compared to the last few coaches, he is so calm on the sidelines that it's hard to remember that he's there. That's not necessarily a bad thing. So far, his bench coaching seems to have been solid, with good use of the players he's got. It's too early to judge him on recruiting.

The bad news is that only one player got any sort of "A". The good news is that no one got a "D" or below, and that just about everyone can improve on their performance so far.

Big Ten Preview

Once again, the Big Ten looks tough. This season, there are two Big Ten teams that are ranked at the start of the Big Ten schedule: (#7) Michigan State and (#13) Indiana. They have each only lost one non-conference game. Besides those two ranked teams, there are a few other teams that are likely to do well in conference play, including Wisconsin, Ohio State, and Illinois. Here's how the Big Ten teams have done so far this season:

Team	Big Ten			Overall		
	Wins	Losses	Percent	Wins	Losses	Percent
Michigan State	0	0	0.000	12	1	0.923
Indiana	0	0	0.000	11	1	0.917
Minnesota	0	0	0.000	10	2	0.833
Wisconsin	0	0	0.000	10	2	0.833
Ohio State	0	0	0.000	9	3	0.750
Purdue	0	0	0.000	9	4	0.692
Penn State	0	0	0.000	8	4	0.667
Illinois	0	0	0.000	8	5	0.615
Northwestern	0	0	0.000	5	4	0.556
Iowa	0	0	0.000	7	6	0.538
Michigan	0	0	0.000	4	8	0.333

There are a few surprises here, especially how well Minnesota and Purdue have done, and how poorly Iowa has done.

By the way, some of the Big Ten teams still have some non-conference games to play:

- 1/16/2008 – Northwestern at Chicago State
- 1/19/2008 – Ohio State at Tennessee
- 1/26/2008 – Indiana vs. Connecticut
- 1/30/2008 – Northwestern vs. Texas-Pan American

I expect the Big Ten teams to win all of these remaining non-conference matchups.

Here's my prediction of what the Big Ten standings will look like at the end of the season:

Team	Big Ten			Overall		
	Wins	Losses	Percent	Wins	Losses	Percent
Indiana	16	2	0.889	28	3	0.903
Michigan State	15	3	0.833	27	4	0.871
Wisconsin	12	6	0.667	22	8	0.733
Ohio State	11	7	0.611	21	10	0.677
Illinois	10	8	0.556	18	13	0.581
Purdue	9	9	0.500	18	13	0.581
Iowa	8	10	0.444	15	16	0.484
Northwestern	7	11	0.389	14	15	0.482
Minnesota	5	13	0.278	15	15	0.500
Michigan	4	14	0.222	8	22	0.267

Penn State	2	16	0.111	10	20	0.333

Here are the games scheduled for the upcoming week (Week #1):

Wednesday (01/02/2008)
Wisconsin at Michigan
Penn State at Northwestern
Indiana at Iowa

Thursday (01/03/2008)
Ohio State at Illinois

Saturday (01/05/2008)
Michigan at Purdue
Minnesota at Michigan State
Iowa at Wisconsin

Sunday (01/06/2008)
Northwestern at Ohio State
Penn State at Illinois

There are a couple of big games this week:

- Wisconsin at Michigan on Wednesday. Michigan gets a chance to show that they're better than their non-conference record would suggest.
- Indiana at Iowa on Wednesday. Indiana has a better team, but Iowa is tough at home.
- Ohio State at Illinois on Thursday. They're both potential contenders in the Big Ten race.
- Michigan at Purdue on Saturday. Michigan has had trouble on the road, and they need to prove that they can win away from home.

Here's the entire Big Ten schedule, with the teams in alphabetical order. I'll include this table every week, with the wins and losses filled in:

Team	Record	Wins	Losses	Remaining Games
Illinois	0-0			Ohio State (H) Penn State (H) Wisconsin (A) Indiana (A) Michigan (H) Purdue (A) Ohio State (A) Northwestern (H) Michigan State (A) Purdue (H) Indiana (H) Minnesota (A) Penn State (A) Wisconsin (H) Michigan (A) Iowa (A) Michigan State (H) Minnesota (H)
Indiana	0-0			Iowa (A) Michigan (A)

				Illinois (H) Minnesota (A) Penn State (H) Iowa (H) Wisconsin (A) Northwestern (H) Illinois (A) Ohio State (A) Wisconsin (H) Michigan State (H) Purdue (H) Northwestern (A) Ohio State (H) Michigan State (A) Minnesota (H) Penn State (A)
Iowa	0-0			Indiana (H) Wisconsin (A) Ohio State (A) Michigan State (H) Purdue (H) Michigan (A) Indiana (A) Penn State (H) Purdue (A) Ohio State (H) Wisconsin (H) Minnesota (A) Michigan (H) Northwestern (H) Michigan State (A) Penn State (A) Illinois (H) Northwestern (A)
Michigan	0-0			Wisconsin (H) Purdue (A) Indiana (H) Northwestern (A) Illinois (A) Iowa (H) Wisconsin (A) Michigan State (A) Minnesota (H) Ohio State (A) Penn State (H) Iowa (A) Ohio State (H) Minnesota (A) Illinois (H) Northwestern (H) Penn State (A) Purdue (H)
Michigan State	0-0			Minnesota (H)

				Purdue (H) Iowa (A) Ohio State (H) Minnesota (A) Northwestern (A) Michigan (H) Illinois (H) Penn State (A) Northwestern (H) Purdue (A) Indiana (A) Penn State (H) Iowa (H) Wisconsin (A) Indiana (H) Illinois (A) Ohio State (A)
Minnesota	0-0			Michigan State (A) Northwestern (H) Penn State (A) Indiana (H) Michigan State (H) Ohio State (A) Michigan (A) Wisconsin (H) Northwestern (A) Iowa (H) Illinois (H) Wisconsin (A) Michigan (H) Penn State (H) Purdue (A) Ohio State (H) Indiana (A) Illinois (A)
Northwestern	0-0			Penn State (H) Ohio State (A) Minnesota (A) Michigan (H) Wisconsin (A) Michigan State (H) Illinois (A) Indiana (A) Minnesota (H) Michigan State (A) Ohio State (H) Purdue (H) Iowa (A) Indiana (H) Michigan (A) Purdue (A) Iowa (H) Wisconsin (H)

Ohio State	0-0			Illinois (A) Northwestern (H) Iowa (H) Purdue (A) Michigan State (A) Illinois (H) Minnesota (H) Penn State (A) Iowa (A) Michigan (H) Indiana (H) Northwestern (A) Michigan (A) Wisconsin (H) Indiana (A) Minnesota (A) Purdue (H) Michigan State (H)
Penn State	0-0			Northwestern (A) Illinois (A) Minnesota (H) Wisconsin (H) Indiana (A) Purdue (H) Iowa (A) Ohio State (H) Michigan State (H) Purdue (A) Michigan (A) Illinois (H) Michigan State (A) Minnesota (A) Iowa (H) Michigan (H) Wisconsin (A) Indiana (H)
Purdue	0-0			Michigan (H) Michigan State (A) Ohio State (H) Iowa (A) Illinois (H) Penn State (A) Wisconsin (H) Iowa (H) Illinois (A) Penn State (H) Wisconsin (A) Michigan State (H) Northwestern (A) Indiana (A) Minnesota (H) Northwestern (H) Ohio State (A)

				Michigan (A)
Wisconsin	0-0			Michigan (A) Iowa (H) Illinois (H) Penn State (A) Northwestern (H) Michigan (H) Purdue (A) Indiana (H) Minnesota (A) Iowa (A) Purdue (H) Indiana (A) Minnesota (H) Illinois (A) Ohio State (A) Michigan State (H) Penn State (H) Northwestern (A)

As I mentioned above, the Big Ten schedule this season is a little closer to balanced, with 18 games for each team instead of 16. In the past, each team played 6 other teams twice, and 4 teams once. With this season's schedule, each team will play 8 teams twice, and only 2 teams once. It's interesting to see which teams each team gets to play only once:

Team	Doesn't Play
Illinois	Iowa (H) Northwestern (A)
Indiana	Michigan (H) Purdue (A)
Iowa	Illinois (A) Minnesota (H)
Michigan	Indiana (A) Michigan State (H)
Michigan State	Michigan (A) Wisconsin (H)
Minnesota	Iowa (A) Purdue (H)
Northwestern	Illinois (H) Penn State (A)
Ohio State	Wisconsin (A) Penn State (H)
Penn State	Northwestern (H) Ohio State (A)
Purdue	Indiana (H) Minnesota (A)
Wisconsin	Michigan State (A) Ohio State (H)

The big winners here are Michigan and Wisconsin, who get to skip games with 2 contenders. The big loser is Indiana, who misses games against 2 of the lower-division teams.

The Big Picture

Here's the 2007-2008 schedule/results:

Date	Opponent	Site	Result	Score	Record
11/01/2007 (Thu)	Ferris State (exhibition)	Ann Arbor	W	78-40	0-0
11/09/2007 (Fri)	Radford	Ann Arbor	W	82-55	1-0
11/11/2007 (Sun)	Brown	Ann Arbor	W	72-57	2-0
11/15/2007 (Thu)	Georgetown	Washington, D.C.	L	74-52	2-1
Carrs/Safeway Great Alaska Shootout					
11/21/2007 (Wed)	Butler	Anchorage, Alaska	L	79-65	2-2
11/23/2007 (Fri)	Eastern Washington	Anchorage, Alaska	W	61-53	3-2
11/24/2007 (Sat)	Western Kentucky	Anchorage, Alaska	L	73-69	3-3
ACC/Big Ten Challenge					
11/28/2007 (Wed)	Boston College	Ann Arbor	L	77-64	3-4
12/01/2007 (Sat)	Harvard	Boston, Mass.	L	62-51	3-5
12/08/2007 (Sat)	Duke	Durham, N.C.	L	95-67	3-6
12/12/2007 (Wed)	Oakland	Ann Arbor	W	103-87	4-6
12/15/2007 (Sat)	Central Michigan	Ann Arbor	L	78-67	4-7
12/22/2007 (Sat)	UCLA	Ann Arbor	L	69-54	4-8
01/02/2008 (Wed)	Wisconsin	Ann Arbor			
01/05/2008 (Sat)	Purdue	West Lafayette, Ind.			
01/08/2008 (Tue)	Indiana	Ann Arbor			
01/12/2008 (Sat)	Northwestern	Evanston, Ill.			
01/16/2008 (Wed)	Illinois	Champaign, Ill.			
01/19/2008 (Sat)	Iowa	Ann Arbor			
01/22/2008 (Tue)	Wisconsin	Madison, Wis.			
01/27/2008 (Sun)	Michigan State	East Lansing, Mich.			
01/31/2008 (Thu)	Minnesota	Ann Arbor			
02/05/2008 (Tue)	Ohio State	Columbus, Ohio			
02/09/2008 (Sat)	Penn State	Ann Arbor			
02/14/2008 (Thu)	Iowa	Iowa City, Iowa			
02/17/2008 (Sun)	Ohio State	Ann Arbor			
02/21/2008 (Thu)	Minnesota	Minneapolis, Minn.			
02/23/2008 (Sat) or 02/24/2008 (Sun)	Illinois	Ann Arbor			
02/26/2008 (Tue)	Northwestern	Ann Arbor			
03/01/2008 (Sat)	Penn State	State College, Pa.			
03/08/2008 (Sat) or 03/09/2008 (Sun)	Purdue	Ann Arbor			
Big Ten Tournament					
03/13/2008 (Thu)	First Round	Indianapolis, Ind.			
03/14/2008 (Fri)	Quarterfinal	Indianapolis, Ind.			
03/15/2008 (Sat)	Semifinal	Indianapolis, Ind.			
03/16/2008 (Sun)	Championship	Indianapolis, Ind.			

The Upcoming Week

As you can see in the schedule above, Michigan has two games this week. On Wednesday (01/02/2008, 7:00 p.m.), they play Wisconsin in Crisler Arena, then on Saturday (01/05/2008, 2:00 p.m.), they play at Purdue. The Purdue game is on ESPN, so tune in and come on down and cheer on the Wolverines.

Go Blue!