

SIUE captures opening women's volleyball win in five sets over Toledo on road

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FORT WAYNE, Ind. – SIUE volleyball captured a five-set victory over Toledo in the opening match of the Fort Wayne Invitational Presented by Hyatt Place, defeating the Rockets 21-25, 25-15, 31-29, 21-25, 15-11.

SIUE continues play Saturday with two matches. The Cougars face host Fort Wayne in an 11 a.m. CT match followed by the finale against Quinnipiac at 3:30 p.m. CT.

The Cougars handed Interim Head Coach Kendall Paulus her first collegiate victory.

"Everything flowed nicely, and it was great to get her first win," SIUE senior middle blocker Taylor Joens said.

Joens recorded the final two kills of the match and led the Cougars with 18. That matched her career high set last season against UIC.

"She did such a good job of seeing the court and going for it," Paulus said.

"Our offense was balanced so when I did get an opportunity to swing the pins were pulling the block for me," said Joens.

Three more Cougars piled on double-digit kills as the team finished with 69 for the match, more than in any match last season. Emily Harrison recorded 13. Ashley Witt came off the bench for 12. Sophomore middle blocker Kiana Fields set a career high with 10 kills in her first collegiate start.

"Four people with double-digit kills is phenomenal," said Paulus.

It was the third straight time in the short series between the two schools that the match has gone to five sets. SIUE now leads the series 2-1.

"It was a roller coaster match. We stayed very steady," said Paulus.

The Cougars were matched up against a squad that finished with 17 blocks. Toledo's Saige Thomas led all hitters with 24 kills. Paulus said some adjustments during the match put Toledo out of sync at the right time.

"Their block was huge so it really challenged us," she said. "The fact that we had as many kills against them as we did with an enormous block really shows something about our attacking ability."

SIUE finished with 10 blocks with four each from Joens and Fields.

Sophomore Samantha Knight and sophomore transfer Mallory Nicholson took care of the setting duties in the opener for the Cougars. Knight led SIUE with 39 assists, a career best.

"Our setters did a great job," said Paulus. "Because they were such a great blocking team, their choices really mattered. It was hard to get the attackers a one-on-one block opportunity so we had to be creative."

SIUE's defense collected 90 digs with libero Katie Shashack leading the team with 18 followed by 17 from Jackie Scott.

"It really made a difference when she (Scott) was in the back row," noted Paulus.

Joens said the defense was great on both sides which made for long rallies.

"That's what made it difficult, but we were so determined on our side that we were playing to the whistle," added Joens.