

Cougars Improve to 4-4 Overall, 2-0 In OVC With 67-65 Win Over Tennessee State

by Joe Pott

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. – Playing for the first time in 33 days, SIUE men's basketball emerged from a hard-fought game with a 67-65 win over Tennessee State Thursday night.

With the win, the Cougars improved to 4-4 overall and are 2-0 in OVC play for the first time since the 2014-15 season.

Tennessee State fell to 2-10 overall and 1-8 in OVC play.

"What can you say," SIUE Head Coach Brian Barone quipped. "Our guys fought from the jump. What this team has done and what our administration has done to allow us to get to this point...it gives us a lot of pride."

Early on, the shots weren't falling for the Cougars, who found themselves down by as many as 14 with 3:54 to play in the first half. SIUE then scored the next 12 points to pull within two (27-25) at halftime.

"(The run) was huge," Barone said. "Colin Schneider on our staff called a particular little action and we kept going to it. It was a heck of a read. I thought Courtney (Carter) controlled the end of the half really well."

The Cougars extended the run to 18 points, scoring the first six points of the second half to pull ahead 31-27. They never trailed in the game again.

"It allowed us to feel normal again," Barone said of the run. "We were slipping and throwing the ball around and missing some layups. We had some bad rotations. Our guys decided, enough was enough. Let's get back to what we've always done."

SIUE opened its largest lead at 15 points (57-42) after a three-point play by [Mike Adewunmi](#) with 6:06 left, but it was Tennessee State who answered with a run. The Tigers went on a 15-0 run to tie the score. TSU freshman Marcus Fitzgerald scored 13 of the 15 points including the layup to tie the score at 57 with 4:01 left.

He finished with a game-high 32 points.

"Fitzgerald is a heck of a player," Barone said. "We tried making a few adjustments on him."

Adewunmi responded for the Cougars with a three-pointer from the right wing to regain the lead with 3:37 to play.

Fitzgerald tied the score at 64 with 1:35 to play, before a [Shamar Wright](#) tip dunk put the Cougars back on top 66-64.

Fitzgerald went to the free throw line with 2.2 seconds left with a chance to tie, but missed the second free throw. Adewunmi hit one of two free throws with a second to play for the final score.

Adewunmi led the Cougars with 18 points and added eight rebounds. [Shamar Wright](#) pitched in 14 points and career-best and team-high nine rebounds.

SIUE connected on 38 percent of its shots, but knocked down 48 percent in the second half. The Cougars were 6-24 from three-point range and 11-23 from the free throw line.

"We got tired and our free throws were evidence of that," Barone added. "Our guys were resilient through a lot including the missed free throws. I was really proud of these guys and how they showed up tonight."

[Michael Matas](#) provided a spark off the bench, scoring nine, going five-for-five at the free throw line and collecting four rebounds in nine minutes of play.

"He hasn't played significantly since the game against (University of Health Sciences and Pharmacy) and yet he was ready," Barone said. "He has stayed ready. He is an ultimate teammate. He is a program guy. He stuck to the game plan."

The Cougars will stay in Nashville to face Belmont Saturday afternoon.