11/03/2008 – Week #01 – The Beilein Experiment, Year Two

Here We Go Again

Welcome back to "Nothing But 'Net" for the 2008-2009 University of Michigan men's basketball season. I know it's just barely November, but the first (and only) exhibition game is this Thursday (11/06/2008), and the first "real" game is the next Tuesday (11/11/2008). It's time to get prepared!

Last season was the first for head coach John Beilein, and it was pretty disappointing. The team finished 10-22, 5-13 in the Big Ten, including a lousy record (7-6) in "should win" games, and mediocre record (3-6) in "toss up" games. Now, I understand that he stepped into a bad situation, with a team that was a little short on talent, and he implemented a whole new system (sounds like the whole Rich Rodriguez situation, doesn't it?), so there was bound to be a "learning curve". However, I don't think anyone expected the learning curve to be quite so steep.

The returning players on this season's team have a full year's worth of experience, and Beilein has his first real class of recruits. I think we can reasonably expect some improvement out there, along with a better record.

Looking Back

Before we look ahead, let's look back one more time, to see how Year One of the John Beilein Experiment went. In a word, it was "disappointing". Michigan didn't have a lot of talent, but they had enough talent to finish better than 10-22.

Here are the results from last season:

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	Cambridge, 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	L	70-54	4-9 (0-1)
01/05/2008 (Sat)	Purdue	West Lafayette, Ind.	L	65-58	4-10 (0-2)
01/08/2008 (Tue)	Indiana	Ann Arbor	L	78-64	4-11 (0-3)
01/12/2008 (Sat)	Northwestern	Evanston, Ill.	W	78-68	5-11 (1-3)
01/16/2008 (Wed)	Illinois	Champaign, Ill.	L	75-57	5-12 (1-4)
01/19/2008 (Sat)	Iowa	Ann Arbor	L	68-60	5-13 (1-5)
01/22/2008 (Tue)	Wisconsin	Madison, Wis.	L	64-61	5-14 (1-6)
01/27/2008 (Sun)	Michigan State	East Lansing, Mich.	L	77-62	5-15 (1-7)
01/31/2008 (Thu)	Minnesota	Ann Arbor	L	77-65	5-16 (1-8)
02/05/2008 (Tue)	Ohio State	Columbus, Ohio	L	65-55	5-17 (1-9)

Date	Opponent	Site	Result	Score	Record
02/09/2008 (Sat)	Penn State	Ann Arbor	W	68-63	6-17 (2-9)
02/14/2008 (Thu)	Iowa	Iowa City, Iowa	W	60-52	7-17 (3-9)
02/17/2008 (Sun)	Ohio State	Ann Arbor	W	80-70	8-17 (4-9)
02/21/2008 (Thu)	Minnesota	Minneapolis, Minn.	L	69-60	8-18 (4-10)
02/23/2008 (Sat)	Illinois	Ann Arbor	W	49-43	9-18 (5-10)
02/26/2008 (Tue)	Northwestern	Ann Arbor	L	62-60	9-19 (5-11)
03/01/2008 (Sat)	Penn State	State College, Pa.	L	69-61	9-20 (5-12)
03/09/2008 (Sun)	Purdue	Ann Arbor	L	72-58	9-21 (5-13)
Big Ten Tournament					
03/13/2008 (Thu)	Iowa	Indianapolis, Ind.	W	55-47	10-21 (5-13)
03/14/2008 (Fri)	Wisconsin	Indianapolis, Ind.	L	51-34	10-22 (5-13)

From last season's "wrap up" article, here's a quick look back at the 2007-2008 season:

When I look at a season, I like to divide the games into 3 categories: games Michigan should win, games Michigan probably doesn't stand much chance of winning, and "toss up" games. In a successful season, Michigan would win all the "should win" games, some of the "toss up" games, and maybe one or two of the "should lose" games. Here's how this season's games were divided up in my mind:

- *"Should Win" games (13): Radford, Brown, Eastern Washington, Harvard, Oakland, Central Michigan, Northwestern (home and away), Illinois (home), Iowa (home), Minnesota (home), Penn State (home and away).*
- *"Should Lose" games (10): Georgetown, Duke, UCLA, Wisconsin (home, away, tournament), Purdue (away), Ohio State (away), Indiana, Michigan State.*
- *"Toss Up" games (9): Butler, Western Kentucky, Boston College, Purdue (home), Iowa (away and tournament), Illinois (away), Ohio State (home), Minnesota (away).*

This season, Michigan didn't come close to those expectations:

- *"Should Win" games (7-6). They lost to Harvard, Central Michigan, Northwestern (home), Iowa (home), Minnesota (home), and Penn State (away). This was very disappointing.*
- *"Should Lose" games (0-10). They put up a good fight in some of these games, but didn't win any of them.*
- *"Toss Up" games (3-6). They only beat Iowa (away and tournament) and Ohio State (home). They lost the rest.*

If they could have won all 13 of their "should win" games, they would have finished a much more respectable 16-16, and been invited to the NIT. I think that's what most people hoped for this year.

So, what happened? Why did they do so poorly, especially in their "should win" games? Was it lack of talent, poor coaching, a tough schedule, too much youth, or "growing pains"? I tend to think that it was mostly "growing pains", combined with a tough schedule (the 7th toughest in the nation) and too much youth. So far, people seem to be very patient with Beilein. The understanding seems to be: "it will take a couple years for Beilein to get the players he needs for his system, and to get everyone running his system well". In the meantime, the "fire the coach" crowd seems to be willing to wait and see, at least for now.

You can't talk about this season's Michigan basketball without looking back at last season's team, and talking about who isn't coming back. In this case, there aren't many losses:

- Ron Coleman - Ron had a pretty disappointing senior season. He had a few good games, but most of the time he was pretty ineffective out there. In his career, Ron had some big games, and he showed some leadership, but he never really achieved his full potential.

- Ekpe Udoh - Ekpe would have been a junior this season, but he decided that he didn't fit in well in the Beilein system, so he transferred to Arkansas. It's a shame that he left, because he was a good player, especially on defense. He was a great shot-blocker, and a good rebounder.

    - Adam Block - Adam was a walk-on freshman guard who only played in 4 games last season, with virtually no stats. This is not a big loss.

Of the three players who left, Udoh will be missed the most.

Looking Forward

Last season, there were so many unknowns at the start, it was hard to guess what was going to happen. This season, there are a lot less changes. The team has had a year to get used to the Beilein system, and a there are more returning players than there were last season.

First, let's look at the 2008-2009 schedule:

Date	Opponent	Site
11/06/2008 (Thu)	Saginaw Valley State (exh)	Ann Arbor
2K Sports Classic benefiting Coaches vs. Cancer		
11/11/2008 (Tue)	Michigan Tech	Ann Arbor
11/12/2008 (Wed)	Northeastern or IUPUI	Ann Arbor
11/20/2008 (Thu)	Semifinal	New York, NY
11/21/2008 (Fri)	Final game or Consolation game	New York, NY
11/25/2008 (Tue)	Norfolk State	Ann Arbor
11/29/2008 (Sat)	Savannah State	Ann Arbor
ACC/Big Ten Challenge		
12/03/2008 (Wed)	at Maryland	College Park, MD
12/06/2008 (Sat)	Duke	Ann Arbor
12/13/2008 (Sat)	Eastern Michigan	Ann Arbor
12/20/2008 (Sat)	vs. Oakland	Auburn Hills, MI
12/22/2008 (Mon)	Florida Gulf Coast	Ann Arbor
12/29/2008 (Mon)	North Carolina Central	Ann Arbor
12/31/2009 (Wed)	Wisconsin	Ann Arbor
01/04/2009 (Sun)	Illinois	Ann Arbor
01/07/2009 (Wed)	at Indiana	Bloomington, IN
01/11/2009 (Sun)	Iowa	Ann Arbor
01/14/2009 (Wed)	at Illinois	Champaign, IL
01/17/2009 (Sat)	Ohio State	Ann Arbor
01/20/2009 (Tue)	at Penn State	State College, PA

01/24/2009 (Sat)	Northwestern	Ann Arbor
01/28/2009 (Wed)	at Ohio State	Columbus, OH
01/31/2009 (Sat)	at Purdue	West Lafayette, IN
02/05/2009 (Thu)	Penn State	Ann Arbor
02/07/2009 (Sat)	at Connecticut	Storrs, CT
02/10/2009 (Tue)	Michigan State	Ann Arbor
02/15/2009 (Sun)	at Northwestern	Evanston, IL
02/19/2009 (Thu)	Minnesota	Ann Arbor
02/22/2009 (Sun)	at Iowa	Iowa City, IA
02/26/2009 (Thu)	Purdue	Ann Arbor
03/01/2009 (Sun)	at Wisconsin	Madison, WI
03/07/2009 (Sat) or 03/08/2009 (Sun)	at Minnesota	Minneapolis, MN
Big Ten Tournament		
03/12/2009 (Thu)	First Round	Indianapolis, IN
03/13/2009 (Fri)	Quarterfinal	Indianapolis, IN
03/14/2009 (Sat)	Semifinal	Indianapolis, IN
03/15/2009 (Sun)	Championship	Indianapolis, IN

This season's non-conference schedule is not as challenging as last season's, but it still features a few tough games: Duke and Connecticut, and some potentially tough competition (Duke, UCLA, UMass, Houston) if Michigan makes it to Madison Square Garden (MSG) in the 2K Sports Classic. The Wolverines should win their bracket of the 2K Sports tournament, but I don't expect them to win either game in MSG. They should be able to beat Norfolk State, Savannah State, Eastern Michigan, Oakland, Florida Gulf Coast, and North Carolina Central, but I don't expect them to beat Duke, Maryland, or Connecticut. That all works out to a non-conference record of 8-5. Not bad, but no "quality wins" either.

Once they get to the Big Ten portion of their schedule, things will start to get interesting. Last 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 each. This season, Michigan only plays Indiana (in Bloomington) and Michigan State (in Ann Arbor) once. These are the same two teams that Michigan only played once last season, with the venues reversed.

Of the 9 home Big Ten games, Michigan should be able to win 4 of them (Iowa, Northwestern, Penn State, and Minnesota). I can also see 4 wins on the road (Indiana, Penn State, Northwestern, and Minnesota). The home games vs. Michigan State and Purdue are almost certain losses, and the road games at Illinois, Ohio State, Purdue, and Wisconsin also look pretty hopeless. That leaves 4 "toss-up" games: Wisconsin, Illinois, and Ohio State in Ann Arbor, and Iowa on the road. That all works out to a Big Ten record of anywhere from 8-10 to 12-6. Figure on 9-9. Add that to the 8-5 non-conference record, and we're looking at 17-14, which sure sounds like another trip to the National Invitation Tournament (NIT).

Breaking things down into my three favorite categories:

"Should win" games (12): Michigan Tech, 2nd round 2K Classic opponent (Northeastern or IUPUI), Norfolk State, Savannah State, Eastern Michigan, Oakland, Florida Gulf Coast, North Carolina Central,

	Northwestern (home and away), Penn State (home), and Minnesota (home).
"Should lose" games (10):	One of the 2K Classic games at MSG, Maryland, Duke, Illinois (away), Ohio State (away), Purdue (home and away), Connecticut, Michigan State, and Wisconsin (away).
"Toss up" games (9):	One of the 2K Classic games at MSG, Wisconsin (home), Illinois (home), Indiana (away), Iowa (home and away), Ohio State (home), Penn State (away), and Minnesota (away).

So, if Michigan can win all 12 of their "should win" games, and more than half (5 out of 9) of their "toss up" games, that works out to the same record: 17-14.

Meet The Wolverines

Michigan has six new players this season: three true freshmen on scholarship (Ben Cronin, Stuart ("Stu") Douglass, and Zack Novak), one redshirt freshman (Eric Puls), one transfer with freshman eligibility (Laval Lucas-Perry), and one walk-on freshman (Corey Person). The returning players are Zack Gibson, Kelvin Grady, Manny Harris, C.J. Lee, David Merritt, Jevohn Shepherd, DeShawn Sims, and Anthony Wright.

Here are all the players currently listed on the roster, grouped by eligibility:

Freshmen

Ben Cronin (#35)
Height: 7' 0"
Weight: 265
Position: Center
Comments: Cronin could be the big man that Michigan needs. Udoh and Gibson did their best last season, but they were often out-matched by bigger, most powerful centers. Cronin should be able to hold his own in there. Unfortunately, he is currently recovering from a hip injury, and he might miss a part or all of this season. Stay tuned for details.

Stuart ("Stu") Douglass (#1)
Height: 6' 3"
Weight: 175 pounds
Position: Guard
Comments: He's a very good 3-point shooter, which is just what Michigan needs for the Beilein offense. We'll have to see about his speed, ball-handling, and defense.

Laval Lucas-Perry (#31)
Height: 6' 3"
Weight: 185 pounds
Position: Guard
Comments: LLP transferred from Arizona in December, so he'll have to wait until the Big Ten season starts next year to be eligible. However, he has been allowed to practice with the team since he transferred, so he's getting very familiar with the Beilein offense. He'll have 2.5 years of eligibility remaining.

Zack Novak (#0)
Height: 6' 5"

Weight: 210 pounds
Position: Guard
Comments: Zack is another very good 3-point shooter. Michigan needed more guards last season, and they're getting them for this season. It should be noted that Novak's high school runs the Beilein offense, so Novak is already very familiar with it.

Corey Person (#23)
Height: 6' 4"
Weight: 200
Position: Guard
Comments: Corey is a freshman walk-on, so he'll be expected to help out as a practice player. We'll see if he ever gets into the real games.

Eric Puls (#30)
Height: 6' 10"
Weight: 210
Position: Center
Comments: Eric is a "preferred walk-on", and he'll definitely help out as a practice player. We'll see if he ever gets into the real games. He redshirted last year, so he still has freshman eligibility.

Sophomores

Kelvin Grady (#44)
Height: 5' 11"
Weight: 170
Position: Guard
Comments: Yes, Kelvin is the younger brother of Kevin Grady, from the football team. He is very quick, and he's a very good 3-point shooter. He had a very inconsistent freshman year, but when he was "on" he was very good.

Manny Harris (#3)
Height: 6' 5"
Weight: 185
Position: Guard
Comments: Manny was Mr. Basketball for the state of Michigan his senior year in high school. He's quick, he's a good shooter, he's tall (for a guard) so he can rebound, and he's a good defender. He had a very good freshman season, and he's expected to carry Michigan again this season.

Anthony Wright (#12)
Height: 6' 6"
Weight: 235
Position: Forward
Comments: Anthony redshirted his first year in the program, so he has sophomore eligibility. He's a big, powerful guy, with a great touch from 3-point range. He can really help the team this year.

Juniors

Zack Gibson (#32)
Height: 6' 10"
Weight: 220

Position: Forward
Comments: Zack is a transfer from Rutgers, where he didn't play much during his freshman year. He played pretty well last season at Michigan, and he has junior eligibility this season.

DeShawn Sims (#34)
Height: 6' 8"
Weight: 235
Position: Forward
Comments: DeShawn is tall and powerful, and he's a great scorer. He had some good games last season, and he should give Michigan some badly needed muscle underneath.

Seniors

C.J. Lee (#2)
Height: 6' 0"
Weight: 180
Position: Guard
Comments: C.J. is the other transfer on the team this season. He played for 2 years at Manhattan College, where he never started, and had miniscule stats. He had to sit out last season, and he has 2 years of eligibility left.

David Merritt (#15)
Height: 5' 10"
Weight: 170
Position: Guard
Comments: David is a walk-on. He's mostly a practice player, but he did get some significant playing time last season. He switched uniform numbers, again. His first season on the team, he was #30, then he was #11 last season, and now he's #15 this season.

Jevohn Shepherd (#22)
Height: 6' 5"
Weight: 215
Position: Forward
Comments: Jevohn is very fast, a good leaper ("Air Canada"), and a very good defender. He needs to work on his shot a little. After three years wearing #15, he switched to #22 for his senior season.

I'm guessing that the initial starting lineup will be:

- Ben Cronin (if he's healthy) at center (backed up by Eric Puls). Zack Gibson played center last season, and he could be called upon to do it again this season.
- DeShawn Sims and Zack Gibson at forwards (backed up by Anthony Wright and Jevohn Shepherd).
- Manny Harris and C.J. Lee at guards (backed up by the rest of the team). I'm guessing that Kelvin Grady and all 3 freshman scholarship guards will see a lot of playing time.

Michigan has got a very unbalanced roster this season, with no experienced centers, four forwards, and about a dozen guards. Rebounding and defending against a big opposing center could be a real problem.

The Upcoming Week

As you can see in the schedule above, Michigan has one game this week: on Thursday (11/06/2008) at 7:00 p.m., they play their first and only exhibition game, against Saginaw Valley State, in Crisler Arena. Come on out and cheer on the Wolverines, and check out the newcomers. I'm working as an usher again this season, so stop by Section 8/11 to say hello.

Go Blue!