Nothing But 'Net – Week #13 – 02/02/2015 – Overachieving, Just Not Enough

The University of Michigan men's basketball team played two games last week, and they won one and lost one. On Tuesday (01/27/2015), they beat Nebraska 58-44 in Crisler Arena, then on Sunday (02/01/2015), they lost at Michigan State 76-66 (overtime). The win and the loss leave Michigan with an overall record of 13-9 (6-4 in the Big Ten).

Michigan continues to overachieve, but not enough to win the games they're supposed to lose. Two weeks ago, they took (#6) Wisconsin into overtime, then ran out of gas and lost by 6. Last week, they took favored MSU into overtime on the road, then ran out of gas and failed to score, losing by 10. Taking both of those games to overtime is a big achievement, especially with Michigan's injury/illness ravaged roster, but they still need to "get over the hump" and win one (or more) of these "marquee" matchups. At this point, an NCAA tournament bid seems unlikely, but they might still get into the NIT.

The Nebraska game was probably the most impressive game Michigan has played this season. They played hard, they played smart, and they controlled the game. After exchanging baskets in the early going, the score was tied (6-6) with 15:03 left in the 1st half. UM went on a quick 7-0 run to make score 13-6, with 10:28 left in the half, and they never trailed again. They let Nebraska creep within 2 points (20-18) with 1:52 left in the 1st half, but they pushed the lead back up to 5 (23-18) at halftime. They opened the 2nd half with a beautiful 15-2 run, which gave them an 18 point lead (38-20) with 15:15 to go, and that was the game. The lead only slipped under 10 points once (47-39, with 5:53 to go), but UM pushed it back up to 17 points (58-41) with 2:00 left, and coasted home. It was the first comfortable Big Ten win of the season.

The MSU game was anything but comfortable. Neither team was able to pull away in regulation, although UM did build up a few small leads in the 1st half. They didn't last, and MSU led by 5 (29-24) at halftime. Michigan opened the 2nd half on fire, and managed to build up another small lead (45-40) with 13:19. Once again, it didn't last, and they found themselves down 5 points (66-61) with 1:24 to go. They scored the last 5 points in regulation, and tied it up 66-66. Overtime was a nightmare. Michigan missed all 5 shots, and even a free throw, while MSU went 3-for-6, and added 4 free throws. It was a sad way to cap off an inspired comeback.

The stats for the Nebraska game are pretty solid. Michigan shot pretty well overall (22-for-46 = 47.8%), they shot pretty well from 3-point range (6-for-14 = 42.9%), and they were perfect from the free throw line (8-for-8 = 100.0%). They crushed Nebraska on the boards (34-26), but they lost the turnover battle (13-10).

The stats for the MSU game are not nearly as impressive. Michigan shot pretty well again overall (27-for-62 = 43.5%), but they shot poorly from 3-point range (6-for-20 = 30.0%). They also shot poorly from the free throw line (6-for-10 = 60.0%). They lost the rebounding battle badly (43-29), but they (barely) won the turnover battle (11-12). I've said it before: this UM team looks good when the 3-pointers are going in, but they look terrible when they aren't. 30% is not good.

Individually, there's only one player left from the original "Big 3": Zak Irvin. He's the only player to hit double figures in both games, with 14 points vs. Nebraska and 11 vs. MSU. He also had a career-high 12 rebounds in the Nebraska game, for his first career double-double.

What happened to the other two players from the "Big 3"? Caris LeVert injured his left foot a couple weeks ago (in the Northwestern game), and he's done for the season, and Derrick Walton Jr. missed both games last week with a foot injury related to the "turf toe" injury he suffered way back in November in the Villanova game. Walton will be back sometime this season, but the official word is "not in the foreseeable future". This is bad news.

While we're on the subject of injuries and illnesses, Mark Donnal also missed both games last week, with a respiratory illness, presumably the flu. This is the worst season I've ever seen for injuries and illnesses.

Back to the individual stats: the rest of the starters had a mixed week. Muhammad-Ali Abdur-Rahkman had 9 points vs. Nebraska and a career-high 18 points vs. MSU. Spike Albrecht had 6 points vs. Nebraska and a career-high 18 points vs. MSU. Aubrey Dawkins had 13 and 7. Ricky Doyle had 4 and 3. The real story last week has been the emergence of MAAR as an offensive weapon.

The bench continued to chip in a few points. Max Bielfeldt had 12 and 7 points, Kameron Chatman had 0 and 2 points, Andrew Dakich had 0 and 0 points (he finally took a shot vs. MSU, but it was blocked), Austin Hatch played 7 seconds vs. Nebraska (but didn't touch the ball), and Sean Lonergan didn't attempt a shot. Bielfeldt and Chatman are the only subs left on the bench that are a threat to score.

This Week

This week, Michigan plays two more games. On Thursday (02/05/2015, 7:00 p.m., ESPN), they play Iowa in Crisler, then on Sunday (02/08/2015, 1:00 p.m., CBS), they play at (#22) Indiana. Iowa isn't unbeatable, and if UM can play with the same intensity that they showed in the last 4 games, they should be able to keep the game close, and hope for good things at the end. Playing in Bloomington is never easy, and it would be quite the upset for this shorthanded, patchwork Michigan team to win there.

Check back here next week to see what happened, and why.

Go Blue!