

Eastern Illinois Tops SIUE Men on Seniors Day 70-52

March 2 2020 9:37 AM



EDWARDSVILLE – Tyresse Williford scored a team-best 17 points for SIUE, but visiting Eastern Illinois spoiled the Cougars' Senior Day by posting a 70-52 win Saturday in the First Community Arena at the Vadalabene Center.

SIUE closed its men's basketball season with an 8-23 record and finished 5-13 in the Ohio Valley Conference. Eastern Illinois, bound for the OVC tourney next week, improved to 16-14 and 9-9. The Panthers, who have won four consecutive games, split the season series with the Cougars and are 15-5 overall in the conference.

"You can see they (Panthers) are playing with a lot of confidence and they continued it today," first-year SIUE Head Coach Brian Barone said. "We really wanted to win more than anything for our guys because they cared so much and they played hard all season."

Brandon Jackson, Anselm Uzuegbunem, Justin Benton, D'Quan Applewhite and Williford all played in their final game for the Cougars. Barone made that group the SIUE starters for the finale.

"I learned a lot from them, including how to communicate better," Barone said of the seniors. "If the players don't buy into what we are doing, then I don't grow."

Barone added, "I have so many thought about these guys that I can see a story in each one of them. It wasn't always smooth because there were times when we got flustered and frustrated, but I took a lot of pride in coaching these guys."

And they took pride in playing for the Cougars.

"I was only here two years, but I can see the program heading in the right direction," Williford said. "We challenged the younger guys all season and it's going the right way."

Jackson played in 122 games overall, an SIUE record covering 51 seasons. The Cougars program dates to the 1967-68 campaign.

"It has been a long journey and I thank God for my opportunity," Jackson said.

The Cougars' journey was mostly uphill in their last game. They fell behind early on, never led and even trailed 59-30 with nine minutes to play.

Nevertheless, SIUE fought back, yet EIU's three-point firepower – hitting 12 of 27 from the beyond the arc – proved to be the difference. Four players scored in double digits for the Panthers, who made 27 of 56 shots. SIUE outrebounded EIU 35-31, but the Cougars made 20 turnovers and connected on only 19 of 50 shots, including 4 of 15 from three-point range.

Williford made 6 of 14 shots, a three-pointer, all four of his free throws and had five rebounds. Jackson collected nine points and six rebounds, while Mike Adewunmi contributed nine points and five rebounds. Uzuegbunem had four points and five rebounds in his last game. Applewhite had two points.

EIU led at the break 35-19, thanks to the Panthers scoring the first 10 points of the game and then closing the half with a 9-2 burst. Four players combined for 28 of EIU's first-half points.

Williford tried to keep the Cougars close with his nine points. However, SIUE made only 9 of 25 shots – just 1 of 7 from three-point land -- and committed 12 turnovers.