

Nothing But 'Net – Week #08 – 12/20/2010 – Can We Start Believing Yet?

No one wants to be the first to say it, but the University of Michigan men's basketball team is sure looking like it's going to be better than expected. These last few years of football and basketball have taught all Michigan fans to keep their expectations low, and hope for the best. There have been so many signs of promise, always followed by more disappointment, that it just feels dangerous to get too excited when things go well. We're used to thinking "sure, things are going well now, but can disaster be far behind?"

So, is it too early to get excited about the basketball team? Are they just setting us up for another disappointment? I don't know, but I'm starting to believe that better times are ahead, and not too far in the future. Before this season started, all the doomsayers looked at Michigan's young, inexperienced team, with two big glaring holes that used to be Manny Harris and DeShawn Sims, and said "no chance". Too many young players, too many players who had never played a minute of college basketball, not enough height, not enough scoring, blah, blah, blah. Those young players have grown up quickly, they've gotten good experience, they've worked around the height problem, and they've spread the scoring around. They're not "seasoned veterans" yet, but they're improving every game, and they're improving faster than most people would have thought possible. They're still young, they still occasionally make the kind of dumb mistakes that young players make, and they're going to be short on height all season, but somehow they've managed to win some tough games against some good teams. They're 9-2, they've won 6 games in a row, and they have quality wins against Clemson (on the road), Utah, and now Oakland. Yes, Oakland has moved up into the "quality win" category. They hung in there with (#14) Purdue, (#16) Illinois, and (#7) Michigan State, before they upset (#7) Tennessee on the road. They came into Crisler Arena on Saturday with a good team and a lot of confidence, and [UM beat them soundly, 69-51](#). Michigan did MUCH better against Oakland than any of the other Big Ten teams has done. That's why I'm starting to believe. That's also why I've reset the Nothing But 'Net Expectation-O-Meter (NBNEOM) to "Exceeds Expectations".

Oh yeah, Michigan played one other game this week: on [Tuesday they beat North Carolina Central \(NCCU\), 64-44](#). It was pretty boring game, especially in the first half, but Michigan played well enough to win handily, and they took care of business. This wasn't the first time this season that Michigan has "played down to the competition" against teams that they were obviously better than (Bowling Green, Harvard, Concordia). The good news is that they haven't lost to any teams that they should have beaten. The bad news is that they've looked mediocre against some of those teams. The really good news is that they seem to have an "extra gear" that they kick into vs. the better teams on their schedule.

Stats? Sure, why not. Michigan didn't shoot particularly well (41% overall, 28% three-pointers) vs. NCCU, but NCCU shot even worse. UM won the rebounding battle, and had twice as many assists as turnovers, and those are the kind of stats you need to win a game by 20. UM shot a little better (45% and 32%) vs. Oakland, which is better than Oakland shot. Michigan barely won the rebounding battle (40-39), and had more assists than turnovers, so there's an 18-point win.

Complete stats for [NCCU](#) and [Oakland](#) at MGoBlue.com.

Individually, Michigan continues to have balanced scoring, with three players in double figures in both games. [Darius Morris](#) was the leading scorer in both games (12 and 18 points, respectively), but [Tim Hardaway, Jr.](#) also had a good week, with double figures in both games (11 and 10). [Evan Smotrycz](#) finally got his scoring going again, with 10 and 7 points, and [Zack Novak](#) came close to double figures in both games (9 and 13). Novak had another double-double, with 12 rebounds to go with his 13 points. [Jordan Morgan](#) didn't score much this week (4 and 5), but he did have 11 rebounds against Oakland.

The big story this week has been the sudden emergence of [Jon Horford](#). He had a very good game against NCCU (9 points and 9 rebounds), and a pretty good game vs. Oakland (4 points and 6 rebounds), but the amazing part is how much more confident and poised he looks out

there suddenly. Morgan got in foul trouble in both games, and Horford came in and did a very good job replacing him both offensively and defensively. He's not as big and strong as Morgan, but he made up for it with speed, agility, and finesse. It's nice to have two good options at center. The third "young big", [Blake McLimans](#), is a bit behind the other two guys, but he's getting there. He did finally hit his first 3-pointer in the NCCU game, after missing his first 13 attempts. He got a big hand for it.

It's almost Christmas, so the Wolverines only have one game this week: Thursday (12/23, 6:00) vs. [Bryant University](#). UM is obviously better than Bryant, and they should win easily, but this is another game where they might "play down to the competition". I don't expect them to lose to Bryant, but the game might be a lot closer than expected. Ah, the joys of a young team.

Go Blue!