

Nikitinaite, Troeckler, Thatha Lead SIUE Cougars Women's Basketball Team Over Tritons in Exhibition Play

by Eric Hess

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EDWARDSVILLE – [Gabby Nikitinaite](#) scored a game-high 27 points as SIUE defeated UMSL 74-66 in exhibition women's college basketball action at First Community Arena.

Saturday's contest was the first-ever showing at SIUE for Nikitinaite, a transfer from George Washington, as well as first-year Head Coach [Samantha Quigley Smith](#).

Nikitinaite shot 10 of 17 from the field with four three-pointers. She was a perfect 3 of 3 from the free-throw line, adding five rebounds and four assists.

Smith said it was exciting to get back in front of a crowd.

"It's been a year and a half since that's happened, so to turn it on and be in front of people - getting a little bit further away from COVID and closer to a sense of normalcy was really important for our team to get today," she said.

"It felt great to get back on the floor," said Nikitinaite. "Coach has trust in me and the team, and we're going to make sure we do the right things, so it just felt good overall."

UMSL got off to a good start against the Cougars, leading 21-11 with 9:36 left in the second quarter.

"Obviously you look at every game and you nitpick and you want your team to be the best they can be, so I think if we can get a little bit better of a start, we're going to be in great shape going into the future here in the next couple weeks," said Smith.

SIUE finished the rest of the second quarter by besting the Tritons 24-11 to take a 35-32 halftime lead.

"We had a better coming out into that third quarter, ready to play," said Smith. "I think we were a lot more ready. We understood what we needed to do to be successful against UMSL, and UMSL is a really tough team. They play in a great league (Great Lakes Valley Conference)."

Smith was named the GLVC's Coach of the Year last season while a head coach at Lewis.

"More than anything it was a focus and energy going into the second half that got us moving in the right direction. We got a few more strings of defensive stops - and that's how you go on scoring runs, you can get stops on the defensive end and that was a big part of it," she added.

[Allie Troeckler](#) and [Ajulu Thatha](#) joined Nikitinaite in double figures with 17 and 12 points, respectively. SIUE shot 38.7 percent from the field (24-62) and hit 6 of 19 shot from beyond the arc.

UMSL finished with four players scoring in double figures led by 14 from Alex LaPorta. Kiara Stewart, Danielle Berry and Faye Meissner each had 10.

"It's been a learning experience for everyone," said Smith. "Teaching them, seeing how they like to be coached as well, but having incoming freshmen and transfers join a veteran group, you have to all mesh and find the right string of people, the right lineup, so that's why you play exhibitions and scrimmages so you can see who plays well together, who does things well in certain situations, putting them in the best positions to be successful. I would say our coaching staff is trying to do more than anything, and it's a competitive mindset that we're trying to instill in them."

SIUE kicks off the regular season Wednesday with a 7 p.m. road contest at Kansas. It is the first of four road games to start the season for the Cougars.

